

THE TALE OF GRAY DICK

Stephen King

They had looked everywhere for protection from their most devastating foe-except to the murderous know-how of their old wives' tales.

When evening came, Roland Deschain returned on horseback from the Manni village to Eisenhart's Lazy B. He'd spent the afternoon in a long palaver with Henschick, the dinh of the Manni. Only here in Calla Bryn Sturgis, the head of clan was called the heart-stone. In the case of Henschick, Roland thought the term fit very well. Yet the man understood that trouble was on the way. Stony-hearted he might be; stupid he was not.

Roland sat behind the ranch house, listening to the boys shout and the dog bark. Back in Gilead (where the gunslinger had come from a thousand years before), this sort of porch, facing the barns, stock-well, and fields, would have been called the work-stoop.

"Boys!" Eisenhart bawled. "What in the name of the Man Jesus am I going to tell yer mothers if you kill yer sad selfs jumpin out of that barn?"

"We're okay!" Benny Slightman called. He was the son of Eisenhart's foreman. Dressed in bib overalls and barefooted, he was standing in the open bay of the barn, just above the carved letters which said LAZY B. "Unless... do you really want us to stop, sai?"

Eisenhart glanced toward Roland, who saw his own boy, Jake, standing just behind Benny, impatiently waiting his chance to risk his bones. Jake was also dressed in bib overalls-a pair of his new friend's, no doubt-and the look of them made Roland smile. Jake wasn't the sort of boy you imagined in such clothes.

"It's nil to me, one way or the other, if that's what you want to know," Roland said.

"Garn, then!" the rancher called. Then he turned his attention to the bits and pieces of hardware spread out on the boards. "What do'ee

think? Will any of 'em shoot?"

Eisenhart had produced all three of his guns for Roland's inspection. The best was the rifle. The other two were pistols of the sort Roland and his friends had called "barrel-shooters" as children, because of the oversized cylinders which had to be revolved with the side of the hand after each shot. Roland had disassembled Eisenhart's shooting irons with no initial comment. Once again he had set out gun oil, this time in a bowl instead of a saucer.

"I said-"

"I heard you, sai," Roland said. "Your rifle is as good as I've seen this side of Lud, the great city. The barrel-shooters..." He shook his head. "That one with the nickel plating might fire. The other you might as well stick in the ground. Maybe it'll grow something better."

"Hate to hear you speak so," Eisenhart said. "These were from my da' and his da' before him and on back at least this many." He raised four fingers and both thumbs. "They was always kept together and passed to the likeliest son by dead-letter. When I got 'em instead of my elder brother, I was some pleased."

"I'm sorry."

"Say thankya."

The sun was going down red in the west, turning the yard the color of blood. There was a line of rockers on the porch. Eisenhart was settled in one of them. Roland sat cross-legged on the boards, housekeeping Eisenhart's inheritance. That the pistols would probably never fire meant nothing to the gunslinger's hands, which had been trained to this work long ago and still found it soothing.

Now, with a speed that made the rancher blink, Roland put the weapons back together in a rapid series of clicks and clacks. He set them aside on a square of sheepskin, wiped his fingers on a rag, and sat in the rocker next to Eisenhart's. He guessed that on more

ordinary evenings, Eisenhart and his wife sat out here side by side, watching the sun abandon the day.

The wife had been part of his palaver that afternoon, more important because of what was not said than because of what was.

Roland rummaged through his purse for his tobacco pouch, found it, and built himself a cigarette with the priest's fresh, sweet tobacco. The Peres housekeeper, Rosalita, had added her own present, a little stack of delicate papers she called "rice-pulls." Roland thought they wrapped as good as any cigarette paper, and he paused a moment to admire the finished product before tipping the end into the match Eisenhart had popped alight with one horny thumbnail. The gunslinger dragged deep and exhaled a long plume that rose but slowly in the evening air, which was still and surprisingly muggy for summer's end. "Good," he said, and nodded.

"Aye? May it do ya fine. I never got the taste for it myself."

The barn was far bigger than the ranch house, at least fifty yards long and fifty feet high. The front was festooned with reap-charms in honor of the season; stuffy-guys with huge sharproot heads stood guard. From above the open bay over the main doors, the butt of the head-beam jutted. A rope had been fastened around this. Below, in the yard, the boys had built a good-sized stack of hay. Oy stood on one side of it. The dog was looking up as Benny Slightman grabbed the rope, gave it a tug, then retreated back into the loft and out of sight. Oy began to bark in anticipation. A moment later Benny came pelting forward with the rope wrapped in his fists and his hair flying out behind him.

The boy let go, flew into the haystack, disappeared, then came up laughing. Oy ran around him, barking.

Roland watched Jake reel in the rope. Benny lay on the ground, playing dead, until Oy licked his face. Then he sat up, giggling.

To one side of the barn was a remuda of workhorses, perhaps twenty in all. A trio of cowpokes in chaps and battered shor' boots were leading the last half-dozen mounts toward it. On the other side of the yard was a slaughter-pen filled with steers. In the following weeks they would be butchered and sent downriver on the trading boats.

Jake retreated into the loft, then came pelting forward and launched himself into space along the arc of the rope. The two men watched him disappear, laughing, into the pile of hay.

"We bide, gunslinger," Eisenhart said. "Even in the face of the outlaws, we bide. They come... but then they go. Do'ee ken?"

"Ken very well, say thankya."

Eisenhart nodded. "If we stand against 'em, all that may change. To you and yours, it might not mean s'much as a fart in a high wind either way. If ye survive, you'll move along, win or lose. We have nowhere to go."

"But-

Eisenhart raised his hand. "Hear me, I beg. Would'ee hear me?"

Roland nodded. Beyond them, the boys were running back into the barn for another leap. Soon the coming dark would put an end to their game.

"Suppose they send fifty or sixty, as they have before, and we wipe them out? And then, suppose that a week or a month later, after you're gone, they send five hundred against us?"

Roland considered this. As he was doing so, Margaret Eisenhart-Margaret Henschick that was-joined them. She was slim, fortyish, small-breasted, dressed in jeans and a shirt of gray silk. She was a pretty woman. She was also a problematic woman, stuffed with unspoken rage. After meeting her father-he that was called the

heart-stone, he with the uncut, ungroomed beard which signified that he was childless-Roland thought he understood that rage a little better. As far as Henschick was concerned, this woman was bound for hell simply for the ankle she showed the world below the cuff of her jeans. And her husband? The children they'd made together? Better not to ask Henschick's opinion of them, and Roland hadn't. Sai Eisenhart's hair, pulled into a bun against her neck, was black threaded with white. One hand hid beneath her apron.

"How many harriers might come against us is a fair question," she said, "but this might not be a fair time to ask it."

Eisenhart gave his sai a look that was half humorous and half irritated. "Do I tell you how to run your kitchen, woman? When to cook and when to wash?"

"Only four times a week," said she. Then, seeing Roland rise from the rocker next to her husband's: "Nay, sit still, I beg you. I've been in a chair this last hour, peeling sharproot with Edna, yon's mother." She nodded in Benny's direction. "It's good to be on my feet." She watched, smiling, as the boys swung out into the pile of hay and landed, laughing, while Oy danced and barked. "Vaughn and I have never had to face the full horror of it, Roland. We had six, all twins, but all grown in the times between raids. So we may not have all the understanding needed to make such a decision as you ask."

"Being lucky doesn't make a man stupid," Eisenhart said. "Quite the contrary, is what I think. Cool eyes see clear."

"Perhaps," she said, watching the boys run back into the barn. They were bumping shoulders and laughing, each trying to get to the ladder first. "Perhaps, aye. But the heart must call for its rights, too, and a man or woman who doesn't listen is a fool. Sometimes 'tis best to swing on the rope, even if it's too dark to see if the hay's there or not."

Roland reached out and touched her hand.

She gave him a small, distracted smile. It was only a moment before she returned her attention to the boys, but it was long enough for Roland to see that she was frightened. Terrified, in fact. Knowing your gold or your crops were at risk was one thing. Knowing it was your children, that was another.

“Ben, Jake!” she called. “Enough! Time to wash and then come in! There’s pie for those can eat it, and cream to go on top!”

Benny came to the open bay. “My da’ says we can sleep in my tent over on the bluff, sai, if it’s all right with you.”

Margaret Eisenhart looked at her husband. Eisenhart nodded. “All right,” she said, “tent it is and give you joy of it, but come in now if you’d have pie. Last warning! And wash first, mind’ee! Hands and faces!”

“Aye, say thankya,” Benny said. “Can Oy have pie?” Margaret Eisenhart thudded the pad of her left hand against her brow, as if she had a headache. The right, Roland was interested to note, stayed beneath her apron. “Aye,” she said, “pie for the bumblerdog too, as I’m sure he’s Arthur Eld in disguise and will reward me with jewels and gold and the healing touch.”

“Thankee, sai,” Jake called. “Could we have one more swing first? It’s the quickest way down.”

“Well,” Eisenhart said, “the broken leg usually hides in the last caper, but have on, if’ee must.”

They had on, and there were no broken legs. Both boys hit the haypile squarely, popped up laughing and looking at each other, then footraced for the kitchen with Oy running behind them appearing to herd them.

“It’s wonderful how quickly children can become friends,” Margaret Eisenhart said, but she didn’t look like one contemplating something wonderful. She looked sad.

“Yes,” Roland said. “Wonderful it is.” He laid his purse across his lap, seemed on the verge of pulling the knot that anchored the laces, then didn’t. “Which are your men good with?” he asked Eisenhart. “Bow or bah? For I know it’s surely not the rifle or revolver.”

“We favor the bah,” Eisenhart said. “Fit the bolt, wind it, aim it, fire it, ‘tis done.”

Roland nodded. It was as he had expected. Not good, because the bah was rarely accurate at a distance greater than twenty-five yards, and that only on a still day. On one when a strong breeze was kicking up... or, gods help us, a gale...

But Eisenhart was looking at his wife. Looking at her with a kind of reluctant admiration. She stood with her eyebrows raised, looking back at her man. Looking him back a question. What was this? It surely had to do with the hand under the apron.

“Garn, tell ‘im,” Eisenhart said. Then he pointed an almost-angry finger at Roland, like the barrel of a pistol. “It changes nothing, though. Nothing! Say thankya!” This last with the lips drawn back in a kind of savage grin. Roland was more puzzled than ever, but he felt a faint stirring of hope. It might be false hope, probably would be, but anything was better than the worries and confusions-and the aches-that had beset him lately.

“Nay,” Margaret said with maddening modesty. “‘Tis not my place to tell. To show, perhaps, but not to tell.”

Eisenhart sighed, considered, then turned to Roland. “Ye know Lady Oriza.”

Roland nodded. The Lady of the Rice, in some places considered a goddess, in others a heroine, in some, both.

“And ye know how she did away with Gray Dick, who killed her father?”

Roland nodded again.

According to the story-a good one that he must remember to tell Jake, when once more there was time for storytelling-Lady Oriza invited Gray Dick, a famous outlaw prince, to a vast dinner party in Waydon, her castle by the River Send. She wanted to forgive him for the murder of her father, she said, for she had accepted the Man Jesus into her heart and such was according to His teachings.

Ye'll get me there and kill me, be I stupid enough to come, said Gray Dick.

Nay, nay, said the Lady Oriza, never think it. All weapons will be left outside the castle. And when we sit in the banqueting hall below, there will be only me, at one end of the table, and thee, at the other.

You'll conceal a dagger in your sleeve or a bola beneath your dress, said Gray Dick. And if you don't, I will.

Nay, nay, said the Lady Oriza, never think it, for we shall both be naked.

At this Gray Dick was overcome with lust, for Lady Oriza was fair. It excited him to think of his prick getting hard at the sight of her bare breasts and bush, and no breeches on him to conceal his excitement from her maiden's eye. And he thought he understood why she would make such a proposal. "His haughty heart will undo him," Lady Oriza told her maid (whose name was Marian and who went on to have many fanciful adventures of her own).

The lady was right. I've killed Lord Grenfall, wiliest lord in all the river baronies, Gray Dick told himself. And who is left to avenge him but one weak daughter? (Oh, but she was fair.) So she sues for peace. And maybe even for marriage, if she has audacity and imagination as well as beauty.

So he accepted her offer. His men searched the banquet hall downstairs before he arrived and found no weapons-not on the table,

not under the table, not behind the tapestries. What none of them could know was that for weeks before the banquet, Lady Oriza had practiced throwing a specially weighted dinner plate. She did this for hours a day. She was athletically inclined to begin with, and her eyes were keen. Also, she hated Gray Dick with all her heart and had determined to make him pay no matter what the cost.

The dinner plate wasn't just weighted; its rim had been sharpened. Dick's men overlooked this, as she and Marian had been sure they would. And so they banqueted, and what a strange banquet that must have been, with the laughing, handsome outlaw naked at one end of the table and the demurely smiling but exquisitely beautiful maiden thirty feet from him at the other end, equally naked. They toasted each other with Lord Grenfall's finest rough red. It infuriated the lady to the point of madness to watch him guzzle that exquisite country wine down as though it were water, scarlet drops rolling off his chin and splashing to his hairy chest, but she gave no sign; simply smiled coquettishly and sipped from her own glass. She could feel the weight of his eyes on her breasts. It was like having unpleasant bugs lumbering on her skin.

How long did this charade go on? Some tale-tellers had her putting an end to Gray Dick after the second toast. (His: May your beauty ever increase. Hers: May your first day in hell last ten thousand years, and may it be the shortest.) Others-the sort of spinners who enjoyed drawing out the suspense-recounted a meal of a dozen courses before Lady Oriza gripped the special plate, looking Gray Dick in the eyes and smiling at him while she turned it, feeling for the dull place on the rim where it would be safe to grip.

No matter how long the tale, it always ended the same way, with Lady Oriza flinging the plate. Little fluted channels had been carved on its underside, beneath the sharpened rim, to help it fly true. And it did fly true, humming weirdly as it went, casting its fleeting shadow on the roast pork and turkey, the heaping bowls of vegetables, the fresh fruit piled on crystal serving dishes.

A moment after she flung the plate on its slightly rising course-her arm still outstretched, her first finger and cocked thumb pointing at her father's assassin-Gray Dick's head flew out through the open door and into the foyer behind him. For a moment longer Gray Dick's body stood. For a moment longer Gray Dick's penis pointed at her like an accusing finger. But a dick can't stand stiff for long when the neck of its Dick is spouting blood in a geyser. It shriveled with shocking suddenness. For a moment longer the body stood where it was, and then Gray Dick crashed forward onto a huge roast of beef and a mountain of herbed rice.

Lady Oriza, whom Roland would hear referred to as the Lady of the Plate in some of his wanderings, raised her glass of wine and toasted the body. She said...

"May your first day in hell last ten thousand years," Roland murmured.

Margaret nodded. "Aye, and let that one be the shortest. A terrible toast, but one I'd gladly give each of the outlaws who dare to take our babies. Each and every one!" Her visible hand clenched. In the fading red light she looked feverish and ill. And, Roland thought, she looked like her father. "We had six, do ya. An even half-dozen. Has my husband told you why none of them are here, to help with the reap-tide slaughtering and penning? Has he told you that, gunslinger?"

"Margaret, there's no need," Eisenhart said. He shifted uncomfortably in his rocker.

"Ah, but mayhap there is. It goes back to what we were saying before. Mayhap ye pay a price for leaping, but sometimes ye pay an even higher one for looking. Our children grew up free and clear, with no child-thieves to worry about. I gave birth to my first two, Tom and Tessa, less than a month before the Wolves came last time.

The others followed along, neat as peas out of a pod. The youngest be only fifteen, do ya see. And I'd never turn my back on 'em, or my

face from 'em, as some would to their get, simply because they have the audacity to wriggle out from beneath a hard fist. Some ye may have visited even this day, gunslinger, or am I wrong?"

"Margaret-" her husband began.

She ignored him. "But ours'd not be s'lucky with their own children, and they knew it. And so they're gone. Some north along the Arc, some south. Looking for a place where the Wolves don't come."

She turned to Eisenhart, and although she spoke to Roland, it was her husband she looked at as she had her final word.

"One of every two; that's the outlaw bounty. That's what they take every twenty-some years. Except for us. They took all of our children, although they never laid their hands on a single one."

Silence fell on the back porch. The condemned steers in the slaughter-pen mooded moromcally. From the kitchen came the sound of boy-laughter.

Eisenhart had dropped his head. Roland could see nothing but the extravagant bush of his mustache, but he didn't need to see the man's face to know that he was either weeping or struggling very hard not to.

"I'd not make'ee feel bad for all the rice of the Arc," she said, and stroked her husband's shoulder with infinite tenderness. "And they come back betimes, aye, which is more than the dead do, except in our dreams. They're not so old that they don't miss their mother, or have how-do-ye-do-it questions for their da'. But they're gone, nevertheless. And that's the price of safety." She looked down at Eisenhart for a moment, one hand on his shoulder and the other still beneath her apron. "Now tell how angry with me you are," she said, "for I'd know."

Eisenhart shook his head. "Not angry," he said in a muffled voice.

“And have’ee changed your mind?”

Eisenhart shook his head again.

“Stubborn old thing,” she said, but she spoke with good-humored affection. “Stubborn as a stick, aye, and we all say thankya.”

“I’m thinking about it,” he said, still not looking up. “Still thinking, which is more than I expected at this late date-usually I make up my mind and rhere’s the end of it.

“Roland, I understand young Jake showed Overholser and the rest of ‘em some shooting out in the woods. Might be we could show you something right here that’d raise your eyebrows. Maggie, go in and get your Oriza.”

“No need,” she said, at last taking her hand from beneath her apron, “for I brought it out with me, and here’tis.”

It was a blue plate with a delicate webbed pattern. A for-special plate. After a moment Roland recognized the webbing for what it was: young oriza, the seedling rice plant. When sai Eisenhart tapped her knuckles on the plate, it gave out a peculiar high ringing. It looked like china, but wasn’t. Glass, then? Some sort of glass?

He held his hand out for it with the solemn, respectful mien of one who knows and respects weapons. She hesitated, biting the corner of her lip. Roland reached into his holster, which he’d strapped back on before leaving this woman’s father, and pulled his revolver. He held it out to her, butt first.

“Nay,” she said, letting the word out on a long breath of sigh. “No need to offer me a hostage, Roland. I reckon I c’n trust you with my Oriza. But mind how you touch, or you’ll lose another finger, and I think you could ill afford that, for I see you’re already two shy on your right hand.”

A single look at the blue plate-the sai's Oriza-made it clear how wise that warning was. At the same time, Roland felt a bright spark of excitement and appreciation. It had been long years since he'd seen a new weapon of worth, and never one like this.

The plate was metal, not glass-some light, strong alloy. It was the size of an ordinary dinner plate, a foot in diameter. Three-quarters of the edge (or perhaps a bit more) had been sharpened to suicidal keenness.

"There's never a question of where to grip, even if ye're in a hurry," Margaret said. "For, do'ee see-"

"Yes," Roland said in a tone of deepest admiration. Two of the rice-stalks crossed in what could have been the great letter "Hn," which by itself means both here and now. At the point where these stalks crossed (only a sharp eye would pick them out of the bigger pattern to begin with), the rim of the plate was not only dull but slightly thicker. Good to grip.

Roland turned the plate over. Beneath, in the center, was a small metal pod. To Jake, it might have looked like the plastic pencil-sharpener he'd taken to school in his pocket as a first-grader. To Roland, who had never seen a pencil-sharpener, it looked a little like the abandoned egg case of some insect.

"That makes the whistling noise when the plate flies, do ya ken," she said. She had seen Roland's honest admiration and was reacting to it, her color high and her eyes bright. She looked thus more like her father than ever.

"It has no other purpose?"

"None," she said. "But it must whistle, for it's part of the story, isn't it?"

Roland nodded. Of course it was.

The Sisters of Oriza, Margaret Eisenhart said, was a group of women who liked to help others-

“And gossip amongst theirselves,” Eisenhart growled, but he sounded good-humored.

“Aye, that too,” she allowed.

They cooked for funerals and festivals. They sometimes held sewing circles and quilting bees after a family had lost its belongings to fire or when one of the river-floods came every six or eight years and drowned the smallholders closest to the Whye. It was the Sisters who kept the Pavilion well tended and the Town Gathering Hall well swept on the inside and well kept on the outside. They put on dances for the young people, and chaperoned them. They were sometimes hired by the richer folk to cater wedding celebrations, and such affairs were always fine, the talk of the Calla for months afterward, sure. Among themselves they did gossip, aye, she'd not deny it; they also played cards, and Points, and Castles. (How Henchick's brow would have furrowed at the thought of gossip, Roland thought. How his eye, cold to begin with, would have chilled at the mention of cards!)

“And you throw the plate,” Roland said.

“Aye,” said she, “but ye must understand we only do it for the fun of the thing. Hunting's men's work, and they do fine with the bah.” She was stroking her husband's shoulder again, this time a bit nervously, Roland thought. He also thought that if the men really did do fine with the bah, she never would have come out with that pretty, deadly thing held under her apron. Nor would Eisenhart have encouraged her.

Roland opened his tobacco pouch, took out one of Rosalita's rice-pulls, and drifted it toward the plate's sharp edge. The square of thin paper fluttered to the porch a moment later, cut neatly in two. Only for the fun of the thing, Roland thought, and almost smiled.

“What metal?” he asked. “Does thee know?”

She raised her eyebrows slightly at this Manni form of address but didn't comment on it. “Titanium is what Andy calls it. It comes from a great old factory building, far north, in Calla Sen Chre. There are many ruins there. I've never been, but I've heard the tales. It sounds spooky.”

Roland nodded. “And the plates-how are they made?”

“It's the ladies of Calla Sen Chre who make them, and send them to the Callas all round about. Although Calla Divine is as far south as that sort of trading reaches, I think.”

“The ladies make these,” Roland mused. “The ladies.”

“Somewhere there's a machine that still makes 'em, that's all it is,” Eisenhart said. Roland was amused at his tone of gruff defensiveness. “Comes down to no more than pushing a button, I 'magine.”

Margaret, looking at him with a woman's smile, said nothing to this, either for or against. Perhaps she didn't know about the manufacture of the plates, but she certainly knew the politics that keep a marriage sweet.

“So there are Sisters north and south of here along the Arc,” Roland said. “And all of them throw the plate.”

“Aye-from Sen Chre to Divine south of us. Further south or north, I don't know. We like to help and we like to talk. We throw our plates once a month, in memory of how Lady Oriza did for Gray Dick, but few of us are any good at it.”

“Are you good at it, sai?”

She was silent, biting at the corner of her lip again.

“Show him,” Eisenhart growled. “Show him and be done.”

They walked down the steps, the rancher's wife leading the way, Eisenhart behind her, Roland third. Behind them the kitchen door opened and banged shut.

"Gods-a-glory, missus Eisenhart's gonna throw the dish!" Benny Slightman cried gleefully. "Jake! You won't believe it!"

"Send 'em back in, Vaughn," she said. "They don't need to see this."

"Nar, let 'em look," Eisenhart said. "Don't hurt a boy to see a woman do well."

"Send them back, Roland, aye?" She looked at him, flushed and flustered and very pretty. To Roland she looked ten years younger than when she'd come out on the porch, but he wondered how she'd fling in such a state. It was something he much wanted to see, because ambushing was brutal work, quick and emotional.

"I agree with your husband," he said. "I'd let them stay."

"Have it as you like," she said. Roland saw she was actually pleased, that she wanted an audience, and his hope increased. He thought it increasingly likely that this pretty middle-aged wife, this exile from the Manni with her small breasts and salt-and-pepper hair, had a hunter's heart. Not a gunslinger's heart, but at this point he would settle for a few hunters-a few killers-male or female.

She marched toward the barn, and when they were fifty yards from the stuffy-guys flanking its door, he touched her shoulder and made her stop.

"Nay," she said, "'tis too far."

"I've seen you fling as far and half again," her husband said, and stood firm in the face of her angry look. "I have."

"Not with a gunslinger from the Line of Eld standing by my right elbow, you haven't," she said, but she stayed where she was.

Roland went to the barn door and took the grinning sharproot head from the stuffy on the left side. He went into the barn. Here was a stall filled with freshly picked potatoes. He took one of the potatoes and set it atop the stuffy-guy's shoulders, where the sharproot had been. It was a good-sized spud, but the contrast was still comic; the stuffy-guy now looked like Mr. Tinyhead in a carnival show or street fair.

"Oh, Roland, no!" she cried, sounding genuinely shocked. "I could never!"

"I don't believe you," he said, and stood aside. "Throw."

For a moment he thought she wouldn't. She looked around for her husband. If Eisenhart had still been standing beside her, Roland thought she would have thrust the plate into his hands and run for the house and never mind if he cut himself on it, either. But Vaughn Eisenhart had withdrawn to the foot of the steps. The boys stood above him, Benny Slightman watching with mere interest, Jake with closer attention, his brows drawn together and the smile suddenly gone from his face.

"Roland, I-"

"None of it, missus, I beg. Your talk of leaping was all very fine, and certainly you leaped when you left your father and his folken, but that was years ago and I'd see if you're still limber. Throw."

She recoiled a little at the mention of her father, eyes widening as if she had been slapped. Then she turned to face the barn door and drew her right hand above her left shoulder. The plate glimmered in the late light, which was now more pink than red. Her lips had thinned to a white line. For a moment all the world held still.

"Riza!" she cried in a shrill, furious voice, and cast her arm forward. Her hand opened, the index finger pointing precisely along the path the plate would take. Of all of them in the yard (the cowpokes had

also stopped to watch), only Roland's eyes were sharp enough to follow the flight of the dish.

True! he exulted. True as ever was!

The plate gave a kind of moaning howl as it bolted above the dirt yard. Less than two seconds after it had left her hand, the potato lay in two pieces, one by the stuffy-guy's gloved right hand and the other by its left. The plate itself stuck in the side of the barn door, quivering.

The boys raised a cheer. Benny hoisted his hand as his new friend had taught him, and Jake slapped him a high five.

"Great going, sai Eisenhart!" Jake called.

"Good hit! Say thankya!" Benny added.

Roland observed the way the woman's lips drew back from her teeth at this hapless, well-meant praise-she looked like a horse that has seen a snake. "Boys," he said, "I'd go inside now, were I you."

Benny was bewildered. Jake, however, took another look at Margaret Eisenhart and understood. You did what you had to... and then the reaction set in. "Come on, Ben," he said.

"But-"

"Come on." Jake took his new friend by the shirt and tugged him back toward the kitchen door.

Roland let the woman stay where she was for a moment, head down, trembling with reaction. Strong color still blazed in her cheeks, but everywhere else her skin had gone as pale as milk. He thought she was struggling not to vomit.

He went to the barn door, grasped the plate at the grasping-place, and pulled. He was astounded at how much effort it took before the

plate first wiggled and then came loose. He brought it back to her, held it out. "Thy tool."

For a moment she didn't take it, only looked at him with a species of bright hate. "Why do you mock me with speech, Roland? What did my father tell thee?"

In the face of her rage he only shook his head. "I do not mock thee."

Margaret Eisenhart abruptly seized Roland by the neck. Her grip was dry and so hot her skin felt feverish. She pulled his ear to her uneasy, twitching mouth. He thought he could smell every bad dream she must have had since deciding to leave her people for Calla Bryn Sturgis's big rancher.

"I know thee spoke with Henchick today," she said. "Will'ee speak to him more? Ye will, won't you?"

Roland nodded, transfixed by her grip. The strength of it. The little puffs of air against his ear. Did a lunatic hide deep down inside everyone, even such a woman as this?

"Good. Say thankya. Tell him Margaret of the Redpath Clan does fine with her heathen man, aye, fine still." Her grip tightened. "Tell him she regrets nothing! Will'ee do that for me?"

"Aye, lady, if you like."

She snatched the plate from him, fearless of its lethal edge. "What would ye visit on us, ye gunstruck man?"

Eisenhart joined them. He looked uncertainly at his wife, who had endured exile from her people and the hardening of her father's heart for his sake. For a moment she looked at him as though she didn't know him.

"I only do as ka wills," Roland said.

“Ka!” she cried, and her lip lifted. A sneer transformed her good looks to an ugliness that was almost startling. It would have frightened the boys. “Every troublemaker’s excuse! Put it up your bum with the rest of the dirt!”

“I do as ka wills and so will you,” Roland said.

She looked at him, seeming not to comprehend. Roland took the hot hand that had gripped him and squeezed it, not quite to the point of pain.

“And so will you.”

She met his gaze for a moment, then dropped her eyes. “Aye,” she muttered. “Oh, aye, so do we all.”

She left him for the house.