

THE GUNSLINGER

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TO
ED FERMAN

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

THE GUNSLINGER

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

II

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

"Afraid of spirits."

"I expect he thinks you're one."

"I expect he does."

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

"That's Zoltan."

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

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

The gunslinger nodded amiably.

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

"You teach him that?"

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

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

"After the other one, I guess."

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

"How long since he passed by?"

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

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

"Did he stop off?" the gunslinger asked.

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

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

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

"Yes."

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

"I'm just a man."

"You'll never catch him."

"I'll catch him."

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

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

"Thanks."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tak-tak-tak.

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

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

Tak-tak-tak.

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

He slept

III

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

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

"How?"

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

"No, the mule."

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

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

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

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

Brown nodded. "I think this is it."

IV

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

"Musical fruit," he muttered.

After dinner, the gunslinger offered his tobacco.

— Now. Now the questions will come.

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

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

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

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

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

"You don't like town?"

"No."

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

"That so?"

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

"He laid you a trap."

"Yes."

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

— Now the questions will come.

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

Zoltan shifted restlessly, seemed about to speak, subsided.

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

"Sure."

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

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

"Sure."

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

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

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

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

"I started to tell you about Tull."

"Is it growing?"

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

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

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

The gunslinger closed his eyes. His mind whirled crazily.

"You doped me," he said thickly.

"No. I've done nothing."

The gunslinger opened his eyes warily.

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

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

V

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Hey!" the gunslinger called.

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

"I got a mule here."

"Good for you."

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

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

"How long you want him put up?"

"A night. Maybe two. Maybe longer."

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

"I'm not asking for any."

"Blood money," the hostler muttered.

"What?"

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

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

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

"How they hanging?" the gunslinger asked conversationally.

No answer.

"You dudes live in town?"

No answer.

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

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

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

"Might get a burger at Sheb's."

"That the honky-tonk?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Watch me," one of the players in the corner said and matched three hearts with four spades, emptying his hand. The one with the hearts swore, handed over his bet, and the next was dealt. The gunslinger approached the bar. "You got hamburger?" he asked.

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

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

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

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

The gunslinger put a gold piece on the bar.

Eyes followed it.

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

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

"Go sit down," the gunslinger said quietly.

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

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

"Don't expect any."

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

"Do you have salt?"

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

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

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

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

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

The woman behind the bar made a small moaning sound.

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

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

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

They stared at each other, the gunslinger and the man who had gone around the rim of madness. He spoke, and the gunslinger, dumfounded, heard himself addressed in the High Speech:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Not tonight they won't."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You know my price," she said.

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

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

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

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

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

"Put out the lights."

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

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

"No," she whispered.

"Then put out the lights."

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

VI

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

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

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

"He was touched by God."

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

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

"Yes."

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

"Yes."

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

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

"The man in black," he said.

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

"Yes."

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

VII

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

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

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

Alice watched him curiously, but no one else noticed

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

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

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

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

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

"Hey, Allie!"

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

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

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

"Wake," she said.

"I noticed the departed."

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

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

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

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

"Weed-eater?"

"Yes! What else did he have?"

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

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

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

"No need to be."

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

"I don't have change for this."

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

"Are you only passing through?" she asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What are you, drunk?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Under the bar, her hands worked faster.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

him.

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

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

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

"Then why don't you stop?"

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

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

She walked to the table and hesitated there, uncertain.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

VIII

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

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

"Um." He was rolling another cigarette.

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

"No."

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

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

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

"Don't go," she said.

"We'll see."

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

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

IX

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

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

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

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

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

"What's south of the desert?"

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

He got up.

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

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

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

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

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

x

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

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

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

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

"You meant my mule," the gunslinger said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Kennerly grinned again, showing gums and a few sociable yellow teeth. "Dwellers. Weed. Desert.

What else?" He cackled, and his eyes measured the gunslinger coldly.

"How big is the desert?"

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

"Sick? I heard he was dead."

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

"But you believe in demons."

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

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

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

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

"Drivel," the gunslinger said shortly.

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

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

"Surely. You stayin' a little?"

"I guess I might."

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

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

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

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

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

XI

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No," he said.

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

"Not now," he said thickly.

"I can make you strong -"

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

XII

The next night the bar was closed. It was whatever passed for the Sabbath in Tull. The gunslinger went to the tiny, leaning church by the graveyard while Allie washed tables with strong disinfectant and rinsed kerosene lamp chimnies in soapy water. An odd purple dusk had fallen, and the church, lit from the inside, looked almost like a blast furnace from the road.

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

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

No description could take the measure of the woman.

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

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

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

"My dear little brothers and sisters in Christ."

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

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

"A little rustle ran through the audience.

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

A soft, shurring sigh in the audience.

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

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

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

Moans, nods.

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

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

hat.

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

"O Jesus Savior - "

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

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

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

"Yesss - "

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

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

"Ahhh - "

"Ah, God - "

"Gawwwwwwww - "

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

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

"Yes, Lord!"

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

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

"The Interloper!"

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

"The Interloper!"

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

"In - "

"The - "

"Oh, Jesus . . . Oh - "

"- looper -

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"The... the Interloper."

"Called who?"

"Called Satan." Raw, oozing whisper.

"Will you renounce?"

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

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

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

"On my mother's name!"

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

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

"He forgives you that, Jonson."

"Praise God," Jonson said, still weeping.

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

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

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

"Yes and praise God!" Jonson wept.

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

"Yess... " Sated.

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

"Praise God... "

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

XIII

In bed again.

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

"How long has she been here?"

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

"Where did she come from? Which direction?"

"I don't know." Lying.

"Allie?"

"I don't know!"

"Allie?"

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

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

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

"You know the answer to that."

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

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

XIV

It was the last day, and he knew it.

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

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

"It's going to dust up today. "

"I'm not surprised."

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

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

XV

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

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

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

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

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

"He came to you," the gunslinger said.

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

"He screwed you. "

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

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

"Why did he heal the weed-eater?"

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

"I hope he smiled when he said it."

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

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

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

"Yes."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No!"

"Answer me!"

"No!"

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

"The demon, then," he said.

"No - "

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

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

"Answer me. "

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

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

She screamed something, high and inarticulate.

"What?"

"Mountains!"

"What about them?"

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

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

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

XVI

By the time he arrived at Kennerly's, a queer obscurity had come over the northern horizon and he knew it was dust. Over Tull the air was still dead quiet.
Kennerly was waiting for him on the chaff-strewn stage that was the floor of his barn. "Leaving?"
He grinned abjectly at the gunslinger.
"Yes."
"Not before the storm?"
"Ahead of it"
"The wind goes faster than a man on a mule. In the open it can kill you."
"I'll want the mule now," the gunslinger said simply.
"Sure." But Kennerly did not turn away, merely stood as if searching for something further to say, grinning his groveling, hate-filled grin, and his eyes flicked up and over the gunslinger's shoulder.
The gunslinger sidestepped and turned at the same time, and the heavy stick of stovewood that the girl Soobie held swished through the air, grazing his elbow only. She lost hold of it with the force of her swing and it clattered over the floor. In the explosive height of the loft, barn swallows took shadowed wing.
The girl looked at him bovinely. Her breasts thrust with overripe grandeur at the wash-faded shirt she wore. One thumb sought the haven of her mouth with dreamlike slowness.
The gunslinger turned back to Kennerly. Kennerly's grin was huge. His skin was waxy yellow. His eyes rolled in their sockets. "I - " he began in a phlegm-filled whisper and could not continue.
"The mule," the gunslinger prodded gently.
"Sure, sure, sure," Kennerly whispered, the grin now touched with incredulity. He shuffled after it.
He moved to where he could watch Kennerly, The
hostler brought the mule back and handed him the bridle.

. ,

"You get in an tend your sister," he said to Soobie.
Soobie tossed her head and didn't move.
The gunslinger left them there, staring at each other across the dusty, droppings-strewn floor, he with his sick grin, she with dumb, inanimate defiance. Outside the heat was still like a hammer.

XVII

He walked the mule up the center of the street, his boots sending up squirts of dust His waterbags were strapped across the mule's back.
He stopped at Sheb's, and Allie was not there. The place was deserted, battened for the storm, but still dirty from the night before. She had not begun her cleaning and the place was as fetid as a wet dog.
He filled his tote sack with corn meal, dried and roasted corn, and half of the raw hamburger in the cooler. He left four gold pieces stacked on the planked counter. Allie did not come down. Sheb's piano bid him a silent, yellow-toothed good-by. He stepped back out and cinched the tote sack across the mule's back. There was a tight feeling in his throat. He might still avoid the trap, but the chances were small. He was, after all, the interloper.
He walked past the shuttered, waiting buildings, feeling the eyes that peered through cracks and chinks. The man in black had played God in Tull. Was it only a sense of the cosmic comic, or a matter of desperation? It was a question of some importance.
There was a shrill, harried scream from behind him, and doors suddenly threw themselves open. Forms lunged. The trap was sprung, then. Men in long handles and men in dirty dungarees. Women in slacks and in faded dresses.
Even children, tagging after their parents. And in every hand there was a chunk of wood or a knife.
His reaction was automatic, instantaneous, inbred. He whirled on his heels while his hands pulled

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

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

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

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

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

INTERLOPER! THE ANTICHRIST!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

like scarecrows. Blood and brains flew in streamers.

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

He had time to reload one gun.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Silence came back in, filling jagged spaces.

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

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

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

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

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

He walked out of town. His mule was standing in a

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

XVIII

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

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

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

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

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

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

The gunslinger lit a smoke without replying.

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

"I don't know. "

"Are you?"

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

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

XIX

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

"The mule?" The gunslinger asked.

"I'll eat it," Brown said.

"Okay."

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

"You know it."

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

XX

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

He stirred again and awoke. He blinked at the dead fire with its own shape superimposed over the other, more geometrical one. He was a romantic, he knew it, and he guarded the knowledge jealously. That, of course, made him think of Cort again. He didn't know where Cort was. The world had moved on.

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

THE WAY STATION

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

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

Pretty-plain, loony-sane
The ways of the world all will change and all the ways remain the same
but if you're mad or only sane
the rain in Spain falls mainly on the plain.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

O Jesus, you're far gone.

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

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

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

... the rain in Spain...

He moved forward, drawing one gun.

... falls mainly on the plain.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Want something to eat?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I thought you were somebody else."

"The priest?"

The gunslinger looked up sharply. "What priest?"

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

"What did the priest look like?"

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

"Like a hood and a cassock?"

"What's a cassock?"

"A robe."

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

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

"I - I - "

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

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

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

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

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

The boy looked at him distractedly. "Yes."

"Which one?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Did somebody bring you?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"There was a place... the one before this one. A high

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

"A statue in the water?"

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

"Are you making this up?"

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

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

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

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

"A what?"

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

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

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

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

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

"With this."

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

"Where are you?" he asked.

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

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

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

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

"Uh-huh?"

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

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

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

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

"Jake?"

"Shhh. I want to sleep."

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

"Kay."

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

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

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

Demons, perhaps.

He shuddered abruptly, an abrupt twisting of his back. Heatflesh poked out on his skin, then receded. He went to the control switch and pushed the ON button. The machine began to hum. After perhaps half a minute, a stream of cool, clear water belched from the pipe and went down the drain to be recirculated. Perhaps three gallons flowed out of the pipe before the pump shut itself down with a final click. It was a thing as alien to this place and time as true love, and yet as concrete as a Judgment, a silent reminder of the time when the world had not yet moved on. It probably ran on an atomic slug, as there was no electricity within a thousand miles of here and even dry batteries would have lost their charge long ago. The gunslinger didn't like it. He went back and sat down beside the boy, who had put one hand under his cheek. Nice-looking boy. The gunslinger drank some more water and crossed his legs so he was sitting Indian fashion. The boy, like the squatter on the edge of the desert who kept the bird (Zoltan, the gunslinger remembered abruptly, the bird's name was Zoltan), had lost his sense of time, but the fact that the man in black was closer seemed beyond doubt. Not for the first time, the gunslinger wondered if the man in black was letting him catch up for some reason of his own. Perhaps the gunslinger was playing into his hands. He tried to imagine what the confrontation might be like, and could not. He was very hot, but he no longer felt sick. The nursery rhyme occurred to him again, but this time instead of his mother, he thought of Cort – Cort, with his face hem-stitched with the scars of bricks and bullets and blunt instruments. The scars of war. He wondered if Cort had ever had a love to match those monumental scars. He doubted it. He thought of Aileen, and of Marten, that incomplete enchanter.

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

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

Love o love o careless love

See what careless love has done.

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

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

pop, and went to the stable door. There was a small flame dancing in darkness on the porch of the inn. He walked toward it, his shadow long and black and trailing in the ochre light of the sunset. Jake was sitting by a kerosene lamp. "The oil was in a drum," he said, "but I was scared to burn it in the house. Everything's so dry -"

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

"We have to talk," he said.

Jake nodded.

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

"Are you going to kill him?"

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

"Where?"

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

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

"Only a handful."

"Corn?"

"A little."

The gunslinger nodded. "Is there a cellar?"

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

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

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

"What would you be afraid of?"

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

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

"Yes. Is he a bad man?"

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

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

"Of course."

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

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

They crossed to the stable together.

The next morning he explored the cellar.

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

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

The gunslinger peered around and waited for his nighteyes.

"You all right?" Jake called down nervously.

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

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

The cans were vegetables – green beans, yellow beans... and three cans of corned beef. He scooped up an armload and went back to the ladder. He climbed halfway up and handed them to Jake, who knelt to receive them. He went back for more. It was on the third trip that he heard the groaning in the foundations. He turned, looked, and felt a kind of dreamy terror wash over him, a feeling both languid and repellent, like sex in the water – one drowning within another. The foundation was composed of huge sandstone blocks that had probably been evenly cornered when the way station was new, but which were now at every zigzag, drunken angle. It made the wall look as if it were inscribed with strange, meandering hieroglyphics. And from the joining of two of these abstruse cracks, a thin spill of sand was running, as if something on the other side was digging itself through with slobbering, agonized intensity. The groaning rose and fell, becoming louder, until the whole cellar was full of the sound, an abstract noise of ripping pain and dreadful effort. "Come up!" Jake screamed. "O Jesus, mister, come up!" "Go away," the gunslinger said calmly. "Come up!" Jake screamed again. The gunslinger did not answer. He pulled leather with his right hand. There was a hole in the wall now, a hole as big as a coin. He could hear, through the curtain of his own terror, Jake's pattering feet as the boy ran. Then the spill of sand stopped. The groaning ceased, but there was a sound of steady, labored breathing. "Who are you?" The gunslinger asked. No answer. And in the High Speech, his voice filling with the old thunder of command, Roland demanded: "Who are you, Demon? Speak, if you would speak. My time is short; my hands lose patience." "Go slow," a dragging, clotted voice said from within the wall. And the gunslinger felt the dreamlike terror deepen and grow almost solid. It was the voice of Alice, the woman he had stayed with in the town of Tull. But she was dead; he had seen her go down himself, a bullet hole between her eyes. Fathoms seemed to swim by his eyes, descending. "Go slow past the Drawers, gunslinger. While you travel with the boy, the man in black travels with your soul in his pocket." "What do you mean? Speak on!" But the breathing was gone. The gunslinger stood for a moment, frozen, and then one of the huge spiders dropped on his arm and scrambled frantically up to his shoulder. With an involuntary grunt he brushed it away and got his feet moving. He did not want to do it, but custom was strict, inviolable. The dead from the dead, as the old proverb has it; only a corpse may speak. He went to the hole and punched at it. The sandstone crumbled easily at the edges, and with a bare stiffening of muscles, he thrust his hand through the wall. And touched something solid, with raised and fretted knobs. He drew it out. He held a jawbone, rotted at the far hinge. The teeth leaned this way and that. "All right," he said softly. He thrust it rudely into his back pocket and went back up the ladder, carrying the last cans awkwardly. He left the trapdoor open. The sun would get in and kill the spiders. Jake was halfway across the stable yard, cowering on the cracked, rubbly hardpan. He screamed when he saw the gunslinger, backed away a step or two, and then ran to him, crying. "I thought it got you, that it got you, I thought –" "It didn't." He held the boy to him, feeling his face, hot against his chest, and his hands, dry against his ribcage. It occurred to him later that this was when he began to love the boy – which was, of course, what the man in black must have planned all along. "Was it a demon?" The voice was muffled. "Yes. A speaking-demon. We don't have to go back there anymore. Come on." They went to the stable, and the gunslinger made a rough pack from the blanket he had slept under – it was hot and prickly, but there was nothing else. That done, he filled the waterbags from the pump. "You carry one of the waterbags," the gunslinger said. "Wear it around your shoulders – like a fakir carries his snake. See?" "Yes." The boy looked up at him worshipfully. He slung one of the bags. "Is it too heavy?" "No. It's fine." "Tell me the truth, now. I can't carry you if you get a sunstroke." "I won't have a sunstroke. I'll be okay."

The gunslinger nodded.

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

"Yes."

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

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

"Goodbye!" Jake cried. "Goodbye!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Here, sit down," the gunslinger said.

"No, I'm okay."

"Sit down."

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

"Drink."

"I'm not supposed to until – "

"Drink."

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

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

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

"That's neat," he said.

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

The boy shook his head sleepily.

"Sure. And there was an evil man – "

"The priest?"

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

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

"Lay over, then."

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

What would follow?

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

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

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

II

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

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

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

"Get ready," Roland whispered to Cuthbert.

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

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

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

"You were slow," he said.

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

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

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

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

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

"Look!" Roland cried. He pointed up.

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

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

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

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

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

He stood up proudly, the hawk on his arm.

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

"He struck me," Roland said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Come on," Roland said.

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

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

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

"He'll tell Cort."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"All right"

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

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

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

"In Farson?"

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

"Risky."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Of course," Hax said, and laughed.

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

Hax did not reply.

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

give no cramps to your belly, Robeson."

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

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

"Roland."

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

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

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

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

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

He looked more closely at his son.

"It preys on you."

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

His father smiled.

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

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

"Yes."

"He fed both of you when Cort – "

"Yes."

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

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

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

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

"Yet you told. Why?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Hang."

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

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

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

"Father?"

"What?"

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

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

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

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

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

"No," his father said flatly.

"Why?"

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

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

"Good night, father," Roland said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Let's go up," Roland said.

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

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

"All right."

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

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

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

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

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

"I won't sleep tonight"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Why did you do that?" Cuthbert asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Roland?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

III

"Look, " Jake said, pointing upward.

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

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

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

"Is that him?" Jake asked.

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

"That's him, Jake."

"Do you think we'll catch him?"

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

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

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

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

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

Except, perhaps, the road to the Tower.

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

THE ORACLE AND THE MOUNTAINS

The boy found the oracle and it almost destroyed him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"We stay here tomorrow," the gunslinger said.

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

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

"How do you know that?"

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

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

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

Susan, his beloved, was dying before his eyes:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Nnnnnnn-nnn -Jake.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jake screamed again.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I was?" Jake looked at him suspiciously.

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

"See?"

Jake nodded, bewildered.

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

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

The gunslinger only looked at him.

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

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

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

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

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

"I just do."

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

"All right," Jake said.

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

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

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

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

Jake only looked puzzled.

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

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

"What's that?"

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

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

"Will it hurt you?" Jake asked.

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

"I don't like it"

"Never mind."

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

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

"Not for a little while. Be quiet."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Please."

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

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

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

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

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

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

He went to the altar, stood beside it for a moment coherent thought was now almost impossible. His teeth felt strange in his head. The world held too much light. He climbed up on the altar and lay back. His mind was becoming a jungle full of strange thought-plants that he had never seen or suspected before, a willow-jungle that had grown up around a mescaline spring. The sky was water and he hung suspended over it. The thought gave him a vertigo that seemed faraway and unimportant. A line of old poetry occurred to him, not a nursery verse now, no; his mother had feared the drugs and the necessity of them (as she had feared Cort and the necessity for this beater of boys); this verse came from one of the Dens to the north of the desert, where men still lived among the machines that usually didn't work... and which sometimes ate the men when they did. The lines played again and again, reminding him (in an unconnected way that was typical of the mescaline rush) of snow falling in a globe he had owned as a child, mystic and half fantastical:

Beyond the reach of human range

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

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

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

The grasses of the clearing suddenly whipped and bent

I come.

I come.

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

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

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

"Speak prophecy," he said.

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

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

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

Would you have mercy on the boy?

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

"After," he said.

Now. Please. Now.

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

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

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

"Prophecy," he said – a bleak noun.

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

Sleep, then.

"No."

Then half-sleep.

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

And half-slept

Three. This is the number of your/ate.

Three?

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

Which three?

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

Tell me what you can.

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

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

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

The second?

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

The third?
In chains.
The man in black? Where is he?
Near. You will speak with him.
Of what will we speak?
The Tower.
The boy? Jake?

Tell me of the boy!
The boy is your gateway to the man in black. The man in black is your gate to the three. The three are your way to the Dark Tower.
How? How can that be? Why must it be? 'We see in part, and thus is the mirror -God damn you.
No god damned me.
"Don't patronize me, Thing. I'm stronger than you.

What do they call you, then? Star-slut? Whore of the Winds?
Some live on love that comes to the ancient places... even
in these sad and evil times. Some, gunslinger, live on blood. Even, I understand, on the blood
O/young boys.
May he not be spared?
Yes.
How?
Cease, gunslinger. Strike your camp and turn west. In the west there is still a need for men who
live by the bullet.
I am sworn by my father's guns and by the treachery of Marten.
Marten is no more. The man in black has eaten his soul. This you know.
I am sworn.
Then you are damned.
Have your way with me, bitch.

Eagerness.
The shadow swung over him, enfolded him. Suddenly ecstasy broken only by a galaxy of pain, as
faint and bright as ancient stars gone red with collapse. Faces came to him unbidden at the climax
of their coupling: Sylvia Pittston, Alice, the woman from Tull, Susan, Aileen, a hundred others.
And finally, after an eternity, he pushed her away from him, once again in his right mind, bone-
weary and disgusted.
No! It isn't enough! It -"Let me be," the gunslinger said. He sat up and almost
fell off the altar before regaining his feet. She touched him tentatively
(honeysuckle, jasmine, sweet attar)
and he pushed her violently, falling to his knees.
He staggered up and made his drunken way to the perimeter of the circle. He staggered through,
feeling a huge weight fall from his shoulders. He drew a shuddering, weeping breath. As he started
away he could feel
her standing at the bars of her prison, watching him go from her. He wondered how long it might be
before someone else crossed the desert and found her, hungry and alone. For a moment he felt
dwarfed by the possibilities of time.

"You're sick!"
Jake stood up fast when the gunslinger shambled back through the last trees and came into camp.
Jake had been huddled by the ruins of the tiny fire, the jawbone across his knees, gnawing
disconsolately on the bones of the rabbit. Now he ran toward the gunslinger with a look of
distress that made Roland feel the full, ugly weight of a coming betrayal - one he sensed which
might only be the first of many.
"No," he said. "Not sick. Just tired. I'm whipped." He gestured absently at the jawbone. "You can
throw that away."
Jake threw it quickly and violently, rubbing his hands across his shirt after doing it.
The gunslinger sat down - almost fell down - feeling the aching joints and the pummeled, thick
mind that was the unlovely afterglow of mescaline. His crotch also pulsed with a dull ache. He
rolled a cigarette with careful, unthinking slowness. Jake watched. The gunslinger had a sudden
impulse to tell him what he had learned, then thrust the idea away with horror. He wondered if a
part of him - mind or soul - might not be disintegrating.

"We sleep here tonight," the gunslinger said. "Tomorrow we climb. I'll go out a little later and see if I can't shoot something for supper. I've got to sleep now. Okay?"

"Sure."

The gunslinger nodded and lay back. When he woke up the shadows were long across the small grass clearing. "Build up the fire," he told Jake and tossed him his flint and steel. "Can you use that?"

"Yes, I think so."

The gunslinger walked toward the willow grove and then turned left, skirting it. At a place where the ground opened out and upward in heavy open grass, he stepped back into the shadows and stood silently. Faintly, clearly, he could hear the clik-clink-clik-clink of Jake striking sparks. He stood without moving for ten minutes, fifteen, twenty. Three rabbits came, and the gunslinger pulled leather. He took down the two plumpest, skinned them and gutted them, brought them back to the camp. Jake had the fire going and the water was already steaming over it.

The gunslinger nodded to him. "That's a good piece of work."

Jake flushed with pleasure and silently handed back the flint and steel.

While the stew cooked, the gunslinger used the last of the light to go back into the willow grove. Near the first pool he began to hack at the tough vines that grew near the water's marshy verge. Later, as the fire burned down to coals and Jake slept, he would plait them into ropes that might be of some limited use later. But he did not think somehow that the climb would be a particularly difficult one. He felt a sense of fate that he no longer even considered odd.

The vines bled green sap over his hands as he carried them back to where Jake waited.

They were up with the sun and packed in half an hour. The gunslinger hoped to shoot another rabbit in the meadow as they fed, but time was short and no rabbit showed itself. The bundle of their remaining food was now so small and light that Jake carried it easily. He had toughened up, this boy; you could see it.

The gunslinger carried their water, freshly drawn from one of the springs. He looped his three vine ropes

around his belly. They gave the circle of stones a wide berth (the gunslinger was afraid the boy might feel a recurrence of fear, but when they passed above it on a stony rise, Jake only offered it a passing glance and then looked at a bird that hovered upwind). Soon enough, the trees began to lose their height and lushness. Trunks were twisted and roots seemed to struggle with the earth in a tortured hunt for moisture.

"It's all so old," Jake said glumly when they paused for a rest. "Isn't there anything young?"

The gunslinger smiled and gave Jake an elbow. "You are," he said.

"Will it be a hard climb?"

The gunslinger looked at him, curious. "The mountains are high. Don't you think it will be a hard climb?"

Jake looked back at him, his eyes clouded, puzzled. "No."

They went on.

The sun climbed to its zenith, seemed to hang there more briefly than it ever had during the desert crossing, and then passed on, giving them back their shadows. Shelves of rock protruded from the rising land like the arms of giant easychairs buried in the earth. The scrub grass turned yellow and sere. Finally they were faced with a deep, chim neylike crevasse in their path and they scaled a short, peeling rise of rock to get around and above it. The ancient granite had faulted on lines that were steplike, and as they had both intuited, the climb was an easy one. They paused on the four-foot-wide scarp at the top and looked back over the falling land to the desert, which curled around the up land like a huge yellow paw. Further off it gleamed at them in a white shield that dazzled the eye, receding into dim waves of rising heat. The gunslinger felt faintly amazed at the realization that this desert had nearly murdered him.

From where they stood, in a new coolness, the desert certainly appeared momentous, but not deadly. They turned back to the business of the climb, scrambling over jackstraw falls of rock and crouch-walking up inclined planes of stone shot with glitters of quartz and mica. The rock was pleasantly warm to the touch, but the air was definitely cooler. In the late afternoon the gunslinger heard the faint sound of thunder. The rising line of the mountains obscured the sight of the rain on the other side, however.

When the shadows began to turn purple, they camped in the overhang of a jutting brow of rock. The gunslinger anchored their blanket above and below, fashioning a kind of shanty lean-to. They sat at the mouth of it, watching the sky spread a cloak over the world. Jake dangled his feet over the drop. The gunslinger rolled his evening smoke and eyed Jake half humorously. "Don't roll over in your sleep," he said, "or you may wake up in hell."

"I won't," Jake replied seriously. "My mother says -He broke it off.

"She says what?"

"That I sleep like a dead man," Jake finished. He looked at the gunslinger, who saw that the boy's mouth was trembling as he strove to keep back tears - only a boy, he thought, and pain smote him, like the ice pick that too much cold water can sometimes plant in the forehead. Only a boy. Why? Silly question. When a boy, wounded in body or spirit, called that question out to Cort, that ancient, scarred baffle-engine whose job it was to teach the sons of gunslingers the beginning of what they had to know, Cort would answer:

Why is a crooked letter and can't be made straight... never mind why, just get up, pus-head! Gel up! The day's young!

"Why am I here?" Jake asked. "Why did I forget everything from before?"

"Because the man in black has drawn you here," the gunslinger said. "And because of the Tower. The Tower stands at a kind of... power-nexus. In time. "

"I don't understand that!"

"Nor do I," the gunslinger said. "But something has been happening. Just in my own time. 'The world has moved on,' we say... we've always said. But it's moving on faster now. Something has happened to time."

They sat in silence. A breeze, faint but with an edge, picked at their legs. Somewhere it made a hollow whooooo in a rock fissure.

"Where do you come from?" Jake asked.

"From a place that no longer exists. Do you know the Bible?"

"Jesus and Moses. Sure."

The gunslinger smiled. "That's right. My land had a Biblical name - New Canaan, it was called. The land of milk and honey. In the Bible's Canaan, there were supposed to be grapes so big that men had to carry them on sledges. We didn't grow them that big, but it was a sweet land."

"I know about Ulysses," Jake said hesitantly. "Was he in the Bible?"

"Maybe," the gunslinger said. "The Book is lost now

- all except the parts I was forced to memorize.

"But the others - "

"No others," the gunslinger said. "I'm the last."

A tiny wasted moon began to rise, casting its slitted gaze down into the tumble of rocks where they sat.

"Was it pretty? Your country... your land?"

"It was beautiful," the gunslinger said absently. "There were fields and rivers and mists in the morning. But that's only pretty. My mother used to say that..., and that the only real beauty is order and love and light."

Jake made a noncommittal noise.

The gunslinger smoked and thought of how it had been

- the nights in the huge central hall, hundreds of richly clad figures moving through the slow, steady waltz steps or the faster, light ripples of the pol-kam, Aileen on his arm, her eyes brighter than the most precious gems, the light of the crystal-enclosed electric lights making highlights in the newly done hair of the courtesans and their half-cynical amours. The hall had been huge, an island of light whose age was beyond telling, as was the whole Central Place, which was made up of nearly a hundred stone castles. It had been twelve years since he had seen it, and leaving for the last time, Roland had ached as he turned his face away from it and began his first cast for the trail of the man in black. Even then, twelve years ago, the walls had fallen, weeds grew in the courtyards, bats roosted amongst the great beams of the central hall, and the galleries echoed with the soft swoop and whisper of swallows. The fields where Cort had taught them archery and gunnery and falconry were gone to hay and timothy and wild vines. In the huge and echoey kitchen where Hax had once held his own fuming and aromatic court, a grotesque colony of Slow Mutants nested, peering at him from the merciful darkness of pantries and shadowed pillars. The warm steam that had been filled with the pungent odors of roasting beef and pork had been transmuted to the clammy damp of moss and huge white toadstools grew in corners where not even the Slow Muties dared to encamp. The huge oak subcellar bulkhead stood open, and the most poignant smell of all had issued from that, and odor that seemed to symbolize with a flat finality all the hard facts of dissolution and decay: the high sharp odor of wine gone to vinegar. It had been no struggle to turn his face to the south and leave it behind - but it had hurt his heart.

"Was there a war?" Jake asked.

"Even better," the gunslinger said and pitched the last smoldering ember of his cigarette away.

"There was a revolution. We won every battle, and lost the war. No one won the war, unless maybe it was the scavengers. There must have been rich pickings for years after."

"I wish I'd lived there," Jake said wistfully.

"It was another world," the gunslinger said. "Time to turn in."

The boy, now only a dim shadow, turned on his side and curled up with the blanket tossed loosely over him. The gunslinger sat sentinel over him for perhaps an hour after, thinking his long, sober thoughts. Such meditation was a new thing for him, novel, sweet in a melancholy sort of way, but still utterly without practical value: there was no solution to the problem of Jake other than the one the Oracle had offered – and that was simply not possible. There might have been tragedy in the situation, but the gunslinger did not see that; he saw only the predestination that had always been there. And finally, his more natural character reasserted itself and he slept deeply, with no dreams.

The climb became grimmer on the following day as they continued to angle toward the narrow V of the pass through the mountains. The gunslinger pushed slowly, still with no sense of hurry. The dead stone beneath their feet left no trace of the man in black, but the gunslinger knew he had been this way before them – and not only from the path of his climb as he and Jake had observed him, tiny and bug-like, from the foothills. His aroma was printed on every cold downdraft of air. It was an oily, sardonic odor, as bitter to his nose as the aroma of devil-grass.

Jake's hair had grown much longer, and it curled slightly at the base of his sunburned neck. He climbed tough, moving with sure-footedness and no apparent acrophobia as they crossed gaps or scaled their way up ledged facings. Twice already he had gone up in places the gunslinger could not have managed. Jake had anchored one of the ropes so that the gunslinger could climb up hand over hand.

The following morning they climbed through a coldly damp snatch of cloud that began blotting out the tumbled slopes below them. Patches of hard, granulated snow began to appear nestled in some of the deeper pockets of stone. It glittered like quartz and its texture was as dry as sand. That afternoon they found a single footprint in one of these snow patches. Jake stared at it for a moment with awful fascination, then looked up frightfully, as if expecting to see the man in black materialize into his own footprint. The gunslinger tapped him on the shoulder then and pointed ahead. "Go. The day's getting old."

Later, they made camp in the last of the daylight on a wide, flat ledge to the east and north of the cut that slanted into the heart of the mountains. The air was frigid; they could see the puffs of their breath, and the humid sound of thunder in the red-and-purple afterglow of the day was surreal, slightly lunatic.

The gunslinger thought the boy might begin to question him, but there were no questions from Jake. The boy fell almost immediately into sleep. The gunslinger followed his example. He dreamed again of the dark place in the earth, the dungeon, and again of Jake as an alabaster saint with a nail through his forehead. He awoke with a gasp, instinctively reaching for the jawbone that was no longer there, expecting to feel the grass of that ancient grove. He felt rock instead, and the cold thinness of altitude in his lungs. Jake was asleep beside him, but his sleep was not easy: he twisted and mumbled inarticulate words to himself, chasing his own phantoms. The gunslinger laid over uneasily, and slept again.

They were another week before they reached the end of the beginning – for the gunslinger, a twisted prologue of twelve years, from the final crash of his native place and the gathering of the other three. For Jake, the gateway had been a strange death in another world. For the gunslinger it had been a stranger death yet – the endless hunt for the man in black through a world with neither map nor memory. Cuthbert and the others were gone, all of them gone:

Randolph, Jamie de Curry, Aileen, Susan, Marten (yes, they had dragged him down, and there had been gunplay, and even that grape had been bitter). Until finally only three remained of the old world, three like dreadful cards from a terrible deck of tarot cards: gunslinger, man in black, and the Dark Tower.

A week after Jake saw the footstep, they faced the man in black for a brief moment of time. In that moment, the gunslinger felt he could almost understand the gravid implication of the Tower itself, for that moment seemed to stretch out forever.

They continued southwest, reaching a point perhaps halfway through the Cyclopean mountain range, and just as the going seemed about to become really difficult for the first time (above them, seeming to lean out, the icy ledges and screaming buttes made the gunslinger feel an unpleasant reverse vertigo), they began to descend again along the side of the narrow pass. An angular, zigzagging path led them toward a canyon floor where an ice-edged stream boiled with slaty, headlong power from higher country still.

On that afternoon the boy paused and looked back at the gunslinger, who had paused to wash his face in the stream.

"I smell him," Jake said.

"So do I."

Ahead of them the mountain threw up its final defense

— a huge slab of insurmountable granite facing that climbed into cloudy infinity. At any moment the gunslinger expected a twist in the stream to bring them upon a high waterfall and the insurmountable smoothness of rock — dead end. But the air here had that odd magnifying quality that is common to high places, and it was another day before they reached that great granite face. The gunslinger began to feel the dreadful tug of anticipation again, the feeling that it was all finally in his grasp. Near the end, he had to fight himself to keep from breaking into a trot.

"Wait!" The boy had stopped suddenly. They faced a sharp elbow-bend in the stream; it boiled and frothed with high energy around the eroded hang of a giant sandstone boulder. All that morning they had been in the shadow of the mountains as the canyon narrowed.

Jake was trembling violently and his face had gone pale.

"What's the matter?"

"Let's go back," Jake whispered. "Let's go back quick."

The gunslinger's face was wooden.

"Please?" The boy's face was drawn, and his jawline shook with suppressed agony. Through the heavy blanket of stone they still heard thunder, as steady as machines in the earth. The slice of sky they could see had itself assumed a turbulent, gothic gray above them as warm and cold currents met and warred.

"Please, please!" The boy raised a fist, as if to strike the gunslinger's chest.

"No."

The boy's face took on wonder. "You're going to kill me. He killed me the first time and you are going to kill me now."

The gunslinger felt the lie on his lips. He spoke it:

"You'll be all right" And a greater lie. "I'll take care. "

Jake's face went gray, and he said no more. He put an unwilling hand out, and he and the gunslinger went around the elbow-bend. They came face to face with that final rising wall and the man in black.

He stood no more than twenty feet above them, just to the right of the waterfall that crashed and spilled from a huge ragged hole in the rock. Unseen wind rippled and tugged at his hooded robe. He held a staff in one hand. The other hand he held out to them in a mocking gesture of wel come. He seemed a prophet, and below that rushing sky, mounted on a ledge of rock, a prophet of doom, his voice the voice of Jeremiah.

"Gunslinger! How well you fulfill the prophecies of old! Good day and good day and good day!" He laughed, the sound echoing ever over the bellow of the falling water.

Without a thought and seemingly without a click of motor relays, the gunslinger had drawn his pistols. The boy cowered to his right and behind, a small shadow.

Roland fired three times before he could gain control of his traitor hands — the echoes bounced their bronze tones against the rock valley that rose around them, over the sound of the wind and water.

A spray of granite puffed over the head of the man in black; a second to the left of his hood; a third to the right. He had missed cleanly all three times.

The man in black laughed — a full, hearty laugh that seemed to challenge the receding echo of gunshots. "Would you kill all your answers so easily, gunslinger?"

"Come down," the gunslinger said. "Answers all around."

Again that huge, derisive laugh. "It's not your bullets I fear, Roland. It's your idea of answers that scares me. "

"Come down."

"The other side, I think," the man in black said. "On the other side we will hold much council."

His eyes flicked to Jake and he added:

"Just the two of us."

Jake flinched away from him with a small, whining cry, and the man in black turned, his robe swirling in the gray air like a batwing. He disappeared into the cleft in the rock from which the water spewed at full force. The gunslinger exercised grim will and did not send a bullet after him — would you kill all your answers so easily, gunslinger?

There was only the sound of wind and water, sounds that had been in this place of desolation for a thousand years. Yet the man in black had been here. After these twelve years, Roland had seen him close-up, spoken to him. And the man in black had laughed at him.

On the other side we will hold much council.

The boy looked up at him with dumbly submissive sheep's eyes, his body trembling. For a moment the

gunslinger saw the face of Alice, the girl from Tull, superimposed over Jake's, the scar standing out on her forehead like a mute accusation, and felt brute loathing for them both (it would not occur to him until much later that both the scar on Alice's forehead and the nail he saw spiked through Jake's forehead in his dreams were in the same place). Jake seemed to catch a whiff of his thought and a moan was dragged from his throat. But it was short; he twisted his lips shut over it. He held the makings of a fine man, perhaps a gunslinger in his own right if given time. Just the two of us.

The gunslinger felt a great and unholy thirst in some deep unknown pit of his body, a thirst no wine could touch. Worlds trembled, almost within reach of his fingers, and in some instinctual way he strove not to be corrupted, knowing in his colder mind that such strife was vain and always would be.

It was noon. He looked up, letting the cloudy, unsettled daylight shine for the last time on the all-too-vulnerable sun of his own righteousness. No one ever really pays for it in silver, he thought. The price of any evil – necessary or otherwise – comes due in flesh.

"Come with me or stay," the gunslinger said.

The boy only looked at him mutely. And to the gunslinger, in that final and vital moment of uncoupling from a moral principle, he ceased to be Jake and became only the boy, an impersonality to be moved and used.

Something screamed in the windy stillness; he and the boy both heard.

The gunslinger began, and after a moment Jake came after. Together they climbed the tumbled rock beside the steely-cold falls, and stood where the man in black had stood before them. And together they entered in where he had disappeared. The darkness swallowed them.

THE SLOW MUTANTS

The gunslinger spoke slowly to Jake in the rising and falling inflections of a dream:

"There were three of us: Cuthbert, Jamie, and I. We weren't supposed to be there, because none of us had passed from the time of children. If we had been caught, Cort would have striped us. But we weren't. I don't think any of the ones that went before us were caught, either. Boys must put on their fathers' pants in private, strut them in front of the mirror, and then sneak them back on their hangers; it was like that. The father pretends he doesn't notice the new way they are hung up, or the traces of boot-polish mustaches still under their noses. Do you see?" The boy said nothing. He had said nothing since they had relinquished the daylight. The gunslinger had talked hectically, feverishly, to fill his silence. He had not looked back at the lights as they passed into the lightlessness beneath the mountains, but the boy had. The gunslinger had read the failing of day in the soft mirror of Jake's cheek:

Now faint rose; now milk-glass; now pallid silver; now the last dusk-glow touch of evening; now nothing. The gunslinger had struck a false light and they had gone on.

Now they were camped. No echo from the man in black returned to them. Perhaps he had stopped to rest, too. Or perhaps he floated onward and without running-lights, through nighted chambers.

"It was held once a year in the Great Hall," the gunslinger went on. "We called it The Hall of Grandfathers. But it was only the Great Hall."

The sound of dripping water came to their ears.

"A courting rite." The gunslinger laughed deprecatingly, and the insensate walls made the sound into a loon-like wheeze. "In the old days, the books say, it was the welcoming of spring. But civilization, you know...."

He trailed off, unable to describe the change inherent in that mechanized noun, the death of the romantic and its sterile, carnal revenant, living only a forced respiration of glitter and ceremony; the geometric steps of courtship during the Easter-night dance at the Great Hall which had replaced the mad scribble of love which he could only intuit dimly – hollow grandeur in the place of mean and sweeping passions which might once have erased souls.

"They made something decadent out of it," the gunslinger said. "A play. A game." In his voice was all the unconscious distaste of the ascetic. His face, had there been stronger light to illumine it, would have shown change – harshness and sorrow. But his essential force had not been cut or diluted. The lack of imagination that still remained in that face was remarkable.

"But the Ball," the gunslinger said. "The Ball. . ."

The boy did not speak.

"There were five crystal chandeliers, heavy glass with electric lights. It was all light, it was an island of light.

"We had sneaked into one of the old balconies, the ones that were supposed to be unsafe. But we were still boys. We were above everything, and we could look down on it I don't remember that any of us said anything. We only looked, and we looked for hours.

"There was a great stone table where the gunslingers and their women sat, watching the dancers. A few of the gunslingers danced, but only a few. And they were the young ones. The other ones only sat, and it seemed to me they were half embarrassed in all that light, that civilized light. They were revered ones, the feared ones, the guardians, but they seemed like hostlers in that crowd of cavaliers with their soft women. . . .

"There were four circular tables loaded with food, and they turned all the time. The cooks' boys never stopped coming and going from seven until three the next morning. The tables rotated like clocks, and we could smell roast pork, beef, lobster, chickens, baked apples. There were ices and candies. There were great flaming skewers of meat.

"And Marten sat next to my mother and father - I knew them even from so high above - and once she and Marten danced, slowly and revolvingly, and the others cleared the floor for them and clapped when it was over. The gunslingers did not clap, but my father stood slowly and held his hands out to her. And she went, smiling.

"It was a moment of passage, boy. A time such as must be at the Tower itself, when things come together and hold and make power in time. My father had taken control, had been acknowledged and singled out. Marten was the acknowledger; my father was the mover. And his wife my mother, went to him, the connection between them. Betrayer.

"My father was the last lord of light."

The gunslinger looked down at his hands. The boy still said nothing. His face was only thoughtful.

"I remember how they danced," the gunslinger said softly. "My mother and Marten the enchanter. I remember how they danced, revolving slowly together and apart, in the old steps of courtship."

He looked at the boy, smiling. "But it meant nothing, you know. Because power had been passed in some way that none of them knew but all understood, and my mother was locked root and rind to the holder and wielder of that power. Was it not so? She went to him when the dance was over, didn't she? And clasped his hand? Did they applaud? Did the hall ring with it as those pansy-boys and their soft ladies applauded and lauded him? Did it? Did it?"

Bitter water dripped distantly in the darkness. The boy said nothing.

"I remember how they danced," the gunslinger said softly. "I remember how they danced. . . . "He looked up at the unseeable stone roof and it seemed for a moment that he might scream at it, rail at it, challenge it blindly - those dumb tonnages of insensible granite that bore their tiny lives in its stone intestine.

"What hand could have held the knife that did my father to his death?"

"I'm tired," the boy said wistfully.

The gunslinger lapsed into silence, and the boy laid over and put one hand between his cheek and the stone. The little flame in front of them guttered. The gunslinger rolled a smoke. It seemed he could see the crystal light still, in the sardonic hall of his memory; hear the shout of accolade, empty in a husked land that stood even then hopeless against a gray ocean of time. The island of light hurt him bitterly, and he wished he had never held witness to it, or to his father's cuckoldry.

He passed smoke between his mouth and nostrils, looking down at the boy. How we make large circles in earth for ourselves, he thought. How long before the daylight again?

He slept.

After the sound of his breathing had become long and steady and regular, the boy opened his eyes and looked at the gunslinger with an expression that was very much like love. The last light of the fire caught in one pupil for a moment and was drowned there. He went to sleep.

The gunslinger had lost most of his time sense in the desert, which was changeless; he lost the rest of it here in these chambers under the mountains, which were lightless. Neither of them had any means of telling time, and the concept of hours became meaningless. In a sense, they stood outside of time. A day might have been a week, or a week a day. They walked, they slept, they ate thinly. Their only companion was the steady thundering rush of the water, drilling its auger path through the stone. They followed it, drank from its flat, mineral-salted depth. At times the gunslinger thought he saw fugitive drifting lights like corpse-lamps beneath its surface, but supposed they were only projections of his brain, which had not forgotten the light. Still, he cautioned the boy not to put his feet in the water.

The range finder in his head took them on steadily.

The path beside the river (for it was a path; smooth, sunken to a slight concavity) led always

upward, toward the river's head. At regular intervals they came to curved stone pylons with sunken ringbolts; perhaps once oxen or stage-horses had tethered there. At each was a steel flagon holding an electric torch, but these were all barren of life and light. During the third period of rest-before-sleep, the boy wandered away a little. The gunslinger could hear small conversation of rattled pebbles as he moved cautiously.

"

"Careful," he said. "You can't see where you are.

"I'm crawling. It's . . . say!"

"What is it?" The gunslinger half crouched, touching the haft of one gun.

There was a slight pause. The gunslinger strained his eyes uselessly.

"I think it's a railroad," the boy said dubiously.

The gunslinger got up and walked slowly toward the sound of Jake's voice, leading with one foot lightly to test for pitfalls.

"Here." A hand reached out and cat's-pawed the gunslinger's face. The boy was very good in the dark, better than the gunslinger himself. His eyes seemed to dilate until there was no color left in them: the gunslinger saw this as he struck a meager light. There was no fuel in this rock womb, and what they had brought with them was going rapidly to ash. At times the urge to strike a light was well-nigh insatiable.

The boy was standing beside a curved rock wall that was lined with parallel metal staves off into the darkness. Each carried black bulbs that might once have been conductors of electricity. And beside and below, set only inches off the stone floor, were tracks of bright metal. What might have run on those tracks at one time? The gunslinger could only imagine black electric bullets, flying through this forever night with affrighted searchlight eyes going before. He had never heard of such things. But there were skeletons in the world, just as there were demons. He had once come upon a hermit who had gained a quasi-religious power over a miserable flock of kine-keepers by possession of an ancient gasoline pump. The hermit crouched beside it, one arm wrapped possessively around it, and preached wild, guttering, sullen sermons. He occasionally placed the still-bright steel nozzle, which was attached to a rotted rubber hose, between his legs. On the pump, in perfectly legible (although rust-clotted) letters, was a legend of unknown meaning: AMOCO. Lead Free. Amoco had become the totem of a thundergod, and they had worshipped Him with the half-mad slaughter of sheep.

Hulks, the gunslinger thought. Only meaningless hulks in sands that once were seas.

And now a railroad.

"We'll follow it," he said.

The boy said nothing.

The gunslinger extinguished the light and they slept. When the gunslinger awoke the boy was up before him, sitting on one of the rails and watching him sightlessly in the dark.

They followed the rails like blindmen, the gunslinger leading, the boy following. They slipped their feet along one rail always, also like blindmen. The steady rush of the river off to the right was their companion. They did not speak, and this went on for three periods of waking. The gunslinger felt no urge to think coherently, or to plan. His sleep was dreamless.

During the fourth period of waking and walking, they literally stumbled on a handcar.

The gunslinger ran into it chest-high, and the boy, walking on the other side, struck his forehead and went down with a cry.

The gunslinger made a light immediately. "Are you all right?" The words sounded sharp, almost waspish, and he winced at them.

"Yes." The boy was holding his head gingerly. He shook it once to make sure he had told the truth. They turned to look at what they had run into.

It was a flat square of metal that sat mutely on the tracks. There was a see-saw handle in the center of the square. The gunslinger had no immediate sense of it, but the boy knew immediately.

"It's a handcar."

"What?"

"Handcar," the boy said impatiently, "like in the old movies. Look."

He pulled himself up and went to the handle. He managed to push it down, but it was necessary to hang all his

weight on the handle. He grunted briefly. The handcar moved a foot, with silent timelessness, on the rails.

"It works a little hard," the boy said, as if apologizing for it.

The gunslinger pulled himself up and pushed the handle down. The handcar moved forward obediently, then stopped. he could feel a drive-shaft turn beneath his feet. The operation pleased him - it

was the first old machine other than the pump at the way station that he had seen in years which still worked well, but it disquieted him, too. It would take them to their destination that much quicker. The curse-kiss again, he thought, and knew the man in black had meant them to find this, too.

"Neat, huh?" The boy said, and his voice was full of loathing.

"What are movies?" The gunslinger asked again.

Jake still did not answer and they stood in a black silence, like in a tomb where life had fled. The gunslinger could hear his organs at work inside his body and the boy's respiration. That was all.

"You stand on one side. I stand on the other side," Jake said. "You'll have to push by yourself until it gets rolling good. Then I can help. First you push, then I push. We'll go right along. Get it?"

"I get it," the gunslinger said. His hands were in helpless, despairing fists.

"But you'll have to push by yourself until it gets rolling good," the boy repeated, looking at him.

The gunslinger had a sudden vivid picture of the Great Hall a year after the spring Ball, in the shattered, hulked shards of revolt, civil strife, and invasion. It was followed with the memory of Allie, the woman from Tull with the scar, pushed and pulled by the bullets that were killing her in reflex. It was followed by Jamie's face, blue in death, by Susan's, twisted and weeping. All my old friends, the gunslinger thought, and smiled hideously.

"I'll push," the gunslinger said.

He began to push.

They rolled on through the dark, faster now, no longer having to feel their way. Once the awkwardness of a buried age had been run off the handcar, it went smoothly. The boy tried to do his share, and the gunslinger allowed him small shifts – but mostly he pumped by himself, in large and chest-stretching rises and failings. The river was their companion, sometimes closer on their right, sometimes further away. Once it took on huge and thunderous hollowness, as if passing through a prehistoric cathedral narthex. Once the sound of it disappeared almost altogether. The speed and the made wind against their faces seemed to take the place of sight and to put them once again in a frame of time and reference. The gunslinger estimated they were making anywhere from ten to fifteen miles an hour, always on a shallow, almost imperceptible uphill grade that wore him out deceptively. When they stopped he slept like the stone itself. Their food was almost gone again. Neither of them worried about it.

For the gunslinger, the tenseness of a coming climax was as unperceivable but as real and as accretive as the fatigue of propelling the handcar. They were close to the end of the beginning. He felt like a performer placed on center stage minutes before the rise of the curtain; settled in position with his first line held in his mind, he heard the unseen audience rattling programs and settling in seats. He lived with a tight, tidy ball of unholy anticipation in his belly and welcomed the exercise that let him sleep.

The boy spoke less and less; but at their stopping place one sleep-period before they were attacked by the Slow Mutants, he asked the gunslinger almost shyly about his coming of age.

The gunslinger had been leaning against the handle, a cigarette from his dwindling supply of tobacco clamped in his mouth. He had been on the verge of his usual unthinking sleep when the boy asked his question.

"Why would you want to know that?" He asked.

The boy's voice was curiously stubborn, as if hiding embarrassment. "I just do." And after a pause, he added:

"I always wondered about growing up. It's mostly lies."

"It wasn't growing up," the gunslinger said. "I never grew up all at once. I did it one place and another along the way. I saw a man hung once. That was part of it, though I didn't know it then. I left a girl in a place called King's Town twelve years ago. That was another part. I never knew any of the parts when they happened. Only later I knew that."

He realized with some unease that he was avoiding.

"I suppose the coming of age was part, too," he said, almost grudgingly. "It was formal. Almost stylized; like a dance." He laughed unpleasantly. "Like love."

"Love and dying have been my life."

The boy said nothing.

"It was necessary to prove one's self in battle," the gunslinger began.

Summer and hot.

August had come to the land like a vampire lover, killing the land and the crops of the tenant farmers, turning the fields of the castle-city white and sterile. In the west, some miles distant and near the borders that were the end of the civilized world, fighting had already begun. All reports were bad, and all of them palled before the heat that rested over this place of the center. Cattle lolled

empty-eyed in the pens of the stockyards. Pigs grunted listlessly, unmindful of knives whetted for the coming fall. People whined about taxes and conscription, as they always have; but there was an emptiness beneath the apathetic passion play of politics. The center had frayed like a rag rug that had been washed and walked on and shaken and hung and dried. The lines and nets of mesh which held the last jewel at the breast of the world were unraveling. Things were not holding together. The earth drew in its breath in the summer of the coming eclipse.

The boy idled along the upper corridor of this stone place which was home, sensing these things, not understanding. He was also empty and dangerous.

It had been three years since the hanging of the cook who had always been able to find snacks for hungry boys, and he had filled out. Now, dressed only in faded denim pants, fourteen years old, he had already come to the widened chest-span and lengthening legs that would characterize his manhood. He was still unbedded, but two of the younger slatterns of a West-Town merchant had cast eyes on him. He had felt a response and felt it more strongly now. Even in the coolness of the passage, he felt sweat on his body.

Ahead were his mother's apartments and he approached them incuriously, meaning only to pass them and go upward to the roof, where a thin breeze and the pleasure of his hand awaited.

He had passed the door when a voice called him:

"You. Boy."

It was Marten, the enchanter. He was dressed with a suspicious, upsetting casualness - black whipcord trousers almost as tight as leotards, and a white shirt open halfway down his chest. His hair was tousled.

The boy looked at him silently.

"Come in, come in! Don't stand in the hall! Your mother wants to speak to you." He was smiling with his mouth, but the lines of his face held a deeper, more sardonic humor. Beneath that there was only coldness.

But his mother did not seem to want to see him. She sat in the low-backed chair by the large window in the central parlor of her apartments, the one which overlooked the hot blank stone of the central courtyard. She was dressed in a loose, informal gown and looked at the boy only once - a quick, glinting rueful smile, like autumn sun on stream water. During the rest of the interview she studied her hands.

He saw her seldom now, and the phantom of cradle songs had almost faded from his brain. But she was a beloved stranger. He felt an amorphous fear, and an uncoalesced hatred for Marten, his father's right-hand man (or was it the other way around?), was born.

And, of course, there had already been some back street talk - talk which he honestly thought he hadn't heard.

"Are you well?" She asked him softly, studying her hands. Marten stood beside her, a heavy, disturbing hand near the juncture of her white shoulder and white neck, smiling on them both. His brown eyes were dark to the point of blackness with smiling.

"Yes," he said.

"Your studies go well?"

"I'm trying," he said. They both knew he was not flash ingly intelligent like Cuthbert, or even quick, like Jamie. He was a plodder and a bludgeoner.

"And David?" She knew his affection for the hawk.

The boy looked up at Marten, still smiling paternally down on all this. "Past his prime."

His mother seemed to wince; for a moment Marten's face seemed to darken, his grip on her shoulder tighten.

Then she looked out into the hot whiteness of the day, and all was as it had been.

It's a charade, he thought. A game. Who is playing with whom?

"You have a scar on your forehead," Marten said, still smiling. "Are you going to be a fighter like your father or are you just slow?"

This time she did wince.

"Both," the boy said. He looked steadily at Marten and smiled painfully. Even in here, it was very hot.

Marten stopped smiling abruptly. "You can go to the roof now, boy. I believe you have business there."

But Marten had misunderstood, underestimated. They had been speaking in the low tongue, a parody of informality. But now the boy flashed into High Speech:

"My mother has not yet dismissed me, bondsman!"

Marten's face twisted as if quirt-lashed. The boy heard his mother's dreadful, woeful gasp. She spoke his name.

But the painful smile remained intact on the boy's face and he stepped forward. "Will you give me a sign of fealty, bondsman? In the name of my father whom you serve?"

Marten stared at him, rankly unbelieving.

"Go," Marten said gently. "Go and find your hand."

Smiling, the boy went.

As he closed the door and went back the way he came, he heard his mother wail. It was a banshee sound.

Then he heard Marten's laugh.

The boy continued to smile as he went to his test.

Jamie had come from the shop-wives, and when he saw the boy crossing the exercise yard, he ran to tell Roland the latest gossips of bloodshed and revolt to the west. But he fell aside, the words all unspoken. They had known each other since the time of infancy, and as boys they had dared each other, cuffed each other, and made a thousand explorations of the walls within which they had both been birthed.

The boy strode past him, staring without seeing, grinning his painful grin. He was walking toward Cort's cottage, where the shades were drawn to ward off the savage afternoon heat. Cort napped in the afternoon so that he could enjoy his evening tomcat forays into the mazed and filthy brothels of the lower town to the fullest extent

Jamie knew in a flash of intuition, knew what was to come, and in his fear and ecstasy he was torn between following Roland and going after the others.

Then his hypnotism was broken and he ran toward the main buildings, screaming. "Cuthbert! Allen! Thomas!" His screams sounded puny and thin in the heat. They had known, all of them, in that invisible way boys have, that the boy would be the first of them to try the line. But this was too soon.

The hideous grin on Roland's face galvanized him as no news of wars, revolts, and witchcrafts could have done. This was more than words from a toothless mouth given over fly-specked heads of lettuce.

Roland walked to the cottage of his teacher and kicked the door open. It slammed backward, hit the plain rough plaster of the wall and rebounded.

He had never been here before. The entrance opened on an austere kitchen that was cool and brown.

A table. Two straight chairs. Two cabinets. A faded linoleum floor, tracked in black paths from the cooler set in the floor to the counter where knives hung, to the table.

A public man's privacy here. The last faded sobriety of a violent midnight carouser who had loved the boys of three generations roughly, and made some of them into gunslingers.

"Cort!"

He kicked the table, sending it across the room and into the counter. Knives from the wall rack fell in twinkling jackstraws.

There was thick stirring in the other room, a half-sleep clearing of the throat. The boy did not enter, knowing it was sham, knowing that Cort had awakened immediately in the cottage's other room and stood with one glittering eye beside the door, waiting to break the intruder's un wary neck.

"Cort, I want you, bondsman!"

Now he spoke the High Speech, and Cort swung the door open. He was dressed only in thin underwear shorts, a squat man with bow legs, runneled with scars from top to toe, thick with twists of muscle. There was a round, bulging belly. The boy knew from experience that it was spring steel. The one good eye glared at him from the bashed and dented hairless head.

The boy saluted formally. "Teach me no more, bonds-

''

man. Today I teach you.

"You are early, puler," he said casually, but he also spoke the High Speech. "Five years early, I should judge. I will ask only once. Will you renege?"

The boy only smiled his hideous, painful smile. For Cort, who had seen the smile on a score of bloodied, scarlet-skied fields of honor and dishonor, it was answer enough

— perhaps the only answer he would have believed.

"It's too bad," the teacher said absently. "You have been a most promising pupil — the best in two dozen years, I should say. It will be sad to see you broken and set upon a blind path. But the

world has moved on. Bad times are on horseback."

The boy still did not speak (and would have been incapable of any coherent explanation, had it been required), but for the first time the awful smile softened a little.

"Still, there is the line of blood," Cort said somberly, "revolt and witchcraft to the west or no. I am your bondsman, boy. I recognize your command and bow to it now -if never again - with my heart."

And Cort, who had cuffed him, kicked him, bled him, cursed him, made mock of him and called him the very eye of syphilis, bent to one knee and bowed his head.

The boy touched the leathery, vulnerable flesh of his neck with wonder, "Rise, bondsman. In love." Cort stood slowly, and there might have been pain behind the impassive mask of his reamed features. "This is waste. Renege, boy. I break my own oath. Renege, and wait!"

The boy said nothing.

"Very well." Cort's voice became dry and businesslike. "One hour. And the weapon of your choice. "

"You will bring your stick?"

"I always have."

"How many sticks have been taken from you, Cort?" Which was tantamount to asking: How many boys have entered the square yard beyond the Great Hall and returned as gunslinger apprentices?

"No stick will be taken from me today," Cort said slowly. "I regret it. There is only the once, boy. The penalty for overeagerness is the same as the penalty for unworthiness. Can you not wait?"

The boy recalled Marten standing over him, tall as mountains. "No."

"Very well. What weapon do you choose?"

The boy said nothing.

Cort's smile showed a jagged ring of teeth. "Wise enough to begin. In an hour. You realize you will in all probability never see the others, or your father, or this place again?"

"I know what exile means," he said softly.

"Go now."

The boy went, without looking back.

The cellar of the barn was spuriously cool, dank, smelling of cobwebs and earthwater. It was lit from the ubiquitous sun, but felt none of the day's heat; the boy kept the hawk here and the bird seemed comfortable enough.

David was old, now, and no longer hunted the sky. His feathers had lost the radiant animal brightness of three years ago, but the eyes were still as piercing and motionless as ever. You cannot friend a hawk, they said, unless you are a hawk yourself, alone and only a sojourner in the land, without friends or the need of them. The hawk pays no coinage to morals.

David was an old hawk now. The boy hoped (or was he too unimaginative to hope? Did he only know?) that he himself was a young one.

"Hai," he said softly and extended his arm to the tethered perch.

The hawk stepped onto the boy's arm and stood motionless, unhooded. With his other hand the boy reached into his pocket and fished out a bit of dried jerky. The hawk snapped it deftly from between his fingers and made it disappear.

The boy began to stroke David very carefully. Cort most probably would not have believed it if he had seen it, but Cort did not believe the boy's time had come, either.

"I think you die today," he said, continuing to stroke. "I think you will be made sacrifice, like all those little birds we trained you on. Do you remember? No? It doesn't matter. After today, I am the hawk."

David stood on his arm, silent and unblinking, indifferent to his life or death.

"You are old," the boy said reflectively. "And perhaps not my friend. Even a year ago you would have had my eyes instead of that little string of meat, isn't it so? Cort would laugh. But if we get close enough . . . which is it, bird? Age . or friendship?"

David did not say.

The boy hooded him and found the jesses, which were looped at the end of David's perch. They left the barn.

The yard behind the Great Hall was not really a yard at all, but only a green corridor whose walls were formed by tangled, thick-grown hedges. It had been used for the rite of coming of age since time out of mind, long before Cort and his predecessor, who had died of a stab-wound from an overzealous hand in this place. Many boys had left the corridor from the east end, where the teacher always entered, as men. The east end faced the Great Hall and all the civilization and intrigue of the lighted world. Many more had slunk away, beaten and bloody, from the west end, where the boys always entered, as boys forever. The west end faced the mountains and the hut-

dwellers; beyond that, the tangled barbarian forests; and beyond that the desert. The boy who became a man progressed from darkness and unlearning to light and responsibility. The boy who was beaten could only retreat, forever and forever. The hallway was as smooth and green as a gaming field. It was exactly fifty yards long.

Each end was usually clogged with tense spectators and relatives, for the ritual was usually forecast with great accuracy – eighteen was the most common age (those who had not made their test by the age of twenty-five usually slipped into obscurity as freeholders, unable to face the brutal all-or-nothing fact of the field and the test). But on this day there were none but Jamie, Cuthbert, Allen, and Thomas. They clustered at the boy's end, gape-mouthed and frankly terrified.

"Your weapon, stupid!" Cuthbert hissed, in agony. "You forgot your weapon!"

"I have it," the boy said distantly. Dimly he wondered if the news of this had reached yet to the central buildings, to his mother – and Marten. His father was on a hunt, not due back for weeks. In this he felt a sense of shame, for he felt that in his father he would have found understanding, if not approval. "Has Cort come?"

"Cort is here." The voice came from the far end of the corridor, and Cort stepped into view, dressed in a short singlet. A heavy leather band encircled his forehead to keep sweat from his eyes. He held an ironwood stick in one hand, sharp on one end, heavily blunted and spatulate on the other. He began the litany which all of them, chosen by the blind blood of their fathers, had known since early childhood, learned against the day when they would, perchance, become men.

"Have you come here for a serious purpose, boy?"

"I have come for a serious purpose, teacher."

"Have you come as an outcast from your father's house?"

"I have so come, teacher." And would remain outcast until he had bested Cort. If Cort bested him, he would remain outcast forever.

"Have you come with your chosen weapon?"

"I have so come, teacher."

"What is your weapon?" This was the teacher's advantage, his chance to adjust his plan of battle to the sling or the spear or the net.

"My weapon is David, teacher."

Cort halted only briefly.

"So then have you at me, boy?"

"I do."

"Be swift, then."

And Cort advanced into the corridor, switching his pike from one hand to the other. The boys sighed flutteringly, like birds, as their compatriot stepped to meet him.

My weapon is David, teacher.

Did Cort remember? Had he fully understood? If so, perhaps it was all lost. It turned on surprise – and on whatever stuff the hawk had left in him. Would he only sit, disinterested, on the boy's arm, while Cort struck him brainless with the ironwood? Or seek the high, hot sky?

They drew close together, and the boy loosened the hawk's hood with nerveless fingers. It dropped to the green grass, and the boy halted in his tracks. He saw Cort's eyes drop to the bird and widen with surprise and slow-dawning comprehension.

Now, then.

"At him!" The boy cried and raised his arm.

And David flew like a silent brown bullet, stubby wings pumping once, twice, three times, before crashing into Cort's face, talons and beak searching.

"Hai! Roland!" Cuthbert screamed deliriously.

Cort staggered backwards, off balance. The ironwood staff rose and beat futilely at the air about his head. The hawk was an undulating, blurred bundle of feathers.

The boy arrowed forward, his hand held out in a straight wedge, his elbow locked.

Still, Cort was almost too quick for him. The bird had covered ninety percent of his vision, but the ironwood came up again, spatulate end forward, and Cort cold bloodily performed the only action that could turn events at that point. He beat his own face three times, biceps flexing mercilessly.

David fell away, broken and twisted. One wing flapped at the ground frantically. His cold, predator's eyes stared fiercely into the teacher's bloody, streaming face. Cort's bad eye now bulged blindly from its socket.

The boy delivered a kick to Cort's temple, connecting solidly. It should have ended it; his leg had been numbed by Cort's only blow, but it still should have ended it. It did not. For a moment Cort's face went slack, and then he lunged, grabbing for the boy's foot.

The boy skipped back and tripped over his own feet. He went down asprawl. He heard, from far away the sound of Jamie's scream.

Cort was up, ready to fall on him and finish it. He had lost his advantage. For a moment they looked at each other, the teacher standing over the pupil, with gouts of blood pouring from the left side of his face, the bad eye now closed except for a thin slit of white. There would be no brothels for Cort this night.

Something ripped jaggedly at the boy's hand. It was the hawk, David, tearing blindly. Both wings were broken. It was incredible that he still lived.

The boy grabbed him like a stone, unmindful of the jabbing, diving beak that was taking the flesh from his wrist in ribbons. As Cort flew at him, all spread-eagled, the boy threw the hawk upward.

"Hai! David! Kill!"

Then Cort blotted out the sun and came down atop of him.

The bird was smashed between them, and the boy felt a calloused thumb probe for the socket of his eye. He turned it, at the same time bringing up the slab of his thigh to block Cort's crotch-seeking knee. His own hand flailed against the tree of Cort's neck in three hard chops. It was like hitting ribbed stone.

Then Cort made a thick grunting. His body shuddered. Faintly, the boy saw one hand flailing for the dropped stick, and with a jackknifing lunge, he kicked it out of reach. David had hooked one talon into Cort's right ear. The other battered mercilessly at the teacher's cheek, making it a ruin. Warm blood splattered the boy's face, smelling of sheared copper.

Cort's fist struck the bird once, breaking it's back. Again, and the neck snapped away at a crooked angle. And still the talon clutched. There was no ear now; only a red hole tunneled into the side of Cort's skull. The third blow sent the bird flying, clearing Cort's face.

The boy brought the edge of his hand across the bridge of Cort's nose, breaking the thin bone. Blood sprayed.

Cort's grasping, unseeing hand ripped at the boy's buttocks and Roland rolled away blindly, finding Cort's stick, rising to his knees.

Cort came to his own knees, grinning. His face was curtained with gore. The one seeing eye rolled madly in its socket. The nose was smashed over to a haunted, leaning angle. Both cheeks hung in flaps.

The boy held his stick like a baseball player waiting for the pitch.

Cort double-fainted, then came directly at him.

The boy was ready. The ironwood swung in a flat arc, striking Cort's skull with a dull thudding noise. Cort fell on his side, looking at the boy with a lazy unseeing expression. A tiny trickle of spit came from his mouth.

"Yield or die," the boy said. His mouth was filled with wet cotton.

And Cort smiled. Nearly all consciousness was gone, and he would remain tended in his cottage for a week afterward, wrapped in the blackness of coma, but now he held on with all the strength of his pitiless, shadowless life.

"I yield, gunslinger. I yield smiling."

Cort's clear eye closed.

The gunslinger shook him gently, but with persistence. The others were around him now, their hands trembling to thump his back and hoist him to their shoulders; but they held back, afraid, sensing a new gulf. Yet it was not as strange as it could have been, because there had always been a gulf between this one and the rest.

Cort's eye fluttered open again, weakly.

"The key," the gunslinger said. "My birthright, teacher. I need it."

His birthright was the guns – not the heavy ones of his father, weighted with sandalwood – but guns, all the same. Forbidden to all but a few. The ultimate, the final weapon. In the heavy vault under the barracks where he by ancient law was now required to abide, away from his mother's breast, hung his apprentice weapons, heavy cumbersome things of steel and nickel. Yet they had seen his father through his apprenticeship, and his father now ruled at least in name.

"Is it so fearsome, then?" Cort muttered, as if in his sleep. "So pressing? I feared so. And yet you won."

"The key."

"The hawk . . . a fine ploy. A fine weapon. How long did it take you to train the bastard?"

"I never trained David. I friended him. The key."

"Under my belt, gunslinger." The eye closed again.

The gunslinger reached under Cort's belt, feeling the heavy press of his belly, the huge muscles there now slack and asleep. The key was on a brass ring. He clutched it in his hand, restraining the mad urge to thrust it up to the sky in a salutation of victory.

He got to his feet and was finally turning to the others when Cort's hand fumbled for his foot. For a moment the gunslinger feared some last attack and tensed, but Cort only looked up at him and beckoned with one crusted finger.

"I'm going to sleep now," Cort whispered calmly. "Perhaps forever, I don't know. I teach you no more, gunslinger. You have surpassed me, and two years younger than your father, who was the youngest. But let me counsel."

"What?" Impatiently.

"Wait."

"Huh?" The word was startled out of him.

"Let the word and the legend go before you. There are those who will carry both." His eyes flicked over the gunslinger's shoulder. "Fools, perchance. Let the word go before you. Let your shadow grow. Let it grow hair on its face. Let it become dark." He smiled grotesquely. "Given time, words may even enchant an enchanter. Do you take my meaning, gunslinger?"

"Yes."

"Will you take my last counsel?"

The gunslinger rocked back on his heels, a hunkered, thinking posture that foreshadowed the man. He looked at the sky. It was deepening, purpling. The heat of the day was failing and thunderheads in the west foretold rain. Lightning tines jabbed the placid flank of the rising foot hills miles distant. Beyond that, the mountains. Beyond that, the rising fountains of blood and unreason. He was tired, tired into his bones and beyond.

He looked back at Cort. "I will bury my hawk tonight, teacher. And later go into lower town to inform those in the brothels that will wonder about you."

Cort's lips parted in a pained smile. And then he slept.

The gunslinger got to his feet and turned to the others. "Make a litter and take him to his house. Then bring a nurse. No, two nurses. Okay?"

They still watched him, caught in a bated moment that was not yet able to be broken. They still looked for a corona of fire, or a werewolf change of features.

"Two nurses," the gunslinger repeated, and then smiled. They smiled.

"You god-damned horse drover!" Cuthbert suddenly yelled, grinning. "You haven't left enough meat for the rest of us to pick off the bone!"

"The world won't move on tomorrow," the gunslinger said, quoting the old adage with a smile.

"Allen, you butter ass. Move your freight"

Allen set about making the litter; Thomas and Jamie went together to the main hall and the infirmary.

The gunslinger and Cuthbert looked at each other. They had always been the closest – or as close as they could be under the particular shades of their characters. There was a speculative, open light in Cuthbert's eyes, and the gunslinger controlled only with great difficulty the need to tell him not to call for the test for a year or even eighteen months, lest he go west. But they had been through a great deal together, and the gunslinger did not feel he could risk it without an expression that might be taken for patronization. I've begun to scheme, he thought, and was a little dismayed. Then he thought of Marten, of his mother, and he smiled a deceiver's smile at his friend.

I am to be the first, he thought, knowing it for the first time, although he had thought of it (in a bemused way) many times before. I am to be first

"Let's go," he said.

"With pleasure, gunslinger."

They left by the east end of the hedge-bordered corridor; Thomas and Jamie were returning with the nurses already. They looked like ghosts in their heavy white robes, crossed at the breast with red.

"Shall I help you with the hawk?" Cuthbert asked.

"Yes," the gunslinger said.

And later, when darkness had come and the rushing thundershowers with it; while huge, phantom caissons rolled across the sky and lightning washed the crooked streets of the lower town in blue fire; while horses stood at hitching rails with their heads down and their tails drooping, the gunslinger took a woman and lay with her.

It was quick and good. When it was over and they lay side by side without speaking, it began to hail with a brief, rattling ferocity. Downstairs and far away, someone was playing Hey Jude ragtime. The gunslinger's mind turned reflectively inward. It was in that hail-splattered silence, just before sleep overtook him, that he first thought that he might also be the last.

The gunslinger did not, of course, tell the boy all of this, but perhaps most of it had come

through anyway. He had already realized that this was an extremely perceptive boy, not so different from Cuthbert, or even Jamie.

"You asleep?" the gunslinger asked.

"No."

"Did you understand what I told you?"

"Understand it?" The boy asked, with cautious scorn. "Understand it? Are you kidding?"

"No." But the gunslinger felt defensive. He had never told anyone about his coming of age before, because he felt ambivalent about it. Of course, the hawk had been a perfectly acceptable weapon, yet it had been a trick, too. And a betrayal. The first of many: Am I readying to throw this boy at the man in black?

"I understood it," the boy said. "It was a game, wasn't it? Do grown men always have to play games? Does everything have to be an excuse for another kind of game? Do any men grow up or do they only come of age?"

"You don't know everything," the gunslinger said, trying to hold his slow anger.

"No. But I know what I am to you."

"And what is that?" The gunslinger asked tightly.

"A poker chip."

The gunslinger felt an urge to find a rock and brain the boy. Instead, he held his tongue.

"Go to sleep," he said. "Boys need their sleep."

And in his mind he heard Marten's echo: Go and find your hand.

He sat stiffly in the darkness, stunned with horror and terrified (for the first time in his existence; of anything) of the self-loathing that might come.

During the next period of waking, the railway angled closer to the underground river, and they came upon the Slow Mutants.

Jake saw the first one and screamed aloud.

The gunslinger's head, which had been fixed straight forward as he pumped the handcar, jerked to the right. There was a rotten jack-o-lantern greenness below and away from them, circular and pulsating faintly. For the first time he became aware of odor – faint, unpleasant, wet.

The greenness was a face, and the face was abnormal. Above the flattened nose was an insectile node of eyes, looking at them expressionlessly. The gunslinger felt an atavistic crawl in his intestines and privates. He stepped up the rhythm of arms and handcar handle slightly.

The glowing face faded.

"What was it?" the boy asked, crawling. "What – "The words stopped dumb in his throat as they came up upon and passed a group of three faintly glowing forms, standing between the rails and the invisible river, watching them, motionless.

"They're Slow Mutants," the gunslinger said. "I don't

think they'll bother us. They're probably just as frightened of us as we are of – "

One of the forms broke free and shambled toward them, glowing and changing. The face was that of a starving idiot. The faint naked body had been transformed into a knotted mess of tentacular limbs with suckers.

The boy screamed again and crowded against the gunslinger's leg like an affrighted dog.

One of the tentacles pawed across the flat platform of the handcar. It reeked of the wet and the dark and of strangeness. The gunslinger let loose of the handle and drew. He put a bullet through the forehead of the starving idiot face. It fell away, its faint swamp-fire glow fading, an eclipsed moon. The gunflash lay bright and branded on their dark retinas, fading only reluctantly. The smell of expended powder was hot and savage and alien in this buried place.

There were others, more of them. None moved against them overtly, but they were closing in on the tracks, a silent, hideous party of rubbernecks.

"You may have to pump for me," the gunslinger said. "Can you?"

"Yes."

"Then be ready."

The boy stood close to him, his body poised. His eyes took in the Slow Mutants only as they passed, not traversing, not seeing more than they had to. The boy assumed a psychic bulge of terror, as if his very id had somehow sprung out through his pores to form a telepathic shield. The gunslinger pumped steadily but did not increase his speed. The Slow Mutants could smell their terror, he knew that, but he doubted if terror would be enough for them. He and the boy were, after all, creatures of the light, and whole. How they must hate us, he thought, and wondered if they had hated the man in black in the same way.

He thought not, or perhaps he had passed among them and through their pitiful hive colony unknown, only the shadow of a dark wing.

The boy made a noise in his throat and the gunslinger turned his head almost casually. Four of them were charging the handcar in a stumbling way – one of them in the process of finding a handgrip.

The gunslinger let go of the handle and drew again, with the same sleepy casual motion. He shot the lead mutant in the head. The mutant made a sighing, sobbing noise and began to grin. Its hands were limp and fishlike, dead; the fingers clove to one another like the fingers of a glove long immersed in drying mud. One of these corpse-hands found the boy's foot and began to pull.

The boy shrieked aloud in the granite womb.

The gunslinger shot the mutant in the chest. It began to slobber through the grin. Jake was going off the side. The gunslinger caught one of his arms and was almost pulled off balance himself. The thing was amazingly strong. The gunslinger put another bullet in the mutant's head. One eye went out like a candle. Still it pulled. They engaged in a silent tug of war for Jake's jerking, wriggling body. They yanked on him like a wishbone.

The handcar was slowing down. The others began to close in – the lame, the halt, the blind. Perhaps they only looked for a Jesus to heal them, to raise them Lazarus-like from the darkness. It's the end for the boy, the gunslinger thought with perfect coldness. This is the end he meant. Let go and pump or hold on and be buried. The end for the boy.

He gave a tremendous yank on the boy's arm and shot the mutant in the belly. For one frozen moment its grip grew even tighter and Jake began to slide off the edge again. Then the dead mud-hands loosened, and the Slow Mutie fell on its face between the tracks behind the slowing handcar, still grinning.

"I thought you'd leave me," the boy was sobbing. "I thought . . . I thought. . ."

"Hold onto my belt," the gunslinger said. "Hold on just as tight as you can."

The hand worked into his belt and clutched there; the boy was breathing in great convulsive, silent gasps.

The gunslinger began to pump steadily again, and the handcar picked up speed. The Slow Mutants fell back a step and watched them go with faces hardly human (or pathetically so), faces that generated the weak phosphorescence common to those weird deep-sea fishes that live under incredible black pressure, faces that held no anger or hate on their senseless orbs, but only what seemed to be a semiconscious, idiot regret.

"They're thinning," the gunslinger said. The drawn-up muscles of his lower belly and privates relaxed the smallest bit. "They're –"

The Slow Mutants had put rocks across the track. The way was blocked. It had been a quick, poor job, perhaps the work of only a minute to clear, but they were stopped. And someone would have to get down and move them. The boy moaned and shuddered closer to the gunslinger. The gunslinger let go of the handle and the handcar coasted noiselessly to the rocks, where it thumped to rest.

The Slow Mutants began to close in again, almost casually, almost as if they had been passing by, lost in a dream of darkness, and had found someone of whom to ask directions. A street-corner congregation of the damned beneath the ancient rock.

"Are they going to get us?" The boy asked calmly.

"No. Be quiet a second."

He looked at the rocks. The mutants were weak, of course, and had not been able to drag any of the boulders to block their way. Only small rocks. Only enough to stop them, to make someone get down.

"Get down," the gunslinger said. "You'll have to move them. I'll cover you."

"No," the boy whispered. "Please."

"I can't give you a gun and I can't move the rocks and shoot too. You have to get down."

Jake's eyes rolled terribly; for a moment his body shuddered in tune with the turnings of his mind, and then he wriggled over the side and began to throw rocks to the right and the left madly, not looking.

The gunslinger drew and waited.

Two of them, lurching rather than walking, went for the boy with arms like dough. The guns did their work, stitching the darkness with red-white lances of light that pushed needles of pain into the gunslinger's eyes. The boy screamed and continued to throw away rocks. Witch-glow leaped and danced. Hard to see, now, that was the worst. Everything had gone to shadows.

One of them, glowing hardly at all, suddenly reached for the boy with rubber boogeyman arms. Eyes that ate up half the mutie's head rolled wetly.

Jake screamed again and turned to struggle.

The gunslinger fired without allowing himself to think, before his spotty vision could betray his hands into a terrible quiver; the two heads were only inches apart. It was the mutie who fell, slitheringly.

Jake threw rocks wildly. The mutants milled just outside the invisible line of trespass, closing a

little at a time, now very close. Others had caught up, swelling their number. "All right," the gunslinger said. "Get on. Quick." When the boy moved, the mutants came at them. Jake was over the side and scrambling to his feet; the gunslinger was already pumping again, all out. Both guns were holstered now. They must run. Strange hands slapped the metal plane of the car's surface. The boy was holding his belt with both hands now, his face pressed tightly into the small of the gunslinger's back. A group of them ran onto the tracks, their faces full of that mindless, casual anticipation. The gunslinger was pumped full of adrenalin; the car was flying along the tracks into the darkness. They struck the four or five pitiful hulks full force. They flew like rotten bananas struck from the stem. On and on, into the soundless, flying, banshee darkness. After an age, the boy raised his face into the made wind, dreading and yet needing to know. The ghost of gun-flashes still lingered on his retinas. There was nothing to see but the darkness and nothing to hear but the rumble of the river. "They're gone," the boy said, suddenly fearing an end to the tracks in the darkness, and the wounding crash as they jumped the rails and plunged to twisted ruin. He had ridden in cars; once his humorless father had driven at ninety on the New Jersey Turnpike and had been stopped. But he had never ridden like this, with the wind and the blindness and the terrors behind and ahead, with the sound of the river like a chuckling voice – the voice of the man in black. The gunslinger's arms were pistons in a lunatic human factory. "They're gone," the boy said timidly, the words ripped from his mouth by the wind. "You can slow down now. We left them behind." But the gunslinger did not hear. They careened onward into the strange dark. They went on three periods of waking and sleeping without incident.

During the fourth period of waking (halfway through? three-quarters? they didn't know – only that they weren't tired enough yet to stop) there was a sharp thump beneath them, the handcar swayed, and their bodies immediately leaned to the right with gravity as the rails took a gradual turn to the left.

There was a light ahead – a glow so faint and alien that it seemed at first to be a totally new element, neither earth, air, fire, or water. It had no color and could only be discerned by the fact that they had regained their hands and faces in a dimension beyond that of touch. Their eyes had become so light-sensitive that they noticed the glow over five miles before they approached it.

"The end," the boy said tightly. "It's the end."

"No." The gunslinger spoke with odd assurance. "It isn't."

And it was not. They reached light but not day.

As they approached the source of the glow, they saw for the first time that the rock wall to the left had fallen away and their tracks had been joined by others which crossed in a complex spider web. The light laid them in burnished vectors. On some of them there were dark boxcars, passenger coaches, a stage that had been adapted to rails. They made the gunslinger nervous, like ghost galleons trapped in an underground Sargasso.

The light grew stronger, hurting their eyes a little, but growing slowly enough to allow them to adapt. They came from dark to light like divers coming up from deep fathoms in slow stages. Ahead, drawing nearer, was a huge hangar stretching up into the dark. Cut into it, showing yellow squares of

light, were a series of perhaps twenty-four entranceways, growing from the size of toy windows to a height of twenty feet as they drew closer. They passed inside through one of the middle ways. Written above were a series of characters, in various languages, the gunslinger presumed. He was astounded to find that he could read the last one; it was an ancient root of the High Speech itself and said:

TRACK 10 TO SURFACE AND POINTS WEST

The light inside was brighter; the tracks met and merged through a series of switchings. Here some of the traffic lanterns still worked, flashing eternal reds and greens and ambers.

They rolled between rising stone piers caked black with the passage of thousands of vehicles, and then they were in some kind of central terminal. The gunslinger let the hand-car coast slowly to a stop, and they peered around.

"It's like the subway," the boy said.

"Subway?"

"Never mind."

The boy climbed up and onto the hard cement. They looked at silent, deserted booths where newspapers and books had once been vended; an ancient bootery; a weapon shop (the gunslinger, with a sudden burst of excitement, saw revolvers and rifles; closer inspection showed that their barrels had been filled with lead; he did, however, pick out a bow, which he slung over his back, and a quiver of almost useless, badly weighted arrows); a women's apparel shop. Somewhere a converter was turning the air over and over, as it had for thousands of years – but perhaps not for much longer. It had a grating noise somewhere in the middle of its cycle which served to remind that perpetual motion, even under strictly controlled conditions, is still a fool's dream. The air had a mechanized taste. Their shoes made flat echoes.

The boy cried out: "Hey! Hey...."

The gunslinger turned around and went to him. The boy was standing, transfixed, at the book stall. Inside, sprawled in the far corner, was a mummy. The mummy was wearing a blue uniform with gold piping – a trainman's uniform by the look. There was an ancient, perfectly preserved newspaper on the mummy's lap, which crumbled to dust when the gunslinger attempted to look at it. The mummy's face was like an old, shriveled apple. Cautiously, the gunslinger touched the cheek. There was a small puff of dust, and they looked through the cheek and into the mummy's mouth. A gold tooth twinkled.

"Gas," the gunslinger murmured. "They used to be able to make a gas that would do this."

"They fought wars with it," the boy said darkly.

"Yes."

There were other mummies, not a great many, but a few. They were all wearing blue and gold ornamental uniforms. The gunslinger supposed that the gas had been used when the place was empty of all incoming and outgoing traffic. Perhaps, in some dim day, the station had been a military objective of some long-gone army and cause.

The thought depressed him.

"We had better go on," he said, and started toward Track 10 and the handcar again. But the boy stood rebelliously behind him.

"Not going."

The gunslinger turned back, surprised.

The boy's face was twisted and trembling. "You won't get what you want until I'm dead. I'll take my chances by myself."

The gunslinger nodded noncommittally, hating himself. "Okay." He turned around and walked across to the stone piers and leaped easily down onto the handcar.

"You made a deal!" The boy screamed after him. "I know you did!"

The gunslinger, not replying, carefully put the bow in front of the T-post rising out of the handcar's floor, out of harm's way.

The boy's fists were clenched, his features drawn in agony.

How easily you bluff this young boy, the gunslinger told himself dryly. Again and again his intuition has led him to this point, and again and again you have led him on by the nose – after all, he has no friends but you.

In a sudden, simple thought (almost a vision) it came to him that all he had to do was give it over, turn around, take the boy with him, make him the center of a new force. The Tower did not have to be obtained in this humiliating, nose-rubbing way. Let it come after the boy had a growth of years, when the two of them could cast the man in black aside like a cheap wind-up toy.

Surely, he thought cynically. Surely.

He knew with sudden coldness that going backward would mean death for both of them – death or worse: entombment with the living dead behind them. Decay of all the faculties. With, perhaps, the guns of his father living long after both of them, kept in rotten splendor as totems not unlike the unforgotten gas pump.

Show some guts, he told himself falsely.

He reached for the handle and began to pump it. The handcar moved away from the stone piers.

The boy screamed: "Wait!" And began running on the diagonal, toward where the handcar would emerge toward the darkness ahead. The gunslinger had an impulse to speed up, to leave the boy alone yet at least with an uncertainty.

Instead, he caught him as he leaped. The heart beneath

the thin shirt thrummed and fluttered as Jake clung to him. It was like the beat of a chicken's heart.

It was very close now.

The sound of the river had become very loud, filling even their dreams with its steady thunder. The gunslinger, more as a whim than anything else, let the boy pump them ahead while he shot a

number of arrows into the dark, tethered by fine white lengths of thread.

The bow was very bad, incredibly preserved but with a terrible pull and aim despite that, and the gunslinger knew that very little would improve it. Even re-stringing would not help the tired wood. The arrows would not fly far into the dark, but the last one he sent out came back wet and slick. The gunslinger only shrugged when the boy asked him how far, but privately he didn't think the arrow could have traveled more than a hundred yards from the rotted bow – and lucky to get that.

And still the sound grew louder.

During the third waking period after the station, a spectral radiance began to grow again. They had entered a long tunnel of some weird phosphorescent rock, and the wet walls glittered and twinkled with thousands of minute starbursts. They saw things in a kind of eerie, horror-house surreality.

The brute sound of the river was channeled to them by the confining rock, magnified in its own natural amplifier. Yet the sound remained oddly constant, even as they approached the crossing point the gunslinger was sure lay ahead, because the walls were widening, drawing back. The angle of their ascent became more pronounced.

The tracks arrowed straight ahead in the new light. To the gunslinger they looked like the captive tubes of swamp

gas sometimes sold for a pretty at the Feast of Joseph fair-time; to the boy they looked like endless streamers of neon tubing. But in its glow they could both see that the rock that had enclosed them so long ended up ahead in ragged twin peninsulas that pointed toward a gulf of darkness ahead –the chasm over the river.

The tracks continued out and over the unknowable drop, supported by a trestle aeons old. And beyond, what seemed an incredible distance, was a tiny pinprick of light; not phosphorescence or fluorescence, but the hard, true light of day. It was as tiny as a needle-prick in a dark cloth, yet weighted with frightful meaning.

"Stop," the boy said. "Stop for a minute. Please."

Unquestioning, the gunslinger let the handcar coast to a rest. The sound of the river was a steady, booming roar, coming from beneath and ahead. The artificial glow from the wet rock was suddenly hateful. For the first time he felt a claustrophobic hand touch him, and the urge to get out, to get free of this living burial, was strong and nearly undeniable.

"We'll go through," the boy said. "Is that what he wants? For us to drive the handcar out over . . . that . . . and fall down?"

The gunslinger knew it was not but said: "I don't know what he wants."

"We're close now. Can't we walk?"

They got down and approached the lip of the drop carefully. The stone beneath their feet continued to rise until, with a sudden, angling drop, the floor fell away from the tracks and the tracks continued alone, across blackness.

The gunslinger dropped to his knees and peered down. He could dimly make out a complex, nearly incredible webwork of steel girders and struts, disappearing down toward the roar of the river, all in support of the graceful arch of the tracks across the void. In his mind's eye he could imagine the work of time and water on the steel, in deadly tandem. How much support was left? Little? Hardly any? None? He suddenly saw the face of the mummy again, and the way the flesh, seemingly solid, had crumbled effortlessly to powder at the bare touch of his finger.

"We'll walk," the gunslinger said.

He half expected the boy to balk again, but he preceded the gunslinger calmly out onto the rails, crossing on the welded steel slats calmly, with sure feet. The gunslinger followed him, ready to catch him if Jake should put foot wrong.

They left the handcar behind them and walked precariously out over darkness.

The gunslinger felt a fine slick of sweat cover his skin. The trestle was rotten, very rotten. It thrummed beneath his feet with the heady motion of the river far beneath, swaying a little on unseen guy wires. We're acrobats, he thought. Look, mother, no net. I'm flying. He knelt once and examined the crossties they were walking on. They were caked and pitted with rust (he could feel the reason on his face; fresh air, the friend of corruption: very close to the surface now), and a strong blow of the fist made the metal quiver sickly. Once he heard a warning groan beneath his feet and felt the steel settle preparatory to giving way, but he had already moved on.

The boy, of course, was over a hundred pounds lighter and safe enough, unless the going became progressively worse.

Behind them, the handcar had melted into the general gloom. The stone pier on the left extended out perhaps twenty feet. Further than the one on the right, but this was also left behind and they

were alone over the gulf.

At first it seemed that the tiny prick of daylight remained mockingly constant (perhaps drawing away from them at the exact pace they approached it – that would be wonderful magic indeed), but gradually the gunslinger realized that it was widening, becoming more defined. They were still below it, but the tracks were still rising.

The boy gave a surprised grunt and suddenly lurched to the side, arms pinwheeling in slow, wide revolutions. It seemed that he tottered on the brink for a very long time indeed before stepping forward again.

"It almost went on me," he said softly, without emotion. "Step over."

The gunslinger did so. The crosstie the boy had stepped on had given way almost entirely and flopped downward lazily, swinging easily on a disintegrating rivet, like a shutter on a haunted window.

Upward, still upward. It was a nightmare walk and so seemed to go on much longer than it did; the air itself seemed to thicken and become like taffy, and the gunslinger felt as if he might be swimming rather than walking. Again and again his mind tried to turn itself to thoughtful, lunatic consideration of the awful space between this trestle and the river below. His brain viewed it in spectacular detail, and how it would be: The scream of twisting metal, the lurch as his body slid off to the side, the grabbing for nonexistent handholds with the fingers, the swift rattle of bootheels on treacherous, rotted steel – and then down, turning over and over, the warm spray in his crotch as his bladder let go, the rush of wind against his face, rippling his hair up in cartoon fright, pulling his eyelids back, the dark water rushing to meet him, faster, outstripping even his own scream –

Metal screamed beneath him and he stepped past it unhurriedly, shifting his weight, not thinking of the drop, or of how far they had come, or of how far was left. Not thinking that the boy was expendable and that the sale of his honor was now, at last, nearly negotiated.

"Three ties out here," the boy said coolly. "I'm going to jump. Here! Here!"

The gunslinger saw him silhouetted for a moment against the daylight, an awkward, hunched spread-eagle. He landed and the whole edifice swayed drunkenly. Metal beneath them protested and something far below fell, first with a crash, then with the sound of deep water.

"Are you over?" The gunslinger asked.

"Yes," the boy said remotely, "but it's very rotten. I don't think it will hold you. Me, but not you. Go back now. Go back now and leave me alone."

His voice was hysterical, cold but hysterical.

The gunslinger stepped over the break. One large step did it. The boy was shuddering helplessly.

"Go back. I don't want you to kill me."

"For Christ's sake, walk," the gunslinger said roughly. "It's going to fall down."

The boy walked drunkenly now, his hands held out shudderingly before him, fingers splayed.

They went up.

Yes, it was much more rotten now. There were frequent breaks of one, two, even three ties, and the gunslinger expected again and again that they would find the long empty space between rails that would either force them back or make them walk on the rails themselves, balanced giddily over the chasm.

He kept his eyes fixed on the daylight.

The glow had taken on a color – blue – and as it came closer it became softer, paling the radiance of the phosphor

as it mixed with it. Fifty yards or a hundred? He could not say.

They walked, and now he looked at his feet, crossing from tie to tie. When he looked again, the glow had grown to a hole, and it was not a light but a way out. They were almost there.

Thirty yards, yes. Ninety short feet. It could be done. Perhaps they would have the man in black yet. Perhaps, in the bright sunlight the evil flowers in his mind would shrivel and anything would be possible.

The sunlight was blocked out.

He looked up, startled, staring, and saw a silhouette filling the light, eating it up, allowing only chinks of mocking blue around the outline of shoulders, the fork of crotch.

"Hello, boys!"

The man in black's voice echoed to them, amplified in this natural throat of stone, the sarcasm taking on mighty overtones. Blindly, the gunslinger sought the jawbone, but it was gone, lost somewhere, used up.

He laughed above them and the sound crashed around them, reverberating like surf in a filling cave. The boy screamed and tottered, a windmill again, arms gyrating through the scant air.

Metal ripped and sloughed beneath them; the rails canted through a slow and dreamy twisting. The

boy plunged, and one hand flew up like a gull in the darkness, up, up, and then he hung over the pit; he dangled there, his dark eyes staring up at the gunslinger in final blind lost knowledge. "Help me."

Booming, racketing: "Come now, gunslinger. Or catch me never!"

All chips on the table. Every card up but one. The boy dangled, a living Tarot card, the hanged man, the Phoenician sailor, innocent lost and barely above the wave of a stygian sea. Wait then, wait awhile.

"Do I go?" The voice so loud, he makes it hard to think, the power to cloud men's minds. . . . Don't make it bad, take a sad song and make it better. . . . "Help me."

The trestle had begun to twist further, screaming, pulling loose from itself, giving -"Then I shall leave you."

"No!"

His legs carried him in a sudden leap through the entropy that held him, above the dangling boy, into a skidding, plunging rush toward the light that offered, the Tower frozen on the retina of his mind's eye in a black frieze, suddenly silence, the silhouette gone, even the beat of his heart gone as the trestle settled further, beginning its final slow dance to the depths, tearing loose, his hand finding the rocky, lighted lip of damnation; and behind him, in the dreadful silence, the boy spoke from too far beneath him.

"Go then. There are other worlds than these."

It tore away from him, the whole weight of it; and as he pulled himself up and through to the light and the breeze and the reality of a new karma (we all shine on), he twisted his head back, for a moment in his agony striving to be Janus- but there was nothing, only plummeting silence, for the boy made no sound.

Then he was up, pulling his legs through onto the rocky escarpment that looked toward a grassy plain at the descending foot, toward where the man in black stood spread-legged, with arms crossed.

The gunslinger stood drunkenly, pallid as a ghost, eyes huge and swimming beneath his forehead, shirt smeared with the white dust of his final, lunging crawl. It came to him that he would always flee murder. It came to him that there would be further degradations of the spirit ahead that might make this one seem infinitesimal, and yet he would still flee it, down corridors and through cities, from bed to bed; he would flee the boy's face and try to bury it in cunts or even in further destruction, only to enter one final room and find it looking at him over a candle flame. He had become the boy; the boy had become him. He was a wurderlak, lycanthropus of his own making, and in deep dreams he would become the boy and speak strange tongues. This is death. Is it? Is it?

He walked slowly, drunkenly down the rocky hill toward where the man in black waited. Here the tracks had been worn away, under the sun of reason, and it was as if they had never been. The man in black pushed his hood away with the backs of both hands, laughing.

"So!" he cried. "Not an end, but the end of the beginning, eh? You progress, gunslinger! You progress! Oh, how I admire you!"

The gunslinger drew with blinding speed and fired twelve times. The gun-flashes dimmed the sun itself, and the pounding of the explosions slammed back from the rock-faced escarpments behind them.

"Now," the man in black said, laughing. "Oh, now. We make great magic together, you and I. You kill me no more than you kill yourself."

He withdrew, walking backwards, facing the gunslinger, grinning. "Come. Come. Come."

The gunslinger followed him in broken boots to the place of counseling.

THE GUNSLINGER AND THE DARKMAN

The man in black led him to an ancient killing ground to make palaver. The gunslinger knew it immediately; a Golgotha, place-of-the-skull. And bleached skulls stared blandly up at them - cattle, coyotes, deer, rabbits. Here the alabaster xylophone of a hen pheasant killed as she fed; there the tiny, delicate bones of a mole, perhaps killed for pleasure by a wild dog. The Golgotha was a bowl indented into the descending slope of the mountain, and below, in easier altitudes, the gunslinger could see Joshua trees and scrub firs. The sky overhead was a softer blue than he had seen for a twelve-month, and there was an indefinable something that spoke of the

sea in the not-too-great distance.

Jam in the West, Cuthbert, he thought wonderingly.

And of course in each skull, in each rondure of vacated eye, he saw the boy's face.

The man in black sat on an ancient ironwood log. His boots were powdered white with dust and the uneasy bone-meal of this place. He had put his hood up again, but the gunslinger could see the square shape of his chin clearly, and the shading of his jaw.

The shadowed lips twitched in a smile. "Gather wood, gunslinger. This side of the mountains is gentle, but at this altitude, the cold still may put a knife in one's belly. And this is a place of death, eh?"

"I'll kill you," the gunslinger said.

"No you won't You can't. But you can gather wood to remember your Isaac."

The gunslinger had no understanding of the reference. He went wordlessly and gathered wood like a common cook's boy. The pickings were slim. There was no devil-grass on this side and the ironwood would not burn. It had become stone. He returned finally with a large armload, powdered and dusted with disintegrated bone, as if dipped in flour. The sun had sunk beyond the highest Joshua trees and had taken on a reddish glow and peered at them with baleful indifference through the black, tortured branches.

"Excellent," the man in black said. "How exceptional you are! How methodical! I salute you!" He giggled, and the gunslinger dropped the wood at his feet with a crash that ballooned up bone dust. The man in black did not start or jump; he merely began laying the fire. The gunslinger watched, fascinated, as the idiogram (fresh, this time) took shape. When it was finished, it resembled a small and complex double chim ney about two feet high. The man in black lifted his hand skyward, shaking back the voluminous sleeve from a tapered, handsome hand, and brought it down rapidly, index and pinky fingers forked out in the traditional sign of the evil eye. There was a blue flash of flame, and their fire was lighted.

"I have matches," the man in black said jovially, "but I thought you might enjoy the magic. For a pretty, gunslinger. Now cook our dinner."

The folds of his robe shivered, and the plucked and gutted carcass of a plump rabbit fell on the dirt.

The gunslinger spitted the rabbit wordlessly and roasted it. A savory smell drifted up as the sun went down.

Purple shadows drifted hungrily over the bowl where the man in black had chosen to finally face him. The gunslinger felt hunger begin to rumble endlessly in his belly as the rabbit browned; but when the meat was cooked and its juices sealed in, he handed the entire skewer wordlessly to the man in black, rummaged in his own nearly flat knapsack, and withdrew the last of his jerky. It was salty, painful to his mouth, and tasted like tears.

"That's a worthless gesture," the man in black said, managing to sound angry and amused at the same time.

"Nevertheless," the gunslinger said. There were tiny sores in his mouth, the result of vitamin deprivation, and the salt taste made him grin bitterly.

"Are you afraid of enchanted meat?"

"Yes."

The man in black slipped his hood back.

The gunslinger looked at him silently. In a way, the face of the man in black was an uneasy disappointment. It was handsome and regular, with none of the marks and twists which indicate a person who has been through awesome times and who has been privy to great and unknown secrets. His hair was black and of a ragged, matted length. His forehead was high, his eyes dark and brilliant. His nose was nondescript. The lips were full and sensual. His complexion was pallid, as was the gunslinger's own.

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He said finally, "I expected an older man.

"Not necessary. I am nearly immortal. I could have taken a face that you more expected, of course, but I elected to show you the one I was - ah - born with. See, gunslinger, the sunset."

The sun had departed already, and the western sky was filled with a sullen furnace light.

"You won't see another sunrise for what may seem a very long time," the man in black said softly.

The gunslinger remembered the pit under the mountains and then looked at the sky, where the constellations sprawled in clockspring profusion.

"It doesn't matter," he said softly, "now."

The man in black shuffled the cards with flying, merging rapidity. The deck was huge, the design

on the backs of the cards convoluted. "These are tarot cards," the man in black was saying, "a mixture of the standard deck and a selection of my own development Watch closely gunslinger."
"Why?"

"I'm going to tell your future, Roland. Seven cards must be turned, one at a time, and placed in conjunction with the others. I've not done this for over three hundred years. And I suspect I've never read one quite like yours." The mocking note was creeping in again, like a Kuvian night-soldier with a killing knife gripped in one hand. "You are the world's last adventurer. The last crusader. How that must please you, Roland! Yet you have no idea how close you stand to the Tower now, how close in time. Worlds turn about your head."

"Read my fortune then," he said harshly.

The first card was turned.

"The Hanged Man," the man in black said. The darkness had given him back his hood. "Yet here, in conjunction with nothing else, it signifies strength and not death. You, gunslinger, are the Hanged Man, plodding ever onward toward your goal over all the pits of Hades. You have already dropped one co-traveler into the pit, have you not?"

He turned the second card. "The Sailor. Note the clear brow, the hairless cheeks, the wounded eyes. He drowns, gunslinger, and no one throws out the line. The boy Jake."

The gunslinger winced, said nothing.

The third card was turned. A baboon stood grinningly

astride a young man's shoulder. The young man's face was turned up, a grimace of stylized dread and horror on his features. Looking more closely, the gunslinger saw the baboon held a whip.

"The Prisoner," the man in black said. The fire cast uneasy, flickering shadows over the face of the ridden man, making it seem to move and writhe in wordless terror. The gunslinger flicked his eyes away.

"A trifle upsetting, isn't he?" The man in black said, and seemed on the verge of sniggering.

He turned the fourth card. A woman with a shawl over her head sat spinning at a wheel. To the gunslinger's dazed eyes, she appeared to be smiling craftily and sobbing at the same time.

"The Lady of Shadows," the man in black remarked. "Does she look two-faced to you, gunslinger? She is. A veritable Janus."

"Why are you showing me these?"

"Don't ask!" The man in black said sharply, yet he smiled. "Don't ask. Merely watch. Consider this only pointless ritual if it eases you and cools you to do so. Like church."

He tittered and turned the fifth card.

A grinning reaper clutched a scythe with bony fingers.

"

"Death," the man in black said simply. "Yet not for you."

The sixth card.

The gunslinger looked at it and felt a strange, crawling anticipation in his guts. The feeling was mixed with horror and joy, and the whole of the emotion was unnamable. It made him feel like throwing up and dancing at the same time.

"The Tower," the man in black said softly.

The gunslinger's card occupied the center of the pattern; each of the following four stood at one corner, like satellites circling a star.

"Where does that one go?" The gunslinger asked.

The man in black placed the Tower over the Hanged Man, covering it completely.

"What does that mean?" The gunslinger asked. The man in black did not answer.

"What does that mean?" He asked raggedly. The man in black did not answer.

"God damn you!" No answer.

"Then what's the seventh card?"

The man in black turned the seventh. A sun rose in a luminously blue sky. Cupids and sprites sported around it

"The seventh is Life," the man in black said softly. "But not for you. "

"Where does it fit the pattern?"

"That is not for you to know," the man in black said. "Or for me to know." He flipped the card carelessly into the dying fire. It charred, curled and flashed to flame. The gunslinger felt his heart quail and turn icy in his chest.

"Sleep now," the man in black said carelessly. "Perchance to dream and that sort of thing."

"I'm going to choke you dead," the gunslinger said. His legs coiled with savage, splendid suddenness, and he flew across the fire at the other. The man in black, smiling, swelled in his vision and then retreated down a long and echoing corridor filled with obsidian pylons. The world

filled with the sound of sardonic laughter, he was falling, dying, sleeping.
He dreamed.

The universe was void. Nothing moved. Nothing was.

The gunslinger drifted, bemused.

"Let us have light," the voice of the man in black said nonchalantly, and there was light. The gunslinger thought in a detached way that the light was good.

"Now darkness overhead with stars in it. Water down

below." It happened. He drifted over endless seas. Above, the stars twinkled endlessly.

"Land," the man in black invited. There was; it heaved itself out of the water in endless, galvanic convulsions. It was red, arid, cracked and glazed with sterility. Volcanoes blurted endless magma like giant pimples on some ugly adolescent's baseball head.

"Okay," the man in black was saying. "That's a start. Let's have some plants. Trees. Grass and fields."

There was. Dinosaurs rambled here and there, growling and woofing and eating each other and getting stuck in bubbling, odiferous tarpits. Huge tropical rain-forests sprawled everywhere. Giant ferns waved at the sky with serrated leaves, beetles with two heads crawled on some of them. All this the gunslinger saw. And yet he felt big.

"Now man," the man in black said softly, but the gunslinger was falling., falling up. The horizon of this vast and fecund earth began to curve. Yes, they had all said it had curved, his teachers, they had claimed it had been proved long before the world had moved on. But this –Further and further. Continents took shape before his amazed eyes, and were obscured with clocksprings of clouds. The world's atmosphere held it in a placental sac. And the sun, rising beyond the earth's shoulder –He cried out and threw an arm before his eyes.

"Let there be light!" The voice that cried was no longer that of the man in black. It was gigantic, echoing. It filled space, and the spaces between spaces.

"Light!"

Falling, falling.

The sun shrank. A red planet crossed with canals whirled past him, two moons circling it furiously. A whirling belt of stones. A gigantic planet that seethed with gasses, too huge to support itself, oblate in consequence. A ringed world that glittered with its engirdlement of icy spicules.

"Light! Let there be –Other worlds, one, two three. Far beyond the last, one lonely ball of ice and rock twirling in dead darkness about a sun that glittered no brighter than a tarnished penny.

Darkness.

"No," the gunslinger said, and his words were flat and echoless in the darkness. It was darker than dark. Beside it the darkest night of a man's soul was noonday. The darkness under the mountains was a mere smudge on the face of Light. "No more, please, no more now. No more –"LIGHT!"

"No more. No more, please –The stars themselves began to shrink. Whole nebulae drew together and became mindless smudges. The whole universe seemed to be drawing around him.

"Jesus no more no more no more –The voice of the man in black whispered silkily in his

ear: "Then renege. Cast away all thoughts of the Tower. Go your way, gunslinger, and save your soul."

He gathered himself. Shaken and alone, enwrapt in the darkness, terrified of an ultimate meaning rushing at him, he gathered himself and uttered the final, flashing imperative:

"NO! NEVER!"

"THEN LET THERE BE LIGHT!"

And there was light, crashing in on him like a hammer, a great and primordial light. In it, consciousness perished – but before it did, the gunslinger saw something of cosmic importance. He clutched it with agonized effort and sought himself.

He fled the insanity the knowledge implied, and so came back to himself.

It was still night – whether the same or another, he had no way of knowing. He pushed himself up from where

his demon spring at the man in black had carried him and looked at the ironwood where the man in black had been sitting. He was gone.

A great sense of despair flooded him – God, all that to do over again – and then the man in black said from behind him: "Over here, gunslinger. I don't like you so close. You talk in your sleep."

He tittered.

The gunslinger got groggily to his knees and turned around. The fire had burned down to red embers and gray ashes, leaving the familiar decayed pattern of exhausted fuel. The man in black was seated next to it, smacking his lips over the greasy remains of the rabbit.

"You did fairly well," the man in black said. "I never could have sent that vision to Marten. He would have come back drooling."

"What was it?" The gunslinger asked. His words were blurred and shaky. He felt that if he tried to rise, his legs would buckle.

"The universe," the man in black said carelessly. He burped and threw the bones into the fire where they glistened with unhealthy whiteness. The wind above the cup of the Golgotha whistled with keen unhappiness.

"Universe," the gunslinger said blankly.

"You want the Tower," the man in black said. It seemed to be a question.

"Yes."

"But you shan't have it," the man in black said, and smiled with bright cruelty. "I have an idea of how close to the edge that last pushed you. The Tower will kill you half a world away."

"You know nothing of me," the gunslinger said quietly, and the smile faded from the other's lips.

"I made your father and I broke him," the man in black said grimly. "I came to your mother through Marten and took her. It was written, and it was. I am the furthest minion of the Dark Tower. Earth has been given into my hand."

"What did I see?" The gunslinger asked. "At the end? What was it?"

"What did it seem to be?"

The gunslinger was silent, thoughtful. He felt for his tobacco, but there was none. The man in black did not offer to refill his pipe by either black magic or white.

"There was light," the gunslinger said finally. "Great white light. And then – " He broke off and stared at the man in black. He was leaning forward, and an alien emotion was stamped on his face, writ too large for lies or denial. Wonder.

"You don't know," he said, and began to smile. "O great sorcerer who brings the dead to life. You don't know."

"I know," the man in black said. "But I don't know... what."

"White light," the gunslinger repeated. "And then – a blade of grass. One single blade of grass that filled every thing. And I was tiny. Infinitesimal."

"Grass." The man in black closed his eyes. His face looked drawn and haggard. "A blade of grass. Are you sure?"

"Yes." The gunslinger frowned. "But it was purple."

And so the man in black began to speak.

The universe (he said) offers a paradox too great for the finite mind to grasp. As the living brain cannot conceive of a nonliving brain – although it may think it can – the finite mind cannot grasp the infinite.

The prosaic fact of the universe's existence single-handedly defeats the pragmatist and the cynic. There was a time, yet a hundred generations before the world moved on, when mankind had achieved enough technical and scientific prowess to chip a few splinters from the great stone pillar of reality. Even then, the false light of science (knowledge, if you like) shone in only a few developed countries. Yet, despite a tremendous increase in available facts, there were remarkably few insights. Gunslinger, our fathers conquered the-disease-which-rots, which we call cancer, almost conquered aging, went to the moon – ("I don't believe that," the gunslinger said flatly, to

which the man in black merely smiled and answered, "You needn't.")

– and made or discovered a hundred other marvelous baubles. But this wealth of information produced little or no insight. There were no great odes written to the wonders of artificial insemination – ("What?" "Having babies from frozen mansperm. "

"Bullshit." "As you wish..., although not even the ancients could produce children from that material.")

– or to the car-which-moves. Few if any seemed to have grasped the Principle of Reality; new knowledge leads always to yet more awesome mysteries. Greater physiological knowledge of the brain makes the existence of the soul less possible yet more probable by the nature of the search. Do you see? Of course you don't. You are surrounded by your own romantic aura, you lie cheek and jowl daily with the arcane. Yet now you approach the limits –not of belief, but of comprehension. You face reverse entropy of the soul.

But to the more prosaic:

The greatest mystery the universe offers is not life but Size. Size encompasses life, and the Tower encompasses Size. The child, who is most at home with wonder, says:
Daddy, what is above the sky? And the father says: The darkness of space. The child: What is beyond space? The father: The galaxy. The child: Beyond the galaxy? The father: Another galaxy. The child: Beyond the other galaxies? The father: No one knows.
You see? Size defeats us. For the fish, the lake in which he lives is the universe. What does the fish think when he is jerked up by the mouth through the silver limits of existence and into a new universe where the air drowns him and the light is blue madness? Where hugh bipeds with no gills stuff it into a suffocating box and cover it with wet weeds to die?
Or one might take the point of a pencil and magnify it. One reaches the point where a stunning realization strikes home: The pencil point is not solid; it is composed of atoms which whirl and revolve like a trillion demon planets. What seems solid to us is actually only a loose net held together by gravitation. Shrunk to the correct size, the distances between these atoms might become leagues, gulfs, aeons. The atoms themselves are composed of nuclei and revolving protons and electrons. One may step down further to subatomic particles. And then to what? Tachyons? Nothing? Of course not. Everything in the universe denies nothing; to suggest conclusions to things is one impossibility.
If you fell outward to the limit of the universe, would you find a board fence and signs reading DEAD END? No. You might find something hard and rounded, as the chick must see the egg from the inside. And if you should peck through that shell, what great and torrential light might shine through your hole at the end of space? Might you look through and discover our entire universe is but part of one atom on a blade of grass? Might you be forced to think that by burning a twig you incinerate an eternity of eternities? That existence rises not to one infinite but to an infinity of them?
Perhaps you saw what place our universe plays in the scheme of things – as an atom in a blade of grass. Could it be that everything we can perceive, from the infinitesimal virus to the distant Horsehead Nebula, is contained in one blade of grass. .. a blade that may have existed for only a day or two in an alien time-flow? What if that blade should be cut off by a scythe? When it began to die, would the rot seep into our own universe and our own lives, turning everything yellow and brown and desicated? Perhaps it's already begun to happen. We say the world has moved on; maybe we really mean that it has begun to dry up.
Think how small such a concept of things makes us, gunslinger! If a God watches over it all, does He actually mete out justice for a race of gnats among an infinitude of races of gnats? Does his eye see the sparrow fall when the sparrow is less than a speck of hydrogen floating disconnected in the depth of space? And if He does see... what must the nature of such a God be? Where does He live? How is it possible to live beyond infinity?
Imagine the sand of the Mohaine Desert, which you crossed to find me, and imagine a trillion universes – not worlds but universes – encapsulated in each grain of that desert; and within each universe an infinity of others. We tower over these universes from our pitiful grass vantage point; with one swing of your boot you may knock a billion billion worlds flying off into darkness, in a chain never to be completed.
Size, gunslinger... Size....
Yet suppose further. Suppose that all worlds, all universes, met in a single nexus, a single pylon, a Tower. A stairway, perhaps, to the Godhead itself. Would you dare, gunslinger? Could it be that somewhere above all of endless reality, there exists a Room...?
You dare not.
You dare not.

"Someone has dared," the gunslinger said.
"Who would that be?"
"God," the gunslinger said softly. His eyes gleamed. "God has dared. . . or is the room empty, seer?"
"I don't know." Fear passed over the man in black's bland face, as soft and dark as a buzzard's wing. "And, furthermore, I don't ask. It might be unwise."
"Afraid of being struck dead?" The gunslinger asked sardonically.
"Perhaps afraid of an accounting," the man in black replied, and there was silence for a while. The night was very long. The Milky Way sprawled above them in great splendor, yet terrifying in its emptiness. The gunslinger wondered what he would feel if that inky sky should split open and let in a torrent of light.

"The fire," he said. "I'm cold."

The gunslinger drowsed and awoke to see the man in black regarding him avidly, unhealthily.

"What are you staring at?"

"You, of course. "

"Well, don't" He poked up the fire, ruining the precision of the idiogram. "I don't like it." He looked to the east to see if there was the beginning of light, but this night went on and on.

"You seek the light so soon?"

"I was made for light"

"Ah, so you were! And so impolite of me to forget the fact! Yet we have much to discuss yet, you and I. For so has it been told to me by my master."

"Who?"

The man in black smiled. "Shall we tell the truth then, you and I? No more lies? No more glammer?"

"Glammer? What does that mean?"

But the man in black persisted: "Shall there be truth between us, as two men? Not as friends, but as enemies and equals? There is an offer you will get rarely, Roland. Only enemies speak the truth. Friends and lovers lie endlessly, caught in the web of duty."

"Then we'll speak the truth." He had never spoken

less on this night "Start by telling me what glammer is."

"Glammer is enchantment, gunslinger. My master's enchantment has prolonged this night and will prolong it still..., until our business is done. "

"How long will that be?"

"Long. T can tell you no better. I do not know myself." The man in black stood over the fire, and the glowing embers made patterns on his face. "Ask. I will tell you what I know. You have caught me. It is fair; I did not think you would. Yet your quest has only begun. Ask. It will lead us to business soon enough."

"Who is your master?"

"I have never seen him, but you must. In order to reach the Tower you must reach this one first, the Ageless Stranger. " The man in black smiled spitelessly. "You must slay him, gunslinger. Yet I think it is not what you wished to ask."

"If you've never seen him, how do you know him?"

"He came to me once in a dream. As a stripling he came to me, when I lived in a far land. A thousand years ago, or five or ten. He came to me in days before the old ones had yet to cross the sea. In a land called England. A sheaf of centuries ago he imbued me with my duty, although there were errands in between my youth and my apotheosis. You are that, gunslinger." He tittered. "You see, someone has taken you seriously."

"This Stranger has no name?"

"O, he is named."

"And what is his name?"

"Maerlyn," the man in black said softly, and somewhere in the easterly darkness where the mountains lay a rockslide punctuated his words and a puma screamed like a woman. The gunslinger shivered and the man in black flinched. "Yet I do not think that is what you wished to ask, either. It is not your nature to think so far ahead."

The gunslinger knew the question; it had gnawed him all this night, and he thought, for years before. It trembled on his lips but he didn't ask it... not yet.

"This Stranger, this Maerlyn, is a minion of the Tower? Like yourself?"

"Much greater than I. It has been given to him to live backward in time. He darkies. He tincts. He is in all times. Yet there is one greater than he."

"Who?"

"The Beast," the man in black whispered fearfully. "The keeper of the Tower. The originator of all glammer.

"What is it? What does this Beast - "

"Ask me no more!" The man in black cried. His voice aspired to sternness and crumbled into beseechment. "I know not! I do not wish to know. To speak of the Beast is to speak of the ruination of one's own soul. Before It, Maerlyn is as Jam to him."

"And beyond the Beast is the Tower and whatever the Tower contains?"

"Yes," whispered the man in black. "But none of these things are what you wish to ask."

True.

"All right," the gunslinger said, and then asked the world's oldest question. "Do I know you? Have I seen you somewhere before?"

"Yes."

"Where?" The gunslinger leaned forward urgently. This was a question of his destiny. The man in black clapped his hands to his mouth and giggled through them like a small child. "I think you know. "

"Where!" He was on his feet; his hands had dropped to the worn butts of his guns.

"Not with those, gunslinger. Those do not open doors; those only close them forever. "

"Where?" The gunslinger reiterated.

"Must I give him a hint?" The man in black asked the darkness. "I believe I must "He looked at the gunslinger with eyes that burned. "There was a man who gave you advice," he said. "Your teacher - "

"Yes, Cort," the gunslinger interrupted impatiently.

"The advice was to wait. It was bad advice. For even then Marten's plans against your father had proceeded. And when your father returned - "

"He was killed," the gunslinger said emptily.

"And when you turned and looked, Marten was gone ... gone west Yet there was a man in Marten's entourage, a man who affected the dress of a monk and the shaven head of a penitent - "

"Walter," the gunslinger whispered. "You. .. you're not Marten at all. You're Walter!"

The man in black tittered. "At your service. "

"I ought to kill you now."

"That would hardly be fair. After all, it was I who delivered Marten into your hands three years later, when - "

"Then you've controlled me."

"In some ways, yes. But no more, gunslinger. Now comes the time of sharing. Then, in the morning, I will cast the runes. Dreams will come to you. And then your real quest must begin."

"Walter," the gunslinger repeated, stunned.

"Sit," the man in black invited. "I tell you my story. Yours, I think, will be much longer. "

"I don't talk of myself," the gunslinger muttered.

"Yet tonight you must So that we may understand."

"Understand what? My purpose? You know that To find the Tower is my purpose. I'm sworn."

"Not your purpose, gunslinger. Your mind. Your slow, plodding, tenacious mind. There has never been one quite like it, in all the history of the world. Perhaps in the history of creation.

"This is the time of speaking. This is the time of histories.

"Then speak."

The man in black shook the voluminous arm of his robe. A foil-wrapped package fell out and caught the dying embers in many reflective folds.

"Tobacco, gunslinger. Would you smoke?"

He had been able to resist the rabbit, but he could not resist this. He opened the foil with eager fingers. There was fine crumbled tobacco inside, and green leaves to wrap it in, amazingly moist. He had not seen such tobacco for ten years.

He rolled two cigarettes and bit the ends of each to release flavor. He offered one to the man in black, who took it. Each of them took a burning twig from the fire.

The gunslinger lit his cigarette and drew the aromatic smoke deep into his lungs, closing his eyes to concentrate the senses. He blew out with long, slow satisfaction.

"Is it good?" the man in black enquired.

"Yes. Very good."

"Enjoy it. It may be the last smoke for you in a very long time."

The gunslinger took this impassively.

"Very well," the man in black said. "To begin then:

"You must understand that the Tower has always been, and there have always been boys who know of it and lust for it, more than power or riches or women.. "

There was talk then, a night's worth of talk and God alone knew how much more, but the Gunslinger remembered little of it later. . . and to his oddly practical mind, little of it seemed to matter. The man in black told him that he must go to the sea, which lay no more than twenty easy miles to the west, and there he would be invested with the power of drawing.

"But that's not exactly right, either," the man in black said, pitching his cigarette into the remains of the campfire. "No one wants to invest you with a power of any kind, gunslinger; it is simply in you, and I am compelled to tell you, partly because of the sacrifice of the boy, and partly because it is the law; the natural law of things. Water must run downhill, and you must be told. You will draw three, I understand... but I don't really care, and I don't really want to

know."

"The three," the gunslinger murmured, thinking of the Oracle.

"And then the fun begins. But, by then, I'll be long gone. Good-bye, gunslinger. My part is done now. The chain is still in your hands. Beware it doesn't wrap itself around your neck."

Compelled by something outside him, Roland said, "You have one more thing to say, don't you?"

"Yes," the man in black said, and he smiled at the gunslinger with his depthless eyes and stretched one of his hands out toward him. "Let there be light."

And there was light.

Roland awoke by the ruins of the campfire to find himself ten years older. His black hair had thinned at the temples and gone the gray of cobwebs at the end of autumn. The lines in his face were deeper, his skin rougher.

The remains of the wood he had carried had turned to ironwood, and the man in black was a laughing skeleton in a rotting black robe, more bones in this place of bones, one more skull in Golgotha.

The gunslinger stood up and looked around. He looked at the light and saw that the light was good. With a sudden quick gesture he reached toward the remains of his companion of the night before., a night that had somehow lasted ten years. He broke off Walter's jawbone and jammed it carelessly into the left hip pocket of his jeans - a fitting enough replacement for the one lost under the mountains.

The Tower. Somewhere ahead, it waited for him - the nexus of Time, the nexus of Size.

He began west again, his back set against the sunrise, heading toward the ocean, realizing that a great passage of his life had come and gone. "I loved you, Jake," he said aloud.

The stiffness wore out of his body and he began to walk more rapidly. By that evening he had come to the end of the land. He sat on a beach which stretched left and right forever, deserted. The waves beat endlessly against the shore, pounding and pounding. The setting sun painted the water in a wide strip of fool's gold.

There the gunslinger sat, his face turned up into the fading light. He dreamed his dreams and watched as the stars came out; his purpose did not flag, nor did his heart falter; his hair, finer now and gray, blew around his head, and the sandalwood-inlaid guns of his father lay smooth and deadly against his hips, and he was lonely but did not find loneliness in any way a bad or ignoble thing. The dark came down on the world and the world moved on. The gunslinger waited for the time of the drawing and dreamed his long dreams of the Dark Tower, to which he would some day come at dusk and approach, winding his horn, to do some unimaginable final battle.

AFTERWORD

The foregoing tale, which is almost (but not quite!) complete in itself, is the first stanza in a much longer work called The Dark Tower. Some of the work beyond this segment has been completed, but there is much more to be done

- my brief synopsis of the action to follow suggests a length approaching 3000 pages, perhaps more. That probably sounds as if my plans for the story have passed beyond mere ambition and into the land of lunacy... but ask your favorite English teacher sometime to tell you about the plans Chaucer had for The Canterbury Tales - now Chaucer might have been crazy.

At the speed which the work entire has progressed so far, I would have to live approximately 300 years to complete the tale of the Tower; this segment, "The Gunslinger and the Dark Tower," was written over a period of twelve years. It is by far the longest I've taken with any work... and it might be more honest to put it another way: it is the longest that any of my unfinished works has remained alive and viable in my own mind, and if a book is not alive in the writer's mind, it is as dead as year-old horse shit even if words continue to march across the page.

The Dark Tower began, I think, because I inherited a ream of paper in the spring semester of my senior year in college. It wasn't a ream of your ordinary garden-variety bond paper, not even a ream of those colorful "second sheets" that many struggling writers use because those reams of colored sheets (often with large chunks of undissolved wood floating in them) are three or four dollars cheaper.

The ream of paper I inherited was bright green, nearly as thick as cardboard, and of an extremely eccentric size- about seven inches wide by about ten inches long, as I recall. I was working at the University of Maine library at the time, and several reams of this stuff, in various hues, turned up one day, totally unexplained and unaccounted for. My wife-to-be, the then Tabitha Spruce, took one of these reams of paper (robin's egg blue) home with her; the fellow she was then going with took home another (Roadrunner yellow). I got the green stuff.

As it happened, all three of us turned out to be real writers—a coincidence almost too large to be termed mere coincidence in a society where literally tens of thousands (maybe hundreds of thousands) of college students aspire to the writer's trade and where bare hundreds actually break through. I've gone on to publish half a dozen novels or so, my wife has published one (Small World) and is hard at work on an even better one, and the fellow she was going with back then, David Lyons, has developed into a fine poet and the founder of Lynx Press in Massachusetts. Maybe it was the paper, folks. Maybe it was magic paper. You know, like in a Stephen King novel. Anyway, all of you out there reading this may not understand how fraught with possibility those five hundred sheets of blank paper seemed to be, although I'd guess there are plenty of you who are nodding in perfect understanding right now. Publishing writers can, of course, have all the blank paper they want; it is their stock-in-trade. It's even tax deductible. They can have so much, in fact, that all of those blank sheets can actually begin to cast a malign spell—better writers than I have talked about the mute challenge of all that white space, and God knows some of them have been intimidated into silence by it. The other side of the coin, particularly to a young writer, is almost unholy exhilaration all that blank paper can bring on; you feel like an alcoholic contemplating a fifth of whiskey with the seal unbroken.

I was at that time living in a scuzzy riverside cabin not far from the University, and I was living all by myself—the first third of the foregoing tale was written in a ghastly, unbroken silence which I now, with a houseful of rioting children, two secretaries, and a housekeeper who always thinks I look ill, find hard to remember. The three roommates with whom I had begun the year had all flunked out By March, when the ice went out of the river, I felt like the last of Agatha Christie's ten little Indians.

Those two factors, the challenge of that blank green paper, and the utter silence (except for the trickle of the melting snow as it ran downhill and into the Stillwater), were more responsible than anything else for the opening lay of *The Dark Tower*. There was a third factor, but without the first two, I don't believe the story ever would have been written.

That third element was a poem I'd been assigned two years earlier, in a sophomore course covering the earlier romantic poets (and what better time to study romantic poetry than in one's sophomore year?). Most of the other poems had fallen out of my consciousness in the period between, but that one, gorgeous and rich and inexplicable, remained... and it remains still. That poem was "Childe Roland," by Robert Browning.

I had played with the idea of trying a long romantic novel embodying the feel, if not the exact sense, of the Browning poem. Play was as far as things had gone because I had too many other things to write—poems of my own, short stories, newspaper columns, God knows what.

But during that spring semester, a sort of hush fell over my previously busy creative life—not a writer's block, but a sense that it was time to stop goofing around with a pick and shovel and get behind the controls of one big great God a' mighty steam shovel, a sense that it was time to try and dig something big out of the sand, even if the effort turned out to be an abysmal failure. And so, one night in March of 1970, I found myself sitting at my old office-model Underwood with the chipped 'm' and the flying capital 'O' and writing the words that begin this story: The man in black/led across the desert and the gun-slinger followed.

In the years since I typed that sentence, with Johnny Winter on the stereo not quite masking the sound of melting snow running downhill outside, I have started to go gray, I have begotten children, I have buried my mother, I have gone on drugs and gone off them, and I've learned a few things about myself—some of them rueful, some of them unpleasant, most of them just plain funny. As the gunslinger himself would probably point out, the world has moved on.

But I've never completely left the gunslinger's world in all that time. The thick green paper got lost somewhere along the way, but I still have the original forty or so pages of typescript, comprising the sections titled "The Gunslinger" and "The Way Station." It was replaced by a more legitimate-looking paper, but I remember those funny green sheets with more affection than I could ever convey in words. I came back to the gunslinger's world when Salem's Lot was going badly ("The Oracle and the Mountains") and wrote of the boy Jake's sad ending not long after I had seen another boy, Danny Torrance, escape another bad place in *The Shining*. In fact, the only time when my thoughts did not turn at least occasionally to the gunslinger's dry and yet somehow gorgeous world (at least it has always

seemed gorgeous to me) was when I was inhabiting another that seemed every bit as real—the post-apocalypse world of *The Stand*. The final segment presented here, "The Gunslinger and the Man in Black," was written less than eighteen months ago, in western Maine.

I believe that I probably owe readers who have come this far with me some sort of synopsis ("the argument," those great old romantic poets would have called it) of what is to come, since I'll

almost surely die before completing the entire novel... or epic... or whatever you'd call it. The sad fact is that I can't really do that. People who know me understand that I am not an intellectual ball of fire, and people who have read my work with some critical approval (there are a few; I bribe them) would probably agree that the best of my stuff has come more from the heart than from the head... or from the gut, which is the place from which the strongest emotional writing originates.

All of which is just a way of saying that I'm never completely sure where I'm going, and in this story that is even more true than usual. I know from Roland's vision near the end that his world is indeed moving on because Roland's universe exists within a single molecule of a weed dying in some cosmic vacant lot (I think I probably got this idea from Clifford D. Simak's Ring Around the Sun; please don't sue me, Cliff!), and I know that the drawing involves calling three people from our own world (as Jake himself was called by the man in black) who will join Roland in his quest for the Dark Tower— I know that because segments of the second cycle of stories (called "The Drawing of the Three") have already been written.

But what of the gunslinger's murky past? God, I know so little. The revolution that topples the gunslinger's "world of light"? I don't know. Roland's final confrontation with Marten, who seduces his mother and kills his father? Don't know. The deaths of Roland's compatriots, Cuthbert and Jamie, or his adventures during the years between his coming of age and his first appearance to us in the desert?

I don't know that, either. And there's this girl, Susan. Who is she? Don't know.

Except somewhere inside, I do. Somewhere inside I know all of those things, and there is no need of an argument, or a synopsis, or an outline (outlines are the last resource of bad fiction writers who wish to God they were writing masters' theses). When it's time, those things— and their relevance to the gunslinger's quest—will roll out as naturally as tears or laughter. And if they never get around to rolling out, well, as Confucius once said, five hundred million Red Chinese don't give a shit.

I do know this: at some point, at some magic time, there will be a purple evening (an evening made for romance!) when Roland will come to his dark tower, and approach it, winding his horn..., and if I should ever get there, you'll be the first to know.

Stephen King
Bangor, Maine

THE DARK TOWER II

THE DRAWING OF THE THREE

Stephen King

PLUME

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To Don Grant, who's taken a chance on these novels, one by one.

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ARGUMENT

The Drawing of the Three is the second volume of a long tale called The Dark Tower, a tale inspired by and to some degree dependent upon Robert Browning's narrative poem "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" (which in its turn owes a debt to King Lear).

The first volume, The Gunslinger, tells how Roland, the last gunslinger of a world which has "moved on," finally catches up with the man in black ... a sorcerer he has chased for a very long time—just how long we do not yet know. The man in black turns out to be a fellow named Walter, who falsely claimed the friendship of Roland's father in those days before the world moved on.

Roland's goal is not this half-human creature but the Dark Tower; the man in black—and, more specifically, what the man in black knows—is his first step on his road to that mysterious place.

Who, exactly, is Roland? What was his world like before it "moved on?" What is the Tower, and why does he pursue it? We have only fragmentary answers. Roland is a gunslinger, a kind of knight, one of those charged with holding a world Roland remembers as being "filled with love and light" as it is; to keep it from moving on.

We know that Roland was forced to an early trial of manhood after discovering that his mother had become the mistress of Marten, a much greater sorcerer than Walter (who, unknown to Roland's father, is Marten's ally); we know Marten has planned Roland's discovery, expecting Roland to fail and to be "sent West"; we know that Roland triumphs in his test.

What else do we know? That the gunslinger's world is not completely unlike our own. Artifacts such as gasoline pumps and certain songs ("Hey Jude," for instance, or the bit of doggerel that begins "Beans, beans, the musical fruit . . .") have survived; so have customs and rituals oddly like those from our own romanticized view of the American west.

And there is an umbilicus which somehow connects our world to the world of the gunslinger. At a way-station on a long-deserted coach-road in a great and sterile desert, Roland meets a boy named Jake who died in our world. A boy who was, in fact, pushed from a street-corner by the ubiquitous (and iniquitous) man in black. The last thing Jake, who was on his way to school with his book-bag in one hand and his • lunch-box in the other, remembers of his world—our world— I is being crushed beneath the wheels of a Cadillac . . . and dying.

Before reaching the man in black, Jake dies again. . . this time because the gunslinger, faced with the second-most agon-izing choice of his life, elects to sacrifice this symbolic son. Given a choice between the Tower and child, possibly between damnation and salvation, Roland chooses the Tower.

"Go, then," Jake tells him before plunging into the abyss. "There are other worlds than these."

The final confrontation between Roland and Walter occurs in a dusty golgotha of decaying bones. The dark man tells Roland's future with a deck of Tarot cards. These cards, showing a man called The Prisoner, a woman called The Lady of Shadows, and a darker shape that is simply Death ("but not for you, gunslinger,"

the man in black tells him), are prophe-cies which become the subject of this volume. . . and Roland's second step on the long and difficult path to the Dark Tower.

The Gunslinger end?, with Roland sitting upon the beach of the Western Sea, watching the sunset. The man in black is dead, the gunslinger's own future course unclear; The Draw-ing of the Three begins on that same beach, less than seven hours later.

-PROLOGUE: THE SAILOR

PROLOGUE

The gunslinger came awake from a confused dream which seemed to consist of a single image: that of the Sailor in the Tarot deck from which the man in black had dealt (or purported to deal) the gunslinger's own moaning future.

He drowns, gunslinger, the man in black was saying, and no one throws out the line. The boy Jake.

But this was no nightmare. It was a good dream. It was good because he was the one drowning, and that meant he was not Roland at all but Jake, and he found this a relief because it would be far better to drown as Jake than to live as himself, a man who had, for a cold dream, betrayed a child who had trusted him. Good, all right, I'll drown, he thought, listening to the roar of the sea. Let me drown. But this was not the sound of the open deeps; it was the grating sound of water with a throatful of stones. Was he the Sailor? If so, why was land so close? And, in fact, was he not on the land? It felt as if—

Freezing cold water doused his boots and ran up his legs to his crotch. His eyes flew open then, and what snapped him out of the dream wasn't his freezing balls, which had suddenly shrunk to what felt like the size of walnuts, nor even the horror to his right, but the thought of his guns. . . his guns, and even more important, his shells. Wet guns could be quickly disas-sembled, wiped dry, oiled, wiped dry again, oiled again, and re-assembled; wet shells, like wet matches, might or might not ever be usable again.

The horror was a crawling thing which must have been cast up by a previous wave. It dragged a wet, gleaming body laboriously along the sand. It was about four feet long and about four yards to the right. It regarded Roland with bleak eyes on stalks. Its long serrated beak dropped open and it began to make a noise that was weirdly like human speech: plaintive, even desperate questions in an alien tongue. "Did-a-chick? Dum-a-chum? Dad-a-cham? Ded-a-check?"

The gunslinger had seen lobsters. This wasn't one, although lobsters were the only things he had ever seen which this creature even vaguely resembled. It didn't seem afraid of him at all. The gunslinger didn't know if it was dangerous or not. He didn't care about his own mental confusion—his temporary inability to remember where he was or how he had gotten there, if he had actually caught the

man in black or if all that had only been a dream. He only knew he had to get away from the water before it could drown his shells.

He heard the grinding, swelling roar of water and looked from the creature (it had stopped and was holding up the claws with which it had been pulling itself along, looking absurdly like a boxer assuming his opening stance, which, Cort had taught them, was called The Honor Stance) to the incoming breaker with its curdle of foam.

It hears the wave, the gunslinger thought. Whatever it is, it's got ears. He tried to get up, but his legs, too numb to feel, buckled under him.

I'm still dreaming, he thought, but even in his current confused state this was a belief much too tempting to really be believed. He tried to get up again, almost made it, then fell back. The wave was breaking. There was no time again. He had to settle for moving in much the same way the creature on his right seemed to move: he dug in with both hands and dragged his butt up the stony shingle, away from the wave.

He didn't progress enough to avoid the wave entirely, but he got far enough for his purposes. The wave buried nothing but his boots. It reached almost to his knees and then retreated. Perhaps the first one didn't go as far as I thought.

Perhaps—

There was a half-moon in the sky. A caul of mist covered it, but it shed enough light for him to see that the holsters were too dark. The guns, at least, had suffered a wetting. It was impossible to tell how bad it had been, or if either the shells currently in the cylinders or those in the crossed gunbelts had also been wetted. Before checking, he had to get away from the water. Had to—"Dod-a-chock?" This was much closer. In his worry over the water he had forgotten the creature the water had cast up. He looked around and saw it was now only four feet away. Its claws were buried in the stone- and shell-littered sand of the shingle, pulling its body along. It lifted its meaty, serrated body, making it momentarily resemble a scorpion, but Roland could see no stinger at the end of its body.

Another grinding roar, this one much louder. The creature immediately stopped and raised its claws into its own peculiar version of the Honor Stance again.

This wave was bigger. Roland began to drag himself up the slope of the strand again, and when he put out his hands, the clawed creature moved with a speed of which its previous movements had not even hinted.

The gunslinger felt a bright flare of pain in his right hand, but there was no time to think about that now. He pushed with the heels of his soggy boots, clawed with his hands, and managed to get away from the wave.

"Did-a-chick?" the monstrosity enquired in its plaintive Won't you help me?

Can't you see I am desperate? voice, and Roland saw the stumps of the first and second fingers of his right hand disappearing into the creature's jagged beak.

It lunged again and Roland lifted his dripping right hand just in time to save his remaining two fingers.

"Dum-a-chum? Dad-a-cham?"

The gunslinger staggered to his feet. The thing tore open his dripping jeans, tore through a boot whose old leather was soft but as tough as iron, and took a chunk of meat from Roland's lower calf.

He drew with his right hand, and realized two of the fingers needed to perform this ancient killing operation were gone only when the revolver thumped to the sand.

The monstrosity snapped at it greedily.

"No, bastard!" Roland snarled, and kicked it. It was like kicking a block of rock. . . one that bit. It tore away the end of Roland's right boot, tore away most of his great toe, tore the boot itself from his foot.

The gunslinger bent, picked up his revolver, dropped it, cursed, and finally managed. What had once been a thing so easy it didn't even bear thinking about had suddenly become a trick akin to juggling.

The creature was crouched on the gunslinger's boot, tear-ing at it as it asked its garbled questions. A wave rolled toward the beach, the foam which curdled its top looking pallid and dead in the netted light of the half-moon. The lobstrosity stopped working on the boot and raised its claws in that boxer's pose.

Roland drew with his left hand and pulled the trigger three times. Click, click, click.

Now he knew about the shells in the chambers, at least.

He bolstered the left gun. To holster the right he had to turn its barrel downward with his left hand and then let it drop into its place. Blood slimed the worn ironwood handgrips; blood spotted the holster and the old jeans to which the holster was thong-tied. It poured from the stumps where his fingers used to be.

His mangled right foot was still too numb to hurt, but his right hand was a bellowing fire. The ghosts of talented and long-trained fingers which were already decomposing in the digestive juices of that thing's guts screamed that they were still there, that they were burning.

I see serious problems ahead, the gunslinger thought remotely.

The wave retreated. The monstrosity lowered its claws, tore a fresh hole in the gunslinger's boot, and then decided the wearer had been a good deal more tasty than this bit of skin it had somehow sloughed off.

"Dud-a-chum?" it asked, and scurried toward him with ghastly speed. The gunslinger retreated on legs he could barely feel, realizing that the creature must have some intelli-gence; it had approached him cautiously, perhaps from a long way down the strand, not sure what he was or of what he might be capable. If the dousing wave hadn't wakened him, the thing would have torn off his face while he was still deep in his dream. Now it had decided he was not only tasty but vulnera-ble; easy prey.

It was almost upon him, a thing four feet long and a foot high, a creature which might weigh as much as seventy pounds and which was as single-mindedly carnivorous as David, the hawk he had had as a boy—but without David's dim vestige of loyalty.

The gunslinger's left bootheel struck a rock jutting from the sand and he tottered on the edge of falling.

"Dod-a-chock?" the thing asked, solicitously it seemed, and peered at the gunslinger from its stalky, waving eyes as its claws reached . . . and then a wave came, and the claws went up again in the Honor Stance. Yet now they wavered the slightest bit, and the gunslinger realized that it responded to the sound of the wave, and now the sound was—for it, at least—fading a bit.

He stepped backward over the rock, then bent down as the wave broke upon the shingle with its grinding roar. His head was inches from the insectile face of the creature. One of its claws might easily have slashed the eyes from his face, but its trembling claws, so like clenched fists, remained raised to either side

of its parrotlike beak.

The gunslinger reached for the stone over which he had nearly fallen. It was large, half-buried in the sand, and his mutilated right hand howled as bits of dirt and sharp edges of pebble ground into the open bleeding flesh, but he yanked the rock free and raised it, his lips pulled away from his teeth.

"Dad-a—" the monstrosity began, its claws lowering and opening as the wave broke and its sound receded, and the gunslinger swept the rock down upon it with all his strength.

There was a crunching noise as the creature's segmented back broke. It lashed wildly beneath the rock, its rear half lifting and thudding, lifting and thudding. Its interrogatives became buzzing exclamations of pain. Its claws opened and shut upon nothing. Its maw of a beak gnashed up clots of sand and pebbles.

And yet, as another wave broke, it tried to raise its claws again, and when it did the gunslinger stepped on its head with his remaining boot. There was a sound like many small dry twigs being broken. Thick fluid burst from beneath the heel of Roland's boot, splashing in two directions. It looked black.

The thing arched and wriggled in a frenzy. The gunslinger planted his boot harder.

A wave came.

The monstrosity's claws rose an inch . . . two inches . . . trembled and then fell, twitching open and shut.

The gunslinger removed his boot. The thing's serrated beak, which had separated two fingers and one toe from his living body, slowly opened and closed. One antenna lay broken on the sand. The other trembled meaninglessly.

The gunslinger stamped down again. And again.

He kicked the rock aside with a grunt of effort and marched along the right side of the monstrosity's body, stamp-ing methodically with his left boot, smashing its shell, squeez-ing its pale guts out onto dark gray sand. It was dead, but he meant to have his way with it all the same; he had never, in all his long strange time, been so fundamentally hurt, and it had all been so unexpected. He kept on until he saw the tip of one of his own fingers in the dead thing's sour mash, saw the white dust beneath the nail from the golgotha where he and the man in black had held their long palaver, and then he looked aside and vomited.

The gunslinger walked back toward the water like a drunken man, holding his wounded hand against his shirt, looking back from time to time to make sure the thing wasn't still alive, like some tenacious wasp you swat again and again and still twitches, stunned but not dead; to make sure it wasn't following, asking its alien questions in its deadly despairing voice.

Halfway down the shingle he stood swaying, looking at the place where he had been, remembering. He had fallen asleep, apparently, just below the high tide line. He grabbed his purse and his torn boot.

In the moon's glabrous light he saw other creatures of the same type, and in the caesura between one wave and the next, heard their questioning voices.

The gunslinger retreated a step at a time, retreated until he reached the grassy edge of the shingle. There he sat down, and did all he knew to do: he sprinkled the stumps of fingers and toe with the last of his tobacco to stop the bleeding, sprinkled it thick in spite of the new stinging (his missing great toe had joined the chorus), and then he only sat, sweating in the chill, wondering about

infection, wondering how he would make his way in this world with two fingers on his right hand gone (when it came to the guns both hands had been equal, but in all other things his right had ruled), wondering if the thing had some poison in its bite which might already be working its way into him, wondering if morning would ever come.

THE DOOR

1

Three. This is the number of your fate.

Three?

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

Which three?

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

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

He tried to speak but his voice was gone, the voice of the oracle, Star-Slut, Whore of the Winds, both were gone; he saw a card fluttering down from nowhere to now here, turning and turning in the lazy dark. On it a baboon grinned from over the shoulder of a young man with dark hair; its disturbingly human fingers were buried so deeply in the young man's neck that their tips had disappeared in flesh. Looking more closely, the gunslinger saw the baboon held a whip in one of those clutching, strangling hands. The face of the ridden man seemed to writhe in wordless terror.

The Prisoner, the man in black (who had once been a man the gunslinger trusted, a man named Walter) whispered chummily. A trifle upsetting, isn't he? A trifle upsetting ... a trifle upsetting ... a trifle—

2

The gunslinger snapped awake, waving at something with his mutilated hand, sure that in a moment one of the monstrous shelled things from the Western Sea would drop on him, desperately enquiring in its foreign tongue as it pulled his face off his skull.

Instead a sea-bird, attracted by the glister of the morning sun on the buttons of his shirt, wheeled away with a frightened squawk.

Roland sat up.

His hand throbbed wretchedly, endlessly. His right foot did the same. Both fingers and toe continued to insist they were there. The bottom half of his shirt was gone; what was left resembled a ragged vest. He had used one piece to bind his hand, the other to bind his foot.

Go away, he told the absent parts of his body. You are ghosts now. Go away.

It helped a little. Not much, but a little. They were ghosts, all right, but lively ghosts.

The gunslinger ate jerky. His mouth wanted it little, his stomach less, but he insisted. When it was inside him, he felt a little stronger. There was not much left, though; he was nearly up against it.

Yet things needed to be done.

He rose unsteadily to his feet and looked about. Birds swooped and dived, but the world seemed to belong to only him and them. The monstrosities were gone. Perhaps they were nocturnal; perhaps tidal. At the moment it seemed to make no difference.

The sea was enormous, meeting the horizon at a misty blue point that was impossible to determine. For a long moment the gunslinger forgot his agony in

its contemplation. He had never seen such a body of water. Had heard of it in children's stories, of course, had even been assured by his teachers—some, at least—that it existed—but to actually see it, this immensity, this amazement of water after years of arid land, was difficult to accept. . . difficult to even see.

He looked at it for a long time, enrapt, making himself see it, temporarily forgetting his pain in wonder.

But it was morning, and there were still things to be done.

He felt for the jawbone in his back pocket, careful to lead with the palm of his right hand, not wanting the stubs of his fingers to encounter it if it was still there, changing that hand's ceaseless sobbing to screams.

It was.

All right.

Next.

He clumsily unbuckled his gunbelts and laid them on a sunny rock. He removed the guns, swung the chambers out, and removed the useless shells. He threw them away. A bird settled on the bright gleam tossed back by one of them, picked it up in its beak, then dropped it and flew away.

The guns themselves must be tended to, should have been tended to before this, but since no gun in this world or any other was more than a club without ammunition, he laid the gunbelts themselves over his lap before doing anything else and carefully ran his left hand over the leather.

Each of them was damp from buckle and clasp to the point where the belts would cross his hips; from that point they seemed dry. He carefully removed each shell from the dry portions of the belts. His right hand kept trying to do this job, insisted on forgetting its reduction in spite of the pain, and he found himself returning it to his knee again and again, like a dog too stupid or fractious to heel. In his distracted pain he came close to swatting it once or twice.

I see serious problems ahead, he thought again.

He put these shells, hopefully still good, in a pile that was dishearteningly small. Twenty. Of those, a few would almost certainly misfire. He could depend on none of them. He removed the rest and put them in another pile. Thirty-seven. Well, you weren't heavy loaded, anyway, he thought, but he recognized the difference between fifty-seven live rounds and what might be twenty. Or ten. Or five. Or one. Or none.

He put the dubious shells in a second pile.

He still had his purse. That was one thing. He put it in his lap and then slowly disassembled his guns and performed the ritual of cleaning. By the time he was finished, two hours had passed and his pain was so intense his head reeled with it; conscious thought had become difficult. He wanted to sleep. He had never wanted that more in his life/But in the service of duty there was never any acceptable reason for denial.

"Cort," he said in a voice that he couldn't recognize, and laughed dryly.

Slowly, slowly, he reassembled his revolvers and loaded them with the shells he presumed to be dry. When the job was done, he held the one made for his left hand, cocked it... and then slowly lowered the hammer again. He wanted to know, yes. Wanted to know if there would be a satisfying report when he squeezed the trigger or only another of those useless clicks. But a click would mean nothing, and a report would only reduce twenty to nineteen... or nine... or three... or none.

He tore away another piece of his shirt, put the other shells—the ones which had been wetted—in it, and tied it, using his left hand and his teeth. He put them in his purse.

Sleep, his body demanded. Sleep, you must sleep, now, before dark, there's nothing left, you're used up—

He tottered to his feet and looked up and down the deserted strand. It was the color of an undergarment which has gone a long time without washing, littered with sea-shells which had no color. Here and there large rocks protruded from the gross-grained sand, and these were covered with guano, the older layers the yellow of ancient teeth, the fresher splotches white.

The high-tide line was marked with drying kelp. He could see pieces of his right boot and his waterskins lying near that line. He thought it almost a miracle that the skins hadn't been washed out to sea by high-surfing waves. Walking slowly, limping exquisitely, the gunslinger made his way to where they were. He picked up one of them and shook it by his ear. The other was empty. This one still had a little water left in it. Most would not have been able to tell the difference between the two, but the gunslinger knew each just as well as a mother knows which of her identical twins is which. He had been travelling with these waterskins for a long, long time. Water sloshed inside. That was good—a gift. Either the creature which had attacked him or any of the others could have torn this or the other open with one casual bite or slice of claw, but none had and the tide had spared it. Of the creature itself there was no sign, although the two of them had finished far above the tide-line. Perhaps other predators had taken it; perhaps its own kind had given it a burial at sea, as the elaphaunts, giant creatures of whom he had heard in child-hood stories, were reputed to bury their own dead.

He lifted the waterskin with his left elbow, drank deeply, and felt some strength come back into him. The right boot was of course ruined. . . but then he felt a spark of hope. The foot itself was intact—scarred but intact—and it might be possible to cut the other down to match it, to make something which would last at least awhile. . . .

Faintness stole over him. He fought it but his knees unhinged and he sat down, stupidly biting his tongue.

You won't fall unconscious, he told himself grimly. Not here, not where another of those things can come back tonight and finish the job.

So he got to his feet and tied the empty skin about his waist, but he had only gone twenty yards back toward the place where he had left his guns and purse when he fell down again, half-fainting. He lay there awhile, one cheek pressed against the sand, the edge of a seashell biting against the edge of his jaw almost deep enough to draw blood. He managed to drink from the waterskin, and then he crawled back to the place where he had awakened. There was a Joshua tree twenty yards up the slope—it was stunted, but it would offer at least some shade.

To Roland the twenty yards looked like twenty miles.

Nonetheless, he laboriously pushed what remained of his possessions into that little puddle of shade. He lay there with his head in the grass, already fading toward what could be sleep or unconsciousness or death. He looked into the sky and tried to judge the time. Not noon, but the size of the puddle of shade in which he rested said noon was close. He held on a moment longer, turning his right arm over and bringing it close to his eyes, looking for the telltale red

lines of infection, of some poison seeping steadily toward the middle of him. The palm of his hand was a dull red. Not a good sign. I jerk off left-handed, he thought, at least that's some-thing. Then darkness took him, and he slept for the next sixteen hours with the sound of the Western Sea pounding ceaselessly in his dreaming ears.

3

When the gunslinger awoke again the sea was dark but there was faint light in the sky to the east. Morning was on its way. He sat up and waves of dizziness almost overcame him.

He bent his head and waited.

When the faintness had passed, he looked at his hand. It was infected, all right—a tell-tale red swelling that spread up the palm and to the wrist. It stopped there, but already he could see the faint beginnings of other red lines, which would lead eventually to his heart and kill him. He felt hot, feverish. I need medicine, he thought. But there is no medicine here.

Had he come this far just to die, then? He would not. And if he were to die in spite of his determination, he would die on his way to the Tower.

How remarkable you are, gunslinger! the man in black tittered inside his head.

How indomitable! How romantic in your stupid obsession!

"Fuck you," he croaked, and drank. Not much water left, either. There was a whole sea in front of him, for all the good it could do him; water, water everywhere, but not a drop to drink. Never mind.

He buckled on his gunbelts, tied them—this was a process which took so long that before he was done the first faint light of dawn had brightened to the day's actual prologue—and then tried to stand up. He was not convinced he could do it until it was done.

Holding to the Joshua tree with his left hand, he scooped up the not-quite-empty waterskin with his right arm and slung it over his shoulder. Then his purse.

When he straightened the faintness washed over him again and he put his head down, waiting, willing.

The faintness passed.

Walking with the weaving, wavering steps of a man in the last stages of ambulatory drunkenness, the gunslinger made his way back down to the strand. He stood, looking at an ocean as dark as mulberry wine, and then took the last of his jerky from his purse. He ate half, and this time both mouth and stomach accepted a little more willingly. He turned and ate the other half as he watched the sun come up over the mountains where Jake had died—first seeming to catch on the cruel and treeless teeth of those peaks, then rising above them.

Roland held his face to the sun, closed his eyes, and smiled. He ate the rest of his jerky.

He thought: Very well. I am now a man with no food, with two less fingers and one less toe than I was born with; I am a gunslinger with shells which may not fire; I am sickening from a monster's bite and have no medicine; I have a day's water if I'm lucky; I may be able to walk perhaps a dozen miles if I press myself to the last extremity. I am, in short, a man on the edge of everything.

Which way should he walk? He had come from the east; he could not walk west without the powers of a saint or a savior. That left north and south.

North.

That was the answer his heart told. There was no question in it.
North.
The gunslinger began to walk.

4

He walked for three hours. He fell twice, and the second time he did not believe he would be able to get up again. Then a wave came toward him, close enough to make him remember his guns, and he was up before he knew it, standing on legs that quivered like stilts.

He thought he had managed about four miles in those three hours. Now the sun was growing hot, but not hot enough to explain the way his head pounded or the sweat pouring down his face; nor was the breeze from the sea strong enough to explain the sudden fits of shuddering which some-times gripped him, making his body lump into gooseflesh and his teeth chatter.

Fever, gunslinger, the man in black tittered. What's left inside you has been touched afire.

The red lines of inlet lion were more pronounced now; they had marched upward from his right wrist halfway to his elbow.

He made another mile and drained his waterbag dry. He tied it around his waist with the other. The landscape was monotonous and unpleasing. The sea to his right, the moun-tains to his left, the gray, shell-littered sand under the feet of his cut-down boots. The waves came and went. He looked for the lobstrosities and saw none. He walked out of nowhere toward nowhere, a man from another time who, it seemed, had reached a point of pointless ending.

Shortly before noon he fell again and knew he could not get up. This was the place, then. Here. This was the end, after all.

On his hands and knees, he raised his head like a groggy fighter . . . and some distance ahead, perhaps a mile, perhaps three (it was difficult to judge distances along the unchanging reach of the strand with the fever working inside him, making his eyeballs pulse in and out), he saw something new. Some-thing which stood upright on the beach.

What was it?

(three)

Didn't matter.

(three is the number of your fate)

The gunslinger managed to get to his feet again. He croaked something, some plea which only the circling sea-birds heard (and how happy they would be to gobble my eyes from my head, he thought, how happy to have such a tasty bit!), and walked on, weaving more seriously now, leaving tracks behind him that were weird loops and swoops.

He kept his eyes on whatever it was that stood on the strand ahead. When his hair fell in his eyes he brushed it aside. It seemed to grow no closer. The sun reached the roof of the sky, where it seemed to remain far too long. Roland imagined he was in the desert again, somewhere between the last out-lander's hut (the musical fruit the more you eat the more you toot)

and the way-station where the boy

(your Isaac)

had awaited his coming.

His knees buckled, straightened, buckled, straightened again. When his hair fell

in his eyes once more he did not bother to push it back; did not have the strength to push it back. He looked at the object, which now cast a narrow shadow back toward the upland, and kept walking.

He could make it out now, fever or no fever.

It was a door.

Less than a quarter of a mile from it, Roland's knees buckled again and this time he could not stiffen their hinges. He fell, his right hand dragged across gritty sand and shells, the stumps of his fingers screamed as fresh scabs were scored away. The stumps began to bleed again.

So he crawled. Crawled with the steady rush, roar, and retreat of the Western Sea in his ears. He used his elbows and his knees, digging grooves in the sand above the twist of dirty green kelp which marked the high-tide line. He supposed the wind was still blowing—it must be, for the chills continued to whip through his body—but the only wind he could hear was the harsh gale which gusted in and out of his own lungs.

The door grew closer.

Closer.

At last, around three o'clock of that long delirious day, with his shadow beginning to grow long on his left, he reached it. He sat back on his haunches and regarded it wearily.

It stood six and a half feet high and appeared to be made of solid ironwood, although the nearest ironwood tree must grow seven hundred miles or more from here. The doorknob looked as if it were made of gold, and it was filigreed with a design which the gunslinger finally recognized: it was the grinning face of the baboon.

There was no keyhole in the knob, above it, or below it.

The door had hinges, but they were fastened to nothing—or so it seems, the gunslinger thought. This is a mystery, a most marvellous mystery, but does it really matter? You are dying. Your own mystery—the only one that really matters to any man or woman in the end—approaches.

All the same, it did seem to matter.

This door. This door where no door should be. It simply stood there on the gray strand twenty feet above the high tide line, seemingly as eternal as the sea itself, now casting the slanted shadow of its thickness toward the east as the sun westered.

Written upon it in black letters two-thirds of the way up, written in the high speech, were two words:

THE PRISONER

A demon has infested him. The name of the demon is HEROIN.

The gunslinger could hear a low droning noise. At first he thought it must be the wind or a sound in his own feverish head, but he became more and more convinced that the sound was the sound of motors . . . and that it was coming from behind the door.

Open it then. It's not locked. You know it's not locked.

Instead he tottered gracelessly to his feet and walked above the door and around to the other side.

There was no other side.

Only the dark gray strand, stretching back and back. Only the waves, the shells,

the high-tide line, the marks of his own approach—bootprints and holes that had been made by his elbows. He looked again and his eyes widened a little. The door wasn't here, but its shadow was.

He started to put out his right hand—oh, it was so slow learning its new place in what was left of his life—dropped it, and raised his left instead. He groped, feeling for hard resistance.

If I feel it I'll knock on nothing, the gunslinger thought. That would be an interesting thing to do before dying!

His hand encountered thin air far past the place where the door—even if invisible—should have been.

Nothing to knock on.

And the sound of motors—if that's what it really had been—was gone. Now there was just the wind, the waves, and the sick buzzing inside his head.

The gunslinger walked slowly back to the other side of what wasn't there, already thinking it had been a hallucination to start with, a—

He stopped.

At one moment he had been looking west at an uninterrupted view of a gray, rolling wave, and then his view was interrupted by the thickness of the door. He could see its keyplate, which also looked like gold, with the latch protruding from it like a stubby metal tongue. Roland moved his head an inch to the north and the door was gone. Moved it back to where it had been and it was there again. It did not appear; it was just there.

He walked all the way around and faced the door, swaying.

He could walk around on the sea side, but he was convinced that the same thing would happen, only this time he would fall down.

I wonder if I could go through it from the nothing side?

Oh, there were all sorts of things to wonder about, but the truth was simple: here stood this door alone on an endless stretch of beach, and it was for only one of two things: opening or leaving closed.

The gunslinger realized with dim humor that maybe he wasn't dying quite as fast as he thought. If he had been, would he feel this scared?

He reached out and grasped the doorknob with his left hand. Neither the deadly cold of the metal or the thin, fiery heat of the runes engraved upon it surprised him.

He turned the knob. The door opened toward him when he pulled.

Of all the things he might have expected, this was not any of them.

The gunslinger looked, froze, uttered the first scream of terror in his adult life, and slammed the door. There was nothing for it to bang shut on, but it banged shut just the same, sending seabirds screeching up from the rocks on which they had perched to watch him.

5

What he had seen was the earth from some high, impossible distance in the sky—miles up, it seemed. He had seen the shadows of clouds lying upon that earth, floating across it like dreams. He had seen what an eagle might see if one could fly thrice as high as any eagle could.

To step through such a door would be to fall, screaming, for what might be minutes, and to end by driving one's self deep into the earth.

No, you saw more.

He considered it as he sat stupidly on the sand in front of the closed door with his wounded hand in his lap. The first faint tracers had appeared above his elbow now. The infection would reach his heart soon enough, no doubt about that.

It was the voice of Cort in his head.

Listen to me, maggots. Listen for your lives, for that's what it could mean some day. You never see all that you see. One of the things they send you to me for is to show you what you don't see in what you see—what you don't see when you're scared, or fighting, or running, or fucking. No man sees all that he sees, but before you're gunslingers—those of you who don't go west, that is—you'll see more in one single glance than some men see in a lifetime. And some of what you don't see in that glance you'll see afterwards, in the eye of your memory—if you live long enough to remember, that is. Because the difference between seeing and not seeing can be the difference between living and dying.

He had seen the earth from this huge height (and it had somehow been more dizzying and distorting than the vision of growth which had come upon him shortly before the end of his time with the man in black, because what he had seen through the door had been no vision), and what little remained of his attention had registered the fact that the land he was seeing was neither desert nor sea but some green place of incredible lushness with interstices of water that made him think it was a swamp, but—

What little remained of your attention, the voice of Cort mimicked savagely. You saw more!

Yes.

He had seen white.

White edges.

Bravo, Roland! Cort cried in his mind, and Roland seemed to feel the swat of that hard, callused hand. He winced.

He had been looking through a window.

The gunslinger stood with an effort, reached forward, felt cold and burning lines of thin heat against his palm. He opened the door again.

6

The view he had expected—that view of the earth from some horrendous, unimaginable height—was gone. He was looking at words he didn't understand. He almost understood them; it was as if the Great Letters had been twisted. . . .

Above the words was a picture of a horseless vehicle, a motor-car of the sort which had supposedly filled the world before it moved on. Suddenly he thought of the things Jake had said when, at the way station, the gunslinger had hypno-tized him.

This horseless vehicle with a woman wearing a fur stole laughing beside it, could be whatever had run Jake over in that strange other world.

This is that other world, the gunslinger thought.

Suddenly the view . . .

It did not change; it moved. The gunslinger wavered on his feet, feeling vertigo and a touch of nausea. The words and the picture descended and now he saw an aisle with a double row of seats on the far side. A few were empty, but there were men in most of them, men in strange dress. He supposed they were suits, but he had never seen any like them before. The things around their necks could

likewise be ties or cravats, but he had seen none like these, either. And, so far as he could tell, not one of them was armed—he saw no dagger nor sword, let alone a gun. What kind of trusting sheep were these? Some read papers covered with tiny words—words broken here and there with pictures—while others wrote on papers with pens of a sort the gunslinger had never seen. But the pens mattered little to him. It was the paper. He lived in a world where paper and gold were valued in rough equivalency. He had never seen so much paper in his life. Even now one of the men tore a sheet from the yellow pad which lay upon his lap and crumpled it into a ball, although he had only written on the top half of one side and not at all on the other. The gunslinger was not too sick to feel a twinge of horror and outrage at such unnatural profligacy.

Beyond the men was a curved white wall and a row of windows. A few of these were covered by some sort of shutters, but he could see blue sky beyond others.

Now a woman approached the doorway, a woman wear-ing what looked like a uniform, but of no sort Roland had ever seen. It was bright red, and part of it was pants. He could see the place where her legs became her crotch. This was nothing he had ever seen on a woman who was not undressed.

She came so close to the door that Roland thought she would walk through, and he blundered back a step, lucky not to fall. She looked at him with the practiced solicitude of a woman who is at once a servant and no one's mistress but her own. This did not interest the gunslinger. What interested him was that her expression never changed. It was not the way you expected a woman—anybody, for that matter—to look at a dirty, swaying, exhausted man with revolvers crisscrossed on his hips, a blood-soaked rag wrapped around his right hand, and jeans which looked as if they'd been worked on with some kind of buzzsaw.

"Would you like. . ." the woman in red asked. There was more, but the gunslinger didn't understand exactly what it meant. Food or drink, he thought. That red cloth—it was not cotton. Silk? It looked a little like silk, but—

"Gin," a voice answered, and the gunslinger understood that. Suddenly he understood much more:

It wasn't a door.

It was eyes.

Insane as it might seem, he was looking at part of a carriage that flew through the sky. He was looking through someone's eyes.

Whose?

But he knew. He was looking through the eyes of the prisoner.

CHAPTER 2 EDDIE DEAN

1

As if to confirm this idea, mad as it was, what the gun-slinger was looking at through the doorway suddenly rose and slid sideways. The view turned (that feeling of vertigo again, a feeling of standing still on a plate with wheels under it, a plate which hands he could not see moved this way and that), and then the aisle was flowing past the edges of the doorway. He passed a place where several women, all dressed in the same red uniforms, stood. This was a

place of steel things, and he would have liked to make the moving view stop in spite of his pain and exhaustion so he could see what the steel things were—machines of some sort. One looked a bit like an oven. The army woman he had already seen was pouring the gin which the voice had requested. The bottle she poured from was very small. It was glass. The vessel she was pouring it into looked like glass but the gunslinger didn't think it actually was.

What the doorway showed had moved along before he could see more. There was another of those dizzying turns and he was looking at a metal door. There was a lighted sign in a small oblong. This word the gunslinger could read. VACANT, it said.

The view slid down a little. A hand entered it from the right of the door the gunslinger was looking through and grasped the knob of the door the gunslinger was looking at. He saw the cuff of a blue shirt, slightly pulled back to reveal crisp curls of black hair. Long fingers. A ring on one of them, with a jewel set into it that might have been a ruby or a firedim or a piece of trumpery trash.

The gunslinger rather thought it this last—it was too big and vulgar to be real. The metal door swung open and the gunslinger was looking into the strangest privy he had ever seen. It was all metal.

The edges of the metal door flowed past the edges of the door on the beach. The gunslinger heard the sound of it being closed and latched. He was spared another of those giddy spins, so he supposed the man through whose eyes he was watching must have reached behind himself to lock himself in.

Then the view did turn—not all the way around but half—and he was looking into a mirror, seeing a face he had seen once before... on a Tarot card. The same dark eyes and spill of dark hair. The face was calm but pale, and in the eyes—eyes through which he saw now reflected back at him—Roland saw some of the dread and horror of that baboon-ridden creature on the Tarot card.

The man was shaking.

He's sick, too.

Then he remembered Nort, the weed-eater in Tull.

He thought of the Oracle.

A demon has infested him.

The gunslinger suddenly thought he might know what HEROIN was after all: something like the devil-grass.

A trifle upsetting, isn't he?

Without thought, with the simple resolve that had made him the last of them all, the last to continue marching on and on long after Cuthbert and the others had died or given up, committed suicide or treachery or simply recanted the whole idea of the Tower; with the single-minded and incurious resolve that had driven him across the desert and all the years before the desert in the wake of the man in black, the gunsling-er stepped through the doorway.

2

Eddie ordered a gin and tonic—maybe not such a good idea to be going into New York Customs drunk, and he knew once he got started he would just keep on going—but he had to have something.

When you got to get down and you can't find the elevator, Henry had told him once, you got to do it any way you can. Even if it's only with a shovel.

Then, after he'd given his order and the stewardess had left, he started to feel

like he was maybe going to vomit. Not for sure going to vomit, only maybe, but it was better to be safe. Going through Customs with a pound of pure cocaine under each armpit with gin on your breath was not so good; going through Customs that way with puke drying on your pants would be disaster. So better to be safe.

The feeling would probably pass, it usually did, but better to be safe.

Trouble was, he was going cool turkey. Cool, not cold. More words of wisdom from that great sage and eminent junkie Henry Dean.

They had been sitting on the penthouse balcony of the Regency Tower, not quite on the nod but edging toward it, the sun warm on their faces, done up so good. .

. back in the good old days, when Eddie had just started to snort the stuff and Henry himself had yet to pick up his first needle.

Everybody talks about going cold turkey, Henry had said, but before you get there, you gotta go cool turkey.

And Eddie, stoned out of his mind, had cackled madly, because he knew exactly what Henry was talking about. Henry, however, had not so much as cracked a smile.

In some ways cool turkey's worse than cold turkey, Henry said. At least when you make it to cold turkey, you KNOW you're gonna puke, you KNOW you're going to shake, you KNOW you're gonna sweat until it feels like you're drowning in it.

Cool turkey is, like, the curse of expectation.

Eddie remembered asking Henry what you called it when a needle-freak (which, in those dim dead days which must have been all of sixteen months ago, they had both solemnly assured themselves they would never become) got a hot shot.

You call that baked turkey, Henry had replied promptly, and then had looked surprised, the way a person does when he's said something that turned out to be a lot funnier than he actually thought it would be, and they looked at each other, and then they were both howling with laughter and clutching each other.

Baked turkey, pretty funny, not so funny now.

Eddie walked up the aisle past the galley to the head, checked the sign—VACANT—and opened the door.

Hey Henry, o great sage if eminent junkie big brother, while we're on the subject of our feathered friends, you want to hear my definition of cooked goose? That's when the Customs guy at Kennedy decides there's something a little funny about the way you look, or it's one of the days when they got the dogs with the PhD noses out there instead of at Port Authority and they all start to bark and pee all over the floor and it's you they're all just about strangling themselves on their choke-chains trying to get to, and after the Customs guys toss all your luggage they take you into the little room and ask you if you'd mind taking off your shirt and you say yeah I sure would I'd mind like hell, I picked up a little cold down in the Bahamas and the air-conditioning in here is real high and I'm afraid it might turn into pneumonia and they say oh is that so, do you always sweat like that when the air-conditioning's too high, Mr. Dean, you do, well, excuse us all to hell, now do it, and you do it, and they say maybe you better take off the t-shirt too, because you look like maybe you got some kind of a medical problem, buddy, those bulges under your pits look like maybe they could be some kind of lymphatic tumors or something, and you don't even bother to say anything else, it's like a center-fielder who doesn't even bother to chase the ball when it's hit a certain way, he just turns around and watches it go into the upper deck, because when it's gone it's gone, so you take off the t-shirt and hey, looky here, you're some lucky kid, those aren't

tumors, unless they're what you might call tumors on the corpus of society, yuk-yuk-yuk, those things look more like a couple of baggies held there with Scotch strapping tape, and by the way, don't worry about that smell, son, that's just goose. It's cooked.

He reached behind him and pulled the locking knob. The lights in the head brightened. The sound of the motors was a soft drone. He turned toward the mirror, wanting to see how bad he looked, and suddenly a terrible, pervasive feeling swept over him: a feeling of being watched.

Hey, come on, quit it, he thought uneasily. You're supposed to be the most unparanoid guy in the world. That's why they sent you. That's why— But it suddenly seemed those were not his own eyes in the mirror, not Eddie Dean's hazel, almost-green eyes that had melted so many hearts and allowed him to part so many pretty sets of legs during the last third of his twenty-one years, not his eyes but those of a stranger. Not hazel but a blue the color of fading Levis. Eyes that were chilly, precise, unexpected marvels of calibration. Bombardier's eyes.

Reflected in them he saw—clearly saw—a seagull swoop-ing down over a breaking wave and snatching something from it.

He had time to think What in God's name is this shit? and then he knew it wasn't going to pass; he was going to throw up after all.

In the half-second before he did, in the half-second he went on looking into the mirror, he saw those blue eyes disappear . . . but before that happened there was suddenly the feeling of being two people ... of being possessed, like the little girl in *The Exorcist*.

Clearly he felt a new mind inside his own mind, and heard a thought not as his own thought but more like a voice from a radio: I've come through. I'm in the sky-carriage.

There was something else, but Eddie didn't hear it. He was too busy throwing up into the basin as quietly as he could.

When he was done, before he had even wiped his mouth, something happened which had never happened to him before. For one frightening moment there was nothing—only a blank interval. As if a single line in a column of newsprint had been neatly and completely inked out.

What is this? Eddie thought helplessly. What the hell is this shit?

Then he had to throw up again, and maybe that was just as well; whatever you might say against it, regurgitation had at least this much in its favor: as long as you were doing it, you couldn't think of anything else.

3

I've come through. I'm in the sky-carriage, the gunslinger thought. And, a second later: He sees me in the mirror!

Roland pulled back—did not leave but pulled back, like a child retreating to the furthest corner of a very long room. He was inside the sky-carriage; he was also inside a man who was not himself. Inside *The Prisoner*. In that first moment, when he had been close to the front (it was the only way he could describe it), he had been more than inside; he had almost been the man. He felt the man's illness, whatever it was, and sensed that the man was about to retch. Roland understood that if he needed to, he could take control of this man's body. He would suffer his pains, would be ridden by whatever demon-ape rode him, but if

he needed to he could.

Or he could stay back here, unnoticed.

When the prisoner's fit of vomiting had passed, the gun-slinger leaped forward—this time all the way to the front. He understood very little about this strange situation, and to act in a situation one does not understand is to invite the most terrible consequences, but there were two things he needed to know—and he needed to know them so desperately that the needing outweighed any consequences which might arise.

Was the door he had come through from his own world still there?

And if it was, was his physical self still there, collapsed, untenanted, perhaps dying or already dead without his self's self to go on unthinkingly running lungs and heart and nerves? Even if his body still lived, it might only continue to do so until night fell. Then the lobstrosities would come out to ask their questions and look for shore dinners.

He snapped the head which was for a moment his head around in a fast backward glance.

The door was still there, still behind him. It stood open on his own world, its hinges buried in the steel of this peculiar privy. And, yes, there he lay, Roland, the last gunslinger, lying on his side, his bound right hand on his stomach.

I'm breathing, Roland thought. I'll have to go back and move me. But there are things to do first. Things . . .

He let go of the prisoner's mind and retreated, watching, waiting to see if the prisoner knew he was there or not.

4

After the vomiting stopped, Eddie remained bent over the basin, eyes tightly closed.

Blanked there for a second. Don't know what it was. Did I look around?

He groped for the faucet and ran cool water. Eyes still closed, he splashed it over his cheeks and brow.

When it could be avoided no longer, he looked up into the mirror again.

His own eyes looked back at him.

There were no alien voices in his head.

No feeling of being watched.

You had a momentary fugue, Eddie, the great sage and eminent junkie advised him.

A not uncommon phenomenon in one who is going cool turkey.

Eddie glanced at his watch. An hour and a half to New York. The plane was scheduled to land at 4:05 EDT, but it was really going to be high noon. Showdown time.

He went back to his seat. His drink was on the divider. He took two sips and the stew came back to ask him if she could do any thing else for him. He opened his mouth to say no. . .and then there was another of those odd blank moments.

5

"I'd like something to eat, please," the gunslinger said through Eddie Dean's mouth.

"We'll be serving a hot snack in—"

"I'm really starving, though," the gunslinger said with perfect truthfulness.
"Anything at all, even a popkin—"
"Popkin?" the army woman frowned at him, and the gunslinger suddenly looked into the prisoner's mind. Sand-wich . . . the word was as distant as the murmur in a conch shell.
"A sandwich, even," the gunslinger said.
The army woman looked doubtful. "Well... I have some tuna fish ..."
"That would be fine," the gunslinger said, although he had never heard of tooter fish in his life. Beggars could not be choosers.
"You do look a little pale," the army woman said. "I thought maybe it was air-sickness."
"Pure hunger."
She gave him a professional smile. "I'll see what I can rustle up."
Russel? the gunslinger thought dazedly. In his own world to russel was a slang verb meaning to take a woman by force. Never mind. Food would come. He had no idea if he could carry it back through the doorway to the body which needed it so badly, but one thing at a time, one thing at a time.
Russel, he thought, and Eddie Dean's head shook, as if in disbelief.
Then the gunslinger retreated again.

6

Nerves, the great oracle and eminent junkie assured him. Just nerves. All part of the cool turkey experience, little brother.
But if nerves was what it was, how come he felt this odd sleepiness stealing over him—odd because he should have been itchy, ditsy, feeling that urge to squirm and scratch that came before the actual shakes; even if he had not been in Henry's "cool turkey" state, there was the fact that he was about to attempt bringing two pounds of coke through U.S. Customs, a felony punishable by not less than ten years in federal prison, and he seemed to suddenly be having blackouts as well.
Still, that feeling of sleepiness.
He sipped at his drink again, then let his eyes slip shut.
Why'd you black out?
I didn't, or she'd be running for all the emergency gear they carry.
Blanked out, then. It's no good either way. You never blanked out like that before in your life. Nodded out, yeah, but never blanked out.
Something odd about his right hand, too. It seemed to throb vaguely, as if he had pounded it with a hammer.
He flexed it without opening his eyes. No ache. No throb. No blue bombardier's eyes. As for the blank-outs, they were just a combination of going cool turkey and a good case of what the great oracle and eminent et cetera would no doubt call the smuggler's blues.
But I'm going to sleep, just the same, he thought. How 'bout that?
Henry's face drifted by him like an untethered balloon. Don't worry, Henry was saying. You'll be all right, little brother. You fly down there to Nassau, check in at the Aquinas, there'll be a man come by Friday night. One of the good guys. He'll fix you, leave you enough stuff to take you through the weekend. Sunday night he brings the coke and you give him the key to the safe deposit box. Monday morning you do the routine just like Balazar said. This guy will

play; he knows how it's supposed to go. Monday noon you fly out, and with a face as honest as yours, you'll breeze through Customs and we'll be eating steak in Sparks before the sun goes down. It's gonna be a breeze, little brother, nothing but a cool breeze.

But it had been sort of a warm breeze after all.

The trouble with him and Henry was they were like Charlie Brown and Lucy. The only difference was once in awhile Henry would hold onto the football so Eddie could kick it—not often, but once in awhile. Eddie had even thought, while in one of his heroin dazes, that he ought to write Charles Schultz a letter. Dear Mr. Schultz, he would say. You're missing a bet by ALWAYS having Lucy pull the foot-ball up at the last second. She ought to hold it down there once in awhile. Nothing Charlie Brown could ever predict, you understand. Sometimes she'd maybe hold it down for him to kick three, even four times in a row, then nothing for a month, then once, and then nothing for three or four days, and then, you know, you get the idea. That would REALLY fuck the kid up, wouldn't it?

Eddie knew it would really fuck the kid up.

From experience he knew it.

One of the good guys, Henry had said, but the guy who showed up had been a sallow-skinned thing with a British accent, a hairline moustache that looked like something out of a 1940s film noire, and yellow teeth that all leaned inward, like the teeth of a very old animal trap.

"You have the key, Senor?" he asked, except in that Brit-ish public school accent it came out sounding like what you called your last year of high school.

"The key's safe," Eddie said, "if that's what you mean."

"Then give it to me."

"That's not the way it goes. You're supposed to have something to take me through the weekend. Sunday night you're supposed to bring me something. I give you the key. Monday you go into town and use it to get something else. I don't know what, 'cause that's not my business."

Suddenly there was a small flat blue automatic in the sallow-skinned thing's hand. "Why don't you just give it to me, Senor? I will save time and effort; you will save your life."

There was deep steel in Eddie Dean, junkie or no junkie. Henry knew it; more important, Balazar knew it. That was why he had been sent. Most of them thought he had gone because he was hooked through the bag and back again. He knew it, Henry knew it, Balazar, too. But only he and Henry knew he would have gone even if he was as straight as a stake. For Henry. Balazar hadn't got quite that far in his figuring, but fuck Balazar.

"Why don't you just put that thing away, you little scuzz?" Eddie asked. "Or do you maybe want Balazar to send someone down here and cut your eyes out of your head with a rusty knife?"

The sallow thing smiled. The gun was gone like magic; in its place was a small envelope. He handed it to Eddie. "Just a little joke, you know."

"If you say so."

"I see you Sunday night."

He turned toward the door.

"I think you better wait."

The sallow thing turned back, eyebrows raised. "You think I won't go if I want to go?"

"I think if you go and this is bad shit, I'll be gone tomor-row. Then you'll be

in deep shit."

The sallow thing turned sulky. It sat in the room's single easy chair while Eddie opened the envelope and spilled out a small quantity of brown stuff. It looked evil. He looked at the sallow thing.

"I know how it looks, it looks like shit, but that's just the cut," the sallow thing said. "It's fine."

Eddie tore a sheet of paper from the notepad on the desk and separated a small amount of the brown powder from the pile. He fingered it and then rubbed it on the roof of his mouth. A second later he spat into the wastebasket.

"You want to die? Is that it? You got a death-wish?"

"That's all there is." The sallow thing looked more sulky than ever.

"I have a reservation out tomorrow," Eddie said. This was a lie, but he didn't believe the sallow thing had the resources to check it. "TWA. I did it on my own, just in case the contact happened to be a fuck-up like you. I don't mind. It'll be a relief, actually. I wasn't cut out for this sort of work."

The sallow thing sat and cogitated. Eddie sat and concentrated on not moving. He felt like moving; felt like slipping and sliding, hipping and bopping, shucking and jiving, scratching his scratches and cracking his crackers. He even felt his eyes wanting to slide back to the pile of brown powder, although he knew it was poison. He had fixed at ten that morning; the same number of hours had gone by since then. But if he did any of those things, the situation would change. The sallow thing was doing more than cogitating; it was watching him, trying to calculate the depth of him.

"I might be able to find something," it said at last.

"Why don't you try?" Eddie said. "But come eleven, I turn out the light and put the DO NOT DISTURB sign on the door, and anybody that knocks after I do that, I call the desk and say someone's bothering me, send a security guy."

"You are a fuck," the sallow thing said in its impeccable British accent.

"No," Eddie said, "a fuck is what you expected. I came with my legs crossed. You want to be here before eleven with something that I can use—it doesn't have to be great, just something I can use—or you will be one dead scuzz."

The sallow thing was back long before eleven; he was back by nine-thirty. Eddie guessed the other stuff had been in his car all along.

A little more powder this time. Not white, but at least a dull ivory color, which was mildly hopeful.

Eddie tasted. It seemed all right. Actually better than all right. Pretty good.

He rolled a bill and snorted.

"Well, then, until Sunday," the sallow thing said briskly, getting to its feet.

"Wait," Eddie said, as if he were the one with the gun. In a way he was. The gun was Balazar. Emilio Balazar was a high-caliber big shot in New York's wonderful world of drugs.

"Wait?" the sallow thing turned and looked at Eddie as if he believed Eddie must be insane. "For what?"

"Well, I was actually thinking of you," Eddie said. "If I get really sick from what I just put into my body, it's off. If I die, of course it's off. I was just thinking that, if I only get a little sick, I might give you another chance. You know, like that story about how some kid rubs a lamp and gets three wishes."

"It will not make you sick. That's China White."

"If that's China White," Eddie said, "I'm Dwight Gooden."

"Who?"

"Never mind."

The sallow thing sat down. Eddie sat by the motel room desk with the little pile of white powder nearby (the D-Con or whatever it had been had long since gone down the John). On TV the Braves were getting shellacked by the Mets, courtesy of WTBS and the big satellite dish on the Aquinas Hotel's roof. Eddie felt a faint sensation of calm which seemed to come from the back of his mind . . . except where it was really coming from, he knew from what he had read in the medical journals, was from the bunch of living wires at the base of his spine, that place where heroin addiction takes place by causing an unnatural thickening of the nerve stern.

Want to take a quick cure? he had asked Henry once. Break your spine, Henry. Your legs stop working, and so does your cock, but you stop needing the needle right away.

Henry hadn't thought it was funny.

In truth, Eddie hadn't thought it was that funny either. When the only fast way you could get rid of the monkey on your back was to snap your spinal cord above that bunch of nerves, you were dealing with one heavy monkey. That was no capuchin, no cute little organ grinder's mascot; that was a big mean old baboon. Eddie began to snuffle.

"Okay," he said at last. "It'll do. You can vacate the premises, scuzz."

The sallow thing got up. "I have friends," he said. "They could come in here and do things to you. You'd beg to tell me where that key is."

"Not me, champ," Eddie said. "Not this kid." And smiled. He didn't know how the smile looked, but it must not have looked all that cheery because the sallow thing vacated the premises, vacated them fast, vacated them without looking back.

When Eddie Dean was sure he was gone, he cooked.

Fixed.

Slept.

8

As he was sleeping now.

The gunslinger, somehow inside this man's mind (a man whose name he still did not know; the lowling the prisoner thought of as "the sallow thing" had not known it, and so had never spoken it), watched this as he had once watched plays as a child, before the world had moved on. . . or so he thought he watched, because plays were all he had ever seen. If he had ever seen a moving picture, he would have thought of that first. The things he did not actually see he had been able to pluck from the prisoner's mind because the associations were close. It was odd about the name, though. He knew the name of the prisoner's brother, but not the name of the man himself. But of course names were secret things, full of power.

And neither of the things that mattered was the man's name. One was the weakness of the addiction. The other was the steel buried inside that weakness, like a good gun sinking in quicksand.

This man reminded the gunslinger achingly of Cuthbert.

Someone was coming. The prisoner, sleeping, did not hear. The gunslinger, not sleeping, did, and came forward again.

9

Great, Jane thought. He tells me how hungry he is and I fix something up for him because he's a little bit cute, and then he falls asleep on me.

Then the passenger—a guy of about twenty, tall, wearing clean, slightly faded bluejeans and a paisley shirt—opened his eyes a little and smiled at her.

"Thankee sai," he said—or so it sounded. Almost archaic ... or foreign.

Sleep-talk, that's all, Jane thought.

"You're welcome." She smiled her best stewardess smile, sure he would fall asleep again and the sandwich would still be there, uneaten, when it was time for the actual meal service.

Well, that was what they taught you to expect, wasn't it?

She went back to the galley to catch a smoke.

She struck the match, lifted it halfway to her cigarette, and there it stopped, unnoticed, because that wasn't all they taught you to expect.

I thought he was a little bit cute. Mostly because of his eyes. His hazel eyes.

But when the man in 3A had opened his eyes a moment ago, they hadn't been hazel; they had been blue. Not sweet-sexy blue like Paul Newman's eyes, either, but the color of icebergs. They—

"Ow!"

The match had reached her fingers. She shook it out.

"Jane?" Paula asked. "You all right?"

"Fine. Daydreaming."

She lit another match and this time did the job right. She had only taken a single drag when the perfectly reasonable explanation occurred to her. He wore contacts. Of course. The kind that changed the color of your eyes. He had gone into the bathroom. He had been in there long enough for her to worry about him being airsick—he had that pallid complexion, the look of a man who is not quite well. But he had only been taking out his contact lenses so he could nap more comfortably. Perfectly reasonable.

You may feel something, a voice from her own not-so-distant past spoke suddenly. Some little tickle. You may see something just a little bit wrong.

Colored contact lenses.

Jane Doming personally knew over two dozen people who wore contacts. Most of them worked for the airline. No one ever said anything about it, but she thought maybe one reason was they all sensed the passengers didn't like to see flight personnel wearing glasses—it made them nervous.

Of all those people, she knew maybe four who had color-contacts. Ordinary contact lenses were expensive; colored ones cost the earth. All of the people of Jane's acquaintance who cared to lay out that sort of money were women, all of them extremely vain.

So what? Guys can be vain, too. Why not? He's good-looking.

No. He wasn't. Cute, maybe, but that was as far as it went, and with the pallid complexion he only made it to cute by the skin of his teeth. So why the color-contacts?

Airline passengers are often afraid of flying.

In a world where hijacking and drug-smuggling had become facts of life, airline personnel are often afraid of passengers.

The voice that had initiated these thoughts had been that of an instructor at flight school, a tough old battle-axe who looked as if she could have flown the mail with Wiley Post, saying: Don't ignore your suspicions. If you forget everything else you've learned about coping with potential or actual terrorists, remember this: don't ignore your suspicions. In some cases you'll get a crew who'll say during the debriefing that they didn't have any idea until the guy pulled out a grenade and said hang a left for Cuba or everyone on the aircraft is going to join the jet-stream. But in most cases you get two or three different people—mostly flight attendants, which you women will be in less than a month—who say they felt something. Some little tickle. A sense that the guy in 91C or the young woman in 5A was a little wrong. They felt something, but they did nothing. Did they get fired for that? Christ, no! You can't put a guy in restraints because you don't like the way he scratches his pimples. The real problem is they felt something . . . and then forgot.

The old battle-axe had raised one blunt finger. Jane Doming, along with her fellow classmates, had listened raptly as she said, If you feel that little tickle, don't do anything. . . but that includes not forgetting. Because there's always that one little chance that you just might be able to stop something before it gets started . . . something like an unscheduled twelve-day layover on the tarmac of some shitpot Arab country.

Just colored contacts, but...

Thankee, sai.

Sleep-talk? Or a muddled lapse into some other language?

She would watch, Jane decided.

And she would not forget.

10

Now, the gunslinger thought. Now we'll see, won't we?

He had been able to come from his world into this body through the door on the beach. What he needed to find out was whether or not he could carry things back. Oh, not himself, he was confident that he could return through the door and reenter his own poisoned, sickening body at any time he should desire. But other things? Physical things? Here, for instance, in front of him, was food: something the woman in the uniform had called a tooter-fish sandwich. The gunslinger had no idea what tooter-fish was, but he knew a popkin when he saw it, although this one looked curiously uncooked.

His body needed to eat, and his body would need to drink, but more than either, his body needed some sort of medicine. It would die from the lobster's bite without it. There might be such medicine in this world; in a world where carriages rode through the air far above where even the strongest eagle could fly, anything seemed possible. But it would not matter how much powerful medicine there was here if he could carry nothing physical through the door. You could live in this body, gunslinger, the voice of the man in black whispered deep inside his head. Leave that piece of breathing meat over there for the lobster-things. It's only a husk, anyway.

He would not do that. For one thing it would be the most murderous sort of thievery, because he would not be content to be just a passenger for long, looking out of this man's eyes like a traveller looking out of a coach window at the passing scenery.

For another, he was Roland. If dying was required, he intended to die as Roland. He would die crawling toward the Tower, if that was what was required.

Then the odd harsh practicality that lived beside the romantic in his nature like a tiger with a roe reasserted itself. There was no need to think of dying with the experiment not yet made.

He picked up the popkin. It had been cut in two halves. He held one in each hand. He opened the prisoner's eyes and looked out of them. No one was looking at him (although, in the galley, Jane Doming was thinking about him, and very hard).

Roland turned toward the door and went through, hold-ing the popkin-halves in his hands.

11

First he heard the grinding roar of an incoming wave; next he heard the argument of many sea-birds arising from the closest rocks as he struggled to a sitting position (cowardly buggers were creeping up, he thought, and they would have been taking pecks out of me soon enough, still breathing or no—they're nothing but vultures with a coat of paint); then he became aware that one popkin half—the one in his right hand—had tumbled onto the hard gray sand because he had been holding it with a whole hand when he came through the door and now was—or had been—holding it in a hand which had suffered a forty per cent reduction.

He picked it up clumsily, pinching it between his thumb and ring finger, brushed

as much of the sand from it as he could, and took a tentative bite. A moment later he was wolf-ing it, not noticing the few bits of sand which ground between his teeth. Seconds later he turned his attention to the other half. It was gone in three bites.

The gunslinger had no idea what tooter-fish was—only that it was delicious. That seemed enough.

12

In the plane, no one saw the tuna sandwich disappear. No one saw Eddie Dean's hands grasp the two halves of it tightly enough to make deep thumb-indentations in the white bread.

No one saw the sandwich fade to transparency, then dis-appear, leaving only a few crumbs.

About twenty seconds after this had happened, Jane Doming snuffed her cigarette and crossed the head of the cabin. She got her book from her totebag, but what she really wanted was another look at 3A.

He appeared to be deeply asleep. . . but the sandwich was gone.

Jesus, Jane thought. He didn't eat it; he swallowed it whole. And now he's asleep again? Are you kidding?

Whatever was tickling at her about 3A, Mr. Now-They're-Hazel-Now-They're-Blue, kept right on tickling. Something about him was not right. Something.

CHAPTER 3 CONTACT AND LANDING

1

Eddie was awakened by an announcement from the co-pilot that they should be landing at Kennedy International, where the visibility was unlimited, the winds out of the west at ten miles an hour, and the temperature a jolly seventy degrees, in forty-five minutes or so. He told them that, if he didn't get another chance, he wanted to thank them one and all for choosing Delta.

He looked around and saw people checking their duty declaration cards and their proofs of citizenship—coming in from Nassau your driver's license and a credit card with a stateside bank listed on it was supposed to be enough, but most still carried passports—and Eddie felt a steel wire start to tighten inside him.

He still couldn't believe he had gone to sleep, and so soundly.

He got up and went to the restroom. The bags of coke under his arms felt as if they were resting easily and firmly, fitting as nicely to the contours of his sides as they had in the hotel room where a soft-spoken American named William Wilson had strapped them on. Following the strapping operation, the man whose name Poe had made famous (Wilson had only looked blankly at Eddie when Eddie made some allusion to this) handed over the shirt. Just an ordinary paisley shirt, a little faded, the sort of thing any frat-boy might wear back on the plane following a short pre-exams holiday . . . except this one was specially tailored to hide unsightly bulges.

"You check everything once before you set down just to be sure," Wilson said,

"but you're gonna be fine."

Eddie didn't know if he was going to be fine or not, but he had another reason for wanting to use the John before the FASTEN SEATBELTS light came on. In spite of all temptation—and most of last night it hadn't been temptation but raging need—he had managed to hold onto the last little bit of what the sallow thing had had the temerity to call China White.

Clearing customs from Nassau wasn't like clearing customs from Haiti or Quincon or Bogota, but there were still people watching. Trained people. He needed any and every edge he could get. If he could go in there a little cooled out, just a little, it might be the one thing that put him over the top.

He snorted the powder, flushed the little twist of paper it had been in down the John, then washed his hands.

Of course, if you make it, you'll never know, will you? he thought. No. He wouldn't. And wouldn't care.

On his way back to his seat he saw the stewardess who had brought him the drink he hadn't finished. She smiled at him. He smiled back, sat down, buckled his seat-belt, took out the flight magazine, turned the pages, and looked at pictures and words. Neither made any impression on them. That steel wire continued to tighten around his gut, and when the FASTEN SEATBELTS light did come on, it took a double turn and cinched tight.

The heroin had hit—he had the sniffles to prove it—but he sure couldn't feel it.

One thing he did feel shortly before landing was another of those unsettling periods of blankness . . . short, but most definitely there.

The 727 banked over the water of Long Island Sound and started in.

2

Jane Doming had been in the business class galley, helping Peter and Anne stow the last of the after-meal drinks glasses when the guy who looked like a college kid went into the first class bathroom.

He was returning to his seat when she brushed aside the curtain between business and first, and she quickened her step without even thinking about it, catching him with her smile, making him look up and smile back.

His eyes were hazel again.

All right, all right. He went into the John and took them out before his nap; he went into the John and put them in again afterwards. For Christ's sake, Janey!

You're being a goose!

She wasn't, though. It was nothing she could put her finger on, but she was not being a goose.

He's too pale.

So what? Thousands of people are too pale, including your own mother since her gall bladder went to hell.

He had very arresting blue eyes—maybe not as cute as the hazel contacts—but certainly arresting. So why the bother and expense?

Because he likes designer eyes. Isn't that enough?

No.

Shortly before FASTEN SEAT BELTS and final cross-check, she did something she had never done before; she did it with that tough old battle-axe of an instructor in mind. She filled a Thermos bottle with hot coffee and put on the red plastic top without first pushing the stopper into the bottle's throat. She

screwed the top on only until she felt it catch the first thread.

Susy Douglas was making the final approach announcement, telling the geese to extinguish their cigarettes, telling them they would have to stow what they had taken out, telling them a Delta gate agent would meet the flight, telling them to check and make sure they had their duty-declaration cards and proofs of citizenship, telling them it would now be necessary to pick up all cups, glasses and speaker sets.

I'm surprised we don't have to check to make sure they're dry, Jane thought distractedly. She felt her own steel wire wrapping itself around her guts, cinching them tight.

"Get my side," Jane said as Susy hung up the mike.

Susy glanced at the Thermos, then at Jane's face. "Jane? Are you sick? You look as white as a—"

"I'm not sick. Get my side. I'll explain when you get back." Jane glanced briefly at the jump-seats beside the left-hand exit door. "I want to ride shotgun."

"Jane—"

"Get my side."

"All right," Susy said. "All right, Jane. No problem."

Jane Doming sat down in the jump-seat closest to the aisle. She held the Thermos in her hands and made no move to fasten the web-harness. She wanted to keep the Thermos in complete control, and that meant both hands.

Susy thinks I've flipped out.

Jane hoped she had.

If Captain McDonald lands hard, I'm going to have blisters all over my hands.

She would risk it.

The plane was dropping. The man in 3A, the man with the two-tone eyes and the pale face, suddenly leaned down and pulled his travelling bag from under the seat.

This is it, Jane thought. This is where he brings out the grenade or the automatic weapon or whatever the hell he's got.

And the moment she saw it, the very moment, she was going to flip the red top off the Thermos in her slightly trembling hands, and there was going to be one very surprised Friend of Allah rolling around on the aisle floor of Delta Flight 901 while his skin boiled on his face.

3A unzipped the bag.

Jane got ready.

3

The gunslinger thought this man, prisoner or not, was probably better at the fine art of survival than any of the other men he had seen in the air-carriage.

The others were fat things, for the most part, and even those who looked reasonably fit also looked open, unguarded, their faces those of spoiled and cosseted children, the faces of men who would fight— eventually—but who would whine almost endlessly before they did; you could let their guts out onto their shoes and their last expressions would not be rage or agony but stupid surprise.

The prisoner was better. . . but not good enough. Not at all.

The army woman. She saw something. I don't know what, but she saw something wrong. She's awake to him in a way she's not to the others.

The prisoner sat down. Looked at a limp-covered book he thought of as a "Magda-Seen," although who Magda might have been or what she might have seen mattered not a whit to Roland. The gunslinger did not want to look at a book, amazing as such things were; he wanted to look at the woman in the army uniform. The urge to come forward and take control was very great. But he held against it. . . at least for the time being.

The prisoner had gone somewhere and gotten a drug. Not the drug he himself took, nor one that would help cure the gunslinger's sick body, but one that people paid a lot of money for because it was against the law. He would give this drug to his brother, who would in turn give it to a man named Balazar. The deal would be complete when Balazar traded them the kind of drug they took for this one—if, that was, the prisoner was able to correctly perform a ritual unknown to the gun-slinger (and a world as strange as this must of necessity have many strange rituals); it was called Clearing the Customs.

But the woman sees him.

Could she keep him from Clearing the Customs? Roland thought the answer was probably yes. And then? Gaol. And if the prisoner were gaoled, there would be no place to get the sort of medicine his infected, dying body needed.

He must Clear the Customs, Roland thought. He must. And he must go with his brother to this man Balazar. It's not in the plan, the brother won't like it, but he must.

Because a man who dealt in drugs would either know a man or be a man who also cured the sick. A man who could listen to what was wrong and then . . . maybe .

..

He must Clear the Customs, the gunslinger thought.

The answer was so large and simple, so close to him, that he very nearly did not see it at all. It was the drug the prisoner meant to smuggle in that would make Clearing the Customs so difficult, of course; there might be some sort of Oracle who might be consulted in the cases of people who seemed suspicious. Otherwise, Roland gleaned, the Clearing ceremony would be simplicity itself, as crossing a friendly border was in his own world. One made the sign of fealty to that kingdom's monarch—a simple token gesture—and was allowed to pass.

He was able to take things from the prisoner's world to his own. The tooter-fish popkin proved that. He would take the bags of drugs as he had taken the popkin. The prisoner would Clear the Customs. And then Roland would bring the bags of drugs back.

Can you?

Ah, here was a question disturbing enough to distract him from the view of the water below . . . they had gone over what looked like a huge ocean and were now turning back toward the coastline. As they did, the water grew steadily closer.

The air-carriage was coming down (Eddie's glance was brief, cursory; the gunslinger's as rapt as the child seeing his first snowfall). He could take things from this world, that he knew. But bring them back again? That was a thing of which he as yet had no knowing. He would have to find out.

The gunslinger reached into the prisoner's pocket and closed the prisoner's fingers over a coin.

Roland went back through the door.

The birds flew away when he sat up. They hadn't dared come as close this time. He ached; he was woozy, feverish . . . yet it was amazing how much even a little bit of nourishment had revived him.

He looked at the coin he had brought back with him this time. It looked like silver, but the reddish tint at the edge suggested it was really made of some baser metal. On one side was a profile of a man whose face suggested nobility, courage, stubbornness. His hair, both curled at the base of the skull and pigged at the nape of the neck, suggested a bit of vanity as well. He turned the coin over and saw something so startling it caused him to cry out in a rusty, croaking voice.

On the back was an eagle, the device which had decorated his own banner, in those dim days when there had still been kingdoms and banners to symbolize them.

Time's short. Go back. Hurry.

But he tarried a moment longer, thinking. It was harder to think inside this head—the prisoner's was far from clear, but it was, temporarily at least, a cleaner vessel than his own.

To try the coin both ways was only half the experiment, wasn't it?

He took one of the shells from his cartridge belt and folded it over the coin in his hand.

Roland stepped back through the door.

5

The prisoner's coin was still there, firmly curled within the pocketed hand. He didn't have to come forward to check on the shell; he knew it hadn't made the trip.

He came forward anyway, briefly, because there was one thing he had to know. Had to see.

So he turned, as if to adjust the little paper thing on the back of his seat (by all the gods that ever were, there was paper everywhere in this world), and looked through the doorway. He saw his body, collapsed as before, now with a fresh trickle of blood flowing from a cut on his cheek—a stone must have done it when he left himself and crossed over.

The cartridge he had been holding along with the coin lay at the base of the door, on the sand.

Still, enough was answered. The prisoner could Clear the Customs. Their guards o' the watch might search him from head to toe, from asshole to appetite, and back again.

They'd find nothing.

The gunslinger settled back, content, unaware, at least for the time being, that he still had not grasped the extent of his problem.

6

The 727 came in low and smooth over the salt marshes of Long Island, leaving sooty trails of spent fuel behind. The landing gear came down with a rumble and a thump.

7

3A, the man with the two-tone eyes, straightened up and Jane saw—actually saw—a snub-nosed Uzi in his hands before she realized it was nothing but his duty declaration card and a little zipper bag of the sort which men sometimes use to hold their passports.

The plane settled like silk.

Letting out a deep, shaking shudder, she tightened the red top on the Thermos.

"Call me an asshole," she said in a low voice to Susy, buckling the cross-over belts now that it was too late. She had told Susy what she suspected on the final approach, so Susy would be ready. "You have every right."

"No," Susy said. "You did the right thing."

"I over-reacted. And dinner's on me."

"Like hell it is. And don't look at him. Look at me. Smile, Janey."

Jane smiled. Nodded. Wondered what in God's name was going on now.

"You were watching his hands," Susy said, and laughed. Jane joined in. "I was watching what happened to his shirt when he bent over to get his bag. He's got enough stuff under there to stock a Woolworth's notions counter. Only I don't think he's carrying the kind of stuff you can buy at Woolworth's."

Jane threw back her head and laughed again, feeling like a puppet. "How do we handle it?" Susy had five years' senior-ity on her, and Jane, who only a minute ago had felt she had the situation under some desperate kind of control, now only felt glad to have Susy beside her.

"We don't. Tell the Captain while we're taxiing in. The Captain speaks to customs. Your friend there gets in line like everyone else, except then he gets pulled out of line by some men who escort him to a little room. It's going to be the first in a very long succession of little rooms for him, I think."

"Jesus." Jane was smiling, but chills, alternately hot and cold, were racing through her.

She hit the pop-release on her harness when the reverse thrusters began to wind down, handed the Thermos to Susy, then got up and rapped on the cockpit door. Not a terrorist but a drug-smuggler. Thank God for small favors. Yet in a way she hated it. He had been cute.

Not much, but a little.

8

He still doesn't see, the gunslinger thought with anger and dawning desperation. Gods!

Eddie had bent to get the papers he needed for the ritual, and when he looked up the army woman was staring at him, her eyes bulging, her cheeks as white as the paper things on the backs of the seats. The silver tube with the red top, which he had at first taken for some kind of canteen, was apparently a weapon. She was holding it up between her breasts now. Roland thought that in a moment or two she would either throw it or spin off the red top and shoot him with it.

Then she relaxed and buckled her harness even though the thump told both the gunslinger and the prisoner the aircarriage had already landed. She turned to the army woman she was sitting with and said something. The other woman laughed and nodded, but if that was a real laugh, the gun-slinger thought, he was a river-toad.

The gunslinger wondered how the man whose mind had become temporary home for the gunslinger's own ka, could be so stupid. Some of it was what he was putting into

his body, of course . . . one of this world's versions of devil-weed. Some, but not all. He was not soft and unobservant like the others, but in time he might be.

They are as they are because they live in the light, the gunslinger thought suddenly. That light of civilization you were taught to adore above all other things. They live in a world which has not moved on.

If this was what people became in such a world, Roland was not sure he didn't prefer the dark. "That was before the world moved on," people said in his own world, and it was always said in tones of bereft sadness . . . but it was, perhaps, sadness without thought, without consideration.

She thought I/ he—meant to grab a weapon when I/he— bent down to get the papers. When she saw the papers she relaxed and did what everyone else did before the carriage came down to the ground again. Now she and her friend are talking and laughing but their faces—her face especially, the face of the woman with the metal tube—are not right. They are talking, all right, but they are only pretending to laugh. . . and that is because what they are talking about is I/ him.

The air-carriage was now moving along what seemed a long concrete road, one of many. Mostly he watched the women, but from the edges of his vision the gunslinger could see other air-carriages moving here and there along other roads. Some lumbered; some moved with incredible speed, not like carriages at all but like projectiles fired from guns or cannons, preparing to leap into the air. As desperate as his own situation had become, part of him wanted very much to come forward and turn his head so he could see these vehicles as they leaped into the sky. They were man-made but every bit as fabulous as the stories of the Grand Featherex which had supposedly once lived in the distant (and probably mythical) kingdom of Garlan—more fabulous, perhaps, simply because these were man-made.

The woman who had brought him the popkin unfastened her harness (this less than a minute since she had fastened it) and went forward to a small door. That's where the driver sits, the gunslinger thought, but when the door was opened and she stepped in he saw it apparently took three drivers to operate the air-carriage, and even the brief glimpse he was afforded of what seemed like a million dials and levers and lights made him understand why.

The prisoner was looking at all but seeing nothing—Cort would have first sneered, then driven him through the nearest wall. The prisoner's mind was completely occupied with grabbing the bag under the seat and his light jacket from the overhead bin . . . and facing the ordeal of the ritual.

The prisoner saw nothing; the gunslinger saw every-thing.

The woman thought him a thief or a madman. He—or perhaps it was I, yes, that's likely enough—did something to make her think that. She changed her mind, and then the other woman changed it back . . . only now I think they know what's really wrong. They know he's going to try to profane the ritual.

Then, in a thunderclap, he saw the rest of his problem. First, it wasn't just a matter of taking the bags into his world as he had the coin; the coin hadn't been stuck to the prisoner's body with the glue-string the prisoner had wrapped around and around his upper body to hold the bags tight to his skin. This glue-string was only part of his problem. The prisoner hadn't missed the temporary disappearance of one coin among many, but when he realized that whatever it was he had risked his life for was suddenly gone, he was surely

going to raise the racks . . . and what then?

It was more than possible that the prisoner would begin to behave in a manner so irrational that it would get him locked away in gaol as quickly as being caught in the act of profanation. The loss would be bad enough; for the bags under his arms to simply melt away to nothing would proba-bly make him think he really had gone mad.

The air-carriage, ox-like now that it was on the ground, labored its way through a left turn. The gunslinger realized that he had no time for the luxury of further thought. He had to do more than come forward; he must make contact with Eddie Dean.

Right now.

9

Eddie tucked his declaration card and passport in his breast pocket. The steel wire was now turning steadily around his guts, sinking in deeper and deeper, making his nerves spark and sizzle. And suddenly a voice spoke in his head. Not a thought; a voice.

Listen to me, fellow. Listen carefully. And if you would remain safe, let your face show nothing which might further rouse the suspicions of those army women. God knows they're suspicious enough already.

Eddie first thought he was still wearing the airline earphones and picking up some weird transmission from the cockpit. But the airline headphones had been picked up five minutes ago.

His second thought was that someone was standing beside him and talking. He almost snapped his head to the left, but that was absurd. Like it or not, the raw truth was that the voice had come from inside his head.

Maybe he was receiving some sort of transmission—AM, FM, or VHF on the fillings in his teeth. He had heard of such th—

Straighten up, maggot! They're suspicious enough with-out you looking as if you've gone crazy!

Eddie sat up fast, as if he had been whacked. That voice wasn't Henry's, but it was so much like Henry's when they had been just a couple of kids growing up in the Projects, Henry eight years older, the sister who had been between them now only a ghost of memory; Selina had been struck and killed by a car when Eddie was two and Henry ten. That rasping tone of command came out whenever Henry saw him doing some-thing that might end with Eddie occupying a pine box long before his time ... as Selina had.

What in the blue fuck is going on here?

You're not hearing voices that aren't there, the voice inside his head returned.

No, not Henry's voice—older, dryer . . . stronger. But like Henry's voice. . . and impossible not to believe. That's the first thing. You're not going crazy. I AM another person.

This is telepathy?

Eddie was vaguely aware that his face was completely expressionless. He thought that, under the circumstances, that ought to qualify him for the Best Actor of the Year Academy Award. He looked out the window and saw the plane closing in on the Delta section of Kennedy's International Arrivals Building.

I don't know that word. But I do know that those army women know you are carrying...

There was a pause. A feeling—odder beyond telling—of phantom fingers rummaging through his brain as if he were a living card catalogue.

. . . heroin or cocaine. I can't tell which except—except it must be cocaine because you're carrying the one you don't take to buy the one you do.

"What army women?" Eddie muttered in a low voice. He was completely unaware that he was speaking aloud. "What in the hell are you talking ab—"

That feeling of being slapped once more... so real he felt his head ring with it.

Shut your mouth, you damned jackass!

All right, all right! Christ!

Now that feeling of rummaging fingers again.

Army stewardesses, the alien voice replied. Do you under-stand me? I have no time to con your every thought, prisoner!

"What did you—" Eddie began, then shut his mouth. What did you call me?

Never mind. Just listen. Time is very, very short. They know. The army stewardesses know you have this cocaine.

How could they? That's ridiculous!

I don't know how they came by their knowledge, and it doesn't matter. One of them told the drivers. The drivers will tell whatever priests perform this ceremony, this Clearing of Customs—

The language of the voice in his head was arcane, the terms so off-kilter they were almost cute . . . but the message came through loud and clear. Although his face remained expressionless, Eddie's teeth came together with a painful click and he drew a hot little hiss in through them.

The voice was saying the game was over. He hadn't even gotten off the plane and the game was already over.

But this wasn't real. No way this could be real. It was just his mind, doing a paranoid little jig at the last minute, that was all. He would ignore it. Just ignore it and it would go awa—

You will NOT ignore it or you will go to jail and I will die! the voice roared.

Who in the name of God are you? Eddie asked reluctantly, fearfully, and inside his head he heard someone or something let out a deep and gusty sigh of relief.

10

He believes, the gunslinger thought. Thank all the gods that are or ever were, he believes!

11

The plane stopped. The FASTEN SEAT BELTS light went out. The jetway rolled forward and bumped against the for-ward port door with a gentle thump.

They had arrived.

12

There is a place where you can put it while you perform the Clearing of Customs, the voice said. A safe place. Then, when you are away, you can get it again and take it to this man Balazar.

People were standing up now, getting things out of the overhead bins and trying

to deal with coats which were, according to the cockpit announcement, too warm to wear.

Get your bag. Get your jacket. Then go into the privy again.

Pr—

Oh. Bathroom. Head.

If they think I've got dope they'll think I'm trying to dump it.

But Eddie understood that part didn't matter. They wouldn't exactly break down the door, because that might scare the passengers. And they'd know you couldn't flush two pounds of coke down an airline toilet and leave no trace. Not unless the voice was really telling the truth . . . that there was some safe place. But how could there be?

Never mind, damn you! MOVE!

Eddie moved. Because he had finally come alive to the situation. He was not seeing all Roland, with his many years and his training of mingled torture and precision, could see, but he could see the faces of the stewards—the real faces, the ones behind the smiles and the helpful passing of garment bags and cartons stowed in the forward closet. He could see the way their eyes flicked to him, whiplash quick, again and again.

He got his bag. He got his jacket. The door to the jetway had been opened, and people were already moving up the aisle. The door to the cockpit was open, and here was the Captain, also smiling. . . but also looking at the passengers in first class who were still getting their things together, spotting him—no, targeting him—and then looking away again, nodding to someone, tousling a youngster's head.

He was cold now. Not cold turkey, just cold. He didn't need the voice in his head to make him cold. Cold—sometimes that was okay. You just had to be careful you didn't get so cold you froze.

Eddie moved forward, reached the point where a left turn would take him into the jetway—and then suddenly put his hand to his mouth.

"I don't feel well," he murmured. "Excuse me." He moved the door to the cockpit, which slightly blocked the door to the first class head, and opened the bathroom door on the right.

"I'm afraid you'll have to exit the plane," the pilot said sharply as Eddie opened the bathroom door. "It's—"

"I believe I'm going to vomit, and I don't want to do it on your shoes," Eddie said, "or mine, either."

A second later he was in with the door locked. The Captain was saying something. Eddie couldn't make it out, didn't want to make it out. The important thing was that it was just talk, not yelling, he had been right, no one was going to start yelling with maybe two hundred and fifty passengers still waiting to deplane from the single forward door. He was in, he was temporarily safe . . . but what good was it going to do him?

If you're there, he thought, you better do something very quick, whoever you are.

For a terrible moment there was nothing at all. That was a short moment, but in Eddie Dean's head it seemed to stretch out almost forever, like the Bonomo's Turkish Taffy Henry had sometimes bought him in the summer when they were kids; if he were bad, Henry beat the shit out of him, if he were good, Henry bought him Turkish Taffy. That was the way Henry handled his heightened responsibilities during summer vacation.

God, oh Christ, I imagined it all, oh Jesus, how crazy could I have b—
Get ready, a grim voice said. I can't do it alone. I can COME FORWARD but I can't make you COME THROUGH. You have to do it with me. Turn around. Eddie was suddenly seeing through two pairs of eyes, feeling with two sets of nerves (but not all the nerves of this other person were here; parts of the other were gone, freshly gone, screaming with pain), sensing with ten senses, thinking with two brains, his blood beating with two hearts. He turned around. There was a hole in the side of the bathroom, a hole that looked like a doorway. Through it he could see a gray, grainy beach and waves the color of old athletic socks breaking upon it. He could hear the waves. He could smell salt, a smell as bitter as tears in his nose. Go through. Someone was thumping on the door to the bathroom, telling him to come out, that he must deplane at once. Go through, damn you! Eddie, moaning, stepped toward the doorway . . . stum-bled . . . and fell into another world.

13

He got slowly to his feet, aware that he had cut his right palm on an edge of shell. He looked stupidly at the blood welling across his lifeline, then saw another man rising slowly to his feet on his right. Eddie recoiled, his feelings of disorientation and dreamy dislocation suddenly supplanted by sharp terror: this man was dead and didn't know it. His face was gaunt, the skin stretched over the bones of his face like strips of cloth wound around slim angles of metal almost to the point where the cloth must tear itself open. The man's skin was livid save for hectic spots of red high on each cheekbone, on the neck below the angle of jaw on either side, and a single circular mark between the eyes like a child's effort to replicate a Hindu caste symbol. Yet his eyes—blue, steady, sane—were alive and full of terrible and tenacious vitality. He wore dark clothes of some homespun material; the shirt, its sleeves rolled up, was a black faded almost to gray, the pants something that looked like bluejeans. Gunbelts crisscrossed his hips, but the loops were almost all empty. The holsters held guns that looked like .45s—but .45s of an incredibly antique vintage. The smooth wood of their handgrips seemed to glow with their own inner light. Eddie, who didn't know he had any intention of speak-ing—anything to say—heard himself saying something never-theless. "Are you a ghost?" "Not yet," the man with the guns croaked. "The devil-weed. Cocaine. Whatever you call it. Take off your shirt." "Your arms—" Eddie had seen them. The arms of the man who looked like the extravagant sort of gunslinger one would only see in a spaghetti western were glowing with lines of bright, baleful red. Eddie knew well enough what lines like that meant. They meant blood-poisoning. They meant the devil was doing more than breathing up your ass; he was already crawling up the sewers that led to your pumps. "Never mind my fucking arms!" the pallid apparition told him. "Take off your

shirt and get rid of it!"

He heard waves; he heard the lonely hoot of a wind that knew no obstruction; he saw this mad dying man and nothing else but desolation; yet from behind him he heard the mur-muring voices of deplaning passengers and a steady muffled pounding.

"Mr. Dean!" That voice, he thought, is in another world. Not really doubting it; just trying to pound it through his head the way you'd pound a nail through a thick piece of mahogany. "You'll really have to—"

"You can leave it, pick it up later," the gunslinger croaked. "Gods, don't you understand I have to talk here? It hurts! And there is no time, you idiot!"

There were men Eddie would have killed for using such a word . . . but he had an idea that he might have a job killing this man, even though the man looked like killing might do him good.

Yet he sensed the truth in those blue eyes; all questions were canceled in their mad glare.

Eddie began to unbutton his shirt. His first impulse was to simply tear it off, like Clark Kent while Lois Lane was tied to a railroad track or something, but that was no good in real life; sooner or later you had to explain those missing buttons. So he slipped them through the loops while the pounding behind him went on.

He yanked the shirt out of his jeans, pulled it off, and dropped it, revealing the strapping tape across his chest. He looked like a man in the last stages of recovery from badly fractured ribs.

He snapped a glance behind him and saw an open door ... its bottom jamb had dragged a fan shape in the gray grit of the beach when someone—the dying man, presumably—had opened it. Through the doorway he saw the first-class head, the basin, the mirror. . . and in it his own desperate face, black hair spilled across his brow and over his hazel eyes. In the background he saw the gunslinger, the beach, and soaring seabirds that screeched and squabbled over God knew what.

He pawed at the tape, wondering how to start, how to find a loose end, and a dazed sort of hopelessness settled over him. This was the way a deer or a rabbit must feel when it got halfway across a country road and turned its head only to be fixated by the oncoming glare of headlights.

It had taken William Wilson, the man whose name Poe had made famous, twenty minutes to strap him up. They would have the door to the first-class bathroom open in five, seven at most.

"I can't get this shit off," he told the swaying man in front of him. "I don't know who you are or where I am, but I'm telling you there's too much tape and too little time."

14

Deere, the co-pilot, suggested Captain McDonald ought to lay off pounding on the door when McDonald, in his frustration at 3A's lack of response, began to do so.

"Where's he going to go?" Deere asked. "What's he going to do? Flush himself down the John? He's too big."

"But if he's carrying—" McDonald began.

Deere, who had himself used cocaine on more than a few occasions, said: "If he's carrying, he's carrying heavy. He can't get rid of it."

"Turn off the water," McDonald snapped suddenly.

"Already have," the navigator (who had also tooted more than his flute on occasion) said. "But I don't think it matters. You can dissolve what goes into the holding tanks but you can't make it not there." They were clustered around the bathroom door, with its OCCUPIED sign glowing jeerily, all of them speaking in low tones. "The DEA guys drain it, draw off a sample, and the guy's hung."

"He could always say someone came in before him and dumped it," McDonald replied. His voice was gaining a raw edge. He didn't want to be talking about this; he wanted to be doing something about it, even though he was acutely aware that the geese were still filing out, many looking with more than ordinary curiosity at the flight-deck crew and steward-esses gathered around the bathroom door. For their part, the crew were acutely aware that an act that was—well, overly overt—could provoke the terrorist boogeyman that now lurked in the back of every air-traveler's mind. McDonald knew his navigator and flight engineer were right, he knew that the stuff was apt to be in plastic bags with the scuzzball's prints on them, and yet he felt alarm bells going off in his mind. Something was not right about this. Something inside of him kept screaming Fast one! Fast one! as if the fellow from 3A were a riverboat gambler with palmed aces he was all ready to play.

"He's not trying to flush the John," Susy Douglas said. "He's not even trying to run the basin faucets. We'd hear them sucking air if he was. I hear something, but—"

"Leave," McDonald said curtly. His eyes flicked to Jane Doming. "You too. We'll take care of this."

Jane turned to go, cheeks burning.

Susy said quietly: "Jane bird-dogged him and I spotted the bulges under his shirt. I think we'll stay, Captain McDon-ald. If you want to bring charges of insubordination, you can. But I want you to remember that you may be raping the hell out of what could be a really big DEA bust."

Their eyes locked, flint sparking off steel.

Susy said, "I've flown with you seventy, eighty times, Mac. I'm trying to be your friend."

McDonald looked at her a moment longer, then nodded. "Stay, then. But I want both of you back a step toward the cockpit."

He stood on his toes, looked back, and saw the end of the line now just emerging from tourist class into business. Two minutes, maybe three.

He turned to the gate agent at the mouth of the hatch, who was watching them closely. He must have sensed some sort of problem, because he had unholstered his walkie-talkie and was holding it in his hand.

"Tell him I want customs agents up here," McDonald said quietly to the navigator. "Three or four. Armed. Now."

The navigator made his way through the line of pas-sengers, excusing himself with an easy grin, and spoke quietly to the gate agent, who raised his walkie-talkie to his mouth and spoke quietly into it.

McDonald—who had never put anything stronger than aspirin into his system in his entire life and that only rarely—turned to Deere. His lips were pressed into a thin white line like a scar.

"As soon as the last of the passengers are off, we're break-ing that shithouse door open," he said. "I don't care if Cus-toms is here or not. Do you understand?"

"Roger," Deere said, and watched the tail of the line make its way into first class.

15

"Get my knife," the gunslinger said. "It's in my purse."

He gestured toward a cracked leather bag lying on the sand. It looked more like a big packsack than a purse, the kind of thing you expected to see hippies carrying as they made their way along the Appalachian Trail, getting high on nature (and maybe a bomber joint every now and then), except this looked like the real thing, not just a prop for some airhead's self-image; something that had done years and years of hard—maybe desperate—travelling.

Gestured, but did not point. Couldn't point. Eddie realized why the man had a swatch of dirty shirting wrapped around his right hand: some of his fingers were gone.

"Get it," he said. "Cut through the tape. Try not to cut yourself. It's easy to do. You'll have to be careful, but you'll have to move fast just the same. There isn't much time."

"I know that," Eddie said, and knelt on the sand. None of this was real. That was it, that was the answer. As Henry Dean, the great sage and eminent junkie would have put it, Flip-flop, hippety-hop, offa your rocker and over the top, life's a fiction and the world's a lie, so put on some Creedence and let's get high.

None of it was real, it was all just an extraordinarily vivid nodder, so the best thing was just to ride low and go with the flow.

It sure was a vivid nodder. He was reaching for the zipper—or maybe it would be a velcro strip—on the man's "purse" when he saw it was held together by a crisscross pattern of rawhide thongs, some of which had broken and been carefully reknotted—reknotted small enough so they would still slide through the grommetted eyelets.

Eddie pulled the drag-knot at the top, spread the bag's opening, and found the knife beneath a slightly damp package that was the piece of shirting tied around the bullets. Just the handle was enough to take his breath away ... it was the true mellow gray-white of pure silver, engraved with a complex series of patterns that caught the eye, drew it—

Pain exploded in his ear, roared across his head, and momentarily puffed a red cloud across his vision. He fell clumsily over the open purse, struck the sand, and looked up at the pale man in the cut-down boots. This was no nodder. The blue eyes blazing from that dying face were the eyes of all truth.

"Admire it later, prisoner," the gunslinger said. "For now just use it."

He could feel his ear throbbing, swelling.

"Why do you keep calling me that?"

"Cut the tape," the gunslinger said grimly. "If they break into yon privy while you're still over here, I've got a feeling you're going to be here for a very long time. And with a corpse for company before long."

Eddie pulled the knife out of the scabbard. Not old; more than old, more than ancient. The blade, honed almost to the point of invisibility, seemed to be all age caught in metal.

"Yeah, it looks sharp," he said, and his voice wasn't steady.

The last passengers were filing out into the jetway. One of them, a lady of some seventy summers with that exquisite look of confusion which only first-time fliers with too many years or too little English seem capable of wearing, stopped to show Jane Doming her tickets. "How will I ever find my plane to Montreal?" she asked. "And what about my bags? Do they do my Customs here or there?"

"There will be a gate agent at the top of the jetway who can give you all the information you need, ma'am," Jane said.

"Well, I don't see why you can't give me all the information I need," the old woman said. "That jetway thing is still full of people."

"Move on, please, madam," Captain McDonald said. "We have a problem."

"Well, pardon me for living," the old woman said huffily, "I guess I just fell off the hearse!"

And strode past them, nose tilted like the nose of a dog scenting a fire still some distance away, tote-bag clutched in one hand, ticket-folder (with so many boarding-pass stubs sticking out of it that one might have been tempted to believe the lady had come most of the way around the globe, changing planes at every stop along the way) in the other.

"There's a lady who may never fly Delta's big jets again," Susy murmured.

"I don't give a fuck if she flies stuffed down the front of Superman's Jockies," McDonald said. "She the last?"

Jane darted past them, glanced at the seats in business class, then poked her head into the main cabin. It was deserted.

She came back and reported the plane empty.

McDonald turned to the jetway and saw two uniformed Customs agents fighting their way through the crowd, excusing themselves but not bothering to look back at the people they jostled aside. The last of these was the old lady, who dropped her ticket-folder. Papers flew and fluttered everywhere and she shrilled after them like an angry crow.

"Okay," McDonald said, "you guys stop right there."

"Sir, we're Federal Customs officers—"

"That's right, and I requested you, and I'm glad you came so fast. Now you just stand right there because this is my plane and that guy in there is one of my geese. Once he's off the plane and into the jetway, he's your goose and you can cook him any way you want." He nodded to Deere. "I'm going to give the son of a bitch one more chance and then we're going to break the door in."

"Okay by me," Deere said.

McDonald whacked on the bathroom door with the heel of his hand and yelled,

"Come on out, my friend! I'm done asking!"

There was no answer.

"Okay," McDonald said. "Let's do it."

Dimly, Eddie heard an old woman say: "Well, pardon me for living! I guess I just fell off the hearse!"

He had parted half the strapping tape. When the old woman spoke his hand jerked a little and he saw a trickle of blood run down his belly.

"Shit," Eddie said.

"It can't be helped now," the gunslinger said in his hoarse voice. "Finish the job. Or does the sight of blood make you sick?"

"Only when it's my own," Eddie said. The tape had started just above his belly. The higher he cut the harder it got to see. He got another three inches or so, and almost cut himself again when he heard McDonald speaking to the Cus-toms agents: "Okay, you guys stop right there."

"I can finish and maybe cut myself wide open or you can try," Eddie said. "I can't see what I'm doing. My fucking chin's in the way."

The gunslinger took the knife in his left hand. The hand was shaking. Watching that blade, honed to a suicidal sharp-ness, shaking like that made Eddie extremely nervous.

"Maybe I better chance it mys—"

"Wait."

The gunslinger stared fixedly at his left hand. Eddie didn't exactly disbelieve in telepathy, but he had never exactly believed in it, either. Nevertheless, he felt something now, something as real and palpable as heat baking out of an oven. After a few seconds he realized what it was: the gathering of this strange man's will.

How the hell can he be dying if I can feel the force of him that strongly?

The shaking hand began to steady down. Soon it was barely shivering. After no more than ten seconds it was as solid as a rock.

"Now," the gunslinger said. He took a step forward, raised the knife, and Eddie felt something else baking off him—rancid fever.

"Are you left-handed?" Eddie asked.

"No," the gunslinger said.

"Oh Jesus," Eddie said, and decided he might feel better if he closed his eyes for a moment. He heard the harsh whisper of the masking tape parting.

"There," the gunslinger said, stepping back. "Now pull it off as far as you can. I'll get the back."

No polite little knocks on the bathroom door now; this was a hammering fist. The passengers are out, Eddie thought. No more Mr. Nice Guy. Oh shit.

"Come on out, my friend! I'm done asking!"

"Yank it!" the gunslinger growled.

Eddie grabbed a thick tab of strapping tape in each hand and yanked as hard as he could. It hurt, hurt like hell. Stop bellyaching, he thought. Things could be worse. You could be hairy-chested, like Henry.

He looked down and saw a red band of irritated skin about seven inches wide across his sternum. Just above the solar plexus was the place where he had poked himself. Blood welled in a dimple and ran down to his navel in a scarlet runnel. Beneath his armpits, the bags of dope now dangled like badly tied saddlebags.

"Okay," the muffled voice beyond the bathroom door said to someone else. "Let's d—"

Eddie lost the rest of it in the unexpected riptide of pain across his back as the gunslinger unceremoniously tore the rest of the girdle from him.

He bit down against a scream.

"Put your shirt on," the gunslinger said. His face, which Eddie had thought as pallid as the face of a living man could become, was now the color of ancient ashes. He held the girdle of tape (now sticking to itself in a meaningless tangle, the big bags of white stuff looking like strange cocoons) in his left

hand, then tossed it aside. Eddie saw fresh blood seeping through the makeshift bandage on the gunslinger's right hand. "Do it fast."

There was a thudding sound. This wasn't someone pounding for admittance. Eddie looked up in time to see the bathroom door shudder, to see the lights in there flicker. They were trying to break it in.

He picked his shirt up with fingers that suddenly seemed too large, too clumsy. The left sleeve was turned inside out. He tried to stuff it back through the hole, got his hand stuck for a moment, then yanked it out so hard he pulled the sleeve back again with it.

Thud, and the bathroom door shivered again.

"Gods, how can you be so clumsy?" the gunslinger moaned, and rammed his own fist into the left sleeve of Eddie's shirt. Eddie grabbed the cuff as the gunslinger pulled back. Now the gunslinger held the shirt for him as a butler might hold a coat for his master. Eddie put it on and groped for the lowest button.

"Not yet!" the gunslinger barked, and tore another piece away from his own diminishing shirt. "Wipe your gut!"

Eddie did the best he could. The dimple where the knife had actually pierced his skin was still welling blood. The blade was sharp, all right. Sharp enough.

He dropped the bloody wad of the gunslinger's shirt on the sand and buttoned his shirt.

Thud. This time the door did more than shudder; it buckled in its frame. Looking through the doorway on the beach, Eddie saw the bottle of liquid soap fall from where it had been standing beside the basin. It landed on his zipper bag.

He had meant to stuff his shirt, which was now buttoned (and buttoned straight, for a wonder), into his pants. Suddenly a better idea struck him. He unbuckled his belt instead.

"There's no time for that!" The gunslinger realized he was trying to scream and was unable. "That door's only got one hit left in it!"

"I know what I'm doing," Eddie said, hoping he did, and stepped back through the doorway between the worlds, unsnapping his jeans and raking the zipper down as he went.

After one desperate, despairing moment, the gunslinger followed him; physical and full of hot physical ache at one moment, nothing but cool ka in Eddie's head at the next.

18

"One more," McDonald said grimly, and Deere nodded. Now that all the passengers were out of the jetway as well as the plane itself, the Customs agents had drawn their weapons.

"Now!"

The two men drove forward and hit the door together. It flew open, a chunk of it hanging for a moment from the lock and then dropping to the floor.

And there sat Mr. 3A, with his pants around his knees and the tails of his faded paisley shirt concealing—barely—his jackhandle. Well, it sure does look like we caught him in the act, Captain McDonald thought wearily. Only trouble is, the act we caught him in wasn't against the law, last I heard. Suddenly he could feel the throb in his shoulder where he had hit the door—what? three times? four?

Out loud he barked, "What in hell's name are you doing in there, mister?"

"Well, I was taking a crap, " 3A said, "but if all you guys got a bad problem, I guess I could wipe myself in the terminal—"

"And I suppose you didn't hear us, smart guy?"

"Couldn't reach the door." 3A put out his hand to demonstrate, and although the door was now hanging askew against the wall to his left, McDonald could see his point. "I suppose I could have gotten up, but I, like, had a desperate situation on my hands. Except it wasn't exactly on my hands, if you get my drift. Nor did I want it on my hands, if you catch my further drift." 3A smiled a winning, slightly daffy smile which looked to Captain McDonald approximately as real as a nine-dollar bill. Listening to him, you'd think no one had ever taught him the simple trick of leaning forward.

"Get up," McDonald said.

"Be happy to. If you could just move the ladies back a little?" 3A smiled charmingly. "I know it's outdated in this day and age, but I can't help it. I'm modest. Fact is, I've got a lot to be modest about." He held up his left hand, thumb and forefinger roughly half an inch apart, and winked at Jane Doming, who blushed bright red and immediately disappeared up the jetway, closely followed by Susy.

You don't look modest, Captain McDonald thought. You look like a cat that just got the cream, that's what you look like.

When the stewards were out of sight, 3A stood and pulled up his shorts and jeans. He then reached for the flush button and Captain McDonald promptly knocked his hand away, grabbed his shoulders, and pivoted him toward the aisle. Deere hooked a restraining hand into the back of his pants.

"Don't get personal," Eddie said. His voice was light and just right—he thought so, anyway—but inside everything was in free fall. He could feel that other, feel him clearly. He was inside his mind, watching him closely, standing steady, meaning to move in if Eddie fucked up. God, it all had to be a dream, didn't it? Didn't it?

"Stand still," Deere said.

Captain McDonald peered into the toilet.

"No shit," he said, and when the navigator let out a bray of involuntary laughter, McDonald glared at him.

"Well, you know how it is," Eddie said. "Sometimes you get lucky and it's just a false alarm. I let off a couple of real rippers, though. I mean, we're talking swamp gas. If you'd lit a match in here three minutes ago, you could have roasted a Thanksgiving turkey, you know? It must have been something I ate before I got on the plane, I g—"

"Get rid of him," McDonald said, and Deere, still holding Eddie by the back of the pants, propelled him out of the plane and into the jetway, where each Customs officer took one arm.

"Hey!" Eddie cried. "I want my bag! And I want my jacket!"

"Oh, we want you to have all your stuff," one of the officers said. His breath, heavy with the smell of Maalox and stomach acid, puffed against Eddie's face.

"We're very inter-ested in your stuff. Now let's go, little buddy."

Eddie kept telling them to take it easy, mellow out, he could walk just fine, but he thought later the tips of his shoes only touched the floor of the jetway three or four times between the 727's hatch and the exit to the terminal, where three more Customs officers and half a dozen airport security cops stood, the Customs guys waiting for Eddie, the cops holding back a small crowd that stared

at him with uneasy, avid interest as he was led away.

CHAPTER 4 THE TOWER

1

Eddie Dean was sitting in a chair. The chair was in a small white room. It was the only chair in the small white room. The small white room was crowded. The small white room was smoky. Eddie was in his underpants. Eddie wanted a cigarette. The other six—no, seven—men in the small white room were dressed. The other men were standing around him, enclosing him. Three—no, four—of them were smoking cigarettes.

Eddie wanted to jitter and jive. Eddie wanted to hop and bop.

Eddie sat still, relaxed, looking at the men around him with amused interest, as if he wasn't going crazy for a fix, as if he wasn't going crazy from simple claustrophobia.

The other in his mind was the reason why. He had been terrified of the other at first. Now he thanked God the other was there.

The other might be sick, dying even, but there was enough steel left in his spine for him to have some left to loan this scared twenty-one-year-old junkie.

"That is a very interesting red mark on your chest," one of the Customs men said. A cigarette hung from the corner of his mouth. There was a pack in his shirt pocket. Eddie felt as if he could take about five of the cigarettes in that pack, line his mouth with them from corner to corner, light them all, inhale deeply, and be easier in his mind. "It looks like a stripe. It looks like you had something taped there, Eddie, and all at once decided it would be a good idea to rip it off and get rid of it."

"I picked up an allergy in the Bahamas," Eddie said. "I told you that. I mean, we've been through all of this several times. I'm trying to keep my sense of humor, but it's getting harder all the time."

"Fuck your sense of humor," another said savagely, and Eddie recognized that tone. It was the way he himself sounded when he'd spent half a night in the cold waiting for the man and the man didn't come. Because these guys were junkies, too. The only difference was guys like him and Henry were their junk.

"What about that hole in your gut? Where'd that come from, Eddie? Publishers' Clearing House?" A third agent was pointing at the spot where Eddie had poked himself. It had finally stopped dribbling but there was still a dark purple bubble there which looked more than ready to break open at the slightest urging. Eddie indicated the red band where the tape had been. "It itches," he said. This was no lie. "I fell asleep on the plane— check the stew if you don't believe me—"

"Why wouldn't we believe you, Eddie?"

"I don't know," Eddie said. "Do you usually get big drug smugglers who snooze on their way in?" He paused, gave them a second to think about it, then held out his hands. Some of the nails were ragged. Others were jagged. When you went cool turkey, he had discovered, your nails suddenly became your favorite munchies.

"I've been pretty good about not scratching, but I must have dug myself a damned good one while I was sleeping."

"Or while you were on the nod. That could be a needle-mark." Eddie could see they both knew better. You shot your-self up that close to the solar plexus, which was the nervous system's switchboard, you weren't ever going to shoot yourself up again.

"Give me a break," Eddie said. "You were in my face so close to look at my pupils I thought you were going to soul-kiss me. You know I wasn't on the nod." The third Customs agent looked disgusted. "For an inno-cent lambikins, you know an awful lot about dope, Eddie."

"What I didn't pick up on Miami Vice I got from The Readers' Digest. Now tell me the truth—how many times are we going to go through this?"

A fourth agent held up a small plastic Baggie. In it were several fibers.

"These are filaments. We'll get lab confirmation, but we know what sort they are. They're filaments of strapping tape."

"I didn't take a shower before I left the hotel," Eddie said for the fourth time. "I was out by the pool, getting some sun. Trying to get rid of the rash. The allergy rash. I fell asleep. I was damned lucky to make the plane at all. I had to run like hell. The wind was blowing. I don't know what stuck to my skin and what didn't."

Another reached out and ran a finger up the three inches of flesh from the inner bend of Eddie's left elbow.

"And these aren't needle tracks."

Eddie shoved the hand away. "Mosquito bites. I told you. Almost healed. Jesus Christ, you can see that for yourself!"

They could. This deal hadn't come up overnight. Eddie had stopped arm-popping a month ago. Henry couldn't have done that, and that was one of the reasons it had been Eddie, had to be Eddie. When he absolutely had to fix, he had taken it very high on his upper left thigh, where his left testicle lay against the skin of the leg... as he had the other night, when the sallow thing had finally brought him some stuff that was okay. Mostly he had just snorted, something with which Henry could no longer content himself. This caused feelings Eddie couldn't exactly define ... a mixture of pride and shame. If they looked there, if they pushed his testicles aside, he could have some serious problems. A blood-test could cause him problems even more serious, but that was one step further than they could go without some sort of evidence—and evi-dence was something they just didn't have. They knew every-thing but could prove nothing. All the difference between world and want, his dear old mother would have said.

"Mosquito bites."

"Yes."

"And the red mark's an allergic reaction."

"Yes. I had it when I went to the Bahamas; it just wasn't that bad."

"He had it when he went down there," one of the men said to another.

"Uh-huh," the second said. "You believe it?"

"Sure."

"You believe in Santa Claus?"

"Sure. When I was a kid I even had my picture taken with him once." He looked at Eddie. "You got a picture of this famous red mark from before you took your little trip, Eddie?"

Eddie didn't reply.

"If you're clean, why won't you take a blood-test?" This was the first guy again, the guy with the cigarette in the corner of his mouth. It had almost

burned down to the filter.

Eddie was suddenly angry—white-hot angry. He listened inside.

Okay, the voice responded at once, and Eddie felt more than agreement, he felt a kind of go-to-the-wall approval. It made him feel the way he felt when Henry hugged him, tousled his hair, punched him on the shoulder, and said You done good, kid—don't let it go to your head, but you done good.

"You know I'm clean." He stood up suddenly—so suddenly they moved back. He looked at the smoker who was closest to him. "And I'll tell you something, babe, if you don't get that coffin-nail out my face I'm going to knock it out."

The guy recoiled.

"You guys have emptied the crap-tank on that plane already. God, you've had enough time to have been through it three times. You've been through my stuff. I bent over and let one of you stick the world's longest finger up my ass. If a prostate check is an exam, that was a motherfucking safari. I was scared to look down. I thought I'd see that guy's fingernail sticking out of my cock."

He glared around at them.

"You've been up my ass, you've been through my stuff, and I'm sitting here in a pair of Jockies with you guys blowing smoke in my faces. You want a blood-test? Kay. Bring in someone to do it."

They murmured, looked at each other. Surprised. Uneasy.

"But if you want to do it without a court order," Eddie said, "whoever does it better bring a lot of extra hypos and vials, because I'll be damned if I'm gonna piss alone. I want a Federal marshal in here, and I want each one of you to take the same goddam test, and I want your names and IDs on each vial, and I want them to go into that Federal marshal's custody. And whatever you test mine for—cocaine, heroin, bennies, pot, whatever—I want those same tests performed on the samples from you guys. And then I want the results turned over to my lawyer."

"Oh boy, YOUR LAWYER," one of them cried. "That's what it always comes down to with you shitbags, doesn't it, Eddie? You'll hear from MY LAWYER. I'll sic MY LAWYER on you. That crap makes me want to puke!"

"As a matter of fact I don't currently have one," Eddie said, and this was the truth. "I didn't think I needed one. You guys changed my mind. You got nothing because I have nothing, but the rock and roll just doesn't stop, does it? So you want me to dance? Great. I'll dance. But I'm not gonna do it alone. You guys'll have to dance, too."

There was a thick, difficult silence.

"I'd like you to take down your shorts again, please, Mr. Dean," one of them said. This guy was older. This guy looked like he was in charge of things. Eddie thought that maybe—just maybe—this guy had finally realized where the fresh tracks might be. Until now they hadn't checked. His arms, his shoulders, his legs . . . but not there. They had been too sure they had a bust.

"I'm through taking things off, taking things down, and eating this shit," Eddie said. "You get someone in here and we'll do a bunch of blood-tests or I'm getting out. Now which do you want?"

That silence again. And when they started looking at each other, Eddie knew he had won.

WE won, he amended. What's your name, fella?

Roland. Yours is Eddie. Eddie Dean.

You listen good.

Listen and watch.

"Give him his clothes," the older man said disgustedly. He looked at Eddie. "I don't know what you had or how you got rid of it, but I want you to know that we're going to find out."

The old dude surveyed him.

"So there you sit. There you sit, almost grinning. What you say doesn't make me want to puke. What you are does."

"I make you want to puke."

"That's affirmative."

"Oh boy," Eddie said. "I love it. I'm sitting here in a little room and I've got nothing on but my underwear and there's seven guys around me with guns on their hips and/ make you want to puke? Man, you have got a problem."

Eddie took a step toward him. The Customs guy held his ground for a moment, and then something in Eddie's eyes—a crazy color that seemed half-hazel, half-blue—made him step back against his will.

"I'M NOT CARRYING!" Eddie roared. "QUIT NOW! JUST QUIT! LET ME ALONE!"

The silence again. Then the older man turned around and yelled at someone,

"Didn't you hear me? Get his clothes!"

And that was that.

2

"You think we're being tailed?" the cabbie asked. He sounded amused.

Eddie turned forward. "Why do you say that?" "You keep looking out the back window." "I never thought about being tailed," Eddie said. This was the absolute truth. He had seen the tails the first time he looked around. Tails, not tail. He didn't have to keep looking around to confirm their presence. Out-patients from a sanitarium for the mentally retarded would have trouble losing Eddie's cab on this late May afternoon; traffic on the L.I.E. was sparse. "I'm a student of traffic patterns, that's all."

"Oh," the cabbie said. In some circles such an odd statement would have prompted questions, but New York cab drivers rarely question; instead they assert, usually in a grand manner. Most of these assertions begin with the phrase This city! as if the words were a religious invocation preceding a sermon . . . which they usually were. Instead, this one said: "Because if you did think we were being tailed, we're not. I'd know. This city! Jesus! I've tailed plenty of people in my time. You'd be surprised how many people jump into my cab and say 'Follow that car.' I know, sounds like something you only hear in the movies, right? Right. But like they say, art imitates life and life imitates art. It really happens! And as for shaking a tail, it's easy if you know how to set the guy up. You ..."

Eddie tuned the cabbie down to a background drone, listening just enough so he could nod in the right places. When you thought about it, the cabbie's rap was actually quite amusing. One of the tails was a dark blue sedan. Eddie guessed that one belonged to Customs. The other was a panel truck with GINELLI'S PIZZA written on the sides. There was also a picture of a pizza, only the pizza was a smiling boy's face, and the smiling boy was smacking his lips, and written under the picture was the slogan "UMMMMMM! It's-a GOOOOD Pizza!" Only some young urban artist with a spray-can and a rudimentary sense of humor had drawn a line through Pizza and had printed PUSSY above it.

Ginelli. There was only one Ginelli Eddie knew; he ran a restaurant called Four Fathers. The pizza business was a side-line, a guaranteed stiff, an accountant's angel. Ginelli and Balazar. They went together like hot dogs and mustard. According to the original plan, there was to have been a limo waiting outside the terminal with a driver ready to whisk him away to Balazar's place of business, which was a midtown saloon. But of course the original plan hadn't included two hours in a little white room, two hours of steady questioning from one bunch of Customs agents while another bunch first drained and then raked the contents of Flight 901's waste-tanks, looking for the big carry they also suspected, the big carry that would be unflushable, undissolvable.

When he came out, there was no limo, of course. The driver would have had his instructions: if the mule isn't out of the terminal fifteen minutes or so after the rest of the passengers have come out, drive away fast. The limo driver would know better than to use the car's telephone, which was actually a radio that could easily be monitored. Balazar would call people, find out Eddie had struck trouble, and get ready for trouble of his own. Balazar might have recognized Eddie's steel, but that didn't change the fact that Eddie was a junkie. A junkie could not be relied upon to be a stand-up guy.

This meant there was a possibility that the pizza truck just might pull up in the lane next to the taxi, someone just might stick an automatic weapon out of the pizza truck's window, and then the back of the cab would become something that looked like a bloody cheese-grater. Eddie would have been more worried about that if they had held him for four hours instead of two, and seriously worried if it had been six hours instead of four. But only two ... he thought Balazar would trust him to have hung on to his lip at least that long. He would want to know about his goods.

The real reason Eddie kept looking back was the door.

It fascinated him.

As the Customs agents had half-carried, half-dragged him down the stairs to Kennedy's administration section, he had looked back over his shoulder and there it had been, improbable but indubitably, inarguably real, floating along at a distance of about three feet. He could see the waves rolling steadily in, crashing on the sand; he saw that the day over there was beginning to darken. The door was like one of those trick pictures with a hidden image in them, it seemed; you couldn't see that hidden part for the life of you at first, but once you had, you couldn't unsee it, no matter how hard you tried.

It had disappeared on the two occasions when the gunslinger went back without him, and that had been scary— Eddie had felt like a child whose nightlight has burned out. The first time had been during the customs interrogation.

I have to go, Roland's voice had cut cleanly through whatever question they were currently throwing at him. I'll only be a few moments. Don't be afraid.

Why? Eddie asked. Why do you have to go?

"What's wrong?" one of the Customs guys had asked him. "All of a sudden you look scared."

All of a sudden he had felt scared, but of nothing this yo-yo would understand. He looked over his shoulder, and the Customs men had also turned. They saw nothing but a blank white wall covered with white panels drilled with holes to damp sound; Eddie saw the door, its usual three feet away (now it was embedded in the room's wall, an escape hatch none of his interrogators could see). He saw more. He saw things coming out of the waves, things that looked like refugees

from a horror movie where the effects are just a little more special than you want them to be, special enough so everything looks real. They looked like a hideous cross-breeding of prawn, lobster, and spider. They were making some weird sound.

"You getting the jim-jams?" one of the Customs guys had asked. "Seeing a few bugs crawling down the wall, Eddie?"

That was so close to the truth that Eddie had almost laughed. He understood why the man named Roland had to go back, though; Roland's mind was safe enough—at least for the time being—but the creatures were moving toward his body, and Eddie had a suspicion that if Roland did not soon vacate it from the area it currently occupied, there might not be any body left to go back to.

Suddenly in his head he heard David Lee Roth bawling: Oh lyyyyy . . . ain't got no body . . . and this time he did laugh. He couldn't help it.

"What's so funny?" the Customs agent who had wanted to know if he was seeing bugs asked him.

"This whole situation," Eddie had responded. "Only in the sense of peculiar, not hilarious. I mean, if it was a movie it would be more like Fellini than Woody Alien, if you get what I mean."

You'll be all right? Roland asked.

Yeah, fine. TCB, man.

I don't understand.

Go take care of business.

Oh. All right. I'll not be long.

And suddenly that other had been gone. Simply gone. Like a wisp of smoke so thin that the slightest vagary of wind could blow it away. Eddie looked around again, saw nothing but drilled white panels, no door, no ocean, no weird mon-strosities, and he felt his gut begin to tighten. There was no question of believing it had all been a hallucination after all; the dope was gone, and that was all the proof Eddie needed. But Roland had ... helped, somehow. Made it easier.

"You want me to hang a picture there?" one of the Cus-toms guys asked.

"No," Eddie said, and blew out a sigh. "I want you to let me out of here."

"Soon as you tell us what you did with the skag," another said, "or was it coke?" And so it started again: round and round she goes and where she stops nobody knows.

Ten minutes later—ten very long minutes—Roland was suddenly back in his mind.

One second gone, next second there. Eddie sensed he was deeply exhausted.

Taken care of? he asked.

Yes. I'm sorry it took so long. A pause. I had to crawl.

Eddie looked around again. The doorway had returned, but now it offered a slightly different view of that world, and he realized that, as it moved with him here, it moved with Roland there. The thought made him shiver a little. It was like being tied to this other by some weird umbilicus. The gunslinger's body lay collapsed in front of it as before, but now he was looking down a long stretch of beach to the braided high-tide line where the monsters wandered about, growling and buzzing. Each time a wave broke all of them raised their claws. They looked like the audiences in those old documen-tary films where Hitler's speaking and everyone is throwing that old seig heil! salute like their lives depended on it—which ; they probably did, when you thought about it. Eddie could see the tortured markings of the gunslinger's progress in the sand.

As Eddie watched, one of the horrors reached up, light-ning quick, and snared a sea-bird which happened to swoop ; too close to the beach. The thing fell to the sand in two bloody, spraying chunks. The parts were covered by the shelled horrors even before they had stopped twitching. A single white feather drifted up. A claw snatched it down.

Holy Christ, Eddie thought numbly. Look at those snappers.

"Why do you keep looking back there?" the guy in charge had asked.

"From time to time I need an antidote," Eddie said.

"From what?"

"Your face."

3

The cab driver dropped Eddie at the building in Co-Op City, thanked him for the dollar tip, and drove off. Eddie just stood for a moment, zipper bag in one hand, his jacket hooked over a finger of the other and slung back over his shoulder. Here he shared a two-bedroom apartment with his brother. He stood for a moment looking up at it, a monolith with all the style and taste of a brick Saltines box. The many windows made it look like a prison cellblock to Eddie, and he found the view as depressing as Roland—the other—did amazing. Never, even as a child, did I see a building so high, Roland said. And there are so many of them!

Yeah, Eddie agreed. We live like a bunch of ants in a hill. It may look good to you, but I'll tell you, Roland, it gets old. It gets old in a hurry.

The blue car cruised by; the pizza truck turned in and approached. Eddie stiffened and felt Roland stiffen inside him. Maybe they intended to blow him away after all.

The door? Roland asked. Shall we go through? Do you wish it? Eddie sensed Roland was ready—for anything—but the voice was calm.

Not yet, Eddie said. Could be they only want to talk. But be ready.

He sensed that was an unnecessary thing to say; he sensed that Roland was readier to move and act in his deepest sleep than Eddie would ever be in his most wide-awake moment.

The pizza truck with the smiling kid on the side closed in. The passenger window rolled down and Eddie waited outside the entrance to his building with his shadow trailing out long in front of him from the toes of his sneakers, waiting to see which it would be—a face or a gun.

4

The second time Roland left him had been no more than five minutes after the Customs people had finally given up and let Eddie go.

The gunslinger had eaten, but not enough; he needed to drink; most of all he needed medicine. Eddie couldn't yet help him with the medicine Roland really needed (although he suspected the gunslinger was right and Balazar could ... if Balazar wanted to), but simple aspirin might at least knock down the fever that Eddie had felt when the gunslinger stepped close to sever the top part of the tape girdle. He paused in front of the newsstand in the main terminal.

Do you have aspirin where you come from?

I have never heard of it. Is it magic or medicine?

Both, I guess.

Eddie went into the newsstand and bought a tin of Extra-Strength Anacin. He went over to the snack bar and bought a couple of foot-long dogs and an extra-large Pepsi. He was putting mustard and catsup on the franks (Henry called the foot-longs Godzilla-dogs) when he suddenly remembered this stuff wasn't for him.

For all he knew, Roland might not like mustard and catsup. For all he knew, Roland might be a veggie. For all he knew, this crap might kill Roland.

Well, too late now, Eddie thought. When Roland spoke— when Roland acted—Eddie knew all this was really happen-ing. When he was quiet, that giddy feeling that it must be a dream—an extraordinarily vivid dream he was having as he slept on Delta 901 inbound to Kennedy—insisted on creeping back.

Roland had told him he could carry the food into his own world. He had already done something similar once, he said, when Eddie was asleep. Eddie found it all but impossible to believe, but Roland assured him it was true.

Well, we still have to be damned careful, Eddie said. They've got two Customs guys watching me. Us. Whatever the hell I am now.

I know we have to be careful, Roland returned. There aren't two; there are five.

Eddie suddenly felt one of the weird-est sensations of his entire life. He did not move his eyes but felt them moved. Roland moved them.

A guy in a muscle shirt talking into a telephone.

A woman sitting on a bench, rooting through her purse.

A young black guy who would have been spectacularly handsome except for the harelip which surgery had only partially repaired, looking at the tee-shirts in the newsstand Eddie had come from not long since.

There was nothing wrong about any of them on top, but Eddie recognized them for what they were nonetheless and it was like seeing those hidden images in a child's puzzle, which, once seen, could never be unseen. He felt dull heat in his cheeks, because it had taken the other to point out what he should have seen at once. He had spotted only two. These three were a little better, but not that much; the eyes of the phone-man weren't blank, imagining the person he was talking to but aware, actually looking, and the place where Eddie was . . . that was the place to which the phone-man's eyes just happened to keep returning. The purse-woman didn't find what she wanted or give up but simply went on rooting endlessly. And the shopper had had a chance to look at every shirt on the spindle-rack at least a dozen times.

All of a sudden Eddie felt five again, afraid to cross the street without Henry to hold his hand.

Never mind, Roland said. And don't worry about the food, either. I've eaten bugs while they were still lively enough for some of them to go running down my throat.

Yeah, Eddie replied, but this is New York.

He took the dogs and the soda to the far end of the counter and stood with his back to the terminal's main concourse. Then he glanced up in the left-hand corner. A convex mirror bulged there like a hypertensive eye. He could see all of his followers in it, but none was close enough to see the food and cup of soda, and that was good, because Eddie didn't have the slightest idea what was going to happen to it.

Put the astin on the meat-things. Then hold everything in your hands.

Aspirin.

Good. Call It flutergork if you want, pr... Eddie. Just do it.

He took the Anacin out of the stapled bag he had stuffed in his pocket, almost put it down on one of the hot-dogs, and suddenly realized that Roland would have problems just get-ting what Eddie thought of as the poison-proofing—off the tin, let alone opening it.

He did it himself, shook three of the pills onto one of the napkins, debated, then added three more.

Three now, three later, he said. If there is a later.

All right. Thank you.

Now what?

Hold all of it.

Eddie had glanced into the convex mirror again. Two of the agents were strolling casually toward the snack bar, maybe not liking the way Eddie's back was turned, maybe smelling a little prestidigitation in progress and wanting a closer look. If something was going to happen, it better happen quick.

He put his hands around everything, feeling the heat of the dogs in their soft white rolls, the chill of the Pepsi. In that moment he looked like a guy getting ready to carry a snack back to his kids . . . and then the stuff started to melt.

He stared down, eyes widening, widening, until it felt to him that they must soon fall out and dangle by their stalks.

He could see the hotdogs through the rolls. He could see the Pepsi through the cup, the ice-choked liquid curving to conform to a shape which could no longer be seen.

Then he could see the red Formica counter through the foot-long and the white wall through the Pepsi. His hands slid toward each other, the resistance between them growing less and less. . . and then they closed against each other, palm to palm. The food. . . the napkins . . . the Pepsi Cola. . . the six Anacin . . . all the things which had been between his hands were gone.

Jesus jumped up and played the fiddle, Eddie thought numbly. He flicked his eyes up toward the convex mirror.

The doorway was gone. . . just as Roland was gone from his mind.

Eat hearty, my friend, Eddie thought . . . but was this weird alien presence that called itself Roland his friend? That was far from proved, wasn't it? He had saved Eddie's bacon, true enough, but that didn't mean he was a Boy Scout. All the same, he liked Roland. Feared him . . . but liked him as well.

Suspected that in time he could love him, as he loved Henry.

Eat well, stranger, he thought. Eat well, stay alive. . . and come back.

Close by were a few mustard-stained napkins left by a previous customer. Eddie balled them up, tossed them in the trash-barrel by the door on his way out, and chewed air as if finishing a last bite of something. He was even able to manu-facture a burp as he approached the black guy on his way toward the signs pointing the way to LUGGAGE and GROUND TRANSPORTATION.

"Couldn't find a shirt you liked?" Eddie asked.

"I beg your pardon?" the black guy turned from the American Airlines departures monitor he was pretending to study.

"I thought maybe you were looking for one that said PLEASE FEED ME, I AM A U.S. GOVERNMENT EM-PLOYEE," Eddie said, and walked on.

As he headed down the stairs he saw the purse-rooter hurriedly snap her purse shut and get to her feet.

Oh boy, this is gonna be like the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade.

It had been one fuck of an interesting day, and Eddie didn't think it was over yet.

5

When Roland saw the lobster-things coming out of the waves again (their coming had nothing to do with tide, then; it was the dark that brought them), he left Eddie Dean to move himself before the creatures could find and eat him.

The pain he had expected and was prepared for. He had lived with pain so long it was almost an old friend. He was appalled, however, by the rapidity with which his fever had increased and his strength decreased. If he had not been dying before, he most assuredly was now. Was there something powerful enough in the prisoner's world to keep that from happening? Perhaps. But if he didn't get some of it within the next six or eight hours, he thought it wouldn't matter. If things went much further, no medicine or magic in that world or any other that would make him well again.

Walking was impossible. He would have to crawl.

He was getting ready to start when his eye fixed upon the twisted band of sticky stuff and the bags of devil-powder. If he left the stuff here, the lobstrosities would almost surely tear the bags open. The sea-breeze would scatter the powder to the four winds. Which is where it belongs, the gunslinger thought grimly, but he couldn't allow it. When the time came, Eddie Dean would be in a long tub of trouble if he couldn't produce that powder. It was rarely possible to bluff men of the sort he guessed this Balazar to be. He would want to see what he had paid for, and until he saw it Eddie would have enough guns pointed at him to equip a small army.

The gunslinger pulled the twisted rope of glue-string over to him and slung it over his neck. Then he began to work his way up the beach.

He had crawled twenty yards—almost far enough to consider himself safe, he judged—when the horrible (yet cosmically funny) funny realization that he was leaving the door-way behind came to him. What in God's name was he going through this for?

He turned his head and saw the doorway, not down on the beach, but three feet behind him. For a moment Roland could only stare, and realize what he would have known already, if not for the fever and the sound of the Inquisitors, drumming their ceaseless questions at Eddie, Where did you, how did you, why did you, when did you (questions that seemed to merge eerily with the questions of the scabbling horrors that came crawling and wriggling out of the waves:

Dad-a-chock? Dad-a-chum? Did-a-chick?), as mere delirium. Not so.

Now I take it with me everywhere I go, he thought, just as he does. It comes with us everywhere now, following like a curse you can never get rid of.

All of this felt so true as to be unquestionable . . . and so did one other thing.

If the door between them should close, it would be closed forever.

When that happens, Roland thought grimly, he must be on this side. With me.

What a paragon of virtue you are, gunslinger! the man in black laughed. He seemed to have taken up permanent residence inside Roland's head. You have killed the boy; that was the sacrifice that enabled you to catch me and, I suppose, to create the door between worlds. Now you intend to draw your three, one by one, and condemn all of them to something you would not have for

yourself: a lifetime in an alien world, where they may die as easily as animals in a zoo set free in a wild place.

The Tower, Roland thought wildly. Once I've gotten to the Tower and done whatever it is I'm supposed to do there, accomplished whatever fundamental act of restoration or redemption for which I was meant, then perhaps they— But the shrieking laughter of the man in black, the man who was dead but lived on as the gunslinger's stained con-science, would not let him go on with the thought.

Neither, however, could the thought of the treachery he contemplated turn him aside from his course.

He managed another ten yards, looked back, and saw that even the largest of the crawling monsters would venture no further than twenty feet above the high-tide line. He had already managed three times that distance.

It's well, then.

Nothing is well, the man in black replied merrily, and you know it.

Shut up, the gunslinger thought, and for a wonder, the voice actually did.

Roland pushed the bags of devil-dust into the cleft between two rocks and covered them with handfuls of sparse saw-grass. With that done he rested briefly, head thumping like a hot bag of waters, skin alternately hot and cold, then rolled back through the doorway into that other world, that other body, leaving the increasing deadly infection behind for a little while.

6

The second time he returned to himself, he entered a body so deeply asleep that he thought for a moment it had entered a comatose state... a state of such lowered bodily function that in moments he would feel his own consciousness start down a long slide into darkness.

Instead, he forced his body toward wakefulness, punched and pummelled it out of the dark cave into which it had crawled. He made his heart speed up, made his nerves re-accept the pain that sizzled through his skin and woke his flesh to groaning reality.

It was night now. The stars were out. The popkin-things Eddie had bought him were small bits of warmth in the chill.

He didn't feel like eating them, but eat them he would. First, though . . .

He looked at the white pills in his hand. Astin, Eddie called it. No, that wasn't quite right, but Roland couldn't pronounce the word as the prisoner had said it. Medicine was what it came down to. Medicine from that other world.

If anything from your world is going to do for me, Pris-oner, Roland thought grimly, I think it's more apt to be your potions than your popkins.

Still, he would have to try it. Not the stuff he really needed—or so Eddie believed—but something which might reduce his fever.

Three now, three later. If there is a later.

He put three of the pills in his mouth, then pushed the cover—some strange white stuff that was neither paper nor glass but which seemed a bit like both—off the paper cup which held the drink, and washed them down.

The first swallow amazed him so completely that for a moment he only lay there, propped against a rock, his eyes so wide and still and full of reflected starlight that he would surely have been taken for dead already by anyone who hap-pened to pass by. Then he drank greedily, holding the cup in both hands, the

rotted, pulsing hurt in the stumps of his fingers barely noticed in his total absorption with the drink.

Sweet! Gods, such sweetness! Such sweetness! Such—

One of the small flat icecubes in the drink caught in his throat. He coughed, pounded his chest, and choked it out. Now there was a new pain in his head: the silvery pain that comes with drinking something too cold too fast.

He lay still, feeling his heart pumping like a runaway engine, feeling fresh energy surge into his body so fast he felt as if he might actually explode.

Without thinking of what he was doing, he tore another piece from his shirt—soon it would be no more than a rag hanging around his neck—and laid it across one leg. When the drink was gone he would pour the ice into the rag and make a pack for his wounded hand. But his mind was elsewhere.

Sweet! it cried out again and again, trying to get the sense of it, or to convince itself there was sense in it, much as Eddie had tried to convince himself of the other as an actual being and not some mental convulsion that was only another part of himself trying to trick him. Sweet! Sweet! Sweet!

The dark drink was laced with sugar, even more than Marten—who had been a great glutton behind his grave ascetic's exterior—had put in his coffee in mornings and at 'Downers.

Sugar . . . white . . . powder . . .

The gunslinger's eyes wandered to the bags, barely visible under the grass he had tossed over them, and wondered briefly if the stuff in this drink and the stuff in the bags might be one and the same. He knew that Eddie had understood him perfectly over here, where they were two separate physical creatures; he suspected that if he had crossed bodily to Eddie's world (and he understood instinctively it could be done . . . although if the door should shut while he was there, he would be there forever, as Eddie would be here forever if their positions were reversed), he would have understood the language just as perfectly. He knew from being in Eddie's mind that the languages of the two worlds were similar to begin with. Similar, but not the same. Here a sandwich was a popkin. There to rustle was finding something to eat. So... was it not possible that the drug Eddie called cocaine was, in the gunslinger's world, called sugar?

Reconsideration made it seem unlikely. Eddie had bought this drink openly, knowing that he was being watched by people who served the Priests of Customs. Further, Roland sensed he had paid comparatively little for it. Less, even, than for the popkins of meat. No, sugar was not cocaine, but Roland could not understand why anyone would want cocaine or any other illegal drug, for that matter, in a world where such a powerful one as sugar was so plentiful and cheap.

He looked at the meat popkins again, felt the first stir-rings of hunger . . . and realized with amazement and confused thankfulness that he felt better.

The drink? Was that it? The sugar in the drink?

That might be part of it—but a small part. Sugar could revive one's strength for awhile when it was flagging; this was something he had known since he was a child. But sugar could not dull pain or damp the fever-fire in your body when some infection had turned it into a furnace. All the same, that was exactly what had happened to him . . . was still happening.

The convulsive shuddering had stopped. The sweat was drying on his brow. The fishhooks which had lined his throat seemed to be disappearing. Incredible as it

was, it was also an inarguable fact, not just imagination or wishful thinking (in point of fact, the gunslinger had not been capable of such frivolity as the latter in unknown and unknowable decades). His missing fingers and toes still throbbed and roared, but he believed even these pains to be muted.

Roland put his head back, closed his eyes and thanked God.

God and Eddie Dean.

Don't make the mistake of putting your heart near his hand, Roland, a voice from the deeper ranges of his mind spoke—this was not the nervous, tittery-bitchy voice of the man in black or the rough one of Cort; to the gunslinger it sounded like his father. You know that what he's done for you he has done out of his own personal need, just as you know that those men—Inquisitors though they may be—are partly or completely right about him. He is a weak vessel, and the reason they took him was neither false nor base. There is steel in him, I dispute it not. But there is weakness as well. He is like Hax, the cook. Hax poisoned reluctantly . . . but reluctance has never stilled the screams of the dying as their intestines rupture. And there is yet another reason to beware . . .

But Roland needed no voice to tell him what that other reason was. He had seen that in Jake's eyes when the boy finally began to understand his purpose.

Don't make the mistake of putting your heart near his hand.

Good advice. You did yourself ill to feel well of those to whom ill must eventually be done.

Remember your duty, Roland.

"I've never forgotten it," he husked as the stars shone pitilessly down and the waves grated on the shore and the lobster monstrosities cried their idiot questions. "I'm damned for my duty. And why should the damned turn aside?"

He began to eat the meat popkins which Eddie called "dogs."

Roland didn't much care for the idea of eating dog, and these things tasted like gutter-leavings compared to the tooter-fish, but after that marvellous drink, did he have any right to complain? He thought not. Besides, it was late in the game to worry overmuch about such niceties.

He ate everything and then returned to the place where now Eddie was, in some magical vehicle that rushed along a metal road filled with other such vehicles . . . dozens, maybe hundreds, and not a horse pulling a single one.

7

Eddie stood ready as the pizza truck pulled up; Roland stood even more ready inside of him.

Just another version of Diana's Dream, Roland thought. What was in the box? The golden bowl or the biter-snake? And just as she turns the key and puts her hands upon the lid she hears her mother calling "Wake up, Diana! It's time to milk!"

Okay, Eddie thought. Which is it gonna be? The lady or the tiger?

A man with a pale, pimply face and big buck teeth looked out of the pizza truck's passenger window. It was a face Eddie knew.

"Hi, Col," Eddie said without much enthusiasm. Beyond Col Vincent, sitting behind the wheel, was Old Double-Ugly, which was what Henry called Jack Andolini.

But Henry never called him that to his face, Eddie thought. No, of course not. Calling Jack something like that to his face would be a wonderful way to get yourself killed. He was a huge man with a bulging caveman's forehead and a

prothagonous jaw to match. He was related to Enrico Balazar by marriage ... a niece, a cousin, some fucking thing. His gigantic hands clung to the wheel of the delivery truck like the hands of a monkey clinging to a branch. Coarse sprouts of hair grew from his ears. Eddie could only see one of those ears now because Jack Andolini remained in profile, never looking around.

Old Double-Ugly. But not even Henry (who, Eddie had to admit, was not always the most perceptive guy in the world) had ever made the mistake of calling him Old Double-Stupid. Colin Vincent was no more than a glorified gofer. Jack, how-ever, had enough smarts behind that Neanderthal brow to be Balazar's number one lieutenant. Eddie didn't like the fact that Balazar had sent a man of such importance. He didn't like it at all.

"Hi, Eddie," Col said. "Heard you had some trouble."

"Nothing I couldn't handle," Eddie said. He realized he was scratching first one arm then the other, one of the typical junkie moves he had tried so hard to keep away from while they had him in custody. He made himself stop. But Col was smiling, and Eddie felt an urge to slam a fist all the way through that smile and out the other side. He might have done it, too. . . except for Jack. Jack was still staring straight ahead, a man who seemed to be thinking his own rudimentary thoughts as he observed the world in the simple primary colors and elementary motions which were all a man of such intellect (or so you'd think, looking at him) could perceive. Yet Eddie thought Jack saw more in a single day than Col Vincent would in his whole life.

"Well, good," Col said. "That's good."

Silence. Col looked at Eddie, smiling, waiting for Eddie to start the Junkie Shuffle again, scratching, shifting from foot to foot like a kid who needs to go to the bathroom, waiting mostly for Eddie to ask what was up, and by the way, did they just happen to have any stuff on them?

Eddie only looked back at him, not scratching now, not moving at all.

A faint breeze blew a Ring-Ding wrapper across the park-ing lot. The scratchy sound of its skittering passage and the wheezy thump of the pizza truck's loose valves were the only sounds.

Col's knowing grin began to falter.

"Hop in, Eddie," Jack said without looking around. "Let's take a ride."

"Where?" Eddie asked, knowing.

"Balazar's." Jack didn't look around. He flexed his hands on the wheel once. A large ring, solid gold except for the onyx stone which bulged from it like the eye of a giant insect, glittered on the third finger of his right as he did it.

"He wants to know about his goods."

"I have his goods. They're safe."

"Fine. Then nobody has anything to worry about," Jack Andolini said, and did not look around.

"I think I want to go upstairs first," Eddie said. "I want to change my clothes, talk to Henry—"

"And get fixed up, don't forget that," Col said, and grinned his big yellow-toothed grin. "Except you got nothing to fix with, little chum."

Dad-a-chum? the gunslinger thought in Eddie's mind, and both of them shuddered a little.

Col observed the shudder and his smile widened. Oh, here it is after all, that smile said. The good old Junkie Shuffle. Had me worried there for a minute, Eddie. The teeth revealed by the smile's expansion were not an improvement on

those pre-viously seen.

"Why's that?"

"Mr. Balazar thought it would be better to make sure you guys had a clean place," Jack said without looking around. He went on observing the world an observer would have believed it impossible for such a man to observe. "In case anyone showed up."

"People with a Federal search warrant, for instance," Col said. His face hung and leered. Now Eddie could feel Roland also wanting to drive a fist through the rotted teeth that made that grin so reprehensible, so somehow irredeemable. The unanimity of feeling cheered him up a little. "He sent in a cleaning service to wash the walls and vacuum the carpets and he ain't going to charge you a red cent for it, Eddie!"

Now you'll ask what I've got, Col's grin said. Oh yeah, now you'll ask, Eddie my boy. Because you may not love the candy-man, but you do love the candy, don't you? And now that you know Balazar's made sure your own private stash is gone— A sudden thought, both ugly and frightening, flashed through his mind. If the stash was gone—

"Where's Henry?" he said suddenly, so harshly that Col drew back, surprised. Jack Andolini finally turned his head. He did so slowly, as if it was an act he performed only rarely, and at great personal cost. You almost expected to hear old oilless hinges creaking inside the thickness of his neck.

"Safe," he said, and then turned his head back to its original position again, just as slowly.

Eddie stood beside the pizza truck, fighting the panic trying to rise in his mind and drown coherent thought. Sud-denly the need to fix, which he had been holding at bay pretty well, was overpowering. He had to fix. With a fix he could think, get himself under control—

Quit it! Roland roared inside his head, so loud Eddie winced (and Col, mistaking Eddie's grimace of pain and sur-prise for another little step in the Junkie Shuffle, began to grin again). Quit it! I'll be all the goddamned control you need!

You don't understand! He's my brother! He's my fucking brother! Balazar's got my brother!

You speak as if it was a word I'd never heard before. Do you fear for him?

Yes! Christ, yes!

Then do what they expect. Cry. Pule and beg. Ask for this fix of yours. I'm sure they expect you to, and I'm sure they have it. Do all those things, make them sure of you, and you can be sure all your fears will be justified.

I don't understand what you m—

I mean if you show a yellow gut, you will go far toward getting your precious brother killed. Is that what you want?

All right. I'll be cool. It may not sound that way, but I'll be cool.

Is that what you call it? All right, then. Yes. Be cool.

"This isn't the way the deal was supposed to go down," Eddie said, speaking past Col and directly at Jack Andolini's tufted ear. "This isn't why I took care of Balazar's goods and hung onto my lip while some other guy would have been puking out five names for every year off on the plea-bargain."

"Balazar thought your brother would be safer with him," Jack said, not looking around. "He took him into protective custody."

"Well good," Eddie said. "You thank him for me, and you tell him that I'm back,

his goods are safe, and I can take care of Henry just like Henry always took care of me. You tell him I'll have a six-pack on ice and when Henry walks in the place we're going to split it and then we'll get in our car and come on into town and do the deal like it was supposed to be done. Like we talked about it."

"Balazar wants to see you, Eddie," Jack said. His voice was implacable, immovable. His head did not turn. "Get in the truck."

"Stick it where the sun doesn't shine, motherfucker," Eddie said, and started for the doors to his building.

8

It was a short distance but he had gotten barely halfway when Andolini's hand clamped on his upper arm with the paralyzing force of a vise-grip. His breath as hot as a bull's on the back of Eddie's neck. He did all this in the time you would have thought, looking at him, it would have taken his brain to convince his hand to pull the door-handle up.

Eddie turned around.

Be cool, Eddie, Roland whispered.

Cool, Eddie responded.

"I could kill you for that," Andolini said. "No one tells me stick it up my ass, especially no shitass little junkie like you."

"Kill shit!" Eddie screamed at him—but it was a calculated scream. A cool scream, if you could dig that. They stood there, dark figures in the golden horizontal light of late spring sundown in the wasteland of housing developments that is the Bronx's Co-Op City, and people heard the scream, and people heard the word kill, and if their radios were on they turned them up and if their radios were off they turned them on and then turned them up because it was better that way, safer.

"Rico Balazar broke his word! I stood up for him and he didn't stand up for me! So I tell you to stick it up your fuckin ass, I tell him to stick it up his fuckin ass, I tell anybody I want to stick it up his fuckin ass!"

Andolini looked at him. His eyes were so brown the color seemed to have leaked into his corneas, turning them the yellow of old parchment.

"I tell President Reagan to stick it up his ass if he breaks his word to me, and fuck his fuckin rectal palp or whatever it is!"

The words died away in echoes on brick and concrete. A single child, his skin very black against his white basketball shorts and high-topped sneakers, stood in the playground across the street, watching them, a basketball held loosely against his side in the crook of his elbow.

"You done?" Andolini asked when the last of the echoes were gone.

"Yes," Eddie said in a completely normal tone of voice.

"Okay," Andolini said. He spread his anthropoid fingers and smiled . . . and when he smiled, two things happened simultaneously: the first was that you saw a charm that was so surprising it had a way of leaving people defenseless; the second was that you saw how bright he really was. How dangerously bright. "Now can we start over?"

Eddie brushed his hands through his hair, crossed his arms briefly so he could scratch both arms at the same time, and said, "I think we better, because this is going nowhere."

"Okay," Andolini said. "No one has said nothing, and no one has ranked out

nobody." And without turning his head or breaking the rhythm of his speech he added, "Get back in the truck, dumb wit."

Col Vincent, who had climbed cautiously out of the delivery truck through the door Andolini had left open retreated so fast he thumped his head. He slid across the seat and slouched in his former place, rubbing it and sulking.

"You gotta understand the deal changed when the Customs people put the arm on you," Andolini said reasonably. "Balazar is a big man. He has interests to protect. People to protect. One of those people, it just so happens, is your brother Henry. You think that's bullshit? If you do, you better think about the way Henry is now."

"Henry's fine," Eddie said, but he knew better and he couldn't keep the knowing out of his voice. He heard it and knew Jack Andolini heard it, too. These days Henry was always on the nod, it seemed like. There were holes in his shirts from cigarette burns. He had cut the shit out of his hand using the electric can-opener on a can of Calo for Potzie, their cat. Eddie didn't know how you cut yourself with an electric can-opener, but Henry had managed it. Sometimes the kitchen table would be powdery with Henry's leavings, or Eddie would find blackened curls of char in the bathroom sink.

Henry, he would say, Henry, you gotta take care of this, this is getting out of hand, you're a bust walking around and waiting to happen.

Yeah, okay, little brother, Henry would respond, zero perspiration, I got it all under control, but sometimes, looking at Henry's ashy face and burned out eyes, Eddie knew Henry was never going to have anything under control again.

What he wanted to say to Henry and couldn't had nothing to do with Henry getting busted or getting them both busted. What he wanted to say was Henry, it's like you're looking for a room to die in. That's how it looks to me, and I want you to fucking quit it. Because if you die, what did I live for?

"Henry isn't fine," Jack Andolini said. "He needs someone to watch out for him. He needs—what's that song say? A bridge over troubled waters. That's what Henry needs. A bridge over troubled waters. If Roche is being that bridge."

If Roche is a bridge to hell, Eddie thought. Out loud he said, "That's where Henry is? At Balazar's place?"

"Yes."

"I give him his goods, he gives me Henry?"

"And your goods," Andolini said, "don't forget that."

"The deal goes back to normal, in other words."

"Right."

"Now tell me you think that's really gonna happen. Come on, Jack. Tell me. I wanna see if you can do it with a straight face. And if you can do it with a straight face, I wanna see how much your nose grows."

"I don't understand you, Eddie."

"Sure you do. Balazar thinks I've got his goods? If he thinks that, he must be stupid, and I know he's not stupid."

"I don't know what he thinks," Andolini said serenely. "It's not my job to know what he thinks. He knows you had his goods when you left the Islands, he knows Customs grabbed you and then let you go, he knows you're here and not on your way to Riker's, he knows his goods have to be somewhere."

"And he knows Customs is still all over me like a wetsuit on a skin-diver, because you know it, and you sent him some kind of coded message on the truck's radio. Something like 'Double cheese, hold the anchovies,' right, Jack?"

Jack Andolini said nothing and looked serene.

"Only you were just telling him something he already knew. Like connecting the dots in a picture you can already see what it is."

Andolini stood in the golden sunset light that was slowly turning furnace orange and continued to look serene and continued to say nothing at all.

"He thinks they turned me. He thinks they're running me. He thinks I might be stupid enough to run. I don't exactly blame him. I mean, why not? A smackhead will do anything. You want to check, see if I'm wearing a wire?"

"I know you're not," Andolini said. "I got something in the van. It's like a fuzz-buster, only it picks up short-range radio transmissions. And for what it's worth, I don't think you're running for the Feds."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. So do we get in the van and go into the city or what?"

"Do I have a choice?"

No, Roland said inside his head.

"No," Andolini said.

Eddie went back to the van. The kid with the basketball was still standing across the street, his shadow now so long it was a gantry.

"Get out of here, kid," Eddie said. "You were never here, you never saw nothing or no one. Fuck off."

The kid ran.

Col was grinning at him.

"Push over, champ," Eddie said.

"I think you oughtta sit in the middle, Eddie."

"Push over," Eddie said again. Col looked at him, then looked at Andolini, who did not look at him but only pulled the driver's door closed and looked serenely straight ahead like Buddha on his day off, leaving them to work the seating arrangements out for themselves. Col glanced back at Eddie's face and decided to push over.

They headed into New York—and although the gunslinger (who could only stare wonderingly at spires even greater and more graceful, bridges that spanned a wide river like steel cobwebs, and rotered air-carriages that hovered like strange man-made insects) did not know it, the place they were headed for was the Tower.

9

Like Andolini, Enrico Balazar did not think Eddie Dean was running for the Feds; like Andolini, Balazar knew it.

The bar was empty. The sign on the door read CLOSED TONITE ONLY. Balazar sat in his office, waiting for Andolini and Col Vincent to arrive with the Dean kid.

His two personal body-guards, Claudio Andolini, Jack's brother, and 'Cimi Dretto, were with him. They sat on the sofa to the left of Balazar's large desk, watching, fascinated, as the edifice Balazar was building grew. The door was open. Beyond the door was a short hallway. To the right it led to the back of the bar and the little kitchen beyond, where a few simple pasta dishes were prepared. To the left was the accountant's office and the storage room. In the accountant's office three more of Balazar's "gentlemen"—this was how they were

known—were playing Trivial Pursuit with Henry Dean.

"Okay," George Biondi was saying, "here's an easy one, Henry. Henry? You there, Henry? Earth to Henry, Earth peo-ple need you. Come in, Henry. I say again: come in, H—"

"I'm here, I'm here," Henry said. His voice was the slurry, muddy voice of a man who is still asleep telling his wife he's awake so she'll leave him alone for another five minutes.

"Okay. The category is Arts and Entertainment. The question is ... Henry? Don't you fuckin nod off on me, asshole!"

"I'm not!" Henry cried back querulously.

"Okay. The question is, 'What enormously popular novel by William Peter Blatty, set in the posh Washington D.C. suburb of Georgetown, concerned the demonic possession of a young girl?' "

"Johnny Cash," Henry replied.

"Jesus Christ!" Tricks Postino yelled. "That's what you say to every thin! Johnny Cash, that's what you say to fuckin everything!"

"Johnny Cash is everything," Henry replied gravely, and there was a moment of silence palpable in its considering surprise. . . then a gravelly burst of laughter not just from the men in the room with Henry but the two other "gentlemen" sitting in the storage room.

"You want me to shut the door, Mr. Balazar?" 'Cimi asked quietly.

"No, that's fine," Balazar said. He was second-generation Sicilian, but there was no trace of accent in his speech, nor was it the speech of a man whose only education had been in the streets. Unlike many of his contemporaries in the business, he had finished high school. Had in fact done more: for two years he had gone to business school—NYU. His voice, like his business methods, was quiet and cultured and American, and this made his physical aspect as deceiving as Jack Andolini's. People hearing his clear, unaccented American voice for the first time almost always looked dazed, as if hearing a particularly good piece of ventriloquism. He looked like a farmer or innkeeper or small-time mafioso who had been successful more by virtue of being at the right place at the right time than because of any brains. He looked like what the wiseguys of a previous generation had called a "Mustache Pete." He was a fat man who dressed like a peasant. This evening he wore a plain white cotton shirt open at the throat (there were spreading sweat-stains beneath the arms) and plain gray twill pants. On his fat sockless feet were brown loafers, so old they were more like slippers than shoes. Blue and purple varicose veins squirmed on his ankles.

'Cimi and Claudio watched him, fascinated.

In the old days they had called him Roche—The Rock. Some of the old-timers still did. Always in the right-hand top drawer of his desk, where other businessmen might keep pads, pens, paper-clips, things of that sort, Enrico Balazar kept three decks of cards. He did not play games with them, however.

He built with them.

He would take two cards and lean them against each other, making an A without the horizontal stroke. Next to it he would make another A-shape. Over the top of the two he would lay a single card, making a roof. He would make A after A, overlaying each, until his desk supported a house of cards. You bent over and looked in, you saw something that looked like a hive of triangles. 'Cimi had seen these houses fall over hundreds of times (Claudio had also seen it happen from time to time, but not so frequently, because he was thirty years younger

than 'Cimi, who expected to soon retire with his bitch of a wife to a farm they owned in northern New Jersey, where he would devote all his time to his garden. . . and to outliving the bitch he had married; not his mother-in-law, he had long since given up any wistful notion he might once have had of eating fettucini at the wake of La Monstra, La Monstra was eternal, but for outliving the bitch there was at least some hope; his father had had a saying which, when translated, meant something like "God pisses down the back of your neck every day but only drowns you once," and while 'Cimi wasn't completely sure he thought it meant God was a pretty good guy after all, and so he could hope to outlive the one if not the other), but had only seen Balazar put out of temper by such a fall on a single occasion. Mostly it was something errant that did it—someone closing a door hard in another room, or a drunk stumbling against a wall; there had been times when 'Cimi saw an edifice Mr. Balazar (whom he still called Da Boss, like a character in a Chester Gould comic strip) had spent hours building fall down because the bass on the juke was too loud. Other times these airy constructs fell down for no per-ceptible reason at all. Once—this was a story he had told at least five thousand times, and one of which every person he knew (with the exception of himself) had tired—Da Boss had looked up at him from the ruins and said: "You see this 'Cimi? For every mother who ever cursed God for her child dead in the road, for every father who ever cursed the man who sent him | away from the factory with no job, for every child who was ever born to pain and asked why, this is the answer. Our lives are like these things I build. Sometimes they fall down for a I reason, sometimes they fall down for no reason at all."

Carlocimi Dretto thought this the most profound state-ment of the human condition he had ever heard.

That one time Balazar had been put out of temper by the collapse of one of his structures had been twelve, maybe four-teen years ago. There was a guy who came in to see him about booze. A guy with no class, no manners. A guy who smelled like he took a bath once a year whether he needed it or not. A mick, in other words. And of course it was booze. With micks it was always booze, never dope. And this mick, he thought what was on Da Boss's desk was a joke. "Make a wish!" he yelled after Da Boss had explained to him, in the way one gentleman explains to another, why it was impossible for them to do business. And then the mick, one of those guys with curly red hair and a complexion so white he looked like he had TB or something, one of those guys whose names started with O and then had that little curly mark between the O and the real name, had blown on Da Boss's desk, like a nino blowing out the candles on a birthday cake, and cards flew everywhere around Balazar's head, and Balazar had opened the left top drawer in his desk, the drawer where other businessmen might keep their personal stationery or their private memos or some-thing like that, and he had brought out a .45, and he had shot the Mick in the head, and Balazar's expression never changed, and after 'Cimi and a guy named Truman Alexander who had died of a heart attack four years ago had buried the Mick under a chickenhouse somewhere outside of Sedonville, Connecti-cut, Balazar had said to 'Cimi, "It's up to men to build things, paisan. It's up to God to blow them down. You agree?"

"Yes, Mr. Balazar," 'Cimi had said. He did agree.

Balazar had nodded, pleased. "You did like I said? You put him someplace where chickens or ducks or something like that could shit on him?"

"Yes."

"That's very good," Balazar said calmly, and took a fresh deck of cards from the right top drawer of his desk.

One level was not enough for Balazar, Roche. Upon the roof of the first level he would build a second, only not quite so wide; on top of the second a third; on top of the third a fourth. He would go on, but after the fourth level he would have to stand to do so. You no longer had to bend much to look in, and when you did what you saw wasn't rows of triangle shapes but a fragile, bewildering, and impossibly lovely hall of diamond-shapes. You looked in too long, you felt dizzy. Once 'Cimi had gone in the Mirror Maze at Coney and he had felt like that. He had never gone in again.

'Cimi said (he believed no one believed him; the truth was no one cared one way or the other) he had once seen Balazar build something which was no longer a house of cards but a tower of cards, one which stood nine levels high before it collapsed. That no one gave a shit about this was something 'Cimi didn't know because everyone he told affected amaze-ment because he was close to Da Boss. But they would have been amazed if he had had the words to describe it—how delicate it had been, how it reached almost three quarters of the way from the top of the desk to the ceiling, a lacy construct of jacks and deuces and kings and tens and Big Akers, a red and black configuration of paper diamonds standing in defiance of a world spinning through a universe of incoherent motions and forces; a tower that seemed to 'Cimi's amazed eyes to be a ringing denial of all the unfair paradoxes of life.

If he had known how, he would have said: I looked at what he built, and to me it explained the stars.

10

Balazar knew how everything would have to be.

The Feds had smelled Eddie—maybe he had been stupid to send Eddie in the first place, maybe his instincts were failing him, but Eddie had seemed somehow so right, so perfect. His uncle, the first man he had worked for in the business, said there were exceptions to every rule but one: Never trust a junkie. Balazar had said nothing—it was not the place of a boy of fifteen to speak, even if only to agree—but privately had thought the only rule to which there was no exception was that there were some rules for which that was not true.

But if Tio Verone were alive today, Balazar thought, he would laugh at you and say look, Rico, you always were too smart for your own good, you knew the rules, you kept your mouth shut when it was respectful to keep it shut, but you always had that snot look in your eyes. You always knew too much about how smart you were, and so you finally fell into the pit of your own pride, just like I always knew you would.

He made an A shape and overlaid it.

They had taken Eddie and held him awhile and then let him go.

Balazar had grabbed Eddie's brother and the stash they shared. That would be enough to bring him . . . and he wanted Eddie.

He wanted Eddie because it had only been two hours, and two hours was wrong.

They had questioned him at Kennedy, not at 43rd Street, and that was wrong, too.

That meant Eddie had succeeded in ditching most or all of the coke.

Or had he?

He thought. He wondered.

Eddie had walked out of Kennedy two hours after they took him off the plane. That was too short a time for them to have sweated it out of him and too long for them to have decided he was clean, that some stew had made a rash mistake. He thought. He wondered.

Eddie's brother was a zombie, but Eddie was still smart, Eddie was still tough. He wouldn't have turned in just two hours . . . unless it was his brother.

Something about his brother.

But still, how come no 43rd Street? How come no Cus-toms van, the ones that looked like Post Office trucks except for the wire grilles on the back windows? Because Eddie really had done something with the goods? Ditched them? Hidden them?

Impossible to hide goods on an airplane.

Impossible to ditch them.

Of course it was also impossible to escape from certain prisons, rob certain banks, beat certain raps. But people did. Harry Houdini had escaped from strait-jackets, locked trunks, fucking bank vaults. But Eddie Dean was no Houdini.

Was he?

He could have had Henry killed in the apartment, could have had Eddie cut down on the L.I.E. or, better yet, also in the apartment, where it would look to the cops like a couple of junkies who got desperate enough to forget they were brothers and killed each other. But it would leave too many questions unanswered.

He would get the answers here, prepare for the future or merely satisfy his curiosity, depending on what the answers were, and then kill both of them.

A few more answers, two less junkies. Some gain and no great loss.

In the other room, the game had gotten around to Henry again. "Okay, Henry," George Biondi said. "Be careful, because this one is tricky. The category is Geography. The question is, 'What is the only continent where kangaroos are a native form of life?' "

A hushed pause.

"Johnny Cash," Henry said, and this was followed by a bull-throated roar of laughter.

The walls shook.

'Cimi tensed, waiting for Balazar's house of cards (which would become a tower only if God, or the blind forces that ran the universe in His name, willed it), to fall down.

The cards trembled a bit. If one fell, all would fall.

None did.

Balazar looked up and smiled at 'Cimi. "Piasan," he said. "Il Dio est bono; il Dio est malo; temps est poco-poco; tu est une grande peeparollo."

'Cimi smiled. "Si, senor," he said. "lo grande peeparollo; lo va fanculo por tu."

"None va fanculo, catzarro," Balazar said. "Eddie Dean va fanculo." He smiled gently, and began on the second level of his tower of cards.

When the van pulled to the curb near Balazar's place, Col Vincent happened to be looking at Eddie. He saw something impossible. He tried to speak and found

himself unable. His tongue was stuck to the roof of his mouth and all he could get out was a muffled grunt.
He saw Eddie's eyes change from brown to blue.

12

This time Roland made no conscious decision to come forward. He simply leaped without thinking, a movement as involuntary as rolling out of a chair and going for his guns when someone burst into a room.

The Tower! he thought fiercely. It's the Tower, my God, the Tower is in the sky, the Tower! I see the Tower in the sky, drawn in lines of red fire! Cuthbert!

Alan! Desmond! The Tower! The T—

But this time he felt Eddie struggling—not against him, but trying to talk to him, trying desperately to explain some-thing to him.

The gunslinger retreated, listening—listening desper-ately, as above a beach some unknown distance away in space and time, his mindless body twitched and trembled like the body of a man experiencing a dream of highest ecstasy or deepest horror.

13

Sign! Eddie was screaming into his own head . . . and into the head of that other.

It's a sign, just a neon sign, I don't know what tower it is you're thinking about but this is just a bar, Balazar's place, The Leaning Tower, he named it that after the one in Pisa! It's just a sign that's supposed to look like the fucking Leaning Tower of Pisa! Let up! Let up! You want to get us killed before we have a chance to go at them?

Pitsa? the gunslinger replied doubtfully, and looked again.

A sign. Yes, all right, he could see now: it was not the Tower, but a Signpost.

It leaned to one side, and there were many scalloped curves, and it was a marvel, but that was all. He could see now that the sign was a thing made of tubes, tubes which had somehow been filled with glowing red swamp-fire. In some places there seemed to be less of it than others; in those places the lines of fire pulsed and buzzed.

He now saw letters below the tower which had been made of shaped tubes; most of them were Great Letters. TOWER he could read, and yes, LEANING. LEANING TOWER. The first word was three letters, the first T, the last E, the middle one which he had never seen.

Tre? he asked Eddie.

THE. It doesn't matter. Do you see it's just a sign? That's what matters!

I see, the gunslinger answered, wondering if the prisoner really believed what he was saying or was only saying it to keep the situation from spilling over as the tower depicted in those lines of fire seemed about to do, wondering if Eddie believed any sign could be a trivial thing.

Then ease off! Do you hear me? Ease off!

Be cool? Roland asked, and both felt Roland smile a little in Eddie's mind.

Be cool, right. Let me handle things.

Yes. All right. He would let Eddie handle things.

For awhile.

Col Vincent finally managed to get his tongue off the roof of his mouth. "Jack."
His voice was as thick as shag carpet.

Andolini turned off the motor and looked at him, irritated.

"His eyes."

"What about his eyes?"

"Yeah, what about my eyes?" Eddie asked.

Col looked at him.

The sun had gone down, leaving nothing in the air but the day's ashes, but there was light enough for Col to see that Eddie's eyes were brown again.

If they had ever been anything else.

You saw it, part of his mind insisted, but had he? Col was twenty-four, and for the last twenty-one of those years no one had really believed him trustworthy.

Useful sometimes. Obe-dient almost always... if kept on a short leash.

Trustworthy? No. Col had eventually come to believe it himself.

"Nothing," he muttered.

"Then let's go," Andolini said.

They got out of the pizza van. With Andolini on their left and Vincent on their right, Eddie and the gunslinger walked into The Leaning Tower.

CHAPTER 5 SHOWDOWN AND SHOOT-OUT

1

In a blues tune from the twenties Billie Holiday, who would one day discover the truth for herself, sang: "Doctor tole me daughter you got to quit it fast/Because one more rocket gonna be your last." Henry Dean's last rocket went up just five minutes before the van pulled up in front of The Leaning Tower and his brother was herded inside.

Because he was on Henry's right, George Biondi—known to his friends as "Big George" and to his enemies as "Big Nose"—asked Henry's questions. Now, as Henry sat nodding and blinking owlshly over the board, Tricks Postino put the die in a hand which had already gone the dusty color that results in the extremities after long-term heroin addiction, the dusty color which is the precursor of gangrene.

"Your turn, Henry," Tricks said, and Henry let the die fall from his hand.

When he went on staring into space and showed no intention of moving his game piece, Jimmy Haspio moved it for him. "Look at this, Henry," he said. "You got a chance to score a piece of the pie."

"Reese's Pieces," Henry said dreamily, and then looked around, as if awakening.

"Where's Eddie?"

"He'll be here pretty soon," Tricks soothed him. "Just play the game."

"How about a fix?"

"Play the game, Henry."

"Okay, okay, stop leaning on me."

"Don't lean on him," Kevin Blake said to Jimmy.

"Okay, I won't," Jimmy said.

"You ready?" George Biondi said, and gave the others an enormous wink as Henry's chin floated down to his breast-bone and then slowly rose once more—it was like watching a soaked log not quite ready to give in and sink for good.

"Yeah," Henry said. "Bring it on."

"Bring it on!" Jimmy Haspio cried happily.

"You bring that fucker!" Tricks agreed, and they all roared with laughter (in the other room Balazar's edifice, now three levels high, trembled again, but did not fall).

"Okay, listen close," George said, and winked again. Although Henry was on a Sports category, George announced the category was Arts and Entertainment. "What popular country and western singer had hits with 'A Boy Named Sue,' 'Folsom Prison Blues,' and numerous other shitkicking songs?"

Kevin Blake, who actually could add seven and nine (if you gave him poker chips to do it with), howled with laughter, clutching his knees and nearly upsetting the board.

Still pretending to scan the card in his hand, George continued: "This popular singer is also known as The Man in Black. His first name means the same as a place you go to take a piss and his last name means what you got in your wallet unless you're a fucking needle freak."

There was a long expectant silence.

"Walter Brennan," Henry said at last.

Bellows of laughter. Jimmy Haspio clutched Kevin Blake. Kevin punched Jimmy in the shoulder repeatedly. In Balazar's office, the house of cards which was now becoming a tower of cards trembled again.

"Quiet down!" Cimi yelled. "Da Boss is buildin!"

They quieted at once.

"Right," George said. "You got that one right, Henry. It was a toughie, but you came through."

"Always do," Henry said. "Always come through in the fuckin clutch. How about a fix?"

"Good idea!" George said, and took a Roi-Tan cigar box from behind him. From it he produced a hypo. He stuck it into the scarred vein above Henry's elbow, and Henry's last rocket took off.

2

The pizza van's exterior was grungy, but underneath the road-filth and spray-paint was a high-tech marvel the DEA guys would have envied. As Balazar had said on more than one occasion, you couldn't beat the bastards unless you could compete with the bastards—unless you could match their equipment. It was expensive stuff, but Balazar's side had an advantage: they stole what the DEA had to buy at grossly inflated prices. There were electronics company employees all the way down the Eastern Seaboard willing to sell you top secret stuff at bargain basement prices. These catzzaroni (Jack Andolini called them Silicon Valley Coke-Heads) practically threw the stuff at you.

Under the dash was a fuzz-buster; a UHF police radar jammer; a high-range/high frequency radio transmissions detector; an h-r/hf jammer; a transponder-amplifier that would make anyone trying to track the van by standard

triangulation methods decide it was simultaneously in Connecti-cut, Harlem, and Montauk Sound; a radio-telephone . . . and a small red button which Andolini pushed as soon as Eddie Dean got out of the van.

In Balazar's office the intercom uttered a single short buzz.

"That's them," he said. "Claudio, let them in. 'Cimi, you tell everyone to dummy up. So far as Eddie Dean knows, no one's with me but you and Claudio. 'Cimi, go in the store-room with the other gentlemen."

They went, 'Cimi turning left, Claudio Andolini going right.

Calmly, Balazar started on another level of his edifice.

3

Just let me handle it, Eddie said again as Claudio opened the door.

Yes, the gunslinger said, but remained alert, ready to come forward the instant it seemed necessary.

Keys rattled. The gunslinger was very aware of odors— old sweat from Col Vincent on his right, some sharp, almost acerbic aftershave from Jack Andolini on his left, and, as they stepped into the dimness, the sour tang of beer.

The smell of beer was all he recognized. This was no tumble-down saloon with sawdust on the floor and planks set across sawhorses for a bar—it was as far from a place like Sheb's in Tull as you could get, the gunslinger reckoned.

Glass gleamed mellowly everywhere, more glass in this one room than he had seen in all the years since his childhood, when supply-lines had begun to break down, partially because of interdicting raids carried out by the rebel forces of Parson, the Good Man, but mostly, he thought, simply because the world was moving on. Farson had been a symptom of that great movement, not the cause. He saw their reflections everywhere—on the walls, on the glass-faced bar and the long mirror behind it; he could even see them reflected as curved miniatures in the graceful bell-shapes of wine glasses hung upside down above the bar. . . glasses as gorgeous and fragile as festival ornaments.

In one corner was a sculpted creation of lights that rose and changed, rose and changed, rose and changed. Gold to green; green to yellow; yellow to red; red to gold again. Written across it in Great Letters was a word he could read but which meant nothing to him: ROCKOLA.

Never mind. There was business to be done here. He was no tourist; he must not allow himself the luxury of behaving like one, no matter how wonderful or strange these things might be.

The man who had let them in was clearly the brother of the man who drove what Eddie called the van (as in vanguard, Roland supposed), although he was much taller and perhaps five years younger. He wore a gun in a shoulder-rig.

"Where's Henry?" Eddie asked. "I want to see Henry." He raised his voice.

"Henry! Hey, Henry!"

No reply; only silence in which the glasses hung over the bar seemed to shiver with a delicacy that was just beyond the range of a human ear.

"Mr. Balazar would like to speak to you first."

"You got him gagged and tied up somewhere, don't you?" Eddie asked, and before Claudio could do more than open his mouth to reply, Eddie laughed. "No, what am I thinking about—you got him stoned, that's all. Why would you bother with ropes and gags when all you have to do to keep Henry quiet is needle him? Okay. Take

me to Balazar. Let's get this over with."

4

The gunslinger looked at the tower of cards on Balazar's desk and thought:
Another sign.

Balazar did not look up—the tower of cards had grown too tall for that to be necessary—but rather over the top. His expression was one of pleasure and warmth.

"Eddie," he said. "I'm glad to see you, son. I heard you had some trouble at Kennedy."

"I ain't your son," Eddie said flatly.

Balazar made a little gesture that was at the same time comic, sad, and untrustworthy: You hurt me, Eddie, it said, you hurt me when you say a thing like that.

"Let's cut through it," Eddie said. "You know it comes down to one thing or the other: either the Feds are running me or they had to let me go. You know they didn't sweat it out of me in just two hours. And you know if they had I'd be down at 43rd Street, answering questions between an occasional break to puke in the basin."

"Are they running you, Eddie?" Balazar asked mildly.

"No. They had to let me go. They're following, but I'm not leading."

"So you ditched the stuff," Balazar said. "That's fascinat-ing. You must tell me how one ditches two pounds of coke when that one is on a jet plane. It would be handy information to have. It's like a locked room mystery story."

"I didn't ditch it," Eddie said, "but I don't have it any-more, either."

"So who does?" Claudio asked, then blushed when his brother looked at him with dour ferocity.

"He does," Eddie said, smiling, and pointed at Enrico Balazar over the tower of cards. "It's already been delivered."

For the first time since Eddie had been escorted into the office, a genuine expression illuminated Balazar's face: sur-prise. Then it was gone. He smiled politely.

"Yes," he said. "To a location which will be revealed later, after you have your brother and your goods and are gone. To Iceland, maybe. Is that how it's supposed to go?"

"No," Eddie said. "You don't understand. It's here. Deliv-ery right to your door. Just like we agreed. Because even in this day and age, there are some people who still believe in living up to the deal as it was originally cut.

Amazing, I know, but true."

They were all staring at him.

How'm I doing, Roland? Eddie asked.

I think you are doing very well. But don't let this man Balazar get his balance, Eddie. I think he's dangerous.

You think so, huh? Well, I'm one up on you there, my friend. I know he's dangerous. Very fucking dangerous.

He looked at Balazar again, and dropped him a little wink. "That's why you're the one who's gotta be concerned with the Feds now, not me. If they turn up with a search warrant, you could suddenly find yourself fucked without even opening your legs, Mr. Balazar."

Balazar had picked up two cards. His hands suddenly shook and he put them aside. It was minute, but Roland saw it and Eddie saw it, too. An expression of uncertainty—even momentary fear, perhaps—appeared and then disappeared on his face.

"Watch your mouth with me, Eddie. Watch how you express yourself, and please remember that my time and my tolerance for nonsense are both short."

Jack Andolini looked alarmed.

"He made a deal with them, Mr. Balazar! This little shit turned over the coke and they planted it while they were pretending to question him!"

"No one has been in here," Balazar said. "No one could get close, Jack, and you know it. Beepers go when a pigeon farts on the roof."

"But—"

"Even if they had managed to set us up somehow, we have so many people in their organization we could drill fifteen holes in their case in three days. We'd know who, when, and how."

Balazar looked back at Eddie.

"Eddie," he said, "you have fifteen seconds to stop bull-shitting. Then I'm going to have 'Cimi Dretto step in here and hurt you. Then, after he hurts you for awhile, he will leave, and from a room close by you will hear him hurting your brother."

Eddie stiffened.

Easy, the gunslinger murmured, and thought, All you have to do to hurt him is to say his brother's name. It's like poking an open sore with a stick.

"I'm going to walk into your bathroom," Eddie said. He pointed at a door in the far left corner of the room, a door so unobtrusive it could almost have been one of the wall panels. "I'm going in by myself. Then I'm going to walk back out with a pound of your cocaine. Half the shipment. You test it. Then you bring Henry in here where I can look at him. When I see him, see he's okay, you are going to give him our goods and he's going to ride home with one of your gentlemen. While he does, me and. . ." Roland, he almost said, ". . . me and the rest of the guys we both know you got here can watch you build that thing. When Henry's home and safe—which means no one standing there with a gun in his ear—he's going to call and say a certain word. This is something we worked out before I left. Just in case."

The gunslinger checked Eddie's mind to see if this was true or bluff. It was true, or at least Eddie thought it was. Roland saw Eddie really believed his brother Henry would die before saying that word in falsity. The gunslinger was not so sure.

"You must think I still believe in Santa Claus," Balazar said.

"I know you don't."

"Claudio. Search him. Jack, you go in my bathroom and search it. Everything."

"Is there any place in there I wouldn't know about?" Andolini asked.

Balazar paused for a long moment, considering Andolini carefully with his dark brown eyes. "There is a small panel on the back wall of the medicine cabinet," he said. "I keep a few personal things in there. It is not big enough to hide a pound of dope in, but maybe you better check it."

Jack left, and as he entered the little privy, the gunslinger saw a flash of the same frozen white light that had illuminated the privy of the air-carriage. Then the door shut.

Balazar's eyes flicked back to Eddie.

"Why do you want to tell such crazy lies?" he asked, almost sorrowfully. "I thought you were smart."

"Look in my face," Eddie said quietly, "and tell me that I am lying."

Balazar did as Eddie asked. He looked for a long time. Then he turned away, hands stuffed in his pockets so deeply that the crack of his peasant's ass showed a little. His posture was one of sorrow—sorrow over an erring son—but before he turned Roland had seen an expression on Balazar's face that had not been sorrow. What Balazar had seen in Eddie's face had left him not sorrowful but profoundly disturbed.

"Strip," Claudio said, and now he was holding his gun on Eddie. Eddie started to take his clothes off.

5

I don't like this, Balazar thought as he waited for Jack Andolini to come back out of the bathroom. He was scared, suddenly sweating not just under his arms or in his crotch, places where he sweated even when it was the dead of winter and colder than a well-digger's belt-buckle, but all over. Eddie had gone off looking like a junkie—a smart junkie but still a junkie, someone who could be led anywhere by the skag fishhook in his balls—and had come back looking like . . . like what? Like he'd grown in some way, changed.

It's like somebody poured two quarts of fresh guts down his throat.

Yes. That was it. And the dope. The fucking dope. Jack was tossing the bathroom and Claudio was checking Eddie with the thorough ferocity of a sadistic prison guard; Eddie had stood with a stolidity Balazar would not previously have believed possible for him or any other dooper while Claudio spat four times into his left palm, rubbed the snot-flecked spittle all over his right hand, then rammed it up Eddie's asshole to the wrist and an inch or two beyond.

There was no dope in his bathroom, no dope on Eddie or in him. There was no dope in Eddie's clothes, his jacket, or his travelling bag. So it was all nothing but a bluff.

Look in my face and tell me that I am lying.

So he had. What he saw was upsetting. What he saw was that Eddie Dean was perfectly confident: he intended to go into the bathroom and come back with half of Balazar's goods.

Balazar almost believed it himself.

Claudio Andolini pulled his arm back. His fingers came out of Eddie Dean's asshole with a plopping sound. Claudio's mouth twisted like a fishline with knots in it.

"Hurry up, Jack, I got this junkie's shit on my hand!" Claudio yelled angrily.

"If I'd known you were going to be prospecting up there, Claudio, I would have wiped my ass with a chair-leg last time I took a dump," Eddie said mildly. "Your hand would have come out cleaner and I wouldn't be standing here feeling like I just got raped by Ferdinand the Bull."

"Jack!"

"Go on down to the kitchen and clean yourself up," Balazar said quietly. "Eddie and I have got no reason to hurt each other. Do we, Eddie?"

"No," Eddie said.

"He's clean, anyway," Claudio said. "Well, clean ain't the word. What I mean is he ain't holding. You can be goddam sure of that." He walked out, holding his

dirty hand in front of him like a dead fish.

Eddie looked calmly at Balazar, who was thinking again of Harry Houdini, and Blackstone, and Doug Henning, and David Copperfield. They kept saying that magic acts were as dead as vaudeville, but Henning was a superstar and the Copperfield kid had blown the crowd away the one time Balazar had caught his act in Atlantic City. Balazar had loved magicians from the first time he had seen one on a streetcorner, doing card-tricks for pocket-change. And what was the first thing they always did before making something appear— something that would make the whole audience first gasp and then applaud? What they did was invite someone up from the audience to make sure that the place from which the rabbit or dove or bare-breasted cutie or the whatever was to appear was perfectly empty. More than that, to make sure there was no way to get anything inside.

I think maybe he's done it. I don't know how, and I don't care. The only thing I know for sure is that I don't like any of this, not one damn bit.

6

George Biondi also had something not to like. He doubted if Eddie Dean was going to be wild about it, either.

George was pretty sure that at some point after 'Cimi had come into the accountant's office and doused the lights, Henry had died. Died quietly, with no muss, no fuss, no bother. Had simply floated away like a dandelion spore on a light breeze. George thought maybe it had happened right around the time Claudio left to wash his shitty hand in the kitchen.

"Henry?" George muttered in Henry's ear. He put his mouth so close that it was like kissing a girl's ear in a movie theater, and that was pretty fucking gross, especially when you considered that the guy was probably dead—it was like narcophobia or whatever the fuck they called it—but he had to know, and the wall between this office and Balazar's was thin.

"What's wrong, George?" Tricks Postino asked.

"Shut up," 'Cimi said. His voice was the low rumble of an idling truck.

They shut up.

George slid a hand inside Henry's shirt. Oh, this was getting worse and worse. That image of being with a girl in a movie theater wouldn't leave him. Now here he was, feeling her up, only it wasn't a her but a him, this wasn't just narcophobia, it was fucking faggot narcophobia, and Henry's scrawny junkie's chest wasn't moving up and down, and there wasn't anything inside going thump-thump-thump. For Henry Dean it was all over, for Henry Dean the ball-game had been rained out in the seventh inning. Wasn't nothing ticking but his watch. He moved into the heavy Old Country atmosphere of olive oil and garlic that surrounded 'Cimi Dretto.

"I think we might have a problem," George whispered.

7

Jack came out of the bathroom.

"There's no dope in there," he said, and his flat eyes studied Eddie. "And if you were thinking about the window, you can forget it. That's ten-gauge steel mesh."

"I wasn't thinking about the window and it is in there," Eddie said quietly.

"You just don't know where to look."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Balazar," Andolini said, "but this crock is getting just a little too full for me."

Balazar studied Eddie as if he hadn't even heard Andolini. He was thinking very deeply.

Thinking about magicians pulling rabbits out of hats.

You got a guy from the audience to check out the fact that the hat was empty.

What other thing that never changed? That no one saw into the hat but the magician, of course. And what had the kid said? I'm going to walk into your bathroom. I'm going in by myself.

Knowing how a magic trick worked was something he usually wouldn't want to know; knowing spoiled the fun.

Usually.

This, however, was a trick he couldn't wait to spoil.

"Fine," he said to Eddie. "If it's in there, go get it. Just like you are.

Bare-ass."

"Good," Eddie said, and started toward the bathroom door.

"But not alone," Balazar said. Eddie stopped at once, his body stiffening as if Balazar had shot him with an invisible harpoon, and it did Balazar's heart good to see it. For the first time something hadn't gone according to the kid's plan.

"Jack's going with you."

"No," Eddie said at once. "That's not what I—"

"Eddie," Balazar said gently, "you don't tell me no.

That's one thing you never do."

8

It's all right, the gunslinger said. Let him come.

But. . . but...

Eddie was close to gibbering, barely holding onto his control. It wasn't just the sudden curve-ball Balazar had thrown him; it was his gnawing worry over Henry, and, grow-ing steadily ascendant over all else, his need for a fix.

Let him come. It will be all right. Listen:

Eddie listened.

9

Balazar watched him, a slim, naked man with only the first suggestion of the junkie's typical cave-chested slouch, his head cocked to one side, and as he watched Balazar felt some of his confidence evaporate. It was as if the kid was listening to a voice only he could hear.

The same thought passed through Andolini's mind, but in a different way: What's this? He looks like the dog on those old RCA Victor records!

Col had wanted to tell him something about Eddie's eyes. Suddenly Jack Andolini wished he had listened.

Wish in one hand, shit in the other, he thought.

If Eddie had been listening to voices inside his head, they had either quit talking or he had quit paying attention.

"Okay," he said. "Come along, Jack. I'll show you the Eighth Wonder of the World." He flashed a smile that neither Jack Andolini or Enrico Balazar cared

for in the slightest.

"Is that so?" Andolini pulled a gun from the clamshell holster attached to his belt at the small of his back. "Am I gonna be amazed?"

Eddie's smile widened. "Oh yeah. I think this is gonna knock your socks off."

10

Andolini followed Eddie into the bathroom* He was holding the gun up because his wind was up.

"Close the door," Eddie said.

"Fuck you," Andolini answered.

"Close the door or no dope," Eddie said.

"Fuck you," Andolini said again. Now, a little scared, feeling that there was something going on that he didn't understand, Andolini looked brighter than he had in the van.

"He won't close the door," Eddie yelled at Balazar. "I'm getting ready to give up on you, Mr. Balazar. You probably got six wiseguys in this place, every one of them with about four guns, and the two of you are going batshit over a kid in a crapper. A. junkie kid."

"Shut the fucking door, Jack!" Balazar shouted.

"That's right," Eddie said as Jack Andolini kicked the door shut behind him. "Is you a man or is you a m—"

"Oh boy, ain't I had enough of this turd," Andolini said to no one in particular. He raised the gun, butt forward, meaning to pistol-whip Eddie across the mouth.

Then he froze, gun drawn up across his body, the snarl that bared his teeth slackening into a slack-jawed gape of surprise as he saw what Col Vincent had seen in the van.

Eddie's eyes changed from brown to blue.

"Now grab him!" a low, commanding voice said, and although the voice came from Eddie's mouth, it was not Eddie's voice.

Schizo, Jack Andolini thought. He's gone schizo, gone fucking schi—

But the thought broke off when Eddie's hands grabbed his shoulders, because when that happened, Andolini saw a hole in reality suddenly appear about three feet behind Eddie.

No, not a hole. Its dimensions were too perfect for that.

It was a door.

"Hail Mary fulla grace," Jack said in a low breathy moan. Through that doorway which hung in space a foot or so above the floor in front of Balazar's private shower he could see a dark beach which sloped down to crashing waves. Things were moving on that beach. Things.

He brought the gun down, but the blow which had been meant to break off all of Eddie's front teeth at the gum-line did no more than mash Eddie's lips back and bloody them a little.

All the strength was running out of him. Jack could feel it happening.

"I told you it was gonna knock your socks off, Jack," Eddie said, and then yanked him. Jack realized what Eddie meant to do at the last moment and began to fight like a wildcat, but it was too late—they were tumbling backward through that doorway, and the droning hum of New York City at night, so familiar and constant you never even heard it unless it wasn't there anymore, was replaced by

the grinding sound of the waves and the grating, questioning voices of dimly seen horrors crawling to and fro on the beach.

11

We'll have to move very fast, or we'll find ourselves basted in a hot oast, Roland had said, and Eddie was pretty sure the guy meant that if they didn't shuck and jive at damn near the speed of light, their geese were going to be cooked. He believed it, too. When it came to hard guys, Jack Andolini was like Dwight Gooden: you could rock him, yes, you could shock him, maybe, but if you let him get away in the early innings he was going to stomp you flat later on. Left hand! Roland screamed at himself as they went through and he separated from Eddie. Remember! Left hand! Left hand! He saw Eddie and Jack stumble backward, fall, and then go rolling down the rocky scree that edged the beach, struggling for the gun in Andolini's hand. Roland had just time to think what a cosmic joke it would be if he arrived back in his own world only to discover that his physical body had died while he had been away. . . and then it was too late. Too late to wonder, too late to go back.

12

Andolini didn't know what had happened. Part of him was sure he had gone crazy, part was sure Eddie had doped him or gassed him or something like that, part believed that the vengeful God of his childhood had finally tired of his evils and had plucked him away from the world he knew and set him down in this weird purgatory.

Then he saw the door, standing open, spilling a fan of white light—the light from Balazar's John—onto the rocky ground—and understood it was possible to get back. Andolini was a practical man above all else. He would worry about what all this meant later on. Right now he intended to kill this creep's ass and get back through that door.

The strength that had gone out of him in his shocked surprise now flooded back. He realized Eddie was trying to pull his small but very efficient Colt Cobra out of his hand and had nearly succeeded. Jack pulled it back with a curse, tried to aim, and Eddie promptly grabbed his arm again.

Andolini hoisted a knee into the big muscle of Eddie's right thigh (the expensive gabardine of Andolini's slacks was now crusted with dirty gray beach sand) and Eddie screamed as the muscle seized up.

"Roland!" he cried. "Help me! For Christ's sake, help me!"

Andolini snapped his head around and what he saw threw him off-balance again. There was a guy standing there . . . only he looked more like a ghost than a guy. Not exactly Casper the Friendly Ghost, either. The swaying figure's white, haggard face was rough with beard-stubble. His shirt was in tatters which blew back behind him in twisted ribbons, showing the starved stack of his ribs. A filthy rag was wrapped around his right hand. He looked sick, sick and dying, but even so he also looked tough enough to make Andolini feel like a soft-boiled egg.

And the joker was wearing a pair of guns.

They looked older than the hills, old enough to have come from a Wild West

museum . . . but they were guns just the same, they might even really work, and Andolini suddenly realized he was going to have to take care of the white-faced man right away . . . unless he really was a spook, and if that was the case, it wouldn't matter fuck-all, so there was really no sense worrying about it.

Andolini let go of Eddie and snap-rolled to the right, barely feeling the edge of rock that tore open his five-hundred-dollar sport jacket. At the same instant the gunslinger drew left-handed, and his draw was as it had always been, sick or well, wide awake or still half asleep: faster than a streak of blue summer lightning.

I'm beat, Andolini thought, full of sick wonder. Christ, he's faster than anybody I ever saw! I'm beat, holy Mary Mother of God, he's gonna blow me away, he's g—

The man in the ragged shirt pulled the trigger of the revolver in his left hand and Jack Andolini thought—really thought—he was dead before he realized there had been only a dull click instead of a report.

Misfire.

Smiling, Andolini rose to his knees and raised his own gun.

"I don't know who you are, but you can kiss your ass good-bye, you fucking spook," he said.

13

Eddie sat up, shivering, his naked body pocked with goosebumps. He saw Roland draw, heard the dry snap that should have been a bang, saw Andolini come up on his knees, heard him say something, and before he really knew what he was doing his hand had found a ragged chunk of rock. He pulled it out of the grainy earth and threw it as hard as he could.

It struck Andolini high on the back of the head and bounced away. Blood sprayed from a ragged hanging flap in Jack Andolini's scalp. Andolini fired, but the bullet that surely would have killed the gunslinger otherwise went wild.

14

Not really wild, the gunslinger could have told Eddie. When you feel the wind of the slug on your cheek, you can't really call it wild.

He thumbed the hammer of his gun back and pulled the trigger again as he recoiled from Andolini's shot. This time the bullet in the chamber fired—the dry, authoritative crack echoed up and down the beach. Gulls asleep on rocks high above the lobstersties awoke and flew upward in screaming, startled packs. The gunslinger's bullet would have stopped Andolini for good in spite of his own involuntary recoil, but by then Andolini was also in motion, falling sideways, dazed by the blow on the head. The crack of the gunslinger's revolver seemed distant, but the searing poker it plunged into his left arm, shattering the elbow, was real enough. It brought him out of his daze and he rose to his feet, one arm hanging broken and useless, the gun wavering wildly about in his other hand, looking for a target.

It was Eddie he saw first, Eddie the junkie, Eddie who had somehow brought him to this crazy place. Eddie was standing there as naked as the day he had been born, shivering in the chilly wind, clutching himself with both arms. Well, he might die here, but he would at least have the pleasure of taking Eddie Fucking

Dean with him.

Andolini brought his gun up. The little Cobra now seemed to weigh about twenty pounds, but he managed.

15

This better not be another misfire, Roland thought grimly, and thumbed the hammer back again. Below the din of the gulls, he heard the smooth oiled click as the chamber revolved.

16

It was no misfire.

17

The gunslinger hadn't aimed at Andolini's head but at the gun in Andolini's hand. He didn't know if they still needed this man, but they might; he was important to Balazar, and because Balazar had proved to be every bit as dangerous as Roland had thought he might be, the best course was the safest one. His shot was good, and that was no surprise; what happened to Andolini's gun and hence to Andolini was. Roland had seen it happen, but only twice in all the years he had seen men fire guns at each other.

Bad luck for you, fellow, the gunslinger thought as Andolini wandered off toward the beach, screaming. Blood poured down his shirt and pants. The hand which had been holding the Colt Cobra was missing below the middle of the palm. The gun was a senseless piece of twisted metal lying on the sand.

Eddie stared at him, stunned. No one would ever mis-judge Jack Andolini's caveman face again, because now he had no face; where it had been there was now nothing but a churned mess of raw flesh and the black screaming hole of his mouth.

"My God, what happened?"

"My bullet must have struck the cylinder of his gun at the second he pulled the trigger," the gunslinger said. He spoke as dryly as a professor giving a police academy ballistics lecture. "The result was an explosion that tore the back off his gun. I think one or two of the other cartridges may have exploded as well."

"Shoot him," Eddie said. He was shivering harder than ever, and now it wasn't just the combination of night air, sea breeze, and naked body that was causing it. "Kill him. Put him out of his misery, for God's s—"

"Too late," the gunslinger said with a cold indifference that chilled Eddie's flesh all the way in to the bone.

And Eddie turned away just too late to avoid seeing the lobstrosities swarm over Andolini's feet, tearing off his Gucci loafers. . . with the feet still inside them, of course. Screaming, waving his arms spasmodically before him, Andolini fell forward. The lobstrosities swarmed greedily over him, question-ing him anxiously all the while they were eating him alive: Dad-a-chack? Did-a-chick? Dum-a-chum? Dod-a-chock?

"Jesus," Eddie moaned. "What do we do now?"

"Now you get exactly as much of the
(devil-powder the gunslinger said; cocaine Eddie heard)

as you promised the man Balazar," Roland said, "no more and no less. And we go back." He looked levelly at Eddie. "Only this time I have to go back with you. As myself."

"Jesus Christ," Eddie said. "Can you do that?" And at once answered his own question. "Sure you can. But why?"

"Because you can't handle this alone," Roland said. "Come here."

Eddie looked back at the squirming hump of clawed creatures on the beach. He had never liked Jack Andolini, but he felt his stomach roll over just the same.

"Come here," Roland said impatiently. "We've little time, and I have little liking for what I must do now. It's something I've never done before. Never thought I would do." His lips twisted bitterly. "I'm getting used to doing things like that."

Eddie approached the scrawny figure slowly, on legs that felt more and more like rubber. His bare skin was white and glimmering in the alien dark. Just who are you, Roland? he thought. What are you? And that heat I feel baking off you—is it just fever? Or some kind of madness? I think it might be both.

God, he needed a fix. More: he deserved a fix.

"Never done what before?" he asked. "What are you talk-ing about?"

"Take this," Roland said, and gestured at the ancient revolver slung low on his right hip. Did not point; there was no finger to point with, only a bulky, rag-wrapped bundle. "It's no good to me. Not now, perhaps never again."

"I. . ." Eddie swallowed. "I don't want to touch it."

"I don't want you to either," the gunslinger said with curious gentleness, "but I'm afraid neither of us has a choice. There's going to be shooting."

"There is?"

"Yes." The gunslinger looked serenely at Eddie. "Quite a lot of it, I think."

18

Balazar had become more and more uneasy. Too long. They had been in there too long and it was too quiet. Dis-tantly, maybe on the next block, he could hear people shout-ing at each other and then a couple of rattling reports that were probably firecrackers . . . but when you were in the sort of business Balazar was in, firecrackers weren't the first thing you thought of.

A scream. Was that a scream?

Never mind. Whatever's happening on the next block has nothing to do with you.

You're turning into an old woman.

All the same, the signs were bad. Very bad.

"Jack?" he yelled at the closed bathroom door.

There was no answer.

Balazar opened the left front drawer of his desk and took out the gun. This was no Colt Cobra, cozy enough to fit in a clamshell holster; it was a .357 Magnum.

"'Cimi!" he shouted. "I want you!"

He slammed the drawer. The tower of cards fell with a soft, sighing thump.

Balazar didn't even notice.

'Cimi Dretto, all two hundred and fifty pounds of him, filled the doorway. He saw that Da Boss had pulled his gun out of the drawer, and 'Cimi immediately pulled his own from beneath a plaid jacket so loud it could have caused flash-burns on anyone who made the mistake of looking at it too long.

"I want Claudio and Tricks," he said. "Get them quick. The kid is up to

something."

"We got a problem," 'Cimi said.

Balazar's eyes flicked from the bathroom door to 'Cimi. "Oh, I got plenty of those already," he said. "What's this new one, 'Cimi?"

'Cimi licked his lips. He didn't like telling Da Boss bad news even under the best of circumstances; when he looked like this . . .

"Well," he said, and licked his lips. "You see—"

"Will you hurry the fuck up?" Balazar yelled.

19

The sandalwood grips of the revolver were so smooth that Eddie's first act upon receiving it was to nearly drop it on his toes. The thing was so big it looked prehistoric, so heavy he knew he would have to lift it two-handed. The recoil, he thought, is apt to drive me right through the nearest wall. That's if it fires at all. Yet there was some part of him that wanted to hold it, that responded to its perfectly expressed purpose, that sensed its dim and bloody history and wanted to be part of it.

No one but the best ever held this baby in his hand, Eddie thought. Until now, at least.

"Are you ready?" Roland asked.

"No, but let's do it," Eddie said.

He gripped Roland's left wrist with his left hand. Roland slid his hot right arm around Eddie's bare shoulders.

Together they stepped back through the doorway, from the windy darkness of the beach in Roland's dying world to the cool fluorescent glare of Balazar's private bathroom in The Leaning Tower.

Eddie blinked, adjusting his eyes to the light, and heard 'Cimi Dretto in the other room. "We got a problem," 'Cimi was saying. Don't we all, Eddie thought, and then his eyes riveted on Balazar's medicine chest. It was standing open. In his mind he heard Balazar telling Jack to search the bathroom, and heard Andolini asking if there was any place in there he wouldn't know about. Balazar had paused before replying. There is a small panel on the back wall of the medicine cabinet, he had said. I keep a few personal things in there.

Andolini had slid the metal panel open but had neglected to close it. "Roland!" he hissed.

Roland raised his own gun and pressed the barrel against his lips in a shushing gesture. Eddie crossed silently to the medicine chest.

A few personal things—there was a bottle of supposito-ries, a copy of a blearily printed magazine called Child's Play (the cover depicting two naked girls of about eight engaged in a soul-kiss) . . . and eight or ten sample packages of Keflex. Eddie knew what Keflex was. Junkies, prone as they were to infections both general and local, usually knew.

Keflex was an antibiotic.

"Oh, I got plenty of those already," Balazar was saying. He sounded harried.

"What's this new one, 'Cimi?"

If this doesn't knock out whatever's wrong with him nothing will, Eddie thought. He began to grab the packages and went to stuff them into his pockets. He realized he had no pockets and uttered a harsh bark that wasn't even close to laughter.

He began to dump them into the sink. He would have to pick them up later ... if there was a later.

"Well," 'Cimi was saying, "you see—"

"Will you hurry the fuck up?" Balazar yelled.

"It's the kid's big brother," 'Cimi said, and Eddie froze with the last two packages of Keflex still in his hand, his head cocked. He looked more like the dog on the old RCA Victor records than ever.

"What about him?" Balazar asked impatiently.

"He's dead," 'Cimi said.

Eddie dropped the Keflex into the sink and turned toward Roland.

"They killed my brother," he said.

20

Balazar opened his mouth to tell 'Cimi not to bother him with a bunch of crap when he had important things to worry about—like this impossible-to-shake feeling that the kid was going to fuck him, Andolini or no Andolini—when he heard the kid as clearly as the kid had no doubt heard him and 'Cimi. "They killed my brother," the kid said.

Suddenly Balazar didn't care about his goods, about the unanswered questions, or anything except bringing this situation to a screeching halt before it could get any weirder.

"Kill him, Jack!" he shouted.

There was no response. Then he heard the kid say it again: "They killed my brother. They killed Henry."

Balazar suddenly knew—knew—it wasn't Jack the kid was talking to.

"Get all the gentlemen," he said to 'Cimi. "All of them. We're gonna burn his ass and when he's dead we're gonna take him in the kitchen and I'm gonna personally chop his head off."

21

"They killed my brother," the prisoner said. The gunslinger said nothing. He only watched and thought: The bottles. In the sink. That's what I need, or what he thinks I need. The packets. Don't forget. Don't forget.

From the other room: "Kill him, Jack!"

Neither Eddie nor the gunslinger took any notice of this.

"They killed my brother. They killed Henry."

In the other room Balazar was now talking about taking Eddie's head as a trophy. The gunslinger found some odd comfort in this: not everything in this world was different from his own, it seemed.

The one called 'Cimi began shouting hoarsely for the others. There was an ungentlemanly thunder of running feet.

"Do you want to do something about it, or do you just want to stand here?"

Roland asked.

"Oh, I want to do something about it," Eddie said, and raised the gunslinger's revolver. Although only moments ago he had believed he would need both hands to do it, he found that he could do it easily.

"And what is it you want to do?" Roland asked, and his voice seemed distant to

his own ears. He was sick, full of fever, but what was happening to him now was the onset of a different fever, one which was all too familiar. It was the fever that had overtaken him in Tull. It was battle-fire, hazing all thought, leaving only the need to stop thinking and start shooting.

"I want to go to war," Eddie Dean said calmly.

"You don't know what you're talking about," Roland said, "but you are going to find out. When we go through the door, you go right. I have to go left. My hand." Eddie nodded. They went to their war.

22

Balazar had expected Eddie, or Andolini, or both of them. He had not expected Eddie and an utter stranger, a tall man with dirty gray-black hair and a face that looked as if it had been chiseled from obdurate stone by some savage god. For a moment he was not sure which way to fire.

'Cimi, however, had no such problems. Da Boss was mad at Eddie. Therefore, he would punch Eddie's clock first and worry about the other catzarro later. 'Cimi turned ponderously toward Eddie and pulled the trigger of his automatic three times. The casings jumped and gleamed in the air. Eddie saw the big man turning and went into a mad slide along the floor, whizzing along like some kid in a disco contest, a kid so jived-up he didn't realize he'd left his entire John Travolta outfit, underwear included, behind; he went with his wang wagging and his bare knees first heating and then scorching as the friction built up. Holes punched through plastic that was supposed to look like knotty pine just above him. Slivers of it rained down on his shoulders and into his hair.

Don't let me die naked and needing a fix, God, he prayed, knowing such a prayer was more than blasphemous; it was an absurdity. Still he was unable to stop it.

/// die, but please, just let me have one more—

The revolver in the gunslinger's left hand crashed. On the open beach it had been loud; over here it was deafening.

"Oh Jeez!" 'Cimi Dretto screamed in a strangled, breathy voice. It was a wonder he could scream at all. His chest sud-denly caved in, as if someone had swung a sledgehammer at a barrel. His white shirt began to turn red in patches, as if poppies were blooming on it. "Oh Jeez! Oh Jeez! Oh J—"

Claudio Andolini shoved him aside. 'Cimi fell with a thud. Two of the framed pictures on Balazar's wall crashed down. The one showing Da Boss presenting the Sportsman of the Year trophy to a grinning kid at a Police Athletic League banquet landed on 'Cimi's head. Shattered glass fell on his shoulders.

"oh jeez" he whispered in a fainting little voice, and blood began to bubble from his lips.

Claudio was followed by Tricks and one of the men who had been waiting in the storage room. Claudio had an auto-matic in each hand; the guy from the storage room had a Remington shotgun sawed off so short that it looked like a derringer with a case of the mumps; Tricks Postino was carry-ing what he called The Wonderful Rambo Machine—this was an M-16 rapid-fire assault weapon.

"Where's my brother, you fucking needle-freak?" Claudio screamed. "What'd you do to Jack?" He could not have been terribly interested in an answer, because he began to fire with both weapons while he was still yelling. I'm dead, Eddie thought, and then Roland fired again. Claudio Andolini was propelled backwards in a cloud of his own blood. The auto-matics flew from his hands and slid across

Balazar's desk. They thumped to the carpet amid a flutter of playing cards. Most of Claudio's guts hit the wall a second before Claudio caught up with them.

"Get him!" Balazar was shrieking. "Get the spook! The kid ain't dangerous! He's nothing but a bare-ass junkie! Get the spook! Blow him away!"

He pulled the trigger on the .357 twice. The Magnum was almost as loud as Roland's revolver. It did not make neat holes in the wall against which Roland crouched; the slugs smashed gaping wounds in the fake wood to either side of Roland's head. White light from the bathroom shone through the holes in ragged rays.

Roland pulled the trigger of his revolver.

Only a dry click.

Misfire.

"Eddie!" the gunslinger yelled, and Eddie raised his own gun and pulled the trigger.

The crash was so loud that for a moment he thought the gun had blown up in his hand, as Jack's had done. The recoil did not drive him back through the wall, but it did snap his arm up in a savage arc that jerked all the tendons under his arm.

He saw part of Balazar's shoulder disintegrate into red spray, heard Balazar screech like a wounded cat, and yelled, "The junkie ain't dangerous, was that what you said? Was that it, you numb fuck? You want to mess with me and my brother? I'll show you who's dangerous! I'll sh—"

There was a boom like a grenade as the guy from the storage room fired the sawed-off. Eddie rolled as the blast tore a hundred tiny holes in the walls and bathroom door. His naked skin was seared by shot in several places, and Eddie understood that if the guy had been closer, where the thing's pattern was tight, he would have been vaporized.

Hell, I'm dead anyway, he thought, watching as the guy from the storage room worked the Remington's jack, pump-ing in fresh cartridges, then laying it over his forearm. He was grinning. His teeth were very yellow—Eddie didn't think they had been acquainted with a toothbrush in quite some time.

Christ, I'm going to get killed by some fuckhead with yellow teeth and I don't even know his name, Eddie thought dimly. At least I put one in Balazar. At least I did that much. He wondered if Roland had another shot. He couldn't remember.

"I got him!" Tricks Postino yelled cheerfully. "Gimme a clear field, Dario!" And before the man named Dario could give him a clear field or anything else, Tricks opened up with The Wonderful Rambo Machine. The heavy thunder of machine-gun fire filled Balazar's office. The first result of this barrage was to save Eddie Dean's life. Dario had drawn a bead on him with the sawed-off, but before he could pull its double triggers, Tricks cut him in half.

"Stop it, you idiot!" Balazar screamed.

But Tricks either didn't hear, couldn't stop, or wouldn't stop. Lips pulled back from his teeth so that his spit-shining teeth were bared in a huge shark's grin, he raked the room from one end to the other, blowing two of the wall panels to dust, turning framed photographs into clouds of flying glass fragments, hammering the bathroom door off its hinges. The frosted glass of Balazar's shower stall exploded. The March of Dimes trophy Balazar had gotten the year before bonged like a bell as a slug drove through it.

In the movies, people actually kill other people with hand-held rapid-fire guns.

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This third volume of the tale is gratefully dedicated to my son OWEN PHILIP KING: Khef, Ka, and Ka-tet.

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ARGUMENT

The Waste Lands is the third volume of a longer tale inspired by and to some degree dependent upon Robert Browning's narrative poem "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came."

The first volume, The Gunslinger, tells how Roland, the last gun-slinger in a world which has "moved on," pursues and finally catches the man in black, a sorcerer named Walter who falsely claimed the friendship of Roland's father in the days when the unity of Mid-World still held. Catching this half-human spell-caster is not Roland's ultimate goal but only another landmark along the road to the powerful and mysterious Dark Tower, which stands at the nexus of time.

Who, exactly, is Roland? What was his world like before it moved on? What is the Tower and why does he pursue it? We have only frag-mentary answers. Roland is clearly a land of knight, one of those charged with holding (or possibly redeeming) a world Roland remembers as being "filled with love and light." Just how closely Roland's memory resembles the way that world actually was is very much open to question, however.

We do know that he was forced to an early trial of manhood after discovering that his mother had become the mistress of Marten, a much greater sorcerer than Walter; we know that Marten orchestrated Roland's discovery of his mother's affair, expecting Roland to fail his test of manhood and be "sent West" into the wastes; we know that Roland laid Marten's plans at nines by passing the test.

here. Me. Henry Dean. So what I think I'll do, brother o' mine, is just sort of rag on you about certain things. I won't come right out and say, "Don't do that, it's makin me nervous," because that might make me sound, you know, a little fucked up in the head. But I can rag on you, because that's part of what big brothers do, right? All part of the image. I'll rag on you and tease you and make fun of you until you just . . . fucking . . . QUIT IT! Okay?

Well, it wasn't okay, not really, but in the Dean household, things usually went the way Henry wanted them to go. And until very recently, that had seemed right—not okay but right. There was a small but crucial difference there, if you could but dig it. There were two reasons why it seemed right. One was an on-top reason; the other was an underneath reason.

The on-top reason was because Henry had to Watch Out for Eddie when Mrs. Dean was at work. He had to Watch Out all the time, because once there had been a Dean sister, if you could but dig it. She would have been four years older than Eddie and four years younger than Henry if she had lived, but that was the thing, you see, because she hadn't lived. She had been run over by a drunk driver when Eddie was two. She had been watching a game of hopscotch on the sidewalk when it happened.

As a lad, Eddie had sometimes thought of his sister while listening to Mel Alien doing the play-by-play on The Yankee Baseball Network. Someone would really pound one and Mel would bellow, "Holy cow, he got all of that one! SEEYA LATER!"

Well, the drunk had gotten all of Gloria Dean, holy cow, seeya later. Gloria was now in that great upper deck in the sky, and it had not happened because she was unlucky or because the State of New York had decided not to jerk the jerk's license after his third OUI or even because God had bent down to pick up a peanut; it had happened (as Mrs. Dean frequently told her sons) because there had been no one around to Watch Out for Gloria.

Henry's job was to make sure nothing like that ever happened to Eddie. That was his job and he did it, but it wasn't easy. Henry and Mrs. Dean agreed on that, if nothing else. Both of them frequently reminded Eddie of just how much Henry had sacrificed to keep Eddie safe from drunk drivers and muggers and junkies and possibly even malevolent aliens who might be cruising around in the general vicinity of the upper deck, aliens who might decide to come down from their UFOs on nuclear-powered jet-skis at any time in order to kidnap little kids like Eddie Dean. So it was wrong to make Henry more nervous than this terrible responsibility had already made him. If Eddie was doing something that did make Henry more nervous, Eddie ought to cease doing that thing immediately. It was a way of paying Henry back for all the time Henry had spent Watching Out for Eddie. When you thought about it that way, you saw that doing things better than Henry could do them was very unfair.

Then there was the underneath reason. That reason (the world beneath the world, one might say) was more powerful, because it could never be stated: Eddie could not allow himself to be better than Henry at much of anything, because Henry was, for the most part, good for nothing . . . except Watching Out for Eddie, of course.

Henry taught Eddie how to play basketball in the playground near the apartment building where they lived—this was in a cement suburb where the towers of Manhattan stood against the horizon like a dream and the welfare check was king.

Eddie was eight years younger than Henry and much smaller, but he was also much faster. He had a natural feel for the game; once he got on the cracked, hilly cement of the court with the ball in his hands, the moves seemed to sizzle in his nerve-endings. He was faster, but that was no big deal. The big deal was this: he was better than Henry. If he hadn't known it from the results of the pick-up games in which they sometimes played, he would have known it from Henry's thunderous looks and the hard punches to the upper arm Henry often dealt out on their way home afterwards. These punches were supposedly Henry's little jokes—"Two for flinching!" Henry would cry cheerily, and then whap-whap! Into Eddie's bicep with one knuckle extended—but they didn't feel like jokes. They felt like warnings. They felt like Henry's way of saying You better not fake me out and make me look stupid when you drive for the basket, bro; you better remember that I'm Watching Out for You.

The same was true with reading . . . baseball . . . Ring-a-Levio . . . math . . . even jump-rope, which was a girl's game. That he was better at these things, or could be better, was a secret that had to be kept at all costs. Because Eddie was the younger brother. Because Henry was Watching Out for him. But the most important part of the underneath reason was also the simplest: these things had to be kept secret because Henry was Eddie's big brother, and Eddie adored him.

4

Two DAYS AGO, WHILE Susannah was skinning out a rabbit and Roland was starting supper, Eddie had been in the forest just south of camp. He had seen a funny spur of wood jutting out of a fresh stump. A weird, feeling—he supposed it was the one people called *deja vu*—swept over him, and he found himself staring fixedly at the spur, which looked like a badly shaped doorknob. He was distantly aware that his mouth had gone dry.

After several seconds, he realized he was looking at the spur sticking out of the stump but thinking about the courtyard behind the building where he and Henry had lived—thinking about the feel of the warm cement under his ass and the whopping smells of garbage from the dumpster around the corner in the alley. In this memory he had a chunk of wood in his left hand and a paring knife from the drawer by the sink in his right. The chunk of wood jutting from the stump had called up the memory of that brief period when he had fallen violently in love with wood-carving. It was just that the memory was buried so deep he hadn't realized, at first, what it was.

What he had loved most about carving was the seeing part, which happened even before you began. Sometimes you saw a car or a truck. Sometimes a dog or cat. Once, he remembered, it had been the face of an idol—one of the spooky Easter Island monoliths he had seen in an issue of *National Geographic* at school. That had turned out to be a good one. The game was to find out how much of that thing you could get out of the wood without breaking it. You could never get it all, but if you were very careful, you could sometimes get quite a lot.

There was something inside the boss on the side of the stump. He thought he might be able to release quite a lot of it with Roland's knife—it was the sharpest, handiest tool he had ever used.

Something inside the wood, waiting patiently for someone—someone like him!—to come along and let it out. To set it free.

Oh lookit the sissy! Whatcha makin today, sissy? A dollhouse? A pisspot for your

She was looking at him anxiously. "Do we still have enough time to get there?"

Eddie nodded. "Barely."

Three minutes later they were headed down the Great Road again. It glimmered ahead of them like a ghost. And an hour after that, as the first light of dawn began to touch the sky in the east, a rhythmic sound began far ahead of them.

The sound of drums, Roland thought.

Machinery, Eddie thought. Some huge piece of machinery.

It's a heart, Susannah thought. Some huge, diseased, beating heart . . . and it's in that city, where we have to go.

Two hours later, the sound stopped as suddenly as it had begun. White, featureless clouds had begun to fill the sky above them, first veiling the early sun, then blotting it out. The circle of standing stones lay less than five miles ahead now, gleaming in the shadowless light like the teeth of a fallen monster.

20

SPAGHETTI WEEK AT THE MAJESTIC!

the battered, dispirited marquee jutting over the corner of Brooklyn and Markey Avenues proclaimed.

2 SERGIO LEONE CLASSIX!

A FISTFUL OF \$\$ PLUS GOOD BAD & UGLY!

99 Cents ALL SHOWS

A gum-chewing cutie with rollers in her blonde hair sat in the box office listening to Led Zep on her transistor and reading one of the tabloids of which Mrs. Shaw was so fond. To her left, in the theater's remaining display case, there was a poster showing Clint Eastwood.

Jake knew he should get moving—three o'clock was almost here—but he paused a moment anyway, staring at the poster behind the dirty, cracked glass. Eastwood was wearing a Mexican serape. A cigar was clamped in his teeth. He had thrown one side of the serape back over his shoulder to free his gun. His eyes were a pale, faded blue. Bombar-dier's eyes.

It's not him, Jake thought, but it's almost him. It's the eyes, mostly . . . the eyes are almost the same.

"You let me drop," he said to the man in the old poster, the man who was not Roland. "You let me die. What happens this time?"

"Hey, kid," the blonde ticket-seller called, making Jake start. "You gonna come in or just stand there and talk to yourself?"

"Not me," Jake said. "I've already seen those two."

He got moving again, turning left on Markey Avenue.

Once again he waited for the feeling of remembering forward to seize him, but it didn't come. This was just a hot, sunny street lined with sandstone-colored apartment buildings that looked like prison cellblocks to Jake. A few young women were walking along, pushing baby-carriages in pairs and talking desultorily, but the street was otherwise deserted. It was unseasonably hot for May—too hot to stroll.

What am I looking for? What?

From behind him came a burst of raucous male laughter. It was followed by an outraged female shriek: "You give that back\."

Jake jumped, thinking the owner of the voice must mean him.

"Give it back, Henry! I'm not kidding!"

Jake turned and saw two boys, one at least eighteen and the other a lot younger . . . twelve or thirteen. At the sight of this second boy, Jake's heart did something that felt like a loop-the-loop in his chest. The lad was wearing green corduroys instead of madras shorts, but the yellow T-shirt was the same, and he had a battered old basketball under one arm. Although his back was to Jake, Jake knew he had found the boy from last night's dream.

21

THE GIRL WAS THE gum-chewing cutie from the ticket-booth. The older of the two boys—who looked almost old enough to be called a man— had her newspaper in his hands. She grabbed for it. The newspaper-grabber—he was wearing denims and a black T-shirt with the sleeves rolled up—held it over his head and grinned.

"Jump for it, Maryanne! Jump, girl, jump!"

She stared at him with angry eyes, her cheeks flushed. "Give it to me!" she said. "Quit fooling around and give it back! Bastard!"

"Oooo wisten to dat, Eddie!" the old kid said. "Bad wang-gwidge! Naughty, naughty!" He waved the newspaper just out of the blonde tick-et-seller's grasp, grinning, and Jake suddenly understood. These two were walking home from school together—although they probably didn't go to the same one, if he was right about the difference in their ages—and the bigger boy had gone over to the box office, pretending he had something interesting to tell the blonde. Then he had reached through the slot at the bottom and snatched her paper.

The big boy's face was one that Jake had seen before; it was the face of a kid who would think it the height of hilarity to douse a cat's tail with lighter fluid or feed a bread-ball with a fishhook planted in the middle to a hungry dog. The sort of lad who sat in the back of the room and snapped bra-straps and then said "Who me?" with a big, dumb look of surprise on his face when someone finally complained. There weren't many lads like him at Piper, but there were a few. Jake supposed there were a few in every school. They dressed better at Piper, but the face was the same. He guessed that in the old days, people would have said it was the face of a boy who was born to be hung.

Maryanne jumped for her newspaper, which the old boy in the black pants had rolled into a tube. He pulled it out of her reach just before she could grab it, then whacked her on the head with it, the way you might whack a dog for piddling on the carpet. She was beginning to cry now—mostly from humiliation, Jake guessed. Her face was now so red it was almost glowing. "Keep it, then!" she yelled at him. "I know you can't read, but you can look at the pictures, at least!"

She began to turn away.

could not—it was as if part of his brain refused to see it, as if seeing would lead to comprehension and comprehension to madness.

"Hurry up, Jake!" he screamed into the keyhole. "For Christ's sake, move it!" Above the speaking ring, thunder ripped the sky like cannon-fire and the rain turned to hail.

32

FOR A MOMENT AFTER the key fell, Jake only stood where he was, staring down at the narrow crack between the boards.

Incredibly, he felt sleepy.

That shouldn't have happened, he thought. It's one thing too much. I can't go on with this, not one minute, not one single second longer. I'm going to curl up against that door instead. I'm going to go to sleep, right away, all at once, and when it grabs me and pulls me toward its mouth, I'll never wake up. Then the thing coming out of the wall grunted, and when Jake looked up, his urge to give in vanished in a single stroke of terror. Now it was all the way out of the wall, a giant plaster head with one broken wooden eye and one reaching plaster hand. Chunks of lathing stood out on its skull in random hackles, like a child's drawing of hair. It saw Jake and opened its mouth, revealing jagged wooden teeth. It grunted again. Plaster-dust drifted out of its yawning mouth like cigar smoke.

Jake fell to his knees and peered into the crack. The key was a small brave shimmer of silvery light down there in the dark, but the crack was far too narrow to admit his fingers. He seized one of the boards and yanked with all his might. The nails which held it groaned ... but held.

There was a jangling crash. He looked down the hallway and saw the hand, which was bigger than his whole body, seize the fallen chandelier and throw it aside.

The rusty chain which had once held it suspended rose like a bullwhip and then came down with a heavy crump. A dead lamp on a rusty chain rattled above Jake, dirty glass chattering against ancient brass.

The doorkeeper's head, attached only to its single hunched shoulder and reaching arm, slid forward above the floor. Behind it, the remains of the wall collapsed in a cloud of dust. A moment later the fragments humped up and became the creature's twisted, bony back.

The doorkeeper saw Jake looking and seemed to grin. As it did, splinters of wood poked out of its wrinkling cheeks. It dragged itself forward through the dust-hazed ballroom, mouth opening and closing. Its great hand groped amid the ruins, feeling for purchase, and ripped one of the French doors at the end of the hall from its track.

Jake screamed breathlessly and began to wrench at the board again. It wouldn't come, but the gunslinger's voice did:

"The other one, Jake! Try the other one!"

He let go of the board he had been yanking at and grabbed the one on the other side of the crack. As he did, another voice spoke. He heard this one not in his head but with his ears, and understood it was coming from the other side of the door—the door he had been looking for ever since the day he hadn't been run over in the street.

"Hurry up, Jake! For Christ's sake, hurry up!"

When he yanked this other board, it came free so easily that he almost tumbled over backward.

33

Two WOMEN WERE STANDING in the doorway of the used appliance shop across the street from The Mansion. The older was the proprietor; the younger had been her only customer when the sounds of crashing walls and breaking beams began. Now, without knowing they were doing it, they linked arms about each other's waists and stood that way, trembling like children who hear a noise in the dark.

Up the street, a trio of boys on their way to the Dutch Hill Little League field stood gaping at the house, their Red Ball Flyer wagon filled with baseball equipment forgotten behind them. A delivery driver nosed his van into the curb and got out to look. The patrons of Henry's Corner Market and the Dutch Hill Pub came straggling up the street, looking around wildly.

Now the ground began to tremble, and a fan of fine cracks started to spread across Rhinehold Street.

"Is it an earthquake?" the delivery van driver shouted at the women standing outside the appliance shop, but instead of waiting for an answer he jumped back behind the wheel of his van and drove away rapidly, swerving to the wrong side of the street to keep away from the ruined house which was the epicenter of this convulsion.

The entire house seemed to be bowing inward. Boards splintered, jumped off its face, and rained down into the yard. Dirty gray-black waterfalls of slate shingles poured down from the eaves. There was an earsplitting bang and a long, zigzagging crack shot down the center of The Mansion. The door disappeared into it and then the whole house began to swallow itself from the outside in.

The younger woman suddenly broke the older one's grip. "I'm get-ting out of here," she said, and began to run up the street without looking back.

34

A HOT, STRANGE WIND began to sigh down the hallway, blowing Jake's sweaty hair back from his brow as his fingers closed over the silver key. He now understood on some instinctive level what this place was, and what was happening. The doorkeeper was not just in the house, it was the house: every board, every shingle, every windowsill, every eave. And now it was pushing forward, becoming some crazily jumbled representation of its true shape as it did. It meant to catch him before he could use the key. Beyond the giant white head and the crooked, hulking shoulder, he could see boards and shingles and wire and bits of glass—even the front door and the broken banister—flying up the main hall and into the ballroom, joining the form which bulked there, creating more and more of the misshapen plaster-man that was even now groping toward him with its freakish hand.

Jake yanked his own hand out of the hole in the floor and saw it was covered with huge trundling beetles. He slapped it against the wall to knock them off, and cried out as the wall first opened and then tried to close around his wrist. He yanked his hand free just in time, whirled, and jammed the silver key into the hole in the plate.

to the Grays 'n Pubes, even now." He looked at Eddie. "Our da' said there was once electric candles in the city. There are those who say they mought still burn."

"Imagine that," Eddie replied wonderingly, and Susannah pinched his leg, hard, under the table.

"Yes," the other twin said. He spoke seriously, unaware of Eddie's sarcasm. "You pushed a button and they came on—bright, heatless candles with any wicks or reservoirs for oil. And I've heard it said that once, in the old days, Quick, the outlaw prince, actually flew up into the sky in a mechanical bird. But one of its wings broke and he died in a great fall, like Icarus."

Susannah's mouth dropped open. "You know the story of Icarus?"

"Ay, lady," he said, clearly surprised she should find this strange. "He of the beeswax wings."

"Children's stories, both of them," Aunt Talitha said with a sniff. "I know the story of the endless lights is true, for I saw them with my own eyes when I was but a green girl, and they may still glow from time to time, ay; there are those I trust who say they've seen them on clear nights, although it's been long years since I have myself. But no man ever flew, not even the Great Old Ones."

Nonetheless, there were strange machines in the city, built to do peculiar and sometimes dangerous things. Many of them might still run, but the elderly twins reckoned that none now in the city knew how to start them up, for they hadn't been heard in years.

Maybe that could change, though, Eddie thought, his eyes gleaming. If, that is, an enterprising, travel-minded young man with a little knowl-edge of strange machinery and endless lights came along. It could be just a matter of finding the ON switches. I mean, it really could be that simple. Or maybe they just blew a bunch of fuses—think of that, friends and neighbors! Just replace half a dozen 400-amp Busses and light the whole place up like a Reno Saturday night!

Susannah elbowed him and asked, in a low voice, what was so funny. Eddie shook his head and put a finger to his lips, earning an irritated look from the love of his life. The albinos, meanwhile, were continuing their story, handing its thread back and forth with the unconscious ease which probably nothing but lifetime twinship can provide.

Four or five generations ago, they said, the city had still been quite heavily populated and reasonably civilized, although the residents drove wagons and buckboards along the wide boulevards the Great Old Ones had constructed for their fabulous horseless vehicles. The city-dwellers were artisans and what the twins called "manufactories," and trade both on the river and over it had been brisk.

"Over it?" Roland asked.

"The bridge over the Send still stands," Aunt Talitha said, "or did twenty year ago."

"Ay, old Bill Muffin and his boy saw it not ten year ago," Si agreed, making his first contribution to the conversation.

"What sort of bridge?" the gunslinger asked.

"A great thing of steel cables," one of the twins said. "It stands in the sky like the web of some great spider." He added shyly: "I should like to see it again before I die."

"Probably fallen in by now," Aunt Talitha said dismissively, "and good riddance."

Devil's work." She turned to the twins. "Tell them what's happened since, and why the city's so dangerous now—apart from any haunts that may den there, that is, and I'll warrant there's a power of em. These folks want to get on, and the sun's on the wester."

10

THE REST OF THE story was but another version of a tale Roland of Gilead had heard many times and had, in some measure, lived through himself. It was fragmentary and incomplete, undoubtedly shot through with myth and misinformation, its linear progress distorted by the odd changes—both temporal and directional—which were now taking place in the world, and it could be summed up in a single compound sentence: Once there was a world we knew, but that world has moved on.

These old people of River Crossing knew of Gilead no more than Roland knew of the River Barony, and the name of John Parson, the man who had brought ruin and anarchy on Roland's land, meant nothing to them, but all stories of the old world's passing were similar . . . too similar, Roland thought, to be coincidence.

A great civil war—perhaps in Garlan, perhaps in a more distant land called Porla—had erupted three, perhaps even four hundred years ago. Its ripples had spread slowly outward, pushing anarchy and dissension ahead of them. Few if any kingdoms had been able to stand against those slow waves, and anarchy had come to this part of the world as surely as night follows sunset. At one time, whole armies had been on the roads, sometimes in advance, sometimes in retreat, always confused and without long-term goals. As time passed, they crumbled into smaller groups, and these degenerated into roving bands of harriers. Trade faltered, then broke down entirely. Travel went from a matter of inconvenience to one of danger. In the end, it became almost impossible. Communication with the city thinned steadily and had all but ceased a hundred and twenty years ago. Like a hundred other towns Roland had ridden through—first with Cuthbert and the other gunslingers cast out of Gilead, then alone, in pursuit of the man in black—River Crossing had been cut off and thrown on its own resources. At this point Si roused himself, and his voice captured the travellers at once. He spoke in the hoarse, cadenced tones of a lifelong teller of tales—one of those divine fools born to merge memory and mendacity into dreams as airily gorgeous as cobwebs strung with drops of dew.

"We last sent tribute to the Barony castle in the time of my greatgran'da," he said. "Twenty-six men went with a wagon of hides—there was no hard coin anymore by then, o' course, and 'twas the best they could do. It was a long and dangerous journey of almost eighty wheels, and six died on the way. Half fell to harriers bound for the war in the city; the other half died either of disease or devilgrass.

"When they finally arrived, they found the castle deserted but for the rooks and black-birds. The walls had been broken; weeds o'ergrew the Court o' State. There had been a great slaughter on the fields to the west; it were white with bones and red with rusty armor, so my da's gran'da said, and the voices of demons cried out like the east wind from the jawbones o' those who'd fallen there. The village beyond the castle had been burned to the ground and a thousand or more

Odetta. I'm sure there's a God, but I don't think He has much if anything to do with us these days; I believe that after we killed His son, He finally got it through His head that there wasn't nothing to be done with the sons of Adam or the daughters of Eve, and He washed His hands of us. Wise fella.

She had responded to this (which she had fully expected; she was eleven at the time, and knew the turn of her father's mind quite well) by showing him a squib on the Community Churches page of the local newspaper. It said that Rev. Murdock of the Grace Methodist Church would that Sunday elucidate on the topic "God Speaks to Each of Us Every Day"—with a text from First Corinthians. Her father had laughed over that so hard that tears had squirted from the corners of his eyes. Well, I guess each of us hears someone talking, he had said at last, and you can bet your bottom dollar on one thing, sweetie: each of us—including this here Reverend Murdock—hears that voice say just exactly what he wants to hear. It's so convenient that way.

What these people had apparently wanted to hear in the recorded drum-track was an invitation to commit ritual murder. And now, when the drums began to throb through these hundreds or thousands of speak-ers—a hammering back-beat which was only the percussion to a Z.Z. Top song called "Velcro Fly," if Eddie was right—it became their signal to unlimber the hangropes and run a few folks up the nearest speaker-posts.

How many? she wondered as Eddie rolled her along in her wheel-chair, its nicked and dented hard rubber tires crackling over broken glass and whispering through drifts of discarded paper. How many have been killed over the years because some electronic circuit under the city got the hiccups? Did it start because they recognized the essential alienness of the music, which came somehow—like us, and the airplane, and some of the cars along these streets—from another world? She didn't know, but she knew she had come around to her father's cynical point of view on the subject of God and the chats He might or might not have with the sons of Adam and the daughters of Eve. These people had been looking for a reason to slaughter each other, that was all, and the drums had been as good a reason as any.

She found herself thinking of the hive they had found—the mis-shapen hive of white bees whose honey would have poisoned them if they had been foolish enough to eat of it. Here, on this side of the Send, was another dying hive; more mutated white bees whose sting would be no less deadly for their confusion, loss, and perplexity.

And how many more will have to die before the tape finally breaks?

As if her thoughts had caused it to happen, the speakers suddenly began to transmit the relentless, syncopated heartbeat of the drums. Eddie yelled in surprise. Susannah screamed and clapped both hands to her ears—but before she did, she could faintly hear the rest of the music: the track or tracks which had been muted decades ago when someone (probably quite by accident) had bumped the balance control, knocking it all the way to one side and burying both the guitars and the vocal.

Eddie continued to push her along The Street of the Turtle and the Path of the Beam, trying to look in all directions at once and trying not to smell the odor of putrefaction. Thank God for the wind, he thought.

He began to push the wheelchair faster, scanning the weedy gaps between the big white buildings for the graceful sweep of an overhead monorail track. He wanted

to get out of this endless aisle of the dead. As he took yet another deep breath of that speciously sweet cinnamon smell, it seemed to him that he had never wanted anything so badly in his whole life.

19

JAKE'S DAZE WAS BROKEN abruptly when Gasher grabbed him by the collar and yanked with all the force of a cruel rider braking a galloping horse. He stuck one leg out at the same time and Jake went crashing backward over it. His head connected with the pavement and for a moment all the lights went out. Gasher, no humanitarian, brought him around quickly by seizing Jake's lower lip and yanking it upward and outward.

Jake screamed and bolted to a sitting position, striking out blindly with his fists. Gasher dodged the blows easily, hooked his other hand into Jake's armpit, and yanked him to his feet. Jake stood there, rocking drunkenly back and forth. He was beyond protest now; almost beyond understanding. All he knew for sure was that every muscle in his body felt sprung and his wounded hand was howling like an animal caught in a trap.

Gasher apparently needed a breather, and this time he was slower getting his wind back. He stood bent over with his hands planted on the knees of his green trousers, panting in fast little whistling breaths. His yellow headscarf had slipped askew. His good eye glittered like a trum-pery diamond. The white silk eyepatch was now wrinkled, and curds of evil-looking yellow muck oozed onto his cheek from beneath it.

"Take a look over your head, cully, and you'll see why I brung you up short. Get an eyeful!"

Jake tilted his head upward, and in the depths of his shock he was not at all surprised to see a marble fountain as big as a house-trailer dangling eighty feet above them. He and Gasher were almost below it. The fountain was held suspended by two rusty cables which were mostly hidden within huge, unsteady stacks of church pews. Even in his less-than-acute state, Jake saw that these cables were more seriously frayed than the remaining hangers on the bridge had been.

"See it?" Gasher asked, grinning. He raised his left hand to his covered eye, scooped a mass of the pussy material from beneath it, and flicked it indifferently aside. "Beauty, ain't it? Oh, the Tick-Tock Man's a trig cove, all right, and no mistake. (Where's those goat-fucking drums? They should have started by now—if Copperhead's forgot em, I'll ram a stick so far up his arse he'll taste bark.) Now look ahead of you, my delicious little squint."

Jake did, and Gasher immediately clouted him so hard that he stag-gered backward and almost fell.

"Not across, idiot child! Down! See them two dark cobblestones?"

After a moment, Jake did. He nodded apathetically.

"Yer don't want'er step on em, for that'd bring the whole works down on your head, cully, and anybody who wanted yer after that'd have to pick yer up with a blotter. Understand?"

Jake nodded again.

beneath the demon Moon (I)

1

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

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

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

When Blaine the Mono blammed overhead, running up the night like a bullet running up the barrel of a gun, windows broke, dust sifted down, and several of the skulls disintegrated like ancient pottery vases. Outside, a brief hurricane of radioactive dust blew up the street, and the hitching post in front of the Elegant Beef and Pork Restaurant was sucked into the squally updraft like smoke. In the town square, the Candleton Fountain split in two, spilling out not water but only dust, snakes, mutie scorpions, and a few of the blindly trundling turtle-beetles. Then the shape which had hurtled above the town was gone as if it had never been,

Candleton reverted to the mouldering activity which had been its substitute for life over the last two and a half centuries . . . and then the trailing sonic boom caught up, slamming its thunderclap above the town for the first time in seven years, causing enough vibration to tumble the mercantile store on the far side of the fountain. The posse ro-bot tried to voice one final warning: "Elevated rad—" and then quit for good, facing into its corner like a child that has been bad.

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

The doe was *not* normal—a stumpish fifth leg dangled down from the center of her lower belly like a teat, wagging bonelessly to and fro when she walked, and a blind third eye peered milkily from the left side of her muzzle. Yet she was fertile, and her DNA was in reasonably good order for a twelfth-generation mutie. In her six years of life she had given birth to three live young. Two of these fawns had been not just viable but nor-mal—threaded stock, Aunt Talitha of River Crossing would have called them. The third, a skinless, bawling horror, had been killed quickly by its sire.

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

The deer slipped her mouth into the water, began to drink, then looked up, eyes wide, muzzle dripping. Off in the distance she could hear a low humming sound. A moment later it was joined by an eyelash of light. Alarm flared in the doe's nerves, but although her reflexes were fast and the light when first glimpsed was still many wheels away across the desolate countryside, there was never a chance for her to escape. Before she could even begin to fire her muscles, the distant spark had swelled to a searing wolf's eye of light that flooded the stream and the clearing with its glare. With the light came the maddening hum of Blaine's slo-trans en-gines, running at full capacity. There was a blur of pink above the con-crete ridge which bore the rail; a rooster-tail of dust, stones, small dismembered animals, and whirling foliage followed along after. The doe was killed instantly by the concussion of Blaine's passage. Too large to be sucked in the mono's wake, she was still yanked forward almost sev-enty yards, with water dripping from her muzzle and hoofs. Much of her hide (and the boneless fifth leg)

CHAPTER II

proving honesty

1

Rhea darted into her hut, crossed in front of the guttering fire, then stood in the doorway to her tiny bedroom, swiping a hand through her hair in a distracted gesture. The bitch hadn't seen her outside the hut—she surely would have stopped caterwauling, or at least faltered in it if she had— and that was good, but the cursed hidey-hole had sealed itself up again, and that was bad. There was no time to open it again, either. Rhea hurried to the bed, knelt, and pushed the box far back into the shadows beneath.

Ay, that would do; until Susy Greengown was gone, it would do very well. Smiling on the right side of her mouth (the left was mostly frozen), Rhea got up, brushed her dress, and went to meet her second appointment of the night.

2

Behind her, the unlocked lid of the box clicked open. It came up less than an inch, but that was enough to allow a sliver of pulsing rose-colored light to shine out.

3

Susan Delgado stopped about forty yards from the witch's hut, the sweat chilling on her arms and the nape of her neck. Had she just spied an old woman (surely the one she had come to see) dart down that last bit of path leading from the top of the hill? She thought she had.

Don't stop singing—when an old lady hurries like that, she doesn't want to be seen. If you stop singing, she'll likely know she was.

For a moment Susan thought she'd stop anyway—that her memory would close up like a startled hand and deny her another verse of the old song which she had been singing since youngest childhood. But the next verse came to her, and she

continued on (with feet as well as voice):

*"Once my cares were far away,
Yes, once my cares were far away,
Now my love has gone from me
And misery is in my heart to stay."*

A bad song for a night such as this, mayhap, but her heart went its own way without much interest in what her head thought or wanted; al-ways had^ She was frightened to be out by moonlight, when werewolves were said to walk, she was frightened of her errand, and she was fright-ened by what that errand portended. Yet when she had gained the Great Road out of Hambry and her heart had demanded she run, she had run— under the light of the Kissing Moon and with her skirt held above her knees she had galloped like a pony, with her shadow galloping right be-side her. For a mile or more she had run, until every muscle in her body tingled and the air she pulled down her throat tasted like some sweet heated liquid. And when she reached the upland track leading to this high sinister, she had sung. Because her heart demanded it. And, she supposed, it really hadn't been such a bad idea; if nothing else, it had kept the worst of her megrims away. Singing was good for that much, anyway.

Now she walked to the end of the path, singing the chorus of "Care-less Love." As she stepped into the scant light which fell through the open door and onto the stoop, a harsh raincrow voice spoke from the shadows: "Stop yer howling, missy—it catches in my brains like a fishhook!"

Susan, who had been told all her life that she had a fair singing voice, a gift from her gramma, no doubt, fell silent at once, abashed. She stood on the stoop with her hands clasped in front of her apron. Beneath the apron she wore her second-best dress (she only had two). Beneath it, her heart was thumping very hard.

A cat—a hideous thing with two extra legs sticking out of its sides like toasting forks—came into the doorway first. It looked up at her, seemed to measure her, then screwed its face up in a look that was eerily human: contempt. It hissed at her, then flashed away into the night.

Well, good evening to you, too, Susan thought.

The old woman she had been sent to see stepped into the doorway.

better than a travelling cir-cus, if not for the problems that would follow if this € were not put right. What sort of work could they do in Hambry if it got around that € the boogeymen were afraid of the children, instead of vice-versa? €

There's time to stop this before there's killing, mayhap. If you want to. Do you? €

Jonas decided he did; that they could walk out winners if they played it just right. He also decided the Affiliation brats would not, unless they were very lucky indeed, be leaving Mejis Barony alive.

Where's the other one? Dearborn?

A good question. An *important* question. Embarrassment would be-come outright humiliation if he found himself trumped in the same fash-ion as Roy and Clay. Dearborn wasn't in the bar, and that was sure. Jonas turned on his heels, scanning the South High Street in both directions. It was almost day-bright under a Kissing Moon only two nights past the full. No one there, not in the street, not on the far side, where Hambry's mercantile store stood. The mercantile had a porch, but there was nothing on it save for a line of carved totems illustrating Guardians of the Beam: Bear, Tur-tle, Fish, Eagle, Lion, Bat, and Wolf. Seven of twelve, bright as marble in the moonlight, and no doubt great favorites of the kiddies. No men over there, though. Good. Lovely.

Jonas peered hard into the thread of alley between the mercantile and the butcher's, glimpsed a shadow behind a tumble of cast-off boxes, tensed, then relaxed as he saw a cat's shining green eyes. He nodded and turned to the business at hand, pushing back the lefthand batwing and stepping into the Travellers' Rest. Alain heard the squeak of a hinge, but Jonas's gun was at his temple before he could even begin to turn.

"Sonny, unless you're a barber, I think you'd better put that pigsticker down. You don't get a second warning."

"No," Alain said.

Jonas, who had expected nothing but compliance and had been pre-pared for nothing else, was thunderstruck. "*What?* "

"You heard me," Alain said. "I said no."

After making their manners and excusing themselves from Seafront, Roland had

left his friends to their own amusements—they would finish up at the Travellers' Rest, he supposed, but wouldn't stay long or get into much trouble when they had no money for cards and could drink nothing more exciting than cold tea. He had ridden into town another way, tethered his mount at a public post in the lower of the two town squares (Rusher had offered a single puzzled nicker at this treatment, but no more), and had since been tramping the empty, sleeping streets with his hat yanked low over his eyes and his hands clasped into an aching knot at the small of his back.

His mind was full of questions—things were wrong here, very wrong. At first he'd thought that was just his imagination, the childish part of him finding make-believe troubles and storybook intrigue because he had been removed from the heart of the real action. But after his talk with "Rennie" Renfrew, he knew better. There were questions, outright mysteries, and the most hellish thing of all was that he couldn't concentrate on them, let alone go any distance toward making sense of them. Every time he tried, Susan Delgado's face intruded ... her face, or the sweep of her hair, or even the pretty, fearless way her silk-slipped feet had followed his boots in the dance, never lagging or hesitating. Again and again he heard the last thing he had said to her, speaking in the stilted, priggish voice of a boy preacher. He would have given almost anything to take back both the tone and the words themselves. She'd be on Thorin's pillow come Reap-tide, and kindle him a child before the first snow flew, perhaps a male heir, and what of it? Rich men, famous men, and well-blooded men had taken gilly-girls since the beginning of time; Arthur Eld had had better than forty himself, according to the tales. So, really, what was it to him?

I think I've gone and fallen in love with her. That's what it is to me.

A dismaying idea, but not a dismissible one; he knew the landscape of his own heart too well. He loved her, very likely it was so, but part of him also hated her, and held to the shocking thought he'd had at dinner: that he could have shot Susan Delgado through the heart if he'd come armed. Some of this was jealousy, but not all; perhaps not even the greater part. He had made some indefinable but powerful connection between Olive Thorin—her sad but game little smile from the foot of the table—and his own mother. Hadn't some of that same woeful, rueful look been in his mother's eyes on the day when he had come upon her and his father's advisor? Marten in an open-throated shirt, Gabrielle Deschain in a sacque that had

slipped off one shoulder, the whole room reeking of what they had been up to that hot morning?

His mind, tough as it already was, shrank from the image, horrified. It returned instead to that of Susan Delgado—her gray eyes and shining hair. He saw her laughing, chin uptilted, hands clasped before the sap-phire Thorin had given her. Roland could forgive her the gilly business, he supposed. What he could not forgive, in spite of his attraction to Susan, was that awful smile on Olive Thorin's face as she watched the girl sitting in what should have been her place. Sitting in her place and laughing.

These were the things that chased through his head as he paced off acres of moonlight. He had no business with such thoughts, Susan Delgado was not the reason he was here, nor was the ridiculous knuckle-cracking Mayor and his pitiable country-Mary of a wife . . . yet he couldn't put them away and get to what *was* his business. He had forgot-ten the face of his father, and walked in the moonlight, hoping to find it again.

In such fashion he came along the sleeping, silver-gilded High Street, walking north to south, thinking vaguely that he would perhaps stand Cuthbert and Alain to a taste of something wet and toss the dice down Satan's Alley a time or two before going back to get Rusher and call it a night. And so it was that he happened to spy Jonas—the man's gaunt figure and fall of long white hair were impossible to mistake—standing outside the batwings of the Travellers' Rest and peering in. Jonas did this with one hand on the butt of his gun and a tense set of body that put everything else from Roland's mind at once. Something was going on, and if Bert and Alain were in there, it might involve them. They were the strangers in town, after all, and it was possible—even likely—that not everyone in Hambry loved the Affiliation with the fervor that had been professed at tonight's dinner. Or perhaps it was Jonas's friends who were in trouble. *Something* was brewing, in any case. With no clear thought as to why he was doing it, Roland went softly up the steps to the mercantile's porch. There was a line of carved animals there (and probably spiked firmly to the boards, so that drunken wags from the saloon across the street couldn't carry them away, chanting the nursery rhymes of their childhood as they went). Roland stepped behind the last one in line—it was the Bear—and bent his knees so that the crown of his hat wouldn't show. Then he went as still as the carving. He could see Jonas turn, look across the street, then look to his left,

BENEATH THE huntress moon

1

True love, like any other strong and addicting drug, is boring—once the tale of encounter and discovery is told, kisses quickly grow stale and caresses tiresome . . . except, of course, to those who share the kisses, who give and take the caresses while every sound and color of the world seems to deepen and brighten around them. As with any other strong drug, true first love is really only interesting to those who have become its prisoners. And, as is true of any other strong and addicting drug, true first love is dangerous.

2

Some called Huntress the last moon of summer; some called it the first of fall. Whichever it was, it signaled a change in the life of the Barony. Men put out into the bay wearing sweaters beneath their oilskins as the winds began to turn more and more firmly into autumn's east-west alley, and to sharpen as they turned. In the great Barony orchards north of Hambry (and in smaller orchards owned by John Croydon, Henry Wertner, Jake White, and the morose but wealthy Coral Thorin), the pickers began to appear in the rows, carrying their odd, off-kilter ladders; they were followed by horse-drawn carts full of empty barrels. Downwind of the cider-houses—especially downwind of the great Barony cider-mansion a mile north of Seafront—the breezy air was filled with the sweet tang of blems being pressed by the basketload. Away from the shore of the Clean Sea, the days remained warm as the Huntress waxed, skies were clear day and night, but summer's real heat had departed with the Peddler. The last cutting of hay began and was finished in the run of a week—that last one was always scant, and ranchers and freeholders alike would curse it, scratching their heads and asking themselves why they even bothered ... but come rainy, blowsy old March, with the

bam lofts and bins rapidly emptying, they always knew. In the Barony's gardens—the great ones of the ranch-ers, the smaller ones of the freeholders, and the tiny backyard plots of the townsfolk—men and women and children appeared in their old clothes and boots, their *sombreros* and *sombreros*. They came with the legs of their pants tied down firmly at the ankles, for in the time of the Huntress, snakes and scorpions in plentiful numbers wandered east from the desert. By the time old Demon Moon began to fatten, a line of rattlers would hang from the hitching posts of both the Travellers' Rest and the mercan-tille across the street. Other businesses would similarly decorate their hitching posts, but when the prize for the most skins was given on Reap-ing Day, it was always the inn or the market that won it. In the fields and gardens, baskets to pick into were cast along the rows by women with their hair tied up in kerchiefs and reap-charms hidden in their bosoms. The last of the tomatoes were picked, the last of the cucumbers, the last of the corn, the last of the parey and mingo. Waiting behind them, as the days sharpened and the autumn storms began to near, would come squash, sharproot, pumpkins, and potatoes. In Mejis the time of reaping had be-gun, while overhead, clearer and clearer on each starry night, the Huntress pulled her bow and looked east over those strange, watery leagues no man or woman of Mid-World had ever seen.

3

Those in the grip of a strong drug—heroin, devil grass, true love—often find themselves trying to maintain a precarious balance between secrecy and ecstasy as they walk the tightrope of their lives. Keeping one's bal-ance on a tightrope is difficult under the soberest circumstances; doing so while in a state of delirium is all but impossible. *Completely* impossible, in the long run. Roland and Susan were delirious, but at least had the thin advantage of knowing it. And the secret would not have to be kept forever, but only until Reaping Day Fair, at the very longest. Things might end even sooner than that, if the Big Coffin Hunters broke cover. The actual first move might be made by one of the other players, Roland thought, but no matter who moved first, Jonas and his men would be there, a part of it. The part apt to be most dangerous to the three boys. Roland and Susan were careful—as careful as delirious people could be, at any

that their time of freedom is coming to an end. They swoop and then stand with their faces pointing west when the wind gusts, showing their asses to winter. On the ranches, porch-nets are taken down and shutters rehung. In the huge ranch kitchens and smaller farmhouse kitchens, no one is stealing Reap-kisses, and no one is even thinking about sex. This is the time of putting up and laying by, and the kitchens fume with steam and pulse with heat from before dawn until long after dark. There is the smell of apples and beets and beans and sharproot and curing strips of meat. Women work ceaselessly all day and then sleep-walk to bed, where they lie like corpses until the next dark morning calls them back to their kitchens.

Leaves are burned in town yards, and as the week goes on and Old Demon's face shows ever more clearly, red-handed stuffy-guys are thrown on the pyres more and more frequently. In the fields, cornshucks flare like torches, and often stuffies bum with them, their red hands and white-cross eyes rippling in the heat. Men stand around these fires, not speaking, their faces solemn. No one will say what terrible old ways and unspeakable old gods are being propitiated by the burning of the stuffy-guys, but they all know well enough. From time to time one of these men will whisper two words under his breath: *charyou tree*.

They are closing, closing, closing the year.

The streets rattle with firecrackers—and sometimes with a heftier "big-hang" that makes even placid carthorses rear in their traces—and echo with the laughter of children. On the porch of the mercantile and across the street at the Travellers' Rest, kisses—sometimes humidly open and with much sweet lashing of tongues—are exchanged, but Coral Thorin's whores ("cotton-gillies" is what the airy-fairy ones like Gert Moggins like to call themselves) are bored. They will have little custom this week.

This is not Year's End, when the winterlogs will bum and Mejis will be bamdances from one end to the other . . . and yet it is. This is the *real* year's end, *charyou tree*, and everyone, from Stanley Ruiz standing at the bar beneath The Romp to the farthest of Fran Lengyll's *vaqueros* out on the edge of the Bad Grass, knows it. There is a kind of echo in the bright air, a yearning for other places in the blood, a loneliness in the heart that sings like the wind.

But this year there's something else, as well: a sense of wrongness that no one can quite voice. Folks who never had a nightmare in their lives will awake screaming

with them during the week of *fin de ano*; men who consider themselves peaceful will find themselves not only in fist-fights but instigating them; discontented boys who would only have dreamed of running away in other years will this year actually do it, and most will not come back after the first night spent sleeping raw. There is a sense—inarticulate but very much there—that things have gone amiss this season. It is the closing of the year; it is also the closing of the peace. For it is here, in the sleepy Out-World Barony of Mejis, that Mid-World's last great conflict will shortly begin; it is from here that the blood will begin to flow. In two years, no more, the world as it has been will be swept away. It starts here. From its field of roses, the Dark Tower cries out in its beast's voice. Time is a face on the water.

2

Coral Thorin was coming down the High Street from the Bayview Hotel when she spied Sheemie, leading Caprichoso and heading in the opposite direction. The boy was singing "Careless Love" in a voice both high and sweet. His progress was slow; the barrels slung over Capi's back were half again as large as the ones he had carried up to the Coos not long before.

Coral hailed her boy-of-all-work cheerily enough. She had reason to be cheery; Eldred Jonas had no use for *fin de ano* abstinence. And for a man with a bad leg, he could be very inventive.

"Sheemie!" she called. "Where go ye? Seafront?"

"Aye," Sheemie said. "I've got the *graf them* asked for. All parties come Reaping Fair, aye, tons of em. Dance a lot, get hot a lot, drink *graf* to cool off a lot! How pretty you look, sai Thorin, cheeks all pinky-pink, so they are."

"Oh, law! How kind of you to say, Sheemie!" She favored him with a dazzling smile. "Go on, now, you flatterer—don't linger."

"Noey-no, off I go."

Coral stood watching after him and smiling. *Dance a lot, get hot a lot*, Sheemie had said. About the dancing Coral didn't know, but she was sure this year's Reaping would be hot, all right. Very hot indeed.

3

Miguel met Sheemie at Seafront's archway, gave him the look of lofty contempt he reserved for the lower orders, then pulled the cork from first one barrel and then the other. With the first, he only sniffed from the bung; at the second, he stuck his thumb in and then sucked it thoughtfully. With his wrinkled cheeks hollowed inward and his toothless old mouth working, he looked like an ancient bearded baby.

"Tasty, ain't it?" Sheemie asked. "Tasty as a pasty, ain't it, good old Miguel, been here a thousand years?"

Miguel, still sucking his thumb, favored Sheemie with a sour look. "*Andale. Andale, simplon.*"

Sheemie led his mule around the house to the kitchen. Here the breeze off the ocean was sharp and shiversome. He waved to the women in the kitchen, but not a one waved back; likely they didn't even see him. A pot boiled on every trink of the enormous stove, and the women— working in loose long-sleeved cotton garments like shifts and wearing their hair tied up in brightly colored clouts—moved about like phantoms glimpsed in fog.

Sheemie took first one barrel from Capi's back, then the other. Grunt-ing, he carried them to the huge oak tank by the back door. He opened the tank's lid, bent over it, and then backed away from the eye-wateringly strong smell of elderly *graf*. €

"Whew!" he said, hoisting the first barrel. "Ye could get drunk just on the smell o' that lot!"

He emptied in the fresh *graf*, careful not to spill. When he was fin-ished, the tank was pretty well topped up. That was good, for on Reaping Night, apple-beer would flow out of the kitchen taps like water.

He slipped the empty barrels into their carriers, looked into the kitchen once more to be sure he wasn't being observed (he wasn't; Coral's simple-minded tavern-boy was the last thing on anyone's minds that morning), and then led Capi not back the way they'd come but along a path which led to Seafront's storage sheds.

There were three of them in a row, each with its own red-handed stuffy-guy sitting in front. The guys appeared to be watching Sheemie, and that gave him the shivers. Then he remembered his trip to crazy old bitch-lady Rhea's house. *She* had been scary. These were just old duds stuffed full of straw.

"Susan?" he called, low. "Are ye here?"

The door of the center shed was ajar. Now it trundled open a little. "Come in!" she called, also low. "Bring the mule! Hurry!"

He led Capi into a shed which smelled of straw and beans and tack ... and something else. Something sharper. *Fireworks*, he thought. *Shooting-powder, too*. Susan, who had spent the morning enduring final fittings, was dressed in a thin silk wrapper and large leather boots. Her hair was done up in curling papers of bright blue and red.

Sheemie tittered. "You look quite amusing, Susan, daughter of Pat. Quite a chuckle for me, I think."

"Yes, I'm a picture for an artist to paint, all right," Susan said, look-ing distracted.

"We have to hurry. I have twenty minutes before I'm missed. I'll be missed before, if that randy old goat is looking for me ...let's be quick!"

They lifted the barrels from Capi's back. Susan took a broken horse-bit from the pocket of her wrapper and used the sharp end to pry off one of the tops. She tossed the bit to Sheemie, who pried off the other. The apple-tart smell of *graf* filled the shed.

"Here!" She tossed Sheemie a soft cloth. "Dry it out as well as you can. Doesn't have to be perfect, they're wrapped, but it's best to be safe."

They wiped the insides of the barrels, Susan stealing nervous glances at the door every few seconds. "All right," she said. "Good. Now ... there's two kinds. I'm sure they won't be missed; there's enough stuff back there to blow up half the world." She hurried back into the dimness of the shed, holding the hem of her wrapper up with one hand, her boots clomping. When she came back, her arms were full of wrapped packages.

"These are the bigger ones," she said.

He stored them in one of the casks. There were a dozen packages in all, and Sheemie could feel round things inside, each about the size of a child's fist. Big-bangers. By the time he had finished packing and putting the top back on the barrel, she had returned with an armload of smaller packages. These he stored in the other barrel. They were the little 'uns, from the feel, the ones that not only banged but flashed colored fire.

She helped him resling the barrels on Capi's back, still shooting those little glances at the shed door. When the barrels were secured to Caprichoso's sides, Susan

sighed with relief and brushed her sweaty forehead with the backs of her hands. "Thank the gods that part's over," she said. "Now ye know where ye're to take them?"

"Aye, Susan daughter of Pat. To the Bar K. My friend Arthur Heath will put em safe."

"And if anyone asks what ye're doing out that way?" "Taking sweet *graf* to the In-World boys, 'cause they've decided not to come to town for the Fair . . . why won't they, Susan? Don't they like Fairs?"

"Ye'll know soon enough. Don't mind it now, Sheemie. Go on—best be on your way."

Yet he lingered.

"What?" she asked, trying not to be impatient. "Sheemie, what is it?"

"I'd like to take a *fin de ano* kiss from ye, so I would." Sheemie's face had gone an alarming shade of red.

Susan laughed in spite of herself, then stood on her toes and kissed the comer of his mouth. With that, Sheemie floated out to the Bar K with his load of fire.

4

Reynolds rode out to Citgo the following day, galloping with a scarf wrapped around his face so only his eyes peered out. He would be very glad to get out of this damned place that couldn't decide if it was ranch-land or seacoast. The temperature wasn't all that low, but after coming in over the water, the wind cut like a razor. Nor was that all—there was a brooding quality to Hambry and all of Mejis as the days wound down toward the Reap; a haunted feeling he didn't care for a bit. Roy felt it, too. Reynolds could see it in his eyes.

No, he'd be glad to have those three baby knights so much ash in the wind and this place just a memory.

He dismounted in the crumbling refinery parking lot, tied his horse to the bumper of a rusty old hulk with the mystery-word chevrolet barely readable on its tailboard, then walked toward the oilpatch. The wind blew hard, chilling him even through the ranch-style sheepskin coat he wore, and twice he had to yank his hat down around his ears to keep it from blowing off. On the whole, he was glad he couldn't see himself; he proba-bly looked like a fucking farmer.

The place seemed fine, though . . . which was to say, deserted. The wind made a lonely sougning sound as it combed through the firs on ei-ther side of the pipe. You'd never guess that there were a dozen pairs of eyes looking out at you as you strolled.

"Hai!" he called. "Come on out here, pard, and let's have some palaver."

For a moment there was no response; then Hiram Quint of the Piano Ranch and Barkie Callahan of the Travellers' Rest came ducking their way out through the trees. *Holy shit*, Reynolds thought, somewhere be-tween awe and amusement.

There ain't that much beef in a butcher shop.

There was a wretched old musketoon stuck into the waistband of Quint's pants; Reynolds hadn't seen one in years. He thought that if Quint was lucky, it would only misfire when he pulled the trigger. If he was un-lucky, it would blow up in his face and blind him.

"All quiet?" he asked.

Quint replied in Mejis bibble-babble. Barkie listened, then said: "All well, sai. He say he and his men grow impatient." Smiling cheerfully, his face giving no indication of what he was saying, Barkie added: "If brains was blackpowder, this ijit couldn't blow his nose."

"But he's a trustworthy idiot?"

Barkie shrugged. It might have been assent.

They went through the trees. Where Roland and Susan had seen al-most thirty tankers, there were now only half a dozen, and of those six, only two actually had oil in them. Men sat on the ground or snoozed with their *sombreros* over their faces. Most had guns that looked about as trust-worthy as the one in Quint's waistband. A few of the poorer *vaqs* had *bolas*. On the whole, Reynolds guessed they would be more effective.

"Tell Lord Perth here that if the boys come, it's got to be an ambush, and they'll only have one chance to do the job right," Reynolds said to Barkie.

Barkie spoke to Quint. Quint's lips parted in a grin, revealing a scari-fying picket of black and yellow fangs. He spoke briefly, then put his hands out in front of them and closed them into huge, scarred fists, one above the other, as if wringing the neck of an invisible enemy. When Barkie began to translate, Clay Reynolds waved it away. He had caught only one word, but it was enough: *muerto*.

All that pre-Fair week, Rhea sat in front of the glass, peering into its depths. She had taken time to sew Ermot's head back onto his body with clumsy stitches of black thread, and she sat with the decaying snake around her neck as she watched and dreamed, not noticing the stench that began to arise from the reptile as time passed. Twice Musty came nigh, mewing for food, and each time Rhea batted the troublesome thing away without so much as a glance. She herself grew more and more gaunt, her eyes now looking like the sockets of the skulls stored in the net by the door to her bedroom. She dozed occasionally as she sat with the ball in her lap and the stinking snakeskin looped about her throat, her head down, the sharp point of her chin digging at her chest, runners of drool hanging from the loose puckers of her lips, but she never really slept. There was too much to see, far too much to see.

And it was hers for the seeing. These days she didn't even have to pass her hands above the glass to open its pink mists. All the Barony's meanness, all its petty (and not so petty) cruelties, all its cozening and ly-ing lay before her. Most of what she saw was small and demeaning stuff—masturbating boys peeking through knotholes at their undressed sisters, wives going through husbands' pockets, looking for extra money or tobacco, Sheb the piano-player licking the seat of the chair where his favorite whore had sat for awhile, a maid at Seafront spitting into Kimba Rimer's pillowcase after the Chancellor had kicked her for being slow in getting out of his way.

These were all things which confirmed her opinion of the society she had left behind. Sometimes she laughed wildly; sometimes she spoke to the people she saw in the glass ball, as if they could hear her. By the third day of the week before Reaping, she had ceased her trips to the privy, even though she could carry the ball with her when she went, and the sour stench of urine began to rise from her. By the fourth day, Musty had ceased coming near her. Rhea dreamed in the ball and lost herself in her dreams, as others had done before her; deep in the petty pleasures of far seeing, she was un-aware that the pink ball was stealing the wrinkled remains of her *anima*. She likely would have considered it a fair trade if she had known. She saw all the things people did in the shadows, and they were the only things she cared for, and for them she almost certainly would have

considered her life's force a fair trade.

6

"Here," the boy said, "let *me* light it, gods damn you." Jonas would have recognized the speaker; he was the lad who had waved a severed dog's tail across the street at Jonas and called, *We're Big Coffin Hunters just like you!*

The boy to whom this charming child had spoken tried to hold onto the piece of liver they had copped from the knacker's behind the Low Market. The first boy seized his ear and twisted. The second boy howled and held the chunk of liver out, dark blood running down his grimy knuckles as he did.

"That's better," the first boy said, taking it. "You want to remember who the *capataz* is, round here."

They were behind a bakery stall in the Low Market. Nearby, drawn by the smell of hot fresh bread, was a mangy mutt with one blind eye. He stared at them with hungry hope.

There was a slit in the chunk of raw meat. Poking out of it was a green big-bang fuse. Below the fuse, the liver bulged like the stomach of a pregnant woman. The first boy took a sulfur match, stuck it between his protruding front teeth, and lit it.

"He won't never!" said a third boy, in an agony of hope and anticipation.

"Thin as he is?" the first boy said. "Oh yes he will. Bet ye my deck of cards against yer hosstail."

The third boy thought it over and shook his head.

The first boy grinned. "It's a wise child ye are," he said, and lit the big-bang's fuse.

"Hey, cully!" he called to the dog. "Want a bite o' sumpin good? Here ye go!"

He threw the chunk of raw liver. The scrawny dog never hesitated at the hissing fuse, but lunged forward with its one good eye fixed on the first decent food it had seen in days. As it snatched the liver out of the air, the big-bang the boys had slipped into it went off. There was a roar and a flash. The dog's head disintegrated from the jaws down. For a moment it continued to stand there, dripping, staring at them with its one good eye, and then it collapsed.

"Toadjer!" the first boy jeered. "Toadjer he'd take it! Happy Reap to us, eh?"

"What are you boys doing?" a woman's voice called sharply. "Get out of there, ye ravens!"

The boys fled, cackling, into the bright afternoon. They did sound like ravens.

7

Cuthbert and Alain sat their horses at the mouth of Eyebolt. Even with the wind blowing the sound of the thinny away from them, it got inside your head and buzzed there, rattling your teeth.

"I hate it," Cuthbert said through clenched teeth. "Gods, let's be quick."

"Aye," Alain said. They dismounted, bulky in their ranch-coats, and tied their horses to the brush which lay across the front of the canyon. Ordinarily, tethering wouldn't have been necessary, but both boys could see the horses hated the whining, grinding sound as much as they did. Cuthbert seemed to hear the thinny in his mind, speaking words of invitation in a groaning, horribly persuasive voice.

Come on, Bert. Leave all this foolishness behind: the drums, the pride, the fear of death, the loneliness you laugh at because laughing's all you can think to do. And the girl, leave her, too. You love her, don't you? And even if you don't, you want her. It's sad that she loves your friend instead of you, but if you come to me, all that will stop bothering you very soon. So come on. What are you waiting for?

"What am I waiting for?" he muttered.

"Huh?"

"I said, what are we waiting for? Let's get this done and get the holy hell out of here."

From their saddlebags they each took a small cotton bag. These contained gunpowder extracted from the smaller firecrackers Sheemie had brought them two days before. Alain dropped to his knees, pulled his knife, and began to crawl backward, digging a trench as far under the roll of brush as he could.

"Dig it deep," Cuthbert said. "We don't want the wind to blow it away."

Alain gave him a look which was remarkably hot. "Do you want to do it? Just so you can make sure it's done right?"

It's the thinny, Cuthbert thought. It's working on him, too.

"No, Al," he said humbly. "You're doing fine for someone who's both blind and soft in the head. Go on."

Alain looked at him fiercely a moment longer, then grinned and resumed the trench under the brush. "You'll die young, Bert."

"Aye, likely." Cuthbert dropped to his own knees and began to crawl after Alain, sprinkling gunpowder into the trench and trying to ignore the buzzy, cajoling voice of the thinny. No, the gunpowder probably wouldn't blow away, not unless there was a full gale. But if it rained, even the rolls of brush wouldn't be much protection. If it rained—

Don't think of that, he told himself. *That's ka.*

They finished loading gunpowder trenches under both sides of the brush barrier in only ten minutes, but it felt longer. To the horses as well, it seemed; they were stamping impatiently at the far end of their tethers, their ears laid back and their eyes rolling. Cuthbert and Alain untied them and mounted up. Cuthbert's horse actually bucked twice . . . except it felt more to Cuthbert as if the poor old thing were shuddering.

In the middle distance, bright sunshine twanged of bright steel. The tankers at Hanging Rock. They had been pulled in as light to the sandstone outcrop as possible, but when the sun was high, most of the shadow disappeared, and concealment disappeared with it.

"I really can't believe it," Alain said as they started back. It would be a long ride, including a wide swing around Hanging Rock to make sure they weren't seen.

"They must think we're blind."

"It's stupid they think we are," Cuthbert said, "but I suppose it comes to the same."

Now that Eyebolt Canyon was falling behind them, he felt almost giddy with relief. Were they going in there a few days from now? Actually *going in*, riding to within mere yards of where that cursed puddle started? He couldn't believe it . . . and he made himself stop thinking about it before he could *start* believing it.

"More riders heading out to Hanging Rock," Alain said, pointing back toward the woods beyond the canyon. "Do you see them?"

They were small as ants from this distance, but Bert saw them very well.

"Changing the guard. The important thing is that they don't see us—you don't think they can, do you?"

"Over here? Not likely."

Cuthbert didn't think so, either.

"They'll *all* be down come Reap, won't they?" Alain asked. "It won't do us much good to only catch a few."

"Yes—I'm pretty sure they all will."

"Jonas and his pals?"

"Them, too."

Ahead of them, the Bad Grass grew closer. The wind blew hard in their faces, making their eyes water, but Cuthbert didn't mind. The sound of the thinny was down to a faint drone behind him, and would soon be gone completely. Right now that was all he needed to make him happy.

"Do you think we'll get away with it, Bert?"

"Dunno," Cuthbert said. Then he thought of the gunpowder trenches lying beneath the dry rolls of brush, and grinned. "But I'll tell you one thing, Al: they'll know we were here."

8

In Mejis, as in every other Barony of Mid-World, the week before a Fair-Day was a political week. Important people came in from the farther corners of the Barony, and there were a good many Conversationals leading up to the main Conversational on Reaping Day. Susan was expected to be present at these—mostly as a decorative testimony to the Mayor's continuing puissance. Olive was also present, and, in a cruelly comic dumb-show that only the women truly appreciated, they sat on either side of the aging cockatoo, Susan pouring the coffee, Olive passing the cake, both of them gracefully accepting compliments on food and drink they'd had no hand in preparing.

Susan found it almost impossible to look at Olive's smiling, unhappy face. Her husband would never lie with Pat Delgado's daughter . . . but sai Thorin didn't know that, and Susan couldn't tell her. She had only to glimpse the Mayor's wife from the corner other eye to remember what Roland had said that day on the Drop: *For a moment I thought she was my mother.* But that was the problem, wasn't it? Olive Thorin was nobody's mother. That was what had opened the door to this horrible situation in the first place.

There had been something much on Susan's mind to do, but with the round of activities at Mayor's House, it was but three days to Reaping before she got the chance. Finally, following this latest Conversational, she was able to slip out of Pink Dress with Applique (how she hated it! how she hated them all!) and jump back into jeans, a plain riding shirt, and a ranch-coat. There was no time to braid

her hair, as she was expected back for Mayor's Tea, but Maria tied it back for her and off she had gone to the house she would shortly be leaving forever. Her business was in the back room of the stable—the room her father had used as an office—but she went into the house first and heard what she'd hoped to hear: her aunt's ladylike, whistling snores. Lovely.

Susan got a slice of bread and honey and took it out to the barn-stable, protecting it as best she could from the clouds of dust that blew across the yard in the wind. Her aunt's stuffy-guy rattled on his post in the garden.

She ducked into the sweet-smelling shadows of the barn. Pylon and Felicia nickered hello, and she divided what she hadn't eaten between them. They seemed pleased enough to get it. She made especially of Feli-cia, whom she would soon be leaving behind.

She had avoided the little office since her father died, afraid of exactly the sort of pang that struck her when she lifted the latch and went in. The narrow windows were now covered with cobwebs, but they still let in autumn's bright light, more than enough for her to be able to see the pipe in the ashtray—the red one, his favorite, the one he called his thinking-pipe— and a bit of tack laid over the back of his desk chair. He had probably been mending it by gaslight, had put it by thinking to finish the next day ... then the snake had done its dance under Foam's hoofs and there had never been a next day. Not for Pat Delgado.

"Oh, Da," she said in a small and broken voice. "How I do miss thee."

She crossed to the desk and ran her fingers along its surface, leaving trails of dust. She sat down in his chair, listened to it creak under her as it had always creaked under him, and that pushed her over the edge. For the next five minutes she sat there and wept, screwing her fists into her eyes as she had as a wee shim. Only now, of course, there was no Big Pat to come upon her and jolly her out of it, taking her on his lap and kissing her in that sensitive place under her chin (especially sensitive to the bristles on his upper lip, it had been) until her tears turned to giggles. Time was a face on the water, and this time it was the face of her father.

At last her tears tapered to sniffles. She opened the desk drawers, one after another, finding more pipes (many rendered useless by his constant stem-chewing), a hat, one of her own dolls (it had a broken arm Pat had apparently never gotten around to putting right), quill-pens, a little flask— empty but with a

faint smell of whiskey still present around its neck. The only item of interest was in the bottom drawer: a pair of spurs. One still had its star rowel, but the other had been broken off. These were, she was almost positive, the spurs he had been wearing on the day he died.

If my da was here, she had begun that day on the Drop. *But he's not*, Roland had said. *He's dead*.

A pair of spurs, a broken-off rowel.

She bounced them in her hand, in her mind's eye seeing Ocean Foam rear, spilling her father (one spur catches in a stirrup; the rowel breaks free), then stumbling sideways and falling atop him. She saw this clearly, but she didn't see the snake Fran Lengyll had told them about. That she didn't see at all.

She put the spurs back where she had found them, got up, and looked at the shelf to the right of the desk, handy to Pat Delgado's smart hand. Here was a line of leather-bound ledgers, a priceless trove of books in a society that had forgotten how to make paper. Her father had been the man in charge of the Barony's horse for almost thirty years, and here were his stockline books to prove it.

Susan took down the last one and began to page through it. This time she almost welcomed the pang that struck her as she saw her father's familiar hand—the labored script, the steep and somehow more confident numbers.

Born of HENRIETTA, (2) foals both well

Stillborn of DELIA, a roan (MUTANT)

Born of YOLANDA, a THOROUGHBRED, a GOOD MALE COLT

And, following each, the date. So neat, he had been. So thorough. So ...

She stopped suddenly, aware that she had found what she was looking for even without any clear knowledge of what she was doing in here. The last dozen pages of her da's final stockline book had been torn out.

Who had done it? Not her father; a largely self-taught man, he revered paper the way some people revered gods or gold.

And why had it been done?

That she thought she knew: horses, of courses. There were too many on the Drop. And the ranchers—Lengyll, Croydon, Renfrew—were lying about the threaded quality of the stockline. So was Henry Wertner, the man who had succeeded to her

father's job. €

If my da was here— €

But he's not. He's dead. €

She had told Roland she couldn't believe Fran Lengyll would lie about her father's death . . . but she could believe it now.

Gods help her, she could believe it now.

"What are ye doing in here?"

She gave a little scream, dropped the book, and whirled around. Cordelia stood there in one of her rusty black dresses. The top three buttons were undone, and Susan could see her aunt's collarbones sticking out above the plain white cotton of her shift. It was only on seeing those protruding bones that Susan realized how much weight Aunt Cord had lost over the last three months or so. She could see the red imprint of the pillow on her aunt's left cheek, like the mark of a slap. Her eyes glittered from dark, bruised-looking hollows of flesh.

"Aunt Cord! You startled me! You—"

"What are ye doing in here?" Aunt Cord repeated.

Susan bent and picked up the book. "I came to remember my father," she said, and put the book back on the shelf. Who had torn those pages out? Lengyll? Rimer? She doubted it. She thought it more likely that the woman standing before her right now had done it. Perhaps for as little as a single piece of red gold. *Nothing asked, nothing told, so all is well*, she would have thought, popping the coin into her money-box, after first biting its edge to make sure it was true.

"Remember him? It's ask his forgiveness, ye should do. For ye've forgotten his face, so ye have. Most grievous have ye forgotten it, Sue."

Susan only looked at her.

"Have ye been with *him* today?" Cordelia asked in a brittle, laughing voice. Her hand went to the red pillow-mark on her cheek and began rubbing it. She had been getting bad by degrees, Susan realized, but had become ever so much worse since the gossip about Jonas and Coral Thorin had started. "Have ye been with sai Dearborn? Is yer crack still dewy from his spend? Here, let me see for myself!" Her aunt glided forward—spectral in her black dress, her bodice open, her slippered feet peeping—and Susan pushed her back. In her fright and disgust, she pushed hard. Cordelia struck the wall beside the cobwebbed window.

"Ye should ask forgiveness yerself," Susan said. "To speak to his daughter so in

this place. *In this place.*" She let her eyes turn to the shelf of ledgers, then return to her aunt. The look of frightened calculation she saw on Cordelia Delgado's face told her all she wanted or needed to know. She hadn't been a party to her brother's murder, that Susan could not believe, but she had known something of it. Yes, something.

"Ye faithless bitch," Cordelia whispered.

"No," Susan said, "I have been true."

And so, she realized, she had been. A great weight seemed to slip off her shoulders at the thought. She walked to the door of the office and turned back to her aunt.

"I've slept my last night here," she said. "I'll not listen to more such as this. Nor look at ye as ye are now. It hurts my heart and steals the love I've kept for ye since I was little, when ye did the best ye could to be my ma."

Cordelia clapped her hands over her face, as if looking at Susan hurt her.

"Get out, then!" she screamed. *"Go back to Seafront or wherever it is thee rolls with that boy! If I never see thy trollop's face again, I'll count my life good!"*

Susan led Pylon from the stable. When she got him into the yard, she was sobbing almost too hard to mount up. Yet mount she did, and she couldn't deny that there was relief in her heart as well as sorrow. When she turned onto the High Street and booted Pylon into a gallop, she didn't look back.

9

In a dark hour of the following morning, Olive Thorin crept from the room where she now slept to the one she had shared for almost forty years with her husband. The floor was cold under her bare feet and she was shivering by the time she reached the bed ... but the chilly floor wasn't the only reason she was shivering. She slid in beside the gaunt, snoring man in the nightcap, and when he turned away from her (his knees and back crackling loudly as he did), she pressed against him and hugged him tightly. There was no passion in this, but only a need to share a bit of his warmth. His chest—narrow but almost as well-known to her as her own plump one—rose and fell under her hands, and she began to quiet a little. He stirred, and she thought for a moment he would wake and find her sharing his bed for the first time in gods knew how long.

Yes, wake, she thought, do. She didn't dare wake him of her own—all her courage

had been exhausted just getting here, creeping through the dark following one of the worst dreams she had ever had in her life—but if he woke, she would take it as a sign and tell him she had dreamed of a vast bird, a cruel golden-eyed roc that flew above the Barony on wings that dripped blood.

Wherever its shadow fell, there was blood, she would tell him, and its shadow fell everywhere. The Barony ran with it, from Hambry all the way out to Eyebolt. And I swelled big fire in the wind. I ran to tell you and you were dead in your study, sitting by the hearth with your eyes gouged out and a skull in your lap.

But instead of waking, in his sleep he took her hand, as he had used to, do before he had begun to look at the young girls—even the serving-wenches—when they passed, and Olive decided she would only lie here, and be still and let him hold her hand. Let it be like the old days for a bit, when everything had been right between them.

She slept a little herself. When she woke, dawn's first gray light was creeping in through the windows. He had dropped her hand—had, in fact, scooted away from her entirely, to his edge of the bed. It wouldn't do for him to wake and find her here, she decided, and the urgency of her night-mare was gone. She turned back the covers, swung her feet out, then looked at him once more. His nightcap had come askew. She put it right, her hands smoothing the cloth and the bony brow beneath. He stirred again. Olive waited until he had quieted, then got up. She slipped back to her own room like a phantom.

10

The midway booths opened in Green Heart two days before Reaping-Fair, and the first folks came to try their luck at the spinning wheel and the bottle-toss and the basket-ring. There was also a pony-train—a cart filled with laughing children, pulled along a figure eight of narrow-gauge rails.

("Was the pony named Charlie?" Eddie Dean asked Roland.

("I think not," Roland said. "We have a rather unpleasant word that sounds like that in the High Speech."

("What word?" Jake asked.

("The one," said the gunslinger, "that means death.")

Roy Depape stood watching the pony plod its appointed rounds for a couple of

turns, remembering with some nostalgia his own rides in such a cart as a child. Of course, most of his had been stolen.

When he had looked his fill, Depape sauntered on down to the Sheriff's office and went in. Herk Avery, Dave, and Frank Claypool were cleaning an odd and fantastical assortment of guns. Avery nodded at Depape and went back to what he was doing. There was something strange about the man, and after a moment or two Depape realized what it was: the Sheriff wasn't eating. It was the first time he'd ever come in here that the Sheriff didn't have a plate of grub close at hand.

"All ready for tomorrow?" Depape asked.

Avery gave him a half-irritated, half-smiling look. "What the hell kind of question is that?"

"One that Jonas sent me to ask," Depape said, and at that Avery's queer, nervy smile faltered a little.

"Aye, we're ready." Avery swept a meaty arm over the guns. "Don't ye see we are?"

Depape could have quoted the old saying about how the proof of the pudding was in the eating, but what was the point? Things would work out if the three boys were as fooled as Jonas thought they were; if they weren't fooled, they would likely carve Herk Avery's fat butt off the top of his legs and feed it to the handiest pack of wolverines. It didn't make much never mind to Roy Depape one way or the other.

"Jonas also ast me to remind you it's early."

"Aye, aye, we'll be there early," Avery agreed. "These two and six more good men. Fran Lengyll's asked to go along, and he's got a machine-gun." Avery spoke this last with ringing pride, as if he himself had in-vented the machine-gun. Then he looked at Depape slyly. "What about you, coffin-hand? Want to go along? Won't take me more'n an eyblink to deputize ye."

"I have another chore. Reynolds, too." Depape smiled. "There's plenty of work for all of us. Sheriff—after all, it's Reaping."

That afternoon, Susan and Roland met at the hut in the Bad Grass. She told him about the book with the torn-out pages, and Roland showed her what he'd left in

the hut's north corner, secreted beneath a mouldering pile of skins. She looked first at this, then at him with wide and frightened eyes. "What's wrong? What does thee *suspect is* wrong?"

He shook his head. *Nothing* was wrong ... not that he could tell, any-way. And yet he had felt a strong need to do what he'd done, to leave what he'd left. It wasn't the touch, nothing like it, but only intuition.

"I think everything is all right ... or as right as things can be when the odds may turn out fifty of them for each of us. Susan, our only chance is to take them by surprise. You're not going to risk that, are you? Not planning to go to Lengyll, waving your father's stockline book around?"

She shook her head. If Lengyll had done what she now suspected, he'd get his payback two days from now. There would be reaping, all right. Reaping aplenty. But this ... this frightened her, and she said so.

"Listen." Roland took her face in his hands and looked into her eyes. "I'm only trying to be careful. If things go badly—and they could—you're the one most likely to get away clean. You and Sheemie. If that happens, Susan, you—*thee*—must come here and take my guns. Take them west to Gilead. Find my father. He'll know thee are who thee says by what thee shows. Tell him what happened here. That's all."

"If anything happens to thee, Roland, I won't be able to do anything. Except die." His hands were still on her face. Now he used them to make her head shake slowly, from side to side. "You won't die," he said. There was a coldness in his voice and eyes that struck her not with fear but awe. She thought of his blood—of how old it must be, and how cold it must some-times flow. "Not with this job undone. Promise me."

"I... I promise, Roland. I do."

"Tell me aloud what you promise."

"I'll come here. Get yer guns. Take them to yer da. Tell him what happened."

He nodded and let go of her face. The shapes of his hands were printed faintly on her cheeks.

"Ye frightened me," Susan said, and then shook her head. That wasn't right. "Ye *do* frighten me."

"I can't help what I am."

"And I wouldn't change it." She kissed his left cheek, his right cheek, his mouth.

She put her hand inside his shirt and caressed his nipple. It grew instantly hard beneath the tip of her finger. "Bird and bear and hare and fish," she said, now making soft butterfly kisses all over his face. "Give your love her fondest wish." After, they lay beneath a bearskin Roland had brought along and listened to the wind sigh through the grass.

"I love that sound," she said. "It always makes me wish I could be part of the wind ... go where it goes, see what it sees."

"This year, if *ka* allows, you will."

"Aye. And with thee." She turned to him, up on one elbow. Light fell through the ruined roof and dappled her face. "Roland, I love thee." She kissed him . . . and then began to cry.

He held her, concerned. "What is it? Sue, what troubles thee?"

"I don't know," she said, crying harder. "All I know is that there's a shadow on my heart." She looked at him with tears still flowing from her eyes. "Thee'd not leave me, would ye, dear? Thee'd not go without Sue, would ye?"

"No."

"For I've given all I have to ye, so I have. And my virginity's the very least of it, thee knows."

"I'd never leave you." But he felt cold in spite of the bearskin, and the wind outside—so comforting a moment ago—sounded like beast's breath. "Never, I swear."

"I'm frightened, though. Indeed I am."

"You needn't be," he said, speaking slowly and carefully ... for suddenly all the wrong words wanted to come tumbling out of his mouth. *We 'll leave this, Susan—not day after tomorrow, on Reaping, but now, this minute. Dress and we'll go crosswise to the wind; it's south we'll ride and never look back. We'll be—*—haunted.

That's what they would be. Haunted by the faces of Alain and Cuthbert; haunted by the faces of all the men who might die in the Shaved Mountains, massacred by weapons torn from the armory-crypts where they should have been left. Haunted most of all by the faces of their fathers, for all the rest of their lives. Not even the South Pole would be far enough to escape those faces.

"All you need do day after tomorrow is claim indisposition at lunch." They had gone over all this before, but now, in his sudden, pointless fright, it was all he

could think of to say. "Go to your room, then leave as you did on the night we met in the graveyard. Hide up a little. Then, when it's three o' the clock, ride here, and look under the skins in yon comer. If my guns are gone—and they will be, I swear they will—then everything's all right. You'll ride to meet us. Come to the place above the canyon, the one we told you of. We'll—"

"Aye, I know all that, but something's wrong." She looked at him, touched the side of his face. "I fear for thee and me, Roland, and know not why."

"All will work out," he said. "*Ka*—"

"Speak not to me of *ka*!" she cried. "Oh please don't! *Ka* like a wind, my father said, it takes what it will and minds the plea of no man or woman. Greedy old *ka*, how I hate it!"

"Susan—"

"No, say no more." She lay back and pushed the bearskin down to her knees, exposing a body that far greater men than Hart Thorin might have given away kingdoms for. Beads of sunlight ran over her bare skin like rain. She held her arms out to him. Never had she looked more beautiful to Roland than she did then, with her hair spread about her and that haunted look on her face. He would think later: *She knew. Some part of her knew.* €

"No more talking," she said. "Talking's done. If you love me, then love me." And for the last time, Roland did. They rocked together, skin to skin and breath to breath, and outside the wind roared into the west like a tidal wave.



That evening, as the grinning Demon rose in the sky, Cordelia left her house and walked slowly across the lawn to her garden, detouring around the pile of leaves she had raked that afternoon. In her arms was a bundle of clothes. She dropped them in front of the pole to which her stuffy-guy was bound, then looked raptly up at the rising moon: the knowing wink of the eye, the ghoul's grin; silver as bone was that moon, a white button against violet silk. It grinned at Cordelia; Cordelia grinned back. Finally, with the air of a woman awakening from a trance, she stepped forward and pulled the stuffy-guy off its

pole. His head lolled limply against her shoulder, like the head of a man who has found himself too drunk to dance. His red hands dangled.

She stripped off the guy's clothes, uncovering a bulging, vaguely humanoid shape in a pair of her dead brother's longhandles. She took one of the things she had brought from the house and held it up to the moonlight. A red silk riding shirt, one of Mayor Thorin's presents to Miss Oh So Young and Pretty. One of those she wouldn't wear. Whore's clothes, she had called them. And what did that make Cordelia Delgado, who had taken care of her even after her bullheaded da had decided he must stand against the likes of Fran Lengyll and John Croydon? It made her a whore-house madam, she supposed.

This thought led to an image of Eldred Jonas and Coral Thorin, naked and striving while a honky-tonk piano planked out "Red Dirt Boogie" be-low them, and Cordelia moaned like a dog.

She yanked the silk shirt over the stuffy's head. Next came one of Susan's split riding skirts. After the skirt, a pair of her slippers. And last, replacing the *sombrero*, one of Susan's spring bonnets.

Presto! The stuffy-guy was now a stuffy-gal.

"And caught red-handed ye are," she whispered. "I know. Oh yes, I know. I wasn't born yesterday."

She carried the stuffy from the garden to the pile of leaves on the lawn. She laid it close by the leaves, then scooped some up and pushed them into the bodice of the riding shirt, making rudimentary breasts. That done, she took a match from her pocket and struck it alight.

The wind, as if eager to cooperate, dropped. Cordelia touched the match to the dry leaves. Soon the whole pile was blazing. She picked the stuffy-gal up in her arms and stood with it in front of the fire. She didn't hear the rattling firecrackers from town, or the wheeze of the steam-organ in Green Heart, or the mariachi band playing in the Low Market; when a burning leaf rose and swirled past her hair, threatening to set it alight, she didn't seem to notice. Her eyes were wide and blank.

When the fire was at its height, she stepped to its edge and threw the stuffy on. Flame whumped up around it in bright orange gusts; sparks and burning leaves swirled skyward in a funnel.

"So let it be done!" Cordelia cried. The firelight on her face turned her tears to

blood. "*Charyou tree!* Aye, just so!"

The thing in the riding clothes caught fire, its face charring, its red hands blazing, its white-cross eyes turning black. Its bonnet flared; the face began to bum. Cordelia stood and watched, fists clenching and unclenching, heed-less of the sparks that lit on her skin, heedless of the blazing leaves that swirled toward the house. Had the house caught fire, she would likely have ignored that as well. She watched until the stuffy dressed in her niece's clothes was noth-ing but ashes lying atop more ashes. Then, as slowly as a robot with rust in its works, she walked back to the house, lay down on the sofa, and slept like the dead.

13

It was three-thirty in the morning of the day before Reaping, and Stanley Ruiz thought he was finally done for the night. The last music had quit twenty minutes ago—Sheb had outlasted the mariachis by an hour or so, and now lay snoring with his face in the sawdust. Sai Thorin was upstairs, and there had been no sign of the Big Coffin Hunters; Stanley had an idea those were up to Seafront tonight. He also had an idea there was black work on offer, although he didn't know that for sure. He looked up at the glassy, two-headed gaze of The Romp. "Nor want to, old pal," he said. "All I want is about nine hours of sleep—tomorrow comes the real party, and they won't leave till dawn. So—"

A shrill scream rose from somewhere behind the building. Stanley jerked backward, thumping into the bar. Beside the piano, Sheb raised his head briefly, muttered "Wuzzat?" and dropped it back with a thump.

Stanley had absolutely no urge to investigate the source of the scream, but he supposed he would, just the same. It had sounded like that sad old bitch Pettie the Trotter. "I'd like to trot your saggy old ass right out of town," he muttered, then bent down to look under the bar. There were two stout ashwood clubs here, The Calmer and The Killer. The Calmer was smooth buried wood, guaranteed to put out the lights for two hours any time you tapped some boisterous cull's head in the right place with it.

Stanley consulted his feelings and took the other club. It was shorter than The Calmer, wider at the top. And the business end of The Killer was studded with nails.

Stanley went down to the end of the bar, through the door, and across a dim supply-room stacked with barrels smelling of *graf* and whiskey. At the rear was a door giving on the back yard. Stanley approached it, took a deep breath, and unlocked it. He kept expecting Pettie to voice an-other head-bursting scream, but none came. There was only the sound of the wind.

Maybe you got lucky and she's kilt, Stanley thought. He opened the door, stepping back and raising the nail-studded club at the same time.

Pettie wasn't kilt. Dressed in a stained shift (a Pettie-skirt, one might say), the whore was standing on the path which led to the back privy, her hands clutched together above the swell of her bosom and below the drooping turkey-wattles of her neck. She was looking up at the sky.

"What is it?" Stanley asked, hurrying down to her. "Near scared ten years off my life, ye did."

"The moon, Stanley!" she whispered. "Oh, look at the moon, would ye!"

He looked up, and what he saw set his heart thumping, but he tried to speak reasonably and calmly. "Come now, Pettie, it's dust, that's all. Be reasonable, dear, ye know how the wind's blown these last few days, and no rain to knock down what it carries; it's dust, that's all."

Yet it didn't look like dust.

"I know what I see," whispered Pettie.

Above them, Demon Moon grinned and winked one eye through what appeared to be a shifting scrim of blood.

CHAPTER VII

TAKING THE BALL

While a certain whore and certain bartender were still gaping up at the bloody moon, Kimba Rimer awoke sneezing.

Damn, a cold for Reaping, he thought. *As much as I have to be out over the next two days, I'll be lucky if it doesn't turn into—*

Something fluffed the end of his nose, and he sneezed again. Coming out of his narrow chest and dry slot of a mouth, it sounded like a small-caliber pistol-shot in the black room.

"Who's there?" he cried.

No answer. Rimer suddenly imagined a bird, something nasty and bad-tempered, that had gotten in here in daylight and was now flying around in the dark, fluttering against his face as he slept. His skin crawled—birds, bugs, bats, he hated them all—and he fumbled so energetically for the gas-lamp on the table by his bed that he almost knocked it off onto the floor.

As he drew it toward him, that flutter came again. This time puffing at his cheek. Rimer screamed and recoiled against the pillows, clutching the lamp to his chest. He turned the switch on the side, heard the hiss of gas, then pushed the spark. The lamp lit, and in the thin circle of its radiance, he saw not a fluttering bird but Clay Reynolds sitting on the edge of the bed. In one hand Reynolds held the feather with which he had been tick-ling Mejia's Chancellor. His other was hidden in his cloak, which lay in his lap.

Reynolds had disliked Rimer from their first meeting in the woods far west of town—those same woods, beyond Eyebolt Canyon, where Far-son's man Latigo now quartered the main contingent of his troops. It had been a windy night, and as he and the other Coffin Hunters entered the lit-tle glade where Rimer, accompanied by Lengyll and Croydon, were sitting by a small fire, Reynolds's cloak swirled around him. "*Sai Manto*," Rimer had said, and the other two had laughed. It had been meant as a harmless joke, but it hadn't seemed harmless to Reynolds. In many of the lands where he had travelled, *manto* meant not "cloak" but "leaner" or "bender." It was, in fact, a slang term for homosexual. That Rimer (a provincial man under his veneer of cynical sophistication) didn't know this never crossed Reynolds's mind. He knew when people were making small of him, and if he could make such a person pay, he did so.

For Kimba Rimer, payday had come.

"Reynolds? What are you doing? How did you get in h—"

"You got to be thinking of the wrong cowboy," the man sitting on the bed replied.

"No Reynolds here. Just *Senor Manto*." He took out the hand which had been under his cloak. In it was a keenly honed *cuchillo*. Reynolds had purchased it in Low Market with this chore in mind. He raised it now and drove the twelve-inch blade into Rimer's chest. It went all the way through, pinning him like a bug. A *bedbug*, Reynolds thought.

The lamp fell out of Rimer's hands and rolled off the bed. It landed on the foot-runner, but did not break. On the far wall was Kimba Rimer's distorted, struggling shadow. The shadow of the other man bent over it like a hungry vulture.

Reynolds lifted the hand which had held the knife. He turned it so the small blue tattooed coffin between thumb and forefinger was in front of Rimer's eyes. He wanted it to be the last thing Rimer saw on this side of the clearing.

"Let's hear you make fun of me now," Reynolds said. He smiled. "Come on. Let's just hear you."

2

Shortly before five o'clock, Mayor Thorin woke from a terrible dream. In it, a bird with pink eyes had been cruising slowly back and forth above the Barony.

Wherever its shadow fell, the grass turned yellow, the leaves fell shocked from the trees, and the crops died. The shadow was turning his green and pleasant Barony into a waste land. *It may be my Barony, but it's my bird, too*, he thought just before awakening, huddled into a shuddery ball on one side of his bed. *My bird, I brought it here, I let it out of its cage.*

There would be no more sleep for him this night, and Thorin knew it. He poured himself a glass of water, drank it, then walked into his study, absently picking his nightgown from the cleft of his bony old ass as he went. The puff on the end of his nightcap bobbed between his shoulder blades; his knees cracked at every step.

As for the guilty feelings expressed by the dream . . . well, what was done was done. Jonas and his friends would have what they'd come for (and paid so handsomely for) in another day; a day after that, they'd be gone. Fly away, bird with the pink eyes and pestilent shadow; fly away to wherever you came from and

take the Big Coffin Boys with you. He had an idea that by Year's End he'd be too busy dipping his wick to think much about such things. Or to dream such dreams. Besides, dreams without visible sign were just dreams, not omens.

The visible sign might have been the boots beneath the study drapes—just the scuffed tips of them showing—but Thorin never looked in that direction. His eyes were fixed on the bottle beside his favorite chair. Drinking claret at five in the morning was no sort of habit to get into, but this once wouldn't hurt. He'd had a terrible dream, for gods' sake, and after all—

"Tomorrow's Reaping," he said, sitting in the wing-chair on the edge of the hearth.

"I guess a man can jump a fence or two, come Reap."

He poured himself a drink, the last he'd ever take in this world, and coughed as the fire hit his belly and then climbed back up his throat, warming it. Better, aye, much. No giant birds now, no plaguey shadows. He stretched out his arms, laced his long and bony fingers together, and cracked them viciously.

"I *hate* it when you do that, you scrawny git," spoke a voice directly into Thorin's left ear.

Thorin jumped. His heart took its own tremendous leap in his chest. The empty glass flew from his hand, and there was no foot-runner to cushion its landing. It smashed on the hearth.

Before Thorin could scream, Roy Depape brushed off the mayoral nightcap, seized the gauzy remains of the mayoral mane, and yanked the mayoral head back. The knife Depape held in his other hand was much humbler than the one Reynolds had used, but it cut the old man's throat efficiently enough. Blood sprayed scarlet in the dim room. Depape let go of Thorin's hair, went back to the drapes he had been hiding behind, and picked something up off the floor. It was Cuthbert's lookout. Depape brought it back to the chair and put it in the dying Mayor's lap. "Bird . . ." Thorin gargled through a mouthful of blood. "Bird!"

"Yar, old fella, and trig o' you to notice at a time like this, I will say." Depape pulled Thorin's head back again and took the old man's eyes out with two quick flips of his knife. One went into the dead fireplace; the other hit the wall and slid down behind the fire-tools. Thorin's right foot trembled briefly and was still.

One more job to do.

Depape looked around, saw Thorin's nightcap, and decided the ball on the end would serve. He picked it up, dipped it in the puddle of blood in the Mayor's lap,

and drew the Good Man's *sigul*—



—on the wall.

"There," he murmured, standing back. "If that don't finish em, noth-ing on earth will."

True enough. The only question left unanswered was whether or not Roland's *ka-tet* could be taken alive.

3

Jonas had told Fran Lengyll exactly where to place his men, two inside the stable and six more out, three of these latter gents hidden behind rusty old implements, two hidden in the burnt-out remains of the home place, one—Dave Hollis—crouched on top of the stable itself, spying over the roofpeak. Lengyll was glad to see that the men in the posse took their job seriously. They were only boys, it was true, but boys who had on one oc-casion come off ahead of the Big Coffin Hunters.

Sheriff Avery gave a fair impression of being in charge of things until they got within a good shout of the Bar K. Then Lengyll, machine-gun slung over one shoulder (and as straight-hacked in the saddle as he had been at twenty), took command. Avery, who looked nervous and sounded out of breath, seemed relieved rather than offended.

"I'll tell ye where to go as was (old to me, for it's a good plan, and I've no quarrel with it," Lengyll had told his posse. In the dark, their faces were little more than dim blurs. "Only one thing I'll say to ye on my own hook. We don't need em alive, but it's best we have em so—it's the Barony we want to put paid to em, the common folk, and so put paid to this whole business, as well. Shut the door on it, if ye will. So I say this: if there's cause to shoot, shoot. But I'll flay the skin off the face of any man who shoots without cause. Do ye understand?"

No response. It seemed they did.

"All right," Lengyll had said. His face was stony. "I'll give ye a minute to make

sure your gear's muffled, and then on we go. Not another' word from here on out."

4

Roland, Cuthbert, and Alain came out of the bunkhouse at quarter past six that morning, and stood a-row on the porch. Alain was finishing his coffee. Cuthbert was yawning and stretching. Roland was buttoning his shirt and looking southwest, toward the Bad Grass. He was thinking not of ambushes but of Susan. Her tears. *Greedy old ka, how I hate it*, she had said.

His instincts did not awake; Alain's touch, which had sensed Jonas on the day Jonas had killed the pigeons, did not so much as quiver. As for Cuthbert—"One more day of quiet!" that worthy exclaimed to the dawning sky. "One more day of grace! One more day of silence, broken only by the lover's sigh and the tattoo of horses' hoofs!"

"One more day of your bullshit," Alain said. "Come on."

They set off across the dooryard, sensing the eight pairs of eyes on them not at all. They walked into the stable past the two men flanking the door, one hidden behind an ancient harrow, the other tucked behind an untidy stack of hay, both with guns drawn.

Only Rusher sensed something was wrong. He stamped his feet, rolled his eyes, and, as Roland backed him out of his stall, tried to rear.

"Hey, boy," he said, and looked around. "Spiders, I reckon. He hates them."

Outside, Lengyll stood up and waved both hands forward. Men moved silently toward the front of the stable. On the roof, Dave Hollis stood with his gun drawn. His monocle was tucked away in his vest pocket, so it should blink no badly timed reflection.

Cuthbert led his mount out of the stable. Alain followed. Roland came last, short-leading the nervous, prancy gelding.

"Look," Cuthbert said cheerily, still unaware of the men standing directly behind him and his friends. He was pointing north. "A cloud in the shape of a bear! Good luck for—"

"Don't move, cullies," Fran Lengyll called. "Don't so much as shuf-fle yer god-pounding feet."

Alain *did* begin to turn—in startlement more than anything else—and there was a

ripple of small clicking sounds, like many dry twigs all snap-ping at once. The sound of cocking pistols and musketoons.

"No, Al!" Roland said. "Don't move! Don't!" In his throat despair rose like poison, and tears of rage stung at the comers of his eyes ... yet he stood quiet. Cuthbert and Alain must stand quiet, too. If they moved, they'd be killed. "Don't move!" he called again. "Either of you!"

"Wise, cully." Lengyll's voice was closer now, and accompanied by several pairs of footfalls. "Put yer hands behind ye."

Two shadows flanked Roland, long in the first light. Judging by the bulk of the one on his left, he guessed it was being thrown by Sheriff Avery. He probably wouldn't be offering them any white tea this day. Lengyll would belong to the other shadow.

"Hurry up, Dearborn, or whatever yer name may be. Get em behind ye. Small of yer back. There's guns pointed at your pards, and if we end up taking in only two of yer instead of three, life'll go on."

Not taking any chances with us, Roland thought, and felt a moment of perverse pride. With it came a taste of something that was almost amuse-ment. Bitter, though; that taste continued very bitter.

"Roland!" It was Cuthbert, and there was agony in his voice. "Ro-land, don't!" But there was no choice. Roland put his hands behind his back. Rusher uttered a small, reproving whinny as if to say all this was *highly* improper—and trotted away to stand beside the bunkhouse porch.

"You're going to feel metal on your wrists," Lengyll said. "*Esposas*. "

Two cold circles slipped over Roland's hands. I here was a click and suddenly the arcs of the handcuffs were tight against his wrists.

"All right," said another voice. "Now you, son,"

"Be damned if I will!" Cuthbert's voice wavered on the edge of hysteria

There was a thud and a muffled cry of pain. Roland turned around and saw Alain down on one knee, the heel of his left hand pressed against his forehead. Blood ran down his face.

"Ye want me to deal him another 'un?" Jake White asked. He had an old pistol in his hand, reversed so the butt was forward. "I can, you know; my arm is feeling very limber for this early in the day."

"No!" Cuthbert was twitching with horror and something like grief. Ranged

behind him were three armed men, looking on with nervous avidity.

"Then be a good boy an' get yer hands behind yer."

Cuthbert, still fighting tears, did as he was told. *Esposas* were put on him by Deputy Bridger. The other two men yanked Alain to his feet. He reeled a little, then stood firm as he was handcuffed. His eyes met Ro-land's, and Al tried to smile. In some ways it was the worst moment of that terrible ambush morning. Roland nodded back and made himself a promise: he would never be taken like this again, not if he lived to be a thousand years old.

Lengyll was wearing a trailscarf instead of a string tie this morning, but Roland thought he was inside the same box-tail coat he'd worn to the Mayor's welcoming party, all those weeks ago. Standing beside him, puff-ing with excitement, anxiety, and self-importance, was Sheriff Avery.

"Boys," the Sheriff said, "ye're arrested for transgressing the Barony. The specific charges are treason and murder."

"Who did we murder?" Alain asked mildly, and one of the posse ut-tered a laugh either shocked or cynical, Roland couldn't tell which.

"The Mayor and his Chancellor, as ye know quite well," Avery said. "Now—"

"How can you do this?" Roland asked curiously. It was Lengyll to whom he spoke. "Mejis is your home place; I've seen the line of your fa-thers in the town cemetery. How can you do this to your home place, sai Lengyll?"

"I've no intention of standing out here and making palaver with ye," Lengyll said. He glanced over Roland's shoulder. "Alvarez! Get his horse! Boys as trig as this bunch should have no problem riding with their hands behind their—"

"No, tell me," Roland interposed. "Don't hold back, sai Lengyll— these are your friends you've come with, and not a one who isn't inside your circle. How can you do it? Would you rape your own mother if you came upon her sleeping with her dress up?"

Lengyll's mouth twitched—not with shame or embarrassment but momentary prudish distaste, and then the old rancher looked at Avery. "They teach em to talk pretty in Gilead, don't they?"

Avery had a rifle. Now he stepped toward the handcuffed gunslinger with the butt raised. "I'll teach 'im how to talk proper to a man of the gen-try, so I will! Knock the teef straight out of his head, if you say aye, Fran!"

Lengyll held him back, looking tired. "Don't be a fool. I don't want to bring him

back laying over a saddle unless he's dead."

Avery lowered his gun. Lengyll turned to Roland.

"Ye're not going to live long enough to profit from advice, Dear-born," he said, "but I'll give'ee some, anyway: stick with the winners in this world. And know how the wind blows, so ye can tell when it changes direction."

"You've forgotten the face of your father, you scurrying little mag-got," Cuthbert said clearly.

This got to Lengyll in a way Roland's remark about his mother had not—it showed in the sudden bloom of color in his weathered cheeks.

"Get em mounted!" he said. "I want em locked up tight within the hour!"

5

Roland was boosted into Rusher's saddle so hard he almost flew off on the other side—would have, if Dave Hollis had not been there to steady him and then to wedge Roland's boot into the stirrup. Dave offered the gunslinger a nervous, half-embarrassed smile.

"I'm sorry to see you here," Roland said gravely.

"It's sorry I am to be here," the deputy said. "If murder was your business, I wish you'd gotten to it sooner. And your friend shouldn't have been so arrogant as to leave his calling-card." He nodded toward Cuthbert.

Roland hadn't the slightest idea what Deputy Dave was referring to, but it didn't matter. It was just part of the frame, and none of these men believed much of it, Dave likely included. Although, Roland supposed, they would come to believe it in later years and tell it to their children and grandchildren as gospel. The glorious day they'd ridden with the posse and taken down the traitors.

The gunslinger used his knees to turn Rusher . . . and there, standing by the gate between the Bar K's dooryard and the lane leading to the Great Road, was Jonas himself. He sat astride a deep-chested bay, wearing a green felt drover's hat and an old gray duster. There was a rifle in the scabbard beside his right knee. The left side of the duster was pulled back to expose the butt of his revolver. Jonas's white hair, untied today, lay over his shoulders.

He doffed his hat and held it out to Roland in courtly greeting. "A good game," he said. "You played very well for someone who was taking his milk out of a tit not

so long ago."

"Old man," Roland said, "you've lived too long."

Jonas smiled. "You'd remedy that if you could, wouldn't you? Yar, I reckon." He flicked his eyes at Lengyll. "Get their toys, Fran. Look specially sharp for knives. They've got guns, but not with em. Yet I know a bit more about those shooting irons than they might think. And funny boy's slingshot. Don't forget that, for gods' sake. He like to take Roy's head off with it not so long ago."

"Are you talking about the carrot-top?" Cuthbert asked. His horse was dancing under him; Bert swayed back and forth and from side to side like a circus rider to keep from tumbling off. "He never would have missed his head. His balls, maybe, but not his head."

"Probably true," Jonas agreed, watching as the spears and Roland's shortbow were taken into custody. The slingshot was on the back of Cuthbert's belt, tucked into a holster he had made for it himself. It was very well for Roy Depape that he hadn't tried Bert, Roland knew—Bert could take a bird on the wing at sixty yards. A pouch holding steel shot hung at the boy's left side. Bridger took it, as well. While this was going on, Jonas fixed Roland with an amiable smile. "What's your real name, brat? Fess up—no harm in telling now; you're going to ride the handsome, and we both know it."

Roland said nothing. Lengyll looked at Jonas, eyebrows raised. Jonas shrugged, then jerked his head in the direction of town. Lengyll nodded and poked Roland with one hard, chapped finger. "Come on, boy. Let's ride."

Roland squeezed Rusher's sides; the horse trotted toward Jonas. And suddenly Roland knew something. As with all his best and truest intuitions, it came from nowhere and everywhere—absent at one second, all there and fully dressed at the next.

"Who sent you west, maggot?" he asked as he passed Jonas. "Couldn't have been Cort—you're too old. Was it his father?"

The look of slightly bored amusement left Jonas's face—*flew* from his face, as if slapped away. For one amazing moment the man with the white hair was a child again: shocked, shamed, and hurt.

"Yes, Cort's da—I see it in your eyes. And now you're here, on the Clean Sea ... except you're really in the west. The soul of a man such as you can never leave the west."

Jonas's gun was out and cocked in his hand with such speed that only Roland's extraordinary eyes were capable of marking the movement. There was a murmur from the men behind them—partly shock, mostly awe.

"Jonas, don't be a fool!" Lengyll snarled. "You ain't killin em after we took the time and risk to hood em and tie their hooks, are ye?"

Jonas seemed to take no notice. His eyes were wide; the comers of his seamed mouth were trembling. "Watch your words, Will Dearborn," he said in a low, hoarse voice. "You want to watch em ever so close. I got two pounds of pressure on a three-pound trigger right this second."

"Fine, shoot me," Roland said. He lifted his head and looked down at Jonas.

"Shoot, exile. Shoot, worm. Shoot, you failure. You'll still live in exile and die as you lived."

For a moment he was sure Jonas *would* shoot, and in that moment Roland felt death would be enough, an acceptable end after the shame of being caught so easily. In that moment Susan was absent from his mind. Nothing breathed in that moment, nothing called, nothing moved. The shadows of the men watching this confrontation, both on foot and on horseback, were printed depthless on the dirt. Then Jonas dropped the hammer of his gun and slipped it back into its holster.

"Take em to town and jug em," he said to Lengyll. "And when I show up, I don't want to see one hair harmed on one head. If I could keep from killing this one, you can keep from hurting the rest. Now go on."

"Move," Lengyll said. His voice had lost some of its bluff authority. It was now the voice of a man who realizes (too late) that he has bought chips in a game where the stakes are likely much too high.

They rode. As they did, Roland turned one last time. The contempt Jonas saw in those cool young eyes stung him worse than the whips that had scarred his back in Garlan years ago.

6

When they were out of sight, Jonas went into the bunkhouse, pulled up the board which concealed their little armory, and found only two guns. The matched set of six-shooters with the dark handles—Dearborn's guns, surely—were gone.

You 're in the west. The soul of a man such as you can never leave the west. You'll

live in exile and die as you lived. €

Jonas's hands went to work, disassembling the revolvers Cuthbert and Alain had brought west. Alain's had never even been worn, save on the practice-range. Outside, Jonas threw the pieces, scattering them every which way. He threw as hard as he could, trying to rid himself of that cool blue gaze and the shock of hearing what he'd believed no man had known. Roy and Clay suspected, but even they hadn't known for sure.

Before the sun went down, everyone in Mejis would know that Eldred Jonas, the white-haired regulator with the tattooed coffin on his hand, was nothing but a failed gunslinger.

You'll live in exile and die as you lived. €

"P'raps," he said, looking at the burned-out ranch house without really seeing it. "But I'll live longer than you, young Dearborn, and die long after your bones are rusting in the ground."

He mounted up and swung his horse around, sawing viciously at the reins. He rode for Citgo, where Roy and Clay would be waiting, and he rode hard, but Roland's eyes rode with him.

7

"Wake up! Wake up, sai! Wake up! Wake up!"

At first the words seemed to be coming from far away, drifting down by some magical means to the dark place where she lay. Even when the voice was joined by a rudely shaking hand and Susan knew she *must* wake up, it was a long, hard struggle.

It had been weeks since she'd gotten a decent night's sleep, and she had expected more of the same last night. . . *especially* last night. She had lain awake in her luxurious bedchamber at Seafront, tossing from side to side, possibilities—none good—crowding her mind. The nightgown she wore crept up to her hips and bunched at the small of her back. When she got up to use the commode, she took the hateful thing off, hurled it into a corner, and crawled back into bed naked. Being out of the heavy silk nightgown had done the trick. She dropped off almost at once . . . and in this case, *dropped off was*, exactly right: it was less like falling asleep than falling into some thoughtless, dreamless crack in the earth.

Now this intruding voice. This intruding arm, shaking her so hard that her head rolled from side to side on the pillow. Susan tried to slide away from it, pulling her knees up to her chest and mouthing fuzzy protests, but the arm followed. The shaking recommenced; the nagging, calling voice never stopped.

"Wake up, sai! Wake up! In the name of the Turtle and the Bear, wake up!"

Maria's voice. Susan hadn't recognized it at first because Maria was so upset.

Susan had never heard her so, or expected to. Yet it *was so*; the maid sounded on the verge of hysteria.

Susan sat up. For a moment so much input—all of it wrong—crashed in on her that she was incapable of moving. The duvet beneath which she had slept tumbled into her lap, exposing her breasts, and she could do no more than pluck weakly at it with the tips of her fingers.

The first wrong thing was the light. It flooded through the windows more strongly than it ever had before . . . because, she realized, she had never been in this room so late before. Gods, it had to be ten o' the clock, perhaps later.

The second wrong thing was the sounds from below. Mayor's House was ordinarily a peaceful place in the morning; until noon one heard little but *casa vaqueros* leading the horses out for their morning exercise, the whicker-whicker-whick of Miguel sweeping the courtyard, and the con-stant boom and shush of the waves. This morning there were shouts, curses, galloping horses, the occasional burst of strange, jagged laughter. Somewhere outside her room—perhaps not in this wing, but close— Susan heard the running thud of booted feet.

The wrongest thing of all was Maria herself, cheeks ashy beneath her olive skin-tone, and her usually neat hair tangled and unbound. Susan would have guessed only an earthquake could make her look so, if that.

"Maria, what is it?"

"You have to go, sai. Seafront maybe not safe for you just now. Your own house maybe better. When I don't see you earlier, I think you gone there already. You chose a bad day to sleep late."

"Go?" Susan asked. Slowly, she pulled the duvet all the way up to her nose and stared at Maria over it with wide, puffy eyes. "What do you mean, go?"

"Out the back." Maria plucked the duvet from Susan's sleep-numbed hands again and this time stripped it all the way down to her ankles. "Like you did before. Now, missy, now! Dress and go! Those boys put away, aye, but what if they have

friends? What if they come back, kill you, too?"

Susan had been getting up. Now all the strength ran out of her legs and she sat back down on the bed again. "Boys?" she whispered. "Boys kill who? *Boys kill who?*"

This was a good distance from grammatical, but Maria took her meaning.

"Dearborn and his pinboys," she said.

"Who are they supposed to have killed?"

"The Mayor and the Chancellor." She looked at Susan with a kind of distracted sympathy. "Now get up, I tell you. And get gone. This place gone *loco*."

"They didn't do any such thing," Susan said, and only just restrained herself from adding, *It wasn't in the plan*.

"Sai Thorin and sai Rimer jus' as dead, whoever did it." There were more shouts below, and a sharp little explosion that didn't sound like a firecracker. Maria looked in that direction, then began to throw Susan her clothes. "The Mayor's eyes, they gouged right out of his head."

"They couldn't have! Maria, I know them—"

"Me, I don't know nothing about them and care less—but I care about you. Get dressed and get out, I tell you. Quick as you can."

"What's happened to them?" A terrible thought came to Susan and she leaped to her feet, clothes falling all around her. She seized Maria by the shoulders. "They haven't been killed?" Susan shook her. "Say they haven't been killed!"

"I don't think so. There's been a t'ousan' shouts and ten t'ousan' ru-mors go the rounds, but I think jus' jailed. Only . . ."

There was no need for her to finish; her eyes slipped from Susan's, and that involuntary shift (along with the confused shouts from below) told all the rest. Not killed yet, but Hart Thorin had been greatly liked, and from an old family. Roland, Cuthbert, and Alain were strangers.

Not killed yet ... but tomorrow was Reaping, and tomorrow night was Reaping Bonfire.

Susan began to dress as fast as she could.

Reynolds, who had been with Jonas longer than Depape, took one look at the

figure cantering toward them through the skeletal oil derricks, and turned to his partner. "Don't ask him any questions—he's not in any mood for silly questions this morning."

"How do you know?"

"Never mind. Just keep your ever-fucking gob shut."

Jonas reined up before them. He sat slumped in his saddle, pale and thoughtful. His look prompted one question from Roy Depape in spite of Reynolds's caution. "Eldred, are you all right?"

"Is anyone?" Jonas responded, then fell silent again. Behind them, Citgo's few remaining pumpers squalled tiredly.

At last Jonas roused himself and sat a little straighter in the saddle. "The cubs'll be stored supplies by now. I told Lengyll and Avery to fire a double set of pistol-shots if anything went wrong, and there hasn't been any shooting like that."

"We didn't hear none, either, Eldred," Depape said eagerly. "Nothing atall like that."

Jonas grimaced. "You wouldn't, would you? Not out in this noise. Fool!"

Depape bit his lip, saw something in the neighborhood of his left stir-rup that needed adjusting, and bent to it.

"Were you boys seen at your business?" Jonas asked. "This morning, I mean, when you sent Rimer and Thorin off. Even a chance either of you was seen?" Reynolds shook his head for both of them. " 'Twas clean as could be."

Jonas nodded as if the subject had been of only passing interest to him, then turned to regard the oilpatch and the rusty derricks. "Mayhap folks are right," he said in a voice almost too low to hear. "Mayhap the Old People *were* devils." He turned back to them. "Well, we're the devils now. Ain't we. Clay?"

"Whatever you think, Eldred," Reynolds said.

"I said what I think. *We're* the devils now, and by God, that's how we'll behave. What about Quint and that lot down there?" He cocked his head toward the forested slope where the ambush had been laid.

"Still there, pending your word," Reynolds said.

"No need of em now." He favored Reynolds with a dark look. "That Dearborn's a coozey brat. I wish I was going to be in Hambry tomorrow night just so I could lay a torch between his feet. I almost left him cold and dead at the Bar K. Would've if

not for Lengyll. Coozey little brat is what he is."

Slumping as he spoke. Face growing blacker and blacker, like storm clouds drifting across the sun. Depape, his stirrup fixed, tossed Reynolds a nervous glance. Reynolds didn't answer it. What point? If Eldred went crazy now (and Reynolds had seen it happen before), there was no way they could get out of his killing-zone in time.

"Eldred, we got quite a spot more to do."

Reynolds spoke quietly, but it got through. Jonas straightened. He took off his hat, hung it on his saddle as if the horn were a coathook, and brushed absently through his hair with his fingers.

"Yar—quite a spot is right. Ride down there. Tell Quint to send for oxen to pull those last two full tankers out to Hanging Rock. He sh'd keep four men with him to hook em up and take em on to Latigo. The rest can go on ahead."

Reynolds now judged it safe to ask a question. "When do the rest of Latigo's men get there?"

"Men?" Jonas snorted. "Don't we wish, cully! The rest of Latigo's *boys'll* ride out to Hanging Rock by moonlight, pennons no doubt flying for all the coyotes and other assorted desert-dogs to see and be awed by. They'll be ready to do escort duty by ten tomorrow, I sh'd think ... al-though if they're the sort of lads I'm expecting, fuck-ups are apt to be the rule of the day. The good news is that we don't much need em, anyway. Things look well in hand. Now go down there, get them about their busi-ness, and then ride back to me, just as fast's you can."

Jonas turned and looked toward the lumpy swell of hills to the northwest.

"We have business of our own," he said. "Soonest begun, boys, soon-est done. I want to shake the dust of fucking Mejis off my hat and boots as soon as I can. I don't like the way it feels anymore. Not at all."

The woman, Theresa Maria Dolores O'Shyven, was forty years old, plump, pretty, mother of four, husband of Peter, a *vaquero* of laughing tempera-ment. She was also a seller of rugs and draperies in the Upper Market; many of the prettier and more delicate appointments at Seafront had passed through Theresa O'Shyven's hands, and her family was quite well-to-do. Although her husband was a range-

rider, the O'Shyven clan was what would have been called middle-class in another place and time. Her two oldest children were grown and gone, one right out o' Barony. The third eldest was sparking and hoping to marry his heart's delight at Year's End. Only the youngest suspected something was wrong with Ma, and this one had no idea how close Theresa was to complete obsessional madness.

Soon, Rhea thought, watching Theresa avidly in the ball. She 'll start doing it soon, but first she's got to get rid of the brat.

There was no school at Reaptide, and the stalls opened only for a few hours in the afternoon, so Theresa sent her youngest daughter off with a pie. A Reaptide gift to a neighbor, Rhea surmised, although she couldn't hear the soundless instructions the woman gave her daughter as she pulled a knitted cap down over the girl's ears. And 'twouldn't be a neighbor too close, either; she'd want time, would Theresa Maria Dolores O'Shyven, time to be a-choring. It was a good-sized house, and there were a lot of corners in it that needed cleaning.

Rhea chuckled; the chuckle turned into a hollow gust of coughing. In the corner, Musty looked at the old woman hauntedly. Although far from the emaciated skeleton that his mistress had become, Musty didn't look good at all.

The girl was shown out with the pie under her arm; she paused to give her mother a single troubled look, and then the door was shut in her face.

"Now!" Rhea croaked. "Them comers is waitin! Down on yer knees, woman, and get to business!"

First Theresa went to the window. When she was satisfied with what she saw—her daughter out the gate and down the High Street, likely—she turned back to her kitchen. She walked to the table and stood there, look-ing dreamy-eyed into space. "No, none o' that, now!" Rhea cried impatiently. She no longer saw her own filthy hut, she no longer smelled either its rank aromas or her own. She had gone into the Wizard's Rainbow. She was with Theresa O'Shyven, whose cottage had the cleanest comers in all Mejis. Mayhap in all Mid-World.

"Hurry, woman!" Rhea half-screamed. "Get to yer housework!"

As if hearing, Theresa unbuttoned her housedress, stepped out of it, and laid it neatly over a chair. She pulled the hem of her clean, mended shift up over her knees, went to the comer, and got down on all fours. "That's it, my *corazon!*" Rhea cried, nearly choking on a phlegmy mixture of coughing and laughter. "Do yer chores, now, and do em wery pert!"

Theresa O'Shyven poked her head forward to the full length of her neck, opened her mouth, stuck out her tongue, and began to lick the corner. She lapped it as Musty lapped his milk. Rhea watched this, slapping her knee and whooping, her face growing redder and redder as she rocked from side to side. Oh, Theresa was her favorite, aye! No doubt! For hours now she would crawl about on her hands and knees with her ass in the air, licking into the corners, praying to some obscure god—not even the Man-Jesus God—for forgiveness of who knew what as she did this, her penance. Sometimes she got splinters in her tongue and had to pause to spit blood into the kitchen basin. Up until now some sixth sense had always gotten her to her feet and back into her dress before any of her family returned, but Rhea knew that sooner or later the woman's obsession would take her too far, and she would be surprised. Perhaps today would be the day—the little girl would come back early, perhaps for a coin to spend in town, and discover her mother down on her knees and licking the corners. Oh, what a spin and raree! How Rhea wanted to see it! How she longed to—

Suddenly Theresa O'Shyven was gone. The interior of her neat little cottage was gone. *Everything* was gone, lost in curtains of shifting pink light. For the first time in weeks, the wizard's glass had gone blank.

Rhea picked the ball up in her scrawny, long-nailed fingers and shook it. "What's wrong with you, plaguey thing? *What's wrong?*"

The ball was heavy, and Rhea's strength was fading. After two or three hard shakes, it slipped in her grip. She cradled it against the deflated remains of her breasts, trembling.

"No, no, lovey," she crooned. "Come back when ye're ready, aye, Rhea lost her temper a bit but she's got it back now, she never meant to shake ye and she'd never *ever* drop ye, so ye just—"

She broke off and cocked her head, listening. Horses approaching. No, not approaching; *here*. Three riders, by the sound. They had crept up on her while she was distracted.

The boys? Those plaguey boys?

Rhea held the ball against her bosom, eyes wide, lips wet. Her hands were now so thin that the ball's pink glow shone through them, faintly illuminating the dark spokes that were her bones.

"Rhea! Rhea of the Coos!"

No, not the boys.

"Come out here, and bring what you were given!"

Worse.

"Farson wants his property! We've come to take it!"

Not the boys but the Big Coffin Hunters.

"Never, ye dirty old white-haired prick," she whispered. "Ye'll never take it." Her eyes moved from side to side in small, shooting peeks. Scraggle-headed and tremble-mouthed, she looked like a diseased coyote driven into its final arroyo. She looked down at the ball and a whining noise began to escape her. Now even the pink glow was gone. The sphere was as dark as a corpse's eyeball.

10

A shriek came from the hut.

Depape turned to Jonas with wide eyes, his skin prickling. The thing which had uttered that cry hardly sounded human.

"Rhea!" Jonas called again. "Bring it out here now, woman, and hand it over! I've no time to play games with you!"

The door of the hut swung open. Depape and Reynolds drew their guns as the old crone stepped out, blinking against the sunlight like some-thing that's spent its whole life in a cave. She was holding John Farson's favorite toy high over her head. There were plenty of rocks in the dooryard she could throw it against, and even if her aim was bad and she missed them all, it might smash anyway.

This could be bad, and Jonas knew it—there were some people you just couldn't threaten. He had focused so much of his attention on the brats (who, ironically, had been taken as easy as milk) that it had never occurred to him to worry much about this part of it. And Kimba Rimer, the man who had suggested Rhea as the perfect custodian for Maerlyn's Rainbow, was dead. Couldn't lay it at Rimer's doorstep if things went wrong up here, could he?

Then, just to make things a little worse when he'd have thought they'd gone as far west as they could without dropping off the cold end of the earth, he heard the cocking sound of Depape drawing the hammer of his gun.

"Put that away, you idiot!" he snarled.

"But look at her!" Depape almost moaned. "*Look* at her, Eldred!"

He *was*. The thing inside the black dress appeared to be wearing the corpse of a putrefying snake around its throat for a necklace. She was so scrawny that she resembled nothing so much as a walking skeleton. Her peeling skull was only tufted with hair; the rest had fallen out. Sores clus-tered on her cheeks and brow, and there was a mark like a spider-bite on the left side of her mouth. Jonas thought that last might be a scurvy-bloom, but he didn't really care one way or another. What he cared about was the ball upraised in the dying woman's long and shivering claws.

11

The sunlight so dazzled Rhea's eyes that she didn't see the gun pointed at her, and when her vision cleared, Depape had put it away again. She looked at the men lined up across from her—the bespectacled redhead, the one in the cloak, and Old White-Hair Jonas—and uttered a dusty croak of laughter. Had she been afraid of them, these mighty Coffin Hunters? She supposed she had, but for gods' sake, why? They were men, that was all, just more men, and she had been beating such all her life. Oh, they thought they ruled the roost, all right—nobody in Mid-World ac-cused anyone of forgetting the face of his *mother*—but they were poor things, at bottom, moved to tears by a sad song, utterly undone by the sight of a bare breast, and all the more capable of being manipulated sim-ply because they were so sure they were strong and tough and wise.

The glass was dark, and as much as she hated that darkness, it had cleared her mind.

"Jonas!" she cried. "Eldred Jonas!"

"I'm here, old mother," he said. "Long days and pleasant nights."

"Never mind yer sops, time's too short for em." She came four steps farther and stopped with the ball still held over her head. Near her, a gray chunk of stone jutted from the weedy ground. She looked at it, then back at Jonas. The implication was unspoken but unmistakable.

"What do you want?" Jonas asked.

"The ball's gone dark," she said, answering from the side. "All the time I had it in my keeping, it was lively—aye, even when it showed nothing I could make out, it was passing lively, bright and pink—but it fell dark almost at the sound of yer

voice. It doesn't want to go with ye."

"Nevertheless, I'm under orders to take it." Jonas's voice became soft and conciliating. It wasn't the tone he used when he was in bed with Coral, but it was close. "Think a minute, and you'll see my situation. Far-son wants it, and who am I to stand against the wants of a man who'll be the most powerful in Mid-World when Demon Moon rises next year? If I come back without it and say Rhea of the Coos refused me it, I'll be killed."

"If ye come back and tell him I broke it in yer ugly old face, ye'll be killed, too," Rhea said. She was close enough for Jonas to see how far her sickness had eaten into her. Above the few remaining tufts of her hair, the wretched ball was trembling back and forth. She wouldn't be able to hold it much longer. A minute at most. Jonas felt a dew of sweat spring out on his forehead.

"Aye, mother. But d'you know, given a choice of deaths, I'd choose to take the cause of my problem with me. That's you, darling."

She croaked again—that dusty replica of laughter—and nodded appreciatively. "

"Twon't do Farson any good without me in any case," she said. "It's found its mistress, I wot—that's why it went dark at the sound of yer voice."

Jonas wondered how many others had believed the ball was just for them. He wanted to wipe the sweat from his brow before it ran in his eyes, but kept his hands in front of him, folded neatly on the horn of his saddle.

He didn't dare look at either Reynolds or Depape. and could only hope they would leave the play to him. She was balanced on both a physical and mental knife-edge; the smallest movement would send her tumbling off in one direction or the other.

"Found the one it wants, has it?" He thought he saw a way out of this. If he was lucky. And it might be lucky for her, as well. "What should we do about that?"

"Take me with ye." Her face twisted into an expression of gruesome greed; she looked like a corpse that is trying to sneeze. *She doesn't realize she's dying*, Jonas thought. *Thank the gods for that.* "Take the ball, but take me, as well. I'll go with ye to Farson. I'll become his soothsayer, and nothing will stand before us, not with me to read the ball for him. Take me with ye!"

"All right," Jonas said. It was what he had hoped for. "Although what Farson decides is none o' mine. You know that?"

"Aye."

"Good. Now give me the ball. I'll give it back into your keeping, if you like, but I

need to make sure it's whole."

She slowly lowered it. Jonas didn't think it was entirely safe even cradled in her arms, but he breathed a little easier when it was, all the same. She shuffled toward him, and he had to control an urge to gig his horse back from her.

He bent over in the saddle, holding his hands out for the glass. She looked up at him, her old eyes still shrewd behind their crusted lids. One of them actually drew down in a conspirator's wink. "I know yer mind, Jonas. Ye think, 'I'll take the ball, then draw my gun and kill her, what harm?' Isn't that true? Yet there *would* be harm, and all to you and yours. Kill me and the ball will never shine for Farson again. For someone, aye, someday, mayhap; but not for him . . . and will he let ye live if ye bring his toy back and he discovers it's broken?"

Jonas had already considered this. "We have a bargain, old mother. You go west with the glass ... unless you die beside the trail some night. You'll pardon me for saying so, but you don't look well."

She cackled. "I'm better'n I look, oh yar! Years left 'fore this clock o' mine runs down!"

I think you may be wrong about that, old mother, Jonas thought. But he kept his peace and only held his hands out for the ball.

For a moment longer she held it. Their arrangement was made and agreed to on both sides, but in the end she could barely bring herself to ungrasp the ball. Greed shone in her eyes like moonlight through fog.

He held his hands out patiently, saying nothing, waiting for her mind to accept reality—if she let go, there was some chance. If she held on, very likely everyone in this stony, weedy yard would end up riding the handsome before long.

With a sigh of regret, she finally put the ball in his hands. At the in-stant it passed from her to him, an ember of pink light pulsed deep in the depths of the glass. A throb of pain drove into Jonas's head . . . and a shiver of lust coiled in his balls.

As from a great distance, he heard Depape and Reynolds cocking their pistols.

"Put those away," Jonas said. "But—" Reynolds looked confused.

"They thought'ee was going to double-cross Rhea," the old woman said, cackling.

"Good thing ye're in charge rather than them, Jonas ... mayhap you know summat they don't."

He knew something, all right—how dangerous the smooth, glassy thing in his hands was. It could take him in a blink, if it wanted. And in a month, he would be

like the witch: scrawny, raddled with sores, and too obsessed to know or care. "*Put them away!*" he shouted.

Reynolds and Depape exchanged a glance, then reholstered their guns. "There was a bag for this thing," Jonas said. "A drawstring bag laid inside the box. Get it."

"Aye," Rhea said, grinning unpleasantly at him. "But it won't keep the ball from takin ye if it wants to. Ye needn't think it will." She sur-veyed the other two, and her eye fixed on Reynolds. "There's a cart in my shed, and a pair of good gray goats to pull it." She spoke to Reynolds, but her eyes kept turning back to the ball, Jonas noticed . . . and now *his* damned eyes wanted to go there, too.

"You don't give me orders," Reynolds said.

"No, but I do," Jonas said. His eyes dropped to the ball, both wanting and fearing to see that pink spark of life deep inside. Nothing. Cold and dark. He dragged his gaze back up to Reynolds again. "Get the cart."

12

Reynolds heard the buzzing of flies even before he slipped through the shed's sagging door, and knew at once that Rhea's goats had finished their days of pulling. They lay bloated and dead in their pen, legs sticking up and the sockets of their eyes squirming with maggots. It was impossi-ble to know when Rhea had last fed and watered them, but Reynolds guessed at least a week, from the smell. *Too busy watching what goes on in that glass ball to bother, he thought. And what's she wearing that dead snake around her neck for?*

"I don't want to know," he muttered from behind his pulled-up neck-erchief. The only thing he *did* want right now was to get the hell out of here.

He spied the cart, which was painted black and overlaid with cabalis-tic designs in gold. It looked like a medicine-show wagon to Reynolds; it also looked a bit like a hearse. He seized it by the handles and dragged it out of the shed as fast as he could. Depape could do the rest, by gods. Hitch his horse to the cart and haul the old woman's stinking freight to ... where? Who knew? Eldred, maybe.

Rhea came tottering out of her hut with the drawstring bag they'd brought the ball in, but she stopped, head cocked, listening, when Rey-nolds asked his question. Jonas thought it over, then said: "Seafront to begin, I guess. Yar, that'll do for her, and this glass bauble as well, I reckon, until the party's over tomorrow."

"Aye, Seafront, I've never been there," Rhea said, moving forward again. When she reached Jonas's horse (which tried to shy away from her), she opened the bag. After a moment's further consideration, Jonas dropped the ball in. It bulged round at the bottom, making a shape like a teardrop.

Rhea wore a sly smile. "Mayhap we'll meet Thorin. If so, I might have something to show him in the Good Man's toy that'd interest him ever so much."

"If you meet him," Jonas said, getting down to help hitch Depape's horse to the black cart, "it'll be in a place where no magic is needed to see far."

She looked at him, frowning, and then the sly smile slowly resur-faced. "Why, I b'lieve our Mayor's met wiv a accident!"

"Could be," Jonas agreed.

She giggled, and soon the giggle turned into a full-throated cackle. She was still cackling as they drew out of the yard, cackling and sitting in the little black cart with its cabalistic decorations like the Queen of Black Places on her throne.

CHAPTER VIII

the ashes

Panic is highly contagious, especially in situations when nothing is known and

everything is in flux. It was the sight of Miguel, the old *mozo*, that started Susan down its greased slope. He was in the middle of Seafront's courtyard, clutching his broom of twigs against his chest and looking at the riders who passed to and fro with an expression of perplexed misery. His *sombrero* was twisted around on his back, and Susan observed with something like horror that Miguel—usually brushed and clean and neat as a pin—was wearing his *serape* inside out. There were tears on his cheeks, and as he turned this way and that, following the passing riders, trying to hile those he recognized, she thought of a child she had once seen toddle out in front of an oncoming stage. The child had been pulled back in time by his father; who would pull Miguel back?

She started for him, and a *vaquero* aboard a wild-eyed spotted roan galloped so close by her that one stirrup ticked off her hip and the horse's tail flicked her forearm. She voiced a strange-sounding little chuckle. She had been worried about Miguel and had almost been run down herself! Funny!

She looked both ways this time, started forward, then drew back again as a loaded wagon came careering around the comer, tottering on two wheels at first. What it was loaded with she couldn't see—the goods in the wagonbed were covered with a tarp -but she saw Miguel move toward it, still clutching his broom. Susan thought of the child in front of the stage again and shrieked an inarticulate cry of alarm. Miguel cringed back at the last moment and the cart flew by him, bounded and swayed across the courtyard, and disappeared out through the arch.

Miguel dropped his broom, clapped both hands to his cheeks, fell to his knees, and began to pray in a loud, lamenting voice. Susan watched him for a moment, her mouth working, and then sprinted for the stables, no longer taking care to keep against the side of the building. She had caught the disease that would grip almost all of Hambry by noon, and al-though she managed to do a fairly apt job of saddling Pylon (on any other day there would have been three stable-boys vying for the chance to help the pretty sai), any ability to think had left her by the time she heel-kicked the startled horse into a run outside the stable door.

When she rode past Miguel, still on his knees and praying to the bright sky with his hands upraised, she saw him no more than any other rider had before her.

She rode straight down the High Street, thumping her spurless heels at Pylon's sides until the big horse was fairly flying. Thoughts, questions, possible plans of action ... none of those had a place in her head as she rode. She was but vaguely aware of the people milling in the street, allowing Pylon to weave his own path through them. The only thing she was aware of was his name—*Roland, Roland, Roland!*—ringing in her head like a scream. Everything had gone upside down. The brave little *ka-tet* they had made that night at the graveyard was broken, three of its members jailed and with not long to live (if they even *were* still alive), the last member lost and confused, as crazy with terror as a bird in a barn. If her panic had held, things might have turned out in a much different fashion. But as she rode through the center of town and out the other side, her way took her toward the house she had shared with her father and her aunt. That lady had been watching for the very rider who now approached.

As Susan neared, the door flew open and Cordelia, dressed in black from throat to toe, rushed down the front walk to the street, shrieking with either horror or laughter. Perhaps both. The sight of her cut through the foreground haze of panic in Susan's mind . . . but not because she recognized her aunt.

"*Rhea!*" she cried, and drew back on the reins so violently that the horse skidded, reared, and almost tilted them over backward. That would likely have crushed the life out of his mistress, but Pylon managed to keep at least his back feet, pawing at the sky with his front ones and whinnying loudly. Susan slung an arm around his neck and hung on for dear life.

Cordelia Delgado, wearing her best black dress and a lace mantilla over her hair, stood in front of the horse as if in her own parlor, taking no notice of the hooves cutting the air less than two feet in front of her nose. In one gloved hand she held a wooden box.

Susan belatedly realized that this wasn't Rhea, but the mistake really wasn't that odd. Aunt Cord wasn't as thin as Rhea (not yet, anyway), and more neatly dressed (except for her dirty gloves—why her aunt was wearing gloves in the first place Susan didn't know, let alone why they looked so smudged), but the mad look in her eyes was horribly similar.

"Good day t'ye, Miss Oh So Young and Pretty!" Aunt Cord greeted her in a cracked, vivacious voice that made Susan's heart tremble. Aunt Cord curtsied one-handed, holding the little box curled against her chest with the other. "Where

go ye on this fine autumn day? Where go ye so speedy? To no lover's arms, that seems sure, for one's dead and the other ta'en!"

Cordelia laughed again, thin lips drawing back from big white teeth. Horse teeth, almost. Her eyes glared in the sunlight.

Her mind's broken, Susan thought. *Poor thing. Poor old thing.*

"Did thee put Dearborn up to it?" Aunt Cord asked. She crept to Py-lon's side and looked up at Susan with luminous, liquid eyes. "Thee did, didn't thee? Aye! Perhaps thee even gave him the knife he used, after runnin yer lips o'er it for good luck. Ye're in it together—why not admit it? At least admit thee's lain with that boy, for I know it's true. I saw the way he looked at ye the day ye were sitting in the window, and the way ye looked back at him!"

Susan said, "If ye'll have truth, I'll give it to ye. We're lovers. And we'll be man and wife ere Year's End."

Cordelia raised one dirty glove to the blue sky and waved it as if say-ing hello to the gods. She screamed with mingled triumph and laughter as she waved. "And t'be *wed*, she thinks! Ooooo! Ye'd no doubt drink the blood of your victims on the marriage altar, too, would ye not? Oh, wicked! It makes me weep!" But instead of weeping she laughed again, a howl of mirth into the blind blue face of the sky.

"We planned no murders," Susan said, drawing—if only in her own mind—a line of difference between the killings at Mayor's House and the trap they had hoped to spring on Parson's soldiers. "And he *did* no mur-ders. No, this is the business of your friend Jonas, I wot. His plan, his filthy work."

Cordelia plunged her hand into the box she held, and Susan under-stood at once why the gloves she wore were dirty: she had been grubbing in the stove.

"I curse thee with the ashes!" Cordelia cried, flinging a black and gritty cloud of them at Susan's leg and the hand which held Pylon's reins. *"I curse thee to darkness, both of thee! Be ye happy together, ye faith-less! Ye murderers! Ye cozeners! Ye liars! Ye fornicators! Ye lost and renounced!"*

With each cry, Cordelia Delgado threw another handful of ashes. And with each cry, Susan's mind grew clearer, colder. She held fast and al-lowed her aunt to pelt her; in fact, when Pylon, feeling the gritty rain against his side, attempted to pull away, Susan giggled him set. There were spectators now, avidly watching this old ritual of renunciation (Sheemie was among them, eyes wide and mouth quivering), but Susan barely noticed. Her mind was her own again, she had an idea of what to

do, and for that alone she supposed she owed her aunt some sort of thanks.

"I forgive ye, Aunt," she said.

The box of stove-ashes, now almost empty, tumbled from Cordelia's hands as if Susan had slapped her. "What?" she whispered. "What does thee say?"

"For what ye did to yer brother and my father," Susan said. "For what ye were a part of."

She rubbed a hand on her leg and bent with the hand held out before her. Before her aunt could pull away, Susan had wiped ashes down one of her cheeks. The smudge stood out there like a wide, dark scar. "But wear that, all the same," she said. "Wash it off if ye like, but I think ye'll wear it in yer heart yet awhile." She paused. "I think ye already do. Goodbye."

"Where does thee think thee's going?" Aunt Cord was pawing at the soot-mark on her face with one gloved hand, and when she lunged for-ward in an attempt to grasp Pylon's reins, she stumbled over the box and almost fell. It was Susan, still bent over to her aunt's side, who grasped her shoulder and held her up. Cordelia pulled back as if from the touch of an adder. "Not to him! Ye'll not go to him now, ye mad goose!"

Susan turned her horse away. "None of yer business. Aunt. This is the end between us. But mark what I say: we'll be married by Year's End. Our firstborn is already conceived."

"Thee'll be married tomorrow night if thee goes nigh him' Joined in smoke, wedded in fire, bedded in the ashes! *Bedded in the ashes*, do ye hear me?"

The madwoman advanced on her, railing, but Susan had no more time to listen. The day was fleeting. There would be time to do the things that needed doing, but only if she moved at speed.

"Goodbye," she said again, and then galloped away. Her aunt's last words followed her: *In the ashes, do ye hear me?*

3

On her way out of town along the Great Road, Susan saw riders coming toward her, and got off the highway. This would not, she felt, be a good time to meet pilgrims. There was an old granary nearby; she rode Pylon behind it, stroked his neck, murmured for him to be quiet.

It took the riders longer to reach her position than she would have expected, and when they finally got there, she saw why. Rhea was with them, sitting in a black cart covered with magical symbols. The witch had been scary when Susan had seen her on the night of the Kissing Moon, but still recognizably human; what the girl saw passing before her now, rocking from side to side in the black cart and clutching a bag in her lap, was an unsexed, sore-raddled creature that looked more like a troll than a human being. With her were the Big Coffin Hunters.

"To Seafront!" the thing in the cart screamed. "Hie you on, and at full speed! I'll sleep in Thorin's bed tonight or know the reason why! Sleep in it and piss in it, if I take a notion! Hie you on, I say!"

Depape—it was to his horse that the cart had been harnessed—turned around and looked at her with distaste and fear. "Still your mouth."

Her answer was a fresh burst of laughter. She rocked from side to side, holding a bag on her lap with one hand and pointing at Depape with the twisted, long-nailed index finger of the other. Looking at her made Susan feel weak with terror, and she felt the panic around her again, like some dark fluid that would happily drown her brain if given half a chance.

She worked against the feeling as best she could, holding onto her mind, refusing to let it turn into what it had been before and would be again if she let it—a brainless bird trapped in a barn, bashing into the walls and ignoring the open window through which it had entered.

Even when the cart was gone below the next hill and there was nothing left of them but dust hanging in the air, she could hear Rhea's wild cackling.

4

She reached the hut in the Bad Grass at one o' the clock. For a moment she just sat astride Pylon, looking at it. Had she and Roland been here hardly twenty-four hours ago? Making love and making plans? It was hard to believe, but when she dismounted and went in, the wicker basket in which she had brought them a cold meal confirmed it. It still sat upon the rickety table.

Looking at the hamper, she realized she hadn't eaten since the previous evening—a miserable supper with Hart Thorin that she'd only picked at, too aware of his eyes on her body. Well, they'd done their last crawl, hadn't they? And she'd

never have to walk down another Seafront hall-way wondering what door he was going to come bursting out of like Jack out of his box, all grabbing hands and stiff, randy prick.

Ashes, she thought. Ashes and ashes. But not us, Roland. I swear, my darling, not us.

She was frightened and tense, trying to put everything she now must do in order—a process to be followed just as there was a process to be followed when saddling a horse—but she was also sixteen and healthy. One look at the hamper and she was ravenous.

She opened it, saw there were ants on the two remaining cold beef sandwiches, brushed them off, and gobbled the sandwiches down. The bread had gotten rather stiff, but she hardly noticed. There was a half jar of sweet cider and part of a cake, as well.

When she had finished everything, she went to the north corner of the hut and moved the hides someone had begun to cure and then lost interest in. There was a hollow beneath. Within it, wrapped in soft leather, were Roland's guns.

If things go badly, thee must come here and take them west to Gilead. Find my € father. €

With faint but genuine curiosity, Susan wondered if Roland had really expected she would ride blithely off to Gilead with his unborn child in her belly while he and his friends were roasted, screaming and red-handed, on the Reap-Night bonfire.

She pulled one of the guns out of its holster. It took her a moment or two to see how to get the revolver open, but then the cylinder rolled out and she saw that each chamber was loaded. She snapped it back into place and checked the other one.

She concealed them in the blanket-roll behind her saddle, just as Roland had, then mounted up and headed east again. But not toward town. Not yet. She had one more stop to make first.

5

At around two o' the clock, word that Fran Lengyll would be speaking at the Town Gathering Hall began to sweep through the town of Mejis. No one could have said

where this news (it was too firm and specific to be a rumor) began, and no one much cared; they simply passed it on.

By three o' the clock, the Gathering Hall was full, and two hundred or more stood outside, listening as Lengyll's brief address was relayed back to them in whispers. Coral Thorin, who had begun passing the news of Lengyll's impending appearance at the Travellers' Rest, was not there. She knew what Lengyll was going to say; had, in fact, supported Jonas's argument that it should be as simple and direct as possible. There was no need for rabble-rousing; the townsfolk would be a mob by sundown of

Reaping Day, a mob always picked its own leaders, and it always picked the right ones.

Lengyll spoke with his hat held in one hand and a silver reap-charm hanging from the front of his vest. He was brief, he was rough, and he was convincing. Most folks in the crowd had known him all their lives, and didn't doubt a word he said. Hart Thorin and Kimba Rimer had been murdered by Dearborn, Heath, and Stockworth, Lengyll told the crowd of men in denim and women in faded gingham. The crime had come home to them because of a certain item—a bird's skull—left in Mayor Thorin's lap.

Murmurs greeted this. Many of Lengyll's listeners had seen the skull, either mounted on the horn of Cuthbert's saddle or worn jauntily around his neck. They had laughed at his prankishness. Now they thought of how he had laughed back at them, and realized he must have been laughing at a different joke all along. Their faces darkened.

The weapon used to slit the Chancellor's throat, Lengyll continued, had belonged to Dearborn. The three young men had been taken that morning as they prepared to flee Mejis. Their motivations were not entirely clear, but they were likely after horses. If so, they would be for John Farson, who was known to pay well for good nags, and in cash. They were, in other words, traitors to their own lands and to the cause of the Affiliation.

Lengyll had planted Brian Hockey's son Rufus three rows back. Now, exactly on time, Rufus Hookey shouted out: "Has they confessed?"

"Aye," Lengyll said. "Confessed both murders, and spoke it most proud, so they did."

A louder murmur at this, almost a rumble. It ran backward like a wave to the

outside, where it went from mouth to mouth: most proud, most proud, they had murdered in the dark of night and spoke it most proud.

Mouths were tucked down. Fists clenched.

"Dearborn said that Jonas and his friends had caught on to what they were doing, and took the word to Rimer. They killed Chancellor Rimer to shut him up while they finished their chores, and Thorin in case Rimer had passed word on."

This made little sense, Latigo had argued. Jonas had smiled and nod-ded. *No*, he had said, *not a mite of sense, but it doesn't matter.*

Lengyll was prepared to answer questions, but none were asked. There was only the murmur, the dark looks, the muted click and clink of reap-charms as people shifted on their feet.

The boys were in jail. Lengyll made no statement concerning what would happen to them next, and once again he was not asked. He said that some of the activities scheduled for the next day—the games, the rides, the turkey-run, the pumpkin-carving contest, the pig-scramble, the rid-dling competition, and the dance—had been cancelled out of respect for the tragedy. The things that really mattered would go on, of course, as they always had and must: the cattle and livestock judging, the horse-pull, the sheep-shearing, the stockline meetings, and the auctions: horse, pig, cow, sheep. And the bonfire at moonrise. The bonfire and the burning of the guys. *Charyou tree* was the end of Reaping Fair-Day, and had been since time out of mind. Nothing would stop it save the end of the world.

"The bonfire will bum and the stuffy-guys will bum on it," Eldred Jonas had told Lengyll. "That's all you're to say. It's all you *need* to say."

And he'd been right, Lengyll saw. It was on every face. Not just the determination to do right, but a kind of dirty eagerness. There were old ways, old rites of which the red-handed stuffy-guys were one surviving remnant. There were *los ceremoniosos*: *Charyou tree*. It had been genera-tions since they had been practiced (except, every once and again, in se-cret places out in the hills), but sometimes when the world moved on, it came back to where it had been.

Keep it brief, Jonas had said, and it had been fine advice, fine advice indeed. He wasn't a man Lengyll would have wanted around in more peaceful times, but a useful one in times such as these.

"Gods give you peace," he said now, stepping back and folding his arms with his hands on his shoulders to show he had finished. "Gods give us all peace."

"Long days and peaceful nights," they returned in a low, automatic chorus. And then they simply turned and left, to go wherever folks went on the afternoon before Reaping. For a good many of them, Lengyll knew, it would be the Travellers' Rest or the Bayview Hotel. He raised a hand and mopped his brow. He hated to be out in front of people, and never so much as today, but he thought it had gone well. Very well, indeed.

6

The crowd streamed away without speaking. Most, as Lengyll had fore-seen, headed for the saloons. Their way took them past the jail, but few looked at it... and those few who did, did so in tiny, furtive glances. The porch was empty (save for a plump red-handed stuffy sprawled in Sheriff Avery's rocker), and the door stood ajar, as it usually did on warm and sunny afternoons. The boys were inside, no doubt about that, but there was no sign that they were being guarded with any particular zeal.

If the men passing on their way downhill to the Rest and the Bayview had banded together into one group, they could have taken Roland and his friends with no trouble whatsoever. Instead, they went by with their heads down, walking stolidly and with no conversation to where the drinks were waiting. Today was not the day. Nor tonight.

Tomorrow, however—

7

Not too far from the Bar K, Susan saw something on the Barony's long slope of grazing-land that made her rein up and simply sit in the saddle with her mouth open. Below her and much farther east of her position, at least three miles away, a band of a dozen cowboys had rounded up the biggest herd of Drop-runners she had ever seen: perhaps four hundred head in all. They ran lazily, going where the *vaqs* pointed them with no trouble.

Probably think they're going in for the winter, Susan thought. But they weren't headed in toward the ranches running along the crest of the Drop; the herd, so large it flowed on the grass like a cloud-shadow, was headed west, toward

Hanging Rock.

Susan had believed everything Roland said, but this made it true in a personal way, one she could relate directly to her dead father. Horses, of courses.

"You bastards," she murmured. "You horse-thieving *bastards*." She turned Pylon and rode for the burned-out ranch. To her right, her shadow was growing long. Overhead, the Demon Moon glimmered ghostly in the daylight sky.

8

She had worried that Jonas might have left men at the Bar K—although why he would've she didn't really know, and the fear turned out to be groundless in any case. The ranch was as empty as it had been for the five or six years between the fire that had put paid to it and the arrival of the boys from In-World. She could see signs of that morning's confrontation, however, and when she went into the bunkhouse where the three of them had slept, she at once saw the gaping hole in the floorboards. Jonas had neglected to close it up again after taking Alain's and Cuthbert's guns.

She went down the aisle between the bunks, dropped to one knee, and looked into the hole. Nothing. Yet she doubted if what she had come for had been there in the first place—the hole wasn't big enough.

She paused, looking at the three cots. Which was Roland's? She sup-posed she could find out—her nose would tell her, she knew the smell of his hair and skin very well—but she thought she would do better to put such soft impulses behind her. What she needed now was to be hard and quick—to move without pausing or looking back.

Ashes, Aunt Cord whispered in her head, almost too faintly to hear. Susan shook her head impatiently, as if to clear that voice away, and walked out back.

There was nothing behind the bunkhouse, nothing behind the privy or to either side of it. She went around to the back of the old cook-shack next, and there she found what she'd come looking for, placed casually and with no attempt at concealment: the two small barrels she had last seen slung over Caprichoso's back. The thought of the mule summoned the thought of Sheemie, looking down at her from his man's height and with his hopeful boy's face. *I'd like to take a fin de ano kiss from ye, so I would.*

Sheemie, whose life had been saved by "Mr. Arthur Heath." Sheemie, who had risked the wrath of the witch by giving Cuthbert the note meant for her aunt. Sheemie, who had brought these barrels up here. They had been smeared with soot to partially camouflage them, and Susan got some on her hands and the sleeves of her shirt as she took off the tops— more ashes. But the firecrackers were still inside: the round, fist-sized big-bangers and the smaller ladyfingers. She took plenty of both, stuffing her pockets until they bulged and carrying more in her arms. She stowed them in her saddlebags, then looked up at the sky. Three-thirty. She wanted to get back to Hambry no earlier than twilight, and that meant at least an hour to wait. There was a little time to be soft, after all. Susan went back into the bunkhouse and found the bed which had been Roland's easily enough. She knelt beside it like a child saying bed-time prayers, put her face against his pillow, and inhaled deeply. "Roland," she said, her voice muffled. "How I love thee. How I love thee, dear." She lay on his bed and looked toward the window, watching the light drain away. Once she raised her hands in front of her eyes, examining the barrel-soot on her fingers. She thought of going to the pump in front of the cookhouse and washing, but decided not to. Let it stay. They were *ka-tet*, one from many—strong in purpose and strong in love. Let the ashes stay, and do their worst.

9

My Susie has'er faults, but she's always on time. Pat Delgado used to say. *Fearful € punctual, that girl.* €

It was true on the night before Reap. She skirted her own house and rode up to the Travellers' Rest not ten minutes after the sun had finally gone behind the hills, filling the High Street with thick mauve shadows.

The street was eerily deserted, considering it was the night before Reap; the band which had played in Green Heart every night for the last week was silent; there were periodic rattles of firecrackers, but no yelling, laughing children; only a few of the many colored lamps had been lit.

Stuffy-guys seemed to peer from every shadow-thickened porch. Susan shivered at the sight of their blank white-cross eyes.

Doings at the Rest were similarly odd. The hitching-rails were crowded (even more horses had been tied at the rails of the mercantile across the street) and light shone from every window—so many windows and so many lights that the inn looked like a vast ship on a darkened sea—but there was none of the usual riot and jubilation, all set to the jagtime tunes pouring out of Sheb's piano.

She found she could imagine the customers inside all too well— a hundred men, maybe more—simply standing around and drinking. Not talking, not laughing, not chucking the dice down Satan's Alley and cheering or groaning at the result. No bottoms stroked or pinched; no Reap-kisses stolen; no arguments started out of loose mouths and finished with hard fists. Just men drinking, not three hundred yards from where her love and his friends were locked up. The men who were here wouldn't do anything tonight but drink, though. And if she was lucky . . . brave and lucky...

As she drew Pylon up in front of the saloon with a murmured word, a shape rose out of the shadows. She tensed, and then the first orangey light of the rising moon caught Sheemie's face. She relaxed again—even laughed a little, mostly at herself. He was a part of their *ka-tet*; she knew he was. Was it surprising that he should know, as well?

"Susan," he murmured, taking off his *sombrero* and holding it against his chest. "I been waiting for'ee."

"Why?" she asked.

" 'Cause I knew ye'd come." He looked back over his shoulder at the Rest, a black bulk spraying crazy light toward every point of the compass. "We're going to let Arthur and them free, ain't we?"

"I hope so," she said.

"We have to. The folks in there, they don't talk, but they don't *have* to talk. I knows, Susan, daughter of Pat. *I knows.*"

She supposed he did. "Is Coral inside?"

Sheemie shook his head. "Gone up to Mayor's House. She told Stanley she was going to help lay out the bodies for the funeral day after to-morrow, but I don't think she'll be here for the funeral. I think the Big Coffin Hunters is going and she'll go with 'em." He raised a hand and swiped at his leaking eyes. "Your mule, Sheemie—" "All saddled, and I got the long halter." She looked at him, open-mouthed. "How did ye know—" "Same way I knew ye'd be coming, Susan-sai. I

just knew." He shrugged, then pointed vaguely. "Capi's around the back. I tied him to the cook's pump."

"That's good." She fumbled in the saddlebag where she had put the smaller firecrackers. "Here. Take some of these. Do'ee have a sulfur or two?"

"Aye." He asked no questions, simply stuffed the firecrackers into his front pocket. She, however, who had never been through the bat-wing doors of the Travellers' Rest in her whole life, had another question for him.

"What do they do with their coats and hats and *scrapes* when they come in, Sheemie? They must take em off; drinking's warm work."

"Oh, aye. They puts em on a long table just inside the door. Some fights about whose is whose when they're ready to go home."

She nodded, thinking hard and fast. He stood before her, still holding his *sombrero* against his chest, letting her do what he could not ... at least not in the conventionally understood way. At last she raised her head again.

"Sheemie, if you help me, you're done in Hambry ... done in Mejis ... done in the Outer Arc. You go with us if we get away. You have to under-stand that. Do you?" She saw he did; his face fairly shone with the idea. "Aye, Susan! Go with you and Will Dearborn and Richard Stockworth and my best friend, Mr. Arthur Heath! Go to In-World! We'll see buildings and statues and women in gowns like fairy princesses and—"

"If we're caught, we'll be killed."

He stopped smiling, but his eyes didn't waver. "Aye, killed we'll be if ta'en, most like."

"Will you still help me?"

"Capi's all saddled," he repeated. Susan reckoned that was answer enough. She took hold of the hand pressing the *sombrero* to Sheemie's chest (the hat's crown was pretty well crushed, and not for the first time). She bent, holding Sheemie's fingers with one hand and the horn of her saddle with the other, and kissed his cheek. He smiled up at her.

"We'll do our best, won't we?" she asked him.

"Aye, Susan daughter of Pat. We'll do our best for our friends. Our very best."

"Yes. Now listen, Sheemie. Very carefully."

She began to talk, and Sheemie listened.

Twenty minutes later, as the bloated orange moon struggled above the buildings of the town like a pregnant woman climbing a steep hill, a lone *vaquero* led a mule along Hill Street in the direction of the Sheriff's office. This end of Hill Street was a pit of shadows. There was a little light around Green Heart, but even the park (which would have been thronged, noisy, and brilliantly lit in any other year) was mostly empty. Nearly all the booths were closed, and of those few that remained open, only the fortune-teller was doing any business. Tonight all fortunes were bad, but still they came—don't they always?

The *vaquero* was wearing a heavy serape; if this particular cowboy had the breasts of a woman, they were concealed. The *vaq* wore a large, sweat-stained *sombrero*; if this cowboy had the face of a woman, it was likewise concealed. Low, from beneath that hat's broad brim, came a voice singing "Careless Love."

The mule's small saddle was buried under the large bundle which had been roped to it—cloth or clothes of some kind, it might have been, although the deepening shadows made it impossible to say for sure. Most amusing of all was what hung around the mule's neck like some peculiar reape-charm: two *sombreros* and a drover's hat strung on a length of rope.

As the *vaq* neared the Sheriff's office, the singing ceased. The place might have been deserted if not for the single dim light shining through one window. In the porch rocker was a comical stuffy-guy wearing one of Herk Avery's embroidered vests and a tin star. There were no guards; absolutely no sign that the three most hated men in Mejis were sequestered within. And now, very faintly, the *vaquero* could hear the strum of a guitar.

It was blotted out by a thin rattle of firecrackers. The *vaq* looked over one shoulder and saw a dim figure. It waved. The *vaquero* nodded, waved back, then tied the mule to the hitching-post—the same one where Roland and his friends had tied their horses when they had come to introduce themselves to the Sheriff, on a summer day so long ago.

The door opened—no one had bothered to lock it—while Dave Hollis was trying,

for about the two hundredth time, to play the bridge of "Cap-tain Mills, You Bastard." Across from him, Sheriff Avery sat rocked back in his desk chair with his hands laced together on his paunch. The room flickered with mild orange lamplight.

"You keep it up, Deputy Dave, and there won't have to be any execu-tion," Cuthbert Allgood said. He was standing at the door of one of the cells with his hands wrapped around the bars. "We'll kill ourselves. In self-defense."

"Shut up, maggot," Sheriff Avery said. He was half-dozing in the wake of a four-chop dinner, thinking of how he would tell his brother (and his brother's wife, who was killing pretty) in the next Barony about this heroic day. He would be modest, but he would still get it across to them that he'd played a central role; that if not for him, these three young *ladrones* might have—

"Just don't sing," Cuthbert said to Dave. "I'll confess to the murder of Arthur Eld himself if you just don't sing."

To Bert's left, Alain was sitting cross-legged on his bunk. Roland was lying on his with his hands behind his head, looking up at the ceiling. But at the moment the door's latch clicked, he swung to a sitting position. As if he'd only been waiting. "That'll be Bridger," Deputy Dave said, gladly putting his guitar aside. He hated this duty and couldn't wait to be relieved. Heath's jokes were the worst. That he could continue to joke in the face of what was go-ing to happen to them tomorrow. "I think it's likely one *of them*," Sheriff Avery said, meaning the Big Coffin Hunters.

In fact, it was neither. It was a cowboy all but buried in a *serape* that looked much too big for him (the ends actually dragged on the boards as he clumped in and shut the door behind him), and wearing a hat that came way down over his eyes. To Herk Avery, the fellow looked like some-body's idea of a cowboy stuffy.

"Say, stranger!" he said, beginning to smile ... for this was surely someone's joke, and Herk Avery could take a joke as well as any man. Especially after four chops and a mountain of mashed. "Howdy! What business do ye—"

The hand which hadn't closed the door had been under the *scrape*. When it came out, it was clumsily holding a gun all three of the prisoners recognized at once. Avery stared at it, his smile slowly fading. His hands unlaced themselves. His feet, which had been propped up on his desk, came down to the floor.

"Whoa, partner," he said slowly. "Let's talk about it."

"Get the keys off the wall and unlock the cells," the *vaq* said in a hoarse, artificially deep voice. Outside, unnoticed by all save Roland, more firecrackers rattled in a dry, popping string.

"I can't hardly do that," Avery said, easing open the bottom drawer of his desk with his foot. There were several guns, left over from that morning, inside. "Now, I don't know if that thing's loaded, but I don't hardly think a traildog like you—" The newcomer pointed the gun at the desk and pulled the trigger. The report was deafening in the little room, but Roland thought—hoped—that with the door shut, it would sound like just another firecracker. Bigger than some, smaller than others. *Good girl*, he thought. *Oh, good girl—but be careful. For gods' sake, Sue, be careful.*

All three of them standing in a line at the cell doors now, eyes wide and mouths tight.

The bullet struck the corner of the Sheriff's rolltop and tore off a huge splinter. Avery screamed, tilted back in his chair again, and went sprawl-ing. His foot remained hooked under the drawer-pull; the drawer shot out and overturned, spilling three ancient firearms across the board floor.

"Susan, look out!" Cuthbert shouted, and then: "No, Dave!"

At the end of his life, it was duty and not fear of the Big Coffin Hunters which propelled Dave Hollis, who had hoped to be Sheriff of Mejis himself when Avery retired (and, he sometimes told his wife, Judy, a better one than Fatso had ever dreamed of being). He forgot that he had serious questions about the way the boys had been taken as well as about what they might or might not have done. All he thought of then was that they were prisoners o' the Barony, and such would not be taken if he could help it.

He lunged for the cowboy in the too-big clothes, meaning to tear the gun out of his hands. And shoot him with it, if necessary.

12

Susan was staring at the yellow blaze of fresh wood on the corner of the Sheriff's desk, forgetting everything in her amazement—so much damage inflicted by the single twitch of a finger!—when Cuthbert's desperate shout awakened her to her position.

She shrank back against the wall, avoiding Dave's first swipe at the oversized *serape*, and, without thinking, pulled the trigger again. There was another loud explosion, and Dave Hollis—a young man only two years older than she herself—was flung backward with a smoking hole in his shirt between two points of the star he wore. His eyes were wide and unbelieving. His monocle lay by one outstretched hand on its length of black silk ribbon. One of his feet struck his guitar and knocked it to the floor with a thrum nearly as musical as the chords he had been trying to make.

"Dave," she whispered. "Oh Dave, I'm sorry, what did I do?"

Dave tried once to get up, then collapsed forward on his face. The hole going into the front of him was small, but the one she was looking at now, the one coming out the back, was huge and hideous, all black and red and charred edges of cloth ... as if she had run him through with a blazing hot poker instead of shooting him with a gun, which was supposed to be merciful and civilized and was clearly neither one.

"Dave," she whispered. "Dave, I..."

"*Susan look out!*" Roland shouted.

It was Avery. He scuttled forward on his hands and knees, seized her around the calves, and yanked her feet out from under her. She came down on her bottom with a tooth-rattling crash and was face to face with him—his frog-eyed, large-pored face, his garlic-smelling hole of a mouth.

"Gods, ye're a *girl*," he whispered, and reached for her. She pulled the trigger of Roland's gun again, setting the front of her *serape* on fire and blowing a hole in the ceiling. Plaster dust drifted down. Avery's ham sized hands settled around her throat, cutting off her wind. Somewhere far away, Roland shrieked her name.

She had one more chance.

Maybe.

One's enough, Sue, her father spoke inside of her head. *One's all ye need, my dear*. She cocked Roland's pistol with the side of her thumb, socked the muzzle deep into the flab hanging from the underside of Sheriff Herk Avery's head, and pulled the trigger.

The mess was considerable.

Avery's head dropped into her lap, as heavy and wet as a raw roast. Above it, she could feel growing heat. At the bottom edge of her vision was the yellow flicker of fire.

"On the desk!" Roland shouted, yanking the door of his cell so hard it rattled in its frame. "Susan, the water-pitcher! For your father's sake!"

She rolled Avery's head out of her lap, got to her feet, and staggered to the desk with the front of the *serape* burning. She could smell its charred stench and was grateful in some far corner of her mind that she'd had time, while waiting for dusk, to tie her hair behind her.

The pitcher was almost full, but not with water; she could smell the sweet-sour tang of *graf*. She doused herself with it, and there was a brisk hissing as the liquid hit the flames. She stripped the *serape* off (the over-sized *sombrero* came with it) and threw it on the floor. She looked at Dave again, a boy she had grown up with, one she might even have kissed behind the door of Hockey's, once upon an antique time.

"Susan!" It was Roland's voice, harsh and urgent. "The keys! Hurry!"

Susan grabbed the keyring from the nail on the wall. She went to Roland's cell first and thrust the ring blindly through the bars. The air was thick with smells of gunsmoke, burned wool, blood. Her stomach clenched helplessly at every breath. Roland picked the right key, reached back through the bars with it, and plunged it into the lockbox. A moment later he was out, and hugging her roughly as her tears broke. A moment after that, Cuthbert and Alain were out, as well.

"You're an angel!" Alain said, hugging her himself.

"Not I," she said, and began to cry harder. She thrust the gun at Roland. It felt filthy in her hand; she never wanted to touch one again. "Him and me played together when we were berries. He was one of the good ones—never a braid-puller or a bully—and he grew up a good one. Now I've ended him, and who'll tell his wife?"

Roland took her back into his arms and held her there for a moment. "You did what you had to. If not him, then us. Does thee not know it?"

She nodded against his chest. "Avery, him I don't mind so much, but Dave . . ."

"Come on," Roland said. "Someone might recognize the gunshots for what they were. Was it Sheemie throwing firecrackers?"

She nodded. "I've got clothes for you. Hats and *scrapes*."

Susan hurried back to the door, opened it, peeked out in either direction, then slipped into the growing dark.

Cuthbert took the charred *serape* and put it over Deputy Dave's face. "Tough luck, partner," he said. "You got caught in between, didn't you? I reckon you wasn't so bad."

Susan came back in, burdened with the stolen gear which had been tied to Capi's saddle. Sheemie was already off on his next errand without having to be told. If the inn-boy was a halfwit, she'd known a lot of folks in her time who were running on quarters and eighths.

"Where'd you get this stuff?" Alain asked.

"The Travellers' Rest. And I didn't. Sheemie did." She held the hats out. "Come on, hurry."

Cuthbert took the headgear and passed it out. Roland and Alain had already slipped into the *scrapes*; with the hats added and pulled well down over their faces, they could have been any Drop-*vaqs* in Barony.

"Where are we going?" Alain asked as they stepped out onto the porch. The street was still dark and deserted at this end; the gunshots had attracted no attention.

"Hockey's, to start with," Susan said. "That's where your horses are."

They went down the street together in a little group of four. Capi was gone; Sheemie had taken the mule along. Susan's heart was thudding rapidly and she could feel sweat standing out on her brow, but she still felt cold. Whether or no what she had done was murder, she had ended two lives this evening, and crossed a line that could never be recrossed in the other direction. She had done it for Roland, for her love, and simply knowing she could have done no different **now** offered some consolation.

Be happy together, ye faithless, ye cozeners, ye murderers. I curse thee with the € ashes. €

Susan seized Roland's hand, and when he squeezed, she squeezed back. And as € she looked up at Demon Moon, its wicked face now drain-ing from choleric red-€ orange to silver, she thought that when she had pulled the trigger on poor, earnest € Dave Hollis, she had paid for her love with the dearest currency of all—had paid € with her soul. If he left her now, her aunt's curse would be fulfilled, for only ashes € would remain. €

CHAPTER IX

REAPING

1

As they stepped into the stable, which was lit by one dim gas lamp, a shadow moved out of one of the stalls. Roland, who had belted on both guns, now drew them. Sheemie looked at him with an uncertain smile, holding a stirrup in one hand. Then the smile broadened, his eyes flashed with happiness, and he ran toward them.

Roland bolstered his guns and made ready to embrace the boy, but Sheemie ran past him and threw himself into Cuthbert's arms.

"Whoa, whoa," Cuthbert said, first staggering back comically and then lifting Sheemie off his feet. "You like to knock me over, boy!"

"She got ye out!" Sheemie cried. "Knew she would, so I did! Good old Susan!" Sheemie looked around at Susan, who stood beside Roland. She was still pale, but now seemed composed. Sheemie turned back to Cuthbert and planted a kiss directly in the center of Bert's forehead.

"Whoa!" Bert said again. "What's that for?"

" 'Cause I love you, good old Arthur Heath! You saved my life!"

"Well, maybe I did," Cuthbert said, laughing in an embarrassed way (his borrowed sombrero, too large to begin with, now sat comically askew on his head), "but if we don't get a move on, I won't have saved it for long."

"Horses are all saddled," Sheemie said. "Susan told me to do it and I did. I did it just right. I just have to put this stirrup on Mr. Richard Stock-worth's horse,

because the one on there's 'bout worn through."

"That's a job for later," Alain said, taking the stirrup. He put it aside, then turned to Roland. "Where do we go?"

Roland's first thought was that they should return to the Thorin mausoleum.

Sheemie reacted with instant horror. "The boneyard? And with De-mon Moon at the full?" He shook his head so violently that his *sombrero* came off and his hair flew from side to side. "They're dead in there, sai Dearborn, but if ye tease em during the time of the Demon, they's apt to get up and walk!"

"It's no good, anyway," Susan said. "The women of the town'll be lining the way from Seafront with flowers, and filling the mausoleum, too. Olive will be in charge, if she's able, but my aunt and Coral are apt to be in the company. Those aren't ladies we want to meet."

"All right," Roland said. "Let's mount up and ride. Think about it, Susan. You too, Sheemie. We want a place where we can hide up until dawn, at least, and it should be a place we can get to in less than an hour. Off the Great Road, and in any direction from Hambry but northwest."

"Why not northwest?" Alain asked.

"Because that's where we're going now. We've got a job to do ... and we're going to let them know we're doing it. Eldred Jonas most of all." He offered a thin blade of smile. "I want him to know the game is over. No more Castles. The *real* gunslingers are here. Let's see if he can deal with them."

2

An hour later, with the moon well above the trees, Roland's *ka-tet* arrived at the Citgo oilpatch. They rode out parallel to the Great Road for safety's sake, but, as it happened, the caution was wasted: they saw not one rider on the road, going in either direction. *It's as if Reaping's been cancelled this year*, Susan thought . . . then she thought of the red-handed stuffies, and shivered. They would have painted Roland's hands red tomorrow night, and still would, if they were caught. *Not just him, either. All of us.*

Sheemie, too.

They left the horses (and Caprichoso, who had trotted ill-temperedly but nimbly behind them on a tether) tied to some long-dead pumping equipment in the

southeastern corner of the patch, and then walked slowly toward the working derricks, which were clustered in the same area. They spoke in whispers when they spoke at all. Roland doubted if that was necessary, but whispers here seemed natural enough. To Roland, Citgo was far spookier than the graveyard, and while he doubted that the dead in that latter place awoke even when Old Demon was full, there were some *very* unquiet corpses here, squalling zombies that stood rusty-weird in the moonlight with their pistons going up and down like marching feet. Roland led them into the active part of the patch, nevertheless, past a sign which read how's your hardhat? and another reading we produce oil, we refine safety. They stopped at the foot of a derrick grinding so loudly that Roland had to shout in order to be heard.

"Sheemie! Give me a couple of those big-bangers!"

Sheemie had taken a pocketful from Susan's saddlebag and now handed a pair of them over. Roland took Bert by the arm and pulled him forward. There was a square of rusty fencing around the derrick, and when the boys tried to climb it, the horizontals snapped like old bones. They looked at each other in the running shadows combined of machinery and moonlight, nervous and amused.

Susan twitched Roland's arm. *"Be careful!"* she shouted over the rhythmic *whumpa-whumpa-whumpa* of the derrick machinery. She didn't look frightened, he saw, only excited and alert.

He grinned, pulled her forward, and kissed the lobe of her ear. "Be ready to run," he whispered. "If we do this right, there's going to be a new candle here at Citgo. A hellacious big one."

He and Cuthbert ducked under the lowest strut of the rusty derrick tower and stood next to the equipment, wincing at the cacophony. Roland wondered that it hadn't torn itself apart years ago. Most of the works were housed in rusty metal blocks, but he could see a gigantic turning shaft of some kind, gleaming with oil that must be supplied by automated jets. Up this close, there was a gassy smell that reminded him of the jet that flared rhythmically on the other side of the oilpatch.

"Giant-farts!" Cuthbert shouted.

"What?"

"I said it smells like . . . aw, never mind! Let's do it if-we can ... can we? "

Roland didn't know. He walked toward the machinery crying out beneath metal cowls which were painted a faded, rusting green. Bert followed with some

reluctance. The two of them slid into a short aisle, smelly and baking hot, that took them almost directly beneath the derrick. Ahead of them, the shaft at the end of the piston turned steadily, shedding oily teardrops down its smooth sides. Beside it was a curved pipe—almost surely an overflow pipe, Roland thought. An occasional drop of crude oil fell from its lip, and there was a black puddle on the ground beneath. He pointed at it, and Cuthbert nodded.

Shouting would do no good in here; the world was a roaring, squeal-ing din. Roland curled one hand around his friend's neck and pulled Cuth-bert's ear to his lips; he held a big-bang up in front of Bert's eyes with the other.

"Light it and run," he said. "I'll hold it, give you as much time as I can. That's for my benefit as much as for yours. I want a clear path back through that machinery, do you understand?"

Cuthbert nodded against Roland's lips, then turned the gunslinger's head so he could speak in the same fashion. "What if there's enough gas here to bum the air when I make a spark?"

Roland stepped back. Raised his palms in a "How-do-I-know?" ges-ture. Cuthbert laughed and drew out a box of sulfur matches which he had scooped off Avery's desk before leaving. He asked with his eyebrows if Roland was ready. Roland nodded.

The wind was blowing hard, but under the derrick the surrounding machinery cut it off and the flame from the sulfur rose straight. Roland held out the big-banger, and had a momentary, painful memory of his mother: how she had hated these things, how she had always been sure that he would lose an eye or a finger to one. Cuthbert tapped his chest above his heart and kissed his palm in the universal gesture of good luck. Then he touched the flame to the fuse. It began to sputter. Bert turned, pretended to bang off a covered block of machinery—that was Bert, Roland thought; he would joke on the gallows—and then dashed back down the short corridor they'd used to get here.

Roland held the round firework as long as he dared, then lobbed it into the overflow pipe. He winced as he turned away, half-expecting what Bert was afraid of: that the very air would explode. It didn't. He ran down the short aisle, came into the clear, and saw Cuthbert standing just outside the broken bit of fencing. Roland flapped both hands at him—*Go, you idiot, go!*—and then the world blew up behind him.

The sound was a deep, belching thud that seemed to shove his eardrums inward and suck the breath out of his throat. The ground rolled under his feet like a wave under a boat, and a large, warm hand planted it-self in the center of his back and shoved him forward. He thought he ran with it for a step—maybe even two or three steps—and then he was lifted off his feet and hurled at the fence, where Cuthbert was no longer stand-ing; Cuthbert was sprawled on his back, staring up at something behind Roland. The boy's eyes were wide and wondering; his mouth hung open. Roland could see all this very well, because Citgo was now as bright as in full daylight. They had lit their own Reaping bonfire, it seemed, a night early and much brighter than the one in town could ever hope to be.

He went skidding on his knees to where Cuthbert lay, and grabbed him under one arm. From behind them came a vast, ripping roar, and now chunks of metal began to fall around them. They got up and ran toward where Alain stood in front of Susan and Sheemie, trying to protect them.

Roland took a quick look back over his shoulder and saw that the re-mains of the derrick—about half of it still stood—were glowing blackish red, like a heated horseshoe, around a flaring yellow torch that ran per-haps a hundred and fifty feet into the sky. It was a start. He didn't know how many other derricks they could fire before folk began arriving from town, but he was determined to do as many as possible, no matter what the risks might be. Blowing up the tankers at Hanging Rock was only half the job. Farson's *source* had to be wiped out.

Further firecrackers dropped down further overflow pipes turned out not to be necessary. There was a network of interconnected pipes under the oilpatch, most filled with natural gas that had leaked in through an-cient, decaying seals. Roland and Cuthbert had no more than reached the others when there was a fresh explosion, and a fresh tower of flame erupted from a derrick to the right of the one they had set afire. A moment later, a third derrick—this one sixty full yards away from the first two— exploded with a dragon's roar. The ironwork tore free of its anchoring concrete pillars like a tooth pulled from a decayed gum. It rose on a cush-ion of blazing blue and yellow, attained a height of perhaps seventy feet, then heeled over and came crashing back down, spewing sparks in every direction. Another. Another. And yet another.

The five young people stood in their comer, stunned, holding their hands up to shield their eyes from the glare. Now the oilpatch flared like a birthday cake, and

the heat baking toward them was enormous.

"Gods be kind," Alain whispered.

If they lingered here much longer, Roland realized, they would be popped like corn. There were the horses to consider, too; they were well away from the main focus of the explosions, but there was no guarantee that the focus would stay where it was; already he saw two derricks that hadn't even been working engulfed in flames. The horses would be terrified.

Hell, *he* was terrified.

"Come on!" he shouted.

They ran for the horses through shifting yellow-orange brilliance.

3

At first Jonas thought it was going on in his own head—that the explosions were part of their lovemaking.

Lovemaking, yar. Lovemaking, horseshit. He and Coral made love no more than donkeys did sums. But it was *something*. Oh yes indeed it was.

He'd been with passionate women before, ones who took you into a kind of oven-place and then held you there, staring with greedy intensity as they pumped their hips, but until Coral he'd never been with a woman that sparked such a powerfully harmonic chord in himself. With sex, he had always been the kind of man who took it when it came and forgot it when it didn't. But with Coral he only wanted to take it, take it, and take it some more. When they were together they made love like cats or ferrets, twisting and hissing and clawing; they bit at each other and cursed at each other, and so far none of it was even close to enough. When he was with her, Jonas sometimes felt as if he were being fried in sweet oil.

Tonight there had been a meeting with the Horsemen's Association, which had pretty much become the Farson Association in these latter days. Jonas had brought them up to date, had answered their idiotic questions, and had made sure they understood what they'd be doing the next day. With that done, he had checked on Rhea, who had been installed in Kimba Rimer's old suite. She hadn't even noticed Jonas peering in at her. She sat in Rimer's high-ceilinged, book-lined study—behind Rimer's ironwood desk, in Rimer's upholstered chair, looking as out of place as a whore's bloomers on a church altar. On Rimer's desk was the

Wizard's Rainbow. She was passing her hands back and forth above it and mutter-ing rapidly under her breath, but the ball remained dark.

Jonas had locked her in and had gone to Coral. She had been waiting for him in the parlor where tomorrow's Conversational would have been held. There were plenty of bedrooms in that wing, but it was to her dead brother's that she had led him ... and not by accident, either, Jonas was sure. There they made love in the canopied bed Hart Thorin would never share with his gilly.

It was fierce, as it had always been, and Jonas was approaching his or-gasm when the first oil derrick blew. *Christ, she's something*, he thought. *There's never in the whole damned world been a woman like—*

Then two more explosions, in rapid succession, and Coral froze for a moment beneath him before beginning to thrust her hips again. "Citgo," she said in a hoarse, panting voice.

"Yar," he growled, and began to thrust with her. He had lost all inter-est in making love, but they had reached the point where it was impossi-ble to stop, even under threat of death or dismemberment.

Two minutes later he was striding, naked, toward Thorin's little lick of a balcony, his half-erect penis wagging from side to side ahead of him like some halfwit's idea of a magic wand. Coral was a step behind him, as naked as he was.

"Why now?" she burst out as Jonas thrust open the balcony door. "I could have come three more times!"

Jonas ignored her. The countryside looking northwest was a moon-gilded darkness . . . except where the oilpatch was. There he saw a fierce yellow core of light. It was spreading and brightening even as he watched; one thudding explosion after another hammered across the intervening miles.

He felt a curious darkening in his mind—that feeling had been there ever since the brat, Dearborn, by the some febrile leap of intuition, had recognized him for who and what he was. Making love to the energetic Coral melted that feeling a little, but now, looking at the burning tangle of fire which had five minutes ago been the Good Man's oil reserves, it came back with debilitating intensity, like a swamp-fever that sometimes quits the flesh but hides in the bones and never really leaves. *You 're in the west*, Dearborn had said. *The soul of a man such as you can never leave the west*. Of course it was true, and he hadn't needed any such titmonkey as Will Dearborn to tell him ... but now that it had been said, there was a part of his

mind that couldn't stop thinking about it.

Fucking Will Dearborn. Where, exactly, was he now, him and his pair of good-mannered mates? In Avery's *culabozo*? Jonas didn't think so. Not anymore.

Fresh explosions ripped the night. Down below, men who had run and shouted in the wake of the early morning's assassinations were run-ning and shouting again.

"It's the biggest Reaping firework that ever was," Coral said in a low voice.

Before Jonas could reply, there was a hard hammering on the bed-room door. It was thrown open a second later, and Clay Reynolds came clumping across the room, wearing a pair of blue jeans and nothing else. His hair was wild; his eyes were wilder.

"Bad news from town, Eldred," he said. "Dearborn and the other two In-World brats"

Three more explosions, falling almost on top of each other. From the blazing Citgo oilpatch a great red-orange fireball rose lazily into the black of night, faded, disappeared. Reynolds walked out onto the balcony and stood between them at the railing, unmindful of their nakedness. He stared at the fireball with wide, wondering eyes until it was gone. As gone as the brats. Jonas felt that curious, debilitating gloom trying to steal over him again.

"How did they get away?" he asked. "Do you know? Does Avery?"

"Avery's dead. The deputy who was with him, too. 'Twas another deputy found em, Todd Bridger . . . Eldred, what's going on out there? What happened?"

"Oh, that's your boys," Coral said. "Didn't take em long to start their own Reaping party, did it?"

How much heart do they have? Jonas asked himself. It was a good question—maybe the only one that mattered. Were they now done mak-ing trouble ... or just getting started?

He once more wanted to be out of here—out of Seafront, out of Hambry, out of Mejis. Suddenly, more than anything, he wanted to be miles and wheels and leagues away. He had bounded around his Hillock, it was too late to go back, and now he felt horribly exposed.

"Clay."

"Yes, Eldred?"

But the man's eyes—and his mind—were still on the conflagration at Citgo. Jonas took his shoulder and turned Reynolds toward him. Jonas felt his own mind

starting to pick up speed, ticking past points and details, and welcomed the feeling. That queer, dark sense of fatalism faded and disappeared.

"How many men are here?" he asked.

Reynolds frowned, thought about it. "Thirty-five." he said. "Maybe."

"How many armed?"

"With guns?"

"No, with pea-blowers, you damned fool."

"Probably . . ." Reynolds pulled his lower lip, frowning more fiercely than ever.

"Probably a dozen. That's guns likely to work, you ken."

"The big boys from the Horsemen's Association? Still all here?"

"I think so."

"Get Lengyll and Renfrew. At least you won't have to wake em up; they'll *all* be up, and most of em right down there." Jonas jerked a thumb at the courtyard. "Tell Renfrew to put together an advance party. Armed men. I'd like eight or ten, but I'll take five. Have that old woman's cart harnessed to the strongest, hardiest pony this place has got. Tell that old fuck Miguel that if the pony he chooses dies in the traces between here and Hanging Rock, he'll be using his wrinkled old balls for earplugs."

Coral Thorin barked brief, harsh laughter. Reynolds glanced at her, did a double-take at her breasts, then looked back at Jonas with an effort.

"Where's Roy?" Jonas asked.

Reynolds looked up. "Third floor. With some little serving maid."

"Kick him out," Jonas said. "It's his job to get the old bitch ready to ride."

"We're going?"

"Soon as we can. You and me first, with Renfrew's boys, and Lengyll behind, with the rest of the men. You just make sure Hash Renfrew's with us, Clay; that man's got sand in his craw."

"What about the horses out on the Drop?"

"Never mind the everfucking horses." There was another explosion at Citgo; another fireball floated into the sky. Jonas couldn't see the dark clouds of smoke which must be rushing up, or smell the oil; the wind, out of the east and into the west, would be carrying both away from town.

"But—"

"Just do as I say." Jonas now saw his priorities in clear, ascending order. The

horses were on the bottom—Farson could find horses damned near anywhere. Above them were the tankers gathered at Hanging Rock. They were more important than ever now, because the source was gone. Lose the tankers, and the Big Coffin Hunters could forget going home.

Yet most important of all was Parson's little piece of the Wizard's Rainbow. It was the one truly irreplaceable item. If it was broken, let it be broken in the care of George Latigo, not that of Eldred Jonas.

"Get moving," he told Reynolds. "Depape rides after, with Lengyll's men. You with me. Go on. Make it happen."

"And me?" Coral asked.

He reached out and tugged her toward him. "I ain't forgot you, darlin," he said. Coral nodded and reached between his legs, oblivious of the staring Clay Reynolds. "Aye," she said. "And I ain't forgot you."

4

They escaped Citgo with ringing ears and slightly singed around the edges but not really hurt, Sheemie riding double behind Cuthbert and Caprichoso clattering after, at the end of his long lead.

It was Susan who came up with the place they should go, and like most solutions, it seemed completely obvious . . . once someone had thought of it. And so, not long after Reaping Eve had become Reaping Mom, the five of them came to the hut in the Bad Grass where Susan and Roland had on several occasions met to make love.

Cuthbert and Alain unrolled blankets, then sat on them to examine the guns they had liberated from the Sheriff's office. They had also found Bert's slingshot.

"These're hard calibers," Alain said, holding one up with the cylinder sprung and peering one-eyed down the barrel. "If they don't throw too high or wide, Roland, I think we can do some business with them."

"I wish we had that rancher's machine-gun," Cuthbert said wistfully.

"You know what Cort would say about a gun like that?" Roland asked, and Cuthbert burst out laughing. So did Alain.

"Who's Cort?" Susan asked.

"The tough man Eldred Jonas only thinks he is," Alain said. "He was our teacher."

Roland suggested that they catch an hour or two of sleep—the next day was apt to be difficult. That it might also be their last was something he didn't feel he had to say.

"Alain, are you listening?"

Alain, who knew perfectly well that Roland wasn't speaking of his ears or his attention-span, nodded.

"Do you hear anything?"

"Not yet."

"Keep at it."

"I will . . . but I can't promise anything. The touch is flukey. You know that as well as I do."

"Just keep trying."

Sheemie had carefully spread two blankets in the corner next to his proclaimed best friend. "He's Roland . . . and *he's* Alain . . . who are you, good old Arthur Heath? Who are you really?"

"Cuthbert's my name." He stuck out his hand. "Cuthbert Allgood. How do y'do, and how do y'do, and how do y'do again?"

Sheemie shook the offered hand, then began giggling. It was a cheer-ful, unexpected sound, and made them all smile. Smiling hurt Roland a little, and he guessed that if he could see his own face, he'd observe a pretty good bum from being so close to the exploding derricks.

"Key-youth-bert," Sheemie said, giggling. "Oh my! Key-youth-bert, that's a funny name, no wonder you're such a funny fellow. Key-youth-bert, oh-aha-ha-ha, that's a pip, a real pip!"

Cuthbert smiled and nodded. "Can I kill him now, Roland, if we don't need him any longer?"

"Save him a bit, why don't you?" Roland said, then turned to Susan, his own smile fading. "Will thee walk out with me a bit, Sue? I'd talk to thee."

She looked up at him, trying to read his face. "All right." She held out her hand. Roland took it, they walked into the moonlight together, and beneath its light, Susan felt dread take hold of her heart.

They walked out in silence, through sweet-smelling grass that tasted good to cows and horses even as it was expanding in their bellies, first bloating and then killing them. It was high—at least a foot taller than Roland's head—and still green as summer. Children sometimes got lost in the Bad Grass and died there, but Susan had never feared to be here with Roland, even when there were no sky-markers to steer by; his sense of direction was uncannily perfect.

"Sue, thee disobeyed me in the matter of the guns," he said at last.

She looked at him, smiling, half-amused and half-angry. "Does thee wish to be back in thy cell, then? Thee and thy friends?"

"No, of course not. Such bravery!" He held her close and kissed her. When he drew back, they were both breathing hard. He took her by the arms and looked into her eyes. "But thee mustn't disobey me this time."

She looked at him steadily, saying nothing.

"Thee knows," he said. "Thee knows what I'd tell thee."

"Aye, perhaps."

"Say. Better you than me, maybe."

"I'm to stay at the hut while you and the others go. Sheemie and I are to stay."

He nodded. "Will you? Will *thee*?"

She thought of how unfamiliar and wretched Roland's gun had felt in her hand as she held it beneath the *serape*; of the wide, unbelieving look in Dave's eyes as the bullet she'd fired into his chest flung him backward; of how the first time she'd tried to shoot Sheriff Avery, the bullet had only succeeded in setting her own clothing afire, although he had been right there in front of her. They didn't have a gun for her (unless she took one of Roland's), she couldn't use one very well in any case ... and, more im-portant, she didn't *want* to use one. Under those circumstances, and with Sheemie to think about, too, it was best she just stay out of the way.

Roland was waiting patiently. She nodded. "Sheemie and I'll wait for thee. It's my promise."

He smiled, relieved.

"Now pay me back with honesty, Roland."

"If I can."

She looked up at the moon, shuddered at the ill-omened face she saw, and looked back at Roland. "What chance thee'll come back to me?"

He thought about this very carefully, still holding to her arms. "Far better than Jonas thinks," he said at last. "We'll wait at the edge of the Bad Grass and should be able to mark his coming well enough."

"Aye, the herd o' horses I saw—"

"He may come without the horses," Roland said, not knowing how well he had matched Jonas's thinking, "but his folk will make noise even if they come without the herd. If there's enough of them, we'll see them, as well—they'll cut a line through the grass like a part in hair."

Susan nodded. She had seen this many times from the Drop—the mysterious parting of the Bad Grass as groups of men rode through it.

"If they're looking for thee, Roland? If Jonas sends scouts ahead?"

"I doubt he'll bother." Roland shrugged. "If they do, why, we'll kill them. Silent, if we can. Killing's what we were trained to do; we'll do it."

She turned her hands over, and now she was gripping his arms instead of the other way around. She looked impatient and afraid. "Thee hasn't answered my question. What chance I'll see thee back?"

He thought it over. "Even toss," he said at last.

She closed her eyes as if struck, drew in a breath, let it out, opened her eyes again.

"Bad," she said, "yet maybe not as bad as I thought. And if thee doesn't come back? Sheemie and I go west, as thee said before?"

"Aye, to Gilead. There'll be a place of safety and respect for you there, dear, no matter what . . . but it's especially important that you go if you *don't* hear the tankers explode. Thee knows that, doesn't thee?"

"To warn yer people—thy *ka-tet*."

Roland nodded.

"I'll warn them, no fear. And keep Sheemie safe, too. He's as much the reason we've got this far as anything I've done."

Roland was counting on Sheemie for more than she knew. If he and Bert and Alain *were* killed, it was Sheemie who would stabilize her, give her reason to go on.

"When does thee leave?" Susan asked. "Do we have time to make love?"

"We have time, but perhaps it's best we don't," he said. "It's going to be hard enough to leave thee again without. Unless you really want to . . ." His eyes half-pleaded with her to say yes.

"Let's just go back and lie down a bit," she said, and took his hand. For a moment it trembled on her lips to tell him that she was kindled with his child, but at the last moment she kept silent. There was enough for him to think about without that added, mayhap ... and she didn't want to pass such happy news beneath such an ugly moon. It would surely be bad luck.

They walked back through high grass that was already springing to-gether along their path. Outside the hut, he turned her toward him, put his hands on her cheeks, and softly kissed her again.

"I will love thee forever, Susan," he said. "Come whatever storms."

She smiled. The upward movement of her cheeks spilled a pair of tears from her eyes. "Come whatever storms," she agreed. She kissed him again, and they went inside.

6

The moon had begun to descend when a party of eight rode out beneath the arch with come in peace writ upon it in the Great Letters. Jonas and Reynolds were in the lead. Behind them came Rhea's black wagon, drawn by a trotting pony that looked strong enough to go all night and half the next day. Jonas had wanted to give her a driver, but Rhea re-fused—"Never was an animal I didn't get on with better than any man ever could," she'd told him, and that seemed to be true. The reins lay limp in her lap; the pony worked smart without them. The other five men consisted of Hash Renfrew, Quint, and three of Renfrew's best *vaqueros*.

Coral had wanted to come as well, but Jonas had different ideas. "If we're killed, you can go on more or less as before," he'd said. "There'll be nothing to tie you to us."

"Without ye, I'm not sure there'd be any reason *to* go on," she said.

"Ar, quit that schoolgirl shit, it don't become you. You'd find plenty of reasons to keep staggerin down the path, if you had to put your mind to it. If all goes well—as I expect it will—and you still want to be with me, ride out of here as soon as you get word of our success. There's a town west of here in the Vi Castis Mountains. Ritzy. Go there on the fastest horse you can swing a leg over. You'll be there ahead of us by days, no matter how smart we're able to push along. Find a respectable inn that'll take a woman on her own . . . if there is such a thing in

Ritzzy. Wait. When we get there with the tankers, you just fall into the column at my right hand. Have you got it?"

She had it. One woman in a thousand was Coral Thorin—sharp as Lord Satan, and able to fuck like Satan's favorite harlot. Now if things only turned out to be as simple as he'd made them sound.

Jonas fell back until his horse was pacing alongside the black cart. The ball was out of its bag and lay in Rhea's lap. "Anything?" he asked. He both hoped and dreaded to see that deep pink pulse inside it again.

"Nay. It'll speak when it needs to, though—count on it."

"Then what good are *you*, old woman?"

"Ye'll know when the time comes," Rhea said, looking at him with arrogance (and some fear as well, he was happy to see).

Jonas spurred his horse back to the head of the little column. He had decided to take the ball from Rhea at the slightest sign of trouble. In truth, it had already inserted its strange, addicting sweetness into his head; he thought about that single pink pulse of light he'd seen far too much.

Balls, he told himself. *Battlesweat's all I've got. Once this business is over, I'll be my old self again.*

Nice if true, but...

... but he had, in truth, begun to wonder.

Renfrew was now riding with Clay. Jonas nudged his horse in between them. His dicky leg was aching like a bastard; another bad sign.

"Lengyll?" he asked Renfrew.

"Putting together a good bunch," Renfrew said, "don't you fear Fran Lengyll. Thirty men."

"Thirty! God Harry's body, I told you I wanted forty! Forty at least!"

Renfrew measured him with a pale-eyed glance, then winced at a particularly vicious gust of the freshening wind. He pulled his neckerchief up over his mouth and nose. The *vaqs* riding behind had already done so. "How afraid of these three boys are you, Jonas?"

"Afraid for both of us, I guess, since you're too stupid to know who they are or what they're capable of." He raised his own neckerchief, then forced his voice into a more reasonable timbre. It was best he do so; he needed these bumpkins yet awhile longer. Once the ball was turned over to Latigo, that might change.

"Though mayhap we'll never see them."

"It's likely they're already thirty miles from here and riding west as fast as their horses'll take em," Renfrew agreed. "I'd give a crown to know how they got loose."

What does it matter, you idiot? Jonas thought, but said nothing.

"As for Lengyll's men, they'll be the hardest boys he can lay hands on—if it comes to a fight, those thirty will fight like sixty."

Jonas's eyes briefly met Clay's. *I'll believe it when I see it*, Clay's brief glance said, and Jonas knew again why he had always liked this one better than Roy Depape.

"How many armed?"

"With guns? Maybe half. They'll be no more than an hour behind us."

"Good." At least their back door was covered. It would have to do. And he couldn't wait to be rid of that thrice-cursed ball.

Oh? whispered a sly, half-mad voice from a place much deeper than his heart. *Oh, can't you?*

Jonas ignored the voice until it stilled. Half an hour later, they turned off the road and onto the Drop. Several miles ahead, moving in the wind like a silver sea, was the Bad Grass.



7

Around the time that Jonas and his party were riding down the Drop, Roland, Cuthbert, and Alain were swinging up into their saddles. Susan and Sheemie stood by the doorway to the hut, holding hands and watching them solemnly.

"Thee'll hear the explosions when the tankers go, and smell the smoke," Roland said. "Even with the wind the wrong way, I think thee'll smell it. Then, no more than an hour later, more smoke. There." He pointed. "That'll be the brush piled in front of the canyon's mouth."

"And if we don't see those things?"

"Into the west. But thee will, Sue. I swear thee will."

She stepped forward, put her hands on his thigh, and looked up at him in the latening moonlight. He bent; put his hand lightly against the back of her head; put his mouth on her mouth.

"Go thy course in safety," Susan said as she drew back from him.

"Aye," Sheemie added suddenly. "Stand and be true, all three." He came forward himself and shyly touched Cuthbert's boot.

Cuthbert reached down, took Sheemie's hand, and shook it. "Take care of her, old boy."

Sheemie nodded seriously. "I will."

"Come on," Roland said. He felt that if he looked at her solemn, up-turned face again, he would cry. "Let's go."

They rode slowly away from the hut. Before the grass closed behind them, hiding it from view, he looked back a final time.

"Sue, I love thee."

She smiled. It was a beautiful smile. "Bird and bear and hare and fish," she said. The next time Roland saw her, she was caught inside the Wizard's glass.

8

What Roland and his friends saw west of the Bad Grass had a harsh, lonely beauty. The wind was lifting great sheets of sand across the stony desert floor; the moonlight turned these into foot racing phantoms. At moments Hanging Rock was visible some two wheels distant, and the mouth of Eyebolt Canyon two wheels farther on. Sometimes both were gone, hidden by the dust. Behind them, the tall grass made a souging, singing sound.

"How do you boys feel?" Roland asked. "All's well?"

They nodded.

"There's going to be a lot of shooting, I think."

"We'll remember the faces of our fathers," Cuthbert said.

"Yes," Roland agreed, almost absently. "We'll remember them very well." He stretched in the saddle. "The wind's in our favor, not theirs—that's one good thing. We'll hear them coming. We must judge the size of the group. All right?" They both nodded.

"If Jonas has still got his confidence, he'll come soon, in a small party—whatever gunnies he can put together on short notice—and he'll have the ball. In that case, we'll ambush them, kill them all, and take the Wizard's Rainbow."

Alain and Cuthbert sat quiet, listening intently. The wind gusted, and Roland clapped a hand to his hat to keep it from flying off. "If he fears more trouble from us, I think he's apt to come later on, and with a bigger party of riders. If that happens, we'll let them pass . . . then, if the wind is our friend and keeps up, we'll fall in behind them."

Cuthbert began to grin. "Oh Roland," he said. "Your father would be proud. Only fourteen, but cozy as the devil!"

"Fifteen come next moonrise," Roland said seriously. "If we do it this way, we may have to kill their drogue riders. Watch my signals, all right?"

"We're going to cross to Hanging Rock as part of their party?" Alain asked. He had always been a step or two behind Cuthbert, but Roland didn't mind; sometimes reliability was better than quickness. "Is that it?"

"If the cards fall that way, yes."

"If they've got the pink ball with em, you'd better hope it doesn't give us away," Alain said.

Cuthbert looked surprised. Roland bit his lip, thinking that sometimes Alain was plenty quick. Certainly he had come up with this unpleasant little idea ahead of Bert . . . ahead of Roland, too.

"We've got a lot to hope for this morning, but we'll play our cards as they come off the top of the pack."

They dismounted and sat by their horses there on the edge of the grass, saying little. Roland watched the silver clouds of dust racing each other across the desert floor and thought of Susan. He imagined them married, living in a freehold somewhere south of Gilead. By then Farson would have been defeated, the world's strange decline reversed (the childish part of him simply assumed that making an end to John Farson would somehow see to that), and his gunslinging days would be over. Less than a year it had been since he had won the right to carry the six-shooters he wore on his hips—and to carry his father's great revolvers when Steven Deschain decided to pass them on—and already he was tired of them. Susan's kisses had softened his heart and quickened him, some-how; had made another life possible. A better one, perhaps. One with a house, and kiddies, and—

"They're coming," Alain said, snapping Roland out of his reverie. The gunslinger stood up, Rusher's reins in one fist. Cuthbert stood tensely nearby. "Large party or small? Does thee ... do you know?"

Alain stood facing southeast, hands held out with the palms up. Be-yond his shoulder, Roland saw Old Star just about to slip below the hori-zon. Only an hour until dawn, then.

"I can't tell yet," Alain said.

"Can you at least tell if the ball—"

"No. Shut up, Roland, let me listen!"

Roland and Cuthbert stood and watched Alain anxiously, at the same time straining their ears to hear the hooves of horses, the creak of wheels, or the murmur of men on the passing wind. Time spun out. The wind, rather than dropping as Old Star disappeared and dawn approached, blew more fiercely than ever. Roland looked at Cuthbert, who had taken out his slingshot and was playing nervously with the pull. Bert raised one shoul-der in a shrug.

"It's a small party," Alain said suddenly. "Can either of you touch them?"

They shook their heads.

"No more than ten, maybe only six."

"Gods!" Roland murmured, and pumped a fist at the sky. He couldn't help it. "And the ball?"

"I can't touch it," Alain said. He sounded almost as though he were sleeping himself. "But it's with them, don't you think?"

Roland did. A small party of six or eight, probably travelling with the ball. It was perfect.

"Be ready, boys," he said. "We're going to take them."

9

Jonas's party made good time down the Drop and into the Bad Grass. The guide-stars were brilliant in the autumn sky, and Renfrew knew them all. He had a click-line to measure between the two he called The Twins, and he stopped the group briefly every twenty minutes or so to use it. Jonas hadn't the slightest doubt the old cowboy would bring them out of the tall grass pointed straight at Hanging Rock. Then, about an hour after they'd entered the Bad Grass, Quint rode up beside him.

"That old lady, she want to see you, sai. She say it's important."

"Do she, now?" Jonas asked.

"Aye." Quint lowered his voice. "That ball she got on her lap all glowy."

"Is that so? I tell you what. Quint—keep my old trail-buddies com-pany while I see what's what." He dropped back until he was pacing be-side the black cart. Rhea raised her face to him, and for a moment, washed as it was in the pink light, he thought it the face of a young girl.

"So," she said. "Here y'are, big boy. I thought ye'd show up pretty smart." She cackled, and as her face broke into its sour lines of laughter, Jonas again saw her as she really was—all but sucked dry by the thing in her lap. Then he looked down at it himself . . . and was lost. He could feel that pink glow radiating into all the deepest passages and hollows of his mind, lighting them up in a way they'd never been lit up before. Even Coral, at her dirty busiest, couldn't light him up that way. "Ye like it, don't ye?" she half-laughed, half-crooned. "Aye, so ye do, so would anyone, such a pretty glam it is! But what do ye *see*, sai Jonas?"

Leaning over, holding to the saddle-horn with one hand, his long hair hanging down in a sheaf, Jonas looked deeply into the ball. At first he saw only that luscious, labial pink, and then it began to draw apart. Now he saw a hut surrounded by tall grass. The sort of hut only a hermit could love. The door—it was painted a peeling but still bright red—stood open. And sitting there on the stone stoop with her hands in her lap, her blankets on the ground at her feet, and her unbound hair around her shoulders was ...

"I'll be damned!" Jonas whispered. He had now leaned so far out of the saddle that he looked like a trick rider in a circus show, and his eyes seemed to have disappeared; there were only sockets of pink light where they had been. Rhea cackled delightedly. "Aye, it's Thorin's gilly that never was! Dearborn's lovergirl!" Her cackling stopped abruptly. "Lovergirl of the young proddy who killed my Ermot. And he'll pay for it, aye, so he will. Look closer, sai Jonas! Look closer!"

He did. Everything was clear now, and he thought he should have seen it earlier. Everything this girl's aunt had feared had been true. Rhea had known, although why she hadn't told anyone the girl had been screw-ing one of the In-World boys, Jonas didn't know. And Susan had done more than just screw Will Dearborn; she'd helped him escape, him and his trail-mates, and she might well have killed two

lawmen for him, into the bargain.

The figure in the ball swam closer. Watching that made him feel a little dizzy, but it was a pleasant dizziness. Beyond the girl was the hut, faintly lit by a lamp which had been turned down to the barest core of flame. At first Jonas thought someone was sleeping in one corner, but on second glance he decided it was only a heap of hides that looked vaguely human.

"Do'ee spy the boys?" Rhea asked, seemingly from a great distance. "Do'ee spy em, m'lord sai?"

"No," he said, his own voice seeming to come from that same distant place. His eyes were pinned to the ball. He could feel its light baking deeper and deeper into his brain. It was a good feeling, like a hot fire on a cold night. "She's alone. Looks as if she's waiting."

"Aye." Rhea gestured above the ball—a curt dusting-off movement of the hands—and the pink light was gone. Jonas gave a low, protesting cry, but no matter; the ball was dark again. He wanted to stretch his hands out and tell her to make the light return—to beg her, if necessary—and held himself back by pure force of will. He was rewarded by a slow return of his wits. It helped to remind himself that Rhea's gestures were as meaningless as the puppets in a Pinch and Jilly show. The ball did what *it* wanted, not what *she* wanted.

Meanwhile, the ugly old woman was looking at him with eyes that were perversely shrewd and clear. "Waiting for what, do'ee suppose?" she asked. There was only one thing she *could* be waiting for. Jonas thought with rising alarm. The boys. The three beardless sons of bitches from In-World. And if they weren't with her, they might well be up ahead, doing their own waiting.

Waiting for him. Possibly even waiting for—

"Listen to me," he said. "I'll only speak once, and you best answer true. Do they know about that thing? *Do those three boys know about the Rainbow?*"

Her eyes shifted away from his. It was answer enough in one way, but not in another. She had had things her way all too long up there on her hill; she had to know who was boss down here. He leaned over again and grabbed her shoulder. It was horrible—like grabbing a bare bone that somehow still lived—but he made himself hold on all the same. And squeeze. She moaned and wriggled, but he held on.

"Tell me, you old bitch! Run your fucking gob!"

"They might know of it," she whined. "The girl might've seen some-thing the night she came to be—am-, let go, ye're killing me!"

"If I wanted to kill you, you'd be dead." He took another longing glance at the ball, then sat up straight in the saddle, cupped his hands around his mouth, and called: "Clay! Hold up!" As Reynolds and Ren-frew reined back, Jonas raised a hand to halt the *vaqs* behind him.

The wind whispered through the grass, bending it, rippling it, whip-ping up eddies of sweet smell. Jonas stared ahead into the dark, even though he knew it was fruitless to look for them. They could be any-where, and Jonas didn't like the odds in an ambush. Not one bit.

He rode to where Clay and Renfrew were waiting. Renfrew looked impatient.

"What's the problem? Dawn'll be breaking soon. We ought to get a move-on."

"Do you know the huts in the Bad Grass?"

"Aye, most. Why—"

"Do you know one with a red door?"

Renfrew nodded and pointed northish. "Old Soony's place. He had some sort of religious conversion—a dream or a vision or something. That's when he painted the door of his hut red. He's gone to the Manni-folk these last five years." He no longer asked why, at least; he had seen something on Jonas's face that had shut up his questions.

Jonas raised his hand, looked at the blue coffin tattooed there for a second, then turned and called for Quint. "You're in charge," Jonas told him.

Quint's shaggy eyebrows shot up. "*Me?*"

"Yar. But you're not going on—there's been a change of plan."

"What—"

"Listen and don't open your mouth again unless there's something you don't understand. Get that damned black cart turned around. Put your men around it and hie on back the way we came. Join up with Lengyll and his men. Tell them Jonas says wait where you find em until he and Rey-nolds and Renfrew come. Clear?"

Quint nodded. He looked bewildered but said nothing.

"Good. Get about it. And tell the witch to put her toy back in its bag." Jonas passed a hand over his brow. Fingers which had rarely shaken before had now picked up a minute tremble. "It's distracting."

Quint started away, then looked back when Jonas called his name.

"I think those In-World boys are out here, Quint. Probably ahead of where we are now, but if they're back the way you're going, they'll probably set on you."

Quint looked nervously around at the grass, which rose higher than his head. Then his lips tightened and he returned his attention to Jonas.

"If they attack, they'll try to take the ball," Jonas continued. "And sai, mark me well: any man who doesn't die protecting it will wish he had." He lifted his chin at the *vaqs*, who sat astride their horses in a line behind the black cart. "Tell them that."

"Aye, boss," Quint said.

"When you reach Lengyll's party, you'll be safe."

"How long should we wait for yer if ye don't come?"

"Til hell freezes over. Now go." As Quint left, Jonas turned to Reynolds and Renfrew. "We're going to make a little side-trip, boys," he said.

10

"Roland." Alain's voice was low and urgent. "They've turned around."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. There's another group coming along behind them. A much larger one. That's where they're headed."

"Safety in numbers, that's all," Cuthbert said.

"Do they have the ball?" Roland asked. "Can you touch it yet?"

"Yes, they have it. It makes them easy to touch even though they're going the other way now. Once you find it, it glows like a lamp in a mineshaft."

"Does Rhea still have the keeping of it?"

"I think so. It's awful to touch her."

"Jonas is afraid of us," Roland said. "He wants more men around him when he comes. That's what it is, what it must be." Unaware that he was both right and badly out in his reckoning. Unaware that for one of the few times since they had left Gilead, he had lapsed into a teenager's disastrous certainty.

"What do we do?" Alain asked.

"Sit here. Listen. Wait. They'll bring the ball this way again if they're going to Hanging Rock. They'll have to."

"Susan?" Cuthbert asked. "Susan and Sheemie? What about them? How do we

know they're all right?"

"I suppose that we don't." Roland sat down, cross-legged, with Pusher's trailing reins in his lap. "But Jonas and his men will be back soon enough. And when they come, we'll do what we must."

11

Susan hadn't wanted to sleep inside—the hut felt wrong to her without Roland. She had left Sheemie huddled under the old hides in the corner and taken her own blankets outside. She sat in the hut's doorway for a little while, looking up at the stars and praying for Roland in her own fashion. When she began to feel a little better, she lay down on one blanket and pulled the other over her. It seemed an eternity since Maria had shaken her out of her heavy sleep, and the open-mouthed, glottal snores drifting out of the hut didn't bother her much. She slept with her head pillowed on one arm, and didn't wake when, twenty minutes later, Sheemie came to the doorway, blinked at her sleepily, and then walked off into the grass to urinate. The only one to notice him was Caprichoso, who stuck out his long muzzle and took a nip at Sheemie's butt as the boy passed him. Sheemie, still mostly asleep, reached back and pushed the muzzle away. He knew Capi's tricks well enough, so he did.

Susan dreamed of the willow grove—bird and bear and hare and fish—and what woke her wasn't Sheemie's return from his necessary but a cold circle of steel pressing into her neck. There was a loud click that she recognized at once from the Sheriff's office: a pistol being cocked. The willow grove faded from the eye of her mind.

"Shine, little sunbeam," said a voice. For a moment her bewildered, half-waking mind tried to believe it was yesterday, and Maria wanted her to get up and out of Seafront before whoever had killed Mayor Thorin and Chancellor Rimer could come back and kill her, as well.

No good. It wasn't the strong light of midmorning that her eyes opened upon, but the ash-pallid glow of five o'clock. Not a woman's voice but a man's. And not a hand shaking her shoulder but the barrel of a gun against her neck.

She looked up and saw a lined, narrow face framed by white hair. Lips no more than a scar. Eyes the same faded blue as Roland's. Eldred Jonas. The man standing

behind him had bought her own da drinks once upon a happier time: Hash Renfrew. A third man, one of Jonas's *ka-tet*, ducked into the hut. Freezing terror filled her midsection—some for her, some for Sheemie. She wasn't sure the boy would even understand what was happening to them. *These are two of the three men who tried to kill him*, she thought. *He'll understand that much.*

"Here you are, Sunbeam, here you come," Jonas said companionably, watching her blink away the sleepfog. "Good! You shouldn't be napping all the way out here on your own, not a pretty sai such as yourself. But don't worry, I'll see you get back to where you belong."

His eyes flicked up as the redhead with the cloak stepped out of the hut. Alone. "What's she got in there. Clay? Anything?"

Reynolds shook his head. "All still on the hoss, I reckon."

Sheemie, Susan thought. *Where are you, Sheemie?*

Jonas reached out and caressed one of her breasts briefly. "Nice," he said. "Tender and sweet. No wonder Dearborn likes you."

"Get yer filthy blue-marked hand off me, you bastard."

Smiling, Jonas did as she bid. He turned "his head and regarded the mule. "I know this one; it belongs to my good friend Coral. Along with everything else, you've turned livestock thief! Shameful, shameful, this younger generation. Don't you agree, sai Renfrew?"

But her father's old associate said nothing. His face was carefully blank, and Susan thought he might be just the tiniest tad ashamed of his presence here.

Jonas turned back to her, his thin lips curved in the semblance of a benevolent smile. "Well, after murder I suppose stealing a mule comes easy, don't it?"

She said nothing, only watched as Jonas stroked Capi's muzzle.

"What all were they hauling, those boys, that it took a mule to put it on?"

"Shrouds," she said through numb lips. "For you and all yer friends. A fearful heavy load it made, too—near broke the poor animal's back."

"There's a saying in the land I come from," Jonas said, still smiling. "Clever girls go to hell. Ever heard it?" He went on stroking Capi's nose. The mule liked it; his neck was thrust out to its full length, his stupid little eyes half-closed with pleasure. "Has it crossed your mind that fellows who unload their pack animal, split up what it was carrying, and take the goods away usually ain't coming back?" Susan said nothing.

"You've been left high and dry, Sunbeam. Fast fucked is usually fast forgot, sad to say. Do you know where they went?"

"Yes," she said. Her voice was low, barely a whisper.

Jonas looked pleased. "If you was to tell, things might go easier for you. Would you agree, Renfrew?"

"Aye," Renfrew said. "They're traitors, Susan—for the Good Man. If you know where they are or what they're up to, tell us."

Keeping her eyes fixed on Jonas, Susan said: "Come closer." Her numbed lips didn't want to move and it came out sounding like *Cung gloser*, but Jonas understood and leaned forward, stretching his neck in a way that made him look absurdly like Caprichoso. When he did, Susan spat in his face.

Jonas recoiled, lips twisting in surprise and revulsion. "*Arrr! BITCH!*" he cried, and launched a full-swung, open-handed blow that drove her to the ground. She landed at full length on her side with black stars ex-ploding across her field of vision. She could already feel her right cheek swelling like a balloon and thought, *If he'd hit an inch or two lower, he might've broken my neck. Mayhap that would've been best.* She raised her hand to her nose and wiped blood from the right nostril.

Jonas turned to Renfrew, who had taken a single step forward and then stopped himself. "Put her on her horse and tie her hands in front of her. Tight." He looked down at Susan, then kicked her in the shoulder hard enough to send her rolling toward the hut. "Spit on me, would you? Spit on Eldred Jonas, would you, you bitch?"

Reynolds was holding out his neckerchief. Jonas took it, wiped the spittle from his face with it, then dropped into a hunker beside her. He took a handful of her hair and carefully wiped the neckerchief with it. Then he hauled her to her feet. Tears of pain now peeped from the comers of her eyes, but she kept silent.

"I may never see your friend again, sweet Sue with the tender little titties, but I've got you, ain't I? Yar. And if Dearborn gives us trouble, I'll give you double. And make sure Dearborn knows. You may count on it."

His smile faded, and he gave her a sudden, bitter shove that almost sent her sprawling again.

"Now get mounted, and do it before I decide to change your face a lit-tle with my knife."

Sheemie watched from the grass, terrified and silently crying, as Susan spit in the bad Coffin Hunter's face and was knocked to the ground, hit so hard the blow might have killed her. He almost rushed out then, but some-thing—it could have been his friend Arthur's voice in his head—told him that would only get *him* killed.

He watched as Susan mounted. One of the other men—not a Coffin Hunter but a big rancher Sheemie had seen in the Rest from time to time—tried to help, but Susan pushed him away with the sole of her boot. The man stood back with a red face.

Don't make em mad, Susan, Sheemie thought. Oh gods, don't do that, they'll hit ye some more! Oh, yer poor face! And ye got a nosebleed, so you do!

"Last chance," Jonas told her. "Where are they, and what do they mean to do?"

"Go to hell," she said.

He smiled—a thin, hurty smile. "Likely I'll find you there when I ar-rive," he said.

Then, to the other Coffin Hunter: "You checked the place careful?"

"Whatever they had, they took it," the redhead answered. "Only thing they left was Dearborn's punch-bunny."

That made Jonas laugh meany-mean as he climbed on board his own horse.

"Come on," he said, "let's ride."

They went back into the Bad Grass. It closed around them, and it was as if they had never been there . . . except that Susan was gone, and so was Capi. The big rancher riding beside Susan had been leading the mule.

When he was sure they weren't going to return, Sheemie walked slowly back into the clearing, doing up the button on top of his pants as he came. He looked from the way Roland and his friends had gone to the one in which Susan had been taken. Which?

A moment's thought made him realize there was no choice. The grass out here was tough and springy. The path Roland and Alain and good old Arthur Heath (so Sheemie still thought of him, and always would) had taken was gone. The one made by Susan and her captors, on the other hand, was still clear. And perhaps, if he followed her, he could do some-thing for her. Help her.

Walking at first, then jogging as his fear that they might double back and catch him dissipated, Sheemie went in the direction Susan had been taken. He would follow her most of that day.

13

Cuthbert—not the most sanguine of personalities in any situation—grew more and more impatient as the day brightened toward true dawn. *It's Reaping*, he thought. *Finally Reaping, and here we sit with our knives sharpened and not a thing in the world to cut.*

Twice he asked Alain what he "heard." The first time Alain only grunted. The second time he asked what Bert *expected* him to hear, with someone yapping away in his ear like that.

Cuthbert, who did not consider two enquiries fifteen minutes apart as "yapping away," wandered off and sat morosely in front of his horse. After a bit, Roland came over and sat down beside him.

"Waiting," Cuthbert said. "That's what most of our time in Mejis has been about, and it's the thing I do worst."

"You won't have to do it much longer," Roland said.

14

Jonas's company reached the place where Fran Lengyll's party had made a temporary camp about an hour after the sun had topped the horizon. Quint, Rhea, and Renfrew's *vaqs* were already there and drinking coffee, Jonas was glad to see. Lengyll started forward, saw Susan riding with her hands tied, and actually drew back a step, as if he wanted to find a comer to hide in. There were no comers out here, however, so he stood fast. He did not look happy about it, however.

Susan nudged her horse forward with her knees, and when Reynolds tried to grab her shoulder, she dipped it to the side, temporarily eluding him.

"Why, Francis Lengyll! Imagine meeting you here!"

"Susan, I'm sorry to see ye so," Lengyll said. His flush crept closer and closer to his brow, like a tide approaching a seawall. "It's bad company ye've fallen in with, girl . . . and in the end, bad company always leaves ye to face the music

alone."

Susan actually laughed. "Bad company!" she said. "Aye, ye'd know about that, wouldn't ye, Fran?"

He turned, awkward and stiff in his embarrassment. She raised one booted foot and, before anyone could stop her, kicked him squarely between the shoulderblades. He went down on his stomach, his whole face widening in shocked surprise.

"No ye don't, ye bold cunt!" Renfrew shouted, and fetched her a wal-lop to the side of the head—it was on the left, and at least evened things up a bit, she would think later when her mind cleared and she was capable of thinking. She swayed in the saddle, but kept her seat. And she never looked at Renfrew, only at Lengyll, who had now managed to get to his hands and knees. He wore a deeply dazed expression.

"You killed my father!" she screamed at him. *"You killed my father, you cowardly, sneaking excuse for a man!"* She looked at the party of ranchers and vaqs, all of them staring at her now. *"There he is, Fran Lengyll, head of the Horsemen's Association, as low a sneak as ever walked! Low as coyote shit! Low as—"*

"That's enough," Jonas said, watching with some interest as Lengyll scuttled back to his men—and yes, Susan was bitterly delighted to see, it was a full-fledged scuttle—with his shoulders hunched. Rhea was cack-ling, rocking from side to side and making a sound like fingernails on a piece of slate. The sound shocked Susan, but she wasn't a bit surprised by Rhea's presence in this company.

"It could never be enough," she said, looking from Jonas to Lengyll with an expression of contempt so deep it seemed bottomless. "For him it could never be enough."

"Well, perhaps, but you did quite well in the time you had, lady-sai. Few could have done better. And listen to the witch cackle! Like salt in his wounds, I wot . . . but we'll shut her up soon enough." Then, turning his head: "Clay!"

Reynolds rode up.

"Think you can get Sunbeam back to Seafront all right?"

"I think so." Reynolds tried not to show the relief he felt at being sent back east instead of west. He had begun to have a bad feeling about Hang-ing Rock, Latigo, the tankers . . . about the whole show, really. God knew why. "Now?"

"Give it another minute," Jonas said. "Mayhap there's going to be a spot of killing

right here. Who knows? But it's the unanswered questions that makes it worthwhile getting up in the morning, even when a man's leg aches like a tooth with a hole in it. Wouldn't you say so?"

"I don't know, Eldred."

"Sai Renfrew, watch our pretty Sunbeam a minute. I have a piece of property to take back."

His voice carried well—he had meant that it should—and Rhea's cackles cut off suddenly, as if severed out of her throat with a hooking-knife. Smiling, Jonas walked his horse toward the black cart with its jost-ling show of gold symbols. Reynolds rode on his left, and Jonas sensed rather than saw Depape fall in on his right. Roy was a good enough boy, really; his head was a little soft, but his heart was in the right place, and you didn't have to tell him *everything*.

For every step forward Jonas's horse took, Rhea shrank back a little in the cart. Her eyes shifted from side to side in their deep sockets, look-ing for a way out that wasn't there.

"Keep away from me, ye charry man!" she cried, raising a hand toward him. With the other she clutched the sack with the ball in it ever more tightly. "Keep away, or I'll bring the lightning and strike ye dead where ye sit yer horse! Yer harrier friends, too!"

Jonas thought Roy hesitated briefly at that, but Clay never did, nor did Jonas himself. He guessed there was a great lot she could do ... or that there had been, at one time. But that was before the hungry glass had en-tered her life.

"Give it up to me," he said. He reached the side of her wagon and held his hand out for the bag. "It's not yours and never was. One day you'll doubtless have the Good Man's thanks for keeping it so well as you have, but now you must give it up."

She screamed—a sound of such piercing intensity that several of the *vaqueros* dropped their tin coffee-cups and clapped their hands over their ears. At the same time she knotted her hand through the drawstring and raised the bag over her head. The curved shape of the ball swung back and forth at the bottom of it like a pendulum.

"*I'll not!*" she howled. "*I'll smash it on the ground before I give it up to the likes o' you!*"

Jonas doubted if the ball would break, not hurled by her weak arms onto the

trampled, springy mat of the Bad Grass, but he didn't think he would have occasion to find out, one way or the other.

"Clay," he said. "Draw your gun."

He didn't need to look at Clay to see that he'd done it; he saw the frantic way her eyes shifted to the left, where Clay sat his horse.

"I'm going to have a count," Jonas said. "Just a short one; if I get to three and she hasn't passed that bag over, blow her ugly head off."

"Aye."

"One," Jonas said, watching the ball pendulum back and forth at the bottom of the upheld bag. It was glowing; he could see dull pink even through the cloth. "Two. Enjoy hell, Rhea, goodbye. Thr—"

"Here!" she screamed, thrusting it out toward him and shielding her face with the crooked hook of her free hand. *"Here, take it! And may it damn you the way it's damned me!"*

"Thankee-sai."

He grabbed the bag just below the draw top and yanked. Rhea screamed again as the string skinned her knuckles and tore off one of her nails. Jonas hardly heard. His mind was a white explosion of exultation. For the first time in his long professional life he forgot his job, his sur-roundings, and the six thousand things that could get him killed on any day. He had it; he had it; by all the graves of all the gods, he had the fuck-ing thing!

Mine! he thought, and that was all. He somehow restrained the urge to open the bag and stick his head inside it, like a horse sticking its head into a bag of oats, and looped the drawstring over the pommel of his saddle twice instead. He took in a breath as deep as his lungs would allow, then expelled it. Better. A little.

"Roy."

"Aye, Jonas."

It would be good to get out of this place, Jonas thought, and not for the first time. To get away from these hicks. He was sick of *aye* and *ye* and *so it is*, sick to his bones.

"Roy, we'll give the bitch a ten-count this time. If she isn't out of my sight by then, you have my permission to blow her ass off. Now, let's see if you can do the counting. I'll be listening close, so mind you don't skip any!"

"One," Depape said eagerly. "Two. Three. Four."

Spitting curses, Rhea snatched up the reins of the cart and spanked the pony's back with them. The pony laid its ears back and jerked the cart forward so vigorously that Rhea went tumbling backward off the cant-board, her feet up, her white and bony shins showing above her ankle-high black shoes and mismatched wool stockings. The *vaqueros* laughed. Jonas laughed himself. It was pretty funny, all right, seeing her on her back with her pins in the air.

"Fuh-fuh-five," Depape said, laughing so hard he was hiccupping. "Sih-sih-six!" Rhea climbed back up, flopped onto the cantboard again with all the grace of a dying fish, and peered around at them, wall-eyed and sneering.

"*I curse ye all!*" she screamed. It cut through them, stilling their laughter even as the cart bounced toward the edge of the trampled clear-ing. "*Every last one of ye! Ye... and ye... and ye!*" Her crooked finger pointed last at Jonas. "*Thief! Miserable thief!*"

As though it was yours, Jonas marveled (although "Mine!" was the first word to occur to him, once he had taken possession of it). *As though such a wonder could ever belong to a back-country reader of rooster-guts such as you.*

The cart bounced its way into the Bad Grass, the pony pulling hard with its ears laid back; the old woman's screams served to drive it better than any whip could have done. The black slipped into the green. They saw the cart flicker like a conjurer's trick, and then it was gone. For a long time yet, however, they heard her shrieking her curses, calling death down upon them beneath the Demon Moon.

15

"Go on," Jonas told Clay Reynolds. "Take our Sunbeam back. And if you want to stop on the way and make some use of her, why, be my guest." He glanced at Susan as he said this, to see what effect it might be having, but he was disappointed—she looked dazed, as if the last blow Renfrew had dealt her had scrambled her brains, at least temporarily. "Just make sure she gets to Coral at the end of all the fun." "I will. Any message for sai Thorin?"

"Tell her to keep the wench someplace safe until she hears from me. And . . . why don't you stay with her. Clay? Coral, I mean—come tomor-row, I don't think we'll have to worry about this 'un anymore, but Coral . . . ride with her to Ritzy when she goes. Be her escort, like."

Reynolds nodded. Better and better. Seafront it would be, and that was fine. He might like a little taste of the girl once he got her there, but not on the way. Not under the ghostly-full daytime Demon Moon. "Go on, then. Get started."

Reynolds led her across the clearing, aiming for a point well away from the bent swath of grass where Rhea had made her exit. Susan rode silently, downcast eyes fixed on her bound wrists.

Jonas turned to face his men. "The three young fellows from In-World have broken their way out of jail, with that haughty young bitch's help," he said, pointing at Susan's departing back.

There was a low, growling murmur from the men. That "Will Dear-born" and his friends were free they had known; that sai Delgado had helped them escape they had not . . . and it was perhaps just as well for her that Reynolds was at that moment leading her into the Bad Grass and out of sight.

"Never mind!" Jonas shouted, pulling their attention back to him. He reached out a stealthy hand and caressed the curve at the bottom of the drawstring bag. Just touching the ball made him feel as if he could do anything, and with one hand tied behind his back, at that.

"Never mind her, and never mind them!" His eyes moved from Lengyll to Wertner to Croydon to Brian Hookey to Roy Depape. "We're close to forty men, going to join another hundred and fifty. They're three, and not one a day over sixteen. Are you afraid of three little boys?"

"No!" they cried.

"If we run on em, my cullies, what will we do?"

"*KILL THEM!*" The shout so loud that it sent rooks rising up into the morning sun, cawing their displeasure as they commenced the hunt for more peaceful surroundings.

Jonas was satisfied. His hand was still on the sweet curve of the ball, and he could feel it pouring strength into him. *Pink strength*, he thought, and grinned.

"Come on, boys. I want those tankers in the woods west of Eyebolt before the home folks light their Reap-Night Bonfire."

Sheemie, crouched down in the grass and peering into the clearing, was nearly run

over by Rhea's black wagon; the screaming, gibbering witch passed so close to him that he could smell her sour skin and dirty hair. If she had looked down, she couldn't have missed seeing him and undoubt-edly would have turned him into a bird or a bumbler or maybe even a mosquito.

The boy saw Jonas pass custody of Susan to the one in the cloak, and began working his way around the edge of the clearing. He heard Jonas haranguing the men (many of whom Sheemie knew; it shamed him to know how many Mejis cowboys were doing that bad Coffin Hunter's bid-ding), but paid no attention to what he was saying. Sheemie froze in place as they mounted up, momentarily scared they would come in his direc-tion, but they rode the other way, west. The clearing emptied almost as if by magic . . . except it wasn't *entirely* empty.

Caprichoso had been left behind, his lead trailing on the beaten grass. Capi looked after the depart-ing riders, brayed once—as if to tell them they could all go to hell—then turned and made eye-contact with Sheemie, who was peering out into the clearing. The mule flicked his ears at the boy, then tried to graze. He lipped the Bad Grass a single time, raised his head, and brayed at Sheemie, as if to say this was all the inn-boy's fault.

Sheemie stared thoughtfully at Caprichoso, thinking of how much easier it was to ride than to walk. Gods, yes ... but that second bray de-cided him against it. The mule might give one of his disgusted cries at the wrong time and alert the man who had Susan.

"You'll find your way home, I reckon," Sheemie said. "So long, pal. So long, good old Capi. See you farther down the path."

He found the path made by Susan and Reynolds, and began to trot af-ter them once more.

17

"They're coming again," Alain said a moment before Roland sensed it himself—a brief flicker in his head like pink lightning. "All of them."

Roland hunkered in front of Cuthbert. Cuthbert looked back at him without even a suggestion of his usual foolish good humor.

"Much of it's on you," Roland said, then tapped the slingshot. "And on that."

"I know."

"How much have you got in the armory?"

"Almost four dozen steel balls." Bert held up a cotton bag which had, in more settled times, held his father's tobacco. "Plus assorted fireworks in my saddlebag."

"How many big-bangers?"

"Enough, Roland." Unsmiling. With the laughter gone from them, he had the hollow eyes of just one more killer. "Enough."

Roland ran a hand down the front of the *serape* he wore, letting his palm reacquaint itself with the rough weave. He looked at Cuthbert's, then at Alain's, telling himself again that it could work, yes, as long as they held their nerve and didn't let themselves think of it in terms of three against forty or fifty, it could work.

"The ones out at Hanging Rock will hear the shooting once it starts, won't they?" Al asked.

Roland nodded. "With the wind blowing from us to them, there's no doubt of that."

"We'll have to move fast, then."

"We'll go as best we can." Roland thought of standing between the tangled green hedges behind the Great Hall, David the hawk on his arm and a sweat of terror trickling down his back. *I think you die today*, he had told the hawk, and he had told it true. Yet he himself had lived, and passed his test, and walked out of the testing corridor facing east. Today it was Cuthbert and Alain's turn to be tested—not in Gilead, in the traditional place of proving behind the Great Hall, but here in Mejis, on the edge of the Bad Grass, in the desert, and in the canyon. Eyebolt Canyon.

"Prove or die," Alain said, as if reading the run of the gunslinger's thoughts.

"That's what it comes down to."

"Yes. That's what it always comes down to, in the end. How long before they get here, do you think?"

"An hour at least, I'd say. Likely two."

"They'll be running a 'watch-and-go.' "

Alain nodded. "I think so, yes."

"That's not good," Cuthbert said.

"Jonas is afraid of being ambushed in the grass," Roland said. "Maybe of us setting fire to it around him. They'll loosen up when they get into the clear."

"You hope," Cuthbert said.

Roland nodded gravely. "Yes. I hope."

18

At first Reynolds was content to lead the girl along the broken backtrail at a fast walk, but about thirty minutes after leaving Jonas, Lengyll, and the rest, he broke into a trot. Pylon matched Reynolds's horse easily, and just as easily when, ten minutes later, he upped their speed to a light but steady run.

Susan held to the horn of her saddle with her bound hands and rode easily at Reynolds's right, her hair streaming out behind her. She thought her face must be quite colorful; the skin of her cheeks felt raised at least two inches higher than usual, welted and tender. Even the passing wind stung a little.

At the place where the Bad Grass gave way to the Drop, Reynolds stopped to give the horses a blow. He dismounted himself, turned his back to her, and took a piss. As he did, Susan looked up along the rise of land and saw the great herd, now untended and unravelling at the edges. They had done that much, perhaps. It wasn't much, but it was something.

"Do you need to do the necessary?" Reynolds asked. "I'll help you down if you do, but don't say no now and whine about it later."

"Ye're afraid. Big brave regulator that ye are, ye're scared, ain't ye? Aye, coffin tattoo and all."

Reynolds tried a contemptuous grin. It didn't fit his face very well this morning.

"You ort to leave the fortune-telling to those that are good at it, missy. Now do you need a necessary stop or not?"

"No. And ye *are* afraid. Of what?"

Reynolds, who only knew that his bad feeling hadn't left him when he left Jonas, as he'd hoped it would, bared his tobacco-stained teeth at her. "If you can't talk sensible, just shut up."

"Why don't ye let me go? Perhaps my friends will do the same for you, when they catch us up."

This time Reynolds grunted laughter which was almost genuine. He swung himself into his saddle, hawked, spat. Overhead, Demon Moon was a pale and bloated ball in the sky. "You can dream, miss'sai," he said, "dreaming's free. But you ain't never going to see those three again. They're for the worms, they are."

Now let's ride."
They rode.

19

Cordelia hadn't gone to bed at all on Reaping Eve. She sat the night through in her parlor chair, and although there was sewing on her lap, she had put not a single stitch in nor picked one out. Now, as morning's light brightened toward ten o' the clock, she sat in the same chair, looking out at nothing. What was there to look at, anyway? Everything had come down with a smash—all her hopes of the fortune Thorin would settle on Susan and Susan's child, perhaps while he still lived, certainly in his dead-letter; all her hopes of ascending to her proper place in the community; all her plans for the future. Swept away by two wilful young people who couldn't keep their pants up.

She sat in her old chair with her knitting on her lap and the ashes Susan had smeared on her cheek standing out like a brand, and thought: *They'll find me dead in this chair, someday—old, poor, and forgotten. That ungrateful child! After all I did for her!*

What roused her was a weak scratching at the window. She had no idea how long it had been going on before it finally intruded on her consciousness, but when it did, she laid her needlework aside and got up to see. A bird, perhaps. Or children playing Reaping jokes, unaware that the world had come to an end. Whatever it was, she would shoo it away.

Cordelia saw nothing at first. Then, as she was about to turn away, she spied a pony and cart at the edge of the yard. The cart was a little disquieting—black, with gold symbols overpainted—and the pony in the shafts stood with its head lowered, not grazing, looking as if it had been run half to death.

She was still frowning out at this when a twisted, filthy hand rose in the air directly in front of her and began to scratch at the glass again. Cordelia gasped and clapped both hands to her bosom as her heart took a startled leap in her chest. She backed up a step, and gave a little shriek as her calf brushed the tender of the stove.

The long, dirty nails scratched twice more, then fell away.

Cordelia stood where she was for a moment, irresolute, then went to the door,

stopping at the woodbox to pick up a chunk of ash which fitted her hand. Just in case. Then she jerked the door open, went to the corner of the house, drew in a deep, steadying breath, and went around to the garden side, raising the ash-chunk as she did.

"Get out, whoever ye are! Scat before I—"

Her voice was stilled by what she saw: an incredibly old woman crawling through the frost-killed flowerbed next to the house—crawling toward her. The crone's stringy white hair (what remained of it) hung in her face. Sores festered on her cheeks and brow; her lips had split and drizzled blood down her pointed, warty chin. The corneas of her eyes had gone a filthy gray-yellow, and she panted like a cracked bellows as she moved.

"Good woman, help me," this specter gasped. "Help me if ye will, for I'm about done up."

The hand holding the chunk of ash sagged. Cordelia could hardly believe what she was seeing. "Rhea?" she whispered. "Is it Rhea?"

"Aye," Rhea whispered, crawling relentlessly through the dead silk-flowers, dragging her hands through the cold earth. "Help me."

Cordelia retreated a step, her makeshift bludgeon now hanging at her knee. "No, I... I can't have such as thee in my house ... I'm sorry to see ye so, but . . . but I have a reputation, ye ken . . . folk watch me close, so they do ..."

She glanced at the High Street as she said this, as if expecting to see a line of townspeople outside her gate, watching eagerly, avid to fleet their wretched gossip on its lying way, but there was no one there. Hambry was quiet, its walks and byways empty, the customary joyous noise of Reap-ing Fair-Day stilled. She looked back at the thing which had fetched up in her dead flowers.

"Yer niece ... did this . . ." the thing in the dirt whispered. "All . . . her fault . . ."

Cordelia dropped the chunk of wood. It clipped the side of her ankle, but she hardly noticed. Her hands curled into fists before her.

"Help me," Rhea whispered. "I know ... where she is ... we ... we have work, us two ... women's . . . work ..."

Cordelia hesitated a moment, then went to the woman, knelt, got an arm around her, and somehow got her to her feet. The smell coming off her was reeky and nauseating—the smell of decomposing flesh.

Bony fingers caressed Cordelia's cheek and the side of her neck as she helped the

hag into the house. Cordelia's flesh crawled, but she didn't pull away until Rhea collapsed into a chair, gasping from one end and farting from the other.

"Listen to me," the old woman hissed.

"I am." Cordelia drew a chair over and sat beside her. At death's door she might be, but once her eye fell on you, it was strangely hard to look away. Now Rhea's fingers dipped inside the bodice of her dirty dress, brought out a silver charm of some kind, and began to move it back and forth rapidly, as if telling beads.

Cordelia, who hadn't felt sleepy all night, began to feel that way now.

"The others are beyond us," Rhea said, "and the ball has slipped my grasp. But *she*—! Back to Mayor's House she's been ta'en, and mayhap we could see to her—we could do that much, aye."

"You can't see to anything," Cordelia said distantly. "You're dying."

Rhea wheezed laughter and a trickle of yellowish drool. "Dying? Nay! Just done up and in need of a refreshment. Now listen to me, Cordelia daughter of Hiram and sister of Pat!"

She hooked a bony (and surprisingly strong) arm around Cordelia's neck and drew her close. At the same time she raised her other hand, twirling the silver medallion in front of Cordelia's wide eyes. The crone whispered, and after a bit Cordelia began to nod her understanding.

"Do it, then," the old woman said, letting go. She slumped back in her chair, exhausted. "Now, for I can't last much longer as I am. And I'll need a bit o' time after, mind ye. To revive, like."

Cordelia moved across the room to the kitchen area. There, on the counter beside the hand-pump, was a wooden block in which were sheathed the two sharp knives of the house. She took one and came back. Her eyes were distant and far, as Susan's had been when she and Rhea stood in the open doorway of Rhea's hut in the light of the Kissing Moon.

"Would ye pay her back?" Rhea asked. "For that's why I've come to ye."

"Miss Oh So Young and Pretty," Cordelia murmured in a barely audi-ble voice.

The hand not holding the knife floated up to her face and touched her ash-smeared cheek. "Yes. I'd be repaid of her, so I would."

"To the death?"

"Aye. Hers or mine."

" 'Twill be hers," Rhea said, "never fear it. Now refresh me, Cordelia. Give me

what I need!"

Cordelia unbuttoned her dress down the front, pushing it open to re-veal an ungenerous bosom and a middle which had begun to curve out in the last year or so, making a tidy little potbelly. Yet she still had the ves-tige of a waist, and it was here she used the knife, cutting through her shift and the top layers of flesh beneath. The white cotton began to bloom red at once along the slit.

"Aye," Rhea whispered. "Like roses. I dream of them often enough, roses in bloom, and what stands black among em at the end of the world. Come closer!" She put her hand on the small of Cordelia's back, urging her forward. She raised her eyes to Cordelia's face, then grinned and licked her lips. "Good. Good enough."

Cordelia looked blankly over the top of the old woman's head as Rhea of the Coos buried her face against the red cut in the shift and began to drink.

20

Roland was at first pleased as the muted jingle of harness and buckle drew closer to the place where the three of them were hunkered down in the high grass, but as the sounds drew closer still—close enough to hear mur-muring voices as well as soft-thudding hooves—he began to be afraid. For the riders to pass close was one thing, but if they were, through foul luck, to come right upon them, the three boys would likely die like a nest of moles uncovered by the blade of a passing plow.

Ka surely hadn't brought them all this way to end in such fashion, had it? In all these miles of Bad Grass, how could that party of oncoming rid-ers possibly strike the one point where Roland and his friends had pulled up? But still they closed in, the sound of tack and buckle and men's voices growing ever sharper.

Alain looked at Roland with dismayed eyes and pointed to the left. Roland shook his head and patted his hands toward the ground, indicating they would stay put. They *had* to stay put; it was too late to move without being heard.

Roland drew his guns.

Cuthbert and Alain did the same.

In the end, the plow missed the moles by sixty feet. The boys could actually see the horses and riders flashing through the thick grass; Roland easily made out that the party was led by Jonas, Depape, and Lengyll, rid-ing three abreast. They were

followed by at least three dozen others, glimpsed as roan flashes and the bright red and green of *serapes* through the grass. They were strung out pretty well, and Roland thought he and his friends could reasonably hope they'd string out even more once they reached open desert.

The boys waited for the party to pass, holding their horses' heads in case one of them took it in mind to whicker a greeting to the nags so close by. When they were gone, Roland turned his pale and unsmiling face to his friends.

"Mount up," he said. "Reaping's come."

21

They walked their horses to the edge of the Bad Grass, meeting the path of Jonas's party where the grass gave way first to a zone of stunted bushes and then to the desert itself.

The wind howled high and lonesome, carrying big drifts of gritty dust under a cloudless dark blue sky. Demon Moon stared down from it like the filmed eye of a corpse. Two hundred yards ahead, the drogue riders backing Jonas's party were spread out in a line of three, their *sombreros* jammed down tight on their heads, their shoulders hunched, their *scrapes* blowing.

Roland moved so that Cuthbert rode in the middle of their trio. Bert had his slingshot in his hand. Now he handed Alain half a dozen steel balls, and Roland another half-dozen. Then he raised his eyebrows questioningly. Roland nodded and they began to ride.

Dust blew past them in rattling sheets, sometimes turning the drogue riders into ghosts, sometimes obscuring them completely, but the boys closed in steadily. Roland rode tense, waiting for one of the drogues to turn in his saddle and see them, but none did—none of them wanted to put his face into that cutting, grit-filled wind. Nor was there sound to warn them; there was sandy hardpack under the horses' hooves now, and it didn't give away much.

When they were just twenty yards behind the drogues, Cuthbert nodded—they were close enough for him to work. Alain handed him a ball. Bert, sitting ramrod straight in the saddle, dropped it into the cup of his slingshot, pulled, waited for the wind to drop, then released. The rider ahead on the left jerked as if stung, raised one hand a little, then toppled out of his saddle. Incredibly, neither of his

two *companeros* seemed to no-tice. Roland saw what he thought was the beginning of a reaction from the one on the right when Bert drew again, and the rider in the middle col-lapsed forward onto his horse's neck. The horse, startled, reared up. The rider flopped bonelessly backward, his *sombrero* tumbling off, and fell. The wind dropped enough for Roland to hear his knee snap as his foot caught in one of his stirrups.

The third rider now began to turn. Roland caught a glimpse of a bearded face—a dangling cigarette, unlit because of the wind, one aston-ished eye—and then Cuthbert's sling *thumped* again. The astonished eye was replaced by a red socket. The rider slid from his saddle, groping for the horn and missing it.

Three gone, Roland thought.

He kicked Rusher into a gallop. The others did the same, and the boys rode forward into the dust a stirrup's width apart. The horses of the am-bushed drogue riders veered off to the south in a group, and that was good. Riderless horses ordinarily didn't raise eyebrows in Mejis, but when they were saddled—More riders up ahead: a single, then two side by side, then another single. Roland drew his knife, and rode up beside the fellow who was now drogue and didn't know it.

"What news?" he asked conversationally, and when the man turned, Roland buried his knife in his chest. The *vaq's* brown eyes widened above the bandanna he'd pulled up outlaw-style over his mouth and nose, and then he tumbled from his saddle.

Cuthbert and Alain spurred past him, and Bert, not slowing, took the two riding ahead with his slingshot. The fellow beyond them heard some-thing in spite of the wind, and swivelled in his saddle. Alain had drawn his own knife and now held it by the tip of the blade. He threw hard, in the exaggerated full-arm motion they had been taught, and although the range was long for such work—twenty feet at least, and in windy air—his aim was true. The hilt came to rest protruding from the center of the man's bandanna. The *vaq* groped for it, making choked gargling sounds around the knife in his throat, and then he too dropped from the saddle. Seven now.

Like the story of the shoemaker and the flies, Roland thought. His heart was beating slow and hard in his chest as he caught up with Alain and Cuthbert. The wind gusted a lonely whine. Dust flew, swirled, then dropped with the wind.

Ahead of them were three more riders, and ahead of them the main party. Roland pointed at the next three, then mimed the slingshot. Pointed beyond them and mimed firing a revolver. Cuthbert and Alain nodded. They rode forward, once again stirrup-to-stirrup, closing in.

22

Bert got two of the three ahead of them clean, but the third jerked at the wrong moment, and the steel ball meant for the back of his head only clipped his earlobe on the way by. Roland had drawn his gun by then, however, and put a bullet in the man's temple as he turned. That made ten, a full quarter of Jonas's company before the riders even realized trouble had begun. Roland had no idea if it would be enough of an advantage, but he knew that the first part of the job was done. No more stealth; now it was a matter of raw killing.

"Hile! Hile!" he screamed in a ringing, carrying voice. *"To me, gunslingers! To me! Ride them down! No prisoners!"*

They spurred toward the main party, riding into battle for the first time, closing like wolves on sheep, shooting before the men ahead of them had any slight idea of who had gotten in behind them or what was happening. The three boys had been trained as gunslingers, and what they lacked in experience they made up for with the keen eyes and reflexes of the young. Under their guns, the desert east of Hanging Rock became a killing-floor.

Screaming, not a single thought among them above the wrists of their deadly hands, they sliced into the unprepared Mejis party like a three-sided blade, shooting as they went. Not every shot killed, but not a one went entirely wild, either. Men flew out of their saddles and were dragged by boots caught in stirrups as their horses bolted; other men, some dead, some only wounded, were trampled beneath the feet of their panicky, rearing mounts.

Roland rode with both guns drawn and tiring, Rusher's reins gripped in his teeth so they wouldn't fall overside and trip the horse up. Two men dropped beneath his fire on his left, two more on the right. Ahead of them, Brian Hookey turned in his saddle, his beard-stubby face long with amazement. Around his neck, a reap-charm in the shape of a bell swung and tinkled as he grabbed for the shotgun which hung in a scabbard over one burly blacksmith's shoulder. Before he could

do more than get a hand on the gunstock, Roland blew the silver bell off his chest and exploded the heart which lay beneath it. Hookey pitched out of his saddle with a grunt.

Cuthbert caught up with Roland on the right side and shot two more men off their horses. He gave Roland a fierce and blazing grin. "*Al was right!*" he shouted.

"These are hard calibers!"

Roland's talented fingers did their work, rolling the cylinders of the guns he held and reloading at a full gallop—doing it with a ghastly, super-natural speed—and then beginning to fire again. Now they had come almost all the way through the group, riding hard, laying men low on both sides and straight ahead as well. Alain dropped back a little and turned his horse, covering Roland and Cuthbert from behind.

Roland saw Jonas, Depape, and Lengyll reining around to face their attackers. Lengyll was clawing at his machine-gun, but the strap had gotten tangled in the wide collar of the duster he wore, and every time he grabbed for the stock, it bobbed out of his reach. Beneath his heavy gray-blond mustache, Lengyll's mouth was twisted with fury.

Now, riding between Roland and Cuthbert and these three, holding a huge blued-steel five-shot in one hand, came Hash Renfrew.

"Gods damn you!" Renfrew cried. "Oh, you rotten sister-fuckers!" He dropped his reins and laid the five-shot in the crook of one elbow to steady it. The wind gusted viciously, wrapping him in an envelope of swirling brown grit.

Roland had no thought of retreating, or perhaps jiggling to one side or the other. He had, in fact, no thoughts at all. The fever had descended over his mind and he burned with it like a torch inside a glass sleeve. Screaming through the reins caught in his teeth, he galloped toward Hash Renfrew and the three men behind him.

23

Jonas had no clear idea of what was happening until he heard Will Dear-born screaming

(Hile! To me! No prisoners!)

a battle-cry he knew of old. Then it fell into place and the rattle of gunfire made

sense. He reined around, aware of Roy doing the same be-side him . . . but most aware of the ball in its bag, a thing both powerful and fragile, swinging back and forth against the neck of his horse.

"It's those *kids!*" Roy exclaimed. His total surprise made him look more stupid than ever.

"*Dearborn, you bastard!*" Hash Renfrew spat, and the gun in his hand thundered a single time.

Jonas saw Dearborn's sombrero rise from his head, its brim chewed away. Then the kid was firing, and he was good—better than anyone Jonas had ever seen in his life. Renfrew was hammered back out of his saddle with both legs kicking, still holding onto his monster gun, firing it twice at the dusty-blue sky before hitting the ground on his back and rolling, dead, on his side.

Lengyll's hand dropped away from the elusive wire stock of his speed-shooter and he only stared, unable to believe the apparition bearing down on him out of the dust. "Get back!" he cried. "In the name of the Horsemen's Association, I tell you—" Then a large black hole appeared in the center of his forehead, just above the place where his eyebrows tangled together. His hands flew up to his shoulders, palms out, as if he were declaring surrender. That was how he died.

"Son of a bitch, oh you little sister-fucking son of a bitch!" Depape howled. He tried to draw and his revolver got caught in his *scrape*. He was still trying to pull it free when a bullet from Roland's gun opened his mouth in a red scream almost all the way down to his adam's apple.

This can't be happening, Jonas thought stupidly. *It can't, there are too many of us.* But it *was* happening. The In-World boys had struck unerringly at the fracture-line; were performing what amounted to a textbook example of how gunslingers were supposed to attack when the odds were bad. And Jonas's coalition of ranchers, cowboys, and town tough-boys had shat-tered. Those not dead were fleeing to every point of the compass, spurring their horses as if a hundred devils paroled from hell were in pursuit. They were far from a hundred, but they *fought* like a hundred. Bodies were scattered in the dust everywhere, and as Jonas watched, he saw the one serving as their back door—Stockworth—ride down another man, bump him out of his saddle, and put a bullet in his head as he fell. *Gods of the earth*, he thought, *that was Croydon, him that owns the Piano Ranch!* Except he didn't own it anymore.

And now Dearborn was bearing down on Jonas with his gun drawn. Jonas snatched the drawstring looped around the horn of his saddle and unwound it with two fast, hard snaps of the wrist. He held the bag up in the windy air, his teeth bared and his long white hair streaming.

"Come any closer and I'll smash it! I mean it, you damned puppy! Stay where you are!"

Roland never hesitated in his headlong gallop, never paused to think; his hands did his thinking for him now, and when he remembered all this later, it was distant and silent and queerly warped, like something seen in a flawed mirror ... or a wizard's glass.

Jonas thought: *Gods, it's him! It's Arthur Eld himself come to take me!*

And as the barrel of Roland's gun opened in his eye like the entrance to a tunnel or a mineshaft, Jonas remembered what the brat had said to him in the dusty dooryard of that burned-out ranch: *The soul of a man such as you can never leave the west.*

I knew, Jonas thought. Even then I knew my ka had pretty well run out. But surely he won't risk the ball . . . he can't risk the ball, he's the dinh of this ka-tet and he can't risk it...

"To me!" Jonas screamed. *"To me, boys! They're only three, for gods' sake! To me, you cowards!"*

But he was alone—Lengyll killed with his idiotic machine-gun lying by his side, Roy a corpse glaring up at the bitter sky, Quint fled, Hookey dead, the ranchers who had ridden with them gone. Only Clay still lived, and he was miles from here. *"I'll smash it!"* he shrieked at the cold-eyed boy bearing down on him like death's sleekest engine. *"Before all the gods, I'll—"*

Roland thumbed back the hammer of his revolver and fired. The bullet struck the center of the tattooed hand holding the drawstring cord and vaporized the palm, leaving only fingers that twitched their random way out of a spongy red mass. For just a moment Roland saw the blue coffin, and then it was covered by downspilling blood.

The bag dropped. And, as Rusher collided with Jonas's horse and slewed it to the side. Roland caught the bag deftly in the crook of one arm. Jonas, screaming in dismay as the prize left him, grabbed at Roland, caught his shoulder, and almost succeeded in turning the gunslinger out of his saddle. Jonas's blood rained across

Roland's face in hot drops.

"*Give it back, you brat!*" Jonas clawed under his *serape* and brought out another gun. "*Give it back, it's mine!*"

"Not anymore," Roland said. And, as Rusher danced around, quick and delicate for such a large animal, Roland fired two point-blank rounds into Jonas's face. Jonas's horse bolted out from under him and the man with the white hair landed spreadeagled on his back with a thump. His arms and legs spasmed, jerked, trembled, then stilled.

Roland looped the bag's drawstring over his shoulder and rode back toward Alain and Cuthbert, ready to give aid ... but there was no need. They sat their horses side by side in the blowing dust, at the end of a scat-tered road of dead bodies, their eyes wide and dazed—eyes of boys who have passed through fire for the first time and can hardly believe they have not been burned. Only Alain had been wounded; a bullet had opened his left cheek, a wound that healed clean but left a scar he bore until his dying day. He could not remember who had shot him, he said later on, or at what point of the battle. He had been lost to himself during the shoot-ing, and had only vague memories of what had happened after the charge began. Cuthbert said much the same.

"Roland," Cuthbert said now. He passed a shaky hand down his face. "Hile, gunslinger."

"Hile."

Cuthbert's eyes were red and irritated from the sand, as if he had been crying. He took back the unspent silver slingshot balls when Roland handed them to him without seeming to know what they were. "Roland, we're alive."

"Yes."

Alain was looking around dazedly. "Where did the others go?"

"I'd say at least twenty-five of them are back there," Roland said, ges-turing at the road of dead bodies. "The rest—" He waved his hand, still with a revolver in it, in a wide half-circle. "They've gone. Had their fill of Mid-World's wars, I wot."

Roland slipped the drawstring bag off his shoulder, held it before him on the bridge of his saddle for a moment, and then opened it. For a moment the bag's mouth was black, and then it filled with the irregular pulse of a lovely pink light. It crept up the gunslinger's smooth cheeks like fingers and swam in his eyes.

"Roland," Cuthbert said, suddenly nervous, "I don't think you should play with

that. Especially not now. They'll have heard the shooting out at Hanging Rock. If we're going to finish what we started, we don't have time for—"

Roland ignored him. He slipped both hands into the bag and lifted the wizard's glass out. He held it up to his eyes, unaware that he had smeared it with droplets of Jonas's blood. The ball did not mind; this was not the first time it had been blood-touched. It flashed and swirled formlessly for a moment, and then its pink vapors opened like curtains. Roland saw what was there, and lost himself within it.

CHAPTER X

BENEATH THE DEMON MOON (II)

1

Coral's grip on Susan's arm was firm but not painful. There was nothing particularly cruel about the way she was moving Susan along the down-stairs corridor, but there was a relentlessness about it that was disheartening. Susan didn't try to protest; it would have been useless. Behind the two women were a pair of *vaqueros* (armed with knives and *bolas* rather than guns; the available guns had all gone west with Jonas). Behind the *vaqs*, skulking along like a sullen ghost

which lacks the necessary psychic energy to fully materialize itself, came the late Chancellor's older brother, Laslo. Reynolds, his taste for a spot of journey's-end rape blunted by his growing sense of disquiet, had either remained above or gone off to town.

"I'm going to put ye in the cold pantry until I know better what to do with'ee, dear," Coral said. "Ye'll be quite safe there ... and warm. How fortunate ye wore a *serape*. Then . . . when Jonas gets back ..."

"Ye'll never see sai Jonas again," Susan said. "He won't ever—"

Fresh pain exploded in her sensitive face. For a moment it seemed the entire world had blown up. Susan reeled back against the dressed stone wall of the lower corridor, her vision first blurred, then slowly clearing. She could feel blood flowing down her cheek from a wound opened by the stone in Coral's ring when Coral had backhanded her. And her nose. *That* cussed thing was bleeding again, too.

Coral was looking at her in a chilly this-is-all-business-to-me fashion, but Susan believed she saw something different in the woman's eyes. Fear, mayhap.

"Don't talk to me about Eldred, missy. He's sent to catch the boys who killed my brother. The boys *you* set loose."

"Get off it." Susan wiped her nose, grimaced at the blood pooled in her palm, and wiped it on the leg of her pants. "I know who killed Hart as well as ye do yerself, so don't pull mine and I won't yank yer own." She watched Coral's hand rise, ready to slap, and managed a dry laugh. "Go on. Cut my face open on the other side, if ye like. Will that change how ye sleep tonight with no man to warm the other side of the bed?"

Coral's hand came down fast and hard, but instead of slapping, it seized Susan's arm again. Hard enough to hurt, this time, but Susan barely felt it. She had been hurt by experts this day, and would suffer more hurt gladly, if that would hasten the moment when she and Roland could be together again.

Coral hauled her the rest of the way down the corridor, through the kitchen (that great room, which would have been all steam and bustle on any other Reaping Day, now stood uncannily deserted), and to the iron-bound door on the far side. This she opened. A smell of potatoes and gourds and sharproot drifted out.

"Get in there. Go smart, before I decide to kick yer winsome ass square."

Susan looked her in the eye, smiling.

"I'd damn ye for a murderer's bed-bitch, sai Thorin, but ye've already damned yerself. Ye know it, too—'tis written in yer face, to be sure. So I'll just drop ye a curtsey"—still smiling, she suited action to the words— "and wish ye a very good day."

"Get in and shut up yer saucy mouth!" Coral cried, and pushed Susan into the cold pantry. She slammed the door, ran the bolt, and turned her blazing eyes upon the *vaqs*, who stood prudently away from her.

"Keep her well, *muchachos*. Mind ye do."

She brushed between them, not listening to their assurances, and went up to her late brother's suite to wait for Jonas, or word of Jonas. The whey-faced bitch sitting down there amongst the carrots and potatoes knew nothing, but her words (*ye'll never see sai Jonas again*) €

were in Coral's head now; they echoed and would not leave. €

2

Twelve o' the clock sounded from the squat bell-tower atop the Town Gathering Hall. And if the unaccustomed silence which hung over the rest of Hambry seemed strange as that Reap morning passed into afternoon, the silence in the Travellers' Rest was downright eerie. Better than two hundred souls were packed together beneath the dead gaze of The Romp,, all of them drinking hard, yet there was hardly a sound among them save for the shuffle of feet and the impatient rap of glasses on the bar, indicat-ing that another drink was wanted.

Sheb had tried a hesitant tune on the piano—"Big Bottle Boogie," everyone liked that one—and a cowboy with a mutie-mark on one cheek had put the tip of a knife in his ear and told him to shut up that noise if he wanted to keep what passed for his brains on the starboard side of his eardrum. Sheb, who would be happy to go on drawing breath for another thousand years if the gods so allowed, quit his piano-bench at once, and went to the bar to help Stanley and Pettie the Trotter serve up the booze.

The mood of the drinkers was confused and sullen. Reaping Fair had been stolen from them, and they didn't know what to do about it. There would still be a bonfire, and plenty of stuffy-guys to bum on it, but there were no Reap-kisses today and would be no dancing tonight; no riddles, no races, no pig-wrestle, no

jokes ... no good cheer, dammit! No hearty farewell to the end of the year! Instead of joviality there had been murder in the dark, and the escape of the guilty, and now only the hope of retribution instead of the certainty of it. These folk, sullen-drunk and as potentially dangerous as stormclouds filled with lightning, wanted someone to focus on, someone to tell them what to do.

And, of course, someone to toss on the fire, as in the days of Eld.

It was at this point, not long after the last toll of noon had faded into the cold air, that the batwing doors opened and two women came in. A good many knew the crone in the lead, and several of them crossed their eyes with their thumbs as a ward against her evil look. A murmur ran through the room. It was the Coos, the old witch-woman, and although her face was pocked with sores and her eyes sunk so deep in their sockets they could barely be seen, she gave off a peculiar sense of vitality. Her lips were red, as if she had been eating winterberries.

The woman behind her walked slowly and stiffly, with one hand pressed against her midsection. Her face was as white as the witch-woman's mouth was red.

Rhea advanced to the middle of the floor, passing the gawking trail-hands at the Watch Me tables without so much as a glance. When she reached the center of the bar and stood directly beneath The Romp's glare, she turned to look at the silent drovers and townsfolk.

"Most of ye know me!" she cried in a rusty voice which stopped just short of stridency. "Those of ye who don't have never wanted a love-potion or needed the ram put back in yer rod or gotten tired of a nagging mother-in-law's tongue. I'm Rhea, the wise-woman of the Coos, and this lady beside me is aunt to the girl who freed three murderers last night... this same girl who murdered yer town's Sheriff and a good young man— married, he was, and with a kid on the way. He stood before her with 'is defenseless hands raised, pleadin for his life on behalf of his wife and his babby to come, and still she shot 'im! Cruel, she is! Cruel and heartless!"

A mutter ran through the crowd. Rhea raised her twisted old claws and it stilled at once. She turned in a slow circle to see them all, hands still raised, looking like the world's oldest, ugliest prizefighter.

"Strangers came and ye welcomed em in!" she cried in her rusty crow's voice.

"Welcomed em and gave em bread to eat, and it's ruin they've fed ye in return!

The deaths of those ye loved and depended on, spoilage to the time of the harvest,

and gods know what curses upon the time to *follow fin de ano!*"

More murmurs, now louder. She had touched their deepest fear: that this year's evil would spread, might even snarl the newly threaded stock which had so slowly and hopefully begun to emerge along the Outer Arc.

"But they've gone and likely won't be back!" Rhea continued. "Mayhap just as well—why should their strange blood taint our ground? But there's this other... one raised among us ... a young woman gone traitor to her town and rogue among her own kind."

Her voice dropped to a hoarse whisper on this last phrase; her listeners strained forward to hear, faces grim, eyes big. And now Rhea pulled the pallid, skinny woman in the rusty black dress forward. She stood Cordelia in front other like a doll or a ventriloquist's dummy, and whispered in her ear ... but the whisper travelled, somehow; they all heard it.

"Come, dear. Tell em what ye told me."

In a dead, carrying voice, Cordelia said: "She said she wouldn't be the Mayor's gilly. He wasn't good enough for such as her, she said. And then she seduced Will Dearborn. The price of her body was a fine position in Gilead as his consort . . . and the murder of Hart Thorin. Dearborn paid her price. Lusty as he was for her, he paid gladly. His friends helped; they may have had the use of 'er as well, for all I know. Chancellor Rimer must have gotten in their way. Or p'rhaps they just saw him, and felt like doing him, too."

"Bastards!" Pettie cried. "Sneaking young culls!"

"Now tell cm what's needed to clarify the new season before it's sp'iled, dearie," Rhea said in a crooning voice.

Cordelia Delgado raised her head and looked around at the men. She took a breath, pulling the sour, intermingled smells of gray and beer and smoke and whiskey deep into her spinster's lungs.

"Take her. Ye must take her. I say it in love and sorrow, so I do."

Silent. Their eyes.

"Paint her hands."

The glass gaze of the thing on the wall, looking its stuffed judgment over the waiting room.

"*Charyou tree*, " Cordelia whispered.

They did not cry their agreement but sighed it, like autumn wind through stripped

trees.

3

Sheemie ran after the bad Coffin Hunter and Susan-sai until he could literally run no more—his lungs were afire and the stitch which had formed in his side turned into a cramp. He pitched forward onto the grass of the Drop, his left hand clutching his right armpit, grimacing with pain.

He lay there for some time with his face deep in the fragrant grass, knowing they were getting farther and farther ahead but also knowing it would do him no good to get up and start running again until the stitch was good and gone. If he tried to hurry the process, the stitch would simply come back and lay him low again. So he lay where he was, lifting his head to look at the tracks left by Susan-sai and the bad Coffin Hunter, and he was just about ready to try his feet when Caprichoso bit him. Not a nip, mind you, but a good healthy chomp. Capi had had a difficult twenty-four hours, and he hadn't much liked to see the author of all his misery lying on the grass, apparently taking a nap.

"*Yeee-OWWWW-by-damn!*" Sheemie cried, and rocketed to his feet. There was nothing so magical as a good bite on the ass, a man of more philosophic bent might have reflected; it made all other concerns, no matter how heavy or sorrowful, disappear like smoke.

He whirled about. "Why did you do that, you mean old sneak of a Capi?" Sheemie was rubbing his bottom vigorously, and large tears of pain stood out in his eyes. "That hurts like . . . like a big old *sonovabitch!*"

Caprichoso extended his neck to its maximum length, bared his teeth in the satanic grin which only mules and dromedaries can command, and brayed. To Sheemie that bray sounded very like laughter.

The mule's lead still trailed back between his sharp little hoofs. Sheemie reached for it, and when Capi dipped his head to inflict another bite, the boy gave him a good hard whack across the side of his narrow head. Capi snorted and blinked. "You had that coming, mean old Capi," Sheemie said. "I'll have to shit from a squat for a week, so I will. Won't be able to sit on the damned jakes." He doubled the lead over his fist and climbed aboard the mule. Capi made no attempt to buck him off, but Sheemie winced as his wounded part settled atop the ridge of the

mule's spine. This was good luck just the same, though, he thought as he kicked the animal into motion. His ass hurt, but at least he wouldn't have to walk ... or try to run with a stitch in his side.

"Go on, stupid!" he said. "Hurry up! Fast as you can, you old sonovabitch!"

In the course of the next hour, Sheemie called Capi "you old sonovabitch" as often as possible—he had discovered, as many others had before him, that only the first cussword is really hard; after that, there's nothing quite like them for relieving one's feelings.

4

Susan's trail cut diagonally across the Drop toward the coast and the grand old adobe that rose there. When Sheemie reached Seafront, he dis-mounted outside the arch and only stood, wondering what to do next. That they had come here, he had no doubt—Susan's horse, Pylon, and the bad Coffin Hunter's horse were tethered side by side in the shade, occasionally dropping their heads and blowing in the pink stone trough that ran along the courtyard's ocean side.

What to do now? The riders who came and went beneath the arch (mostly white-headed *vaqs* who'd been considered too old to form a part of Lengyll's party) paid no attention to the inn-boy and his mule, but Miguel might be a different story. The old *mozo* had never liked him, acted as if he thought Sheemie would turn thief, given half a chance, and if he saw Coral's slop-and-carry-boy skulking in the courtyard, Miguel would very likely drive him away.

No, he won't, he thought grimly. *Not today, today I can't let him boss me. I won't go even if he hollers.*

But if the old man *did* holler and raised an alarm, what then? The bad Coffin Hunter might come and kill him. Sheemie had reached a point where he was willing to die for his friends, but not unless it served a purpose.

So he stood in the cold sunlight, shifting from foot to foot, irresolute, wishing he was smarter than he was, that he could think of a plan. An hour passed this way, then two. It was slow time, each passing moment an exercise in frustration. He sensed any opportunity to help Susan-sai slip-ping away, but didn't know what to do about it. Once he heard what sounded like thunder from the west . . . although a bright fall day like this didn't seem right for thunder.

He had about decided to chance the courtyard anyway—it was temporarily deserted, and he might be able to make it across to the main house—when the man he had feared came staggering out of the stables.

Miguel Torres was festooned with reape-charms and was very drunk. He approached the center of the courtyard in rolling side-to-side loops, the tugstring of his *sombrero* twisted against his scrawny throat, his long white hair flying. The front of his *chibosa* was wet, as if he had tried to take a leak without remembering that you had to unlimber your dingus first. He had a small ceramic jug in one hand. His eyes were fierce and bewildered.

"Who done this?" Miguel cried. He looked up at the afternoon sky and the Demon Moon which floated there. Little as Sheemie liked the old man, his heart cringed. It was bad luck to look directly at old Demon, so it was. "Who done this thing? I ask that you tell me, *senor! Por favor!*" A pause, then a scream so powerful that Miguel reeled on his feet and almost fell. He raised his fists, as if he would box an answer out of the winking face in the moon, then dropped them wearily. Corn liquor slopped from the neck of the jug and wet him further. "*Maricon,*" he muttered. He staggered to the wall (almost tripping over the rear legs of the bad Coffin Hunter's horse as he went), then sat down with his back against the adobe wall. He drank deeply from the jug, then pulled his *sombrero* up and settled it over his eyes. His arm twitched the jug, then settled it back, as if in the end it had proved too heavy. Sheemie waited until the old man's thumb came unhooked from the jughandle and the hand flopped onto the cobbles. He started forward, then decided to wait even a little longer. Miguel was old and Miguel was mean. but Sheemie guessed Miguel might also be tricky. Lots of folks were, especially the mean ones.

He waited until he heard Miguel's dusty snores, then led Capi into the courtyard, wincing at every clop of the mule's hooves. Miguel never stirred, however. Sheemie tied Capi to the end of the hitching rail (wincing again as Caprichoso brayed a tuneless greeting to the horses tied there), then walked quickly across to the main door, through which he had never in his life expected to pass. He put his hand on the great iron latch, looked back once more at the old man sleeping against the wall, then opened the door and tiptoed in.

He stood for a moment in the oblong of sun the open door admitted, his shoulders hunched all the way up to his ears, expecting a hand to settle on the scruff of his

neck (which bad-natured folk always seemed able to find, no matter how high you hunched your shoulders) at any moment; an angry voice would follow, asking what he thought he was doing here.

The foyer stood empty and silent. On the far wall was a tapestry de-picting *vaqueros* herding horses along the Drop; against it leaned a guitar with a broken string. Sheemie's feet sent back echoes no matter how lightly he walked. He shivered. This was a house of murder now, a bad place. There were likely ghosts. Still, Susan was here. Somewhere.

He passed through the double doors on the far side of the foyer and entered the reception hall. Beneath its high ceiling, his footfalls echoed more loudly than ever. Long-dead mayors looked down at him from the walls; most had spooky eyes that seemed to follow him as he walked, marking him as an intruder. He knew their eyes were only paint, but still . . .

One in particular troubled him: a fat man with clouds of red hair, a bulldog mouth, and a mean glare in his eye, as if he wanted to ask what some halfwit inn-boy was doing in the Great Hall at Mayor's House.

"Quit looking at me that way, you big old sonuvabitch," Sheemie whispered, and felt a little better. For the moment, at least.

Next came the dining hall, also empty, with the long trestle tables pushed back against the wall. There was the remains of a meal on one—a single plate of cold chicken and sliced bread, half a mug of ale. Looking at those few bits of food on a table that had served dozens at various fairs and festivals—that should have served dozens this very day—brought the enormity of what had happened home to Sheemie. And the sadness of it, too. Things had changed in Hambry, and would likely never be the same again.

These long thoughts did not keep him from gobbling the leftover chicken and bread, or from chasing it with what remained in the alepot. It had been a long, foodless day.

He belched, clapped both hands over his mouth, eyes making quick and guilty side-to-side darts above his dirty fingers, and then walked on.

The door at the far end of the room was latched but unlocked. Sheemie opened it and poked his head out into the corridor which ran the length of Mayor's House. The way was lit with gas chandeliers, and was as broad as an avenue. It was empty—at least for the moment—but he could hear whispering voices from other

rooms, and perhaps other floors, as well. He supposed they belonged to the maids and any other servants that might be about this afternoon, but they sounded very ghostly to him, just the same. Perhaps one belonged to Mayor Thorin, wandering the cor-ridor right in front of him (if Sheemie could but see him . . . which he was glad he couldn't). Mayor Thorin wandering and wondering what had hap-pened to him, what this cold jellylike stuff soaking into his nightshirt might be, who—
A hand gripped Sheemie's arm just above the elbow. He almost shrieked.

"Don't!" a woman whispered. "For your father's sake!"

Sheemie somehow managed to keep the scream in. He turned. And there, wearing jeans and a plain checked ranch-shirt, her hair tied back, her pale face set, her dark eyes blazing, stood the Mayor's widow.

"S-S-Sai Thorin ... I... I... I..."

There was nothing else he could think of to say. *Now she'll call for the guards o' the watch, if there be any left*, he thought. In a way, it would be a relief

"Have ye come for the girl? The Delgado girl?"

Grief had been good to Olive, in a terrible way—had made her face seem less plump, and oddly young. Her dark eyes never left his, and for-bade any attempt at a lie. Sheemie nodded.

"Good. I can use your help, boy. She's down below, in the pantry, and she's guarded."

Sheemie gaped, not believing what he was hearing.

"Do you think I believe she had anything to do with Hart's murder?" Olive asked, as if Sheemie had objected to her idea. "I may be fat and not so speedy on my pins anymore, but I'm not a complete idiot. Come on, now. Seafront's not a good place for sai Delgado just now—too many people from town know where she is."

5

"Roland."

He will hear this voice in uneasy dreams for the rest of his life, never quite remembering what he has dreamed, only knowing that the dreams leave him feeling ill somehow—walking restlessly, straightening pictures in loveless rooms, listening to the call to muzzein in alien town squares.

"Roland of Gilead."

This voice, which he almost recognizes; a voice so like his own that a psychiatrist from Eddie's or Susannah's or Jake's when-and-where would say it is his voice, the voice of his subconscious, but Roland knows better; Roland knows that often the voices that sound the most like our own when they speak in our heads are those of the most terrible outsiders, the most dangerous intruders.

"Roland, son of Steven."

The ball has taken him first to Hambry and to Mayor's House, and he would see more of what is happening there, but then it takes him away— calls him away in that strangely familiar voice, and he has to go. There is no choice because, unlike Rhea or Jonas, he is not watching the ball and the creatures who speak soundlessly within it; he is inside the ball, a part of its endless pink storm.

"Roland, come. Roland, see."

And so the storm whirls him first up and then away. He flies across the Drop, rising and rising through stacks of air first warm and then cold, and he is not alone in the pink storm which bears him west along the Path of the Beam. Sheb flies past him, his hat cocked back on his head; he is singing "Hey Jude " at the top of his lungs as his nicotine-stained fingers plink keys that are not there—transported by his tune, Sheb doesn't seem to realize that the storm has ripped his piano away.

"Roland, come,"

the voice says—the voice of the storm, the voice of the glass—and Roland comes. The Romp flies by him, glassy eyes blazing with pink light. A scrawny man in farmer's overalls goes flying past, his long red hair streaming out behind him. "Life for you, and for your crop, " he says—something like that, anyway—and then he's gone. Next, spinning like a weird windmill, comes an iron chair (to Roland it looks like a torture de-vice) equipped with wheels, and the boy gunslinger thinks The Lady of Shadows without knowing why he thinks it, or what it means. Now the pink storm is carrying him over blasted mountains, now over a fertile green delta where a broad river runs its oxbow squiggles like a vein, reflecting a placid blue sky that turns to the pink of wild roses as the storm passes above. Ahead, Roland sees an uprushing column of dark-ness and his heart quails, but this is where the pink storm is taking him, and this is where he must go. I want to get out, he thinks, but he's not stupid, he realizes the truth: he may never get out. The wizard's glass has swallowed him. He may re-main in its stormy,

muddled eye forever.

I'll shoot my way out, if I have to, he thinks, but no—he has no guns. He is naked in the storm, rushing bareass toward that virulent blue-black infection that has buried all the landscape beneath it.

And yet he hears singing.

Faint but beautiful—a sweet harmonic sound that makes him shiver and think of Susan: bird and bear and hare and fish.

Suddenly Sheemie's mule (Caprichoso, Roland thinks, a beautiful name) goes past, galloping on thin air with his eyes as bright as firedims in the storm's lumbre fuego. Following him, wearing a sombrero and riding a broom festooned with fluttering reap-charms, comes Rhea of the Coos. "I'll get you, my pretty!" she screams at the fleeing mule, and then, cackling, she is gone, zooming and brooming.

Roland plunges into the black, and suddenly his breath is gone. The world around him is noxious darkness; the air seems to creep on his skin like a layer of bugs. He is buffeted, boxed to and fro by invisible fists, then driven downward in a dive so violent he fears he will be smashed against the ground: so fell Lord Perth.

Dead fields and deserted villages roll up out of the gloom; he sees blasted trees that will give no shade—oh, but all is shade here, all is death here, this is the edge of End-World, where some dark day he will come, and all is death here.

"Gunslinger, this is Thunderclap."

"Thunderclap," he says.

"Here are the unbreathing; the white faces."

"The unbreathing. The white faces. "

Yes. He knows that, somehow. This is the place of slaughtered soldiers, the cloven helm, the rusty halberd; from here come the pale warriors. This is Thunderclap, where clocks run backward and the grave-yards vomit out their dead.

Ahead is a tree like a crooked, clutching hand; on its topmost branch a billy-bumbler has been impaled. It should be dead, but as the pink storm carries Roland past, it raises its head and looks at him with inexpressible pain and weariness.

"Oy!" it cries, and then it, too, is gone and not to be remembered for many years.

"Look ahead, Roland—see your destiny."

Now, suddenly, he knows that voice—it is the voice of the Turtle. He looks and sees a brilliant blue-gold glow piercing the dirty dark-ness of Thunderclap. Before

he can do more than register it, he breaks out of the darkness and into the light like something coming out of an egg, a creature at last being born.

"Light! Let there be light!"

the voice of the Turtle cries, and Roland has to put his hands to his eyes and peek through his fingers to keep from being blinded. Below him is a field of blood—or so he thinks then, a boy of fourteen who has that day done his first real killing. This is the blood that has flowed out of Thunderclap and threatens to drown our side of the world, he thinks, and it will not be for untold years that he will finally rediscover his time inside the ball and put this memory together with Eddie's dream and tell his com-padres, as they sit in the turnpike breakdown lane at the end of the night, that he was wrong, that he had been fooled by the brilliance, coming as it did, so hard on the heels of Thunderclap's shadows. "It wasn't blood but roses," he tells Eddie, Susannah, and Jake.

"Gunslinger, look—look there."

Yes, there it is, a dusty gray-black pillar rearing on the horizon: the Dark Tower, the place where all Beams, all lines of force, converge. In its spiraling windows he sees fitful electric blue fire and hears the cries of all those pent within; he senses both the strength of the place and the wrong-ness of it; he can feel how it is spooling error across everything, softening the divisions between the worlds, how its potential for mischief is growing stronger even as disease weakens its truth and coherence, like a body afflicted with cancer; this jutting arm of dark gray stone is the world's great mystery and last awful riddle.

It is the Tower, the Dark Tower rearing to the sky, and as Roland rushes toward it in the pink storm, he thinks: I will enter you, me and my friends, if ka wills it so; we will enter you and we will conquer the wrong-ness within you. It may be years yet, but I swear by bird and bear and hare and fish, by all I love that— But now the sky fills with flaggy clouds which flow out of Thunderclap, and the world begins to go dark; the blue light from the Tower's rising windows shines like mad eyes, and Roland hears thousands of screaming, wailing voices.

"You will kill everything and everyone you love,"

says the voice of the Turtle, and now it is a cruel voice, cruel and hard.

"and still the Tower will be pent shut against you."

The gunslinger draws in all his breath and draws together all his force; when he cries his answer to the Turtle, he does so for all the generations of his blood:

"NO! IT WILL NOT STAND! WHEN I COME HERE IN MY BODY, IT WILL NOT STAND! I SWEAR ON MY FA-THER 'S NAME. IT WILL NOT STAND!"

"Then die,"

the voice says, and Roland is hurled at the gray-black stone flank of the Tower, to be smashed there like a bug against a rock. But before that can happen—

6

Cuthbert and Alain stood watching Roland with increasing concern. He had the piece of Maerlyn's Rainbow raised to his face, cupped in his hands as a man might cup a ceremonial goblet before making a toast. The drawstring bag lay crumpled on the dusty toes of his boots; his cheeks and forehead were washed in a pink glow that neither boy liked. It seemed alive, somehow, and hungry.

They thought, as if with one mind: *I can't see his eyes. Where are his eyes?*

"Roland?" Cuthbert repeated. "If we're going to get out to Hanging Rock before they're ready for us, you have to put that thing away."

Roland made no move to lower the ball. He muttered something un-der his breath; later, when Cuthbert and Alain had a chance to compare notes, they both agreed it had been *thunderclap*.

"Roland?" Alain asked, stepping forward. As gingerly as a surgeon slipping a scalpel into the body of a patient, he slipped his right hand be-tween the curve of the ball and Roland's bent, studious face. There was no response. Alain pulled back and turned to Cuthbert.

"Can you touch him?" Bert asked.

Alain shook his head. "Not at all. It's like he's gone somewhere far away."

"We have to wake him up." Cuthbert's voice was dust-dry and shaky at the edges.

"Vannay told us that if you wake a person from a deep hypnotic trance too suddenly, he can go mad," Alain said. "Remember? I don't know if I dare—"

Roland stirred. The pink sockets where his eyes had been seemed to grow. His mouth flattened into the line of bitter determination they both knew well.

"No! It will not stand!" he cried in a voice that made gooseflesh rip-ple the skin of the other two boys; that was not Roland's voice at all, at least not as he was now; that was the voice of a man.

"No," Alain said much later, when Roland slept and he and Cuthbert , sat up

before the campfire. "That was the voice of a king."

Now, however, the two of them only looked at their absent, roaring friend, paralyzed with fright.

*"When I come here in my body, it will not stand! I swear on my fa-ther 's name, IT €
WILL NOT STAND!" €*

Then, as Roland's unnaturally pink face contorted, like the face of a man who confronts some unimaginable horror, Cuthbert and Alain lunged forward. It was no longer a question of perhaps destroying him in an ef-fort to save him; if they didn't do something, the glass would kill him as they watched.

In the dooryard of the Bar K, it had been Cuthbert who clipped Roland; this time Alain did the honors, administering a hard right to the center of the gunslinger's forehead. Roland tumbled backward, the ball spilling out of his loosening hands and the terrible pink light leaving his face. Cuthbert caught the boy and Alain caught the ball. Its heavy pink glow was weirdly insistent, beating at his eyes and pulling at his mind, but Alain stuffed it resolutely into the drawstring bag again without look-ing at it... and as he pulled the cord, yanking the bag's mouth shut, he saw the pink light wink out, as if it knew it had lost. For the time being, at least. He turned back, and winced at the sight of the bruise puffing up from the middle of Roland's brow. "Is he—"

"Out cold," Cuthbert said.

"He better come to soon."

Cuthbert looked at him grimly, with not a trace of his usual amia-bility. "Yes," he said, "you're certainly right about that."

Sheemie waited at the foot of the stairs which led down to the kitchen area, shifting uneasily from foot to foot and waiting for sai Thorin to come back, or to call him. He didn't know how long she'd been in the kitchen, but it felt like forever. He wanted her to come back, and more than that—more than anything—he wanted her to bring Susan-sai with her. Sheemie had a terrible feeling about this place and this day; a feeling that darkened like the sky, which was now all obscured with smoke in the west. What was happening out there, or if it had anything to do with the thundery sounds he'd heard earlier, Sheemie didn't

know, but he wanted to be out of here before the smoke-hazed sun went down and the *real* De-mon Moon, not its pallid day-ghost, rose in the sky.

One of the swinging doors between the corridor and the kitchen pushed open and Olive came hurrying out.. She was alone.

"She's in the pantry, all right," Olive said. She raked her fingers through her graying hair. "I got that much out of those two *pupuras*, but no more. I knew it was going to be that way as soon as they started talking that stupid crunk of theirs."

There was no proper word for the dialect of the Mejis *vaqueros*, but "crunk" served well enough among the Barony's higher-born citizens. Olive knew both of the *vaqs* guarding the pantry, in the vague way of a person who has once ridden a lot and passed gossip and weather with other Drop-riders, and she knew damned well these old boys could do better than crunk. They had spoken it so they could pretend to misunder-stand her, and save both them and her the embarrassment of an outright refusal. She had gone along with the deception for much the same reason, although she could have responded with crunk of her own perfectly well—and called them some names their mothers never used—had she wanted.

"I told them there were men upstairs," she said, "and I thought maybe they meant to steal the silver. I said I wanted the *maloficios* turned out. And still they played dumb. *No habla, sai*. Shit. *Shit!*"

Sheemie thought of calling them a couple of big old sonuvabitches, and decided to keep silent. She was pacing back and forth in front of him and throwing an occasional burning look at the closed kitchen doors. At last she stopped in front of Sheemie again.

"Turn out your pockets," she said. "Let's see what you have for hopes and garlands."

Sheemie did as she asked, producing a little pocketknife (a gift from Stanley Ruiz) and a half-eaten cookie from one. From the other he brought out three lady-finger firecrackers, a big-banger, and a few sulfur matches.

Olive's eyes gleamed when she saw these. "Listen to me, Sheemie," she said.

Cuthbert patted Roland's face with no result. Alain pushed him aside, knelt, and

took the gunslinger's hands. He had never used the touch this way, but had been € told it was possible—that one could reach another's mind, in at least some cases. €
Roland! Roland, wake up! Please! We need you! €

At first there was nothing. Then Roland stirred, muttered, and pulled his hands out of Alain's. In the moment before his eyes opened, both of the other two boys were struck by the same fear of what they might see: no eyes at all, only raving pink light.

But they were Roland's eyes, all right—those cool blue shooter's eyes. He struggled to gain his feet, and failed the first time. He held out his hands. Cuthbert took one, Alain the other. As they pulled him up, Bert saw a strange and frightening thing: there were threads of white in Roland's hair. There had been none that morning; he would have sworn to it. The morning had been a long time ago, however.

"How long was I out?" Roland touched the bruise in the center of his forehead with the tips of his fingers and winced.

"Not long," Alain said. "Five minutes, maybe. Roland, I'm sorry I hit you, but I had to. It was ... I thought it was killing you."

"Mayhap 'twas. Is it safe?"

Alain pointed wordlessly to the drawstring bag.

"Good. It's best one of you carry it for now. I might be . . ." He searched for the right word, and when he found it, a small, wintry smile touched the comers of his mouth—"tempted," he finished. "Let's ride for Hanging Rock. We've got work yet to finish."

"Roland . . ." Cuthbert began.

Roland turned, one hand on the horn of his horse's saddle.

Cuthbert licked his lips, and for a moment Alain didn't think he would be able to ask. *If you don't, I will*, Alain thought . . . but Bert managed, bringing the words out in a rush.

"What did you see?"

"Much," Roland said. "I saw much, but most of it is already fading out of my mind, the way dreams do when you wake up. What I do remember I'll tell you as we ride. You must know, because it changes everything. We're going back to Gilead, but not for long."

"Where after that?" Alain asked, mounting.

"West. In search of the Dark Tower. If we survive today, that is. Come on. Let's take those tankers."

9

The two *vaqs* were rolling smokes when there was a loud bang from up-stairs. They both jumped and looked at each other, the tobacco from their works-in-progress sifting down to the floor in small brown flurries. A woman shrieked. The doors burst open. It was the Mayor's widow again, this time accompanied by a maid. The *vaqs* knew her well—Maria Tomas, the daughter of an old *compadre* from the Piano Ranch.

"The thieving bastards have set the place on fire!" Maria cried, speak-ing to them in crunk. "Come and help!"

"Maria, sai, we have orders to guard—"

"A *putina* locked in the pantry?" Maria shouted, her eyes blazing. "Come, ye stupid old donkey, before the whole place catches! Then ye can explain to Senor Lengyll why ye stood here using yer thumbs for fart-corks while Seafront burned down around yer ears!"

"Go on!" Olive snapped. "Are you cowards?"

There were several smaller bangs as, above them in the great parlor, Sheemie set off the lady-fingers. He used the same match to light the drapes.

The two *viejos* exchanged a glance. "*Andelay*, " said the older of the two, then looked back at Maria. He no longer bothered with the crunk. "Watch this door," he said.

"Like a hawk," she agreed.

The two old men bustled out, one gripping the cords of his *bolas*, the other pulling a long knife from the scabbard on his belt.

As soon as the women heard their footsteps on the stairs at the end of the hall, Olive nodded to Maria and they crossed the room. Maria threw the bolts; Olive pulled the door open. Susan came out at once, looking from one to the other, then smiling tentatively. Maria gasped at the sight of her mistress's swelled face and the blood crusted around her nose.

Susan took Maria's hand before the maid could touch her face and squeezed her fingers gently. "Do ye think Thorin would want me now?" she asked, and then

seemed to realize who her other rescuer was. "Olive ... sai Thorin ... I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be cruel. But ye must believe that Roland, him ye know as Will Dearborn, would never—"

"I know it well," Olive said, "and there's no time for this now. Come on."

She and Maria led Susan out of the kitchen, away from the stairs ascending to the main house and toward the storage rooms at the far north end of the lower level. In the drygoods storage room, Olive told the two of them to wait. She was gone for perhaps five minutes, but to Susan and Maria it seemed an eternity.

When she came back, Olive was wearing a wildly colored *scrape* much too big for her—it might have been her husband's, but Susan thought it looked too big for the late Mayor, as well. Olive had tucked a piece of it into the side of her jeans to keep from stumbling over it. Slung over her arm like blankets, she had two more, both smaller and lighter. "Put these on," she said. "It's going to be cold."

Leaving the drygoods store, they went down a narrow servants' passageway toward the back courtyard. There, if they were fortunate (and if Miguel was still unconscious), Sheemie would be waiting for them with mounts. Olive hoped with all her heart that they would be fortunate. She wanted Susan safely away from Hambry before the sun went down.

And before the moon rose.

10

"Susan's been taken prisoner," Roland told the others as they rode west toward Hanging Rock. "That's the first thing I saw in the glass."

He spoke with such an air of absence that Cuthbert almost reined up. This wasn't the ardent lover of the last few months. It was as if Roland had found a dream to ride through the pink air within the ball, and part of him rode it still. *Or is it riding him?* Cuthbert wondered.

"What?" Alain asked. "Susan taken? How? By whom? Is she all right?"

"Taken by Jonas. He hurt her some, but not too badly. She'll heal . . . and she'll live. I'd turn around in a second if I thought her life was in any real danger."

Ahead of them, appearing and disappearing in the dust like a mirage, was Hanging Rock. Cuthbert could see the sunlight pricking hazy sun-stars on the tankers, and he could see men. A lot of them. A lot of horses, as well. He patted the neck of his

own mount, then glanced across to make sure Alain had Lengyll's machine-gun. He did. Cuthbert reached around to the small of his back, making sure of the slingshot. It was there. Also his deerskin ammunition bag, which now contained a number of the big-bangers Sheemie had stolen as well as steel shot.

He's using every ounce of his will to keep from going back, anyway, Cuthbert thought. He found the realization comforting—sometimes Roland scared him. There was something in him that went beyond steel. Some-thing like madness. If it was there, you were glad to have it on your side ... but often enough you wished it wasn't there at all. On *anybody's* side.

"Where is she?" Alain asked.

"Reynolds took her back to Seafront. She's locked in the pantry ... or *was* locked there. I can't say which, exactly, because . . ." Roland paused, thinking. "The ball sees far, but sometimes it sees more. Sometimes it sees a future that's already happening."

"How can the future already be happening?" Alain asked. "I don't know, and I don't think it was always that way. I think it's more to do with the world than Maerlyn's Rainbow. Time is strange now. We *know* that, don't we? How things sometimes seem to ... slip. It's almost as if there's a thinny everywhere, breaking things down. But Su-san's safe. I know that, and that's enough for me. Sheemie is going to help her ... or *is* helping her. Somehow Jonas missed Sheemie, and he followed Susan all the way back."

"Good for Sheemie!" Alain said, and pumped his fist into the air. "Hurrah!" Then: "What about us? Did you see us in this future?"

"No. This part was all quick—I hardly snatched more than a glance before the ball took me away. *Flew* me away, it seemed. But ... I saw smoke on the horizon. I remember that. It could have been the smoke of burning tankers, or the brush piled in front of Eyebolt, or both. I think we're going to succeed."

Cuthbert was looking at his old friend in a queerly distraught way. The young man so deeply in love that Bert had needed to knock him into the dust of the courtyard in order to wake him up to his responsibilities . . . where was that young man, exactly? What had changed him, given him those disturbing strands of white hair?

"If we survive what's ahead," Cuthbert said, watching the gunslinger closely, "she'll meet us on the road. Won't she, Roland?"

He saw the pain on Roland's face, and now understood: the lover was here, but the

ball had taken away his joy and left only grief. That, and some new purpose—yes, Cuthbert felt it very well—which had yet to be stated.

"I don't know," Roland said. "I almost hope not, because we can never be as we were."

"*What?*" This time Cuthbert *did* rein up.

Roland looked at him calmly enough, but now there were tears in his eyes.

"We are fools *of ka*" the gunslinger said. "*Ka* like a wind, Susan calls it." He looked first at Cuthbert on his left, then at Alain on his right. "The Tower is our *ka*; mine especially. But it isn't hers, nor she mine. No more is John Parson our *ka*. We're not going toward his men to defeat him, but only because they're in our way." He raised his hands, then dropped them again, as if to say, *What more do you need me to tell you?*

"There *is* no Tower, Roland," Cuthbert said patiently. "I don't know what you saw in that glass ball, but there *is* no Tower. Well, as a symbol, I suppose—like Arthur's Cup, or the Cross of the man-Jesus—but not as a real thing, a real building—"

"Yes," Roland said. "It's real."

They looked at him uncertainly, and saw no doubt on his face. "It's real, and our fathers know. Beyond the dark land—I can't re-member its name now, it's one of the things I've lost—is End-World, and in End-World stands the Dark Tower. Its existence is the great secret our fathers keep; it's what has held them together as *ka-tet* across all the years of the world's decline. When we return to Gilead—if we return, and I now think we will—I'll tell them what I've seen, and they'll confirm what I say."

"You saw all that in the glass?" Alain asked in an awe-hushed voice.

"I saw much."

"But not Susan Delgado," Cuthbert said.

"No. When we finish with yonder men and she finishes with Mejis, her part in our *ka-tet* ends. Inside the ball, I was given a choice: Susan, and my life as her husband and father of the child she now carries ... or the Tower." Roland wiped his face with a shaking hand. "I would choose Susan in an instant, if not for one thing: the Tower is crumbling, and if it falls, everything we know will be swept away. There will be chaos be-yond our imagining. We must go ... *and we will go.*"

Above his young and unlined cheeks, below his young and unlined brow, were the ancient killer's eyes that Eddie Dean would first glimpse in the mirror of an air-liner's bathroom. But now they swam with childish tears.

There was nothing childish in his voice, however.

"I choose the Tower. I must. Let her live a good life and long with someone else—she will, in time. As for me, I choose the Tower."

11

Susan mounted on Pylon, which Sheemie had hastened to bring around to the rear courtyard after lighting the draperies of the great parlor on fire. Olive Thorin rode one of the Barony geldings with Sheemie double-mounted behind her and holding onto Capi's lead. Maria opened the back gate, wished them good luck, and the three trotted out. The sun was west-ering now, but the wind had pulled away most of the smoke that had risen earlier. Whatever had happened in the desert, it was over now ... or hap-pening on some other layer of the same present time.

Roland, be thee well, Susan thought. I'll see thee soon, dear . . . as soon as I can.

"Why are we going north?" she asked after half an hour's silent riding.

"Because Seacoast Road's best."

"But—"

"Hush! They'll find you gone and search the house first . . . if t'asn't burned flat, that is. Not finding you there, they'll send west, along the Great Road." She cast an eye on Susan that was not much like the dithery, slightly confabulated Olive Thorin that folks in Hambry knew ... or thought they knew. "If I know that's the direction you'd choose, so will others we'd do well to avoid."

Susan was silent. She was too confused to speak, but Olive seemed to know what she was about, and Susan was grateful for that.

"By the time they get around to sniffing west, it'll be dark. Tonight we'll stay in one of the sea-cliff caves five miles or so from here. I grew up a fisherman's daughter, and I know all those caves, none better." The thought of the caves she'd played in as a girl seemed to cheer her. "To-morrow we'll cut west, as you like. I'm afraid you're going to have a plump old widow as a chaperone for a bit. Better get used to the idea."

"Thee's too good," Susan said. "Ye should send Sheemie and I on alone, sai."

"And go back to what? Why, I can't even get two old trailhands on kitchen-duty to follow my orders. Fran Lengyll's boss of the shooting-match now, and I've no urge to wait and see how he does at it. Nor if he decides he'd be better off with me adjudged mad and put up safe in a *haci* with bars on the windows. Or shall I stay to see how Hash Renfrew does as Mayor, with his boots up on my tables?" Olive actually laughed.

"Sai, I'm sorry."

"We shall all be sorry later on," Olive said, sounding remarkably cheery about it.

"For now, the most important thing is to reach those caves unobserved. It must seem that we vanished into thin air. Hold up."

Olive checked her horse, stood in the stirrups, looked around to make sure of her position, nodded, then twisted in the saddle so she could speak to Sheemie.

"Young man, it's time for ye to mount yer trusty mule and go back to Seafront. If there are riders coming after us, ye must turn em aside with a few well-chosen words. Will'ee do that?"

Sheemie looked stricken. "I don't have any well-chosen words, sai Thorin, so I don't. I hardly have any words at all."

"Nonsense," Olive said, and kissed Sheemie's forehead. "Go back at a goodish trot. If'ee spy no one coming after us by the time the sun touches the hills, then turn north again and follow. We shall wait for ye by the signpost. Do ye know where I mean?"

Sheemie thought he did, although it marked the outmost northern boundary of his little patch of geography. "The red 'un? With the *som-brero* on it, and the arrow pointing back for town?"

"The very one. Ye won't get that far until after dark, but there'll be plenty of moonlight tonight. If ye don't come right away, we'll wait. But ye must go back, and shift any men that might be chasing us off our track. Do ye understand?"

Sheemie did. He slid off Olive's horse, clucked Caprichoso forward, and climbed on board, wincing as the place the mule had bitten came down. "So it'll be, Olive-sai."

"Good, Sheemie. Good. Off'ee go, then."

"Sheemie?" Susan said. "Come to me a moment, please."

He did, holding his hat in front of him and looking up at her worship-fully. Susan bent and kissed him not on the forehead but firmly on the mouth. Sheemie came

close to fainting.

"Thankee-sai," Susan said. "For everything."

Sheemie nodded. When he spoke, he could manage nothing above a whisper. "

'Twas only *ka*," he said. "I know that... but I love you, Susan-sai. Go well. I'll see you soon."

"I look forward to it."

But there was no soon, and no later for them, either. Sheemie took one look back as he rode his mule south, and waved. Susan lifted her own hand in return. It was the last Sheemie ever saw of her, and in many ways, that was a blessing.

12

Latigo had set pickets a mile out from Hanging Rock, but the blond boy Roland, Cuthbert, and Alain encountered as they closed in on the tankers looked confused and unsure of himself, no danger to anyone. He had scurvy-blossoms around his mouth and nose, suggesting that the men Farson had sent on this duty had ridden hard and fast, with little in the way of fresh supplies.

When Cuthbert gave the Good Man's *sigul*—hands clasped to the chest, left above right, then both held out to the person being greeted—the blond picket did the same, and with a grateful smile.

"What spin and raree back there?" he asked, speaking with a strong In-World accent—to Roland, the boy sounded like a Nordite.

"Three boys who killed a couple of big bugs and then hied for the hills." Cuthbert replied. He was an eerily good mimic, and gave the boy back his own accent faultlessly. "I here were a tight. It be over now, but they did fight fearful."

"What—"

"No time," Roland said brusquely. "We have dispatches." He crossed his hands on his chest, then held them out. "Hile! Farson!"

"Good Man!" the blond returned smartly. He gave back the salute with a smile that said he would have asked Cuthbert where he was from and who he was related to, if there had been more time. Then they were past him and inside Latigo's perimeter. As easy as that.

"Remember that it's hit-and-run," Roland said. "Slow down for noth-ing. What we don't get must be left—there'll be no second pass."

"Gods, don't even suggest such a thing," Cuthbert said, but he was smiling. He pulled his sling out of its rudimentary holster and tested its elastic draw with a thumb. Then he licked the thumb and hoisted it to the wind. Not much problem there, if they came in as they were; the wind was strong, but at their backs. Alain unslung Lengyll's machine-gun, looked at it doubtfully, then yanked back the slide-cock. "I don't know about this, Roland. It's loaded, and I think I see how to use it, but—"

"Then use it," Roland said. The three of them were picking up speed now, the hooves of their horses drumming against the hardpan. The wind gusted, belling the fronts of their *scrapes*. "This is the sort of work it was meant for. If it jams, drop it and use your revolver. Are you ready?"

"Yes, Roland."

"Bert?"

"Aye," Cuthbert said in a wildly exaggerated Hambry accent, "so I am, so I am." Ahead of them, dust puffed as groups of riders passed before and behind the tankers, readying the column for departure. Men on foot looked around at the oncomers curiously but with a fatal lack of alarm.

Roland drew both revolvers. "*Gilead!*" he cried. "*Hile! Gilead!*"

He spurred Rusher to a gallop. The other two boys did the same. Cuthbert was in the middle again, sitting on his reins, slingshot in hand, lucifer matches radiating out of his tightly pressed lips.

The gunslingers rode down on Hanging Rock like furies.

13

Twenty minutes after sending Sheemie back south, Susan and Olive came around a sharp bend and found themselves face to face with three mounted men in the road. In the late-slanting sun, she saw that the one in the middle had a blue coffin tattooed on his hand. It was Reynolds. Susan's heart sank.

The one on Reynolds's left—he wore a stained white drover's hat and had a lazily cocked eye—she didn't know, but the one on the right, who looked like a stony-hearted preacher, was Laslo Rimer. It was Rimer that Reynolds glanced at, after smiling at Susan.

"Why, Las and I couldn't even get us a drink to send his late brother, the

Chancellor of Whatever You Want and the Minister of Thank You Very Much, on with a word," Reynolds said. "We hadn't hardly hit town before we got persuaded out here. I wasn't going to go, but . . . damn! That old lady's something. Could talk a corpse into giving a blowjob, if you'll pardon the crudity. I think your aunt may have lost a wheel or two off her cart, though, sai Delgado. She—"

"Your friends are dead," Susan told him.

Reynolds paused, shrugged. "Well now. Maybe *si* and maybe *no*. Me, I think I've decided to travel on without em even if they ain't. But I might hang around here one more night. This Reaping business . . . I've heard so much about the way folks do it in the Outers. 'Specially the bonfire part."

The man with the cocked eye laughed phlegmily.

"Let us pass," Olive said. "This girl has done nothing, and neither have I."

"She helped Dearborn escape," Rimer said, "him who murdered your own husband and my brother. I wouldn't call that nothing."

"The gods may restore Kimba Rimer in the clearing," Olive said, "but the truth is he looted half of this town's treasury, and what he didn't give over to John Farson, he kept for himself."

Rimer recoiled as if slapped.

"Ye didn't know I knew? Laslo, I'd be angry at how little any of ye thought of me ... except why would I want to be thought of by the likes of you, anyway? I knew enough to make me sick, leave it at that. I know that the man you're sitting beside—"

"Shut up," Rimer muttered.

"—was likely the one who cut yer brother's black heart open; sai Reynolds was seen that early morning in that wing, so I've been told—"

"*Shut up, you cunt!*"

"—and so I believe."

"Better do as he says, sai, and hold your tongue," Reynolds said. Some of the lazy good humor had left his face. Susan thought: *He doesn't like people knowing what he did. Not even when he's the one on top and what they know can't hurt him. And he's less without Jonas. A lot less. He knows it, too.*

"Let us pass," Olive said. €

"No, sai, I can't do that." €

"I'll help ye, then, shall I?" €

Her hand had crept beneath the outrageously large *serape* during the palaver, and now she brought out a huge and ancient *pistola*, its handles of yellowed ivory, its filigreed barrel of old tarnished silver. On top was a brass powder-and-spark. Olive had no business even drawing the thing—it caught on her *serape*, and she had to fight it free. She had no business cocking it, either, a process that took both thumbs and two tries. But the three men were utterly flummoxed by the sight of the elderly blunderbuss in her hands, Reynolds as much as the other two; he sat his horse with his jaw hanging slack. Jonas would have wept.

"Get her!" a cracked old voice shrieked from behind the men blocking the road.

"What's wrong with ye, ye stupid culls? GET HER!"

Reynolds started at that and went for his gun. He was fast, but he had given Olive too much of a headstart and was beaten, beaten cold. Even as he cleared leather with the barrel of his revolver, the Mayor's widow held the old gun out in both hands, and, squinching her eyes shut like a little girl who is forced to eat something nasty, pulled the trigger.

The spark flashed, but the damp powder only made a weary *floop* sound and disappeared in a puff of blue smoke. The ball—big enough to have taken Clay Reynolds's head off from the nose on up, had it fired—stayed in the barrel.

In the next instant his own gun roared in his fist. Olive's horse reared, whinnying. Olive went off the gelding head over boots, with a black hole in the orange stripe of her *serape*—the stripe which lay above her heart.

Susan heard herself screaming. The sound seemed to come from very far away. She might have gone on for some time, but then she heard the clop of approaching pony hooves from behind the men in the road... and knew. Even before the man with the lazy eye moved aside to show her, she knew, and her screams stopped. The galloped-out pony that had brought the witch back to Hambry had been replaced by a fresh one, but it was the same black cart, the same golden cabalistic symbols, the same driver. Rhea sat with the reins in her claws, her head ticking from side to side like the head of a rusty old robot, grinning at Susan without humor. Grinning as a corpse grins.

"Hello, my little sweeting," she said, calling her as she had all those months ago, on the night Susan had come to her hut to be proved honest. On the night Susan had come running most of the way, out of simple high spirits. Beneath the light of the Kissing Moon she had come, her blood high from the exercise, her skin

flushed; she had been singing "Care-less Love."

"Yer pallies and screw-buddies have taken my ball, ye ken," Rhea said, clucking the pony to a stop a few paces ahead of the riders. Even Reynolds looked down on her with uneasiness. "Took my lovely glam, that's what those bad boys did. Those bad, bad boys. But it showed me much while yet I had it, aye. It sees far, and in more ways than one. Much of it I've forgot ... but not which way ye'd come, my sweeting. Not which way that precious old dead bitch laying yonder on the road would bring ye. And now ye must go to town." Her grin widened, became some-thing unspeakable. "It's time for the fair, ye ken."

"Let me go," Susan said. "Let me go, if ye'd not answer to Roland of Gilead." Rhea ignored her and spoke to Reynolds. "Bind her hands before her and stand her in the back of the cart. There's people that'll want to see her. A good look is what they'll want, and a good look is just what they'll have. If her aunt's done a proper job, there'll be a lot of them in town. Get her up, now, and be smart about it."

14

Alain had time for one clear thought: *We could have gone around them—if what € Roland said is true, then only the wizard's glass matters, and we have that. We € could have gone around them. €*

Except, of course, that was impossible. A hundred generations of gunslinger blood argued against it. Tower or no Tower, the thieves must not be allowed to have their prize. Not if they could be stopped.

Alain leaned forward and spoke directly into his horse's ear. "Jig or rear when I start shooting, and I'll knock your fucking brains out."

Roland led them in, outracing the other two on his stronger horse. The clot of men nearest by—five or six mounted, a dozen or more on foot and examining a pair of the oxen which had dragged the tankers out here—gazed at him stupidly until he began to fire, and then they scattered like quail. He got every one of the riders; their horses fled in a widening fan, trailing their reins (and, in one case, a dead soldier). Somewhere someone was shouting, "Harriers! Harriers! Mount up, you fools!"

"*Alain!*" Roland screamed as they bore down. In front of the tankers, a double handful of riders and armed men were coming together—*milling* together—in a

clumsy defensive line. *"Now! Now!"*

Alain raised the machine-gun, seated its rusty wire stock in the hollow of his shoulder, and remembered what little he knew about rapid-fire weapons: aim low, swing fast and smooth.

He touched the trigger and the speed-shooter bellowed into the dusty air, recoiling against his shoulder in a series of rapid thuds, shooting bright fire from the end of its perforated barrel. Alain raked it from left to right, running the sight above the scattering, shouting defenders and across the high steel hides of the tankers.

The third tanker actually blew up on its own. The sound it made was like no explosion Alain had ever heard: a guttural, muscular ripping sound accompanied by a brilliant flash of orange-red fire. The steel shell rose in two halves. One of these spun thirty yards through the air and landed on the desert floor in a furiously burning hulk; the other rose straight up into a column of greasy black smoke. A burning wooden wheel spun across the sky like a plate and came back down trailing sparks and burning splinters.

Men fled, screaming—some on foot, others laid flat along the necks of their nags, their eyes wide and panicky.

When Alain reached the end of the line of tankers, he reversed the track of the muzzle. The machine-gun was hot in his hands now, but he kept his finger pressed to the trigger. In this world, you had to use what you could while it still worked. Beneath him, his horse ran on as if it had understood every word Alain had whispered in its ear.

Another! I want another! €

But before he could blow another tanker, the gun ceased its chatter—perhaps € jammed, probably empty. Alain threw it aside and drew his re-volver. From beside € him there came the *thuppp* of Cuthbert's slingshot, audible even over the cries of € the men, the hoofbeats of the horses, the *whoosh* of the burning tanker. Alain saw € a sputtering big-bang arc into the sky and come down exactly where Cuthbert had € aimed: in the oil puddling around the wooden wheels of a tanker marked sunoco. € For a moment Alain could clearly see the line of nine or a dozen holes in the € tanker's bright side—holes he had put there with sai Lengyll's speed-shooter—and € then there was a crack and a flash as the big-bang exploded. A moment later, the € holes running along the bright flank of the tanker began to shimmer. The oil € beneath them was on fire. €

"Get out!" a man in a faded campaign hat yelled. "She's gointer blow! They 're all going to b— "

Alain shot him, exploding the side of his face and knocking him out of one old, sprung boot. A moment later the second tanker blew up. One burning steel panel shot out sideways, landed in the growing puddle of crude oil beneath a third tanker, and then that one exploded, as well. Black smoke rose in the air like the fumes of a funeral pyre; it darkened the day and drew an oily veil across the sun.

15

All six of Parson's chief lieutenants had been carefully described to Roland—to all fourteen gunslingers in training—and he recognized the man running for the *remuda* at once: George Latigo. Roland could have shot him as he ran, but that, ironically, would have made possible a get-away that was cleaner than he wanted. Instead, he shot the man who ran to meet him.

Latigo wheeled on the heels of his boots and stared at Roland with blazing, hate-filled eyes. Then he ran again, hiling another man, shouting for the riders who were huddled together beyond the burning zone.

Two more tankers exploded, whamming at Roland's eardrums with dull iron fists, seeming to suck the air back from his lungs like a riptide. The plan had been for Alain to perforate the tankers and for Cuthbert to then shoot in a steady, arcing stream of big-bangers, lighting the spilling oil. The one big-banger he actually shot seemed to confirm that the plan had been feasible, but it was the last slingshot-work Cuthbert did that day.

The ease with which the gunslingers had gotten inside the enemy's perimeter and the confusion which greeted their original charge could have been chalked up to inexperience and exhaustion, but the placing of the tankers had been Latigo's mistake, and his alone. He had drawn them tight without even thinking about it, and now they blew tight, one after another. Once the conflagration began, there was no chance of stopping it. Even before Roland raised his left arm and circled it in the air, signalling for Alain and Cuthbert to break off, the work was done.

Latigo's encampment was an oily inferno, and John Farson's plans for a motorized assault were so much black smoke being tattered apart by *the fin de ano* wind.

"Ride!" Roland screamed. *"Ride, ride, ride!"*

They spurred west, toward Eyebolt Canyon. As they went, Roland felt a single bullet drone past his left ear. It was, so far as he knew, the only shot fired at any of them during the assault on the tankers.

16

Latigo was in an ecstasy of fury, a perfect brain-bursting rage, and that was probably merciful—it kept him from thinking of what the Good Man would do when he learned of this fiasco. For the time being, all Latigo cared about was catching the men who had ambushed him ... if an am-bush in desert country was even possible.

Men? No.

The *boys* who had done this.

Latigo knew who they were, all right; he didn't know how they had gotten out here, but he knew who they were, and their run would stop right here, east of the woods and rising hills.

"Hendricks!" he bawled. Hendricks had at least managed to hold his men—half a dozen of them, all mounted—near the *remuda*. *"Hendricks, to me!"*

As Hendricks rode toward him, Latigo spun the other way and saw a huddle of men standing and watching the burning tankers. Their gaping mouths and stupid young sheep faces made him feel like screaming and dancing up and down, but he refused to give in to that. He held a narrow beam of concentration, one aimed directly at the raiders, who must not under any circumstances be allowed to escape.

"You!" he shouted at the men. One of them turned; the others did not. Latigo strode to them, drawing his pistol as he went. He slapped it into the hand of the man who had turned toward the sound of his voice, and pointed at random to one of those who had not. "Shoot that fool."

Dazed, his face that of a man who believes he is dreaming, the soldier raised the pistol and shot the man to whom Latigo had pointed. That un-lucky fellow went down in a heap of knees and elbows and twitching hands. The others turned.

"Good," Latigo said, taking his gun back.

"Sir!" Hendricks cried. *"I see them, sir! I have the enemy in clear view!"*

Two more tankers exploded. A few whickering shards of steel flew in their direction. Some of the men ducked; Latigo did not so much as twitch. Nor did Hendricks. A good man. Thank God for at least one such in this nightmare.

"Shall I hie after them, sir?"

"I'll take your men and hie after them myself, Hendricks. Mount these hoss-guts before us." He swept an arm at the standing men, whose doltish attention had been diverted from the burning tankers to their dead comrade. "Pull in as many others as you can. Do you have a bugler?"

"Yes, sir, Raines, sir!" Hendricks looked around, beckoned, and a pimply, scared-looking boy rode forward. A dented bugle on a frayed strap hung askew on the front of his shirt.

"Raines," Latigo said, "you're with Hendricks."

"Yes, sir."

"Get as many men as you can, Hendricks, but don't linger over the job. They're headed for that canyon, and I believe someone told me it's a box. If so, we're going to turn it into a shooting gallery."

Hendricks's lips spread in a twisted grin. "Yes, sir."

Behind them, the tankers continued to explode.

17

Roland glanced back and was astonished by the size of the black, smoky column rising into the air. Ahead he could clearly see the brush blocking most of the canyon's mouth. And although the wind was blowing the wrong way, he could now hear the maddening mosquito-whine of the thinny.

He patted the air with his outstretched hands, signalling for Cuthbert and Alain to slow down. While they were both still looking at him, he took off his bandanna, whipped it into a rope, and tied it so it would cover his ears. They copied him. It was better than nothing.

The gunslingers continued west, their shadows now running out behind them as long as gantries on the desert floor. Looking back, Roland could see two groups of riders streaming in pursuit. Latigo was at the head of the first, Roland thought, and he was deliberately holding his riders back a little, so that the two groups could merge and attack together.

Good, he thought.

The three of them rode toward Eyebolt in a tight line, continuing to hold their own horses in, allowing their pursuers to close the distance. Every now and then another thud smote the air and shivered through the ground as one of the remaining tankers blew up. Roland was amazed at how easy it had been—even after the battle with Jonas and Lengyll, which should have put the men out here on their mettle, it had been easy. It made him think of a Reaptide long ago, he and Cuthbert surely no more than seven years old, running along a line of stuffy-guys with sticks, knocking them over one after the other, bang-bang-bangety-bang. The sound of the thinny was warbling its way into his brain in spite of the bandanna over his ears, making his eyes water. Behind him, he could hear the whoops and shouts of the pursuing men. It delighted him. Latigo's men had counted the odds—two dozen against three, with many more of their own force riding hard to join the battle—and their peckers were up once more. Roland faced front and pointed Rusher at the slit in the brush marking the entrance to Eyebolt Canyon.



18

Hendricks fell in beside Latigo, breathing hard, cheeks glaring with color. "Sir! Beg to report!"

"Then do it."

"I have twenty men, and there are p'raps three times that number rid-ing hard to join us."

Latigo ignored all of this. His eyes were bright blue flecks of ice. Un-der his mustache was a small, greedy smile. "Rodney," he said, speaking Hendricks's first name almost with the caress of a lover.

"Sir?"

"I think they're going in, Rodney. Yes . . . look. I'm sure of it. Two more minutes and it'll be too late for them to turn back." He raised his gun, laid the muzzle across his forearm, and threw a shot at the three riders ahead, mostly in exuberance.

"Yes, sir, very good, sir." Hendricks turned and waved viciously for his men to close up, close up.

19

"Dismount!" Roland shouted when they reached the line of tangled brush. It had a smell that was at once dry and oily, like a fire waiting to happen. He didn't know if their failure to ride their horses into the canyon would put Latigo's wind up or not, and he didn't care. These were good mounts, fine Gilead stock, and over these last months, Rusher had become his friend. He would not take him or any of the horses into the canyon, where they would be caught between the fire and the thinny.

The boys were off the horses in a flash, Alain pulling the drawstring bag free of his saddle-horn and slinging it over one shoulder. Cuthbert's and Alain's horses ran at once, whinnying, parallel to the brush, but Rusher lingered for a moment, looking at Roland. "Go on." Roland slapped him on the flank. "Run."

Rusher ran, tail streaming out behind him. Cuthbert and Alain slipped through the break in the brush. Roland followed, glancing down to make sure that the powder-trail was still there. It was, and still dry—there had been not a drop of rain since the day they'd laid it.

"Cuthbert," he said. "Matches."

Cuthbert gave him some. He was grinning so hard it was a wonder they hadn't fallen out of his mouth. "We warmed up their day, didn't we, Roland? Aye!"

"We did, indeed," Roland said, grinning himself. "Go on, now. Back to that chimney-cut."

"Let me do it," Cuthbert said. "Please, Roland, you go with Alain and let me stay. I'm a firebug at heart, always have been."

"No," Roland said. "This part of it's mine. Don't argue with me. Go on. And tell Alain to mind the wizard's glass, no matter what."

Cuthbert looked at him for a moment longer, then nodded. "Don't wait too long."

"I won't."

"May your luck rise, Roland."

"May yours rise twice."

Cuthbert hurried away, boots rattling on the loose stone which carpeted the floor of the canyon. He reached Alain, who lifted a hand to Roland. Roland nodded back, then ducked as a bullet snapped close enough to his temple to flick his hatbrim.

He crouched to the left of the opening in the brush and peered around, the wind now striking full in his face. Latigo's men were closing rapidly. More rapidly than he had expected. If the wind blew out the lucifers—

Never mind the ifs. Hold on, Roland. . . hold on... wait for them. . . €

He held on, hunkering with an unlit match in each hand, now peering out through € a tangle of interlaced branches. The smell of mesquite was strong in his nostrils. € Not far behind it was the reek of burning oil. The drone of the thinny filled his € head, making him feel dizzy, a stranger to himself. He thought of how it had been € inside the pink storm, flying through the air ... how he had been snatched away € from his vision of Su-san. *Thank God for Sheemie*, he thought distantly. *He'll € make sure she finishes the day someplace safe.* But the craven whine of the thinny € seemed somehow to mock him, to ask him if there had been more to see. €

Now Latigo and his men were crossing the last three hundred yards to the canyon's € mouth at a full-out gallop, the ones behind closing up fast. It would be hard for the € ones riding point to stop suddenly without the risk of being ridden down. €

It was time. Roland stuck one of the lucifers between his front teeth and raked it € forward. It lit, spilling one hot and sour spark onto the wet bed of his tongue. € Before the lucifer's head could bum away, Roland touched it to the powder in the € trench. It lit at once, running left beneath the north end of the brush in a bright € yellow thread. €

He lunged across the opening—which might be wide enough for two horses € running flank to flank—with the second lucifer already poised behind his teeth. He € struck it as soon as he was somewhat blocked from the wind, dropped it into the € powder, heard the splutter-hiss, then turned and ran. €

Mother and father, was Roland's first shocked thought—memory so deep and unexpected it was like a slap. *At Lake Saroni.*

When had they gone there, to beautiful Lake Saroni in the northern part of Gilead Barony? That Roland couldn't remember. He knew only that he had been very small, and that there had been a beautiful stretch of sandy beach for him to play on, perfect for an aspiring young castle-builder such as he. That was what he had been doing on one day of their

(vacation? was it a vacation? did my parents once upon a time actu-ally take a € vacation?) €

trip, and he had looked up, something—maybe only the cries of the birds circling over the lake—had made him look up, and there were his mother and father, Steven and Gabrielle Deschain, at the water's edge, standing with their backs to him and their arms around each other's waists, looking out at blue water beneath a blue summer sky. How his heart had filled with love for them! How infinite was love, twining in and out of hope and memory like a braid with three strong strands, so much the Bright Tower of every human's life and soul.

It wasn't love he felt now, however, but terror. The figures standing before him as he ran back to where the canyon ended (where the *rational* part of the canyon ended) weren't Steven of Gilead and Gabrielle of Arten but his mollies, Cuthbert and Alain. They didn't have their arms around each other's waists, either, but their hands were clasped, like the hands of fairy-tale children lost in a threatening fairy-tale wood. Birds circled, but they were vultures, not gulls, and the shimmering, mist-topped stuff before the two boys wasn't water.

It was the thinny, and as Roland watched, Cuthbert and Alain began to walk toward it.

"Stop!" he screamed. *"For your fathers' sakes, stop!"*

They did not stop. They walked hand-in-hand toward the white-edged hem of the smoky green shimmer. The thinny whined its pleasure, mur-mured endearments, promised rewards. It baked the nerves numb and picked at the brain.

There was no time to reach them, so Roland did the only thing he could think of: raised one of his guns and fired it over their heads. The re-port was a hammer-blow in the canyon's enclosure, and for a moment the ricochet whine was louder than that of the thinny. The two boys stopped only inches from its sick shimmer. Roland kept expecting it to reach out and grab them, as it had grabbed the low-

flying bird when they had been here on the night of the Peddler's Moon. He triggered two more shots into the air, the reports hitting the walls and rolling back. "*Gunslingers!*" he cried. "*To me! To me!*"

It was Alain who turned toward him first, his dazed eyes seeming to float in his dust-streaked face. Cuthbert continued forward another step, the tips of his boots disappearing in the greenish-silver froth at the edge of the thinny (the whingeing grumble of the thing rose half a note, as if in anticipation), and then Alain yanked him back by the tugstring of his *som-brero*. Cuthbert tripped over a good-sized chunk of fallen rock and landed hard. When he looked up, his eyes had cleared. "Gods!" he murmured, and as he scrambled to his feet, Roland saw that the toes of his boots were gone, clipped off neatly, as if with a pair of gardening shears. His great toes stuck out.

"Roland," he gasped as he and Alain stumbled toward him. "Roland, we were almost gone. It *talks!*"

"Yes. I've heard it. Come on. There's no time."

He led them to the notch in the canyon wall, praying that they could get up quick enough to avoid being riddled with bullets ... as they certainly would be, if Latigo arrived before they could get up at least part of the way.

A smell, acrid and bitter, began to fill the air—an odor like boiling juniper berries. And the first tendrils of whitish-gray smoke drifted past them.

"Cuthbert, you first. Alain, you next. I'll come last. Climb fast, boys. Climb for your lives."

21

Latigo's men poured through the slot in the wall of brush like water pouring into a funnel, gradually widening the gap as they came. The bottom layer of the dead vegetation was already on fire, but in their excitement none of them saw these first low flames, or marked them if they did. The pungent smoke also went unnoticed; their noses had been deadened by the colossal stench of the burning oil. Latigo himself, in the lead with Hendricks close behind, had only one thought; two words that pounded at his brain in a kind of vicious triumph: *Box canyon! Box canyon! Box canyon!*

Yet something began to intrude on this mantra as he galloped deeper into Eyebolt,

his horse's hooves clattering nimbly through the scree of rocks and €
(bones) €

whitish piles of cow-skulls and ribcages. This was a kind of low buzzing, a maddening, slobbering whine, insectile and insistent. It made his eyes water. Yet, strong as the sound was (if it *was* a sound; it almost seemed to be coming from *inside* him), he pushed it aside, holding onto his mantra

(*box canyon box canyon got em in a box canyon*)

instead. He would have to face Walter when this was over, perhaps Farson himself, and he had no idea what his punishment would be for los-ing the tankers ... but all that was for later. Now he wanted only to kill these interfering bastards. Up ahead, the canyon took a jog to the north. They would be beyond that point, and probably not far beyond, either. Backed up against the canyon's final wall, trying to squeeze themselves behind what fallen rocks there might be. Latigo would mass what guns he had and drive them out into the open with ricochets. They would probably come with their hands up, hoping for mercy. They would hope in vain. After what they'd done, the trouble they'd caused—

As Latigo rode around the jog in the canyon's wall, already levelling his pistol, his horse screamed—like a woman, it screamed—and reared beneath him. Latigo caught the saddle-horn and managed to stay up, but the horse's rear hooves slid sideways in the scree and the animal went down. Latigo let go of the horn and threw himself clear, already aware that the sound which had been creeping into his ears was suddenly ten times stronger, buzzing loud enough to make his eyeballs pulse in their sockets, loud enough to make his balls tingle unpleasantly, loud enough to blot out the mantra which had been beating so insistently in his head. The insistence of the thinny was far, far greater than any George Latigo could have managed.

Horses flashed around him as he landed in a kind of sprawling squat, horses that were shoved forward willy-nilly by the oncoming press from behind, by riders that squeezed through the gap in pairs (then trios as the hole in the brush, now burning all along its length, widened) and then spread out again once they were past the bottleneck, none of them clearly realizing that the entire *canyon* was a bottleneck. Latigo got a confused glimpse of black tails and gray forelegs and dappled fetlocks; he saw chaps, and jeans, and boots jammed into stir-rups. He tried to get up and a horseshoe clanged against the back of his skull. His hat saved him from

unconsciousness, but he went heavily to his knees with his head down, like a man who means to pray, his vision full of stars and the back of his neck instantly soaked with blood from the gash the passing hoof had opened in his scalp. Now he heard more screaming horses. Screaming men, as well. He got up again, coughing out the dust raised by the passing horses (such acrid dust, too; it clawed his throat like smoke), and saw Hendricks trying to spur his horse south and east against the oncoming tide of riders. He couldn't do it. The rear third of the canyon was some sort of swamp, filled with greenish steaming water, and there must be quicksand beneath it, because Hendricks's horse seemed stuck. It screamed again, and tried to rear. Its hindquarters slewed sideways. Hendricks crashed his boots into the animal's sides again and again, attempting to get it in motion, but the horse didn't—or couldn't—move. That hungry buzzing sound filled Latigo's ears, and seemed to fill the world.

"Back! Turn back!"

He tried to scream the words, but they came out in what was little more than a croak. Still the riders pounded past him, raising dust that was too thick to be *only* dust. Latigo pulled in breath so he could scream louder—they *had* to go back, something was dreadfully wrong in Eyebolt Canyon—and hacked it out without saying anything.

Screaming horses.

Reeking smoke.

And everywhere, filling the world like lunacy, that whining, whingeing, cringing buzz.

Hendricks's horse went down, eyes rolling, bit-parted teeth snapping at the smoky air and splattering curds of foam from its lips. Hendricks fell into the steaming stagnant water, and it wasn't water at all. It came alive, somehow, as he struck it; grew green hands and a green, shifty mouth; pawed his cheek and melted away the flesh, pawed his nose and tore it off, pawed at his eyes and stripped them from their sockets. It pulled Hendricks under, but before it did, Latigo saw his denuded jawbone, a bloody piston to drive his screaming teeth.

Other men saw, and tried to wheel away from the green trap. Those who managed to do so in time were broadsided by the next wave of men—some of whom were, incredibly, still yipping or bellowing full-throated battle cries. More horses and riders were driven into the green shimmer, which accepted them eagerly. Latigo,

standing stunned and bleeding like a man in the middle of a stampede (which was exactly what he was), saw the soldier to whom he had given his gun. This fellow, who had obeyed Latigo's order and shot one of his *compadres* in order to awaken the rest of them, threw himself from his saddle, howling, and crawled back from the edge of the green stuff even as his horse plunged in. He tried to get to his feet, saw two riders bearing down on him, and clapped his hands across his face. A moment later he was ridden down.

The shrieks of the wounded and dying echoed in the smoky canyon, but Latigo hardly heard them. What he heard mostly was that buzzing, a sound that was almost a voice. Inviting him to jump in. To end it here. Why not? It was over, wasn't it? All over.

He struggled away instead, and was now able to make some head-way; the stream of riders packing its way into the canyon was easing. Some of the riders fifty or sixty yards back from the jog had even been able to turn their horses. But these were ghostly and confused in the thick-ening smoke.

The cunning bastards have set the brush on fire behind us. Gods of heaven, gods of earth, I think we 're trapped in here. €

He could give no commands—every time he drew in breath to try, he coughed it wordlessly back out again—but he was able to grab a passing rider who looked all of seventeen and yank him out of his saddle. The boy went down headfirst and smashed his brow open on a jutting chunk of rock. Latigo was mounted in his place before the kid's feet had stopped twitching.

He jerked the horse's head around and spurred for the front of the canyon, but the smoke thickened to a choking white cloud before he got more than twenty yards. The wind was driving it this way. Latigo could make out—barely—the shifting orange glare of the burning brush at the desert end.

He wheeled his new horse back the way it had come. More horses loomed out of the fog. Latigo crashed into one of them and was thrown for the second time in five minutes. He landed on his knees, scrambled to his feet, and staggered back downwind, coughing and retching, eyes red and streaming.

It was a little better beyond the canyon's northward jog, but wouldn't be for much longer. The edge of the thinny was a tangle of milling horses, many with broken legs, and crawling, shrieking men. Latigo saw several hats floating on the greenish surface of the whining organism that filled the back of the canyon; he

saw boots; he saw wristlets; he saw neckerchiefs; he saw the bugle-boy's dented instrument, still trailing its frayed strap.

Come in, the green shimmer invited, and Latigo found its buzz strangely attractive ... intimate, almost. *Come in and visit, squat and hun-ker, be at rest, be at peace, be at one.*

Latigo raised his gun, meaning to shoot it. He didn't believe it could be killed, but he would remember the face of his father and go down shooting, all the same. Except he didn't. The gun dropped from his relaxing fingers and he walked forward—others around him were now doing the same—into the thinny. The buzzing rose and rose, filling his ears until there was noth-ing else. Nothing else at all.

22

They saw it all from the notch, where Roland and his friends had stopped in a strung-out line about twenty feet below the top. They saw the scream-ing confusion, the panicky milling, the men who were trampled, the men and horses that were driven into the thinny ... and the men who, at the end, walked willingly into it.

Cuthbert was closest to the top of the canyon's wall, then Alain, then Roland, standing on a six-inch shelf of rock and holding an outcrop just above him. From their vantage-point they could see what the men strug-gling in their smoky hell below them could not: that the thinny was grow-ing, reaching out, crawling eagerly toward them like an incoming tide.

Roland, his battle-lust slaked, did not want to watch what was happening below, but he couldn't turn away. The whine of the thinny— cowardly and triumphant at the same time, happy and sad at the same time, lost and found at the same time—held him like sweet, sticky ropes. He hung where he was, hypnotized, as did his friends above him, even when the smoke began to rise, and its pungent tang made him cough dryly.

Men shrieked their lives away in the thickening smoke below. They struggled in it like phantoms. They faded as the fog thickened, climbing the canyon walls like water. Horses whinnied desperately from beneath that acrid white death. The wind swirled its surface in prankish whirl-pools. The thinny buzzed, and above where it

lay, the surface of the smoke was stained a mystic shade of palest green. Then, at long last, John Farson's men screamed no more. *We killed them*, Roland thought with a kind of sick and fascinated horror. Then: *No, not we. I. I killed them.*

How long he might have stayed there Roland didn't know—perhaps until the rising smoke engulfed him as well, but then Cuthbert, who had begun to climb again, called down three words from above him; called down in a tone of surprise and dismay. "Roland! *The moon!*"

Roland looked up, startled, and saw that the sky had darkened to a velvety purple. His friend was outlined against it and looking east, his face stained fever-orange with the light of the rising moon.

Yes, orange, the thinny buzzed inside his head. *Laughed* inside his head. *Orange as 'twas when it rose on the night you came out here to see me and count me. Orange like afire. Orange like a bonfire.*

How can it be almost dark? he cried inside himself, but he knew—yes, he knew very well. Time had slipped back together, that was all, like layers of ground embracing once more after the argument of an earthquake. Twilight had come. *Moonrise* had come.

Terror struck Roland like a closed fist aimed at the heart, making him jerk backward on the small ledge he'd found. He groped for the horn-shaped outcrop above him, but that act of rebalancing was far away; most of him was inside the pink storm again, before he had been snatched away and shown half the cosmos. Perhaps the wizard's glass had only shown him what stood worlds far away in order to keep from showing him what might soon befall so close to home. *I'd turn around if I thought her life was in any real danger*, he had said. *In a second.*

And if the ball knew that? If it couldn't lie, might it not misdirect? Might it not take him away and show him a dark land, a darker tower? And it had shown him something else, something that recurred to him only now: a scrawny man in farmer's overalls who had said. . . what? Not quite what he'd thought, not what he had been used to hearing all his life; not *Life for you and life for your crop*, but. . . "Death," he whispered to the stones surrounding him. "Death for you, life for my crop. *Charyou tree*. That's what he said, *Charyou tree*. Come, Reap."

Orange, gunslinger, a cracked old voice laughed inside his head. The voice of the

Coos. *The color of bonfires. Charyou tree, fin de ano, these are the old ways of € which only the stuffy-guys with their red hands re-main . . . until tonight. Tonight € the old ways are refreshed, as the old ways must be, from time to time. Charyou € tree, you damned babby, Charyou tree: tonight you pay for my sweet Ermot. € Tonight you pay for all. Come, Reap. €*

"Climb!" he screamed, reaching up and slapping Alain's behind. "Climb, climb! For your father's sake, *climb!*"

"Roland, what—?" Alain's voice was dazed, but he did begin to climb, going from handhold to handhold and rattling small pebbles down into Roland's upturned face. Squinting against their fall, Roland reached and swatted Al's bottom again, driving him like a horse.

"*Climb*, gods damn you!" he cried. "It mayn't be too late, even now!"

But he knew better. Demon Moon had risen, he had seen its orange light shining on Cuthbert's face like delirium, and he knew better. In his head the lunatic buzz of the thinny, that rotting sore eating through the flesh of reality, joined with the lunatic laughter of the witch, and he knew better.

Death for you, life for the crop. Charyou tree.

Oh, Susan—

23

Nothing was clear to Susan until she saw the man with the long red hair and the straw hat which did not quite obscure his lamb-slaughterer's eyes; the man with the cornshucks in his hands. He was the first, just a farmer (she had glimpsed him in the Lower Market, she thought; had even nod-ded to him, as countryfolk do, and he back to her), standing by himself not far from the place where Silk Ranch Road and the Great Road inter-sected, standing in the light of the rising moon. Until they came upon him, nothing was clear; after he hurled his bundle of cornshucks at her as she passed, standing in the slowly rolling cart with her hands bound in front of her and her head lowered and a rope around her neck, everything was clear.

"*Charyou tree*, " he called, almost sweetly uttering words of the Old People she hadn't heard since her childhood, words that meant "Come, Reap" . . . and something else, as well. Something hidden, something se-cret, something to do

with that root word, *char*, that word which meant only death. As the dried shucks fluttered around her boots, she understood the secret very well; understood also that there would be no baby for her, no wedding for her in the fairy-distant land of Gilead, no hall in which she and Roland would be joined and then saluted beneath the electric lights, no husband, no more nights of sweet love; all that was over. The world had moved on and all that was over, done before fairly begun. She knew that she had been put in the back of the cart, *stood* in the back of the cart, and that the surviving Coffin Hunter had looped a noose around her neck. "Don't try to sit," he had said, sounding almost apologetic. "I have no desire to choke you, girly. If the wagon bumps and you fall, I'll try to keep the knot loose, but if you try to sit, I'll have to give you a pinching. *Her* orders." He nodded to Rhea, who sat erect on the seat of the cart, the reins in her warped hands. "*She's* in charge now."

And so she had been; so, as they neared town, she still was. Whatever the possession of her glam had done to her body, whatever the loss of it had done to her mind, it had not broken her power; that seemed to have increased, if anything, as if she'd found some other source from which she could feed, at least for awhile. Men who could have broken her over one knee like a stick of kindling followed her commands as unquestioningly as children.

There were more and more men as that Reaping afternoon wound its shallow course to night: half a dozen ahead of the cart, riding with Rimer and the man with the cocked eye, a full dozen riding behind it with Reynolds, the rope leading to her neck wound around his tattooed hand, at their head. She didn't know who these men were, or how they had been summoned.

Rhea had taken this rapidly increasing party north a little farther, then turned southwest on the old Silk Ranch Road, which wound back toward town. On the eastern edge of Hambry, it rejoined the Great Road. Even in her dazed state, Susan had realized the harridan was moving slowly, measuring the descent of the sun as they went, not clucking at the pony to hurry but actually reining it in, at least until afternoon's gold had gone. When they passed the farmer, thin-faced and alone, a good man, no doubt, with a freehold farm he worked hard from first gleam to last glow and a family he loved (but oh, there were those lamb-slaughterer eyes below the brim of his battered hat), she understood this leisurely course of travel, too. Rhea had been waiting for the moon.

With no gods to pray to, Susan prayed to her father. €

*Da? If thee's there, help me to be strong as lean be, and help me hold to him, to €
the memory of him. Help me to hold to myself as well. Not for rescue, not for €
salvation, but just so as not to give them the satisfaction of seeing my pain and my €
fear. And him, help him as well. . . €*

"Help keep him safe," she whispered. "Keep my love safe; take my love safe to where he goes, give him joy in who he sees, and make him a cause of joy in those who see him."

"Praying, dearie?" the old woman asked without turning on the seat. Her croaking voice oozed false compassion. "Aye, ye'd do well t'make things right with the Powers while ye still can—before the spit's burned right out of yer throat!" She threw back her head and cackled, the strag-gling remains of her broomstraw hair flying out orange in the light of the bloated moon.

24

Their horses, led by Rusher, had come to the sound of Roland's dismayed shout. They stood not far away, their manes rippling in the wind, shaking their heads and whinnying their displeasure whenever the wind dropped enough for them to get a whiff of the thick white smoke rising from the canyon.

Roland paid no attention to the horses or the smoke. His eyes were fixed on the drawstring sack slung over Alain's shoulder. The ball inside had come alive again; in the growing dark, the bag seemed to pulse like some weird pink firefly. He held out his hands for it.

"Give it to me!"

"Roland, I don't know if—"

"Give it to me, damn your face!" €

Alain looked at Cuthbert, who nodded . . . then lifted his hands sky-ward in a weary, distracted gesture.

Roland tore the bag away before Alain could do more than begin to shrug it off his shoulder. The gunslinger dipped into it and pulled the glass out. It was glowing fiercely, a pink Demon Moon instead of an or-ange one.

Behind and below them, the nagging whine of the thinny rose and fell, rose and fell.

"Don't look directly into that thing," Cuthbert muttered to Alain. "Don't, for your father's sake."

Roland bent his face over the pulsing ball, its light running over his cheeks and brow like liquid, drowning his eyes in its dazzle.

In Maerlyn's Rainbow he saw her—Susan, horse-drover's daughter, lovely girl at the window. He saw her standing in the back of a black cart decorated with gold symbols, the old witch's cart. Reynolds rode behind her, holding the end of a rope that was noosed around her neck. The cart was rolling toward Green Heart, making its way with processional slow-ness. Hill Street was lined with people of whom the farmer with the lamb-slaughterer's eyes had been only the first—all those folk of Hambry and Mejis who had been deprived of their fair but were now given this ancient dark attraction in its stead: *Charyou tree*, come, Reap, death for you, life for our crops.

A soundless whispering ran through them like a gathering wave, and they began to pelt her—first with cornhusks, then with rotting tomatoes, then with potatoes and apples. One of these latter struck her cheek. She reeled, almost fell, then stood straight again, now raising her swollen but still lovely face so the moon painted it. She looked straight ahead.

"*Charyou tree*, " they whispered. Roland couldn't hear them, but he could see the words on their lips. Stanley Ruiz was there, and Pettie, and Gert Moggins, and Frank Claypool, the deputy with the broken leg; Jamie McCann, who was to have been this year's Reap Lad. Roland saw a hundred people he had known (and mostly liked) during his time in Mejis. Now these people pelted his love with cornshucks and vegetables as she stood, hands bound before her, in the back of Rhea's cart.

The slowly rolling cart reached Green Heart, with its colored paper lanterns and silent carousel where no laughing children rode ... no, not this year. The crowd, still speaking those two words—*chanting* them now, it appeared—parted. Roland saw the heaped pyramid of wood that was the unlit bonfire. Sitting around it, their backs propped on the central column, their lumpy legs outstretched, was a ring of red-handed stuffy-guys. There was a single hole in the ring; a single waiting vacancy.

And now a woman emerged from the crowd. She wore a rusty black dress and held a pail in one hand. A smear of ash stood out on one of her cheeks like a

brand. She—

Roland began to shriek. It was a single word, over and over again:

No, no, no, no, no, no! The ball's pink light flashed brighter with each repetition, as if his horror refreshed and strengthened it. And now, with each of those pulses, Cuthbert and Alain could see the shape of the gunslinger's skull beneath his skin. "We have to take it away from him," Alain said. "We have to, it's sucking him dry. It's killing him!"

Cuthbert nodded and stepped forward. He grabbed the ball, but couldn't take it from Roland's hands. The gunslinger's fingers seemed welded to it.

"Hit him!" he told Alain. "Hit him again, you have to!"

But Alain might as well have been hitting a post. Roland didn't even rock back on his heels. He continued to cry out that single negative— "*No! No! No! No* "—and the ball flashed faster and faster, eating its way into him through the wound it had opened, sucking up his grief like blood.

25

"Charyou tree!" Cordelia Delgado cried, darting forward from where she had been waiting. The crowd cheered her, and beyond her left shoulder Demon Moon winked, as if in complicity. *"Charyou tree, ye faithless bitch! Charyou tree!"* She flung the pail of paint at her niece, splattering her pants and dressing her tied hands in a pair of wet scarlet gloves. She grinned up at Susan as the cart rolled past. The smear of ash stood out on her cheek; in the center of her pale forehead, a single vein pulsed like a worm.

"Bitch!" Cordelia screamed. Her fists were clenched; she danced a kind of hilarious jig, feet jumping, bony knees pumping beneath her skirt. *"Life for the crops! Death for the bitch! Charyou tree! Come, Reap!"*

The cart rolled past her; Cordelia faded from Susan's sight, just one more cruel phantasm in a dream that would soon end. *Bird and bear and hare and fish*, she thought. *Be safe, Roland; go with my love. That's my fondest wish.*

"Take her!" Rhea screamed. "Take this murdering bitch and cook her red-handed! *Charyou tree!*"

"Charyou tree!" the crowd responded. A forest of willing hands grew in the moonlit air; somewhere firecrackers rattled and children laughed excitedly.

Susan was lifted from the cart and handed toward the waiting wood-pile above the heads of the crowd, passed by uplifted hands like a heroine returned triumphantly home from the wars. Her hands dripped red tears upon their straining, eager faces. The moon overlooked it all, dwarfing the glow of the paper lanterns.

"Bird and bear and hare and fish," she murmured as she was first low-ered and then slammed against the pyramid of dry wood, put in the place which had been left for her—the whole crowd chanting in unison now, "*Charyou TREE! Charyou TREE! Charyou TREE!*"

"Bird and bear and hare and fish."

Trying to remember how he had danced with her that night. Trying to remember how he had loved with her in the willow grove. Trying to re-member that first meeting on the dark road: *Thankee-sai, we 're well met*, he had said, and yes, in spite of everything, in spite of this miserable end-ing with the folk who had been her neighbors turned into prancing goblins by moonlight, in spite of pain and betrayal and what was coming, he had spoken the truth: they had been well met, they had been very well met, indeed.

"*Charyou TREE! Charyou TREE! Charyou TREE!*" €

Women came and piled dry cornshucks around her feet. Several of them slapped her (it didn't matter; her bruised and puffy face seemed to have gone numb), and one—it was Misha Alvarez, whose daughter Susan had taught to ride—spat into her eyes and then leaped prankishly away, shaking her hands at the sky and laughing. For a moment she saw Coral Thorin, festooned with reap-charms, her arms filled with dead leaves which she threw at Susan; they fluttered down around her in a crackling, aro-matic shower.

And now came her aunt again, and Rhea beside her. Each held a torch. They stood before her, and Susan could smell sizzling pitch.

Rhea raised her torch to the moon. "*CHARYOU TREE!*" she screamed in her rusty old voice, and the crowd responded, "*CHARYOU TREE!*"

Cordelia raised her own torch. "*COME, REAP!*"

"*COME, REAP!*" they cried back to her.

"Now, ye bitch," Rhea crooned. "Now comes warmer kisses than any yer love ever gave ye."

"Die, ye faithless," Cordelia whispered. "Life for the crops, death for you."

It was she who first flung her torch into the cornshucks which were piled as high

as Susan's knees; Rhea flung hers a bare second later. The cornshucks blazed up at once, dazzling Susan with yellow light.

She drew in a final breath of cool air, warmed it with her heart, and loosed it in a defiant shout: "*ROLAND, I LOVE THEE!*"

The crowd fell back, murmuring, as if uneasy at what they had done, now that it was too late to take it back; here was not a stuffy-guy but a cheerful girl they all knew, one of their own, for some mad reason backed up against the Reap-Night bonfire with her hands painted red. They might have saved her, given another moment—some might have, anyway—but it was too late. The dry wood caught; her pants caught; her shirt caught; her long blonde hair blazed on her head like a crown.

"ROLAND, I LOVE THEE!" €

At the end of her life she was aware of heat but not pain. She had time to consider € his eyes, eyes of that blue which is the color of the sky at first light of morning. € She had time to think of him on the Drop, riding Rusher flat-out with his black € hair flying back from his temples and his necker-chief rippling; to see him € laughing with an ease and freedom he would never find again in the long life € which stretched out for him beyond hers, and it was his laughter she took with her € as she went out, fleeing the light and heat into the silky, consoling dark, calling to € him over and over as she went, calling bird and bear and hare and fish. €

26

There was no word, not even *no*, in his screams at the end: he howled like a gutted animal, his hands welded to the ball, which beat like a runaway heart. He watched in it as she burned.

Cuthbert tried again to take the cursed thing away, and couldn't. He did the only other thing he could think of—drew his revolver, pointed it at the ball, and thumbed back the hammer. He would likely wound Roland, and the flying glass might even blind him, but there was no other choice. If they didn't do something, the glam would kill him.

But there was no need. As if seeing Cuthbert's gun and understanding what it meant, the ball went instantly dark and dead in Roland's hands. Roland's stiff body, every line and muscle trembling with horror and out-rage, went limp. He

dropped like a stone, his fingers at last letting go of the ball. His stomach cushioned it as he struck the ground; it rolled off him and trickled to a stop by one of his limp, outstretched hands. Nothing burned in its darkness now except for one baleful orange spark—the tiny reflection of the rising Demon Moon.

Alain looked at the glass with a species of disgusted, frightened awe; looked at it as one might look at a vicious animal that now sleeps ... but will wake again, and bite when it does.

He stepped forward, meaning to crush it to powder beneath his boot. "Don't you dare," Cuthbert said in a hoarse voice. He was kneeling beside Roland's limp form but looking at Alain. The rising moon was in his eyes, two small, bright stones of light. "Don't you dare, after all the misery and death we've gone through to get it. Don't you even *think* of it."

Alain looked at him uncertainly for a moment, thinking he should de-stroy the cursed thing, anyway—misery suffered did not justify misery to come, and as long as the thing on the ground remained whole, misery was all it would bring anyone. It was a *misery-machine*, that was what it was, and it had killed Susan Delgado. He hadn't seen what Roland had seen in the glass, but he had seen his friend's face, and that had been enough. It had killed Susan, and it would kill more, if left whole.

But then he thought of *ka* and drew back. Later he would bitterly re-gret doing so. "Put it in the bag again," Cuthbert said, "and then help me with Roland. We have to get out of here."

The drawstring bag lay crumpled on the ground nearby, fluttering in the wind. Alain picked up the ball, hating the feel of its smooth, curved surface, expecting it to come alive under his touch. It didn't, though. He put it in the bag, and looped it over his shoulder again. Then he knelt be-side Roland.

He didn't know how long they tried unsuccessfully to bring him around—until the moon had risen high enough in the sky to turn silver again, and the smoke roiling out of the canyon had begun to dissipate, that was all he knew. Until Cuthbert told him it was enough; they would have to sling him over Rusher's saddle and ride with him that way. If they could get into the heavily forested lands west o' Barony before dawn, Cuthbert said, they would likely be safe . . . but they had to get at least that far. They had smashed Parson's men apart with stunning ease, but the remains would likely knit together again the following day. Best they be gone

before that happened.

And that was how they left Eyebolt Canyon, and the seacoast side of Mejis; riding west beneath the Demon Moon, with Roland laid across his saddle like a corpse.

27

The next day they spent in II Bosque, the forest west of Mejis, waiting for Roland to wake up. When afternoon came and he remained unconscious, Cuthbert said: "See if you can touch him."

Alain took Roland's hands in his own, marshalled all his concentration, bent over his friend's pale, slumbering face, and remained that way for almost half an hour. Finally he shook his head, let go of Roland's hands, and stood up.

"Nothing?" Cuthbert asked.

Alain sighed and shook his head.

They made a travois of pine branches so he wouldn't have to spend another night riding oversaddle (if nothing else, it seemed to make Rusher nervous to be carrying his master in such a way), and went on, not traveling on the Great Road—that would have been far too dangerous—but parallel to it. When Roland remained unconscious the following day (Mejis falling behind them now, and both boys feeling a deep tug of homesickness, inexplicable but as real as tides), they sat on either side of him, looking at each other over the slow rise and fall of his chest.

"Can an unconscious person starve, or die of thirst?" Cuthbert asked. "They can't, can they?"

"Yes," Alain said. "I think they can."

It had been a long, nerve-wracking night of travel. Neither boy had slept well the previous day, but on this one they slept like the dead, with blankets over their heads to block the sun. They awoke minutes apart as the sun was going down and Demon Moon, now two nights past the full, was rising through a troubled rack of clouds that presaged the first of the great autumn storms.

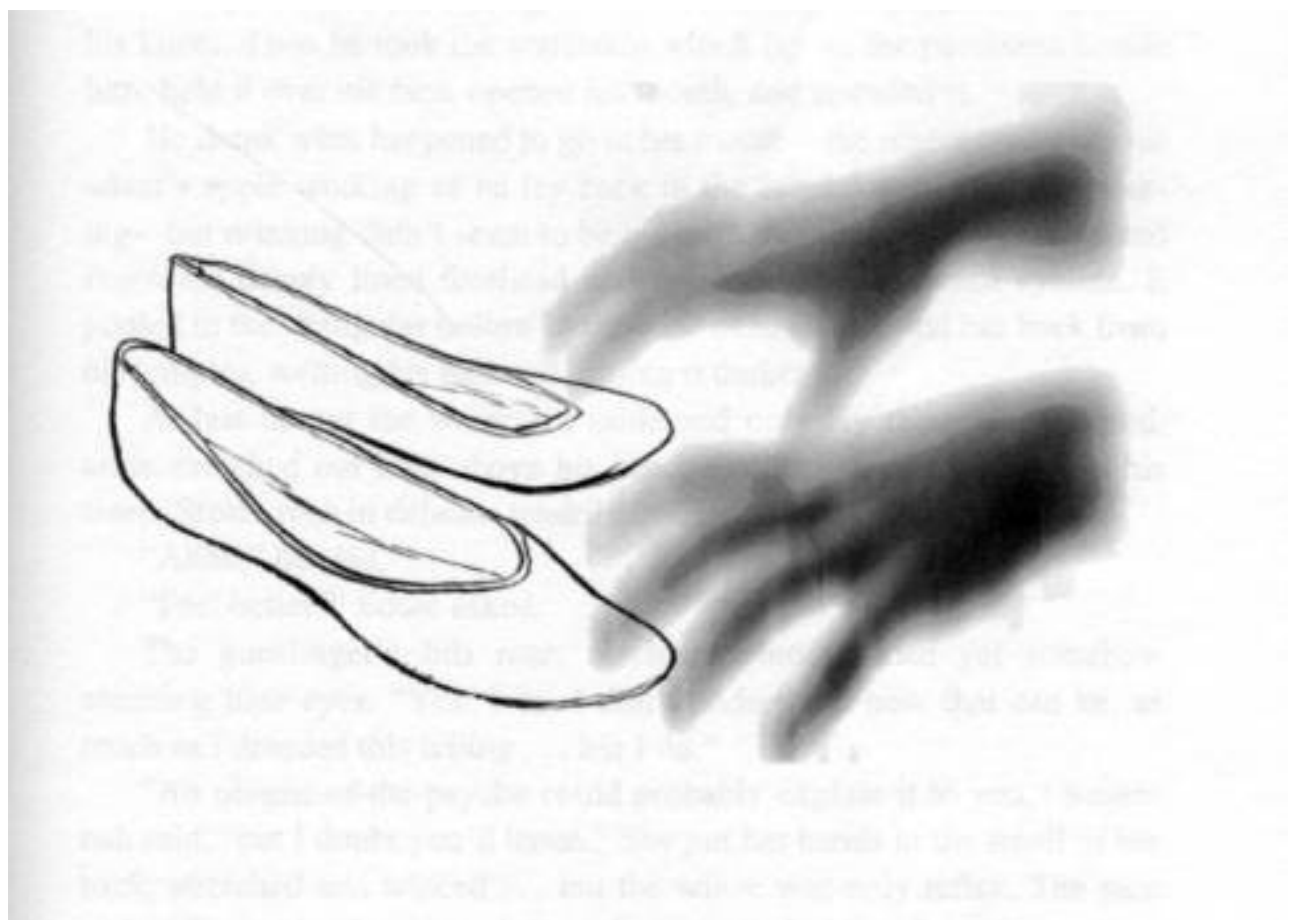
Roland was sitting up. He had taken the glass from the drawstring bag. He sat with it cradled in his arms, a darkened bit of magic as dead as the glass eyes of The Romp. Roland's own eyes, also dead, looked indifferently off into the moonlit corridors of the forest. He would eat but not sleep. He would drink from the

streams they passed but not speak. And he would not be parted from the piece of Maerlyn's Rainbow which they had brought out of Mejis at such great price. It did not glow for him, however. *Not*, Cuthbert thought once, *while Al and I are awake to see it, anyway.*

Alain couldn't get Roland's hands off the ball, and so he laid his own on Roland's cheeks, touching him that way. Except there was nothing to touch, nothing there. The thing which rode west with them toward Gilead was not Roland, or even a ghost of Roland. Like the moon at the close of its cycle, Roland had gone.

PART FOUR

ALL GOD'S CHILLUN GOT SHOES



CHAPTER I

KANSAS IN THE MORNING

1

For the first time in
(hours? days?)

the gunslinger fell silent. He sat for a moment looking toward the building to the east of them (with the sun behind it, the glass palace was a black shape surrounded by a gold nimbus) with his forearms propped on his knees. Then he took the waterskin which lay on the pavement beside him, held it over his face, opened his mouth, and upended it.

He drank what happened to go in his mouth—the others could see his adam's apple working as he lay back in the breakdown lane, still pour-ing—but drinking didn't seem to be his primary purpose. Water streamed down his deeply lined forehead and bounced off his closed eyelids. It pooled in the triangular hollow at the base of his throat and ran back from his temples, wetting his hair and turning it darker.

At last he put the waterskin aside and only lay there, eyes closed, arms stretched out high above his head, like a man surrendering in his sleep. Steam rose in delicate tendrils from his wet face.

"Ahhh," he said.

"Feel better?" Eddie asked.

The gunslinger's lids rose, disclosing those faded yet somehow alarming blue eyes.

"Yes. I do. I don't understand how that can be, as much as I dreaded this telling . . . but I do."

"An ologist-of-the-psyche could probably explain it to you," Susan-nah said, "but I doubt you'd listen." She put her hands in the small of her back, stretched and winced ... but the wince was only reflex. The pain and stiffness she'd expected weren't there, and although there was one small creak near the base other spine, she didn't get the satisfying series of snaps, crackles, and pops she had expected.

"Tell you one thing," Eddie said, "this gives a whole new meaning to 'Get it off your chest.' How long have we been here, Roland?"

"Just one night."

" 'The spirits have done it all in a single night,' " Jake said in a dreamy voice. His legs were crossed at the ankles; Oy sat in the diamond shape made by the boy's bent knees, looking at him with his bright gold-black eyes.

Roland sat up, wiping at his wet cheeks with his neckerchief and looking at Jake sharply. "What is it you say?"

"Not me. A guy named Charles Dickens wrote that. In a story called *A Christmas Carol*. All in a single night, huh?"

"Does any part of your body say it was longer?"

Jake shook his head. No, he felt pretty much the way he did any morning—better than on some. He had to take a leak, but his back teeth weren't exactly floating, or anything like that.

"Eddie? Susannah?"

"I feel good," Susannah said. "Surely not as if I stayed up all night, let alone many of em."

Eddie said, "It reminds me of the time I spent as a junkie, in a way—"

"Doesn't everything?" Roland asked dryly.

"Oh, that's funny," Eddie said. "A real howl. Next train that goes crazy on us, *you* can ask it the silly questions. What I meant was that you'd spend so many nights high that you got used to feeling like ten pounds of shit in a nine-pound bag when you got up in the morning—bad head, stuffy nose, thumping heart, glass in the old spine. Take it from your pal Eddie, you can tell just from the way you feel in the morning how good dope is for you. Anyway, you'd get so used to that—/did, any-way—that when you actually took a night off, you'd wake up the next morning and sit there on the edge of the bed, thinking, 'What the flick's wrong with me? Am I sick? I feel weird. Did I have a stroke in the night?' "

Jake laughed, then clapped a hand over his mouth so violently that it was as if he wanted not just to hold the sound in but call it back. "Sorry," he said. "That made me think of my dad."

"One of my people, huh?" Eddie said. "Anyway, I expect to be sore, I expect to be tired, I expect to creak when I walk... but I actually think all I need to put me right is a quick pee in the bushes."

"And a bite to eat?" Roland asked.

Eddie had been wearing a ^mall smile. Now it faded. "No," he said. "After that story, I'm not all that hungry. In fact, I'm not hungry at all."

2

Eddie carried Susannah down the embankment and popped her behind a stand of laurel bushes to do her necessary. Jake was sixty or seventy yards east, in a grove of birches. Roland had said he would use the remedial strip to do his morning necessary, then raised his eyebrows when his New York friends laughed.

Susannah wasn't laughing when she came out of the bushes. Her face was streaked with tears. Eddie didn't ask her; he knew. He had been fight-ing the feeling himself. He took her gently in his arms and she put her face against the side of his neck. They stayed that way for a little while.

"*Charyou tree*, " she said at last, pronouncing it as Roland had: chair-you tree, with a little upturned vowel at the end.

"Yeah," Eddie said, thinking that a Charlie by any other name was still a Charlie. As, he supposed, a rose was a rose was a rose. "Come, Reap."

She raised her head and began to wipe her swimming eyes. "To have gone through all that," she said, keeping her voice low ... and looking once at the turnpike embankment to make sure Roland wasn't there, look-ing down at them. "And *at fourteen*."

"Yeah. It makes my adventures searching for the elusive dime bag in Tompkins Square look pretty tame. In a way, though, I'm almost relieved."

"Relieved? Why?"

"Because I thought he was going to tell us that he killed her himself. For his damned Tower."

Susannah looked squarely into his eyes. "But he thinks that's what he did. Don't you understand that?"

3

When they were back together again and there was food actually in sight, all of them decided they could eat a bit, after all. Roland shared out the last of the burritos (*Maybe later today we can stop in at the nearest Boing Boing Burgers and see what they've got for leftovers*, Eddie thought), and they dug in. All of them, that was, except Roland. He picked up his burrito, looked at it, then looked away. Eddie saw an expression of sadness on the gunslinger's face that made him look both old and lost. It hurt Ed-die's heart, but he couldn't think what to do about it.

Jake, almost ten years younger, could. He got up, went to Roland, knelt beside him, put his arms around the gunslinger's neck, and hugged him. "I'm sorry you lost your friend," he said.

Roland's face worked, and for a moment Eddie was sure he was go-ing to lose it.

A long time between hugs, maybe. Mighty long. Eddie had to look away for a moment. *Kansas in the morning*, he told himself. *A sight you never expected to see. Dig on that for awhile, and let the man be.*

When he looked back, Roland had it together again. Jake was sitting beside him, and Oy had his long snout on one of the gunslinger's boots. Roland had begun to eat his burrito. Slowly, and without much relish . . . but he was eating.

A cold hand—Susannah's—crept into Eddie's. He took it and folded his fingers over it.

"One night," she marvelled.

"On our body-clocks, at least," Eddie said. "In our heads . . ."

"Who knows?" Roland agreed. "But storytelling always changes time. At least it does in my world." He smiled. It was unexpected, as al-ways, and as always, it transformed his face into something nearly beauti-ful. Looking at that, Eddie mused, you could see how a girl might have fallen in love with Roland, once upon a time. Back when he had been long and going on tall but maybe not so ugly; back when the Tower hadn't yet got its best hold on him.

"I think it's that way in all worlds, sugar," Susannah said. "Could I ask you a couple of questions, before we get rolling?"

"If you like."

"What happened to you? How long were you ... gone?"

"I was certainly gone, you're right about that. I was travelling. *Wan-dering*. Not in Maerlyn's Rainbow, exactly ... I don't think I ever would have returned from there, if I'd gone into it while I was still . . . sick . . . but everyone has a wizard's glass, of course. Here." He tapped his fore-head gravely, just above the space between his eyebrows. "That's where I went. That's where I travelled while my friends travelled east with me. I got better there, little by little. I held onto the ball, and I travelled inside my head, and I got better. But the glass never glowed for me until the very end ... when the battlements of the castle and the towers of the city were actually in sight. If it had awakened earlier..."

He shrugged.

"If it had awakened before I'd started to get some of my strength of mind back, I don't think I'd be here now. Because any world—even a pink one with a glass sky—would have been preferable to one where there was no Susan. I suppose the force that gives the glass its life knew that... and waited."

"But when it *did* glow for you again, it told you the rest," Jake said. "It must have. It told you the parts that you weren't there to see."

"Yes. I know as much of the story as I do because of what I saw in the ball."

"You told us once that John Farson wanted your head on a pole," Ed-die said.

"Because you stole something from him. Something he held dear. It was the glass ball, wasn't it?"

"Yes. He was more than furious when he found out. He was insane with rage. In your parlance, Eddie, he 'went nuclear.' "

"How many more times *did* it glow for you?" Susannah asked.

"And what happened to it?" Jake added.

"I saw in it three times after we left Mejis Barony," Roland said. "The first was on the night before we came home to Gilead. That was when I travelled in it the longest, and it showed me what I've told you. A few things I've only guessed at, but most I was shown. It showed me these things not to teach or enlighten, but to hurt and wound. The remaining pieces of the Wizard's Rainbow are all evil things. Hurt enlivens them, somehow. It waited until my mind was strong enough to understand and *withstand*... and then it showed me all the things I missed in my stu-pid adolescent complacency. My lovesick daze. My prideful, murderous conceit."

"Roland, don't," Susannah said. "Don't let it hurt you still."

"But it does. It always will. Never mind. It doesn't matter now; that tale is told."

"The second time I saw into the glass—*went* into the glass—was three days after I came home. My mother wasn't there, although she was due that evening. She had gone into Debaria—a kind of retreat for women—to wait and pray for my return. Nor was Marten there. He was in Cressia, with Farson."

"The ball," Eddie said. "Your father had it by then?"

"No-o," Roland said. He looked down at his hands, and Eddie observed a faint flush rising into his cheeks. "I didn't give it to him at first. I found it... hard to give up."

"I bet," Susannah said. "You and everyone else who ever looked into the goddam thing."

"On the third afternoon, before we were to be banqueted to celebrate our safe return"

"I bet you were really in a mood to party, too," Eddie said.

Roland smiled without humor, still studying his hands. "At around four o' the clock, Cuthbert and Alain came to my rooms. We were a trio for an artist to paint, I wot—windburned, hollow-eyed, hands covered with healing cuts and scrapes from our climb up the side of the canyon, scrawny as scarecrows. Even Alain, who tended toward stoutness, all but disappeared when he turned sideways. They confronted me, I suppose you'd say. They'd kept the secret of the ball to that point—out of respect for me and for the loss I'd suffered, they told me, and I believed them— but they would keep it no longer than that night's meal. If I wouldn't give it up voluntarily, it would be a question for our fathers to decide. They were horribly embarrassed, especially Cuthbert, but they were determined. "I told them I'd give it over to my own father before the banquet— before my mother arrived by coach from Debaria, even. They should come early and see that I kept my promise. Cuthbert started to hem and haw and say that wouldn't be necessary, but of course it *was* necessary—"

"Yeah," Eddie said. He had the look of a man who understood this part of the story perfectly. "You can go into the crapper on your own, but it's a lot easier to actually flush all the bad shit down the toilet if you have somebody with you."

"Alain, at least, knew it would be better for me—easier—if I didn't have to hand the ball over alone. He hushed Cuthbert up and said they'd be there. And they were. And I gave it over, little as I wanted to. My fa-ther went as pale as paper when he looked into the bag and saw what was there, then excused himself and took it away. When he came back, he picked up his glass of wine and went on talking to us of our adventures in Mejis as if nothing had happened."

"But between the time your friends talked to you about it and the time you gave it up, you looked into it," Jake said. "*Went* into it. Travelled in it. What did it show you that time?"

"First the Tower again," Roland said, "and the beginning of the way there. I saw the fall of Gilead, and the triumph of the Good Man. We'd put those things back a mere twenty months or so by destroying the tankers and the oilpatch. I could do nothing about that, but it showed me something I *could* do. There was a certain knife. The blade had been treated with an especially potent poison, something from a distant Mid-World Kingdom called Garlan. Stuff so strong even the tiniest cut would cause almost instant death. A wandering singer—in truth, John Parson's eldest nephew—had brought this knife to court. The man he gave it to was the

castle's chief of domestic staff. This man was to pass the knife on to the actual assassin. My father was not meant to see the sun come up on the morning after the banquet." He smiled at them grimly. "Because of what I saw in the Wizard's Glass, the knife never reached the hand that would have used it, and there was a new chief of domestics by the end of that week. These are pretty tales I tell you, are they not? Aye, very pretty, indeed."

"Did you see the person the knife was meant for?" Susannah asked. "The actual killer?"

"Yes."

"Anything else? Did you see anything else?" Jake asked. The plan to murder Roland's father didn't seem to hold much interest for him.

"Yes." Roland looked puzzled. "Shoes. Just for a minute. Shoes tum-bling through the air. At first I thought they were autumn leaves. And when I saw what they really were, they were gone and I was lying on my bed with the ball hugged in my arms . . . pretty much the way I carried it back from Mejis. My father ... as I've said, his surprise when he looked inside the bag was very great, indeed."

You told him who had the knife with the special poison on it, Susan-nah thought, Jeeves the Butler, or whoever, but you didn't tell him who was supposed to actually use it, did you, sugar? Why not? Because you wanted to take care of dat little spot o' work yo ownself? But before she could ask, Eddie was asking a question of his own.

"Shoes? Flying through the air? Does that mean anything to you now?"

Roland shook his head.

"Tell us about the rest of what you saw in it," Susannah said.

He gave her a look of such terrible pain that what Susannah had only suspected immediately solidified to fact in her mind. She looked away from him and groped for Eddie's hand.

"I cry your pardon, Susannah, but I cannot. Not now. For now, I've told all I can."

"All right," Eddie said. "All right, Roland, that's cool."

"Ool," Oy agreed.

"Did you ever see the witch again?" Jake asked.

For a long time it seemed Roland would not answer this, either, but in the end he did.

"Yes. She wasn't done with me. Like my dreams of Susan, she fol-lowed me. All

the way from Mejis, she followed me."

"What do you mean?" Jake asked in a low, awed voice. "Cripes, Roland, what do you mean?"

"Not now." He got up. "It's time we were on our way again." He nodded to the building which floated ahead of them; the sun was just now clearing its battlements. "Yon glitter-dome's a good distance away, but I think we can reach it this afternoon, if we move brisk. 'Twould be best. It's not a place I'd reach after nightfall, if that can be avoided."

"Do you know what it is yet?" Susannah asked.

"Trouble," he repeated. "And in our road."

4

For awhile that morning, the thinny warbled so loudly that not even the bullets in their ears would entirely stop up the sound; at its worst, Susan-nah felt as if the bridge of her nose would simply disintegrate, and when she looked at Jake, she saw he was weeping copiously—not crying the way people do when they're sad, but the way they do when their sinuses are in total revolt. She couldn't get the saw-player the kid had mentioned out of her mind. *Sounds Hawaiian*, she thought over and over again as Eddie pushed her grimly along in the new wheelchair, weaving in and out of the stalled vehicles. *Sounds Hawaiian, doesn't it? Sounds fucking Hawaiian, doesn't it. Miss Oh So Black and Pretty?*

On both sides of the turnpike the thinny lapped all the way up to the embankment, casting its twitching, misshapen reflections of trees and grain elevators, seeming to watch the pilgrims pass as hungry animals in a zoo might watch plump children. Susannah would find herself thinking of the thinny in Eyebolt Canyon, reaching out hungrily through the smoke for Latigo's milling men, pulling them in (and some going in on their own, walking like zombies in a horror movie), and then she would find herself thinking of the guy in Central Park again, the wacko with the saw. *Sounds Hawaiian, doesn't it? Counting one thinny, and it sounds Hawai-ian, doesn't it?*

Just when she thought she could stand it not a moment longer, the thinny began to draw back from 1-70 again, and its humming warble at last began to fade.

Susannah was eventually able to pull the bullets out of her ears. She tucked them

into the side-pocket of her chair with a hand that shook slightly.

"That was a bad one," Eddie said. His voice sounded clogged and weepy. She looked around at him and saw his cheeks were wet, his eyes red. "Take it easy, Suzie-pie," he said. "It's my sinuses, that's all. That sound kills em."

"Me, too," Susannah said.

"My sinuses are okay, but my head aches," Jake said. "Roland, do you have any more aspirin?"

Roland stopped, rummaged, and found the bottle.

"Did you ever see Clay Reynolds again?" Jake asked, after swallow-ing the pills with water from the skin he carried.

"No, but I know what happened to him. He got a bunch together, some of them deserters from Parson's army, went to robbing banks ... in toward our part of the world, this was, but by then bank-thieves and stage-robbers didn't have much to fear from gunslingers."

"The gunslingers were busy with Farson," Eddie said.

"Yes. But Reynolds and his men were trapped by a smart sheriff who turned the main street of a town called Oakley into a killing-zone. Six of the ten in the gang were killed outright. The rest were hung. Reynolds was one of those. This was less than a year later, during the time of Wide Earth." He paused, then said: "One of those shot dead in the killing-zone was Coral Thorin. She had become Reynolds's woman; rode and killed with the rest of them."

They went on in silence for a bit. In the distance, the thinny warbled its endless song. Jake suddenly ran ahead to a parked camper. A note had been left under the wiper blade on the driver's side. By standing on his toes, he was just able to reach it. He scanned it, frowning.

"What does it say?" Eddie asked.

Jake handed it over. Eddie looked, then passed it to Susannah, who read it in turn and gave it to Roland. He looked, then shook his head. "I can make out only a few words—*old woman, dark man*. What does the rest say? Read it to me."

Jake took it back. " 'The old woman from the dreams is in Nebraska. Her name is Abigail.' " He paused. "Then, down here, it says, 'The dark man is in the west. Maybe Vegas.' "

Jake looked up at the gunslinger, the note fluttering in his hand, his face puzzled and uneasy. But Roland was looking toward the palace which shimmered across

the highway—the palace that was not in the west but in the east, the palace that was light, not dark.

"In the west," Roland said. "Dark man, Dark Tower, and always in the west."

"Nebraska's west of here, too," Susannah said hesitantly. "I don't know if that matters, this Abigail person, but..."

"I think she's part of another story," Roland said.

"But a story close to this one," Eddie put in. "Next door, maybe. Close enough to swap sugar for salt... or start arguments."

"I'm sure you're right," Roland said, "and we may have business with the 'old woman' and the 'dark man' yet... but today our business is east. Come on."

They began walking again.



"What about Sheemie?" Jake asked after awhile.

Roland laughed, partly in surprise at the question, partly in pleased remembrance. "He followed us. It couldn't have been easy for him, and it must have been damned scary in places—there were wheels and wheels of wild country between Mejis and Gilead, and plenty of wild folks, too. Worse than just folks, mayhap. But *ka* was with him, and he showed up in time for Year's End Fair. He and that damned mule."

"Capi," Jake said.

"Appy," Oy repeated, padding along at Jake's heel.

"When we went in search of the Tower, I and my friends, Sheemie was with us. As a sort of squire, I suppose you'd say. He . . ." But Roland trailed off, biting at his lip, and of that he would say no more.

"Cordelia?" Susannah asked. "The crazy aunt?"

"Dead before the bonfire had burned down to embers. It might have been a heart-storm, or a brain-storm—what Eddie calls a stroke."

"Perhaps it was shame," Susannah said. "Or horror at what she'd done."

"It may have been," Roland said. "Waking to the truth when it's too late is a terrible thing. I know that very well."

"Something up there," Jake said, pointing at a long stretch of road from which the cars had been cleared. "Do you see?"

Roland did—with his eyes he seemed to see everything—but it was another fifteen minutes or so before Susannah began to pick up the small black specks ahead in the road. She was quite sure she knew what they were, although what she thought was less vision than intuition. Ten minutes after that, she was sure.

They were shoes. Six pairs of shoes placed neatly in a line across the eastbound lanes of Interstate 70.

CHAPTER II

SHOES IN THE ROAD

1

They reached the shoes at mid-morning. Beyond them, clearer now, stood the glass palace. It glimmered a delicate green shade, like the reflection of a lily pad in still water. There were shining gates in front of it; red pen-nons snapped from its towers in a light breeze.

The shoes were also red.

Susannah's impression that there were six pairs was understandable but wrong—there were actually four pairs and one quartet. This latter— four dark red booties made of supple leather—was undoubtedly meant for the four-footed member of their *ka-tet*. Roland picked one of them up and felt inside it. He didn't know how many bumblers had worn shoes in the history of the world, but he was willing to guess that none had ever been gifted with a set of silk-lined leather booties.

"Bally, Gucci, eat your heart out," Eddie said. "This is great stuff."

Susannah's were easiest to pick out, and not just because of the femi-nine, sparkly swoops on the sides. They weren't really shoes at all—they had been made to fit over the stumps of her legs, which ended just above the knees.

"Now look at this," she marvelled, holding one up so the sun could flash on the rhinestones with which the shoes were decorated ... if they *were* rhinestones. She had a crazy notion that maybe they were diamond chips. "Cappies. After four years of gettin along in what my friend Cyn-thia calls 'circumstances of reduced leg-room,' I finally got myself a pair of cappies. Think of that."

"Cappies," Eddie mused. "Is that what they call em?"

"That's what they call em, sugar."

Jake's were bright red Oxfords—except for the color, they would have looked

perfectly at home in the well-bred classrooms of The Piper School. He flexed one, then turned it over. The sole was bright and un-marked. There was no manufacturer's stamp, nor had he really expected one. His father had maybe a dozen pairs of fine handmade shoes. Jake knew them when he saw them. Eddie's were low boots with Cuban heels *{Maybe in this world you call them Mejis heels, he thought}* and pointed toes ... what, back in his other life, had been known as "street-boppers." Kids from the mid-sixties—an era Odetta/Detta/Susannah had just missed—might have called them "Beatle-boots." Roland's, of course, were cowboy boots. Fancy ones—you'd go danc-ing rather than droving in such as these. Looped stitching, side decora-tions, narrow, haughty arches. He examined them without picking them up, then looked at his fellow travellers and frowned. They were looking at each other. You would have said three people couldn't do that, only a pair ... but you only would have said it if you'd never been part of a *ka-tet*.

Roland still shared *khef* with them; he felt the powerful current of their mingled thought, but could not understand it. *Because it's of their world. They come from different whens of that world, but they see some-thing here that's common to all three of them.*

"What is it?" he asked. "What do they mean, these shoes?"

"I don't think any of us know *that*, exactly," Susannah said.

"No," Jake said. "It's another riddle." He looked at the weird, blood red Oxford shoe in his hands with distaste. "Another goddamned riddle."

"Tell what you know." He looked toward the glass palace again. It was perhaps fifteen New York miles away, now, shining in the clear day, delicate as a mirage, but as real as ... well, as real as shoes. "Please, tell me what you know about these shoes."

"I got shoes, *you* got shoes, all God's chillun got shoes," Odetta said. "That's the prevailin opinion, anyway."

"Well," Eddie said, "*we* got em, anyway. And you're thinking what I'm thinking, aren't you?"

"I guess I am."

"You, Jake?"

Instead of answering with words, Jake picked up the other Oxford (Roland had no doubt that all the shoes, including Oy's, would fit per-fectly) and clapped them

briskly together three times. It meant nothing to Roland, but both Eddie and Susannah reacted violently, looking around, looking especially at the sky, as if expecting a storm born out of this bright autumn sunshine. I hey ended up looking at the glass palace again . . . and then at each other, in that knowing, round-eyed way that made Roland feel like shaking them both until their teeth rattled. Yet he waited. Sometimes that was all a man could do.

"After you killed Jonas, you looked into the ball," Eddie said, turning to him.

"Yes."

"*Travelled* in the ball."

"Yes, but I don't want to talk about that again now; it has nothing to do with these—"

"I think it does," Eddie said. "You flew inside a pink storm. Inside a pink *gale*, you could say. Gale is a word you might use for a storm, isn't it? Especially if you were making up a riddle."

"Sure," Jake said. He sounded dreamy, almost like a boy who talks in his sleep.

"When does Dorothy fly over the Wizard's Rainbow? When she's a Gale."

"We ain't in Kansas anymore, sugar," Susannah said, and then voiced a strange, humorless bark which Roland supposed was a species of laugh-ter. "May look a little like it, but Kansas was never . . . you know, this *thin*:'

"I don't understand you," Roland said. But he felt cold, and his heart was beating too fast. There were thinnies everywhere now, hadn't he told them that? Worlds melting into one another as the forces of the Tower weakened? As the day when the rose would be plowed under drew nearer?

"You saw things as you flew," Eddie said. "Before you got to the dark land, the one you called Thunderclap, you saw things. The piano-player, Sheb. Who turned up again later in your life, didn't he?"

"Yes, in Tull."

"And the dweller with the red hair?"

"Him, too. He had a bird named Zoltan. But when we met, he and I, we said the normal. 'Life for you, life for your crop,' that sort of thing. I thought I heard the same when he flew by me in the pink storm, but he really said something else." He glanced at Susannah. "I saw your wheel-chair, too. The old one."

"And you saw the witch."

"Yes. I—"

In a creaky chortle that reminded Roland unnervingly of Rhea, Jake Chambers cried: "I'll get you, my pretty! And your little dog, too!"

Roland stared at him, trying not to gape.

"Only in the movie, the witch wasn't riding a broom," Jake said. "She was on her bike, the one with the basket on the back."

"Yeah, no reap-charms, either," Eddie said. "Would have been a nice touch, though. I tell you, Jake, when I was a kid, I used to have night-mares about the way she laughed."

"It was the monkeys that gave me the creeps," Susannah said. "The flying monkeys. I'd get thinkin about em, and then have to crawl into bed with my mom and dad. They'd still be arguin 'bout whose bright idea it was to take me to that show in the foist place when I fell asleep be-tween em."

"I wasn't worried about clapping the heels together," Jake said. "Not a bit." It was Susannah and Eddie he was speaking to; for the time being, it was as if Roland wasn't even there. "I wasn't wearing them, after all."

"True," Susannah said, sounding severe, "but you know what my daddy always used to say?"

"No, but I have a feeling we're going to find out," Eddie said.

She gave Eddie a brief, severe look, then turned her attention back to Jake. "

'Never whistle for the wind unless you want it to blow,' " she said. "And it's good advice, no matter what Young Mister Foolish here may think."

"Spanked again," Eddie said, grinning.

"Tanked!" Oy said, eyeing Eddie severely.

"Explain this to me," Roland said in his softest voice. "I would hear. I would share your *khef*. And I would share it *now*."

2

They told him a story almost every American child of the twentieth century knew, about a Kansas farmgirl named Dorothy Gale who had been carried away by a cyclone and deposited, along with her dog, in the Land of Oz. There was no 1-70 in Oz, but there was a yellow brick road which served much the same purpose, and there were witches, both good and bad. There was a *ka-tet* comprised of Dorothy, Toto, and three friends she met along the way: the Cowardly Lion, the

Tin Woodman, and the Scare-crow. They each had €
(*bird and bear and hare and fish*) €

a fondest wish, and it was with Dorothy's that Roland's new friends (and Roland himself, for that matter) identified the most strongly: she wanted to find her way home again.

"The Munchkins told her that she had to follow the yellow brick road to Oz," Jake said, "and so she went. She met the others along the way, sort of like you met us, Roland—"

"Although you don't look much like Judy Garland," Eddie put in.

"—and eventually they got there. To Oz, the Emerald Palace, and the guy who lived in the Emerald Palace." He looked toward the glass palace ahead of them, greener and greener in the strengthening light, and then back to Roland.

"Yes, I understand. And was this fellow, Oz, a powerful *dinh*? A Baron? Perhaps a King?"

Again, the three of them exchanged a glance from which Roland was excluded.

"That's complicated," Jake said. "He was sort of a humbug—"

"A bumhug? What's that?"

"*Humbug*, " Jake said, laughing. "A faker. All talk, no action. But maybe the important thing is that the Wizard actually came from—"

"Wizard?" Roland asked sharply. He grasped Jake's shoulder with his diminished right hand. "Why do you call him so?"

"Because that was his title, sug," Susannah said. "The Wizard of Oz." She lifted Roland's hand gently but firmly from Jake's shoulder. "Let him tell it, now. He don't need you to squeeze it out of him."

"Did I hurt you? Jake, I cry your pardon."

"Nah, I'm fine," Jake said. "Don't worry about it. Anyway, Dorothy and her friends had a lot of adventures before finding out the Wizard was a, you know, a bumhug." Jake giggled at this with his hands clapped to his forehead and pushing back his hair, like a child of five. "He couldn't give the Lion courage, the Scarecrow a brain, or the Tin Woodman a heart. Worst of all, he couldn't send Dorothy back to Kansas. The Wizard had a balloon, but he went without her. I don't think he meant to, but he did."

"It seems to me, from your telling of the tale," Roland said, speaking very slowly, "that Dorothy's friends had the things they wanted all along."

"That's the moral of the story," Eddie said. "Maybe what makes it a great story. But Dorothy was stuck in Oz, you see. Then Glinda showed up. Glinda the Good. And, as a present for smooshing one of the bad witches under her house and melting another one, Glinda told Dorothy how to use the ruby slippers. The ones Glinda gave her."

Eddie raised the red Cuban-heeled street-boppers which had been left for him on the dotted white line of 1-70.

"Glinda told Dorothy to click the heels of the ruby slippers together three times. That would take her back to Kansas, she said. And it did." "And that's the end of the tale?"

"Well," Jake said, "it was so popular that the guy who wrote it went ahead and wrote about a thousand more Oz stories—"

"Yeah," Eddie said. "Everything but *Glinda's Guide to Firm Thighs*."

"—and there was this crazy remake called *The Wiz*, starring black people—"

"Really?" Susannah asked. She looked bemused. "What a *peculiar* concept."

"—but the only one that really matters is the first one, I think," Jake finished.

Roland hunkered and put his hands into the boots which had been left for him. He lifted them, looked at them, put them down again. "Are we supposed to put them on, do you think? Here and now?"

His three friends from New York looked at each other doubtfully. At last Susannah spoke for them—fed him the *khef* which he could feel but not quite share on his own.

"Best not to right now, maybe. Too many bad-ass spirits here." "*Takuro* spirits," Eddie murmured, mostly to himself. Then: "Look, let's just take em along. If we're supposed to put em on, I think we'll know when the time comes. In the meantime, I think we ought to beware of bumhugs bearing gifts."

It cracked Jake up, as Eddie had known it would; sometimes a word or an image got into your funny bone like a virus and just lived there awhile. Tomorrow the word "bumhug" might mean nothing to the kid; for the rest of today, however, he was going to laugh every time he heard it. Eddie intended to use it a lot, especially when ole Jake wasn't expect-ing it.

They picked up the red shoes which had been left for them in the east-bound lanes (Jake took Oy's) and moved on again toward the shimmering glass castle.

Oz, Roland thought. He searched his memory, but he didn't think it was a name he

had ever heard before, or a word of the High Speech that had come in disguise, as *char* had come disguised as Charlie. Yet it had a sound that belonged in this business; a sound more of his world than of Jake's, Susannah's, and Eddie's, from whence the tale had come.

3

Jake kept expecting the Green Palace to begin looking normal as they drew closer to it, the way the attractions in Disney World began to look normal as you drew close to them—not *ordinary*, necessarily, but *normal*, things which were as much a part of the world as the corner bus stop or mailbox or park bench, stuff you could touch, stuff you could write fuck piper on, if you took a notion.

But that didn't happen, wasn't *going* to happen, and as they neared the Green Palace, Jake realized something else: it was the most beautiful, radiant thing he had ever seen in his life. Not trusting it—and he did not—didn't change the fact. It was like a drawing in a fairy-tale book, one so good it had become real, somehow. And, like the thinny, it hummed ... except that this sound was far fainter, and not unpleasant.

Pale green walls rose to battlements that jutted and towers that soared, seeming almost to touch the clouds floating over the Kansas plains. These towers were topped with needles of a darker, emerald green; it was from these that the red pennants nickered. Upon each pennant the symbol of the open eye



had been traced in yellow.

It's the mark of the Crimson King, Jake thought. *It's really his sigil, not John Farson's*. He didn't know how he knew this (how could he, when Alabama's Crimson Tide was the only Crimson *anything* he knew?), but he did.

"So beautiful," Susannah murmured, and when Jake glanced at her, he thought she was almost crying. "But not nice, somehow. Not right. Maybe not downright *bad*, the way the thinny is, but.. ."

"But not nice," Eddie said. "Yeah. That works. Not a red light, maybe, but a bright yellow one just the same." He rubbed the side of his face (a gesture he had picked up from Roland without even realizing it) and looked puzzled. "It feels almost not

serious—a practical joke."

"I doubt it's a joke," Roland said. "Do you think it's a copy of the place where Dorothy and her *ka-tet* met the false wizard?"

Again, the three erstwhile New Yorkers seemed to exchange a single glance of consultation. When it was over, Eddie spoke for all of them. "Yeah. Yeah, probably. It's not the same as the one in the movie, but if this thing came out of our minds, it wouldn't be. Because we see the one from L. Frank Baum's book, too. Both from the illustrations in the book. . ."

"And the ones from our imaginations," Jake said.

"But that's it," Susannah said. "I'd say we're definitely off to see the Wizard."

"You bet," Eddie said. "Because-because-because-because-*because*—"

"*Because of the wonderful things he does!*" Jake and Susannah finished in unison, then laughed, delighted with each other, while Roland frowned at them, feeling puzzled and looking left out.

"But I have to tell you guys," Eddie said, "that it's only gonna take about one more wonderful thing to send me around to the dark side of the Psycho Moon. Most likely for good."

4

As they drew closer, they could see Interstate 70 stretching away into the pale green depths of the castle's slightly rounded outer wall; it floated there like an optical illusion. Closer yet, and they could hear the pennants snapping in the breeze and see their own ripply reflections, like drowned folk who somehow walk at the bottoms of watery tropical graves.

There was an inner redoubt of dark blue glass—it was a color Jake associated with the bottles fountain-pen ink came in—and a rust-hued wall-walk between the redoubt and the outer wall. That color made Susannah think of the bottles Hires root-beer had come in when she was a little girl.

The way in was blocked by a barred gate that was both huge and ethereal: it looked like wrought iron which had been turned to glass. Each cunningly made stake was a different color, and these colors seemed to come from the *inside*, as if the bars were filled with some bright gas or liquid.

The travellers stopped before it. There was no sign of the turnpike beyond it;

instead of roadway, there was a courtyard of silver glass—a huge flat mirror, in fact. Clouds floated serenely through its depths; so did the image of the occasional swooping bird. Sun reflected off this glass courtyard and ran across the green castle walls in ripples. On the far side, the wall of the palace's inner ward rose in a glimmery green cliff, broken by narrow loophole windows of jet-black glass. There was also an arched entry in this wall that made Jake think of St. Patrick's Cathedral.

To the left of the main doorway was a sentry-box made of cream-colored glass shot through with hazy orange threads. Its door, painted with red stripes, stood open. The phone-booth-sized room inside was empty, although there was something on the floor which looked to Jake like a newspaper.

Above the entry, flanking its darkness, were two crouching, leering gargoyles of darkest violet glass. Their pointed tongues poked out like bruises.

The pennants atop the towers flapped like schoolyard flags.

Crows cawed over empty cornfields now a week past the Reap.

Distant, the thinny whined and warbled.

"Look at the bars of this gate," Susannah said. She sounded breathless and awestruck. "Look very closely."

Jake bent toward the yellow bar until his nose nearly touched it and a faint yellow stripe ran down the middle of his face. At first he saw nothing, and then he gasped. What he had taken for motes of some kind were creatures—living creatures—imprisoned inside the bar, swimming in tiny schools. They looked like fish in an aquarium, but they also (*their heads*, Jake told himself, *I think it's mostly their heads*) looked oddly, disquietingly human. As if, Jake thought, he were looking into a vertical golden sea, all the ocean in a glass rod—and living myths no bigger than grains of dust swimming within it. A tiny woman with a fish's tail and long blonde hair streaming out behind her swam to her side of the glass, seemed to peer out at the giant boy (her eyes were round, startled, and beautiful), and then flipped away again.

Jake felt suddenly dizzy and weak. He closed his eyes until the feeling of vertigo went away, then opened them again and looked around at the others. "Cripes! Are they all the same?"

"All different, I think," said Eddie, who had already peered into two or three. He bent close to the purple rod, and his cheeks lit up as if in the glow of an old-

fashioned fluoroscope. "These guys here look like birds— little tiny birds." Jake looked and saw that Eddie was right: inside the gate's purple up-right were flocks of birds no bigger than summer minges. They swooped giddily about in their eternal twilight, weaving over and under one another, their wings leaving tiny silver trails of bubbles.

"Are they really there?" Jake asked breathlessly. "Are they, Roland, **or** are we only imagining them?"

"I don't know. But I know what this gate has been made to look like."

"So do I," Eddie said. He surveyed the shining posts, each with its own column of imprisoned light and life. Each of the gate's wings consisted of six colored bars. The one in the center—broad and flat instead of round, and made to split in two when the gate was opened—was the thirteenth. This one was dead black, and in this one nothing moved.

Oh, maybe not that you can see, but there are things moving around in there, all right, Jake thought. There's life in there, terrible life. And maybe there are roses, too. Drowned ones.

"It's a Wizard's Gate," Eddie said. "Each bar has been made to look like one of the balls in Maerlyn's Rainbow. Look, here's the pink one."

Jake leaned toward it, hands propped on his thighs. He knew what would be inside even before he saw them: horses, of courses. Tiny herds of them, galloping through that strange pink stuff that was neither light nor liquid. Horses running in search of a Drop they would never find, mayhap.

Eddie stretched his hands out to grasp the sides of the central post, the black one.

"Don't!" Susannah called sharply.

Eddie ignored her, but Jake saw his chest stop for a moment and his lips tighten as he wrapped his hands around the black bar and waited for something—some force perhaps sent Special Delivery all the way from the Dark Tower itself—to change him, or even to strike him dead. When nothing happened, he breathed deep again, and risked a smile. "No electricity, but . . ." He pulled; the gate held fast. "No give, either. I see where it splits down the middle, but I get nothing. Want to take a shot, Roland?"

Roland reached for the gate, but Jake put a hand on his arm and stopped him before the gunslinger could do more than give it a preliminary shake. "Don't bother. That's not the way."

"Then what is?"

Instead of answering, Jake sat down in front of the gate, near the place where this strange version of 1-70 ended, and began putting on the shoes which had been left for him. Eddie watched a moment, then sat down beside him. "I guess we ought to try it," he said to Jake, "even though it'll probably turn out to be just another bumhug."

Jake laughed, shook his head, and began to tighten the laces of the blood-red Oxfords. He and Eddie both knew it was no bumhug. Not this time.

5

"Okay," Jake said when they had all put on their red shoes (he thought they looked extraordinarily stupid, especially Eddie's pair). "I'll count to three, and we'll click our heels together. Like this." He clicked the Ox-fords together once, sharply . . . and the gate shivered like a loosely fastened shutter blown by a strong wind. Susannah cried out. There followed a low, sweet chiming sound from the Green Palace, as if the walls themselves had vibrated.

"I guess this'll do the trick, all right," Eddie said. "I warn you, though, I'm not singing 'Somewhere Over the Rainbow.' That's not in my contract."

"The rainbow is here," the gunslinger said softly, stretching his diminished hand out to the gate.

It wiped the smile off Eddie's face. "Yeah, I know. I'm a little scared, Roland."

"So am I," the gunslinger said, and indeed, Jake thought he looked pale and ill.

"Go on, sugar," Susannah said. "Count before we all lose our nerve." "One ... two ... *three*."

They clicked their heels together solemnly and in unison: *tock, tock, tock*. The gate shivered more violently this time, the colors in the uprights brightening perceptibly. The chime that followed was higher, sweeter—the sound of fine crystal tapped with the haft of a knife. It echoed in dreamy harmonics that made Jake shiver, half with pleasure and half with pain.

But the gate didn't open.

"What—" Eddie began.

"I know," Jake said. "We forgot Oy."

"Oh Christ," Eddie said. "I left the world I knew to watch a kid try to put booties

on a fucked-up weasel. Shoot me, Roland, before I breed."

Roland ignored him, watching Jake closely as the boy sat down on the turnpike and called, "Oy! To me!"

The bumbler came willingly enough, and although he had surely been a wild creature before they had met him on the Path of the Beam, he allowed Jake to slip the red leather booties onto his paws without making trouble: in fact, once he got the idea, he stepped into the last two. When all four of the little red shoes were in place (they looked, in fact, the most like Dorothy's ruby slippers), Oy sniffed at one of them, then looked attentively back at Jake.

Jake clicked his heels together three times, looking at the bumbler as he did so, ignoring the rattle of the gate and the soft chime from the walls of the Green Palace.

"You, Oy!"

"Oy!"

He rolled over on his back like a dog playing dead, then simply looked at his own feet with a kind of disgusted bewilderment. Looking at him, Jake had a sharp memory: trying to pat his stomach and rub his head at the same time, and his father making fun of him when he couldn't do it right away.

"Roland, help me. He knows what he's supposed to do, but he doesn't know how to do it." Jake glanced up at Eddie. "And don't make any smart remarks, okay?"

"No," Eddie said. "No smart remarks, Jake. Do you think just Oy has to do it this time, or is it still a group effort?"

"Just him, I think."

"But it wouldn't hurt us to kind of click along with Mitch," Susan-nah said.

"Mitch who?" Eddie asked, looking blank.

"Never mind. Go on, Jake, Roland. Give us a count again."

Eddie grasped Oy's forepaws. Roland gently grasped the bumbler's rear paws. Oy looked nervous at this—as if he perhaps expected to be swung briskly into the air and given the old heave-ho—but he didn't struggle.

"One, two, *three*."

Jake and Roland gently patted Oy's forepaws and rear paws together in unison. At the same time they clicked the heels of their own footwear. Eddie and Susannah did the same.

This time the harmonic was a deep, sweet bong, like a glass church bell. The black

glass bar running down the center of the gate did not split open but shattered, spraying crumbs of obsidian glass in all directions.

Some rattled against Oy's hide. He sprang up in a hurry, yanking out of Jake's and Roland's grip and trotting a little distance away. He sat on the broken white line between the travel lane and the passing lane of the high-way, his ears laid back, looking at the gate and panting.

"Come on," Roland said. He went to the left wing of the gate and pushed it slowly open. He stood at the edge of the mirror courtyard, a tall, lanky man in cowpoke jeans, an ancient shirt of no particular color, and improbable red cowboy boots.

"Let's go in and see what the Wizard of Oz has to say for himself."

"If he's still here," Eddie said.

"Oh, I think he's here," Roland murmured. "Yes, I think he's here."

He ambled toward the main door with the empty sentry-box beside it. The others followed, welded to their own downward reflections by the red shoes like sets of Siamese twins.

Oy came last, skipping nimbly along in his ruby slippers, pausing once to sniff down at his own reflected snout.

"Oy!" he cried to the humbler floating below him, and then hurried after Jake.

CHAPTER III

the wizard

Roland stopped at the sentry-box, glanced in, then picked up the thing which was lying on the floor. The others caught up with him and clustered around. It had

looked like a newspaper, and that was just what it was . . . although an exceedingly odd one. No Topeka *Capital-Journal* this, and no news of a population-levelling plague.

The Oy Daily Buzz

Vol. MDLXVDI No. 96 "Daily Buzz, Daily Buzz, Handsome Iz as Handsome
Duuzz" Weather: Here today, gone tomorrow Lucky Numbers: None Prognosis:
Bad

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 story p. 6)

Below this was a picture of Roland, Eddie, Susannah, and Jake cross-ing the mirrored courtyard, as if this had happened the day before instead of only minutes ago. Beneath it was a caption reading: Tragedy in **Oz: Travellers Arrive Seeking Fame and Fortune; Find Death Instead.**

"I like that," Eddie said, adjusting Roland's revolver in the holster he wore low on his hip. "Comfort and encouragement after days of confu-sion. Like a hot drink on a cold fucking night."

"Don't be afraid of this," Roland said. "This *is* a joke."

"I'm not afraid," Eddie said, "but it's a little more than a joke. I lived with Henry Dean for a lot of years, and I know when there's a plot to psych me out afoot. I know it very well." He looked curiously at Roland. "I hope you don't mind me saying this, but *you 're* the one who looks scared, Roland."

"I'm terrified," Roland said simply.

2

The arched entryway made Susannah think of a song which had been popular ten years or so before she had been yanked out of her world and into Roland's. *Saw an eyeball peepin through a smoky cloud behind the Green Door*, the lyric went. *When I said "Joe sent me, " someone laughed out loud behind the Green Door.* There were actually two doors here in-stead of one, and no peephole through which an eyeball could look in ei-ther. Nor did Susannah try that old speakeasy deal about how Joe had sent her. She did, however, bend forward to read the sign hanging from one of the circular glass door-pulls. *bell out of order, please knock*, it said.

"Don't bother," she said to Roland, who had actually doubled up his fist to do as the sign said. "It's from the story, that's all."

Eddie pulled her chair back slightly, stepped in front of it, and took hold of the circular pulls. The doors opened easily, the hinges rolling in silence. He took a step forward into what looked like a shadowy green grotto, cupped his hands to his mouth, and called: "*Hey!*"

The sound of his voice rolled away and came back changed... small, echoing, lost. Dying, it seemed.

"Christ," Eddie said. "Do we have to do this?"

"If we want to get back to the Beam, I think so." Roland looked paler than ever, but he led them in. Jake helped Eddie lift Susannah's chair over the sill (a milky block of jade-colored glass) and inside. Oy's little shoes flashed dim red on the green glass floor. They had gone only ten paces when the doors slammed shut behind them with a no-question-about-it boom that rolled past them and went echoing away into the depths of the Green Palace.

3

There was no reception room; only a vaulted, cavernous hallway that seemed to go on forever. The walls were lit with a faint green glow. *This is just like the hallway in the movie*, Jake thought, *the one where the Cow-ardly Lion got so scared when he stepped on his own tail.*

And, adding a little extra touch of verisimilitude Jake could have done without, Eddie spoke up in a trembly (and better than passable) Bert Lahr imitation: "Wait a minute, fellas, I wuz just thinkin—I really don't wanna see the Wizard this much. I better wait for you outside!"

"Stop it," Jake said sharply.

"Oppit!" Oy agreed. He walked directly at Jake's heel, swinging his head watchfully from side to side as he went. Jake could hear no sound except for their own passage ... yet he sensed something: a sound that *wasn't*. It was, he thought, like looking at a wind-chime that wants only the slightest puff of breeze to set it tinkling.

"Sorry," Eddie said. "Really." He pointed. "Look down there."

About forty yards ahead of them, the green corridor *did* end, in a narrow green doorway of amazing height—perhaps thirty feet from the floor to its pointed tip. And from behind it, Jake could now hear a steady thrumming sound. As they drew closer and the sound grew louder, his dread grew. He had to make a conscious effort to take the last dozen steps to the door. He knew this sound; he knew it from the run he'd made with Gasher under Lud, and from the run he and his friends had made on Blaine the Mono. It was the steady beat-beat-beat of slo-trans engines. "It's like a nightmare," he said in a small, close-to-tears voice. "We're right back where we started."

"No, Jake," the gunslinger said, touching his hair. "Never think it. What you feel is an illusion. Stand and be true."

The sign on this door wasn't from the movie, and only Susannah knew it was from Dante. abandon hope, all ye who enter here, it said.

Roland reached out with his two-fingered right hand and pulled the thirty-foot door open.

What lay beyond it was, to the eyes of Jake, Susannah, and Eddie, a weird combination of *The Wizard of Oz* and Blaine the Mono. A thick mg (pale blue, like the one in the Barony Coach) lay on the floor. The chamber was like the nave of a cathedral, soaring to impenetrable heights of greenish-black. The pillars which supported the glowing walls were great glass ribs of alternating green and pink light; the pink was the exact shade of Blaine's hull. Jake saw these supporting pillars had been carved with a billion different images, none of them comforting; they jostled the eye and unsettled the heart. There seemed to be a preponderance of screaming faces.

Ahead of them, dwarfing the visitors, turning them into creatures that seemed no bigger than ants, was the chamber's only furnishing: an enormous green glass throne. Jake tried to estimate its size and was unable—he had no reference-points to help him. He thought that the throne's back might be fifty feet high, but it could as easily have been seventy-five or a hundred. It was marked with the open eye symbol, this time traced in red instead of yellow. The rhythmic thrusting of the light made the eye seem alive; to be beating like a heart.

Above the throne, rising like the pipes of a mighty medieval organ, were thirteen great cylinders, each pulsing a different color. Each, that was, save for the pipe which ran directly down in back of the throne's center. That one was black as midnight and as still as death.

"Hey!" Susannah shouted from her chair. "Anyone here?"

At the sound of her voice, the pipes flashed so brilliantly that Jake had to shield his eyes. For a moment the entire throneroom glared like an exploding rainbow. Then the pipes went out, went dark, went dead, just as the wizard's glass in Roland's story had done when the glass (or the force inhabiting the glass) decided to shut up for awhile. Now there was only the column of blackness, and the steady green pulse of the empty throne.

Next, a somehow tired humming sound, as of a very old servomechanism being called into use one final time, began to whine its way into their ears. Panels, each at least six feet long and two feet wide, slid open in the arms of the throne. From the black slots thus revealed, a rose-colored smoke began to drift out and up. As it rose, it darkened to a bright red. And in it, a terribly familiar zigzag line appeared. Jake knew what it was even before the words

{Lud Candleton Rilea The Falls of the Hounds Dasherville Topeka) €

appeared, glowing smoke-bright.

It was Blaine's route-map.

Roland could say all he wanted about how things had changed, how Jake's feeling of being trapped in a nightmare

{this is the worst nightmare of my life, and that is the truth} €

was just an illusion created by his confused mind and frightened heart, but Jake knew better. This place might look a little bit like the throneroom of Oz the Great and Terrible, but it was really Blaine the Mono. They were back aboard Blaine, and soon the riddling would begin all over again.

Jake felt like screaming.

5

Eddie recognized the voice that boomed out of the smoky route-map hanging above the green throne, but he believed it was Blaine the Mono no more than he believed it was the Wizard of Oz. *Some* wizard, perhaps, but this wasn't the Emerald City, and Blaine was just as dead as dogshit. Eddie had sent him home with a fuckin rupture.

"HELLO THERE AGAIN, LITTLE TRAILHANDS!"

The smoky route-map pulsed, but Eddie no longer associated it with the voice, although he guessed they were supposed to. No, the voice was coming from the pipes.

He glanced down, saw Jake's paper-white face, and knelt beside him. "If scrap, kid," he said.

"N-No ... it's Blaine ... not dead..."

"He's dead, all right. This is nothing but an amplified version of the after-school announcements . . . who's got detention and who's supposed to report to Room Six for Speech Therapy. You dig?"

"What?" Jake looked up at him, lips wet and trembling, eyes dazed. "What do you—"

"Those pipes are *speakers*. Even a pipsqueak can sound big through a twelve-speaker Dolby sound-system; don't you remember the movie? It has to sound big because it's a bumhug, Jake—just a bumhug."

"WHAT ARE YOU TELLING HIM, EDDIE OF NEW YORK? ONE OF YOUR

STUPID, NASTY-MINDED LITTLE JOKES? ONE OF YOUR UNFAIR RIDDLES?"

"Yeah," Eddie said. "The one that goes, 'How many dipolar comput-ers does it take to screw in a lightbulb?' Who are you, buddy? I know goddam well you're not Blaine the Mono, so who are you?"

"I ... AM . . . **Oz!**" the voice thundered. The glass columns flashed; so did the pipes behind the throne. "OZ THE GREAT! OZ THE POWERFUL! WHO ARE YOU?"

Susannah rolled forward until her wheelchair was at the base of the dull green steps leading up to a throne that would have dwarfed even Lord Perth.

"I'm Susannah Dean, the small and crippled," she said, "and I was raised to be polite, but not to suffer bullshit. We're here because we're *s'poz*ed to be here—why else did we get left the shoes?"

"WHAT DO YOU WANT OF ME, SUSANNAH? WHAT WOULD YOU HAVE, LITTLE COWGIRL?"

"*You* know," she said. "We want what everyone wants, so far as I know—to go back home again, 'cause there's no place like home. We—"

"You can't go home," Jake said. He spoke in a rapid, frightened murmur. "You can't go home again, Thomas Wolfe said that, and that is the truth."

"It's a *lie*, sug," Susannah said. "A flat-out lie. You *can* go home again. All you have to do is find the right rainbow and walk under it. We've found it; the rest is just, you know, footwork."

"WOULD YOU GO BACK TO NEW YORK, SUSANNAH DEAN? EDDIE DEAN? JAKE CHAMBERS? IS THAT WHAT YOU ASK OF OZ, THE MIGHTY AND POWERFUL?"

"New York isn't home for us anymore," Susannah said. She looked very small yet very fearless as she sat in her new wheelchair at the foot of the enormous, pulsing throne. "No more than Gilead is home for Roland. Take us back to the Path of the Beam. That's where we want to go, be-cause that's our way home. Only way home we got."

"GO AWAY!" cried the voice from the pipes. "GO AWAY AND COME BACK TOMORROW! WE'LL DISCUSS THE BEAM THEN! FIDDLE-DE-DEE, SAID SCARLETT, WE'LL TALK ABOUT THE BEAM TOMORROW, FOR TOMORROW IS ANOTHER DAY!"

"No," Eddie said. "We'll talk about it now."

"DO NOT AROUSE THE WRATH OF THE GREAT AND POW-ERFUL OZ!"

the voice cried, and the pipes flashed furiously with each word. Susannah was sure this was supposed to be scary, but she found it almost amusing, instead. It was like watching a salesman demonstrate a child's toy. *Hey, kids! When you talk, the pipes flash bright colors! Try it and see!*

"Sugar, you best listen, now," Susannah said. "What *you* don't want to do is arouse the wrath of folks with guns. Especially when you be livin in a glass house."

"I SAID COME BACK TOMORROW!"

Red smoke once more began to boil out of the slots in the arms of the throne. It was thicker now. The shape which had been Blaine's route-map melted apart and joined it. The smoke formed a face, this time. It was nar-row and hard and watchful, framed by long hair.

It's the man Roland shot in the desert, Susannah thought wonderingly. *It's that man Jonas. I know it is.*

Now Oz spoke in a slightly trembling voice: "DO YOU PRESUME TO THREATEN THE GREAT OZ?" The lips of the huge, smoky face hovering over the throne's seat parted in a snarl of mingled menace and contempt. "YOU UNGRATEFUL CREATURES! OH, YOU UNGRATE-FUL CREATURES!"

Eddie, who knew smoke and mirrors when he saw them, had glanced in another direction. His eyes widened and he gripped Susannah's arm above the elbow.

"Look," he whispered. "Christ, Suze, look at Oy!"

The billy-bumbler had no interest in smoke-ghosts, whether they were monorail route-maps, dead Coffin Hunters, or just Hollywood spe-cial effects of the pre-World War II variety. He had seen (or smelled) something that was more interesting.

Susannah grabbed Jake, turned him, and pointed at the bumbler. She saw the boy's eyes widen with understanding a moment before Oy reached the small alcove in the left wall. It was screened from the main chamber by a green curtain which matched the glass walls. Oy stretched his long neck forward, caught the curtain's fabric in his teeth, and yanked it back.

Behind the curtain red and green lights flashed; cylinders spun inside glass boxes; needles moved back and forth inside long rows of lighted di-als. Yet Jake barely noticed these things. It was the man who took all his attention, the one sitting at the console, his back to them. His filthy hair, streaked with dirt and blood, hung to his shoulders in matted clumps. He was wearing some sort of headset, and was speaking into a tiny mike which hung in front of his mouth. His back was to them, and at first he had no idea that Oy had smelled him out and uncovered his hiding place.

"GO!" thundered the voice from the pipes . . . except now Jake saw where it was *really* coming from. "COME BACK TOMORROW IF YOU LIKE, BUT GO NOW! I WARN YOU!"

"It *is* Jonas, Roland must not have killed him after all," Eddie whis-pered, but Jake knew better. He had recognized the voice. Even distorted by the amplification of the colored pipes, he had recognized the voice. How could he have ever believed it to be the voice of Blaine?

"I WARN YOU, IF YOU REFUSE—"

Oy barked, a sharp and somehow forbidding sound. The man in the equipment alcove began to turn.

Tell me, cully, Jake remembered this voice saying before its owner had discovered the dubious attractions of amplification. *Tell me all you know about dipolar computers and transitive circuits. Tell me and I'll give you a drink.*

It wasn't Jonas, and it wasn't the Wizard of anything. It was David Quick's grandson. It was the Tick-Tock Man.

7

Jake stared at him, horrified. The coiled, dangerous creature who had lived beneath Lud with his mates—Gasher and Hoots and Brandon and Tilly—was gone. This might have been that monster's ruined father ... or grandfather. His left eye—the one Oy had punctured with his claws— bulged white and misshapen, partly in its socket and partly on his un-shaven cheek. The right side of his head looked half-scalped, the skull showing through in a long, triangular strip. Jake had a distant, panic-darkened memory of a flap of skin falling over the side of Tick-Tock's face, but he had been on the edge of hysteria by that point... and was again

now.

Oy had also recognized the man who had tried to kill him and was barking hysterically, head down, teeth bared, back bowed. Tick-Tock stared at him with wide, stunned eyes.

"Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain," said a voice from behind them, and then tittered. "My friend Andrew is having another in a long series of bad days. Poor boy. I suppose I was wrong to bring him out of Lud, but he just looked so *lost*..." The owner of the voice tittered again.

Jake swung around and saw that there was now a man sitting in the middle of the great throne, with his legs casually crossed in front of him. He was wearing jeans, a dark jacket that belted at the waist, and old, run-down cowboy boots. On his jacket was a button that showed a pig's head with a bullethole between the eyes. In his lap this newcomer held a draw-string bag. He rose, standing in the seat of the throne like a child in daddy's chair, and the smile dropped away from his face like loose skin. Now his eyes blazed, and his lips parted over vast, hungry teeth.

"Get them, Andrew! Get them! Kill them! Every sister-fucking one of them!"

"My life for you!" the man in the alcove screamed, and for the first time Jake saw the machine-gun propped in the corner. Tick-Tock sprang for it and snatched it up.

"My life for you!" €

He turned, and Oy was on him once again, leaping forward and up-ward, sinking his teeth deep into Tick-Tock's left thigh, just below the crotch.

Eddie and Susannah drew in unison, each raising one of Roland's big guns. They fired in concert, not even the smallest overlap in the sound of their shots. One of them tore off the top of Tick-Tock's miserable head, buried itself in the equipment, and created a loud but mercifully brief snarl of feedback. The other took him in the throat.

He staggered forward one step, then two. Oy dropped to the floor and backed away from him, snarling. A third step took Tick-Tock out into the throneroom proper. He raised his arms toward Jake, and the boy could read Ticky's hatred in his remaining green eye; the boy thought he could hear the man's last, hateful thought: *Oh, you fucking little squint—*

Then Tick-Tock collapsed forward, as he had collapsed in the Cradle of the Grays . . . only this time he would rise no more.

"Thus fell Lord Perth, and the earth did shake with that thunder," said the man on

the throne.

Except he's not a man, Jake thought. Not a man at all. We've found the Wizard at last, I think. And I'm pretty sure I know what's in the bag he has.

"Marten," Roland said. He held out his left hand, the one which was still whole.

"Marten Broadcloak. After all these years. After all these *centuries*."

"Want this, Roland?"

Eddie put the gun he had used to kill the Tick-Tock Man in Roland's hand. A tendril of blue smoke was still rising from the barrel. Roland looked at the old revolver as if he had never seen it before, then slowly lifted it and pointed it at the grinning, rosy-cheeked figure sitting cross-legged on the Green Palace's throne.

"Finally," Roland breathed, thumbing back the trigger. "Finally in my sights."

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"That six-shooter will do you no good, as I think you know," the man on the throne said. "Not against *me*. Only misfires against *me*, Roland, old fellow. How's the family, by the way? I seem to have lost touch with them over the years. I was always such a *lousy* correspondent. Someone ought to take a hosswhip to me, aye, so they should!"

He threw back his head and laughed. Roland pulled the trigger of the gun in his hand. When the hammer fell there was only a dull click.

"Toadger," the man on the throne said. "I think you must have gotten some of those wet slugs in there by accident, don't you? The ones with the flat powder? Good for blocking the sound of the thinny, but not so good for shooting old wizards, are they? Too bad. And your hand, Roland, look at your *hand*! Short a couple of fingers, by the look. My, this *has* been hard on you, hasn't it? Things could get easier, though. You and your friends could have a fine, fruitful life—and, as Jake would say, that is the truth. No more lobstrosities, no more mad trains, no more disquiet-ing—not to mention dangerous—trips to other worlds. All you have to do is give over this stupid and hopeless quest for the Tower."

"No," Eddie said.

"No," Susannah said.

"No," Jake said.

"No!" Oy said, and added a bark.

The dark man on the green throne continued to smile, unperturbed. "Roland?" he asked. "What about you?" Slowly, he raised the drawstring bag. It looked dusty and old. It hung from the wizard's fist like a teardrop, and now the thing in its pouch began to pulse with pink light. "Cry off, and they need never see what's inside this—they need never see the last scene of that sad long-ago play. Cry off. Turn from the Tower and go your way."

"No," Roland said. He began to smile, and as his smile broadened, that of the man sitting on the throne began to falter. "You can enchant my guns, those of this world, I reckon," he said.

"Roland, I don't know what you're thinking of, laddie, but I warn you not to—" "Not to cross Oz the Great? Oz the Powerful? But I think I will, Marten ... or Maerlyn ... or whoever you call yourself now..."

"Flagg, actually," the man on the throne said. "And we've met be-fore." He smiled. Instead of broadening his face, as smiles usually did, it contracted Flagg's features into a narrow and spiteful grimace. "In the wreck of Gilead. You and your surviving pals—that laughing donkey Cuthbert Allgood made one of your party, I remember, and DeCurry, the fellow with the birthmark, made another—were on your way west, to seek the Tower. Or, in the parlance of Jake's world, you were off to see the Wizard. I know you saw me, but I doubt you knew until now that I saw you, as well."

"And will again, I reckon," Roland said. "Unless, that is, I kill you now and put an end to your interference."

Still holding his own gun out in his left hand, he went for the one tucked in the waistband of his jeans—Jake's Ruger, a gun from another world and perhaps immune to this creature's enchantments—with his right. And he was fast as he had always been fast, his speed blinding.

The man on the throne shrieked and cringed back. The bag fell from his lap, and the glass ball—once held by Rhea, once held by Jonas, once held by Roland himself—slipped out of its mouth. Smoke, green this time instead of red, billowed from the slots in the arms of the throne. It rose in obscuring fumes. Yet Roland still might have shot the figure disappearing into the smoke if he had made a clean draw. He didn't, however; the Ruger slid in the grip of his reduced hand, then twisted. The front sight caught on his belt-buckle. It took only an extra quarter-second for him to free the snag, but that was the quarter-second he had needed. He

pumped three shots into the billowing smoke, then ran forward, oblivious of the shouts of the others.

He waved the smoke aside with his hands. His shots had shattered the back of the throne into thick green slabs of glass, but the man-shaped creature which had called itself Flagg was gone. Roland found himself already beginning to wonder if he—or it had been there in the first place.

The ball was still there, however, unharmed and glowing the same en-ticing pink he remembered from so long ago—from Mejis, when he had been young and in love. This survivor of Maerlyn's Rainbow had rolled almost to the edge of the throne's seat; two more inches and it would have plunged over and shattered on the floor. Yet it had not; still it remained, this bewitched thing Susan Delgado had first glimpsed through the win-dow of Rhea's hut, under the light of the Kissing Moon.

Roland picked it up—how well it fit his hand, how natural it felt against his palm, even after all these years—and looked into its cloudy, troubled depths. "You always did have a charmed life," he whispered to it. He thought of Rhea as he had seen her in this ball—her ancient, laugh-ing eyes. He thought of the flames from the Reap-Night bonfire rising around Susan, making her beauty shimmer in the heat. Making it shiver like a mirage.

Wretched glam! he thought. *If I dashed you to the floor, surely we would drown in the sea of tears that would pour out of your split belly . . . the tears of all those you've put to ruin.*

And why not do it? Left whole, the nasty thing might be able to help them back to the Path of the Beam, but Roland didn't believe they actu-ally *needed* it. He thought that Tick-Tock and the creature which had called itself Flagg had been their last challenge in that regard. The Green Palace was their door back to Mid-World ... and it was theirs, now. They had conquered it by force of arms.

But you can't go yet, gunslinger. Not until you've finished your story, told the last € scene. €

Whose voice was that? Vannay's? No. Cort's? No. Nor was it the voice of his father, who had once turned him naked out of a whore's bed. That was the hardest voice, the one he often heard in his troubled dreams, the one he wanted so to please and so seldom could. No, not that voice, not this time.

This time what he heard was the voice *of ka*—*ka* like a wind. He had told so much

of that awful fourteenth year ... but he hadn't finished the tale. As with Detta Walker and the Blue Lady's forspecial plate, there was one more thing. A hidden thing. The question wasn't, he saw, whether or not the five of them could find their way out of the Green Palace and re-cover the Path of the Beam; the question was whether or not they could go on as *ka-tet*. If they were to do that, there could be nothing hidden; he would have to tell them of the final time he had looked into the wizard's glass in that long-ago year. Three nights past the welcoming banquet, it had been. He would have to tell them—

No, Roland, the voice whispered. Not just tell. Not this time. You know better.

Yes. He knew better.

"Come," he said, turning to them.

They drew slowly around him, their eyes wide and filling with the ball's flashing pink light. Already they were half-hypnotized by it, even Oy.

"We are *ka-tet*," Roland said, holding the ball toward them. "We are one from many. I lost my one true love at the beginning of my quest for the Dark Tower. Now look into this wretched thing, if you would, and see what I lost not long after. See it once and for all; see it very well."

They looked. The ball, cupped in Roland's upraised hands, began to pulse faster. It gathered them in and swept them away. Caught and whirled in the grip of that pink storm, they flew over the Wizard's Rain-bow to the Gilead that had been.

CHAPTER. IV

the glass

Jake of New York stands in an upper corridor of the Great Hall of Gilead—more castles, here in the green land, than Mayor's House. He looks around and sees Susannah and Eddie standing by a tapestry, their eyes big, their hands tightly entwined. And Susannah is standing; she has her legs back, at least for now, and what she called "cappies " have been replaced by a pair of ruby slippers exactly like those Dorothy wore when she stepped out upon her version of the Great Road to find the Wizard of Oz, that bumhug.

She has her legs because this is a dream, Jake thinks, but knows it is no dream. He looks down and sees Oy looking up at him with his anxious, intelligent, gold-ringed eyes. He is still wearing the red booties. Jake bends and strokes Oy 's head. The feel of the humbler's fur under his hand is clear and real. No, this isn't a dream.

Yet Roland is not here, he realizes; they are four instead of five. He realizes something else as well: the air of this corridor is faintly pink, and small pink halos revolve around the funny, old-fashioned lightbulbs that illuminate the corridor. Something is going to happen; some story is go-ing to play out in front of their eyes. And now, as if the very thought had summoned them, the boy hears the click of approaching footfalls.

It's a story I know, Jake thinks. One I've been told before.

As Roland comes around the corner, he realizes what story it is: the one where Marten Broadcloak stops Roland as Roland passes by on his way to the rooftop, where it will perhaps be cooler. "You, boy, " Marten will say. "Come in! Don't stand in the hall! Your mother wants to speak to you. " But of course that isn't the truth, was never the truth, will never be the truth, no matter how much time slips and bends. What Marten wants is for the boy to see his mother, and to understand that Gabrielle Deschain has become the mistress of his father's wizard. Marten wants to goad the boy into an early test of manhood while his father is away and can't put a stop to it; he wants to get the puppy out of his way before it can grow teeth long enough to bite.

Now they will see all this; the sad comedy will go its sad and pre-ordained course in front of their eyes. I'm too young, Jake thinks, but of course he is not too young; Roland will be only three years older when he comes to Mejis with his friends and meets Susan upon the Great Road. Only three years older when he loves her; only three years older when he loses her.

I don't care, I don't want to see it— €

And won't, he realizes as Roland draws closer; all that has already happened. For this is not August, the time of Full Earth, but late fall or early winter. He can tell by the serape Roland wears, a souvenir of his trip to the Outer Arc, and by the vapor that smokes from his mouth and nose each time he exhales: no central heating in Gilead, and it's cold up here.

There are other changes as well: Roland is now wearing the guns which are his birthright, the big ones with the sandalwood grips. His father passed them on at the banquet, Jake thinks. He doesn't know how he knows this, but he does. And Roland's face, although still that of a boy, is not the open, untried face of the one who idled up this same corridor five months before; the boy who was ensnared by Marten has been through much since then, and his battle with Cort has been the very least of it.

Jake sees something else, too: the boy gunslinger is wearing the red cowboy boots. He doesn't know it, though. Because this isn't really happening. €

Yet somehow it is. They are inside the wizard's glass, they are inside the pink storm (those pink halos revolving around the light fixtures re-mind Jake of The Falls of the Hounds, and the moonbows revolving in the mist), and this is happening all over again.

"Roland!" Eddie calls from where he and Susannah stand by the tapestry. Susannah gasps and squeezes his shoulder, wanting him to be silent, but Eddie ignores her. "No, Roland! Don't! Bad idea! " "No! Olan!" Oy yaps.

Roland ignores both of them, and he passes by Jake a hand's breadth away without seeing him. For Roland, they are not here; red boots or no red boots, this ka-tet is far in his future.

He stops at a door near the end of the corridor, hesitates, then raises his fist and knocks. Eddie starts down the corridor toward him, still holding Susannah's hand... now he looks almost as if he is dragging her.

"Come on, Jake, " says Eddie.

"No, I don't want to."

"It's not about what you want, and you know it. We're supposed to see. If we can't stop him, we can at least do what we came here to do. Now come on!"

Heart heavy with dread, his stomach clenched in a knot, Jake comes along. As they approach Roland—the guns look enormous on his slim hips, and his unlined

but already tired face somehow makes Jake feel like weeping—the gunslinger knocks again.

"She ain't there, sugar!" Susannah shouts at him. "She ain't there or she ain't answering the door, and which one it is don't matter to you! Leave it! Leave her! She ain't worth it! Just bein your mother don't make her worth it! Go away!" But he doesn't hear her, either, and he doesn't go away. As Jake, Eddie, Susannah, and Oy gather unseen behind him, Roland tries the door to his mother's room and finds it unlocked. He opens it, revealing a shadowy chamber decorated with silk hangings. On the floor is a rug that looks like the Persians beloved of Jake's mother . . . only this rug, Jake knows, comes from the Province of Kashamin. On the far side of the parlor, by a window which has been shuttered against the winter winds, Jake sees a low-backed chair and knows it is the one she was in on the day of Roland's manhood test; it is where she was sitting when her son observed the love-bite on her neck.

The chair is empty now, but as the gunslinger takes another step into the room and turns to look toward the apartment's bedroom, Jake observes a pair of shoes—black, not red—beneath the drapes flanking the shuttered window.

"Roland!" he shouts. "Roland, behind the drapes! Someone behind the drapes! Look out!"

But Roland doesn't hear.

"Mother?" he calls, and even his voice is the same, Jake would know it anywhere . . . but it is such a magically freshened version of it! Young and uncracked by all the years of dust and wind and cigarette smoke. "Mother, it's Roland! I want to talk to you!"

Still no answer. He walks down the short hall which leads to the bed-room. Part of Jake wants to stay here in the parlor, to go to that drape and yank it aside, but he knows this isn't the way it's supposed to go. Even if he tried, he doubts it would do any good; his hand would likely pass right through, like the hand of a ghost.

"Come on," Eddie says. "Stay with him."

They go in a cluster that might have been comic under other circumstances. Not under these; here it is a case of three people desperate for the comfort of friends. Roland stands looking at the bed against the room's left wall. He looks at it as if hypnotized. Perhaps he is trying to imagine Marten in it with his mother; perhaps he is remembering Susan, with whom he never slept in a proper bed, let alone a

canopied luxury such as this. Jake can see the gunslinger's dim profile in a three-paneled mirror across the room, in an alcove. This triple glass stands in front of a small table the boy recognizes from his mother's side of his parents' bedroom; it is a vanity.

The gunslinger shakes himself and comes back from whatever thoughts have seized his mind. On his feet are those terrible boots; in this dim light, they look like the boots of a man who has walked through a creek of blood.

"Mother!"

He takes a step toward the bed and actually bends a little, as if he thinks she might be hiding under it. If she's been hiding, however, it wasn't there; the shoes which Jake saw beneath the drape were women's shoes, and the shape which now stands at the end of the short corridor, just out-side the bedroom door, is wearing a dress. Jake can see its hem.

And he sees more than that. Jake understands Roland's troubled relationship with his mother and father better than Eddie or Susannah ever could, because Jake's own parents are peculiarly like them: Elmer Chambers is a gunslinger for the Network, and Megan Chambers has a long history of sleeping with sick friends. This is nothing Jake has been told, but he knows, somehow; he has shared khaf with his mother and father, and he knows what he knows.

He knows something about Roland, as well: that he saw his mother in the wizard's glass. It was Gabrielle Deschain, fresh back from her retreat in Debaria, Gabrielle who would confess to her husband the errors of her ways and her thinking after the banquet, who would cry his pardon and beg to be taken back to his bed. . . and, when Steven drowsed after their lovemaking, she would bury the knife in his breast . . . or perhaps only lightly scratch his arm with it, not even waking him. With that knife, it would come to the same either way.

Roland had seen it all in the glass before finally turning the wretched thing over to his father, and Roland had put a stop to it. To save Steven Deschain 's life, Eddie and Susannah would have said, had they seen so far into the business, but Jake has the unhappy wisdom of unhappy children and sees further. To save his mother's life as well. To give her one last chance to recover her sanity, one last chance to stand at her husband's side and be true. One last chance to repent of Marten Broadcloak.

Surely she will, surely she must! Roland saw her face that day, how unhappy she

was, and surely she must! Surely she cannot have chosen the magician! If he can only make her see . . .

So, unaware that he has once more lapsed into the unwisdom of the very young—Roland cannot grasp that unhappiness and shame are often no match for desire—he has come here to speak to his mother, to beg her to come back to her husband before it's too late. He has saved her from herself once, he will tell her, but he cannot do it again.

And if she still won't go, Jake thinks, or tries to brave it out, pretend she doesn't know what he's talking about, he'll give her a choice: leave Gilead with his help—now, tonight—or be clapped in chains tomorrow morning, a traitor so outrageous she will almost certainly be hung as Hax the cook was hung.

"Mother?" he calls, still unaware of the shape standing in the shadows behind him. He takes one further step into the room, and now the shape moves. The shape raises its hands. There is something in its hands. Not a gun, Jake can tell that much, but it has a deadly look to it, a snaky look, somehow—

"Roland, watch out!" Susannah shrieks, and her voice is like a magical switch. There is something on the dressing table—the glass, of course;

Gabrielle has stolen it, it's what she 'll bring to her lover as a consolation prize for the murder her son prevented—and now it lights as if in response to Susannah's voice. It sprays brilliant pink light up the triple mirror and casts its glow back into the room. In that light, in that triple glass, Roland finally sees the figure behind him.

"Christ!" Eddie Dean shrieks, horrified. "Oh Christ, Roland! That's not your mother! That's—"

It's not even a woman, not really, not anymore; it is a kind of living corpse in a road-filthy black dress. There are only a few straggling tufts of hair left on her head and there's a gaping hole where her nose used to be, but her eyes still blaze, and the snake she holds wriggling between her hands is very lively. Even in his own horror, Jake has time to wonder if she got it from under the same rock where she found the one Roland killed.

It is Rhea who has been waiting for the gunslinger in his mother's apartment; it is the Coos, come not just to retrieve her glam but to finish with the boy who has caused her so much trouble.

"Now, ye trollop's get!" she cries shrilly, cackling. "Now ye'll pay!"

But Roland has seen her, in the glass he has seen her, Rhea betrayed by the very ball she came to take back, and now he is whirling, his hands dropping to his new guns with all their deadly speed. He is fourteen, his reflexes are the sharpest and quickest they 'll ever be, and he goes off like exploding gunpowder.

"No, Roland, don't!" Susannah screams. "It's a trick, it's a glam!"

Jake has just time to look from the mirror to the woman actually standing in the doorway; has just time to realize he, too, has been tricked.

Perhaps Roland also understands the truth at the last split-second— that the woman in the doorway really is his mother after all, that the thing in her hands isn't a snake but a belt, something she has made for him, a peace offering, mayhap, that the glass has lied to him in the only way it can...by reflection.

In any case, it's too late. The guns are out and thundering, their bright yellow flashes lighting the room. He pulls the trigger of each gun twice before he can stop, and the four slugs drive Gabrielle Deschain back into the corridor with the hopeful can-we-make-peace smile still on her face.

She dies that way, smiling.

Roland stands where he is, the smoking guns in his hands, his face cramped in a grimace of surprise and horror, just beginning to get the truth of what he must carry with him the rest of his life: he has used the guns of his father to kill his mother.

Now cackling laughter fills the room. Roland does not turn; he is frozen by the woman in the blue dress and black shoes who lies bleeding in the corridor of her apartment; the woman he came to save and has killed, instead. She lies with the hand-woven belt draped across her bleed-ing stomach.

Jake turns for him, and is not surprised to see a green-faced woman in a pointed black hat swimming inside the hall. It is the Wicked Witch of the East; it is also, he knows, Rhea of the Coos. She stares at the boy with the guns in his hands and bares her teeth at him in the most terrible grin Jake has ever seen in his life.

"I've burned the stupid girl ye loved—aye, burned her alive, I did— and now I've made ye a matricide. Do ye repent of killing my snake yet, gunslinger? My poor, sweet Ermot? Do ye regret playing yer hard games with one more trig than ye 'll ever be in yer miserable life? "

He gives no sign that he hears, only stares at his lady mother. Soon he will go to her, kneel by her, but not yet; not yet.

The face in the ball now turns toward the three pilgrims, and as it does it changes, becomes old and bald and raddled—becomes, in fact, the face Roland saw in the lying mirror. The gunslinger has been unable to see his future friends, but Rhea sees them; aye, she sees them very well.

"Cry it off! " she croaks—it is the caw of a raven sitting on a leafless branch beneath a winter-dimmed sky. "Cry it off! Renounce the Tower!"

"Never, you bitch, " Eddie says.

"Ye see what he is! What a monster he is! And this is only the beginning of it, ye ken! Ask him what happened to Cuthbert! To Alain—Alain 's touch, clever as 'twas, saved him not in the end, so it didn't! Ask him what happened to Jamie De Curry! He never had a friend he didn't kill, never had a lover who's not dust in the wind!"

"Go your way, " Susannah says, "and leave us to ours. "

Rhea's green, cracked lips twist in a horrible sneer. "He's killed his own mother! What will he do to you, ye stupid brown-skinned bitch ? "

"He didn't kill her, " Jake said. "You killed her. Now go!"

Jake takes a step toward the ball, meaning to pick it up and dash it to the floor . . . and he can do that, he realizes, for the ball is real. It's the one thing in this vision that is. But before he can put his hands to it, it flashes a soundless explosion of pink light. Jake throws his hands up in front of his face to keep from being blinded, and then he is

(melting I'm melting what a world oh what a world) €

falling, he is being whirled down through the pink storm, out of Oz and back to € Kansas, out of Oz and back to Kansas, out of Oz and back to— €

CHAPTER V

THE PATH OF THE BEAM

1

"—home," Eddie muttered. His voice sounded thick and punch-drunk to his own ears. "Back home, because there's no place like home, no indeed."

He tried to open his eyes and at first couldn't. It was as if they were glued shut. He put the heel of his hand to his forehead and pushed up, tightening the skin on his face. It worked; his eyes popped open. He saw neither the throneroom of the Green Palace nor (and this was what he had really expected) the richly appointed but somehow claustrophobic bed-room in which he had just been.

He was outside, lying in a small clearing of winter-white grass. Nearby was a little grove of trees, some still with their last brown leaves clinging to the branches. And one branch with an odd white leaf, an al-bino leaf. There was a pretty trickle of running water farther into the grove. Standing abandoned in the high grass was Susannah's new and im-proved wheelchair. There was mud on the tires, Eddie saw, and a few late leaves, crispy and brown, caught in the spokes. A few swatches of grass, too. Overhead was a skyful of still white clouds, every bit as interesting as a laundry-basket full of sheets.

The sky was clear when we went inside the Palace, he thought, and realized time had slipped again. How much or how little, he wasn't sure he wanted to know—Roland's world was like a transmission with its gear-teeth all but stripped away; you never knew when time was going to pop into neutral or race you away in overdrive.

Was this Roland's world, though? And if it was, how had they gotten back to it? "How should I know?" Eddie croaked, and got slowly to his feet, wincing as he did so. He didn't think he was hungover, but his legs were sore and he felt as if he

had just taken the world's heaviest Sunday after-noon nap.

Roland and Susannah lay on the ground under the trees. The gunslinger was stirring, but Susannah lay on her back, arms spread extravagantly wide, snoring in an unladylike way that made Eddie grin. Jake was nearby, with Oy sleeping on his side by one of the kid's knees. As Eddie looked at them, Jake opened his eyes and sat up. His gaze was wide but blank; he was awake, but had been so heavily asleep he didn't know it yet.

"Gruz," Jake said, and yawned.

"Yep," Eddie said, "that works for me." He turned in a slow circle, and had gotten three quarters of the way back to where he'd started when he saw the Green Palace on the horizon. From here it looked very small, and its brilliance had been robbed by the sunless day. Eddie guessed it might be thirty miles away. Leading toward them from that direction were the tracks of Susannah's wheelchair.

He could hear the thinny, but faintly. He thought he could see it, as well—a quicksilver shimmer like bogwater, stretching across the flat, open land . . . and finally drying up about five miles away. Five miles west of here? Given the location of the Green Palace and the fact that they had been travelling east on 1-70, that was the natural assumption, but who really knew, especially with no visible sun to use for orientation?

"Where's the turnpike?" Jake asked. His voice sounded thick and gummy. Oy joined him, stretching first one rear leg, then the other. Eddie saw he had lost one of his booties at some point.

"Maybe it was cancelled due to lack of interest."

"I don't think we're in Kansas anymore," Jake said. Eddie looked at him sharply, but didn't believe the kid was consciously riffing on *The Wizard of Oz*. "Not the one where the Kansas City Royals play, not the one where the Monarchs play, either."

"What gives you that idea?"

Jake hoisted a thumb toward the sky, and when Eddie looked up, he saw that he had been wrong: it wasn't *all* still white overcast, boring as a basket of sheets. Directly above their heads, a band of clouds was moiling toward the horizon as steadily as a conveyor belt.

They were back on the Path of the Beam.

"Eddie? Where you at, sugar?"

Eddie looked down from the lane of clouds in the sky and saw Susan-nah sitting up, rubbing the back of her neck. She looked unsure of where she was. Perhaps even of *who* she was. The red cappies she was wearing looked oddly dull in this light, but they were still the brightest things in Eddie's view ... until he looked down at his own feet and saw the street-boppers with their Cuban heels. Yet these also looked dull, and Eddie no longer thought it was just the day's cloudy light that made them seem so. He looked at Jake's shoes, Oy's remaining three slippers, Roland's cow-boy boots (the gunslinger was sitting up now, arms crossed around his knees, looking blankly off into the distance). All the same ruby red, but a *lifeless* red, somehow. As if some magic essential to them had been used up. Suddenly, Eddie wanted them off his feet.

He sat down beside Susannah, gave her a kiss, and said: "Good morning, Sleeping Beauty. Or afternoon, if it's that." Then, quickly, almost hating to touch them (it was like touching dead skin, somehow), Eddie yanked off the street-boppers. As he did, he saw that they were scuffed at the toes and muddy at the heels, no longer new looking. He'd wondered how they'd gotten here; now, feeling the ache in the muscles of his legs and remembering the wheelchair tracks, he knew. They had walked, by God. Walked in their sleep.

"That," Susannah said, "is the best idea you've had since . . . well, in a long time." She stripped off the cappies. Close by, Eddie saw Jake tak-ing off Oy's booties. "Were we there?" Susannah asked him. "Eddie, were we really there when he..." "When I killed my mother," Roland said. "Yes, you were there. As I was. Gods help me, I was there. I did it." He covered his face with his hands and began to voice a series of harsh sobs.

Susannah crawled across to him in that agile way that was almost a version of walking. She put an arm around him and used her other hand to take his hands away from his face. At first Roland didn't want to let her do that, but she was persistent, and at last his hands—those killer's hands—came down, revealing haunted eyes which swam with tears.

Susannah urged his face down against her shoulder. "Be easy, Roland," she said. "Be easy and let it go. This part is over now. You past it."

"A man doesn't get past such a thing," Roland said. "No, I don't think so. Not ever."

"You didn't kill her," Eddie said.

"That's too easy." The gunslinger's face was still against Susannah's shoulder, but his words were clear enough. "Some responsibilities can't be shirked. Some *sins* can't be shirked. Yes, Rhea was there—in a way, at least—but I can't shift it all to the Coos, much as I might like to."

"It wasn't her, either," Eddie said. "That's not what I mean."

Roland raised his head. "What in hell's name are you talking about?"

"*Ka*, " Eddie said. "*Ka* like a wind."

3

In their packs there was food none of them had put there—cookies with Keebler elves on the packages, Saran Wrapped sandwiches that looked like the kind you could get (if you were desperate, that was) from turnpike vending machines, and a brand of cola neither Eddie, Susannah, nor Jake knew. It tasted like Coke and came in a red and white can, but the brand was Nozz-A-La.

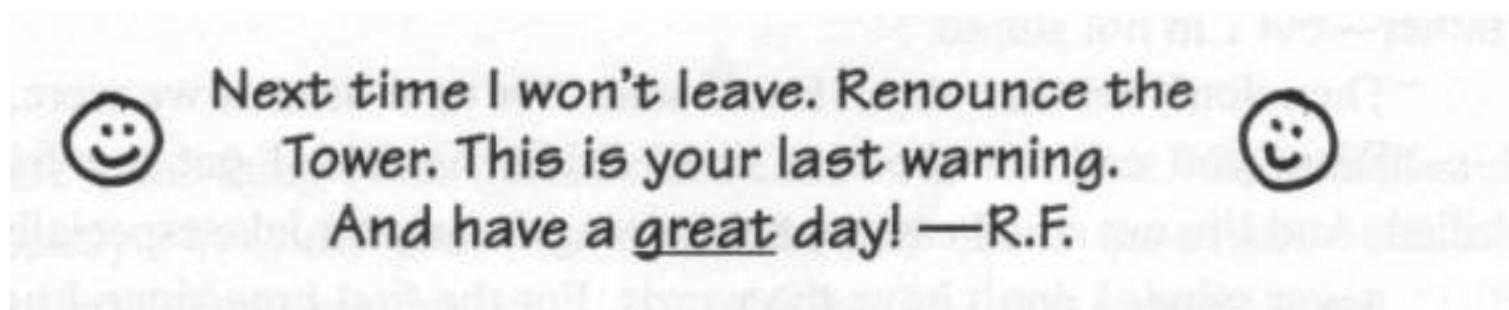
They ate a meal with their backs to the grove and their faces to the distant glimmer of the Green Palace, and called it lunch. *If we start to lose the light in an hour or so, we can make it supper by voice vote*, Eddie thought, but he didn't believe they'd need to. His interior clock was run-ning again now, and that mysterious but usually accurate device suggested that it was early afternoon. At one point he stood up and raised his soda, smiling into an invisible camera. "When I'm travelling through the Land of Oz in my new Takuro Spirit, I drink Nozz-A-La!" he proclaimed. "It fills me up but never fills me out! It makes me happy to be a man! It makes me know God! It gives me the outlook of an angel and the balls of a tiger! When I drink Nozz-A-La, I say 'Gosh! Ain't I glad to be alive!' I say—"

"Sit down, you bumhug," Jake said, laughing.

"Ug," Oy agreed. His snout was on Jake's ankle, and he was watch-ing the boy's sandwich with great interest.

Eddie started to sit, and then that strange albino leaf caught his eye again. *That's no leaf*, he thought, and walked over to it. No, not a leaf but a scrap of paper. He

turned it over and saw columns of "blah blah" and "yak yak" and "all the stuff's the same." Usually newspapers weren't blank on one side, but Eddie wasn't surprised to find this **one** was—the *Oz Daily Buzz* had only been a prop, after all. Nor was the blank side blank. Printed on it in neat, careful letters, was this message:



Below that, a little drawing:



Eddie brought the note back to where the others were eating. Each of them looked at it. Roland held it last, ran his thumb over it thoughtfully, feeling the texture of the paper, then gave it back to Eddie.

"R.F.," Eddie said. "The man who was running Tick-Tock. This is from him, isn't it?"

"Yes. He must have brought the Tick-Tock Man out of Lud."

"Sure," Jake said darkly. "That guy Flagg looked like someone who'd know a first-class bumhug when he found one. But how did they get here before us? What could be faster than Blaine the Mono, for cripe's sake?"

"A door," Eddie said. "Maybe they came through one of those special doors."

"Bingo," Susannah said. She held her hand out, palm up, and Eddie slapped it.

"In any case, what he suggests is not bad advice," Roland said. "I urge you to

consider it most seriously. And if you want to go back to your world, I will allow you to go."

"Roland, I can't believe you," Eddie said. "This, after you dragged me and Suze over here, kicking and screaming? You know what my brother would say about you? That you're as contrary as a hog on ice-skates."

"I did what I did before I learned to know you as friends," Roland said. "Before I learned to love you as I loved Alain and Cuthbert. And before I was forced to ... to revisit certain scenes. Doing that has ..." He paused, looking down at his feet (he had put his old boots back on again) and thinking hard. At last he looked up again. "There was a part of me that hadn't moved or spoken in a good many years. I thought it was dead. It isn't. I have learned to love again, and I'm aware that this is probably my last chance to love. I'm slow—Vannay and Cort knew that; so did my father—but I'm not stupid."

"Then don't act that way," Eddie said. "Or treat us as if we were."

"What you call 'the bottom line,' Eddie, is this: I get my friends killed. And I'm not sure I can even risk doing that again. Jake especially. . . I... never mind. I don't have the words. For the first time since I turned around in a dark room and killed my mother, I may have found something more important than the Tower. Leave it at that."

"All right, I guess I can respect that."

"So can I," Susannah said, "but Eddie's right about *ka*." She took the note and ran a finger over it thoughtfully. "Roland, you can't talk about that—*ka*, I mean—then turn around and take it back again, just because you get a little low on willpower and dedication."

"Willpower and dedication are good words," Roland remarked. "There's a bad one, though, that means the same thing. That one is *obsession*."

She shrugged it away with an impatient twitch of her shoulders. "Sugarpie, either this whole business is *ka*, or none of it is. And scary as *ka* might be—the idea of fate with eagle eyes and a bloodhound's nose—I find the idea of no *ka* even scarier." She tossed the R.F. note aside on the matted grass.

"Whatever you call it, you're just as dead if it runs you over," Roland said. "Rimer . . . Thorin . . . Jonas . . . my mother . . . Cuthbert . . . Susan. Just ask them. Any of them. If you only could."

"You're missing the biggest part of this," Eddie said. "You *can't* send us back.

Don't you realize that, you big galoot? Even if there was a door, we wouldn't go through it. Am I wrong about that?"

He looked at Jake and Susannah. They shook their heads. Even Oy shook his head. No, he wasn't wrong.

"We've *changed*," Eddie said. "We..." Now he was the one who didn't know how to go on. How to express his need to see the Tower . . . and his other need, just as strong, to go on carrying the gun with the sandal-wood insets. *The big iron* was how he'd come to think of it. Like in that old Marty Robbins song about the man with the big iron on his hip. "It's *ka*," he said. It was all he could think of that was big enough to cover it.

"Kaka," Roland replied, after a moment's consideration. The three of them stared at him, mouths open. Roland of Gilead had made a joke.

4

"There's one thing I don't understand about what we saw," Susannah said hesitantly. "Why did your mother hide behind that drape when you came in, Roland? Did she mean to..." She bit her lip, then brought it out. "Did she mean to kill you?"

"If she'd meant to kill me, she wouldn't have chosen a belt as her weapon. The very fact that she had made me a present—and that's what it was, it had my initials woven into it—suggests that she meant to ask my forgiveness. That she had had a change of heart."

Is that what you know, or only what you want to believe? Eddie thought. It was a question he would never ask. Roland had been tested enough, had won their way back to the Path of the Beam by reliving that terrible final visit to his mother's apartment, and that was enough.

"I think she hid because she was ashamed," the gunslinger said. "Or because she needed a moment to think of what to say to me. Of how to explain."

"And the ball?" Susannah asked him gently. "Was it on the vanity table, where we saw it? And did she steal it from your father?"

"Yes to both," Roland said. "Although . . . *did* she steal it?" He seemed to ask this question of himself. "My father knew a great many things, but he sometimes kept what he knew to himself."

"Like him knowing that your mother and Marten were seeing each other," Susannah said.

"Yes."

"But, Roland . . . you surely don't believe that your father would knowingly have allowed *you* to ... to ..."

Roland looked at her with large, haunted eyes. His tears had gone, but when he tried to smile at her question, he was unable. "Have knowingly allowed his son to kill his wife?" he asked. "No, I can't say that. Much as I'd like to, I can't. That he should have *caused* such a thing to have hap-pened, to have deliberately set it in motion, like a man playing Castles . . . that I cannot believe. But would he allow *ka* to run its course? Aye, most certainly."

"What happened to the ball?" Jake asked.

"I don't know. I fainted. When I awoke, my mother and I were still alone, one dead and one alive. No one had come to the sound of the shots—the walls of that place were thick stone, and that wing mostly empty as well. Her blood had dried. The belt she'd made me was covered with it, but I took it, and I put it on. I wore that bloodstained gift for many years, and how I lost it is a tale for another day—I'll tell it to you before we have done, for it bears on my quest for the Tower. "But although no one had come to investigate the gunshots, someone had come for another reason. While I lay fainted away by my mother's corpse, that someone came in and took the wizard's glass away."

"Rhea?" Eddie asked.

"I doubt she was so close in her body ... but she had a way of making friends, that one. Aye, a way of making friends. I saw her again, you know." Roland explained no further, but a stony gleam arose in his eyes. Eddie had seen it before, and knew it meant killing.

Jake had retrieved the note from R.F. and now gestured at the little drawing beneath the message. "Do you know what this means?"

"I have an idea it's the *sigul* of a place I saw when I first travelled in the wizard's glass. The land called Thunderclap." He looked around at them, one by one. "I think it's there that we'll meet this man—this *thing*—named Flagg again."

Roland looked back the way they had come, sleepwalking in their fine red shoes.

"The Kansas we came through was *his* Kansas, and the plague that emptied out that land was *his* plague. At least, that's what I believe."

"But it might not stay there," Susannah said.

"It could travel," Eddie said.

"To *our* world," Jake said.

Still looking back toward the Green Palace, Roland said: "To your world, or any other."

"Who's the Crimson King?" Susannah asked abruptly.

"Susannah, I know not."

They were quiet, then, watching Roland look toward the palace where he had faced a false wizard and a true memory and somehow opened the door back to his own world by so doing.

Our world, Eddie thought, slipping an arm around Susannah. *Our world now. If we go back to America, and perhaps we'll have to before this is over, we 'll arrive as strangers in a strange land, no matter what when it is. This is our world now. The world of the Beams, and the Guardians, and the Dark Tower.*

"We got some daylight left," he said to Roland, and put a hesitant hand on the gunslinger's shoulder. When Roland immediately covered it with his own hand, Eddie smiled. "You want to use it, or what?"

"Yes," Roland said. "Let's use it." He bent and shouldered his pack.

"What about the shoes?" Susannah asked, looking doubtfully at the little red pile they had made.

"Leave them here," Eddie said. "They've served their purpose. Into your wheelchair, girl." He put his arms around her and helped her in.

"All God's children have shoes," Roland mused. "Isn't that what you said, Susannah?"

"Well," she said, settling herself, "the correct dialect adds a soupcon of flavor, but you've got the essence, honey, yes."

"Then we'll undoubtedly find more shoes as God wills it," Roland said.

Jake was looking into his knapsack, taking inventory of the foodstuffs that had been added by some unknown hand. He held up a chicken leg in a Baggie, looked at it, then looked at Eddie. "Who do you suppose packed this stuff?"

Eddie raised his eyebrows, as if to ask Jake how he could possibly be so stupid.

"The Keebler Elves," he said. "Who else? Come on, let's go."

They clustered near the grove, five wanderers on the face of an empty land. Ahead of them, running across the plain, was a line in the grass which exactly matched the lane of rushing clouds in the sky. This line was nothing so obvious as a path . . . but to the awakened eye, the way that everything bent in the same direction was as clear as a painted stripe.

The Path of the Beam. Somewhere ahead, where this Beam intersected all the others, stood the Dark Tower. Eddie thought that, if the wind were right, he would almost be able to smell its sullen stone.

And roses—the dusky scent of roses.

He took Susannah's hand as she sat in her chair; Susannah took Roland's; Roland took Jake's. Oy stood two paces before them, head up, scenting the autumn air that combed his fur with unseen fingers, his gold-ringed eyes wide.

"We are *ka-tet*," Eddie said. It crossed his mind to wonder at how much he'd changed; how he had become a stranger, even to himself. "We are one from many."

"*Ka-tet*," Susannah said. "We are one from many."

"One from many," Jake said. "Come on, let's go."

Bird and bear and hare and fish, Eddie thought.

With Oy in the lead, they once more set out for the Dark Tower, walking along the Path of the Beam.

AFTERWORD



The scene in which Roland bests his old teacher, Cort, and goes off to roister in the less savory section of Gilead was written in the spring of 1970. The one in which Roland's father shows up the following morning was written in the summer of 1996. Although only sixteen hours pass between the two occurrences in the world of the story, twenty-six *years* had passed in the life of the story's teller. Yet the moment finally came, and I found myself confronting myself across a whore's bed—the unemployed schoolboy with the long black hair and beard on one side, the successful popular novelist ("America's shlockmeister," as I am affectionately known by my legions of admiring critics) on the other.

I mention this only because it sums up the essential weirdness of the Dark Tower experience for me. I have written enough novels and short stories to fill a solar system of the imagination, but Roland's story is my Jupiter—a planet that dwarfs all the others (at least from my own perspective), a place of strange atmosphere, crazy landscape, and savage gravitational pull. Dwarfs the others, did I say? I think there's more to it than that, actually. I am coming to understand that Roland's world (or worlds) actually *contains* all the others of my making; there is a place in Mid-World for Randall Flagg, Ralph Roberts, the wandering boys from *The Eyes of the Dragon*, even Father Callahan, the damned priest from *'Salem 's Lot*, who rode out of New England on a Grey-hound Bus and wound up dwelling on the border of a terrible Mid-World land called Thunderclap. This seems to be where they all finish up, and why not? Mid-World was here first, before all of them, dreaming under the blue gaze of Roland's bombardier eyes.

This book has been too long in coming—a good many readers who enjoy Roland's adventures have all but howled in frustration—and for that I apolo-gize. The reason is best summed up by Susannah's thought as she prepares to tell Blaine the first riddle of their contest: *It is hard to begin*. There's nothing in these pages that I agree with more.

I knew that *Wizard and Glass* meant doubling back to Roland's young days, and to his first love affair, and I was scared to death of that story. Sus-pense is relatively easy, at least for me; love is hard. Consequently I dallied, I temporized, I procrastinated, and the book remained unwritten.

I began at last, working in motel rooms on my Macintosh PowerBook, while driving cross-country from Colorado to Maine after finishing my work on the miniseries version of *The Shining*. It occurred to me as I drove north through the deserted miles of western Nebraska (where I also happened to be, driving back from Colorado, when I got the idea for a story called "Children of the Corn"), that if I didn't start soon, I would never write the book at all.

But I no longer know the truth of romantic love, I told myself. *I know about marriage, and mature love, but forty-eight has a way of forgetting the heat and passion of seventeen.*

I will help you with that part, came the reply. I didn't know who that voice belonged to on that day outside Thetford, Nebraska, but I do now, be-cause I have looked into his eyes across a whore's bed in a land that exists very clearly in my

imagination. Roland's love for Susan Delgado (and hers for him) is what was told to me by the boy who began this story. If it's right, thank him. If it's wrong, blame whatever got lost in the translation.

Also thank my friend Chuck Verrill, who edited the book and hung with me every step of the way. His encouragement and help were invaluable, as was the encouragement of Elaine Koster, who has published all of these cow-boy romances in paperback.

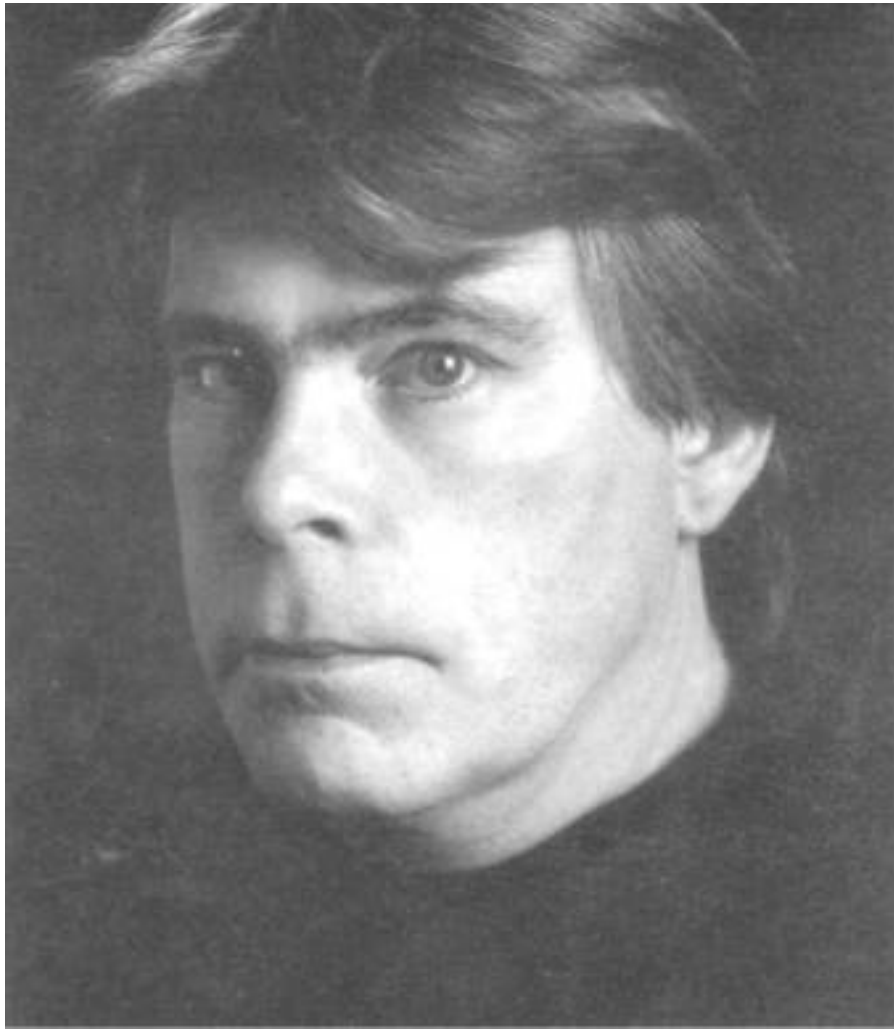
Most thanks of all go to my wife, who supports me in this madness as best she can and helped me on this book in a way she doesn't even know. Once, in a dark time, she gave me a funny little rubber figure that made me smile. It's Rocket J.

Squirrel, wearing his blue aviator's hat and with his arms bravely outstretched. I put that figure on my manuscript as it grew (and grew ... and *grew*), hoping some of the love that came with it would kind of fertilize the work. It must have worked, at least to a degree; the book is here, after all. I don't know if it's good or bad—I lost all sense of perspective around page four hundred—but it's here. That alone seems like a miracle. And I have started to believe I might actually live to complete this cycle of stories. (Knock on wood.)

There are three more to be told, I think, two set chiefly in Mid-World and one almost entirely in our world—that's the one dealing with the vacant lot on the corner of Second and Forty-sixth, and the rose that grows there. That rose, I must tell you, is in terrible danger.

In the end; Roland's *ka-tet* will come to the nightscape which is Thunderclap . . . and to what lies beyond it. All may not live to reach the Tower, but I believe that those who do reach it will stand and be true.

—Stephen King
Lovell, Maine, October 27, 1996



STEPHEN KING, the world's best selling novelist, is the author of more than thirty books, most recently *Desperation*, *Rose Madder*, *Insomnia*, and *The Green Mile*. His four volumes in the Dark Tower series, including *The Gunslinger*, *The Drawing of the Three*, and *The Waste Lands*, are all available in Plume trade paperback editions. He lives in Bangor, Maine, with his wife, novelist Tabitha King.

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A PLUME BOOK



Dark Tower V

by Stephen King

Prologue: Calla Bryn Sturgis

1

Tian was blessed (although few farmers would use such a word) with three patches: River Field, where his family had grown rice since time out of mind; Roadside Field, where ka-Jaffords had grown sharproot, pumpkin, and corn for those same long years and generations; and Son of a Bitch, a thankless tract which mostly grew rocks and blisters and busted hopes. Tian wasn't the first Jaffords determined to make something of the twenty acres behind the home place; his gran-pere, perfectly sane in all other respects, had been convinced there was gold there. Tian's mother had been equally positive it would grow porin, a spice of great worth. Tian's insanity was madrigal. Of course madrigal would grow in Son of a Bitch. Must grow there. He had gotten hold of a thousand seeds (and a dear penny they had cost him) which were now hidden beneath the floorboards of his bedroom. All that remained before planting next year was to break ground in Son of a Bitch. This was a chore easier spoken of than accomplished.

Tian was blessed with livestock, including three mules, but a man would be mad to try using a mule out in Son of a Bitch; the beast unlucky enough to draw such duty would likely be lying legbroke or stung to death by noon of the first day. One of Tian's uncles had almost met this latter fate some years before. He had come running back to the home place, screaming at the top of his lungs and pursued by huge mutie wasps with stingers the size of nails.

They had found the nest (well, Andy had found it; Andy wasn't bothered by wasps no matter how big they were) and burned it with kerosene, but there might be others. Then there were the holes. You couldn't burn holes, could you? No. And Son of a Bitch sat on what the old folks called "loose ground." It was consequently possessed of almost as many holes as rocks, not to mention at least one cave that puffed out draughts of nasty, decay-smelling air. Who knew what boggarts might lurk down its dark throat?

As for the holes, the worst of them weren't out where a man (or a mule) could see them. Not at all, sir. Never think so, thankee-sai. The leg-breakers were always

concealed in innocent-seeming nestles of weeds and high grass. Your mule would step in, there would come a bitter crack like a snapping branch, and then the damned thing would be lying there on the ground, teeth bared, eyes rolling, braying its agony at the sky. Until you put it out of its misery, that was, and stock was valuable in Calla Bryn Sturgis, even stock that wasn't precisely threaded.

Tian therefore plowed with his sister in the traces. No reason not to. Tia was roont, hence good for little else. She was a big girl—the roont ones often grew to prodigious size—and she was willing, Man Jesus love her. The Old Fella had made her a Jesus-tree, what he called a crucifix, and she wore it everywhere. It swung back and forth now, thumping against her sweating skin as she pulled.

The plow was attached to her shoulders by a rawhide harness. Behind her, alternately guiding the plow by its old ironwood handles and his sister by the hame-traces, Tian grunted and yanked and pushed when the blade of the plow dropped down and verged on becoming stuck. It was the end of Full Earth but as hot as midsummer here in Son of a Bitch; Tia's overalls were dark and damp and stuck to her long and meaty thighs. Each time Tian tossed his head to get his hair out of his eyes, sweat flew out of the mop in a spray.

"Gee, ye bitch!" he cried. "Yon rock's a plow-breaker, are ye blind?"

Not blind; not deaf, either; just stupid. Roont. She heaved to the left, and hard. Behind her, Tian stumbled forward with a neck-snapping jerk and barked his shin on another rock, one he hadn't seen and the plow had, for a wonder, missed. As he felt the first warm trickles of blood running down to his ankle, he wondered (and not for the first time) what madness it was that always got the Jaffordses out here. In his deepest heart he had an idea that madrigal would sow no more than the porin had before it, although you could grow devil-grass; yep, he could have bloomed all twenty acres with that shit, had he wanted. The trick was to keep it out, and it was always New Earth's first chore. It—

The plow rocked to the right and then jerked forward, almost pulling his arms out of their sockets. "Arr!" he cried. "Go easy, girl! I can't grow em back if you pull em out, can I?"

Tia turned her broad, sweaty, empty face up to a sky full of low-hanging clouds and honked laughter. Man Jesus, but she even sounded like a donkey. Yet it was laughter, human laughter. Tian wondered, as he sometimes couldn't help doing, if that laughter meant anything. Did she understand some of what he was saying, or did she only respond to his tone of voice? Did any of the roont ones—

"Good day, sai," said a loud and almost completely toneless voice from behind

him. The owner of the voice ignored Tian's scream of surprise. "Pleasant days, and may they be long upon the earth. I am here from a goodish wander and at your service."

Tian whirled around, saw Andy standing there—all twelve feet of him—and was then almost jerked flat as his sister took another of her lurching steps forward. The plow's hame-traces were pulled from his hands and flew around his throat with an audible snap. Tia, unaware of this potential disaster, took another sturdy step forward. When she did, Tian's wind was cut off. He gave a whooping, gagging gasp and clawed at the straps. All of this Andy watched with his usual large and meaningless smile.

Tia jerked forward again and Tian was pulled off his feet. He landed on a rock that dug savagely into the cleft of his buttocks, but at least he could breathe again. For the moment, anyway. Damned unlucky field! Always had been! Always would be!

Tian snatched hold of the leather strap before it could pull tight around his throat again and yelled, "Hold, ye bitch! Whoa up if you don't want me to twist yer great and useless tits right off the front of yer!"

Tia halted agreeably enough and looked back to see what was what. Her smile broadened. She lifted one heavily muscled arm—it glowed with sweat—and pointed. "Andy!" she said. "Andy's come!"

"I ain't blind," Tian said and got to his feet, rubbing his bottom. Was that part of him also bleeding? He had an idea it was.

"Good day, sai," Andy said to her, and tapped his metal throat three times with his three metal fingers. "Long days and pleasant nights."

Although Tia had surely heard the standard response to this—And may you have twice the number—a thousand times or more, all she could do was once more raise her broad idiot's face to the sky and utter her donkey laugh. Tian felt a surprising moment of pain, not in his arms or throat or outraged ass but in his heart. He vaguely remembered her as a little girl: as pretty and quick as a dragonfly, as smart as ever you could wish. Then—

But before he could finish the thought, a premonition came. Except that was too fine a word for it. In fact, it was time. Overtime. Yet he felt a sinking in his heart. The news would come while I'm out here, too, he thought. Out in this godforsaken patch where nothing is well and all luck is bad.

"Andy," he said.

"Yes!" Andy said, smiling. "Andy, your friend! Back from a goodish wander and at your service. Would you like your horoscope, sai Tian? It is Full Earth. The moon is red, what is called the Huntress Moon in Mid-World that was. A friend will call! Business affairs prosper! You will have two ideas, one good and one bad—"

"The bad one was coming out here to turn this field," Tian said. "Never mind my goddam horoscope, Andy. Why are you here?"

Andy's smile probably could not become troubled—he was a robot, after all, the last one in Calla Bryn Sturgis or for miles and wheels around—but to Tian it seemed to grow troubled, just the same. The robot looked like a young child's stick-figure of an adult, impossibly tall and impossibly thin. His legs and arms were silvery. His head was a stainless steel barrel with electric eyes. His body, no more than a cylinder seven feet high, was gold. Stamped in the middle—what would have been a man's chest—was this legend:

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ANDY

Design: MESSENGER (Many Other Functions)
Serial # DNF 34821 V 63

Why or how this silly thing had survived when all the rest of the robots were gone—gone for generations—Tian neither knew nor cared. You were apt to see him anywhere in the Calla (he would not venture beyond its borders) striding on his impossibly long silver legs, looking everywhere, occasionally clicking to himself as he stored (or perhaps purged—who knew?) information. He sang songs, passed on gossip and rumor from one end of town to the other—a tireless walker was Andy the robot—and seemed to enjoy the giving of horoscopes above all things, although there was general agreement in the village that they meant little.

He had one other function, however, and that meant much.

"Why are ye here, ye bag of bolts and beams? Answer me! Is it the Wolves? Are they coming from Thunderclap?"

Tian stood there looking up into Andy's stupid smiling metal face, the sweat growing cold on his skin, praying with all his might that the foolish thing would say no, then offer to tell his horoscope again, or perhaps to sing "The Green Corn

A-Dayoy," all twenty or thirty verses.

But all Andy said, still smiling, was: "Yes, sai."

"Christ and the Man Jesus," Tian said (he'd gotten an idea from the Old Fella that those were two names for the same thing, but had never bothered pursuing the question). "How long?"

"One moon of days before they arrive," Andy replied, still smiling.

"From full to full?"

"Yes, sai."

Thirty days, then. Thirty days to the Wolves. And there was no sense hoping Andy was wrong. No one knew how the robot could know they were coming out of Thunderclap so far in advance of their arrival, but he did know. And he was never wrong.

"Fuck you for your bad news!" Tian cried, and was furious at the waver he heard in his own voice. "What use are you?"

"I'm sorry that the news is bad," Andy said. His guts clicked audibly, his eyes flashed a brighter blue, and he took a step backward. "Would you not like me to tell your horoscope? This is the end of Wide Earth, a time particularly propitious for finishing old business and meeting new people—"

"And fuck your false prophecy, too!!" Tian bent, picked up a clod of earth, and threw it at the robot. A pebble buried in the clod clanged off Andy's metal hide. Tia gasped, then began to cry. Andy backed off another step, his shadow trailing out spider-long in Son of a Bitch field. But his hateful, stupid smile remained.

"What about a song? I have learned an amusing one from the Manni far north of town; it is called 'In Time of Loss, Make God Your Boss.' " From somewhere deep in Andy's guts came the wavering honk of a pitch-pipe, followed by a ripple of piano keys. "It goes—"

Sweat rolling down his cheeks and sticking his itchy balls to his thighs. Tia blatting her stupid face at the sky. And this idiotic, bad-news-bearing robot getting ready to sing him some sort of Manni hymn.

"Be quiet, Andy." He spoke reasonably enough, but through clamped teeth.

"Sai," the robot agreed, then fell mercifully silent.

Tian went to his bawling sister, put his arm around her, smelled the large (but not entirely unpleasant) work-smell of her. He sighed, then began to stroke her trembling arm.

"Quit it, ye great bawling cunt," he said. The words might have been ugly but the tone was kind in the extreme, and it was tone she responded to. She began to quiet. Her brother stood with the flare of her hip pushing into him just below his ribcage (she was a full foot taller), and any passing stranger would likely have stopped to look at them, amazed by the similarity of face and the great dissimilarity of size. The resemblance, at least, was honestly come by: they were twins.

He soothed his sister with a mixture of endearments and profanities—in the years since she had come back roont from the west, the two modes of expression were much the same to Tian Jaffords—and at last she ceased her weeping. And when a rustie flew across the sky, doing loops and giving out the usual series of ugly blats, she pointed and laughed.

A feeling was rising in Tian, one so foreign to his nature that he didn't even recognize it. "Ain't right," he said. "Nossir. By the Man Jesus and all the gods that be, it ain't." He looked to the west, where the hills rolled away into a rising membranous darkness that might have been clouds but wasn't. It was the borderland between Mid-World and End-World. The edge of Thunderclap.

"Ain't right what they do to us."

"Sure you wouldn't like to hear your horoscope, sai? I see many bright coins and a beautiful dark lady."

"The dark ladies will have to do without me," Tian said, and began pulling the harness off his sister's broad shoulders. "I'm married, as I'm sure ye very well know."

"Many a married man has had his jilly," Andy observed. To Tian he sounded almost smug.

"Not those who love their wives." Tian shouldered the harness (he'd made it himself, there being a marked shortage of tack for human beings in most livery barns) and turned toward the home place. "And not farmers, in any case. Show me a farmer who can afford a jilly and I'll kiss your shiny ass. Go on, Tia."

"Home place?" she asked.

"That's right."

"Lunch at home place?" She looked at him in a muddled, hopeful way. "Taters?" A pause. "Gravy?"

"Shore," Tian said. "Why the hell not?"

Tia let out a whoop and began running toward the house. There was something almost awe-inspiring about her when she ran. As their father had once observed, not long before the brain-storm that carried him off, "Bright or dim, that's a lot of meat in motion."

Tian walked slowly after her, head down, watching for the holes which his sister seemed to avoid without even looking, as if some strange deep part of her had mapped the location of each one. That strange new feeling kept growing and growing. He knew about anger—any farmer who'd ever lost cows to the milk-sick or watched a summer hailstorm beat his corn flat knew plenty about anger—but this was deeper. This was rage, and it was a new thing. He walked slowly, head down, fists clenched. He wasn't aware of Andy following along behind him until the robot said, "There's other news, sai. Northwest of town, along the path of the Beam, strangers from Out-World—"

"Bugger the Beam, bugger the strangers, and bugger your good self," Tian said. "Let me be, Andy."

Andy stood where he was for a moment, surrounded by the rocks and weeds and useless knobs of Son of a Bitch, that thankless tract of Jaffrey land. Relays inside him clicked. His eyes flashed. And he decided to go and talk to the Old Fella. The Old Fella never told him to bugger his good self. The Old Fella was always willing to hear his horoscope.

And he was always interested in strangers.

Andy started toward town and Our Lady of Serenity.

2

Zalia Jaffords didn't see her husband and sister-in-law come back from Son of a Bitch; didn't hear Tia plunging her head repeatedly into the rain-barrel outside the barn and then blowing moisture off her lips like a horse. Zalia was on the south side of the house, hanging out wash and keeping an eye on the children. She wasn't aware that Tian was back until she saw him looking out the kitchen window at her. She was surprised to see him there at all and much more than surprised at the look of him. His face was ashy pale except for two bright blots of color high up on his cheeks and a third glaring in the center of his forehead like a brand.

She dropped the few pins she was still holding back into her clothes basket and started for the house.

"Where goin, Ma?" Heddon called, and "Where goin, Maw-Maw?" Hedda echoed.

"Never mind," she said. "Just keep a eye on your ka-babbies."

"Why-yyy?" Hedda whined. She had that whine down to a science. One of these days she would draw it out a little too long and her mother would clout her over the hills and far away.

"Because ye're the oldest," she said.

"But—"

"Shut your mouth, Hedda Jaffords."

"We'll watch em, Ma," Heddon said. Always agreeable was her Heddon; probably not quite so bright as his sister, but bright wasn't everything. Far from it. "Want us to finish hanging the wash?"

"Hed-donnnn..." From his sister. That irritating whine again. But she had no time for them. She just took one glance at the others: Lyman and Lia, who were five, and Aaron, who was two. Aaron sat naked in the dirt, happily chunking two stones together. He was the rare singleton, and how the women of the village envied her on account of him! Because Aaron would always be safe. The others, however, Heddon and Hedda...Lyman and Lia...

She suddenly understood what it might mean, him back at the house in the middle of the day like this. She prayed to the gods it wasn't so, but when she came into the kitchen and saw the way he was looking out at the kiddies, she feared it was.

"Tell me it isn't the Wolves," she said in a dry and frantic voice. "Say it's not."

"It is," Tian replied. "Thirty days, Andy says—moon to moon. And on that Andy's never—"

Before he could go on, Zalia Jaffords clapped her hands to her temples and voiced a shriek. In the side yard, Hedda jumped up. In another moment she would have been running for the house, but Heddon held her back.

"They won't take any as young as Lyman and Lia, will they?" she asked him.

"Hedda or Heddon, maybe, but surely not the babbies? Not my little ones? Why, they won't see their sixth for another half-year!"

"The Wolves have taken em as young as three, and you know it," Tian said. His hands opened and closed, opened and closed. That feeling inside him continued to grow—the feeling that was deeper than mere anger.

She looked at him, tears spilling down her face.

"Mayhap it's time to say no." Tian spoke in a voice he hardly recognized as his own.

"How can we?" she whispered. "Oh, T, how in the name of all the gods can we?"

"Dunno," he said. "But come here, woman, I beg you."

She came, throwing one last glance over her shoulder at the five children in the back yard—as if to make sure they were still all there, that no Wolves had taken them yet—and then crossed the living room. Gran-pere sat in his corner chair by the dead fire, head bent over, dozing and drizzling from his folded, toothless mouth.

From this room the barn was visible. Tian drew his wife to the window and pointed. "There," he said. "Do you mark em, woman? Do you see em very well?"

Of course she did. Tian's sister, six and a half feet tall, now standing with the straps of her overalls lowered and her big breasts sparkling with water as she splashed them from the rain-barrel. Standing in the barn doorway was Zalman, Zalia's very own brother. Almost seven feet tall he was, big as Lord Perth and as empty of face as the girl. A strapping young man watching a strapping young woman with her breasts out on show like that might well have been sporting a bulge in his pants, but there was none in Zally's. Nor ever would be. He was roont.

She turned back to T. They looked at each other, a man and woman not roont, but only because of dumb luck. So far as either of them knew, it could just as easily have been Zal and Tia standing in here and watching Tian and Zalia out by the barn, grown large of body and empty of head.

"Of course I see," she told him. "Does ye think I'm blind?"

"Don't it sometimes make you wish you was?" he asked. "To see em so?"

Zalia made no reply.

"Not right, woman. Not right. Never has been."

"But since time out of mind—"

"Bugger time out of mind, too!" Tian cried. "They's children! Our children!"

"Would you have the Wolves burn the Calla to the ground, then? Leave us all with our throats cut? That or worse? For it's happened in other places. You know it has."

He knew, all right. And who would put matters right, if not the men of Calla Bryn Sturgis? Certainly there were no authorities, not so much as a sheriff, either high or low, in these parts. They were on their own. Even long ago, when the Inner Baronies had glowed with light and culture, they would have seen precious little sign of that bright-life out here. These were the borderlands, and life here had always been strange. Then the Wolves had begun coming and life had grown far stranger. How long ago had it begun? How many generations? Tian didn't know, but he thought "time out of mind" was too long. The Wolves had been raiding into the borderland villages when Gran-pere was young, certainly—Gran-pere's own twin had been snatched as the two of them sat in the dust, playing at jacks. "Dey tuk eem cos he closah to de rud," Gran-pere had told them (many times). "Eef Ah come out of dee house firs' da' day, Ah be closah to de rud an dey take me, God is good!" Then he would kiss the wooden cross the Old Fella had given him, hold it skyward, and cackle.

Yet Gran-pere's own Gran-pere had told him that in his day—which would have been five or perhaps even six generations back, if Tian's calculations were right—that there had been no Wolves sweeping out of Thunderclap on their horrible gray horses. Once Tian had asked the old man, And did all but a few of the babbies come in twos back then? Did yer Old Fella ever say? Gran-pere had considered this long, then had shaken his head. No, he couldn't remember that his Gran-pere had ever said about that, one way or the other.

Zalia was looking at him anxiously. "Ye're in no mood to think of such things, I wot, after spending your morning in that rocky patch."

"My frame of mind won't change when they come or who they'll take," Tian said.

"Ye'll not do something foolish, T, will you? Something foolish and all on your own?"

"No," he said.

No hesitation. He's already begun to lay plans, she thought, and allowed herself a thin gleam of hope. Surely there was nothing Tian could do against the Wolves—nothing any of them could do—but he was far from stupid. In a farming village where most men could think no further than hoeing the next row or planting

their stiffies on Saturday night, Tian was something of an anomaly. He could write his name; he could write words which said I LOVE YOU ZALLIE (and had won her by so doing, even though she couldn't read them there in the dirt); he could add the numbers and also call them back from big to small, which he said was even more difficult. Was it possible...?

Part of her didn't want to complete that thought. And yet, when she turned her mother's heart and mind to Hedda and Heddon, Lia and Lyman, part of her wanted to hope. "What, then?"

"I'm going to call a meeting at the Town Gathering Hall," he said. "I'll send the feather. "

"Will they come?"

"When they hear this news, every man in the Calla will turn up. We'll talk it over. Mayhap they'll want to fight this time. Mayhap they'll want to fight for their babbies."

From behind them, a cracked old voice said, "Ye foolish killin."

Tian and Zalia turned, hand in hand, to look at the old man. Killin was a harsh word, but Tian judged the old man was looking at them—at him—kindly enough.

"Why d'ye say so, Gran-pere?" he asked.

"Men'd go forrad from such a meetin as ye plan on and burn down hat' countryside, were dey in drink," the old man said. "Men sober—" He shook his head. "Ye'll never move such."

"I think this time you might be wrong, Grand-pere," Tian said, and Zalia felt cold terror squeeze her heart. He believed it. He really did.

3

There would have been less grumbling if he'd given them at least one night's notice, but Tian wouldn't do that. One moon of days before they arrive, Andy had said, and that was all the horoscope Tian Jaffords needed. They didn't have the luxury of even a single fallow night. And when he sent Heddon and Hedda with the feather, they did come. He'd known they would. It had been over twenty years since the Wolves last came calling to Calla Bryn Sturgis, and times had been good. If they were allowed to reap this time, the crop would be a large one.

The Calla's Gathering Hall was an adobe at the end of the village high street,

beyond Took's General Store and cater-corner from the town pavillion, which was now dusty and dark with the end of summer. Soon enough the ladies of the town would begin decorating it for Reap, but they'd never made a lot of Reaping Night in the Calla. The children always enjoyed seeing the stuffy-guys thrown on the fire, of course, and the bolder fellows would steal their share of kisses as the night itself approached, but that was about it. Your fripperies and festivals might do for Mid-World and In-World, but this was neither. Out here they had more serious things to worry about than Reaping Day Fairs.

Things like the Wolves.

Some of the men—from the well-to-do farms to the east and the three ranches to the south—came on horses. Eisenhart of the Lazy B even brought his rifle and wore crisscrossed ammunition bandoliers. (Tian Jaffords doubted if the bullets were any good, or that the ancient rifle would fire even if some of them were.) A delegation of the Manni folk came crammed into a buckboard drawn by a pair of mutie geldings—one with three eyes, the other with a pylon of raw pink flesh poking out of its back. Most of the Calla's menfolk came on donkeys and burros, dressed in their white pants and long colorful shirts. They knocked their dusty sombreros back on the tugstrings with callused thumbs as they stepped into the Gathering Hall, looking uneasily at each other. The benches were of plain pine. With no womenfolk and none of the roont ones, the men filled less than thirty of the ninety benches. There was some talk, but no laughter at all.

Tian stood out front with the feather now in his hands, watching the sun as it sank toward the horizon, its gold steadily deepening to a color that was like infected blood. When it touched the hills, he took one more look up the high street. It was empty except for three or four roont fellas sitting on the steps of Took's. All of them huge and good for nothing more than yanking rocks out of the ground. He saw no more men, no more approaching donkeys. He took a deep breath, let it out, then drew in another and looked up at the deepening sky.

"Man Jesus, I don't believe in you," he said. "But if you're there, help me now. Tell God thankee."

Then he went inside and closed the Gathering Hall doors a little harder than was strictly necessary. The talk stopped. A hundred and forty men, most of them farmers, watched him walk to the front of the hall, the wide legs of his white pants swishing, his shor'-boots clacking on the hardwood floor. He had expected to be terrified by this point, perhaps even to find himself speechless. He was a farmer, not a stage performer or a politician. Then he thought of his children, and when he looked up at the men, he found he had no trouble meeting their eyes. The feather in

his hands did not tremble. When he spoke, his words followed each other easily, naturally, and coherently. They might not do as he hoped they would—Gran-pere might be right about that—but he saw they were willing enough to listen. And wasn't that the necessary first step?

"You all know who I am," he said as he stood there with his hands clasped around the reddish feather's ancient stalk. "Tian Jaffords, son of Alan Jaffords, husband of Zalia Hoonik that was. She and I have five, two pairs and a singleton."

Low murmurs at that, most probably having to do with how lucky Tian and Zalia were, how lucky with their Aaron. Tian waited for the voices to die away.

"I've lived in the Calla all my life. I've shared your khef and you have shared mine. Now hear what I say, I beg you."

"We say thankee-sai," they murmured. It was little more than a stock response, yet Tian was encouraged.

"The Wolves are coming," he said. "I have this news from Andy. Thirty days from moon to moon and then they're here."

More low murmurs. Tian heard dismay and outrage, but no surprise. When it came to spreading news, Andy was extremely efficient.

"Even those of us who can read and write a little have almost no paper to write on," Tian said, "so I cannot tell ye with any real certainty when last they came. There are no records, ye ken, just one mouth to another. I know I was well-breeched, so it's longer than twenty years—"

"It's twenty-four," said a voice in the back of the room.

"Nay, twenty-three," said a voice closer to the front, and Reuben Caverro stood up. He was a plump man with a round, cheerful face. The cheer was gone from it now, however, and it showed only distress. "They took Ruth, my sissy: hear me, I beg."

A murmur—really no more than a vocalized sigh of agreement—came from the men sitting crammed together on the benches. They could have spread out, but had chosen shoulder-to-shoulder instead. Sometimes there was comfort in discomfort, Tian reckoned.

Reuben said, "We were playing under the big pine in the front yard when they came. I made a mark on that tree each year after. Even after they brung her back, I went on with em. It's twenty-three marks and twenty-three years." With that he sat down.

"Twenty-three or twenty-four, makes no difference," Tian said. "Those who were babbies—or kiddies—when the Wolves came last time have grown up since and had kiddies of their own. There's a fine crop here for those bastards. A fine crop of children." He paused, giving them a chance to think of the next idea for themselves before speaking it aloud. "If we let it happen," he said at last. "If we let the Wolves take our children into Thunderclap and then send them back to us roont."

"What the hell else can we do?" cried a man sitting on one of the middle benches. "They's not human!" At this there was a general (and miserable) mumble of agreement.

One of the Manni stood up, pulling his dark blue cloak tight against his bony shoulders. He looked around at the others with baleful eyes. They weren't mad, those eyes, but to Tian they looked a long league from reasonable. "Hear me, I beg," he said.

"We say thankee-sai." Respectful but reserved. To see a Manni up close was a rare thing, and here were eight, all in a bunch. Tian was delighted they had come. If anything would underline the deadly seriousness of this business, the appearance of the Manni would do it.

The Gathering Hall door opened and one more man slipped inside. None of them, including Tian, noticed. They were watching the Manni.

"Hear what the Book says: When the Angel of Death passed over Aegypt, he killed the firstborn in every house where the blood of a sacrificial lamb hadn't been daubed on the doorposts. So says the Book."

"Praise the Book," said the rest of the Manni.

"Perhaps we should do likewise," the Manni spokesman went on. His voice was calm, but a pulse beat wildly in his forehead. "Perhaps we should turn these next thirty days into a festival of joy for the wee ones, and then put them to sleep, and let their blood out upon the earth. Let the Wolves take their corpses into the West, should they desire."

"You're insane," Benito Cash said, indignant and at the same time almost laughing. "You and all your kind. We ain't gonna kill our babbies!"

"Would the ones that come back not be better off dead?" the Manni responded. "Great useless hulks! Scooped-out shells!"

"Aye, and what about their brothers and sisters?" asked Vaughn Eisenhart. "For the Wolves only take one out of every two, as ye very well know."

A second Manni rose, this one with a silky-white beard flowing down over his breast. The first one sat down. The old man looked around at the others, then at Tian. "You hold the feather, young fella—may I speak?"

Tian nodded for him to go ahead. This wasn't a bad start at all. Let them fully explore the box they were in, explore it all the way to the corners. He was confident they'd see there were only two alternatives, in the end: let the Wolves take one of every pair under the age of puberty, as they always had, or stand and fight. But to see that, they needed to understand that all other ways out were dead ends.

The old man spoke patiently. Sorrowfully, even. "To take those who would have been left behind as well as those who'd come back to us spoiled forever...aye, it's a terrible thing to consider. But think'ee this, sais: if the Wolves were to come and find us childless, they might leave us alone ever after."

"Aye, so they might," one of the smallhold farmers rumbled—Tian believed his name was Jorge Estrada. "And so they might not. Manni-sai, would you really kill a whole town's children for what might be?"

A strong rumble of agreement ran through the crowd. Another smallholder, Garrett Strong, rose to his feet. His pug-dog's face was truculent. His thumbs were hung in his belt. "Better we all kill ourselves," he said. "Babbies and grown-ups alike."

The Manni didn't look outraged at this. Nor did any of the other blue-cloaks around him. "It's an option," the old man said. "We would speak of it if others would." He sat down.

"Not me," Garrett Strong said. "It'd be like cuttin off your damn head to save shaving, hear me I beg."

There was laughter and a few cries of Hear you very well. Garrett sat back down, looking a little less tense, and put his head together with Vaughn Eisenhart. One of the other ranchers, Diego Adams, was listening in, his black eyes intent.

Another smallholder rose—Bucky Javier. He had bright little blue eyes in a small head that seemed to slope back from his goatee'd chin. "What if we left for awhile?" he asked. "What if we took our children and went back east? All the way to the Big River, mayhap?"

There was a moment of considering silence at this bold idea. The Big River was almost all the way back to Mid-World...where, according to Andy, a great palace of green glass had lately appeared and even more lately disappeared again. Tian

was about to respond himself when Eben Took, the storekeeper's son, did it for him. Tian was relieved. He hoped to be silent as long as possible. When they were talked out, he'd tell them what was left.

"Are ye mad?" Eben asked. "Wolves'd come in, see us gone, and burn all to the ground—farms and ranches, crops and stores, root and branch. What would we come back to?"

"And what if they came after us?" Jorge Estrada chimed in. "Do'ee think we'd be hard to follow, for such as the Wolves? They'd burn us out as Took says, ride our backtrail, and take the kiddies anyway!"

Louder agreement. The stomp of shor'-boots on the plain pine floorboards. And a few cries of Hear him, hear him!

"Besides," Neil Faraday said, standing and holding his vast and filthy sombrero in front of him, "they never steal all our children." He spoke in a frightened let's-be-reasonable tone that set Tian's teeth on edge. It was this counsel he feared above all others. Its deadly-false call to reason.

One of the Manni, this one younger and beardless, uttered a sharp and contemptuous laugh. "Ah, one saved out of every two! And that make it all right, does it? God bless thee!" He might have said more, but White-Beard clamped a gnarled hand on the young man's arm. That worthy said no more, but he didn't lower his head submissively, either. His eyes were hot, his lips a thin white line.

"I don't mean it's right," Neil said. He had begun to spin his sombrero in a way that made Tian feel a little dizzy. "But we have to face the realities, don't we? Aye. And they don't take em all. Why my daughter, Georgina, she's just as apt and canny—"

"Yar, and yer son George is a great empty-headed galoot," Ben Slightman said. Slightman was Eisenhart's foreman, and he did not suffer fools lightly. "I seen him settin on the steps in front of Tooky's when I rode downstreet. Seen him very well. Him and some others equally empty-brained."

"But—"

"I know," Slightman said. "You have a daughter who's as apt as an ant and canny as the day is long. I give you every joy of her. I'm just pointin out, like, that if not for the Wolves, you'd mayhap have a son just as apt and canny. Nor would he eat a peck a day, winter and summer, to no good end for ye, not even a brace o' grandbabbies."

Cries of Hear him and Say thankee as Ben Slightman sat down.

"They always leave us enough to go on with, don't they?" asked a smallhold farmer whose place was just west of Tian's, near the edge of the Calla. His name was Louis Haycox, and he spoke in a musing, bitter tone of voice. Below his moustache, his lips curved in a smile that didn't have much humor in it. "We won't kill our children," he said, looking at the Manni. "All God's grace to ye, gentlemen, but I don't believe even you could do so, came it right down to the killin-floor. Or not all of ye. We can't pull up bag and baggage and go east—or in any other direction—because we leave our farms behind. They'd burn us out, all right, and come after the children just the same. They need em, gods know why.

"It always comes back to the same thing: we're farmers, most of us. Strong when our hands are in the soil, weak when they ain't. I got two kiddies of my own, four years old, and I love em both well. Should hate to lose either. But I'd give one to keep the other. And my farm." Murmurs of agreement met this. "What other choice do we have? I say this: it would be the world's worst mistake to anger the Wolves. Unless, of course, we can stand against them. If t'were possible, I'd stand. But I just don't see how it is."

Tian felt his heart shrivel with each of Haycox's words. How much of his thunder had the man stolen? Gods and the Man Jesus!

Wayne Overholser got to his feet. He was Calla Bryn Sturgis's most successful farmer, and had a vast sloping belly to prove it. "Hear me, I beg."

"We say thankee-sai," they murmured.

"Tell you what we're going to do," he said, looking around. "What we always done, that's what. Do any of you want to talk about standing against the Wolves? Are any of you that mad? With what? Spears and rocks and a few bows? Maybe four rusty old soft-calibers like that?" He jerked a thumb toward Eisenhart's rifle.

"Don't be making fun of my shooting-iron, son," Eisenhart said, but he was smiling ruefully.

"They'll come and they'll take the children," Overholser said, looking around. "Some of the children. Then they'll leave us alone again for a generation or even longer. So it is, so it has been, and I say leave it alone."

Disapproving rumbles rose at this, but Overholser waited them out.

"Twenty-three years or twenty-four, it don't matter," he said when they were quiet again. "Either way it's a long time. A long time of peace. Could be you've

forgotten a few things, folks. One is that children are like any other crop. God always sends more. I know that sounds hard. But it's how we've lived and how we have to go on."

Tian didn't wait for any of the stock responses. If they went any further down this road, any chance he might have to turn them would be lost. He raised the opopanax feather and said, "Hear what I say! Would ye hear, I beg!"

"Thankee-sai," they responded. Overholser was looking at Tian distrustfully.

And you're right to look at me so, the farmer thought. For I've had enough of such soft and cowardly common sense, so I have.

"Wayne Overholser is a smart man and a successful man," Tian said, "and I hate to speak against his position for those reasons. And for another, as well: he's old enough to be my Da'."

"Ware he ain't your Da'," Garrett Strong's only farmhand—Rossiter, his name was—called out, and there was general laughter. Even Overholser smiled at this jest.

"Son, if ye truly hate to speak agin me, don't ye do it," he said. He continued to smile, but only with his mouth.

"I must, though," Tian said. He began to walk slowly back and forth in front of the benches. In his hands, the rusty-red plume of the opopanax feather swayed. Tian raised his voice slightly so they'd understand he was no longer speaking just to Overholser.

"I must because sai Overholser is old enough to be my Da'. His children are grown, ye ken, and so far as I know there were only two to begin with, one girl and one boy." He paused, then shot the killer. "Born two years apart." Both singletons, in other words. Both safe from the Wolves. The crowd murmured.

Overholser flushed a bright and dangerous red. "That's a rotten goddamned thing to say! My get has nothing to do with this whether single or double! Give me that feather, Jaffords. I got a few things to say."

But the boots began to thump down on the boards, slowly at first, then picking up speed until they rattled like hail. Overholser looked around angrily, now so red he was nearly purple.

"I'd speak!" he shouted. "Would'ee not hear me, I beg?"

Cries of No, no and Not now and Jaffords has the feather and Sit and listen came in

response. Tian had an idea sai Overholser was learning—and remarkably late in the game—that there was often a deep-running resentment of a village's richest and most successful. Those less fortunate or less canny might tug their hats off when the rich folk passed in their buckboards or lowcoaches, they might send thank-you delegations when the rich folk loaned their hired hands to help with a house- or barn-raising, the well-to-do might be cheered at Year End Gathering for helping to buy the piano that now sat in the pavillion's musica. Yet the men of the Calla tromped their shor'-boots to drown Overholser out with a certain savage satisfaction. Even those who undoubtedly supported what he'd said (Neil Faraday, for one) were tromping hard enough to break a sweat.

Overholser, unused to being balked in such a way—flabbergasted, in fact—tried one more time. "I'd have the feather, do ye, I beg!"

"No," Tian said. "In your time, but not now."

There were actual cheers at this, mostly from the smallest of the smallhold farmers and some of their hands. The Manni did not join in. They were now drawn so tightly together that they looked like a dark blue inkstain in the middle of the hall. They were clearly bewildered by this turn. Vaughn Eisenhart and Diego Adams, meanwhile, moved to flank Overholser and speak low to him.

You've got a chance, Tian thought. Better make the most of it.

He raised the feather and they quieted.

"Everyone will have a chance to speak," he said. "As for me, I say this: we can't go on this way, simply bowing our necks and standing quiet when the Wolves come and take our children. They—"

"They always return them," a hand named Farren Posella said timidly.

"They return husks!" Tian cried, and there were a few cries of Hear him. Not enough, however, Tian judged. Not enough by far. Not yet. The bulk of his work was yet to do.

He lowered his voice again—he did not want to harangue them. Overholser had tried that and gotten nowhere, a thousand acres or not.

"They return husks. And what of us? What is this doing to us? Some might say nothing, that the Wolves have always been a part of our life in Calla Bryn Sturgis, like the occasional cyclone or earthquake. Yet that is not true. They've been coming for six generations, at most. But the Calla's been here a thousand years and more."

The old Manni with the bony shoulders and baleful eyes half-rose. "He says true, folken. There were farmers here—and Manni-folk among em—when the darkness in Thunderclap hadn't yet come, let alone the Wolves."

They received this with looks of wonder. Their awe seemed to satisfy the old man, who nodded and sat back down.

"So the Wolves are almost a new thing," Tian said. "Six times have they come over mayhap a hundred and twenty or a hundred and forty years. Who can say? For as ye ken, time has softened, somehow."

A low rumble. A few nods.

"In any case, once a generation," Tian went on. He was aware that a hostile contingent was coalescing around Overholser, Eisenhart, and Adams. These men he would not move even if he were gifted with the tongue of an angel. Well, he could do without them, maybe. If he caught the rest. "Once a generation they come, and how many children do they take? Twelve? Eighteen? Maybe as many as thirty?"

"Sai Overholser may not have babbies this time, but I do—not one set of twins but two. Heddon and Hedda, Lyman and Lia. I love all four, but in a month of days, two of them will be taken away. And when those two come back, they'll be roont. Whatever spark there is that makes a complete human being, it'll be out forever."

Hear him, hear him swept through the room like a sigh.

"How many of you have twins with no hair except that which grows on their heads?" Tian demanded. "Raise yer hands!"

Six men raised their hands. Then eight. A dozen. Every time Tian began to think they were done, another reluctant hand went up. In the end, he counted twenty-two hands. He could see that Overholser was dismayed by such a large count. Diego Adams had his hand raised, and Tian was pleased to see he'd moved away a little bit from Overholser and Eisenhart. Three of the Manni had their hands up. Jorge Estrada. Louis Haycox. Many others he knew, which was not surprising, really; he knew these men. Probably all of them except for a few wandering fellows working smallhold farms for short wages and hot dinners.

"Each time they come and take our children, they take a little more of of our hearts and our souls," Tian said.

"Oh come on, now, son," Eisenhart said. "That's laying it on a bit th—"

"Shut up, Rancher," a voice said. It was shocking in its anger and contempt. "He's got the feather. Let him speak out to the end."

Eisenhart whirled around, as if to mark who had spoken to him so. Only bland faces looked back.

"Thankee sai," Tian said evenly. "I've almost come to the end. I keep thinking of trees. Strong trees. You can strip the leaves of a strong tree and it will live. Cut its bark with many names and it will live to grow its skin over them again. You can even take from the heartwood and it will live. But if you take of the heartwood again and again and again, year after year, there will come a time when even the strongest tree must die. I've seen it happen on my farm, and it's an ugly thing. They die from the inside out. You can see it in the leaves as they turn yellow from the trunk to the tips of the branches. And that's what the Wolves are doing to this little village of ours. What they're doing to our Calla."

"Hear him!" cried Freddy Rosario from the next farm over. "Hear him very well!" Freddy had twins of his own, although they were still on the tit and so probably safe.

"You say that if we stand and fight, they'll kill us all and burn the Calla from west-border to east."

"Yes," Overholser said. "So I do say. Nor am I the only one." And from all around him came rumbles of agreement.

"Yet each time we simply stand by with our heads lowered and our hands open while the Wolves take what's dearer to us than any crop or house or barn, they scoop a little more of the heart's wood from the tree that is this village!" Tian spoke strongly, now standing still with the feather raised high in one hand. "If we don't stand and fight soon, we'll be dead, anyway! This is what I say, Tian Jaffords, son of Alan! If we don't stand and fight soon, we'll be roont ourselves!"

Loud cries of Hear him! Exuberant stomping of shor'-boots. Even some applause.

George Telford, another rancher, whispered briefly to Eisenhart and Overholser. They listened, then nodded. Telford rose. He was silver-haired, tanned, and handsome in the weatherbeaten way women seemed to like.

"Had your say, son?" he asked kindly, as one might ask a child if he had played enough for one afternoon and was ready for his nap.

"Yar, reckon," Tian said. He suddenly felt dispirited. Telford wasn't a rancher on a scale with Vaughn Eisenhart, but he had a silver tongue. Tian had an idea he was

going to lose this, after all.

"May I have the feather, then?"

Tian thought of holding onto it, but what good would it do? He'd said his best. He had an idea it wouldn't be good enough—not once Telford got finished shredding his arguments with that smooth voice of his—but he'd tried. Perhaps he and Zalia should pack up the kids and go out east themselves. Moon to moon before the Wolves came, according to Andy. A person could get a hell of a head start on trouble in thirty days.

He passed the feather.

"We all appreciate young sai Jaffords's passion, and certainly no one doubts his courage," George Telford was saying. He spoke with the feather held against the left side of his chest, over his heart. His eyes roved the audience, seeming to make eye contact—friendly eye contact—with each man. "But we have to think of the kiddies who would be left as well as those who would be taken, don't we? In fact, we have to protect all the kiddies, whether they be twins, triplets, or singletons like sai Jaffords's Aaron."

Telford turned to Tian now.

"What will you tell your children as the Wolves shoot their mother and mayhap set their gran-pere on fire with one of their light-sticks? What can you say to make the sound of those shrieks all right? To sweeten the smell of burning skin and burning crops? That it's souls we're a-saving? Or the heart's wood of some make-believe tree?"

He paused, giving Tian a chance to reply, but Tian had no reply to make. He'd almost had them...but he'd left Telford out of his reckoning. Smooth-voiced sonofabitch Telford, who was also far past the age when he needed to be concerned about the Wolves calling into his dooryard on their great gray horses.

Telford nodded, as if Tian's silence was no more than he expected, and turned back to the benches. "When the Wolves come," he said, "they'll come with fire-hurling weapons—the light-sticks, ye ken--and guns, and flying metal things. I misremember the name of those—"

"The drones," someone called.

"The sneetches," called someone else.

"Stealthies!" called a third.

Telford was nodding and smiling gently. A teacher with good pupils. "Whatever they are, they fly through the air, seeking their targets, and when they lock on, they put forth whirling blades as sharp as razors. They can strip a man from top to toe in five seconds, leaving nothing around him but a circle of blood and hair. So my own gran-pere told me, and I have no reason not to believe it."

"Hear him, hear him well!" the men on the benches shouted. Their eyes had grown huge and frightened.

"The Wolves themselves are terrible fearsome, so 'tis said," Telford went on, moving smoothly from one campfire story to the next. "They look sommat' like men, and yet they are not men but something bigger and far more awful. And those they serve in far Thunderclap are more terrible by far. Vampires, I've heard. Broken-helm undead ronin. Warriors of the Scarlet Eye."

The men muttered. Even Tian felt a cold scamper of rat's paws up his back at the mention of the Eye.

"So I've been told," Telford went on, "and while I don't believe it all, I believe much. Never mind Thunderclap, though. Let's stick to the Wolves. The Wolves are our problem, and problem enough. Especially when they come armed to the teeth!" He shook his head, smiling grimly. "What would we do? Perhaps we could knock them from their greathorses with hoes, sai Jaffords? D'ee think?"

Derisive laughter greeted this.

"We have no weapons that can stand against them," Telford said. He was now dry and businesslike, a man stating the bottom line. "Even if we had such, we're farmers and ranchers and stockmen, not fighters. We—"

"Stop that talk, Telford. You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

Shocked gasps greeted this chilly pronouncement. There were cracking backs and necks as men turned to see who had spoken. Slowly, then, as if to give them exactly what they wanted, a white-haired figure in a long black coat and a turned-around collar rose slowly from the bench at the very back of the room. The scar on his forehead—it was in the shape of a cross—was very bright in the light of the kerosene lamps. It was the fellow who had slipped in unnoticed while the Manni elder was going on about Aegypt and sacrificial lambs and the Angel of Death.

It was the Old Fella.

Telford recovered himself with relative speed, but when he spoke, Tian thought he

still looked shocked. "Beg pardon, Pere Callahan, but I have the feather—"

"To hell with your heathen feather and to hell with your cowardly counsel," Pere Callahan said. He stepped into the aisle and began to hobble down the center aisle, stepping with the grim gait of arthritis. He wasn't as old as the Manni elder, nor nearly so old as Tian's gran-pere (who claimed he was the oldest person not only here but in Calla Lockwood to the south), and yet he seemed somehow older than both. Older than the ages. Some of this no doubt had to do with the haunted eyes that looked out at the world from below the scar on his forehead (according to Zalia, it had been self-inflicted). More had to do with the sound of him. Although he had been here long and long—enough years to build his strange Man Jesus church and convert half the Calla to his way of spiritual thinking—not even a stranger would have been fooled into believing Pere Callahan was from here. His alienness was in his flat and nasal speech and in the often obscure slang he used ('street-jive,' he called it). He had undoubtedly come from one of those other worlds the Manni were always babbling about, although he never spoke of it and Calla Bryn Sturgis was now his home. He had been here since long before Tian Jaffords was born—since town elders like Wayne Overholser and Vaughn Eisenhart had worn short pants—and no one disputed his right to speak, with or without the feather.

Younger than Tian's gran-pere he might be, but Pere Callahan was still the Old Fella.

4

Now he surveyed the men of Call Bryn Sturgis, not even glancing at George Telford. The feather sagged in Telford's hand. He sat down on the first bench, still holding it.

Callahan began with one of his slang-terms, but they were farmers and no one needed to ask for an explanation.

"This is chickenshit."

He surveyed them longer. Most would not return his look. After a moment, even Eisenhart and Adams dropped their eyes. Overholser kept his head up, but under the Old Fella's dry and bitter gaze, the rancher looked petulant rather than defiant.

"Chickenshit," the man in the black coat and turned-around collar repeated. A small gold cross gleamed below the notch in the backwards collar. On his forehead, that other cross—the one he'd supposedly carved in his flesh with his

own thumbnail in partial penance for some awful sin—glared under the lamps like a tattoo.

"This young man isn't one of my flock, but he's right, and I think you all know it. You know it in your hearts. Even you, Mr. Overholser. And you, George Telford."

"Know no such thing," Telford said, but his voice was weak and stripped of its former persuasive charm.

"All your lies will cross your eyes, that's what my mother would have told you." Callahan offered Telford a thin smile Tian wouldn't have wanted it pointed in his direction. And then Callahan did turn to him. "I never heard it put better than you put it tonight, boy. Thankee-sai."

Tian raised a feeble hand and managed an even more feeble smile. He felt like a character in a silly festival play, saved at the last moment by some improbable supernatural intervention.

"I know a bit about cowardice," Callahan said, turning to the men on the benches. "I have personal experience, you might say. I know how one cowardly decision leads to another...and another...and another...until it's too late to turn around, too late to change. Mr. Telford, I assure you the tree of which young Mr. Jaffords spoke is not make-believe. The Calla is in dire danger. Your souls are in danger."

"Hail Mary, full of grace," said someone on the left side of the room, "the Lord is with thee. Blessed is the fruit of thy womb, J—"

"Bag it," Callahan snapped. "Save it for Sunday." His eyes, blue sparks in their deep hollows, studied them. "For this night, never mind God and Mary and the Man Jesus. Never mind the sneetches and light-sticks of the Wolves, either. You must fight. You're the men of the Calla, are you not? Then act like men. Stop behaving like dogs crawling on their bellies to lick the boots of a cruel master."

Overholser went dark red at that, and began to stand. Diego Adams grabbed his arm and spoke in his ear. For a moment Overholser remained as he was, frozen in a kind of crouch, and then he sat back down. Adams stood up.

"Sounds good, padrone," Adams said in his heavy accent. "Sounds brave. Yet there are still a few questions, mayhap. Haycox asked one of em. How can ranchers and farmers stand against armed killers out of the west?"

"By hiring armed killers of our own," Callahan replied.

There was a moment of utter, amazed silence. It was almost as if the Old Fella had

lapsed into another language. At last Diego Adams said—cautiously, "I don't understand."

"Of course you don't," the Old Fella said. "So listen and gain wisdom. Rancher Adams and all of you, listen and gain wisdom. Not six days' ride northeast of us, and bound southwest along the Path of the Beam, come three gunslingers and one 'prentice." He smiled at their amazement—their utter and complete amazement. Then he turned to Tian. "The 'prentice isn't much older than your Heddon and Hedda, but he's already as quick as a snake and as deadly as a scorpion. The others are quicker and deadlier by far. You want hard calibers? They're at hand. I set my watch and warrant on it."

This time Overholser made it all the way to his feet. His face burned as if with a fever. His great pod of a belly trembled. "What children's goodnight story is this?" he asked. "If there ever were such men, they passed out of existence with Gilead. And Gilead has been dust in the wind for a thousand years."

There were no mutterings of support or dispute. No mutterings of any kind. The crowd was still frozen, caught in the reverberation of that one mythic word: gunslingers.

"You're wrong," Callahan said, "but we don't need to fight over it. We can go and see for ourselves. A small party will do, I think. Jaffords here...myself...and what about you, Overholser? Want to come?"

"There ain't no gunslingers!" Overholser roared.

Behind him, Jorge Estrada stood up. "Pere Callahan, God's grace on you—"

"—and you, Jorge."

"—but even if there were gunslingers, how could three stand against forty or sixty? And not forty or sixty normal men, but forty or sixty Wolves?"

"Hear him, he speaks sense!" Eben Took, the storekeeper's son, called out.

"And why would they fight for us?" Estrada continued. "We make it from year to year, but not much more. What could we offer them, beyond a few hot meals? And what man agrees to die for his dinner?"

"Hear him, hear him!" Telford, Overholser, and Eisenhart cried in unison. Others stamped rhythmically up and down on the boards.

The Old Fella waited until the stomping had quit, and then said: "I have books in the Rectory. Half a dozen."

Although most of them knew this, the thought of books—all that paper—still provoked a general sigh of wonder.

"According to one of them, gunslingers were forbidden to take reward. Supposedly because they descend from the line of Arthur Eld."

"The Eld! The Eld!" the Manni whispered, and several raised fists into the air with the first and fourth fingers raised. Hook em horns, the Old Fella thought. Go, Texas. He managed to stifle a laugh, but not the smile that rose on his lips.

"Are ye speaking of hardcases who wander the land, doing good deeds?" Telford asked in a gently mocking voice. "Surely you're too old for such tales, Pere."

"Not hardcases," Callahan said patiently, "gunslingers."

"How do you know, Pere?" Tian heard himself ask. "And how can three men stand against the Wolves?"

One of the gunslingers was actually a woman, but Callahan saw no need to muddy the waters further (although an impish part of him wanted to, just the same). "I know because I know," he said. "As for how three may stand against many—three and an apprentice, actually—that's a question for their dinh. We'll ask him. And they wouldn't be fighting just for their dinners, you know. Not at all."

"What else, then?" Bucky Javier asked.

Callahan knew they were there because he had seen them. He had seen them because the thing under the church floor had awakened. They would want the thing under the floor, and that was good because the Old Fella, who had once run from a town called Jerusalem's Lot in another world, wanted to be rid of it. If he wasn't rid of it soon, it would kill him.

Ka had come to Calla Bryn Sturgis. Ka like a wind.

"In time, Mr. Javier," Callahan said. "All in good time, sai."

Meantime, a whisper had begun in the Gathering Hall. It slipped along the benches like from mouth to mouth, a breeze of hope and fear.

Gunslingers.

Gunslingers to the east, come out of Mid-World.

And it was true, God help them. Arthur Eld's last deadly children, moving toward Calla Bryn Sturgis along the Path of the Beam. Ka like a wind.

"Time to be men," Pere Callahan told them. Beneath the scar on his forehead, his eyes burned like lamps. Yet his tone was not without compassion. "Time to stand up, gentlemen. Time to stand and be true."