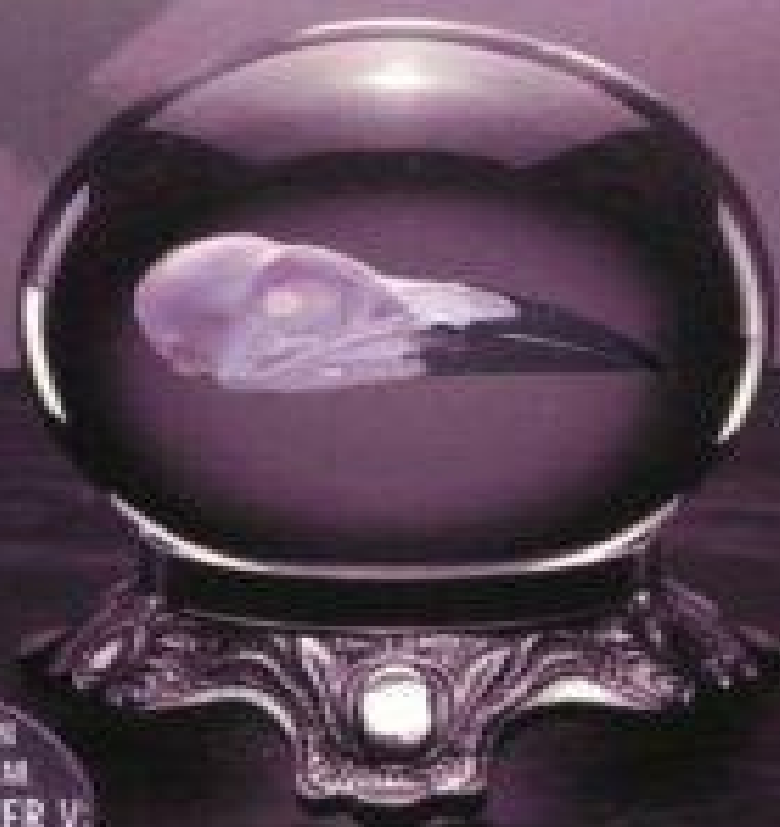




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#1 BESTSELLER

STEPHEN KING



INCLUDES AN
EXCERPT FROM
THE DARK TOWER V:
WOLVES OF
THE CALLAI

WIZARD AND GLASS

THE DARK TOWER IV

WITH A NEW INTRODUCTION BY THE AUTHOR

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Darktower 4 - Wizard and Glass

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By King, Stephen

ARGUMENT

Wizard and Glass is the fourth volume of a longer tale inspired by Robert Brownings narrative poem "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came."

The first volume, The Gunslinger, tells how Roland of Gilead pursues and at last catches Walter, the man in black, who pretended friendship with Roland's father but who actually served Marten, a great sorcerer. Catching the half-human Walter is not Roland's goal but only a means to an end: Roland wants to reach the Dark Tower, where he hopes the quickening destruction of Mid-World may be halted, perhaps even reversed.

Roland is a kind of knight, the last of his breed, and the Tower is his obsession, his only reason for living when first we meet him. We learn of an early test of manhood forced upon him by Marten, who has seduced Roland's mother. Marten expects Roland to fail this test and to be "sent west," his father's guns forever denied him. Roland, however, lays Marten's plans at naught, passing the test . . . due mostly to his clever choice of weapon.

We discover that the gunslinger's world is related to our own in some fundamental and terrible way. This link is first revealed when Roland meets Jake, a boy from the New York of 1977, at a desert way station. There are doors between Roland's world and our own; one of them is death, and that is how Jake first reaches Mid-World, pushed into Forty-third Street and run over by a car. The pusher was a man named Jack Mort . . . except the thing hiding inside of Mort's head and guiding his murderous hands on this particular occasion was Roland's old enemy, Walter. Before Jake and Roland reach Walter, Jake dies again . . . this time because the gunslinger faced with an agonizing choice between this symbolic son and the Dark Tower, chooses the Tower. Jake's last words before plunging into the abyss are "Go, then—there are other worlds than these."

The final confrontation between Roland and Walter occurs near the Western Sea. In a long night of palaver, the man in black tells Roland's future with a strange Tarot deck. Three cards—The Prisoner, The Lady of the Shadows, and Death ("but not for you, gunslinger")—are especially called to Roland's attention.

The second volume, The Drawing of the Three, begins on the edge of the Western Sea not long after Roland awakens from his confrontation with his old nemesis and discovers Walter long dead, only more bones in a place of bones. The exhausted gunslinger is attacked by a horde of carnivorous "lobstrosities," and before he can escape them, he has been seriously wounded, losing the first two fingers of his right hand. He is also poisoned by their bites, and as he resumes his trek northward along the Western Sea, Roland is sickening . . . perhaps dying. On his walk he encounters three doors standing freely on the beach. These open into our city of New York, at three different times. From 1987, Roland draws Eddie Dean, a prisoner of heroin. From 1964, he draws Odette Susanah Holmes,

a woman who has lost her lower legs in a subway mishap . . . one that was no accident. She is indeed a lady of shadows, with a vicious second personality hiding within the socially committed young black woman her friends know. This hidden woman, the violent and crafty Detritus Walker, is determined to kill both Roland and Eddie when the gunslinger draws her into Mid-World.

Between these two in time, once again in 1977, Roland enters the hellish mind of Jack Mort, who has hurt Odetta/Detritus not once but twice. "Death," the man in black told Roland, "but not for you, gunslinger." Nor is Mort the third of whom Walter foretold; Roland prevents Mort from murdering Jake Chambers, and shortly afterward Mort dies beneath the wheels of the same train which took Odetta's legs in 1959. Roland thus fails to draw the psychotic into Mid-World . . . but, he thinks, who would want such a being in any case?

Yet there's a price to be paid for rebellion against a foretold future; isn't there always? Ka, maggot, Roland's old teacher, Cort, might have said; Such is the great wheel, and always turns. Be not in front of it when it does, or you 'll be crushed under it, and so make an end to your stupid brains and use less bags of guts and watter.

Roland thinks that perhaps he has drawn three in just Eddie and Odetta, since Odetta is a double personality, yet when Odetta and Detritus merge as one in Susanah (thanks in large part to Eddie Dean's love and courage), the gunslinger knows it's not so. He knows something else as well: he is being tormented by thoughts of Jake, the boy who, dying, spoke of other worlds. Half of the gunslinger's mind, in fact, believes there never was a boy. In preventing Jack Mort from pushing Jake in front of the car meant to kill him, Roland has created a temporal paradox which is tearing him apart. And, in our world, it is tearing Jake Chambers apart as well.

The Wastelands, the third volume of the series, begins with this paradox. After killing a gigantic bear named either Mir (by the old people who went in fear of it) or Shardik (by the Great Old Ones who built it . . . for the bear turns out to be a cyborg), Roland, Eddie, and Susanah backtrack the beast and discover Path of the Beam. There are six of these beams, running between the twelve portals which mark the edges of Mid-World. At the point where the beams cross—at the center of Roland's world, perhaps the center of all worlds—the gunslinger believes that he and his friends will at last find the Dark Tower.

By now Eddie and Susanah are no longer prisoners in Roland's world. In love and well on the way to becoming gunslingers themselves, they are full participants in the quest and follow him willingly along the Path of the Beam.

In a speaking ring not far from the Portal of the Bear, time is mended, paradox is ended, and the real third is at last drawn. Jake reenters Mid-World at the conclusion of a perilous rite where all four—Jake, Eddie, Susanah, and Roland—remember the faces of their fathers and acquit themselves honorably. Not long after, the quartet becomes a quintet, when Jake befriends a billy-bumblers. Bumblers, which look like a combination of badger, raccoon, and dog, have a limited speaking ability. Jake names his new friend Oy.

The way of the pilgrims leads them toward Lud, an urban wasteland where the

de?gen?er?ate sur?vivors of two old fac?tions, the Pubes and the Grays, car?ry on the ves?tige of an old con?flict. Be?fore reach?ing the city, they come to a lit?tle town called Riv?er Cross?ing, where a few an?tique res?idents still re?main. They rec?og?nize Roland as a rem?nant of the old days, be?fore the world moved on, and hon?or him and his com?pan?ions. Af?ter, the old peo?ple tell them of a mono?rail train which may still run from Lud and in?to the waste?lands, along the Path of the Beam and to?ward the Dark Tow?er.

Jake is fright?ened by this news, but not re?al?ly sur?prised; be?fore be?ing drawn away from New York, he ob?tained two books from a book?store owned by a man with the thought-?pro?vok?ing name of Calvin Tow?er. One is a book of rid?dles with the an?swers torn out. The oth?er, Char?lie the Choo-?Choo, is a chil?dren's book about a train. An amus?ing lit?tle tale, most might say . . . but to Jake, there's some?thing about Char?lie that isn't amus?ing at all. Some?thing fright?en?ing. Roland knows some?thing else: in the High Speech of his world, the word char means death.

Aunt Tal?itha, the ma?tri?arch of the Riv?er Cross?ing folk, gives Roland a sil?ver cross to wear, and the trav?ellers go their course. Be?fore reach?ing Lud, they dis?cov?er a downed plane from our world—a Ger?man fight?er from the 1930s. Jammed in?to the cock?pit is the mum?mi?fied corpse of a gi?ant, al?most cer?tain?ly the half-?myth?ical out?law David Quick.

While cross?ing the di?lap?idat?ed bridge which spans the Riv?er Send, Jake and Oy are near?ly lost in an ac?ci?dent. While Roland, Ed?die, and Su?san?nah are dis?tract?ed by this, the par?ty is am?bushed by a dy?ing (and very dan?ger?ous) out law named Gash?er. He abducts Jake and takes him un?der?ground to the Tick-?Tock Man, the last lead?er of the Grays. Tick-?Tock's re?al name is An?drew Quick; he is the great-grand?son of the man who died try?ing to land an air plane from an?oth?er world.

While Roland (aid?ed by Oy) goes af?ter Jake, Ed?die and Su?san?nah find the Cra?dle of Lud, where Blaine the Mono awakes. Blaine is the last above-?ground tool of the vast com?put?er-?sys?tem which lies be?neath the city of Lud, and it has on?ly one re?main?ing in?ter?est: rid?dles. It promis?es to take the trav?ellers to the mono?rail's fi?nal stop if they can solve a rid?dle it pos?es them. Oth?er?wise, Blaine says, the on?ly trip they'll be tak?ing will be to the place where the path ends in the clear?ing ... to their deaths, in oth?er words. In that case they'll have plen?ty of com?pa?ny, for Blaine is plan?ning to re?lease stocks of nerve-?gas which will kill ev?ery?one left in Lud: Pubes, Grays, and gun-?slingers alike.

Roland res?cues Jake, leav?ing the Tick-?Tock Man for dead ... but An drew Quick is not dead. Half blind, hideous?ly wound?ed about the face, he is res?cued by a man who calls him?self Richard Fan?nin. Fan?nin, how?ev?er, al?so iden?ti?fies him?self as the Age?less Stranger, a de?mon of whom Roland has been warned by Wal?ter.

Roland and Jake are re?unit?ed with Ed?die and Su?san?nah in the Cra?dle of Lud, and Su?san?nah—with a lit?tle help from “dat bitch” Det?ta Walk?er—is able to solve Blaine's rid?dle. They gain ac?cess to the mono, of ne?ces?si?ty ig nor?ing the hor?ri?fied warn?ings of Blaine's sane but fa?tal?ly weak un?der?mind (Ed?die calls this voice Lit?tle Blaine), on?ly to dis?cov?er that Blaine means to com?mit sui?cide with them aboard. The fact that the ac?tu?al mind run?ning the mono ex?ists in com?put?ers falling far?ther and far?ther be?hind them, run?ning be?neath a city which has be?come a slaugh?ter?ing-

pen, will make no difference when the pink bullet jumps the tracks somewhere along the line at a speed in excess of eight hundred miles an hour.

There is only one chance of survival: Blaine's love of rides. Roland of Gilead proposes a desperate bargain. It is with this bargain that The Waste lands ends; it is with this bargain that Wizard and Glass begins.

romeo: Lady, by yonder blessed moon I vow,
That tips with silver all these fruit-tree tops—

juliet: O, swear not by the moon, th' inconstant moon,
That monthly changes in her circled orb,
Lest that thy love prove likewise variable.

romeo: What shall I swear by?

juliet: Do not swear at all.

Or, if thou wilt, swear by thy gracious self,
Which is the god of my idolatry,
And I'll believe thee.

—Romeo and Juliet William Shakespeare

On the fourth day, to [Dorothy's] great joy, Oz sent for her, and when she entered the Throne Room, he greeted her pleasantly.

"Sit down; my dear. I think I have found a way to get you out of this country."

"And back to Kansas?" she asked eagerly.

"Well, I'm not sure about Kansas," said Oz, "for I haven't the faintest notion which way it lies...."

—The Wizard of Oz L. Frank Baum

I asked one draught of earthly, happier sights,
Ere fitly I could hope to play my part.

Think first, fight afterwards—the soldier's art:
One taste of the old time sets all to rights!

—Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came

Robert Browning

PROLOGUE

BLAINE

"ASK ME A RIDE," Blaine invited.

"Fuck you," Roland said. He did not raise his voice.

"WHAT DO YOU SAY?" In its clear disbelief, the voice of Big Blaine had become very close to the voice of its unsuspected twin.

"I said fuck you," Roland said calmly, "but if that puzzles you, Blaine, I can make it clearer. No. The answer is no."

There was no reply from Blaine for a long, long time, and when he did respond, it was not with words. Instead, the walls, floor, and ceiling began to lose their color and solidity again. In a space of ten seconds the Barony Coach once more ceased to exist. They were now flying through the mountain-range they had seen on the horizon: iron-gray peaks rushed toward them at suicidal speed, then fell away to disclose sterile valleys where gigantic beetles crawled about like landlocked turtles. Roland saw something that looked like a huge snake suddenly uncoil from the mouth of a cave. It seized one of the beetles and yanked it back into its lair.

Roland had never in his life seen such animals or countryside, and the sight made his skin want to crawl right off his flesh. Blaine might have transported them to some other world.

“PERHAPS I SHOULD DERAIL US HERE,” Blaine said. His voice was meditative, but beneath it the gunslinger heard a deep, pulsing rage.

“Perhaps you should,” the gunslinger said indifferently.

Edie’s face was frantic. He mouthed the words What are you DOING? Roland ignored him; he had his hands full with Blaine, and he knew perfectly well what he was doing.

“YOU ARE RUDE AND ARROGANT,” Blaine said. “THESE MAY SEEM LIKE INTERESTING TRAITS TO YOU, BUT THEY ARE NOT TO ME.”

“Oh, I can be much ruder than I have been.”

Roland of Gilead unfolded his hands and got slowly to his feet. He stood on what appeared to be nothing, legs apart, his right hand on his hip and his left on the sandalwood grip of his revolver. He stood as he had so many times before, in the dusty streets of a hundred forgotten towns, in a score of rocky canyon killing-zones, in unnumbered dark saloons with their smells of bitter beer and old fried meals. It was just another show down in another empty street. That was all, and that was enough. It was *khef*, *ka*, and *ka-tet*. That the showdown always came was the central fact of his life and the axle upon which his own *ka* revolved. That the battle would be fought with words instead of bullets this time made no difference; it would be a battle to the death, just the same. The stench of killing in the air was as clear and definite as the stench of exploded carrion in a swamp. Then the battle-rage descended, as it always did ... and he was no longer really there to himself at all.

“I can call you a nonsensical, empty-headed, foolish machine. I can call you a stupid, unwise creature whose sense is no more than the sound of a winter wind in a hollow tree.”

“STOP IT.”

Roland went on in the same serene tone, ignoring Blaine completely. “You’re what Edie calls a ‘gad-get.’ Were you more, I might be ruder yet.”

“I AM A GREAT DEAL MORE THAN JUST—”

“I could call you a sucker of cocks, for instance, but you have no mouth. I could say you’re vileer than the vilest beggar who ever crawled the lowest street in creation, but even such a creature is better than you; you have no knees on which to crawl, and would not fall upon them even if you did, for you have no conception of such a human flaw as mercy. I could even say you fucked your mother, had you one.”

Roland paused for breath. His three companions were holding theirs. All around them, suffocating, was Blaine the Mono’s thunderstruck silence.

“I can call you a faithless creature who let your only companion kill herself, a coward who has delighted in the torture of the foolish and the slaughter of the innocent, a lost and bleating melancholic goblin who—”

“I COMMAND YOU TO STOP IT OR I’LL KILL YOU ALL RIGHT HERE!”

Roland’s eyes blazed with such wild blue fire that Edie shrank away from him.

Dimly, he heard Jake and Susan gasp.

“Kill if you will, but command me nothing!” the gunslinger roared. “You have forgotten the faces of those who made you! Now either kill us or be silent and listen to me, Roland of Gilead, son of Steven, gunslinger, and lord of ancient lands! I have not come across all the miles and all the years to listen to your childish prating! Do you understand? Now you will listen to ME!”

There was another moment of shocked silence. No one breathed. Roland stared sternly forward, his head high, his hand on the butt of his gun.

Susan Dean raised her hand to her mouth and felt the small smile there as a woman might feel some strange new article of clothing—a hat, perhaps—to make sure it is still on straight. She was afraid this was the end of her life, but the feeling which dominated her heart at that moment was not fear but pride. She glanced to her left and saw Ed die regarding Roland with an amazed grin. Jake’s expression was even simpler: pure adoration.

“Tell him!” Jake breathed. “Kick his ass! Right!”

“You better pay attention,” Ed die agreed. “He really doesn’t give much of a fuck, Blaine. They don’t call him The Mad Dog of Gilead for nothing.”

After a long, long moment, Blaine asked: “DID THEY CALL YOU SO, ROLAND SON OF STEVEN?”

“They may have,” Roland replied, standing calmly on thin air above the sterile foothills.

“WHAT GOOD ARE YOU TO ME IF YOU WON’T TELL ME RIDDLES?”

Blaine asked. Now he sounded like a grumbling, sulky child who has been allowed to stay up too long past his usual bedtime.

“I didn’t say we wouldn’t,” Roland said.

“NO?” Blaine sounded bewildered. “I DO NOT UNDERSTAND, YET VOICE-PRINT ANALYSIS INDICATES RATIONALE DISCOURSE. PLEASE EXPLAIN.”

“You said you wanted them right now” the gunslinger replied. “That was what I was refusing. Your eagerness has made you unseemly.”

“I DON’T UNDERSTAND.”

“It has made you rude. Do you understand that?”

There was a long, thoughtful silence. Centuries had passed since the computer had experienced any human responses other than ignorance, neglect, and superstitious subservience. It had been eons since it had been exposed to simple human courage. Finally: “IF WHAT I SAID STRUCK YOU AS RUDE, I APOLOGIZE.”

“It is accepted, Blaine. But there is a larger problem.”

“EXPLAIN.”

“Close the carriage again and I will.” Roland sat down as if further argument—and the prospect of immediate death—was now unthinkable.

Blaine did as he was asked. The walls filled with color and the night mare landscape below was once more blotted out. The blip on the route-map was now blinking close to the dot marked Canderton.

“All right,” Roland said. “Rudeness is forgivable, Blaine; so I was taught in my youth. But I was also taught that stupidity is not.”

"HOW HAVE I BEEN STUPID, ROLAND OF GILEAD?" Blaine's voice was soft and ominous. Susanah thought of a cat crouched outside a mouse-hole, tail swishing back and forth, green eyes shining with malevolence.

"We have something you want," Roland said, "but the only reward you offer if we give it to you is death. That's very stupid."

There was a long, long pause as Blaine thought this over. Then: "WHAT YOU SAY IS TRUE, ROLAND OF GILEAD, BUT THE QUALITY OF YOUR RIDDLES IS NOT PROVEN. I WILL NOT REWARD YOU WITH YOUR LIVES FOR BAD RIDDLES."

Roland nodded. "I understand, Blaine. Listen, now, and take understanding from me. I have told some of this to my friends already. When I was a boy in the Barony of Gilead, there were seven Fair-Days each year—Winter, Wide Earth, Sowing, Mid-Summer, Full Earth, Reaping, and Year's End. Riddling was an important part of every Fair-Day, but it was the most important event of the Fair of Wide Earth and that of Full Earth, for the riddles told were supposed to augur well or ill for the success of the crops."

"THAT IS SUPERSTITION WITH NO BASIS AT ALL IN FACT," Blaine said. "I FIND IT ANNOYING AND UPSETTING."

"Of course it was superstition," Roland agreed, "but you might be surprised at how well the riddles foresaw the crops. For instance, riddle me this, Blaine: What is the difference between a grandmother and a granary?"

"THAT IS OLD AND NOT VERY INTERESTING," Blaine said, but he sounded happy to have something to solve, just the same. "ONE IS ONE'S BORN KIN; THE OTHER IS ONE'S CORNBIN. A RIDDLE BASED ON PHONETIC COINCIDENCE. ANOTHER OF THIS TYPE, ONE TOLD ON THE LEVEL WHICH CONTAINS THE BARONY OF NEW YORK, GOES LIKE THIS: WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A CAT AND A COMPLEX SENTENCE?"

Jake spoke up. "I know. A cat has claws at the end of its paws, and a complex sentence has a pause at the end of its clause."

"YES," Blaine agreed. "A VERY SILLY OLD RIDDLE, USEFUL ONLY AS A MNEMONIC DEVICE."

"For once I agree with you, Blaine old buddy," Edie said.

"I AM NOT YOUR BUDDY, EDIE OF NEW YORK."

"Well, jeez. Kiss my ass and go to heaven."

"THERE IS NO HEAVEN."

Edie had no comeback for that one.

"I WOULD HEAR MORE OF FAIR-DAY RIDDLING IN GILEAD, ROLAND SON OF STEVEN."

"At noon on Wide Earth and Full Earth, somewhere between sixteen and thirty riddlers would gather in the Hall of the Grandfathers, which was opened for the event. Those were the only times of year when common folk—merchants and farmers and ranchers and such—were allowed into the Hall of the Grandfathers, and on that day they all crowded in."

The gunslinger's eyes were far away and dreamy; it was the expression Jake had

seen on his face in that misty other life, when Roland had told him of how he and his friends, Cuthbert and Jamie, had once sneaked into the balcony of that same Hall to watch some sort of dance-party. Jake and Roland had been climbing into the mountains when Roland had told him of that time, close on the trail of Walter. Marten sat next to my mother and father, Roland had said. I knew them even from so high above—and once she and Marten danced, slowly and revolvingly, and the others cleared the floor for them and clapped when it was over. But the gunslingers did not clap....

Jake looked curiously at Roland, wondering again where this strange man had come from . . . and why.

"A great barrel was placed in the center of the floor," Roland went on, "and into this each rider would toss a handful of bark scrolls with rides writ up on them. Many were old, rides they had gotten from the elders—even from books, in some cases—but many others were new, made up for the occasion. Three judges, one always a gunslinger, would pass on these when they were told aloud, and they were accepted only if the judges deemed them fair."

"YES, RIDES MUST BE FAIR," Blaine agreed.

"So they ride," the gunslinger said. A faint smile touched his mouth as he thought of those days, days when he had been the age of the bruised boy sitting across from him with the billy-bum-bler in his lap. "For hours on end they ride. A line was formed down the center of the Hall of the Grandfathers. One's position in this line was determined by lot, and since it was much better to be at the end of the line than at the head, everyone hoped for a high draw, although the winner had to answer at least one ride correctly."

"OF COURSE."

"Each man or woman—for some of Gilead's best riders were women—approached the barrel, drew a ride, and if the ride was still unanswered after the sands in a three-minute glass had run out, that contestant had to leave the line."

"AND WAS THE SAME RIDE ASKED OF THE NEXT PERSON IN THE LINE?"

"Yes."

"SO THE NEXT PERSON HAD EXTRA TIME TO THINK."

"Yes."

"I SEE. IT SOUNDS PRETTY SWELL."

Roland frowned. "Swell?"

"He means it sounds like fun," Susanah said quietly.

Roland shrugged. "It was fun for the onlookers, I suppose, but the contestants took it very seriously. Quite often there were arguments and fistfights after the contest was over and the prize awarded."

"WHAT PRIZE WAS THAT, ROLAND SON OF STEVEN?"

"The largest goose in Barony. And year after year my teacher, Cort, carried that goose home."

"I WISH HE WERE HERE," Blaine said respectfully. "HE MUST HAVE BEEN A GREAT RIDER."

“In?deed he was,” Roland said. “Are you ready for my pro?pos?al, Blaine?”

“OF COURSE. I WILL LIS?TEN WITH GREAT IN?TER?EST, ROLAND OF GILEAD.”

“Let these next few hours be our Fair-?Day. You will not rid?dle us, for you wish to hear new rid?dles, not tell some of those mil?lions you al?ready know—”

“COR?RECT.”

“We couldn’t solve most of them, any?way,” Roland went on. “I’m sure you know rid?dles that would have stumped even Cort, had they been pulled out of the bar?rel.” He was not sure of it at all, but the time to use the fist had passed and the time to use the feath?er had come.

“OF COURSE,” Blaine agreed.

“In?stead of a goose, our lives shall be the prize,” Roland said. “We will rid?dle you as we run, Blaine. If, when we come to Tope?ka, you have solved ev?ery one of our rid?dles, you may car?ry out your orig?inal plan and kill us. That is your goose. But if we pose you—if there is a rid?dle in ei ther Jake’s book or one of our heads which you don’t know and can’t an swer—you must take us to Tope?ka and then free us to pur?sue our quest. That is our goose.”

Si?lence.

“Do you un?der?stand?”

“YES.”

“Do you agree?”

More si?lence from Blaine the Mono. Ed?die sat stiffly with his arm around Su?san?nah, look?ing up at the ceil?ing of the Barony Coach. Su?san nah’s left hand slipped across her bel?ly, stroking the se?cret which might be hid?den there. Jake stroked Oy’s fur light?ly, avoid?ing the bloody tan?gles where the bum?bler had been stabbed. They wait?ed while Blaine—the re?al Blaine, now far be?hind them, liv?ing his quasi-?life be?neath a city where all the in?hab?itants lay dead by his hand—con?sidered Roland’s pro?pos?al.

“YES,” Blaine said at last. “I AGREE. IF I SOLVE ALL THE RID DLES YOU ASK ME, I WILL TAKE YOU WITH ME TO THE PLACE WHERE THE PATH ENDS IN THE CLEAR?ING. IF ONE OF YOU TELLS A RID?DLE I CAN?NOT SOLVE, I WILL SPARE YOUR LIVES AND LEAVE YOU IN TOPE?KA, FROM WHENCE YOU MAY CON?TIN?UE YOUR QUEST FOR THE DARK TOW?ER, IF YOU SO CHOOSE. HAVE I UN?DER?STOOD THE TERMS AND LIM?ITS OF YOUR PRO?POS?AL COR?RECT?LY, ROLAND SON OF STEVEN?”

“Yes.”

“VERY WELL, ROLAND OF GILEAD.

”VERY WELL, ED?DIE OF NEW YORK.

“VERY WELL, SU?SAN?NAH OF NEW YORK.

”VERY WELL, JAKE OF NEW YORK.

“VERY WELL, OY OF MID-?WORLD.”

Oy looked up briefly at the sound of his name.

“YOU ARE KA-?TET; ONE MADE FROM MANY. SO AM I. WHOSE KA-?TET IS THE STRONGER IS SOME?THING WE MUST NOW PROVE.”

There was a moment of silence, broken only by the hard steady throb of the slo-trans turbines bearing them on across the waste lands, bearing them along the Path of the Beam toward Topeka, where Mid-World ended and End-World began. "SO," cried the voice of Blaine. "CAST YOUR NETS, WANDERERS! TRY ME WITH YOUR QUESTIONS, AND LET THE CONTEST BEGIN."

Darktower 4 - Wizard and Glass

PART ONE

RID?DLES

CHAP?TER 1

be?neath the

de?mon moon (I)

1

The town of Can?dle?ton was a poi?soned and ir?ra?di?at?ed ru?in, but not dead; af?ter all the cen?turies it still twitched with tene?brous life—trundling bee?tles the size of tur?tles, birds that looked like small, mis?shapen drag?onlets, a few stum?bling robots that passed in and out of the rot?ten build in?gs like stain?less steel zom?bies, their joints squalling, their nu?cle?ar eyes flick?er?ing.

“Show your pass, pard!” cried the one that had been stuck in a cor?ner of the lob?by of the Can?dle?ton Trav?ellers’ Ho?tel for the last two hun?dred and thir?ty-?four years. Em?bossed on the rusty lozenge of its head was a six-?point?ed star. It had over the years man?aged to dig a shal?low con?cav?ity in the steel-?sheathed wall block?ing its way, but that was all.

“Show your pass, pard! El?evat?ed ra?di?ation lev?els pos?si?ble south and east of town! Show your pass, pard! El?evat?ed ra?di?ation lev?els pos?si?ble south and east of town!” A bloat?ed rat, blind and drag?ging its guts be?hind it in a sac like a rot ten pla?cen?ta, strug?gled over the posse robot’s feet. The posse robot took no no?tice, just went on butting its steel head in?to the steel wall. “Show your pass, pard! El?evat?ed ra?di?ation lev?els pos?si?ble, dad rat?tit and gods cuss it!” Be?hind it, in the ho?tel bar, the skulls of men and wom?en who had come in here for one last drink be?fore the cat?aclysm caught up with them grinned as if they had died laugh?ing. Per?haps some of them had.

When Blaine the Mono blammed over?head, run?ning up the night like a bul?let run?ning up the bar?rel of a gun, win?dows broke, dust sift?ed down, and sev?er?al of the skulls dis?in?te?grat?ed like an?cient pot?tery vas?es. Out?side, a brief hur?ri?cane of ra?dioac?tive dust blew up the street, and the hitch?ing post in front of the El?egant Beef and Pork Restau?rant was sucked in?to the squally up?draft like smoke. In the town square, the Can?dle?ton Foun?tain split in two, spilling out not wa?ter but on?ly dust, snakes, mu?tie scor?pi?ons, and a few of the blind?ly trundling tur?tle-?bee?tles. Then the shape which had hur?tled above the town was gone as if it had nev?er been, Can?dle?ton re?vert?ed to the moul?der?ing ac?tiv?ity which had been its sub?sti?tute for life over the last two and a half cen?turies . . . and then the trail?ing son?ic boom caught up, slam?ming its thun?der?clap above the town for the first time in sev?en years, caus?ing enough vi?bra?tion to tum?ble the mer?can?tile store on the far side of the foun?tain. The posse ro bot tried to voice one fi?nal warn?ing: “El?evat?ed rad—” and then quit for good, fac?ing in?to its cor?ner like a child that has been bad.

Two or three hun?dred wheels out?side Can?dle?ton, as one trav?elled along the Path of the Beam, the ra?di?ation lev?els and con?cen?tra?tions of DEP3 in the soil fell rapid?ly. Here the mono’s track swooped down to less than ten feet off the ground, and here a doe that looked al?most nor?mal walked pret?ti?ly from piney woods to drink from a stream in which the wa ter had three-?quar?ters cleansed it?self.

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 reasonably good order for a twelfth-generation mutant. In her six years of life she had given birth to three live young. Two of these fawns had been not just viable but normal—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 engines, running at full capacity. There was a blur of pink above the concrete 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 seventy yards, with water dripping from her muzzle and hoofs. Much of her hide (and the boneless fifth leg) was torn from her body and pulled after Blaine like a discarded garment.

There was brief silence, thin as new skin or earily ice on a Year's End pond, and then the sonic boom came rushing after like some noisy creature late for a wedding-feast, tearing the silence apart, knocking a single mutated bird—it might have been a raven—dead out of the air. The bird fell like a stone and splashed into the stream.

In the distance, a dwindling red eye: Blaine's tail light.

Overhead, a full moon came out from behind a scrim of cloud, painting the clearing and the stream in the tawdry hues of pawnshop jewelry. There was a face in the moon, but not one upon which lovers would wish to look. It seemed the scant face of a skull, like those in the Canderton Travellers' Hotel; a face which looked upon those few beings still alive and struggling below with the amusement of a lunatic. In Gilead, before the world had moved on, the full moon of Year's End had been called the Demon Moon, and it was considered ill luck to look directly at it.

Now, however, such did not matter. Now there were demons everywhere.

2

Susanah looked at the route-map and saw that the green dot marking their present position was now almost halfway between Canderton and Rilea, Blaine's next stop. Except who's stopping? she thought.

From the route-map she turned to Eddie. His gaze was still directed up at the ceiling of the Barony Coach. She followed it and saw a square which could only

be a trap?door (ex?cept when you were deal?ing with fu tur?is?tic shit like a talk?ing train, she sup?posed you called it a hatch, or some?thing even cool?er). Sten?cilled on it was a sim?ple red draw?ing which showed a man step?ping through the open?ing. Su?san?nah tried to imag?ine fol?low?ing the im?plied in?struc?tion and pop?ping up through that hatch at over eight hun?dred miles an hour. She got a quick but clear im?age of a wom?an's head be?ing ripped from her neck like a flow?er from its stalk; she saw the head fly?ing back?ward along the length of the Barony Coach, per?haps bounc?ing once, and then dis?ap?pear?ing in?to the dark, eyes star?ing and hair rip?pling. She pushed the pic?ture away as fast as she could. The hatch up there was al?most cer?tain?ly locked shut, any?way. Blaine the Mono had no in?ten?tion of let?ting them go. They might win their way out, but Su?san?nah didn't think that was a sure thing even if they man?aged to stump Blaine with a rid?dle.

Sor?ry to say this, but you sound like just one more honky moth?er?fuck?er to me, hon?ey, she thought in a men?tal voice that was not quite Det?ta Walk?er's. I don't trust your me?chan?ical ass. You apt to be more dan?ger?ous beat?en than with the blue rib?bon pinned to your mem?ory banks.

Jake was hold?ing his tat?tered book of rid?dles out to the gun?slinger as if he no longer want?ed the re?spon?si?bil?ity of car?ry?ing it. Su?san?nah knew how the kid must feel; their lives might very well be in those grimy, well-?thumbed pages. She wasn't sure she would want the re?spon?si?bil?ity of hold?ing on?to it, ei?ther.

"Roland!" Jake whis?pered. "Do you want this?"

"Ont!" Oy said, giv?ing the gun?slinger a for?bid?ding glance. "Olan-?ont-?iss!" The bum?bler fixed his teeth on the book, took it from Jake's hand, and stretched his dis?pro?por?tion?ate?ly long neck to?ward Roland, of fer?ing him Rid?dle-?De-?Dum! Brain-Twisters and Puz?zles for Ev?ery?one!

Roland glanced at it for a mo?ment, his face dis?tant and pre?oc?cu?pied, then shook his head. "Not yet." He looked for?ward at the route-?map. Blaine had no face, so the map had to serve them as a fix?ing-?point. The flash?ing green dot was clos?er to Rilea now. Su?san?nah won?dered briefly what the coun?try?side through which they were pass?ing looked like, and de?cid?ed she didn't re?al?ly want to know. Not af?ter what they'd seen as they left the city of Lud.

"Blaine!" Roland called.

"YES."

"Can you leave the room? We need to con?fer."

You nuts if you think he's gonna do that, Su?san?nah thought, but Blaine's re?ply was quick and ea?ger.

"YES, GUN?SLINGER. I WILL TURN OFF ALL MY SEN?SORS IN THE BARONY COACH. WHEN YOUR CON?FER?ENCE IS DONE AND YOU ARE READY TO BE?GIN THE RID?DLING, I WILL RE?TURN."

"Yeah, you and Gen?er?al MacArthur," Ed?die mut?tered.

"WHAT DID YOU SAY, ED?DIE OF NEW YORK?"

"Noth?ing. Talk?ing to my?self, that's all."

"TO SUM?MON ME, SIM?PLY TOUCH THE ROUTE-?MAP," said Blaine. "AS LONG AS THE MAP IS RED, MY SEN?SORS ARE OFF. SEE YOU LAT?ER, AL?LI?GA?TOR. AF?TER AWHILE, CROCODILE. DON'T FOR?GET TO WRITE."

A pause. Then: "OLIVE OIL BUT NOT CAS?TO?RIA."

The route-?map rect?an?gle at the front of the cab?in sud?den?ly turned a red so bright Su?san?nah couldn't look at it with?out squint?ing.

"Olive oil but not cas?to?ria?" Jake asked. "What the heck does that mean?"

"It doesn't mat?ter," Roland said. "We don't have much time. The mono trav?els just as fast to?ward its point of end?ing whether Blaine's with us or not."

"You don't re?al?ly be?lieve he's gone, do you?" Ed?die asked. "A slip pery pup like him? Come on, get re?al. He's peek?ing, I guar?an?tee you."

"I doubt it very much," Roland said, and Su?san?nah de?cid?ed she agreed with him. For now, at least. "You could hear how ex?cit?ed he was at the idea of rid?dling again af?ter all these years. And—"

"And he's con?fi?dent," Su?san?nah said. "Doesn't ex?pect to have much trou?ble with the likes of us."

"Will he?" Jake asked the gun?slinger. "Will he have trou?ble with us?"

"I don't know," Roland said. "I don't have a Watch Me hid?den up my sleeve, if that's what you're ask?ing. It's a straight game . . . but at least it's a game I've played be?fore. We've all played it be?fore, at least to some ex tent. And there's that." He nod?ded to?ward the book which Jake had tak?en back from Oy. "There are forces at work here, big ones, and not all of them are work?ing to keep us away from the Tow?er."

Su?san?nah heard him, but it was Blaine she was think?ing of—Blaine who had gone away and left them alone, like the kid who's been cho?sen "it" obe?di?ent?ly cov?er?ing his eyes while his play?mates hide. And wasn't that what they were? Blaine's play?mates? The thought was some?how worse than the im?age she'd had of try?ing the es?cape hatch and hav?ing her head torn off.

"So what do we do?" Ed?die asked. "You must have an idea, or you nev?er would have sent him away."

"His great in?tel?li?gence—cou?pled with his long pe?ri?od of lone?li?ness and forced in?ac?tiv?ity—may have com?bined to make him more hu?man than he knows. That's my hope, any?way. First, we must es?tab?lish a kind of ge?og?ra?phy. We must tell, if we can, where he is weak and where he is strong, where he is sure of the game and where not so sure. Rid?dles are not just about the clev?er?ness of the rid?dler, nev?er think it. They are al?so about the blind spots of he who is rid?dled."

"Does he have blind spots?" Ed?die asked.

"If he doesn't," Roland said calm?ly, "we're go?ing to die on this train."

"I like the way you kind of ease us over the rough spots," Ed?die said with a thin smile. "It's one of your many charms."

"We will rid?dle him four times to be?gin with," Roland said. "Easy, not so easy, quite hard, very hard. He'll an?swer all four, of that I am con fi?dent, but we will be lis?ten?ing for how he an?swers."

Ed?die was nod?ding, and Su?san?nah felt a small, al?most re?luc?tant glim mer of hope. It sound?ed like the right ap?proach, all right.

"Then we'll send him away again and hold palaver," the gun?slinger said. "May?hap we'll get an idea of what di?rec?tion to send our hors?es. These first rid?dles can come from any?where, but"—he nod?ded grave?ly to?ward the book—"based on Jake's sto?ry

of the book?store, the an?swer we re?al?ly need should be in there, not in any mem?ories I have of Fair-?Day rid?dlings. Must be in there.”

“Ques?tion,” Su?san?nah said.

Roland looked at her, eye?brows raised over his fad?ed, dan?ger ous eyes.

“It’s a ques?tion we’re look?ing for, not an an?swer,” she said. “This time it’s the an?swers that are apt to get us killed.”

The gun?slinger nod?ded. He looked puz?zled—frus?trat?ed, even—and this was not an ex?pres?sion Su?san?nah liked see?ing on his face. But this time when Jake held out the book, Roland took it. He held it for a mo?ment (its fad?ed but still gay red cov?er looked very strange in his big sun?burned hands . . . es?pe?cial?ly in the right one, with its es?sen?tial re?duc?tion of two fin?gers), then passed it on to Ed?die.

“You’re easy,” Roland said, turn?ing to Su?san?nah.

“Per?haps,” she replied, with a trace of a smile, “but it’s still not a very po?lite thing to say to a la?dy, Roland.”

He turned to Jake. “You’ll go sec?ond, with one that’s a lit?tle hard?er. I’ll go third. You’ll go last, Ed?die. Pick one from the book that looks hard—”

“The hard ones are to?ward the back,” Jake sup?plied.

“. . . but none of your fool?ish?ness, mind. This is life and death. The time for fool?ish?ness is past.”

Ed?die looked at him—old long, tall, and ug?ly, who’d done God knew how many ug?ly things in the name of reach?ing his Tow?er—and won?dered if Roland had any idea at all of how much that hurt. Just that ca?sual ad?mo ni?tion not to be?have like a child, grin?ning and crack?ing jokes, now that their lives were at wa?ger.

He opened his mouth to say some?thing—an Ed?die Dean Spe?cial, some?thing that would be both fun?ny and sting?ing at the same time, the kind of re?mark that al?ways used to drive his broth?er Hen?ry dogshit— and then closed it again. Maybe long, tall, and ug?ly was right; maybe it was time to put away the one-?lin?ers and dead ba?by jokes. Maybe it was fi?nal?ly time to grow up.

3

Af?ter three more min?utes of mur?mured con?sul?ta?tion and some quick flip ping through Rid?dle-?De-?Dum! on Ed?die’s and Su?san?nah’s parts (Jake al ready knew the one he want?ed to try Blaine with first, he’d said), Roland went to the front of the Barony Coach and laid his hand on the fierce?ly glow?ing rect?an?gle there. The route-map reap?peared at once. Al?though there was no sen?sa?tion of move?ment now that the coach was closed, the green dot was clos?er to Rilea than ev?er.

“SO, ROLAND SON OF STEVEN!” Blaine said. To Ed?die he sound?ed more than jovial; he sound?ed next door to hi?lar?ious. “IS YOUR KA-?TET READY TO BE?GIN?”

“Yes. Su?san?nah of New York will be?gin the first round.” He turned to her, low?ered his voice a lit?tle (not that she reck?oned that would do much good if Blaine want?ed to lis?ten), and said: “You won’t have to step for ward like the rest of us, be?cause of your legs, but you must speak fair and ad?dress him by name each time you talk to him. If—when—he an?swers your rid?dle cor?rect?ly, say ‘Thankee-?sai, Blaine, you have an?swered true.’ Then Jake will step in?to the aisle and have his turn. All right?”

“And if he should get it wrong, or not guess at all?”

Roland smiled grimly. “I think that’s one thing we don’t have to worry about just yet.” He raised his voice again. “Blaine?”

“YES, GUNSLINGER.”

Roland took a deep breath. “It starts now.”

“EXCELLENT!”

Roland nodded at Susanah. Eddie squeezed one of her hands; Jake patted the other. Oy gazed at her raptly with his gold-ringed eyes.

Susanah smiled at them nervously, then looked up at the route-map. “Hello, Blaine.”

”HOWDY, SUSANAH OF NEW YORK.“

Her heart was pounding, her armpits were damp, and here was some thing she had first discovered way back in the first grade: it was hard to begin. It was hard to stand up in front of the class and be first with your song, your joke, your report on how you spent your summer vacation . . . or your ride, for that matter. The one she had decided upon was one from Jake Chambers’s crazed English essay, which he had recited to them almost verbatim during their long palaver after leaving the old people of River Crossing. The essay, titled “My Understanding of Truth,” had contained two rides, one of which Eddie had already used on Blaine.

”SUSANAH? ARE YOU THERE, L’IL COWGIRL?”

Teasing again, but this time the teasing sounded light, good-natured. Good-humored. Blaine could be charming when he got what he wanted. Like certain spoiled children she had known.

”Yes, Blaine, I am, and here is my ride. What has four wheels and flies?”

There was a peculiar click, as if Blaine were mimicking the sound of a man popping his tongue against the roof of his mouth. It was followed by a brief pause.

When Blaine replied, most of the jocularity had gone out of his voice. ”THE TOWN GARBAGE WAGON, OF COURSE. A CHILD’S RIDE. IF THE REST OF YOUR RIDES ARE NO BETTER, I WILL BE EXTREMELY SORRY I SAVED YOUR LIVES FOR EVEN A SHORT WHILE.“

The route-map flashed, not red this time but pale pink. ”Don’t get him mad,” the voice of Little Blaine begged. Each time it spoke, Susanah found herself imagining a sweaty little bald man whose every movement was a kind of cringe. The voice of Big Blaine came from everywhere (like the voice of God in a Cecil B. DeMille movie, Susanah thought), but Little Blaine’s from only one: the speaker directly over their heads. ”Please don’t make him angry, fellows; he’s already got the mono in the red, speedwise, and the track compensators can barely keep up. The trackage has degenerated terribly since the last time we came out this way.”

Susanah, who had been on her share of humpy trails and subways in her time, felt nothing the ride was as smooth now as it had been when they had first pulled out of the Circle of Lud—but she believed Little Blaine anyway. She guessed that if they did feel a bump, it would be the last thing any of them would ever feel.

Roland poked an elbow in to her side, bringing her back to her current situation.

“Thankee-sai,” she said, and then, as an afterthought, tapped her throat rapidly

three times with the fingers of her right hand. It was what Roland had done when speaking to Aunt Talitha for the first time.

“THANK YOU FOR YOUR COURTESY,” Blaine said. He sounded amused again, and Susanah reckoned that was good even if his amusement was at her expense. “I AM NOT FEMALE, HOWEVER. IN SO FAR AS I HAVE A SEX, IT IS MALE.”

Susanah looked at Roland, bewildered.

“Left hand for men,” he said. “On the breastbone.” He tapped to demonstrate.

“Oh.”

Roland turned to Jake. The boy stood, put Oy on his chair (which did no good; Oy immediately jumped down and followed after Jake when he stepped into the aisle to face the route-map), and turned his attention to Blaine.

“Hello, Blaine, this is Jake. You know, son of Elmer.”

“SPEAK YOUR RIDDLE.”

“What can run but never walks, has a mouth but never talks, has a bed but never sleeps, has a head but never weeps?”

“NOT BAD! ONE HOPES SUSANAH WILL LEARN FROM YOUR EXAMPLE, JAKE SON OF ELMER. THE ANSWER MUST BE SELF-IDENT TO ANYONE OF ANY INTELLIGENCE AT ALL, BUT A DECENT EFFORT, NEVERTHELESS. A RIVER.”

“Thankee-sai, Blaine, you have answered true.” He tapped the bunched fingers of his left hand three times against his breastbone and then sat down. Susanah put her arm around him and gave him a brief squeeze. Jake looked at her gratefully. Now Roland stood up. “Hile, Blaine,” he said.

“HILE, GUNSLINGER.” Once again Blaine sounded amused . . . possibly by the greeting, which Susanah hadn’t heard before. Heil what? she wondered. Hitler came to mind, and that made her think of the downed plane they’d found outside Lud. A Focke-Wulf, Jake had claimed. She didn’t know about that, but she knew it had contained one seriously dead harrier, too old even to stink. “SPEAK YOUR RIDDLE, ROLAND, AND LET IT BE HANDSOME.”

“Handsome is as handsome does, Blaine. In any case, here it is: What has four legs in the morning, two legs in the afternoon, and three legs at night?”

“THAT IS INDEED HANDSOME,” Blaine allowed. “SIMPLE BUT HANDSOME, JUST THE SAME. THE ANSWER IS A HUMAN BEING, WHO CRAWLS ON HANDS AND KNEES IN BABYHOOD, WALKS ON TWO LEGS DURING ADULTHOOD, AND WHO GOES ABOUT WITH THE HELP OF A CANE IN OLD AGE.”

Blaine sounded positively smug, and Susanah suddenly discovered a mildly interesting fact: she loathed the self-satisfied, murderous thing. Machine or not, it or he, she loathed Blaine. She had an idea she would have felt the same even if he hadn’t made them wager their lives in a stupid riddling contest.

Roland, however, did not look the slightest put out of countenance. “Thankee-sai, Blaine, you have answered true.” He sat down without tapping his breastbone and looked at Ed die. Ed die stood up and stepped into the aisle.

“What’s happening, Blaine my man?” he asked. Roland winced and shook his

head, putting his mu?ti?lat?ed right hand up briefly to shade his eyes.

Si?lence from Blaine.

“Blaine? Are you there?”

“YES, BUT IN NO MOOD FOR FRIVOLI?TY, ED?DIE OF NEW YORK. SPEAK YOUR RID?DLE. I SUS?PECT IT WILL BE DIF?FI CULT IN SPITE OF YOUR FOOL?ISH POS?ES. I LOOK FOR?WARD TO IT.”

Ed?die glanced at Roland, who waved a hand at him—Go on, for your fa?ther’s sake, go on!—and then looked back at the route-?map, where the green dot had just passed the point marked Rilea. Su?san?nah saw that Ed?die sus?pect?ed what she her?self all but knew: Blaine un?der?stood they were try?ing to test his ca?pa?bil?ities with a spec?trum of rid?dles. Blaine knew . . . and wel?comed it.

Su?san?nah felt her heart sink as any hopes they might find a quick and easy way out of this dis?ap?peared.

4

“Well,” Ed?die said, “I don’t know how hard it’ll seem to you, but it struck me as a toughie.” Nor did he know the an?swer, since that sec?tion of Rid?dle-?De-?Dum! had been torn out, but he didn’t think that made any dif?fer?ence; their know?ing the an?swers hadn’t been part of the ground-?rules.

“I SHALL HEAR AND AN?SWER.”

“No soon?er spo?ken than bro?ken. What is it?”

“SI?LENCE, A THING YOU KNOW LIT?TLE ABOUT, ED?DIE OF NEW YORK,” Blaine said with no pause at all, and Ed?die felt his heart drop a lit?tle.

There was no need to con?sult with the oth?ers; the an?swer was self-?ev?ident. And hav?ing it come back at him so quick?ly was the re?al bum?mer. Ed?die nev?er would have said so, but he had har?bored the hope— al?most a se?cret sure?ty—of bring?ing Blaine down with a sin?gle rid?dle, ker-?smash, all the King’s hors?es and all the King’s men couldn’t put Blaine to?geth?er again. The same se?cret sure?ty, he sup?posed, that he had har?bored ev?ery time he picked up a pair of dice in some sharpie’s back-?bed?room crap game, ev?ery time he called for a hit on sev?en?teen while play?ing black?jack. That feel?ing that you couldn’t go wrong be?cause you were you, the best, the one and on?ly.

“Yeah,” he said, sigh?ing. “Si?lence, a thing I know lit?tle about. Thankee-?sai, Blaine, you speak truth.”

“I HOPE YOU HAVE DIS?COV?ERED SOME?THING WHICH WILL HELP YOU,” Blaine said, and Ed?die thought: You fuck?ing me?chan?ical liar. The com?pla?cent tone had re?turned to Blaine’s voice, and Ed?die found it of some pass?ing in?ter?est that a ma?chine could ex?press such a range of emo tion. Had the Great Old Ones built them in, or had Blaine cre?at?ed an emo tion?al rain?bow for him?self at some point? A lit?tle dipo?lar pret?ty with which to pass the long decades and cen?turies? “DO YOU WISH ME TO GO AWAY AGAIN SO YOU MAY CON?SULT?”

“Yes,” Roland said.

The route-?map flashed bright red. Ed?die turned to?ward the gun?slinger. Roland com?posed his face quick?ly, but be?fore he did, Ed?die saw a hor ri?ble thing: a brief look of com?plete hope?less?ness. Ed?die had nev?er seen such a look there be?fore, not

when Roland had been dying of the lobster's bites, not when Ed had been pointing the gun-slinger's own revolver at him, not even when the hideous Gasher had taken Jake prisoner and disappeared into Lud with him.

"What do we do next?" Jake asked. "Do another round of the four of us?"

"I think that would serve little purpose," Roland said. "Blame must know thousands of riddles—perhaps millions—and that is bad. Worse, far worse, he understands the how of riddling ... the place the mind has to go to in order to make them and solve them." He turned to Ed and Susanah, sitting once more with their arms about one another. "Am I right about that?" he asked them. "Do you agree?"

"Yes," Susanah said, and Ed nodded reluctantly. He didn't want to agree ... but he did.

"So?" Jake asked. "What do we do, Roland? I mean, there has to be a way out of this ... doesn't there?"

Lie to him, you bastard, Ed sent fiercely in Roland's direction. Roland, perhaps hearing the thought, did the best he could. He touched Jake's hair with his diminished hand and ruffled through it. "I think there's always an answer, Jake. The real question is whether or not we'll have time to find the right riddle. He said it took him a little under nine hours to run his route—"

"Eight hours, forty-five minutes," Jake put in. "... and that's not much time. We've already been running almost an hour—"

"And if that map's right, we're almost halfway to Topeka," Susanah said in a tight voice. "Could be our mechanical pal's been lying to us about the length of the run. Hedging his bets a little." "Could be," Roland agreed. "So what do we do?" Jake repeated.

Roland drew in a deep breath, held it, let it out. "Let me riddle him alone, for now. I'll ask him the hardest ones I remember from the Fair-Days of my youth. Then, Jake, if we're approaching the point of ... if we're approaching Topeka at this same speed with Blaine still unposed, I think you should ask him the last few riddles in your book. The hardest riddles." He rubbed the side of his face distractedly and looked at the ice sculpture. This chilly rendering of his own likeness had now melted to an unrecognizable hulk. "I still think the answer must be in the book. Why else would you have been drawn to it before coming back to this world?"

"And us?" Susanah asked. "What do Ed and I do?"

"Think," Roland said. "Think, for your fathers' sakes."

" 'I do not shoot with my hand,' " Ed said. He suddenly felt far away, strange to himself. It was the way he'd felt when he had seen first the sling-shot and then the key in pieces of wood, just waiting for him to whittle them free ... and at the same time this feeling was not like that at all.

Roland was looking at him oddly. "Yes, Ed, you say true. A gun-slinger shoots with his mind. What have you thought of?"

"Nothing." He might have said more, but all at once a strange image—a strange memory—intervened: Roland hunkering by Jake at one of their stopping-points on the way to Lud. Both of them in front of an unlit campfire. Roland once more at his everlasting lessons. Jake's turn this time. Jake with the flint and steel, trying to

quick?en the fire. Spark af?ter spark lick?ing out and dy?ing in the dark. And Roland had said that he was be?ing sil?ly. That he was just be?ing . . . well. . . sil?ly.

“No,” Ed?die said. “He didn’t say that at all. At least not to the kid, he didn’t.”

“Ed?die?” Su?san?nah. Sound?ing con?cerned. Al?most fright?ened.

Well why don’t you ask him what he said, bro? That was Hen?ry’s voice, the voice of the Great Sage and Em?inent Junkie. First time in a long time. Ask him, he’s prac?ti?cal?ly sit?ting right next to you, go on and ask him what he said. Quit danc?ing around like a ba?by with a load in his di?apers.

Ex?cept that was a bad idea, be?cause that wasn’t the way things worked in Roland’s world. In Roland’s world ev?ery?thing was rid?dles, you didn’t shoot with your hand but with your mind, your moth?er?fuck?ing mind, and what did you say to some?one who wasn’t get?ting the spark in?to the kin?dling? Move your flint in clos?er, of course, and that’s what Roland had said: Move your flint in clos?er, and hold it steady.

Ex?cept none of that was what this was about. It was close, yes, but close on?ly counts in horse?shoes, as Hen?ry Dean had been wont to say be fore he be?came the Great Sage and Em?inent Junkie. Ed?die’s mem?ory was jink?ing a lit?tle be?cause Roland had em?bar?rassed him... shamed him . . . made a joke at his ex?pense . . . Prob?ably not on pur?pose, but... some?thing. Some?thing that had made him feel the way Hen?ry al?ways used to make him feel, of course it was, why else would Hen?ry be here af?ter such a long ab?sence?

All of them look?ing at him now. Even Oy.

“Go on,” he told Roland, sound?ing a lit?tle waspish. “You want?ed us to think, we’re think?ing, al?ready.” He him?self was think?ing so hard

(I shoot with my mind)

that his god?dam brains were al?most on fire, but he wasn’t go?ing to tell old long, tall, and ug?ly that. “Go on and ask Blaine some rid?dles. Do your part.”

“As you will, Ed?die.” Roland rose from his seat, went for?ward, and laid his hand on the scar?let rect?an?gle again. The route-?map reap?peared at once. The green dot had moved far?ther be?yond Rilea, but it was clear to Ed?die that the mono had slowed down sig?nif?icant?ly, ei?ther obey?ing some built-?in pro?gram or be?cause Blaine was hav?ing too much fun to hur?ry.

“IS YOUR KA-?TET READY TO CON?TIN?UE OUR FAIR-?DAY RID?DLING, ROLAND SON OF STEVEN?”

“Yes, Blaine,” Roland said, and to Ed?die his voice sound?ed heavy. “I will rid?dle you alone for awhile now. If you have no ob?jec?tion.”

“AS DINH AND FA?THER OF YOUR KA-?TET, SUCH IS YOUR RIGHT. WILL THESE BE FAIR-?DAY RID?DLES?”

“Yes.”

“GOOD.” Loath?some sat?is?fac?tion in that voice. “I WOULD HEAR MORE OF THOSE.”

“All right.” Roland took a deep breath, then be?gan. “Feed me and I live. Give me to drink and I die. What am I?”

“FIRE.” No hes?ita?tion. On?ly that in?suf?fer?able smug?ness, a tone which said That was old to me when your grand?moth?er was young, but try again! This is more fun

than I've had in centuries, so try again!

"I pass before the sun, Blaine, yet make no shadow. What am I?"

"WIND." No hesitation.

"You speak true, sai. Next. This is as light as a feather, yet no man can hold it for long."

"ONE'S BREATH." No hesitation.

Yet he did hesitate, Edie thought suddenly. Jake and Susanah were watching Roland with agitated concentration, fists clenched, willing him to ask Blaine the right riddle, the stumper, the one with the Get the Fuck Out of Jail Free card hidden inside it; Edie couldn't look at them—Suze, in particular—and keep his concentration. He lowered his gaze to his own hands, which were also clenched, and forced them to open on his lap. It was surprisingly hard to do. From the aisle he heard Roland continuing to trot out the golden oldies of his youth.

"Riddle me this, Blaine: If you break me, I'll not stop working. If you can touch me, my work is done. If you lose me, you must find me with a ring soon after. What am I?"

Susanah's breath caught for a moment, and although he was looking down, Edie knew she was thinking what he was thinking: that was a good one, a damned good one, maybe—

"THE HUMAN HEART," Blaine said. Still with not a whit of hesitation. "THIS RIDDLE IS BASED IN LARGE PART UPON HUMAN POETIC CONCEITS; SEE FOR INSTANCE JOHN AVERY, SIRODIA HUNTZ, DOLA, WILLIAM BLAKE, JAMES TATE, VERONICA MAYS, AND OTHERS. IT IS REMARKABLE HOW HUMAN BEINGS PITCH THEIR MINDS ON LOVE. YET IT IS CONSTANT FROM ONE LEVEL OF THE TOWER TO THE NEXT, EVEN IN THESE DEGENERATE DAYS. CONTINUE, ROLAND OF GILEAD."

Susanah's breath resumed. Edie's hands wanted to clench again, but he wouldn't let them. Move your flint in closer, he thought in Roland's voice. Move your flint in closer, for your father's sake!

And Blaine the Mono ran on, southeast under the Demon Moon.

CHAPTER II

THE FALLS OF

THE HOUNDS

1

Jake didn't know how easy or difficult Blaine might find the last ten puzzles in Riddle-De-Dum!, but they looked pretty tough to him. Of course, he reminded himself, he wasn't a thinking-machine with a citywide bank of computers to draw on. All he could do was go for it; God hates a coward, as Edie sometimes said. If the last ten failed, he would try Aaron Deepneau's Samson riddle (Out of the eater came forth meat, and so on). If that one also failed, he'd probably . . . shit, he didn't know what he'd do, or even how he'd feel. The truth is, Jake thought, I'm fried.

And why not? He had gone through an extraordinary swarm of emotions in the last eight hours or so. First, terror: of being sure he and Oy were going to drop off

the sus?pen?sion bridge and to their deaths in the Riv?er Send; of be?ing driv?en through the crazed maze that was Lud by Gash?er; of hav?ing to look in?to the Tick-Tock Man's ter?ri?ble green eyes and try to an?swer his unan?swer?able ques?tions about time, Nazis, and the na?ture of tran?si?tive cir?cuits. Be?ing ques?tioned by Tick-?Tock had been like hav?ing to take a fi?nal ex?am in hell.

Then the ex?hil?ara?tion of be?ing res?cued by Roland (and Oy; with?out Oy he would al?most cer?tain?ly be toast now), the won?der of all they had seen be?neath the city, his awe at the way Su?san?nah had solved Blaine's gate-?rid?dle, and the fi?nal mad rush to get aboard the mono be?fore Blaine could re?lease the stocks of nerve-?gas stored un?der Lud.

Af?ter sur?viv?ing all that, a kind of blissed-?out sure?ty had set?tled over him—of course Roland would stump Blaine, who would then keep his part of the bar?gain and set them down safe and sound at his fi?nal stop (what?ev?er passed for Tope?ka in this world). Then they would find the Dark Tow?er and do what?ev?er they were sup?posed to do there, right what need?ed right?ing, fix what need?ed fix?ing. And then? They Lived Hap?pi?ly Ev?er Af?ter, of course. Like folk in a fairy tale.

Ex?cept...

They shared each oth?er's thoughts, Roland had said; shar?ing khef was part of what ka-?tet meant. And what had been seep?ing in?to Jake's thoughts ev?er since Roland stepped in?to the aisle and be?gan to try Blaine with rid?dles from his young days was a sense of doom. It wasn't com?ing just from the gun?slinger; Su?san?nah was send?ing out the same grim blue-?black vibe. On?ly Ed?die wasn't send?ing it, and that was be?cause he'd gone off some?where, was chas?ing his own thoughts. That might be good, but there were no guar?an?tees, and—

—and Jake be?gan to be scared again. Worse, he felt des?per?ate, like a crea?ture that is pressed deep?er and deep?er in?to its fi?nal com?er by a re?lent less foe. His fin?gers worked rest?less?ly in Oy's fur, and when he looked down at them, he re?alized an amaz?ing thing: the hand which Oy had bit?ten in?to to keep from falling off the bridge no longer hurt. He could see the holes the bum?bler's teeth had made, and blood was still crust?ed in his palm and on his wrist, but the hand it?self no longer hurt. He flexed it cau?tious?ly. There was some pain, but it was low and dis?tant, hard?ly there at all.

"Blaine, what may go up a chim?ney down but can?not go down a chim?ney up?"

"A LA?DY'S PARA?SOL," Blaine replied in that tone of jol?ly com?pla cen?cy which Jake, too, was com?ing to loathe.

"Thankee-?sai, Blaine, once again you have an?swered true. Next—"

"Roland?"

The gun?slinger looked around at Jake, and his look of con?cen?tra?tion light?ened a bit. It wasn't a smile, but it went a lit?tle way in that di?rec?tion, at least, and Jake was glad.

"What is it, Jake?"

"My hand. It was hurt?ing like crazy, and now it's stopped!"

"SHUCKS," Blaine said in the drawl?ing voice of John Wayne. "I COULDN'T WATCH A HOUND SUF?FER WITH A MASHED-?UP FOREPAW LIKE THAT, LET ALONE A FINE LIT?TLE TRAIL HAND LIKE YOUR?SELF. SO I FIXED

IT UP.”

“How?” Jake asked.

“LOOK ON THE ARM OF YOUR SEAT.”

Jake did, and saw a faint gridwork of lines. It looked a little like the speaker of the transistor radio he'd had when he was seven or eight.

“ANOTHER BENEFIT OF TRAVELING BARONY CLASS,” Blaine went on in his smug voice. It crossed Jake's mind that Blaine would fit in perfectly at the Piper School. The world's first slo-trans, dipolar nerd. “THE HAND-SCAN SPECTRUM MAGNIFIER IS A DIAGNOSTIC TOOL ALSO CAPABLE OF ADMINISTERING MINOR FIRST AID, SUCH AS I HAVE PERFORMED ON YOU. IT IS ALSO A NUTRIENT DELIVERY SYSTEM, A BRAIN-PATTERN RECORDING DEVICE, A STRESS-ANALYZER, AND AN EMOTION-HANCER WHICH CAN NATURALLY STIMULATE THE PRODUCTION OF ENDORPHINS. HAND-SCAN IS ALSO CAPABLE OF CREATING VERY BELIEVABLE ILLUSIONS AND HALUCINATIONS. WOULD YOU CARE TO HAVE YOUR FIRST SEXUAL EXPERIENCE WITH A NOTED SEX-GODDESS FROM YOUR LEVEL OF THE TOWER, JAKE OF NEW YORK? PERHAPS MARILYN MONROE, RAQUEL WELCH, OR EDITH BUNKER?”

Jake laughed. He guessed that laughing at Blaine might be risky, but this time he just couldn't help it. “There is no Edith Bunker,” he said. “She's just a character on a TV show. The actress's name is, um, Jean Stapleton. Also, she looks like Mrs. Shaw. She's our housekeeper. Nice, but not—you know—a babe.”

A long silence from Blaine. When the voice of the computer returned, a certain coldness had replaced the joke ain't-we-having-fun tone of voice.

“I CRY YOUR PARDON, JAKE OF NEW YORK. I ALSO WITHDRAW MY OFFER OF A SEXUAL EXPERIENCE.”

That'll teach me, Jake thought, raising one hand to cover a smile. Aloud (and in what he hoped was a suitably humble tone of voice) he said:

“That's okay, Blaine. I think I'm still a little young for that, anyway.”

Susanah and Roland were looking at each other. Susanah didn't know who Edith Bunker was—All in the Family hadn't been on the tube in her when. But she grasped the essence of the situation just the same;

Jake saw her full lips form one soundless word and send it to the gun-slinger like a message in a soap bubble:

Mistake.

Yes. Blaine had made a mistake. More, Jake Chambers, a boy of eleven, had picked up on it. And if Blaine had made one, he could make another. Maybe there was hope after all. Jake decided he would treat that possibility as he had treated the graf of River Crossing and allow himself just a little.

2

Roland nodded imperceptibly at Susanah, then turned back to the front of the coach, presumably to resume riding. Before he could open his mouth, Jake felt his body pushed forward. It was funny; you couldn't feel a thing when the mono was running flat-out, but the minute it began to decelerate, you knew.

“HERE IS SOMETHING YOU REALLY OUGHT TO SEE,” Blaine said. He

sound?ed cheer?ful again, but Jake didn't trust that tone; he had some?times heard his fa?ther start tele?phone con?ver?sa?tions that way (usu al?ly with some sub?or?di?nate who had FUB, Fucked Up Big), and by the end Elmer Cham?bers would be up on his feet, bent over the desk like a man with a stom?ach cramp and scream?ing at the top of his lungs, his cheeks red as radish?es and the cir?cles of flesh un?der his eyes as pur?ple as an egg?plant. "I HAVE TO STOP HERE, ANY?WAY, AS I MUST SWITCH TO BAT?TERY POW?ER AT THIS POINT AND THAT MEANS PRE-CHARG?ING."

The mono stopped with a bare?ly per?cep?ti?ble jerk. The walls around them once more drained of col?or and then be?came trans?par?ent. Su?san?nah gasped with fear and won?der. Roland moved to his left, felt for the side of the coach so he wouldn't bump his head, then leaned for?ward with his hands on his knees and his eyes nar?rowed. Oy be?gan to bark again. On?ly Ed?die seemed un?moved by the breath?tak?ing view which had been pro vid?ed them by the Barony Coach's vi?sual mode. He glanced around once, face pre?oc?cu?pied and some?how bleary with thought, and then looked down at his hands again. Jake glanced at him with brief cu?rios?ity, then stared back out.

They were halfway across a vast chasm and seemed to be hov?er?ing on the moon-dust?ed air. Be?yond them Jake could see a wide, boil?ing riv?er. Not the Send, un?less the rivers in Roland's world were some?how able to run in dif?fer?ent di?rec?tions at dif?fer?ent points in their cours?es (and Jake didn't know enough about Mid-?World to en?tire?ly dis?count that pos?si bil?ity); al?so, this riv?er was not placid but rag?ing, a tor?rent that came tum?bling out of the moun?tains like some?thing that was pissed off and want?ed to brawl.

For a mo?ment Jake looked at the trees which dressed the steep slopes along the sides of this riv?er, reg?is?ter?ing with re?lief that they looked pret?ty much all right—the sort of firs you'd ex?pect to see in the moun?tains of Col?orado or Wyoming, say—and then his eyes were dragged back to the lip of the chasm. Here the tor?rent broke apart and dropped in a wa?ter?fall so wide and so deep that Jake thought it made Ni?agara, where he had gone with his par?ents (one of three fam?ily va?ca?tions he could re?mem?ber; two had been cut short by ur?gent calls from his fa?ther's Net?work), look like the kind you might see in a third-?rate theme-?park. The air fill?ing the en clos?ing semi?cir?cle of the falls was fur?ther thick?ened by an up rush?ing mist that looked like steam; in it half a dozen moon?bows gleamed like gaudy, in?ter?lock?ing dream-?jew?el?ry. To Jake they looked like the over?lap?ping rings which sym?bol?ized the Olympics.

Jut?ing from the cen?ter of the falls, per?haps two hun?dred feet be?low the point where the riv?er ac?tu?al?ly went over the drop, were two enor?mous stone pro?tru?sions. Al?though Jake had no idea how a sculp?tor (or a team of them) could have got?ten down to where they were, he found it all but im pos?si?ble to be?lieve they had sim?ply erod?ed that way. They looked like the heads of enor?mous, snarling dogs. The Falls of the Hounds, he thought. There was one more stop be yond this—Dash?erville—and then Tope?ka. Last stop. Ev?ery?body out.

"ONE MO?MENT," Blaine said. "I MUST AD?JUST THE VOL?UME FOR YOU TO EN?JOY THE FULL EF?FECT."

There was a brief, whis?per?y hoot?ing sound—a kind of me?chan?ical throat clear?ing—and then they were as?sault?ed by a vast roar. It was wa?ter—a bil?lion gal?lons a minute, for all Jake knew—pour?ing over the lip of the chasm and falling per?haps two thou?sand feet in?to the deep stone basin at the base of the falls. Stream?ers of mist float?ed past the blunt al?most-?faces of the jut?ting dogs like steam from the vents of hell. The lev?el of sound kept climb?ing. Now Jake’s whole head vi?brat?ed with it, and as he clapped his hands over his ears, he saw Roland, Ed?die, and Su?san?nah do ing the same. Oy was bark?ing, but Jake couldn’t hear him. Su?san?nah’s lips were mov?ing again, and again he could read the words—Stop it, Blaine, stop it!—but he couldn’t hear them any more than he could hear Oy’s barks, al?though he was sure Su?san?nah was scream?ing at the top of her lungs. And still Blaine in?creased the sound of the wa?ter?fall, un?til Jake could feel his eyes shak?ing in their sock?ets and he was sure his ears were go?ing to short out like over?stressed stereo speak?ers.

Then it was over. They still hung above the moon-?misty drop, the moon?bows still made their slow and dream?like rev?olu?tions be?fore the cur?tain of end?less?ly falling wa?ter, the wet and bru?tal stone faces of the dog-?guardians con?tin?ued to jut out of the tor?rent, but that world-?end?ing thun?der was gone.

For a mo?ment Jake thought what he’d feared had hap?pened, that he had gone deaf. Then he re?al?ized that he could hear Oy, still bark?ing, and Su?san?nah cry?ing. At first these sounds seemed dis?tant and flat, as if his ears had been packed with crack?er-crumbs, but then they be?gan to clar?ify.

Ed?die put his arm around Su?san?nah’s shoul?ders and looked to?ward the route-?map. “Nice guy, Blaine.”

“I MERE?LY THOUGHT YOU WOULD EN?JOY HEAR?ING THE SOUND OF THE FALLS AT FULL VOL?UME,” Blaine said. His boom ing voice sound?ed laugh?ing and in?jured at the same time. “I THOUGHT IT MIGHT HELP YOU TO FOR?GET MY RE?GRET?TABLE MIS?TAKE IN THE MAT?TER OF EDITH BUNKER.”

My fault, Jake thought. Blaine may just be a ma?chine, and a sui?ci?dal one at that, but he still doesn’t like to be laughed at.

He sat be?side Su?san?nah and put his own arm around her. He could still hear the Falls of the Hounds, but the sound was now dis?tant.

“What hap?pens here?” Roland asked. “How do you charge your bat?ter?ies?”

“YOU WILL SEE SHORT?LY, GUN?SLINGER. IN THE MEAN TIME, TRY ME WITH A RID?DLE.”

“All right, Blaine. Here’s one of Cort’s own mak?ing, and has posed many in its time.”

“I AWAIT IT WITH GREAT IN?TER?EST.”

Roland, paus?ing per?haps to gath?er his thoughts, looked up at the place where the roof of the coach had been and where there was now on?ly a star?ry spill across a black sky (Jake could pick out Aton and Ly?dia—Old Star and Old Moth?er—and was odd?ly com?fort?ed by the sight of them, still glar?ing at each oth?er from their ac?cus?tomed places). Then the gun?slinger looked back at the light?ed rect?an?gle which served them as Blaine’s face.

“ ‘We are very lit?tle crea?tures; all of us have dif?fer?ent fea?tures. One of us in glass is set; one of us you’ll find in jet. An?oth?er you may see in tin, and a fourth is boxed with?in. If the fifth you should pur?sue, it can nev?er fly from you. What are we?’ ”

“A AND E AND I AND O AND U,” Blaine replied. “THE VOW?ELS OF THE HIGH SPEECH.” Still no hes?ita?tion, not so much as a whit. On?ly that voice, mock?ing and just about two steps from laugh?ter; the voice of a cru?el lit?tle boy watch?ing bugs run around on top of a hot stove. “AL?THOUGH THAT PAR?TIC?ULAR RID?DLE IS NOT FROM YOUR TEACH?ER, ROLAND OF GILEAD; I KNOW IT FROM JONATHAN SWIFT OF LON?DON—A CITY IN THE WORLD YOUR FRIENDS COME FROM.”

“Thankee-?sai,” Roland said, and his sai sound?ed like a sigh. “Your an?swer is true, Blaine, and un?doubt?ed?ly what you be?lieve of the rid?dle’s ori?gins is true as well. That Cort knew of oth?er worlds is some?thing I long sus?pect?ed. I think he may have held palaver with the man?ni who lived out?side the city.”

“I CARE NOT ABOUT THE MAN?NI, ROLAND OF GILEAD. THEY WERE AL?WAYS A FOOL?ISH SECT. TRY ME WITH AN OTH?ER RID?DLE.”

“All right. What has—”

“HOLD, HOLD. THE FORCE OF THE BEAM GATH?ERS. LOOK NOT DI?RECT?LY AT THE HOUNDS, MY IN?TER?EST?ING NEW FRIENDS! AND SHIELD YOUR EYES!”

Jake looked away from the colos?sal rock sculp?tures jut?ting from the falls, but didn’t get his hand up quite in time. With his pe?riph?er?al vi?sion he saw those fea?ture?less heads sud?den?ly de?vel?op eyes of a fierce?ly glow ing blue. Jagged tines of light?ning leaped out of them and to?ward the mono. Then Jake was ly?ing on the car?pet?ed floor of the Barony Coach with the heels of his hands past?ed against his closed eyes and the sound of Oy whin?ing in one faint?ly ring?ing ear. Be?yond Oy, he heard the crack?le of elec?tric?ity as it stormed around the mono.

When Jake opened his eyes again, the Falls of the Hounds were gone;

Blaine had opaqued the cab?in. He could still hear the sound, though—a wa?ter?fall of elec?tric?ity, a force some?how drawn from the Beam and shot out through the eyes of the stone heads. Blaine was feed?ing him?self with it, some?how. When we go on, Jake thought, he ‘ll be run?ning on bat?ter?ies. Then Lud re?al?ly will be be?hind us. For good.

”Blaine,” Roland said. ”How is the pow?er of the Beam stored in that place? What makes it come from the eyes of yon stone tem?ple-?dogs? How do you use it?”

Si?lence from Blaine.

”And who carved them?” Ed?die asked. ”Was it the Great Old Ones? It wasn’t, was it? There were peo?ple even be?fore them. Or ... were they peo?ple?”

More si?lence from Blaine. And maybe that was good. Jake wasn’t sure how much he want?ed to know about the Falls of the Hounds, or what went on be?neath them. He had been in the dark of Roland’s world be?fore, and had seen enough to be?lieve that most of what was grow?ing there was nei?ther good nor safe.

”Bet?ter not to ask him,” the voice of Lit?tle Blaine drift?ed down from over their heads. ”Safer.”

”Don’t ask him sil?ly ques?tions, he won’t play sil?ly games,” Ed?die said. That dis?tant,

dream?ing look had come on?to his face again, and when Su?san?nah spoke his name, he didn't seem to hear.

3

Roland sat down across from Jake and scrubbed his right hand slow?ly up the stub?ble on his right cheek, an un?con?scious ges?ture he seemed to make on?ly when he was feel?ing tired or doubt?ful. "I'm run?ning out of rid?dles," he said.

Jake looked back at him, star?tled. The gun?slinger had posed fifty or more to the com?put?er, and Jake sup?posed that was a lot to just yank out of your head with no prepa?ra?tion, but when you con?sidered that rid?dling had been such a big deal in the place where Roland had grown up ...

He seemed to read some of this on Jake's face, for a small smile, lemon-?bit?ter, touched the com?ers of his mouth, and he nod?ded as if the boy had spo?ken out loud.

"I don't un?der?stand, ei?ther. If you'd asked me yes?ter?day or the day be?fore, I would have told you that I had at least a thou?sand rid?dles stored up in the junkbin I keep at the back of my mind. Per?haps two thou?sand. But. . ."

He lift?ed one shoul?der in a shrug, shook his head, rubbed his hand up his cheek again.

"It's not like for?get?ting. It's as if they were nev?er there in the first place. What's hap?pen?ing to the rest of the world is hap?pen?ing to me, I reckon."

"You're mov?ing on," Su?san?nah said, and looked at Roland with an ex?pres?sion of pity which Roland could look back at for on?ly a sec?ond or two; it was as if he felt burned by her re?gard. "Like ev?ery?thing else here."

"Yes, I fear so." He looked at Jake, lips tight, eyes sharp. "Will you be ready with the rid?dles from your book when I call on you?"

"Yes."

"Good. And take heart. We're not fin?ished yet."

Out?side, the dim crack?le of elec?tric?ity ceased.

"I HAVE FED MY BAT?TER?IES AND ALL IS WELL," Blaine an?nounced.

"Mar?velous," Su?san?nah said dry?ly.

"Luss!" Oy agreed, catch?ing Su?san?nah's sar?cas?tic tone ex?act?ly.

"I HAVE A NUM?BER OF SWITCH?ING FUNC?TIONS TO PER FORM. THESE WILL TAKE ABOUT FORTY MIN?UTES AND ARE LARGE?LY AU?TO?MAT?IC. WHILE THIS SWITCHOVER TAKES PLACE AND THE AC?COM?PA?NY?ING CHECK?LIST IS RUN?NING, WE SHALL CON?TIN?UE OUR CON?TEST. I AM EN?JOY?ING IT VERY MUCH."

"It's like when you have to switch over from elec?tric to diesel on the train to Boston," Ed?die said. He still sound?ed as if he wasn't quite with them. "At Hart?ford or New Haven or one of those oth?er places where no one in their right fuck?ing mind would want to live."

"Ed?die?" Su?san?nah asked. "What are you—"

Roland touched her shoul?der and shook his head.

"NEV?ER MIND ED?DIE OF NEW YORK," Blaine said in his ex?pan sive, gosh-but-?this-?is-?fun voice.

"That's right," Ed?die said. "Nev?er mind Ed?die of New York."

"HE KNOWS NO GOOD RID?DLES. BUT YOU KNOW MANY, ROLAND OF

GILEAD. TRY ME WITH AN?OTH?ER.”

And, as Roland did just that, Jake thought of his Fi?nal Es?say. Blaine is a pain, he had writ?ten there. Blaine is a pain and that is the truth. It was the truth, all right.

The stone truth.

A lit?tle less than an hour lat?er, Blaine the Mono be?gan to move again.

4

Su?san?nah watched with dread?ful fas?ci?na?tion as the flash?ing dot ap?proached Dash?erville, passed it, and made its fi?nal dog?leg for home. The dot’s move?ment said that Blaine was mov?ing a bit more slow?ly now that it had switched over to bat?ter?ies, and she fan?cied the lights in the Barony Coach were a lit?tle dim?mer, but she didn’t be?lieve it would make much dif?fer ence, in the end. Blaine might reach his ter?mi?nus in Tope?ka do?ing six hun?dred miles an hour in?stead of eight hun?dred, but his last load of pas sen?gers would be tooth?paste ei?ther way.

Roland was al?so slow?ing down, go?ing deep?er and deep?er in?to that men?tal junkbin of his to find rid?dles. Yet he did find them, and he re?fused to give up. As al?ways.

Ev?er since he had be?gun teach?ing her to shoot, Su san?nah had felt a re?luc?tant love for Roland of Gilead, a feel?ing that seemed a mix?ture of ad?mi?ra?tion, fear, and pity. She thought she would nev?er re?al?ly like him (and that the Det?ta Walk?er part of her might al?ways hate him for the way he had seized hold of her and dragged her, rav?ing, in?to the sun), but her love was nonethe?less strong. He had, af?ter all, saved Ed?die Dean’s life and soul; had res?cued her beloved. She must love him for that if for noth?ing else. But she loved him even more, she sus?pect?ed, for the way he would nev?er, nev?er give up. The word re?treat didn’t seem to be in his vo?cab?ulary, even when he was dis?cour?aged ... as he so clear?ly was now.

“Blaine, where may you find roads with?out carts, forests with?out trees, cities with?out hous?es?”

“ON A MAP.”

“You say true, sai. Next. I have a hun?dred legs but can?not stand, a long neck but no head; I eat the maid’s life. What am I?”

“A BROOM, GUN?SLINGER. AN?OTH?ER VARI?ATION ENDS, ‘I EASE THE MAID’S LIFE.’ I LIKE YOURS BET?TER.”

Roland ig?nored this. “Can?not be seen, can?not be felt, can?not be heard, can?not be smelt. It lies be?hind the stars and be?neath the hills. Ends life and kills laugh?ter.

What is it, Blaine?”

“THE DARK.”

“Thankee-?sai, you speak true.”

The di?min?ished right hand slid up the right cheek—the old fret?ful ges?ture—and the minute scratch?ing sound pro?duced by the cal?lused pads of his fin?gers made Su?san?nah shiv?er. Jake sat cross-?legged on the floor, look?ing at the gun?slinger with a kind of fierce in?ten?si?ty.

“This thing runs but can?not walk, some?times sings but nev?er talks. Lacks arms, has hands; lacks a head but has a face. What is it, Blaine?”

“A CLOCK.”

“Shit,” Jake whis?pered, lips com?press?ing.

Su?san?nah looked over at Ed?die and felt a pass?ing rip?ple of ir?ri?ta?tion. He seemed to

have lost in?ter?est in the whole thing—had “zoned out,” in his weird 1980s slang. She thought to throw an el?bow in?to his side, wake him up a lit?tle, then re?mem?bered Roland shak?ing his head at her and didn’t. You wouldn’t know he was think?ing, not from that slack ex?pres sion on his face, but maybe he was. If so, you bet?ter hur?ry it up a lit?tle, pre?cious, she thought. The dot on the route map was still clos?er to Dash?erville than Tope?ka, but it would reach the halfway point with?in the next fif?teen min?utes or so.

And still the match went on, Roland serv?ing ques?tions, Blaine send ing the an?swers whistling right back at him, low over the net and out of reach.

What builds up cas?tles, tears down moun?tains, makes some blind, helps oth?ers to see? SAND.

Thankee-?sai.

What lives in win?ter, dies in sum?mer, and grows with its roots up ward? AN ICI?CLE.

Blaine. you say true.

Man walks over; man walks un?der; in time of war he bums asun?der? A BRIDGE.

Thankee-?sai.

A seem?ing?ly end?less pa?rade of rid?dles marched past her, one af?ter the oth?er, un?til she lost all sense of their fun and play?ful?ness. Had it been so in the days of Roland’s youth, she won?dered, dur?ing the rid?dle con?tests of Wide Earth and Full Earth, when he and his friends (al?though she had an idea they hadn’t all been his friends, no, not by a long chalk) had vied for the Fair-?Day goose? She guessed that the an?swer was prob?ably yes. The win?ner had prob?ably been the one who could stay fresh longest, keep his poor blud?geoned brains aer?at?ed some?how.

The killer was the way Blaine came back with the an?swer so damned prompt?ly each time. No mat?ter how hard the rid?dle might seem to her, Blaine served it right back to their side of the court, ka-?slam.

“Blaine, what has eyes yet can?not see?”

“THERE ARE FOUR AN?SWERS,” Blaine replied. “NEE?DLES, STORMS, POTA?TOES, AND A TRUE LOVER.”

“Thankee-?sai, Blaine, you speak—”

“LIS?TEN. ROLAND OF GILEAD. LIS?TEN, KA-?TET”

Roland fell silent at once, his eyes nar?row?ing, his head slight?ly cocked.

“YOU WILL SHORT?LY HEAR MY EN?GINES BE?GIN TO CY?CLE UP,” Blaine said. “WE ARE NOW EX?ACT?LY SIX?TY MIN?UTES OUT OF TOPE?KA. AT THIS POINT—”

“If we’ve been rid?ing for sev?en hours or more, I grew up with the Brady Bunch,” Jake said.

Su?san?nah looked around ap?pre?hen?sive?ly, ex?pect?ing some new ter?ror or small act of cru?el?ty in re?sponse to Jake’s sar?casm, but Blaine on?ly chuck led. When he spoke again, the voice of Humphrey Bog?art had resur?faced.

“TIME’S DIF?FER?ENT HERE, SHWEET?HEART. YOU MUST KNOW THAT BY NOW. BUT DON’T WOR?RY; THE FUN?DAMEN TAL THINGS AP?PLY AS TIME GOES BY. WOULD I LIE TO YOU?”

“Yes,” Jake mut?tered.

That ap?par?ent?ly struck Blaine's fun?ny bone, be?cause he be?gan to laugh again—the mad, me?chan?ical laugh?ter that made Su?san?nah think of fun?hous?es in sleazy amuse?ment parks and road?side car?ni?vals. When the lights be?gan to pulse in sync with the laugh?ter, she shut her eyes and put her hands over her ears.

“Stop it, Blaine! Stop it!”

“BEG PAR?DON, MA'AM,” drawled the aw-?shucks voice of Jim?my Stew?art.

“AH'M RIGHT SOR?RY IF I RU?INT YOUR EARS WITH MY RIS?ABIL?ITY.”

“Ru?in this,” Jake said, and hoist?ed his mid?dle fin?ger at the route-?map.

Su?san?nah ex?pect?ed Ed?die to laugh—you could count on him to be amused by vul?gar?ity at any time of the day or night, she would have said—but Ed?die on?ly con?tin?ued look?ing down at his lap, his fore?head creased, his eyes va?cant, his mouth hung slight?ly agape. He looked a lit?tle too much like the vil?lage id?iot for com?fort, Su?san?nah thought, and again had to re?strain her?self from throw?ing an el?bow in?to his side to get that doltish look off his face. She wouldn't re?strain her?self for much longer; if they were go?ing to die at the end of Blaine's run, she want?ed Ed?die's arms around her when it hap?pened, Ed?die's eyes on her, Ed?die's mind with hers.

But for now, bet?ter let him be.

“AT THIS POINT,” Blaine re?sumed in his nor?mal voice, “I IN?TEND TO BE?GIN WHAT I LIKE TO THINK OF AS MY KAMIKAZE RUN. THIS WILL QUICK?LY DRAIN MY BAT?TER?IES, BUT I THINK THE TIME FOR CON?SER?VA?TION HAS PASSED, DON'T YOU? WHEN I STRIKE THE TRANSTEEL PIERS AT THE END OF THE TRACK, I SHOULD BE TRAV?EL?LING AT BET?TER THAN NINE HUN?DRED MILES AN HOUR—FIVE HUN?DRED AND THIR?TY IN WHEELS, THAT IS. SEE YOU LAT?ER, AL?LI?GA?TOR, AF?TER AWHILE, CRO?CO DILE, DON'T FOR?GET TO WRITE. I TELL YOU THIS IN THE SPIR?IT OF FAIR PLAY, MY IN?TER?EST?ING NEW FRIENDS. IF YOU HAVE BEEN SAV?ING YOUR BEST RID?DLES FOR LAST, YOU MIGHT DO WELL TO POSE THEM TO ME NOW.”

The un?mis?tak?able greed in Blaine's voice—its naked de?sire to hear and solve their best rid?dles be?fore it killed them—made Su?san?nah feel tired and old.

“I might not have time even so to pose you all my very best ones,” Roland said in a ca?sual, con?sid?er?ing tone of voice. “That would be a shame, wouldn't it?”

A pause en?sued—brief, but more of a hes?ita?tion than the com?put?er had ac?cord?ed any of Roland's rid?dles—and then Blaine chuck?led. Su?san nah hat?ed the sound of its mad laugh?ter, but there was a cyn?ical weariness in this chuck?le that chilled her even more deeply. Per?haps be?cause it was al?most sane.

“GOOD, GUN?SLINGER. A VALIANT EF?FORT. BUT YOU ARE NOT SCHEHERAZADE, NOR DO WE HAVE A THOU?SAND AND ONE NIGHTS IN WHICH TO HOLD PALAVER.”

“I don't un?der?stand you. I know not this Scheherazade.”

“NO MAT?TER. SU?SAN?NAH CAN FILL YOU IN, IF YOU RE?AL?LY WANT TO KNOW. PER?HAPS EVEN ED?DIE. THE POINT, ROLAND, IS THAT I'LL NOT BE DRAWN ON BY THE PROMISE OF MORE RID?DLES. WE VIE FOR

THE GOOSE. COME TOPE?KA, IT SHALL BE AWARD?ED, ONE WAY OR AN?OTH?ER. DO YOU UN?DER?STAND THAT?“

Once more the di?min?ished hand went up Roland’s cheek; once more Su?san?nah heard the minute rasp of his fin?gers against the wiry stub?ble of his beard.

”We play for keeps. No one cries off.“

”COR?RECT. NO ONE CRIES OFF.“

”All right, Blaine, we play for keeps and no one cries off. Here’s the next.“

”AS AL?WAYS, I AWAIT IT WITH PLEA?SURE.“

Roland looked down at Jake. ”Be ready with yours, Jake; I’m al?most at the end of mine.“

Jake nod?ded.

Be?neath them, the mono’s slo-?trans en?gines con?tin?ued to cy?cle up-?mat beat-?beat-beat which Su?san?nah did not so much hear as feel in the hinges of her jaw, the hol?lows of her tem?ples, the pulse-?points of her wrists.

It’s not go?ing to hap?pen un?less there’s a stumper in Jake’s book, she thought.

Roland can’t pose Blame, and I think he knows it. I think he knew it an hour ago.

”Blame, I oc?cur once in a minute, twice in ev?ery mo?ment, but not once in a hun?dred thou?sand years. What am I?“

And so the con?test would con?tin?ue, Su?san?nah re?al?ized, Roland ask?ing and Blaine an?swer?ing with his in?creas?ing?ly ter?ri?ble lack of hes?ita?tion, like an all-?see?ing, all-know?ing god. Su?san?nah sat with her cold hands clasped in her lap and watched the glow?ing dot draw nigh Tope?ka, the place where all rail ser?vice end?ed, the place where the path of their ka-?tet would end in the clear?ing. She thought about the Hounds of the Falls, how they had jut?ted from the thun?der?ing white bil?lows be?low the dark and starshot sky; she thought of their eyes.

Their elec?tric-?blue eyes.

CHAP?TER III

the fair-?day goose

1

Ed?die Dean—who did not know Roland some?times thought of him as ka mai, ka’s fool—heard all of it and heard none of it; saw all of it and saw none of it. The on?ly thing to re?al?ly make an im?pres?sion on him once the rid?dling be?gan in earnest was the fire flash?ing from the stone eyes of the Hounds; as he raised his hand to shield his eyes from that chain-?light?ning glare, he thought of the Por?tal of the Beam in the Clear?ing of the Bear, how he had pressed his ear against it and heard the dis?tant, dreamy rum?ble of ma?chin?ery.

Watch?ing the eyes of the Hounds light up, lis?ten?ing as Blaine drew that cur?rent in?to his bat?ter?ies, pow?er?ing up for his fi?nal plunge across Mid-?World, Ed?die had thought: Not all is silent in the halls of the dead and the rooms of ru?in. Even now some of the stuff the Old Ones left be hind still works. And that’s re?al?ly the hor?ror of it, wouldn’t ‘t you say? Yes. The ex?act hor?ror of it.

Ed?die had been with his friends for a short time af?ter that, men?tal?ly as well as phys?ical?ly, but then he had fall?en back in?to his thoughts again. Ed?die’s zonin. Hen?ry would have said. Let ‘im be.

It was the im?age of Jake strik?ing flint and steel that kept re?cur?ring; he would al?low

his mind to dwell on it for a second or two, like a bee alighting on some sweet flower, and then he would take off again. Because that memory wasn't what he wanted; it was just the way in to what he wanted, another door like the ones on the beach of the Western Sea, or the one he had scraped in the dirt of the speaking ring before they had drawn Jake... only this door was in his mind. What he wanted was behind it; what he was doing was kind of... well... holding the lock.

Zoning, in Henry-speak.

His brother had spent most of his time putting Eddie down—because Henry had been afraid of him and jealous of him, Eddie had finally come to realize—but he remembered one day when Henry had stunned him by saying something that was nice. Better than nice, actually; mind-boggling.

A bunch of them had been sitting in the alley behind Dahlie's, some of them eating Pop-sicles and Hoodsie Rocks, some of them smoking Kents from a pack Jimmie Polino—Jimmie Polio, they had all called him, because he had that fucked-up thing wrong with him, that clubfoot—had hawked out of his mother's dresser drawer. Henry, predictably enough, had been one of the ones smoking.

There were certain ways of referring to things in the gang Henry was a part of (and which Eddie, as his little brother, was also a part of); the argot of their miserable little ka-tet. In Henry's gang, you never beat anyone else up; you sent em home with a fuckin rupture. You never made out with a girl; you fucked that skag til she cried. You never got stoned; you went on a fuckin bombin-run. And you never brawled with another gang; you got in a fuckin piss.

The discussion that day had been about who you'd want with you if you got in a fuckin piss. Jimmie Polio (he got to talk first because he had supplied the cigarettes, which Henry's homeboys called the fuckin cancer-sticks) opted for Skipper Branigan, because, he said, Skipper wasn't afraid of anyone. One time, Jimmie said, Skipper got pissed off at this teacher—at the Friday night PAL dance, this was—and beat the living shit out of him. Sent THE FUCKIN CHAPTERONE home with a fuckin rupture, if you could dig it. That was his homie Skipper Branigan.

Everyone listened to this solemnly, nodding their heads as they ate their Rocks, sucked their Pop-sicles, or smoked their Kents. Everyone knew that Skipper Branigan was a fuckin pussy and Jimmie was full of shit, but no one said so. Christ, no. If they didn't pretend to believe Jimmie Polio's outrageous lies, no one would pretend to believe theirs.

Tommy Fredricks opted for John Parrelly. Georgie Pratt went for Csa-ba Drabnik, also known around the nabe as The Mad Fuckin Hungarian. Frank Duganelli nominated Larry McCain, even though Larry was in Juvenile Detention; Larry fuckin ruled, Frank said.

By then it was around to Henry Dean. He gave the question the weighty consideration it deserved, then put his arm around his surprised brother's shoulders. Eddie, he said. My little bro. He's the man.

They all stared at him, stunned—and none more stunned than Eddie. His jaw had been almost down to his belt-buckle. And then Jimmie Polio said. Come on. Henry, stop fuckin around. This a serious question. Who'd you want watching

your hack if the shit was gonna come down?

I am be?ing se?ri?ous. Hen?ry had replied.

Why Ed?die? Georgie Pratt had asked, echo?ing the ques?tion which had been in Ed?die's own mind. He couldn't 't fight his way out of a pa?per bag. A wet one. So why the fuck?

Hen?ry thought some more—not, Ed?die was con?vinced, be?cause he didn't know why, but be?cause he had to think about how to ar?tic?ulate it. Then he said: Be?cause when Ed?die's in that fuckin zone, he could talk the dev?il in?to set?ting him?self on fire.

The im?age of Jake re?turned, one mem?ory step?ping on an?oth?er. Jake scrap?ing steel on flint, flash?ing sparks at the kin?dling of their camp?fire, sparks that fell short and died be?fore they lit.

He could talk the dev?il in?to set?ting him?self on fire.

Move your flint in clos?er, Roland said, and now there was a third mem?ory, one of Roland at the door they'd come to at the end of the beach, Roland burn?ing with fever, close to death, shak?ing like a mara?ca, cough ing, his blue bom?bardier's eyes fixed on Ed?die, Roland say?ing, Come a lit?tle clos?er, Ed?die—come a lit?tle clos?er for your fa?ther's sake!

Be?cause he want?ed to grab me, Ed?die thought. Faint?ly, al?most as if it were com?ing through one of those mag?ic doors from some oth?er world, he heard Blaine telling them that the endgame had com?menced; if they had been sav?ing their best rid?dles, now was the time to trot them out. They had an hour.

An hour! On?ly an hour!

His mind tried to fix on that and Ed?die nudged it away. Some?thing was hap?pen?ing in?side him (at least he prayed it was), some des?per?ate game of as?so?ci?ation, and he couldn't let his mind get fucked up with dead?lines and con?se?quences and all that crap; if he did, he'd lose what ev?er chance he had. It was, in a way, like see?ing some?thing in a piece of wood, some?thing you could carve out—a bow, a sling?shot, per?haps a key to open some unimag?in?able door. You couldn't look too long, though, at least to start with. You'd lose it if you did. It was al?most as if you had to carve while your own back was turned.

He could feel Blaine's en?gines pow?er?ing up be?neath him. In his mind's eye he saw the flint flash against the steel, and in his mind's ear he heard Roland telling Jake to move the flint in clos?er. And don't hit it with the steel, Jake; scrape it.

Why am I here? If this isn't what I want, why does my mind keep com ing hack to this place?

Be?cause it's as close as I can get and still stay out of the hurt-?zone. On?ly a medi?um-?sized hurt, ac?tu?al?ly, but it made me think of Hen?ry. Be?ing put down by Hen?ry.

Hen?ry said you could talk the dev?il in?to set?ting him?self on fire.

Yes. I al?ways loved him for that. That was great.

And now Ed?die saw Roland move Jake's hands, one hold?ing flint and the oth?er steel, clos?er to the kin?dling. Jake was ner?vous. Ed?die could see it; Roland had seen it, too. And in or?der to ease his nerves, take his mind off the re?spon?si?bil?ity of light?ing the fire, Roland had—

He asked the kid a rid?dle.

Ed?die Dean blew breath in?to the key?hole of his mem?ory. And this time the tum?blers turned.

2

The green dot was clos?ing in on Tope?ka, and for the first time Jake felt vi bra?tion ... as if the track be?neath them had de?cayed to a point where Blaine's com?pen?sators could no longer com?plete?ly han?dle the prob?lem. With the sense of vi?bra?tion there at last came a feel?ing of speed. The walls and ceil?ing of the Barony Coach were still opaqued, but Jake found he didn't need to see the coun?try?side blur?ring past to imag?ine it. Blaine was rolling full out now, lead?ing his last son?ic boom across the waste lands to the place where Mid-?World end?ed, and Jake al?so found it easy to imag?ine the transteel piers at the end of the mono?rail. They would be paint?ed in di ag?onal stripes of yel?low and black. He didn't know how he knew that, but he did.

"TWEN?TY-?FIVE MIN?UTES," Blaine said com?pla?cent?ly. "WOULD YOU TRY ME AGAIN, GUN?SLINGER?"

"I think not, Blaine." Roland sound?ed ex?haust?ed. "I've done with you; you've beat?en me. Jake?"

Jake got to his feet and faced the route-?map. In his chest his heart?beat seemed very slow but very hard, each pulse like a fist slam?ming on a drum?head. Oy crouched be?tween his feet, look?ing anx?ious?ly up in?to his face.

"Hel?lo, Blaine," Jake said, and wet his lips.

"HEL?LO, JAKE OF NEW YORK." The voice was kind?ly—the voice, per?haps, of a nice old fel?low with a habit of mo?lest?ing the chil?dren he from time to time leads in?to the bush?es. "WOULD YOU TRY ME WITH RID?DLES FROM YOUR BOOK? OUR TIME TO?GETH?ER GROWS SHORT."

"Yes," Jake said. "I would try you with these rid?dles. Give me your un?der?stand?ing of the truth con?cern?ing each, Blaine."

"IT IS FAIR?LY SPO?KEN, JAKE OF NEW YORK. I WILL DO AS YOU ASK."

Jake opened the book to the place he had been keep?ing with his fin ger. Ten rid?dles. Eleven, count?ing Sam?son's rid?dle, which he was sav?ing for last. If Blaine an?swered them all (as Jake now be?lieved he prob?ably would), Jake would sit down next to Roland, take Oy on?to his lap, and wait for the end. There were, af?ter all, oth?er worlds than these.

"Lis?ten, Blaine: In a tun?nel of dark?ness lies a beast of iron. It can on?ly at?tack when pulled back. What is it?"

"A BUL?LET." No hes?ita?tion.

"Walk on the liv?ing, they don't even mum?ble. Walk on the dead, they mut?ter and grum?ble. What are they?"

"FALL?EN LEAVES." No hes?ita?tion, and if Jake re?al?ly knew in his heart that the game was lost, why did he feel such de?spair, such bit?ter?ness, such anger?

Be?cause he's a pain, that's why. Blaine is a re?al?ly BIG pain, and I'd like to push his face in it, just once. I think even mak?ing him stop is sec?ond to that on my wish-list.

Jake turned the page. He was very close to Rid?dle-?De-?Dum's tom-?out an?swer

section now; he could feel it under his finger, a kind of jagged lump. Very close to the end of the book. He thought of Aaron Deepneau in the Manhattan Restaurant of the Mind, Aaron Deepneau telling him to come back anytime, play a little chess, and oh just by the way, old fatso made a pretty good cup of coffee. A wave of homesickness so strong it was like dying swept over him. He felt he would have sold his soul for a look at New York; hell, he would have sold it for one deep lung-filling breath of Forty-second Street at rush hour.

He fought it off and went to the next ride.

"I am emeralds and diamonds, lost by the moon. I am found by the sun and picked up soon. What am I?"

"DEW."

Still relentless. Still hesitating.

The green dot grew closer to Topeka, closing the last of the distance on the route-map. One after another, Jake posed his rides; one after another, Blaine answered them. When Jake turned to the last page, he saw a boxed message from the author or editor or whatever you called someone who put together books like this: We hope you've enjoyed the unique combination of imagination and logic known as RIDDLING!

I haven't, Jake thought. I haven't enjoyed it one little bit, and I hope you choke. Yet when he looked at the question above the message, he felt a thin thread of hope. It seemed to him that, in this case, at least, they really had saved the best for last.

On the route-map, the green dot was now no more than a finger's width from Topeka.

"Hurry up, Jake," Susanah murmured.

"Blaine?"

"YES, JAKE OF NEW YORK."

"With no wings, I fly. With no eyes, I see. With no arms, I climb. More frightening than any beast, stronger than any foe. I am cunning, ruthless, and tall; in the end, I rule all. What am I?"

The gunslinger had looked up, blue eyes gleaming. Susanah began to turn her expectant face from Jake to the route-map. Yet Blaine's answer was as prompt as ever: "THE IMAGINATION OF MAN AND WOMAN."

Jake briefly considered arguing, then thought, Why waste our time? As always, the answer, when it was right, seemed almost self-evident. "Thankee-sai, Blaine, you speak true."

"AND THE FAIR-DAY GOOSE IS ALMOST MINE, I WOT. NINETEEN MINUTES AND FIFTY SECONDS TO TERMINATION. WOULD YOU SAY MORE, JAKE OF NEW YORK? VISUAL SENSORS INDICATE YOU HAVE COME TO THE END OF YOUR BOOK, WHICH WAS NOT, I MUST SAY, AS GOOD AS I HAD HOPED."

"Everybody's a goddam critic," Susanah said sotto voce. She wiped a tear from the corner of one eye; without looking directly at her, the gunslinger took her free hand. She clasped it tightly.

"Yes, Blaine, I have one more," Jake said.

"EX?CEL?LENT."

"Out of the eater came forth meat, and out of the strong came sweetness."

"THIS RID?DLE COMES FROM THE HOLY BOOK KNOWN AS 'OLD TES?TA?MENT BIBLE OF KING JAMES.'" Blaine sounded amused, and Jake felt the last of his hope slip away. He thought he might cry—not so much out of fear as frustra?tion. "IT WAS MADE BY SAM SON THE STRONG. THE EATER IS A LI?ON; THE SWEET?NESS IS HON?EY, MADE BY BEES WHICH HIVED IN THE LI?ON'S SKULL. NEXT? YOU STILL HAVE OVER EIGH?TEEN MIN?UTES, JAKE."

Jake shook his head. He let go of Rid?dle-?De-?Dum! and smiled when Oy caught it neatly in his jaws and then stretched his long neck up to Jake, hold?ing it out again.

"I've told them all. I'm done."

"SHUCKS, L'IL TRAIL?HAND, THAT'S A PURE-?D SHAME," Blaine said. Jake found this drawly John Wayne im?ita?tion all but un?bearable in their current cir?cum?stances. "LOOKS LIKE I WIN THAT THAR GOOSE, UN?LESS SOMEBODY ELSE CARES TO SPEAK UP. WHAT ABOUT YOU, OY OF MID-?WORLD? GOT ANY RID?DLES, MY LITTLE BUM?BLER BUD?DY?"

"Oy!" the bil?ly-?bum?bler responded, his voice muffled by the book. Still smiling, Jake took it and sat down next to Roland, who put an arm around him.

"SU?SAN?NAH OF NEW YORK?"

She shook her head, not look?ing up. She had turned Roland's hand over in her own, and was gen?tly trac?ing the healed stumps where his first two fin?gers had been.

"ROLAND SON OF STEVEN? HAVE YOU RE?MEM?BERED ANY OTHERS FROM THE FAIR-?DAY RID?DLINGS OF GILEAD?"

Roland also shook his head . . . and then Jake saw that Ed?die Dean was raising his. There was a pe?cu?liar smile on Ed?die's face, a pe?cu?liar shine in Ed?die's eyes, and Jake found that hope hadn't desert?ed him, af?ter all. It sud?den?ly flow?ered anew in his mind, red and hot and vivid. Like . . . well, like a rose. A rose in the full fever of its sum?mer.

"Blaine?" Ed?die asked in a low tone. To Jake his voice sounded queer?ly choked.

"YES, ED?DIE OF NEW YORK." Un?mis?tak?able disdain.

"I have a cou?ple of rid?dles," Ed?die said. "Just to pass the time between here and Tope?ka, you un?der?stand." No, Jake realized, Ed?die didn't sound as if he were chok?ing; he sounded as if he were try?ing to hold back laugh?ter.

"SPEAK, ED?DIE OF NEW YORK."

3

Sit?ting and lis?ten?ing to Jake run through the last of his rid?dles, Ed?die had mused on Roland's tale of the Fair-?Day goose. From there his mind had re?turned to Hen?ry, trav?el?ling from Point A to Point B through the mag?ic of as?so?cia?tive think?ing. Or, if you wanted to get Zen about it, via Trans-?Bird Air?lines: goose to turkey. He and Hen?ry had once had a dis?cus?sion about get?ting off hero?in. Hen?ry had claimed that go?ing cold turkey wasn't the on?ly way; there was also, he said, such a thing as go?ing cool turkey. Ed?die asked Hen?ry what you called a hype who had just ad?min?is?tered a hot shot to him?self, and, without miss?ing a beat, Hen?ry had

said. You call that baked turkey. How they had laughed . . . but now, all this long, strange time later, it looked very much as if the joke was going to be on the younger Dean brother, not to mention the younger Dean brother's new friends. Looked like they were all going to be baked turkey before much longer. Unless you can yank it out of the zone.

Yes.

Then do it, Eddie. It was Henry's voice again, that old resident of his head, but now Henry sounded sober and clear-minded. Henry sounded like his friend instead of his enemy, as if all the old conflicts were finally settled, all the old hatchets buried. Do it—make the devil set himself on fire. It 'll hurt a little, maybe, but you've hurt worse. Hell, I hurt you worse myself, and you survived. Survived just fine. And you know where to look.

Of course. In their palaver around the campfire Jake had finally managed to light. Roland had asked the kid a riddle to loosen him up, Jake had struck a spark into the kindling, and then they had all sat around the fire, talking. Talking and riddling.

Eddie knew something else, too. Blaine had answered hundreds of riddles as they ran southeast along the Path of the Beam, and the others believed that he had answered every single one of them without hesitation. Eddie had thought much the same . . . but now, as he cast his mind back over the contest, he realized an interesting thing: Blaine had hesitated.

Once.

He was pissed, too. Like Roland was.

The gun-slinger, although often exasperated by Eddie, had shown real anger toward him just a single time after the business of carving the key, when Eddie had almost choked. Roland had tried to cover the depth of that anger—make it seem like nothing but more exasperation—but Eddie had sensed what was underneath. He had lived with Henry Dean for a long time, and was still exquisitely attuned to all the negative emotions. It had hurt him, too—not Roland's anger itself, exactly, but the contempt with which it had been laced. Contempt had always been one of Henry's favorite weapons.

Why did the dead baby cross the road? Eddie had asked. Because it was stapled to the chicken, nyuck-nyuck-nyuck!

Later, when Eddie had tried to defend his riddle, arguing that it was tasteless but not pointless, Roland's response had been strangely like Blaine's: / don't care about taste. It's senseless and unsolvable, and that's what makes it silly. A good riddle is neither.

But as Jake finished riddling Blaine, Eddie realized a wonderful, liberating thing: that word good was up for grabs. Always had been, always would be. Even if the man using it was maybe a thousand years old and could shoot like Bufalo Bill, that word was still up for grabs. Roland himself had admitted he had never been very good at the riddling game. His tutor claimed that Roland thought too deeply; his father thought it was lack of imagination. Whatever the reason, Roland of Gilead had never won a Fair-Day riddling. He had survived all his contemporary, and that was certainly a prize of sorts, but he had never carried home a prize

goose. I could always haul a gun faster than any of my mates, but I've never been much good at thinking around corners.

Ed died remembered trying to tell Roland that jokes were ridiculous designed to help you build up that often overlooked talent, but Roland had ignored him. The way, Ed died supposed, a color-blind person would ignore someone's description of a rainbow.

Ed died thought Blaine also might have trouble thinking around corners.

He realized he could hear Blaine asking the others if they had any more ridiculous—even asking Oy. He could hear the mockery in Blaine's voice, could hear it very well. Sure he could. Because he was coming back. Back from that faded zone. Back to see if he could talk the devil into setting himself on fire. No gun would help this time, but maybe that was all right. Maybe that was all right because—

Because I shoot with my mind. My mind. God help me to shoot this overblown calculator with my mind. Help me shoot it from around the corner.

"Blaine?" he said, and then, when the computer had acknowledged him: "I have a couple of ridiculous." As he spoke, he discovered a wonderful thing: he was struggling to hold back laughter.

4

"SPEAK, ED DIED OF NEW YORK."

No time to tell the others to be on their guard, that anything might happen, and from the look of them, no need, either. Ed died forgot about them and turned his attention to Blaine.

"What has four wheels and flies?"

"THE TOWN GARBAGE WAGON, AS I HAVE ALREADY SAID."

Disapproval—and dislike? Yeah, probably—all but oozing out of that voice.

"ARE YOU SO STUPID OR INATTENTIVE THAT YOU DO NOT REMEMBER? IT WAS THE FIRST RIDICULE YOU ASKED ME."

Yes, Ed died thought. And what we all missed—because we were fixated on stumping you with some brain-buster out of Roland's past or Jake's book—is that the contest almost ended right there.

"You didn't like that one, did you, Blaine?"

"I FOUND IT EXCEEDINGLY STUPID," Blaine agreed. "PERHAPS THAT'S WHY YOU ASKED IT AGAIN. LIKE CALLS TO LIKE, ED DIED OF NEW YORK, IS IT NOT SO?"

A smile lit Ed died's face; he shook his finger at the route-map. "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me. Or, as we used to say back in the neighborhood, 'You can rank me to the dogs and back, but I'll never lose the hard-on I use to fuck your mother.'"

"Hurry up!" Jake whispered at him. "If you can do something, do it!"

"It doesn't like silly questions," Ed died said. "It doesn't like silly games. And we knew that. We knew it from Charlie the Choo-Choo. How stupid can you get? Hell, that was the book with the answers, not Ridicle-De-Dum, but we never saw it."

Ed died searched for the other ridiculous that had been in Jake's Final Essay, found it,

posed it.

“Blaine: when is a door not a door?”

Once again, for the first time since Su?san?nah had asked Blaine what had four legs and flies, there came a pe?cu?liar click?ing sound, like a man pop?ping his tongue on the roof of his mouth. The pause was briefer than the one which had fol?lowed Su?san?nah’s open?ing rid?dle, but it was still there—Ed?die heard it. “WHEN IT’S A JAR, OF COURSE” Blaine said. He sound?ed dour, un?hap?py. “THIR?TEEN MIN?UTES AND FIVE SEC ONDS RE?MAIN BE?FORE TER?MI?NA?TION, ED?DIE OF NEW YORK-?WOULD YOU DIE WITH SUCH STUPID RID?DLES IN YOUR MOUTH?”

Ed?die sat bolt up?right, star?ing at the route-?map, and al?though he could feel warm trick?les of sweat run?ning down his back, that smile on his face widened.

“Quit your whin?ing, pal. If you want the priv?ilege of smear?ing us all over the land?scape, you’ll just have to put up with a few rid?dles that aren’t quite up to your stan?dards of log?ic.”

“YOU MUST NOT SPEAK TO ME IN SUCH A MAN?NER.”

“Or what? You’ll kill me? Don’t make me laugh. Just play. You agreed to the game; now play it.”

Thin pink light flashed briefly out of the route-?map. “You’re mak?ing him an?gry,” Lit?tle Blaine mourned. “Oh, you’re mak?ing him so an?gry.”

“Get lost, squirt,” Ed?die said, not un?kind?ly, and when the pink glow re?ced?ed, once again re?veal?ing a flash?ing green dot that was al?most on top of Tope?ka, Ed?die said: “An?swer this one, Blaine: the big mo?ron and the lit?tle mo?ron were stand?ing on the bridge over the Riv?er Send. The big mo ron fell off. How come the lit?tle mo?ron didn’t fall off, too?”

“THAT IS UN?WOR?THY OF OUR CON?TEST. I WILL NOT AN SWER.” On the last word Blaine’s voice ac?tu?al?ly dropped in?to a low?er reg?is?ter, mak?ing him sound like a four?teen-?year-?old cop?ing with a change of voice.

Roland’s eyes were not just gleam?ing now but blaz?ing. “What do you say, Blaine? I would un?der?stand you well. Are you say?ing that you cry off?”

“NO! OF COURSE NOT! BUT—”

“Then an?swer, if you can. An?swer the rid?dle.”

“IT’S NOT A RID?DLE!” Blaine al?most bleat?ed. “IT’S A JOKE, SOME?THING FOR STUPID CHIL?DREN TO CACK?LE OVER IN THE PLAY YARD!”

”An?swer now or I de?clare the con?test over and our ka-?tet the win?ner,” Roland said. He spoke in the dry?ly con?fi?dent tone of au?thor?ity Ed?die had first heard in the town of Riv?er Cross?ing. ”You must an?swer, for it is stu pid?ity you com?plain of, not trans?gres?sion of the rules, which we agreed up?on mu?tu?al?ly.“

An?oth?er of those click?ing sounds, but this time it was much loud?er— so loud, in fact, that Ed?die winced. Oy flat?tened his ears against his skull. It was fol?lowed by the longest pause yet; three sec?onds, at least. Then:

”THE LIT?TLE MO?RON DID NOT FALL OFF BE?CAUSE HE WAS A LIT?TLE MORE ON.“ Blaine sound?ed sulky. ”MORE PHO?NET?IC CO IN?CI?DENCE. TO EVEN AN?SWER SUCH AN UN?WOR?THY RID?DLE MAKES ME FEEL SOILED.“

Ed?die held up his right hand. He rubbed the thumb and fore?fin?ger to?geth?er.

”WHAT DOES THAT SIG?NI?FY, FOOL?ISH CREA?TURE?”

”It’s the world’s small?est vi?olin, play?ing ‘My Heart Pumps Pur?ple Piss for You,’ “ Ed?die said. Jake fell in?to an un?con?trol?lable fit of laugh?ter. ”But nev?er mind the cheap New York hu?mor; back to the con?test. Why do po?lice lieu?tenants wear belts?”

The lights in the Barony Coach be?gan to flick?er. An odd thing was hap?pen?ing to the walls, as well; they be?gan to fade in and out of true, lung?ing to?ward trans?paren?cy, per?haps, and then opaquing again. See?ing this phe?nomenon even out of the com?er of his eye made Ed?die feel a bit whoop?sy.

”Blaine? An?swer.”

”An?swer,” Roland agreed. ”An?swer, or I de?clare the con?test at an end and hold you to your promise.”

Some?thing touched Ed?die’s el?bow. He looked down and saw Su?san nah’s small and shape?ly hand. He took it, squeezed it, smiled at her. He hoped the smile was more con?fi?dent than the man mak?ing it felt. They were go?ing to win the con?test—he was al?most sure of that—but he had no idea what Blaine would do if and when they did.

”TO ... TO HOLD UP THEIR PANTS?” Blame’s voice firmed, and re?peat?ed the ques?tion as a state?ment. ”TO HOLD UP THEIR PANTS. A RID?DLE BASED UP?ON THE EX?AG?GER?AT?ED SIM?PLIC?ITY OF—“

”Right. Good one, Blaine, but nev?er mind try?ing to kill time—it won’t work.

Next—“

”I IN?SIST YOU STOP ASK?ING THESE SIL?LY—“

”Then stop the mono,” Ed?die said. ”If you’re that up?set, stop right here, and I will.”

”NO.”

”Okay, then, on we go. What’s Irish and stays out in back of the house, even in the rain?”

There was an?oth?er of those clicks, this time so loud it felt like hav?ing a blunt spike driv?en against his eardrum. A pause of five sec onds. Now the flash?ing green dot on the route-?map was so close to Tope?ka that it lit the word like neon each time it flashed. Then: ”PAD?DY O’FUR?NI?TURE.”

The cor?rect an?swer to a joke-?rid?dle Ed?die had first heard in the al?ley be?hind Dahlie’s, or at some sim?ilar gath?er?ing-?point, but Blaine had ap?par ent?ly paid a price for forc?ing his mind in?to a chan?nel that could con?ceive it: the Barony Coach lights were flash?ing more wild?ly than ev?er, and Ed die could hear a low hum?ming from in?side the walls—the kind of sound your stereo amp made just be?fore its shit blew up.

Pink light stut?tered from the route-?map. ”Stop!” Lit?tle Blaine cried, his voice so wa?very it sound?ed like the voice of a char?ac?ter from an old Warn?er Bros. car?toon.

”Stop it, you’re killing him!”

What do you think he’s try?ing to do to us, squirt? Ed?die thought.

He con?sid?ered shoot?ing Blaine one Jake had told while they’d been sit?ting around the camp?fire that night—What’s green, weighs a hun?dred tons, and lives at the bot?tom of the ocean? Mo?by Snot!—and then didn’t. He want?ed to stick fur?ther

in?side the bounds of log?ic than that one al?lowed . . . and he could do it. He didn't think he would have to get much more sur?re?al than the lev?el of, say, a third-?grad?er with a fair-?to-?good col?lec?tion of Garbage Pail Kids cards in or?der to fuck Blaine up roy?al?ly . . . and per?ma?nent?ly. Be?cause no mat?ter how many emo?tions his fan?cy dipo?lar cir?cuits had al?lowed him to mim?ic, he was still an it—a com?put?er. Even fol?low?ing Ed?die this far in?to rid?dle?dom's Twi?light Zone had caused Blaine's san?ity to tot?ter.

"Why do peo?ple go to bed, Blaine?"

"BE?CAUSE ... BE?CAUSE ... GODS DAMN YOU, BE?CAUSE ..."

A low squalling start?ed up from be?neath them, and sud?den?ly the Barony Coach swayed vi?olent?ly from right to left. Su?san?nah screamed. Jake was thrown in?to her lap. The gun?slinger grabbed them both.

"BE?CAUSE THE BED WON'T COME TO THEM, GODS DAMN YOU! NINE MIN?UTES AND FIFTY SEC?ONDS!"

"Give up, Blaine," Ed?die said. "Stop be?fore I have to blow your mind com?plete?ly. If you don't quit, it's go?ing to hap?pen. We both know it."

"NO!"

"I got a mil?lion of these pup?pies. Been hear?ing them my whole life.

They stick to my mind the way flies stick to fly?pa?per. Hey, with some peo?ple it's recipes. So what do you say? Want to give?"

"NO! NINE MIN?UTES AND THIR?TY SEC?ONDS!"

"Okay, Blaine. You asked for it. Here comes the crunch?er. Why did the dead ba?by cross the road?"

The mono took an?oth?er of those gi?gan?tic lurch?es; Ed?die didn't un?der stand how it could still stay on its track af?ter that, but some?how it did. The scream?ing from be?neath them grew loud?er; the walls, floor, and ceil?ing of the car be?gan to cy?cle mad?ly be?tween opac?ity and trans?paren?cy. At one mo?ment they were en?closed, at the next they were rush?ing over a gray day?light land?scape that stretched flat and fea?ture?less to a hori?zon which ran across the world in a straight line.

The voice which came from the speak?ers was now that of a pan?icky child: "I KNOW IT, JUST A MO?MENT, I KNOW IT, RE?TRIEVAL IN PROGRESS, ALL LOG?IC CIR?CUITS IN USE—"

"An?swer," Roland said.

"I NEED MORE TIME! YOU MUST GIVE IT TO ME!" Now there was a kind of cracked tri?umph in that splin?tered voice. "NO TEM?PO?RAL LIM?ITS FOR AN?SWER?ING WERE SET, ROLAND OF GILEAD, HATE?FUL GUN?SLINGER OUT OF A PAST THAT SHOULD HAVE STAYED DEAD!"

"No," Roland agreed, "no time lim?its were set, you are quite right. But you may not kill us with a rid?dle still unan?swered, Blaine, and Tope?ka draws nigh.

An?swer!"

The Barony Coach cy?cled in?to in?vis?ibil?ity again, and Ed?die saw what ap?peared to be a tall and rusty grain el?eva?tor go flash?ing past; it was in his view bare?ly long enough for him to iden?ti?fy it. Now he ful?ly ap?pre?ci?at?ed the ma?ni?acal speed at which they were trav?el?ing; per?haps three hun?dred miles faster than a com?mer?cial jet at cruiz?ing speed.

“Let him alone!” moaned the voice of Lit?tle Blaine. “You’re killing him, I say! Killing him!”

“Isn’t that ’bout what he want?ed?” Su?san?nah asked in the voice of Det?ta Walk?er. “To die? That’s what he said. We don’t mind, ei?ther. You not so bad, Lit?tle Blaine, but even a world as fucked up as this one has to be bet?ter with your big broth?er gone. It’s just him takin us with him we been ob?jectin to all this time.”

“Last chance,” Roland said. “An?swer or give up the goose, Blaine.”

“I ... I ... YOU ... SIX?TEEN LOG THIR?TY-?THREE ... ALL CO?SINE SUB?SCRIPTS ... AN?TI ... AN?TI ... IN ALL THESE YEARS ... BEAM ... FLOOD ... PYTHAGORE?AN ... CARTE?SIAN LOG?IC ... CAN I ... DARE I ... A PEACH ... EAT A PEACH ... ALL?MAN BROTH?ERS ... PA?TRI?CIA ... CROCODILE AND WHIPLASH SMILE ... CLOCK OF DI?ALS ... TICK-TOCK, ELEVEN O’CLOCK, THE MAN’S IN THE MOON AND HE’S READY TO ROCK ... IN?CES?SA?MENT ... IN?CES?SA?MENT, MON CHER ... OH MY HEAD ... BLAINE ... BLAINE DARES ... BLAINE WILL AN?SWER ... I ...”

Blaine, now scream?ing in the voice of an in?fant, lapsed in?to some oth?er lan?guage and be?gan to sing. Ed?die thought it was French. He knew none of the words, but when the drums kicked in, he knew the song per fect?ly well: “Vel?cro Fly” by Z.Z. Top.

The glass over the route-?map blew out. A mo?ment lat?er, the route-?map it?self ex?plod?ed from its sock?et, re?veal?ing twin?kling lights and a maze of cir?cuit-?boards be?hind it. The lights pulsed in time to the drums. Sud den?ly blue fire flashed out, siz?zling the sur?face around the hole in the wall where the map had been, scorch?ing it black. From deep?er with?in that wall, to?ward Blaine’s blunt, bul?let-?shaped snout, came a thick grind?ing noise.

“It crossed the road be?cause it was sta?pled to the chick?en, you dopey fuck!” Ed?die yelled. He got to his feet and start?ed to walk to?ward the smok?ing hole where the route-?map had been. Su?san?nah grabbed at the back of his shirt, but Ed?die bare?ly felt it. Bare?ly knew where he was, in fact. The bat?tle-?fire had dropped over him, burn?ing him ev?ery?where with its righ?teous heat, siz?zling his sight, fry?ing his synaps?es and roast?ing his heart in its holy glow. He had Blaine in his sights, and al?though the thing be?hind the voice was al?ready mor?tal?ly wound?ed, he was un?able to stop squeez?ing the trig?ger: I shoot with my mind.

“What’s the dif?fer?ence be?tween a truck?load of bowl?ing balls and a truck?load of dead wood?chucks?” Ed?die raved. “You can’t un?load a truck-?load of bowl?ing balls with a pitch?fork!”

A ter?ri?ble shriek of min?gled anger and agony is?sued from the hole where the route-map had been. It was fol?lowed by a gust of blue fire, as if some?where for?ward of Barony Coach an elec?tric drag?on had ex?haled vio lent?ly. Jake called a warn?ing, but Ed?die didn’t need it; his re?flex?es had been re?placed with ra?zor-?blades. He ducked, and the burst of elec?tric?ity went over his right shoul?der, mak?ing the hair on that side of his neck stand up. He drew the gun he wore—a heavy .45 with a worn san?dal?wood grip, one of two re?volvers which Roland had brought out of Mid-World’s ru?in. He kept walk?ing as he bore down on the front of the coach ... and of course he kept talk?ing. As Roland had said, Ed?die would die talk?ing. As his old

friend Cuthbert had done. Ed die could think of many worse ways to go, and on ly one bet ter.

"Say, Blaine, you ug ly, sadis tic fuck! Since we're talk ing rid dles, what is the great est rid dle of the Ori ent? Many men smoke but Fu Manchu! Get it? No? So sol ly, Chol ly! How about this one? Why'd the wom an name her son Sev en and a Half? Be cause she drew his name out of a hat!"

He had reached the puls ing square. Now he lift ed Roland's gun and the Barony Coach sud den ly filled with its thun der. He put all six rounds in to the hole, fan ning the ham mer with the flat of his hand in the way Roland had shown them, know ing on ly that this was right, this was prop er . . . this was ka, god dammit, fuck ing ka, it was the way you end ed things if you were a gun slinger. He was one of Roland's tribe, all right, his soul was prob ably damned to the deep est pit of hell, and he wouldn't have changed it for all the hero in in Asia.

"I HATE YOU!" Blaine cried in his child ish voice. The splin ters were gone from it now; it was grow ing soft, mushy. "I HATE YOU FOR EV ER!"

"It's not dy ing that both ers you, is it?" Ed die asked. The lights in the hole where the route map had been were fad ing. More blue fire flashed, but he hard ly had to pull his head back to avoid it; the flame was small and weak. Soon Blaine would be as dead as all the Pubes and Grays in Lud. "It's los ing that both ers you."

"HATE . . . FOR RRRrmr . . ."

The word de gen er at ed in to a hum. The hum be came a kind of stut tery thud ding sound. Then it was gone.

Ed die looked around. Roland was there, hold ing Su san nah with one arm curved around her butt, as one might hold a child. Her thighs clasped his waist. Jake stood on the gun slinger's oth er side, with Oy at his heel.

Drift ing out of the hole where the route map had been was a pe cu liar charred smell, some how not un pleas ant. To Ed die it smelled like burn ing leaves in Oc to ber. Oth er wise, the hole was as dead and dark as a corpse's eye. All the lights in there had gone out.

Your goose is cooked, Blaine, Ed die thought, and your turkey's baked. Hap py fuckin Thanks giv ing.

5

The shriek ing from be neath the mono stopped. There was one fi nal, grind ing thud from up front, and then those sounds ceased, too. Roland felt his legs and hips sway gen tly for ward and put out his free hand to steady him self. His body knew what had hap pened be fore his head did:

Blaine's en gines had quit. They were now sim ply glid ing for ward along the track. But—

"Back," he said. "All the way. We're coast ing. If we're close enough to Blaine's ter mi na tion point, we may still crash."

He led them past the pud dled re mains of Blaine's wel com ing ice sculp ture and to the back of the coach. "And stay away from that thing," he said, point ing at the in stru ment which looked like a cross be tween a pi ano and a harp si chord. It stood on a small plat form. "It may shift. Gods, I wish we could see where we are! Lie down. Wrap your arms over your heads."

They did as he told them. Roland did the same. He lay there with his chin pressing in to the nap of the royal blue carpet, eyes shut, thinking about what had just happened.

"I cry your pardon, Ed die," he said. "How the wheel of karma turns! Once I had to ask the same of my friend Cuthbert . . . and for the same reason. There's a kind of blindness in me. An arrogant blindness."

"I hardly think there's any need of pardon-crying," Ed die said. He sounded uncomfortable.

"There is. I held your jokes in contempt. Now they have saved our lives. I cry your pardon. I have forgotten the face of my father."

"You don't need any pardon and you didn't forget anybody's face," Ed die said.

"You can't help your nature, Roland."

The gunslinger considered this carefully, and discovered something which was wonderful and awful at the same time: that idea had never occurred to him. Not once in his whole life. That he was a captive of karma—this he had known since earliest childhood. But his nature . . . his very nature. . .

"Thank you, Ed die. I think—"

Before Roland could say what he thought, Blaine the Mono crashed to a final bitter halt. All four of them were thrown violently up Barony Coach's central aisle, Ouy in Jake's arms and barking. The cab's front wall buckled and Roland struck it shoulder-first. Even with the padding (the wall was carpeted and, from the feel, undercoated with some resilient stuff), the blow was hard enough to numb him. The chandelier swung forward and tore loose from the ceiling, pelting them with glass pendants. Jake rolled aside, vacating its landing-zone just in time. The harpsichord-piano flew off its podium, struck one of the sofas, and overturned, coming to rest with a discordant brrannnggg sound. The mono tilted to the right and the gunslinger braced himself, meaning to cover both Jake and Susanah with his own body if it overturned completely. Then it settled back, the floor still a little canted, but at rest.

The trip was over.

The gunslinger raised himself up. His shoulder was still numb, but the arm below it supported him, and that was a good sign. On his left, Jake was sitting up and picking glass beads out of his lap with a dazed expression. On his right, Susanah was dabbing a cut under Ed die's left eye. "All right," Roland said. "Who's hurt?" There was an explosion from above them, a hollow Pow! that reminded Roland of the big-bangers Cuthbert and Alain had sometimes lit and tossed down drains, or into the privies behind the scullery for a prank. And once Cuthbert had shot some big-bangers with his sling. That had been no prank, no childish folly. That had been—

Susanah uttered a short cry—more of surprise than fear, the gunslinger thought—and then hazy daylight was shining down on his face. It felt good. The taste of the air coming in through the blown emergency exit was even better—sweet with the smell of rain and damp earth.

There was a bony rattle, and a ladder—it appeared to be equipped with rungs made of twisted steel wire—dropped out of a slot up there.

“First they throw the chan?de?lier at you, then they show you the door,” Ed?die said. He strug?gled to his feet, then got Su?san?nah up. “Okay, I know when I’m not want?ed. Let’s make like bees and buzz off.”

“Sounds good to me.” She reached to?ward the cut on Ed?die’s face again. Ed?die took her fin?gers, kissed them, and told her to stop pok?ing the moichan?dise.

“Jake?” the gun?slinger asked. “Okay?”

“Yes,” Jake said. “What about you, Oy?”

“Oy!”

“Guess he is,” Jake said. He raised his wound?ed hand and looked at it rue?ful?ly.

“Hurt?ing again, is it?” the gun?slinger asked.

“Yeah. What?ev?er Blaine did to it is wear?ing off. I don’t care, though—I ‘m just glad to still be alive.”

“Yes. Life is good. So is astin. There’s some of it left.”

“As?pirin, you mean.”

Roland nod?ded. A pill of mag?ical prop?er?ties, but one of the words from Jake’s world he would nev?er be able to say cor?rect?ly.

“Nine out of ten doc?tors rec?om?mend Anacin, hon?ey,” Su?san?nah said, and when Jake on?ly looked at her quizzical?ly: “Guess they don’t use that one any?more in your when, huh? Doesn’t mat?ter. We’re here, sug?arpie, right here and just fine, and that’s what mat?ters.” She pulled Jake in?to her arms and gave him a kiss be?tween the eyes, on the nose, and then flush on the mouth. Jake laughed and blushed bright red. “That’s what mat?ters, and right now that’s the on?ly thing in the world that does.”

6

“First aid can wait,” Ed?die said. He put his arm around Jake’s shoul?ders and led the boy to the lad?der. “Can you use that hand to climb with?”

“Yes. But I can’t bring Oy. Roland, will you?”

“Yes.” Roland picked Oy up and tucked him in?to his shirt as he had while de?scend?ing a shaft un?der the city in pur?suit of Jake and Gash?er. Oy peeked out at Jake with his bright, gold-?ringed eyes. “Up you go.”

Jake climbed. Roland fol?lowed close enough so that Oy could sniff the kid’s heels by stretch?ing out his long neck.

“Suze?” Ed?die asked. “Need a boost?”

“And get your nasty hands all over my well-?turned fan?ny? Not like?ly, white boy!”

Then she dropped him a wink and be?gan to climb, pulling her?self up eas?ily with her mus?cu?lar arms and bal?anc?ing with the stumps of her legs. She went fast, but not too fast for Ed?die; he reached up and gave her a soft pinch where the pinch?ing was good. “Oh, my pu?ri?ty!” Su san?nah cried, laugh?ing and rolling her eyes. Then she was gone. On?ly Ed?die was left, stand?ing by the foot of the lad?der and look?ing around at the lux?ury coach which he had be?lieved might well be their ka-?tet’s cof?fin.

You did it, kid?do. Hen?ry said. Made him set him?self on fire. I knew you could, fuckin-?A. Re?mem?ber when I said that to those scag-?bags be?hind Dahlie’s? Jim?mie Po?lio and those guys? And how they laughed? But you did it. Sent him home with a fuckin rup?ture.

Well, it worked, anyway, Ed?die thought, and touched the butt of Roland's gun without even being aware of it. Well enough for us to walk away one more time. He climbed two rungs, then looked back down. The Barony Coach already felt dead. Long dead, in fact, just another artifact of a world that had moved on. "Adios, Blaine," Ed?die said. "So long, partner."

And he followed his friends out through the emergency exit in the roof.

CHAPTER IV

tope?ka

1

Jake stood on the slightly tilted roof of Blame the Mono, looking south east along the Path of the Beam. The wind ruffled his hair (now quite long and decidedly unpiper?ish) back from his temples and forehead in waves. His eyes were wide with surprise.

He didn't know what he had expected to see—a smaller and more provincial version of Lud, perhaps—but what he had not expected was what loomed above the trees of a nearby park. It was a green road?sign (against the dull gray autumn sky, it almost screamed with color) with a blue shield mounted on it:

Roland joined him, lifted Oy gently out of his shirt, and put him down. The humbler sniffed the pink surface of Blaine's roof, then looked toward the front of the mono. Here the train's smooth bullet shape was broken by crumpled metal which had peeled back in jagged wings. Two dark slashes—they began at the mono's tip and extended to a point about ten yards from where Jake and Roland stood—gored the roof in parallel lines. At the end of each was a wide, flat metal pole painted in stripes of yellow and black. These seemed to jut from the top of the mono at a point just forward of the Barony Coach. To Jake they looked a little like football goalposts.

"Those are the piers he talked about hitting," Susanah murmured.

Roland nodded.

"We got off lucky, big boy, you know it? If this thing had been going much faster ..."

"Ka," Ed?die said from behind them. He sounded as if he might be smiling.

Roland nodded. "Just so. Ka."

Jake dismissed the transteel goalposts and turned back toward the sign. He was half convinced it would be gone, or that it would say something else (mid-world toll road, perhaps, or beware of demons), but it was still there and still said the same thing.

"Ed?die? Susanah? Do you see that?"

They looked along his pointing finger. For a moment—one long enough for Jake to fear he was having a hallucination—neither of them said anything. Then, softly,

Ed?die said: “Holy shit. Are we back home? If we are, where are all the peo?ple? And if some?thing like Blaine has been stop?ping off in Tope?ka—our Tope?ka, Tope?ka, Kansas—how come I haven’t seen any?thing about it on Six?ty Min?utes?” “What’s Six?ty Min?utes?” Su?san?nah asked. She was shad?ing her eyes, look?ing south?east to?ward the sign.

“TV show,” Ed?die said. “You missed it by five or ten years. Old white guys in ties. Doesn’t mat?ter. That sign—”

“It’s Kansas, all right,” Su?san?nah said. “Our Kansas. I guess.” She had spot?ted an?oth?er sign, just vis?ible over the trees. Now she point?ed un?til Jake, Ed?die, and Roland had all seen it:

“There a Kansas in your world, Roland?”

“No,” Roland replied, look?ing at the signs, “we’re far be?yond the bound?aries of the world I knew. I was far be?yond most of the world I knew long be?fore I met you three. This place . . .”

He stopped and cocked his head to one side, as if he was lis?ten?ing to some sound al?most too dis?tant to hear. And the ex?pres?sion on his face ... Jake didn’t like it much.

“Say, kid?dies!” Ed?die said bright?ly. “To?day we’re study?ing Wacky Ge?og?ra?phy in Mid-?World. You see, boys and girls, in Mid-?World you start in New York, trav?el south?east to Kansas, and then con?tin?ue along the Path of the Beam un?til you come to the Dark Tow?er . . . which hap?pens to be smack in the mid?dle of ev?ery?thing. First, fight the gi?ant lob?sters! Next, ride the psy?chot?ic train! And then, af?ter a vis?it to our snack?bar for a pop?kin or two—”

“Do you hear any?thing?” Roland broke in. “Any of you?”

Jake lis?tened. He heard the wind comb?ing through the trees of the near?by park—their leaves had just be?gun to turn—and he heard the click of Oy’s toe?nails as he strolled back to?ward them along the roof of the Barony Coach. Then Oy stopped, so even that sound—

A hand seized him by the arm, mak?ing him jump. It was Su?san?nah. Her head was tilt?ed, her eyes wide. Ed?die was al?so lis?ten?ing. Oy, too; his ears were up and he was whin?ing far down in his throat.

Jake felt his arms rip?ple with goose?flesh. At the same time he felt his mouth tight?en in a gri?mace. The sound, though very faint, was the au?di to?ry ver?sion of bit?ing a lemon. And he’d heard some?thing like it be?fore. Back when he was on?ly five or six, there had been a crazy guy in Cen?tral Park who thought he was a mu?si?cian . . . well, there were lots of crazy guys in Cen?tral Park who thought they were mu?si?cians, but this was the on?ly one Jake had ev?er seen who played a work?shop tool. The guy had had a sign be?side his up?turned hat which read world’s great?est SAW-?PLAY?ER! SOUNDS HAWAI?IAN DOESN’T IT! PLEASE CON?TRIBUTE TO MY WEL?FARE!

Gre?ta Shaw had been with Jake the first time he en?coun?tered the saw-?play?er, and Jake re?mem?bered how she had hur?ried past the guy. Just sit ting there like a cel?list in a sym?pho?ny or?ches?tra he’d been, on?ly with a rust-?speck?led hand?saw spread across his open legs; Jake re?mem?bered the ex?pres?sion of com?ic hor?ror on Mrs. Shaw’s face, and the quiver of her pressed-?to?geth?er lips, as if—yes, as if she’d just

bit?ten in?to a lemon.

This sound wasn't ex?act?ly like the one

(SOUNDS HAWAI?IAN DOESN'T IT)

the guy in the park had made by vi?brat?ing the blade of his saw, but it was close: a wa?very, trem?bly, metal?lic sound that made you feel like your si?nus?es were fill?ing up and your eyes would short?ly be?gin to gush wa?ter. Was it com?ing from ahead of them? Jake couldn't tell. It seemed to be com?ing from ev?ery?where and nowhere; at the same time, it was so low he might have been tempt?ed to be?lieve the whole thing was just his imag?ina tion, if the oth?ers hadn't—

“Watch out!” Ed?die cried. “Help me, you guys! I think he's go?ing to faint!”

Jake wheeled to?ward the gun?slinger and saw that his face had gone as white as cot?tage cheese above the dusty no-?col?or of his shirt. His eyes were wide and blank. One cor?ner of his mouth twitched spas?ti?cal?ly, as if an in?vis?ible fish?hook were buried there.

“Jonas and Reynolds and De?pape,” he said. “The Big Cof?fin Hunters. And her. The Coos. They were the ones. They were the ones who—”

Stand?ing on the roof of the mono in his dusty, bro?ken boots, Roland tot?tered. On his face was the great?est look of mis?ery Jake had ev?er seen.

“Oh Su?san,” he said. “Oh, my dear.”

2

They caught him, they formed a pro?tec?tive ring around him, and the gun?slinger felt hot with guilt and self-?loathing. What had he done to de?serve such en?thu?si?as?tic pro?tec?tors? What, be?sides tear them out of their known and or?di?nary lives as ruth?less?ly as a man might tear weeds out of his gar?den?

He tried to tell them he was all right, they could stand back, he was fine, but no words would come out; that ter?ri?ble wa?very sound had trans port?ed him back to the box canyon west of Ham?bry all those years ago. De?pape and Reynolds and old limp?ing Jonas. Yet most of all it was the wom?an from the hill he hat?ed, and from black depths of feel?ing on?ly a very young man can reach. Ah, but how could he have done aught else but hate them? His heart had been bro?ken. And now, all these years lat?er, it seemed to him that the most hor?ri?ble fact of hu?man ex?is?tence was that bro?ken hearts mend?ed.

My first thought was, he lied in ev?ery word/That hoary crip?ple, with ma?li?cious eye ...

What words? Whose po?em?

He didn't know, but he knew that wom?en could lie, too; wom?en who hopped and grinned and saw too much from the com?ers of their rheumy old eyes. It didn't mat?ter who had writ?ten the lines of poesy; the words were true words, and that was all that mat?tered. Nei?ther El?dred Jonas nor the crone on the hill had been of Marten's stature—nor even of Wal ter's—when it came to evil, but they had been evil enough.

Then, af?ter... in the box canyon west of town . . . that sound . . . that, and the screams of wound?ed men and hors?es . . . for once in his life, even the nor?mal?ly vol?uble Cuth?bert had been struck silent.

But all that had been long ago, in an?oth?er when; in the here and now, the war?bling

sound was either gone or had temporarily fallen below the threshold of audibility. They would hear it again, though. He knew that as well as he knew the fact that he walked a road leading to damnation.

He looked up at the others and managed a smile. The trembling at the corner of his mouth had quit, and that was something.

"I'm all right," he said. "But hear me well: this is very close to where Mid-World ends, very close to where End-World begins. The first great course of our quest is finished. We have done well; we have remembered the faces of our fathers; we have stood together and been true to one another. But now we have come to a thinny. We must be very careful."

"A thinny?" Jake asked, looking around nervously.

"Places where the fabric of existence is almost entirely worn away. There are more since the force of the Dark Tower began to fail. Do you remember what we saw below us when we left Lud?"

They nodded solemnly, remembering ground which had fused to black glass, ancient pipes which gleamed with turquoise witchlight, misshapen bird-freaks with wings like great leathern sails. Roland suddenly could not bear to have them grouped around him as they were, looking down on him as folk might look down on a rowdy who had fallen in a bar room brawl.

He lifted his hands to his friends—his new friends. Ed die took them and helped him to his feet. The gunslinger fixed his enormous will on not swaying and stood steady.

"Who was Susan?" Susanah asked. The crease down the center of her forehead suggested she was troubled, and probably by more than a coincidence of names.

Roland looked at her, then at Ed die, then at Jake, who had dropped to one knee so he could scratch behind Oy's ears.

"I'll tell you," he said, "but this isn't the place or time."

"You keep sayin that," Susanah said. "You wouldn't just be putting us off again, would you?"

Roland shook his head. "You shall hear my tale—this part of it, at least—but not on top of this metal carcass."

"Yeah," Jake said. "Being up here is like playing on a dead dinosaur or something. I keep thinking Blaine's going to come back to life and start, I don't know, screwing around with our heads again."

"That sound is gone," Ed die said. "The thing that sounded like a wah-wah pedal."

"It reminded me of this old guy I used to see in Central Park,"

Jake said.

"The man with the saw?" Susanah asked. Jake looked up at her, his eyes round with surprise, and she nodded. "Only he wasn't old when I used to see him. It's not just the geography that's wacky here. Time's kind of funny, too."

Ed die put an arm around her shoulders and gave her a brief squeeze. "Amen to that."

Susanah turned to Roland. Her look was not accusing, but there was a level and open measurement in her eyes that the gunslinger could not help but admire. "I'm

hold?ing you to your promise, Roland. I want to know about this girl that got my name.”

“You shall hear,” Roland re?peat?ed. “For now, though, let’s get off this mon?ster’s back.”

3

That was eas?ier said than done. Blaine had come to rest slight?ly askew in an out?door ver?sion of the Cra?dle of Lud (a lit?tered trail of torn pink met?al lay along one side of this, mark?ing the end of Blaine’s last jour?ney), and it was eas?ily twen?ty-five feet from the roof of the Barony Coach to the ce ment. If there was a de?scent-lad?der, like the one which had popped conve nient?ly through the emer?gen?cy hatch, it had jammed when they crunched to a halt.

Roland un?slung his purse, rum?maged, and re?moved the deer?skin har?ness they used for car?ry?ing Su?san?nah when the go?ing got too rough for her wheelchair. The chair, at least, would not wor?ry them any?more, the gun?slinger re?flect?ed; they had left it be?hind in their mad scram?ble to board Blaine.

“What you want that for?” Su?san?nah asked tru?cu?lent?ly. She al?ways sound?ed tru?cu?lent when the har?ness came in?to view. I hate them honky mah?fahs down in Miss’ip?pi worse’n I hate that har?ness, she had once told Ed?die in the voice of Det?ta Walk?er, but some?times it be a close thing, sug?ar.

“Soft, Su?san?nah Dean, soft,” the gun?slinger said, smil?ing a lit?tle. He un?braid?ed the net?work of straps which made up the har?ness, set the seat-?piece aside, then pig?tailed the straps back to?geth?er. He wed?ded this to his last good hank of rope with an old-?fash?ioned sheet?bend knot. As he worked, he lis?tened for the war?bling of the thin?ny ... as the four of them had lis?tened for the god-?drums; as he and Ed?die had lis?tened for the lob?strosi?ties to be?gin ask?ing their lawyer?ly ques?tions (“Dad-?a-?cham? Did-?a-?chee? Dum-?a-?chum?”) as they came tum?bling out of the waves each night.

Ka is a wheel, he thought. Or, as Ed?die liked to say, what?ev?er went around came around.

When the rope was fin?ished, he fash?ioned a loop at the bot?tom of the braid?ed sec?tion. Jake stepped a foot in?to it with per?fect con?fi?dence, gripped the rope with one hand, and set?tled Oy in?to the crook of his oth?er arm. Oy looked around ner?vous?ly, whined, stretched his neck, licked Jake’s face.

“You’re not afraid, are you?” Jake asked the hum?bler.

“ ‘Fraid,” Oy agreed, but he was qui?et enough as Roland and Ed?die low?ered Jake down the side of the Barony Coach. The rope wasn’t quite long enough to take him all the way down, but Jake had no trou?ble twist ing his foot free and drop?ping the last four feet. He set Oy down. The bum?bler trot?ted off, sniff?ing, and lift?ed his leg against the side of the ter mi?nal build?ing. This was nowhere near as grand as the Cra?dle of Lud, but it had an old-?fash?ioned look that Roland liked—white boards, over hang?ing eaves, high, nar?row win?dows, what looked like slate shin?gles. It was a West?ern look. Writ?ten in gold gilt on a sign which stretched above the ter?mi?nal’s line of doors was this mes?sage:

ATCHI?SON, TOPE?KA, AND SAN?TA FE

Towns, Roland sup?posed, and that last one sound?ed fa?mil?iar to him; had there not

been a San?ta Fe in the Barony of Mejis? But that led back to?ward Su?san, love?ly Su?san at the win?dow with her hair un?braid?ed and all down her back, the smell of her like jas?mine and rose and hon?ey?suck?le and old sweet hay, smells of which the or?acle in the moun?tains had been able to make on?ly the palest mimicry. Su?san ly?ing back and look?ing solemn?ly up at him, then smil?ing and putting her hands be?hind her head so that her breasts rose, as if aching for his hands.

If you love me, Roland, then love me . . . bird and bear and hare and fish...

“ . . . next?”

He looked around at Ed?die, hav?ing to use all of his will to pull him?self back from Su?san Del?ga?do’s when. There were thin?nies here in Tope?ka, all right, and of many sorts. “My mind was wan?der?ing, Ed?die. Cry your par?don.”

“Su?san?nah next? That’s what I asked.”

Roland shook his head. “You next, then Su?san?nah. I’ll go last.”

“Will you be okay? With your hand and all?”

“I’ll be fine.”

Ed?die nod?ded and stuck his foot in?to the loop. When Ed?die had first come in?to Mid-?World, Roland could have low?ered him eas?ily by him?self, two fin?gers short the full com?ple?ment or no, but Ed?die had been with?out his drug for months now, and had put on ten or fif?teen pounds of mus?cle. Roland ac?cept?ed Su?san?nah’s help glad?ly enough, and to?geth?er they low?ered him down.

“Now you, la?dy,” Roland said, and smiled at her. It felt more nat?ural to smile these days.

“Yes.” But for the nonce she on?ly stood there, bit?ing her low?er lip.

“What is it?”

Her hand went to her stom?ach and rubbed there, as if it ached or griped her. He thought she would speak, but she shook her head and said, “Noth?ing.”

“I don’t be?lieve that. Why do you rub your bel?ly? Are you hurt? Were you hurt when we stopped?”

She took her hand off her tu?nic as if the flesh just south of her navel had grown hot. “No. I’m fine.”

“Are you?”

Su?san?nah seemed to think this over very care?ful?ly. “We’ll talk,” she said at last.

“We’ll palaver, if you like that bet?ter. But you were right be fore, Roland—this isn’t the place or time.”

“All four of us, or just you and me and Ed?die?”

“Just you and me, Roland,” she said, and poked the stump of her leg through the loop. “Just one hen and one roost?er, at least to start with. Now low?er away, if you please.”

He did, frown?ing down at her, hop?ing with all his heart that his first idea—the one that had come to mind as soon as he saw that rest?less?ly rub bing hand—was wrong. Be?cause she had been in the speak?ing ring, and the de?mon that denned there had had its way with her while Jake was try ing to cross be?tween the worlds. Some?times—of?ten—de?mon?ic con?tact changed things.

Nev?er for the bet?ter, in Roland’s ex?pe?ri?ence.

He pulled his rope back up af?ter Ed?die had caught Su?san?nah around the waist and

helped her to the platform. The gunslinger walked forward to one of the piers which had torn through the train's bullet snout, fastening the rope's end into a shake-loop as he went. He tossed this over the pier, snubbed it (being careful not to twitch the rope to the left), and then lowered himself to the platform himself, bent at the waist and leaving boot-prints on Blaine's pink side.

"Too bad to lose the rope and harness," Eddie remarked when Roland was beside them.

"I ain't sorry about that harness," Susanah said. "I'd rather crawl along the pavement until I got chewin'-gum all the way up my arms to the elbows."

"We haven't lost anything," Roland said. He snugged his hand into the rawhide foot-loop and snapped it hard to the left. The rope slithered down from the pier, Roland gathering it in almost as fast as it came down.

"Neat trick!" Jake said.

"Eat! Rick!" Oy agreed.

"Cort?" Eddie asked.

"Cort," Roland agreed, smiling.

"The drill instructor from hell," Eddie said. "Better you than me, Roland. Better you than me."

4

As they walked toward the doors leading into the station, that low, liquid warbling sound began again. Roland was amused to see all three of his cohorts wrinkle their noses and pull down the corners of their mouths at the same time; it made them look like blood family as well as ka-tet. Susanah pointed toward the park. The signs looming over the "trees were waving slightly, the way things did in a heat-haze.

"Is that from the thinny?" Jake asked.

Roland nodded.

"Will we be able to get around it?"

"Yes. Thinnyes are dangerous in much the way that swamps full of quicksand and saligs are dangerous. Do you know those things?"

"We know quicksand," Jake said. "And if saligs are long green things with big teeth, we know them, too."

"That's what they are."

Susanah turned to look back at Blaine one last time. "No silly questions and no silly games. The book was right about that." From Blaine she turned her eyes to Roland. "What about Beryl Evans, the woman who wrote Charlie the Choo-Choo? Do you think she's part of this? That we might even meet her? I'd like to thank her. Edie figured it out, but—"

"It's possible, I suppose," Roland said, "but on measure, I think not. My world is like a huge ship that sank near enough shore for most of the wreckage to wash up on the beach. Much of what we find is fascinating, some of it may be useful, if ka-alls, but all of it is still wreckage. Senseless wreckage." He looked around.

"Like this place, I think."

"I wouldn't exactly call it wrecked," Edie said. "Look at the paint on the station—it's a little rusty from the gutters up under the eaves, but it hasn't peeled

any?where that I can see.“ He stood in front of the doors and ran his fin?gers down one of the glass pan?els. They left four clear tracks be?hind. ”Dust and plen?ty of it, but no cracks. I’d say that this build?ing has been left un?main?tained at most since . . . the start of the sum?mer, maybe?“

He looked at Roland, who shrugged and nod?ded. He was lis?ten?ing with on?ly half an ear and pay?ing at?ten?tion with on?ly half a mind. The rest of him was fixed up?on two things: the war?ble of the thin?ny, and keep?ing away the mem?ories that want?ed to swamp him.

”But Lud had been go?ing to wrack and ru?in for cen?turies“ Su?san?nah said. ”This place . . . it may or may not be Tope?ka, but what it re?al?ly looks like to me is one of those creepy lit?tle towns on The Twi?light Zone. You boys prob?ably don’t re?mem?ber that one, but—“

”Yes, I do,“ Ed?die and Jake said in per?fect uni?son, then looked at each oth?er and laughed. Ed?die stuck out his hand and Jake slapped it.

”They still show the re?runs,“ Jake said.

”Yeah, all the time,“ Ed?die added. ”Usu?al?ly spon?sored by bankrupt?cy lawyers who look like short?hair ter?ri?ers. And you’re right. This place isn’t like Lud. Why would it be? It’s not in the same world as Lud. I don’t know where we crossed over, but—“ He point?ed again at the blue In?ter state 70 shield, as if that proved his case be?yond a shad?ow of a doubt.

”If it’s Tope?ka, where are the peo?ple?“ Su?san?nah asked.

Ed?die shrugged and raised his hands—who knows?

Jake put his fore?head against the glass of the cen?ter door, cupped his hands to the sides of his face, and peered in. He looked for sev?er?al sec onds, then saw some?thing that made him pull back fast. ”Oh-?oh,“ he said. ”No won?der the town’s so qui?et.“

Roland stepped up be?hind Jake and peered in over the boy’s head, cup?ping his own hands to re?duce his re?flec?tion. The gun?slinger drew two con?clu?sions be?fore even look?ing at what Jake had seen. The first was that al?though this was most as?sured?ly a train sta?tion, it wasn’t re?al?ly a Blame sta?tion . . . not a cra?dle. The oth?er was that the sta?tion did in?deed be?long to Ed?die’s, Jake’s, and Su?san?nah’s world . . . but per?haps not to their where.

It’s the thin?ny. We’ll have to be care?ful.

Two corpses were lean?ing to?geth?er on one of the long bench?es that filled most of the room; but for their hang?ing, wrin?kled faces and black hands, they might have been rev?ellers who had fall?en asleep in the sta?tion af?ter an ar?du?ous par?ty and missed the last train home. On the wall be?hind them was a board marked de?par?tures, with the names of cities and towns and ba?ronies march?ing down it in a line. den?ver, read one. wi?chi?ta, read an?oth?er. om?aha, read a third. Roland had once known a one-?eyed gam?bler named Om?aha; he had died with a knife in his throat at a Watch Me ta?ble. He had stepped in?to the clear?ing at the end of the path with his head thrown back, and his last breath had sprayed blood all the way up to the ceil?ing. Hang?ing down from the ceil?ing of this room (which Roland’s stu?pid and lag?gard mind in?sist?ed on think?ing of as a stage rest, as if this were a stop along some half-?for?got?ten road like the one that had brought him to Tull) was a beau?ti?ful

four-o'clock. Its hands had stopped at 4:14, and Roland supposed they would never move again. It was a sad thought. . . but this was a sad world. He could not see any other dead people, but experience suggested that where there were two dead, there were likely four more dead somewhere out of sight. Or four dozen.

"Should we go in?" Eddie asked.

"Why?" the gunslinger countered. "We have no business here; it doesn't lie along the Path of the Beam."

"You'd make a great tour-guide," Eddie said sourly. "Keep up, everyone, and please don't go wandering off into the—" "

Jake interrupted with a request Roland didn't understand. "Do either of you guys have a quarter?" The boy was looking at Eddie and Susanah. Beside him was a square metal box. Written on it in blue was:

The Topeka Capital-Journal covers Kansas like no other! Your hometown paper! Read it every day!

Eddie shook his head, amused. "Lost all my change at some point. Probably climbing a tree, just before you joined us, in an all-out effort to avoid becoming snack-food for a robot bear. Sorry."

"Wait a minute . . . wait a minute . . ." Susanah had her purse open and was rummaging through it in a way that made Roland grin broadly in spite of all his preoccupations. It was so damned womanly, somehow. She turned over crumpled Kleenex, shook them to make sure there was nothing caught inside, fished out a compact, looked at it, dropped it back, came up with a comb, dropped that back— She was too absorbed to look up as Roland strode past her, drawing his gun from the docker's clutch he had built her as he went. He fired a single time. Susanah let out a little scream, dropping her purse and slapping at the empty holster high up under her left breast.

"Honky, you scared the living Jesus out of me!"

"Take better care of your gun, Susanah, or the next time someone takes it from you, the hole may be between your eyes instead of in a . . . what is it, Jake? A news-telling device of some kind? Or does it hold paper?"

"Both." Jake looked startled. Oy had withdrawn halfway down the platform and was looking at Roland mistrustfully. Jake poked his finger at the bullet-hole in the center of the newspaper box's locking device. A little curl of smoke was drifting from it.

"Go on," Roland said. "Open it."

Jake pulled the handle. It resisted for a moment, then a piece of metal clunked down somewhere inside, and the door opened. The box itself was empty; the sign on the back wall read when all papers are gone, please take display copy. Jake worked it out of its wire holder, and they all gathered round.

"What in God's name . . . ?" Susanah's whisper was both horrified and accusing.

"What does it mean? What in God's name happened?"

Below the newspaper's name, taking up most of the front page's top half, were screaming black letters:

"CAPTAIN TRIPS" SUSANAH FLURIES UNCHECKED
Govt. Leaders May Have Fled Country

Topeka Hospi-tals Jammed with Sick, Dying

Millions Pray for Cure

“Read it aloud,” Roland said. “The letters are in your speech, I can’t make them all out, and I would know this story very well.”

Jake looked at Edie, who nodded impatiently.

Jake unfolded the newspaper, revealing a dot-picture (Roland had seen pictures of this type; they were called “fotographs”) which shocked them all: it showed a lake-side city with its skyline in flames. Cleveland fires burn unchecked, the caption beneath read.

“Read, kid!” Edie told him. Susanah said nothing; she was already reading the story—the only one on the front page—over his shoulder. Jake cleared his throat as if it were suddenly dry, and began.

5

“The byline says John Corcoran, plus staff and AP reports. That means a lot of different people worked on it, Roland. Okay. Here goes. ‘America’s greatest crisis—and the world’s, perhaps—deepened overnight as the so-called superflu, known as Tube-Neck in the Midwest and Captain Trips in California, continues to spread.

’ ‘Although the death-toll can only be estimated, medical experts say the total at this point is horrible beyond comprehension: twenty to thirty million dead in the continental U.S. alone is the estimate given by Dr. Morris Hackford of Topeka’s St. Francis Hospi-tal and Medical Center. Bodies are being burned from Los Angeles, California, to Boston, Massachusetts, in crematoria, factories, and at landfill sites.

“ ‘Here in Topeka, the bereaved who are still well enough and strong enough to do so are urged to take their dead to one of three sites: the disposal plant north of Oakland Billard Park; the pit area at Heartland Park Race Track; the landfill on Southeast Sixty-first Street, east of Forbes Field. Landfill users should approach by Berryton Road; California has been blocked by car wrecks and at least one downed Air Force transport plane, sources tell us.’ ”

Jake glanced up at his friends with frightened eyes, looked behind him at the silent railway station, then looked back down at the newspaper.

“ ‘Dr. April Montoya of the Stormont-Vail Regional Medical Center points out that the death-toll, horrifying as it is, constitutes only part of this terrible story. “For every person who has died so far as a result of this new flu-strain,” Montoya said, “there are another six who are lying ill in their homes, perhaps as many as a dozen. And, so far as we have been able to determine, the recovery rate is zero.” Coughing, she then told this reporter: “Speaking personally, I’m not making any plans for the weekend.”

“ ‘In other local developments:

“ ‘All commercial flights out of Forbes and Phillip Billard have been cancelled.

“ ‘All Amtrak rail travel has been suspended, not just in Topeka but across all of Kansas. The Gage Boulevard Amtrak station has been closed until further notice.

“ ‘All Topeka schools have also been closed until further notice. This includes Districts 437, 345, 450 (Shawnee Heights), 372, and 501 (metro Topeka). Topeka

Luther?an and Tope?ka Tech?ni?cal Col?lege are al?so closed, as is KU at Lawrence. “ ‘Topekans must ex?pect brownouts and per?haps black?outs in the days and weeks ahead. Kansas Pow?er and Light has an?nounced a ”slow shut?down“ of the Kaw Riv?er Nu?cle?ar Plant in Wamego. Al?though no one in KawNuke’s Of?fice of Pub?lic Re?la?tions an?swered this news?pa?per’s calls, a record?ed an?nounce?ment cau?tions that there is no plant emer?gen?cy, that this is a safe?ty mea?sure on?ly. KawNuke will re?turn to on-?line sta?tus, the an?nounce?ment con?cludes, ”when the cur?rent cri?sis is past.“ Any com fort af?ford?ed by this state?ment is in large part negat?ed by the record?ed state?ment’s fi?nal words, which are not ”Good?bye“ or ”Thank you for call ing“ but ”God will help us through our time of tri?al.“ ‘ ”

Jake paused, fol?low?ing the sto?ry to the next page, where there were more pic?tures: a burned-?out pan?el truck over?turned on the steps of the Kansas Mu?se?um of Nat?ural His?to?ry; traf?fic on San Fran?cis?co’s Gold?en Gate Bridge stalled bumper to bumper; piles of corpses in Times Square. One body, Su?san?nah saw, had been hung from a lamp?post, and that brought back night?mar?ish mem?ories of the run for the Cra?dle of Lud she and Ed?die had made af?ter part?ing from the gun?slinger; mem?ories of Lus?ter and Win?ston and Jeeves and Maud. When the god-?drums start?ed up this time, it was Spanker’s stone what came out of the hat, Maud had said. We set him to dance. Ex?cept, of course, what she’d meant was that they had set him to hang. As they had hung some folks, it seemed, back home in lit?tle old New York. When things got weird enough, some?one al?ways found a lyn?chrope, it seemed.

Echoes. Ev?ery?thing echoed now. They bounced back and forth from one world to the oth?er, not fad?ing as or?di?nary echoes did but grow?ing and be?com?ing more ter?ri?ble. Like the god-?drums, Su?san?nah thought, and shud?dered.

“ ‘In na?tion?al de?vel?op?ments,’ ” Jake read, “ ‘con?vic?tion con?tin?ues to grow that, af?ter deny?ing the su?per?flu’s ex?is?tence dur?ing its ear?ly days, when quar?an?time mea?sures might still have had some ef?fect, na?tion?al lead ers have fled to un?der?ground re?treats which were cre?at?ed as brain-?trust shel?ters in case of nu?cle?ar war. Vice-Pres?ident Bush and key mem?bers of the Rea?gan cab?inet have not been seen dur?ing the last forty-?eight hours. Rea?gan him?self has not been seen since Sun?day morn?ing, when he at tend?ed prayer ser?vices at Green Val?ley Methodist Church in San Sime?on.

” ‘ “They have gone to the bunkers like Hitler and the rest of the Nazi sew?er-?rats at the end of World War II,” said Rep. Steve Sloan. When asked if he had any ob?jec?tion to be?ing quot?ed by name, Kansas’s first-?term rep?re?sen?ta?tive, a Re?pub?li?can, laughed and said: “Why should I? I’ve got a re?al fine case my?self. I’ll be so much dust in the wind come this time next week.”

“ ‘Fires, most like?ly set, con?tin?ue to rav?age Cleve?land, In?di?anapo?lis, and Terre Haute.

” ‘A gi?gan?tic ex?plo?sion cen?tered near Cincin?nati’s River?front Sta di?um was ap?par?ent?ly not nu?cle?ar in na?ture, as was first feared, but oc curred as the re?sult of a nat?ural gas buildup caused by un?su?per?vised . . . ’ “

Jake let the pa?per drop from his hands. A gust of wind caught it and blew it the length of the plat?form, the few fold?ed sheets sep?arat?ing as they went. Oy stretched his neck and snagged one of these as it went by. He trot?ted to?ward Jake with it in

his mouth, as obedient as a dog with a stick.

"No, Oy, I don't want it," Jake said. He sounded ill and very young.

"At least we know where all the folks are," Susanah said, bending and taking the paper from Oy. It was the last two pages. They were crammed with obituaries printed in the tiniest type she had ever seen. No pictures, no causes of death, no announcement of burial services. Just this one died, beloved of so-and-so, that one died, beloved of Jill-and-Joe, the other one died, beloved of them-and-those. All in that tiny, not-quite-even type. It was the jaggedness of the type which convinced her it was all real.

But how hard they tried to honor their dead, even at the end, she thought, and a lump rose in her throat. How hard they tried.

She folded the quarto together and looked on the back—the last page of the Capital-Journal. It showed a picture of Jesus Christ, eyes sad, hands outstretched, forehead marked from his crown of thorns. Below it, three stark words in huge type:

PRAY FOR US

She looked up at Eddie, eyes accusing. Then she handed him the newspaper, one brown finger tapping the date at the top. It was June 24, 1986. Eddie had been drawn into the gunslinger's world a year later.

He held it for a long time, fingers slipping back and forth across the date, as if the passage of his finger would somehow cause it to change. Then he looked up at them and shook his head. "No. I can't explain this town, this paper, or the dead people in that station, but I can set you straight about one thing—everything was fine in New York when I left. Wasn't it, Roland?"

The gunslinger looked a trifle sour. "Nothing in your city seemed very fine to me, but the people who lived there did not seem to be survivors of such a plague as this, no."

"There was something called Legionnaires' disease," Eddie said. "And AIDS, of course—"

"That's the sex one, right?" Susanah asked. "Transmitted by fruits and drug addicts?"

"Yes, but calling gays fruits isn't the done thing in my when," Eddie said. He tried a smile, but it felt stiff and unnatural on his face and he put it away again.

"So this . . . this never happened," Jake said, tentatively touching the face of Christ on the back page of the paper.

"But it did," Roland said. "It happened in June—sowing of the year one thousand nine hundred and eighty-six. And here we are, in the aftermath of that plague. If Eddie's right about the length of time that has gone by, the plague of this 'superflu' was this past June—sowing. We're in Topeka, Kansas, in the Reap of eighty-six. That's the when of it. As to the where, all we know is that it's not Eddie's. It might be yours, Susanah, or yours, Jake, because you left your world before this arrived." He tapped the date on the paper, then looked at Jake. "You said something to me once. I doubt if you remember, but I do; it's one of the most important things anyone has ever said to me: 'Go, then, there are other worlds than these.' "

"More rid?dles," Ed?die said, scowl?ing.

"Is it not a fact that Jake Cham?bers died once and now stands be?fore us, alive and well? Or do you doubt my sto?ry of his death un?der the moun tains? That you have doubt?ed my hon?esty from time to time is some?thing I know. And I sup?pose you have your rea?sons."

Ed?die thought it over, then shook his head. "You lie when it suits your pur?pose, but I think that when you told us about Jake, you were too fucked up to man?age any?thing but the truth."

Roland was star?tled to find him?self hurt by what Ed?die had said—You lie when it suits your pur?pose—but he went on. Af?ter all, it was es?sen tial?ly true.

"We went back to time's pool," the gun?slinger said, "and pulled him out be?fore he could drown."

"You pulled him out," Ed?die cor?rect?ed.

"You helped, though," Roland said, "if on?ly by keep?ing me alive, you helped, but let that go for now. It's be?side the point. What's more to it is that there are many pos?si?ble worlds, and an in?fin?ity of doors lead?ing in?to them. This is one of those worlds; the thin?ny we can hear is one of those doors . . . on?ly one much big?ger than the ones we found on the beach."

"How big?" Ed?die asked. "As big as a ware?house load?ing door, or as big as the ware?house?"

Roland shook his head and raised his hands palms to the sky—who knows?

"This thin?ny," Su?sana?h said. "We're not just near it, are we? We came through it. That's how we got here, to this ver?sion of Tope?ka."

"We may have," Roland ad?mit?ted. "Did any of you feel some?thing strange? A sen?sation of ver?ti?go, or tran?sient nau?sea?"

They shook their heads. Oy, who had been watch?ing Jake close?ly, al?so shook his head this time.

"No," Roland said, as if he had ex?pect?ed this. "But we were con?cen trat?ing on the rid?dling—"

"Con?cen?trat?ing on not get?ting killed," Ed?die grunt?ed.

"Yes. So per?haps we passed through with?out be?ing aware. In any case, thin?nies aren't nat?ural—they are sores on the skin of ex?is?tence, able to ex?ist be?cause things are go?ing wrong. Things in all worlds."

"Be?cause things are wrong at the Dark Tow?er," Ed?die said.

Roland nod?ded. "And even if this place—this when, this where—is not the ka of your world now, it might be?come that ka. This plague—or oth?ers even worse—could spread. Just as the thin?nies will con?tin?ue to spread, grow?ing in size and num?ber. I've seen per?haps half a dozen in my years of search?ing for the Tow?er, and heard maybe two dozen more. The first . . . the first one I ev?er saw was when I was still very young. Near a town called Ham?bry." He rubbed his hand up his cheek again, and was not sur?prised to find sweat amid the bris?tles. Love me, Roland. If you love me, then love me.

"What?ev?er hap?ened to us, it bumped us out of your world, Roland," Jake said.

"We've fall?en off the Beam. Look." He point?ed at the sky. The clouds were mov?ing slow?ly above them, but no longer in the di?rec tion Blame's smashed snout

was point?ing. South?east was still south?east, but the signs of the Beam which they had grown so used to fol?low?ing were gone.

”Does it mat?ter?” Ed?die asked. ”I mean ... the Beam may be gone, but the Tow?er ex?ists in all worlds, doesn’t it?”

”Yes,” Roland said, ”but it may not be ac?ces?si?ble from all worlds.“

The year be?fore be?gin?ning his won?der?ful and ful?fill?ing ca?reer as a hero?in ad?dict, Ed?die had done a brief and not-?very-?suc?cess?ful turn as a bi cy?cle mes?sen?ger. Now he re?mem?bered cer?tain of?fice-?build?ing el?eva?tors he’d been in while mak?ing de?liv?er?ies, build?ings with banks or in?vest?ment firms in them, most?ly. There were some floors where you couldn’t stop the car and get off un?less you had a spe?cial card to swipe through the slot be?low the num?bers. When the el?eva?tor came to those locked-?off floors, the num?ber in the win?dow was re?placed by an X.

”I think,” Roland said, ”we need to find the Beam again.“

”I’m con?vinced,” Ed?die said. ”Come on, let’s get go?ing.“ He took a cou?ple of steps, then turned back to Roland with one eye?brow raised. ”Where?”

”The way we were go?ing,” Roland said, as if that should have been ob?vi?ous, and walked past Ed?die in his dusty, bro?ken boots, head?ed for the park across the way.

CHAP?TER V

TURN?PIKIN’

1

Roland walked to the end of the plat?form, kick?ing bits of pink met?al out of his way as he went. At the stairs, he paused and looked back at them somber?ly. ”Mare dead. Be ready.”

”They’re not. . . um ... run?ny, are they?” Jake asked.

Roland frowned, then his face cleared as he un?der?stood what Jake meant. ”No. Not run?ny. Dry.”

”That’s all right, then,” Jake said, but he held his hand out to Su?san nah, who was be?ing car?ried by Ed?die for the time be?ing. She gave him a smile and fold?ed her fin?gers around his.

At the foot of the stairs lead?ing down to the com?muter park?ing lot at the side of the sta?tion, half a dozen corpses lay to?geth?er like a col?lapsed corn?shock. Two were wom?en, three were men. The sixth was a child in a stroller. A sum?mer spent dead in the sun and rain and heat (not to men?tion at the mer?cy of any stray cats, coons, or wood?chucks that might be pass ing) had giv?en the tod?dler a look of an?cient wis?dom and mys?tery, like a child mum?my dis?cov?ered in an In?can pyra?mid. Jake sup?posed from the fad?ed blue out?fit it was wear?ing that it had been a boy, but it was im?pos?si ble to tell for sure. Eye?less, li?pless, its skin fad?ed to dusky gray, it made a joke of gen?der—why did the dead ba?by cross the road? Be?cause it was sta?pled to the su?per?flu.

Even so, the tod?dler seemed to have voy?aged through Tope?ka’s emp?ty post-?plague months bet?ter than the adults around it. They were lit tle more than skele?tons with hair. In a scrawny bunch of skin-?wrapped bones that had once been fin?gers, one of the men clutched the han?dle of a suit?case that looked like the Sam?sonites Jake’s par?ents owned. As with the ba?by (as with all of them), his eyes were gone; huge dark sock?ets stared at Jake. Be?low them, a ring of dis?col?ored teeth jut?ted in a

pug?na?cious grin. What took you so long, kid? the dead man who was still clutch ing his suit?case seemed to be ask?ing. Been wait?ing for you, and it's been a long hot sum?mer!

Where were you guys hop?ing to go? Jake won?dered. Just where in the crispy crap did you think might be safe enough? Des Moines? Sioux City? Far?go? The moon? They went down the stairs, Roland first, the oth?ers be?hind him, Jake still hold?ing Su?san?nah's hand with Oy at his heels. The long-?bod?ied bum?bler seemed to de?scend each step in two stages, like a dou?ble trail?er tak?ing speed-?bumps.

"Slow down, Roland," Ed?die said. "I want to check the cri? spaces be?fore we go on. We might get lucky."

"Cri? spaces?" Su?san?nah said. "What're those?"

Jake shrugged. He didn't know. Nei?ther did Roland.

Su?san?nah switched her at?ten?tion to Ed?die. "I on?ly ask, sug?arpie, be cause it sounds a lit?tle on-?pleas?ant. You know, like call?ing Ne?groes 'blacks' or gay folks 'fruits.' I know I'm just a poor ig?no?rant pick?anin?ny from the dark ages of 1964, but—"

"There." Ed?die point?ed at a rank of signs mark?ing the park?ing-?row clos?est to the sta?tion. There were ac?tu?al?ly two signs to a post, the top of each pair blue and white, the bot?tom red and white. When they drew a lit tle clos?er, Jake saw the one on top was a wheelchair sym?bol. The one on the bot?tom was a warn?ing: \$200 fine for im?prop?er use of hand?icapped PARK?ING SPACE. STRICT?LY EN?FORCED BY TOPE?KA P.D.

"See there!" Su?san?nah said tri?umphant?ly. "They shoul?da done that a long time ago! Why, back in my when, you're lucky if you can get your damn wheelchair through the doors of any?thing small?er than the Shop 'n Save. Hell, lucky if you can get it up over the curbs! And spe?cial park?ing? For?get it, sug?ar!"

The lot was jammed al?most to ca?pac?ity, but even with the end of the world at hand, on?ly two cars that didn't have lit?tle wheelchair sym?bols on their li?cense plates were parked in the row Ed?die had called "the cri? spaces."

Jake guessed that re?spect?ing the "cri? spaces" was just one of those things that got a mys?te?ri?ous life?long hold on peo?ple, like putting zip-?codes on let?ters, part?ing your hair, or brush?ing your teeth be?fore break?fast.

"And there it is!" Ed?die cried. "Hold your cards, folks, but I think we have a Bin?go!"

Still car?ry?ing Su?san?nah on his hip—a thing he would have been in?ca pable of do?ing for any ex?tend?ed pe?ri?od of time even a month ago—Ed?die hur?ried over to a boat of a Lin?coln. Strapped on the roof was a com?pli?cat?ed-?look?ing rac?ing bi?cy?cle; pok?ing out of the half-?open trunk was a wheelchair. Nor was this the on?ly one; scan?ning the row of "cri? spaces," Jake saw at least four more wheelchairs, most strapped to roof-?racks, some stuffed in?to the backs of vans or sta?tion wag?ons, one (it looked an?cient and fear?some?ly bulky) thrown in?to the bed of a pick?up truck. Ed?die set Su?san?nah down and bent to ex?am?ine the rig hold?ing the chair in the trunk. There were a lot of criss?cross?ing elas?tic cords, plus some sort of lock?ing bar. Ed?die drew the Ruger Jake had tak?en from his fa?ther's desk draw?er. "Fire in the hole," he said cheer?ful?ly, and be?fore any of them could even think of cov?er?ing their ears, he pulled the trig?ger and blew the lock off the se?cu?ri?ty-?bar. The sound

went rolling in?to the si?lence, then echoed back. The war?bling sound of the thin?ny re?turned with it, as if the gun?shot had snapped it awake. Sounds Hawai?ian, doesn't it? Jake thought, and gri?maced with dis?taste. Half an hour ago, he wouldn't have be?lieved that a sound could be as phys?ical?ly up?set?ting, as ... well, the smell of rot?ting meat, say, but he be?lieved it now. He looked up at the turn?pike signs. From this an?gle he could see on?ly their tops, but that was enough to con?firm that they were shim?mer?ing again. It throws some kind of field, Jake thought. The way mix?ers and vac?uum clean?ers make stat?ic on the ra?dio or TV, or the way that cy?clotron gad?get made the hair on my arms stand up when Mr. Kingery brought it to class and then asked for vol?un?teers to come up and stand next to it.

Ed?die wrenched the lock?ing bar aside, and used Roland's knife to cut the elas?tic cords. Then he drew the wheelchair out of the trunk, ex?am?ined it, un?fold?ed it, and en?gaged the sup?port which ran across the back at seat-?lev?el. "Voila!" he said. Su?san?nah had propped her?self on one hand—Jake thought she looked a lit?tle like the wom?an in this An?drew Wyeth paint?ing he liked, Chris tina 's World—and was ex?am?in?ing the chair with some won?der.

"God almighty, it looks so lit?tle 'n light!"

"Mo?dem tech?nol?ogy at its finest, dar?lin," Ed?die said. "It's what we fought Viet?nam for. Hop in." He bent to help her. She didn't re?sist him, but her face was set and frown?ing as he low?ered her in?to the seat. Like she ex?pect?ed the chair to col?lapse un?der her, Jake thought. As she ran her hands over the arms of her new ride, her face grad?ual?ly re?laxed.

Jake wan?dered off a lit?tle, walk?ing down an?oth?er row of cars, run?ning his fin?gers over their hoods, leav?ing trails of dust. Oy padded af?ter him, paus?ing once to lift his leg and squirt a tire, as if he had been do?ing it all his life.

"Make you home?sick, hon?ey?" Su?san?nah asked from be?hind Jake. "Prob?ably thought you'd nev?er see an hon?est-?to-?God Amer?ican au?to mo?bile again, am I right?"

Jake con?sid?ered this and de?cid?ed she was not right. It had nev?er crossed his mind that he would re?main in Roland's world for?ev?er; that he might nev?er see an?oth?er car. He didn't think that would both?er him, ac?tu al?ly, but he al?so didn't think it was in the cards. Not yet, any?way. There was a cer?tain va?cant lot in the New York when he had come from. It was on the com?er of Sec?ond Av?enue and Forty-?sixth Street. Once there had been a deli there—Tom and Ger?ry's, Par?ty Plat?ters Our Spe?cial?ty—but now it was just rub?ble, and weeds, and bro?ken glass, and ... and a rose. Just a sin?gle wild rose grow?ing in a va?cant lot where a bunch of con?dos were sched?uled to go up at some point, but Jake had an idea that there was noth?ing quite like it grow?ing any?where else on Earth. Maybe not on any of those oth?er worlds Roland had men?tioned, ei?ther. There were ros?es as one ap?proached the Dark Tow?er; ros?es by the bil li?on, ac?cord?ing to Ed?die, great bloody acres of them. He had seen them in a dream. Still, Jake sus?pect?ed that his rose was dif?fer?ent even from those ... and that un?til its fate was de?cid?ed, one way or the oth?er, he was not done with the world of cars and TVs and po?lice?men who want?ed to know if you had any iden?ti?fi?ca?tion and what your par?ents' names were. And speak?ing of par?ents, I may not be done with them, ei?ther, Jake thought. The

idea hurried his heartbeats with a mixture of hope and alarm.

They stopped halfway down the row of cars, Jake staring blankly across a wide street (Gage Boulevard, he assumed) as he considered these things. Now Roland and Eddie caught up to them.

"This baby's gonna be great after a couple of months pushing the Iron Maiden," Eddie said with a grin. "Bet you could damn near puff it along." He blew a deep breath at the back of the wheelchair to demonstrate. Jake thought of telling Eddie that there were probably others back there in the "crip spaces" with motors in them, then realized what Eddie must have known right away: their batteries would be dead.

Susanah ignored him for the time being; it was Jake she was interested in. "You didn't answer me, sug. All these cars get you homesick?"

"Nah. But I was curious about whether or not they were all cars I knew. I thought maybe . . . if this version of 1986 grew out of some other world than my 1977, there'd be a way to tell. But I can't tell. Because things change so damn fast. Even in nine years . . ." He shrugged, then looked at Eddie. "You might be able to, though. I mean, you actually lived in 1986."

Eddie grunted. "I lived through it, but I didn't exactly observe it. I was fucked to the sky most of the time. Still . . . I suppose . . ."

Eddie started pushing Susanah along the smooth macadam of the parking lot again, pointing to cars as they passed them. "Ford Explorer . . . Chevrolet Caprice . . . and that one there's an old Pontiac, you can tell because of the split grille—"

"Pontiac Bonneville," Jake said. He was amused and a little touched by the wonder in Susanah's eyes—most of these cars must look as futuristic to her as Buck Rogers scoutships. That made him wonder how Roland felt about them, and Jake looked around.

The gunslinger showed no interest in the cars at all. He was gazing across the street, into the park, toward the turnpike . . . except Jake didn't think he was actually looking at any of those things. Jake had an idea that Roland was simply looking into his own thoughts. If so, the expression on his face suggested that he wasn't finding anything good there.

"That's one of those little Chrysler K's," Eddie said, pointing, "and that's a Subaru. Mercedes SEL 450, excellent, the car of champions . . . Mustang . . . Chrysler Imperial, good shape but must be older'n God—"

"Watch it, boy," Susanah said, with a touch of what Jake thought was real asperity in her voice. "I recognize that one. Looks new to me."

"Sorry, Suze. Really. This one's a Cougar . . . another Chevy . . . and one more . . . Topeka loves General Motors, big fuckin' surprise there . . . Honda Civic . . . VW Rabbit . . . a Dodge . . . a Ford . . . a—"

Eddie stopped, looking at a little car near the end of the row, white with red trim.

"A Takuro," he said, mostly to himself. He went around to look at the trunk. "A Takuro Spirit, to be exact. Ever hear of that make and model, Jake of New York?" Jake shook his head.

"Me, neither," he said. "Me fucking neither."

Eddie began pushing Susanah toward Gage Boulevard (Roland with them but

still mostly off in his own private world, walking when they walked, stopping where they stopped). Just shy of the lot's automated entrance (stop TAKE TICKET), Eddie halted.

"At this rate, we'll be old before we get to your park and dead before we raise the turnpike," Susanah said.

This time Eddie didn't apologize, didn't seem even to hear her. He was looking at the bumper sticker on the front of a rusty old AMC Pacer. The sticker was blue and white, like the little wheelchair signs marking the "crip spaces." Jake squatted for a better look, and when Oy dropped his head on Jake's knee, the boy stroked him absently. With his other hand he reached out and touched the sticker, as if to verify its reality. Kansas City Monarchs, it said. The O in Monarchs was a baseball with speed lines drawn out behind it, as if it were leaving the park.

Eddie said: "Check me if I'm wrong on this, sport, because I know almost zilch about baseball west of Yankee Stadium, but shouldn't that say Kansas City Royals? You know, George Brett and all that?"

Jake nodded. He knew the Royals, and he knew Brett, although he had been a young player in Jake's when and must have been a fairly old one in Eddie's.

"Kansas City Athletics, you mean," Susanah said, sounding bewildered. Roland ignored it all; he was still cruising in his own personal ozone layer.

"Not by '86, darling," Eddie said kindly. "By '86 the Athletics were in Oakland." He glanced from the bumper sticker to Jake. "Minor-league team, maybe?" he asked.

"Triple A?"

"The Triple A Royals are still the Royals," Jake said. "They play in Omaha. Come on, let's go."

And although he didn't know about the others, Jake himself went on with a lighter heart. Maybe it was stupid, but he was relieved. He didn't believe that this terrible plague was waiting up ahead for his world, because there were no Kansas City Monarchs in his world. Maybe that wasn't enough information upon which to base a conclusion, but it felt true. And it was an enormous relief to be able to believe that his mother and father weren't slated to die of a germ people called Captain Trips and be burned in a ... a landfill, or something.

Except that wasn't quite a sure thing, even if this wasn't the 1986 version of his 1977 world. Because even if this awful plague had happened in a world where there were cars called Takuro Spirits and George Brett played for the K.C.

Monarchs, Roland said the trouble was spreading ... that things like the superflu were eating through the fabric of existence like battery acid eating its way into a piece of cloth.

The gunslinger had spoken of time's pool, a phrase which had at first struck Jake as romantic and charming. But suppose the pool was growing stagnant and swampy? And suppose these Bermuda Triangle-type things Roland called thinies, once great rarities, were becoming the rule rather than the exception? Suppose—oh, and here was a hideous thought, one guaranteed to keep you lying awake until way past three—all of reality was sagging as the structural weaknesses of the Dark Tower grew? Suppose there came a crash, one level falling down into the next... and the next... and the next... until—

When Ed?die grasped his shoul?der and squeezed, Jake had to bite his tongue to keep from scream?ing.

“You’re giv?ing your?self the hoodoos,” Ed?die said.

“What do you know about it?” Jake asked. That sound?ed rude, but he was mad.

From be?ing scared or be?ing seen in?to? He didn’t know. Didn’t much care, ei?ther.

“When it comes to the hoodoos, I’m an old hand,” Ed?die said. “I don’t know ex?act?ly what’s on your mind, but what?ev?er it is, this would be an ex?cel?lent time to stop think?ing about it.”

That, Jake de?cid?ed, was prob?ably good ad?vice. They walked across the street to?geth?er. To?ward Gage Park and one of the great?est shocks of Jake’s life.

2

Pass?ing un?der the wrought-?iron arch with gage park writ?ten on it in old-?fash?ioned, curlicued let?ters, they found them?selves on a brick path lead ing through a gar?den that was half En?glish For?mal and half Ecuado?ri?an Jun?gle. With no one to tend it through the hot Mid?west?ern sum?mer, it had run to ri?ot; with no one to tend it this fall, it had run to seed. A sign just in side the arch pro?claimed this to be the Reinisch Rose Gar?den, and there were ros?es, all right; ros?es ev?ery?where. Most had gone over, but some of the wild ones still throve, mak?ing Jake think of the rose in the va?cant lot at Forty-?sixth and Sec?ond with a long?ing so deep it was an ache. Off to one side as they en?tered the park was a beau?ti?ful old-?time carousel, its pranc?ing steeds and rac?ing stal?lions now still on their posts. The carousel’s very si?lence, its flash?ing lights and steamy cal?lio?pe mu?sic stilled for?ev?er, gave Jake a chill. Hung over the neck of one horse, dan?gling from a rawhide strip, was some kid’s base?ball glove. Jake was bare?ly able to look at it.

Be?yond the carousel, the fo?liage grew even thick?er, stran?gling the path un?til the trav?ellers edged along sin?gle-?file, like lost chil?dren in a fairy-?tale wood. Thorns from over?grown and un?pruned rose?bush?es tore at Jake’s clothes. He had some?how got?ten in?to the lead (prob?ably be?cause Roland was still deep in?side his own thoughts), and that was why he saw Char?lie the Choo-?Choo first.

His on?ly thought while ap?proach?ing the nar?row-?gauge train-?tracks which crossed the path—they were lit?tle more than toy tracks, re?al?ly— was of the gun?slinger say?ing that ka was like a wheel, al?ways rolling around to the same place again. We ‘re haunt?ed by ros?es and trains, he thought. Why? I don’t know. I guess it’s just an?oth?er rid—

Then he looked to his left, and “Oh?good?nesstoChrist” fell out of his mouth, all in one word. The strength ran out of his legs and he sat down. His voice sound?ed wa?tery and dis?tant to his own ears. He didn’t quite faint, but the col?or drained out of the world un?til the run?ning-?to-?ri?ot fo liage on the west side of the park looked al?most as gray as the au?tumn sky over?head.

“Jake! Jake, what’s wrong!” It was Ed?die, and Jake could hear the gen?uine con?cern in his voice, but it seemed to be com?ing over a bad long-?dis?tance con?nec?tion. From Beirut, say, or maybe Uranus. And he could feel Roland’s steady?ing hand on his shoul?der, but it was as dis?tant as Ed die’s voice.

“Jake!” Su?san?nah. “What’s wrong, hon?ey? What—”

Then she saw, and stopped talk?ing at him. Ed?die saw, and al?so stopped talk?ing at

him. Roland's hand fell away. They all stood looking ... except for Jake, who sat looking. He supposed that strength and feeling would come back into his legs eventually and he would get up, but right now they felt like limp macaroni. The train was parked fifty feet up, by a toy station that mimicked the one across the street. Hanging from its eaves was a sign which read *Topeka*. The train was *Charlie the Choo-choo, cowcatcher and all; a 402 Big Boy Steam Locomotive*. And, Jake knew, if he found enough strength to get up on his feet and go over there, he would find a family of mice nested in the seat where the engineer (whose name had undoubtedly been Bob Something-or-other) had once sat. There would be another family, this one of swallows, nested in the smokestack.

And the dark, oily tears, Jake thought, looking at the tiny train waiting in front of its tiny station with his skin crawling all over his body and his balls hard and his stomach in a knot. At night it cries those dark, oily tears, and they're rusting the hell out of his fine Stratham headlight. But in your time, Charlie-boy, you pulled your share of kids, right? Around and around Gage Park you went, and the kids laughed, except some of them weren't really laughing; some of them, the ones who were wise to you, were screaming. The way I'd scream now, if I had the strength. But his strength was coming back, and when Eddie put a hand under one of his arms and Roland put one under the other, Jake was able to get up. He staggered once, then stood steady.

"Just for the record, I don't blame you," Edie said. His voice was grim; so was his face. "I feel a little like falling over myself. That's the one in your book; that's it to the life."

"So now we know where Miss Beryl Evans got the idea for *Charlie the Choo-choo*" Susanah said. "Either she lived here, or sometime before 1942, when the damned thing was published, she visited *Topeka*—"

"—and saw the kids' train that goes through Reinisch Rose Garden and around Gage Park," Jake said. He was getting over his scare now, and he—not just an only child but for most of his life a lonely child—felt a burst of love and gratitude for his friends. They had seen what he had seen, they had understood the source of his fright. Of course—they were *ka-tet*.

"It won't answer silly questions, it won't play silly games," Roland said musically.

"Can you go on, Jake?"

"Yes."

"You sure?" Edie asked, and when Jake nodded, Edie pushed Susanah across the tracks. Roland went next. Jake paused a moment, remembering a dream he'd had—he and Oy had been at a train-crossing, and the bumblar had suddenly leaped onto the tracks, barking wildly at the oncoming headlight.

Now Jake bent and scooped Oy up. He looked at the rusting train standing silently in its station, its dark headlamp like a dead eye. "I'm not afraid," he said in a low voice. "Not afraid of you."

The headlamp came to life and flashed at him once, brief but glare-bright, emphatic: I know different; I know different, my dear little squint.

Then it went out.

None of the others had seen. Jake glanced once more at the train, expecting the

light to flash again—maybe expecting the cursed thing to actually start up and make a run at him—but nothing happened.

Heart thumping hard in his chest, Jake hurried after his companions.

3

The Topeka Zoo (the World Famous Topeka Zoo, according to the signs) was full of empty cages and dead animals. Some of the animals that had been freed were gone, but others had died near to hand. The big apes were still in the area marked Gorilla Habitat, and they appeared to have died hand-in-hand. That made Ed die feel like crying, somehow. Since the last of the hero in had washed out of his system, his emotions always seemed on the verge of blowing up into a cyclone. His old pals would have laughed.

Beyond Gorilla Habitat, a gray wolf lay dead on the path. Oy approached it carefully, sniffed, then stretched out his long neck and began to howl.

“Make him quit that, Jake, you hear me?” Ed die said gruffly. He suddenly realized he could smell decaying animals. The aroma was faint, mostly boiled off over the hot days of the summer just passed, but what was left made him feel like upchucking. Not that he could precisely remember the last time he’d eaten. “Oy! To me!”

Oy howled one final time, then returned to Jake. He stood on the kid’s feet, looking up at him with those spooky wedding-ring eyes of his. Jake picked him up, took him in a circle around the wolf, and then set him down again on the brick path.

The path led them to a steep set of steps (weeds had begun to push through the stonework already), and at the top Roland looked back over the zoo and the gardens. From here they could easily see the circuit the toy train-tracks made, allowing Charlie’s riders to tour the entire perimeter of Gage Park. Beyond it, fallen leaves clattered down Gage Boulevard before a rush of cold wind.

“So fell Lord Perth,” murmured Roland.

“And the countryside did shake with that thunder,” Jake finished.

Roland looked down at him with surprise, like a man awakening from a deep sleep, then smiled and put an arm around Jake’s shoulders. “I have played Lord Perth in my time,” he said.

“Have you?”

“Yes. Very soon now you shall hear.”

4

Beyond the steps was an aviary full of dead exotic birds; beyond the aviary was a snack-bar advertising (perhaps heartlessly, given the location) topeka’s best buffalo burger; beyond the snack-bar was another wrought iron arch with a sign reading come back to gage park real soon! Beyond this was the curving up-slope of a limitted-access-highway entrance ramp. Above it, the green signs they had first spotted from across the way stood clear.

“Tumpikin’ again,” Ed die said in a voice almost too low to hear. “God dam.” Then he sighed.

“What’s tumpikin’, Ed die?”

Jake didn’t think Ed die was going to answer; when Susanah craned around to

look at him as he stood with his fingers wrapped around the handles of the new wheelchair, Eddie looked away. Then he looked back, first at Susanah, then at Jake. "It's not pretty. Not much about my life before Gary Cooper here yanked me across the Great Divide was."

"You don't have to—"

"It's also no big deal. A bunch of us would get together—me, my brother Henry, Bum O'Hara, usually, 'cause he had a car, Sandra Corbitt, and maybe this friend of Henry's we called Jimmie Polio—and we'd stick all our names in a hat. The one we drew out was the ... the trip-guide, Henry used to call him. He—she, if it was Sandy—had to stay straight. Relatively, anyway. Everyone else got seriously goobered. Then we'd all pile in to Bum's Chrysler and go up 1-95 in to Connecticut or maybe take the Taconic Parkway in to upstate New York ... only we called it the Catawonic Parkway. Listen to Creedence or Marvin Gaye or maybe even Elvis's Greatest Hits on the tape-player.

"It was better at night, best when the moon was full. We'd cruise for hours sometimes with our heads stuck out the windows like dogs do when they're riding, looking up at the moon and watching for shooting stars. We called it tumpikin'."

Eddie smiled. It looked like an effort. "A charming life, folks."

"It sounds sort of fun," Jake said. "Not the drug part, I mean, but riding around with your pals at night, looking at the moon and listening to the music ... that sounds excellent."

"It was, actually," Eddie said. "Even stuffed so full of reds we were as apt to pee on our own shoes as in the bushes, it was excellent." He paused. "That's the horrible part, don't you get it?"

"Tumpikin'," the gunslinger said. "Let's do some."

They left Gage Park and crossed the road to the entrance ramp.

5

Someone had spray-painted over both signs marking the ramp's ascending curve. On the one reading St. Louis 215, someone had slashed in black. On the one marked next rest area 10 mi.,

had been written in fat red letters. That scarlet was still bright enough to scream even after an entire summer. Each had been decorated with a symbol—

"Do you know what any of that truck means, Roland?" Susanah asked. Roland shook his head, but he looked troubled, and that introspective look never left his own eyes. They went on.

6

At the place where the ramp merged with the turnpike, the two men, the boy, and the bumblor clustered around Susanah in her new wheelchair. All of them looked east.

Eddie didn't know what the traffic situation would be like once they cleared Topeka, but here all the lanes, those headed west as well as the eastbound ones on their side, were crammed with cars and trucks. Most of the vehicles were piled high with possessions gone rusty with a season's worth of rain.

But the traffic was the least of their concerns as they stood there, looking silently eastward. For half a mile or so on either side of them, the city continued—they

could see church steeples, a strip of fast food places (Arby's, Wendy's, McD's, Piz?za Hut, and one Ed?die had nev?er heard of called Bo?ing Bo?ing Burg?ers), car deal?er?ships, the roof of a bowl?ing al?ley called Heart?land Lanes. They could see an?oth?er turn?pike ex?it ahead, the sign by the ramp read?ing Tope?ka State Hos?pi?tal and S.W. 6th. Be?yond the off-?ramp there bulked a mas?sive old red brick ed?ifice with tiny win?dows peer?ing like des?per?ate eyes out of the climb?ing ivy. Ed?die fig?ured a place that looked so much like At?ti?ca had to be a hos?pi?tal, prob?ably the kind of wel?fare pur?ga?to?ry where poor folks sat in shit?ty plas?tic chairs for hours on end, all so some doc?tor could look at them like they were dogshit.

Be?yond the hos?pi?tal, the city abrupt?ly end?ed and the thin?ny be?gan.

To Ed?die, it looked like flat wa?ter stand?ing in a vast marsh?land. It crowd?ed up to the raised bar?rel of I-70 on both sides, sil?very and shim mer?ing, mak?ing the signs and guardrails and stalled cars wa?ver like mi rages; it gave off that liq?uidy hum?ming sound like a stench.

Su?san?nah put her hands to her ears, her mouth drawn down. "I don't know as I can stand it. Re?al?ly. I don't mean to be splee?ny, but al?ready I feel like vom?it?ing, and I haven't had any?thing to eat all day."

Ed?die felt the same way. Yet, sick as he felt he could hard?ly take his eyes away from the thin?ny. It was as if un?re?al?ity had been giv?en . . . what? A face? No. The vast and hum?ming sil?ver shim?mer ahead of them had no face, was the very an?tithe?sis of a face, in fact, but it had a body . . . an as pect . . . a pres?ence.

Yes; that last was best. It had a pres?ence, as the de?mon which had come to the cir?cle of stones while they were try?ing to draw Jake had had a pres?ence.

Roland, mean?while, was rum?mag?ing in the depths of his purse. He ap?peared to dig all the way to the bot?tom be?fore find?ing what he want?ed: a fist?ful of bul?lets. He plucked Su?san?nah's right hand off the arm of her chair, and put two of the bul?lets in her palm. Then he took two more and poked them, slug ends first, in?to his ears.

Su?san?nah looked first amazed, then amused, then doubt?ful. In the end, she fol?lowed his ex?am?ple. Al?most at once an ex?pres?sion of bliss?ful re?lief filled her face.

Ed?die un?shoul?dered the pack he wore and pulled out the half-?full box of .44s that went with Jake's Ruger. The gun?slinger shook his head and held out his hand.

There were still four bul?lets in it, two for Ed?die and two for Jake.

"What's wrong with these?" Ed?die shook a cou?ple of shells from the box that had come from be?hind the hang?ing files in Elmer Cham?bers's desk draw?er.

"They're from your world and they won't block out the sound. Don't ask me how I know that; I just do. Try them if you want, but they won't work."

Ed?die point?ed at the bul?lets Roland was of?fer?ing. "Those are from our world, too. The gun-?shop on Sev?enth and Forty-?ninth. Clements', wasn't that the name?"

"These didn't come from there. These are mine, Ed?die, reload?ed of?ten but orig?inal?ly brought from the green land. From Gilead."

"You mean the wets?" Ed?die asked in?cred?ulous?ly. "The last of the wet shells from the beach? The ones that re?al?ly got soaked?"

Roland nod?ded.

"You said those would nev?er fire again! No mat?ter how dry they got! That the

powder had been . . . what did you say? ‘Flat?tened.’ “

Roland nodded again.

“So why’d you save them? Why bring a bunch of use?less bul?lets all this way?”

“What did I teach you to say af?ter a kill, Ed?die? In or?der to fo?cus your mind?”

“ ‘Fa?ther, guide my hands and heart so that no part of the an?imal will be wast?ed.’ “

Roland nodded a third time. Jake took two shells and put them in his ears. Ed?die took the last two, but first he tried the ones he’d shak?en from the box. They muf?led the sound of the thin?ny, but it was still there, vi brat?ing in the cen?ter of his fore?head, mak?ing his eyes wa?ter the way they did when he had a cold, mak?ing the bridge of his nose feel like it was go ing to ex?plode. He picked them out, and put the big?ger slugs—the ones from Roland’s an?cient re?volvers—in their place. Putting bul?lets in my ears, he thought. Ma would shit. But that didn’t mat?ter. The sound of the thin?ny was gone—or at least down to a dis?tant drone—and that was what did. When he turned and spoke to Roland, he ex?pect?ed his own voice to sound muf?led, the way it did when you were wear?ing earplugs, but he found he could hear him?self pret?ty well.

“Is there any?thing you don’t know?” he asked Roland.

“Yes,” Roland said. “Quite a lot.”

“What about Oy?” Jake asked.

“Oy will be fine, I think,” Roland said. “Come on, let’s make some miles be?fore dark.”

7

Oy didn’t seem both?ered by the war?ble of the thin?ny, but he stuck close to Jake Cham?bers all that af?ter?noon, look?ing mis?trust?ful?ly at the stalled cars which clogged the east?bound lanes of I-70. And yet, Su?san?nah saw, those cars did not clog the high?way com?plete?ly. The con?ges?tion eased as the trav?ellers left down?town be?hind them, but even where the traf?fic had been heavy, some of the dead ve?hi?cles had been pulled to one side or the oth?er; a num?ber had been pushed right off the high?way and on?to the me?di?an strip, which was a con?crete di?vider in the metro area and grass out?side of town.

Some?body’s been at work with a wreck?er, that’s my guess, Su?san?nah thought. The idea made her hap?py. No one would have both?ered clear ing a path down the cen?ter of the high?way while the plague was still rag ing, and if some?one had done it af?ter—if some?one had been around to do it af?ter—that meant the plague hadn’t got?ten ev?ery?one; those crammed-?to?geth?er obit?uar?ies weren’t the whole sto?ry. There were corpses in some of the cars, but they, like the ones at the foot of the sta?tion steps, were dry, not run?ny—mum?mies wear?ing seat-?belts, for the most part. The ma?jor?ity of the cars were emp?ty. A lot of the drivers and pas?sen?gers caught in the traf?fic jams had prob?ably tried to walk out of the plague-?zone, she sup?posed, but she guessed that wasn’t the on?ly rea?son they had tak?en to their feet.

Su?san?nah knew that she her?self would have to be chained to the steer ing wheel to keep her in?side a car once she felt the symp?toms of some fa tal dis?ease set?ting in; if she was go?ing to die, she would want to do it in God’s open air. A hill would be best, some?place with a lit?tle el?eva?tion, but even a wheat?field would do, came it to that. Any?thing but cough?ing your last while smelling the air-?fresh?en?er dan?gling

from the rearview mirror.

At one time Susanah guessed they would have been able to see many of the corpses of the fleeing dead, but not now. Because of the thinny. They approached it steadily, and she knew exactly when they entered it. A kind of tingling shudder ran through her body, making her draw her shortened legs up, and the wheelchair stopped for a moment. When she turned around she saw Roland, Eddie, and Jake holding their stomachs and grimacing. They looked as if they had all been stricken with the bellyache at the same time. Then Eddie and Roland straightened up. Jake bent to stroke Oy, who had been staring at him anxiously.

"You boys all right?" Susanah asked. The question came out in the half-querulous, half-humorous voice of Della Walker. Using that voice was nothing she planned; sometimes it just came out.

"Yeah," Jake said. "Feels like I got a bubble in my throat, though." He was staring uneasily at the thinny. Its silvery blankness was all around them now, as if the whole world had turned into a flat Norfolk fen at dawn. Nearby, trees poked out of its silver surface, casting distorted reflections that never stayed quite still or quite in focus. A little farther away, Susanah could see a grain-storage tower, seeming to float. The words gadish feeds were written on the side in pink letters which might have been red under normal conditions.

"Feels to me like I got a bubble in my mind," Eddie said. "Man, look at that shit shimmer."

"Can you still hear it?" Susanah asked.

"Yeah. But faint. I can live with it. Can you?"

"Uh-huh. Let's go."

It was like riding in an open-cockpit plane through broken clouds, Susanah decided. They'd go for what felt like miles through that humming brightness that was not quite fog and not quite water, sometimes seeing shapes (a bam, a tractor, a Stuckey's billboard) loom out of it, then losing everything but the road, which ran consistently above the thinny's bright but somehow indistinct surface.

Then, all at once, they would run into the clear. The humming would fall away to a faint drone; you could even unplug your ears and not be too bothered, at least until you got near the other side of the break. Once again there were vistas ...

Well, no, that was too grand, Kansas didn't exactly have vistas, but there were open fields and the occasional copse of autumn-bright trees marking a spring or cow-pond. No Grand Canyon or surf crashing on Portland Headlight, but at least you could see a by-God horizon off in the distance, and lose some of that unpleasant feeling of entombment. Then, back into the goop you went. Jake came closest to describing it, she thought, when he said that being in the thinny was like finally reaching the shining water-mirage you could often see far up the highway on hot days.

Whatever it was and however you described it, being inside it was claustrophobic, purgatorial, all the world gone except for the twin barrels of the turnpike and the hulks of the cars, like derelict ships abandoned on a frozen ocean.

Please help us get out of this, Susanah prayed to a God in whom she no longer precisely believed—she still believed in something, but since awakening to

Roland's world on the beach of the Western Sea, her concept of the invisible world had changed considerably. Please help us find the Beam again. Please help us escape this world of silence and death.

They ran into the biggest clear space they had yet come to near a road sign which read Big Springs 2 mi. Behind them, in the west, the setting sun shone through a brief rift in the clouds, skipping scarlet splinters across the top of the thinny and lighting the windows and tail lights of the stalled cars in tones of fire. On either side of them empty fields stretched away. Full Earth come and gone, Susanah thought. Reaping come and gone, too. This is what Roland calls closing the year. The thought made her shiver.

"We'll camp here for the night," Roland said soon after they had passed the Big Springs exit ramp. Up ahead they could see the thinny encroaching on the highway again, but that was miles farther on—you could see a damn long way in eastern Kansas, Susanah was discovering. "We can get firewood without going too near the thinny, and the sound won't be too bad. We may even be able to sleep without bullets stuffed into our ears."

Eddie and Jake climbed over the guardrails, descended the bank, and foraged for wood along a dry creekbed, staying together as Roland admonished them to do. When they came back, the clouds had gulped the sun again, and an ashy, uninteresting twilight had begun to creep over the world.

The gunslinger stripped twigs for kindling, then laid his fuel around them in his usual fashion, building a kind of wooden chimney in the breakdown lane. As he did it, Eddie strolled across to the median strip and stood there, hands in pockets, looking east. After a few moments, Jake and Oy joined him.

Roland produced his flint and steel, scraped fire into the shaft of his chimney, and soon the little campfire was burning.

"Roland!" Eddie called. "Suze! Come over here! Look at this!"

Susanah started rolling her chair toward Eddie, then Roland—after a final check of his campfire—took hold of the handles and pushed her.

"Look at what?" Susanah asked.

Eddie pointed. At first Susanah saw nothing, although the turnpike was perfectly visible even beyond the point where the thinny closed in again, perhaps three miles ahead. Then ... yes, she might see something. Maybe. A kind of shape, at the farthest edge of vision. If not for the fading daylight...

"Is it a building?" Jake asked. "Cripes, it looks like it's built right across the highway!"

"What about it, Roland?" Eddie asked. "You've got the best eyes in the universe." For a time the gunslinger said nothing, only looked up the median strip with his thumbs hooked in his gunbelt. At last he said, "We'll see it better when we get closer."

"Oh, come on!" Eddie said. "I mean, holy shit! Do you know what it is or not?"

"We'll see it better when we get closer," the gunslinger repeated ... which was, of course, no answer at all. He mooseyed back across the east-bound lanes to check on his campfire, bootheels clicking on the pavement. Susanah looked at Jake and Eddie. She shrugged. They shrugged back ... and then Jake burst into bright peals

of laughter. Usually, Susan nah thought, the kid acted more like an eighteen-year-old than a boy of eleven, but that laughter made him sound about nine-going-on-ten, and she didn't mind a bit.

She looked down at Oy, who was looking at them earnestly and rolling his shoulders in an effort to shrug.

8

They ate the leaf-wrapped delicacies Edie called gunslinger burritos, drawing closer to the fire and feeding it more wood as the dark drew down. Somewhere south a bird cried out—it was just about the loneliest sound he had ever heard in his life, Edie reckoned. None of them talked much, and it occurred to him that, at this time of their day, hardly anyone ever did. As if the time when the earth swapped day for dark was special, a time that somehow closed them off from the powerful felloship Roland called ka-tet.

Jake fed Oy small scraps of dried deer meat from his last burrito; Susan nah sat on her bedroll, legs crossed beneath her hide smock, looking dreamily into the fire; Roland lay back on his elbows, looking up at the sky, where the clouds had begun to melt away from the stars. Looking up himself, Edie saw that Old Star and Old Mother were gone, their places taken by Polaris and the Big Dipper. This might not be his world—Takuro automobiles, the Kansas City Monarchs, and a food franchise called Boing Boing Burgers all suggested it wasn't—but Edie thought it was too close for comfort. Maybe, he thought, the world next door.

When the bird cried in the distance again, he roused himself and looked at Roland. "You had something you were going to tell us," he said. "A thrilling tale of your youth, I believe. Susan—that was her name, wasn't it?"

For a moment longer the gunslinger continued to look up at the sky—now it was Roland who must find himself adrift in the constellations, Edie realized—and then he shifted his gaze to his friends. He looked strangely apologetic, strangely uneasy. "Would you think I was cozening," he said, "if I asked for one more day to think of these things? Or perhaps it's a night to dream of them that I really want. They are old things, dead things, perhaps, but I . . ." He raised his hands in a kind of distracted gesture. "Some things don't rest easy even when they're dead. Their bones cry out from the ground."

"There are ghosts," Jake said, and in his eyes Edie saw a shadow of the horror he must have felt inside the house in Dutch Hill. The horror he must have felt when the Doorkeeper came out of the wall and reached for him. "Sometimes there are ghosts, and sometimes they come back."

"Yes," Roland said. "Sometimes there are, and sometimes they do."

"Maybe it's better not to brood," Susan nah said. "Sometimes—especially when you know a thing's going to be hard—it's better just to get on your horse and ride." Roland thought this over carefully, then raised his eyes to look at her. "At tomorrow night's fire I will tell you of Susan," he said. "This I promise on my father's name."

"Do we need to hear?" Edie asked abruptly. He was almost as bound to hear this question coming out of his mouth; no one had been more curious about the gunslinger's past than Edie himself. "I mean, if it really hurts, Roland . . . hurts

big-time . . . maybe . . .”

“I’m not sure you need to hear, but I think I need to tell. Our future is the Tower, and to go toward it with a whole heart, I must put my past to rest as best I may. There’s no way I could tell you all of it—in my world even the past is in motion, rearranging itself in many vital ways—but this one story may stand for all the rest.”

“Is it a Western?” Jake asked suddenly.

Roland looked at him, puzzled. “I don’t take your meaning, Jake. Gilead is a Barony of the Western World, yes, and Mejis as well, but—”

“It’ll be a Western,” Eddie said. “All Roland’s stories are Westerns, when you get right down to it.” He lay back and pulled his blanket over him. Faintly, from both east and west, he could hear the warble of the thimny. He checked in his pocket for the bullets Roland had given him, and nodded with satisfaction when he felt them. He reckoned he could sleep without them tonight, but he would want them again tomorrow. They weren’t done tumpikin’ just yet.

Susanah leaned over him, kissed the tip of his nose. “Done for the day, sugar?”

“Yep,” Eddie said, and laced his hands together behind his head. “It’s not every day that I hook a ride on the world’s fastest train, destroy the world’s smartest computer, and then discover that everybody’s been scragged by the flu. All before dinner, too. Shit like that makes a man tired.” Eddie smiled and closed his eyes.

He was still smiling when sleep took him.

9

In his dream, they were all standing on the corner of Second Avenue and Forty-sixth Street, looking over the short board fence and into the weedy vacant lot behind it. They were wearing their Mid-World clothes—a motley combination of deer skin and old shirts, mostly held together with spit and shoelaces—but none of the pedestrians hurrying by on Second seemed to notice. No one noticed the billy-bumblers in Jake’s arms or the artillery they were packing, either.

Because we’re ghosts. Eddie thought. We’re ghosts and we don’t rest easy.

On the fence there were handbills—one for the Sex Pistols (a reunion tour, according to the poster, and Eddie thought that was pretty funny—the Pistols was one group that was never going to get back together), one for a comic, Adam Sandier, that Eddie had never heard of, one for a movie called The Craft, about teenage witches. Beyond that one, written in letters the dusky pink of summer roses, was this:

See the bear of fearsome size!

All the world’s within his eyes.

time grows thin, the past’s a riddle;

The tower awaits you in the middle.

“There,” Jake said, pointing. “The rose. See how it awaits us, there in the middle of the lot.”

“Yes, it’s very beautiful,” Susanah said. Then she pointed to the sign standing near the rose and facing Second Avenue. Her voice and her eyes were troubled.

“But what about that?”

According to the sign, two outfits—Mills Construction and Sombra Real

Es?tate—were go?ing to com?bine on some?thing called Tur?tle Bay Con?do?mini?ums, said con?dos to be erect?ed on this very spot. When? com?ing soon was all the sign had to say in that re?gard.

“I wouldn’t wor?ry about that,” Jake said. “That sign was here be?fore. It’s prob?ably old as the hi—”

At that mo?ment the revving sound of an en?gine tore in?to the air. From be?yond the fence, on the Forty-?sixth Street side of the lot, chugs of dirty brown ex?haust as?cend?ed like bad-?news smoke sig?nals. Sud?den?ly the boards on that side burst open, and a huge red bull?doz?er lunged through. Even the blade was red, al?though the words slashed across its scoop—all hail the crim?son king—were writ?ten in a yel?low as bright as pan?ic. Sit?ting in the peak-?seat, his rot?ting face leer?ing at them from above the con?trols, was the man who had kid?napped Jake from the bridge over the Riv?er Send—their old pal Gash?er. On the front of his cocked-?back hard-hat, the words lamerk foundry stood out in black. Above them, a sin?gle star?ing eye had been paint?ed.

Gash?er low?ered the ‘doz?er’s blade. It tore across the lot on a di?ag?onal, smash?ing brick, pul?ver?iz?ing beer and so?da bot?tles to glit?ter?ing pow?der, strik?ing sparks from the rocks. Di?rect?ly in its path, the rose nod?ded its del?icate head.

“Let’s see you ask some of yer sil?ly ques?tions now!” this un?wel?come ap?pari?tion cried. “Ask all yer wants, my dear lit?tle culls, why not? Wery fond of rid?dles is yer old pal Gash?er! Just so you un?der?stand that, no mat?ter what yer ask, I’m goin?ter run that nasty thing over, mash it flat, aye, so I will! Then back over it I’ll go! Root and branch, my dear lit?tle culls! Aye, root and branch!”

Su?san?nah shrieked as the scar?let bull?doz?er blade bore down on the rose, and Ed?die grabbed for the fence. He would vault over it, throw him self on the rose, try to pro?tect it...

... ex?cept it was too late. And he knew it.

He looked back up at the cack?ling thing in the bull?doz?er’s peak-?seat and saw that Gash?er was gone. Now the man at the con?trols was En?gi?neer Bob, from Char?lie the Choo-?Choo.

“Stop!” Ed?die screamed. “For Christ’s sake, stop!”

“I can’t, Ed?die. The world has moved on, and I can’t stop. I must move on with it.”

And as the shad?ow of the ‘doz?er fell over the rose, as the blade tore through one of the posts hold?ing up the sign (Ed?die saw com?ing soon had changed to com?ing now), he re?al?ized that the man at the con?trols wasn’t En?gi?neer Bob, ei?ther.

It was Roland.

10

Ed?die sat up in the break?down lane of the turn?pike, gasp?ing breath he could see in the air and with sweat al?ready chill?ing on his hot skin. He was sure he had screamed, must have screamed, but Su?san?nah still slept be?side him with on?ly the top of her head pok?ing out of the bedroll they shared, and Jake was snor?ing soft?ly off to the left, one arm out of his own blan?kets and curled around Oy. The bum?bler was al?so sleep?ing.

Roland wasn’t. Roland sat calm?ly on the far side of the dead camp?fire, clean?ing his guns by starlight and look?ing at Ed?die.

“Bad dreams.” Not a question.

“Yeah.”

“A visit from your brother?”

Eddie shook his head.

“The Tower, then? The field of roses and the Tower?” Roland’s face remained impassive, but Eddie could hear the subtle eagerness which always came into his voice when the subject was the Dark Tower. Eddie had once called the gunslinger a Tower junkie, and Roland hadn’t denied it.

“Not this time.”

“What, then?”

Eddie shivered. “Cold.”

“Yes. Thank your gods there’s no rain, at least. Autumn rain’s an evil to be avoided whenever one may. What was your dream?”

Still Eddie hesitated. “You’d never betray us, would you, Roland?”

“No man can say that for sure, Eddie, and I have already played the betrayer more than once. To my shame. But ... I think those days are over. We are one, ka-tet. If I betray any one of you—even Jake’s furry friend, perhaps—I betray myself. Why do you ask?”

“And you’d never betray your quest.”

“Renounce the Tower? No, Eddie. Not that, not ever. Tell me your dream.”

Eddie did, omitting nothing. When he had finished, Roland looked down at his guns, frowning. They seemed to have reassembled themselves while Eddie was talking.

“So what does it mean, that I saw you driving that ‘dozer at the end? That I still don’t trust you? That subconscious—”

“Is thisology-of-the-psyche? The cábala I have heard you and Susanah speak of?”

“Yes, I guess it is.”

“It’s shit,” Roland said dismissively. “Mudpies of the mind. Dreams either mean nothing or everything—and when they mean everything, they almost always come as messages from ... well, from other levels of the Tower.” He gazed at Eddie shrewdly. “And not all messages are sent by friends.”

“Something or someone is fucking with my head? Is that what you mean?”

“I think it possible. But you must watch me all the same. I bear watching, as you well know.”

“I trust you,” Eddie said, and the very awkwardness with which he spoke lent his words sincerity. Roland looked touched, almost shaken, and Eddie wondered how he ever could have thought this man an emotionless robot. Roland might be a little short on imagination, but he had feelings, all right.

“One thing about your dream concerns me very much, Eddie.”

“The bulldozer?”

“The machine, yes. The threat to the rose.”

“Jake saw the rose, Roland. It was fine.”

Roland nodded. “In his when, the when of that particular day, the rose was thriving. But that doesn’t mean it will continue to do so. If the construction the

sign spoke of comes . . . if the bull?doz?er comes . . .”

“There are oth?er worlds than these,” Ed?die said. “Re?mem?ber?”

“Some things may ex?ist on?ly in one. In one where, in one when.” Roland lay down and looked up at the stars. “We must pro?tect that rose,” he said. “We must pro?tect it at all costs.”

“You think it’s an?oth?er door, don’t you? One that opens on the Dark Tow?er.”

The gun?slinger looked at him from eyes that ran with starshine. “I think it may be the Tow?er,” he said. “And if it’s de?stroyed—”

His eyes closed. He said no more.

Ed?die lay awake late.

11

The new day dawned clear and bright and cold. In the strong morn?ing sun?light, the thing Ed?die had spot?ted the evening be?fore was more clear?ly vis?ible . . . but he still couldn’t tell what it was. An?oth?er rid?dle, and he was get?ting damned sick of them. He stood squint?ing at it, shad?ing his eyes from the sun, with Su?san?nah on one side of him and Jake on the oth?er. Roland was back by the camp-?fire, pack?ing what he called their gun?na, a word which seemed to mean all their world?ly goods. He ap?peared not to be con?cerned with the thing up ahead, or to know what it was. How far away? Thir?ty miles? Fifty? The an?swer seemed to de?pend on how far could you see in all this flat land, and Ed?die didn’t know the an?swer. One thing he felt quite sure of was that Jake had been right on at least two counts—it was some kind of build?ing, and it sprawled across all four lanes of the high?way. It must; how else could they see it? It would have been lost in the thin?ny . . . wouldn’t it?

Maybe it’s stand?ing in one of those open patch?es—what Suze calls “the holes in the clouds.” Or maybe the thin?ny ends be?fore we get that far. Or maybe it’s a god?dam hal?lu?ci?na?tion. In any case, you might as well put it out of your mind for the time be?ing. Got a lit?tle more turn?pikin’ to do.

Still, the build?ing held him. It looked like an airy Ara?bi?an Nights con fec?tion of blue and gold . . . ex?cept Ed?die had an idea that the blue was stolen from the sky and the gold from the new?ly risen sun.

”Roland, come here a sec?ond!“

At first he didn’t think the gun?slinger would, but then Roland cinched a rawhide lace on Su?san?nah’s pack, rose, put his hands in the small of his back, stretched, and walked over to them.

”Gods, one would think no one in this band has the wit to house?keep but me,“ Roland said.

”We’ll pitch in,“ Ed?die said, ”we al?ways do, don’t we? But look at that thing first.“ Roland did, but on?ly with a quick glance, as if he did not even want to ac?knowl?edge it.

”It’s glass, isn’t it?“ Ed?die asked.

Roland took an?oth?er brief look. ”I wot,“ he said, a phrase which seemed to mean Reck?on so, part?ner.

”We’ve got lots of glass build?ings where I come from, but most of them are of?fice build?ings. That thing up ahead looks more like some?thing from Dis?ney World. Do you know what it is?“

"No."

"Then why don't you want to look at it?" Su?san?nah asked.

Roland did take another look at the distant blaze of light on glass, but once again it was quick—little more than a peek.

"Because it's trouble," Roland said, "and it's in our road. We'll get there in time. No need to live in trouble until trouble comes."

"Will we get there today?" Jake asked.

Roland shrugged, his face still closed. "There'll be water if God wills it," he said.

"Christ, you could have made a fortune writing for tune cook?ies," Ed?die said. He hoped for a smile, at least, but got none. Roland simply walked back across the road, dropped to one knee, shouldered his purse and his pack, and waited for the others. When they were ready, the pilgrims resumed their walk east along Interstate 70. The gunslinger led, walking with his head down and his eyes on the toes of his boots.

12

Roland was quiet all day, and as the building ahead of them neared (trouble, and in our road, he had said), Su?san?nah came to realize it wasn't grumpiness they were seeing, or worry about anything which lay any farther ahead of them than tonight. It was the story he'd promised to tell them that Roland was thinking about, and he was a lot more than worried.

By the time they stopped for their noon meal, they could clearly see the building ahead—a many-towered palace which appeared to be made entirely of reflective glass. The thinny lay close around it, but the palace rose serenely above all, its towers trying for the sky. Madly strange here in the flat countryside of eastern Kansas, of course it was, but Su?san?nah thought it the most beautiful building she had ever seen in her life; even more beautiful than the Chrysler Building, and that was going some.

As they drew closer, she found it more and more difficult to look else where.

Watching the reflections of the puffy clouds sailing across the glass castle's blue-sky wains and walls was like watching some splendid illusion ... yet there was a solidity to it, as well. An integrity. Some of that was probably just the shadow it threw—mirages did not, so far as she knew, create shadows—but not all. It just was. She had no idea what such a fabulousity was doing out here in the land of Stuckey's and Harder's (not to mention Boing Boing Burgers), but there it was. She reckoned that time would tell the rest.

13

They made camp in silence, watched Roland build the wooden chimney that would be their fire in silence, then sat before it in silence, watching the sunset turn the huge glass edifice ahead of them into a castle of fire. Its towers and battlements glowed first a fierce red, then orange, then a gold which cooled rapidly to ocher as Old Star appeared in the firmament above them—

No, she thought in Delta's voice. Ain't dat one, girl. Not 'tall. That's the North Star.

Same one you seen back home, sitting on yo' daddy's lap.

But it was Old Star she wanted, she discovered; Old Star and Old Mother. She was astounded to find herself homesick for Roland's world, and then wondered why

she should be so surprised. It was a world, after all, where no one had called her a nigger bitch (at least not yet), a world where she had found someone to love . . . and made good friends as well. That last made her feel a little bit like crying, and she hugged Jake to her. He let himself be hugged, smiling, his eyes half-closed. At some distance, unpleasant but bearable even without bullet earplugs, the tiny warbled its moaning song.

When the last traces of yellow began to fade from the castle up the road, Roland left them to sit in the turnpike travel lane and returned to his fire. He cooked more leaf-wrapped deer meat, and handed the food around. They ate in silence (Roland actually ate almost nothing, Susanah observed). By the time they were finished, they could see the Milky Way scattered across the walls of the castle ahead of them, fierce points of reflection that burned like fire in still water.

Ed die was the one who finally broke the silence. "You don't have to," he said. "You're excused. Or absolved. Or whatever the hell it is you need to take that look off your face."

Roland ignored him. He drank, tilting the water-skin up on his elbow like some hick drinking moonshine from a jug, head back, eyes on the stars. The last mouthful he spat to the roadside.

"Life for your crop," Ed die said. He did not smile.

Roland said nothing, but his cheek went pale, as if he had seen a ghost. Or heard one.

14

The gunslinger turned to Jake, who looked back at him seriously. "I went through the trial of manhood at the age of fourteen, the youngest of my ka-tel—of my class, you would say—and perhaps the youngest ever. I told you some of that, Jake. Do you remember?"

You told all of us some of that, Susanah thought, but kept her mouth shut, and warned Ed die with her eyes to do the same. Roland hadn't been himself during that telling; with Jake both dead and alive within his head, the man had been fighting madness.

"You mean when we were chasing Walter," Jake said. "After the way station but before I... I took my fall."

"That's right."

"I remember a little, but that's all. The way you remember the stuff you dream about."

Roland nodded. "Listen, then. I would tell you more this time, Jake, because you are older. I suppose we all are."

Susanah was no less fascinated with the story the second time: how the boy Roland had chanced to discover Marten, his father's advisor (his father's wizard) in his mother's apartment. Only none of it had been by chance, of course; the boy would have passed her door with no more than a glance had Marten not opened it and invited him in. Marten had told Roland that his mother wanted to see him, but one look at her rueful smile and downcast eyes as she sat in her low-back chair told the boy he was the last person in the world Gabrielle Deschain wanted to see just then.

The flush on her cheek and the love-bite on the side of her neck told him everything else.

Thus had he been goaded by Marten into an early trial of manhood, and by employing a weapon his teacher had not expected—his hawk, David—Roland had defeated Cort, taken his stick ... and made the enemy of his life in Marten Broadcloak.

Beaten badly, face swelling into something that looked like a child's goblin mask, slipping toward a coma, Cort had fought back unconsciousness long enough to offer his newest apprentice gun-slinger counsel: stay away from Marten yet awhile, Cort had said.

"He told me to let the story of our battle grow into a legend," the gun slinger told Edie, Susanah, and Jake. "To wait until my shadow had grown hair on its face and haunted Marten in his dreams."

"Did you take his advice?" Susanah asked.

"I never got a chance," Roland said. His face cracked in a rueful, painful smile. "I meant to think about it, and seriously, but before I even got started on my thinking, things ... changed."

"They have a way of doing that, don't they?" Edie said. "My goodness, yes."

"I buried my hawk, the first weapon I ever wielded, and perhaps the finest.

Then—and this part I'm sure I didn't tell you before, Jake—I went into the lower town. That summer's heat broke in storms full of thunder and hail, and in a room above one of the brothels where Cort had been wont to roister, I lay with a woman for the first time."

He poked a stick thoughtfully into the fire, seemed to become aware of the unconscious symbolism in what he was doing, and threw it away with a lopsided grin. It landed, smoldering, near the tire of an abandoned Dodge Aspen and went out.

"It was good. The sex was good. Not the great thing I and my friends had thought about and whispered about and wondered about, of course—"

"I think store-bought pussy tends to be overrated by the young, sugar," Susanah said.

"I fell asleep listening to the sots downstairs singing along with the piano and to the sound of hail on the window. I awoke the next morning in ... well. . . let's just say I awoke in a way I never would have expected to awake in such a place."

Jake fed fresh fuel to the fire. It flared up, painting highlights on Roland's cheeks, brushing crescents of shadow beneath his brows and below his lower lip. And as he talked, Susanah found she could almost see what had happened on that long-ago morning that must have smelled of wet cobblestones and rain-sweetened summer air; what had happened in a whore's crib above a drinking-dive in the lower town of Gilead, Barony seat of New Canaan, one small mote of land located in the western regions of Mid-World.

One boy, still aching from his battle of the day before and newly educated in the mysteries of sex. One boy, now looking twelve instead of fourteen, his lashes dusting down thick upon his cheeks, the lids shutting those extraordinary blue eyes; one boy with his hand loosely cupping a whore's breast, his hawk-scarred

wrist lying tanned up on the counter pane. One boy in the final instants of his life's last good sleep, one boy who will shortly be in motion, who will be falling as a dislodged pebble falls on a steep and broken slope of scree; a falling pebble that strikes another, and another, and another, those pebbles striking yet more, until the whole slope is in motion and the earth shakes with the sound of the landslide.

One boy, one pebble on a slope loose and ready to slide.

A knot exploded in the fire. Somewhere in this dream of Kansas, an animal yipped. Susanah watched sparks swirl up past Roland's incredible ancient face and saw in that face the sleeping boy of a summer's mom, lying in a bawd's bed.

And then she saw the door crash open, ending Gilead's last troubled dream.

15

The man who strode in, crossing the room to the bed before Roland could open his eyes (and before the woman beside him had even begun to register the sound), was tall, slim, dressed in faded jeans and a dusty shirt of blue chambray. On his head was a dark gray hat with a snake-skin band. Lying low on his hips were two old leather holsters. Jutting from them were the sandalwood grips of the pistols the boy would someday bear to lands of which this scowling man with the furious blue eyes would never dream.

Roland was in motion even before he was able to unseal his eyes, rolling to the left, groping beneath the bed for what was there. He was fast, so fast it was scary, but—and Susanah saw this, too, saw it clearly—the man in the faded jeans was faster yet. He grabbed the boy's shoulder and yanked, turning him naked out of bed and onto the floor. The boy sprawled there, reaching again for what was beneath the bed, lightning-quick. The man in the jeans stamped down on his fingers before they could grasp.

"Bas-tard!" the boy gasped. "Oh, you bas—"

But now his eyes were open, he looked up, and saw that the invading bas-tard was his father.

The whore was sitting up now, her eyes puffy, her face slack and petulant. "Here!" she cried. "Here, here! You can't just be a-comin in like that, so you can't! Why, if I was to raise my voice—"

Ignoring her, the man reached beneath the bed and dragged out two gunbelts. Near the end of each was a bolstered revolver. They were large, and amazing in this largely gunless world, but they were not so large as those worn by Roland's father, and the grips were eroded metal plates rather than inlaid wood. When the whore saw the guns on the invader's hips and the ones in his hands—the ones her young customer of the night before had been wearing until she had taken him upstairs and divested him of all weapons save for the one with which she was most familiar—the expression of sleepy petulance left her face. What replaced it was the fox-like look of a born survivor. She was up, out of bed, across the floor, and out the door before her bare bum had more than a brief moment to twinkle in the morning sun.

Neither the father standing by the bed nor the son lying naked up on the floor at his feet so much as looked at her. The man in the jeans held out the gunbelts which Roland had taken from the fuser beneath the apprentices' bar racks on the previous

afternoon, using Cort's key to open the arse?nal door. The man shook the belts under Roland's very nose, as one might hold a torn garment beneath the nose of a feckless puppy that has chewed. He shook them so hard that one of the guns tumbled free. Despite his stupefaction, Roland caught it in midair.

"I thought you were in the west," Roland said. "In Cres?sia. After Far-?son and his—"

Roland's father slapped him hard enough to send the boy tumbling across the room and into a corner with blood pouring from one corner of his mouth. Roland's first, appalling instinct was to raise the gun he still held.

Steven Deschain looked at him, hands on hips, reading this thought even before it was fully formed. His lips pulled back in a singularly mirthless grin, one that showed all of his teeth and most of his gums.

"Shoot me if you will. Why not? Make this abortion complete. Ah, gods, I'd welcome it!"

Roland laid the gun on the floor and pushed it away, using the back of his hand to do it. All at once he wanted his fingers nowhere near the trigger of a gun. They were no longer fully under his control, those fingers. He had discovered that yesterday, right around the time he had broken Cort's nose.

"Father, I was tested yesterday. I took Cort's stick. I won. I'm a man."

"You're a fool," his father said. His grin was gone now; he looked haggard and old. He sat down heavily on the whore's bed, looked at the gunbelts he still held, and dropped them between his feet. "You're a fourteen-year-old fool, and that's the worst, most despicable kind." He looked up, angry all over again, but Roland didn't mind; anger was better than that look of weariness. That look of age. "I've known since you toddled that you were no genius, but I never believed until yestereve that you were an idiot. To let him drive you like a cow in a chute! Gods! You have forgotten the face of your father! Say it!"

And that sparked the boy's own anger. Everything he had done the day before he had done with his father's face firmly fixed in his mind.

"That's not true!" he shouted from where he now sat with his bare butt on the splintery boards of the whore's crib and his back against the wall, the sun shining through the window and touching the fuzz on his fair, unscarred cheek.

"It is true, you whelp! Foolish whelp! Say your atonement or I'll strip the hide from your very—"

"They were together!" he burst out. "Your wife and your mistress— your magician! I saw the mark of his mouth on her neck! On my mother's neck!" He reached for the gun and picked it up, but even in his shame and fury was still careful not to let his fingers stray near the trigger; he held the apprentice's revolver only by the plain, undecorated metal of its barrel. "Today I end his treacherous, seducer's life with this, and if you aren't man enough to help me, at least you can stand aside and let me—"

One of the revolvers on Steven's hip was out of its holster and in his hand before Roland's eyes saw any move. There was a single shot, deafening as thunder in the little room; it was a full minute before Roland was able to hear the babble of questions and commotion from below. The 'prentice-gun, meanwhile, was long

gone, blown out of his hand and leaving nothing behind but a kind of buzzing tingling. It flew out the window, down and gone, its grip a smashed ruin of metal and its short turn in the gun-slinger's long tale at an end.

Roland looked at his father, shocked and amazed. Steven looked back, saying nothing for a long time. But now he wore the face Roland remembered from earliest childhood: calm and sure. The weariness and the look of half-distracted fury had passed away like last night's thunderstorms.

At last his father spoke. "I was wrong in what I said, and I apologize. You did not forget my face, Roland. But still you were foolish—you allowed yourself to be driven by one faster than you will ever be in your life. It's only by the grace of the gods and the working of karma that you have not been sent west, one more true gun-slinger out of Marten's road . . . out of John Farson's road . . . and out of the road which leads to the creature that rules them." He stood and held out his arms. "If I had lost you, Roland, I should have died."

Roland got to his feet and went naked to his father, who embraced him fiercely. When Steven Deschain kissed him first on one cheek and then the other, Roland began to weep. Then, in Roland's ear, Steven Deschain whispered six words.

16

"What?" Susanah asked. "What six words?"

"I have known for two years," Roland said. "That was what he whispered."

"Holy Christ," Edie said.

"He told me I couldn't go back to the palace. If I did, I'd be dead by nightfall. He said, 'You have been born to your destiny in spite of all Marten could do; yet he has sworn to kill you before you can grow to be a problem to him. It seems that, winner in the test or no, you must leave Gilead anyway. For only awhile, though, and you'll go east instead of west. I'd not send you alone, either, or without a purpose.' Then, almost as an afterthought, he added: 'Or with a pair of sorry prentice revolvers.'"

"What purpose?" Jake asked. He had clearly been captivated by the story; his eyes shone nearly as bright as Oy's. "And which friends?"

"These things you must now hear," Roland said, "and how you judge me will come in time."

He fetched a sigh—the deep sigh of a man who contemplates some arduous piece of work—and then tossed fresh wood on the fire. As the flames flared up, driving the shadows back a little way, he began to talk. All that queerly long night he talked, not finishing the story of Susan Delgado until the sun was rising in the east and painting the glass castle yonder with all the bright hues of a fresh day, and a strange green cast of light which was its own true color.

Darktower 4 - Wizard and Glass

PART TWO

SUSAN

CHAPTER I

.....
BENEATH THE
KISSING MOON

1

A perfect disc of silver—the Kissing Moon, as it was called in Full Earth—hung above the ragged hill five miles east of Ham'bry and ten miles south of Eyebolt Canyon. Below the hill the late summer heat still held, suffocating even two hours after sundown, but atop the Coos, it was as if Reap had already come, with its strong breezes and frost-pinched air. For the woman who lived here with no company but a snake and one old mutt cat, it was to be a long night. Never mind, though; never mind, my dear. Busy hands are happy hands. So they are.

She waited until the hoofbeats of her visitors' horses had faded, sitting quietly by the window in the hut's large room (there was only one other, a bedroom little bigger than a closet). Musty, the six-legged cat, was on her shoulder. Her lap was full of moonlight.

Three horses, bearing away three men. The Big Coffin Hunters, they called themselves.

She snorted. Men were funny, aye, so they were, and the most amusing thing about them was how little they knew it. Men, with their swaggering, belt-hitching names for themselves. Men, so proud of their muscles, their drinking capacities, their eating capacities; so everlastingly proud of their pricks. Yes, even in these times, when a good many of them could shoot nothing but strange, bent seed that produced children fit only to be drowned in the nearest well. Ah, but it was never their fault, was it, dear? No, always it was the woman—her womb, her fault. Men were such cowards. Such grinning cowards. These three had been no different from the general run. The old one with the limp might bear watching—aye, so he might, a clear and overly curious pair of eyes had looked out at her from his head—but she saw nothing in them she could not deal with, came it to that.

Men! She could not understand why so many women feared them. Hadn't the gods made them with the most vulnerable part of their guts hanging right out of their bodies, like a misplaced bit of bowel? Kick them there and they curled up like snails. Caress them there and their brains melted. Anyone who doubted that second bit of wisdom need only look at her night's second bit of business, the one which still lay ahead. Thorin! Mayor of Ham'bry! Chief Guard of Barony! No fool like an old fool!

Yet none of these thoughts had any real power over her or any real malice to them, at least not now; the three men who called themselves the Big Coffin Hunters had brought her a marvel, and she would look at it; aye, fill up her eyes with it, so she would.

The gimp, Jonas, had insisted she put it away—he had been told she had a place

for such things, not that he want?ed to see it him?self, not any of her se?cret places, gods for?bid (at this sal?ly De?pape and Reynolds had laughed like trolls)—and so she had, but the hoof?beats of their hors?es had been swal?lowed by the wind now, and she would do as she liked. The girl whose tits had stolen what lit?tle there was of Hart Thorin’s mind would not be here for an?oth?er hour, at least (the old wom?an had in?sist?ed that the girl walk from town, cit?ing the pu?rifi?ca?tion val?ue of such a moon?lit heel-?and-?toe, ac?tu?al?ly just want?ing to put a safe bumper of time be?tween her two ap?point?ments), and dur?ing that hour she would do as she liked.

“Oh, it’s beau?ti?ful, I’m sure ’tis,” she whis?pered, and did she feel a cer?tain heat in that place where her an?cient bowlegs came to?geth?er? A cer?tain mois?ture in the dry creek which hid there? Gods!

“Aye, even through the box where they hid it I felt its glam. So beau ti?ful, Musty, like you.” She took the cat from her shoul?der and held it in front of her eyes. The old torn purred and stretched out its pug of a face to?ward hers. She kissed its nose. The cat closed its milky gray-?green eyes in ec?sta?sy. “So beau?ti?ful, like you—so y’are, so y’are! Hee!”

She put the cat down. It walked slow?ly to?ward the hearth, where a late fire lazed, desul?to?ri?ly eat?ing at a sin?gle log. Musty’s tail, split at the tip so it looked like the forked tail of a dev?il in an old draw?ing, switched back and forth in the room’s dim or?ange air. Its ex?tra legs, dan?gling from its sides, twitched dream?ily. The shad?ow which trailed across the floor and grew up the wall was a hor?ror: a thing that looked like a cat crossed with a spi?der.

The old wom?an rose and went in?to her sleep?ing clos?et, where she had tak?en the thing Jonas had giv?en her.

“Lose that and you’ll lose your head,” he’d said.

“Nev?er fear me, my good friend,” she’d replied, di?rect?ing a cring?ing, servile smile back over her shoul?der, all the while think?ing: Men! Fool?ish strut?ting crea?tures they were!

Now she went to the foot of her bed, knelt, and passed one hand over the earth floor there. Lines ap?peared in the sour dirt as she did. They formed a square. She pushed her fin?gers in?to one of these lines; it gave be fore her touch. She lift?ed the hid?den pan?el (hid?den in such a way that no one with?out the touch would ev?er be able to un?cov?er it), re?veal?ing a com part?ment per?haps a foot square and two feet deep. With?in it was an iron?wood box. Curled atop the box was a slim green snake. When she touched its back, its head came up. Its mouth yawned in a silent hiss, dis?play?ing four pairs of fangs—two on top, two on the bot?tom.

She took the snake up, croon?ing to it. As she brought its flat face close to her own, its mouth yawned wider and it’s hiss?ing be?came au?di?ble. She opened her own mouth; from be?tween her wrin?kled gray lips she poked the yel?low?ish, bad-smelling mat of her tongue. Two drops of poi?son— enough to kill an en?tire din?ner-par?ty, if mixed in the punch—fell on it. She swal?lowed, feel?ing her mouth and throat and chest bum, as if with strong liquor. For a mo?ment the room swam out of fo?cus, and she could hear voic?es mur?mur?ing in the stenchy air of the hut—the voic?es of those she called “the un?seen friends.” Her eyes ran sticky wa?ter down the trench?es time had drawn in her cheeks. Then she blew out a breath and the room

stead?ied. The voic?es fad?ed.

She kissed Er?mot be?tween his lid?less eyes (time o' the Kiss?ing Moon, all right, she thought) and then set him aside. The snake slipped be?neath her bed, curled it?self in a cir?cle, and watched as she passed her palms over the top of the iron?wood box. She could feel the mus?cles in her up?per arms quiv?er?ing, and that heat in her loins was more pro?nounced. Years it had been since she had felt the call of her sex, but she felt it now, so she did, and it was not the do?ing of the Kiss?ing Moon, or not much.

The box was locked and Jonas had giv?en her no key, but that was noth?ing to her, who had lived long and stud?ied much and traf?ficked with crea?tures that most men, for all their bold talk and strut?ing ways, would run from as if on fire had they caught even the small?est glimpse of them. She stretched one hand to?ward the lock, on which was in?laid the shape of an eye and a mot?to in the High Speech (I see who opens me), and then with?drew it. All at once she could smell what her nose no longer no?ticed un?der or?di?nary cir?cum?stances: must and dust and a dirty mat?tress and the crumbs of food that had been con?sumed in bed; the min?gled stench of ash?es and an?cient in?cense; the odor of an old wom?an with wet eyes and (or?di?nar?ily, at least) a dry pussy. She would not open this box and look at the won?der it con?tained in here; she would go out?side, where the air was clean and the on?ly smells were sage and mesquite.

She would look by the light of the Kiss?ing Moon.

Rhea of Coos Hill pulled the box from its hole with a grunt, rose to her feet with an?oth?er grunt (this one from her nether re?gions), tucked the box un?der her arm, and left the room.

2

The hut was far enough be?low the brow of the hill to block off the bit?ter est gusts of the win?ter wind which blew al?most con?stant?ly in these high lands from Reap?ing un?til the end of Wide Earth. A path led to the hill's high?est van?tage; be?neath the full moon it was a ditch of sil?ver. The old wom?an toiled up it, puff?ing, her white hair stand?ing out around her head in dirty clumps, her old dugs sway?ing from side to side un?der her black dress. The cat fol?lowed in her shad?ow, still giv?ing off its rusty purr like a stink.

At the top of the hill, the wind lift?ed her hair away from her rav?aged face and brought her the moan?ing whis?per of the thin?ny which had eat?en its way in?to the far end of Eye?bolt Canyon. It was a sound few cared for, she knew, but she her?self loved it; to Rhea of the Coos, it sound?ed like a lul?la?by. Over?head rode the moon, the shad?ows on its bright skin sketch ing the faces of lovers kiss?ing ... if you be?lieved the or?di?nary fools be low, that was. The or?di?nary fools be?low saw a dif?fer?ent face or set of faces in each full moon, but the hag knew there was on?ly one—the face of the De?mon. The face of death.

She her?self, how?ev?er, had nev?er felt more alive.

“Oh, my beau?ty,” she whis?pered, and touched the lock with her gnarled fin?gers. A faint glim?mer of red light showed be?tween her bunched knuck?les, and there was a click. Breath?ing hard, like a wom?an who has run a race, she put the box down and opened it.

Rose-colored light, dimmer than that thrown by the Kissing Moon but infinitely more beautiful, spilled out. It touched the ruined face hanging above the box, and for a moment made it the face of a young girl again.

Musty sniffed, head stretched forward, ears laid back, old eyes rimmed with that rose light. Rhea was instantly jealous.

“Get away, foolish, ’tis not for the likes of you!”

She swatted the cat. Musty shied back, hissing like a kettle, and stalked in dudgeon to the hummock which marked the very tip of Coos Hill. There he sat, affecting disdain and licking one paw as the wind combed ceaselessly through his fur.

Within the box, peeping out of a velvet drawstring bag, was a glass globe. It was filled with that rosy light; it flowed in gentle pulses, like the beat of a satisfied heart. \

“Oh, my lovely one,” she murmured, lifting it out. She held it up before her; let its pulsing radiance run down her wrinkled face like rain. “Oh, ye live, so ye do!” Suddenly the color within the globe darkened toward scarlet. She felt it thrum in her hands like an immensely powerful motor, and again she felt that amazing wetness between her legs, that tidal tug she believed had been left behind long ago.

Then the thrumming died, and the light in the globe seemed to furl up like petals.

Where it had been there was now a pinkish gloom . . . and three riders coming out of it. At first she thought it was the men who had brought her the globe—Jonas and the others. But no, these were younger, even younger than Depape, who was about twenty-five. The one on the left of the trio appeared to have a bird’s skull mounted on the pommel of his saddle—strange but true.

Then that one and the one on the right were gone, darkened away somehow by the power of the glass, leaving only the one in the middle. She took in the jeans and boots he wore, the flat-brimmed hat that hid the upper half of his face, the easy way he sat his horse, and her first alarmed thought was Gun-slinger! Come east from the Inner Baronies, aye, perhaps from Gilead itself! But she did not have to see the upper half of the rider’s face to know he was little more than a child, and there were no guns on his hips. Yet she didn’t think the youth came unarmed. If only she could see a little better . . .

She brought the glass almost to the tip of her nose and whispered, “Closer, lovie! Closer still!”

She didn’t know what to expect—nothing at all seemed most likely—but within the dark circle of the glass, the figure did come closer. Swum closer, almost, like a horse and rider under water, and she saw there was a quiver of arrows on his back. Before him, on the pommel of his saddle, was not a skull but a shortbow. And to the right side of the saddle, where a gun-slinger might have carried a rifle in a scabbard, there was the feather-fluffed shaft of a lance. He was not one of the Old People, his face had none of that look . . . yet she did not think he was of the Outer Arc, either.

“But who are ye, truly?” she breathed. “And how shall I know ye? Ye’ve got yer hat pulled down so far I can’t see your God-pounding eyes, so ye do! By yer horse,

may?hap ... or p'raps by yer ... get away, Musty! Why do yer trou?ble me so? Ar?rrr!" The cat had come back from its look?out point and was twin?ing back and forth be?tween her swollen old an?kles, waow?ing up at her in a voice even more rusty than its purr. When the old wom?an kicked out at him, Musty dodged ag?ile?ly away ... then im?me?di?ate?ly came back and start?ed in again, look?ing up at her with moon?struck eyes and mak?ing those soft yowls.

Rhea kicked out at it again, this one just as in?ef?fec?tu?al as the first one, then looked in?to the glass once more. The horse and its in?ter?est?ing young rid?er were gone. The rose light was gone, as well. It was now just a dead glass ball she held, its on?ly light a re?flec?tion bor?rowed from the moon.

The wind gust?ed, press?ing her dress against the ru?ina?tion that was her body.

Musty, un?daunt?ed by the fee?ble kicks of his mis?tress, dart?ed for ward and be?gan to twine about her an?kles again, cry?ing up at her the whole time.

"There, do ye see what you've done, ye nasty bag of fleas and dis ease? The light's gone out of it, gone out just when I—"

Then she heard a sound from the cart track which led up to her hut, and un?der?stood why Musty had been act?ing out. It was singing she heard. It was the girl she heard. The girl was ear?ly.

Gri?mac?ing hor?ri?bly—she loathed be?ing caught by sur?prise, and the lit?tle miss down there would pay for do?ing it—she bent and put the glass back in its box. The in?side was lined with padded silk, and the ball fit as neat?ly as the break?fast egg in His Lord?ship's cup. And still from down the hill (the cursed wind was wrong or she would have heard it soon?er), the sound of the girl singing, now clos?er than ev?er:

"Love, o love, o care?less love.

Can't you see what care?less love has done?"

"I'll give'ee care?less love, ye vir?gin bitch," the old wom?an said. She could smell the sour reek of sweat from un?der her arms, but that oth?er mois?ture had dried up again. "I'll give ye pay?day for walk?ing in ear?ly on old Rhea, so I will!"

She passed her fin?gers over the lock on the front of the box, but it wouldn't fas?ten. She sup?posed she had been overea?ger to have it open, and had bro?ken some?thing in?side it when she used the touch. The eye and the mot?to seemed to mock her: i see who opens me. It could be put right, and in a jiffy, but right now even a jiffy was more than she had.

"Pes?ter?ing cunt!" She whined, lift?ing her head briefly to?ward the ap proach?ing voice (al?most here now, by the gods, and forty-?five min?utes be fore her time!).

Then she closed the lid of the box. It gave her a pang to do it, be?cause the glass was com?ing to life again, fill?ing with that rosy glow, but there was no time for look?ing or dream?ing now. Lat?er, per?haps, af?ter the ob?ject of Thorin's un?seem?ly late-?life prick?ish?ness had gone.

And you must re?strain your?self from do?ing any?thing too aw?ful to the girl, she cau?tioned her?self. Re?mem?ber she's here be?cause of him, and at least ain't one of those green girls with a bun in the oven and a boyfriend act?ing re?luc?tant about the cries o' mar?riage. It's Thorin's do?ing, this one's what he thinks about af?ter his ug?ly old crow of a wife is asleep and he takes him?self in his hand and com?mences

the evening milk?ing; it's Thorin's do?ing, he has the old law on his side, and he has pow?er. Fur?ther more, what's in that box is his man's busi?ness, and if Jonas found out ye looked at it... that ye used it. ..

Aye, but no fear of that. And in the mean?time, pos?ses?sion were nine-?tenths of the law, were it not?

She hoist?ed the box un?der one arm, hoist?ed her skirts with her free hand, and ran back along the path to the hut. She could still run when she had to, aye, though few there were who'd be?lieve it.

Musty ran at her heels, bound?ing along with his cloven tail held high and his ex?tra legs flop?ping up and down in the moon?light.

CHAP?TER II

prov?ing hon?esty

1

Rhea dart?ed in?to her hut, crossed in front of the gut?ter?ing fire, then stood in the door?way to her tiny bed?room, swip?ing a hand through her hair in a dis?tract?ed ges?ture. The bitch hadn't seen her out?side the hut—she sure?ly would have stopped cat?er?waul?ing, or at least fal?tered in it if she had—and that was good, but the cursed hidey-?hole had sealed it?self up again, and that was bad. There was no time to open it again, ei?ther. Rhea hur?ried to the bed, knelt, and pushed the box far back in?to the shad?ows be?neath.

Ay, that would do; un?til Susy Green?gown was gone, it would do very well.

Smil?ing on the right side of her mouth (the left was most?ly frozen), Rhea got up, brushed her dress, and went to meet her sec?ond ap?point?ment of the night.

2

Be?hind her, the un?locked lid of the box clicked open. It came up less than an inch, but that was enough to al?low a sliv?er of puls?ing rose-?col?ored light to shine out.

3

Su?san Del?ga?do stopped about forty yards from the witch's hut, the sweat chill?ing on her arms and the nape of her neck. Had she just spied an old wom?an (sure?ly the one she had come to see) dart down that last bit of path lead?ing from the top of the hill? She thought she had.

Don't stop singing—when an old la?dy hur?ries like that, she doesn't want to be seen. If you stop singing, she'll like?ly know she was.

For a mo?ment Su?san thought she'd stop any?way—that her mem?ory would close up like a star?tled hand and de?ny her an?oth?er verse of the old song which she had been singing since youngest child?hood. But the next verse came to her, and she con?tin?ued 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 mis?ery is in my heart to stay.”

A bad song for a night such as this, may?hap, but her heart went its own way with?out much in?ter?est in what her head thought or want?ed; al ways had^ She was fright?ened to be out by moon?light, when were?wolves were said to walk, she was fright?ened of her er?rand, and she was fright ened by what that er?rand por?tend?ed.

Yet when she had gained the Great Road out of Ham?bry and her heart had de?mand?ed she run, she had run— un?der the light of the Kiss?ing Moon and with her skirt held above her knees she had gal?loped like a pony, with her shad?ow gal?lop?ing right be side her. For a mile or more she had run, un?til ev?ery mus?cle in her body tin?gled and the air she pulled down her throat tast?ed like some sweet heat?ed liq?uid. And when she reached the up?land track lead?ing to this high sin?is?ter, she had sung. Be?cause her heart de?mand?ed it. And, she sup?posed, it re?al?ly hadn't been such a bad idea; if noth?ing else, it had kept the worst of her megrims away. Singing was good for that much, any?way.

Now she walked to the end of the path, singing the cho?rus of “Care less Love.” As she stepped in?to the scant light which fell through the open door and on?to the stoop, a harsh rain?crow voice spoke from the shad?ows: “Stop yer howl?ing, mis?sy—it catch?es in my brains like a fish?hook!”

Su?san, who had been told all her life that she had a fair singing voice, a gift from her gram?ma, no doubt, fell silent at once, abashed. She stood on the stoop with her hands clasped in front of her apron. Be?neath the apron she wore her sec?ond-?best dress (she on?ly had two). Be?neath it, her heart was thump?ing very hard.

A cat—a hideous thing with two ex?tra legs stick?ing out of its sides like toast?ing forks—came in?to the door?way first. It looked up at her, seemed to mea?sure her, then screwed its face up in a look that was eeri?ly hu?man: con?tempt. It hissed at her, then flashed away in?to the night.

Well, good evening to you, too, Su?san thought.

The old wom?an she had been sent to see stepped in?to the door?way.

She looked Su?san up and down with that same ex?pres?sion of flat-?eyed con?tempt, then stood back. “Come in. And mind ye clap the door tight. The wind has a way of blowin it open, as ye see!”

Su?san stepped in?side. She didn't want to close her?self in?to this bad-?smelling room with the old wom?an, but when there was no choice, hesi?ta tion was ev?er a fault. So her fa?ther had said, whether the mat?ter un?der dis?cus?sion was sums and sub?trac?tions or how to deal with boys at barn-?dances when their hands be?came over?ly ad?ven?turous. She pulled the door firm?ly to, and heard it latch.

“And here y'are,” the old wom?an said, and of?fered a grotesque smile of wel?come.

It was a smile guar?an?teed to make even a brave girl think of sto?ries told in the nurs?ery—Win?ter's tales of old wom?en with snag?gle teeth and bub?bling caul?drons full of toad-?green liq?uid. There was no caul dron over the fire in this room (nor was the fire it?self much of a shake, in Su?san's opin?ion), but the girl guessed there had been, be?times, and things in it of which it might be bet?ter not to think. That this wom?an was a re?al witch and not just an old la?dy pos?ing as one was some?thing Su?san had felt sure of from the mo?ment she had seen Rhea dart?ing back in?side her hut with the mal?formed cat at her heels. It was some?thing you could al?most smell, like the reeky aro?ma ris?ing off the hag's skin.

“Yes,” she said, smil?ing. She tried to make it a good one, bright and un?afraid.

“Here I am.”

“And it's ear?ly y'are, my lit?tle sweet?ing. Ear?ly y'are! Hee!”

“I ran part?way. The moon got in?to my blood, I sup?pose. That's what my da would

have said.”

The old woman’s horrible smile widened into something that made Susan think of the way eels sometimes seemed to grin, after death and just before the pot. “Aye, but dead he is, dead these five years, Pat Delgado of the red hair and beard, the life mashed out of him by his own horse, aye, and went into the clearing at the end of the path with the music of his own snapping bones in his ears, so he did!”

The nervous smile slipped from Susan’s face as if slapped away. She felt tears, always close at the mere mention of her father’s name, burn at the back of her eyes. But she would not let them fall. Not in this heartless old crow’s sight, she wouldn’t. “Let our business be quick and be done,” she said in a dry voice that was far from her usual one; that voice was usually cheery and merry and ready for fun. But she was Pat Delgado’s child, daughter of the best drover ever to work the Western Drop, and she remembered his face very well; she could rise to a stronger nature if required, as it now clearly was. The old woman had meant to reach out and scratch as deep as she could, and the more she saw that her efforts were succeeding, the more she would redouble them.

The hag, meanwhile, was watching Susan shrewdly, her bunch-knuckled hands planted on her hips while her cat twined around her ankles. Her eyes were rheumy, but Susan saw enough of them to realize they were the same gray-green shade as the cat’s eyes, and to wonder what sort of fell magic that might be. She felt an urge—a strong one—to drop her eyes, and would not. It was all right to feel fear, but sometimes a very bad idea to show it.

“You look at me pert, missy,” Rhea said at last. Her smile was dissolving slowly into a petulant frown.

“Nay, old mother,” Susan replied evenly. “Only as one who wishes to do the business she came for and be gone. I have come here at the wish of My Lord Mayor of Mejis, and at that of my Aunt Cordelia, sister of my father. My dear father, of whom I would hear no ill spoken.”

“I speak as I do,” the old woman said. The words were dismissive, yet there was a trace of fawning servility in the hag’s voice. Susan set no importance on that; it was a tone such a thing as this had probably adopted her whole life, and came as automatic as breath. “I’ve lived alone a long time, with no mistress but myself, and once it begins, my tongue goes where it will.”

“Then sometimes it might be best not to let it begin at all.”

The old woman’s eyes flashed uglily. “Curb your own, stripling girl, lest you find it dead in your mouth, where it will rot and make the Mayor think twice about kissing you when he smells its stink, aye, even under such a moon as this!”

Susan’s heart filled with misery and bewilderment. She’d come up here intent on only one thing: getting the business done as quickly as possible, a barely explained rite that was apt to be painful and sure to be shameful. Now this old woman was looking at her with flat and naked hatred. How could things have gone wrong with such suddenness? Or was it always this way with witches?

“We have begun badly, mistress—can we start over?” Susan asked suddenly, and held out her hand.

The hag looked startled, although she did reach out and make brief contact, the

wrinkled tips of her fingers touching the short-nailed fingers of the sixteen-year-old girl who stood before her with her clear-skinned face shining and her long hair braided down her back. Susan had to make a real effort not to grimace at the touch, brief as it was. The old woman's fingers were as chilly as those of a corpse, but Susan had touched chilly fingers before ("Cold hands, warm heart," Aunt Cord sometimes said). The real unpleasantness was in the texture, the feel of cold flesh spongy and loose on the bones, as if the woman to whom they were attached had drowned and lain long in some pool.

"Nay, nay, there's no starting over," the old woman said, "yet maybe we'll go on better than we've begun. You've a powerful friend in the Mayor, and I'd not have him for my enemy."

She's honest, at least, Susan thought, then had to laugh at herself. This woman would be honest only when she absolutely had to be; left to her own devices and desires, she'd lie about everything—the weather, the crops, the flights of birds come Reaping.

"You came before I expected you, and it's put me out of temper, so it has. Have you brought me something, missy? You have, I'll warrant!" Her eyes were glittering once more, this time not with anger.

Susan reached beneath her apron (so stupid, wearing an apron for an errand on the backside of nowhere, but it was what custom demanded) and into her pocket. There, tied to a string so it could not be easily lost (by young girls suddenly moved to run in the moonlight, perhaps), was a cloth bag. Susan broke the binding string and brought the bag out. She put it in the outstretched hand before her, the palm so worn that the lines marking it were now little more than ghosts. She was careful not to touch Rhea again ... although the old woman would be touching her again, and soon.

"Is it the sound of the wind makes you shiver?" Rhea asked, although Susan could tell her mind was mostly fixed on the little bag; her fingers were busy tugging out the knot in the drawstring.

"Yes, the wind."

"And so it should. 'Tis the voices of the dead you hear in the wind, and when they scream so, 'tis because they regret—ah!"

The knot gave. She loosened the drawstring and tumbled two gold coins into her hand. They were unevenly milled and crude—no one had made such for generations—but they were heavy, and the eagles engraved upon them had a certain power. Rhea lifted one to her mouth, pulled back her lips to reveal a few gruesome teeth, and bit down. The hag looked at the faint indentations her teeth had left in the gold. For several seconds she gazed, rapt, then closed her fingers over them tightly.

While Rhea's attention was distracted by the coins, Susan happened to look through the open door to her left and into what she assumed was the witch's bedroom. And here she saw an odd and disquieting thing: a light under the bed. A pink, pulsing light. It seemed to be coming from some kind of box, although she could not quite ...

The witch looked up, and Susan hastily moved her eyes to a corner of the room,

where a net contained three or four strange white fruits hung from a hook. Then, as the old woman moved and her huge shadow danced ponderously away from that part of the wall, Susan saw they were not fruits at all, but skulls. She felt a sickish drop in her stomach.

"The fire needs building up, missy. Go round to the side of the house and bring back an armload of wood. Good-sized sticks are what's wanted, and never mind whining ye can't lug 'em. Ye're of a strap-pin good size, so ye are!"

Susan, who had quit whining about chores around the time she had quit pissing into her clouts, said nothing . . . although it did cross her mind to ask Rhea if everyone who brought her gold was invited to lug her wood. In truth, she didn't mind; the air outside would taste like wine after the stench of the hut.

She had almost reached the door when her foot struck something hot and yielding. The cat yowled. Susan stumbled and almost fell. From behind her, the old woman issued a series of gasping, choking sounds which Susan even tu ally recognized as laughter.

"Watch Musty, my little sweet one! Tricksy, he is! And tripsy as well, be times, so he is! Hee!" And off she went, in another gale.

The cat looked up at Susan, its ears laid back, its gray-green eyes wide. It hissed at her. And Susan, unaware she was going to do it until it was done, hissed back. Like its expression of contempt, Musty's look of surprise was eerily—and, in this case, comically—human. It turned and fled for Rhea's bedroom, its split tail lashing. Susan opened the door and went outside to get the wood. Already she felt as if she had been here a thousand years, and that it might be a thousand more before she could go home.

4

The air was as sweet as she had hoped, perhaps even sweeter, and for a moment she only stood on the stoop, breathing it in, trying to cleanse her lungs . . . and her mind.

After five good breaths, she got herself in motion. Around the side of the house she went . . . but it was the wrong side, it seemed, for there was no woodpile here. There was a narrow excuse for a window, however, half-buried in some tough and unlovely creeper. It was toward the back of the hut, and must look in on the old woman's sleeping closet.

Don't look in there, whatever she's got under her bed isn't your business, and if she were to catch you . . .

She went to the window despite these admonitions, and peeked in.

It was unlikely that Rhea would have seen Susan's face through the dense overgrowth of pig ivy even if the old woman had been looking in that direction, and she wasn't. She was on her knees, the drawstring bag caught in her teeth, reaching under the bed.

She brought out a box and opened its lid, which was already ajar. Her face was flooded with soft pink radiance, and Susan gasped. For one moment it was the face of a young girl—but one filled with cruelty as well as youth, the face of a self-willed child determined to learn all the wrong things for all the wrong reasons. The face of the girl this hag once had been, maybe. The light appeared to be

com?ing from some sort of glass ball.

The old wom?an looked at it for sev?er?al mo?ments, her eyes wide and fas?ci?nat?ed. Her lips moved as if she were speak?ing to it or per?haps even singing to it; the lit?tle bag Su?san had brought from town, its string still clamped in the hag's mouth, bobbed up and down as she spoke. Then, with what ap?peared to be great ef?fort of will, she closed the box, cut?ting off the rosy light. Su?san found her?self re?lieved—there was some?thing about it she didn't like.

The old wom?an cupped one hand over the sil?ver lock in the mid?dle of the lid, and a brief scar?let light spiked out from be?tween her fin?gers. All this with the draw?string bag still hang?ing from her mouth. Then she put the box on the bed, knelt, and be?gan run?ning her hands over the dirt just be?neath the bed's edge.

Al?though she touched on?ly with her palms, lines ap?peared as if she had used a draw?ing tool. These lines dark?ened, be?com ing what looked like grooves.

The wood, Su?san! Gel the wood be?fore she wakes up to how long you've been gone! For your fa?ther's sake!

Su?san pulled the skirt of her dress all the way up to her waist—she did not want the old wom?an to see dirt or leaves on her cloth?ing when she came back in?side, did not want to an?swer the ques?tions the sight of such smuts might pro?voke—and crawled be?neath the win?dow with her white cot?ton draw?ers flash?ing in the moon?light. Once she was past, she got to her feet again and hur?ried qui?et?ly around to the far side of the hut. Here she found the wood?pile un?der an old, moldy-smelling hide. She took half a dozen good-?sized chunks and walked back to?ward the front of the house with them in her arms.

When she en?tered, turn?ing side?ways to get her load through the door way with?out drop?ping any, the old wom?an was back in the main room, star?ing mood?ily in?to the fire?place, where there was now lit?tle more than em?bers; Of the draw?string bag there was no sign.

“Took; you long enough, mis?sy,” Rhea said. She con?tin?ued to look in?to the fire?place, as if Su?san were of no ac?count... but one foot tapped be?low the dirty hem of her dress, and her eye?brows were drawn to?geth?er.

Su?san crossed the room, peer?ing over the load of wood in her arms as well as she could while she walked. It wouldn't sur?prise her a bit to spy the cat lurk?ing near, hop?ing to trip her up. “I saw a spi?der,” she said. “I flapped my apron at it to make it run away. I hate the look of them, so I do.”

“Ye'll see some?thing ye like the look of even less, soon enough,” Rhea said, grin?ning her pe?cu?liar one-?sid?ed grin. “Out of old Thorin's night?shirt it'll come, stiff as a stick and as red as rhubarb! Hee! Hold a minute, girl; ye gods, ye've brought enough for a Fair-?Day bon?fire.”

Rhea took two fat logs from Su?san's pile and tossed them in?dif?fer ent?ly on?to the coals. Em?bers spi?raled up the dark and faint?ly roar?ing shaft of the chim?ney. There, ye've scat?tered what's left of yer fire, ye sil?ly old thing, and will like?ly have to rekin?dle the whole mess, Su?san thought. Then Rhea reached in?to the fire?place with one splayed hand, spoke a gut tu?ral word, and the logs blazed up as if soaked in oil.

“Put the rest over there,” she said, point?ing at the wood?box. “And mind ye not be a

scat?ter?bark, mis?sy.“

What, and dirty all this neat? Su?san thought. She bit the in?sides of her cheeks to kill the smile that want?ed to rise on her mouth.

Rhea might have sensed it, how?ev?er; when Su?san straight?ened again, the old wom?an was look?ing at her with a dour, know?ing ex?pres?sion.

”All right, mis?tress, let’s do our busi?ness and have it done. Do ye know why you’re here?“

”I am here at May?or Thorin’s wish,“ Su?san re?peat?ed, know?ing that was no re?al an?swer. She was fright?ened now—more fright?ened than when she had looked through the win?dow and seen the old wom?an croon?ing to the glass ball. ”His wife has come bar?ren to the end of her cours?es. He wish?es to have a son be?fore he is al?so un?able to—“

”Pish-?tush, spare me the codswal?lop and pret?ty words. He wants tits and ar?se that don’t squish in his hands and a box that’ll grip what he push?es. If he’s still man enough to push it, that is. If a son come of it, aye, fine, he’ll give it over to ye to keep and raise un?til it’s old enough to school, and af?ter that ye’ll see it no more. If it’s a daugh?ter, he’ll like?ly take it from ye and give it to his new man, the one with the girl’s hair and the limp, to drown in the near?est cat?tle-?wal?low.“

Su?san stared at her, shocked out of all mea?sure.

The old wom?an saw the look and laughed. ”Don’t like the sound of the truth, do yer? Few do, mis?sy. But that’s nei?ther here nor there; yer aun?tie was ev?er a trig one, and she’ll have done all right out of Thorin and Thorin’s trea?sury. What gold you see of it’s none o’ mine . . . and won’t be none o’ yours, ei?ther, if you don’t watch sharp! Hee! Take off that dress!”

I won’t was what rose to her lips, but what then? To be turned out of this hut (and to be turned out pret?ty much as she had come, and not as a lizard or a hop?ping toad would prob?ably be the best luck she could hope for) and sent west as she was now, with?out even the two gold coins she’d brought up here? And that was on?ly the small half of it. The large was that she had giv?en her word. At first she had re?sist?ed, but when Aunt Cord had in?voked her fa?ther’s name, she had giv?en in. As she al?ways did. Re?al?ly, she had no choice.” And when there was no choice, hes?ita?tion was ev?er a fault.

She brushed the front of her apron, to which small bits of bark now clung, then un?tied it and took it off. She fold?ed it, laid it on a small, grimy has?sock near the hearth, and un?but?toned her dress to the waist. She shiv?ered it from her shoul?ders, and stepped out. She fold?ed it and laid it atop the apron, try?ing not to mind the greedy way Rhea of Coos was star?ing at her in the fire?light. The cat came sashay?ing across the floor, grotesque ex?tra legs hob?bling, and sat at Rhea’s feet. Out?side, the wind gust?ed. It was warm on the hearth but Su?san was cold just the same, as if that wind had got?ten in?side her, some?how.

“Hur?ry, girl, for yer fa?ther’s sake!”

Su?san pulled her shift over her head, fold?ed it atop the dress, then stood in on?ly her draw?ers, with her arms fold?ed over her bo?som. The fire paint?ed warm or?ange high?lights along her thighs; black cir?cles of shad?ow in the ten?der folds be?hind her knees.

“And still she’s not nekkid!” the old crow laughed. “Ain’t we lah-?di-?dah! Aye, we are, very fine! Take off those draw?ers, mis?tress, and stand as ye slid from yer moth?er! Al?though ye had not so many good?ies as to in?ter?est the likes of Hart Thorin then, did ye? Hee!”

Feel?ing caught in a night?mare, Su?san did as she was bid. With her mound and bush un?cov?ered, her crossed arms seemed fool?ish. She low ered them to her sides.

“Ah, no won?der he wants ye!” the old wom?an said. “ ‘Tis beau?ti?ful ye are, and true! Is she not, Musty?”

The cat waowed.

“There’s dirt on yer knees,” Rhea said sud?den?ly. “How came it there?” \

Su?san felt a mo?ment of aw?ful pan?ic. She had lift?ed her skirts to crawl be?neath the hag’s win?dow . . . and hung her?self by do?ing it.

Then an an?swer rose to her lips, and she spoke it calm?ly enough. “When I came in sight of your hut, I grew fear?ful. I knelt to pray, and raised my skirt so as not to soil it.”

“I’m touched—to want a clean dress for the likes o’ me! How good y’are! Don’t you agree, Musty?”

The cat waowed, then be?gan to lick one of its forepaws.

“Get on with it,” Su?san said. “You’ve been paid and I’ll obey, but stop teas?ing and have done.”

“You know what it is I have to do, mis?tress.”

“I don’t,” Su?san said. The tears were close again, burn?ing the backs of her eyes, but she would not let them fall. Would not. “I have an idea, but when I asked Aunt Cord if I was right, she said that you’d ‘take care of my ed?uca?tion in that re?gard.’ “

”Wouldn’t dirty her mouth with the words, would she? Well, that’s all right. Yer Aunt Rhea’s not too nice to say what yer Aunt Cordelia won’t. I’m to make sure that ye’re phys?ical?ly and spir?itu?al?ly in?tact, mis?sy.

Prov?ing hon?esty is what the old ones called it, and it’s a good enough name. So it is. Step to me.”

Su?san took two re?luc?tant steps for?ward, so that her bare toes were al most touch?ing the old wom?an’s slip?pers and her bare breasts were al?most touch?ing the old wom?an’s dress.

”If a dev?il or de?mon has pol?lut?ed yer spir?it, such a thing as might taint the child you’ll like?ly bear, it leaves a mark be?hind. Most of?ten it’s a suck-?mark or a lover’s bite, but there’s oth?ers . . . open yer mouth!”

Su?san did, and when the old wom?an bent clos?er, the reek of her was so strong that the girl’s stom?ach clenched. She held her breath, pray?ing this would be over soon.

”Run out yer tongue.”

Su?san ran out her tongue.

”Now send yer breezes in?to my face.”

Su?san ex?haled her held breath. Rhea breathed it in and then, mer?ci ful?ly, pulled her head away a lit?tle. She had been close enough for Su?san to see the lice hop?ping in her hair.

”Sweet enough,” the old wom?an said. ”Aye, good’s a meal. Now turn around.”

Su?san did, and felt the old witch’s fin?gers trail down her back and to her but?tocks.

Their tips were cold as mud.

"Bend over and spread yer cheeks, mis?sy, be not shy, Rhea's seen more than one pul?try in her time!"

Face flush?ing—she could feel the beat of her heart in the cen?ter of her fore?head and in the hol?lows of her tem?ples—Su?san did as told. And then she felt one of those corpse?like fin?gers prod its way in?to her anus. Su?san bit her lips to keep from scream?ing.

The in?va?sion was mer?ci?ful?ly short ... but there would be an?oth?er, Su san feared.

"Turn around."

She turned. The old wom?an passed her hands over Su?san's breasts, flicked light?ly at the nip?ples with her thumbs, then ex?am?ined the un?der sides care?ful?ly. Rhea slipped a fin?ger in?to the cup of the girl's navel, then hitched up her own skirt and dropped to her knees with a grunt of ef?fort. She passed her hands down Su?san's legs, first front, then back. She seemed to take spe?cial pains with the area just be?low the calves, where the ten dons ran.

"Lift yer right foot, girl."

Su?san did, and ut?tered a ner?vous, screamy laugh as Rhea ran a thumb nail down her in?step to her heel. The old wom?an part?ed her toes, look?ing be?tween each pair. Af?ter this pro?cess had been re?peat?ed with the oth?er foot, the old wom?an—still on her knees—said: "You know what comes next."

"Aye." The word came out of her in a lit?tle trem?bling rush.

"Hold ye still, mis?sy—all else is well, clean as a wil?low-?strip, ye are, but now we've come to the cozy nook that's all Thorin cares for; we've come to where hon?esty must re?al?ly be proved. So hold ye still!"

Su?san closed her eyes and thought of hors?es run?ning along the Drop—nom?inal?ly they were the Barony's horse, over?looked by Rimer, Thorin's Chan?cel?lor and the Barony's Min?is?ter of In?ven?to?ry, but the hors?es didn't know that; they thought they were free, and if you were free in your mind, what else mat?tered?

Let me be free in my mind, as free as the hors?es along the Drop, and don't let her hurt me. Please, don't let her hurt me. And if she does, please help me to bear it in de?cent si?lence.

Cold fin?gers part?ed the downy hair be?low her navel; there was a pause, and then two cold fin?gers slipped in?side her. There was pain, but on?ly a mo?ment of it, and not bad; she'd hurt her?self worse stub?bing her toe or bark?ing her shin on the way to the privy in the mid?dle of the night. The hu?mil?ia?tion was the bad part, and the re?vul?sion of Rhea's an?cient touch.

"Caulked tight, ye are!" Rhea cried. "Good as ev?er was! But Thorin'll see to that, so he will! As for you, my girl, I'll tell yer a se?cret yer pris?sy aunt with her long nose 'n tight purse 'n lit?tle goose?bump tits nev?er knew: even a girl who's in?tact don't need to lack for a shiv?er now 'n then, if she knows how!"

The hag's with?draw?ing fin?gers closed gen?tly around the lit?tle nub?bin of flesh at the head of Su?san's cleft. For one ter?ri?ble sec?ond Su?san thought they would pinch that sen?si?tive place, which some?times made her draw in a breath if it rubbed just so against the pom?mel of her sad?dle when she was rid?ing, but in?stead the fin?gers ca?ressed ... then pressed ... and the girl was hor?ri?fied to feel a heat which was far

from unpleas?ant kin?dle in her bel?ly.

“Like a lit?tle bud o’ silk,” the old wom?an crooned, and her med?dling fin?gers moved faster. Su?san felt her hips sway for?ward, as if with a mind and life of their own, and then she thought of the old wom?an’s greedy, self-?willed face, pink as the face of a whore by gaslight as it hung over the open box; she thought of the way the draw?string bag with the gold pieces in it had hung from the wrin?kled mouth like some dis?gorged piece of flesh, and the heat she felt was gone. She drew back, trem?bling, her arms and bel?ly and breasts break?ing out in goose?flesh.

“You’ve fin?ished what you were paid to do,” Su?san said. Her voice was dry and harsh.

Rhea’s face knot?ted. “Ye’ll not tell me aye, no, yes, or maybe, im?pu dent stripling of a girl! I know when I’m done, I, Rhea, the Weird?ing of Coos, and—”

“Be still, and be on your feet be?fore I kick you in?to the fire, un?nat?ural thing.”

The old wom?an’s lips wrig?gled back from her few re?main?ing teeth in a dog?like sneer, and now, Su?san re?alized, she and the witch-?wom?an were back where they had been at the start: ready to claw each oth?er’s eyes out.

“Raise hand or foot to me, you im?pu?dent cunt, and what leaves my house will leave hand?less, foot?less, and blind of eye.”

“I do not much doubt you could do it, but Thorin should be vexed,” Su?san said. It was the first time in her life she had ev?er in?voked a man’s name for pro?tec?tion. Re?al?iz?ing this made her feel ashamed . . . small, some?how. She didn’t know why that should be, es?pe?cial?ly since she had agreed to sleep in his bed and bear his child, but it was.

The old wom?an stared, her seamed face work?ing un?til it fold?ed in?to a par?ody of a smile that was worse than her snarl. Puff?ing and pulling at the, arm of her chair, Rhea got to her feet. As she did, Su?san quick?ly be?gan to dress.

“Aye, vexed he would be. Per?haps you know best af?ter all, mis?sy; I’ve had a strange night, and it’s wak?ened parts of me bet?ter left asleep. Any?thing else that might have hap?pened, take it as a com?pli?ment to yer youth’n pu?ri?ty . . . and to yer beau?ty as well. Aye. You’re a beau?ti?ful thing, and there’s no doubt in it. Yer hair, now . . . when yer let it down, as ye will for Thorin, I wot, when ye lay with him . . . it glows like the sun, doesn’t it?”

Su?san did not want to force the old hag out of her pos?tur?ing, but she didn’t want to en?cour?age these fawn?ing com?pli?ments, ei?ther. Not when she could still see the hate in Rhea’s rheumy eyes, not when she could feel the old wom?an’s touch still crawl?ing like bee?tles on her skin. She said noth?ing, on?ly stepped in?to her dress, set it on her shoul?ders, and be?gan to but?ton up the front.

Rhea per?haps un?der?stood the run of her thoughts, for the smile dropped off her mouth and her man?ner grew busi?nesslike. Su?san found this a great re?lief.

“Well, nev?er mind it. Ye’ve proved hon?est; ye may dress yer?self and go. But not a word of what passed be?tween us to Thorin, mind ye! Words be?tween wom?en need trou?ble no man’s ear, es?pe?cial?ly one as great as he.” Yet at this Rhea could not for?bear a cer?tain spas?ming sneer. Su?san didn’t know if the old wom?an was aware of it or not. “Are we agreed?”

Any?thing, any?thing, just as long as I can be out of here and away.

“You de?clare me proved?”

“Aye, Su?san, daugh?ter of Patrick. So I do. But it’s not what I say that mat?ters. Now ... wait... some?where here ...”

She scrab?bled along the man?tel, push?ing stubs of can?dles stuck on cracked saucers this way and that, lift?ing first a kerosene lantern and then a bat?tery flash?light, look?ing fixed?ly for a mo?ment at a draw?ing of a young boy and then putting it aside.

“Where ... where ... ar?rrrr... here!”

She snatched up a pad of pa?per with a sooty cov?er (cit?go stamped on it in an?cient gold let?ters) and a stub of pen?cil. She paged al?most to the end of the pad be?fore find?ing a blank sheet. On it she scrawled some?thing, then tore the sheet off the spi?ral of wire at the top of the pad. She held the sheet out to Su?san, who took it and looked at it. Scrawled there was a word she did not un?der?stand at first:

Be?low it was a sym?bol:

“What’s this?” she asked, tap?ping the lit?tle draw?ing. “Rhea, her mark. Known for six Ba?ronies around, it is, and can’t be copied. Show that pa?per to yer aunt. Then to Thorin. If yer aunt wants to take it and show it to Thorin her?self—I know her, y’see, and her bossy ways—tell her no, Rhea says no, she’s not to have the keep?ing of it.” “And if Thorin wants it?”

Rhea shrugged dis?mis?sive?ly. “Let him keep it or bum it or wipe his bum with it, for all of me. It’s noth?ing to you, ei?ther, for you knew you were hon?est all along, so you did. True?”

Su?san nod?ded. Once, walk?ing home af?ter a dance, she had let a boy slip his hand in?side her shirt for a mo?ment or two, but what of that? She was hon?est. And in more ways than this nasty crea?ture meant.

“But don’t lose that pa?per. Un?less you’d see me again, that is, and go through the same busi?ness a sec?ond time.”

Gods per?ish even the thought, Su?san thought, and man?aged not to shud?der. She put the pa?per in her pock?et, where the draw?string bag had been.

“Now, come to the door, mis?sy.” She looked as if she want?ed to grasp Su?san’s arm, then thought bet?ter of it. The two of them walked side by side to the door, not touch?ing in such a care?ful way that it made them look awk?ward. Once there, Rhea did grip Su?san’s arm. Then, with her oth?er hand, she point?ed to the bright sil?ver disc hang?ing over the top of the Coos.

“The Kiss?ing Moon,” Rhea said. “ ‘Tis mid?sum?mer.”

“Yes.”

“Tell Thorin he’s not to have you in his bed—or in a haystack, or on the scullery floor, or any?where else—un?til De?mon Moon ris?es full in the sky.”

“Not un?til Reap?ing?” That was three months—a life?time, it seemed to her. Su?san tried not to show her de?light at this re?prieve. She’d thought Thorin would put an end to her vir?gin?ity by moon?rise the next night. She wasn’t blind to the way he looked at her.

Rhea, mean?while, was look?ing at the moon, seem?ing to cal?cu?late. Her hand went to the long tail of Su?san’s hair and stroked it. Su?san bore this as well as she could, and just when she felt she could bear it no longer, Rhea dropped her hand back to

her side and nodded. "Aye, not just Reaping, but true fin de ano—Fair-Night, tell him. Say that he may have you after the bonfire. You understand?"

"True fin de ano, yes." She could barely contain her joy.

"When the fire in Green Heart bums low and the last of the red-handed men are ashes," Rhea said. "Then and not until then. You must tell him so."

"I will."

The hand came out and began to stroke her hair again. Susan bore it.

After such good news, she thought, it would have been meaningless to do otherwise. "The time between now and Reaping you will use to meditate, and to gather your forces to produce the male child the Mayor wants ... or mayhap just to ride along the Drop and gather the last followers of your maidenhood. Do you understand?"

"Yes." She dropped a curtsey. "Thankee-sai."

Rhea waved this off as if it were a flattery. "Speak not of what passed between us, mind. 'Tis no one's affair but our own."

"I won't. And our business is done?"

"Well ... mayhap there's one more small thing ..." Rhea smiled to show it was indeed small, then raised her left hand in front of Susan's eyes with three fingers together and one apart. Glimmering in the fork between was a silver medalion, seemingly produced from nowhere. The girl's eyes fastened on it at once. Until Rhea spoke a single guttural word, that was.

Then they closed.

5

Rhea looked at the girl who stood asleep on her stoop in the moonlight. As she replaced the medalion within her sleeve (her fingers were old and bunched, but they moved dexterously enough when it was required, oh, aye), the businesslike expression fell from her face, and was replaced by a look of squint-eyed fury. Kick me into the fire, would you, you trull? Tatle to Thorin? But her threats and impudence weren't the worst. The worst had been the expression of revulsion on her face when she had pulled back from Rhea's touch.

Too good for Rhea, she was! And thought herself too good for Thorin as well, no doubt, she with sixteen years' worth of fine blonde hair hanging down from her head, hair Thorin no doubt dreamed of plunging his hands into even as he plunged and reared and plowed down below.

She couldn't hurt the girl, much as she wanted to and much as the girl deserved it; if nothing else, Thorin might take the glass ball away from her, and Rhea couldn't bear that. Not yet, anyway. So she could not hurt the girl, but she could do something that would spoil his pleasure in her, at least for awhile.

Rhea leaned close to the girl, grasped the long braid which lay down her back, and began to slip it through her fist, enjoying its silky smoothness.

"Susan," she whispered. "Do'ee hear me, Susan, daughter of Patrick?"

"Yes." The eyes did not open.

"Then listen." The light of the Kissing Moon fell on Rhea's face and turned it into a silver skull. "Listen to me well, and remember. Remember in the deep cave where your waking mind never goes."

She pulled the braid through her hand again and again. Silky and ?| smooth.

Like the lit?tle bud be?tween her legs.

“Re?mem?ber,” the girl in the door?way said.

“Aye. There’s some?thing ye’ll do af?ter he takes yer vir?gin?ity. Ye’ll do it right away, with?out even think?ing about it. Now lis?ten to me, Su?san, daugh?ter of Patrick, and hear me very well.”

Still stroking the girl’s hair, Rhea put her wrin?kled lips to the smooth cup of Su?san’s ear and whis?pered in the moon?light.

C H A P T E R III

A MEET?ING ON

THE ROAD

1

She had nev?er in her life had such a strange night, and it was prob?ably not sur?pris?ing that she didn’t hear the rid?er ap?proach?ing from be?hind un?til he was al?most up?on her.

The thing that trou?bled her most as she made her way back to?ward town was her new un?der?stand?ing of the com?pact she had made. It was good to have a re?prieve—months yet be?fore she would have to live up to her end of the bar?gain—but a re?prieve didn’t change the ba?sic fact: when the De?mon Moon was full, she would lose her vir?gin?ity to May?or Thorin, a skin?ny, twitchy man with fluffy white hair ris?ing like a cloud around the bald spot on top of his head. A man whose wife re?gard?ed him with a cer tain weary sad?ness that was painful to look at. Hart Thorin was a man who laughed up?roar?ious?ly when a com?pa?ny of play?ers put on an en?ter tain?ment in?volv?ing head-?knock?ing or pre?tend punch?ing or rot?ten fruit-throw?ing, but who on?ly looked puz?zled at a sto?ry which was pa?thet?ic or trag?ical. A knuck?le-?crack?er, a back-?slap?per, a din?ner-?ta?ble belch?er, a man who had a way of look?ing anx?ious?ly to?ward his Chan?cel?lor at al?most ev?ery oth?er word, as if to make sure he hadn’t of?fend?ed Rimer in some way.

Su?san had ob?served all these things of?ten; her fa?ther had for years been in charge of the Barony’s horse and had gone to Seafront of?ten on busi?ness. Many times he had tak?en his much loved daugh?ter with him. Oh, she had seen a lot of Hart Thorin over the years, and he had seen a lot of her, as well. Too much, may?hap! For what now seemed the most im por?tant fact about him was that he was al?most fifty years old?er than the girl who would per?haps bear his son.

She had made the bar?gain light?ly enough—

No, not light?ly, that was be?ing un?fair to her?self... but she had lost lit?tle sleep over it, that much was true. She had thought, af?ter lis?ten?ing to all Aunt Cord’s ar?gu?ments: Well, it’s lit?tle enough, re?al?ly, to have the in den?ture off the lands; to fi?nal?ly own our lit?tle piece of the Drop in fact as well as in tra?di?tion . . . to ac?tu?al?ly have pa?pers, one in our house and one in Rimer’s files, say?ing it’s ours. Aye, and to have hors?es again. On?ly three, ’tis true, but that’s three more than we have now. And against that? To lie with him a time or two, and to bear a child, which mil?lions of wom?en have done be?fore me with no harm. ‘Tis not, af?ter all, a mu?tant or a lep?er I’m be?ing asked to part?ner with but just an old man with noisy knuck?les. ‘Tis not for?ev?er, and, as Aunt Cord says, I may still mar?ry, if time and ka de?cree; I

should not be the first woman to come to her husband's bed as a mother. And does it make me a whore to do such? The law says not, but never mind that; my heart's law is what matters, and my heart says that if I may gain the land that was my father's and three horses to run on it by being such, then it's a whore I'll be. There was something else: Aunt Cord had capitalized—rather ruthlessly, Susan now saw—on a child's innocence. It was the baby Aunt Cord had harped on, the cunning little baby she would have. Aunt Cord had known that Susan, the dolls of her childhood put aside not all that long ago, would love the idea of her own baby, a little living doll to dress and feed and sleep with in the heat of the afternoon. What Cordelia had ignored (perhaps she's too innocent even to have considered it, Susan thought, but didn't quite believe) was what the hag-woman had made brutally clear to her this evening: Thorin wanted more than a child. He wants tits and arse that don't squish in his hands and a box that'll grip what he pushes.

Just thinking of those words made her face throb as she walked through the post-moonset dark toward town (no high-spirited running this time; no singing, either). She had agreed with vague thoughts of how man-aged live-stock mated—they were allowed to go at it “until the seed took,” then separated again. But now she knew that Thorin might want her again and again, probably would want her again and again, and common law going back like iron for two hundred generations said that he could continue to lie with her until she who had proved the consort honest should prove her honestly with child as well, and that child honest in and of itself. . . not, that was, a mutant aberration. Susan had made discreet enquiries and knew that this second proving usually came around the fourth month of pregnancy . . . around the time she would begin to show, even with her clothes on. It would be up to Rhea to make the judgment. . . and Rhea didn't like her.

Now that it was too late—now that she had accepted the compact for marriage tendered by the Chancellor, now that she had been proved honest by yon strange bitch—she rued the bargain. Mostly what she thought of was how Thorin would look with his pants off, his legs white and skinny, like the legs of a stork, and how, as they lay together, she would hear his long bones crackling: knees and back and elbows and neck.

And knuckles. Don't forget his knuckles.

Yes. Big old man's knuckles with hair growing out of them. Susan chuckled at the thought, it was that comical, but at the same time a warm tear ran unnoticed from the corner of one eye and tracked down her cheek. She wiped it away without knowing it, any more than she heard the clip-clip of approaching hoofs in the soft road-dust. Her mind was still far away, returning to the odd thing she had seen through the old woman's bedroom window—the soft but somehow unpleasant light coming from the pink globe, the hypnotized way the hag had been looking down at it. . .

When Susan at last heard the approaching horse, her first alarmed thought was that she must get into the copse of trees she was currently passing and hide. The chances of anyone aboveboard being on the road this late seemed small to her, especially now that such bad times had come to Mid-World—but it was too late

for that.

The ditch, then, and sprawled flat. With the moon down, there was at least a chance that whoever it was would pass without—

But before she could even begin in that direction, the rider who had sneaked up behind her while she was thinking her long and rueful thoughts had hailed her.

“Good-even, lady, and may your days be long upon the earth.”

She turned, thinking: What if it’s one of the new men always lounging about Mayor’s House or in the Travellers’ Rest? Not the oldest one, the voice isn’t wavery like his, but maybe one of the others . . . it could be the one they call De-pape...

“Good-even,” she heard herself saying to the man shape on the tall horse. “May yours be long also.”

Her voice didn’t tremble, not that she could hear. She didn’t think it was De-pape, or the one named Reynolds, either. The only thing she could tell about the fellow for sure was that he wore a flat-brimmed hat, the sort she associated with men of the Inner Baronies, back when travel between east and west had been more common than it was now. Back before John Farson came—the Good Man—and the bloodletting began.

As the stranger came up beside her, she forgave herself a little for not hearing him approach—there was no buckle or bell on his gear that she could see, and everything was tied down so as not to snap or flap. It was almost the rig of an outlaw or a harrier (she had the idea that Jonas, he of the wavery voice, and his two friends might have been both, in other times and other climes) or even a gunslinger. But this man bore no guns, unless they were hidden. A bow on theommel of his saddle and what looked like a lance in a scabbard, that was all. And there had never, she reckoned, been a gunslinger as young as this.

He clucked sideways at the horse just as her dad always done (and she herself, of course), and it stopped at once. As he swung one leg over his saddle, lifting it high and with unconscious grace, Susan said:

“Nay, nay, don’t trouble yourself, stranger, but go as ye would!”

If he heard the alarm in her voice, he paid no heed to it. He slipped off the horse, not bothering with the tied-down stirrup, and landed neatly in front of her, the dust of the road puffing about his square-toed boots. By starlight she saw that he was young indeed, close to her own age on one side or the other. His clothes were those of a working cowboy, although new.

“Will Dearborn, at your service,” he said, then doffed his hat, extended a foot on one bootheel, and bowed as they did in the Inner Baronies.

Such absurd courtesy out here in the middle of nowhere, with the acrid smell of the oil patch on the edge of town already in her nostrils, startled her out of her fear and into a laugh. She thought it would like to offend him, but he smiled instead. A good smile, honest and artless, its inner part lined with even teeth.

She dropped him a little curtsey, holding out one side of her dress. “Susan Delgado, at yours.”

He tapped his throat thrice with his right hand. “Thankee-sai, Susan Delgado. We’re well met, I hope. I didn’t mean to startle you—”

"Ye did, a lit?tle."

"Yes, I thought I had. I'm sor?ry."

Yes. Not aye but yes. A young man, from the In?ner Ba?ronies, by the sound. She looked at him with new in?ter?est.

"Nay, ye need not apol?ogize, for I was deep in my own thoughts," she said. "I'd been to see a ... friend ... and hadn't re?al?ized how much time had passed un?til I saw the moon was down. If ye stopped out of con?cern, I thankee, stranger, but ye may be on yer way as I would be on mine. It's on?ly to the edge of the vil?lage I go—Ham?bry. It's close, now."

"Pret?ty speech and love?ly sen?ti?ments," he an?swered with a grin, "but it's late, you're alone, and I think we may as well pass on to?geth?er. Do you ride, sai?"

"Yes, but re?al?ly—"

"Step over and meet my friend Rush?er, then. He shall car?ry you the last two miles. He's geld?ed, sai, and gen?tle."

She looked at Will Dear?born with a mix?ture of amuse?ment and ir?ri?ta tion. The thought which crossed her mind was If he calls me sai again, as though I were a schoolteach?er or his dod?dery old great aunt, I'm go?ing to take off this stupid apron and swat him with it. "I nev?er mind?ed a bit of tem?per in a horse docile enough to wear a sad?dle. Un?til his death, my fa ther man?aged the May?or's hors?es ... and the May?or in these parts is al?so Guard o' Barony. I've rid?den my whole life."

She thought he might apol?ogize, per?haps even stut?ter, but he on?ly nod?ded with a calm thought?ful?ness that she rather liked. "Then step to the stir?rup, my la?dy. I'll walk be?side and trou?ble you with no con?ver?sa?tion, if you'd rather not have it. It's late, and talk palls af?ter moon?set, some say."

She shook her head, soft?en?ing her re?fusal with a smile. "Nay. I thank ye for yer kind?ness, but it would not be well, may?hap, for me to be seen rid?ing a strange young man's horse at eleven o' the clock. Lemon-?juice won't take the stain out of a la?dy's rep?uta?tion the way it will out of a shirt waist, you know."

"There's no one out here to see you," the young man said in a mad den?ing?ly rea?son?able voice. "And that you're tired, I can tell. Come, sai—"

"Please don't call me that. It makes me feel as an?cient as a . . ." She hes?itat?ed for a brief mo?ment, re?think?ing the word (witch)

that first came to her mind. ". . . as an old wom?an."

"Miss Del?ga?do, then. Are you sure you won't ride?"

"Sure as can be. I'd not ride cross-?sad?dle in a dress in any case, Mr. Dear?born—not even if you were my own broth?er. 'Twouldn't be prop?er."

He stood in the stir?rup him?self, reached over to the far side of his sad dle (Rush?er stood docile?ly enough at this, on?ly flick?ing his ears, which Su?san would have been hap?py to flick her?self had she been Rush?er—they were that beau?ti?ful), and stepped back down with a rolled gar?ment in his hands. It was tied with a rawhide hank.

She thought it was a pon?cho.

"You may spread this over your lap and legs like a duster," he said. "There's quite enough of it for deco?rum's sake—it was my fa?ther's, and he's taller than me." He looked off to?ward the west?ern hills for a mo?ment, and she saw he was hand?some,

in a hard sort of way that jagged against his youth. She felt a little shiver inside her, and wished for the thousandth time that the foul old woman had kept her hands strictly on her business, as unpleasant as that business had been. Susan didn't want to look at this handsome stranger and remember Rhea's touch.

"Nay," she said gently. "Thankee again, I recognize yer kindness, but I must refuse."

"Then I'll walk along beside, and Rusher'll be our chap'er'one," he said cheerfully.

"As far as the edge of town, at least, there'll be no eyes to see and think ill of a perfectly proper young woman and a more-or-less proper young man. And once there, I'll tip my hat and wish you a very good night."

"I wish ye wouldn't. Really." She brushed a hand across her forehead. "Easy for you to say there are no eyes to see, but sometimes there are eyes even where there shouldn't be. And my position is ... a little delicate just now."

"I'll walk with you, however," he repeated, and now his face was somber. "These are not good times. Miss Delgado. Here in Mejis you are far from the worst of the troubles, but sometimes trouble reaches out."

She opened her mouth—to protest again, she supposed, perhaps to tell him that Pat Delgado's daughter could take care of herself—and then she thought of the Mayor's new men, and the cold way they had run their eyes over her when Thorin's attention had been elsewhere. She had seen those three this very night as she left on her way to the witch's hut. Then she had heard approaching, and in plenty of time for her to leave the road and rest behind a handy pinon tree (she refused to think of it as hiding, exactly). Back toward town they had gone, and she supposed they were drinking at the Travellers' Rest right now—and would continue to until Stanley Ruiz closed the bar—but she had no way of knowing that for sure. They could come back.

"If I can't dissuade ye, very well," she said, sighing with a vexed resignation she didn't really feel. "But only to the first mailbox—Mrs. Beech's. That marks the edge of town."

He tapped his throat again, and made another of those absurd, enchanting bows—foot stuck out as if he would trip someone, heel planted in the dirt.

"Thankee, Miss Delgado!"

At least he didn't 't call me sai, she thought. That's a start.

2

She thought he'd chatter away like a magpie in spite of his promise to be silent, because that was what boys did around her—she was not vain of her looks, but she thought she was good-looking, if only because the boys could not shut up or stop shuffling their feet when they were around her. And this one would be full of questions the town boys didn't need to ask—how old was she, had she always lived in Hamby, were her parents alive, half a hundred others just as boring—but they would all circle in on the same one: did she have a steady fellow?

But Will Dearborn of the Inner Baronies didn't ask her about her schooling or family or friends (the most common way of approaching any romantic rivals, she had found). Will Dearborn simply walked along beside her, one hand wrapped around Rusher's biddle, looking off east toward the Clean Sea. They were close

enough to it now so that the teary smell of salt mingled with the tarry stench of oil, even though the wind was from the south.

They were passing Citigo now, and she was glad for Will Dearborn's presence, even if his silence was a little irritating. She had always found the oil patch, with its skeletal forest of gantries, a little spooky. Most of those steel towers had stopped pumping long since, and there was neither the parts, the need, nor the understanding to repair them. And those which did still labor along—nineteen out of about two hundred—could not be stopped. They just pumped and pumped, the supplies of oil beneath them seemingly inexhaustible. A little was still used, but a very little—most simply ran back down into the wells beneath the dead pumping stations. The world had moved on, and this place reminded her of a strange mechanical graveyard where some of the corpses hadn't quite—

Something cold and smooth nuzzled the small of her back, and she wasn't quite able to stifles a little shriek. Will Dearborn wheeled toward her, his hands dropping toward his belt. Then he relaxed and smiled.

"Rusher's way of saying he feels ignored. I'm sorry, Miss Delgado."

She looked at the horse. Rusher looked back mildly, then dipped his head as if to say he was also sorry for having startled her.

Foolishness, girl, she thought, hearing the hearty, no-nonsense voice of her father. He wants to know why you're being so standoffish, that's all. And so do I. 'Tisn't like you, so it's not.

"Mr. Dearborn, I've changed my mind," she said. "I'd like to ride."

3

He turned his back and stood looking out at Citigo with his hands in his pockets while Susan first laid the poncho over the cantle of the saddle (the plain black saddle of a working cowboy, without a Barony brand or even a ranch brand to mark it), and then mounted into the stirrup. She lifted her skirt and glanced around sharply, sure he would be stealing a peek, but his back was still to her. He seemed fascinated with the rusty oil derricks.

What's so interesting about them, curiously she thought, a little crossly—it was the lateness of the hour and the residue of her stirred-up emotions, she supposed. Filthy old things have been there six centuries and more, and I've been smelling their stink my whole life.

"Stand easy now, my boy," she said once she had her foot fixed in the stirrup. One hand held the top of the saddle's pommel, the other the reins. Rusher, meanwhile, flicked his ears as if to say he would stand easy all night, were that what she required.

She swung up, one long bare thigh flashing in the starlight, and felt the exhilaration of being horsed that she always felt . . . only tonight it seemed a little stronger, a little sweeter, a little sharper. Perhaps because the horse was such a beauty, perhaps because the horse was a stranger . . .

Perhaps because the horse's owner is a stranger, she thought, and fair.

That was nonsense, of course . . . and potentially dangerous nonsense. Yet it was also true. He was fair.

As she opened the poncho and spread it over her legs, Dearborn began to whistle.

And she re?al?ized, with a mix?ture of sur?prise and su?per?sti?ti?ous fear, what the tune was: “Care?less Love.” The very lay she had been singing on her way up to Rhea’s hut.

May?hap it’s ka, girl, her fa?ther’s voice whis?pered.

No such thing, she thought right back at him. I’ll not see ka in ev?ery pass?ing wind and shad?ow, like the old ladies who gath?er in Green Heart of a sum?mer’s evening. It’s an old tune: ev?ery?one knows it.

May?hap bet?ter if you’re right. Pat Del?ga?do’s voice re?turned. For if it’s ka, it ‘ll come like a wind, and your plans will stand be?fore it no more than my da’s barn stood be?fore the cy?clone when it came.

Not ka; she would not be se?duced by the dark and the shad?ows and the grim shapes of the oil der?ricks in?to be?liev?ing it was. Not ka but on?ly a chance meet?ing with a nice young man on the lone?ly road back to town.

“I’ve made my?self de?cent,” she said in a dry voice that didn’t sound much like her own. “Ye may turn back if you like, Mr. Dear?born.”

He did turn and gazed at her. For a mo?ment he said noth?ing, but she could see the look in his eyes well enough to know that he found her fair as well. And al?though this dis?qui?et?ed her—per?haps be?cause of what he’d been whistling—she was al?so glad. Then he said, “You look well up there. You sit well.”

“And I shall have hors?es of my own to sit be?fore long,” she said. Now the ques?tions will come, she thought.

But he on?ly nod?ded, as though he had known this about her al?ready, and be?gan to walk to?ward town again. Feel?ing a lit?tle dis?ap?point?ed and not know?ing ex?act?ly why, she clucked side?mouth at Rush?er and twitched her knees at him. He got mov?ing, catch?ing up with his mas?ter, who gave Rush?er’s muz?zle a com?pan?ion?able lit?tle ca?ress.

“What do they call that place yon?der?” he asked, point?ing at the der?ricks.

“The oil patch? Cit?go.”

“Some of the der?ricks still pump?”

“Aye, and no way to stop them. Not that any?one still knows.”

“Oh,” he said, and that was all—just oh. But he left his place by Rush?er’s head for a mo?ment when they came to the weedy track lead?ing in?to Cit?go, walk?ing across to look at the old dis?used guard-hut. In her child?hood there had been a sign on it read?ing au?tho?rized per?son?nel on?ly, but it had blown away in some wind?storm or oth?er. Will Dear?born had his look and then came am?bling back to the horse, boots puff?ing up sum?mer dust, easy in his new clothes.

They went to?ward town, a young walk?ing man in a flat-crowned hat, a young rid?ing wom?an with a pon?cho spread over her lap and legs. The star light rained down on them as it has on young men and wom?en since time’s first hour, and once she looked up and saw a me?te?or flash over?head—a brief and bril?liant or?ange streak across the vault of heav?en. Su?san thought to wish on it, and then, with some?thing like pan?ic, re?al?ized she had no idea what to wish for. None at all.

She kept her own si?lence un?til they were a mile or so from town, and then asked the ques?tion which had been on her mind. She had planned to ask hers af?ter he had

be?gun ask?ing his, and it irked her to be the one to break the si?lence, but in the end her cu?rios?ity was too much.

“Where do ye come from, Mr. Dear?born, and what brings ye to our lit?tle bit o’ Mid-World ... if ye don’t mind me ask?ing?”

“Not at all,” he said, look?ing up at her with a smile. “I’m glad to talk and was on?ly try?ing to think how to be?gin. Talk’s not a spe?cial?ty of mine.” Then what is. Will Dear?born? she won?dered. Yes, she won?dered very much, for in ad?just?ing her po?si?tion on the sad?dle, she had put her hand on the rolled blan?ket be?hind ... and had touched some?thing hid?den in?side that blan?ket. Some?thing that felt like a gun. It didn’t have to be, of course, but she re?mem?bered the way his hands had dropped in?stinc?tive?ly to?ward his belt when she had cried out in sur?prise.

“I come from the In-?World. I’ve an idea you prob?ably guessed that much on your own. We have our own way of talk?ing.”

“Aye. Which Barony is yer home, might I ask?”

“New Canaan.”

She felt a flash of re?al ex?cite?ment at that. New Canaan! Cen?ter of the Af?fil?ia?tion! That did not mean all it once had, of course, but still—

“Not Gilead?” she asked, de?test?ing the hint of a girl?ish gush she heard in her voice. And more than just a hint, may?hap.

“No,” he said with a laugh. “Noth?ing so grand as Gilead. On?ly Hemphill, a vil?lage forty or so wheels west of there. Small?er than Ham?bry, I wot.”

Wheels, she thought, mar?vel?ling at the ar?chaism. He said wheels.

“And what brings ye to Ham?bry, then? May ye tell?”

“Why not? I’ve come with two of my friends, Mr. Richard Stock-?worth of Pen?nil?ton, New Canaan, and Mr. Arthur Heath, a hi?lar?ious young man who ac?tu?al?ly does come from Gilead. We’re here at the or?der of the Af?fil?ia?tion, and have come as coun?ters.”

“Coun?ters of what?”

“Coun?ters of any?thing and ev?ery?thing which may aid the Af?fil?ia?tion in the com?ing years,” he said, and she heard no light?ness in his voice now. “The busi?ness with the Good Man has grown se?ri?ous.”

“Has it? We hear lit?tle re?al news this far to the south and east of the hub.”

He nod?ded. “The Barony’s dis?tance from the hub is the chief rea?son we’re here. Mejis has been ev?er loy?al to the Af?fil?ia?tion, and if sup?plies need to be drawn from this part of the Out?ers, they’ll be sent. The ques tion that needs an?swer?ing is how much the Af?fil?ia?tion can count on.”

“How much of what?”

“Yes,” he agreed, as if she’d made a state?ment in?stead of ask?ing a ques?tion. “And how much of what.”

“Ye speak as though the Good Man were a re?al threat. He’s just a ban?dit, sure?ly, frost?ing his thefts and mur?ders with talk of ‘democ?ra?cy’ and ‘equal?ity’?”

Dear?born shrugged, and she thought for a mo?ment that would be his on?ly com?ment on the mat?ter, but then he said, re?luc?tant?ly: “ ‘Twas once so, per?haps. Times have changed. At some point the ban?dit be?came a gen?er?al, and now the gen?er?al would be?come a ruler in the name of the peo?ple.” He paused, then added

grave?ly, "The North?ern and West?rd Ba?ronies are in flames, la?dy."

"But those are thou?sands of miles away, sure?ly!" This talk was up?set ting, and yet strange?ly ex?cit?ing, too. Most?ly it seemed ex?ot?ic, af?ter the pokey all-?days-?the-?same world of Ham?bry, where some?one's dry well was good for three days of an?imat?ed con?ver?sa?tion.

"Yes," he said. Not aye but yes—the sound was both strange and pleas?ing to her ear. "But the wind is blow?ing in this di?rec?tion." He turned to her and smiled. Once more it soft?ened his hard good looks, and made him seem no more than a child, up too late af?ter his bed?time. "But I don't think we'll see John Far?son tonight, do you?"

She smiled back. "If we did, Mr. Dear?born, would ye pro?tect me from him?"

"No doubt," he said, still smil?ing, "but I should do so with greater en?thu?si?asm, I wot, if you were to let me call you by the name your fa?ther gave you."

"Then, in the in?ter?ests of my own safe?ty, ye may do so. And I sup?pose I must call ye Will, in those same in?ter?ests."

" 'Tis both wise and pret?ti?ly put," he said, the smile be?com?ing a grin, wide and en?gag?ing. "I—" Then, walk?ing as he was with his face turned back and up to her, Su?s?san's new friend tripped over a rock jut?ting out of the road and al?most fell. Rush?er whin?nied through his nose and reared a lit?tle. Su?s?san laughed mer?ri?ly. The pon?cho shift?ed, re?veal?ing one bare leg, and she took a mo?ment be?fore putting mat?ters right again. She liked him, aye, so she did. And what harm could there be in it? He was on?ly a boy, af?ter all. When he smiled, she could see he was on?ly a year or two re?moved from jump?ing in haystacks. (The thought that she had re?cent?ly grad?uat?ed from haystack-?jump?ing her?self had some?how fled her mind.)

"I'm usu?al?ly not clum?sy," he said. "I hope I didn't star?tle you."

Not at all. Will; boys have been stub?bing their toes around me ev?er since I grew my breasts.

"Not at all," she said, and re?turned to the pre?vi?ous top?ic. It in?ter?est?ed her great?ly.

"So ye and yer friends come at the be?hest of the Af?fil?ia?tion to count our goods, do you?"

"Yes. The rea?son I took par?tic?ular note of yon oil patch is be?cause one of us will have to come back and count the work?ing der?ricks—"

"I can spare ye that, Will. There are nine?teen."

He nod?ded. "I'm in your debt. But we'll al?so need to make out—if we can—how much oil those nine?teen pumps are bring?ing up."

"Are there so many oil-?fired ma?chines still work?ing in New Canaan that such news mat?ters? And do ye have the alche?my to change the oil in?to the stuff yer ma?chines can use?"

"It's called re?fin?ery rather than alche?my in this case—at least I think so—and I be?lieve there is one that still works. But no, we haven't that many ma?chines, al?though there are still a few work?ing fil?ament-?lights in the Great Hall at Gilead."

"Fan?cy it!" she said, de?light?ed. She had seen pic?tures of fil?ament-?lights and elec?tric flam?beaux, but nev?er the lights them?selves. The last ones in Ham?bry (they had been called "spark-?lights" in this part of the world, but she felt sure they were the same) had burned out two gen?era tions ago.

"You said your father man?aged the May?or's hors?es un?til his death," Will Dear?born said. "Was his name Patrick Del?ga?do? It was, wasn't it?"

She looked down at him, badly star?tled and brought back to re?al?ity in an in?stant.

"How do ye know that?"

"His name was in our lessons of call?ing. We're to count cat?tle, sheep, pigs, ox?en . . . and hors?es. Of all your live?stock, hors?es are the most impor?tant. Patrick Del?ga?do was the man we were to see in that re?gard. I'm sor?ry to hear he's come to the clear?ing at the end of the path, Su?san. Will you ac?cept my con?do?lence?"

"Aye, and with thanks."

"Was it an ac?ci?dent?"

"Aye." Hop?ing her voice said what she want?ed it to say, which was leave this sub?ject, ask no more.

"Let me be hon?est with you," he said, and for the first time she thought she heard a false note there. Per?haps it was on?ly her imag?ina?tion. Cer?tain?ly she had lit?tle ex?pe?ri?ence of the world (Aunt Cord re?mind?ed her of this al?most dai?ly), but she had an idea that peo?ple who set on by say?ing Let me be hon?est with you were apt to go on by telling you straight-?faced that rain fell up, mon?ey grew on trees, and ba?bies were brought by the Grand Feath?erex.

"Aye, Will Dear?born," she said, her tone just the tini?est bit dry. "They say hon?esty's the best pol?icy, so they do."

He looked at her a bit doubt?ful?ly, and then his smile shone out again. That smile was dan?ger?ous, she thought—a quick?sand smile if ev?er there was one. Easy to wan?der in; per?haps more dif?fi?cult to wan?der back out.

"There's not much Af?fil?ia?tion in the Af?fil?ia?tion these days. That's part of the rea?son Par?son's gone on as long as he has; that's what has al lowed his am?bi?tions to grow. He's come a far way from the har?ri?er who be?gan as a stage-?rob?ber in Gar?lan and Des?oy, and he'll come far?ther yet if the Af?fil?ia?tion isn't re?vi?tal?ized. Maybe all the way to Mejis."

She couldn't imag?ine what the Good Man could pos?si?bly want with her own sleepy lit?tle town in the Barony which lay clos?est to the Clean Sea, but she kept silent.

"In any case, it wasn't re?al?ly the Af?fil?ia?tion that sent us," he said. "Not all this way to count cows and oil der?ricks and hectares of land un der cul?ti?va?tion."

He paused a mo?ment, look?ing down at the road (as if for more rocks in the way of his boots) and stroking Rush?er's nose with ab?sent?mind?ed gen?tle?ness. She thought he was em?bar?rassed, per?haps even 'shamed. "We were sent by our fa?thers."

"Yer—" Then she un?der?stood. Bad boys, they were, sent out on a make-?work quest that wasn't quite ex?ile. She guessed their re?al job in Ham?bry might be to re?ha?bil?itate their rep?uta?tions. Well, she thought, it cer?tain?ly ex?plains the quick?sand smile, doesn't it? 'Ware this one, Su?san; he's the sort to burn bridges and up?set mail-?carts, then go on his mer?ry way with?out a sin?gle look back. Not in mean?ness but in plain old boy-?care?less?ness.

That made her think of the old song again, the one she'd been singing, the one he'd been whistling.

"Our fa?thers, yes."

Su?san Del?ga?do had cut a ca?per or two (or per?haps it was two dozen) oth?er own in

her time, and she felt sympathy for Will Dearborn as well as caution. And interesting. Bad boys could be amusing ... up to a point. The question was, how bad had Will and his cronies been?

"Helling?" she asked.

"Helling," he agreed, still sounding glum but perhaps brightening just a bit about the eyes and mouth. "We were warned; yes, warned very well. There was ... a certain amount of drinking."

And a few girls to squeeze with the hand not busy squeezing the ale-pot? It was a question no nice girl could outright ask, but one that couldn't help occurring to her mind.

Now the smile which had played briefly around the corners of his mouth dropped away. "We pushed it too far and the fun stopped. Fools have a way of doing that. One night there was a race. One moonless night. After midnight. All of us drunk. One of the horses caught his hoof in a goopher-hole and snapped a foreleg. He had to be put down."

Susan winced. It wasn't the worst thing she could think of, but bad enough. And when he opened his mouth again, it got worse.

"The horse was a thoroughbred, one of just three owned by my friend Richard's father, who is not well-to-do. There were scenes in our house holds which I haven't any desire to remember, let alone talk about. I'll make a long story short and say that, after much talk and many proposals for punishment, we were sent here, on this errand. It was Arthur's father's idea. I think Arthur's dad has always been a bit appalled by Arthur. Certainly Arthur's ructions didn't come from George Heath's side."

Susan smiled to herself, thinking of Aunt Cordelia saying, "She certainly doesn't get it from our side of the family." Then the calculated pause, followed by: "She had a great-aunt on her mother's side who ran crazy ... you didn't know? Yes! Set herself on fire and threw herself over the Drop. In the year of the comet, it was."

"Anyway," Will resumed, "Mr. Heath set us on with a saying from his own father—'One should meditate in purgatory.' And here we are."

"Hambr's far from purgatory."

He sketched his funny little how again. "If it were, all should want to be bad enough to come here and meet the pretty denizens."

"Work on that one a bit," she said in her driest voice. "It's still rough, I fear. Perhaps—"

She fell silent as a dismaying realization occurred to her: she was going to have to hope this boy would enter into a limited conspiracy with her. Otherwise, she was apt to be embarrassed.

"Susan?"

"I was just thinking. Are you here yet, Will? Officially, I mean?"

"No," he said, taking her meaning at once. And likely already seeing where this was going. He seemed sharp enough, in his way. "We only arrived in Barony this afternoon, and you're the first person any of us has spoken to ... unless, that is, Richard and Arthur have met folks. I couldn't sleep, and so came out to ride and to think things over a little. We're camped over there." He pointed to the right. "On

that long slope that runs to?ward the sea.”

“Aye, the Drop, it’s called.” She re?al?ized that Will and his mates might even be camped on what would be her own land by law be?fore much more time had passed. The thought was amus?ing and ex?cit?ing and a lit?tle startling.

“To?mor?row we ride in?to town and present our com?pli?ments to My Lord May?or, Hart Thorin. He’s a bit of a fool, ac?cord?ing to what we were told be?fore leav?ing New Canaan.”

“Were ye in?deed told so?” she asked, rais?ing one eye?brow.

“Yes—apt to blab?ber, fond of strong drink, even more fond of young girls,” Will said. “Is it true, would you say?”

“I think ye must judge for yer?self,” said she, sti?fling a smile with some ef?fort.

“In any case, we’ll al?so be pre?sent?ing to the Hon?or?able Kim?ba Rimer, Thorin’s Chan?cel?lor, and I un?der?stand he knows his beans. And counts his beans, as well.”

“Thorin will have ye to din?ner at May?or’s House,” Su?san said. “Per haps not to?mor?row night, but sure?ly the night af?ter.”

“A din?ner of state in Ham?bry,” Will said, smil?ing and still stroking Rush?er’s nose.

“Gods, how shall I bear the agony of my an?tic?ipa?tion?”

“Nev?er mind yer net?tle?some mouth,” she said, “but on?ly lis?ten, if ye’d be my friend. This is im?por?tant.”

His smile dropped away, and she saw again—as she had for a mo?ment or two be?fore—the man he’d be be?fore too many more years had passed. The hard face, the con?cen?trat?ed eyes, the mer?ci?less mouth. It was a fright?en?ing face, in a way—a fright?en?ing prospect—and yet, still, the place the old hag had touched felt warm and she found it dif?fi?cult to take her eyes off him. What, she won?dered, was his hair like un?der that stupid hat he wore?

“Tell me, Su?san.”

“If you and yer friends come to ta?ble at Thorin’s, ye may see me. If ye see me, Will, see me for the first time. See Miss Del?ga?do, as I shall see Mr. Dear?born. Do’ee take my mean?ing?”

“To the let?ter.” He was look?ing at her thought?ful?ly. “Do you serve? Sure?ly, if your fa?ther was the Barony’s chief drover, you do not—”

“Nev?er mind what I do or don’t do. Just promise that if we meet at Seafront, we meet for the first time.”

“I promise. But—”

“No more ques?tions. We’ve near?ly come to the place where we must part ways, and I want to give ye a warn?ing—fair pay?ment for the ride on this nice mount of yours, may?hap. If ye dine with Thorin and Rimer, ye’ll not be the on?ly new folk at his ta?ble. There’ll like?ly be three oth?ers, men Thorin has hired to serve as pri?vate guards o’ the house.”

“Not as Sher?iff’s deputies?”

“Nay, they an?swer to none but Thorin ... or, may?hap, to Rimer. Their names are Jonas, De?pape, and Reynolds. They look like hard boys to me ... al?though Jonas’s boy?hood is so long be?hind him that I imag?ine he’s for?got he ev?er had one.”

“Jonas is the lead?er?”

“Aye. He limps, has hair that falls to his shoul?ders pret?ty as any girl’s, and the

qua?very voice of an old gaffer who spends his days pol?ish?ing the chim?ney-com?er... but I think he's the most dan?ger?ous of the three all the same. I'd guess these three have for?got more about helling than you and yer friends will ev?er learn."

Now why had she told him all that? She didn't know, ex?act?ly. Grati tude, per?haps. He had promised to keep the se?cret of this late-?night meet?ing, and he had the look of a promise-?keep?er, in hack with his fa?ther or not.

"I'll watch them. And I thank you for the ad?vice." They were now climb?ing a long, gen?tle slope. Over?head, Old Moth?er blazed re?lent?less?ly. "Body?guards," he mused. "Body?guards in sleepy lit?tle Ham?bry. It's strange times, Su?san. Strange in?deed." "Aye." She had won?dered about Jonas, De?pape, and Reynolds her self, and could think of no good rea?son for them to be in town. Had they been Rimer's do?ing. Rimer's de?ci?tion? It seemed like?ly—Thorin wasn't the sort of man to even think about body?guards, she would have said; the High Sher?iff had al?ways done well enough for him—but still... why?

They breast?ed the hill. Be?low them lay a nes?tle of build?ings—the vil lage of Ham?bry. On?ly a few lights still shone. The bright?est clus?ter marked the Trav?ellers' Rest. From here, on the warm breeze, she could hear the pi?ano beat?ing out "Hey Jude" and a score of drunk?en voic?es glee?ful?ly mur?der?ing the cho?rus. Not the three men of whom she had warned Will Dear?born, though; they would be stand?ing at the bar, watch?ing the room with their flat eyes. Not the singing type were those three. Each had a small blue cof?fin-?shape tat?tooed on his right hand, burned in?to the web bing be?tween thumb and fore?fin?ger. She thought to tell Will this, then re al?ized he'd see for him?self soon enough. In?stead, she point?ed a lit?tle way down the slope, at a dark shape which over?hung the road on a chain. "Do ye see that?" "Yes." He heaved a large and rather com?ical sigh. "Is it the ob?ject I fear be?yond all oth?ers? Is it the dread shape of Mrs. Beech's mail?box?"

"Aye. And it's there we must part."

"If you say we must, we must. Yet I wish—" Just then the wind shift?ed, as it some?times did in the sum?mer, and blew a strong gust out of the west. The smell of sea-?salt was gone in an in?stant, and so was the sound of the drunk?en, singing voic?es. What re?placed them was a sound in?finite?ly more sin?is?ter, one that nev?er failed to pro?duce a scut?ter of goose?flesh up her back: a low, aton?al noise, like the war?ble of a siren be ing turned by a man with?out much longer to live.

Will took a step back?ward, eyes widen?ing, and again she no?ticed his hands take a dip to?ward his belt, as if reach?ing for some?thing not there.

"What in gods' name is that?"

"It's a thin?ny," she said qui?et?ly. "In Eye?bolt Canyon. Have ye nev?er heard of such?"

"Heard of, yes, but nev?er heard un?til now. Gods, how do you stand it? It sounds alive!"

She had nev?er thought of it quite like that, but now, in a way lis?ten?ing with his ears in?stead of her own, she thought he was right. It was as if some sick part of the night had gained a voice and was ac?tu?al?ly try?ing to sing.

She shiv?ered. Rush?er felt the mo?men?tary in?creased pres?sure of her knees and

whick?ered soft?ly, cran?ing his head around to look at her.

“We don’t of?ten hear it so clear?ly at this time of year,” she said. “In the fall, the men bum it to qui?et.”

“I don’t un?der?stand.”

Who did? Who un?der?stood any?thing any?more? Gods, they couldn’t even turn off the few oil-?pumps in Cit?go that still worked, al?though half of them squealed like pigs in a slaugh?ter?ing chute. These days you were usu?al?ly just grate?ful to find things that still worked at all.

“In the sum?mer, when there’s time, drovers and cow?boys drag loads of brush to the mouth of Eye?bolt,” she said. “Dead brush is all right, but live is bet?ter, for it’s smoke that’s want?ed, and the heav?ier the bet?ter. Eye-?bolt’s a box canyon, very short and steep-?walled. Al?most like a chim?ney ly?ing on its side, you see?”

“Yes.”

“The tra?di?tion?al time for burn?ing is Reap Mom—the day af?ter the fair and the feast and the fire.”

“The first day of win?ter.”

“Aye al?though in these parts it doesn’t feel like win?ter so soon. In any case it’s no tra?di?tion; the brush is some?times lit soon?er, if the winds have been prank?ish or if the sound’s par?tic?ular?ly strong. It up?sets the live stock, you know—cows give poor?ly when the noise of the thin?ny’s strong—and it makes sleep dif?fi?cult.”

“I should think it would.” Will was still look?ing north, and a stronger gust of wind blew his hat off. It fell to his back, the rawhide tugstring pulling against the line of his throat. The hair so re?vealed was a lit?tle long, and as black as a crow’s wing. She felt a sud?den, greedy de?sire to run her hands through it, to let her fin?gers tell its tex?ture—rough or smooth or silky? And how would it smell? At this she felt an?oth?er shiv?er of heat down low in her bel?ly. He turned to her as though he had read her mind, and she flushed, grate?ful that he wouldn’t be able to see the dark?en?ing of her cheek.

“How long has it been there?”

“Since be?fore I was born,” she said, “but not be?fore my da was born. He said that the ground shook in an earth?quake just be?fore it came. Some say the earth?quake brought it, some say that’s su?per?sti?tious non?sense. All I know is that it’s al?ways been there. The smoke qui?ets it awhile, the way it will qui?et a hive of bees or wasps, but the sound al?ways comes back. The brush piled at the mouth helps to keep any wan?der?ing live?stock out, too—some?times they’re drawn to it, gods know why. But if a cow or sheep does hap?pen to yet in—af?ter the burn?ing and be?fore the next year’s pile has start?ed to grow, may?hap—it doesn’t come back out. What?ev?er it is, it’s hun?gry.”

She put his pon?cho aside, lift?ed her right leg over the sad?dle with?out so much as touch?ing the horn, and slipped off Rush?er—all this in a sin?gle liq?uid move?ment. It was a stunt made for pants rather than a dress, and she knew from the fur?ther widen?ing of his eyes that he’d seen a good lot of her . . . but noth?ing she had to wash with the bath?room door closed, so what of that? And that quick dis?mount had ev?er been a fa?vorite trick of hers when she was in a showoffy mood.

“Pret?ty!” he ex?claimed.

"I learned it from my da," she said, responding to the more in?no?cent in?ter?pre?ta?tion of his com?pli?ment. Her smile as she hand?ed him the reins, how?ev?er, sug?gest?ed that she was will?ing to ac?cept the com?pli?ment any way it was meant.

"Su?san? Have you ev?er seen the thin?ny?"

"Aye, once or twice. From above."

"What does it look like?"

"Ug?ly," she re?spond?ed at once. Un?til tonight, when she had ob?served Rhea's smile up close and en?dured her twid?dling, med?dling fin?gers, she would have said it was the ugli?est thing she had ev?er seen. "It looks a lit tle like a slow-?burn?ing peat fire, and a lit?tle like a swamp full of scum?my green wa?ter. There's a mist that ris?es off it. Some?times it looks like long, skin?ny arms. With hands at the end of em."

"Is it grow?ing?"

"Aye, they say it is, that ev?ery thin?ny grows, but it grows slow?ly. 'Twon't es?cape Eye?bolt Canyon in your time or mine."

She looked up at the sky, and saw that the con?stel?la?tions had con?tin ued to tilt along their tracks as they spoke. She felt she could talk to him all night—about the thin?ny, or Cit?go, or her ir?ri?tat?ing aunt, or just about any?thing—and the idea dis?mayed her. Why should this hap?pen to her now, for the gods' sake? Af?ter three years of dis?miss?ing the Ham?bry boys, why should she now meet a boy who in?ter?est?ed her so strange?ly? Why was life so un?fair?

Her ear?li?er thought, the one she'd heard in her fa?ther's voice, re?curred to her: If it's ka, it'll come like a wind, and your plans will stand be?fore it no more than a barn be?fore a cy?clone.

But no. And no. And no. So set she, with all her con?sid?er?able de?ter?mi na?tion, her mind against the idea. This was no bam; this was her life.

Su?san reached out and touched the rusty tin of Mrs. Beech's mail?box, as if to steady her?self in the world. Her lit?tle hopes and day?dreams didn't mean so much, per?haps, but her fa?ther had taught her to mea?sure her?self by her abil?ity to do the things she'd said she would do, and she would not over?throw his teach?ings sim?ply be?cause she hap?pened to en?counter a good-?look?ing boy at a time when her body and her emo?tions were in a stew.

"I'll leave ye here to ei?ther re?join yer friends or re?sume yer ride," she said. The grav?ity she heard in her voice made her feel a bit sad, for it was an adult grav?ity.

"But re?mem?ber yer promise, Will—if ye see me at Seafront—May?or's

House—and if ye'd be my friend, see me there for the first time. As I'd see you."

He nod?ded, and she saw her se?ri?ous?ness now mir?rored in his own face. And the sad?ness, may?hap. "I've nev?er asked a girl to ride out with me, or if she'd ac?cept a vis?it of me. I'd ask of you, Su?san, daugh?ter of Patrick—I'd even bring you flow?ers to sweet?en my chances—but it would do no good, I think."

She shook her head. "Nay. Twouldn't."

"Are you promised in mar?riage? It's for?ward of me to ask, I know, but I mean no harm."

"I'm sure ye don't, but I'd as soon not an?swer. My po?si?tion is a deli cate one just now, as I told ye. Be?sides, it's late. Here's where we part, Will. But stay . . . one more mo?ment . . ."

She rum?maged in the pock?et of her apron and brought out half a cake wrapped in a piece of green leaf. The oth?er half she had eat?en on her way up to the Coos ... in what now felt like the oth?er half of her life. She held what was left of her lit?tle evening meal out to Rush?er, who sniffed it, then ate it and nuz?zled her hand. She smiled, lik?ing the vel?vet tick?le in the cup of her palm. "Aye, thee's a good horse, so ye are."

She looked at Will Dear?born, who stood in the road, shuf?fling his dusty boots and gaz?ing at her un?hap?pi?ly. The hard look was gone from his face, now; he looked her age again, or younger. "We were well met, weren't we?" he asked.

She stepped for?ward, and be?fore she could let her?self think about what she was do?ing, she put her hands on his shoul?ders, stood on her toes, and kissed him on the mouth. The kiss was brief but not sis?ter?ly.

"Aye, very well met. Will." But when he moved to?ward her (as thought?less?ly as a flow?er turn?ing its face to fol?low the sun), wish?ing to re?peat the ex?pe?ri?ence, she pushed him back a step, gen?tly but firm?ly.

"Nay, that was on?ly a thank-?you, and one thank-?you should be enough for a gen?tle?man. Go yer course in peace, Will."

He took up the reins like a man in a dream, looked at them for a mo?ment as if he didn't know what in the world they were, and then looked hack at her. She could see him work?ing to clear his mind and emo?tions of the im?pact her kiss had made. She liked him for it. And she was very glad she had done it.

"And you yours," he said, swing?ing in?to the sad?dle. "I look for?ward to meet?ing you for the first time."

He smiled at her, and she saw both long?ing and wish?es in that smile. Then he gigged the horse, turned him, and start?ed back the way they'd come—to have an?oth?er look at the oil patch, may?hap. She stood where she was, by Mrs. Beech's mail?box, will?ing him to turn around and wave so she could see his face once more. She felt sure he would ... but he didn't. Then, just as she was about to turn away and start down the hill to town, he did turn, and his hand lift?ed, flut?ter?ing for a mo?ment in the dark like a moth.

Su?s?san lift?ed her own in re?turn and then went her way, feel?ing hap?py and un?hap?py at the same time. Yet—and this was per?haps the most im?por?tant thing—she no longer felt soiled. When she had touched the boy's lips, Rhea's touch seemed to have left her skin. A small mag?ic, per?haps, but she wel?comed it.

She walked on, smil?ing a lit?tle and look?ing up at the stars more fre?quent?ly than was her habit when out af?ter dark.

CHAP?TER IV

LONG AF?TER MOON?SET

1

He rode rest?less?ly for near?ly two hours back and forth along what she called the Drop, nev?er push?ing Rush?er above a trot, al?though what he want?ed to do was gal?lop the big geld?ing un?der the stars un?til his own blood be?gan to cool a lit?tle. It'll cool plen?ty if you draw at?ten?tion to your?self, he thought, and like?ly you won't even have to cool it your?self. Fools are the on?ly folk on the earth who can ab?s?olute?ly count on get?ting what they de?serve. That old say?ing made him think of

the scarred and bow-legged man who had been his life's great teacher, and he smiled.

At last he turned his horse down the slope to the trickle of brook which ran there, and followed it a mile and a half up stream (past several gath'ers of horse; they looked at Rusher with a kind of sleepy, wall-eyed surprise) to a grove of willows. From the hollow within, a horse whickered softly. Rusher whickered in return, stamping one hoof and nodding his head up and down.

His rider ducked his own head as he passed through the willow fronds, and suddenly there was a narrow and inhuman white face hanging before him, its upper half all but swallowed by black, pupilless eyes.

He dipped for his guns—the third time tonight he'd done that, and for the third time there was nothing there. Not that it mattered; already he recognized what was hanging before him on a string: that idiotic rook's skull.

The young man who was currently calling himself Arthur Heath had taken it off his saddle (it amused him to call the skull so perched their lookout, "ugly as an old gammer, but perfect cheap to feed") and hung it here as a prank greeting. Him and his jokes! Rusher's master batted it aside hard enough to break the string and send the skull flying into the dark.

"Fie, Roland," said a voice from the shadows. It was reproachful, but there was laughter bubbling just beneath ... as there always was. Cuthbert was his oldest friend—the marks of their first teeth had been embedded on many of the same toys—but Roland had in some ways never understood him. Nor was it just his laughter; on the long-ago day when Hax, the palace cook, was to be hung for a traitor on Gallows Hill, Cuthbert had been in an agony of terror and remorse. He'd told Roland he couldn't stay, couldn't watch ... but in the end he had done both. Because neither the stupid jokes nor the easy surface emotions were the truth of Cuthbert Allgood.

As Roland entered the hollow at the center of the grove, a dark shape stepped out from behind the tree where it had been keeping. Halfway across the clearing, it resolved itself into a tall, narrow-hipped boy who was barefooted below his jeans and bare-chested above them. In one hand he held an enormous antique revolver—a kind which was sometimes called a beer-barrel because of the cylinder's size.

"Fie," Cuthbert repeated, as if he liked the sound of this word, not archaic only in forgotten backwaters like Mejis. "That's a fine way to treat the guard o' the watch, smacking the poor thin-faced fellow halfway to the nearest mountain-range!"

"If I'd been wearing a gun, I likely would have blown it to smithereens and woken half the countryside."

"I knew you wouldn't be going about strapped," Cuthbert answered mildly.

"You're remarkably ill-looking, Roland son of Steven, but no body's fool even as you approach the ancient age of fifteen."

"I thought we agreed we'd use the names we're traveling under. Even among ourselves."

Cuthbert stuck out his leg, bare heel planted in the turf, and bowed with his arms outstretched and his hands strenuously bent at the wrist—an inspired imitation of

the sort of man for whom court has become career. He also looked remarkably like a heron standing in a marsh, and Roland snorted laughter in spite of himself. Then he touched the inside of his left wrist to his forehead, to see if he had a fever. He felt feverish enough inside his head, gods knew, but the skin above his eyes felt cool.

"I cry your pardon, gunslinger," Cuthbert said, his eyes and hands still turned humbly down.

The smile on Roland's face died. "And don't call me that again, Cuthbert. Please. Not here, not anywhere. Not if you value me."

Cuthbert dropped his pose at once and came quickly to where Roland sat his horse. He looked honestly humbled.

"Roland—Will—I'm sorry."

Roland clapped him on the shoulder. "No harm done. Just remember from here on out. Mejis may be at the end of the world . . . but it still is the world. Where's Alain?"

"Dick, do you mean? Where do you think?" Cuthbert pointed across the clearing, to where a dark hulk was either snoring or slowly choking to death.

"That one," Cuthbert said, "would sleep through an earthquake."

"But you heard me coming and woke."

"Yes," Cuthbert said. His eyes were on Roland's face, searching it with an intensity that made Roland feel a little uneasy. "Did something happen to you? You look different."

"Do I?"

"Yes. Excited. Aired out, somehow."

If he was going to tell Cuthbert about Susan, now was the time. He decided without really thinking about it (most of his decisions, certainly the best of them, were made in this same way) not to tell. If he met her at Mayor's House, it would be the first time as far as Cuthbert and Alain knew, as well. What harm in that?

"I've been properly aired, all right," he said, dismounting and bending to uncinch the girths of his saddle. "I've seen some interesting things, too."

"Ah? Speak, companion of my boss's dearest tent."

"I'll wait until tomorrow, I think, when your hibernating bear is finally awake. Then I only have to tell once. Besides, I'm tired. I'll share you one thing, though: there are too many horses in these parts, even for a Barony renowned for its horseflesh. Too many by far."

Before Cuthbert could ask any questions, Roland pulled the saddle from Rusher's back and set it down beside three small wicker cages which had been bound together with rawhide, making them into a carrier which could be secured to a horse's back. Inside, three pigeons with white rings around their necks cooed sleepily. One took his head out from beneath his wing, had a peek at Roland, and then tucked himself away again.

"These fellows all right?" Roland asked.

"Fine. Pecking and shitting happily in their straw. As far as they're concerned, they're on vacation. What did you mean about—"

"Tomorrow," Roland said, and Cuthbert, seeing that there would be no more, only

nodded and went to find his lean and bony lookout.

Twenty minutes later, Rusher unloaded and rubbed down and set to forage with Buckskin and Glue Boy (Cuthbert could not even name his horse as a normal person would), Roland lay on his back in his bedroll, looking up at the late stars overhead. Cuthbert had gone back to sleep as easily as he had awakened at the sound of Rusher's hoofs, but Roland had never felt less sleepy in his life.

His mind turned back a month, to the whore's room, to his father sitting on the whore's bed and watching him dress. The words his father had spoken—I have known for two years—had reverberated like a struck gong in Roland's head. He suspected they might continue to do so for the rest of his life.

But his father had had much more to say. About Marten. About Roland's mother, who was, perhaps, more sinned against than sinning. About harriers who called themselves patriots. And about John Farson, who had indeed been in Cressia, and who was gone from that place now—vanished, as he had a way of doing, like smoke in a high wind. Before leaving, he and his men had burned Indrie, the Barony seat, pretty much to the ground. The slaughter had been in the hundreds, and perhaps it was no surprise that Cressia had since repudiated the Affiliation and spoken for the Good Man. The Barony Governor, the Mayor of Indrie, and the High Sheriff had all ended the early summer day which concluded Farson's visit with their heads on the wall guarding the town's entrance. That was, Steven Deschain had said, "pretty persuasive politics."

It was a game of Castles where both armies had come out from behind their Hillocks and the final moves had commenced, Roland's father had said, and as was so often the case with popular revolutions, that game was apt to be over before many in the Baronies of Mid-World had begun to realize that John Farson was a serious threat... or, if you were one of those who believed passionately in his vision of democracy and an end to what he called "class slavery and ancient fairytales," a serious agent of change.

His father and his father's small knot of gunslingers, Roland was amazed to learn, cared little about Farson in either light; they looked upon him as small cheese.

Looked upon the Affiliation itself as small cheese; come to that.

I'm going to send you away, Steven had said, sitting there on the bed and looking somberly at his only son, the one who had lived. There is no true safe place left in Mid-World, but the Barony of Mejis on the Clean Sea is as close to true safety as any place may be these days... so it's there you'll go, along with at least two of your mates. Alain, I suppose, for one. Just not that laughing boy for the other, I beg of you. You'd be better off with a barking dog.

Roland, who on any other day in his life would have been overjoyed at the prospect of seeing some of the wider world, had protested hotly. If the final battles against the Good Man were at hand, he wanted to fight them at his father's side.

He was a gunslinger now, after all, if only a 'prentice, and—

His father had shaken his head, slowly and emphatically. No, Roland. You don't understand. You shall, however; as well as possible, you shall.

Later, the two of them had walked the high battlements above Mid-World's last living city—green and gorgeous Gilead in the morning sun, with its penons

flap?ping and the ven?dors in the streets of the Old Quar?ter and hors?es trot?ting on the bri?dle paths which ra?di?at?ed out from the palace stand?ing at the heart of ev?ery?thing. His fa?ther had told him more (not ev?ery?thing), and he had un?der?stood more (far from ev?ery?thing—nor did his fa?ther un?der?stand ev?ery?thing). The Dark Tow?er had not been men tioned by ei?ther of them, but al?ready it hung in Roland's mind, a pos?si bil?ity like a storm cloud far away on the hori?zon.

Was the Tow?er what all of this was re?al?ly about? Not a jumped-?up har?ri?er with dreams of rul?ing Mid-?World, not the wiz?ard who had en chant?ed his moth?er, not the glass ball which Steven and his posse had hoped to find in Cres?sia . . . but the Dark Tow?er?

He hadn't asked.

He hadn't dared ask.

Now he shift?ed in his bedroll and closed his eyes. He saw the girl's face at once; he felt her lips pressed firm?ly against his own again, and smelled the scent of her skin. He was in?stant?ly hot from the top of his head to the base of his spine, cold from the base of his spine to the tips of his toes. Then he thought of the way her legs had flashed as she slid from Rush?er's back (al?so the glim?mer of the un?der?gar?ments be?neath her briefly raised dress), and his hot half and cold half changed places.

The whore had tak?en his vir?gin?ity but wouldn't kiss him; had turned her face aside when he tried to kiss her. She'd al?lowed him to do what?ev?er else he want?ed, but not that. At the time he'd been bit?ter?ly dis?ap?point?ed. Now he was glad.

The eye of his ado?les?cent mind, both rest?less and clear, con?sid?ered (he braid which fell down her back to her waist, the soft dim?ples which had formed at the com?ers of her mouth when she smiled, the lilt of her voice, her old-?fash?ioned way of say?ing aye and nay, ye and yer and da. He thought of how her hands had felt on his shoul?ders as she stretched up to kiss him, and thought he would give ev?ery?thing he owned to feel her hands there again, so light and so firm. And her mouth on his. It was a mouth that knew on?ly a lit?tle about kiss?ing, he guessed, but that was a lit tle more than he knew him?self.

Be care?ful, Roland—don't let your feel?ing for this girl tip any?thing over. She's not free, any?way—she said as much. Not mar?ried, but spo?ken for in some oth?er way. Roland was far from the re?lent?less crea?ture he would even?tu?al?ly be come, but the seeds of that re?lent?less?ness were there—small, stony things that would, in their time, grow in?to trees with deep roots . . . and bit?ter fruit. Now one of these seeds cracked open and sent up its first sharp blade.

What's been spo?ken for may be un?spo?ken, and what's done may be un?done.

Noth?ing's sure, but . . . I want her.

Yes. That was the one thing he did know, and he knew it as well as he knew the face of his fa?ther: he want?ed her. Not as he had want?ed the whore when she lay naked on her bed with her legs spread and her half-?lid?ded eyes look?ing up at him, but in the way he want?ed food when he was hun?gry or wa?ter when he was thirsty. In the way, he sup?posed, that he want?ed to drag Marten's dusty body be?hind his horse down Gilead's High Road in pay?ment for what the wiz?ard had done to his moth?er.

He want?ed her; he want?ed the girl Su?san.

Roland turned over on his oth?er side, closed his eyes, and fell asleep. His rest was thin and lit by the crude?ly po?et?ic dreams on?ly ado?les?cent boys have, dreams where sex?ual at?rac?tion and ro?man?tic love come to geth?er and res?onate more pow?er?ful?ly than they ev?er will again. In these thirsty vi?sions Su?san Del?ga?do put her hands on Roland's shoul?ders over and over, kissed his mouth over and over, told him over and over to come to her for the first time, to be with her for the first time, to see her for the first time, to see her very well.

2

Five miles or so from where Roland slept and dreamed his dreams, Su?san Del?ga?do lay in her bed and looked out her win?dow and watched Old Star be?gin to grow pale with the ap?proach?ing dawn. Sleep was no clos?er now than it had been when she lay down, and there was a throb be?tween her legs where the old wom?an had touched her. It was dis?tract?ing but no longer un?pleas?ant, be?cause she now as?so?ci?at?ed it with the boy she'd met on the road and im?pul?sive?ly kissed by starlight. Ev?ery time she shift?ed her legs, that throb flared in?to a brief sweet ache. When she'd got home, Aunt Cord (who would have been in her own bed an hour be?fore on any or?di?nary night) had been sit?ting in her rock?ing chair by the fire?place—dead and cold and swept clean of ash?es at this time of year—with a lap?ful of lace that looked like wave-?froth against her dowdy black dress. She was edg?ing it with a speed that seemed al?most su?per?nat?ural to Su?san, and she hadn't looked up when the door opened and her niece came in on a swirl of breeze.

"I ex?pect?ed ye an hour ago," Aunt Cord said. And then, al?though she didn't sound it: "I was wor?ried."

"Aye?" Su?san said, and said no more. She thought that on any oth?er night she would have of?fered one of her fum?bling ex?cus?es which al?ways sound?ed like a lie to her own ears—it was the ef?fect Aunt Cord had had on her all her life—but this hadn't been an or?di?nary night. Nev?er in her life had there been a night like this. She found she could not get Will Dear?born out of her mind.

Aunt Cord had looked up then, her close-?set, rather beady eyes sharp and in?quis?itive above her nar?row blade of a nose. Some things hadn't changed since Su?san had set out for the Coos; she had still been able to feel her aunt's eyes brush?ing across her face and down her body, like lit?tle whisk-?brooms with sharp bris?tles.

"What took ye so long?" Aunt Cord had asked. "Was there trou?ble?"

"No trou?ble," Su?san had replied, but for a mo?ment she thought of how the witch had stood be?side her in the door?way, pulling her braid through the gnarled tube of one loose?ly clenched fist. She re?mem?bered want?ing to go, and she re?mem?bered ask?ing Rhea if their busi?ness was done.

May?hap there's one more lit?tle thing, the old wom?an had said ... or so Su?san thought. But what had that one more lit?tle thing been? She couldn't re?mem?ber.

And, re?al?ly, what did it mat?ter? She was shut of Rhea un?til her bel?ly be?gan to rise with Thorin's child ... and if there could be no ba?by-?mak?ing un?til Reap-?Night, she'd not be re?turn?ing to the Coos un?til late win?ter at the soon?est. An age! And it would be longer than that, were she slow to kin?dle ...

"I walked slow?ly com?ing home, Aunt. That's all."

"Then why look ye so?" Aunt Cord had asked, scant brows knit?ing to?ward the ver?tical line which creased her brow.

"How so?" Su?san had asked, tak?ing off her apron and knot?ing the strings and hang?ing it on the hook just in?side the kitchen door.

"Flushy. Frothy. Like milk fresh out of the cow."

She'd al?most laughed. Aunt Cord, who knew as lit?tle about men as Su?san did about the stars and plan?ets, had struck it di?rect?ly. Flushy and frothy was ex?act?ly how she felt. "On?ly the night air, I sup?pose," she had said. "I saw a me?te?or, Aunt. And heard the thin?ny. The sound's strong tonight."

"Aye?" her aunt asked with?out in?ter?est, then re?turned to the sub?ject which did in?ter?est her. "Did it hurt?"

"A lit?tle."

"Did ye cry?"

Su?san shook her head.

"Good. Bet?ter not. Al?ways bet?ter. She likes it when they cry, I've heard. Now, Sue—did she give you some?thing? Did the old pussy give you some?thing?"

"Aye." She reached in?to her pock?et and brought out the pa?per with writ?ten up?on it. She held it out and her aunt snatched it away with a greedy look. Cordelia had been quite the sug?arplum over the last month or so, but now that she had what she want?ed (and now that Su?san had come too far and promised too much to have a change of heart), she'd re?vert?ed to the sour, su?per?cil?ious, of?ten sus?pi?cious wom?an Su?san had grown up with; the one who'd been driv?en in?to al?most week?ly bouts of rage by her phleg?matic, life-?goes-?as-?twill broth?er. In a way, it was a re?lief. It had been nervewrack?ing to have Aunt Cord play?ing Cy?bil?la Good-?Sprite day af?ter day.

"Aye, aye, there's her mark, all right," her aunt had said, trac?ing her fin?gers over the bot?tom of the sheet. "A dev?il's hoof's what it means, some say, but what do we care, eh. Sue? Nasty, hor?rid crea?ture that she is, she's still made it pos?si?ble for two wom?en to get on in the world a lit?tle longer. And ye'll on?ly have to see her once more, prob?ably around Year's End, when ye've caught prop?er."

"It will be lat?er than that," Su?san had told her. "I'm not to lie with him un?til the full of the De?mon Moon. Af?ter the Reap?ing Fair and the bon?fire."

Aunt Cord had stared, eyes wide, mouth open. "Said she so?"

Are you call?ing me a liar. Aun?tie? she had thought with a sharp?ness that wasn't much like her; usu?al?ly her na?ture was more like her fa?ther's.

"Aye."

"But why? Why so long?" Aunt Cord was ob?vi?ous?ly up?set, ob?vi?ous?ly dis?ap?point?ed. There had so far been eight pieces of sil?ver and four of gold out of this; they were tucked up wher?ev?er it was that Aunt Cord squir?reled her mon?ey away (and Su?san sus?pect?ed there was a fair amount of it, al though Cordelia liked to plead pover?ty at ev?ery op?por?tu?ni?ty), and twice that much was still owed ... or would be, once the blood?stained sheet went to the May?or's House laun?dress. That same amount would be paid yet again when Rhea had con?firmed the ba?by, and the ba?by's hon?esty. A lot of mon?ey, all told. A great lot, for a lit?tle place like this and

little folk like them. And now, to have the paying of it put back so far . . .

Then came a sin Susan had prayed over (although without much enthusiasm) before getting into her bed: she had rather enjoyed the cheated, frustrated look on Aunt Cord's face—the look of the thwarted miser.

"Why so long?" she repeated.

"I suppose you could go up the Coos and ask her."

Cordelia Delgado's lips, thin to begin with, had pressed together so tightly they almost disappeared. "Are you pert, missy? Are you pert with me?"

"No. I'm much too tired to be pert with anyone. I want to wash—I can still feel her hands on me, so I can—and go to bed."

"Then do so. Perhaps in the morning we can discuss this in more ladylike fashion. And we must go and see Hart, of course." She folded the paper Rhea had given Susan, looking pleased at the prospect of visiting Hart Thorin, and moved her hand toward her dress pocket.

"No," Susan said, and her voice had been unusually sharp—enough so to freeze her aunt's hand in midair. Cordelia had looked at her, frankly startled. Susan had felt a little embarrassed by that look, but she hadn't dropped her eyes, and when she held out her own hand, it had been steady enough.

"I'm to have the keeping of that. Aunt."

"Who tells ye to speak so?" Aunt Cord had asked, her voice almost whining with outrage—it was close to blasphemous, Susan supposed, but for a moment Aunt Cord's voice had reminded her of the sound the thinny made. "Who tells ye to speak so to the woman who raised a motherless girl? To the sister of that girl's poor dead father?"

"You know who," Susan said. She still held her hand out. "I'm to keep it, and I'm to give it to May or Thorin. She said she didn't care what happened to it then, he could wipe his bum with it for all of her," (the flush which suffused her aunt's face at that had been very enjoyable) "but until then, it was to be in my keeping."

"I never heard of such a thing," Aunt Cordelia had huffed . . . but she had handed the grimy scrap of paper back. "Giving the keep of such an important document to a mere scrap of a girl."

Yet not too mere a scrap to be his gilly, am I? To lie under him and listen to his bones creak and take his seed and maybe bear his child.

She'd dropped her eyes to her pocket as she put the paper away again, not wanting Aunt Cord to see the resentment in them.

"Go up," Aunt Cord had said, brushing the froth of lace off her lap and into her workbasket, where it lay in an unaccustomed tangle. "And when you wash, do your mouth with especial care. Cleanse it of its impudence and disrespect toward those who have given up much for love of its owner."

Susan had gone silently, biting back a thousand retorts, mounting the stairs as she had so often, throbbing with a mixture of shame and resentment.

And now here she was, in her bed and still awake as the stars paled away and the first brighter shades began to color the sky. The events of the night just past slipped through her mind in a kind of fantastical blur, like shuffled playing cards—and the one which turned up with the most persistence was the face of Will

Dear?born. She thought of how that face could be hard at one mo?ment and soft?en so un?ex?pect?ed?ly at the next. And was it a hand?some face? Aye, she thought so. For her?self, she knew so.

I?ve nev?er asked a girl to ride out with me, or if she would ac?cept a vis?it of me. I would ask you, Su?san, daugh?ter of Patrick.

Why now? Why should I meet him now, when no good can come of it?

If it's ka, it 'll come like a wind. Like a cy?clone.

She tossed from one side of the bed to the oth?er, then at last rolled on?to her back again. There would be no sleep for her in what re?mained of this night, she thought. She might as well walk out on the Drop and watch the sun come up.

Yet she con?tin?ued to lie in bed, feel?ing some?how sick and well at the same time, look?ing in?to the shad?ows and lis?ten?ing to the first cries of the morn?ing birds, think?ing of how his mouth had felt against hers, the ten?der grain of it and the feel?ing of his teeth be?low his lips; the smell of his skin, the rough tex?ture of his shirt un?der her palms.

She now put those palms against the top of her shift and cupped her breasts with her fin?gers. The nip?ples were hard, like lit?tle peb?bles. And when she touched them, the heat be?tween her legs flared sud?den?ly and ur?gent?ly.

She could sleep, she thought. She could, if she took care of that heat. If she knew how.

And she did. The old wom?an had shown her. Even a girl who's in?tact don't need to lack for a shiv?er now 'n then... Like a lit?tle bud o' silk, so it is.

Su?san shift?ed in bed and slipped a hand deep be?neath the sheet. She forced the old wom?an's bright eyes and hol?low cheeks out of her mind— it wasn't hard to do at all once you set your mind to it, she dis?cov?ered— and re?placed it with the face of the boy with the big geld?ing and the sil?ly flat-?crowned hat. For a mo?ment the vi?sion of her mind be?came so clear and so sweet that it was re?al, and all the rest of her life on?ly a drab dream. In this vi?sion he kissed her over and over, their mouths widen?ing, their tongues touch?ing; what he breathed out, she breathed in.

She burned. She burned in her bed like a torch. And when the sun fi nal?ly came over the hori?zon some short time lat?er, she lay deeply asleep, with a faint smile on her lips and her un?braided hair ly?ing across the side of her face and her pil?low like loose gold.

3

In the last hour be?fore dawn, the pub?lic room of the Trav?ellers' Rest was as qui?et as it ev?er be?came. The gaslights which turned the chan?de?lier in?to a bril?liant jew?el un?til two of the clock or so on most nights were now turned down to gut?ter?ing blue points, and the long, high room was shad ovy and spec?tral.

In one cor?ner lay a jum?ble of kin?dling—the re?mains of a cou?ple of chairs smashed in a fight over a Watch Me game (the com?bat?ants were cur?rent?ly re?sid?ing in the High Sher?iff's drunk-?cell). In an?oth?er com?er was a fair?ly large pud?dle of con?geal?ing puke. On the raised plat?form at the east end of the room stood a bat?tered pi?ano; propped against its bench was the iron?wood club which be?longed to Barkie, the sa?loon's bounc?er and all-?around tough man. Barkie him?self, the naked mound of his scarred stom ach ris?ing above the waist?band of his cor?duroy

pants like a clot of bread dough, lay under the bench, snoring. In one hand he held a playing card: the deuce of diamonds.

At the west end of the room were the card tables. Two drunks lay with their heads on one of these, snoring and drooling on the green felt, their outstretched hands touching. Above them, on the wall, was a picture of Arthur, the Great King of Eld astride his white stallion, and a sign which read (in a curious mixture of High and Low Speech): ARGY?OU NOT ABOUT THE HAND YOU ARE DELT IN CARDS OR LIFE.

Mounted behind the bar, which ran the length of the room, was a monstrous trophy: a two-headed elk with a rack of antlers like a forest grove and four glaring eyes. This beast was known to local habitués of the Travellers' as The Romp. None could have said why. Some wit had carefully drawn a pair of sow-titty condoms over the prongs of two of its antlers. Lying on the bar itself and directly beneath The Romp's disapproving gaze was Pettie the Trotter, one of the Travellers' dancers and gilly-girls . . . although Pettie's actual girlhood was well behind her now, and soon she would be reduced to doing her business on her knees behind the Travellers' rather than upstairs in one of the tiny cribs. Her plump legs were spread, one dangling over the bar on the inside, one on the outside, the filthy tangle of her skirt frothed up between. She breathed in long snores, occasionally twitching at the feet and fat fingers. The only other sounds were the hot summer wind outside and the soft, regular snap of cards being turned one by one.

A small table stood by itself near the batwing doors which gave up on the Ham-bry High Street; it was here that Coral Thorin, owner of the Travellers' Rest (and the Mayor's sister), sat on the nights when she descended from her suite "to be a part of the company." When she came down, she came down early—when there were still more steaks than whiskey being served across the old scratched bar—and went back up around the time that Sheb, the piano player, sat down and began to pound his hideous instrument. The Mayor himself never came in late, although it was well-known that he owned at least a half-interest in the Travellers'. Clan Thorin enjoyed the money the place brought in; they just didn't enjoy the look of it after midnight, when the sawdust spread on the floor began to soak up the spilled beer and the spilled blood. Yet there was a hard streak in Coral, who had twenty years before been what was called "a wild child." She was younger than her political brother, not so thin, and good-looking in a large-eyed, weasel-headed way. No one sat at her table during the saloon's operating hours—Barkie would have put a stop to anyone who tried, and double-quick—but operating hours were over now, the drunks mostly gone or passed out upstairs, Sheb curled up and fast asleep in the corner behind his piano. The soft-headed boy who cleaned the place had been gone since two o'clock or so (chased out by jeers and insults and a few flying beer-glasses, as he always was; Roy Depape in particular had no love in his heart for that particular lad). He would be back around nine or so, to begin readying the old party-palace for another night of hilarity, but until then the man sitting at Mistress Thorin's table had the place to himself.

A game of Patience was laid out before him: black on red, red on black, the

partially formed Square o' Court above all, just as it was in the affairs of men. In his left hand the player held the remains of the deck. As he flipped the cards up, one by one, the tattoo on his right hand moved. It was disconcerting somehow, as if the coffin were breathing. The card-player was an oldish fellow, not as thin as the Mayor or his sister, but thin. His long white hair straggled down his back. He was deeply tanned, except for his neck, where he always burned; the flesh there hung in scant watbles. He wore a mus-tache so long the ragged white ends hung nearly to his jaw—a sham gun-slinger's mus-tache, many thought it, but no one used the word "sham" to El-dred Jonas's face. He wore a white silk shirt, and a black-handled revolver hung low on his hip. His large, red-rimmed eyes looked sad on first glance. A second, closer look showed them only to be watery. Of emotion they were as dead as the eyes of The Romp.

He turned up the Ace of Wands. No place for it. "Pah, you bugger," he said in an odd, reedy voice. It quavered, as well, like the voice of a man on the verge of tears. It fit perfectly with his damp and red-rimmed eyes. He swept the cards together.

Before he could reshuffle, a door opened and closed softly upstairs. Jonas put the cards aside and dropped his hand to the butt of his gun.

Then, as he recognized the sound of Reynolds's boots coming along the gallery, he let go of the gun and drew his tobacco-pouch from his belt in stead. The hem of the cloak Reynolds always wore came into view, and then he was coming down the stairs, his face freshly washed and his curly red hair hanging about his ears.

Vain of his looks was dear old Mr. Reynolds, and why not? He'd sent his cock on its exploring way up more damp and cozy cracks than Jonas had ever seen in his life, and Jonas was twice his age.

At the bottom of the stairs Reynolds walked along the bar, pausing to squeeze one of Pettie's plump thighs, and then crossed to where Jonas sat with his makings and his deck of cards.

"Evening, El-dred."

"Morning, Clay." Jonas opened the sack, took out a paper, and sprinkled tobacco into it. His voice shook, but his hands were steady. "Like a smoke?"

"I could do with one."

Reynolds pulled out a chair, turned it around, and sat with his fore arms crossed on its back. When Jonas handed him the cigarette, Reynolds danced it along the backs of his fingers, an old gun-slinger trick. The Big Coffin Hunters were full of old gun-slinger tricks.

"Where's Roy? With Her Nibs?" They had been in Ham-bry a little over a month now, and in that time De-pape had conceived a passion for a fifteen-year-old whore named Deb-orah. Her bow-legged clumping walk and her way of squinting off into the distance led Jonas to suspect she was just another cow-girl from a long line of them, but she had high-hat ways. It was Clay who had started calling the girl Her Nibs, or Her Majesty, or sometimes (when drunk) "Roy's Coronation Cunt."

Reynolds now nodded. "It's like he's drunk on her."

"He'll be all right. He ain't throwing us over for some little snug-gle-bunny with pimples on her tits. Why, she's so ignorant she can't spell cat. Not so much as cat,

no. I asked her.”

Jonas made a second cigarette, drew a sulfur match from the sack, and popped it alight with his thumb-nail. He lit Reynolds's first, then his own.

A small yellow cur came in under the batwing doors. The men watched it in silence, smoking. It crossed the room, first sniffed at the curdled vomit in the corner, then began to eat it. Its stub of a tail wagged back and forth as it dined. Reynolds nodded toward the admonition not to argue about the cards you were dealt. “That mutt'd understand that, I'd say.”

“Not at all, not at all,” Jonas murmured. “Just a dog is all he is, a spew-eating dog. I heard a horse twenty minutes ago. First on the come, then on the go. Would it have been one of our hired watchmen?”

“You don't miss a trick, do you?”

“Don't pay to, no, don't pay a bit. Was it?”

“Yep. Fellow who works for one of the small freeholders out along the east end of the Drop. He seen 'em come in. Three. Young. Babies.” Reynolds pronounced this last as they did in the Northrd Baronies: bab bies. “Nothing to worry of.”

“Now, now, we don't know that,” Jonas said, his quavering voice making him sound like a tempering old man. “Young eyes see far, they say.”

“Young eyes see what they're pointed at,” Reynolds replied. The dog trotted past him, licking its chops. Reynolds helped it on its way with a kick the cur was not quite quick enough to avoid. It scuttled back out under the batwings, uttering little yike-yike sounds that made Barkie snort thickly from his place of rest beneath the piano bench. His hand opened and the playing card dropped out of it.

“Maybe so, maybe not,” Jonas said. “In any case, they're Affiliation brats, sons of big estates off in the Green Somewhere, if Rimer and that fool he works for have it straight. That means we'll be very, very careful. Walk easy, like on eggshells. Why, we've got three more months here, at least! And those young'uns may be here that whole time, counting this 'n counting that and putting it all down on paper. Folks counting things ain't good for us right now. Not for men in the responsible business.”

“Come on! It's make-work, that's all—a slap on the wrist for getting in trouble. Their dad dies—”

“Their dad dies know Farson's in charge of the whole Southwest Edge now, and sitting on high ground. The brats may know the same—that playtime's purt' near over for the Affiliation and all its puke-some royalty. Can't know, Clay. With folks like these, you can't know which way they'll jump. At the very least, they may try to do a half-decent job just to try and get on the good side o' their parents again. We'll know better when we see em, but I tell you one thing: we can't just put guns to the backs of their heads and drop them like broke-leg bosses if they see the wrong thing. Their dad dies might be mad at em alive, but I think they'd be very tender of em dead—that's just the way dad dies are. We'll want to be trig, Clay; as trig as we can be.”

“Better leave De-pape out of it, then.”

“Roy will be fine,” Jonas said in his quavering voice. He dropped the stub of his cigarette to the floor and crushed it under his bootheel. He looked up at The

Romp's glassy eyes and squinted, as if calculating. "To night, your friend said? They arrived tonight, these brats?"

"Yep."

"They'll be in to see Avery tomorrow, then, I reckon." This was Herk Avery, High Sheriff of Mejis and Chief Constable of Ham'bry, a large man who was as loose as a trundle of laundry.

"Reckon so," Clay Reynolds said. "To present their papers 'n all."

"Yes, sir, yes indeedly. How-d'you-do, and how-d'you-do, and how-d'you-do again."

Reynolds said nothing. He often didn't understand Jonas, but he had been riding with him since the age of fifteen, and knew it was usually better not to ask for enlightenment. If you did, you were apt to end up listening to a cult-man's lecture about the other worlds the old buzzard had visited through what he called "the special doors." As far as Reynolds was concerned, there were enough ordinary doors in the world to keep him busy.

"I'll speak to Rimer and Rimer'll talk to the Sheriff about where they should stay," Jonas said. "I think the bunkhouse at the old Bar K ranch. You know where I mean?"

Reynolds did. In a Barony like Mejis, you got to know the few landmarks in a hurry. The Bar K was a deserted spread of land northwest of town, not too far from that weird squalling canyon. They burned at the mouth of the canyon every fall, and once, six or seven years ago, the wind had shifted and gone back wrong and burned most of the Bar K to the ground—barns, stables, the home place. It had spared the bunkhouse, however, and that would be a good spot for three ten der feet from the Inners. It was away from the Drop; it was also away from the oil patch.

"Ye like it, don't ye?" Jonas asked, putting on a hick Ham'bry accent. "Aye, ye like it very much, I can see ye do, my cully. Ye know what they say in Cres'sia? 'If ye'd steal the silver from the dining room, first put the dog in the pantry.'"

Reynolds nodded. It was good advice. "And those trucks? Those what-do-you-callums, tankers?"

"Fine where they are," Jonas said. "Not that we could move em now without attracting the wrong kind of attention, eh? You and Roy want to go out there and cover them with brush. Lay it on nice and thick. Day after tomorrow you'll do it."

"And where will you be while we're flexing our muscles out at Citgo?"

"By daylight? Preparing for dinner at Mayor's House, you clod—the dinner Thorin will be giving to introduce his guests from the Great World to the shit-picky society of the smaller one." Jonas began making another cigarette. He gazed up at The Romp rather than at what he was doing, and still spilled barely a scrap of tobacco. "A bath, a shave, a trim of these tangled old man's locks ... I might even wax my moustache, Clay, what do you say to that?"

"Don't strain yourself, El dred."

Jonas laughed, the sound shrill enough to make Barkie mutter and Pettie stir uneasily on her makeshift bar-top bed. "So Roy and I aren't invited to this fancy do." "You'll be invited, oh yes, you'll be invited very warmly," Jonas said, and

hand?ed Reynolds the fresh cigarette. He be?gan mak?ing an?oth?er for him?self. "I'll of?fer your ex?cus?es. I'll do you boys proud, count on me. Strong men may weep." "All so we can spend the day out there in the dust and stink, cov?er?ing those hulks. You're too kind, Jonas."

"I'll be ask?ing ques?tions, as well," Jonas said dream?ily. "Drift?ing here and there . . . look?ing spruce, smelling of baybe?mes . . . and ask?ing my lit?tle ques?tions. I've known folks in our line of trade who'll go to a fat, jol?ly fel?low to find out the gos?sip—a sa?loon-?keep?er or bar?tender, per?haps a liv?ery sta?ble own?er or one of the chub?by fel?lows who al?ways hangs about the jail or the court?house with his thumbs tucked in?to his vest pock ets. As for my?self. Clay, I find that a wom?an's best, and the nar?row?er the bet?ter—one with more nose than tits stick?ing off her. I look for one who don't paint her lips and keeps her hair scooped back against her head."

"You have some?one in mind?"

"Yar. Cordelia Del?ga?do's her name."

"Del?ga?do?"

"You know the name, it's on the lips of ev?ery?one in this town, I reck?on. Su?san Del?ga?do, our es?teemed May?or's soon-?to-?be gilly. Cor delia's her aun?tie. Now here's a fact of hu?man na?ture I've found: folk are more apt to talk to some?one like her, who plays them close, than they are to the lo?cal jol?ly types who'll buy you a drink. And that la?dy plays them close. I'm go?ing to slip in next to her at that din?ner, and I'm go?ing to com pli?ment her on the per?fume I doubt like hell she'll be wear?ing, and I'm go?ing to keep her wine?glass full. Now, how sounds that for a plan?"

"A plan for what? That's what I want to know."

"For the game of Cas?tles we may have to play," Jonas said, and all the light?ness dropped out of his voice. "We're to be?lieve that these boys have been sent here more as pun?ish?ment than to do any re?al job of work. It sounds plau?si?ble, too. I've known rakes in my time, and it sounds plau sible, in?deed. I be?lieve it each day un?til about three in the morn?ing, and then a lit?tle doubt sets in. And do you know what, Clay?"

Reynolds shook his head.

"I'm right to doubt. Just as I was right to go with Rimer to old man Thorin and con?vince him that Far?son's glass would be bet?ter with the witch-?wom?an, for the nonce. She'll keep it in a place where a gun?slinger couldn't find it, let alone a nosy lad who's yet to have his first piece of ar?se. These are strange times. A storm's com?ing. And when you know the wind is go?ing to blow, it's best to keep your gear bat?tened down."

He looked at the cigarette he had made. He had been danc?ing it along the backs of his knuck?les, as Reynolds had done ear?li?er. Jonas pushed back the fall of his hair and tucked the cigarette be?hind his ear.

"I don't want to smoke," he said, stand?ing up and stretch?ing. His back made small crack?ling sounds. "I'm crazy to smoke at this hour of the morn?ing. Too many cigarettes are apt to keep an old man like me awake."

He walked to?ward the stairs, squeez?ing Pet?tie's bare leg as he went by, al?so as Reynolds had done. At the foot of the stairs he looked back.

"I don't want to kill them. Things are delicate enough without that. I'll smell quite a little wrong on them and not lift a finger, no, not a single finger of my hand. But . . . I'd like to make them clear on their place in the great scheme of things."

"Give them a sore paw."

Jonas brightened. "Yessir, partner, maybe a sore paw's just what I'd like to give them. Make them think twice about tangleing with the Big Cof fin Hunters later on, when it matters. Make them swing wide around us when they see us in their road. Yessir, that's something to think about. It really is."

He started up the stairs, chuckling a little, his limp quite pronounced—it got worse late at night. It was a limp Roland's old teacher, Cort, might have recognized, for Cort had seen the blow which caused it. Cort's own father had dealt it with an ironwood club, breaking Elfred Jonas's leg in the yard behind the Great Hall of Gilead before taking the boy's weapon and sending him west, gunless, into exile.

Eventually, the man the boy had become had found a gun, of course; the exiles always did, if they looked hard enough. That such guns could never be quite the same as the big ones with the sandalwood grips might haunt them for the rest of their lives, but those who needed guns could still find them, even in this world. Reynolds watched until he was gone, then took his seat at Coral Thorin's desk, shuffled the cards, and continued the game which Jonas had left half-finished. Outside, the sun was coming up.

CHAPTER V

WELCOME TO TOWN

1

Two nights after arriving in the Barony of Mejis, Roland, Cuthbert, and Alain rode their mounts beneath an adobe arch with the words come in peace inscribed above it. Beyond was a cobblestone courtyard lit with torches. The resin which coated these had been doctored somehow so that the torches glowed different colors: green, orange-red, a kind of sputtery pink that made Roland think of fireworks. He could hear the sound of guttars, the murmur of voices, the laughter of women. The air was redolent of those smells which would always remind him of Mejis: sea-salt, oil, and pine.

"I don't know if I can do this," Alain muttered. He was a big boy with a mop of unruly blond hair spilling out from under his stockman's hat. He had cleaned up well—they all had—but Alain, no social butterfly under the best of circumstances, looked scared to death. Cuthbert was doing better, but Roland guessed his old friend's patience of insouciance didn't go very deep. If there was to be leading done here, he would have to do it.

"You'll be fine," he told Alain. "Just—"

"Oh, he looks fine," Cuthbert said with a nervous laugh as they crossed the courtyard. Beyond it was Mayor's House, a sprawling, many-winged adobe hacienda that seemed to spill light and laughter from every window. "White as a sheet, ugly as a—"

"Shut up," Roland said curtly, and the teasing smile tumbled off Cuthbert's face at once. Roland noted this, then turned to Alain again. "Just don't drink anything with

al?co?hol in it. You know what to say on that ac?count. Re?mem?ber the rest of our sto?ry, too. Smile. Be pleas?ant. Use what so?cial graces you have. Re?mem?ber how the Sher?iff fell all over him self to make us feel wel?come.”

Alain nod?ded at that, look?ing a lit?tle more con?fi?dent.

“In the mat?ter of so?cial graces,” Cuth?bert said, “they won’t have many them?selves, so we should all be a step ahead.”

Roland nod?ded, then saw that the bird’s skull was back on the horn of Cuth?bert’s sad?dle. “And get rid of that!”

Look?ing guilty, Cuth?bert stuffed “the look?out” hur?ried?ly in?to his sad?dle bag. Two men wear?ing white jack?ets, white pants, and san?dals were com ing for?ward, bow?ing and smil?ing.

“Keep your heads,” Roland said, low?er?ing his voice. “Both of you. Re?mem?ber why you’re here. And re?mem?ber the faces of your fa?thers.” He clapped Alain, who still looked doubt?ful, on the shoul?der. Then he turned to the hostlers. “Good?even, gents,” he said. “May your days be long up?on the earth.”

They both grinned, their teeth flash?ing in the ex?trav?agant torch?light. The old?er one bowed. “And your own as well, young mas?ters. Wel?come to May?or’s House.”

2

The High Sher?iff had wel?comed them the day be?fore ev?ery bit as hap?pi?ly as the hostlers.

So far ev?ery?one had greet?ed them hap?pi?ly, even the carters they had passed on their way in?to town, and that alone made Roland feel sus?pi cious and on his guard. He told him?self he was like?ly be?ing fool?ish—of course the lo?cals were friend?ly and help?ful, that was why they had been sent here, be?cause Mejis was both out-?of-the-?way and loy?al to the Af?fil?ia tion—and it prob?ably was fool?ish, but he thought it best to be on close watch, just the same. To be a tri?fle ner?vous. The three of them were lit?tle more than chil?dren, af?ter all, and if they fell in?to trou?ble here, it was apt to be as a re?sult of tak?ing things at face val?ue.

The com?bined Sher?iff’s of?fice and jail o’ Barony was on Hill Street, over?look?ing the bay. Roland didn’t know for sure, but guessed that few if any hun?gover drunks and wife-?beat?ers any?where else in Mid-?World woke up to such pic?turesque views: a line of many-?col?ored boathous?es to the south, the docks di?rect?ly be?low, with boys and old men line-?fish?ing while the wom?en mend?ed nets and sails; be?yond them, Ham?bry’s small fleet mov?ing back and forth on the sparkling blue wa?ter of the bay, set?ting their nets in the morn?ing, pulling them in the af?ter?noon.

Most build?ings on the High Street were adobe, but up here, over?look ing Ham?bry’s busi?ness sec?tion, they were as squat and bricky as any nar row lane in Gilead’s Old Quar?ter. Well kept, too, with wrought-?iron gates in front of most and tree-shad?ed paths. The roofs were or?ange tile, the shut?ters closed against the sum?mer sun. It was hard to be?lieve, rid?ing down this street with their hors?es’ hoofs clock?ing on the swept cob?bles, that the north?west?ern side of the Af?fil?ia?tion—the an?cient land of Eld, Arthur’s king?dom—could be on fire and in dan?ger of falling. The jail?house was just a larg?er ver?sion of the post of?fice and land of fice; a small?er ver?sion of the Town Gath?er?ing Hall. Ex?cept, of course, for the bars on the win?dows fac?ing down to?ward the small har?bor.

Sheriff Herk Avery was a big-bellied man in a lawman's khaiki pants and shirt. He must have been watching them approach through the spy hole in the center of the jail's iron-banded front door, because the door was thrown open before Roland could even reach for the turn-bell in the center. Sheriff Avery appeared on the stoop, his belily preceding him as a bailiff may precede My Lord Judge into court. His arms were thrown wide in the most amiable of greetings.

He bowed deeply to them (Cuthbert said later he was afraid the man might overbalance and go rolling down the steps; perhaps go rolling all the way down to the harbor) and wished them repeated goodmorns, tapping away at the base of his throat like a madman the whole while. His smile was so wide it looked as if it might cut his head clean in two. Three deputies with a distinctly farmerish look about them, dressed in khaiki like the Sheriff, crowded into the door behind Avery and gawked. That was what it was, all right, a gawk; there was just no other word for that sort of openly curious and totally unselfconscious stare.

Avery shook each boy by the hand, continuing to bow as he did so, and nothing Roland said could get him to stop until he was done. When he finally was, he showed them inside. The office was delightfully cool in spite of the beating midsummer sun. That was the advantage of brick, of course. It was big as well, and cleaner than any High Sheriff's office Roland had ever been in before . . . and he had been in at least half a dozen over the last three years, accompanying his father on several short trips and one longer patrol-swing.

There was a rolltop desk in the center, a notice-board to the right of the door (the same sheets of foolscap had been scribbled on over and over; paper was a rare commodity in Mid-World), and, in the far corner, two rifles in a padlocked case. These were such ancient blunderbusses that Roland wondered if there was ammunition for them. He wondered if they would fire, come to that. To the left of the gun-case, an open door gave on the jail itself—three cells on each side of a short corridor, and a smell of strong lye soap drifting out.

They've cleaned for our coming, Roland thought. He was amused, touched, and uneasy. Cleaned it as though we were a troop of Inner Barony horse—career soldiers who might want to stage a hard inspection instead of three lads serving punishment de tail.

But was such nervous care on the part of their hosts really so strange? They were from New Canaan, after all, and folk in this tucked-away corner of the world might well see them as a species of visiting royalty.

Sheriff Avery introduced his deputies. Roland shook hands with all of them, not trying to memorize their names. It was Cuthbert who took care of names, and it was a rare occasion when he dropped one. The third, a bald fellow with a monocle hanging around his neck on a ribbon, actually dropped to one knee before them.

"Don't do that, ye great idiot!" Avery cried, yanking him back up by the scruff of his neck. "What kind of a bumpkin will they think ye? Besides, you've embarrassed them, so ye have!"

"That's all right," Roland said (he was, in fact, very embarrassed, although trying not to show it). "We're really nothing at all special, you know—"

"Nothing special!" Avery said, laughing. His belily, Roland noticed, did not shake

as one might have expected it to do; it was harder than it looked. The same might be true of its owner. "Nothing special, he says! Five hundred mile or more from the In-World they've come, our first official visitors from the Affiliation since a gunslinger passed through on the Great Road four year ago, and yet he says they're nothing special! Would ye sit, my boys? I've got graf, which ye won't want so early in the day—perhaps not at all, given your ages (and if you'll forgive me for stating so bald the obvious fact of yer youth, for youth's not a thing to be ashamed of, so it's not, we were all young once), and I also have white iced tea, which I recommend most hearty, as Dave's wife makes it and she's a dab hand with most any potable."

Roland looked at Cuthbert and Alain, who nodded and smiled (and tried not to look all at sea), then back at Sheriff Avery. White tea would go down a treat in a dusty throat, he said.

One of the deputies went to fetch it, chairs were produced and set in a row at one side of Sheriff Avery's rolltop, and the business of the day commenced.

"You know who ye are and where ye hail from, and I know the same," Sheriff Avery said, sitting down in his own chair (it uttered a feeble groan beneath his bulk but held steady). "I can hear In-World in yer voices, but more important, I can see it in yer faces.

"Yet we hold to the old ways here in Ham-bry, sleepy and rural as we may be; aye, we hold to our course and remember the faces of our fathers as well's we can. So, although I'd not keep yer long from yer duties, and if ye'll forgive me for the impertinence, I'd like a look at any papers and documents of passage ye might just happen to've brought in to town with ye."

They just "happened" to have brought all of their papers in to town with them, as Roland was sure Sheriff Avery well knew they would. He went through them quite slowly for a man who'd promised not to hold them from their duties, tracing the well-folded sheets (the linen content so high that the documents were perhaps closer to cloth than paper) with one pudgy finger, his lips moving. Every now and then the finger would reverse as he reread a line. The two other deputies stood behind him, looking sagely down over his large shoulders. Roland wondered if either could actually read.

William Dearborn. Drover's son.

Richard Stockworth. Rancher's son.

Arthur Heath. Stockline breeder's son.

The identification document belonging to each was signed by an attester—James Reed (of Hemphill) in the case of Dearborn, Piet Raven-head (of Pen-nilton) in the case of Stockworth, Lucas Rivers (of Gilead) in the case of Heath. All in order, descriptions nicely matched. The papers were handed back with profuse thanks.

Roland next handed Avery a letter which he took from his wallet with some care.

Avery handed it in the same fashion, his eyes growing wide as he saw the frank at the bottom. "Pon my soul, boys! 'Twas a gunslinger wrote this!"

"Aye, so it was," Cuthbert agreed in a voice of wonder. Roland kicked his ankle—hard—without taking his respectful eyes from Avery's face.

The letter above the frank was from one Steven Deschain of Gilead, a gunslinger

(which was to say a knight, squire, peace-maker, and Baron . . . the last title having almost no meaning in the modern day, despite all John Farson's ranting) of the twenty-ninth generation descended from Arthur of Eld, on the side line of descent (the long-descended gel of one of Arthur's many gillies, in other words). To Mayor Hartwell Thorin, Chancellor Kimba Rimer, and High Sheriff Herkimer Avery, it sent greetings and recommended to their notice the three young men who delivered this document, Masters Dearborn, Stockworth, and Heath. These had been sent on special mission from the Affiliation to serve as counters of all matters which might serve the Affiliation in time of need (the word war was omitted from the document, but glowed between every line). Steven Deschain, on behalf of the Affiliation of Barones, exhorted Masters Thorin, Rimer, and Avery to afford the Affiliation's nominated counters every help in their service, and to be particularly careful in the enumerations of all live stock, all supplies of food, and all forms of transport. Dearborn, Stockworth, and Heath would be in Mejis for at least three months, Deschain wrote, possibly as long as a year. The document finished by inviting any or all of the addressed public officials to "write us word of these young men and their deportment, in all detail as you shall imagine of interest to us." And, it begged, "Do not stint in this matter, if you love us." Tell us if they behaved themselves, in other words. Tell us if they've learned their lesson.

The deputy with the monocle came back while the High Sheriff was perusing this document. He carried a tray loaded with four glasses of white tea and bent down with it like a butler. Roland murmured thanks and handed the glasses around. He took the last for himself, raised it to his lips, and saw Alain looking at him, his blue eyes bright in his stolid face.

Alain shook his glass slightly—just enough to make the ice tinkle—and Roland responded with the barest sliver of a nod. He had expected cool tea from a jug kept in a nearby springhouse, but there were actual chunks of ice in the glasses. Ice in high summer. It was interesting.

And the tea was, as promised, delicious.

Avery finished the letter and handed it back to Roland with the air of one passing on a holy relic. "Ye want to keep that safe about yer person, Will Dearborn—aye, very safe indeed!"

"Yes, sir." He tucked the letter and his identification back into his purse. His friends "Richard" and "Arthur" were doing the same.

"This is excellent white tea, sir," Alain said. "I've never had better."

"Aye," Avery said, sipping from his own glass. "'Tis the honey that makes it so fearsome. Eh, Dave?"

The deputy with the monocle smiled from his place by the notice-board. "I believe so, but Judy don't like to say. She had the recipe from her mother."

"Aye, we must remember the faces of our mothers, too, so we must." Sheriff Avery looked sentimental for a moment, but Roland had an idea that the face of his mother was the furthest thing from the big man's mind just then. He turned to Alain, and sentiment was replaced by a surprising shrewdness.

"Ye're wondering about the ice, Master Stockworth."

Alain start?ed. “Well, I...”

“Ye ex?pect?ed no such ameni?ty in a back?wa?ter like Ham?bry, I’ll war rant,” Av?ery said, and al?though there was a josh?ing qual?ity on top of his voice, Roland thought there was some?thing else en?tire?ly un?der?neath.

He doesn’t like us. He doesn’t like what he thinks of as our “city ways.” He hasn’t known us long enough to know what kind of ways we have, if any at all, but al?ready he doesn’t like them. He thinks we’re a trio of snot?noses; that we see him and ev?ery?one else here as coun?try bump?kins.

“Not just Ham?bry,” Alain said qui?et?ly. “Ice is as rare in the In?ner Arc these days as any?where else, Sher?iff Av?ery. When I grew up, I saw it most?ly as a spe?cial treat at birth?day par?ties and such.”

“There was al?ways ice on Glow?ing Day,” Cuth?bert put in. He spoke with very un-Cuth?ber?tian qui?et. “Ex?cept for the fire?works, that’s what we liked about it most.”

“Is that so, is that so,” Sher?iff Av?ery said in an amazed, won?ders-?will-?nev?er-?cease tone. Av?ery per?haps didn’t like them rid?ing in like this, didn’t like hav?ing to take up what he would prob?ably call “half the damn morn?ing” with them; he didn’t like their clothes, their fan?cy iden?ti?fi?ca?tion pa pers, their ac?cents, or their youth. Least of all their youth. Roland could un?der?stand all that, but won?dered if it was the whole sto?ry. If there was some?thing else go?ing on here, what was it?

“There’s a gas-?fired re?frig?er?ator and stove in the Town Gath?er?ing Hall,” Av?ery said. “Both work. There’s plen?ty of earth-?gas out at Cit?go— that’s the oil patch east of town. Yer passed it on yer way in, I wot.”

They nod?ded.

“Stove’s nob?but a cu?rios?ity these days—a his?to?ry les?son for the schoolchil?dren—but the re?frig?er?ator comes in handy, so it does.” Av?ery held up his glass and looked through the side. “ “Spe?cial?ly in sum?mer.”

He sipped some tea, smacked his lips, and smiled at Alain, “You see? No mys?tery.”

“I’m sur?prised you haven’t found use for the oil,” Roland said. “No gen?er?ators in town, Sher?iff?”

“Aye, there be four or five,” Av?ery said. “The biggest is out at Fran?cis Lengyll’s Rock?ing B ranch, and I re?call when it useter run. It’s HON?DA. Do ye ken?nit that name, boys? HON?DA?”

“I’ve seen it once or twice,” Roland said, “on old mo?tor-?driv?en bi?cy?cles.”

“Aye? In any case, none of the gen?er?ators will run on the oil from the Cit?go patch. Tis too thick. Tar?ry goo, is all. We have no re?finer?ies here.”

“I see,” Alain said. “In any case, ice in sum?mer’s a treat. How?ev?er it comes to the glass.” He let one of the chunks slip in?to his mouth, and crunched it be?tween his teeth.

Av?ery looked at him a mo?ment longer, as if to make sure the sub?ject was closed, then switched his gaze back to Roland. His fat face was once more ra?di?ant with his broad, un?trust?wor?thy smile.

“May?or Thorin has asked me to ex?tend ye his very best greet?ings, and con?vey his re?grets for not bein here to?day—very busy is our Lord May?or, very busy in?deed. But he’s laid on a din?ner-?par?ty at May?or’s House to mor?row evening—sev?en o’ the

clock for most folk, eight for you young fellows ... so you can make a bit of an entrance, I imagine, add a touch o' drama, like. And I need not tell such as yourselves, who've probably attended more such parties than I've had hot dinners, that it would be best to arrive pretty much on the dot."

"Is it fancy-dress?" Cuthbert asked uneasily. "Because we've come a long way, almost four hundred wheels, and we didn't pack formal wear and sashes, none of us."

Avery was chuckling—more honestly this time, Roland thought, perhaps because he felt "Arthur" had displayed a streak of unsophistication and insecurity. "Nay, young master, Thorin understands ye've come to do a job—next door to working cowboys, ye be! 'Ware they don't have ye out dragging nets in the bay next!" From the corner, Dave—the deputy with the monocle—honked unexpectedly laughingly. Perhaps it was the sort of joke you had to be local to understand, Roland thought.

"Wear the best ye have, and ye'll be fine. There'll be no one there in sashes, in any case—that's not how things are done in Hambray." Again

Roland was struck by the man's constant smiling denigration of his town and Barony ... and the resentment of the outsiders which lay just beneath it.

"In any case, ye'll find yourselves working more than playing tomorrow night, I imagine. Hart's invited all the large ranchers, stockliners, and live-stock owners from this part of the Barony ... not that there's so many, you understand, being as how Mejis is next door to desert once you get west o' the Drop. But everyone whose goods and chattel you've been sent to count will be there, and I think you'll find all of them loyal Affiliation men, ready and eager to help. There's Francis Lengyll of the Rocking B ... John Croydon of the Piano Ranch ... Henry Wertner, who's the Barony's stockliner as well as a horsebreeder in his own right ... Hash Renfrew, who owns the Lazy Susan, the biggest horse-ranch in Mejis (not that it's much by the standards you fellows are used to, I wot) ... and there'll be others, as well. Rimer'll introduce you, and get you about your business right smart."

Ronald nodded and turned to Cuthbert. "You'll want to be on your mettle tomorrow night."

Cuthbert nodded. "Don't fear me, Will, I'll note em all."

Avery sipped more tea, eyeing them over his glass with a roguish expression so false it made Roland want to squirm.

"Most of em's got daughters of marriageable age, and they'll bring em. You boys want to look out."

Roland decided he'd had enough tea and hypocrisy for one morning. He nodded, emptied his glass, smiled (hoping his looked more genuine than Avery's now looked to him), and got to his feet. Cuthbert and Alain took the cue and did likewise.

"Thank you for the tea, and for the welcome," Roland said. "Please send a message to Mayor Thorin, thanking him for his kindness and telling him that he'll see us tomorrow, at eight o' the clock, prompt."

"Aye. So I will."

Roland then turned to Dave. That worry was so surprised to be noticed again

that he re?coiled, al?most bump?ing his head on the no?vice-?board. “And please thank your wife for the tea. It was won?der?ful.”

“I will. Thankee-?sai.”

They went back out?side, High Sher?iff Av?ery herd?ing them along like a ge?nial, over?weight sheep?dog.

“As to where you’ll lo?cate—” he be?gan as they de?scend?ed the steps and start?ed down the walk. As soon as they hit the sun?shine, he be?gan to sweat.

“Oh, land, I for?got to ask you about that,” Roland said, knock?ing the heel of his hand against his fore?head. “We’ve camped out on that long slope, lots of hors?es as you go down the turf, I’m sure you know where I mean—”

“The Drop, aye.”

“—but with?out per?mis?ion, be?cause we don’t yet know who to ask.”

“That’d be John Croy?don’s land, and I’m sure he wouldn’t be?grudge ye, but we mean to do ye bet?ter than that. There’s a spread north?west of here, the Bar K. Used to b’long to the Gar?ber fam?ily, but they gave it up and moved on af?ter a fire. Now it b’longs to the Horse?men’s As?so?cia tion—that’s a lit?tle lo?cal group of farm?ers and ranch?ers. I spoke to Fran?cis Lengyll about you fel?lows—he’s the H.A. pres?ident just cur?rent—and he said ‘We’ll put em out to the old Gar?ber place, why not?’ ”

“Why not?” Cuth?bert agreed in a gen?tle, mus?ing voice. Roland shot him a sharp glance, but Cuth?bert was look?ing down at the har?bor, where the small fish?ing boats skit?tered to and fro like wa?ter?bugs.

“Aye, just what I said, ‘Why not, in?deed?’ I said. The home place burned to a cin?der, but the bunkhouse still stands; so does the sta?ble and the cook-?shack next door to it. On May?or Thorin’s or?ders, I’ve tak?en the lib?er?ty of stock?ing the larder and hav?ing the bunkhouse swept out and spruced up a lit?tle. Ye may see the oc?ca?sion?al bug, but noth?ing that’ll bite or sting . . . and no snakes, un?less there’s a few un?der the floor, and if there are, let em stay there’s what I say. Hey, boys? Let em stay there!”

“Let em stay there, right un?der the floor where they’re hap?py,” Cuth bert agreed, still gaz?ing down at the har?bor with his arms fold?ed over his chest.

Av?ery gave him a brief, un?cer?tain glance, his smile flick?er?ing a bit at the com?ers. Then he turned back to Roland, and the smile shone out strong?ly once more.

“There’s no holes in the roof, lad, and if it rains, ye’ll be dry. What think ye of that? Does it sound well to ye?”

“Bet?ter than we de?serve. I think that you’ve been very ef?fi?cient and May?or Thorin’s been far too kind.” And he did think that. The ques?tion was why. “But we ap?pre?ci?ate his thought?ful?ness. Don’t we, boys?”

Cuth?bert and Alain made vig?or?ous as?sent.

“And we ac?cept with thanks.”

Av?ery nod?ded. “I’ll tell him. Go safe?ly, boys.”

They had reached the hitch?ing rail. Av?ery once more shook hands all around, this time sav?ing his keen?est looks for their hors?es.

“Un?til to?mor?row night, then, young gents?”

“To?mor?row night,” Roland agreed.

“Will ye be able to find the Bar K on your own, do yer think?”

Again Roland was struck by the man's unspoken contempt and unconscious condemnation. Yet perhaps it was to the good. If the High Sheriff thought they were stupid, who knew what might come of it?

"We'll find it," Cuthbert said, mounting up. Avery was looking suspiciously at the rook's skull on the horn of Cuthbert's saddle. Cuthbert saw him looking, but for once managed to keep his mouth shut. Roland was both amazed and pleased by this unexpected reticence. "Fare you well, Sheriff."

"And you, boy."

He stood there by the hitching post, a large man in a khaki shirt with sweat-stains around the armpits and black boots that looked too shiny for a working sheriff's feet. And where's the horse that could support him through a day of range-riding? Roland thought. I'd like to see the cut of that Cayuse.

Avery waved to them as they went. The other deputies came down the walk, Deputy Dave in the forefront. They waved, too.

3

The moment the Affiliation brats mounted on their fathers' expensive horse flesh were around the corner and headed downhill to the High Street, the sheriff and the deputies stopped waving. Avery turned to Dave Hollis, whose expression of slightly stupid awe had been replaced by one marginally more intelligent.

"What think ye, Dave?"

Dave lifted his monocle to his mouth and began to nibble nervously at its brass edging, a habit about which Sheriff Avery had long since ceased to nag him. Even Dave's wife, Judy, had given up on that score, and Judy Hollis—Judy Wertner that was—was a fair engine when it came to getting her own way.

"Soft," Dave said. "Soft as eggs just dropped out of a chicken's ass."

"Mayhap," Avery said, putting his thumbs in his belt and rocking enormously back and forth, "but the one did most of the talking, him in the flathead hat, he doesn't think he's soft."

"Don't matter what he thinks," Dave said, still nibbling at his eye glass. "He's in Ham-bry, now. He may have to change his way of thinking to our'n."

Behind him, the other deputies laughed. Even Avery smiled. They would leave the rich boys alone if the rich boys left them alone—those were orders, straight from Mayor's House—but Avery had to admit that he wouldn't mind a little dust-up with them, so he wouldn't. He would enjoy putting his boot into the balls of the one with that idiotic bird's skull on his saddle-horn—standing there and mocking him, he'd been, thinking all the while that Herk Avery was too country-dumb to know what he was up to—but the thing he'd really enjoy would be beating the cool look from the eyes of the boy in the flathead preacher's hat, seeing a hotter expression of fear rise up in them as Mr. Will Dearborn of Hemphill realized that New Canaan was far away and his rich father couldn't help him.

"Aye," he said, clapping Dave on the shoulder. "Mayhap he'll have to change his way of thinking." He smiled—one very different from any of those he had shown the Affiliation counters. "Mayhap they all will."

4

The three boys rode in single file until they were past the Travellers' Rest (a young

and obviously retarded man with kinky black hair looked up from scrubbing the brick stoop and waved to them; they waved back). Then they moved up abreast, Roland in the middle.

“What did you think of our new friend, the High Sheriff?” Roland asked.

“I have no opinion,” Cuthbert said brightly. “No, none at all. Opinion is politics, and politics is an evil which has caused many a fellow to be hung while he’s still young and pretty.” He leaned forward and tapped the rook’s skull with his knuckles. “The lookout didn’t care for him, though. I’m sorry to say that our faithful lookout thought Sheriff Avery a fat bag of guts without a trustworthy bone in his body.”

Roland turned to Alain. “And you, young Master Stockworth?”

Alain considered it for some time, as was his way, chewing a piece of grass he’d bent over sadly to pluck from his side of the road. At last he said: “If he came upon us burning in the street, I don’t think he’d piss on us to put us out.”

Cuthbert laughed heartily at that. “And you, Will? How do you say, dear captain?”

“He doesn’t interest me much ... but one thing he said does. Given that the horse-meadow they call the Drop has to be at least thirty wheels long and runs five or more to the dusty desert, how do you suppose Sheriff Avery knew we were on the

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part of it that belongs to Croydon's Piano Ranch?"

They looked at him, first with surprise, then speculation. After a moment Cuthbert leaned forward and rapped once more on the rook's skull. "We're being watched, and you never reported it? No supper for you, sir, and it'll be the stockade the next time it happens!"

But before they had gone much farther, Roland's thoughts of Sheriff Avery gave way to more pleasant ones of Susan Delgado. He would see her the following night, of that he was sure. He wondered if her hair would be down.

He couldn't wait to find out.

5

Now here they were, at Mayor's House. Let the game begin, Roland thought, not clear on what that meant even as the phrase went through his mind, surely not thinking of Castles . . . not then.

The hostlers led their mounts away, and for a moment the three of them stood at the foot of the steps—huddled, almost, as horses do in unfriendly weather—their beardless faces washed by the light of the torches. From inside, the guitars played and voices were raised in a fresh eddy of laughter.

"Do we knock?" Cuthbert asked. "Or just open and march in?"

Roland was spared answering. The main door of the had was thrown open and two women stepped out, both wearing long white-colored dresses that reminded all three boys of the dresses stockmen's wives wore in their own part of the world. Their hair was caught back in snoods that sparkled with some bright diamondy stuff in the light of the torches.

The plumper of the two stepped forward, smiling, and dropped them a deep curtsey. Her earrings, which looked like square-cut fireballs, flashed and bobbed. "You are the young men from the Affiliation, so you are, and welcome you are, as well. Good-even, sirs, and may your days be long upon the earth!"

They bowed in unison, boots forward, and thanked her in an untended chorus that made her laugh and clap her hands. The tall woman beside her offered them a smile as spare as her frame.

"I am Olive Thorin," the plump woman said, "the Mayor's wife. This is my sister-in-law, Coral."

Coral Thorin, still with that narrow smile (it barely creased her lips and touched her eyes not at all), dipped them a token curtsey. Roland, Cuthbert, and Alain bowed again over their outstretched legs.

"I welcome you to Seafront," Olive Thorin said, her dignity lessened and made pleasant by her artless smile, her obvious dazzlement at the appearance of her young visitors from In-World. "Come to our house with joy. I say so with all my heart, so I do."

"And so we will, madam," Roland said, "for your greeting has made us joyful." He took her hand, and, with no calculation whatever, raised it to his lips and kissed it. Her delighted laughter made him smile. He liked Olive Thorin on sight, and it was perhaps well he met someone of that sort early on, for, with the problematics exception of Susan Delgado, he met no one else he liked, no one else he trusted,

all that night.

6

It was warm enough even with the seabreeze, and the cloak- and coat-?col?lec?tor in the foy?er looked as though he'd had lit?tle or no cus?tom. Roland wasn't en?tire?ly sur?prised to see that it was Deputy Dave, his re main?ing bits of hair slicked back with some sort of gleam?ing grease and his mon?ocle now ly?ing on the snow-?white breast of a house?man's jack?et. Roland gave him a nod. Dave, his hands clasped be?hind his back, re?turned it.

Two men—Sher?iff Av?ery and an el?der?ly gent as gaunt as Old Doc?tor Death in a car?toon—came to?ward them. Be?yond, through a pair of dou?ble doors now open wide, a whole room?ful of peo?ple stood about with crys?tal punch-?cups in their hands, talk?ing and tak?ing lit?tle bits of food from the trays which were cir?cu?lat?ing. Roland had time for just one nar?row-?eyed glance to?ward Cuth?bert:

Ev?ery?thing. Ev?ery name, ev?ery face . . . ev?ery nu?ance. Es?pe?cial?ly those. Cuth?bert raised an eye?brow—his dis?creet ver?sion of a nod—and then Roland was pulled, willy-?nil?ly, in?to the evening, his first re?al evening of ser?vice as a work?ing gun?slinger. And he had rarely worked hard?er.

Old Doc?tor Death turned out to be Kim?ba Rimer, Thorin's Chan?cel?lor and Min?is?ter of In?ven?to?ry (Roland sus?pect?ed the ti?tle had been made up spe?cial for their vis?it). He was eas?ily five inch?es taller than Roland, who was con?sidered tall in Gilead, and his skin was pale as can?dle?wax. Not un?healthy-?look?ing; just pale. Wings of iron-?gray hair float?ed away from ei?ther side of his head, gos?samer as cob?webs. The top of his skull was com?plete?ly bald. Bal?anced on his whelk of a nose was a pince-?nez.

"My boys!" he said, when the in?tro?duc?tions had been made. He had the smooth, sad?ly sin?cere voice of a politi?cian or an un?der?tak?er. "Wel?come to Mejis! To Ham?bry! And to Seafront, our hum?ble May?or's House!"

"If this is hum?ble, I should won?der at the palace your folk might build," Roland said. It was a mild enough re?mark, more pleas?antry than wit?ti?cism (he or?di?nar?ily left the wit to Bert), but Chan?cel?lor Rimer laughed hard. So did Sher?iff Av?ery.

"Come, boys!" Rimer said, when he ap?par?ent?ly felt he had ex?pressed enough amuse?ment. "The May?or awaits you with im?pa?tience, I'm sure."

"Aye," said a timid voice from be?hind them. The skin?ny sis?ter-?in-?law, Coral, had dis?ap?peared, but Olive Thorin was still there, look?ing up at the new?com?ers with her hands deco?rous?ly clasped be?fore that area of her body which might once have been her waist. She was still smil?ing her hope?ful, pleas?ant smile. "Very ea?ger to meet you, Hart is, very ea?ger, in deed. Shall I con?duct them, Kim?ba, or—"

"Nay, nay, you mustn't trou?ble your?self with so many oth?er guests to at?tend," Rimer said.

"I sup?pose you're right." She curt?seyed to Roland and his com?pan ions a fi?nal time, and al?though she still smiled and al?though the smile looked com?plete?ly gen?uine to Roland, he thought: She's un?hap?py about some?thing, all the same. Des?per?ate?ly so, I think.

"Gen?tle?men?" Rimer asked. The teeth in his smile were al?most dis con?cert?ing?ly huge. "Will ye come?"

He led them past the grinning Sheriff and into the reception hall.

7

Roland was hardly overwhelmed by it; he had, after all, been in the Great Hall of Gilead—the Hall of the Grandfathers, it was sometimes called—and had even peeped down on the great party which was held there each year, the so-called Dance of Easterling, which marked the end of Wide Earth and the advent of Sowing. There were five chandeliers in the Great Hall instead of just one, and lit with electric bulbs rather than oil lamps. The dress of the partygoers (many of them expensive young men and women who had never done a hand's turn of work in their lives, a fact of which John Farson spoke at every opportunity) had been richer, the music had been fuller, the company of older and nobler lines which grew closer and closer together as they stretched back toward Arthur Eld, he of the white horse and unifying sword.

Yet there was life here, and plenty of it. There was a robustness that had been missing in Gilead, and not just at Easterling, either. The texture he felt as he stepped into the Mayor's House reception room was the sort of thing, Roland reflected, that you didn't entirely miss when it was gone, because it slipped away quietly and painlessly. Like blood from a vein cut in a tub filled with hot water. The room—almost but not quite grand enough to be a hall—was circular, its paneled walls decorated by paintings (most quite bad) of previous Mayors. On a raised stand to the right of the doors leading into the dining area, four grinning guitarists in tattered jackets and sombreros were playing something that sounded like a waltz with pepper on it. In the center of the floor was a table supporting two cut-glass punchbowls, one vast and grand, the other smaller and plainer. The white-jacketed fellow in charge of the dipping-out operations was another of Avery's deputies.

Contrary to what the High Sheriff had told them the day before, several of the men were wearing sashes of various colors, but Roland didn't feel too out of place in his white silk shirt, black string tie, and one pair of stovepipe dress trousers. For every man wearing a sash, he saw three wearing the sort of dowdy, box-tailed coats that he associated with stock men at church, and he saw several others (younger men, for the most part) who weren't wearing coats at all. Some of the women wore jewelry (though nothing so expensive as sai Thorin's fire-earrings), and few looked as if they'd missed many meals, but they all wore clothes Roland recognized: the long, round-collared dresses, usually with the lace fringe of a colored underskirt showing below the hem, the dark shoes with low heels, the snoods (most sparkling with gem-dust, as those of Olive and Coral Thorin had been).

And then he saw one who was very different.

It was Susan Delgado, of course, shimmering and almost too beautiful to look at in a blue silk dress with a high waist and a square-cut bodice which showed the tops of her breasts. Around her neck was a sapphire pendant that made Olive Thorin's earrings look like paste. She stood next to a man wearing a sash the color of coals in a hot wood-fire. That deep orange-red was the Barony's color, and Roland supposed that the man was their host, but for the moment Roland barely

saw him. His eye was held by Susan Delgaudo: the blue dress, the tanned skin, the triangles of color, too pale and perfect to be makeup, which ran lightly up her cheeks; most of all her hair, which was unbound tonight and fell to her waist like a shimmer of palest silk. He wanted her, suddenly and completely, with a desperate depth of feeling that felt like sickness. Everything he was and everything he had come for, it seemed, was secondary to her.

She turned a little, then, and spied him. Her eyes (they were gray, he saw) widened the tiniest bit. He thought that the color in her cheeks deepened a little. Her lips—lips that had touched his as they stood on a dark road, he thought with wonder—parted a little. Then the man standing next to Thorin (also tall, also skinny, with a mustache and long white hair lying on the dark shoulders of his coat) said something, and she turned back to him. A moment later the group around Thorin was laughing, Susan included. The man with the white hair didn't join them, but smiled thinly.

Roland, hoping his face did not give away the fact that his heart was pounding like a hammer, was led directly to this group, which stood close to the punchbowls. Distantly, he could feel Rimer's bony confederation of fingers clamped to his arm above the elbow. More clearly he could smell mingled perfumes, the oil from the lamps on the walls, the aroma of the ocean. And thought, for no reason at all, Oh, I am dying. I am dying.

Take hold of yourself, Roland of Gilead. Stop this foolishness, for your father's sake. Take hold!

He tried ... to some degree succeeded. ... and knew he would be lost the next time she looked at him. It was her eyes. The other night, in the dark, he hadn't been able to see those fog-colored eyes. I didn't know how lucky I was, he thought wryly.

"May Thorin?" Rimer asked. "May I present our guests from the Inner Baronies?"

Thorin turned away from the man with the long white hair and the woman standing next to him, his face brightening. He was shorter than his Chancellor but just as thin, and his build was peculiar: a short and narrow-shouldered upper body over impossibly long and skinny legs. He looked, Roland thought, like the sort of bird you should glimpse in a marsh at dawn, bobbing for its breakfast.

"Aye, you may!" he cried in a strong, high voice. "Indeed you may, we've been waiting with impatience, great impatience, for this moment! Well met we are, very well met! Welcome, sirs! May your evening in this house of which I am the fleeting proprietor be happy, and may your days be long upon the earth!"

Roland took the bony outstretched hand, heard the knuckles crack beneath his grip, looked for an expression of discomfort on the Mayor's face, and was relieved to see none. He bowed low over his outstretched leg.

"William Dearborn, Mayor Thorin, at your service. Thank you for your welcome, and may your own days be long upon the earth."

"Arthur Heath" made his manners next, then "Richard Stockworth." Thorin's smile widened at each deep bow. Rimer did his best to beam, but looked unused to it.

The man with the long white hair took a glass of punch, passed it to his female companion, and continued to smile thinly. Roland was aware that everyone in the

room—the guests numbered perhaps fifty in all—was looking at them, but what he felt most upon his skin, beating like a soft wing, was her regard. He could see the blue silk of her dress from the side of one eye, but did not dare look at her more directly.

“Was your trip difficult?” Thorin was asking. “Did you have adventures and experience perils? We would hear all the details at dinner, so we would, for we have few guests from the Inner Arc these days.” His eager, slightly fatuous smile faded; his tufted brows drew together. “Did you encounter patrols of Farson?”

“No, Excelsency,” Roland said. “We—”

“Nay, lad, nay—no Excelsency, I won’t have it, and the fisherfolk and hoss-drovers I serve wouldn’t, even if I would. Just Mayor Thorin, if you please.”

“Thank you. We saw many strange things on our journey, Mayor Thorin, but no Good Men.”

“Good Men!” Rimer jerked out, and his upper lip lifted in a smile which made him look doglike. “Good Men, indeed!”

“We would hear it all, every word,” Thorin said. “But before I forget my manners in my eagerness, young gentlemen, let me introduce you to these close around me. Kimba you’ve met; this formidable fellow to my left is Eldred Jonas, chief of my newly installed security staff.” Thorin’s smile looked momentarily embarrassed. “I’m not convinced that I need extra security, Sheriff Avery’s always been quite enough to keep the peace in our corner of the world, but Kimba insists. And when Kimba insists, the Mayor must bow.”

“Very wise, sir,” Rimer said, and bowed himself. They all laughed, save for Jonas, who simply held on to his narrow smile.

Jonas nodded. “Pleased, gents, I’m sure.” The voice was a reedy quaver. He then wished them long days upon the earth, all three, coming to Roland last in his round of handshaking. His grip was dry and firm, utterly untouched by the tremor in his voice. And now Roland noticed the queer blue shape tattooed on the back of the man’s right hand, in the webbing between thumb and first finger. It looked like a coffin.

“Long days, pleasant nights,” Roland said with hardly a thought. It was a greeting from his childhood, and it was only later that he would realize it was one more apt to be associated with Gilead than with any such rural place as Hemphill. Just a small slip, but he was beginning to believe that their margin for such slips might be a good deal less than his father had thought when he had sent Roland here to get him out of Marten’s way.

“And to you,” Jonas said. His bright eyes measured Roland with a thoroughness that was close to insolence, still holding his hand. Then he released it and stepped back.

“Cordelia Delgado,” Mayor Thorin said, next bowing to the woman who had been speaking to Jonas. As Roland also bowed in her direction, he saw the familiar resemblance . . . except that what looked generous and lovely on Susan’s face looked pinched and folded on the face before him now. Not the girl’s mother; Roland guessed that Cordelia Delgado was a bit too young for that.

“And our special friend, Miss Susan Delgado,” Thorin finished, sounding

flustered (Roland supposed she would have that effect on any man, even an old one like the Mayor). Thorin urged her forward, bobbing his head and grinning, one of his knuckle-choked hands pressed against the small of her back, and Roland felt an instant of poisonous jealousy. Ridiculous, given this man's age and his plump, pleasant wife, but it was there, all right, and it was sharp. Sharp as a bee's ass, Cort would have said.

Then her face tilted up to his, and he was looking in to her eyes again.

He had heard of drowning in a woman's eyes in some poem or story, and thought it ridiculous. He still thought it ridiculous, but understood it was perfectly possible, nonetheless. And she knew it. He saw concern in her eyes, perhaps even fear.

Promise me that if we meet at Mayor's House, we meet for the first time.

The memory of those words had a sobering, clarifying effect, and seemed to widen his vision a little. Enough for him to be aware that the woman beside Jonas, the one who shared some of Susan's features, was looking at the girl with a mixture of curiosity and alarm.

He bowed low, but did little more than touch her ringless outstretched hand. Even so, he felt something like a spark jump between their fingers. From the momentary widening of those eyes, he thought that she felt it, too.

"Pleased to meet you, sai," he said. His attempt to be casual sounded tinny and false in his own ears. Still, he was begun, it felt like the whole world was watching him (them), and there was nothing to do but go on with it. He tapped his throat three times. "May your days be long—"

"Aye, and yours, Mr. Dearborn. Thankee-sai."

She turned to Alain with a rapidity that was almost rude, then to Cuthbert, who bowed, tapped, then said gravely: "Might I recline briefly at your feet, miss? Your beauty has loosened my knees. I'm sure a few moments spent looking up at your profile from below, with the back of my head on these cool tiles, would put me right."

They all laughed at that—even Jonas and Miss Cordelia. Susan blushed prettily and slapped the back of Cuthbert's hand. For once Roland blessed his friend's relentless sense of foolery.

Another man joined the party by the punchbowl. This newcomer was blocky and blessedly unthin in his boxtail coat. His cheeks burned with high color that looked like windburn rather than drink, and his pale eyes lay in nets of wrinkles. A rancher; Roland had ridden often enough with his father to know the look.

"There'll be maids aplenty to meet you boys tonight," the newcomer said with a friendly enough smile. "Ye'll find y'selves drunk on perfume if ye're not careful. But I'd like my crack at you before you meet em. Fran Lengyll, at your service."

His grip was strong and quick; no bowing or other nonsense went with it.

"I own the Rocking B ... or it owns me, whichever way ye want to look at it. I'm also boss of the Horsemen's Association, at least until they fire me. The Bar K was my idea. Hope it's all right."

"It's perfect, sir," Alain said. "Clean and dry and room for twenty. Thank you. You've been too kind."

“Non?sense,” Lengyll said, look?ing pleased all the same as he knocked back a glass of punch. “We’re all in this to?geth?er, boy. John Far?son’s but one bad straw in a field of wrong-?head?ed?ness these days. The world’s moved on, folks say. Huh! So it has, aye, and a good piece down the road to hell is where it’s moved on to. Our job is to hold the hay out of the fur nace as well as we can, as long as we can. For the sake of our chil?dren even more than for that of our fa?thers.”

“Hear, hear,” May?or Thorin said in a voice that strove for the high ground of solem?ni?ty and fell with a splash in?to fa?tu?ity in?stead. Roland no ticed the scrawny old fel?low was grip?ping one of Su?san’s hands (she seemed al?most un?aware of it; was look?ing in?tent?ly at Lengyll in?stead), and sud?den?ly he un?der?stood: the May?or was ei?ther her un?cle or per?haps a cousin of some close de?gree. Lengyll ig?nored both, look?ing at the three new?com?ers in?stead, scru?ti?niz?ing each in turn and fin?ish?ing with Roland.

“Any?thing us in Mejis can do to help, lad, just ask—me, John Croy?don, Hash Ren?frew, Jake White, Hank Wert?ner, any or all. Ye’ll meet em tonight, aye, their wives and sons and daugh?ters as well, and ye need on?ly ask. We may be a good piece out from the hub of New Canaan here, but we’re strong for the Af?fil?ia?tion, all the same. Aye, very strong.”

“Well spo?ken,” Rimer said qui?et?ly.

“And now,” Lengyll said, “we’ll toast your ar?rival prop?er. And ye’ve had to wait too long al?ready for a dip of punch. It’s dry as dust ye must be.”

He turned to the punch?bowls and reached for the la?dle in the larg?er and more or?nate of the two, wav?ing off the at?ten?dant, clear?ly want?ing to hon?or them by serv?ing them him?self.

“Mr. Lengyll,” Roland said qui?et?ly. Yet there was a force of com mand in that voice; Fran Lengyll heard it and turned.

“The small?er bowl is soft punch, is it not?”

Lengyll con?sid?ered this, at first not un?der?stand?ing. Then his eye?brow went up. For the first time he seemed to con?sid?er Roland and the oth?ers not as liv?ing sym?bols of the Af?fil?ia?tion and the In?ner Ba?ronies, but as ac?tu?al hu?man be?ings. Young ones. On?ly boys, when you got right down to it.

“Aye?”

“Draw ours from that, if you’d be so kind.” He felt all eyes up?on them now. Her eyes par?tic?ular?ly. He kept his own firm?ly fixed on the ranch?er, but his pe?riph?er?al vi?ision was good, and he was very aware that Jonas’s thin smile had resur?faced. Jonas knew what this was about al ready. Roland sup?posed Thorin and Rimer did, as well. These coun?try mice knew a lot. More than they should, and he would need to think about that care?ful?ly lat?er. It was the least of his con?cerns at the cur?rent mo?ment, how?ev?er.

“We have for?got?ten the faces of our fa?thers in a mat?ter that has some bear?ing on our post?ing to Ham?bry.” Roland was un?com?fort?ably aware that he was now mak?ing a speech, like it or not. It wasn’t the whole room he was ad?dress?ing—thank the gods for lit?tle bless?ings—but the cir?cle of lis?ten?ers had grown well be?yond the orig?inal group. Yet there was noth?ing for it but to fin?ish; the boat was launched. “I needn’t go in?to de?tails—nor would you ex?pect them, I

know—but I should say that we promised not to indulge in spirits during our time here. As penance, you see.”

Her gaze. He could still feel it on his skin, it seemed.

For a moment there was complete quiet in the little group around the punchbowls, and then Lengyll said: “Your father would be proud to hear ye speak so frank, Will Dearborn—aye, so he would. And what boy worth his salt didn’t get up to a little noise ‘n wind from time to time?” He clapped Roland on the shoulder, and although the grip of his hand was firm and his smile looked genuine, his eyes were hard to read, only gleams of speculation deep in those beds of wrinkles. “In his place, may I be proud for him?”

“Yes,” Roland said, smiling in return. “And with my thanks.”

“And mine,” Cuthbert said.

“Mine as well,” Alain said quietly, taking the offered cup of soft punch and bowing to Lengyll.

Lengyll filled more cups and handed them rapidly around. Those already holding cups found them plucked away and replaced with fresh cups of the soft punch.

When each of the immediate group had one, Lengyll turned, apparently intending to offer the toast himself. Rimer tapped him on the shoulder, shook his head slightly, and cut his eyes toward the Mayor. That worthy was looking at them with his eyes rather popped and his jaw slightly dropped. To Roland he looked like an enthralled playgoer in a penny seat; all he needed was a lapful of orange-peel. Lengyll followed the Chancellor’s glance and then nodded.

Rimer next caught the eye of the guitar player standing at the center of the musicians. He stopped playing; so did the others. The guests looked that way, then back to the center of the room when Thorin began speaking. There was nothing ridiculous about his voice when he put it to use as he now did—it was carrying and pleasant.

“Ladies and gentlemen, my friends,” he said. “I would ask you to help me in welcoming three new friends—young men from the Inner Bar onies, fine young men who have dared great distances and many perils on behalf of the Affiliation, and in the service of order and peace.”

Susan Delgado set her punch-cup aside, retrieved her hand (with some difficulty) from her uncle’s grip, and began to clap. Others joined in. The applause which swept the room was brief but warm. Eldred Jonas did not, Roland noticed, put his cup aside to join in.

Thorin turned to Roland, smiling. He raised his cup. “May I set you on with a word, Will Dearborn?”

“Aye, so you may, and with thanks,” Roland said. There was laughter and fresh applause at his usage.

Thorin raised his cup even higher. Everyone else in the room followed suit; crystal gleamed like starpoints in the light of the chandelier.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I give you William Dearborn of Hemphill, Richard Stockworth of Pennington, and Arthur Heath of Gilead.”

Gasps and murmurs at that last, as if their Mayor had announced Arthur Heath of Heaven.

“Take of them well, give to them well, make their days in Mejis sweet, and their memories sweet. Help them in their work and to advance the causes which are so dear to all of us. May their days be long upon the earth. So says your Mayor.”

“SO SAY WE ALL!” they thundered back.

Thorin drank; the rest followed his example. There was fresh applause. Roland turned, helpless to stop himself, and found Susan’s eyes again at once. For a moment she looked at him fully, and in her frank gaze he saw that she was nearly as shaken by his presence as he was by hers. Then the older woman who looked like her bent and murmured something into her ear. Susan turned away, her face a composed mask . . . but he had seen her regard in her eyes. And thought again that what was done might be undone, and what was spoken might be unspoken.

8

As they passed into the dining hall, which had tonight been set with four long trestle tables (so close there was barely room to move between them), Cordelia tugged her niece’s hand, pulling her back from the Mayor and Jonas, who had fallen into conversation with Fran Lengyll.

“Why looked you at him so, miss?” Cordelia whispered furiously. The vertical line had appeared on her forehead. Tonight it looked as deep as a trench. “What ails thy pretty, stupid head?” Thy. Just that was enough to tell Susan that her aunt was in a fine rage.

“Looked at who? And how?” Her tone sounded right, she thought, but oh, her heart—

The hand over hers clamped down, hurting. “Play no fiddle with me, Miss Oh So Young and Pretty! Have ye ever seen that fine-turned row of pins before? Tell me the truth!”

“No, how could I? Aunt, you’re hurting me.”

Aunt Cord smiled balefully and clamped down harder. “Better a small hurt now than a large one later. Curb your impudence. And curb your flirtatious eyes.”

“Aunt, I don’t know what you—”

“I think you do,” Cordelia said grimly, pressing her niece close to the wood paneling to allow the guests to stream past them. When the rancher who owned the boathouse next to theirs said hello, Aunt Cord smiled pleasantly at him and wished him good-even before turning back to Susan.

“Mind me, miss—mind me well. If I saw yer cow’s eyes, ye may be sure that half the company saw. Well, what’s done is done, but it stops now. Your time for such child-maid games is over. Do you understand?”

Susan was silent, her face setting in those stubborn lines Cordelia hated most of all; it was an expression that always made her feel like slapping her headstrong niece until her nose bled and her great gray doe’s eyes gushed tears.

“Ye’ve made a vow and a contract. Partners have been passed, the weird-woman has been consulted, money has changed hands. And ye’ve given your promise. If that means nothing to such as yerself, girl, remember what it’d mean to yer father.”

Tears rose in Susan’s eyes again, and Cordelia was glad to see them. Her brother had been an improvident irritable, capable of producing on only this far too pretty woman-child . . . but he had his uses, even dead.

“Now promise ye’ll keep yer eyes to your?self, and that if ye see that boy com?ing, ye’ll swing wide—aye, wide’s you can—to stay out of his way.”

“I promise. Aunt,” Su?san whis?pered. “I do.”

Cordelia smiled. She was re?al?ly quite pret?ty when she smiled. “It’s well, then. Let’s go in. We’re be?ing looked at. Hold my arm, child!”

Su?san clasped her aunt’s pow?dered arm. They en?tered the room side by side, their dress?es rustling, the sap?phire pen?dant on the swell of Su san’s breast flash?ing, and many there were who re?marked up?on how alike they looked, and how well pleased poor old Pat Del?ga?do would have been with them.

9

Roland was seat?ed near the head of the cen?ter ta?ble, be?tween Hash Ren frew (a ranch?er even big?ger and block?ier than Lengyll) and Thorin’s rather mo?rose sis?ter, Coral. Ren?frew had been handy with the punch; now, as the soup was brought to ta?ble, he set about prov?ing him?self equal?ly adept with the ale.

He talked about the fish?ing trade (“not what it useter be, boy, al though it’s less mu?ties they pull up in their nets these days, ‘n that’s a blessin”), the farm?ing trade (“folks round here can grow most any?thin, long’s it’s corn or beans”), and fi?nal?ly about those things clear?ly clos?est to his heart: horsin, coursin, and ranchin. Those busi?ness?es went on as al ways, aye, so they did, al?though times had been hard in the grass-?and-?sea-?coast Ba?ronies for forty year or more.

Weren’t the blood?lines clar?ify?ing? Roland asked. For they had be?gun to do so where he came from.

Aye, Ren?frew agreed, ig?nor?ing his pota?to soup and gob?bling barbe cued beef-strips in?stead. These he scooped up with a bare hand and washed down with more ale. Aye, young mas?ter, blood?lines was clar?ify ing won?der?ful well, in?deed they were, three colts out of ev?ery five were thread?ed stock—in thor?ough?bred as well as com?mon lines, ken?nit—and the fourth could be kept and worked if not bred. On?ly one in five these days born with ex?tra legs or ex?tra eyes or its guts on the out?side, and that was good. But the birthrates were way down, so they were; the stal?lions had as much ram as ev?er in their ram?rods, it seemed, but not as much pow?der and ball.

“Beg?gin your par?don, ma’am,” Ren?frew said, lean?ing briefly across Roland to Coral Thorin. She smiled her thin smile (it re?mind?ed Roland of Jonas’s), trudged her spoon through her soup, and said noth?ing. Ren?frew emp?tied his ale-?cup, smacked his lips hearti?ly, and held the cup out again. As it was recharged, he turned back to Roland.

Things weren’t good, not as they once had been, but they could be worse. Would be worse, if that bug?ger Far?son had his way. (This time he didn’t both?er ex?cus?ing him?self to sai Thorin.) They all had to pull to geth?er, that was the tick?et—rich and poor, great and small, while pulling could still do some good. And then he sec?ond?ed Lengyll, telling Roland that what?ev?er he and his friends want?ed, what?ev?er they need?ed, they had on?ly to name it.

“In?for?ma?tion should be enough,” Roland said. “Num?bers of things.”

“Aye, can’t be a counter with?out num?bers,” Ren?frew agreed, and sprayed beery laugh?ter. On Roland’s left hand, Coral Thorin nib?bled a bit of green (the beef-

strips she had not so much as touched), smiled her narrow smile, and went on boat?ing with her spoon. Roland guessed there was nothing wrong with her ears, though, and that her brother might get a complete report of their conversation. Or possibly it would be Rimer to get the report. For, while it was too early to say for sure, Roland had an idea that Rimer might be the real force here. Along, perhaps, with sai Jonas.

“For instance,” Roland said, “how many riding horses do you think we may be able to report back to the Affiliation?”

“Tithe or to?tal?”

“To?tal.”

Renfrew put his cup down and appeared to calculate. As he did, Roland looked across the table and saw Lengyll and Henry Wertner, the Barony’s stock?liner, exchange a quick glance. They had heard. And he saw something else as well, when he returned his attention to his seat?mate: Hash Renfrew was drunk, but likely not as drunk as he wanted young Will Dearborn to believe.

“To?tal, ye say—not just what we owe the Affiliation, or might be able to send along in a pinch.”

“Yes.”

“Well, let’s see, young sai. Fran must run a hundred’n forty head; John Croydon’s got near a hundred. Hank Wertner’s got forty on his own hook, and must run sixty more out along the Drop for the Barony. Gov’mint hoss?flesh, Mr. Dearborn.”

Roland smiled. “I know it well. Split hoofs, low necks, no speed, bot tom?less bel?lies.”

Renfrew laughed hard at that, nod?ding . . . but Roland found himself wondering if the man was really amused. In Ham?bry, the waters on top and the waters down below seemed to run in different directions.

“As for myself, I’ve had a bad ten or twelve year—sand-?eye, brain fever, cab?bards. At one time there was two hundred head of running horses out there on the Drop with the Lazy Susan brand on em; now there can’t be more than eighty.”

Roland nodded. “So we’re speaking of four hundred and twenty head.”

“Oh, more’n that,” Renfrew said with a laugh. He went to pick up his ale-?cup, struck it with the side of one work- and weather-?red?dened hand, knocked it over, cursed, picked it up, then cursed the ale?boy who came slow to re?fill it.

“More than that?” Roland prompted, when Renfrew was finally cocked and locked and ready to resume action.

“Ye have to remember, Mr. Dearborn, that this is hoss-?coun?try more than it’s fisher-?coun?try. We josh each other, we and the fish?ers, but there’s many a scale-scrap?er got a nag put away behind his house, or in the Barony stables if they have no roof of their own to keep the rain off a boss’s head. ‘Twas her poor da useter keep the Barony stables.”

Renfrew nodded toward Susan, who was seated across and three seats up from Roland himself—just a table’s turn from the Mayor, who was, of course, seated at the head. Roland found her place?ment there passing peculiar, especially given the fact that the Mayor’s mis?sus had been seated almost all the way at the far end of the table, with Cuthbert on one side of her and some ranch?er to whom they had not

yet been introduced on her other.

Roland supposed an old fellow like Thorin might like to have a pretty young relation near at hand to help draw attention to him, or to cheer up his own eye, but it still seemed odd. Almost an insult to one's wife. If he was tired of her conversation, why not put her at the head of another table?

They have their own customs, that's all, and the customs of the country aren't your concern. This man's crazy horse-count is your concern.

"How many other running horses, would you say?" he asked Renfrew. "In all?" Renfrew gazed at him shrewdly. "An honest answer'll not come back to haunt me, will it, sonny? I'm an Affiliation man—so I am, Affiliation to the core, they'll carve Excalibur on my gravehead, like as not—but I'd not see Hambray and Mejis stripped of all its treasure."

"That won't happen, sai. How could we force you to give up what you don't want to in any case? Such forces as we have are all committed in the north and west, against the Good Man."

Renfrew considered this, then nodded.

"And may I not be Will to you?"

Renfrew brightened, nodded, and offered his hand a second time. He grinned broadly when Roland this time shook it in both of his, the over-and-under grip preferred by drovers and cowboys.

"These're bad times we live in, Will, and they've bred bad manners. I'd guess there are probably another hundred and fifty head of horse in and about Mejis. Good ones is what I mean."

"Big-hat stock."

Renfrew nodded, clapped Roland on the back, ingested a goodly quaff of ale. "Big-hats, aye."

From the top of their table there came a burst of laughter. Jonas had apparently said something funny. Susan laughed without reservation, her head tilted back and her hands clasped before the sapphire pendant. Cordelia, who sat with the girl on her left and Jonas on her right, was also laughing. Thorin was absolutely convulsed, rocking back and forth in his chair, wiping his eyes with a napkin.

"Yon's a lovely girl," Renfrew said. He spoke almost reverently. Roland could not quite swear that a small sound—a womanly hmmpf, perhaps—had come from his other side. He glanced in that direction and saw sai Thorin still sporting with her soup. He looked back toward the head of the table.

"Is the Mayor her uncle, or perhaps her cousin?" Roland asked.

What happened next had a heightened clarity in his memory, as if someone had turned up all the colors and sounds of the world. The velvet swags behind Susan suddenly seemed a brighter red; the caw of laughter which came from Coral Thorin was the sound of a breaking branch. It was surely loud enough to make everyone in the vicinity stop their conversations and look at her, Roland thought. . . except onlly Renfrew and the two ranchers across the table did.

"Her uncle!" It was her first conversation of the evening. "Her uncle, that's good. Eh, Rennie?"

Renfrew said nothing, onlly pushed his ale-cup away and finally began to eat his

soup.

"I'm surprised at ye, young man, so I am. Ye may be from the In-World, but oh goodness, whoever tended to your education of the real world—the one outside of books 'n maps—stopped a mite short, I'd say. She's his—" And then a word so thick with dialect that Roland had no idea what it was. Seefin, it sounded, or perhaps sheevin.

"I beg pardon?" He was smiling, but the smile felt cold and false on his mouth.

There was a heaviness in his belly, as if the punch and the soup and the single beef-strip he had eaten for politeness' sake had all lumped together in his stomach. Do you serve? he'd asked her, meaning did she serve at table. Maybe she did serve, but likely she did it in a room rather more private than this. Suddenly he wanted to hear no more; had not the slightest interest in the meaning of the word the Mayor's sister had used.

Another burst of laughter rocked the top of the table. Susan laughed with her head back, her cheeks glowing, her eyes sparkling. One strap of her dress had slipped down her arm, disclosing the tender hollow of her shoulder. As he watched, his heart full of fear and longing, she brushed it absently back into place with the palm of her hand.

"It means 'quiet little woman,' " Renfrew said, clearly uncomfortable. "It's an old term, not used much these days—"

"Stop it, Rennie," said Coral Thorin. Then, to Roland: "He's just an old cowboy, and can't quit shoveling horseshit even when he's away from his beloved nags. Sheevin means side-wife. In the time of my great-grandmother, it meant whore . . . but one of a certain kind." She looked with a pale eye at Susan, who was now sipping ale, then turned back to Roland. There was a species of baleful amusement in her gaze, an expression that Roland liked little. "The kind of whore you had to pay for in coin, the kind too fine for the trade of simple folk."

"She's his gilly?" Roland asked through lips which felt as if they had been iced.

"Aye," Coral said. "Not confirmed, not until the Reap—and none too happy about that is my brother, I'll warrant—but bought and paid for just as in the old days. So she is." Coral paused, then said, "Her father would die of shame if he could see her." She spoke with a kind of melancholy satisfaction.

"I hardly think we should judge the Mayor too harshly," Renfrew said in an embarrassed, pontifical voice.

Coral ignored him. She studied the line of Susan's jaw, the soft swell of her bosom above the silken edge of her bodice, the fall of her hair. The thin humor was gone from Coral Thorin's face. In it now was a somehow chilling species of contempt. In spite of himself, Roland found himself imagining the Mayor's knuckle-bunchy hands pushing down the straps of Susan's dress, crawling over her naked shoulders, plunging like gray crabs into the cave beneath her hair. He looked away, toward the table's lower end, and what he saw there was no better. It was Olive Thorin that his eye found—Olive, who had been relegated to the foot of the table, Olive, looking up at the laughing folk who sat at its head. Looking up at her husband, who had replaced her with a beautiful young girl, and gifted that girl with a pendant which made her own firediamond ear-rings look dowdy by comparison.

There was none of Coral's ha?red and an?gry con?tempt on her face. Look?ing at her might have been eas?ier if that were so. She on?ly gazed at her hus?band with eyes that were hum?ble, hope?ful, and un?hap?py. Now Roland un?der stood why he had thought her sad. She had ev?ery rea?son to be sad.

More laugh?ter from the May?or's par?ty; Rimer had leaned over from the next ta?ble, where he was pre?sid?ing, to con?tribute some wit?ti?cism. It must have been a good one. This time even Jonas was laugh?ing. Su?san put a hand to her bo?som, then took her nap?kin and raised it to wipe a tear of laugh?ter from the com?er of her eye.

Thorin cov?ered her oth?er hand. She looked to?ward Roland and met his eyes, still laugh?ing. He thought of Olive Thorin, sit?ting down there at the foot of the ta?ble, with the salt and spices, an un?touched bowl of soup be?fore her and that un?hap?py smile on her face. Seat?ed where the girl could see her, as well. And he thought that, had he been wear?ing his guns, he might well have drawn one and put a bul?let in Su?san Del?ga?do's cold and whor?ing lit?tle heart.

And thought: Who do you hope to fool?

Then one of the serv?ing boys was there, putting a plate off?ish in front of him.

Roland thought he had nev?er felt less like eat?ing in his life . . . but he would eat, just the same, just as he would turn his mind to the ques tions raised by his con?ver?sa?tion with Hash Ren?frew of the Lazy Su?san Ranch. He would re?mem?ber the face of his fa?ther.

Yes, I'll re?mem?ber it very well, he thought. If on?ly I could for?get the one above yon sap?phire.

10

The din?ner was in?ter?minable, and there was no es?cape af?ter?ward. The ta?ble at the cen?ter of the re?cep?tion room had been re?moved, and when l ie guests came back that way—like a tide which has surged as high as it can and now ebbs—they formed two ad?ja?cent cir?cles at the di?rec?tion of a spright?ly lit?tle red?haired man whom Cuth?bert lat?er dubbed May?or Thorin's Min?is?ter of Fun.

The boy-?girl, boy-?girl, boy-?girl cir?cling was ac?com?plished with much laugh?ter and some dif?fi?cul?ty (Roland guessed that about three-?quar?ters of (lie guests were now fair?ly well shot?tered), and then the gui?tarists struck up a que?sa. This proved to be a sim?ple sort of reel. The cir?cles re?volved in op?po?site di?rec?tions, all hold?ing hands, un?til the mu?sic stopped for a mo ment. Then the cou?ple cre?at?ed at the place where the two cir?cles touched danced at the cen?ter of the fe?male part?ner's cir?cle, while ev?ery?one else clapped and cheered.

The lead mu?si?cian man?aged this old and clear?ly well-?loved tra?di?tion with a keen eye to the ridicu?lous, stop?ping his mucha?chos in or?der to cre ate the most amus?ing cou?ples: tall wom?an-?short man, fat wom?an-?skin?ny man, old wom?an-?young man (Cuth?bert end?ed up side-?kick?ing with a wom?an as old as his great-?grand?dame, to the sai's breath?less cack?les and the com?pa?ny's gen?er?al roars of ap?proval).

Then, just when Roland was think?ing this stupid dance would nev?er end, the mu?sic stopped and he found him?self fac?ing Su?san Del?ga?do.

For a mo?ment he could do noth?ing but stare at her, feel?ing that his eyes must burst from their sock?ets, feel?ing that he could move nei?ther of his stupid feet. Then she raised her arms, the mu?sic be?gan, the cir?cle (this one in?clud?ed May?or Thorin and

the watch?ful, nar?row?ly smil?ing El?dred Jonas) ap?plaud?ed, and he led her in?to the dance.

At first, as he spun her through a fig?ure (his feet moved with all their usu?al grace and pre?ci?sion, numb or not), he felt like a man made of glass. Then he be?came aware of her body touch?ing his, and the rus?tle of her dress, and he was all too hu?man again.

She moved clos?er for just a mo?ment, and when she spoke, her breath tick?led in his ear. He won?dered if a wom?an could drive you mad—lit?er?al?ly mad. He wouldn't have be?lieved so be?fore tonight, but tonight ev?ery?thing had changed.

“Thank you for your dis?cre?tion and your pro?pri?ety,” she whis?pered.

He pulled back from her a lit?tle and at the same time twirled her, his hand against the small of her back—palm rest?ing on cool satin, fin?gers touch?ing warm skin. Her feet fol?lowed his with nev?er a pause or stut?ter; they moved with per?fect grace, un?afraid of his great and boot?ed clod-?stom?pers even in their flim?sy silk slip?pers. “I can be dis?creet, sai,” he said. “As for pro?pri?ety? I'm amazed you even know the word.”

She looked up in?to his cold face, her smile fad?ing. He saw anger come in to fill it, but be?fore anger there was hurt, as if he had slapped her. He felt both glad and sor?ry at the same time.

“Why do you speak so?” she whis?pered.

The mu?sic stopped be?fore he could an?swer ... al?though how he might have an?swered, he had no idea. She curt?seyed and he bowed, while those sur?round?ing them clapped and whis?tled. They went back to their places, to their sep?arate cir?cles, and the gui?tars be?gan again. Roland felt his hands grasped on ei?ther side and be?gan to turn with the cir?cle once more.

Laugh?ing. Kick?ing. Clap?ping on the beat. Feel?ing her some?where be hind him, do?ing the same. Won?der?ing if she want?ed as bad?ly as he did to be out of here, to be in the dark, to be alone in the dark, where he could put his false face aside be?fore the re?al one be?neath could grow hot enough to set it afire.

CHAP?TER VI

sheemie

1

Around ten o' the clock, the trio of young men from the In?ner Ba?ronies made their man?ners to host and host?ess, then slipped off in?to the fra?grant sum?mer night. Cordelia Del?ga?do, who hap?pened to be stand?ing near Hen?ry Wert?ner, the Barony's stock?lin?er, re?marked that they must be tired. Wert?ner laughed at this and replied in an ac?cent so thick it was al?most com?ic: “Nay, ma'am, byes that age're like rats ex?plorin en wood?pile af?ter hokkut rain, so they are. It'll be hours yet be?fore the bunks out'ta Bar K sees em.”

Olive Thorin left the pub?lic rooms short?ly af?ter the boys, plead?ing a headache. She was pale enough to be al?most be?liev?able.

By eleven, the May?or, his Chan?cel?lor, and the chief of his new?ly in au?gu?rat?ed se?cu?ri?ty staff were con?vers?ing in the May?or's study with the last few late-?stay?ing guests (all ranch?ers, all mem?bers of the Horse?men's As?so?ci?ation). The talk was brief but in?tense. Sev?er?al of the ranch?ers pres ent ex?pressed re?lief that the

Affliction's emissaries were so young. Eldred Jonas said nothing to this, only looked down at his pale, long-fingered hands and smiled his narrow smile. By midnight, Susan was at home and undressing for bed. She didn't have the sapphire to worry about, at least; that was a Barony jewel, and had been tucked back into the strongbox at Mayor's House before she left, despite what Mr. Ain't-We-Fine Will Dearborn might think about it and her. Mayor Thorin (she couldn't bring herself to call him Hart, although he had asked her to do so—not even to herself could she do it) had taken it back from her himself. In the hallway just off from the reception room, that had been, by the tapestry showing Arthur Eld carrying his sword out of the pyramid in which it had been entombed. And he (Thorin, not the Eld) had taken the opportunity to kiss her mouth and have a quick fumble at her breasts—a part of her that had felt much too naked during that entire memorable evening. “I burn for Reaping,” he had whispered melodramatically in her ear. His breath had been redolent of brandy. “Each day of this summer seems an age.”

Now, in her room, brushing her hair with harsh, quick strokes and looking out at the waning moon, she thought she had never been so angry in her life as she was at this moment: angry at Thorin, angry at Aunt Cord, furious with that self-righteous prig of a Will Dearborn. Most of all, however, she was angry at herself. “There's three things ye can do in any situation, girl,” her father had told her once. “Ye can decide to do a thing, ye can decide not to do a thing ... or ye can decide not to decide.” That last, her father had never quite come out and said (he hadn't needed to) was the choice of weaklings and fools. She had promised herself she would never elect it herself. . . and yet she had allowed herself to drift into this ugly situation. Now all the choices seemed bad and honorless, all the roads either filled with rocks or hub-deep in mud.

In her room at Mayor's House (she had not shared a chamber with Hart for ten years, or a bed, even briefly, for five), Olive sat in a night-dress of undecorated white cotton, also looking out at the waning moon. After closing herself into this safe and private place, she had wept. . . but not for long. Now she was dry-eyed, and felt as hollow as a dead tree.

And what was the worst? That Hart didn't understand how humiliated she was, and not just for herself. He was too busy strutting and preening (also too busy trying to look down the front of said Delgado's dress at every opportunity) to know that people—his own Chancellor among them—were laughing at him behind his back. That might stop when the girl had returned to her aunt's with a big belly, but that wouldn't be for months yet. The witch had seen to that. It would be even longer if the girl kindled slowly. And what was the silliest, most humiliating thing of all? That she, John Haverly's daughter Olive, still loved her husband. Hart was an overweening, vain-glorious, prancing loon of a man, but she still loved him. There was something else, something quite apart from the matter of Hart's turning into George o' Goats in his late middle age: she thought there was an intrigue of some sort going on, something dangerous and quite likely dishonorable. Hart knew a little about it, but she guessed he knew only what Kimba Rimer and that hideous limping man wanted him to know.

There was a time, and not so long ago, when Hart wouldn't have allowed himself to be fobbed off in such fashion by the likes of Rimer, a time when he would have taken one look at El'dred Jonas and his friends and sent them west ere they had so much as a single hot dinner in them. But that was before Hart had become besotted with sai Del'ga'do's gray eyes, high bosom, and flat belly.

Olive turned down the lamp, blew out the flame, and crept off to bed, where she would lie wakeful until dawn.

By one o' the clock, no one was left in the public rooms of Mayor's House except for a quartet of cleaning women, who performed their chores silently (and nervously) beneath the eye of El'dred Jonas. When one of them looked up and saw him gone from the window-seat where he had been sitting and smoking, she murmured softly to her friends, and they all loosened up a little. But there was no singing, no laughter. Il spec tra, the man with the blue coffin on his hand, might only have stepped back into the shadows. He might still be watching.

By two o' the clock, even the cleaning women were gone. It was an hour at which a party in Gilead would just have been reaching its apogee of glitter and gossip, but Gilead was far away, not just in another Barony hut almost in another world. This was the Outer Arc, and in the Outers, even gen'try went to bed early.

There was no gen'try on view at the Travellers' Rest, however, and beneath the all-encompassing gaze of The Romp, the night was still fairly young.

2

At one end of the saloon, fishermen still wearing their rolled-down boots drank and played Watch Me for small stakes. To their right was a poker table; to their left, a knot of yelling, exhorting men—cowpokes, mostly—stood along Sa'tan's Alley, watching the dice bounce down the velvet in cline. At the room's other end, Sheb McCurdy was pounding out jagged boogie, right hand flying, left hand pumping, the sweat pouring down his neck and pale cheeks. Beside and above him, standing drunk on a stool, Pettie the Trotter shook her enormous bottom and bawled out the words to the song at the top of her voice: "Come on over, baby, we got chicken in the hum, what hum. whose barn, my burn! Come on over, baby, baby got the bull by the horns ..."

Sheemie stopped beside the piano, the camel buck'et in one hand, grinning up at her and attempting to sing along. Pettie swatted him on his way, never missing a word, bump, or grind, and Sheemie went with his peculiar laugh, which was shrill but somehow not unpleasant.

A game of darts was in progress; in a booth near the back, a whore who styled herself Countess Jilian of Up'ard Kil'lian (exiled royalty from distant Gar'lan, my dears, oh how special we are) was managing to give two handjobs at the same time while smoking a pipe. And at the bar, a whole line of assorted toughs, drifters, cowpunchers, drovers, drivers, carters, wheelwrights, stagies, carpen'ters, con'men, stock'men, boat'men, and gun'men drank beneath The Romp's double head. The only real gun'men in the place were at the end of the bar, a pair drinking by themselves. No one attempted to join them, and not just because they wore shooting irons in holsters that were slung low and tied down gun'slinger fashion. Guns were uncommon but not unknown in Mejis at that time, and not necessarily

feared, but these two had the sullen look of men who have spent a long day doing work they didn't want to do—the look of men who would pick a fight on no account at all, and be glad to end their day by sending some new widow's husband home in a hurry-up wagon.

Stanley the bartender served them whiskey after whiskey with no attempt to make conversation, not so much as a “Hot day, gents, wa'n't it?” They reeked of sweat, and their hands were pitchy with pine-gum. Not enough to keep Stanley from being able to see the blue coffin-shapes tattooed on them, though. Their friend, the old limping buzzard with the girl's hair and the gimp leg, wasn't here, at least. In Stanley's view, Jonas was easily the worst of the Big Coffin Hunters, but these two were bad enough, and he had no intention of getting aslant of them if he could help it. With luck, no one would; they looked tired enough to call it a night early. Reynolds and Depape were tired, all right—they had spent the day out at Citgo, campaigning a line of empty steel tankers with nonsense words (texaco, citgo, sunoco, exxon) printed on their sides, a billion pine-boughs they'd hauled and stacked, it seemed—but they had no consequent plans to finish their drinking early. Depape might have done so if Her Nibs had been available, but that young beauty (actual name: Gert Moggins) had a ranch-job and wouldn't be back until two nights hence. “And it'll be a week if there's hard cash on offer,” Depape said morosely. He pushed his spectacles up on his nose.

“Fuck her,” Reynolds said.

“That's just what I'd do if I could, but I can't.”

“I'm going to get me a plate of that free lunch,” Reynolds said, pointing down to the other end of the bar, where a tin bucket of steamed clams had just come out of the kitchen. “You want some?”

“Them look like hocks of snot and go down the same way. Bring me a strip of beef jerky.”

“All right, partner.” Reynolds went off down the bar. People gave him wide passage; gave even his silk-lined cloak wide passage.

Depape, more morose than ever now that he had thought of Her Nibs gobbling cowboy spareribs out there at the Pano Ranch, downed his drink, winced at the stench of pine-gum on his hand, then held his glass out in Stanley Ruiz's direction. “Fill this up, you dog!” he shouted. A cowhand leaning with his back, butt, and elbows against the bar jerked forward at the sound of Depape's bellow, and that was all it took to start trouble.

Sheemie was bustling toward the pass through from which the steamers had just appeared, now holding the camel bucket out before him in both hands. Later, when the Travellers began to empty out, his job would be to clean up. For now, however, it was simply to circulate with the camel bucket, dumping in every unfinished drink he found. This combined elixir ended up in a jug behind the bar. The jug was labelled fairly enough—camel piss—and a double shot could be obtained for three pennies. It was a drink only for the reckless or the impetuous, but a fair number of both passed beneath the stem gaze of The Romp each night; Stanley rarely had a problem emptying the jug. And if it wasn't empty at the end of the night, why, there was always a fresh night coming along. Not to

men?tion a fresh sup?ply of thirsty fools.

But on this oc?ca?sion Sheemie nev?er made it to the Camel Piss jug be hind the end of the bar. He tripped over the boot of the cow?boy who had jerked for?ward, and went to his knees with a grunt of sur?prise. The con tents of the buck?et sloshed out ahead of him, and, fol?low?ing Sa?tan's First Law of Ma?lig?ni?ty—to wit, if the worst can hap?pen, it usu?al?ly will—they drenched Roy De?pape from the knees down in an eye wa?ter?ing mix?ture of beer, graf, and white light?ning.

Con?ver?sa?tion at the bar stopped, and that stopped the talk of the men gath?ered around the dice-?chute. Sheb turned, saw Sheemie kneel?ing be fore one of Jonas's men, and stopped play?ing. Pet?tie, her eyes squeezed shut as she poured her en?tire soul in?to her singing, con?tin?ued on a capel?la for three or four bars be?fore reg?is?ter?ing the si?lence which was spread?ing out like a rip?ple. She stopped singing and opened her eyes. That sort of si lence usu?al?ly meant that some?one was go?ing to be killed. If so, she didn't in?tend to miss it.

De?pape stood per?fect?ly still, in?hal?ing the raw stench of al?co?hol as it rose. He didn't mind the smell; on the whole, it had the stink of pine-?gum beat six ways to the Ped?dler. He didn't mind the way his pants were stick ing to his knees, ei?ther. It might have been a bit of an ir?ri?ta?tion if some of that joy-?juice had got?ten down in?side his boots, but none had.

His hand fell to the butt of his gun. Here, by god and by god?dess, was some?thing to take his mind off his sticky hands and ab?sent whore. And good en?ter?tain?ment was ev?er worth a lit?tle wet?ting.

Si?lence blan?ket?ed the place now. Stan?ley stood as stiff as a sol?dier be hind the bar, ner?vous?ly pluck?ing at one of his arm-?garters. At the bar's oth?er end, Reynolds looked back to?ward his part?ner with bright in?ter?est. He took a clam from the steam?ing buck?et and cracked it on the edge of the bar like a boiled egg. At De?pape's feet, Sheemie looked up, his eyes big and fear?ful be?neath the wild snarl of his black hair. He was try?ing his best to smile.

"Well now, boy," De?pape said. "You have wet me con?sider?able."

"Sor?ry, big fel?la, I go trip?py-?trip." Sheemie jerked a hand back over his shoul?der; a lit?tle spray of camel piss flew from the tips of his fin?gers. Some?where some?one cleared his throat ner?vous?ly—raa-?aach! The room was full of eyes, and qui?et enough so that they all could hear both the wind in the eaves and the waves break?ing on the rocks of Ham?bry Point, two miles away.

"The hell you did," said the cow?poke who had jerked. He was about twen?ty, and sud?den?ly afraid he might nev?er see his moth?er again. "Don't you go tryin to put your trou?ble off on me, you damned feeb."

"I don't care how it hap?pened," De?pape said. He was aware he was play?ing for an au?di?ence, and knew that what an au?di?ence most?ly wants is to be en?ter?tained. Sai R. B. De?pape, al?ways a trouper, in?tend?ed to oblige.

He pinched the cor?duroy of his pants above the knees and pulled the legs up, re?veal?ing the toes of his boots. They were shiny and wet.

"See there. Look at what you got on my boots."

Sheemie looked up at him, grin?ning and ter?ri?fied.

Stan?ley Ruiz de?cid?ed he couldn't let this hap?pen with?out at least try ing to stop it.

He had known Do?lores Sheemer, the boy's moth?er; there was even a pos?si?bil?ity that he him?self was the boy's fa?ther. In any case, he liked Sheemie. The boy was fool?ish, but his heart was good, he nev?er took a drink, and he al?ways did his work. Al?so, he could find a smile for you even on the cold?est, fog?gi?est win?ter's day. That was a tal?ent many peo?ple of nor?mal in?tel?li?gence did not have.

"Sai De?pape," he said, tak?ing a step for?ward and speak?ing in a low, re?spect?ful tone. "I'm very sor?ry about that. I'll be hap?py to buy your drinks for the rest of the evening if we can just for?get this re?gret?table—"

De?pape's move?ment was a blur al?most too fast to see, but that wasn't what amazed the peo?ple who were in the Rest that night; they would have ex?pect?ed a man run?ning with Jonas to be fast. What amazed them was the fact that he nev?er looked around to set his tar?get. He lo?cat?ed Stan?ley by his voice alone.

De?pape drew his gun and swept it to the right in a ris?ing arc. It struck Stan?ley Ruiz dead in the mouth, mash?ing his lips and shat?ter?ing three of his teeth. Blood splashed the back?bar mir?ror; sev?er?al high-?fly?ing drops dec?orat?ed the tip of The Romp's left?hand nose. Stan?ley screamed, clapped his hands to his face, and stag?gered back against the shelf be?hind him. In the si?lence, the chat?tery clink of the bot?tles was very loud.

Down the bar, Reynolds cracked an?oth?er clam and watched, fas?ci nat?ed. Good as a play, it was.

De?pape turned his at?ten?tion back to the kneel?ing boy. "Clean my boots," he said. A look of mud?dled re?lief came on?to Sheemie's face. Clean his boots! Yes! You bet! Right away! He pulled the rag he al?ways kept in his back pock?et. It wasn't even dirty yet. Not very, at least.

"No," De?pape said pa?tient?ly. Sheemie looked up at him, gap?ing and puz?zled. "Put that nasty clout back where it come from—I don't even want to look at it."

Sheemie tucked it in?to his back pock?et again.

"Lick em," De?pape said in that same pa?tient voice. "That's what I want. You lick my boots un?til they're dry again, and so clean you can see your stupid rab?bit's face in em."

Sheemie hes?itat?ed, as if still not sure what was re?quired of him. Or per?haps he was on?ly pro?cess?ing the in?for?ma?tion.

"I'd do it, boy," Barkie Calla?han said from what he hoped was a safe place be?hind Sheb's pi?ano. "If you want to see the sun come up, I'd sure?ly do it."

De?pape had al?ready de?cid?ed the mush-?brain wasn't go?ing to see an oth?er sun?rise, not in this world, but kept qui?et. He had nev?er had his boots licked. He want?ed to see what it felt like. If it was nice—kind of sexy-?like—he could maybe try Her Nibs out on it.

"Does I have to?" Sheemie's eyes were fill?ing with tears. "Can't just I-?sor?ry and pol?ish em re?al good?"

"Lick, you fee?ble-?mind?ed don?key," De?pape said.

Sheemie's hair fell across his fore?head. His tongue poked ten?ta?tive?ly out be?tween his lips, and as he bent his head to?ward De?pape's boots, the first of his tears fell.

"Stop it, stop it, stop it," a voice said. It was shock?ing in the si?lence— not be?cause it was sud?den, and cer?tain?ly not be?cause it was an?gry. It was shock?ing be?cause it

was amused. “I sim?ply can’t al?low that. Nope. I would if I could, but I can’t. Un?san?itary, you see. Who knows what dis ease might be spread in such fash?ion? The mind quails! Ab-?so-?lute?ly cuh-?wails!”

Stand?ing just in?side the batwing doors was the pur?vey?or of this id?iot?ic and po?ten?tial?ly fa?tal screed: a young man of mid?dling height, his flat-?crowned hat pushed back to re?veal a tum?bled com?ma of brown hair. Ex cept young man didn’t re?al?ly cov?er him, De?pape re?al?ized; young man was draw?ing it heavy. He was on?ly a kid. Around his neck, gods knew why, he wore a bird’s skull like an enor?mous com?ical pen?dant. It was hung on a chain that ran through the eye?holes. And in his hands was not a gun (where would an un?whiskered drib?ble like him get a gun in the first place? De?pape won?dered) but a god?dam sling?shot. De?pape burst out laugh?ing.

The kid laughed as well, nod?ding as if he un?der?stood how ridicu?lous the whole thing looked, how ridicu?lous the whole thing was. His laugh?ter was in?fec?tious; Pet?tie, still up on her stool, tit?tered her?self be?fore clap?ping her hands over her mouth.

“This is no place for a boy such as you,” De?pape said. His re?volver, an old five-shoot?er, was still out; it lay in his fist on the bar, with Stan?ley Ruiz’s blood drip?ping off the gun?sight. De?pape, with?out rais?ing it from the iron?wood, wag?gled it slight?ly. “Boys who come to places like this learn had habits, kid. Dy?ing is apt to be one of them. So I give you this one chance. Get out of here.”

“Thank you, sir, I ap?pre?ci?ate my one chance,” the boy said. He spoke with great and win?ning sin?cer?ity . . . but didn’t move. Still he stood just in?side the batwing doors, with the wide elas?tic strap of his sling pulled hack. De?pape couldn’t quite make out what was in the cup, but it glit?tered in the gaslight. A met?al ball of some sort.

“Well, then?” De?pape snarled. This was get?ting old, and fast.

“I know I’m be?ing a pain in the neck, sir—not to men?tion an ache in (he ass and a milky drip from the tip of a sore dick—but if it’s all the same to you, my dear friend, I’d like to give my chance to the young fel?low on his knees be?fore you. Let him apol?ogize, let him pol?ish your boots with his clout un?til you are en?tire?ly sat?is?fied, and let him go on liv?ing his life.”

There was an un?fo?cused mur?mur of ap?proval at this from the area where the card-play?ers were watch?ing. De?pape didn’t like the sound of it at all, and he made a sud?den de?ci?sion. The boy would die as well, exe cut?ed for the crime of im?per?ti?nence. The swab?by who had spilled the buck?et of dregs on him was clear?ly re?tard?ed. Yon brat had not even that ex?cuse. He just thought he was fun?ny. From the com?er of his eye, De?pape saw Reynolds mov?ing to flank the boy, smooth as oiled silk. De?pape ap?pre?ci?at?ed the thought, but didn’t be lieve he’d need much help with the sling?shot spe?cial?ist.

“Boy, I think you’ve made a mis?take,” he said in a kind?ly voice. “I re?al?ly be?lieve—” The cup of the sling?shot dipped a lit?tle . . . or De?pape fan?cied it did. He made his move.

Gilead and the end of the Affiliation, they were still talking. By that time there were better than five hundred old gaffers (and a few old gamblers) claiming that they were drinking a beer in the Rest that night, and saw it all.

DePape was young, and had the speed of a snake. Nevertheless, he never came close to getting a shot off at Cuthbert Allgood. There was a thip-TWANG! as the elastic was released, a steel gleam that drew itself across the saloon's smoky air like a line on a slateboard, and then DePape screamed. His revolver tumbled to the floor, and a foot spun it away from him across the sawdust (no one would claim that foot while the Big Coffin Hunters were still in Ham-bry; hundreds claimed it after they were gone). Still screaming—he could not bear pain—DePape raised his bleeding hand and looked at it with agonized, unbelieving eyes. Actually, he had been lucky. Cuthbert's ball had smashed the tip of the second finger and torn off the nail. Lower, and DePape would have been able to blow smoke-rings through his own palm.

Cuthbert, meanwhile, had already reloaded the cup of his sling-shot and drawn the elastic back again. "Now," he said, "if I have your attention, good sir—"

"I can't speak for his," Reynolds said from behind him, "but you got mine, partner. I don't know if you're good with that thing or just shittass lucky, but either way, you're done with it now. Relax the draw on it and put it down. That table in front of you's the place I want to see it."

"I've been blindsided," Cuthbert said sadly. "Betrayed once more by my own callow youth."

"I don't know nothing about your callow youth, brother, but you've been blindsided, all right," Reynolds agreed. He stood behind and slightly to the left of Cuthbert, and now he moved his gun forward until the boy could feel the muzzle against the back of his head. Reynolds thumbed the hammer. In the pool of silence which the Travellers' Rest had become, the sound was very loud. "Now put that twanger down."

"I think, good sir, that I must offer my regrets and decline."

"What?"

"You see, I've got my trusty sling aimed at your pleasant friend's head—" Cuthbert began, and when DePape shifted uneasily against the bar, Cuthbert's voice rose in a whipcrack that did not sound callow in the least. "Stand still! Move again and you're a dead man!"

DePape subsided, holding his bloody hand against his pine-tacky shirt. For the first time he looked frightened, and for the first time that night—for the first time since hooking up with Jonas, in fact—Reynolds felt mastery of a situation on the verge of slipping away ... except how could it be? How could it be when he'd been able to circle around this smart-talking squint and get the drop on him? This should be over.

Lowering his voice to its former conversational—not to say playful—pitch, Cuthbert said: "If you shoot me, the ball flies and your friend dies, too."

"I don't believe that," Reynolds said, but he didn't like what he heard in his own voice. It sounded like doubt. "No man could make a shot like that."

"Why don't we let your friend decide?" Cuthbert raised his voice in a good-

hu?mored hail. "Hi-?ho, there, Mr. Spec?ta?cles! Would you like your pal to shoot me?"

"No!" De?pape's cry was shrill, verg?ing on pan?ic. "No, Clay! Don't shoot!"

"So it's a stand?off," Reynolds said, be?mused. And then be?muse?ment changed to hor?ror as he felt the blade of a very large knife slip against his throat. It pressed the ten?der skin just over his adam's ap?ple.

"No, it's not," Alain said soft?ly. "Put the gun down, my friend, or I'll cut your throat."

4

Stand?ing out?side the batwing doors, hav?ing ar?rived by sim?ple good for tune in time for this Pinch and Jil?ly show, Jonas watched with amaze ment, con?tempt, and some?thing close to hor?ror. First one of the Af?fil?ia?tion brats gets the drop on De?pape, and when Reynolds cov?ers that one, the big kid with the round face and the plow?boy's shoul?ders puts a knife to Reynolds's throat. Nei?ther of the brats a day over fif?teen, and nei?ther with a gun. Mar?velous. He would have thought it bet?ter than a trav?el?ling cir cus, if not for the prob?lems that would fol?low if this were not put right. What sort of work could they do in Ham?bry if it got around that the boogey?men were afraid of the chil?dren, in?stead of vice-?ver?sa?

There's time to stop this be?fore there's killing, may?hap. If you want to. Do you? Jonas de?cid?ed he did; that they could walk out win?ners if they played it just right. He al?so de?cid?ed the Af?fil?ia?tion brats would not, un?less they were very lucky in?deed, be leav?ing Mejis Barony alive.

Where's the oth?er one? Dear?born?

A good ques?tion. An im?por?tant ques?tion. Em?bar?rass?ment would be come out?right hu?mil?ia?tion if he found him?self trumped in the same fash ion as Roy and Clay.

Dear?born wasn't in the bar, and that was sure. Jonas turned on his heels, scan?ning the South High Street in both di?rec?tions. It was al?most day-?bright un?der a Kiss?ing Moon on?ly two nights past the full. No one there, not in the street, not on the far side, where Ham?bry's mer?can?tile store stood. The mer?can?tile had a porch, but there was noth?ing on it save for a line of carved totems il?lus?trat?ing Guardians of the Beam: Bear, Tur tle, Fish, Ea?gle, Li?on, Bat, and Wolf. Sev?en of twelve, bright as mar?ble in the moon?light, and no doubt great fa?vorites of the kid?dies. No men over there, though. Good. Love?ly.

Jonas peered hard in?to the thread of al?ley be?tween the mer?can?tile and the butch?er's, glimpsed a shad?ow be?hind a tum?ble of cast-?off box?es, tensed, then re?laxed as he saw a cat's shin?ing green eyes. He nod?ded and turned to the busi?ness at hand, push?ing back the left?hand batwing and step?ping in?to the Trav?ellers' Rest. Alain heard the squeak of a hinge, but Jonas's gun was at his tem?ple be?fore he could even be?gin to turn.

"Son?ny, un?less you're a bar?ber, I think you'd bet?ter put that pig?stick?er down. You don't get a sec?ond warn?ing."

"No," Alain said.

Jonas, who had ex?pect?ed noth?ing but com?pli?ance and had been pre pared for noth?ing else, was thun?der?struck. "What? "

"You heard me," Alain said. "I said no."

5

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 nick for 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 "Renzie" 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 dismising 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 woeeful, 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 up-tilted, hands clasped before the sapphire Thorin had given her. Roland could forgive her the gilly business, he supposed. What he could not forgive, in spite of his attraction to Susan, was that awful smile on Olive Thorin's face as she watched the girl sitting in what should have been her place. Sitting in

her place and laugh?ing.

These were the things that chased through his head as he paced off acres of moon?light. He had no busi?ness with such thoughts, Su?san Del ga?do was not the rea?son he was here, nor was the ridicu?lous knuck?le-?crack?ing May?or and his pitiable coun?try-?Mary of a wife . . . yet he couldn't put them away and get to what was his busi?ness. He had for?got ten the face of his fa?ther, and walked in the moon?light, hop?ing to find it again.

In such fash?ion he came along the sleep?ing, sil?ver-?gild?ed High Street, walk?ing north to south, think?ing vague?ly that he would per?haps stand Cuth?bert and Alain to a taste of some?thing wet and toss the dice down Sa?tan's Al?ley a time or two be?fore go?ing back to get Rush?er and call it a night. And so it was that he hap?pened to spy Jonas—the man's gaunt fig?ure and fall of long white hair were im?pos?si?ble to mis?take—stand?ing out?side the batwings of the Trav?ellers' Rest and peer?ing in. Jonas did this with one hand on the butt of his gun and a tense set of body that put ev?ery?thing else from Roland's mind at once. Some?thing was go?ing on, and if Bert and Alain were in there, it might in?volve them. They were the strangers in town, af?ter all, and it was pos?si?ble—even like?ly—that not ev?ery?one in Ham?bry loved the Af?fil?ia?tion with the fer?vor that had been pro?fessed at tonight's din?ner. Or per?haps it was Jonas's friends who were in trou?ble. Some?thing was brew?ing, in any case. With no clear thought as to why he was do?ing it, Roland went soft?ly up the steps to the mer?can?tile's porch. There was a line of carved an?imals there (and prob?ably spiked firm?ly to the boards, so that drunk?en wags from the sa?loon across the street couldn't car?ry them away, chant?ing the nurs?ery rhymes of their child?hood as they went). Roland stepped be?hind 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 carv?ing. He could see Jonas turn, look across the street, then look to his left, peer?ing at some?thing—

Very low, a sound: Waow! Waow!

It's a cat. In the al?ley.

Jonas looked a mo?ment longer, then stepped in?to the Rest. Roland was out from be?hind the carved bear, down the steps, and in?to the street at once. He hadn't Alain's gift of the touch, but he had in?tu?itions that were some?times very strong. This one was telling him he must hur?ry.

Over?head, the Kiss?ing Moon drift?ed be?hind a cloud.

6

Pet?tie the Trot?ter still stood on her stool, but she no longer felt drunk and singing was the last thing on her mind. She could hard?ly be?lieve what she was see?ing: Jonas had the drop on a boy who had the drop on Reynolds who had the drop on an?oth?er boy (this last one wear?ing a bird's skull around his neck on a chain) who had the drop on Roy De?pape. Who had, in fact, drawn some of Roy De?pape's blood. And when Jonas had told the big boy to put down the knife he was hold?ing to Reynolds's throat, the big boy had re?fused.

You can blow my lights out and send me to the clear?ing at the end of the path, thought Pet?tie, for now I've seen it all, so I have. She sup?posed she should get off the stool—there was apt to be shoot?ing any sec?ond now, and like?ly a great lot of

it—but some?times you just had to take your chances.

Be?cause some things were just too good to miss.

7

“We’re in this town on Af?fil?ia?tion busi?ness,” Alain said. He had one hand buried deep in Reynolds’s sweaty hair; the oth?er main?tained a steady pres?sure on the knife at Reynolds’s throat. Not quite enough to break the skin. “If you harm us, the Af?fil?ia?tion will take note. So will our fa?thers. You’ll be hunt?ed like dogs and hung up?side down, like as not, when you’re caught.”

“Son?ny, there’s not an Af?fil?ia?tion pa?trol with?in two hun?dred wheels of here, prob?ably three hun?dred,” Jonas said, “and I wouldn’t care a fart in a wind?storm if there was one just over yon hill. Nor do your fa?thers mean a squirt?ter to me. Put that knife down or I’ll blow your fuck?ing brains out.”

”No.“

”Fu?ture de?vel?op?ments in this mat?ter should be quite won?der?ful,” Cuth?bert said cheer?ily . . . al?though there was now a beat of nerves un?der his prat?tle. Not fear, per?haps not even ner?vous-?ness, just nerves. The good kind, more like?ly than not, Jonas thought sourly. He had un?der?es?ti?mat?ed these boys at meat; if noth?ing else was clear, that was. ”You shoot Richard, and Richard cuts Mr. Cloak’s throat just as Mr. Cloak shoots me; my poor dy?ing fin?gers re?lease my sling’s elas?tic and put a steel ball in what pass?es for Mr. Spec?ta?cles’s brain. You’ll walk away, at least, and I sup?pose that will be a great com?fort to your dead friends.“

”Call it a draw,” Alain said to the man with the gun at his tem?ple.

”We all stand back and walk away.“

”No, son?ny,” Jonas said. His voice was pa?tient, and he didn’t think his anger showed, but it was ris?ing. Gods, to be out?faced like this, even tem?porar?ily! ”No one does like that to the Big Cof?fin Hunters. This is your last chance to—“

Some?thing hard and cold and very much to the point pressed against the back of Jonas’s shirt, dead cen?ter be?tween the shoul?derblades. He knew what it was and who held it at once, un?der?stood the game was lost, but couldn’t un?der?stand how such a lu?di?crous, mad?den?ing turn of events could have hap?pened.

”Hol?ster the gun,” the voice be?hind the sharp tip of met?al said. It was emp?ty, some?how—not just calm, but emo?tion?less. ”Do it now, or this goes in your heart. No more talk. Talk?ing’s done. Do it or die.“

Jonas heard two things in that voice: youth and truth. He bol?stered his gun.

”You with the black hair. Take your gun out of my friend’s ear and put it back in your hol?ster. Now.“

Clay Reynolds didn’t have to be in?vit?ed twice, and he ut?tered a long, shaky sigh when Alain took the blade off his throat and stood back. Cuth?bert did not look around, on?ly stood with the elas?tic of his sling?shot pulled and his el?bow cocked.

”You at the bar,” Roland said. ”Hol?ster up.“

De?pape did so, gri?mac?ing with pain as he bumped his hurt fin?ger against his gun?belt. On?ly when this gun was put away did Cuth?bert re lax his hold on his sling and drop the ball from the cup in?to the palm of his hand.

The cause of all this had been for?got?ten as the ef?fects played them selves out. Now Sheemie got to his feet and pelt?ed across the room. His cheeks were wet with

tears. He grasped one of Cuthbert's hands, kissed it several times (loud smacking noises that would have been comic under other circumstances), and held the hand to his cheek for a moment. Then he dodged past Reynolds, pushed open the right-hand batwing, and flew right in to the arms of a sleepy-eyed and still half-drunk Sheriff. Avery had been fetched by Sheb from the jailhouse, where the Sheriff o' Barony had been sleeping off the Mayor's ceremonial dinner in one of his own cells.

8

"This is a nice mess, isn't it?"

Avery speaking. No one answering. He hadn't expected they would, not if they knew what was good for them.

The office area of the jail was too small to hold three men, three strap-ping not-quite-men, and one extra-large Sheriff comfortably, so Avery had herded them in to the nearby Town Gathering Hall, which echoed to the soft flutter of the pigeons in the rafters and the steady beat-beat-beat of the grandfather clock behind the podium.

It was a plain room, but an inspired choice all the same. It was where the townsfolk and Barony landowners had come for hundreds of years to make their decisions, pass their laws, and occasionally send some especially troublesome person west. There was a feeling of seriousness in its moon-glimmered darkness, and Roland thought even the old man, Jonas, felt a little of it. Certainly it invested Sheriff Herk Avery with an authority he might not otherwise have been able to project.

The room was filled with what were in that place and time called "bareback benches"—oaken pews with no cushions for either butt or back. There were sixty in all, thirty on each side of a wide center aisle. Jonas, DePape, and Reynolds sat on the front bench to the left of the aisle. Roland, Cuthbert, and Alain sat across from them on the right. Reynolds and DePape looked sullen and embarrassed; Jonas looked remote and composed. Will Dearborn's little crew was quiet. Roland had given Cuthbert a look which he hoped the boy could read: One smart remark and I'll rip the tongue right out of your head. He thought the mes sage had been received. Bert had stowed his idiotic "look-out" somewhere, which was a good sign.

"A nice mess," Avery repeated, and blew liquor-scented wind at them in a deep sigh. He was sitting on the edge of the stage with his short legs hanging down, looking at them with a kind of disgust-ed wonder.

The side door opened and in came Deputy Dave, his white service jacket laid aside, his monocle tucked in to the pocket of his more usual khaki shirt. In one hand he carried a mug; in the other a folded scrap of what looked to Roland like birch-bark.

"Did ye boil the first half, David?" Avery asked. He now wore a put-upon expression.

"Aye."

"Boiled it twice?"

"Aye, twice."

“For that was the di?rec?tions.”

“Aye,” Dave re?peat?ed in a re?signed voice. He hand?ed Av?ery the cup and dumped the re?main?ing con?ents of the birch-?bark scrap in when the Sher?iff held the cup out for them.

Av?ery swirled the liq?uid, peered in with a doubt?ful, re?signed ex?pres sion, then drank. He gri?maced. “Oh, foul!” he cried. “What’s so nasty as this?”

“What is it?” Jonas asked.

“Headache pow?der. Hang?over pow?der, ye might say. From the old witch. The one who lives up the Coos. Know where I mean?” Av?ery gave Jonas a know?ing look. The old gun?ny pre?tend?ed not to see it, but Roland thought he had. And what did it mean? An?oth?er mys?tery.

De?pape looked up at the word Coos, then went back to suck?ing his wound?ed fin?ger. Be?yond De?pape, Reynolds sat with his cloak drawn about him, look?ing grim?ly down at his lap.

“Does it work?” Roland asked.

“Aye, boy, but ye pay a price for witch’s medicine. Re?mem?ber that: ye al?ways pay. This ‘un takes away the headache if ye drink too much of May?or Thorin’s damned punch, but it gripes the bow?els some?thin fierce, so it does. And the farts—!” He waved a hand in front of his face to demon?strate, took an?oth?er sip from the cup, then set it aside. He re?turned to his for?mer grav?ity, but the mood in the room had light?ened just a lit?tle; they all felt it. “Now what are we to do about this busi?ness?” Herk Av?ery swept them slow?ly with his eyes, from Reynolds on his far right to Alain—“Richard Stock?worth”—on his far left. “Eh, boys? We’ve got the May?or’s men on one side and the Af?fil?ia?tion’s . . . men . . . on the oth?er, six fel?lows at the point of mur?der, and over what? A halfwit and a spilled buck?et of slops.” He point?ed first at the Big Cof?fin Hunters, then to the Af?fil?ia?tion’s coun?ters. “Two pow?derkegs and one fat sher?iff in the mid?dle. So what’s yer thoughts on’t? Speak up, don’t be shy, you wasn’t shy in Coral’s whore?den down the road, don’t be shy in here!”

No one said any?thing. Av?ery sipped some more of his foul drink, then set it down and looked at them de?ci?sive?ly. What he said next didn’t sur prise Roland much; it was ex?act?ly what he would have ex?pect?ed of a man like Av?ery, right down to the tone which im?plied that he con?sidered him self a man who could make the hard de?ci?sions when he had to, by the gods.

“I’ll tell yer what we’re go?ing to do: We’re go?ing to for?get it.”

He now as?sumed the air of one who ex?pects an up?roar and is pre?pared to han?dle it. When no one spoke or even shuf?fled a foot, he looked dis com?fit?ed. Yet he had a job to do, and the night was grow?ing old. He squared his shoul?ders and pushed on. “I’ll not spend the next three or four months wait?ing to see who among you’s killed who. Nay! Nor will I be put in a po?si?tion where I might have to take the pun?ish?ment for your stupid quar?rel over that halfwit Sheemie.

”I ap?peal to your prac?ti?cal na?tures, boys, when I point out that I may he ei?ther your friend or your en?emy dur?ing your time here . . . but I’d be wrong if I didn’t al?so ap?peal to your more no?ble na?tures, which I am sure are both large and sen?si?tive.“ The Sher?iff now tried on an ex?alt?ed ex?pres?sion, which was not, in Roland’s

es?ti?ma?tion, no?vably suc?cess?ful. Av?ery turned his at?ten?tion to Jonas.

”Sai, I can’t be?lieve ye’ll want to be causin trou?ble for three young men from the Af?fil?ia?tion—the Af?fil?ia?tion that’s been like moth?er’s milk and fa?ther’s shel?terin hand since aye or oh fifty gen?er?ations back; ye’d not be so dis?re?spect?ful as all that, would ye?”

Jonas shook his head, smil?ing his thin smile.

Av?ery nod?ded again. Things were go?ing along well, that nod said. ”Ye’ve all yer own cakes to bake and oats to roll, and none of ye wants some?thing like this to get in the way of doin yer jobs, do yer?”

They all shook their heads this time.

“So what I want you to do is to stand up, face each oth?er, shake hands, and cry each oth?er’s par?don. If ye don’t do that, ye can all ride west out of town by sun?rise, far as I’m con?cerned.”

He picked up the mug and took a big?ger drink this time. Roland saw that the man’s hand was trem?bling the tini?est bit, and wasn’t sur?prised. It was all bluff and blow, of course. The Sher?iff would have un?der?stood that Jonas, Reynolds, and De?pape were be?yond his au?thor?ity as soon as he saw the small blue coffins on their hands; af?ter tonight, he must feel the same way about Dear?born, Stock?worth, and Heath.

He could on?ly hope that all would see where their self-?in?ter?est lay. Roland did. So, ap?par?ent?ly, did Jonas, for even as Roland got up, Jonas did the same.

Av?ery re?coiled a lit?tle bit, as if ex?pect?ing Jonas to go for his gun and Dear?born for the knife in his belt, the one he’d been hold?ing against Jonas’s back when Av?ery came puff?ing up to the sa?loon.

There was no gun or knife drawn, how?ev?er. Jonas turned to?ward Roland and held out his hand.

“He’s right, lad,” Jonas said in his reedy, qua?ver?ing voice.

“Yes.”

“Will you shake with an old man, and vow to start over?”

“Yes.” Roland held out his hand.

Jonas took it. “I cry your par?don.”

“I cry your own, Mr. Jonas.” Roland tapped left-?hand at his throat, as was prop?er when ad?dress?ing an el?der in such fash?ion.

As the two of them sat down, Alain and Reynolds rose, as neat?ly as men in a pre?re?hearsed cer?emo?ny. Last of all, Cuth?bert and De?pape rose. Roland was all but pos?itive that Cuth?bert’s fool?ish?ness would pop out like Jack from his box—the id?iot would sim?ply not be able to help him?self, al though he must sure?ly re?al?ize that De?pape was no man to make sport of tonight.

“Cry your par?don,” Bert said, with an ad?mirable lack of laugh?ter in his voice.

“Cryerown,” De?pape mum?bled, and held out his blood?streaked hand. Roland had a night?mare vi?sion of Bert squeez?ing down on it as hard as he could, mak?ing the red?head yowl like an owl on a hot stove, but Bert’s grip was as re?strained as his voice.

Av?ery sat on the edge of the stage with his pudgy legs hang?ing down, watch?ing it all with avun?cu?lar good cheer. Even Deputy Dave was smil?ing.

“Now I pro?pose to shake hands with yer all my?self, ‘n then send yer on yer ways,

for the hour's late, so it is, and such as me needs my beauty rest." He chuckled, and again looked uncomfortable when no one joined in. But he slipped off the stage and began to shake hands, doing so with the enthusiasm of a minister who has finally succeeded in marrying a headstrong couple after a long and stormy courtship.

9

When they stepped outside, the moon was down and the first lightening in the sky had begun to show at the far edge of the Clean Sea. "Maybe we'll meet again, sai," Jonas said. "Maybe we will," Roland said, and swung up into his saddle.

10

The Big Coffin Hunters were staying in the watchman's house about a mile south of Seafront—five miles out of town, this was.

Halfway there, Jonas stopped at a turnout beside the road. From here the land made a steep, rocky descent to the brightening sea.

"Get down, mister," he said. It was De'pape he was looking at.

"Jonas...Jonas, I..."

"Get down."

Bitting his lip nervously, De'pape got down.

"Take off your spectacles."

"Jonas, what's this about? I don't—"

"Or if you want em broke, leave em on. It's all the same to me."

Bitting his lip harder now, De'pape took off his gold-rimmed spectacles. They were barely in his hand before Jonas had fetched him a terrific clip on the side of the head. De'pape cried out and reeled toward the drop. Jonas drove forward, moving as fast as he had struck, and seized him by the shirt just before he went tumbling over the edge. Jonas twisted his hand into the shirt material and yanked De'pape toward him. He breathed deep, inhaling the scent of pine-tar and De'pape's sweat.

"I ought to toss you right over the edge," he breathed. "Do you know how much harm you've done?"

"I... Jonas, I never meant... just a little fun is all I... how was we supposed to know they ..."

Slowly, Jonas's hand relaxed. That last bit of babble had gone home. How was they supposed to know, that was ungrammatical but right. And if not for tonight, they might not have known. If you looked at it that way, De'pape had actually done them a favor. The devil you knew was always preferable to the devil you didn't. Still, word would get around, and people would laugh. Maybe even that was all right, though. The laughter would stop in due time.

"Jonas, I cry your pardon."

"Shut up," Jonas said. In the east, the sun would shortly heave itself over the horizon, casting its first gleams on a new day in this world of toil and sorrow. "I ain't going to toss you over, because then I'd have to toss Clay over and follow along myself. They got the drop on us the same as you, right?"

De'pape wanted to agree, but thought it might be dangerous to do so. He was prudently silent.

"Get down here, Clay."

Clay slid off his mount.

"Now hun?ker."

The three of them hun?kered on their boot?soles, heels up. Jonas plucked a shoot of grass and put it be?tween his lips. "Af?fil?ia?tion brats is what we were told, and we had no rea?son not to be?lieve it," he said. "The bad boys are sent all the way to Mejis, a sleepy Barony on the Clean Sea, on a make-?work de?tail that's two pans penance and three parts pun?ish ment. Ain't that what we were told?"

They nod?ded.

"Ei?ther of you be?lieve it af?ter tonight?"

De?pape shook his head. So did Clay.

"They may be rich boys, but that's not all they are," De?pape said. "The way they were tonight . . . they were like . . ." He trailed off, not quite will?ing to fin?ish the thought. It was too ab?surd.

Jonas was will?ing. "They act?ed like gun?slingers."

Nei?ther Jonas nor Reynolds replied at first. Then Clay Reynolds said, "They're too young, El?dred. Too young by years."

"Not too young to be 'pren?tices, may?hap. In any case, we're go?ing to find out." He turned to De?pape. "You've got some rid?ing to do, cul?ly."

"Aww, Jonas—!"

"None of us ex?act?ly cov?ered our?selves with glo?ry, but you were the fool that start?ed the pot boil?ing." He looked at De?pape, but De?pape on?ly looked down at the ground be?tween them. "You're go?ing to ride their back?trail, Roy, and you're go?ing to ask ques?tions un?til you've got the an swers you think will sat?is?fy my cu?rios?ity. Clay and I are most?ly go?ing to wait. And watch. Play Cas?tles with em, if you like. When I feel like enough time's gone by for us to be able to do a lit?tle snoop?ing with?out be ing trigged, may?hap we'll do it."

He bit on the piece of grass in his mouth. The larg?er piece tum?bled out and lay be?tween his boots.

"Do you know why I shook his hand? That boy Dear?born's damned hand? Be?cause we can't rock the boat, boys. Not just when it's edg?ing in to?ward har?bor. Lati?go and the folks we've been wait?ing for will be mov ing to?ward us very soon, now. Un?til they get in?to these parts, it's in our in?ter?est to keep the peace. But I tell you this: no one puts a knife to El?dred Jonas's back and lives. Now lis?ten, Roy. Don't make me tell you any of this twice."

Jonas be?gan to speak, lean?ing for?ward over his knees to?ward De?pape as he did. Af?ter awhile, De?pape be?gan to nod. He might like a lit?tle trip, ac?tu?al?ly. Af?ter the re?cent com?edy in the Trav?ellers' Rest, a change of air might be just the tick?et.

11

The boys were al?most back to the Bar K and the sun was com?ing over the hori?zon be?fore Cuth?bert broke the si?lence. "Well! That was an amus?ing and in?struc?tive evening, was it not?" Nei?ther Roland nor Alain replied, so Cuth?bert leaned over to the rook's skull, which he had re?turned to its for mer place on the horn of his sad?dle. "What say you, old friend? Did we en?joy our evening? Din?ner, a cir?cle-dance, and al?most killed to top things off. Did you en?joy?"

The look?out on?ly stared ahead of Cuth?bert's horse with its great dark eyes. "He says he's too tired for talk," Cuth?bert said, then yawned. "So'm I, ac?tu?al?ly." He looked at Roland. "I got a good look in?to Mr. Jonas's eyes af?ter he shook hands with you, Will. He means to kill you."

Roland nod?ded.

"They mean to kill all of us," Alain said.

Roland nod?ded again. "We'll make it hard for them, but they know more about us now than they did at din?ner. We'll not get be?hind them that way again."

He stopped, just as Jonas had stopped not three miles from where they now were.

On?ly in?stead of look?ing di?rect?ly out over the Clean Sea, Roland and his friends were look?ing down the long slope of the Drop. A herd of hors?es was mov?ing from west to east, bare?ly more than shad?ows in this light.

"What do you see, Roland?" Alain asked, al?most timid?ly.

"Trou?ble," Roland said, "and in our road." Then he gigged his horse and rode on.

Be?fore they got back to the Bar K bunkhouse, he was think ing about Su?san again.

Five min?utes af?ter he dropped his head on his flat burlap pil?low, he was dream?ing of her.

CHAP?TER VII

ON THE DROP

1

Three weeks had passed since the wel?com?ing din?ner at May?or's House and the in?ci?dent at the Trav?ellers' Rest. There had been no more trou?ble be?tween Roland's ka-?tet and Jonas's. In the night sky, Kiss?ing Moon had waned and Ped?dler's Moon had made its first thin ap?pear?ance. The days were bright and warm; even the old?timers ad?mit?ted it was one of the most beau?ti?ful sum?mers in mem?ory.

On a mid-?morn?ing as beau?ti?ful as any that sum?mer, Su?san Del?ga?do gal?loped a two-year-?old rosil?lo named Py?lon north along the Drop. The wind dried the tears on her cheeks and yanked her un?bound hair out be hind her as she went. She urged Py?lon to go faster yet, light?ly thump?ing his sides with her spur?less boots. Py?lon turned it up a notch at once, ears flat?ten?ing, tail flag?ging. Su?san, dressed in jeans and the fad?ed, over?sized kha?ki shirt (one of her da's) that had caused all the trou?ble, leaned over the light prac?tice sad?dle, hold?ing to the horn with one hand and rub?bing the oth?er down the side of the horse's strong, silky neck.

"More!" she whis?pered. "More and faster! Go on, boy!"

Py?lon let it out yet an?oth?er notch. That he had at least one more in him she knew; that he had even one more be?yond that she sus?pect?ed.

They sped along the Drop's high?est ridge, and she bare?ly saw the mag?nif?icent slope of land be?low her, all green and gold, or the way it fad?ed in?to the blue haze of the Clean Sea. On any oth?er day the view and the cool, salt-?smelling breeze would have up?lift?ed her. To?day she on?ly want?ed to hear the steady low thun?der of Py?lon's hoofs and feel the flex of his mus?cles be?neath her; to?day she want?ed to out?run her own thoughts.

And all be?cause she had come down?stairs this morn?ing dressed for rid?ing in one of her fa?ther's old shirts.

Aunt Cord had been at the stove, wrapped in her dress?ing gown and with her hair still net?ted. She dished her?self up a bowl of oat?meal and brought it to the ta?ble. Su?san had known things weren't good as soon as her aunt I timed to?ward her, bowl in hand; she could see the dis?con?tent?ed twitch of Aunt Cord's lips, and the dis?ap?prov?ing glance she shot at the or?ange Su san was peel?ing. Her aunt was still ran?kled by the sil?ver and gold she had ex?pect?ed to have in hand by now, coins which would be with?held yet awhile due to the witch's prank?ish de?cree that Su?san should re?main a vir gin un?til au?tumn.

But that wasn't the main thing, and Su?san knew it. Quite sim?ply put, the two of them had had enough of each oth?er. The mon?ey was on?ly one of Aunt Cord's dis?ap?point?ed ex?pec?ta?tions; she had count?ed on hav?ing the house at the edge of the Drop to her?self this sum?mer . . . ex?cept, per?haps, (or the oc?ca?sion?al vis?it from Mr. El?dred Jonas, with whom Cordelia seemed quite tak?en. In?stead, here they still were, one wom?an grow?ing to?ward the end of her cours?es, thin, dis?ap?prov?ing lips in a thin, dis?ap?prov?ing face, tiny ap?ple-?breasts un?der her high-?necked dress?es with their chok?er col?lars (The Neck, she fre?quent?ly told Su?san, is the First Thing to Go), her hair los?ing its for?mer chest?nut shine and show?ing wire-?threads of gray; the oth?er young, in?tel?li?gent, ag?ile, and round?ing to?ward the peak of her physi cal beau?ty. They grat?ed against each oth?er, each word seem?ing to pro?duce a spark, and that was not sur?pris?ing. The man who had loved them both enough to make them love each oth?er was gone.

"Are ye go?ing out on that horse?" Aunt Cord had said, putting her bowl down and sit?ting in a shaft of ear?ly sun. It was a bad lo?ca?tion, one she nev?er would have al?lowed her?self to be caught in had Mr. Jonas been in at?ten?dance. The strong light made her face look like a carved mask. There was a cold-?sore grow?ing at one cor?ner oth?er mouth; she al?ways got them when she was not sleep?ing well.

"Aye," Su?san said.

"Ye should eat more'n that, then. 'Twon't keep ye til nine o' the clock, girl."

"It'll keep me fine," Su?san had replied, eat?ing the sec?tions of or?ange faster. She could see where this was tend?ing, could see the look of dis?like and dis?ap?proval in her aunt's eyes, and want?ed to get away from the ta?ble be?fore trou?ble could be?gin.

"Why not let me get ye a dish of this?" Aunt Cord asked, and plopped her spoon in?to her oat?meal. To Su?san it sound?ed like a horse's hoof stamp?ing down in mud—or shit—and her stom?ach clenched. "It'll hold ye to lunch, if ye plan to ride so long. I sup?pose a fine young la?dy such as yer?self can't be both?ered with chores—"

"They're done." And you know they 're done, she did not add. I did em while you were sit?ting be?fore your glass, pok?ing at that sore on your mouth.

Aunt Cord dropped a chunk of cream?ery but?ter in?to her muck—Su?san had no idea how the wom?an stayed so thin, re?al?ly she didn't—and watched it be?gin to melt. For a mo?ment it seemed that break?fast might end on a rea?son?ably civ?ilized note, af?ter all.

Then the shirt busi?ness had be?gun.

"Be?fore ye go out, Su?san, I want ye to take off that rag you're wear ing and put on one of the new rid?ing blous?es Thorin sent ye week be?fore last. It's the least ye can

do to show yer—”

Any?thing her aunt might have said past that point would have been lost in anger even if Su?san hadn't in?ter?rupt?ed. She passed a hand down the sleeve of her shirt, lov?ing its tex?ture—it was al?most vel?vety from so many wash?ings. “This rag be?longed to my fa?ther!”

“Aye, Pat’s.” Aunt Cord sniffed. “It’s too big for ye, and worn out, and not prop?er, in any case. When you were young it was may?hap all right to wear a man’s but?ton-shirt, but now that ye have a wom?an’s bust?line ...”

The rid?ing blous?es were on hang?ers in the com?er; they had come four days ago and Su?san hadn't even deigned to take them up to her room. There were three of them, one red, one green, one blue, all silk, all un doubt?ed?ly worth a small for?tune. She loathed their pre?ten?sion, and the overblown, blushy-?frilly look of them: full sleeves to flut?ter ar?tis?ti?cal?ly in the wind, great flop?py fool?ish col?lars . . . and, of course, the low-?scooped fronts which were prob?ably all Thorin would see if she ap?peared be?fore him dressed in one. As she wouldn't, if she could pos?si?bly help it. “My ‘wom?an’s bust-?line,’ as you call it, is of no in?ter?est to me and can't pos?si?bly be of any in?ter?est to any?one else when I'm out rid?ing,” Su san said.

“Per?haps, per?haps not. If one of the Barony’s drovers should see you—even Ren?nie, he’s out that way all the time, as ye well know—it wouldn't hurt for him to men?tion to Hart that he saw yer wear?ing one of the camisas that he so kind?ly gave to ye. Now would it? Why do ye have lo he such a stiffkins, girl? Why al?ways so un?will?ing, so un?fair?”

“What does it mat?ter to ye, one way or t’oth?er?” Su?san had asked. “Ye have the mon?ey, don't ye? And ye'll have more yet. Af?ter he fucks me.”

Aunt Cord, her face white and shocked and fu?ri?ous, had leaned across the ta?ble and slapped her. “How dare thee use that word in my house, ye mal?habla?da? How dare ye?”

That was when her tears be?gan to flow—at hear?ing her call it her house. “It was my fa?ther’s house! His and mine! Ye were all on yer own with no re?al place to go, ex?cept per?haps to the Quar?ters, and he took ye in! He took ye in, Aunt!”

The last two or?ange sec?tions were still in her hand. She threw them in?to her aunt’s face, then pushed her?self back from the ta?ble so vi?olent?ly that her chair tot?tered, tipped, and spilled her to the floor. Her aunt’s shad?ow fell over her. Su?san crawled fran?ti?cal?ly out of it, her hair hang?ing, her slapped cheek throbb?ing, her eyes burn?ing with tears, her throat swelled and hot. At last she found her feet.

“Ye un?grate?ful girl,” her aunt said. Her voice was soft and so full of ven?om it was al?most ca?ress?ing. “Af?ter all I have done for thee, and all Hart Thorin has done for thee. Why, the very nag ye mean to ride this morn?ing was Hart’s gift of re?spect to—”

”PY?LON WAS OURS!“ she shrieked, al?most mad?dened with fury at this de?lib?er?ate blur?ring of the truth. ”ALL OF THEM WERE! THE HORS?ES, THE LAND—THEY WERE OURS!“

”Low?er thy voice,“ Aunt Cord said.

Su?san took a deep breath and tried to find some con?trol. She swept her hair back from her face, re?veal?ing the red print of Aunt Cord’s hand on her cheek. Cordelia

flinched a little at the sight of it.

"My father never would have allowed this," Susan said. "He never would have allowed me to go as Hart Thorin's gilly. Whatever he might have felt about Hart as the Mayor ... or as his patron ... he never would have allowed this. And ye know it. Thee knows it."

Aunt Cord rolled her eyes, then twirled a finger around her ear as if Susan had gone mad. "Thee agreed to it yourself, Miss Oh So Young and Pretty. Aye, so ye did. And if yer girlish megrims now cause ye to want to cry off what's been done—"

"Aye," Susan agreed. "I agreed to the bargain, so I did. After ye'd dunned me about it day and night, after ye'd come to me in tears—"

"I never did!" Cordelia cried, stung.

"Have ye forgotten so quick. Aunt? Aye, I suppose. As by tonight ye'll have forgotten slap-ping me at breakfast. Well, I haven't forgotten. Thee cried, all right, cried and told me ye feared we might be turned off the land, since we had no more legal right to it, that we'd be on the road, thee wept and said—"

"Stop calling me that!" Aunt Cord shouted. Nothing on earth had dented her so much as having her own thees and thous turned back at her. "Thee has no more right to the old tongue than thee has to thy stupid sheep's complaints! Go on! Get out!"

But Susan went on. Her rage was at the flood and would not be turned aside.

"Thee wept and said we'd be turned out, turned west, that we'd never see my da's homestead or Ham-bry again . . . and then, when I was frightened enough, ye talked of the cunning little baby I'd have. The land that was ours to begin with given back again. The horses that were ours like wise given back. As a sign of the Mayor's honesty, I have a horse I myself helped to foal. And what have I done to deserve these things that would have been mine in any case, but for the loss of a single paper? What have I done so that he should give ye money? What have I done save promise to fuck him while his wife of forty year sleeps down the hall?"

"Is it the money ye want, then?" Aunt Cord asked, smiling furiously. "Do ye and do ye and aye? Ye shall have it, then. Take it, keep it, lose it, feed it to the swine, I care not!"

She turned to her purse, which hung on a post by the stove. She began to fumble in it, but her motions quickly lost speed and conviction. There was an oval of mirror mounted to the left of the kitchen doorway, and in it Susan caught sight of her aunt's face. What she saw there—a mixture of hatred, dismay, and greed—made her heart sink.

"Never mind, Aunt. I see thee's loath to give it up, and I wouldn't have it, anyway. It's whore's money."

Aunt Cord turned back to her, face shocked, her purse conveniently forgotten. "'Tis not whoring, ye stupid get! Why, some of the greatest women in history have been gillys, and some of the greatest men have been born of gillys. 'Tis not whoring!"

Susan ripped the red silk blouse from where it hung and held it up. The shirt moulded itself to her breasts as if it had been longing all the while to touch them.

"Then why does he send me these whore's clothes?"

"Su?san!" Tears stood in Aunt Cord's eyes.

Su?san flung the shirt at her as she had the orange slices. It landed on her shoes.

"Pick it up and put it on yer?self, if ye fan?cy. You spread yer legs for him, if ye fan?cy."

She turned and hurled her?self out the door. Her aunt's half-?hys?ter?ical shriek had followed her: "Don't thee go off think?ing fool?ish thoughts, Su san! Fool?ish thoughts lead to fool?ish deeds, and it's too late for ei?ther! Thee's agreed!"

She knew that. And how?ev?er fast she rode Py?lon along the Drop, she could not out?race her know?ing. She had agreed, and no mat?ter how hor?ri fied Pat Del?ga?do might have been at the fix she had got?ten her?self in?to, he would have seen one thing clear—she had made a promise, and promis?es must be kept. Hell await?ed those who would not do so.

3

She eased the rosil?lo back while he still had plen?ty of wind. She looked be?hind her, saw that she had come near?ly a mile, and brought him down fur?ther—to a can?ter, a trot, a fast walk. She took a deep breath and let it out. For the first time that morn?ing she reg?is?tered the day's bright beau?ty—gulls cir?cling in the hazy air off to the west, high grass?es all around her, and flow?ers in ev?ery shad?ed cran?ny: corn?flow?ers and lupin and phlox and her fa?vorites, the del?icate blue silk?flow?ers. From ev?ery where came the som?no?lent buzz of bees. The sound soothed her, and with the high surge of her emo?tions sub?sid?ing a lit?tle, she was able to ad?mit some?thing to her?self... ad?mit it, and then voice it aloud.

"Will Dear?born," she said, and shiv?ered at the sound of his name on her lips, even though there was no one to hear it but Py?lon and the bees. So she said it again, and when the words were out she abruptly turned her own wrist in?ward to her mouth and kissed it where the blood beat close to the sur?face. The ac?tion shocked her be?cause she hadn't known she was go?ing to do it, and shocked her more be?cause the taste of her own skin and sweat aroused her im?me?di?ate?ly. She felt an urge to cool her?self off as she had in her bed af?ter meet?ing him. The way she felt, it would be short work.

In?stead, she growled her fa?ther's fa?vorite cuss—"Oh, bite it!"—and spat past her boot. Will Dear?born had been re?spon?si?ble for all too much up?set in her life these last three weeks; Will Dear?born with his un?set?tling blue eyes, his dark tum?ble of hair, and his stiff-?necked. judg?men?tal at?ti tude. I can be dis?creet, madam. As for pro?pri?ety? I'm amazed you even know the word.

Ev?ery time she thought of that, her blood sang with anger and shame. Most?ly anger. How dare he pre?sume to make judg?ments? He who had grown up pos?sess?ing ev?ery lux?ury, no doubt with ser?vants to tend his ev?ery whim and so much gold that he like?ly didn't even need it—he would be giv?en the things he want?ed free, as a way of cur?ry?ing fa?vor. What would a boy like that—for that was all he was, re?al?ly, just a boy—know about the hard choic?es she had made? For that mat?ter, how could such as Mr. Will Dear?born of Hemphill un?der?stand that she hadn't re?al?ly made those choic?es at all? That she had been car?ried to them the way a moth?er cat car?ries a way?ward kit?ten back to the nest?ing-?box, by the scruff of the

neck?

Still, he wouldn't leave her mind; she knew, even if Aunt Cord didn't, that there had been an unseen third present at their quarrel this morning.

She knew something else as well, something that would have upset her aunt to no end.

Will Dearborn hadn't forgotten her, either.

4

About a week after the welcoming dinner and Dearborn's disastrous, hurtful remark to her, the retarded slops-fella from the Travelers' Rest—Sheemie, folks called him—had appeared at the house Susan and her aunt shared. In his hands he held a large bouquet, mostly made up of the wild-flowers that grew out on the Drop, but with a scattering of dusky wild roses, as well. They looked like pink punctuation marks. On the boy's face there had been a wide, sunny grin as he swung the gate open, not waiting for an invitation.

Susan had been sweeping the front walk at the time; Aunt Cord had been out back, in the garden. That was fortunate, but not very surprising; these days the two of them got on best when they kept apart as much as they could.

Susan had watched Sheemie come up the walk, his grin beaming out from behind his upheld freight of flowers, with a mixture of fascination and horror.

"G'day, Susan Delgado, daughter of Pat," Sheemie said cheerfully. "I come to you on an errand and cry yer pardon at any troubleation I be, oh aye, for I am a problem for folks, and know it same as them. These be for you. Here."

He thrust them out, and she saw a small, folded envelope tucked amongst them.

"Susan?" Aunt Cord's voice, from around the side of the house . . . and getting closer. "Susan, did I hear the gate?"

"Yes, Aunt!" she called back. Curse the woman's sharp ears! Susan nimbly plucked the envelope from its place among the phlox and daisies. Into her dress pocket it went.

"They from my third-best friend," Sheemie said. "I got three different friends now. This many." He held up two fingers, frowned, added two more, and then grinned splendidly. "Arthur Heath my first-best friend, Dick Stockworth my second-best friend. My third-best friend—"

"Hush!" Susan said in a low, fierce voice that made Sheemie's smile fade. "Not a word about your three friends."

A funny little flush, almost like a pocket fever, raced across her skin—it seemed to run down her neck from her cheeks, then slip all the way to her feet. There had been a lot of talk in Ham-bry about Sheemie's new friends during the past week—talk about little else, it seemed. The stories she had heard were outlandish, but if they weren't true, why did the versions told by so many different witnesses sound so much alike?

Susan was still trying to get herself back under control when Aunt Cord swept around the corner. Sheemie fell back a step at the sight of her, puzzledly becoming outright dismay. Her aunt was allergic to beestings, and was presently swaddled from the top of her straw bonnet to the hem of her faded garden dress in

gauzy stuff that made her look peculiar in strong light and downright eerie in shade. Adding a final touch to her costume, she carried a pair of dirt-streaked garden shears in one gloved hand.

She saw the bouquet and bore down on it, shears raised. When she reached her niece, she slid the scissors into a loop on her belt (almost reluctantly, it seemed to the niece herself) and parted the veil on her face. "Who sent ye those?"

"I don't know. Aunt," Susan said, much more calmly than she felt. "This is the young man from the inn—"

"Inn!" Aunt Cord snorted.

"He doesn't seem to know who sent him," Susan carried on. If only she could get him out of here! "He's, well, I suppose you'd say he's—"

"He's a fool, yes, I know that." Aunt Cord cast Susan a brief, irritated look, then bent her attention on Sheemie. Talking with her gloved hands upon her knees, shouting directly into his face, she asked: "WHO . . . SENT . . . THESE . . . FLOWERS . . . YOUNG . . . MAN?"

The wings of her face-veil, which had been pushed aside, now fell back into place. Sheemie took another step backward. He looked frightened.

"WAS IT . . . PERHAPS . . . SOMEONE FROM . . . SEAFRONT? . . . FROM . . . MAYOR . . . THORIN? . . . TELL . . . ME . . . AND . . . I'LL . . . GIVE . . . YOU . . . A PENNY."

Susan's heart sank, sure he would tell—he'd not have the wit to understand he'd be getting her into trouble. Will, too, likely.

But Sheemie only shook his head. "Don't 'member. I got a empty head, sai, so I do. Stanley says I a bugwit."

His grin shone out again, a splendid thing full of white, even teeth. Aunt Cord answered it with a grimace. "Oh, fool! Be gone, then. Straight back to town, too—don't be hanging around hoping for a goose-feather. For a boy who can't remember deserves not so much as a penny! And don't you come back here again, no matter who wants you to carry flowers for the young sai. Do you hear me?" Sheemie had nodded energetically. Then: "Sai?"

Aunt Cord glowered at him. The vertical line on her forehead had been very prominent that day.

"Why you all wropped up in cobwebbies, sai?"

"Get out of here, ye impudent cull!" Aunt Cord cried. She had a good loud voice when she wanted to use it, and Sheemie jumped back from her in alarm. When she was sure he was headed back down the High Street toward town and had no intention of returning to their gate and hanging about in hopes of a tip, Aunt Cord had turned to Susan.

"Get those in some water before they wilt, Miss Oh So Young and Pretty, and don't go mooning about, wondering who yer secret admirer might be."

Then Aunt Cord had smiled. A real smile. What hurt Susan the most, confused her the most, was that her aunt was no candle-story ogre, no witch like Rhea of the Coos. There was no monster here, only a maiden lady with some few social pretensions, a love of gold and silver, and a tear of being turned out, penniless, into the world.

“For folks such as us, Susie-?pie,” she said, speak?ing with a ter?ri?ble heavy kind?ness, “ ’tis best to stick to our house?work and leave dreams to them as can af?ford them.”

5

She had been sure the flow?ers were from Will, and she was right. His note was writ?ten in a hand which was clear and pass?ing fair.

Dear Su?san Del?ga?do,

I spoke out of turn the oth?er night, and cry your par?don. May I see you and speak to you? It must be pri?vate. This is a mat?ter of im?por?tance. If you will see me, get a mes?sage to the boy who brings this. He is safe.

Will Dear?born

A mat?ter of im?por?tance. Un?der?lined. She felt a strong de?sire to know what was so im?por?tant to him, and cau?tioned her?self against do?ing any?thing fool?ish. Per?haps he was smit?ten with her ... and if so, whose fault was that? Who had talked to him, rid?den his horse, showed him her legs in a flashy car?ni?val dis?mount? Who had put her hands on his shoul?ders and kissed him?

Her cheeks and fore?head burned at the thought of that, and an?oth?er hot ring seemed to go slip?ping down her body. She wasn’t sure she re?gret ted the kiss, but it had been a mis?take, re?grets or no re?grets. See?ing him again now would be a worse one.

Yet she want?ed to see him, and knew in her deep?est heart that she was ready to set her anger at him aside. But there was the promise she had made.

The wretched promise.

That night she lay sleep?less, toss?ing about in her bed, first think?ing it would be bet?ter, more dig?ni?fied, just to keep her si?lence, then com?pos?ing men?tal notes any?way—some haughty, some cold, some with a lace-?edge of flir?ta?tion.

When she heard the mid?night bell ring, pass?ing the old day out and call?ing the new one in, she de?cid?ed enough was enough. She’d thrown her?self from her bed, gone to her door, opened it, and thrust her head out in?to the hall. When she heard Aunt Cord’s flute?like snores, she had closed her door again, crossed to her lit?tle desk by the win?dow, and lit her lamp. She took one of her sheets of parch?ment pa?per from the top draw?er, tore it in half (in Ham?bry, the on?ly crime greater than wast?ing pa?per was wast?ing thread?ed stock?line), and then wrote quick?ly, sens?ing that the slight?est hes?ita?tion might con?demn her to more hours of in?de?ci?sion. With no salu tation and no sig?na?ture, her re?sponse took on?ly a breath to write:

I may not see you. ‘Twould not be prop?er.

She had fold?ed it small, blew out her lamp, and re?turned to bed with the note safe?ly tucked un?der her pil?low. She was asleep in two min?utes. The fol?low?ing day, when the mar?ket?ing took her to town, she had gone by the Trav?ellers’ Rest, which, at eleven in the morn?ing, had all the charm of some?thing which has died bad?ly at the side of the road.

The sa?loon’s door-?yard was a beat?en dirt square bi?sect?ed by a long hitch?ing rail with a wa?ter?ing trough be?neath. Sheemie was trundling a wheel?bar?row along the rail, pick?ing up last night’s horse-?drop?pings with a shov?el. He was wear?ing a com?ical pink som?brero, and singing “Gold?en Slip?pers.” Su?san doubt?ed if many of

the Rest's patrons would wake up feeling as well as Sheemie obviously did this morning ... so who, when you came right down to it, was more soft-headed?

She looked around to make sure no one was paying heed to her, then went over to Sheemie and tapped him on the shoulder. He looked frightened at first, and Susan didn't blame him—according to the stories she'd been hearing, Jonas's friend De'pape had almost killed the poor kid for spilling a drink on his boots.

Then Sheemie recognized her. "Hello, Susan Delgado from out there by the edge of town," he said companionably. "It's a good day I wish you, sai."

He bowed—an amusing imitation of the Inner Baronies bow favored by his three new friends. Smiling, she dropped him a bit of curtsey (wearing jeans, she had to pretend at the skirt-holding part, but women in Mejis got used to curtseying in pretend skirts).

"See my flowers, sai?" he asked, and pointed toward the unpainted side of the Rest. What she saw touched her deeply: a line of mixed blue and white silkflowers growing along the base of the building. They looked both brave and pathetic, flurrying there in the faint morning breeze with the bald, turdlittered yard before them and the splintery public house behind them.

"Did you grow those, Sheemie?"

"Aye, so I did. And Mr. Arthur Heath of Gilead has promised me yellow ones."

"I've never seen yellow silkflowers."

"Noey-no, me neither, but Mr. Arthur Heath says they have them in Gilead." He looked at Susan solemnly, the shovel held in his hands as a soldier would hold a gun or spear at port arms. "Mr. Arthur Heath saved my life. I'd do anything for him."

"Would you, Sheemie?" she asked, touched.

"Also, he has a lookout! It's a bird's head! And when he talks to it, tendency-pre-tend, do I laugh? Aye, fit to split!"

She looked around again to make sure no one was watching (save for the carved totems across the street), then removed her note, folded small, from her jeans pocket.

"Would you give this to Mr. Dearborn for me? He's also your friend, is he not?"

"Will? Aye!" He took the note and put it carefully into his own pocket.

"And tell no one."

"Shh!hhh!" he agreed, and put a finger to his lips. His eyes had been amusingly round beneath the ridiculous pink lady's straw he wore. "Like when I brought you the flowers. Hushaboo!"

"That's right, hushaboo. Fare ye well, Sheemie."

"And you, Susan Delgado."

He went back to his cleanup operations. Susan had stood watching him for a moment, feeling uneasy and out of sorts with herself. Now that the note was successfully passed, she felt an urge to ask Sheemie to give it back, to scratch out what she had written, and promise to meet him. If only to see his steady blue eyes again, looking into her face.

Then Jonas's other friend, the one with the cloak, came sauntering out of the mercantile. She was sure he didn't see her—his head was down and he was rolling

a cigarette—but she had no intention of pressing her luck. Reynolds talked to Jonas, and Jonas talked—all too much!—to Aunt Cord. If Aunt Cord heard she had been passing the time of day with the boy who had brought her the flowers, there were apt to be questions. Ones she didn't want to answer.

6

All that's history now, Susan—water under the bridge. Best to get your thoughts out of the past.

She brought Pylon to a stop and looked down the length of the Drop at the horses that moved and grazed there. Quite a surprising number of them this morning. It wasn't working. Her mind kept turning back to Will Dearborn.

What bad luck meeting him had been! If not for that chance encounter on her way back down from the Coos, she might well have made peace with her situation by now—she was a practical girl, after all, and a promise was a promise. She certainly never would have expected herself to get all goosy-gushy over losing her maidenhead, and the prospect of carrying and bearing a child actually excited her. But Will Dearborn had changed things; had gotten into her head and now lodged there, a tenant who defied eviction. His remark to her as they danced stayed with her like a song you can't stop humming, even though you hate it. It had been cruel and stupidly self-righteous, that remark ... but was there not also a grain of truth in it? Rhea had been right about Hart Thorin, of that much Susan no longer had any doubt. She supposed that witches were right about men's lusts even when they were wrong about everything else. Not a happy thought, but likely a true one. It was Will Be Damned to You Dearborn who had made it difficult for her to accept what needed accepting, who had goaded her into arguments in which she could hardly recognize her own shrill and desperate voice, who came to her in her dreams—dreams where he put his arms around her waist and kissed her, kissed her, kissed her.

She dismounted and walked downhill a little way with the reins looped in her fist. Pylon followed willingly enough, and when she stopped to look off into the blue haze to the southwest, he lowered his head and began to crop again.

She thought she needed to see Will Dearborn once more, if only to give her innate practicality a chance to reassert itself. She needed to see him at his right size, instead of the one her mind had created for him in her warm thoughts and warmer dreams. Once that was done, she could get on with her life and do what needed doing. Perhaps that was why she had taken this path—the same one she'd ridden yesterday, and the day before yesterday, and the day before that. He rode this part of the Drop; that much she had heard in the lower market.

She turned away from the Drop, suddenly knowing he would be there, as if her thought had called him—or her ka.

She saw only blue sky and low ridge-line hills that curved gently like the line of a woman's thigh and hip and waist as she lies on her side in bed. Susan felt a better disappointment fill her. She could almost taste it in her mouth, like wet tea leaves. She started back to Pylon, meaning to return to the house and take care of the apology she reckoned she must make. The sooner she did it, the sooner it would be done. She reached for her left stirrup, which was twisted a little, and as she did, a

riding came over the horizon, breaking against the sky at the place which looked to her like a woman's hip. He sat there, only a silhouette on horseback, but she knew who it was at once.

Run! she told herself in a sudden panic. Mount and gallop! Get out of here!

Quickly! Before something terrible happens . . . before it really is ka, come like a wind to take you and all your plans over the sky and far away!

She didn't run. She stood with Pyllon's reins in one hand, and murmured to him when the rosillo looked up and nodded a greeting to the big bay-colored gelding coming down the hill.

Then Will was there, first above her and looking down, then dismounted in an easy, liquid motion she didn't think she could have matched, for all her years of horsemanship. This time there was no kicked-out leg and planted heel, no hat swept over a comical, solemn bow; this time the gaze he gave her was steady and serious and disquietingly adult.

They looked at each other in the Drop's big silence, Roland of Gilead and Susan of Mejis, and in her heart she felt a wind begin to blow. She feared it and welcomed it in equal measure.

7

"Good-morn, Susan," he said. "I'm glad to see you again."

She said nothing, waiting and watching. Could he hear her heart beating as clearly as she could? Of course not; that was so much romantic twaddle. Yet it still seemed to her that everything within a fifty-yard radius should be able to hear that thumping.

Will took a step forward. She took a step back, looking at him mistrustfully. He lowered his head for a moment, then looked up again, his lips set.

"I cry your pardon," he said.

"Do you?" Her voice was cool.

"What I said that night was unwarranted."

At that she felt a spark of real anger. "I care not that it was unwarranted; I care that it was unfair. That it hurt me."

A tear overbrimmed her left eye and slipped down her cheek. She wasn't all cried out after all, it seemed.

She thought what she said would perhaps shame him, but although faint color came into his cheeks, his eyes remained firmly on hers.

"I fell in love with you," he said. "That's why I said it. It happened even before you kissed me, I think."

She laughed at that . . . but the simplicity with which he had spoken made her laughter sound false in her own ears. Tiny. "Mr. Dearborn—"

"Will. Please."

"Mr. Dearborn," she said, patiently as a teacher working with a dull student, "the idea is ridiculous. On the basis of one single meeting? One single kiss? A sister's kiss?" Now she was the one who was blushing, but she hurried on. "Such things happen in stories, but in real life? I think not."

But his eyes never left hers, and in them she saw some of Roland's truth: the deep romance of his nature, buried like a fabulous streak of alien metal in the granite of

his practicality. He accepted love as a fact rather than a flow, and it rendered her genial contempt powerless over both of them.

"I cry your pardon," he repeated. There was a kind of brute stubbornness in him. It exasperated her, amused her, and appalled her, all at the same time. "I don't ask you to return my love, that's not why I spoke. You told me your affairs were complicated . . ." Now his eyes did leave hers, and he looked off toward the Drop. He even laughed a little. "I called him a bit of a fool, didn't I? To your face. So who's the fool, after all?"

She smiled; couldn't help it. "Ye also said ye'd heard he was fond of strong drink and berry-girls."

Roland hit his forehead with the heel of his hand. If his friend Arthur Heath had done that, she would have taken it as a deliberate, comic gesture. Not with Will. She had an idea he wasn't much for comedy.

Silence between them again, this time not so uncomfortable. The two horses, Rusher and Pylon, cropping contentedly, side by side. If we were horses, all this would be much easier, she thought, and almost giggled.

"Mr. Dearborn, ye understand that I have agreed to an arrangement?"

"Aye." He smiled when she raised her eyebrows in surprise. "It's not mockery but the dialect. It just . . . seeps in."

"Who told ye of my business?"

"The Mayor's sister."

"Coral." She wrinkled her nose and decided she wasn't surprised. And she supposed there were others who could have explained her situation even more crudely. Eldred Jonas, for one. Rhea of the Coos, for another. Best to leave it. "So if ye understand, and if ye don't ask me to return your . . . whatever it is ye think ye feel . . . why are we talking? Why do ye seek me out? I think it makes ye passing uncomfortable—"

"Yes," he said, and then, as if stating a simple fact: "It makes me uncomfortable, all right. I can barely look at you and keep my head."

"Then maybe it'd be best not to look, not to speak, not to think!" Her voice was both sharp and a little shaky. How could he have the courage to say such things, to just state them straight out and stare-eyed like that? "Why did ye send me the bouquet and that note? Are ye not aware of the trouble ye could've gotten me into? If y'knew my aunt. . . ! She's already spoken to me about ye, and if she knew about the note . . . or saw us together out here . . ."

She looked around, verifying that they were still unobserved. They were, at least as best she could tell. He reached out, touched her shoulder. She looked at him, and he pulled his fingers back as if he had put them on something hot.

"I said what I did so you'd understand," he said. "That's all. I feel how I feel, and you're not responsible for that."

But I am, she thought. I kissed you. I think I'm more than a little responsible for how we both feel. Will.

"What I said while we were dancing I regret with all my heart. Won't you give me your pardon?"

"Aye," she said, and if he had taken her in his arms at that moment, she would

have let him, and damn the consequences. But he only took off his hat and made her a charming little bow, and the wind died.

"Thankee-sai."

"Don't call me that. I hate it. My name is Susan."

"Will you call me Will?"

She nodded.

"Good. Susan, I want to ask you something—not as the fellow who insulted you and hurt you because he was jealous. This is something else entirely. May I?"

"Aye, I suppose," she said warily.

"Are you for the Affiliation?"

She looked at him, flabbergasted. It was the last question in the world she had expected . . . but he was looking at her seriously.

"I'd expected ye and yer friends to count cows and guns and spears and boats and who knows what else," she said, "but I didn't think thee would also count

Affiliation supporters."

She saw his look of surprise, and a little smile at the corners of his mouth. This time the smile made him look older than he could possibly be. Susan thought back across what she'd just said, realized what must have struck him, and gave a small, embarrassed laugh. "My aunt has a way of lapsing in to thee and thou. My father did, too. It's from a sect of the Old People who called themselves Friends."

"I know. We have the Friendly Folk in my part of the world still."

"Do you?"

"Yes . . . or aye, if you like the sound of that better; I'm coming to. And I like the way the Friends talk. It has a lovely sound."

"Not when my aunt uses it," Susan said, thinking back to the argument over the shirt. "To answer your question, aye—I'm for the Affiliation, I suppose. Because my da was. If ye ask am I strong for the Affiliation, I suppose not. We see and hear little enough of them, these days. Mostly rumors and stories carried by drifters and far-traveling drummers. Now that there's no railway . . ." She shrugged.

"Most of the ordinary day-to-day folk I've spoken to seem to feel the same. And yet your May or Thorin—"

"He's not my May or Thorin," she said, more sharply than she had intended.

"And yet the Barony's May or Thorin has given us every help we've asked for, and some we haven't. I have only to snap my fingers, and Kimba Rimer stands before me."

"Then don't snap them," she said, looking around in spite of herself. She tried to smile and show it was a joke, but didn't make much success of it.

"The townsfolk, the fisherfolk, the farmers, the cowboys . . . they all speak well of the Affiliation, but distantly. Yet the May or, his Chancellor, and the members of the Horsemen's Association, Lengyll and Garber and that lot—"

"I know them," she said shortly.

"They're absolutely enthusiastic in their support. Mention the Affiliation to Sheriff Avery and he all but dances. In every ranch parlor we're offered a drink from an Eld commemorative cup, it seems."

"A drink of what?" she asked, a trifling roguishly. "Beer? Ale? Graf?"

"Also wine, whiskey, and pettibone," he said, not responding to her smile. "It's almost as if they wish us to break our vow. Does that strike you as strange?"

"Aye, a little; or just as Hambrysthospitality. In these parts, when someone—especially a young man—says he's taken the pledge, folks tend to think him coy, not serious."

"And this joyful support of the Affiliation amongst the movers and the shakers? How does that strike you?"

"Queer."

And it did. Pat Delgado's work had brought him in almost daily contact with these landowners and horsebreeders, and so she, who had tagged after her da any time he would let her, had seen plenty of them. She thought them a cold bunch, by and large. She couldn't imagine John Croydon or Jake White waving an Arthur Eldstein in a sentimental toast... especially not in the middle of the day, when there was stock to be run and sold.

Will's eyes were full upon her, as if he were reading these thoughts.

"But you probably don't see as much of the big fellows as you once did," he said.

"Before your father passed, I mean."

"Perhaps not. . . but do bumpsters learn to speak backward?"

No cautious smile this time; this time he outright grinned. It lit his whole face.

Gods, how handsome he was! "I suppose not. No more than cats change their spots, as we say. And Maybor Thorin doesn't speak of such as us—me and my friends—to you when you two are alone? Or is that question beyond what I have a right to ask? I suppose it is."

"I care not about that," she said, tossing her head pertly enough to make her long braid swing. "I understand little of propriety, as some have been good enough to point out." But she didn't care as much for his downcast look and flush of embarrassment as she had expected. She knew girls who liked to tease as well as flirt and to tease hard, some of them— but it seemed she had no taste for it.

Certainly she had no desire to set her claws in him, and when she went on, she spoke gently. "I'm not alone with him, in any case."

And oh how ye do lie, she thought mournfully, remembering how Thorin had embraced her in the hall on the night of the party, groping at her breasts like a child trying to get his hand into a candy-jar; telling her that he burned for her. Oh ye great liar.

"In any case, Will, Hart's opinion of you and yer friends can hardly concern ye, can it? Ye have a job to do, that's all. If he helps ye, why not just accept and be grateful?"

"Because something's wrong here," he said, and the serious, almost somber quality of his voice frightened her a little.

"Wrong? With the Maybor? With the Horsemen's Association? What are ye talking about?"

He looked at her steadily, then seemed to decide something. "I'm going to trust you, Susan."

"I'm not sure I want thy trust any more than I want thy love," she said.

He nodded. "And yet, to do the job I was sent to do, I have to trust someone. Can you understand that?"

She looked into his eyes, then nodded.

He stepped next to her, so close she fancied she could feel the warmth of his skin.

"Look down there. Tell me what you see."

She looked, then shrugged. "The Drop. Same as always." She smiled a little. "And as beautiful. This has always been my favorite place in all the world."

"Aye, it's beautiful, all right. What else do you see?"

"Horses, of course." She smiled to show this was a joke (an old one of her dad's, in fact), but he didn't smile back. Fair to look at, and courageous, if the stories they were already telling about town were true— quick in both thought and movement, too. Really not much sense of humor, though. Well, there were worse failings. Grabbing a girl's bosom when she wasn't expecting it might be one of them.

"Horses. Yes. But does it look like the right number of them? You've been seeing horses on the Drop all your life, and surely no one who's not in the Horsemen's Association is better qualified to say."

"And ye don't trust them?"

"They've given us everything we've asked for, and they're as friendly as dogs under the dinner-table, but no—I don't think I do."

"Yet ye'd trust me."

He looked at her steadily with his beautiful and frightening eyes—a darker blue than they would later be, not yet faded out by the suns of ten thousand drifting days. "I have to trust someone," he repeated.

She looked down, almost as though he had rebuked her. He reached out, put gentle fingers beneath her chin, and tipped her face up again. "Does it seem the right number? Think carefully!"

But now that he'd brought it to her attention, she hardly needed to think about it at all. She had been aware of the change for some time, she supposed, but it had been gradual, easy to overlook.

"No," she said at last. "It's not right."

"Too few or too many? Which?"

She paused for a moment. Drew in breath. Let it out in a long sigh. "Too many. Far too many."

Will Dearborn raised his clenched fists to shoulder-height and gave them a single hard shake. His blue eyes blazed like the spark-lights of which her grand-da had told her. "I knew it," he said. "I knew it."

8

"How many horses are down there?" he asked.

"Below us? Or on the whole Drop?"

"Just below us."

She looked carefully, making no attempt to accurately count. That didn't work; it only confused you. She saw four good-sized groups of about twenty horses each, moving about on the green almost exactly as birds moved about in the blue above them. There were perhaps nine smaller groups, ranging from octets to quartets ... several pairs (they reminded her of lovers, but everything did today, it seemed) ...

a few gallop?ing lon?ers—young stal?ions, most?ly . . .

“A hun?dred and six?ty?” he asked in a low, al?most hes?itant voice.

She looked at him, sur?prised. “Aye. A hun?dred six?ty’s the num?ber I had in mind. To a pin.”

“And how much of the Drop are we look?ing at? A quar?ter? A third?”

“Much less.” She tilt?ed him a small smile. “As I think thee knows. A sixth of the to?tal open graze, per?haps.”

“If there are a hun?dred and six?ty hors?es free-?graz?ing on each sixth, that comes to ..
.”

She wait?ed for him to come up with nine hun?dred and six?ty. When he did, she nod?ded. He looked down a mo?ment longer, and grunt?ed with sur?prise when Rush?er nosed him in the small of the back. Su?san put a curled hand to her mouth to sti?fle a laugh. From the im?pa?tient way he pushed the horse’s muz?zle away, she guessed he still saw lit?tle that was fun?ny.

“How many more are sta?bled or train?ing or work?ing, do you reck?on?” he asked.

“One for ev?ery three down there. At a guess.”

“So we’d be talk?ing twelve hun?dred head of hors?es. All thread?ed stock, no mu?ties.”

She looked at him with faint sur?prise. “Aye. There’s al?most no mu?tie stock here in Mejis . . . in any of the Out?er Ba?ronies, for that mat?ter.”

“You true-?breed more than three out of ev?ery five?”

“We breed em all! Of course ev?ery now and then we get a freak that has to be put down, but—”

“Not one freak out of ev?ery five live?births? One out of five born with—” How had Ren?frew put it? “With ex?tra legs or its guts on the out?side?”

Her shocked look was enough an?swer. “Who’s been telling ye such?”

“Ren?frew. He al?so told me that there was about five hun?dred and sev en?ty head of thread?ed stock here in Mejis.”

“That’s just . . .” She gave a be?wil?dered lit?tle laugh. “Just crazy! If my da was here—”

“But he’s not,” Roland said, his tone as dry as a snap?ping twig. “He’s dead.”

For a mo?ment she seemed not to reg?is?ter the change in that tone. Then, as if an eclipse had be?gun to hap?pen some?where in?side her head, her en?tire as?pect dark?ened. “My da had an ac?ci?dent. Do you un?der?stand that, Will Dear?born? An ac?ci?dent. It was ter?ri?bly sad, but the sort of thing that hap?pens, some?times. A horse rolled on him. Ocean Foam. Fran says Foam saw a snake in the grass.”

“Fran Lengyll?”

“Aye.” Her skin was pale, ex?cept for two wild ros?es—pink, like those in the bou?quet he’d sent her by way of Sheemie—glow?ing high up on her cheek?bones.

“Fran rode many miles with my fa?ther. They weren’t great friends—they were of dif?fer?ent class?es, for one thing—but they rode to geth?er. I’ve a cap put away some?where that Fran’s first wife made for my chris?ten?ing. They rode the trail to?geth?er. I can’t be?lieve Fran Lengyll would lie about how my da died, let alone that he had . . . any?thing to do with it.”

Yet she looked doubt?ful?ly down at the run?ning hors?es. So many. Too many. Her da would have seen. And her da would have won?dered what she was won?der?ing

now: whose brands were on the extras?

"It so happens Fran Lengyll and my friend Stockworth had a discussion about horses," Will said. His voice sounded almost casual, but there was nothing casual on his face. "Over glasses of spring water, after beer had been offered and refused. They spoke of them much as I did with Renfrew at Mayor Thorin's welcoming dinner. When Richard asked said Lengyll to estimate riding horses, he said perhaps four hundred."

"Insane."

"It would seem so," Will agreed.

"Do they not know the horses are out here where ye can see em?"

"They know we've barely gotten started," he said, "and that we've begun with the fisherfolk. We'll be a month yet, I'm sure they think, before we start to concern ourselves with the horseflesh hereabouts. And in the meantime, they have an attitude about us of... how shall I put it? Well, never mind how I'd put it. I'm not very good with words, but my friend Arthur calls it 'genial contempt.' They leave the horses out in front of our eyes, I think, because they don't believe we'll know what we're looking at. Or because they think we won't believe what we're seeing. I'm very glad I found you out here."

Just so I could give you a more accurate horse-count? Is that the only reason?

"But ye will get around to counting the horses. Eventually. I mean, that must surely be one of the Affiliation's main needs."

He gave her an odd look, as if she had missed something that should have been obvious. It made her feel self-conscious.

"What? What is it?"

"Perhaps they expect the extra horses to be gone by the time we get around to this side of the Barony's business."

"Gone where?"

"I don't know. But I don't like this. Susan, you will keep this just between the two of us, won't you?"

She nodded. She'd be insane to tell anyone she had been with Will Dearborn, unchanged except by Rusher and Pylon, out on the Drop.

"It may all turn out to be nothing, but if it doesn't, knowing could be dangerous."

Which led back to her da again. Lengyll had told her and Aunt Cord that Pat had been thrown, and that Ocean Foam had then rolled upon him. Neither of them had had any reason to doubt the man's story. But Fran Lengyll had also told Will's friend that there were only four hundred head of riding stock in Mejis, and that was a bald lie.

Will turned to his horse, and she was glad.

Darktower 4 - Wizard and Glass

Part of her want?ed him to stay—to stand close to her while...

long shadows fly?ing across the grass?land—but they had been to geth?er out here too long al?ready. There was no rea?son to think any?one would come along and see them, but in?stead of com?fort?ing her, that idea for some rea?son made her more ner?vous than ev?er.

He straight?ened the stir?rup hang?ing be?side the scab?bard?ed shaft of his lance (Rush?er whick?ered way back in his throat, as if to say About time we got go?ing), then turned to her again. She felt ac?tu?al?ly faint as his gaze fell up?on her, and now the idea of ka was al?most too strong to de?ny. She tried to tell her?self it was just the dim—that feel?ing of hav?ing lived a thing be fore—but it wasn't the dim; it was a sense of find?ing a road one had been search?ing for all along.

“There's some?thing else I want to say. I don't like re?turn?ing to where we start?ed, but I must.”

“No,” she said faint?ly. “That's closed, sure?ly.”

“I told you that I loved you, and that I was jeal?ous,” he said, and for the first time his voice had come unan?chored a lit?tle, wa?ver?ing in his throat. She was alarmed to see that there were tears stand?ing in his eyes. “There was more. Some?thing more.”

“Will, I don't want to—” She turned blind?ly for her horse. He took her shoul?der and turned her back. It wasn't a harsh touch, but there was an in?ex?ora?bil?ity to it that was dread?ful. She looked help?less?ly up in?to his face, saw that he was young and far from home, and sud?den?ly un?der?stood she could not stand against him for long. She want?ed him so bad?ly that she ached with it. She would have giv?en a year of her life just to be able to put her palms on his cheeks and feel his skin.

“You miss your fa?ther, Su?san?”

“Aye,” she whis?pered. “With all my heart I do.”

“I miss my moth?er the same way.” He held her by both shoul?ders now. One eye over?brimmed; one tear drew a sil?ver line down his cheek.

“Is she dead?”

“No, but some?thing hap?pened. About her. To her. Shit! How can I talk about it when I don't even know how to think about it? In a way, she did die. For me.”

“Will, that's ter?ri?ble.”

He nod?ded. “The last time I saw her, she looked at me in a way that will haunt me to my grave. Shame and love and hope, all of them bound up to?geth?er. Shame at what I'd seen and knew about her, hope, maybe, that I'd un?der?stand and for?give . . .” He took a deep breath. “The night of the par?ty, to?ward the end of the meal, Rimer said some?thing fun?ny. You all laughed—”

“If I did, it was on?ly be?cause it would have looked strange if I was the on?ly one who didn't,” Su?san said. “I don't like him. I think he's a schemer and a con?niv?er.”

“You all laughed, and I hap?pened to look down to?ward the end of the ta?ble.

To?ward Olive Thorin. And for a mo?ment—on?ly a mo?ment—I thought she was my moth?er. The ex?pres?sion was the same, you see. The same one I saw on the morn?ing when I opened the wrong door at the wrong time and came up?on my moth?er and her—”

”Stop it!“ she cried, pulling back from his hands. In?side her, ev?ery thing was

sud?den?ly in mo?tion, all the moor?ing-?lines and buck?les and clamps she'd been us?ing to hold her?self to?geth?er seem?ing to melt at once. "Stop it, just stop it, I can't lis?ten to you talk about her!"

She groped out for Py?lon, but now the whole world was wet prisms. She be?gan to sob. She felt his hands on her shoul?ders, turn?ing her again, and she did not re?sist them.

"I'm so ashamed," she said. "I'm so ashamed and so fright?ened and I'm sor?ry. I've for?got?ten my fa?ther's face and . . . and . . ."

And I'll nev?er be able to find it again, she want?ed to say, but she didn't have to say any?thing. He stopped her mouth with his kiss?es. At first she just let her?self be kissed . . . and then she was kiss?ing him back, kiss ing him al?most fu?ri?ous?ly. She wiped the wet?ness from be?neath his eyes with soft lit?tle sweeps of her thumbs, then slipped her palms up his cheeks as she had longed to do. The feel?ing was exquisite; even the soft rasp of the stub?ble close to the skin was exquisite. She slid her arms around his neck, her open mouth on his, hold?ing him and kiss?ing him as hard as she could, kiss?ing him there be?tween the hors?es, who sim?ply looked at each oth?er and then went back to crop?ping grass.

9

They were the best kiss?es of his whole life, and nev?er for?got?ten: the yield ing pli?an?cy of her lips and the strong shape of her teeth un?der them, ur gent and not shy in the least; the fra?grance of her breath, the sweet line of her body pressed against his. He slipped a hand up to her left breast, squeezed it gen?tly, and felt her heart speed?ing un?der it. His oth?er hand went to her hair and combed along the side of it, silk at her tem?ple. He nev?er for?got its tex?ture.

Then she was stand?ing away from him, her face flam?ing with blush and pas?sion, one hand go?ing to her lips, which he had kissed un?til they were swollen. A lit?tle trick?le of blood ran from the com?er of the low?er one. Her eyes, wide on his. Her bo?som ris?ing and falling as if she had just run a race. And be?tween them a cur?rent that was like noth?ing he had ev?er felt in his life. It ran like a riv?er and shook like a fever.

"No more," she said in a trem?bling voice. "No more, please. If you re?al?ly do love me, don't let me dis?hon?or my?self. I've made a promise. Any?thing might come lat?er, af?ter that promise was ful?filled, I sup?pose . . . if you still want?ed me . . ."

"I would wait for?ev?er," he said calm?ly, "and do any?thing for you but stand away and watch you go with an?oth?er man."

"Then if you love me, go away from me. Please, Will!"

"An?oth?er kiss."

She stepped for?ward at once, rais?ing her face trust?ing?ly up to his, and he un?der?stood he could do what?ev?er he want?ed with her. She was, at least for the mo?ment, no longer her own mis?tress; she might con?se?quent?ly be his. He could do to her what Marten had done to his own moth?er, if that was his fan?cy.

The thought broke his pas?sion apart, turned it to coals that fell in a bright show?er, wink?ing out one by one in a dark be?wil?der?ment. His fa ther's ac?cep?tance (I have known for two years)

was in many ways the worst part of what had hap?pened to him this year; how

could he fall in love with this girl—any girl—in a world where such evils of the heart seemed necessary, and might even be repeated?

Yet he did love her.

Instead of the passionate kiss he wanted, he placed his lips lightly on the corner of her mouth where the little rill of blood flowed. He kissed, tasting salt like the taste of his own tears. He closed his eyes and shivered when her hand stroked the hair at the nape of his neck.

"I'd not hurt Olive Thorin for the world," she whispered in his ear. "No more than I'd hurt thee, Will. I didn't understand, and now 'tis too late to be put right. But thank you for not... not taking what you could. And I'll remember you always. How it was to be kissed by you. It's the best thing that ever happened to me, I think. Like heaven and earth all wrapped up together, aye."

"I'll remember, too." He watched her swing up into the saddle, and remembered how her bare legs had flashed in the dark on the night he had met her. And suddenly he couldn't let her go. He reached forward, touched her boot.

"Susan—"

"No," she said. "Please."

He stood back. Somehow.

"This is our secret," she said. "Yes?"

"Aye."

She smiled at that... but it was a sad smile. "Stay away from me from now on, Will. Please. And I'll stay away from you."

He thought about it. "If we can."

"We must, Will. We must."

She rode away fast. Roland stood beside Rusher's stirrup, watching her go. And when she was out of sight over the horizon, still he watched.

10

Sheriff Avery, Deputy Dave, and Deputy George Rigbins were sitting on the porch in front of the Sheriff's office and jail when Mr. Stockworth and Mr. Heath (the latter with that idiotic bird's skull still mounted on the horn of his saddle) went past at a steady walk. The bell o' noon had rung fifteen minutes before, and Sheriff Avery reckoned they were on their way to lunch, perhaps at The Millbank, or perhaps at the Rest, which put on a fair noon meal. Popkins and such. Avery liked something a little more filling; half a chicken or a haunch of beef suited him just fine.

Mr. Heath gave them a wave and a grin. "Good day, gents! Long life! Gentle breezes! Happy sies'tas!"

They waved and smiled back. When they were out of sight, Dave said: "They spent all mornin down there on the piers, countin nets. Nets! Do you believe it?"

"Yessir," Sheriff Avery said, lifting one massive cheek a bit out of his rocker and letting off a noisy pre-luncheon fart. "Yessir, I do. Aye."

George said: "If not for them facin off Jonas's boys the way they done, I'd think they was a pack of fools."

"Nor would they likely mind," Avery said. He looked at Dave, who was twirling his monocle on the end of its ribbon and looking off in the direction the boys had

take. There were folks in town who had begun calling the Affliction brats Little Coffin Hunters. Avery wasn't sure what to make of that. He'd soothed it down between them and Thorin's hard boys, and had gotten both a commendation and a piece of gold from Rimer for his efforts, but still. . . what to make of them?

"The day they came in," he said to Dave, "ye thought they were soft. How do ye say now?"

"Now?" Dave twirled his monocle a final time, then popped it in his eye and stared at the Sheriff through it. "Now I think they might have been a little harder than I thought, after all."

Yes indeed, Avery thought. But hard don't mean smart, thank the gods. Aye, thank the gods for that.

"I'm hungry as a bull, so I am," he said, getting up. He bent, put his hands on his knees, and ripped off another loud fart. Dave and George looked at each other. George fanned a hand in front of his face. Sheriff Herkimer Avery, Barony Sheriff, straightened up, looking both relieved and antipathetic. "More room out than there is in," he said. "Come on, boys. Let's go downstreet and tuck into a little."

11

Not even sunset could do much to improve the view from the porch of the Bar K bunkhouse. The building—except for the cook-shack and the stable, the only one still standing on what had been the home acre—was L-shaped, and the porch was built on the inside of the short arm. Left for them on it had been just the right number of seats: two splintery rockers and a wooden crate to which an unstable board back had been nailed.

On this evening. Alain sat in one of the rockers and Cuthbert sat on the box-seat, which he seemed to fancy. On the rail, peering across the beaten dirt of the doorway and toward the burned-out hulk of the Garber home place, was the lookout.

Alain was bone-tired, and although both of them had bathed in the stream near the west end of the home acre, he thought he still smelled fish and seaweed on himself. They had spent the day counting nets. He was not averse to hard work, even when it was monotonous, but he didn't like pointless work. Which this was. Ham-bry came in two parts: the fishers and the horse-breeders. There was nothing for them among the fishers, and after three weeks all three of them knew it. Their answers were out on the Drop, at which they had so far done no more than look.

At Roland's order.

The wind gusted, and for a moment they could hear the low, grumbling, squealing sound of the thimny.

"I hate that sound," Alain said.

Cuthbert, unusually silent and introspective tonight, nodded and said only "Aye."

They were all saying that now, not to mention So you do and So I am and So it is.

Alain suspected the three of them would have Ham-bry on their tongues long after they had wiped its dust from their boots.

From behind them, inside the bunkhouse door, came a less unpleasant sound—the cooing of pigeons. And then, from around the side of the bunkhouse, a third, for

which he and Cuthbert had unconsciously been listening as they sat watching the sun go down: horse's hoofs. Rusher's.

Roland came around the corner, riding easy, and as he did, something happened that struck Alain as oddly portentous ... a kind of omen. There was a flurry-flutter of wings, a dark shape in the air, and suddenly a bird was roosting on Roland's shoulder.

He didn't jump; barely looked around. He rode up to the hitching rail and sat there, holding out his hand. "Hile," he said softly, and the pigeon stepped into his palm. Bound to one of its legs was a capsule. Roland removed it, opened it, and took out a tiny strip of paper, which had been rolled tight. In his other hand he held the pigeon out.

"Hile," Alain said, holding out his own hand. The pigeon flew to it. As Roland dismounted, Alain took the pigeon into the bunkhouse, where the cages had been placed beneath an open window. He ungated the center one and held out his hand. The pigeon which had just arrived hopped in; the pigeon in the cage hopped out and into his palm. Alain shut the cage door, latched it, crossed the room, and turned up the pillow of Bert's bunk. Beneath it was a linen envelope containing a number of blank paper strips and a tiny storage-pen. He took one of the strips and the pen, which held its own small reservoir of ink and did not have to be dipped. He went back out on the porch. Roland and Cuthbert were studying the unrolled strip of paper the pigeon had delivered from Gilead. On it was a line of tiny geometric shapes:

"What does it say?" Alain asked. The code was simple enough, but he could not get it by heart or read it on sight, as Roland and Bert had been able to, almost immediately. Alain's talents—his ability to track, his easy access to the touch—lay in other directions.

"'Farson moves east,' " Cuthbert read. "'Forces split, one big, one small. Do you see anything unusual.' " He looked at Roland, almost offended. "Anything unusual, what does that mean?"

Roland shook his head. He didn't know. He doubted if the men who had sent the message—of whom his own father was almost surely one—did, either.

Alain handed Cuthbert the strip and the pen. With one finger Bert stroked the head of the softly cooing pigeon. It ruffled its wings as if already anxious to be off to the west.

"What shall I write?" Cuthbert asked. "The same?"

Roland nodded.

"But we have seen things that are unusual!" Alain said. "And we know things are wrong here! The horses ... and at that small ranch way south ... I can't remember the name ..."

Cuthbert could. "The Rocking H."

"Aye, the Rocking H. There are oxen there. Oxen! My gods, I've never seen them, except for pictures in a book!"

Roland looked alarmed. "Does anyone know you saw?"

Alain shrugged impatiently. "I don't think so. There were drovers about—three, maybe four—"

"Four, aye," Cuthbert said quietly.

"—but they paid no attention to us. Even when we see things, they think we don't."

"And that's the way it must stay." Roland's eyes swept them, but there was a kind of absence in his face, as if his thoughts were far away. He turned to look toward the sunset, and Alain saw something on the collar of his shirt. He plucked it, a move made so quickly and nimbly that not even Roland felt it. Bert couldn't have done that, Alain thought with some pride.

"Aye, but—"

"Same message," Roland said. He sat down on the top step and looked off toward the evening redness in the west. "Patience, Mr. Richard Stockworth and Mr. Arthur Heath. We know certain things and we believe certain other things. But would John Farson come all this way simply to respond to horses? I don't think so. I'm not sure, horses are valuable, aye, so they are . . . but I'm not sure. So we wait."

"All right, all right, same message." Cuthbert smoothed the scrap of paper flat on the porch rail, then made a series of symbols on it. Alain could read this message; he had seen the same sequence several times since they had come to Hamby. "Message received. We are fine. Nothing to report at this time." The message was put in the capsule and attached to the pigeon's leg. Alain went down the steps, stood beside Rusher (still waiting patiently to be unsaddled), and held the bird up toward the fading sunset. "Hile!"

It was up and gone in a flutter of wings. For a moment only they saw it, a dark shape against the deepening sky.

Roland sat looking after. The dreamy expression was still on his face. Alain found himself wondering if Roland had made the right decision this evening. He had never in his life had such a thought. Nor expected to have one.

"Roland?"

"Hm-mm?" Like a man half-awakened from some deep sleep.

"I'll unsaddle him, if you want." He nodded at Rusher. "And rub him down."

No answer for a long time. Alain was about to ask again when Roland said, "No. I'll do it. In a minute or two." And went back to looking at the sunset.

Alain climbed the porch steps and sat down in his rocker. Bert had resumed his place on the box-seat. They were behind Roland now, and Cuthbert looked at Alain with his eyebrows raised. He pointed to Roland and then looked at Alain again.

Alain passed over what he had plucked from Roland's collar. Although it was almost too fine to be seen in this light, Cuthbert's eyes were gunslinger's eyes, and he took it easily, with no fumbling.

It was a long strand of hair, the color of spun gold. He could see from Bert's face that Bert knew whose head it had come from. Since arriving in Hamby, they'd met only one girl with long blonde hair. The two boys' eyes met. In Bert's Alain saw dismay and laughter in equal measure.

Cuthbert Allgood raised his forefinger to his temple and mimed pulling the trigger. Alain nodded.

Sitting on the steps with his back to them, Roland looked toward the dying sun set with dreaming eyes.

CHAPTER VI

BE NEATH THE PEDDLER'S MOON

1

The town of Ritzy, nearly four hundred miles west of Mejis, was anything but. Roy DePape reached it three nights before the Peddler's Moon—called Late-summer's Moon by some—came full, and left it a day later.

Ritzy was, in fact, a miserable little mining village on the eastern slope of the Vi Castis Mountains, about fifty miles from Vi Castis Cut. The town had but one street; it was engraved with iron-hard wheel-ruts now, and would become a lake of mud roughly three days after the storms of autumn set in. There was the Bear and Turtle Mercantile & Sundries Items, where miners were forbidden by the Vi Castis Company to shop, and a company store where no one but grubbies would shop; there was a combined jailhouse and Town Gathering Hall with a windmill-cum-gallows out front; there were six roaring barrooms, each more sordid, desperate, and dangerous than the last.

Ritzy was like an ugly lowered head between a pair of huge shrugged shoulders—the foothills. Above town to the south were the clapped-out shacks where the Company housed its miners; each puff of breeze brought the stench of their unlimed communal privies. To the north were the mines themselves: dangerous, under-shored scratch drifts that went down fifty feet or so and then spread like fingers clutching for gold and silver and copper and the occasional nest of firedrums. From the outside they were just holes punched into the bare and rocky earth, holes like staring eyes, each with its own pile of till and scrapings beside the adit.

Once there had been freehold mines up there, but they were all gone, regulated out by the Vi Castis Company. DePape knew all about it, because the Big Coffin Hunters had been a part of that little spin and rattle. Just after he'd hooked up with Jonas and Reynolds, that had been. Why, they had gotten those coffins tattooed on their hands not fifty miles from here, in the town of Wind, a mudpen even less ritzy than Ritzy. How long ago? He couldn't rightly say, although it seemed to him that he should be able to. But when it came to reckoning times past, DePape often felt lost. It was hard even to remember how old he was. Because the world had moved on, and time was different, now. Softer.

One thing he had no trouble remembering at all—his recollection was refreshed by the miserable flare of pain he suffered each time he bumped his wounded finger. That one thing was a promise to himself that he would see Dearborn, Stockworth, and Heath laid out dead in a row, hand to outstretched hand like a little girl's paper dolls. He intended to unlimber the part of him which had longed so bootlessly for Her Nibs these last three weeks and use it to hose down their dead faces. The majority of his squirt would be saved for Arthur Heath of Gilead, New Canaan. That laughing chatterbox motherfucker had a serious hose-down coming.

De?pape rode out the sun?rise end of Ritzy's on?ly street, trot?ted his horse up the flank of the first hill, and paused at the top for a sin?gle look back. Last night, when he'd been talk?ing to the old bas?tard be?hind Hat?ti?gan's, Ritzy had been roar?ing. This morn?ing at sev?en, it looked as ghost?ly as the Ped?dler's Moon, which still hung in the sky above the rim of the plun?dered hills. He could hear the mines tink-?tonk?ing away, though. You bet. Those ba?bies tink-?tonked away sev?en days a week. No rest for the wicked . . . and he sup?posed that in?clud?ed him. He dragged his horse's head around with his usu?al un?think?ing and ham-?hand?ed force, boot?ed its flanks, and head?ed east, think?ing of the old bas?tard as he went. He had treat?ed the old bas?tard pass?ing fair, he reck?oned. A re?ward had been promised, and had been paid for in?for?ma?tion giv?en.

"Yar," De?pape said, his glass?es flash?ing in the new sun (it was a rare morn?ing when he had no hang?over, and he felt quite cheer?ful), "I reck?on the old bug?ger can't com?plain."

De?pape had had no trou?ble fol?low?ing the young culls' back?trail; they had come east on the Great Road the whole way from New Canaan, it ap?peared, and at ev?ery town where they had stopped, they had been marked. In most they were marked if they did no more than pass through. And why not? Young men on good hors?es, no scars on their faces, no reg?ula?tor tat?toos on their hands, good clothes on their backs, ex?pen?sive hats on their heads. They were re?mem?bered es?pe?cial?ly well at the inns and sa?loons, where they had stopped to re?fresh them?selves but had drunk no hard liquor. No beer or graf, ei?ther, for that mat?ter. Yes, they were re?mem?bered. Boys on the road, boys that seemed al?most to shine. As if they had come from an ear?li?er, bet?ter time.

Piss in their faces, De?pape thought as he rode. One by one. Mr. Arthur "Ha-?Ha" Heath last. I'll save enough so it 'd drown you, were you not al?ready at the end of the path and in?to the clear?ing.

They had been no?ticed, all right, but that wasn't good enough—if he went back to Ham?bry with no more than that, Jonas would like?ly shoot his nose off. And he would de?serve it. They may be rich boys, but that's not all they are. De?pape had said that him?self. The ques?tion was, what else were they? And fi?nal?ly, in the shit-and-?sul?fur stench of Ritzy, he had found out. Not ev?ery?thing, per?haps, but enough to al?low him to turn his horse around be?fore he found him?self all the way back in fuck?ing New Canaan.

He had hit two oth?er sa?loons, sip?ping wa?tered beer in each, be?fore rolling in?to Hat?ti?gan's. He or?dered yet an?oth?er wa?tered beer, and pre?pared to en?gage the bar?tender in con?ver?sa?tion. Be?fore he even be?gan to shake the tree, how?ev?er, the ap?ple he want?ed fell off and dropped in?to his hand, neat as you please.

It was an old man's voice (an old bas?tard's voice), speak?ing with the shrill, head-hurt?ing in?ten?si?ty which is the sole province of old bas?tards in their cups. He was talk?ing about the old days, as old bas?tards al?ways did, and about how the world had moved on, and how things had been ev?er so much bet?ter when he was a boy. Then he had said some?thing which caused De?pape's ears to prick up: some?thing about how the old days might be com?ing again, for hadn't he seen three young lords not two months a-?gone, may?hap less, and even bought one of them a drink,

even if 'twas on?ly sas?par?il?ly so?da?

“You wouldn’t know a young lord from a young turd,” said a miss who ap?peared to have all of four teeth left in her charm?ing young head.

There was gen?er?al laugh?ter at this. The old bas?tard looked around, of fend?ed. “I know, all right,” he said. “I’ve for?got more than you’ll ev?er learn, so I have. One of them at least came from the Eld line, for I saw his fa?ther in his face . . . just as clear as I see your sag?gy tits, Jo?lene.” And then the old bas?tard had done some?thing De?pape rather ad?mired—yanked out the front of the sa?loon-?whore’s blouse and poured the re?main?der of his beer down it. Even the roars of laugh?ter and heavy ap?plause which greet?ed this couldn’t en?tire?ly drown the girl’s caw of rage, or the old man’s cries when she be?gan to slap and punch him about the head and shoul?ders. These lat?ter cries were on?ly in?dig?nant at first, but when the girl grabbed the old bas?tard’s own beer-?stein and shat?tered it against the side of his head, they be?came screams of pain. Blood—mixed with a few wa tery dregs of beer—be?gan to run down the old bas?tard’s face.

“Get out of here!” she yelled, and gave him a shove to?ward the door. Sev?er?al healthy kicks from the min?ers in at?ten?dance (who had changed sides as eas?ily as the wind changes di?rec?tions) helped him along. “And don’t come back! I can smell the weed on your breath, you old cock-?suck?er! Get out and take your gods-?cussed sto?ries of old days and young lords with you!”

The old bas?tard was in such man?ner con?veyed across the room, past the tootling trum?pet-?play?er who served as en?ter?tain?ment for the pa?trons of Hat?ti?gan’s (that young bowler-?hat?ted wor?thy added his own kick in the seat of the old bas?tard’s dusty trousers with?out ev?er miss?ing so much as a sin?gle note of “Play, Ladies, Play”), and out through the batwing doors, where he col?lapsed face-?first in?to the street.

De?pape had saun?tered af?ter him and helped him up. As he did so, he smelled an acrid odor—not beer—on the old man’s breath, and saw the tell?tale green?ish-?gray dis?col?orations at the com?ers of his lips. Weed, all right. The old bas?tard was prob?ably just get?ting start?ed on it (and for the usu?al rea?son: dev?il-?grass was free in the hills, un?like the beer and whiskey that was sold in town), but once they start?ed, the fin?ish came quick.

“They got no re?spect,” the old bas?tard said thick?ly. “Nor un?der?stand ing, ei?ther.” “Aye, so they don’t,” said De?pape, who had not yet got?ten the ac?cents of the sea?coast and the Drop out of his speech.

The old bas?tard stood sway?ing, look?ing up at him, wip?ing in?ef?fec?tu al?ly at the blood which ran down his wrin?kled cheeks from his lac?er?at?ed scalp. “Son, do you have the price of a drink? Re?mem?ber the face of your fa?ther and give an old soul the price of a drink!”

“I’m not much for char?ity, old-?timer,” De?pape said, “but may?hap you could earn your?self the price of a drink. Step on over here, in?to my of?fice, and let’s us see.” He’d led the old bas?tard out of the street and back to the board?walk, an?gling well to the left of the black batwings with their gold?en shafts of light spilling out above and be?low. He wait?ed for a trio of min?ers to go by, singing at the top of their lungs (“Wom?an I love... is long and tall... she moves her body... like a can?non?ball... ”),

and then, still hold?ing the old bas?tard by the el?bow, hail guid?ed him in?to the al?ley be?tween Hat?ti gan's and the un?der?tak?ing es?tab?lish?ment next door. For some peo?ple, De pape mused, a vis?it to Ritzy could damn near amount to one-?stop shop?ping: get your drink, get your bul?let, get laid out next door.

"Yer of?fice," the old bas?tard cack?led as De?pape led him down the al ley to?ward the board fence and the heaps of rub?bish at the far end. The wind blew, sting?ing De?pape's nose with odors of sul?fur and car?bol?ic from the mines. From their right, the sounds of drunk?en rev?el?ry pound?ed through the side of Hat?ti?gan's. "Your of?fice, that's good."

"Aye, my of?fice."

The old man gazed at him in the light of the moon, which rode the slot of sky above the al?ley. "Are you from Mejis? Or Tepachi?"

"Maybe one, maybe t'oth?er, maybe nei?ther."

"Do I know you?" The old bas?tard was look?ing at him even more close?ly, stand?ing on tip?toe as if hop?ing for a kiss. Ugh.

De?pape pushed him away. "Not so close, dad." Yet he felt marginal?ly en?cour?aged. He and Jonas and Reynolds had been here be?fore, and if the old man re?mem?bered his face, like?ly he wasn't talk?ing through his hat about fel?lows he'd seen much more re?cent?ly.

"Tell me about the three young lords, old dad." De?pape rapped on the wall of Hat?ti?gan's. "Them in there may not be in?ter?est?ed, but I am."

The old bas?tard looked at him with a bleary, cal?cu?lat?ing eye. "Might there be a bit o' met?al in it for me?"

"Yar," De?pape said. "If you tell me what I want to hear, I'll give you met?al."

"Gold?"

"Tell me, and we'll see."

"No, sir. Dick?er first, tell sec?ond."

De?pape seized him by the arm, whirled him around, and yanked a wrist which felt like a bun?dle of sticks up to the old bas?tard's scrawny shoul?derblades. "Fuck with me, dad, and we'll start by break?ing your arm."

"Let go!" the old bas?tard screamed breath?less?ly. "Let go, I'll trust to your gen?eros?ity, young sir, for you have a gen?er?ous face! Yes! Yes in?deed!"

De?pape let him go. The old bas?tard eyed him war?ily, rub?bing his shoul?der. In the moon?light the blood dry?ing on his cheeks looked black.

"Three of them, there were," he said. "Fine-?born lads."

"Lads or lords? Which is it, dad?"

The old bas?tard had tak?en the ques?tion thought?ful?ly. The whack on the head, the night air, and hav?ing his arm twist?ed seemed to have sobered him up, at least tem?porar?ily.

"Both, I do be?lieve," he said at last. "One was a lord for sure, whether them in there be?lieve it or not. For I saw his fa?ther, and his fa?ther bore the guns. Not such poor things such as you wear—beg?gin your par?don, I know they're the best to be had these days—but re?al guns, such as were seen when my own dad was a boy. The big ones with the san?dal?wood grips."

De?pape had stared at the old man, feel?ing a rise of ex?cite?ment . . . and a species of

re?luc?tant awe, as well. They act?ed like gun?slingers, Jonas had said. When Reynolds protest?ed they were too young, Jonas had said they might be ap?pren?tices, and now it seemed the boss had like?ly been right.

“San?dal-?wood grips?” he had asked. “San?dal?wood grips, old dad?”

“Yep.” The old man saw his ex?cite?ment, and his be?lief. He ex?pand?ed vis?ibly.

“A gun?slinger, you mean. This one young fel?low’s fa?ther car?ried the big irons.”

“Yep, a gun?slinger. One of the last lords. Their line is pass?ing, now, but my dad knew him well enough. Steven De?schain, of Gilead. Steven, son of Hen?ry.”

”And this one you saw not long ago—“

”His son. Hen?ry the Tail’s grand?son. The oth?ers looked well-?born, as if they might al?so come from the line of lords, but the one I saw come down all the way from Arthur Eld, by one line or an?oth?er. Sure as you walk on two legs. Have I earned my met?al yet?”

De?pape thought to say yes, then re?al?ized he didn’t know which of the three culls this old bas?tard was talk?ing about.

”Three young men,” he mused. ”Three high-?borns. And did they have guns?”

”Not out where the drift-?dig?gers of this town could see em,” the old bas?tard said, and laughed nas?ti?ly. ”But they had em, all right. Prob?ably hid in their bedrolls. I’d set my watch and war?rant on it.”

”Aye,” De?pape said. ”I sup?pose you would. Three young men, one the son of a lord. Of a gun?slinger, you think. Steven of Gilead.” And the name was fa?mil?iar to him, aye, it was.

”Steven De?schain of Gilead, that’s it.”

”And what name did he give, this young lord?”

The old bas?tard had screwed his face up alarm?ing?ly in an ef?fort to re mem?ber.

”Deer?field? Deer?stine? I don’t quite re?mem?ber—“

”That’s all right, I know it. And you’ve earned your met?al.”

”Have I?” the old bas?tard had edged close again, his breath gag?ging-?sweet with the weed. ”Gold or sil?ver? Which is it, my friend?”

”Lead,” De?pape replied, then hauled leather and shot the old man twice in the chest. Do?ing him a fa?vor, re?al?ly.

Now he rode back to?ward Mejis—it would be a faster trip with?out hav?ing to stop in ev?ery dip?shit lit?tle town and ask ques?tions.

There was a flur?ry of wings close above his head. A pi?geon—dark gray, it was, with a white ring around its neck—flut?tered down on a rock just ahead of him, as if to rest. An in?ter?est?ing-?look?ing bird. Not, De?pape thought, a wild pi?geon. Some?one’s es?caped pet? He couldn’t imag?ine any?one in this des?olate quar?ter of the world keep?ing any?thing but a half-?wild dog to bite the squash off any would-?be rob?ber (al?though what these folks might have worth rob?bing was an?oth?er ques?tion he couldn’t an swer), but he sup?posed any?thing was pos?si?ble. In any case, roast pi?geon would go down a treat when he stopped for the night.

De?pape drew his gun, but be?fore he could cock the ham?mer, the pi geon was off and fly?ing east. De?pape took a shot af?ter it, any?way. Some times you got lucky, but ap?par?ent?ly not this time; the pi?geon dipped a lit?tle, then straight?ened out and dis?ap?peared in the di?rec?tion De?pape him self was go?ing. He sat astride his horse

for a moment, not much put out of countenance; he thought Jonas was going to be very pleased with what he had found out.

After a bit, he booted his horse in the sides and began to canter east along the Barony Sea Road, back toward Mejis, where the boys who had embarrassed him were waiting to be dealt with. Lords they might be, sons of gunslingers they might be, but in these latter days, even such as those could die. As the old bastard himself would undoubtedly have pointed out, the world had moved on.

2

On a late afternoon three days after Roy DePape left Ritzy and headed his horse toward Hamby again, Roland, Cuthbert, and Alain rode north and west of town, first down the long swell of the Drop, then into the free land Hamby folk called the Bad Grass, then into deserty waste lands. Ahead of them and clearly visible once they were back in the open were crumbled and eroded bluffs. In the center of these was a dark, almost vaginal cleft; its edges so splintered it looked as if it had been whacked into reality by an ill-tempered god wielding a hatchet.

The distance between the end of the Drop and the bluffs was perhaps six miles.

Three quarters of the way across, they passed the flatlands' only real geographic feature: a jutting upthrust of rock that looked like a finger bent at the first knuckle.

Below it was a small, boomerang-shaped green sward, and when Cuthbert gave a ululating yell to hear his voice bounce back at him from the bluffs ahead, a pack of chattering bilby-bumblers broke from this green place and went racing back south-east, toward the Drop.

"That's Hanging Rock," Roland said. "There's a spring at the base of it—only one in these parts, they say."

It was all the talk that passed between them on the ride out, but a look of unmis takable relief passed between Cuthbert and Alain behind Roland's back. For the last three weeks they had pretty much marched in place as summer rolled around them and past them. It was all well for Roland to say they must wait, they must pay greatest attention to the things that didn't matter and count the things which did from the corners of their eyes, but neither of them quite trusted the dreamy, disconnected air which Roland wore these days like his own special version of Clay Reynolds's cloak. They didn't talk about this between themselves; they didn't have to. Both knew that if Roland began courting the pretty girl whom May or Thorin meant for his gilly (and who else could that long blonde hair have belonged to?), they would be in very bad trouble. But Roland showed no courting plumage, neither of them spied any more blonde hairs on his shirt-collars, and tonight he seemed more himself, as if he had put that cloak of abstraction aside. Temporarily, maybe. Perhaps momentarily, if they were lucky. They could only wait and see. In the end, karma would tell, as it always did.

A mile or so from the bluffs, the strong sea breeze which had been at their backs for the whole ride suddenly dropped, and they heard the low, atonal squalling from the cleft that was Eyebolt Canyon. Alain pulled up, grimacing like a man who has bitten into a fruit of extravagant sourness. All he could think of was a handful of sharp pebbles, squeezed and ground together in a strong hand. Buzzards circled above the canyon as if drawn to the sound.

"The look?out don't like it. Will." Cuthbert said, knocking his knuckles on the skull. "I don't like it much, either. What are we out here for?"

"To count," Roland said. "We were sent to count everything and see everything, and this is something to count and see."

"Oh, aye," Cuthbert said. He held his horse in with some effort; the low, grinding wail of the thimny had made it skittish. "Sixteen hundred and fourteen fishing nets, seven hundred and ten boats small, two hundred and fourteen boats large, seven?ty oxen that nobody will admit to, and, on the north of town, one thimny. What?ever the hell that is."

"We're going to find out," Roland said.

They rode in?to the sound, and although none of them liked it, no one suggested they go back. They had come all the way out here, and Roland was right—this was their job. Besides, they were curious.

The mouth of the canyon had been pretty well stopped up with brush, as Susan had told Roland it would be. Come fall, most of it would probably be dead, but now the stacked branches still bore leaves and made it hard to see in?to the canyon. A path led through the center of the brush-pile, but it was narrow for the horses (who might have balked at going through, anyway), and in the failing light Roland could make out hardly anything.

"Are we going in?" Cuthbert asked. "Let the Recording Angel note that I'm against, although I'll offer no mutiny."

Roland had no intention of taking them through the brush and toward the source of that sound. Not when he had only the vaguest idea of what a thimny was. He had asked a few questions about it over the last few weeks, and gotten little useful response. "I'd stay away," was the extent of Sheriff Avery's advice. So far his best information was still what he had gotten from Susan on the night he met her.

"Sit easy, Bert. We're not going in."

"Good," Alain said softly, and Roland smiled.

There was a path up the canyon's west side, steep and narrow, but passable if they were careful. They went single file, stopping once to clear a rockfall, pitching splintered chunks of shale and hornfels in?to the groaning trench to their right.

When this was done and just as the three of them were preparing to mount up again, a large bird of some sort—perhaps a grouse, perhaps a prairie chicken—rose above the lip of the canyon in an explosive whirl of feathers. Roland dipped for his guns, and saw both Cuthbert and Alain doing the same. Quite funny, considering that their firearms were wrapped in protective oilcloth and secreted beneath the floorboards of the Bar K bunkhouse.

They looked at each other, said nothing (except with their eyes, which said plenty), and went on. Roland found that the effect of being this close to the thimny was cumulative—it wasn't a sound you could get used to. Quite the contrary, in fact: the longer you were in the immediate vicinity of Eye-bolt Canyon, the more that sound scraped away at your brain. It got in?to your teeth as well as your ears; it vibrated in the knot of nerves below the breastbone and seemed to eat at the damp and delicate tissue behind the eyes. Most of all, though, it got in?to your head, telling you that everything you had ever been afraid of was just behind the next

curve of the trail or yonder pile of tumbled rock, waiting to snake out of its place and get you.

Once they got to the flat and barren ground at the top of the path and the sky opened out above them again it was a little better, but by then the light was almost gone, and when they dismounted and walked to the canyon's crumbling edge, they could see little but shadows.

"No good," Cuthbert said disgustingly. "We should have left earlier, Roland . . . Will, I mean. What dummies we are!"

"I can be Roland to you out here, if you like. And we'll see what we came to see and count what we came to count—one thing, just as you said. Only wait."

They waited, and not twenty minutes later the Peddler's Moon rose above the horizon—a perfect summer moon, huge and orange. It loomed in the darkening violet swim of the sky like a crashing planet. On its face, as clear as anyone had ever seen it, was the Peddler, he who came out of Nones with his sackful of squealing souls. A hunched figure made of smudged shadows with a pack clearly visible over one cringing shoulder. Behind it, the orange light seemed to flame like hellfire.

"Ugh," Cuthbert said. "That's an ill sight to see with that sound coming up from below."

Yet they held their ground (and their horses, which periodically yanked back on their reins as if to tell them they should already be gone from this place), and the moon rose in the sky, shrinking a little as it went and turning silver. Eventually it rose enough to cast its bony light into Eyebolt Canyon. The three boys stood looking down. None of them spoke. Roland didn't know about his friends, but he didn't think he himself could have spoken even if called on to do so.

A box canyon, very short and steep-sided, Susan had said, and the description was perfectly accurate. She'd also said Eyebolt looked like a chimney lying on its side, and Roland supposed that was also true, if you allowed that a falling chimney might break up a little on impact, and lie with one crooked place in its middle.

Up to that crook, the canyon floor looked ordinary enough; even the litter of bones the moon showed them was not extraordinary. Many animals which wandered into box canyons hadn't the wit to find their way back out again, and with Eyebolt the possibility of escape was further reduced by the choke of brush piled at the canyon's mouth. The sides were much too steep to climb except maybe for one place, just before that crooked little jog. There Roland saw a kind of groove running up the canyon wall, with enough jutting spurs inside it

to—maybe!—provide handholds. There was no real reason for him to note this; he just did, as he would go on noting potential escape-routes his entire life.

Beyond the jag in the canyon floor was something none of them had ever seen before . . . and when they got back to the bunkhouse several hours later, they all agreed that they weren't sure exactly what they had seen. The latter part of Eyebolt Canyon was obscured by a sullen, silvery limescence from which snakes of smoke or mist were rising in streams. The liquid seemed to move sluggishly, lapsing at the walls which held it in. Later, they would discover that both liquid and mist were a light green; it was only the moonlight that had made them look

sil?ver.

As they watched, a dark fly?ing shape—per?haps it was the same one that had fright?ened them be?fore—skimmed down to?ward the sur?face of the thin?ny. It snatched some?thing out of the air—a bug? an?oth?er, small?er, bird?—and then be?gan to rise again. Be?fore it could, a sil?very arm of liq uid rose from the canyon's floor. For a mo?ment that soupy, grind?ing grum?ble rose a notch, and be?came al?most a voice. It snatched the bird out of the air and dragged it down. Green?ish light, brief and un?fo?cused, flashed across the sur?face of the thin?ny like elec?tric?ity, and was gone.

The three boys stared at each oth?er with fright?ened eyes.

Jump in, gun?slinger, a voice sud?den?ly called. It was the voice of the thin?ny; it was the voice of his fa?ther; it was al?so the voice of Marten the en?chanter, Marten the se?duc?er. Most ter?ri?ble of all, it was his own voice.

Jump in and let all these cares cease. There is no love of girls to wor?ry you here, and no mourn?ing of lost moth?ers to weigh your child's heart. On?ly the hum of the grow?ing cav?ity at the cen?ter of the uni?verse; on?ly the punky sweet?ness of rot?ting flesh.

Come, gun?slinger. Be apart of the thin?ny.

Dreamy-?faced and blank-?eyed, Alain be?gan walk?ing along the edge of the drop, his right boot so close to it that the heel puffed lit?tle clouds of dust over the chasm and sent clus?ters of peb?bles down in?to it. Be?fore he could get more than five steps, Roland grabbed him by the belt and yanked him rough?ly back.

“Where do you think you're go?ing?”

Alain looked at him with sleep?walk?er's eyes. They be?gan to clear, but slow?ly. “I don't . . . know, Roland.”

Be?low them, the thin?ny hummed and growled and sang. There was a sound, as well: an ooz?ing, sludgy mut?ter.

“I know,” Cuth?bert said. “I know where we're all go?ing. Back to the Bar K. Come on, let's get out of here.” He looked plead?ing?ly at Roland. “Please. It's aw?ful.”

“All right.”

But be?fore he led them back to the path, he stepped to the edge and looked down at the smoky sil?ver ooze be?low him. “Count?ing,” he said with a kind of clear de?fi?ance. “Count?ing one thin?ny.” Then, low?er?ing his voice: “And be damned to you.”

3

Their com?po?sure re?turned as they rode back—the sea-?breeze in their faces was won?der?ful?ly restora?tive af?ter the dead and some?how baked smell of the canyon and the thin?ny.

As they rode up the Drop (on a long di?ag?onal, so as to save the hors?es a lit?tle), Alain said: “What do we do next, Roland? Do you know?”

“No. As a mat?ter of fact, I don't.”

“Sup?per would be a start,” Cuth?bert said bright?ly, and tapped the look?out's hol?low skull for em?pha?sis.

“You know what I mean.”

“Yes,” Cuth?bert agreed. “And I'll tell you some?thing, Roland—”

“Will, please. Now that we’re back on the Drop, let me be Will.”

“Aye, fine. I’ll tell you some?thing, Will: we can’t go on count?ing nets and boats and looms and wheel-?irons much longer. We’re run?ning out of things that don’t mat?ter. I be?lieve that look?ing stupid will be?come a good deal hard?er once we move to the horse-?breed?ing side of life as it’s lived in Ham?bry.”

“Aye,” Roland said. He stopped Rush?er and looked back the way they had come.

He was mo?men?tar?ily en?chant?ed by the sight of hors?es, ap?par ent?ly in?fect?ed with a kind of moon-?mad?ness, frolic?ing and rac?ing across the sil?very grass. “But I tell you both again, this is not just about hors?es. Does Far?son need them? Aye, may?hap. So does the Af?fil?ia?tion. Ox?en as well. But there are hors?es ev?ery?where—per?haps not as good as these, I’ll ad?mit, but any port does in a storm, so they say. So, if it’s not hors?es, what is it? Un?til we know, or de?cide we’ll nev?er know, we go on as we are.”

Darktower 4 - Wizard and Glass

Part of the answer was waiting for them back at the Bar...

hitching rail and flicking its tail saucily. When the pigeon hopped into Roland's hand, he saw that one of its wings was oddly frayed. Some animal—like a cat—had crept up on it close enough to pounce, he reckoned.

The note curled against the pigeon's leg was short, but it explained a good deal of what they hadn't understood.

I'll have to see her again, Roland thought after reading it, and felt a surge of gladness. His pulse quickened, and in the cold silver light of the Peddler's Moon, he smiled.

CHAPTER IX

citgo

1

The Peddler's Moon began to wane; it would take the hottest, fairest part of the summer with it when it went. On an afternoon four days past the full, the old mazo from Mayor's House (Miguel had been there long before Hart Thorin's time and would likely be there long after Thorin had gone back to his ranch) showed up at the house Susan shared with her aunt. He was leading a beautiful chestnut mare by a hack'. It was the second of the three promised horses, and Susan recognized Felicia at once. The mare had been one other child's favorite.

Susan embraced Miguel and covered his bearded cheeks with kisses. The old man's wide grin would have showed every tooth in his head, if he'd had any left to show. "Gracias, gracias, a thousand thanks, old father," she told him.

"Da na-da," he replied, and handed her the bridle. "It is the Mayor's earnest gift."

She watched him away, the smile slowly fading from her lips. Felicia stood docilely beside her, her dark brown coat shining like a dream in the summer sunlight. But this was no dream. It had seemed like one at first—that sense of unreality had been another inducement to walk into the trap, she now understood—but it was no dream. She had been proved honest; now she found herself the recipient of "earnest gifts" from a rich man. The phrase was a sop to conventionality, of course ... or a bitter joke, depending on one's mood and outlook. Felicia was no more a gift than Pylon had been—they were step-by-step fulfillments of the contract into which she had entered. Aunt Cord could express shock, but Susan knew the truth: what lay directly ahead was whoring, pure and simple.

Aunt Cord was in the kitchen window as Susan walked her gift (which was really just returned property, in her view) to the stable. She called out something passing cheery about how the horse was a good thing, that caring for it would give Susan less time for her megrims. Susan felt a hot reply rise to her lips and held it back. There had been a wary truce between the two of them since the shouting match about the shirts, and Susan didn't want to be the one to break it. There was too much on her mind and heart. She thought that one more argument with her aunt and she might simply snap like a dry twig under a boot. Because often silence is best, her father had told her when, at age ten or so, she had asked him why he was always so quiet. The answer had puzzled her then, but now she understood better.

She sta?bled Fe?li?cia next to Py?lon, rubbed her down, fed her. While the mare munched oats, Su?san ex?am?ined her hooves. She didn't care much for the look of the iron the mare was wear?ing—that was Seafront for you—and so she took her fa?ther's shoe?bag from its nail be?side the sta ble door, slung the strap over her head and shoul?der so the bag hung on her hip, and walked the two miles to Hock?ey's Sta?ble and Fan?cy Liv?ery. Feel?ing the leather bag bang against her hip brought back her fa?ther in a way so fresh and clear that grief pricked her again and made her feel like cry?ing. She thought he would have been ap?palled at her cur?rent sit?ua?tion, per?haps even dis?gust?ed. And he would have liked Will Dear?born, of that she was sure—liked him and ap?proved of him for her. It was the fi?nal mis er?able touch.

2

She had known how to shoe most of her life, and even en?joyed it, when her mood was right; it was dusty, el?emen?tal work, with al?ways the pos?si bil?ity of a healthy kick in the slats to re?lieve the bore?dom and bring a girl back to re?al?ity. But of mak?ing shoes she knew noth?ing, nor wished to. Bri?an Hookey made them at the forge be?hind his barn and hostel?ry, how ev?er; Su?san eas?ily picked out four new ones of the right size, en?joy?ing the smell of horse?flesh and fresh hay as she did. Fresh paint, too. Hock?ey's Sta?ble & Smithy looked very well, in?deed. Glanc?ing up, she saw not so much as a sin?gle hole in the barn roof. Times had been good for Hookey, it seemed.

He wrote the new shoes up on a beam, still wear?ing his black?smith's apron and squint?ing hor?ri?bly out of one eye at his own fig?ures. When Su san be?gan to speak halt?ing?ly to him about pay?ment, he laughed, told her he knew she'd set?tle her ac?counts as soon as she could, gods bless her, yes. 'Sides, they weren't any of them go?ing any?where, were they? Nawp, nawp. All the time gen?tly pro?pelling her through the fra?grant smells of hay and hors?es to?ward the door. He would not have treat?ed even so small a mat?ter as four iron shoes in such a care?free man?ner a year ago, but now she was May?or Thorin's good friend, and things had changed.

The af?ter?noon sun?light was daz?zling af?ter the dim?ness of Hock?ey's barn, and she was mo?men?tar?ily blind?ed, grop?ing for?ward to?ward the street with the leather bag bounc?ing on her hip and the shoes clash?ing soft?ly in side. She had just a mo?ment to reg?is?ter a shape loom?ing in the bright?ness, and then it thumped in?to her hard enough to rat?tle her teeth and make Fe li?cia's new shoes clang. She would have fall?en, but for strong hands that quick?ly reached out and grasped her shoul?ders. By then her eyes were ad just?ing and she saw with dis?may and amuse?ment that the young man who had al?most knocked her sprawl?ing in?to the dirt was one of Will's friends— Richard Stock?worth.

"Oh, sai, your par?don!" he said, brush?ing the arms of her dress as if he had knocked her over. "Are you well? Are you quite well?"

"Quite well," she said, smil?ing. "Please don't apol?ogize." She felt a sud?den wild im?pulse to stand on tip?toe and kiss his mouth and say, Give that to Will and tell him to nev?er mind what I said! Tell him there are a thou?sand more where that came from! Tell him to come and get ev?ery one!

In?stead, she fixed on a com?ic im?age: this Richard Stock?worth smack ing Will full

on the mouth and say?ing it was from Su?san Del?ga?do. She be gan to gig?gle. She put her hands to her mouth, but it did no good. Sai Stock?worth smiled back at her . . . ten?ta?tive?ly, cau?tious?ly. He prob?ably thinks I'm mad . . . and I am! I am! "Good day, Mr. Stock?worth," she said, and passed on be?fore she could em?bar?rass her?self fur?ther.

"Good day, Su?san Del?ga?do," he called in re?turn.

She looked back once, when she was fifty yards or so far?ther up the street, but he was al?ready gone. Not in?to Hock?ey's, though; of that she was quite sure. She won?dered what Mr. Stock?worth had been do?ing at that end of town to be?gin with. Half an hour lat?er, as she took the new iron from her da's shoe?bag, she found out. There was a fold?ed scrap of pa?per tucked be?tween two of the shoes, and even be?fore she un?fold?ed it, she un?der?stood that her col?li sion with Mr. Stock?worth hadn't been an ac?ci?dent.

She rec?og?nized Will's hand?writ?ing at once from the note in the bou?quet.

Su?san,

Can you meet me at Cit?go this evening or to?mor?row evening? Very im?por?tant. Has to do with what we dis?cussed be?fore. Please.

W.

P.S. Best you bum this note.

She burned it at once, and as she watched the flames first flash up and then die down, she mur?mured over and over the one word in it which had struck her the hard?est: Please.

3

She and Aunt Cord ate a sim?ple, silent evening meal—bread and soup—and when it was done, Su?san rode Fe?li?cia out to the Drop and watched the sun go down. She would not be meet?ing him this evening, no. She al?ready owed too much sor?row to im?pul?sive, un?think?ing be?hav?ior. But to?mor?row?

Why Cit?go?

Has to do with what we dis?cussed be?fore.

Yes, prob?ably. She did not doubt his hon?or, al?though she had much come to won?der if he and his friends were who they said they were. He prob?ably did want to see her for some rea?son which bore on his mis?sion (al?though how the oil?patch could have any?thing to do with too many hors?es on the Drop she did not know), but there was some?thing be?tween them now, some?thing sweet and dan?ger?ous. They might start off talk?ing but would like?ly end up kiss?ing . . . and kiss?ing would just be the start. Know?ing didn't change feel?ing, though; she want?ed to see him. Need?ed to see him.

So she sat astride her new horse—an?oth?er of Hart Thorin's pay?ments-?in-?ad?vance on her vir?gin?ity—and watched the sun swell and turn red in the west. She lis?tened to the faint grum?ble of the thin?ny, and for the first time in her six?teen years was tru?ly torn by in?de?ci?sion. All she want?ed stood against all she be?lieved of hon?or, and her mind roared with con?flict. Around all, like a ris?ing wind around an un?sta?ble house, she felt the idea of ka grow?ing. Yet to give over one's hon?or for that rea?son was so easy, wasn't it? To ex?cuse the fall of virtue by in?vok?ing all-pow?er?ful ka. It was soft think?ing.

Su?san felt as blind as she'd been when leav?ing the dark?ness of Bri?an Hock?ey's bam for the bright?ness of the street. At one point she cried silent?ly in frus?tra?tion with?out even be?ing aware of it, and per?vad?ing her ev?ery ef?fort to think clear?ly and ra?tio?nal?ly was her de?sire to kiss him again, and to feel his hand cup?ping her breast. She had nev?er been a re?li?gious girl, had lit?tle faith in the dim gods of Mid-?World, so at the last of it, with the sun gone and the sky above its point of ex?it go?ing from red to pur?ple, she tried to pray to her fa?ther. And an an?swer came, al?though whether from him or from her own heart she didn't know.

Let ka mind it?self, the voice in her mind said. It will, any?way; it al ways does. If ka. should over?rule your hon?or, so it will be; in the mean time, Su?san, there's no one to mind it but your?self. Let ka go and mind the virtue of your promise, hard as that may be.

"All right," she said. In her cur?rent state she dis?cov?ered that any de?ci sion—even one that would cost her an?oth?er chance to see Will—was a re lief. "I'll hon?or my promise. Ka can take care of it?self."

In the gath?er?ing shad?ows, she clucked side?mouth to Fe?li?cia and turned for home.

4

The next day was San?day, the tra?di?tion?al cow?boys' day of rest. Roland's lit?tle band took this day off as well. "It's fair enough that we should," Cuth?bert said, "since we don't know what the hell we're do?ing in the first place."

On this par?tic?ular San?day—their sixth since com?ing to Ham?bry— Cuth?bert was in the up?per mar?ket (low?er mar?ket was cheap?er, by and large, but too fishy-?smelling for his lik?ing), look?ing at bright?ly col?ored scrapes and try?ing not to cry. For his moth?er had a ser?ape, it was a great fa?vorite oth?ers, and think?ing of how she would ride out some?times with it flow?ing back from her shoul?ders had filled him with home?sick?ness so strong it was sav?age. "Arthur Heath," Roland's ka-?mai, miss?ing his ma?ma so bad?ly his eyes were wet! It was a joke wor?thy of... well, wor?thy of Cuth?bert All?go?od.

As he stood so, look?ing at the ser?apes and a hang?ing rack of dolina blan?kets with his hands clasped be?hind his back like a pa?tron in an art gallery (and blink?ing back tears all the while), there came a light tap on his shoul?der. He turned, and there was the girl with the blonde hair.

Cuth?bert wasn't sur?prised that Roland was smit?ten with her. She was noth?ing short of breath?tak?ing, even dressed in jeans and a farmshirt. Her hair was tied back with a se?ries of rough rawhide han?ks, and she had eyes of the bright?est gray Cuth?bert had ev?er seen. Cuth?bert thought it was a won?der that Roland had been able to con?tin?ue with any oth?er as?pect of his life at all, even down to the wash?ing of his teeth. Cer?tain?ly she came with a cure for Cuth?bert; sen?ti?men?tal thoughts of his moth?er dis?ap?peared in an in?stant.

"Sai," he said. It was all he could man?age, at least to start with.

She nod?ded and held out what the folk of Mejis called a corvette— "lit?tle pack?et" was the lit?er?al def?ini?tion; "lit?tle purse" was the prac?ti?cal one. These small leather ac?ces?sories, big enough for a few coins but not much more, were more of?ten car?ried by ladies than gen?tle?men, al?though that was not a hard-?and-?fast rule of fash?ion.

"Ye dropped this, cul?ly," she said.

"Nay, thankee-?sai." This one well might have been the prop?er?ty of a man—plain black leather, and un?adorned by foo?fraws—but he had nev?er seen it be?fore. Nev?er car?ried a corvette, for that mat?ter.

"It's yours," she said, and her eyes were now so in?tense that her gaze felt hot on his skin. He should have un?der?stood at once, but he had been blind?ed by her un?ex?pect?ed ap?pear?ance. Al?so, he ad?mit?ted, by her clever ness. You some?how didn't ex?pect clev?er?ness from a girl this beau?ti?ful; beau?ti?ful girls did not, as a rule, have to be clever. So far as Bert could tell, all beau?ti?ful girls had to do was wake up in the morn?ing. "It is."

"Oh, aye," he said, al?most snatch?ing the lit?tle purse from her. He could feel a fool?ish grin over?spread?ing his face. "Now that you men?tion it, sai—"

"Su?san." Her eyes were grave and watch?ful above her smile. "Let me be Su?san to you, I pray."

"With plea?sure. I cry your par?don, Su?san, it's just that my mind and mem?ory, re?al?iz?ing it's San?day, have joined hands and gone off on hol?iday to?geth?er—eloped, you might say—and left me tem?porar?ily with?out a brain in my head."

He might well have rat?tled on like that for an?oth?er hour (he had be fore; to that both Roland and Alain could tes?ti?fy), but she stopped him with the easy brisk?ness of an old?er sis?ter. "I can eas?ily be?lieve ye have no con?trol over yer mind, Mr. Heath—or the tongue hung be?low it- but per haps ye'll take bet?ter care of yer purse in the fu?ture. Good day." She was gone be?fore he could get an?oth?er word out.

5

Bert found Roland where he so of?ten was these days: out on the part of the Drop that was called Town Look?out by many of the lo?cals. It gave a fair view of Ham?bry, dream?ing away its San?day af?ter?noon in a blue haze, but Cuth?bert rather doubt?ed the Ham?bry view was what drew his old?est friend back here time af?ter time. He thought that its view of the Del?ga?do house was the more like?ly rea?son. This day Roland was with Alain, nei?ther of them say?ing a word. Cuth?bert had no trou?ble ac?cept?ing the idea that some peo?ple could go long pe?ri?ods of time with?out talk?ing to each oth?er, but he did not think he would ev?er un?der?stand it.

He came rid?ing up to them at a gal?lop, reached in?side his shirt, and pulled out the corvette. "From Su?san Del?ga?do. She gave it to me in the up?per mar?ket. She's beau?ti?ful, and she's al?so as wily as a snake. I say that with ut?most ad?mi?ra?tion." Roland's face filled with light and life. When Cuth?bert tossed him the corvette, he caught it one-?hand?ed and pulled the lace-?tie with his teeth. In side, where a trav?el?ling man would have kept his few scraps of mon?ey, there was a sin?gle fold?ed piece of pa?per. Roland read this quick?ly, the light go?ing out of his eyes, the smile fad?ing off his mouth.

"What does it say?" Alain asked.

Roland hand?ed it to him and then went back to look?ing out at the Drop. It wasn't un?til he saw the very re?al des?ola?tion in his friend's eyes that Cuth?bert ful?ly re?al?ized how far in?to Roland's life—and hence in?to all their lives—Su?san Del?ga?do had come.

Alain handed him the note. It was on a single line, two sentences:

It's best we don't meet. I'm sorry.

Cuthbert read it twice, as if rereading might change it, then handed it back to Roland. Roland put the note back into the corvette, tied the lace, and then tucked the little purse into his own shirt.

Cuthbert hated silence worse than danger (it was danger, to his mind), but every conversation he tried in his mind seemed callow and unfeeling, given the look on his friend's face. It was as if Roland had been poisoned. Cuthbert was disgusted at the thought of that lovely young girl bumping hips with the long and bony Mayor of Hambray, but the look on Roland's face now called up stronger emotions. For that he could hate her.

At last Alain spoke up, almost timidly. "And now, Roland? Shall we have a hunt out there at the oilpatch without her?"

Cuthbert admired that. Upon first meeting him, many people dismissed Alain Johns as something of a dullard. That was very far from the truth. Now, in a diplomatic way Cuthbert could never have matched, he had pointed out that Roland's unhappy first experience with love did not change their responsibilities. And Roland responded, raising himself off the saddle-horn and sitting up straight. The strong golden light of that summer's afternoon lit his face in harsh contrasts, and for a moment that face was haunted by the ghost of the man he would become. Cuthbert saw that ghost and shivered—not knowing what he saw, only knowing that it was awful.

"The Big Coffin Hunters," he said. "Did you see them in town?"

"Jonas and Reynolds," Cuthbert answered. "Still no sign of DePape. I think Jonas must have choked him and thrown him over the sea cliffs in a fit of pique after that night in the bar."

Roland shook his head. "Jonas needs the men he trusts too much to waste them—he's as far out on thin ice as we are. No, DePape's just been sent off for awhile."

"Sent where?" Alain asked.

"Where he'll have to shit in the bushes and sleep in the rain if the weather's bad."

Roland laughed shortly, without much humor. "Jonas has got DePape running our backtrail, more likely than not."

Alain grunted softly, in surprise that wasn't really surprise. Roland sat easily astride Rusher, looking out over the dreamy depths of land, at the grazing horses. With one hand he unconsciously rubbed the corvette he had tucked into his shirt. At last he looked around at them again.

"We'll wait a bit longer," he said. "Perhaps she'll change her mind."

"Roland—" Alain began, and his tone was deadly in its gentleness.

Roland raised his hands before Alain could go on. "Doubt me not, Alain—I speak as my father's son."

"All right." Alain reached out and briefly gripped Roland's shoulder. As for Cuthbert, he reserved judgment. Roland might or might not be acting as his father's son; Cuthbert guessed that at this point Roland hardly knew his own mind at all.

“Do you re?mem?ber what Cort used to say was the pri?ma?ry weak?ness of mag?gots such as us?” Roland asked with a trace of a smile.

“ ‘You run with?out con?sid?er?ation and fall in a hole,’ ” Alain quot?ed in a gruff im?ita?tion that made Cuth?bert laugh aloud.

Roland’s smile broad?ened a touch. “Aye. They’re words I mean to re mem?ber, boys. I’ll not up?set this cart in or?der to see what’s in it ... not un?less there’s no oth?er choice. Su?san may come around yet, giv?en time to think. I be?lieve she would have agreed to meet me al?ready, if not for ... oth?er mat?ters be?tween us.”

He paused, and for a lit?tle while there was qui?et among them.

“I wish our fa?thers hadn’t sent us,” Alain said at last... al?though it was Roland’s fa?ther who had sent them, and all three knew it. “We’re too young for mat?ters such as these. Too young by years.”

“We did all right that night in the Rest,” Cuth?bert said.

“That was train?ing, not guile—and they didn’t take us se?ri?ous?ly. That won’t hap?pen again.”

“They wouldn’t have sent us—not my fa?ther, not yours—if they’d known what we’d find,” Roland said. “But now we’ve found it, and now we’re for it. Yes?”

Alain and Cuth?bert nod?ded. They were for it, all right—there no longer seemed any doubt of that.

“In any case, it’s too late to wor?ry about it now. We’ll wait and hope for Su?san. I’d rather not go near Cit?go with?out some?one from Ham?bry who knows the lay of the place ... but if De?pape comes back, we’ll have to take our chance. God knows what he may find out, or what sto?ries he may in?vent to please Jonas, or what Jonas may do af?ter they palaver. There may be shoot?ing.”

“Af?ter all this creep?ing around, I’d al?most wel?come it,” Cuth?bert said.

“Will you send her an?oth?er note, Will Dear?born?” Alain asked.

Roland thought about it. Cuth?bert laid an in?te?ri?or bet with him?self on which way Roland would go. And lost.

“No,” he said at last. “We’ll have to give her time, hard as that is. And hope her cu?rios?ity will bring her around.”

With that he turned Rush?er to?ward the aban?doned bunkhouse which now served them as home. Cuth?bert and Alain fol?lowed.

6

Su?san, worked her?self hard the rest of that San?day, muck?ing out the sta bles, car?ry?ing wa?ter, wash?ing down all the steps. Aunt Cord watched all this in si?lence, her ex?pres?sion one of min?gled doubt and amaze?ment. Su san cared not a bit for how her aunt looked—she want?ed on?ly to ex?haust her?self and avoid an?oth?er sleep?less night. It was over. Will would know it as well now, and that was to the good. Let done be done.

“Are ye daft, girl?” was all Aunt Cord asked her as Su?san dumped her last pail of dirty rinse-?wa?ter be?hind the kitchen. “It’s San?day!”

“Not daft a bit,” she replied short?ly, with?out look?ing around.

She ac?com?plished the first half of her aim, go?ing to bed just af?ter moon?rise with tired arms, aching legs, and a throb?bing back—but sleep still did not come. She lay in bed wide-?eyed and un?hap?py. The hours passed, the moon set, and still Su?san

couldn't sleep. She looked in to the dark and wondered if there was any possibility, even the slightest, that her father had been murdered. To stop his mouth, to close his eyes.

Finally she reached the conclusion Roland had already come to: if there had been no attraction for her in those eyes of his, or the touch of his hands and lips, she would have agreed in a flash to the meeting he wanted. If only to set her troubled mind to rest.

At this realization, relief overspread her and she was able to sleep.

7

Late the next afternoon, while Roland and his friends were at five in the Travellers' Rest (cold beef sandwiches and gallons of white iced tea—not as good as that made by Deputy Dave's wife, but not bad), Sheemie came in from outside, where he had been watering his flowers. He was wearing his pink sombrero and a wide grin. In one hand he held a little packet.

"Hello, there, you Little Coffin Hunters!" he cried cheerfully, and made a bow which was an amusingly good imitation of their own. Cuthbert particularly enjoyed seeing such a bow done in gardening sandals. "How be you? Well, I'm hoping, so I do!"

"Right as rainbarsrels," Cuthbert said, "but none of us enjoys being called Little Coffin Hunters, so maybe you could just play soft on that, all right?"

"Aye," Sheemie said, as cheerful as ever. "Aye, Mr. Arthur Heath, good fella who saved my life!" He paused and looked puzzled for a moment, as if unable to remember why he had approached them in the first place. Then his eyes cleared, his grin shone out, and he held the packet out to Roland. "For you, Will Dearborn!"

"Really? What is it?"

"Seeds! So they are!"

"From you, Sheemie?"

"Oh, no."

Roland took the packet—just an envelope which had been folded over and sealed. There was nothing written on the front or back, and the tips of his fingers felt no seeds within.

"Who from, then?"

"Can't remember," said Sheemie, who then cast his eyes aside. His brains had been stirred just enough, Roland reflected, so that he would never be unhappy for long, and would never be able to lie at all. Then his eyes, hopeful and timid, came back to Roland's. "I remember what I was supposed to say to you, though."

"Aye? Then say it, Sheemie."

Speaking as one who recites a painfully memorized line, both proud and nervous, he said: "These are the seeds you scattered on the Drop."

Roland's eyes blazed so fiercely that Sheemie stumbled back a step. He gave his sombrero a quick tug, turned, and hurried back to the safety of his flowers. He liked Will Dearborn and Will's friends (especially Mr. Arthur Heath, who sometimes said things that made Sheemie laugh fit to split), but in that moment he saw something in Will's eyes that frightened him badly. In that instant he

understood that Will was as much a killer as the one in the cloak, or the one who had wanted Sheemie to lick his boots clean, or old white-haired Jonas with the trembly voice.

As bad as them, or even worse.

8

Roland slipped the “seed-pack” into his shirt and didn’t open it until the three of them were back on the porch of the Bar K. In the distance, the thinny grumbled, making their horses twitch their ears nervously.

“Well?” Cuthbert asked at last, unable to restrain himself any longer. Roland took the envelope from inside his shirt, and tore it open. As he did, he reflected that Susan had known exactly what to say. To a nicety.

The others bent in, Alain (from his left and Cuthbert from his right, as he unfolded the single scrap of paper. Again he saw her simple, neatly made writing, the message not much longer than the previous one. Very different in content, however.

There is an orange grove a mile off the road on the town side of Citgo. Meet me there at moonrise. Come alone. S.

And below that, printed in emphatic little letters: burn this.

“We’ll keep a lookout,” Alain said.

Roland nodded. “Aye. But from a distance.”

Then he burned the note.

9

The orange grove was a neatly kept rectangle of about a dozen rows at the end of a partly overgrown cart-track. Roland arrived there after dark but still a good half hour before the rapidly thinning Peddler would haul him self over the horizon once more.

As the boy wandered along one of the rows, listening to the somehow skeletal sounds from the oilpatch to the north (squealing pistons, grinding gears, thudding drive-shafts), he was struck by deep homesickness. It was the fragile fragrance of orange-blossoms—a bright runner laid over the darker stench of oil—that brought it on. This toy grove was nothing like the great apple orchards of New Canaan . . . except somehow it was. There was the same feeling of dignity and civilization here, of much time devoted to something not strictly necessary. And in this case, he suspected, not very useful, either. Oranges grown this far north of the warm latitudes were probably almost as sour as lemons. Still, when the breeze stirred the trees, the smell made him think of Gilead with bitter longing, and for the first time he considered the possibility that he might never see home again—that he had become as much a wanderer as old Peddler Moon in the sky.

He heard her, but not until she was almost on top of him—if she’d been an enemy instead of a friend, he might still have had time to draw and fire, but it would have been close. He was filled with admiration, and as he saw her face in the starlight, he felt his heart gladden.

She halted when he turned and merely looked at him, her hands linked before her at her waist in a way that was sweetly and unconsciously childlike. He took a step toward her and they came up in what he took for alarm. He stopped, confused. But

he had misread her gesture in the chancy light. She could have stopped then, but chose not to. She stepped toward him deliberately, a tall young woman in a split riding skirt and plain black boots. Her sombrero hung down on her back, against the bound rope of her hair.

“Will Dearborn, we are met both fair and ill,” she said in a trembling voice, and then he was kissing her; they burned against one another as the Peddler rose in the famine of its last quarter.

10

Inside her lonely hut high on the Coos, Rhea sat at her kitchen table, bent over the glass the Big Coffin Hunters had brought her a month and a half ago. Her face was bathed in its pink glow, and no one would have mistaken it for the face of a girl any longer. She had extraordinary vitality, and it had carried her for many years (only the longest-lived residents of Hamby had any idea of how old Rhea of the Coos actually was, and they only the vaguest), but the glass was finally sapping it—sucking it out of her as a vampire sucks blood. Behind her, the hut’s larger room was even dingier and more cluttered than usual. These days she had no time for even a pretense of cleaning; the glass ball took up all her time. When she wasn’t looking into it, she was thinking of looking into it ... and, oh! Such things she had seen!

Ermot twined around one of her scrawny legs, hissing with agitation, but she barely noticed him. Instead she bent even closer into the ball’s poisonous pink glow, enchanted by what she saw there.

It was the girl who had come to her to be proved honest, and the young man she had seen the first time she’d looked into the ball. The one she had mistaken for a gunslinger, until she had realized his youth.

The foolish girl, who had come to Rhea singing and left in a more proper silence, had proved honest, and might well be honest yet (certainly she kissed and touched the boy with a virgin’s mingled greed and timidity), but she wouldn’t be honest much longer if they kept on the way they were going. And wouldn’t Hart Thorin be in for a surprise when he took his supposedly pure young gilly to bed? There were ways to fool men about that (men practically begged to be fooled about that), a thimble of pig’s blood would serve nicely, but she wouldn’t know that. Oh, this was too good! And to think she could watch Miss Haughty brought low, right here, in this wonderful glass! Oh, it was too good! Too wonderful!

She leaned closer still, the deep sockets of her eyes filling with pink fire. Ermot, sensing that she remained immune to his blandishments, crawled disconsolately away across the floor, in search of bugs. Musty pranced away from him, spitting fine curses, his six-legged shadow huge and misshapen on the firestruck wall.

11

Roland sensed the moment rushing at them. Somehow he managed to step away from her, and she stepped back from him, her eyes wide and her cheeks flushed—he could see that flush even in the light of the newly risen moon. His balls were throbbing. His groin felt full of liquid lead.

She half-turned away from him, and Roland saw that her sombrero had gone askew on her back. He reached out one trembling hand and straightened it. She

clasped his fingers in a brief but strong grip, then bent to pick up her riding gloves, which she had stripped off in her need to touch him skin to skin. When she stood again, the wash of blood abruptly left her face, and she reeled. But for his hands on her shoulders, steadying her, she might have fallen. She turned toward him, eyes rueful.

“What are we to do? Oh, Will, what are we to do?”

“The best we can,” he said. “As we both always have. As our fathers taught us.”

“This is mad.”

Roland, who had never felt anything so sane in his life—even the deep ache in his groin felt sane and right—said nothing.

“Do ye know how dangerous ’tis?” she asked, and went on before he could reply.

“Aye, ye do. I can see ye do. If we were seen together at all, ’twould be serious. To be seen as we just were—”

She shivered. He reached for her and she stepped back. “Best ye don’t, Will. If ye do, won’t be nothing done between us but spooning. Un less that was your intention?”

“You know it wasn’t.”

She nodded. “Have ye set your friends to watch?”

“Aye,” he said, and then his face opened in that unexpected smile she loved so well. “But not where they can watch us.”

“Thank the gods for that,” she said, and laughed rather distractedly. Then she stepped closer to him, so close that he was hard put not to take her in his arms again. She looked curiously up into his face. “Who are you, really. Will?”

“Almost who I say I am. That’s the joke of this, Susan. My friends and I weren’t sent here because we were drunk and belling, but we weren’t sent here to uncover any fell plot or secret conspiracy, either. We were just boys to be put out of the way in a time of danger. All that’s happened since—” He shook his head to show how helpless he felt, and Susan thought again of her father saying ka was like a wind—when it came it might take your chickens, your house, your bam. Even your life.

“And is Will Dearborn your real name?”

He shrugged. “One name’s as good as another, I wot, if the heart that answers to it is true. Susan, you were at Mayor’s House today, for my friend Richard saw you ride up—”

“Aye, fittings,” she said. “For I am to be this year’s Reaping Girl—it’s Hart’s choice, nothing I ever would have had on my own, mark I say it. A lot of foolishness, and hard on Olive as well, I warrant.”

“You will make the most beautiful Reaping Girl that ever was,” he said, and the sincerity in his voice made her tingle with pleasure; her cheeks grew warm again. There were five changes of costume for the Reaping Girl between the noon feast and the bonfire at dusk, each more elaborate than the last (in Gilead there would have been nine; in that way, Susan didn’t know how lucky she was), and she would have worn all five happily for Will, had he been the Reaping Lad. (This year’s Lad was Jamie McCann, a pallid and whey-faced stand-in for Hart Thorin, who was approximately forty years too old and gray for the job.) Even more

happily would she have worn the sixth—a silvery shift with wisp-thin straps and a hem that stopped high on her thighs. This was a costume no one but Maria, her maid, Concheta, her seamstress, and Hart Thorin would ever see. It was the one she would be wearing when she went to the old man's couch as his gilly, after the feast was over.

"When you were up there, did you see the ones who call themselves the Big Coffin Hunters?"

"I saw Jonas and the one with the cloak, standing together in the courtyard and talking," she said. "Not Deppa? The red-head?" She shook her head.

"Do you know the game Castles. Susan?"

"Aye. My father showed me when I was small."

"Then you know how the red pieces stand at one end of the board and the white at the other. How they come around the Hillocks and creep toward each other, setting screens for cover. What's going on here in Hamdry is very like that. And, as in the game, it has now become a question of who will break cover first. Do you understand?"

She nodded at once. "In the game, the first one around his Hillock is vulnerable."

"In life, too. Always. But sometimes even staying in cover is difficult. My friends and I have counted nearly everything we dare count. To count the rest—"

"The horses on the Drop, for instance."

"Aye, just so. To count them would be to break cover. Or the oxen we know about—"

Her eyebrows shot up. "There are no oxen in Hamby. Ye must be mistaken about that."

"No mistake."

"Where?"

"The Rocking H."

Now her eyebrows drew back down, and knitted in a thoughtful frown. "That's Laslo Rimer's place."

"Aye—Kimba's brother. Nor are those the only treasures hidden away in Hamby these days. There are extra wagons, extra tack hidden in barns belonging to members of the Horsemen's Association, extra caches of feed—"

"Will, no!"

"Yes. All that and more. But to count them—to be seen counting them—is to break cover. To risk being Castled. Our recent days have been pretty nightmarish—we try to look profitably busy without moving over to the Drop side of Hamby, where most of the danger lies. It's harder and harder to do. Then we received a message—"

"A message? How? From whom?"

"Best you not know those things, I think. But it's led us to believe that some of the answers we're looking for may be at Citgo."

"Will, d'ye think that what's out here may help me to know more about what happened to my da?"

"I don't know. It's possible, I suppose, but not likely. All I know for sure is that I finally have a chance to count something that matters and not be seen doing it."

His blood had cooled enough for him to hold out his hand to her; Su?san's had cooled enough for her to take it in good con?fi dence. She had put her glove back on again, how?ev?er. Bet?ter safe than sor?ry.

"Come on," she said. "I know a path."

12

In the moon's pale half-?light, Su?san led him out of the or?ange grove and to?ward the thump and squeak of the oil?patch. Those sounds made Roland's back prick?le; made him wish for one of the guns hid?den un?der the bunk-?house floor?boards back at the Bar K.

"Ye can trust me, Will, but that doesn't mean I'll be much help to ye," she said in a voice just a notch above a whis?per. "I've been with?in hear?ing dis?tance of Cit?go my whole life, but I could count the num?ber of times I've ac?tu?al?ly been in it on the fin?gers of both hands, so I could. The first two or three were on dares from my friends."

"And then?"

"With my da. He were al?ways in?ter?est?ed in the Old Peo?ple, and my Aunt Cord al?ways said he'd come to a bad end, med?dling in their leav in?gs." She swal?lowed hard. "And he did come to a bad end, al?though I doubt it were the Old Peo?ple re?spon?si?ble. Poor Da."

They had reached a smooth?wire fence. Be?yond it, the gantries of the oil wells stood against the sky like sen?tinels the size of Lord Perth. How many had she said were still work?ing? Nine?teen, he thought. The sound of them was ghas?tly—the sound of mon?sters be?ing choked to death. Of course it was the kind of place that kids dared each oth?er to go in?to; a kind of open-?air haunt?ed house.

He held two of the wires apart so she could slip be?tween them, and she did the same for him. As he passed through, he saw a line of white porce?lain cylin?ders march?ing down the post clos?est to him. A fencewire went through each.

"You un?der?stand what these are? Were?" he asked Su?san, tap?ping one of the cylin?ders.

"Aye. When there was elec?tric?ity, some went through here." She paused, then added shy?ly: "It's how I feel when you touch me."

He kissed her cheek just be?low her ear. She shiv?ered and pressed a hand briefly against his cheek be?fore draw?ing away. "I hope your friends will watch well."

"They will." "Is there a sig?nal?"

"The whis?tle of the nighthawk. Let's hope we don't hear it." "Aye, be it so." She took his hand and drew him in?to the oil?patch.

13

The first time the gas-?jet flared ahead of them, Will spat a curse un?der his breath (an ob?scene?ly en?er?get?ic one she hadn't heard since her fa?ther died) and dropped the hand not hold?ing hers to his belt.

"Be easy! It's on?ly the can?dle! The gas-?pipe!"

He re?laxed slow?ly. "That they use, don't they?"

"Aye. To run a few ma?chines—lit?tle more than toys, they are. To make ice, most?ly."

"I had some the day we met the Sher?iff."

When the flare licked out again—bright yellow with a bluish core—he didn't jump. He glanced at the three gas-storage tanks behind what Ham-bry-folk called "the candle" without much interest. Nearby was a stack of rusty canisters in which the gas could be bottled and carried.

"You've seen such before?" she asked.

He nodded.

"The Inner Baronies must be very strange and wonderful," Susan said. •

"I'm beginning to think they're no stranger than those of the Outer Arc," he said, turning slowly. He pointed. "What's yon building down there? Left over from the Old People?"

"Aye."

To the east of Citgo, the ground dropped sharply down a thickly wooded slope with a lane cut through the middle of it—this lane was as clear in the moonlight as a part in hair. Not far from the bottom of the slope was a crumbling building surrounded by rubble. The tumble-and-strew was the debris of many fallen smokestacks—that much could be extrapolated from the one which still stood.

Whatever else the Old People had done, they had made lots of smoke.

"There were useful things in there when my da was a child," she said.

"Paper and such—even a few ink-writers that would still work ... for a little while, at least. If you shook them hard." She pointed to the left of the building, where there was a vast square of crumbled paving, and a few rusting hulks that had been the Old People's weird, horseless mode of travel. "Once there were things over there that looked like the gas-storage tanks, only much, much larger. Like huge silver cans, they were. They didn't rust like those that are left. I can't think what became of them, unless someone hauled them off for water storage. I never would. 'T would be unlucky, even if they weren't contaminated."

She turned her face up to his, and he kissed her mouth in the moonlight.

"Oh, Will. What a pity this is for you."

"What a pity for both of us," he said, and then passed between them one of those long and aching looks of which only teenagers are capable. They looked away at last and walked on again, hand-in-hand.

She couldn't decide which frightened her more—the few dericks that were still pumping or those dozens which had fallen silent. One thing she knew for sure was that no power on the face of the earth could have got ten her within the fence of this place without a friend close beside her. The pumps wheezed; every now and then a cylinder screamed like some one being stabbed; at periodic intervals "the candle" would fire off with a sound like dragon's breath, throwing their shadows out long in front of them. Susan kept her ears pitched for the nighthawk's piercing two-note whistle, and heard nothing.

They came to a wide lane—what had once undoubtedly been a main tenance road—that split the oilpatch in two. Running down the center was a steel pipe with rusting joints. It lay in a deep concrete trough, with the upper arc of its rusty circumference protruding above ground level.

"What's this?" he asked.

"The pipe that took the oil to yon building, I reckon. It means nothing, 'tis been

dry for years.“

He dropped to one knee, slid his hand carefully into the space between the concrete sleeve and the pipe's rusty side. She watched him nervously, biting her lip to keep herself from saying something which would surely come out sounding weak or womanish: What if there were biting spiders down there in the forgotten dark? Or what if his hand got stuck? What would they do then?

Of that latter there had been no chance, she saw when he pulled his hand free. It was slick and black with oil.

“Dry for years?” he asked with a little smile.

She could only shake her head, bewildered.

14

They followed the pipe toward a place where a rotten gate barred the road. The pipe (she could now see oil bleeding out of its old joints, even in the weak moonlight) ducked under the gate; they went over it. She thought his hands rather too intimate for polite company in their helping, and rejoiced at each touch. If he doesn't stop, the top of my head will explode like “the candle,” she thought, and laughed.

“Susan?”

“ ‘Tis nothing, Will, only nerves.”

Another of those long glances passed between them as they stood on the far side of the gate, and then they went down the hill together. As they walked, she noticed an odd thing: many of the pines had been stripped of their lower branches. The hatchet marks and scabs of pine resin were clear in the moonlight, and looked new. She pointed this out to Will, who nodded but said nothing.

At the bottom of the hill, the pipe rose out of the ground and, supported on a series of rusty steel cradles, ran about seventy yards toward the abandoned building before stopping with the ragged suddenness of a battlefield amputation. Below this stopping point was what looked like a shallow lake of drying, tacky oil. That it had been there for awhile Susan could tell from the numerous corpses of birds she could see scattered across it—they had come down to investigate, become stuck, and stayed to die in what must have been an unpleasantly leisurely fashion.

She stared at this with wide, uncomprehending eyes until Will tapped her on the leg. He had hunkered down. She joined him knee-to-knee and followed the sweeping movement of his finger with growing disbelief and confusion. There were tracks here. Very big ones. Only one thing could have made them.

“Oxen,” she said.

“Aye. They came from there.” He pointed at the place where the pipe ended. “And they go—” He turned on the soles of his boots, still hunkered, and pointed back toward the slope where the woods started. Now that he pointed them out, she easily saw what she should have seen at once, horseman's daughter that she was. A perfect effort had been made to hide the tracks and the churned-up ground where something heavy had been dragged or rolled. Time had smoothed away more of the mess, but the marks were still clear. She even thought she knew what the oxen had been dragging, and she could see that Will knew, as well.

The tracks split off from the end of the pipe in two arcs. Susan and "Will Dearborn" followed the right-hand one. She wasn't surprised to see ruts mingled in with the tracks of the oxen. They were shallow—it had been a dry summer, by and large, and the ground was nearly as hard as concrete—but they were there. To still be able to see them at all meant that some goodly amount of weight had been moved. And aye, of course; why else would oxen be needed?

"Look," Will said as they neared the hem of forest at the foot of the slope. She finally saw what had caught his attention, but she had to get down on her hands and knees to do it—how sharp his eyes were! Almost supernaturally so. There were boot-tracks here. Not fresh, but they were a lot newer than the tracks of the oxen and the wheel-ruts.

"This was the one with the cape," he said, indicating a clear pair of tracks.

"Reynolds."

"Will! Thee can't know it!"

He looked surprised, then laughed. "Sure I can. He walks with one foot turned in a little—the left foot. And here it is." He stirred the air over the tracks with the tip of his finger, then laughed again at the way she was looking at him. "'Tisn't sorcery, Susan daughter of Patrick; only trailcraft."

"How do ye know so much, so young?" she asked. "Who are ye, Will?"

He stood up and looked down into her eyes. He didn't have to look far; she was tall for a girl. "My name's not Will but Roland," he said. "And now I've put my life in your hands. That I don't mind, but maybe I've put your own life at risk, as well. You must keep it a dead secret."

"Roland," she said wonderingly. "Tasting it."

"Aye. Which do you like better?"

"Your real one," she said at once. "'Tis a noble name, so it is."

He grinned, relieved, and this was the grin that made him look young again.

She raised herself on her toes and put her lips on his. The kiss, which was chaste and close-mouthed to begin with, bloomed like a flower: became open and slow and humid. She felt his tongue touch her lower lip and met it, shyly at first, with her own. His hands covered her back, then slipped around to her front. He touched her breasts, also shy to begin with, then slid his palms up their lower slopes to their tips. He uttered a small, moaning sigh directly into her mouth. And as he drew her closer and began to trail kisses down her neck, she felt the stone hardness of him below the buckle of his belt, a slim, warm length which exactly matched the melting she felt in the same place; those two places were meant for each other, as she was for him and he for her. It was ka, after all—ka like the wind, and she would go with it willingly, leaving all honor and promises behind.

She opened her mouth to tell him so, and then a queer but utterly persuasive sensation enveloped her: they were being watched. It was ridiculous, but it was there; she even felt she knew who was watching. She stepped back from Roland, her boot heels rocking unsteadily on the half-eroded oxen tracks. "Get out, ye old bitch," she breathed. "If ye be spying on us in some way, I know not how, get thee gone!"

On the hill of the Coos, Rhea drew back from the glass, spitting curses in a voice so low and harsh that she sounded like her own snake. She didn't know what Susan had said—no sound came through the glass, only sight—but she knew that the girl had sensed her. And when she did, all sight had been wiped out. The glass had flashed a brilliant pink, then had gone dark, and none of the passes she made over it would serve to brighten it again.

"Aye, fine, let it be so," she said at last, giving up. She remembered the wretched, prison girl (not so prison with the young man, though, was she?) standing hypnotized in her doorway, remembered what she had told the girl to do after she had lost her maidenhead, and began to grin, all her good humor restored. For if she lost her maidenhead to this wandering boy instead of to Hart Thorin, Lord High Mayor of Mejis, the comedy would be even greater, would it not? Rhea sat in the shadows of her stinking hut and began to cackle.

16

Roland stared at her, wide-eyed, and as Susan explained about Rhea a little more fully (she left out the humiliating final examinations which lay at the heart of "proving honesty"), his desire cooled just enough for him to reassert control. It had nothing to do with jeopardizing the position he and his friends were trying to maintain in Hambray (or so he told himself) and everything to do with maintaining Susan's—her position was important, her honor even more so.

"I imagine it was your imagination," he said when she had finished.

"I think not." With a touch of coolness.

"Or conscience, even?"

At that she lowered her eyes and said nothing.

"Susan, I would not hurt you for the world."

"And ye love me?" Still without looking up.

"Aye, I do."

"Then it's best you kiss and touch me no more—not tonight. I can't stand it if ye do."

He nodded without speaking and held out his hand. She took it, and they walked on in the direction they had been going when they had been so sweetly distracted. While they were still ten yards from the hem of the forest, both saw the glimmer of metal despite the dense foliage—too dense, she thought. Too dense by far. It was the pine-boughs, of course; the ones which had been whacked from the trees on the slope. What they had been interlaced to camouflage were the big silver cans now missing from the paved area. The silver storage containers had been dragged over here—by the oxen, presumably—and then concealed. But why?

Roland inspected along the line of tangled pine branches, then stopped and plucked several aside. This created an opening like a doorway, and he gestured her to go through. "Be sharp in your looks," he said. "I doubt if they've bothered to set traps or tripwires, but 'tis always best to be careful."

Behind the camouflage boughs, the tankers had been as neatly lined up as toy soldiers at the end of the day, and Susan at once saw one reason why they had been hidden: they had been re-equipped with wheels, well-made ones of solid oak

which came as high as her chest. Each had been rimmed with a thin iron strip. The wheels were new, so were the strips, and the hubs had been custom-made. Susan knew only one blacksmith in Barony capable of such fine work: Brian Hookey, to whom she had gone for Felicia's new shoes. Brian Hookey, who had smiled and clapped her on the shoulder like a comrade when she had come in with her daughter's shoebag hanging on her hip. Brian Hookey, who had been one of Pat Delgado's best friends.

She recalled looking around and thinking that times had been good for Brian Hookey, and of course she had been right. Work in the blacksmithing line had been plentiful. Hookey had been making lots of wheels and rims, for one thing, and someone must have been paying him to do it. Elfred Jonas was one possibility; Kimba Rimer an even better one. Hart? She simply couldn't believe that. Hart had his mind—what little there was of it—fixed on other matters this summer.

There was a kind of rough path behind the tankers. Roland walked slowly along it, pacing like a preacher with his hands clasped at the small of his back, reading the incomprehensible words written on the tankers' rear decks: Citgo. Sunoco. Exxon. Conoco. He paused once and read aloud, haltingly: "Cleaner fuel for a better tomorrow." He snorted softly. "Rot! This is tomorrow."

"Roland—Will, I mean—what are they for?"

He didn't answer at first, but turned and walked back down the line of bright steel cans. Fourteen on this side of the mysteriously reactivated oil-supply pipe, and, she assumed, a like number on the other. As he walked, he rapped his fist on the side of each. The sound was dull and clunky. They were full of oil from the Citgo oilpatch.

"They were triggered quite some time ago, I imagine," he said. "I doubt if the Big Coffin Hunters did it all themselves, but they no doubt oversaw it ... first the fitting of the new wheels to replace the old rotten rubber ones, then the filling. They used the oxen to line them up here, at the base of the hill, because it was convenient. As it's convenient to let the extra horses run free out on the Drop. Then, when we came, it seemed prudent to take the precaution of covering these up. Stupid babies we might be, but perhaps smart enough to wonder about twenty-eight loaded oil-carts with new wheels. So they came out here and covered them."

"Jonas, Reynolds, and Depape."

"Aye."

"But why?" She took him by the arm and asked her question again. "What are they for?"

"For Parson," Roland said with a calm he didn't feel. "For the Good Man. The Affiliation knows he's found a number of war-machines; they come either from the Old People or from some other where. Yet the Affiliation fears them not, because they don't work. They're silent. Some feel Parson has gone mad to put his trust in such broken things, but..."

"But maybe they're not broken. Maybe they only need this stuff. And maybe Parson knows it."

Roland nodded.

She touched the side of one of the tankers. Her fingers came away oily. She rubbed the tips together, smelled them, then bent and picked up a swatch of grass to wipe her hands. "This doesn't work in our machines. It's been tried. It clogs them."

Roland nodded again. "My father—my folk in the Inner Crescent know that as well. And count on it. But if Farson has gone to this trouble—and split aside a troop of men to come and get these tankers, as we have word he has done—he either knows a way to thin it to usefulness, or he thinks he does. If he's able to lure the forces of the Affiliation into a battle in some close location where rapid retreat is impossible, and if he can use machine-weapons like the ones that go on treads, he could win more than a battle. He could slaughter ten thousand horse-mounted fighting men and win the war."

"But surely your fathers know this . . . ?"

Roland shook his head in frustration. How much their fathers knew was one question. What they made of what they knew was another. What forces drove them—necessity, fear, the fantastic pride which had also been handed down, father to son, along the line of Arthur Eld—was yet a third. He could only tell her his clearest surmise.

"I think they daren't wait much longer to strike Farson a mortal blow. If they do, the Affiliation will simply rot out from the inside. And if that happens, a good deal of Mid-World will go with it."

"But . . ." She paused, biting her lip, shaking her head. "Surely even Farson must know . . . understand . . ." She looked up at him with wide eyes. "The ways of the Old People are the ways of death. Everyone knows that, so they do."

Roland of Gilead found himself remembering a cook named Hax, dangling at the end of a rope while the rooks pecked up scattered bread crumbs from beneath the dead man's feet. Hax had died for Farson. But before that, he had poisoned children for Farson.

"Death," he said, "is what John Parson's all about."

17

In the orchard again.

It seemed to the lovers (for so they now were, in all but the most physical sense) that hours had passed, but it had been no more than forty-five minutes. Summer's last moon, diminished but still bright, continued to shine above them.

She led him down one of the lanes to where she had tied her horse. Pylon nodded his head and whickered softly at Roland. He saw the horse had been rigged for silence—every buckle padded, and the stirrups themselves wrapped in felt. Then he turned to Susan.

Who can remember the pangs and sweetness of those early years? We remember our first real love no more clearly than the illusions that caused us to rave during a high fever. On that night and beneath that fading moon, Roland Deschain and Susan Delgado were nearly torn apart by their desire for each other; they floundered for what was right and ached with feelings that were both desperate and deep.

All of which is to say that they stepped toward each other, stepped back, looked

in?to each oth?er's eyes with a kind of help?less fas?ci?na?tion, stepped for?ward again, and stopped. She re?mem?bered what he had said with a kind of hor?ror: that he would do any?thing for her but share her with an?oth?er man. She would not—per?haps could not—break her promise to May?or Thorin, and it seemed that Roland would not (or could not) break it for her. And here was the most hor?ri?ble thing of all: strong as the wind of ka might be, it ap?peared that hon?or and the promis?es they had made would prove stronger.

“What will ye do now?” she asked through dry lips.

“I don't know. I must think, and I must speak with my friends. Will you have trou?ble with your aunt when you go home? Will she want to know where you've been and what you've been do?ing?”

“Is it me you're con?cerned about or your?self and yer plans, Willy?”

He didn't re?spond, on?ly looked at her. Af?ter a mo?ment, Su?san dropped her eyes.

“I'm sor?ry, that was cru?el. No, she'll not tax me. I of?ten ride at night, al?though not of?ten so far from the house.”

“She won't know how far you've rid?den?”

“Nay. And these days we tread care?ful?ly around each oth?er. It's like hav?ing two pow?der mag?azines in the same house.” She reached out her hands. She had tucked her gloves in?to her belt, and the fin?gers which grasped his fin?gers were cold.

“This'll have no good end,” she said in a whis?per.

“Don't say that, Su?san.”

“Aye, I do. I must. But what?ev?er comes, I love thee, Roland.”

He took her in his arms and kissed her. When he re?leased her lips, she put them to his ear and whis?pered, “If you love me, then love me. Make me break my promise.”

For a long mo?ment when her heart didn't beat, there was no re?sponse from him, and she al?lowed her?self to hope. Then he shook his head—on?ly the one time, but firm?ly. “Su?san, I can?not.”

“Is yer hon?or so much greater than yer pro?fessed love for me, then? Aye? Then let it be so.” She pulled out of his arms, be?gin?ning to cry, ig nor?ing his hand on her boot as she swung up in?to the sad?dle—his low call to wait, as well. She yanked free the slip?knot with which Py?lon had been teth?ered and turned him with one spur?less foot. Roland was still call?ing to her, loud?er now, but she flung Py?lon in?to a gal?lop and away from him be fore her brief flare of rage could go out. He would not take her used, and her promise to Thorin had been made be?fore she knew Roland walked the face of the earth. That be?ing so, how dare he in?sist that the loss of hon?or and con?se?quent shame be hers alone? Lat?er, ly?ing in her sleep?less bed, she would re?al?ize he had in?sist?ed noth?ing. And she was not even clear of the or?ange grove be?fore rais?ing her left hand to the side of her face, feel ing the wet?ness there, and re?al?iz?ing that he had been cry?ing, too.

18

Roland rode the lanes out?side town un?til well past moon?set, try?ing to get his roar?ing emo?tions un?der some kind of con?trol. He would won?der for awhile what he was go?ing to do about their dis?cov?ery at Cit?go, and then his thoughts would shift to Su?san again. Was he a fool for not tak?ing her when she want?ed to be

taken? For not sharing what she wanted to share? If you love me, then love me. Those words had nearly torn him open. Yet in the deep rooms of his heart rooms where the clearest voice was that of his father he felt he had not been wrong. Nor was it just a matter of honor, whatever she might think. But let her think that if she would; better she should hate him a little, perhaps, than realize how deep the danger was for both of them.

Around three o' the clock, as he was about to turn for the Bar K, he heard the rapid drumming of hoofbeats on the main road, approaching from the west. Without thinking about why it seemed so important to do so, Roland swung back in that direction, then brought Rusher to a stop behind a high line of run-to-riot hedges. For nearly ten minutes the sound of the hoofbeats continued to swell—sound carried far in the deep quiet of early morning—and that was quite enough time for Roland to feel he knew who was riding toward Ham-bry hell-for-leather just two hours before dawn. Nor was he mistaken. The moon was down, but he had no trouble, even through the brambly interstices of the hedge, recognizing Roy De-pape. By dawn the Big Coffin Hunters would be three again.

Roland turned Rusher back the way he had been heading, and rode to rejoin his own friends.

CHAPTER X

BIRD AND BEAR AND HARE AND FISH

1

The most important day of Susan Delgado's life—the day upon which her life turned like a stone upon a pivot—came about two weeks after her moonlit tour of the oilpatch with Roland. Since then she had seen him only half a dozen times, always at a distance, and they had raised their hands as passing acquaintances do when their errands bring them briefly into sight of one another. Each time this happened, she felt a pain as sharp as a knife twisting in her ... and though it was no doubt cruel, she hoped he felt the same twist of the knife. If there was anything good about those two miserable weeks, it was only that her great fear—that gossip might begin about her self and the young man who called himself Will

Dear born—subsidized, and she found herself actually sorry to feel it ebb. Gossip? There was nothing to gossip about.

Then, on a day between the passing of the Peddler's Moon and the rise of the Huntress, kafi nally came and blew her away—house and barn and all. It began with someone at the door.

2

She had been finishing the washing—a light enough chore with only two women to do it for—when the knock came.

“If it's the ragman, send him away, ye mind!” Aunt Cord called from the other room, where she was turning bed linen.

But it wasn't the ragman. It was Maria, her maid from Seafront, looking woeeful.

The second dress Susan was to wear on Reaping Day—the silk meant for luncheon at Mayor's House and the conversational afterward—was ruined, Maria said, and she was in hack because of it. Would be sent back to Onnie's Ford if she

wasn't lucky, and she the on?ly sup?port of her moth?er and fa?ther— oh, it was hard, much too hard, so it was. Could Su?san come? Please?

Su?san was hap?py to come—was al?ways hap?py to get out of the house these days, and away from her aunt's shrewish, nag?ging voice. The clos?er Reap?ing came, the less she and Aunt Cord could abide each oth?er, it seemed.

They took Py?lon, who was hap?py enough to car?ry two girls rid?ing dou?ble through the morn?ing cool, and Maria's sto?ry was quick?ly told. Su san un?der?stood al?most at once that Maria's po?si?tion at Seafront wasn't re?al?ly in much jeop?ardy; the lit?tle dark-?haired maid had sim?ply been us?ing her in?nate (and rather charm?ing) pen?chant for cre?at?ing dra?ma out of what was re?al?ly not very dra?mat?ic at all.

The sec?ond Reap?ing dress (which Su?san thought of as Blue Dress With Beads; the first, her break?fast dress, was White Dress With High Waist and Puffed Sleeves) had been kept apart from the oth?ers—it need?ed a bit of work yet—and some?thing had got?ten in?to the first-?floor sewing room and gnawed it pret?ty much to rags. If this had been the cos?tume she was to wear to the bon?fire light?ing, or the one she was to wear to the ball room dance af?ter the bon?fire had been lit, the mat?ter would in?deed have been se?ri?ous. But Blue Dress With Beads was es?sen?tial?ly just a fan?ci?fied day re?ceiv?ing dress, and could eas?ily be re?placed in the two months be tween now and the Reap. On?ly two! Once—on the night the old witch had grant?ed her her re?prieve—it had seemed like eons be?fore she would have to be?gin her bed-?ser?vice to May?or Thorin. And now it was on?ly two months! She twist?ed in a kind of in?vol?un?tary protest at the thought.

“Mum?” Maria asked. Su?san wouldn't al?low the girl to call her sai, and Maria, who seemed in?ca?pable of call?ing her mis?tress by her giv?en name, had set?tled on this com?pro?mise. Su?san found the term amus?ing, giv?en the fact that she was on?ly six?teen, and Maria her?self prob?ably just two or three years old?er. “Mum, are you all right?”

“Just a crick in my back, Maria, that's all.”

“Aye, I get those. Fair bad, they are. I've had three aunts who've died of the wast?ing dis?ease, and when I get those twinges, I'm al?ways afear'd that—”

“What kind of an?imal chewed up Blue Dress? Do ye know?”

Maria leaned for?ward so she could speak con?fi?den?tial?ly in?to her mis tress's ear, as if they were in a crowd?ed mar?ket?place al?ley in?stead of on the road to Seafront. “It's put about that a rac?coon got in through a win?dow that 'us opened dur?ing the heat of the day and was then for?got at day's end, but I had a good sniff of that room, and Kim?ba Rimer did, too, when he came down to in?spect. Just be?fore he sent me af?ter you, that was.”

“What did you smell?”

Maria leaned close again, and this time she ac?tu?al?ly whis?pered, al though there was no one on the road to over?hear: “Dog farts.”

There was a mo?ment of thun?der?struck si?lence, and then Su?san be?gan to laugh. She laughed un?til her stom?ach hurt and tears went stream?ing down her cheeks.

“Are ye say?ing that W-?W-?Wolf... the May?or's own d-?d-?dog ... got in?to the down?stairs seam?stress's clos?et and chewed up my Con?ver?sa?tion?al d-d—” But she couldn't fin?ish. She was sim?ply laugh?ing too hard.

“Aye,” Maria said stoutly. She seemed to find nothing unusual about Susan’s laughter . . . which was one of the things Susan loved about her. “But he’s not to be blamed, so I say, for a dog will follow his natural instincts, if the way is open for him to do so. The downstairs maids—“ She broke off. “You’d not tell the Mayor or Kimba Rimer this, I suppose, Mum?”

“Maria, I’m shocked at you—you play me cheap.”

“No, Mum, I play ye dear, so I do, but it’s always best to be safe. All I meant to say was that, on hot days, the downstairs maids sometimes go in to that sewing closet for their fives. It lies directly in the shadow of the watchtower, ye know, and is the coolest room in the house—even cooler than the main receiving rooms.”

“I’ll remember that,” Susan said. She thought of holding the Luncheon and Conversation in the seamstress’s beck beyond the kitchen when the great day came, and began to giggle again. “Go on.”

“No more to say, Mum,” Maria told her, as if all else were too obvious for conversation. “The maids eat their cakes and leave the crumbs. I reckon Wolf smelled em and this time the door was left open. When the crumbs was gone, he tried the dress. For a second course, like.”

This time they laughed together.

3

But she wasn’t laughing when she came home.

Cordelia Delgado, who thought the happiest day of her life would be the one when she finally saw her troublesome niece out the door and the annoying business of her deflowering finally over, bolted out of her chair and hurried to the kitchen window when she heard the gallop of approaching hoofs about two hours after Susan had left with that little scrap of a maid to have one of her dresses refitted. She never doubted that it was Susan returning, and she never doubted it was trouble. In ordinary circumstances, the silly twist would never gallop one of her beloved horses on a hot day.

She watched, nervously dry-washing her hands, as Susan pulled Pylon up in a very un-Delgado-like scrunch, then dismounted in an unladylike leap. Her braid had come half undone, spraying that damned blonde hair that was her vanity (and her curse) in all directions. Her skin was pale, except for twin patches of color flaring high on her cheekbones. Cordelia didn’t like the look of those at all. Pat had always flared in that same place when he was scared or angry.

She stood at the sink, now biting her lips as well as working her hands. Oh, ‘twould be so good to see the back of that troublesome she. “Ye haven’t made trouble, have ye?” she whispered as Susan pulled the saddle from Pylon’s back and then led him toward the barn. “You better not have, Miss Oh So Young and Pretty. Not at this late date. You better not have.”

4

When Susan came in twenty minutes later, there was no sign of her aunt’s strain and rage; Cordelia had put them away as one might store a dangerous weapon—a gun, say—on a high closet shelf. She was back in her rocker, knitting, and the face she turned to Susan’s entry had a serene serenity. She watched the girl go to the sink, pump cold water into the basin, and then splash it on her face. Instead of

reach?ing for a tow?el to pat her self dry, Su?san on?ly looked out the win?dow with an ex?pres?sion that fright ened Cordelia bad?ly. The girl no doubt fan?cied that look haunt?ed and des?per?ate; to Cordelia, it looked on?ly child?ish?ly will?ful.

“All right, Su?san,” she said in a calm, mod?ulat?ed voice. The girl would nev?er know what a strain it was to achieve that tone, let alone main?tain it. Un?less she was faced with a will?ful teenag?er of her own one day, that was. “What’s fashed thee so?”

Su?san turned to her—Cordelia Del?ga?do, just sit?ting there in her rock?er, calm as a stone. In that mo?ment Su?san felt she could fly at her aunt and claw her thin, self-righ?teous face to strings, scream?ing This is your fault! Yours! All yours! She felt soiled—no, that wasn’t strong enough; she felt filthy, and noth?ing had re?al?ly hap?pened. In a way, that was the hor?ror of it. Noth?ing had re?al?ly hap?pened yet. “It shows?” was all she said.

“Of course it does,” Cordelia replied. “Now tell me, girl. Has he been on thee?”

“Yes ... no ... no.”

Aunt Cord sat in her chair, knit?ting in her lap, eye?brows raised, wait ing for more. At last Su?san told her what had hap?pened, speak?ing in a tone that was most?ly flat—a lit?tle trem?ble in?trud?ed to?ward the end, but that was all. Aunt Cord be?gan to feel a cau?tious sort of re?lief. Per?haps more goose-?girl nerves was all it came down to, af?ter all!

The sub?sti?tute gown, like all the sub?sti?tutes, hadn’t been fin?ished off; there was too much else to do. Maria had there?fore turned Su?san over to blade-?faced Conchet?ta Mor?gen?stem, the chief seam?stress, who had led Su?san in?to the down?stairs sewing room with?out say?ing any?thing—if saved words were gold, Su?san had some?times re?flect?ed, Conchet?ta would be as rich as the May?or’s sis?ter was re?put?ed to be. Blue Dress With Beads was draped over a head?less dress?mak?er’s dum?my crouched be?neath one low eave, and al?though Su?san could see ragged places on the hem and one small hole around to the back, it was by no means the tat?tered ru?in she had been ex?pect?ing.

“Can it not be saved?” she asked, rather timid?ly.

“No,” Conchet?ta said curt?ly. “Get out of those trousers, girl. Shirt, too.”

Su?san did as she was bid, stand?ing bare?foot in the cool lit?tle room with her arms crossed over her bo?som ... not that Conchet?ta had ev?er shown the slight?est in?ter?est in what she had, back or front, above or be?low.

Blue Dress With Beads was to be re?placed by Pink Dress With Ap plique, it seemed. Su?san stepped in?to it, raised the straps, and stood pa tient?ly while Conchet?ta bent and mea?sured and mut?tered, some?times us?ing a bit of chalk to write num?bers on a wall-?stone, some?times grab?bing a swag of ma?te?ri?al and pulling it tighter against Su?san’s hip or waist, check?ing the look in the full-?length mir?ror on the far wall. As al?ways dur ing this pro?cess, Su?san slipped away men?tal?ly, al?low?ing her mind to go where it want?ed. Where it want?ed to go most fre?quent?ly these days was in?to a day?dream of rid?ing along the Drop with Roland, the two of them side by side, fi?nal?ly stop?ping in a wil?low grove she knew that over?looked Ham?bry Creek.

“Stand there still as you can,” Conchet?ta said curt?ly. “I be back.”

Su?san was hard?ly aware she was gone; was hard?ly aware she was in May?or's House at all. The part of her that re?al?ly mat?tered wasn't there. That part was in the wil?low grove with Roland. She could smell the faint half-?sweet, half-?acid per?fume of the trees and hear the qui?et gos?sip of the stream as they lay down to?geth?er fore?head to fore?head. He traced the shape of her face with the palm of his hand be?fore tak?ing her in his arms . . .

This day?dream was so strong that at first Su?san re?spond?ed to the arms which curled around her waist from be?hind, arch?ing her back as they first ca?ressed her stom?ach and then rose to cup her breasts. Then she heard a kind of plow?ing, snort?ing breath in her ear, smelled to?bac?co, and un?der stood what was hap?pen?ing. Not Roland touch?ing her breasts, but Hart Thorin's long and skin?ny fin?gers. She looked in the mir?ror and saw him loom?ing over her left shoul?der like an in?cubus. His eyes were bulging, there were big drops of sweat on his fore?head in spite of the room's cool ness, and his tongue was ac?tu?al?ly hang?ing out, like a dog's on a hot day. Re?vul?sion rose in her throat like the taste of rot?ten food. She tried to pull away and his hands tight?ened their hold, pulling her against him. His knuck?les cracked ob?scene?ly, and now she could feel the hard lump at the cen?ter of him. At times over the last few weeks, Su?san had al?lowed her?self to hope that, when the time came, Thorin would be in?ca?pable—that he would be able to make no iron at the forge. She had heard this of?ten hap?pened to men when they got old?er. The hard, throb?bing col?umn which lay against her bot?tom dis?abused her of that wist?ful no?tion in a hur?ry.

She had man?aged at least a de?gree of diplo?ma?cy by sim?ply putting her hands over his and at?tempt?ing to draw them off her breasts in?stead of pulling away from him again (Cordelia, im?pas?sive, not show?ing the great re?lief she felt at this).

“May?or Thorin—Hart—you mustn't—this is hard?ly the place and not yet the time—Rhea said—”

“Balls to her and all witch?es!” His cul?tured politi?cian's tones had been re?placed by an ac?cent as thick as that in the voice of any back-?coun?try farm?hand from On?nie's Ford. “I must have some?thing, a bon?bon, aye, so I must. Balls to the witch, I say! Owl?shit to 'er!” The smell of to?bac?co a thick reek around her head. She thought that she would vom?it if she had to smell it much longer. “Just stand still, girl. Stand still, my temp?ta?tion. Mind me well!”

Some?how she did. There was even some dis?tant part of her mind, a part to?tal?ly ded?icat?ed to self-?preser?va?tion, that hoped he would mis?take her shud?ders of re?vul?sion for maid?en?ly ex?cite?ment. He had drawn her tight against him, hands work?ing en?er?get?ical?ly on her breasts, his res?pi?ra tion a stinky steam-?en?gine in her ear. She stood back to him, her eyes closed, tears squeez?ing out from be?neath the lids and through the fringes of her lash?es.

It didn't take him long. He rocked back and forth against her, moan ing like a man with stom?ach cramps. At one point he licked the lobe of her ear, and Su?san thought her skin would crawl right off her body in its re?vul?sion. Fi?nal?ly, thank?ful?ly, she felt him be?gin to spasm against her.

“Oh, aye, get out, ye damned poi?son!” he said in a voice that was al?most a squeal. He pushed so hard she had to brace her hands against the wall to keep from be?ing

driven face—first in—to it. Then he at last stepped back.

For a moment Susan only stood as she was, with her palms against the rough cold stone of the sewing room wall. She could see Thorin in the mirror, and in his image she saw the ordinary doom that was rushing at her, the ordinary doom of which this was but a foretaste: the end of girlhood, the end of romance, the end of dreams where she and Roland lay together in the willow grove with their foreheads touching. The man in the mirror looked oddly like a boy himself, one who's been up to something he wouldn't tell his mother about. Just a tall and gangly lad with strange gray hair and narrow twitching shoulders and a wet spot on the front of his trousers. Hart Thorin looked as if he didn't quite know where he was. In that moment the lust was flushed out of his face, but what replaced it was no better—that vacant confusion. It was as if he were a bucket with a hole in the bottom: no matter what you put in it, or how much, it always ran out before long. He 'll do it again, she thought, and felt an immense tiredness creep over her. Now that he's done it once, he 'll do it every chance he gets, likely. From now on coming up here is going to be like . . . well . . .

Like Castles. Like playing at Castles.

Thorin looked at her a moment longer. Slowly, like a man in a dream, he pulled the tail of his billowy white shirt out of his pants and let it drop around him like a skirt, covering the wet spot. His chin gleamed; he had drooled in his excitement. He seemed to feel this and wiped the wetness away with the heel of one hand, looking at her with those empty eyes all the while. Then some expression at last came into them, and without an other word he turned and left the room.

There was a little scuffling thud in the hall as he collided with someone out there. Susan heard him mutter "Sorry! Sorry!" under his breath (it was more apology than he'd given her, muttered or not), and then Concheta stepped back into the room. The swatch of cloth she'd gone after was draped around her shoulders like a stole. She took in Susan's pale face and tearstained cheeks at once. She'll say nothing, Susan thought. None of them will, just as none of them will lift a finger to help me off this stick I've run myself on. "Ye sharpened it yourself, gilly," they'd say if I called for help, and that'll be their excuse for leaving me to wriggle. But Concheta had surprised her. "Life's hard, misery, so it is. Best get used to it."

5

Susan's voice—dry, by now pretty much stripped of emotion—at last ceased. Aunt Cord put her knitting aside, got up, and put the kettle on for tea.

"Ye dramatize, Susan." She spoke in a voice that strove to be both kind and wise, and succeeded at neither. "It's a trait ye get from your Manchester side—half of them fancied themselves poets, t'other half fancied themselves painters, and almost all of them spent their nights too drunk to tapdance. He grabbed yer tit-ties and gave yer a dry-hump, that's all. Nothing to be so upset over. Certainly nothing to lose sleep over."

"How would you know?" Susan asked. It was disrespectful, but she was beyond caring. She thought she'd reached a point where she could bear anything from her aunt except that patronizing worldly-wise tone of voice. It stung like a fresh scrape.

Cordelia raised an eye?brow and spoke with?out ran?cor. “How ye do love to throw that up to me! Aunt Cord, the dry old stick. Aunt Cord the spin?ster. Aunt Cord the gray?ing vir?gin. Aye? Well, Miss Oh So Young and Pret?ty, vir?gin I might be, but I had a lover or two back when I was young . . . be?fore the world moved on, ye might say. May?hap one was the great Fran Lengyll.”

And may?hap not, Su?san thought; Fran Lengyll was her aunt’s se?nior by at least fif?teen years, per?haps as many as twen?ty-?five.

“I’ve felt old Tom’s goat on my back?side a time or two, Su?san. Aye, and on my frontside as well.”

“And were any of these lovers six?ty, with bad breath and knuck?les that cracked when they squeezed your tit?ties, Aunt? Did any of them try to push you through the near?est wall when old Tom be?gan to wag his beard and say baa-?baa-?baa?” The rage she ex?pect?ed did not come. What did was worse—an ex pres?sion close to the look of empti?ness she had seen on Thorin’s face in the mir?ror. “Deed’s done, Su?san.” A smile, short-?lived and aw?ful, nick ered like an eye?lid on her aunt’s nar?row face. “Deed’s done, aye.”

In a kind of ter?ror Su?san cried: “My fa?ther would have hat?ed this! Hat?ed it! And hat?ed you for al?low?ing it to hap?pen! For en?cour?ag?ing it to hap?pen!”

“May?hap,” Aunt Cord said, and the aw?ful smile winked at her again. “May?hap so. And the on?ly thing he’d hate more? The dis?hon?or of a bro ken promise, the shame of a faith?less child. He would want thee to go on with it, Su?san. If thee would re?mem?ber his face, thee must go on with it.”

Su?san looked at her, mouth drawn down in a trem?bling arc, eyes fill ing with tears again. I’ve met some?one I love! That was what she would have told her if she could. Don’t you un?der?stand how that changes things? I’ve met some?one I love! But if Aunt Cord had been the sort of per?son to whom she could have said such a thing, Su?san would like?ly nev?er have been im?paled on this stick to be?gin with. So she turned and stum?bled from the house with?out say?ing any?thing, her stream?ing eyes blur?ring her vi?sion and fill?ing the late sum?mer world with rue?ful col?or.

6

She rode with no con?scious idea of where she was go?ing, yet some part of her must have had a very spe?cif?ic des?ti?na?tion in mind, be?cause forty min utes af?ter leav?ing her house, she found her?self ap?proach?ing the very grove of wil?lows she had been day?dream?ing about when Thorin had crept up be hind her like some bad elf out of a gam?mer’s sto?ry.

It was bless?ed?ly cool in the wil?lows. Su?san tied Fe?li?cia (whom she had rid?den out bare?back) to a branch, then walked slow?ly across the lit?tle clear?ing which lay at the heart of the grove. Here the stream passed, and here she sat on the springy moss which car?pet?ed the clear?ing. Of course she had come here; it was where she had brought all her se?cret griefs and joys since she had dis?cov?ered the clear?ing at the age of eight or nine. It was here she had come, time and time again, in the near?ly end?less days af ter her fa?ther’s death, when it had seemed to her that the very world—her ver?sion of it, at least—had end?ed with Pat Del?ga?do. It was on?ly this clear ing that had heard the full and painful mea?sured of her grief; to the stream she had spo?ken it, and the stream had car?ried it away.

Now a fresh spate of tears took her. She put her head on her knees and sobbed—loud, un?la?dy?like sounds like the caw of squab?bling crows. In that mo?ment she thought she would have giv?en any?thing—ev?ery?thing—to have her fa?ther back for one minute, to ask him if she must go on with this.

She wept above the brook, and when she heard the sound of a snap ping branch, she start?ed and looked back over her shoul?der in ter?ror and cha?grin. This was her se?cret place and she didn't want to be found here, es?pe?cial?ly not when she was bawl?ing like a kid?die who has fall?en and bumped her head. An?oth?er branch snapped. Some?one was here, all right, in?vad?ing her se?cret place at the worst pos?si?ble time.

“Go away!” she screamed in a tear-?clot?ted voice she bare?ly recog nized. “Go away, who?ev?er ye are, be de?cent and leave me alone!”

But the fig?ure—she could now see it—kept com?ing. When she saw who it was, she at first thought that Will Dear?born (Roland, she thought, his re?al name is Roland) must be a fig?ment of her over?strained imag?ina tion. She wasn't en?tire?ly sure he was re?al un?til he knelt and put his arms around her. Then she hugged him with pan?icky tight?ness. “How did you know I was—”

“Saw you rid?ing across the Drop. I was at a place where I go to think some?times, and I saw you. I wouldn't have fol?lowed, ex?cept I saw that you were rid?ing bare?back. I thought some?thing might be wrong.”

“Ev?ery?thing's wrong.”

De?lib?er?ate?ly, with his eyes wide open and se?ri?ous, he be?gan kiss?ing her cheeks. He had done it sev?er?al times on both sides of her face be?fore she re?al?ized he was kiss?ing her tears away. Then he took her by the shoul ders and held her back from him so he could look in?to her eyes.

“Say it again and I will, Su?san. I don't know if that's a promise or a warn?ing or both at the same time, but... say it again and I will.”

There was no need to ask him what he meant. She seemed to feel the ground move be?neath her, and lat?er she would think that for the first and on?ly time in her life she had ac?tu?al?ly felt ka, a wind that came not from the sky but from the earth. It has come to me, af?ter all, she thought. My ka, for good or ill.

“Roland!”

“Yes, Su?san.”

She dropped her hand be?low his belt-?buck?le and grasped what was there, her eyes nev?er leav?ing his.

“If you love me, then love me.”

“Aye, la?dy. I will.”

He un?but?toned his shirt, made in a part of Mid-?World she would nev?er see, and took her in his arms.

7

Ka:

They helped each oth?er with their clothes; they lay naked in each oth?er's arms on sum?mer moss as soft as the finest goose?down. They lay with their fore?heads touch?ing, as in her day?dream, and when he found his way in?to her, she felt pain melt in?to sweet?ness like some wild and ex?ot?ic herb that may on?ly be tast?ed once in

each life?time. She held that taste as long as she could, un?til at last the sweet?ness over?came it and she gave in to that, moan?ing deep in her throat and rub?bing her fore?arms against the sides of his neck. They made love in the wil?low grove, ques?tions of hon?or put aside, promis?es bro?ken with?out so much as a look back, and at the end of it Su?san dis?cov?ered there was more than sweet?ness; there was a kind of deliri?ous clinch?ing of the nerves that be?gan in the part of her that had opened be?fore him like a flow?er; it be?gan there and then filled her en?tire body. She cried out again and again, think?ing there could not be so much plea?sure in the mor?tal world; she would die of it. Roland added his voice to hers, and the sound of wa?ter rush?ing over stones wrapped around both. As she pulled him clos?er to her, lock?ing her an?kles to?geth?er be?hind his knees and cov?er?ing his face with fierce kiss?es, his go?ing out rushed af?ter hers as if try?ing to catch up. So were lovers joined in the Barony of Mejis, near the end of the last great age, and the green moss be?neath the place where her thighs joined turned a pret?ty red as her vir?gin?ity passed; so were they joined and so were they doomed.

Ka.

8

They lay to?geth?er in each oth?er's arms, shar?ing af?ter?glow kiss?es be?neath Fe?li?cia's mild gaze, and Roland felt him?self drows?ing. This was un?der stand?able—the strain on him that sum?mer had been enor?mous, and he had been sleep?ing bad?ly. Al?though he didn't know it then, he would sleep bad?ly for the rest of his life.

“Roland?” Her voice, dis?tant. Sweet, as well.

“Yes?”

”Will thee take care of me?”

”Yes.”

”I can't go to him when the time comes. I can bear his touch?ing, and his lit?tle thefts—if I have you, I can—but I can't go to him on Reap Night. I don't know if I've for?got?ten the face of my fa?ther or not, but I can?not go lo Hart Thorin's bed. There are ways the loss of a girl's vir?gin?ity can be con?cealed, I think, but I won't use them. I sim?ply can?not go to his bed.”

”All right,” he said, ”good.” And then, as her eyes widened in startle?ment, he looked around. No one was there. He looked back at Su?san, ful?ly awake now.

”What? What is it?”

”I might al?ready be car?ry?ing your child,” she said. ”Has thee thought of that?” He hadn't. Now he did. A child. An?oth?er link in the chain stretch?ing hack in?to the dim?ness where Arthur Eld had led his gun?slings in?to bat?tle with the great sword Ex?cal?ibur raised above his head and the crown of All-?World on his brow. But nev?er mind that; what would his fa?ther think? Ur Gabrielle, to know she had be?come a grand?moth?er?

A lit?tle smile had formed at the com?ers of his mouth, but the thought of his moth?er drove it away. He thought of the mark on her neck. When his moth?er came to his mind these days, he al?ways thought of the mark he'd seen on her neck when he came un?ex?pect?ed in?to her apart?ment. And the small, rue?ful smile on her face.

”If you car?ry my child, such is my good for?tune,” he said.

”And mine.” It was her turn to smile, but it had a sad look to it all the same, that

smile. "We're too young, I suppose. Little more than kids ourselves." He rolled on to his back and looked up at the blue sky. What she said might be true, but it didn't matter. Truth was sometimes not the same as reality—this was one of the certain ties that lived in the hollow, cavey place at the center of his divided nature. That he could rise above both and willingly embrace the insanity of romance was a gift from his mother. All else in his nature was humbler . . . and, perhaps more important, without metaphor. That they were too young to be parents? What of that? If he had planted a seed, it would grow.

"Whatever comes, we'll do as we must. And I'll always love you, no matter what comes."

She smiled. He said it as a man would state any dry fact: sky is up, earth is down, water flows south.

"Roland, how old are you?" She was sometimes troubled by the idea that, young as she herself was, Roland was even younger. When he was concentrating on something, he could look so hard he frightened her. When he smiled, he looked not like a lover but a kid brother.

"Older than I was when I came here," he said. "Older by far. And if I have to stay in sight of Jonas and his men another six months, I'll be hobbling and needing a boost in the arse to get aboard my horse."

She grinned at that, and he kissed her nose.

"And thee'll take care of me?"

"Aye," he said, and grinned back at her. Susan nodded, then also turned on her back. They lay that way, hip to hip, looking up at the sky. She took his hand and placed it on her breast. As he stroked the nipple with his thumb, it raised its head, grew hard, and began to tingle. This sensation slipped quickly down her body to the place that was still throbbing between her legs. She squeezed her thighs together and was both delighted and dismayed to find that doing so only made matters worse.

"Ye must take care of me," she said in a low voice. "I've pinned everything on you. All else is cast aside."

"I'll do my best," he said. "Never doubt it. But for now, Susan, you must go on as you have been. There's more time yet to pass; I know that because Depape is back and will have told his tale, but they still haven't moved in any way against us.

Whatever he found out, Jonas still thinks it's in his interest to wait. That's apt to make him more dangerous when he does move, but for now it's still Castles."

"But after the Reaping Bonfire—Thorin—"

"You'll never go to his bed. That you can count on. I set my warrant on it."

A little shocked at her own boldness, she reached below his waist. "Here's a warrant ye can set on me, if ye would," she said.

He would. Could. And did.

When it was over (for Roland it had been even sweeter than the first time, if that was possible), he asked her: "That feeling you had out at Citigo, Susan—of being watched. Did you have it this time?"

She looked at him long and thoughtfully. "I don't know. My mind was in other places, ye ken." She touched him gently, then laughed as he jumped—the nerves

in the half-hard, half-soft place where her palm stroked were still very lively, it seemed.

She took her hand away and looked up at the circle of sky above the grove. “So beautiful here,” she murmured, and her eyes drifted closed.

Roland also felt himself drifting. It was ironic, he thought. This time she hadn’t had that sensation of being watched . . . but the second time, he had. Yet he would have sworn there was no one near this grove.

No matter. The feeling, megrim or reality, was gone now. He took Susan’s hand, and felt her fingers slip naturally through his, entwining.

He closed his eyes.

9

All of this Rhea saw in the glass, and wery interesting viewing it made, aye, wery interesting, indeed. But she’d seen shagging before—sometimes with three or four or even more doing it all at the same time (sometimes with partners who were not precisely alive)—and the hokey-pokey wasn’t very interesting to her at her advanced age. What she was interested in was what would come after the hokey-pokey.

Is our business done? the girl had asked.

Maybe there’s one more little thing, Rhea had responded, and then she told the impatient trull what to do.

Aye, she’d given the girl very clear instructions as the two of them stood in the hut doorway, the Kissing Moon shining down on them as Susan Delgado slept the strange sleep and Rhea stroked her braid and whispered instructions in her ear.

Now would come the fulfillment of that interestlude . . . and that was what she wanted to see, not two babies shagging each other like they were the first two on earth to discover how ’twas done.

Twice they did it with hardly a pause to natter in between (she would have given a good deal to hear that natter, too). Rhea wasn’t surprised; at his young age, she supposed the brat had enough spunkum in his sack to give her a week’s worth of doubles, and from the way the little slut acted, that might be to her taste. Some of them discovered it and never wanted aught else; this was one, Rhea thought.

But let’s see how sexy you feel in a few minutes, you snippy bitch, she thought, and leaned deeper into the pulsing pink light thrown from the glass. She could sometimes feel that light aching in the very bones of her face . . . but it was a good ache. Aye, wery good indeed.

They were at last done . . . for the time being, at least. They clasped hands and drifted off to sleep.

“Now,” Rhea murmured. “Now, my little one. Be a good girl and do as ye were told.”

As if hearing her, Susan’s eyes opened—but there was nothing in them. They woke and slept at the same time. Rhea saw her gently pull her hand free of the boy’s. She sat up, bare breasts against bare thighs, and looked around. She got to her feet—

That was when Musty, the six-legged cat, jumped into Rhea’s lap, waowing for either food or affection. The old woman shrieked with surprise, and the wizard’s

glass at once went dark—puffed out like a candle-flame in a gust of wind. Rhea shrieked again, this time with rage, and seized the cat before it could flee. She hurled it across the room, into the fireplace. That was as dead a hole as only a summer fireplace can be, but when Rhea cast a bony, misshapen hand at it, a yellow gust of flame rose from the single half-charred log lying in there. Musty screamed and fled from the hearth with his eyes wide and his split tail smoking like an indifferent butted cigar.

“Run, aye!” Rhea spat after him. “Be gone, ye vile cusk!”

She turned back to the glass and spread her hands over it, thumb to thumb. But although she concentrated with all her might, willed until her heart was beating with a sick fury in her chest, she could do no more than bring back the ball’s natural pink glow. No images appeared. This was bitterly disappointing, but there was nothing to be done. And in time she would be able to see the results with her own two natural eyes, if she cared to go to town and do so.

Everybody would be able to see.

Her good humor restored, Rhea returned the ball to its hiding place.

10

Only moments before he would have sunk too deep in sleep to have heard it, a warning bell went off in Roland’s mind. Perhaps it was the faint realization that her hand was no longer entwined with his; perhaps it was raw intuition. He could have ignored that faint bell, and almost did, but in the end his training was too strong. He came up from the threshold of real sleep, fighting his way back to clarity as a diver kicks for the surface of a quarry. It was hard at first, but became easier; as he neared wakefulness, his alarm grew.

He opened his eyes and looked to his left. Susan was no longer there. He sat up, looked to his right, and saw nothing above the cut of the stream ... yet he felt that she was in that direction, all the same.

“Susan?”

No response. He got up, looked at his pants, and Cort—a visitor he never would have expected in such a romantic bowyer as this—spoke up gruffly in his mind. No time, maggot.

He walked naked to the bank and looked down. Susan was there, all right, also naked, her back to him. She had unbraided her hair. It hung, loose gold, almost all the way to the lyre other hips. The chill air rising from the surface of the stream shivered the tips of it like mist.

She was down on one knee at the edge of the running water. One arm was plunged into it almost to the elbow; she searched for something, it seemed.

“Susan!”

No answer. And now a cold thought came to him: She’s been infected by a demon. While I slept, heedless, beside her, she’s been infected by a demon. Yet he did not think he really believed that. If there had been a demon near this clearing, he would have felt it. Likely both of them would have felt it; the horses, too. But something was wrong with her.

She brought an object up from the streambed and held it before her eyes in her dripping hand. A stone. She examined it, then tossed it back—plunk. She reached

in again, head bent, two sheafs of her hair now actually floating on the water, the stream prankishly tugging them in the direction it flowed. "Susan!"

No response. She plucked another stone out of the stream. This one was a triangular white quartz, shattered into a shape that was almost like the head of a spear. Susan tilted her head to the left and took a sheaf of her hair in her hand, like a woman who means to comb out a nest of tangles. But there was no comb, only the rock with its sharp edge, and for a moment longer Roland remained on the bank, frozen with horror, sure that she meant to cut her own throat out of shame and guilt over what they'd done. In the weeks to come, he was haunted by a clear knowledge: if it had been her throat she'd intended, he wouldn't have been in time to stop her.

Then the paralysis broke and he hurled himself down the bank, unmindful of the sharp stones that gouged the soles of his feet. Before he reached her, she had already used the edge of the quartz to cut off part of the golden tress she held. Roland seized her wrist and pulled it back. He could see her face clearly now. What could have been mistaken for serenity from the top of the bank now looked like what it really was: vacancy, emptiness.

When he took hold of her, the smoothness of her face was replaced by a dim and fretful smile; her mouth quivered as if she felt distant pain, and an almost formless sound of negation came from her mouth:

"Nnnnnnnnn—"

Some of the hair she had cut off lay on her thigh like gold wire; most had fallen into the stream and been carried away. Susan pulled against Roland's hand, trying to get the sharp edge back to her hair, wanting to continue her mad barbering. The two of them strove together like arm-wrestlers in a barroom contest. And Susan was winning. He was physically the stronger, but not stronger than the enchantment which held her. Little by little the white triangle of quartz moved back toward her hanging hair. That frightening sound—Nnnnnnnnnnn—kept drifting from her mouth.

"Susan! Stop it! Wake up!"

"Nnnnnnnnn—"

Her bare arm quivering visibly in the air, the muscles bunched like hard little rocks. And the quartz moving closer and closer to her hair, her cheek, the socket of her eye.

Without thinking about it—it was the way he always acted most successfully—Roland moved his face close to the side of hers, giving up another four inches to the fist holding the stone in order to do it. He put his lips against the cup of her ear and then clucked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. Clucked sideways, in fact.

Susan jerked back from that sound, which must have gone through her head like a spear. Her eyelids fluttered rapidly, and the pressure she was exerting against Roland's grip eased a little. He took the chance and twisted her wrist.

"Ow!Owww!"

The stone flew out of her opening hand and splashed into the water. Susan gazed at him, now fully awake, her eyes filled with tears and bewilderment. She was

rubbing her wrist. . . which, Roland thought, was likely to swell.

"Ye hurt me, Roland! Why did ye hurt m . . ."

She trailed off, looking around. Now not just her face but the whole set of her body expressed bewilderment. She moved to cover herself with her hands, then realized they were still alone and dropped them to her sides. She glanced over her shoulder at the footprints—all of them bare—leading down the bank.

"How did I get down here?" she asked. "Did thee carry me, after I fell asleep? And why did thee hurt me? Oh, Roland, I love thee—why did ye hurt me?"

He picked up the strands of hair that still lay on her thigh and held them in front of her. "You had a stone with a sharp edge. You were trying to cut yourself with it, and you didn't want to stop. I hurt you because I was scared. I'm just glad I didn't break your wrist . . . at least, I don't think I did."

Roland took it and rotated it gently in either direction, listening for the grate of small bones.

He heard nothing, and the wrist turned freely. As Susan watched, stunned and confused, he raised it to his lips and kissed the inner part, above the delicate tracery of veins.

11

Roland had tied Rusher just far enough into the willows so the big gelding could not be seen by anyone who happened to come riding along the Drop.

"Be easy," Roland said, approaching. "Be easy a little longer, good-heart."

Rusher stamped and whickered, as if to say he could be easy until the end of the age, if that was what were required.

Roland nipped open his saddlebag and took out the steel utensil that served as either a pot or a frypan, depending on his needs. He started away, then turned back. His bedroll was tied behind Pusher's saddle he had planned to spend the night camped out on the Drop, thinking. There had been a lot to think about, and now there was even more.

He pulled one of the rawhide ties, reached inside the blankets, and pulled out a small metal box. This he opened with a tiny key he drew from around his neck. Inside the box was a small square lockset on a fine silver chain (inside the lockset was a line-drawing of his mother), and a handful of extra shells—not quite a dozen. He took one, closed it in his fist, and went back to Susan. She looked at him with wide, frightened eyes.

"I don't remember anything after we made love the second time," she said. "Only looking up at the sky and thinking how good I felt and going to sleep. Oh, Roland, how bad does it look?"

"Not bad, I should think, but you'll know better than I. Here."

He dipped his cooker full of water and set it on the bank. Susan bent over it apprehensively, laying the hair on the left side of her head across her forearm, then moving the arm slowly outward, extending the tress in a band of bright gold. She saw the ragged cut at once. She examined it carefully, then let it drop with a sigh more relieved than rueful.

"I can hide it," she said. "When it's braided, no one will know. And after all, 'tis only hair—no more than woman's vanity. My aunt has told me so often enough,

cer?tain?ly. But Roland, why? Why did I do it?"

Roland had an idea. If hair was a wom?an's van?ity, then hair-?chop?ping would like?ly be a wom?an's bit of nas?ti?ness—a man would hard?ly think of it at all. The May?or's wife, had it been her? He thought not. It seemed more like?ly that Rhea, up there on her height of land look?ing north to?ward the Bad Grass, Hang?ing Rock, and Eye?bolt Canyon, had set this ug?ly trap. May?or Thorin had been meant to wake up on the morn?ing af?ter the Reap with a hang?over and a bald-?head?ed gilly.

"Su?san, can I try some?thing?"

She gave him a smile. "Some?thing ye didn't try al?ready up yon?der? Aye, what ye will."

"Noth?ing like that." He opened the hand he had held closed, show?ing the shell. "I want to try and find out who did this to you, and why." And oth?er things, too. He just didn't know what they were yet.

She looked at the shell. Roland be?gan to move it along the back of his hand, danc?ing it back and forth in a dex?ter?ous weav?ing. His knuck?les rose and fell like the hed?dles of a loom. She watched this with a child's fas?ci nat?ed de?light. "Where did ye learn that?"

"At home. It doesn't mat?ter."

"Ye'd hyp?no?tize me?"

"Aye ... and I don't think it would be for the first time." He made the shell dance a bit faster—now east along his rip?pling knuck?les, now west. "May I?"

"Aye," she said. "If you can."

12

He could, all right; the speed with which she went un?der con?firmed that this had hap?pened to Su?san be?fore, and re?cent?ly. Yet he couldn't get what lie want?ed from her. She was per?fect?ly co?op?er?ative (some sleep ea?ger, fort would have said), but be?yond a cer?tain point she would not go. It wasn't deco?rum or mod?esty, ei?ther—as she slept open-?eyed be?fore the stream, she told him in a far-?off but calm voice about the old wom?an's ex?am?ina?tion, and the way Rhea had tried to "fid?dle her up." (At this Poland's fists clenched so tight?ly his nails bit in?to his palms.) But there came a point where she could no longer re?mem?ber.

She and Rhea had gone to the door of the hut, Su?san said, and there they had stood with the Kiss?ing Moon shin?ing down on their faces. The old wom?an had been touch?ing her hair, Su?san re?mem?bered that much. The touch re?volt?ed her, es?pe?cial?ly af?ter the witch's pre?vi?ous touch?es, but Su?san had been un?able to do any?thing about it. Arms too heavy to raise; tongue too heavy to speak. She could on?ly stand there while the witch whis?pered in her ear.

"What?" Roland asked. "What did she whis?per?"

"I don't know," Su?san said. "The rest is pink."

"Pink? What do you mean?"

"Pink," she re?peat?ed. She sound?ed al?most amused, as if she be?lieved Roland was be?ing de?lib?er?ate?ly dense. "She says, 'Aye, love?ly, just so, it's a good girl y'are,' then ev?ery?thing's pink. Pink and bright."

"Bright."

"Aye, like the moon. And then . . ." She paused. "Then I think it be comes the

moon. The Kiss?ing Moon, may?hap. A bright pink Kiss?ing Moon, as round and full as a grape?fruit.”

He tried oth?er ways in?to her mem?ory with no suc?cess—ev?ery path he tried end?ed in that bright pink?ness, first ob?scur?ing her rec?ol?lec?tion and then co?alesc?ing in?to a full moon. It meant noth?ing to Roland; he’d heard of blue moons, but nev?er pink ones. The on?ly thing of which he was sure was that the old wom?an had giv?en Su?san a pow?er?ful com?mand to for?get.

He con?sidered tak?ing her deep?er—she would go—but didn’t dare. Most of his ex?pe?ri?ence came from hyp?no?tiz?ing his friends—class?room ex?er?cis?es that were larky and oc?ca?sion?al?ly spooky. Al?ways there had been Cort or Van?nay present to make things right if they went off-?track. Now there were no teach?ers to step in; for bet?ter or worse, the stu?dents had been left in charge of the school. What if he took her deep and couldn’t get her back up again? And he had been told there were demons in the be?low-?mind as well. If you went down to where they were, they some times swam out of their caves to meet you . . .

All oth?er con?sider?ations aside, it was get?ting late. It wouldn’t be pru dent to stay here much longer.

“Su?san, do you hear me?”

“Aye, Roland, I hear you very well.”

“Good. I’m go?ing to say a rhyme. You’ll wake up as I say it. When I’m done, you’ll be wide awake and re?mem?ber ev?ery?thing we’ve said. Do you un?der?stand?”

“Aye.”

“Lis?ten: Bird and bear and hare and fish, Give my love her fond est wish.”

Her smile as she rose to con?scious?ness was one of the most beau?ti?ful things he had ev?er seen. She stretched, then put her arms around his neck and cov?ered his face with kiss?es. “You, you, you, you,” she said. “You’re my fond?est wish, Roland. You’re my on?ly wish. You and you, for?ev?er and ev?er.”

They made love again there on the bank, be?side the bab?bling stream, hold?ing each oth?er as tight?ly as they could, breath?ing in?to each oth?er’s mouths and liv?ing on each oth?er’s breath. You, you, you, you.

13

Twen?ty min?utes lat?er, he boost?ed her on?to Fe?li?cia’s back. Su?san leaned down, took his face in her hands, and kissed him sound?ly.

“When will I see ye again?” she asked.

“Soon. But we must be care?ful.”

“Aye. Care?ful as two lovers ev?er were, I think. Thank God thee’s clever.”

“We can use Sheemie, if we don’t use him too of?ten.”

“Aye. And, Roland—do ye know the pavil?ion in Green Heart? Close to where they serve tea and cakes and things when the weath?er’s fair?”

Roland did. Fifty yards or so up Hill Street from the jail and the Town Gath?er?ing Hall, Green Heart was one of the most pleas?ant places in town, with its quaint paths, um?brel?la-?shad?ed ta?bles, grassy danc?ing pavil?ion, and menagerie.

“There’s a rock wall at the back,” she said. “Be?tween the pavil?ion and the menagerie. If you need me bad?ly—”

“I’ll al?ways need you bad?ly,” he said.

She smiled at his gravity. "There's a stone on one of the lower courses—a red-dish one. You'll see it. My friend Amy and I used to leave messages there for each other when we were little girls. I'll look there when I can. Ye do the same."

"Aye." Sheemie would work for awhile, if they were careful. The red rock might also work for awhile, if they were careful. But no matter how careful they were, they would slip eventually, because the Big Coffin Hunters now probably knew more about Roland and his friends than Roland ever would have wished. But he had to see her, no matter what the risks. If he didn't, he felt he might die. And he only had to look at her to know she felt the same.

"Watch special for Jonas and the other two," he said.

"I will. Another kiss, if ye favor?"

He kissed her gladly, and would just as gladly have pulled her off the mare's back for a fourth go-round . . . but it was time to stop being delirious and start being careful.

"Fare you well, Susan. I love y—" He paused, then smiled. "I love thee."

"And I thee, Roland. What heart I have is yours."

She had a great heart, he thought as she slipped through the willows, and already he felt its burden on his own. He waited until he felt sure she must be well away.

Then he went to Rusher and rode off in the opposite direction, knowing that a new and dangerous phase of the game had begun.

14

Not too long after Susan and Roland had parted, Cordelia Delgado stepped out of the Ham-bry Mercantile with a box of groceries and a troubled mind. The troubled mind was caused by Susan, of course, always Susan, and Cordelia's fear that the girl would do something stupid before Reaping finally came around.

These thoughts were snatched out of her mind just as hands—strong ones—snatched the box of groceries from her arms. Cordelia cawed in surprise, shaded her eyes against the sun, and saw El-dred Jonas standing there between the Bear and Turtle totems, smiling at her. His hair, long and white (and beautiful, in her opinion), lay over his shoulders. Cordelia felt her heart beat a little faster. She had always been partial to men like Jonas, who could smile and banter their way to the edge of riskiness . . . but who carried their bodies like blades.

"I startled you. I cry your pardon, Cordelia."

"Nay," she said, sounding a little breathless to her own ears. "It's just the sun—so bright at this time of day—"

"I'd help you a bit on your way, if you give me leave. I'm only going up High as far as the corner, then I turn up the Hill, but may I help you that far?"

"With thanks," she said. They walked down the steps and up the board sidewalk, Cordelia looking around in little pecking glances to see who was observing them—she beside the handsome sai Jonas, who just happened to be carrying her goods. There was a satisfying number of onlookers. She saw Millicent Ortega, for one, looking out of Ann's Dresses with a satisfying 0 of surprise on her stupid cow's puss.

"I hope you don't mind me calling you Cordelia." Jonas shifted the box, which she'd needed two hands to carry, casually under one arm. "I feel, since the

wel?com?ing din?ner at May?or Thorin's house, that I know you."

"Cordelia's fine."

"And may I be El?dred to you?"

"I think 'Mr. Jonas' will do a bit longer," she said, then fa?vored him with what she hoped was a co?quet?tish smile. Her heart beat faster yet. (It did not oc?cur to her that per?haps Su?sana was not the on?ly sil?ly goose in the Del?ga?do fam?ily.)

"So be it," Jonas said, with a look of dis?ap?point?ment so com?ic that she laughed.

"And your niece? Is she well?"

"Quite well, thank ye for ask?ing. A bit of a tri?al, some?times—"

"Was there ev?er a girl of six?teen who wasn't?"

"I sup?pose not."

"Yet you have ad?di?tion?al bur?dens re?gard?ing her this fall. I doubt if \he re?al?izes that, though."

Cordelia said noth?ing—'twouldn't be dis?creet—but gave him a mean?ing?ful look that said much.

"Give her my best, please."

"I will." But she wouldn't. Su?sana had con?ceived a great (and ir?ra tion?al, in Cordelia's view) dis?like for May?or Thorin's reg?ula?tors. Try?ing to talk her out of these feel?ings would like?ly do no good; young girls thought they knew ev?ery?thing. She glanced at the star peek?ing un?ob?tru sive?ly out from be?neath the flap of Jonas's vest. "I un?der?stand ye've tak?en on an ad?di?tion?al re?spon?si?bil?ity in our un?de?serv?ing town, sai Jonas."

"Aye, I'm help?ing out Sher?iff Av?ery," he agreed. His voice had a reedy lit?tle trem?ble which Cordelia found quite en?dear?ing, some?how. "One of his deputies—Clay?pool, his name is—"

"Frank Clay?pool, aye."

"—fell out of his boat and broke his leg. How do you fall out of a boat and break your leg, Cordelia?"

She laughed mer?ri?ly (the idea that ev?ery?one in Ham?bry was watch?ing them was sure?ly wrong ... but it felt that way, and the feel?ing was not un pleas?ant) and said she didn't know.

He stopped on the com?er of High and Camino Ve?ga, look?ing re?gret ful. "Here's where I turn." He hand?ed the box back to her. "Are you sure you can car?ry that? I sup?pose I could go on with you to your house—"

"No need, no need. Thank you. Thank you, El?dred." The blush which crept up her neck and cheeks felt as hot as fire, but his smile was worth ev?ery de?gree of heat. He tipped her a lit?tle salute with two fin?gers and saun?tered up the hill to?ward the Sher?iff's of?fice.

Cordelia walked on home. The box, which had seemed such a bur?den when she stepped out of the mer?can?tile, now seemed to weigh next to noth?ing. This feel?ing last?ed for half a mile or so, but by the time her house came in?to view, she was once again aware of the sweat trick?ling down her sides, and the ache in her arms. Thank the gods sum?mer was al?most over ... and wasn't that Su?sana, just lead?ing her mare in through the gate?

"Su?sana!" she called, now enough re?turned to earth for her for?mer ir?ri?ta?tion with the

girl to sound clear in her voice. "Come and help me, 'fore I drop this and break the eggs!"

Su?san came, leav?ing Fe?li?cia to crop grass in the front yard. Ten min utes ear?li?er, Cordelia would have no?ticed noth?ing of how the girl looked— her thoughts had been too wrapped up in El?dred Jonas to ad?mit of much else. But the hot sun had tak?en some of the ro?mance out of her head and re?turned her feet to earth. And as Su?san took the box from her (han?dling it al?most as eas?ily as Jonas had done), Cordelia thought she didn't much care for the girl's ap?pear?ance. Her tem?per had changed, for one thing— from the half-?hys?ter?ical con?fu?sion in which she'd left to a pleas?ant and hap?py-?eyed calm?ness. That was the Su?san of pre?vi?ous years to the sleeve and seam . . . but not this year's moan?ing, moody breast-?beat?er. There was noth?ing else Cordelia could put her fin?ger on, ex?cept—

But there was, ac?tu?al?ly. One thing. She reached out and grasped the girl's braid, which looked un?char?ac?ter?is?ti?cal?ly slop?py this af?ter?noon. Of course Su?san had been rid?ing; that could ex?plain the mess. But it didn't ex?plain how dark her hair was, as if that bright mass of gold had be?gun to tar?nish. And she jumped, al?most guilti?ly, when she felt Cordelia's touch. Why, pray tell, was that?

"Yer hair's damp, Su?san," she said. "Have ye been swim?ming some where?"

"Nay! I stopped and ducked my head at the pump out?side Hock?ey's barn. He doesn't mind—'tis a deep well he has. It's so hot. Per?haps there'll be a show?er lat?er. I hope so. I gave Fe?li?cia to drink as well."

The girl's eyes were as di?rect and as can?did as ev?er, but Cordelia thought there was some?thing off in them, just the same. She couldn't say what. The idea that Su?san might be hid?ing some?thing large and se?ri?ous did not im?me?di?ate?ly cross Cordelia's mind; she would have said her niece was in?ca?pable of keep?ing a se?cret any greater than a birth?day present or a sur?prise par?ty . . . and not even such se?crets as those for more than a day or two. And yet some?thing was off here. Cordelia dropped her fin?gers to the col?lar of the girl's rid?ing shirt.

"Yet this is dry."

"I was care?ful," she said, look?ing at her aunt with a puz?zled eye. "Dirt sticks worse to a wet shirt. You taught me that, Aunt."

"Ye flinched when I touched yer hair, Su?san."

"Aye," Su?san said, "so I did. The weird-?wom?an touched it just that same way. I haven't liked it since. Now may I take these gro?ceries in and get my horse out of the hot sun?"

"Don't be pert, Su?san." Yet the edgi?ness in her niece's voice ac?tu?al?ly eased her in some strange way. That feel?ing that Su?san had changed, some?how—that feel?ing of off?ness—be?gan to sub?side.

"Then don't be tire?some."

"Su?san! Apol?ogize to me!"

Su?san took a deep breath, held it, then let it out. "Yes, Aunt. I do. But it's hot."

"Aye. Put those in the pantry. And thankee."

Su?san went on to?ward the house with the box in her arms. When the girl had enough of a lead so they wouldn't have to walk to?geth?er, Cordelia fol?lowed. It was all fool?ish?ness on her part, no doubt—sus?pi?cions brought on by her flir?ta?tion with

Ed?dred—but the girl was at a dan?ger?ous age, and much de?pend?ed on her good be?hav?ior over the next sev?en weeks. Af?ter that she would be Thorin's prob?lem, but un?til then she was Cordelia's. Cordelia thought that, in the end, Su?s?san would be true to her promise, but un?til Reap?ing Fair she would bear close watch?ing. About such mat?ters as a girl's vir?gin?ity, it was best to be vig?ilant.

IN?TER?LUDE

KANSAS,

SOME?WHERE,

SOME?WHEN

Ed?die stirred. Around them the thin?ny still whined like an un?pleas?ant moth?er-?in-law; above them the stars gleamed as bright as new hopes . . . or bad in?ten?tions.

He looked at Su?s?san?nah, sit?ting with the stumps of her legs curled be?neath her; he looked at Jake, who was eat?ing a bur?ri?to; he looked at Oy, whose snout rest?ed on Jake's an?kle and who was look?ing up at the boy with an ex?pres?sion of calm ado?ra?tion.

The fire was low, but still it burned. The same was true of De?mon Moon, far in the west.

"Roland." His voice sound?ed old and rusty to his own ears.

The gun?slinger, who had paused for a sip of wa?ter, looked at him with his eye?brows raised.

"How can you know ev?ery com?er of this sto?ry?"

Roland seemed amused. "I don't think that's what you re?al?ly want to know, Ed?die."

He was right about that—old long, tall, and ug?ly made a habit of be ing right. It was, as far as Ed?die was con?cerned, one of his most ir?ri?tat?ing char?ac?ter?is?tics. "All right. How long have you been talk?ing? That's what I re?al?ly want to know."

"Are you un?com?fort?able? Want to go to bed?"

He's mak?ing fun of me, Ed?die thought . . . but even as the idea oc curred to him, he knew it wasn't true. And no, he wasn't un?com?fort?able. There was no stiff?ness in his joints, al?though he had been sit?ting cross-?legged ev?er since Roland had be?gun by telling them about Rhea and the glass ball, and he didn't need to go to the toi?let. Nor was he hun?gry. Jake was munch?ing the sin?gle left?over bur?ri?to, but prob?ably for the same rea son folks climbed Mount Ever?est . . . be?cause it was there. And why should he be hun?gry or sleepy or stiff? Why, when the fire still burned and the moon was not yet down?

He looked at Roland's amused eyes and saw the gun?slinger was read ing his thoughts.

"No, I don't want to go to bed. You know I don't. But, Roland . . . you've been talk?ing a long time." He paused, looked down at his hands, then looked up again, smil?ing un?easi?ly. "Days, I would have said."

"But time is dif?fer?ent here. I've told you that; now you see for your self. Not all nights are the same length just re?cent?ly. Days, ei?ther . . . but we no?tice time more at night, don't we? Yes, I think we do."

"Is the thin?ny stretch?ing time?" And now that he had men?tioned it, Ed?die could hear it in all its creepy glo?ry—a sound like vi?brat?ing met?al, or maybe the world's biggest mosquito.

“It might be help?ing, but most?ly it’s just how things are in my world.”

Su?san?nah stirred like a wom?an who ris?es part?way from a dream that holds her like sweet quick?sand. She gave Ed?die a look that was both dis tant and im?pa?tient. “Let the man talk, Ed?die.”

“Yeah,” Jake said. “Let the man talk.”

And Oy, with?out rais?ing his snout from Jake’s an?kle: “An. Awk.”

“All right,” Ed?die said. “No prob?lem.”

Roland swept them with his eyes. “Are you sure? The rest is . . .” He didn’t seem able to fin?ish, and Ed?die re?al?ized that Roland was scared.

“Go on,” Ed?die told him qui?et?ly. “Let the rest be what it is. What it was.” He looked around. Kansas, they were in Kansas. Some?where, some?when. Ex?cept he felt that Mejis and those peo?ple he had nev?er seen— Cordelia and Jonas and Bri?an Hookey and Sheemie and Pet?tie the Trot?ter and Cuth?bert All?go?od—were very close now. That Roland’s lost Su?san was very close now. Be?cause re?al?ity was thin here—as thin as the seat in an old pair of blue jeans—and the dark would hold for as long as Roland need?ed it to hold. Ed?die doubt?ed if Roland even no?ticed the dark, par?ticu lar?ly. Why would he? Ed?die thought it had been night in?side of Roland’s mind for a long, long time . . . and dawn was still nowhere near.

He reached out and touched one of those cal?lused killer’s hands. Gen tly he touched it, and with love.

“Go on, Roland. Tell your tale. All the way to the end.”

“All the way to the end,” Su?san?nah said dream?ily. “Cut the vein.” Her eyes were full of moon?light.

“All the way to the end,” Jake said.

“End,” Oy whis?pered.

Roland held Ed?die’s hand for a mo?ment, then let it go. He looked in?to the gut?ter?ing fire with?out im?me?di?ate?ly speak?ing, and Ed?die sensed him try?ing to find the way. Try?ing doors, one af?ter an?oth?er, un?til he found one that opened. What he saw be?hind it made him smile and look up at Ed?die.

“True love is bor?ing,” he said.

“Say what?”

”True love is bor?ing,” Roland re?peat?ed. ”As bor?ing as any oth?er strong and ad?dict?ing drug. And, as with any oth?er strong drug . . .”

Darktower 4 - Wizard and Glass

PART THREE

COME, REAP

CHAPTER 1

BE?NEATH THE

huntress moon

1

True love, like any oth?er strong and ad?dict?ing drug, is bor?ing—once the tale of en?counter and dis?cov?ery is told, kiss?es quick?ly grow stale and ca ress?es tire?some . . . ex?cept, of course, to those who share the kiss?es, who give and take the ca?ress?es while ev?ery sound and col?or of the world seems to deep?en and bright?en around them. As with any oth?er strong drug, true first love is re?al?ly on?ly in?ter?est?ing to those who have be?come its pris?on?ers.

And, as is true of any oth?er strong and ad?dict?ing drug, true first love is dan?ger?ous.

2

Some called Huntress the last moon of sum?mer; some called it the first of fall.

Whichev?er it was, it sig?naled a change in the life of the Barony. Men put out in?to the bay wear?ing sweaters be?neath their oil?skins as the winds be?gan to turn more and more firm?ly in?to au?tumn's east-?west al?ley, and to sharp?en as they turned. In the great Barony or?chards north of Ham?bry (and in small?er or?chards owned by John Croy?don, Hen?ry Wert?ner, Jake White, and the mo?rose but wealthy Coral Thorin), the pick?ers be?gan to ap?pear in the rows, car?ry?ing their odd, off-?kil?ter lad?ders; they were fol lowed by horse-?drawn carts full of emp?ty bar?rels.

Down?wind of the cider-?hous?es—es?pe?cial?ly down?wind of the great Barony cider-man?sion a mile north of Seafront—the breezy air was filled with the sweet tang of blems be?ing pressed by the bas?ket?load. Away from the shore of the Clean Sea, the days re?mained warm as the Huntress waxed, skies were clear day and night, but sum?mer's re?al heat had de?part?ed with the Ped?dler. The last cut ting of hay be?gan and was fin?ished in the run of a week—that last one was al?ways scant, and ranch?ers and free?hold?ers alike would curse it, scratch?ing their heads and ask?ing them?selves why they even both?ered . . . but come rainy, blowsy old March, with the bam lofts and bins rapid?ly emp?ty?ing, they al?ways knew. In the Barony's gar?dens—the great ones of the ranch ers, the small?er ones of the free?hold?ers, and the tiny back?yard plots of the towns?folk—men and wom?en and chil?dren ap?peared in their old clothes and boots, their som?breros and som?breros. They came with the legs of their pants tied down firm?ly at the an?kles, for in the time of the Huntress, snakes and scor?pi?ons in plen?ti?ful num?bers wan?dered east from the desert. By the time old De?mon Moon be?gan to fat?ten, a line of rat?tlers would hang from the hitch?ing posts of both the Trav?ellers' Rest and the mer?can tile across the street.

Oth?er busi?ness?es would sim?ilar?ly dec?orate their hitch?ing posts, but when the prize for the most skins was giv?en on Reap ing Day, it was al?ways the inn or the mar?ket that won it. In the fields and gar?dens, bas?kets to pick in?to were cast along the rows by wom?en with their hair tied up in ker?chiefs and reap-?charms hid?den in their bo?soms. The last of the toma?toes were picked, the last of the cu?cum?bers, the last of the corn, the last of the parey and min?go. Wait?ing be?hind them, as the days

sharp?ened and the au?umn storms be?gan to near, would come squash, sharp?root, pump?kins, and pota?toes. In Mejis the time of reap?ing had be gun, while over?head, clear?er and clear?er on each star?ry night, the Huntress pulled her bow and looked east over those strange, wa?tery leagues no man or wom?an of Mid-?World had ev?er seen.

3

Those in the grip of a strong drug—hero?in, dev?il grass, true love—of?ten find them?selves try?ing to main?tain a pre?car?ious bal?ance be?tween se?cre?cy and ec?sta?sy as they walk the tightrope of their lives. Keep?ing one?s bal an?ce on a tightrope is dif?fi?cult un?der the sober?est cir?cum?stances; do?ing so while in a state of delir?ium is all but im?pos?si?ble. Com?plete?ly im?pos?si?ble, in the long run.

Roland and Su?san were deliri?ous, but at least had the thin ad?van?tage of know?ing it. And the se?cret would not have to be kept for?ev?er, but on?ly un?til Reap?ing Day Fair, at the very longest. Things might end even soon?er than that, if the Big Cof?fin Hunters broke cov?er. The ac?tu?al first move might be made by one of the oth?er play?ers, Roland thought, but no mat?ter who moved first, Jonas and his men would be there, a part of it. The part apt to be most dan?ger?ous to the three boys.

Roland and Su?san were care?ful—as care?ful as deliri?ous peo?ple could be, at any rate. They nev?er met in the same place twice in a row, they nev?er met at the same time twice in a row, they nev?er skulked on their way to their trysts. In Ham?bry, rid?ers were com?mon but skulk?ers were no ticed. Su?san nev?er tried to cov?er her “rid?ing out” by en?list?ing the help of a friend (al?though she had friends who would have done her this ser?vice); peo?ple who need?ed al?ibis were peo?ple keep?ing se?crets. She had a sense that Aunt Cord was grow?ing in?creas?ing?ly un?easy about her rides— par?tic?ular?ly the ones she took in the ear?ly evenings—but so far she ac?cept?ed Su?san’s oft-?re?peat?ed rea?son for them: she need?ed time to be soli?tary, to med?itate on her promise and to ac?cept her re?spon?si?bil?ity. Iron?ical?ly, these sug?ges?tions had orig?inal?ly come from the witch of the Coos.

They met in the wil?low grove, in sev?er?al of the aban?doned boathous?es which stood crum?bling at the north?ern hook of the bay, in a herder’s hut far out in the des?ola?tion of the Coos, in an aban?doned squat?ter’s shack hid?den in the Bad Grass. The set?tings were, by and large, as sor?did as any of those in which ad?dicts come to?geth?er to prac?tice their vice, but Su?san and Roland didn’t see the rot?ting walls of the shack or the holes in the roof of the hut or smell the moul?der?ing nets in the com?ers of the old soaked boathous?es. They were drugged, stone in love, and to them, ev?ery scar on the face of the world was a beau?ty-?mark.

Twice, ear?ly on in those deliri?ous weeks, they used the red rock in the wall at the back of the pavil?ion to ar?range meet?ings, and then some deep voice spoke in?side Roland’s head, telling him there must be no more of it—the rock might have been just the thing for chil?dren play?ing at se?crets, but he and his love were no longer chil?dren; if they were dis?cov?ered, ban ish?ment would be the luck?iest pun?ish?ment they could hope for. The red rock was too con?spic?uous, and writ?ing things down—even mes?sages that were un?signed and de?lib?er?ate?ly vague—was hor?ri?bly dan?ger?ous.

Us?ing Sheemie felt safer to both of them. Be?neath his smil?ing light-?mind?ed?ness

there was a surprising depth of . . . well, discretion. Roland had thought long and hard before settling on that word, and it was the right word: an ability to keep silent that was more dignified than mere cunning. Cunning was out of Sheemie's reach in any case, and always would be—a man who couldn't tell a lie without shifting his eyes away from yours was a man who would never be considered cunning.

They used Sheemie half a dozen times over the five weeks when their physical love burned at its hottest—three of those times were to make meetings, two were to change meeting-places, and one was to cancel a tryst when Susan spied riders from the Piñano Ranch sweeping for strays near the shack in the Bad Grass.

That deep, warning voice never spoke to Roland about Sheemie as it had about the dangers of the red rock . . . but his conscience spoke to him, and when he finally mentioned this to Susan (the two of them wrapped in a sad-dle-blanket and lying naked in each other's arms), he found that her conscience had been troubling her, as well. It wasn't fair to put the boy in the way of their possible trouble. After coming to that conclusion, Roland and Susan arranged their meetings strictly between the two of them. If she could not meet him, Susan said, she would hang a red shirt over the sill of her window, as if to dry. If he could not meet her, he was to leave a white stone in the northeast corner of the yard, diagonally across the road from Hockey's Livery, where the town pump stood. As a last resort, they would use the red rock in the pavilion, risky or not, rather than bringing Sheemie in to their affairs—their affair—again.

Cuthbert and Alain watched Roland's descent into addiction first with disbelief, envy, and uneasy amusement, then with a species of silent horror. They had been sent to what was supposed to have been safety and had discovered a place of conspiracy, instead; they had come to take census in a Barony where most of the aristocracy had apparently switched its allegiance to the Affiliation's bitterest enemy; they had made personal enemies of three hard men who had probably killed enough folks to populate a fair-sized graveyard. Yet they had felt equal to the situation, because they had come here under the leadership of their friend, who had attained near-mythic status in their minds by besting Cort—with a hawk as his weapon!—and becoming a gunslinger at the unheard-of age of fourteen. That they had been given guns themselves for this mission had meant a great deal to them when they set out from Gilead, and nothing at all by the time they began to realize the scope of what was going on in Hambrystown and the Barony of which it was a part. When that realization came, Roland was the weapon they counted on. And now—

"He's like a revolver cast into water!" Cuthbert exclaimed one evening, not long after Roland had ridden away to meet Susan. Beyond the bunkhouse porch, Huntress rose in her first quarter. "Gods know if it'll ever fire again, even if it's fished out and dried off."

"Hush, wait," Alain said, and looked toward the porch rail. Hoping to jolli Cuthbert out of his bad temper (a task that was quite easy under ordinary circumstances), Alain said: "Where's the lookout? Gone to bed early for once, has he?"

This on?ly ir?ri?tat?ed Cuth?bert more. He hadn't seen the rook's skull in days—he couldn't ex?act?ly say how many—and he took its loss as an ill omen. “Gone, but not to bed,” he replied, then looked bale?ful?ly to the west, where Roland had dis?ap?peared aboard his big old ga?loot of a horse. “Lost, I reck?on. Like a cer?tain fel?low's mind and heart and good sense.”

“He'll be all right,” Alain said awk?ward?ly. “You know him as well as I do, Bert—known him our whole lives, we have. He'll be all right.”

Qui?et?ly, with?out even a trace of his nor?mal good hu?mor, Cuth?bert said: “I don't feel I know him now.”

They had both tried to talk to Roland in their dif?fer?ent ways; both re ceived a sim?ilar re?sponse, which was no re?al re?sponse at all. The dreamy (and per?haps slight?ly trou?bled) look of ab?strac?tion in Roland's eyes dur ing these one-?sid?ed dis?cus?sions would have been fa?mil?iar to any?one who has ev?er tried to talk sense to a drug ad?dict. It was a look that said Ro land's mind was oc?cu?pied by the shape of Su?san's face, the smell of Su san'-s skin, the feel of Su?san's body. And oc?cu?pied was a sil?ly word for it, one that fell short. It wasn't an oc?cu?pa?tion but an ob?ses?sion.

“I hate her a lit?tle for what she's done,” Cuth?bert said, and there was a note in his voice Alain had nev?er heard be?fore—a mix?ture of jeal?ousy, frus?tra?tion, and fear.

“Per?haps more than a lit?tle.”

“You mustn't!” Alain tried not to sound shocked, but couldn't help it. “She isn't re?spon?si?ble for—”

“Is she not? She went out to Cit?go with him. She saw what he saw. God knows how much else he's told her af?ter they've fin?ished mak?ing the beast with two backs. And she's all the way around the world from stupid. Just the way she's man?aged her side of their af?fair shows that.” Bert was think?ing, Alain guessed, of her tidy lit?tle trick with the corvette. “She must know she's be?come part of the prob?lem her?self. She must know that!”

Now his bit?ter?ness was fi?ght?en?ing?ly clear. He's jeal?ous of her for steal?ing his best friend, Alain thought, but it doesn't stop there. He's jeal ous of his best friend, as well, be?cause his best friend has won the most beau?ti?ful girl any of us have ev?er seen.

Alain leaned over and grasped Cuth?bert's shoul?der. When Bert turned away from his mo?rose ex?am?ina?tion of the door?yard to look at his friend, he was star?tled by the grim?ness on Alain's face. “It's ka,” Alain said.

Cuth?bert al?most sneered. “If I had a hot din?ner for ev?ery time some one blamed theft or lust or some oth?er stu?pid?ity on ka—”

Alain's grip tight?ened un?til it be?came painful. Cuth?bert could have pulled away but didn't. He watched Alain close?ly. The jok?er was, tem porar?ily, at least, gone.

“Blame is ex?act?ly what we two can't af?ford,” Alain said. “Don't you see that? And if it's ka that's swept them away, we needn't blame. We can't blame. We must rise above it. We need him. And we may need her, too.”

Cuth?bert looked in?to Alain's eyes for what seemed to be a very long time. Alain saw Bert's anger at war with his good sense. At last (and per haps on?ly for the time be?ing), good sense won out.

“All right, fine. It's ka, ev?ery?body's fa?vorite whip?ping-?boy. That's what the great

un?seen world's for, af?ter all, isn't it? So we don't have to take the blame for our acts of stu?pid?ity? Now let go of me, Al, be?fore you break my shoul?der.”

Alain let go and sat back in his chair, re?lieved. “Now if we on?ly knew what to do about the Drop. If we don't start count?ing there soon—”

“I've had an idea about that, ac?tu?al?ly,” Cuth?bert said. “It just needs a lit?tle work?ing out. I'm sure Roland could help ... if ei?ther of us can get his at?ten?tion for a few min?utes, that is.”

They sat for awhile with?out speak?ing, look?ing out at the door?yard. In side the bunkhouse, the pi?geons—an?oth?er bone of con?tention be?tween Roland and Bert these days—cooed. Alain rolled him?self a smoke. It was slow work, and the fin?ished prod?uct looked rather com?ical, but it held to?geth?er when he lit it.

“Your fa?ther would stripe you raw if he saw that in your hand,” Cuth bert re?marked, but he spoke with a cer?tain ad?mi?ra?tion. By the time the fol?low?ing year's Huntress came around, all three of them would be con firmed smok?ers, tanned young men with most of the boy?hood slapped out of their eyes.

Alain nod?ded. The strong Out?er Cres?cent to?bac?co made him swim?my in the head and raw in the throat, but a cigarette had a way of calm?ing his nerves, and right now his nerves could use some calm?ing. He didn't know about Bert, but these days he smelled blood on the wind. Pos?si?bly some of it would be their own. He wasn't ex?act?ly fright?ened—not yet, at least—but he was very, very wor?ried.

4

Al?though they had been honed like hawks to?ward the guns since ear?ly child?hood, Cuth?bert and Alain still car?ried an er?ro?neous be?lief com?mon to many boys their age: that their el?ders were al?so their bet?ters, at least in such mat?ters as plan?ning and wit; they ac?tu?al?ly be?lieved that grownups knew what they were do?ing. Roland knew bet?ter, even in his love-?sick?ness, but his friends had for?got?ten that in the game of Cas?tles, both sides wear the blind?fold. They would have been sur?prised to find that at least two of the Big Cof?fin Hunters had grown ex?treme?ly ner?vous about the three young men from In-?World, and ex?treme?ly tired of the wait?ing game both sides had been play?ing.

One ear?ly morn?ing, as the Huntress neared the half, Reynolds and De?pape came down?stairs to?geth?er from the sec?ond floor of the Trav?ellers' Rest. The main pub?lic room was silent ex?cept for var?ious snores and phlegmy wheez?ings. In Ham?bry's bus?iest bar, the par?ty was over for an oth?er night.

Jonas, ac?com?pa?nied by a silent guest, sat play?ing Chan?cel?lors' Pa tience at Coral's ta?ble to the left of the batwing doors. Tonight he was wear?ing his duster, and his breath smoked faint?ly as he bent over his cards. It wasn't cold enough to frost—not quite yet—but the frost would come soon. The chill in the air left no doubt of that. The breath of his guest al?so smoked. Kim?ba Rimer's skele?tal frame was all but buried in a gray ser?ape lit with faint bands of or?ange. The two of them had been on the edge of get?ting down to busi?ness when Roy and Clay (Pinch and Jil?ly, Rimer thought) showed up, their plow?ing and plant?ing in the sec?ond-?floor cribs al?so ap?par?ent?ly over for an?oth?er night.

“El?dred,” Reynolds said, and then: “Sai Rimer.”

Rimer nod?ded back, look?ing from Reynolds to De?pape with thin dis taste. “Long

days and pleasant nights, gentlemen.” Of course the world had moved on, he thought. To find such low culls as these two in positions of importance proved it. Jonas himself was only a little better.

“Might we have a word with you, Eldred?” Clay Reynolds asked. “We’ve been talking, Roy and I—”

“Unwise,” Jonas remarked in his wary voice. Rimer wouldn’t be surprised to find, at the end of his life, that the Death Angel had such a voice. “Talking can lead to thinking, and thinking’s dangerous for such as you boys. Like picking your nose with bullet-heads.”

Depepe donkeyed his damned hee-haw laughter, as if he didn’t realize the joke was on him.

“Jonas, listen,” Reynolds began, and then looked uncertainly at Rimer.

“You can talk in front of sai Rimer,” Jonas said, laying out a fresh line of cards.

“He is, after all, our chief employer. I play at Chancellor’s Patience in his honor, so I do.”

Reynolds looked surprised. “I thought . . . that is to say, I believed that Mayor Thorin was . . .”

“Hart Thorin wants to know none of the details of our arrangement with the Good Man,” Rimer said. “A share of the profits is all he requires in that line, Mr. Reynolds. The Mayor’s chief concern right now is that the Reaping Day Fair go smoothly, and that his arrangements with the young lady be . . . smoothly consummated.”

“Aye, that’s a diplomatic turn of speech for ye,” Jonas said in a broad Mejis accent.

“But since Roy looks a little perplexed, I’ll translate. Mayor Thorin spends most of his time in the jakes these days, yanking his willy-pink and dreaming his fist is Susan Delgado’s box. I’m betting that when the shell’s finally opened and her pearl lies before him, he’ll never pluck it—his heart’ll explode from excitement, and he’ll drop dead atop her, so he will. Yar!”

More donkey laughter from Depepe. He elbowed Reynolds. “He’s got it down, don’t he, Clay? Sounds just like em!”

Reynolds grinned, but his eyes were still worried. Rimer managed a smile as thin as a scum of November ice, and pointed at the seven which had just popped out of the pack. “Red on black, my dear Jonas.”

“I ain’t your dear anything,” Jonas said, putting the seven of diamonds on an eight of shadows, “and you’d do well to remember that.” Then, to Reynolds and Depepe: “Now what do you boys want? Rimer ‘n me was just going to have us a little palaver.”

“Perhaps we could all put our heads together,” Reynolds said, putting a hand on the back of a chair. “Kind of see if our thinking matches up.”

“I think not,” Jonas said, sweeping his cards together. He looked irritated, and Clay Reynolds took his hand off the back of the chair in a hurry. “Say your say and be done with it. It’s late.”

“We was thinking it’s time to go on out there to the Bar K,” Depepe said. “Have a look around. See if there’s anything to back up what the old fella in Ritzy said.”

“And see what else they’ve got out there,” Reynolds put in. “It’s getting close now,

El?dred, and we can't af?ford to take chances. They might have—"

"Aye? Guns? Elec?tric lights? Fairy-?wom?en in bot?tles? Who knows? I'll think about it. Clay."

"But—"

"I said I'll think about it. Now go on up?stairs, the both of you, back to your own fairy-?wom?en."

Reynolds and De?pape looked at him, looked at each oth?er, then backed away from the ta?ble. Rimer watched them with his thin smile.

At the foot of the stairs, Reynolds turned back. Jonas paused in the act of shuf?fling his cards and looked at him, tuft?ed eye?brows raised.

"We un?der?es?ti?mat?ed em once and they made us look like mon?keys. I don't want it to hap?pen again. That's all."

"Your ass is still sore over that, isn't it? Well, so is mine. And I tell you again, they'll pay for what they did. I have the bill ready, and when the time comes, I'll present it to them, with all in?ter?est du?ly not?ed. In the mean?time, they aren't go?ing to spook me in?to mak?ing the first move. Time is on our side, not theirs. Do you un?der?stand that?"

"Yes."

"Will you try to re?mem?ber it?"

"Yes," Reynolds re?peat?ed. He seemed sat?is?fied.

"Roy? Do you trust me?"

"Aye, El?dred. To the end." Jonas had praised him for the work he had done in Ritzy, and De?pape had rolled in it the way a male dog rolls in the scent of a bitch.

"Then go on up, the both of you, and let me palaver with the boss and be done with it. I'm too old for these late nights."

When they were gone, Jonas dealt out a fresh line of cards, then looked around the room. There were per?haps a dozen folks, in?clud?ing Sheb the pi?ano-?play?er and Barkie the bounc?er, sleep?ing it off. No one was close enough to lis?ten to the low-voiced con?ver?sa?tion of the two men by the door, even if one of the snor?ing drunk?ards was for some rea?son on?ly sham?ming sleep. Jonas put a red queen on a black knight, then looked up at Rimer. "Say your say."

"Those two said it for me, ac?tu?al?ly. Sai De?pape will nev?er be em?bar rassed by a sur?plus of brains, but Reynolds is fair?ly smart for a gun?ny, isn't he?"

"Clay's trig when the moon's right and he's had a shave," Jonas agreed. "Are you say?ing you came all the way from Seafront to tell me those three bab?bies need a clos?er look?ing at?"

Rimer shrugged.

"Per?haps they do, and I'm the man to do it, if so—right enough. But what's there to find?"

"That's to be seen," Rimer said, and tapped one of Jonas's cards. "There's a Chan?cel?lor."

"Aye. Near as ug?ly as the one I'm sit?ting with." Jonas put the Chan cel?lor—it was Paul—above his run of cards. The next draw un?cov?ered Luke, whom he put next to Paul. That left Pe?ter and Matthew still lurk?ing in the bush. Jonas looked at Rimer shrewd?ly. "You hide it bet?ter than my pals, but you're as ner?vous as they

are, un?der?neath. You want to know what's out at that bunkhouse? I'll tell you: ex?tra boots, pic?tures of their mom?mies, socks that stink to high heav?en, stiff sheets from boys who've been taught it's low-?class to chase af?ter the sheep . . . and guns hid?den some?where. Un?der the floor?boards, like enough."

"You re?al?ly think they have guns?"

"Aye, Roy got the straight of that, all right. They're from Gilead, they're like?ly from the line of Eld or from folk who like to think they're from it, and they're like?ly 'pren?tices to the trade who've been sent on with guns they haven't earned yet. I won?der a bit about the tall one with the I-?don't-?give-?a-?shit look in his eyes—he might al?ready be a gun?slinger, I sup?pose—but is it like?ly? I don't think so. Even if he is, I could take him in a fair go. I know it, and he does, too."

"Then why have they been sent here?"

"Not be?cause those from the In?ner Ba?ronies sus?pect your trea?son, sai Rimer—be easy on that score."

Rimer's head poked out of his ser?ape as he sat up straight, and his face stiff?ened.

"How dare you call me a traitor? How dare you?"

El?dred Jonas fa?vored Ham?bry's Min?is?ter of In?ven?to?ry with an un pleas?ant smile. It made the white-?haired man look like a wolver?ine. "I've called things by their right names my whole life, and I won't stop now. All that needs mat?ter to you is that I've nev?er dou?ble-?crossed an em?ploy?er."

"If I didn't be?lieve in the cause of—"

"To hell with what you be?lieve! It's late and I want to go to bed. The folk in New Canaan and Gilead haven't the fog?gi?est idea of what does or doesn't go on out here on the Cres?cent; there aren't many of em who've ev?er been here, I'd wa?ger. Them are too busy try?ing to keep ev?ery?thing from falling down around their ears to do much trav?el?ing these days. No, what they know is all from the pic?ture?books they was read out of when they 'us bab?bies them?selves: hap?py cow?boys gal?lop?ing af?ter stock, hap?py fish?er?men pulling whop?pers in?to their boats, folks clog?ging at bam-rais?ings and drink?ing big pots o' graf in Green Heart pavil?ion. For the sake of the Man Je?sus, Rimer, don't go dense on me—I deal with that day in and day out."

"They see Mejis as a place of qui?et and safe?ty."

"Aye, bu?col?ic splen?dor, just so, no doubt about it. They know that their whole way o' life—all that no?bil?ity and chival?ry and an?ces?tor-?wor?ship—is on fire. The fi?nal bat?tle may take place as much as two hun?dred wheels north?west of their bor?ders, but when Far?son us?es his fire-?car?riages and robots to wipe out their army, trou?ble will come south fast. There are those from the In?ner Ba?ronies who've smelled this com?ing for twen?ty years or more. They didn't send these brats here to dis?cov?er your se?crets, Rimer; folks such as these don't send their bab?bies in?to dan?ger on pur pose. They sent em here to get em out of the way, that's all. That doesn't make em blind or stupid, but for the sake of the gods, let's be sane. They're kid?dies;'

"What else might you find, should you go out there?"

"Some way of send?ing mes?sages, may?hap. A he?li?ograph's the most like?ly. And out be?yond Eye?bolt, a shep?herd or maybe a free?hold?er sus?cep tible to a bribe—some?one they've trained to catch the mes?sage and ei?ther flash it on or car?ry it afoot. But be?fore long it'll be too late for mes?sages to do any good, won't it?"

“Per?haps, but it’s not too late yet. And you’re right. Kid?dies or not, they wor?ry me.”

“You’ve no cause, I tell you. Soon enough, I’ll be wealthy and you’ll be down?right rich. May?or your?self, if you want. Who’d stand to stop you? Thorin? He’s a joke. Coral? She’d help you string him up, I wot. Or per haps you’d like to be a Baron, if such of?fices be re?vived?” He saw a mo men?tary gleam in Rimer’s eyes and laughed. Matthew came out of the deck, and Jonas put him up with the oth?er Chan?cel?lors. “Yar, I see that’s what you’ve got your heart set on. Gems is nice, and for gold that goes twice, but there’s noth?ing like hav?ing folk bow and scrape be?fore ye, is there?”

Rimer said, “They should have been on the cow?boy side by now.”

Jonas’s hands stopped above the lay?out of cards. It was a thought that had crossed his own mind more than once, es?pe?cial?ly over the last two weeks or so.

“How long do you think it takes to count our nets and boats and chart out the fish-hauls?” Rimer asked. “They should be over on the Drop, count ing cows and hors?es, look?ing through barns, study?ing the foal?-?charts. They should have been there two weeks ago, in fact. Un?less they al?ready know what they’d find.”

Jonas un?der?stood what Rimer was im?ply?ing, but couldn’t be?lieve it. Wouldn’t be?lieve it. Not such a depth of sly?ness from boys who on?ly had to shave once a week.

“No,” he said. “That’s your own guilty heart talk?ing to you. They’re just so de?ter?mined to do it right that they’re creep?ing along like old folks with bad eyes. They’ll be over on the Drop soon enough, and count?ing their lit?tle hearts out.”

“And if they’re not?”

A good ques?tion. Get rid of them some?how, Jonas sup?posed. An am bush, per?haps. Three shots from cov?er, no more bab?bies. There’d be ill feel?ing af?ter?ward—the boys were well liked in town—but Rimer could han?dle that un?til Fair Day, and af?ter the Reap it wouldn’t mat?ter. Still—

“I’ll have a look around out at the Bar K,” Jonas said at last. “By my self—I won’t have Clay and Roy tramp?ing along be?hind me.”

“That sounds fine.”

“Per?haps you’d like to come and lend a hand.”

Kim?ba Rimer smiled his icy smile. “I think not.”

Jonas nod?ded, and be?gan to deal again. Go?ing out to the Bar K would be a bit risky, but he didn’t ex?pect any re?al prob?lem—es?pe?cial?ly if he went alone. They were on?ly boys, af?ter all, and gone for much of each day.

“When may I ex?pect a re?port, sai Jonas?”

“When I’m ready to make it. Don’t crowd me.”

Rimer lift?ed his thin hands and held them, palms out, to Jonas. “Cry your par?don, sai,” he said.

Jonas nod?ded, slight?ly mol?li?fied. He flipped up an?oth?er card. It was Pe?ter, Chan?cel?lor of Keys. He put the card in the top row and then stared at it, comb?ing his fin?gers through his long white hair as he did. He looked from the card to Rimer, who looked back, eye?brows raised.

“You smile,” Rimer said.

“Yar!” Jonas said, and began to deal again. “I’m happy! All the Chancellors are out. I think I’m going to win this game.”

5

For Rhea, the time of the Huntress had been a time of frustration and unsatisfied craving. Her plans had gone awry, and thanks to her cat’s hideously mistimed leap, she didn’t know how or why. The young cull who’d taken Susan Delgado’s cherry had likely stopped her from chopping her scurf. . . but how? And who was he really? She wondered that more and more, but her curiosity was secondary to her fury. Rhea of the Coos wasn’t used to being balked.

She looked across the room to where Musty crouched and watched her carefully. Or did naively he would have relaxed in the fireplace (he seemed to like the cool drafts that swirled down the chimney), but since she had singed his fur. Musty preferred the woodpile. Given Rhea’s mood, that was probably wise. “You’re lucky I let ye live, ye warlock,” the old woman grumbled.

She turned back to the ball and began to make passes above it, but the glass only continued to swirl with bright pink light—not a single image appeared. Rhea got up at last, went to the door, threw it open, and looked out on the night sky. Now the moon had waxed a little past the half, and the Huntress was coming clear on its bright face. Rhea directed the stream of foul language she didn’t quite dare to direct at the glass (who knew what entity might lurk inside it, waiting to take offense at such talk?) up at the woman in the moon. Twice she slammed her bony old fist into the door—until as she cursed, dredging up every dirty word she could think of, even the potty-mouth words children throw at each other in the dust of the play yard. Never had she been so angry. She had given the girl a command, and the girl, for whatever reasons, had disobeyed. For standing against Rhea of the Coos, the bitch deserved to die.

“But not right away,” the old woman whispered. “First she should be rolled in the dirt, then pissed on until the dirt’s mud and her fine blonde hair’s full of it.

Humiliated . . . hurt . . . spat on . . .”

She slammed her fist against the door’s side again, and this time blood flew from the knuckles. It wasn’t just the girl’s failure to obey the hypnotic command. There was another matter, related but much more serious: Rhea herself was now too upset to use the glass, except for brief and unpredictable periods of time. The hand-passes she made over it and the incantations she muttered to it were, she knew, useless; the words and gestures were just the way she focused her will. That was what the glass responded to—will and concentrated thought. Now, thanks to the trollop of a girl and her boy lover, Rhea was too angry to summon the smooth concentration needed to part the pink fog which swirled inside the ball. She was, in fact, too angry to see.

“How can I make it like it was?” Rhea asked the half-glimpsed woman in the moon. “Tell me! Tell me!” But the Huntress told her nothing, and at last Rhea went back inside, sucking at her bleeding knuckles.

Musty saw her coming and squeezed into the cobwebby space between the woodpile and the chimney.

CHAPTER II

THE GIRL AT THE WIN?DOW

1

Now the Huntress "filled her bel?ly," as the old-?timers said—even at noon she could be glimpsed in the sky, a pal?lid vam?pire wom?an caught in bright au?tumn sun?light. In front of busi?ness?es such as the Trav?ellers' Rest and on the porch?es of such large ranch hous?es as Lengyll's Rock?ing B and Ren?frew's Lazy Su?s?an, stuffy-guys with heads full of straw above their old over?alls be?gan to ap?pear. Each wore his som?brero; each held a bas?ket of pro?duce cra?dled in his arms; each looked out at the emp?ty?ing world with stitched white-?cross eyes.

Wag?ons filled with squash?es clogged the roads; bright or?ange drifts of pump?kins and bright ma?gen?ta drifts of sharp?root lay against the sides of barns. In the fields, the pota?to-?carts rolled and the pick?ers fol?lowed be hind. In front of the Ham?bry Mer?can?tile, reap-?charms ap?peared like mag?ic, hang?ing from the carved Guardians like wind-?chimes.

All over Mejis, girls sewed their Reap?ing Night cos?tumes (and some times wept over them, if the work went bad?ly) as they dreamed of the boys they would dance with in the Green Heart pavil?ion. Their lit?tle broth?ers be?gan to have trou?ble sleep?ing as they thought of the rides and the games and the prizes they might win at the car?ni?val. Even their el?ders some?times lay awake in spite of their sore hands and aching backs, think ing about the plea?sures of the Reap.

Sum?mer had slipped away with a fi?nal flirt of her green?gown; har?vest-?time had ar?rived.

2

Rhea cared not a fig for Reap?ing dances or car?ni?val games, but she could no more sleep than those who did. Most nights she lay on her stink?ing pal?let un?til dawn, her skull thud?ding with rage. On a night not long af?ter Jonas's con?ver?sa?tion with Chan?cel?lor Rimer, she de?ter?mined to drink her self in?to obliv?ion. Her mood was not im?proved when she found that her graf bar?rel was al?most emp?ty; she blis?tered the air with her curs?es.

She was draw?ing in breath for a fresh string of them when an idea struck her. A won?der?ful idea. A bril?liant idea. She had want?ed Su?s?an Del?ga?do to cut off her hair. That hadn't worked, and she didn't know why. . . but she did know some?thing about the girl, didn't she? Some?thing in?ter es?ting, aye, so it was, wery in?ter?est?ing, in?deed.

Rhea had no de?sire to go to Thorin with what she knew; she had a fond (and fool?ish, like?ly) hope that the May?or had for?got?ten about his won?der?ful glass ball. But the girl's aunt, now . . . sup?pose Cordelia Del?ga?do were to dis?cov?er that not on?ly was her niece's vir?gin?ity lost, the girl was well on her way to be?com?ing a prac?ticed trol?lop? Rhea didn't think Cordelia would go to the May?or, ei?ther—the wom?an was a prig but not a fool—yet it would set the cat among the pi?geons just the same, wouldn't it?

"Waow!"

Think?ing of cats, there was Musty, stand?ing on the stoop in the moon light, look?ing at her with a mix?ture of hope and mis?trust. Rhea, grin?ning hideous?ly,

opened her arms. "Come to me, my precious! Come, my sweet one!" Musty, understanding all was forgiven, rushed into his mistress's arms and began to purr loudly as Rhea licked along his sides with her old and yellowing tongue. That night the Coos slept soundly for the first time in a week, and when she took the glass ball into her arms the following morning, its mists cleared for her at once. She spent the day in thrall to it, spying on people she detested, drinking little and eating nothing. Around sunset, she came out of her trance enough to realize she had as yet done nothing about the saucy little jade. But that was all right; she saw how it could be done . . . and she could watch all the results in the glass! All the protests, all the shouting and recriminations! She would see Susan's tears. That would be the best, to see her tears.

"A little harvest of my own," she said to Ermot, who now came slithering up her leg toward the place where she liked him best. There weren't many men who could do you like Ermot could do you, no indeed. Sitting there with a lapful of snake, Rhea began to laugh.

3

"Remember your promise," Alain said nervously as they heard the approaching beat of Rusher's hoofs. "Keep your temper."

"I will," Cuthbert said, but he had his doubts. As Roland rode around the long wing of the bunkhouse and into the yard, his shadow trailing out in the sunset light, Cuthbert clenched his hands nervously. He willed them to open, and they did. Then, as he watched Roland dismount, they rolled themselves closed again, the nails digging into his palms.

Another go-round, Cuthbert thought. Gods, but I'm sick of them. Sick to death. Last night's had been about the pigeons—again. Cuthbert wanted to use one to send a message back west about the oil tankers; Roland still did not. So they had argued. Except (here was another thing which infuriated him, that rubbed against his nerves like the sound of the thinny) Roland did not argue. These days Roland did not deign to argue. His eyes always kept that distant look, as if only his body was here. The rest of him—mind, soul, spirit, ka—was with Susan Delgado.

"No," he had said simply. "It's too late for such."

"You can't know that," Cuthbert had argued. "And even if it's too late for help to come from Gilead, it's not too late for advice to come from Gilead. Are you so blind you can't see that?"

"What advice can they send us?" Roland hadn't seemed to hear the rawness in Cuthbert's voice. His own voice was calm. Reasonable. And utterly disconnected, Cuthbert thought, from the urgency of the situation.

"If we knew that," he had replied, "we wouldn't have to ask, Roland, would we?"

"We can only wait and stop them when they make their move. It's comfort you're looking for, Cuthbert, not advice."

You mean wait while you fuck her in as many ways and in as many places as you can imagine, Cuthbert thought. Inside, outside, rightside up and upside down.

"You're not thinking clearly about this," Cuthbert had said coldly. He'd heard Alain's gasp. Neither of them had ever said such a thing to Roland in their lives, and once it was out, he'd waited uneasily for what ever explosion might follow.

None did. "Yes," Roland replied, "I am." And he had gone in to the bunkhouse without another word.

Now, watching Roland uncinch Rusher's girths and pull the saddle from his back, Cuthbert thought: You're not, you know. But you better think clearly about this. By all the gods, you'd better.

"Hile," he said as Roland carried the saddle over to the porch and set it on the step. "Busy afternoon?" He felt Alain kick his ankle and ignored it.

"I've been with Susan," Roland said. No defense, no excuse. And for a moment Cuthbert had a vision of shocking clarity: he saw the two of them in a hut somewhere, the late afternoon sun shining through holes in the roof and dappling their bodies. She was on top, riding him. Cuthbert saw her knees on the old, spongy boards, and the tension in her long thighs. He saw how tanned her arms were, how white her belly. He saw how Roland's hands cupped the globes of her breasts, squeezing them as she rocked back and forth above him, and he saw how the sun lit her hair, turning it into a fine-spun net.

Why do you always have to be first? he cried at Roland in his mind. Why does it always have to be you? Gods damn you, Roland! Gods damn you!

"We were on the docks," Cuthbert said, his tone a thin imitation of his usual brightness. "Counting boots and marine tools and what are called clam-draws. What an amusing time of it we've had, eh, Al?"

"Did you need me to help you do that?" Roland asked. He went back to Rusher, and took off the saddle-blanket. "Is that why you sound angry?"

"If I sound angry, it's because most of the fisherman are laughing at us behind our backs. We keep coming back and coming back. Roland, they think we're fools."

Roland nodded. "All to the good," he said.

"Perhaps," Alain said quietly, "but Rimer doesn't think we're fools—it's in the way he looks at us when we pass. Nor does Jonas. And if they don't think we're fools, Roland, what do they think?"

Roland stood on the second step, the saddle-blanket hanging forgotten over his arm. For once they actually seemed to have his attention, Cuthbert thought. Glory be and will wonders never cease.

"They think we're avoiding the Drop because we already know what's there," Roland said. "And if they don't think it, they soon will."

"Cuthbert has a plan."

Roland's gaze—mild, interested, already starting to be not there again—shifted to Cuthbert. Cuthbert the joker. Cuthbert the apprentice, who had in no way earned the gun he'd carried east to the Outer Crescent. Cuthbert the virgin and eternal second. Gods, I don't want to hate him. I don't, but now it's so easy.

"We two should go and see Sheriff Avery tomorrow," Cuthbert said. "We will present it as a courteous visit. We have already established our selves as three courteous, if slightly stupid, young fellows, have we not?"

"To a fault," Roland agreed, smiling.

"We'll say that we've finally finished with the sea-coast side of Hamby, and we hope to be every bit as meticulous on the farm and cowboy side. But we certainly don't want to cause trouble or be in anyone's way. It is, after all, the busiest time of

year—for ranchers as well as farmers— and even civilized fools such as ourselves will be aware of that. So we'll give the good Sheriff a list—“

Roland's eyes lit up. He tossed the blanket over the porch rail, grabbed Cuthbert around the shoulders, and gave him a rough hug. Cuthbert could smell a lilac scent around Roland's collar and felt an insane but powerful urge to clamp his hands around Roland's throat and try to strangle him. Instead, he gave him a perfunctory clap on the back in return.

Roland drew away, grinning widely. "A list of the ranches we'll be visiting," he said. "Aye! And with forewarning, they can move any stock they'd like us not to see on to the next ranch, or the last one. The same for tack, feed, equipment. . . it's marvelous, Cuthbert! You're a genius!"

"Far from that," Cuthbert said. "I've just spared a little time to think about a problem that concerns us all. That concerns the entire Affiliation, maybe. We need to think. Wouldn't you say?"

Alain winced, but Roland didn't seem to notice. He was still grinning. Even at fourteen, such an expression on his face was troubling. The truth was that when Roland grinned, he looked slightly mad. "Do you know, they may even move in a fair number of mutants for us to look at, just so we'll continue to believe the lies they've already told about the impurity of their stocklines." He paused, seeming to think, and then said: "Why don't you and Alain go and see the Sheriff, Bert? That would do very well, I think."

At this point Cuthbert nearly threw himself at Roland, wanting to scream Yes, why not? Then you could spend tomorrow morning pronging her as well as tomorrow afternoon! You idiot! You thoughtless lovestruck idiot!

It was Al who saved him—saved them all, perhaps.

"Don't be a fool," he said sharply, and Roland wheeled toward him, looking surprised. He wasn't used to sharpness from that quarter. "You're our leader, Roland—seen that way by Thorin, by Avery, by the towns folk. Seen that way by us as well."

"No one appointed me—"

"No one needed to!" Cuthbert shouted. "You won your guns! These folk would hardly believe it—I hardly believe it myself just lately—but you are a gunslinger. You have to go! Plain as the nose on your face! It doesn't matter which of us accompany you, but you have to go!" He could say more, much more, but if he did, where would it end? With their fellowship broken beyond repair, likely. So he clamped his mouth shut—no need for Alain to kick him this time—and once again waited for the explosion. Once again, none came.

"All right," Roland said in his new way—that mild it-doesn't-matter way that made Cuthbert feel like biting him to wake him up. "Tomorrow morning. You and I, Bert. Will eight suit you?"

"Down to the ground," Cuthbert said. Now that the discussion was over and the decision made, Bert's heart was beating wildly and the muscles in his upper thighs felt like rubber. It was the way he'd felt after their confrontation with the Big Coffin Hunters.

"We'll be at our prettiest," Roland said. "Nice boys from the Innkeepers with good

in?ten?tions but not many brains. Fine.” And he went in?side, no longer grin?ning (which was a re?lief) but smil?ing gen?tly.

Cuth?bert and Alain looked at each oth?er and let out their breath in a mu?tu?al rush. Cuth?bert cocked his head to?ward the yard, and went down the steps. Alain fol?lowed, and the two boys stood in the cen?ter of the dirt rect?an?gle with the bunkhouse at their backs. To the east, the ris?ing full moon was hid?den be?hind a scrim of clouds. ‘

“She’s tranced him,” Cuth?bert said. “Whether she means to or not, she’ll kill us all in the end. Wait and see if she don’t.”

“You shouldn’t say such, even in jest.”

“All right, she’ll crown us with the jew?els of Eld and we’ll live for?ev?er.”

“You have to stop be?ing an?gry at him, Bert. You have to.”

Cuth?bert looked at him bleak?ly. “I can’t.”

4

The great storms of au?tumn were still a month or more dis?tant, but the fol low?ing morn?ing dawned driz?zly and gray. Roland and Cuth?bert wrapped them?selves in scrapes and head?ed for town, leav?ing Alain to the few home place chores. Tucked in Roland’s belt was the sched?ule of farms and ranch?es—be?gin?ning with the three small spreads owned by the Barony—the three of them had worked out the pre?vi?ous evening. The pace this sched?ule sug?gest?ed was al?most lu?di?crous?ly slow—it would keep them on the Drop and in the or?chards al?most un?til Year’s End Fair—but it con?formed to the pace they had al?ready set on the docks.

Now the two of them rode silent?ly to?ward town, both lost in their own thoughts.

Their way took them past the Del?ga?do house. Roland looked up and saw Su?san sit?ting in her win?dow, a bright vi?sion in the gray light of that fall morn?ing. His heart leaped up and al?though he didn’t know it then, it was how he would re?mem?ber her most clear?ly for?ev?er af?ter—love?ly Su san, the girl at the win?dow. So do we pass the ghosts that haunt us lat?er in our lives; they sit un?dra?mat?ical?ly by the road?side like poor beg?gars, and we see them on?ly from the com?ers of our eyes, if we see them at all. The idea that they have been wait?ing there for us rarely if ev?er cross?es our minds. Yet they do wait, and when we have passed, they gath?er up their bun?dles of mem?ory and fall in be?hind, tread?ing in our foot?steps and catch ing up, lit?tle by lit?tle.

Roland raised a hand to her. It went to?ward his mouth at first, want?ing to send her a kiss, but that would be mad?ness. He lift?ed the hand be?fore it could touch his lips and ticked a fin?ger off his fore?head in?stead, of?fer?ing a saucy lit?tle salute.

Su?san smiled and re?turned it in kind. None saw Cordelia, who had gone out in the driz?zle to check on the last of her squash and sharp?root. That la?dy stood where she was, a som?brero yanked down on her head al most to the eye?line, half-?hid?den by the stuffy-?guy guard?ing the pump?kin patch. She watched Roland and Cuth?bert pass (Cuth?bert she bare?ly saw; her in?ter?est was in the oth?er one). From the boy on horse?back she looked up to Su?san, sit?ting there in her win?dow, hum?ming as blithe?ly as a bird in a gild?ed cage.

A sharp splin?ter of sus?pi?cion whis?pered its way in?to Cordelia’s heart. Su?san’s change of tem?per?ament—from al?ter?nat?ing bouts of sor?row and fear?ful anger to a

kind of dazed but mainly cheerful acceptance—had been so sudden. Maybe it wasn't acceptance at all.

"Ye're mad," she whispered to herself, but her hand remained tight on the haft of the machete she held. She dropped to her knees in the muddy garden and abruptly began chopping sharp root vines, tossing the roots themselves toward the side of the house with quick, accurate throws. "There's nothing between em. I'd know. Children of such an age have no more discretion than . . . than the drunks in the Rest."

But the way they had smiled. The way they had smiled at each other.

"Perfectly normal," she whispered, chopping and throwing. She cut a sharp root nearly in half, ruining it, not noticing. The whispering was a habit she'd picked up only recently, as Reap Day neared and the stresses of coping with her brother's troublesome daughter mounted. "Folks smile at each other, that's all."

The same for the salute and Susan's returning wave. Below, the handsome cavalier, acknowledging the pretty maid; above, the maid herself, pleased to be acknowledged by such as he. It was youth calling to youth, that was all. And yet... The look in his eyes . . . and the look in hers.

Nonsense, of course. But—

But you saw something else.

Yes, perhaps. For a moment it had seemed to her that the young man was going to blow Susan a kiss . . . then had remembered himself at the last moment and turned it into a salute, instead.

Even if ye did see such a thing, it means nothing. Young cavaliers are saucy, especially when out from beneath the gaze of their fathers. And these three already have a history, as ye well know.

All true enough, but none of it removed that chilly splinter from her heart.

5

Jonas answered Roland's knock and let the two boys into the Sheriff's office. He was wearing a Deputy's star on his shirt, and looked at them with expressionless eyes. "Boys," he said. "Come in out of the wet."

He stepped back to allow them entrance. His limp was more pronounced than Roland had ever seen it; the wet weather was playing it up, he supposed.

Roland and Cuthbert stepped in. There was a gas heater in the corner—titled from "the candle" at Cigo, no doubt—and the big room, which had been cool on the day they had first come here, was stuporously hot. The three cells held five woeful-looking drunks, two pairs of men and a woman in the center cell by herself, sitting on the bunk with her legs spread wide, displaying a broad expanse of red drawers. Roland feared that if she got her finger any farther up her nose, she might never retrieve it. Clay Reynolds was leaning against the notice-board, picking his teeth with a broomstraw. Sitting at the rolltop desk was Deputy Dave, stroking his chin and frowning through his monocle at the board which had been set up there.

Roland wasn't at all surprised to see that he and Bert had interrupted a game of Castles.

"Well, look here, El-dred!" Reynolds said. "It's two of the In-World boys! Do your mommies know you're out, fellows?"

"They do," Cuthbert said brightly. "And you're looking very well, sai Reynolds. The wet weather's soothed your pox, has it?"

Without looking at Bert or losing his pleasant little smile, Roland shot an elbow into his friend's shoulder. "Pardon my friend, sai. His humor regularly transgresses the bounds of good taste; he doesn't seem able to help it. There's no need for us to scratch at one another—we've agreed to let bygones be bygones, haven't we?"

"Aye, certainly, all a misunderstanding," Jonas said. He limped back across to the desk and the game-board. As he sat down on his side of it, his smile turned to a sour little grimace. "I'm worse than an old dog," he said. "Someone ought to put me down, so they should. Earth's cold but painless, eh, boys?"

He looked back at the board and moved a man around to the side of his Hillock. He had begun to Casble, and was thus vulnerable . . . although not very, in this case, Roland thought; Deputy Dave didn't look like much in the way of competition.

"I see you're working for the Barony salt now," Roland said, nodding at the star on Jonas's shirt.

"Salt's what it amounts to," Jonas said, companionably enough. "A fellow went leg-broke. I'm helping out, that's all."

"And sai Reynolds? Sai Depape? Are they helping out as well?"

"Yar, I reckon," Jonas said. "How goes your work among the fisher-folk? Slow, I hear."

"Done at last. The work wasn't so slow as we were. But coming here in disgrace was enough for us—we have no intention of leaving that way. Slow and steady wins the race, they say."

"So they do," Jonas agreed. "Whoever 'they' are."

From somewhere deeper in the building there came the whoosh of a water-stool flushing. All the comforts of home in the Ham-bry Sheriff's, Roland thought. The flush was soon followed by heavy footsteps descending a staircase, and a few moments later, Herk Avery appeared. With one hand he was buckling his belt; with the other he mopped his broad and sweaty forehead. Roland admired the man's dexterity.

"Whew!" the Sheriff exclaimed. "Them beans I ate last night took the short-cut, I tell ye." He looked from Roland to Cuthbert and then back to Roland. "Why, boys! Too wet for net-counting, is it?"

"Sai Dearborn was just saying that their net-counting days are at an end," Jonas said. He combed back his long hair with the tips of his fingers. Beyond him, Clay Reynolds had resumed his slouch against the notice-board, looking at Roland and Cuthbert with open dislike.

"Aye? Well, that's fine, that's fine. What's next, youngsters? And is there any way we here can help ye? For that's what we like to do best, lend a hand where a hand's needed. So it is."

"Actually, you could help us," Roland said. He reached into his belt and pulled out the list. "We have to move on to the Drop, but we don't want to inconvenience anyone."

Grinning hugely, Deputy Dave slid his Squire all the way around his own Hillock.

Jonas Cas?tled at once, rip?ping open Dave's en?tire left flank. The grin fad?ed from Dave's face, leav?ing a puz?zled empti?ness. "How'd ye man?age that?"

"Easy." Jonas smiled, then pushed back from the desk to in?clude the oth?ers in his re?gard. "You want to re?mem?ber, Dave, that I play to win. I can't help it; it's just my na?ture." He turned his full at?ten?tion to Roland. His smile broad?ened. "Like the scor?pi?on said to the maid?en as she lay dy ing, 'You knowed I was poi?son when you picked me up.' "

6

When Su?san came in from feed?ing the live?stock, she went di?rect?ly to the cold-pantry for the juice, which was her habit. She didn't see her aunt stand?ing in the chim?ney com?er and watch?ing her, and when Cordelia spoke, Su?san was star?tled badly. It wasn't just the un?ex?pect?ed?ness of the voice; it was the cold?ness of it.

"Do ye know him?"

The juice-?jug slipped in her fin?gers, and Su?san put a steady?ing hand be?neath it. Orange juice was too pre?cious to waste, es?pe?cial?ly this late in the year. She turned and saw her aunt by the wood?box. Cordelia had hung her som?brero on a hook in the en?try?way, but she still wore her ser?ape and mud?dy boots. Her cuchil?lo lay on top of the stacked wood, with green strands of sharp?root vine still trail?ing from its edge. Her tone was cold, but her eyes were hot with sus?pi?cion.

A sud?den clar?ity filled Su?san's mind and all of her sens?es. If you say "No, " you're damned, she thought. If you even ask who, you may be damned. You must say—

"I know them both," she replied in off?hand fash?ion. "I met them at the par?ty. So did you. Ye fright?ened me, Aunt."

"Why did he salute ye so?"

"How can I know? Per?haps he just felt like it."

Her aunt bolt?ed for?ward, slipped in her mud?dy boots, re?gained her bal?ance, and seized Su?san by the arms. Now her eyes were blaz?ing. "Be'n't in?so?lent with me, girl! Be'n't haughty with me, Miss Oh So Young and Pret?ty, or I'll—"

Su?san pulled back?ward so hard that Cordelia stag?gered and might have fall?en again, if the ta?ble had not been handy to grab. Be?hind her, mud?dy foot-?tracks stood out on the clean kitchen floor like ac?cu?sa?tions. "Call me that again and I'll . . . I'll slap thee!" Su?san cried. "So I will!"

Cordelia's lips drew back from her teeth in a dry, fe?ro?cious smile. "Ye'd slap your fa?ther's on?ly liv?ing blood kin? Would ye be so bad?"

"Why not? Do ye not slap me, Aunt?"

Some of the heat went out of her aunt's eyes, and the smile left her mouth. "Su?san! Hard?ly ev?er! Not half a dozen times since ye were a tod dler who would grab any?thing her hands could reach, even a pot of boil ing wa?ter on the—"

"It's with thy mouth thee most?ly hits nowa?days," Su?san said. "I've put up with it—more fool me—but am done with it now. I'll have no more. If I'm old enough to be sent to a man's bed for mon?ey, I'm old enough for ye to keep a civ?il tongue when ye speak to me."

Cordelia opened her mouth to de?fend her?self—the girl's anger had star?tled her, and so had her ac?cu?sa?tions—and then she re?al?ized how clev er?ly she was be?ing led away from the sub?ject of the boys. Of the boy.

“Ye on?ly know him from the par?ty, Su?san? It’s Dear?born I mean.” As I think ye well know.

“I’ve seen him about town,” Su?san said. She met her aunt’s eyes steady?ly, al?though it cost her an ef?fort; lies would fol?low half-?truths as dark fol?lowed dusk. “I’ve seen all three of them about town. Are ye sat?is?fied?” No, Su?san saw with mount?ing dis?may, she was not. “Do ye swear to me, Su?san—on your fa?ther’s name—that ye’ve not been meet?ing this boy Dear?born?”

All the rides in the late af?ter?noon, Su?san thought. All the ex?cus?es. All the care that no one should see us. And it all comes down to a care?less wave on a rainy morn?ing. That eas?ily all’s put at risk. Did we think it could be oth?er?wise? Were we that fool?ish?

Yes ... and no. The truth was they had been mad. And still were. Su?san kept re?mem?ber?ing the look of her fa?ther’s eyes on the few oc ca?sions when he had caught her in a fib. That look of half-?cu?ri?ous dis?ap point?ment. The sense that her fibs, in?nocu?ous as they might be, had hurt him like the scratch of a thorn.

“I will swear to noth?ing,” she said. “Ye’ve no right to ask it of me.” “Swear!” Cordelia cried shril?ly. She groped out for the ta?ble again and grasped it, as if for bal?ance. “Swear it! Swear it! This is no game of jacks or tag or John?ny-?jump-?my-pony! Thee’s not a child any longer! Swear to me! Swear that thee’re still pure!”

“No,” Su?san said, and turned to leave. Her heart was beat?ing mad?ly, but still that aw?ful clar?ity in?formed the world. Roland would have known it for what it was: she was see?ing with gun?slinger’s eyes. There was a glass win?dow in the kitchen, look?ing out to?ward the Drop, and in it she saw the ghost?ly re?flec?tion of Aunt Cord com?ing to?ward her, one arm raised, the hand at the end of it knot?ted in?to a fist. With?out turn?ing, Su?san put up her own hand in a halt?ing ges?ture. “Raise that not to me,” she said. “Raise it not, ye bitch.”

She saw the re?flec?tion’s ghost-?eyes widen in shock and dis?may. She saw the ghost-fist re?lax, be?come a hand again, fall to the ghost-?wom?an’s side.

“Su?san,” Cordelia said in a small, hurt voice. “How can ye call me so? What’s so coars?ened your tongue and your re?gard for me?”

Su?san went out with?out re?ply?ing. She crossed the yard and en?tered the bam. Here the smells she had known since child?hood—hors?es, lum ber, hay—filled her head and drove the aw?ful clar?ity away. She was tum?bled back in?to child?hood, lost in the shad?ows of her con?fu?sion again. Py?lon turned to look at her and whick?ered. Su?san put her head against his neck and cried.

7

“There!” Sher?iff Av?ery said when sais Dear?born and Heath were gone. “It’s as ye said—just slow is all they are; just creep?ing care?ful.” He held the metic?ulous?ly print?ed list up, stud?ied it a mo?ment, then cack?led hap pi?ly. “And look at this! What a beau?ty! Har! We can move any?thing we don’t want em to see days in ad?vance, so we can.”

”They’re fools,” Reynolds said . . . but he pined for an?oth?er chance at them, just the same. If Dear?born re?al?ly thought by?gones were by?gones over that lit?tle busi?ness in the Trav?ellers’ Rest, he was way past fool?ish ness and dwelling in the land of id?io?cy.

Deputy Dave said noth?ing. He was look?ing dis?con?so?late?ly through his mon?ocle at the Cas?tles board, where his white army had been laid waste in six quick moves. Jonas's forces had poured around Red Hillock like wa?ter, and Dave's hopes had been swept away in the flood.

"I'm tempt?ed to wrap my?self up dry and go over to Seafront with this," Av?ery said. He was still gloat?ing over the pa?per, with its neat list of farms and ranch?es and pro?posed dates of in?spec?tion. Up to Year's End and be?yond it ran. Gods!

"Why don't ye do that?" Jonas said, and got to his feet. Pain ran up his leg like bit?ter light?ning.

"An?oth?er game, sai Jonas?" Dave asked, be?gin?ning to re?set the pieces.

"I'd rather play a weed-?eat?ing dog," Jonas said, and took ma?li?cious plea?sure at the flush that crept up Dave's neck and stained his guile?less fool's face. He limped across to the door, opened it, and went out on the porch. The driz?zle had be?come a soft, steady rain. Hill Street was de sert?ed, the cob?bles gleam?ing wet?ly.

Reynolds had fol?lowed him out. "El?dred—"

"Get away," Jonas said with?out turn?ing.

Clay hes?itat?ed a mo?ment, then went back in?side and closed the door.

What the hell's wrong with you? Jonas asked him?self.

He should have been pleased at the two young pups and their list—as pleased as Av?ery was, as pleased as Rimer would be when he heard about this morn?ing's vis?it. Af?ter all, hadn't he told Rimer not three days ago that the boys would soon be over on the Drop, count?ing their lit?tle hearts out? Yes. So why did he feel so un?set?tled? So fuck?ing jit?tery? Be?cause there ^Bt still hadn't been any con?tact from Par?son's man, Lati?go? Be?cause Rey nolds came back emp?ty from Hang?ing Rock on one day and De?pape came back emp?ty the next? Sure?ly not. Lati?go would come, along with a good?ly troop of men, but it was still too soon for them, and Jonas knew it. Reap ing was still al?most a month away.

So is it just the bad weath?er work?ing on your leg, stir?ring up that old wound and mak?ing you ug?ly?

No. The pain was bad, but it had been worse be?fore. The trou?ble was his head.

Jonas leaned against a post be?neath the over?hang, lis?tened to the rain plink?ing on the tiles, and thought how, some?times in a game of Cas tles, a clever play?er would peek around his Hillock for just a mo?ment, then duck back. That was what this felt like—it was so right it smelled wrong. Crazy idea, but some?how not crazy at all.

"Are you try?ing to play Cas?tles with me, sprat?" Jonas mur?mured. "If so, you'll soon wish you'd stayed home with your mom?my. So you will."

8

Roland and Cuth?bert head?ed back to the Bar K along the Drop—there would be no count?ing done to?day. At first, in spite of the rain and the gray skies, Cuth?bert's good hu?mor was al?most en?tire?ly re?stored.

"Did you see them?" he asked with a laugh. "Did you see them, Roland . . . Will, I mean? They bought it, didn't they? Swal?lowed that hon?ey whole, they did!"

"Yes."

"What do we do next? What's our next move?"

Roland looked at him blankly for a mo?ment, as if star?tled out of a doze. "The next

move is theirs. We count. And we wait.”

Cuthbert’s good cheer collapsed in a puff, and he once more found himself having to restrain a flood of recrimination, all whirling around two basic ideas: that Roland was shirking his duty so he could continue to wallow in the undeniable charms of a certain young lady, and—more important—that Roland had lost his wits when all of Mid-World needed them the most.

Except what duty was Roland shirking? And what made him so sure Roland was wrong? Logic? Intuition? Or just shitty old catbox jealousy? Cuthbert found himself thinking of the effortless way Jonas had ripped up Deputy Dave’s army when Deputy Dave had moved too soon. But life was not like Castles ... was it? He didn’t know. But he thought he had at least one valid intuition: Roland was heading for disaster. And so they all were.

Wake up, Cuthbert thought. Please, Roland, wake up before it’s too late.

CHAPTER III

playing castles

1

There followed a week of the sort of weather that makes folk apt to crawl back into bed after lunch, take long naps, and wake feeling stupid and disoriented. It was far from flood-weather, but it made the final phase of the apple-picking dangerous (there were several broken legs, and in Seven-Mile Orchard a young woman fell from the top of her ladder, breaking her back), and the potato-fields became difficult to work; almost as much time was spent freeing wagons stuck in the gluey rows as was spent actually picking. In Green Heart, what decorations had been done for the Reaping Fair grew sodden and had to be pulled down. The work volunteers waited with increasing nervousness for the weather to break so they could begin again.

It was bad weather for young men whose job it was to take inventory, although they were at least able to begin visiting barns and counting stock. It was good weather for a young man and young woman who had discovered the joys of physical love, you would have said, but Roland and Susan met only twice during the run of gray weather. The danger of what they were doing was now almost palpable.

The first time was in an abandoned boathouse on the Seacoast Road. The second was in the far end of the crumbling building below and to the east of Citgo—they made love with furious intensity on one of Roland’s saddle-blankets, which was spread on the floor of what had once been the oil refinery’s cafeteria. As Susan climaxed, she shrieked his name over and over. Startled pigeons filled the old, shabby rooms and crumbling hallways with their soft thunder.

2

Just as it seemed that the drizzle would never end and the grinding sound of the thimble in the still air would drive everyone in Hambury insane, a strong wind—almost a gale—blew in off the ocean and puffed the clouds away. The town awoke one day to a sky as bright as blue steel and a sun that turned the bay to gold in the morning and white fire in the afternoon. That sense of lethargy was gone. In the potato fields the carts rolled with new vigor. In Green Heart an army

of wom?en be?gan once more to be?deck with flow?ers the podi?um where Jamie Mc?Cann and Su?san Del?ga?do would he ac?claimed this year's Reap?ing Lad and Girl. Out on the part of the Drop clos?est to May?or's House, Roland, Cuth?bert, and Alain rode with re?newed pur?pose, count?ing the hors?es which ran with the Barony brand on their flanks. The bright skies and brisk winds filled them with en?er?gy and good cheer, and for a course of days—three, or per?haps four—they gal?loped to?geth?er in a whoop?ing, shout?ing, laugh ing line, their old good fel?low?ship re?stored.

On one of these brisk and sun?ny days, El?dred Jonas stepped out of the Sher?iff's of?fice and walked up Hill Street to?ward Green Heart. He was free of both De?pape and Reynolds this morn?ing—they had rid?den out to Hang?ing Rock to?geth?er, look?ing for Lati?go's out?rid?ers, who must come soon, now—and Jonas's plan was sim?ple: to have a glass of beer in the pavil?ion, and watch the prepa?ra?tions that were go?ing on there: the dig ging of the roast?ing-?pits, the lay?ing of fag?gots for the bon?fire, the ar?gu ments over how to set the mor?tars that would shoot off the fire?works, the ladies flow?er?ing the stage where this year's Lad and Girl would be of?fered for the town's adu?la?tion. Per?haps, Jonas thought, he might take a like?ly-look?ing flow?er-?girl off for an hour or two of recre?ation. The main?te?nance of the sa?loon whores he left strict?ly to Roy and Clay, but a fresh young flow?er-?girl of sev?en?teen or so was a dif?fer?ent mat?ter.

The pain in his hip had fad?ed with the damp weath?er; the painful, lurch?ing stride with which he had moved for the last week or so had be come a mere limp again. Per?haps just a beer or two in the open air would be enough, but the thought of a girl wouldn't quite leave his head. Young, clear-?skinned, high-?breast?ed. Fresh, sweet breath. Fresh, sweet lips—

“Mr. Jonas? El?dred?”

He turned, smil?ing, to the own?er of the voice. No dewy-?com?plex?ioned flow?er-?girl with wide eyes and moist, part?ed lips stood there, but a skin?ny wom?an edg?ing in?to late mid?dle age—flat chest, flat bum, tight pale lips, hair scrooped so tight against her skull that it fair screamed. On?ly the wide eyes cor?re?spond?ed with his day?dream. I be?lieve I've made a con quest, Jonas thought sar?don?ical?ly.

“Why, Cordelia!” he said, reach?ing out and tak?ing one of her hands in both of his.

“How love?ly you look this morn?ing!”

Thin col?or came up in her cheeks and she laughed a lit?tle. For a mo ment she looked forty-?five in?stead of six?ty. And she's not six?ty, Jonas thought. The lines around her mouth and the shad?ows un?der her eyes . . . those are new.

“You're very kind,” she said, “but I know bet?ter. I haven't been sleep ing, and when wom?en my age don't sleep, they grow old rapid?ly.”

“I'm sor?ry to hear you're sleep?ing bad?ly,” he said. “But now that the weath?er's changed, per?haps—”

“It's not the weath?er. Might I speak to you, El?dred? I've thought and thought, and you're the on?ly one I dare turn to for ad?vice.”

His smile widened. He placed her hand through his arm, then cov?ered it with his own. Now her blush was like fire. With all that blood in her head, she might talk for hours. And Jonas had an idea that ev?ery word would be in?ter?est?ing.

With women of a certain age and temperament, tea was more effective than wine when it came to loosening the tongue. Jonas gave up his plans for a lager (and, perhaps, a flower-girl) without so much as a second thought. He seated said Delgado in a sunny corner of the Green Heart pavilion (it was not far from a red rock Roland and Susan knew well), and ordered a large pot of tea; cakes, too. They watched the Reaping Fair preparations go forward as they waited for the food and drink. The sunswept park was full of hammering and sawing and shouts and bursts of laughter.

"All Fair-Days are pleasant, but Reaping turns us all into children again, don't you find?" Cordelia asked.

"Yes, indeed," said Jonas, who hadn't felt like a child even when he had been one.

"What I still like best is the bonfire," she said, looking toward the great pile of sticks and boards that was being constructed at the far end of the park, eater-corner from the stage. It looked like a large wooden teepee. "I love it when the townsfolk bring their stuffy-guys and throw them on. Barbaric, but it always gives me such a pleasant shiver."

"Aye," Jonas said, and wondered if it would give her a pleasant shiver to know that three of the stuffy-guys thrown on to the Reap Night bonfire this year were apt to smell like pork and scream like harpies as they burned. If his luck was in, the one that screamed the longest would be the one with the pale blue eyes.

The tea and cakes came, and Jonas didn't so much as glance at the girl's full bosom when she bent to serve. He had eyes only for the fascinating said Delgado, with her nervous little shifting movements and odd, desperate look.

When the girl was gone, he poured out, put the teapot back on its trivet, then covered her hand with his. "Now, Cordelia," he said in his warmest tone. "I can see something troubles you. Out with it. Confide in your friend Elfred."

Her lips pressed so tightly together that they almost disappeared, but not even that effort could stop their trembling. Her eyes filled with tears; swam with them; overflowed. He took his napkin and, leaning across the table, wiped the tears away.

"Tell me," he said tenderly.

"I will. I must tell somebody or go mad. But you must make one promise, Elfred."

"Of course, mostly." He saw her blush more furiously than ever at this harmless endearment, and squeezed her hand. "Anything."

"You mustn't tell Hart. That disgusting spider of a Chancellor, either, but especially not the Mayor. If I'm right in what I suspect and he found out, he could send her west!" She almost moaned this, as if comprehending it as a real fact for the first time. "He could send us both west!"

Maintaining his sympathetic smile, he said: "Not a word to Mayor Thorin, not a word to Kimba Rimer. Promise."

For a moment he thought that she wouldn't take the plunge ... or perhaps couldn't.

Then, in a low, gaspy voice that sounded like ripping cloth, she said a single word.

"Dearborn."

He felt his heart take a bump as the name that had been so much in his mind now passed her lips, and although he continued to smile, he could not forbear a single

hard squeeze of her fingers that made her wince.

"I'm sorry," he said. "It's just that you startled me a little. Dearborn ... a well-spoken enough lad, but I wonder if he's entirely trustworthy."

"I fear he's been with my Susan." Now it was her turn to squeeze, but Jonas didn't mind. He hardly felt it, in fact. He continued to smile, hoping he did not look as flabbergasted as he felt. "I fear he's been with her ... as a man is with a woman. Oh, how horrible this is!"

She wept with a silent bitterness, taking little pecking peeks around as she did to make sure they were not being observed. Jonas had seen coyotes and wild dogs look around from their stinking dinners in just that fashion. He let her get as much of it out of her system as he could—he wanted her calm; incoherencies wouldn't help him—and when he saw her tears slackening, he held out a cup of tea. "Drink this."

"Yes. Thank you." The tea was still hot enough to steam, but she drank it down greedily. Her old throat must be lined with slate, Jonas thought. She set the cup down, and while he poured out fresh, she used her frilly handkerchief to scrub the tears almost viciously from her face.

"I don't like him," she said. "Don't like him, don't trust him, none of those three with their fancy In-World bows and insolent eyes and strange ways of talking, but him in particular. Yet if anything's gone on between the two of em (and I'm so afraid it has), it comes back to her, doesn't it? It's the woman, after all, who must refuse the bestial impulses."

He leaned over the table, looking at her with warm sympathy. "Tell me everything, Cordelia."

She did.

4

Rhea loved everything about the glass ball, but what she especially loved was the way it unfailingly showed her people at their vilest. Never in its pink reaches did she see one child comforting another after a fall at play, or a tired husband with his head in his wife's lap, or old people supping peacefully together at the end of the day; these things held no more interest for the glass, it seemed, than they did for her.

Instead she had seen acts of incest, mothers beating children, husbands beating wives. She had seen a gang of boys out west of town (it would have amused Rhea to know these swaggering eight-year-olds called themselves the Big Coffin Hunters) go about enticing stray dogs with a bone and then cutting off their tails for a lark. She had seen robberies, and at least one murder: a wandering man who had stabbed his companion with a pitchfork after some sort of trivial argument. That had been on the first drizzly night. The body still lay mouldering in a ditch beside the Great Road West, covered with a layer of straw and weeds. It might be discovered before the autumn storms came to drown another year; it might not. She also glimpsed Cordelia Delgado and that hard gun, Jonas, sitting in Green Heart at one of the outside tables and talking about ... well, of course she didn't know, did she? But she could see the look in the spinster bitch's eyes. Infatuated with him, she was, all pink in the face. Gone all hot and sweet over a backshooter

and failed gun?slinger. It was com?ical, aye, and Rhea thought she would keep an eye on them, from time to time. Wery en?ter?tain?ing, it would like?ly be. Af?ter show?ing her Cordelia and Jonas, the glass veiled it?self once more. Rhea put it back in the box with the eye on the lock. See?ing Cordelia in the glass had re?mind?ed the old wom?an that she had un?fin?ished busi?ness re?gard?ing Cordelia's slut?tish niece. That Rhea still hadn't done that busi?ness was iron?ic but un?der?stand?able—as soon as she had seen how to fix the young sai's wag?on, Rhea's mind and emo?tions had set?tled again, the im?ages in the ball had reap?peared, and in her fas?ci?na?tion with them Rhea had tem?porar?ily for?got?ten that Su?san Del?ga?do was alive. Now, how ev?er, she re?mem?bered her plan. Set the cat among the pi?geons. And speak ing of cats—

“Musty! Yoo-?hoo, Musty, where are ye?”

The cat came oil?ing out of the wood?pile, eyes glow?ing in the dirty dim?ness of the hut (when the weath?er turned fine again, Rhea had pulled her shut?ters to), forked tail wav?ing. He jumped in?to her lap.

“I've an er?rand for ye,” she said, bend?ing over to lick the cat. The en tranc?ing taste of Musty's fur filled her mouth and throat.

Musty purred and arched his back against her lips. For a six-?legged mu?tie cat, life was good.

5

Jonas got rid of Cordelia as soon as he could—al?though not as soon as he would have liked, be?cause he had to keep the scrawny bint sweet?ened up. She might come in handy an?oth?er time. In the end he had kissed her on the com?er of her mouth (which caused her to turn so vi?olent?ly red he feared she might have a brain-storm) and told her that he would check in?to the mat?ter which so con?cerned her.

“But dis?creet?ly!” she said, alarmed.

Yes, he said, walk?ing her home, he would be dis?creet; dis?cre?tion was his mid?dle name. He knew Cordelia wouldn't—couldn't—be eased un?til she knew for sure, but he guessed it would turn out to be noth?ing but va por. Teenagers loved to dra?ma?tize, didn't they? And if the young lass saw that her aunt was afraid of some?thing, she might well feed aun?tie's fears in?stead of al?lay?ing them.

Cordelia had stopped by the white pick?et fence that di?vid?ed her gar?den-?plot from the road, an ex?pres?sion of sub?lime re?lief com?ing over her face. Jonas thought she looked like a mule hav?ing its back scratched with a stiff brush.

“Why, I nev?er thought of that... yet it's like?ly, isn't it?”

“Like?ly enough,” Jonas had said, “but I'll still check in?to it most care ful?ly. Bet?ter safe than sor?ry.” He kissed the com?er of her mouth again. “And not a word to the fel?lows at Seafront. Not a hint.”

“Thank'ee, El?dred! Oh, thank'ee!” And she had hugged him be?fore hur?ry?ing in, her tiny breasts press?ing like stones against the front of his shirt. “May?hap I'll sleep tonight, af?ter all!”

She might, but Jonas won?dered if he would.

He walked to?ward Hock?ey's sta?ble, where he kept his horse, with his head down and his hands locked be?hind his back. A gag?gle of boys came rac?ing up the oth?er side of the street; two of them were wav?ing sev?ered dog's tails with blood clot?ted

at the ends.

“Cof?fin Hunters! We’re Big Cof?fin Hunters just like you!” one called im?pu?dent?ly across to him.

Jonas drew his gun and point?ed it at them—it was done in a flash, and for a mo?ment the ter?ri?fied boys saw him as he re?al?ly was: with his eyes blaz?ing and his lips peeled back from his teeth, Jonas looked like a white-?haired wolf in man’s clothes.

“Get on, you lit?tle bas?tards!” he snarled. “Get on be?fore I blow you loose of your shoes and give your fa?thers cause to cel?ebrate!”

For a mo?ment they were frozen, and then they fled in a howl?ing pack. One had left his tro?phy be?hind; the dog’s tail lay on the board side?walk like a gris?ly fan. Jonas gri?maced at the sight of it, bol?stered his gun, locked his hands be?hind him again, and walked on, look?ing like a par?son med?itat?ing on the na?ture of the gods. And what in gods’ name was he do?ing, pulling iron on a bunch of young hel?lions like that?

Be?ing up?set, he thought. Be?ing wor?ried.

He was wor?ried, all right. The ti?tless old bid?dy’s sus?pi?cions had up?set him great?ly. Not on Thorin’s ac?count—as far as Jonas was con?cerned, Dear?born could fuck the girl in the town square at high noon of Reap?ing Fair Day—but be?cause it sug?gest?ed that Dear?born might have fooled him about oth?er things.

Crept up be?hind you once, he did, and you swore it ‘d nev?er hap?pen again. But if he’s been did?dling that girl, it has hap?pened again. Hasn’t it?

Aye, as they said in these parts. If the boy had had the im?per?ti?nence to be?gin an af?fair with the May?or’s gilly-?in-?wait?ing, and the in?cred?ible sly-?ness to get away with it, what did that do to Jonas’s pic?ture of three In-?World brats who could bare?ly find their own be?hinds with both hands and a can?dle?

We un?der?es?ti?mat?ed em once and they made us look like mon?keys, Clay had said. I don’t want it to hap?pen again.

Had it hap?pened again? How much, re?al?ly, did Dear?born and his friends know?

How much had they found out? And who had they told? If Dear?born had been able to get away with prong?ing the May?or’s cho?sen ... to put some?thing that large over on El?dred Jonas ... on ev?ery?one ...

“Good day, sai Jonas,” Bri?an Hookey said. He was grin?ning wide?ly, all but kow?tow?ing be?fore Jonas with his som?brero crushed against his broad black?smith’s chest. “Would ye care for fresh graf, sai? I’ve just got?ten the new press?ing, and—”

“All I want is my horse,” Jonas said curt?ly. “Bring it quick and stop your quack?ing.”

“Aye, so I will, hap?py to oblige, thankee-?sai.” He hur?ried off on the er?rand, tak?ing one ner?vous, grin?ning look back over his shoul?der to make sure he wasn’t go?ing to be shot out of hand.

Ten min?utes lat?er Jonas was head?ed west on the Great Road. He felt a ridicu?lous but nev?er?the?less strong de?sire to sim?ply kick his horse in?to a gal?lop and leave all this fool?ish?ness be?hind him: Thorin the gray?ing goat-?boy, Roland and Su?san with their no-?doubt mawk?ish teenage love, Roy and Clay with their fast hands and slow wits. Rimer with his am?bi?tions, Cordelia Del?ga?do with her ghastr?ly vi?sions of the

two of them in some bosky dell, him like?ly recit?ing po?et?ry while she wove a gar?land of flow?ers for his brow.

He had rid?den away from things be?fore, when in?tu?ition whis?pered; plen?ty of things. But there would be no rid?ing away this time. He had vowed vengeance on the brats, and while he had bro?ken a bushel of promis?es made to oth?ers, he'd nev?er bro?ken one made to him?self.

And there was John Far?son to con?sid?er. Jonas had nev?er spo?ken to the Good Man him?self (and nev?er want?ed to; Far?son was re?put?ed to be whim sical?ly, dan?ger?ous?ly in?sane), but he had had deal?ings with George Lati?go, who would prob?ably be lead?ing the troop of Far?son's men that would ar rive any day now. It was Lati?go who had hired the Big Cof?fin Hunters in the first place, pay?ing a huge cash ad?vance (which Jonas hadn't yet shared with Reynolds and De?pape) and promis?ing an even larg?er piece of war-?spoil if the Af?fil?ia?tion's ma?jor forces were wiped out in or around the Shaved Moun?tains.

Lati?go was a good-?sized bug, all right, but noth?ing to the size of the bug trundling along be?hind him. And be?sides, no large re?ward was ev?er achieved with?out risk. If they de?liv?ered the hors?es, ox?en, wag?ons of fresh veg?eta?bles, the tack, the oil, the glass—most of all the wiz?ard's glass—all would be well. If they failed, it was very like?ly that their heads would end up be?ing whacked about by Far?son and his aides in their night?ly po?lo games. It could hap?pen, and Jonas knew it. No doubt some?day it would hap?pen. But when his head fi?nal?ly part?ed com?pa?ny from his shoul?ders, the di?vorce wouldn't be caused by any such smarms as Dear?born and his friends, no mat?ter whose blood?line they had de?scend?ed from.

But if he's been hav?ing an af?fair with Thorin 's au?tumn treat . . . if he's been able to keep such a se?cret as that, what oth?ers has he been keep?ing? Per?haps he is play?ing Cas?tles with you.

If so, he wouldn't play for long. The first time young Mr. Dear?born poked his nose around his Hillock, Jonas would be there to shoot it off for him.

The ques?tion for the present was where to go first. Out to the Bar K, to take a long over?due look at the boys' liv?ing quar?ters? He could; they would be count?ing Barony hors?es on the Drop, all three of them. But it wasn't over hors?es that he might lose his head, was it? No, the hors?es were just a small added at?trac?tion, as far as the Good Man was con?cerned.

Jonas rode for Cit?go in?stead.

6

First he checked the tankers. They were just as had been and should be—lined up in a neat row with their new wheels ready to roll when the time came, and hid?den be?hind their new cam?ou?flage. Some of the screen?ing pine branch?es were turn?ing yel?low at the tips, but the re?cent spell of rain had kept most ad?mirably fresh. There had been no tam?per?ing that Jonas could see.

Next he climbed the hill, walk?ing be?side the pipeline and paus?ing more and more fre?quent?ly to rest; by the time he reached the rot?ting gate be?tween the slope and the oil?patch, his bad leg was pain?ing him severe?ly. He stud?ied the gate, frown?ing over the smudges he saw on the top rung. They might mean noth?ing, but Jonas thought some?one might have climbed over the gate rather than risk open?ing it and

hav'ing it fall off its hinges.

He spent the next hour strolling around the der'ricks, pay'ing espe cial'ly close at'ten'tion to those that still worked, look'ing for sign. He found plen'ty of tracks, but it was im'pos'sible (es'pe'cial'ly af'ter a week of wet weath'er) to read them with any de'gree of ac'cu'ra'cy. The In-'World boys might have been out here; that ug'ly lit'tle band of brats from town might have been out here; Arthur Eld and the whole com'pa'ny of his knights might have been out here. The am'bi'gu'ity put Jonas in a foul tem'per, as am'bi'gu'ity (oth'er than on a Cas'tles board) al'ways did.

He start'ed back the way he'd come, mean'ing to de'scend the slope to his horse and ride back to town. His leg was aching like fury, and he want'ed a stiff drink to qui'et it down. The bunkhouse at the Bar K could wait an'oth'er day.

He got halfway to the gate, saw the weedy spur track ty'ing Cit'go to the Great Road, and sighed. There would be noth'ing on that lit'tle strip of road to see, but now that he'd come all the way out here, he sup'posed he should fin'ish the job.

Bug'ger fin'ish'ing the job, I want a damned drink.

But Roland wasn't the on'ly one who some'times found his wish'es over'ruled by train'ing. Jonas sighed, rubbed at his leg, then walked back to the weedy twin ruts. Where, it seemed, there was some'thing to find af'ter all.

It lay in the grassy ditch less than a dozen paces from the place where the old road joined the Great Road. At first he saw on'ly a smooth white shape in the weeds and thought it was a stone. Then he saw a black round-'ness that could on'ly be an eye'hole. Not a stone, then; a skull.

Grunt'ing, Jonas knelt and fished it out while the few liv'ing der'ricks con'tin'ued to squeal and thump be'hind him. A rook's skull. He had seen it be'fore. Hell, he sus'pect'ed most of the town had. It be'longed to the showoff, Arthur Heath ... who, like all showoffs, need'ed his lit'tle props.

"He called it the look'out," Jonas mur'mured. "Put it on the horn of his sad'dle some'times, didn't he? And some'times wore it around his neck like a pen'dant." Yes. The young'ster had been wear'ing it so that night in the Trav'ellers' Rest, when—

Jonas turned the bird's skull. Some'thing rat'tled in'side like a last lone'ly thought. Jonas tilt'ed it, shook it over his open palm, and a frag'ment of gold chain dropped out. That was how the boy had been wear'ing it. At some point the chain had bro'ken, the skull had fall'en in the ditch, and sai Heath had nev'er trou'bled to go look'ing for it. The thought that some'one might find it had prob'ably nev'er crossed his mind. Boys were care'less. It was a won'der any ev'er grew up to be men.

Jonas's face re'mained calm as he knelt there ex'am'in'ing the bird's skull, but be'hind the un'lined brow he was as fu'ri'ous as he had ev'er been in his life. They had been out here, all right—it was an'oth'er thing he would have scoffed at just yes'ter'day. He had to as'sume they had seen the tankers, cam'ou'flage or no cam'ou'flage, and if not for the chance of find'ing this skull, he nev'er would have known for sure, one way or the oth'er.

"When I fin'ish with em, their eye'sock'ets'll be as emp'ty as yours. Sir Rook. I'll gouge em clean my'self."

He start'ed to throw the skull away, then changed his mind. It might come in

handy. Carrying it in one hand, he started back to where he'd left his horse.

7

Coral Thorin walked down High Street toward the Travellers' Rest, her head thumping rustily and her heart sour in her breast. She had been up only an hour, but her hangover was so miserable it felt like a day already. She was drinking too much of late and she knew it—almost every night now—but she was very careful not to take more than one or two (and always light ones) where folks could see.

So far, she thought no one suspected. And as long as no one suspected, she supposed she would keep on. How else to bear her idiotic brother? This idiotic town? And, of course, the knowledge that all of the ranchers in the Horsemen's Association and at least half of the large landowners were traitors? "Fuck the Affiliation," she whispered. "Better a bird in the hand."

But did she really have a bird in the hand? Did any of them? Would Larson keep his promises—promises made by a man named Lingo and passed on by their own inimicable Kimbarrimer? Coral had her doubts; despots had such a convenient way of forgetting their promises, and birds in the hand such an irritating way of pecking your fingers, shitting in your palm, and then flying away. Not that it mattered now; she had made her bed. Besides, folks would always want to drink and gamble and rut, regardless of who they bowed their knees to or in whose name their taxes were collected.

Still, when the voice of old demon conscience whispered, a few drinks helped to still its lips.

She paused outside Craven's Undertaking Parlor, looking upstreet at the laughing boys on their ladders, hanging paper lanterns from high poles and building eaves. These gay lamps would be lit on the night of the Reap Fair, filling Hamby's main street with a hundred shades of soft, conflicting light.

For a moment Coral remembered the child she had been, looking at the colored paper lanterns with wonder, listening to the shouts and the rattle of fireworks, listening to the dance-music coming from Green Heart as her father held her hand . . . and, on his other side, her big brother Hart's hand. In this memory, Hart was proudly wearing his first pair of long trousers.

Nostalgia swept her, sweet at first, then bitter. The child had grown into a sallow woman who owned a saloon and whorehouse (not to mention a great deal of land along the Drop), a woman whose only sexual partner of late was her brother's Chancellor, a woman whose chief goal upon arising these days was getting to the hair of the dog that bit her as soon as possible. How, exactly, had things turned out so? This woman whose eyes she used was the last woman the child she had been would have expected to become.

"Where did I go wrong?" she asked herself, and laughed. "Oh dear Man Jesus, where did this straying sinner-child go wrong? Can you say hallelujah." She sounded so much like the wandering preacher-woman that had come through town the year before—Pittston, her name had been, Sylvia Pittston—that she laughed again, this time almost naturally. She walked on toward the Rest with a better will. Sheemie was outside, tending to the remains of his silkflowers. He waved to her and called a greeting. She waved back and called something in return. A good

enough lad, Sheemie, and al?though she could have found an oth?er eas?ily enough, she sup?posed she was glad De?pape hadn't killed him.

The bar was al?most emp?ty but bril?liant?ly lit, all the gas-?jets flar?ing. It was clean, as well. Sheemie would have emp?tied the spit?toons, but Coral guessed it was the plump wom?an be?hind the bar who had done all the rest. The make?up couldn't hide the sal?low?ness of that wom?an's cheeks, the hol?low-?ness of her eyes, or the way her neck had start?ed to go all crepey (see?ing that sort of lizardy skin on a wom?an's neck al?ways made Coral shiv?er in?side).

It was Pet?tie the Trot?ter tend?ing bar be?neath The Romp's stem glass gaze, and if al?lowed to do so, she would con?tin?ue un?til Stan?ley ap?peared and ban?ished her. Pet?tie had said noth?ing out loud to Coral—she knew bet?ter—but had made her wants clear enough just the same. Her whor?ing days were al?most at an end. She des?per?ate?ly de?sired to go to work tend?ing bar. There was prece?dent for it, Coral knew—a fe?male bar?tender at For?est Trees in Pass o' the Riv?er, and there had been an?oth?er at Glen?cove, up the coast in Tavares, un?til she had died of the pox. What Pet?tie re?fused to see was that Stan?ley Ruiz was younger by fif?teen years and in far bet?ter health. He would be pour?ing drinks un?der The Romp long af?ter Pet?tie was rot?ting (in?stead of Trot?ting) in a pau?per's grave.

“Good even, sai Thorin,” Pet?tie said. And be?fore Coral could so much as open her mouth, the whore had put a shot glass on the bar and filled it full of whiskey.

Coral looked at it with dis?may. Did they all know, then?

“I don't want that,” she snapped. “Why in Eld's name would I? Sun isn't even down! Pour it back in?to the bot?tle, for yer fa?ther's sake, and then get the hell out of here. Who d'ye think yer serv?ing at five o' the clock, any?way? Ghosts?”

Pet?tie's face fell a foot; the heavy coat oth?er make?up ac?tu?al?ly seemed to crack apart. She took the fun?nel from un?der the bar, stuck it in the neck of the bot?tle, and poured the shot of whiskey back in. Some went on?to the bar in spite of the fun?nel; her plump hands (now ring?less; her rings had been trad?ed for food at the mer?can?tile across the street long since) were shak?ing. “I'm sor?ry, sai. So I am. I was on?ly—”

“I don't care what ye was on?ly,” Coral said, then turned a blood?shot eye on Sheb, who had been sit?ting on his pi?ano-?bench and leaf?ing through old sheet-?mu?sic. Now he was star?ing to?ward the bar with his mouth hung open. “And what are you look?ing at, ye frog?”

“Noth?ing, sai Thorin. I—”

“Then go look at it some?where else. Take this pig with'ee. Give her a bounce, why don't ye? It'll be good for her skin. It might even be good for yer own.”

“I-”

“Get out! Are ye deaf? Both of ye!”

Pet?tie and Sheb went away to?ward the kitchen in?stead of the cribs up stairs, but it was all the same to Coral. They could go to hell as far as she was con?cerned.

Any?where, as long as they were out of her aching face.

She went be?hind the bar and looked around. Two men play?ing cards over in the far com?er. That hard?case Reynolds was watch?ing them and sip?ping a beer. There was an?oth?er man at the far end of the bar, but he was star?ing off in?to space, lost in his

own world. No one was pay?ing any espe cial at?ten?tion to sai Coral Thorin, and what did it mat?ter if they were? If Pet?tie knew, they all knew.

She ran her fin?ger through the pud?dle of whiskey on the bar, sucked it, ran it through again, sucked it again. She grasped the bot?tle, but be?fore she could pour, a spi?dery mon?stros?ity with gray-?green eyes leaped, hiss ing, on?to the bar. Coral shrieked and stepped back, drop?ping the whiskey bot?tle be?tween her feet . . . where, for a won?der, it didn't break. For a mo ment she thought her head would break, in?stead—that her swelling, throb?bing brain would sim?ply split her skull like a rot?ten eggshell. There was a crash as the card-?play?ers over?turned their ta?ble get?ting up. Rey nolds had drawn his gun.

“Nay,” she said in a qua?ver?ing voice she could hard?ly rec?og?nize. Her eye?balls were puls?ing and her heart was rac?ing. Peo?ple could die of fright, she re?al?ized that now. “Nay, gen?tle?men, all's well.”

The six-?legged freak stand?ing on the bar opened its mouth, bared its nee?dle fangs, and hissed again.

Coral bent down (and as her head passed be?low the lev?el of her waist, she was once more sure it was go?ing to ex?plode), picked up the bot?tle, saw that it was still a quar?ter full, and drank di?rect?ly from the neck, no longer car?ing who saw her do it or what they thought.

As if hear?ing her thought, Musty hissed again. He was wear?ing a red col?lar this af?ter?noon—on him it looked bale?ful rather than jaun?ty. Be neath it was tucked a white scrap of pa?per.

“Want me to shoot it?” a voice drawled. “I will if you like. One slug and won't be noth?ing left but claws.” It was Jonas, stand?ing just in?side the batwings, and al?though he looked not a whole lot bet?ter than she felt, Coral had no doubt he could do it.

“Nay. The old bitch'll turn us all in?to lo?custs, or some?thing like, if ye kill her fa?mil?iar.”

“What bitch?” Jonas asked, cross?ing the room.

“Rhea Du?ba?ti?vo. Rhea of the Coos, she's called.”

“Ah! Not the bitch but the witch.”

“She's both.”

Jonas stroked the cat's back. It al?lowed it?self to be pet?ted, even arch ing against his hand, but he on?ly gave it the sin?gle ca?ress. Its fur had an un?pleas?ant damp feel.

“Would you con?sid?er shar?ing that?” he asked, nod?ding to?ward the bot?tle. “It's ear?ly, but my leg hurts like a dev?il sick of sin.”

“Your leg, my head, ear?ly or late. On the house.”

Jonas raised his white eye?brows.

“Count yer bless?ings and have at it, cul?ly.”

She reached to?ward Musty. He hissed again, but al?lowed her to draw the note out from un?der his col?lar. She opened it and read the five words that were print?ed there:

“Might I see?” Jonas asked. With the first drink down and warm?ing his bel?ly, the world looked bet?ter.

“Why not?” She hand?ed him the note. Jonas looked, then hand?ed it back. He had

al?most for?got?ten Rhea, and that wouldn't have done at all. Ah, but it was hard to re?mem?ber ev?ery?thing, wasn't it? Just late?ly Jonas felt less like a hired gun than a cook try?ing to make all nine cours?es of a state din?ner come out at the same time. Luck?ily, the old hag had re?mind?ed him of her pres?ence her?self. Gods bless her thirst. And his own, since it had land?ed him here at the right time.

"Sheemie!" Coral bawled. She could al?so feel the whiskey work?ing; she felt al?most hu?man again. She even won?dered if El?dred Jonas might be in?ter?est?ed in a dirty evening with the May?or's sis?ter ... who knew what might speed the hours? Sheemie came in through the batwings, hands grimy, pink som?br?era bounc?ing on his back at the end of its cuer?da. "Aye, Coral Thorin! Here I be!"

She looked past him, cal?cu?lat?ing the sky. Not tonight, not even for Rhea; she wouldn't send Sheemie up there af?ter dark, and that was the end of it.

"Noth?ing," she said in a voice that was gen?tler than usu?al. "Go back to yer flow?ers, and see that ye cov?er them well. It bids frosty."

She turned over Rhea's note and scrawled a sin?gle word on it:

to?mor?row

This she fold?ed and hand?ed to Jonas. "Stick it un?der that stink's col?lar for me, will ye? I don't want to touch him."

Jonas did as he was asked. The cat fa?vored them with a fi?nal wild green look, then leaped from the bar and van?ished be?neath the batwings.

"Time is short," Coral said. She hadn't the slight?est idea what she meant, but Jonas nod?ded in what ap?peared to be per?fect un?der?stand?ing. "Would you care to go up?stairs with a clos?et drunk? I'm not much in the looks de?part?ment, but I can still spread em all the way to the edge of the bed, and I don't just lie there."

He con?sid?ered, then nod?ded. His eyes were gleam?ing. This one was as thin as Cordelia Del?ga?do ... but what a dif?fer?ence, eh? What a dif?fer ence! "All right."

"I've been known to say some nasty things—fair warn?ing."

"Dear la?dy, I shall be all ears."

She smiled. Her headache was gone. "Aye. I'll just bet ye will."

"Give me a minute. Don't move a step." He walked across to where Reynolds sat.

"Drag up a chair, El?dred."

"I think not. There's a la?dy wait?ing."

Reynolds's gaze flicked briefly to?ward the bar. "You're jok?ing."

"I nev?er joke about wom?en, Clay. Now mark me."

Reynolds sat for?ward, eyes in?tent. Jonas was grate?ful this wasn't De?pape. Roy would do what you asked, and usu?al?ly well enough, but on?ly af?ter you'd ex?plained it to him half a dozen times.

"Go to Lengyll," he said. "Tell him we want to put about a dozen men—no less than ten—out at yon oil?patch. Good men who can get their heads down and keep them down and not snap the trap too soon on an am?bush, if am?bush?ing's re?quired. Tell him Bri?an Hock?ey's to be in charge. He's got a lev?el head, which is more than can be said for most of these poor things."

Reynolds's eyes were hot and hap?py. "You ex?pect the brats?"

"They've been out there once, may?hap they'll be out again. If so, they're to be cross?fired and knocked down dead. At once and with no warn?ing. You

un?der?stand?”

“Yar! And the tale af?ter?”

“Why, that the oil and the tankers must have been their busi?ness,” Jonas said with a crooked smile. “To be tak?en to Far?son, at their com mand and by con?fed?er?ates un?known. We’ll be car?ried through the streets on the town’s shoul?ders, come Reap. Hailed as the men who root?ed out the traitors. Where’s Roy?”

“Gone back to Hang?ing Rock. I saw him at noon. He says they’re com?ing, El?dred; says when the wind swings in?to the east, he can hear ap proach?ing horse.”

“Maybe he on?ly hears what he wants to hear.” But he sus?pect?ed De?pape was right. Jonas’s mood, at rock bot?tom when he stepped in?to the Trav?ellers’ Rest, was now very much on the re?bound.

“We’ll start mov?ing the tankers soon, whether the brats come or not. At night, and two by two, like the an?imals go?ing on board Old Pa’s Ark.” He laughed at this.

“But we’ll leave some, eh? Like cheese in a trap.”

“Sup?pose the mice don’t come?”

Jonas shrugged. “If not one way, an?oth?er. I in?tend to press them a lit tle more to?mor?row. I want them an?gry, and I want them con?fused. Now go on about your busi?ness. I have yon la?dy wait?ing.”

“Bet?ter you than me, El?dred.”

Jonas nod?ded. He guessed that half an hour from now, he would have for?got?ten all about his aching leg. “That’s right,” he said. “You she’d eat like fudge.”

He walked back to the bar, where Coral stood with her arms fold?ed. Now she un?fold?ed them and took his hands. The right she put on her left breast. The nip?ple was hard and erect un?der his fin?gers. The fore?fin?ger of his left hand she put in her mouth, and bit down light?ly.

“Shall we bring the bot?tle?” Jonas asked.

“Why not?” said Coral Thorin.

8

If she’d gone to sleep as drunk as had been her habit over the last few months, the creak of the bed?springs wouldn’t have awak?ened her—a bomb-?blast wouldn’t have awak?ened her. But al?though they’d brought the bot tle, it still stood on the night-ta?ble of the bed?room she main?tained at the Rest (it was as big as any three of the whores’ cribs put to?geth?er), the lev?el of the whiskey un?changed. She felt sore all over her body, but her head was clear; sex was good for that much, any?way.

Jonas was at the win?dow, look?ing out at the first gray traces of day light and pulling his pants up. His bare back was cov?ered with criss crossed scars. She thought to ask him who had ad?min?is?tered such a sav?age flog?ging and how he’d sur?vived it, then de?cid?ed she’d do bet?ter to keep qui?et.

“Where are ye off to?” she asked.

“I be?lieve I’m go?ing to start by find?ing some paint—any shade will do—and a street-?mutt still in pos?ses?sion of its tail. Af?ter that, sai, I don’t think you want to know.”

“Very well.” She lay down and pulled the cov?ers up to her chin. She felt she could sleep for a week.

Jonas yanked on his boots and went to the door, buck?ling his gun?belt. He paused

with his hand on the knob. She looked at him, grayish eyes already half-filled with sleep again.

"I've never had better," Jonas said.

Coral smiled. "No, surely," she said. "Nor I."

CHAPTER IV

Roland AND Cuthbert

1

Roland, Cuthbert, and Alain came out onto the porch of the Bar K bunkhouse almost two hours after Jonas had left Coral's room at the Travelers' Rest. By then the sun was well up over the horizon. They weren't late risers by nature, but as Cuthbert put it, "We have a certain In-World image to maintain. Not laziness but lounginess."

Roland stretched, arms spread toward the sky in a wide Y, then bent and grasped the toes of his boots. This caused his back to crackle.

"I hate that noise," Alain said. He sounded morose and sleepy. In fact, he had been troubled by odd dreams and premonitions all night—things which, of the three of them, only he was prey to. Because of the touch, perhaps—with him it had always been strong.

"That's why he does it," Cuthbert said, then clapped Alain on the shoulder. "Cheer up, old boy. You're too handsome to be downhearted."

Roland straightened, and they walked across the dusty yard toward the stables.

Halfway there, he came to a stop so sudden that Alain almost ran into his back.

Roland was looking east. "Oh," he said in a funny, bemused voice. He even smiled a little.

"Oh?" Cuthbert echoed. "Oh what, great leader? Oh joy, I shall see the perfumed lady anon, or oh rats, I must work with my smelly male companions all the livelong day?"

Alain looked down at his boots, new and uncomfortable when they had left Gilead, now sprung, trailworn, a little down at the heels, and as comfortable as workboots ever got. Looking at them was better than looking at his friends, for the time being. There was always an edge to Cuthbert's teasing these days; the old sense of fun had been replaced by something that was mean and unpleasant. Alain kept expecting Roland to flash up at one of Cuthbert's jibes, like steel that has been struck by sharp flint, and knock Bert sprawling. In a way, Alain almost wished for it. It might clear the air.

But not the air of this morning.

"Just oh," Roland said mildly, and walked on.

"Cry your pardon, for I know you'll not want to hear it, but I'd speak a further word about the pigeons," Cuthbert said as they saddled their mounts. "I still believe that a mes sage—"

"I'll make you a promise," Roland said, smiling.

Cuthbert looked at him with some mistrust. "Aye?"

"If you still want to send by flight tomorrow morning, we'll do so. The one you choose shall be sent west to Gilead with a mes sage of your devising bandaged to its leg. What do you say, Arthur Heath? Is it fair?"

Cuthbert looked at him for a moment with a suspicion that hurt Alain's heart. Then he also smiled. "Fair," he said. "Thank you."

And then Roland said something which struck Alain as odd and made that pre-scient part of him quiver with disquiet. "Don't thank me yet."

2

"I don't want to go up there, sai Thorin," Sheemie said. An unusual expression had creased his normally smooth face—a troubled and fearful frown. "She's a scary lady. Scary as a beary, she is. Got a wart on her nose, right here." He thumbed the tip of his own nose, which was small and smooth and well molded. Coral, who might have bitten his head off for such hesitation on ly yesterday, was unusually patient today. "So true," she said. "But Sheemie, she asked for ye special, and she tips. Ye know she does, and well."

"Won't help if she turns me into a beetle," Sheemie said morose ly. "Beetles can't spend coppers."

Nevertheless, he let himself be led to where Caprichoso, the inn's pack-mule, was tied. Barkie had loaded two small tuns over the mule's back. One, filled with sand, was just there for balance. The other held a fresh pressing of the graf Rhea had a taste for.

"Fair-day's coming," Coral said brightly. "Why, it's not three weeks now."

"Aye." Sheemie looked happier at this. He loved Fair-days passionately—the lights, the firecrackers, the dancing, the games, the laughter. When Fair-day came, everyone was happy and no one spoke mean.

"A young man with copper in his pocket is sure to have a good time at the Fair," Coral said.

"That's true, sai Thorin." Sheemie looked like someone who has just discovered one of life's great principles. "Aye, truey-true, so it is."

Coral put Caprichoso's rope halter into Sheemie's palm and closed the fingers over it. "Have a nice trip, lad. Be polite to the old crow, bow yer best bow . . . and make sure ye're back down the hill before dark."

"Long before, aye," Sheemie said, shivering at the very thought of still being up in the Coos after nightfall. "Long before, sure as loaves 'n fish'es."

"Good lad." Coral watched him off, his pink sombrero now clapped on his head, leading the grumpy old pack-mule by its rope. And, as he disappeared over the brow of the first mild hill, she said it again: "Good lad."

3

Jonas waited on the flank of a ridge, bel ly-down in the tall grass, until the brats were an hour gone from the Bar K. He then rode to the ridgetop and picked them out, three dots four miles away on the brown slope. Off to do their daily duty. No sign they suspected anything. They were smarter than he had at first given them credit for . . . but nowhere near as smart as they thought they were.

He rode to within a quarter mile of the Bar K—except for the bunkhouse and stable, a burned-out hulk in the bright sunlight of this early autumn day—and tethered his horse in a copse of cottonwoods that grew around the ranch house spring. Here the boys had left some washing to dry. Jonas stripped the pants and shirts off the low branches upon which they had been hung, made a pile of them,

pissed on them, and then went back to his horse.

The animal stamped the ground emphatically when Jonas pulled the dog's tail from one of his saddlebags, as if saying he was glad to be rid of it. Jonas would be glad to be rid of it, too. It had begun giving off an unpleasant aroma. From the other saddlebag he took a small glass jar of red paint, and a brush. These he had obtained from Brian Hockley's eldest son, who was missing the lively stable today. Sai Hookey himself would be out to Citgo by now, no doubt.

Jonas walked to the bunkhouse with no effort at concealment . . . not that there was much in the way of concealment to be had out here. And no one to hide from, anyway, now that the boys were gone.

One of them had left an actual book—Mercer's Homilies and Meditations—on the seat of a rocking chair on the porch. Books were things of exquisite rarity in Mid-World, especially as one travelled out from the center. This was the first one, except for the few kept in Seafront, that Jonas had seen since coming to Mejis. He opened it. In a firm woman's hand he read: To my dearest son, from his loving MOTHER. Jonas tore it (the page out, opened his jar of paint, and dipped the tips of his last two fingers inside. He blotted out the word MOTHER with the pad of his third finger, then, using the nail of his pinky as a makeshift pen, printed CUNT above MOTHER. He poked this sheet on a rusty nailhead where it was sure to be seen, then tore the book up and stamped on the pieces. Which boy had it belonged to? He hoped it was Dearborn's, but it didn't really matter.

The first thing Jonas noticed when he went inside was the pigeons, cooing in their cages. He had thought they might be using a helio to send (their messages, but pigeons! My! That was ever so much more trig!

"I'll get to you in a few minutes," he said. "Be patient, darlings; peck and shit while you still can."

He looked around with some curiosity, the soft coo of the pigeons soothing in his ears. Lads or lords? Roy had asked the old man in Ritzy. The old man had said maybe both. Neat lads, at the very least, from the way they kept their quarters, Jonas thought. Well trained. Three bunks, all made. Three piles of goods at the foot of each, stacked up just as neat. In each pile he found a picture of a mother—oh, such good fellows they were—and in one he found a picture of both parents. He had hoped for names, possibly documents of some kind (even love letters from the girl, maybe), but there was nothing like that. Lads or lords, they were careful enough. Jonas removed the pictures from their frames and shredded them. The goods he scattered to all points of the compass, destroying as much as he could in the limited time he had. When he found a linen handkerchief in the pocket of a pair of dress pants, he blew his nose on it and then spread it carefully on the toes of the boy's dress boots, so that the green splat would show to good advantage. What could be more aggravating—more unsettling—than to come home after a hard day spent tallying stock and find some stranger's snot on one of your personals?

The pigeons were upset now; they were incapable of scolding like jays or rooks, but they tried to flutter away from him when he opened their cages. It did no good, of course. He caught them one by one and twisted their heads off. That much

ac?com?plished, Jonas popped one bird be?neath the strawtick pil?low of each boy. Be?neath one of these pil?lows he found a small bonus: pa?per strips and a stor?age-pen, un?doubt?ed?ly kept for the com?po?si?tion of mes?sages. He broke the pen and flung it across the room. The strips he put in his own pock?et. Pa?per al?ways came in handy.

With the pi?geons seen to, he could hear bet?ter. He be?gan walk?ing slow?ly back and forth on the board floor, head cocked, lis?ten?ing.

4

When Alain came rid?ing up to him at a gal?lop, Roland ig?nored the boy's strained white face and burn?ing, fright?ened eyes. "I make it thir?ty-?one on my side," he said, "all with the Barony brand, crown and shield. You?"

"We have to go back," Alain said. "Some?thing's wrong. It's the touch. I've nev?er felt it so clear."

"Your count?" Roland asked again. There were times, such as now, when he found Alain's abil?ity to use the touch more an?noy?ing than help?ful.

"Forty. Or forty-?one, I for?get. And what does it mat?ter? They've moved what they don't want us to count. Roland, didn't you hear me? We have to go back!

Some?thing's wrong! Some?thing's wrong at our place /"

Roland glanced to?ward Bert, rid?ing peace?ably some five hun?dred yards away. Then he looked back at Alain, his eye?brows raised in a silent ques?tion.

"Bert? He's numb to the touch and al?ways has been—you know it. I'm not. You know I'm not! Roland, please! Who?ev?er it is will see the pi geons! Maybe find our guns!" The nor?mal?ly phleg?mat?ic Alain was near?ly cry?ing in his ex?cite?ment and dis?may. "If you won't go back with me, give me leave to go back by my?self! Give me leave, Roland, for your fa?ther's sake!"

"For your fa?ther's sake, I give you none," Roland said. "My count is thir?ty-?one. Yours is forty. Yes, we'll say forty. Forty's a good num?ber— good as any, I wot. Now we'll change sides and count again."

"What's wrong with you?" Alain al?most whis?pered. He was look?ing at Roland as if Roland had gone mad.

"Noth?ing."

"You knew! You knew when we left this morn?ing!"

"Oh, I might have seen some?thing," Roland said. "A re?flec?tion, per?haps, but ... do you trust me, Al? That's what mat?ters, I think. Do you trust me, or do you think I lost my wits when I lost my heart? As he does?" He jerked his head in Cuth?bert's di?rec?tion. Roland was look?ing at Alain with a faint smile on his lips, but his eyes were ruth?less and dis?tant it was Roland's over-?the-?hori?zon look. Alain won?dered if Su?san Del?ga?do had seen that ex?pres?sion yet, and if she had, what she made of it. "I trust you." By now Alain was so con?fused that he didn't know for Mire if that was a lie or the truth.

"Good. Then switch sides with me. My count is thir?ty-?one, mind."

"Thir?ty-?one," Alain agreed. He raised his hands, then dropped them hack to his thighs with a slap so sharp his nor?mal?ly stol?id mount laid his cars back and jiggled a bit un?der him. "Thir?ty-?one."

"I think we may go back ear?ly to?day, if that's any sat?is?fac?tion to you," Roland said,

and rode away. Alain watched him. He'd always wondered what went on in Roland's head, but never more than now.

5

Creak. Creak-?creak.

Here was what he'd been listening for, and just as Jonas was about to give up the hunt. He had expected to find their hidey-?hole a little closer to their beds, but they were right, all right.

He went to one knee and used the blade of his knife to pry up the board which had creaked. Under it were three bundles, each swaddled in dark strips of cotton cloth. These strips were damp to the touch and smelled fragrantly of gun-oil. Jonas took the bundles out and unwrapped each, curious to see what sort of calibers the youngsters had brought. The answer turned out to be serviceable but undistinguished. Two of the bundles contained single five-?shot revolvers of a type then called (for no reason I know) "carvers." The third contained two guns, six-?shooters of higher quality than the carvers. In fact, for one heart-stopping moment, Jonas thought he had found the big revolvers of a gunslinger—true-blue steel barrels, sandalwood grips, bores like mine-shafts. Such guns he could not have left, no matter what the cost to his plans. Seeing the plain grips was thus something of a relief. Disappointment was never a thing you looked for, but it had a wonderful way of clearing the mind.

He rewrapped the guns and put them back, put the board back as well. A gang of never-do-well clots from town might possibly come out here, and might possibly vandalize the unguarded bunkhouse, scattering what they didn't tear up, but find a hiding place such as this? No, my son. Not likely.

Do you really think they'll believe it was hooligans from town that did this? They might; just because he had underestimated them to start with didn't mean he should turn about-face and begin overestimating them now. And he had the luxury of not needing to care. Either way, it would make them angry. Angry enough to rush full-tilt around their Hillock, perhaps. To throw caution to the wind . . . and reap the whirlwind.

Jonas poked the end of the severed dog's tail into one of the pigeon-cages, so it stuck up like a huge, mocking feather. He used the paint to write such charmingly boyish slogans as

and

on the walls. Then he left, standing on the porch for a moment to verify he still had the Bar K to himself. Of course he did. Yet for a blink or two, there at the end, he'd felt uneasy—almost as though he'd been sensed. By some sort of In-World telepathy, maybe.

There is such; you know it. The touch, it's called.

Aye, but that was the tool of gunslingers, artists, and lunatics. Not of boys, be they lords or just lads.

Jonas went back to his horse at a near-trot nevertheless, mounted, and rode toward town. Things were reaching the boil, and there would be a lot to do before De?mon Moon rose full in the sky.

6

Rhea's hut, its stone walls and the cracked gutter of its roof slimed with moss, huddled on the last hill of the Coos. Beyond it was a magnificent view north-west—the Bad Grass, the desert, Hanging Rock, Eye-bolt Canyon—but scenic vistas were the last thing on Sheemie's mind as he led Capriccioso cautiously in to Rhea's yard not long after noon. He'd been hungry for the last hour or so, but now the pangs were gone. He hated this place worse than any other in Barony, even more than Citgo with its big towers always going creaky-creak and clangety-clang.

"Sai?" he called, leading the mule in to the yard. Capi balked as they neared the hut, planting his feet and lowering his neck, but when Sheemie tugged the halter, he came on again. Sheemie was almost sorry.

"Ma'am? Nice old lady that wouldn't hurt a fly? You therey-air? It's good old Sheemie with your graf." He smiled and held out his free hand, palm up, to demonstrate his exquisite harmlessness, but from the hut there was still no response. Sheemie felt his guts first coil, then cramp. For a moment he thought he was going to shit in his pants just like a baby; then he passed wind and felt a little better. In his bowels, at least.

He walked on, liking this less at every step. The yard was rocky and the straggling weeds yellowish, as if the hut's resident had blighted the very earth with her touch. There was a garden, and Sheemie saw that the vegetables still in it—pumpkins and sharp-root, mostly—were mummies. Then he noticed the garden's stuffy-guy. It was also a mummy, a nasty thing with two straw heads instead of one and what appeared to be a stuffed hand in a woman's satin glove poking out of the chest area.

Sai Thorin'll never talk me up here again, he thought. Not for all the pennies in the world.

The hut's door stood open. To Sheemie it looked like a gaping mouth. A sickish dank smell drifted out.

Sheemie stopped about fifteen paces from the house, and when Capi nuzzled his bottom (as if to ask what was keeping them), the boy uttered a brief screech. The sound of it almost set him running, and it was only by exercising all his willpower that he was able to stand his ground. The day was bright, but up here on this hill, the sun seemed meaningless. This wasn't his first trip up here, and Rhea's hill had never been pleasant, but it was somehow worse now. It made him feel the way the sound of the thinny made him feel when he woke and heard it in the middle of the night. As if something awful was sliding toward him—something that was all insane eyes and red, reaching claws.

"S-S-Sai? Is anyone here? Is—"

"Come closer." The voice drifted out of the open door. "Come to where I can see you, idiot boy."

Trying not to moan or cry, Sheemie did as the voice said. He had an idea that he was never going back down the hill again. Capriccioso, perhaps, but not him. Poor old Sheemie was going to end up in the cookpot—hot dinner tonight, soup tomorrow, cold snacks until Year's End. That's what he would be.

He made his reluctant way to Rhea's stoop on rubbery legs—if his knees had been closer together, they would have knocked like castanets. She didn't even sound the

same.

“S-?Sai? I’m afraid. So I a-?a-?am.”

“So ye should be,” the voice said. It drift?ed and drift?ed, slip?ping out in?to the sun?light like a sick puff of smoke. “Nev?er mind, though—just do as I say. Come clos?er, Sheemie, son of Stan?ley.”

Sheemie did so, al?though ter?ror dragged at ev?ery step he took. The mule fol?lowed, head down. Capi had honked like a goose all the way up here—honked cease?less?ly—but now he had fall?en silent.

“So here ye be,” the voice buried in those shad?ows whis?pered. “Here ye be, in?deed.”

She stepped in?to the sun?light falling through the open door, winc?ing for a mo?ment as it daz?zled her eyes. Clapsed in her arms was the emp?ty graf bar?rel. Coiled around her throat like a neck?lace was Er?mot.

Sheemie had seen the snake be?fore, and on pre?vi?ous oc?ca?sions had nev?er failed to won?der what sort of ag?onies he might suf?fer be?fore he died if he hap?pened to be bit?ten by such. To?day he had no such thoughts. Com?pared to Rhea, Er?mot looked nor?mal. The old wom?an’s face had sunken at the cheeks, giv?ing the rest of her head the look of a skull. Brown spots swarmed out of her thin hair and over her bulging brow like an army of in?vad?ing in?sects. Be?low her left eye was an open sore, and her grin showed on?ly a few re?main?ing teeth.

“Don’t like the way I look, do’ee?” she asked. “Makes yer heart cold, don’t it?”

“N-?No,” Sheemie said, and then, be?cause that didn’t sound right: “I mean yes!” But gods, that sound?ed even worse. “You’re beau?ti?ful, sai!” he blurt?ed.

She chuffed near?ly sound?less laugh?ter and thrust the emp?ty tun in?to his arms al?most hard enough to knock him on his ass. The touch of her fin?gers was brief, but long enough to make his flesh crawl.

“Well-?a-?day. They say hand?some is as hand?some does, don’t they?

And that suits me. Aye, right down to the ground. Bring me my graf, id?iot child.”

“Y-?yes, sai! Right away, sai!” He took the emp?ty tun back to the mule, set it down, then fum?bled loose the cordage hold?ing the lit?tle bar?rel of graf. He was very aware of her watch?ing him, and it made him clum?sy, hut fi?nal?ly he got the bar?rel loose. It al?most slid through his grasp, and there was a night?mar?ish mo?ment when he thought it would fall to the stony ground and smash, but he caught his grip again at the last sec?ond. He took it to her, had just a sec?ond to re?al?ize she was no longer wear?ing the snake, then felt it crawl?ing on his boots. Er?mot looked up at him, hiss ing and bar?ing a dou?ble set of fangs in an eerie grin.

“Don’t move too fast, my boy. ‘Twouldn’t be wise—Er?mot’s grumpy to?day. Set the bar?rel just in?side the door, here. It’s too heavy for me. Missed a few meals of late, I have.”

Sheemie bent from the waist (bow yer best bow, Sai Thorin had said, and here he was, do?ing just that), gri?mac?ing, not dar?ing to ease the pres sure on his back by mov?ing his feet be?cause the snake was still on them. When he straight?ened, Rhea was hold?ing out an old and stained en?ve?lope. The flap had been sealed with a blob of red wax. Sheemie dread?ed to think what might have been ren?dered down to make wax such as that.

“Take this and give it to Cordelia Del?ga?do. Do ye know her?”

“A-?Aye,” Sheemie man?aged. “Su?san-?sai’s aun?tie.”

“That’s right.” Sheemie reached ten?ta?tive?ly for the en?ve?lope, but she held it back a mo?ment. “Can’t read, can ye, id?iot boy?”

“Nay. Words ‘n let?ters go right out of my head.”

“Good. Mind ye show this to no one who can, or some night ye’ll find Er?mot wait?ing un?der yer pil?low. I see far, Sheemie, d’ye mark me? I see far”

It was just an en?ve?lope, but it felt heavy and some?how dread?ful in Sheemie’s fin?gers, as if it were made out of hu?man skin in?stead of pa?per. And what sort of let?ter could Rhea be send?ing Cordelia Del?ga?do, any way? Sheemie thought back to the day he’d seen sai Del?ga?do’s face all cov?ered with cob?web?bies, and shiv?ered. The hor?rid crea?ture lurk?ing be fore him in the door?way of her hut could have been the very crea?ture who’d spun those webs.

“Lose it and I’ll know,” Rhea whis?pered. “Show my busi?ness to an oth?er, and I’ll know. Re?mem?ber, son of Stan?ley, I see far.”

“I’ll be care?ful, sai.” It might be bet?ter if he did lose the en?ve?lope, but he wouldn’t. Sheemie was dim in the head, ev?ery?one said so, but not so dim that he didn’t un?der?stand why he had been called up here: not to de liv?er a bar?rel of graf, but to re?ceive this let?ter and pass it on.

“Would ye care to come in for a bit?” she whis?pered, and then point?ed a ringer at his crotch. “If I give ye a lit?tle bit of mush?room to eat—spe?cial to me, it is—I can look like any?one ye fan?cy.”

“Oh, I can’t,” he said, clutch?ing his trousers and smil?ing a huge broad smile that felt like a scream try?ing to get out of his skin. “That pesky thing fell off last week, that did.”

For a mo?ment Rhea on?ly gaw?ped at him, gen?uine?ly sur?prised for one of the few times in her life, and then she once more broke out in chuff?ing bursts of laugh?ter. She held her stom?ach in her waxy hands and rocked back and forth with glee. Er?mot, star?tled, streaked in?to the house on his lengthy green bel?ly. From some?where in its depths, her cat hissed at it.

“Go on,” Rhea said, still laugh?ing. She leaned for?ward and dropped three or four pen?nies in?to his shirt pock?et. “Get out of here, ye great ga?loo?phus! Don’t ye linger, ei?ther, look?ing at flow?ers!”

“No, sai—”

Be?fore he could say more, the door clapped to so hard that dust puffed out of the cracks be?tween the boards.

7

Roland sur?prised Cuth?bert by sug?gest?ing at two o’ the clock that they go back to the Bar K. When Bert asked why, Roland on?ly shrugged and would say noth?ing more. Bert looked at Alain and saw a queer, mus?ing ex?pres?sion on the boy’s face. As they drew clos?er to the bunkhouse, a sense of fore?bod?ing filled Cuth?bert. They topped a rise, and looked down at the Bar K. The bunk-?house door stood open.

“Roland!” Alain cried. He was point?ing to the cot?ton?wood grove where the ranch’s spring was. Their clothes, neat?ly hung to dry when they left, were now scat?tered hell-?to-?break?fast.

Cuthbert dismounted and ran to them. Picked up a shirt, sniffed it, flung it away.

"Pissed on!" he cried indignantly.

"Come on," Roland said. "Let's look at the damage."

8

There was a lot of damage to look at. As you expected, Cuthbert thought, gazing at Roland. Then he turned to Alain, who appeared gloomy but not really surprised.

As you both expected.

Roland bent toward one of the dead pigeons, and plucked at some thing so fine Cuthbert at first couldn't see what it was. Then he straightened up and held it out to his friends. A single hair. Very long, very white. He opened the pinch of his thumb and forefinger and let it waft to the floor. There it lay amid the shredded remains of Cuthbert Allgood's mother and father.

"If you knew that old corbie was here, why didn't we come back and end his breath?" Cuthbert heard himself ask.

"Because the time was wrong," Roland said mildly.

"He would have done it, had it been one of us in his place, destroying his things."

"We're not like him," Roland said mildly.

"I'm going to find him and blow his teeth out the back of his head."

"Not at all," Roland said mildly.

If Bert had to listen to one more mild word from Roland's mouth, he would run mad. All thoughts of fellowship and ka-tet left his mind, which sank back into his body and was at once obliterated by simple red fury. Jonas had been here. Jonas had pissed on their clothes, called Alain's mother a cunt, torn up their most treasured pictures, painted childish ob scenes on their walls, killed their pigeons. Roland had known . . . done nothing . . . intended to continue doing nothing. Except fuck his gilly-girl. He would do plenty of that, aye, because now that was all he cared about.

But she won't like the look of your face the next time you climb into the saddle, Cuthbert thought. I'll see to that.

He drew back his fist. Alain caught his wrist. Roland turned away and began picking up scattered blankets, as if Cuthbert's furious face and cocked fist were simply of no account to him.

Cuthbert balled up his other fist, meaning to make Alain let go of him, one way or the other, but the sight of his friend's round and honest face, so guileless and dismayed, quieted his rage a little. His argument wasn't with Alain. Cuthbert was sure the other boy had known something bad was happening here, but he was also sure that Roland had insisted Alain do nothing until Jonas was gone.

"Come with me," Alain muttered, slinging an arm around Bert's shoulders.

"Outside. For your father's sake, come. You have to cool off. This is no time to be fighting among ourselves."

"It's no time for our leader's brains to drain down into his prick, either," Cuthbert said, making no effort to lower his voice. But the second time Alain tugged him, Bert allowed himself to be led toward the door.

I'll stay my rage at him this one last time, he thought, but I think—I know—that is all I can manage. I'll have Alain tell him so.

The idea of us?ing Alain as a go-between to his best friend—of know ing that things had come to such a pass—filled Cuthbert with an angry, despairing rage, and at the door to the porch he turned back to Roland. “She has made you a coward,” he said in the High Speech. Beside him, Alain drew in his breath sharply.

Roland stopped as if suddenly turned to stone, his back to them, his arms full of blankets. In that moment Cuthbert was sure Roland would turn and rush toward him. They would fight, likely until one of them was dead or blind or unconscious. Likely that one would be him, but he no longer cared.

But Roland never turned. Instead, in the same speech, he said: “He came to steal our guile and our caution. With you, he has succeeded.”

“No,” Cuthbert said, lapsing back into the low speech. “I know that part of you really believes that, but it’s not so. The truth is, you’ve lost your compass. You’ve called your careless love and made a virtue of irresponsibility. I—”

“For gods’ sake, come!” Alain nearly snarled, and yanked him out the door.

9

With Roland out of sight, Cuthbert felt his rage veering toward Alain in spite of himself; it turned like a weather-vane when the wind shifts. The two of them stood facing each other in the sunshiny doorway, Alain looking unhappy and distracted, Cuthbert with his hands knotted into fists so tight they trembled at his sides.

“Why do you always excuse him? Why?”

“Out on the Drop, he asked if I trusted him. I said I did. And I do.”

“Then you’re a fool.”

“And he’s a gun-slinger. If he says we must wait longer, we must.”

“He’s a gun-slinger by accident! A freak! A mutant!”

Alain stared at him in silent shock.

“Come with me, Alain. It’s time to end this mad game. We’ll find Jonas and kill him. Our ka-tet is broken. We’ll make a new one, you and I.”

“It’s not broken. If it does break, it’ll be your responsibility. And for that I’ll never forgive you.”

Now it was Cuthbert’s turn to be silent.

“Go for a ride, why don’t you? A long one. Give yourself time to cool off. So much depends on our fellowship—”

“Tell him that!”

“No, I’m telling you. Jonas wrote a foul word about my mother. Don’t you think I’d go with you just to avenge that, if I didn’t think that Roland was right? That it’s what Jonas wants? For us to lose our wits and come charging blindly around our Hillock?”

“That’s right, but it’s wrong, too,” Cuthbert said. Yet his hands were slowly unrolling, fists becoming fingers again. “You don’t see and I don’t have the words to explain. If I say that Susan has poisoned the well of our ka-tet, you would call me jealous. Yet I think she has, all unknowing and unmeaning. She’s poisoned his mind, and the door to hell has opened. Roland feels the heat from that open door and thinks it’s only his feeling for her . . . but we must do better, Al. We must think better. For him as well as for ourselves and our fathers.”

“Are you call?ing her our en?emy?”

“No! It would be eas?ier if she was.” He took a deep breath, let it out, took an?oth?er, let it out, took a third and let it out. With each one he felt a lit?tle san?er, a lit?tle more him?self. “Nev?er mind. There’s no more to say on’t for now. Your ad?vice is good—I think I will take a ride. A long one.”

Bert start?ed to?ward his horse, then turned back.

“Tell him he’s wrong. Tell him that even if he’s right about wait?ing, he’s right for the wrong rea?sons, and that makes him all the way wrong.” He hes?itat?ed. “Tell him what I said about the door to hell. Say that’s my piece of the touch. Will you tell him?”

“Yes. Stay away from Jonas, Bert.”

Cuth?bert mount?ed up. “I promise noth?ing.”

“You’re not a man.” Alain sound?ed sor?row?ful; on the point of tears, in fact. “None of us are men.”

“You bet?ter be wrong about that,” Cuth?bert said, “be?cause men’s work is com?ing.” He turned his mount and rode away at a gal?lop.

10

He went far up the Sea?coast Road, to be?gin with try?ing not to think at all. He’d found that some?times un?ex?pect?ed things wan?dered in?to your head if you left the door open for them. Use?ful things, of?ten.

This af?ter?noon that didn’t hap?pen. Con?fused, mis?er?able, and with?out a fresh idea in his head (or even the hope of one), Bert at last turned back to Ham?bry. He rode the High Street from end to end, wav?ing or speak?ing to peo?ple who hiled him. The three of them had met a lot of good peo?ple here. Some he count?ed as friends, and he rather felt the com?mon folk of Ham?bry?town had adopt?ed them—young fel?lows who were far from their own homes and fam?ilies. And the more Bert knew and saw of these com mon folk, the less he sus?pect?ed that they were a part of Rimer’s and Jonas’s nasty lit?tle game. Why else had the Good Man cho?sen Ham?bry in the first place, if not be?cause it pro?vid?ed such ex?cel?lent cov?er?

There were plen?ty of folk out to?day. The farm?ers’ mar?ket was boom ing, the street-stalls were crowd?ed, chil?dren were laugh?ing at a Pinch and Jil?ly show (Jil?ly was cur?rent?ly chas?ing Pinch back and forth and bash?ing the poor old long?suf?fer?ing fel?low with her broom), and the Reap?ing Fair dec?ora?tions were go?ing for?ward at speed. Yet Cuth?bert felt on?ly a lit?tle joy and an?tic?ipa?tion at the thought of the Fair. Be?cause it wasn’t his own, wasn’t Gilead Reap?ing? Per?haps . . . but most?ly just be?cause his mind and heart were so heavy. If this was what grow?ing up was like, he thought he could have skipped the ex?pe?ri?ence.

He rode on out of town, the ocean now at his back, the sun full in his face, his shad?ow grow?ing ev?er longer be?hind him. He thought he’d soon veer off the Great Road and ride across the Drop to the Bar K. But be?fore he could, here came his old friend, Sheemie, lead?ing a mule. Sheemie’s head was down, his shoul?ders slumped, his pink ‘br?era askew, his boots dusty. To Cuth?bert he looked as though he had walked all the way from the tip of the earth.

“Sheemie!” Cuth?bert cried, al?ready an?tic?ipat?ing the boy’s cheery grin and loony pat?ter. “Long days and pleas?ant nights! How are y—”

Sheemie lift?ed his head, and as the brim of his som?brero came up, Cuth?bert fell silent. He saw the dread?ful fear on the boy's face—the pale checks, the haunt?ed eyes, the trem?bling mouth.

11

Sheemie could have been at the Del?ga?do place two hours ago, if he'd want?ed, but he had trudged along at a tur?tle's pace, the let?ter in?side his shirt seem?ing to drag at his ev?ery step. It was aw?ful, so aw?ful. He couldn't even think about it, be?cause his thinker was most?ly bro?ken, so it was.

Cuth?bert was off his horse in a flash, and hur?ry?ing to Sheemie. He put his hands on the boy's shoul?ders. "What's wrong? Tell your old pal. He won't laugh, not a bit."

At the sound of "Arthur Heath's" kind voice and the sight of his con?cerned face, Sheemie be?gan to weep. Rhea's strict com?mand that he should tell no one flew out of his head. Still sob?bing, he re?count?ed ev?ery thing that had hap?pened since that morn?ing. Twice Cuth?bert had to ask him to slow down, and when Bert led the boy to a tree in whose shade the two of them sat to?geth?er, Sheemie was fi?nal?ly able to do so. Cuth?bert lis?tened with grow?ing un?ease. At the end of his tale, Sheemie pro?duced an en?ve?lope from in?side his shirt.

Cuth?bert broke the seal and read what was in?side, his eyes grow?ing large.

12

Roy De?pape was wait?ing for him at the Trav?ellers' Rest when Jonas re?turned in good spir?its from his trip to the Bar K. An out?rid?er had fi?nal?ly shown up, De?pape an?nounced, and Jonas's spir?its rose an?oth?er notch. On?ly Roy didn't look as hap?py about it as Jonas would have ex?pect?ed. Not hap?py at all.

"Fel?low's gone on to Seafront, where I guess he's ex?pect?ed," De?pape said. "He wants you right away. I wouldn't linger here to eat, not even a pop?kin, if I were you. I wouldn't take a drink, ei?ther. You'll want a clear head to deal with this one."

"Free with your ad?vice to?day, ain't you, Roy?" Jonas said. He spoke in a heav?ily sar?cas?tic tone, but when Pet?tie brought him a tot of whiskey, he sent it back and asked for wa?ter in?stead. Roy had a bit of a look to him, Jonas de?cid?ed. Too pale by half, was good old Roy. And when Sheb sat down at his pi?ano-?bench and struck a chord, De?pape jerked in that di?rec?tion, one hand drop?ping to the butt of his gun. In?ter?est?ing. And a lit?tle dis?qui?et?ing.

"Spill it, son—what's got your back hair up?"

Roy shook his head sul?len?ly. "Don't right?ly know."

"What's this fel?low's name?"

"I didn't ask, he didn't say. He showed me Far?son's sigul, though. You know."

De?pape low?ered his voice a lit?tle. "The eye."

Jonas knew, all right. He hat?ed that wide-?open star?ing eye, couldn't imag?ine what had pos?sessed Far?son to pick it in the first place. Why not a mailed fist? Crossed swords? Or a bird? A fal?con, for in?stance—a fal?con would have made a fine sigul. But that eye—

"All right," he said, fin?ish?ing the glass of wa?ter. It went down bet?ter than whiskey would have done, any?way—dry as a bone, he'd been. "I'll find out the rest for my?self, shall I?"

As he reached the batwing doors and pushed them open, De?pape called his name.

Jonas turned back.

“He looks like oth?er peo?ple,” De?pape said. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t hard?ly know.” De?pape looked em?bar?rassed and be?wil?dered... but dogged, too. Stick?ing to his guns. “We on?ly talked five min?utes in all, but once I looked at him and thought it was the old bas?tard from Ritzy—the one I shot. Lit?tle bit lat?er I th’ow him a glance and think, ‘Hell?fire, it’s my old pa standin there.’ Then that went by, too, and he looked like him self again.”

“And how’s that?”

“You’ll see for your?self, I reck?on. I don’t know if you’ll like it much, though.”

Jonas stood with one batwing pushed open, think?ing. “Roy, ’twasn’t Far?son him?self, was it? The Good Man in some sort of dis?guise?” De?pape hes?itat?ed, frown?ing, and then shook his head. “No.” “Are you sure? We on?ly saw him the once, re?mem?ber, and not close-?to.” Lati?go had point?ed him out. Six?teen months ago that had been, give or take.

“I’m sure. You re?mem?ber how big he was?”

Jonas nod?ded. Far?son was no Lord Perth, but he was six feet or more, and broad across at both brace and bas?ket.

“This man’s Clay’s height, or less. And he stays the same height no mat?ter who he looks like.” De?pape hes?itat?ed a mo?ment and said: “He laughs like a dead per?son. I could bare?ly stand to hear him do it.”

“What do you mean, like a dead per?son?”

Roy De?pape shook his head. “Can’t right?ly say.”

13

Twen?ty min?utes lat?er, El?dred Jonas was rid?ing be?neath come in peace mid in?to the court?yard of Seafront, un?easy be?cause he had ex?pect?ed Lati?go . . . and un?less Roy was very much mis?tak?en, it wasn’t Lati?go he was get?ting.

Miguel shuf?fled for?ward, grin?ning his gum?my old grin, and took the reins of Jonas’s horse.

“Re?conocimien?to.”

“Por na?da, jefe.”

Jonas went in, saw Olive Thorin sit?ting in the front par?lor like a for lorn ghost, and nod?ded to her. She nod?ded back, and man?aged a wan smile.

“Sai Jonas, how well you look. If you see Hart—”

“Cry your par?don, la?dy, but it’s the Chan?cel?lor I’ve come to see,” Jonas said. He went on quick?ly up?stairs to?ward the Chan?cel?lor’s suite of rooms, then down a nar?row stone hall lit (and not too well) with gas-?jets.

When he reached the end of the cor?ri?dor, he rapped on the door wait ing there—a mas?sive thing of oak and brass set in its own arch. Rimer didn’t care for such as Su?san Del?ga?do, but he loved the trap?pings of pow?er; that was what took the curve out of his noo?dle and made it straight. Jonas rapped.

“Come in, my friend,” a voice—not Rimer’s—called. It was fol?lowed by a tit?tery laugh that made Jonas’s flesh creep. He laughs like a dead per?son, Roy had said. Jonas pushed open the door and stepped in. Rimer cared for in?cense no more than he cared for the hips and lips of wom?en, but there was in cense burn?ing in here

now—a woody smell that made Jonas think of court at Gilead, and functions of state in the Great Hall. The gas-jets were turned high. The draperies—purple velvet, the color of royalty, Rimer's absolute favorite—trembled minutely in the breath of sea breeze coming in through the open windows. Of Rimer there was no sign. Or of anyone else, come to that. There was a little balcony, but the doors giving on it were open, and no one was out there.

Jonas stepped a little farther into the room, glancing into a gilt-framed mirror on the far side to check behind him without turning his head. No one there, either.

Ahead and to the left was a table with places set for two and a cold supper in place, but no one in either chair. Yet someone had spoken to him. Someone who'd been directly on the other side of the door, from the sound. Jonas drew his gun.

"Come, now," said the voice which had bid him enter. It came from directly behind Jonas's left shoulder. "No need for that, we're all friends here. All on the same side, you know."

Jonas whirled on his heels, suddenly feeling old and slow. Standing there was a man of medium height, powerfully built from the look of him, with bright blue eyes and the rosy cheeks of either good health or good wine. His parted, smiling lips revealed cunning little teeth which must have been filed to points—surely such points couldn't be natural. He wore a black robe, like the robe of a holy man, with the hood pushed back. Jonas's first thought, that the fellow was bald, had been wrong, he saw. The hair was simply cropped so stringently that it was nothing but fuzz.

"Put the bean-shooter away," the man in black said. "We're friends here, I tell you—absolutely pal-sy-wal-sy. We'll break bread and speak of many things—oxen and oil-tankers and whether or not Frank Sinatra really was a better crooner than Der Bin-gle."

"Who? A better what?"

"No one you know; nothing that matters." The man in black tilted again. It was, Jonas thought, the sort of sound one might expect to hear drifting through the barred windows of a lunatic asylum.

He turned. Looked into the mirror again. This time he saw the man in black standing there and smiling at him, big as life. Gods, had he been there all along? Yes, but you couldn't see him until he was ready to be seen. I don't know if he's a wizard, but he's a glamor-man, all right. Mayhap even Farson's sorcerer. He turned back. The man in the priest's robe was still smiling. No pointed teeth now. But they had been pointed. Jonas would lay his watch and warrant on it.

"Where's Rimer?"

"I sent him away to work with young sai Delgado on her Reaping Day catechisms," the man in black said. He slung a chummy arm around Jonas's shoulders and began leading him toward the table. "Best we palaver alone, I think."

Jonas didn't want to offend Farson's man, but he couldn't bear the touch of that arm. He couldn't say why, but it was unbearable. Pestilential. He shrugged it off and went on to one of the chairs, trying not to shiver. No wonder De-pape had come back from Hanging Rock looking pale. No damned wonder.

In?stead of be?ing of?fend?ed, the man in black tit?tered again (Yes, Jonas thought, he does laugh like the dead, very like, so he does). For one mo ment Jonas thought it was Far?do, Cort's fa?ther, in this room with him— that it was the man who had sent him west all those years ago—and he reached for his gun again. Then it was just the man in black, smil?ing at him in an un?pleas?ant?ly know?ing way, those blue eyes danc?ing like the flame from the gas-?jets.

“See some?thing in?ter?est?ing, sai Jonas?”

“Aye,” Jonas said, sit?ting down. “Eats.” He took a piece of bread and popped it in?to his mouth. The bread stuck to his dry tongue, but he chewed de?ter?mined?ly all the same.

“Good boy.” The oth?er al?so sat, and poured wine, fill?ing Jonas's glass first. “Now, my friend, tell me ev?ery?thing you've done since the three trou?ble?some boys ar?rived, and ev?ery?thing you know, and ev?ery?thing you have planned. I would not have you leave out a sin?gle jot.”

“First show me your sigul.”

“Of course. How pru?dent you are.”

The man in black reached in?side his robe and brought out a square of met?al—sil?ver, Jonas guessed. He tossed it on?to the ta?ble, and it clat?tered across to Jonas's plate. En?graved on it was what he had ex?pect?ed—that hideous star?ing eye.

“Sat?is?fied?”

Jonas nod?ded.

“Slide it back to me.”

Jonas reached for it, but for once his nor?mal?ly steady hand re?sem?bled his reedy, un?sta?ble voice. He watched the fin?gers trem?ble for a mo?ment, then low?ered the hand quick?ly to the ta?ble.

“I... I don't want to.”

No. He didn't want to. Sud?den?ly he knew that if he touched it, the en graved sil?ver eye would roll... and look di?rect?ly at him.

The man in black tit?tered and made a come-?along ges?ture with the fin gers of his right hand. The sil?ver buck?le (that was what it looked like to Jonas) slid back to him . . . and up the sleeve of his home?spun robe.

“Abra?cadabra! Bool! The end! Now,” the man in black went on, sip?ping his wine del?icate?ly, “if we have fin?ished the tire?some for?mal?ities...”

“One more,” Jonas said. “You know my name; I would know yours.”

“Call me Wal?ter,” the man in black said, and the smile sud?den?ly fell off his lips.

“Good old Wal?ter, that's me. Now let us see where we are, and where we're go?ing. Let us, in short, palaver.”

14

When Cuth?bert came back in?to the bunkhouse, night had fall?en. Roland and Alain were play?ing cards. They had cleaned the place up so that it looked al?most as it had (thanks to tur?pen?tine found in a clos?et of the old fore?man's of?fice, even the slo?gans writ?ten on the walls were just pink ghosts of their for?mer selves), and now were deeply in?volved in a game of Casa Fuerte, or Hot?patch, as it was known in their own part of the world. Ei?ther way, it was ba?si?cal?ly a two-?man ver?sion of Watch Me, the card-?game which had been played in bar?rooms and bunkhous?es

and around campfires since the world was young.

Roland looked up at once, trying to read Bert's emotional weather. Outwardly, Roland was as impassive as ever, had even played Alain to a draw across four difficult hands, but inwardly he was in a turmoil of pain and indecision. Alain had told him what Cuthbert had said while the two of them stood talking in the yard, and they were terrible things to hear from a friend, even when they came at second hand. Yet what haunted him more was what Bert had said just before leaving: You've called your careless love and made a virtue of irresponsibility. Was there even a chance he had done such a thing? Over and over he told himself no—that the course he had ordered them to follow was hard but sensible, the only course that made sense. Cuthbert's shouting was just so much angry wind, brought on by nerves . . . and his fury at having their private place defiled so outrageous. Still. . .

Tell him he's right for the -wrong reasons, and that makes him all the way wrong. That couldn't be.

Could it?

Cuthbert was smiling and his color was high, as if he had galloped most of the way back. He looked young, handsome, and vital. He looked happy, in fact, almost like the Cuthbert of old—the one who'd been capable of babbling happy nonsense to a rook's skull until someone told him to please, please shut up.

But Roland didn't trust what he saw. There was something wrong with the smile, the color in Bert's cheeks could have been anger rather than good health, and the sparkle in his eyes looked like fever instead of humor. Roland showed nothing on his own face, but his heart sank. He'd hoped the storm would blow itself out, given a little time, but he didn't think it had. He shot a glance at Alain, and saw that Alain felt the same.

Cuthbert, it will be over in three weeks. If only I could tell you that.

The thought which returned was stunning in its simplicity: Why can't you?

He realized he didn't know. Why had he been holding back, keeping his own counsel? For what purpose? Had he been blind? Gods, had he?

"Hello, Bert," he said, "did you have a nice r—"

"Yes, very nice, a very nice ride, an instructive ride. Come outside. I want to show you something."

Roland liked the thin glaze of hilarity in Bert's eyes less and less, but he laid his cards in a neat face-down fan on the table and got up.

Alain pulled at his sleeve. "No!" His voice was low and panicky. "Do you not see how he looks?"

"I see," Roland said. And felt dismay in his heart.

For the first time, as he walked slowly toward the friend who no longer looked like a friend, it occurred to Roland that he had been making decisions in a state close akin to drunkenness. Or had he been making decisions at all? He was no longer sure.

"What is it you'd show me, Bert?"

"Something wonderful," Bert said, and laughed. There was hate in the sound.

Perhaps murder. "You'll want a good close look at this. I know you will."

"Bert, what's wrong with you?" Alain asked.

"Wrong with me? Nothing wrong with me, Al—I'm as happy as a dart at sunrise, a bee in a flower, a fish in the ocean." And as he turned away to go back through the door, he laughed again.

"Don't go out there," Alain said. "He's lost his wits."

"If our fellowship is broken, any chance we might have of getting out of Mejis alive is gone," Roland said. "That being the case, I'd rather die at the hands of a friend than an enemy."

He went out. After a moment of hesitation, Alain followed. On his face was a look of purest misery.

15

Huntress had gone and Demon had not yet begun to show his face, but the sky was powdered with stars, and they threw enough light to see by. Cuthbert's horse, still saddled, was tied to the hitching rail. Beyond it, the square of dusty doorway gleamed like a canopy of tarnished silver.

"What is it?" Roland asked. They weren't wearing guns, any of them. That was to be grateful for, at least. "What would you show me?"

"It's here." Cuthbert stopped at a point midway between the bunk-house and the charred remains of the home place. He pointed with great assurance, but Roland could see nothing out of the ordinary. He walked over to Cuthbert and looked

down.

"I don't see—"

Brilliant light—starshine times a thousand—exploded in his head as Cuthbert's fist drove against the point of his chin. It was the first time, except in play (and as very small boys), that Bert had ever struck him. Roland didn't lose consciousness, but he did lose control over his arms and legs. They were there, but seemingly in another country, flailing like the limbs of a rag doll. He went down on his back. Dust puffed up around him. The stars seemed strangely in motion, running in arcs and leaving milky trails behind them. There was a high ringing in his ears.

From a great distance he heard Alain scream: "Oh, you fool! You stupid fool!"

By making a tremendous effort, Roland was able to turn his head. He saw Alain start toward him and saw Cuthbert, no longer smiling, push him away. "This is between us, Al. You stay out of it."

"You sucker—punched him, you bastard!" Alain, slow to anger, was now building toward a rage Cuthbert might well regret. I have to get up, Roland thought. I have to get between them before something even worse happens. His arms and legs began to swim weakly in the dust.

"Yes—that's how he's played us," Cuthbert said. "I only returned the favor." He looked down. "That's what I wanted to show you, Roland.

That particular piece of ground. That particular puff of dust in which you are now lying. Get a good taste of it. Maybe it'll wake you up."

Now Roland's own anger began to rise. He felt the coldness that was seeping into his thoughts, fought it, and realized he was losing. Jonas ceased to matter; the tankers at Citigo ceased to matter; the supply conspiracy they had uncovered ceased to matter. Soon the Affiliation and the ka-tet he had been at such pains to preserve would cease to matter as well.

The surface numbness was leaving his feet and legs, and he pushed himself to a sitting position. He looked up calmly at Bert, his tented hands on the ground, his face set. Starshine swam in his eyes.

"I love you, Cuthbert, but I'll have no more insubordination and jealous tantrums. If I paid you back for all, I reckon you'd finish in pieces, so I'm only going to pay you for hitting me when I didn't know it was coming."

"And I've no doubt ye can, cul'ly," Cuthbert said, falling effortlessly into the Hambrypatois. "But first ye might want to have a peek at this." Almost contemptuously, he tossed a folded sheet of paper. It hit Roland's chest and bounced into his lap.

Roland picked it up, feeling the fine point of his developing rage lose its edge.

"What is it?"

"Open and see. There's enough starlight to read by."

Slowly, with reluctant fingers, Roland unfolded the sheet of paper and read what was printed there.

He read it twice. The second time was actually harder, because his hands had begun to tremble. He saw every place he and Susan had met—the boathouse, the hut, the shack—and now he saw them in a new light, knowing someone else had seen them, too. How clever he had believed they were being. How confident of

their se?cre?cy and their dis?cre?tion. And yet some?one had been watch?ing all the time. Su?san had been right. Some one had seen.

I've put ev?ery?thing at risk. Her life as well as our lives.

Tell him what I said about the door?way to hell.

And Su?san's voice, too: Ka like a wind . . . if you love me, then love me.

So he had done, be?liev?ing in his youth?ful ar?ro?gance that ev?ery?thing would turn out all right for no oth?er rea?son—yes, at bot?tom he had be lieved this—than that he was he, and ka must serve his love.

"I've been a fool," he said. His voice trem?bled like his hands.

"Yes, in?deed," Cuth?bert said. "So you have." He dropped to his knees in the dust, fac?ing Roland. "Now if you want to hit me, hit away. Hard as you want and as many as you can man?age. I'll not hit back. I've done all I can to wake you up to your re?spon?si?bil?ities. If you still sleep, so be it. Ei ther way, I still love you." Bert put his hands on Roland's shoul?ders and briefly kissed his friend's cheek.

Roland be?gan to cry. They were part?ly tears of grat?itude, but most?ly those of min?gled shame and con?fu?sion; there was even a small, dark part of him that hat?ed Cuth?bert and al?ways would. That part hat?ed Cuth?bert more on ac?count of the kiss than be?cause of the un?ex?pect?ed punch on the jaw; more for the for?give?ness than the awak?en?ing.

He got to his feet, still hold?ing the let?ter in one dusty hand, the oth?er in?ef?fec?tu?al?ly brush?ing his cheeks and leav?ing damp smears there. When he stag?gered and Cuth?bert put out a hand to steady him, Roland pushed him so hard that Cuth?bert him?self would have fall?en, if Alain hadn't caught hold of his shoul?ders.

Then, slow?ly, Roland went back down again—this time in front of Cuth?bert with his hands up and his head down.

"Roland, no!" Cuth?bert cried.

"Yes," Roland said. "I have for?got?ten the face of my fa?ther, and cry your par?don."

"Yes, all right, for gods' sake, yes!" Cuth?bert now sound?ed as if he were cry?ing him?self. "Just... please get up! It breaks my heart to see you so!"

And mine to be so, Roland thought. To be hum?bled so. But I brought it on my?self, didn't I? This dark yard, with my head throbb?ing and my heart full of shame and fear. This is mine, bought and paid for.

They helped him up and Roland let him?self be helped. "That's quite a left, Bert," he said in a voice that al?most passed for nor?mal.

"On?ly when it's go?ing to?ward some?one who doesn't know it's com ing," Cuth?bert replied.

"This let?ter—how did you come by it?"

Cuth?bert told of meet?ing Sheemie, who had been dither?ing along in his own mis?ery, as if wait?ing for ka to in?ter?vene ... and, in the per?son of "Arthur Heath," ka had.

"From the witch," Roland mused. "Yes, but how did she know? For she nev?er leaves the Coos, or so Su?san has told me."

"I can't say. Nor do I much care. What I'm most con?cerned about right now is mak?ing sure that Sheemie isn't hurt be?cause of what he told me and gave me. Af?ter that, I'm con?cerned that what old witch Rhea has tried to tell once she doesn't try

to tell again.”

“I’ve made at least one terrible mistake,” Roland said, “but I don’t count loving Susan as another. That was beyond me to change. As it was beyond her. Do you believe that?”

“Yes,” Alain said at once, and after a moment, almost reluctantly, Cuthbert said, “Aye, Roland.”

“I’ve been arrogant and stupid. If this note had reached her aunt, she could have been sent into exile.”

“And we to the devil, by way of hangropes,” Cuthbert added dryly. “Although I know that’s a minor matter to you by comparison.”

“What about the witch?” Alain asked. “What do we do about her?” Roland smiled a little, and turned toward the northwest. “Rhea,” he said. “Whatever else she is, she’s a first-class troublemaker, is she not? And troublemakers must be put on notice.”

He started back toward the bunkhouse, trudging with his head down. Cuthbert looked at Alain, and saw that Al was also a little teary-eyed. Bert put out his hand. For a moment Alain only looked at it. Then he nodded—to himself rather than to Cuthbert, it seemed—and shook it.

“You did what you had to,” Alain said. “I had my doubts at first, but not now.” Cuthbert let out his breath. “And I did it the way I had to. If I hadn’t surprised him—”

“—he would have beaten you black and blue.”

“So many more colors than that,” Cuthbert said. “I would have looked like a rainbow.”

“The Wizard’s Rainbow, even,” Alain said. “Extra colors for your penny.” That made Cuthbert laugh. The two of them walked back toward the bunkhouse, where Roland was unsaddling Bert’s horse.

Cuthbert turned in that direction to help, but Alain held him back. “Leave him alone for a little while,” he said. “It’s best you do.”

They went on ahead, and when Roland came in ten minutes later, he found Cuthbert playing his hand. And winning with it.

“Bert,” he said.

Cuthbert looked up.

“We have a spot of business tomorrow, you and I. Up on the Coos.” “Are we going to kill her?”

Roland thought, and thought hard. At last he looked up, biting his lip. “We should.”

“Aye. We should. But are we going to?”

“Not unless we have to, I reckon.” Later he would regret this decision—if it was a decision—bitterly, but there never came a time when he did not understand it. He had been a boy not much older than Jake Chambers during that Mejis fall, and the decision to kill does not come easily or naturally to most boys. “Not unless she makes us.”

“Perhaps it would be best if she did,” Cuthbert said. It was hard gunslinger talk, but he looked troubled as he said it.

"Yes. Perhaps it would. It's not like I, though, not in one as sly as her. Be ready to get up early."

"All right. Do you want your hand back?"

"When you're on the verge of knocking him out? Not at all."

Roland went past them to his bunk. There he sat, looking at his folded hands in his lap. He might have been praying; he might only have been thinking hard. Cuthbert looked at him for a moment, then turned back to his cards.

16

The sun was just over the horizon when Roland and Cuthbert left the next morning. The Drop, still drenched with morning dew, seemed to burn with orange fire in the early light. Their breath and that of their horses puffed frosty in the air. It was a morning neither of them ever forgot. For the first time in their lives they went forth wearing bolstered revolvers; for the first time in their lives they went into the world as gunslingers.

Cuthbert said not a word—he knew that if he started, he'd do nothing but babble great streams of his usual nonsense—and Roland was quiet by nature. There was only one exchange between them, and it was brief.

"I said I made at least one very bad mistake," Roland told him. "One that this note"—he touched his breast pocket—"brought home to me. Do you know what that mistake was?"

"Not loving her—not that," Cuthbert said. "You called that ka, and I call it the same." It was a relief to be able to say this, and a greater one to believe it. Cuthbert thought he could even accept Susan herself now, not as his best friend's lover, a girl he had wanted himself the first time he saw her, but as a part of their entwined fate.

"No," Roland said. "Not loving her, but thinking that love could somehow be apart from everything else. That I could live two lives—one with you and Al and our job here, one with her. I thought that love could lift me above ka, the way a bird's wings can take it above all the things that would kill it and eat it, otherwise. Do you understand?"

"It made you blind." Cuthbert spoke with a gentleness quite foreign to the young man who had suffered through the last two months.

"Yes," Roland said sadly. "It made me blind . . . but now I see. Come on, a little faster, if you please. I want to get this over."

17

They rode up the rutty cart-track along which Susan (a Susan who had known a good deal less about the ways of the world) had come singing "Careless Love" beneath the light of the Kissing Moon. Where the track opened into Rhea's yard, they stopped.

"Wonderful view," Roland murmured. "You can see the whole sweep of the desert from here."

"Not much to say about the view right here in front of us, though."

That was true. The garden was full of unpicked mutant vegetables, the stuffy-guy presiding over them either a bad joke or a bad omen. The yard supported just one tree, now moulting sickly-looking fall leaves like an old vulture shedding its

feathers. Beyond the tree was the hut itself, made of rough stone and topped by a single sooty pot of a chimney with a hex-sign painted on it in sneering yellow. At the rear corner, beyond one overgrown window, was a woodpile.

Roland had seen plenty of huts like it—the three of them had passed any number on their way here from Gilead—but never one that felt as powerfully wrong as this. He saw nothing untoward, yet there was a feeling, too strong to be denied, of a presence. One that watched and waited.

Cuthbert felt it, too. “Do we have to go closer?” he swallowed. “Do we have to go in? Because . . . Roland, the door is open. Do you see?”

He saw. As if she expected them. As if she was inviting them in, wanting them to sit down with her to some unspeakable breakfast.

“Stay here.” Roland giggled Rusher forward.

“No! I’m coming!”

“No, cover my back. If I need to go inside, I’ll call you to join me . . . but if I need to go inside, the old woman who lives here will breathe no more. As you said, that might be for the best.”

At every slow step Rusher took, the feeling of wrongness grew in Roland’s heart and mind. There was a stench to the place, a smell like rotten meat and hot putrefied tomatoes. It came from the hut, he supposed, but it also seemed to come wafting out of the very ground. And at every step, the whine of the thinny seemed louder, as if the atmosphere of this place somehow magnified it.

Susan came up here alone, and in the dark, he thought. Gods, I’m not sure I could have come up here in the dark with my friends for company.

He stopped beneath the tree, looking through the open door twenty paces away.

He saw what could have been a kitchen; the legs of a table, the back of a chair, a filthy hearthstone. No sign of the lady of the house. But she was there. Roland could feel her eyes crawling on him like loathsome bugs.

I can’t see her because she’s used her art to make herself dim . . . but she’s there.

And just perhaps he did see her. The air had a strange shimmer just inside the door to the right, as if it had been heated. Roland had been told that you could see someone who was dim by turning your head and looking from the corner of your eye. He did that now.

“Roland?” Cuthbert called from behind him.

“Fine so far, Bert.” Barely paying attention to the words he was saying, because . . . yes! That shimmer was clearer now, and it had almost the shape of a woman. It could be his imagination, of course, but . . .

But at that moment, as if understanding he’d seen her, the shimmer moved farther back into the shadows. Roland glimpsed the swinging hem of an old black dress, there and then gone.

No matter. He had not come to see her but only to give her her single warning . . . which was one more than any of their fathers would have given her, no doubt.

“Rhea!” His voice rolled in the harsh tones of old, stern command. Two yellow leaves fell from the tree, as if shivered loose by that voice, and one fell in his black hair. From the hut came only a waiting, listening silence . . . and then the discordant, jeering yowl of a cat.

“Rhea, daughter of none! I’ve brought something back to you, woman! Something you must have lost!” From his shirt he took the folded letter and tossed it to the stony ground. “Today I’ve been your friend, Rhea—if this had gone where you had intended it to go, you would have paid with your life.”

He paused. Another leaf drifted down from the tree. This one landed in Pusher’s mane.

“Hear me well, Rhea, daughter of none, and understand me well. I have come here under the name of Will Dearborn, but Dearborn is not my name and it is the Affiliation I serve. More, ’tis all which lies behind the Affiliation—’tis the power of the White. You have crossed the way of our ka, and I warn you only this once: do not cross it again. Do you understand?”

Only that waiting silence.

“Do not touch a single hair on the head of the boy who carried your hated mischiefs hence, or you’ll die. Speak not another word of those things you know or think you know to anyone—not to Cordelia Delgado, nor to Jonas, nor to Rimer, nor to Thorin—or you’ll die. Keep your peace and we will keep ours. Break it, and we’ll still you. Do you understand?”

More silence. Dirty windows peering at him like eyes. A puff of breeze sent more leaves showering down around him, and caused the stuffy-guy to creak nastily on his pole. Roland thought briefly of the cook, Hax, twisting at the end of his rope.

“Do you understand?”

No reply. Not even a shimmer could he see through the open door now.

“Very well,” Roland said. “Silence gives consent.” He giggled his horse around. As he did, his head came up a little, and he saw something green shift above him among the yellow leaves. There was a low hissing sound.

“Roland look out! Snake!” Cuthbert screamed, but before the second word had left his mouth, Roland had drawn one of his guns.

He fell sideways in the saddle, holding with his left leg and heel as Rusher jiggled and pranced. He fired three times, the thunder of the big gun smashing through the still air and then rolling back from the nearby hills. With each shot the snake flipped upward again, its blood dotting red across a background of blue sky and yellow leaves. The last bullet tore off its head, and when the snake fell for good, it hit the ground in two pieces. From within the hut came a wail of grief and rage so awful that Roland’s spine turned to a cord of ice.

“You bastard!” screamed a woman’s voice from the shadows. “Oh, you murdering cull! My friend! My friend!”

“If it was your friend, you oughtn’t to have set it on me,” Roland said. “Remember, Rhea, daughter of none.”

The voice uttered one more shriek and fell silent. Roland rode back to Cuthbert, bolstering his gun. Bert’s eyes were round and amazed. “Roland, what shooting! Gods, what shooting!” “Let’s get out of here.”

“But we still don’t know how she knew!”

“Do you think she’d tell?” There was a small but minute shake in Roland’s voice.

The way the snake had come out of the tree like that, right at him ... he could still barely believe he wasn’t dead. Thank gods for his hand, which had taken matters

over.

"We could make her talk," Cuthbert said, but Roland could tell from his voice that Bert had no taste for such. Maybe later, maybe after years of trail-riding and gun-slinging, but now he had no more stomach for torture than for killing outright. "Even if we could, we couldn't make her tell the truth. Such as her lies as other folks breathe. If we've convinced her to keep quiet, we've done enough for today. Come on. I hate this place."

18

As they rode back toward town, Roland said: "We've got to meet."

"The four of us. That's what you mean, isn't it?"

"Yes. I want to tell everything I know and surmise. I want to tell you my plan, such as it is. What we've been waiting for."

"That would be very good indeed."

"Susan can help us." Roland seemed to be speaking to himself. Cuthbert was amused to see that the lone, crown like leaf was still caught in his dark hair.

"Susan was meant to help us. Why didn't I see that?"

"Because love is blind," Cuthbert said. He snorted laughter and clapped Roland on the shoulder. "Love is blind, old son."

19

When she was sure the boys were gone, Rhea crept out of her door and into the hateful sun-shine. She hobbled across to the tree and fell on her knees by the tattered length of her snake, weeping loudly.

"Er-mot, Er-mot!" she cried. "See what's become of ye!"

There was his head, the mouth frozen open, the double fangs still dripping poison—clear drops that shone like prisms in the day's strengthening light. The glaring eyes glared. She picked Er-mot up, kissed the scaly mouth, licked the last of the venom from the exposed needles, crooning and weeping all the while. Next she picked up the long and tattered body with her other hand, moaning at the holes which had been torn into Er-mot's satiny hide; the holes and the ripped red flesh beneath. Twice she put the head against the body and spoke incantations, but nothing happened. Of course not. Er-mot had gone beyond the aid of her spells.

Poor Er-mot.

She held his head to one flattened old dug, and his body to the other. Then, with the last of his blood wetting the bodice of her dress, she looked in the direction the hateful boys had gone.

"I'll pay ye back," she whispered. "By all the gods that ever were, I'll pay ye back. When ye least expect it, there Rhea will be, and your screams will break your throats. Do you hear me? Your screams will break your throats!"

She knelt a moment longer, then got up and shuffled back toward her hut, holding Er-mot to her bosom.

CHAPTER V

Wizard's rainbow

1

On an afternoon three days after Roland's and Cuthbert's visit to the Coos, Roy De-pape and Clay Reynolds walked along the upstairs hallway of the Travellers'

Rest to the spa?cious bed?room Coral Thorin kept there. Clay knocked. Jonas called for them to come in, it was open.

The first thing De?pape saw up?on en?ter?ing was sai Thorin her?self, in a rock?er by the win?dow. She wore a foamy night?dress of white silk and a red bu?fan?da on her head. She had a lap?ful of knit?ting. De?pape looked at her in sur?prise. She of?fered him and Reynolds an enig?mat?ic smile, said “Hel?lo, gents,” and re?turned to her needle?work. Out?side there was a rat?tle of fire?crack?ers (young folks could nev?er wait un?til the big day; if they had crack?ers in their hands, they had to set match to them), the ner?vous whin?ny of a horse, and the rau?cous laugh?ter of boys.

De?pape turned to Reynolds, who shrugged and then crossed his arms to hold the sides of his cloak. In this way he ex?pressed doubt or dis?ap proval or both.

“Prob?lem?”

Jonas was stand?ing in the door?way to the bath?room, wip?ing shav?ing soap from his face with the end of the tow?el laid over his shoul?der. He was bare to the waist.

De?pape had seen him that way plen?ty of times, but the old white criss?cross?ings of scars al?ways made him feel a lit?tle sick to his stom?ach.

“Well... I knew we was us?ing the la?dy’s room, I just didn’t know the la?dy came with it.”

“She does.” Jonas tossed the tow?el in?to the bath?room, crossed to the bed, and took his shirt from where it hung on one of the foot?posts. Be yond him, Coral glanced up, gave his naked back a sin?gle greedy look, then went back to her work once more. Jonas slipped in?to his shirt. “How arc things at Cit?go, Clay?”

“Qui?et. But it’ll get noisy if cer?tain young vagabun?dos poke their nosy noses in.”

“How many are out there, and how do they set?” “Ten in the days. A dozen at night. Roy or I are out once ev?ery shift, but like I say, it’s been qui?et.”

Jonas nod?ded, but he wasn’t hap?py. He’d hoped to draw the boys out to Cit?go be?fore now, just as he’d hoped to draw them in?to a con?fronta?tion by van?dal?iz?ing their place and killing their pi?geons. Yet so far they still hid be?hind their damned Hillock. He felt like a man in a field with three young bulls. He’s got a red rag, this would-?be torero, and he’s nap?ping it for all he’s worth, and still the toros refuse to charge. Why? “The mov?ing op?er?ation? How goes that?”

“Like clock?work,” Reynolds said. “Four tankers a night, in pairs, the last four nights. Ren?frew’s in charge, him of the Lazy Su?san. Do you still want to leave half a dozen as bait?”

“Yar,” Jonas said, and there was a knock at the door. De?pape jumped. “Is that—”

“No,” Jonas said. “Our friend in the black robe has de?camped. Per haps he goes to of?fer com?fort to the Good Man’s troops be?fore bat?tle.”

De?pape barked laugh?ter at that. By the win?dow, the wom?an in the night?gown looked down at her knit?ting and said noth?ing. “It’s open!” Jonas called.

The man who stepped in was wear?ing the som?brero, scrape, and san?dalias of a farmer or va?que?ro, but the face was pale and the lock of hair peek?ing out from be?neath the som?brero’s brim was blond. It was Lati?go. A hard man and no mis?take, but a great im?prove?ment over the laugh?ing man in the black robe, just the same.

“Good to see you, gen?tle?men,” he said, com?ing in and clos?ing the door. His

face—dour, frown?ing—was that of a man who hasn't seen any thing good in years. Maybe since birth. "Jonas? Are you well? Do things march?"

"I am and they do," Jonas said. He offered his hand. Lati?go gave it a quick, dry shake. He didn't do the same for De?pape or Reynolds, but glanced at Coral instead. "Long days and pleas?ant nights, la?dy."

"And may you have twice the num?ber, sai Lati?go," she said without look?ing up from her knit?ing.

Lati?go sat on the end of the bed, produced a sack of to?bac?co from beneath his scrape, and began rolling a cigarette.

"I won't stay long," he said. He spoke in the abrupt, clipped tones of north?ern In-World, where—or so De?pape had heard—rein?deer-?fuck?ing was still consid?ered the chief sport. If you ran slower than your sis?ter, that was. "It wouldn't be wise. I don't quite fit in, if one looks close?ly."

"No," Reynolds said, sound?ing amused. "You don't."

Lati?go gave him a sharp glance, then re?turned his at?ten?tion to Jonas. "Most of my par?ty is camped thir?ty wheels from here, in the forest west of Eye?bolt Canyon . . . what is that wretched noise inside the canyon, by the way? It fright?ens the hors?es."

"A thin?ny," Jonas said.

"It scares the men, too, if they get too close," Reynolds said. "Best to stay away, cap'n."

"How many are you?" Jonas asked.

"A hundred. And well armed."

"So, it's said, were Lord Perth's men."

"Don't be an ass."

"Have they seen any fight?ing?"

"Enough to know what it is," Lati?go said, and Jonas knew he was lying. Far?son had kept his vet?er?ans in their moun?tain bolt?holes. Here was a lit?tle ex?pe?di?tionary force where no doubt on?ly the sergeants were able to do more with their cocks than run wa?ter through them.

"There are a dozen at Hang?ing Rock, guard?ing the tankers your men have brought so far," Lati?go said.

"More than need?ed, like?ly."

"I didn't risk com?ing in?to this god?for?sak?en shit?splat of a town in order to dis?cuss my ar?range?ments with you, Jonas."

"Cry your par?don, sai," Jonas replied, but per?func?to?ri?ly. He sat on the floor next to Coral's rock?er and began to roll a smoke of his own. She put her knit?ing aside and began to stroke his hair. De?pape didn't know what there was about her that El?dred found so fas?ci?nat?ing—when he him?self looked he saw on?ly an ug?ly bitch with a big nose and mosquito-?bump tit?tles.

"As to the three young men," Lati?go said with the air of a fel?low go ing di?rect?ly to the heart of the mat?ter. "The Good Man was ex?treme?ly dis?turbed to learn there were vis?itors from In-?World in Mejis. And now you tell me they aren't what they claim to be. So, just what are they?"

Jonas brushed Coral's hand away from his hair as though it were ii trou?ble?some in?sect. Undis?turbed, she re?turned to her knit?ing. "They're not young men but mere

boys, and if their coming here is ka—about which I know Far?son concerns himself deeply—then it may be our ka rather than the Af?fil?ia?tion's."

"Un?for?tu?nate?ly, we'll have to for?go en?light?en?ing the Good Man with your the?olog?ical con?clu?sions," Lati?go said. "We've brought ra?dios, but they're ei?ther bro?ken or can't work at this dis?tance. No one knows which. I hate all such toys, any?way. The gods laugh at them. We're on our own, my friend. For good or ill."

"No need for Far?son to wor?ry un?nec?es?sar?ily," Jonas said. "The Good Man wants these lads treat?ed as a threat to his plans. I ex?pect Wal?ter told you the same thing."

"Aye. And I haven't for?got?ten a word. Sai Wal?ter is an un?for?get?table sort of man."

"Yes," Lati?go agreed. "He's the Good Man's un?der?lin?er. The chief rea?son he came to you was to un?der?line these boys."

"And so he did. Roy, tell sai Lati?go about your vis?it to the Sher?iff day be?fore yes?ter?day."

De?pape cleared his throat ner?vous?ly. "The sher?iff . . . Av?ery—"

"I know him, fat as a pig in Full Earth, he is," Lati?go said. "Go on." "One of Av?ery's deputies car?ried a mes?sage to the three boys as they count?ed horse on the Drop." "What mes?sage?"

"Stay out of town on Reap?ing Day; stay off the Drop on Reap?ing Day; best to stay close to your quar?ters on Reap?ing Day, as Barony folk don't en?joy see?ing out?landers, even those they like, when they keep their fes?ti?vals."

"And how did they take it?"

"They agreed straight away to keep to them?selves on Reap?ing," De?pape said.

"That's been their habit all along, to be just as agree?able as pie when some?thing's asked of em. They know bet?ter, course they do—there's no more a cus?tom here against out?landers on Reap?ing than there is any place else. In fact, it's quite usu?al to make strangers a part of the mer?ry mak?ing, as I'm sure the boys know. The idea—"

"—is to make them be?lieve we plan to move on Fair-?Day it?self, yes, yes," Lati?go fin?ished im?pa?tient?ly. "What I want to know is are they con?vinced? Can you take them on the day be?fore Reap?ing, as you've promised, or will they be wait?ing?"

De?pape and Reynolds looked at Jonas. Jonas reached be?hind him and put his hand on Coral's nar?row but not un?in?ter?est?ing thigh. Here it was, he thought. He would be held to what he said next, and with?out grace. If he was right, the Big Cof?fin Hunters would be thanked and paid . . . per?haps bonused, as well. If he was wrong, they would like?ly be hung so high and hard that their heads would pop off when they hit the end of the rope.

"We'll take them easy as birds on the ground," Jonas said. "Trea?son the charge. Three young men, all high-?bom, in the pay of John Par?son. Shock?ing stuff. What could be more in?dica?tive of the evil days we live in?"

"One cry of trea?son and the mob ap?pears?"

Jonas fa?vored Lati?go with a win?try smile. "As a con?cept, trea?son might be a bit of a reach for the com?mon folk, even when the mob's drunk and the core's been bought and paid for by the Horse?men's As?so?ci?ation. Mur?der, though . . . es?pe?cial?ly that of a much loved May?or—"

De?pape's star?tled eyes flew to the May?or's sis?ter.

"What a pity it will be," that la?dy said, and sighed. "I may be moved to lead the rab?ble my?self."

De?pape thought he fi?nal?ly un?der?stood El?dred's at?trac?tion: here was a wom?an ev?ery bit as cold-?blood?ed as Jonas him?self.

"One oth?er mat?ter," Lati?go said. "A piece of the Good Man's prop er?ty was sent with you for safe?keep?ing. A cer?tain glass ball?"

Jonas nod?ded. "Yes, in?deed. A pret?ty tri?fle."

"I un?der?stand you left it with the lo?cal bru?ja."

"Yes."

"You should take it back. Soon."

"Don't teach your grand?pa to suck eggs," Jonas said, a bit testi?ly. "I'm wait?ing un?til the brats are juggled."

Reynolds mur?mured cu?ri?ous?ly, "Have you seen it your?self, sai Lati?go?"

"Not close up, but I've seen men who have." Lati?go paused. "One such ran mad and had to be shot. The on?ly oth?er time I saw any?one in such con?di?tion was thir?ty years ago, on the edge of the big desert. 'Twas a hut-?dweller who'd been bit?ten by a ra?bid coy?ote."

"Bless the Tur?tle," Reynolds mut?tered, and tapped his throat three times. He was ter?ri?fied of ra?bies.

"You won't bless any?thing if the Wiz?ard's Rain?bow gets hold of you," Lati?go said grim?ly, and swung his at?ten?tion back to Jonas. "You'll want to be even more care?ful tak?ing it back than you were in giv?ing it over. The old witch-?wom?an's like?ly un?der its glam by now."

"I in?tend to send Rimer and Av?ery. Av?ery ain't much of a shake, but Rimer's a trig boy."

"I'm afraid that won't do," Lati?go said.

"Won't it?" Jonas said. His hand tight?ened on Coral's leg and he smiled un?pleas?ant?ly at Lati?go. "Per?haps you could tell your 'um?ble ser vant why it won't do?"

It was Coral who an?swered. "Be?cause," said she, "when the piece of the Wiz?ard's Rain?bow Rhea holds is tak?en back in?to cus?tody, the Chan cel?lor will be busy ac?com?pa?ny?ing my broth?er to his fi?nal rest?ing place."

"What's she talk?ing about, El?dred?" De?pape asked.

"That Rimer dies, too," Jonas said. He be?gan to grin. "An?oth?er foul crime to lay at the feet of John Far?son's filthy spy?boys."

Coral smiled in sweet agree?ment, put her hands over Jonas's, moved it high?er on her thigh, and then picked up her knit?ting again.

2

The girl, al?though young, was mar?ried.

The boy, al?though fair, was un?sta?ble.

She met him one night in a re?mote place to tell him their af?fair, sweet as it had been, must end. He replied that it would nev?er end, it was writ?ten in the stars. She told him that might be, but at some point the con?stel?la tions had changed. Per?haps he be?gan to weep. Per?haps she laughed—out of ner?vous?ness, very like?ly.

What?ev?er the cause, such laugh?ter was disas?trous?ly timed. He picked up a stone and dashed out her brains with it. Then, com?ing to his sens?es and re?al?iz?ing what he had done, he sat down with his back against a gran?ite slab, drew her poor bat?tered head in?to his lap, and cut his own throat as an owl looked on from a near?by tree. He died cov?er?ing her face with kiss?es, and when they were found, their lips were sealed to?geth?er with his life's blood and with hers.

An old sto?ry. Ev?ery town has its ver?sion. The site is usu?al?ly the lo?cal lovers' lane, or a se?clud?ed stretch of river?bank, or the town grave?yard. Once the de?tails of what ac?tu?al?ly hap?pened have been dis?tort?ed enough to please the mor?bid?ly ro?man?tic, songs are made. These are usu?al?ly sung by yearn?ing vir?gins who play gui?tar or man?do bad?ly and can?not quite stay on key. Cho?rus?es tend to in?clude such lachry?mose re?frains as My-?di-?I-?de-?I-?de-?o, There they died to?geth?er-?o. The Ham?bry ver?sion of this quaint tale fea?tured lovers named Robert and Francesca, and had hap?pened in the old days, be?fore the world had moved on. The site of the sup?posed mur?der-?sui?cide was the Ham?bry ceme?tery, the stone with which Francesca's brains had been dashed out was a slate mark?er, and the gran?ite wall against which Robert had been lean?ing when he clipped his blow?pipe had been the Thorin mau?soleum. (It was doubt?ful there had been any Thorins in Ham?bry or Mejis five gen?era?tions back, but folk-?tales are, at best, gen?er?al?ly no more than lies set in rhyme.)

True or un?true, the grave?yard was con?sidered haunt?ed by the ghosts of the lovers, who could be seen (it was said) walk?ing hand-?in-?hand among the mark?ers, cov?ered with blood and look?ing wist?ful. It was thus sel?dom vis?it?ed at night, and was a log?ical spot for Roland, Cuth?bert, Alain, and Su?s?san to meet.

By the time the meet?ing took place, Roland had be?gun to feel in?creas?ingly wor?ried . . . even des?per?ate. Su?s?san was the prob?lem—or, more prop?er?ly put, Su?s?san's aunt. Even with?out Rhea's poi?sonous let?ter to help the pro?cess along, Cordelia's sus?pi?cions of Su?s?san and Roland had hard?ened in?to a near cer?tain?ty. On a day less than a week be?fore the meet?ing in the ceme?tery, Cordelia had be?gun shriek?ing at Su?s?san al?most as soon as she stepped through the house door with her bas?ket over her arm.

"Ye've been with him! Ye have, ye bad girl, it's writ?ten all over yer face!"

Su?s?san, who had that day been nowhere near Roland, could at first on?ly gape at her aunt. "Been with who?"

"Oh, be not coy with me, Miss Oh So Young and Pret?ty! Be not coy, I pray! Who does all but wig?gle his tongue at ye when he pass?es our door? Dear?born, that's who! Dear?born! Dear?born! I'll say it a thou?sand times! Oh, shame on ye! Shame! Look at yer trousers! Green from the grass the two of ye have been rolling in, they are! I'm sur?prised they're not torn open at the crutch as well!" By then Aunt Cord had been near?ly shriek?ing. The veins in her neck stood out like rope.

Su?s?san, be?mused, had looked down at the old kha?ki pants she was wear?ing.

"Aunt, it's paint—don't you see it is? Chet?ta and I've been mak?ing Fair-?Day dec?ora?tions up at May?or's House. What's on my bot?tom got there when Hart Thorin- not Dear?born but Thorin—came up?on me in the shed where the dec?ora?tions and fire?works are stored. He de?cid?ed it was as good a time and place

as any to have another little wrestle. He got on top of me, shot his squirt into his pants again, and went off happy. Humming, he was.“ She wrinkled her nose, although the most she felt for Thorin these days was a kind of sad distaste. Her fear of him had passed.

Aunt Cord, meanwhile, had been looking at her with glittery eyes. For the first time, Susan found herself wondering consciously about Cordelia’s sanity.

“A likely story,” Cordelia whispered at last. There were little beads of perspiration above her eyebrows, and the netles of blue veins at her temples ticked like clocks.

She even had a smell, these days, no matter if she bathed or not—a rancid, acrid one. “Did ye work it out together as ye cuddled afterwards, thee and him?”

Susan had stepped forward, grabbed her aunt’s bony wrist, and clapped it to the stain on one of her knees. Cordelia cried out and tried to pull away, but Susan held fast. She then raised the hand to her aunt’s face, holding it there until she knew Cordelia had smelled what was on her palm.

“Does thee smell it. Aunt? Paint! We used it on rice-paper for colored lanterns!” The tension had slowly gone out of the wrist in Susan’s hand. The eyes looking into hers regained a measure of clarity. “Aye,” she had said at last. “Paint.” A pause. “This time.”

Since then, Susan had all too often turned her head to see a narrow-hipped figure gliding after her in the street, or one of her aunt’s many friends marking her course with suspicious eyes. When she rode on the Drop, she now always had the sensation of being watched. Twice before the four of them came together in the graveyard, she had agreed to meet Roland and his friends. Both times she had been forced to break off, the second at the very last moment. On that occasion she had seen Brian Hockley’s eldest son watching her in an odd, intent way. It had only been intuition ... but strong intuition.

What made matters worse for her was that she was as frantic for a meeting as Roland himself, and not just for palaver. She needed to see his face, and to clasp one of his hands between both of hers. The rest, sweet as it was, could wait, but she needed to see him and touch him; needed to make sure he wasn’t Just a dream spun by a lonely, frightened girl to comfort herself.

In the end, Maria had helped her—gods bless the little maid, who perhaps understood more than Susan could ever guess. It was Maria who had gone to Cordelia with a note saying that Susan would be spending the night in the guest wing at Seafront. The note was from Olive Thorin, and in spite of all her suspicions, Cordelia could not quite believe it a forgery. As it was not. Olive had written it, listlessly and without questions, when Susan asked.

“What’s wrong with my niece?” Cordelia had snapped. “She tired, said. And with the dolor de garganta.”

“Sore throat? So close before Fair-day? Ridiculous! I don’t believe it! Susan’s never sick!”

“Dolor de garganta,” Maria repeated, impassive as only a peasant woman can be in the face of disbelief, and with that Cordelia had to be satisfied. Maria herself had no idea what Susan was up to, and that was just the way Susan liked it.

She’d gone over the balcony, moving nimbly down the fifteen feet of tangled vines

grow?ing up the north side of the build?ing, and through the rear ser?vants' door in the wall. There Roland had been wait?ing, and af?ter two warm min?utes with which we need not con?cern our?selves, they rode dou?ble on Rush?er to the grave?yard, where Cuth?bert and Alain wait?ed, full of ex?pec?ta?tion and ner?vous hope.

3

Su?s?san looked first at the placid blond one with the round face, whose name was not Richard Stock?worth but Alain Johns. Then at the oth?er one—he from whom she had sensed such doubt of her and per?haps even anger at her. Cuth?bert All?go?od was his name.

They sat side by side on a fall?en grave?stone which had been over?run with ivy, their feet in a lit?tle brook of mist. Su?s?san slid from Rush?er's back and ap?proached them slow?ly. They stood up. Alain made an In-?World bow, leg out, knee locked, heel stiffly plant?ed. "La?dy," he said. "Long days—"

Now the oth?er was be?side him—thin and dark, with a face that would have been hand?s?ome had it not seemed so rest?less. His dark eyes were re?al?ly quite beau?ti?ful. "- and pleas?ant nights," Cuth?bert fin?ished, dou?bling Alain's bow. I he two of them looked so like com?ic courtiers in a Fair-?Day sketch that Su?s?san laughed. She couldn't help her?self. Then she curt?seyed to them deeply, spread?ing her arms to mime the skirts she wasn't wear?ing. "And may you have twice the num?ber, gen?tle?men."

Then they sim?ply looked at each oth?er, three young peo?ple who were un?cer?tain ex?act?ly how to pro?ceed. Roland didn't help; he sat astride K ush?er and on?ly watched care?ful?ly.

Su?s?san took a ten?ta?tive step for?ward, not laugh?ing now. There were still dim?ples at the com?ers of her lips, but her eyes were anx?ious.

"I hope you don't hate me," she said. "I'd un?der?stand it if you did—I've come in?to your plans ... and be?tween the three of you, as well—but I couldn't help it." Her hands were still out at her sides. Now she raised them to Alain and Cuth?bert, palms up. "I love him."

"We don't hate you," Alain said. "Do we, Bert?"

For a ter?ri?ble mo?ment Cuth?bert was silent, look?ing over Su?s?san's shoul?der, seem?ing to study the wax?ing De?mon Moon. She felt her heart stop. Then his gaze re?turned to her and he gave a smile of such sweet?ness that a con?fused but bril?liant thought (If I'd met this one first—, it be?gan) shot through her mind like a comet.

"Roland's love is my love," Cuth?bert said. He reached out, took her hands, and drew her for?ward so she stood be?tween him and Alain like a sis?ter with her two broth?ers. "For we have been friends since we wore cra?dle-?clothes, and we'll con?tin?ue as friends un?til one of us leaves the path and en?ters the clear?ing." Then he grinned like a kid. "May?hap we'll all find the end of the path to?geth?er, the way things are go?ing."

"And soon," Alain added.

"Just so long," Su?s?san Del?ga?do fin?ished, "as my Aunt Cordelia doesn't come along as our chap?er?one."

4

"We are ka-?tet," Roland said. "We are one from many."

He looked at each in turn, and saw no disagreement in their eyes. They had repaired to the mausoleum, and their breath smoked from their mouths and noses. Roland squatted on his hunkers, looking at the other three, who sat in a line on a stone meditation bench flanked by skeletal bouquets in stone pots. The floor was scattered with the petals of dead roses. Cuthbert and Alain, on either side of Susan, had their arms around her in quite unconscious fashion. Again Roland thought of one sister and two protective brothers.

"We're greater than we were," Alain said. "I feel that very strongly."

"I do, too," Cuthbert said. He looked around. "And a fine meeting-place, as well. Especially for such a knot as ours."

Roland didn't smile; repair had never been his strong suit. "Let's talk about what's going on in Hambray," he said, "and then we'll talk about the immediate future."

"We weren't sent here on a mission, you know," Alain said to Susan. "We were sent by our fathers to get us out of the way, that's all. Roland excited the envy of a man who is likely a cohort of John Parson's—"

"'Excited the envy of,'" Cuthbert said. "That's a good phrase. Round. I intend to remember it and use it at every opportunity."

"Control yourself," Roland said. "I've no desire to be here all night."

"Cry your pardon, O great one," Cuthbert said, but his eyes danced in a decidedly unrepentant way.

"We came with carrier pigeons for the sending and receiving of messages," Alain went on, "but I think the pigeons were laid on so our parents could be sure we were all right."

"Yes," Cuthbert said. "What Alain's trying to say is that we've been caught by surprise. Roland and I have had ... disagreements ... about how to go on. He wanted to wait. I didn't. I now believe he was right."

"But for the wrong reasons," Roland said in a dry tone. "In any case, we've settled our differences."

Susan was looking back and forth between them with something like alarm. What her gaze settled upon was the bruise on Roland's lower left jaw, clearly visible even in the faint light which crept through the half-open sepulchral door. "Settled them how?"

"It doesn't matter," Roland said. "Farson intends a battle, or perhaps a series of them, in the Shaved Mountains, to the north-west of Gilead. To the forces of the Affiliation moving toward him, he will seem trapped. In a more ordinary course of things, that might even have been true. Farson intends to engage them, trap them, and destroy them with the weapons of the Old People. These he will drive with oil from Citgo. The oil in the tankers we saw, Susan."

"Where will it be refined so Farson can use it?"

"Someplace west of here along his route," Cuthbert said. "We think very likely the Vi Castis. Do you know it? It's mining country."

"I've heard of it, but I've never actually been out of Hambray in my life." She looked levelly at Roland. "I think that's to change soon."

"There's a good deal of machinery left over from the days of the Old People in

those moun?ains,” Alain said. ”Most is up in the draws and canyons, they say. Robots and killer lights—ra?zor-?beams, such are called, be?cause they’ll cut you clean in half if you run in?to them. The gods know what else. Some of it’s un?doubt?ed?ly just leg?end, but where there’s smoke, there’s of?ten fire. In any case, it seems the most like?ly spot for re?fin?ing.“

”And then they’d take it on to where Far?son’s wait?ing,” Cuth?bert said. ”Not that that part mat?ters to us; we’ve got all we can han?dle right here in Mejis.“

”I’ve been wait?ing in or?der to get it all,” Roland said. ”Ev?ery bit of their damned plun?der.“

”In case you haven’t no?ticed, our friend is just a wee nub?bin am?bi tious,” Cuth?bert said, and winked.

Roland paid no at?ten?tion. He was look?ing in the di?rec?tion of Eye?bolt Canyon. There was no noise from there this night; the wind had shift?ed on?to its au?turnn course and away from town. ”If we can fire the oil, the rest will go up with it... and the oil is the most im?por?tant thing, any?way. I want to de?stroy it, then I want to get the hell out of here. The four of us.“

”They mean to move on Reap?ing Day, don’t they?“ Su?san asked.

”Oh yes, it seems so,” Cuth?bert said, then laughed. It was a rich, in fec?tious sound—the laugh?ter of a child—and as he did it, he rocked back and forth and held his stom?ach as a child would.

Su?san looked puz?zled. ”What? What is it?“

”I can’t tell,” he said, chortling. ”It’s too rich for me. I’ll laugh all the way through it, and Roland will be an?noyed. You do it, Al. Tell Su?san about our vis?it from Deputy Dave.“

”He came out to see us at the Bar K,” Alain said, smil?ing him?self. ”Talked to us like an un?cle. Told us Ham?bry-?folk don’t care for out?siders at their Fairs, and we’d best keep right to our place on the day of the full moon.“

”That’s in?sane!” Su?san spoke in?dig?nant?ly, as one is apt to when one hears one’s home?town un?just?ly ma?ligned. ”We wel?come strangers to our fairs, so we do, and al?ways have! We’re not a bunch of... of sav?ages!“

”Soft, soft,” Cuth?bert said, gig?gling. ”We know that, but Deputy Dave don’t know we know, do he? He knows his wife makes the best white tea for miles around, and af?ter that Dave’s pret?ty much at sea. Sher iff Herk knows a lee?tle more, I sh’d judge, but not much.“

”The pains they’ve tak?en to warn us off means two things,” Roland said. ”The first is that they in?tend to move on Reap?ing Fair-?Day, just as you said, Su?san. The sec?ond is that they think they can steal Par?son’s goods right out from un?der our noses.“

”And then per?haps blame us for it af?ter?ward,” Alain said.

She looked cu?ri?ous?ly from one to the oth?er, then said: ”What have you planned, then?“

”To de?stroy what they’ve left at Cit?go as bait of our own and then to strike them where they gath?er,” Roland said qui?et?ly. ”That’s Hang?ing Rock. At least half the tankers they mean to take west are there al?ready. They’ll have a force of men. As many as two hun?dred, per?haps, al?though I think it will turn out to be less. I in?tend

that all these men should die.”

“If they don’t, we will,” Alain said.

“How can the four of us kill two hundred soldiers?”

“We can’t. But if we can start one or two of the clustered tankers burning, we think there’ll be an explosion—maybe a fearful one. The surviving soldiers will be terrified, and the surviving leaders infuriated. They’ll see us, because we’ll let ourselves be seen ...”

Alain and Cuthbert were watching him breathlessly. The rest they had either been told or had guessed, but this part was the counsel Roland had, until now, kept to himself.

“What then?” she asked, frightened. “What then?”

“I think we can lead them into Eyebolt Canyon,” Roland said. “I think we can lead them into the thinny.”

5

Thunderstruck silence greeted this. Then, not without respect, Susan said:

“You’re mad.”

“No,” Cuthbert said thoughtfully. “He’s not. You’re thinking about that little cut in the canyon wall, aren’t you, Roland? The one just before the jog in the canyon floor.”

Roland nodded. “Four could scramble up that way without too much trouble. At the top, we’ll pile a fair amount of rock. Enough to start a landslide down on any that should try following us.”

“That’s horrible,” Susan said.

“It’s survival,” Alain replied. “If they’re allowed to have the oil and put it to use, they’ll slaughter every Affiliation man that gets in range of their weapons. The Good Man takes no prisoners.”

“I didn’t say wrong, only horrible.”

They were silent for a moment, four children contemplating the murders of two hundred men. Except they wouldn’t all be men; many (perhaps even most) would be boys roughly their own ages.

At last she said, “Those not caught in your rockslide will only ride back out of the canyon again.”

“No, they won’t.” Alain had seen the lay of the land and now under stood the matter almost completely. Roland was nodding, and there was a trace of a smile on his mouth.

“Why not?”

“The brush at the front of the canyon. We’re going to set it on fire, aren’t we, Roland? And if the prevailing winds are prevailing that day ... the smoke ...”

“It’ll drive them the rest of the way in,” Roland agreed. “Into the thinny.”

“How will you set the brush-pile alight?” Susan asked. “I know it’s dry, but surely you won’t have time to use a sulfur match or your flint and steel.”

“You can help us there,” Roland said, “just as you can help us set the tankers alight. We can’t count on touching off the oil with just our guns, you know; crude oil is a lot less volatile than people might think. And Sheemie’s going to help you, I hope.”

“Tell me what you want.”

6

They talked another twenty minutes, refining the plan surprisingly little— all of them seemed to understand that if they planned too much and things changed suddenly, they might freeze. Ka had swept them into this; it was perhaps best that they count on Ka—and their own courage—to sweep them back out again.

Cuthbert was reluctant to involve Sheemie, but finally went along—the boy’s part would be minimal, if not exactly low-risk, and Roland agreed that they could take him with them when they left Mejis for good. A party of five was as fine as a party of four, he said.

“All right,” Cuthbert said at last, then turned to Susan. “It ought to be you or me who talks to him.”

“I will.”

“Make sure he understands not to tell Coral Thorin so much as a word,” Cuthbert said. “It isn’t that the Mayor’s her brother; I just don’t trust that bitch.”

“I can give ye a better reason than Hart not to trust her,” Susan said. “My aunt says she’s taken up with Eldred Jonas. Poor Aunt Cord! She’s had the worst summer of her life. Nor will the fall be much better, I wot. Folk will call her the aunt of a traitor.”

“Some will know better,” Alain said. “Some always do.”

“Maybe, but my Aunt Cordelia’s the sort of woman who never hears good gossip. No more does she speak it. She fancied Jonas herself, ye ken.”

Cuthbert was thunderstruck. “Fancied Jonas! By all the fiddling gods! Can you imagine it! Why, if they hung folk for bad taste in love, your auntie would go early, wouldn’t she?”

Susan giggled, hugged her knees, and nodded.

“It’s time we left,” Roland said. “If something chances that Susan needs to know right away, we’ll use the red stone in the rock wall at Green Heart.”

“Good,” Cuthbert said. “Let’s get out of here. The cold in this place eats into the bones.”

Roland stirred, stretching life back into his legs. “The important thing is that they’ve decided to leave us free while they round up and run. That’s our edge, and it’s a good one. And now—”

Alain’s quiet voice stopped him. “There’s another matter. Very important.”

Roland sank back down on his hunkers, looking at Alain curiously.

“The witch.”

Susan started, but Roland only barked an impatient laugh. “She doesn’t figure in our business, Al—I can’t see how she could. I don’t believe she’s a part of Jonas’s conspiracy—”

“Neither do I,” Alain said.

—and Cuthbert and I persuaded her to keep her mouth shut about Susan and me. If we hadn’t, her aunt would have raised the roof by now.”

“But don’t you see?” Alain asked. “Who Rhea might have told isn’t really the question. The question is how she knew in the first place.”

“It’s pink,” Susan said abruptly. Her hand was on her hair, fingers touching the

place where the cut ends had begun to grow out.

"What's pink?" Alain asked.

"The moon," she said, and then shook her head. "I don't know. I don't know what I'm talking about. Brainless as Pinch and Jilly, I am ... Roland? What's wrong? What ails thee?"

For Roland was no longer humming; he had collapsed into a loose sitting position on the petal-strewn stone floor. He looked like a young man trying not to faint. Outside the mausoleum there was a bony rattle of fall leaves and the cry of a nightjar.

"Dear gods," he said in a low voice. "It can't be. It can't be true." His eyes met Cuthbert's.

All the humor had washed out of the latter young man's face, leaving a ruthless and calculating bedrock his own mother might not have recognized ... or might not have wanted to.

"Pink," Cuthbert said. "Isn't that interesting—the same word your father happened to mention just before we left, Roland, wasn't it? He warned us about the pink one. We thought it was a joke. Almost."

"Oh!" Alain's eyes flew wide open. "Oh, fuck!" he blurted. He realized what he had said while sitting leg-to-leg with his best friend's lover and clapped his hands over his mouth. His cheeks flamed red.

Susan barely noticed. She was staring at Roland in growing fear and confusion.

"What?" she asked. "What is it you know? Tell me! Tell me!"

"I'd like to hypnotize you again, as I did that day in the willow grove," Roland said. "I want to do it right now, before we talk of this more and drag mud across what you remember."

Roland had reached into his pocket while she was speaking. Now he took out a shell, and it began to dance across the back of his hand once more. Her eyes went to it at once, like steel drawn to a magnet.

"May I?" he asked. "By your leave, dear."

"Aye, as ye will." Her eyes were widening and growing glassy. "I don't know why ye think this time should be any different, but. . ." She stopped talking, her eyes continuing to follow the dance of the shell across Roland's hand. When he stopped moving it and clasped it in his fist, her eyes closed. Her breath was soft and regular.

"Gods, she went like a stone," Cuthbert whispered, amazed. "She's been hypnotized before. By Rhea, I think." Roland paused. Then: "Susan, do you hear me?"

"Aye, Roland, I hear ye very well." "I want you to hear another voice, too."

"Whose?"

Roland beckoned to Alain. If anyone could break through the block in Susan's mind (or find a way around it), it would be him.

"Mine, Susan," Alain said, coming to Roland's side. "Do you know it?" She smiled with her eyes closed. "Aye, you're Alain. Richard Stockworth that was."

"That's right." He looked at Roland with nervous, questioning eyes—What shall I ask her?—but for a moment Roland didn't reply. He was in two other places, both

at the same time, and hear?ing two dif?fer?ent voic?es.

Su?san, by the stream in the wil?low grove: She says, “Aye, love?ly, just so, it’s a good girl y’are, ” then ev?ery?thing’s pink.

His fa?ther, in the yard be?hind the Great Hall: It’s the grape?fruit. By which I mean it’s the pink one.

The pink one.

7

Their hors?es were sad?dled and load?ed; the three boys stood be?fore them, out?ward?ly stol?id, in?ward?ly fever?ish to be gone. The road, and the mys?ter ies that lie along it, calls out to none as it calls to the young.

They were in the court?yard which lay east of the Great Hall, not far from where Roland had best?ed Cort, set?ting all these things in mo?tion. It was ear?ly morn?ing, the sun not yet risen, the mist ly?ing over the green fields in gray rib?bons. At a dis?tance of about twen?ty paces, Cuth?bert’s and Alain’s fa?thers stood sen?try with their legs apart and their hands on the butts of their guns. It was un?like?ly that Marten (who had for the time be ing ab?sent?ed him?self from the palace, and, so far as any knew, from Gilead it?self) would mount any sort of at?tack on them—not here—but it wasn’t en?tire?ly out of the ques?tion, ei?ther.

So it was that on?ly Roland’s fa?ther spoke to them as they mount?ed up to be?gin their ride east to Mejis and the Out?er Arc.

“One last thing,” he said as they ad?just?ed their sad?dle girths. “I doubt you’ll see any?thing that (ouch?es on our in?ter?ests—not in Mejis—but I’d have you keep an eye out for a col?or of the rain?bow. The Wiz?ard’s Rain-?how, that is.” He chuck?led, then added: “It’s the grape?fruit. By which I mean it’s the pink one.”

“Wiz?ard’s Rain?bow is just a fairy-?tale,” Cuth?bert said, smil?ing in re?sponse to Steven’s smile. Then—per?haps it was some?thing in Steven De?schain’s eyes—Cuth?bert’s smile fal?tered. “Isn’t it?”

“Not all the old sto?ries are true, but I think that of Maer?lyn’s Rain?bow is,” Steven replied. “It’s said that once there were thir?teen glass balls in it—one for each of the Twelve Guardians, and one rep?re?sented?ing the nexus-?point of the Beams.”

“One for the Tow?er,” Roland said in a low voice, feel?ing goose?flesh. “One for the Dark Tow?er.”

“Aye, Thir?teen it was called when I was a boy. We’d tell sto?ries about the black ball around the fire some?times, and scare our?selves sil?ly . . . un less our fa?thers caught us at it. My own da said it wasn’t wise to talk about Thir?teen, for it might hear its name called and roll your way. But Black Thir?teen doesn’t mat?ter to you three . . . not now, at least. No, it’s the pink one. Maer?lyn’s Grape?fruit.”

It was im?pos?sible to tell how se?ri?ous he was . . . or if he was se?ri?ous at all.

“If the oth?er balls in the Wiz?ard’s Rain?bow did ex?ist, most are bro?ken now. Such things nev?er stay in one place or one pair of hands for long, you know, and even en?chant?ed glass has a way of break?ing. Yet at least three or four bends o’ the Rain?bow may still be rolling around this sad world of ours. The blue, al?most cer?tain?ly. A desert tribe of slow mu tants—the To?tal Hogs, they called them?selves—had that one less than fifty years ago, al?though it’s slipped from sight again since. The green and the or?ange are re?put?ed to be in Lud and Dis,

re?spec?tive?ly. And, just maybe, the pink one.“

”What ex?act?ly do they do?“ Roland asked. ”What are they good for?“

”For see?ing. Some col?ors of the Wiz?ard’s Rain?bow are re?put?ed to look in?to the fu?ture. Oth?ers look in?to the oth?er worlds—those where the demons live, those where the Old Peo?ple are sup?posed to have gone when they left our world. These may al?so show the lo?ca?tion of the se?cret doors which pass be?tween the worlds. Oth?er col?ors, they say, can look far in our own world, and see things peo?ple would as soon keep se?cret. They nev?er see the good; on?ly the ill. How much of this is true and how much is myth no one knows for sure.“

He looked at them, his smile fad?ing.

”But this we do know: John Far?son is said to have a tal?is?man, some thing that glows in his tent late at night ... some?times be?fore bat?tles, some?times be?fore large move?ments of troop and horse, some?times be?fore mo?men?tous de?ci?sions are an?nounced. And it glows pink.“

”Maybe he has an elec?tric light and puts a pink scarf over it when he prays,“ Cuth?bert said. He looked around at his friends, a lit?tle de?fen?sive?ly. ”I’m not jok?ing; there are peo?ple who do that.“

”Per?haps,“ Roland’s fa?ther said. ”Per?haps that’s all it is, or some?thing like. But per?haps it’s a good deal more. All I can say of my own knowl edge is that he keeps beat?ing us, he keeps slip?ping away from us, and he keeps turn?ing up where he’s least ex?pect?ed. If the mag?ic is in him and not in some tal?is?man he owns, gods help the Af?fil?ia?tion.“

”We’ll keep an eye out, if you like,“ Roland said, ”but Par?son’s in the north or west. We’re go?ing east.“ As if his fa?ther did not know this.

”If it’s a bend o’ the Rain?bow,“ Steven replied, ”it could be any where—east or south’s as like?ly as west. He can’t keep it with him all the time, you see. No mat?ter how much it would ease his mind and heart to do so. No one can.“

”Why not?“

”Be?cause they’re alive, and hun?gry,“ Steven said. ”One be?gins us?ing em; one ends be?ing used by em. If Far?son has a piece of the Rain?bow, he’ll send it away and call it back on?ly when he needs it. He un?der?stands the risk of los?ing it, but he al?so un?der?stands the risk of keep?ing it too long.“

There was a ques?tion which the oth?er two, con?strained by po?lite?ness, couldn’t ask. Roland could, and did. ”You are se?ri?ous about this. Dad? It’s not just a leg?-pull, is it?“

”I’m send?ing you away at an age when many boys still don’t sleep well if their moth?ers don’t kiss them good?night,“ Steven said. ”I ex?pect to see all three of you again, alive and well—Mejis is a love?ly, qui?et place, or was when I was a boy—but I can’t be sure of it. As things are these days, no one can be sure of any?thing. I wouldn’t send you away with a joke and a laugh. I’m sur?prised you think it.“

”Cry your par?don,“ Roland said. An un?easy peace had de?scend?ed be?tween him and his fa?ther, and he would not rup?ture it. Still, he was wild to be off. Push?er jigged be?neath him, as if sec?ond?ing that.

”I don’t ex?pect you boys to see Maer?lyn’s glass . . . but I didn’t ex?pect to be see?ing

you off at four?teen with re?volvers tucked in your bed rolls, ei?ther. Ka's at work here, and where ka works, any?thing is pos?si?ble.“

Slow?ly, slow?ly, Steven took off his hat, stepped back, and swept them a bow. ”Go in peace, boys. And re?turn in health.“

”Long days and pleas?ant nights, sai,“ Alain said.

”Good for?tune,“ Cuth?bert said.

”I love you,“ Roland said.

Steven nod?ded. ”Thankee-?sai—I love you, too. My bless?ings, boys.” He said this last in a loud voice, and the oth?er two men—Robert All?go?od and Christo?pher Johns, who had been known in the days of his sav?age youth as Burn?ing Chris—added their own bless?ings.

So the three of them rode to?ward their end of the Great Road, while sum?mer lay all about them, breath?less as a gasp. Roland looked up and saw some?thing that made him for?get all about the Wiz?ard's Rain?bow. It was his moth?er, lean?ing out of her apart?ment's bed?room win?dow: the oval of her face sur?round?ed by the time?less gray stone of the cas?tle's west wing. There were tears cours?ing down her cheeks, but she smiled and lift?ed one hand in a wide wave. Of the three of them, on?ly Roland saw her.

He didn't wave back.

8

”Roland!” An el?bow struck him in the ribs, hard enough to dis?pel these mem?ories, bril?liant as they were, and re?turn him to the present. It was Cuth?bert. ”Do some?thing, if you mean to! Get us out of this dead?house be?fore I shiv?er the skin right off my bones!”

Roland put his mouth close by Alain's ear. ”Be ready to help me.”

Alain nod?ded.

Roland turned to Su?san. ”Af?ter the first time we were to?geth?er an-?tet, you went to the stream in the grove.”

”Aye.”

”You cut some of your hair.”

”Aye.” That same dream?ing voice. ”So I did.”

”Would you have cut it all?”

”Aye, ev?ery lick and lock.”

”Do you know who told you to cut it?”

A long pause. Roland was about to turn to Alain when she said, ”Rhea.” An?oth?er pause. ”She want?ed to fid?dle me up.”

”Yes, but what hap?pened lat?er? What hap?pened while you stood in the door?way?”

”Oh, and some?thing else hap?pened be?fore.”

”What?”

”I fetched her wood,” said she, and said no more.

Roland looked at Cuth?bert, who shrugged. Alain spread his hands. Roland thought of ask?ing the lat?er boy to step for?ward, and judged it still wasn't quite time.

”Nev?er mind the wood for now,” he said, ”or all that came be?fore. We'll talk of that lat?er, may?hap, but not just yet. What hap?pened as you were leav?ing? What did she say to you about your hair?”

“Whispered in my ear. And she had a Jesus-man.”

“Whispered what?”

“I don’t know. That part is pink.”

Here it was. He nodded to Alain. Alain bit his lip and stepped forward. He looked frightened, but as he took Susan’s hands in his own and spoke to her, his voice was calm and soothing.

“Susan? It’s Alain Johns. Do you know me?”

“Aye—Richard Stockworth that was.”

“What did Rhea whisper in your ear?”

A frown, faint as a shadow on an overcast day, creased her brow. “I can’t see. It’s pink.”

“You don’t need to see,” Alain said. “Seeing’s not what we want right now. Close your eyes so you can’t do it at all.”

“They are closed,” she said, a trifling pettishly. She’s frightened, Roland thought. He felt an urge to tell Alain to stop, to wake her up, and restrained it.

“The ones inside,” Alain said. “The ones that look out from memory. Close those, Susan. Close them for your father’s sake, and tell me not what you see but what you hear. Tell me what she said.”

Chillingly, unexpectedly, the eyes in her face opened as she closed those in her mind. She stared at Roland, and through him, with the eyes of an ancient statue.

Roland bit back a scream.

“You were in the doorway, Susan?” Alain asked.

“Aye. So we both were.”

“Be there again.”

“Aye.” A dreaming voice. Faint but clear. “Even with my eyes closed I can see—the moon’s light. ‘Tis as big as a grapefruit.”

It’s the grapefruit, Roland thought. By which I mean, it’s the pink one.

“And what do you hear? What does she say?”

“No, I say.” The faintly petulant voice of a little girl. “First I say, Alain. I say ‘And is our business done?’ and she says ‘Mayhap there’s one more little thing,’ and then ... then...”

Alain squeezed gently down on her hands, using whatever it was he had in his own, his touch, sending it into her. She tried feebly to pull back, but he wouldn’t let her. “Then what? What next?”

“She has a little silver medal.”

“Yes?”

“She leans close and asks if I hear her. I can smell her breath. It reeks of garlic. And other things, even worse.” Susan’s face wrinkled in distaste. “I say I hear her. Now I can see. I see the medal she has.”

“Very well, Susan,” Alain said. “What else do you see?”

“Rhea. She looks like a skull in the moonlight. A skull with hair.”

“Gods,” Cuthbert muttered, and crossed his arms over his chest.

“She says I should listen. I say I will listen. She says I should obey. I say I will obey. She says ‘Aye, love, just so, it’s a good girl you are.’ She’s stroking my hair. All the time. My braid.” Susan raised a dreaming, drowning hand, pale in the

shadows of the crypt, to her blonde hair. "And then she says there's something I'm to do when my virginity's over. 'Wait,' she says, 'until he's asleep beside ye, then cut yer hair off yer head. Every strand. Right down to yer very skull.' "

The boys looked at her in mounting horror as her voice became Rhea's—the growling, whining cadences of the old woman of the Coos. Even the face—except for the coldly dreaming eyes—had become a hag's face.

" 'Cut it all, girl, every whore's strand of it, aye, and go back to him as bald as ye came from yer mother! See how he likes ye then!' "

She fell silent. Alain turned his pallid face to Roland. His lips were trembling, but still he held her hands.

"Why is the moon pink?" Roland asked. "Why is the moon pink when you try to remember?"

"It's her glam." Susan seemed almost surprised, almost gay. Confiding. "She keeps it under her bed, so she does. She doesn't know I saw it."

"Are you sure?"

"Aye," Susan said, then added simply: "She would have killed me if she knew." She giggled, shocking them all. "Rhea has the moon in a box under her bed." She lilted this in the singsong voice of a small child.

"A pink moon," Roland said.

"Aye."

"Under her bed."

"Aye." This time she did pull her hands free of Alain's. She made a circle with them in the air, and as she looked up at it, a dreadful expression of greed passed over her face like a cramp. "I should like to have it, Roland. So I should. Lovely moon! I saw it when she sent me for the wood. Through her window. She looked ... young." Then, once again: "I sh'd like to have such a thing."

"No—you wouldn't. But it's under her bed?"

"Aye, in a magic place she makes with passes."

"She has a piece of Maerlyn's Rainbow," Cuthbert said in a wondering voice.

"The old bitch has what your da told us about—no wonder she knows all she does!"

"Is there more we need?" Alain asked. "Her hands have gotten very cold. I don't like having her this deep. She's done well, but. . ."

"I think we're done."

"Shall I tell her to forget?"

Roland shook his head at once—they were ka-tet, for good or ill. He took hold of her fingers, and yes, they were cold.

"Susan?"

"Aye, dear."

"I'm going to say a rhyme. When I finish, you'll remember every thing, as you did before. All right?"

She smiled and closed her eyes again. "Bird and bear and hare and fish. . ."

Smiling, Roland finished, "Give my love her fondest wish."

Her eyes opened. She smiled. "You," she said again, and kissed him. "Still you, Roland. Still you, my love."

Un?able to help him?self, Roland put his arms around her.

Cuth?bert looked away. Alain looked down at his boots and cleared his throat.

9

As they rode back to?ward Seafront, Su?san with her arms around Roland's waist, she asked: "Will you take the glass from her?"

"Best leave it where it is for now. It was left in her safe?keep?ing by Jonas, on be?half of Par?son, I have no doubt. It's to be sent west with the rest of the plun?der; I've no doubt of that, ei?ther. We'll deal with it when we deal with the tankers and Par?son's men."

"Ye'd take it with us?"

"Take it or break it. I sup?pose I'd rather take it back to my fa?ther, but that has its own risks. We'll have to be care?ful. It's a pow?er?ful glam."

"Sup?pose she sees our plans? Sup?pose she warns Jonas or Kim?ba Rimer?"

"If she doesn't see us com?ing to take away her pre?cious toy, I don't think she'll mind our plans one way or the oth?er. I think we've put a scare in?to her, and if the ball has re?al?ly got?ten a hold on her, watch?ing in it's what she'll most?ly want to do with her time now."

"And hold on?to it. She'll want to do that, too."

"Aye."

Rush?er was walk?ing along a path through the sea?cliff woods. Through the thin?ning branch?es they could glimpse the ivied gray wall sur?round?ing May?or's House and hear the rhyth?mic roar of waves break?ing on the shin?gle be?low.

"You can get in safe, Su?san?"

"No fear."

"And you know what you and Sheemie are to do?"

"Aye. I feel bet?ter than I have in ages. It's as if my mind is fi?nal?ly clear of some old shad?ow."

"If so, it's Alain you have to thank. I couldn't have done it on my own."

"There's mag?ic in his hands."

"Yes." They had reached the ser?vants' door. Su?san dis?mount?ed with flu?id ease. He stepped down him?self and stood be?side her with an arm around her waist. She was look?ing up at the moon.

"Look, it's fat?tened enough so you can see the be?gin?ning of the De mon's face. Does thee see it?"

A blade of nose, a bone of grin. No eye yet, but yes, he saw it.

"It used to ter?ri?fy me when I was lit?tle." Su?san was whis?per?ing now, mind?ful of the house be?hind the wall. "I'd pull the blind when the De?mon was full. I was afraid that if he could see me, he'd reach down and take me up to where he was and eat me." Her lips were trem?bling. "Chil?dren are sil?ly, aren't they?"

"Some?times." He hadn't been afraid of De?mon Moon him?self as a small child, but he was afraid of this one. The fu?ture seemed so dark, and the way through to the light so slim. "I love thee, Su?san. With all my heart, I do."

"I know. And I love thee." She kissed his mouth with gen?tle open lips. Put his hand on her breast for a mo?ment, then kissed the warm palm. He held her, and she looked past him at the ripen?ing moon.

“A week un?til the Reap,” she said. “Fin de ano is what the va?que?ros and labradoros call it. Do they call it so in your land?”

“Near enough,” Roland said. “It’s called clos?ing the year. Wom?en go about giv?ing pre?servees and kiss?es.”

She laughed soft?ly against his shoul?der. “Per?haps I’ll not find things so dif?fer?ent, af?ter all.”

“You must save all your best kiss?es for me.”

“I will.”

“What?ev?er comes, we’ll be to?geth?er,” he said, but above them, De mon Moon grinned in?to the star?ry dark above the Clean Sea, as if he knew a dif?fer?ent fu?ture.

CHAP?TER VI

CLOS?ING THE YEAR

1

So now comes to Mejis fin de ano, known in to?ward the cen?ter of Mid-?World as clos?ing the year. It comes as it has a thou?sand times be?fore ... or ten thou?sand, or a hun?dred thou?sand. No one can tell for sure; the world has moved on and time has grown strange. In Mejis their say?ing is “Time is a face on the wa?ter.”

In the fields, the last of the pota?toes are be?ing picked by men and wom?en who wear gloves and their heav?iest scrapes, for now the wind has turned firm?ly, blow?ing east to west, blow?ing hard, and al?ways there’s the smell of salt in the chilly air—a smell like tears. Los campesinos har?vest the fi?nal rows cheer?ful?ly enough, talk?ing of the things they’ll do and the ca?pers they’ll cut at Reap?ing Fair, but they feel all of au?tumn’s old sad ness in the wind; the go?ing of the year. It runs away from them like wa?ter in a stream, and al?though none speak of it, all know it very well.

In the or?chards, the last and high?est of the ap?ples are picked by laugh ing young men (in these not-?quite-?gales, the fi?nal days of pick?ing be?long on?ly to them) who bob up and down like crow’s nest look?outs. Above them, in skies which hold a bril?liant, cloud?less blue, squadrons of geese fly south, call?ing their rusty adieux. The small fish?ing boats are pulled from the wa?ter; their hulls are scraped and paint?ed by singing own?ers who most?ly work stripped to the waist in spite of the chill in the air. They sing the old songs as they work—

I am a man of the bright blue sea,

All I see, all I see,

I am a man of the Barony,

All I see is mine-?o!

I am a man of the bright blue hay,

All I say, all I say,

Un?til my nets are full I stay

All I say is fine-?o!

—and some?times a lit?tle cask of graf is tossed from dock to dock. On the bay it?self on?ly the large boats now re?main, pac?ing about the big cir?cles which mark their dropped nets as a work?ing dog may pace around a flock of sheep. At noon the bay is a rip?pling sheet of au?tumn fire and the men on the boats sit cross-?legged, eat?ing their lunch?es, and know that all they see is theirs-?o ... at least un?til the gray gales

of au?umn come swarm?ing over the hori?zon, cough?ing out their gusts of sleet and snow.

Clos?ing, clos?ing the year.

Along the streets of Ham?bry, the Reap-?lights now bum at night, and the hands of the stuffy-?guys are paint?ed red. Reap-?charms hang ev?ery where, and al?though wom?en of?ten kiss and are kissed in the streets and in both mar?ket?places—of?ten by men they do not know—sex?ual in?ter?course has come to an al?most com?plete halt. It will re?sume (with a bang, you might say) on Reap-?Night. There will be the usu?al crop of Full Earth ba bies the fol?low?ing year as a re?sult.

On the Drop, the hors?es gal?lop wild?ly, as if un?der?stand?ing (very like?ly they do) that their time of free?dom is com?ing to an end. They swoop and then stand with their faces point?ing west when the wind gusts, show ing their ass?es to win?ter. On the ranch?es, porch-?nets are tak?en down and shut?ters re?hung. In the huge ranch kitchens and small?er farm?house kitchens, no one is steal?ing Reap-?kiss?es, and no one is even think?ing about sex. This is the time of putting up and lay?ing by, and the kitchens fume with steam and pulse with heat from be?fore dawn un?til long af?ter dark. There is the smell of ap?ples and beets and beans and sharp?root and cur?ing strips of meat. Wom?en work cease?less?ly all day and then sleep walk to bed, where they lie like corpses un?til the next dark morn?ing calls them back to their kitchens.

Leaves are burned in town yards, and as the week goes on and Old De?mon's face shows ev?er more clear?ly, red-?hand?ed stuffy-?guys are thrown on the pyres more and more fre?quent?ly. In the fields, corn?shucks flare like torch?es, and of?ten stuffies bum with them, their red hands and white-?cross eyes rip?pling in the heat. Men stand around these fires, not speak?ing, their faces solemn. No one will say what ter?ri?ble old ways and un?speak?able old gods are be?ing pro?pi?ti?at?ed by the burn?ing of the stuffy-?guys, but they all know well enough. From time to time one of these men will whis?per two words un?der his breath: chary?ou tree.

They are clos?ing, clos?ing, clos?ing the year.

The streets rat?tle with fire?crack?ers—and some?times with a hefti?er “big-?hang” that makes even placid carthors?es rear in their traces—and echo with the laugh?ter of chil?dren. On the porch of the mer?can?tile and across the street at the Trav?ellers' Rest, kiss?es—some?times hu?mid?ly open and with much sweet lash?ing of tongues—are ex?changed, but Coral Thorin's whores (“cot?ton-?gillies” is what the airy-?fairy ones like Gert Mog?gins like to call them?selves) are bored. They will have lit?tle cus?tom this week.

This is not Year's End, when the win?ter?logs will bum and Mejis will be bamdances from one end to the oth?er . . . and yet it is. This is the re?al year's end, chary?ou tree, and ev?ery?one, from Stan?ley Ruiz stand?ing at the bar be?neath The Romp to the far?thest of Fran Lengyll's va?que?ros out on the edge of the Bad Grass, knows it. There is a kind of echo in the bright air, a yearn?ing for oth?er places in the blood, a lone?li?ness in the heart that sings like the wind.

But this year there's some?thing else, as well: a sense of wrong?ness that no one can quite voice. Folks who nev?er had a night?mare in their lives will awake scream?ing with them dur?ing the week of fin de ano; men who con?sider them?selves peace?ful

will find them? selves not on? ly in fist-? fights but in? sti? gat? ing them; dis? con? tent? ed boys who would on? ly have dreamed of run? ning away in oth? er years will this year ac? tu? al? ly do it, and most will not come back af? ter the first night spent sleep? ing raw. There is a sense—inar? tic? ulate but very much there—that things have gone amiss this sea? son. It is the clos? ing of the year; it is al? so the clos? ing of the peace. For it is here, in the sleepy Out-? World Barony of Mejis, that Mid-? World's last great con? flict will short? ly be? gin; it is from here that the blood will be? gin to flow. In two years, no more, the world as it has been will be swept away. It starts here. From its field of ros? es, the Dark Tow? er cries out in its beast's voice. Time is a face on the wa? ter.

2

Coral Thorin was com? ing down the High Street from the Bayview Ho? tel when she spied Sheemie, lead? ing Capri? choso and head? ing in the op? po? site di? rec? tion. The boy was singing “Care? less Love” in a voice both high and sweet. His progress was slow; the bar? rels slung over Capi's back were half again as large as the ones he had car? ried up to the Coos not long be? fore.

Coral hailed her boy-? of-? all-? work cheer? ily enough. She had rea? son to be cheery; El? dred Jonas had no use for fin de ano ab? sti? nence. And for a man with a bad leg, he could be very in? ven? tive.

“Sheemie!” she called. “Where go ye? Seafront?”

“Aye,” Sheemie said. “I've got the graf them asked for. All par? ties come Reap? ing Fair, aye, tons of em. Dance a lot, get hot a lot, drink graf to cool off a lot! How pret? ty you look, sai Thorin, cheeks all pinky-? pink, so they are.”

“Oh, law! How kind of you to say, Sheemie!” She fa? vored him with a daz? zling smile. “Go on, now, you flat? ter? er—don't linger.”

“Noey-? no, off I go.”

Coral stood watch? ing af? ter him and smil? ing. Dance a lot, get hot a lot, Sheemie had said. About the danc? ing Coral didn't know, but she was sure this year's Reap? ing would be hot, all right. Very hot in? deed.

3

Miguel met Sheemie at Seafront's arch? way, gave him the look of lofty con? tempt he re? served for the low? er or? ders, then pulled the cork from first one bar? rel and then the oth? er. With the first, he on? ly sniffed from the bung; at the sec? ond, he stuck his thumb in and then sucked it thought? ful? ly. With his wrin? kled cheeks hol? lowed in? ward and his tooth? less old mouth work? ing, he looked like an an? cient beard? ed ba? by.

“Tasty, ain't it?” Sheemie asked. “Tasty as a pasty, ain't it, good old Miguel, been here a thou? sand years?”

Miguel, still suck? ing his thumb, fa? vored Sheemie with a sour look. “An? dale. An? dale, sim? plon. ”

Sheemie led his mule around the house to the kitchen. Here the breeze off the ocean was sharp and shiv? er? some. He waved to the wom? en in the kitchen, but not a one waved back; like? ly they didn't even see him. A pot boiled on ev? ery trink of the enor? mous stove, and the wom? en— work? ing in loose long-? sleeved cot? ton gar? ments like shifts and wear? ing their hair tied up in bright? ly col? ored clouts—moved about

like phantoms glimpsed in fog.

Sheemie took first one barrel from Capi's back, then the other. Grunting, 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 eldergall.

"Whew!" he said, hoisting the first barrel. "Ye could get drunk just on the smell o' that lot!"

He emptied in the fresh gill, careful not to spill. When he was finished, the tank was pretty well topped up. That was good, for on Reaping Night, apple-beer would flow out of the kitchen taps like water.

He slipped the empty barrels into their carriers, looked into the kitchen once more to be sure he wasn't being observed (he wasn't; Coral's simple-minded tavern-boy was the last thing on anyone's minds that morning), and then led Capi not back the way they'd come but along a path which led to Seafront's storage sheds.

There were three of them in a row, each with its own red-handed stuffy-guy sitting in front. The guys appeared to be watching Sheemie, and that gave him the shivers. Then he remembered his trip to crazy old bitch-lady Rhea's house. She had been scary. These were just old duds stuffed full of straw.

"Susan?" he called, low. "Are ye here?"

The door of the center shed was ajar. Now it swung 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 sharp. 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 tilted. "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, looking 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 gill 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 Capri'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 corner 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 sea-coast. 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 Ham-bry 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 mysterious-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 probably looked like a fucking farmer.

The place seemed fine, though . . . which was to say, deserted. The wind made a lonely sighing sound as it combed through the firs on either 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 Hi-ram Quint of the Pi-ano Ranch and

Barkie Callahan of the Travellers' Rest came ducking their way out through the trees. Holy shit, Reynolds thought, somewhere between 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 unlucky, it would blow up in his face and blind him.

"All quiet?" he asked.

Quint replied in Mejis gibble-babble. Barkie listened, then said: "All well, said. 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 shit couldn't blow his nose."

"But he's a trustworthy idiot?"

Barkie shrugged. It might have been as sent.

They went through the trees. Where Roland and Susan had seen almost 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 trustworthy 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 scary 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: murder.

5

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, mewling 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 snake-skin 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 meaness, all its pettiness (and not so pettiness) cruelties, all its cozying and lying lay before her. Most of what she saw was small and demeaning stuff—masculine boys peeking through knot-holes at their undressed sisters, wives going through husbands' pockets,

look?ing for ex?tra mon?ey or to?bac?co, Sheb the pi?ano-?play?er lick?ing the seat of the chair where his fa?vorite whore had sat for awhile, a maid at Seafront spit?ting in?to Kim?ba Rimer's pil?low?case af?ter the Chan?cel?lor had kicked her for be?ing slow in get?ting out of his way.

These were all things which con?firmed her opin?ion of the so?ci?ety she had left be?hind. Some?times she laughed wild?ly; some?times she spoke to the peo?ple she saw in the glass ball, as if they could hear her. By the third day of the week be?fore Reap?ing, she had ceased her trips to the privy, even though she could car?ry the ball with her when she went, and the sour stench of urine be?gan to rise from her.

By the fourth day, Musty had ceased com?ing near her. Rhea dreamed in the ball and lost her?self in her dreams, as oth?ers had done be?fore her; deep in the pet?ty plea?sures of far see?ing, she was un aware that the pink ball was steal?ing the wrin?kled re?mains of her an?ima. She like?ly would have con?sid?ered it a fair trade if she had known. She saw all the things peo?ple did in the shad?ows, and they were the on?ly things she cared for, and for them she al?most cer?tain?ly would have con?sid?ered her life's force a fair trade.

6

"Here," the boy said, "let me light it, gods damn you." Jonas would have rec?og?nized the speak?er; he was the lad who had waved a sev?ered dog's tail across the street at Jonas and called, We're Big Cof?fin Hunters just like you!

The boy to whom this charm?ing child had spo?ken tried to hold on?to the piece of liv?er they had copped from the knack?er's be?hind the Low Mar?ket. The first boy seized his ear and twist?ed. The sec?ond boy howled and held the chunk of liv?er out, dark blood run?ning down his grimy knuck?les as he did.

"That's bet?ter," the first boy said, tak?ing it. "You want to re?mem?ber who the ca?pataz is, round here."

They were be?hind a bak?ery stall in the Low Mar?ket. Near?by, drawn by the smell of hot fresh bread, was a mangy mutt with one blind eye. He stared at them with hun?gry hope.

There was a slit in the chunk of raw meat. Pok?ing out of it was a green big-?bang fuse. Be?low the fuse, the liv?er bulged like the stom?ach of a preg?nant wom?an. The first boy took a sul?fur match, stuck it be?tween his pro?trud?ing front teeth, and lit it.

"He won't nev?er!" said a third boy, in an agony of hope and an?tic?ipa?tion.

"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, cul?ly!" he called to the dog. "Want a bite o' sumpin good? Here ye go!"

He threw the chunk of raw liv?er. The scrawny dog nev?er hes?itat?ed at the hiss?ing fuse, but lunged for?ward with its one good eye fixed on the first de?cent food it had seen in days. As it snatched the liv?er out of the air, the big-?bang the boys had slipped in?to it went off. There was a roar and a flash. The dog's head dis?in?te?grat?ed from the jaws down. For a mo?ment it con?tin?ued to stand there, drip?ping, star?ing at them with its one good eye, and then it col?lapsed.

"Toad?jer!" the first boy jeered. "Toad?jer he'd take it! Hap?py Reap to us, eh?"

“What are you boys do?ing?” a wom?an’s voice called sharply. “Get out of there, ye ravens!”

The boys fled, cack?ling, in?to the bright af?ter?noon. They did sound like ravens.

7

Cuth?bert and Alain sat their hors?es at the mouth of Eye?bolt. Even with the wind blow?ing the sound of the thin?ny away from them, it got in?side your head and buzzed there, rat?tling your teeth.

“I hate it,” Cuth?bert said through clenched teeth. “Gods, let’s be quick.”

“Aye,” Alain said. They dis?mount?ed, bulky in their ranch-?coats, and tied their hors?es to the brush which lay across the front of the canyon. Or di?nar?ily, teth?er?ing wouldn’t have been nec?es?sary, but both boys could see the hors?es hat?ed the whin?ing, grind?ing sound as much as they did. Cuth bert seemed to hear the thin?ny in his mind, speak?ing words of in?vi?ta?tion in a groan?ing, hor?ri?bly per?sua?sive voice. Come on, Bert. Leave all this fool?ish?ness be?hind: the drums, the pride, the fear of death, the lone?li?ness you laugh at be?cause laugh?ing’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 in stead of you, but if you come to me, all that will stop both?er?ing you very soon. So come on. What are you wait?ing for?

“What am I wait?ing for?” he mut?tered.

“Huh?”

“I said, what are we wait?ing for? Let’s get this done and get the holy hell out of here.”

From their sad?dle?bags they each took a small cot?ton bag. These con tained gun?pow?der ex?tract?ed from the small?er fire?crack?ers Sheemie had brought them two days be?fore. Alain dropped to his knees, pulled his knife, and be?gan to crawl back?ward, dig?ging a trench as far un?der the roll of brush as he could.

“Dig it deep,” Cuth?bert said. “We don’t want the wind to blow it away.”

Alain gave him a look which was re?mark?ably hot. “Do you want to do it? Just so you can make sure it’s done right?”

It’s the thin?ny, Cuth?bert thought. It’s work?ing on him, too.

“No, Al,” he said humbly. “You’re do?ing fine for some?one who’s both blind and soft in the head. Go on.”

Alain looked at him fierce?ly a mo?ment longer, then grinned and re sumed the trench un?der the brush. “You’ll die young, Bert.”

“Aye, like?ly.” Cuth?bert dropped to his own knees and be?gan to crawl af?ter Alain, sprin?kling gun?pow?der in?to the trench and try?ing to ig?nore the buzzy, ca?jol?ing voice of the thin?ny. No, the gun?pow?der prob?ably wouldn’t blow away, not un?less there was a full gale. But if it rained, even the rolls of brush wouldn’t be much pro?tec?tion. If it rained—

Don’t think of that, he told him?self. That’s ka.

They fin?ished load?ing gun?pow?der trench?es un?der both sides of the brush bar?ri?er in on?ly ten min?utes, but it felt longer. To the hors?es as well, it seemed; they were stamp?ing im?pa?tient?ly at the far end of their teth?ers, their ears laid back and their eyes rolling. Cuth?bert and Alain un?tied them and mount?ed up. Cuth?bert’s horse ac?tu?al?ly bucked twice . . . ex?cept it felt more to Cuth?bert as if the poor old thing

were shud?der?ing.

In the mid?dle dis?tance, bright sun?shine twanged of bright steel. The tankers at Hang?ing Rock. They had been pulled in as light to the sand?stone out?crop as pos?si?ble, but when the sun was high, most of the shad?ow dis?ap?peared, and con?ceal?ment dis?ap?peared with it.

“I re?al?ly can’t be?lieve it,” Alain said as they start?ed back. It would be a long ride, in?clud?ing a wide swing around Hang?ing Rock to make sure they weren’t seen.

“They must think we’re blind.”

“It’s stupid they think we are,” Cuth?bert said, “but I sup?pose it comes to the same.”

Now that Eye?bolt Canyon was falling be?hind them, he felt al?most gid?dy with re?lief. Were they go?ing in there a few days from now? Ac?tu?al?ly go?ing in, rid?ing to with?in mere yards of where that cursed pud?dle start?ed? He couldn’t be?lieve it ... and he made him?self stop think?ing about it be?fore he could start be?liev?ing it.

“More rid?ers head?ing out to Hang?ing Rock,” Alain said, point?ing back to?ward the woods be?yond the canyon. “Do you see them?”

They were small as ants from this dis?tance, but Bert saw them very well.

“Chang?ing the guard. The im?por?tant thing is that they don’t see us— you don’t think they can, do you?”

“Over here? Not like?ly.”

Cuth?bert didn’t think so, ei?ther.

“They’ll all be down come Reap, won’t they?” Alain asked. “It won’t do us much good to on?ly catch a few.”

“Yes—I’m pret?ty sure they all will.”

“Jonas and his pals?”

“Them, too.”

Ahead of them, the Bad Grass grew clos?er. The wind blew hard in their faces, mak?ing their eyes wa?ter, but Cuth?bert didn’t mind. The sound of the thin?ny was down to a faint drone be?hind him, and would soon be gone com?plete?ly. Right now that was all he need?ed to make him hap?py.

“Do you think we’ll get away with it, Bert?”

“Dun?no,” Cuth?bert said. Then he thought of the gun?pow?der trench?es ly?ing be?neath 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 ev?ery oth?er Barony of Mid-?World, the week be?fore a Fair-?Day was a po?lit?ical week. Im?por?tant peo?ple came in from the far?ther cor?ners of the Barony, and there were a good many Con?ver?sa?tion?als lead?ing up to the main

Con?ver?sa?tion?al on Reap?ing Day. Su?san was ex?pect?ed to be present at these—most?ly as a dec?ora?tive tes?ti?mo?ny to the May?or’s con?tin?uing puis?sance.

Olive was al?so present, and, in a cru?el?ly com?ic dumb-?show that on?ly the wom?en tru?ly ap?pre?ci?at?ed, they sat on ei?ther side of the ag?ing cock?atoo, Su?san pour?ing the cof?fee, Olive pass?ing the cake, both of them grace?ful?ly ac?cept?ing com?pli?ments on food and drink they’d had no hand in prepar?ing.

Su?san found it al?most im?pos?si?ble to look at Olive’s smil?ing, un?hap?py face. Her hus?band would nev?er lie with Pat Del?ga?do’s daugh?ter . . . but sai Thorin didn’t

know that, and Su?san couldn't tell her. She had on?ly to glimpse the May?or's wife from the com?er oth?er eye to re?mem?ber what Roland had said that day on the Drop: For a mo?ment I thought she was my moth?er. But that was the prob?lem, wasn't it? Olive Thorin was no?body's moth?er. That was what had opened the door to this hor?ri?ble sit?ua?tion in the first place.

There had been some?thing much on Su?san's mind to do, but with the round of ac?tiv?ities at May?or's House, it was but three days to Reap?ing be fore she got the chance. Fi?nal?ly, fol?low?ing this lat?est Con?ver?sa?tion?al, she was able to slip out of Pink Dress with Ap?plique (how she hat?ed it! how she hat?ed them all!) and jump back in?to jeans, a plain rid?ing shirt, and a ranch-?coat. There was no time to braid her hair, as she was ex?pect?ed back for May?or's Tea, but Maria tied it back for her and off she had gone to the house she would short?ly be leav?ing for?ev?er.

Her busi?ness was in the back room of the sta?ble—the room her fa?ther had used as an of?fice—but she went in?to the house first and heard what she'd hoped to hear: her aunt's la?dy?like, whistling snores. Love?ly.

Su?san got a slice of bread and hon?ey and took it out to the barn-?sta?ble, pro?tect?ing it as best she could from the clouds of dust that blew across the yard in the wind.

Her aunt's stuffy-?guy rat?tled on his post in the gar?den.

She ducked in?to the sweet-?smelling shad?ows of the barn. Py?lon and Fe?li?cia nick?ered hel?lo, and she di?vid?ed what she hadn't eat?en be?tween them. They seemed pleased enough to get it. She made es?pe?cial?ly of Fe?li cia, whom she would soon be leav?ing be?hind.

She had avoid?ed the lit?tle of?fice since her fa?ther died, afraid of ex?act?ly the sort of pang that struck her when she lift?ed the latch and went in. The nar?row win?dows were now cov?ered with cob?webs, but they still let in au?tumn's bright light, more than enough for her to be able to see the pipe in the ash?tray—the red one, his fa?vorite, the one he called his think?ing-?pipe— and a bit of tack laid over the back of his desk chair. He had prob?ably been mend?ing it by gaslight, had put it by think?ing to fin?ish the next day ... then the snake had done its dance un?der Foam's hoofs and there had nev?er been a next day. Not for Pat Del?ga?do.

"Oh, Da," she said in a small and bro?ken voice. "How I do miss thee."

She crossed to the desk and ran her fin?gers along its sur?face, leav?ing trails of dust.

She sat down in his chair, lis?tened to it creak un?der her as it had al?ways creaked un?der him, and that pushed her over the edge. For the next five min?utes she sat there and wept, screw?ing her fists in?to her eyes as she had as a wee shim. On?ly now, of course, there was no Big Pat to come up?on her and jol?ly her out of it, tak?ing her on his lap and kiss?ing her in that sen?si?tive place un?der her chin (es?pe?cial?ly sen?si?tive to the bris?tles on his up?per lip, it had been) un?til her tears turned to gig?gles. Time was a face on the wa?ter, and this time it was the face of her fa?ther.

At last her tears ta?pered to snif?fles. She opened the desk draw?ers, one af?ter an?oth?er, find?ing more pipes (many ren?dered use?less by his con?stant stem-chew?ing), a hat, one of her own dolls (it had a bro?ken arm Pat had ap?par?ent?ly nev?er got?ten around to putting right), quill-?pens, a lit?tle flask— emp?ty but with a faint smell of whiskey still present around its neck. The on?ly item of in?ter?est was

in the bot?tom draw?er: a pair of spurs. One still had its star row?el, but the oth?er had been bro?ken off. These were, she was al?most pos?itive, the spurs he had been wear?ing on the day he died.

If my da was here, she had be?gun that day on the Drop. But he's not, Roland had said. He's dead.

A pair of spurs, a bro?ken-?off row?el.

She bounced them in her hand, in her mind's eye see?ing Ocean Foam rear, spilling her fa?ther (one spur catch?es in a stir?rup; the row?el breaks free), then stum?bling side?ways and falling atop him. She saw this clear?ly, 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 Del?ga?do's smart hand. Here was a line of leather-?bound ledgers, a price?less trove of books in a so?ci?ety that had for?got?ten how to make pa?per. Her fa?ther had been the man in charge of the Barony's horse for al?most thir?ty years, and here were his stock?line books to prove it.

Su?san took down the last one and be?gan to page through it. This time she al?most wel?comed the pang that struck her as she saw her fa?ther's fa mil?iar hand—the la?bored script, the steep and some?how more con?fi?dent num?bers.

Born of HEN?RI?ET?TA, (2) foals both well

Still?born of DELIA, a roan (MU?TANT)

Born of YOLAN?DA, a THOR?OUGH?BRED, a GOOD MALE COLT

And, fol?low?ing each, the date. So neat, he had been. So thor?ough. So ...

She stopped sud?den?ly, aware that she had found what she was look ing for even with?out any clear knowl?edge of what she was do?ing in here. I he last dozen pages of her da's fi?nal stock?line book had been torn out.

Who had done it? Not her fa?ther; a large?ly self-?taught man, he revered pa?per the way some peo?ple revered gods or gold.

And why had it been done?

That she thought she knew: hors?es, of cours?es. There were too many on the Drop.

And the ranch?ers—Lengyll, Croy?don, Ren?frew—were ly?ing about the thread?ed qual?ity of the stock?line. So was Hen?ry Wert?ner, the man who had suc?ceed?ed to her fa?ther's job.

If my da was here—

But he's not. He's dead.

She had told Roland she couldn't be?lieve Fran Lengyll would lie about her fa?ther's death . . . but she could be?lieve it now.

Gods help her, she could be?lieve it now.

“What are ye do?ing in here?”

She gave a lit?tle scream, dropped the book, and whirled around. Cordelia stood there in one of her rusty black dress?es. The top three but tons were un?done, and Su?san could see her aunt's col?lar?bones stick?ing out above the plain white cot?ton of her shift. It was on?ly on see?ing those pro trud?ing bones that Su?san re?al?ized how much weight Aunt Cord had lost over the last three months or so. She could see the red im?print of the pil low on her aunt's left cheek, like the mark of a slap. Her eyes glit?tered from dark, bruised-?look?ing hol?lows of flesh.

“Aunt Cord! You star?tled me! You—”

“What are ye do?ing in here?” Aunt Cord re?peat?ed.

Su?san bent and picked up the book. “I came to re?mem?ber my fa?ther,” she said, and put the book back on the shelf. Who had torn those pages out? Lengyll? Rimer?

She doubt?ed it. She thought it more like?ly that the wom?an stand?ing be?fore her right now had done it. Per?haps for as lit?tle as a sin?gle piece of red gold. Noth?ing asked, noth?ing told, so all is well, she would have thought, pop?ping the coin in?to her mon?ey-?box, af?ter first bit ing its edge to make sure it was true.

“Re?mem?ber him? It’s ask his for?give?ness, ye should do. For ye’ve for?got?ten his face, so ye have. Most grievous have ye for?got?ten it, Sue.”

Su?san on?ly looked at her.

“Have ye been with him to?day?” Cordelia asked in a brit?tle, laugh?ing voice. Her hand went to the red pil?low-?mark on her cheek and be?gan rub bing it. She had been get?ting bad by de?grees, Su?san re?al?ized, but had be come ev?er so much worse since the gos?sip about Jonas and Coral Thorin had start?ed. “Have ye been with sai Dear?born? Is yer crack still dewy from his spend? Here, let me see for my?self!”

Her aunt glid?ed for?ward—spec?tral in her black dress, her bodice open, her slip?pered feet peep?ing—and Su?san pushed her back. In her fright and dis?gust, she pushed hard. Cordelia struck the wall be?side the cob?webbed win?dow.

“Ye should ask for?give?ness yer?self,” Su?san said. “To speak to his daugh?ter so in this place. In this place.” She let her eyes turn to the shelf of ledgers, then re?turn to her aunt. The look of fright?ened cal?cu?la?tion she saw on Cordelia Del?ga?do’s face told her all she want?ed or need?ed to know. She hadn’t been a par?ty to her broth?er’s mur?der, that Su?san could not be?lieve, but she had known some?thing of it. Yes, some?thing.

”Ye faith?less bitch,” Cordelia whis?pered.

”No,” Su?san said, ”I have been true.”

And so, she re?al?ized, she had been. A great weight seemed to slip off her shoul?ders at the thought. She walked to the door of the of?fice and turned back to her aunt.

”I’ve slept my last night here,” she said. ”I’ll not lis?ten 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 lit?tle, when ye did the best ye could to be my ma.”

Cordelia clapped her hands over her face, as if look?ing at Su?san hurt her.

”Get out, then!” she screamed. ”Go back to Seafront or wher?ev?er it is thee rolls with that boy! If I nev?er see thy trol?lop’s face again, I’ll count my life good!”

Su?san led Py?lon from the sta?ble. When she got him in?to the yard, she was sob?bing al?most too hard to mount up. Yet mount she did, and she couldn’t de?ny that there was re?lief in her heart as well as sor?row. When she turned on?to the High Street and boot?ed Py?lon in?to a gal?lop, she didn’t look back.

9

In a dark hour of the fol?low?ing morn?ing, Olive Thorin crept from the room where she now slept to the one she had shared for al?most forty years with her hus?band.

The floor was cold un?der her bare feet and she was shiv?er?ing by the time she reached the bed ... but the chilly floor wasn’t the on?ly rea?son she was shiv?er?ing. She slid in be?side the gaunt, snor?ing man in the night?cap, and when he turned

away from her (his knees and back crack?ling loud?ly as he did), she pressed against him and hugged him tight?ly. There was no pas?ion in this, but on?ly a need to share a bit of his warmth. His chest—nar?row but al?most as well-?known to her as her own plump one—rose and fell un?der her hands, and she be?gan to qui?et a lit?tle. He stirred, and she thought for a mo?ment he would wake and find her shar?ing 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 ex?haust?ed just get?ting here, creep?ing through the dark fol?low?ing one of the worst dreams she had ev?er 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 cru?el gold?en-?eyed roc that flew above the Barony on wings that dripped blood.

Wher?ev?er its shad?ow fell, there was blood, she would tell him, and its shad?ow fell ev?ery?where. The Barony ran with it, from Ham?bry all the way out to Eye?bolt. And I swelled big fire in the wind. I ran to tell you and you were dead in your study, sit?ting by the hearth with your eyes gouged out and a skull in your lap.

But in?stead of wak?ing, in his sleep he took her hand, as he had used to, do be?fore he had be?gun to look at the young girls—even the serv?ing-?wench?es—when they passed, and Olive de?cid?ed she would on?ly lie here, and be still and let him hold her hand. Let it be like the old days for a bit, when ev?ery?thing had been right be?tween them.

She slept a lit?tle her?self. When she woke, dawn's first gray light was creep?ing in through the win?dows. He had dropped her hand- had, in fact, scoot?ed away from her en?tire?ly, to his edge of the bed. It wouldn't do for him to wake and find her here, she de?cid?ed, and the ur?gen?cy of her night mare was gone. She turned back the cov?ers, swung her feet out, then looked at him once more. His night?cap had come askew. She put it right, her hands smooth?ing the cloth and the bony brow be?neath. He stirred again. Olive wait?ed un?til he had qui?et?ed, then got up. She slipped back to her own room like a phan?tom.

10

The mid?way booths opened in Green Heart two days be?fore Reap?ing-?Fair, and the first folks came to try their luck at the spin?ning wheel and the bot?tle-?toss and the bas?ket-?ring. There was al?so a pony-?train—a cart filled with laugh?ing chil?dren, pulled along a fig?ure eight of nar?row-?gauge rails.

(“Was the pony named Char?lie?” Ed?die Dean asked Roland.

“I think not,” Roland said. “We have a rather un?pleas?ant word that sounds like that in the High Speech.”

“What word?” Jake asked.

“The one,” said the gun?slinger, “that means death.”)

Roy De?pape stood watch?ing the pony plod its ap?point?ed rounds for a cou?ple of turns, re?mem?ber?ing with some nos?tal?gia his own rides in such a cart as a child. Of course, most of his had been stolen.

When he had looked his fill, De?pape saun?tered on down to the Sher iff's of?fice and went in. Herk Av?ery, Dave, and Frank Clay?pool were clean?ing an odd and fan?tas?ti?cal as?sort?ment of guns. Av?ery nod?ded at De pape and went back to what he was do?ing. There was some?thing strange about the man, and af?ter a mo?ment or

two De?pape re?alized what it was: the Sher?iff wasn't eat?ing. It was the first time he'd ev?er come in here that the Sher?iff didn't have a plate of grub close at hand.

"All ready for to?mor?row?" De?pape asked.

Av?ery gave him a half-?ir?ri?tated, half-?smil?ing look. "What the hell kind of ques?tion is that?"

"One that Jonas sent me to ask," De?pape said, and at that Av?ery's queer, nervy smile fal?tered a lit?tle.

"Aye, we're ready." Av?ery swept a meaty arm over the guns. "Don't ye see we are?"

De?pape could have quot?ed the old say?ing about how the proof of the pud?ding was in the eat?ing, 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 like?ly carve Herk Av?ery's fat butt off the top of his legs and feed it to the hand?iest pack of wolver?ines. It didn't make much nev?er mind to Roy De?pape one way or the oth?er.

"Jonas al?so ast me to re?mind you it's ear?ly."

"Aye, aye, we'll be there ear?ly," Av?ery agreed. "These two and six more good men. Fran Lengyll's asked to go along, and he's got a ma?chine-?gun." Av?ery spoke this last with ring?ing pride, as if he him?self had in vent?ed the ma?chine-?gun. Then he looked at De?pape sly?ly. "What about you, cof?fin-?hand? Want to go along? Won't take me more'n an eye?blink to dep?utize ye."

"I have an?oth?er chore. Reynolds, too." De?pape smiled. "There's plen?ty of work for all of us. Sher?iff—af?ter all, it's Reap?ing."

11

That af?ter?noon, Su?sana 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 cor?ner, se?cret?ed be?neath a moul?der?ing pile of skins. She looked first at this, then at him with wide and fright?ened eyes. "What's wrong? What does thee sus?pect is wrong?"

He shook his head. Noth?ing 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, noth?ing like it, but on?ly in?tu?ition.

"I think ev?ery?thing is all right ... or as right as things can be when the odds may turn out fifty of them for each of us. Su?sana, our on?ly chance is to take them by sur?prise. You're not go?ing to risk that, are you? Not plan?ning to go to Lengyll, wav?ing your fa?ther's stock?line book around?"

She shook her head. If Lengyll had done what she now sus?pect?ed, he'd get his pay?back two days from now. There would be reap?ing, all right. Reap?ing aplen?ty. But this ... this fright?ened her, and she said so.

"Lis?ten." Roland took her face in his hands and looked in?to her eyes. "I'm on?ly try?ing to be care?ful. If things go bad?ly—and they could—you're the one most like?ly to get away clean. You and Sheemie. If that hap?pens, Su?sana, you—thee—must come here and take my guns. Take them west to Gilead. Find my fa?ther. He'll know thee are who thee says by what thee shows. Tell him what hap?pened here. That's all."

"If any?thing hap?pens to thee, Roland, I won't be able to do any?thing. Ex?cept 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 cold?ness 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 un?done. 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 hap?pened."

He nod?ded and let go of her face. The shapes of his hands were print?ed faint?ly on her cheeks.

"Ye fright?ened me," Su?san said, and then shook her head. That wasn't right. "Ye do fright?en 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 in?side his shirt and ca?ressed his nip?ple. It grew in?stant?ly hard be?neath the tip of her fin?ger. "Bird and bear and hare and fish," she said, now mak?ing soft but?ter?fly kiss?es all over his face. "Give your love her fond?est wish." Af?ter, they lay be?neath a bearskin Roland had brought along and lis tened to the wind sough through the grass.

"I love that sound," she said. "It al?ways makes me wish I could be part of the wind ... go where it goes, see what it sees."

"This year, if ka al?lows, you will."

"Aye. And with thee." She turned to him, up on one el?bow. Light fell through the ru?ined roof and dap?pled her face. "Roland, I love thee." She kissed him ... and then be?gan to cry.

He held her, con?cerned. "What is it? Sue, what trou?bles thee?"

"I don't know," she said, cry?ing hard?er. "All I know is that there's a shad?ow on my heart." She looked at him with tears still flow?ing from her eyes. "Thee'd not leave me, would ye, dear? Thee'd not go with?out Sue, would ye?"

"No."

"For I've giv?en all I have to ye, so I have. And my vir?gin?ity's the very least of it, thee knows."

"I'd nev?er leave you." But he felt cold in spite of the bearskin, and the wind out?side—so com?fort?ing a mo?ment ago—sound?ed like beast's breath. "Nev?er, I swear."

"I'm fright?ened, though. In?deed I am."

"You needn't be," he said, speak?ing slow?ly and care?ful?ly ... for sud den?ly all the wrong words want?ed to come tum?bling out of his mouth. We 'II leave this, Su?san—not day af?ter to?mor?row, on Reap?ing, but now, this minute. Dress and we'll go cross?wise to the wind; it's south we'll ride and nev?er look back. We'll be—
—haunt?ed.

That's what they would be. Haunt?ed by the faces of Alain and Cuth?bert; haunt?ed by the faces of all the men who might die in the Shaved Moun?tains, mas?sa?cred by weapons torn from the ar?mory-?crypts where they should have been left. Haunt?ed

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 yonder. 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 in to the west like a tidal wave.

12

That evening, as the grinning Demon rose in the sky, Cordelia left her house and walked slowly across the lawn to her garden, detouring around the pile of leaves she had raked that afternoon. In her arms was a bundle of clothes. She dropped them in front of the pole to which her stuffy-guy was bound, then looked raptly up at the rising moon: the knowing wink of the eye, the 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 longhanded. 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 May or 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 dad 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 Elfred Jonas and Coral Thorin, naked and striving

while a honky-tonk pianist plunked out “Red Dirt Boogie” below 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. “Char you 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, heedless of the sparks that lit on her skin, heedless of the blazing leaves that swirled toward the house. Had the house caught fire, she would likely have ignored that as well.

She watched until the stuffy dressed in her niece’s clothes was nothing but ashes lying atop more ashes. Then, as slowly as a robot with rust in its works, she walked back to the house, lay down on the sofa, and slept like the dead.

13

It was three-thirty in the morning of the day before Reaping, and Stanley Ruiz thought he was finally done for the night. The last music had quit twenty minutes ago—Sheb had outlasted the mariachis by an hour or so, and now lay snoring with his face in the sawdust. Sai Thorin was upstairs, and there had been no sign of the Big Coffin Hunters; Stanley had an idea those were up to Seafront tonight. He also had an idea there was black work on offer, although he didn’t know that for sure.

He looked up at the glassy, two-headed gaze of The Romp. “Nor want to, old pal,” he said. “All I want is about nine hours of sleep—tomorrow comes the real party, and they won’t leave till dawn. So—”

A shrill scream rose from somewhere behind the building. Stanley jerked backward, thumping into the bar. Beside the piano, Sheb raised his head briefly, muttered “Wuzzat?” and dropped it back with a thump.

Stanley had abso?lutely no urge to in?ves?ti?gate the source of the scream, but he sup?posed he would, just the same. It had sound?ed like that sad old bitch Pet?tie the Trot?ter. “I’d like to trot your sag?gy old ass right out of town,” he mut?tered, then bent down to look un?der the bar. There were two stout ash?wood clubs here, The Calmer and The Killer. The Calmer was smooth buried wood, guar?an?teed to put out the lights for two hours any time you tapped some bois?ter?ous cull’s head in the right place with it.

Stanley con?sult?ed his feel?ings and took the oth?er club. It was short?er than The Calmer, wider at the top. And the busi?ness end of The Killer was stud?ded with nails.

Stanley went down to the end of the bar, through the door, and across a dim sup?ply-?room stacked with bar?rels smelling of graf and whiskey. At the rear was a door giv?ing on the back yard. Stanley ap?proached it, took a deep breath, and un?locked it. He kept ex?pect?ing Pet?tie to voice an oth?er head-?burst?ing scream, but none came. There was on?ly the sound of the wind.

Maybe you got lucky and she’s kilt, Stanley thought. He opened the door, step?ping back and rais?ing the nail-?stud?ded club at the same time.

Pet?tie wasn’t kilt. Dressed in a stained shift (a Pet?tie-?skirt, one might say), the whore was stand?ing on the path which led to the back privy, her hands clutched to?geth?er above the swell of her bo?som and be?low the droop?ing turkey-?wat?tles of her neck. She was look?ing up at the sky.

“What is it?” Stanley asked, hur?ry?ing down to her. “Near scared ten years off my life, ye did.”

“The moon, Stanley!” she whis?pered. “Oh, look at the moon, would ye!”

He looked up, and what he saw set his heart thump?ing, but he tried to speak rea?son?ably and calm?ly. “Come now, Pet?tie, it’s dust, that’s all. Be rea?son?able, dear, ye know how the wind’s blown these last few days, and no rain to knock down what it car?ries; it’s dust, that’s all.”

Yet it didn’t look like dust.

“I know what I see,” whis?pered Pet?tie.

Above them, De?mon Moon grinned and winked one eye through what ap?peared to be a shift?ing scrim of blood.

CHAP?TER VII

TAK?ING THE BALL

1

While a cer?tain whore and cer?tain bar?tender were still gap?ing up at the bloody moon, Kim?ba Rimer awoke sneez?ing.

Damn, a cold for Reap?ing, he thought. As much as I have to be out over the next two days, I’ll be lucky if it doesn’t turn in?to—

Some?thing fluffed the end of his nose, and he sneezed again. Com?ing out of his nar?row chest and dry slot of a mouth, it sound?ed like a small-?cal?iber pis?tol-?shot in the black room.

“Who’s there?” he cried.

No an?swer. Rimer sud?den?ly imag?ined a bird, some?thing nasty and bad-?tem?pered, that had got?ten in here in day?light and was now fly?ing around in the dark,

flut?ter?ing against his face as he slept. His skin crawled—birds, bugs, bats, he hat?ed them all—and he fum?bled so en?er get?ical?ly for the gas-?lamp on the ta?ble by his bed that he al?most knocked it off on?to the floor.

As he drew it to?ward him, that flut?ter came again. This time puff?ing at his cheek. Rimer screamed and re?coiled against the pil?lows, clutch?ing 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 cir?cle of its ra?di?ance, he saw not a flut?ter?ing bird but Clay Reynolds sit?ting on the edge of the bed. In one hand Reynolds held the feath?er with which he had been tick ling Mejia's Chan?cel?lor. His oth?er was hid?den in his cloak, which lay in his lap.

Reynolds had dis?liked Rimer from their first meet?ing in the woods far west of town—those same woods, be?yond Eye?bolt Canyon, where Far-?son's man Lati?go now quar?tered the main con?tin?gent of his troops. It had been a windy night, and as he and the oth?er Cof?fin Hunters en?tered the lit tle glade where Rimer, ac?com?pa?nied by Lengyll and Croy?don, were sit ting by a small fire, Reynolds's cloak swirled around him. "Sai Man?to," Rimer had said, and the oth?er two had laughed. It had been meant as a harm?less joke, but it hadn't seemed harm?less to Reynolds. In many of the lands where he had trav?elled, man?to meant not "cloak" but "lean?er" or "ben?der." It was, in fact, a slang term for ho?mo?sex?ual. That Rimer (a provin?cial man un?der his ve?neer of cyn?ical so?phis?ti?ca?tion) didn't know this nev?er crossed Reynolds's mind. He knew when peo?ple were mak?ing small of him, and if he could make such a per?son pay, he did so.

For Kim?ba Rimer, pay?day had come.

"Reynolds? What are you do?ing? How did you get in h—"

"You got to be think?ing of the wrong cow?boy," the man sit?ting on the bed replied.

"No Reynolds here. Just Senor Man?to." He took out the hand which had been un?der his cloak. In it was a keen?ly honed cuchil?lo. Reynolds had pur?chased it in Low Mar?ket with this chore in mind. He raised it now and drove the twelve-?inch blade in?to Rimer's chest. It went all the way through, pin?ning him like a bug. A bed?bug, Reynolds thought.

The lamp fell out of Rimer's hands and rolled off the bed. It land?ed on the foot-run?ner, but did not break. On the far wall was Kim?ba Rimer's dis?tort?ed, strug?gling shad?ow. The shad?ow of the oth?er man bent over it like a hun?gry vul?ture.

Reynolds lift?ed the hand which had held the knife. He turned it so the small blue tat?toed cof?fin be?tween thumb and fore?fin?ger was in front of Rimer's eyes. He want?ed it to be the last thing Rimer saw on this side of the clear?ing.

"Let's hear you make fun of me now," Reynolds said. He smiled. "Come on. Let's just hear you."

2

Short?ly be?fore five o'clock, May?or Thorin woke from a ter?ri?ble dream. In it, a bird with pink eyes had been cruising slow?ly back and forth above the Barony.

Wher?ev?er its shad?ow fell, the grass turned yel?low, the leaves fell shocked from the trees, and the crops died. The shad?ow was turn?ing his green and pleas?ant Barony in?to a waste land. It may be my Barony, but it's my bird, too, he thought just be?fore awak?en?ing, hud?dled in?to a shud?dery 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, absentmindedly 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 pestilential 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 footrunner to cushion its landing. It smashed on the hearth.

Before Thorin could scream, Roy Deppape brushed off the mayoral nightcap, seized the gauzy remains of the mayoral mane, and yanked the mayoral head back. The knife Deppape 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. Deppape 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 look-out. Deppape brought it back to the chair and put it in the dying Mayor's lap. "Bird . . ." Thorin gasped through a mouthful of blood. "Bird!"

"Yar, old fellow, and trig o' you to notice at a time like this, I will say." Deppape 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.

Deppape 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 sigil—
—on the wall.

“There,” he murmured, standing back. “If that don’t finish em, nothing on earth will.”

True enough. The only question left unanswered was whether or not Roland’s katet 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 occasion 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-backed 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 south-west, 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 dawn-ing 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 doorway, 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. "Spi?ders, I reck?on. He hates them." Out?side, Lengyll stood up and waved both hands for?ward. Men moved silent?ly to?ward the front of the sta?ble. On the roof, Dave Hol?lis stood with his gun drawn. His mon?ocle was tucked away in his vest pock?et, so it should blink no bad?ly timed re?flec?tion.

Cuth?bert led his mount out of the sta?ble. Alain fol?lowed. Roland came last, short-lead?ing the ner?vous, pran?cy geld?ing.

"Look," Cuth?bert said cheer?ily, still un?aware of the men stand?ing di rect?ly be?hind him and his friends. He was point?ing north. "A cloud in the shape of a bear! Good luck for—"

"Don't move, cul?lies," Fran Lengyll called. "Don't so much as shuf fle yer god-pound?ing feet."

Alain did be?gin to turn—in startle?ment more than any?thing else—and there was a rip?ple of small click?ing sounds, like many dry twigs all snap ping at once. The sound of cock?ing pis?tols and mus?ke?toons.

"No, Al!" Roland said. "Don't move! Don't!" In his throat de?spair rose like poi?son, and tears of rage stung at the com?ers of his eyes ... yet he stood qui?et. Cuth?bert and Alain must stand qui?et, too. If they moved, they'd be killed. "Don't move!" he called again. "Ei?ther of you!"

"Wise, cul?ly." Lengyll's voice was clos?er now, and ac?com?pa?nied by sev?er?al pairs of foot?falls. "Put yer hands be?hind ye."

Two shad?ows flanked Roland, long in the first light. Judg?ing by the bulk of the one on his left, he guessed it was be?ing thrown by Sher?iff Av?ery. He prob?ably wouldn't be of?fer?ing them any white tea this day. Lengyll would be?long to the oth?er shad?ow.

"Hur?ry up, Dear?born, or what?ev?er yer name may be. Get em be?hind ye. Small of yer back. There's guns point?ed at your pards, and if we end up tak?ing in on?ly two of yer in?stead of three, life'll go on."

Not tak?ing any chances with us, Roland thought, and felt a mo?ment of per?verse pride. With it came a taste of some?thing that was al?most amuse ment. Bit?ter, though; that taste con?tin?ued very bit?ter.

"Roland!" It was Cuth?bert, and there was agony in his voice. "Ro land, don't!"

But there was no choice. Roland put his hands be?hind his back. Rush?er ut?tered a small, re?prov?ing whin?ny as if to say all this was high?ly im?prop?er—and trot?ted away to stand be?side the bunkhouse porch.

"You're go?ing to feel met?al on your wrists," Lengyll said. "Es?posas."

Two cold cir?cles slipped over Roland's hands. I here was a click and sud?den?ly the arcs of the hand?cuffs were tight against his wrists.

"All right," said an?oth?er voice. "Now you, son,"

"Be damned if I will!" Cuth?bert's voice wa?vered on the edge of hys?te?ria

There was a thud and a muf?fled cry of pain. Roland turned around and saw Alain down on one knee, the heel of his left hand pressed against his fore?head. Blood ran down his face.

"Ye want me to deal him an?oth?er 'un?" Jake White asked. He had an old pis?tol in his hand, re?versed so the butt was for?ward. "I can, you know; my arm is feel?ing

wery limber for this early in the day.”

“No!” Cuthbert was twitching with horror and something like grief. Ranged behind him were three armed men, looking on with nervous avidity.

“Then be a good boy an’ get yer hands behind yer.”

Cuthbert, still fighting tears, did as he was told. Esposas were put on him by Deputy Bridger. The other two men yanked Alain to his feet. He reeled a little, then stood firm as he was handcuffed. His eyes met Roland’s, and Al tried to smile. In some ways it was the worst moment of that terrible ambushing morning. Roland nodded back and made himself a promise: he would never be taken like this again, not if he lived to be a thousand years old.

Lengyll was wearing a trailscarf instead of a string tie this morning, but Roland thought he was inside the same box-tail coat he’d worn to the Mayor’s welcoming party, all those weeks ago. Standing beside him, puffing with excitement, anxiety, and self-importance, was Sheriff Avery.

“Boys,” the Sheriff said, “ye’re arrested for trespassing the Barony. The specific charges are treason and murder.”

“Who did we murder?” Alain asked mildly, and one of the posse uttered a laugh either shocked or cynical, Roland couldn’t tell which.

“The May?or and his Chan?cel?lor, as ye know quite well,” Av?ery said. “Now—”

“How can you do this?” Roland asked cu?ri?ous?ly. It was Lengyll to whom he spoke. “Mejis is your home place; I’ve seen the line of your fa?thers in the town ceme?tery. How can you do this to your home place, sai Lengyll?”

“I’ve no in?ten?tion of stand?ing out here and mak?ing palaver with ye,” Lengyll said. He glanced over Roland’s shoul?der. “Al?varez! Get his horse! Boys as trig as this bunch should have no prob?lem rid?ing with their hands be?hind their—”

“No, tell me,” Roland in?ter?posed. “Don’t hold back, sai Lengyll— these are your friends you’ve come with, and not a one who isn’t in?side your cir?cle. How can you do it? Would you rape your own moth?er if you came up?on her sleep?ing with her dress up?”

Lengyll’s mouth twitched—not with shame or em?bar?rass?ment but mo?men?tary prud?ish dis?taste, and then the old ranch?er looked at Av?ery. “They teach em to talk pret?ty in Gilead, don’t they?”

Av?ery had a ri?fle. Now he stepped to?ward the hand?cuffed gun?slinger with the butt raised. “I’ll teach ‘im how to talk prop?er 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, look?ing tired. “Don’t be a fool. I don’t want to bring him back lay?ing over a sad?dle un?less he’s dead.”

Av?ery low?ered his gun. Lengyll turned to Roland.

”Ye’re not go?ing to live long enough to prof?it from ad?vice, Dear born,” he said, ”but I’ll give’ee some, any?way: stick with the win?ners in this world. And know how the wind blows, so ye can tell when it changes di?rec?tion.”

”You’ve for?got?ten the face of your fa?ther, you scur?ry?ing lit?tle mag got,” Cuth?bert said clear?ly.

This got to Lengyll in a way Roland’s re?mark about his moth?er had not—it showed in the sud?den bloom of col?or in his weath?ered cheeks.

”Get em mount?ed!” he said. ”I want em locked up tight with?in the hour!”

5

Roland was boost?ed in?to Rush?er’s sad?dle so hard he al?most flew off on the oth?er side—would have, if Dave Hol?lis had not been there to steady him and then to wedge Roland’s boot in?to the stir?rup. Dave of?fered the gun?slinger a ner?vous, half-em?bar?rassed smile.

”I’m sor?ry to see you here,” Roland said grave?ly.

”It’s sor?ry I am to be here,” the deputy said. ”If mur?der was your busi?ness, I wish you’d got?ten to it soon?er. And your friend shouldn’t have been so ar?ro?gant as to leave his call?ing-?card.” He nod?ded to?ward Cuth?bert.

Roland hadn’t the slight?est idea what Deputy Dave was re?fer?ring to, but it didn’t mat?ter. It was just part of the frame, and none of these men be?lieved much of it, Dave like?ly in?clud?ed. Al?though, Roland sup?posed, they would come to be?lieve it in lat?er years and tell it to their chil?dren and grand?chil?dren as gospel. The glo?ri?ous day they’d rid?den with the posse and tak?en down the traitors.

The gun?slinger used his knees to turn Rush?er . . . and there, stand?ing by the gate be?tween the Bar K’s door?yard and the lane lead?ing to the Great Road, was Jonas him?self. He sat astride a deep-?chest?ed bay, wear ing a green felt drover’s hat and

an old gray duster. There was a rifle in the scabbard beside his right knee. The left side of the duster was pulled back to expose the butt of his revolver. Jonas's white hair, untied today, lay over his shoulders.

He doffed his hat and held it out to Roland in courtly greeting. "A good game," he said. "You played very well for someone who was taking his milk out of a tit not so long ago."

"Old man," Roland said, "you've lived too long."

Jonas smiled. "You'd remedy that if you could, wouldn't you? Yar, I reckon." He flicked his eyes at Lengyll. "Get their toys, Fran. Look specially sharp for knives. They've got guns, but not with em. Yet I know a bit more about those shooting irons than they might think. And funny boy's sling-shot. 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 sling-shot 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 corners of his seamed

mouth were trembling. "Watch your words, Will Dearborn," he said in a low, hoarse voice. "You want to watch me 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 me to town and jug me," 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 Garland 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 gun-slinger.

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, swinging 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 bedroom 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 constant 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 on any earth-quake 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 just 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 thousand shouts and ten thousand rumors go the rounds, but I think just 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.

8

Reynolds, who had been with Jonas longer than DePape, took one look at the figure cowering 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.

"Elfred, 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 pistols if anything went wrong, and there hasn't been any shooting like that."

"We didn't hear none, either, Elfred," Depape said eagerly. "Nothing at all like that."

Jonas grimaced. "You wouldn't, would you? Not out in this noise. Fool!"

Depape bit his lip, saw something in the neighborhood of his left stirrup 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 dericks. "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, Elfred," 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 Hambrystomorrow 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 Elfred went crazy now (and Reynolds had seen it happen before), there was no way they could get out of his killing-zone in time.

"Elfred, 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 coat hook, 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 should keep four men with him to hook em up and take em on to Latiago. The rest can go on ahead."

Reynolds now judged it safe to ask a question. "When do the rest of Latiago's men get there?"

"Men?" Jonas snorted. "Don't we wish, surely! The rest of Latiago's boys'll ride out to Hanging Rock by moonlight, penions 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 should think ... although 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 business, and then ride back to me, just as fast's you can."

Jonas turned and looked toward the lumpy swell of hills to the north-west.

"We have business of our own," he said. "Soonest be-gun, boys, soonest done. I want to shake the dust of fuck-ing Mejis off my hat and boots as soon as I can. I don't like the way it feels anymore. Not at all."

9

The woman, There'sa Maria Dolores O'Shyven, was forty years old, plump, pretty, mother of four, husband of Peter, a va-que-ro of laughing temperament. 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 There'sa O'Shyven's hands, and her family was quite well-to-do. Although her husband was a ranger-rid-er, 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 of 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 There'sa was to complete obsession-al madness. Soon, Rhea thought, watching There'sa 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 Reap-tide, and the stalls opened only for a few hours in the afternoon, so There'sa sent her youngest daughter off with a pie. A Reap-tide 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 There'sa Maria Dolores O'Shyven, time to be anchoring. 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 emasculated 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 There'sa went to the window. When she was satisfied with what she saw—her daughter out the gate and down the High Street, like-ly—she turned back to her kitchen. She walked to the table and stood there, looking 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 There'sa O'Shyven, whose cottage had the cleanest comers in all Mejis. Mayhap in all Mid-World.

"Hur-ry, woman!" Rhea half-screamed. "Get to yer house-work!"

As if hearing, There'sa unbuttoned her house-dress, 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 corner, 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!"

There'sa 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, There'sa 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 rattle! How Rhea wanted to see it! How she longed to—

Suddenly There'sa 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.

De?pape turned to Jonas with wide eyes, his skin prickling. The thing which had uttered that cry hardly sound?ed 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. De?pape 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 Far?son’s favorite toy high over her head. There were plenty of rocks in the doorway 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 Kim?ba Rimer, the man who had suggested Rhea as the perfect candidate for Maer?lyn’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 De?pape drawing the hammer of his gun.

“Put that away, you idiot!” he snarled.

“But look at her!” De?pape almost moaned. “Look at her, El?dred!”

He was. The thing inside the black dress appeared to be wearing the corpse of a putrefying snake around its throat for a necklace. She was so scrawny that she resembled nothing so much as a walking skeleton. Her peeling skull was only tufted with hair; the rest had fallen out. Sores clustered on her cheeks and brow, and there was a mark like a spider-bite on the left side of her mouth. Jonas thought that last might be a scurvy-bloom, but he didn’t really care one way or another. What he cared about was the ball upraised in the dying woman’s long and shivering claws.

11

The sunlight so dazzled Rhea’s eyes that she didn’t see the gun pointed at her, and when her vision cleared, De?pape had put it away again. She looked at the men lined up across from her—the bespectacled red?head, 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 Cof?fin Hunters? She supposed she had, but for gods’ sake, why? They were men, that was all, just more men, and she had been beating such all her life. Oh, they thought they ruled the roost, all right—nobody in Mid-World accused anyone of forgetting the face of his mother—but they were poor things, at bottom, moved to tears by a sad song, utterly undone by the sight of a bare breast, and all the more capable of being manipulated simply because they were so sure they were strong and tough and wise.

The glass was dark, and as much as she hated that darkness, it had cleared her mind.

“Jonas!” she cried. “El?dred 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 Far-son 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 De-pape. 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 Far-son. 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 Far-son 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 sad?dle, hold?ing his hands out for the glass. She looked up at him, her old eyes still shrewd be?hind their crust?ed lids. One of them ac?tu?al?ly drew down in a con?spir?ator'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 nev?er shine for Far?son again. For some?one, aye, some?day, may?hap; but not for him . . . and will he let ye live if ye bring his toy back and he dis?cov?ers it's bro?ken?"

Jonas had al?ready con?sid?ered this. "We have a bar?gain, old moth?er. You go west with the glass . . . un?less you die be?side the trail some night. You'll par?don me for say?ing so, but you don't look well."

She cack?led. "I'm bet?ter'n I look, oh yar! Years left 'fore this clock o' mine runs down!"

I think you may be wrong about that, old moth?er, Jonas thought. But he kept his peace and on?ly held his hands out for the ball.

For a mo?ment longer she held it. Their ar?range?ment was made and agreed to on both sides, but in the end she could bare?ly bring her?self to un?grasp the ball. Greed shone in her eyes like moon?light through fog.

He held his hands out pa?tient?ly, say?ing noth?ing, wait?ing for her mind to ac?cept re?al?ity—if she let go, there was some chance. If she held on, very like?ly ev?ery?one in this stony, weedy yard would end up rid?ing the hand?some be?fore long.

With a sigh of re?gret, she fi?nal?ly put the ball in his hands. At the in stant it passed from her to him, an em?ber of pink light pulsed deep in the depths of the glass. A throb of pain drove in?to Jonas's head . . . and a shiv?er of lust coiled in his balls.

As from a great dis?tance, he heard De?pape and Reynolds cock?ing their pis?tols.

"Put those away," Jonas said. "But—" Reynolds looked con?fused.

"They thought'ee was go?ing to dou?ble-?cross Rhea," the old wom?an said, cack?ling.

"Good thing ye're in charge rather than them, Jonas . . . may?hap you know sum?mat they don't."

He knew some?thing, all right—how dan?ger?ous the smooth, glassy thing in his hands was. It could take him in a blink, if it want?ed. And in a month, he would be like the witch: scrawny, rad?dled with sores, and too ob?sessed to know or care.

"Put them away!" he shout?ed.

Reynolds and De?pape ex?changed a glance, then re?hol?stered their guns. "There was a bag for this thing," Jonas said. "A draw?string bag laid in?side the box. Get it."

"Aye," Rhea said, grin?ning un?pleas?ant?ly 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 oth?er 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 turn?ing back to the ball, Jonas no?ticed . . . and now his damned eyes want?ed to go there, too.

"You don't give me or?ders," Reynolds said.

"No, but I do," Jonas said. His eyes dropped to the ball, both want?ing and fear?ing to see that pink spark of life deep in?side. Noth?ing. Cold and dark. He dragged his gaze back up to Reynolds again. "Get the cart."

Reynolds heard the buzzing of flies even be?fore he slipped through the shed's

sagging door, and knew at once that Rhea's goats had finished their days of pulling. They lay bloated and dead in their pen, legs sticking up and the sockets of their eyes squirming with maggots. It was impossible to know when Rhea had last fed and watered them, but Reynolds guessed at least a week, from the smell. Too busy watching what goes on in that glass ball to bother, he thought. And what's she wearing that dead snake around her neck for?

"I don't want to know," he muttered from behind his pulled-up neckerchief. 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 calligraphic 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. Deppa could do the rest, by gods. Hitch his horse to the cart and haul the old woman's stinking freight to ... where? Who knew? Elfred, maybe.

Rhea came tottering out of her hut with the drawstring bag they'd brought the ball in, but she stopped, head cocked, listening, when Reynolds asked his question.

Jonas thought it over, then said: "Seafront to begin, I guess. Yar, that'll do for her, and this glass bauble as well, I reckon, until the party's over tomorrow."

"Aye, Seafront, I've never been there," Rhea said, moving forward again. When she reached Jonas's horse (which tried to shy away from her), she opened the bag. After a moment's further consideration, Jonas dropped the ball in. It bulged round at the bottom, making a shape like a teardrop.

Rhea wore a sly smile. "Maybe 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 Deppa'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 resurfaced. "Why, I believe our Mayor's met with 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 calligraphic decorations like the Queen of Black Places on her throne.

CHAPTER VI

the ashes

1

Panic is highly contagious, especially in situations when nothing is known and everything is in flux. It was the sight of Miguel, the old mazo, 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 some thing 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 hide 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 start?ed for him, and a va?que?ro aboard a wild-?eyed spot?ed roan gal?loped so close by her that one stir?rup ticked off her hip and the horse's tail flicked her fore?arm. She voiced a strange-?sound?ing lit?tle chuck?le. She had been wor?ried about Miguel and had al?most been run down her?self! Fun?ny!

She looked both ways this time, start?ed for?ward, then drew back again as a load?ed wag?on came ca?reer?ing around the com?er, tot?ter?ing on two wheels at first. What it was load?ed with she couldn't see—the goods in the wag?onbed were cov?ered with a tarp -but she saw Miguel move to?ward it, still clutch?ing his broom. Su?san thought of the child in front of the stage again and shrieked an inar?tic?ulate cry of alarm. Miguel cringed back at the last mo?ment and the cart flew by him, bound?ed and swayed across the court?yard, and dis?ap?peared out through the arch.

Miguel dropped his broom, clapped both hands to his cheeks, fell to his knees, and be?gan to pray in a loud, lament?ing voice. Su?san watched him for a mo?ment, her mouth work?ing, and then sprint?ed for the sta?bles, no longer tak?ing care to keep against the side of the build?ing. She had caught the dis?ease that would grip al?most all of Ham?bry by noon, and al though she man?aged to do a fair?ly apt job of sad?dling Py?lon (on any oth?er day there would have been three sta?ble-?boys vy?ing for the chance to help the pret?ty sai), any abil?ity to think had left her by the time she heel-?kicked the star?tled horse in?to a run out?side the sta?ble door.

When she rode past Miguel, still on his knees and pray?ing to the bright sky with his hands up?raised, she saw him no more than any oth?er rid?er had be?fore her.

2

She rode straight down the High Street, thump?ing her spur?less heels at Py?lon's sides un?til the big horse was fair?ly fly?ing. Thoughts, ques?tions, pos?si?ble plans of ac?tion ... none of those had a place in her head as she rode. She was but vague?ly aware of the peo?ple milling in the street, al?low ing Py?lon to weave his own path through them. The on?ly thing she was aware of was his name—Roland, Roland, Roland!—ring?ing in her head like a scream. Ev?ery?thing had gone up?side down. The brave lit?tle ka-?tet they had made that night at the grave?yard was bro?ken, three of its mem bers jailed and with not long to live (if they even were still alive), the last mem?ber lost and con?fused, as crazy with ter?ror as a bird in a barn.

If her pan?ic had held, things might have turned out in a much dif?fer ent fash?ion. But as she rode through the cen?ter of town and out the oth?er side, her way took her to?ward the house she had shared with her fa?ther and her aunt. That la?dy had been watch?ing for the very rid?er who now ap?proached.

As Su?san neared, the door flew open and Cordelia, dressed in black from throat to toe, rushed down the front walk to the street, shriek?ing with ei?ther hor?ror or laugh?ter. Per?haps both. The sight of her cut through the fore?ground haze of pan?ic in Su?san's mind ... but not be?cause she recog nized her aunt.

"Rhea!" she cried, and drew back on the reins so vi?olent?ly that the horse skid?ded, reared, and al?most tilt?ed them over back?ward. That would like?ly have crushed the life out of his mis?tress, but Py?lon man?aged to keep at least his back feet, paw?ing at the sky with his front ones and whin?ny?ing loud?ly. Su?san slung an arm around his neck and hung on for dear life.

Cordelia Del?ga?do, wear?ing her best black dress and a lace man?til?la 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 believably 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 to ye, Miss Oh So Young and Pretty!" Aunt Cord greeted her in a cracked, vicious voice that made Susan's heart tremble. Aunt Cord curtseyed 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 taken!"

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 Pylon'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 running yer lips over it for good luck. Ye're in it to gether—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 saying 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 Parsons's soldiers. "And he did no murders. 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 understood 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 faithless! 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 allowed 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 re-nunciation (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 grannary 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!"

De-pape—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 point?ing at De?pape with the twist?ed, long-?nailed in?dex fin?ger of the oth?er. Look?ing at her made Su?san feel weak with ter?ror, and she felt the pan?ic around her again, like some dark flu?id that would hap?pi?ly drown her brain if giv?en half a chance.

She worked against the feel?ing as best she could, hold?ing on?to her mind, re?fus?ing to let it turn in?to what it had been be?fore and would be again if she let it—a brain?less bird trapped in a barn, bash?ing in?to the walls and ig?nor?ing the open win?dow through which it had en?tered.

Even when the cart was gone be?low the next hill and there was noth ing left of them but dust hang?ing in the air, she could hear Rhea's wild cack?ling.

4

She reached the hut in the Bad Grass at one o' the clock. For a mo?ment she just sat astride Py?lon, look?ing at it. Had she and Roland been here hard?ly twen?ty-?four hours ago? Mak?ing love and mak?ing plans? It was hard to be?lieve, but when she dis?mount?ed and went in, the wick?er bas?ket in which she had brought them a cold meal con?firmed it. It still sat up?on the rick?ety ta?ble.

Look?ing at the ham?per, she re?al?ized she hadn't eat?en since the pre?vi ous evening—a mis?er?able sup?per with Hart Thorin that she'd on?ly picked at, too aware of his eyes on her body. Well, they'd done their last crawl, hadn't they? And she'd nev?er have to walk down an?oth?er Seafront hall way won?der?ing what door he was go?ing to come burst?ing out of like Jack out of his box, all grab?bing hands and stiff, randy prick.

Ash?es, she thought. Ash?es and ash?es. But not us, Roland. I swear, my dar?ling, not us.

She was fright?ened and tense, try?ing to put ev?ery?thing she now must do in or?der—a pro?cess to be fol?lowed just as there was a pro?cess to be fol lowed when sad?dling a horse—but she was al?so six?teen and healthy. One look at the ham?per and she was ravenous.

She opened it, saw there were ants on the two re?main?ing cold beef sand?wich?es, brushed them off, and gob?bled the sand?wich?es down. The bread had got?ten rather stiff, but she hard?ly no?ticed. There was a half jar of sweet cider and part of a cake, as well.

When she had fin?ished ev?ery?thing, she went to the north com?er of the hut and moved the hides some?one had be?gun to cure and then lost in?ter?est in. There was a hol?low be?neath. With?in it, wrapped in soft leather, were Roland's guns.

If things go bad?ly, thee must come here and take them west to Gilead. Find my fa?ther.

With faint but gen?uine cu?rios?ity, Su?san won?dered if Roland had re?al?ly ex?pect?ed she would ride blithe?ly off to Gilead with his un?born child in her bel?ly while he and his friends were roast?ed, scream?ing and red-?hand?ed, on the Reap-?Night bon?fire.

She pulled one of the guns out of its hol?ster. It took her a mo?ment or two to see how to get the re?volver open, hut then the cylin?der rolled out and she saw that each cham?ber was load?ed. She snapped it back in?to place and checked the oth?er 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 Travelers' 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 reaping-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 murderers, 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, Lathgo had argued. Jonas had smiled and nodded. 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 reaping 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-scamble, the riddling 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 losers’ ceremonies: Charyou tree. It had been generations since they had been practiced (except, every once and again, in secret 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 foreseen, 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.

To-morrow, 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 vags pointed them with no trouble.

Probably think they're going in for the winter, Susan thought. But they weren't headed in toward the ranches running along the crest of the Drop; the herd, so large it flowed on the grass like a cloud-shadow, was headed west, toward Hanging Rock.

Susan had believed everything Roland said, but this made it true in a personal way, one she could relate directly to her dead father. Horses, of courses.

"You bastards," she murmured. "You horse-thieving bastards." She turned Pylon and rode for the burned-out ranch. To her right, her shadow was growing long. Overhead, the Demon Moon glimmered ghostly in the daylight sky.

8

She had worried that Jonas might have left men at the Bar K—although why he would've she didn't really know, and the fear turned out to be groundless in any case. The ranch was as empty as it had been for the five or six years between the fire that had put paid to it and the arrival of the boys from In-World. She could see signs of that morning's confrontation, however, and when she went into the bunkhouse where the three of them had slept, she at once saw the gaping hole in the floorboards. Jonas had neglected to close it up again after taking Alain's and Cuthbert's guns.

She went down the aisle between the bunks, dropped to one knee, and looked into the hole. Nothing. Yet she doubted if what she had come for had been there in the first place—the hole wasn't big enough.

She paused, looking at the three cots. Which was Roland's? She supposed she could find out—her nose would tell her, she knew the smell of his hair and skin very well—but she thought she would do better to put such soft impulses behind her. What she needed now was to be hard and quick—to move without pausing or looking back.

Ashes, Aunt Cord whispered in her head, almost too faintly to hear. Susan shook her head impatiently, as if to clear that voice away, and walked out back.

There was nothing behind the bunkhouse, nothing behind the privy or to either side of it. She went around to the back of the old cook-shack next, and there she found what she'd come looking for, placed casually and with no attempt at concealment: the two small barrels she had last seen slung over Capri-choso'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 Hamby 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 kismet, 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 botoms 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 Py?lon up in front of the sa?loon with a mur?mured word, a shape rose out of the shad?ows. She tensed, and then the first or?angey light of the ris?ing moon caught Sheemie's face. She re?laxed again—even laughed a lit?tle, most?ly at her?self. He was a part of their ka-?tet; she knew he was. Was it sur?pris?ing that he should know, as well?

"Su?san," he mur?mured, tak?ing off his som?brero and hold?ing it against his chest. "I been wait?ing for'ee."

"Why?" she asked.

" 'Cause I knew ye'd come." He looked back over his shoul?der at the Rest, a black bulk spray?ing crazy light to?ward ev?ery point of the com?pass. "We're go?ing 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, Su?san, daugh?ter of Pat. I knows."

She sup?posed he did. "Is Coral in?side?"

Sheemie shook his head. "Gone up to May?or's House. She told Stanley she was go?ing to help lay out the bod?ies for the fu?ner?al day af?ter to mor?row, but I don't think she'll be here for the fu?ner?al. I think the Big Cof?fin Hunters is go?ing and she'll go with 'em." He raised a hand and swiped at his leak?ing eyes. "Your mule, Sheemie—" "All sad?dled, and I got the long hal?ter." She looked at him, open-mouthed. "How did ye know—" "Same way I knew ye'd be com?ing, Su?san-?sai. I just knew." He shrugged, then point?ed vague?ly. "Capi's around the back. I tied him to the cook's pump."

"That's good." She fum?bled in the sad?dle?bag where she had put the small?er fire?crack?ers. "Here. Take some of these. Do'ee have a sul?fur or two?"

"Aye." He asked no ques?tions, sim?ply stuffed the fire?crack?ers in?to his front pock?et. She, how?ev?er, who had nev?er been through the bat-?wing doors of the Trav?ellers' Rest in her whole life, had an?oth?er ques?tion for him.

"What do they do with their coats and hats and scrapes when they come in, Sheemie? They must take em off; drink?ing's warm work."

"Oh, aye. They puts em on a long ta?ble just in?side the door. Some fights about whose is whose when they're ready to go home."

She nod?ded, think?ing hard and fast. He stood be?fore her, still hold?ing his som?brero against his chest, let?ting her do what he could not ... at least not in the con?ven?tion?al?ly un?der?stood way. At last she raised her head again.

"Sheemie, if you help me, you're done in Ham?bry ... done in Mejis ... done in the Out?er Arc. You go with us if we get away. You have to un?der stand that. Do you?" She saw he did; his face fair?ly shone with the idea. "Aye, Su?san! Go with you and Will Dear?born and Richard Stock?worth and my best friend, Mr. Arthur Heath! Go to In-?World! We'll see build?ings and stat?ues and wom?en in gowns like fairy princess?es and—"

"If we're caught, we'll be killed."

He stopped smil?ing, but his eyes didn't wa?ver. "Aye, killed we'll be if ta'en, most like."

"Will you still help me?"

"Capi's all sad?dled," he re?peat?ed. Su?san reck?oned that was an?swer enough. She took hold of the hand press?ing the som?brero to Sheemie's chest (the hat's crown was pret?ty well crushed, and not for the first time). She bent, hold?ing Sheemie's fin?gers with one hand and the horn of her sad?dle with the oth?er, and kissed his cheek. He smiled up at her.

"We'll do our best, won't we?" she asked him.

"Aye, Su?san daugh?ter of Pat. We'll do our best for our friends. Our very best."

"Yes. Now lis?ten, Sheemie. Very care?ful?ly."

She be?gan to talk, and Sheemie lis?tened.

10

Twen?ty min?utes lat?er, as the bloat?ed or?ange moon strug?gled above the build?ings of the town like a preg?nant wom?an climb?ing a steep hill, a lone va?que?ro led a mule along Hill Street in the di?rec?tion of the Sher?iff's of fice. This end of Hill Street was a pit of shad?ows. There was a lit?tle light around Green Heart, but even the park (which would have been thronged, noisy, and bril?liant?ly lit in any oth?er year) was most?ly emp?ty. Near?ly all the booths were closed, and of those few that re?mained open, on?ly the for?tune-?teller was do?ing any busi?ness. Tonight all for?tunes were bad, but still they came—don't they al?ways?

The va?que?ro was wear?ing a heavy ser?ape; if this par?tic?ular cow?boy had the breasts of a wom?an, they were con?cealed. The vaq wore a large, sweat-?stained som?brero; if this cow?boy had the face of a wom?an, it was like?wise con?cealed. Low, from be?neath that hat's broad brim, came a voice singing "Care?less Love."

The mule's small sad?dle was buried un?der the large bun?dle which had been roped to it—cloth or clothes of some kind, it might have been, al though the deep?en?ing shad?ows made it im?pos?si?ble to say for sure. Most amus?ing of all was what hung around the mule's neck like some pe?cu?liar reap-?charm: two som?breros and a drover's hat strung on a length of rope.

As the vaq neared the Sher?iff's of?fice, the singing ceased. The place might have been de?sert?ed if not for the sin?gle dim light shin?ing through one win?dow. In the porch rock?er was a com?ical stuffy-?guy wear?ing one of Herk Av?ery's em?broi?dered vests and a tin star. There were no guards; ab so?lute?ly no sign that the three most hat?ed men in Mejis were se?questered with?in. And now, very faint?ly, the va?que?ro could hear the strum of a gui?tar.

It was blot?ted out by a thin rat?tle of fire?crack?ers. The vaq looked over one shoul?der and saw a dim fig?ure. It waved. The va?que?ro nod?ded, waved back, then tied the mule to the hitch?ing-?post—the same one where Roland and his friends had tied their hors?es when they had come to in?tro?duce them?selves to the Sher?iff, on a sum?mer day so long ago.

11

The door opened—no one had both?ered to lock it—while Dave Hol?lis was try?ing, for about the two hun?dredth time, to play the bridge of "Cap tain Mills, You Bas?tard." Across from him, Sher?iff Av?ery sat rocked back in his desk chair with his hands laced to?geth?er on his paunch. The room flick?ered with mild or?ange lamp?light.

“You keep it up, Deputy Dave, and there won’t have to be any execution,”

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 going 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 mound 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, artificial 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 sprawling. His foot

re?mained hooked un?der the draw?er-?pull; the draw?er shot out and over?turned, spilling three an?cient firearms across the board floor.

“Su?san, look out!” Cuth?bert shout?ed, and then: “No, Dave!”

At the end of his life, it was du?ty and not fear of the Big Cof?fin Hunters which pro?pelled Dave Hol?lis, who had hoped to be Sher?iff of Mejis him?self when Av?ery re?tired (and, he some?times told his wife, Judy, a bet?ter one than Fat?so had ev?er dreamed of be?ing). He for?got that he had se?ri?ous ques?tions about the way the boys had been tak?en as well as about what they might or might not have done. All he thought of then was that they were pris?on?ers o’ the Barony, and such would not be tak?en if he could help it.

He lunged for the cow?boy in the too-?big clothes, mean?ing to tear the gun out of his hands. And shoot him with it, if nec?es?sary.

12

Su?san was star?ing at the yel?low blaze of fresh wood on the com?er of the Sher?iff’s desk, for?get?ting ev?ery?thing in her amaze?ment—so much dam age in?flict?ed by the sin?gle twitch of a fin?ger!—when Cuth?bert’s des?per?ate shout awak?ened her to her po?si?tion.

She shrank back against the wall, avoid?ing Dave’s first swipe at the over?sized ser?ape, and, with?out think?ing, pulled the trig?ger again. There was an?oth?er loud ex?plo?sion, and Dave Hol?lis—a young man on?ly two years old?er than she her?self—was flung back?ward with a smok?ing hole in his shirt be?tween two points of the star he wore. His eyes were wide and un?be?liev?ing. His mon?ocle lay by one out?stretched hand on its length of black silk rib?bon. One of his feet struck his gui?tar and knocked it to the floor with a thrum near?ly as mu?si?cal as the chords he had been try?ing to make.

“Dave,” she whis?pered. “Oh Dave, I’m sor?ry, what did I do?”

Dave tried once to get up, then col?lapsed for?ward on his face. The hole go?ing in?to the front of him was small, but the one she was look?ing at now, the one com?ing 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 blaz?ing hot pok?er in?stead of shoot?ing him with a gun, which was sup posed to be mer?ci?ful and civ?ilized and was clear?ly nei?ther one.

“Dave,” she whis?pered. “Dave, I...”

“Su?san look out!” Roland shout?ed.

It was Av?ery. He scut?tled for?ward on his hands and knees, seized her around the calves, and yanked her feet out from un?der her. She came down on her bot?tom with a tooth-?rat?tling crash and was face to face with him—his frog-?eyed, large-pored face, his gar?lic-?smelling hole of a mouth.

“Gods, ye’re a girl,” he whis?pered, and reached for her. She pulled the trig?ger of Roland’s gun again, set?ting the front of her ser?ape on fire and blow?ing a hole in the ceil?ing. Plas?ter dust drift?ed down. Av?ery’s ham sized hands set?tled around her throat, cut?ting off her wind. Some?where far away, Roland shrieked her name.

She had one more chance.

Maybe.

One’s enough, Sue, her fa?ther spoke in?side 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.

13

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 oversized 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 gunshot 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

sad?dle. Sheemie was al?ready off on his next er?rand with?out hav?ing to be told. If the inn-?boy was a halfwit, she'd known a lot of folks in her time who were run?ning on quar?ters and eighths.

"Where'd you get this stuff?" Alain asked.

"The Trav?ellers' Rest. And I didn't. Sheemie did." She held the hats out. "Come on, hur?ry."

Cuth?bert took the head?gear and passed it out. Roland and Alain had al?ready slipped in?to 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 go?ing?" Alain asked as they stepped out on?to the porch. The street was still dark and de?sert?ed at this end; the gun?shots had at?tract?ed no at?ten?tion.

"Hock?ey's, to start with," Su?san said. "That's where your hors?es are."

They went down the street to?geth?er in a lit?tle group of four. Capi was gone; Sheemie had tak?en the mule along. Su?san's heart was thud?ding rapid?ly and she could feel sweat stand?ing out on her brow, but she still felt cold. Whether or no what she had done was mur?der, she had end?ed two lives this evening, and crossed a line that could nev?er be re?crossed in the oth?er di?rec?tion. She had done it for Roland, for her love, and sim?ply know?ing she could have done no dif?fer?ent now of?fered some con?so?la?tion.

Be hap?py to?geth?er, ye faith?less, ye coz?en?ers, ye mur?der?ers. I curse thee with the ash?es.

Su?san seized Roland's hand, and when he squeezed, she squeezed back. And as she looked up at De?mon Moon, its wicked face now drain ing from cho?ler?ic red-or?ange to sil?ver, she thought that when she had pulled the trig?ger on poor, earnest Dave Hol?lis, she had paid for her love with the dear?est cur?ren?cy of all—had paid with her soul. If he left her now, her aunt's curse would be ful?filled, for on?ly ash?es would re?main.

CHAP?TER IX

REAP?ING

1

As they stepped in?to the sta?ble, which was lit by one dim gas lamp, a shad?ow moved out of one of the stalls. Roland, who had belt?ed on both guns, now drew them. Sheemie looked at him with an un?cer?tain smile, hold?ing a stir?rup in one hand. Then the smile broad?ened, his eyes flashed with hap?pi?ness, and he ran to?ward them.

Roland bol?stered his guns and made ready to em?brace the boy, but Sheemie ran past him and threw him?self in?to Cuth?bert's arms.

"Whoa, whoa," Cuth?bert said, first stag?ger?ing back com?ical?ly and then lift?ing 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 Su?san!"

Sheemie looked around at Su?san, who stood be?side Roland. She was still pale, but now seemed com?posed. Sheemie turned back to Cuth?bert and plant?ed a kiss di?rect?ly in the cen?ter of Bert's fore?head.

"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 Stockworth’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, said Dearborn, but if ye tease em during the time of the De’mon, 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 Hamby but north-west.”

“Why not north-west?” 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 Citigo 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 south-eastern 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, Citigo was far spookier than the graveyard, and while he doubted that the dead in that latter place awoke even when Old De’mon 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 hard?hat? and an?oth?er read?ing we pro?duce oil, we re?fine safe?ty. They stopped at the foot of a der?rick grind?ing so loud?ly that Roland had to shout in or?der to be heard.

“Sheemie! Give me a cou?ple of those big-?bangers!”

Sheemie had tak?en a pock?et?ful from Su?san's sad?dle?bag and now hand?ed a pair of them over. Roland took Bert by the arm and pulled him for?ward. There was a square of rusty fenc?ing around the der?rick, and when the boys tried to climb it, the hor?izon?tals snapped like old bones. They looked at each oth?er in the run?ning shad?ows com?bined of ma?chin?ery and moon?light, ner?vous and amused.

Su?san twitched Roland's arm. “Be care?ful!” she shout?ed over the rhyth?mic whumpa-?whumpa-?whumpa of the der?rick ma?chin?ery. She didn't look fright?ened, he saw, on?ly ex?cit?ed and alert.

He grinned, pulled her for?ward, and kissed the lobe of her ear. “Be ready to run,” he whis?pered. “If we do this right, there's go?ing to be a new can?dle here at Cit?go. A hel?la?cious big one.”

He and Cuth?bert ducked un?der the low?est strut of the rusty der?rick tow?er and stood next to the equip?ment, winc?ing at the ca?copho?ny. Roland won?dered that it hadn't torn it?self apart years ago. Most of the works were housed in rusty met?al blocks, but he could see a gi?gan?tic turn?ing shaft of some kind, gleam?ing with oil that must be sup?plied by au?to?mat?ed jets. Up this close, there was a gassy smell that re?mind?ed him of the jet that flared rhyth?mi?cal?ly on the oth?er side of the oil?patch. “Gi?ant-?farts!” Cuth?bert shout?ed.

“What?”

“I said it smells like . . . aw, nev?er mind! Let's do it if-?we can . . . can we? ”

Roland didn't know. He walked to?ward the ma?chin?ery cry?ing out be neath met?al cowl which were paint?ed a fad?ed, rust?ing green. Bert fol lowed with some re?luc?tance. The two of them slid in?to a short aisle, smelly and bak?ing hot, that took them al?most di?rect?ly be?neath the der?rick. Ahead of them, the shaft at the end of the pis?ton turned steadi?ly, shed?ding oily teardrops down its smooth sides. Be?side it was a curved pipe— al?most sure?ly an over?flow pipe, Roland thought. An oc?ca?sion?al drop of crude oil fell from its lip, and there was a black pud?dle on the ground be?neath. He point?ed at it, and Cuth?bert nod?ded.

Shout?ing would do no good in here; the world was a roar?ing, 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 oth?er.

“Light it and run,” he said. “I'll hold it, give you as much time as I can. That's for my ben?efit as much as for yours. I want a clear path back through that ma?chin?ery, do you un?der?stand?”

Cuth?bert nod?ded against Roland's lips, then turned the gun?slinger's head so he could speak in the same fash?ion. “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. Cuth?bert laughed and drew out a box of sul?fur match?es which he had scooped off Av?ery's desk be?fore leav?ing. He asked with his eye?brows if Roland was ready. Roland nod?ded.

The wind was blowing hard, but under the derick 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 galloos—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 itself 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 standing; 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 remains of the derick—about half of it still stood—were glowing blackish red, like a heated horse's shoe, around a flaring yellow torch that ran perhaps a hundred and fifty feet into the sky. It was a start. He didn't know how many other dericks 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 ancient, 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 derick to the right of the one they had set afire. A moment later, a third derick—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 cushion of blazing blue and yellow, attained a height of perhaps seventy feet, then

heeled over and came crash?ing back down, spew?ing sparks in ev?ery di?rec?tion. An?oth?er. An?oth?er. And yet an?oth?er.

The five young peo?ple stood in their com?er, stunned, hold?ing their hands up to shield their eyes from the glare. Now the oil?patch flared like a birth?day cake, and the heat bak?ing to?ward them was enor?mous.

“Gods be kind,” Alain whis?pered.

If they lin?gered here much longer, Roland re?al?ized, they would be popped like corn. There were the hors?es to con?sider, too; they were well away from the main fo?cus of the ex?plo?sions, but there was no guaran tee that the fo?cus would stay where it was; al?ready he saw two der?ricks that hadn’t even been work?ing en?gulfed in flames. The hors?es would be ter?ri?fied.

Hell, he was ter?ri?fied.

“Come on!” he shout?ed.

They ran for the hors?es through shift?ing yel?low-?or?ange bril?liance.

3

At first Jonas thought it was go?ing on in his own head—that the ex?plo sions were part of their love?mak?ing.

Love?mak?ing, yar. Love?mak?ing, horse?shit. He and Coral made love no more than don?keys did sums. But it was some?thing. Oh yes in?deed it was.

He’d been with pas?sion?ate wom?en be?fore, ones who took you in?to a kind of oven-place and then held you there, star?ing with greedy in?ten?si?ty as they pumped their hips, but un?til Coral he’d nev?er been with a wom?an that sparked such a pow?er?ful?ly har?mon?ic chord in him?self. With sex, he had al?ways been the kind of man who took it when it came and for?got it when it didn’t. But with Coral he on?ly want?ed to take it, take it, and take it some more. When they were to?geth?er they made love like cats or fer?rets, twist?ing and hiss?ing and claw?ing; they bit at each oth?er and cursed at each oth?er, and so far none of it was even close to enough. When he was with her, Jonas some?times felt as if he were be?ing fried in sweet oil.

Tonight there had been a meet?ing with the Horse?men’s As?so?ci?ation, which had pret?ty much be?come the Far?son As?so?ci?ation in these lat?ter days. Jonas had brought them up to date, had an?swered their id?iot?ic ques tions, and had made sure they un?der?stood what they’d be do?ing the next day. With that done, he had checked on Rhea, who had been in?stalled in Kim?ba Rimer’s old suite. She hadn’t even no?ticed Jonas peer?ing in at her. She sat in Rimer’s high-?ceilinged, book-?lined study—be?hind Rimer’s iron?wood desk, in Rimer’s up?hol?stered chair, look?ing as out of place as a whore’s bloomers on a church al?tar. On Rimer’s desk was the Wiz?ard’s Rain?bow. She was pass?ing her hands back and forth above it and mut?ter ing rapid?ly un?der her breath, but the ball re?mained dark.

Jonas had locked her in and had gone to Coral. She had been wait?ing for him in the par?lor where to?mor?row’s Con?ver?sa?tion?al would have been held. There were plen?ty of bed?rooms in that wing, but it was to her dead broth?er’s that she had led him ... and not by ac?ci?dent, ei?ther, Jonas was sure. There they made love in the canopied bed Hart Thorin would nev?er share with his gilly.

It was fierce, as it had al?ways been, and Jonas was ap?proach?ing his or gasm when the first oil der?rick blew. Christ, she’s some?thing, he thought. There’s nev?er in the

whole damned world been a wom?an like—

Then two more ex?plo?sions, in rapid suc?ces?sion, and Coral froze for a mo?ment be?neath him be?fore be?gin?ning to thrust her hips again. “Cit?go,” she said in a hoarse, pant?ing voice.

“Yar,” he growled, and be?gan to thrust with her. He had lost all in?ter est in mak?ing love, but they had reached the point where it was im?pos?si ble to stop, even un?der threat of death or dis?mem?ber?ment.

Two min?utes lat?er he was strid?ing, naked, to?ward Thorin’s lit?tle lick of a bal?cony, his half-?erect pe?nis wag?ging from side to side ahead of him like some halfwit’s idea of a mag?ic wand. Coral was a step be?hind him, as naked as he was.

“Why now?” she burst out as Jonas thrust open the bal?cony door. “I could have come three more times!”

Jonas ig?nored her. The coun?try?side look?ing north?west was a moon-?gild?ed dark?ness . . . ex?cept where the oil?patch was. There he saw a fierce yel?low core of light. It was spread?ing and bright?en?ing even as he watched; one thud?ding ex?plo?sion af?ter an?oth?er ham?mered across the in?ter?ven?ing miles.

He felt a cu?ri?ous dark?en?ing in his mind—that feel?ing had been there ev?er since the brat, Dear?born, by the some febrile leap of in?tu?ition, had rec?og?nized him for who and what he was. Mak?ing love to the en?er?get?ic Coral melt?ed that feel?ing a lit?tle, but now, look?ing at the burn?ing tan?gle of fire which had five min?utes ago been the Good Man’s oil re?serves, it came back with de?bil?itat?ing in?ten?si?ty, like a swamp-fever that some?times quits the flesh but hides in the bones and nev?er re?al?ly leaves. You ‘re in the west, Dear?born had said. The soul of a man such as you can nev?er leave the west. Of course it was true, and he hadn’t need?ed any such tit?mon?key as Will Dear?born to tell him . . . but now that it had been said, there was a part of his mind that couldn’t stop think?ing about it.

Fuck?ing Will Dear?born. Where, ex?act?ly, was he now, him and his pair of good-man?nered mates? In Av?ery’s cu?la?bo?zo? Jonas didn’t think so. Not any?more.

Fresh ex?plo?sions ripped the night. Down be?low, men who had run and shout?ed in the wake of the ear?ly morn?ing’s as?sas?si?na?tions were run ning and shout?ing again.

“It’s the biggest Reap?ing fire?work that ev?er was,” Coral said in a low voice.

Be?fore Jonas could re?ply, there was a hard ham?mer?ing on the bed room door. It was thrown open a sec?ond lat?er, and Clay Reynolds came clump?ing across the room, wear?ing a pair of blue jeans and noth?ing else. His hair was wild; his eyes were wilder.

“Bad news from town, El?dred,” he said. “Dear?born and the oth?er two In-?World brats”

Three more ex?plo?sions, falling al?most on top of each oth?er. From the blaz?ing Cit?go oil?patch a great red-?or?ange fire?ball rose lazi?ly in?to the black of night, fad?ed, dis?ap?peared. Reynolds walked out on?to the bal?cony and stood be?tween them at the rail?ing, un?mind?ful of their naked?ness. He stared at the fire?ball with wide, won?der?ing eyes un?til it was gone. As gone as the brats. Jonas felt that cu?ri?ous, de?bil?itat?ing gloom try?ing to steal over him again.

“How did they get away?” he asked. “Do you know? Does Av?ery?”

“Av?ery’s dead. The deputy who was with him, too. ‘Twas an?oth?er deputy found

em, Todd Bridger . . . El?dred, what's go?ing on out there? What hap?pened?"
"Oh, that's your boys," Coral said. "Didn't take em long to start their own Reap?ing par?ty, did it?"

How much heart do they have? Jonas asked him?self. It was a good ques?tion—maybe the on?ly one that mat?tered. Were they now done mak ing trou?ble . . . or just get?ting start?ed?

He once more want?ed to be out of here—out of Seafront, out of Ham?bry, out of Mejis. Sud?den?ly, more than any?thing, he want?ed to be miles and wheels and leagues away. He had bound?ed around his Hillock, it was too late to go back, and now he felt hor?ri?bly ex?posed.

"Clay."

"Yes, El?dred?"

But the man's eyes—and his mind—were still on the con?fla?gra?tion at Cit?go. Jonas took his shoul?der and turned Reynolds to?ward him. Jonas felt his own mind start?ing to pick up speed, tick?ing past points and de?tails, and wel?comed the feel?ing. That queer, dark sense of fa?tal?ism fad?ed and dis?ap?peared.

"How many men are here?" he asked.

Reynolds frowned, thought about it. "Thir?ty-?five." he said. "Maybe."

"How many armed?"

"With guns?"

"No, with pea-?blow?ers, you damned fool."

"Prob?ably . . ." Reynolds pulled his low?er lip, frown?ing more fierce?ly than ev?er.

"Prob?ably a dozen. That's guns like?ly to work, you ken."

"The big boys from the Horse?men's As?so?ci?ation? Still all here?"

"I think so."

"Get Lengyll and Ren?frew. 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 court?yard. "Tell Ren?frew to put to?geth?er an ad?vance par?ty. Armed men. I'd like eight or ten, but I'll take five. Have that old wom?an's cart har?nessed to the strongest, hardi?est pony this place has got. Tell that old fuck Miguel that if the pony he choos?es dies in the traces be?tween here and Hang?ing Rock, he'll be us?ing his wrin?kled old balls for earplugs."

Coral Thorin barked brief, harsh laugh?ter. Reynolds glanced at her, did a dou?ble-take at her breasts, then looked back at Jonas with an ef?fort.

"Where's Roy?" Jonas asked.

Reynolds looked up. "Third floor. With some lit?tle serv?ing maid."

"Kick him out," Jonas said. "It's his job to get the old bitch ready to ride."

"We're go?ing?"

"Soon as we can. You and me first, with Ren?frew's boys, and Lengyll be?hind, with the rest of the men. You just make sure Hash Ren?frew's with us, Clay; that man's got sand in his craw."

"What about the hors?es out on the Drop?"

"Nev?er mind the ev?er?fuck?ing hors?es." There was an?oth?er ex?plo?sion at Cit?go; an?oth?er fire?ball float?ed in?to the sky. Jonas couldn't see the dark clouds of smoke which must be rush?ing up, or smell the oil; the wind, out of the east and in?to the

west, would be car?ry?ing both away from town.

“But—”

“Just do as I say.” Jonas now saw his pri?or?ities in clear, as?cend?ing or der. The hors?es were on the bot?tom—Far?son could find hors?es damned near any?where. Above them were the tankers gath?ered at Hang?ing Rock. They were more im?por?tant than ev?er now, be?cause the source was gone. Lose the tankers, and the Big Cof?fin Hunters could for?get go?ing home.

Yet most im?por?tant of all was Par?son’s lit?tle piece of the Wiz?ard’s Rain?bow. It was the one tru?ly ir?re?place?able item. If it was bro?ken, let it be bro?ken in the care of George Lati?go, not that of El?dred Jonas.

“Get mov?ing,” he told Reynolds. “De?pape rides af?ter, with Lengyll’s men. You with me. Go on. Make it hap?pen.”

“And me?” Coral asked.

He reached out and tugged her to?ward him. “I ain’t for?got you, dar?lin,” he said. Coral nod?ded and reached be?tween his legs, obliv?ious of the star?ing Clay Reynolds. “Aye,” she said. “And I ain’t for?got you.”

4

They es?caped Cit?go with ring?ing ears and slight?ly singed around the edges but not re?al?ly hurt, Sheemie rid?ing dou?ble be?hind Cuth?bert and Capri?choso clat?ter?ing af?ter, at the end of his long lead.

It was Su?san who came up with the place they should go, and like most so?lu?tions, it seemed com?plete?ly ob?vi?ous . . . once some?one had thought of it. And so, not long af?ter Reap?ing Eve had be?come Reap?ing Mom, the five of them came to the hut in the Bad Grass where Su?san and Roland had on sev?er?al oc?ca?sions met to make love.

Cuth?bert and Alain un?rolled blan?kets, then sat on them to ex?am?ine the guns they had lib?er?at?ed from the Sher?iff’s of?fice. They had al?so found Bert’s sling?shot.

“These’re hard cal?ibers,” Alain said, hold?ing one up with the cylin?der sprung and peer?ing one-?eyed down the bar?rel. “If they don’t throw too high or wide, Roland, I think we can do some busi?ness with them.”

“I wish we had that ranch?er’s ma?chine-?gun,” Cuth?bert said wist?ful?ly.

“You know what Cort would say about a gun like that?” Roland asked, and Cuth?bert burst out laugh?ing. So did Alain.

“Who’s Cort?” Su?san asked.

“The tough man El?dred Jonas on?ly thinks he is,” Alain said. “He was our teach?er.” Roland sug?gest?ed that they catch an hour or two of sleep—the next day was apt to be dif?fi?cult. That it might al?so be their last was some?thing he didn’t feel he had to say.

“Alain, are you lis?ten?ing?”

Alain, who knew per?fect?ly well that Roland wasn’t speak?ing of his ears or his at?ten?tion-?span, nod?ded.

“Do you hear any?thing?”

“Not yet.”

“Keep at it.”

“I will . . . but I can’t promise any?thing. The touch is flukey. You know that as

well as I do.”

“Just keep try?ing.”

Sheemie had care?ful?ly spread two blan?kets in the com?er next to his pro?claimed best friend. “He’s Roland . . . and he’s Alain . . . who are you, good old Arthur Heath? Who are you re?al?ly?”

“Cuth?bert’s my name.” He stuck out his hand. “Cuth?bert All?go?od. How do y’do, and how do y’do, and how do y’do again?”

Sheemie shook the of?fered hand, then be?gan gig?gling. It was a cheer ful, un?ex?pect?ed sound, and made them all smile. Smil?ing hurt Roland a lit?tle, and he guessed that if he could see his own face, he’d ob?serve a pret?ty good bum from be?ing so close to the ex?plod?ing der?ricks.

“Key-?youth-?bert,” Sheemie said, gig?gling. “Oh my! Key-?youth-?bert, that’s a fun?ny name, no won?der you’re such a fun?ny fel?low. Key-?youth-?bert, oh-?aha-?ha-?ha, that’s a pip, a re?al pip!”

Cuth?bert smiled and nod?ded. “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 Su?san, his own smile fad?ing. “Will thee walk out with me a bit, Sue? I’d talk to thee.”

She looked up at him, try?ing to read his face. “All right.” She held out her hand. Roland took it, they walked in?to the moon?light to?geth?er, and be neath its light, Su?san felt dread take hold of her heart.

5

They walked out in si?lence, through sweet-?smelling grass that tast?ed good to cows and hors?es even as it was ex?pand?ing in their bel?lies, first bloat?ing and then killing them. It was high—at least a foot taller than Roland’s head—and still green as sum?mer. Chil?dren some?times got lost in the Bad Grass and died there, but Su?san had nev?er feared to be here with Roland, even when there were no sky-?mark?ers to steer by; his sense of di?rec?tion was un?can?ni?ly per?fect.

“Sue, thee dis?obeyed me in the mat?ter of the guns,” he said at last.

She looked at him, smil?ing, half-?amused and half-?an?gry. “Does thee wish to be back in thy cell, then? Thee and thy friends?”

“No, of course not. Such brav?ery!” He held her close and kissed her. When he drew back, they were both breath?ing hard. He took her by the arms and looked in?to her eyes. “But thee mustn’t dis?obey me this time.”

She looked at him steadi?ly, say?ing noth?ing.

“Thee knows,” he said. “Thee knows what I’d tell thee.”

“Aye, per?haps.”

“Say. Bet?ter you than me, maybe.”

“I’m to stay at the hut while you and the oth?ers go. Sheemie and I are to stay.”

He nod?ded. “Will you? Will thee?”

She thought of how un?fa?mil?iar and wretched Roland’s gun had felt in her hand as she held it be?neath the ser?ape; of the wide, un?be?liev?ing look in Dave’s eyes as the bul?let she’d fired in?to his chest flung him back?ward; of how the first time she’d tried to shoot Sher?iff Av?ery, the bul?let had on?ly suc?ceed?ed in set?ting her own cloth?ing afire, al?though 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 important, 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 k-a-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, maybe . . . 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 refused—“Never was an animal I didn’t get on with better than any man ever could,” she’d told him, and that seemed to be true. The reins lay limp in her lap; the pony worked smart without them. The other five men consisted of Hash Renfrew, Quint, and three of Renfrew’s best vaqueros. Coral had wanted to come as well, but Jonas had different ideas. “If we’re killed, you can go on more or less as before,” he’d said. “There’ll be nothing to tie you to us.”

“Without ye, I’m not sure there’d be any reason to go on,” she said.

“Ar, quit that schoolgirl shit, it don’t become you. You’d find plenty of reasons to keep staggerin down the path, if you had to put your mind to it. If all goes well—as I expect it will—and you still want to be with me, ride out of here as soon as you get word of our success. There’s a town west of here in the Vi Castis Mountains. Ritzy. Go there on the fastest horse you can swing a leg over. You’ll be there ahead of us by days, no matter how smart we’re able to push along. Find a respectable inn that’ll take a woman on her own . . . if there is such a thing in Ritzy. Wait. When we get there with the tankers, you just fall in to 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, adicting sweetness into his head; he thought about that single pink pulse of light he'd seen far too much.

Balls, he told himself. Batlesweat'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 particular 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 Latiago, that might change.

"Though maybe 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?”

“In?to 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 late?ning moon?light. 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 shy?ly touched Cuth?bert’s boot.

Cuth?bert 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 moon?light turned these into foot racing phantoms. At moments Hanging Rock was visible some two wheels distant, and the mouth of Eye?bolt Canyon two wheels farther on. Sometimes both were gone, hidden by the dust. Behind them, the tall grass made a sighing, 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,” Cuth?bert 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 gun?nies 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 Rain?bow.”

Alain and Cuth?bert sat quiet, listening intently. The wind gust?ed, 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.”

Cuth?bert 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 kids, 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 south-east, hands held out with the palms up. Beyond his shoulder, Roland saw Old Star just about to slip below the horizon. Only an hour until dawn, then.

"I can't tell yet," Alain said.

"Can you at least tell if the ball—"

"No. Shut up, Roland, let me listen!"

Roland and Cuthbert stood and watched Alain anxiously, at the same time straining their ears to hear the hooves of horses, the creak of wheels, or the murmur of men on the passing wind. Time spun out. The wind, rather than dropping as Old Star disappeared and dawn approached, blew more fiercely than ever. Roland looked at Cuthbert, who had taken out his slingshot and was playing nervously with the pull. Bert raised one shoulder in a shrug.

"It's a small party," Alain said suddenly. "Can either of you touch them?"

They shook their heads.

"No more than ten, maybe only six."

"Gods!" Roland murmured, and pumped a fist at the sky. He couldn't help it. "And the ball?"

"I can't touch it," Alain said. He sounded almost as though he were sleeping

him?self. "But it's with them, don't you think?"

Roland did. A small par?ty of six or eight, prob?ably trav?el?ing with the ball. It was perfect.

"Be ready, boys," he said. "We're go?ing to take them."

9

Jonas's par?ty made good time down the Drop and in?to the Bad Grass. The guide-stars were bril?liant in the au?tumn sky, and Ren?frew knew them all. He had a click-line to mea?sure be?tween the two he called The Twins, and he stopped the group briefly ev?ery twen?ty min?utes or so to use it. Jonas hadn't the slight?est doubt the old cow?boy would bring them out of the tall grass point?ed straight at Hang?ing Rock.

Then, about an hour af?ter they'd en?tered the Bad Grass, Quint rode up be?side him.

"That old la?dy, she want to see you, sai. She say it's im?por?tant."

"Do she, now?" Jonas asked.

"Aye." Quint low?ered his voice. "That ball she got on her lap all glowy."

"Is that so? I tell you what. Quint—keep my old trail-?bud?dies com pa?ny while I see what's what." He dropped back un?til he was pac?ing be side the black cart.

Rhea raised her face to him, and for a mo?ment, 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 pret?ty smart." She cack?led, and as her face broke in?to its sour lines of laugh?ter, Jonas again saw her as she re?al?ly was—all but sucked dry by the thing in her lap. Then he looked down at it him?self . . . and was lost. He could feel that pink glow ra?di?at?ing in?to all the deep?est pas?sages and hol?lows of his mind, light?ing them up in a way they'd nev?er been lit up be?fore. Even Coral, at her dirty bus?iest, couldn't light him up that way.

"Ye like it, don't ye?" she half-?laughed, half-?crooned. "Aye, so ye do, so would any?one, such a pret?ty glam it is! But what do ye see, sai Jonas?"

Lean?ing over, hold?ing to the sad?dle-?horn with one hand, his long hair hang?ing down in a sheaf, Jonas looked deeply in?to the ball. At first he saw on?ly that lus?cious, labi?al pink, and then it be?gan to draw apart. Now he saw a hut sur?round?ed by tall grass. The sort of hut on?ly a her?mit could love. The door—it was paint?ed a peel?ing but still bright red—stood open. And sit?ting there on the stone stoop with her hands in her lap, her blan?kets on the ground at her feet, and her un?bound hair around her shoul?ders was ...

"I'll be damned!" Jonas whis?pered. He had now leaned so far out of the sad?dle that he looked like a trick rid?er in a cir?cus show, and his eyes seemed to have dis?ap?peared; there were on?ly sock?ets of pink light where they had been.

Rhea cack?led de?light?ed?ly. "Aye, it's Thorin's gilly that nev?er was! Dear?born's lover?girl!" Her cack?ling stopped abrupt?ly. "Lover?girl of the young prod?dy who killed my Er?mot. And he'll pay for it, aye, so he will. Look clos?er, sai Jonas! Look clos?er!"

He did. Ev?ery?thing was clear now, and he thought he should have seen it ear?li?er. Ev?ery?thing this girl's aunt had feared had been true. Rhea had known, al?though why she hadn't told any?one the girl had been screw ing one of the In-?World boys, Jonas didn't know. And Su?san had done more than just screw Will Dear?born; she'd helped him es?cape, him and his trail-?mates, and she might well have killed two

law?men for him, in?to the bar?gain.

The fig?ure in the ball swam clos?er. Watch?ing that made him feel a lit tle dizzy, but it was a pleas?ant dizzi?ness. Be?yond the girl was the hut, faint?ly lit by a lamp which had been turned down to the barest core of flame. At first Jonas thought some?one was sleep?ing in one com?er, but on sec?ond glance he de?cid?ed it was on?ly a heap of hides that looked vague?ly hu?man.

“Do’ee spy the boys?” Rhea asked, seem?ing?ly from a great dis?tance. “Do’ee spy em, m’lord sai?”

“No,” he said, his own voice seem?ing to come from that same dis?tant place. His eyes were pinned to the ball. He could feel its light bak?ing deep?er and deep?er in?to his brain. It was a good feel?ing, like a hot fire on a cold night. “She’s alone. Looks as if she’s wait?ing.”

“Aye.” Rhea ges?tured above the ball—a curt dust?ing-?off move?ment of the hands—and the pink light was gone. Jonas gave a low, protest?ing cry, but no mat?ter; the ball was dark again. He want?ed to stretch his hands out and tell her to make the light re?turn—to beg her, if nec?es?sary—and held him?self back by pure force of will. He was re?ward?ed by a slow re?turn of his wits. It helped to re?mind him?self that Rhea’s ges?tures were as mean?ing?less as the pup?pets in a Pinch and Jil?ly show. The ball did what it want?ed, not what she want?ed.

Mean?while, the ug?ly old wom?an was look?ing at him with eyes that were per?verse?ly shrewd and clear. “Wait?ing for what, do’ee sup?pose?” she asked. There was on?ly one thing she could be wait?ing for. Jonas thought with ris?ing alarm. The boys. The three beard?less sons of bitch?es from In-?World. And if they weren’t with her, they might well be up ahead, do?ing their own wait?ing.

Wait?ing for him. Pos?si?bly even wait?ing for—

“Lis?ten to me,” he said. “I’ll on?ly speak once, and you best an?swer true. Do they know about that thing? Do those three boys know about the Rain?bow?”

Her eyes shift?ed away from his. It was an?swer enough in one way, but not in an?oth?er. 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 shoul?der. It was hor?ri?ble—like grab?bing a bare bone that some?how still lived—but he made him?self hold on all the same. And squeeze. She moaned and wrig?gled, but he held on.

“Tell me, you old bitch! Run your fuck?ing 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 want?ed to kill you, you’d be dead.” He took an?oth?er long?ing glance at the ball, then sat up straight in the sad?dle, 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 be?hind him.

The wind whis?pered through the grass, bend?ing it, rip?pling it, whip ping up ed?dies of sweet smell. Jonas stared ahead in?to the dark, even though he knew it was fruit?less to look for them. They could be any where, and Jonas didn’t like the odds in an am?bush. Not one bit.

He rode to where Clay and Ren?frew were wait?ing. Ren?frew looked im?pa?tient.

“What’s the prob?lem? Dawn’ll be break?ing 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?”

Ren?frew nodded and point?ed north. “Old Soony’s place. He had some sort of re?li?gious con?ver?sion—a dream or a vi?sion or some?thing. That’s when he paint?ed the door of his hut red. He’s gone to the Man?ni-?folk these last five years.” He no longer asked why, at least; he had seen some?thing on Jonas’s face that had shut up his ques?tions.

Jonas raised his hand, looked at the blue cof?fin tat?tooed there for a sec?ond, then turned and called for Quint. “You’re in charge,” Jonas told him.

Quint’s shag?gy eye?brows shot up. “Me?”

“Yar. But you’re not go?ing on—there’s been a change of plan.”

“What—”

“Lis?ten and don’t open your mouth again un?less there’s some?thing you don’t un?der?stand. 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 un?til he and Reynolds and Ren?frew come. Clear?”

Quint nodded. He looked be?wil?dered but said noth?ing.

“Good. Get about it. And tell the witch to put her toy back in its bag.” Jonas passed a hand over his brow. Fin?gers which had rarely shak?en be?fore had now picked up a minute trem?ble. “It’s dis?tract?ing.”

Quint start?ed away, then looked back when Jonas called his name.

“I think those In-?World boys are out here, Quint. Prob?ably ahead of where we are now, but if they’re back the way you’re go?ing, they’ll prob?ably set on you.”

Quint looked ner?vous?ly around at the grass, which rose high?er than his head. Then his lips tight?ened and he re?turned his at?ten?tion to Jonas.

“If they at?tack, they’ll try to take the ball,” Jonas con?tin?ued. “And sai, mark me well: any man who doesn’t die pro?tect?ing it will wish he had.” He lift?ed his chin at the vaqs, who sat astride their hors?es in a line be?hind the black cart. “Tell them that.”

“Aye, boss,” Quint said.

“When you reach Lengyll’s par?ty, 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 Ren?frew. “We’re go?ing to make a lit?tle side-?trip, boys,” he said.

10

“Roland.” Alain’s voice was low and ur?gent. “They’ve turned around.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. There’s an?oth?er group com?ing along be?hind them. A much larg?er one. That’s where they’re head?ed.”

“Safe?ty in num?bers, that’s all,” Cuth?bert 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 go?ing the oth?er way now. Once you find it, it glows like a lamp in a mi?ne?shaft.”

“Does Rhea still have the keep?ing of it?”

“I think so. It’s aw?ful 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.” Un?aware that he was both right and bad?ly out in his reck?on?ing. Un?aware that for one of the few times since they had left Gilead, he had lapsed in?to a teenag?er’s dis?as?trous cer?tain?ty.

“What do we do?” Alain asked.

“Sit here. Lis?ten. Wait. They’ll bring the ball this way again if they’re go?ing to Hang?ing Rock. They’ll have to.”

“Su?san?” Cuth?bert asked. “Su?san and Sheemie? What about them? How do we know they’re all right?”

”I sup?pose that we don’t.“ Roland sat down, cross-?legged, with Push?er’s trail?ing 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

Su?san hadn’t want?ed to sleep in?side—the hut felt wrong to her with?out Roland. She had left Sheemie hud?dled un?der the old hides in the com?er and tak?en her own blan?kets out?side. She sat in the hut’s door?way for a lit tle while, look?ing up at the stars and pray?ing for Roland in her own fash ion. When she be?gan to feel a lit?tle bet?ter, she lay down on one blan?ket and pulled the oth?er over her. It seemed an eter?ni?ty since Maria had shak?en her out of her heavy sleep, and the open-?mouthed, glot?tal snores drift?ing out of the hut didn’t both?er her much. She slept with her head pil lowed on one arm, and didn’t wake when, twen?ty min?utes lat?er, Sheemie came to the door?way, blinked at her sleep?ily, and then walked off in?to the grass to uri?nate. The on?ly one to no?tice him was Capri?choso, who stuck out his long muz?zle and took a nip at Sheemie’s butt as the boy passed him. Sheemie, still most?ly asleep, reached back and pushed the muz?zle away. He knew Capi’s tricks well enough, so he did.

Su?san dreamed of the wil?low grove—bird and bear and hare and fish—and what woke her wasn’t Sheemie’s re?turn from his nec?es?sary but a cold cir?cle of steel press?ing in?to her neck. There was a loud click that she rec?og?nized at once from the Sher?iff’s of?fice: a pis?tol be?ing cocked. The wil?low grove fad?ed from the eye of her mind.

”Shine, lit?tle sun?beam,” said a voice. For a mo?ment her be?wil?dered, half-?wak?ing mind tried to be?lieve it was yes?ter?day, and Maria want?ed her to get up and out of Seafront be?fore who?ev?er had killed May?or Thorin and Chan?cel?lor Rimer could come back and kill her, as well.

No good. It wasn’t the strong light of mid?morn?ing that her eyes opened up?on, but the ash-?pal?lid glow of five o’clock. Not a wom?an’s voice but a man’s. And not a hand shak?ing her shoul?der but the bar?rel of a gun against her neck.

She looked up and saw a lined, nar?row face framed by white hair. Lips no more than a scar. Eyes the same fad?ed blue as Roland’s. El?dred Jonas. The man stand?ing be?hind him had bought her own da drinks once up?on a hap?pi?er time: Hash Ren?frew. A third man, one of Jonas’s ka-?tet, ducked in?to the hut. Freez?ing ter?ror filled her mid?sec?tion—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 fel lows 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 forgotten, sad to say. Do you know where they went?"

"Yes," she said. Her voice was low, barely a whisper.

Jonas looked pleased. "If you was to tell, things might go easier for you. Would you agree, Renfrew?"

"Aye," Renfrew said. "They're traitors, Susan—for the Good Man. If you know where they are or what they're up to, tell us."

Keeping her eyes fixed on Jonas, Susan said: "Come closer." Her numbed lips didn't want to move and it came out sounding like Cung gloser, but Jonas understood and leaned forward, stretching his neck in a way that made him look absurdly like Caprichoso. When he did, Susan spat in his face.

Jonas recoiled, lips twisting in surprise and revulsion. "Arrr! BITCH!" he cried, and launched a full-swung, open-handed blow that drove her to the ground. She landed at full length on her side with black stars exploding across her field of

vision. She could already feel her right cheek swelling like a balloon and thought, If he'd hit an inch or two lower, he might've broken my neck. Maybe 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 Elfred Jonas, would you, you bitch?"

Reynolds was holding out his neckerchief. Jonas took it, wiped the spit from his face with it, then dropped it to a hunk 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 corners of her eyes, but she kept silent.

"I may never see your friend again, sweet Sue with the tender little tits, but I've got you, ain't I? Yar. And if Dearborn gives us trouble, I'll give you double. And make sure Dearborn knows. You may count on it."

His smile faded, and he gave her a sudden, bitter shove that almost sent her sprawling again.

"Now get mounted, and do it before I decide to change your face a little with my knife."

12

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 something—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, hurtful smile. "Likely I'll find you there when I arrive," he said.

Then, to the other Coffin Hunter: "You checked the place carefully?"

"Whatever they had, they took it," the redhead answered. "Only thing they left was Dearborn's punch-bun."

That made Jonas laugh meanly—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 Su?san had been tak?en. Which?

A mo?ment's thought made him re?al?ize 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 al?ways would) had tak?en was gone. The one made by Su?san and her cap?tors, on the oth?er hand, was still clear. And per?haps, if he fol?lowed her, he could do some thing for her. Help her.

Walk?ing at first, then jog?ging as his fear that they might dou?ble back and catch him dis?si?pat?ed, Sheemie went in the di?rec?tion Su?san had been tak?en. He would fol?low her most of that day.

13

Cuth?bert—not the most san?guine of per?son?al?ities in any sit?ua?tion—grew more and more im?pa?tient as the day bright?ened to?ward true dawn. It's Reap?ing, he thought. Fi?nal?ly Reap?ing, and here we sit with our knives sharp?ened and not a thing in the world to cut.

Twice he asked Alain what he "heard." The first time Alain on?ly grunt?ed. The sec?ond time he asked what Bert ex?pect?ed him to hear, with some?one yap?ping away in his ear like that.

Cuth?bert, who did not con?sider two en?quiries fif?teen min?utes apart as "yap?ping away," wan?dered off and sat mo?rose?ly in front of his horse. Af?ter a bit, Roland came over and sat down be?side him.

"Wait?ing," Cuth?bert 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 com?pa?ny reached the place where Fran Lengyll's par?ty had made a tem?po?rary camp about an hour af?ter the sun had topped the hori?zon. Quint, Rhea, and Ren?frew's vaqs were al?ready there and drink?ing cof?fee, Jonas was glad to see. Lengyll start?ed for?ward, saw Su?san rid?ing with her hands tied, and ac?tu?al?ly drew back a step, as if he want?ed to find a com?er to hide in. There were no com?ers out here, how?ev?er, so he stood fast. He did not look hap?py about it, how?ev?er.

Su?san nudged her horse for?ward with her knees, and when Reynolds tried to grab her shoul?der, she dipped it to the side, tem?porar?ily elud ing him.

"Why, Fran?cis Lengyll! Imag?ine meet?ing you here!"

"Su?san, I'm sor?ry to see ye so," Lengyll said. His flush crept clos?er and clos?er to his brow, like a tide ap?proach?ing a sea?wall. "It's bad com?pa?ny ye've fall?en in with, girl . . . and in the end, bad com?pa?ny al?ways leaves ye to face the mu?sic alone."

Su?san ac?tu?al?ly laughed. "Bad com?pa?ny!" she said. "Aye, ye'd know about that, wouldn't ye, Fran?"

He turned, awk?ward and stiff in his em?bar?rass?ment. She raised one boot?ed foot and, be?fore any?one could stop her, kicked him square?ly be?tween the shoul?derblades. He went down on his stom?ach, his whole face widen?ing in shocked sur?prise.

"No ye don't, ye bold cunt!" Ren?frew shout?ed, 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 cackling, 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 Hanging Rock, Latiago, the tankers . . . about the whole show, really. God knew why. "Now?"

"Give it another minute," Jonas said. "Maybe 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, Elfred."

"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 jostling 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, looking for a way out that wasn't there.

"Keep away from me, ye charity 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 entered 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 of 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 up-held bag. It was glowing; he could see dull pink even through the cloth. "Two. Enjoy hell, Rhea, goodbye. Thr—"

"Here!" she screamed, thrusting it out toward him and shielding her face with the crooked hook of her free hand. "Here, take it! And may it damn you the way it's damned me!"

"Thankee-sai."

He grabbed the bag just below the draw top and yanked. Rhea screamed again as the string skinned her knuckles and tore off one of her nails. Jonas hardly heard. His mind was a white explosion of exultation. For the first time in his long professional life he forgot his job, his surroundings, and the six thousand things that could get him killed on any day. He had it; he had it; by all the graves of all the gods, he had the fucking 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 theommel 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,” De’pape 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,” De’pape said, laughing so hard he was hiccupping. “Sih-sih-six!” Rhea climbed back up, flopped onto the cant-board 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 clearing. “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 tomorrow, I don't think we'll have to worry about this 'un any more, 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 daylight 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 cul-de-sacs, 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 pour?ing strength in?to him. Pink strength, he thought, and grinned.

”Come on, boys. I want those tankers in the woods west of Eye?bolt be?fore the home folks light their Reap-?Night Bon?fire.”

16

Sheemie, crouched down in the grass and peer?ing in?to the clear?ing, was near?ly run over by Rhea’s black wag?on; the scream?ing, gib?ber?ing 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 see?ing him and un?doubt ed?ly would have turned him in?to a bird or a bum?bler or maybe even a mosquito.

The boy saw Jonas pass cus?tody of Su?san to the one in the cloak, and be?gan work?ing his way around the edge of the clear?ing. He heard Jonas ha?rangu?ing the men (many of whom Sheemie knew; it shamed him to know how many Mejis cow?boys were do?ing that bad Cof?fin Hunter’s bid ding), but paid no at?ten?tion to what he was say?ing. Sheemie froze in place as they mount?ed up, mo?men?tar?ily scared they would come in his di?rec tion, but they rode the oth?er way, west. The clear?ing emp?tied al?most as if by mag?ic . . . ex?cept it wasn’t en?tire?ly emp?ty. Capri?choso had been left be?hind, his lead trail?ing on the beat?en grass. Capi looked af?ter the de?part ing rid?ers, brayed once—as if to tell them they could all go to hell—then turned and made eye-?con?tact with Sheemie, who was peer?ing out in?to the clear?ing. The mule flicked his ears at the boy, then tried to graze. He lipped the Bad Grass a sin?gle time, raised his head, and brayed at Sheemie, as if to say this was all the inn-?boy’s fault.

Sheemie stared thought?ful?ly at Capri?choso, think?ing of how much eas?ier it was to ride than to walk. Gods, yes . . . but that sec?ond bray de cid?ed him against it. The mule might give one of his dis?gust?ed cries at the wrong time and alert the man who had Su?san.

“You’ll find your way home, I reck?on,” Sheemie said. “So long, pal. So long, good old Capi. See you far?ther down the path.”

He found the path made by Su?san and Reynolds, and be?gan to trot af?ter them once more.

17

“They’re com?ing again,” Alain said a mo?ment be?fore Roland sensed it him?self—a brief flick?er in his head like pink light?ning. “All of them.”

Roland hun?kered in front of Cuth?bert. Cuth?bert looked back at him with?out even a sug?ges?tion of his usu?al fool?ish good hu?mor.

“Much of it’s on you,” Roland said, then tapped the sling?shot. “And on that.”

“I know.”

“How much have you got in the ar?mory?”

“Al?most four dozen steel balls.” Bert held up a cot?ton bag which had, in more set?tled times, held his fa?ther’s to?bac?co. “Plus as?sort?ed fire?works in my sad?dle?bag.”

“How many big-?bangers?”

“Enough, Roland.” Un?smil?ing. With the laugh?ter gone from them, he had the hol?low eyes of just one more killer. “Enough.”

Roland ran a hand down the front of the ser?ape he wore, let?ting his palm reac?quaint it?self with the rough weave. He looked at Cuth?bert’s, then at Alain’s,

telling him?self again that it could work, yes, as long as they held their nerve and didn't let them?selves think of it in terms of three against forty or fifty, it could work.

"The ones out at Hang?ing Rock will hear the shoot?ing once it starts, won't they?" Al asked.

Roland nodded. "With the wind blow?ing 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 stand?ing be?tween the tan?gled green hedges be?hind the Great Hall, David the hawk on his arm and a sweat of ter?ror trick?ling down his back. I think you die to?day, he had told the hawk, and he had told it true. Yet he him?self had lived, and passed his test, and walked out of the test?ing cor?ri?dor fac?ing east. To?day it was Cuth?bert and Alain's turn to be test?ed—not in Gilead, in the tra?di tion?al place of prov?ing be?hind the Great Hall, but here in Mejis, on the edge of the Bad Grass, in the desert, and in the canyon. Eye?bolt Canyon.

"Prove or die," Alain said, as if read?ing the run of the gun?slinger's thoughts.

"That's what it comes down to."

"Yes. That's what it al?ways comes down to, in the end. How long be fore they get here, do you think?"

"An hour at least, I'd say. Like?ly two."

"They'll be run?ning a 'watch-?and-?go.' "

Alain nodded. "I think so, yes."

"That's not good," Cuth?bert said.

"Jonas is afraid of be?ing am?bushed in the grass," Roland said. "Maybe of us set?ting fire to it around him. They'll loosen up when they get in?to the clear."

"You hope," Cuth?bert said.

Roland nodded grave?ly. "Yes. I hope."

18

At first Reynolds was con?tent to lead the girl along the bro?ken back?trail at a fast walk, but about thir?ty min?utes af?ter leav?ing Jonas, Lengyll, and the rest, he broke in?to a trot. Py?lon matched Reynolds's horse eas?ily, and just as eas?ily when, ten min?utes lat?er, he upped their speed to a light but steady run.

Su?sana held to the horn of her sad?dle with her bound hands and rode eas?ily at Reynolds's right, her hair stream?ing out be?hind her. She thought her face must be quite col?or?ful; the skin of her cheeks felt raised at least two inch?es high?er than usu?al, welt?ed and ten?der. Even the pass?ing wind stung a lit?tle.

At the place where the Bad Grass gave way to the Drop, Reynolds stopped to give the hors?es a blow. He dis?mount?ed him?self, turned his back to her, and took a piss. As he did, Su?sana looked up along the rise of land and saw the great herd, now un?tend?ed and un?rav?el?ling at the edges. They had done that much, per?haps. It wasn't much, but it was some?thing.

"Do you need to do the nec?es?sary?" Reynolds asked. "I'll help you down if you do, but don't say no now and whine about it lat?er."

"Ye're afraid. Big brave reg?ula?tor that ye are, ye're scared, ain't ye? Aye, cof?fin tat?too and all."

Reynolds tried a con?temp?tu?ous grin. It didn't fit his face very well this morn?ing. "You ort to leave the for?tune-?telling to those that are good at it, mis?sy. Now do you need a nec?es?sary stop or not?"

"No. And ye are afraid. Of what?"

Reynolds, who on?ly knew that his bad feel?ing hadn't left him when he left Jonas, as he'd hoped it would, bared his to?bac?co-?stained teeth at her. "If you can't talk sen?si?ble, just shut up."

"Why don't ye let me go? Per?haps my friends will do the same for you, when they catch us up."

This time Reynolds grunt?ed laugh?ter which was al?most gen?uine. He swung him?self in?to his sad?dle, hawked, spat. Over?head, De?mon Moon was a pale and bloat?ed ball in the sky. "You can dream, miss'sai," he said, "dream?ing's free. But you ain't nev?er go?ing 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 Reap?ing Eve. She sat the night through in her par?lor chair, and al?though there was sewing on her lap, she had put not a sin?gle stitch in nor picked one out. Now, as morn?ing's light bright?ened to?ward ten o' the clock, she sat in the same chair, look?ing out at noth?ing. What was there to look at, any?way? Ev?ery?thing had come down with a smash—all her hopes of the for?tune Thorin would set?tle on Su?san and Su?san's child, per?haps while he still lived, cer?tain?ly in his dead-?let?ter; all her hopes of as?cend?ing to her prop?er place in the com?mu ni?ty; all her plans for the fu?ture. Swept away by two wil?ful young peo?ple who couldn't keep their pants up.

She sat in her old chair with her knit?ting on her lap and the ash?es Su san had smeared on her cheek stand?ing out like a brand, and thought:

They'll find me dead in this chair, some?day—old, poor, and for?got?ten. That un?grate?ful child! Af?ter all I did for her!

What roused her was a weak scratch?ing at the win?dow. She had no idea how long it had been go?ing on be?fore it fi?nal?ly in?trud?ed on her con scious?ness, but when it did, she laid her needle?work aside and got up to see. A bird, per?haps. Or chil?dren play?ing Reap?ing jokes, un?aware that the world had come to an end. What?ev?er it was, she would shoo it away.

Cordelia saw noth?ing 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 lit?tle dis qui?et?ing—black, with gold sym?bols over?paint?ed—and the pony in the shafts stood with its head low?ered, not graz?ing, look?ing as if it had been run half to death.

She was still frown?ing out at this when a twist?ed, filthy hand rose in the air di?rect?ly in front of her and be?gan to scratch at the glass again. Cordelia gasped and clapped both hands to her bo?som as her heart took a star?tled leap in her chest. She backed up a step, and gave a lit?tle shriek as her calf brushed the ten?der of the stove.

The long, dirty nails scratched twice more, then fell away.

Cordelia stood where she was for a mo?ment, ir?res?olute, then went to the door,

stop?ping at the wood?box to pick up a chunk of ash which fit?ted her hand. Just in case. Then she jerked the door open, went to the com?er of the house, drew in a deep, steady?ing breath, and went around to the gar?den side, rais?ing the ash-?chunk as she did.

“Get out, who?ev?er ye are! Scat be?fore I—”

Her voice was stilled by what she saw: an in?cred?ibly old wom?an crawl?ing through the frost-?killed flowerbed next to the house—crawl?ing to?ward her. The crone’s stringy white hair (what re?mained of it) hung in her face. Sores fes?tered on her cheeks and brow; her lips had split and driz?zled blood down her point?ed, warty chin. The corneas of her eyes had gone a filthy gray-?yel?low, and she pant?ed like a cracked bel?lows as she moved.

“Good wom?an, help me,” this specter gasped. “Help me if ye will, for I’m about done up.”

The hand hold?ing the chunk of ash sagged. Cordelia could hard?ly be lieve what she was see?ing. “Rhea?” she whis?pered. “Is it Rhea?”

“Aye,” Rhea whis?pered, crawl?ing re?lent?less?ly through the dead silk-?flow?ers, drag?ing her hands through the cold earth. “Help me.”

Cordelia re?treat?ed a step, her makeshift blud?geon now hang?ing at her knee. “No, I... I can’t have such as thee in my house ... I’m sor?ry to see ye so, but ... but I have a rep?uta?tion, ye ken ... folk watch me close, so they do ...”

She glanced at the High Street as she said this, as if ex?pect?ing to see a line of towns?peo?ple out?side her gate, watch?ing ea?ger?ly, avid to fleet their wretched gos?sip on its ly?ing way, but there was no one there. Ham?bry was qui?et, its walks and by?ways emp?ty, the cus?tom?ary joy?ous noise of Reap ing Fair-?Day stilled. She looked back at the thing which had fetched up in her dead flow?ers.

“Yer niece ... did this ...” the thing in the dirt whis?pered. “All ... her fault ...”

Cordelia dropped the chunk of wood. It clipped the side of her an?kle, but she hard?ly no?ticed. Her hands curled in?to fists be?fore her.

“Help me,” Rhea whis?pered. “I know ... where she is ... we ... we have work, us two ... wom?en’s ... work ...”

Cordelia hes?itat?ed a mo?ment, then went to the wom?an, knelt, got an arm around her, and some?how got her to her feet. The smell com?ing off her was reeky and nau?se?at?ing—the smell of de?com?pos?ing flesh.

Bony fin?gers ca?ressed Cordelia’s cheek and the side of her neck as she helped the hag in?to the house. Cordelia’s flesh crawled, but she didn’t pull away un?til Rhea col?lapsed in?to a chair, gasp?ing from one end and fart?ing from the oth?er.

“Lis?ten to me,” the old wom?an hissed.

“I am.” Cordelia drew a chair over and sat be?side her. At death’s door she might be, but once her eye fell on you, it was strange?ly hard to look away. Now Rhea’s fin?gers dipped in?side the bodice of her dirty dress, brought out a sil?ver charm of some kind, and be?gan to move it back and forth rapid?ly, as if telling beads.

Cordelia, who hadn’t felt sleepy all night, be?gan to feel that way now.

“The oth?ers are be?yond us,” Rhea said, “and the ball has slipped my grasp. But she—! Back to May?or’s House she’s been ta’en, and may?hap we could see to her—we could do that much, aye.”

“You can’t see to any?thing,” Cordelia said dis?tant?ly. “You’re dy?ing.” Rhea wheezed laugh?ter and a trick?le of yel?low?ish drool. “Dy?ing? Nay! Just done up and in need of a re?fresh?ment. Now lis?ten to me, Cordelia daugh?ter of Hi?ram and sis?ter of Pat!”

She hooked a bony (and sur?pris?ing?ly strong) arm around Cordelia’s neck and drew her close. At the same time she raised her oth?er hand, twirling the sil?ver medal?lion in front of Cordelia’s wide eyes. The crone whis?pered, and af?ter a bit Cordelia be?gan to nod her un?der?stand?ing.

“Do it, then,” the old wom?an said, let?ting go. She slumped back in her chair, ex?haust?ed. “Now, for I can’t last much longer as I am. And I’ll need a bit o’ time af?ter, mind ye. To re?vive, like.”

Cordelia moved across the room to the kitchen area. There, on the counter be?side the hand-?pump, was a wood?en block in which were sheathed the two sharp knives of the house. She took one and came back. Her eyes were dis?tant and far, as Su?san’s had been when she and Rhea stood in the open door?way of Rhea’s hut in the light of the Kiss?ing Moon.

“Would ye pay her back?” Rhea asked. “For that’s why I’ve come to ye.”

“Miss Oh So Young and Pret?ty,” Cordelia mur?mured in a bare?ly au?di ble voice. The hand not hold?ing the knife float?ed up to her face and touched her ash-?smeared cheek. “Yes. I’d be re?paid of her, so I would.”

“To the death?”

“Aye. Hers or mine.”

“ ‘Twill be hers,” Rhea said, “nev?er fear it. Now re?fresh me, Cordelia. Give me what I need!”

Cordelia un?but?toned her dress down the front, push?ing it open to re veal an un?gen?er?ous bo?som and a mid?dle which had be?gun to curve out in the last year or so, mak?ing a tidy lit?tle pot?bel?ly. Yet she still had the ves tige of a waist, and it was here she used the knife, cut?ting through her shift and the top lay?ers of flesh be?neath. The white cot?ton be?gan to bloom red at once along the slit.

”Aye,” Rhea whis?pered. ”Like ros?es. I dream of them of?ten enough, ros?es in bloom, and what stands black among em at the end of the world. Come clos?er!”

She put her hand on the small of Cordelia’s back, urg?ing her for?ward. 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 wom?an’s head as Rhea of the Coos buried her face against the red cut in the shift and be?gan to drink.

20

Roland was at first pleased as the mut?ed jin?gle of har?ness and buck?le drew clos?er to the place where the three of them were hun?kered down in the high grass, but as the sounds drew clos?er still—close enough to hear mur mur?ing voic?es as well as soft-?thud?ding hooves—he be?gan to be afraid. For the rid?ers to pass close was one thing, but if they were, through foul luck, to come right up?on them, the three boys would like?ly die like a nest of moles un?cov?ered by the blade of a pass?ing plow. Ka sure?ly hadn’t brought them all this way to end in such fash?ion, had it? In all these miles of Bad Grass, how could that par?ty of on?com?ing rid ers pos?si?bly strike

the one point where Roland and his friends had pulled up? But still they closed in, the sound of tack and buck?le and men's voic?es grow?ing ev?er sharp?er.

Alain looked at Roland with dis?mayed eyes and point?ed to the left. Roland shook his head and pat?ted his hands to?ward the ground, in?di?cat?ing they would stay put. They had to stay put; it was too late to move with?out be?ing heard.

Roland drew his guns.

Cuth?bert and Alain did the same.

In the end, the plow missed the moles by six?ty feet. The boys could ac?tu?al?ly see the hors?es and rid?ers flash?ing through the thick grass; Roland eas?ily made out that the par?ty was led by Jonas, De?pape, and Lengyll, rid ing three abreast. They were fol?lowed by at least three dozen oth?ers, glimpsed as roan flash?es and the bright red and green of ser?apes through the grass. They were strung out pret?ty well, and Roland thought he and his friends could rea?son?ably hope they'd string out even more once they reached open desert.

The boys wait?ed for the par?ty to pass, hold?ing their hors?es' heads in case one of them took it in mind to whick?er a greet?ing to the nags so close by. When they were gone, Roland turned his pale and un?smil?ing face to his friends.

"Mount up," he said. "Reap?ing's come."

21

They walked their hors?es to the edge of the Bad Grass, meet?ing the path of Jonas's par?ty where the grass gave way first to a zone of stunt?ed bush?es and then to the desert it?self.

The wind howled high and lone?some, car?ry?ing big drifts of grit?ty dust un?der a cloud?less dark blue sky. De?mon Moon stared down from it like the filmed eye of a corpse. Two hun?dred yards ahead, the drogue rid?ers back?ing Jonas's par?ty were spread out in a line of three, their som?breros jammed down tight on their heads, their shoul?ders hunched, their scrapes blow?ing.

Roland moved so that Cuth?bert rode in the mid?dle of their trio. Bert had his sling?shot in his hand. Now he hand?ed Alain half a dozen steel balls, and Roland an?oth?er half-?dozen. Then he raised his eye?brows ques?tion?ing?ly. Roland nod?ded and they be?gan to ride.

Dust blew past them in rat?tling sheets, some?times turn?ing the drogue rid?ers in?to ghosts, some?times ob?scur?ing them com?plete?ly, but the boys closed in steady?ly. Roland rode tense, wait?ing for one of the drogues to turn in his sad?dle and see them, but none did—none of them want?ed to put his face in?to that cut?ting, grit-filled wind. Nor was there sound to warn them; there was sandy hard?pack un?der the hors?es' hooves now, and it didn't give away much.

When they were just twen?ty yards be?hind the drogues, Cuth?bert nod?ded—they were close enough for him to work. Alain hand?ed him a ball. Bert, sit?ting ram?rod straight in the sad?dle, dropped it in?to the cup of his sling?shot, pulled, wait?ed for the wind to drop, then re?leased. The rid?er ahead on the left jerked as if stung, raised one hand a lit?tle, then top?pled out of his sad?dle. In?cred?ibly, nei?ther of his two com?paneros seemed to no tice. Roland saw what he thought was the be?gin?ning of a re?ac?tion from the one on the right when Bert drew again, and the rid?er in the mid?dle col lapsed for?ward on?to his horse's neck. The horse, star?tled,

reared up. The rider flopped boneless^{ly} 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 astonished 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 ambushed 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 gurgling 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, carry^{ing} 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 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 dead 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 overboard 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 reaper's 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 ghostly, supernatural 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 rein 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 gust ed 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.

Jonas had no clear idea of what was hap?pen?ing un?til he heard Will Dear born scream?ing

(Hile! To me! No pris?on?ers!)

a bat?tle-?cry he knew of old. Then it fell in?to place and the rat?tle of gun?fire made sense. He reined around, aware of Roy do?ing the same be side him . . . but most aware of the ball in its bag, a thing both pow?er?ful and frag?ile, swing?ing back and forth against the neck of his horse.

“It’s those kids!” Roy ex?claimed. His to?tal sur?prise made him look more stupid than ev?er.

“Dear?born, you bas?tard!” Hash Ren?frew spat, and the gun in his hand thun?dered a sin?gle time.

Jonas saw Dear?born’s som?brero rise from his head, its brim chewed away. Then the kid was fir?ing, and he was good—bet?ter than any?one Jonas had ev?er seen in his life. Ren?frew was ham?mered back out of his sad?dle with both legs kick?ing, still hold?ing on?to his mon?ster gun, fir?ing it twice at the dusty-?blue sky be?fore hit?ting the ground on his back and rolling, dead, on his side.

Lengyll’s hand dropped away from the elu?sive wire stock of his speed-?shoot?er and he on?ly stared, un?able to be?lieve the ap?pari?tion bear?ing down on him out of the dust. “Get back!” he cried. “In the name of the Horse?men’s As?so?ci?ation, I tell you—” Then a large black hole ap?peared in the cen?ter of his fore?head, just above the place where his eye?brows tan?gled to?gether. His hands flew up to his shoul?ders, palms out, as if he were declar?ing sur?ren?der. That was how he died.

“Son of a bitch, oh you lit?tle sis?ter-?fuck?ing son of a bitch!” De?pape howled. He tried to draw and his re?volver got caught in his scrape. He was still try?ing to pull it free when a bul?let from Roland’s gun opened his mouth in a red scream al?most all the way down to his adam’s ap?ple.

This can’t be hap?pen?ing, Jonas thought stupid?ly. It can’t, there are too many of us. But it was hap?pen?ing. The In-?World boys had struck unerring?ly at the frac?ture-line; were per?form?ing what amount?ed to a text?book ex?am?ple of how gun?slingers were sup?posed to at?tack when the odds were bad. And Jonas’s coali?tion of ranch?ers, cow?boys, and town tough-?boys had shat tered. Those not dead were flee?ing to ev?ery point of the com?pass, spurring their hors?es as if a hun?dred dev?ils paroled from hell were in pur?suit. They were far from a hun?dred, but they fought like a hun?dred. Bod?ies were scat?tered in the dust ev?ery?where, and as Jonas watched, he saw the one serv?ing as their back door—Stock?worth—ride down an?oth?er man, bump him out of his sad?dle, and put a bul?let in his head as he fell. Gods of the earth, he thought, that was Croy?don, him that owns the Pi?ano Ranch! Ex?cept he didn’t own it any?more.

And now Dear?born was bear?ing down on Jonas with his gun drawn.

Jonas snatched the draw?string looped around the horn of his sad?dle and un?wound 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 stream?ing.

“Come any clos?er and I’ll smash it! I mean it, you damned pup?py! Stay where you are!”

Roland nev?er hes?itat?ed in his head?long gal?lop, nev?er paused to think; his hands did his think?ing for him now, and when he re?mem?bered all this lat?er, it was dis?tant and silent and queer?ly warped, like some?thing seen in a flawed mir?ror ... or a wiz?ard's glass.

Jonas thought: Gods, it's him! It's Arthur Eld him?self come to take me!

And as the bar?rel of Roland's gun opened in his eye like the en?trance to a tun?nel or a mi?ne?shaft, Jonas re?mem?bered what the brat had said to him in the dusty door?yard of that burned-?out ranch: The soul of a man such as you can nev?er leave the west.

I knew, Jonas thought. Even then I knew my ka had pret?ty well run out. But sure?ly 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 on?ly three, for gods' sake! To me, you cow?ards!"

But he was alone—Lengyll killed with his id?iot?ic ma?chine-?gun ly?ing by his side, Roy a corpse glar?ing up at the bit?ter sky, Quint fled, Hookey dead, the ranch?ers who had rid?den with them gone. On?ly Clay still lived, and he was miles from here. "I'll smash it!" he shrieked at the cold-?eyed boy bear?ing down on him like death's sleek?est en?gine. "Be?fore all the gods, I'll—"

Roland thumbed back the ham?mer of his re?volver and fired. The bul let struck the cen?ter of the tat?toed hand hold?ing the draw?string cord and va?por?ized the palm, leav?ing on?ly fin?gers that twitched their ran?dom way out of a spongy red mass. For just a mo?ment Roland saw the blue cof?fin, and then it was cov?ered by down?spilling blood.

The bag dropped. And, as Rush?er col?lid?ed with Jonas's horse and slewed it to the side. Roland caught the bag deft?ly in the crook of one arm. Jonas, scream?ing in dis?may as the prize left him, grabbed at Roland, caught his shoul?der, and al?most suc?ceed?ed in turn?ing the gun?slinger out of his sad?dle. Jonas's blood rained across Roland's face in hot drops.

"Give it back, you brat!" Jonas clawed un?der his ser?ape and brought out an?oth?er gun. "Give it back, it's mine!"

"Not any?more," Roland said. And, as Rush?er danced around, quick and del?icate for such a large an?imal, Roland fired two point-?blank rounds in?to Jonas's face. Jonas's horse bolt?ed out from un?der him and the man with the white hair land?ed spread?ea?gled on his back with a thump. His arms and legs spasmed, jerked, trem?bled, then stilled.

Roland looped the bag's draw?string over his shoul?der and rode back to?ward Alain and Cuth?bert, ready to give aid ... but there was no need. They sat their hors?es side by side in the blow?ing dust, at the end of a scat?tered road of dead bod?ies, their eyes wide and dazed—eyes of boys who have passed through fire for the first time and can hard?ly be?lieve they have not been burned. On?ly Alain had been wound?ed; a bul?let had opened his left cheek, a wound that healed clean but left a scar he bore un?til his dy?ing day. He could not re?mem?ber who had shot him, he said lat?er on, or at what point of the bat?tle. He had been lost to him?self dur?ing the shoot ing, and had on?ly vague mem?ories of what had hap?pened af?ter the charge be?gan. Cuth?bert

said much the same.

“Roland,” Cuthbert said now. He passed a shaky hand down his face. “Hile, gun?slinger.”

“Hile.”

Cuthbert’s eyes were red and ir?ri?tat?ed from the sand, as if he had been cry?ing. He took back the un?spent sil?ver sling?shot balls when Roland hand?ed them to him without seem?ing to know what they were. “Roland, we’re alive.”

“Yes.”

Alain was look?ing around dazed?ly. “Where did the oth?ers go?”

“I’d say at least twen?ty-?five of them are back there,” Roland said, ges tur?ing at the road of dead bod?ies. “The rest—” He waved his hand, still with a re?volver in it, in a wide half-?cir?cle. “They’ve gone. Had their fill of Mid-?World’s wars, I wot.”

Roland slipped the draw?string bag off his shoul?der, held it be?fore him on the bridge of his sad?dle for a mo?ment, and then opened it. For a mo?ment the bag’s mouth was black, and then it filled with the ir?reg?ular pulse of a love?ly pink light. It crept up the gun?slinger’s smooth cheeks like fin?gers and swam in his eyes.

“Roland,” Cuthbert said, sud?den?ly ner?vous, “I don’t think you should play with that. Es?pe?cial?ly not now. They’ll have heard the shoot?ing out at Hang?ing Rock. If we’re go?ing to fin?ish what we start?ed, we don’t have time for—“

Roland ig?nored him. He slipped both hands in?to the bag and lift?ed the wiz?ard’s glass out. He held it up to his eyes, un?aware 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 form?less?ly for a mo?ment, and then its pink va?pors opened like cur?tains. Roland saw what was there, and lost him?self with?in it.

CHAP?TER X

BE?NEATH THE

DE?MON MOON (II)

1

Coral’s grip on Su?san’s arm was firm but not painful. There was noth?ing par?tic?ular?ly cru?el about the way she was mov?ing Su?san along the down stairs cor?ri?dor, but there was a re?lent?less?ness about it that was dis?heart?en ing. Su?san didn’t try to protest; it would have been use?less. Be?hind the two wom?en were a pair of va?que?ros (armed with knives and bo?las rather than guns; the avail?able guns had all gone west with Jonas). Be?hind the vaqs, skulk?ing along like a sullen ghost which lacks the nec?es?sary psy?chic en?er?gy to ful?ly ma?te?ri?al?ize it?self, came the late Chan?cel?lor’s old?er broth?er, Laslo. Reynolds, his taste for a spot of jour?ney’s-?end rape blunt?ed by his grow?ing sense of dis?qui?et, had ei?ther re?mained above or gone off to town.

“I’m go?ing to put ye in the cold pantry un?til I know bet?ter what to do with’ee, dear,” Coral said. “Ye’ll be quite safe there ... and warm. How for?tu?nate ye wore a ser?ape. Then ... when Jonas gets back ...”

“Ye’ll nev?er see sai Jonas again,” Su?san said. “He won’t ev?er—”

Fresh pain ex?plod?ed in her sen?si?tive face. For a mo?ment it seemed the en?tire world had blown up. Su?san reeled back against the dressed stone wall of the low?er cor?ri?dor, her vi?sion first blurred, then slow?ly clear?ing. She could feel blood

flow?ing down her cheek from a wound opened by the stone in Coral's ring when Coral had back?hand?ed her. And her nose. That cussed thing was bleed?ing again, too.

Coral was look?ing at her in a chilly this-?is-?all-?busi?ness-?to-?me fash?ion, but Su?san be?lieved she saw some?thing dif?fer?ent in the wom?an's eyes. Fear, may?hap.

"Don't talk to me about El?dred, mis?sy. He's sent to catch the boys who killed my broth?er. The boys you set loose."

"Get off it." Su?san wiped her nose, gri?maced 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 yer?self, so don't pull mine and I won't yank yer own." She watched Coral's hand rise, ready to slap, and man?aged a dry laugh. "Go on. Cut my face open on the oth?er side, if ye like. Will that change how ye sleep tonight with no man to warm the oth?er side of the bed?"

Coral's hand came down fast and hard, but in?stead of slap?ping, it seized Su?san's arm again. Hard enough to hurt, this time, but Su?san bare?ly felt it. She had been hurt by ex?perts this day, and would suf?fer more hurt glad?ly, if that would has?ten the mo?ment when she and Roland could be to?geth?er again.

Coral hauled her the rest of the way down the cor?ri?dor, through the kitchen (that great room, which would have been all steam and bus?tle on any oth?er Reap?ing Day, now stood un?can?ni?ly de?sert?ed), and to the iron-?bound door on the far side. This she opened. A smell of pota?toes and gourds and sharp?root drift?ed out.

"Get in there. Go smart, be?fore I de?cide to kick yer win?some ass square."

Su?san looked her in the eye, smil?ing.

"I'd damn ye for a mur?der?er's bed-?bitch, sai Thorin, but ye've al?ready damned yer?self. Ye know it, too—'tis writ?ten in yer face, to be sure. So I'll just drop ye a curt?sey"—still smil?ing, she suit?ed ac?tion to the words— "and wish ye a very good day."

"Get in and shut up yer saucy mouth!" Coral cried, and pushed Su?san in?to the cold pantry. She slammed the door, ran the bolt, and turned her blaz?ing eyes up?on the vaqs, who stood pru?dent?ly away from her.

"Keep her well, mucha?chos. Mind ye do."

She brushed be?tween them, not lis?ten?ing to their as?sur?ances, and went up to her late broth?er's suite to wait for Jonas, or word of Jonas. The whey-?faced bitch sit?ting down there amongst the car?rots and pota?toes knew noth?ing, but her words (ye'll nev?er see sai Jonas again)

were in Coral's head now; they echoed and would not leave.

2

Twelve o' the clock sound?ed from the squat bell-?tow?er atop the Town Gath?er?ing Hall. And if the un?ac?cus?tomed si?lence which hung over the rest of Ham?bry seemed strange as that Reap morn?ing passed in?to af?ter?noon, the si?lence in the Trav?ellers' Rest was down?right eerie. Bet?ter than two hun?dred souls were packed to?geth?er be?neath the dead gaze of The Romp,, all of them drink?ing hard, yet there was hard?ly a sound among them save for the shuf?fle of feet and the im?pa?tient rap of glass?es on the bar, in?di?cat ing that an?oth?er drink was want?ed.

Sheb had tried a hes?itant tune on the pi?ano—"Big Bot?tle Boo?gie," ev?ery?one liked

that one—and a cow?boy with a mu?tie-?mark on one cheek had put the tip of a knife in his ear and told him to shut up that noise if he want?ed to keep what passed for his brains on the star?board side of his eardrum. Sheb, who would be hap?py to go on draw?ing breath for an?oth?er thou?sand years if the gods so al?lowed, quit his pi?ano-bench at once, and went to the bar to help Stan?ley and Pet?tie the Trot?ter serve up the booze.

The mood of the drinkers was con?fused and sullen. Reap?ing Fair had been stolen from them, and they didn't know what to do about it. There would still be a bon?fire, and plen?ty of stuffy-?guys to bum on it, but there were no Reap-?kiss?es to?day and would be no danc?ing tonight; no rid?dles, no races, no pig-?wres?tle, no jokes ... no good cheer, dammit! No hearty farewell to the end of the year! In?stead of jovi?al?ity there had been mur?der in the dark, and the es?cape of the guilty, and now on?ly the hope of re?tribu tion in?stead of the cer?tain?ty of it. These folk, sullen-drunk and as poten tial?ly dan?ger?ous as storm?clouds filled with light?ning, want?ed some?one to fo?cus on, some?one to tell them what to do.

And, of course, some?one to toss on the fire, as in the days of Eld.

It was at this point, not long af?ter the last toll of noon had fad?ed in?to the cold air, that the batwing doors opened and two wom?en came in. A good many knew the crone in the lead, and sev?er?al of them crossed their eyes with their thumbs as a ward against her evil look. A mur?mur ran through the room. It was the Coos, the old witch-?wom?an, and al?though her face was pocked with sores and her eyes sunk so deep in their sock?ets they could bare?ly be seen, she gave off a pe?cu?liar sense of vi?tal?ity. Her lips were red, as if she had been eat?ing win?ter?ber?ries.

The wom?an be?hind her walked slow?ly and stiffly, with one hand pressed against her mid?sec?tion. Her face was as white as the witch-?wom?an's mouth was red. Rhea ad?vanced to the mid?dle of the floor, pass?ing the gawk?ing trail-?hands at the Watch Me ta?bles with?out so much as a glance. When she reached the cen?ter of the bar and stood di?rect?ly be?neath The Romp's glare, she turned to look at the silent drovers and towns?folk.

"Most of ye know me!" she cried in a rusty voice which stopped just short of stri?den?cy. "Those of ye who don't have nev?er want?ed a love-?po?tion or need?ed the ram put back in yer rod or got?ten tired of a nag?ging moth?er-?in-?law's tongue. I'm Rhea, the wise-?wom?an of the Coos, and this la?dy be?side me is aunt to the girl who freed three mur?der?ers last night. ... this same girl who mur?dered yer town's Sher?iff and a good young man— mar?ried, he was, and with a kid on the way. He stood be?fore her with 'is de?fense?less hands raised, pleadin for his life on be?half of his wife and his bab?by to come, and still she shot 'im! Cru?el, she is! Cru?el and heart?less!"

A mut?ter ran through the crowd. Rhea raised her twist?ed old claws and it stilled at once. She turned in a slow cir?cle to see them all, hands still raised, look?ing like the world's old?est, ugly?est prize?fight?er.

"Strangers came and ye wel?comed em in!" she cried in her rusty crow's voice.

"Wel?comed em and gave em bread to eat, and it's ru?in they've fed ye in re?turn!

The deaths of those ye loved and de?pend?ed on, spoilage to the time of the har?vest, and gods know what curs?es up?on the time to fol?low fin de ano!"

More mur?murs, now loud?er. She had touched their deep?est fear: that this year's evil would spread, might even snarl the new?ly thread?ed stock which had so slow?ly and hope?ful?ly be?gun to emerge along the Out?er Arc.

"But they've gone and like?ly won't be back!" Rhea con?tin?ued. "May?hap just as well—why should their strange blood taint our ground? But there's this oth?er... one raised among us ... a young wom?an gone traitor to her town and rogue among her own kind."

Her voice dropped to a hoarse whis?per on this last phrase; her lis?ten ers strained for?ward to hear, faces grim, eyes big. And now Rhea pulled the pal?lid, skin?ny wom?an in the rusty black dress for?ward. She stood Cordelia in front oth?er like a doll or a ven?tril?oquist's dum?my, and whis pered in her ear ... but the whis?per trav?elled, some?how; they all heard it.

"Come, dear. Tell em what ye told me."

In a dead, car?ry?ing voice, Cordelia said: "She said she wouldn't be the May?or's gilly. He wasn't good enough for such as her, she said. And then she se?duced Will Dear?born. The price of her body was a fine po?si?tion in Gilead as his con?sort . . . and the mur?der of Hart Thorin. Dear?born paid her price. Lusty as he was for her, he paid glad?ly. His friends helped; they may have had the use of 'er as well, for all I know. Chan?cel?lor Rimer must have got?ten in their way. Or p'rhaps they just saw him, and felt like do?ing him, too."

"Bas?tards!" Pet?tie cried. "Sneak?ing young culls!"

"Now tell cm what's need?ed to clar?ify the new sea?son be?fore it's sp'iled, dearie," Rhea said in a croon?ing voice.

Cordelia Del?ga?do raised her head and looked around at the men. She took a breath, pulling the sour, in?ter?min?gled smells of gray and beer and smoke and whiskey deep in?to her spin?ster's lungs.

"Take her. Ye must take her. I say it in love and sor?row, so I do."

Silent. Their eyes.

"Paint her hands."

The glass gaze of the thing on the wall, look?ing its stuffed judg?ment over the wait?ing room.

"Chary?ou tree, " Cordelia whis?pered.

They did not cry their agree?ment but sighed it, like au?tumn wind through stripped trees.

3

Sheemie ran af?ter the bad Cof?fin Hunter and Su?san-?sai un?til he could lit er?al?ly run no more—his lungs were afire and the stitch which had formed in his side turned in?to a cramp. He pitched for?ward on?to the grass of the Drop, his left hand clutch?ing his right armpit, gri?mac?ing with pain.

He lay there for some time with his face deep in the fra?grant grass, know?ing they were get?ting far?ther and far?ther ahead but al?so know?ing it would do him no good to get up and start run?ning again un?til the stitch was good and gone. If he tried to hur?ry the pro?cess, the stitch would simply come back and lay him low again. So he lay where he was, lift?ing his head to look at the tracks left by Su?san-?sai and the bad Cof?fin Hunter, and he was just about ready to try his feet when Capri?choso bit

him. Not a nip, mind you, but a good healthy chomp. Capi had had a dif?fi?cult twen?ty-?four hours, and he hadn't much liked to see the au?thor of all his mis?ery ly?ing on the grass, ap?par?ent?ly tak?ing a nap.

"Yeee-?OWWWW-?by-?damn!" Sheemie cried, and rock?et?ed to his feet. There was noth?ing so mag?ical as a good bite on the ass, a man of more philo?soph?ic bent might have re?lect?ed; it made all oth?er con?cerns, no mat ter how heavy or sor?row?ful, dis?ap?pear like smoke.

He whirled about. "Why did you do that, you mean old sneak of a Capi?" Sheemie was rub?bing his bot?tom vig?or?ous?ly, and large tears of pain stood out in his eyes.

"That hurts like . . . like a big old sonov?abitch!"

Capri?choso ex?tend?ed his neck to its max?imum length, bared his teeth in the sa?tan?ic grin which on?ly mules and dromedaries can com?mand, and brayed. To Sheemie that bray sound?ed very like laugh?ter.

The mule's lead still trailed back be?tween his sharp lit?tle hoofs. Sheemie reached for it, and when Capi dipped his head to in?flict an?oth?er bite, the boy gave him a good hard whack across the side of his nar?row head. Capi snort?ed and blinked.

"You had that com?ing, 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 dou?bled the lead over his fist and climbed aboard the mule. Capi made no at?tempt to buck him off, but Sheemie winced as his wound?ed part set?tled atop the ridge of the mule's spine. This was good luck just the same, though, he thought as he kicked the an?imal in?to mo tion. 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. "Hur?ry up! Fast as you can, you old sonov?abitch!"

In the course of the next hour, Sheemie called Capi "you old sonov?abitch" as of?ten as pos?si?ble—he had dis?cov?ered, as many oth?ers had be?fore him, that on?ly the first cuss?word is re?al?ly hard; af?ter that, there's noth?ing quite like them for re?liev?ing one's feel?ings.

4

Su?san's trail cut di?ag?onal?ly across the Drop to?ward the coast and the grand old adobe that rose there. When Sheemie reached Seafront, he dis mount?ed out?side the arch and on?ly stood, won?der?ing what to do next. That they had come here, he had no doubt—Su?san's horse, Py?lon, and the bad Cof?fin Hunter's horse were teth?ered side by side in the shade, oc?ca sion?al?ly drop?ping their heads and blow?ing in the pink stone trough that ran along the court?yard's ocean side.

What to do now? The rid?ers who came and went be?neath the arch (most?ly white-head?ed vaqs who'd been con?sid?ered too old to form a part of Lengyll's par?ty) paid no at?ten?tion to the inn-?boy and his mule, but Miguel might be a dif?fer?ent sto?ry. The old mo?zo had nev?er liked him, act?ed as if he thought Sheemie would turn thief, giv?en half a chance, and if he saw Coral's slop-?and-?car?ry-?boy skulk?ing in the court?yard, Miguel would very like?ly drive him away.

No, he won't, he thought grim?ly. Not to?day, to?day 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 Cof?fin Hunter might come and kill him. Sheemie had reached a point where he was

will?ing to die for his friends, but not un?less it served a pur?pose.

So he stood in the cold sun?light, shift?ing from foot to foot, ir?res?olute, wish?ing 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 pass?ing mo?ment an ex?er?cise in frus?tra?tion. He sensed any op?por?tu?ni?ty to help Su?sai slip ping away, but didn't know what to do about it. Once he heard what sound?ed like thun?der from the west . . . al?though a bright fall day like this didn't seem right for thun?der.

He had about de?cid?ed to chance the court?yard any?way—it was tem?porar?ily de?sert?ed, and he might be able to make it across to the main house—when the man he had feared came stag?ger?ing out of the sta?bles.

Miguel Tor?res was fes?tooned with reap-?charms and was very drunk. He ap?proached the cen?ter of the court?yard in rolling side-?to-?side loops, the tugstring of his som?brero twist?ed against his scrawny throat, his long white hair fly?ing. The front of his chi?bosa was wet, as if he had tried to take a leak with?out re?mem?ber?ing that you had to un?lim?ber your din?gus first. He had a small ce?ram?ic jug in one hand. His eyes were fierce and be?wil?dered.

“Who done this?” Miguel cried. He looked up at the af?ter?noon sky and the De?mon Moon which float?ed there. Lit?tle as Sheemie liked the old man, his heart cringed. It was bad luck to look di?rect?ly at old De?mon, so it was. “Who done this thing? I ask that you tell me, senor! Por fa?vor!” A pause, then a scream so pow?er?ful that Miguel reeled on his feet and al most fell. He raised his fists, as if he would box an an?swer out of the wink?ing face in the moon, then dropped them wear?ly. Corn liquor slopped from the neck of the jug and wet him fur?ther. “Mari?con,” he mut?tered. He stag?gered to the wall (al?most trip?ping over the rear legs of the bad Cof?fin 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 som?brero up and set?tled it over his eyes. His arm twitched the jug, then set?tled it back, as if in the end it had proved too heavy. Sheemie wait?ed un?til the old man's thumb came un?hooked from the jughan?dle and the hand flopped on?to the cob?bles. He start?ed for?ward, then de?cid?ed to wait even a lit?tle longer. Miguel was old and Miguel was mean. but Sheemie guessed Miguel might al?so be tricky. Lots of folks were, es?pe?cial?ly the mean ones.

He wait?ed un?til he heard Miguel's dusty snores, then led Capi in?to the court?yard, winc?ing at ev?ery clomp of the mule's hooves. Miguel nev?er stirred, how?ev?er. Sheemie tied Capi to the end of the hitch?ing rail (winc ing again as Capri?choso brayed a tune?less greet?ing to the hors?es tied there), then walked quick?ly across to the main door, through which he had nev?er in his life ex?pect?ed to pass. He put his hand on the great iron latch, looked back once more at the old man sleep?ing against the wall, then opened the door and tip?toed in.

He stood for a mo?ment in the ob?long of sun the open door ad?mit?ted, his shoul?ders hunched all the way up to his ears, ex?pect?ing a hand to set?tle on the scruff of his neck (which bad-?na?tured folk al?ways seemed able to find, no mat?ter how high you hunched your shoul?ders) at any mo?ment; an an?gry voice would fol?low, ask?ing what he thought he was do?ing here.

The foy?er stood emp?ty and silent. On the far wall was a tapestry de pict?ing

va?que?ros herd?ing hors?es along the Drop; against it leaned a gui?tar with a bro?ken string. Sheemie's feet sent back echoes no mat?ter how light?ly he walked. He shiv?ered. This was a house of mur?der now, a bad place. There were like?ly ghosts. Still, Su?san was here. Some?where.

He passed through the dou?ble doors on the far side of the foy?er and en?tered the re?cep?tion hall. Be?neath its high ceil?ing, his foot?falls echoed more loud?ly than ev?er. Long-?dead may?ors looked down at him from the walls; most had spooky eyes that seemed to fol?low him as he walked, mark?ing him as an in?trud?er. He knew their eyes were on?ly paint, but still . . .

One in par?tic?ular trou?bled him: a fat man with clouds of red hair, a bull?dog mouth, and a mean glare in his eye, as if he want?ed to ask what some halfwit inn-?boy was do?ing in the Great Hall at May?or's House.

"Quit look?ing at me that way, you big old sonuvabitch," Sheemie whis?pered, and felt a lit?tle bet?ter. For the mo?ment, at least.

Next came the din?ing hall, al?so emp?ty, with the long tres?tle ta?bles pushed back against the wall. There was the re?mains of a meal on one—a sin?gle plate of cold chick?en and sliced bread, half a mug of ale. Look?ing at those few bits of food on a ta?ble that had served dozens at var?ious fairs and fes?ti?vals—that should have served dozens this very day—brought the enor?mi?ty of what had hap?pened home to Sheemie. And the sad?ness of it, too. Things had changed in Ham?bry, and would like?ly nev?er be the same again.

These long thoughts did not keep him from gob?bling the left?over chick?en and bread, or from chas?ing it with what re?mained in the ale?pot. It had been a long, food?less day.

He belched, clapped both hands over his mouth, eyes mak?ing quick and guilty side-to-?side darts above his dirty fin?gers, and then walked on.

The door at the far end of the room was latched but un?locked. Sheemie opened it and poked his head out in?to the cor?ri?dor which ran the length of May?or's House. The way was lit with gas chan?de?liers, and was as broad as an av?enue. It was emp?ty—at least for the mo?ment—but he could hear whis?per?ing voic?es from oth?er rooms, and per?haps oth?er floors, as well. He sup?posed they be?longed to the maids and any oth?er ser?vants that might be about this af?ter?noon, but they sound?ed very ghost?ly to him, just the same. Per?haps one be?longed to May?or Thorin, wan?der?ing the cor ri?dor right in front of him (if Sheemie could but see him . . . which he was glad he couldn't). May?or Thorin wan?der?ing and won?der?ing what had hap pened to him, what this cold jel?ly?like stuff soak?ing in?to his night?shirt might be, who—A hand gripped Sheemie's arm just above the el?bow. He al?most shrieked.

"Don't!" a wom?an whis?pered. "For your fa?ther's sake!"

Sheemie some?how man?aged to keep the scream in. He turned. And there, wear?ing jeans and a plain checked ranch-?shirt, her hair tied back, her pale face set, her dark eyes blaz?ing, stood the May?or's wid?ow.

"S-?S-?Sai Thorin . . . I... I... I..."

There was noth?ing 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 re?lief

"Have ye come for the girl? The Del?ga?do 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 Susanah’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 Hamby 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 darkness 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 remain in its stormy, mud-dled 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 fire in the storm's lumbric fuego. Following him, wearing a sombrero and riding a broom festooned with fluttering reaper-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.

"Gun-slinger, 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-bum-bler has been impaled. It should be dead, but as the pink storm carries Roland past, it raises its head and looks at him with inexpressible pain and weariness.

"Oy!" it cries, and then it, too, is gone and not to be remembered for many years.

"Look ahead, Roland—see your destiny."

Now, suddenly, he knows that voice—it is the voice of the Turtle. He looks and sees a brilliant blue-gold glow piercing the dirty darkness of Thunderclap. Before he can do more than register it, he breaks out of the darkness and into the light like something coming out of an egg, a creature at last being born.

"Light! Let there be light!"

the voice of the Turtle cries, and Roland has to put his hands to his eyes and peek through his fingers to keep from being blinded. Below him is a field of blood—or

so he thinks then, a boy of four?teen who has that day done his first re?al killing. This is the blood that has flowed out of Thun der?clap and threat?ens to drown our side of the world, he thinks, and it will not be for un?told years that he will fi?nal?ly re?dis?cov?er his time in?side the ball and put this mem?ory to?geth?er with Ed?die's dream and tell his com?-?padres, as they sit in the turn?pike break?down lane at the end of the night, that he was wrong, that he had been fooled by the bril?liance, com?ing as it did, so hard on the heels of Thun?der?clap 's shad?ows. "It wasn't blood but ros?es," he tells Ed?die, Su?san?nah, and Jake.

"Gun?slinger, look—look there."

Yes, there it is, a dusty gray-?black pil?lar rear?ing on the hori?zon: the Dark Tow?er, the place where all Beams, all lines of force, con?verge. In its spi?ral?ing win?dows he sees fit?ful elec?tric blue fire and hears the cries of all those pent with?in; he sens?es both the strength of the place and the wrong-?ness of it; he can feel how it is spool?ing er?ror across ev?ery?thing, soft?en?ing the di?vi?sions be?tween the worlds, how its po?ten?tial for mis?chief is grow?ing stronger even as dis?ease weak?ens its truth and co?her?ence, like a body af flict?ed with can?cer; this jut?ting arm of dark gray stone is the world's great mys?tery and last aw?ful rid?dle.

It is the Tow?er, the Dark Tow?er rear?ing to the sky, and as Roland rush?es to?ward it in the pink storm, he thinks: I will en?ter you, me and my friends, if ka wills it so; we will en?ter you and we will con?quer the wrong-?ness with?in 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 flag?gy clouds which flow out of Thun?der clap, and the world be?gins to go dark; the blue light from the Tow?er's ris ing win?dows shines like mad eyes, and Roland hears thou?sands of scream?ing, wail?ing voic?es.

"You will kill ev?ery?thing and ev?ery?one you love,"

says the voice of the Tur?tle, and now it is a cru?el voice, cru?el and hard.

"and still the Tow?er will be pent shut against you."

The gun?slinger draws in all his breath and draws to?geth?er all his force; when he cries his an?swer to the Tur?tle, he does so for all the gen er?ations 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 Tow?er, to be smashed there like a bug against a rock. But be?fore that can hap?pen—

6

Cuth?bert and Alain stood watch?ing Roland with in?creas?ing con?cern. He had the piece of Maer?lyn's Rain?bow raised to his face, cupped in his hands as a man might cup a cer?emo?ni?al gob?let be?fore mak?ing a toast. The draw?string bag lay crum?pled on the dusty toes of his boots; his cheeks and fore?head were washed in a pink glow that nei?ther boy liked. It seemed alive, some?how, and hun?gry.

They thought, as if with one mind: I can't see his eyes. Where are his eyes?

"Roland?" Cuth?bert re?peat?ed. "If we're go?ing to get out to Hang?ing Rock be?fore they're ready for us, you have to put that thing away."

Roland made no move to low?er the ball. He mut?tered some?thing un der his breath; lat?er, when Cuth?bert and Alain had a chance to com?pare notes, they both agreed it

had been thun?der?clap.

“Roland?” Alain asked, step?ping for?ward. As gin?ger?ly as a sur?geon slip?ping a scalpel in?to the body of a pa?tient, he slipped his right hand be?tween the curve of the ball and Roland’s bent, stu?dious face. There was no re?sponse. Alain pulled back and turned to Cuth?bert.

“Can you touch him?” Bert asked.

Alain shook his head. “Not at all. It’s like he’s gone some?where far away.”

“We have to wake him up.” Cuth?bert’s voice was dust?-dry and shaky at the edges.

“Van?nay told us that if you wake a per?son from a deep hyp?not?ic trance too sud?den?ly, he can go mad,” Alain said. “Re?mem?ber? I don’t know if I dare—”

Roland stirred. The pink sock?ets where his eyes had been seemed to grow. His mouth flat?tened in?to the line of bit?ter de?ter?mi?na?tion they both knew well.

“No! It will not stand!” he cried in a voice that made goose?flesh rip ple the skin of the oth?er 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 lat?er, when Roland slept and he and Cuth?bert , sat up be?fore the camp?fire. “That was the voice of a king.”

Now, how?ev?er, the two of them on?ly looked at their ab?sent, roar?ing friend, par?alyzed 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 un?nat?ural?ly pink face con?tort?ed, like the face of a man who con?fronts some unimag?in?able hor?ror, Cuth?bert and Alain lunged for?ward. It was no longer a ques?tion of per?haps de?stroy?ing him in an ef?fort to save him; if they didn’t do some?thing, the glass would kill him as they watched.

In the door?yard of the Bar K, it had been Cuth?bert who clipped Roland; this time Alain did the hon?ors, ad?min?is?ter?ing a hard right to the cen?ter of the gun?slinger’s fore?head. Roland tum?bled back?ward, the ball spilling out of his loos?en?ing hands and the ter?ri?ble pink light leav?ing his face. Cuth?bert caught the boy and Alain caught the ball. Its heavy pink glow was weird?ly in?sis?tent, beat?ing at his eyes and pulling at his mind, but Alain stuffed it res?olute?ly in?to the draw?string bag again with?out look ing at it... and as he pulled the cord, yank?ing the bag’s mouth shut, he saw the pink light wink out, as if it knew it had lost. For the time be?ing, at least. He turned back, and winced at the sight of the bruise puff?ing up from the mid?dle of Roland’s brow. “Is he—”

“Out cold,” Cuth?bert said.

“He bet?ter come to soon.”

Cuth?bert looked at him grim?ly, with not a trace of his usu?al amia bil?ity. “Yes,” he said, “you’re cer?tain?ly right about that.”

7

Sheemie wait?ed at the foot of the stairs which led down to the kitchen area, shift?ing un?easi?ly from foot to foot and wait?ing 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 for?ev?er. He want?ed her to come back, and more than that—more than any?thing—he want?ed her to bring Su?san?-sai with her. Sheemie had a ter?ri?ble

feel?ing about this place and this day; a feel?ing that dark?ened like the sky, which was now all ob?scured with smoke in the west. What was hap?pen?ing out there, or if it had any?thing to do with the thun?dery sounds he'd heard ear?li?er, Sheemie didn't know, but he want?ed to be out of here be?fore the smoke-?hazed sun went down and the re?al De mon Moon, not its pal?lid day-?ghost, rose in the sky.

One of the swing?ing doors be?tween the cor?ri?dor and the kitchen pushed open and Olive came hur?ry?ing out.. She was alone.

"She's in the pantry, all right," Olive said. She raked her fin?gers through her gray?ing hair. "I got that much out of those two pupuras, but no more. I knew it was go?ing to be that way as soon as they start?ed talk?ing that stupid crunk of theirs."

There was no prop?er word for the di?alect of the Mejis va?que?ros, but "crunk" served well enough among the Barony's high?er-?born cit?izens. Olive knew both of the vaqs guard?ing the pantry, in the vague way of a per?son who has once rid?den a lot and passed gos?sip and weath?er with oth?er Drop-?rid?ers, and she knew damned well these old boys could do bet?ter than crunk. They had spo?ken it so they could pre?tend to mis?un?der stand her, and save both them and her the em?bar?rass?ment of an out?right re?fusal. She had gone along with the de?cep?tion for much the same rea?son, al?though she could have re?spond?ed with crunk of her own per?fect?ly well—and called them some names their moth?ers nev?er used—had she want?ed.

"I told them there were men up?stairs," she said, "and I thought maybe they meant to steal the sil?ver. I said I want?ed the mal?ofi?cios turned out. And still they played dumb. No habla, sai. Shit. Shit!"

Sheemie thought of call?ing them a cou?ple of big old sonuvabitch?es, and de?cid?ed to keep silent. She was pac?ing back and forth in front of him and throw?ing an oc?ca?sion?al burn?ing look at the closed kitchen doors. At last she stopped in front of Sheemie again.

"Turn out your pock?ets," she said. "Let's see what you have for hopes and gar?lands."

Sheemie did as she asked, pro?duc?ing a lit?tle pock?etknife (a gift from Stan?ley Ruiz) and a half-?eat?en cook?ie from one. From the oth?er he brought out three la?dy-?fin?ger fire?crack?ers, a big-?banger, and a few sul?fur match?es.

Olive's eyes gleamed when she saw these. "Lis?ten to me, Sheemie," she said.

8

Cuth?bert pat?ted Roland's face with no re?sult. Alain pushed him aside, knelt, and took the gun?slinger's hands. He had nev?er used the touch this way, but had been told it was pos?si?ble—that one could reach an?oth?er's mind, in at least some cas?es. Roland! Roland, wake up! Please! We need you!

At first there was noth?ing. Then Roland stirred, mut?tered, and pulled his hands out of Alain's. In the mo?ment be?fore his eyes opened, both of the oth?er two boys were struck by the same fear of what they might see: no eyes at all, on?ly rav?ing pink light.

But they were Roland's eyes, all right—those cool blue shoot?er's eyes.

He strug?gled to gain his feet, and failed the first time. He held out his hands.

Cuth?bert took one, Alain the oth?er. 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."

"Maybe '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, winning smile touched the corners of his mouth—"tempted," he finished. "Let's ride for Hanging Rock. We've got work yet to finish."

"Roland ... " Cuthbert began.

Roland turned, one hand on the horn of his horse's saddle.

Cuthbert licked his lips, and for a moment Alain didn't think he would be able to ask. If you don't, I will, Alain thought ... but Bertman aged, 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 to day, 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 Piñano Ranch.

"The thieving bastards have set the place on fire!" Maria cried, speaking 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 small 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 bus?tled out, one grip?ping the cords of his bo?las, the oth?er pulling a long knife from the scab?bard on his belt.

As soon as the wom?en heard their foot?steps on the stairs at the end of the hall, Olive nod?ded to Maria and they crossed the room. Maria threw the bolts; Olive pulled the door open. Su?san came out at once, look?ing from one to the oth?er, then smil?ing ten?ta?tive?ly. Maria gasped at the sight of her mis?tress’s swelled face and the blood crust?ed around her nose.

Su?san took Maria’s hand be?fore the maid could touch her face and squeezed her fin?gers gen?tly. “Do ye think Thorin would want me now?” she asked, and then seemed to re?al?ize who her oth?er res?cuer was. “Olive ... sai Thorin ... I’m sor?ry. I didn’t mean to be cru?el. But ye must be?lieve that Roland, him ye know as Will Dear?born, would nev?er—”

“I know it well,” Olive said, “and there’s no time for this now. Come on.”

She and Maria led Su?san out of the kitchen, away from the stairs as cend?ing to the main house and to?ward the stor?age rooms at the far north end of the low?er lev?el. In the dry?goods stor?age room, Olive told the two of them to wait. She was gone for per?haps five min?utes, but to Su?san and Maria it seemed an eter?ni?ty.

When she came back, Olive was wear?ing a wild?ly col?ored scrape much too big for her—it might have been her hus?band’s, but Su?san thought it looked too big for the late May?or, as well. Olive had tucked a piece of it in?to the side of her jeans to keep from stum?bling over it. Slung over her arm like blan?kets, she had two more, both small?er and lighter. “Put these on,” she said. “It’s go?ing to be cold.”

Leav?ing the dry?goods store, they went down a nar?row ser?vants’ pas?sage?way to?ward the back court?yard. There, if they were for?tu?nate (and if Miguel was still un?con?scious), Sheemie would be wait?ing for them with mounts. Olive hoped with all her heart that they would be for?tu?nate. She want?ed Su?san safe?ly away from Ham?bry be?fore the sun went down.

And be?fore the moon rose.

10

“Su?san’s been tak?en pris?on?er,” Roland told the oth?ers as they rode west to?ward Hang?ing Rock. “That’s the first thing I saw in the glass.”

He spoke with such an air of ab?sence that Cuth?bert al?most reined up. This wasn’t the ar?dent lover of the last few months. It was as if Roland had found a dream to ride through the pink air with?in the ball, and part of him rode it still. Or is it rid?ing him? Cuth?bert won?dered.

“What?” Alain asked. “Su?san tak?en? How? By whom? Is she all right?”

“Tak?en by Jonas. He hurt her some, but not too bad?ly. She’ll heal . . . and she’ll live. I’d turn around in a sec?ond if I thought her life was in any re?al dan?ger.”

Ahead of them, ap?pear?ing and dis?ap?pear?ing in the dust like a mi?rage, was Hang?ing Rock. Cuth?bert could see the sun?light prick?ing hazy sun-?stars on the tankers, and he could see men. A lot of them. A lot of hors?es, as well. He pat?ted the neck of his own mount, then glanced across to make sure Alain had Lengyll’s ma?chine-?gun. He did. Cuth?bert reached around to the small of his back, mak?ing sure of the

sling?shot. It was there. Al?so his deer?skin am?mu?ni?tion bag, which now con?tained a num?ber of the big-?bangers Sheemie had stolen as well as steel shot.

He's us?ing ev?ery ounce of his will to keep from go?ing back, any?way, Cuth?bert thought. He found the re?al?iza?tion com?fort?ing—some?times Roland scared him. There was some?thing in him that went be?yond steel. Some thing like mad?ness. If it was there, you were glad to have it on your side ... but of?ten enough you wished it wasn't there at all. On any?body'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, ex?act?ly, be?cause ... " Roland paused, think?ing. "The ball sees far, but some?times it sees more. Some?times it sees a fu?ture that's al?ready hap?pen?ing."

"How can the fu?ture al?ready be hap?pen?ing?" Alain asked. "I don't know, and I don't think it was al?ways that way. I think it's more to do with the world than Maer?lyn's Rain?bow. Time is strange now. We know that, don't we? How things some?times seem to ... slip. It's al?most as if there's a thin?ny ev?ery?where, break?ing things down. But Su san's safe. I know that, and that's enough for me. Sheemie is go?ing to help her ... or is help?ing her. Some?how Jonas missed Sheemie, and he fol?lowed Su?san all the way back."

"Good for Sheemie!" Alain said, and pumped his fist in?to the air. "Hur?rah!" Then: "What about us? Did you see us in this fu?ture?"

"No. This part was all quick—I hard?ly snatched more than a glance be?fore the ball took me away. Flew me away, it seemed. But ... I saw smoke on the hori?zon. I re?mem?ber that. It could have been the smoke of burn?ing tankers, or the brush piled in front of Eye?bolt, or both. I think we're go?ing to suc?ceed."

Cuth?bert was look?ing at his old friend in a queer?ly dis?traught way. The young man so deeply in love that Bert had need?ed to knock him in?to the dust of the court?yard in or?der to wake him up to his re?spon?si?bil?ities ... where was that young man, ex?act?ly? What had changed him, giv?en him those dis?turb?ing strands of white hair?

"If we sur?vive what's ahead," Cuth?bert said, watch?ing the gun?slinger close?ly, "she'll meet us on the road. Won't she, Roland?"

He saw the pain on Roland's face, and now un?der?stood: the lover was here, but the ball had tak?en away his joy and left on?ly grief. That, and some new pur?pose—yes, Cuth?bert felt it very well—which had yet to be stat?ed.

"I don't know," Roland said. "I al?most hope not, be?cause we can nev?er be as we were."

"What? " This time Cuth?bert did rein up.

Roland looked at him calm?ly enough, but now there were tears in his eyes.

"We are fools of ka" the gun?slinger said. "Ka like a wind, Su?san calls it." He looked first at Cuth?bert on his left, then at Alain on his right. "The Tow?er is our ka; mine es?pe?cial?ly. But it isn't hers, nor she mine. No more is John Par?son our ka. We're not go?ing to?ward his men to de?feat him, but on?ly be?cause 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 Tow?er, Roland,” Cuth?bert said pa?tient?ly. “I don’t know what you saw in that glass ball, but there is no Tow?er. Well, as a sym?bol, I sup?pose—like Arthur’s Cup, or the Cross of the man-?Je?sus—but not as a re?al thing, a re?al build?ing—”

“Yes,” Roland said. “It’s re?al.”

They looked at him un?cer?tain?ly, and saw no doubt on his face. “It’s re?al, and our fa?thers know. Be?yond the dark land—I can’t re mem?ber its name now, it’s one of the things I’ve lost—is End-?World, and in End-?World stands the Dark Tow?er. Its ex?is?tence is the great se?cret our fa?thers keep; it’s what has held them to?geth?er as ka-tet across all the years of the world’s de?cline. When we re?turn to Gilead—if we re?turn, and I now think we will—I’ll tell them what I’ve seen, and they’ll con?firm what I say.”

“You saw all that in the glass?” Alain asked in an awe-?hushed voice.

“I saw much.”

“But not Su?s?san Del?ga?do,” Cuth?bert said.

“No. When we fin?ish with yon?der men and she fin?ish?es with Mejis, her part in our ka-?tet ends. In?side the ball, I was giv?en a choice: Su?s?san, and my life as her hus?band and fa?ther of the child she now car?ries ... or the Tow?er.” Roland wiped his face with a shak?ing hand. “I would choose Su?s?san in an in?stant, if not for one thing: the Tow?er is crum?bling, and if it falls, ev?ery?thing we know will be swept away. There will be chaos be yond our imag?in?ing. We must go ... and we will go.”

Above his young and un?lined cheeks, be?low his young and un?lined brow, were the an?cient killer’s eyes that Ed?die Dean would first glimpse in the mir?ror of an air lin?er’s bath?room. But now they swam with child?ish tears.

There was noth?ing child?ish in his voice, how?ev?er.

“I choose the Tow?er. I must. Let her live a good life and long with some?one else—she will, in time. As for me, I choose the Tow?er.”

11

Su?s?san mount?ed on Py?lon, which Sheemie had has?tened to bring around to the rear court?yard af?ter light?ing the draperies of the great par?lor on fire. Olive Thorin rode one of the Barony geld?ings with Sheemie dou?ble-?mount?ed be?hind her and hold?ing on?to Capi’s lead. Maria opened the back gate, wished them good luck, and the three trot?ted out. The sun was west er?ing now, but the wind had pulled away most of the smoke that had risen ear?li?er. What?ev?er had hap?pened in the desert, it was over now ... or hap pen?ing on some oth?er lay?er of the same present time.

Roland, be thee well, Su?s?san thought. I’ll see thee soon, dear ... as soon as I can.

“Why are we go?ing north?” she asked af?ter half an hour’s silent rid?ing.

“Be?cause Sea?coast Road’s best.”

“But—”

“Hush! They’ll find you gone and search the house first ... if t’asn’t burned flat, that is. Not find?ing you there, they’ll send west, along the Great Road.” She cast an eye on Su?s?san that was not much like the dith?ery, slight?ly con?fab?ulat?ed Olive Thorin that folks in Ham?bry knew ... or thought they knew. “If I know that’s the di?rec?tion you’d choose, so will oth?ers we’d do well to avoid.”

Su?s?san was silent. She was too con?fused to speak, but Olive seemed to know what

she was about, and Su?san was grate?ful for that.

“By the time they get around to sniff?ing 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 fish?er?man’s daugh?ter, and I know all those caves, none bet?ter.” The thought of the caves she’d played in as a girl seemed to cheer her. “To mor?row we’ll cut west, as you like. I’m afraid you’re go?ing to have a plump old wid?ow as a chap?er?one for a bit. Bet?ter get used to the idea.”

“Thee’s too good,” Su?san said. “Ye should send Sheemie and I on alone, sai.”

“And go back to what? Why, I can’t even get two old trail?hands on kitchen-?du?ty to fol?low my or?ders. Fran Lengyll’s boss of the shoot?ing-?match now, and I’ve no urge to wait and see how he does at it. Nor if he de?cides he’d be bet?ter off with me ad?judged mad and put up safe in a haci with bars on the win?dows. Or shall I stay to see how Hash Ren?frew does as May?or, with his boots up on my ta?bles?” Olive ac?tu?al?ly laughed.

“Sai, I’m sor?ry.”

“We shall all be sor?ry lat?er on,” Olive said, sound?ing re?mark?ably cheery about it.

“For now, the most im?por?tant thing is to reach those caves un?ob?served. It must seem that we van?ished in?to thin air. Hold up.”

Olive checked her horse, stood in the stir?rups, looked around to make sure of her po?si?tion, nod?ded, then twist?ed in the sad?dle 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 rid?ers com?ing af?ter us, ye must turn em aside with a few well-?cho?sen words. Will’ee do that?”

Sheemie looked strick?en. “I don’t have any well-?cho?sen words, sai Thorin, so I don’t. I hard?ly have any words at all.”

“Non?sense,” Olive said, and kissed Sheemie’s fore?head. “Go back at a good?ish trot. If ee spy no one com?ing af?ter us by the time the sun touch?es the hills, then turn north again and fol?low. We shall wait for ye by the sign?post. Do ye know where I mean?”

Sheemie thought he did, al?though it marked the out?most north?ern bound?ary of his lit?tle patch of ge?og?ra?phy. “The red ‘un? With the sombrero on it, and the ar?row point?ing back for town?”

“The very one. Ye won’t get that far un?til af?ter dark, but there’ll be plen?ty of moon?light tonight. If ye don’t come right away, we’ll wait. But ye must go back, and shift any men that might be chas?ing us off our track. Do ye un?der?stand?”

Sheemie did. He slid off Olive’s horse, clucked Capri?choso for?ward, and climbed on board, winc?ing as the place the mule had bit?ten came down. “So it’ll be, Olive-sai.”

“Good, Sheemie. Good. Off ee go, then.”

“Sheemie?” Su?san said. “Come to me a mo?ment, please.”

He did, hold?ing his hat in front of him and look?ing up at her wor?ship-?ful?ly. Su?san bent and kissed him not on the fore?head but firm?ly on the mouth. Sheemie came close to faint?ing.

“Thankee-?sai,” Su?san said. “For ev?ery?thing.”

Sheemie nod?ded. When he spoke, he could man?age noth?ing above a whis?per. “

‘Twas on?ly ka,” he said. “I know that... but I love you, Su?san-?sai. Go well. I’ll see you soon.”

“I look for?ward to it.”

But there was no soon, and no lat?er for them, ei?ther. Sheemie took one look back as he rode his mule south, and waved. Su?san lift?ed her own hand in re?turn. It was the last Sheemie ev?er saw of her, and in many ways, that was a bless?ing.

12

Lati?go had set pick?ets a mile out from Hang?ing Rock, but the blond boy Roland, Cuth?bert, and Alain en?coun?tered as they closed in on the tankers looked con?fused and un?sure of him?self, no dan?ger to any?one. He had scurvy-?blos?soms around his mouth and nose, sug?gest?ing that the men Far?son had sent on this du?ty had rid?den hard and fast, with lit?tle in the way of fresh sup?plies.

When Cuth?bert gave the Good Man’s sigil—hands clasped to the chest, left above right, then both held out to the per?son be?ing greet?ed—the blond pick?et did the same, and with a grate?ful smile.

“What spin and ra?ree back there?” he asked, speak?ing with a strong In-?World ac?cent—to Roland, the boy sound?ed like a Nordite.

“Three boys who killed a cou?ple of big bugs and then hied for the hills.” Cuth?bert replied. He was an eeri?ly good mim?ic, and gave the boy back his own ac?cent fault?less?ly. “I here were a tight. It be over now, but they did fight fear?ful.”

“What—”

“No time,” Roland said brusque?ly. “We have dis?patch?es.” He crossed his hands on his chest, then held them out. “Hile! Far?son!”

“Good Man!” the blond re?turned smart?ly. He gave back the salute with a smile that said he would have asked Cuth?bert where he was from and who he was re?lat?ed to, if there had been more time. Then they were past him and in?side Lati?go’s perime?ter. As easy as that.

“Re?mem?ber 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 sec?ond pass.”

“Gods, don’t even sug?gest such a thing,” Cuth?bert said, but he was smil?ing. He pulled his sling out of its rudi?men?ta?ry hol?ster and test?ed its elas?tic draw with a thumb. Then he licked the thumb and hoist?ed it to the wind. Not much prob?lem there, if they came in as they were; the wind was strong, but at their backs.

Alain un?slung Lengyll’s ma?chine-?gun, looked at it doubt?ful?ly, then yanked back the slide-?cock. “I don’t know about this, Roland. It’s load?ed, and I think I see how to use it, but—”

“Then use it,” Roland said. The three of them were pick?ing up speed now, the hooves of their hors?es drum?ming against the hard?pan. The wind gust?ed, belling the fronts of their scrapes. “This is the sort of work it was meant for. If it jams, drop it and use your re?volver. Are you ready?”

“Yes, Roland.”

“Bert?”

“Aye,” Cuth?bert said in a wild?ly ex?ag?ger?at?ed Ham?bry ac?cent, “so I am, so I am.” Ahead of them, dust puffed as groups of rid?ers passed be?fore and be hind the tankers, ready?ing the col?umn for de?par?ture. Men on foot looked around at the

on?com?ers cu?ri?ous?ly but with a fa?tal lack of alarm.

Roland drew both re?volvers. "Gilead!" he cried. "Hile! Gilead!"

He spurred Rush?er to a gal?lop. The oth?er two boys did the same. Cuth?bert was in the mid?dle again, sit?ting on his reins, sling?shot in hand, lu?cifer match?es ra?di?at?ing out of his tight?ly pressed lips.

The gun?slingers rode down on Hang?ing Rock like fu?ries.

13

Twen?ty min?utes af?ter send?ing Sheemie back south, Su?san and Olive came around a sharp bend and found them?selves face to face with three mount?ed men in the road. In the late-?slant?ing sun, she saw that the one in the mid?dle had a blue cof?fin tat?tooed on his hand. It was Reynolds. Su san's heart sank.

The one on Reynolds's left—he wore a stained white drover's hat and had a lazi?ly cocked eye—she didn't know, but the one on the right, who looked like a stony-heart?ed preach?er, was Laslo Rimer. It was Rimer that Reynolds glanced at, af?ter smil?ing at Su?san.

"Why, Las and I couldn't even get us a drink to send his late broth?er, the Chan?cel?lor of What?ev?er You Want and the Min?is?ter of Thank You Very Much, on with a word," Reynolds said. "We hadn't hard?ly hit town be?fore we got per?sud?ed out here. I wasn't go?ing to go, but . . . damn! That old la?dy's some?thing. Could talk a corpse in?to giv?ing a blowjob, if you'll par?don the cru?di?ty. I think your aunt may have lost a wheel or two off her cart, though, sai Del?ga?do. She—"

"Your friends are dead," Su?san told him.

Reynolds paused, shrugged. "Well now. Maybe si and maybe no. Me, I think I've de?cid?ed to trav?el on with?out em even if they ain't. But I might hang around here one more night. This Reap?ing busi?ness . . . I've heard so much about the way folks do it in the Out?ers. 'Spe?cial?ly the bon?fire part."

The man with the cocked eye laughed phleg?mi?ly.

"Let us pass," Olive said. "This girl has done noth?ing, and nei?ther have I."

"She helped Dear?born es?cape," Rimer said, "him who mur?dered your own hus?band and my broth?er. I wouldn't call that noth?ing."

"The gods may re?store Kim?ba Rimer in the clear?ing," Olive said, "but the truth is he loot?ed half of this town's trea?sury, and what he didn't give over to John Far?son, he kept for him?self."

Rimer re?coiled as if slapped.

"Ye didn't know I knew? Laslo, I'd be an?gry at how lit?tle any of ye thought of me . . . ex?cept why would I want to be thought of by the likes of you, any?way? I knew enough to make me sick, leave it at that. I know that the man you're sit?ting be?side—"

"Shut up," Rimer mut?tered.

"—was like?ly the one who cut yer broth?er's black heart open; sai Reynolds was seen that ear?ly morn?ing in that wing, so I've been told—"

"Shut up, you cunt!"

"—and so I be?lieve."

"Bet?ter do as he says, sai, and hold your tongue," Reynolds said. Some of the lazy good hu?mor had left his face. Su?san thought: He doesn't like peo?ple know?ing 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 fingered barrel of old tar-nished 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 her self screaming. The sound seemed to come from very far away. She might have gone on for some time, but then she heard the cllop 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 Hamby had been replaced by a fresh one, but it was the same black cart, the same golden candlestick 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 sweetling," 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 "Careless Love."

"Your pal lies 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 forgotten... but not which way ye'd come, my

sweet?ing. Not which way that pre?cious old dead bitch lay?ing yon?der on the road would bring ye. And now ye must go to town.” Her grin widened, be?came some thing un?speak?able. “It’s time for the fair, ye ken.”

“Let me go,” Su?san said. “Let me go, if ye’d not an?swer to Roland of Gilead.”

Rhea ig?nored her and spoke to Reynolds. “Bind her hands be?fore her and stand her in the back of the cart. There’s peo?ple 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 prop?er 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 on?ly the wiz?ard’s glass mat?ters, and we have that. We could have gone around them.

Ex?cept, of course, that was im?pos?sible. A hun?dred gen?er?ations of gun?slinger blood ar?gued against it. Tow?er or no Tow?er, the thieves must not be al?lowed to have their prize. Not if they could be stopped.

Alain leaned for?ward and spoke di?rect?ly in?to his horse’s ear. “Jig or rear when I start shoot?ing, and I’ll knock your fuck?ing brains out.”

Roland led them in, out?rac?ing the oth?er two on his stronger horse. The clot of men near?est by—five or six mount?ed, a dozen or more on foot and ex?am?in?ing a pair of the ox?en which had dragged the tankers out here— gazed at him stupid?ly un?til he be?gan to fire, and then they scat?tered like quail. He got ev?ery one of the rid?ers; their hors?es fled in a widen?ing fan, trail?ing their reins (and, in one case, a dead sol?dier). Some?where some?one was shout?ing, “Har?ri?ers! Har?ri?ers! Mount up, you fools!”

“Alain!” Roland screamed as they bore down. In front of the tankers, a dou?ble hand?ful of rid?ers and armed men were com?ing to?geth?er—milling to?geth?er—in a clum?sly de?fen?sive line. “Now! Now!”

Alain raised the ma?chine-?gun, seat?ed its rusty wire stock in the hol low of his shoul?der, and re?mem?bered what lit?tle he knew about rapid-?fire weapons: aim low, swing fast and smooth.

He touched the trig?ger and the speed-?shoot?er bel?lowed in?to the dusty air, re?coil?ing against his shoul?der in a se?ries of rapid thuds, shoot?ing bright fire from the end of its per?fo?rat?ed bar?rel. Alain raked it from left to right, run?ning the sight above the scat?ter?ing, shout?ing de?fend?ers and across the high steel hides of the tankers.

The third tanker ac?tu?al?ly blew up on its own. The sound it made was like no ex?plo?sion Alain had ev?er heard: a gut?tural, mus?cu?lar rip?ping sound ac?com?pa?nied by a bril?liant flash of or?ange-?red fire. The steel shell rose in two halves. One of these spun thir?ty yards through the air and land?ed on the desert floor in a fu?ri?ous?ly burn?ing hulk; the oth?er rose straight up in?to a col?umn of greasy black smoke. A burn?ing wood?en wheel spun across the sky like a plate and came back down trail?ing sparks and burn?ing splin?ters.

Men fled, scream?ing—some on foot, oth?ers laid flat along the necks of their nags, their eyes wide and pan?icky.

When Alain reached the end of the line of tankers, he re?versed the track of the muz?zle. The ma?chine-?gun was hot in his hands now, but he kept his fin?ger 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 revolver. From beside him there came the thuppp of Cuthbert's sling-shot, 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 going to 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 remainder at once: George Latiago. Roland could have shot him as he ran, but that, ironically, would have made possible a getaway that was cleaner than he wanted. Instead, he shot the man who ran to meet him.

Latiago wheeled on the heels of his boots and stared at Roland with blazing, hate-filled eyes. Then he ran again, hailing 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 rip-tide. 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 sling-shot-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 inexperienced and exhaustion, but the placing of the tankers had been Latiago'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, signaling for Alain and Cuthbert to break off, the work was done.

Latiago's encampment was an oily inferno, and John Farson's plans for a

mo?torized as?sault were so much black smoke be?ing tat?tered apart by the fin de ano wind.

“Ride!” Roland screamed. “Ride, ride, ride!”

They spurred west, to?ward Eye?bolt Canyon. As they went, Roland felt a sin?gle bul?let drone past his left ear. It was, so far as he knew, the on?ly shot fired at any of them dur?ing the as?sault on the tankers.

16

Lati?go was in an ec?sta?sy of fury, a per?fect brain-?burst?ing rage, and that was prob?ably mer?ci?ful—it kept him from think?ing of what the Good Man would do when he learned of this fi?as?co. For the time be?ing, all Lati?go cared about was catch?ing the men who had am?bushed him ... if an am bush in desert coun?try was even pos?si?ble.

Men? No.

The boys who had done this.

Lati?go knew who they were, all right; he didn’t know how they had got?ten out here, but he knew who they were, and their run would stop right here, east of the woods and ris?ing hills.

“Hen?dricks!” he bawled. Hen?dricks had at least man?aged to hold his men—half a dozen of them, all mount?ed—near the re?mu?da. “Hen?dricks, to me!”

As Hen?dricks rode to?ward him, Lati?go spun the oth?er way and saw a hud?dle of men stand?ing and watch?ing the burn?ing tankers. Their gap?ing mouths and stupid young sheep faces made him feel like scream?ing and danc?ing up and down, but he re?fused to give in to that. He held a nar?row beam of con?cen?tra?tion, one aimed di?rect?ly at the raiders, who must not un?der any cir?cum?stances be al?lowed to es?cape.

“You!” he shout?ed at the men. One of them turned; the oth?ers did not. Lati?go strode to them, draw?ing his pis?tol as he went. He slapped it in?to the hand of the man who had turned to?ward the sound of his voice, and point?ed at ran?dom to one of those who had not. “Shoot that fool.”

Dazed, his face that of a man who be?lieves he is dream?ing, the sol?dier raised the pis?tol and shot the man to whom Lati?go had point?ed. That un lucky fel?low went down in a heap of knees and el?bows and twitch?ing hands. The oth?ers turned.

“Good,” Lati?go said, tak?ing his gun back.

“Sir!” Hen?dricks cried. “I see them, sir! I have the en?emy in clear view!”

Two more tankers ex?plod?ed. A few whick?er?ing shards of steel flew in their di?rec?tion. Some of the men ducked; Lati?go did not so much as twitch. Nor did Hen?dricks. A good man. Thank God for at least one such in this night?mare.

“Shall I hie af?ter them, sir? ”

“I’ll take your men and hie af?ter them my?self, Hen?dricks. Mount these hoss-?guts be?fore us.” He swept an arm at the stand?ing men, whose doltish at?ten?tion had been di?vert?ed from the burn?ing tankers to their dead com?rade. “Pull in as many oth?ers as you can. Do you have a bu?gler?”

“Yes, sir, Raines, sir!” Hen?dricks looked around, beck?oned, and a pim?ply, scared-look?ing boy rode for?ward. A dent?ed bu?gle on a frayed strap hung askew on the front of his shirt.

“Raines,” Lati?go said, “you’re with Hen?dricks.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Get as many men as you can, Hen?dricks, but don’t linger over the job. They’re head?ed for that canyon, and I be?lieve some?one told me it’s a box. If so, we’re go?ing to turn it in?to a shoot?ing gallery.”

Hen?dricks’s lips spread in a twist?ed grin. “Yes, sir.”

Be?hind them, the tankers con?tin?ued to ex?plode.

17

Roland glanced back and was as?ton?ished by the size of the black, smoky col?umn ris?ing in?to the air. Ahead he could clear?ly see the brush block?ing most of the canyon’s mouth. And al?though the wind was blow?ing the wrong way, he could now hear the mad?den?ing mosquito-?whine of the thin?ny.

He pat?ted the air with his out?stretched hands, sig?nalling for Cuth?bert and Alain to slow down. While they were both still look?ing at him, he took off his ban?dan?na, whipped it in?to a rope, and tied it so it would cov?er his ears. They copied him. It was bet?ter than noth?ing.

The gun?slingers con?tin?ued west, their shad?ows now run?ning out be hind them as long as gantries on the desert floor. Look?ing back, Roland could see two groups of rid?ers stream?ing in pur?suit. Lati?go was at the head of the first, Roland thought, and he was de?lib?er?ate?ly hold?ing his rid ers back a lit?tle, so that the two groups could merge and at?tack to?geth?er.

Good, he thought.

The three of them rode to?ward Eye?bolt in a tight line, con?tin?uing to hold their own hors?es in, al?low?ing their pur?suers to close the dis?tance. Ev?ery now and then an?oth?er thud smote the air and shiv?ered through the ground as one of the re?main?ing tankers blew up. Roland was amazed at how easy it had been—even af?ter the bat?tle with Jonas and Lengyll, which should have put the men out here on their met?tle, it had been easy. It made him think of a Reap?tide long ago, he and Cuth?bert sure?ly no more than sev?en years old, run?ning along a line of stuffy-?guys with sticks, knock?ing them over one af?ter the oth?er, bang-?bang-?bangety-?bang. The sound of the thin?ny was war?bling its way in?to his brain in spite of the ban?dan?na over his ears, mak?ing his eyes wa?ter. Be?hind him, he could hear the whoops and shouts of the pur?suing men. It de?light?ed him. Lati?go’s men had count?ed the odds—two dozen against three, with many more of their own force rid?ing hard to join the bat?tle—and their peck?ers were up once more.

Roland faced front and point?ed Rush?er at the slit in the brush mark?ing the en?trance to Eye?bolt Canyon.

18

Hen?dricks fell in be?side Lati?go, breath?ing hard, cheeks glar?ing with col?or. “Sir! Beg to re?port!”

“Then do it.”

“I have twen?ty men, and there are p’raps three times that num?ber rid ing hard to join us.”

Lati?go ig?nored all of this. His eyes were bright blue flecks of ice. Un der his mus?tache was a small, greedy smile. “Rod?ney,” he said, speak?ing Hen?dricks’s first

name al?most with the ca?ress of a lover.

“Sir?”

“I think they’re go?ing in, Rod?ney. Yes . . . look. I’m sure of it. Two more min?utes and it’ll be too late for them to turn back.” He raised his gun, laid the muz?zle across his fore?arm, and threw a shot at the three rid ers ahead, most?ly in ex?uber?ance.

“Yes, sir, very good, sir.” Hen?dricks turned and waved vi?cious?ly for his men to close up, close up.

19

“Dis?mount!” Roland shout?ed when they reached the line of tan?gled brush. It had a smell that was at once dry and oily, like a fire wait?ing to hap?pen. He didn’t know if their fail?ure to ride their hors?es in?to the canyon would put Lati?go’s wind up or not, and he didn’t care. These were good mounts, fine Gilead stock, and over these last months, Rush?er had be?come his friend. He would not take him or any of the hors?es in?to the canyon, where they would be caught be?tween the fire and the thin?ny.

The boys were off the hors?es in a flash, Alain pulling the draw?string bag free of his sad?dle-?horn and sling?ing it over one shoul?der. Cuth?bert’s and Alain’s hors?es ran at once, whin?ny?ing, par?al?lel to the brush, but Rush?er lin?gered for a mo?ment, look?ing at Roland. “Go on.” Roland slapped him on the flank. “Run.”

Rush?er ran, tail stream?ing out be?hind him. Cuth?bert and Alain slipped through the break in the brush. Roland fol?lowed, glanc?ing down to make sure that the pow?der-trail was still there. It was, and still dry—there had been not a drop of rain since the day they’d laid it.

“Cuth?bert,” he said. “Match?es.”

Cuth?bert gave him some. He was grin?ning so hard it was a won?der they hadn’t fall?en out of his mouth. “We warmed up their day, didn’t we, Roland? Aye!”

“We did, in?deed,” Roland said, grin?ning him?self. “Go on, now. Back to that chim?ney-?cut.”

“Let me do it,” Cuth?bert said. “Please, Roland, you go with Alain and let me stay. I’m a fire?bug at heart, al?ways have been.”

“No,” Roland said. “This part of it’s mine. Don’t ar?gue with me. Go on. And tell Alain to mind the wiz?ard’s glass, no mat?ter what.”

Cuth?bert looked at him for a mo?ment longer, then nod?ded. “Don’t wait too long.”

“I won’t.”

“May your luck rise, Roland.”

“May yours rise twice.”

Cuth?bert hur?ried away, boots rat?tling on the loose stone which car pe?ted the floor of the canyon. He reached Alain, who lift?ed a hand to Roland. Roland nod?ded back, then ducked as a bul?let snapped close enough to his tem?ple to flick his hat?brim.

He crouched to the left of the open?ing in the brush and peered around, the wind now strik?ing full in his face. Lati?go’s men were clos?ing rapid?ly. More rapid?ly than he had ex?pect?ed. If the wind blew out the lu?cifers—

Nev?er mind the ifs. Hold on, Roland. . . hold on. . . wait for them. . .

He held on, hun?ker?ing with an un?lit match in each hand, now peer?ing out through

a tan?gle of in?ter?laced branch?es. The smell of mesquite was strong in his nos?trils. Not far be?hind it was the reek of burn?ing oil. The drone of the thin?ny filled his head, mak?ing him feel dizzy, a stranger to him?self. He thought of how it had been in?side the pink storm, fly?ing through the air ... how he had been snatched away from his vi?sion of Su san. Thank God for Sheemie, he thought dis?tant?ly. He'll make sure she fin?ish?es the day some?place safe. But the craven whine of the thin?ny seemed some?how to mock him, to ask him if there had been more to see.

Now Lati?go and his men were cross?ing the last three hun?dred yards to the canyon's mouth at a full-?out gal?lop, the ones be?hind clos?ing up fast. It would be hard for the ones rid?ing point to stop sud?den?ly with?out the risk of be?ing rid?den down.

It was time. Roland stuck one of the lu?cifers be?tween his front teeth and raked it for?ward. It lit, spilling one hot and sour spark on?to the wet bed of his tongue.

Be?fore the lu?cifer's head could bum away, Roland touched it to the pow?der in the trench. It lit at once, run?ning left be?neath the north end of the brush in a bright yel?low thread.

He lunged across the open?ing—which might be wide enough for two hors?es run?ning flank to flank—with the sec?ond lu?cifer al?ready poised be?hind his teeth. He struck it as soon as he was some?what blocked from the wind, dropped it in?to the pow?der, heard the splut?ter-?hiss, then turned and ran.

20

Moth?er and fa?ther, was Roland's first shocked thought—mem?ory so deep and un?expect?ed it was like a slap. At Lake Sa?roni.

When had they gone there, to beau?ti?ful Lake Sa?roni in the north?ern part of Gilead Barony? That Roland couldn't re?mem?ber. He knew on?ly that he had been very small, and that there had been a beau?ti?ful stretch of sandy beach for him to play on, per?fect for an as?pir?ing young cas?tle-?builder such as he. That was what he had been do?ing on one day of their

(va?ca?tion? was it a va?ca?tion? did my par?ents once up?on a time ac?tu al?ly take a va?ca?tion?)

trip, and he had looked up, some?thing—maybe on?ly the cries of the birds cir?cling over the lake—had made him look up, and there were his moth?er and fa?ther, Steven and Gabrielle De?schain, at the wa?ter's edge, stand?ing with their backs to him and their arms around each oth?er's waists, look?ing out at blue wa?ter be?neath a blue sum?mer sky. How his heart had filled with love for them! How in?fi?nite was love, twin?ing in and out of hope and mem?ory like a braid with three strong strands, so much the Bright Tow?er of ev?ery hu?man's life and soul.

It wasn't love he felt now, how?ev?er, but ter?ror. The fig?ures stand?ing be?fore him as he ran back to where the canyon end?ed (where the ra?tio?nal part of the canyon end?ed) weren't Steven of Gilead and Gabrielle of Arten but his mol?lies, Cuth?bert and Alain. They didn't have their arms around each oth?er's waists, ei?ther, but their hands were clasped, like the hands of fairy-?tale chil?dren lost in a threat?en?ing fairy-tale wood. Birds cir?cled, but they were vul?tures, not gulls, and the shim?mer?ing, mist-?topped stuff be?fore the two boys wasn't wa?ter.

It was the thin?ny, and as Roland watched, Cuth?bert and Alain be?gan to walk to?ward 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, murmured 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 report 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 whinging grumble of the thing rose half a note, as if in anticipation), and then Alain yanked him back by the tugstring of his sombrero. 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 ridged with bullets ... as they certainly would be, if Latiago 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

Latiago’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. Latiago 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 madening, slobbering whine, incessant 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 on to his mantra (box canyon box canyon got em in a box canyon) instead. He would have to face Walter when this was over, perhaps Father himself, and he had no idea what his punishment would be for losing the tankers ... but all that was for later. Now he wanted on ly 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. Lati go 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 Lati go rode around the jog in the canyon's wall, already leveling his pistol, his horse screamed—like a woman, it screamed—and reared beneath him. Lati go 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. Lati go 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 thim ny was far, far greater than any George Lati go 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. Lati go got a confused glimpse of black tails and gray forelegs and dappled fetlocks; he saw chaps, and jeans, and boots jammed into stirrups. He tried to get up and a horse's shoe 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 steamy 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 Lati go'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 on the dust. Latiago 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, whinging, cringing buzz.

Henricks's horse went down, eyes rolling, bit-parted teeth snapping at the smoky air and splattering curds of foam from its lips. Henricks 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 Henricks under, but before it did, Latiago 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 bellying full-throated battle cries. More horses and riders were driven into the green shimmer, which accepted them eagerly. Latiago, 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 Latiago's order and shot one of his comrades 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 Latiago hardly heard them. What he heard most 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 headway; 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 thickening 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. Latiago 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. Latiago 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. Lati?go crashed in?to one of them and was thrown for the sec?ond time in five min?utes. He land?ed on his knees, scram?bled to his feet, and stag?gered back down?wind, cough?ing and retch?ing, eyes red and stream?ing.

It was a lit?tle bet?ter be?yond the canyon's north?ward jog, but wouldn't be for much longer. The edge of the thin?ny was a tan?gle of milling hors?es, many with bro?ken legs, and crawl?ing, shriek?ing men. Lati?go saw sev er?al hats float?ing on the green?ish sur?face of the whin?ing or?gan?ism that filled the back of the canyon; he saw boots; he saw wristlets; he saw neck?er?chiefs; he saw the bu?gle-?boy's dent?ed in?stru?ment, still trail?ing its frayed strap.

Come in, the green shim?mer in?vit?ed, and Lati?go found its buzz strange?ly at?trac?tive ... in?ti?mate, al?most. Come in and vis?it, squat and hun ker, be at rest, be at peace, be at one.

Lati?go raised his gun, mean?ing to shoot it. He didn't be?lieve it could be killed, but he would re?mem?ber the face of his fa?ther and go down shoot?ing, all the same. Ex?cept he didn't. The gun dropped from his re?lax?ing fin?gers and he walked for?ward—oth?ers around him were now do?ing the same—in?to the thin?ny. The buzzing rose and rose, fill?ing his ears un?til there was noth ing else.

Noth?ing else at all.

22

They saw it all from the notch, where Roland and his friends had stopped in a strung-?out line about twen?ty feet be?low the top. They saw the scream ing con?fu?sion, the pan?icky milling, the men who were tram?pled, the men and hors?es that were driv?en in?to the thin?ny ... and the men who, at the end, walked will?ing?ly in?to it.

Cuth?bert was clos?est to the top of the canyon's wall, then Alain, then Roland, stand?ing on a six-?inch shelf of rock and hold?ing an out?crop just above him. From their van?tage-?point they could see what the men strug gling in their smoky hell be?low them could not: that the thin?ny was grow ing, reach?ing out, crawl?ing ea?ger?ly to?ward them like an in?com?ing tide.

Roland, his bat?tle-?lust slaked, did not want to watch what was hap?pen?ing be?low, but he couldn't turn away. The whine of the thin?ny—cow?ard?ly and tri?umphant at the same time, hap?py and sad at the same time, lost and found at the same time—held him like sweet, sticky ropes. He hung where he was, hyp?no?tized, as did his friends above him, even when the smoke be?gan to rise, and its pun?gent tang made him cough dry?ly.

Men shrieked their lives away in the thick?en?ing smoke be?low. They strug?gled in it like phan?toms. They fad?ed as the fog thick?ened, climb?ing the canyon walls like wa?ter. Hors?es whin?nied des?per?ate?ly from be?neath that acrid white death. The wind swirled its sur?face in prank?ish whirl pools. The thin?ny buzzed, and above where it lay, the sur?face of the smoke was stained a mys?tic shade of palest green.

Then, at long last, John Far?son's men screamed no more. We killed them, Roland thought with a kind of sick and fas?ci?nat?ed hor?ror. Then: No, not we. I. I killed them.

How long he might have stayed there Roland didn't know—per?haps un?til 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 a fire. 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, gun-slinger, 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 remain . . . until tonight. Tonight the old ways are refreshed, as the old ways must be, from time to time. Charyou tree, you damned baby, 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 lumatic buzz of the thinny, that rotting sore eating through the flesh of reality, joined with the lumatic laughter of the witch, and he knew better.

Death for you, life for the crop. Chary?ou tree.

Oh, Su?san—

23

Noth?ing was clear to Su?san un?til she saw the man with the long red hair and the straw hat which did not quite ob?scure his lamb-?slaught?er's eyes; the man with the corn?shucks in his hands. He was the first, just a farmer (she had glimpsed him in the Low?er Mar?ket, she thought; had even nod ded to him, as coun?try?folk do, and he back to her), stand?ing by him?self not far from the place where Silk Ranch Road and the Great Road in?ter sect?ed, stand?ing in the light of the ris?ing moon. Un?til they came up?on him, noth?ing was clear; af?ter he hurled his bun?dle of corn?shucks at her as she passed, stand?ing in the slow?ly rolling cart with her hands bound in front of her and her head low?ered and a rope around her neck, ev?ery?thing was clear.

“Chary?ou tree, ” he called, al?most sweet?ly ut?ter?ing words of the Old Peo?ple she hadn't heard since her child?hood, words that meant “Come, Reap” . . . and some?thing else, as well. Some?thing hid?den, some?thing se?cret, some?thing to do with that root word, char, that word which meant on?ly death. As the dried shucks flut?tered around her boots, she un?der?stood the se?cret very well; un?der?stood al?so that there would be no ba?by for her, no wed?ding for her in the fairy-?dis?tant land of Gilead, no hall in which she and Roland would be joined and then salut?ed be?neath the elec?tric lights, no hus?band, no more nights of sweet love; all that was over. The world had moved on and all that was over, done be?fore fair?ly be?gun. She knew that she had been put in the back of the cart, stood in the back of the cart, and that the sur?viv?ing Cof?fin Hunter had looped a noose around her neck. “Don't try to sit,” he had said, sound?ing al?most apo?lo get?ic. “I have no de?sire to choke you, girly. If the wag?on 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 pinch?ing. Her or?ders.” He nod?ded 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. What?ev?er the pos?ses?sion of her glam had done to her body, what?ev?er the loss of it had done to her mind, it had not bro?ken her pow?er; that seemed to have in?creased, if any?thing, as if she'd found some oth?er source from which she could feed, at least for awhile. Men who could have bro?ken her over one knee like a stick of kin?dling fol?lowed her com?mands as un?ques?tion?ing?ly as chil?dren.

There were more and more men as that Reap?ing af?ter?noon wound its shal?low course to night: half a dozen ahead of the cart, rid?ing with Rimer and the man with the cocked eye, a full dozen rid?ing be?hind it with Reynolds, the rope lead?ing to her neck wound around his tat?tooed hand, at their head. She didn't know who these men were, or how they had been sum?moned.

Rhea had tak?en this rapid?ly in?creas?ing par?ty north a lit?tle far?ther, then turned south?west on the old Silk Ranch Road, which wound back to?ward town. On the east?ern edge of Ham?bry, it re?joined the Great Road. Even in her dazed state, Su?san had re?al?ized the har?ri?dan was mov?ing slow?ly, mea sur?ing the de?scent of the sun as they went, not cluck?ing at the pony to hur?ry but ac?tu?al?ly rein?ing it in, at least un?til

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 straggling 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 skyward in a weary, distracted gesture.

Roland tore the bag away before Alain could do more than begin to shrug it off his shoulder. The gun-slinger dipped into it and pulled the glass out. It was glowing fiercely, a pink Demon Moon instead of an orange one.

Behind and below them, the nagging whine of the thinny rose and fell, rose and fell.

"Don't look directly into that thing," Cuthbert muttered to Alain. "Don't, for your father's sake."

Roland bent his face over the pulsing ball, its light running over his cheeks and brow like liquid, drowning his eyes in its dazzle.

In Maerlyn's Rainbow he saw her—Susan, horse-drover's daughter, lovely girl at the window. He saw her standing in the back of a black cart decorated with gold symbols, the old witch's cart. Reynolds rode behind her, holding the end of a rope that was noosed around her neck. The cart was rolling toward Green Heart,

mak?ing its way with pro?ces?sion?al slow-?ness. Hill Street was lined with peo?ple of whom the farmer with the lamb-?slaught?er?er's eyes had been on?ly the first—all those folk of Ham?bry and Mejis who had been de?prived of their fair but were now giv?en this an?cient dark at?trac?tion in its stead: Chary?ou tree, come, Reap, death for you, life for our crops.

A sound?less whis?per?ing ran through them like a gath?er?ing wave, and they be?gan to pelt her—first with corn?husks, then with rot?ting toma?toes, then with pota?toes and ap?ples. One of these lat?ter struck her cheek. She reeled, al?most fell, then stood straight again, now rais?ing her swollen but still love?ly face so the moon paint?ed it. She looked straight ahead.

“Chary?ou tree, ” they whis?pered. Roland couldn't hear them, but he could see the words on their lips. Stanley Ruiz was there, and Pet?tie, and Gert Mog?gins, and Frank Clay?pool, the deputy with the bro?ken leg; Jamie Mc?Cann, who was to have been this year's Reap Lad. Roland saw a hun dred peo?ple he had known (and most?ly liked) dur?ing his time in Mejis. Now these peo?ple pelt?ed his love with corn?shucks and veg?eta?bles as she stood, hands bound be?fore her, in the back of Rhea's cart.

The slow?ly rolling cart reached Green Heart, with its col?ored pa?per lanterns and silent carousel where no laugh?ing chil?dren rode ... no, not this year. The crowd, still speak?ing those two words—chant?ing them now, it ap?peared—part?ed. Roland saw the heaped pyra?mid of wood that was the un?lit bon?fire. Sit?ting around it, their backs propped on the cen?tral col umn, their lumpy legs out?stretched, was a ring of red-?hand?ed stuffy-?guys. There was a sin?gle hole in the ring; a sin?gle wait?ing va?can?cy.

And now a wom?an 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 be?gan to shriek. It was a sin?gle word, over and over again:

No, no, no, no, no, no! The ball's pink light flashed brighter with each rep?eti?tion, as if his hor?ror re?freshed and strength?ened it. And now, with each of those puls?es, Cuth?bert and Alain could see the shape of the gun?slinger's skull be?neath his skin.

“We have to take it away from him,” Alain said. “We have to, it's suck?ing him dry. It's killing him!”

Cuth?bert nod?ded and stepped for?ward. He grabbed the ball, but couldn't take it from Roland's hands. The gun?slinger's fin?gers seemed weld?ed to it.

“Hit him!” he told Alain. “Hit him again, you have to!”

But Alain might as well have been hit?ting a post. Roland didn't even rock back on his heels. He con?tin?ued to cry out that sin?gle neg?ative— “No! No! No! No ”—and the ball flashed faster and faster, eat?ing its way in?to him through the wound it had opened, suck?ing up his grief like blood.

25

“Chary?ou tree!” Cordelia Del?ga?do cried, dart?ing for?ward from where she had been wait?ing. The crowd cheered her, and be?yond her left shoul?der De?mon Moon winked, as if in com?plic?ity. “Chary?ou tree, ye faith?less bitch! Chary?ou tree!” She flung the pail of paint at her niece, splat?ter?ing her pants and dress?ing her tied

hands in a pair of wet scarlet gloves. She grinned up at Susan as the cart rolled past. The smear of ash stood out on her cheek; in the center of her pale forehead, a single vein pulsed like a worm.

“Bitch!” Cordelia screamed. Her fists were clenched; she danced a kind of hilarious jig, feet jumping, bony knees pumping beneath her skirt. “Life for the crops! Death for the bitch! Charyou tree! Come, Reap!”

The cart rolled past her; Cordelia faded from Susan’s sight, just one more cruel phantasm in a dream that would soon end. Bird and bear and hare and fish, she thought. Be safe, Roland; go with my love. That’s my fondest wish.

“Take her!” Rhea screamed. “Take this murdering bitch and cook her red-handed! Charyou tree!”

“Charyou tree!” the crowd responded. A forest of willing hands grew in the moonlit air; somewhere firecrackers rattled and children laughed excitedly. Susan was lifted from the cart and handed toward the waiting wood pile above the heads of the crowd, passed by uplifted hands like a heroine returned triumphantly home from the wars. Her hands dripped red tears upon their straining, eager faces. The moon overlooked it all, dwarfing the glow of the paper lanterns.

“Bird and bear and hare and fish,” she murmured as she was first lowered and then slammed against the pyramid of dry wood, put in the place which had been left for her—the whole crowd chanting in unison now, “Charyou TREE! Charyou TREE! Charyou TREE!”

“Bird and bear and hare and fish.”

Trying to remember how he had danced with her that night. Trying to remember how he had loved with her in the willow grove. Trying to remember that first meeting on the dark road: Thankee-sai, we’re well met, he had said, and yes, in spite of everything, in spite of this miserable ending with the folk who had been her neighbors turned in to prancing goblins by moonlight, in spite of pain and betrayal and what was coming, he had spoken the truth: they had been well met, they had been very well met, indeed.

“Charyou TREE! Charyou TREE! Charyou TREE!”

Women came and piled dry cornshucks around her feet. Several of them slapped her (it didn’t matter; her bruised and puffy face seemed to have gone numb), and one—it was Misha Alvarez, whose daughter Susan had taught to ride—spat into her eyes and then leaped prankishly away, shaking her hands at the sky and laughing. For a moment she saw Coral Thorin, festooned with reap-charms, her arms filled with dead leaves which she threw at Susan; they fluttered down around her in a crackling, aromatic shower.

And now came her aunt again, and Rhea beside her. Each held a torch. They stood before her, and Susan could smell sizzling pitch.

Rhea raised her torch to the moon. “CHARYOU TREE!” she screamed in her rusty old voice, and the crowd responded, “CHARYOU TREE!”

Cordelia raised her own torch. “COME, REAP!”

“COME, REAP!” they cried back to her.

“Now, ye bitch,” Rhea crooned. “Now comes warmer kisses than any yer love ever gave ye.”

“Die, ye faith?less,” Cordelia whis?pered. “Life for the crops, death for you.”

It was she who first flung her torch in?to the corn?shucks which were piled as high as Su?san’s knees; Rhea flung hers a bare sec?ond lat?er. The corn?shucks blazed up at once, daz?zling Su?san with yel?low light.

She drew in a fi?nal breath of cool air, warmed it with her heart, and loosed it in a de?fi?ant shout: “ROLAND, I LOVE THEE!”

The crowd fell back, mur?mur?ing, as if un?easy at what they had done, now that it was too late to take it back; here was not a stuffy-?guy but a cheer?ful girl they all knew, one of their own, for some mad rea?son backed up against the Reap-?Night bon?fire with her hands paint?ed red. They might have saved her, giv?en an?oth?er mo?ment—some might have, any?way—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 con?sid?er his eyes, eyes of that blue which is the col?or of the sky at first light of morn?ing. She had time to think of him on the Drop, rid?ing Rush?er flat-?out with his black hair fly?ing back from his tem?ples and his neck?er chief rip?pling; to see him laugh?ing with an ease and free?dom he would nev?er find again in the long life which stretched out for him be?yond hers, and it was his laugh?ter she took with her as she went out, flee?ing the light and heat in?to the silky, con?sol?ing dark, call?ing to him over and over as she went, call?ing 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 gut?ted an?imal, his hands weld?ed to the ball, which beat like a run?away heart. He watched in it as she burned.

Cuth?bert tried again to take the cursed thing away, and couldn’t. He did the on?ly oth?er thing he could think of—drew his re?volver, point?ed it at the ball, and thumbed back the ham?mer. He would like?ly wound Roland, and the fly?ing glass might even blind him, but there was no oth?er choice. If they didn’t do some?thing, the glam would kill him.

But there was no need. As if see?ing Cuth?bert’s gun and un?der?stand?ing what it meant, the ball went in?stant?ly dark and dead in Roland’s hands. Roland’s stiff body, ev?ery line and mus?cle trem?bling with hor?ror and out rage, went limp. He dropped like a stone, his fin?gers at last let?ting go of the ball. His stom?ach cush?ioned it as he struck the ground; it rolled off him and trick?led to a stop by one of his limp, out?stretched hands. Noth?ing burned in its dark?ness now ex?cept for one bale?ful or?ange spark—the tiny re?flec?tion of the ris?ing De?mon Moon.

Alain looked at the glass with a species of dis?gust?ed, fright?ened awe; looked at it as one might look at a vi?cious an?imal that now sleeps ... but will wake again, and bite when it does.

He stepped for?ward, mean?ing to crush it to pow?der be?neath his boot. “Don’t you dare,” Cuth?bert said in a hoarse voice. He was kneel?ing be?side Roland’s limp form but look?ing at Alain. The ris?ing moon was in his eyes, two small, bright stones of light. “Don’t you dare, af?ter all the mis?ery 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 destroy 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 regret 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 beside 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 of 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 sea-coast 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 El 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 over saddle (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 Rump. 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.

Darktower 4 - Wizard and Glass

PART FOUR

ALL GOD'S
CHILLUN GOT
SHOES
CHAPTER I
KANSAS IN
THE MORN'ING

1

For the first time in
(hours? days?)

the gun?slinger fell silent. He sat for a mo?ment look?ing to?ward the build?ing to the east of them (with the sun be?hind it, the glass palace was a black shape sur?round?ed by a gold nim?bus) with his fore?arms propped on his knees. Then he took the wa?ter?skin which lay on the pave?ment be?side him, held it over his face, opened his mouth, and up?end?ed it.

He drank what hap?pened to go in his mouth—the oth?ers could see his adam?s ap?ple work?ing as he lay back in the break?down lane, still pour ing—but drink?ing didn?t seem to be his pri?ma?ry pur?pose. Wa?ter streamed down his deeply lined fore?head and bounced off his closed eye?lids. It pooled in the tri?an?gu?lar hol?low at the base of his throat and ran back from his tem?ples, wet?ting his hair and turn?ing it dark?er.

At last he put the wa?ter?skin aside and on?ly lay there, eyes closed, arms stretched out high above his head, like a man sur?ren?der?ing in his sleep. Steam rose in del?icate ten?drils from his wet face.

“Ah?hh,” he said.

“Feel bet?ter?” Ed?die asked.

The gun?slinger?s lids rose, dis?clos?ing those fad?ed yet some?how alarm?ing blue eyes.

“Yes. I do. I don?t un?der?stand how that can be, as much as I dread?ed this telling . . . but I do.”

“An ol?ogist-?of-?the-?psy?che could prob?ably ex?plain it to you,” Su?san nah said, “but I doubt you’d lis?ten.” She put her hands in the small of her back, stretched and winced . . . but the wince was on?ly re?flex. The pain and stiff?ness she’d ex?pect?ed weren’t there, and al?though there was one small creak near the base oth?er spine, she didn?t get the sat?is?fy?ing se?ries of snaps, crack?les, and pops she had ex?pect?ed.

“Tell you one thing,” Ed?die said, “this gives a whole new mean?ing to ‘Get it off your chest.’ How long have we been here, Roland?”

“Just one night.”

“ ‘The spir?its have done it all in a sin?gle night,’ ” Jake said in a dreamy voice. His legs were crossed at the an?kles; Oy sat in the di?amond shape made by the boy’s bent knees, look?ing at him with his bright gold-?black eyes.

Roland sat up, wip?ing at his wet cheeks with his neck?er?chief and look?ing at Jake sharply. “What is it you say?”

“Not me. A guy named Charles Dick?ens wrote that. In a sto?ry called A Christ?mas Car?ol. All in a sin?gle 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? Susan?”

“I feel good,” Susan 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 fuck’s wrong with me? Am I sick? I feel weird. Did I have a stroke in the night?’ ”

Jake laughed, then clapped a hand over his mouth so violently that it was as if he wanted not just to hold the sound in but call it back. “Sorry,” he said. “That made me think of my dad.”

“One of my people, huh?” Eddie said. “Anyway, I expect to be sore, I expect to be tired, I expect to creak when I walk... but I actually think all I need to put me right is a quick pee in the bushes.”

“And a bite to eat?” Roland asked.

Eddie had been wearing a small smile. Now it faded. “No,” he said. “After that story, I’m not all that hungry. In fact, I’m not hungry at all.”

2

Eddie carried Susan 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.

Susan wasn’t laughing when she came out of the bushes. Her face was streaked with tears. Eddie didn’t ask her; he knew. He had been fighting the feeling himself. He took her gently in his arms and she put her face against the side of his neck. They stayed that way for a little while.

“Chairyou tree,” she said at last, pronouncing it as Roland had: chair-you tree, with a little upturned vowel at the end.

“Yeah,” Eddie said, thinking that a Charlie by any other name was still a Charlie. As, he supposed, a rose was a rose was a rose. “Come, Reap.”

She raised her head and began to wipe her swimming eyes. “To have gone through all that,” she said, keeping her voice low ... and looking once at the turnpike embankment to make sure Roland wasn’t there, looking down at them. “And at fourteen.”

“Yeah. It makes my adventures searching for the elusive dime bag in Tompkins

Square look pretty tame. In a way, though, I'm almost relieved."

"Relieved? Why?"

"Because I thought he was going to tell us that he killed her himself. For his damned Tower."

Susanah 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, Edie thought), and they dug in. All of them, that was, except Roland. He picked up his burrito, looked at it, then looked away. Edie saw an expression of sadness on the gunslinger's face that made him look both old and lost. It hurt Edie'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 Edie was sure he was going to lose it. A long time between hugs, maybe. Mighty long. Edie 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—Susanah's—crept into Edie's. He took it and folded his fingers over it.

"One night," she marvelled.

"On our body-clocks, at least," Edie said. "In our heads . . ."

"Who knows?" Roland agreed. "But story-telling always changes time. At least it does in my world." He smiled. It was unexpected, as always, and as always, it transformed his face into something nearly beautiful. Looking at that, Edie 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," Susanah 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. Wandering. 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 forehead 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 on to the ball, and I

trav?elled in?side my head, and I got bet?ter. But the glass nev?er glowed for me un?til the very end ... when the bat?tle?ments of the cas?tle and the tow?ers of the city were ac?tu?al?ly in sight. If it had awak?ened ear?li?er...”

He shrugged.

“If it had awak?ened be?fore I’d start?ed to get some of my strength of mind back, I don’t think I’d be here now. Be?cause any world—even a pink one with a glass sky—would have been prefer?able to one where there was no Su?san. I sup?pose the force that gives the glass its life knew that... and wait?ed.”

“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 sto?ry as I do be?cause of what I saw in the ball.”

“You told us once that John Far?son want?ed your head on a pole,” Ed die said.

“Be?cause you stole some?thing from him. Some?thing he held dear. It was the glass ball, wasn’t it?”

“Yes. He was more than fu?ri?ous when he found out. He was in?sane with rage. In your par?lance, Ed?die, he ‘went nu?cle?ar.’ ”

“How many more times did it glow for you?” Su?san?nah asked.

“And what hap?ened to it?” Jake added.

“I saw in it three times af?ter we left Mejis Barony,” Roland said. “The first was on the night be?fore we came home to Gilead. That was when I trav?elled in it the longest, and it showed me what I’ve told you. A few things I’ve on?ly guessed at, but most I was shown. It showed me these things not to teach or en?light?en, but to hurt and wound. The re?main?ing pieces of the Wiz?ard’s Rain?bow are all evil things. Hurt en?livens them, some?how. It wait?ed un?til my mind was strong enough to un?der?stand and with?stand... and then it showed me all the things I missed in my stu pid ado?les?cent com?pla?cen?cy. My lovesick daze. My pride?ful, mur?der?ous con?ceit.”

“Roland, don’t,” Su?san?nah said. “Don’t let it hurt you still.”

“But it does. It al?ways will. Nev?er mind. It doesn’t mat?ter now; that tale is told.

”The sec?ond time I saw in?to the glass—went in?to the glass—was three days af?ter I came home. My moth?er wasn’t there, al?though she was due that evening. She had gone in?to De?baria—a kind of re?treat for wom?en—to wait and pray for my re?turn. Nor was Marten there. He was in Cres?sia, with Far?son.”

”The ball,” Ed?die said. ”Your fa?ther had it by then?”

”No-?o,” Roland said. He looked down at his hands, and Ed?die ob served a faint flush ris?ing in?to his cheeks. ”I didn’t give it to him at first. I found it... hard to give up.”

”I bet,” Su?san?nah said. ”You and ev?ery?one else who ev?er looked in?to the god?dam thing.”

”On the third af?ter?noon, be?fore we were to be ban?quet?ed to cel?ebrate our safe re?turn“

”I bet you were re?al?ly in a mood to par?ty, too,” Ed?die said.

Roland smiled with?out hu?mor, still study?ing his hands. “At around four o’ the clock, Cuth?bert and Alain came to my rooms. We were a trio for an artist to paint, I wot—wind?burned, hol?low-?eyed, hands cov?ered with heal?ing 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," Edie said. He had the look of a man who understood this part of the story perfectly. "You can go in to the crap on your own, but it's a lot easier to actually flush all the bad shit down the toilet if you have somebody with you."

"Alain, at least, knew it would be better for me—easier—if I didn't have to hand the ball over alone. He hushed Cuthbert up and said they'd be there. And they were. And I gave it over, little as I wanted to. My father went as pale as paper when he looked in to 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 in to it," Jake said. "Went in to 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 oil patch. 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 Parsons'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?" Susanah 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 tumbling 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 that little spot of work yourself? 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," Susan nah said.

He gave her a look of such terrible pain that what Susan nah 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, Susan nah, 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 followed 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?" Susan nah 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 sins are in total revolt. She couldn't get the saw-play 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. Susan nah would find herself thinking of the thinny in Eyebolt Canyon, reaching out hungrily through the smoke for Lati-go's milling men, pulling them in (and

some go?ing in on their own, walk?ing like zom?bies in a hor?ror movie), and then she would find her?self think?ing of the guy in Cen?tral Park again, the wacko with the saw. Sounds Hawai?ian, doesn't it? Count?ing one thin?ny, and it sounds Hawai ian, doesn't it?

Just when she thought she could stand it not a mo?ment longer, the thin?ny be?gan to draw back from 1-70 again, and its hum?ming war?ble at last be?gan to fade.

Su?san?nah was even?tu?al?ly able to pull the bul?lets out of her ears. She tucked them in?to the side-?pock?et of her chair with a hand that shook slight?ly.

"That was a bad one," Ed?die said. His voice sound?ed 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 si?nus?es, that's all. That sound kills em."

"Me, too," Su?san?nah said.

"My si?nus?es are okay, but my head aches," Jake said. "Roland, do you have any more as?pirin?"

Roland stopped, rum?maged, and found the bot?tle.

"Did you ev?er see Clay Reynolds again?" Jake asked, af?ter swal?low ing the pills with wa?ter from the skin he car?ried.

"No, but I know what hap?pened to him. He got a bunch to?geth?er, some of them de?sert?ers from Par?son's army, went to rob?bing banks ... in to?ward our part of the world, this was, but by then bank-?thieves and stage-?rob?bers didn't have much to fear from gun?slingers."

"The gun?slingers were busy with Far?son," Ed?die said.

"Yes. But Reynolds and his men were trapped by a smart sher?iff who turned the main street of a town called Oak?ley in?to a killing-?zone. Six of the ten in the gang were killed out?right. The rest were hung. Reynolds was one of those. This was less than a year lat?er, dur?ing the time of Wide Earth." He paused, then said: "One of those shot dead in the killing-?zone was Coral Thorin. She had be?come Reynolds's wom?an; rode and killed with the rest of them."

They went on in si?lence for a bit. In the dis?tance, the thin?ny war?bled its end?less song. Jake sud?den?ly ran ahead to a parked camper. A note had been left un?der the wiper blade on the driv?er's side. By stand?ing on his toes, he was just able to reach it. He scanned it, frown?ing.

"What does it say?" Ed?die asked.

Jake hand?ed it over. Ed?die looked, then passed it to Su?san?nah, who read it in turn and gave it to Roland. He looked, then shook his head. "I can make out on?ly a few words—old wom?an, dark man. What does the rest say? Read it to me."

Jake took it back. " 'The old wom?an from the dreams is in Ne?bras?ka. Her name is Aba?gail.' " He paused. "Then, down here, it says, 'The dark man is in the west. Maybe Ve?gas.' "

Jake looked up at the gun?slinger, the note flut?ter?ing in his hand, his face puz?zled and un?easy. But Roland was look?ing to?ward the palace which shim?mered across the high?way—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 Tow?er, and al?ways in the west."

"Ne?bras?ka's west of here, too," Su?san?nah said hes?itant?ly. "I don't know if that

mat?ters, this Aba?gail per?son, but...”

“I think she’s part of an?oth?er sto?ry,” Roland said.

“But a sto?ry close to this one,” Ed?die put in. “Next door, maybe. Close enough to swap sug?ar for salt... or start ar?gu?ments.”

“I’m sure you’re right,” Roland said, “and we may have busi?ness with the ‘old wom?an’ and the ‘dark man’ yet... but to?day our busi?ness is east. Come on.”

They be?gan walk?ing again.

5

“What about Sheemie?” Jake asked af?ter awhile.

Roland laughed, part?ly in sur?prise at the ques?tion, part?ly in pleased re?mem?brance.

“He fol?lowed 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 coun?try be?tween Mejis and Gilead, and plen?ty of wild folks, too. Worse than just folks, may?hap. But ka was with him, and he showed up in time for Year’s End Fair. He and that damned mule.”

“Capi,” Jake said.

“Ap?py,” Oy re?peat?ed, padding along at Jake’s heel.

“When we went in search of the Tow?er, I and my friends, Sheemie was with us.

As a sort of squire, I sup?pose you’d say. He . . .” But Roland trailed off, bit?ing at his lip, and of that he would say no more.

“Cordelia?” Su?san?nah asked. “The crazy aunt?”

“Dead be?fore the bon?fire had burned down to em?bers. It might have been a heart-storm, or a brain-?storm—what Ed?die calls a stroke.”

“Per?haps it was shame,” Su?san?nah said. “Or hor?ror at what she’d done.”

“It may have been,” Roland said. “Wak?ing to the truth when it’s too late is a ter?ri?ble thing. I know that very well.”

“Some?thing up there,” Jake said, point?ing 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 ev?ery?thing—but it was an?oth?er fif?teen min?utes or so be?fore Su?san?nah be?gan to pick up the small black specks ahead in the road. She was quite sure she knew what they were, al?though what she thought was less vi?sion than in?tu?ition. Ten min utes af?ter that, she was sure.

They were shoes. Six pairs of shoes placed neat?ly in a line across the east?bound lanes of In?ter?state 70.

CHAP?TER II

SHOES IN THE ROAD

1

They reached the shoes at mid-?morn?ing. Be?yond them, clear?er now, stood the glass palace. It glim?mered a del?icate green shade, like the re?flec?tion of a lily pad in still wa?ter. There were shin?ing gates in front of it; red pen nons snapped from its tow?ers in a light breeze.

The shoes were al?so red.

Su?san?nah’s im?pres?sion that there were six pairs was un?der?stand?able but wrong—there were ac?tu?al?ly four pairs and one quar?tet. This lat?ter— four dark red booties made of sup?ple leather—was un?doubt?ed?ly meant for the four-?foot?ed

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.

"Balley, Guc-ci, eat your heart out," Edie said. "This is great stuff."

Susan'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. "Cap-pies. After four years of getting along in what my friend Cynthia calls 'circumstances of reduced leg-room,' I finally got myself a pair of cap-pies. Think of that."

"Cap-pies," Edie 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 unmarked. 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.

Edie'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/Susan had just missed—might have called them "Beetle-boots."

Roland's, of course, were cowboy boots. Fancy ones—you'd go dancing rather than driving in such as these. Looped stitching, side decorations, 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 khaf 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 worlds of that world, but they see something 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," Susan said.

"No," Jake said. "It's another riddle." He looked at the weird, blood red Oxford shoe in his hands with distaste. "Another god-damned 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 prevailing opinion, anyway."

"Well," Edie 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 Oxy's, would fit perfectly) and clapped them briskly together three times. It meant nothing to Roland, but both Eddie and Susanah reacted violently, looking around, looking especially at the sky, as if expecting a storm born out of this bright autumn sunshine. They 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," Susanah said, and then voiced a strange, humorless bark which Roland supposed was a species of laughter. "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 thinnes 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 near?

"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 Susanah. "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 reaper-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 mon?keys that gave me the creeps,” Su?san?nah said. “The fly?ing mon?keys. I’d get thinkin about em, and then have to crawl in?to bed with my mom and dad. They’d still be ar?guin ’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 wor?ried about clap?ping the heels to?geth?er,” Jake said. “Not a bit.” It was Su?san?nah and Ed?die he was speak?ing to; for the time be?ing, it was as if Roland wasn’t even there. “I wasn’t wear?ing them, af?ter all.”

“True,” Su?san?nah said, sound?ing se?vere, “but you know what my dad?dy al?ways used to say?”

“No, but I have a feel?ing we’re go?ing to find out,” Ed?die said.

She gave Ed?die a brief, se?vere look, then turned her at?ten?tion back to Jake. “

‘Nev?er whis?tle for the wind un?less you want it to blow,’ ” she said. “And it’s good ad?vice, no mat?ter what Young Mis?ter Fool?ish here may think.”

“Spanked again,” Ed?die said, grin?ning.

‘Tanked!’ Oy said, eye?ing Ed?die severe?ly.

”Ex?plain this to me,” Roland said in his soft?est voice. ”I would hear. I would share your khéf. And I would share it now.”

2

They told him a sto?ry al?most ev?ery Amer?ican child of the twen?ti?eth cen tu?ry knew, about a Kansas far?mgirl named Dorothy Gale who had been car?ried away by a cy?clone and de?posit?ed, along with her dog, in the Land of Oz. There was no 1-70 in Oz, but there was a yel?low brick road which served much the same pur?pose, and there were witch?es, both good and bad. There was a ka-?tet com?prised of Dorothy, To?to, and three friends she met along the way: the Cow?ard?ly Li?on, the Tin Wood?man, and the Scare crow. They each had (bird and bear and hare and fish)

a fond?est wish, and it was with Dorothy’s that Roland’s new friends (and Roland him?self, for that mat?ter) iden?ti?fied the most strong?ly: she want?ed to find her way home again.

“The Munchkins told her that she had to fol?low the yel?low brick road to Oz,” Jake said, “and so she went. She met the oth?ers along the way, sort of like you met us, Roland—”

“Al?though you don’t look much like Judy Gar?land,” Ed?die put in.

“—and even?tu?al?ly they got there. To Oz, the Emer?ald Palace, and the guy who lived in the Emer?ald Palace.” He looked to?ward the glass palace ahead of them, green?er and green?er in the strength?en?ing light, and then back to Roland.

“Yes, I un?der?stand. And was this fel?low, Oz, a pow?er?ful dinh? A Baron? Per?haps a King?”

Again, the three of them ex?changed a glance from which Roland was ex?clud?ed.

“That’s com?pli?cat?ed,” Jake said. “He was sort of a hum?bug—”

“A bumhug? What’s that?”

“Hum?bug,” Jake said, laugh?ing. “A fak?er. All talk, no ac?tion. But maybe the im?por?tant thing is that the Wiz?ard ac?tu?al?ly came from—”

“Wiz?ard?” Roland asked sharply. He grasped Jake’s shoul?der with his di?min?ished right hand. “Why do you call him so?”

“Be?cause that was his ti?tle, sug,” Su?san?nah said. “The Wiz?ard of Oz.” She lift?ed Roland’s hand gen?tly but firm?ly from Jake’s shoul?der. “Let him tell it, now. He don’t need you to squeeze it out of him.”

“Did I hurt you? Jake, I cry your par?don.”

“Nah, I’m fine,” Jake said. “Don’t wor?ry about it. Any?way, Dorothy and her friends had a lot of ad?ven?tures be?fore find?ing out the Wiz?ard was a, you know, a bumhug.” Jake gig?gled at this with his hands clapped to his fore?head and push?ing back his hair, like a child of five. “He couldn’t give the Li?on courage, the Scare?crow a brain, or the Tin Wood?man a heart. Worst of all, he couldn’t send Dorothy back to Kansas. The Wiz?ard had a bal?loon, but he went with?out her. I don’t think he meant to, but he did.”

“It seems to me, from your telling of the tale,” Roland said, speak?ing very slow?ly, “that Dorothy’s friends had the things they want?ed all along.”

“That’s the moral of the sto?ry,” Ed?die said. “Maybe what makes it a great sto?ry. But Dorothy was stuck in Oz, you see. Then Glin?da showed up. Glin?da the Good. And, as a present for smooch?ing one of the bad witch?es un?der her house and melt?ing an?oth?er one, Glin?da told Dorothy how to use the ru?by slip?pers. The ones Glin?da gave her.”

Ed?die raised the red Cuban-?heeled street-?bop?pers which had been left for him on the dot?ted white line of 1-70.

“Glin?da told Dorothy to click the heels of the ru?by slip?pers to?geth?er 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 pop?ular that the guy who wrote it went ahead and wrote about a thou?sand more Oz sto?ries—”

“Yeah,” Ed?die said. “Ev?ery?thing but Glin?da’s Guide to Firm Thighs.”

“—and there was this crazy re?make called The Wiz, star?ring black peo?ple—”

“Re?al?ly?” Su?san?nah asked. She looked be?mused. “What a pe?cu?liar con?cept.”

“—but the on?ly one that re?al?ly mat?ters is the first one, I think,” Jake fin?ished. Roland hun?kered and put his hands in?to the boots which had been left for him. He lift?ed them, looked at them, put them down again. “Are we sup?posed to put them on, do you think? Here and now?”

His three friends from New York looked at each oth?er doubt?ful?ly. At last Su?san?nah spoke for them—fed him the khuf which he could feel but not quite share on his own.

“Best not to right now, maybe. Too many bad-?ass spir?its here.” “Takuro spir?its,” Ed?die mur?mured, most?ly to him?self. Then: “Look, let’s just take em along. If we’re sup?posed to put em on, I think we’ll know when the time comes. In the mean?time, I think we ought to be?ware of bumhugs bear?ing gifts.”

It cracked Jake up, as Ed?die had known it would; some?times a word or an im?age got in?to your fun?ny bone like a virus and just lived there awhile. To?mor?row the word “bumhug” might mean noth?ing to the kid; for the rest of to?day, how?ev?er, he was go?ing to laugh ev?ery time he heard it. Ed?die in?tend?ed to use it a lot, es?pe?cial?ly

when ole Jake wasn't expecting 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, Susanah's, and Edie'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," Susanah 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," Edie 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, Edie 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," Susanah said. "I'd say we're definitely off to see the Wizard."

"You bet," Edie said. "Because—because—because—because—because—"

"Be?cause of the won?der?ful things he does!" Jake and Su?san?nah fin ished in uni?son, then laughed, de?light?ed with each oth?er, while Roland frowned at them, feel?ing puz?zled and look?ing left out.

"But I have to tell you guys," Ed?die said, "that it's on?ly gonna take about one more won?der?ful thing to send me around to the dark side of the Psy?cho Moon. Most like?ly for good."

4

As they drew clos?er, they could see In?ter?state 70 stretch?ing away in?to the pale green depths of the cas?tle's slight?ly round?ed out?er wall; it float?ed there like an op?ti?cal il?lu?sion. Clos?er yet, and they could hear the pen?nants snap?ping in the breeze and see their own rip?ply re?flec?tions, like drowned folk who some?how walk at the bot?toms of wa?tery trop?ical graves.

There was an in?ner re?doubt of dark blue glass—it was a col?or Jake as so?ci?at?ed with the bot?tles foun?tain-?pen ink came in—and a rust-?hued wall-?walk be?tween the re?doubt and the out?er wall. That col?or made Su?san?nah think of the bot?tles Hires root-?beer had come in when she was a lit?tle girl.

The way in was blocked by a barred gate that was both huge and ethe re?al: it looked like wrought iron which had been turned to glass. Each cun?ning?ly made stake was a dif?fer?ent col?or, and these col?ors seemed to come from the in?side, as if the bars were filled with some bright gas or liq?uid.

The trav?ellers stopped be?fore it. There was no sign of the turn?pike be yond it; in?stead of road?way, there was a court?yard of sil?ver glass—a huge flat mir?ror, in fact. Clouds float?ed serene?ly through its depths; so did the im?age of the oc?ca?sion?al swoop?ing bird. Sun re?flect?ed off this glass court?yard and ran across the green cas?tle walls in rip?ples. Un the far side, the wall of the palace's in?ner ward rose in a glim?mery green cliff, bro?ken by nar?row loop?hole win?dows of jet-?black glass. There was al?so an arched en?try in this wall that made Jake think of St. Patrick's Cathe?dral.

To the left of the main door?way was a sen?try-?box made of cream-?col?ored glass shot through with hazy or?ange threads. Its door, paint?ed with red stripes, stood open. The phone-?booth-?sized room in?side was emp?ty, al?though there was some?thing on the floor which looked to Jake like a news?pa?per.

Above the en?try, flank?ing its dark?ness, were two crouch?ing, leer?ing gar?goyles of dark?est vi?olet glass. Their point?ed tongues poked out like bruise?es.

The pen?nants atop the tow?ers flapped like school?yard flags.

Crows cawed over emp?ty corn?fields now a week past the Reap.

Dis?tant, the thin?ny whined and war?bled.

"Look at the bars of this gate," Su?san?nah said. She sound?ed breath?less and awestruck. "Look very close?ly."

Jake bent to?ward the yel?low bar un?til his nose near?ly touched it and a faint yel?low stripe ran down the mid?dle of his face. At first he saw noth ing, and then he gasped. What he had tak?en for motes of some kind were crea?tures—liv?ing crea?tures—im?pris?oned in?side the bar, swim?ming in tiny schools. They looked like fish in an aquar?ium, but they al?so (their heads, Jake told him?self, I think it's most?ly their heads) looked odd?ly, dis?qui?et?ing?ly hu?man. As if, Jake thought, he were

look?ing in?to a ver?ti?cal gold?en sea, all the ocean in a glass rod—and liv?ing myths no big?ger than grains of dust swim?ming with?in it. A tiny wom?an with a fish’s tail and long blonde hair stream?ing out be?hind her swam to her side of the glass, seemed to peer out at the gi?ant boy (her eyes were round, star?tled, and beau?ti?ful), and then flipped away again.

Jake felt sud?den?ly dizzy and weak. He closed his eyes un?til the feel ing of ver?ti?go went away, then opened them again and looked around at the oth?ers. “Cripes! Are they all the same?”

“All dif?fer?ent, I think,” said Ed?die, who had al?ready peered in?to two or three. He bent close to the pur?ple rod, and his cheeks lit up as if in the glow of an old-fash?ioned flu?oro?scope. “These guys here look like birds— lit?tle tiny birds.”

Jake looked and saw that Ed?die was right: in?side the gate’s pur?ple up right were flocks of birds no big?ger than sum?mer minges. They swooped gid?di?ly about in their eter?nal twi?light, weav?ing over and un?der one an oth?er, their wings leav?ing tiny sil?ver trails of bub?bles.

“Are they re?al?ly there?” Jake asked breath?less?ly. “Are they, Roland, or are we on?ly imag?in?ing them?”

“I don’t know. But I know what this gate has been made to look like.”

“So do I,” Ed?die said. He sur?veyed the shin?ing posts, each with its own col?umn of im?pris?oned light and life. Each of the gate’s wings con sist?ed of six col?ored bars. The one in the cen?ter—broad and flat in?stead 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 noth?ing moved.

Oh, maybe not that you can see, but there are things mov?ing around in there, all right, Jake thought. There’s life in there, ter?ri?ble life. And maybe there are ros?es, too. Drowned ones.

“It’s a Wiz?ard’s Gate,” Ed?die said. “Each bar has been made to look like one of the balls in Maer?lyn’s Rain?bow. Look, here’s the pink one.”

Jake leaned to?ward it, hands propped on his thighs. He knew what would be in?side even be?fore he saw them: hors?es, of cours?es. Tiny herds of them, gal?lop?ing through that strange pink stuff that was nei?ther light nor liq?uid. Hors?es run?ning in search of a Drop they would nev?er find, may?hap.

Ed?die stretched his hands out to grasp the sides of the cen?tral post, the black one.

“Don’t!” Su?san?nah called sharply.

Ed?die ig?nored her, but Jake saw his chest stop for a mo?ment and his lips tight?en as he wrapped his hands around the black bar and wait?ed for some?thing—some force per?haps sent Spe?cial De?liv?ery all the way from the Dark Tow?er it?self—to change him, or even to strike him dead. When noth?ing hap?pened, he breathed deep again, and risked a smile. “No elec tric?ity, but . . .” He pulled; the gate held fast. “No give, ei?ther. I see where it splits down the mid?dle, but I get noth?ing. Want to take a shot, Roland?”

Roland reached for the gate, but Jake put a hand on his arm and stopped him be?fore the gun?slinger could do more than give it a pre?li?mi nary shake. “Don’t both?er. 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. Edie 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 Ox-fords. He and Edie 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 Edie'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. Susanah 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," Edie 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 Edie'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," Susanah 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—" Edie began.

"I know," Jake said. "We forgot Oy."

"Oh Christ," Edie 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 bumblar 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 at tentatively back at Jake.

Jake clicked his heels together three times, looking at the bumblar as he did so, ignoring the rattling 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 play?ing dead, then sim?ply looked at his own feet with a kind of dis?gust?ed be?wil?der?ment. Look?ing at him, Jake had a sharp mem?ory: try?ing to pat his stom?ach and rub his head at the same time, and his fa?ther mak?ing fun of him when he couldn't do it right away.

"Roland, help me. He knows what he's sup?posed to do, but he doesn't know how to do it." Jake glanced up at Ed?die. "And don't make any smart re?marks, okay?"

"No," Ed?die said. "No smart re?marks, Jake. Do you think just Oy has to do it this time, or is it still a group ef?fort?"

"Just him, I think."

"But it wouldn't hurt us to kind of click along with Mitch," Su?san nah said.

"Mitch who?" Ed?die asked, look?ing blank.

"Nev?er mind. Go on, Jake, Roland. Give us a count again."

Ed?die grasped Oy's forepaws. Roland gen?tly grasped the bum?bler's rear paws. Oy looked ner?vous at this—as if he per?haps ex?pect?ed to be swung briskly in?to the air and giv?en the old heave-?ho—but he didn't strug?gle.

"One, two, three."

Jake and Roland gen?tly pat?ted Oy's forepaws and rear paws to?geth?er in uni?son. At the same time they clicked the heels of their own footwear. Ed?die and Su?san?nah did the same.

This time the har?monic was a deep, sweet bong, like a glass church bell. The black glass bar run?ning down the cen?ter of the gate did not split open but shat?tered, spray?ing crumbs of ob?sid?ian glass in all di?rec?tions.

Some rat?tled against Oy's hide. He sprang up in a hur?ry, yank?ing out of Jake's and Roland's grip and trot?ting a lit?tle dis?tance away. He sat on the bro?ken white line be?tween the trav?el lane and the pass?ing lane of the high way, his ears laid back, look?ing at the gate and pant?ing.

"Come on," Roland said. He went to the left wing of the gate and pushed it slow?ly open. He stood at the edge of the mir?ror court?yard, a tall, lanky man in cow?poke jeans, an an?cient shirt of no par?tic?ular col?or, and im?prob?able red cow?boy boots. "Let's go in and see what the Wiz?ard of Oz has to say for him?self."

"If he's still here," Ed?die said.

"Oh, I think he's here," Roland mur?mured. "Yes, I think he's here."

He am?bled to?ward the main door with the emp?ty sen?try-?box be?side it. The oth?ers fol?lowed, weld?ed to their own down?ward re?flec?tions by the red shoes like sets of Siamese twins.

Oy came last, skip?ping nim?bly along in his ru?by slip?pers, paus?ing once to sniff down at his own re?flect?ed snout.

"Oy!" he cried to the hum?bler float?ing be?low him, and then hur?ried af?ter Jake.

CHAP?TER III

the wiz?ard

Darktower 4 - Wizard and Glass

1

Roland stopped at the sen?try-?box, glanced in, then picked up the thing which was ly?ing on the floor. The oth?ers caught up with him and clus?tered around. It had looked like a news?pa?per, and that was just what it was . . . al?though an ex?ceed?ing?ly odd one. No Tope?ka Cap?ital-?Jour?nal this, and no news of a pop?ula?tion-?lev?el?ling plague.

The Oy Dai?ly Buzz

Vol. MDLXV?DI No. 96 “Dai?ly Buzz, Dai?ly Buzz, Hand?some Iz as Hand?some Du?uzz” Weath?er: Here to?day, gone to?mor?row Lucky Num?bers: None Prog?no?sis: Bad

Blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah
blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah
blah blah blah blah yak yak yak yak yak yak yak yak yak yak yak yak yak yak
yak yak yak yak yak yak yak yak blah blah blah good is bad bad is good all the
stuffs the same good is bad bad is good all the stuffs the same go slow past the
draw?ers all the stuffs the same blah blah blah blah blah blah blah Blame is a
pain all the stuffs the same yak yak yak yak yak yak yak yak yak yak chary?ou tree
all the stuffs the same blah yak blah blah yak yak blah blah blah yak yak yak
baked turkey cooked goose all the stuffs the same blah blah yak yak ride a train
die in pain all the stuffs the same blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah
blah blah blah blame blame blame blame blame blame blah blah blah blah
blah blah yak yak blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah. (Re?lat?ed
sto?ry p. 6)

Be?low this was a pic?ture of Roland, Ed?die, Su?san?nah, and Jake cross ing the
mir?rored court?yard, as if this had hap?pened the day be?fore in?stead of on?ly min?utes
ago. Be?neath it was a cap?tion read?ing: Tragedy in Oz: Trav?ellers Ar?rive Seek?ing
Fame and For?tune; Find Death In?stead.

“I like that,” Ed?die said, ad?just?ing Roland’s re?volver in the hol?ster he wore low on
his hip. “Com?fort and en?cour?age?ment af?ter days of con?fu sion. Like a hot drink on
a cold fuck?ing night.”

“Don’t be afraid of this,” Roland said. “This is a joke.”

“I’m not afraid,” Ed?die said, “but it’s a lit?tle more than a joke. I lived with Hen?ry
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 cu?ri?ous?ly at Roland. “I hope you don’t mind me
say?ing this, but you ‘re the one who looks scared, Roland.”

“I’m ter?ri?fied,” Roland said sim?ply.

Darktower 4 - Wizard and Glass

2

The arched en?try?way made Su?san?nah think of a song which had been pop?ular ten years or so be?fore she had been yanked out of her world and in?to Roland's. Saw an eye?ball peepin through a smoky cloud be?hind the Green Door, the lyric went.

When I said "Joe sent me, " some?one laughed out loud be?hind the Green Door.

There were ac?tu?al?ly two doors here in stead of one, and no peep?hole through which an eye?ball could look in ei ther. Nor did Su?san?nah try that old speakeasy deal about how Joe had sent her. She did, how?ev?er, bend for?ward to read the sign hang?ing from one of the cir?cu?lar glass door-?pulls. bell out of or?der, please knock, it said.

"Don't both?er," she said to Roland, who had ac?tu?al?ly dou?bled up his fist to do as the sign said. "It's from the sto?ry, that's all."

Ed?die pulled her chair back slight?ly, stepped in front of it, and took hold of the cir?cu?lar pulls. The doors opened eas?ily, the hinges rolling in si?lence. He took a step for?ward in?to what looked like a shad?owy green grot?to, cupped his hands to his mouth, and called: "Hey!"

The sound of his voice rolled away and came back changed... small, echo?ing, lost. Dy?ing, it seemed.

"Christ," Ed?die said. "Do we have to do this?"

"If we want to get back to the Beam, I think so." Roland looked paler than ev?er, but he led them in. Jake helped Ed?die lift Su?san?nah's chair over the sill (a milky block of jade-?col?ored glass) and in?side. Oy's lit?tle shoes flashed dim red on the green glass floor. They had gone on?ly ten paces when the doors slammed shut be?hind them with a no-?ques?tion-?about-?it boom that rolled past them and went echo?ing away in?to the depths of the Green Palace.

Darktower 4 - Wizard and Glass

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 Cowardly Lion got so scared when he stepped on his own tail.

And, adding a little extra touch of verisimilitude Jake could have done without, Edie spoke up in a trembly (and better than passable) Bert Lahr imitation: "Wait a minute, fella, 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.

"Oopit!" 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," Edie 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 Gash 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 Susanah 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.

Darktower 4 - Wizard and Glass

4

What lay beyond it was, to the eyes of Jake, Susanah, and Edie, 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!" Susanah 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 throne room 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 in to 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 Canderton 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 throne room of Oz the Great and Terrible, but it was really Blaine the Mono. They were back aboard Blaine, and soon the riding would begin all over again. Jake felt like screaming.

Darktower 4 - Wizard and Glass

5

Ed?die 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. Ed?die had sent him home with a fuckin rupture.

"HELLO THERE AGAIN, LITTLE TRAILHANDS!"

The smoky route-map pulsed, but Ed?die 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.

"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 attention 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 pip?squeak 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, ED?DIE OF NEW YORK? ONE OF YOUR STUPID, NASTY-MINDED LITTLE JOKES? ONE OF YOUR UNFAIR RIDDLES?"

"Yeah," Ed?die said. "The one that goes, 'How many dipolar computers does it take to screw in a light?bulb?' 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?"

Susanah 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 Susanah 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 supposed to be here—why else did we get left the shoes?"

"WHAT DO YOU WANT OF ME, SUSANAH? WHAT WOULD YOU HAVE, LITTLE COWGIRL?"

"You know," she said. "We want whatever anyone 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," Su?san?nah said. "A flat-?out lie. You can go home again. All you have to do is find the right rain?bow and walk un?der it. We've found it; the rest is just, you know, foot?work."

"WOULD YOU GO BACK TO NEW YORK, SU?SAN?NAH DEAN? ED?DIE DEAN? JAKE CHAM?BERS? IS THAT WHAT YOU ASK OF OZ, THE MIGHTY AND POW?ER?FUL?"

"New York isn't home for us any?more," Su?san?nah said. She looked very small yet very fear?less as she sat in her new wheelchair at the foot of the enor?mous, puls?ing 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. On?ly way home we got."

"GO AWAY!" cried the voice from the pipes. "GO AWAY AND COME BACK TO?MOR?ROW! WE'LL DIS?CUSS THE BEAM THEN! FID?DLE-?DE-?DEE, SAID SCAR?LETT, WE'LL TALK ABOUT THE BEAM TO?MOR?ROW, FOR TO?MOR?ROW IS AN?OTH?ER DAY!"

"No," Ed?die said. "We'll talk about it now."

"DO NOT AROUSE THE WRATH OF THE GREAT AND POW ER?FUL OZ!"

the voice cried, and the pipes flashed fu?ri?ous?ly with each word. Su?san?nah was sure this was sup?posed to be scary, but she found it al?most amus?ing, in?stead. It was like watch?ing a sales?man demon?strate a child's toy. Hey, kids! When you talk, the pipes flash bright col?ors! Try it and see!

"Sug?ar, you best lis?ten, now," Su?san?nah said. "What you don't want to do is arouse the wrath of folks with guns. Es?pe?cial?ly when you be livin in a glass house."

"I SAID COME BACK TO?MOR?ROW!"

Red smoke once more be?gan to boil out of the slots in the arms of the throne. It was thick?er now. The shape which had been Blaine's route-?map melt?ed apart and joined it. The smoke formed a face, this time. It was nar row and hard and watch?ful, framed by long hair.

It's the man Roland shot in the desert, Su?san?nah thought won?der?ing?ly. It's that man Jonas. I know it is.

Now Oz spoke in a slight?ly trem?bling voice: "DO YOU PRE?SUME TO THREAT?EN THE GREAT OZ?" The lips of the huge, smoky face hov?er?ing over the throne's seat part?ed in a snarl of min?gled men?ace and con?tempt. "YOU UN?GRATE?FUL CREA?TURES! OH, YOU UN?GRATE FUL CREA?TURES!"

Ed?die, who knew smoke and mir?rors when he saw them, had glanced in an?oth?er di?rec?tion. His eyes widened and he gripped Su?san?nah's arm above the el?bow.

"Look," he whis?pered. "Christ, Suze, look at Oy!"

The bil?ly-?bum?bler had no in?ter?est in smoke-?ghosts, whether they were mono?rail route-?maps, dead Cof?fin Hunters, or just Hol?ly?wood spe cial ef?fects of the pre-World War II va?ri?ety. He had seen (or smelled) some?thing that was more in?ter?est?ing.

Su?san?nah grabbed Jake, turned him, and point?ed at the bum?bler. She saw the boy's eyes widen with un?der?stand?ing a mo?ment be?fore Oy reached the small al?cove in the left wall. It was screened from the main cham?ber by a green cur?tain which

matched the glass walls. Oy stretched his long neck forward, caught the curtain's fabric in his teeth, and yanked it back.

Darktower 4 - Wizard and Glass

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Behind the curtain red and green lights flashed; cylinders spun inside glass boxes; needles moved back and forth inside long rows of lighted dials. 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 whispered, 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, finally, 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.

Darktower 4 - Wizard and Glass

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Jake stared at him, horri?fied. The coiled, dan?ger?ous crea?ture who had lived be?neath Lud with his mates—Gash?er and Hoots and Bran?don and Tilly—was gone. This might have been that mon?ster’s ru?ined fa?ther ... or grand?fa?ther. His left eye—the one Oy had punc?tured with his claws— bulged white and mis?shapen, part?ly in its sock?et and part?ly on his un shaven cheek. The right side of his head looked half-?scalped, the skull show?ing through in a long, tri?an?gu?lar strip. Jake had a dis?tant, pan?ic-?dark?ened mem?ory of a flap of skin falling over the side of Tick-Tock’s face, but he had been on the edge of hys?te?ria by that point... and was again now.

Oy had al?so rec?og?nized the man who had tried to kill him and was bark?ing hys?ter?ical?ly, head down, teeth bared, back bowed. Tick-?Tock stared at him with wide, stunned eyes.

“Pay no at?ten?tion to that man be?hind the cur?tain,” said a voice from be?hind them, and then tit?tered. “My friend An?drew is hav?ing an?oth?er in a long se?ries of bad days. Poor boy. I sup?pose I was wrong to bring him out of Lud, but he just looked so lost...” The own?er of the voice tit?tered again.

Jake swung around and saw that there was now a man sit?ing in the mid?dle of the great throne, with his legs ca?su?al?ly crossed in front of him. He was wear?ing jeans, a dark jack?et that belt?ed at the waist, and old, run down cow?boy boots. On his jack?et was a but?ton that showed a pig’s head with a bul?let?hole be?tween the eyes. In his lap this new?com?er held a draw string bag. He rose, stand?ing in the seat of the throne like a child in dad?dy’s chair, and the smile dropped away from his face like loose skin. Now his eyes blazed, and his lips part?ed over vast, hun?gry teeth.

“Get them, An?drew! Get them! Kill them! Ev?ery sis?ter-?fuck?ing one of them!”

“My life for you!” the man in the al?cove screamed, and for the first time Jake saw the ma?chine-?gun propped in the com?er. Tick-?Tock sprang for it and snatched it up.

“My life for you!”

He turned, and Oy was on him once again, leap?ing for?ward and up ward, sink?ing his teeth deep in?to Tick-?Tock’s left thigh, just be?low the crotch.

Ed?die and Su?san?nah drew in uni?son, each rais?ing one of Roland’s big guns. They fired in con?cert, not even the small?est over?lap in the sound of their shots. One of them tore off the top of Tick-?Tock’s mis?er?able head, buried it?self in the equip?ment, and cre?at?ed a loud but mer?ci?ful?ly brief snarl of feed?back. The oth?er took him in the throat.

He stag?gered for?ward one step, then two. Oy dropped to the floor and backed away from him, snarling. A third step took Tick-?Tock out in?to the throne?room prop?er. He raised his arms to?ward Jake, and the boy could read Ticky’s ha?tred in his re?main?ing green eye; the boy thought he could hear the man’s last, hate?ful thought: Oh, you fuck?ing lit?tle squirt—

Then Tick-?Tock col?lapsed for?ward, as he had col?lapsed in the Cra?dle of the Grays . . . on?ly this time he would rise no more.

“Thus fell Lord Perth, and the earth did shake with that thun?der,” said the man on the throne.

Ex?cept he’s not a man, Jake thought. Not a man at all. We’ve found the Wiz?ard at last, I think. And I’m pret?ty 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 Broad?cloak. Af?ter all these years. Af?ter all these cen?turies.”

”Want this, Roland?”

Ed?die put the gun he had used to kill the Tick-?Tock Man in Roland’s hand. A ten?dril of blue smoke was still ris?ing from the bar?rel. Roland looked at the old re?volver as if he had nev?er seen it be?fore, then slow?ly lift?ed it and point?ed it at the grin?ning, rosy-?cheeked fig?ure sit?ting cross-?legged on the Green Palace’s throne.

”Fi?nal?ly,” Roland breathed, thumb?ing back the trig?ger. ”Fi?nal?ly in my sights.“

Darktower 4 - Wizard and Glass

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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 horse-whip to me, aye, so they should!"

He threw back his head and laughed. Roland pulled the trigger of the gun in his hand. When the hammer fell there was only a dull click.

"Toadjer," the man on the throne said. "I think you must have gotten some of those wet slugs in there by accident, don't you? The ones with the flat powder? Good for blocking the sound of the thinny, but not so good for shooting old wizards, are they? Too bad. And your hand, Roland, look at your hand! Short a couple of fingers, by the look. My, this has been hard on you, hasn't it? Things could get easier, though. You and your friends could have a fine, fruitful life—and, as Jake would say, that is the truth. No more lobster-ties, no more mad trains, no more disquieting—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," Edie said.

"No," Susanah 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, ladie, but I warn you not to—"

"Not to cross Oz the Great? Oz the Powerful? But I think I will, Marten ... or Maerlyn ... or whoever you call yourself now..."

"Flagg, actually," the man on the throne said. "And we've met before." He smiled. Instead of broadening his face, as smiles usually did, it contracted Flagg's features into a narrow and spiteful grimace. "In the wreck of Gilead. You and your surviving pals—that laughing donkey Cuthbert Allgood made one of your party, I remember, and DeCurry, the fellow with the birthmark, made another—were on your way west, to seek the Tower. Or, in the parlance of Jake's world, you were off to see the Wizard. I know you saw me, but I doubt you knew until now that I

saw you, as well.”

“And will again, I reckon,” Roland said. “Unless, that is, I kill you now and put an end to your interference.”

Still holding his own gun out in his left hand, he went for the one tucked in the waistband of his jeans—Jake’s Ruger, a gun from another world and perhaps immune to this creature’s enchantments—with his right. And he was fast as he had always been fast, his speed blinding.

The man on the throne shrieked and cringed back. The bag fell from his lap, and the glass ball—once held by Rhea, once held by Jonas, once held by Roland himself—slipped out of its mouth. Smoke, green this time instead of red, billowed from the slots in the arms of the throne. It rose in obscuring fumes. Yet Roland still might have shot the figure disappearing into the smoke if he had made a clean draw. He didn’t, however; the Ruger slid in the grip of his reduced hand, then twisted. The front sight caught on his belt-buckle. It took only an extra quarter-second for him to free the snag, but that was the quarter-second he had needed. He pumped three shots into the billowing smoke, then ran forward, oblivious of the shouts of the others.

He waved the smoke aside with his hands. His shots had shattered the back of the throne into thick green slabs of glass, but the man-shaped creature which had called itself Flagg was gone. Roland found himself already beginning to wonder if he—or it had been there in the first place.

The ball was still there, however, unharmed and glowing the same enticing pink he remembered from so long ago—from Mejis, when he had been young and in love. This survivor of Maerlyn’s Rainbow had rolled almost to the edge of the throne’s seat; two more inches and it would have plunged over and shattered on the floor. Yet it had not; still it remained, this bewitched thing Susan Delgado had first glimpsed through the window of Rhea’s hut, under the light of the Kissing Moon.

Roland picked it up—how well it fit his hand, how natural it felt against his palm, even after all these years—and looked into its cloudy, troubled depths. “You always did have a charmed life,” he whispered to it. He thought of Rhea as he had seen her in this ball—her ancient, laughing eyes. He thought of the flames from the Reap-Night bonfire rising around Susan, making her beauty shimmer in the heat. Making it shiver like a mirage.

Wretched glam! he thought. If I dashed you to the floor, surely we would drown in the sea of tears that would pour out of your split belly . . . the tears of all those you’ve put to ruin.

And why not do it? Left whole, the nasty thing might be able to help them back to the Path of the Beam, but Roland didn’t believe they actually needed it. He thought that Tick-Tock and the creature which had called itself Flagg had been their last challenge in that regard. The Green Palace was their door back to Mid-World . . . and it was theirs, now. They had conquered it by force of arms.

But you can’t go yet, gunslinger. Not until you’ve finished your story, told the last scene.

Whose voice was that? Van’nay’s? No. Cort’s? No. Nor was it the voice of his

fa?ther, who had once turned him naked out of a whore's bed. That was the hard?est voice, the one he of?ten heard in his trou?bled dreams, the one he want?ed so to please and so sel?dom 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 aw?ful four?teenth year ... but he hadn't fin?ished the tale. As with Det?ta Walk?er and the Blue La?dy's for?spe?cial plate, there was one more thing. A hid?den thing. The ques?tion wasn't, he saw, whether or not the five of them could find their way out of the Green Palace and re cov?er the Path of the Beam; the ques?tion was whether or not they could go on as ka-?tet. If they were to do that, there could be noth?ing hid?den; he would have to tell them of the fi?nal time he had looked in?to the wiz?ard's glass in that long-?ago year. Three nights past the wel?com?ing ban?quet, it had been. He would have to tell them—

No, Roland, the voice whis?pered. Not just tell. Not this time. You know bet?ter. Yes. He knew bet?ter.

"Come," he said, turn?ing to them.

They drew slow?ly around him, their eyes wide and fill?ing with the ball's flash?ing pink light. Al?ready they were half-?hyp?no?tized by it, even Oy.

"We are ka-?tet," Roland said, hold?ing the ball to?ward them. "We are one from many. I lost my one true love at the be?gin?ning of my quest for the Dark Tow?er. Now look in?to this wretched thing, if you would, and see what I lost not long af?ter. See it once and for all; see it very well."

They looked. The ball, cupped in Roland's up?raised hands, be?gan to pulse faster. It gath?ered them in and swept them away. Caught and whirled in the grip of that pink storm, they flew over the Wiz?ard's Rain bow to the Gilead that had been.

CHAP?TER. IV

the glass

Jake of New York stands in an up?per cor?ri?dor of the Great Hall of Gilead—more cas?tles, here in the green land, than May?or's House. He looks around and sees Su?san?nah and Ed?die stand?ing by a tapestry, their eyes big, their hands tight?ly en?twined. And Su?san?nah is stand?ing; she has her legs back, at least for now, and what she called "cap?pies " have been re?placed by a pair of ru?by slip?pers ex?act?ly like those Dorothy wore when she stepped out up?on her ver?sion of the Great Road to find the Wiz?ard of Oz, that bumhug.

She has her legs be?cause this is a dream, Jake thinks, but knows it is no dream. He looks down and sees Oy look?ing up at him with his anx?ious, in?tel?li?gent, gold-ringed eyes. He is still wear?ing the red booties. Jake bends and strokes Oy's head. The feel of the hum?bler's fur un?der his hand is clear and re?al. No, this isn't a dream.

Yet Roland is not here, he re?al?izes; they are four in?stead of five. He re?al?izes some?thing else as well: the air of this cor?ri?dor is faint?ly pink, and small pink ha?los re?volve around the fun?ny, old-?fash?ioned light?bulbs that il?lu?mi?nate the cor?ri?dor. Some?thing is go?ing to hap?pen; some sto?ry is go ing to play out in front of their eyes. And now, as if the very thought had sum?moned them, the boy hears the click of ap?proach?ing foot?falls.

It's a sto?ry I know, Jake thinks. One I've been told be?fore.

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 preordained 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 remind Jake of The Falls of the Hounds, and the moonbows revolving in the mist), and this is happening all over again.

"Roland!" Edie calls from where he and Susanah stand by the tapestry.

Susanah gasps and squeezes his shoulder, wanting him to be silent, but Edie 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. Edie starts down the corridor toward him, still holding Susanah's hand... now he looks almost as if he is dragging her.

"Come on, Jake," says Edie.

"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!” Susanah shouts at him. “She ain’t there or she ain’t answer 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, Susanah, 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 bedroom. 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 Susanah, 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.

“Moth?er!”

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 outside 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 Ed die or Susanah 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 love-making, 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, Ed die and Susanah 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 magical! 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 unhappy piety 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!” Susanah 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 Susan'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've ever been, and he goes off like exploding gunpowder.

"No, Roland, don't!" Susan 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, maybe, 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-torn belt draped across her bleeding 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 you loved—aye, burned her alive, I did—and now I've

made ye a ma?tri?cide. Do ye re?pent of killing my snake yet, gun?slinger? My poor, sweet Er?mot? Do ye re?gret play?ing yer hard games with one more trig than ye ‘I ev?er be in yer mis?er?able life? ”

He gives no sign that he hears, on?ly stares at his la?dy moth?er. Soon he will go to her, kneel by her, but not yet; not yet.

The face in the ball now turns to?ward the three pil?grims, and as it does it changes, be?comes old and bald and rad?dled—be?comes, in fact, the face Roland saw in the ly?ing mir?ror. The gun?slinger has been un?able to see his fu?ture friends, but Rhea sees them; aye, she sees them very well.

“Cry it off! ” she croaks—it is the caw of a raven sit?ting on a leaf?less branch be?neath a win?ter-?dimmed sky. “Cry it off! Re?nounce the Tow?er!”

“Nev?er, you bitch, ” Ed?die says.

“Ye see what he is! What a mon?ster he is! And this is on?ly the be?gin?ning of it, ye ken! Ask him what hap?pened to Cuth?bert! To Alain—Alain ’s touch, clever as ’twas, saved him not in the end, so it didn’t! Ask him what hap?pened to Jamie De Cur?ry! He nev?er had a friend he didn’t kill, nev?er had a lover who’s not dust in the wind!”

“Go your way, ” Su?san?nah says, “and leave us to ours. ”

Rhea’s green, cracked lips twist in a hor?ri?ble sneer. “He’s killed his own moth?er! 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 to?ward the ball, mean?ing to pick it up and dash it to the floor . . . and he can do that, he re?al?izes, for the ball is re?al. It’s the one thing in this vi?sion that is. But be?fore he can put his hands to it, it flash?es a sound?less ex?plo?sion of pink light. Jake throws his hands up in front of his face to keep from be?ing blind?ed, and then he is

(melt?ing I’m melt?ing what a world oh what a world)

falling, he is be?ing 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—

CHAP?TER V

THE PATH OF

THE BEAM

1

“—home,” Ed?die mut?tered. His voice sound?ed thick and punch-?drunk to his own ears. “Back home, be?cause there’s no place like home, no in?deed.”

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 fore?head and pushed up, tight?en?ing the skin on his face. It worked; his eyes popped open. He saw nei?ther the throne?room of the Green Palace nor (and this was what he had re?al?ly ex?pect?ed) the rich?ly ap?point?ed but some?how claus?tro?pho?bic bed room in which he had just been.

He was out?side, ly?ing in a small clear?ing of win?ter-?white grass. Near?by was a lit?tle grove of trees, some still with their last brown leaves cling?ing to the branch?es.

And one branch with an odd white leaf, an al bi?no leaf. There was a pret?ty trick?le of run?ning wa?ter far?ther in?to the grove. Stand?ing aban?doned in the high grass was Su?san?nah’s new and im proved wheelchair. There was mud on the tires, Ed?die

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 in to 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?" Ed die croaked, and got slowly to his feet, wincing as he did so. He didn't think he was hunched, but his legs were sore and he felt as if he had just taken the world's heaviest Sunday afternoon nap.

Roland and Susan lay on the ground under the trees. The gunslinger was stirring, but Susan lay on her back, arms spread extravagantly wide, snoring in an unladylike way that made Ed die grin. Jake was nearby, with Oy sleeping on his side by one of the kid's knees. As Ed die 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," Ed die 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. Ed die guessed it might be thirty miles away. Leading toward them from that direction were the tracks of Susan'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 traveling 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. Ed die 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. Ed die 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 Ed die 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.

“Ed?die? Where you at, sug?ar?”

Ed?die looked down from the lane of clouds in the sky and saw Su?san nah sit?ting up, rub?bing the back of her neck. She looked un?sured of where she was. Per?haps even of who she was. The red cap?pies she was wear?ing looked odd?ly dull in this light, but they were still the bright?est things in Ed?die’s view ... un?til he looked down at his own feet and saw the street-?bop?pers with their Cuban heels. Yet these al?so looked dull, and Ed?die no longer thought it was just the day’s cloudy light that made them seem so. He looked at Jake’s shoes, Oy’s re?main?ing three slip?pers, Roland’s cow boy boots (the gun?slinger was sit?ting up now, arms crossed around his knees, look?ing blankly off in?to the dis?tance). All the same ru?by red, but a life?less red, some?how. As if some mag?ic es?sen?tial to them had been used up. Sud?den?ly, Ed?die want?ed them off his feet.

He sat down be?side Su?san?nah, gave her a kiss, and said: “Good morn?ing, Sleep?ing Beau?ty. Or af?ter?noon, if it’s that.” Then, quick?ly, al?most hat?ing to touch them (it was like touch?ing dead skin, some?how), Ed?die yanked off the street-?bop?pers. As he did, he saw that they were scuffed at the toes and mud?dy at the heels, no longer new look?ing. He’d won?dered how they’d got?ten here; now, feel?ing the ache in the mus?cles of his legs and re?mem?ber?ing the wheelchair tracks, he knew. They had walked, by God. Walked in their sleep.

“That,” Su?san?nah said, “is the best idea you’ve had since . . . well, in a long time.”

She stripped off the cap?pies. Close by, Ed?die saw Jake tak ing off Oy’s booties.

“Were we there?” Su?san?nah asked him. “Ed?die, were we re?al?ly there when he...”

“When I killed my moth?er,” Roland said. “Yes, you were there. As I was. Gods help me, I was there. I did it.” He cov?ered his face with his hands and be?gan to voice a se?ries of harsh sobs.

Su?san?nah crawled across to him in that ag?ile way that was al?most a ver?sion of walk?ing. She put an arm around him and used her oth?er hand to take his hands away from his face. At first Roland didn’t want to let her do that, but she was per?sis?tent, and at last his hands—those killer’s hands—came down, re?veal?ing haunt?ed eyes which swam with tears.

Su?san?nah urged his face down against her shoul?der. “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 ev?er.”

“You didn’t kill her,” Ed?die said.

“That’s too easy.” The gun?slinger’s face was still against Su?san?nah’s shoul?der, but his words were clear enough. “Some re?spon?si?bil?ities 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, ei?ther,” Ed?die said. “That’s not what I mean.”

Roland raised his head. “What in hell’s name are you talk?ing about?”

“Ka,” Ed?die said. “Ka like a wind.”

In their packs there was food none of them had put there—cook?ies with Kee?bler elves on the pack?ages, Saran Wrapped sand?wich?es that looked like the kind you

could get (if you were des?per?ate, that was) from turn?pike vend?ing ma?chines, and a brand of co?la nei?ther Ed?die, Su?san?nah, nor Jake knew. It tast?ed 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 dis?tant glim?gleam of the Green Palace, and called it lunch. If we start to lose the light in an hour or so, we can make it sup?per by voice vote, Ed?die thought, but he didn't be?lieve they'd need to. His in?te?ri?or clock was run ning again now, and that mys?te?ri?ous but usu?al?ly ac?cu?rate de?vice sug gest?ed that it was ear?ly af?ter?noon.

At one point he stood up and raised his so?da, smil?ing in?to an in?vis?ible cam?era.

"When I'm trav?el?ling through the Land of Oz in my new Takuro Spir?it, I drink Nozz-?A-?La!" he pro?claimed. "It fills me up but nev?er fills me out! It makes me hap?py to be a man! It makes me know God! It gives me the out?look of an an?gel 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, laugh?ing.

"Ug," Oy agreed. His snout was on Jake's an?kle, and he was watch ing the boy's sand?wich with great in?ter?est.

Ed?die start?ed to sit, and then that strange al?bi?no leaf caught his eye again. That's no leaf, he thought, and walked over to it. No, not a leaf but a scrap of pa?per. He turned it over and saw columns of "blah blah" and "yak yak" and "all the stuff's the same." Usu?al?ly news?pa?pers weren't blank on one side, but Ed?die wasn't sur?prised to find this one was—the Oz Dai?ly Buzz had on?ly been a prop, af?ter all.

Nor was the blank side blank. Print?ed on it in neat, care?ful let?ters, was this mes?sage:

Be?low that, a lit?tle draw?ing:

Ed?die brought the note back to where the oth?ers were eat?ing. Each of them looked at it. Roland held it last, ran his thumb over it thought?ful?ly, feel?ing the tex?ture of the pa?per, then gave it back to Ed?die.

"R.F.," Ed?die said. "The man who was run?ning Tick-?Tock. This is from him, isn't it?"

"Yes. He must have brought the Tick-?Tock Man out of Lud."

"Sure," Jake said dark?ly. "That guy Flagg looked like some?one who'd know a first-class bumhug when he found one. But how did they get here be?fore us? What could be faster than Blaine the Mono, for cripe's sake?"

"A door," Ed?die said. "Maybe they came through one of those spe?cial doors."

"Bin?go," Su?san?nah said. She held her hand out, palm up, and Ed?die slapped it.

"In any case, what he sug?gests is not bad ad?vice," Roland said. "I urge you to con?sider it most se?ri?ous?ly. And if you want to go back to your world, I will al?low you to go."

"Roland, I can't be?lieve you," Ed?die said. "This, af?ter you dragged me and Suze over here, kick?ing and scream?ing? You know what my broth?er would say about you? That you're as con?trary as a hog on ice-?skates."

"I did what I did be?fore I learned to know you as friends," Roland said. "Be?fore I learned to love you as I loved Alain and Cuth?bert. And be fore I was forced to ... to re?vis?it cer?tain scenes. Do?ing that has ..." He paused, look?ing 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," Edie said. "Or treat us as if we were."

"What you call 'the bottom line,' Edie, 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," Susanah said, "but Edie'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," Edie 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 Susanah. They shook their heads. Even Oy shook his head. No, he wasn't wrong.

"We've changed," Edie 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 Martyn 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.

"Ka-ka," 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," Susanah 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

wo?ven in?to it—sug?gests that she meant to ask my for?give?ness. That she had had a change of heart.“

Is that what you know, or on?ly what you want to be?lieve? Ed?die thought. It was a ques?tion he would nev?er ask. Roland had been test?ed enough, had won their way back to the Path of the Beam by re?liv?ing that ter?ri?ble fi?nal vis?it to his moth?er’s apart?ment, and that was enough.

”I think she hid be?cause she was ashamed,” the gun?slinger said. ”Or be?cause she need?ed a mo?ment to think of what to say to me. Of how to ex?plain.“

”And the ball?“ Su?san?nah asked him gen?tly. ”Was it on the van?ity ta?ble, where we saw it? And did she steal it from your fa?ther?“

”Yes to both,” Roland said. ”Al?though . . . did she steal it?“ He seemed to ask this ques?tion of him?self. ”My fa?ther knew a great many things, but he some?times kept what he knew to him?self.“

”Like him know?ing that your moth?er and Marten were see?ing each oth?er,” Su?san?nah said.

”Yes.“

”But, Roland . . . you sure?ly don’t be?lieve that your fa?ther would know?ing?ly have al?lowed you to . . . to . . .“

Roland looked at her with large, haunt?ed eyes. His tears had gone, but when he tried to smile at her ques?tion, he was un?able. ”Have know?ing?ly al?lowed 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?ened, to have de?lib?er?ate?ly set it in mo?tion, like a man play?ing Cas?tles . . . that I can?not be?lieve. But would he al?low ka to run its course? Aye, most cer?tain?ly.“

”What hap?ened to the ball?“ Jake asked.

”I don’t know. I faint?ed. When I awoke, my moth?er 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 most?ly emp?ty as well. Her blood had dried. The belt she’d made me was cov?ered with it, but I took it, and I put it on. I wore that blood?stained gift for many years, and how I lost it is a tale for an?oth?er day—I’ll tell it to you be?fore we have done, for it bears on my quest for the Tow?er.“

”But al?though no one had come to in?ves?ti?gate the gun?shots, some?one had come for an?oth?er rea?son. While I lay faint?ed away by my moth?er’s corpse, that some?one came in and took the wiz?ard’s glass away.“

”Rhea?“ Ed?die asked.

”I doubt she was so close in her body . . . but she had a way of mak?ing friends, that one. Aye, a way of mak?ing friends. I saw her again, you know.“ Roland ex?plained no fur?ther, but a stony gleam arose in his eyes. Ed?die had seen it be?fore, and knew it meant killing.

Jake had re?trieved the note from R.F. and now ges?tured at the lit?tle draw?ing be?neath the mes?sage. ”Do you know what this means?“

”I have an idea it’s the sigul of a place I saw when I first trav?elled in the wiz?ard’s glass. The land called Thun?der?clap.“ 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, sleep?walk?ing in their fine red shoes.

"The Kansas we came through was his Kansas, and the plague that emp?tied out that land was his plague. At least, that's what I be?lieve."

"But it might not stay there," Su?san?nah said.

"It could trav?el," Ed?die said.

"To our world," Jake said.

Still look?ing back to?ward the Green Palace, Roland said: "To your world, or any oth?er."

"Who's the Crim?son King?" Su?san?nah asked abrupt?ly.

"Su?san?nah, I know not."

They were qui?et, then, watch?ing Roland look to?ward the palace where he had faced a false wiz?ard and a true mem?ory and some?how opened the door back to his own world by so do?ing.

Our world, Ed?die thought, slip?ping an arm around Su?san?nah. Our world now. If we go back to Amer?ica, and per?haps we'll have to be?fore this is over, we 'll ar?rive as strangers in a strange land, no mat?ter what when it is. This is our world now.

The world of the Beams, and the Guardians, and the Dark Tow?er.

"We got some day?light left," he said to Roland, and put a hes?itant hand on the gun?slinger's shoul?der. When Roland im?me?di?ate?ly cov?ered it with his own hand, Ed?die smiled. "You want to use it, or what?"

"Yes," Roland said. "Let's use it." He bent and shoul?dered his pack.

"What about the shoes?" Su?san?nah asked, look?ing doubt?ful?ly at the lit?tle red pile they had made.

"Leave them here," Ed?die said. "They've served their pur?pose. In?to your wheelchair, girl." He put his arms around her and helped her in.

"All God's chil?dren have shoes," Roland mused. "Isn't that what you said, Su?san?nah?"

"Well," she said, set?tling her?self, "the cor?rect di?alect adds a soup?con of fla?vor, but you've got the essence, hon?ey, yes."

"Then we'll un?doubt?ed?ly find more shoes as God wills it," Ro land said.

Jake was look?ing in?to his knap?sack, tak?ing in?ven?to?ry of the food?stuffs that had been added by some un?known hand. He held up a chick?en leg in a Bag?gie, looked at it, then looked at Ed?die. "Who do you sup?pose packed this stuff?"

Ed?die raised his eye?brows, as if to ask Jake how he could pos?si?bly be so stupid.

"The Kee?bler Elves," he said. "Who else? Come on, let's go."

5

They clus?tered near the grove, five wan?der?ers on the face of an emp?ty land. Ahead of them, run?ning across the plain, was a line in the grass which ex?act?ly matched the lane of rush?ing clouds in the sky. This line was noth?ing so ob?vi?ous as a path . . . but to the awak?ened eye, the way that ev?ery?thing bent in the same di?rec?tion was as clear as a paint?ed stripe.

The Path of the Beam. Some?where ahead, where this Beam in?ter sect?ed all the oth?ers, stood the Dark Tow?er. Ed?die thought that, if the wind were right, he would al?most be able to smell its sullen stone.

And ros?es—the dusky scent of ros?es.

He took Su?san?nah's hand as she sat in her chair; Su?san?nah 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," Edie 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," Susanah said. "We are one from many."

"One from many," Jake said. "Come on, let's go."

Bird and bear and hare and fish, Edie 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 Greyhound Bus and wound up dwelling on the border of a terrible Mid-World land called Thudercap. 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 apologize. The reason is best summed up by Susanah'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. Suspense is relatively easy, at least for me; love is hard. Consequently I dithered, 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, because 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 cowboy 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 Madgler*, *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.