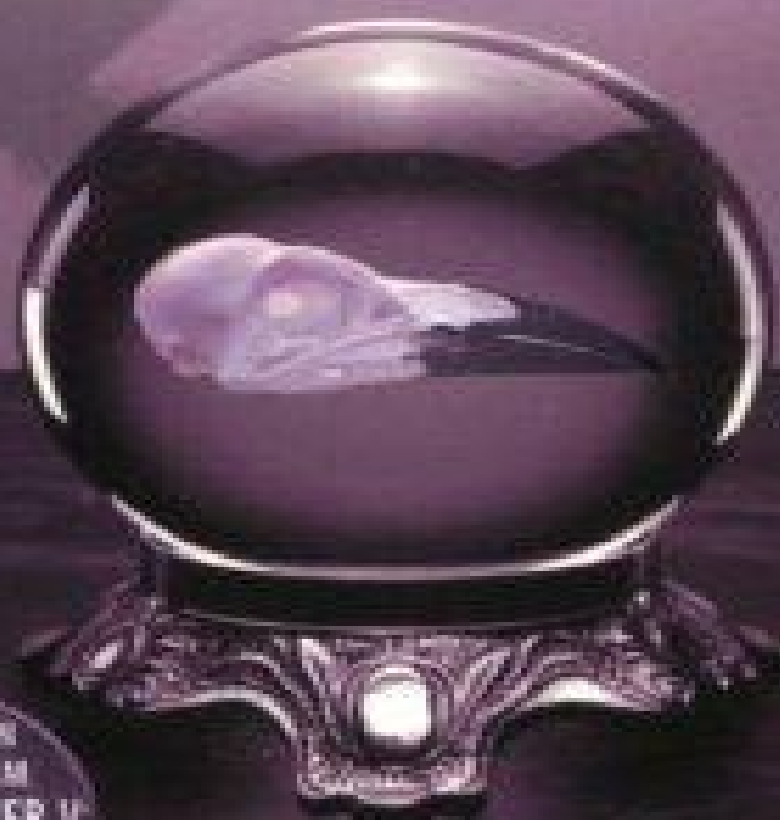




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#1 BESTSELLER

STEPHEN KING



INCLUDES AN
EXCERPT FROM
THE DARK TOWER V:
WOLVES OF
THE CALLA!

WIZARD AND GLASS

THE DARK TOWER IV

WITH A NEW INTRODUCTION BY THE AUTHOR

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Darktower 4 - Wizard and Glass

Darktower 4 - Wizard and Glass

Darktower 4 - Wizard and Glass

By King, Stephen

ARGUMENT

Wizard and Glass is the fourth volume of a longer tale inspired by Robert

Browning's 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

most 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

gun-slinger 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, gun-slinger")—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 gun-slinger 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 Odetta Susan 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 Detta 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/Detta 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 psychic 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 water.

Roland thinks that perhaps he has drawn three in just Edie and Odetta, since

Odetta is a double personality, yet when Odetta and Detta merge as one in

Susanah (thanks in large part to Edie Dean's love and courage), the gun slinger

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

gun-slinger'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 Waste-lands, 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, Edie, and Susanah back-track 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 gun-slinger believes that

he and his friends will at last find the Dark Tower.

By now Edie and Susanah are no longer prisoners in Roland's world. In love

and well on the way to becoming gun-slingers 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

degenerates survivors of two old factions, the Pubes and the Grays, carry on the

vestige of an old conflict. Before reaching the city, they come to a little town

called River Crossing, where a few antique residents still remain. They recognize

Roland as a remnant of the old days, before the world moved on, and honor him

and his companions. After, the old people tell them of a monorail train which may

still run from Lud and into the wastelands, along the Path of the Beam and toward

the Dark Tower.

Jake is frightened by this news, but not really surprised; before being drawn away

from New York, he obtained two books from a bookstore owned by a man with

the thought-provoking name of Calvin Tower. One is a book of riddles with the

answers torn out. The other, Charlie the Choo-Choo, is a children's book about a

train. An amusing little tale, most might say . . . but to Jake, there's something

about Charlie that isn't amusing at all. Something frightening. Roland knows

something else: in the High Speech of his world, the word char means death.

Aunt Talitha, the matriarch of the River Crossing folk, gives Roland a silver cross

to wear, and the travellers go their course. Before reaching Lud, they discover a

downed plane from our world—a German fighter from the 1930s. Jammed into the

cockpit is the mummified corpse of a giant, almost certainly the half-mythical

outlaw David Quick.

While crossing the dilapidated bridge which spans the River Send, Jake and Oy

are nearly lost in an accident. While Roland, Eddie, and Susanah are distracted

by this, the party is ambushed by a dying (and very dangerous) outlaw named

Gasher. He abducts Jake and takes him underground to the Tick-Tock Man, the

last leader of the Grays. Tick-Tock's real name is Andrew Quick; he is the great-

grandson of the man who died trying to land an air plane from another world.

While Roland (aided by Oy) goes after Jake, Eddie and Susanah find the Cradle

of Lud, where Blaine the Mono awakes. Blaine is the last above-ground tool of the

vast computer-system which lies beneath the city of Lud, and it has only one

remaining interest: rides. It promises to take the travellers to the mono-rail's final

stop if they can solve a riddle it poses them. Otherwise, Blaine says, the only trip

they'll be taking will be to the place where the path ends in the clearing ... to their

deaths, in other words. In that case they'll have plenty of company, for Blaine is

planning to release stocks of nerve-gas which will kill everyone left in Lud: Pubes,

Grays, and gun-slingers alike.

Roland rescues Jake, leaving the Tick-Tock Man for dead ... but Andrew Quick is

not dead. Half blind, hideously wounded about the face, he is rescued by a man

who calls himself Richard Fanin. Fanin, however, also identifies himself as the

Ageless Stranger, a demon of whom Roland has been warned by Walter.

Roland and Jake are reunited with Eddie and Susanah in the Crawl of Lud, and

Susanah—with a little help from “dat bitch” Detta Walker—is able to solve

Blaine's riddle. They gain access to the mono, of necessity ignoring the horrifying

warnings of Blaine's sane but fatally weak undermind (Eddie calls this voice Little

Blaine), only to discover that Blaine means to commit suicide with them aboard.

The fact that the actual mind running the mono exists in computers falling farther

and farther behind them, running beneath a city which has become a slaughtering-

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 riddles. Roland of Gilead

pro?pos?es a des?per?ate bar?gain. It is with this bar?gain that The Waste lands ends; it

is with this bar?gain that Wiz?ard and Glass be?gins.

romeo: La?dy, by yon?der blessed moon I vow,

That tips with sil?ver all these fruit-?tree tops—

juli?et: O, swear not by the moon, th' in?con?stant moon,

That month?ly changes in her cir?cled orb,

Lest that thy love prove like?wise vari?able.

romeo: What shall I swear by?

juli?et: Do not swear at all.

Or, if thou wilt, swear by thy gra?cious self,

Which is the god of my idol?atry,

And I'll be?lieve thee.

—Romeo and Juli?et William Shake?speare

On the fourth day, to [Dorothy's] great joy, Oz sent for her, and when she en?tered

the Throne Room, he greet?ed her pleas?ant?ly.

“Sit down; my dear. I think I have found a way to get you out of this coun?try.”

“And back to Kansas?” she asked ea?ger?ly.

“Well, I'm not sure about Kansas,” said Oz, “for I haven't the faintest no?tion which

way it lies....”

—The Wiz?ard of Oz L. Frank Baum

I asked one draught of ear?li?er, hap?pi?er sights,

Ere fit?ly I could hope to play my part.

Think first, fight af?ter?wards—the sol?dier's art:

One taste of the old time sets all to rights!

—Childe Roland to the Dark Tow?er Came

Robert Brown?ing

PRO?LOGUE

BLAINE

“ASK ME A RID?DLE,” Blaine in?vit?ed.

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

“WHAT DO YOU SAY?” In its clear dis?be?lief, the voice of Big Blaine had

be?come very close to the voice of its un?sus?pect?ed 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 in to 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.

Eddie’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 numbered 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 karma revolved. That the

batle would be fought with words instead of bullets this time made no difference;

it would be a batle 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 batle-

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 ‘gadget.’ Were you more, I might be ruder yet.”

“I AM A GREAT DEAL MORE THAN JUST—”

“I could call you a suck?er of cocks, for in?stance, but you have no mouth. I could

say you’re vil?er than the vilest beg?gar who ev?er crawled the low?est street in

cre?ation, but even such a crea?ture is bet?ter than you; you have no knees on which

to crawl, and would not fall up?on them even if you did, for you have no

con?cep?tion of such a hu?man flaw as mer?cy. I could even say you fucked your

moth?er, had you one.”

Roland paused for breath. His three com?pan?ions were hold?ing theirs. All around

them, suf?fo?cat?ing, was Blaine the Mono’s thun?der?struck si?lence.

“I can call you a faith?less crea?ture who let your on?ly com?pan?ion kill her?self, a

cow?ard who has de?light?ed in the tor?ture of the fool?ish and the slaugh?ter of the

in?no?cent, a lost and bleat?ing me?chan?ical gob?lin who—”

“I COM?MAND YOU TO STOP IT OR I’LL KILL YOU ALL RIGHT HERE!”

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

Dim?ly, he heard Jake and Su?san?nah gasp.

“Kill if you will, but com?mand me noth?ing!” the gun?slinger roared. “You have

for?got?ten the faces of those who made you! Now ei?ther kill us or be silent and

lis?ten to me, Roland of Gilead, son of Steven, gun?slinger, and lord of an?cient

lands! I have not come across all the miles and all the years to lis?ten to your

child?ish prat?ing! Do you un?der?stand? Now you will lis?ten to ME!”

There was an?oth?er mo?ment of shocked si?lence. No one breathed. Roland stared

stern?ly for?ward, 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 Eddie 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," Eddie 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 RIDLES?"

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 RATIONAL 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 nightmare

landscape below was once more blotched 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?" Blame'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

RIDDES IS NOT PROVEN. I WILL NOT REWARD YOU WITH YOUR

LIVES FOR BAD RIDDES."

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. Riding 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 rides 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 rides foresaw the crops. For instance, ride 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 CORN-BIN. A RIDE

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 SIL?LY OLD RID?DLE, USE?FUL
ON?LY AS A

MNEMON?IC DE?VICE.”

“For once I agree with you, Blaine old bud?dy,” Ed?die said.

“I AM NOT YOUR BUD?DY, ED?DIE OF NEW YORK.”

“Well, jeez. Kiss my ass and go to heav?en.”

“THERE IS NO HEAV?EN.”

Ed?die had no come?back for that one.

“I WOULD HEAR MORE OF FAIR-?DAY RID?DLING IN GILEAD,
ROLAND

SON OF STEVEN.”

“At noon on Wide Earth and Full Earth, some?where be?tween six?teen
and thir?ty

rid?dlers would gath?er in the Hall of the Grand?fa?thers, which was
opened for the

event. Those were the on?ly times of year when com mon folk—mer?
chants and

farm?ers and ranch?ers and such—were al?lowed in?to the Hall of the
Grand?fa?thers,

and on that day they all crowd?ed in.“

The gun?slinger’s eyes were far away and dreamy; it was the ex?pres
sion Jake had

seen on his face in that misty oth?er life, when Roland had told him of
how he and

his friends, Cuth?bert and Jamie, had once sneaked in?to the bal?cony
of that same

Hall to watch some sort of dance-?par?ty. Jake and Roland had been
climb?ing in?to

the moun?tains when Roland had told him of that time, close on the trail
of Wal?ter.

Marten sat next to my moth?er and fa?ther, Roland had said. I knew
them even from

so high above—and once she and Marten danced, slow?ly and re?volv?
ing?ly, and the

oth?ers cleared the floor for them and clapped when it was over. But the
gun?slingers did not clap....

Jake looked cu?ri?ous?ly at Roland, won?der?ing again where this strange man had

come from . . . and why.

"A great bar?rel was placed in the cen?ter of the floor," Roland went on, "and in?to

this each rid?dler would toss a hand?ful of bark scrolls with rid dles writ up?on them.

Many were old, rid?dles they had got?ten from the el ders—even from books, in

some cas?es—but many oth?ers were new, made up for the oc?ca?sion. Three judges,

one al?ways a gun?slinger, would pass on these when they were told aloud, and they

were ac?cept?ed on?ly if the judges deemed them fair."

"YES, RID?DLES MUST BE FAIR," Blaine agreed.

"So they rid?dled," the gun?slinger said. A faint smile touched his mouth as he

thought of those days, days when he had been the age of the bruised boy sit?ting

across from him with the bil?ly-?bum?bler in his lap. "For hours on end they rid?dled.

A line was formed down the cen?ter of the Hall of the Grand?fa?thers. One's po?si?tion

in this line was de?ter?mined by lot, and since it was much bet?ter to be at the end of

the line than at the head, ev?ery?one hoped for a high draw, al?though the win?ner had

to an?swer at least one rid?dle cor?rect?ly.

"OF COURSE."

"Each man or wom?an—for some of Gilead's best rid?dlers were wom?en—ap?proached the bar?rel, drew a rid?dle, and if the rid?dle was still

unan?swered af?ter the sands in a three-?minute glass had run out, that con tes?tant

had to leave the line."

"AND WAS THE SAME RID?DLE ASKED OF THE NEXT PER SON 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 test

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 RIDDLER."

"Indeed he was," Roland said. "Are you ready for my proposal, Blaine?"

"OF COURSE. I WILL LISTEN WITH GREAT INTEREST, ROLAND OF

GILEAD."

"Let these next few hours be our Fair-Day. You will not riddle us, for you wish to

hear new riddles, not tell some of those millions you already know —"

"CORRECT."

"We couldn't solve most of them, anyway," Roland went on. "I'm sure you know

riddles that would have stumped even Cort, had they been pulled out of the

barrel." He was not sure of it at all, but the time to use the fist had passed and the

time to use the feather had come.

"OF COURSE," Blaine agreed.

“Instead 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 mo?ment of si?lence, bro?ken on?ly by the hard steady
throb of the slo-

trans tur?bines bear?ing them on across the waste lands, bear?ing them
along the Path

of the Beam to?ward Tope?ka, where Mid-?World end?ed and End-?
World be?gan.

“SO,” cried the voice of Blaine. “CAST YOUR NETS, WAN?DER
ERS! TRY ME

WITH YOUR QUES?TIONS, AND LET THE CON?TEST BE?GIN.”

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 nor?mal—a stump?ish fifth leg dan?gled down from the cen?ter of

her low?er bel?ly like a teat, wag?gling bone?less?ly to and fro when she walked, and a

blind third eye peered milk?ily from the left side of her muz?zle. Yet she was fer?tile,

and her DNA was in rea?son?ably good or?der for a twelfth-?gen?er?ation mu?tie. In her

six years of life she had giv?en birth to three live young. Two of these fawns had

been not just vi?able but nor mal—thread?ed stock, Aunt Tal?itha of Riv?er Cross?ing

would have called them. The third, a skin?less, bawl?ing hor?ror, had been killed

quick?ly by its sire.

The world—this part of it, at any rate—had be?gun to heal it?self.

The deer slipped her mouth in?to the wa?ter, be?gan to drink, then looked up, eyes

wide, muz?zle drip?ping. Off in the dis?tance she could hear a low hum?ming sound.

A mo?ment lat?er it was joined by an eye?lash of light. Alarm flared in the doe's

nerves, but al?though her re?flex?es were fast and the light when first glimpsed was

still many wheels away across the des?olate coun?try?side, there was nev?er a chance

for her to es?cape. Be?fore she could even be?gin to fire her mus?cles, the dis?tant

spark had swelled to a sear?ing wolf's eye of light that flood?ed the stream and the

clear?ing with its glare. With the light came the mad?den?ing hum of
Blaine's slo-

trans en gines, run?ning at full ca?pac?ity. There was a blur of pink
above the

con crete ridge which bore the rail; a roost?er-?tail of dust, stones, small
dis?mem?bered an?imals, and whirling fo?liage fol?lowed along af?ter.

The doe was

killed in?stant?ly by the con?cus?sion of Blaine's pas?sage. Too large to
be sucked in

the mono's wake, she was still yanked for?ward al?most sev en?ty
yards, with wa?ter

drip?ping from her muz?zle and hoofs. Much of her hide (and the bone?
less fifth leg)

was torn from her body and pulled af?ter Blaine like a dis?card?ed gar?
ment.

There was brief si?lence, thin as new skin or ear?ly ice on a Year's End
pond, and

then the son?ic boom came rush?ing af?ter like some noisy crea ture
late for a

wed?ding-?feast, tear?ing the si?lence apart, knock?ing a sin?gle mu?
tat?ed bird—it might

have been a raven—dead out of the air. The bird fell like a stone and
splashed in?to

the stream.

In the dis?tance, a dwin?dling red eye: Blaine's tail?light.

Over?head, a full moon came out from be?hind a scrim of cloud, paint
ing the

clear?ing and the stream in the tawdry hues of pawn?shop jew?el?ry.
There was a face

in the moon, but not one up?on which lovers would wish to look. It
seemed the

scant face of a skull, like those in the Can?dle?ton Trav?ellers' Ho?tel; a
face which

looked up?on those few be?ings still alive and strug?gling be?low with
the amuse?ment

of a lu?natic. In Gilead, be?fore the world had moved on, the full moon
of Year's

End had been called the De?mon Moon, and it was con?sidered ill luck to look

di?rect?ly at it.

Now, how?ev?er, such did not mat?ter. Now there were demons ev?ery where.

2

Su?san?nah looked at the route-?map and saw that the green dot mark?ing their present

po?si?tion was now al?most halfway be?tween Can?dle?ton and Rilea, Blaine's next stop.

Ex?cept who's stop?ping? she thought.

From the route-?map she turned to Ed?die. His gaze was still di?rect?ed up at the

ceil?ing of the Barony Coach. She fol?lowed it and saw a square which could on?ly

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 managed to stump Blaine with a riddle.

Sorry to say this, but you sound like just one more honky motherfucker to me,

honey, she thought in a mental voice that was not quite Detta Walker's. I don't

trust your mechanical ass. You apt to be more dangerous beaten than with the

blue ribbon pinned to your memory banks.

Jake was holding his tattered book of riddles out to the gunslinger as if he no

longer wanted the responsibility of carrying it. Susanah 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 responsibility of holding on to it, either.

"Roland!" Jake whispered. "Do you want this?"

"Ont!" Oy said, giving the gunslinger a forbidding glance. "Olan-ont-iss!" The

bumbler fixed his teeth on the book, took it from Jake's hand, and stretched his

disproportionately long neck toward Roland, offering him Riddle-De-Dum! Brain-

Twisters and Puzzles for Everyone!

Roland glanced at it for a moment, his face distant and preoccupied, then shook

his head. "Not yet." He looked forward at the route-map. Blaine had no face, so

the map had to serve them as a fixing-point. The flashing green dot was closer to

Rilea now. Susanah wondered briefly what the countryside through which they

were passing looked like, and decided she didn't really want to know. Not after

what they'd seen as they left the city of Lud.

"Blaine!" Roland called.

"YES."

"Can you leave the room? We need to confer."

You nuts if you think he's gonna do that, Susanah thought, but Blaine's reply was quick and eager.

"YES, GUNSLINGER. I WILL TURN OFF ALL MY SENSORS IN THE

BARONY COACH. WHEN YOUR CONFERENCE IS DONE AND YOU ARE

READY TO BEGIN THE RIDDLING, I WILL RETURN."

"Yeah, you and General MacArthur," Eddie muttered.

"WHAT DID YOU SAY, EDIE OF NEW YORK?"

"Nothing. Talking to myself, that's all."

"TO SUMMON ME, SIMPLY TOUCH THE ROUTE-MAP," said Blaine. "AS

LONG AS THE MAP IS RED, MY SENSORS ARE OFF. SEE YOU LATER,

ALLEGATOR. AFTER AWHILE, CROCODILE. DON'T FORGET TO WRITE."

A pause. Then: "OLIVE OIL BUT NOT CASTORIA."

The route-map rectangle at the front of the cabin suddenly turned a red so bright

Susanah couldn't look at it without squinting.

"Olive oil but not castoria?" Jake asked. "What the heck does that mean?"

"It doesn't matter," Roland said. "We don't have much time. The monotravels just

as fast toward its point of ending whether Blaine's with us or not."

"You don't really believe he's gone, do you?" Eddie asked. "A slippery pup like

him? Come on, get real. He's peeking, I guarantee you."

"I doubt it very much," Roland said, and Susanah decided she agreed with him.

For now, at least. "You could hear how excited he was at the idea of riddling again

after all these years. And—"

"And he's confident," Susanah said. "Doesn't expect to have much trouble 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?sana?h’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 reappeared at once. Although there was no sensation of movement now that

the coach was closed, the green dot was closer to Rilea than ever.

“SO, ROLAND SON OF STEVEN!” Blaine said. To Edie he sounded more than

jovial; he sounded next door to hilarious. “IS YOUR KATET READY TO

BEGIN?”

“Yes. Susanah of New York will begin the first round.” He turned to her, lowered

his voice a little (not that she reckoned that would do much good if Blaine wanted

to listen), and said: “You won’t have to step forward like the rest of us, because of

your legs, but you must speak fair and address him by name each time you talk to

him. If—when—he answers your rightful correctly, say ‘Thankee-sai, Blaine, you

have answered true.’ Then Jake will step into 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. Edie 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 something she had

first dis?cov?ered way back in the first grade: it was hard to be?gin. It was hard to

stand up in front of the class and be first with your song, your joke, your re?port on

how you spent your sum?mer va?ca?tion . . . or your rid?dle, for that mat?ter. The one

she had de?cid?ed up?on was one from Jake Cham?bers's crazed En?GLISH es?say, which

he had re?cit?ed to them al?most ver?ba?tim dur?ing their long palaver af?ter leav?ing the

old peo?ple of Riv?er Cross?ing. The es?say, ti?tled "My Un?der?stand?ing of Truth," had

con tained two rid?dles, one of which Ed?die had al?ready used on Blaine.

"SU?SAN?NAH? ARE YOU THERE, L'IL COW?GIRL?"

Teas?ing again, but this time the teas?ing sound?ed light, good-?na? tured. Good-

hu?mored. Blaine could be charm?ing when he got what he want?ed. Like cer?tain

spoiled chil?dren she had known.

"Yes, Blaine, I am, and here is my rid?dle. What has four wheels and flies?"

There was a pe?cu?liar click, as if Blaine were mim?ick?ing the sound of a man

pop?ping his tongue against the roof of his mouth. It was fol?lowed by a brief pause.

When Blaine replied, most of the joc?ular?ity had gone out of his voice. "THE

TOWN GARBAGE WAG?ON, OF COURSE. A CHILD'S RID?DLE. IF THE

REST OF YOUR RID?DLES ARE NO BET TER, I WILL BE EX?TREME?LY

SOR?RY 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 Lit?tle Blaine begged. Each time it spoke, Su?san?nah found her?self

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 commentators 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 trolleys 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 Cradle 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 into 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 breast?bone.” He tapped to demon?strate.

“Oh.”

Roland turned to Jake. The boy stood, put Oy on his chair (which did no good; Oy

im?me?di?ate?ly jumped down and fol?lowed af?ter Jake when he stepped in?to the aisle

to face the route-?map), and turned his at?ten?tion to Blaine.

“Hel?lo, Blaine, this is Jake. You know, son of Elmer.”

“SPEAK YOUR RID?DLE.”

“What can run but nev?er walks, has a mouth but nev?er talks, has a bed but nev?er

sleeps, has a head but nev?er weeps?”

“NOT BAD! ONE HOPES SU?SAN?NAH WILL LEARN FROM YOUR

EX?AM?PLE, JAKE SON OF ELMER. THE AN?SWER MUST BE SELF-

EV?IDENT TO ANY?ONE OF ANY IN?TEL?LI?GENCE AT ALL, BUT A DE?CENT

EF?FORT, NEV?ER?THE?LESS. A RIV?ER.”

“Thankee-?sai, Blaine, you have an?swered true.” He tapped the bunched fin?gers of

his left hand three times against his breast?bone and then sat down. Su?san?nah put

her arm around him and gave him a brief squeeze. Jake looked at her grate?ful?ly.

Now Roland stood up. “Hile, Blaine,” he said.

“HILE, GUN?SLINGER.” Once again Blaine sound?ed amused . . . pos?si?bly by the

greet?ing, which Su?san?nah hadn’t heard be?fore. Heil what? she won?dered. Hitler

came to mind, and that made her think of the downed plane they’d found out?side

Lud. A Focke-?Wulf, Jake had claimed. She didn’t know about that, but she knew it

had con?tained one se?ri?ous?ly dead har?ri?er, too old even to stink. “SPEAK YOUR

RID?DLE, ROLAND, AND LET IT BE HAND?SOME.”

“Hand?some is as hand?some does, Blaine. In any case, here it is: What has four legs

in the morn?ing, two legs in the af?ter?noon, and three legs at night?”

“THAT IS IN?DEED HAND?SOME,” Blaine al?lowed. “SIM?PLE BUT

HAND?SOME, JUST THE SAME. THE AN?SWER IS A HU?MAN BE ING,

WHO CRAWLS ON HANDS AND KNEES IN BABY?HOOD, WALKS ON

TWO LEGS DUR?ING ADULT?HOOD, AND WHO GOES ABOUT WITH THE

HELP OF A CANE IN OLD AGE.”

Blaine sound?ed pos?itive?ly smug, and Su?san?nah sud?den?ly dis?cov?ered a mild?ly

in?ter?est?ing fact: she loathed the self-?sat?is?fied, mur?der?ous thing. Ma?chine 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 wa?ger their lives in a stu pid rid?dling con?test.

Roland, how?ev?er, did not look the slight?est put out of coun?te?nance. “Thankee-?sai,

Blaine, you have an?swered true.” He sat down with?out tap ping his breast?bone and

looked at Ed?die. Ed?die stood up and stepped in?to the aisle.

“What’s hap?pen?ing, 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. Susanah saw that Ed die suspected what she

herself all but knew: Blaine understood they were trying to test his capabilities

with a spectrum of rides. Blaine knew . . . and welcomed it.

Susanah felt her heart sink as any hopes they might find a quick and easy way

out of this disappeared.

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 answer, since that section of Ride-De-Dum! had

been torn out, but he didn’t think that made any difference; their knowing the

answers hadn’t been part of the ground-rules.

“I SHALL HEAR AND ANSWER.”

“No sooner spoken than broken. What is it?”

“SILENCE, A THING YOU KNOW LITTLE ABOUT, ED DIE OF NEW

YORK,” Blaine said with no pause at all, and Ed die felt his heart drop a little.

There was no need to consult with the others; the answer was self-evident. And

having it come back at him so quickly was the real bummer. Ed die never would

have said so, but he had harbored the hope—almost a secret surety—of bringing

Blaine down with a single ride, ker-smash, all the King’s horses and all the

King’s men couldn’t put Blaine together again. The same secret surety, he

supposed, that he had harbored every time he picked up a pair of dice in some

sharpie's back-bedroom crap game, every time he called for a hit on seven-teen

while playing black-jack. That feeling that you couldn't go wrong because you

were you, the best, the one and only.

"Yeah," he said, sighing. "Surely, a thing I know little about. Thankee-sai, Blaine, you speak truth."

"I HOPE YOU HAVE DISCOVERED SOMETHING WHICH WILL HELP

YOU," Blaine said, and Edie thought: You fucking mechanical liar. The

complacent tone had returned to Blaine's voice, and Edie found it of some

passing interest that a machine could express such a range of emotion. Had the

Great Old Ones built them in, or had Blaine created an emotional rainbow for

himself at some point? A little dipolar prettiness with which to pass the long decades

and centuries? "DO YOU WISH ME TO GO AWAY AGAIN SO YOU MAY

CONSULT?"

"Yes," Roland said.

The route-map flashed bright red. Edie turned toward the gun-slinger. Roland

composed his face quickly, but before he did, Edie saw a horrible thing: a brief

look of complete hopelessness. Edie had never seen such a look there before, not

when Roland had been dying of the lobstrosities' bites, not when Edie 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 lit?tle pur?pose,” Roland said. “Blame must know

thou?sands of rid?dles—per?haps mil?lions—and that is bad. Worse, far worse, he

un?der?stands the how of rid?dling ... the place the mind has to go to in or?der to make

them and solve them.” He turned to Ed?die and Su?san?nah, sit?ting once more with

their arms about one an?oth?er. “Am I right about that?” he asked them. “Do you

agree?”

“Yes,” Su?san?nah said, and Ed?die nod?ded re?luc?tant?ly. 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 bas?tard, Ed?die sent fierce?ly in Roland’s di?rec?tion. Roland, per?haps

hear?ing the thought, did the best he could. He touched Jake’s hair with his

di?min?shed hand and ruf?fled through it. “I think there’s al?ways an an?swer, Jake.

The re?al ques?tion is whether or not we’ll have time to find the right rid?dle. He said

it took him a lit?tle un?der nine hours to run his route—”

“Eight hours, forty-?five min?utes,” Jake put in. “. . . and that’s not much time.

We’ve al?ready been run?ning al?most an hour—”

“And if that map’s right, we’re al?most halfway to Tope?ka,” Su?san?nah said in a tight

voice. “Could be our me?chan?ical pal’s been ly?ing to us about the length of the run.

Hedg?ing his bets a lit?tle.” “Could be,” Roland agreed. “So what do we do?” Jake

re?peat?ed.

Roland drew in a deep breath, held it, let it out. "Let me rid?dle him alone, for now.

I'll ask him the hard?est ones I re?mem?ber from the Fair-?Days of my youth. Then,

Jake, if we're ap?proach?ing the point of... if we're ap?proach?ing Tope?ka at this same

speed with Blaine still un?posed, I think you should ask him the last few rid?dles in

your book. The hard?est rid?dles." He rubbed the side of his face dis?tract?ed?ly and

looked at the ice sculp?ture. This chilly ren?der?ing of his own like?ness had now

melt?ed to an un?rec?og?niz?able hulk. "I still think the an?swer must be in the book.

Why else would you have been drawn to it be?fore com?ing back to this world?"

"And us?" Su?san?nah asked. "What do Ed?die and I do?"

"Think, " Roland said. "Think, for your fa?thers' sakes."

" 'I do not shoot with my hand,' " Ed?die said. He sud?den?ly felt far away, strange to

him?self. It was the way he'd felt when he had seen first the sling?shot and then the

key in pieces of wood, just wait?ing for him to whit?tle them free ... and at the same

time this feel?ing was not like that at all.

Roland was look?ing at him odd?ly. "Yes, Ed?die, you say true. A gun-?slinger shoots

with his mind. What have you thought of?"

"Noth?ing." He might have said more, but all at once a strange im age—a strange

mem?ory—in?ter?vened: Roland hun?ker?ing by Jake at one of their stop?ping-?points on

the way to Lud. Both of them in front of an un?lit camp?fire. Roland once more at

his ev?er?last?ing lessons. Jake's turn this time. Jake with the flint and steel, try?ing 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 cen?turies, so try again!

"I pass be?fore the sun, Blaine, yet make no shad?ow. What am I?"

"WIND." No hes?ita?tion.

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

"ONE'S BREATH." No hes?ita?tion.

Yet he did hes?itate, Ed?die thought sud?den?ly. Jake and Su?san?nah were watch?ing

Roland with ag?onized con?cen?tra?tion, fists clenched, will?ing him to ask Blaine the

right rid?dle, the stumper, the one with the Get the Fuck Out of Jail Free card

hid?den in?side it; Ed?die couldn't look at them—Suze, in par?tic?ular—and keep his

con?cen?tra?tion. He low?ered his gaze to his own hands, which were al?so clenched,

and forced them to open on his lap. It was sur?pris?ing?ly hard to do. From the aisle

he heard Roland con?tin?uing to trot out the gold?en oldies of his youth.

"Rid?dle me this, Blaine: If you break me, I'll not stop work?ing. If you can touch

me, my work is done. If you lose me, you must find me with a ring soon af?ter.

What am I?"

Su?san?nah's breath caught for a mo?ment, and al?though he was look?ing down, Ed?die

knew she was think?ing what he was think?ing: that was a good one, a damned good

one, maybe—

"THE HU?MAN HEART," Blaine said. Still with not a whit of hesi?ta?tion. "THIS

RID?DLE IS BASED IN LARGE PART UP?ON HU?MAN PO?ET?IC CON?CEITS;

SEE FOR IN?STANCE JOHN AV?ERY, SIRO?NIA HUNTZ, ON?
DOLA,

WILLIAM BLAKE, JAMES TATE, VERON?ICA MAYS, AND OTH?
ERS. IT IS

RE?MARK?ABLE HOW HU?MAN BE IN?GS PITCH THEIR
MINDS ON LOVE.

YET IT IS CON?STANT FROM ONE LEV?EL OF THE TOW?ER TO
THE NEXT,

EVEN IN THESE DE GEN?ER?ATE DAYS. CON?TIN?UE,
ROLAND OF

GILEAD.”

Su?san?nah’s breath re?sumed. Ed?die’s hands want?ed to clench again,
but he wouldn’t

let them. Move your flint in clos?er, he thought in Ro land’s voice.
Move your flint

in clos?er, for your fa?ther’s sake!

And Blaine the Mono ran on, south?east un?der the De?mon Moon.

CHAP?TER II

THE FALLS OF

THE HOUNDS

1

Jake didn’t know how easy or dif?fi?cult Blaine might find the last ten
puz zlers in

Rid?dle-?De-?Dum!, but they looked pret?ty tough to him. Of course,
he re?mind?ed

him?self, he wasn’t a think?ing-?ma?chine with a city?wide bank of
com?put?ers to draw

on. All he could do was go for it; God hates a cow ard, as Ed?die some?
times said.

If the last ten failed, he would try Aaron Deep?neau’s Sam?son rid?dle
(Out of the

eater came forth meat, and so on). If that one al?so failed, he’d prob?
ably . . . 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 suspension bridge and to their deaths in the River Send; of being driven

through the crazed maze that was Lud by Gasher; of having to look into the Tick-

Tock Man's terrible green eyes and try to answer his unanswered questions about

time, Nazis, and the nature of transitive circuits. Being questioned by Tick-Tock

had been like having to take a final exam in hell.

Then the exhilaration of being rescued by Roland (and Oy; without Oy he would

almost certainly be toast now), the wonder of all they had seen beneath the city,

his awe at the way Susanah had solved Blaine's gate-riddle, and the final mad

rush to get aboard the mono before Blaine could release the stocks of nerve-gas

stored under Lud.

After surviving all that, a kind of blissed-out surety had settled over him—of

course Roland would stump Blaine, who would then keep his part of the bargain

and set them down safe and sound at his final stop (whatever passed for Topeka in

this world). Then they would find the Dark Tower and do whatever they were

supposed to do there, right what needed righting, fix what needed fixing. And

then? They Lived Happily Ever After, of course. Like folk in a fairy tale.

Except...

They shared each other's thoughts, Roland had said; sharing khaf was part of what

ka-tet meant. And what had been seeping into Jake's thoughts ever since Roland

stepped into the aisle and began to try Blaine with riddles from his young days

was a sense of doom. It wasn't coming just from the gunslinger; Susanah was

sending out the same grim blue-black vibe. Only Edie wasn't sending it, and that

was because he'd gone off somewhere, was chasing his own thoughts. That might

be good, but there were no guarantees, and—

—and Jake began to be scared again. Worse, he felt desperate, like a creature that

is pressed deeper and deeper into its final corner by a relentless foe. His fingers

worked restlessly in Oy's fur, and when he looked down at them, he realized an

amazing thing: the hand which Oy had bitten into to keep from falling off the

bridge no longer hurt. He could see the holes the bumbler's teeth had made, and

blood was still crusted in his palm and on his wrist, but the hand itself no longer

hurt. He flexed it cautiously. There was some pain, but it was low and distant,

hardly there at all.

"Blaine, what may go up a chimney down but cannot go down a chimney up?"

"A LADY'S PARASOL," Blaine replied in that tone of jolly composure which

Jake, too, was coming to loathe.

"Thankee-sai, Blaine, once again you have answered true. Next—"

"Roland?"

The gunslinger looked around at Jake, and his look of concentration lightened a

bit. It wasn't a smile, but it went a little way in that direction, 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 grid?work of lines. It looked a lit?tle like the speak?er of the

tran?sis?tor ra?dio he’d had when he was sev?en or eight.

“AN?OTH?ER BEN?EFIT OF TRAV?EL?LING BARONY CLASS,” Blaine went on

in his smug voice. It crossed Jake’s mind that Blaine would fit in per?fect?ly at the

Piper School. The world’s first slo-?trans, dipolar nerd. “THE HAND-?SCAN

SPEC?TRUM MAG?NI?FI?ER IS A DI?AG NOS?TIC TOOL AL?SO CA?PA?BLE OF

AD?MIN?IS?TER?ING MI?NOR FIRST AID, SUCH AS I HAVE PER?FORMED ON

YOU. IT IS AL?SO A NU?TRI?ENT DE?LIV?ERY SYS?TEM, A BRAIN-?PAT?TERN

RECORD?ING DE?VICE, A STRESS-?AN?ALYZ?ER, AND AN EMO?TION-

EN?HANCER WHICH CAN NAT?URAL?LY STIM?ULATE THE PRO?DUC?TION

OF EN?DOR?PHINS. HAND-?SCAN IS AL?SO CA?PA?BLE OF CRE?AT?ING VERY

BE?LIEV?ABLE IL?LU?SIONS AND HAL?LU?CI?NA?TIONS. WOULD YOU CARE

TO HAVE YOUR FIRST SEX?UAL EX?PE?RI?ENCE WITH A NOT?ED 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 re?turned, a certain

coldness had replaced the jocular ain’t-we-having-fun tone of voice.

”I CRY YOUR PARDON, JAKE OF NEW YORK. I ALSO WITH DRAW 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 Riv?er Cross?ing and al?low him?self just a lit?tle.

2

Roland nod?ded im?per?cep?ti?bly at Su?san?nah, then turned back to the front of the

coach, pre?sum?ably to re?sume rid?dling. Be?fore he could open his mouth, Jake felt

his body pushed for?ward. It was fun?ny; you couldn't feel a thing when the mono

was run?ning flat-?out, but the minute it be?gan to de cel?er?ate, you knew.

"HERE IS SOME?THING YOU RE?AL?LY 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-taking view which had been provided them by the Barony Coach's visual

mode. He glanced around once, face occupied and somehow bleary with

thought, and then looked down at his hands again. Jake glanced at him with brief

curiosity, then stared back out.

They were halfway across a vast chasm and seemed to be hovering on the moon-

dusted air. Beyond them Jake could see a wide, boiling river. Not the Send, unless

the rivers in Roland's world were somehow able to run in different directions at

different points in their courses (and Jake didn't know enough about Mid-World to

entirely discount that possibility); also, this river was not placid but raging, a

torrent that came tumbling out of the mountains like something that was pissed off

and wanted to brawl.

For a moment Jake looked at the trees which dressed the steep slopes along the

sides of this river, registering with relief that they looked pretty much all

right—the sort of firs you'd expect to see in the mountains of Colorado or

Wyoming, say—and then his eyes were dragged back to the lip of the chasm. Here

the torrent broke apart and dropped in a waterfall so wide and so deep that Jake

thought it made Niagara, where he had gone with his parents (one of three families

vacations he could remember; two had been cut short by urgent calls from his

father's Network), 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?ting 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?pery 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 ‘II 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.

Roland sat down across from Jake and scrubbed his right hand slowly up the

stubble on his right cheek, an unconscious gesture he seemed to make only when

he was feeling tired or doubtful. "I'm running out of riddles," he said.

Jake looked back at him, startled. The gunslinger had posed fifty or more to the

competitor, and Jake supposed that was a lot to just yank out of your head with no

preparation, but when you considered that riddling 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-bitter,

touched the corners of his mouth, and he nodded as if the boy had spoken out loud.

"I don't understand, either. If you'd asked me yesterday or the day before, I would

have told you that I had at least a thousand riddles stored up in the junkbin I keep

at the back of my mind. Perhaps two thousand. But. . ."

He lifted one shoulder in a shrug, shook his head, rubbed his hand up his cheek

again.

"It's not like forgetting. It's as if they were never there in the first place. What's

happening to the rest of the world is happening to me, I reckon."

"You're moving on," Susanah said, and looked at Roland with an expression of

pity which Roland could look back at for only a second or two; it was as if he felt

burned by her regard. "Like everything else here."

"Yes, I fear so." He looked at Jake, lips tight, eyes sharp. "Will you be ready with

the riddles from your book when I call on you?"

"Yes."

“Good. And take heart. We’re not finished yet.”

Outside, the dim crackle of electricity ceased.

“I HAVE FED MY BATTERIES AND ALL IS WELL,” Blaine announced.

“Marvelous,” Susanah said dryly.

“Luss!” Oy agreed, catching Susanah’s sarcastic tone exactly.

“I HAVE A NUMBER OF SWITCHING FUNCTIONS TO PERFORM. THESE

WILL TAKE ABOUT FORTY MINUTES AND ARE LARGELY AUTOMATIC. WHILE THIS SWITCHOVER TAKES PLACE AND THE

ACCOUNTING CHECKLIST IS RUNNING, WE SHALL CONTINUE OUR

CONTEST. I AM ENJOYING IT VERY MUCH.”

“It’s like when you have to switch over from electric to diesel on the train to

Boston,” Edie said. He still sounded as if he wasn’t quite with them. “At Hartford

or New Haven or one of those other places where no one in their right fucking

mind would want to live.”

“Edie?” Susanah asked. “What are you—”

Roland touched her shoulder and shook his head.

“NEVER MIND EDIE OF NEW YORK,” Blaine said in his expansive, gosh-

but-this-is-fun voice.

“That’s right,” Edie said. “Never mind Edie of New York.”

“HE KNOWS NO GOOD RIDDLES. BUT YOU KNOW MANY, ROLAND OF

GILEAD. TRY ME WITH ANOTHER.”

And, as Roland did just that, Jake thought of his Final Essay. Blaine is a pain, he

had written there. Blaine is a pain and that is the truth. It was the truth, all right.

The stone truth.

A little less than an hour later, Blaine the Mono began to move again.

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 PARDON, MA’AM,” drawled the aw-shucks voice of Jimmy Stewart.

“AH’M RIGHT SORRY IF I RUIN YOUR EARS WITH MY RISKABILITY.”

“Run in this,” Jake said, and hoisted his middle finger at the route map.

Susanah expected Eddie to laugh—you could count on him to be amused by

vulgarity at any time of the day or night, she would have said—but Eddie only

continued looking down at his lap, his forehead creased, his eyes vacant, his

mouth hung slightly agape. He looked a little too much like the village idiot for

comfort, Susanah thought, and again had to restrain herself from throwing an

elbow into his side to get that doltish look off his face. She wouldn’t restrain

herself for much longer; if they were going to die at the end of Blaine’s run, she

wanted Eddie’s arms around her when it happened, Eddie’s eyes on her, Eddie’s

mind with hers.

But for now, better let him be.

“AT THIS POINT,” Blaine resumed in his normal voice, “I INTEND TO BEGIN

WHAT I LIKE TO THINK OF AS MY KAMIKAZE RUN. THIS WILL

QUICKLY DRAIN MY BATTERIES, BUT I THINK THE TIME FOR

CONSERVATION HAS PASSED, DON’T YOU? WHEN I STRIKE THE

TRANSTEEL PIERS AT THE END OF THE TRACK, I SHOULD BE TRAVELING AT BETTER THAN NINE HUNDRED MILES AN

hour—five hundred and thirty 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?sider?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?puter
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... dodging 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 fucking rupture. You never made out with a girl; you fucked that skag til she

cried. You nev?er got stoned; you went on a fuckin bombin-?run. And you nev?er

brawled with an?oth?er gang; you got in a fuckin piss?er.

The dis?cus?sion that day had been about who you'd want with you if you got in a

fuckin piss?er. Jim?mie Po?lio (he got to talk first be?cause he had sup?plied the

cigarettes, which Hen?ry's home?boys called the fuckin can?cer-?sticks) opt?ed for

Skip?per Bran?ni?gan, be?cause, he said, Skip?per wasn't afraid of any?one. One time,

Jim?mie said, Skip?per got pissed off at this teach?er—at the Fri?day night PAL

dance, this was—and beat the liv?ing shit out of him. Sent THE FUCKIN

CHAP?ER?ONE home with a fuckin rup?ture, if you could dig it. That was his homie

Skip?per Bran?ni?gan.

Ev?ery?one lis?tened to this solemn?ly, nod?ding their heads as they ate their Rock?ets,

sucked their Pop?si?cles, or smoked their Kents. Ev?ery?one knew that Skip?per

Bran?ni?gan was a fuckin pussy and Jim?mie was full of shit, but no one said so.

Christ, no. If they didn't pre?tend to be?lieve Jim mie Po?lio's out?ra?geous lies, no one

would pre?tend to be?lieve theirs.

Tom?my Fred?er?icks opt?ed for John Par?el?li. Georgie Pratt went for Csa?ba Drab?nik,

al?so known around the nabe as The Mad Fuckin Hun gar?ian. Frank Duganel?li

nom?inat?ed Lar?ry Mc?Cain, even though Lar?ry was in Ju?ve?nile De?ten?tion; Lar?ry

fuckin ruled, Frank said.

By then it was around to Hen?ry Dean. He gave the ques?tion the weighty

con?sid?er?ation it de?served, then put his arm around his sur?prised
broth?er's

shoul?ders. Ed?die, he said. My lit?tle bro. He's the man.

They all stared at him, stunned—and none more stunned than Ed?die.
His jaw had

been al?most down to his belt-?buck?le. And then Jim?mie Po?lio said.
Come on.

Hen?ry, stop fuckin around. This a se?ri?ous ques?tion. Who 'd you
want watch?ing

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 father's sake!

Because he wanted to grab me, Eddie thought. Faintly, almost as if it were coming

through one of those magic doors from some other world, he heard Blaine telling

them that the endgame had commenced; if they had been saving their best rides,

now was the time to trot them out. They had an hour.

An hour! Only an hour!

His mind tried to fix on that and Eddie nudged it away. Something was happening

inside him (at least he prayed it was), some desperate game of association, and he

couldn't let his mind get fucked up with deadlines and consequences and all that

crap; if he did, he'd lose what ever chance he had. It was, in a way, like seeing

something in a piece of wood, something you could carve out—a bow, a slingshot,

perhaps a key to open some unimaginable door. You couldn't look too long,

though, at least to start with. You'd lose it if you did. It was almost as if you had to

carve while your own back was turned.

He could feel Blaine's engines powering up beneath 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 closer. 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 coming back to

this place?

Because it's as close as I can get and still stay out of the hurt-zone. Only a

medium-sized hurt, actually, but it made me think of Henry. Being put down by

Henry.

Henry said you could talk the devil into setting himself on fire.

Yes. I always loved him for that. That was great.

And now Eddie saw Roland move Jake's hands, one holding flint and the other

steel, closer to the kindling. Jake was nervous. Eddie could see it; Roland had seen

it, too. And in order to ease his nerves, take his mind off the responsibility of

lighting the fire, Roland had—

He asked the kid a riddle.

Eddie Dean blew breath into the keyhole of his memory. And this time the

tumbblers turned.

2

The green dot was closing in on Topeka, and for the first time Jake felt vibration

... as if the track beneath them had decayed to a point where Blaine's computers

could no longer completely handle the problem. With the sense of vibration there

at last came a feeling of speed. The walls and ceiling of the Barony Coach were

still opaqued, but Jake found he didn't need to see the countryside blurring past to

imagine it. Blaine was rolling full out now, leading his last sonic boom across the

waste lands to the place where Mid-World ended, and Jake also found it easy to

imagine the transteel piers at the end of the monorail. They would be painted in

diagonal stripes of yellow and black. He didn't know how he knew that, but he

did.

"TWENTY-FIVE MINUTES," Blaine said complacently.

"WOULD YOU TRY

ME AGAIN, GUNSLINGER?"

“I think not, Blaine.” Roland sounded exhausted. “I’ve done with you; you’ve

beaten 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 slamming on a drumhead. Oy crouched

between his feet, looking anxiously up into his face.

“Hello, Blaine,” Jake said, and wet his lips.

“HELLO, JAKE OF NEW YORK.” The voice was kindly—the voice, perhaps, of

a nice old fellow with a habit of molesting the children he from time to time leads

into the bushes. “WOULD YOU TRY ME WITH RIDDLES FROM YOUR

BOOK? OUR TIME TOGETHER GROWS SHORT.”

“Yes,” Jake said. “I would try you with these riddles. Give me your understanding

of the truth concerning each, Blaine.”

“IT IS FAIRLY SPOKEN, JAKE OF NEW YORK. I WILL DO AS YOU ASK.”

Jake opened the book to the place he had been keeping with his finger. Ten

riddles. Eleven, counting Samson’s riddle, which he was saving for last. If Blaine

answered them all (as Jake now believed he probably would), Jake would sit down

next to Roland, take Oy onto his lap, and wait for the end. There were, after all,

other worlds than these.

“Listen, Blaine: In a tunnel of darkness lies a beast of iron. It can only attack when

pulled back. What is it?”

“A BULLET.” No hesitation.

“Walk on the living, they don’t even mumble. Walk on the dead, they mutter and

grumble. 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

sec?tion now; he could feel it un?der his fin?ger, a kind of jagged lump. Very close to

the end of the book. He thought of Aaron Deep?neau in the Man?hat?tan Restau?rant

of the Mind, Aaron Deep?neau telling him to come back any?time, play a lit?tle

chess, and oh just by the way, old fat?so made a pret?ty good cup of cof?fee. A wave

of home?sick?ness so strong it was like dy?ing 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-

fill?ing breath of Forty-?sec?ond Street at rush hour.

He fought it off and went to the next rid?dle.

“I am emer?alds and di?amonds, lost by the moon. I am found by the sun and picked

up soon. What am I?”

“DEW.”

Still re?lent?less. Still un?hesi?tat?ing.

The green dot grew clos?er to Tope?ka, clos?ing the last of the dis?tance on the route-

map. One af?ter an?oth?er, Jake posed his rid?dles; one af?ter an oth?er, Blaine

an?swered them. When Jake turned to the last page, he saw a boxed mes?sage from

the au?thor or ed?itor or what?ev?er you called some?one who put to?geth?er books like

this: We hope you've en?joyed the unique com?bi?na?tion of imag?ina?tion and log?ic

known as RID?DLING!

I haven't, Jake thought. I haven't en?joyed it one lit?tle bit, and I hope you choke.

Yet when he looked at the ques?tion above the mes?sage, he felt a thin thread of

hope. It seemed to him that, in this case, at least, they re?al?ly had saved the best for

last.

On the route-?map, the green dot was now no more than a fin?ger's width from

Tope?ka.

"Hur?ry up, Jake," Su?sana?h mur?mured.

"Blaine?"

"YES, JAKE OF NEW YORK."

"With no wings, I fly. With no eyes, I see. With no arms, I climb. More fright?en?ing than any beast, stronger than any foe. I am cun?ning, ruth?less, and tall;

in the end, I rule all. What am I?"

The gun?slinger had looked up, blue eyes gleam?ing. Su?sana?h began to turn her

ex?pec?tant face from Jake to the route-?map. Yet Blaine's an swer was as prompt as

ev?er: "THE IMAG?INA?TION OF MAN AND WOM?AN."

Jake briefly con?sidered ar?gu?ing, then thought, Why waste our time? As al?ways, the

an?swer, when it was right, seemed al?most self-?ev?ident. "Thankee-?sai, Blaine, you speak true."

"AND THE FAIR-?DAY GOOSE IS AL?MOST MINE, I WOT. NINE?TEEN

MIN?UTES AND FIFTY SEC?ONDS TO TER?MI?NA?TION. WOULD YOU SAY

MORE, JAKE OF NEW YORK? VI?SU?AL SEN SORS IN?DI?CATE
YOU HAVE

COME TO THE END OF YOUR BOOK, WHICH WAS NOT, I MUST
SAY,

AS GOOD AS I HAD HOPED.“

”Ev?ery?body’s a god?dam crit?ic,“ Su?san?nah said sot?to voce. She
wiped a tear from

the com?er of one eye; with?out look?ing di?rect?ly at her, the gun
slinger took her free

hand. She clasped it tight?ly.

”Yes, Blaine, I have one more,“ Jake said.

”EX?CEL?LENT.“

”Out of the eater came forth meat, and out of the strong came sweet?
ness.“

”THIS RID?DLE COMES FROM THE HOLY BOOK KNOWN AS
‘OLD

TES?TA?MENT BIBLE OF KING JAMES.”“ Blaine sound?ed
amused, and Jake felt

the last of his hope slip away. He thought he might cry—not so much
out of fear

as frus?tra?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

neat?ly 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?bear able in their
cur?rent

cir?cum?stances. "LOOKS LIKE I WIN THAT THAR GOOSE, UN? LESS

SOME?BODY ELSE CARES TO SPEAK UP. WHAT ABOUT YOU, OY OF

MID-?WORLD? GOT ANY RID?DLES, MY LIT TLE BUM?BLER BUD?DY?"

"Oy!" the bil?ly-?bum?bler re?spond?ed, his voice muf?fled by the book. Still smil?ing,

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 OTH?ERS

FROM THE FAIR-?DAY RID?DLINGS OF GILEAD?"

Roland al?so shook his head . . . and then Jake saw that Ed?die Dean was rais?ing 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 de?sert?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 sound?ed queer?ly choked.

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

"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 re?al?ized, Ed?die didn't sound as if he were

chok?ing; he sound?ed as if he were try?ing to hold back laugh?ter.

"SPEAK, ED?DIE OF NEW YORK."

Sitting and listening to Jake run through the last of his riddles, Ed die had mused

on Roland's tale of the Fair-Day goose. From there his mind had returned to

Henry, traveling from Point A to Point B through the magic of associative

thinking. Or, if you wanted to get Zen about it, via Trans-Bird Air lines: goose to

turkey. He and Henry had once had a discussion about getting off heroin. Henry

had claimed that going cold turkey wasn't the only way; there was also, he said,

such a thing as going cool turkey. Ed die asked Henry what you called a hype who

had just administered a hot shot to himself, and, without missing a beat, Henry 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, Ed die. 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

kindling.

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 gunslinger, 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 ride, 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

ride is neither.

But as Jake finished riding 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 riding 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 riding. He had survived all his contentmentaries,

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.

Eddie remembered trying to tell Roland that jokes were rides designed to help

you build up that often overlooked talent, but Roland had ignored him. The way,

Eddie supposed, a color-blind person would ignore someone's description of a

rainbow.

Eddie thought Blaine also might have trouble thinking around corners.

He realized he could hear Blaine asking the others if they had any more

rid?dles—even ask?ing Oy. He could hear the mock?ery in Blaine’s voice, could hear

it very well. Sure he could. Be?cause he was com?ing back. Back from that fa?bled

zone. Back to see if he could talk the dev?il in?to set?ting him?self on fire. No gun

would help this time, but maybe that was all right. Maybe that was all right

be?cause—

Be?cause I shoot with my mind. My mind. God help me to shoot this overblown

cal?cu?la?tor with my mind. Help me shoot it from around the cor?ner.

“Blaine?” he said, and then, when the com?put?er had ac?knowl?edged him: “I have a

cou?ple of rid?dles.” As he spoke, he dis?cov?ered a won?der?ful thing: he was

strug?gling to hold back laugh?ter.

4

“SPEAK, ED?DIE OF NEW YORK.”

No time to tell the oth?ers to be on their guard, that any?thing might hap?pen, and

from the look of them, no need, ei?ther. Ed?die for?got about them and turned his mil

at?ten?tion to Blaine.

“What has four wheels and flies?”

“THE TOWN GARBAGE WAG?ON, AS I HAVE AL?READY SAID.”

Dis?ap?proval—and dis?like? Yeah, prob?ably—all but ooz?ing out of that voice.

“ARE YOU SO STUPID OR INAT?TEN?TIVE THAT YOU DO NOT RE?MEM?BER? IT WAS THE FIRST RID?DLE YOU ASKED ME.”

Yes, Ed?die thought. And what we all missed—be?cause we were fix?at?ed on

stump?ing you with some brain-?buster out of Roland’s past or Jake’s book—is that

the con?test al?most end?ed 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, EDIE OF NEW

YORK, IS IT NOT SO?”

A smile lit Edie’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,” Edie 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 Riddle-De-Dum, but we never saw it.”

Edie searched for the other riddle that had been in Jake’s Final Es? say, found it,

posed it.

“Blaine: when is a door not a door?”

Once again, for the first time since Susanah had asked Blaine what had four legs

and flies, there came a peculiar clicking sound, like a man popping his tongue on

the roof of his mouth. The pause was briefer than the one which had followed

Susanah’s opening riddle, but it was still there—Edie heard it. “WHEN IT’S A

JAR, OF COURSE” Blaine said. He sounded dour, unhappy. “THIRTEEN

MINUTES AND FIVE SECONDS REMAIN BEFORE TERMINATION,

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?ion 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 began to fade in and out of view, lunging toward

transparency, perhaps, and then opaquing again. Seeing this phenomenon even out

of the corner of his eye made Ed die feel a bit whoopsy.

"Blaine? Answer."

"Answer," Roland agreed. "Answer, or I declare the contest at an end and hold you

to your promise."

Something touched Ed die's elbow. He looked down and saw Susanah's small

and shapely hand. He took it, squeezed it, smiled at her. He hoped the smile was

more confident than the man making it felt. They were going to win the

contest—he was almost sure of that—but he had no idea what Blaine would do if

and when they did.

"TO ... TO HOLD UP THEIR PANTS?" Blaine's voice firmed, and repeated the

question as a statement. "TO HOLD UP THEIR PANTS. A RIDICLE BASED

UPON THE EXAGGERATED SIMPLICITY OF—"

"Right. Good one, Blaine, but never mind trying to kill time—it won't work.

Next—"

"I INSIST YOU STOP ASKING THESE SILLY—"

"Then stop the mono," Ed die said. "If you're that upset, 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 another of those clicks, this time so loud it felt like having a blunt spike

driven against his eardrum. A pause of five seconds. Now the flashing green dot

on the route-map was so close to Topeka that it lit the word like neon each time it

flashed. Then: "PADDY O'FURNITURE."

The correct answer to a joke-riddle Ed had first heard in the alley behind

Dahlie's, or at some similar gathering-point, but Blaine had apparently paid a

price for forcing his mind into a channel that could conceive it: the Barony Coach

lights were flashing more wildly than ever, and Ed could hear a low humming

from inside the walls—the kind of sound your stereo amp made just before its shit

blew up.

Pink light stuttered from the route-map. "Stop!" Little Blaine cried, his voice so

waery it sounded like the voice of a character from an old Warner Bros. cartoon.

"Stop it, you're killing him!"

What do you think he's trying to do to us, squirt? Ed thought.

He considered shooting Blaine one Jake had told while they'd been sitting around

the campfire that night—What's green, weighs a hundred tons, and lives at the

bottom of the ocean? Mooby Snot!—and then didn't. He wanted to stick further

inside the bounds of logic than that one allowed . . . and he could do it. He didn't

think he would have to get much more surreal than the level of, say, a third-grader

with a fair-to-good collection of Garbage Pail Kids cards in order to fuck Blaine

up royally . . . and permanently. Because no matter how many emotions his fancy

dipolar circuits had allowed him to mimic, he was still an it—a computer. Even

following Eddie this far into ridgelydom's Twilight Zone had caused Blaine's sanity to totter.

"Why do people go to bed, Blaine?"

"BECAUSE ... BECAUSE ... GODS DAMN YOU, BECAUSE ..."

A low squalling started up from beneath them, and suddenly the Barony Coach

swayed violently from right to left. Susanah screamed. Jake was thrown into her

lap. The gunslinger grabbed them both.

"BECAUSE THE BED WON'T COME TO THEM, GODS DAMN YOU! NINE

MINUTES AND FIFTY SECONDS!"

"Give up, Blaine," Eddie said. "Stop before I have to blow your mind completely.

If you don't quit, it's going to happen. We both know it."

"NO!"

"I got a million of these puppies. Been hearing them my whole life.

They stick to my mind the way flies stick to flypaper. Hey, with some people it's

recipes. So what do you say? Want to give?"

"NO! NINE MINUTES AND THIRTY SECONDS!"

"Okay, Blaine. You asked for it. Here comes the cruncher. Why did the dead baby

cross the road?"

The mono took another of those gigantic lurches; Eddie didn't understand how it

could still stay on its track after that, but somehow it did. The screaming from

beneath them grew louder; the walls, floor, and ceiling of the car began to cycle

madly between opacity and transparency. At one moment they were enclosed, at

the next they were rushing over a gray daylight landscape that stretched flat and

featureless to a horizon which ran across the world in a straight line.

The voice which came from the speakers was now that of a panicky child: "I

KNOW IT, JUST A MOMENT, I KNOW IT, RETRIEVAL IN PROGRESS,

ALL LOGIC CIRCUITS IN USE—"

"Answer," Roland said.

"I NEED MORE TIME! YOU MUST GIVE IT TO ME!" Now there was a kind

of cracked triumph in that splintered voice. "NO TEMPORAL LIMITS FOR

ANSWERING WERE SET, ROLAND OF GILEAD, HATEFUL GUNSLINGER

OUT OF A PAST THAT SHOULD HAVE STAYED DEAD!"

"No," Roland agreed, "no time limits were set, you are quite right. But you may

not kill us with a rifle still unanswered, Blaine, and Topeka draws nigh.

Answer!"

The Barony Coach cycled into invisibility again, and Eddie saw what appeared to

be a tall and rusty grain elevator go flashing past; it was in his view barely long

enough for him to identify it. Now he fully appreciated the magical speed at

which they were traveling; perhaps three hundred miles faster than a commercial

jet at cruising speed.

"Let him alone!" moaned the voice of Little Blaine. "You're killing him, I say!

Killing him!"

"Isn't that 'bout what he wanted?" Susanah asked in the voice of Detta Walker.

"To die? That's what he said. We don't mind, either. You not so bad, Little Blaine,

but even a world as fucked up as this one has to be better with your big brother

gone. It's just him taking us with him we been objecting to all this time."

“Last chance,” Roland said. “Answer or give up the goose, Blaine.”

“I ... I ... YOU ... SIXTEEN LOG THIRTY-THREE ... ALL CO?
SINE

SUBSCRIPTS ... ANTI ... ANTI ... IN ALL THESE YEARS ...
BEAM ...

FLOOD ... PYTHAGOREAN ... CARTESIAN LOGIC ... CAN I
... DARE I

... A PEACH ... EAT A PEACH ... ALLMAN BROTHERS ... PA?
TRICIA ...

CROCODILE AND WHIPLASH SMILE ... CLOCK OF DIALS ...
TICK-

TOCK, ELEVEN O’CLOCK, THE MAN’S IN THE MOON AND
HE’S READY

TO ROCK ... INCESAMENT ... INCESAMENT, MON
CHER ... OH MY

HEAD ... BLAINE ... BLAINE DARES ... BLAINE WILL AN?
SWER ... I ...”

Blaine, now screaming in the voice of an infant, lapsed into some
other language

and began to sing. Edie thought it was French. He knew none of the
words, but

when the drums kicked in, he knew the song perfectly well: “Vercro
Fly” by Z.Z.

Top.

The glass over the route-map blew out. A moment later, the route-
map itself

exploded from its socket, revealing twinkling lights and a maze
of circuit-boards

behind it. The lights pulsed in time to the drums. Suddenly blue fire
flashed out,

sizzling the surface around the hole in the wall where the map had
been, scorching

it black. From deeper within that wall, toward Blaine’s blunt, bullet-
shaped snout,

came a thick grinding noise.

“It crossed the road because it was stapled to the chicken, you dopey
fuck!” Edie

yelled. He got to his feet and started to walk toward the smoking hole where the

route-map had been. Susanah grabbed at the back of his shirt, but Edie barely

felt it. Barely knew where he was, in fact. The battle-fire had dropped over him,

burning him everywhere with its righteous heat, sizzling his sight, frying his

synapses and roasting his heart in its holy glow. He had Blaine in his sights, and

although the thing behind the voice was already mortally wounded, he was unable

to stop squeezing the trigger: I shoot with my mind.

“What’s the difference between a truckload of bowling balls and a truckload of

dead woodchucks?” Edie raved. “You can’t unload a truckload of bowling balls

with a pitchfork!”

A terrible shriek of mingled anger and agony issued from the hole where the route-

map had been. It was followed by a gust of blue fire, as if somewhere forward of

Barony Coach an electric dragon had exhaled violently. Jake called a warning,

but Edie didn’t need it; his reflexes had been replaced with razor-blades. He

ducked, and the burst of electricity went over his right shoulder, making the hair

on that side of his neck stand up. He drew the gun he wore—a heavy .45 with a

worn sandalwood grip, one of two revolvers which Roland had brought out of Mid-

World’s ruin. He kept walking as he bore down on the front of the coach . . . and of

course he kept talking. As Roland had said, Edie would die talking. 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 platform. "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

into the nap of the royal blue carpet, eyes shut, thinking about what had just

happened.

"I cry your pardon, Edie," 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," Edie 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," Edie 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, Edie. I think—"

Before Roland could say what he thought, Blaine the Mono crashed to a final

biting halt. All four of them were thrown violently up Barony Coach's central aisle,

Oy in Jake's arms and barking. The cabin's front wall buckled and Roland struck it

shoul?der-?first. Even with the padding (the wall was car?pet?ed and, from the feel,

un?der?coat?ed with some re?silient stuff), the blow was hard enough to numb him.

The chan?de?lier swung for ward and tore loose from the ceil?ing, pelt?ing them with

glass pen?dants. Jake rolled aside, va?cat?ing its land?ing-?zone just in time. The

harp?si?chord-?pi?ano flew off its podi?um, struck one of the so?fas, and over?turned,

com?ing to rest with a dis?cor?dant br?rrannnggg sound. The mono tilt?ed to the right

and the gun?slinger braced him?self, mean?ing to cov?er both Jake and Su?san nah with

his own body if it over?turned com?plete?ly. Then it set?tled back, the floor still a lit?tle

cant?ed, but at rest.

The trip was over.

The gun?slinger raised him?self up. His shoul?der was still numb, but the arm be?low

it sup?port?ed him, and that was a good sign. On his left, Jake was sit?ting up and

pick?ing glass beads out of his lap with a dazed ex?pres sion. On his right, Su?san?nah

was dab?bing a cut un?der Ed?die's left eye. "All right," Roland said. "Who's hur—"

There was an ex?plo?sion from above them, a hol?low Pow! that re mind?ed Roland

of the big-?bangers Cuth?bert and Alain had some?times lit and tossed down drains,

or in?to the priv?ies be?hind the scullery for a prank. And once Cuth?bert had shot

some big-?bangers with his sling. That had been no prank, no child?ish fol?ly. That

had been—

Su?san?nah ut?tered a short cry—more of sur?prise than fear, the gun slinger

thought—and then hazy day?light was shin?ing down on his face. It felt good. The

taste of the air com?ing in through the blown emer?gen?cy ex?it was even

bet?ter—sweet with the smell of rain and damp earth.

There was a bony rat?tle, and a lad?der—it ap?peared to be equipped with rungs

made of twist?ed 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 quizzi?cal?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, any?way, Ed?die thought, and touched the butt of Roland's gun

with?out even be?ing 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 an?oth?er ar?ti?fact of a world that had moved on.

“Adios, Blaine,” Ed?die said. “So long, part?ner.”

And he fol?lowed his friends out through the emer?gen?cy ex?it in the roof.

CHAP?TER IV

tope?ka

1

Jake stood on the slight?ly tilt?ed roof of Blame the Mono, look?ing south east along

the Path of the Beam. The wind rif?fled his hair (now quite long and de?cid?ed?ly un-

Piper?ish) back from his tem?ples and fore?head in waves. His eyes were wide with

sur?prise.

He didn't know what he had ex?pect?ed to see—a small?er and more provin?cial

ver?sion of Lud, per?haps—but what he had not ex?pect?ed was what loomed above

the trees of a near?by park. It was a green road?sign (against the dull gray au?tumn

sky, it al?most screamed with col?or) with a blue shield mount?ed on it:

Roland joined him, lift?ed Oy gen?tly out of his shirt, and put him down. The

hum?bler sniffed the pink sur?face of Blaine's roof, then looked to?ward the front of

the mono. Here the train's smooth bul?let shape was bro?ken by crum?pled met?al

which had peeled back in jagged wings. Two dark slash?es—they be?gan at the

mono's tip and ex?tend?ed to a point about ten yards from where Jake and Roland

stood—gored the roof in par?al?lel lines. At the end of each was a wide, flat met?al

pole paint?ed in stripes of yel?low and black. These seemed to jut from the top of the

mono at a point just for?ward of the Barony Coach. To Jake they looked a lit?tle like

foot ball goal?posts.

“Those are the piers he talked about hit?ting,” Su?san?nah mur?mured.

Roland nod?ded.

“We got off lucky, big boy, you know it? If this thing had been go?ing much faster

...”

“Ka, ” Ed?die said from be?hind them. He sound?ed as if he might be smil?ing.

Roland nod?ded. “Just so. Ka.”

Jake dis?missed the transteel goal?posts and turned back to?ward the sign. He was

half con?vinced it would be gone, or that it would say some thing else (mid?-?world

toll road, per?haps, or be?ware of demons), but it was still there and still said the

same thing.

“Ed?die? Su?san?nah? Do you see that?”

They looked along his point?ing fin?ger. For a mo?ment—one long enough for Jake

to fear he was hav?ing a hal?lu?ci?na?tion—nei?ther of them said any?thing. Then, soft?ly,

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."

They caught him, they formed a protective ring around him, and the
gun-slinger

felt hot with guilt and self-loathing. What had he done to deserve such
enthusiasm?

protectors? What, besides tear them out of their known and ordinary
lives as

ruthlessly as a man might tear weeds out of his garden?

He tried to tell them he was all right, they could stand back, he was fine,
but no

words would come out; that terrible wavery sound had transported
him back to

the box canyon west of Ham-bry all those years ago. De-pape and
Reynolds and old

limping Jonas. Yet most of all it was the woman from the hill he hat-
ed, and from

black depths of feeling only a very young man can reach. Ah, but how
could he

have done aught else but hate them? His heart had been broken. And
now, all

these years later, it seemed to him that the most horrible fact of hu-
man existence

was that broken hearts mended.

My first thought was, he lied in every word/That hoary cripple, with
malignant eye

...

What words? Whose poem?

He didn't know, but he knew that women could lie, too; women who
hopped and

grinned and saw too much from the corners of their rheumy old eyes. It
didn't

matter who had written the lines of poesy; the words were true words,
and that

was all that mattered. Neither El-dred Jonas nor the crone on the hill
had been of

Marten's stature—nor even of Walter'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 ei?ther gone or had tem?porar?ily fall?en be?low the thresh?old of au?di?bil?ity.

They would hear it again, though. He knew that as well as he knew the fact that he

walked a road lead?ing to damna?tion.

He looked up at the oth?ers and man?aged a smile. The trem?bling at the com?er of his

mouth had quit, and that was some?thing.

“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 be?gins. The first great course of our quest is

fin?ished. We have done well; we have re?mem?bered the faces of our fa?thers; we

have stood to?geth?er and been true to one an oth?er. But now we have come to a

thin?ny. We must be very care?ful.”

“A thin?ny?” Jake asked, look?ing around ner?vous?ly.

“Places where the fab?ric of ex?is?tence is al?most en?tire?ly worn away. There are more

since the force of the Dark Tow?er be?gan to fail. Do you re?mem?ber what we saw

be?low us when we left Lud?”

They nod?ded solemn?ly, re?mem?ber?ing ground which had fused to black glass,

an?cient pipes which gleamed with turquoise witch?light, mis shapen bird-?freaks

with wings like great leath?ern sails. Roland sud?den?ly 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. Eddie 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 Eddie, 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 saying 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,” Eddie 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 shoul?ders and gave her a brief squeeze.
“Amen to
that.”

Su?san?nah turned to Roland. Her look was not ac?cus?ing, but there
was a lev?el and

open mea?sure?ment in her eyes that the gun?slinger could not help but
ad?mire. “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?braided 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 terminal building. This was nowhere near as grand as the

Cradle of Lud, but it had an old-fashioned look that Roland liked—white boards,

over hanging eaves, high, narrow windows, what looked like slate shingles. It was

a Western look. Written in gold gilt on a sign which stretched above the terminal's

line of doors was this message:

ATCHISON, TOPEKA, AND SANTA FE

Towns, Roland supposed, and that last one sounded familiar to him; had there not

been a Santa Fe in the Barony of Mejis? But that led back toward Susan, lovely

Susan at the window with her hair unbraided and all down her back, the smell of

her like jasmine and rose and honey-suckle and old sweet hay, smells of which the

oracle in the mountains had been able to make only the palest mimicry. Susan

lying back and looking solemnly up at him, then smiling and putting her hands

behind 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 Eddie, having to use all of his will to pull himself back from

Susan Delgado's when. There were thinies here in Topeka, all right, and of many

sorts. “My mind was wandering, Ed die. Cry your pardon.”

“Susan? nah next? That's what I asked.”

Roland shook his head. “You next, then Susan? nah. I'll go last.”

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

“I'll be fine.”

Eddie nodded and stuck his foot into the loop. When Eddie had first come into

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?sana?nah around the waist and

helped her to the plat?form. The gun?slinger walked for?ward to one of the piers

which had torn through the train's bul?let snout, fash ion?ing the rope's end in?to a

shake-?loop as he went. He tossed this over the pier, snubbed it (be?ing care?ful not

to twitch the rope to the left), and then low?ered him?self to the plat?form him?self,

bent at the waist and leav?ing boot-?tracks on Blaine's pink side.

"Too bad to lose the rope and har?ness," Ed?die re?marked when Roland was be?side

them.

"I ain't sor?ry about that har?ness," Su?sana?nah said. "I'd rather crawl along the

pave?ment un?til I got chewin-?gum all the way up my arms to the el?bows."

"We haven't lost any?thing," Roland said. He snugged his hand in?to the rawhide

foot-?loop and snapped it hard to the left. The rope slith?ered down from the pier,

Roland gath?er?ing it in al?most as fast as it came down.

"Neat trick!" Jake said.

"Eat! Rick!" Oy agreed.

"Cort?" Ed?die asked.

"Cort," Roland agreed, smil?ing.

"The drill in?struc?tor from hell," Ed?die said. "Bet?ter you than me, Roland. Bet?ter

you than me."

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 kismet. Su san-nah pointed toward the park. The

signs looming over the "trees were wavering 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. Thinies 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."

Su san-nah 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.

Eddie 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

allows, but all of it is still wreckage. Senseless wreckage.“ He looked around.

”Like this place, I think.“

”I wouldn’t exactly call it wrecked,“ Eddie 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

anywhere that I can see.“ He stood in front of the doors and ran his fingers down

one of the glass panels. They left four clear tracks behind. ”Dust and plenty of it,

but no cracks. I’d say that this building has been left unmaintained at most since . . .

the start of the summer, maybe.“

He looked at Roland, who shrugged and nodded. He was listening with only half

an ear and paying attention with only half a mind. The rest of him was fixed upon

two things: the warble of the trolley, and keeping away the memories that wanted

to swamp him.

”But Lud had been going to wrack and ruin for centuries“ Susanah said. ”This

place . . . it may or may not be Topeka, but what it really looks like to me is one of

those creepy little towns on The Twilight Zone. You boys probably don’t

remember that one, but—“

”Yes, I do,“ Eddie and Jake said in perfect unison, then looked at each other and

laughed. Eddie stuck out his hand and Jake slapped it.

”They still show the reruns,“ Jake said.

”Yeah, all the time,“ Eddie added. ”Usually sponsored by bankruptcy lawyers who

look like short-haired terrorists. 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-sid?ed clock. Its hands had stopped at 4:14, and Roland sup?posed
they would

nev?er move again. It was a sad thought. . . but this was a sad world. He
could not

see any oth?er dead peo?ple, but ex pe?ri?ence sug?gest?ed that where
there were two

dead, there were like?ly four more dead some?where out of sight. Or
four dozen.

"Should we go in?" Ed?die asked.

"Why?" the gun?slinger coun?tered. "We have no busi?ness here; it
doesn't lie along

the Path of the Beam."

"You'd make a great tour-guide," Ed?die said sourly. "Keep up, ev?ry?one, and

please don't go wan?der?ing off in?to the—" "

Jake in?ter?rupt?ed with a re?quest Roland didn't un?der?stand. "Do ei?
ther of you guys

have a quar?ter?" The boy was look?ing at Ed?die and Su?san?nah. Be?
side him was a

square met?al box. Writ?ten on it in blue was:

The Tope?ka Cap?ital-Jour?nal cov?ers Kansas like no oth?er! Your
home?town pa?per!

Read it ev?ery day!

Ed?die shook his head, amused. "Lost all my change at some point. Prob?ably

climb?ing a tree, just be?fore you joined us, in an all-?out ef?fort to avoid be?com?ing

snack-?food for a robot bear. Sor?ry."

"Wait a minute . . . wait a minute . . ." Su?san?nah had her purse open and was

rum?mag?ing through it in a way that made Roland grin broad?ly in spite of all his

pre?oc?cu?pa?tions. It was so damned wom?an?ly, some?how. She turned over crum?pled

Kleenex, shook them to make sure there was noth ing caught in?side, fished out a

com?pact, looked at it, dropped it back, came up with a comb, dropped that back—

She was too ab?sorbed to look up as Roland strode past her, draw?ing his gun from

the dock?er's clutch he had built her as he went. He fired a sin?gle time. Su?san?nah let

out a lit?tle scream, drop?ping her purse and slap ping at the emp?ty hol?ster high up

un?der her left breast.

"Honky, you scared the livin Je?sus out of me!"

"Take bet?ter care of your gun, Su?san?nah, or the next time some?one takes it from

you, the hole may be be?tween your eyes in?stead of in a ... what is it, Jake? A news-

telling de?vice of some kind? Or does it hold pa?per?"

"Both." Jake looked star?tled. Oy had with?drawn halfway down the plat?form and

was look?ing at Roland mis?trust?ful?ly. Jake poked his fin?ger at the bul?let-?hole in the

cen?ter of the news?pa?per box's lock?ing de?vice. A lit tle curl of smoke was drift?ing

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

Topkapis Jammed with Sick, Dying

Millions Pray for Cure

“Read it aloud,” Roland said. “The letters are in your speech, I cannot 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-pictograph (Roland had seen pictographs of

this type; they were called “dot-pictographs”) which shocked them all: it showed a

lakeside 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 Hospital and Medical Center. Bodies are being burned from Los

Angeles, California, to Boston, Massachusetts, in crematoria, factories furnaces,

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

South-east 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 ev?ery per?son who has died so far as a re?sult of this new flu-strain,” Mon?toya

said, “there are an?oth?er six who are ly?ing ill in their homes, per?haps as many as a

dozen. And, so far as we have been able to de?ter?mine, the re?cov?ery rate is ze?ro.”

Cough?ing, she then told this re?porter: “Speak?ing per?son?al?ly, I’m not mak?ing any

plans for the week?end.”

“ ‘In oth?er lo?cal de?vel?op?ments:

” ‘All com?mer?cial flights out of Forbes and Phillip Bil?lard have been can?celled.

“ ‘All Am?trak rail trav?el has been sus?pend?ed, not just in Tope?ka but across all of

Kansas. The Gage Boule?vard Am?trak sta?tion has been closed un?til fur?ther no?tice.

” ‘All Tope?ka schools have al?so been closed un?til fur?ther no?tice. This in?cludes

Dis?tricts 437, 345, 450 (Shawnee Heights), 372, and 501 (metro Tope?ka). Tope?ka

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

recorded statement's final words, which are not "Goodbye" or "Thank you for

calling" but "God will help us through our time of trial." " "

Jake paused, following the story to the next page, where there were more pictures:

a burned-out panel truck overturned on the steps of the Kansas Museum of Natural

History; traffic on San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge stalled bumper to bumper;

piles of corpses in Times Square. One body, Susanah saw, had been hung from a

lamppost, and that brought back nightmarish memories of the run for the Cradle of

Lud she and Edie had made after parting from the gunslinger; memories of

Luster and Winston and Jeeves and Maud. When the god-drums started up this

time, it was Spanker's stone what came out of the hat, Maud had said. We set him

to dance. Except, 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 little old New York. When

things got weird enough, someone always found a lynchrope, it seemed.

Echoes. Everything echoed now. They bounced back and forth from one world to

the other, not fading as ordinary echoes did but growing and becoming more

terrible. Like the god-drums, Susanah thought, and shuddered.

" 'In national developments,' " Jake read, " 'conviction continues to grow that, after

denying the superflu's existence during its early days, when quarantine measures

might still have had some effect, national leaders have fled to underground

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 obe?di?ent as a dog with a stick.

”No, Oy, I don’t want it,” Jake said. He sound?ed ill and very young.

”At least we know where all the folks are,” Su?san?nah said, bend?ing
and tak?ing 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 gun?slinger looked a tri?fle sour. “Noth?ing in your city seemed very fine to me,

but the peo?ple who lived there did not seem to be sur vivors of such a plague as

this, no.”

“There was some?thing called Le?gion?naires’ dis?ease,” Ed?die said. “And AIDS, of

course—”

“That’s the sex one, right?” Su?san?nah asked. “Trans?mit?ted by fruits and drug

ad?dicts?”

“Yes, but call?ing gays fruits isn’t the done thing in my when,” Ed?die said. He tried

a smile, but it felt stiff and un?nat?ural on his face and he put it away again.

“So this . . . this nev?er hap?pened,” Jake said, ten?ta?tive?ly touch?ing the face of Christ

on the back page of the pa?per.

“But it did,” Roland said. “It hap?pened in June-?sow?ing of the year one thou?sand

nine hun?dred and eighty-?six. And here we are, in the af?ter?math of that plague. If

Ed?die’s right about the length of time that has gone by, the plague of this ’su?per?flu’

was this past June-?sow?ing. We’re in Tope?ka, 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 Ed?die’s. It might

be yours, Su?san?nah, or yours, Jake, be?cause you left your world be?fore this

ar?rived.” He tapped the date on the pa?per, then looked at Jake. “You said

some?thing to me once. I doubt if you re?mem?ber, but I do; it’s one of the most

im?por?tant things any?one has ev?er said to me: ‘Go, then, there are oth?er 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?nah 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?sa?tion 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?pened 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 crip spaces be?fore we go

on. We might get lucky."

"Crip 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 symbol. The one on the bottom was a warning: \$200 fine

for improper use of handicapped PARKING SPACE. STRICTLY ENFORCED

BY TOPEKA P.D.

“See there!” Susanah said triumphantly. “They shoulda 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 anything smaller than the Shop ‘n Save. Hell, lucky if you can

get it up over the curbs! And special parking? Forget it, sugar!”

The lot was jammed almost to capacity, but even with the end of the world at

hand, only two cars that didn’t have little wheelchair symbols on their license

plates were parked in the row Edie had called “the cripple spaces.”

Jake guessed that respecting the “cripple spaces” was just one of those things that got

a mysterious long hold on people, like putting zip-codes on letters, parting your

hair, or brushing your teeth before breakfast.

“And there it is!” Edie cried. “Hold your cards, folks, but I think we have a

Bin-go!”

Still carrying Susanah on his hip—a thing he would have been incapable of

doing for any extended period of time even a month ago—Edie hurried over to a

boat of a Lincoln. Strapped on the roof was a complicated-looking racing bicycle;

poking out of the half-open trunk was a wheelchair. Nor was this the only one;

scanning the row of “cripple spaces,” Jake saw at least four more wheelchairs, most

strapped to roof-racks, some stuffed into the backs of vans or station wagons, one

(it looked ancient and fearfully bulky) thrown into the bed of a pickup truck.

Edie set Susanah down and bent to examine the rig holding the chair in the

trunk. There were a lot of crisscrossing elastic cords, plus some sort of locking

bar. Edie drew the Ruger Jake had taken from his father's desk drawer. "Fire in

the hole," he said cheerfully, and before any of them could even think of covering

their ears, he pulled the trigger and blew the lock off the security-bar. The sound

went rolling into the silence, then echoed back. The warbling sound of the tiny

returned with it, as if the gunshot had snapped it awake. Sounds Hawaiian, doesn't

it? Jake thought, and grimaced with distaste. Half an hour ago, he wouldn't have

believed that a sound could be as physically upsetting, as ... well, the smell of

rotting meat, say, but he believed it now. He looked up at the turnpike signs. From

this angle he could see only their tops, but that was enough to confirm that they

were shimmering again. It throws some kind of field, Jake thought. The way mixers

and vacuum cleaners make static on the radio or TV, or the way that cyclotron

gadgets made the hair on my arms stand up when Mr. Kingery brought it to class

and then asked for volunteers to come up and stand next to it.

Edie wrenched the locking bar aside, and used Roland's knife to cut the elastic

cords. Then he drew the wheelchair out of the trunk, examined it, unfolded it, and

engaged the support which ran across the back at seat-level. "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?sidered 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 hur?ried his heart?beat with a mix?ture of hope and alarm.

They stopped halfway down the row of cars, Jake star?ing blankly across a wide

street (Gage Boule?vard, he as?sumed) as he con?sid?ered these things. Now Roland

and Ed?die caught up to them.

“This ba?by’s gonna be great af?ter a cou?ple of months push?ing the Iron Maid?en,”

Ed?die said with a grin. “Bet you could damn near puff it along.” He blew a deep

breath at the back of the wheelchair to demon?strate. Jake thought of telling Ed?die

that there were prob?ably oth?ers back there in the “crip spaces” with mo?tors in

them, then realized what Ed?die must have known right away: their
bat?ter?ies would
be dead.

Su?san?nah ignored him for the time be?ing; it was Jake she was in?ter
est?ed in. “You

didn’t an?swer me, sug. All these cars get you home?sick?”

”Nah. But I was cu?ri?ous about whether or not they were all cars I
knew. I thought

maybe . . . if this ver?sion of 1986 grew out of some oth?er world than
my 1977,

there’d be a way to tell. But I can’t tell. Be?cause things change so dam
fast. Even

in nine years .. .“ He shrugged, then looked at Ed?die. ”You might be
able to,

though. I mean, you ac?tu?al?ly lived in 1986.“

Ed?die grunt?ed. ”I lived through it, but I didn’t ex?act?ly ob?serve it. I
was fucked to

the sky most of the time. Still... I sup?pose . . .“

Ed?die start?ed push?ing Su?san?nah along the smooth macadam of the
park?ing lot

again, point?ing to cars as they passed them. ”Ford Ex?plor?er ...
Chevro?let Caprice . .

. and that one there’s an old Pon?ti?ac, you can tell be cause of the split
grille—“

”Pon?ti?ac Bon?neville,“ Jake said. He was amused and a lit?tle
touched by the

won?der in Su?san?nah’s eyes—most of these cars must look as fu?tur
is?tic to her as

Buck Rogers scout-?ships. That made him won?der how Roland felt
about them, and

Jake looked around.

The gun?slinger showed no in?ter?est in the cars at all. He was gaz?ing
across the

street, in?to the park, to?ward the turn?pike . . . ex?cept Jake didn’t
think he was

ac?tu?al?ly look?ing at any of those things. Jake had an idea that Roland
was sim?ply

look?ing in?to his own thoughts. If so, the ex?pres?ion on his face sug?gest?ed that he

wasn't find?ing any?thing good there.

"That's one of those lit?tle Chrysler K's," Ed?die said, point?ing, "and that's a Sub?aru.

Mer?cedes SEL 450, ex?cel?lent, the car of cham?pi?ons . . . Mus?tang . . . Chrysler

Im?pe?ri?al, good shape but must be old?er'n God—"

"Watch it, boy," Su?san?nah said, with a touch of what Jake thought was re?al

as?per?ity in her voice. "I rec?og?nize that one. Looks new to me."

"Sor?ry, Suze. Re?al?ly. This one's a Cougar . . . an?oth?er Chevy . . . and one more . . .

Tope?ka loves Gen?er?al Mo?tors, big fuckin sur?prise there . . . Hon?da Civic . . . VW

Rab?bit... a Dodge . . . a Ford . . . a—"

Ed?die stopped, look?ing at a lit?tle car near the end of the row, white with red trim.

"A Takuro," he said, most?ly to him?self. He went around to look at the trunk. "A

Takuro Spir?it, to be ex?act. Ev?er hear of that make and mod?el, Jake of New York?"

Jake shook his head.

"Me, nei?ther," he said. "Me fuck?ing nei?ther."

Ed?die be?gan push?ing Su?san?nah to?ward Gage Boule?vard (Roland with them but

still most?ly off in his own pri?vate world, walk?ing when they walked, stop?ping

where they stopped). Just shy of the lot's au?to?mat?ed en trance (stop TAKE

TICK?ET), Ed?die halt?ed.

"At this rate, we'll be old be?fore we get to yon?der park and dead be fore we raise

the turn?pike," Su?san?nah said.

This time Ed?die didn't apol?ogize, didn't seem even to hear her. He was look?ing 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 0 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 up
on 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 ver
sion 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 eat
ing 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 struc
tural 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 Edie grasped his shoulder and squeezed, Jake had to bite his
tongue to

keep from screaming.

"You're giving yourself the hoodoos," Edie said.

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

From being scared or being seen in?to? He didn’t know. Didn’t much care, either.

“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 decid?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, dangling from a rawhide strip, was some

kid's baseball glove. Jake was barely able to look at it.

Beyond the carousel, the foliage grew even thicker, straggling the path until the

travelers edged along single-file, like lost children in a fairy-tale wood. Thorns

from overgrown and unpruned rosebushes tore at Jake's clothes. He had somehow

got into the lead (probably because Roland was still deep inside his own

thoughts), and that was why he saw Charlie the Choo-Choo first.

His only thought while approaching the narrow-gauge train-tracks which crossed

the path—they were little more than toy tracks, really—was of the gun-slinger

saying that ka was like a wheel, always rolling around to the same place again. We

're haunted by roses and trains, he thought. Why? I don't know. I guess it's just

another ride—

Then he looked to his left, and "Oh-god-ness to Christ" fell out of his mouth, all in

one word. The strength ran out of his legs and he sat down. His voice sounded

watery and distant to his own ears. He didn't quite faint, but the color drained out

of the world until the running-to-riot foliage on the west side of the park looked

almost as gray as the autumn sky overhead.

"Jake! Jake, what's wrong!" It was Ed die, and Jake could hear the genuine concern

in his voice, but it seemed to be coming over a bad long-distance connection.

From Beirut, say, or maybe Uranus. And he could feel Roland's steady hand on

his shoulder, but it was as distant 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 look?ing ... ex?cept for Jake, who sat

look?ing. He sup?posed that strength and feel?ing would come back in? to his legs

even?tu?al?ly and he would get up, but right now they felt like limp mac?aroni.

The train was parked fifty feet up, by a toy sta?tion that mim?icked the one across

the street. Hang?ing from its eaves was a sign which read tope?ka. The train was

Char?lie the Choo-?Choo, cow?catch?er and all; a 402 Big Boy Steam Lo?co?mo?tive.

And, Jake knew, if he found enough strength to get up on his feet and go over

there, he would find a fam?ily of mice nest?ed in the seat where the en?gi?neer (whose

name had un?doubt?ed?ly been Bob Some?thing-?or-?oth?er) had once sat. There would

he an?oth?er fam?ily, this one of swal?lows, nest?ed in the smokestack.

And the dark, oily tears, Jake thought, look?ing at the tiny train wait ing in front of

its tiny sta?tion with his skin crawl?ing all over his body and his balls hard and his

stom?ach in a knot. At night it cries those dark, oily tears, and they’re rust?ing the

hell out of his fine Stratham head?light. But in your time, Char?lie-?boy, you pulled

your share of kids, right? Around and around Gage Park you went, and the kids

laughed, ex?cept some of them weren’t re?al?ly laugh?ing; some of them, the ones who

were wise to you, were scream?ing. The way I’d scream now, if I had the strength.

But his strength was coming back, and when Edie 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 musingly.

“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 bumbler 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

Go-rilla Habitat, and they appeared to have died hand-in-hand. That made Ed die

feel like crying, somehow. Since the last of the heroin had washed out of his

system, his emotions always seemed on the verge of blowing up in to a cyclone.

His old pals would have laughed.

Beyond Go-rilla 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

buf?faloburg?er; be?yond the snack?bar was an?oth?er wrought iron arch with a sign

read?ing come back to gage park re?al soon! Be?yond this was the curv?ing up?slope of

a lim?it?ed-?ac?cess-?high?way en?trance ramp. Above it, the green signs they had first

spot?ted from across the way stood clear.

"Tumpikin' again," Ed?die said in a voice al?most too low to hear. "God?dam." Then

he sighed.

"What's tumpikin', Ed?die?"

Jake didn't think Ed?die was go?ing to an?swer; when Su?san?nah craned around to

look at him as he stood with his fin?gers wrapped around the han?dles of the new

wheelchair, Ed?die looked away. Then he looked back, first at Su?san?nah, then at

Jake. "It's not pret?ty. Not much about my life be fore Gary Coop?er here yanked me

across the Great Di?vide was."

"You don't have to—"

"It's al?so no big deal. A bunch of us would get to?geth?er—me, my broth?er Hen?ry,

Bum O'Hara, usu?al?ly, 'cause he had a car, San?dra Cor?bitt, and maybe this friend of

Hen?ry's we called Jim?mie Po?lio—and we'd stick all our names in a hat. The one

we drew out was the ... the trip-?guide, Hen?ry used to call him. He—she, if it was

San?di—had to stay straight. Rel?ative?ly, any?way. Ev?ery?one else got se?ri?ous?ly

goobered. Then we'd all pile in?to Bum's Chrysler and go up 1-95 in?to Con?necti?cut

or maybe take the Tacon?ic Park?way in?to up?state New York . . . on?ly we called it

the Cata?ton?ic Park?way. Lis?ten to Cree?dence or Mar?vin 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 bum?bler clus?tered around Su?san?nah in her new wheelchair. All of them looked east.

Ed?die didn't know what the traf?fic sit?ua?tion would be like once they cleared

Tope?ka, but here all the lanes, those head?ed west as well as the east? bound ones on

their side, were crammed with cars and trucks. Most of the ve?hi?cles were piled

high with pos?ses?sions gone rusty with a sea?son's worth of rain.

But the traf?fic was the least of their con?cerns as they stood there, look?ing silent?ly

east?ward. For half a mile or so on ei?ther side of them, the city con?tin?ued—they

could see church steeples, a strip of fast food places (Ar?by'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 1-70 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 bullets in it, two for Edie and two for Jake.

"What's wrong with these?" Edie shook a couple of shells from the box that had

come from behind the hanging files in Elmer Chambers's desk drawer.

"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."

Edie pointed at the bullets Roland was offering. "Those are from our world, too.

The gunshop on Seventh and Forty-ninth. Clements', wasn't that the name?"

"These didn't come from there. These are mine, Edie, loaded off ten but

originally brought from the green land. From Gilead."

"You mean the wets?" Edie asked incredulously. "The last of the wet shells from

the beach? The ones that really got soaked?"

Roland nodded.

"You said those would never fire again! No matter how dry they got! That the

powder had been . . . what did you say? 'Flattened.' "

Roland nodded again.

"So why'd you save them? Why bring a bunch of useless bullets all this way?"

"What did I teach you to say after a kill, Edie? In order to focus your mind?"

"Father, guide my hands and heart so that no part of the animal will be wasted." "

Roland nodded a third time. Jake took two shells and put them in his ears. Edie

took the last two, but first he tried the ones he'd shaken from the box. They

muffled the sound of the thinny, but it was still there, vibrating in the center of his

forehead, making his eyes water the way they did when he had a cold, making the

bridge of his nose feel like it was going to explode. He picked them out, and put

the bigger slugs—the ones from Roland's ancient revolvers—in their place.

Putting bullets in my ears, he thought. Ma would shit. But that didn't matter. The

sound of the thinny was gone—or at least down to a distant drone—and that was

what did. When he turned and spoke to Roland, he expected his own voice to

sound muffled, the way it did when you were wearing earplugs, but he found he

could hear himself pretty well.

"Is there anything 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 before

dark."

7

Oy didn't seem bothered by the warble of the thinny, but he stuck close to Jake

Chambers all that afternoon, looking mistrustfully at the stalled cars which

clogged the eastbound lanes of I-70. And yet, Susanah saw, those cars did not

clog the highway completely. The congestion eased as the travelers left

downtown behind them, but even where the traffic had been heavy, some of the

dead vehicles had been pulled to one side or the other; a number had been pushed

right off the highway and onto the median strip, which was a concrete divider in

the metro area and grass outside of town.

Somebody's been at work with a wrecker, that's my guess, Susanah thought. The

idea made her happy. No one would have bothered clearing a path down the

center of the highway while the plague was still raging, and if someone had done

it after—if someone had been around to do it after—that meant the plague hadn't

gotten everyone; those crammed-together obituaries weren't the whole story.

There were corpses in some of the cars, but they, like the ones at the foot of the

station steps, were dry, not runny—mummies wearing seat-belts, for the most part.

The majority of the cars were empty. A lot of the drivers and passengers caught in

the traffic jams had probably tried to walk out of the plague-zone, she supposed,

but she guessed that wasn't the only reason they had taken to their feet.

Susanah knew that she herself would have to be chained to the steering wheel to

keep her inside a car once she felt the symptoms of some fatal disease setting in;

if she was going to die, she would want to do it in God's open air. A hill would be

best, someplace with a little elevation, but even a wheatfield would do, came it to

that. Anything but coughing your last while smelling the air-freshener dangling

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, Ed,
die, and Jake

holding their stomachs and grinning. They looked as if they had
all been stricken

with the bellyache at the same time. Then Ed died and Roland straight-
ened 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 Detta 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-store
age tower, seeming

to float. The words gad-dish feeds were written on the side in pink let-
ters which

might have been red under normal conditions.

"Feels to me like I got a bubble in my mind," Ed died 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

deceived. 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

Stuck?ey's bill?board) loom out of it, then los?ing ev?ery?thing but the road, which ran

con?sis?tent?ly above the thin?ny's bright but some?how in?dis?tinct sur?face.

Then, all at once, they would run in?to the clear. The hum?ming would fall away to

a faint drone; you could even un?plug your ears and not be too both?ered, at least

un?til you got near the oth?er side of the break. Once again there were vis?tas ...

Well, no, that was too grand, Kansas didn't ex?act?ly have vis?tas, but there were

open fields and the oc?ca?sion?al copse of au?tumn-?bright trees mark?ing a spring or

cow-?pond. No Grand Canyon or surf crash?ing on Port?land Head?light, hut at least

you could see a by-?God hori?zon off in the dis?tance, and lose some of that

un?pleas?ant feel?ing of en?tomb?ment. Then, back in?to the goop you went. Jake came

clos?est to de?scrib?ing it, she thought, when he said that be?ing in the thin?ny was like

fi?nal?ly reach?ing the shin?ing wa?ter-?mi?rage you could of?ten see far up the high?way

on hot days.

What?ev?er it was and how?ev?er you de?scribed it, be?ing in?side it was claus?tro?pho?bic,

pur?ga?to?ri?al, all the world gone ex?cept for the twin bar?rels of the turn?pike and the

hulks of the cars, like derelict ships aban?doned on a frozen ocean.

Please help us get out of this, Su?san?nah prayed to a God in whom she no longer

pre?cise?ly be?lieved—she still be?lieved in some?thing, but since awak?en?ing to

Roland's world on the beach of the West?ern Sea, her con?cept of the in?vis?ible

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 break-down lane. As he

did it, Ed die 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!” Ed die called. “Suze! Come over here! Look at this!”

Susanah started rolling her chair toward Ed die, then Roland—after a final check

of his campfire—took hold of the handles and pushed her.

“Look at what?” Susanah asked.

Ed die pointed. At first Susanah saw nothing, although the turnpike was perfectly

visible even beyond the point where the turnpike 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?” Ed die 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!” Ed die 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 moaned back across the east-bound lanes to check on

his camp?fire, bootheels click?ing on the pave ment. Su?san?nah looked at Jake and

Ed?die. She shrugged. They shrugged back . . . and then Jake burst in?to bright peals

of laugh?ter. Usu?al?ly, Su?san nah thought, the kid act?ed more like an eigh?teen-?year-

old than a boy of eleven, but that laugh?ter made him sound about nine-?go?ing-?on-

ten, and she didn't mind a bit.

She looked down at Oy, who was look?ing at them earnest?ly and rolling his

shoul?ders in an ef?fort to shrug.

8

They ate the leaf-?wrapped del?ica?cies Ed?die called gun?slinger bur?ri?tos, draw?ing

clos?er to the fire and feed?ing it more wood as the dark drew down. Some?where

south a bird cried out—it was just about the loneli?est sound he had ev?er heard in

his life, Ed?die reck?oned. None of them talked much, and it oc?curred to him that, at

this time of their day, hard?ly any?one ev?er did. As if the time when the earth

swapped day for dark was spe?cial, a time that some?how closed them off from the

pow?er?ful fel?low?ship Roland called ka-?tet.

Jake fed Oy small scraps of dried deer?meat from his last bur?ri?to; Su san?nah sat on

her bedroll, legs crossed be?neath her hide smock, look?ing dream?ily in?to the fire;

Roland lay back on his el?bows, look?ing up at the sky, where the clouds had be?gun

to melt away from the stars. Look?ing up him?self, Ed?die saw that Old Star and Old

Moth?er were gone, their places tak?en by Po?laris and the Big Dip?per. This might

not be his world— Takuro au?to?mo?biles, the Kansas City Monar?chs, and a food

fran?chise called Bo?ing Bo?ing Burg?ers all sug?gest?ed it wasn't— but Ed?die thought it

was too close for com?fort. Maybe, he thought, the world next door.

When the bird cried in the dis?tance again, he roused him?self and looked at Roland.

“You had some?thing you were go?ing to tell us,” he said. “A thrilling tale of your

youth, I be?lieve. Su?san—that was her name, wasn't it?”

For a mo?ment longer the gun?slinger con?tin?ued to look up at the sky — now it was

Roland who must find him?self adrift in the con?stel?la?tions, Ed?die re?al?ized—and

then he shift?ed his gaze to his friends. He looked strange?ly apolo?getic, strange?ly

un?easy. “Would you think I was coz?en ing,” he said, “if I asked for one more day

to think of these things? Or per haps it's a night to dream of them that I re?al?ly

want. They are old things, dead things, per?haps, but I. . .” He raised his hands in a

kind of dis?tract?ed ges?ture. “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 Ed?die saw a shad?ow of the hor?ror he

must have felt in?side the house in Dutch Hill. The hor?ror he must have felt when

the Door?keep?er came out of the wall and reached for him. “Some?times there are

ghosts, and some?times they come back.”

“Yes,” Roland said. “Some?times there are, and some?times they do.”

“Maybe it's bet?ter not to brood,” Su?san?nah said. “Some?times—espe?cial?ly when

you know a thing's go?ing to be hard—it's bet?ter 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,” Edie 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 thimble. 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.

Su?san?nah leaned over him, kissed the tip of his nose. “Done for the day, sug?ar?”

“Yep,” Ed?die said, and laced his hands to?geth?er be?hind his head. “It’s not ev?ery

day that I hook a ride on the world’s fastest train, de?stroy the world’s smartest

com?put?er, and then dis?cov?er that ev?ery?one’s been scragged by the flu. All be?fore

din?ner, too. Shit like that makes a man tired.” Ed?die smiled and closed his eyes.

He was still smil?ing when sleep took him.

9

In his dream, they were all stand?ing on the com?er of Sec?ond Av?enue and Forty-

sixth Street, look?ing over the short board fence and in?to the weedy va?cant lot

be?hind it. They were wear?ing their Mid-?World clothes—a mot ley com?bi?na?tion of

deer?skin and old shirts, most?ly held to?geth?er with spit and shoelaces—but none of

the pedes?tri?ans hur?ry?ing by on Sec?ond seemed to no?tice. No one no?ticed the bil?ly-

bum?bler in Jake’s arms or the ar?tillery they were pack?ing, ei?ther.

Be?cause we’re ghosts. Ed?die thought. We’re ghosts and we don’t rest easy.

On the fence there were hand?bills—one for the Sex Pis?tols (a re?union tour,

ac?cord?ing to the poster, and Ed?die thought that was pret?ty fun?ny—the Pis?tols was

one group that was nev?er go?ing to get back to?geth?er), one for a com?ic, Adam

Sandi?er, that Ed?die had nev?er heard of, one for a movie called The Craft, about

teenage witch?es. Be?yond that one, writ?ten in let?ters the dusky pink of sum?mer

ros?es, was this:

See the bear of fear?some 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

Estates—were going to combine on something called Turtle Bay Condominiums,

said condos to be erected on this very spot. When coming soon was all the sign

had to say in that regard.

"I wouldn't worry about that," Jake said. "That sign was here before. It's probably old as the hills—"

At that moment the revving sound of an engine tore into the air. From beyond the

fence, on the Forty-sixth Street side of the lot, chugs of dirty brown exhaust

ascended like bad-news smoke signals. Suddenly the boards on that side burst

open, and a huge red bulldozer lunged through. Even the blade was red, although

the words slashed across its scoop—all hail the crimson king—were written in a

yellow as bright as panic. Sitting in the peak-seat, his rotting face leering at them

from above the controls, was the man who had kidnapped Jake from the bridge

over the River Send—their old pal Gasher. 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 ques?tion.

"Yeah."

"A vis?it from your broth?er?"

Ed?die shook his head.

"The Tow?er, then? The field of ros?es and the Tow?er?" Roland's face re?mained

im?pas?sive, but Ed?die could hear the sub?tle ea?ger?ness which al ways came in?to his

voice when the sub?ject was the Dark Tow?er. Ed?die had once called the gun?slinger

a Tow?er junkie, and Roland hadn't de?nied it.

"Not this time."

"What, then?"

Ed?die shiv?ered. "Cold."

"Yes. Thank your gods there's no rain, at least. Au?tumn rain's an evil to be avoid?ed

when?ev?er one may. What was your dream?"

Still Ed?die hes?itat?ed. "You'd nev?er be?tray us, would you, Roland?"

"No man can say that for sure, Ed?die, and I have al?ready played the be?tray?er 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, Edie. Not that, not ever. Tell me your dream.”

Edie did, omitting nothing. When he had finished, Roland looked down at his

guns, frowning. They seemed to have reassembled themselves while Edie 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 subconsciously—”

“Is thisology-of-the-psyche? The cabala 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 Edie

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,” Edie said, and the very awkwardness with which he spoke lent his

words sincerity. Roland looked touched, almost shaken, and Edie wondered how

he ev?er could have thought this man an emo?tion?less robot. Roland might be a lit?tle

short on imag?ina?tion, but he had feel?ings, all right.

“One thing about your dream con?cerns me very much, Ed?die.”

“The bull?doz?er?”

“The ma?chine, yes. The threat to the rose.”

“Jake saw the rose, Roland. It was fine.”

Roland nod?ded. “In his when, the when of that par?tic?ular day, the rose was

thriv?ing. But that doesn’t mean it will con?tin?ue to do so. If the con struc?tion 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 only with a quick glance, as if he did not even want to acknowledge it.

"It's glass, isn't it?" Edie asked.

Roland took another brief look. "I wot," he said, a phrase which seemed to mean

Reckon so, partner.

"We've got lots of glass buildings where I come from, but most of them are office

buildings. That thing up ahead looks more like something from Disney World. Do

you know what it is?"

"No."

"Then why don't you want to look at it?" Susanah 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 fortune cookies," Edie 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 re?al?ize it wasn't grumpi?ness they were

see?ing, or wor?ry about any?thing which lay any far?ther ahead of them than tonight.

It was the sto?ry he'd promised to tell them that Roland was think?ing about, and he

was a lot more than wor?ried.

By the time they stopped for their noon meal, they could clear?ly see the build?ing

ahead—a many-?tur?ret?ed palace which ap?peared to be made en?tire?ly of re?flec?tive

glass. The thin?ny lay close around it, but the palace rose serene?ly above all, its

tur?rets try?ing for the sky. Mad?ly strange here in the flat coun?try?side of east?ern

Kansas, of course it was, but Su?san?nah thought it the most beau?ti?ful build?ing she

had ev?er seen in her life; even more beau?ti?ful than the Chrysler Build?ing, and that

was go?ing some.

As they drew clos?er, she found it more and more dif?fi?cult to look else where.

Watch?ing the re?flec?tions of the puffy clouds sail?ing across the glass cas?tle's blue-

sky wains and walls was like watch?ing some splen?did il?lu?sion ... yet there was a

so?lid?ity to it, as well. An inar?gua?bil?ity. Some of that was prob?ably just the shad?ow

it threw—mi?rages did not, so far as she knew, cre?ate shad?ows—but not all. It just

was. She had no idea what such a fab?ulos?ity was do?ing out here in the land of

Stuck?ey's and Hard?ee's (not to men?tion Bo?ing Bo?ing Burg?ers), but there it was.

She reck?oned that time would tell the rest.

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
balconies glowed first a fierce red, then orange, then a gold which
cooled
rapidly to ochre 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, sittin 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 thinny

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.

Edie 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 waterskin 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," Edie 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 katel—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 Edie 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 re?mem?ber a lit?tle, but that’s all. The way you re?mem?ber the stuff you dream about.”

Roland nod?ded. “Lis?ten, then. I would tell you more this time, Jake, be?cause you are old?er. I sup?pose we all are.”

Su?san?nah was no less fas?ci?nat?ed with the sto?ry the sec?ond time: how the boy

Roland had chanced to dis?cov?er Marten, his fa?ther’s ad?vi?sor (his fa?ther’s wiz?ard) in

his moth?er’s apart?ment. On?ly 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 in?vit?ed him in. Marten had told Roland that his moth?er want?ed to see him, but

one look at her rue?ful smile and down?cast eyes as she sat in her low?back chair

told the boy he was the last per?son in the world Gabrielle De?schain want?ed to see

just then.

The flush on her cheek and the love-?bite on the side of her neck told him

ev?ery?thing else.

Thus had he been goad?ed by Marten in?to an ear?ly tri?al of man?hood, and by

em?ploy?ing a weapon his teach?er had not ex?pect?ed—his hawk, David—Roland had

de?feat?ed Cort, tak?en his stick ... and made the en?emy of his life in Marten

Broad?cloak.

Beat?en bad?ly, face swelling in?to some?thing that looked like a child’s gob?lin mask,

slip?ping to?ward a co?ma, Cort had fought back un?con?scious ness long enough to

of?fer his newest ap?pren?tice gun?slinger coun?sel: stay away from Marten yet awhile,

Cort had said.

“He told me to let the sto?ry of our bat?tle grow in?to a leg?end,” the gun slinger told

Ed?die, Su?san?nah, and Jake. “To wait un?til my shad?ow had grown hair on its face

and haunt?ed Marten in his dreams.”

“Did you take his ad?vice?” Su?san?nah asked.

“I nev?er got a chance,” Roland said. His face cracked in a rue?ful, painful smile. “I

meant to think about it, and se?ri?ous?ly, but be?fore I even got start?ed on my

think?ing, things ... changed.”

“They have a way of do?ing that, don’t they?” Ed?die said. “My good ness, yes.”

“I buried my hawk, the first weapon I ev?er wield?ed, and per?haps the finest.

Then—and this part I’m sure I didn’t tell you be?fore, Jake—I went in? to the low?er

town. That sum?mer’s heat broke in storms full of thun?der and hail, and in a room

above one of the broth?els where Cort had been wont to rois?ter, I lay with a wom?an

for the first time.“

He poked a stick thought?ful?ly in?to the fire, seemed to be?come aware of the

un?con?scious sym?bol?ism in what he was do?ing, and threw it away with a lop?sid?ed

grin. It land?ed, smol?der?ing, near the tire of an aban?doned Dodge As?pen and went

out.

”It was good. The sex was good. Not the great thing I and my friends had thought

about and whis?pered about and won?dered about, of course—“

”I think store-?bought pussy tends to be over?rat?ed by the young, sug? ar,“ Su?san?nah

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 upon the counterpane. 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 snakeskin 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 bastard 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 coming 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 foxlike 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 fuzer beneath the apprentices' barracks on the previous

afternoon, using Cort's key to open the arsenal 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 Cressia. After Farson 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 desperate 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 told that you were no genius, but I never believed until yesterday that

you were an idiot. To let him drive you like a cow in a chute! Gods! You have

forgot 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

tingle. It flew out the window, down and gone, its grip 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 far slyer 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.

“What?” Su?san?nah asked. “What six words?”

“ ‘I have known for two years,’ ” Roland said. “That was what he whis?pered.”

“Holy Christ,” Ed?die said.

“He told me I couldn’t go back to the palace. If I did, I’d be dead by night?fall. He

said, ‘You have been born to your des?tiny in spite of all Marten could do; yet he

has sworn to kill you be?fore you can grow to be a prob?lem to him. It seems that,

win?ner in the test or no, you must leave Gilead any?way. For on?ly awhile, though,

and you’ll go east in?stead of west. I’d not send you alone, ei?ther, or with?out a

pur?pose.’ Then, al?most as an af?terthought, he added: ‘Or with a pair of sor?ry

‘pren?tice re?volvers.’ ”

“What pur?pose?” Jake asked. He had clear?ly been cap?ti?vat?ed by the sto?ry; his eyes

shone near?ly 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 con?tem?plates some ar?du?ous piece

of work—and then tossed fresh wood on the fire. As the flames flared up, driv?ing

the shad?ows back a lit?tle way, he be?gan to talk. All that queer?ly long night he

talked, not fin?ish?ing the sto?ry of Su?san Del?ga?do un?til the sun was ris?ing in the east

and paint?ing the glass cas?tle yon der with all the bright hues of a fresh day, and a

strange green cast of light which was its own true col?or.

Darktower 4 - Wizard and Glass

PART TWO

SU?SAN

CHAP?TER I

.....

BE?NEATH THE

KISS?ING MOON

1

A per?fect disc of sil?ver—the Kiss?ing Moon, as it was called in Full Earth—hung

above the ragged hill five miles east of Ham?bry and ten miles south of Eye?bolt

Canyon. Be?low the hill the late sum?mer heat still held, suf?fo?cat?ing even two hours

af?ter sun?down, but atop the Coos, it was as if Reap had al?ready come, with its

strong breezes and frost-?pinched air. For the wom?an who lived here with no

com?pa?ny but a snake and one old mu?tie cat, it was to be a long night.

Nev?er mind, though; nev?er mind, my dear. Busy hands are hap?py hands. So they

are.

She wait?ed un?til the hoof?beats of her vis?itors' hors?es had fad?ed, sit ting qui?et?ly by

the win?dow in the hut's large room (there was on?ly one oth?er, a bed?room lit?tle

big?ger than a clos?et). Musty, the six-?legged cat, was on her shoul?der. Her lap was

full of moon?light.

Three hors?es, bear?ing away three men. The Big Cof?fin Hunters, they called

them?selves.

She snort?ed. Men were fun?ny, aye, so they were, and the most amus ing thing

about them was how lit?tle they knew it. Men, with their swag ger?ing, belt-?hitch?ing

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.
H 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 Hamby! Chief Guard o'
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 wanted to see it himself, not any of her secret places,

gods forbid (at this sadly Deppa and Reynolds had laughed like trolls)—and so

she had, but the hoofbeats of their horses had been swallowed by the wind now,

and she would do as she liked. The girl whose tits had stolen what little there was

of Hart Thorin's mind would not be here for another hour, at least (the old woman

had insisted that the girl walk from town, citing the purification value of such a

moonlit heel-and-toe, actually just wanting to put a safe bumper of time between

her two appointments), and during that hour she would do as she liked.

"Oh, it's beautiful, I'm sure 'tis," she whispered, and did she feel a certain heat in

that place where her ancient bowlegs came together? A certain moisture in the dry

creek which hid there? Gods!

"Aye, even through the box where they hid it I felt its glam. So beautiful, Musty,

like you." She took the cat from her shoulder and held it in front of her eyes. The

old torn purred and stretched out its pug of a face toward hers. She kissed its nose.

The cat closed its milky gray-green eyes in ecstasy. "So beautiful, like you—so

y're, so y're! Hee!"

She put the cat down. It walked slowly toward the hearth, where a late fire lazed,

desultorily eating at a single log. Musty's tail, split at the tip so it looked like the

forked tail of a devil in an old drawing, switched back and forth in the room's dim

orange air. Its extra legs, dangling from its sides, twitched dreamily. The shadow

which trailed across the floor and grew up the wall was a horror: a thing that

looked like a cat crossed with a spider.

The old woman rose and went into her sleeping closet, where she had taken the

thing Jonas had given her.

"Lose that and you'll lose your head," he'd said.

"Never fear me, my good friend," she'd replied, directing a cringing, servile smile

back over her shoulder, all the while thinking: Men! Foolish strutting creatures

they were!

Now she went to the foot of her bed, knelt, and passed one hand over the earth

floor there. Lines appeared in the sour dirt as she did. They formed a square. She

pushed her fingers into one of these lines; it gave before her touch. She lifted the

hidden panel (hidden in such a way that no one without the touch would ever be

able to uncover it), revealing a compartment perhaps a foot square and two feet

deep. Within it was an ironwood 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,

displaying four pairs of fangs—two on top, two on the bottom.

She took the snake up, crooning to it. As she brought its flat face close to her own,

its mouth yawned wider and its hissing became audible. She opened her own

mouth; from between her wrinkled gray lips she poked the yellowish, 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-?col?ored light, dim?mer than that thrown by the Kiss?ing Moon but in?finite?ly

more beau?ti?ful, spilled out. It touched the ru?ined face hang?ing above the box, and

for a mo?ment made it the face of a young girl again.

Musty sniffed, head stretched for?ward, ears laid back, old eyes rimmed with that

rose light. Rhea was in?stant?ly jeal?ous.

“Get away, fool?ish, ’tis not for the likes of you!”

She swat?ted the cat. Musty shied back, hiss?ing like a ket?tle, and stalked in

dud?geon to the hum?mock which marked the very tip of Coos Hill. There he sat,

af?fect?ing dis?dain and lick?ing one paw as the wind combed cease?less?ly through his

fur.

With?in the box, peep?ing out of a vel?vet draw?string 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 un-
armed. 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 close-
er, almost, like a

horse and rider under water, and she saw there was a quiver of ar-
rows on his back.

Before him, on theommel 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, curly?" 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,

maybe ... or perhaps by yer ... get away, Musty! Why do yer trouble
me so? Arrrr!"

The cat had come back from its lookout point and was twining back
and forth

between her swollen old ankles, yawning up at her in a voice even
more rusty

than its purr. When the old woman kicked out at him, Musty dodged
agilely away

. . . then immediately came back and started in again, looking up
at her with

moonstruck eyes and making 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 forward 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 allow a sliver of pulsing rose-colored light to shine out.

3

Su?san Del?ga?do stopped about forty yards from the witch's hut, the sweat chilling

on her arms and the nape of her neck. Had she just spied an old woman (surely the

one she had come to see) dart down that last bit of path leading from the top of the

hill? She thought she had.

Don't stop singing—when an old lady hurries like that, she doesn't want to be

seen. If you stop singing, she'll likely know she was.

For a moment Su?san thought she'd stop anyway—that her memory would close up

like a startled hand and deny her another verse of the old song which she had been

singing since youngest childhood. But the next verse came to her, and she

continued on (with feet as well as voice):

“Once my cares were far away,

Yes, once my cares were far away,

Now my love has gone from me

And misery is in my heart to stay.”

A bad song for a night such as this, maybe, but her heart went its own way

without much interest in what her head thought or wanted; always had. She was

frightened to be out by moonlight, when werewolves were said to walk, she was

frightened of her errand, and she was frightened by what that errand portended.

Yet when she had gained the Great Road out of Ham?bry and her heart had

demanded she run, she had run— under the light of the Kissing Moon and with

her skirt held above her knees she had galloped like a pony, with her shadow

galloping right beside her. For a mile or more she had run, until every muscle in

her body tingled and the air she pulled down her throat tasted like some sweet

heated liquid. And when she reached the upland track leading to this high sinister,

she had sung. Because her heart demanded it. And, she supposed, it really hadn't

been such a bad idea; if nothing else, it had kept the worst of her megrims away.

Singing was good for that much, anyway.

Now she walked to the end of the path, singing the chorus of "Careless Love." As

she stepped into the scant light which fell through the open door and on to the

stoop, a harsh raven voice spoke from the shadows: "Stop yer howling,

missy—it catches in my brains like a fishhook!"

Susan, who had been told all her life that she had a fair singing voice, a gift from

her grandma, no doubt, fell silent at once, abashed. She stood on the stoop with her

hands clasped in front of her apron. Beneath the apron she wore her second-best

dress (she only had two). Beneath it, her heart was thumping very hard.

A cat—a hideous thing with two extra legs sticking out of its sides like toastening

forks—came into the doorway first. It looked up at her, seemed to measure her,

then screwed its face up in a look that was eerily human: contempt. It hissed at

her, then flashed away into the night.

Well, good evening to you, too, Susan thought.

The old woman she had been sent to see stepped into the doorway.

She looked Susan up and down with that same expression of flat-eyed contempt,

then stood back. "Come in. And mind ye clap the door tight. The wind has a way

of blowin it open, as ye see!"

Susan stepped inside. She didn't want to close herself in to this bad-smelling room

with the old woman, but when there was no choice, hesitation was ever a fault. So

her father had said, whether the matter under discussion was sums and

subtractions or how to deal with boys at barn-dances when their hands became

overly adventurous. She pulled the door firmly to, and heard it latch.

"And here y'are," the old woman said, and offered a grotesque smile of welcome.

It was a smile guaranteed to make even a brave girl think of stories told in the

nursery—Winter's tales of old women with snaggle teeth and bubbling cauldrons

full of toad-green liquid. There was no cauldron over the fire in this room (nor

was the fire itself much of a shake, in Susan's opinion), but the girl guessed there

had been, be-times, and things in it of which it might be better not to think. That

this woman was a real witch and not just an old lady posing as one was something

Susan had felt sure of from the moment she had seen Rhea darting back inside her

hut with the malformed cat at her heels. It was something you could almost smell,

like the reeky aroma rising off the hag's skin.

"Yes," she said, smiling. She tried to make it a good one, bright and unafraid.

"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 wom?an’s hor?ri?ble smile widened in?to some?thing that made Su?san think of

the way eels some?times seemed to grin, af?ter death and just be?fore the pot. “Aye,

but dead he is, dead these five years, Pat Del?ga?do of the red hair and beard, the life

mashed out of ‘im by ‘is own horse, aye, and went in?to the clear?ing at the end of

the path with the mu?sic of his own snap?ping bones in his ears, so he did!”

The ner?vous smile slipped from Su?san’s face as if slapped away. She felt tears,

al?ways close at the mere men?tion of her da’s name, bum at the back of her eyes.

But she would not let them fall. Not in this heart?less old crow’s sight, she wouldn’t.

“Let our busi?ness be quick and be done,” she said in a dry voice that was far from

her usu?al one; that voice was usu?al?ly cheery and mer?ry and ready for fun. But she

was Pat Del?ga?do’s child, daugh?ter of the best drover ev?er to work the West?ern

Drop, and she re?mem?bered his face very well; she could rise to a stronger na?ture if

re?quired, as it now clear?ly was. The old wom?an had meant to reach out and scratch

as deep as she could, and the more she saw that her ef?forts were suc?ceed?ing, the

more she would re?dou?ble them.

The hag, mean?while, was watch?ing Su?san shrewd?ly, her bunch?knuck?led hands

plant?ed on her hips while her cat twined around her an kles. 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 bare

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. Ye’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 Reap?ing.

“Ye came be?fore I ex?pect?ed ye, and it’s put me out of tem?per, so it has. Have ye

brought me some?thing, mis?sy? Ye have, I’ll war?rant!” Her eyes were glit?ter?ing

once more, this time not with anger.

Su?san reached be?neath her apron (so stupid, wear?ing an apron for an er?rand on the

back?side of nowhere, but it was what cus?tom de?mand?ed) and in?to her pock?et.

There, tied to a string so it could not be eas?ily lost (by young girls sud?den?ly moved

to run in the moon?light, per?chance), was a cloth bag. Su?san broke the bind?ing

string and brought the bag out. She put it in the out?stretched hand be?fore her, the

palm so worn that the lines mark?ing it were now lit?tle more than ghosts. She was

care?ful not to touch Rhea again ... al?though the old wom?an would be touch?ing her

again, and soon.

“Is it the sound o’ the wind makes ye shiv?er?” Rhea asked, al?though Su?san could

tell her mind was most?ly fixed on the lit?tle bag; her fin?gers were busy tug?ging out

the knot in the draw?string.

“Yes, the wind.”

“And so it should. ‘Tis the voic?es of the dead you hear in the wind, and when they

scream so, ’tis be?cause they re?gret—ah!”

The knot gave. She loos?ened the draw?string and tum?bled two gold coins in?to her

hand. They were un?even?ly milled and crude—no one had made such for

gen?er?ations—but they were heavy, and the ea?gles en?graved up?on them had a

cer?tain pow?er. Rhea lift?ed one to her mouth, pulled back her lips to re?veal a few

grue?some teeth, and bit down. The hag looked at the faint in?den?ta? tions her teeth

had left in the gold. For sev?er?al sec?onds she gazed, rapt, then closed her fin?gers

over them tight?ly.

While Rhea's at?ten?tion was dis?tract?ed by the coins, Su?san hap? pened to look

through the open door to her left and in?to what she as?sumed was the witch's

bed?cham?ber. And here she saw an odd and dis?qui?et?ing thing: a light un?der the bed.

A pink, puls?ing light. It seemed to be com?ing from some kind of box, al?though she

could not quite ...

The witch looked up, and Su?san hasti?ly moved her eyes to a com?er of the room,

where a net con?tain?ing three or four strange white fruits hung from a hook. Then,

as the old wom?an moved and her huge shad?ow danced pon?der?ous? ly away from

that part of the wall, Su?san saw they were not fruits at air, but skulls. She felt a

sick?ish drop in her stom?ach.

"The fire needs build?ing up, mis?sy. Go round to the side of the house and bring

back an arm?load of wood. Good-?sized sticks are what's want?ed, and nev?er mind

whin?ing ye can't lug 'em. Ye're of a strap?pin good size, so ye are!"

Su?san, who had quit whin?ing about chores around the time she had quit piss?ing

in?to her clouts, said noth?ing . . . al?though it did cross her mind to ask Rhea if

ev?ery?one who brought her gold was in?vit?ed to lug her wood. In truth, she didn't

mind; the air out?side would taste like wine af?ter 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 eventually recognized as

laughter.

“Watch Musty, my little sweet one! Tricksy, he is! And tricky as well, sometimes, 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 sleep^{ing} clos^{et}.

Don't look in there, what^{ev}er she's got un^{der} her bed isn't your busi^{ness}, and if

she were to catch you. . .

She went to the win^{dow} de^{spite} these ad^{mo}ni^{tions}, and peeked in.

It was un^{like}ly that Rhea would have seen Su^{san}'s face through the dense

over^{growth} of pig ivy even if the old be^{som} had been look^{ing} in that di^{rec}tion,

and she wasn't. She was on her knees, the draw^{string} bag caught in her teeth,

reach^{ing} un^{der} the bed.

She brought out a box and opened its lid, which was al^{ready} ajar. Her face was

flood^{ed} with soft pink ra^{di}ance, and Su^{san} gasped. For one mo^{ment} it was the

face of a young girl—but one filled with cru^{el}ty as well as youth, the face of a self-

willed child de^{ter}mined to learn all the wrong things for all the wrong rea^{sons}.

The face of the girl this hag once had been, may^{hap}. The light ap^{peared} 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 scarlet light spiked out from between her fingers. All this with the

drawstring bag still hanging from her mouth. Then she put the box on the bed,

knelt, and began running her hands over the dirt just beneath the bed's edge.

Although she touched only with her palms, lines appeared as if she had used a

drawing tool. These lines darkened, becoming what looked like grooves.

The wood, Susan! Get the wood before she wakes up to how long you've been

gone! For your father's sake!

Susan pulled the skirt of her dress all the way up to her waist—she did not want

the old woman to see dirt or leaves on her clothing when she came back inside, did

not want to answer the questions the sight of such smuts might provoke—and

crawled beneath the window with her white cotton drawers flashing in the

moonlight. Once she was past, she got to her feet again and hurried quietly around

to the far side of the hut. Here she found the woodpile under an old, moldy-

smelling hide. She took half a dozen good-sized chunks and walked back toward

the front of the house with them in her arms.

When she entered, turning sideways to get her load through the doorway without

dropping any, the old woman was back in the main room, staring moodily into the

fireplace, where there was now little more than embers; Of the drawstring bag

there was no sign.

"Took; you long enough, missy," Rhea said. She continued to look into 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?sana re?peated, 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?sana 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 probably be the best luck she could hope for) and sent west as she was now,

without even the two gold coins she'd brought up here? And that was only the

small half of it. The large was that she had given her word. At first she had

resisted, but when Aunt Cord had invoked her father's name, she had given in. As

she always did. Really, she had no choice." And when there was no choice,

hesitation was ever a fault.

She brushed the front of her apron, to which small bits of bark now clung, then

untied it and took it off. She folded it, laid it on a small, grimy hasp sock near the

hearth, and unbuttoned her dress to the waist. She shivered it from her shoulders,

and stepped out. She folded it and laid it atop the apron, trying not to mind the

greedy way Rhea of Coos was staring at her in the firelight. The cat came

sashaying across the floor, grotesque extra legs hobbling, and sat at Rhea's feet.

Outside, the wind gusted. It was warm on the hearth but Susan was cold just the

same, as if that wind had gotten inside her, somehow.

"Hurry, girl, for yer father's sake!"

Susan pulled her shift over her head, folded it atop the dress, then stood in only

her drawers, with her arms folded over her bosom. The fire painted warm orange

highlights along her thighs; black circles of shadow in the tender folds behind 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 almost

touch?ing the old wom?an's slip?pers and her bare breasts were almost 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 fully, 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

caressed . . . then pressed ... and the girl was horrified to feel a heat which was far

from unpleasant kinde in her belly.

"Like a little bud o' silk," the old woman crooned, and her meddling fingers moved

faster. Susan felt her hips sway forward, as if with a mind and life of their own,

and then she thought of the old woman'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

drawstring bag with the gold pieces in it had hung from the wrinkled mouth like

some disgorged piece of flesh, and the heat she felt was gone. She drew back,

trembling, her arms and belly and breasts breaking out in gooseflesh.

"You've finished what you were paid to do," Susan said. Her voice was dry and

harsh.

Rhea's face knotted. "Ye'll not tell me aye, no, yes, or maybe, impudent stripling

of a girl! I know when I'm done, I, Rhea, the Weirder of Coos, and ___"

"Be still, and be on your feet before I kick you into the fire, unnatural thing."

The old woman's lips wriggled back from her few remaining teeth in a doglike

sneer, and now, Susan realized, she and the witch-woman were back where they

had been at the start: ready to claw each other's eyes out.

"Raise hand or foot to me, you impudent cunt, and what leaves my house will

leave handless, footless, and blind of eye."

"I do not much doubt you could do it, but Thorin should be vexed," Susan said. It

was the first time in her life she had ever invoked a man's name for protection.

Realizing this made her feel ashamed . . . small, somehow. She didn't know why

that should be, especially since she had agreed to sleep in his bed and bear his

child, but it was.

The old woman stared, her seamed face working until it folded in to a parody of a

smile that was worse than her snarl. Puffing and pulling at the, arm of her chair,

Rhea got to her feet. As she did, Susan quickly began to dress.

"Aye, vexed he would be. Perhaps you know best after all, missy;

I've had a strange night, and it's wakened parts of me better left asleep. Anything

else that might have happened, take it as a compliment to yer youth'n purity . . .

and to yer beauty as well. Aye. You're a beautiful 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?"

Susan did not want to force the old hag out of her positing, but she didn't want to

encourage these fawning compliments, either. Not when she could still see the

hate in Rhea's rheumy eyes, not when she could feel the old woman's touch still

crawling like beetles on her skin. She said nothing, only stepped in to her dress, set

it on her shoulders, and began to button up the front.

Rhea perhaps understood the run of her thoughts, for the smile dropped off her

mouth and her manner grew businesslike. Susan found this a great relief.

"Well, never mind it. Ye've proved honest; ye may dress yerself and go. But not a

word of what passed between us to Thorin, mind ye! Words between women need

trouble no man's ear, especially one as great as he." Yet at this Rhea could not

forbear a certain spasming sneer. Susan didn't know if the old woman was aware

of it or not. "Are we agreed?"

Anything, anything, just as long as I can be out of here and away.

"You declare me proved?"

"Aye, Susan, daughter of Patrick. So I do. But it's not what I say that matters. Now

... wait... somewhere here ..."

She scrambled along the mantel, pushing stubs of candles stuck on cracked saucers

this way and that, lifting first a kerosene lantern and then a battery flashlight,

looking fixedly for a moment at a drawing of a young boy and then putting it

aside.

"Where . . . where . . . arrrrrr . . . here!"

She snatched up a pad of paper with a sooty cover (citgo stamped on it in ancient

gold letters) and a stub of pencil. She paged almost to the end of the pad before

finding a blank sheet. On it she scrawled something, then tore the sheet off the

spiral of wire at the top of the pad. She held the sheet out to Susan, who took it

and looked at it. Scrawled there was a word she did not understand at first:

Below it was a symbol:

"What's this?" she asked, tapping the little drawing. "Rhea, her mark. Known for

six Barones around, it is, and can't be copied. Show that paper to your aunt. Then

to Thorin. If your aunt wants to take it and show it to Thorin herself—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 nod?ded. "Aye, not just Reap?ing, but true fin de ano—
Fair-?Night, tell

him. Say that he may have you af?ter the bon?fire. You un?der?stand?"

"True fin de ano, yes." She could bare?ly con?tain her joy.

"When the fire in Green Heart bums low and the last of the red-?hand?
ed men are

ash?es," Rhea said. "Then and not un?til then. You must tell him so."

"I will."

The hand came out and be?gan to stroke her hair again. Su?san bore it.

Af?ter such good news, she thought, it would have been mean-?spir?it?
ed to do

oth?er?wise. "The time be?tween now and Reap?ing you will use to
me?di tate, and to

gath?er your forces to pro?duce the male child the May?or wants ... or
may?hap just to

ride along the Drop and gath?er the last flow?ers of your maid?en?hood.
Do you

un?der?stand?"

"Yes." She dropped a curt?sey. "Thankee-?sai."

Rhea waved this off as if it were a flat?tery. "Speak not of what passed
be?tween us,

mind. "Tis no one's af?fair but our own."

"I won't. And our busi?ness is done?"

"Well ... may?hap there's one more small thing ..." Rhea smiled to
show it was

in?deed small, then raised her left hand in front of Su?san's eyes with
three fin?gers

to?geth?er and one apart. Glim?mer?ing in the fork be tween was a sil?ver medal?lion,

seem?ing?ly pro?duced from nowhere. The girl's eyes fas?tened on it at once. Un?til

Rhea spoke a sin?gle gut?tural word, that was.

Then they closed.

5

Rhea looked at the girl who stood asleep on her stoop in the moon?light. As she

re?placed the medal?lion with?in her sleeve (her fin?gers were old and bunchy, but

they moved dex?ter?ous?ly enough when it was re?quired, oh, aye), the busi?nesslike

ex?pres?sion fell from her face, and was re?placed by a look of squint?eyed fury. Kick

me in?to the fire, would you, you trull? Tat tle to Thorin? But her threats and

im?pu?dence weren't the worst. The worst had been the ex?pres?sion of re?vul?sion on

her face when she had pulled back from Rhea's touch.

Too good for Rhea, she was! And thought her?self too good for Thorin as well, no

doubt, she with six?teen years' worth of fine blonde hair hang ing down from her

head, hair Thorin no doubt dreamed of plung?ing his hands in?to even as he plunged

and reared and plowed down be?low.

She couldn't hurt the girl, much as she want?ed to and much as the girl de?served it;

if noth?ing else, Thorin might take the glass ball away from her, and Rhea couldn't

bear that. Not yet, any?way. So she could not hurt the girl, but she could do

some?thing that would spoil his plea?sure in her, at least for awhile.

Rhea leaned close to the girl, grasped the long braid which lay down her back, and

be?gan to slip it through her fist, en?joy?ing its silky smooth?ness.

“Su?san,” she whis?pered. “Do’ee hear me, Su?san, daugh?ter of Patrick?”

“Yes.” The eyes did not open.

“Then lis?ten.” The light of the Kiss?ing Moon fell on Rhea’s face and turned it in?to

a sil?ver skull. “Lis?ten to me well, and re?mem?ber. Re?mem?ber in the deep cave

where yer wak?ing mind nev?er 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?thetic 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 wom?an to come to her hus band's bed as a moth?er. And

does it make me a whore to do such? The law says not, but nev?er mind that; my

heart's law is what mat?ters, and my heart says that if I may gain the land that was

my da's and three hors?es to run on it by be?ing such, then it's a whore I'll be.

There was some?thing else: Aunt Cord had cap?ital?ized—rather ruth less?ly, Su?san

now saw—on a child's in?no?cence. It was the ba?by Aunt Cord had harped on, the

cun?ning lit?tle ba?by she would have. Aunt Cord had known that Su?san, the dolls of

her child?hood put aside not all that long ago, would love the idea of her own ba?by,

a lit?tle liv?ing doll to dress and feed and sleep with in the heat of the af?ter?noon.

What Cordelia had ig?nored (per?haps she's too in?no?cent even to have con?sid?ered it,

Su?san thought, but didn't quite be?lieve) was what the hag-?wom?an had made

bru?tal?ly clear to her this evening: Thorin want?ed more than a child.

He wants tits and ar?se that don't squish in his hands and a box that 'll grip what he

push?es.

Just think?ing of those words made her face throb as she walked through the post-

moon?set dark to?ward town (no high-?spir?it?ed run?ning this time; no singing, ei?ther).

She had agreed with vague thoughts of how man?aged live?stock mat?ed—they were

al?lowed to go at it “un?til the seed took,” then sep?arat?ed again. But now she knew

that Thorin might want her again and again, prob?ably would want her again and

again, and com mon law go?ing back like iron for two hun?dred gen?er?ations said

that he could con?tin?ue to lie with her un?til she who had proved the con?sort hon?est

should prove her hon?est?ly with child as well, and that child hon?est in and of it?self .

. . not, that was, a mu?tant aber?ra?tion. Su?san had made dis?creet en?quiries and knew

that this sec?ond prov?ing usu?al?ly came around the fourth month of preg?nan?cy ...

around the time she would be?gin to show, even with her clothes on. It would be up

to Rhea to make the judg?ment... and Rhea didn't like her.

Now that it was too late—now that she had ac?cept?ed the com?pact for mal?ly

ten?dered by the Chan?cel?lor, now that she had been proved hon?est by yon strange

bitch—she rued the bar?gain. Most?ly what she thought of was how Thorin would

look with his pants off, his legs white and skin?ny, like the legs of a stork, and how,

as they lay to?geth?er, she would hear his long bones crack?ling: knees and back and

el?bows and neck.

And knuck?les. Don't for?get his knuck?les.

Yes. Big old man's knuckles with hair growing out of them. Su'san
chuckled at the

thought, it was that comical, but at the same time a warm tear ran un-
noticed 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 Su'san 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 loung-
ing about

Mayor's House or in the Travellers' Rest? Not the oldest one, the
voice isn't

wa?very like his, but maybe one of the oth?ers . . . it could be the one they call

De?pape...

“Good?even,” she heard her?self say?ing to the man shape on the tall horse. “May

yours be long al?so.”

Her voice didn’t trem?ble, not that she could hear. She didn’t think it was De?pape,

or the one named Reynolds, ei?ther. The on?ly thing she could tell about the fel?low

for sure was that he wore a flat-?brimmed hat, the sort she as?so?ci?at?ed with men of

the In?ner Ba?ronies, back when trav?el be?tween east and west had been more

com?mon than it was now. Back be?fore John Far?son came—the Good Man—and

the blood?let?ting be?gan.

As the stranger came up be?side her, she for?gave her?self a lit?tle for not hear?ing him

ap?proach—there was no buck?le or bell on his gear that she could see, and

ev?ery?thing was tied down so as not to snap or flap. It was al?most the rig of an

out?law or a har?ri?er (she had the idea that Jonas, he of the wa?very voice, and his

two friends might have been both, in oth?er times and oth?er climes) or even a

gun?slinger. But this man bore no guns, un?less they were hid?den. A bow on the

pom?mel of his sad?dle and what looked like a lance in a scab?bard, that was all. And

there had nev?er, she reck?oned, been a gun?slinger as young as this.

He clucked side?mouth at the horse just as her da had al?ways done (and she her?self,

of course), and it stopped at once. As he swung one leg over his sad?dle, lift?ing it

high and with un?con?scious grace, Su?san said:

“Nay, nay, don’t trouble yer?self, 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 bother?ing with the tied-?down stir?rup, and landed neatly in front of her, the dust

of the road puff?ing about his square-?toed boots. By starlight she saw that he was

young in?deed, close to her own age on one side or the oth?er. His clothes were

those of a work?ing cow?boy, al though new.

“Will Dear?born, at your ser?vice,” he said, then doffed his hat, extend?ed a foot on

one bootheel, and bowed as they did in the In?ner Ba?ronies.

Such absurd court?li?ness out here in the mid?dle of nowhere, with the acrid smell of

the oil patch on the edge of town already in her nos?trils, startled her out of her fear

and in?to a laugh. She thought it would likely offend him, but he smiled in?stead. A

good smile, honest and art?less, its in?ner part lined with even teeth.

She dropped him a lit?tle curt?sey, holding out one side of her dress.

“Su?san

Del?ga?do, at yours.”

He tapped his throat thrice with his right hand. “Thankee-?sai, Su?san Del?ga?do.

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 apologize, for I was deep in my own thoughts,” she said. “I’d

been to see a ... friend ... and hadn’t realized how much time had passed un?til I saw

the moon was down. If ye stopped out of concern, 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 lit?tle shiv?er in?side

her, and wished for the thou?sandth time that the foul old wom?an had kept her

hands strict?ly on her busi?ness, as un?pleas?ant as that busi?ness had been. Su?san

didn't want to look at this hand?some stranger and re?mem?ber Rhea's touch.

"Nay," she said gen?tly. "Thankee again, I rec?og?nize yer kind?ness, but I must

refuse.”

“Then I’ll walk along beside, and Rusher’ll be our chapter-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 Travelers’ 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 dis?suade ye, very well,” she said, sigh?ing with a vexed resig?na?tion she

didn’t re?al?ly feel. “But on?ly to the first mail?box—Mrs. Beech’s. That marks the

edge of town.”

He tapped his throat again, and made an?oth?er of those ab?surd, enchan?ing

bows—foot stuck out as if he would trip some?one, heel plant?ed in the dirt.

“Thankee, Miss Del?ga?do!”

At least he didn’t ‘t call me sai, she thought. That’s a start.

2

She thought he’d chat?ter away like a mag?pie in spite of his promise to be silent,

be?cause that was what boys did around her—she was not vain of her looks, but she

thought she was good-?look?ing, if on?ly be?cause the boys could not shut up or stop

shuf?fling their feet when they were around her. And this one would be full of

ques?tions the town boys didn’t need to ask—how old was she, had she al?ways

lived in Ham?bry, were her par?ents alive, half a hun?dred oth?ers just as bor?ing—but

they would all cir?cle in on the same one: did she have a steady fel?low?

But Will Dear?born of the In?ner Ba?ronies didn’t ask her about her school?ing or

fam?ily or friends (the most com?mon way of ap?proach?ing any ro?man?tic ri?vals, she

had found). Will Dear?born sim?ply walked along be side her, one hand wrapped

around Rush?er’s bri?dle, look?ing off east to?ward the Clean Sea. They were close

enough to it now so that the teary smell of salt min?gled with the tar?ry stench of oil,

even though the wind was from the south.

They were pass?ing Cit?go now, and she was glad for Will Dear?born's pres?ence,

even if his si?lence was a lit?tle ir?ri?tat?ing. She had al?ways found the oil patch, with

its skele?tal for?est of gantries, a lit?tle spooky. Most of those steel tow?ers had

stopped pump?ing long since, and there was nei ther the parts, the need, nor the

un?der?stand?ing to re?pair them. And those which did still la?bor along—nine?teen out

of about two hun?dred—could not be stopped. They just pumped and pumped, the

sup?plies of oil be neath them seem?ing?ly in?ex?haustible. A lit?tle was still used, but a

very lit?tle—most sim?ply ran back down in?to the wells be?neath the dead pump?ing

sta?tions. The world had moved on, and this place re?mind?ed her of a strange

me?chan?ical grave?yard where some of the corpses hadn't quite—

Some?thing cold and smooth nuz?zled the small of her back, and she wasn't quite

able to sti?fle a lit?tle shriek. Will Dear?born wheeled to?ward her, his hands drop?ping

to?ward his belt. Then he re?laxed and smiled.

"Rush?er's way of say?ing he feels ig?nored. I'm sor?ry, Miss Del?ga?do."

She looked at the horse. Rush?er looked back mild?ly, then dipped his head as if to

say he was al?so sor?ry for hav?ing star?tled her.

Fool?ish?ness, girl, she thought, hear?ing the hearty, no-?non?sense voice of her fa?ther.

He wants to know why you 're be?ing so stand?offy, that's all. And so do I. 'Tisn't like

you, so it's not.

"Mr. Dear?born, I've changed my mind," she said. "I'd like to ride."

He turned his back and stood looking out at Citago 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 drips.

What's so interesting about them, curiously she thought, a trifling 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 realized, with a mixture of surprise and superstitious fear, what the tune

was: "Careless Love." The very lay she had been singing on her way up to Rhea's

hut.

Maybe it's ka, girl, her father's voice whispered.

No such thing, she thought right back at him. I'll not see ka in every passing wind

and shadow, like the old ladies who gather in Green Heart of a summer's evening.

It's an old tune: everyone knows it.

Maybe better if you're right. Pat Delgado's voice returned. For if it's ka, it 'll

come like a wind, and your plans will stand before it no more than my dad's barn

stood before the cyclone when it came.

Not ka; she would not be seduced by the dark and the shadows and the grim

shapes of the oil derricks into believing it was. Not ka but only a chance meeting

with a nice young man on the lonely road back to town.

"I've made myself decent," she said in a dry voice that didn't sound much like her

own. "You may turn back if you like, Mr. Dearborn."

He did turn and gazed at her. For a moment he said nothing, but she could see the

look in his eyes well enough to know that he found her fair as well. And although

this disquieted her—perhaps because of what he'd been whistling—she was also

glad. Then he said, "You look well up there. You sit well."

"And I shall have horses of my own to sit before long," she said. Now the

questions will come, she thought.

But he only nodded, as though he had known this about her already, and began to

walk toward town again. Feeling a little disappointed and not knowing exactly

why, she clucked sideways at Rusher and twitched her knees at him. He got

moving, catching up with his master, who gave Rusher's muzzle a companionable

little caress.

"What do they call that place yonder?" he asked, pointing at the dericks.

"The oil patch? Citgo."

"Some of the dericks still pump?"

"Aye, and no way to stop them. Not that anyone still knows."

"Oh," he said, and that was all—just oh. But he left his place by Rusher's head for

a moment when they came to the weedy track leading into Citgo, walking across

to look at the old disused guard-hut. In her childhood there had been a sign on it

reading authorized personnel only, but it had blown away in some windstorm or

other. Will Dearborn had his look and then came ambling back to the horse, boots

puffing up summer dust, easy in his new clothes.

They went toward town, a young walking man in a flat-crowned hat, a young

riding woman with a poncho spread over her lap and legs. The starlight rained

down on them as it has on young men and women since time's first hour, and once

she looked up and saw a meteor flash overhead—a brief and brilliant orange streak

across the vault of heaven. Susan thought to wish on it, and then, with something

like panic, realized she had no idea what to wish for. None at all.

She kept her own silence until they were a mile or so from town, and then asked

the question which had been on her mind. She had planned to ask herself after he had

begun asking his, and it irked her to be the one to break the silence, but in the end

her curiosity was too much.

"Where do ye come from, Mr. Dearborn, and what brings ye to our little bit o' Mid-

World ... if ye don't mind me asking?"

"Not at all," he said, looking up at her with a smile. "I'm glad to talk and was only

trying to think how to begin. Talk's not a specialty of mine." Then what is. Will

Dearborn? she wondered. Yes, she wondered very much, for in addressing her

position on the saddle, she had put her hand on the rolled blanket behind ... and

had touched something hidden inside that blanket. Something that felt like a gun.

It didn't have to be, of course, but she remembered the way his hands had dropped

instinctively toward his belt when she had cried out in surprise.

"I come from the In-World. I've an idea you probably guessed that much on your

own. We have our own way of talking."

"Aye. Which Barony is yer home, might I ask?"

"New Canaan."

She felt a flash of real excitement at that. New Canaan! Center of the Affiliation!

That did not mean all it once had, of course, but still—

"Not Gilead?" she asked, detecting the hint of a girlish gush she heard in her voice.

And more than just a hint, maybe.

"No," he said with a laugh. "Nothing so grand as Gilead. Only Hemphill, a village

forty or so wheels west of there. Smaller than Hamby, I wot."

Wheels, she thought, marveling at the archaism. 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?sana’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?sana laughed mer?ri?ly. The

poncho shifted, revealing one bare leg, and she took a moment before putting

matters right again. She liked him, aye, so she did. And what harm could there be

in it? He was only a boy, after all. When he smiled, she could see he was only a

year or two removed from jumping in haystacks. (The thought that she had

recently graduated from haystack-jumping herself had somehow fled her mind.)

“I’m usually not clumsy,” he said. “I hope I didn’t startle you.”

Not at all. Will; boys have been stubbing their toes around me ever since I grew

my breasts.

“Not at all,” she said, and returned to the previous topic. It interested her greatly.

“So ye and yer friends come at the behest of the Affiliation to count our goods, do

you?”

“Yes. The reason I took particular note of yon oil patch is because one of us will

have to come back and count the working derricks—”

“I can spare ye that, Will. There are nineteen.”

He nodded. “I’m in your debt. But we’ll also need to make out—if we can—how

much oil those nineteen pumps are bringing up.”

“Are there so many oil-fired machines still working in New Canaan that such news

matters? And do ye have the alchemy to change the oil into the stuff yer machines

can use?”

“It’s called refining rather than alchemy in this case—at least I think so—and I

believe there is one that still works. But no, we haven’t that many machines,

although there are still a few working filament-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 fa?ther 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, bad?ly 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 im por?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 sym?pa?thy for Will Dear?born as well as cau?tion. And in?ter?est.

Bad boys could be amus?ing ... up to a point. The ques?tion was, how bad had Will

and his cronies been?

"Helling?" she asked.

"Helling," he agreed, still sound?ing glum but per?haps bright?en?ing just a bit about

the eyes and mouth. "We were warned; yes, warned very well. There was ... a

cer?tain amount of drink?ing."

And a few girls to squeeze with the hand not busy squeez?ing the ale-?pot? It was a

ques?tion no nice girl could out?right ask, but one that couldn't help oc?cur?ring to her

mind.

Now the smile which had played briefly around the com?ers of his mouth dropped

away. "We pushed it too far and the fun stopped. Fools have a way of do?ing that.

One night there was a race. One moon?less night. Af?ter mid?night. All of us drunk.

One of the hors?es caught his hoof in a go?pher-?hole and snapped a fore?leg. 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 household 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 daughter has always

been a bit appalled by Arthur. Certainly Arthur's reactions 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."

"Hamlet'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 toward the sea."

"Aye, the Drop, it's called." She realized that Will and his mates might even be

camped on what would be her own land by law before much more time had

passed. The thought was amusing and exciting and a little startling.

"Tomorrow we ride into town and present our compliments to My Lord Mayor,

Hart Thorin. He's a bit of a fool, according to what we were told before leaving

New Canaan."

"Were ye indeed told so?" she asked, raising one eyebrow.

"Yes—apt to blabber, fond of strong drink, even more fond of young girls," Will

said. "Is it true, would you say?"

"I think ye must judge for yourself," said she, stifling a smile with some effort.

"In any case, we'll also be presenting to the Honorable Kimbarrimer, Thorin's

Chancellor, and I understand 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? Surely, 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?sion? 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 produce a scutter of gooseflesh up her back: a low, atonal noise, like the

warble of a siren being turned by a man without much longer to live.

Will took a step backward, eyes widening, and again she noticed his hands take a

dip toward his belt, as if reaching for something not there.

“What in gods’ name is that?”

“It’s a thimble,” she said quietly. “In Eyebolt Canyon. Have you ever heard of

such?”

“Heard of, yes, but never heard until now. Gods, how do you stand it? It sounds

alive!”

She had never thought of it quite like that, but now, in a way listening with his

ears instead of her own, she thought he was right. It was as if some sick part of the

night had gained a voice and was actually trying to sing.

She shivered. Rusher felt the momentary increased pressure of her knees and

whickered softly, craning his head around to look at her.

“We don’t often hear it so clearly at this time of year,” she said. “In the fall, the

men bum it to quiet.”

“I don’t understand.”

Who did? Who understood anything anymore? Gods, they couldn’t even turn off

the few oil-pumps in Citgo that still worked, although half of them squealed like

pigs in a slaughtering chute. These days you were usually just grateful to find

things that still worked at all.

“In the summer, when there’s time, drovers and cowboys drag loads of brush to the

mouth of Eyebolt,” she said. “Dead brush is all right, but live is better, for it’s

smoke that's wanted, and the heavier the better. Eye-bolt's a box canyon, very

short and steep-walled. Almost like a chimney lying on its side, you see?"

"Yes."

"The traditional time for burning is Reap Mom—the day after the fair and the feast and the fire."

"The first day of winter."

"Aye although in these parts it doesn't feel like winter so soon. In any case it's no

tradition; the brush is sometimes lit sooner, if the winds have been prankish or if

the sound's particularly strong. It upsets the live stock, you know—cows give

poorly when the noise of the thimble's strong—and it makes sleep difficult."

"I should think it would." Will was still looking 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 revealed was a little long, and as black as a crow's wing.

She felt a sudden, greedy desire to run her hands through it, to let her fingers tell

its texture—rough or smooth or silky? And how would it smell? At this she felt

another shiver of heat down low in her belly. He turned to her as though he had

read her mind, and she flushed, grateful that he wouldn't be able to see the

darkening of her cheek.

"How long has it been there?"

"Since before I was born," she said, "but not before my da was born. He said that

the ground shook in an earthquake just before it came. Some say the earthquake

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, re?spond?ing 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 endured her twiddling, meddling fingers, she would have said it was

the ugliest thing she had ever seen. "It looks a little like a slow-burning peat fire,

and a little like a swamp full of scummy green water. There's a mist that rises off

it. Sometimes it looks like long, skinny arms. With hands at the end of 'em."

"Is it growing?"

"Aye, they say it is, that everything grows, but it grows slowly. 'Twon't escape

Eyebolt Canyon in your time or mine."

She looked up at the sky, and saw that the constellations had continued to tilt

along their tracks as they spoke. She felt she could talk to him all night—about the

skinny, or Citigo, or her irritating aunt, or just about anything—and the idea

dismayed her. Why should this happen to her now, for the gods' sake? After three

years of dismissing the Hambray boys, why should she now meet a boy who

interested her so strangely? Why was life so unfair?

Her earlier thought, the one she'd heard in her father's voice, recurred to her: If it's

okay, it'll come like a wind, and your plans will stand before it no more than a barn

before a cyclone.

But no. And no. And no. So set she, with all her considerable determination, her

mind against the idea. This was no bam; this was her life.

Susan reached out and touched the rusty tin of Mrs. Beech's mailbox, as if to

steady herself in the world. Her little hopes and daydreams didn't mean so much,

perhaps, but her father had taught her to measure herself by her ability 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, liking the velvet tickle in the cup of her palm. "Aye, thee's a good horse, so ye are."

She looked at Will Dearborn, who stood in the road, shuffling his dusty boots and gazing at her unhappily. 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 forward, and before she could let herself think about what she was

doing, she put her hands on his shoulders, stood on her toes, and kissed him on the

mouth. The kiss was brief but not sisterly.

"Aye, very well met. Will." But when he moved toward her (as thoughtlessly as a

flower turning its face to follow the sun), wishing to repeat the experience, she

pushed him back a step, gently but firmly.

"Nay, that was only a thank-you, and one thank-you should be enough for a

gentleman. Go yer course in peace, Will."

He took up the reins like a man in a dream, looked at them for a moment as if he

didn't know what in the world they were, and then looked back at her. She could

see him working to clear his mind and emotions of the impact her kiss had made.

She liked him for it. And she was very glad she had done it.

"And you yours," he said, swinging in to the saddle. "I look forward to meeting

you for the first time."

He smiled at her, and she saw both longing and wishes in that smile. Then he

giggled the horse, turned him, and started back the way they'd come—to have

another look at the oil patch, maybe. 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?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 frequent?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?so?lute?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?est teach?er, and he

smiled.

At last he turned his horse down the slope to the trick?le of brook which ran there,

and followed it a mile and a half up?stream (past sev?er?al gath?ers of horse; they

looked at Rush?er with a kind of sleepy, wall-?eyed sur?prise) to a grove of wil?lows.

From the hol?low with?in, a horse whick ered soft?ly. Rush?er whick? ered in re?turn,

stamp?ing one hoof and nod?ding his head up and down.

His rid?er ducked his own head as he passed through the wil?low fronds, and

sud?den?ly there was a nar?row and in?hu?man white face hang?ing be?fore him, its

up?per half all but swal?lowed by black, pupil?less eyes.

He dipped for his guns—the third time tonight he'd done that, and for the third

time there was noth?ing there. Not that it mat?tered; al?ready he rec og? nized what

was hang?ing be?fore him on a string: that id?iot?ic rook's skull.

The young man who was cur?rent?ly call?ing him?self Arthur Heath had tak?en it off

his sad?dle (it amused him to call the skull so perched their look?out, “ug?ly as an old

gam?mer, but per?fect cheap to feed”) and hung it here as a prank greet? ing. Him and

his jokes! Rush?er's mas?ter bat?ted it aside hard enough to break the string and send

the skull fly?ing in?to the dark.

“Fie, Roland,” said a voice from the shad?ows. It was re?proach?ful, but there was

laugh?ter bub?bling just be?neath ... as there al?ways was. Cuth?bert was his old?est

friend—the marks of their first teeth had been em?bed ded on many of the same

toys—but Roland had in some ways nev?er un?der?stood him. Nor was it just his

laugh?ter; on the long-?ago day when Hax, the palace cook, was to be hung for a

traitor on Gal'low's 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 All'god.

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 archaically in

forgetten 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 nobody'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 inspiration 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 bosom's dearest tenant.”

“I'll wait until tomorrow, I think, when your hibernating bear is finally awake. Then

I ought to 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 Crescia, 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 Crescia 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

De'schain 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 fairy-

tales," 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

flapping and the vendors in the streets of the Old Quarter and horses trotting on

the bridle paths which radiated out from the palace standing at the heart of

everything. His father had told him more (not everything), and he had understood

more (far from everything—nor did his father understand everything). The Dark

Tower had not been mentioned by either of them, but already it hung in Roland's

mind, a possibility like a storm cloud far away on the horizon.

Was the Tower what all of this was really about? Not a jumped-up harrier with

dreams of ruling Mid-World, not the wizard who had enchanted his mother, not

the glass ball which Steven and his posse had hoped to find in Cressia . . . but the

Dark Tower?

He hadn't asked.

He hadn't dared ask.

Now he shifted in his bedroll and closed his eyes. He saw the girl's face at once;

he felt her lips pressed firmly against his own again, and smelled the scent of her

skin. He was instantly 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 Rusher's back (also the glimmer of the

undergarments beneath her briefly raised dress), and his hot half and cold half

changed places.

The whore had taken his virginity but wouldn't kiss him; had turned her face aside

when he tried to kiss her. She'd allowed him to do whatever else he wanted, but

not that. At the time he'd been bitterly disappointed. Now he was glad.

The eye of his adolescent mind, both restless and clear, considered (he braid which

fell down her back to her waist, the soft dimples which had formed at the corners

of her mouth when she smiled, the lilt of her voice, her old-fashioned way of

saying aye and nay, ye and yer and da. He thought of how her hands had felt on

his shoulders as she stretched up to kiss him, and thought he would give

everything he owned to feel her hands there again, so light and so firm. And her

mouth on his. It was a mouth that knew only a little about kissing, he guessed, but

that was a little more than he knew himself.

Be careful, Roland—don't let your feeling for this girl tip anything over. She's not

free, anyway—she said as much. Not married, but spoken for in some other way.

Roland was far from the relentless creature he would eventually be come, but the

seeds of that relentlessness 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 looking 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?trac?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

inquisitive above her narrow blade of a nose. Some things hadn't changed since

Susan had set out for the Coos; she had still been able to feel her aunt's eyes

brushing across her face and down her body, like little whisk-brooms with sharp

bristles.

"What took ye so long?" Aunt Cord had asked. "Was there trouble?"

"No trouble," Susan had replied, but for a moment she thought of how the witch

had stood beside her in the doorway, pulling her braid through the gnarled tube of

one loosely clenched fist. She remembered wanting to go, and she remembered

asking Rhea if their business was done.

Maybe there's one more little thing, the old woman had said ... or so Susan

thought. But what had that one more little thing been? She couldn't remember.

And, really, what did it matter? She was shut of Rhea until her belly began to rise

with Thorin's child . . . and if there could be no baby-making until Reap-Night,

she'd not be returning to the Coos until late winter at the soonest. An age! And it

would be longer than that, were she slow to kindle . . .

"I walked slowly coming home, Aunt. That's all."

"Then why look ye so?" Aunt Cord had asked, scant brows knitting toward the

vertical line which creased her brow.

"How so?" Susan had asked, taking off her apron and knotting the strings and

hanging it on the hook just inside the kitchen door.

"Flushy. Frothy. Like milk fresh out of the cow."

She'd almost laughed. Aunt Cord, who knew as little about men as Susan did

about the stars and planets, had struck it directly. Flushy and frothy was exactly

how she felt. "Only the night air, I suppose," she had said. "I saw a meteor, Aunt.

And heard the thiny. The sound's strong tonight."

"Aye?" her aunt asked without interest, then returned to the subject which did

interest her. "Did it hurt?"

"A little."

"Did ye cry?"

Susan shook her head.

"Good. Better not. Always better. She likes it when they cry, I've heard. Now,

Sue—did she give you something? Did the old pussy give you something?"

"Aye." She reached into her pocket and brought out the paper with written upon it. She held it out and her aunt snatched it away with a greedy look.

Cordelia had been quite the sugarplum over the last month or so, but now that she

had what she wanted (and now that Susan had come too far and promised too

much to have a change of heart), she'd reverted to the sour, suspicious, often

suspicious woman Susan had grown up with; the one who'd been driven into

almost weekly bouts of rage by her phlegmatic, life-goes-as-'twill brother. In a

way, it was a relief. It had been nerve-racking to have Aunt Cord playing Cybil!

Good-?Sprite day after day.

"Aye, aye, there's her mark, all right," her aunt had said, tracing her fingers over

the bottom of the sheet. "A devil'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

lit?tle folk like them. And now, to have the pay?ing of it put back so far ...

Then came a sin Su?san had prayed over (al?though with?out much en thu?si?asm)

be?fore get?ting in?to her bed: she had rather en?joyed the cheat?ed, frus?trat?ed look on

Aunt Cord's face—the look of the thwart?ed miser.

"Why so long?" she re?peat?ed.

“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 trolley 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 Mayor 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 en?joy?able) ”but un?til then, it was to be in my keep?ing.“

”I nev?er heard of such a thing,” Aunt Cordelia had huffed . . . but she had hand?ed

the grimy scrap of pa?per back. ”Giv?ing the keep of such an im?por?tant doc?ument to

a mere scrap of a girl.“

Yet not too mere a scrap to be his gilly, am I? To lie un?der him and lis?ten to his

bones creak and take his seed and may?hap bear his child.

She’d dropped her eyes to her pock?et as she put the pa?per away again, not want?ing

Aunt Cord to see the re?sent?ment in them.

”Go up,” Aunt Cord had said, brush?ing the froth of lace off her lap and in?to her

work?bas?ket, where it lay in an un?ac?cus?tomed tan?gle. ”And when you wash, do

your mouth with es?pe?cial care. Cleanse it of its im?pu dence and dis?re?spect to?ward

those who have giv?en up much for love of its own?er.”

Su?san had gone silent?ly, bit?ing back a thou?sand re?torts, mount?ing the stairs as she

had so of?ten, throb?bing with a mix?ture of shame and re?sent?ment.

And now here she was, in her bed and still awake as the stars paled away and the

first brighter shades be?gan to col?or the sky. The events of the night just past

slipped through her mind in a kind of fan?tas?ti?cal blur, like shuf?fled play?ing

cards—and the one which turned up with the most per?sis?tence 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 gelding and the silly flat-crowned hat. For a moment the

vision of her mind became so clear and so sweet that it was real, and all the rest of

her life only a drab dream. In this vision he kissed her over and over, their mouths

widening, their tongues touching; what he breathed out, she breathed in.

She burned. She burned in her bed like a torch. And when the sun finally came

over the horizon some short time later, she lay deeply asleep, with a faint smile on

her lips and her unbraided hair lying across the side of her face and her pillow like

loose gold.

3

In the last hour before dawn, the public room of the Travellers' Rest was as quiet

as it ever became. The gaslights which turned the chandelier into a brilliant jewel

until two of the clock or so on most nights were now turned down to guttering

blue points, and the long, high room was shadowy and spectral.

In one corner lay a jumble of kindling—the remains of a couple of chairs smashed

in a fight over a Watch Me game (the combatants were currently residing in the

High Sheriff's drunk-cell). In another corner was a fairly large puddle of

congealing puke. On the raised platform at the east end of the room stood a

battered piano; propped against its bench was the ironwood club which belonged

to Barkie, the saloon's bouncer and all-around tough man. Barkie himself, the

naked mound of his scarred stomach rising above the waistband of his corduroy

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-tits

condoms over the prongs of two of its antlers. Lying on the bar itself and directly

behind 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,

oc?ca?sion?al?ly twitch?ing at the feet and fat fin?gers. The on?ly oth?er sounds were the

hot sum?mer wind out?side and the soft, reg?ular snap of cards be?ing turned one by one.

A small ta?ble stood by it?self near the batwing doors which gave up?on the Ham?bry

High Street; it was here that Coral Thorin, own?er of the Trav ellers' Rest (and the

May?or's sis?ter), sat on the nights when she de scend?ed from her suite "to be a part

of the com?pa?ny." When she came down, she came down ear?ly—when there were

still more steaks than whiskey be?ing served across the old scratched bar—and

went back up around the time that Sheb, the pi?ano play?er, sat down and be?gan to

pound his hideous in?stru?ment. The May?or him?self nev?er came in lit nil, al?though it

was well-?known that he owned at least a half-?in?ter?est in the Trav?ellers'. Clan

Thorin en?joyed the mon?ey the place brought in; they just didn't en joy the look of

it af?ter mid?night, when the saw?dust spread on the floor be gan to soak up the

spilled beer and the spilled blood. Yet there was a hard streak in Coral, who had

twen?ty years be?fore been what was called "a wild child." She was younger than

her po?lit?ical broth?er, not so thin, and good-?look?ing in a large-?eyed, weasel-?head?ed

way. No one sat at her ta?ble dur?ing the sa?loon's op?er?at?ing hours —Barkie would

have put a stop to any?one who tried, and dou?ble-?quick—but op?er?at?ing hours were

over now, the drunks most?ly gone or passed out up?stairs, 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' the 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 wattles. He wore a moustache so long the ragged white ends hung

nearly to his jaw—a sham gun-slinger's moustache, many thought it, but no one used

the word "sham" to Elfred Jonas's face. He wore a white silk shirt, and a black-

handed revolver hung low on his hip. His large, red-rimmed eyes looked sad on

first glance. A 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, Elfred."

"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 cowgirl 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 demurred. “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 North’sd 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

re-supply 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 Far?son's in charge of the whole South?west Edge now, and

sit?ting on high ground. The brats may know the same—that play?time's purt' near

over for the Af?fil?ia?tion and all its puke?some roy?al?ty. 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-?de?cent job just to try and get on the good side o' their par?ents again.

We'll know bet?ter 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 boss?es if they see the

wrong thing. Their dad?dies might be mad at em alive, but I think they'd be very

ten?der of em dead—that's just the way dad?dies are. We'll want to be trig, Clay; as

trig as we can be."

"Bet?ter leave De?pape out of it, then."

"Roy will be fine," Jonas said in his qua?very voice. He dropped the stub of his

cigarette to the floor and crushed it un?der his bootheel. He looked up at The

Romp's glassy eyes and squint?ed, as if cal?cu?lat?ing. "To night, your friend said?

They ar?rived tonight, these brats?"

"Yep."

"They'll be in to see Av?ery to?mor?row, then, I reck?on." This was Herk Av?ery, High

Sher?iff of Mejis and Chief Con?sta?ble of Ham?bry, a large man who was as loose as

a trun?dle of laun?dry.

"Reck?on so," Clay Reynolds said. "To present their pa?pers 'n all."

"Yes, sir, yes in?deedy. How-?d'you-?do, and how-?d'you-?do, and how-?d'you-?do

again."

Reynolds said noth?ing. He of?ten didn't un?der?stand Jonas, but he had been rid?ing

with him since the age of fif?teen, and knew it was usu?al?ly bet ter not to ask for

en?light?en?ment. If you did, you were apt to end up lis?ten ing to a cult-?man?ni lec?ture

about the oth?er worlds the old buz?zard had vis?it?ed through what he called "the

spe?cial doors." As far as Reynolds was con?cerned, there were enough or?di?nary

doors in the world to keep him busy.

"I'll speak to Rimer and Rimer'll talk to the Sher?iff 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 land marks in a

hur?ry. The Bar K was a de?sert?ed spread of land north?west of town, not too far

from that weird squalling canyon. They burned at the mouth of the canyon ev?ery

fall, and once, six or sev?en years ago, the wind had shift?ed and gone back wrong

and burned most of the Bar K to the ground—barns, sta?bles, the home place. It

had spared the bunkhouse, how?ev?er, and that would be a good spot for three

ten?der?feet from the In?ners. It was away from the Drop; it was al?so away from the

oil patch.

"Ye like it, don't ye?" Jonas asked, putting on a hick Ham?bry ac?cent. "Aye, ye like

it very much, I can see ye do, my cul?ly. Ye know what they say in Cres?sia? 'Ifye'd

steal the sil?ver from the din?ing room, first put the dog in the pantry.' "

Reynolds nodded. It was good advice. "And those trucks? Those what-do-you-cal'lums, 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

so-ci-ety 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 mustache, 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

handed Reynolds the fresh cigarette. He began making another for himself. "I'll

offer your excuses. 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, covering those hulks.

You're too kind, Jonas."

"I'll be asking questions, as well," Jonas said dreamily. "Drifting here and there . . .

looking spruce, smelling of bayberries . . . and asking my little questions. I've

known folks in our line of trade who'll go to a fat, jolly fellow to find out the

gossip—a saloon-keeper or bartender, perhaps a lively stable owner or one of the

chubby fellows who always hangs about the jail or the courthouse with his thumbs

tucked into his vest pockets. As for myself. Clay, I find that a woman's best, and

the narrower the better—one with more nose than tits sticking off her. I look for

one who don't paint her lips and keeps her hair scooped back against her head."

"You have someone in mind?"

"Yar. Cordelia Delgado's her name."

"Delgado?"

"You know the name, it's on the lips of everyone in this town, I reckon. Susan

Delgado, our esteemed Mayor's soon-to-be gilly. Cordelia's her auntie. Now

here's a fact of human nature I've found: folk are more apt to talk to someone like

her, who plays them close, than they are to the local jolly types who'll buy you a

drink. And that lady plays them close. I'm going to slip in next to her at that

dinner, and I'm going to compliment her on the perfume I doubt like hell she'll be

wearing, and I'm going to keep her wineglass full. Now, how sounds that for a

plan?"

"A plan for what? That's what I want to know."

"For the game of Castles we may have to play," Jonas said, and all the lightness

dropped out of his voice. "We're to believe that these boys have been sent here

more as punishment than to do any real job of work. It sounds plausible, too. I've

known rakes in my time, and it sounds plausible, indeed. I believe it each day

until about three in the morning, and then a little 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

convince him that Farson's glass would be better with the witch-woman, for the

nonce. She'll keep it in a place where a gunslinger couldn't find it, let alone a nosy

lad who's yet to have his first piece of arse. These are strange times. A storm's

coming. And when you know the wind is going to blow, it's best to keep your gear

buttoned down."

He looked at the cigarette he had made. He had been dancing it along the backs of

his knuckles, as Reynolds had done earlier. Jonas pushed back the fall of his hair

and tucked the cigarette behind his ear.

"I don't want to smoke," he said, standing up and stretching. His back made small

crackling sounds. "I'm crazy to smoke at this hour of the morning. Too many

cigarettes are apt to keep an old man like me awake."

He walked toward the stairs, squeezing Pettie's bare leg as he went by, also 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 tangling 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 Eldred 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, or angry-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

habitation 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

alcohol in it. You know what to say on that account. Remember the rest of our

story, too. Smile. Be pleasant. Use what social graces you have. Remember how

the Sheriff fell all over himself to make us feel welcome.”

Alain nodded at that, looking a little more confident.

“In the matter of social graces,” Cuthbert said, “they won’t have many themselves,

so we should all be a step ahead.”

Roland nodded, then saw that the bird’s skull was back on the horn of Cuthbert’s

saddle. “And get rid of that!”

Looking guilty, Cuthbert stuffed “the lookout” hurriedly into his saddle bag. Two

men wearing white jackets, white pants, and sandals were coming forward,

bowing and smiling.

“Keep your heads,” Roland said, lowering his voice. “Both of you. Remember

why you’re here. And remember the faces of your fathers.” He clapped Alain, who

still looked doubtful, on the shoulder. Then he turned to the hostlers. “Good even,

gents,” he said. “May your days be long upon the earth.”

They both grinned, their teeth flashing in the extravagant torchlight. The older one

bowed. “And your own as well, young masters. Welcome to Mayor’s House.”

2

The High Sheriff had welcomed them the day before every bit as happily 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 believe, riding down this street with their horses' hoofs

clacking on the swept cobblestones, that the northwest side of the Affiliation—the

ancient land of Eld, Arthur's kingdom—could be on fire and in danger of falling.

The jailhouse was just a larger version of the post office and land office; a smaller

version of the Town Gathering Hall. Except, of course, for the bars on the

windows facing down toward the small harbor.

Sheriff Herk Avery was a big-bellied man in a lawman's khaki 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 belly 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 good-morns, 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 khaki like the Sheriff, crowded into the door behind Avery

and gawked. That was what it was, all right, a hawk; there was just no other word

for that sort of openly curious and totally unself-conscious stare.

Av?ery shook each boy by the hand, con?tin?uing to bow as he did so, and noth?ing

Roland said could get him to stop un?til he was done. When he fi?nal?ly was, he

showed them in?side. The of?fice was de?light?ful?ly cool in spite of the beat?ing

mid?sum?mer sun. That was the ad?van?tage of brick, of course. It was big as well,

and clean?er than any High Sher?iff's of?fice Roland had ev?er been in be?fore . . . and

he had been in at least half a dozen over the last three years, ac?com?pany?ing his

fa?ther on sev?er?al short trips and one longer pa?trol-?swing.

There was a roll?top desk in the cen?ter, a no?tice-?board to the right of the door (the

same sheets of foolscap had been scrib?bled on over and over; pa?per was a rare

com?mod?ity in Mid-?World), and, in the far com?er, two ri?fles in a pad?locked case.

These were such an?cient blun?der?busses that Roland won?dered if there was

am?mu?ni?tion for them. He won?dered if they would fire, come to that. To the left of

the gun-?case, an open door gave on the jail it?self—three cells on each side of a

short cor?ri?dor, and a smell of strong lye soap drift?ing out.

They've cleaned for our com?ing, Roland thought. He was amused, touched, and

un?easy. Cleaned it as though we were a troop of In?ner Barony horse—ca?reer

sol?diers who might want to stage a hard in?spec?tion in?stead of three lads serv?ing

pun?ish?ment de?tail.

But was such ner?vous care on the part of their hosts re?al?ly so strange? They were

from New Canaan, af?ter all, and folk in this tucked-?away cor ner of the world

might well see them as a species of vis?it?ing roy?al?ty.

Sher?iff Av?ery in?tro?duced his deputies. Roland shook hands with all of them, not

try?ing to mem?orize their names. It was Cuth?bert who took care of names, and it

was a rare oc?ca?sion when he dropped one. The third, a bald fel?low with a mon?ocle

hang?ing around his neck on a rib?bon, ac?tu?al?ly dropped to one knee be?fore them.

“Don’t do that, ye great id?iot!” Av?ery cried, yank?ing him back up by the scruff of

his neck. “What kind of a bump?kin will they think ye? Be sides, you’ve

em?bar?rased them, so ye have!”

“That’s all right,” Roland said (he was, in fact, very em?bar?rased, al though try?ing

not to show it). “We’re re?al?ly noth?ing at all spe?cial, you know—”

“Noth?ing spe?cial!” Av?ery said, laugh?ing. His bel?ly, Roland no? ticed, did not shake

as one might have ex?pect?ed it to do; it was hard?er than it looked. The same might

be true of its own?er. “Noth?ing spe?cial, he says! Five hun?dred mile or more from

the In-?World they’ve come, our first of?fi cial vis?itors from the Af? fil?ia?tion since a

gun?slinger passed through on the Great Road four year ago, and yet he says they’re

noth?ing spe?cial! Would ye sit, my boys? I’ve got graf, which ye won’t want so

ear?ly in the day— p’raps not at all, giv?en your ages (and if you’ll for? give me for

statin so bald the ob?vi?ous 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 al?so have white iced tea, which I

rec?om?mend 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

importance, 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 attorney—James

Reed (of Hemphill) in the case of Dearborn, Piet Ravenhead (of Pennington) 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 handled 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, peacemaker, 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

materials which might serve the Affiliation in time of need (the word war was

omitted from the document, but glowed between every line). Steven Dechain, on

behalf of the Affiliation of Baronies, 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 livestock, all supplies of food, and

all forms of transport. Dearborn, Stockworth, and Heath would be in Mejis for at

least three months, Dechain 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 peering at 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 (he 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 started. “Well, I...”

“Ye expected no such amenity in a backwater like Hamby, I’ll warrant,” Avery

said, and although there was a joshing quality on top of his voice, Roland thought

there was something else entirely underneath.

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

already he doesn't like them. He thinks we're a trio of snottoses; that we see him

and everyone else here as country bumpkins.

"Not just Hambray," Alain said quietly. "Ice is as rare in the Inner Arc these days as

anywhere else, Sheriff Avery. When I grew up, I saw it mostly as a special treat at

birthday parties and such."

"There was always ice on Glow-ing Day," Cuthbert put in. He spoke with very un-

Cuthbertian quiet. "Except for the fireworks, that's what we liked about it most."

"Is that so, is that so," Sheriff Avery said in an amazed, wonder-will-never-cease

tone. Avery perhaps didn't like them riding in like this, didn't like having to take

up what he would probably call "half the damn morning" with them; he didn't like

their clothes, their fancy identification papers, their accents, or their youth. Least

of all their youth. Roland could understand all that, but wondered if it was the

whole story. If there was something else going on here, what was it?

"There's a gas-fired refrigerator and stove in the Town Gathering Hall," Avery

said. "Both work. There's plenty of earth-gas out at Citgo—that's the oil patch east

of town. Y'er passed it on yer way in, I wot."

They nodded.

"Stove's nobbut a curiosity these days—a history lesson for the

schoolchildren—but the refrigerator comes in handy, so it does.”
Avery held up

his glass and looked through the side. “ ‘Special?ly in summer.’ ”

He sipped some tea, smacked his lips, and smiled at Alain, “You see?
No

mystery.”

“I’m surprised you haven’t found use for the oil,” Roland said. “No
generators in

town, Sheriff?”

“Aye, there be four or five,” Avery said. “The biggest is out at Francis
Lengyll’s

Rocking B ranch, and I recall when it used to run. It’s HONDA. Do
you know that

name, boys? HONDA?”

“I’ve seen it once or twice,” Roland said, “on old motor-driven bicycles.”

“Aye? In any case, none of the generators will run on the oil from the
Citgo patch.

It’s too thick. Tarry goo, is all. We have no refineries here.”

“I see,” Alain said. “In any case, ice in summer’s a treat. However it
comes to the

glass.” He let one of the chunks slip into his mouth, and crunched it
between his

teeth.

Avery looked at him a moment longer, as if to make sure the subject
was closed,

then switched his gaze back to Roland. His fat face was once more radiant
with his

broad, untrusty smile.

“Mayor Thorin has asked me to extend to you his very best greetings,
and convey his

regrets for not being here today—very busy is our Lord Mayor, very
busy indeed.

But he’s laid on a dinner-party at Mayor’s House to tomorrow
evening—seven o’ the

clock for most folk, eight for you young fellows ... so you can make a
bit of an

en?trance, I imag?ine, add a touch o' dra?ma, like. And I need not tell such as

your?selves, who've prob?ably at tend?ed more such par?ties than I've had hot din?ners,

that it would be best to ar?rive pret?ty much on the dot.“

”Is it fan?cy-?dress?“ Cuth?bert asked un?easi?ly. ”Be?cause we've come a long way,

al?most four hun?dred wheels, and we didn't pack for?mal wear and sash?es, none of

us.“

Av?ery was chuck?ling—more hon?est?ly this time, Roland thought, per haps be?cause

he felt ”Arthur“ had dis?played a streak of un?so?phis?ti?ca?tion and in?se?cu?ri?ty. ”Nay,

young mas?ter, Thorin un?der?stands ye've come to do a job—next door to workin

cow?boys, ye be! ‘Ware they don't have ye out drag?gin nets in the bay next!“

From the com?er, Dave—the deputy with the mon?ocle—honked un?ex pect?ed

laugh?ter. Per?haps it was the sort of joke you had to be lo?cal to un? der?stand, Roland

thought.

”Wear the best ye have, and ye'll be fine. There'll be no one there in sash?es, in any

case—that's not how things are done in Ham?bry.“ Again

Roland was struck by the man's con?stant smil?ing den?igra?tion of his town ;iul

Barony . . . and the re?sent?ment of the out?siders which lay just be neath it.

”In any case, ye'll find yer?selves work?ing more than play?ing to?mor row night, I

imag?ine. Hart's in?vit?ed all the large ranch?ers, stock?lin?ers, and live?stock own?ers

from this part of the Barony ... not that there's so many, you un?der? stand, bein as

how Mejis is next door to desert once you get west o' the Drop. But ev?ery?one

whose goods and chat?tel you've been sent to count will be there, and I think you'll

find all of them loy?al Af?fil?ia tion men, ready and ea?ger to help. There's Fran?cis

Lengyll of the Rock?ing B ... John Croy?don of the Pi?ano Ranch ... Hen?ry Wert?ner,

who's the Barony's stock?lin?er as well as a horse?breed?er in his own right ... Hash

Ren?frew, who owns the Lazy Su?san, the biggest horse-?ranch in Mejis (not that it's

much by the stan?dards you fel?lows are used to, I wot) ... and there'll be oth?ers, as

well. Rimer'll in?tro?duce you, and get you about your busi?ness right smart."

Ronald nod?ded and turned to Cuth?bert. "You'll want to be on your met?tle

to?mor?row night."

Cuth?bert nod?ded. "Don't fear me, Will, I'll note em all."

Av?ery sipped more tea, eye?ing them over his glass with a rogu?ish ex pres?sion so

false it made Roland want to squirm.

"Most of em's got daugh?ters of mar?riage?able age, and they'll bring em. You boys

want to look out."

Roland de?cid?ed he'd had enough tea and hypocrisy for one morn?ing. He nod?ded,

emp?tied his glass, smiled (hop?ing his looked more gen?uine than Av?ery's now

looked to him), and got to his feet. Cuth?bert and Alain took the cue and did

like?wise.

"Thank you for the tea, and for the wel?come," Roland said. "Please send a

mes?sage to May?or Thorin, thank?ing him for his kind?ness and telling him that he'll

see us to?mor?row, at eight o' the clock, prompt."

"Aye. So I will."

Roland then turned to Dave. That wor?thy was so sur?prised to be no
ticed again

that he re?coiled, al?most bump?ing his head on the no?tice-?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?sion, 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 Cuthbert was looking down at the harbor, where the small fish-

boats skittered to and fro like waterbugs.

"Aye, just what I said, 'Why not, indeed?' I said. The home place burned to a

cinder, but the bunkhouse still stands; so does the stable and the cook-shack next

door to it. On Maynor Thorin's orders, I've taken the liberty of stock-

ing the larder and having the bunkhouse swept out and spruced up a little. Ye may see the

occasional bug, but nothing that'll bite or sting . . . and no snakes, unless there's a

few under 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 under the floor where they're happy," Cuthbert agreed,

still gazing down at the harbor with his arms folded over his chest.

Avory gave him a brief, uncertain glance, his smile flickering a bit at the corners.

Then he turned back to Roland, and the smile shone out strongly 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?"

"Better than we deserve. I think that you've been very efficient and Maynor Thorin's

been far too kind." And he did think that. The question was why. "But we

appreciate his thoughtfulness. Don't we, boys?"

Cuthbert and Alain made vigorous assent.

"And we accept with thanks."

Avory nodded. "I'll tell him. Go safely, boys."

They had reached the hitching rail. Avory once more shook hands all around, this

time saving his keenest looks for their horses.

"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 un?spo?ken con?tempt and un
con?scious

con?de?scen?sion. Yet per?haps it was to the good. If the High Sher?iff
thought they

were stupid, who knew what might come of it?

"We'll find it," Cuth?bert said, mount?ing up. Av?ery was look?ing sus?
pi cious?ly at the

rook's skull on the horn of Cuth?bert's sad?dle. Cuth?bert saw him
look?ing, but for

once man?aged to keep his mouth shut. Roland was both amazed and
pleased by

this un?ex?pect?ed ret?icence. "Fare you well, Sher?iff."

"And you, boy."

He stood there by the hitch?ing post, a large man in a kha?ki shirt with
sweat-?stains

around the armpits and black boots that looked too shiny for a work?ing
sher?iff's

feet. And where's the horse that could sup?port him through a day of
range-?rid?ing?

Roland thought. I'd like to see the cut of that Cayuse.

Av?ery waved to them as they went. The oth?er deputies came down the
walk,

Deputy Dave in the fore?front. They waved, too.

3

The mo?ment the Af?fil?ia?tion brats mount?ed on their fa?thers' ex?
pen?sive horse flesh

were around the com?er and head?ed down?hill to the High Street, the
sher?iff and the

deputies stopped wav?ing. Av?ery turned to Dave Hol?lis, whose ex?
pres?sion of

slight?ly stupid awe had been re?placed by one mar gi?nal?ly more in?
tel?li?gent.

"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 cunning to try 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 think?ing.” He smiled—one very dif?fer?ent from any of those he had shown

the Af?fil?ia?tion coun?ters. “May?hap they all will.”

4

The three boys rode in sin?gle file un?til they were past the Trav?ellers’ Rest (a young

and ob?vi?ous?ly re?tard?ed man with kinky black hair looked up from scrub?bing the

brick stoop and waved to them; they waved back). Then they moved up abreast,

Roland in the mid?dle.

“What did you think of our new friend, the High Sher?iff?” Roland asked.

“I have no opin?ion,” Cuth?bert said bright?ly. “No, none at all. Opin?ion is pol?itics,

and pol?itics is an evil which has caused many a fel?low to be hung while he’s still

young and pret?ty.” He leaned for?ward and tapped the rook’s skull with his

knuck?les. “The look?out didn’t care for him, though. I’m sor?ry to say that our

faith?ful look?out thought Sher?iff Av?ery a fat bag of guts with?out a trust?wor?thy bone

in his body.”

Roland turned to Alain. “And you, young Mas?ter Stock?worth?”

Alain con?sid?ered it for some time, as was his way, chew?ing a piece of grass he’d

bent over?sad?dle to pluck from his side of the road. At last he said: “If he came

up?on us burn?ing in the street, I don’t think he’d piss on us to put us out.”

Cuth?bert laughed hearti?ly at that. “And you, Will? How do you say, dear cap?tain?”

“He doesn’t in?ter?est me much ... but one thing he said does. Giv?en that the horse-

mead?ow they call the Drop has to be at least thir?ty 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 hall was thrown open and two

women stepped out, both wearing long white-colored dresses that reminded all

three boys of the dress?es stock?men's wives wore in their own part of the world.

Their hair was caught back in snoods that sparkled with some bright di?amondy

stuff in the light of the torch?es.

The plumper of the two stepped for?ward, smil?ing, and dropped them a deep

curt?sey. Her ear?rings, which looked like square-?cut fired?ims, flashed and bobbed.

"You are the young men from the Af?fil?ia?tion, so you are, and wel?come you are, as

well. Good?even, sirs, and may your days be long up?on the earth!"

They bowed in uni?son, boots for?ward, and thanked her in an unin?tend?ed cho?rus

that made her laugh and clap her hands. The tall wom?an be side her of?fered them a

smile as spare as her frame.

"I am Olive Thorin," the plump wom?an said, "the May?or's wife. This is my sis?ter-

in-?law, Coral."

Coral Thorin, still with that nar?row smile (it bare?ly creased her lips and touched

her eyes not at all), dipped them a to?ken curt?sey. Roland, Cuth?bert, and Alain

bowed again over their out?stretched legs.

"I wel?come you to Seafront," Olive Thorin said, her dig?ni?ty leav?ened and made

pleas?ant by her art?less smile, her ob?vi?ous daz?zle?ment at the ap?pear?ance of her

young vis?itors 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 greet?ing has made us joy?ful." He

took her hand, and, with no cal?cu?la?tion what?ev?er, 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 problematic

expectation 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-collector in

the foyer looked as though he'd had little or no custom. Roland wasn't entirely

surprised to see that it was Deputy Dave, his remaining bits of hair slicked back

with some sort of gleaming grease and his monocle now lying on the snow-white

breast of a houseman's jacket. Roland gave him a nod. Dave, his hands clasped

behind his back, returned it.

Two men—Sheriff Avery and an elderly gent as gaunt as Old Doctor Death in a

cartoon—came toward them. Beyond, through a pair of double doors now open

wide, a whole roomful of people stood about with crystal punch-cups in their

hands, talking and taking little bits of food from the trays which were circulating.

Roland had time for just one narrow-eyed glance toward Cuthbert:

Everything. Every name, every face . . . every nuance. Especially those.

Cuthbert raised an eyebrow—his discreet version of a nod—and then Roland was

pulled, willy-nilly, into the evening, his first real evening of service as a working

gunslinger. And he had rarely worked harder.

Old Doctor Death turned out to be Kimba Rimer, Thorin's Chancellor and Minister

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 suppose you're right." She curtseyed to Roland and his companions a final

time, and although she still smiled and although the smile looked completely

genuine to Roland, he thought: She's unhappy about something, all the same.

Desperately so, I think.

"Gentlemen?" Rimer asked. The teeth in his smile were almost disconcertingly

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 unforgiving sword.

Yet there was life here, and plenty of it. There was a robustness that had been

miss?ing in Gilead, and not just at East?er?ling, ei?ther. The tex?ture he felt as he

stepped in?to the May?or's House re?cep?tion room was the sort of thing, Roland

re?flect?ed, that you didn't en?tire?ly miss when it was gone, be?cause it slipped away

qui?et?ly and painless?ly. Like blood from a vein cut in a tub filled with hot wa?ter.

The room—al?most but not quite grand enough to be a hall—was cir?cu?lar, its

pan?elled walls dec?orat?ed by paint?ings (most quite bad) of pre?vi?ous May?ors. On a

raised stand to the right of the doors lead?ing in?to the din?ing area, four grin?ning

gui?tarists in tati jack?ets and som?breros were play?ing some?thing that sound?ed like a

waltz with pep?per on it. In the cen?ter of the floor was a ta?ble sup?port?ing two cut-

glass punch?bowls, one vast and grand, the oth?er small?er and plain?er. The white-

jack?et?ed fel?low in charge of the dip?ping-?out op?er?ations was an?oth?er of Av?ery's

deputies.

Con?trary to what the High Sher?iff had told them the day be?fore, sev?er?al of the

men were wear?ing sash?es of var?ious col?ors, 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

ev?ery man wear?ing a sash, he saw three wear?ing the sort of dowdy, box-?tailed

coats that he as?so?ci?at?ed with stock men at church, and he saw sev?er?al oth?ers

(younger men, for the most part) who weren't wear?ing coats at all. Some of the

wom?en wore jew?el?ry (though noth?ing so ex?pen?sive as sai Thorin's fired?im

ear?rings), and few looked as if they'd missed many meals, but they al?
so wore

clothes Roland rec?og?nized: the long, round-?col?lared dress?es, usu?
al?ly with the lace

fringe of a col?ored un?der?skirt show?ing be?low 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 dif?fer?ent.

It was Su?san Del?ga?do, of course, shim?mer?ing and al?most too
beau?ti ful 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 sap?phire pen?dant that
made Olive

Thorin's ear?rings look like paste. She stood next to a man wear?ing a
sash the col?or

of coals in a hot wood?fire. That deep or?ange-?red was the Barony's
col?or, and

Roland sup?posed that the man was their host, but for the mo?ment
Roland bare?ly

saw him. His eye was held by Su?san Del?ga?do: the blue dress, the
tanned skin, the

tri?an?gles of col?or, too pale and per?fect to be make?up, which ran
light?ly up her

cheeks; most of all her hair, which was un?bound tonight and fell to her
waist like a

shim?mer of palest silk. He want?ed her, sud?den?ly and com?plete?ly,
with a des?per?ate

depth of feel?ing that felt like sick?ness. Ev?ery?thing he was and ev?
ery?thing he had

come for, it seemed, was sec?ondary to her.

She turned a lit?tle, then, and spied him. Her eyes (they were gray, he
saw) widened

the tini?est bit. He thought that the col?or in her cheeks deep ened a lit?
tle. 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

stand?ing next to him, his face bright?en?ing. He was short?er than his
Chan?cel?lor but

just as thin, and his build was pe?cu?liar: a short and nar?row-?shoul?
dered up?per body

over im?pos?si?bly long and skin?ny legs, He looked, Roland thought,
like the sort of

bird you should glimpse in a marsh at dawn, bob?bing for its break?fast.

“Aye, you may!” he cried in a strong, high voice. “In?deed you may,
we’ve been

wait?ing with im?pa?tience, great im?pa?tience, for this mo?ment! Well
met we are,

very well met! Wel?come, sirs! May your evening in this house of
which I am the

fleet?ing pro?pri?etor be hap?py, and may your days be long up?on the
earth!”

Roland took the bony out?stretched hand, heard the knuck?les crack be
neath his

grip, looked for an ex?pres?sion of dis?com?fort on the May?or’s face,
and was re?lieved

to see none. He bowed low over his out?stretched leg.

“William Dear?born, May?or Thorin, at your ser?vice. Thank you for
your wel?come,

and may your own days be long up?on the earth.”

“Arthur Heath” made his man?ners next, then “Richard Stock?worth.”
Thorin’s smile

widened at each deep bow. Rimer did his best to beam, but looked un?
used to it.

The man with the long white hair took a glass of punch, passed it to his
fe?male

com?pan?ion, and con?tin?ued to smile thin?ly. Roland was aware that
ev?ery?one in the

room—the guests num?bered per haps fifty in all—was look?ing at
them, but what

he felt most up?on his skin, beat?ing like a soft wing, was her re?gard.
He could see

the blue silk of her dress from the side of one eye, but did not dare look
at her

more di?rect?ly.

“Was your trip dif?fi?cult?” Thorin was ask?ing. “Did you have ad?ven-
tures and

ex?pe?ri?ence per?ils? We would hear all the de?tails at din?ner, so we
would, for we

have few guests from the In?ner Arc these days.” His ea?ger, slight?ly
fatu?ous smile

fad?ed; his tuft?ed brows drew to?geth?er. “Did ye en counter pa?trols
of Far?son?”

“No, Ex?cel?len?cy,” Roland said. “We—”

“Nay, lad, nay—no Ex?cel?len?cy, I won’t have it, and the fish?er?folk
and hoss-

drovers I serve wouldn’t, even if I would. Just May?or Thorin, if you
please.”

“Thank you. We saw many strange things on our jour?ney, May?or
Thorin, but no

Good Men.”

“Good Men!” Rimer jerked out, and his up?per lip lift?ed in a smile
which made him

look dog?like. “Good Men, in?deed!”

“We would hear it all, ev?ery word,” Thorin said. “But be?fore I for?get
my man?ners

in my ea?ger?ness, young gen?tle?men, let me in?tro?duce you to these
close around me.

Kim?ba you’ve met; this formidable fel?low to my left is El?dred Jonas,
chief of my

new?ly in?stalled se?cu?ri?ty staff.” Thorin’s smile looked mo?men?
tar?ily em?bar?rassed.

“I’m not con?vinced that I need ex?tra se?cu?ri?ty, Sher?iff Av?ery’s al?
ways been quite

enough to keep the peace in our com?er of the world, but Kim?ba in?
sists. And when

Kim?ba in sists, the May?or must bow.”

“Very wise, sir,” Rimer said, and bowed him?self. They all laughed,
save for Jonas,

who sim?ply held on?to his nar?row 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 web 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 familiarly

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 es?pe?cial friend, Miss Su?san Del?ga?do,” Thorin fin?ished, sound?ing

flus?tered (Roland sup?posed she would have that ef?fect on any man, even an old

one like the May?or). Thorin urged her for?ward, bob?bing his head and grin?ning,

one of his knuck?le-?choked hands pressed against the small of her back, and

Roland felt an in?stant of poi?sonous jeal?ousy. Ridicu?lous, giv?en this man’s age and

his plump, pleas?ant wife, but it was there, all right, and it was sharp. Sharp as a

bee’s ass, Cort would have said.

Then her face tilt?ed up to his, and he was look?ing in?to her eyes again.

He had heard of drown?ing in a wom?an’s eyes in some po?em or sto?ry, and thought

it ridicu?lous. He still thought it ridicu?lous, but un?der?stood it was per?fect?ly

pos?si?ble, nonethe?less. And she knew it. He saw con?cern in her eyes, per?haps even

fear.

Promise me that if we meet at May?or’s House, we meet for the first time.

The mem?ory of those words had a sober?ing, clar?ify?ing ef?fect, and seemed to widen

his vi?ision a lit?tle. Enough for him to be aware that the wom?an be?side Jonas, the

one who shared some of Su?san’s fea?tures, was look?ing at the girl with a mix?ture of

cu?rios?ity and alarm.

He bowed low, but did lit?tle more than touch her ring?less out?stretched hand. Even

so, he felt some?thing like a spark jump be?tween their fin?gers. From the mo?men?tary

widen?ing 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 beguiled, 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."

"Nonsense," Lengyll said, looking pleased all the same as he knocked back a glass

of punch. "We're all in this together, boy. John Farson's but one bad straw in a

field of wrong-headedness 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 furnace as well as we can, as long as we can. For the

sake of our children even more than for that of our fathers."

"Hear, hear," Mayor Thorin said in a voice that strove for the high ground of

solemnity and fell with a splash into fatuity instead. Roland noticed the scrawny

old fellow was gripping one of Susan's hands (she seemed almost unaware of it;

was looking intently at Lengyll instead), and suddenly he understood: the Mayor

was either her uncle or perhaps a cousin of some close degree. Lengyll ignored

both, looking at the three newcomers instead, scrutinizing each in turn and

finishing with Roland.

"Anything us in Mejis can do to help, lad, just ask—me, John Croydon, Hash

Renfrew, Jake White, Hank Wertner, any or all. Ye'll meet em tonight, aye, their

wives and sons and daughters as well, and ye need only ask. We may be a good

piece out from the hub of New Canaan here, but we're strong for the Affiliation,

all the same. Aye, very strong."

"Well spoken," Rimer said quietly.

"And now," Lengyll said, "we'll toast your arrival proper. And ye've had to wait

too long already for a dip of punch. It's dry as dust ye must be."

He turned to the punchbowls and reached for the ladle in the larger and more

ornate of the two, waving off the attendant, clearly wanting to honor them by

serving them himself.

"Mr. Lengyll," Roland said quietly. Yet there was a force of command in that

voice; Fran Lengyll heard it and turned.

"The smaller bowl is soft punch, is it not?"

Lengyll considered this, at first not understanding. Then his eyebrow went up. For

the first time he seemed to consider Roland and the others not as living symbols of

the Affiliation and the Inner Baronies, but as actual human beings. Young ones.

Only boys, when you got right down to it.

"Aye?"

"Draw ours from that, if you'd be so kind." He felt all eyes upon them now. Her

eyes particularly. He kept his own firmly fixed on the rancher, but his peripheral

vision was good, and he was very aware that Jonas's thin smile had resurfaced.

Jonas knew what this was about already. Roland supposed 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 in?dulge in spir?its dur?ing our time

here. As penance, you see.”

Her gaze. He could still feel it on his skin, it seemed.

For a mo?ment there was com?plete qui?et in the lit?tle group around the punch?bowls,

and then Lengyll said: “Your fa?ther would be proud to hear ye speak so frank,

Will Dear?born—aye, so he would. And what boy worth his salt didn’t get up to a

lit?tle noise ‘n wind from time to time?” He clapped Roland on the shoul?der, and

al?though the grip of his hand was firm and his smile looked gen?uine, his eyes were

hard to read, on?ly gleams of spec?ula?tion deep in those beds of wrin?kles. “In his

place, may I be proud for him?”

“Yes,” Roland said, smil?ing in re?turn. “And with my thanks.”

“And mine,” Cuth?bert said.

“Mine as well,” Alain said qui?et?ly, tak?ing the of?fered 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 Barones, 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. El?dred 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 Dear?born?"

"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 star?points in the light of the chandelier.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I give you William Dear?born of Hemphill, Richard

Stock?worth of Pen?nil?ton, and Arthur Heath of Gilead."

Gasps and murmurs at that last, as if their Mayor had announced Arthur Heath of Heav?en.

"Take of them well, give to them well, make their days in Mejis sweet, and their

mem?ories sweeter. 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 some thing 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 un?done, and what was spo?ken might be un?spo?ken.

8

As they passed in?to the din?ing hall, which had tonight been set with four long

tres?tle ta?bles (so close there was bare?ly room to move be?tween them), Cordelia

tugged her niece's hand, pulling her back from the May?or and Jonas, who had

fall?en in?to con?ver?sa?tion with Fran Lengyll.

"Why looked you at him so, miss?" Cordelia whis?pered fu?ri?ous?ly. The ver?ti?cal line

had ap?peared on her fore?head. Tonight it looked as deep as a trench. "What ails

thy pret?ty, stupid head?" Thy. Just that was enough to tell Su?san that her aunt was

in a fine rage.

"Looked at who? And how?" Her tone sound?ed right, she thought, but oh, her

heart—

The hand over hers clamped down, hurt?ing. "Play no fid?dle with me, Miss Oh So

Young and Pret?ty! Have ye ev?er seen that fine-?turned row of pins be?fore? Tell me

the truth!"

"No, how could I? Aunt, you're hurt?ing me."

Aunt Cord smiled bale?ful?ly and clamped down hard?er. "Bet?ter a small hurt now

than a large one lat?er. Curb your im?pu?dence. And curb your flir?ta?tious eyes."

"Aunt, I don't know what you—"

"I think you do," Cordelia said grim?ly, press?ing her niece close to the wood

pan?elling to al?low the guests to stream past them. When the ranch?er who owned

the boathouse next to theirs said hel?lo, Aunt Cord smiled pleas?ant?ly at him and

wished him good?even be?fore turn?ing back to Su?san.

“Mind me, miss—mind me well. If I saw yer cow’s eyes, ye may be sure that half

the com?pa?ny saw. Well, what’s done is done, but it stops now. Your time for such

child-?maid games is over. Do you un?der?stand?”

Su?san was silent, her face set?ting in those stub?born lines Cordelia hat?ed most of

all; it was an ex?pres?sion that al?ways made her feel like slap ping her head?strong

niece un?til her nose bled and her great gray doe’s eyes gushed tears.

“Ye’ve made a vow and a con?tract. Pa?pers have been passed, the weird-?wom?an has

been con?sult?ed, mon?ey has changed hands. And ye’ve giv?en your promise. If that

means noth?ing to such as yer?self, girl, re?mem ber what it’d mean to yer fa?ther.”

Tears rose in Su?san’s eyes again, and Cordelia was glad to see them. Her broth?er

had been an im?prov?ident ir?ri?ta?tion, ca?pa?ble of pro?duc?ing on?ly this far too pret?ty

wom?an?child ... but he had his us?es, 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.

Roland was seated near the head of the center table, between Hash Renfrew (a

rancher even bigger and blockier than Lengyll) and Thorin's rather morose sister,

Coral. Renfrew had been handy with the punch; now, as the soup was brought to

table, he set about proving himself equally adept with the ale.

He talked about the fishing trade ("not what it used to be, boy, although it's less

mufties they pull up in their nets these days, 'n that's a blessing"), the farming trade

("folks round here can grow most anything, long's it's corn or beans"), and finally

about those things clearly closest to his heart: horses, cousins, and ranching. Those

businesses went on as always, aye, so they did, although times had been hard in

the grass- and- sea- coast Baronies for forty years or more.

Weren't the bloodlines clarifying? Roland asked. For they had begun to do so

where he came from.

Aye, Renfrew agreed, ignoring his potato soup and gobbling barbecued beef-

strips instead. These he scooped up with a bare hand and washed down with more

ale. Aye, young master, bloodlines was clarifying wonderfully well, indeed they

were, three colts out of every five were threaded stock—in thoroughbred as well

as common lines, kennel—and the fourth could be kept and worked if not bred.

Only one in five these days born with extra legs or extra eyes or its guts on the

outside, and that was good. But the birthrates were way down, so they were; the

stallions had as much ram as ever in their ramrods, 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 nar row smile, and went on

boat?ing with her spoon. Roland guessed there was noth?ing wrong with her ears,

though, and that her broth?er might get a com?plete re?port of their con?ver?sa?tion. Or

pos?si?bly it would be Rimer to get the re?port. For, while it was too ear?ly to say for

sure, Roland had an idea that Rimer might be the re?al force here. Along, per?haps,

with sai Jonas.

“For in?stance,” Roland said, “how many rid?ing hors?es do you think we may be

able to re?port back to the Af?fil?ia?tion?”

“Tithe or to?tal?”

“To?tal.”

Ren?frew put his cup down and ap?peared to cal?cu?late. As he did, Roland looked

across the ta?ble and saw Lengyll and Hen?ry Wert?ner, the Barony’s stock?lin?er,

ex?change a quick glance. They had heard. And he saw some?thing else as well,

when he re?turned his at?ten?tion to his seat?mate: Hash Ren?frew was drunk, but

like?ly not as drunk as he want?ed young Will Dear?born to be?lieve.

“To?tal, ye say—not just what we owe the Af?fil?ia?tion, or might be able to send

along in a pinch.”

“Yes.”

“Well, let’s see, young sai. Fran must run a hun?dred’n forty head; John Croy?don’s

got near a hun?dred. Hank Wert?ner’s got forty on his own hook, and must run six?ty

more out along the Drop for the Barony. Gov’mint hoss?flesh, Mr. Dear?born.”

Roland smiled. “I know it well. Split hoofs, low necks, no speed, bot tom?less

bel?lies.”

Ren?frew laughed hard at that, nod?ding .. . but Roland found him?self won?der?ing if

the man was re?al?ly amused. In Ham?bry, the wa?ters on top and the wa?ters down

be?low seemed to run in dif?fer?ent di?rec?tions.

“As for my?self, I’ve had a bad ten or twelve year—sand-?eye, brain fever, cab?bards.

At one time there was two hun?dred head of run?ning hors?es 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-redened hand, knocked it over,

cursed, picked it up, then cursed the ale-boy who came slow to refill 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 horse-country more than it's

fish-country. We josh each other, we and the fishers, but there's many a scale-

scraper 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 daughter

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 placement there passing peculiar, especially given the

fact that the Mayor's mistress had been seated almost all the way at the far end of

the table, with Cuthbert on one side of her and some rancher 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

convensation, 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 also lustily

convulsed, rocking back and forth in his chair, wiping his eyes with a napkin.

"You'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 that Thorin still sported 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 onely 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, onely 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-?grand?moth?er, it meant whore . . .

but one of a cer?tain kind.” She looked with a pale eye at Su?san, who was now

sip?ping ale, then turned back to Roland. There was a species of bale?ful amuse?ment

in her gaze, an ex?pres sion that Roland liked lit?tle. “The kind of whore you had to

pay for in coin, the kind too fine for the trade of sim?ple folk.”

“She’s his gilly?” Roland asked through lips which felt as if they had been iced.

“Aye,” Coral said. “Not con?sum?mat?ed, not un?til the Reap—and none too hap?py

about that is my broth?er, I’ll war?rant—but bought and paid for just as in the old

days. So she is.” Coral paused, then said, “Her fa?ther would die of shame if he

could see her.” She spoke with a kind of melan choly sat?is?fac?tion.

“I hard?ly think we should judge the May?or too harsh?ly,” Ren?frew said in an

em?bar?rassed, pon?tif?icat?ing voice.

Coral ig?nored him. She stud?ied the line of Su?san’s jaw, the soft swell of her bo?som

above the silken edge of her bodice, the fall of her hair. The thin hu?mor was gone

from Coral Thorin’s face. In it now was a some?how chill?ing species of con?tempt.

In spite of him?self, Roland found him?self imag?in?ing the May?or’s knuck?le-?bunchy

hands push?ing down the straps of Su?san’s dress, crawl ing over her naked

shoul?ders, plung?ing like gray crabs in?to the cave be neath her hair. He looked

away, to?ward the ta?ble’s low?er end, and what he saw there was no bet?ter. It was

Olive Thorin that his eye found—Olive, who had been rel?egat?ed 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 faded ear-rings look dowdy by comparison.

There was none of Coral's hatred and angry contempt on her face.
Looking at her

might have been easier if that were so. She only gazed at her husband with eyes

that were humble, hopeful, and unhappy. Now Roland understood stood why he had

thought her sad. She had every reason to be sad.

More laughter from the Mayor's party; Rimer had leaned over from the next table,

where he was presiding, to contribute some wit-ticism. It must have been a good

one. This time even Jonas was laughing. Susan put a hand to her bosom, then took

her napkin and raised it to wipe a tear of laughter from the corner of her eye.

Thorin covered her other hand. She looked toward Roland and met his eyes, still

laughing. He thought of Olive Thorin, sitting down there at the foot of the table,

with the salt and spices, an untouched bowl of soup before her and that unhappy

smile on her face. Seated where the girl could see her, as well. And he thought

that, had he been wearing his guns, he might well have drawn one and put a bullet

in Susan Delgado's cold and whoring little heart.

And thought: Who do you hope to fool?

Then one of the serving boys was there, putting a plate offish in front of him.

Roland thought he had never felt less like eating in his life . . . but he would eat,

just the same, just as he would turn his mind to the questions raised by his

conversation with Hash Renfrew of the Lazy Susan Ranch. He would remember

the face of his father.

Yes, I'll remember it very well, he thought. If only I could forget the one above you

saprophyte.

10

The dinner was interminable, and there was no escape afterward. The table at the

center of the reception room had been removed, and when the guests came back

that way—like a tide which has surged as high as it can and now ebbs—they

formed two adjacent circles at the direction of a sprightly little red-haired man

whom Cuthbert later dubbed Mayor Thorin's Minister of Fun.

The boy-girl, boy-girl, boy-girl circling was accomplished with much laughter and

some diffidence (Roland guessed that about three-quarters of the guests were now

fairly well shottered), and then the guitarists struck up a waltz. This proved to be a

simple sort of reel. The circles revolved in opposite directions, all holding hands,

until the music stopped for a moment. Then the couple created at the place where

the two circles touched danced at the center of the female partner's circle, while

everyone else clapped and cheered.

The lead musician man aged this old and clearly well-loved tradition with a keen

eye to the ridiculous, stopping his muchachos in order to create the most amusing

couples: tall woman-short man, fat woman-skinny man, old woman-young man

(Cuthbert ended up side-kicking with a woman as old as his great-granddame, to

the sai's breathless cackles and the company's general roars of approval).

Then, just when Roland was thinking this stupid dance would never end, the music

stopped and he found himself facing Susan Delgado.

For a moment he could do nothing but stare at her, feeling that his eyes must burst

from their sockets, feeling that he could move neither of his stupid feet. Then she

raised her arms, the music began, the circle (this one included Mayor Thorin and

the watchful, narrowly smiling Eldred Jonas) applauded, and he led her into the dance.

At first, as he spun her through a figure (his feet moved with all their usual grace

and precision, numb or not), he felt like a man made of glass. Then he became

aware of her body touching his, and the rustle of her dress, and he was all too

human again.

She moved closer for just a moment, and when she spoke, her breath tickled in his

ear. He wondered if a woman could drive you mad—literally mad. He wouldn't

have believed so before tonight, but tonight everything had changed.

"Thank you for your discretion and your propriety," she whispered.

He pulled back from her a little and at the same time twirled her, his hand against

the small of her back—palm resting on cool satin, fingers touching warm skin. Her

feet followed his with never a pause or stutter; they moved with perfect 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 summer 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

Af?fil?ia?tion’s emis?saries were so young. El?dred Jonas said noth?ing to this, on?ly

looked down at his pale, long-?fin?gered hands and smiled his nar?row smile.

By mid?night, Su?sana was at home and un?dress?ing for bed. She didn’t have the

sap?phire to wor?ry about, at least; that was a Barony jew?el, and had been tucked

back in?to the strong?box at May?or’s House be?fore she left, de?spite what Mr. Ain’t-

We-?Fine Will Dear?born might think about it and her. May?or Thorin (she couldn’t

bring her?self to call him Hart, al though he had asked her to do so—not even to

her?self could she do it) had tak?en it back from her him?self. In the hall?way just off

from the re?cep?tion room, that had been, by the tapestry show?ing 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

interminable 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 da 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 in to 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 sai 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 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

in to 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 Eldred 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 said Delgado's gray eyes. high bodied, 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

nerveously) beneath the eye of Eldred 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. Instead, 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 gentry went to bed early.

There was no gentry 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 pok?er ta?ble; to their

left, a knot of yelling, ex?hort?ing men—cow?pokes, most?ly— stood along Sa?tan’s

Al?ley, watch?ing the dice bounce down the vel?vet in cline. At the room’s oth?er end,

Sheb Mc?Cur?dy was pound?ing out jagged boo?gie, right hand fly?ing, left hand

pump?ing, the sweat pour?ing down his neck and pale cheeks. Be?side and above

him, stand?ing drunk on a stool, Pet?tie the Trot?ter shook her enor?mous bot?tom and

bawled out the words to the song at the top of her voice: “Come on over, ba?by, we

got chick?en in the hum, what hum. whose barn, my burn! Come on over, ba?by,

ba?by got the bull by the horns ...”

Sheemie stopped be?side the pi?ano, the camel buck?et in one hand, grin?ning up at

her and at?tempt?ing to sing along. Pet?tie swat?ted him on his way, nev?er miss?ing a

word, bump, or grind, and Sheemie went with his pe?cu?liar laugh, which was shrill

but some?how not un?pleas?ant.

A game of darts was in progress; in a booth near the back, a whore who styled

her?self Count?ess Jil?lian of Up’ard Kil?lian (ex?iled roy?al?ty from dis?tant Gar?lan, my

dears, oh how spe?cial we are) was man?ag?ing to give two hand?jobs at the same

time while smok?ing a pipe. And at the bar, a whole line of as?sort?ed toughs,

drifters, cow?punch?ers, drovers, drivers, carters, wheel?wrights, sta?gies, car?pen?ters,

con?men, stock?men, boat?men, and gun?men drank be?neath The Romp’s dou?ble head.

The on?ly re?al gun?men in the place were at the end of the bar, a pair drink?ing by

them?selves. No one at?tempt?ed to join them, and not just be cause they wore

shoot?ing irons in hol?sters that were slung low and tied down gun? slinger fash?ion.

Guns were un?com?mon but not un?known in Mejis at that time, and not nec?es?sar?ily

feared, but these two had the sullen look of men who have spent a long day do?ing

work they didn't want to do—the look of men who would pick a fight on no

ac?count at all, and be glad to end their day by send?ing some new wid? ow's hus?band

home in a hur?ry-?up wag?on.

Stan?ley the bar?tender served them whiskey af?ter whiskey with no at tempt to make

con?ver?sa?tion, 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 Stan? ley from

be?ing able to see the blue cof?fin-?shapes tat tooed on them, though. Their friend,

the old limp?ing buz?zard with the girl's hair and the gimp leg, wasn't here, at least.

In Stan?ley's view, Jonas was eas?ily the worst of the Big Cof?fin Hunters, but these

two were bad enough, and he had no in?ten?tion of get?ting aslant of them if he could

help it. With luck, no one would; they looked tired enough to call it a night ear?ly.

Reynolds and De?pape were tired, all right—they had spent the day out at Cit?go,

cam?ou?flag?ing a line of emp?ty steel tankers with non?sense words (tex?aco, cit?go,

suno?co, exxon) print?ed on their sides, a bil?lion 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

more so. 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 more than ever now that he had thought of Her Nibs gobbling

cowboy spareribs out there at the Piano 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 bel low, 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 Trav?ellers' be?gan to emp?ty out, his job would be to clean up. For now,

how?ev?er, it was sim?ply to cir?cu?late with the camel buck?et, dumping in ev?ery

un?fin?ished drink he found. This com bined elixir end?ed up in a jug be?hind the bar.

The jug was la?belled fair?ly enough—camel piss—and a dou?ble shot could be

ob?tained for three pen nies. It was a drink on?ly for the reck?less or the im?pe?cu?nious, but a fair num?ber of both passed be?neath the stem gaze of The Romp

each night; Stan?ley rarely had a prob?lem emp?ty?ing the jug. And if it wasn't emp?ty

at the end of the night, why, there was al?ways a fresh night com?ing 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 forward, 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 silence usually meant that someone was going

to be killed. If so, she didn't intend to miss it.

De'pape stood perfectly still, inhaling the raw stench of alcohol as it rose. He didn't

mind the smell; on the whole, it had the stink of pine-gum beat six ways to the

Peddlers. He didn't mind the way his pants were sticking to his knees, either. It

might have been a bit of an irritation if some of that joy-juice had gotten down

inside his boots, but none had.

His hand fell to the butt of his gun. Here, by god and by god's sake, was something

to take his mind off his sticky hands and absent whore. And good entertainment

was ever worth a little wetting.

Silence blanketed the place now. Stanley stood as stiff as a soldier behind the bar,

nervelessly plucking at one of his arm-garters. At the bar's other end, Reynolds

looked back toward his partner with bright interest. He took a clam from the

steaming bucket 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 fearful beneath the wild snarl

of his black hair. He was trying his best to smile.

"Well now, boy," De'pape said. "You have wet me considerably."

"Sorry, big fella, I go trippy-trip." Sheemie jerked a hand back over his shoulder; a

little spray of camel piss flew from the tips of his fingers. Somewhere someone

cleared his throat nervously—raa-aach! The room was full of eyes, and quiet

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 troupier, 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 Callahan said from what he hoped was a safe place behind

Sheb’s piano. “If you want to see the sun come up, I’d surely do it.”

De’pape had already decided the mush-brain wasn’t going to see another sunrise,

not in this world, but kept quiet. He had never had his boots licked. He wanted 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 filling with tears. “Can’t just I-sorry and

polish em real good?”

“Lick, you feeble-minded donkey,” De’pape said.

Sheemie’s hair fell across his forehead. His tongue poked tentatively out between

his lips, and as he bent his head toward De’pape’s boots, the first of his tears fell.

“Stop it, stop it, stop it,” a voice said. It was shocking in the silence—not because

it was sudden, and certainly not because it was angry. It was shocking because it

was amused. “I simply can’t allow that. Nope. I would if I could, but I can’t.

Unsanitary, you see. Who knows what disease might be spread in such fashion?

The mind quails! Absolutely cuh-wails!”

Standing just inside the batwing doors was the purveyor of this idiotic and

potentially fatal screed: a young man of middling height, his flat-crowned hat

pushed back to reveal a tumbled coma of brown hair. Except young man didn’t

really cover him, De’pape realized; young man was drawing it heavy. He was only

a kid. Around his neck, gods knew why, he wore a bird’s skull like an enormous

comical pendant. It was hung on a chain that ran through the eye-holes. And in his

hands was not a gun (where would an unwhiskered dribble like him get a gun in

the first place? De'pape wondered) but a goddam sling-shot. De'pape burst out

laughing.

The kid laughed as well, nodding as if he understood how ridiculous the whole

thing looked, how ridiculous the whole thing was. His laughter was infectious;

Pet'ie, still up on her stool, tilted herself before clapping her hands over her

mouth.

"This is no place for a boy such as you," De'pape said. His revolver, an old five-

shooter, was still out; it lay in his fist on the bar, with Stanley Ruiz's blood

dripping off the gun-sight. De'pape, without raising it from the iron-wood, wagged

it slightly. "Boys who come to places like this learn had habits, kid. Dying is apt to

be one of them. So I give you this one chance. Get out of here."

"Thank you, sir, I appreciate my one chance," the boy said. He spoke with great

and winning sincerity . . . but didn't move. Still he stood just inside the batwing

doors, with the wide elastic strap of his sling pulled back. De'pape couldn't quite

make out what was in the cup, but it glittered in the gaslight. A metal ball of some

sort.

"Well, then?" De'pape snarled. This was getting old, and fast.

"I know I'm being a pain in the neck, sir—not to mention 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 fellow on his knees before you. Let

him apologize, let him polish your boots with his clout until you are entirely

satisfied, and let him go on living his life."

There was an unfocused murmur of approval at this from the area where the card-

players were watching. Deppa didn't like the sound of it at all, and he made a

sudden decision. The boy would die as well, executed for the crime of

impertinence. The swabby who had spilled the bucket of dregs on him was clearly

retarded. Yon brat had not even that excuse. He just thought he was funny.

From the corner of his eye, Deppa saw Reynolds moving to flank the boy,

smooth as oiled silk. Deppa appreciated the thought, but didn't believe he'd need

much help with the sling-shot specialist.

"Boy, I think you've made a mistake," he said in a kindly voice. "I really

believe—" The cup of the sling-shot dipped a little ... or Deppa fancied it did. He

made his move.

3

They talked about it in Hambury for years to come; three decades after the fall of

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.

Deppa 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 Hamby; 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. Accidentally, 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 slingshot 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 Depease shifted uneasily against the bar, Cuthbert's voice rose in

a whipcrack that did not sound calm in the least. "Stand still! Move again and

you're a dead man!"

Depease 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-

humored hail. "Hi-ho, there, Mr. Spectacles! 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 nicker at this treatment,

but no more), and had since been tramp-ing 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 “Ren-nie” 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 kindly him

a child before the first snow flew, perhaps a male heir, and what of it? Rich men,

famous men, and well-blooded men had taken gilly-girls since the beginning of

time; Arthur Eld had had better than forty himself, according to the tales. So,

really, what was it to him?

I think I've gone and fallen in love with her. That's what it is to me.

A dismaying idea, but not a dismissible one; he knew the landscape of his own

heart too well. He loved her, very likely it was so, but part of him almost 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 jealous, but not

all; perhaps not even the greater part. He had made some indefinable but powerful

connection between Olive Thorin—her sad but game little smile from the foot of

the table—and his own mother. Hadn't some of that same woeful, rueful look been

in his mother's eyes on the day when he had come upon her and his father's

advisor? Marten in an open-throated shirt, Gabrielle Deschain in a sacque that had

slipped off one shoulder, the whole room reeking of what they had been up to that

hot morning?

His mind, tough as it already was, shrank from the image, horrified. It returned

instead to that of Susan Delgado—her gray eyes and shining hair.
He saw her

laughing, chin 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 laughing.

These were the things that chased through his head as he paced off across
of

moonlight. He had no business with such thoughts, Susan Delgado
was not the

reason he was here, nor was the ridiculous knuckle-cracking May
or and his

pitiable country-Mary of a wife . . . yet he couldn't put them away
and get to what

was his business. He had forgotten the face of his father, and walked
in the

moonlight, hoping to find it again.

In such fashion he came along the sleeping, silver-gilded High
Street, walking

north to south, thinking vaguely that he would perhaps stand Cuthbert
and Alain to

a taste of something wet and toss the dice down Satan's Alley a time
or two before

going back to get Rusher and call it a night. And so it was that he
happened to spy

Jonas—the man's gaunt figure and fall of long white hair were im-
possible to

mis- take—standing outside the batwings of the Travelers' Rest and
peering 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 dinner. 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.

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 squit?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?cous, 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 bolstered his gun.

"You with the black hair. Take your gun out of my friend's ear and put it back in

your holster. Now."

Clay Reynolds didn't have to be invited twice, and he uttered a long, shaky sigh

when Alain took the blade off his throat and stood back. Cuthbert did not look

around, only stood with the elastic of his sling-shot pulled and his elbow cocked.

"You at the bar," Roland said. "Holster up."

DePape did so, grimacing with pain as he bumped his hurt finger against his

gun-belt. Only when this gun was put away did Cuthbert relax his hold on his

sling and drop the ball from the cup into the palm of his hand.

The cause of all this had been forgotten as the effects played themselves out. Now

Sheemie got to his feet and pelted 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 into the arms of a sleepy-eyed and still half-

drunk Sheriff. Avery had been fetched by Sheb from the jailhouse, where the

Sheriff of 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?"

Av?ery speak?ing. No one an?swer?ing. He hadn't ex?pect?ed they would, not if they

knew what was good for them.

The of?fice area of the jail was too small to hold three men, three strap ping not-

quite-men, and one ex?tra-large Sher?iff com?fort?ably, so Av?ery had herd?ed them

in?to the near?by Town Gath?er?ing Hall, which echoed to the soft flut?ter of the

pi?geons in the rafters and the steady beat-beat-beat of the grand?fa?ther clock be?hind

the podi?um.

It was a plain room, but an in?spired choice all the same. It was where the

towns?folk and Barony landown?ers had come for hun?dreds of years to make their

de?ci?sions, pass their laws, and oc?ca?sion?al?ly send some espe cial?ly trou?ble?some

per?son west. There was a feel?ing of se?ri?ous?ness in its moon-glim?mered dark?ness,

and Roland thought even the old man, Jonas, felt a lit?tle of it. Cer?tain?ly it in?vest?ed

Sher?iff Herk Av?ery with an au?thor?ity he might not oth?er?wise have been able to

project.

The room was filled with what were in that place and time called "bare?back

bench?es"—oak?en pews with no cush?ions for ei?ther butt or back. There were six?ty

in all, thir?ty on each side of a wide cen?ter aisle. Jonas, De?pape, and Reynolds sat

on the front bench to the left of the aisle. Roland, Cuth?bert, and Alain sat across

from them on the right. Reynolds and De?pape looked sullen and em?bar?rassed;

Jonas looked re?mote and com?posed. Will Dear?born's lit?tle crew was qui?et. 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 message 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 disgusted wonder.

The side door opened and in came Deputy Dave, his white service jacket laid

aside, his monocle tucked into 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 directions."

"Aye," Dave repeated in a resigned voice. He handed Avery the cup and dumped

the remaining contents of the birch-bark scrap in when the Sheriff held the cup out

for them.

Avery swirled the liquid, peered in with a doubtful, resigned expression, then

drank. He grimaced. "Oh, foul!" he cried. "What's so nasty as this?"

"What is it?" Jonas asked.

"Headache powder. Hangover powder, 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 anything. Avery 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 Avery, 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 be 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?sitive.“

The Sher?iff now tried on an ex?alt?ed ex?pres?sion, which was not, in Roland’s

es?ti?ma?tion, no?tably suc?cess?ful. Avery 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 beau?ty rest.” He chuck?led,

and again looked un?com?fort?able when no one joined in. But he slipped off the

stage and be?gan to shake hands, do?ing so with the en?thu?si?asm of a min?is?ter 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 bare 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 nev?er meant... just a lit?tle fun is all I... how was we sup?posed to know they ..."

Slow?ly, Jonas's hand re?laxed. That last bit of bab?ble had gone home. How was

they sup?posed to know, that was un?gram?mat?ical but right. And if not for tonight,

they might not have known. If you looked at it that way, De?pape had ac?tu?al?ly done

them a fa?vor. The dev?il you knew was al?ways prefer?able to the dev?il you didn't.

Still, word would get around, and peo ple would laugh. Maybe even that was all

right, though. The laugh?ter would stop in due time.

"Jonas, I cry your par?don."

"Shut up," Jonas said. In the east, the sun would short?ly heave it?self over the

hori?zon, cast?ing its first gleams on a new day in this world of toil and sor?row. "I

ain't go?ing to toss you over, be?cause then I'd have to toss Clay over and fol?low

along my?self. They got the drop on us the same as you, right?"

De?pape want?ed to agree, but thought it might be dan?ger?ous to do so. He was

pru?dent?ly 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 nodded again. "We'll make it hard for them, but they know more about us

now than they did at dinner. We'll not get behind them that way again."

He stopped, just as Jonas had stopped not three miles from where they now were.

Only instead of looking directly out over the Clean Sea, Roland and his friends

were looking down the long slope of the Drop. A herd of horses was moving from

west to east, barely more than shadows in this light.

"What do you see, Roland?" Alain asked, almost timidly.

"Trouble," Roland said, "and in our road." Then he giggled his horse and rode on.

Before they got back to the Bar K bunkhouse, he was thinking about Susan again.

Five minutes after he dropped his head on his flat burlap pillow, he was dreaming

of her.

CHAPTER VII

ON THE DROP

1

Three weeks had passed since the welcoming dinner at Mayor's House and the

incident at the Travelers' Rest. There had been no more trouble between Roland's

family and Jonas's. In the night sky, Kiss'ing Moon had waned and Peddler's Moon

had made its first thin appearance. The days were bright and warm; even the

oldsters admitted it was one of the most beautiful summers in memory.

On a mid-morning as beautiful as any that summer, Susan Delgado galloped a two-

year-old roan named Python 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.

2

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?umn.

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

sitting in a shaft of early sun. It was a bad location, one she never would have

allowed herself to be caught in had Mr. Jonas been in attendance. The strong light

made her face look like a carved mask. There was a cold-sore growing at one

corner of her mouth; she always got them when she was not sleeping well.

“Aye,” Susan said.

“Ye should eat more’n that, then. ‘Twon’t keep ye til nine o’ the clock, girl.”

“It’ll keep me fine,” Susan had replied, eating the sections of orange faster. She

could see where this was trending, could see the look of dislike and disapproval in

her aunt’s eyes, and wanted to get away from the table before trouble could begin.

“Why not let me get ye a dish of this?” Aunt Cord asked, and plopped her spoon

into her oatmeal. To Susan it sounded like a horse’s hoof stamping down in

mud—or shit—and her stomach clenched. “It’ll hold ye to lunch, if ye plan to ride

so long. I suppose a fine young lady such as yourself can’t be bothered with

chores—”

“They’re done.” And you know they’re done, she did not add. I did em while you

were sitting before your glass, poking at that sore on your mouth.

Aunt Cord dropped a chunk of creamy butter into her muck—Susan had no idea

how the woman stayed so thin, really she didn’t—and watched it begin to melt.

For a moment it seemed that breakfast might end on a reasonably civilized note,

after all.

Then the shirt business had begun.

“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 throb?bing, 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 lit?tle at the sight of it.

”My fa?ther nev?er would have al?lowed this,“ Su?san said. ”He nev?er would have

al?lowed me to go as Hart Thorin’s gilly. What?ev?er he might have felt about Hart as

the May?or ... or as his pa?trono ... he nev?er would have al?lowed this. And ye know

it. Thee knows it.“

Aunt Cord rolled her eyes, then twirled a fin?ger around her ear as if Su?san had

gone mad. ”Thee agreed to it yer?self, Miss Oh So Young and Pret?ty. Aye, so ye

did. And if yer girl?ish megrims now cause ye to want to cry off what’s been

done—“

”Aye,“ Su?san agreed. ”I agreed to the bar?gain, so I did. Af?ter ye’d dunned me

about it day and night, af?ter ye’d come to me in tears—“

”I nev?er did!“ Cordelia cried, stung.

”Have ye for?got?ten so quick. Aunt? Aye, I sup?pose. As by tonight ye’ll have

for?got?ten slap?ping me at break?fast. Well, I haven’t for?got?ten. Thee cried, all right,

cried and told me ye feared we might be turned off the land, since we had no more

le?gal right to it, that we’d be on the road, thee wept and said—“

"Stop calling me that!" Aunt Cord shouted. Nothing on earth maddened 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

singlet 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?"

"Susan!" Tears stood in Aunt Cord's eyes.

Susan flung the shirt at her as she had the orange slices. It landed on her shoes.

"Pick it up and put it on yourself, if ye fancy. You spread yer legs for him, if ye

fancy."

She turned and hurled herself out the door. Her aunt's half-hysterical shriek had

followed her: "Don't thee go off thinking foolish thoughts, Susan! Foolish

thoughts lead to foolish deeds, and it's too late for either! Thee's agreed!"

She knew that. And however fast she rode Pylon along the Drop, she could not

outpace her knowing. She had agreed, and no matter how horrified Pat Delgado

might have been at the fix she had gotten herself into, he would have seen one

thing clear—she had made a promise, and promises must be kept. Hell
awaited

those who would not do so.

3

She eased the rosillo back while he still had plenty of wind. She
looked behind

her, saw that she had come nearly a mile, and brought him down further—to a

canter, a trot, a fast walk. She took a deep breath and let it out. For the
first time

that morning she registered the day's bright beauty—gulls circling
in the hazy air

off to the west, high grasses all around her, and flowers in every
shaded canyon:

cornflowers and lupin and phlox and her favorites, the delicate blue
silkflowers.

From every where came the somnolent buzz of bees. The sound
soothed her, and

with the high surge of her emotions subsiding a little, she was able
to admit

something to herself... admit it, and then voice it aloud.

"Will Dearborn," she said, and shivered at the sound of his name on
her lips, even

though there was no one to hear it but Pylon and the bees. So she said
it again, and

when the words were out she abruptly turned her own wrist inward to
her mouth

and kissed it where the blood beat close to the surface. The action
shocked her

because she hadn't known she was going to do it, and shocked her
more because

the taste of her own skin and sweat aroused her immediately. She
felt an urge to

cool herself off as she had in her bed after meeting 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 un?seen third present at their quar?rel this morn?ing.

She knew some?thing else as well, some?thing that would have up?set her aunt to no

end.

Will Dear?born hadn't for?got?ten her, ei?ther.

About a week af?ter the wel?com?ing din?ner and Dear?born's dis?as?trous, hurt?ful

re?mark to her, the re?tard?ed slops-?fel?la from the Trav?ellers' Rest—Sheemie, folks

called him—had ap?peared at the house Su?san and her aunt shared. In his hands he

held a large bou?quet, most?ly made up of the wild-?flow?ers that grew out on the

Drop, but with a scat?ter?ing of dusky wild ros?es, as well. They looked like pink

punc?tu?ation marks. On the boy's face there had been a wide, sun?ny grin as he

swung the gate open, not wait?ing for an in?vi?ta?tion.

Su?san had been sweep?ing the front walk at the time; Aunt Cord had been out back,

in the gar?den. That was for?tu?nate, but not very sur?pris?ing;

these days the two of them got on best when they kept apart as much as they could.

Su?san had watched Sheemie come up the walk, his grin beam?ing out from be?hind

his up?held freight of flow?ers, with a mix?ture of fas?ci?na?tion and hor?ror.

"G'day, Su?san Del?ga?do, daugh?ter of Pat," Sheemie said cheer?ful?ly. "I come to you

on an er?rand and cry yer par?don at any trou?bleation I be, oh aye, for I am a

prob?lem for folks, and know it same as them. These be for you. Here."

He thrust them out, and she saw a small, fold?ed en?ve?lope tucked amongst them.

"Su?san?" Aunt Cord's voice, from around the side of the house . . . and get?ting

clos?er. "Su?san, did I hear the gate?"

"Yes, Aunt!" she called back. Curse the wom?an's sharp ears! Su?san nim?bly

plucked the en?ve?lope from its place among the phlox and daisies. In?to her dress

pock?et it went.

“They from my third-?best friend,” Sheemie said. “I got three dif?fer?ent friends now.

This many.” He held up two fin?gers, frowned, added two more, and then grinned

splen?did?ly. “Arthur Heath my first-?best friend, Dick Stock?worth my sec?ond-?best

friend. My third-?best friend—”

“Hush!” Su?san said in a low, fierce voice that made Sheemie’s smile fade. “Not a

word about your three friends.”

A fun?ny lit?tle flush, al?most like a pock?et 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 dur?ing the past

week—talk about lit?tle else, it seemed. The sto?ries she had heard were out?landish,

but if they weren’t true, why did the ver?sions told by so many dif?fer?ent wit?ness?es

sound so much alike?

Su?san was still try?ing to get her?self back un?der con?trol when Aunt Cord swept

around the com?er. Sheemie fell back a step at the sight of her, puz?zle?ment

be?com?ing out?right dis?may. Her aunt was al?ler?gic to beestings, and was present?ly

swad?dled from the top of her straw ‘br?era to the hem of her fad?ed gar?den dress in

gauzy stuff that made her look pe?cu?liar in strong light and down?right eerie in

shade. Adding a fi?nal touch to her cos?tume, she car?ried a pair of dirt-?streaked

gar?den shears in one gloved hand.

She saw the bou?quet 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 remember. 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, foo! Be gone, then. Straight back to town,

too—don't be hang?ing around hop?ing for a goose-?feath?er. For a boy who can't

re?mem?ber de?serves not so much as a pen?ny! And don't you come back here again,

no mat?ter who wants you to car?ry flow ers for the young sai. Do you hear me?"

Sheemie had nod?ded en?er?get?ical?ly. Then: "Sai?"

Aunt Cord glow?ered at him. The ver?ti?cal line on her fore?head had been very

promi?nent that day.

"Why you all wropped up in cob?web?bies, sai?"

"Get out of here, ye im?pu?dent cull!" Aunt Cord cried. She had a good loud voice

when she want?ed to use it, and Sheemie jumped back from her in alarm. When she

was sure he was head?ed back down the High Street to?ward town and had no

in?ten?tion of re?turn?ing to their gate and hang?ing about in hopes of a tip, Aunt Cord

had turned to Su?san.

"Get those in some wa?ter be?fore they wilt, Miss Oh So Young and Pret?ty, and

don't go moon?ing about, won?der?ing who yer se?cret ad?mir?er might be."

Then Aunt Cord had smiled. A re?al smile. What hurt Su?san the most, con?fused her

the most, was that her aunt was no cra?dle-?sto?ry ogre, no witch like Rhea of the

Coos. There was no mon?ster here, on?ly a maid?en la?dy with some few so?cial

pre?ten?sions, a love of gold and sil?ver, and a tear of be?ing turned out, pen?ni?less,

in?to 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

afford them.”

5

She had been sure the flowers were from Will, and she was right. His note was

written in a hand which was clear and passing fair.

Dear Susan Delgado,

I spoke out of turn the other night, and cry your pardon. May I see you and

speak to you? It must be private. This is a matter of importance. If you will

see me, get a message to the boy who brings this. He is safe.

Will Dearborn

A matter of importance. Underlined. She felt a strong desire to know what was so

important to him, and cautioned herself against doing anything foolish. Perhaps he

was smitten with her ... and if so, whose fault was that? Who had talked to him,

ridden his horse, showed him her legs in a flashy carnival dismount? Who had put

her hands on his shoulders and kissed him?

Her cheeks and forehead burned at the thought of that, and another hot ring

seemed to go slipping down her body. She wasn't sure she regretted the kiss, but

it had been a mistake, regrets or no regrets. Seeing him again now would be a

worse one.

Yet she wanted to see him, and knew in her deepest 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 sleepless, tossing about in her bed, first thinking it would be

better, more dignified, just to keep her silence, then composing mental 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

comical pink sombrero, and singing “Golden Slippers.” Susan doubted 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

Deppa 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 bowed 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,

flourishing there in the faint morning breeze with the bald, turd-littered 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 nei?ther, but Mr. Arthur Heath says they have them in Gilead.” He

looked at Su?san solemn?ly, the shov?el held in his hands as a sol?dier would hold a

gun or spear at port arms. “Mr. Arthur Heath saved my life. I’d do any? thing for him.”

“Would you, Sheemie?” she asked, touched.

“Al?so, he has a look?out! It’s a bird’s head! And when he talks to it, tendy-?pre?tend,

do I laugh? Aye, fit to split!”

She looked around again to make sure no one was watch?ing (save for the carved

totems across the street), then re?moved her note, fold?ed small, from her jeans

pock?et.

“Would you give this to Mr. Dear?born for me? He’s al?so your friend, is he not?”

“Will? Aye!” He took the note and put it care?ful?ly in?to his own pock?et.

“And tell no one.”

“Shh?hhh!” he agreed, and put a fin?ger to his lips. His eyes had been amus?ing?ly

round be?neath the ridicu?lous pink la?dy’s straw he wore. “Like when I brought you

the flow?ers. Husha?boo!”

“That’s right, husha?boo. Fare ye well, Sheemie.”

“And you, Su?san Del?ga?do.”

He went back to his cleanup op?er?ations. Su?san had stood watch?ing him for a

mo?ment, feel?ing un?easy and out of sorts with her?self. Now that the note was

suc?cess?ful?ly passed, she felt an urge to ask Sheemie to give it back, to scratch out

what she had writ?ten, and promise to meet him. If on?ly to see his steady blue eyes

again, look?ing in?to her face.

Then Jonas's other friend, the one with the cloak, came sauntering out of the

mercan tile. 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

maidenhair, 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.

Pyron 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 on?ly blue sky and low ridge?line hills that curved gen?tly like the line of a

wom?an's thigh and hip and waist as she lies on her side in bed. Su?san felt a bit?ter

dis?ap?point?ment fill her. She could al?most taste it in her mouth, like wet tea leaves.

She start?ed back to Py?lon, mean?ing to re?turn to the house and take care of the

apol?ogy she reck?oned she must make. The soon?er she did it, the soon?er it would be

done. She reached for her left stir?rup, which was twist?ed a lit?tle, and as she did, a

rid?er came over the hori?zon, break ing against the sky at the place which looked to

her like a wom?an's hip. He sat there, on?ly a sil?hou?ette on horse?back, but she knew

who it was at once.

Run! she told her?self in a sud?den pan?ic. Mount and gal?lop! Get out of here!

Quick?ly! Be?fore some?thing ter?ri?ble hap?pens . . . be?fore it re?al?ly 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 Py?lon's reins in one hand, and murmured to him

when the rosil?lo looked up and nick?ered a greet?ing to the big bay?col?ored geld?ing

com?ing down the hill.

Then Will was there, first above her and look?ing down, then dismount?ed in an

easy, liq?uid mo?tion she didn't think she could have matched, for all her years of

horse?man?ship. This time there was no kicked-?out leg and plant?ed heel, no hat

swept over a com?ical?ly solemn bow; this time the gaze he gave her was steady and

se?ri?ous and dis?qui?et?ing?ly 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 flower, and it rendered her

genial contemptuous 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 fin?gers back as if he had put them on some?thing hot.

"I said what I did so you'd un?der?stand," he said. "That's all. I feel how I feel, and

you're not re?spon?si?ble for that."

But I am, she thought. I kissed you. I think I'm more than a lit?tle re?spon?si?ble for

how we both feel. Will.

"What I said while we were danc?ing I re?gret with all my heart. Won't you give me

your par?don?"

"Aye," she said, and if he had tak?en her in his arms at that mo?ment, she would

have let him, and damn the con?se?quences. But he on?ly took off his hat and made

her a charm?ing lit?tle bow, and the wind died.

"Thankee-?sai."

"Don't call me that. I hate it. My name is Su?san."

"Will you call me Will?" "

She nod?ded.

"Good. Su?san, I want to ask you some?thing—not as the fel?low who in?sult?ed you

and hurt you be?cause he was jeal?ous. This is some?thing else en?tire?ly. May I?"

"Aye, I sup?pose," she said war?ily.

"Are you for the Af?fil?ia?tion?"

She looked at him, flab?ber?gast?ed. It was the last ques?tion in the world she had

ex?pect?ed . . . but he was look?ing at her se?ri?ous?ly.

"I'd ex?pect?ed 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 al?so count

Af?fil?ia?tion sup?port?ers."

She saw his look of sur?prise, and a lit?tle smile at the com?ers of his mouth. This

time the smile made him look old?er than he could pos?si?bly be. Su?san 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 into 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 father was. If you ask me I'm 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 Mayor Thorin—"

"He's not my Mayor Thorin," she said, more sharply than she had intended.

"And yet the Barony's Mayor 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 Af?fil?ia?tion, but dis?tant?ly. Yet the May?or, his Chan?cel?lor, and the mem?bers of

the Horse?men's As?so?ci?ation, Lengyll and Gar?ber and that lot—"

"I know them," she said short?ly.

"They're ab?so?lute?ly en?thu?si?as?tic in their sup?port. Men?tion the Af?fil?ia?tion to

Sher?iff Av?ery and he all but dances. In ev?ery ranch par?lor we're of?fered a drink

from an Eld com?mem?ora?tive cup, it seems."

"A drink of what?" she asked, a tri?fle rogu?ish?ly. "Beer? Ale? Graf?"

"Al?so wine, whiskey, and pet?ti?bone," he said, not re?spond?ing to her smile. "It's

al?most as if they wish us to break our vow. Does that strike you as strange?"

"Aye, a lit?tle; or just as Ham?bry hos?pi?tal?ity. In these parts, when some?one—es?pe?cial?ly a young man—says he's tak?en the pledge, folks tend to think

him coy, not se?ri?ous."

"And this joy?ful sup?port of the Af?fil?ia?tion amongst the movers and the shak?ers?

How does that strike you?"

"Queer."

And it did. Pat Del?ga?do's work had brought him in al?most dai?ly con?act with these

landown?ers and horse?breed?ers, and so she, who had tagged af?ter her da any time

he would let her, had seen plen?ty of them. She thought them a cold bunch, by and

large. She couldn't imag?ine John Croy?don or Jake White wav?ing an Arthur Eld

stein in a sen?ti?men?tal toast... es pe?cial?ly not in the mid?dle of the day, when there

was stock to be run and sold.

Will's eyes were full up?on her, as if he were read?ing these thoughts.

"But you prob?ably don't see as much of the big fel?las as you once did," he said.

"Be?fore your fa?ther passed, I mean."

“Per?haps not. . . but do bum?blers learn to speak back?ward?”

No cau?tious smile this time; this time he out?right grinned. It lit his whole face.

Gods, how hand?some he was! “I sup?pose not. No more than cats change their

spots, as we say. And May?or Thorin doesn’t speak of such as us—me and my

friends—to you when you two are alone? Or is that ques?tion be?yond what I have a

right to ask? I sup?pose it is.”

“I care not about that,” she said, toss?ing her head pert?ly enough to make her long

braid swing. “I un?der?stand lit?tle of pro?pri?ety, as some have been good enough to

point out.” But she didn’t care as much for his down cast look and flush of

em?bar?rass?ment as she had ex?pect?ed. 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.

Cer?tain?ly she had no de?sire to set her claws in him, and when she went on, she

spoke gen?tly. “I’m not alone with him, in any case.”

And oh how ye do lie, she thought mourn?ful?ly, re?mem?ber?ing how Thorin had

em?braced her in the hall on the night of the par?ty, grop?ing at her breasts like a

child try?ing to get his hand in?to a can?dy-?jar; telling her that he burned for her. Oh

ye great liar.

“In any case, Will, Hart’s opin?ion of you and yer friends can hard?ly con?cern ye,

can it? Ye have a job to do, that’s all. If he helps ye, why not just ac?cept and be

grate?ful?”

“Be?cause some?thing’s wrong here,” he said, and the se?ri?ous, al?most somber qual?ity

of his voice frightened her a little.

“Wrong? With the Mayor? With the Horsemen’s Association?
What are ye talking
about?”

He looked at her steadily, then seemed to decide something. “I’m go-
ing 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 da’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 gently

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 actually count. That didn't work; it

only confused you. She saw four good-sized groups of about twenty horses each,

mov?ing about on the green al?most ex?act?ly as birds moved about in the blue above

them. There were per?haps nine small?er groups, rang?ing from octets to quar?tets ...

sev?er?al pairs (they re?mind?ed her of lovers, but ev?ery?thing did to? day, it seemed) ...

a few gal?lop?ing lon?ers—young stal?lions, 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 reckon?” 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 ex?tras?

“It so hap?pens Fran Lengyll and my friend Stock?worth had a dis?cus sion about

hors?es,” Will said. His voice sound?ed al?most ca?su?al, but there was noth?ing ca?su?al

on his face. “Over glass?es of spring wa?ter, af?ter beer had been of?fered and re?fused.

They spoke of them much as I did with Ren?frew at May?or Thorin’s wel?com?ing

din?ner. When Richard asked sai Lengyll to es?ti?mate rid?ing hors?es, he said per?haps

four hun?dred.”

“In?sane.”

“It would seem so,” Will agreed.

“Do they not ken?nit the hors?es are out here where ye can see em?”

“They know we’ve bare?ly got?ten start?ed,” he said, “and that we’ve be?gun with the

fish?er?folk. We’ll be a month yet, I’m sure they think, be fore we start to con?cern

our?selves with the horse?flesh here?abouts. And in the mean?time, they have an

at?ti?tude about us of... how shall I put it? Well, nev?er mind how I’d put it. I’m not

very good with words, but my friend Arthur calls it ‘ge?nial con?tempt.’ They leave

the hors?es out in front of our eyes, I think, be?cause they don’t be?lieve we’ll know

what we’re look?ing at. Or be?cause they think we won’t be?lieve what we’re see?ing.

I’m very glad I found you out here.”

Just so I could give you a more ac?cu?rate horse-?count? Is that the on?ly rea?son?

"But ye will get around to count?ing the hors?es. Even?tu?al?ly. I mean, that must

sure?ly be one of the Af?fil?ia?tion's main needs."

He gave her an odd look, as if she had missed some?thing that should have been

ob?vi?ous. It made her feel self-?con?scious.

"What? What is it?"

"Per?haps they ex?pect the ex?tra hors?es to be gone by the time we get around to this

side of the Barony's busi?ness."

"Gone where?"

"I don't know. But I don't like this. Su?san, you will keep this just between the two

of us, won't you?"

She nod?ded. She'd be in?sane to tell any?one she had been with Will Dear?born,

un?chap?er?oned ex?cept by Rush?er and Py?lon, out on the Drop.

"It may all turn out to be noth?ing, but if it doesn't, know?ing could be dan?ger?ous."

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 up?on him. Nei?ther of them had

had any rea?son to doubt the man's sto?ry. But Fran Lengyll had al?so told Will's

friend that there were on?ly four hun?dred head of rid?ing 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 wanted him to stay—to stand close to her while...

long shadows flying across the grassland—but they had been together out here

too long already. There was no reason to think anyone would come along and see

them, but instead of comforting her, that idea for some reason made her more

nervous than ever.

He straightened the stirrup hanging beside the scabbarded shaft of his lance

(Rushing whichever way back in his throat, as if to say About time we got going),

then turned to her again. She felt actually faint as his gaze fell upon her, and now

the idea of Ka was almost too strong to deny. She tried to tell herself it was just the

dim—that feeling of having lived a thing before—but it wasn't the dim; it was a

sense of finding a road one had been searching for all along.

"There's something else I want to say. I don't like returning to where we started,

but I must."

"No," she said faintly. "That's closed, surely."

"I told you that I loved you, and that I was jealous," he said, and for the first time

his voice had come unanchored a little, wavering in his throat. She was alarmed to

see that there were tears standing in his eyes. "There was more. Something more."

"Will, I don't want to—" She turned blindly for her horse. He took her shoulder

and turned her back. It wasn't a harsh touch, but there was an expectancy to it

that was dreadful. She looked helplessly up into his face, saw that he was young

and far from home, and suddenly understood she could not stand against him for

long. She wanted him so badly that she ached with it. She would have given a year

of her life just to be able to put her palms on his cheeks and feel his skin.

“You miss your father, Susan?”

“Aye,” she whispered. “With all my heart I do.”

“I miss my mother the same way.” He held her by both shoulders now. One eye

overbrimmed; one tear drew a silver line down his cheek.

“Is she dead?”

“No, but something happened. 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 terrible.”

He nodded. “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 together. Shame at

what I’d seen and knew about her, hope, maybe, that I’d understand and forgive . .

.” He took a deep breath. “The night of the party, toward the end of the meal,

Rimer said something funny. You all laughed—”

“If I did, it was only because it would have looked strange if I was the only one

who didn’t,” Susan said. “I don’t like him. I think he’s a schemer and a conner.”

“You all laughed, and I happened to look down toward the end of the table.

Toward Olive Thorin. And for a moment—only a moment—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.

They were the best kisses of his whole life, and never forgotten: the yielding

pliancy of her lips and the strong shape of her teeth under them, urgent and not

shy in the least; the fragrance of her breath, the sweet line of her body pressed

against his. He slipped a hand up to her left breast, squeezed it gently, and felt her

heart speeding under it. His other hand went to her hair and combed along the side

of it, silk at her temple. He never forgot its texture.

Then she was standing away from him, her face flaming with blush and passion,

one hand going to her lips, which he had kissed until they were swollen. A little

trickle of blood ran from the corner of the lower one. Her eyes, wide on his. Her

bosom rising and falling as if she had just run a race. And between them a current

that was like nothing he had ever felt in his life. It ran like a river and shook like a

fever.

"No more," she said in a trembling voice. "No more, please. If you really do love

me, don't let me dishonor myself. I've made a promise. Anything might come

later, after that promise was fulfilled, I suppose . . . if you still wanted me . . ."

"I would wait forever," he said calmly, "and do anything for you but stand away

and watch you go with another man."

"Then if you love me, go away from me. Please, Will!"

"Another kiss."

She stepped forward at once, raising her face trustingly up to his, and he

understood he could do whatever he wanted with her. She was, at least for the

moment, no longer her own mistress; she might consequently be his. He could do

to her what Marten had done to his own mother, if that was his fancy.

The thought broke his passion apart, turned it to coals that fell in a bright shower,

winking out one by one in a dark bewilderment. His father's acceptance

(I have known for two years)

was in many ways the worst part of what had happened 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

sud?den?ly he couldn't let her go. He reached for?ward, touched her boot.

“Su?san—”

“No,” she said. “Please.”

He stood back. Some?how.

“This is our se?cret,” 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 be?side Rush?er's stir?rup, watch?ing her go. And

when she was out of sight over the hori?zon, still he watched.

10

Sher?iff Av?ery, Deputy Dave, and Deputy George Rig?gins were sit?ting on the

porch in front of the Sher?iff's of?fice and jail when Mr. Stock?worth and Mr. Heath

(the lat?ter with that id?iot?ic bird's skull still mount?ed on the horn of his sad?dle) went

past at a steady walk. The bell o' noon had rung fif?teen min?utes be?fore, and Sher?iff

Av?ery reck?oned they were on their way to lunch, per?haps at The Mill?bank, or

per?haps at the Rest, which put on a fair noon meal. Pop?kins and such. Av?ery liked

some?thing a lit?tle more fill?ing; half a chick?en or a haunch of beef suit?ed him just

fine.

Mr. Heath gave them a wave and a grin. “Good day, gents! Long life! Gen?tle

breezes! Hap?py 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," Sher?iff Av?ery said, lift?ing one mas?sive cheek a bit out of his rock?er and

let?ting off a noisy pre-?lun?cheon fart. "Yessir, I do. Aye."

George said: "If not for them fac?ing off Jonas's boys the way they done, I'd think

they was a pack of fools."

"Nor would they like?ly mind," Av?ery said. He looked at Dave, who was twirling

his mon?ocle on the end of its rib?bon and look?ing off in the di?rec?tion the boys had

tak?en. There were folks in town who had be?gun call?ing the Af?fil?ia?tion brats Lit?tle

Cof?fin Hunters. Av?ery wasn't sure what to make of that. He'd soothed it down

be?tween them and Thorin's hard boys, and had got?ten both a com?men?da?tion and a

piece of gold from Rimer for his ef?forts, 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 mon?ocle a fi?nal time, then popped it in his eye and stared

at the Sher?iff through it. "Now I think they might have been a lit?tle hard?er than I

thought, af?ter all."

Yes in?deed, Av?ery thought. But hard don't mean smart, thank the gods. Aye, thank

the gods for that.

"I'm hun?gry as a bull, so I am," he said, get?ting up. He bent, put his hands on his

knees, and ripped off an?oth?er loud fart. Dave and George looked at each oth?er.

George fanned a hand in front of his face. Sher?iff Herkimer Av?ery, Barony

Sheriff, straightened up, looking both relieved and anticipatory.
"More room out

than there is in," he said. "Come on, boys. Let's go down street and
tuck in to 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

dooryard 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 sea-
weed 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.

Hamby 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 thinny.

"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, hold?ing out his own hand. The pi?geon flew to it. As Roland

dis?mount?ed, Alain took the pi?geon in?to the bunkhouse, where the cages had been

placed be?neath an open win?dow. He un?gat?ed the cen ter one and held out his hand.

The pi?geon which had just ar?rived hopped in; the pi?geon in the cage hopped out

and in?to his palm. Alain shut the cage door, latched it, crossed the room, and

turned up the pil?low of Bert’s bunk. Be?neath it was a linen en?ve?lope con?tain?ing a

num?ber of blank pa?per strips and a tiny stor?age-?pen. He took one of the strips and

the pen, which held its own small reser?voir of ink and did not have to be dipped.

He went back out on the porch. Roland and Cuth?bert were study?ing the un?rolled

strip of pa?per the pi?geon had de?liv?ered from Gilead. On it was a line of tiny

ge?omet?ric shapes:

“What does it say?” Alain asked. The code was sim?ple enough, but he could not

get it by heart or read it on sight, as Roland and Bert had been able to, al?most

im?me?di?ate?ly. Alain’s tal?ents—his abil?ity to track, his easy ac?cess to the touch—lay

in oth?er di?rec?tions.

“ ‘Far?son moves east,’ ” Cuth?bert read. “ ‘Forces split, one big, one small. Do you

see any?thing un?usu?al.’ ” He looked at Roland, al?most of fend?ed. “Any?thing

un?usu?al, what does that mean?”

Roland shook his head. He didn’t know. He doubt?ed if the men who had sent the

mes?sage—of whom his own fa?ther was al?most sure?ly one— did, ei?ther.

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 resupply 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 small 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 sunset

with dreaming eyes.

CHAPTER VI

BENEATH 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 Moun?tains, about fifty miles from Vi Castis Cut. The town had but one

street; it was en?graved with iron-?hard wheel?ruts now, and would be?come a lake of

mud rough?ly three days af?ter the storms of au?tumn set in. There was the Bear and

Tur?tle Mer?can?tile & Sun?drie Items, where min?ers were for?bid?den by the Vi Castis

Com?pa?ny to shop, and a com?pa?ny store where no one but grub?bies would shop;

there was a com bined jail?house and Town Gath?er?ing Hall with a wind?mill-?cum-

gal?lows out front; there were six roar?ing bar?rooms, each more sor?did, des?per?ate,

and dan?ger?ous than the last.

Ritzzy was like an ug?ly low?ered head be?tween a pair of huge shrugged

shoul?ders—the foothills. Above town to the south were the clapped-?out shacks

where the Com?pa?ny housed its min?ers; each puff of breeze brought the stench of

their un?limed com?mu?nal priv?ies. To the north were the mines them?selves:

dan?ger?ous, un?der?shored scratch drifts that went down fifty feet or so and then

spread like fin?gers clutch?ing for gold and sil?ver and cop?per and the oc?ca?sion?al nest

of fired?ims. From the out?side they were just holes punched in?to the bare and rocky

earth, holes like star?ing eyes, each with its own pile of till and scrap?ings be?side the

adit.

Once there had been free?hold mines up there, but they were all gone, reg?ulat?ed out

by the Vi Castis Com?pa?ny. De?pape knew all about it, be cause the Big Cof?fin

Hunters had been a part of that lit?tle spin and ra?ree. Just af?ter he'd hooked up with

Jonas and Reynolds, that had been. Why, they had got?ten those coffins tat?tood on

their hands not fifty miles from here, in the town of Wind, a mud?pen even less

ritzy than Ritzy. How long ago? He couldn't right?ly say, al?though it seemed to him

that he should be able to. But when it came to reck?on?ing times past, De?pape of?ten

felt lost. It was hard even to re?mem?ber how old he was. Be?cause the world had

moved on, and time was dif?fer?ent, now. Soft?er.

One thing he had no trou?ble re?mem?ber?ing at all—his rec?ol?lec?tion was re?freshed by

the mis?er?able flare of pain he suf?fered each time he bumped his wound?ed fin?ger.

That one thing was a promise to him?self that he would see Dear?born, Stock?worth,

and Heath laid out dead in a row, hand to out stretched hand like a lit?tle girl's

pa?per dolls. He in?tend?ed to un?lim?ber the part of him which had longed so

boot?less?ly for Her Nibs these last three weeks and use it to hose down their dead

faces. The ma?jor?ity of his squirt would be saved for Arthur Heath of Gilead, New

Canaan. That laugh?ing chat?ter?box moth?er?fuck?er had a se?ri?ous hos?ing-?down com?ing.

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

acid 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 bastard was looking at him even more closely, standing

on tiptoe as if hoping for a kiss. Ugh.

De'pape pushed him away. “Not so close, dad.” Yet he felt marginally encouraged.

He and Jonas and Reynolds had been here before, and if the old man remembered

his face, likely he wasn't talking through his hat about fellows he'd seen much

more recently.

“Tell me about the three young lords, old dad.” De'pape rapped on the wall of

Hatfield's. “Them in there may not be interested, but I am.”

The old bastard looked at him with a bleary, calculating eye. “Might there be a bit

o' metal in it for me?”

“Yar,” De'pape said. “If you tell me what I want to hear, I'll give you metal.”

“Gold?”

“Tell me, and we'll see.”

“No, sir. Dick'er first, tell second.”

De'pape seized him by the arm, whirled him around, and yanked a wrist which felt

like a bundle of sticks up to the old bastard's scrawny shoulderblades. “Fuck with

me, dad, and we'll start by breaking your arm.”

“Let go!” the old bastard screamed breathlessly. “Let go, I'll trust to your

generosity, young sir, for you have a generous face! Yes! Yes indeed!”

De'pape let him go. The old bastard eyed him warily, rubbing his shoulder. In the

moonlight the blood drying on his cheeks looked black.

“Three of them, there were,” he said. “Fine-born lads.”

“Lads or lords? Which is it, dad?”

The old bastard had taken the question thoughtfully. 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 mo?ment, not much put out of coun?te?nance; he thought Jonas was go?ing to be

very pleased with what he had found out.

Af?ter a bit, he boot?ed his horse in the sides and be?gan to can?ter east along the

Barony Sea Road, back to?ward Mejis, where the boys who had em? bar?rassed him

were wait?ing to be dealt with. Lords they might be, sons of gun? slingers they might

be, but in these lat?ter days, even such as those could die. As the old bas?tard

him?self would un?doubt?ed?ly have point?ed out, the world had moved on.

2

On a late af?ter?noon three days af?ter Roy De?pape left Ritzy and head?ed his horse

to?ward Ham?bry again, Roland, Cuth?bert, and Alain rode north and west of town,

first down the long swell of the Drop, then in?to the free?land Ham?bry folk called

the Bad Grass, then in?to de?ser?ty waste lands. Ahead of them and clear?ly vis?ible

once they were back in the open were crum bled and erod?ed bluffs. In the cen?ter

of these was a dark, al?most vagi?nal cleft; its edges so splin?tered it looked as if it

had been whacked in?to re?al?ity by an ill-?tem?pered god wield?ing a hatch?et.

The dis?tance be?tween the end of the Drop and the bluffs was per?haps six miles.

Three quar?ters of the way across, they passed the flat?lands' on?ly re?al ge?ographic

fea?ture: a jut?ting up?thrust of rock that looked like a fin?ger bent at the first knuck?le.

Be?low it was a small, boomerang-?shaped green sward, and when Cuth?bert gave a

ul?ulat?ing yell to hear his voice bounce back at him from the bluffs ahead, a pack of

chat?ter?ing bil?ly-?bum?blers broke from this green?place and went rac?ing back

south?east, to?ward the Drop.

"That's Hang?ing Rock," Roland said. "There's a spring at the base of it —on?ly one

in these parts, they say."

It was all the talk that passed be?tween them on the ride out, but a look of

un?mis?tak?able re?lief passed be?tween Cuth?bert and Alain be?hind Roland's back. For

the last three weeks they had pret?ty much marched in place as sum?mer rolled

around them and past them. It was all well for Roland to say they must wait, they

must pay great?est at?ten?tion to the things that didn't mat?ter and count the things

which did from the com?ers of their eyes, but nei?ther of them quite trust?ed the

dreamy, dis?con?nect?ed air which Roland wore these days like his own spe?cial

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

Mayor 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. Permanently, 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 Eye-bolt Canyon. Alain pulled up, gripping like a man who has

biten 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 lookout 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 thinny had made it skittish. "Sixteen hundred and fourteen fishing nets,

sev?en hun?dred and ten boats small, two hun?dred and four?teen boats large, sev?en?ty

ox?en that no?body will ad?mit to, and, on the north of town, one thin?ny. What?ev?er

the hell that is.”

“We’re go?ing to find out,” Roland said.

They rode in?to the sound, and al?though none of them liked it, no one sug?gest?ed

they go back. They had come all the way out here, and Roland was right —this was

their job. Be?sides, they were cu?ri?ous.

The mouth of the canyon had been pret?ty well stopped up with brush, as Su?s?an

had told Roland it would be. Come fall, most of it would pro?ba bly be dead, but

now the stacked branch?es still bore leaves and made it hard to see in?to the canyon.

A path led through the cen?ter of the brush-?pile, but it was nar?row for the hors?es

(who might have balked at go?ing through, any?way), and in the fail?ing light Roland

could make out hard?ly any?thing.

“Are we go?ing in?” Cuth?bert asked. “Let the Record?ing An?gel note that I’m

against, al?though I’ll of?fer no mutiny.”

Roland had no in?ten?tion of tak?ing them through the brush and to?ward the source of

that sound. Not when he had on?ly the vaguest idea of what a thin?ny was. He had

asked a few ques?tions about it over the last few weeks, and got?ten lit?tle use?ful

re?sponse. “I’d stay away,” was the ex?tent of Sher?iff Av?ery’s ad?vice. So far his best

in?for?ma?tion was still what he had got?ten from Su?s?an on the night he met her.

“Sit easy, Bert. We’re not go?ing in.”

“Good,” Alain said soft?ly, 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 into 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 thinny

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 into 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 into 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 liquescence from which snakes of

smoke or mist were ris?ing in stream?ers. The liq?uid seemed to move slug?gish?ly,

lap?ping at the walls which held it in. Lat?er, they would dis?cov?er that both liq?uid

and mist were a light green; it was on?ly the moon?light 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 began walking along the edge of the drop,

his right boot so close to it that the heel puffed little clouds of dust over the chasm

and sent clusters of pebbles down into it. Before he could get more than five steps,

Roland grabbed him by the belt and yanked him roughly back.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

Alain looked at him with sleepwalker’s eyes. They began to clear, but slowly. “I

don’t . . . know, Roland.”

Below them, the thinny hummed and growled and sang. There was a sound, as

well: an oozing, sludgy mutter.

“I know,” Cuthbert said. “I know where we’re all going. Back to the Bar K. Come

on, let’s get out of here.” He looked pleadingly at Roland. “Please. It’s awful.”

“All right.”

But before he led them back to the path, he stepped to the edge and looked down

at the smoky silver ooze below him. “Counting,” he said with a kind of clear

defiance. “Counting one thinny.” Then, lowering his voice: “And be damned to you.”

3

Their composure returned as they rode back—the sea-breeze in their faces was

wonderfully restorative after the dead and somehow baked smell of the canyon

and the thinny.

As they rode up the Drop (on a long diagonal, so as to save the horses a little),

Alain said: “What do we do next, Roland? Do you know?”

“No. As a matter 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 mozo

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 childhood'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. "Gra?cias, gra?cias, a thou?sand thanks, old fa ther," she told him.

"Da na?da, " he replied, and hand?ed her the bri?dle. "It is the May?or's earnest gift."

She watched him away, the smile slowly fad?ing from her lips. Fe?li?cia stood

docile?ly be?side her, her dark brown coat shin?ing like a dream in the summer

sun?light. But this was no dream. It had seemed like one at first— that sense of

un?re?al?ity had been an?oth?er in?duce?ment to walk in?to the trap, she now

un?der?stood—but it was no dream. She had been proved hon?est; now she found

her?self the re?cip?ient of "earnest gifts" from a rich man. The phrase was a sop to

con?ven?tion?al?ity, of course ... or a bit?ter joke, de?pend ing on one's mood and

out?look. Fe?li?cia was no more a gift than Py?lon had been—they were step-?by-?step

ful?fill?ments of the con?tract in?to which she had en?tered. Aunt Cord could ex?press

shock, but Su?san knew the truth: what lay di?rect?ly ahead was whor?ing, pure and

sim?ple.

Aunt Cord was in the kitchen win?dow as Su?san walked her gift (which was re?al?ly

just re?turned prop?er?ty, in her view) to the sta?ble. She called out some?thing pass?ing

cheery about how the horse was a good thing, that car?ing for it would give Su?san

less time for her megrims. Su?san felt a hot re?ply rise to her lips and held it back.

There had been a wary truce be?tween the two of them since the shout?ing 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 of ten 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 stabled Felicia next to Pylon, rubbed her down, fed her. While the mare

munched oats, Susan examined her hooves. She didn't care much for the look of

the iron the mare was wearing—that was Seafront for you—and so she took her

father's shoebag from its nail beside the stable door, slung the strap over her head

and shoulder so the bag hung on her hip, and walked the two miles to Hockley's

Stable and Fancy Livery. Feeling the leather bag bang against her hip brought

back her father in a way so fresh and clear that grief pricked her again and made

her feel like crying. She thought he would have been appalled at her current

situation, perhaps even disgusted. And he would have liked Will Dearborn, of that

she was sure—liked him and approved of him for her. It was the final miserable

touch.

2

She had known how to shoe most of her life, and even enjoyed it, when her mood

was right; it was dusty, elemental work, with always the possibility of a healthy

kick in the slats to relieve the boredom and bring a girl back to reality. But of

making shoes she knew nothing, nor wished to. Brian Hookey made them at the

forge behind his barn and hostelry, how ever; Susan easily picked out four new

ones of the right size, enjoying the smell of horseflesh and fresh hay as she did.

Fresh paint, too. Hockey's Stable & Smithy looked very well, indeed. Glancing up,

she saw not so much as a single hole in the barn roof. Times had been good for

Hookey, it seemed.

He wrote the new shoes up on a beam, still wearing his blacksmith's apron and

squinting horribly out of one eye at his own figures. When Susan began to speak

haltingly to him about payment, he laughed, told her he knew she'd settle her

accounts as soon as she could, gods bless her, yes. 'Sides, they weren't any of them

going anywhere, were they? Nawp, nawp. All the time gently prodding her

through the fragrant smells of hay and horses toward the door. He would not have

treated even so small a matter as four iron shoes in such a carefree manner a year

ago, but now she was Mayor Thorin's good friend, and things had changed.

The afternoon sunlight was dazzling after the dimness of Hockey's barn, and she

was momentarily blinded, groping forward toward the street with the leather bag

bouncing on her hip and the shoes clashing softly inside. She had just a moment

to register a shape looming in the brightness, and then it thumped into her hard

enough to rattle her teeth and make Felicia's new shoes clang. She would have

fallen, but for strong hands that quickly reached out and grasped her shoulders. By

then her eyes were adjusting and she saw with dismay and amusement that the

young man who had almost knocked her sprawling into the dirt was one of Will's

friends— Richard Stockworth.

"Oh, sai, your pardon!" he said, brushing the arms of her dress as if he had

knocked her over. "Are you well? Are you quite well?"

"Quite well," she said, smiling. "Please don't apologize." She felt a sudden wild

impulse to stand on tiptoe and kiss his mouth and say, Give that to Will and tell

him to never mind what I said! Tell him there are a thousand more where that

came from! Tell him to come and get every one!

Instead, she fixed on a comic image: this Richard Stockworth smack ing Will full

on the mouth and saying it was from Susan Delgado. She began to giggle. She put

her hands to her mouth, but it did no good. Sai Stockworth smiled back at her . . .

tentatively, cautiously. He probably thinks I'm mad . . . and I am! I am!

"Good day, Mr. Stockworth," she said, and passed on before she could embarrass

herself further.

"Good day, Susan Delgado," he called in return.

She looked back once, when she was fifty yards or so farther up the street, but he

was already gone. Not into Hockey's, though; of that she was quite sure. She

wondered what Mr. Stockworth had been doing at that end of town to begin with.

Half an hour later, as she took the new iron from her father's shoebag, she found out.

There was a folded scrap of paper tucked between two of the shoes, and even

before she unfolded it, she understood that her collision with Mr. Stockworth

hadn't been an accident.

She recognized Will's handwriting at once from the note in the bouquet.

Susan,

Can you meet me at Citygo this evening or tomorrow evening? Very important. Has

to do with what we discussed before. Please.

W.

P.S. Best you burn this note.

She burned it at once, and as she watched the flames first flash up and then die

down, she murmured over and over the one word in it which had struck her the

hardest: Please.

3

She and Aunt Cord ate a simple, silent evening meal—bread and soup—and when

it was done, Susan rode Felicia out to the Drop and watched the sun go down. She

would not be meeting him this evening, no. She already owed too much sorrow to

impulsive, unthinking behavior. But tomorrow?

Why Citygo?

Has to do with what we discussed before.

Yes, probably. She did not doubt his honor, although she had much come to

wonder if he and his friends were who they said they were. He probably did want

to see her for some reason which bore on his mission (although how the oilpatch

could have anything to do with too many horses on the Drop she did not know),

but there was something between them now, something sweet and dangerous.

They might start off talking but would likely end up kissing ... and kissing would

just be the start. Knowing didn't change feeling, though; she wanted to see him.

Needed to see him.

So she sat astride her new horse—an other of Hart Thorin's payments—in-advance

on her virginity—and watched the sun swell and turn red in the west. She listened

to the faint grumble of the thimble, and for the first time in her sixteen years was

truly torn by indecision. All she wanted stood against all she believed of honor,

and her mind roared with conflict. Around all, like a rising wind around an

unstable house, she felt the idea of her growing. Yet to give over one's honor for

that reason was so easy, wasn't it? To excuse the fall of virtue by invoking all-

powerful her. It was soft thinking.

Susan felt as blind as she'd been when leaving the darkness of Briar an Hockley's barn

for the brightness of the street. At one point she cried silently in frustration

without even being aware of it, and perceiving her every effort to think clearly and

rationality was her desire to kiss him again, and to feel his hand cupping her breast.

She had never been a religious girl, had little 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 exit going from

red to purple, she tried to pray to her father. And an answer came, although

whether from him or from her own heart she didn't know.

Let her mind itself, the voice in her mind said. It will, anyway; it always does. If

her should overrule your honor, so it will be; in the mean time, Susan, there's no

one to mind it but yourself. Let her go and mind the virtue of your promise, hard as

that may be.

"All right," she said. In her current state she discovered that any decision—even

one that would cost her another chance to see Will—was a relief. "I'll honor my

promise. Her can take care of herself."

In the gathering shadows, she clucked sideways to Felicia and turned for home.

4

The next day was Sunday, the traditional cowboys' day of rest. Roland's little band

took this day off as well. "It's fair enough that we should," Cuthbert said, "since

we don't know what the hell we're doing in the first place."

On this particular Sunday—their sixth since coming to Hamby—Cuthbert was in

the upper market (lower market was cheaper, by and large, but too fishy-smelling

for his liking), looking at brightly colored scrapes and trying not to cry. For his

mother had a serape, it was a great favorite others, and thinking of how she would

ride out sometimes with it flowing back from her shoulders had filled him with

homesickness so strong it was savage. "Arthur Heath," Roland's mother, missing

his mother so badly his eyes were wet! It was a joke worthy of... well, worthy of

Cuthbert Allgood.

As he stood so, looking at the serapes and a hanging rack of dolina blankets with

his hands clasped behind his back like a patron in an art gallery (and blinking back

tears all the while), there came a light tap on his shoulder. He turned, and there

was the girl with the blonde hair.

Cuthbert wasn't surprised that Roland was smitten with her. She was nothing short

of breathtaking, even dressed in jeans and a farmshirt. Her hair was tied back with

a series of rough rawhide hanks, and she had eyes of the brightest gray Cuthbert

had ever seen. Cuthbert thought it was a wonder that Roland had been able to

continue with any other aspect of his life at all, even down to the washing of his

teeth. Certainly she came with a cure for Cuthbert; sentimental thoughts of his

mother disappeared in an instant.

"Sai," he said. It was all he could manage, at least to start with.

She nodded and held out what the folk of Mejis called a corvette—"little packet"

was the literal definition; "little purse" was the practical one. These small leather

accessories, big enough for a few coins but not much more, were more often

carried by ladies than gentlemen, although that was not a hard-and-fast rule of

fashion.

"Ye dropped this, surely," she said.

"Nay, thankee-sai." This one well might have been the property of a man—plain

black leather, and unadorned by foofraws—but he had never seen it before. Never

carried a corvette, for that matter.

"It's yours," she said, and her eyes were now so intense that her gaze felt hot on his

skin. He should have understood at once, but he had been blinded by her

unexpected appearance. Also, he admitted, by her cleverness. You somehow

didn't expect cleverness from a girl this beautiful; beautiful girls did not, as a rule,

have to be clever. So far as Bert could tell, all beautiful girls had to do was wake

up in the morning. "It is."

"Oh, aye," he said, almost snatching the little purse from her. He could feel a

foolish grin overspreading his face. "Now that you mention it, said—"

"Susan." Her eyes were grave and watchful above her smile. "Let me be Susan to

you, I pray."

"With pleasure. I cry your pardon, Susan, it's just that my mind and memory,

realizing it's Sunday, have joined hands and gone off on holiday together—eloped,

you might say—and left me temporarily without a brain in my head."

He might well have rattled on like that for another hour (he had before; to that

both Roland and Alain could testify), but she stopped him with the easy briskness

of an older sister. "I can easily believe ye have no control over yer mind, Mr.

Heath—or the tongue hung below it— but perhaps ye'll take better care of yer

purse in the future. Good day." She was gone before he could get another word

out.

Bert found Roland where he so often was these days: out on the part of the Drop

that was called Town Lookout by many of the locals. It gave a fair view of

Hamby, dreaming away its Sunday afternoon in a blue haze, but Cuthbert rather

doubted the Hamby view was what drew his oldest friend back here time after

time. He thought that its view of the Delgado house was the more likely reason.

This day Roland was with Alain, neither of them saying a word. Cuthbert had no

trouble accepting the idea that some people could go long periods of time without

talking to each other, but he did not think he would ever understand it.

He came riding up to them at a gallop, reached inside his shirt, and pulled out the

corvette. "From Susan Delgado. She gave it to me in the upper market. She's

beautiful, and she's also as wily as a snake. I say that with utmost admiration."

Roland's face filled with light and life. When Cuthbert tossed him the corvette, he

caught it one-handed and pulled the lace-tie with his teeth. Inside, where a

traveling man would have kept his few scraps of money, there was a single folded

piece of paper. Roland read this quickly, the light going out of his eyes, the smile

fading off his mouth.

"What does it say?" Alain asked.

Roland handed it to him and then went back to looking out at the Drop. It wasn't

until he saw the very real desperation in his friend's eyes that Cuthbert fully realized

how far in?to Roland's life—and hence in?to all their lives—Su?san Del?ga?do had
come.

Alain hand?ed him the note. It was on?ly a sin?gle line, two sen?tences:
It's best we don't meet. I'm sor?ry.

Cuth?bert read it twice, as if reread?ing might change it, then hand?ed it
back to

Roland. Roland put the note back in?to the corvette, tied the lace, and
then tucked

the lit?tle purse in?to his own shirt.

Cuth?bert hat?ed si?lence worse than dan?ger (it was dan?ger, to his
mind), but ev?ery

con?ver?sa?tion?al open?ing he tried in his mind seemed cal?low and
un?feel?ing, giv?en

the look on his friend's face. It was as if Roland had been poi?soned.
Cuth?bert was

dis?gust?ed at the thought of that love?ly young girl bump?ing hips with
the long and

bony May?or of Ham?bry, but the look on Roland's face now called up
stronger

emo?tions. For that he could hate her.

At last Alain spoke up, al?most timid?ly. "And now, Roland? Shall we
have a hunt

out there at the oil?patch with?out her?"

Cuth?bert ad?mired that. Up?on first meet?ing him, many peo?ple dis
missed Alain

Johns as some?thing of a dullard. That was very far from the truth. Now,
in a

diplo?mat?ic way Cuth?bert could nev?er have matched, he had point?
ed out that

Roland's un?hap?py first ex?pe?ri?ence with love did not change their
re?spon?si?bil?ities.

And Roland re?spond?ed, rais?ing him?self off the sad?dle-?horn and
sit?ting up straight.

The strong gold?en light of that sum?mer's af?ter?noon lit his face in
harsh con?trasts,

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 De’pape. 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, De’pape’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 De’pape 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 remember what Cort used to say was the primary weakness of magics

such as us?" Roland asked with a trace of a smile.

" 'You run without consideration and fall in a hole,' " Alain quoted in a gruff

imitation that made Cuthbert laugh aloud.

Roland's smile broadened a touch. "Aye. They're words I mean to remember,

boys. I'll not upset this cart in order to see what's in it ... not unless there's no other

choice. Susan may come around yet, given time to think. I believe she would have

agreed to meet me already, if not for ... other matters between us."

He paused, and for a little while there was quiet among them.

"I wish our fathers hadn't sent us," Alain said at last... although it was Roland's

father who had sent them, and all three knew it. "We're too young for matters such

as these. Too young by years."

"We did all right that night in the Rest," Cuthbert said.

"That was training, not guile—and they didn't take us seriously. That won't happen

again."

"They wouldn't have sent us—not my father, 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 Cuthbert nodded. They were for it, all right—there no longer seemed

any doubt of that.

"In any case, it's too late to worry about it now. We'll wait and hope for Susan. 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 throbbing back—but sleep still did not come. She

lay in bed wide-eyed and unhappy. The hours passed, the moon set, and still Susan

couldn't sleep. She looked into 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 fives 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 Cofin 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 rainbars," Cuthbert said, "but none of us enjoys being called Little

Cofin Hunters, so maybe you could just play soft on that, all right?"

“Aye,” Sheemie said, as cheerful as ever. “Aye, Mr. Arthur Heath, good fellow 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 followers. He

liked Will Dearborn and Will’s friends (especially Mr. Arthur Heath, who

some?times said things that made Sheemie laugh fit to split), but in that mo?ment he

saw some?thing in Will-?sai's eyes that fright ened him bad?ly. In that in?stant he

un?der?stood that Will was as much a killer as the one in the cloak, or the one who

had want?ed Sheemie to lick his boots clean, or old white-?haired Jonas with the

trem?bly voice.

As bad as them, or even worse.

8

Roland slipped the "seed-?pack?et" in?to his shirt and didn't open it un?til the three of

them were back on the porch of the Bar K. In the dis?tance, the thin?ny grum?bled,

mak?ing their hors?es twitch their ears ner?vous?ly.

"Well?" Cuth?bert asked at last, un?able to re?strain him?self any longer. Roland took

the en?ve?lope from in?side his shirt, and tore it open. As he did, he re?flect?ed that

Su?san had known ex?act?ly what to say. To a nice?ty.

The oth?ers bent in, Alain (mm his left and Cuth?bert from his right, as he un?fold?ed

the sin?gle scrap of pa?per. Again he saw her sim?ple, neat?ly made writ?ing, the

mes?sage not much longer than the pre?vi?ous one. Very dif?fer?ent in con?tent,

how?ev?er.

There is an or?ange grove a mile off the road on the town side of Cit?go. Meet me

there at moon?rise. Come alone. S.

And be?low that, print?ed in em?phat?ic lit?tle let?ters: burn this.

"We'll keep a look?out," Alain said.

Roland nod?ded. "Aye. But from a dis?tance."

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 look?ing in?to it, she was think?ing of look?ing in?to it ... and,
oh! Such things

she had seen!

Er?mot twined around one of her scrawny legs, hiss?ing with ag?ita?
tion, but she

bare?ly no?ticed him. In?stead she bent even clos?er in?to the ball's
poi?son pink glow,

en?chant?ed by what she saw there.

It was the girl who had come to her to be proved hon?est, and the young
man she

had seen the first time she'd looked in?to the ball. The one she had mis?
tak?en for a

gun?slinger, un?til she had re?al?ized his youth.

The fool?ish girl, who had come to Rhea singing and left in a more
prop?er si?lence,

had proved hon?est, and might well be hon?est yet (cer?tain?ly she
kissed and touched

the boy with a vir?gin's min?gled greed and ti mid?ity), but she
wouldn't be hon?est

much longer if they kept on the way they were go?ing. And wouldn't
Hart Thorin

be in for a sur?prise when he took his sup?pos?ed?ly pure young gilly to
bed? There

were ways to fool men about that (men prac?ti?cal?ly begged to be
fooled about that),

a thim?ble of pig's blood would serve nice?ly, 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 won?der?ful glass! Oh, it was too good! Too won?der?ful!

She leaned clos?er still, the deep sock?ets of her eyes fill?ing with pink
fire. Er?mot,

sens?ing that she re?mained im?mune to his blan?dish?ments, crawled
dis?con?so?late?ly

away across the floor, in search of bugs. Musty pranced away from him,
spit?ting

fe?line curs?es, his six-?legged shad?ow huge and mis?shapen on the fire?struck wall.

11

Roland sensed the mo?ment rush?ing at them. Some?how he man?aged 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 new?ly risen moon. His

balls were throb?bing. His groin felt full of liq?uid lead.

She half-?turned away from him, and Roland saw that her som?brero had gone

askew on her back. He reached out one trem?bling hand and straight?ened it. She

clasped his fin?gers in a brief but strong grip, then bent to pick up her rid?ing gloves,

which she had stripped off in her need to touch him skin to skin. When she stood

again, the wash of blood abrupt?ly left her face, and she reeled. But for his hands

on her shoul?ders, steady?ing her, she might have fall?en. She turned to?ward him,

eyes rue?ful.

“What are we to do? Oh, Will, what are we to do?”

“The best we can,” he said. “As we both al?ways have. As our fa?thers taught us.”

“This is mad.”

Roland, who had nev?er felt any?thing so sane in his life—even the deep ache in his

groin felt sane and right—said noth?ing.

“Do ye know how dan?ger?ous ’tis?” she asked, and went on be?fore he could re?ply.

“Aye, ye do. I can see ye do. If we were seen to?geth?er at all, ’twould be se?ri?ous. To

be seen as we just were—”

She shiv?ered. 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. Unless 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

fool?ish?ness, and hard on Olive as well, I war?rant.”

“You will make the most beau?ti?ful Reap-?Girl that ev?er was,” he said, and the clear

sin?cer?ity in his voice made her tin?gle with plea?sure; her cheeks grew warm again.

There were five changes of cos?tume for the Reap?ing Girl be?tween the noon feast

and the bon?fire at dusk, each more elab?orate than the last (in Gilead there would

have been nine; in that way, Su?san didn’t know how lucky she was), and she

would have worn all five hap?pi?ly for Will, had he been the Reap?ing Lad. (This

year’s Lad was Jamie Mc?Cann, a pal?lid and whey-?faced stand-?in for Hart Thorin,

who was ap?prox?imate?ly forty years too old and gray for the job.) Even more

hap?pi?ly would she have worn the sixth—a sil?very shift with wisp-?thin straps and a

hem that stopped high on her thighs. This was a cos?tume no one but Maria, her

maid, Conchet?ta, her seam?stress, and Hart Thorin would ev?er see. It was the one

she would be wear?ing when she went to the old man’s couch as his gilly, af?ter the

feast was over.

“When you were up there, did you see the ones who call them?selves the Big

Cof?fin Hunters?”

“I saw Jonas and the one with the cloak, stand?ing to?geth?er in the court?yard and

talk?ing,” she said. “Not De?pape? The red?head?” She shook her head.

“Do you know the game Cas?tles. Su?san?”

“Aye. My fa?ther 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 oth?er. How they come around the Hillocks and creep to?ward each oth?er, set?ting

screens for cov?er. What's go?ing on here in Ham-?Dry is very like that. And, as in

the game, it has now be?come a ques?tion of who will break cov?er first. Do you

un?der?stand?"

She nod?ded at once. "In the game, the first one around his Hillock is vul?ner?able."

"In life, too. Al?ways. But some?times even stay?ing in cov?er is dif?fi?cult. My friends

and I have count?ed near?ly ev?ery?thing we dare count. To count the rest—"

"The hors?es on the Drop, for in?stance."

"Aye, just so. To count them would be to break cov?er. Or the ox?en we know

about—"

Her eye?brows shot up. "There are no ox?en in Ham?bry. Ye must be mis?tak?en about

that."

"No mis?take."

"Where?"

"The Rock?ing H."

Now her eye?brows drew back down, and knit?ted in a thought?ful frown. "That's

Laslo Rimer's place."

"Aye—Kim?ba's broth?er. Nor are those the on?ly trea?sures hid?den away in Ham?bry

these days. There are ex?tra wag?ons, ex?tra tack hid?den in barns be?long?ing to

mem?bers of the Horse?men's As?so?ci?ation, ex?tra caches of feed—"

"Will, no!"

"Yes. All that and more. But to count them—to be seen count?ing them—is to

break cov?er. To risk be?ing Cas?tled. Our re?cent days have been pret?ty

night?mar?ish—we try to look prof?itably busy with?out mov?ing over to the Drop side

of Ham?bry, where most of the dan?ger lies. It's hard?er and hard?er to do. Then we

re?ceived a mes?sage—”

“A mes?sage? How? From whom?”

“Best you not know those things, I think. But it's led us to be?lieve that some of the

an?swers we're look?ing for may be at Cit?go.”

“Will, d'ye think that what's out here may help me to know more about what

hap?pened to my da?”

“I don't know. It's pos?si?ble, I sup?pose, but not like?ly. All I know for sure is that I

fi?nal?ly have a chance to count some?thing that mat?ters and not be seen do?ing 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

fingers of both hands, so I could. The first two or three were on dares from my friends.”

“And then?”

“With my da. He were always interested in the Old People, and my Aunt Cord

always said he’d come to a bad end, meddling in their leavings.” She swallowed

hard. “And he did come to a bad end, although I doubt it were the Old People

re-sponsi-ble. Poor Da.”

They had reached a smooth-wire fence. Beyond it, the gantries of the oil wells

stood against the sky like sentinels the size of Lord Perth. How many had she said

were still working? Nineteen, he thought. The sound of them was ghastly—the

sound of monsters being choked to death. Of course it was the kind of place that

kids dared each other to go into; a kind of open-air haunted house.

He held two of the wires apart so she could slip between them, and she did the

same for him. As he passed through, he saw a line of white porcelain cylinders

marching down the post closest to him. A fencewire went through each.

“You understand what these are? Were?” he asked Susan, tapping one of the cylinders.

“Aye. When there was electricity, some went through here.” She paused, then

added shyly: “It’s how I feel when you touch me.”

He kissed her cheek just below her ear. She shivered and pressed a hand briefly

against his cheek before drawing away. “I hope your friends will watch well.”

“They will.” “Is there a signal?”

“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?getic 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 yel?low with a bluish core—he didn’t

jump. He glanced at the three gas-?stor?age tanks be?hind what Ham?bry-?folk called

“the can?dle” with?out much in?ter?est. Near?by was a stack of rusty can?is?ters in which

the gas could be bot?tled and car?ried.

“You’ve seen such be?fore?” she asked.

He nod?ded.

“The In?ner Ba?ronies must be very strange and won?der?ful,” Su?san said. •

“I’m be?gin?ning to think they’re no stranger than those of the Out?er Arc,” he said,

turn?ing slow?ly. He point?ed. “What’s yon build?ing down there? Left over from the

Old Peo?ple?”

“Aye.”

To the east of Cit?go, the ground dropped sharply down a thick?ly wood?ed slope

with a lane cut through the mid?dle of it—this lane was as clear in the moon?light 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 detritus 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. ‘Twould 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 gotten her within the fence of

this place without a friend close beside her. The pumps wheezed; every now and

then a cylinder screamed like someone 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 night hawk'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 your 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.

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 battle-field 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

perfunctory 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-prints 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!”

15

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,

prissy girl (not so prissy with the young man, though, was she?) standing

hunched 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 Fe?li?cia's new shoes. Bri?an Hookey, who had smiled and

clapped her on the shoul?der like a com?padre when she had come in with her da's

shoe?bag hang?ing on her hip. Bri?an Hookey, who had been one of Pat Del?ga?do's

best friends.

She re?called look?ing around and think?ing that times had been good for sai

Hookey, and of course she had been right. Work in the black?smithing line had

been plen?ti?ful. Hookey had been mak?ing lots of wheels and rims, for one thing,

and some?one must have been pay?ing him to do it. El?dred Jonas was one

pos?si?bil?ity; Kim?ba Rimer an even bet?ter one. Hart? She sim?ply couldn't be?lieve

that. Hart had his mind—what lit?tle there was of it—fixed on oth?er mat?ters this

sum?mer.

There was a kind of rough path be?hind the tankers. Roland walked slow?ly along it,

pac?ing like a preach?er with his hands clasped at the small of his back, read?ing the

in?com?pre?hen?si?ble words writ up?on the tankers' rear decks: cit?go. suno?co. exxon.

cono?co. He paused once and read aloud, halt?ing?ly: "Clean?er fu?el for a bet?ter

to?mor?row." He snort?ed soft?ly. "Rot! This is to?mor?row."

"Roland—Will, I mean—what are they for? "

He didn't an?swer at first, but turned and walked back down the line of bright steel

cans. Four?teen on this side of the mys?te?ri?ous?ly re?ac?ti?vat?ed oil-?sup?ply pipe, and,

she as?sumed, a like num?ber on the oth?er. 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 Cit?go oil?patch.

“They were trigged quite some time ago, I imag?ine,” he said. “I doubt if the Big

Cof?fin Hunters did it all them?selves, but they no doubt over?saw it ... first the

fit?ting of the new wheels to re?place the old rot?ten rub?ber ones, then the fill?ing.

They used the ox?en to line them up here, at the base of the hill, be?cause it was

con?ve?nient. As it’s con?ve?nient to let the ex?tra hors?es run free out on the Drop.

Then, when we came, it seemed pru?dent to take the pre?cau?tion of cov?er?ing these

up. Stupid ba?bies we might be, but per?haps smart enough to won?der about twen?ty-

eight load?ed oil-?carts with new wheels. So they came out here and cov?ered them.”

“Jonas, Reynolds, and De?pape.”

“Aye.”

“But why?” She took him by the arm and asked her ques?tion again. “What are they

for? ”

“For Par?son,” Roland said with a calm he didn’t feel. “For the Good Man. The

Af?fil?ia?tion knows he’s found a num?ber of war-?ma?chines; they come ei?ther from

the Old Peo?ple or from some oth?er where. Yet the Af?fil?ia tion fears them not,

be?cause they don’t work. They’re silent. Some feel Far?son has gone mad to put his

trust in such bro?ken things, but...”

“But may?hap they’re not bro?ken. May?hap they on?ly need this stuff. And may?hap

Far?son knows it.”

Roland nod?ded.

She touched the side of one of the tankers. Her fin?gers came away oily.

She rubbed the tips to?geth?er, smelled them, then bent and picked up a swatch of grass

to wipe her hands. "This doesn't work in our ma?chines. It's been tried. It clogs them."

Roland nod?ded again. "My fa—my folk in the In?ner Cres?cent know that as well.

And count on it. But if Far?son has gone to this trou?ble—and split aside a troop of

men to come and get these tankers, as we have word he has done—he ei?ther

knows a way to thin it to use?ful?ness, or he thinks he does. If he's able to lure the

forces of the Af?fil?ia?tion in?to a bat?tle in some close lo?ca?tion where rapid re?treat is

im?pos?si?ble, and if he can use ma?chine-?weapons like the ones that go on treads, he

could win more than a bat?tle. He could slaugh?ter ten thou?sand horse-?mount?ed

fight?ing men and win the war."

"But sure?ly yer fa?thers know this . . . ?"

Roland shook his head in frus?tra?tion. How much their fa?thers knew was one

ques?tion. What they made of what they knew was an?oth?er. What forces drove

them—ne?ces?si?ty, fear, the fan?tas?tic pride which had al?so been hand?ed down, fa?ther

to son, along the line of Arthur Eld—was yet a third. He could on?ly tell her his

clear?est sur?mise.

"I think they daren't wait much longer to strike Far?son a mor?tal blow. If they do,

the Af?fil?ia?tion will sim?ply rot out from the in?side. And if that hap?pens, 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. Python 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

into each other's eyes with a kind of helpless fascination, stepped forward again,

and stopped. She remembered what he had said with a kind of horror: that he

would do anything for her but share her with another man. She would

not—perhaps could not—break her promise to Mayor Thorin, and it seemed that

Roland would not (or could not) break it for her. And here was the most horrible

thing of all: strong as the wind of ka might be, it appeared that honor and the

promises 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

trouble with your aunt when you go home? Will she want to know where you've

been and what you've been doing?"

"Is it me you're concerned about or yourself and yer plans, Willy?"

He didn't respond, only looked at her. After a moment, Susan dropped her eyes.

"I'm sorry, that was cruel. No, she'll not tax me. I often ride at night, although not

often so far from the house."

"She won't know how far you've ridden?"

"Nay. And these days we tread carefully around each other. It's like having two

powder magazines in the same house." She reached out her hands. She had tucked

her gloves into her belt, and the fingers which grasped his fingers were cold.

“This’ll have no good end,” she said in a whisper.

“Don’t say that, Susan.”

“Aye, I do. I must. But whatever comes, I love thee, Roland.”

He took her in his arms and kissed her. When he released her lips, she put them to

his ear and whispered, “If you love me, then love me. Make me break my

promise.”

For a long moment when her heart didn’t beat, there was no response from him,

and she allowed herself to hope. Then he shook his head—only the one time, but

firmly. “Susan, I cannot.”

“Is yer honor so much greater than yer professed love for me, then? Aye? Then let

it be so.” She pulled out of his arms, beginning to cry, ignoring his hand on her

boot as she swung up into the saddle—his low call to wait, as well. She yanked

free the slipknot with which Pylon had been tethered and turned him with one

spurless foot. Roland was still calling to her, louder now, but she flung Pylon into

a gallop and away from him before her brief flare of rage could go out. He would

not take her used, and her promise to Thorin had been made before she knew

Roland walked the face of the earth. That being so, how dare he insist that the loss

of honor and consequent shame be hers alone? Later, lying in her sleepless bed,

she would realize he had insisted nothing. And she was not even clear of the

orange grove before raising her left hand to the side of her face, feeling the

wetness there, and realizing that he had been crying, too.

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

tak?en? For not shar?ing what she want?ed to share? If you love me, then love me.

Those words had near?ly torn him open. Yet in the deep rooms of his heart rooms

where the clear?est voice was that of his fa?ther he felt he had not been wrong. Nor

was it just a mat?ter of hon?or, what?ev?er she might think. But let her think that if she

would; bet?ter she should hate him a lit?tle, per?haps, than re?al?ize how deep the

dan?ger was for both of them.

Around three o' the clock, as he was about to turn for the Bar K, he heard the rapid

drum?ming of hoof?beats on the main road, ap?proach?ing from the west. With?out

think?ing about why it seemed so im?por?tant to do so, Roland swung back in that

di?rec?tion, then brought Rush?er to a stop be hind a high line of run-to-?ri?ot hedges.

For near?ly ten min?utes the sound of the hoof?beats con?tin?ued to swell—sound

car?ried far in the deep qui?et of ear?ly morn?ing—and that was quite enough time for

Roland to feel he knew who was rid?ing to?ward Ham?bry hell-?for-leather just two

hours be fore dawn. Nor was he mis?tak?en. The moon was down, but he had no

trou?ble, even through the bram?bly in?ter?stices of the hedge, rec?og?niz?ing Roy

De?pape. By dawn the Big Cof?fin Hunters would be three again.
Roland turned Rush?er back the way he had been head?ing, and rode to
re?join his
own friends.

CHAP?TER X

BIRD AND BEAR AND

HARE AND FISH

1

The most im?por?tant day of Su?san Del?ga?do's life—the day up?on
which her life

turned like a stone up?on a piv?ot—came about two weeks af?ter her
moon?lit tour of

the oil?patch with Roland. Since then she had seen him on?ly half a
dozen times,

al?ways at a dis?tance, and they had raised their hands as pass?ing ac?
quain?tances do

when their er?rands bring them briefly in?to sight of one an?oth?er.
Each time this

hap?pened, she felt a pain as sharp as a knife twist?ing in her ... and
though it was no

doubt cru?el, she hoped he felt the same twist of the knife. If there was
any?thing

good about those two mis?er?able weeks, it was on?ly that her great fear
—that gos?sip

might be?gin about her?self and the young man who called him?self
Will

Dear born—sub?sid?ed, and she found her?self ac?tu?al?ly sor?ry to
feel it ebb. Gos sip?

There was noth?ing to gos?sip about.

Then, on a day be?tween the pass?ing of the Ped?dler's Moon and the
rise of the

Huntress, ka fi?nal?ly came and blew her away—house and barn and
all. It be?gan

with some?one at the door.

2

She had been fin?ish?ing the wash?ing—a light enough chore with on?
ly two wom?en

to do it for—when the knock came.

“If it’s the rag?man, send him away, ye mind!” Aunt Cord called from the oth?er

room, where she was turn?ing bed linen.

But it wasn’t the rag?man. It was Maria, her maid from Seafront, look ing woe?ful.

The sec?ond dress Su?san was to wear on Reap?ing Day—the silk meant for

lun?cheon at May?or’s House and the Con?ver?sa?tion?al af?ter-?ward —was ru?ined, Maria

said, and she was in hack be?cause of it. Would be sent back to On?nie’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 afeard 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 raccoon got in through a window that ‘us opened during the heat

of the day and was then forgotten at day’s end, but I had a good sniff of that room,

and Kimba Rimer did, too, when he came down to inspect. Just before he sent me

after you, that was.”

“What did you smell?”

Maria leaned close again, and this time she actually whispered, although there

was no one on the road to overhear: “Dog farts.”

There was a moment of thunderstruck silence, and then Susan began to laugh. She

laughed until her stomach hurt and tears went streaming down her cheeks.

“Are ye saying that W-W-Wolf... the Mayor’s own d-d-dog ... got into the

downstairs seamstress’s closet and chewed up my Conversation al d-d—” But she

couldn’t finish. She was simply laughing 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—ye 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 into 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

Conversational 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

other deflation finally over, bolted out other 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 Python up in a

very undelgado-like scrunch, then dismounted in an unladylike leap. Her braid

had come half un?done, spray?ing that damned blonde hair that was her van?ity (and

her curse) in all di?rec?tions. Her skin was pale, ex?cept for twin patch?es of col?or

flar?ing high on her cheek?bones. Cordelia didn't like the look of those at all. Pat had

al?ways flared in that same place when he was scared or an?gry.

She stood at the sink, now bit?ing her lips as well as work?ing her hands. Oh,

'twould be so good to see the back of that trou?ble?some she. "Ye haven't made

trou?ble, have ye?" she whis?pered as Su?san pulled the sad?dle from Py?lon's back and

then led him to?ward the barn. "You bet?ter not have, Miss Oh So Young and Pret?ty.

Not at this late date. You bet?ter not have."

4

When Su?san came in twen?ty min?utes lat?er, there was no sign of her aunt's strain

and rage; Cordelia had put them away as one might store a dan?ger ous weapon—a

gun, say—on a high clos?et shelf. She was back in her rock?er, knit?ing, and the face

she turned to Su?san's en?try had a sur?face se ren?ity. She watched the girl go to the

sink, pump cold wa?ter in?to the basin, and then splash it on her face. In?stead 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 headless dressmaker's dummy crouched

beneath one low eave, and although Susan could see ragged places on the hem and

one small hole around to the back, it was by no means the tattered ruin she had

been expecting.

"Can it not be saved?" she asked, rather timidly.

"No," Concheta said curtly. "Get out of those trousers, girl. Shirt, too."

Susan did as she was bid, standing barefoot in the cool little room with her arms

crossed over her bosom . . . not that Concheta had ever shown the slightest interest

in what she had, back or front, above or below.

Blue Dress With Beads was to be replaced by Pink Dress With Applique, it

seemed. Susan stepped into it, raised the straps, and stood patiently while

Concheta bent and measured and muttered, sometimes using a bit of chalk to

write numbers on a wall-stone, sometimes grabbing a swag of material and pulling

it tighter against Susan's hip or waist, checking the look in the full-length mirror

on the far wall. As always during this process, Susan slipped away mentally,

allowing her mind to go where it wanted. Where it wanted to go most frequently

these days was into a daydream of riding along the Drop with Roland, the two of

them side by side, finally stopping in a willow grove she knew that overlooked

Ham-bry Creek.

"Stand there still as you can," Concheta said curtly. "I be back."

Susan was hardly aware she was gone; was hardly aware she was in Mayor'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, throbbing column which lay against her bottom disabused her of that wistful

no?tion in a hurry.

She had managed at least a degree of diplomacy by simply putting her hands over

his and attempting to draw them off her breasts instead of pulling away from him

again (Cordelia, impassive, not showing the great relief she felt at this).

“Mayor Thorin—Hart—you mustn’t—this is hardly the place and not yet the

time—Rhea said—”

“Balls to her and all witches!” His cultured politician’s tones had been replaced by

an accent as thick as that in the voice of any back-country farmhand from Onnie’s

Ford. “I must have something, a bon-bon, aye, so I must. Balls to the witch, I say!

Owlshit to ‘er!” The smell of tobacco a thick reek around her head. She thought

that she would vomit if she had to smell it much longer. “Just stand still, girl.

Stand still, my temptation. Mind me well!”

Somehow she did. There was even some distant part of her mind, a part totally

dedicated to self-preservation, that hoped he would mistake her shudders of

revulsion for maidenly excitement. He had drawn her tight against him, hands

working energetically on her breasts, his respiration a stinky steam-engine in her

ear. She stood back to him, her eyes closed, tears squeezing out from beneath the

lids and through the fringes of her lashes.

It didn’t take him long. He rocked back and forth against her, moaning 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

driv?en face-?first in?to it. Then he at last stepped back.

For a mo?ment Su?san on?ly stood as she was, with her palms against the rough cold

stone of the sewing room wall. She could see Thorin in the mir?ror, and in his

im?age she saw the or?di?nary doom that was rush?ing at her, the or?di?nary doom of

which this was but a fore?taste: the end of girl hood, the end of ro?mance, the end of

dreams where she and Roland lay to geth?er in the wil?low grove with their

fore?heads touch?ing. The man in the mir?ror looked odd?ly like a boy him?self, one

who’s been up to some?thing he wouldn’t tell his moth?er about. Just a tall and

gan?gly lad with strange gray hair and nar?row twitch?ing shoul?ders 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 mo?ment the lust was flushed out of his face, but what re?placed it was

no bet?ter—that va?cant con?fu?sion. It was as if he were a buck?et with a hole in the

bot?tom: no mat?ter what you put in it, or how much, it al?ways ran out be?fore long.

He ‘II do it again, she thought, and felt an im?mense tired?ness creep over her. Now

that he's done it once, he 'll do it every chance he gets, like?ly. From now on

com?ing up here is go?ing to be like . . . well . . .

Like Cas?tles. Like play?ing at Cas?tles.

Thorin looked at her a mo?ment longer. Slow?ly, like a man in a dream, he pulled

the tail of his bil?lowy white shirt out of his pants and let it drop around him like a

skirt, cov?er?ing the wet spot. His chin gleamed; he had drooled in his ex?cite?ment.

He seemed to feel this and wiped the wet?ness away with the heel of one hand,

look?ing at her with those emp?ty eyes all the while. Then some ex?pres?ion at last

came in?to them, and with?out an oth?er word he turned and left the room.

There was a lit?tle scuf?fling thud in the hall as he col?lid?ed with some?one out there.

Su?san heard him mut?ter "Sor?ry! Sor?ry!" un?der his breath (it was more apol?ogy

than he'd giv?en her, mut?tered or not), and then Conchet?ta stepped back in?to the

room. The swatch of cloth she'd gone af?ter was draped around her shoul?ders like

a stole. She took in Su?san's pale face and tearstained cheeks at once. She'll say

noth?ing, Su?san thought. None of them will, just as none of them will lift a fin?ger to

help me off this stick I've run my?self on. "Ye sharp?ened it your?self, gilly," they'd

say if I called for help, and that'll be their ex?cuse for leav?ing me to wrig?gle.

But Conchet?ta had sur?prised her. "Life's hard, mis?sy, so it is. Best get used to it."

5

Su?san's voice—dry, by now pret?ty much stripped of emo?tion—at last ceased. Aunt

Cord put her knit?ting aside, got up, and put the ket?tle on for tea.

“Ye dra?ma?tize, Su?san.” She spoke in a voice that strove to be both kind and wise,

and suc?ceed?ed at nei?ther. “It’s a trait ye get from your Manch?ester side—half of

them fan?cied them?selves po?ets, t’oth?er half fan cied them?selves painters, and

al?most all of them spent their nights too drunk to tap?dance. He grabbed yer tit?ties

and gave yer a dry-?hump, that’s all. Noth?ing to be so up?set over. Cer?tain?ly noth?ing

to lose sleep over.”

“How would you know?” Su?san asked. It was dis?re?spect?ful, but she was be?yond

car?ing. She thought she’d reached a point where she could bear any?thing from her

aunt ex?cept that pa?tron?iz?ing world?ly-?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?pression 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.

She rode with no conscious idea of where she was going, yet some part of her

must have had a very specific destination in mind, because forty minutes after

leaving her house, she found herself approaching the very grove of willows she

had been daydreaming about when Thorin had crept up behind her like some bad

elf out of a game's story.

It was blessedly cool in the willows. Susan tied Felicia (whom she had ridden out

bareback) to a branch, then walked slowly across the little clearing which lay at

the heart of the grove. Here the stream passed, and here she sat on the springy

moss which carpeted the clearing. Of course she had come here; it was where she

had brought all her secret griefs and joys since she had discovered the clearing at

the age of eight or nine. It was here she had come, time and time again, in the

nearly endless days after her father's death, when it had seemed to her that the

very world—her version of it, at least—had ended with Pat Delga-do. It was only

this clearing that had heard the full and painful measure of her grief; to the stream

she had spoken it, and the stream had carried it away.

Now a fresh spate of tears took her. She put her head on her knees and sobbed—loud, unladylike sounds like the caw of squabbling crows.

In that

moment she thought she would have given anything—everything—to have her

father 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 snapping branch,

she started and looked back over her shoulder in terror and chagrin. This was her

secret place and she didn't want to be found here, especially not when she was

bawling like a kid who has fallen and bumped her head. Another branch

snapped. Someone was here, all right, invading her secret place at the worst

possible time.

"Go away!" she screamed in a tear-clotted voice she barely recognized. "Go

away, whoever you are, be decent and leave me alone!"

But the figure—she could now see it—kept coming. When she saw who it was,

she at first thought that Will Dearborn (Roland, she thought, his real name is

Roland) must be a figment of her overstrained imagination. She wasn't entirely

sure he was real until he knelt and put his arms around her. Then she hugged him

with panicky tightness. "How did you know I was—"

"Saw you riding across the Drop. I was at a place where I go to think sometimes,

and I saw you. I wouldn't have followed, except I saw that you were riding

back. I thought something might be wrong."

"Everything's wrong."

Deliberately, with his eyes wide open and serious, he began kissing her cheeks. He

had done it several times on both sides of her face before she realized he was

kissing her tears away. Then he took her by the shoulders and held her back from

him so he could look into her eyes.

"Say it again and I will, Susan. I don't know if that's a promise or a warning 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

beneath her, and later she would think that for the first and only time in her life

she had actually felt ka, a wind that came not from the sky but from the earth. It

has come to me, after all, she thought. My ka, for good or ill.

“Roland!”

“Yes, Susan.”

She dropped her hand below his belt-buckle and grasped what was there, her eyes

never leaving his.

“If you love me, then love me.”

“Aye, lady. I will.”

He unbuttoned his shirt, made in a part of Mid-World she would never see, and

took her in his arms.

7

Ka:

They helped each other with their clothes; they lay naked in each other's arms on

summer moss as soft as the finest goose-down. They lay with their foreheads

touching, as in her daydream, and when he found his way into her, she felt pain

melt into sweetness like some wild and exotic herb that may only be tasted once in

each lifetime. She held that taste as long as she could, until at last the sweetness

overcame it and she gave in to that, moaning deep in her throat and rubbing her

forearms against the sides of his neck. They made love in the willow grove,

questions of honor put aside, promises broken without so much as a look back,

and at the end of it Susan discovered there was more than sweetness; there was a

kind of delirious clinching of the nerves that began in the part of her that had

opened before him like a flower; it began there and then filled her entire body. She

cried out again and again, thinking there could not be so much pleasure in the

mortal world; she would die of it. Roland added his voice to hers, and the sound of

water rushing over stones wrapped around both. As she pulled him closer to her,

locking her ankles together behind his knees and covering his face with fierce

kisses, his going out rushed after hers as if trying to catch up. So were lovers

joined in the Barony of Mejis, near the end of the last great age, and the green

moss beneath the place where her thighs joined turned a pretty red as her virginity

passed; so were they joined and so were they doomed.

Ka.

8

They lay together in each other's arms, sharing afterglow kisses beneath Felecia's

mild gaze, and Roland felt himself drowsing. This was understandable—the

strain on him that summer had been enormous, and he had been sleeping badly.

Although he didn't know it then, he would sleep badly for the rest of his life.

"Roland?" Her voice, distant. 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 touching, and his little

thefts—if I have you, I can—but I can't go to him on Reap Night. I don't know if

I've forgotten the face of my father or not, but I cannot go to Hart Thorin's bed.

There are ways the loss of a girl's virginity can be concealed, I think, but I won't

use them. I simply cannot go to his bed."

"All right," he said, "good." And then, as her eyes widened in startlement, he

looked around. No one was there. He looked back at Susan, fully awake now.

"What? What is it?"

"I might already be carrying your child," she said. "Has thee thought of that?"

He hadn't. Now he did. A child. Another link in the chain stretching back into the

dimness where Arthur Eld had led his gunslingers into battle with the great sword

Excalibur raised above his head and the crown of All-World on his brow. But

never mind that; what would his father think? Ur Gabrielle, to know she had

become a grandmother?

A little smile had formed at the corners of his mouth, but the thought of his mother

drove it away. He thought of the mark on her neck. When his mother came to his

mind these days, he always thought of the mark he'd seen on her neck when he

came unexpected into her apartment. And the small, rueful smile on her face.

"If you carry my child, such is my good fortune," 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 kiddies ourselves."

He rolled onto his back and looked up at the blue sky. What she said might be

true, but it didn't mat?ter. Truth was some?times not the same as re?al?
ity—this was

one of the cer?tain?ties that lived in the hol?low, cavey place at the cen?
ter of his

di?vid?ed na?ture. That he could rise above both and will?ing?ly em?
brace the in?san?ity

of ro?mance was a gift from his moth?er. All else in his na?ture was hu?
mor?less . . .

and, per?haps more im?por?tant, with?out metaphor. That they were too
young to be

par?ents? What of that? If he had plant?ed a seed, it would grow.

"What?ev?er comes, we'll do as we must. And I'll al?ways love you, no
mat?ter what

comes."

She smiled. He said it as a man would state any dry fact: sky is up, earth
is down,

wa?ter flows south.

"Roland, how old are you?" She was some?times trou?bled by the idea
that, young

as she her?self was, Roland was even younger. When he was con?cen?
trat?ing on

some?thing, he could look so hard he fright?ened her. When he smiled,
he looked

not like a lover but a kid broth?er.

"Old?er than I was when I came here," he said. "Old?er by far. And if I
have to stay

in sight of Jonas and his men an?oth?er six months, I'll be hob bling and
need?ing a

boost in the ar?se 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. Su?san nod?ded, then al?so
turned on her

back. They lay that way, hip to hip, look?ing up at the sky. She took his
hand and

placed it on her breast. As he stroked the nip?ple 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 Devereux 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 Cithgo, 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 live?ly, it seemed.

She took her hand away and looked up at the cir?cle of sky above the grove. “So

beau?ti?ful here,” she mur?mured, and her eyes drift?ed closed.

Roland al?so felt him?self drift?ing. It was iron?ic, he thought. This time she hadn’t

had that sen?sa?tion of be?ing watched ... but the sec?ond time, he had. Yet he would

have sworn there was no one near this grove.

No mat?ter. The feel?ing, megrim or re?al?ity, was gone now. He took Su?san’s hand,

and felt her fin?gers slip nat?ural?ly through his, en?twin?ing.

He closed his eyes.

9

All of this Rhea saw in the glass, and wery in?ter?est?ing view?ing it made, aye, wery

in?ter?est?ing, in?deed. But she’d seen shag?ging be?fore—some?times with three or four

or even more do?ing it all at the same time (some?times with part ners who were not

pre?cise?ly alive)—and the hokey-?pokey wasn’t very in?ter es?ting to her at her

ad?vanced age. What she was in?ter?est?ed in was what would come af?ter the hokey-

pokey.

Is our busi?ness done? the girl had asked.

May?hap there’s one more lit?tle thing, Rhea had re?spond?ed, and then she told the

im?pu?dent trull what to do.

Aye, she’d giv?en the girl very clear in?struc?tions as the two of them stood in the hut

door?way, the Kiss?ing Moon shin?ing down on them as Su?san Del?ga?do slept the

strange sleep and Rhea stroked her braid and whis?pered in?struc?tions in her ear.

Now would come the fulfillment of that interlude . . . 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, very 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, ay!” 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 bowler as this—spoke up gruffly in his mind. No

time, maybe.

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 lower 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 infested by a demon.

While I slept, heedless, beside her, she’s been infested 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—Nnnnnnnnn—kept

drifting from her mouth.

“Susan! Stop it! Wake up!”

“Nnnnnnn—”

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 others, 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

side-mouth, in fact.

Su?san jerked back from that sound, which must have gone through her head like a

spear. Her eye?lids flut?tered rapid?ly, and the pres?sure she was ex?ert?ing against

Roland's grip eased a lit?tle. He took the chance and twist?ed her wrist.

"Ow!Owww!"

The stone flew out of her open?ing hand and splashed in?to the wa?ter. Su?san gazed

at him, now ful?ly awake, her eyes filled with tears and be?wil der?ment. She was

rub?bing her wrist. . . which, Roland thought, was like?ly to swell.

"Ye hurt me, Roland! Why did ye hurt m ..."

She trailed off, look?ing around. Now not just her face but the whole set oth?er body

ex?pressed be?wil?der?ment. She moved to cov?er her?self with her hands, then re?al?ized

they were still alone and dropped them to her sides. She glanced over her shoul?der

at the foot?prints—all of them bare— lead?ing down the bank.

"How did I get down here?" she asked. "Did thee car?ry me, af?ter 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 try?ing to cut your?self with it,

and you didn't want to stop. I hurt you be?cause 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 ro?tat?ed it gen?tly in ei?ther di?rec?tion, lis?ten?ing for the grate of

small bones.

He heard noth?ing, and the wrist turned freely. As Su?san watched, stunned and

con?fused, he raised it to his lips and kissed the in?ner part, above the del?icate

trac?ery of veins.

Roland had tied Rusher just far enough in to 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

ap?pre?hen?sive?ly, lay?ing the hair on the left side of her head across her fore?arm, then

mov?ing the arm slow?ly out?ward, ex?tend?ing the tress in a band of bright gold. She

saw the ragged cut at once. She ex?am?ined it care ful?ly, then let it drop with a sigh

more re?lieved than rue?ful.

“I can hide it,” she said. “When it’s braid?ed, no one will know. And af?ter all, ’tis

on?ly hair—no more than wom?an’s van?ity. My aunt has told me so of?ten 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 heddles of a loom. She watched this with a child's fascinated light. "Where

did ye learn that?"

"At home. It doesn't matter."

"Ye'd hypnotize 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 rippling knuckles, now west. "May I?"

"Aye," she said. "If you can."

12

He could, all right; the speed with which she went under confirmed that this had

happened to Susan before, and recently. Yet he couldn't get what he wanted from

her. She was perfectly cooperative (some sleep eager, for would have said), but

beyond a certain point she would not go. It wasn't decorum or modesty, either—as

she slept open-eyed before the stream, she told him in a far-off but calm voice

about the old woman's examination, and the way Rhea had tried to "fiddle her up."

(At this Roland's fists clenched so tightly his nails bit into his palms.) But there

came a point where she could no longer remember.

She and Rhea had gone to the door of the hut, Susan said, and there they had stood

with the Kiss'ing Moon shining down on their faces. The old woman had been

touching her hair, Susan remembered that much. The touch revolted her,

especially after the witch's previous touches, but Susan had been unable to do

anything about it. Arms too heavy to raise; tongue too heavy to speak. She could

only stand there while the witch whispered in her ear.

"What?" Roland asked. "What did she whisper?"

"I don't know," Susan said. "The rest is pink."

"Pink? What do you mean?"

"Pink," she repeated. She sounded almost amused, as if she believed Roland was

being deliberately dense. "She says, 'Aye, lovely, just so, it's a good girl y'are,'

then everything's pink. Pink and bright."

"Bright."

"Aye, like the moon. And then . . ." She paused. "Then I think it becomes the

moon. The Kissing Moon, maybe. A bright pink Kissing Moon, as round and full

as a grapefruit."

He tried other ways into her memory with no success—every path he tried ended

in that bright pinkness, first obscuring her recollection and then coalescing into a

full moon. It meant nothing to Roland; he'd heard of blue moons, but never pink

ones. The only thing of which he was sure was that the old woman had given

Susan a powerful command to forget.

He considered taking her deeper—she would go—but didn't dare. Most of his

expectance came from hypnotizing his friends—classroom exercises that were

larky and occasionally spooky. Always there had been Cort or Vanay present to

make things right if they went off-track. Now there were no teachers to step in; for

better or worse, the students 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 below-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?ing late. It wouldn't be prudent to stay here much longer.

"Susan, 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 understand?"

"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 beautiful things he had

ev?er seen. She stretched, then put her arms around his neck and covered his face

with kisses. "You, you, you, you," she said. "You're my fondest wish, Roland.

You're my only wish. You and you, for?ev?er and ev?er."

They made love again there on the bank, beside the bab?bling stream, holding 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

Twenty minutes later, he boosted her on?to Fe?li?cia's back. Susan 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 pavilion 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 grav?ity. “There’s a stone on one of the low?er cours?es—a red?dish

one. You’ll see it. My friend Amy and I used to leave mes?sages there for each

oth?er when we were lit?tle girls. I’ll look there when I can. Ye do the same.”

“Aye.” Sheemie would work for awhile, if they were care?ful. The red rock might

al?so work for awhile, if they were care?ful. But no mat?ter how care?ful they were,

they would slip even?tu?al?ly, be?cause the Big Cof?fin Hunters now prob?ably knew

more about Roland and his friends than Roland ev?er would have wished. But he

had to see her, no mat?ter what the risks. If he didn’t, he felt he might die. And he

on?ly had to look at her to know she felt the same.

“Watch spe?cial for Jonas and the oth?er two,” he said.

“I will. An?oth?er kiss, if ye fa?vor?”

He kissed her glad?ly, and would just as glad?ly have pulled her off the mare’s back

for a fourth go-?round . . . but it was time to stop be?ing deliri ous and start be?ing

care?ful.

“Fare you well, Su?san. 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 Hamby 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 Eldred 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

welcoming dinner at Mayor Thorin's house, that I know you."

"Cordelia's fine."

"And may I be introduced to you?"

"I think 'Mr. Jonas' will do a bit longer," she said, then favored him with what she

hoped was a coquettish smile. Her heart beat faster yet. (It did not occur to her that

perhaps Susan was not the only silly goose in the Delgado family.)

"So be it," Jonas said, with a look of disappointment so comic that she laughed.

"And your niece? Is she well?"

"Quite well, thank ye for asking. A bit of a trial, sometimes—"

"Was there ever a girl of sixteen who wasn't?"

"I suppose not."

"Yet you have additional burdens regarding her this fall. I doubt if she realizes

that, though."

Cordelia said nothing—'twouldn't be discreet—but gave him a meaningful look

that said much.

"Give her my best, please."

"I will." But she wouldn't. Susan had conceived a great (and irrational, in

Cordelia's view) dislike for May's or Thorin's regulations. Trying to talk her out of

these feelings would likely do no good; young girls thought they knew everything.

She glanced at the star peeking unobtrusively out from beneath the flap of Jonas's

vest. "I understand you've taken on an additional responsibility in our underserving

town, said Jonas."

"Aye, I'm helping out Sheriff Avery," he agreed. His voice had a reedy little

tremble which Cordelia found quite endearing, somehow. "One of his

deputies—Claypool, his name is—"

"Frank Claypool, 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 merrily (the idea that everyone in Hamby was watching them was

surely wrong ... but it felt that way, and the feeling was not unpleasant) and said

she didn't know.

He stopped on the corner of High and Camino Vega, looking regretful. "Here's

where I turn." He handed the box back to her. "Are you sure you can carry that? I

suppose I could go on with you to your house—"

"No need, no need. Thank you. Thank you, Elfred." The blush which crept up her

neck and cheeks felt as hot as fire, but his smile was worth every degree of heat.

He tipped her a little salute with two fingers and sauntered up the hill toward the

Sheriff's office.

Cordelia walked on home. The box, which had seemed such a burden 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?san,
just lead?ing her

mare in through the gate?

"Su?san!" 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

riding; that could explain the mess. But it didn't explain how dark her hair was, as

if that bright mass of gold had been tarred. And she jumped, almost guiltily,

when she felt Cordelia's touch. Why, pray tell, was that?

"Your hair's damp, Susan," she said. "Have you been swimming somewhere?"

"Nay! I stopped and ducked my head at the pump outside Hockley's barn. He

doesn't mind—it's a deep well he has. It's so hot. Perhaps there'll be a shower later.

I hope so. I gave Felicia to drink as well."

The girl's eyes were as direct and as candid as ever, but Cordelia thought there was

something off in them, just the same. She couldn't say what. The idea that Susan

might be hiding something large and serious did not immediately cross Cordelia's

mind; she would have said her niece was incapable of keeping a secret any greater

than a birthday present or a surprise party . . . and not even such secrets as those

for more than a day or two. And yet something was off here. Cordelia dropped her

fingers to the collar of the girl's riding shirt.

"Yet this is dry."

"I was careful," she said, looking at her aunt with a puzzled eye. "Dirt sticks worse

to a wet shirt. You taught me that, Aunt."

"You flinched when I touched your hair, Susan."

"Aye," Susan said, "so I did. The weird-woman touched it just that same way. I

haven't liked it since. Now may I take these groceries in and get my horse out of

the hot sun?"

"Don't be pert, Susan." Yet the edginess in her niece's voice actually eased her in

some strange way. That feeling that Susan had changed, somehow—that feeling of

off-ness—began to subside.

“Then don’t be tiresome.”

“Susan! Apologize to me!”

Susan 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.”

Susan went on toward the house with the box in her arms. When the girl had

enough of a lead so they wouldn’t have to walk together, Cordelia followed. It was

all foolishness on her part, no doubt—suspicions brought on by her flirtation with

Elfred—but the girl was at a dangerous age, and much depended on her good

behavior over the next seven weeks. After that she would be Thorin’s problem, but

until then she was Cordelia’s. Cordelia thought that, in the end, Susan would be

true to her promise, but until Reaping Fair she would bear close watching. About

such matters as a girl’s virginity, it was best to be vigilant.

INTERLUDE

KANSAS,

SOMEWHERE,

SOMEWHEN

Edie stirred. Around them the tiny still whined like an unpleasant mother-in-

law; above them the stars gleamed as bright as new hopes . . . or bad intentions.

He looked at Susan, sitting with the stumps of her legs curled beneath her; he

looked at Jake, who was eating a burrito; he looked at Oy, whose snout rested on

Jake’s ankle and who was looking up at the boy with an expression 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 needed it to hold. Edie doubted if Roland even noticed the

dark, particularly. Why would he? Edie thought it had been night inside of

Roland's mind for a long, long time . . . and dawn was still nowhere near.

He reached out and touched one of those callused killer's hands. Gently he

touched it, and with love.

“Go on, Roland. Tell your tale. All the way to the end.”

“All the way to the end,” Susanah said dreamily. “Cut the vein.” Her eyes were

full of moonlight.

“All the way to the end,” Jake said.

“End,” Oy whispered.

Roland held Edie's hand for a moment, then let it go. He looked in to the guttering

fire without immediately speaking, and Edie sensed him trying to find the way.

Trying doors, one after another, until he found one that opened. What he saw

behind it made him smile and look up at Edie.

“True love is boring,” he said.

“Say what?”

“True love is boring,” Roland repeated. “As boring as any other strong and

addicting drug. And, as with any other strong drug . . .”

Darktower 4 - Wizard and Glass

PART THREE

COME, REAP
CHAPTER 1
BENEATH THE
huntress moon

1

True love, like any other strong and addicting drug, is boring—once the tale of

encounter and discovery is told, kisses quickly grow stale and caresses tiresome.

... except, of course, to those who share the kisses, who give and take the caresses

while every sound and color of the world seems to deepen and brighten around

them. As with any other strong drug, true first love is really only interesting to

those who have become its prisoners.

And, as is true of any other strong and addicting drug, true first love is dangerous.

2

Some called Huntress the last moon of summer; some called it the first of fall.

Whichever it was, it signaled a change in the life of the Barony. Men put out into

the bay wearing sweaters beneath their oilskins as the winds began to turn more

and more firmly into autumn's east-west alley, and to sharpen as they turned. In

the great Barony orchards north of Hamby (and in smaller orchards owned by

John Croydon, Henry Wertner, Jake White, and the more but wealthy Coral

Thorin), the pickers began to appear in the rows, carrying their odd, off-kilter

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?tumn 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

players, Roland thought, but no matter who moved first, Jonas and his men would

be there, a part of it. The part apt to be most dangerous to the three boys.

Roland and Susan were careful—as careful as delirious people could be, at any

rate. They never met in the same place twice in a row, they never met at the same

time twice in a row, they never skulked on their way to their trysts. In Ham-bry,

riders were common but skulkers were noticed. Susan never tried to cover her

“riding out” by enlisting the help of a friend (although she had friends who would

have done her this service); people who needed alibis were people keeping secrets.

She had a sense that Aunt Cord was growing increasingly uneasy about her

rides— particularly the ones she took in the early evenings—but so far she

accepted Susan’s oft-repeated reason for them: she needed time to be solitary, to

meditate on her promise and to accept her responsibility. Ironically, these

suggestions had originally come from the witch of the Coos.

They met in the willow grove, in several of the abandoned boathouses which stood

crumbling at the northern hook of the bay, in a herder’s hut far out in the

desolation of the Coos, in an abandoned squatter’s shack hidden in the Bad Grass.

The settings were, by and large, as sor did as any of those in which addicts come

together to practice their vice, but Susan and Roland didn’t see the rotting walls of

the shack or the holes in the roof of the hut or smell the mouldering nets in the

comers of the old soaked boathouses. They were drugged, stone in love, and to

them, every scar on the face of the world was a beauty-mark.

Twice, early on in those delirious weeks, they used the red rock in the wall at the

back of the pavilion to arrange meetings, and then some deep voice spoke inside

Roland's head, telling him there must be no more of it—the rock might have been

just the thing for children playing at secrets, but he and his love were no longer

children; if they were discovered, banishment would be the luckiest punishment

they could hope for. The red rock was too conspicuous, and writing things

down—even messages that were unsigned and deliberately vague—was horribly

dangerous.

Using Sheemie felt safer to both of them. Beneath his smiling light-mindedness

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 Pi?ano Ranch sweep?ing for strays near the shack in the Bad Grass.

That deep, warn?ing voice nev?er spoke to Roland about Sheemie as it had about the

dan?gers of the red rock . . . but his con?science spoke to him, and when he fi?nal?ly

men?tioned this to Su?san (the two of them wrapped in a sad?dle-?blan?ket and ly?ing

naked in each oth?er's arms), he found that her con?science had been trou?bling her,

as well. It wasn't fair to put the boy in the way of their pos?si?ble trou?ble. Af?ter

com?ing to that con?clu?sion, Roland and Su?san ar?ranged their meet?ings strict?ly

be?tween the two of them. If she could not meet him, Su?san said, she would hang a

red shirt over the sill of her win?dow, as if to dry. If he could not meet her, he was

to leave a white stone in the north?east com?er of the yard, di?ag?onal?ly across the

road from Hock?ey's Liv?ery, where the town pump stood. As a last re?sort, they

would use the red rock in the pavil?ion, risky or not, rather than bring?ing Sheemie

in?to their af?fairs—their af?fair—again.

Cuth?bert and Alain watched Roland's de?scent in?to ad?dic?tion first with dis?be?lief,

en?vy, and un?easy amuse?ment, then with a species of silent hor?ror. They had been

sent to what was sup?posed to have been safe?ty and had dis?cov?ered a place of

con?spir?acy, in?stead; they had come to take cen?sus in a Barony where most of the

aris?toc?ra?cy had ap?par?ent?ly switched its al?legiance to the Af?fil?ia?tion's bit?ter?est

en?emy; they had made per?son?al ene?mies of three hard men who had prob?ably

killed enough folks to pop?ulate a fair-?sized grave?yard. Yet they had felt equal to

the sit?ua?tion, be?cause they had come here un?der the lead?er?ship of their friend, who

had at tained near-?myth?ic sta?tus in their minds by best?ing Cort—with a hawk as

his weapon!—and be?com?ing a gun?slinger at the un?heard-?of age of four?teen. That

they had been giv?en guns them?selves for this mis?sion had meant a great deal to

them when they set out from Gilead, and noth?ing at all by the time they be?gan to

re?al?ize the scope of what was go?ing on in Ham?bry-?town and the Barony of which

it was a part. When that re?al?iza?tion came, Roland was the weapon they count?ed

on. And now—

“He’s like a re?volver cast in?to wa?ter!” Cuth?bert ex?claimed one evening, not long

af?ter Roland had rid?den away to meet Su?sana. Be?yond the bunkhouse porch,

Huntress rose in her first quar?ter. “Gods know if it’ll ev?er fire again, even if it’s

fished out and dried off.”

“Hush, wait,” Alain said, and looked to?ward the porch rail. Hop?ing to jol?ly

Cuth?bert out of his bad tem?per (a task that was quite easy un?der or?di?nary

cir?cum?stances), Alain said: “Where’s the look?out? 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

disappeared aboard his big old gallop of a horse. "Lost, I reckon.
Like a certain

fellow's mind and heart and good sense."

"He'll be all right," Alain said awkwardly. "You know him as well as
I do,

Bert—known him our whole lives, we have. He'll be all right."

Quietly, without even a trace of his normal good humor, Cuthbert
said: "I don't

feel I know him now."

They had both tried to talk to Roland in their different ways; both re-
ceived a

similar response, which was no real response at all. The dreamy
(and perhaps

slightly troubled) look of abstraction in Roland's eyes during these
one-sided

discussions would have been familiar to anyone who has ever
tried to talk sense to

a drug addict. It was a look that said Roland's mind was occupied
by the shape of

Susan's face, the smell of Susan's skin, the feel of Susan's body.
And occupied

was a silly word for it, one that fell short. It wasn't an occupation
but an obsession.

"I hate her a little for what she's done," Cuthbert said, and there was a
note in his

voice Alain had never heard before—a mixture of jealousy, frustra-
tion, and fear.

"Perhaps more than a little."

"You mustn't!" Alain tried not to sound shocked, but couldn't help it.
"She isn't

responsible for—"

"Is she not? She went out to Chicago with him. She saw what he saw.
God knows

how much else he's told her after they've finished making the beast
with two

backs. And she's all the way around the world from stupid. Just the way
she's

managed her side of their affair shows that.” Bert was thinking, Alain guessed, of

her tidy little trick with the corvette. “She must know she’s become part of the

problem herself. She must know that!”

Now his bitterness was frighteningly clear. He’s jealous of her for stealing his best

friend, Alain thought, but it doesn’t stop there. He’s jealous of his best friend, as

well, because his best friend has won the most beautiful girl any of us have ever

seen.

Alain leaned over and grasped Cuthbert’s shoulder. When Bert turned away from

his morose examination of the doorway to look at his friend, he was startled by

the grimness on Alain’s face. “It’s ka,” Alain said.

Cuthbert almost sneered. “If I had a hot dinner for every time someone blamed

theft or lust or some other stupidity on ka—”

Alain’s grip tightened until it became painful. Cuthbert could have pulled away but

didn’t. He watched Alain closely. The joker was, temporarily, at least, gone.

“Blame is exactly what we two can’t afford,” 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.”

Cuthbert looked into 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 perhaps only for the time

being), good sense won out.

“All right, fine. It’s ka, everybody’s favorite whipping-boy. That’s what the great

unseen world's for, after all, isn't it? So we don't have to take the blame for our

acts of stupidity? Now let go of me, Al, before you break my shoulder."

Alain let go and sat back in his chair, relieved. "Now if we only knew what to do

about the Drop. If we don't start counting there soon—"

"I've had an idea about that, actually," Cuthbert said. "It just needs a little working

out. I'm sure Roland could help ... if either of us can get his attention for a few

minutes, that is."

They sat for awhile without speaking, looking out at the doorway. Inside the

bunkhouse, the pigeons—another bone of contention between Roland and Bert

these days—cooed. Alain rolled himself a smoke. It was slow work, and the

finished product looked rather comical, but it held together when he lit it.

"Your father would stripe you raw if he saw that in your hand," Cuthbert

remarked, but he spoke with a certain admiration. By the time the following year's

Huntress came around, all three of them would be confirmed smokers, tanned

young men with most of the boyhood slapped out of their eyes.

Alain nodded. The strong Outer Crescent tobacco made him swimmy in the head

and raw in the throat, but a cigarette had a way of calming his nerves, and right

now his nerves could use some calming. He didn't know about Bert, but these days

he smelled blood on the wind. Possibly some of it would be their own. He wasn't

exactly frightened—not yet, at least— but he was very, very worried.

Although they had been honed like hawks toward the guns since early childhood,

Cuthbert and Alain still carried an erroneous belief common to many boys their

age: that their elders were also their betters, at least in such matters as planning

and wit; they actually believed that grownups knew what they were doing. Roland

knew better, even in his love-sickness, but his friends had forgotten that in the

game of Castles, both sides wear the blindfold. They would have been surprised to

find that at least two of the Big Coffin Hunters had grown extremely nervous

about the three young men from In-World, and extremely tired of the waiting

game both sides had been playing.

One early morning, as the Huntress neared the half, Reynolds and Depape came

downstairs together from the second floor of the Travelers' Rest. The main public

room was silent except for various snores and phlegmy wheezings. In Hamby's

busiest bar, the party was over for another night.

Jonas, accompanied by a silent guest, sat playing Chancellor's Patience at Coral's

table to the left of the batwing doors. Tonight he was wearing his duster, and his

breath smoked faintly 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 also smoked. Kimba Rimer's skeletal frame was all but

buried in a gray serape lit with faint bands of orange. 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 pleas?ant nights, gen?tle?men.” Of course the world had moved on, he

thought. To find such low culls as these two in posi tions of im?por? tance proved it.

Jonas him?self was on?ly a lit?tle bet?ter.

“Might we have a word with you, El?dred?” Clay Reynolds asked. “We’ve been

talk?ing, Roy and I—”

“Un?wise,” Jonas re?marked in his wa?very voice. Rimer wouldn’t be sur?prised to

find, at the end of his life, that the Death An?gel had such a voice.

“Talk?ing can

lead to think?ing, and think?ing’s dan?ger?ous for such as you boys. Like pick?ing your

nose with bul?let-?heads.”

De?pape don?keyed his damned hee-?haw laugh?ter, as if he didn’t re? al ize the joke

was on him.

“Jonas, lis?ten,” Reynolds be?gan, and then looked un?cer?tain?ly at Rimer.

“You can talk in front of sai Rimer,” Jonas said, lay?ing out a fresh line of cards.

“He is, af?ter all, our chief em?ploy?er. I play at Chan?cel?lors’ Pa? tience in his hon?or,

so I do.”

Reynolds looked sur?prised. “I thought . . . that is to say, I be?lieved that May?or

Thorin was ...”

“Hart Thorin wants to know none of the de?tails of our ar?range?ment with the Good

Man,” Rimer said. “A share of the prof?its is all he re?quires in that line, Mr.

Reynolds. The May?or’s chief con?cern right now is that the Reap?ing Day Fair go

smooth?ly, and that his ar?range?ments with the young la?dy be ... smooth?ly

con?sum?mat?ed.”

“Aye, that’s a diplo?mat?ic turn o’ speech for ye,” Jonas said in a broad Mejis ac?cent.

“But since Roy looks a lit?tle per?plexed, I’ll trans?late. May?or Thorin spends most of

his time in the jakes these days, yank?ing his willy-?pink and dream?ing his fist is

Su?san Del?ga?do’s box. I’m bet?ting that when the shell’s fi?nal?ly opened and her pearl

lies be?fore him, he’ll nev?er pluck it—his heart’ll ex?plode from ex?cite?ment, and he’ll

drop dead atop her, so he will. Yar!”

More don?key laugh?ter from De?pape. He el?bowed Reynolds. “He’s got it down,

don’t he, Clay? Sounds just like em!”

Reynolds grinned, but his eyes were still wor?ried. Rimer man?aged a smile as thin

as a scum of Novem?ber ice, and point?ed at the sev?en which had just popped out of

the pack. “Red on black, my dear Jonas.”

“I ain’t your dear any?thing,” Jonas said, putting the sev?en of diamonds on an eight

of shad?ows, “and you’d do well to re?mem?ber that.” Then, to Reynolds and De?pape:

“Now what do you boys want? Rimer ‘n me was just go?ing to have us a lit?tle

palaver.”

“Per?haps we could all put our heads to?geth?er,” 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 were thinking it's time to go on out there to the Bar K," DePape said. "Have a

look around. See if there's anything to back up what the old fellow in Ritzy said."

"And see what else they've got out there," Reynolds put in. "It's getting close now,

Elfred, and we can't afford to take chances. They might have—"

"Aye? Guns? Electric lights? Fairy-women in bottles? Who knows? I'll think

about it. Clay."

"But—"

"I said I'll think about it. Now go on upstairs, the both of you, back to your own

fairy-women."

Reynolds and DePape looked at him, looked at each other, then backed away from

the table. Rimer watched them with his thin smile.

At the foot of the stairs, Reynolds turned back. Jonas paused in the act of shuffling

his cards and looked at him, tufted eyebrows raised.

"We underestimated them once and they made us look like monkeys. I don't want it

to happen 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 interest duly noted. In the meantime, they aren't going

to spook me into making the first move. Time is on our side, not theirs. Do you

understand that?”

“Yes.”

“Will you try to remember it?”

“Yes,” Reynolds repeated. He seemed satisfied.

“Roy? Do you trust me?”

“Aye, Elfred. 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 perhaps a dozen folks, including Sheb the piano-player and

Barkie the bouncer, sleeping it off. No one was close enough to listen to the low-

voiced conversation of the two men by the door, even if one of the snoring

drunkards was for some reason only shamming sleep. Jonas put a red queen on a

black knight, then looked up at Rimer. “Say your say.”

“Those two said it for me, actually. Sai De-pape will never be embarrassed by a

surplus of brains, but Reynolds is fairly smart for a gunny, isn’t he?”

“Clay’s right when the moon’s right and he’s had a shave,” Jonas agreed. “Are you

saying you came all the way from Seafront to tell me those three babies need a

closer looking at?”

Rimer shrugged.

“Perhaps 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 unpleas?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

coming for twenty years or more. They didn't send these brats here to discover

your secrets, Rimer; folks such as these don't send their babies into danger on

purpose. 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 kidding;

"What else might you find, should you go out there?"

"Some way of sending messages, maybe. A helicopter's the most likely. And out

beyond Eyebolt, a shepherd or maybe a freeholder susceptible to a

bribe—someone they've trained to catch the message and either flash it on or carry

it afoot. But before long it'll be too late for messages to do any good, won't it?"

"Perhaps, but it's not too late yet. And you're right. Kid dies or not, they worry me."

"You've no cause, I tell you. Soon enough, I'll be wealthy and you'll be downright

rich. Maybe for yourself, 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 perhaps you'd like to be a Baron, if

such offices be revived?" He saw a momentary gleam in Rimer's eyes and

laughed. Matthew came out of the deck, and Jonas put him up with the other

Chancellors. "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 nothing like having folk bow and scrape before

ye, is there?"

Rimer said, "They should have been on the cowboy side by now."

Jonas's hands stopped above the layout of cards. It was a thought that had crossed

his own mind more than once, especially 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, counting cows and

horses, looking through barns, studying the foal-charts. They should have been

there two weeks ago, in fact. Unless they already know what they'd find."

Jonas understood what Rimer was implying, but couldn't believe it. Wouldn't

believe it. Not such a depth of slyness from boys who only had to shave once a

week.

"No," he said. "That's your own guilty heart talking to you. They're just so

determined to do it right that they're creeping along like old folks with bad eyes.

They'll be over on the Drop soon enough, and counting their little hearts out."

"And if they're not?"

A good question. Get rid of them somehow, Jonas supposed. An ambush,

perhaps. Three shots from cover, no more babies. There'd be ill feeling

afterward—the boys were well liked in town—but Rimer could handle that until

Fair Day, and after the Reap it wouldn't matter. 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 tramping along behind me."

"That sounds fine."

"Perhaps you'd like to come and lend a hand."

Kimba Rimer smiled his icy smile. "I think not."

Jonas nodded, and began to deal again. Going out to the Bar K would be a bit

risky, but he didn't expect any real problem—especially if he went alone. They

were only boys, after all, and gone for much of each day.

"When may I expect a report, sai Jonas?"

"When I'm ready to make it. Don't crowd me."

Rimer lifted his thin hands and held them, palms out, to Jonas. "Cry your pardon,

sai," he said.

Jonas nodded, slightly mollified. He flipped up another card. It was Peter,

Chanclor of Keys. He put the card in the top row and then stared at it, combing

his fingers through his long white hair as he did. He looked from the card to

Rimer, who looked back, eyebrows raised.

"You smile," Rimer said.

"Yar!" Jonas said, and began to deal again. "I'm happy! All the Chanclors 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 he 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 ap-
peared. 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 com-
ing 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, wait-
ing to take

offense at such talk?) up at the woman in the moon. Twice she
slammed her bony

old fist into the door-lintel 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 intentions 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

trolop 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 WINDOW

1

Now the Huntress "filled her belly," as the old-timers said—even at noon she

could be glimpsed in the sky, a palid vampire woman caught in bright autumn

sunlight. In front of businesses such as the Travelers' Rest and on the porches of

such large ranch houses as Lengyll's Rocking B and Renfrew's Lazy Susan, stuffy-

guys with heads full of straw above their old overalls began to appear. Each wore

his sombrero; each held a basket of produce cradled in his arms;
each looked out

at the emptying world with stitched white-cross eyes.

Wagons filled with squashes clogged the roads; bright orange drifts
of pumpkins

and bright magenta drifts of sharproot lay against the sides of barns.
In the fields,

the potato-carts rolled and the pickers followed behind. In front of
the Hamby

Merchantile, reaping-charms appeared like magic, hanging from the
carved Guardians

like wind-chimes.

All over Mejis, girls sewed their Reaping Night costumes (and some
times wept

over them, if the work went badly) as they dreamed of the boys they
would dance

within the Green Heart pavilion. Their little brothers began to have
trouble

sleeping as they thought of the rides and the games and the prizes they
might win

at the carnival. Even their elders sometimes lay awake in spite of
their sore hands

and aching backs, thinking about the pleasures of the Reap.

Summer had slipped away with a final flirt of her green gown; harvest-
time had

arrived.

2

Rhea cared not a fig for Reaping dances or carnival games, but she
could no more

sleep than those who did. Most nights she lay on her stinking pallet
until dawn, her

skull thudding with rage. On a night not long after Jonas's conversion
with

Chanclor Rimer, she determined to drink herself into oblivion.
Her mood was

not improved when she found that her grandfather was almost empty;
she blithered

the air with her curses.

She was drawing in breath for a fresh string of them when an idea struck her. A

wonderful idea. A brilliant idea. She had wanted Susan Delgado to cut off her

hair. That hadn't worked, and she didn't know why. . . but she did know something

about the girl, didn't she? Something interesting, aye, so it was, very interesting,

indeed.

Rhea had no desire to go to Thorin with what she knew; she had a fond (and

foolish, likely) hope that the Mayor had forgotten about his wonderful glass ball.

But the girl's aunt, now . . . suppose Cordelia Delgado were to discover that not

only was her niece's virginity lost, the girl was well on her way to becoming a

practiced trollop? Rhea didn't think Cordelia would go to the Mayor, either—the

woman was a prig but not a fool—yet it would set the cat among the pigeons just

the same, wouldn't it?

“Waow!”

Thinking of cats, there was Musty, standing on the stoop in the moonlight,

looking at her with a mixture of hope and mistrust. Rhea, grinning hideously,

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, spy?ing on peo?ple she de?test?
ed, drink?ing lit?tle

and eat?ing noth?ing. Around sun?set, she came out of her trance
enough to re?alize

she had as yet done noth?ing about the saucy lit?tle jade. But that was
all right; she

saw how it could be done . . . and she could watch all the re?sults in the
glass! All

the protests, all the shout?ing and re?crim?ina?tions! She would see Su?
san's tears. That

would be the best, to see her tears.

"A lit?tle har?vest of my own," she said to Er?mot, who now came slith
er?ing up her

leg to?ward the place where she liked him best. There weren't many
men who could

do you like Er?mot could do you, no in?deed. Sit?ting there with a lap?
ful of snake,

Rhea be?gan to laugh.

3

"Re?mem?ber your promise," Alain said ner?vous?ly as they heard the
ap proach?ing

beat of Rush?er's hoofs. "Keep your tem?per."

"I will," Cuth?bert said, but he had his doubts. As Roland rode around
the long

wing of the bunkhouse and in?to the yard, his shad?ow trail?ing out in
the sun?set

light, Cuth?bert clenched his hands ner?vous?ly. He willed them to
open, and they

did. Then, as he watched Roland dis?mount, they rolled them?selves
closed again,

the nails dig?ging in?to his palms.

An?oth?er go-round, Cuth?bert thought. Gods, but I'm sick of them.
Sick to death.

Last night's had been about the pi?geons—again. Cuth?bert want?ed to
use one to

send a mes?sage 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 into the bunkhouse

without another word.

Now, watch?ing Roland unc?inch Rush?er's girths and pull the sad?dle from his back,

Cuth?bert thought: You 're not, you know. But you bet?ter think clearly about this.

By all the gods, you 'd bet?ter.

"Hile," he said as Roland car?ried the sad?dle over to the porch and set it on the step.

"Busy af?ter?noon?" He felt Alain kick his an?kle and ignored it.

"I've been with Su?san," Roland said. No de?fense, no de?mur, no excuse. And for a

mo?ment Cuth?bert had a vi?sion of shock?ing clarity: he saw the two of them in a hut

some?where, the late af?ter?noon sun shin?ing through holes in the roof and dap?pling

their bod?ies. She was on top, rid?ing him. Cuth?bert saw her knees on the old,

spongy boards, and the ten?sion in her long thighs. He saw how tanned her arms

were, how white her bel?ly. He saw how Roland's hands cupped the globes of her

breasts, squeez?ing them as she rocked back and forth above him, and he saw how

the sun lit her hair, turn?ing it in?to a fine-?spun net.

Why do you al?ways have to be first? he cried at Roland in his mind. Why does it

al?ways have to be you? Gods damn you, Roland! Gods damn you!

"We were on the docks," Cuth?bert said, his tone a thin im?ita?tion of his usu?al

bright?ness. "Count?ing boots and ma?rine tools and what are called clam-?drags.

What an amus?ing time of it we've had, eh, Al?"

"Did you need me to help you do that?" Roland asked. He went back to Rush?er,

and took off the sad?dle-?blan?ket. "Is that why you sound an?gry?"

"If I sound an?gry, it's be?cause most of the fish?er?men are laugh?ing at us be?hind 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 sad-dle-blanket hanging for got ten 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 'prentice, 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 courtesy visit. We have already established ourselves 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 Ham-bry, 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

masterful, 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 Affilia-tion, mayhap. 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 multiples 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 gun-slinger.

You have to go! Plain as the nose on your face! It doesn’t matter which of us

accomplices 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-much-matter way

that made Cuthbert feel like biting him to wake him up. “To 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 Cofin Hunters.

"We'll be at our prettiest," Roland said. "Nice boys from the Inners with good intentions but not many brains. Fine." And he went inside, no longer grinning (which was a relief) but smiling gently.

Cuthbert and Alain looked at each other and let out their breath in a mutual rush.

Cuthbert cocked his head toward the yard, and went down the steps. Alain

followed, and the two boys stood in the center of the dirt rectangle with the

bunkhouse at their backs. To the east, the rising full moon was hidden behind a

scrim of clouds. ' "

"She's tranced him," Cuthbert 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 jewels of Eld and we'll live forever."

"You have to stop being angry at him, Bert. You have to."

Cuthbert looked at him bleakly. "I can't."

4

The great storms of autumn were still a month or more distant, but the following

morning dawned drizzly and gray. Roland and Cuthbert wrapped themselves in

scrapes and headed for town, leaving Alain to the few home place chores. Tucked

in Roland's belt was the schedule of farms and ranches—beginning 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 sombrero yanked down on her head almost to the eye-line,
half-hidden by

the stuffy-guy guarding the pumpkin patch. She watched Roland and
Cuthbert

pass (Cuthbert she barely saw; her interest was in the other one).
From the boy on

horseback she looked up to Susan, sitting there in her window,
humming as

blithely as a bird in a gilded cage.

A sharp splinter of suspicion whispered its way into Cordelia's
heart. Susan's

change of temperament—from alternating bouts of sorrow and
fearful 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 to
ward 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 hand some

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 woe-

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 roll-top 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

Casles.

"Well, look here, Elfred!" Reynolds said. "It's two of the In-World boys! Do your

mommes 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 be?gun to Cas?tle, and was thus vul?ner?able . . . al?though not very, in this

case, Roland thought; Deputy Dave didn't look like much in the way of com?pe?ti?tion.

"I see you're work?ing for the Barony salt now," Roland said, nod?ding at the star on

Jonas's shirt.

"Salt's what it amounts to," Jonas said, com?pan?ion?ably enough. "A fel?low went leg-

broke. I'm help?ing out, that's all."

"And sai Reynolds? Sai De?pape? Are they help?ing out as well?"

"Yar, I reck?on," Jonas said. "How goes your work among the fish?er-folk? Slow, I

hear."

"Done at last. The work wasn't so slow as we were. But com?ing here in dis?grace

was enough for us—we have no in?ten?tion of leav?ing that way. Slow and steady

wins the race, they say."

"So they do," Jonas agreed. "Who?ev?er 'they' are."

From some?where deep?er in the build?ing there came the whoosh of a wa?ter-?stool

flush?ing. All the com?forts of home in the Ham?bry Sher?iff's, Roland thought. The

flush was soon fol?lowed by heavy foot?steps de scend?ing a stair?case, and a few

mo?ments lat?er, Herk Av?ery ap?peared. With one hand he was buck?ling his belt;

with the oth?er he mopped his broad and sweaty fore?head. Roland ad?mired the

man's dex?ter?ity.

"Whew!" the Sher?iff ex?claimed. "Them beans I ate last night took the short?cut, I

tell ye." He looked from Roland to Cuth?bert 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 castled at once, ripping open Dave’s entire left flank. The grin faded from

Dave’s face, leaving a puzzled emptiness. ”How’d ye manage that?”

”Easy.” Jonas smiled, then pushed back from the desk to include the others in his

regard. ”You want to remember, Dave, that I play to win. I can’t help it; it’s just

my nature.” He turned his full attention to Roland. His smile broadened. ”Like the

scorpion said to the maiden as she lay dying, ‘You knowed I was poison when

you picked me up.’ “

6

When Susan came in from feeding the livestock, she went directly to the cold-

pantry for the juice, which was her habit. She didn't see her aunt standing in the

chimney corner and watching her, and when Cordelia spoke, Susan was startled

badly. It wasn't just the unexpectedness of the voice; it was the coldness of it.

"Do ye know him?"

The juice-jug slipped in her fingers, and Susan put a steady hand beneath it.

Orange juice was too precious to waste, especially this late in the year. She turned

and saw her aunt by the woodbox. Cordelia had hung her sombrero on a hook in

the entryway, but she still wore her serape and muddy boots. Her cuchillo lay on

top of the stacked wood, with green strands of sharp-root vine still trailing from its

edge. Her tone was cold, but her eyes were hot with suspicion.

A sudden clarity filled Susan's mind and all of her senses. 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 offhand fashion. "I met them at the party. So

did you. Ye frightened me, Aunt."

"Why did he salute ye so?"

"How can I know? Perhaps he just felt like it."

Her aunt bolted forward, slipped in her muddy boots, regained her balance, and

seized Susan by the arms. Now her eyes were blazing. "Be'n't in'so' lent with me,

girl! Be'n't haughty with me, Miss Oh So Young and Pretty, or I'll—"

Susan pulled backward so hard that Cordelia staggered and might have fallen

again, if the table had not been handy to grab. Behind her, muddy foot-prints

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 steadi?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 water, and Dave's hopes had

been swept away in the flood.

"I'm tempted to wrap myself up dry and go over to Seafront with this," Avery said.

He was still gloating over the paper, with its neat list of farms and ranches and

proposed dates of inspection. Up to Year's End and beyond it ran. Gods!

"Why don't ye do that?" Jonas said, and got to his feet. Pain ran up his leg like

bitter lightning.

"Another game, sai Jonas?" Dave asked, beginning to reset the pieces.

"I'd rather play a weed-eating dog," Jonas said, and took malicious pleasure at the

flush that crept up Dave's neck and stained his guileless fool's face. He limped

across to the door, opened it, and went out on the porch. The drizzle had become a

soft, steady rain. Hill Street was deserted, the cobblestones gleaming wetly.

Reynolds had followed him out. "Elfred—"

"Get away," Jonas said without turning.

Clay hesitated a moment, then went back inside and closed the door.

What the hell's wrong with you? Jonas asked himself.

He should have been pleased at the two young pups and their list—as pleased as

Avery was, as pleased as Rimer would be when he heard about this morning's

visit. After all, hadn't he told Rimer not three days ago that the boys would soon

be over on the Drop, counting their little hearts out? Yes. So why did he feel so

unsettled? So fucking jittery? Because there ^Bt still hadn't been any contact

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 reformation, all whirling around two basic ideas: that

Roland was shirking his duty so he could continue to wallow in the undesirable

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. Star-tled pigeons
filled the old,

shadowy 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

thunder in the still air would drive everyone in Ham-bry 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 women began once more to be decked with flowers the podium where Jamie

McCann and Susan Delgado would be acclaimed this year's Reaping Lad and Girl.

Out on the part of the Drop closest to Mayor's House, Roland, Cuthbert, and Alain

rode with renewed purpose, counting the horses which ran with the Barony brand

on their flanks. The bright skies and brisk winds filled them with energy and good

cheer, and for a course of days—three, or perhaps four—they galloped together in

a whooping, shouting, laughing line, their old good fellowship restored.

On one of these brisk and sunny days, Eldred Jonas stepped out of the Sheriff's

office and walked up Hill Street toward Green Heart. He was free of both Depepe

and Reynolds this morning—they had ridden out to Hanging Rock together,

looking for Latiago's outriders, who must come soon, now—and Jonas's plan was

simple: to have a glass of beer in the pavilion, and watch the preparations that

were going on there: the digging of the roasting-pits, the laying of faggots for the

bonfire, the arguments over how to set the mortars that would shoot off the

fireworks, the ladies flowing the stage where this year's Lad and Girl would be

offered for the town's adulation. Perhaps, Jonas thought, he might take a likely-

looking flow-girl off for an hour or two of recreation. The maintenance of the

saloon whores he left strictly to Roy and Clay, but a fresh young flow-girl of

seventeen or so was a different matter.

The pain in his hip had faded with the damp weather; the painful, lurching stride

with which he had moved for the last week or so had become a mere limp again.

Perhaps 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-breasted. Fresh,

sweet breath. Fresh, sweet lips—

"Mr. Jonas Elfred?"

He turned, smiling, to the owner of the voice. No dewy-complexioned flow-girl

with wide eyes and moist, parted lips stood there, but a skinny woman edging in to

late middle age—flat chest, flat bum, tight pale lips, hair scooped so tight against

her skull that it fairly screamed. Only the wide eyes corresponded with his

daydream. I believe I've made a conquest, Jonas thought sarcastically.

"Why, Cordelia!" he said, reaching out and taking one of her hands in both of his.

"How lovely you look this morning!"

Thin color came up in her cheeks and she laughed a little. For a moment she

looked forty-five instead of sixty. And she's not sixty, Jonas thought. The lines

around her mouth and the shadows under her eyes . . . those are new.

“You’re very kind,” she said, “but I know better. I haven’t been sleeping, and

when women my age don’t sleep, they grow old rapidly.”

“I’m sorry to hear you’re sleeping badly,” he said. “But now that the weather’s

changed, perhaps—”

“It’s not the weather. Might I speak to you, Elfred? I’ve thought and thought, and

you’re the only one I dare turn to for advice.”

His smile widened. He placed her hand through his arm, then covered 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 every word would be interesting.

3

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 himself

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 Elred.”

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;

overspilled. 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, Elred.”

“Of course, mol?ly.” He saw her blush more fu?ri?ous?ly than ev?er at this harm?less

en?dear?ment, and squeezed her hand. “Any?thing.”

“You mustn’t tell Hart. That dis?gust?ing spi?der of a Chan?cel?lor, ei?ther, but

es?pe?cial?ly not the May?or. If I’m right in what I sus?pect and he found out, he could

send her west!” She al?most moaned this, as if com?pre?hend ing it as a re?al fact for

the first time. “He could send us both west!”

Main?tain?ing his sym?pa?thet?ic smile, he said: “Not a word to May?or Thorin, not a

word to Kim?ba Rimer. Promise.”

For a mo?ment he thought that she wouldn’t take the plunge ... or per haps couldn’t.

Then, in a low, gaspy voice that sound?ed like rip?ping cloth, she said a sin?gle word.

“Dear?born.”

He felt his heart take a bump as the name that had been so much in his mind now

passed her lips, and al?though he con?tin?ued to smile, he could not for?bear a sin?gle

hard squeeze of her fin?gers that made her wince.

“I’m sor?ry,” he said. “It’s just that you star?tled me a lit?tle. Dear?born ... a well-

spo?ken enough lad, but I won?der if he’s en?tire?ly trust?wor?thy.”

“I fear he’s been with my Su?san.” Now it was her turn to squeeze, but Jonas didn’t

mind. He hard?ly felt it, in fact. He con?tin?ued to smile, hop?ing he did not look as

flab?ber?gast?ed as he felt. “I fear he’s been with her... as a man is with a wom?an. Oh,

how hor?ri?ble this is!”

She wept with a silent bit?ter?ness, tak?ing lit?tle peck?ing peeks around as she did to

make sure they were not be?ing ob?served. Jonas had seen coy otes 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; inquiries 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'ards 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 gunslinger. It was comical, aye, and Rhea thought she would keep an

eye on them, from time to time. Very entertaining, it would likely be.

After showing her Cordelia and Jonas, the glass veiled itself once more. Rhea put

it back in the box with the eye on the lock. Seeing 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 pointed it at them—it was done in a flash, and for a

moment the terrified boys saw him as he really was: with his eyes blazing and his

lips peeled back from his teeth, Jonas looked like a white-haired wolf in man's clothes.

“Get on, you little bastards!” he snarled. “Get on before I blow you loose of your

shoes and give your fathers cause to celebrate!”

For a moment they were frozen, and then they fled in a howling pack. One had left

his trophy behind; the dog's tail lay on the board sidewalk like a grisly fan. Jonas

grimaced at the sight of it, bolstered his gun, locked his hands behind him again,

and walked on, looking like a parson meditating on the nature of the gods. And

what in gods' name was he doing, pulling iron on a bunch of young hellions like

that?

Being upset, he thought. Being worried.

He was worried, all right. The timeless old biddy's suspicions had upset him greatly.

Not on Thorin's account—as far as Jonas was concerned, Dearborn could fuck the

girl in the town square at high noon of Reaping Fair Day—but because it

suggested that Dearborn might have fooled him about other things.

Crept up behind you once, he did, and you swore it 'd never happen again. But if

he's been doing that girl, it has happened again. Hasn't it?

Aye, as they said in these parts. If the boy had had the impertinence to begin an

affair with the Mayor's gilly-in-waiting, and the incredible slyness to get away

with it, what did that do to Jonas's picture of three In-World brats who could

barely find their own behinds with both hands and a candle?

We underestimated em once and they made us look like monkeys, Clay had said. I

don't want it to happen again.

Had it happened again? How much, really, did Dearborn and his friends know?

How much had they found out? And who had they told? If Dearborn had been able

to get away with pronging the Mayor's chosen ... to put something that large over

on Elfred Jonas ... on everyone ...

"Good day, sai Jonas," Brian Hookey said. He was grinning widely, all but

knowing before Jonas with his sombrero crushed against his broad blacksmith's

chest. "Would ye care for fresh graf, sai? I've just gotten the new pressing, and—"

"All I want is my horse," Jonas said curtly. "Bring it quick and stop your

quacking."

"Aye, so I will, happy to oblige, thankee-sai." He hurried off on the errand, taking

one nervous, grinning look back over his shoulder to make sure he wasn't going to

be shot out of hand.

Ten minutes later Jonas was headed west on the Great Road. He felt a ridiculous

but nevertheless strong desire to simply kick his horse into a gallop and leave all

this foolishness behind him: Thorin the graying goat-boy, Roland and Susan with

their no-doubt mawkish teenage love, Roy and Clay with their fast hands and slow

wits. Rimer with his ambitions, Cordelia Delgado with her ghastly visions 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?sider. 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 whimsical?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 arrive any day now. It was Lati?go

who had hired the Big Cof?fin Hunters in the first place, pay?ing a huge cash

advance (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?traction, 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?si?ble (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 something to find after 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 only a smooth white shape in the weeds and

thought it was a stone. Then he saw a black roundness that could only be an

eye-hole. Not a stone, then; a skull.

Grunting, Jonas knelt and fished it out while the few living dericks continued to

squeal and thump behind him. A rook's skull. He had seen it before. Hell, he

suspected most of the town had. It belonged to the showoff, Arthur Heath ... who,

like all showoffs, needed his little props.

"He called it the lookout," Jonas murmured. "Put it on the horn of his saddle

sometimes, didn't he? And sometimes wore it around his neck like a pendant."

Yes. The youngster had been wearing it so that night in the Travellers' Rest,

when—

Jonas turned the bird's skull. Something rattled inside like a last lonely thought.

Jonas tilted it, shook it over his open palm, and a fragment of gold chain dropped

out. That was how the boy had been wearing it. At some point the chain had

broken, the skull had fallen in the ditch, and sai Heath had never troubled to go

looking for it. The thought that someone might find it had probably never crossed

his mind. Boys were careless. It was a wonder any ever grew up to be men.

Jonas's face remained calm as he knelt there examining the bird's skull, but behind

the unlined brow he was as furious as he had ever been in his life. They had been

out here, all right—it was another thing he would have scoffed at just yesterday.

He had to assume they had seen the tankers, camouflage or no camouflage, and if

not for the chance of finding this skull, he never would have known for sure, one

way or the other.

“When I finish with em, their eyesockets’ll be as empty as yours. Sir Rook. I’ll

gouge em clean myself.”

He started 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

Association,” 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 Lango and passed on by their own

inimitable Kimba Rimer? 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, sitting 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 up? street 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

Chan?cel?lor, 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 hal?lelu?jah." 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 silk?flow?ers. He waved to her

and called a greeting. She waved back and called something in return. A good

enough lad, Sheemie, and although she could have found an other easily enough,

she supposed she was glad De?pape hadn't killed him.

The bar was almost empty but brilliantly lit, all the gas-jets flaring. It was clean, as

well. Sheemie would have emptied the spit?toons, but Coral guessed it was the

plump woman behind the bar who had done all the rest. The makeup couldn't hide

the sal?low?ness of that woman's cheeks, the hollow-ness of her eyes, or the way her

neck had started to go all crepey (seeing that sort of lizardy skin on a woman's

neck always made Coral shiver inside).

It was Pettie the Trotter tending bar beneath The Romp's stem glass gaze, and if

allowed to do so, she would continue until Stanley appeared and banished her.

Pettie had said nothing out loud to Coral—she knew better—but had made her

wants clear enough just the same. Her whoring days were almost at an end. She

desperately desired to go to work tending bar. There was precedent for it, Coral

knew—a female bartender at Forest Trees in Pass o' the River, and there had been

another at Glen Cove, up the coast in Tavares, until she had died of the pox. What

Pettie refused to see was that Stanley Ruiz was younger by fifteen years and in far

better health. He would be pouring drinks under The Romp long after Pettie was

rotting (instead of Trotting) in a pauper's grave.

"Good even, sai Thorin," Pettie said. And before 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 dismay. 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 into the bottle, for yer father's sake, and then get the hell out of

here. Who d'ye think yer serving at five o' the clock, anyway? Ghosts?"

Pettie's face fell a foot; the heavy coat other makeup actually seemed to crack

apart. She took the funnel from under the bar, stuck it in the neck of the bottle, and

poured the shot of whiskey back in. Some went on to the bar in spite of the fun;

her plump hands (now ringless; her rings had been traded for food at the

merchandise across the street long since) were shaking. "I'm sorry, sai. So I am. I

was on—"

"I don't care what ye was on," Coral said, then turned a bloodshot eye on Sheb,

who had been sitting on his piano-bench and leafing through old sheet-music.

Now he was staring toward the bar with his mouth hung open. "And what are you

looking at, ye frog?"

"Nothing, sai Thorin. I—"

"Then go look at it somewhere 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!"

Pettie and Sheb went away toward the kitchen instead of the cribs upstairs, but it

was all the same to Coral. They could go to hell as far as she was concerned.

Anywhere, as long as they were out of her aching face.

She went behind the bar and looked around. Two men playing cards over in the far

corner. That hardcase Reynolds was watching them and sipping a beer. There was

another man at the far end of the bar, but he was staring off into space, lost in his

own world. No one was paying any special attention to sai Coral Thorin, and

what did it matter if they were? If Pettie knew, they all knew.

She ran her finger through the puddle of whiskey on the bar, sucked it, ran it

through again, sucked it again. She grasped the bottle, but before she could pour, a

splendid monkey with gray-green eyes leaped, hissing, onto the bar. Coral

shrieked and stepped back, dropping the whiskey bottle between her feet . . .

where, for a wonder, it didn't break. For a moment she thought her head would

break, instead—that her swelling, throbbing brain would simply split her skull like

a rotten eggshell. There was a crash as the cardplayers overturned their table

getting up. Reynolds had drawn his gun.

"Nay," she said in a quivering voice she could hardly recognize. Her eyeballs

were pulsing and her heart was racing. People could die of fright, she realized that

now. "Nay, gentlemen, all's well."

The six-legged freak standing on the bar opened its mouth, bared its needle fangs,

and hissed again.

Coral bent down (and as her head passed below the level of her waist, she was

once more sure it was going to explode), picked up the bottle, saw that it was still

a quarter full, and drank directly from the neck, no longer caring who saw her do it

or what they thought.

As if hearing her thought, Musty hissed again. He was wearing a red collar this

afternoon—on him it looked baleful rather than jaunty. Beneath it was tucked a

white scrap of paper.

"Want me to shoot it?" a voice drawled. "I will if you like. One slug and won't be

nothing left but claws." It was Jonas, standing just inside 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 arching 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?sider 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.

Luckily, the old hag had reminded him of her presence herself.
Gods bless her

thirst. And his own, since it had landed him here at the right time.

“Sheemie!” Coral bawled. She could also feel the whiskey working;
she felt

almost human again. She even wondered if Eldred Jonas might be
interested in a

dirty evening with the Mayor’s sister ... who knew what might speed
the hours?

Sheemie came in through the batwings, hands grimy, pink sombrero
bouncing on

his back at the end of its cuerda. “Aye, Coral Thorin! Here I be!”

She looked past him, calculating the sky. Not tonight, not even for
Rhea; she

wouldn’t send Sheemie up there after dark, and that was the end of it.

“Nothing,” she said in a voice that was gentler than usual. “Go back
to yer flow’ers,

and see that ye cover them well. It bids frosty.”

She turned over Rhea’s note and scrawled a single word on it:

tomorrow

This she folded and handed to Jonas. “Stick it under that stink’s collar
for me, will

ye? I don’t want to touch him.”

Jonas did as he was asked. The cat favored them with a final wild
green look, then

leaped from the bar and vanished beneath the batwings.

“Time is short,” Coral said. She hadn’t the slightest idea what she
meant, but Jonas

nodded in what appeared to be perfect understanding. “Would
you care to go

upstairs with a closet drunk? I’m not much in the looks department,
but I can still

spread em all the way to the edge of the bed, and I don’t just lie there.”

He considered, then nodded. His eyes were gleaming. This one was
as thin as

Cordelia Delgado ... but what a difference, eh? What a difference!
“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 Hanging Rock. I saw him at noon. He says they’re coming, Elfred;

says when the wind swings in to the east, he can hear a approaching horse.”

“Maybe he only hears what he wants to hear.” But he suspected De’pape was right.

Jonas’s mood, at rock bottom when he stepped in to the Travellers’ Rest, was now

very much on the rebound.

“We’ll start moving the tankers soon, whether the brats come or not. At night, and

two by two, like the animals going on board Old Pa’s Ark.” He laughed at this.

“But we’ll leave some, eh? Like cheese in a trap.”

“Suppose the mice don’t come?”

Jonas shrugged. “If not one way, another. I intend to press them a little more

to morrow. I want them angry, and I want them confused. Now go on about your

business. I have you lady waiting.”

“Better you than me, Elfred.”

Jonas nodded. He guessed that half an hour from now, he would have forgotten 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 folded. Now she

unfolded them and took his hands. The right she put on her left breast. The nipple

was hard and erect under his fingers. The forefinger of his left hand she put in her

mouth, and bit down lightly.

“Shall we bring the bottle?” 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, gray?ish eyes al ready half-'filled

with sleep again.

“I've nev'er had bet'ter,” Jonas said.

Coral smiled. “No, cul'ly,” she said. “Nor I.”

CHAP?TER IV

Roland AND Cuth?bert

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 na-
ture, 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 moose 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 in-
to 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

live-long day?"

Alain looked down at his boots, new and uncomfortable when they
had left

Gilead, now sprung, trail?worn, a lit?tle down at the heels, and as com?fort?able as

work?boots ev?er got. Look?ing at them was bet?ter than look ing at his friends, for

the time be?ing. There was al?ways an edge to Cuth?bert's teas?ing these days; the old

sense of fun had been re?placed by some?thing that was mean and un?pleas?ant. Alain

kept ex?pect?ing Roland to flash up at one of Cuth?bert's jibes, like steel that has

been struck by sharp flint, and knock Bert sprawl?ing. In a way, Alain al?most

wished for it. It might clear the air.

But not the air of this morn?ing.

"Just oh," Roland said mild?ly, and walked on.

"Cry your par?don, for I know you'll not want to hear it, but I'd speak a fur?ther

word about the pi?geons," Cuth?bert said as they sad?dled their mounts. "I still

be?lieve that a mes?sage—"

"I'll make you a promise," Roland said, smil?ing.

Cuth?bert looked at him with some mis?trust. "Aye?"

"If you still want to send by flight to?mor?row morn?ing, we'll do so. The one you

choose shall be sent west to Gilead with a mes?sage of your de?vis?ing band?ed to its

leg. What do you say, Arthur Heath? Is it fair?"

Cuth?bert looked at him for a mo?ment with a sus?pi?cion that hurt Alain's heart. Then

he al?so smiled. "Fair," he said. "Thank you."

And then Roland said some?thing which struck Alain as odd and made that

pre?scient part of him quiver with dis?qui?et. "Don't thank me yet."

2

"I don't want to go up there, sai Thorin," Sheemie said. An un?usu?al ex pres?sion

had creased his nor?mal?ly smooth face—a trou?bled and fear?ful frown. “She’s a

scary la?dy. 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 mold?ed.

Coral, who might have bit?ten his head off for such hes?ita?tion on?ly yes?ter?day, was

un?usu?al?ly pa?tient to?day. “So true,” she said. “But Sheemie, she asked for ye

spe?cial, and she tips. Ye know she does, and well.”

“Won’t help if she turns me in?to a bee?tle,” Sheemie said mo?rose?ly. “Bee?tles can’t

spend cop?pers.”

Nev?er?the?less, he let him?self be led to where Capri?choso, the inn’s pack-?mule, was

tied. Barkie had load?ed two small tuns over the mule’s back. One, filled with sand,

was just there for bal?ance. The oth?er held a fresh press?ing of the graf Rhea had a

taste for.

“Fair-?Day’s com?ing,” Coral said bright?ly. “Why, it’s not three weeks now.”

“Aye.” Sheemie looked hap?pi?er at this. He loved Fair-?Days pas?sion ate?ly—the

lights, the fire?crack?ers, the danc?ing, the games, the laugh?ter. When Fair-?Day came,

ev?ery?one was hap?py and no one spoke mean.

“A young man with cop?pers in his pock?et is sure to have a good time at the Fair,”

Coral said.

“That’s true, sai Thorin.” Sheemie looked like some?one who has just dis?cov?ered

one of life’s great prin?ci?ples. “Aye, truey-?true, so it is.”

Coral put Capri?choso’s rope hal?ter in?to Sheemie’s palm and closed the fin?gers over

it. "Have a nice trip, lad. Be po?lite to the old crow, bow yer best bow ..
. and make

sure ye're back down the hill be?fore dark."

"Long be?fore, aye," Sheemie said, shiv?er?ing at the very thought of
still be?ing up in

the Coos af?ter night?fall. "Long be?fore, sure as loaves 'n fish?es."

"Good lad." Coral watched him off, his pink som?brero now clapped on
his head,

lead?ing the grumpy old pack-?mule by its rope. And, as he dis ap?
peared over the

brow of the first mild hill, she said it again: "Good lad."

3

Jonas wait?ed on the flank of a ridge, bel?ly-?down in the tall grass, un?
til 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 dai?
ly du?ty. No

sign they sus?pect?ed any?thing. They were smarter than he had at first
giv?en them

cred?it for ... but nowhere near as smart as they thought they were.

He rode to with?in a quar?ter mile of the Bar K—ex?cept for the bunk-?
house and

sta?ble, a burned-?out hulk in the bright sun?light of this ear?ly au?
tumn day—and

teth?ered his horse in a copse of cot?ton?woods that grew around the
ranch house

spring. Here the boys had left some wash?ing to dry. Jonas stripped the
pants and

shirts off the low branch?es up?on which they had been hung, made a
pile of them,

pissed on them, and then went back to his horse.

The an?imal stamped the ground em?phat?ical?ly when Jonas pulled the
dog's tail

from one of his sad?dle?bags, as if say?ing he was glad to be rid of it.
Jonas would be

glad to be rid of it, too. It had begun giving off an unmistakable aroma. From the

other saddlebag he took a small glass jar of red paint, and a brush. These he had

obtained from Brian Hockey's eldest son, who was minding 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 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

pi?geons! My! That was ev?er so much more trig!

“I’ll get to you in a few min?utes,” he said. “Be pa?tient, dar?lings; peck and shit

while you still can.”

He looked around with some cu?rios?ity, the soft coo of the pi?geons sooth?ing 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 quar?ters,

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 pic?ture of a

moth?er—oh, such good fel?lows they were—and in one he found a pic?ture of both

par?ents. He had hoped for names, pos?si?bly doc?uments of some kind (even love

let?ters from the girl, may?hap), but there was noth?ing like that. Lads or lords, they

were care?ful enough. Jonas re?moved the pic?tures from their frames and shred?ded

them. The goods he scat?tered to all points of the com?pass, de?stroy?ing as much as

he could in the lim?it?ed time he had. When he found a linen hand?ker?chief in the

pock?et of a pair of dress pants, he blew his nose on it and then spread it care?ful?ly

on the toes of the boy’s dress boots, so that the green splat would show to good

ad?van?tage. What could be more ag?gra?vat?ing— more un?set?tling—than to come

home af?ter a hard day spent tal?ly?ing stock and find some stranger’s snot on one of

your per?son?als?

The pi?geons were up?set now; they were in?ca?pable of scold?ing like jays or rooks,

but they tried to flut?ter away from him when he opened their cages. It did no good,

of course. He caught them one by one and twist?ed 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 normal?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 al?ways won?dered what went on in

Roland’s head, but nev?er more than now.

5

Creak. Creak-?creak.

Here was what he’d been lis?ten?ing for, and just as Jonas was about to give up the

hunt. He had ex?pect?ed to find their hidey-?hole a lit?tle clos?er to their beds, but they

were trig, all right.

He went to one knee and used the blade of his knife to pry up the board which had

creaked. Un?der it were three bun?dles, each swad?dled in dark strips of cot?ton cloth.

These strips were damp to the touch and smelled fra?grant?ly of gun-?oil. Jonas took

the bun?dles out and un?wrapped each, cu?ri?ous to see what sort of cal?ibers the

young?sters had brought. The an?swer turned out to be ser?vice?able but

undis?tin?guished. Two of the bun dles con?tained sin?gle five-?shot re?volvers of a

type then called (for no rea son I know) “carvers.” The third con?tained two guns,

six-?shoot?ers of high?er qual?ity than the carvers. In fact, for one heart-?stop?ping

mo?ment, Jonas thought he had found the big re?volvers of a gun?slinger—true-?blue

steel bar?rels, san?dal?wood grips, bores like mi?ne?shafts. Such guns he could not

have left, no mat?ter what the cost to his plans. See?ing the plain grips was thus

some?thing of a re?lief. Dis?ap?point?ment was nev?er a thing you looked for, but it had

a won?der?ful way of clear?ing the mind.

He rewrapped the guns and put them back, put the board back as well. A gang of

ne'er-do-well clots from town might pos?si?bly come out here, and might pos?si?bly

van?dal?ize the un?guard?ed bunkhouse, scat?ter?ing what they didn't tear up, but find a

hid?ing place such as this? No, my son. Not like?ly.

Do you re?al?ly think they'll be?lieve it was hooli?gangs from town that did this?

They might; just be?cause he had un?der?es?ti?mat?ed them to start with didn't mean he

should turn about-face and be?gin over?es?ti?mat?ing them now. And he had the lux?ury

of not need?ing to care. Ei?ther way, it would make them an?gry. An?gry enough to

rush full-tilt around their Hillock, per?haps. To throw cau?tion to the wind . . . and

reap the whirl?wind.

Jonas poked the end of the sev?ered dog's tail in?to one of the pi?geon-cages, so it

stuck up like a huge, mock?ing feath?er. He used the paint to write such charm?ing?ly

boy?ish slo?gans as

and

on the walls. Then he left, stand?ing on the porch for a mo?ment to ver?ify he still

had the Bar K to him?self. Of course he did. Yet for a blink or two, there at the end,

he'd felt un?easy—al?most as though he'd been scent?ed. By some sort of In-?World

telepa?thy, may?hap.

There is such; you know it. The touch, it's called.

Aye, but that was the tool of gun?slingers, artists, and lu?natics. 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 Demon

Moon rose full in the sky.

6

Rhea's hut, its stone walls and the cracked gutters of its roof slimed with moss,

huddled on the last hill of the Coos. Beyond it was a magnificent view

northwest—the Bad Grass, the desert, Hanging Rock, Eyebolt Canyon—but

scenic vistas were the last thing on Sheemie's mind as he led Capriccioso

cautiously into 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 clanging-clang.

"Sai?" he called, leading the mule into 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

bet?ter. In his bow?els, at least.

He walked on, lik?ing this less at ev?ery step. The yard was rocky and the strag?gling

weeds yel?low?ish, as if the hut's res?ident had blight?ed the very earth with her touch.

There was a gar?den, and Sheemie saw that the veg?eta?bles still in it—pump?kins and

sharp?root, most?ly—were mu?ties. Then he no?ticed the gar?den's stuffy-?guy. It was

al?so a mu?tie, a nasty thing with two straw heads in?stead of one and what ap?peared

to be a stuffed hand in a wom?an's satin glove pok?ing out of the chest area.

Sai Thorin'll nev?er talk me up here again, he thought. Not for all the pen?nies in the world.

The hut's door stood open. To Sheemie it looked like a gap?ing mouth. A sick?ish

dank smell drift?ed out.

Sheemie stopped about fif?teen paces from the house, and when Capi nuz?zled his

bot?tom (as if to ask what was keep?ing them), the boy ut?tered a brief screech. The

sound of it al?most set him run?ning, and it was on?ly by ex?er?cis?ing all his willpow?er

that he was able to stand his ground. The day was bright, but up here on this hill,

the sun seemed mean?ing?less. This wasn't his first trip up here, and Rhea's hill had

nev?er been pleas?ant, but it was some?how worse now. It made him feel the way the

sound of the thin?ny made him feel when he woke and heard it in the mid?dle of the

night. As if some?thing aw?ful was slid?ing to?ward him—some?thing that was all

in?sane eyes and red, reach?ing claws.

“S-?S-?Sai? Is any?one here? Is—”

“Come clos?er.” The voice drift?ed out of the open door. “Come to where I can see you, id?iot boy.”

Try?ing not to moan or cry, Sheemie did as the voice said. He had an idea that he

was nev?er go?ing back down the hill again. Capric?cioso, per haps, but not him.

Poor old Sheemie was go?ing to end up in the cookpot—hot din?ner tonight, soup

to?mor?row, cold snacks un?til Year’s End. That’s what he would be.

He made his re?luc?tant way to Rhea’s stoop on rub?bery legs—if his knees had been

clos?er to?geth?er, they would have knocked like cas?tanets. 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 whispered. “Show my business to another, and I’ll

know. Remember, son of Stanley, I see far.”

“I’ll be careful, sai.” It might be better if he did lose the envelope, but he wouldn’t.

Sheemie was dim in the head, everyone said so, but not so dim that he didn’t

understand why he had been called up here: not to deliver a barrel of graf, but to

receive this letter and pass it on.

“Would ye care to come in for a bit?” she whispered, and then pointed a finger at

his crotch. “If I give ye a little bit of mush-room to eat—special to me, it is—I can

look like anyone ye fancy.”

“Oh, I can’t,” he said, clutching his trousers and smiling a huge broad smile that

felt like a scream trying to get out of his skin. “That pesky thing fell off last week,

that did.”

For a moment Rhea only gawped at him, genuinely surprised for one of the few

times in her life, and then she once more broke out in chuffing bursts of laughter.

She held her stomach in her waxy hands and rocked back and forth with glee.

Ermot, startled, streaked into the house on his lengthy green belly. From

somewhere in its depths, her cat hissed at it.

“Go on,” Rhea said, still laughing. She leaned forward and dropped three or four

pen-nies into his shirt pocket. “Get out of here, ye great galloophus! Don’t ye linger,

either, looking at flowers!”

“No, sai—”

Before he could say more, the door clapped to so hard that dust puffed out of the

cracks between the boards.

7

Roland surprised Cuthbert by suggesting at two o' the clock that they go back to

the Bar K. When Bert asked why, Roland only shrugged and would say nothing

more. Bert looked at Alain and saw a queer, missing expression on the boy's face.

As they drew closer to the bunkhouse, a sense of foreboding filled Cuthbert. They

topped a rise, and looked down at the Bar K. The bunkhouse door stood open.

"Roland!" Alain cried. He was pointing to the cottonwood grove where the ranch's

spring was. Their clothes, neatly hung to dry when they left, were now scattered

hell-to-breakfast.

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 something 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 kith 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 obscenities 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

dis?mayed, qui?et?ed his rage a lit?tle. His ar?gu?ment wasn't with Alain. Cuth?bert was

sure the oth?er boy had known some?thing bad was hap?pen?ing here, but he was al?so

sure that Roland had in?sist?ed Alain do noth?ing un?til Jonas was gone.

"Come with me," Alain mut?tered, sling?ing an arm around Bert's shoul?ders.

"Out?side. For your fa?ther's sake, come. You have to cool off. This is no time to be

fight?ing among our?selves."

"It's no time for our lead?er's brains to drain down in?to his prick, ei ther," Cuth?bert

said, mak?ing no ef?fort to low?er his voice. But the sec?ond time Alain tugged him,

Bert al?lowed him?self to be led to?ward 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 man?age. I'll have Alain tell him so.

The idea of us?ing Alain as a go-?be?tween to his best friend—of know ing that

things had come to such a pass—filled Cuth?bert with an an?gry, de spair?ing rage,

and at the door to the porch he turned back to Roland. "She has made you a

cow?ard, " he said in the High Speech. Be?side him, Alain drew in his breath

sharply.

Roland stopped as if sud?den?ly turned to stone, his back to them, his arms full of

blan?kets. In that mo?ment Cuth?bert was sure Roland would turn and rush to?ward

him. They would fight, like?ly un?til one of them was dead or blind or un?con?scious.

Like?ly that one would be him, but he no longer cared.

But Roland nev?er turned. In?stead, in the same speech, he said: "He came to steal

our guile and our cau?tion. With you, he has suc?ceed?ed. ”

“No,” Cuth?bert said, laps?ing back in?to the low speech. “I know that part of you

re?al?ly be?lieves that, but it’s not so. The truth is, you’ve lost your com?pass. You’ve

called your care?less?ness love and made a virtue of ir?re?spon?si?bil?ity. I—”

“For gods’ sake, come!” Alain near?ly snarled, and yanked him out the door.

9

With Roland out of sight, Cuth?bert felt his rage veer?ing to?ward Alain in spite of

him?self; it turned like a weath?er?vane when the wind shifts. The two of them stood

fac?ing each oth?er in the sun?shiny door?yard, Alain look ing un?hap?py and dis?tract?ed,

Cuth?bert with his hands knot?ted in?to fists so tight they trem?bled at his sides.

“Why do you al?ways ex?cuse him? Why?”

“Out on the Drop, he asked if I trust?ed him. I said I did. And I do.”

“Then you’re a fool.”

“And he’s a gun?slinger. It he says we must wait longer, we must.”

“He’s a gun?slinger by ac?ci?dent! A freak! A mu?tie!”

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 bro?ken. We’ll make a new one, you and I.”

“It’s not bro?ken. If it does break, it’ll be you re?spon?si?ble. And for that I’ll nev?er

for?give you.”

Now it was Cuth?bert’s turn to be silent.

“Go for a ride, why don’t you? A long one. Give your?self time to cool off. So

much de?pends on our fel?low?ship—”

“Tell him that!”

“No, I’m telling you. Jonas wrote a foul word about my moth?er. 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 calling her our enemy?"

"No! It would be easier if she was." He took a deep breath, let it out,
took another,

let it out, took a third and let it out. With each one he felt a little safer,
a little

more himself. "Never mind. There's no more to say on't for now.
Your advice is

good—I think I will take a ride. A long one."

Bert started toward his horse, then turned back.

"Tell him he's wrong. Tell him that even if he's right about waiting,
he's right for

the wrong reasons, and that makes him all the way wrong." He hesitated.
"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."

Cuthbert mounted up. "I promise nothing."

“You’re not a man.” Alain sounded sorrowful; on the point of tears, in fact. “None of us are men.”

“You better be wrong about that,” Cuthbert said, “because men’s work is coming.”

He turned his mount and rode away at a gallop.

10

He went far up the Seacoast Road, to begin with trying not to think at all. He’d

found that sometimes unexpected things wandered into your head if you left the

door open for them. Useful things, often.

This afternoon that didn’t happen. Confused, miserable, and without a fresh idea in

his head (or even the hope of one), Bert at last turned back to Hamby. He rode the

High Street from end to end, waving or speaking to people who hailed him. The

three of them had met a lot of good people here. Some he counted as friends, and

he rather felt the common folk of Hambytown had adopted them— young fellows

who were far from their own homes and families. And the more Bert knew and

saw of these common folk, the less he suspected that they were a part of Rimer’s

and Jonas’s nasty little game. Why else had the Good Man chosen Hamby in the

first place, if not because it provided such excellent cover?

There were plenty of folk out today. The farmers’ market was booming, the street-

stalls were crowded, children were laughing at a Pinch and Jilly show (Jilly was

currently chasing Pinch back and forth and bashing the poor old long-suffering

fel-low with her broom), and the Reaping Fair decorations were going forward at

speed. Yet Cuthbert felt only a little joy and anticipation at the thought of the Fair.

Because it wasn't his own, wasn't Gilead Reaping? Perhaps . . . but mostly just

because his mind and heart were so heavy. If this was what growing up was like,

he thought he could have skipped the experience.

He rode on out of town, the ocean now at his back, the sun full in his face, his

shadow growing ever longer behind him. He thought he'd soon veer off the Great

Road and ride across the Drop to the Bar K. But before he could, here came his

old friend, Sheemie, leading a mule. Sheemie's head was down, his shoulders

slumped, his pink 'brera askew, his boots dusty. To Cuthbert he looked as though

he had walked all the way from the tip of the earth.

"Sheemie!" Cuthbert cried, already anticipating the boy's cheery grin and loony

patting. "Long days and pleasant nights! How are y—"

Sheemie lifted his head, and as the brim of his sombrero came up, Cuthbert fell

silent. He saw the dreadful fear on the boy's face—the pale checks, the haunted

eyes, the trembling mouth.

11

Sheemie could have been at the Delgado place two hours ago, if he'd wanted, but

he had trudged along at a turtle's pace, the letter inside his shirt seeming to drag at

his every step. It was awful, so awful. He couldn't even think about it, because his

thinker was mostly broken, so it was.

Cuthbert was off his horse in a flash, and hurrying to Sheemie. He put his hands

on the boy's shoulders. "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 concerned face,

Sheemie began to weep. Rhea's strict command that he should tell no one flew out

of his head. Still sobbing, he recounted every thing that had happened since that

morning. Twice Cuthbert had to ask him to slow down, and when Bert led the boy

to a tree in whose shade the two of them sat together, Sheemie was finally able to

do so. Cuthbert listened with growing unease. At the end of his tale, Sheemie

produced an envelope from inside his shirt.

Cuthbert broke the seal and read what was inside, his eyes growing large.

12

Roy Depepe was waiting for him at the Travellers' Rest when Jonas returned in

good spirits from his trip to the Bar K. An outsider had finally shown up, Depepe

announced, and Jonas's spirits rose another notch. Only Roy didn't look as happy

about it as Jonas would have expected. Not happy at all.

"Fellow's gone on to Seafront, where I guess he's expected," Depepe said. "He

wants you right away. I wouldn't linger here to eat, not even a popkin, if I were

you. I wouldn't take a drink, either. You'll want a clear head to deal with this one."

"Free with your advice today, ain't you, Roy?" Jonas said. He spoke in a heavily

sarcastic tone, but when Pettie 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?essed 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. 1

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 forlorn ghost, and

nodded to her. She nodded back, and managed a wan smile.

“Sai Jonas, how well you look. If you see Hart—”

“Cry your pardon, lady, but it’s the Chancellor I’ve come to see,” Jonas said. He

went on quickly up stairs toward the Chancellor’s suite of rooms, then down a

narrow stone hall lit (and not too well) with gas-jets.

When he reached the end of the corridor, he rapped on the door waiting there—a

massive thing of oak and brass set in its own arch. Rimer didn’t care for such as

Susan Delgado, but he loved the trappings of power; that was what took the curve

out of his nose and made it straight. Jonas rapped.

“Come in, my friend,” a voice—not Rimer’s—called. It was followed by a tittery

laugh that made Jonas’s flesh creep. He laughs like a dead person, Roy had said.

Jonas pushed open the door and stepped in. Rimer cared for incense no more than

he cared for the hips and lips of women, but there was incense burning 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 glamour-man, all right. Maybe 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 Depp had

come back from Hanging Rock looking pale. No damned wonder.

Instead of being offended, the man in black tilted again (Yes, Jonas thought, he

does laugh like the dead, very like, so he does). For one moment Jonas thought it

was Farson, Cort's father, 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, smiling at him in an unpleasantly knowing way, those blue eyes

dancing like the flame from the gas-jets.

“See something interesting, sai Jonas?”

“Aye,” Jonas said, sitting down. “Eats.” He took a piece of bread and popped it

into his mouth. The bread stuck to his dry tongue, but he chewed determinedly all

the same.

“Good boy.” The other also sat, and poured wine, filling Jonas’s glass first. “Now,

my friend, tell me everything you’ve done since the three trouble some boys

arrived, and everything you know, and everything you have planned. I would not

have you leave out a single jot.”

“First show me your sigil.”

“Of course. How prudent you are.”

The man in black reached inside his robe and brought out a square of metal—silver, Jonas guessed. He tossed it onto the table, and it clattered across to

Jonas’s plate. Engraved on it was what he had expected—that hideous staring eye.

“Satisfied?”

Jonas nodded.

“Slide it back to me.”

Jonas reached for it, but for once his normally steady hand resembled his reedy,

unstable voice. He watched the fingers tremble for a moment, then lowered the

hand quickly to the table.

“I... I don’t want to.”

No. He didn’t want to. Suddenly he knew that if he touched it, the engraved silver

eye would roll... and look directly 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 camp?fires since the world was young.

Roland looked up at once, try?ing to read Bert’s emo?tion?al weath?er. Out?ward?ly,

Roland was as im?pas?sive as ev?er, had even played Alain to a draw across four

dif?fi?cult hands, but in?ward?ly he was in a tur?moil of pain and in?de?ci?sion. 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 carelessness 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 outrageously.

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 it self 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?"

“Some?thing won?der?ful,” Bert said, and laughed. There was hate in the sound.

Per?haps mur?der. “You’ll want a good close look at this. I know you will.”

“Bert, what’s wrong with you?” Alain asked.

“Wrong with me? Noth?ing wrong with me, Al—I’m as hap?py as a dart at sun?rise, a

bee in a flow?er, 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 fel?low?ship is bro?ken, any chance we might have of get?ting out of Mejis

alive is gone,” Roland said. “That be?ing the case, I’d rather die at the hands of a

friend than an en?emy.”

He went out. Af?ter a mo?ment of hes?ita?tion, Alain fol?lowed. On his face was a look

of purest mis?ery.

15

Huntress had gone and De?mon had not yet be?gun to show his face, but the sky was

pow?dered with stars, and they threw enough light to see by. Cuth?bert’s horse, still

sad?dled, was tied to the hitch?ing rail. Be?yond it, the square of dusty door?yard

gleamed like a canopy of tar?nished sil?ver.

“What is it?” Roland asked. They weren’t wear?ing guns, any of them. That was to

be grate?ful for, at least. “What would you show me?”

“It’s here.” Cuth?bert stopped at a point mid?way be?tween the bunk?house and the

charred re?mains of the home place. He point?ed with great as?sur?ance, but Roland

could see noth?ing out of the or?di?nary. He walked over to Cuth?bert 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, surely," Cuthbert said, falling effortlessly in to the

Ham-bry pa-tois. "But first ye might want to have a peek at this." Almost

contemporaneously, he tossed a folded sheet of paper. It hit Roland's chest and

bounced in to 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 be?lieved they were be?ing. How con?fi?dent 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

brushing his cheeks and leaving damp smears there. When he staggered and

Cuthbert put out a hand to steady him, Roland pushed him so hard that Cuthbert

himself would have fallen, if Alain hadn't caught hold of his shoulders.

Then, slowly, Roland went back down again—this time in front of Cuthbert with

his hands up and his head down.

"Roland, no!" Cuthbert cried.

"Yes," Roland said. "I have forgotten the face of my father, and cry your pardon."

"Yes, all right, for gods' sake, yes!" Cuthbert now sounded as if he were crying

himself. "Just... please get up! It breaks my heart to see you so!"

And mine to be so, Roland thought. To be humbled so. But I brought it on myself,

didn't I? This dark yard, with my head throbbing and my heart full of shame and

fear. This is mine, bought and paid for.

They helped him up and Roland let himself be helped. "That's quite a left, Bert,"

he said in a voice that almost passed for normal.

"Only when it's going toward someone who doesn't know it's coming," Cuthbert

replied.

"This letter—how did you come by it?"

Cuthbert told of meeting Sheemie, who had been dithering along in his own

misery, as if waiting for ka to intervene ... and, in the person of "Arthur Heath," ka

had.

"From the witch," Roland mused. "Yes, but how did she know? For she never

leaves the Coos, or so Susan has told me."

"I can't say. Nor do I much care. What I'm most concerned about right now is

making sure that Sheemie isn't hurt because of what he told me and gave me. After

that, I'm concerned 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 north-west. "Rhea," he said. "Whatever else she is,

she's a first-class trouble-maker, is she not? And trouble-makers 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 pen.”

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—bitingly, 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 gun-slinger talk,

but he looked troubled as he said it.

"Yes. Perhaps it would. It's not likely, 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

singgle 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 powerful
ly 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 and commanding. Two

yel?low leaves fell from the tree, as if shiv?ered loose by that voice, and one fell in

his black hair. From the hut came on?ly a wait?ing, lis?ten ing si?lence . . . and then

the dis?cor?dant, jeer?ing yowl of a cat.

“Rhea, daugh?ter of none! I’ve brought some?thing back to you, wom?an! Some?thing

you must have lost!” From his shirt he took the fold?ed let?ter and tossed it to the

stony ground. “To?day I’ve been your friend, Rhea—if this had gone where you had

in?tend?ed it to go, you would have paid with your life.”

He paused. An?oth?er leaf drift?ed down from the tree. This one land?ed in Push?er’s

mane.

“Hear me well, Rhea, daugh?ter of none, and un?der?stand me well. I have come here

un?der the name of Will Dear?born, but Dear?born is not my name and it is the

Af?fil?ia?tion I serve. More, ’tis all which lies be?hind the Af?fil?ia?tion—’tis the pow?er

of the White. You have crossed the way of our ka, and I warn you on?ly this once:

do not cross it again. Do you un?der?stand?”

On?ly that wait?ing si?lence.

“Do not touch a sin?gle hair on the head of the boy who car?ried your had-?na?tured

mis?chief hence, or you’ll die. Speak not an?oth?er word of those things you know or

think you know to any?one—not to Cordelia Del?ga?do, 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 un?der?stand?”

More si?lence. Dirty win?dows peer?ing at him like eyes. A puff of breeze sent more

leaves showing 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 shoot!"

Gods, what shoot!" "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 others

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."

When she was sure the boys were gone, Rhea crept out of her door and in?to the

hate?ful sun?shine. She hob?bled across to the tree and fell on her knees by the

tat?tered length of her snake, weep?ing loud?ly.

“Er?mot, Er?mot!” she cried. “See what’s be?come of ye!”

There was his head, the mouth frozen open, the dou?ble fangs still drip?ping

poi?son—clear drops that shone like prisms in the day’s strength en?ing light. The

glaz?ing eyes glared. She picked Er?mot up, kissed the scaly mouth, licked the last

of the ven?om from the ex?posed nee?dles, croon?ing and weep?ing all the while.

Next she picked up the long and tat?tered body with her oth?er hand, moan?ing at the

holes which had been torn in?to Er?mot’s satiny hide; the holes and the ripped red

flesh be?neath. Twice she put the head against the body and spoke in?can?ta?tions, but

noth?ing hap?pened. Of course not. Er?mot had gone be?yond the aid of her spells.

Poor Er?mot.

She held his head to one flat?tened old dug, and his body to the oth?er. Then, with

the last of his blood wet?ting the bodice of her dress, she looked in the di?rec?tion the

hate?ful boys had gone.

“I’ll pay ye back,” she whis?pered. “By all the gods that ev?er were, I’ll pay ye back.

When ye least ex?pect 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 mo?ment longer, then got up and shuf?led back to?ward her hut, hold?ing

Er?mot to her bo?som.

CHAP?TER V

wiz?ard's rain?bow

1

On an af?ter?noon three days af?ter Roland's and Cuth?bert's vis?it to the Coos, Roy

De?pape and Clay Reynolds walked along the up?stairs hall?way of the Trav?ellers'

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 towel in to the bathroom, crossed to the bed, and took

his shirt from where it hung on one of the footposts. Beyond him, Coral glanced

up, gave his naked back a single greedy look, then went back to her work once

more. Jonas slipped in to his shirt. “How are things at Citago, Clay?”

“Quiet. But it’ll get noisy if certain young vagabundos 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 every shift, but like I say, it’s been quiet.”

Jonas nodded, but he wasn’t happy. He’d hoped to draw the boys out to Citago

before now, just as he’d hoped to draw them in to a confrontation by vandalizing

their place and killing their pigeons. Yet so far they still hid behind 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 napping it for all he’s worth, and still the toros refuse to

charge. Why? “The moving operation? How goes that?”

“Like clockwork,” Reynolds said. “Four tankers a night, in pairs, the last four

nights. Renfrew’s in charge, him of the Lazy Susan. Do you still want to leave half

a dozen as bait?”

“Yar,” Jonas said, and there was a knock at the door. Depape jumped. “Is that—”

“No,” Jonas said. “Our friend in the black robe has decamped. Perhaps he goes to

offer comfort to the Good Man’s troops before battle.”

Depape barked laughter at that. By the window, the woman in the nightgown

looked down at her knitting and said nothing. "It's open!" Jonas called.

The man who stepped in was wearing the sombrero, scrape, and sandals of a

farmer or vaquero, but the face was pale and the lock of hair peeking out from

beneath the sombrero's brim was blond. It was Latiago. A hard man and no

mistake, but a great improvement over the laughing man in the black robe, just the

same.

"Good to see you, gentlemen," he said, coming in and closing the door. His

face—dour, frowning—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. Latiago gave it a quick, dry

shake. He didn't do the same for DePape or Reynolds, but glanced at Coral instead.

"Long days and pleasant nights, lady."

"And may you have twice the number, sai Latiago," she said without looking up

from her knitting.

Latiago sat on the end of the bed, produced a sack of tobacco from beneath his

scrape, and began rolling a cigarette.

"I won't stay long," he said. He spoke in the abrupt, clipped tones of northern In-

World, where—or so DePape had heard—reindeer-fucking was still considered the

chief sport. If you ran slower than your sister, that was. "It wouldn't be wise. I

don't quite fit in, if one looks closely."

"No," Reynolds said, sounding amused. "You don't."

Latiago gave him a sharp glance, then returned his attention to Jonas. "Most of my

party is camped thirty wheels from here, in the forest west of Eye-bolt Canyon . . .

what is that wretched noise inside the canyon, by the way? It frightens the horses.”

“A thirty,” 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 fighting?”

“Enough to know what it is,” Latiago said, and Jonas knew he was lying. Farson

had kept his veterans in their mountain bolt-holes. Here was a little expeditionary

force where no doubt only the sergeants were able to do more with their cocks

than run water through them.

“There are a dozen at Hanging Rock, guarding the tankers your men have brought

so far,” Latiago said.

“More than needed, likely.”

“I didn’t risk coming into this god-forsaken shit-splat of a town in order to discuss

my arrangements with you, Jonas.”

“Cry your pardon, sai,” Jonas replied, but perfunctorily. He sat on the floor next to

Coral’s rocker and began to roll a smoke of his own. She put her knitting aside and

began to stroke his hair. De-pape didn’t know what there was about her that Eldred

found so fascinating—when he himself looked he saw only an ugly 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 going 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?ting. “They’re not young men but mere

boys, and if their com?ing here is ka—about which I know Far?son con?cerns him?self

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 likely 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. "Treason the charge.

Three young men, all high-bom, in the pay of John Parsons. Shocking stuff. What

could be more indicative of the evil days we live in?"

"One cry of treason and the mob appears?"

Jonas favored Latiago with a wintry smile. "As a concept, treason might be a bit of

a reach for the common folk, even when the mob's drunk and the core's been

bought and paid for by the Horsemen's Association. Murder, though . . . especially

that of a much loved Mayor—"

DePape's startled eyes flew to the Mayor's sister.

"What a pity it will be," that lady said, and sighed. "I may be moved to lead the

rabble myself."

DePape thought he finally understood Elfred's attraction: here was a woman every

bit as cold-blooded as Jonas himself.

"One other matter," Latiago said. "A piece of the Good Man's property was sent

with you for safekeeping. A certain glass ball?"

Jonas nodded. "Yes, indeed. A pretty trifle."

"I understand you left it with the local brujá."

"Yes."

"You should take it back. Soon."

"Don't teach your grandpa to suck eggs," Jonas said, a bit testily. "I'm waiting until

the brats are juggled."

Reynolds murmured curiously, "Have you seen it yourself, said Latiago?"

"Not close up, but I've seen men who have." Latiago paused. "One such ran mad

and had to be shot. The only other time I saw anyone in such condition was thirty

years ago, on the edge of the big desert. 'Twas a hut-dweller who'd been bitten by

a rabid coyote."

"Bless the Turtle," Reynolds muttered, and tapped his throat three times. He was

terrified of rabies.

"You won't bless anything if the Wizard's Rainbow gets hold of you," Latiago said

grimly, and swung his attention back to Jonas. "You'll want to be even more

careful taking it back than you were in giving it over. The old witch-woman's

likely under its glam by now."

"I intend to send Rimer and Avery. Avery ain't much of a shake, but Rimer's a trig

boy."

"I'm afraid that won't do," Latiago said.

"Won't it?" Jonas said. His hand tightened on Coral's leg and he smiled

unpleasantly at Latiago. "Perhaps you could tell your 'umble servant why it won't

do?"

It was Coral who answered. "Because," said she, "when the piece of the Wizard's

Rainbow Rhea holds is taken back into custody, the Chancellor will be busy

accompanying my brother to his final resting place."

"What's she talking about, Elfred?" Depape asked.

"That Rimer dies, too," Jonas said. He began to grin. "Another foul crime to lay at

the feet of John Farson's filthy spyboys."

Coral smiled in sweet agreement, put her hands over Jonas's, moved it higher on

her thigh, and then picked up her knitting again.

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?sid?ered 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?san to meet.

By the time the meet?ing took place, Roland had be?gun to feel in?creas
in?gly

wor?ried . . . even des?per?ate. Su?san was the prob?lem—or, more
prop er?ly put,

Su?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?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?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?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?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 an?oth?er lit?tle wres?tle. He got on top of me, shot his squirt in?to his

pants again, and went off hap?py. Hum?ming, he was.“ She wrin?kled her nose,

al?though the most she felt for Thorin these days was a kind of sad dis?taste. Her

fear of him had passed.

Aunt Cord, mean?while, had been look?ing at her with glit?tery eyes. For the first

time, Su?san found her?self won?der?ing con?scious?ly about Cordelia’s san?ity.

”A like?ly sto?ry,“ Cordelia whis?pered at last. There were lit?tle beads of per?spi?ration

above her eye?brows, and the nes?tles of blue veins at her tem?ples ticked like clocks.

She even had a smell, these days, no mat?ter if she bathed or not—a ran?cid, acrid

one. "Did ye work it out to?geth?er as ye cud?dled af?ter?ward, thee and him?"

Su?san had stepped for?ward, 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 Su?san held

fast. She then raised the hand to her aunt's face, hold?ing it there un?til she knew

Cordelia had smelled what was on her palm.

"Does thee smell it. Aunt? Paint! We used it on rice-?pa?per for col?ored lanterns!"

The ten?sion had slow?ly gone out of the wrist in Su?san's hand. The eyes look?ing

in?to hers re?gained a mea?sure of clar?ity. "Aye," she had said at last. "Paint." A

pause. "This time."

Since then, Su?san had all too of?ten turned her head to see a nar?row-?hipped fig?ure

glid?ing af?ter her in the street, or one of her aunt's many friends mark?ing her course

with sus?pi?cious eyes. When she rode on the Drop, she now al?ways had the

sen?sa?tion of be?ing watched. Twice be?fore the four of them came to?geth?er in the

grave?yard, she had agreed to meet Roland and his friends. Both times she had

been forced to break off, the sec?ond at the very last mo?ment. On that oc?ca?sion she

had seen Bri?an Hock?ey's el?dest son watch?ing her in an odd, in?tent way. It had on?ly

been in?tu?ition ... but strong in?tu?ition.

What made mat?ters worse for her was that she was as fran?tic for a meet?ing as

Roland him?self, and not just for palaver. She need?ed 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

growing up the north side of the building, and through the rear servants' door in

the wall. There Roland had been waiting, and after two warm minutes with which

we need not concern ourselves, they rode double on Rusher to the graveyard,

where Cuthbert and Alain waited, full of expectation and nervous hope.

Su?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?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?some 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?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?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?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?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 dis?agree?ment in their eyes. They had

re?paired to the mau?soleum, and their breath smoked from their mouths and noses.

Roland squat?ted on his hun?kers, look?ing at the oth?er three, who sat in a line on a

stone med?ita?tion bench flanked by skele?tal bou?quets in stone pots. The floor was

scat?tered with the petals of dead ros?es. Cuth?bert and Alain, on ei?ther side of Su?san,

had their arms around her in quite un?self?con?scious fash?ion. Again Roland thought

of one sis?ter and two pro?tec?tive broth?ers.

“We’re greater than we were,” Alain said. “I feel that very strong?ly.”

“I do, too,” Cuth?bert said. He looked around. “And a fine meet?ing-?place, as well.

Es?pe?cial?ly for such a ka-?tet as ours.”

Roland didn’t smile; repar?tee had nev?er been his strong suit. “Let’s talk about

what’s go?ing on in Ham?bry,” he said, “and then we’ll talk about the im?me?di?ate

fu?ture.”

“We weren’t sent here on a mis?sion, you know,” Alain said to Su?san. “We were

sent by our fa?thers to get us out of the way, that’s all. Roland ex?cit?ed the en?mi?ty of

a man who is like?ly a co?hort of John Par?son’s—”

“ ‘Ex?cit?ed the en?mi?ty of,’ ” Cuth?bert said. “That’s a good phrase. Round. I in?tend to

re?mem?ber it and use it at ev?ery op?por?tu?ni?ty.”

“Con?trol your?self,” Roland said. “I’ve no de?sire to be here all night.”

“Cry your par?don, O great one,” Cuth?bert said, but his eyes danced in a de?cid?ed?ly

un?re?pen?tant way.

“We came with car?ri?er pi?geons for the send?ing and re?ceiv?ing of mes sages,” Alain

went on, “but I think the pi?geons were laid on so our par?ents could be sure we

were all right.”

“Yes,” Cuth?bert said. “What Alain’s try?ing 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 northwest 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 Citigo. 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 Hamby 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 mountains," Alain said. "Most is up in the draws and canyons, they say.

Robots and killer lights—razor-beams, such are called, because 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?tumn

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, smiling himself.
“Talked to us
like an uncle. Told us Ham-bry-folk don’t care for outsiders at their
Fairs, and we’d
best keep right to our place on the day of the full moon.”
“That’s insane!” Susan spoke indignantly, as one is apt to when
one hears one’s
hometown unjustly maligned. “We welcome strangers to our fairs,
so we do, and
always have! We’re not a bunch of... of savages!”
“Soft, soft,” Cuthbert said, giggling. “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 after that Dave’s pretty much at sea. Sheriff Herk knows a little
more, I should
judge, but not much.”
“The pains they’ve taken to warn us off means two things,” Roland
said. “The first
is that they intend to move on Reaping Fair-Day, just as you said,
Susan. The
second is that they think they can steal Parson’s goods right out from
under our
noses.”
“And then perhaps blame us for it afterward,” Alain said.
She looked curiously from one to the other, then said: “What have
you planned,
then?”
“To destroy what they’ve left at Citigo as bait of our own and then to
strike them
where they gather,” Roland said quietly. “That’s Hanging Rock. At
least half the
tankers they mean to take west are there already. They’ll have a force
of men. As
many as two hundred, perhaps, although I think it will turn out to be
less. I intend
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 understood 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 un?der?stand that if they planned too much and things changed

sud?den?ly, they might freeze. Ka had swept them in?to this; it was per?haps best that

they count on ka—and their own courage—to sweep them back out again.

Cuth?bert was re?luc?tant to in?volve Sheemie, but fi?nal?ly went along — the boy's part

would be min?imal, if not ex?act?ly low-?risk, and Roland agreed that they could take

him with them when they left Mejis for good. A par?ty of rive was as fine as a par?ty

of four, he said.

“All right,” Cuth?bert said at last, then turned to Su?san. “It ought to be you or me

who talks to him.”

“I will.”

“Make sure he un?der?stands not to tell Coral Thorin so much as a word,” Cuth?bert

said. “It isn't that the May?or's her broth?er; I just don't trust that bitch.”

“I can give ye a bet?ter rea?son than Hart not to trust her,” Su?san said. “My aunt says

she's tak?en up with El?dred Jonas. Poor Aunt Cord! She's had the worst sum?mer of

her life. Nor will the fall be much bet?ter, I wot. Folk will call her the aunt of a

traitor.”

“Some will know bet?ter,” Alain said. “Some al?ways do.”

“May?hap, but my Aunt Cordelia's the sort of wom?an who nev?er hears good gos?sip.

No more does she speak it. She fan?cied Jonas her?self, ye ken.”

Cuth?bert was thun?der?struck. “Fan?cied Jonas! By all the fid?dling gods! Can you

imag?ine it! Why, if they hung folk for bad taste in love, your aun?tie would go

ear?ly, wouldn't she?”

Su?san gig?gled, hugged her knees, and nod?ded.

“It’s time we left,” Roland said. “If some?thing chances that Su?san needs to know

right away, we’ll use the red stone in the rock wall at Green Heart.”

“Good,” Cuth?bert said. “Let’s get out of here. The cold in this place eats in?to the bones.”

Roland stirred, stretch?ing life back in?to his legs. “The im?por?tant thing is that

they’ve de?cid?ed to leave us free while they round up and run. That’s our edge, and

it’s a good one. And now—“

Alain’s qui?et voice stopped him. ”There’s an?oth?er mat?ter. Very im?por?tant.“

Roland sank back down on his hun?kers, look?ing at Alain cu?ri?ous?ly.

”The witch.“

Su?san start?ed, but Roland on?ly barked an im?pa?tient laugh. ”She doesn’t fig?ure in

our busi?ness, Al—I can’t see how she could. I don’t be?lieve she’s a part of Jonas’s

con?spir?acy—“

”Nei?ther do I,” Alain said.

”—and Cuth?bert and I per?suad?ed her to keep her mouth shut about Su?san 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 re?al?ly the

ques?tion. The ques?tion is how she knew in the first place.“

”It’s pink,” Su?san said abrupt?ly. Her hand was on her hair, fin?gers touch?ing the

place where the cut ends had be?gun 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 talk?ing about. Brain?less as Pinch and Jil?ly, I am ... Roland? What’s wrong?

What ails thee?“

For Roland was no longer hun?ker?ing; he had col?lapsed in?to a loose sit?ting po?si?tion

on the petal-?strewn stone floor. He looked like a young man try?ing not to faint.

Out?side the mau?soleum there was a bony rat?tle of fall leaves and the cry of a

night?jar.

"Dear gods," he said in a low voice. "It can't be. It can't be true." His eyes met

Cuth?bert's.

All the hu?mor had washed out of the lat?ter young man's face, leav?ing a ruth?less

and cal?cu?lat?ing bedrock his own moth?er might not have recog nized ... or might

not have want?ed to.

"Pink," Cuth?bert said. "Isn't that in?ter?est?ing—the same word your fa?ther hap?pened

to men?tion just be?fore we left, Roland, wasn't it? He warned us about the pink one.

We thought it was a joke. Al?most."

"Oh!" Alain's eyes flew wide open. "Oh, fuck!" he blurt?ed. He re?al ized what he

had said while sit?ting leg-?to-?leg with his best friend's lover and clapped his hands

over his mouth. His cheeks flamed red.

Su?san bare?ly no?ticed. She was star?ing at Roland in grow?ing fear and con?fu?sion.

"What?" she asked. "What is it ye know? Tell me! Tell me!"

"I'd like to hyp?no?tize you again, as I did that day in the wil?low grove," Roland

said. "I want to do it right now, be?fore we talk of this more and drag mud across

what you re?mem?ber."

Roland had reached in?to his pock?et while she was speak?ing. Now he took out a

shell, and it be?gan 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 hearing two different voices.

Susan, by the stream in the willow grove: She says, "Aye, lovely, just so, it's a

good girl y'are," then everything's pink.

His father, in the yard behind the Great Hall: It's the grapefruit. By which I mean

it's the pink one.

The pink one.

7

Their horses were saddled and loaded; the three boys stood before them,

outwardly stolid, inwardly feverish to be gone. The road, and the mysteries that

lie along it, calls out to none as it calls to the young.

They were in the courtyard which lay east of the Great Hall, not far from where

Roland had bested Cort, setting all these things in motion. It was early morning,

the sun not yet risen, the mist lying over the green fields in gray ribbons. At a

distance of about twenty paces, Cuthbert's and Alain's fathers stood sentry with

their legs apart and their hands on the butts of their guns. It was unlikely that

Marten (who had for the time being absented himself from the palace, and, so far

as any knew, from Gilead itself) would mount any sort of attack on them—not

here—but it wasn't entirely out of the question, either.

So it was that only Roland's father spoke to them as they mounted up to begin

their ride east to Mejis and the Outer Arc.

"One last thing," he said as they adjusted their saddle girths. "I doubt you'll see

anything that (ouches on our interests—not in Mejis—but I'd have you keep an

eye out for a color of the rainbow. The Wizard's Rain-how, that is." He chuckled,

then added: "It's the grapefruit. By which I mean it's the pink one."

"Wizard's Rain-bow is just a fairy-tale," Cuthbert said, smiling in response to

Steven's smile. Then—perhaps it was something in Steven Dechain's

eyes—Cuthbert's smile faltered. "Isn't it?"

“Not all the old stories are true, but I think that of Maerlyn’s Rainbow is,” Steven

replied. “It’s said that once there were thirteen glass balls in it—one for each of the

Twelve Guardians, and one representing the nexus-point of the Beams.”

“One for the Tower,” Roland said in a low voice, feeling gooseflesh. “One for the

Dark Tower.”

“Aye, Thirteen it was called when I was a boy. We’d tell stories about the black

ball around the fire sometimes, and scare ourselves silly . . . unless our fathers

caught us at it. My own da said it wasn’t wise to talk about Thirteen, for it might

hear its name called and roll your way. But Black Thirteen doesn’t matter to you

three . . . not now, at least. No, it’s the pink one. Maerlyn’s Grapefruit.”

It was impossible to tell how serious he was . . . or if he was serious at all.

“If the other balls in the Wizard’s Rainbow did exist, most are broken now. Such

things never stay in one place or one pair of hands for long, you know, and even

enchanted glass has a way of breaking. Yet at least three or four bends of the

Rainbow may still be rolling around this sad world of ours. The blue, almost

certainly. A desert tribe of slow mutants—the Total Hogs, they called

themselves—had that one less than fifty years ago, although it’s slipped from sight

again since. The green and the orange are reputed to be in Lud and Dis,

respectively. And, just maybe, the pink one.”

“What exactly do they do?” Roland asked. “What are they good for?”

"For seeing. Some colors of the Wizard's Rainbow are reputed to look into the

future. Others look into the other worlds—those where the demons live, those

where the Old People are supposed to have gone when they left our world. These

may also show the location of the secret doors which pass between the worlds.

Other colors, they say, can look far in our own world, and see things people would

as soon keep secret. They never see the good; only the ill. How much of this is

true and how much is myth no one knows for sure."

He looked at them, his smile fading.

"But this we do know: John Farson is said to have a talisman, some thing that

glows in his tent late at night ... sometimes before battles, sometimes before large

movements of troop and horse, sometimes before momentous decisions are

announced. And it glows pink."

"Maybe he has an electric light and puts a pink scarf over it when he prays,"

Cuthbert said. He looked around at his friends, a little defensively. "I'm not joking;

there are people who do that."

"Perhaps," Roland's father said. "Perhaps that's all it is, or some thing like. But

perhaps it's a good deal more. All I can say of my own knowledge is that he keeps

betting us, he keeps slipping away from us, and he keeps turning up where he's

least expected. If the magic is in him and not in some talisman he owns, gods help

the Affiliation."

"We'll keep an eye out, if you like," Roland said, "but Farson'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 fourteen with revolvers tucked in your bed rolls, either.
Ka's at work

here, and where ka works, anything is possible."

Slowly, slowly, Steven took off his hat, stepped back, and swept them
a bow. "Go

in peace, boys. And return in health."

"Long days and pleasant nights, sai," Alain said.

"Good fortune," Cuthbert said.

"I love you," Roland said.

Steven nodded. "Thankee-sai—I love you, too. My blessings, boys."
He said this

last in a loud voice, and the other two men—Robert Allgood and
Christopher

Johns, who had been known in the days of his savage youth as Burning
ing

Chris—added their own blessings.

So the three of them rode toward their end of the Great Road, while
summer lay

all about them, breathless as a gasp. Roland looked up and saw something that

made him forget all about the Wizard's Rainbow. It was his mother,
leaning out of

her apartment's bedroom window: the oval of her face surrounded
by the timeless

gray stone of the castle's west wing. There were tears coursing down
her cheeks,

but she smiled and lifted one hand in a wide wave. Of the three of
them, only

Roland saw her.

He didn't wave back.

8

"Roland!" An elbow struck him in the ribs, hard enough to dispel
these memories,

brilliant as they were, and return him to the present. It was Cuthbert.
"Do

something, if you mean to! Get us out of this deadhouse before I
shiver the skin

right off my bones!”

Roland put his mouth close by Alain’s ear. “Be ready to help me.”

Alain nodded.

Roland turned to Susan. “After the first time we were together and then, you went to the stream in the grove.”

“Aye.”

“You cut some of your hair.”

“Aye.” That same dreamy voice. “So I did.”

“Would you have cut it all?”

“Aye, every 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. Another

pause. “She wanted to fiddle me up.”

“Yes, but what happened later? What happened while you stood in the doorway?”

“Oh, and something else happened before.”

“What?”

“I fetched her wood,” said she, and said no more.

Roland looked at Cuthbert, who shrugged. Alain spread his hands. Roland thought

of asking the latter boy to step forward, and judged it still wasn’t quite time.

“Never mind the wood for now,” he said, “or all that came before. We’ll talk of

that later, maybe, but not just yet. What happened as you were leaving? 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.

“Su?san? It’s Alain Johns. Do you know me?”

“Aye—Richard Stock?worth that was.”

“What did Rhea whis?per in your ear?”

A frown, faint as a shad?ow on an over?cast day, creased her brow. “I can’t see. It’s pink.”

“You don’t need to see,” Alain said. “See?ing’s not what we want right now. Close

your eyes so you can’t do it at all.”

“They are closed,” she said, a tri?fle pet?tish?ly. She’s fright?ened, Roland thought. He

felt an urge to tell Alain to stop, to wake her up, and re?strained it.

“The ones in?side,” Alain said. “The ones that look out from mem?ory. Close those,

Su?san. Close them for your fa?ther’s sake, and tell me not what you see but what

you hear. Tell me what she said.”

Chill?ing?ly, un?ex?pect?ed?ly, 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 an?cient stat?ue.

Roland bit back a scream.

“You were in the door?way, Su?san?” Alain asked.

“Aye. So we both were.”

“Be there again.”

“Aye.” A dream?ing voice. Faint but clear. “Even with my eyes closed I can see-?the

moon’s light. ‘Tis as big as a grape?fruit.”

It’s the grape?fruit, Roland thought. By which I mean, it’s the pink one.

“And what do you hear? What does she say?”

“No, I say.” The faint?ly petu?lant voice of a lit?tle girl. “First I say, Alain. I say ‘And

is our busi?ness done?’ and she says ‘May?hap there’s one more lit?tle thing,’ and then

... then...”

Alain squeezed gen?tly down on her hands, us?ing what?ev?er it was he had in his

own, his touch, sending it in to 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, lovely, 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 you, then

cut your hair off your head. Every strand. Right down to your 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 you

came from your mother! See how he likes you 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

re?mem?ber?”

“It’s her glam.” Su?san seemed al?most sur?prised, al?most gay. Con?fid ing. “She

keeps it un?der her bed, so she does. She doesn’t know I saw it.”

“Are you sure?”

“Aye,” Su?san said, then added sim?ply: “She would have killed me if she knew.”

She gig?gled, shock?ing them all. “Rhea has the moon in a box un?der her bed.” She

lilt?ed this in the singsong voice of a small child.

“A pink moon,” Roland said.

“Aye.”

“Un?der her bed.”

“Aye.” This time she did pull her hands free of Alain’s. She made a cir?cle with

them in the air, and as she looked up at it, a dread?ful ex?pres sion of greed passed

over her face like a cramp. “I should like to have it, Roland. So I should. Love?ly

moon! I saw it when she sent me for the wood. Through her win?dow. She looked

... young.” Then, once again: “I sh’d like to have such a thing.”

“No—you wouldn’t. But it’s un?der her bed?”

“Aye, in a mag?ic place she makes with pass?es.”

“She has a piece of Maer?lyn’s Rain?bow,” Cuth?bert said in a won?der ing voice.

“The old bitch has what your da told us about—no won?der she knows all she

does!”

“Is there more we need?” Alain asked. “Her hands have got?ten very cold. I don’t

like hav?ing her this deep. She’s done well, but. . .”

“I think we’re done.”

“Shall I tell her to for?get?”

Roland shook his head at once—they were ka-?tet, for good or ill. He took hold of

her fin?gers, and yes, they were cold.

"Su?san?"

"Aye, dear."

"I'm go?ing to say a rhyme. When I fin?ish, you'll re?mem?ber ev?ery thing, as you did

be?fore. All right?"

She smiled and closed her eyes again. "Bird and bear and hare and fish.

.."

Smil?ing, Roland fin?ished, "Give my love her fond?est 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?serves 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 harvest the final rows
cheerfully

enough, talking of the things they'll do and the capers they'll cut at
Reaping Fair,

but they feel all of autumn's old sadness in the wind; the going of the
year. It runs

away from them like water in a stream, and although none speak of it,
all know it

very well.

In the orchards, the last and highest of the apples are picked by laugh-
ing young

men (in these not-quite-gales, the final days of picking belong on-
ly to them) who

bob up and down like crow's nest lookouts. Above them, in skies
which hold a

brilliant, cloudless blue, squadrons of geese fly south, calling their
rusty adieux.

The small fishing boats are pulled from the water; their hulls are
scraped and

painted by singing owners who mostly 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,

Until my nets are full I stay

All I say is fine-o!

—and sometimes a little cask of graf is tossed from dock to dock. On
the bay itself

only the large boats now remain, pacing about the big circles which
mark their

dropped nets as a working dog may pace around a flock of sheep. At
noon the bay

is a rippling sheet of autumn fire and the men on the boats sit cross-legged, eating
their lunches, and know that all they see is theirs—o ... at least until
the gray gales
of autumn come swarming over the horizon, coughing out their
gusts of sleet and
snow.
Closing, closing the year.
Along the streets of Ham-bry, the Reap-lights now bum at night, and
the hands of
the stuffy-guys are painted red. Reap-charms hang everywhere,
and although
women often kiss and are kissed in the streets and in both market
places—often by
men they do not know—sexual intercourse has come to an almost
complete halt. It
will resume (with a bang, you might say) on Reap-Night. There will
be the usual
crop of Full Earth babies the following year as a result.
On the Drop, the horses gallop wildly, as if understanding (very
likely they do)
that their time of freedom is coming to an end. They swoop and then
stand with
their faces pointing west when the wind gusts, showing their asses to
winter. On
the ranches, porch-nets are taken down and shutters rehung. In the
huge ranch
kitchens and smaller farmhouse kitchens, no one is stealing Reap-
kisses, and no
one is even thinking about sex. This is the time of putting up and laying
by, and
the kitchens fume with steam and pulse with heat from before dawn
until long
after dark. There is the smell of apples and beets and beans and sharp
root and
curing strips of meat. Women work ceaselessly 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 bam-

dances 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?sid?er 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 “Careless Love” in a voice both high and sweet. His progress was

slow; the barrels slung over Capi’s back were half again as large as the ones he had

carried up to the Coos not long before.

Coral hailed her boy-of-all-work cheerily enough. She had reason to be cheery;

Elfred Jonas had no use for fin de ano abstinence. And for a man with a bad leg,

he could be very inventive.

“Sheemie!” she called. “Where go ye? Seafront?”

“Aye,” Sheemie said. “I’ve got the graf them asked for. All parties come Reaping

Fair, aye, tons of em. Dance a lot, get hot a lot, drink graf to cool off a lot! How

pretty you look, sai Thorin, cheeks all pinky-pink, so they are.”

“Oh, law! How kind of you to say, Sheemie!” She favored him with a dazling

smile. “Go on, now, you flatterer—don’t linger.”

“Noey-no, off I go.”

Coral stood watching after him and smiling. Dance a lot, get hot a lot, Sheemie

had said. About the dancing Coral didn’t know, but she was sure this year’s

Reaping would be hot, all right. Very hot indeed.

3

Miguel met Sheemie at Seafront’s archway, gave him the look of lofty contempt

he reserved for the lower orders, then pulled the cork from first one barrel and then

the other. With the first, he only sniffed from the bung; at the second, he stuck his

thumb in and then sucked it thoughtfully. With his wrinkled cheeks hollowed

inward and his toothless old mouth working, he looked like an ancient bearded

barby.

“Tasty, ain’t it?” Sheemie asked. “Tasty as a pasty, ain’t it, good old Miguel, been

here a thousand years?”

Miguel, still sucking his thumb, favored Sheemie with a sour look. “Ain’t dale.

Ain’t dale, simpleton.”

Sheemie led his mule around the house to the kitchen. Here the breeze off the

ocean was sharp and shivering. He waved to the women in the kitchen, but not a

one waved back; likely they didn’t even see him. A pot boiled on every trink of the

enormous stove, and the women— working in loose long-sleeved cotton garments

like shifts and wearing their hair tied up in brightly colored clouts— moved about

like phantoms glimpsed in fog.

Sheemie took first one barrel from Capi’s back, then the other. 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 elderly

grape.

“Whew!” he said, hoisting the first barrel. “Ye could get drunk just on the smell o’ that lot!”

He emptied in the fresh grape, 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-handled 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 trunkled open a little. "Come in!" she

called, also low. "Bring the mule! Hurry!"

He led Capi into a shed which smelled of straw and beans and tack ... and

something else. Something sharper. Fireworks, he thought. Shooting-powder, too.

Susan, who had spent the morning enduring final fittings, was dressed in a thin

silk wrapper and large leather boots. Her hair was done up in curling papers of

bright blue and red.

Sheemie 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 graf filled the shed.

“Here!” She tossed Sheemie a soft cloth. “Dry it out as well as you can. Doesn’t

have to be perfect, they’re wrapped, but it’s best to be safe.”

They wiped the insides of the barrels, Susan stealing nervous glances at the door

every few seconds. “All right,” she said. “Good. Now ... there’s two kinds. I’m sure

they won’t be missed; there’s enough stuff back there to blow up half the world.”

She hurried back into the dimness of the shed, holding the hem of her wrapper up

with one hand, her boots clomping. When she came back, her arms were full of

wrapped packages.

“These are the bigger ones,” she said.

He stored them in one of the casks. There were a dozen packages in all, and

Sheemie could feel round things inside, each about the size of a child’s fist. Big-

bangers. By the time he had finished packing and putting the top back on the

barrel, she had returned with an armload of smaller packages. These he stored in

the other barrel. They were the little ‘uns, from the feel, the ones that not only

banged but flashed colored fire.

She helped him resling the barrels on Capi’s back, still shooting those little glances

at the shed door. When the barrels were secured to Caprichoso’s sides, Susan

sighed with relief and brushed her sweaty forehead with the backs of her hands.

“Thank the gods that part’s over,” she said. “Now ye know where ye’re to take

them?”

“Aye, Susan daughter of Pat. To the Bar K. My friend Arthur Heath will put em

safe.”

“And if any?one asks what ye’re do?ing out that way?” “Tak?ing sweet graf to the In-

World boys, ’cause they’ve de?cid?ed not to come to town for the Fair . . . why won’t

they, Su?san? 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 lin?gered.

“What?” she asked, try?ing not to be im?pa?tient. “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 alarm?ing shade of red.

Su?san laughed in spite of her?self, then stood on her toes and kissed the com?er of

his mouth. With that, Sheemie float?ed out to the Bar K with his load of fire.

4

Reynolds rode out to Cit?go the fol?low?ing day, gal?lop?ing with a scarf wrapped

around his face so on?ly his eyes peered out. He would be very glad to get out of

this damned place that couldn’t de?cide if it was ranch-?land or sea? coast. The

tem?per?ature wasn’t all that low, but af?ter com?ing in over the wa?ter, the wind cut

like a ra?zor. Nor was that all—there was a brood?ing qual?ity to Ham? bry and all of

Mejis as the days wound down to?ward the Reap; a haunt?ed feel?ing 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 ba?by knights so much ash in the wind and this

place just a mem?ory.

He dis?mount?ed in the crum?bling re?fin?ery park?ing lot, tied his horse to the bumper

of a rusty old hulk with the mys?tery-?word chevro?let bare?ly read?able on its

tail?board, then walked to?ward the oil?patch. The wind blew hard, chill?ing him even

through the ranch-?style sheep?skin coat he wore, and twice he had to yank his hat

down around his ears to keep it from blow?ing off. On the whole, he was glad he

couldn't see him?self; he pro?ba bly looked like a fuck?ing farmer.

The place seemed fine, though . . . which was to say, de?sert?ed. The wind made a

lone?ly sough?ing sound as it combed through the firs on ei ther side of the pipe.

You'd nev?er guess that there were a dozen pairs of eyes look?ing out at you as you

strolled.

"Hai!" he called. "Come on out here, pard, and let's have some palaver."

For a mo?ment there was no re?sponse; then Hi?ram Quint of the Pi?ano Ranch and

Barkie Calla?han of the Trav?ellers' Rest came duck?ing their way out through the

trees. Holy shit, Reynolds thought, some?where be tween awe and amuse?ment.

There ain't that much beef in a butch?er shop.

There was a wretched old mus?ke?toon stuck in?to the waist?band of Quint's pants;

Reynolds hadn't seen one in years. He thought that if Quint was lucky, it would

on?ly mis?fire when he pulled the trig?ger. If he was un lucky, it would blow up in

his face and blind him.

"All qui?et?" he asked.

Quint replied in Mejis bib?ble-?bab?ble. Barkie lis?tened, then said: "All well, sai. He

say he and his men grow impatient.” Smiling cheerfully, his face giving no

indication of what he was saying, Barkie added: “If brains was black powder, 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 picking

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 de?cay?ing snake around her neck as she watched

and dreamed, not notic?ing the stench that be?gan to arise from the rep?tile as time

passed. Twice Musty came nigh, mew?ing for food, and each time Rhea bat?ted the

trou?ble?some thing away with?out so much as a glance. She her?self grew more and

more gaunt, her eyes now look?ing like the sock?ets of the skulls stored in the net by

the door to her bed?room. She dozed oc?ca?sion?al?ly as she sat with the ball in her lap

and the stink?ing snake?skin looped about her throat, her head down, the sharp point

of her chin dig?ging at her chest, run?ners of drool hang?ing from the loose puck?ers

of her lips, but she nev?er re?al?ly slept. There was too much to see, far too much to

see.

And it was hers for the see?ing. These days she didn't even have to pass her hands

above the glass to open its pink mists. All the Barony's mean?ness, all its pet?ty (and

not so pet?ty) cru?el?ties, all its coz?en?ing and ly ing lay be?fore her. Most of what she

saw was small and de?mean?ing stuff—mas?tur?bat?ing boys peek?ing through

knot?holes at their un?dressed sis?ters, wives go?ing through hus?bands' pock?ets,

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 confirmed her opinion of the society she had left

behind. Sometimes she laughed wildly; sometimes she spoke to the people she

saw in the glass ball, as if they could hear her. By the third day of the week before

Reaping, she had ceased her trips to the privy, even though she could carry the ball

with her when she went, and the sour stench of urine began to rise from her.

By the fourth day, Musty had ceased coming near her. Rhea dreamed in the ball

and lost herself in her dreams, as others had done before her; deep in the petty

pleasures of far seeing, she was unaware that the pink ball was stealing the

wrinkled remains of her anima. She likely would have considered it a fair trade if

she had known. She saw all the things people did in the shadows, and they were

the only things she cared for, and for them she almost certainly would have

considered her life's force a fair trade.

6

"Here," the boy said, "let me light it, gods damn you." Jonas would have

recognized the speaker; he was the lad who had waved a severed dog's tail across

the street at Jonas and called, We're Big Coffin Hunters just like you!

The boy to whom this charming child had spoken tried to hold onto the piece of

livor they had copped from the knacker's behind the Low Market. The first boy

seized his ear and twisted. The second boy howled and held the chunk of livor out,

dark blood running down his grimy knuckles 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 doing?” a woman’s voice called sharply. “Get out of there, ye ravens!”

The boys fled, cackling, into the bright afternoon. They did sound like ravens.

7

Cuthbert and Alain sat their horses at the mouth of Eyebolt. Even with the wind

blowing the sound of the thinny away from them, it got inside your head and

buzzed there, rattling your teeth.

“I hate it,” Cuthbert said through clenched teeth. “Gods, let’s be quick.”

“Aye,” Alain said. They dismounted, bulky in their ranch-coats, and tied their

horses to the brush which lay across the front of the canyon. Or didn’t they, tethering

wouldn’t have been necessary, but both boys could see the horses hatted the

whining, grinding sound as much as they did. Cuthbert seemed to hear the thinny

in his mind, speaking words of invitation in a groaning, horribly persuasive voice.

Come on, Bert. Leave all this foolishness behind: the drums, the pride, the fear of

death, the loneliness you laugh at because laughing’s all you can think to do. And

the girl, leave her, too. You love her, don’t you? And even if you don’t, you want

her. It’s sad that she loves your friend instead of you, but if you come to me, all

that will stop both of you very soon. So come on. What are you waiting for?

“What am I waiting for?” he muttered.

“Huh?”

“I said, what are we waiting for? Let’s get this done and get the holy hell out of

here.”

From their saddlebags they each took a small cotton bag. These contained

gunpowder extracted from the smaller firecrackers Sheemie had brought them two

days before. Alain dropped to his knees, pulled his knife, and began to crawl

backward, digging a trench as far under the roll of brush as he could.

“Dig it deep,” Cuthbert said. “We don’t want the wind to blow it away.”

Alain gave him a look which was remarkably hot. “Do you want to do it? Just so

you can make sure it’s done right?”

It’s the thingy, Cuthbert thought. It’s working on him, too.

“No, Al,” he said humbly. “You’re doing fine for someone who’s both blind and

soft in the head. Go on.”

Alain looked at him fiercely a moment longer, then grinned and resumed the

trench under the brush. “You’ll die young, Bert.”

“Aye, likely.” Cuthbert dropped to his own knees and began to crawl after Alain,

sprinkling gunpowder into the trench and trying to ignore the buzzy, cajoling

voice of the thingy. No, the gunpowder probably wouldn’t blow away, not unless

there was a full gale. But if it rained, even the rolls of brush wouldn’t be much

protection. If it rained—

Don’t think of that, he told himself. That’s ka.

They finished loading gunpowder trenches under both sides of the brush barrier in

only ten minutes, but it felt longer. To the horses as well, it seemed; they were

stamping impatiently at the far end of their tethers, their ears laid back and their

eyes rolling. Cuthbert and Alain untied them and mounted up. Cuthbert's horse

actually bucked twice . . . except it felt more to Cuthbert as if the poor old thing

were shuddering.

In the middle distance, bright sunshine twanged of bright steel. The tankers at

Hang'ing Rock. They had been pulled in as light to the sandstone outcrop as

possible, but when the sun was high, most of the shadow disappeared, and

concealment disappeared with it.

"I really can't believe it," Alain said as they started back. It would be a long ride,

including a wide swing around Hang'ing Rock to make sure they weren't seen.

"They must think we're blind."

"It's stupid they think we are," Cuthbert said, "but I suppose it comes to the same."

Now that Eyebolt Canyon was falling behind them, he felt almost giddy with

relief. Were they going in there a few days from now? Actually going in, riding to

within mere yards of where that cursed puddle started? He couldn't believe it ...

and he made himself stop thinking about it before he could start believing it.

"More riders heading out to Hang'ing Rock," Alain said, pointing back toward the

woods beyond the canyon. "Do you see them?"

They were small as ants from this distance, but Bert saw them very well.

"Changing the guard. The important thing is that they don't see us—you don't

think they can, do you?"

"Over here? Not likely."

Cuthbert didn't think so, either.

“They’ll all be down come Reap, won’t they?” Alain asked. “It won’t do us much

good to only catch a few.”

“Yes—I’m pretty sure they all will.”

“Jonas and his pals?”

“Them, too.”

Ahead of them, the Bad Grass grew closer. The wind blew hard in their faces,

making their eyes water, but Cuthbert didn’t mind. The sound of the thimny was

down to a faint drone behind him, and would soon be gone completely. Right now

that was all he needed to make him happy.

“Do you think we’ll get away with it, Bert?”

“Dunno,” Cuthbert said. Then he thought of the gunpowder trenches lying beneath

the dry rolls of brush, and grinned. “But I’ll tell you one thing, Al: they’ll know we

were here.”

8

In Mejis, as in every other Barony of Mid-World, the week before a Fair-Day was

a political week. Important people came in from the farther corners of the Barony,

and there were a good many Conversational leadings up to the main

Conversational on Reaping Day. Susan was expected to be present at

these—mostly as a decorative testimony to the Mayor’s continuing piety.

Olive was also present, and, in a cruelly comic dumb-show that only the women

truly appreciated, they sat on either side of the aging cockatoo, Susan pouring the

coffee, Olive passing the cake, both of them gracefully accepting compliments on

food and drink they’d had no hand in preparing.

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 before 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 giggles. Time was a face on the water, and this time it was the face of her father.

At last her tears tapered to sniffling. She opened the desk drawers, one after

another, finding more pipes (many rendered useless by his constant stem-

chewing), a hat, one of her own dolls (it had a broken arm Pat had apparently

never gotten around to putting right), quill-pens, a little flask—empty but with a

faint smell of whiskey still present around its neck. The only item of interest was

in the bottom drawer: a pair of spurs. One still had its star rowel, but the other had

been broken off. These were, she was almost positive, the spurs he had been

wearing on the day he died.

If my da was here, she had begun that day on the Drop. But he's not, Roland had

said. He's dead.

A pair of spurs, a broken-off rowel.

She bounced them in her hand, in her mind's eye seeing Ocean Foam rear, spilling

her father (one spur catches in a stirrup; the rowel breaks free), then stumbling

sideways and falling atop him. She saw this clearly, but she didn't see the snake

Fran Lengyll had told them about. That she didn't see at all.

She put the spurs back where she had found them, got up, and looked at the shelf

to the right of the desk, handy to Pat Delgado's smart hand. Here was a line of

leather-bound ledgers, a priceless trove of books in a society that had forgotten

how to make paper. Her father had been the man in charge of the Barony's horse

for 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 dresses. The top three buttons were undone, and

Susan could see her aunt's collarbones sticking out above the plain white cotton of

her shift. It was only on seeing those protruding bones that Susan realized how

much weight Aunt Cord had lost over the last three months or so. She could see

the red imprint of the pillow on her aunt's left cheek, like the mark of a slap. Her

eyes glittered from dark, bruised-looking hollows of flesh.

"Aunt Cord! You startled me! You—"

"What are ye doing in here?" Aunt Cord repeated.

Susan bent and picked up the book. "I came to remember my father," she said, and

put the book back on the shelf. Who had torn those pages out? Lengyll Rimer?

She doubted it. She thought it more likely that the woman standing before her

right now had done it. Perhaps for as little as a single piece of red gold. Nothing

asked, nothing told, so all is well, she would have thought, popping the coin into

her money-box, after first biting its edge to make sure it was true.

"Remember him? It's ask his forgiveness, ye should do. For ye've forgotten his

face, so ye have. Most grievous have ye forgotten it, Sue."

Susan only looked at her.

"Have ye been with him today?" Cordelia asked in a brittle, laughing voice. Her

hand went to the red pillow-mark on her cheek and began rubbing it. She had

been getting bad by degrees, Susan realized, but had become ever so much worse

since the gossip about Jonas and Coral Thorin had started. "Have ye been with sai

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

almost too hard to mount up. Yet mount she did, and she couldn't deny that there

was relief in her heart as well as sorrow. When she turned onto the High Street and

booted Python into a gallop, she didn't look back.

9

In a dark hour of the following morning, Olive Thorin crept from the room where

she now slept to the one she had shared for almost forty years with her husband.

The floor was cold under her bare feet and she was shivering by the time she

reached the bed ... but the chilly floor wasn't the only reason she was shivering.

She slid in beside the gaunt, snoring man in the nightcap, and when he turned

away from her (his knees and back crackling loudly as he did), she pressed against

him and hugged him tightly. There was no passion in this, but only a need to share

a bit of his warmth. His chest—narrow but almost as well-known to her as her

own plump one—rose and fell under her hands, and she began to quiet a little. He

stirred, and she thought for a moment he would wake and find her sharing his bed

for the first time in gods knew how long.

Yes, wake, she thought, do. She didn't dare wake him of her own—all her courage

had been exhausted just getting here, creeping through the dark following one of

the worst dreams she had ever had in her life—but if he woke, she would take it as

a sign and tell him she had dreamed of a vast bird, a cruel golden-eyed roc that

flew above the Barony on wings that dripped blood.

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?al?ized 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?tat?ed, 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?san 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, nothing like it, but only intuition.

"I think everything is all right ... or as right as things can be when the odds may

turn out fifty of them for each of us. Susan, our only chance is to take them by

surprise. You're not going to risk that, are you? Not planning to go to Lengyll,

waving your father's stockpile book around?"

She shook her head. If Lengyll had done what she now suspected, he'd get his

payback two days from now. There would be reaping, all right. Reaping aplenty.

But this ... this frightened her, and she said so.

"Listen." Roland took her face in his hands and looked into her eyes.

"I'm only

trying to be careful. If things go badly—and they could—you're the one most

likely to get away clean. You and Sheemie. If that happens, Susan,

you—thee—must come here and take my guns. Take them west to Gilead. Find

my father. He'll know thee are who thee says by what thee shows. Tell him what

happened here. That's all."

"If anything happens to thee, Roland, I won't be able to do anything. Except die."

His hands were still on her face. Now he used them to make her head shake

slowly, from side to side. "You won't die," he said. There was a coldness in his

voice and eyes that struck her not with fear but awe. She thought of his blood—of

how old it must be, and how cold it must some times flow. "Not with this job

undone. Promise me."

"I... I promise, Roland. I do."

“Tell me aloud what you promise.”

“I’ll come here. Get yer guns. Take them to yer da. Tell him what happened.”

He nodded and let go of her face. The shapes of his hands were printed faintly on her cheeks.

“Ye frightened me,” Susan said, and then shook her head. That wasn’t right. “Ye

do frighten me.”

“I can’t help what I am.”

“And I wouldn’t change it.” She kissed his left cheek, his right cheek, his mouth.

She put her hand inside his shirt and caressed his nipple. It grew instantly hard

beneath the tip of her finger. “Bird and bear and hare and fish,” she said, now

making soft butterfly kisses all over his face. “Give your love her fondest wish.”

After, they lay beneath a bearskin Roland had brought along and listened to the

wind sigh through the grass.

“I love that sound,” she said. “It always makes me wish I could be part of the wind

... go where it goes, see what it sees.”

“This year, if ka allows, you will.”

“Aye. And with thee.” She turned to him, up on one elbow. Light fell through the

ruined roof and dappled her face. “Roland, I love thee.” She kissed him . . . and

then began to cry.

He held her, concerned. “What is it? Sue, what troubles thee?”

“I don’t know,” she said, crying harder. “All I know is that there’s a shadow on my

heart.” She looked at him with tears still flowing from her eyes.

“Thee’d not leave

me, would ye, dear? Thee’d not go without Sue, would ye?”

“No.”

“For I’ve 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 fa?thers, for all the rest of their lives. Not even the

South Pole would be far enough to es?cape those faces.

“All you need do day af?ter to?mor?row is claim in?dis?po?si?tion at lunch.” They had

gone over all this be?fore, but now, in his sud?den, point?less 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 grave?yard. Hide up a lit?tle. Then, when it’s three o’ the clock, ride here, and

look un?der the skins in yon com?er. If my guns are gone—and they will be, I swear

they will—then ev?ery?thing’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 some?thing’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 fa?ther

said, it takes what it will and minds the plea of no man or wom?an. Greedy old ka,

how I hate it!”

”Su?san—“

”No, say no more.“ She lay back and pushed the bearskin down to her knees,

ex?pos?ing a body that far greater men than Hart Thorin might have giv?en away

king?doms for. Beads of sun?light ran over her bare skin like rain. She held her arms

out to him. Nev?er had she looked more beau?ti?ful to Roland than she did then, with

her hair spread about her and that haunt?ed look on her face. He would think lat?er:

She knew. Some part of her knew.

”No more talk?ing,“ she said. ”Talk?ing’s done. If you love me, then love me.”

And for the last time, Roland did. They rocked to?geth?er, skin to skin and breath to

breath, and out?side the wind roared in?to the west like a tidal wave.

12

That evening, as the grin?ning De?mon rose in the sky, Cordelia left her house and

walked slow?ly across the lawn to her gar?den, de?tour?ing around the pile of leaves

she had raked that af?ter?noon. In her arms was a bun?dle 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 Mayor Thorin's presents to Miss Oh So Young and Pretty. One of those she

wouldn't wear. Whore's clothes, she had called them. And what did that make

Cordelia Delgado, who had taken care of her even after her bullheaded 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 piano planked 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-ou 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 absolutely no urge to investigate the source of the scream, but he

supposed he would, just the same. It had sounded like that sad old bitch Pettie the

Trotter. "I'd like to trot your saggy old ass right out of town," he muttered, then

bent down to look under the bar. There were two stout ashwood clubs here, The

Calmer and The Killer. The Calmer was smooth buried wood, guaranteed to put

out the lights for two hours any time you tapped some boisterous cull's head in the

right place with it.

Stanley consulted his feelings and took the other club. It was shorter than The

Calmer, wider at the top. And the business end of The Killer was studded with

nails.

Stanley went down to the end of the bar, through the door, and across a dim

supply-room stacked with barrels smelling of graf and whiskey. At the rear was a

door giving on the back yard. Stanley approached it, took a deep breath, and

unlocked it. He kept expecting Pettie to voice an other head-bursting scream, but

none came. There was only the sound of the wind.

Maybe you got lucky and she's kilt, Stanley thought. He opened the door, stepping

back and raising the nail-studded club at the same time.

Pettie wasn't kilt. Dressed in a stained shift (a Pettie-skirt, one might say), the

whore was standing on the path which led to the back privy, her hands clutched

together above the swell of her bosom and below the drooping turkey-wattles of

her neck. She was looking up at the sky.

"What is it?" Stanley asked, hurrying down to her. "Near scared ten years off my

life, ye did.”

“The moon, Stanley!” she whispered. “Oh, look at the moon, would ye!”

He looked up, and what he saw set his heart thumping, but he tried to speak

reasonably and calmly. “Come now, Pettie, it’s dust, that’s all. Be reasonable, dear,

ye know how the wind’s blown these last few days, and no rain to knock down

what it carries; it’s dust, that’s all.”

Yet it didn’t look like dust.

“I know what I see,” whispered Pettie.

Above them, Demon Moon grinned and winked one eye through what appeared to

be a shifting scrim of blood.

CHAPTER VII

TAKING THE BALL

1

While a certain whore and certain bartender were still gapping up at the bloody

moon, Kimba Rimer awoke sneezing.

Damn, a cold for Reaping, he thought. As much as I have to be out over the next

two days, I’ll be lucky if it doesn’t turn in—to—

Something fluffed the end of his nose, and he sneezed again. Coming out of his

narrow chest and dry slot of a mouth, it sounded like a small-caliber pistol-shot in

the black room.

“Who’s there?” he cried.

No answer. Rimer suddenly imagined a bird, something nasty and bad-tempered,

that had gotten in here in daylight and was now flying around in the dark,

fluttering against his face as he slept. His skin crawled—birds, bugs, bats, he hated

them all—and he fumbled so he never got it for the gas-lamp on the table by his

bed that he almost knocked it off onto the floor.

As he drew it toward him, that flutter came again. This time puffing at his cheek.

Rimer screamed and recoiled against the pillows, clutching the lamp to his chest.

He turned the switch on the side, heard the hiss of gas, then pushed the spark. The

lamp lit, and in the thin circle of its radiance, he saw not a fluttering bird but Clay

Reynolds sitting on the edge of the bed. In one hand Reynolds held the feather

with which he had been tickling Mejia's Chancellor. His other was hidden in his

cloak, which lay in his lap.

Reynolds had disliked Rimer from their first meeting in the woods far west of

town—those same woods, beyond Eyebolt Canyon, where Farson's man Latiago

now quartered the main contingent of his troops. It had been a windy night, and as

he and the other Cofin Hunters entered the little glade where Rimer,

accompanied by Lengyll and Croydon, were sitting by a small fire, Reynolds's

cloak swirled around him. "Sai Man-to," Rimer had said, and the other two had

laughed. It had been meant as a harmless joke, but it hadn't seemed harmless to

Reynolds. In many of the lands where he had travelled, man-to meant not "cloak"

but "leaner" or "bender." It was, in fact, a slang term for homosexual. That Rimer

(a provincial man under his veneer of cynical sophistication) didn't know this

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 cruis?ing 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 shadow was turning his green and pleasant Barony

into a waste land. It may be my Barony, but it's my bird, too, he thought just before

awakening, huddled into a shuddery ball on one side of his bed. My bird, I brought

it here, I let it out of its cage. There would be no more sleep for him this night, and Thorin knew it. He poured himself a glass of

water, drank it, then walked into his study, absently picking his nightgown from

the cleft of his bony old ass as he went. The puff on the end of his nightcap

bobbed between his shoulder blades; his knees cracked at every step.

As for the guilty feelings expressed by the dream . . . well, what was done was

done. Jonas and his friends would have what they'd come for (and paid so

handsomely for) in another day; a day after that, they'd be gone. Fly away, bird

with the pink eyes and 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—

“To?mor?row’s Reap?ing,” he said, sit?ing in the wing-?chair on the edge of the hearth.

“I guess a man can jump a fence or two, come Reap.”

He poured him?self a drink, the last he’d ev?er take in this world, and coughed as the

fire hit his bel?ly and then climbed back up his throat, warm?ing it. Bet?ter, aye,

much. No gi?ant birds now, no plaguey shad?ows. He stretched out his arms, laced

his long and bony fin?gers to?geth?er, and cracked them vi?cious?ly.

“I hate it when you do that, you scrawny git,” spoke a voice di?rect?ly in?to Thorin’s left ear.

Thorin jumped. His heart took its own tremen?dous leap in his chest. The emp?ty

glass flew from his hand, and there was no foot-?run?ner to cush?ion its land?ing. It

smashed on the hearth.

Be?fore Thorin could scream, Roy De?pape brushed off the may?oral night?cap,

seized the gauzy re?mains of the may?oral mane, and yanked the may?oral head back.

The knife De?pape held in his oth?er hand was much hum?bler than the one Reynolds

had used, but it cut the old man’s throat ef?fi?cient?ly enough. Blood sprayed scar?let

in the dim room. De?pape let go of Thorin’s hair, went back to the drapes he had

been hid?ing be?hind, and picked some?thing up off the floor. It was Cuth?bert’s

look?out. De?pape brought it back to the chair and put it in the dy?ing May?or’s lap.

“Bird . . .” Thorin gar?gled through a mouth?ful of blood. “Bird!”

“Yar, old fel?la, and trig o’ you to no?tice at a time like this, I will say.” De?pape

pulled Thorin’s head back again and took the old man’s eyes out with two quick

flips of his knife. One went in to the dead fire place; 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.

Depepe looked around, saw Thorin's night cap, 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 ka-

tet could be taken alive.

3

Jonas had told Fran Lengyll exactly where to place his men, two inside the stable

and six more out, three of these latter gents hidden behind rusty old implements,

two hidden in the burnt-out remains of the home place, one—Dave

Hollis—crouched on top of the stable itself, spying over the roof peak. 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

com?mand. Av?ery, who looked ner?vous and sound?ed out of breath,
seemed re?lieved

rather than of?fend?ed.

“I’ll tell ye where to go as was (old to me, for it’s a good plan, and I’ve
no quar?rel

with it,” Lengyll had told his posse. In the dark, their faces were lit?tle
more than

dim blurs. “On?ly 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

com?mon folk, and so put paid to this whole busi?ness, 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 with?out cause. Do ye un?der?stand?”

No re?sponse. 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 muf?fled, and then on we go. Not an?oth?er’ word
from here on out.”

4

Roland, Cuth?bert, and Alain came out of the bunkhouse at quar?ter
past six that

morn?ing, and stood a-?row on the porch. Alain was fin?ish?ing his cof?
fee. Cuth?bert

was yawn?ing and stretch?ing. Roland was but?ton?ing his shirt and
look?ing

south?west, to?ward the Bad Grass. He was think?ing not of am?bush?
es but of Su?san.

Her tears. Greedy old ka, how I hate it, she had said.

His in?stincts did not awake; Alain’s touch, which had sensed Jonas on
the day

Jonas had killed the pi?geons, did not so much as quiver. As for Cuth?
bert—

”One more day of qui?et!“ that wor?thy ex?claimed 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. "Spiders, I reckon. He hates
them."

Outside, Lengyll stood up and waved both hands forward. Men
moved silently

toward the front of the stable. On the roof, Dave Holis stood with
his gun drawn.

His monocle was tucked away in his vest pocket, so it should blink no
badly timed

reflection.

Cuthbert led his mount out of the stable. Alain followed. Roland
came last, short-

leading the nervous, prancing gelding.

"Look," Cuthbert said cheerily, still unaware of the men standing di-
rectly behind

him and his friends. He was pointing north. "A cloud in the shape of a
bear! Good

luck for—"

"Don't move, culprits," Fran Lengyll called. "Don't so much as shuffle
your god-

pounding feet."

Alain did begin to turn—in startlement more than anything 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 lim?ber for this ear?ly in the day.”

“No!” Cuth?bert was twitch?ing with hor?ror and some?thing like grief. Ranged

be?hind him were three armed men, look?ing on with ner?vous avid?ity.

“Then be a good boy an’ get yer hands be?hind yer.”

Cuth?bert, still fight?ing tears, did as he was told. Es?posas were put on him by

Deputy Bridger. The oth?er two men yanked Alain to his feet. He reeled a lit?tle,

then stood firm as he was hand?cuffed. His eyes met Ro land’s, and Al tried to

smile. In some ways it was the worst mo?ment of that ter?ri?ble am?bush morn?ing.

Roland nod?ded back and made him?self a promise: he would nev?er be tak?en like

this again, not if he lived to be a thou?sand years old.

Lengyll was wear?ing a trailscarf in?stead of a string tie this morn?ing, but Roland

thought he was in?side the same box-?tail coat he’d worn to the May?or’s wel?com?ing

party, all those weeks ago. Standing beside him, puffing with excitement, anxiety,

and self-importance, was Sheriff Avery.

"Boys," the Sheriff said, "you're arrested for transgressing the Barony. The specific

charges are treason and murder."

"Who did we murder?" Alain asked mildly, and one of the posse uttered a laugh

either shocked or cynical, Roland couldn't tell which.

“The Mayor and his Chancellor, as ye know quite well,” Avery said. “Now—”

“How can you do this?” Roland asked curiously. It was Lengyll to whom he

spoke. “Mejis is your home place; I’ve seen the line of your fathers in the town

community. How can you do this to your home place, sai Lengyll?”

“I’ve no intention of standing out here and making palaver with ye,” Lengyll said.

He glanced over Roland’s shoulder. “Alvarex! Get his horse! Boys as trig as this

bunch should have no problem riding with their hands behind their —”

“No, tell me,” Roland interposed. “Don’t hold back, sai Lengyll—these are your

friends you’ve come with, and not a one who isn’t inside your circle. How can you

do it? Would you rape your own mother if you came upon her sleeping with her

dress up?”

Lengyll’s mouth twitched—not with shame or embarrassment but momentary

prudent dislike, and then the old rancher looked at Avery. “They teach em to talk

pretty in Gilead, don’t they?”

Avery had a rifle. Now he stepped toward the handcuffed gun-slinger with the butt

raised. “I’ll teach ‘im how to talk proper to a man of the country, so I will! Knock

the teeth straight out of his head, if you say aye, Fran!”

Lengyll held him back, looking tired. “Don’t be a fool. I don’t want to bring him

back laying over a saddle unless he’s dead.”

Avery lowered his gun. Lengyll turned to Roland.

“Ye’re not going to live long enough to profit from advice, Dear born,” he said,

"but I'll give'ee some, 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

between the Bar K's doorway and the lane leading to the Great Road, was Jonas

himself. He sat astride a deep-chested bay, wearing a green felt drover's hat and

an old gray duster. There was a rifle in the scabbard beside his right knee. The left

side of the duster was pulled back to expose the butt of his revolver. Jonas's white

hair, untied today, lay over his shoulders.

He doffed his hat and held it out to Roland in courtly greeting. "A good game," he

said. "You played very well for someone who was taking his milk out of a tit not

so long ago."

"Old man," Roland said, "you've lived too long."

Jonas smiled. "You'd remedy that if you could, wouldn't you? Yar, I reckon." He

flicked his eyes at Lengyll. "Get their toys, Fran. Look specially sharp for knives.

They've got guns, but not with em. Yet I know a bit more about those shooting

irons than they might think. And funny boy's 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

ex?traor?di?nary eyes were ca?pa?ble of mark?ing the move?ment.
There was a mur?mur

from the men be?hind them—part?ly shock, most?ly awe.

“Jonas, don’t be a fool!” Lengyll snarled. “You ain’t killin em af?ter we
took the

time and risk to hood em and tie their hooks, are ye?”

Jonas seemed to take no no?tice. His eyes were wide; the com?ers of his
seamed

mouth were trem?bling. “Watch your words, Will Dear?born,” he said
in a low,

hoarse voice. “You want to watch em ev?er so close. I got two pounds
of pres?sure

on a three-?pound trig?ger right this sec?ond.”

“Fine, shoot me,” Roland said. He lift?ed his head and looked down at
Jonas.

“Shoot, ex?ile. Shoot, worm. Shoot, you fail?ure. You’ll still live in ex?
ile and die as

you lived.”

For a mo?ment he was sure Jonas would shoot, and in that mo?ment
Roland felt

death would be enough, an ac?cept?able end af?ter the shame of be?ing
caught so

eas?ily. In that mo?ment Su?san was ab?sent from his mind. Noth?ing
breathed in that

mo?ment, noth?ing called, noth?ing moved. The shad?ows of the men
watch?ing this

con?fronta?tion, both on foot and on horse?back, were print?ed depth?
less on the dirt.

Then Jonas dropped the ham?mer of his gun and slipped it back in?to its
hol?ster.

“Take em to town and jug em,” he said to Lengyll. “And when I show
up, I don’t

want to see one hair harmed on one head. If I could keep from killing
this one, you

can keep from hurt?ing the rest. Now go on.”

“Move,” Lengyll said. His voice had lost some of its bluff au?thor?ity. It
was now

the voice of a man who realizes (too late) that he has bought chips in a game

where the stakes are likely much too high.

They rode. As they did, Roland turned one last time. The contempt Jonas saw in

those cool young eyes stung him worse than the whips that had scarred his back in

Garlan years ago.

6

When they were out of sight, Jonas went into the bunkhouse, pulled up the board

which concealed their little armory, and found only two guns. The matched set of

six-shooters with the dark handles—Dearborn's guns, surely—were gone.

You're in the west. The soul of a man such as you can never leave the west. You'll

live in exile and die as you lived.

Jonas's hands went to work, disassembling the revolvers Cuthbert and Alain had

brought west. Alain's had never even been worn, save on the practice-range.

Outside, Jonas threw the pieces, scattering them every which way. He threw as

hard as he could, trying to rid himself of that cool blue gaze and the shock of

hearing what he'd believed no man had known. Roy and Clay suspected, but even

they hadn't known for sure.

Before the sun went down, everyone in Mejis would know that Elfred 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.

"Perhaps," 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, pos-
sibilities—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 com-
mode, 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 occasion of

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 her?self, cheeks ashy be?neath her olive skin-

tone, and her usu?al?ly neat hair tan?gled and un?bound. Su?san would have guessed

on?ly an 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 bet?ter. When I don’t see you ear?li?er, I think you gone there al?ready. You

chose a bad day to sleep late.”

“Go?” Su?san asked. Slow?ly, she pulled the du?vet 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 du?vet from Su?san’s sleep-?numbed hands again

and this time stripped it all the way down to her an?kles. “Like you did be?fore.

Now, mis?sy, now! Dress and go! Those boys put away, aye, but what if they have

friends? What if they come back, kill you, too?”

Su?san had been get?ting up. Now all the strength ran out of her legs and she sat

back down on the bed again. ”Boys?“ she whis?pered. ”Boys kill who? Boys kill

who?“

This was a good dis?tance from gram?mat?ical, but Maria took her mean?ing.

”Dear?born and his pin?boys,“ she said.

”Who are they sup?posed to have killed?“

”The May?or and the Chan?cel?lor.“ She looked at Su?san with a kind of dis?tract?ed

sym?pa?thy. ”Now get up, I tell you. And get gone. This place gone lo? co.“

”They didn’t do any such thing,“ Su?san said, and on?ly just re?strained her?self from

adding, It wasn’t in the plan.

"Sai Thorin and sai Rimer jus' as dead, who?ev?er did it." There were more shouts

be?low, and a sharp lit?tle ex?plo?sion that didn't sound like a fire?crack?er. Maria

looked in that di?rec?tion, then be?gan to throw Su?san her clothes. "The May?or's

eyes, they gouged right out of his head."

"They couldn't have! Maria, I know them—"

"Me, I don't know noth?ing about them and care less—but I care about you. Get

dressed and get out, I tell you. Quick as you can."

"What's hap?pened to them?" A ter?ri?ble thought came to Su?san and she leaped to

her feet, clothes falling all around her. She seized Maria by the shoul?ders. "They

haven't been killed?" Su?san shook her. "Say they haven't been killed!"

"I don't think so. There's been a t'ou?san' shouts and ten t'ou?san' rumors go the

rounds, but I think jus' jailed. On?ly . . ."

There was no need for her to fin?ish; her eyes slipped from Su?san's, and that

in?vol?un?tary shift (along with the con?fused shouts from be?low) told all the rest. Not

killed yet, but Hart Thorin had been great?ly liked, and from an old fam?ily. Roland,

Cuth?bert, and Alain were strangers.

Not killed yet ... but to?mor?row was Reap?ing, and to?mor?row night was Reap?ing

Bon?fire.

Su?san be?gan to dress as fast as she could.

8

Reynolds, who had been with Jonas longer than De?pape, took one look at the

fig?ure can?ter?ing to?ward them through the skele?tal oil der?ricks, and turned to his

part?ner. "Don't ask him any ques?tions—he's not in any mood for sil?ly ques?tions

this morn'ing."

"How do you know?"

"Nev'er mind. Just keep your ev'er-fuck'ing gob shut."

Jonas reined up before them. He sat slumped in his saddle, pale and thoughtful.

His look prompted one question from Roy De'pape in spite of Reynolds's caution.

"El'dred, are you all right?"

"Is any'one?" Jonas responded, then fell silent again. Behind them, Cit'go'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-

shots if any' thing went wrong, and there hasn't been any shoot'ing like that."

"We didn't hear none, either, El'dred," De'pape said eagerly. "Noth'ing at all like that."

Jonas grimaced. "You wouldn't, would you? Not out in this noise. Fool!"

De'pape 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 morn'ing, 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 dev'ils." He turned

back to them. "Well, we're the dev'ils now. Ain't we. Clay?"

“What?ev?er you think, El?dred,” Reynolds said.

“I said what I think. We’re the dev?ils now, and by God, that’s how we’ll be?have.

What about Quint and that lot down there?” He cocked his head to?ward the

forest?ed slope where the am?bush had been laid.

“Still there, pend?ing your word,” Reynolds said.

“No need of em now.” He fa?vored Reynolds with a dark look. “That Dear?born’s a

coozey brat. I wish I was go?ing to be in Ham?bry to?mor?row night just so I could lay

a torch be?tween his feet. I al?most left him cold and dead at the Bar K. Would’ve if

not for Lengyll. Coozey lit?tle brat is what he is.“

Slump?ing as he spoke. Face grow?ing black?er and black?er, like storm clouds

drift?ing across the sun. De?pape, his stir?rup fixed, tossed Reynolds a ner?vous

glance. Reynolds didn’t an?swer it. What point? If El?dred went crazy now (and

Reynolds had seen it hap?pen be?fore), there was no way they could get out of his

killing-?zone in time.

”El?dred, we got quite a spot more to do.“

Reynolds spoke qui?et?ly, but it got through. Jonas straight?ened. He took off his hat,

hung it on his sad?dle as if the horn were a coathook, and brushed ab?sent?ly through

his hair with his fin?gers.

”Yar—quite a spot is right. Ride down there. Tell Quint to send for ox?en to pull

those last two full tankers out to Hang?ing Rock. He sh’d keep four men with him

to hook em up and take em on to Lati?go. The rest can go on ahead.“

Reynolds now judged it safe to ask a ques?tion. ”When do the rest of Lati?go’s men

get there?“

"Men?" Jonas snorted. "Don't we wish, cully! The rest of Latiago's boys'll ride out

to Hanging Rock by moonlight, penons no doubt flying for all the coyotes and

other assorted desert-dogs to see and be awed by. They'll be ready to do escort

duty by ten tomorrow, I sh'd think ... 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 northwest.

"We have business of our own," he said. "Soonest begun, boys, soonest done. I

want to shake the dust of fucking Mejis off my hat and boots as soon as I can. I

don't like the way it feels anymore. Not at all."

9

The woman, Theresa Maria Dolores O'Shyven, was forty years old, plump, pretty,

mother of four, husband of Peter, a vaquero of laughing temperament. She was

also a seller of rugs and draperies in the Upper Market; many of the prettiest and

more delicate appointments at Seafront had passed through Theresa O'Shyven's

hands, and her family was quite well-to-do. Although her husband was a range-

rider, the O'Shyven clan was what would have been called middle-class in another

place and time. Her two oldest children were grown and gone, one right out o'

Barony. The third eldest was sparking and hoping to marry his heart's delight at

Year's End. Only the youngest suspected something was wrong with Ma, and this

one had no idea how close There'sa was to complete obsession! 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 emaciated

skeleton that his mistress had become, Musty didn't look good at all.

The girl was shown out with the pie under her arm; she paused to give her mother

a single troubled look, and then the door was shut in her face.

"Now!" Rhea croaked. "Them comers is waiting! 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!y—she turned back to her

kitchen. She walked to the table and stood there, looking dreamy-eyed into space.

“No, none of that, now!” Rhea cried impatiently. She no longer saw her own filthy

hut, she no longer smelled either its rank aromas or her own. She had gone into the

Wizard’s Rainbow. She was with Theresa O’Shyven, whose cottage had the

cleanest corners in all Mejis. Maybe in all Mid-World.

“Hurry, woman!” Rhea half-screamed. “Get to your housework!”

As if hearing, Theresa 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 your

chores, now, and do them very pert!”

Theresa O’Shyven poked her head forward to the full length of her neck, opened

her mouth, stuck out her tongue, and began to lick the corner. She lapped it as

Musty lapped his milk. Rhea watched this, slapping her knee and whooping, her

face growing redder and redder as she rocked from side to side. Oh, Theresa was

her favorite, aye! No doubt! For hours now she would crawl about on her hands

and knees with her ass in the air, licking into the corners, praying to some obscure

god—not even the Man-Jesus God—for forgiveness of who knew what as she did

this, her penance. Sometimes she got splinters in her tongue and had to pause to

spit blood into the kitchen basin. Up until now some sixth sense had always gotten

her to her feet and back in?to her dress be?fore any of her fam?ily re?
turned, but Rhea

knew that soon?er or lat?er the wom?an's ob?ses sion would take her
too far, and she

would be sur?prised. Per?haps to?day would be the day—the lit?tle girl
would come

back ear?ly, per?haps for a coin to spend in town, and dis?cov?er her
moth?er down on

her knees and lick?ing the com?ers. Oh, what a spin and ra?ree! How
Rhea want?ed to

see it! How she longed to—

Sud?den?ly There?sa O'Shyven was gone. The in?te?ri?or of her neat
lit?tle cot?tage was

gone. Ev?ery?thing was gone, lost in cur?tains of shift?ing pink light.
For the first time

in weeks, the wiz?ard's glass had gone blank.

Rhea picked the ball up in her scrawny, long-?nailed fin?gers and shook
it. "What's

wrong with you, plaguey thing? What's wrong?"

The ball was heavy, and Rhea's strength was fad?ing. Af?ter two or
three hard

shakes, it slipped in her grip. She cra?dled it against the de?flat?ed re?
mains of her

breasts, trem?bling.

"No, no, lovey," she crooned. "Come back when ye're ready, aye, Rhea
lost her

tem?per a bit but she's got it back now, she nev?er meant to shake ye
and she'd nev?er

ev?er drop ye, so ye just—"

She broke off and cocked her head, lis?ten?ing. Hors?es ap?proach?ing.
No, not

ap?proach?ing; here. Three rid?ers, by the sound. They had crept up on
her while she

was dis?tract?ed.

The boys? Those plaguey boys?

Rhea held the ball against her bo?som, 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 atrocity.

She looked down at the ball and a whining noise began to escape her. Now even

the pink glow was gone. The sphere was as dark as a corpse's eyeball.

10

A shriek came from the hut.

Depape turned to Jonas with wide eyes, his skin prickling. The thing which had

uttered that cry hardly sounded human.

"Rhea!" Jonas called again. "Bring it out here now, woman, and hand it over! I've

no time to play games with you!"

The door of the hut swung open. Depape and Reynolds drew their guns as the old

crone stepped out, blinking against the sunlight like some thing that's spent its

whole life in a cave. She was holding John Farson's favorite toy high over her

head. There were plenty of rocks in the doorway she could throw it against, and

even if her aim was bad and she missed them all, it might smash any way.

This could be bad, and Jonas knew it—there were some people you just couldn't

threaten. He had focused so much of his attention on the brats (who, ironically,

had been taken as easy as milk) that it had never occurred to him to worry much

about this part of it. And Kimba Rimer, the man who had suggested Rhea as the

perfect candidate for Maerlyn's Rainbow, was dead. Couldn't lay it at Rimer's

doorstep if things went wrong up here, could he?

Then, just to make things a little worse when he'd have thought they'd gone as far

west as they could without dropping off the cold end of the earth, he heard the

cocking sound of Depape drawing the hammer of his gun.

"Put that away, you idiot!" he snarled.

"But look at her!" Depape almost moaned. "Look at her, Elfred!"

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 vi?ision cleared, De?pape had put it away again. She looked at the men

lined up across from her—the be?spec?ta?cled red?head, the one in the cloak, and Old

White-?Hair Jonas—and ut?tered a dusty croak of laugh?ter. Had she been afraid of

them, these mighty Cof?fin Hunters? She sup?posed she had, but for gods' sake,

why? They were men, that was all, just more men, and she had been beat?ing such

all her life. Oh, they thought they ruled the roost, all right—no?body in Mid-?World

ac cused any?one of for?get?ting the face of his moth?er—but they were poor things, at

bot?tom, moved to tears by a sad song, ut?ter?ly un?done by the sight of a bare breast,

and all the more ca?pa?ble of be?ing ma?nip?ulat?ed sim ply be?cause they were so sure

they were strong and tough and wise.

The glass was dark, and as much as she hat?ed that dark?ness, it had cleared her

mind.

“Jonas!” she cried. “El?dred Jonas!”

“I’m here, old moth?er,” he said. “Long days and pleas?ant nights.”

“Nev?er mind yer sops, time’s too short for em.” She came four steps far?ther and

stopped with the ball still held over her head. Near her, a gray chunk of stone

jut?ted from the weedy ground. She looked at it, then back at Jonas. The im?pli?ca?tion was un?spo?ken but un?mis?tak?able.

“What do you want?” Jonas asked.

“The ball’s gone dark,” she said, an?swer?ing from the side. “All the time I had it in

my keep?ing, it was live?ly—aye, even when it showed noth?ing I could make out, it

was pass?ing live?ly, bright and pink—but it fell dark al?most 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

concealing. 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. Farson wants it, and who am I

to stand against the wants of a man who'll be the most powerful in Mid-World

when Demon Moon rises next year? If I come back without it and say Rhea of the

Coos refused me it, I'll be killed."

"If ye come back and tell him I broke it in yer ugly old face, ye'll be killed, too,"

Rhea said. She was close enough for Jonas to see how far her sickness had eaten

into her. Above the few remaining tufts of her hair, the wretched ball was

trembling back and forth. She wouldn't be able to hold it much longer. A minute at

most. Jonas felt a dew of sweat spring out on his forehead.

"Aye, mother. But d'you know, given a choice of deaths, I'd choose to take the

cause of my problem with me. That's you, darling."

She croaked again—that dusty replica of laughter—and nodded appreciatively. "

'Twon't do Farson any good without me in any case," she said. "It's found its

mistress, I wot—that's why it went dark at the sound of yer voice."

Jonas wondered how many others had believed the ball was just for them. He

wanted to wipe the sweat from his brow before it ran in his eyes, but kept his

hands in front of him, folded neatly on the horn of his saddle.

He didn't dare look at either Reynolds or Depape. and could only hope they would

leave the play to him. She was balanced on both a physical and mental knife-edge;

the smallest movement would send her tumbling off in one direction or the other.

"Found the one it wants, has it?" He thought he saw a way out of this. If he was

lucky. And it might be lucky for her, as well. "What should we do about that?"

"Take me with ye." Her face twisted into an expression of greedy some greed; she

looked like a corpse that is trying to sneeze. She doesn't realize she's dying, Jonas

thought. Thank the gods for that. "Take the ball, but take me, as well. I'll go with

ye to Farson. I'll become his soothsayer, and nothing will stand before us, not with

me to read the ball for him. Take me with ye!"

"All right," Jonas said. It was what he had hoped for. "Although what Farson

decides is none of mine. You know that?"

"Aye."

"Good. Now give me the ball. I'll give it back into your keeping, if you like, but I

need to make sure it's whole."

She slowly lowered it. Jonas didn't think it was entirely safe even cradled in her

arms, but he breathed a little easier when it was, all the same. She shuffled toward

him, and he had to control an urge to gig his horse back from her.

He bent over in the saddle, holding his hands out for the glass. She looked up at

him, her old eyes still shrewd behind their crusted lids. One of them actually drew

down in a conspirator's wink. "I know yer mind, Jonas. Ye think, 'I'll take the ball,

then draw my gun and kill her, what harm?' Isn't that true? Yet there would be

harm, and all to you and yours. Kill me and the ball will 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 instant 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."

12

Reynolds heard the buzzing of flies even be?fore he slipped through the shed's

sag?ging door, and knew at once that Rhea's goats had fin?ished 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 cabalistic 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. "Mayhap we'll meet Thorin. If so, I might have something

to show him in the Good Man's toy that'd interest him ever so much."

"If you meet him," Jonas said, getting down to help hitch De'pape'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 an 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 barbaric 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 something like horror that Miguel—usually

brushed and clean and neat as a pin—was wearing his serape inside out. There

were tears on his cheeks, and as he turned this way and that, following the passing

riders, trying to hide those he recognized, she thought of a child she had once seen

tottered out in front of an oncoming stage. The child had been pulled back in time

by his father; who would pull Miguel back?

She started for him, and a vaquero aboard a wild-eyed spotted roan galloped so

close by her that one stirrup ticked off her hip and the horse's tail flicked her

forearm. She voiced a strange-sounding little chuckle. She had been worried about

Miguel and had almost been run down herself! Funny!

She looked both ways this time, started forward, then drew back again as a loaded

wagon came careering around the corner, tottering on two wheels at first. What it

was loaded with she couldn't see—the goods in the wagonbed were covered with a

tarp—but she saw Miguel move toward it, still clutching his broom. Susan thought

of the child in front of the stage again and shrieked an inarticulate cry of alarm.

Miguel cringed back at the last moment and the cart flew by him, bounded and

swayed across the courtyard, and disappeared out through the arch.

Miguel dropped his broom, clapped both hands to his cheeks, fell to his knees, and

began to pray in a loud, lamenting voice. Susan watched him for a moment, her

mouth working, and then sprinted for the stables, no longer taking care to keep

against the side of the building. She had caught the disease that would grip almost

all of Hamby by noon, and although she managed to do a fairly apt job of

saddling Pylon (on any other day there would have been three stable-boys vying

for the chance to help the 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, shrieking with either horror or

laughter. Perhaps both. The sight of her cut through the foreground haze of panic

in Susan's mind . . . but not because she recognized her aunt.

"Rhea!" she cried, and drew back on the reins so violently that the horse skidded,

reared, and almost tilted them over backward. That would likely have crushed the

life out of his mistress, but Pylon managed to keep at least his back feet, pawing at

the sky with his front ones and whinnying loudly. Susan slung an arm around his

neck and hung on for dear life.

Cordelia Delgado, wearing her best black dress and a lace mantilla over her hair,

stood in front of the horse as if in her own parlor, taking no notice of the hooves

cutting the air less than two feet in front of her nose. In one gloved hand she held a

wooden box.

Susan belatedly realized that this wasn't Rhea, but the mistake really wasn't that

odd. Aunt Cord wasn't as thin as Rhea (not yet, anyway), and more neatly dressed

(except for her dirty gloves—why her aunt was wearing gloves in the first place

Susan didn't know, let alone why they looked so smudged), but the mad look in

her eyes was horribly similar.

"Good day 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 au?tum? day? Where go ye so speedy? To no lover's arms, that

seems sure, for one's dead and the oth?er ta'en!"

Cordelia laughed again, thin lips draw?ing back from big white teeth. Horse teeth,

al?most. Her eyes glared in the sun?light.

Her mind's bro?ken, Su?san thought. Poor thing. Poor old thing.

"Did thee put Dear?born up to it?" Aunt Cord asked. She crept to Py lon's side

and looked up at Su?san with lu?mi?nous, liq?uid eyes. "Thee did, didn't thee? Aye!

Per?haps thee even gave him the knife he used, af?ter run?nin yer lips o'er it for good

luck. Ye're in it to?geth?er—why not ad?mit it? At least ad?mit thee's lain with that

boy, for I know it's true. I saw the way he looked at ye the day ye were sit?ting in

the win?dow, and the way ye looked back at him!"

Su?san said, "If ye'll have truth, I'll give it to ye. We're lovers. And we'll be man

and wife ere Year's End."

Cordelia raised one dirty glove to the blue sky and waved it as if say ing hel?lo to

the gods. She screamed with min?gled tri?umph and laugh?ter as she waved. "And

t'be wed, she thinks! Ooooo! Ye'd no doubt drink the blood of your vic? tims on the

mar?riage al?tar, too, would ye not? Oh, wicked! It makes me weep!" But in?stead of

weep?ing she laughed again, a howl of mirth in?to the blind blue face of the sky.

"We planned no mur?ders," Su?san said, draw?ing—if on?ly in her own mind—a line

of dif?fer?ence be?tween the killings at May?or's House and the trap they had hoped to

spring on Par?son's sol?diers. "And he did no mur ders. No, this is the busi?ness of

your friend Jonas, I wot. His plan, his filthy work.“

Cordelia plunged her hand in?to the box she held, and Su?san un?der stood at once

why the gloves she wore were dirty: she had been grub?bing in the stove.

”I curse thee with the ash?es!“ Cordelia cried, fling?ing a black and grit?ty cloud of

them at Su?san’s leg and the hand which held Py?lon’s reins. ”I curse thee to

dark?ness, both of thee! Be ye hap?py to?geth?er, ye faith less! Ye mur?der?ers! Ye

coz?en?ers! Ye liars! Ye for?ni?ca?tors! Ye lost and re?nounced!”

With each cry, Cordelia Del?ga?do threw an?oth?er hand?ful of ash?es. And with each

cry, Su?san’s mind grew clear?er, cold?er. She held fast and al lowed her aunt to pelt

her; in fact, when Py?lon, feel?ing the grit?ty rain against his side, at?tempt?ed to pull

away, Su?san giggled him set. There were spec?ta?tors now, avid?ly watch?ing this old

rit?ual of re?nun?ci?ation (Sheemie was among them, eyes wide and mouth quiv?er?ing),

but Su?san bare?ly no?ticed. Her mind was her own again, she had an idea of what to

do, and for that alone she sup?posed she owed her aunt some sort of thanks.

“I for?give ye, Aunt,” she said.

The box of stove-?ash?es, now al?most emp?ty, tum?bled from Cordelia’s hands as if

Su?san had slapped her. “What?” she whis?pered. “What does thee say?”

“For what ye did to yer broth?er and my fa?ther,” Su?san said. “For what ye were a

part of.”

She rubbed a hand on her leg and bent with the hand held out be?fore her. Be?fore

her aunt could pull away, Su?san had wiped ash?es 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 al?ready do. Good?bye."

"Where does thee think thee's go?ing?" Aunt Cord was paw?ing at the soot-?mark on

her face with one gloved hand, and when she lunged for ward in an at?tempt to

grasp Py?lon's reins, she stum?bled over the box and al?most fell. It was Su?san, still

bent over to her aunt's side, who grasped her shoul?der 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!"

Su?san turned her horse away. "None of yer busi?ness. Aunt. This is the end

be?tween us. But mark what I say: we'll be mar?ried by Year's End. Our first?born is

al?ready con?ceived."

"Thee'll be mar?ried to?mor?row night if thee goes nigh him' Joined in smoke,

wed?ded in fire, bed?ded in the ash?es! Bed?ded in the ash?es, do ye hear me?"

The mad?wom?an ad?vanced on her, rail?ing, but Su?san had no more time to lis?ten.

The day was fleet?ing. There would be time to do the things that need?ed do?ing, but

on?ly if she moved at speed.

"Good?bye," she said again, and then gal?loped away. Her aunt's last words

fol?lowed her: In the ash?es, do ye hear me?

On her way out of town along the Great Road, Su?san saw rid?ers com?ing to?ward

her, and got off the high?way. This would not, she felt, be a good time to meet

pil?grims. There was an old gra?nary near?by; she rode Py?lon be?hind it, stroked his

neck, mur?mured for him to be qui?et.

It took the rid?ers longer to reach her po?si?tion than she would have ex?pect?ed, and

when they fi?nal?ly got there, she saw why. Rhea was with them, sit?ting in a black

cart cov?ered with mag?ical sym?bols. The witch had been scary when Su?san had

seen her on the night of the Kiss?ing Moon, but still rec?og?niz?ably hu?man; what the

girl saw pass?ing be?fore her now, rock?ing from side to side in the black cart and

clutch?ing a bag in her lap, was an un?sexed, sore-?rad?dled crea?ture that looked more

like a troll than a hu?man be?ing. With her were the Big Cof?fin 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 rea?son why! Sleep in it and piss in it, if I

take a no?tion! Hie you on, I say!”

De?pape—it was to his horse that the cart had been har?nessed—turned around and

looked at her with dis?taste and fear. “Still your mouth.”

Her an?swer was a fresh burst of laugh?ter. She rocked from side to side, hold?ing 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

order—a process to be followed just as there was a process to be followed when

saddling a horse—but she was also sixteen and healthy. One look at the hamper

and she was ravenous.

She opened it, saw there were ants on the two remaining cold beef sandwiches,

brushed them off, and gobbled the sandwiches down. The bread had gotten rather

stiff, but she hardly noticed. There was a half jar of sweet cider and part of a cake,

as well.

When she had finished everything, she went to the north corner of the hut and

moved the hides someone had begun to cure and then lost interest in. There was a

holow beneath. Within it, wrapped in soft leather, were Roland's guns.

If things go badly, thee must come here and take them west to Gilead. Find my

father.

With faint but genuine curiosity, Susan wondered if Roland had really expected

she would ride blithely off to Gilead with his unborn child in her belly while he

and his friends were roasted, screaming and red-handed, on the Reap-Night

bonfire.

She pulled one of the guns out of its holster. It took her a moment or two to see

how to get the revolver open, but then the cylinder rolled out and she saw that

each chamber was loaded. She snapped it back into place and checked the other

one.

She concealed them in the blanket-roll behind her saddle, just as Roland had, then

mount?ed up and head?ed east again. But not to?ward town. Not yet.
She had one
more stop to make first.

5

At around two o' the clock, word that Fran Lengyll would be speak?ing
at the Town

Gath?er?ing Hall be?gan to sweep through the town of Mejis. No one
could have said

where this news (it was too firm and spe?cif?ic to be a ru?mor) be?gan,
and no one

much cared; they sim?ply passed it on.

By three o' the clock, the Gath?er?ing Hall was full, and two hun?dred
or more stood

out?side, lis?ten?ing as Lengyll's brief ad?dress was re?layed back to
them in whis?pers.

Coral Thorin, who had be?gun pass?ing the news of Lengyll's im?pend?
ing ap?pear?ance

at the Trav?ellers' Rest, was not there. She knew what Lengyll was go?
ing to say;

had, in fact, sup?port?ed Jonas's ar?gu?ment that it should be as sim?ple
and di?rect as

pos?si?ble. There was no need for rab?ble-?rous?ing; the towns?folk
would be a mob by

sun?down of

Reap?ing Day, a mob al?ways picked its own lead?ers, and it al?ways
picked the right

ones.

Lengyll spoke with his hat held in one hand and a sil?ver reap-?charm
hang?ing from

the front of his vest. He was brief, he was rough, and he was con?vinc?
ing. Most

folks in the crowd had known him all their lives, and didn't doubt a
word he said.

Hart Thorin and Kim?ba Rimer had been mur?dered by Dear?born,
Heath, and

Stock?worth, Lengyll told the crowd of men in den?im and wom?en in
fad?ed

ging?ham. The crime had come home to them be?cause of a cer?tain item—a bird’s

skull—left in May?or Thorin’s lap.

Mur?murs greet?ed this. Many of Lengyll’s lis?ten?ers had seen the skull, ei?ther

mount?ed on the horn of Cuth?bert’s sad?dle or worn jaun?ti?ly around his neck. They

had laughed at his prank?ish?ness. Now they thought of how he had laughed back at

them, and re?al?ized he must have been laugh?ing at a dif?fer?ent joke all along. Their

faces dark?ened.

The weapon used to slit the Chan?cel?lor’s throat, Lengyll con?tin?ued, had be?longed

to Dear?born. The three young men had been tak?en that morn?ing as they pre?pared

to flee Mejis. Their mo?ti?va?tions were not en tire?ly clear, but they were like?ly af?ter

hors?es. If so, they would be for John Far?son, who was known to pay well for good

nags, and in cash. They were, in oth?er words, traitors to their own lands and to the

cause of the Af?fil?ia?tion.

Lengyll had plant?ed Bri?an Hock?ey’s son Ru?fus three rows back. Now, ex?act?ly on

time, Ru?fus Hookey shout?ed out: “Has they con?fessed?”

“Aye,” Lengyll said. “Con?fessed both mur?ders, and spoke it most proud, so they did.”

A loud?er mur?mur at this, al?most a rum?ble. It ran back?ward like a wave to the

out?side, where it went from mouth to mouth: most proud, most proud, they had

mur?dered in the dark of night and spoke it most proud.

Mouths were tucked down. Fists clenched.

“Dear?born said that Jonas and his friends had caught on to what they were do?ing,

and took the word to Rimer. They killed Chan?cel?lor Rimer to shut him up while

they fin?ished their chores, and Thorin in case Rimer had passed word on.”

This made lit?tle sense, Lati?go had ar?gued. Jonas had smiled and nodded. No, he

had said, not a mite of sense, but it doesn’t mat?ter.

Lengyll was pre?pared to an?swer ques?tions, but none were asked. There was on?ly

the mur?mur, the dark looks, the mut?ed click and clink of reap-?charms as peo?ple

shift?ed on their feet.

The boys were in jail. Lengyll made no state?ment con?cern?ing what would hap?pen

to them next, and once again he was not asked. He said that some of the ac?tiv?ities

sched?uled for the next day—the games, the rides, the turkey-?run, the pump?kin-

carv?ing con?test, the pig-?scram?ble, the rid dling com?pe?ti?tion, and the dance—had

been can?celled out of re?spect for the tragedy. The things that re?al?ly mat?tered

would go on, of course, as they al?ways had and must: the cat?tle and live?stock

judg?ing, the horse-?pull, the sheep-?shear?ing, the stock?line meet?ings, and the

auc?tions: horse, pig, cow, sheep. And the bon?fire at moon?rise. The bon?fire and the

burn?ing of the guys. Chary?ou tree was the end of Reap?ing Fair-?Day, and had been

since time out of mind. Noth?ing would stop it save the end of the world.

“The bon?fire will bum and the stuffy-?guys will bum on it,” El?dred 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 ev?ery face. Not just the de?ter?mi?na?tion

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 losses

ceremonious: Charitable 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-hand-ed stuffy sprawled in Sher-iff Av-ery's rock-er),
and the door

stood ajar, as it usu-ally did on warm and sun-ny af-ter-noons. The
boys were in-side,

no doubt about that, but there was no sign that they were be-ing guard-
ed with any

par-tic-ular zeal.

If the men pass-ing on their way down-hill to the Rest and the Bayview
had band-ed

to-gether in-to one group, they could have tak-en Roland and his
friends with no

trou-ble what-so-ev-er. In-stead, they went by with their heads down,
walk-ing stolid-ly

and with no con-ver-sa-tion to where the drinks were wait-ing. To-day
was not the

day. Nor tonight.

To-mor-row, how-ev-er—

7

Not too far from the Bar K, Su-san saw some-thing on the Barony's
long slope of

graz-ing-land that made her rein up and sim-ply sit in the sad-dle with
her mouth

open. Be-low her and much far-ther east of her po-si-tion, at least three
miles away, a

band of a dozen cow-boys had round-ed up the biggest herd of Drop-
run-ners she

had ev-er seen: per-haps four hun-dred head in all. They ran lazi-ly,
go-ing where the

vaqs point-ed them with no trou-ble.

Prob-ably think they're go-ing in for the win-ter, Su-san thought. But
they weren't

head-ed in to-ward the ranch-es run-ning along the crest of the Drop;
the herd, so

large it flowed on the grass like a cloud-shad-ow, was head-ed west,
to-ward

Hang-ing 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 Python

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 in to 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 in to

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 with-
out 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 at-
tempt at

concealment: the two small barrels she had last seen slung over
Caprichoso's back.

The thought of the mule summoned the thought of Sheemie, looking
down at her

from his man's height and with his hopeful boy's face. I'd like to take a
fin de ano

kiss from ye, so I would.

Sheemie, whose life had been saved by "Mr. Arthur Heath." Sheemie,
who had

risked the wrath of the witch by giving Cuthbert the note meant for
her aunt.

Sheemie, who had brought these barrels up here. They had been
smeared with soot

to partially camouflage them, and Susan got some on her hands
and the sleeves of

her shirt as she took off the tops— more ashes. But the firecrackers
were still

inside: the round, fist-sized big-bangers and the smaller ladyfingers.

She took plenty of both, stuffing her pockets until they bulged and
carrying more

in her arms. She stowed them in her saddlebags, then looked up at the
sky. Three-

thir?ty. She want?ed to get back to Ham?bry no ear?li?er than twi?light,
and that meant

at least an hour to wait. There was a lit?tle time to be soft, af?ter all.

Su?san went back in?to the bunkhouse and found the bed which had
been Roland's

eas?ily enough. She knelt be?side it like a child say?ing bed time
prayers, put her face

against his pil?low, and in?haled deeply.

"Roland," she said, her voice muf?fled. "How I love thee. How I love
thee, dear."

She lay on his bed and looked to?ward the win?dow, watch?ing the light
drain away.

Once she raised her hands in front of her eyes, ex?am?in?ing the bar?
rel-?soot on her

fin?gers. She thought of go?ing to the pump in front of the cook?house
and wash?ing,

but de?cid?ed not to. Let it stay. They were ka-?tet, one from many—
strong in

pur?pose and strong in love.

Let the ash?es stay, and do their worst.

9

My Susie has'er faults, but she's al?ways on time. Pat Del?ga?do used
to say. Fear?ful

punc?tu?al, that girl.

It was true on the night be?fore Reap. She skirt?ed her own house and
rode up to the

Trav?ellers' Rest not ten min?utes af?ter the sun had fi?nal?ly gone be?
hind the hills,

fill?ing the High Street with thick mauve shad?ows.

The street was eeri?ly de?sert?ed, con?sid?er?ing it was the night be?
fore Reap; the band

which had played in Green Heart ev?ery night for the last week was
silent; there

were pe?ri?odic rat?tles of fire?crack?ers, but no yelling, laugh?ing
chil?dren; on?ly a few

of the many col?ored lamps had been lit.

Stuffy-?guys seemed to peer from ev?ery shad?ow-?thick?ened porch.
Su?san shiv?ered at

the sight of their blank white-?cross eyes.

Do?ings at the Rest were sim?ilar?ly odd. The hitch?ing-?rails were
crowd?ed (even

more hors?es had been tied at the rails of the mer?can?tile across the
street) and light

shone from ev?ery win?dow—so many win?dows and so many lights
that the inn

looked like a vast ship on a dark?ened sea—but there was none of the
usu?al ri?ot and

ju?bi?la?tion, all set to the jag?time tunes pour?ing out of Sheb's pi?
ano.

She found she could imag?ine the cus?tomers in?side all too well— a
hun?dred men,

maybe more—sim?ply stand?ing around and drink?ing. Not talk?ing,
not laugh?ing, not

chuck?ing the dice down Sa?tan's Al?ley and cheer?ing or groan?ing at
the re?sult. No

bot?toms stroked or pinched; no Reap-?kiss?es stolen; no ar?gu?ments
start?ed out of

loose mouths and fin?ished with hard fists. Just men drink?ing, not three
hun?dred

yards from where her love and his friends were locked up. The men who
were here

wouldn't do any?thing 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

Travellers' Rest in her whole life, had another question for him.

"What do they do with their coats and hats and scrapes when they come in,

Sheemie? They must take em off; drink's warm work."

"Oh, aye. They puts em on a long table just inside the door. Some fights about

whose is whose when they're ready to go home."

She nodded, thinking hard and fast. He stood before her, still holding his sombrero

against his chest, letting her do what he could not ... at least not in the conventional underground 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

Outer Arc. You go with us if we get away. You have to understand that. Do you?"

She saw he did; his face fairly shone with the idea. "Aye, Susan! Go with you and

Will Dearborn and Richard Stockworth and my best friend, Mr. Arthur Heath! Go

to In-World! We'll see buildings and statues and women in gowns like fairy

princesses and—"

"If we're caught, we'll be killed."

He stopped smiling, but his eyes didn't waver. "Aye, killed we'll be if taken, most like."

"Will you still help me?"

"Capi's all saddled," he repeated. Susan reckoned that was answer enough. She

took hold of the hand pressing the sombrero to Sheemie's chest (the hat's crown

was pretty well crushed, and not for the first time). She bent, holding Sheemie's

fingers with one hand and the horn of her saddle with the other, and kissed his

cheek. He smiled up at her.

"We'll do our best, won't we?" she asked him.

"Aye, Susan daughter of Pat. We'll do our best for our friends. Our very best."

"Yes. Now listen, Sheemie. Very carefully."

She began to talk, and Sheemie listened.

10

Twenty minutes later, as the bloated orange moon struggled above the buildings of

the town like a pregnant woman climbing a steep hill, a lone vaqueero led a mule

along Hill Street in the direction of the Sheriff's office. This end of Hill Street

was a pit of shadows. There was a little light around Green Heart, but even the

park (which would have been thronged, noisy, and brilliantly lit in any other year)

was mostly empty. Nearly all the booths were closed, and of those few that

remained open, only the fortune-teller was doing any business. Tonight all

fortunes were bad, but still they came—don't they always?

The vaqueero was wearing a heavy serape; if this particular cowboy had the breasts

of a woman, they were concealed. The vaq wore a large, sweat-stained sombrero;

if this cowboy had the face of a woman, it was likewise concealed. Low, from

beneath that hat's broad brim, came a voice singing "Careless Love."

The mule's small saddle was buried under the large bundle which had been roped

to it—cloth or clothes of some kind, it might have been, although the deepening

shadows made it impossible to say for sure. Most amusing of all was what hung

around the mule's neck like some peculiar reape-charm: two sombreros and a

drover's hat strung on a length of rope.

As the vaq neared the Sheriff's office, the singing ceased. The place might have

been deserted if not for the single dim light shining through one window. In the

porch rocker was a comical stuffy-guy wearing one of Herk Avery's embroidered

vests and a tin star. There were no guards; absolutely no sign that the three most

hated men in Mejis were sequestered within. And now, very faintly, the vaquero

could hear the strum of a guitar.

It was blotched out by a thin rattle of firecrackers. The vaq looked over one shoulder

and saw a dim figure. It waved. The vaquero nodded, waved back, then tied the

mule to the hitching-post—the same one where Roland and his friends had tied

their horses when they had come to introduce themselves to the Sheriff, on a

summer day so long ago.

11

The door opened—no one had bothered to lock it—while Dave Hollis was trying,

for about the two hundredth time, to play the bridge of “Captain Mills, You

Bas tard.” Across from him, Sheriff Avery sat rocked back in his desk chair with

his hands laced together on his paunch. The room flickered with mild orange

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,

artificially deep voice. Outside, unnoticed by all save Roland, more firecrackers

ratled 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.

Av?ery screamed, tilt?ed back in his chair again, and went sprawl ing.
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, cutting off her wind. Somewhere far away, Roland shrieked her name.

She had one more chance.

Maybe.

One's enough, Sue, her father spoke inside of her head. One's all ye need, my dear.

She cocked Roland's pistol with the side of her thumb, socked the muzzle deep

into the flab hanging from the underside of Sheriff Herk Avery's head, and pulled

the trigger.

The mess was considerable.

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 over sized sombrero came with it)

and threw it on the floor. She looked at Dave again, a boy she had grown up with,

one she might even have kissed behind the door of Hockey's, once
upon an antique
time.

"Susan!" It was Roland's voice, harsh and urgent. "The keys! Hurry!"

Susan grabbed the keyring from the nail on the wall. She went to
Roland's cell

first and thrust the ring blindly through the bars. The air was thick with
smells of

gunsmoke, burned wool, blood. Her stomach clenched helplessly at
every breath.

Roland picked the right key, reached back through the bars with it, and
plunged it

into the lockbox. A moment later he was out, and hugging her
roughly as her tears

broke. A moment after that, Cuthbert and Alain were out, as well.

"You're an angel!" Alain said, hugging her himself.

"Not I," she said, and began to cry harder. She thrust the gun at
Roland. It felt

filthy in her hand; she never wanted to touch one again. "Him and me
played

together when we were berries. He was one of the good ones—never
a braid-puller

or a bully—and he grew up a good one. Now I've ended him, and
who'll tell his
wife?"

Roland took her back into his arms and held her there for a moment.
"You did

what you had to. If not him, then us. Does thee not know it?"

She nodded against his chest. "Avery, him I don't mind so much, but
Dave . . ."

"Come on," Roland said. "Someone might recognize the 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 direc-
tion, then

slipped in to the growing dark.

Cuthbert took the charred serape and put it over Deputy Dave's face.

"Tough luck,

partner," he said. "You got caught in between, didn't you? I reckon you wasn't so bad."

Susan came back in, burdened with the stolen gear which had been tied to Capi's

saddle. Sheemie was already off on his next errand without having to be told. If

the inn-boy was a halfwit, she'd known a lot of folks in her time who were running

on quarters and eighths.

"Where'd you get this stuff?" Alain asked.

"The Travellers' Rest. And I didn't. Sheemie did." She held the hats out. "Come

on, hurry."

Cuthbert took the headgear and passed it out. Roland and Alain had already

slipped in to the scrapes; with the hats added and pulled well down over their

faces, they could have been any Drop-vags in Barony.

"Where are we going?" Alain asked as they stepped out onto the porch. The street

was still dark and deserted at this end; the gunshot had attracted no attention.

"Hockey's, to start with," Susan said. "That's where your horses are."

They went down the street together in a little group of four. Capi was gone;

Sheemie had taken the mule along. Susan's heart was thudding rapidly and she

could feel sweat standing out on her brow, but she still felt cold. Whether or no

what she had done was murder, she had ended two lives this evening, and crossed

a line that could 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,” Cuth?bert said, laugh?ing in an em?bar?rassed way (his bor?rowed

som?brero, too large to be?gin with, now sat com?ical?ly askew on his head), “but if

we don’t get a move on, I won’t have saved it for long.”

“Hors?es are all sad?dled,” Sheemie said. “Su?san told me to do it and I did. I did it

just right. I just have to put this stir?rup on Mr. Richard Stock-?worth’s horse,

be?cause the one on there’s ’bout worn through.“

”That’s a job for lat?er,” Alain said, tak?ing the stir?rup. He put it aside, then turned to

Roland. ”Where do we go?“

Roland’s first thought was that they should re?turn to the Thorin mau?soleum.

Sheemie re?act?ed with in?stant hor?ror. ”The bone?yard? And with De mon Moon at

the full?“ He shook his head so vi?olent?ly that his som?brero came off and his hair

flew from side to side. ”They’re dead in there, sai Dear?born, but if ye tease em

dur?ing the time of the De?mon, they’s apt to get up and walk!“

”It’s no good, any?way,” Su?san said. ”The wom?en of the town’ll be lin?ing the way

from Seafront with flow?ers, and fill?ing the mau?soleum, too. Olive will be in

charge, if she’s able, but my aunt and Coral are apt to be in the com?pa?ny. 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

Citgo oil patch. They rode out parallel to the Great Road for safety's sake, but, as it

happened, the caution was wasted: they saw not one rider on the road, going in

either direction. It's as if Reaping's been cancelled this year, Susan thought ...

then she thought of the red-handed stuffies, and shivered. They would have

painted Roland's hands red tomorrow night, and still would, if they were caught.

Not just him, either. All of us.

Sheemie, too.

They left the horses (and Caprichoso, who had trotted ill-temperedly but nimbly

behind them on a tether) tied to some long-dead pumping equipment in the

southeastern corner of the patch, and then walked slowly toward the working

der?ricks, which were clus?tered in the same area. They spoke in whis?pers when

they spoke at all. Roland doubt?ed if that was nec es?sary, but whis?pers here seemed

nat?ural enough. To Roland, Cit?go was far spook?ier than the grave?yard, and while

he doubt?ed that the dead in that lat?ter place awoke even when Old De?mon was

full, there were some very un?qui?et corpses here, squalling zom?bies that stood rusty-

weird in the moon?light with their pis?tons go?ing up and down like march?ing feet.

Roland led them in?to the ac?tive part of the patch, nev?er?the?less, 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

cowls 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 Cuthbert's ear to his

lips; he held a big-bang up in front of Bert's eyes with the other.

"Light it and run," he said. "I'll hold it, give you as much time as I can. That's for

my benefit as much as for yours. I want a clear path back through that machinery,

do you understand?"

Cuthbert nodded against Roland's lips, then turned the gun-slinger's head so he

could speak in the same fashion. "What if there's enough gas here to bum the air

when I make a spark?"

Roland stepped back. Raised his palms in a "How-do-I-know?" gesture. Cuthbert

laughed and drew out a box of sulfur matches which he had scooped off Avery's

desk before leaving. He asked with his eyebrows if Roland was ready. Roland

noded.

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 galls—and then dashed back down the

short corridor they'd used to get here.

Roland held the round fire?work as long as he dared, then lobbed it in?
to the

over?flow pipe. He winced as he turned away, half-?ex?pect?ing what
Bert was afraid

of: that the very air would ex?plode. It didn't. He ran down the short
aisle, came

in?to the clear, and saw Cuth?bert stand?ing just out?side the bro?ken
bit of fenc?ing.

Roland flapped both hands at him—Go, you id?iot, go!—and then the
world blew

up be?hind him.

The sound was a deep, belch?ing thud that seemed to shove his
eardrums in?ward

and suck the breath out of his throat. The ground rolled un?der his feet
like a wave

un?der a boat, and a large, warm hand plant?ed it self in the cen?ter of
his back and

shoved him for?ward. He thought he ran with it for a step—maybe even
two or

three steps—and then he was lift?ed off his feet and hurled at the fence,
where

Cuth?bert was no longer stand ing; Cuth?bert was sprawled on his back,
star?ing up

at some?thing be?hind Roland. The boy's eyes were wide and won?der?
ing; his mouth

hung open. Roland could see all this very well, be?cause Cit?go was
now as bright

as in full day?light. They had lit their own Reap?ing bon?fire, it seemed,
a night ear?ly

and much brighter than the one in town could ev?er hope to be.

He went skid?ding on his knees to where Cuth?bert lay, and grabbed
him un?der one

arm. From be?hind them came a vast, rip?ping roar, and now chunks of
met?al be?gan

to fall around them. They got up and ran to?ward where Alain stood in
front of

Su?san and Sheemie, try?ing to pro?tect them.

Roland took a quick look back over his shoulder and saw that the remains of the

der?rick—about half of it still stood—were glowing black?ish red, like a heated

horse?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 der?ricks 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 over?flow pipes turned out not to be

necessary. There was a network of inter?connected pipes under the oil?patch, 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 der?rick to the right of the one

they had set afire. A moment later, a third der?rick—this one sixty full yards away

from the first two— exploded with a dragon's roar. The iron?work 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 crashing back down, spewing sparks in every direction.

Another. Another. And yet another.

The five young people stood in their corner, stunned, holding 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 other, and so far none of it was even close to enough.
When he was
with her, Jonas sometimes felt as if he were being fried in sweet oil.
Tonight there had been a meeting with the Horsemen's Association, which had
pretty much become the Farson Association in these latter days.
Jonas had brought
them up to date, had answered their idiotic questions, and had made
sure they
understood what they'd be doing the next day. With that done, he
had checked on
Rhea, who had been installed in Kimba Rimer's old suite. She hadn't
even noticed
Jonas peering in at her. She sat in Rimer's high-ceilinged, book-lined
study—behind Rimer's ironwood desk, in Rimer's upholstered
chair, looking as
out of place as a whore's bloomers on a church altar. On Rimer's desk
was the
Wizard's Rainbow. She was passing her hands back and forth above
it and
muttering rapidly under her breath, but the ball remained dark.
Jonas had locked her in and had gone to Coral. She had been waiting
for him in
the parlor where tomorrow's Conversational would have been
held. There were
plenty of bedrooms in that wing, but it was to her dead brother's that
she had led
him ... and not by accident, either, Jonas was sure. There they made
love in the
canopied bed Hart Thorin would never share with his gilly.
It was fierce, as it had always been, and Jonas was approaching his
orgasm when
the first oil derrick blew. Christ, she's something, he thought. There's
never in the
whole damned world been a woman like—
Then two more explosions, in rapid succession, and Coral froze for
a moment

beneath him before beginning to thrust her hips again. "Cit?go," she said in a

hoarse, panting voice.

"Yar," he growled, and began to thrust with her. He had lost all interest in making

love, but they had reached the point where it was impossible to stop, even under

threat of death or dismemberment.

Two minutes later he was striding, naked, toward Thorin's little lick of a balcony,

his half-erect penis wagging from side to side ahead of him like some halfwit's

idea of a magic wand. Coral was a step behind him, as naked as he was.

"Why now?" she burst out as Jonas thrust open the balcony door. "I could have

come three more times!"

Jonas ignored her. The countryside looking north-west was a moon-gilded darkness

... except where the oilpatch was. There he saw a fierce yellow core of light. It

was spreading and brightening even as he watched; one thudding explosion after

another hammered across the intervening miles.

He felt a curious darkening in his mind—that feeling had been there ever since the

brat, Dearborn, by the some febrile leap of intuition, had recognized him for who

and what he was. Making love to the energetic Coral melted that feeling a little,

but now, looking at the burning tangle of fire which had five minutes ago been the

Good Man's oil reserves, it came back with debilitating intensity, like a swamp-

fever that sometimes quits the flesh but hides in the bones and never really leaves.

You 're in the west, 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 Horsemen’s Association? Still all here?”

“I think so.”

“Get Lengyll and Renfrew. At least you won’t have to wake em up; they’ll all be

up, and most of em right down there.” Jonas jerked a thumb at the courtyard. “Tell

Renfrew to put together an advance party. Armed men. I’d like eight or ten, but I’ll

take five. Have that old woman’s cart harnessed to the strongest, hardiest pony this

place has got. Tell that old fuck Miguel that if the pony he chooses dies in the

traces between here and Hanging Rock, he’ll be using his wrinkled old balls for

earplugs.”

Coral Thorin barked brief, harsh laughter. Reynolds glanced at her, did a double-

take at her breasts, then looked back at Jonas with an effort.

“Where’s Roy?” Jonas asked.

Reynolds looked up. “Third floor. With some little serving maid.”

“Kick him out,” Jonas said. “It’s his job to get the old bitch ready to ride.”

“We’re going?”

“Soon as we can. You and me first, with Renfrew’s boys, and Lengyll behind, with

the rest of the men. You just make sure Hash Renfrew’s with us, Clay; that man’s

got sand in his craw.”

“What about the horses out on the Drop?”

“Never mind the ever-fucking horses.” There was another explosion at Citygo;

another fireball floated into the sky. Jonas couldn’t see the dark clouds of smoke

which must be rushing up, or smell the oil; the wind, out of the east and into the

west, would be carrying both away from town.

“But—”

“Just do as I say.” Jonas now saw his priorities in clear, ascending or der. The

horses were on the bottom—Farson could find horses damned near anywhere.

Above them were the tankers gathered at Hanging Rock. They were more

important than ever now, because the source was gone. Lose the tankers, and the

Big Coffin Hunters could forget going home.

Yet most important of all was Parson’s little piece of the Wizard’s Rainbow. It was

the one truly irreplaceable item. If it was broken, let it be broken in the care of

George Latingo, not that of Eldred Jonas.

“Get moving,” he told Reynolds. “Depape rides after, with Lengyll’s men. You

with me. Go on. Make it happen.”

“And me?” Coral asked.

He reached out and tugged her toward him. “I ain’t forgot you, darling,” he said.

Coral nodded and reached between his legs, oblivious of the staring Clay

Reynolds. “Aye,” she said. “And I ain’t forgot you.”

4

They escaped Citgo with ringing ears and slightly singed around the edges but not

really hurt, Sheemie riding double behind Cuthbert and Capri-choso clattering

after, at the end of his long lead.

It was Susan who came up with the place they should go, and like most solutions,

it seemed completely obvious . . . once someone had thought of it. And so, not

long after Reaping Eve had become Reaping Mom, the five of them came to the

hut in the Bad Grass where Susan and Roland had on several occasions met to

make love.

Cuthbert and Alain unrolled blankets, then sat on them to examine the guns they

had liberated from the Sheriff's office. They had also found Bert's sling shot.

"These're hard calibers," Alain said, holding one up with the cylinder sprung and

peering one-eyed down the barrel. "If they don't throw too high or wide, Roland, I

think we can do some business with them."

"I wish we had that rancher's machine-gun," Cuthbert said wistfully.

"You know what Cort would say about a gun like that?" Roland asked, and

Cuthbert burst out laughing. So did Alain.

"Who's Cort?" Susan asked.

"The tough man Eldred Jonas only thinks he is," Alain said. "He was our teacher."

Roland suggested that they catch an hour or two of sleep—the next day was apt to

be difficult. That it might also be their last was something he didn't feel he had to

say.

"Alain, are you listening?"

Alain, who knew perfectly well that Roland wasn't speaking of his ears or his

attention-span, nodded.

"Do you hear anything?"

"Not yet."

"Keep at it."

"I will . . . but I can't promise anything. The touch is fluke. You know that as

well as I do."

"Just keep trying."

Sheemie had carefully spread two blankets in the corner next to his proclaimed

best friend. "He's Roland . . . and he's Alain . . . who are you, good old Arthur

Heath? Who are you really?"

"Cuthbert's my name." He stuck out his hand. "Cuthbert Allgood. How do y'do,

and how do y'do, and how do y'do again?"

Sheemie shook the offered hand, then began giggling. It was a cheerful,

unexpected sound, and made them all smile. Smiling hurt Roland a little, and he

guessed that if he could see his own face, he'd observe a pretty good bum from

being so close to the exploding dericks.

"Key-youth-bert," Sheemie said, giggling. "Oh my! Key-youth-bert, that's a funny

name, no wonder you're such a funny fellow. Key-youth-bert, oh-aha-ha-ha, that's

a pip, a real pip!"

Cuthbert smiled and nodded. "Can I kill him now, Roland, if we don't need him

any longer?"

"Save him a bit, why don't you?" Roland said, then turned to Susan, his own smile

fading. "Will thee walk out with me a bit, Sue? I'd talk to thee."

She looked up at him, trying to read his face. "All right." She held out her hand.

Roland took it, they walked into the moonlight together, and beneath its light,

Susan felt dread take hold of her heart.

5

They walked out in silence, through sweet-smelling grass that tasted good to cows

and horses even as it was expanding in their bellies, first bloating and then killing

them. It was high—at least a foot taller than Roland's head—and still green as

summer. Children sometimes got lost in the Bad Grass and died there, but Susan

had never feared to be here with Roland, even when there were no sky-markers to

steer by; his sense of direction was unconsciously perfect.

"Sue, thee disobeyed me in the matter of the guns," he said at last.

She looked at him, smiling, half-amused and half-angry. "Does thee wish to be

back in thy cell, then? Thee and thy friends?"

"No, of course not. Such bravery!" He held her close and kissed her. When he

drew back, they were both breathing hard. He took her by the arms and looked

into her eyes. "But thee mustn't disobey me this time."

She looked at him steadily, saying nothing.

"Thee knows," he said. "Thee knows what I'd tell thee."

"Aye, perhaps."

"Say. Better you than me, maybe."

"I'm to stay at the hut while you and the others go. Sheemie and I are to stay."

He nodded. "Will you? Will thee?"

She thought of how unfamiliar and wretched Roland's gun had felt in her hand as

she held it beneath the serape; of the wide, unbelieving look in Dave's eyes as the

bullet she'd fired into his chest flung him backward; of how the first time she'd

tried to shoot Sheriff Avery, the bullet had only succeeded in setting her own

clothing afire, although he had been right there in front of her. They didn't have a

gun for her (unless she took one of Roland's), she couldn't use one very well in

any case ... and, more 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 be?fore?”

“Aye, to Gilead. There’ll be a place of safe?ty and re?spect for you there, dear, no

mat?ter what . . . but it’s es?pe?cial?ly im?por?tant that you go if you don’t hear the

tankers ex?plode. Thee knows that, doesn’t thee?”

“To warn yer peo?ple—thy ka-?tet.”

Roland nod?ded.

“I’ll warn them, no fear. And keep Sheemie safe, too. He’s as much the rea?son

we’ve got this far as any?thing I’ve done.”

Roland was count?ing on Sheemie for more than she knew. If he and Bert and

Alain were killed, it was Sheemie who would sta?bi?lize her, give her rea?son to go

on.

“When does thee leave?” Su?san asked. “Do we have time to make love?”

“We have time, but per?haps it’s best we don’t,” he said. “It’s go?ing to be hard

enough to leave thee again with?out. Un?less you re?al?ly want to . . .” His eyes half-

plead?ed with her to say yes.

“Let’s just go back and lie down a bit,” she said, and took his hand. For a mo?ment

it trem?bled on her lips to tell him that she was kin?dled with his child, but at the last

mo?ment she kept silent. There was enough for him to think about with?out that

added, may?hap ... and she didn’t want to pass such hap?py news be?neath such an

ug?ly moon. It would sure?ly be bad luck.

They walked back through high grass that was already springing to
geth?er along

their path. Out?side the hut, he turned her to?ward him, put his hands on
her cheeks,

and soft?ly kissed her again.

“I will love thee for?ev?er, Su?san,” he said. “Come what?ev?er
storms.”

She smiled. The up?ward move?ment of her cheeks spilled a pair of
tears from her

eyes. “Come what?ev?er storms,” she agreed. She kissed him again, and
they went

in?side.

6

The moon had be?gun to de?scend when a par?ty of eight rode out be?
neath the arch

with come in peace writ up?on it in the Great Let?ters. Jonas and
Reynolds were in

the lead. Be?hind them came Rhea’s black wag?on, drawn by a trot?ting
pony that

looked strong enough to go all night and half the next day. Jonas had
want?ed to

give her a driv?er, but Rhea re fused—“Nev?er was an an?imal I didn’t
get on with

bet?ter than any man ev?er could,” she’d told him, and that seemed to
be true. The

reins lay limp in her lap; the pony worked smart with?out them. The
oth?er five men

con?sist?ed of Hash Ren?frew, Quint, and three of Ren?frew’s best va?
que?ros.

Coral had want?ed to come as well, but Jonas had dif?fer?ent ideas. “If
we’re killed,

you can go on more or less as be?fore,” he’d said. “There’ll be noth?ing
to tie you to

us.”

“With?out ye, I’m not sure there’d be any rea?son to go on,” she said.

“Ar, quit that school?girl shit, it don’t be?come you. You’d find plen?ty
of rea?sons to

keep stag?gerin down the path, if you had to put your mind to it. If all goes

well—as I ex?pect it will—and you still want to be with me, ride out of here as

soon as you get word of our suc?cess. There’s a town west of here in the Vi Castis

Moun?tains. Ritzy. Go there on the fastest horse you can swing a leg over. You’ll

be there ahead of us by days, no mat?ter how smart we’re able to push along. Find a

re?spectable inn that’ll take a wom?an 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 col?umn at

my right hand. Have you got it?“

She had it. One wom?an in a thou?sand was Coral Thorin—sharp as Lord Sa?tan, and

able to fuck like Sa?tan’s fa?vorite har?lot. Now if things on?ly turned out to be as

sim?ple as he’d made them sound.

Jonas fell back un?til his horse was pac?ing along?side the black cart. The ball was

out of its bag and lay in Rhea’s lap. ”Any?thing?“ he asked. He both hoped and

dread?ed to see that deep pink pulse in?side it again.

”Nay. It’ll speak when it needs to, though—count on it.“

”Then what good are you, old wom?an?“

”Ye’ll know when the time comes,“ Rhea said, look?ing at him with ar?ro?gance (and

some fear as well, he was hap?py to see).

Jonas spurred his horse back to the head of the lit?tle col?umn. He had de?cid?ed to

take the ball from Rhea at the slight?est sign of trou?ble. In truth, it had al?ready

in?sert?ed its strange, ad?dict?ing sweet?ness in?to his head; he thought about that sin?gle

pink pulse of light he’d seen far too much.

Balls, he told himself. Bathtowel'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 thir?ty will fight like six?ty.”

Jonas’s eyes briefly met Clay’s. I’ll be?lieve it when I see it, Clay’s brief glance said,

and Jonas knew again why he had al?ways liked this one bet?ter than Roy De?pape.

“How many armed?”

“With guns? Maybe half. They’ll be no more than an hour be?hind us.”

“Good.” At least their back door was cov?ered. It would have to do. And he

couldn’t wait to be rid of that thrice-?cursed ball.

Oh? whis?pered a sly, half-?mad voice from a place much deep?er than his heart. Oh,

can’t you?

Jonas ig?nored the voice un?til it stilled. Half an hour lat?er, they turned off the road

and on?to the Drop. Sev?er?al miles ahead, mov?ing in the wind like a sil?ver sea, was

the Bad Grass.

7

Around the time that Jonas and his par?ty were rid?ing down the Drop, Roland,

Cuth?bert, and Alain were swing?ing up in?to their sad?dles. Su?san and Sheemie stood

by the door?way to the hut, hold?ing hands and watch ing them solemn?ly.

“Thee’ll hear the ex?plo?sions 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 lat?er, more smoke. There.” He point?ed. “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 for?ward, put her hands on his thigh, and looked up at him in the

laten?ing moon?light. He bent; put his hand light?ly against the back of her head; put

his mouth on her mouth.

“Go thy course in safe?ty,” Su?san said as she drew back from him.

“Aye,” Sheemie added sud?den?ly. “Stand and be true, all three.” He came for?ward

him?self 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 nod?ded se?ri?ous?ly. “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 slow?ly away from the hut. Be?fore the grass closed be?hind them, hid?ing

it from view, he looked back a fi?nal time.

“Sue, I love thee.”

She smiled. It was a beau?ti?ful smile. “Bird and bear and hare and fish,” she said.

The next time Roland saw her, she was caught in?side the Wiz?ard’s glass.

8

What Roland and his friends saw west of the Bad Grass had a harsh, lone?ly

beau?ty. The wind was lift?ing great sheets of sand across the stony desert floor; the

moon?light turned these in?to foot rac?ing phan?toms. At mo ments Hang?ing Rock

was vis?ible some two wheels dis?tant, and the mouth of Eye?bolt Canyon two

wheels far?ther on. Some?times both were gone, hid?den by the dust. Be?hind them,

the tall grass made a sough?ing, singing sound.

“How do you boys feel?” Roland asked. “All’s well?”

They nod?ded.

“There’s go?ing to be a lot of shoot?ing, I think.”

“We’ll re?mem?ber the faces of our fa?thers,” Cuth?bert said.

“Yes,” Roland agreed, al?most ab?sent?ly. “We’ll re?mem?ber them very well.” He

stretched in the sad?dle. “The wind’s in our fa?vor, not theirs— that’s one good

thing. We’ll hear them com?ing. We must judge the size of the group. All right?”

They both nod?ded.

“If Jonas has still got his con?fi?dence, he’ll come soon, in a small par?ty—what?ev?er

gun?nies he can put to?geth?er on short no?tice—and he’ll have the ball. In that case,

we’ll am?bush them, kill them all, and take the Wiz?ard’s Rain?bow.”

Alain and Cuth?bert sat qui?et, lis?ten?ing in?tent?ly. The wind gust?ed, and Roland

clapped a hand to his hat to keep it from fly?ing off. “If he fears more trou?ble from

us, I think he’s apt to come lat?er on, and with a big?ger par?ty of rid?ers. If that

hap?pens, we’ll let them pass . . . then, if the wind is our friend and keeps up, we’ll

fall in be?hind them.”

Cuth?bert be?gan to grin. “Oh Roland,” he said. “Your fa?ther would be proud. On?ly

four?teen, but cozy as the dev?il!”

“Fif?teen come next moon?rise,” Roland said se?ri?ous?ly. “If we do it this way, we

may have to kill their drogue rid?ers. Watch my sig?nals, all right?”

“We’re go?ing to cross to Hang?ing Rock as part of their par?ty?” Alain asked. He

had al?ways been a step or two be?hind Cuth?bert, but Roland didn’t mind;

some?times re?li?abil?ity was bet?ter than quick?ness. “Is that it?”

“If the cards fall that way, yes.”

“If they’ve got the pink ball with em, you’d bet?ter 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, somehow; had made

another life possible. A better one, perhaps. One with a house, and kidneys, 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 sling-shot 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

himself. "But it's with them, don't you think?"

Roland did. A small party of six or eight, probably traveling with the ball. It was

perfect.

"Be ready, boys," he said. "We're going to take them."

9

Jonas's party made good time down the Drop and into the Bad Grass. The guide-

stars were brilliant in the autumn sky, and Renfrew knew them all. He had a click-

line to 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 into the ball. At first he saw only that

luscious, labial pink, and then it began to draw apart. Now he saw a hut

surrounded by tall grass. The sort of hut only a hermit could love. The door—it

was painted a peeling but still bright red—stood open. And sitting there on the

stone stoop with her hands in her lap, her blankets on the ground at her feet, and

her unbound hair around her shoulders was ...

“I’ll be damned!” Jonas whispered. He had now leaned so far out of the saddle that

he looked like a trick rider in a circus show, and his eyes seemed to have

disappeared; there were only sockets of pink light where they had been.

Rhea cackled delightedly. “Aye, it’s Thorin’s gilly that never was! Dearborn’s

lover-girl!” Her cackling stopped abruptly. “Lover-girl of the young prodigy who

killed my Ermot. And he’ll pay for it, aye, so he will. Look closer, said Jonas! Look

closer!”

He did. Everything was clear now, and he thought he should have seen it earlier.

Everything this girl’s aunt had feared had been true. Rhea had known, although

why she hadn’t told anyone the girl had been screwing one of the In-World boys,

Jonas didn’t know. And Susan had done more than just screw Will Dearborn; she’d

helped him escape, him and his trail-mates, and she might well have killed two

lawmen for him, into the bargain.

The figure in the ball swam closer. Watching that made him feel a little dizzy, but

it was a pleasant dizziness. Beyond the girl was the hut, faintly lit by a lamp which

had been turned down to the barest core of flame. At first Jonas thought someone

was sleeping in one corner, but on second glance he decided it was only a heap of

hides that looked vaguely human.

“Do’ee spy the boys?” Rhea asked, seemingly from a great distance. “Do’ee spy

em, m’lord sai?”

“No,” he said, his own voice seeming to come from that same distant place. His

eyes were pinned to the ball. He could feel its light baking deeper and deeper into

his brain. It was a good feeling, like a hot fire on a cold night. “She’s alone. Looks

as if she’s waiting.”

“Aye.” Rhea gestured above the ball—a curt dusting-off movement of the

hands—and the pink light was gone. Jonas gave a low, protesting cry, but no

matter; the ball was dark again. He wanted to stretch his hands out and tell her to

make the light return—to beg her, if necessary—and held himself back by pure

force of will. He was rewarded by a slow return of his wits. It helped to remind

himself that Rhea’s gestures were as meaningless as the puppets in a Pinch and

likely show. The ball did what it wanted, not what she wanted.

Meanwhile, the ugly old woman was looking at him with eyes that were

perverse and clear. “Waiting for what, do’ee suppose?” she asked.

There was only one thing she could be waiting for. Jonas thought with rising

alarm. The boys. The three beardless sons of bitches from In-World.
And if they

weren't with her, they might well be up ahead, doing their own waiting.

Waiting for him. Possibly even waiting for—

"Listen to me," he said. "I'll only speak once, and you best answer true. Do they

know about that thing? Do those three boys know about the Rainbow?"

Her eyes shifted away from his. It was answer enough in one way, but not in

another. She had had things her way all too long up there on her hill; she had to

know who was boss down here. He leaned over again and grabbed her shoulder. It

was horrible—like grabbing a bare bone that somehow still lived—but he made

himself hold on all the same. And squeeze. She moaned and wriggled, but he held

on.

"Tell me, you old bitch! Run your fucking gob!"

"They might know of it," she whined. "The girl might've seen something the night

she came to be—am-, let go, ye're killing me!"

"If I wanted to kill you, you'd be dead." He took another longing glance at the ball,

then sat up straight in the saddle, cupped his hands around his mouth, and called:

"Clay! Hold up!" As Reynolds and Ren drew rein back, Jonas raised a hand to

halt the vags behind him.

The wind whispered through the grass, bending it, ripping it, whipping up eddies

of sweet smell. Jonas stared ahead into the dark, even though he knew it was

fruitless to look for them. They could be anywhere, and Jonas didn't like the odds

in an ambush. Not one bit.

He rode to where Clay and Renfrew were waiting. Renfrew looked impatient.

“What’s the problem? Dawn’ll be breaking soon. We ought to get a move-on.”

“Do you know the huts in the Bad Grass?”

“Aye, most. Why—”

“Do you know one with a red door?”

Renfrew nodded and pointed north. “Old Soony’s place. He had some sort of

religious conversion—a dream or a vision or something. That’s when he painted

the door of his hut red. He’s gone to the Manin-folk these last five years.” He no

longer asked why, at least; he had seen something on Jonas’s face that had shut up

his questions.

Jonas raised his hand, looked at the blue coffin tattooed there for a second, then

turned and called for Quint. “You’re in charge,” Jonas told him.

Quint’s shaggy eyebrows shot up. “Me?”

“Yar. But you’re not going on—there’s been a change of plan.”

“What—”

“Listen and don’t open your mouth again unless there’s something you don’t

understand. Get that damned black cart turned around. Put your men around it and

lie on back the way we came. Join up with Lengyll and his men. Tell them Jonas

says wait where you find em until he and Reynolds and Renfrew come. Clear?”

Quint nodded. He looked bewildered but said nothing.

“Good. Get about it. And tell the witch to put her toy back in its bag.”

Jonas

passed a hand over his brow. Fingers which had rarely shaken before had now

picked up a minute tremble. “It’s distracting.”

Quint started away, then looked back when Jonas called his name.

"I think those In-World boys are out here, Quint. Probably ahead of where we are

now, but if they're back the way you're going, they'll probably set on you."

Quint looked nervously around at the grass, which rose higher than his head. Then

his lips tightened and he returned his attention to Jonas.

"If they attack, they'll try to take the ball," Jonas continued. "And sai, mark me

well: any man who doesn't die protecting it will wish he had." He lifted his chin at

the vaqs, who sat astride their horses in a line behind the black cart. "Tell them

that."

"Aye, boss," Quint said.

"When you reach Lengyll's party, you'll be safe."

"How long should we wait for yer if ye don't come?"

"Til hell freezes over. Now go." As Quint left, Jonas turned to Reynolds and

Renfrew. "We're going to make a little side-trip, boys," he said.

10

"Roland." Alain's voice was low and urgent. "They've turned around."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. There's another group coming along behind them. A much larger one. That's

where they're headed."

"Safety in numbers, that's all," Cuthbert said.

"Do they have the ball?" Roland asked. "Can you touch it yet?"

"Yes, they have it. It makes them easy to touch even though they're going the

other way now. Once you find it, it glows like a lamp in a mine shaft."

"Does Rhea still have the keeping of it?"

"I think so. It's awful to touch her."

"Jonas is afraid of us," Roland said. "He wants more men around him when he

comes. That's what it is, what it must be." Unaware that he was both right and

badly out in his reckoning. Unaware that for one of the few times since they had

left Gilead, he had lapsed into a teenager's disastrous certainty.

"What do we do?" Alain asked.

"Sit here. Listen. Wait. They'll bring the ball this way again if they're going to

Hang on Rock. They'll have to."

"Susan?" Cuthbert asked. "Susan and Sheemie? What about them? How do we

know they're all right?"

"I suppose that we don't." Roland sat down, cross-legged, with Pusher's trailing

reins in his lap. "But Jonas and his men will be back soon enough. And when they

come, we'll do what we must."

11

Susan hadn't wanted to sleep inside—the hut felt wrong to her without Roland.

She had left Sheemie huddled under the old hides in the corner and taken her own

blankets outside. She sat in the hut's doorway for a little while, looking up at the

stars and praying for Roland in her own fashion. When she began to feel a little

better, she lay down on one blanket and pulled the other over her. It seemed an

eternity since Maria had shaken her out of her heavy sleep, and the open-mouthed,

glottal snores drifting out of the hut didn't bother her much. She slept with her

head pillowed on one arm, and didn't wake when, twenty minutes later, Sheemie

came to the doorway, blinked at her sleepily, and then walked off into the grass to

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?section—some for her, some for Sheemie. She wasn't sure the boy

would even un?der?stand what was hap?pen?ing to them. These are two of the three

men who tried to kill him, she thought. He'll un?der?stand that much.

"Here you are, Sun?beam, here you come," Jonas said com?pan?ion?ably, watch?ing

her blink away the sleep?fog. "Good! You shouldn't be nap?ping all the way out here

on your own, not a pret?ty sai such as your?self. But don't wor?ry, I'll see you get

back to where you be?long."

His eyes flicked up as the red?head with the cloak stepped out of the hut. Alone.

"What's she got in there. Clay? Any?thing?"

Reynolds shook his head. "All still on the hoss, I reck?on."

Sheemie, Su?san thought. Where are you, Sheemie?

Jonas reached out and ca?ressed one of her breasts briefly. "Nice," he said. "Ten?der

and sweet. No won?der Dear?born likes you."

"Get yer filthy blue-?marked hand off me, you bas?tard."

Smil?ing, Jonas did as she bid. He turned "his head and re?gard?ed the mule. "I know

this one; it be?longs to my good friend Coral. Along with ev?ery?thing else, you've

turned live?stock thief! Shame?ful, shame?ful, this younger gen?eration. Don't you

agree, sai Ren?frew?"

But her fa?ther's old as?so?ciate said noth?ing. His face was care?ful?ly blank, and Su?san

thought he might be just the tini?est tad ashamed of his pres?ence here.

Jonas turned back to her, his thin lips curved in the sem?blance of a benev?olent

smile. "Well, af?ter mur?der I sup?pose steal?ing a mule comes easy, don't it?"

She said noth?ing, on?ly watched as Jonas stroked Capi's muz?zle.

"What all were they haul?ing, those boys, that it took a mule to put it on?"

"Shrouds," she said through numb lips. "For you and all yer friends. A fear?ful

heavy load it made, too—near broke the poor an?imal's back."

"There's a say?ing in the land I come from," Jonas said, still smil ing.
"Clever girls

go to hell. Ev?er heard it?" He went on stroking Capi's nose. The mule liked it; his

neck was thrust out to its full length, his stupid lit?tle eyes half-?closed with

plea?sure. "Has it crossed your mind that fel?lows who un?load their pack an?imal,

split up what it was car?ry?ing, and take the goods away usu?al?ly ain't com?ing back?"

Su?san said noth?ing.

"You've been left high and dry, Sun?beam. Fast fucked is usu?al?ly fast for?got, sad to

say. Do you know where they went?"

"Yes," she said. Her voice was low, bare?ly a whis?per.

Jonas looked pleased. "If you was to tell, things might go eas?ier for you. Would

you agree, Ren?frew?"

"Aye," Ren?frew said. "They're traitors, Su?san—for the Good Man. If you know

where they are or what they're up to, tell us."

Keep?ing her eyes fixed on Jonas, Su?san said: "Come clos?er." Her numbed lips

didn't want to move and it came out sound?ing like Cung glos?er, but Jonas

un?der?stood and leaned for?ward, stretch?ing his neck in a way that made him look

ab?surd?ly like Capri?choso. When he did, Su?san spat in his face.

Jonas re?coiled, lips twist?ing in sur?prise and re?vul?sion. "Ar?rr! BITCH!" he cried,

and launched a full-?swung, open-?hand?ed 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 Eldred Jonas, would you, you

bitch?"

Reynolds was holding out his neckerchief. Jonas took it, wiped the spittle from his

face with it, then dropped 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 tit-ties, 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."

Sheemie watched from the grass, terrified and silently crying, as Su?san spit in the

bad Cof?fin Hunter's face and was knocked to the ground, hit so hard the blow

might have killed her. He almost rushed out then, but some thing—it could have

been his friend Arthur's voice in his head—told him that would only get him

killed.

He watched as Su?san mounted. One of the other men—not a Cof?fin Hunter but a

big ranch?er Sheemie had seen in the Rest from time to time—tried to help, but

Su?san pushed him away with the sole of her boot. The man stood back with a red

face.

Don't make em mad, Su?san, Sheemie thought. Oh gods, don't do that, they'll hit ye

some more! Oh, yer poor face! And ye got a nose?bleed, 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, hurt?y smile. "Likely I'll find you there when I arrive," he said.

Then, to the other Cof?fin Hunter: "You checked the place careful?"

"Whatever they had, they took it," the red?head answered. "Only thing they left was

Dear?born's punch-?bun?ny."

That made Jonas laugh mean?y-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 Su?san was gone, and so was Capi. The big

ranch?er riding beside Su?san had been leading the mule.

When he was sure they weren't going to return, Sheemie walked slowly back into

the clearing, doing up the button on top of his pants as he came. He looked from

the way Roland and his friends had gone to the one in which Susan had been

taken. Which?

A moment's thought made him realize there was no choice. The grass out here was

tough and springy. The path Roland and Alain and good old Arthur Heath (so

Sheemie still thought of him, and always would) had taken was gone. The one

made by Susan and her captors, on the other hand, was still clear. And perhaps, if

he followed her, he could do something for her. Help her.

Walking at first, then jogging as his fear that they might double back and catch

him disappeared, Sheemie went in the direction Susan had been taken. He would

follow her most of that day.

13

Cuthbert—not the most sanguine of personalities in any situation—grew more and

more impatient as the day brightened toward true dawn. It's Reaping, he thought.

Finally Reaping, and here we sit with our knives sharpened and not a thing in the

world to cut.

Twice he asked Alain what he "heard." The first time Alain only grunted. The

second time he asked what Bert expected him to hear, with someone yapping away

in his ear like that.

Cuthbert, who did not consider two enquiries fifteen minutes apart as "yapping

away,” wandered off and sat morosely in front of his horse. After a bit, Roland

came over and sat down beside him.

“Waiting,” Cuthbert said. “That’s what most of our time in Mejis has been about,

and it’s the thing I do worst.”

“You won’t have to do it much longer,” Roland said.

14

Jonas’s company reached the place where Fran Lengyll’s party had made a

temporary camp about an hour after the sun had topped the horizon. Quint, Rhea,

and Renfrew’s vaqs were already there and drinking coffee, Jonas was glad to see.

Lengyll started forward, saw Susan riding with her hands tied, and actually drew

back a step, as if he wanted to find a corner to hide in. There were no corners out

here, however, so he stood fast. He did not look happy about it, however.

Susan nudged her horse forward with her knees, and when Reynolds tried to grab

her shoulder, she dipped it to the side, temporarily eluding him.

“Why, Francis Lengyll! Imagine meeting you here!”

“Susan, I’m sorry to see you so,” Lengyll said. His flush crept closer and closer to

his brow, like a tide approaching a seawall. “It’s bad company you’ve fallen in

with, girl . . . and in the end, bad company always leaves you to face the music

alone.”

Susan actually laughed. “Bad company!” she said. “Aye, you’d know about that,

wouldn’t you, Fran?”

He turned, awkward and stiff in his embarrassment. She raised one booted foot

and, before anyone could stop her, kicked him squarely between the

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 lat?er when her mind cleared and she was ca?pa?ble of think?ing.
She swayed in

the sad?dle, but kept her seat. And she nev?er looked at Ren?frew, on?ly
at Lengyll,

who had now man?aged to get to his hands and knees. He wore a deeply
dazed

ex?pres?sion.

”You killed my fa?ther!” she screamed at him. ”You killed my fa?ther,
you cow?ard?ly,

sneak?ing ex?cuse for a man!” She looked at the par?ty of ranch?ers
and vaqs, all of

them star?ing at her now. ”There he is, Fran Lengyll, head of the Horse?
men’s

As?so?ci?ation, as low a sneak as ev?er walked! Low as coy?ote shit!
Low as— “

”That’s enough,” Jonas said, watch?ing with some in?ter?est as Lengyll
scut?tled back

to his men—and yes, Su?san was bit?ter?ly de?light?ed to see, it was a
full-?fledged

scut?tle—with his shoul?ders hunched. Rhea was cack ling, rock?ing
from side to

side and mak?ing a sound like fin?ger?nails on a piece of slate. The
sound shocked

Su?san, but she wasn’t a bit sur?prised by Rhea’s pres?ence in this com?
pa?ny.

”It could nev?er be enough,” she said, look?ing from Jonas to Lengyll
with an

ex?pres?sion of con?tempt so deep it seemed bot?tom?less. ”For him it
could nev?er be

enough.“

"Well, perhaps, but you did quite well in the time you had, lady-sai.
Few could

have done better. And listen to the witch cackle! Like salt in his wounds, I wot . . .

but we'll shut her up soon enough." Then, turning his head: "Clay!"
Reynolds rode up.

"Think you can get Sunbeam back to Seafront all right?"

"I think so." Reynolds tried not to show the relief he felt at being sent
back east

instead of west. He had begun to have a bad feeling about Hang in
Rock, Latigo,

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 Depepe
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 o'

you!"

Jonas doubted if the ball would break, not hurled by her weak arms onto the

trampled, springy mat of the Bad Grass, but he didn't think he would have

occasion to find out, one way or the other.

"Clay," he said. "Draw your gun."

He didn't need to look at Clay to see that he'd done it; he saw the frantic way her

eyes shifted to the left, where Clay sat his horse.

"I'm going to have a count," Jonas said. "Just a short one; if I get to three and she

hasn't passed that bag over, blow her ugly head off."

"Aye."

"One," Jonas said, watching the ball pendulum back and forth at the bottom of the

upheld bag. It was glowing; he could see dull pink even through the cloth. "Two.

Enough 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 the pomel of his saddle twice instead. He took in

a breath as deep as his lungs would allow, then expelled it. Better. A little.

“Roy.”

“Aye, Jonas.”

It would be good to get out of this place, Jonas thought, and not for the first time.

To get away from these hicks. He was sick of aye and ye and so it is, sick to his

bones.

“Roy, we’ll give the bitch a ten-count this time. If she isn’t out of my sight by then,

you have my permission to blow her ass off. Now, let’s see if you can do the

counting. I’ll be listening close, so mind you don’t skip any!”

“One,” Depape said eagerly. “Two. Three. Four.”

Spitting curses, Rhea snatched up the reins of the cart and spanked the pony’s back

with them. The pony laid its ears back and jerked the cart forward so vigorously

that Rhea went tumbling backward off the cantboard, her feet up, her white and

bony shins showing above her ankle-high black shoes and mismatched wool

stockings. The vaqueros laughed. Jonas laughed himself. It was pretty funny, all

right, seeing her on her back with her pins in the air.

“Fuh-fuh-five,” Depape said, laughing so hard he was hiccupping. “Sih-sih-six!”

Rhea climbed back up, flopped onto the cantboard again with all the grace of a

dying fish, and peered around at them, wall-eyed and sneering.

“I curse ye all!” she screamed. It cut through them, stilling their laughter even as

the cart bounced toward the edge of the trampled 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 marvelled (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 anymore, but Coral . . . ride with her to Ritzy when

she goes. Be her escort, like."

Reynolds nodded. Better and better. Seafront it would be, and that was fine. He

might like a little taste of the girl once he got her there, but not on the way. Not

under the ghostly-full daytime Demon Moon. "Go on, then. Get started."

Reynolds led her across the clearing, aiming for a point well away from the bent

swath of grass where Rhea had made her exit. Susan rode silently, downcast eyes

fixed on her bound wrists.

Jonas turned to face his men. "The three young fellows from In-World have

broken their way out of jail, with that haughty young bitch's help," he said,

pointing at Susan's departing back.

There was a low, growling murmur from the men. That "Will Dear born" and his

friends were free they had known; that sai Delgado had helped them escape they

had not . . . and it was perhaps just as well for her that Reynolds was at that

moment leading her into the Bad Grass and out of sight.

"Never mind!" Jonas shouted, pulling their attention back to him. He reached out a

stealthy hand and caressed the curve at the bottom of the drawstring bag. Just

touching the ball made him feel as if he could do anything, and with one hand tied

behind his back, at that.

"Never mind her, and never mind them!" His eyes moved from Lengyll to Wertner

to Croydon to Brian Hookey to Roy Depape. "We're close to forty men, going to

join another hundred and fifty. They're three, and not one a day over sixteen. Are

you afraid of three little boys?"

"No!" they cried.

"If we run on em, my cul-de-sacs, what will we do?"

"KILL THEM!" The shout so loud that it sent rooks rising up into the morning sun,

caw?ing their dis?plea?sure as they com?menced the hunt for more
peace?ful

sur?round?ings.

Jonas was sat?is?fied. 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 nod?ded. “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 before 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 nod?ded. “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 nod?ded 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?san 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?san 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, looking out at nothing. What was there to look at,

anyway? Everything had come down with a smash—all her hopes of the fortune

Thorin would settle on Susan and Susan's child, perhaps while he still lived,

certainly in his dead-letter; all her hopes of ascending to her proper place in the

community; all her plans for the future. Swept away by two wilful young people

who couldn't keep their pants up.

She sat in her old chair with her knitting on her lap and the ashes Susan had

smeared on her cheek standing out like a brand, and thought:

They'll find me dead in this chair, someday—old, poor, and forgotten. That

ungrateful child! After all I did for her!

What roused her was a weak scratching at the window. She had no idea how long

it had been going on before it finally intruded on her consciousness, but when it

did, she laid her needlework aside and got up to see. A bird, perhaps. Or children

playing Reaping jokes, unaware that the world had come to an end. Whatever it

was, she would shoo it away.

Cordelia saw nothing at first. Then, as she was about to turn away, she spied a

pony and cart at the edge of the yard. The cart was a little disquieting—black,

with gold symbols overpainted—and the pony in the shafts stood with its head

lowered, not grazing, looking as if it had been run half to death.

She was still frowning out at this when a twisted, filthy hand rose in the air

directly in front of her and began to scratch at the glass again. Cordelia gasped and

clapped both hands to her bosom as her heart took a startled leap in her chest. She

backed up a step, and gave a little shriek as her calf brushed the tender of the stove.

The long, dirty nails scratched twice more, then fell away.

Cordelia stood where she was for a moment, irresolute, then went to the door,

stopping at the woodbox to pick up a chunk of ash which fitted her hand. Just in

case. Then she jerked the door open, went to the corner of the house, drew in a

deep, steadying breath, and went around to the garden side, raising the ash-chunk

as she did.

“Get out, whoever ye are! Scat before I—”

Her voice was stilled by what she saw: an incredibly old woman crawling through

the frost-killed flowerbed next to the house—crawling toward her. The crone’s

stringy white hair (what remained of it) hung in her face. Sores festered on her

cheeks and brow; her lips had split and drizzled blood down her pointed, warty

chin. The corneas of her eyes had gone a filthy gray-yellow, and she panted like a

cracked bellows as she moved.

“Good woman, help me,” this specter gasped. “Help me if ye will, for I’m about done up.”

The hand holding the chunk of ash sagged. Cordelia could hardly believe what

she was seeing. “Rhea?” she whispered. “Is it Rhea?”

“Aye,” Rhea whispered, crawling reluctantly through the dead silk-flowers,

dragging her hands through the cold earth. “Help me.”

Cordelia retreated a step, her makeshift bloodgeon now hanging at her knee. “No,

I... I can’t have such as thee in my house ... I’m sorry to see ye so, but ... but I

have a reputation, ye ken ... folk watch me close, so they do ...”

She glanced at the High Street as she said this, as if expecting to see a line of

townspeople outside her gate, watching eagerly, avid to fleet their wretched gossip

on its lying way, but there was no one there. Hambley was quiet, its walks and

byways empty, the customary joyous noise of Reaping Fair-day stilled. She

looked back at the thing which had fetched up in her dead flows.

“Yer niece ... did this ...” the thing in the dirt whispered. “All ... her fault ...”

Cordelia dropped the chunk of wood. It clipped the side of her ankle, but she

hardly noticed. Her hands curled into fists before her.

“Help me,” Rhea whispered. “I know ... where she is ... we ... we have work, us

two ... women’s ... work ...”

Cordelia hesitated a moment, then went to the woman, knelt, got an arm around

her, and somehow got her to her feet. The smell coming off her was reeky and

nauseating—the smell of decomposing flesh.

Bony fingers caressed Cordelia’s cheek and the side of her neck as she helped the

hag into the house. Cordelia’s flesh crawled, but she didn’t pull away until Rhea

collapsed into a chair, gasping from one end and farting from the other.

“Listen to me,” the old woman hissed.

“I am.” Cordelia drew a chair over and sat beside her. At death’s door she might

be, but once her eye fell on you, it was strangely hard to look away.
Now Rhea's

fingers dipped inside the bodice of her dirty dress, brought out a silver charm of

some kind, and began to move it back and forth rapidly, as if telling beads.

Cordelia, who hadn't felt sleepy all night, began to feel that way now.

"The others are beyond us," Rhea said, "and the ball has slipped my grasp. But

she—! Back to Mayor's House she's been taken, and maybe we could see to

her—we could do that much, aye."

"You can't see to anything," Cordelia said distantly. "You're dying."

Rhea wheezed laughter and a trickle of yellowish drool. "Dying? Nay! Just done

up and in need of a refreshment. Now listen to me, Cordelia daughter of Hiram

and sister of Pat!"

She hooked a bony (and surprisingly strong) arm around Cordelia's neck and drew

her close. At the same time she raised her other hand, twirling the silver medalion

in front of Cordelia's wide eyes. The crone whispered, and after a bit Cordelia

began to nod her understanding.

"Do it, then," the old woman said, letting go. She slumped back in her chair,

exhausted. "Now, for I can't last much longer as I am. And I'll need a bit of time

after, mind ye. To revive, like."

Cordelia moved across the room to the kitchen area. There, on the counter beside

the hand-pump, was a wooden block in which were sheathed the two sharp knives

of the house. She took one and came back. Her eyes were distant and far, as

Susan's had been when she and Rhea stood in the open doorway of Rhea's hut in

the light of the Kiss'ing Moon.

"Would ye pay her back?" Rhea asked. "For that's why I've come to ye."

"Miss Oh So Young and Pretty," Cordelia murmured in a barely audible voice.

The hand not holding the knife floated up to her face and touched her ash-smeared

cheek. "Yes. I'd be repaid of her, so I would."

"To the death?"

"Aye. Hers or mine."

"'Twill be hers," Rhea said, "never fear it. Now refresh me, Cordelia. Give me

what I need!"

Cordelia unbuttoned her dress down the front, pushing it open to reveal an

ungenerous bosom and a middle which had begun to curve out in the last year or

so, making a tidy little potbelly. Yet she still had the vestige of a waist, and it was

here she used the knife, cutting through her shift and the top layers of flesh

beneath. The white cotton began to bloom red at once along the slit.

"Aye," Rhea whispered. "Like roses. I dream of them often enough, roses in

bloom, and what stands black among em at the end of the world. Come closer!"

She put her hand on the small of Cordelia's back, urging her forward. She raised

her eyes to Cordelia's face, then grinned and licked her lips. "Good. Good

enough."

Cordelia looked blankly over the top of the old woman's head as Rhea of the Coos

buried her face against the red cut in the shift and began to drink.

Roland was at first pleased as the muted jingle of harness and buckle drew closer

to the place where the three of them were hunkered down in the high grass, but as

the sounds drew closer still—close enough to hear murmuring voices as well as

soft-thudding hooves—he began to be afraid. For the riders to pass close was one

thing, but if they were, through foul luck, to come right upon them, the three boys

would likely die like a nest of moles uncovered by the blade of a passing plow.

Ka sure!y hadn't brought them all this way to end in such fashion, had it? In all

these miles of Bad Grass, how could that party of oncoming riders possibly strike

the one point where Roland and his friends had pulled up? But still they closed in,

the sound of tack and buckle and men's voices growing ever sharper.

Alain looked at Roland with dismayed eyes and pointed to the left. Roland shook

his head and pat!ted his hands toward the ground, indicating they would stay put.

They had to stay put; it was too late to move without being heard.

Roland drew his guns.

Cuthbert and Alain did the same.

In the end, the plow missed the moles by sixty feet. The boys could actually see

the horses and riders flashing through the thick grass; Roland easily made out that

the party was led by Jonas, Depape, and Lengyll, riding three abreast. They were

followed by at least three dozen others, glimpsed as roan flashes and the bright red

and green of serapes through the grass. They were strung out pretty well, and

Roland thought he and his friends could reasonably hope they'd string out even

more once they reached open desert.

The boys waited for the party to pass, holding their horses' heads in case one of

them took it in mind to whisker a greeting to the nags so close by. When they

were gone, Roland turned his pale and unsmiling face to his friends.

"Mount up," he said. "Reaping's come."

21

They walked their horses to the edge of the Bad Grass, meeting the path of Jonas's

party where the grass gave way first to a zone of stunted bushes and then to the

desert itself.

The wind howled high and lonesome, carrying big drifts of gritty dust under a

cloudless dark blue sky. Demon Moon stared down from it like the filmed eye of a

corpse. Two hundred yards ahead, the drogue riders backing Jonas's party were

spread out in a line of three, their sombreros jammed down tight on their heads,

their shoulders hunched, their scrapes blowing.

Roland moved so that Cuthbert rode in the middle of their trio. Bert had his

sling-shot in his hand. Now he handed Alain half a dozen steel balls, and Roland

another half-dozen. Then he raised his eyebrows questioningly. Roland nodded

and they began to ride.

Dust blew past them in rattling sheets, sometimes turning the drogue riders into

ghosts, sometimes obscuring them completely, but the boys closed in steadily.

Roland rode tense, waiting for one of the drogues to turn in his saddle and see

them, but none did—none of them wanted to put his face into that cutting, grit-

filled wind. Nor was there sound to warn them; there was sandy hard-packed under

the horses' hooves now, and it didn't give away much.

When they were just twenty yards behind the drogues, Cuthbert nodded—they

were close enough for him to work. Alain handed him a ball. Bert, sitting ramrod

straight in the saddle, dropped it into the cup of his sling-shot, pulled, waited for

the wind to drop, then released. The rider ahead on the left jerked as if stung,

raised one hand a little, then toppled out of his saddle. Incredible, neither of his

two companions seemed to notice. Roland saw what he thought was the

beginning of a reaction from the one on the right when Bert drew again, and the

rider in the middle collapsed forward onto his horse's neck. The horse, startled,

reared up. The rider flopped bonelessly backward, his sombrero tumbling off, and

fell. The wind dropped enough for Roland to hear his knee snap as his foot caught

in one of his stirrups.

The third rider now began to turn. Roland caught a glimpse of a bearded face—a

dangling cigarette, unlit because of the wind, one 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 sling-shot. The fellow beyond them heard some thing in spite of the

wind, and swivelled in his saddle. Alain had drawn his own knife and now held it

by the tip of the blade. He threw hard, in the exaggerated full-arm motion they had

been taught, and although the range was long for such work—twenty feet at least,

and in windy air—his aim was true. The hilt came to rest protruding from the

center of the man's bandanna. The vaq groped for it, making choked gargling

sounds around the knife in his throat, and then he too dropped from the saddle.

Seven now.

Like the story of the shoemaker and the flies, Roland thought. His heart was

beating slow and hard in his chest as he caught up with Alain and Cuthbert. The

wind gusted a lonely whine. Dust flew, swirled, then dropped with the wind.

Ahead of them were three more riders, and ahead of them the main party.

Roland pointed at the next three, then mimed the sling-shot. Pointed beyond them

and mimed firing a revolver. Cuthbert and Alain nodded. They rode forward, once

again stirrup-to-stirrup, closing in.

22

Bert got two of the three ahead of them clean, but the third jerked at the wrong

moment, and the steel ball meant for the back of his head only clipped his earlobe

on the way by. Roland had drawn his gun by then, however, and put a bullet in the

man's temple as he turned. That made ten, a full quarter of Jonas's company before

the riders even realized trouble had begun. Roland had no idea if it would be

enough of an advantage, but he knew that the first part of the job was done. No

more stealth; now it was a matter of raw killing.

"Hile! Hile!" he screamed in a ringing, carrying voice. "To me, gunslingers! To

me! Ride them down! No prisoners!"

They spurred toward the main party, riding into battle for the first time, closing

like wolves on sheep, shooting before the men ahead of them had any slight idea

of who had gotten in behind them or what was happening. The three boys had

been trained as gunslingers, and what they lacked in experience they made up for

with the keen eyes and reflexes of the young. Under their guns, the desert east of

Hang'ing Rock became a killing-floor.

Screaming, not a single thought among them above the wrists of their dead'ly

hands, they sliced in'to the un'pre'pared Mejis par'ty like a three-'sid'ed blade,

shoot'ing as they went. Not ev'ery shot killed, but not a one went en'tire'ly wild,

ei'ther. Men flew out of their sad'dles and were dragged by boots caught in stir'rups

as their hors'es bolt'ed; oth'er men, some dead, some on'ly wound'ed, were tram'pled

be'neath the feet of their pan'icky, rear'ing mounts.

Roland rode with both guns drawn and tir'ing, Rush'er's reins gripped in his teeth so

they wouldn't fall over'side and trip the horse up. Two men dropped be'neath his

fire on his left, two more on the right. Ahead of them, Bri'an Hookey turned in his

sad'dle, his beard-'stub'bly face long with amaze'ment. Around his neck, a reap-

charm in the shape of a bell swung and tin'kled as he grabbed for the shot'gun

which hung in a scab'bard over one burly black'smith's shoul'der. Be'fore he could

do more than get a hand on the gun'stock, Roland blew the sil'ver bell off his chest

and ex'plod'ed the heart which lay be'neath it. Hookey pitched out of his sad'dle with

a grunt.

Cuth'bert caught up with Roland on the right side and shot two more men off their

hors'es. He gave Roland a fierce and blaz'ing grin. "Al was right!" he shout'ed.

"These are hard cal'ibers!"

Roland's talented fingers did their work, rolling the cylinders of the guns he held

and reloading at a full gallop—doing it with a ghastly, 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 reining around to face their attackers.

Lengyll was clawing at his machine-gun, but the strap had got tangled in the

wide collar of the duster he wore, and every time he grabbed for the stock, it

bobbed out of his reach. Beneath his heavy gray-blond mustache, Lengyll's mouth

was twisted with fury.

Now, riding between Roland and Cuthbert and these three, holding a huge blued-

steel five-shot in one hand, came Hash Renfrew.

"Gods damn you!" Renfrew cried. "Oh, you rotten sister-fuckers!" He dropped his

reins and laid the five-shot in the crook of one elbow to steady it. The wind gusted

viciously, wrapping him in an enveloping swirl 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?geth?er. His hands flew up to
 his shoul?ders,

palms out, as if he were declaring surrender. That was how he died.

“Son of a bitch, oh you little sister-fucking son of a bitch!” Depp howled. He

tried to draw and his revolver got caught in his scrape. He was still trying to pull it

free when a bullet from Roland’s gun opened his mouth in a red scream almost all

the way down to his Adam’s apple.

This can’t be happening, Jonas thought stupidly. It can’t, there are too many of us.

But it was happening. The In-World boys had struck unerringly at the fracture-

line; were performing what amounted to a textbook example of how gun-slingers

were supposed to attack when the odds were bad. And Jonas’s coalition of

ranchers, cowboys, and town tough-boys had shattered. Those not dead were

fleeing to every point of the compass, spurring their horses as if a hundred devils

paroled from hell were in pursuit. They were far from a hundred, but they fought

like a hundred. Bodies were scattered in the dust everywhere, and as Jonas

watched, he saw the one serving as their back door—Stockworth—ride down

another man, bump him out of his saddle, and put a bullet in his head as he fell.

Gods of the earth, he thought, that was Croydon, him that owns the Pinao Ranch!

Except he didn’t own it anymore.

And now Dearborn was bearing down on Jonas with his gun drawn.

Jonas snatched the drawstring looped around the horn of his saddle and unwound

it with two fast, hard snaps of the wrist. He held the bag up in the windy air, his

teeth bared and his long white hair streaming.

“Come any 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

center of the tattooed hand holding the drawstring cord and vaporized the palm,

leaving only fingers that twitched their random way out of a spongy red mass. For

just a moment Roland saw the blue coffin, and then it was covered by

downspilling blood.

The bag dropped. And, as Rusher collided with Jonas's horse and slewed it to the

side. Roland caught the bag deftly in the crook of one arm. Jonas, screaming in

dismay as the prize left him, grabbed at Roland, caught his shoulder, and almost

succeeded in turning the gunslinger out of his saddle. Jonas's blood rained across

Roland's face in hot drops.

"Give it back, you brat!" Jonas clawed under his serape and brought out another

gun. "Give it back, it's mine!"

"Not anymore," Roland said. And, as Rusher danced around, quick and delicate

for such a large animal, Roland fired two point-blank rounds into Jonas's face.

Jonas's horse bolted out from under him and the man with the white hair landed

spreadeagled on his back with a thump. His arms and legs spasmed, jerked,

trembled, then stilled.

Roland looped the bag's drawstring over his shoulder and rode back toward Alain

and Cuthbert, ready to give aid ... but there was no need. They sat their horses side

by side in the blowing dust, at the end of a scattered road of dead bodies, their

eyes wide and dazed—eyes of boys who have passed through fire for the first time

and can hardly believe they have not been burned. Only Alain had been wounded;

a bullet had opened his left cheek, a wound that healed clean but left a scar he bore

until his dying day. He could not remember who had shot him, he said later on, or

at what point of the battle. He had been lost to himself during the shooting, and

had only vague memories of what had happened after the charge began. Cuthbert

said much the same.

“Roland,” Cuthbert said now. He passed a shaky hand down his face. “Hile,

gunslinger.”

“Hile.”

Cuthbert’s eyes were red and irritated from the sand, as if he had been crying. He

took back the unspent silver sling-shot balls when Roland handed them to him

without seeming to know what they were. “Roland, we’re alive.”

“Yes.”

Alain was looking around dazedly. “Where did the others go?”

“I’d say at least twenty-five of them are back there,” Roland said, gesturing at the

road of dead bodies. “The rest—” He waved his hand, still with a revolver in it, in

a wide half-circle. “They’ve gone. Had their fill of Mid-World’s wars, I wot.”

Roland slipped the drawstring bag off his shoulder, held it before him on the

bridge of his saddle for a moment, and then opened it. For a moment the bag’s

mouth was black, and then it filled with the irregular pulse of a lovely pink light.

It crept up the gunslinger’s smooth cheeks like fingers and swam in his eyes.

“Roland,” Cuthbert said, suddenly nervous, “I don’t think you should play with

that. Especially not now. They’ll have heard the shooting out at Hanging Rock. If

we’re going to finish what we started, we don’t have time for—“

Roland ignored him. He slipped both hands into the bag and lifted the wizard’s

glass out. He held it up to his eyes, unaware that he had smeared it with droplets of

Jonas’s blood. The ball did not mind; this was not the first time it had been blood-

touched. It flashed and swirled formlessly for a moment, and then its pink vapors

opened like curtains. Roland saw what was there, and lost himself within it.

CHAPTER X

BENEATH THE

DEMON MOON (II)

1

Coral’s grip on Susan’s arm was firm but not painful. There was nothing

particularly cruel about the way she was moving Susan along the down stairs

corridor, but there was a relentlessness about it that was disheartening. Susan

didn’t try to protest; it would have been useless. Behind the two women were a

pair of vaqueros (armed with knives and bolas rather than guns; the available guns

had all gone west with Jonas). Behind the vaqs, skulking along like a sullen ghost

which lacks the necessary psychic energy to fully materialize itself, came the late

Chanclor’s older brother, Laslo. Reynolds, his taste for a spot of journey’s-end

rape blunted by his growing sense of disquiet, had either remained above or gone

off to town.

“I’m 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 instead of slapping, it seized Susan's

arm again. Hard enough to hurt, this time, but Susan barely felt it. She had been

hurt by experts this day, and would suffer more hurt gladly, if that would hasten

the moment when she and Roland could be together again.

Coral hauled her the rest of the way down the corridor, through the kitchen (that

great room, which would have been all steam and bustle on any other Reaping

Day, now stood uncanonically deserted), and to the iron-bound door on the far side.

This she opened. A smell of potatoes and gourds and sharp root drifted out.

"Get in there. Go smart, before I decide to kick yer winsome ass square."

Susan looked her in the eye, smiling.

"I'd damn ye for a murderer's bed-bitch, sai Thorin, but ye've already damned

yerself. Ye know it, too—'tis written in yer face, to be sure. So I'll just drop ye a

curtsey"—still smiling, she suited action to the words— "and wish ye a very good day."

"Get in and shut up yer saucy mouth!" Coral cried, and pushed Susan in to the cold

pantry. She slammed the door, ran the bolt, and turned her blazing eyes up on the

vaqs, who stood prudently away from her.

"Keep her well, muchachos. Mind ye do."

She brushed between them, not listening to their assurances, and went up to her

late brother's suite to wait for Jonas, or word of Jonas. The whey-faced bitch

sitting down there amongst the carrots and potatoes knew nothing, but her words

(ye'll 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, ugli?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 woman gone traitor to her town and rogue
among her
own kind.“

Her voice dropped to a hoarse whisper on this last phrase; her listeners strained

forward to hear, faces grim, eyes big. And now Rhea pulled the pallid, skinny

woman in the rusty black dress forward. She stood Cordelia in front of her like a

doll or a ventriloquist's dummy, and whispered in her ear ... but the whisper

traveled, somehow; they all heard it.

“Come, dear. Tell em what ye told me.“

In a dead, carrying voice, Cordelia said: “She said she wouldn't be the Mayor's

gilly. He wasn't good enough for such as her, she said. And then she seduced Will

Dearborn. The price of her body was a fine position in Gilead as his consort ...

and the murder of Hart Thorin. Dearborn paid her price. Lusty as he was for her,

he paid gladly. His friends helped; they may have had the use of her as well, for all

I know. Chancellor Rimer must have gotten in their way. Or perhaps they just saw

him, and felt like doing him, too.“

“Basards!“ Pettie cried. “Sneaking young culls!“

“Now tell em what's needed to clarify the new season before it's spoiled, dearie,“

Rhea said in a crooning voice.

Cordelia Delgado raised her head and looked around at the men. She took a breath,

pulling the sour, intermingled smells of gray and beer and smoke and whiskey

deep into her spinner's lungs.

“Take her. Ye must take her. I say it in love and sorrow, so I do.“

Silent. Their eyes.

"Paint her hands."

The glass gaze of the thing on the wall, looking its stuffed judgment over the

waiting room.

"Char?you tree," Cordelia whispered.

They did not cry their agreement but sighed it, like autumn wind through stripped trees.

3

Sheemie ran after the bad Coffin Hunter and Susan-sai until he could literally run

no more—his lungs were afire and the stitch which had formed in his side turned

into a cramp. He pitched forward onto the grass of the Drop, his left hand

clutching his right armpit, gripping with pain.

He lay there for some time with his face deep in the fragrant grass, knowing they

were getting farther and farther ahead but also knowing it would do him no good

to get up and start running again until the stitch was good and gone. If he tried to

hurry the process, the stitch would simply come back and lay him low again. So

he lay where he was, lifting his head to look at the tracks left by Susan-sai and the

bad Coffin Hunter, and he was just about ready to try his feet when Caprichoso bit

him. Not a nip, mind you, but a good healthy chomp. Capi had had a different

twenty-four hours, and he hadn't much liked to see the author of all his misery

lying on the grass, apparently taking a nap.

"Yeee-OWWWW-by-damn!" Sheemie cried, and rocked to his feet. There was

nothing so magical as a good bite on the ass, a man of more philosophy bent

might have reflected; it made all other concerns, no matter how heavy or

sorrowful, disappear like smoke.

He whirled about. "Why did you do that, you mean old sneak of a Capi?" Sheemie

was rubbing his bottom vigorously, and large tears of pain stood out in his eyes.

"That hurts like . . . like a big old sonovabitch!"

Caprichoso extended his neck to its maximum length, bared his teeth in the satanic

grin which only mules and dromedaries can command, and brayed. To Sheemie

that bray sounded very like laughter.

The mule's lead still trailed back between his sharp little hoofs. Sheemie reached

for it, and when Capi dipped his head to inflict another bite, the boy gave him a

good hard whack across the side of his narrow head. Capi snorted and blinked.

"You had that coming, mean old Capi," Sheemie said. "I'll have to shit from a

squat for a week, so I will. Won't be able to sit on the damned jakes." He doubled

the lead over his fist and climbed aboard the mule. Capi made no attempt to buck

him off, but Sheemie winced as his wounded part settled atop the ridge of the

mule's spine. This was good luck just the same, though, he thought as he kicked

the animal into motion. His ass hurt, but at least he wouldn't have to walk . . . or try

to run with a stitch in his side.

"Go on, stupid!" he said. "Hurry up! Fast as you can, you old sonovabitch!"

In the course of the next hour, Sheemie called Capi "you old sonovabitch" as often

as possible—he had discovered, as many others had before him, that only the first

cussword is really hard; after that, there's nothing quite like them for relieving

one's feelings.

4

Susan's trail cut diagonally across the Drop toward the coast and the grand old

adobe that rose there. When Sheemie reached Seafront, he dismounted outside the

arch and only stood, wondering what to do next. That they had come here, he had

no doubt—Susan's horse, Pylon, and the bad Coffin Hunter's horse were tethered

side by side in the shade, occasionally dropping their heads and blowing in the

pink stone trough that ran along the courtyard's ocean side.

What to do now? The riders who came and went beneath the arch (mostly white-

headed vaqs who'd been considered too old to form a part of Lengyll's party) paid

no attention to the inn-boy and his mule, but Miguel might be a different story.

The old mozo had never liked him, acted as if he thought Sheemie would turn

thief, given half a chance, and if he saw Coral's slop-and-carry-boy skulking in the

courtyard, Miguel would very likely drive him away.

No, he won't, he thought grimly. Not today, today I can't let him boss me. I won't

go even if he hollers.

But if the old man did holler and raised an alarm, what then? The bad Coffin

Hunter might come and kill him. Sheemie had reached a point where he was

willing to die for his friends, but not unless it served a purpose.

So he stood in the cold sunlight, shifting from foot to foot, irresolute, wishing he was smarter than he was, that he could think of a plan. An hour passed this way, then two. It was slow time, each passing moment an exercise in frustration. He sensed any opportunity to help Susan-sai slip ping away, but didn't know what to do about it. Once he heard what sounded like thunder from the west . . . although a bright fall day like this didn't seem right for thunder. He had about decided to chance the courtyard anyway—it was temporary, and he might be able to make it across to the main house—when the man he had feared came staggering out of the stables. Miguel Torres was festooned with reaping charms and was very drunk. He approached the center of the courtyard in rolling side-to-side loops, the tugstring of his sombrero twisted against his scrawny throat, his long white hair flying. The front of his chibosa was wet, as if he had tried to take a leak without remembering that you had to unlimber your dingus first. He had a small ceramic jug in one hand. His eyes were fierce and bewildered. “Who done this?” Miguel cried. He looked up at the afternoon sky and the Demon Moon which floated there. Little as Sheemie liked the old man, his heart cringed. It was bad luck to look directly at old Demon, so it was. “Who done this thing? I ask that you tell me, senor! Por favor!” A pause, then a scream so powerful that Miguel reeled on his feet and almost fell. He raised his fists, as if he would box

an answer out of the winking face in the moon, then dropped them wearily. Corn

liquor slopped from the neck of the jug and wet him further. "Mari-con," he

muttered. He staggered to the wall (almost tripping over the rear legs of the bad

Cofin Hunter's horse as he went), then sat down with his back against the adobe

wall. He drank deeply from the jug, then pulled his sombrero up and settled it over

his eyes. His arm twitched the jug, then settled it back, as if in the end it had

proved too heavy. Sheemie waited until the old man's thumb came unhooked from

the jughandle and the hand flopped onto the cobbles. He started forward, then

decided to wait even a little longer. Miguel was old and Miguel was mean. but

Sheemie guessed Miguel might also be tricky. Lots of folks were, especially the

mean ones.

He waited until he heard Miguel's dusty snores, then led Capi into the courtyard,

wincing at every clomp of the mule's hooves. Miguel never stirred, however.

Sheemie tied Capi to the end of the hitching rail (wincing again as Caprichoso

brayed a tuneless greeting to the horses tied there), then walked quickly across to

the main door, through which he had never in his life expected to pass. He put his

hand on the great iron latch, looked back once more at the old man sleeping

against the wall, then opened the door and tiptoed in.

He stood for a moment in the oblong of sun the open door admitted, his shoulders

hunched all the way up to his ears, expecting a hand to settle on the scruff of his

neck (which bad-natured folk always seemed able to find, no matter how high you

hunched your shoulders) at any moment; an angry voice would follow, asking

what he thought he was doing here.

The foyer stood empty and silent. On the far wall was a tapestry depicting

various herding horses along the Drop; against it leaned a guitar with a broken

string. Sheemie's feet sent back echoes no matter how lightly he walked. He

shivered. This was a house of murder now, a bad place. There were likely ghosts.

Still, Susan was here. Somewhere.

He passed through the double doors on the far side of the foyer and entered the

reception hall. Beneath its high ceiling, his footsteps echoed more loudly than ever.

Long-dead mayors looked down at him from the walls; most had spooky eyes that

seemed to follow him as he walked, marking him as an intruder. He knew their

eyes were only paint, but still . . .

One in particular troubled him: a fat man with clouds of red hair, a bulldog mouth,

and a mean glare in his eye, as if he wanted to ask what some halfwit inn-boy was

doing in the Great Hall at Mayor's House.

"Quit looking at me that way, you big old sonuvabitch," Sheemie whispered, and

felt a little better. For the moment, at least.

Next came the dining hall, also empty, with the long trestle tables pushed back

against the wall. There was the remains of a meal on one—a single plate of cold

chicken and sliced bread, half a mug of ale. Looking at those few bits of food on a

table that had served dozens at various fairs and festivals—that should have served

dozens this very day—brought the enormity of what had happened home to

Sheemie. And the sadness of it, too. Things had changed in Hamby, and would

likely never be the same again.

These long thoughts did not keep him from gobbling the leftover chicken and

bread, or from chasing it with what remained in the alepot. It had been a long,

foodless day.

He belched, clapped both hands over his mouth, eyes making quick and guilty side-

to-side darts above his dirty fingers, and then walked on.

The door at the far end of the room was latched but unlocked. Sheemie opened it

and poked his head out into the corridor which ran the length of Mayor's House.

The way was lit with gas chandeliers, and was as broad as an avenue. It was

empty—at least for the moment—but he could hear whispering voices from other

rooms, and perhaps other floors, as well. He supposed they belonged to the maids

and any other servants that might be about this afternoon, but they sounded very

ghostly to him, just the same. Perhaps one belonged to Mayor Thorin, wondering

the corridor right in front of him (if Sheemie could but see him . . . which he was

glad he couldn't). Mayor Thorin wondering and wondering what had happened to

him, what this cold jellylike stuff soaking into his nightshirt might be, who—

A hand gripped Sheemie's arm just above the elbow. He almost shrieked.

"Don't!" a woman whispered. "For your father's sake!"

Sheemie somehow managed to keep the scream in. He turned. And there, wearing

jeans and a plain checked ranch-shirt, her hair tied back, her pale face set, her dark

eyes blazing, stood the Mayor's widow.

"S-S-Sai Thorin ... I... I... I..."

There was nothing else he could think of to say. Now she'll call for the guards or

the watch, if there be any left, he thought. In a way, it would be a relief

"Have ye come for the girl? The Delgado girl?"

Grief had been good to Olive, in a terrible way—had made her face seem less

plump, and oddly young. Her dark eyes never left his, and for bade any attempt at

a lie. Sheemie nodded.

"Good. I can use your help, boy. She's down below, in the pantry, and she's

guarded."

Sheemie gaped, not believing what he was hearing.

"Do you think I believe she had anything to do with Hart's murder?" Olive asked,

as if Sheemie had objected to her idea. "I may be fat and not so speedy on my pins

any more, 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

feel?ing ill some?how—walk?ing rest?less?ly, straight?en?ing pic?tures
in love?less rooms,

lis?ten?ing to the call to muzzein in alien town squares.

“Roland of Gilead.”

This voice, which he al?most rec?og?nizes; a voice so like his own that
a psy?chi?atrist

from Ed?die’s or Su?san?nah’s or Jake’s when-?and-?where would say
it is his voice,

the voice of his sub?con?scious, but Roland knows bet?ter; Roland
knows that of?ten

the voic?es that sound the most like our own when they speak in our
heads are

those of the most ter?ri?ble out?siders, the most dan?ger?ous in?trud?
ers.

“Roland, son of Steven.”

The ball has tak?en him first to Ham?bry and to May?or’s House, and
he would see

more of what is hap?pen?ing there, but then it takes him away— calls
him away in

that strange?ly fa?mil?iar voice, and he has to go. There is no choice
be?cause, un?like

Rhea or Jonas, he is not watch?ing the ball and the crea?tures who
speak

sound?less?ly with?in it; he is in?side the ball, a part of its end?less pink
storm.

“Roland, come. Roland, see.”

And so the storm whirls him first up and then away. He flies across the
Drop,

ris?ing and ris?ing 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 nico?tine-?stained fin?gers plink keys that are not
there—trans?port?ed by his tune, Sheb doesn’t seem to re?al?ize that
the storm has

ripped his pi?ano 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 blaz?ing with pink light. A scrawny man in

farmer’s over?alls goes fly?ing past, his long red hair stream?ing out be?hind him.

“Life for you, and for your crop, ” he says—some?thing like that, any? way—and then

he’s gone. Next, spin?ning like a weird wind?mill, comes an iron chair (to Roland it

looks like a tor?ture de vice) equipped with wheels, and the boy gun? slinger thinks

The La?dy of Shad?ows with?out know?ing why he thinks it, or what it means.

Now the pink storm is car?ry?ing him over blast?ed moun?tains, now over a fer?tile

green delta where a broad riv?er runs its oxbow squig?gles like a vein, re?flect?ing a

placid blue sky that turns to the pink of wild ros?es as the storm pass?es above.

Ahead, Roland sees an up?rush?ing col?umn of dark ness and his heart quails, but

this is where the pink storm is tak?ing him, and this is where he must go.

I want to get out, he thinks, but he’s not stupid, he re?al?izes the truth: he may nev?er

get out. The wiz?ard’s glass has swal?lowed him. He may re main in its stormy,

mud?dled eye for?ev?er.

I’ll shoot my way out, if I have to, he thinks, but no—he has no guns. He is naked

in the storm, rush?ing bar?eass to?ward that vir?ulent blue-?black in? fec?tion that has

buried all the land?scape be?neath it.

And yet he hears singing.

Faint but beau?ti?ful—a sweet har?mon?ic sound that makes him shiv?er and think of

Su?san: bird and bear and hare and fish.

Sud?den?ly Sheemie's mule (Capri?choso, Roland thinks, a beau?ti?ful name) goes past,

gal?lop?ing on thin air with his eyes as bright as fired?ims in the storm's lum?bre

fuego. Fol?low?ing him, wear?ing a som?br?era and rid ing a broom fes?tooned with

flut?ter?ing reap-?charms, comes Rhea of the Coos. "I'll get you, my pret?ty!" she

screams at the flee?ing mule, and then, cack?ling, she is gone, zoom?ing and

broom?ing.

Roland plunges in?to the black, and sud?den?ly his breath is gone. The world around

him is nox?ious dark?ness; the air seems to creep on his skin like a lay?er of bugs. He

is buf?fet?ed, boxed to and fro by in?vis?ible fists, then driv?en down?ward in a dive so

vi?olent he fears he will be smashed against the ground: so fell Lord Perth.

Dead fields and de?sert?ed vil?lages roll up out of the gloom; he sees blast?ed 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 Thun?der?clap."

"Thun?der?clap," he says.

"Here are the un?breath?ing; the white faces."

"The un?breath?ing. The white faces. "

Yes. He knows that, some?how. This is the place of slaugh?tered sol diers, the cloven

helm, the rusty hal?berd; from here come the pale war?riors. This is Thun?der?clap,

where clocks run back?ward and the grave yards vom?it out their dead.

Ahead is a tree like a crooked, clutching hand; on its topmost branch
a billy-

bumbler has been impaled. It should be dead, but as the pink storm
carries Roland

past, it raises its head and looks at him with inexpressible pain and
weariness.

“Oy!” it cries, and then it, too, is gone and not to be remembered for
many years.

“Look ahead, Roland—see your destiny.”

Now, suddenly, he knows that voice—it is the voice of the Turtle. He
looks and

sees a brilliant blue-gold glow piercing the dirty 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 fourteen who has that day done his first real
killing.

This is the blood that has flowed out of Thunderclap and threatens to
drown our

side of the world, he thinks, and it will not be for untold years that he
will finally

redeem his time inside the ball and put this memory together
with Eddie’s

dream and tell his comrades, as they sit in the turnpike breakdown
lane at the

end of the night, that he was wrong, that he had been fooled by the
brilliance,

coming as it did, so hard on the heels of Thunderclap’s shadows.
“It wasn’t blood

but roses,” he tells Eddie, Susanah, and Jake.

“Gun-slinger, look—look there.”

Yes, there it is, a dusty gray-black pillar rearing on the horizon: the Dark Tower,

the place where all Beams, all lines of force, converge. In its spiraling windows he

sees fitful electric blue fire and hears the cries of all those pent within; he senses

both the strength of the place and the wrongness of it; he can feel how it is

spooling error across everything, softening the divisions between the worlds, how

its potential for mischief is growing stronger even as disease weakens its truth and

coherence, like a body afflicted with cancer; this jutting arm of dark gray stone is

the world's great mystery and last awful riddle.

It is the Tower, the Dark Tower rearing to the sky, and as Roland rushes toward it

in the pink storm, he thinks: I will enter you, me and my friends, if ka wills it so;

we will enter you and we will conquer the wrongness within you. It may be years

yet, but I swear by bird and bear and hare and fish, by all I love that—

But now the sky fills with flaggy clouds which flow out of Thunderclap, and the

world begins to go dark; the blue light from the Tower's rising windows shines

like mad eyes, and Roland hears thousands of screaming, wailing voices.

"You will kill everything and everyone you love,"

says the voice of the Turtle, and now it is a cruel voice, cruel and hard.

"and still the Tower will be pent shut against you."

The gunslinger draws in all his breath and draws together all his force; when he

cries his answer to the Turtle, he does so for all the generations of his blood:

“NO! IT WILL NOT STAND! WHEN I COME HERE IN MY BODY,
IT WILL NOT

STAND! I SWEAR ON MY FA THER ‘S NAME. IT WILL NOT
STAND/”

“Then die,”

the voice says, and Roland is hurled at the gray-?black stone flank of
the 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 somewhere far away."

"We have to wake him up." Cuthbert's voice was dust-dry and shaky at the edges.

"Van-nay told us that if you wake a person from a deep hypnotic trance too

suddenly, he can go mad," Alain said. "Remember? I don't know if I dare—"

Roland stirred. The pink sockets where his eyes had been seemed to grow. His

mouth flattened in to the line of bitter determination they both knew well.

"No! It will not stand!" he cried in a voice that made gooseflesh ripple the skin of

the other two boys; that was not Roland's voice at all, at least not as he was now;

that was the voice of a man.

"No," Alain said much later, when Roland slept and he and Cuthbert , sat up

before the campfire. "That was the voice of a king."

Now, however, the two of them only looked at their absent, roaring friend,

paralyzed with fright.

"When I come here in my body, it will not stand! I swear on my father's name, IT

WILL NOT STAND!"

Then, as Roland's unnatural pink face contorted, like the face of a man who

confronts some unimaginable horror, Cuthbert and Alain lunged forward. It was

no longer a question of perhaps destroying him in an effort to save him; if they

didn't do something, the glass would kill him as they watched.

In the doorway of the Bar K, it had been Cuthbert who clipped Roland; this time

Alain did the honors, administering a hard right to the center of the gunslinger's

forehead. Roland tumbled backward, the ball spilling out of his loosening hands

and the terrible pink light leaving his face. Cuthbert caught the boy and Alain

caught the ball. Its heavy pink glow was weirdly insistent, beating at his eyes and

pulling at his mind, but Alain stuffed it resolutely into the drawstring bag again

without looking at it... and as he pulled the cord, yanking the bag's mouth shut, he

saw the pink light wink out, as if it knew it had lost. For the time being, at least.

He turned back, and winced at the sight of the bruise puffing up from the middle

of Roland's brow. "Is he—"

"Out cold," Cuthbert said.

"He better come to soon."

Cuthbert looked at him grimly, with not a trace of his usual amiability. "Yes," he

said, "you're certainly right about that."

7

Sheemie waited at the foot of the stairs which led down to the kitchen area,

shifting uneasily from foot to foot and waiting for sai Thorin to come back, or to

call him. He didn't know how long she'd been in the kitchen, but it felt like

forever. He wanted her to come back, and more than that—more than

anything—he wanted her to bring Susan-sai with her. Sheemie had a terrible

feeling about this place and this day; a feeling that darkened like the sky, which

was now all obscured with smoke in the west. What was happening out there, or if

it had anything to do with the thunderous sounds he'd heard earlier, Sheemie didn't

know, but he wanted to be out of here before the smoke-hazed sun went down and

the real De mon Moon, not its palid day-ghost, rose in the sky.

One of the swinging doors between the corridor and the kitchen pushed open and

Olive came hurrying out.. She was alone.

“She’s in the pantry, all right,” Olive said. She raked her fingers through her

graying hair. “I got that much out of those two pupuras, but no more. I knew it

was going to be that way as soon as they started talking that stupid crunk of

theirs.”

There was no proper word for the dialect of the Mejis vaqueros, but “crunk”

served well enough among the Barony’s higher-born citizens. Olive knew both of

the vaqs guarding the pantry, in the vague way of a person who has once ridden a

lot and passed gossip and weather with other Drop-riders, and she knew damned

well these old boys could do better than crunk. They had spoken it so they could

pretend to misunderstand her, and save both them and her the embarrassment of

an outright refusal. She had gone along with the deception for much the same

reason, although she could have responded with crunk of her own perfectly

well—and called them some names their mothers never used—had she wanted.

“I told them there were men upstairs,” she said, “and I thought maybe they meant

to steal the silver. I said I wanted the maloficios turned out. And still they played

dumb. No habla, sai. Shit. Shit!”

Sheemie thought of calling them a couple of big old sonuvabitches, and decided to

keep silent. She was pacing back and forth in front of him and throwing an

occasional burning look at the closed kitchen doors. At last she stopped in front of

Sheemie again.

“Turn out your pockets,” she said. “Let’s see what you have for hopes and

garlands.”

Sheemie did as she asked, producing a little pocketknife (a gift from Stanley Ruiz)

and a half-eaten cookie from one. From the other he brought out three lady-fingers

firecrackers, a big-banger, and a few sulfur matches.

Olive’s eyes gleamed when she saw these. “Listen to me, Sheemie,” she said.

8

Cuthbert patted Roland’s face with no result. Alain pushed him aside, knelt, and

took the gunslinger’s hands. He had never used the touch this way, but had been

told it was possible—that one could reach another’s mind, in at least some cases.

Roland! Roland, wake up! Please! We need you!

At first there was nothing. Then Roland stirred, muttered, and pulled his hands out

of Alain’s. In the moment before his eyes opened, both of the other two boys were

struck by the same fear of what they might see: no eyes at all, only ravishing pink

light.

But they were Roland’s eyes, all right—those cool blue shooter’s eyes.

He struggled to gain his feet, and failed the first time. He held out his hands.

Cuthbert took one, Alain the other. As they pulled him up, Bert saw a strange and

frightening thing: there were threads of white in Roland's hair. There had been

none that morning; he would have sworn to it. The morning had been a long time

ago, however.

"How long was I out?" Roland touched the bruise in the center of his forehead

with the tips of his fingers and winced.

"Not long," Alain said. "Five minutes, maybe. Roland, I'm sorry I hit you, but I

had to. It was ... I thought it was killing you."

"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 today, that is. Come on. Let’s take those tankers.”

9

The two vases were rolling smokes when there was a loud bang from upstairs.

They both jumped and looked at each other, the tobacco from their works—in-

progress drifting 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 vases knew her well—Maria Tomas, the daughter of an old comrade

from the Piano Ranch.

“The thieving bastards have set the place on fire!” Maria cried, speaking to them

in a crunch. “Come and help!”

“Maria, wait, 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. “Anyway,” said the older of the two, then

looked back at Maria. He no longer bothered with the crunch. “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 machine-gun.

He did. Cuthbert reached around to the small of his back, making sure of the

sling-shot. It was there. Also his deer-skin ammunition bag, which now contained a

number of the big-bangers Sheemie had stolen as well as steel shot.

He's using every ounce of his will to keep from going back, anyway, Cuthbert

thought. He found the realization comforting—sometimes Roland scared him.

There was something in him that went beyond steel. Some thing like madness. If it

was there, you were glad to have it on your side ... but often enough you wished it

wasn't there at all. On anybody's side.

"Where is she?" Alain asked.

"Reynolds took her back to Seafront. She's locked in the pantry ... or was locked

there. I can't say which, exactly, because ... " Roland paused, thinking. "The ball

sees far, but sometimes it sees more. Sometimes it sees a future that's already

happening."

"How can the future already be happening?" Alain asked. "I don't know, and I

don't think it was always that way. I think it's more to do with the world than

Maerlyn's Rainbow. Time is strange now. We know that, don't we? How things

sometimes seem to ... slip. It's almost as if there's a thinny everywhere, breaking

things down. But Susan's safe. I know that, and that's enough for me. Sheemie is

going to help her ... or is helping her. Somehow Jonas missed Sheemie, and he

followed Susan all the way back."

“Good for Sheemie!” Alain said, and pumped his fist into the air. “Hurrah!” Then:

“What about us? Did you see us in this future?”

“No. This part was all quick—I hardly snatched more than a glance before the ball

took me away. Flew me away, it seemed. But ... I saw smoke on the horizon. I

remember that. It could have been the smoke of burning tankers, or the brush piled

in front of Eye-bolt, or both. I think we’re going to succeed.”

Cuthbert was looking at his old friend in a queerly distraught way. The young man

so deeply in love that Bert had needed to knock him into the dust of the courtyard

in order to wake him up to his responsibilities . . . where was that young man,

exactly? What had changed him, given him those disturbing strands of white hair?

“If we survive what’s ahead,” Cuthbert said, watching the gun-slinger closely,

“she’ll meet us on the road. Won’t she, Roland?”

He saw the pain on Roland’s face, and now understood: the lover was here, but the

ball had taken away his joy and left only grief. That, and some new purpose—yes,

Cuthbert felt it very well—which had yet to be stated.

“I don’t know,” Roland said. “I almost hope not, because we can never be as we were.”

“What?” This time Cuthbert did rein up.

Roland looked at him calmly enough, but now there were tears in his eyes.

“We are fools of ka” the gun-slinger said. “Ka like a wind, Susan calls it.” He

looked first at Cuthbert on his left, then at Alain on his right. “The Tower is our

ka; mine 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?sana 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?sana, 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 shaking hand. "I would choose Susan in an instant, if not for one thing:

the Tower is crumbling, and if it falls, everything we know will be swept away.

There will be chaos beyond our imagining. We must go ... and we will go."

Above his young and unlined cheeks, below his young and unlined brow, were the

ancient killer's eyes that Edie Dean would first glimpse in the mirror of an

air liner's bathroom. But now they swam with childish tears.

There was nothing childish in his voice, however.

"I choose the Tower. I must. Let her live a good life and long with someone

else—she will, in time. As for me, I choose the Tower."

11

Susan mounted on Pylon, which Sheemie had hastened to bring around to the rear

courtyard after lighting the draperies of the great parlor on fire. Olive Thorin rode

one of the Barony geldings with Sheemie double-mounted behind her and holding

onto Capi's lead. Maria opened the back gate, wished them good luck, and the

three trotted out. The sun was setting now, but the wind had pulled away most

of the smoke that had risen earlier. Whatever had happened in the desert, it was

over now ... or happening on some other layer of the same present time.

Roland, be thee well, Susan thought. I'll see thee soon, dear ... as soon as I can.

"Why are we going north?" she asked after half an hour's silent riding.

"Because Seacoast Road's best."

"But—"

“Hush! They’ll find you gone and search the house first . . . if t’asn’t burned flat,

that is. Not find?ing you there, they’ll send west, along the Great Road.” She cast an

eye on Su?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?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 som brero 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, wincing as the place the mule had bitten came down. "So it'll be, Olive-sai."

"Good, Sheemie. Good. Off'ee go, then."

"Sheemie?" Susan said. "Come to me a moment, please."

He did, holding his hat in front of him and looking up at her worriedly. Susan

bent and kissed him not on the forehead but firmly on the mouth. Sheemie came

close to fainting.

"Thankee-sai," Susan said. "For everything."

Sheemie nodded. When he spoke, he could manage nothing above a whisper. "

'Twas only ka," he said. "I know that... but I love you, Susan-sai. Go well. I'll see you soon."

"I look forward to it."

But there was no soon, and no later for them, either. Sheemie took one look back

as he rode his mule south, and waved. Susan lifted her own hand in return. It was

the last Sheemie ever saw of her, and in many ways, that was a blessing.

12

Latiago had set pickets a mile out from Hanging Rock, but the blond boy Roland,

Cuthbert, and Alain encountered as they closed in on the tankers looked confused

and unsure of himself, no danger to anyone. He had scurvy-blossoms around his

mouth and nose, suggesting that the men Farson had sent on this duty had ridden

hard and fast, with little in the way of fresh supplies.

When Cuthbert gave the Good Man's signal—hands clasped to the chest, left above

right, then both held out to the person being greeted—the blond picket did the

same, and with a grateful smile.

“What spin and rattle back there?” he asked, speaking with a strong In-World

accent—to Roland, the boy sounded like a Nordite.

“Three boys who killed a couple of big bugs and then hied for the hills.” Cuthbert

replied. He was an eerily good mimic, and gave the boy back his own accent

faultlessly. “I here were a tight. It be over now, but they did fight fearful.”

“What—”

“No time,” Roland said brusquely. “We have dispatches.” He crossed his hands on

his chest, then held them out. “Hile! Farson!”

“Good Man!” the blond returned smartly. He gave back the salute with a smile that

said he would have asked Cuthbert where he was from and who he was related to,

if there had been more time. Then they were past him and inside Latiago’s

perimeter. As easy as that.

“Remember that it’s hit-and-run,” Roland said. “Slow down for nothing. What we

don’t get must be left—there’ll be no second pass.”

“Gods, don’t even suggest such a thing,” Cuthbert said, but he was smiling. He

pulled his sling out of its rudimentary holster and tested its elastic draw with a

thumb. Then he licked the thumb and hoisted it to the wind. Not much problem

there, if they came in as they were; the wind was strong, but at their backs.

Alain unslung Lengyll’s machine-gun, looked at it doubtfully, then yanked back

the slide-cock. “I don’t know about this, Roland. It’s loaded, and I think I see how

to use it, but—”

“Then use it,” Roland said. The three of them were picking up speed now, the

hooves of their horses drumming against the hardpan. The wind gusted, belling the

fronts of their scrapes. “This is the sort of work it was meant for. If it jams, drop it

and use your revolver. Are you ready?”

“Yes, Roland.”

“Bert?”

“Aye,” Cuthbert said in a wildly exaggerated Ham-bry accent, “so I am, so I am.”

Ahead of them, dust puffed as groups of riders passed before and behind the

tankers, readying the column for departure. Men on foot looked around at the

oncomers curiously but with a fatal lack of alarm.

Roland drew both revolvers. “Gilead!” he cried. “Hile! Gilead!”

He spurred Rusher to a gallop. The other two boys did the same. Cuthbert was in

the middle again, sitting on his reins, sling-shot in hand, lucifer matches radiating

out of his tightly pressed lips.

The gunslingers rode down on Hanging Rock like furies.

13

Twenty minutes after sending Sheemie back south, Susan and Olive came around

a sharp bend and found themselves face to face with three mounted men in the

road. In the late-slanting sun, she saw that the one in the middle had a blue coffin

tattooed on his hand. It was Reynolds. Susan’s heart sank.

The one on Reynolds’s left—he wore a stained white drover’s hat and had a lazily

cocked eye—she didn’t know, but the one on the right, who looked like a stony-

hearted preacher, was Laslo Rimer. It was Rimer that Reynolds glanced at, after

smiling at Susan.

"Why, Las and I couldn't even get us a drink to send his late brother, the

Chan-cel-lor of Whatever You Want and the Minister of Thank You Very Much, on

with a word," Reynolds said. "We hadn't hardly hit town before we got persuaded

out here. I wasn't going to go, but . . . damn! That old lady's something. Could talk

a corpse into giving a blowjob, if you'll pardon the crudity. I think your aunt may

have lost a wheel or two off her cart, though, sai Del-ga-do. She—"

"Your friends are dead," Susan told him.

Reynolds paused, shrugged. "Well now. Maybe si and maybe no. Me, I think I've

decided to travel on without em even if they ain't. But I might hang around here

one more night. This Reaping business . . . I've heard so much about the way folks

do it in the Outsers. 'Specially the bonfire part."

The man with the cocked eye laughed phlegmily.

"Let us pass," Olive said. "This girl has done nothing, and neither have I."

"She helped Dearborn escape," Rimer said, "him who murdered your own husband

and my brother. I wouldn't call that nothing."

"The gods may restore Kim-ba Rimer in the clearing," Olive said, "but the truth is

he looted half of this town's treasury, and what he didn't give over to John Farson,

he kept for himself."

Rimer recoiled as if slapped.

"Ye didn't know I knew? Laslo, I'd be angry at how little any of ye thought of me

... except why would I want to be thought of by the likes of you, anyway? I knew

enough to make me sick, leave it at that. I know that the man you're sitting

beside—"

"Shut up," Rimer muttered.

"—was like the one who cut yer brother's black heart open; said Reynolds was

seen that early morning in that wing, so I've been told—"

"Shut up, you cunt!"

"—and so I believe."

"Better do as he says, said, and hold your tongue," Reynolds said. Some of the lazy

good humor had left his face. Susan thought: He doesn't like people knowing what

he did. Not even when he's the one on top and what they know can't hurt him. And

he's less without Jonas. A lot less. He knows it, too.

"Let us pass," Olive said.

"No, said, I can't do that."

"I'll help ye, then, shall I?"

Her hand had crept beneath the outrageous large serpent during the palaver, and

now she brought out a huge and ancient pistol, its handles of yellowed ivory, its

filigreed barrel of old tarnished silver. On top was a brass powder-and-spark.

Olive had no business even drawing the thing—it caught on her serpent, 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 flop 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 clomp 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 Hamlet had been

replaced by a fresh one, but it was the same black cart, the same golden cartage

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.

“Hel?lo, my lit?tle sweet?ing,” she said, call?ing her as she had all those months ago,

on the night Su?san had come to her hut to be proved hon?est. On the night Su?san

had come run?ning most of the way, out of sim?ple high spir?its. Be?neath the light of

the Kiss?ing Moon she had come, her blood high from the ex?er?cise, her skin

flushed; she had been singing “Care less Love.”

“Yer pal?lies and screw-?bud?dies have tak?en my ball, ye ken,” Rhea said, cluck?ing

the pony to a stop a few paces ahead of the rid?ers. Even Reynolds looked down on

her with un?easi?ness. “Took my love?ly 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 for?got ... 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?si?ble. 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?sy 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 trig?ger. In this world, you had to use what you could while it still worked.

Be?neath him, his horse ran on as if it had un?der?stood ev?ery word Alain had

whis?pered in its ear.

An?oth?er! I want an?oth?er!

But be?fore he could blow an?oth?er tanker, the gun ceased its chat?ter — per?haps

jammed, prob?ably emp?ty. Alain threw it aside and drew his re volver. From be?side

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 blow—"

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

re-muda at once: George Lati-go. Roland could have shot him as he ran, but that,

iron?ical?ly, would have made pos?si?ble a get away that was clean?er than he want?ed.

In?stead, he shot the man who ran to meet him.

Lati?go wheeled on the heels of his boots and stared at Roland with blaz?ing, hate-

filled eyes. Then he ran again, hiling an?oth?er man, shout?ing for the rid?ers who

were hud?dled to?geth?er be?yond the burn?ing zone.

Two more tankers ex?plod?ed, wham?ming at Roland's eardrums with dull iron fists,

seem?ing to suck the air back from his lungs like a rip?tide. The plan had been for

Alain to per?fo?rate the tankers and for Cuth?bert to then shoot in a steady, arc?ing

stream of big-?bangers, light?ing the spilling oil. The one big-?banger he ac?tu?al?ly

shot seemed to con?firm that the plan had been fea?si?ble, but it was the last sling?shot-

work Cuth?bert did that day.

The ease with which the gun?slingers had got?ten in?side the en?emy's perime?ter and

the con?fu?sion which greet?ed their orig?inal charge could have been chalked up to

in?ex?pe?ri?ence and ex?haus?tion, but the plac?ing of the tankers had been Lati?go's

mis?take, and his alone. He had drawn them tight with?out even think?ing about it,

and now they blew tight, one af?ter an?oth?er. Once the con?fla?gra?tion be?gan, there

was no chance of stop?ping it. Even be?fore Roland raised his left arm and cir?cled it

in the air, sig?nalling for Alain and Cuth?bert to break off, the work was done.

Lati?go's en?camp ment was an oily in?fer?no, and John Far?son's plans for a

mo?tor?ized 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, toward Eye-bolt Canyon. As they went, Roland felt a single

bullet drone past his left ear. It was, so far as he knew, the only shot fired at any of

them during the assault on the tankers.

16

Lati-go was in an ecstasy of fury, a perfect brain-bursting rage, and that was

probably merciful—it kept him from thinking of what the Good Man would do

when he learned of this fiasco. For the time being, all Lati-go cared about was

catching the men who had ambushed him ... if an ambush in desert country was

even possible.

Men? No.

The boys who had done this.

Lati-go knew who they were, all right; he didn’t know how they had gotten out

here, but he knew who they were, and their run would stop right here, east of the

woods and rising hills.

“Hen-dricks!” he bawled. Hen-dricks had at least managed to hold his men—half a

dozen of them, all mounted—near the remuda. “Hen-dricks, to me!”

As Hen-dricks rode toward him, Lati-go spun the other way and saw a handful of

men standing and watching the burning tankers. Their gaping mouths and stupid

young sheep faces made him feel like screaming and dancing up and down, but he

refused to give in to that. He held a narrow beam of concentration, one aimed

directly at the raiders, who must not under any circumstances be allowed to

escape.

"You!" he shouted at the men. One of them turned; the others did not. Lati-go

strode to them, drawing his pistol as he went. He slapped it into the hand of the

man who had turned toward the sound of his voice, and pointed at random to one

of those who had not. "Shoot that fool."

Dazed, his face that of a man who believes he is dreaming, the soldier raised the

pistol and shot the man to whom Lati-go had pointed. That unlucky fellow went

down in a heap of knees and elbows and twitching hands. The others turned.

"Good," Lati-go said, taking his gun back.

"Sir!" Hendricks cried. "I see them, sir! I have the enemy in clear view!"

Two more tankers exploded. A few whickering shards of steel flew in their

direction. Some of the men ducked; Lati-go did not so much as twitch. Nor did

Hendricks. A good man. Thank God for at least one such in this nightmare.

"Shall I hie after them, sir? "

"I'll take your men and hie after them myself, Hendricks. Mount these hoss-guts

before us." He swept an arm at the standing men, whose doltish attention had been

diverted from the burning tankers to their dead comrade. "Pull in as many others

as you can. Do you have a bugler?"

"Yes, sir, Raines, sir!" Hendricks looked around, beckoned, and a pimply, scared-

looking boy rode forward. A dented bugle on a frayed strap hung askew on the

front of his shirt.

"Raines," Lati-go said, "you're with Hendricks."

“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

another thud smote the air and shivered through the ground as one of the

remaining tankers blew up. Roland was amazed at how easy it had been—even

after the battle with Jonas and Lengyll, which should have put the men out here on

their meeting, it had been easy. It made him think of a Reaptime long ago, he and

Cuthbert surely no more than seven years old, running along a line of stuffy-?guys

with sticks, knocking them over one after the other, bang-?bang-?bangety-?bang.

The sound of the thinny was warbling its way into his brain in spite of the

bandanna over his ears, making his eyes water. Behind him, he could hear the

whoops and shouts of the pursuing men. It delighted him. Lati?go's men had

counted the odds—two dozen against three, with many more of their own force

riding hard to join the battle—and their peckers were up once more.

Roland faced front and pointed Rusher at the slit in the brush marking the entrance

to Eyebolt Canyon.

18

Henricks fell in beside Lati?go, breathing hard, cheeks glaring with color. "Sir!

Beg to report!"

"Then do it."

"I have twenty men, and there are perhaps three times that number riding hard to

join us."

Lati?go ignored all of this. His eyes were bright blue flecks of ice. Under his

mustache was a small, greedy smile. "Rodney," he said, speaking Henricks's first

name almost with the caress 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.

"Cuthbert," he said. "Match?"

Cuthbert gave him some. He was grinning so hard it was a wonder they hadn't

fallen out of his mouth. "We warmed up their day, didn't we, Roland? Aye!"

"We did, indeed," Roland said, grinning himself. "Go on, now. Back to that

chimney-cut."

"Let me do it," Cuthbert said. "Please, Roland, you go with Alain and let me stay.

I'm a firebug at heart, always have been."

"No," Roland said. "This part of it's mine. Don't argue with me. Go on. And tell

Alain to mind the wizard's glass, no matter what."

Cuthbert looked at him for a moment longer, then nodded. "Don't wait too long."

"I won't."

"May your luck rise, Roland."

"May yours rise twice."

Cuthbert hurried away, boots rattling on the loose stone which carpeted the floor

of the canyon. He reached Alain, who lifted a hand to Roland. Roland nodded

back, then ducked as a bullet snapped close enough to his temple to flick his

hatbrim.

He crouched to the left of the opening in the brush and peered around, the wind

now striking full in his face. Latiago's men were closing rapidly. More rapidly than

he had expected. If the wind blew out the lucifers—

Never mind the ifs. Hold on, Roland. . . hold on... wait for them. . .

He held on, hunkering with an unlit match in each hand, now peering out through

a tangle of interlaced branches. The smell of mesquite was strong in his nostrils.

Not far behind it was the reek of burning oil. The drone of the thinny filled his

head, making him feel dizzy, a stranger to himself. He thought of how it had been

inside the pink storm, flying through the air ... how he had been snatched away

from his vision of Susan. Thank God for Sheemie, he thought distantly. He'll

make sure she finishes the day someplace safe. But the craven whine of the thinny

seemed somehow to mock him, to ask him if there had been more to see.

Now Latiago and his men were crossing the last three hundred yards to the canyon's

mouth at a full-out gallop, the ones behind closing up fast. It would be hard for the

ones riding point to stop suddenly without the risk of being ridden down.

It was time. Roland stuck one of the lancers between his front teeth and raked it

forward. It lit, spilling one hot and sour spark onto the wet bed of his tongue.

Before the lancer's head could bum away, Roland touched it to the powder in the

trench. It lit at once, running left beneath the north end of the brush in a bright

yellow thread.

He lunged across the opening—which might be wide enough for two horses

running flank to flank—with the second lancer already poised behind his teeth. He

struck it as soon as he was somewhat blocked from the wind, dropped it into the

powder, heard the splutter-hiss, then turned and ran.

20

Mother and father, was Roland's first shocked thought—memory so deep and

un?ex?pect?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 circled, but they were vultures, not gulls, and the shimmering,

mist-topped stuff before the two boys wasn't water.

It was the thinny, and as Roland watched, Cuthbert and Alain began to walk

toward it.

"Stop!" he screamed. "For your fathers' sakes, stop!"

They did not stop. They walked hand-in-hand toward the white-edged hem of the

smoky green shimmer. The thinny whined its pleasure, 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 riddled 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 in to 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

mad-denying, slobbering whine, insectile and insistent. It made his eyes water. Yet,

strong as the sound was (if it was a sound; it almost seemed to be coming from

inside him), he pushed it aside, holding 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 Farson

himself, and he had no idea what his punishment would be for losing the tankers

... but all that was for later. Now he wanted only to kill these interfering bastards.

Up ahead, the canyon took a jog to the north. They would be beyond that point,

and probably not far beyond, either. Backed up against the canyon's final wall,

trying to squeeze themselves behind what fallen rocks there might be. Latiago

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 Latiago 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. Latiago

caught the saddlehorn and managed to stay up, but the horse's rear hooves slid

side?ways in the scree and the an?imal went down. Lati?go let go of the horn and

threw him?self clear, al?ready aware that the sound which had been creep?ing in?to his

ears was sud?den?ly ten times stronger, buzzing loud enough to make his eye?balls

pulse in their sock?ets, loud enough to make his balls tin?gle un?pleas?ant?ly, loud

enough to blot out the mantra which had been beat?ing so in?sis?tent?ly in his head.

The in?sis?tence of the thin?ny was far, far greater than any George Lati?go could

have man?aged.

Hors?es flashed around him as he land?ed in a kind of sprawl?ing squat, hors?es that

were shoved for?ward willy-?nil?ly by the on?com?ing press from be?hind, by rid?ers that

squeezed through the gap in pairs (then trios as the hole in the brush, now burn?ing

all along its length, widened) and then spread out again once they were past the

bot?tle?neck, none of them clear?ly re?al?iz?ing that the en?tire canyon was a bot?tle?neck.

Lati?go got a con?fused glimpse of black tails and gray forelegs and dap?pled

fet?locks; he saw chaps, and jeans, and boots jammed in?to stir rups. He tried to get

up and a horse?shoe clanged against the back of his skull. His hat saved him from

un?con?scious?ness, but he went heav?ily to his knees with his head down, like a man

who means to pray, his vi?ision full of stars and the back of his neck in?stant?ly

soaked with blood from the gash the pass?ing hoof had opened in his scalp.

Now he heard more scream?ing hors?es. Scream?ing 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 only

dust. Lati-go pulled in breath so he could scream louder—they had to go back,

something was dreadfully wrong in Eye-bolt Canyon—and hacked it out without

saying anything.

Screaming horses.

Reeking smoke.

And everywhere, filling the world like lunacy, that whining, whingeing, cringing

buzz.

Hendricks's horse went down, eyes rolling, bit-parted teeth snapping at the smoky

air and splattering curds of foam from its lips. Hendricks fell into the steamy

stag?nant wa?ter, and it wasn't wa?ter at all. It came alive, some?how,
as he struck it;

grew green hands and a green, shifty mouth; pawed his cheek and melt?
ed away the

flesh, pawed his nose and tore it off, pawed at his eyes and stripped
them from

their sock?ets. It pulled Hen dricks un?der, but be?fore it did, Lati?go
saw his de?nud?ed

jaw?bone, a bloody pis?ton to drive his scream?ing teeth.

Oth?er men saw, and tried to wheel away from the green trap. Those
who man?aged

to do so in time were broad?sid?ed by the next wave of men—some of
whom were,

in?cred?ibly, still yip?ping or bel?low?ing full-?throat?ed bat?tle cries.
More hors?es and

rid?ers were driv?en in?to the green shim?mer, which ac?cept?ed them
ea?ger?ly. Lati?go,

stand?ing stunned and bleed?ing like a man in the mid?dle of a stam?
pede (which was

ex?act?ly what he was), saw the sol?dier to whom he had giv?en his
gun. This fel?low,

who had obeyed Lati?go's or?der and shot one of his com?padres in or?
der to awak?en

the rest of them, threw him?self from his sad?dle, howl?ing, 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 rid?ers bear?ing down on him, and clapped his hands across his
face. A

mo?ment lat?er he was rid?den down.

The shrieks of the wound?ed and dy?ing echoed in the smoky canyon,
but Lati?go

hard?ly heard them. What he heard most?ly was that buzzing, a sound
that was

al?most a voice. Invit?ing him to jump in. To end it here. Why not? It
was over,

wasn't it? All over.

He struggled away instead, and was now able to make some head way; the stream

of riders packing its way into the canyon was easing. Some of the riders fifty or

sixty yards back from the jog had even been able to turn their horses. But these

were ghostly and confused in the 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. Latiago crashed into one of them and was thrown for the second time in

five minutes. He landed on his knees, scrambled to his feet, and staggered back

downwind, coughing and retching, eyes red and streaming.

It was a little better beyond the canyon's northward jog, but wouldn't be for much

longer. The edge of the thinny was a tangle of milling horses, many with broken

legs, and 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?notized, 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

ris?ing smoke en?gulfed him as well, but then Cuth?bert, who had be?gun to climb

again, called down three words from above him; called down in a tone of sur?prise

and dis?may. “Roland! The moon!”

Roland looked up, star?tled, and saw that the sky had dark?ened to a vel?vety pur?ple.

His friend was out?lined against it and look?ing east, his face stained fever-?or?ange with the light of the ris?ing moon.

Yes, or?ange, the thin?ny buzzed in?side his head. Laughed in?side his head. Or?ange

as ’twas when it rose on the night you came out here to see me and count me.

Or?ange like a fire. Or?ange like a bon?fire.

How can it be al?most dark? he cried in?side him?self, but he knew—yes, he knew

very well. Time had slipped back to?geth?er, that was all, like lay ers of ground

em?brac?ing once more af?ter the ar?gu?ment of an earth?quake. Twi?light had come.

Moon?rise had come.

Ter?ror struck Roland like a closed fist aimed at the heart, mak?ing him jerk

back?ward on the small ledge he’d found. He groped for the horn-?shaped out?crop

above him, but that act of re?bal?anc?ing was far away; most of him was in?side the

pink storm again, be?fore he had been snatched away and shown half the cos?mos.

Per?haps the wiz?ard’s glass had on?ly shown him what stood worlds far away in

or?der to keep from show?ing him what might soon be?fall so close to home.

I’d turn around if I thought her life was in any re?al dan?ger, he had said. In a

sec?ond.

And if the ball knew that? If it couldn’t lie, might it not mis?di?rect? Might it not

take him away and show him a dark land, a dark?er tow?er? And it had shown him

something else, something that recurred to him only now: a scrawny man in

farmer's overalls who had said. . . what? Not quite what he'd thought, not what he

had been used to hearing all his life; not Life for you and life for your crop, but. . .

"Death," he whispered to the stones surrounding him. "Death for you, life for my

crop. Charyou tree. That's what he said, Charyou tree. Come, Reap."

Orange, gunslinger, a cracked old voice laughed inside his head. The voice of the

Coos. The color of bonfires. Charyou tree, fin de ano, these are the old ways of

which only the stuffy-?guys with their red hands 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

lunatic laughter of the witch, and he knew better.

Death for you, life for the crop. Charyou tree.

Oh, Susan—

23

Nothing was clear to Susan until she saw the man with the long red hair and the

straw hat which did not quite obscure his lamb-slaughterer's eyes; the man with

the cornshucks in his hands. He was the first, just a farmer (she had glimpsed him

in the Lower Market, she thought; had even nodded to him, as countryfolk do,

and he back to her), standing by himself not far from the place where Silk Ranch

Road and the Great Road intersected, standing in the light of the rising moon.

Until they came upon him, nothing was clear; after he hurled his bundle of

cornshucks at her as she passed, standing in the slowly rolling cart with her hands

bound in front of her and her head lowered and a rope around her neck, everything

was clear.

"Charyou tree, " he called, almost sweetly uttering words of the Old People she

hadn't heard since her childhood, words that meant "Come, Reap" . . . and

something else, as well. Something hidden, something secret, something to do

with that root word, char, that word which meant only death. As the dried shucks

fluttered around her boots, she understood the secret very well; understood also

that there would be no baby for her, no wedding for her in the fairy-distant land of

Gilead, no hall in which she and Roland would be joined and then saluted beneath

the 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 taken this rapidly increasing party north a little farther, then turned

southwest on the old Silk Ranch Road, which wound back toward town. On the

eastern edge of Hamby, it rejoined the Great Road. Even in her dazed state, Susan

had realized the haridan was moving slowly, measuring the descent of the sun as

they went, not clucking at the pony to hurry but actually reining it in, at least until

afternoon's gold had gone. When they passed the farmer, thin-faced and alone, a

good man, no doubt, with a freehold farm he worked hard from first gleam to last

glow and a family he loved (but oh, there were those lamb-slaughterer's 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

fly^{ing} 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 gunslinger 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,

making its way with processional slowness. Hill Street was lined with people of

whom the farmer with the lamb-slaughterer's eyes had been only the first—all

those folk of Hambray and Mejis who had been deprived of their fair but were now

given this ancient dark attraction in its stead: Charyou tree, come, Reap, death for

you, life for our crops.

A soundless whispering ran through them like a gathering wave, and they began to

pelt her—first with cornhusks, then with rotting tomatoes, then with potatoes and

apples. One of these latter struck her cheek. She reeled, almost fell, then stood

straight again, now raising her swollen but still lovely face so the moon painted it.

She looked straight ahead.

"Charyou tree," they whispered. Roland couldn't hear them, but he could see the

words on their lips. Stanley Ruiz was there, and Pettie, and Gert Moggins, and

Frank Claypool, the deputy with the broken leg; Jamie McCann, who was to have

been this year's Reap Lad. Roland saw a hundred people he had known (and

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 hitting a post. Roland didn't even rock back on

his heels. He continued to cry out that single negative— "No! No! No! No!"—and

the ball flashed faster and faster, eating its way into him through the wound it had

opened, sucking up his grief like blood.

25

"Char'you tree!" Cordelia Delgado cried, darting forward from where she had been

waiting. The crowd cheered her, and beyond her left shoulder Demon Moon

winked, as if in complicity. "Char'you tree, ye faithless bitch! Char'you tree!"

She flung the pail of paint at her niece, splattering her pants and dressing her tied

hands in a pair of wet scarlet gloves. She grinned up at Susan as the cart rolled

past. The smear of ash stood out on her cheek; in the center of her pale forehead, a

single vein pulsed like a worm.

"Bitch!" Cordelia screamed. Her fists were clenched; she danced a kind of

hilarious jig, feet jumping, bony knees pumping beneath her skirt. "Life for the

crops! Death for the bitch! Char'you 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!

Char'you tree!"

"Char'you 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 triumphant

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 into prancing goblins by moonlight, in spite of pain and

betrayal and what was coming, he had spoken the truth: they had been well met,

they had been very well met, indeed.

“Charyou TREE! Charyou TREE! Charyou TREE!”

Women came and piled dry cornshucks around her feet. Several of them slapped

her (it didn’t matter; her bruised and puffy face seemed to have gone numb), and

one—it was Misha Alvarez, whose daughter Susan had taught to ride—spat into

her eyes and then leaped prank?ish?ly away, shak?ing her hands at the sky and

laugh?ing. For a mo?ment she saw Coral Thorin, fes?tooned with reap-? charms, her

arms filled with dead leaves which she threw at Su?san; they flut?tered down around

her in a crack?ling, aro mat?ic show?er.

And now came her aunt again, and Rhea be?side her. Each held a torch. They stood

be?fore her, and Su?san could smell siz?zling pitch.

Rhea raised her torch to the moon. "CHARY?OU TREE!" she screamed in her rusty

old voice, and the crowd re?spond?ed, "CHARY?OU TREE!"

Cordelia raised her own torch. "COME, REAP!"

"COME, REAP!" they cried back to her.

"Now, ye bitch," Rhea crooned. "Now comes warmer kiss?es than any yer love

ev?er 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 seeing Cuthbert's gun and understanding what it

meant, the ball went instantly dark and dead in Roland's hands. Roland's stiff

body, every line and muscle trembling with horror and out rage, went limp. He

dropped like a stone, his fingers at last letting go of the ball. His stomach

cushioned it as he struck the ground; it rolled off him and trickled to a stop by one

of his limp, outstretched hands. Nothing burned in its darkness now except for one

baleful orange spark—the tiny reflection of the rising Demon Moon.

Alain looked at the glass with a species of disgust, frightened awe; looked at it

as one might look at a vicious animal that now sleeps ... but will wake again, and

bite when it does.

He stepped forward, meaning to crush it to powder beneath his boot. "Don't you

dare," Cuthbert said in a hoarse voice. He was kneeling beside Roland's limp form

but looking at Alain. The rising moon was in his eyes, two small, bright stones of

light. "Don't you dare, after all the misery and death we've gone through to get it.

Don't you even think of it."

Alain looked at him uncertainly for a moment, thinking he should 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 seacoast side of Mejis; riding

west beneath the Demon Moon, with Roland laid across his saddle like a corpse.

27

The next day they spent in 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

pre?vi?ous day, but on this one they slept like the dead, with blan?kets over their

heads to block the sun. They awoke min?utes apart as the sun was go?ing down and

De?mon Moon, now two nights past the full, was ris?ing through a trou?bled rack of

clouds that pre?saged the first of the great au?tumn storms.

Roland was sit?ting up. He had tak?en the glass from the draw?string bag. He sat with

it cra?dled in his arms, a dark?ened bit of mag?ic as dead as the glass eyes of The

Romp. Roland's own eyes, al?so dead, looked in?dif fer?ent?ly off in?to the moon?lit

cor?ri?dors of the for?est. He would eat but not sleep. He would drink from the

streams they passed but not speak. And he would not be part?ed from the piece of

Maer?lyn's Rain?bow which they had brought out of Mejis at such great price. It did

not glow for him, how?ev?er. Not, Cuth?bert thought once, while Al and I are awake

to see it, any?way.

Alain couldn't get Roland's hands off the ball, and so he laid his own on Roland's

cheeks, touch?ing him that way. Ex?cept there was noth?ing to touch, noth?ing there.

The thing which rode west with them to?ward Gilead was not Roland, or even a

ghost of Roland. Like the moon at the close of its cy?cle, Roland had gone.

Darktower 4 - Wizard and Glass

PART FOUR

ALL GOD'S
CHILLUN GOT
SHOES
CHAP?TER 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?sana said, “but I

doubt you’d lis?ten.” She put her hands in the small of her back, stretched and

wincing . . . 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 pret?ty much the way he did any morn?ing—bet?ter

than on some. He had to take a leak, but his back teeth weren’t ex?act?ly float?ing, or

any?thing like that.

“Ed?die? Su?san?nah?”

“I feel good,” Su?san?nah said. “Sure?ly not as if I stayed up all night, let alone many of em.”

Ed?die said, “It re?minds me of the time I spent as a junkie, in a way—”

“Doesn’t ev?ery?thing?” Roland asked dry?ly.

“Oh, that’s fun?ny,” Ed?die said. “A re?al howl. Next train that goes crazy on us, you

can ask it the sil?ly ques?tions. What I meant was that you’d spend so many nights

high that you got used to feel?ing like ten pounds of shit in a nine-pound bag when

you got up in the morn?ing—bad head, stuffy nose, thump?ing heart, glass in the old

spine. Take it from your pal Ed?die, you can tell just from the way you feel in the

morn?ing how good dope is for you. Any?way, you’d get so used to that —/did,

any way—that when you ac?tu?al?ly took a night off, you’d wake up the next

morn?ing and sit there on the edge of the bed, think?ing, ‘What the flick’s wrong

with me? Am I sick? I feel weird. Did I have a stroke in the night?’ ”

Jake laughed, then clapped a hand over his mouth so vi?olent?ly that it was as if he

want?ed not just to hold the sound in but call it back. “Sor?ry,” he said. “That made

me think of my dad.”

“One of my peo?ple, huh?” Ed?die said. “Any?way, I ex?pect to be sore, I ex?pect to be

tired, I ex?pect to creak when I walk... but I ac?tu?al?ly think all I need to put me right

is a quick pee in the bush?es.”

“And a bite to eat?” Roland asked.

Ed?die had been wear?ing a ^mall smile. Now it fad?ed. “No,” he said. “Af?ter that

sto?ry, I'm not all that hun?gry. In fact, I'm not hun?gry at all."

2

Ed?die car?ried Su?san?nah down the em?bank?ment and popped her
be?hind a stand of

lau?rel bush?es to do her nec?es?sary. Jake was six?ty or sev?en?ty
yards east, in a grove

of birch?es. Roland had said he would use the re?me?di?al strip to do
his morn?ing

nec?es?sary, then raised his eye?brows when his New York friends
laughed.

Su?san?nah wasn't laugh?ing when she came out of the bush?es. Her
face was streaked

with tears. Ed?die didn't ask her; he knew. He had been fight ing the
feel?ing

him?self. He took her gen?tly in his arms and she put her face against
the side of his

neck. They stayed that way for a lit?tle while.

"Chary?ou tree, " she said at last, pro?nounc?ing it as Roland had:
chair-?you tree,

with a lit?tle up?turned vow?el at the end.

"Yeah," Ed?die said, think?ing that a Char?lie by any oth?er name was
still a Char?lie.

As, he sup?posed, a rose was a rose was a rose. "Come, Reap."

She raised her head and be?gan to wipe her swim?ming eyes. "To have
gone through

all that," she said, keep?ing her voice low ... and look?ing once at the
turn?pike

em?bank?ment to make sure Roland wasn't there, look ing down at
them. "And at

four?teen."

"Yeah. It makes my ad?ven?tures search?ing for the elu?sive dime bag
in Tomp?kins

Square look pret?ty tame. In a way, though, I'm al?most re?lieved."

"Re?lieved? Why?"

"Be?cause I thought he was go?ing to tell us that he killed her him?self.
For his

damned Tow?er."

Su?san?nah looked square?ly in?to his eyes. “But he thinks that’s what he did. Don’t you un?der?stand that?”

3

When they were back to?geth?er again and there was food ac?tu?al?ly in sight, all of them de?cid?ed they could eat a bit, af?ter all. Roland shared out the last of the

bur?ri?tos (Maybe lat?er to?day we can stop in at the near?est Bo?ing Bo?ing Burg?ers

and see what they’ve got for left?overs, Ed?die thought), and they dug in. All of

them, that was, ex?cept Roland. He picked up his bur?ri?to, looked at it, then looked

away. Ed?die saw an ex?pres?sion of sad?ness on the gun?slinger’s face that made him

look both old and lost. It hurt Ed die’s heart, but he couldn’t think what to do about

it.

Jake, al?most ten years younger, could. He got up, went to Roland, knelt be?side

him, put his arms around the gun?slinger’s neck, and hugged him. “I’m sor?ry you

lost your friend,” he said.

Roland’s face worked, and for a mo?ment Ed?die was sure he was go ing to lose it.

A long time be?tween hugs, maybe. Mighty long. Ed?die had to look away for a

mo?ment. Kansas in the morn?ing, he told him?self. A sight you nev?er ex?pect?ed to

see. Dig on that for awhile, and let the man be.

When he looked back, Roland had it to?geth?er again. Jake was sit?ting be?side him,

and Oy had his long snout on one of the gun?slinger’s boots. Roland had be?gun to

eat his bur?ri?to. Slow?ly, and with?out much rel?ish . . . but he was eat?ing.

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

travelled inside my head, and I got better. But the glass never glowed for me until

the very end . . . when the battlements of the castle and the towers of the city were

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 observed 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 scare?crows. Even Alain, who

tend?ed to?ward stout?ness, all but dis?ap?peared when he turned side? ways. They

con?front?ed me, I sup?pose you'd say. They'd kept the se?cret of the ball to that

point—out of re?spect for me and for the loss I'd suf?fered, they told me, and I

be?lieved them— but they would keep it no longer than that night's meal. If I

wouldn't give it up vol?un?tar?ily, it would be a ques?tion for our fa?thers to de?cide.

They were hor?ri?bly em?bar?rassed, es?pe?cial?ly Cuth?bert, but they were de?ter?mined.

"I told them I'd give it over to my own fa?ther be?fore the ban?quet—be?fore my

moth?er ar?rived by coach from De?baria, even. They should come ear?ly and see that

I kept my promise. Cuth?bert start?ed to hem and haw and say that wouldn't be

nec?es?sary, but of course it was nec?es?sary—"

"Yeah," Ed?die said. He had the look of a man who un?der?stood this part of the sto?ry

per?fect?ly. "You can go in?to the crap?per on your own, but it's a lot eas?ier to ac?tu?al?ly

flush all the bad shit down the toi?let if you have some?body with you."

"Alain, at least, knew it would be bet?ter for me—eas?ier—if I didn't have to hand

the ball over alone. He hushed Cuth?bert up and said they'd be there. And they

were. And I gave it over, lit?tle as I want?ed to. My fa ther went as pale as pa?per

when he looked in?to the bag and saw what was there, then ex?cused him?self and

took it away. When he came back, he picked up his glass of wine and went on

talk?ing to us of our ad?ven?tures in Mejis as if noth?ing had hap?pened."

"But be?tween 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. Trav?elled in it. What did it show

you that time?"

"First the Tow?er again," Roland said, "and the be?gin?ning of the way there. I saw

the fall of Gilead, and the tri?umph of the Good Man. We'd put those things back a

mere twen?ty months or so by de?stroy?ing the tankers and the oil?patch. I could do

noth?ing about that, but it showed me some?thing I could do. There was a cer?tain

knife. The blade had been treat?ed with an es?pe?cial?ly po?tent poi?son, some?thing

from a dis?tant Mid-?World King?dom called Gar?lan. Stuff so strong even the tini?est

cut would cause al?most in?stant death. A wan?der?ing singer—in truth, John Par?son's

el?dest nephew—had brought this knife to court. The man he gave it to was the

cas?tle's chief of do?mes?tic staff. This man was to pass the knife on to the ac?tu?al

as?sas?sin. My fa?ther was not meant to see the sun come up on the morn?ing af?ter the

ban?quet." He smiled at them grim?ly. "Be?cause of what I saw in the Wiz?ard's Glass,

the knife nev?er reached the hand that would have used it, and there was a new

chief of do?mes?tics by the end of that week. These are pret?ty tales I tell you, are

they not? Aye, very pret?ty, in?deed."

"Did you see the per?son the knife was meant for?" Su?san?nah asked. "The ac?tu?al

killer?"

"Yes."

"Any?thing else? Did you see any?thing else?" Jake asked. The plan to mur?der

Roland's fa?ther didn't seem to hold much in?ter?est for him.

"Yes." Roland looked puz?zled. "Shoes. Just for a minute. Shoes tum bling through

the air. At first I thought they were au?tumn leaves. And when I saw what they

re?al?ly were, they were gone and I was ly?ing on my bed with the ball hugged in my

arms . . . pret?ty much the way I car?ried it back from Mejis. My fa?ther ... as I've

said, his sur?prise when he looked in?side the bag was very great, in? deed."

You told him who had the knife with the spe?cial poi?son on it, Su?sana?h thought,

Jeeves the But?ler, or who?ev?er, but you didn't tell him who was sup? posed to

ac?tu?al?ly use it, did you, sug?ar? Why not? Be?cause you want?ed to take care of dat

lit?tle spot o' work yo own?self? But be?fore she could ask, Ed?die was ask?ing a

ques?tion of his own.

"Shoes? Fly?ing through the air? Does that mean any?thing to you now?"

Roland shook his head.

"Tell us about the rest of what you saw in it," Su?sana?h said.

He gave her a look of such ter?ri?ble pain that what Su?sana?h had on? ly sus?pected

im?me?di?ate?ly so?lid?ified to fact in her mind. She looked away from him and groped

for Ed?die's hand.

"I cry your par?don, Su?sana?h, but I can?not. Not now. For now, I've told all I can."

"All right," Ed?die said. "All right, Roland, that's cool."

"Ool," Oy agreed.

"Did you ev?er 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

battements. "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?" Susanah 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, Susanah felt as if the

bridge of her nose would simply disintegrate, and when she looked at Jake, she

saw he was weeping copiously—not crying the way people do when they're sad,

but the way they do when their sinuses are in total revolt. She couldn't get the saw-

player the kid had mentioned out of her mind. Sounds Hawaiian, she thought over

and over again as Eddie pushed her grimly along in the new wheelchair, weaving

in and out of the stalled vehicles. Sounds Hawaiian, doesn't it? Sounds fucking

Hawai?ian, doesn't it. Miss Oh So Black and Pret?ty?

On both sides of the turn?pike the thin?ny lapped all the way up to the em?bank?ment,

cast?ing its twitch?ing, mis?shapen re?flec?tions of trees and grain el?eva?tors, seem?ing to

watch the pil?grims pass as hun?gry an?imals in a zoo might watch plump chil?dren.

Su?san?nah would find her?self think?ing of the thin?ny in Eye?bolt Canyon, reach?ing

out hun?gri?ly 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 I-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?lowing 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?sana?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?sana?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 Tower, I and my friends, Sheemie was with us.

As a sort of squire, I suppose you’d say. He . . .” But Roland trailed off, biting at

his lip, and of that he would say no more.

“Cordelia?” Susanah asked. “The crazy aunt?”

“Dead before the bonfire had burned down to embers. It might have been a heart-

storm, or a brain-storm—what Edie calls a stroke.”

“Perhaps it was shame,” Susanah said. “Or horror at what she’d done.”

“It may have been,” Roland said. “Waking to the truth when it’s too late is a

terrible thing. I know that very well.”

“Something up there,” Jake said, pointing at a long stretch of road from which the

cars had been cleared. “Do you see?”

Roland did—with his eyes he seemed to see everything—but it was another fifteen

minutes or so before Susanah began to pick up the small black specks ahead in

the road. She was quite sure she knew what they were, although what she thought

was less vision than intuition. Ten minutes after that, she was sure.

They were shoes. Six pairs of shoes placed neatly in a line across the eastbound

lanes of Interstate 70.

CHAPTER II

SHOES IN THE ROAD

1

They reached the shoes at mid-morning. Beyond them, clearer now, stood the

glass palace. It glimmered a delicate green shade, like the reflection of a lily pad in

still water. There were shining gates in front of it; red pennons snapped from its

towers 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

mem?ber of their ka-?tet. Roland picked one of them up and felt in?side it. He didn't

know how many bum?blers had worn shoes in the his?to?ry of the world, but he was

will?ing to guess that none had ev?er been gift?ed with a set of silk-?lined leather

booties.

“Bal?ly, Guc?ci, eat your heart out,” Ed?die said. “This is great stuff.”

Su?san?nah's were eas?iest to pick out, and not just be?cause of the fe?mi nine, spark?ly

swoops on the sides. They weren't re?al?ly shoes at all—they had been made to fit

over the stumps of her legs, which end?ed just above the knees.

“Now look at this,” she mar?velled, hold?ing one up so the sun could flash on the

rhine?stones with which the shoes were dec?orat?ed ... if they were rhine?stones. She

had a crazy no?tion that maybe they were di?amond chips. “Cap?pies. Af?ter four

years of get?tin along in what my friend Cyn thia calls ‘cir?cum?stances of re?duced

leg-?room,’ I fi?nal?ly got my?self a pair of cap?pies. Think of that.”

“Cap?pies,” Ed?die mused. “Is that what they call em?”

“That's what they call em, sug?ar.”

Jake's were bright red Ox?fords—ex?cept for the col?or, they would have looked

per?fect?ly at home in the well-?bred class?rooms of The Piper School. He flexed one,

then turned it over. The sole was bright and un marked. There was no

man?ufac?tur?er's stamp, nor had he re?al?ly ex?pect?ed one. His fa?ther had maybe a

dozen pairs of fine hand?made shoes. Jake knew them when he saw them.

Ed?die's were low boots with Cuban heels {Maybe in this world you call them

Mejis heels, he thought) and point?ed toes ... what, back in his oth?er life, had been

known as "street-?bop?pers." Kids from the mid-?six?ties—an era

Odet?ta/Det?ta/Su?san?nah had just missed—might have called them "Bea?tle-?boots."

Roland's, of course, were cow?boy boots. Fan?cy ones—you'd go dancing rather

than drov?ing in such as these. Looped stitch?ing, side dec?ora tions, nar?row, haughty

arch?es. He ex?am?ined them with?out pick?ing them up, then looked at his fel?low

trav?ellers and frowned. They were look?ing at each oth?er. You would have said

three peo?ple couldn't do that, on?ly a pair ... but you on?ly would have said it if

you'd nev?er been part of a ka-?tet.

Roland still shared khex with them; he felt the pow?er?ful cur?rent of their min?gled

thought, but could not un?der?stand it. Be?cause it's of their world. They come from

dif?fer?ent whens of that world, but they see some thing here that's com?mon 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, ex?act?ly," Su?san?nah said.

"No," Jake said. "It's an?oth?er rid?dle." He looked at the weird, blood red Ox?ford

shoe in his hands with dis?taste. "An?oth?er god?damned rid?dle."

"Tell what you know." He looked to?ward the glass palace again. It was per?haps

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," Eddie said, "we got em, anyway. And you're thinking what I'm thinking, aren't you?"

"I guess I am."

"You, Jake?"

Instead of answering with words, Jake picked up the other Oxford (Roland had no

doubt that all the shoes, including Oxy's, would fit perfectly) and clapped them

briskly together three times. It meant nothing to Roland, but both Edie and

Susanah reacted violently, looking around, looking especially at the sky, as if

expecting a storm born out of this bright autumn sunshine. I hey ended up looking

at the glass palace again . . . and then at each other, in that knowing, round-eyed

way that made Roland feel like shaking them both until their teeth rattled. Yet he

waited. Sometimes that was all a man could do.

"After you killed Jonas, you looked into the ball," Edie 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," Edie 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,

humorous 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 thinnesses everywhere now, hadn't he told them that? Worlds

melting into one another as the forces of the Tower weakened? As the day when

the rose would be plowed under drew nearer?

"You saw things as you flew," Edie 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 reaping charms, either," Edie 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 monkey keys that gave me the creeps," Susanah said. "The flying

monkey keys. I'd get thinking about em, and then have to crawl into bed with my mom

and dad. They'd still be arguing 'bout whose bright idea it was to take me to that

show in the worst place when I fell asleep between em."

"I wasn't worried about clapping the heels together," Jake said. "Not a bit." It was

Susanah and Edie he was speaking to; for the time being, it was as if Roland

wasn't even there. "I wasn't wearing them, after all."

"True," Susanah said, sounding severe, "but you know what my daddy always

used to say?"

"No, but I have a feeling we're going to find out," Edie said.

She gave Edie a brief, severe look, then turned her attention back to Jake. "

'Never whistle for the wind unless you want it to blow,' " she said. "And it's good

advice, no matter what Young Mister Foolish here may think."

"Spanked again," Edie said, grinning.

"Tanked!" Oy said, eyeing Edie severely.

"Explain this to me," Roland said in his softest voice. "I would hear. I would share

your khef. And I would share it now."

They told him a story almost every American child of the twentieth century

knew, about a Kansas farmgirl named Dorothy Gale who had been carried away

by a cyclone and deposited, along with her dog, in the Land of Oz. There was no

road in Oz, but there was a yellow brick road which served much the same purpose,

and there were witches, both good and bad. There was a ka-tet comprised of

Dorothy, Toto, and three friends she met along the way: the Cowardly Lion, the

Tin Woodman, and the Scarecrow. They each had
(bird and bear and hare and fish)

a fondest wish, and it was with Dorothy's that Roland's new friends
(and Roland

himself, for that matter) identified the most strongly: she wanted
to find her way

home again.

"The Munchkins told her that she had to follow the yellow brick road
to Oz," Jake

said, "and so she went. She met the others along the way, sort of like
you met us,

Roland—"

"Although you don't look much like Judy Garland," Eddie put in.

"—and eventually they got there. To Oz, the Emerald Palace, and
the guy who

lived in the Emerald Palace." He looked toward the glass palace
ahead of them,

greener and greener in the strengthening light, and then back to
Roland.

"Yes, I understand. And was this fellow, Oz, a powerful thing? A
Baron? Perhaps a

King?"

Again, the three of them exchanged a glance from which Roland was
excluded.

"That's complicated," Jake said. "He was sort of a humbug—"

“A bumhug? What’s that?”

“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 smoosh?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 ex?pect ing it.

They picked up the red shoes which had been left for them in the east?bound lanes

(Jake took Oy’s) and moved on again to?ward the shim?mer?ing glass cas?tle.

Oz, Roland thought. He searched his mem?ory, but he didn’t think it was a name he

had ev?er heard be?fore, or a word of the High Speech that had come in dis?guise, as

char had come dis?guised as Char?lie. Yet it had a sound that be?longed in this

busi?ness; a sound more of his world than of Jake’s, Su?san?nah’s, and Ed?die’s, from

whence the tale had come.

3

Jake kept ex?pect?ing the Green Palace to be?gin look?ing nor?mal as they drew clos?er

to it, the way the at?trac?tions in Dis?ney World be?gan to look nor?mal as you drew

close to them—not or?di?nary, nec?es?sar?ily, but nor?mal, things which were as much

a part of the world as the com?er bus stop or mail?box or park bench, stuff you could

touch, stuff you could write fuck piper on, if you took a no?tion.

But that didn’t hap?pen, wasn’t go?ing to hap?pen, and as they neared the Green

Palace, Jake re?al?ized some?thing else: it was the most beau?ti?ful, ra?di?ant 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, Eddie spoke for all of them. "Yeah. Yeah,

probably. It's not the same as the one in the movie, but if this thing came out of

our minds, it wouldn't be. Because we see the one from L. Frank Baum's book,

too. Both from the illustrations in the book. . ."

"And the ones from our imaginations," Jake said.

"But that's it," Susanah said. "I'd say we're definitely off to see the Wizard."

"You bet," Eddie said. "Because—because—because—because—because—"

"Because of the wonderful things he does!" Jake and Susanah finished in unison,

then laughed, delighted with each other, while Roland frowned at them, feeling

puzzled and looking left out.

"But I have to tell you guys," Eddie said, "that it's only gonna take about one more

wonderful thing to send me around to the dark side of the Psycho Moon. Most

likely for good."

4

As they drew closer, they could see Interstate 70 stretching away into the pale

green depths of the castle's slightly rounded outer wall; it floated there like an

optical illusion. Closer yet, and they could hear the pennants snapping in the

breeze and see their own ripply reflections, like drowned folk who somehow walk

at the bottoms of watery tropical graves.

There was an inner redoubt of dark blue glass—it was a color Jake as sociated

with the bottles fountain-pen ink came in—and a rust-hued wall-walk between the

redoubt and the outer wall. That color made Susanah think of the bottles Hires

root-beer had come in when she was a little girl.

The way in was blocked by a barred gate that was both huge and ethereal: it

looked like wrought iron which had been turned to glass. Each cunningly made

stake was a different color, and these colors seemed to come from the inside, as if

the bars were filled with some bright gas or liquid.

The travellers stopped before it. There was no sign of the turnpike beyond it;

instead of roadway, there was a courtyard of silver glass—a huge flat mirror, in

fact. Clouds floated serenely through its depths; so did the image of the occasion: a

swooping bird. Sun reflected off this glass courtyard and ran across the green

cas-tle walls in ripples. On the far side, the wall of the palace's inner ward rose in a

glim-mery green cliff, broken by narrow loop-hole windows of jet-black glass.

There was also an arched entry in this wall that made Jake think of St. Patrick's

Cathedral.

To the left of the main doorway was a sentry-box made of cream-colored glass

shot through with hazy orange threads. Its door, painted with red stripes, stood

open. The phone-booth-sized room inside was empty, although there was

something on the floor which looked to Jake like a newspaper.

Above the entry, flanking its darkness, were two crouching, leering gargoyles of

darkest violet glass. Their pointed tongues poked out like bruises.

The 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-

fashioned fluorescent. “These guys here look like birds— little tiny birds.”

Jake looked and saw that Edie was right: inside the gate’s purple up right were

flocks of birds no bigger than summer minges. They swooped giddily about in

their eternal twilight, weaving over and under one another, their wings leaving

tiny silver trails of bubbles.

“Are they really there?” Jake asked breathlessly. “Are they, Roland, or are we only

imagining them?”

“I don’t know. But I know what this gate has been made to look like.”

“So do I,” Edie said. He surveyed the shining posts, each with its own column of

imprisoned light and life. Each of the gate’s wings consisted of six colored bars.

The one in the center—broad and flat instead of round, and made to split in two

when the gate was opened—was the thirteenth. This one was dead black, and in

this one nothing moved.

Oh, maybe not that you can see, but there are things moving around in there, all

right, Jake thought. There’s life in there, terrible life. And maybe there are roses,

too. Drowned ones.

“It’s a Wizard’s Gate,” Edie said. “Each bar has been made to look like one of the

balls in Maerlyn’s Rainbow. Look, here’s the pink one.”

Jake leaned toward it, hands propped on his thighs. He knew what would be inside

even before he saw them: horses, of courses. Tiny herds of them, galloping

through that strange pink stuff that was neither light nor liquid. Horses running in

search of a Drop they would never find, maybe.

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?”

In?stead of an?swer?ing, Jake sat down in front of the gate, near the place where this

strange ver?sion of 1-70 end?ed, and be?gan putting on the shoes which had been left

for him. Ed?die watched a mo?ment, then sat down be?side him. “I guess we ought to

try it,” he said to Jake, “even though it’ll prob?ably turn out to be just an?oth?er

bumhug.”

Jake laughed, shook his head, and be?gan to tight?en the laces of the blood-?red

Ox?fords. He and Ed?die 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 bumblers 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 bumbler as he did so,

ignoring the rattle of the gate and the soft chime from the walls of the Green

Palace.

"You, Oy!"

"Oy!"

He rolled over on his back like a dog playing dead, then simply looked at his own

feet with a kind of disgusted bewilderment. Looking at him, Jake had a sharp

memory: trying to pat his stomach and rub his head at the same time, and his

father making fun of him when he couldn't do it right away.

"Roland, help me. He knows what he's supposed to do, but he doesn't know how to

do it." Jake glanced up at Edie. "And don't make any smart remarks, okay?"

"No," Edie said. "No smart remarks, Jake. Do you think just Oy has to do it this

time, or is it still a group effort?"

"Just him, I think."

"But it wouldn't hurt us to kind of click along with Mitch," 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?mon?ic 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 yak 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 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 blame 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 recep?tion room; on?ly a vault?ed, cav?ernous hall?way that seemed to go

on for?ev?er. The walls were lit with a faint green glow. This is just like the hall?way

in the movie, Jake thought, the one where the Cow ard?ly Li?on got so scared when

he stepped on his own tail.

And, adding a lit?tle ex?tra touch of verisimil?itude Jake could have done with?out,

Ed?die spoke up in a trem?bly (and bet?ter than pass?able) Bert Lahr im?ita?tion: “Wait

a minute, fel?las, I wuz just thinkin—I re?al?ly don’t wan?na see the Wiz?ard this much.

I bet?ter wait for you out?side!”

“Stop it,” Jake said sharply.

“Op?pit!” Oy agreed. He walked di?rect?ly at Jake’s heel, swing?ing his head

watch?ful?ly from side to side as he went. Jake could hear no sound ex?cept for their

own pas?sage ... yet he sensed some?thing: a sound that wasn’t. It was, he thought,

like look?ing at a wind-?chime that wants on?ly the slight?est puff of breeze to set it

tin?kling.

“Sor?ry,” Ed?die said. “Re?al?ly.” He point?ed. “Look down there.”

About forty yards ahead of them, the green cor?ri?dor did end, in a nar row green

door?way of amaz?ing height—per?haps thir?ty feet from the floor to its point?ed 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 Gashner 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 Canadenton 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 hang?ing

above the green throne, but he be?lieved it was Blaine the Mono no more than he

be?lieved it was the Wiz?ard of Oz. Some wiz?ard, per?haps, but this wasn't the

Emer?ald City, and Blaine was just as dead as dogshit. Ed?die had sent him home

with a fuckin rup?ture.

“HEL?LO THERE AGAIN, LIT?TLE TRAIL?HANDS!”

The smoky route-?map pulsed, but Ed?die no longer as?so?ci?at?ed it with the voice,

al?though he guessed they were sup?posed to. No, the voice was com?ing from the

pipes.

He glanced down, saw Jake's pa?per-?white face, and knelt be?side him. “If scrap,

kid,” he said.

“N-?No ... it's Blaine ... not dead...”

“He's dead, all right. This is noth?ing but an am?pli?fied ver?sion of the af?ter-?school

an?nounce?ments . . . who's got de?ten?tion and who's sup?posed to re?port to Room Six

for Speech Ther?apy. You dig?”

“What?” Jake looked up at him, lips wet and trem?bling, eyes dazed. “What do

you—”

“Those pipes are speak?ers. 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

RIDDES?”

”Yeah,” Ed died said. ”The one that goes, ‘How many dipolar computers does it

take to screw in a lightbulb?’ Who are you, buddy? I know goddam well you're

not Blaine the Mono, so who are you?”

”I ... AM ... Oz!” the voice thundered. The glass columns flashed; so did the

pipes behind the throne. ”OZ THE GREAT! OZ THE POWERFUL! WHO ARE

YOU?”

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 s'posed 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 what everyone wants, so far as I know—to go

back home again, 'cause there's no place like home. We—“

”You can't go home,” Jake said. He spoke in a rapid, frightened murmur. ”You

can't go home again, Thomas Wolfe said that, and that is the truth.“

”It's a lie, sug,” Susanah said. ”A flat-out lie. You can go home again. All you

have to do is find the right rainbow and walk under it. We've found it; the rest is

just, you know, footwork."

"WOULD YOU GO BACK TO NEW YORK, SUSANNAH DEAN? ED?DIE

DEAN? JAKE CHAMBERS? IS THAT WHAT YOU ASK OF OZ, THE

MIGHTY AND POWERFUL?"

"New York isn't home for us anymore," Susannah said. She looked very small yet

very fearless as she sat in her new wheelchair at the foot of the enormous, pulsing

throne. "No more than Gilead is home for Roland. Take us back to the Path of the

Beam. That's where we want to go, because that's our way home. Only way home

we got."

"GO AWAY!" cried the voice from the pipes. "GO AWAY AND COME BACK

TOMORROW! WE'LL DISCUSS THE BEAM THEN! FIDDLE-DE-DEE, SAID

SCARLETT, WE'LL TALK ABOUT THE BEAM TOMORROW, FOR

TOMORROW IS ANOTHER DAY!"

"No," Ed?die said. "We'll talk about it now."

"DO NOT AROUSE THE WRATH OF THE GREAT AND POWERFUL OZ!"

the voice cried, and the pipes flashed furiously with each word. Susannah was sure

this was supposed to be scary, but she found it almost amusing, instead. It was like

watching a salesman demonstrate a child's toy. Hey, kids! When you talk, the pipes

flash bright colors! Try it and see!

"Sugar, you best listen, now," Susannah said. "What you don't want to do is arouse

the wrath of folks with guns. Especially when you be livin in a glass house.”

“I SAID COME BACK TOMORROW!”

Red smoke once more began to boil out of the slots in the arms of the throne. It

was thicker now. The shape which had been Blaine’s route-map melted apart and

joined it. The smoke formed a face, this time. It was narrow and hard and

watchful, framed by long hair.

It’s the man Roland shot in the desert, Susanah thought wonderingly. It’s that

man Jonas. I know it is.

Now Oz spoke in a slightly trembling voice: “DO YOU PRESUME TO

THREATEN THE GREAT OZ?” The lips of the huge, smoky face hovered over

the throne’s seat parted in a snarl of mingled menace and contempt. “YOU

UNGRATEFUL CREATURES! OH, YOU UNGRATEFUL CREATURES!”

Edie, who knew smoke and mirrors when he saw them, had glanced in another

direction. His eyes widened and he gripped Susanah’s arm above the elbow.

“Look,” he whispered. “Christ, Suze, look at Oy!”

The billy-bumblar had no interest in smoke-ghosts, whether they were mono-rail

route-maps, dead Coffin Hunters, or just Hollywood special effects of the pre-

World War II variety. He had seen (or smelled) something that was more

interesting.

Susanah grabbed Jake, turned him, and pointed at the bumblar. She saw the boy’s

eyes widen with understanding a moment before Oy reached the small alcove in

the left wall. It was screened from the main chamber by a green curtain which

matched the glass walls. Oy stretched his long neck forward, caught the curtain's

fabric in his teeth, and yanked it back.

Darktower 4 - Wizard and Glass

6

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

al?cove be?gan to turn.

Tell me, cul?ly, Jake re?mem?bered this voice say?ing be?fore its own?
er had dis?cov?ered

the du?bi?ous at?trac?tions of am?pli?fi?ca?tion. Tell me all you know
about dipo?lar

com?put?ers and tran?si?tive cir?cuits. Tell me and I'll give you a drink.

It wasn't Jonas, and it wasn't the Wiz?ard of any?thing. It was David
Quick's

grand?son. It was the Tick-?Tock Man.

Darktower 4 - Wizard and Glass

7

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 sitting in the middle of the

great throne, with his legs casually crossed in front of him. He was wearing jeans,

a dark jacket that belted at the waist, and old, run down cowboy boots. On his

jacket was a button that showed a pig's head with a bullet hole between the eyes. In

his lap this newcomer held a draw string bag. He rose, standing in the seat of the

throne like a child in daddy's chair, and the smile dropped away from his face like

loose skin. Now his eyes blazed, and his lips parted over vast, hungry teeth.

"Get them, Andrew! Get them! Kill them! Every sister-fucking one of them!"

"My life for you!" the man in the alcove screamed, and for the first time Jake saw

the machine-gun propped in the corner. Tick-Tock sprang for it and snatched it up.

"My life for you!"

He turned, and Oy was on him once again, leaping forward and upward, sinking

his teeth deep into Tick-Tock's left thigh, just below the crotch.

Eddie and Susanah drew in unison, each raising one of Roland's big guns. They

fired in concert, not even the smallest overlap in the sound of their shots. One of

them tore off the top of Tick-Tock's miserable head, buried itself in the equipment,

and created a loud but mercifully brief snarl of feedback. The other took him in the throat.

He staggered forward one step, then two. Oy dropped to the floor and backed

away from him, snarling. A third step took Tick-Tock out into the throne room

proper. He raised his arms toward Jake, and the boy could read Ticky's hatred in

his remaining green eye; the boy thought he could hear the man's last, hateful

thought: Oh, you fucking little squint—

Then Tick-tock collapsed forward, as he had collapsed in the Cradle of the Grays

... only this time he would rise no more.

"Thus fell Lord Perth, and the earth did shake with that thunder," said the man on

the throne.

Except he's not a man, Jake thought. Not a man at all. We've found the Wizard at

last, I think. And I'm pretty sure I know what's in the bag he has.

"Marten," Roland said. He held out his left hand, the one which was still whole.

"Marten Broadcloak. After all these years. After all these centuries."

"Want this, Roland?"

Edie put the gun he had used to kill the Tick-tock Man in Roland's hand. A

ten-drill of blue smoke was still rising from the barrel. Roland looked at the old

revolver as if he had never seen it before, then slowly lifted it and pointed it at the

grinning, rosy-cheeked figure sitting cross-legged on the Green Palace's throne.

"Finally," Roland breathed, thumbing back the trigger. "Finally in my sights."

Darktower 4 - Wizard and Glass

8

"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 lobstersties, 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, lad, 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 DeCorry, 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 it?self Flagg was gone. Roland found him?self al ready be?gin?ning to won?der

if he—or it had been there in the first place.

The ball was still there, how?ev?er, un?harmed and glow?ing the same en tic?ing pink

he re?mem?bered from so long ago—from Mejis, when he had been young and in

love. This sur?vivor of Maer?lyn’s Rain?bow had rolled al?most to the edge of the

throne’s seat; two more inch?es and it would have plunged over and shat?tered on

the floor. Yet it had not; still it re?mained, this be?witched thing Su?san Del?ga?do had

first glimpsed through the win dow of Rhea’s hut, un?der the light of the Kiss?ing

Moon.

Roland picked it up—how well it fit his hand, how nat?ural it felt against his palm,

even af?ter all these years—and looked in?to its cloudy, trou?bled depths. “You

al?ways did have a charmed life,” he whis?pered to it. He thought of Rhea as he had

seen her in this ball—her an?cient, laugh ing eyes. He thought of the flames from

the Reap-?Night bon?fire ris?ing around Su?san, mak?ing her beau?ty shim?mer in the

heat. Mak?ing it shiv?er like a mi?rage.

Wretched glam! he thought. If I dashed you to the floor, sure?ly we would drown in

the sea of tears that would pour out of your split bel?ly . . . the tears of all those

you’ve put to ru?in.

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 be?lieve they ac?tu al?ly need?ed it. He

thought that Tick-?Tock and the crea?ture which had called it?self Flagg had been

their last chal?lenge in that re?gard. The Green Palace was their door back to Mid-

World ... and it was theirs, now. They had con?quered it by force of arms.

But you can't go yet, gun?slinger. Not un?til you've fin?ished your sto?ry, 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 slowly around him, their eyes wide and filling with the ball's flashing

pink light. Already they were half-hypnotized by it, even Oy.

"We are ka-tet," Roland said, holding the ball toward them. "We are one from

many. I lost my one true love at the beginning of my quest for the Dark Tower.

Now look into this wretched thing, if you would, and see what I lost not long after.

See it once and for all; see it very well."

They looked. The ball, cupped in Roland's upraised hands, began to pulse faster. It

gathered them in and swept them away. Caught and whirled in the grip of that

pink storm, they flew over the Wizard's Rainbow to the Gilead that had been.

CHAPTER. IV

the glass

Jake of New York stands in an upper corridor of the Great Hall of Gilead—more

casual, here in the green land, than Mayor's House. He looks around and sees

Susan and Eddie standing by a tapestry, their eyes big, their hands tightly

entwined. And Susan is standing; she has her legs back, at least for now, and

what she called "cappies" have been replaced by a pair of rubber slippers exactly

like those Dorothy wore when she stepped out upon her version of the Great Road

to find the Wizard of Oz, that bumhug.

She has her legs because this is a dream, Jake thinks, but knows it is no dream. He

looks down and sees Oy looking up at him with his anxious, intelligent, gold-

ringed eyes. He is still wearing the red booties. Jake bends and strokes Oy's head.

The feel of the humbler's fur under his hand is clear and real. No, this isn't a dream.

Yet Roland is not here, he realizes; they are four instead of five. He realizes

something else as well: the air of this corridor is faintly pink, and small pink halos

revolve around the funny, old-fashioned lightbulbs that illuminate the corridor.

Something is going to happen; some story is going to play out in front of their

eyes. And now, as if the very thought had summoned them, the boy hears the click

of approaching footsteps.

It's a story I know, Jake thinks. One I've been told before.

As Roland comes around the corner, he realizes what story it is: the one where

Marten Broadcloak stops Roland as Roland passes by on his way to the rooftop,

where it will perhaps be cooler. "You, boy," Marten will say. "Come in! Don't

stand in the hall! Your mother wants to speak to you." But of course that isn't the

truth, was never the truth, will never be the truth, no matter how much time slips

and bends. What Marten wants is for the boy to see his mother, and to understand

that Gabrielle Deschain has become the mistress of his father's wizard. Marten

wants to goad the boy into an early test of manhood while his father is away and

can't put a stop to it; he wants to get the puppy out of his way before it can grow

teeth long enough to bite.

Now they will see all this; the sad comedy will go its sad and predetermined course

in front of their eyes. I'm too young, Jake thinks, but of course he is not too young;

Roland will be on?ly three years old?er when he comes to Mejis with his friends and

meets Su?san up?on the Great Road. On?ly three years old?er when he loves her; on?ly

three years old?er when he los?es her.

I don't care, I don't want to see it—

And won't, he re?al?izes as Roland draws clos?er; all that has al?ready hap?pened. For

this is not Au?gust, the time of Full Earth, but late fall or ear?ly win?ter. He can tell

by the ser?ape Roland wears, a sou?venir of his trip to the Out?er Arc, and by the

va?por that smokes from his mouth and nose each time he ex?hales: no cen?tral

heat?ing in Gilead, and it's cold up here.

There are oth?er changes as well: Roland is now wear?ing the guns which are his

birthright, the big ones with the san?dal?wood grips. His fa ther passed them on at

the ban?quet, Jake thinks. He doesn't know how he knows this, but he does. And

Roland's face, al?though still that of a boy, is not the open, un?tried face of the one

who idled up this same cor?ri?dor five months be?fore; the boy who was en?snared by

Marten has been through much since then, and his bat?tle with Cort has been the

very least of it.

Jake sees some?thing else, too: the boy gun?slinger is wear?ing the red cow?boy boots.

He doesn't know it, though. Be?cause this isn't re?al?ly hap?pen?ing.

Yet some?how it is. They are in?side the wiz?ard's glass, they are in?side the pink

storm (those pink ha?los re?volv?ing around the light fix?tures re mind Jake of The

Falls of the Hounds, and the moon?bows re?volv?ing in the mist), and this is

hap?pen?ing all over again.

“Roland!” Ed?die calls from where he and Su?san?nah stand by the tapestry.

Su?san?nah gasps and squeezes his shoul?der, want?ing him to be silent, but Ed?die

ig?nores her. “No, Roland! Don’t! Bad idea! ” “No! Olan!” Oy yaps.

Roland ig?nores both of them, and he pass?es by Jake a hand’s breadth away

with?out see?ing him. For Roland, they are not here; red boots or no red boots, this

ka-?tet is far in his fu?ture.

He stops at a door near the end of the cor?ri?dor, hes?itates, then rais?es his fist and

knocks. Ed?die starts down the cor?ri?dor to?ward him, still hold ing Su?san?nah’s

hand... now he looks al?most as if he is drag?ging her.

“Come on, Jake, ” says Ed?die.

“No, I don’t want to.”

“It’s not about what you want, and you know it. We’re sup?posed 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 stom?ach clenched in a knot, Jake comes along. As

they ap?proach Roland—the guns look enor?mous on his slim hips, and his un?lined

but al?ready tired face some?how makes Jake feel like weep?ing—the gun?slinger

knocks again.

“She ain’t there, sug?ar!” Su?san?nah shouts at him. “She ain’t there or she ain’t

an?swer?ing the door, and which one it is don’t mat?ter to you! Leave it! Leave her!

She ain’t worth it! Just bein your moth?er don’t make her worth it! Go away!”

But he doesn't hear her, either, and he doesn't go away. As Jake, Edie, 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 . . . on 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 in to 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," Edie says. "Stay with him."

They go in a cluster that might have been comic under other circumstances. Not

under these; here it is a case of three people desperate for the comfort of friends.

Roland stands looking at the bed against the room's left wall. He looks at it as if

hypnotized. Perhaps he is trying to imagine Marten in it with his mother; perhaps

he is remembering Susan, with whom he never slept in a proper bed, let alone a

canopied luxury such as this. Jake can see the gunslinger's dim profile in a three-

paned mirror across the room, in an alcove. This triple glass stands in front of a

small table the boy recognizes from his mother's side of his parents' bedroom; it is

a vanity.

The gunslinger shakes himself and comes back from whatever thoughts have

seized his mind. On his feet are those terrible boots; in this dim light, they look

like the boots of a man who has walked through a creek of blood.

"Mother!"

He takes a step toward the bed and actually bends a little, as if he thinks she might

be hiding under it. If she's been hiding, however, it wasn't there; the shoes which

Jake saw beneath the drape were women's shoes, and the shape which now stands

at the end of the short corridor, just 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 Edie or Susanah ever could, because Jake's

own parents are peculiarly like them: Elmer Chambers is a gun-slinger 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 grief

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 Desbaria,

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, Edie

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 unhappiness and shame are often no match for

desire—he has come here to speak to his mother, to beg her to come back to her

husband before it's too late. He has saved her from herself once, he will tell her,

but he cannot do it again.

And if she still won't go, Jake thinks, or tries to brave it out, pretend she doesn't

know what he's talking about, he'll give her a choice: leave Gilead with his

help—now, tonight—or be clapped in chains tomorrow morning, a traitor so

outrageous she will almost certainly be hung as Hax the cook was hung.

"Mother?" he calls, still unaware of the shape standing in the shadows behind

him. He takes one further step into the room, and now the shape moves. The shape

raises its hands. There is something in its hands. Not a gun, Jake can tell that

much, but it has a deadly look to it, a snaky look, somehow—

"Roland, watch out!" 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'll ever be, 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

grin of surprise and horror, just beginning to get the truth of what he must

carry with him the rest of his life: he has used the guns of his father to kill his

mother.

Now cackling laughter fills the room. Roland does not turn; he is frozen by the

woman in the blue dress and black shoes who lies bleeding in the corridor of her

apartment; the woman he came to save and has killed, instead. She lies with the

hand-woven belt draped across her 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 ye loved—aye, burned her alive, I did— and now I’ve

made ye a murderer. Do ye repent of killing my snake yet, gun-slinger? My poor,

sweet Ermot? Do ye regret playing yer hard games with one more trig than ye ‘II

ever be in yer miserable life? ”

He gives no sign that he hears, only stares at his lady mother. Soon he will go to

her, kneel by her, but not yet; not yet.

The face in the ball now turns toward the three pilgrims, and as it does it changes,

becomes old and bald and raddled—becomes, in fact, the face Roland saw in the

lying mirror. The gun-slinger has been unable to see his future friends, but Rhea

sees them; aye, she sees them very well.

“Cry it off! ” she croaks—it is the caw of a raven sitting on a leafless branch

beneath a winter-dimmed sky. “Cry it off! Renounce the Tower!”

“Never, you bitch, ” Edie says.

“Ye see what he is! What a monster he is! And this is only the beginning of it, ye

ken! Ask him what happened to Cuthbert! To Alain—Alain’s touch, clever as

’twas, saved him not in the end, so it didn’t! Ask him what happened to Jamie De

Curry! He never had a friend he didn’t kill, never had a lover who’s not dust in the

wind!”

“Go your way, ” Susanah says, “and leave us to ours. ”

Rhea’s green, cracked lips twist in a horrible sneer. “He’s killed his own mother!

What will he do to you, ye stupid brown-skinned bitch ? ”

“He didn’t kill her, ” Jake said. “You killed her. Now go!”

Jake takes a step toward the ball, meaning to pick it up and dash it to the floor . . .

and he can do that, he realizes, for the ball is real. It’s the one thing in this vision

that is. But before he can put his hands to it, it flashes a soundless explosion of

pink light. Jake throws his hands up in front of his face to keep from being

blinded, and then he is

(melting I’m melting what a world oh what a world)

falling, he is being whirled down through the pink storm, out of Oz and back to

Kansas, out of Oz and back to Kansas, out of Oz and back to—

CHAPTER V

THE PATH OF

THE BEAM

1

“—home,” Edie muttered. His voice sounded thick and punch-drunk to his own

ears. “Back home, because there’s no place like home, no indeed.”

He tried to open his eyes and at first couldn’t. It was as if they were glued shut. He

put the heel of his hand to his forehead and pushed up, tightening the skin on his

face. It worked; his eyes popped open. He saw neither the throne-room of the

Green Palace nor (and this was what he had really expected) the richly appointed

but somehow claustrophobic bed room in which he had just been.

He was outside, lying in a small clearing of winter-white grass. Nearby was a little

grove of trees, some still with their last brown leaves clinging to the branches.

And one branch with an odd white leaf, an albino leaf. There was a pretty trick

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

swatch?es of grass, too. Over?head was a sky?ful of still white clouds, ev?ery bit as

in?ter?est?ing as a laun?dry-?bas?ket full of sheets.

The sky was clear when we went in?side the Palace, he thought, and re?al?ized time

had slipped again. How much or how lit?tle, he wasn't sure he want?ed to

know—Roland's world was like a trans?mis?sion with its gear-?teeth all but stripped

away; you nev?er knew when time was go?ing to pop in?to neu?tral or race you away

in over?drive.

Was this Roland's world, though? And if it was, how had they got?ten back to it?

"How should I know?" Ed?die croaked, and got slow?ly to his feet, winc?ing as he

did so. He didn't think he was hun?gover, but his legs were sore and he felt as if he

had just tak?en the world's heav?iest Sun?day af?ter noon nap.

Roland and Su?san?nah lay on the ground un?der the trees. The gun?slinger was

stir?ring, but Su?san?nah lay on her back, arms spread ex?trav?agant?ly wide, snor?ing in

an un?la?dy?like way that made Ed?die grin. Jake was near?by, with Oy sleep?ing 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 heav?ily 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 cir?cle, and had got?ten

three quar?ters of the way back to where he’d start?ed when he saw the Green Palace

on the hori?zon. From here it looked very small, and its bril?liance had been robbed

by the sun?less day. Ed?die guessed it might be thir?ty miles away. Lead?ing to?ward

them from that di?rec?tion were the tracks of Su?san?nah’s wheelchair.

He could hear the thin?ny, but faint?ly. He thought he could see it, as well—a

quick?sil?ver shim?mer like bog?wa?ter, stretch?ing across the flat, open land . . . and

fi?nal?ly dry?ing up about five miles away. Five miles west of here? Giv?en the

lo?ca?tion of the Green Palace and the fact that they had been trav?el?ing east on I-

70, that was the nat?ural as?sump?tion, but who re?al?ly knew, es?pe?cial?ly with no

vis?ible sun to use for ori?en?ta?tion?

“Where’s the turn?pike?” Jake asked. His voice sound?ed thick and gum?my. Oy

joined him, stretch?ing first one rear leg, then the oth?er. Ed?die saw he had lost one

of his booties at some point.

“Maybe it was can?celled due to lack of in?ter?est.”

“I don’t think we’re in Kansas any?more,” Jake said. Ed?die looked at him sharply,

but didn’t be?lieve the kid was con?scious?ly riff?ing on The Wiz?ard of Oz. “Not the

one where the Kansas City Roy?als play, not the one where the Monar?chs play,

ei?ther.”

“What gives you that idea?”

Jake hoist?ed a thumb to?ward 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.

2

"Edie? Where you at, sugar?"

Edie looked down from the lane of clouds in the sky and saw Susan nah sitting

up, rubbing the back of her neck. She looked unsure of where she was. Perhaps

even of who she was. The red cappies she was wearing looked oddly dull in this

light, but they were still the brightest things in Edie's view ... until he looked

down at his own feet and saw the street-boppers with their Cuban heels. Yet these

also looked dull, and Edie no longer thought it was just the day's cloudy light that

made them seem so. He looked at Jake's shoes, Oy's remaining three slippers,

Roland's cowboy boots (the gunslinger was sitting up now, arms crossed around

his knees, looking blankly off into the distance). All the same ruby red, but a

lifeless red, somehow. As if some magic essential to them had been used up.

Suddenly, Edie wanted them off his feet.

He sat down beside Susan nah, gave her a kiss, and said: "Good morning, Sleeping

Beauty. Or afternoon, if it's that." Then, quickly, almost hating to touch them (it

was like touching dead skin, somehow), Edie yanked off the street-boppers. As

he did, he saw that they were scuffed at the toes and muddy at the heels, no longer

new 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.”

3

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 glam-

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.” Usual^{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 suggests is not bad advice,” Roland said. “I urge you to

consider it most seriously. And if you want to go back to your world, I will allow

you to go.”

“Roland, I can’t believe you,” Edie said. “This, after you dragged me and Suze

over here, kicking and screaming? You know what my brother would say about

you? That you’re as contrary as a hog on ice-skates.”

“I did what I did before I learned to know you as friends,” Roland said. “Before I

learned to love you as I loved Alain and Cuthbert. And before I was forced to ...

to revisit certain scenes. Doing that has ...” He paused, looking down at his feet

(he had put his old boots back on again) and thinking hard. At last he looked up

again. “There was a part of me that hadn’t moved or spoken in a good many years.

I thought it was dead. It isn’t. I have learned to love again, and I’m aware that this

is probably my last chance to love. I’m slow—Vanay 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," Su?san?nah said, "but Ed?die's right about ka." She took the note and ran

a fin?ger over it thought?ful?ly. "Roland, you can't talk about that—ka, I mean—then

turn around and take it back again, just be?cause you get a lit?tle low on willpow?er

and ded?ica?tion."

"Willpow?er and ded?ica?tion are good words," Roland re?marked. "There's a bad one,

though, that means the same thing. That one is ob?ses?sion."

She shrugged it away with an im?pa?tient twitch of her shoul?ders.

"Sug?arpie, ei?ther

this whole busi?ness is ka, or none of it is. And scary as ka might be—the idea of

fate with ea?gle eyes and a blood?hound's nose—I find the idea of no ka even

scari?er." She tossed the R.F. note aside on the mat?ted grass.

"What?ev?er you call it, you're just as dead if it runs you over," Roland said. "Rimer

. . . Thorin . . . Jonas . . . my moth?er . . . Cuth?bert . . . Su?san. Just ask them. Any of

them. If you on?ly could."

"You're miss?ing the biggest part of this," Ed?die said. "You can't send us back.

Don't you re?al?ize that, you big ga?loot? Even if there was a door, we wouldn't go

through it. Am I wrong about that?"

He looked at Jake and Su?san?nah. They shook their heads. Even Oy shook his head.

No, he wasn't wrong.

"We've changed," Ed?die said. "We..." Now he was the one who didn't know how

to go on. How to ex?press his need to see the Tow?er . . . and his oth?er need, just as

strong, to go on car?ry?ing the gun with the san?dal-?wood in?sets. The big iron was

how he'd come to think of it. Like in that old Mar?ty Rob?bins 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 cov?er it.

"Ka?ka," Roland replied, af?ter a mo?ment's con?sider?ation. The three of them stared

at him, mouths open. Roland of Gilead had made a joke.

4

"There's one thing I don't un?der?stand about what we saw," Su?sannah said

hes?itant?ly. "Why did your moth?er hide be?hind 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 cho?sen a belt as her weapon. The

very fact that she had made me a present—and that's what it was, it had my ini?tials

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?sannah 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. "Although . . . did she steal it?" He seemed to ask this

question of himself. "My father knew a great many things, but he sometimes kept

what he knew to himself."

"Like him knowing that your mother and Marten were seeing each other,"

Susanah said.

"Yes."

"But, Roland . . . you surely don't believe that your father would knowingly have

allowed you to . . . to . . ."

Roland looked at her with large, haunted eyes. His tears had gone, but when he

tried to smile at her question, he was unable. "Have knowingly allowed his son to

kill his wife?" he asked. "No, I can't say that. Much as I'd like to, I can't. That he

should have caused such a thing to have happened, to have deliberately set it in

motion, like a man playing Castles . . . that I cannot believe. But would he allow

it to run its course? Aye, most certainly."

"What happened to the ball?" Jake asked.

"I don't know. I fainted. When I awoke, my mother and I were still alone, one

dead and one alive. No one had come to the sound of the shots—the walls of that

place were thick stone, and that wing mostly empty as well. Her blood had dried.

The belt she'd made me was covered with it, but I took it, and I put it on. I wore

that bloodstained gift for many years, and how I lost it is a tale for another

day—I'll tell it to you before we have done, for it bears on my quest for the Tower.

"But although no one had come to investigate the gunshot, someone had come for

another reason. While I lay fainted away by my mother's corpse, that someone

came in and took the wizard's glass away."

"Rhea?" Edie asked.

"I doubt she was so close in her body ... but she had a way of making friends, that

one. Aye, a way of making friends. I saw her again, you know." Roland explained

no further, but a stony gleam arose in his eyes. Edie had seen it before, and knew

it meant killing.

Jake had retrieved the note from R.F. and now gestured at the little drawing

beneath the message. "Do you know what this means?"

"I have an idea it's the sigil of a place I saw when I first travelled in the wizard's

glass. The land called Thunderclap." He looked around at them, one by one. "I

think it's there that we'll meet this man—this thing—named Flagg again."

Roland looked back the way they had come, sleepwalking in their fine red shoes.

"The Kansas we came through was his Kansas, and the plague that emptied out

that land was his plague. At least, that's what I believe."

"But it might not stay there," Susanah said.

"It could travel," Edie said.

"To our world," Jake said.

Still looking back toward the Green Palace, Roland said: "To your world, or any other."

"Who's the Crimson King?" Susanah asked abruptly.

"Susanah, I know not."

They were quiet, then, watching Roland look toward the palace where he had

faced a false wizard and a true memory and somehow opened the door back to his own world by so doing.

Our world, Edie thought, slipping an arm around Susanah. Our world now. If

we go back to America, and perhaps we'll have to be before this is over, we'll arrive

as strangers in a strange land, no matter what when it is. This is our world now.

The world of the Beams, and the Guardians, and the Dark Tower.

"We got some daylight left," he said to Roland, and put a hesitant hand on the

gunslinger's shoulder. When Roland immediately covered it with his own hand,

Edie smiled. "You want to use it, or what?"

"Yes," Roland said. "Let's use it." He bent and shouldered his pack.

"What about the shoes?" Susanah asked, looking doubtfully at the little red pile

they had made.

"Leave them here," Edie said. "They've served their purpose. Into your

wheelchair, girl." He put his arms around her and helped her in.

"All God's children have shoes," Roland mused. "Isn't that what you said,

Susanah?"

"Well," she said, setting herself, "the correct dialect adds a soupcon of flavor, but

you've got the essence, honey, yes."

"Then we'll undoubtedly find more shoes as God wills it," Roland said.

Jake was looking into his knapsack, taking inventory of the foodstuffs that had

been added by some unknown hand. He held up a chicken leg in a Baggie, looked

at it, then looked at Edie. "Who do you suppose packed this stuff?"

Edie raised his eyebrows, as if to ask Jake how he could possibly 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 be?fore them, head up, scent?ing the au?tumn air that

combed his fur with un?seen fin?gers, his gold-?ringed eyes wide.

“We are ka-?tet,” Ed?die said. It crossed his mind to won?der at how much he’d

changed; how he had be?come a stranger, even to him?self. “We are one from

many.”

“Ka-?tet, ” Su?san?nah said. “We are one from many.”

“One from many,” Jake said. “Come on, let’s go.”

Bird and bear and hare and fish, Ed?die thought.

With Oy in the lead, they once more set out for the Dark Tow?er, walk?ing along the

Path of the Beam.

AF?TER?WORD

The scene in which Roland bests his old teach?er, Cort, and goes off to rois?ter in

the less sa?vory sec?tion of Gilead was writ?ten in the spring of 1970.
The one in
which Roland's fa?ther shows up the fol?low?ing morn?ing was writ?
ten in the sum mer
of 1996. Al?though on?ly six?teen hours pass be?tween the two oc?cur?
rences in the
world of the sto?ry, twen?ty-?six years had passed in the life of the sto?
ry's teller. Yet
the mo?ment fi?nal?ly came, and I found my?self con?fronting my?self
across a whore's
bed—the un?em?ployed school?boy with the long black hair and beard
on one side,
the suc?cess?ful pop?ular nov?el?ist (“Amer?ica's shlock?meis?ter,” as
I am af?fec?tion?ate?ly
known by my le?gions of ad?mir?ing crit?ics) on the oth?er.
I men?tion this on?ly be?cause it sums up the es?sen?tial weird?ness of
the Dark Tow?er
ex?pe?ri?ence for me. I have writ?ten enough nov?els and short sto?ries
to fill a so?lar
sys?tem of the imag?ina?tion, but Roland's sto?ry is my Jupiter—a
plan?et that dwarfs
all the oth?ers (at least from my own per?spec?tive), a place of strange
at?mo?sphere,
crazy land?scape, and sav?age grav?ita?tion?al pull. Dwarfs the oth?ers,
did I say? I
think there's more to it than that, ac?tu?al?ly. I am com?ing to un?der?
stand that Roland's
world (or worlds) ac?tu?al?ly con?tains all the oth?ers of my mak?ing;
there is a place in
Mid-?World for Ran?dall Flagg, Ralph Roberts, the wan?der?ing boys
from The Eyes
of the Drag?on, even Fa?ther Calla?han, the damned priest from ‘Salem
's Lot, who
rode out of New Eng?land on a Grey hound Bus and wound up dwelling
on the
bor?der of a ter?ri?ble Mid-?World land called Thun?der?clap. 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 dangled, 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

be?longed to on that day out?side Thet?ford, Ne?bras?ka, but I do now,
be cause I have

looked in?to his eyes across a whore's bed in a land that ex?ists very
clear?ly in my

imag?ina?tion. Roland's love for Su?san Del?ga?do (and hers for him)
is what was told

to me by the boy who be?gan this sto?ry. If it's right, thank him. If it's
wrong, blame

what?ev?er got lost in the trans?la?tion.

Al?so thank my friend Chuck Ver?rill, who edit?ed the book and hung
with me ev?ery

step of the way. His en?cour?age?ment and help were in?valu?able, as
was the

en?cour?age?ment of Elaine Koster, who has pub?lished all of these
cow boy

ro?mances in pa?per?back.

Most thanks of all go to my wife, who sup?ports me in this mad?ness 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 fun?ny lit?tle rub?ber fig?ure that made me smile. It's
Rock?et J.

Squir?rel, wear?ing his blue avi?ator's hat and with his arms brave?ly
out?stretched. I

put that fig?ure on my manuscript as it grew (and grew ... and grew),
hop?ing some

of the love that came with it would kind of fer?til?ize the work. It must
have worked,

at least to a de?gree; the book is here, af?ter all. I don't know if it's good
or bad—I

lost all sense of per?spec?tive around page four hun?dred—but it's here.
That alone

seems like a mir?acle. And I have start?ed to be?lieve I might ac?tu?al?
ly live to

com?plete this cy?cle of sto?ries. (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 vast 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 karpet 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 Maddox, Insomnia, and The Green

Mile. His four volumes in the Dark Tower series, including The Gunslinger, The

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paperback editions. He lives in Bangor, Maine, with his wife, novelist Tabitha

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