

Dark Tower 1:
Gunslinger part
3-The Oracle and
the Mountains

King, Stephen

Note: This is not the actual book cover

THE ORACLE AND THE MOUNTAINS

Stephen King

I

The boy found the oracle and it almost destroyed him.

Some thin instinct brought the gunslinger up from sleep to the velvet darkness, which had fallen on them at dusk like a shroud of well water. That had been when he and Jake reached the grassy, nearly level oasis above the first rise of tumbled foothills. Even on the hardscrabble below, where they had toiled and fought for every foot in the killer sun, they had been able to hear the sound of crickets rubbing their legs seductively together in the perpetual green of willow groves above them. The gunslinger remained calm in his mind, and the boy had kept up at least the pretense of a facade, and that had made the gunslinger proud. But Jake hadn't been able to hide the wildness in his eyes, which were white and starey, the eyes of a horse scenting water and held back from bolting only by the tenuous chain of its master's mind; like a horse at the point where only understanding, not the spur, could hold it steady. The gunslinger could gauge the need in Jake by the madness the sounds of the crickets bred in him.

The sun trampled down on them all the way; even when it turned a swollen, feverish red with sunset, it shone perversely through the knife-cut in the hills off to their left, blinding them and making every teardrop of sweat into a prism of pain.

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

“Here,” the gunslinger said. Up ahead the grass deepened into a jungle of green willows that was shocking after the parched sterility of the endless hardpan.

There would be a spring, perhaps several of them, and it would be even cooler, but it was better out here in the open. The boy had pushed every step he could push, and there might be sucker-bats in the deeper shadows of the grove. The bats might break the boy’s sleep, no matter how deep it was, and if they were vampires, neither of them might awaken... at least, not in this world.

The boy said, “I’ll get some wood.”

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

The boy sat When the gunslinger got back, Jake was asleep in the grass. A large praying mantis was performing ablutions on the springy stem of Jake’s cowlick.

The gunslinger set the fire and went after water.

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

Mixed with the last of their canned food, the rabbit made an excellent stew. He woke Jake and watched him as he ate, bleary but ravenous.

“We stay here tomorrow,” the gunslinger said.

“But that man you’re after.., that priest”

“He’s no priest And don’t worry. We’ve got him.”

“How do you know that?”

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

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

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

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

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

“The boy!” She was screaming. “Roland, the boy!”

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

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

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

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

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

“Nnnnnnnnnn —Jake.

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

down a tunnel of overhanging willow and sumac. Moss struck his shoulders. Some clung in sighing gray tendrils.

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

There was a ring of tall, black stones which looked like some sort of surreal animal-trap in the moonlight. In the center was a table of stone... an altar.

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

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

The gunslinger felt it touch him — the spirit of the oracle, the succubus. His loins were suddenly filled with rose light, a light that was soft yet hard. He felt his head twisting, his tongue thickening and becoming excruciatingly sensitive to even the spittle that coated it. He did not think when he pulled the half-rotted jawbone from the pocket where he had carried it since he found it in the lair of the Speaking Demon at the way station. He did not think, but it did not frighten him to operate on pure instinct. He held the jawbone's frozen, prehistoric grin up in front of him, holding his other arm out stiffly, first and last fingers poked out in the ancient forked talisman, the ward against the evil eye.

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

Jake screamed again.

The gunslinger walked to him, and held the jawbone in front of Jake's warring eyes. A wet sound of agony. The boy tried to pull his gaze away, could not. And suddenly both eyes rolled up to show the whites. Jake collapsed. His body struck the earth limply, one hand almost touching the altar. The gunslinger dropped to one knee and picked him up. He was amazingly light, as dehydrated as a November leaf from their long walk through the desert. Around him Roland could feel the presence that dwelt in the circle of stones, whirring with a jealous anger — its prize had been taken from it. When the gunslinger passed out of the circle, the sense of frustrated jealousy faded. He carried Jake back to their camp. By the time they got there, the boy's twitching unconsciousness had become deep sleep. The gunslinger paused for a moment above the gray ruin of the fire. The moonlight on Jake's face reminded him again of a church saint, alabaster purity all unknown. He suddenly hugged the boy, knowing that he loved him. And it seemed that he could almost feel the laughter from the man in black, someplace far above them.

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

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

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

"I was?" Jake looked at him suspiciously.

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

"See?"

Jake nodded, bewildered.

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

Fear flashed on Jake’s face. “You’re leaving me!”

The gunslinger only looked at him.

“No,” Jake said after a moment “I guess you’re not.”

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

Hate and disgust crossed Jake’s face, mixed with bewilderment. “I couldn’t. I .

. . I just couldn’t”

“You can. You may have to. Especially after midday. It’s important. Dig?”

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

“I just do.”

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

“All right,” Jake said.

The gunslinger laid the jawbone carefully on the ground next to the ruins of the fire, where it grinned up through the grass like some eroded fossil that has seen the light of day after a night of five thousand years. Jake would not look at it His face was pale and miserable. The gunslinger wondered if it would profit them for him to

put the boy to sleep and question him, but he decided there would be little gain. He knew well enough that the spirit of the stone circle was surely a demon, and very likely an oracle as well. A demon with no shape, only a kind of unformed sexual glare with the eye of prophecy. He wondered sardonically if it might not be the soul of Sylvia Pittston, the giant woman whose religious huckstering had led to the final showdown in Tull... but knew it was not. The stones in the circle had been ancient, this particular demon's territory staked out long before the earliest shade of pre-history. But the gunslinger knew the forms of speaking quite well and did not think the boy would h

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

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

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

Jake only looked puzzled.

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

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

"What's that?"

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

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

“Will it hurt you?” Jake asked.

“It never has,” the gunslinger said, conscious of the evasion.

“I don’t like it”

“Never mind.”

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

“When does something happen to you?” Jake asked.

“Not for a little while. Be quiet.”

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

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

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

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

“I have to go,” he said, getting up.

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

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

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

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

— they tickled at him like a cat’s whiskers. But this time he felt fairly calm.

That was good.

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

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

He went to the altar, stood beside it for a moment coherent thought was now almost impossible. His teeth felt strange in his head. The

world held too much light. He climbed up on the altar and lay back. His mind was becoming a jungle full of strange thought-plants that he had never seen or suspected before, a willow-jungle that had grown up around a mescaline spring. The sky was water and he hung suspended over it. The thought gave him a vertigo that seemed faraway and unimportant.

A line of old poetry occurred to him, not a nursery verse now, no; his mother had feared the drugs and the necessity of them (as she had feared Cort and the necessity for this beater of boys); this verse came from one of the Dens to the north of the desert, where men still lived among the machines that usually didn't work... and which sometimes ate the men when they did. The lines played again and again, reminding him (in an unconnected way that was typical of the mescaline rush) of snow falling in a globe he had owned as a child, mystic and half fantastical:

Beyond the reach of human range

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

The trees which overhung the altar contained faces. He watched them with abstracted fascination: Here was a dragon, green and twitching. Here a wood-nymph with beckoning branch arms. Here a living skull overgrown with slime.

Faces. Faces.

The grasses of the clearing suddenly whipped and bent I come.

I come.

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

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

A sigh. A faint sound of weeping. The gunslinger's genitals felt drawn and hard.

Over him and beyond the faces in the leaves, he could see the mountains — hard and brutal and full of teeth.

The body moved against him, struggled with him. He felt his hands curl into fists. She had sent him a vision of Susan. It was Susan above him, lovely Susan at the window, waiting for him with her hair spilled down her back and over her shoulders. He tossed his head, but her face followed.

Jasmine, rose, honeysuckle, old hay..., the smell of love. Love me.

“Speak prophecy,” he said.

Please, the oracle wept. Don't be cold. It is always so cold here —
Hands slipping over his flesh, manipulating, lighting him on fire.
Pulling him.

Drawing. A black crevice. The ultimate wanton. Wet and warm —No.
Dry. Cold.

Sterile.

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

Would you have mercy on the boy?

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

“After,” he said.

Now. Please. Now.

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

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

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

Wind rippled the grass in tortured patterns.

“Prophecy,” he said — a bleak noun.

A weeping, tired sigh. He could almost have granted the mercy she begged, but —

there was Jake. He would have found Jake dead or insane if he had been any later last night

Sleep, then.

“No.”

Then half-sleep.

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

change blew, bringing with it the cinnamon smell of late October. The gunslinger watched as the world moved on.

And half-slept

Three. This is the number of your fate.

Three?

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

Which three?

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

Tell me what you can.

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

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

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

The second?

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

The third?

In chains.

The man in black? Where is he?

Near. You will speak with him.

Of what will we speak?

The Tower.

The boy? Jake?

Tell me of the boy!

The boy is your gateway to the man in black. The man in black is your gate to the three. The three are your way to the Dark Tower.

How? How can that be? Why must it be? 'We see in part, and thus is the mirror —God damn you.

No god damned me.

“Don't patronize me, Thing. I'm stronger than you.

What do they call you, then? Star-slut? Whore of the Winds?

Some live on love that comes to the ancient places... even in these sad and evil times. Some, gunslinger, live on blood. Even, I understand, on the blood of young boys.

May he not be spared?

Yes.

How?

Cease, gunslinger. Strike your camp and turn west. In the west there is still a need for men who live by the bullet.

I am sworn by my father's guns and by the treachery of Marten.

Marten is no more. The man in black has eaten his soul. This you know.

I am sworn.

Then you are damned.

Have your way with me, bitch.

Eagerness.

The shadow swung over him, enfolded him. Suddenly ecstasy broken only by a galaxy of pain, as faint and bright as ancient stars gone red with collapse.

Faces came to him unbidden at the climax of their coupling: Sylvia Pittston, Alice, the woman from Tull, Susan, Aileen, a hundred others.

And finally, after an eternity, he pushed her away from him, once again in his right mind, bone-weary and disgusted.

No! It isn't enough! It —“Let me be,” the gunslinger said. He sat up and almost fell off the altar before regaining his feet. She touched him tentatively (honeysuckle, jasmine, sweet attar)

and he pushed her violently, falling to his knees.

He staggered up and made his drunken way to the perimeter of the circle. He staggered through, feeling a huge weight fall from his shoulders. He drew a shuddering, weeping breath. As he started away he could feel her standing at the bars of her prison, watching him go from her. He wondered how long it might be before someone else crossed the desert and found her, hungry and alone. For a moment he felt dwarfed by the possibilities of time.

“You're sick!”

Jake stood up fast when the gunslinger shambled back through the last trees and came into camp. Jake had been huddled by the ruins of the tiny fire, the jawbone across his knees, gnawing disconsolately on the bones of the rabbit. Now he ran toward the gunslinger with a look of distress that made Roland feel the full, ugly weight of a

coming betrayal — one he sensed which might only be the first of many.

“No,” he said. “Not sick. Just tired. I’m whipped.” He gestured absently at the jawbone. “You can throw that away.”

Jake threw it quickly and violently, rubbing his hands across his shirt after doing it.

The gunslinger sat down — almost fell down — feeling the aching joints and the pummeled, thick mind that was the unlovely afterglow of mescaline. His crotch also pulsed with a dull ache. He rolled a cigarette with careful, unthinking slowness. Jake watched. The gunslinger had a sudden impulse to tell him what he had learned, then thrust the idea away with horror. He wondered if a part of him — mind or soul — might not be disintegrating.

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

“Sure.”

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

“Yes, I think so.”

The gunslinger walked toward the willow grove and then turned left, skirting it.

At a place where the ground opened out and upward in heavy open grass, he stepped back into the shadows and stood silently. Faintly, clearly, he could hear the clik-clink-clik-clink of Jake striking sparks. He stood without moving for ten minutes, fifteen, twenty. Three rabbits came, and the gunslinger pulled leather. He took down the

two plumpest, skinned them and gutted them, brought them back to the camp. Jake had the fire going and the water was already steaming over it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Will it be a hard climb?"

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

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

They went on.

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

From where they stood, in a new coolness, the desert certainly appeared momentous, but not deadly.

They turned back to the business of the climb, scrambling over jackstraw falls of rock and crouch-walking up inclined planes of stone shot with glitters of quartz and mica. The rock was pleasantly warm to the touch, but the air was definitely cooler. In the late afternoon the gunslinger heard the faint sound of thunder. The rising line of the mountains obscured the sight of the rain on the other side, however.

When the shadows began to turn purple, they camped in the overhang of a jutting brow of rock. The gunslinger anchored their

blanket above and below, fashioning a kind of shanty lean-to. They sat at the mouth of it, watching the sky spread a cloak over the world. Jake dangled his feet over the drop. The gunslinger rolled his evening smoke and eyed Jake half humorously. “Don’t roll over in your sleep,” he said, “or you may wake up in hell.”

“I won’t,” Jake replied seriously. “My mother says —He broke it off.

“She says what?”

“That I sleep like a dead man,” Jake finished. He looked at the gunslinger, who saw that the boy’s mouth was trembling as he strove to keep back tears — only a boy, he thought, and pain smote him, like the ice pick that too much cold water can sometimes plant in the forehead. Only a boy. Why? Silly question. When a boy, wounded in body or spirit, called that question out to Cort, that ancient, scarred baffle-engine whose job it was to teach the sons of gunslingers the beginning of what they had to know, Cort would answer: Why is a crooked letter and can’t be made straight... never mind why, just get up, pus-head! Gel up! The day’s young!

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

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

“I don’t understand that!”

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

They sat in silence. A breeze, faint but with an edge, picked at their legs.

Somewhere it made a hollow whooooo in a rock fissure.

“Where do you come from?” Jake asked.

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

“Jesus and Moses. Sure.”

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

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

“Maybe,” the gunslinger said. “The Book is lost now — all except the parts I was forced to memorize.

“But the others — “

“No others,” the gunslinger said. “I’m the last.”

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

“Was it pretty? Your country.., your land?”

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

Jake made a noncommittal noise.

The gunslinger smoked and thought of how it had been — the nights in the huge central hall, hundreds of richly clad figures moving through the slow, steady waltz steps or the faster, light ripples of the pol-kam, Aileen on his arm, her eyes brighter than the most precious

gems, the light of the crystal-enclosed electric lights making highlights in the newly done hair of the courtesans and their half-cynical amours. The hall had been huge, an island of light whose age was beyond telling, as was the whole Central Place, which was made up of nearly a hundred stone castles. It had been twelve years since he had seen it, and leaving for the last time, Roland had ached as he turned his face away from it and began his first cast for the trail of the man in black. Even then, twelve years ago, the walls had fallen, weeds grew in the courtyards, bats roosted amongst the great beams of the central hall, and the galleries echoed with the soft swoop and whisper of swallows. The fields where Cort had taught them archery and gunnery and falconry were gone to hay and timo

“Was there a war?” Jake asked.

“Even better,” the gunslinger said and pitched the last smoldering ember of his cigarette away. “There was a revolution. We won every battle, and lost the war.

No one won the war, unless maybe it was the scavengers. There must have been rich pickings for years after.”

“I wish I’d lived there,” Jake said wistfully.

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

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

The climb became grimmer on the following day as they continued to angle toward the narrow V of the pass through the mountains. The gunslinger pushed slowly, still with no sense of hurry. The dead stone beneath their feet left no trace of the man in black, but the gunslinger knew he had been this way before them —

and not only from the path of his climb as he and Jake had observed him, tiny and bug-like, from the foothills. His aroma was printed on every cold downdraft of air. It was an oily, sardonic odor, as bitter to his nose as the aroma of devil-grass.

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

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

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

The gunslinger thought the boy might begin to question him, but there were no questions from Jake. The boy fell almost immediately into sleep. The gunslinger followed his example. He dreamed again

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

They were another week before they reached the end of the beginning — for the gunslinger, a twisted prologue of twelve years, from the final crash of his native place and the gathering of the other three. For Jake, the gateway had been a strange death in another world. For the gunslinger it had been a stranger death yet — the endless hunt for the man in black through a world with neither map nor memory. Cuthbert and the others were gone, all of them gone: Randolph, Jamie de Curry, Aileen, Susan, Marten (yes, they had dragged him down, and there had been gunplay, and even that grape had been bitter). Until finally only three remained of the old world, three like dreadful cards from a terrible deck of tarot cards: gunslinger, man in black, and the Dark Tower.

A week after Jake saw the footstep, they faced the man in black for a brief moment of time. In that moment, the gunslinger felt he could almost understand the gravid implication of the Tower itself, for that moment seemed to stretch out forever.

They continued southwest, reaching a point perhaps halfway through the Cyclopean mountain range, and just as the going seemed about to become really difficult for the first time (above them, seeming to lean out, the icy ledges and screaming buttes made the gunslinger feel an unpleasant reverse vertigo), they began to descend again along the side of the narrow pass. An angular, zigzagging path led them toward a canyon floor where an ice-edged stream boiled with slaty, headlong power from higher country still.

On that afternoon the boy paused and looked back at the gunslinger, who had paused to wash his face in the stream.

“I smell him,” Jake said.

“So do I.”

Ahead of them the mountain threw up its final defense — a huge slab of insurmountable granite facing that climbed into cloudy infinity. At any moment the gunslinger expected a twist in the stream to bring them upon a high waterfall and the insurmountable smoothness of rock — dead end. But the air here had that odd magnifying quality that is common to high places, and it was another day before they reached that great granite face.

The gunslinger began to feel the dreadful tug of anticipation again, the feeling that it was all finally in his grasp. Near the end, he had to fight himself to keep from breaking into a trot.

“Wait!” The boy had stopped suddenly. They faced a sharp elbow-bend in the stream; it boiled and frothed with high energy around the eroded hang of a giant sandstone boulder. All that morning they had been in the shadow of the mountains as the canyon narrowed.

Jake was trembling violently and his face had gone pale.

“What’s the matter?”

“Let’s go back,” Jake whispered. “Let’s go back quick.”

The gunslinger’s face was wooden.

“Please?” The boy’s face was drawn, and his jawline shook with suppressed agony.

Through the heavy blanket of stone they still heard thunder, as steady as machines in the earth. The slice of sky they could see had itself assumed a turbulent, gothic gray above them as warm and cold currents met and warred.

“Please, please!” The boy raised a fist, as if to strike the gunslinger’s chest.

“No.”

The boy’s face took on wonder. “You’re going to kill me. He killed me the first time and you are going to kill me now.”

The gunslinger felt the lie on his lips. He spoke it: “You’ll be all right”
And a greater lie. “I’ll take care. “

Jake’s face went gray, and he said no more. He put an unwilling hand out, and he and the gunslinger went around the elbow-bend. They came face to face with that final rising wall and the man in black.

He stood no more than twenty feet above them, just to the right of the waterfall that crashed and spilled from a huge ragged hole in the rock. Unseen wind rippled and tugged at his hooded robe. He held a staff in one hand. The other hand he held out to them in a mocking gesture of welcome. He seemed a prophet, and below that rushing sky, mounted on a ledge of rock, a prophet of doom, his voice the voice of Jeremiah.

“Gunslinger! How well you fulfill the prophecies of old! Good day and good day and good day!” He laughed, the sound echoing ever over the bellow of the falling water.

Without a thought and seemingly without a click of motor relays, the gunslinger had drawn his pistols. The boy cowered to his right and behind, a small shadow.

Roland fired three times before he could gain control of his traitor hands —

the echoes bounced their bronze tones against the rock valley that rose around them, over the sound of the wind and water.

A spray of granite puffed over the head of the man in black; a second to the left of his hood; a third to the right. He had missed cleanly all three times.

The man in black laughed — a full, hearty laugh that seemed to challenge the receding echo of gunshots. “Would you kill all your answers so easily, gunslinger?”

“Come down,” the gunslinger said. “Answers all around.”

Again that huge, derisive laugh. “It’s not your bullets I fear, Roland. It’s your idea of answers that scares me. “

“Come down.”

“The other side, I think,” the man in black said. “On the other side we will hold much council.”

His eyes flicked to Jake and he added:

“Just the two of us.”

Jake flinched away from him with a small, whining cry, and the man in black turned, his robe swirling in the gray air like a batwing. He disappeared into the cleft in the rock from which the water spewed at full force. The gunslinger exercised grim will and did not send a bullet after him — would you kill all your answers so easily, gunslinger?

There was only the sound of wind and water, sounds that had been in this place of desolation for a thousand years. Yet the man in black had been here. After these twelve years, Roland had seen him close-up, spoken to him. And the man in black had laughed at him.

On the other side we will hold much council.

The boy looked up at him with dumbly submissive sheep’s eyes, his body trembling. For a moment the gunslinger saw the face of Alice, the girl from Tull, superimposed over Jake’s, the scar standing out on her forehead like a mute accusation, and felt brute loathing for them both (it would not occur to him until much later that both the scar on Alice’s forehead and the nail he saw spiked through Jake’s forehead

in his dreams were in the same place). Jake seemed to catch a whiff of his thought and a moan was dragged from his throat.

But it was short; he twisted his lips shut over it. He held the makings of a fine man, perhaps a gunslinger in his own right if given time.

Just the two of us.

The gunslinger felt a great and unholy thirst in some deep unknown pit of his body, a thirst no wine could touch. Worlds trembled, almost within reach of his fingers, and in some instinctual way he strove not to be corrupted, knowing in his colder mind that such strife was vain and always would be.

It was noon. He looked up, letting the cloudy, unsettled daylight shine for the last time on the all-too-vulnerable sun of his own righteousness. No one ever really pays for it in silver, he thought. The price of any evil — necessary or otherwise — comes due in flesh.

“Come with me or stay,” the gunslinger said.

The boy only looked at him mutely. And to the gunslinger, in that final and vital moment of uncoupling from a moral principle, he ceased to be Jake and became only the boy, an impersonality to be moved and used.

Something screamed in the windy stillness; he and the boy both heard.

The gunslinger began, and after a moment Jake came after. Together they climbed the tumbled rock beside the steely-cold falls, and stood where the man in black had stood before them. And together they entered in where he had disappeared.

The darkness swallowed them.