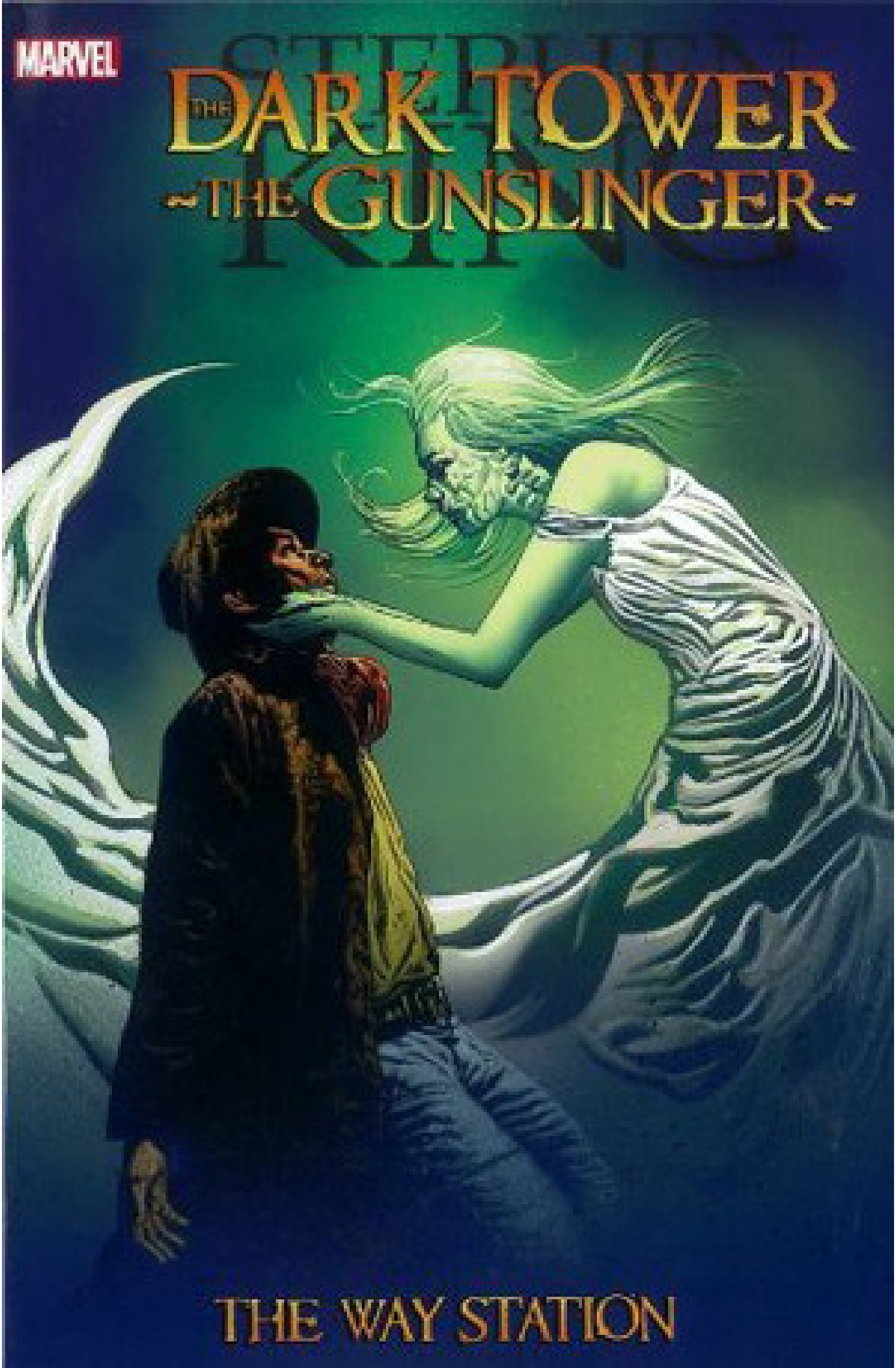
MARVEL
STEPHEN KING
THE DARK TOWER
~THE GUNSLINGER~
THE WAY STATION

THE WAY STATION

Stephen King

I

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

There is joy and also pain

but the rain in Spain falls mainly on the plain.

Pretty-plain, loony-sane

The ways of the world all will change and all the ways remain the same but if you're mad or only sane

the rain in Spain falls mainly on the plain.

We walk in love but fly in chains

And the planes in Spain fall mainly in the rain.

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

Now it came back maddeningly, like prickly heat, chasing its own tail in his mind as he walked. All his water was gone, and he knew he was very likely a dead man. He had never expected it to come to

this, and he was sorry. Since noon he had been watching his feet rather than watching the way ahead. Out here even the devil-grass had grown stunted and yellow. The hardpan had disintegrated in places to mere rubble. The mountains were not noticeably clearer, although sixteen days had passed since he had left the hut of the last homesteader, a loony-sane young man on the edge of the desert He had had a raven, the gunslinger remembered, but he couldn't remember the raven's name.

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

He stopped and looked up suddenly. It made his head buzz and for a moment his whole body seemed to float The mountains dreamed against the far horizon. But there was something else up ahead, something much closer. Perhaps only five miles away. He squinted at it, but his eyes were sandblasted and going glare blind. He shook his head and began to walk again. The rhyme circled and buzzed.

About an hour later he fell down and skinned his hands. He looked at the tiny beads of blood on his flaked skin with unbelief. The blood looked no thinner; it looked mutely viable. It seemed almost as smug as the desert He dashed the drops away, haling them blindly. Smug? Why not? The blood was not thirsty. The blood was being served. The blood was being made sacrifice unto. Blood sacrifice. All the blood needed to do was run… and run.., and run.

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

O Jesus, you're far gone.

He got up, holding his hands to his chest and the thing he had seen earlier was almost in front of him, startling a cry out of him — a dust-choked crow-croak.

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

Him, then. At last The man in black.

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

He moved forward, drawing one gun.

… falls mainly on the plain.

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

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

“You’re covered! You’re covered! You’re —”

The figure moved restlessly and stood up. The gunslinger thought: My God, he is worn away to nothing, what’s happened to him? Because the man in black had shrunk two full feet and his hair had gone white.

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

The gunslinger shook his head again and started for the stable with his head lowered, gun still in hand. He couldn’t think yet His head was filled with motes and there was a huge, thrumming ache building in it The inside of the stable was silent and dark and exploding with heat The gunslinger stared around himself with huge, floating walleyes. He made a drunken about-face and saw the boy standing in the ruined doorway, staring at him. A huge lancet of pain slipped dreamily into his head, cutting from temple to temple, dividing his brain like an orange. He reholstered his gun, swayed, put out his hands as if to ward off phantoms, and fell over on his face.

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

The boy was hunkered down beside him. When he saw the gunslinger’s eyes were open, he reached behind him and gave the gunslinger a dented tin can filled with water. He grasped it with trembling hands and allowed himself to drink a little — just a little.

When that was down and sitting in his belly, he drank a little more. Then he spilled the rest over his face and made shocked blowing noises.

The boy's pretty lips curved in a solemn little smile.

"Want something to eat?"

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

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

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

"There's more," Jake said. He took the can and walked toward the rear of the stable. He paused and smiled back at the gunslinger uncertainly. The gunslinger nodded at him and then put his head down and propped it with his hands. The boy was well-made, handsome, perhaps nine. There had been a shadow on his face, but there were shadows on all faces now.

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

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

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

"I thought you were somebody else."

“The priest?”

The gunslinger looked up sharply. “What priest?”

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

“What did the priest look like?”

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

“Like a hood and a cassock?”

“What’s a cassock?”

“A robe.”

The boy nodded. “A robe and a hood.”

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

“I — I — “

Patiently, the gunslinger said, “I’m not going to hurt you.”

“I don’t know. I can’t remember time. Every day is the same.”

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

“No. Not long. I haven’t been here long.”

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

The boy looked at him distractedly. "Yes."

"Which one?"

"A week. Or two. I didn't come out. He didn't even drink. I thought he might be the ghost of a priest I was scared. I've been scared almost all the time." His face quivered like crystal on the edge of the ultimate, destructive high note.

"He didn't even build a fire. He just sat there. I don't even know if he went to sleep."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Did somebody bring you?”

“No,” the boy said. “I was just here.”

“You’re not making any sense,” the gunslinger said flatly.

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

“Don’t feel so sorry for yourself. Make do.”

“I didn’t ask to be here,” the boy repeated bewildered defiance.

The gunslinger ate another piece of the meat, chewing the salt out of it before swallowing. The boy had become part of it, and the gunslinger was convinced he told the truth —he had not asked for it. It was too bad. He himself … he had asked for it But he had not asked for the game to become this dirty. He had not asked to be allowed to turn his guns on the unarmed populace of Tull; had not asked to shoot Allie, her face marked by that strange, shining scar; had not asked to be faced with a choice between the obsession of his duty and his quest and criminal amorality. The man in black had begun to pull bad strings in his desperation, if it was the man in black who had pulled this particular string.

It was not fair to ring in innocent bystanders and make them speak lines they didn’t understand on a strange stage. Allie, he thought Allie at least had been into the world in her own self-illusory way. But this boy… this God-damned boy….

“Tell me what you can remember,” he told Jake.

“It’s only a little. It doesn’t seem to make any sense any more.”

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

“There was a place… the one before this one. A high place with lots of rooms and a patio where you could look at tall buildings and water. There was a statue that stood in the water.”

“A statue in the water?”

“Yes. A lady with a crown and a torch.”

“Are you making this up?”

“I guess I must be,” the boy said hopelessly. “There were things to ride in on the streets. Big ones and little ones. Yellow ones. A lot of yellow ones. I walked to school. There were cement paths beside the streets. Windows to look in and more statues wearing clothes. The statues sold the clothes. I know it sounds crazy, but the statues sold the clothes.”

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

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

“A what?”

“I don’t know.” The boy’s fingers made a slow, unconscious clinching motion at his throat — a gesture the gunslinger associated with hanging. “I don’t know.

It’s just all gone.” And he looked away.

“May I put you to sleep?” The gunslinger asked. “I’m not sleepy.”

“I can make you sleepy, and I can make you remember.”

Doubtfully, Jake asked, “How could you do that?”

“With this.”

The gunslinger removed one of the shells from his gunbelt and twirled it in his fingers. The movement was dexterous, as flowing as oil. The shell cartwheeled effortlessly from thumb and index and index and second, to second and ring, to ring and pinky. It popped out of sight and reappeared; seemed to float briefly, and then reversed. The shell walked across the gunslinger’s fingers. The fingers themselves moved like a beaded curtain in a breeze. The boy watched, his initial doubt replaced with plain delight, then by raptness, then by a dawning mute blankness. The eyes slipped shut The shell danced back and forth. Jake’s eyes opened again, caught the steady, limpid dance between the gunslinger’s fingers for a while longer, and then his eyes closed once more. The gunslinger continued, but Jake’s eyes did not open again. The boy breathed with steady, bovine calmness. Was this part of it? Yes. There was a certain beauty, a logic, like the lacy frettings that fringe hard blue ice-packs. He seemed to hear the the sky, and in his desert-scoured ears, the gunslinger heard the faint sweet sound of wind-chimes.

“Where are you?” he asked.

Jake Chambers is going downstairs with his book bag There is Earth Science, there is Economic Geography, there is a notepad, a pencil, a lunch his mother’s cook, Mrs. Greta Shaw, has made for him in the chrome-and-formica kitchen where a fan whirrs eternally, sucking up alien odors. In his lunch sack he has a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, a bologna, lettuce, and onion sandwich, and four Oreo cookies. His parents do not hate him, but they seem to have overlooked him. They have abdicated and left him to Mrs. Greta Shaw, to nannies, to a tutor in the summer and The School (which is Private and Nice, and most of all, White) the rest of the time. None of

these people have ever pretended to be more than what they are — professional people, the best in their fields. None have folded him to a particularly warm bosom as usually happens in the historical novels his mother reads and which fake has dipped into, looking for the “hot parts.

“Hysterical novels, his fat her sometimes calls them, and sometimes, “bod Jake does not know that he hates all the professional people, but he does.

People have always bewildered him. He likes stairs and will not use the self-service elevator in his building His mother, who is scrawny in a sexy way, often goes to bed with sick friends.

Now he is on the street, Jake Chambers is on the street, he has “Hit the bricks.” He is clean and well-mannered, comely, sensitive. He has no friends; only acquaintances. He has never bothered to think about this, but it hurts him.

He does not know or understand that a long association with professional people has caused him to take many of their traits. Mrs. Greta Shaw makes hands folded in his lap, still breathing calmly. He had told his tale without much emotion, although his voice had trembled near the end, when he had come to the part about the “priest” and the “Act of Contrition.” He had not, of course, told the gunslinger about his family and his own sense of bewildered dichotomy, but that had seeped through anyway — enough had seeped through to make out its shape.

The fact that there had never been such a city as the boy described (or, if so, it had only existed in the myth of prehistory) was not the most upsetting part of the story, but it was disturbing. It was all disturbing. The gunslinger was afraid of the implications.

“Jake?”

“Uh-huh?”

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

“Forget it,” the boy said promptly. “I bled.”

“All right You’re going to sleep, understand? Go ahead and lie over.”

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

“Jake?”

“Shhh. I want to sleep.”

“Yes. And when you wake up you won’t remember any of this.”

“Kay.”

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

At the back of the stable was a small, dark room with a stainless steel machine in the center. It was untouched by rust or rot. It looked like a butter churn.

At the left, a chrome pipe jutted from it, terminating over a drain in the floor. The gunslinger had seen pumps like it in other dry places, but never one so big. He could not contemplate how deep they must

have drilled before they struck water, secret and forever black under the desert Why hadn't they removed the pump when the way station had been abandoned?

Demons, perhaps.

He shuddered abruptly, an abrupt twisting of his back. Heatflesh poked out on his skin, then receded. He went to the control switch and pushed the ON button.

The machine began to hum. After perhaps half a minute, a stream of cool, clear water belched from the pipe and went down the drain to be recirculated. Perhaps three gallons flowed out of the pipe before the pump shut itself down with a final click. It was a thing as alien to this place and time as true love, and yet as concrete as a Judgment, a silent reminder of the time when the world had not yet moved on. It probably ran on an atomic slug, as there was no electricity within a thousand miles of here and even dry batteries would have lost their charge long ago. The gunslinger didn't like it He went back and sat down beside the boy, who had put one hand under his cheek.

Nice-looking boy. The gunslinger drank some more water and crossed his legs so he was sitting Indian fashion. The boy, like the squatter on the edge of the desert who kept the bird (Zoltan, the gunslinger remembered abruptly, the bird's name was Zoltan), had lost his sense of time, but the fact that the man in black was closer seemed beyond doubt Not for the first time, the gunslinger wondered if the man in black was letting him catch up for some reason of his own. Perhaps the gunslinger was playing into his hands. He tried to imagine what the confrontation might be like, and could not He was very hot, but he no longer felt sick. The nursery rhyme occurred to him again, but this time instead of his mother, he thought of Cort — Cort, with his face hem-stitched with the scars of bricks and bullets and blunt instruments.

The scars of war. He wondered if Cort had ever had a love to match those monumental scars. He doubted it He thought of Aileen, and of Marten, that incomplete enchanter.

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

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

Love o love o careless love

See what careless love has done.

The gunslinger laughed, bemused. Jam the last of that green and warm-hued world.

And for all his nostalgia, he felt no self-pity. The world had moved on mercilessly, but his legs were still strong, and the man in black was closer.

The gunslinger nodded out

When he woke up it was almost dark and the boy was gone. The gunslinger got up, hearing his joints pop, and went to the stable door. There was a small flame dancing in darkness on the porch of the inn. He walked toward it, his shadow long and black and trailing in the ochre light of the sunset.

Jake was sitting by a kerosene lamp. “The oil was in a drum,” he said, “but I was scared to burn it in the house. Everything’s so dry —”

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

“We have to talk,” he said.

Jake nodded.

“I guess you know I’m on the prod for that man you saw.”

“Are you going to kill him?”

“I don’t know. I have to make him tell me something. I may have to make him take me someplace.”

“Where?”

“To find a tower,” the gunslinger said. He held his cigarette over the chimney of the lamp and drew on it; the smoke drifted away on the rising night breeze.

Jake watched it. His face showed neither fear nor curiosity, certainly not enthusiasm.

“So I’m going on tomorrow,” the gunslinger said. “You’ll have to come with me.

How much of that meat is left?”

“Only a handful.”

“Corn?”

“A little.”

The gunslinger nodded. “Is there a cellar?”

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

“We’ll get up early and see if there’s anything down there worth taking. Then we’ll bug out”

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

“What would you be afraid of?”

The book looked at him ominously. “Spooks. Of him coming back.”

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

“Yes. Is he a bad man?”

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

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

“Of course.”

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

He turned back and picked up the lamp. “Let’s go to sleep,” he said.

They crossed to the stable together.

The next morning he explored the cellar.

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

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

The gunslinger peered around and waited for his nighteyes.

“You all right?” Jake called down nervously.

“Yes. He focused on the corner. “There are cans. Wait”

He went carefully to the corner, ducking his head. There was an old box with one side folded down. The cans were vegetables — green beans, yellow beans… and three cans of corned beef.

He scooped up an armload and went back to the ladder. He climbed halfway up and handed them to Jake, who knelt to receive them. He went back for more.

It was on the third trip that he heard the groaning in the foundations.

He turned, looked, and felt a kind of dreamy terror wash over him, a feeling both languid and repellent, like sex in the water — one drowning within another.

The foundation was composed of huge sandstone blocks that had probably been evenly cornered when the way station was new, but which were now at every zigzag, drunken angle. It made the wall look as if it were inscribed with strange, meandering hierogliphics. And from the joining of two of these abstruse cracks, a thin spill of

sand was running, as if something on the other side was digging itself through with slobbering, agonized intensity.

The groaning rose and fell, becoming louder, until the whole cellar was full of the sound, an abstract noise of ripping pain and dreadful effort.

“Come up!” Jake screamed. “O Jesus, mister, come up!”

“Go away,” the gunslinger said calmly.

“Come up!” Jake screamed again.

The gunslinger did not answer. He pulled leather with his right hand.

There was a hole in the wall now, a hole as big as a coin. He could hear, through the curtain of his own terror, Jake’s pattering feet as the boy ran.

Then the spill of sand stopped. The groaning ceased, but there was a sound of steady, labored breathing.

“Who are you?” The gunslinger asked.

No answer.

And in the High Speech, his voice filling with the old thunder of command, Roland demanded: “Who are you, Demon? Speak, if you would speak. My time is short; my hands lose patience.”

“Go slow,” a dragging, clotted voice said from within the wall. And the gunslinger felt the dreamlike terror deepen and grow almost solid. It was the voice of Alice, the woman he had stayed with in the town of Tull. But she was dead; he had seen her go down himself, a bullet hole between her eyes. Fathoms seemed to swim by his eyes, descending. “Go slow past the Drawers, gunslinger.

While you travel with the boy, the man in black travels with your soul in his pocket.”

“What do you mean? Speak on!”

But the breathing was gone.

The gunslinger stood for a moment, frozen, and then one of the huge spiders dropped on his arm and scrambled frantically up to his shoulder. With an involuntary grunt he brushed it away and got his feet moving. He did not want To do it, but custom was strict, inviolable. The dead from the dead, as the old proverb has it; only a corpse may speak. He went to the hole and punched at it.

The sandstone crumbled easily at the edges, and with a bare stiffening of muscles, he thrust his hand through the wall.

And touched something solid, with raised and fretted knobs. He drew it out. He held a jawbone, rotted at the far hinge. The teeth leaned this way and that.

“All right,” he said softly. He thrust it rudely into his back pocket and went back up the ladder, carrying the last cans awkwardly. He left the trapdoor open.

The sun would get in and kill the spiders.

Jake was halfway across the stable yard, cowering on the cracked, rubbly hardpan. He screamed when he saw the gunslinger, backed away a step or two, and then ran to him, crying.

“I thought it got you, that it got you, I thought —”

“It didn’t.” He held the boy to him, feeling his face, hot against his chest, and his hands, dry against his ribcage. It occurred to him later that this was when he began to love the boy — which was, of course, what the man in black must have planned all along.

“Was it a demon?” The voice was muffled.

“Yes. A speaking-demon. We don’t have to go back there anymore. Come on.”

They went to the stable, and the gunslinger made a rough pack from the blanket he had slept under — it was hot and prickly, but there was nothing else. That done, he filled the waterbags from the pump.

“You carry one of the waterbags,” the gunslinger said. “Wear it around your shoulders — like a fakir carries his snake. See?”

“Yes.” The boy looked up at him worshipfully. He slung one of the bags.

“Is it too heavy?”

“No. It’s fine.”

“Tell me the truth, now. I can’t carry you if you get a sunstroke.”

“I won’t have a sunstroke. I’ll be okay.”

The gunslinger nodded.

“We’re going to the mountains, aren’t we?”

“Yes.”

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

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

“Goodbye!” Jake cried. “Goodbye!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Here, sit down,” the gunslinger said.

“No, I’m okay.”

“Sit down.”

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

“Drink.”

“I’m not supposed to until — “

“Drink.”

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

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

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

“That’s neat,” he said.

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

The boy shook his head sleepily.

“Sure. And there was an evil man — “

“The priest?”

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

“Merlin and Arthur and the knights of the round table,” Jake said dreamily.

The gunslinger felt a nasty jolt go through him. “Yes,” he said. “I was very young, …”

But the boy was asleep sitting up, his hands folded neatly in his lap.

“When I snap my fingers, you’ll wake up. You’ll be rested and fresh. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Lay over, then.”

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

What would follow?

The question was too vague to catch his interest. Cuthbert would have found interest in it, lively interest, but Cuthbert was gone, and the gunslinger could only go forward in the way he knew.

He watched the boy as he smoked, and his mind turned back on Cuthbert, who had always laughed — to his death he had gone laughing — and Cort, who never laughed, and on Marten, who

sometimes smiled — a thin, silent smile that had its own disquieting gleam… like an eye that slips open in the dark and discloses blood. And there had been the falcon, of course. The falcon was named David, after the legend of the boy with the sling. David, he was quite sure, knew nothing but the need for murder, rending, and terror. Like the gunslinger himself. David was no dilettante; he played the center of the court.

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

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

II

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

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

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

"Get ready," Roland whispered to Cuthbert.

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

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

Cort abruptly raised the trap in his hands and let the side fall open. The dove was out and up, trying for the sky in a quick, fluttering blast of its wings.

Cuthbert pulled the leash, but he was slow; the hawk was already up and his takeoff was awkward. With a brief twitch of its wings the hawk had recovered. It struck upward, gaining altitude over the dove, moving bullet-swift.

Cort walked over to where the boys stood, casually, and swung his huge and twisted fist at Cuthbert's ear. The boy fell over without a

sound, although his lips writhed back from his gums. A trickle of blood flowed slowly from his ear and onto the rich green grass.

“You were slow,” he said.

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

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

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

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

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

“Look!” Roland cried. He pointed up.

The hawk had climbed above the soaring dove. It glided for a moment, its stubby, muscular wings outstretched and without movement on the still, white spring air.

Then it folded its wings and dropped like a stone. The two bodies came together, and for a moment Roland fancied he could see blood in the air… but it might have been his imagination. The hawk gave a brief scream of triumph. The dove fluttered, twisting, to the ground, and Roland ran toward the kill, leaving Cort and the chastened Cuthbert behind him.

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

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

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

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

He stood up proudly, the hawk on his arm.

“What’s this?” Cort asked, pointing to the dripping slash on Roland’s forearm.

The boy stationed himself to receive the blow, locking his throat against any possible cry, but no blow fell.

“He struck me,” Roland said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Then there’s hope for you,” Cort said. “When you think you can, you come for me, maggot.”

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

Cuthbert nodded again, the same frightening smile on his face. “I grieve,” he said. “I have forgotten the face —”

“Cut that shit,” Cort said, losing interest. He turned to Roland. “Go on, now.

The both of you. If I have to look at your stupid maggot faces any longer I’ll puke my guts.”

“Come on,” Roland said.

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

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

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

“He’ll tell Cort.”

“He’s no friend of Cort’s.” Roland said, and then shrugged. “And what if he did?”

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

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

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

but rather as if they were ordinary children with a slight touch of madness —

and Cuthbert was not the first of Cort's students whom he had fed on the sly. At this moment — one of six working appliances left on the whole estate. It was his personal domain, and he stood there watching the two boys bolt the gravied meat scraps he had produced. Behind, before, and all around, cookboys, scullions, and various underlings rushed through the foaming, humid air, rattling pans, stirring stew, slaving over potatoes and vegetables in nether regions. In the dimly lit pantry alcove, a washerwoman with a doughy, miserable face and hair caught up in a rag splashed water around on the floor with a mop.

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

"All right" Hax nodded to the Guard, and he nodded back. "You boys," he said.

"Go over to Maggie, she'll give you some pie. Then scat"

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

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

"All right"

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

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

“… . the good man,” the Guard was saying.

“In Farson?”

“In two weeks,” the Guard replied. “Maybe three. You have to come with us.

There’s a shipment from the freight depot…. “A particularly loud crash of pots and pans and a volley of catcalls directed at the hapless potboy who had dropped them blotted out some of the rest; then the boys heard the Guard finish: “.. .

poisoned meat”

“Risky.”

“Ask not what the good man can do for you — “the Guard began.

“— but what you can do for him,” Hax sighed. “Soldier, ask not”

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

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

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

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

“Children everywhere,” the Guard said gently. “It’s the children we — and he —

care about.”

“Poisoned meat. Such a strange way to care for children.” Hax uttered a heavy, whistling sigh. “Will they curdle and hold their bellies and cry for their mammas? I suppose they will.”

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

“Of course,” Hax said, and laughed.

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

Hax did not reply.

“I go on duty in twenty minutes,” the Guard said, his voice once more calm.

“Give me a joint of mutton and I will pinch one of your girls and make her giggle. When I leave — “My mutton will give no cramps to your belly, Robeson.”

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

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

“Roland.”

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

What he saw, even in Cuthbert's humorous, intelligent face, was nothing —

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

That, and nothing else. Nothing at all.

They were gunslinger's eyes.

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

His father was dressed in black jeans and a blue work shirt. His cloak, dusty and streaked, torn to the lining in one place, was slung carelessly over his shoulder with no regard for the way it and he clashed with the elegance of the room. He was desperately thin and the heavy handlebar mustache below his nose seemed to weight his head as he looked down at his son. The guns crisscrossed over the wings of his hips hung at the perfect angle for his hands, the worn sandalwood handles looking dull and sleepy in this languid indoor light "The head cook," his father said softly. "Imagine it! The tracks that were blown upland at the railhead. The dead stock in Hendrickson. And perhaps even.., imagine! Imagine!"

He looked more closely at his son.

"It preys on you."

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

His father smiled.

“Yes,” Roland said. “I guess it… it preys on me.

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

“Yes.”

“He fed both of you when Cort — “

“Yes.”

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

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

“It preys on you because you feel you’ve killed?”

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

“Yet you told. Why?”

The boy’s eyes widened. “How could I not? Treason was — “

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

“I didn’t!” The words jerked out of him violently. “I wanted to kill him — both of them! Liars! Snakes! They —“Go ahead.”

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

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

The boy, impatient before this, felt both pleased and troubled. “He will — “

“Hang.”

The boy nodded. “I want to see it.”

Roland the elder threw his head back and roared laughter. “Not as formidable as I thought… or perhaps just stupid.” He closed his mouth abruptly. An arm shot out like a bolt of lightning and grabbed the boy’s upper arm painfully. He grimaced but did not flinch. His father peered at him steadily, and the boy looked back, although it was more difficult than hooding the hawk had been.

“All right,” he said, and turned abruptly to go.

“Father?”

“What?”

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

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

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

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

“Yes,” Roland said, grasping the concept instantly —it was one he never forgot.

“But if you got him — “

“No,” his father said flatly.

“Why?”

For a moment his father seemed on the verge of saying why, but he bit it back.

“We’ve talked enough for now, I think. Go out from me. “

He wanted to tell his father not to forget his promise when the time came for Hax to step through the trap, but he was sensitive to his father’s moods. He suspected his father wanted to fuck. He closed that door quickly. He was aware that his mother and father did that … that thing together, and he was reasonably well informed as to what that act was, but the mental picture that always condensed with the thought made him feel both uneasy and oddly guilty.

Some years later, Susan would tell him the story of Oedipus, and he would absorb it in quiet thoughtfulness, thinking of the odd and bloody triangle formed by his father, his mother, and by Marten — known in some quarters as the good man.

Or perhaps it was a quadrangle, if one wished to add himself.

“Good night, father,” Roland said.

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

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

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

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

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

They had not understood until they arrived, riding double on Cuthbert’s gelding.

They were the first, fully two hours ahead of anyone else and four hours before the hanging, and Gallows Hill stood deserted — except for the rooks and ravens.

The birds were everywhere, and of course they were all black. They roosted noisily on the hard, jutting bar that overhung the trap — the armature of death. They sat in a row along the edge of the platform, they jostled for position on the stairs.

“They leave them,” Cuthbert muttered. “For the birds.”

“Let’s go up,” Roland said.

Cuthbert looked at him with something like horror. “Do you think — “

Roland cut him off with a gesture of his hands. “We’re years early. No one will come.”

“All right.”

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

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

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

“I can’t,” Cuthbert whispered. “I can’t watch it.”

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

“You can, Bert.”

“I won’t sleep tonight”

“Then you won’t,” Roland said, not seeing what that had to do with it Cuthbert suddenly seized Roland’s hand and looked at him with such mute agony that Roland’s own doubt came back, and he wished sickly that they had never gone to the west kitchen that night His father had been right Better every man, woman, and child in Farson than this.

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

“Let’s not go up,” Cuthbert said. “We’ve seen everything.”

And Roland nodded reluctantly, feeling his grip on that thing — whatever it was — weaken. Cort, he knew, would have knocked them both sprawling and then forced them up to the platform step by cursing step … and sniffing fresh blood back up their noses as they went Cort would probably have looped new hemp over the yardarm

itself and put the noose around each of their necks in turn, would have made them stand on the trap to feel it; and Cort would have been ready to strike them again if either wept or lost control of his bladder. And Cort, of course, would have been right For the first time in his life, Roland found himself hating his own childhood. He wished for the size and calluses and sureness of age.

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

“Why did you do that?” Cuthbert asked.

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

“Always have it”

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

He fingered the splinter from the gallows tree with sick bewilderment Cuthbert lay beside him with his face made impassive.

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

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

The birds had all flown, but Roland knew they were waiting.

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

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

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

"Roland?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

They paused beneath the crosstree, looking up at the dangling, twisting body.

Cuthbert reached up and touched one hairy ankle, defiantly. The body started on a new, twisting arc.

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

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

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

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

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

III

“Look, ” Jake said, pointing upward.

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

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

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

“Is that him?” Jake asked.

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

“That’s him, Jake.”

“Do you think we’ll catch him?”

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

“They’re so high,” Jake said. “What’s on the other side?”

“I don’t know,” the gunslinger said. “I don’t think anybody does. Maybe they did once. Come on, boy.”

They began to move upward again, sending small runnels of pebbles and sand down toward the desert that washed away behind them in

a flat bake-sheet that seemed to never end. Above them, far above, the man in black moved up and up and up. It was impossible to see if he looked back. He seemed to leap across impossible gulfs, to scale sheer faces. Once or twice he disappeared, but always they saw him again, until the violet curtain of dusk shut him out of their view. When they made their camp for the evening, the boy spoke little, and the gunslinger wondered if the boy knew what he had already intuited. He thought of Cuthbert's face, hot, dismayed, excited. He thought of the crumbs. He thought of the birds.

It ends this way, he thought. Again and again it ends this way. There are quests and roads that lead ever onward, and all of them end in the same place — upon the killing ground.

Except, perhaps, the road to the Tower.

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