

STARKBLAST

ONE

During the days after they left the Green Palace that wasn't Oz after all—but which was now the tomb of the unpleasant fellow Roland's ka-tet had known as the Tick-Tock Man—the boy Jake began to range farther and farther ahead of Roland, Eddie, and Susannah.

"Don't you worry about him?" Susannah asked Roland. "Out there on his own?"

"He's got Oy with him," Eddie said, referring to the billy-bumbler who had adopted Jake as his special friend. "Mr. Oy gets along with nice folks all right, but he's got a mouthful of sharp teeth for those who aren't so nice. As that guy Gasher found out to his sorrow."

"Jake also has his father's gun," Roland said. "And he knows how to use it. That he knows very well. And he won't leave the Path of the Beam." He pointed overhead with his reduced hand. The low-hanging sky was mostly still, but a single corridor of clouds moved steadily southeast. Toward the land of Thunderclap, if the note left behind for them by the man who styled himself RF had told the truth.

Toward the Dark Tower.

"But why—" Susannah began, and then her wheelchair hit a bump. She turned to Eddie. "Watch where you're pushin me, sugar."

"Sorry," Eddie said. "Public Works hasn't been doing any maintenance along this stretch of the turnpike lately. Must be dealing with budget cuts."

It wasn't a turnpike, but it was a road . . . or had been: two ghostly ruts with an occasional tumbledown shack to

mark the way. Earlier that morning they had even passed an abandoned store with a barely readable sign: **TOOK'S OUTLAND MERCANTILE**. They investigated inside for supplies—Jake and Oy had still been with them then—and had found nothing but dust, ancient cobwebs, and the skeleton of what had been either a large raccoon, a small dog, or a billy-bumbler. Oy had taken a cursory sniff and then pissed on the bones before leaving the store to sit on the hump in the middle of the old road with his squiggle of a tail curled around him. He faced back the way they had come, sniffing the air.

Roland had seen the bumbler do this several times lately, and although he had said nothing, he pondered it. Someone trailing them, maybe? He didn't actually believe this, but the bumbler's posture—nose lifted, ears pricked, tail curled—called up some old memory or association that he couldn't quite catch.

"Why does Jake want to be on his own?" Susannah asked.

"Do you find it worrisome, Susannah of New York?" Roland asked.

"Yes, Roland of Gilead, I find it *worrisome*." She smiled amiably enough, but in her eyes, the old mean light sparkled. That was the Detta Walker part of her, Roland reckoned. It would never be completely gone, and he wasn't sorry. Without the strange woman she had once been still buried in her heart like a chip of ice, she would have been only a handsome black woman with no legs below the knees. With Detta on board, she was a person to be reckoned with. A dangerous one. A gunslinger.

"He has plenty of stuff to think about," Eddie said quietly. "He's been through a lot. Not every kid comes back from the dead. And it's like Roland says—if someone tries to face him down, it's the someone who's apt to be sorry."

Eddie stopped pushing the wheelchair, armed sweat from his brow, and looked at Roland. “*Are* there someones in this particular suburb of nowhere, Roland? Or have they all moved on?”

“Oh, there are a few, I wot.”

He did more than wot; they had been peeked at several times as they continued their course along the Path of the Beam. Once by a frightened woman with her arms around two children and a babe hanging in a sling from her neck. Once by an old farmer, a half-mutie with a jerking tentacle that hung from one corner of his mouth. Eddie and Susannah had seen none of these people, or sensed the others that Roland felt sure had, from the safety of the woods and high grasses, marked their progress. Eddie and Susannah had a lot to learn.

But they had learned at least some of what they would need, it seemed, because Eddie now asked: “Are they the ones Oy keeps scenting up behind us?”

“I don’t know.” Roland thought of adding that he was sure something else was on Oy’s strange little bumbler mind, and decided not to. The gunslinger had spent long years with no ka-tet, and keeping his own counsel had become a habit. One he would have to break, if the tet was to remain strong. But not now, not this morning.

“Let’s move on,” he said. “I’m sure we’ll find Jake waiting for us up ahead.”

TWO

Two hours later, just shy of noon, they breasted a rise and halted, looking down at a wide, slow-moving river, gray as pewter beneath the overcast sky. On the northwestern bank—their side—was a barnlike building painted a green so bright it seemed to yell into the muted day. Its mouth jut-

ted out over the water on pilings painted a similar green. Docked to two of these pilings by thick hawsers was a large raft, easily ninety feet by ninety. It was painted in alternating stripes of red and yellow. A tall wooden pole that looked like a mast jutted from the center, but there was no sign of a sail. Several wicker chairs sat in front of it, facing the shore on their side of the river. Jake was seated in one of these. Next to him was an old man in a vast straw hat, baggy green pants, and longboots. On his top half he wore a thin white garment—the kind of shirt Roland thought of as a slinkum. Jake and the old man appeared to be eating well-stuffed popkins. Roland’s mouth sprang water at the sight of them.

Oy was beyond them, at the edge of the circus-painted raft, looking raptly down at his own reflection. Or perhaps at the reflection of the steel cable that ran overhead, spanning the river.

“Is it the Whye?” Susannah asked Roland.

“Yar.”

Eddie grinned. “You say Whye; I say Whye Not?” He raised one hand and waved it over his head. “Jake! Hey, Jake! Oy!”

Jake waved back, and although the river and the raft moored at its edge were still half a mile away, their eyes were uniformly sharp, and they saw the white of the boy’s teeth as he grinned.

Susannah cupped her hands around her mouth. “Oy! Oy! To me, sugar! Come see your mama!”

Uttering shrill yips that were the closest he could get to barks, Oy flew across the raft, disappeared into the barnlike structure, then emerged on their side. He came charging up the path with his ears lowered against his skull and his gold-ringed eyes bright.

“Slow down, sug, you’ll give yourself a heart attack!” Susannah shouted, laughing.

Oy seemed to take this as an order to speed up. He arrived at Susannah's wheelchair in less than two minutes, jumped up into her lap, then jumped down again and looked at them cheerfully. "Olan! Ed! Suze!"

"Hile, Sir Throcken," Roland said, using the ancient word for bumbler he'd first heard in a book read to him by his mother: *The Throcken and the Dragon*.

Oy lifted his leg, watered a patch of grass, then faced back the way they had come, scenting at the air, eyes on the horizon.

"Why does he keep doing that, Roland?" Eddie asked.

"I don't know." But he *almost* knew. Was it some old story, not *The Throcken and the Dragon* but one like it? Roland thought so. For a moment he thought of green eyes, watchful in the dark, and a little shiver went through him—not of fear, exactly (although that might have been a part of it), but of remembrance. Then it was gone.

There'll be water if God wills it, he thought, and only realized he had spoken aloud when Eddie said, "Huh?"

"Never mind," Roland said. "Let's have a little palaver with Jake's new friend, shall we? Perhaps he has an extra popkin or two."

Eddie, tired of the chewy staple they called gunslinger burritos, brightened immediately. "Hell, yeah," he said, and looked at an imaginary watch on his tanned wrist. "Goodness me, I see it's just Gobble O'Clock."

"Shut up and push, honeybee," Susannah said.

Eddie shut up and pushed.

THREE

The old man was sitting when they entered the boat-house, standing when they emerged on the river side. He saw the guns Roland and Eddie were wearing—the big irons