

A white-hot burning

Computer-amplified screams from the entity filled the chamber. It stopped all forward movement, seeming to wilt. Tendrils shot out of its chest, dipping down to start sucking up the water around it. The flare hissed.

"Who's in the tunnel?" Ryan called to J.B.

"Those White Sands soldiers. They won't back down. We've got to make a move, and soon."

Across the room, the plant-thing showed signs of regaining its strength. Ryan watched it, the fear in his stomach cold and hard. A glance at Krysty revealed her face to be drenched with perspiration.

"It wants me to help it," the woman cried. "Wants me to kill you." The pistol trembled in her hands. "Gaia, help me, Ryan, but I don't think I can hold it off much longer." A fine trickle of blood ran down her upper lip from her nose.

Without warning, Krysty swung the blaster toward him.

"I'm sorry, lover."

Bitter Fruit

#35 in the Deathlands series

James Axler

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For Cathy Joyce and Feroze Mohammed, who hold worlds together

First edition January 1997

ISBN 0-373-62535-9

BITTER FRUIT

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Printed in U.S.A.

Was it just a quantum shift— magic mushroom, the Reaper's white umbrella. Lo, Nineveh

and Tyre, Sodom and Gomorrha.

—from the diary of Marylou Crawford A.D. 2001

Chapter One

Ryan Cawdor squinted his eye tight against the blazing desert sun hanging like a cancerous boil over White Sands, New Mexico, and wondered what had set his nervous system to jangling a silent alarm. Without checking his wrist chron, he knew he hadn't been outside the installation much more than ten or fifteen minutes. It was still early afternoon, with much of the day left before him and his group for the recce they'd planned.

The one-eyed warrior paid attention to the warning. Survival in Deathlands depended on a man developing senses that were exceptionally sharp, then having the intelligence to listen when they said something was wrong.

He carried his Steyr SSG-70 rifle at the ready as he jogged up one of the sharper inclines surrounding the installation area. His boots sank through the shifting sand, almost as if they were being sucked down. Pausing near the crest of the incline, he dropped to one knee and surveyed the sandy sea spread out around him.

"Something?" The voice was pitched low and carried across the desert's surface only far enough to reach Ryan.

Without glancing to his left, Ryan knew his friend, J. B. Dix, was already in position. They'd traveled together for a long time, blooded by the years they'd spent with the Trader in the war wags and bound by mutual respect.

"An itch," Ryan said. He was a big man, leaned out by harsh living and staying on the move, but packing muscle that still pushed him over two hundred pounds. A scuffed black leather patch covered the hollow where his left eye had been, and beads of perspiration had cut a path across his forehead following the strap. A scar gouged his face

from the corner of his right eye to below his mouth, looking waxy in the harsh gleam of the unforgiving sun.

"Damned uncomfortable thing, one of those itches," J.B. stated in a laconic voice.

"You?" Ryan asked.

"Yeah."

"Anything?"

"No. Got an idea somebody's eyeballing us."

Ryan glanced in the Armorer's direction. J.B. was a short, wiry man. His steel-rimmed glasses sparked briefly in the sun beneath the battered fedora he wore. His brown shirt and gray pants were stained from long days and hard use. The tops of his high combat boots were barely visible in the powdery sand. "Mebbe we should keep moving."

"Reckon so."

"Give me some cover," Ryan said. "I'll go down and take a look. If somebody wants in this place, they're going to have to cross us first."

"That's what I was thinking."

Ryan shifted his weight and picked up the Steyr. The safety was already off. He started down, staying as much within cover as he could.

After the business in South Dakota, Ryan and his group had made a mat-trans jump to Dulces, New Mexico. They'd taken a couple days of downtime to recover from the wear and tear of the last jump, deciding to explore the area on foot, as the wags they'd discovered in the redoubt wouldn't start.

The journey to White Sands had been relatively quiet. The local mutie bands had been dying slowly from the radiation sickness they'd gotten from living in the area. The survivors worshiped a god they believed lived in the sands of fire, and were bound by arcane ritual to the very thing that made each generation more mutated monsters than anything human. The sustained exposure to radiation ensured none of them would live long.

Ryan paused beside a Hummer, its olive drab color faded over the decades to a sickly greenish gray. Military markings adorned the sides. Only the left rear corner protruded through the tide of sand that had washed over it. A rusted steel rod held the tattered remains of a small United States flag that fluttered halfheartedly in the thin, hot breeze.

Three other vehicles were partially visible in the mounds of sand that had washed in over the installation. All of them were unrecoverable.

Until Jak Lauren had scouted out a hidden entrance to the underground installation, the trip had looked as if it were going to end up as nothing more than wasted effort and needless risk. The albino teenager, Krysty Wroth, Doc Tanner and Mildred Wyeth were all engaged in scouring through the honeycomb of tunnels and rooms they'd found below. Ryan and J.B. had already rotated out for a respite from the heat and the dust below, which bordered on life threatening.

Sand crunched behind Ryan.

Reflexes honed by years of living in Deathlands, the one-eyed man spun to his right, crouching, both hands gripping the Steyr.

A trio of muties erupted from the sand, leaving the shallow troughs they'd evidently dug to spring their trap. Ryan had almost walked over them.

Like some kind of confectioner's frosting, sand covered the creatures' bodies, tracking into the crevices of the open sores that covered most of their skin.

To Ryan, they smelled like death, and the stink hovered over them as they ran at him, screaming in rage. "Fireblast!" he gritted, wondering how the hell he'd missed the smell. That alone should have given them away.

"Sacred grounds, outie!" one of the muties snarled. The effort was made wet and sibilant by the upper lip gone missing to the radiation burns. The few teeth that remained were black and filed to sharp edges, no longer seated securely in the diseased gums. The man carried a homemade knife, fashioned by tying a keen-edged wedge of nuked silicon to a long screwdriver. "Now you die!"

Ryan moved smoothly, bringing the Steyr's butt up in a sharp arc. Firing the weapon would have alerted other muties in the area.

The rifle stock crunched against the creature's face, the bone giving way instantly to the blow. The mutie's skull exploded in a vivid spray of blood and brains.

As the corpse dropped to the ground, the other two muties threw themselves at Ryan. One held an ax, and a knife flashed in the other mutie's hand as they drove him to the sand.

Ryan dodged a knife strike that missed his head by inches and drove the blade deep into the sand. His attacker howled in frustration and started to pull the blade back for another attempt as Ryan caught the second man's wrist, preventing the ax he held from splitting open his skull.

The air over the shoulders of the two muties seemed to ripple, as though a mirage had considered forming there but had suddenly chosen not to. And the itch of warning that had been spreading across Ryan's shoulders became a definite burn.

THE STINKING SMOKE given off by the oilcloth torch had triggered a headache that had been pounding at Krysty's temples for almost an hour.

"Doc."

"Yes, Krysty?" her companion replied from behind her. Like her, he carried a torch, adding to the wreath of smoke that followed them as they worked their way through the underground corridors of the White Sands military installation.

"We check out this room, then we get out of here for a while."

"As you wish, my dear," Doc said in his deep, pleasant voice.

Krysty pressed on, senses alert, paying particular attention to the extra senses given her by the mutie strain that was linked with her own DNA. Her hair was coiled tight against her scalp, feeling like another layer of skin, only more sensitive to the shifting breezes inside the corridor. Of the group, only she and Doc hadn't rotated out topside since entering the complex, and she was sick of dust and dark.

The woman lifted the torch higher until the apex of the yellow-and-white flame nearly kissed the metal ceiling. She was an inch short of six feet, and carried 150 pounds in whipcord curves. Her hair was flame red and sentient, responding to her emotions and mood swings, further evidence of her mutie heritage. Even by the light of the torches, her

eyes were cut emeralds that gleamed liquidly.

Home for Krysty before she'd met Ryan Cawdor and started traveling with him across Deathlands had been a ville called Harmony. Her mother, Sonja, had taught her ways of calling upon and listening to the force of Gaia, the Earth Mother, making Krysty part of her family's mystic heritage. For years Krysty had thought her mother dead, but lately there had been reports suggesting that wasn't true.

Maybe. It was all confusing to Krysty and had raised some questions and anger she had no way of venting. She tightened the grip on her Smith & Wesson Model 640 .38 pistol when the corridor they were following abruptly ended.

"Door," she told Doc, moving the torch forward to see it better. It was heavy steel, set flush with the frame, and it would take some real effort to pry it open if it was locked.

"So I see," the older man responded. "Shall I lead the way?"

"No. Just making sure you were in step is all."

By some counts, Dr. Theophilus Algernon Tanner was nearly two and a half centuries old. He was tall and skinny, built like a leaned-out stork. He was the first success logged by Operation Chronos in the predark days.

Operation Chronos had been part of the Totality Concept, which was developed to explore arcane and esoteric means of future warfare. The focus of Operation Chronos had been time trawling, moving things and individuals through the time stream. Doc was the only human to ever make the trip in one piece, though what it did to his sanity was questionable. He'd been ripped from his family, whom he'd adored, and left stranded in a world he had no way of understanding.

Doc had been welcome to Operation Chronos department heads for only a short time. As a success, he was meant to be cherished. All Doc had wanted to do was get back home. He'd been adamant about the return trip, then forceful. After that hadn't worked, he'd become openly rebellious and downright dangerous. In the end, the department heads had taken a vote, then kicked Doc a hundred years into the future. He'd landed smack in the middle of Deathlands and eventually met Ryan and the companions.

In the uncertain light of the torches, he looked like some kind of phantom from an old Dickens story Krysty could remember her mother reading to her. Tall and spindly, crowned by a mane of silvery hair that framed his gnarled face, Doc wore Victorian dress

with ease. His black frock coat had acquired a greenish hue and luster from age and wear. His knee breeches showed evidences of serviceable stitching, as well as some from a less skilled hand. His knee boots were cracked leather. The Le Mat blaster in his right hand was cocked and steady.

Certain that Doc was fully with her, Krysty pushed the panel beside the door with her thumb while maintaining her hold on the torch. The circuitry hummed when the contacts were made, and the door recessed into the wall.

With her blaster at waist level, Krysty thrust the torch inside the room and followed it. She hadn't expected the door to be powered.

"Mask, Doc," Krysty said, shoving her blaster through the front of her belt. She tugged at the cloth around her neck that she'd raided from one of the med kits they'd turned up during the initial forays on the complex, pulling it up so that it covered her nose and mouth. Breathing was a little harder, but it was worth the extra effort to keep the dust out.

Doc pulled his up, too, looking for all the world like one of the masked desperadoes in the bits of predark vids the woman had seen. Another time Krysty might have pointed out the humor.

When she'd first entered the complex, Krysty had figured the former military installation was going to be a bust. Maybe a few things would be worth salvaging, but nothing that would change their lives. The first few levels had been a washout. On the surface, there was nothing but death. None of the power had worked, though the rumors had hinted at nuclear-powered levels somewhere below ground.

But now she and Doc had reached an area where a powered door still worked. It was a situation that lent itself to caution.

"I am afraid I am going to have to light up another torch," Doc said. The one he held had dimmed to something less than the size of his fist, casting little light.

Krysty nodded. "Go ahead. Won't make matters that much worse." And it was better to have two torches going, in case one went out or had to be jettisoned to free a hand for a weapon. Her throat tightened in anticipation of the acrid smoke that would be generated as the oily dew burned off the folds of cloth when it was first ignited.

"Mayhap lighting it in the hallway would be helpful," Doc suggested.

"Fine." Krysty scanned the interior of the office, taking in the skeleton behind the large metal desk. "Just don't get out of earshot, okay?"

"Indubitably, my dear." Doc quietly took his leave, holstering the Le Mat long enough to draw one of the extra torches from the backpack he carried.

Racks of books filled the built-in shelves behind the desk. Glancing at the titles, Krysty was surprised that most of them had to do with physics and biology. She'd expected them to be military manuals.

She looked at the withered skeleton. Flame light reflected from the brass name badge pinned above the right pocket of the blouse.

"Okay, mister," Krysty said, sheathing her blaster and removing the name badge, "who were you?" She had to blow sand out of the letters to read them.

Colonel Henry Walker.

The torchlight illuminated scars on the laminated wood desktop. Krysty's trained eye told her they were gouges from bullets. She moved the torch, seeking a new angle, then pulled aside the dead man's uniform blouse.

Cracked ribs showed where the bullets had gone through, perhaps a dozen of them. At least one of them had severed the spinal cord, paralyzing the man at once while his killers finished the job.

Doc stepped back into the room with his torch blazing. He looked down at the dead man. "It appears this poor soul died alone and friendless."

"Friendless, at any rate." Krysty pointed toward the empty holster at his side. "Someone stuck around long enough to relieve him of his side arm." She straightened and glanced at the computer setup on the desk.

A slight flicker flared to brief life in the lower right corner.

"Computer's up," she said, leaning forward. She tapped the keys experimentally.

Something hummed inside the monitor casing, then popped. A soft glow emanated from

the screen as the computer came online. A selection of programs delineated as small rectangles with words under them came into view against the light blue field.

"It works," Doc said softly.

"Mebbe." Krysty looked at the menu offered, but none of it made any sense. "Could be you'll understand more of this than I do, Doc."

"Then allow me, my dear."

The screen changed as Doc sorted through the various menus. "Take a look around, dear lady, and see if you can find anything that might pass as a code book. Being of the regimented class, I believe that dead fellow could have left a journal of sorts that might provide a clue as to what procedures to use to look at the sort of files inaccessible to the casual observer."

"Sure." Krysty took a step back and turned her attention to the bookshelves while Doc sorted through the desk drawers.

"If nothing turns up," Doc added, "we can always have Mildred take a go at this. I daresay she is more versed in these infernal contraptions than I."

That was because Mildred Wyeth had been in the twentieth century longer than Doc Tanner.

Krysty shifted her torch and peered through the smoky haze at the books on the shelves. Upon closer inspection, she noticed that stray bullets had ripped the spines off some of the books. One of them sparked with a metallic intensity.

A bullet had smashed flush against the leather spine, ripping away a chunk the size of a quarter. Metal and circuitry was twisted inside. Krysty touched the book. Thick and hard, with edges that remained squared and true, it was heavier than she would have guessed.

She moved toward the shelves to get a better grip, then pulled hard. On the other side of the wall behind the bookshelf, machinery clanked and whirred. A feeling of wrongness and danger ghosted through Krysty's mind.

The floor spun before she could act. She lost the torch as she grabbed the shelves to keep her balance and reached for her blaster. She had the barest impression of Doc turning

toward her in shock, her name on his lips, then light and sight were eclipsed by the closing of the hidden door.

Working hard to keep her head, Krysty pulled on the book again. But nothing happened. She cursed beneath her breath, not wanting to interfere with her hearing as she turned to survey her new surroundings with both hands wrapped around her blaster, the hammer back.

Only Stygian darkness greeted her.

Her gift kicked to life inside her. Wherever Ryan was, she knew her lover was in danger, too. She couldn't see what it was. Maybe if she'd had time and could concentrate better, she'd have been able to get a picture of it in her mind. But she didn't have time and couldn't afford to concentrate.

Because those same senses warned her now that she wasn't alone in the darkness.

Chapter Two

The keen edge of the camp ax halted only inches from Ryan's face. He kept the mutie's wrist trapped in his grip and tried to fight his way from under his two adversaries as they worked to keep him pinned.

"Sacred grounds, outie," the ax wielder shouted. "You and yours should've stayed away." He fought to free his weapon, his other hand scrabbling for Ryan's eye.

Ryan turned his head as the broken fingernails bit deep into his scarred cheek, curiously having no sensation as they tracked across the nerve-dead areas.

The other mutie had drawn his blade free of the sand and was taking aim again.

"Ryan!" J.B. yelled. "Company's coming!" The rapid, ringing cracks of the Armorer's Uzi testified that the three muties who'd attacked Ryan hadn't come alone.

As the mutie with the knife settled into position, leaning heavily on Ryan's chest, J.B.'s Uzi rattled off a short burst and the creature pitched forward. Ryan grabbed the dying mutie's shirt and pulled him off his chest. The other mutie had gotten smarter and was transferring his ax to his off hand.

Shots rang out, some heavier and some higher pitched than the snarl from J.B.'s Uzi.

"Fireblast!" Ryan cursed, throwing his weight to one side as the mutie took a cut at him. He blocked the man's arm to the side and rolled, but before he could get to his feet, he got tangled up with the corpse of the man whose head he'd smashed with the Steyr's butt.

The mutie gave no quarter. With a yell, he launched himself at Ryan again. Bullets ripped into the swell of the dune behind him.

Still on his knees and tangled with the dead man, Ryan reached for his SIG-Sauer P-226. The pistol ripped free of the well-worn leather, coming up as natural as the one-eyed man could take a breath. His finger found the trigger unerringly, and he squeezed through on double action, then followed up with two more rapid shots.

The hollow point bullets took the mutie in the chest. The impact knocked him backward, and he was dead before he landed in the sand.

Ryan raked the terrain with his gaze, counting at least a half-dozen more muties. All of them were in the advanced stages of rad sickness. His nervous system was still jangling, warning him of danger all around, not just in front of him. He darted a quick look over his shoulder and caught a hint of movement there.

He spun toward it, the SIG-Sauer before him.

Nothing was there.

Ryan blinked, his breath already ragged and thready because of the desert's thin air and the blistering heat. The shimmer moved again, less than twenty feet away.

Bullets tunneled into the sand around Ryan's feet, urging him into action. He followed the itch and stayed away from the area where he'd spotted the shimmering movement. His boots shoved deep into the sand as he ran, slowing him considerably. He had to lift his legs high and drive hard to maintain any kind of speed, and his heart hammered with the exertion.

He threw himself behind a tangled section of fence that offered protection from the muties' rounds. He changed magazines in his pistol and stuffed the empty one into a thigh pocket of his pants. It was easier to find ammo than magazines.

Lying prone, he pulled the Steyr into his shoulder and sighted through the scope. He squeezed off two shots, making them both count. One mutie was surely dead, and the other not long for the world. Considering the depth at which they were operating inside the installation, he figured the rest of the group would be unaware they were under attack.

"We can't hold them," J.B. called out. "We stay out here, we're going to get chilled ourselves."

"I know. We're going to have to fall back to the installation."

The shimmering movement shifted outside the corner of Ryan's eye. He snapped his head around in time to see a mutie suddenly swept up from the ground and suspended in the air.

The man yelled and screamed, hanging nearly eight feet from the ground. The shimmering motion Ryan had noticed was all around the mutie.

"Dark night!" J.B. swore in amazement.

The other muties froze and dropped to their knees in benediction. They laid their arms down, then pressed their hands and faces flat into the sand before them, prostrating themselves.

The shimmering movement was a cloud around the suspended man, who fought against whatever held him at the same time he verbally offered himself up to it. Skin broke open along his midsection, partially blurred by the shimmer. Then blood poured out in heaving gouts, followed by the snaky length of the man's intestines spilling out onto the dry sand.

The cabalistic prayers died away, and the mutie began screaming hoarsely in renewed pain and fear. He pummeled whatever was holding him with both gnarled fists.

Ryan gathered himself, rising to his feet. It wasn't quite a hundred yards back to the entrance Jak had found into the structure. J.B. was sixty yards in front of him, in a seated position behind a jagged, upthrust section of the volcanic glass left over from the nuclear

holocaust. The Armorer held the Uzi at the ready, his Smith & Wesson M-4000 scattergun hanging by its shoulder sling muzzle down so he could get to it in an eye blink.

A wild, ululating howl rose in Ryan's wake, swelling into a crescendo. Even without the sudden chatter of J.B.'s subgun, he knew the pursuit had begun again. The skin across the back of his neck tightened and cooled despite the burning glare of the sun. He knew the muties weren't the only thing burning up his backtrail.

He forced himself up the incline, feeling the perspiration roll off him in fat drops. His foot found a soft spot, trod just for a second at an angled edge of something that felt hard and registered as metallic to his imagination, then slid and dropped through the shifting sand to mid thigh.

He fell forward, lunging for distance, keeping his hands locked around the Steyr. He pulled the rifle to his shoulder and fired as quickly as possible. It was almost impossible to miss the charging group of muties, and the high-powered jacketed bullets ripped through one mutie and hit another one behind him.

Then Ryan was aware of the shimmering movement circling him from the left, almost hidden on his blind side. He tried to turn and bring the rifle on target, but the creature was too fast. It was on him, scuttling, cluttering an obscene noise that registered a mad hunger and left a track of shivers down Ryan's spine.

Blood from the dead mutie painted the apparition in places, making visible the short, coarse hair that seemed to cover it and the three black, depthless eyes set deep into a nightmare face.

Two of the thing's ropelike limbs shot out and seized Ryan. One of them wrapped around his left arm, knocking the Steyr from his grip with an iron strength, while the other encircled his waist.

It drew him closer.

With the proximity, Ryan could see what the muties' god was: a spider, covered in some kind of camouflage skin that was more effective than any lizard's natural gift the one-eyed man had ever seen. Fetid breath blew across Ryan, filled with the foul smell of carrion dining. The maw opened, big enough to take Ryan's head and shoulders in a single bite. Black-and-green ichor dripped from fanglike projectiles as it drew him in.

"Ryan!" J.B. shouted. The Armorer unleashed a burst of 9 mm rounds that chewed into the giant spider's body and splattered green splotches.

With a clattering hiss, the spider reared on four of its back legs, lifting Ryan high and moving to devour him again.

Awkward as it was, Ryan curled his right hand around the haft of the panga sheathed at his left side. He pulled it free as the spider dropped him toward its mouth.

THE ROOM WAS DARK and filled with old death. The sick, stale smell of it had rotted into the metallic bulwarks around it for decades. Mildred Wyeth wrinkled her nose in disgust as she forced herself to enter the room, evidently a research lab of some kind. Computer equipment littered the floor, some of it arranged in long lines where several operators had monitored whatever information they'd been working on, while other, independent stages were arranged in a horseshoe shape to oversee various sections of the area.

Skeletons were scattered across the steel floor. Many of them were dressed in faded and worn U.S. Air Force uniforms. Mats had been laid, consisting of sleeping bags, parachutes and tarps, whatever had been at hand. More tarps were hung from thin steel cable that traversed the huge room at various points, forming small pockets of privacy.

She'd been in worse places, she told herself. But not much worse.

Unlike Ryan and the others of the group, Mildred was relatively new to the hardscrabble existence of Deathlands. She'd been born in Lincoln, Nebraska, a week before Christmas in 1964, which would have put her at over 130 years old by the calendar. However, Mildred hadn't lived by a conventional calendar.

Three days after Christmas in the year 2000, she'd been back in her hometown for a social visit with her family and to undergo abdominal surgery for a possible ovarian cyst. Her body hadn't reacted well to the anesthetic, and she'd nearly died before the medical team was able to successfully put her on ice in a cryogenic chamber. Ironically cryogenics had been her field of study and interest, and she'd been trapped by it for a hundred years before Ryan and his band had discovered her and freed her. Apparently the cryonic process had reversed the ill-effects of the anesthetic.

She held the Czech-built .38-caliber ZKR 551 pistol with serious conviction as she moved through the room—the woman had been a champion pistol shooter. Her ebony

skin was dappled with gleaming beads of perspiration, and she'd used a red bandanna to keep the beaded plaits of her hair back out of her face. Her fatigues were already clammy with sweat.

"All dead. Some die rad. Some die gunshot. Some knife."

"I see that, too." Mildred didn't turn to face Jak Lauren, who'd come up behind her like a ghost.

Besides moving like a ghost, he looked like one, too. He was true albino. His long white hair fell to his shoulders, framing a scarred white face with feral ruby eyes. Youthfulness remained in the harsh features, but innocence had been stripped away by a life that had never known anything but violence and death. He resembled a mottled shadow standing in the darkness behind her, dressed in camou-style clothing with iridescent patches of brown and gray.

At less than five and a half feet, and barely over a hundred pounds, bred and blooded in the Cajun country in Louisiana, Jak was a pure product of the Deathlands. Even though she was bigger than the albino teenager and was more cautious on the surface, Mildred felt safe with him. Jak was death on the move, with hair-trigger reflexes.

He stood relaxed, the .357 Magnum Colt Python hanging lazily at the end of his right arm while he played his torch around the deathscape. "They separate. Live own life. Shut others out."

Mildred swept her own torch around, taking in the twisted remains of the people who'd lived and died in the computer nerve center. "They must have thought they had something worth protecting," she said. "Especially if they believed they had to protect it from the others in this compound."

Jak faded away, not making a noise as he moved out to recon again.

Bone and concrete bits crunched under Mildred's feet. She could move quietly by most standards, but the cavernous hollow picked up even the smallest sounds. Still, she felt chagrined to realize the only noises that were being amplified were hers.

A small, skeletal foot caught Mildred's attention. A chill shuddered through her as she brought the light back to it. Then she closed her mind off to the momentary weakness and walled it away.

The foot was part of a child's skeleton. Bleached bone white by the torchlight and by time, it lay curled within the protective grip of a woman's corpse—the sex identified by a patched Air Force blue skirt—beneath a long table. The blankets that had been used to make a bed were from military stores, but had grayed with time.

Mildred knelt, drawn by the pathetic sight. It was nothing new, but here, where they'd only found the bodies of adults, the child's death seemed more pronounced. She played the light over the two corpses. Neither appeared to have died from radiation sickness or violence.

Metal gleamed around the woman's neck, and Mildred reached out for the stainless-steel dog tags. When she tried to move the chain from around the neck, the effort dislodged the skull from its tentative hold on the neck, and it went rolling away. The child collapsed more and seemed to meld in a jumble of bones into its mother.

Mildred studied the information stamped on the dog tags: Lieutenant Jacqueline Dawson, followed by her service number and other pertinent facts. She'd only been thirty-one when the end had arrived.

"Wall you off from the world," Mildred said in a thick voice, "still you think you gotta believe in love. Silly bitch. Love grows in safe houses, places where you worry about the mortgage getting paid on time, not whether you're going to survive."

But she knew that was an unfair assessment. The child could have been the result of a reaching out for creature comfort after the unit had been forced to cut itself off from the rest of the installation.

A pile of toys, shaped from bits of wood carved in the shapes of animals and trucks, filled a plastic basket at the foot of the bedroll. Machined blocks of metal and polished stones were mixed in with them.

However the child had arrived, effort had been made to care for it.

Mildred said a small prayer for them, the words coming easily. Her father had been a Baptist preacher. She started to back out of the area when she spotted the locked journal in the folds of the blanket. She picked it up, then held the torch close to the ragged clothing that fell apart at her touch. The key to the journal was in an empty tin of analgesics. It wasn't much bigger than her thumbnail, with two forked teeth on the end.

Standing beside the workstation, Mildred fitted the key into the lock and turned. The tumblers inside gave reluctantly, and she opened the front cover without trepidation. Whatever secrets the woman had held had died with her decades earlier.

"Lt. J. Dawson" was written in a strong, clearly feminine hand. The blue ink was partially washed out by time and the yellow glow of the torch. The narrative began on the next page.

1/29/01—The world died nine days ago at approximately 1700 Greenwich mean time. It was noon in Washington, D.C., and 1000 hours on base. We'd been watching the presidential inauguration.

A quick scan of the next few pages told Mildred that Dawson had been trying to make sense of everything that had happened. Information had died immediately when the bombs fell and attacks in space destroyed satellite links. The base hadn't known who'd started the attack and had been unable to renew any kind of communications on the backup systems that had been installed.

The story wasn't new. In the places where Ryan had led his group, others had kept similar journals. She flipped through the pages. At first the entries had been inscribed with a regularity that told her the lieutenant had been trying to impose her own sense of security on the confusion that had broken loose around her. She looked at one only a few weeks later.

2/13/01—We've just been notified that we're all trapped here. The radiation is going to be too much for any of us for possibly years.

Major Burroughs (the U.S. Army liaison for the project in charge of security) says we're better off than the other sectors of the installation. With the experimentation our unit has been working on, the lab environs and this facility had to be shielded. And we've got enough supplies to last for decades. God, I say that, and I look at it on this page, but there's no way it can last that long. No way we can last that long.

The hardest part is listening to the others, people some of us might have known, pounding on the door and begging to be let in. But they've been infected by the radiation. There's

nothing that can be done.

Mildred skipped ahead twenty or thirty pages. The entries became shorter, less hopeful and less punctual.

11/28/01—Major Burroughs is going around asking for volunteers to go on a raiding party into the outer sections of the installation. Rumors have started up that no one can lay to rest. We all know what we were working on now. We have to wonder what the other sections of the complex were dealing with.

And if there are any other survivors.

Despite the major's best efforts, the group is starting to divide into factions. It's natural, some of the people say. We're festering inside this center. If we had a goal, maybe everyone would accept a strong leader more easily. Burroughs isn't going to relinquish command without a struggle.

The people who engineered the Lydecker Foundation chose well in him, though. He'll kill whomever he has to in order to keep discipline. I don't think the others see that in him yet. Especially the egghead civilians the project was blessed with.

Mention of the Lydecker Foundation gave Mildred pause. It sounded a lot like the Totality Concept. At the same time it offered hope, the presence of the program here also scared her. Those programs had a habit of being as destructive as anything that had blown the world apart.

Mildred closed the book. It offered perhaps another couple dozen entries. The last one was dated April 19, 2005. She stuffed the journal in the rucksack she'd commandeered, along with some self-heats and ring-pulls. Whatever secrets and sorrows it held could wait until a better time to go through it.

"Not exactly going to be light reading," she told herself in an effort to shake the weight from her shoulders as she gave the dead mother and child a final look.

Turning, she almost walked into Jak.

"Not alone anymore," the albino whispered, covering her mouth with a leathery palm. His torch was off, put away.

She nodded to let him know that she understood, then slipped the Czech blaster from its leather. There was a scrape above her, from somewhere along the catwalk that ringed the computer center.

Mildred threw the torch away and dropped to one side a heartbeat ahead of the bullet that split the air where her skull had been.

Chapter Three

Writhing in the giant spider's grasp, Ryan swung the panga with all his strength. The leg holding him was as tough as he'd expected, but the keen eighteen-inch blade sheared through and freed him. Blood sprayed over him as the arachnid hunkered down in momentary shock and pain.

Ryan landed against the spider's head and immediately pushed off, sliding easily down the blood-slick hair. He dropped feet first into the sand, holding on to the panga tightly.

Wounded, the spider seemed to be having difficulty controlling its protective-coloring ability. It phased in and out of easy view. The natural colors appeared to be a very dark brown that looked black against the sand. The remaining legs dug deeply for purchase, then the body swung so that the creature could track Ryan with its beady black gaze.

Some of the feeling was returning to Ryan's left arm, stinging pain bringing with it a stiff mobility. He managed to reach down for the Steyr and scoop it up.

The spider swept another leg at him, creasing the sand more and more deeply as it approached.

Operating on razored instincts, Ryan leaped over the leg and brought up the Steyr. Holding the rifle in one hand, feeling the burn of the weight settle across his back and

shoulders, he shoved the muzzle into the spider's face, penetrating one of the jet black eye bubbles. He squeezed the trigger as the hairs of another flailing leg missed his cheek. The rifle bucked.

The heavy 7.62 mm round rocketed through the spider's head, spewing a cloud of green ichor out behind it.

Ryan remained relentless as the spider tried to make its escape. He followed the creature, having to step high and stretch to keep the Steyr in place, and fired four more rounds before the arachnid was able to pull away.

The spider swayed drunkenly, trying to use the amputated limb as it retreated. A broken line of muties formed behind it, the ululant wails still keening sharply.

"Incoming!" J.B. warned.

Ryan withdrew quickly, aiming his headlong charge at the Armorer.

J.B. stood up from behind cover, a LAW rocket launcher settled comfortably over one narrow shoulder. His face was grim and sand encrusted under the fedora as he took aim.

Ryan tightened his grip on the panga and the Steyr. There was no way he was going to get entirely clear of the blast area—if the LAW even worked. They'd found it less than an hour ago, and J.B. hadn't had time to clean it.

The muties were already in motion. Some of them approached the spider, acting as if they wanted to help. The arachnid brushed them away like tenpins. The rest of the muties rushed at Ryan and J.B. with renewed fury.

The warhead leaped from the LAW with a distinctive whoosh. The trailing vapor burned orange and green, demonstrating that the chemical propellant wasn't perfect quality. But the explosive still fired when it impacted.

Ryan felt the heat wash across his back, deeper than the direct gaze of the desert sun, then the concussion flattened him in midstep. He went down, going with the force, then pushed himself back up again at once. A few more staggering steps, and he dropped into position beside J.B.

"Never chilled a god before," the Armorer said.

"Could of done this one a lot sooner," Ryan told his friend as he reloaded the Steyr.

The warhead wasn't as destructive as it might have been decades earlier. A smoky, burning husk of the giant spider remained, all seven legs curled inward in some kind of warped fetal position. Several of the muties were down around it, but at least eighteen were making their way toward Ryan and J.B.'s position.

"Hard to see the thing at first," the Armorer said. "You scored that hit, and it started to bleed, I couldn't miss." He dumped the rocket-launcher tube and whipped out the Uzi, burning through half a clip at the approaching muties. "You want to chastise me some more or run?"

"Run," Ryan replied. He gathered his weapons and led the sprint for the opening to the installation. Bullets landed around them, then spanged off the sides of the opening a few seconds later.

Ryan took a standing position at the side of the entry-way and started firing. His first bullet took a mutie in the throat, nearly decapitating him. The corpse fell to the ground and jerked spasmodically.

J.B. opened up at his side, and two more of the muties spilled to the ground in lifeless heaps. "We withdraw, they're going to follow us inside. Could be they know this place better than we do."

"Reckon you're right." Ryan had seen the bodies of muties in some of the corridors. "Holding up here's not going to be an option. And there's probably ways inside this place that we don't know about."

"Awful helpful, thinking about them coming up on us from the back," J.B. commented, and he fired another round burst that only cut the top off a dune but didn't touch the target that went diving away.

"I can stay here," J.B. offered. "Buy you some time to get the others back up here."

"Fuck that. We stand together, same as always."

The muties were massing, yelling at one another and putting their nerve to fever pitch.

"They're coming," Ryan said grimly.

"Never had a doubt of it," J.B. replied.

"You got anything else in that little pouch of nasty surprises you managed to salvage from this place?"

"Couple of grens. Might give them some pause." The Armorer took them out and passed one over.

Ryan cupped the gren gingerly and hooked a finger through the ring just as the muties broke cover and began their charge. "On my count."

J.B. nodded, his face set and impassive.

The muties were fifty yards out and closing.

"Three," Ryan counted down, "two—"

Before he could go any further, he heard the sound of clanking machinery, joined by at least three blistering lines of heavy machine-gun fire.

The .50-caliber bullets chewed into the ranks of the muties without warning. They spun and twisted awkwardly as plate-sized gobbets of diseased flesh exploded from their bodies and flopped onto the dry sand, sending up little bursts of alkaline white dust.

"Dark night!" J.B. breathed.

Ryan flattened against the side of the opening but didn't release the gren. The withering machine-gun fire left nothing alive in the open areas, and chased a handful of survivors into hiding. The one-eyed man blinked to clear his vision. Wet strands of hair hung down into his face.

The growl and clank of machinery continued. A roil of sand tracked up one side of the dunes facing them.

"Wags," J.B. said.

Ryan nodded. There was no mistaking the sound. He'd lived with it for years while he'd been with the Trader.

An M-1 Abrams Main Battle Tank clawed its way through the sand and perched on the edge of a dune less than a hundred yards away. The turret swiveled, the servomotors squealing in response, bringing the main gun to bear on the opening. An M-109 A-2155 mm self-propelled howitzer pulled into a flanking position on the left, followed immediately by two SEAL FAVs—Fast Attack Vehicles.

"Get the feeling we've stepped from the frying pan right into the fire?" J.B. asked.

"Yeah," Ryan replied. "How much plas ex do you have in that pack?"

"What do you have in mind?"

"Shutting this door." Ryan pocketed the gren. "If we have to." The thought didn't sit well with him. Many of the people he'd seen inside the installation had died while trapped in there.

"We could have a problem getting out of here later," J.B. commented.

"Mebbe. But if we try to cross that desert and these people don't want us to, we're going to catch the last train west anyway. I'd rather pick the time when I show up at the station if I got a choice."

"Right." The Armorer slung the Uzi and dropped his pack, rummaging through it.

The war wag's PA system crackled to life. "Attention. This is Major Drake Burroughs of the United States Army. Throw down your weapons and come out of the building."

Ryan glanced at J.B.

"You heard him right," the Armorer said, pushing his glasses up his bridge of a nose with a grimy forefinger. "Stupe thinks he's still part of the U.S. military."

"Give yourselves up," the major shouted, "and you won't be harmed."

"I'm going to buy us some time," Ryan said.

Before the Armorer could attempt to talk him out of it, he stepped into the glare of the sun. He cupped his other hand and shouted back. "I'd rather talk first."

At first there was no reply, then the words rolled like thunder. "You're in no position to negotiate."

Ryan grinned, knowing the wolf's smile would be picked up by others among the unit who were using binoculars. A show of confidence didn't hurt, especially when there wasn't anything to be confident about. "If I wasn't, you wouldn't have opened the ball on this conversation."

Burroughs didn't hesitate long before deciding. A man pulled himself through the hatch of the Abrams war wag and waved another out of the passenger seat of one of the fast-attack vehicles. The buggy roared forward on its fat tires, spinning out tails of sand behind it. As it neared, Ryan saw the 12.7 mm machine gun mounted on top of it.

The wag stopped thirty yards away, its nose pointed in silent challenge at Ryan like a feral animal. The machine gunner's attention never wavered.

The man in the passenger seat got out and walked toward Ryan. He was nearly six and a half feet tall, packaged tight and neat, broad at the shoulder. His uniform was black, contrasting sharply with the platinum white of his short-cropped hair. His face was seamed, tanned and leathery, the eyes and crow's feet covered by dark aviator sunglasses. Ryan guessed his age at forty, perhaps a few years older. He carried a .45 Colt Government Model in a counterterrorist drop holster on his right thigh, and another in shoulder leather was attached to his combat webbing. Kevlar body armor was apparent under the webbing. An American flag was plastered against his upper left shoulder, but its looseness suggested that it was removable.

Burroughs stopped ten feet away and pinned Ryan with his gaze. "Sergeant," he bellowed without looking away.

"Sir," the machine gunner responded.

"I should know this man."

"Sir, you do. Ryan Cawdor. He's in our files."

Burroughs nodded. "One eyed. General description. I thought so. We didn't have a picture

of this man before."

"No, sir. Already been remedied."

"You used to ride with the Trader," Burroughs said to Ryan. "Son of a baron along the East Coast or something, if I remember correctly."

Ryan returned the level gaze full measure. "You're the man with all the answers."

Burroughs didn't reply.

"Got one question for you, though." Ryan kept his voice loud enough so that only J.B. and Burroughs could hear. "You given any thought to how you're going to get back to that wag before me or one of mine put a bullet through your head?"

MILDRED RAN, trying to follow Jak in the darkness. The albino teen had dropped his torch, as well. Her hip bumped painfully against a workstation, sending a computer crashing to the floor.

The computer shattered when it struck the hard surface. White-hot sparks of electricity peppered the darkness. Bullets cut through her former position, striking the metallic shells of other computers and the tables in rapid succession. Some of them were purple tracers, flashing by in a blur.

A hand plucked at Mildred's sleeve. She whirled, bringing up the .38.

"Me," Jak said in a harsh whisper. "Find door. Follow."

"I can't see a thing."

"Follow wind, then." Jak kept pulling at her, not hesitating in the slightest.

"Where are they, dammit?" a voice bellowed above them.

"I'm tracking them," another man answered. "Goddamn thermal imager's all fucked up from the torches they were carrying."

Mildred's mind was screaming at her, demanding to know who the people were who were trying to kill them, and where they'd come from. She was certain they hadn't entered through the door she and Jak had used. She kept the questions to herself, following Jak's lead as best she could. Now that her senses were searching for it, she could feel the breeze moving through the room.

"Down," Jak urged, tugging her into position beside an overturned computer table.

The gunfire around them had almost abated, but was replaced by the noise of men hurrying, shoving through furniture with careless abandon behind them. Mildred hunkered down as Jak had requested, knowing the albino teenager would stick and wouldn't leave her there. She blinked her eyes rapidly, willing her night vision to register.

Flashlights, honest-to-God hand-held units that had to run off battery power, threw beams across the interior of the computer center. Mildred marveled at their presence. Only a few years ago by her personal clock, things like batteries were taken for granted, necessary nuisances available in every convenience store. In the Deathlands, though, they were seldom seen. For someone to be using them so readily meant their pursuers had a stockpile of them or had the technology to construct their own.

Neither theory left her feeling comfortable.

"Split up," the first voice commanded. "Two-man units. Don't try to apprehend them yourselves. Call for backup."

The orders and the man's tone indicated a military or law-enforcement background that Mildred was familiar with from her previous life.

"We don't find and neutralize these bastards, Burroughs is going to have our asses in a sling."

Mildred recognized the name from the journal entries. A flashlight beam whipped over the table above her and drove her further into hiding. Perspiration dripped down her face, soaking into the collar at her neck. For just a moment it highlighted Jak as he stole up behind a man closing on Mildred's position. His face was grim and unforgiving, and he held one of his leaf-bladed knives in a fist.

"Clancy!" a man yelled from the direction the flashlight had come. The light tracked back.

This time the view was of the man dumbly looking down at the gouts of blood staining his uniform blouse from his slashed throat. Jak was already in motion.

"There, goddammit! Somebody take that fucker out!"

Mildred stood up from the table, the Czech pistol in a two-handed grip. As soon as the blade along the barrel leveled with her target, she snapped off three rounds.

The spread among all of them would have fit on a playing card. The flashlight that had been targeting Jak winked out of existence, followed by a bout of cursing that came deep from the soul.

"The bastards took out Eggleton," someone yelled.

Mildred took a step in the direction of the breeze and locked on to another flashlight. She fired three more rounds, then kept moving, guided by Jak's hand on her shoulder.

"Door at ten feet to left. Move. They're closing in."

Mildred ran, knowing from the firing lines that the group they were facing had already sectioned off the room and had nearly pinned down their location. Jak was a dark wraith ahead of her, barely visible against the sudden rectangle of the doorway they'd entered through.

"Damn it! They're making for the door! Cease fire! Ceasefire!"

Lungs burning, trying to feed the need for oxygen that her system demanded, Mildred threw herself through the door just as a rifle bullet sailed above her head. She rolled, listening to the rapid beat of approaching footsteps. She pushed herself up, raising the ZKR in front of her.

At the side of the door, Jak hammered a fist into a control panel. "Got power. Shut door. Lock 'em in."

With a ratcheting grate, the steel door recessed overhead started to drop with a jerk. A plume of rust-colored dust billowed up when it slammed against the flooring hard enough to vibrate through the steel panels.

Mildred paused long enough to pick up a rusted screwdriver from the debris scattered across the floor. She rammed it into the electronic panel Jak had used to seal the door. Wiring flared and soldered itself, shorting out the circuits. Electric current, almost forceful enough to burn her skin, hit her hand before she could jerk it back. The tool held enough metal to burn cherry red from the electricity. She felt confident there'd be no further pursuit from that quarter.

Mildred heard the gunfire then, distant cracks that sounded thin. She knew at once that she and Jak weren't the only ones who'd been attacked.

Chapter Four

Burroughs returned the one-eyed man's harsh stare, then arced a small smile. Cawdor had made no overtly threatening move, nothing that would attract the attention of the men the major knew he had backing his play. "I came forward to this truce with the understanding that we could work something out," he said.

"Guess we didn't." Ryan was matter-of-fact in his appraisal of the situation. "Seems a shame somehow, what with all the trouble you went to."

Burroughs felt the heat of the sun against his neck. He knew Cawdor couldn't see through the dark lenses of his aviators. He peered past the one-eyed man, trying to see how many people were in the mouth of the installation and where they were positioned. A comm headset nestled in his ear and under his chin. It wasn't connected to a satellite relay the way it had been in the old days, but it tied him in with the tank crews.

Intel had reported that Ryan Cawdor was a man to be reckoned with. Burroughs knew that. He'd flagged the man's file himself.

"How far back in the installation have you been?" Burroughs asked.

Ryan shook his head. "The impression I get from you, standing here's done past the safety mark."

The man was right and Burroughs knew it. Besides the orders he'd been given all those years ago, there was also the need to keep Project Calypso secret for his own reasons. The major kept perfectly still. He'd been blooded in Grenada, Panama, Desert Storm and the Bosnian conflict. Even while trapped in the installation, awaiting a time when the rad count would drop to a tolerable level, he'd kept himself and his unit flexible and fit.

"How do you want to handle this?" Burroughs asked.

"I'll step back inside while you stand your ground there," Ryan replied. "Then you can move off."

"How do I know you won't simply shoot me down once you're inside?"

"I set up a deal, I generally stick to it. Mebbe I'm no man of honor, but I am a man of my word."

Everything Burroughs had heard about the man indicated the truth of those words. Still, it didn't ease what felt like a twisted knot of stainless-steel wool in the pit of his stomach. "You've been out here a long time," he said. "I was hoping we could perhaps help each other."

"Do what?"

"Rebuild."

Ryan's eye narrowed as if he hadn't heard right. "Rebuild what? This installation?"

"These are hard times, Mr. Cawdor. Hard times require hard men making hard decisions. This country still has enemies."

Ryan shook his head. "You aren't making any sense."

"There are a lot of people out here who need guidance," Burroughs said. "Haven't you ever wished for more than what this place has to offer?"

The suspicious glint in the man's single eye was unmistakable. "Sounds to me like you're all set up to carve a ville out for yourself and set yourself up as a baron. Mebbe you can do that, and mebbe it's for you. Me, I've had enough of politics to last me a lifetime and then some."

"More than a ville," Burroughs said. Maybe if he got Cawdor to understand, the man would be more willing to listen to reason. The unit didn't need Cawdor specifically. There were others who could be used, but having Cawdor would be a big step in the right direction. Some villes were remnants of cities, set up to barter and trade around specific areas. From what he'd seen and heard of them, the major knew they'd sprung from an old feudal way of society. "Those places are founded on strength and domination, and driven by visions of lust and greed. I can offer more."

"Then again," Ryan said, "considering the current situation—mebbe not."

Burroughs felt the back of his neck burn, and not all the heat was coming from the sun. "You pull back inside the building, there's nowhere to go."

Ryan smiled mirthlessly. "Just because you give a man no place to go, doesn't mean he's going to go nowhere."

Burroughs steeled himself. There was no way he could simply let the man and his group walk away. "You know what a bluff is?"

A thin smile tugged at Ryan's lips. "Sure. Question is, are you running one? Or mebbe you figure I am? I've got no problem with shooting you down where you stand."

"I also notice you're standing in the middle of that door," Burroughs said. "You're probably hard to shoot around."

There was a tense silence, then a woman's voice called, "Ryan."

"Mildred," he acknowledged.

"He's going to need some convincing."

The radio squealed in Burroughs's ear, almost painful in its intensity.

"Major?" Kennedy asked over the headset.

"Stand down," Burroughs ordered. "Not a damn move until I give the order."

"Yes, sir."

Burroughs watched Ryan, expecting the big man to be the one to make the first move. Instead, an impact slammed into his right thigh, followed immediately by the sharp report of a pistol. He'd been struck with enough force that at first he'd thought he'd been shot. Pain spread up and down his thigh. Out of reflex, turning on his left heel and bringing his right leg back to present a profile target, he reached for the .45 in the counter terrorist drop holster. Only the gun wasn't there.

Already in motion, Ryan threw himself back into the opening.

More bullets plucked at Burroughs's clothing, snapping through the sharp crease of his shoulder seam and whispering past his face, ripping through the loose folds of his shirt collar and making it stand out. None of them ever found the Kevlar body armor he wore. Whoever was shooting at him didn't mean him any harm. Yet.

Burroughs went to ground and hit the button activating the communications link. "Fire," he roared. "Hit the front of that building now." He drew the other .45 from its shoulder rig as the sound of heavy machine gun fire ripped across the stillness of the desert. A cold numbness had settled into his leg. A quick glance showed him that the thigh holster had been neatly sheared away and hung upside down by the lower thigh strap. The marksman had been a damn fine shot.

He turned his attention to the front of the building as bullets chipped the stone outer surface and whined from the layers of steel underneath.

"Kennedy," Burroughs called over the radio.

"Sir."

"The inside team?"

"Their communications are breaking up, sir," the man replied. "Best we can figure out, they've been shut off in the old Project Calypso area."

There were only two ways out of the structure. Over the years trapped inside, Burroughs had made certain of that. If the other team had been shut off in the project area, that way was closed. And Ryan Cawdor couldn't hope to hold the other one, even if he'd had the water and supplies and could tolerate the rad intensity still baked into the terrain.

Burroughs crawled to the crest of a dune and fisted his pistol more tightly and shifted the sand so he could lie prone. He sighted along the barrel and waited for his shot with a patience that had been perfected over decades.

KRYSTY FROZE against the wall behind her. The S&W Model 640 .38 pistol was in her hand, loose and ready. Air moved against her face, and she turned and moved slowly in the direction it came from.

Unable to see in the complete darkness, she felt with her gift, probing what lay ahead of her. Something. She wasn't quite sure what it was, but it had an alien feel to it. And it bore the cool, serrated touch of death.

Machinery hummed, low and almost indistinct, from a few yards away. It was an amorphous presence that held an unfocused promise of threat.

The hum deepened, then something clattered overhead. Krysty aimed the pistol in the dark, not doubting that it was pointed directly at the source of the noise. She reached out to the side with her free hand, leaning out from the wall she was using as her guide. Her fingertips brushed against the rough, rusty surface of the opposite wall. There was nothing in front of her or behind her.

A glimmer of light ignited inside a rounded hull almost three feet above Krysty's head. The movement that accompanied it was stiff, filled with off-kilter vibration. She squeezed her pistol's trigger as rapidly as she could. Six rounds spanged off metal with long, loud screams that left blazing comets of sparks in their wake.

At the same time her extra senses sent a quiver through Krysty that triggered an immediate reaction. In response she threw herself forward. Her arms covered her head before she landed, protecting her face and skull from whatever might be covering the ground. Instantly she rolled to one side and put her back to the wall. As she craned her head up to take in the blazing pyre that remained of the sentry drone, she broke open the .38 pistol and shook the empty brass free. In only a matter of seconds, she refilled the chambers and snapped the cylinder closed.

The drone was a spherical shape almost a foot and a half in diameter. Twin tracks only a couple inches apart threaded across the center of the tunnel, hanging from occasional braces from the ceiling. The drone hung from one track like a dead crow with one foot latched around a power line. The fire fed on the circuitry inside the mechanical sentry. A pall of gray blue smoke whipped against the ceiling, then began to drop toward the

bottom of the tunnel.

Knowing the illumination from the fire wasn't going to last long, Krysty pushed herself to her feet. The tracks hanging from the ceiling were powered, and the power had to be coming from somewhere.

She went forward, ducking under the tangle of flaming wires that hung from the security drone. The tunnel ran almost straight, but on a decline that she could feel in her sense of balance and in the way her feet turned as she walked.

The fire in the security drone went out with a collection of little hisses. But before it did, she spotted the oval door at the end of the tunnel.

Krysty had to pass through the last few yards without any light, working from memory. She reached out with her hand, seeking the door. It took six more measured steps to find it.

The metal was rough under the layer of foul ooze. An oily gloss covered everything but the sharpest edges. She felt around until she located the latch, which was recessed into the door. Holding the .38 pistol at the ready, she shoved the door inward. A gentle illumination spilled over her. The fire-retardant ooze crested over the lip at the bottom of the sealed door and glopped into the room.

Without saying a word, Krysty stepped across the threshold, keeping herself in profile to make a smaller target. Her senses gave her an uncertain feeling that no one else was in the room.

Computer mainframes lined the walls around her, red, amber, white, green and orange lights flickering against their surfaces. A steady hum permeated the room, then blowers activated, making the area sound more hollow than it had only a moment ago.

Krysty got the impression that the operation hadn't been a large one, but it had flexed plenty of cybernetic muscle, judging from the hardware she could see. She crossed the room to the nearest workstation and sat, placing the pistol on the desktop beside her.

She recognized the monitoring system from the numerous screens it had available. All of them were linked to a keyboard. "Okay," she told herself, "the drone had power, and the fire systems, and there's light in here. There's got to be power at this level."

She sat tensely on the edge of the swivel chair after hitting the power button she found on the edge of the keyboard. Around her she heard the sharp crackle and chug of the mainframes coming online, then the intake of internal fans even over the hiss of the vents and air system.

There were eight screens before her, glassed-over ebony that only hinted at any kind of depth. Whoever had designed the room had gone to lengths to keep it hidden from the rest of the installation. It stood to reason that whoever used it would also want access to whatever else was available in the complex.

With a rapid string of liquid pops, five of the screens flared to life. The other three remained blank, shot through with occasional bursts of static. The most centrally located screen, slightly smaller than the others, held a menu in lime green letters skating across black velvet: Security Camera Uplink.

Numbers followed, as well as brief listings of where the cameras were. View three was an exterior view, tied in through the Maintenance Program, according to the menu. Krysty was disappointed as she looked up at the dark screen in front of her, marked View Three. Evidently the exterior cameras were the first to go during the attack in 2001.

She checked the menu again, finding a listing for Checkpoints, Interior. Another glance at the screens before her and she found View Two still operable. Though Mildred had the most knowledge of computers, she had taught Krysty the basics. She tagged the keyboard and brought up another menu in the lower right of the second screen, transparent so it didn't wipe out any of the details.

The screen darkened and filled with the cavernous vault of one of the other tunnel shafts. She didn't know where it was or what it showed. The menu on the screen listed five other possible views. Elevator bars allowed her to scan even more. She worked her way through them. Most of them opened up only onto dead screens. There'd been considerable damage done inside the complex, either by the bombing, the systems collapsing or intentional changes in the programming. Lines ran across some screens: "Seized by outside source."

"Sacrificed to prevent disclosure of this unit."

On the next selection, though, she found Ryan. He was dodging back inside the entrance they'd come through, with Jak, Mildred and J.B. surrounding him, covering his retreat. Bullets chopped into the sides of the entrance.

Ryan went into a rolling dive on one shoulder, hurrying out of the killzone afforded through the entrance. Through it, Krysty saw the war buggy perched on the sand, the tires churning as the driver threw his vehicle into gear.

Then the entrance came apart in a terrific explosion that seemed even more horrendous because no sound came through the speakers. Dust and flying debris obscured the camera's view, and a heartbeat later took it out completely.

A thin, irregular line of yellow-and-black static pulsed across the screen, followed almost immediately by red letters that said, "Unit off-line."

Chapter Five

The swirling dust choked Ryan as the explosive force picked up the sand from the floor and mixed it into the air. Then he was slammed in the ribs by a chunk of rock that he never saw coming. His breath, what little he'd been able to take in, rushed from his lungs in a painful gasp.

He staggered and went down on one knee as his muscles were seized in agony. He maintained his grip on the SIG-Sauer blaster with difficulty, feeling the grit that had slid in under his palm against the chilling machine's butt-plates.

"Move," Jak ordered, pushing himself up under one of Ryan's arms. "Got war wags. Wall not hold out long."

"I got it," Ryan snarled, making his body bend to his will in spite of the pain trying to double him up. "I walked into this on my own. I'll see clear of it the same way." Still, he let the albino hustle him farther into the installation before disengaging himself.

J.B. took off his fedora long enough to wipe the fresh layer of dust from his face. Once he was satisfied with the effort, he worked on the lenses of his glasses, managing them one-handed on his shirt while he held on to the shotgun.

"More where they come from," Jak said.

Ryan couldn't see much in the darkness. Once the entrance had been blocked, nearly all of the light had gone with it. "You seen others like them?"

"Sure. Room full. Not ask questions. They just shooting."

Ryan followed the teenager's voice, knowing Jak had marked their way in his mind by memory or things he could touch along the way. He stepped carefully. The debris from the explosion had made walking even more treacherous.

A self-light flared to life, framing Mildred's face as she cupped the flame. "We blocked them in another room," she said. "Jammed the controls on the door. If they want to get out, it's going to take some doing." The fire in her hand spread up the torch she held, growing until it became big enough to light their way.

"They with the same outfit?" J.B. asked.

"Oh, yeah. No doubt about it."

"Where's Krysty and Doc?" Ryan asked as they headed for the stairwell. The large chamber on the other side of the entrance spun out in a wheel, shooting off a half-dozen other tunnels that led into other parts of the structure. Three of them, they'd discovered, were blocked by fallen ceilings and walls. Another had been shut off by a thick steel door that J.B. had said would bring the top of the building down if an attempt was made to blow it.

"Must still be down in the tunnel they were following," Mildred said. "We haven't heard anything from them."

Ryan knew only that Doc and Krysty were somewhere inside the labyrinth they'd ventured into. Since he didn't know for sure they were dead, he had to assume they were still moving. "We got a way open to us now. Go. Mebbe we'll run out of places to go to later." He passed the torch to Jak. "Take the lead. Mildred, you follow. I got the rear, and J.B., you're about a step ahead of me."

The other three nodded tensely and got under way.

Ryan waited at the entrance, leaning around the corner long enough to snap off a shot that caught a man in the shoulder as he tried to make more ground toward the stairwell. He

fired two follow-up shots to pick the guy off as he spun, but both went wide of the mark by only a few inches. Bullets from the other soldiers hammered him back into hiding.

Suddenly a soft, blue gray light pulsed into being above and behind him.

Ryan whirled, his eye adjusting to the flat monitor screen built into the wall. The color was washed-out, leaving the images only a palette of grays to work with, but he had no problem recognizing Krysty. In the distance machinery seemed to fill the background behind her.

"Hello, lover," Ryan called softly. "How are things on the other side?"

There was a harsh sputter of static, punctuated by the words "—way out—map—hurry."

Her image blanked out, fading like a ghost caught in a mat-trans jump. In a moment it was replaced by a jumble of lines Ryan knew had to represent corridors and floors inside the installation.

"Anybody make any sense out of that?" Ryan asked.

"The floor she and Doc on," Jak said. He reached out and tapped the monitor. "Stairwell here. She there." A faded lemon dot stood out against the gray under his forefinger.

"Can you find it?" J.B. asked.

The albino nodded. "Sure."

"Go," Ryan said. "Things around here aren't going to get any friendlier."

An explosion slammed against the exterior of the building with enough force to tear loose inner sections of the wall near the blocked entrance. At the same time the group of attackers inside the complex surged up from the ground and charged the stairwell.

"J.B.," Ryan called.

But the Armorer had already drifted into place on the other side of the entrance.

"HIT THE WALL one more time!" Burroughs ordered. He crouched on the other side of the FAV, taking shelter from the debris raining to the ground. The turret on the M-1 Abrams shifted slightly. The first round from the main gun had caused it to twist slightly in the loose sand.

"Ready, sir," the tank's gunner called out.

"Ready, sir," the tank commander relayed.

"Fire," Burroughs ordered. He took a last look at the debris-choked entrance, knowing there was no way they could hope to penetrate the occluded mess. He hadn't been expecting Cawdor to mine the doorway. His adversary was every bit as good as the reports had indicated. It was just too bad the man refused to see reason.

No matter how tough and seasoned Deathlands had made Ryan Cawdor, there was no way he was going to stand against real military men.

The major was counting on the edge that his unit had brought with them out of the installation after almost a hundred years. It was what was going to deliver a world to him, and he'd spent decades figuring out how to get it right. The casualties Ryan and his people had inflicted reduced Burroughs's favorable odds, though. His men had been blooded and provided with training and discipline that combat men would never receive again. Unless he took the time to train them himself. And the patriotic fervor that drove most of his unit was irreplaceable. None of the recruits he'd be able to find would ever hold the same love for their country that he and his men did.

Project Calypso had given him all the time he figured he'd need to reclaim his country. Provided Cawdor and his team hadn't discovered the project's secrets during their exploration of the installation.

The tank's main gun fired, and the shell was dead-on. Then Burroughs ordered his armor forward for the next phase of their assault. There were only two entrances into the building and his men covered them both. Cawdor and his group were going to die like rats.

"GREN," RYAN WARNED, taking the explosive from his pouch.

"Go," J.B. called back.

The one-eyed warrior pulled the pin and hooked the spherical explosive around the corner and out into the midst of their attackers. He fired at a man partially exposed behind a crooked slab of stone wall, but missed.

An instant later the gren blew, throwing out shrapnel and a brilliant burst of light.

Even though he'd turned his head and closed his eye, the flash imprinted against Ryan's lid and removed some of his night vision. He blinked his eye, trying to clear it.

The second explosion sounded outside, tearing up the inside of the building even more. This time a hole opened up, as big as a man's chest and shoulders.

"Going to be in here on us," J.B. warned, thumbing fresh shells into the M-4000. "Uneven odds are going to get even worse."

Before Ryan could respond, the buckled wall exploded inward, driven not by another 120 mm shell, but by raw tonnage of the rolling tank.

The vehicle roared through the wall as if it were paper, except that the rough and ragged edges of the steel dug deep gouges across the painted finish. Exterior flood-lights mounted on the outside of the war wag sprayed out and focused on the stairwell.

"Dark night," J.B. said. "That man isn't going to back down for anything."

"Man who works that hard," Ryan gritted, "must be hiding a lot. We can't hold here."

The Armorer nodded. "Ready when you are."

"Now," Ryan said, pulling back. He hoped the new light would be confusing to the men watching their position. Once it was known they'd dropped back, the pursuit would begin through the tangle of the stairwells. There'd be little chance of taking a stand. He flicked a last glance at the map Krysty had displayed on the monitor. From the looks of it, they were headed straight for a dead end.

Heavy .50-caliber fire from the tank hosed the stairwell, tracking across the floor and destroying the collections of skeleton honor guards that hadn't already been wrecked by previous gunfire. The steel-plated walls didn't hold, and puckers opened up in them as they gave birth to sudden death.

J.B. took the lead and Ryan followed.

Chapter Six

Watching the events unfold over the surveillance monitors and not being able to do anything about it was maddening. Krysty pushed up from the keyboard, fisting her pistol. There was nothing more she could do. Jak would lead them here.

Most of the power had returned to the hidden lab, bringing with it a stronger light that made everything easier to see. A few seconds later she found another door, which led to a bathroom and a provisions area stocked with self-heats and ring-pulls of water. The wire racks held enough to keep several people alive for days. Even then, she didn't think the soldiers pursuing them would give up.

She'd seen the uniforms. They didn't wear them like men who'd merely borrowed them from stores within the installation. They also handled the war wags easily, like a precise military unit.

After making sure the bathroom and provisions room were secure, she went forward, checking the other door. It was locked with a sliding combination mechanism. Standing only a couple feet away, she aimed her blaster at the lock and squeezed off a pair of rounds.

Sparks scattered in all directions, followed by pieces of stainless steel. Cordite stink was trapped between the narrow walls. The lock, though, was shattered.

She kicked a booted foot against the door and went through with the .38 pistol clutched in both hands. The room held more computer equipment that hummed and pulsed with electronic life. No clues were provided as to what they were there for.

But the centerpiece of the room was the familiar hexagonal shape of a mat-trans unit.

"Thank Gaia," Krysty breathed. She walked closer, studying the interior of the gateway through the arma-glass. It was empty, but the glowing metal disks set into the floor

signaled the unit's readiness. The speckled arma-glass made it hard to see inside. Then she noticed the color: a jade so dark it almost looked black, the tint only visible when she didn't look directly at it.

The vanadium-steel doors were shut tight. She knew nothing short of a missile could penetrate them. Without hesitation she reached for the control pad beside the doors and punched in the access code.

Even though it had probably been a hundred years since they'd been opened, the doors recessed smoothly. Stale air rushed out over her, triggering a gag reflex.

Swallowing her gorge, Krysty moved away from the mat-trans unit and retraced her steps to the keyboard. She searched the screens anxiously for Ryan and the others, but couldn't find them. She tapped the keyboard and brought up other menus, playing other scenes across the monitors.

She almost missed Doc.

The gangly man was still rummaging through the office where the hidden door was. His torch was down to almost an ember now, and he had the Le Mat shoved into the front of his belt as he shoved his way through the shelves and books lining the walls. The floor was littered with books, files and what remained of Colonel Henry Walker.

Krysty found the audio control and opened the channel into the office. "Doc."

He straightened immediately, his blaster in his hand. "Krysty, my dear lady, where are you?"

"Safe."

"By the Three Kennedys, you should not scare an old man that way." The smile on Doc's face showed honest relief. "I was trying to think of a way to break it to friend Ryan that I had lost you."

"You didn't lose me, Doc. I lost myself." Krysty searched the keyboard and found another pull-down menu. One of the coded encryptions was for opening the door.

"I think," Doc said, "that your man perhaps wouldn't have seen that so clearly as you state it. Your care was somewhat entrusted to me."

"Old ideas, Doc, a man looking after a woman and being responsible like that. Mebbe if I was helpless." Despite the tenseness of the situation, she couldn't resist a pointed barb. "Unless you're saying I'm helpless."

"No, dear lady. I would never suggest such a thing as that." The torch sputtered and popped, casting less light with every second.

"Step back." Krysty punched in the access code for the hidden door.

From the vantage point provided by the sec camera, Krysty was able to see the hidden door swing open.

"I knew that was there," Doc said, approaching the shadowed entrance. The view was of the back of his head as he advanced on the door. "However, none of my efforts to open yon portal met with any success."

"The others are on their way there now," Krysty said, "and they're bringing company."

"I had thought perhaps they were ill met," the old man said. "upon hearing the thunderous cannonade."

"Do you still have those explosives we picked up earlier?"

"Why, of course, fair lady. You were the only thing I was in arrears on as far as responsibility goes."

"Dig them out," Krysty said. "We're going to try to close the door after the others arrive." She clicked off the audio portion of the sec board. They had a way out of the redoubt if they could reach it, even if they didn't know where it was going to lead.

"BURROUGHS," Mildred said.

Ryan gripped the stairwell's railing and threw himself over. Jak was a pale ghost sprinting ahead of the others, the blazing brand thrust before him, burning more brightly as it struggled to live against the quick movement. Ryan landed hard on the next set of steps, turned under the first set and headed in the opposite direction as they went down.

"Burroughs," Mildred repeated, anger lighting her voice.

"Save your breath," Ryan said, "for running. Got a long ways to go."

In the distance Jak turned around the first corner two floors below and took part of the light with him. The din of the guns overhead had died away, but the warbling echoes of men's voices drifted through the stairwell. The metal skeleton of steps vibrated under the constant pounding.

"Man said his name was Drake Burroughs?" Mildred asked, out of breath as she navigated the landing that led onto the floor Jak had taken.

"That's right," J.B. answered. "Heard him myself."

"He's a major."

Ryan reached out a hand and caught the corner, throwing himself after the Armorer and Mildred. "Fireblast, I don't have time to carry you if you run out of air."

Mildred stopped talking, instead saving her breath to keep up with her companions.

Jak waited up ahead, his torch held away from his body so some of the shadows still shielded him. "Doc and Krysty are inside," he called out.

Ryan scanned the office, taking in the artificed door bisecting the opening. Krysty and Doc weren't immediately visible.

"Inside," Jak said, pointing.

Ryan crossed the room and peered into the tunnel. A torch was lying on the ground, fighting for its life against a greasy wetness that covered the floor. Doc and Krysty were busy working plas ex around the inside of the narrow corridor.

"Where does the tunnel go?" Ryan asked.

"Mat-trans unit," Krysty said. "Another room just beyond."

"Powered?"

"Yeah. Evidently this redoubt was compartmented. Different levels worked off their own power sources." Krysty worked another line of plas ex into the corner made where the ceiling met the wall. "Doc and I found the explosives earlier. I'd figured we'd pack them out of here, mebbe do some trading at one of the other villes for supplies we might need. Didn't think we'd need this much."

"They come," Jak said quietly.

Ryan nodded.

"Now," Krysty went on, "we're going to use the whole wad at once. If it works, could be we'll cut off pursuit."

"Of course," Doc said as he worked steadfastly and with care, "the downside is that we'll be trapped in even less space if the mat-trans unit does not operate properly."

"Wouldn't have much use for it anyway," Ryan said, "all shot full of holes the way these stupes plan it."

"Buy us some time," Krysty said. "Another couple minutes should see us clear in here."

"Mebbe." Ryan pulled his head out of the tunnel. "Burroughs has a lot of shooters, but I don't think he brought that war wag down with him." He hefted one side of the desk, finding it heavy enough to suit his purpose. "J.B."

The Armorer joined him, picking up the other side of the desk. They moved it toward the door, turning it on its side and spilling everything from the top. The petrified corpse almost tripped Ryan until he kicked himself free of it.

"Throw the torches out," Ryan ordered. "We know where we are and where we're going to head. All that light is doing in here is giving them a better target." He and J.B. positioned the desk crossways in the door as the first shots rang out and smashed against the outer walls and the other side of the room. Before he released the desk, Ryan felt bullets thud to shuddering stops against it.

Mildred and Jak heaved their torches into the corridor, and they drew fire at once. The flames were quickly ripped to shreds.

"Stop firing!" Burroughs yelled.

Swiftly the gunfire died away.

Ryan moved to the left of the door as the final sounds drifted away, leaving a ringing in his ears. He stared through the darkness. The major had settled his men into position fifty yards distant, from the stairwell to two corridors running from the opposite wall.

"You've got nowhere to go, Cawdor," Burroughs yelled.

Ryan made no comment. If the man didn't know about the mat-trans unit, it would work in their favor. Burroughs would feel time was on his side instead of working against him.

"If that's the same guy that was written about in that lady's journal I discovered," Mildred said in a voice pitched low enough that only Ryan and the others could hear, "the man's over a hundred years old."

"Same you," Jak said.

"Watch it, Jak," Mildred cautioned. "A proper young man wouldn't go around mentioning a lady's age."

"Cryosleep?" Ryan asked.

"When we had a look in that project area," she said, "I didn't see any cryo chambers."

Jak shook his head, too.

"This book I got—" Mildred took it out of her clothing, "—mentions Burroughs by name. Same rank. Said he was the man in charge of project security."

"What was the project?" Ryan asked.

"They called it Calypso."

"Ryan," Doc spoke up, "if I may intrude into the conversation."

"Never saw a time when you didn't feel free before," J.B. commented.

Doc ignored the statement. "Calypso may refer to one of the Greek deities. The masterminds who developed the Totality Concept and the others like it have an obvious fondness for that mythology. To wit—"

"Who was Calypso?" Ryan asked, trying to keep the older man on track mentally. Doc had a habit of wandering astray of a subject before circling back to it. If he did return to it at all.

"Calypso is mentioned in Homer's *Odyssey*. As you may recall, after the Trojan War, Odysseus spent ten long years trying to get back to his home and family. Many adventures befell him. One was on the island of Ogygia in the Ionian Sea."

"Cawdor," Burroughs called, "no more truces. You can have your choice of deaths. Come out now, and I promise to be merciful. Make me come in after you, and you'll be days in the dying."

Ryan ignored the man.

"You see," Doc continued, "Odysseus was shipwrecked on the island. Calypso lived there alone. She was a sea nymph, a daughter of Atlas, who carried the entire weight of the world on his shoulders, and as such had many powers. She fell in love with the Greek hero after saving his life, and kept him a prisoner for seven years. If he would have only loved her, she would have granted him immortality and eternal youth, because those were within her ability to give. Instead, he chose to return home, and Zeus made her release him. Odysseus built a raft and left the island, leaving poor Calypso there to die of grief."

Ryan rolled the story over in his mind. Immortality was one of the greatest things mankind had ever lusted after. He glanced at Mildred. "His name's in the book?"

"Yes."

Ryan stared back out into the corridor. "Did you see any radiation scarring on his men?"

"No," J.B. replied. The others answered the same. "Means they had to have stayed in the redoubt after the nukes dropped," Ryan said.

"They live in project area," Jak said. "That time. Not now."

"Stands to reason they've got a base set up somewhere outside the radiation zone," Ryan said. "Probably keep a close watch on the mutie communities."

"Sure," J.B. said. "We worked our way through the villes outside here, everybody warned us away from the area 'cause of the muties. Man like Burroughs, he'd see the mutie populace as a built-in sec device. Probably adds to the stories about how violent they are to keep outlanders away."

"Only we didn't turn so easy," Mildred said. "He had to come after us because there's still something here he's protecting."

"Too late, Ryan," Burroughs called. "Now you're going to burn."

His attention drawn back to the outside corridor, Ryan watched as three teams of men carried small barrels out into the open. He fired his blaster at the nearest of them, catching one man in the head and dropping him. But it was too late to keep the barrel from being thrown. It rolled and tumbled straight for the door, skittering across the debris. The two other barrels followed.

"Krysty," Ryan called out.

"Another moment, lover. I'm setting the detonation switches."

The barrels kept coming, sounding like thunder in the corridor.

Moving swiftly, Ryan grabbed one of the corpses' feet and yanked. Brittle cartilage snapped like twigs. Shorn of flesh, the foot didn't fill out the shoe anymore, so it tumbled free, taking several toes with it. With the long, hard length of bone in his hand, the one-eyed man returned to the door. Aiming deliberately, he flung the leg and foot into the path of the oncoming barrels.

The sock fluttered loose as the leg bone turned end over end, then landed in front of the lead barrel. The cylinder hit the leg with a crunch, then halted and reversed direction, banging back down into the barrel just behind it. Both came to a stop less than twenty yards from the door.

Ryan aimed his blaster at the rolling barrel and fired as fast as he could pull the trigger.

The thumps of the bullets hitting their target sounded thickly hollow. With the fourth or

fifth round, the barrel exploded and was engulfed in a wreath of flames less than ten yards from the doorway. The heat washed over them, riding in like a thermal tide. The flaming barrel stopped little more than five yards distant, uncoiling black smoke in thick ropes to pool against the ceiling.

Gunfire from Burroughs's group looked like a string of fireflies across the hall.

"We stay, they see easy," Jak said.

The room had brightened considerably. Ryan leaned around the door long enough to target the other two barrels, picking up the shadows that suddenly sprinted forward. He waited a heartbeat, letting them draw even with the barrels. One of the men even leaped into the air to hurdle the barrels.

Ryan fired, feeling a round blaze through his shirt and scream along his forearm from his wrist to his elbow.

The other barrels ignited at once, filling the corridor with the sound of the explosions. The leaping man was fried in midair and died without a sound. The burning corpse fell to the floor on the other side of the twisted wreckage of the barrels.

"Ready," Krysty yelled.

There was a momentary lull in the gunfire as the military group dealt with the unexpected carnage. The concussion ripping free of the fuel containers had thrown a sheet of flames over the immediate vicinity.

"Go," Ryan ordered.

The group pulled back, filing into the secret passageway on either side of the sideways door. J.B. hesitated a moment, glancing at Ryan and Krysty.

"I'll be along," Ryan said. The air was already getting thin as the fire burned up the oxygen, feeding itself in a rush.

The Armorer nodded and disappeared. Krysty moved outside, the detonator in her hand. "Here, lover. You decide when to blow it." She tossed it in his direction.

Ryan caught the device easily and gave her a wolfish smile. "Get them tucked in and

ready. This is going to cut it thin."

Krysty gave him a fearful stare. "I'll be waiting for you, lover," she said, then disappeared.

The one-eyed man waited, giving them a three count. He wrapped his left arm around his face to block some of the smoke, breathing through the material sandwiched in the crook of his elbow. The heat pressed against him as he squinted through the uneven brightness.

The soldiers came through the flames in a broken line, moving with their rifles in front of them.

Taking careful aim Ryan managed to shoot one of them through the head before return fire drove him to ground.

He went through the door at a run, wondering if there was a way to shut it and maybe buy them some more time.

The instant after he'd passed through, though, the door wheeled smoothly and slammed shut. Krysty was staying on her toes, reminding him of only one of the reasons he loved her. The light went away, except for the rectangle at the other end of the tunnel. His feet slid through the greasy liquid covering the floor. Voices came from the room behind him. He tried to hurry as fast as he could, but the door wrenched open behind him before he covered a third of the distance.

Ryan's footing was the first thing to go as he twisted to confront whoever might be coming through the tunnel after him. Shifting smoke with ember-covered debris confused his vision as the sonic waves pounded him. He struck the ground hard, all wrong, and a numbness spread down his left arm, allowing the detonator to squirt out of his grip.

The first man through the door took shape before him as he brought up the SIG-Sauer.

Chapter Seven

"Get a flamethrower up here," Burroughs ordered as he waved the first team into motion.

"Yes, sir."

The major gazed down the secret passage. "McMillan," he yelled. His ears were still ringing from the detonations in the enclosed spaces.

"Sir," his second-in-command replied.

"Where the hell are we?"

One of the men brought up the flamethrower.

"Private offices, Major," McMillan answered. "Colonel named Henry Walker."

"What was he in charge of?"

"The Intel we dug out of the computers listed him as a liaison officer for appropriations. Scuttlebutt, however, suggested that he was linked heavy with the CIA or NSA."

The man now clad in the flamethrower gear made another attempt on the passageway. This time he held a bulletproof riot shield in front of himself, as well.

"Where the hell does that passage go?" Burroughs demanded.

"Don't know, sir," McMillan responded. "There's nothing on it as far as I know, and I've been over every square inch of blueprints that were to be had in this installation."

Burroughs knew the man had been given plenty of time to know the entire complex. During the first couple of decades, they'd had to fight hard, room by room sometimes, to acquire dominance in the building. Some of the scientists hadn't been inclined to share their wisdom and research, though, and had forcibly been shown the error of their ways. Some he'd bribed with the fruits of Project Calypso. A few of them he'd had to kill later anyway. Creative minds had genetic problems with discipline and authority.

Those had been the dark times, filled with hate, fear and loathing, emotions that Burroughs hadn't experienced so intimately before. But they had all forged him into the fighting machine he was a century later. He'd learned to conquer. It was a natural

progression from giving protection. The U.S. military had been well aware of that in the latter 1990s as they worked on UN peacekeeping missions throughout the world.

A whoosh of escaping gases, followed by the smell of burning fuel-air mixture, bled into the room. "I got him, Major!" the man with the flamethrower yelled in triumph. "Burned his ass for him!"

Burroughs moved toward the door, watching the twisting shadows as another belch of fiery spray hosed the tunnel. He knew nothing human could survive.

RYAN SAW the man in the flamethrower rig at the same time he spotted the remote-control detonator a dozen paces away. He pushed himself up in a lunge and darted forward, knowing his life was probably measured in a handful of heartbeats. Four strides, and he threw himself forward. He landed hard on his stomach as the blast of fire streamed toward him.

The heat got close enough to singe his hair. He closed his eye and smothered his face in his arms, protecting his vision. He slid across the floor and smashed painfully into a wall.

When the heat receded for a moment, he glanced up, not believing he was still alive. Flames clung to the walls, burning and jerking in the breeze as the superheated air cooled and created a vacuum.

The detonator lay a foot away, surrounded by a brown slick that smelled of chemicals and spoilage.

Ryan fisted it and pushed himself up as the soldier with the flamethrower stepped farther into the tunnel. He didn't bother returning fire. The flamethrower had him outgunned even if he could shoot around the shield the guy held up.

At every driving step, his boots threatened to slip out from under him. His lungs strained for the thin, smoke-laden oxygen left by the fiery gout, and his exertion left black comets dancing in front of his eye.

Fifteen feet from the door, he heard the whoosh of the flamethrower, felt the heat of it approaching him. Ryan threw himself forward. At the entrance and a little ways inside the room, a pool of the unidentified chemical looked deep enough to cover him.

He slid into it face first and went under immediately.

The flamethrower laid down a field of fire over the top of him, baking heat into his back and shoulders. He gave it a three count, guessing that the weapon would have a hard time sustaining a burst longer than that. Surging up from the glop with difficulty, he stayed low and shoved his way into the room.

Voices rang out behind him.

Ryan grabbed the side of the door and swung himself around, aware of the men pounding down the tunnel after him. He armed the detonator with a flick of his thumb, then pressed the button.

The explosions came in quick succession, sucking down all sound in a swirl of white noise that carried a mind-numbing intensity. A wave of turgid chemicals slapped out of the corridor and slammed across the computer workstations and mainframes.

Krysty stood in the other hallway, shouting something Ryan couldn't hear, but he was easily able to read her lips. She held out her hand.

Ryan dropped the detonator and fought hard to maintain his equilibrium. He grabbed Krysty's hand and followed a half step behind her as she led the way to the mat-trans unit.

The others were already inside, blurred shadows beyond the dark jade armaglass.

Krysty entered first and Ryan followed, closing the door to immediately activate the jump.

The woman held Ryan's hand tightly, squeezing it to let him know she was there, then sat cross-legged on the floor.

Dropping down to his haunches with his back to the wall, Ryan glanced up as the ceiling disks came up to power, glowing with a lethal, lambent light. The familiar mist drifted up, wafting into their lungs as they breathed. He tried to prepare himself mentally for the mat-trans jump, but there was no way. It was better to simply lie back and surrender to the process, recover from it later.

He looked up, staring hard through the armaglass window of the security doors.

A handful of shadows waited there, bristling with hostility and rage. One of them smashed a gunbutt against the glass, but the armaglass held.

Not all of Burroughs's men had died in the explosions, nor had they been blocked from coming through. A man waved the others back and raised his assault rifle.

The bullets sparked, spitting yellow flashes from the armaglass, but didn't appear to even chip the surface.

Ryan tried to lift the SIG-Sauer. Everything they knew suggested that the jump process couldn't be interrupted once it had begun, but they were against people who knew a lot more about the mat-trans units than they'd been able to discover on their own and with Doc's help. Curiously no one tried to open the door.

It was almost a relief when the familiar blackness enveloped him.

Chapter Eight

"Lover," Krysty said soothingly, "come back to me."

Chilled to the bone, his heart thudding rapidly inside his chest, Ryan forced his eye open. "Dean?" he croaked.

"Not here," Krysty said. "School. Remember?"

"Fireblast." Ryan made himself sit up against the walls of the mat-trans unit. He'd been dreaming that his son, Dean, had been snatched by Burroughs. The nightmare induced by the jump reluctantly left him. His stomach rolled, and the familiar headache throbbed at his temples.

The others didn't move much, either. J.B. rested beside the door, the Uzi nestled comfortably in his hands. Mildred was beside him, on her back and breathing slow. Jak had curled into a fetal position, a trickle of blood seeping from his right nostril.

"Doc?" Ryan asked.

"Still among the living, my dear Ryan," the old man answered hoarsely. "Thank you for inquiring."

Ryan craned his head and spotted Doc wiping weakly at the pink-and-yellow worms of vomit staining his black frock coat and blue denim shirt.

"Could do with a bit of a wash, I suppose," Doc said.

"Mebbe in a little while." Ryan studied the indigo-colored armaglass, then squinted his eye when he saw the frost clinging to the outside of it. Puddles had formed inside the mat-trans unit.

Ryan focused on gathering his mind and energy. With Krysty's help he got to his feet. "Anybody else cold? Or is it just me?"

"We all are," Krysty admitted.

He put his hand against the window and the chill soaked into his palm readily. "Wherever we are, the climate's definitely gotten bad on us." His thoughts turned to winter. There were redoubts up in Alaska and in the northern areas of Deathlands. The group had been there and seen them. It wasn't a prospect he wanted to consider.

He peered hard through the armaglass, trying to make out the details of the outside chamber. The room looked tidy. Small and angular, only partially revealed by the light streaming from the mat-trans unit, the chamber appeared deserted.

Ryan drew the SIG-Sauer and walked toward the door.

"Got to think about the men who were following us," J.B. declared. "They were still alive. Could be they'll use the mat-trans to try to come after us. If that corridor Doc and Krysty mined caved in real good, they aren't going to have many choices."

"First order of business," Ryan said, "is to try to figure out where we are and how we're going to keep from freezing to death. Everybody up and at the ready. We're on double yellow. Don't see anything moving on the other side of the glass, but that doesn't mean it isn't there."

The rest of the friends got up, falling into position by memory and conditioning. No one was moving too well.

"Do it," he told Krysty, who was ready to open the door. "And when we go out, keep the doors open! Could be Burroughs's men won't be able to make the jump unless this unit's ready to go."

She nodded. Her sentient hair was pulled in tight to her scalp, and her eyes were on Ryan.

"Be careful," Krysty cautioned.

"You feel anything out there?"

"No, but that isn't how I'd treat it."

Ryan nodded. "The door."

She hit the security code. A heartbeat later the mat-trans unit doors opened. The warm air inside turned into a frosty breath as it charged out into the empty anteroom.

Ryan moved outside, keeping himself in a crouch to be a smaller target. His eye strained against the gloom, and he was conscious of J.B. standing watch over him.

The mat-trans unit was in the back third of the room. Shelves lined the walls around them. There were two doors: one dead ahead of Ryan and one on the right. Both were electronically keyed, which meant neither would open without giving some type of warning.

The chill outside the mat-trans unit was more pronounced. Ryan saw his breath fog up the air in front of him. He reached into his pocket for a packet of self-lights. Working one-handed, he slipped one out, then cracked it to life with a thumbnail. He held it away from him so it wouldn't directly highlight him for any potential attackers.

"J.B.," Ryan said.

"Yeah."

"The other door."

"Got it." The Armorer moved almost silently despite the tomblike quietness of the redoubt.

Ryan moved toward the other door. A rectangle of wire-meshed glass was set at eye level. Peering through it, he tried to see beyond but couldn't. He raised the self-light. The weak yellow light bounced off some metal surfaces, but didn't give a clue as to what they were. The thin layer of frost overlaying the glass retreated, running down the metal skin of the door in tiny, diamond-bright tears.

"Too dark," he told the others as he shook out the self-light. "J.B." Without the light, crazy black-and-yellow patterns danced in his vision as the rods and cones tried to reassess the darkness.

The Armorer cracked a self-light, and the sharp sulfur smell lingering in the room grew even stronger. "Can't see," J.B. stated.

Ryan tested the door in front of him and found it unlocked. "Okay, here's the drill. We take one door at a time, leaving our retreat open and an attack front on two sides impossible. Krysty, you're with me. Mildred and Doc, you follow. Jak, you're with J.B."

The albino teenager nodded and moved off to join the Armorer.

"Ryan," Krysty said, "I've found a lamp." She took it from one of the wire shelves. A half-dozen others were racked behind it.

"Light it. If anyone's out there, they're bound to know we're here by now."

Krysty struck a self-light and held it to the wick of a small oil lamp. The flame caught quickly, burning through the wick rapidly and throwing wavering shadows against the plain concrete walls. "Dried out. It'll burn fast for a time." She put the glass back in place and held up the lamp. The reservoir was a third empty, and the thick fluid coiling in the bottom looked briny and gelatinous.

Embers whirled from the wick, then the corona of the flame died down as Krysty twisted up more of the oil-soaked sections. "It's been here for a while."

Doc sniffed. "It seems someone was trying to better a vile concoction with apparently little true success."

"Smells like bad chili fart," Jak commented. But he took another lamp from one of the shelves and removed the hurricane glass to get to the wick.

"A precise observation, lad," Doc agreed, "though it certainly lacks something in polish."

"Now," Ryan said, opening the door and going through.

The room was bigger than the one they'd just quit. More shelves lined the walls, filled with boxes, crates and cylinders.

In the center of the floor, though, was a wag. It was small, only a four-seater, but had armor plating around the sides and a rack across the back for tying other cargo on. A .50-caliber machine gun was mounted on an arm that swiveled out in front of the back seat.

Krysty held the lamp high so the light could flood the room.

"I found a generator," Mildred called out.

"See if you can get it started," Ryan said. A cursory once-over of the wag gave him the impression that everything looked as though it would work. Directly in front of the wag was an electronic door. There were no windows. He tested the lock, but nothing moved. "I'm going with J.B. and Jak to see where that other door leads."

"I'll get an inventory going," Krysty replied.

Ryan nodded and walked back into the other room. The smoke from the two lanterns was already starting to fill the air. Within a half hour or so, the air inside the redoubt would be acrid enough to burn their nasal passages.

"They must be trying to come through," J.B. said as Ryan approached. He pointed his chin in the direction of the mat-trans unit. "Control panels in there keep cycling through color codes, and the disks heat up occasionally like they're going to do something."

Ryan glanced at the unit. Krysty had blocked the doors with a trenching tool, but they'd pulled in hard enough to warp the working end of the blade.

"Be better blow it up," Jak commented. "Mebbe damage. No work no more. No danger."

"Yeah," Ryan agreed. "Except we don't know if we can get out of here ourselves yet. And there's no telling what's waiting for us outside if we do. Let's look around a little more and see what we turn up before we go doing anything too rash."

He nodded at J.B. "The door?"

"Unlocked," the Armorer answered.

"Let's go, then."

J.B. pulled the door open, and Ryan fell into position along the other side. Jak used the reflector on the lamp to aim the light into the room.

Dormant computer hardware lined two walls. The third held video equipment. Besides the door, the fourth wall was totally barren. In the center of the room, a long table sat between two cryo units.

"This isn't a regular redoubt," J.B. ventured. "Too small. More like an emergency hidey-hole."

"That's how I see it, too," Ryan replied, walking farther into the room but keeping the SIG-Sauer at the ready. He heard his footsteps against the bare floor over the rattling hiss of the burning lantern wick. "Who was the dead man back in the office in White Sands?"

"Don't know," J.B. said. "I saw his name on his desk for mebbe a minute before we heaved it. Walker, I think it was."

"Doc or Krysty say anything about him?" Ryan peered into the glass plate at one end of the nearest cryo cylinder. Dust obscured the view.

"No. But they did find the room."

"Whole setup scans like something done oh the qt," Ryan said.

"Way I read it, too," J.B. agreed. "Tighter than a gaudy slut's lip seal."

"Let me borrow that light over here, Jak," Ryan said.

The albino passed it over. "Dead place. Nothing here."

Ryan brushed at the accumulated dust with his forearm again. The post trauma nightmare shakes had faded some, and movement had restored his circulation to a degree, but it was still cold. One thing was for certain—the desert was a thing of the past. He shifted the lantern and peered in the cryo chamber more closely.

The light was weak, diffused by the lamp cover and the cryo chamber's window. It took some concentration to separate the shadows from the contents inside.

A dead man peered back at Ryan. The corpse's eyes were open, but the orbs sat like eelskin-wrapped marbles in sockets that had grown too large for them as the fluids leached away. The skin was sallow, stretched tight and looking like wax, the bones breaking through along the cheeks and chin. He'd been wearing a suit, all tidy and neat perhaps at one time. Now there were holes in it, and a powdery layer of dust covered them.

"Man died hard," Ryan said.

J.B. walked over to have a look. "Unit must have lost power somewhere along the way. Left him trapped inside. Suffocated, I'd guess."

The flesh on the hands was torn and ripped. Fingernails were pulled loose and lying askew in the skin on the remaining fingers.

"Mebbe," Ryan said. He moved the lantern again and saw some of the shadows shift. Black-and-brown cockroaches nearly as long as his thumb scrambled through the dead man's clothes and dessicated flesh, scuttling away from the light. One of them clambered out from behind one of the shrunken eyeballs and perched on it covetously. "Mebbe starvation or dehydration. There a latch?"

The Armorer felt around the cryo chamber. Ryan did the same on his side. It was slightly different than any they'd chanced across in the past.

"Got it," J.B. said. He yanked, and there was a series of snaps. Inside the cold crypt the cockroach fled back into the dead man's skull. A second later J.B. had the cryo chamber open.

Ryan moved the lantern's light over the corpse. Cockroaches scattered with the fury of an

Old Testament plague, their carapaces clicking against the concrete floor when they hit.

Ryan stepped closer, drawing the panga. Cockroaches popped underfoot when he moved. He raked the big knife through the dead man's clothes, turning up a wallet inside the jacket.

"Bugs not from here," Jak said. The albino stood out starkly in the shadows against the wall. "Crawl in somewhere."

"You think mebbe we ought to follow them around?" J.B. asked.

Ryan lifted the lantern so the light would fill the room more properly. Dozens of cockroaches littered the floor, dashing madly to the safety of the computer hardware. More were steadily dropping from the dead man, sounding like a light pattering of rain.

"No." Jak looked at the ceiling. "Let me borrow lantern."

Ryan passed it over, then followed in order to have enough light to read through the identification papers he'd discovered. "Harlan Sitwell. Says here he was a computer-systems analyst working for the National Security Agency."

"United States?" J.B. asked.

"Yeah. Home address was in Maryland."

The Armorer adjusted his hat and looked at Sitwell's remains. "Well, I don't get the feeling that this is Maryland. You see the paper jack sticking out of that wallet?"

Ryan opened it up and looked. The bills were odd colors, not the familiar green of the paper American jack the group had seen from time to time. Instead of men, some of these bills had a fat woman wearing a crown on them. He sorted through them quickly. "All dated before 2001. He's been chilled for a long time."

"One way," J.B. replied, patting the cryo chamber, "or another."

"Look," Jak called, holding up the lantern. "Smoke goes through."

Moving closer, pocketing the wallet he'd recovered after making sure no cockroaches

lurked inside, Ryan peered up at the twisting spiral of black smoke coming from the lantern.

The smoke pooled against the ceiling, creating a twisting cushion that rolled continuously in on itself. But tendrils reached up near the space where a three-foot section of the ceiling joined the wall.

"Could be just a fissure," J.B. suggested.

"No," Jak said. "Has shape." He pointed with a forefinger, inscribing a long rectangle.

Squinting, Ryan was just able to make it out. Jak had sharp eyes. "I'll be back." He returned to the other room and found a wooden box on a wire shelf that he thought would allow him to reach the ceiling once he stood on it.

"This chamber's empty," J.B. said, playing the lantern over the second cryo unit. He passed the lantern to Ryan, who handed it back to Jak. "If there were two, mebbe one of them got out alive."

Ryan stood on the crate and still had to tiptoe to reach the ceiling. He held the panga in one hand and the SIG-Sauer in the other. Straining, he edged the knife blade into the space between the wall and ceiling. The smoke started slipping through the area even faster as dust tumbled down across the computer equipment.

Twisting the blade to give it a better angle to hold on, Ryan pulled the panga down. It took a lot of effort, because the panel was recessed. But in the end gravity helped, and it came swinging down.

Bolted inside the long, hinged panel that dropped nearly to the middle of the room was a ladder. Spiders, earthworms and other insects had made their homes in tangle of roots and dirt.

At the top of the ladder was a crust of dirt.

"Getting the feeling you're crawling out of a grave?" J.B. asked.

"Least we're crawling out," Ryan said. He kicked the ladder hard twice, shaking off most of the live things. The odor of fresh-turned earth was muggy and thick. "If smoke was pulling through that, it can't be too deep over us."

"I got back, Ryan," Jak said. "Ready when you are."

"Let's do it." Ryan put away the panga and went up the ladder, holding his blaster. When he reached the earth mounded overhead, he tested it with his hand. It felt wet and cool, like turgid winter mud. The heavy clay content made it greasy to the touch.

"Look here," J.B. said.

Craning his neck around, Ryan looked.

The Armorer ran his fingers across the top of the door Ryan had pulled down. "Fake grass. Got some stuff here, too, that looks like moss. Kind of worse for the wear."

"Camouflage," Jak said.

Ryan had it figured that way, too. He turned his attention to the earth. Bending his hand back, he drove the heel of his palm into the dirt. The section of earth quivered with the blow, and bits and pieces of it rained to the floor. Twisting and curling worms plopped wetly against the concrete. Dirt and one worm slapped against Ryan's face, hanging for a moment before he brushed it away.

On the third blow the earth turned loose and fell away in large chunks. A cool breeze, wet with the promise of rain and night, swept into the room. It was bracing and made Ryan wish he'd dressed in something warmer. Still, wasn't going to kill him.

He went up the stairs, followed by the albino.

"Smell outside," Jak said in a low voice. "Forest. Flowers. Animal, mebbe."

"Yeah," Ryan said, "I smell it, too." He edged over the lip of the entrance cautiously, relying on his hearing to warn him of any threatening movement.

It was dark topside. The wet chill clung to Ryan as he explored around the hole with his free hand, managing the ladder with just his legs. He kept the blaster in close, so it couldn't be easily knocked from his grip.

Pale light, too washed-out to be daylight, poured in to his left from around a corner and a distance away. He couldn't tell how far because there were no reference points.

Finding a dirt clod, he heaved it in the direction of the light. It smashed against a wall and fell down in pieces, nothing moved in response.

"J.B.," Ryan called, "let me have that lantern up here."

The Armorer passed it along.

Holding it high, Ryan glanced around the inside of the cave. It was maybe ten feet across, less than five feet high.

The roof was irregular limestone, patterned by the moving water that had shaped it centuries ago.

"I'm going on," Ryan said. "Jak's with me. J.B., you hold the back door open."

"Done," the Armorer said.

Ryan climbed out of the hole, stepping onto the cave floor, with Jak a pale shadow at his side.

Chapter Nine

"Springtime," Jak said. "But look winter."

"Yeah," Ryan agreed.

The cave was narrow and twisted around a major bend, opening onto a mouth they had to squat to see through. A valley fell away below them, filled with short trees, a brook that meandered through the heart of it and boulders that stood up from the landscape like mushrooms.

There were no lights, no signs of civilization. A layer of white frost overlaid everything,

brightening up the weak efforts of the quarter-moon in the dark heaven overhead. When the wind blew across the mouth, it made a mild whistling sound that gave an added emphasis to the chill circling Ryan.

"J.B.," he called.

"Yeah."

"Come ahead." Ryan turned down the wick on the lantern, almost extinguishing the light so it wouldn't be seen at a distance. He took a deep breath, and the chill cut through him like a knife. But it was cleansing, too, and took away many of the desert memories and the stink of death.

J.B. joined them there on the lip of the valley. He peered intently at the landscape, then up at the moon. "Night."

Ryan nodded.

"These jumps don't take that long," the Armorer said.

"I know," Ryan agreed.

"Dark night, but we must have come a long way."

"It was the middle of the afternoon in New Mexico," the one-eyed man said. "Where'd that put us in the dark hours?"

"Could be north," Jak ventured. "Alaska. Plenty cold there anyway. Like this. Dark earlier, too."

Under the thin layer of frost, Ryan could make out the verdant growth breaking free. "Farther north," he said, "there'd be a bunch of fir trees. More than we're seeing here. There's birch, like there would be in northern Deathlands, but there's more, too. Beech. A lot of oak."

"Safe jack's that we're in the Northern Hemisphere," J.B. said. "Going by the kind of weather we're seeing before us. Say we went west, following the sun and getting there before morning arrived, that'd put us in China or Russia, or mebbe even Japan."

"No."

"Then Europe," the Armorer said. "France."

Ryan looked out over the midnight landscape and shook his head, not wanting to believe. But they'd been to Japan. The gateways could take you anywhere.

"No find other mat-trans," Jak said, "gonna be long walk back."

Ryan didn't have anything to say about that.

"TOOK A LOOK around outside," Ryan told Krysty and the others when they returned to the redoubt. He patted the side of the wag. "There's no way to get this rig outside."

"I found one," Krysty said.

Mildred had gotten the generator running, though the screech the bearings made after being idle for possibly a hundred years wasn't pleasant. The high pitched scream was almost but not quite above the range of human hearing.

The sound made Ryan's teeth ache. He followed Krysty to the door. Jak had been left posted up top as a guard, with a couple self-heats containing a vegetable stew and a ring-pull of water. The hidden door had closed with difficulty.

Krysty tapped the door in front of the wag at upper and lower contacts. "Blast plates," she said, striking them hard enough that a heavy gong sounded. "And a detonation switch in the wag." She walked back to the vehicle and indicated the compact plastic box on the dash. "Someone set off the explosives, I'm guessing that they were designed to blow the door outward. The wag could roll out over them."

"I assume there must be some sort of escape route, then?" Doc asked. He hunched down beside Mildred. The first thing they'd hooked up to the generator after the lights was a compact hot-plate-space-heater combo. He held out his hands to absorb the heat.

"Nothing but forest out there," Ryan answered. "Not even anything close to a road that I could see."

J.B. nodded in agreement.

"So even if we were able to juice the wag's batteries enough to get the engine to turn over," Mildred said, "we'd be all revved up with no place to go."

"That's about the size of it." Ryan took the self-heat J.B. handed him. It had already heated itself up. He didn't even bother to read the label when he opened it. Whatever it was, it would be hot, and for now that was enough. His mind was filled with the possibilities of the jump. As far as he knew, crossing the Lantic Ocean was impossible by craft. Deathlands wasn't much, but it was home. "The trenching tool still holding?"

The Armorer nodded. "For now. Way it's folding though, could be the contacts will get close enough to allow a jump soon."

"Nothing else to put in there?"

J.B. shook his head. "This place is full of disposables. Nothing really impact resistant. Best bet would be to shove a blaster in there. Steel they're made out of can take a ton of pressure before they give. Don't have anything harder than those."

"How many extra do we have?"

"Nine," Krysty said. "Seven handguns Doc and I salvaged, and two rifles Mildred and I found down here."

"Keep them," Ryan said. "We might need something to barter." He sat with his back to the wall, gratefully soaking up the warmth given off by the space heater. He spooned up the stew inside the self-heat and chewed with real satisfaction. His eyes fell on the .50-caliber machine gun on the wag. "But there's one we can't take with us."

KRYSTY FOUND a toolbox in the back of the wag. It took more than half an hour to unbolt the heavy machine gun from the rack. Though it was probably originally airtight, the hideaway had given way to erosion and the passage of time. Moisture had crept in and partially rusted the retaining bolts.

Ryan ended up having to wedge the tire tool against two of them and snap them off. When the gun was loose, he and J.B. carried it back to the mat-trans unit.

Lights were on in that room, as well, running off the generator. As with every other gateways the companions had found, this one had its own independent nuclear source. But the builders had obviously chosen not to tie into it for the hideaway's needs.

The doors on the gateway had almost succeeded in crushing the trenching tool. There was barely enough room to slide the .50-caliber's barrel into the slot left open. It took a lot of effort to get the machine gun positioned inside.

All the while, blue skeins of electricity kept arcing across the contact points. Thin clouds of the familiar mist twisted inside the mat-trans unit. The glowing disks intermittently flashed to brief life.

"We can't stay here," Ryan said when they'd finished.

"Maybe we could wait outside somewhere," Mildred said. "If those soldiers do come through, we could leave them a false trail to lead them away, then circle back and use the mat-trans again."

Ryan considered that. None of them was happy about being trapped on the wrong side of the Lantic. "How many people did you see coming at the gateway back in New Mexico?"

"Seven. Eight," Krysty amended. "Might have been more in the tunnel that made it through after we left."

"The tunnel might not have even gotten blocked good," Ryan stated. "Could be they're coming and going through there as they please."

"Even if we went back," Doc said, "there is the possibility that the tunnel is blocked. We would have nowhere to go. And if we did, escaping across the desert with the mad major at our heels is not an event I would look forward to."

Ryan glanced at Mildred. The others seemed reconciled to their present lot.

"Okay," Mildred replied. "If we're going to do it, let's do it now."

"How are we fixed for supplies?" Ryan asked.

"Plenty of self-heats and ring-pulls," Krysty answered. "We take too much and it's going to slow us down, though. There's also jackets. I didn't check the sizes as I went through

the boxes, but I think we'll be in good shape."

"Ammo for the blasters?" J.B. asked.

Krysty nodded. "The people that put this together had a siege mentality. They got ammo stored, high and tight, and blades that you can carry and that you can conceal. I found a dozen pop-up tents that haven't even been taken out of the package. Looks like they sleep four if the people in them don't mind sleeping close. They're made of nylon. Not insulated, but they'll be easy to carry. Sleeping bags and blankets, too. And there's backpack frames made out of aluminum."

Ryan nodded. "Take two tents. A sleeping bag for everybody and a couple of blankets. As much ammo, self-heats and ring-pulls as is safe to carry if we have to move fast and quiet."

LESS THAN AN HOUR LATER, the companions were ready to go. They stood in the mouth of the cave looking down at the winter landscape. Night still hung over it, and there was no way to tell how soon morning would come. Jak had reported no movement except for a few nocturnal predators.

Ryan shifted the backpack frame and tried to find a position where it didn't dig into his kidneys. A couple more tries and he succeeded.

"Jak," Ryan said.

"Yeah."

"You got the lead."

Without a word the albino surged forward, disappearing into the lush foliage.

Ryan went second, with Krysty a half step behind him, spread out enough that a surprise attack couldn't take them out at the same time, but close enough to talk without their voices carrying too far. J.B. brought up the rear.

"You find out anything about that colonel while you were prowling his office?" Ryan asked. They went down the side of the mountain at an angle, taking their time because a fall could result in a serious injury that would hold up the whole group. The frost lay over

rock and holes with treacherous smoothness.

"His name was Walker," Krysty replied. "He was shot, probably while he was at his desk. Not much else I learned. There wasn't much time once things started happening."

"Walker," Mildred said. "That journal I'm reading mentions a Colonel Henry Walker."

Ryan pushed aside a limb that was icicle encrusted. The icy layers cracked with a series of pops that echoed around them. The brush was so thick at the lower level of the mountain that it was hard to see more than a few feet in any direction. He was following Jak's footprints, and realized then that if any of Burroughs's coldhearts did make it through the gateway after them, they'd be leaving a clearly marked trail.

"What did it say about him?" Ryan asked.

"Man was hated by nearly everyone at the complex," Mildred answered. "He was a bureaucratic watchdog, had his nose up everybody's ass. Flexed liaison muscle to get funding and extensions on project development, and ran interference when there was a problem. A man like him in a position like that could make a lot of friends or enemies."

"I surmise that the colonel, given his grievous exit from this mortal plane," Doc said, "seemed to lean more in the direction of making enemies."

"The woman who wrote the journal referred to him as a cast-iron son of a bitch," Mildred said. "He was more interested in currying continuing favor with government leaders than representing the project developers and supervisors."

"Why?" Krysty asked.

"To keep his power," Mildred replied, "and his position. Plain as the nose on your face if you've been around the brown-nose system." She smiled. "Course, I'd understand you not really getting the full picture, seeing as how there's not much in the way of bureaucracy in Deathlands."

A powerful, swooping hiss drew Ryan's attention to the trees on his left. An owl, thick and squat with an almost unbelievable wingspan, leaped from the upper branches and took silent flight.

"What about Burroughs?" Ryan asked. He didn't bother sliding the SIG-Sauer back into

leather. It hadn't left his hand since they'd departed the cave. The cold wasn't enough to interfere with the action.

"Burroughs is the man who killed him."

"Why?"

"After the nuclear war, you got to remember what it was like in the complex. People afraid of dying. At the same time knowing they can't go outside, so maybe they're afraid of living, too. Probably very confused times."

"Adding to this was the paranoia of each department trying to keep its research secret. Days passed, then weeks and months. Things got crazy in there. They'd been set up to take orders and be responsible to outside parties that no longer existed. Burroughs took it on himself to get control of the situation."

"And he did," Mildred went on. "He tried to talk to people first, then started killing."

"If Walker had access to a gateway," Krysty asked, "why didn't he just get out of there?"

"I don't know. Maybe right after the nukes fell, he didn't want to chance going through the mat-trans unit. Electromagnetic pulse bomb could have screwed up the atmosphere and signals for a while. Two and a half months into the big freeze, Walker got nailed by one of Burroughs's snitches about nosing into project development. Power was still on in sections of the installation. The woman writing the journal knew that Burroughs killed the colonel. Everybody knew. It let the complex know for sure that Burroughs wasn't going to cut any corners in his bid for taking control."

Ryan understood the methodology easily enough. When he'd been with the Trader, they'd been attacked by road gangs from time to time, young guys who should have had more sense, but they'd let themselves get cocksure following a would-be mercie who knew the talk and tried the walk. In the long run it was generally easier to kill the one doing most of the talking, let the others know they were going to be dealt with seriously. Most times the violence on the part of the road gang ended before their leader's brains hit the ground. Killing one could save a lot of lives.

"Burroughs didn't know about the mat-trans unit or the hidden tunnel," Krysty said. "Makes you wonder what kind of information Walker was keeping on all those computers in that room."

"Guy was able to keep everything that bastard secret," Ryan said, "you got to ask yourself who he was working for. Especially since this isn't near Deathlands."

"So Walker had a rat hole to bolt to if things got messed up," Mildred said.

"I think it was more than that," Ryan said. "But there's no way to prove it. Trader always said a man who worked his ass off to cover his tracks was probably planning big things even if he never got it worked out. Whatever this Walker fella had going on, he had a partner. Bet on it."

"A hundred years ago, lover," Krysty said, "knowing that might have mattered. Whoever was around then is dead and gone by now."

"Major Drake Burroughs isn't," Ryan reminded her, glancing back at her.

She nodded, her sentient hair coiled tight against her skull for the added warmth, her breath making soft white plumes in the gentle breeze.

"You really think he's going to send someone after us?" Mildred asked.

"Hard to say," Ryan said, sidestepping a large pool of water covered over with ice. "But I'd rather plan on him being right back there over my shoulder for a while than to look up and be surprised."

RYAN PUSHED THEM, keeping his friends moving for two straight hours before allowing a brief rest. They'd been awake for more than twenty hours, and going from the desert heat into the chill was sapping their reserves. Still, he was determined not to rest until he'd pushed them as far as he felt he safely could.

J.B. had kept a close watch over their backtrail. There'd been no lights, no signs of pursuit.

The land remained broken and uneven, the terrain almost impassable. Bringing the wag out of the complex, even with its four-wheel-drive capability, would have been impossible, at least if they wanted to remain inconspicuous. The forest surrounding them was dense, almost virgin, and the wildlife had been plentiful.

Ryan crouched beside a boulder after checking his blasters and making sure they hadn't

fouled, then opened a self-heat that contained rice and some kind of meat he wasn't sure he wanted to identify. He ate it anyway. His body would take care of turning it into fuel no matter what it was. When he finished, he took a trenching tool from his pack and dug a hole in the rocky soil, carefully cutting away the topsoil so it hung together like a plug. He dropped the empty self-heat inside.

"You finish with those things," he said, "drop 'em in. If the frost melts off with the morning, there won't be any tracks for Burroughs to follow. No sense in making another trail. Last one finishes kicks the dirt over the mess and covers it with the sod."

"You feel it, lover?" Krysty asked as she approached him.

"What?"

The woman shook her head, but her hair stayed coiled into her scalp. "I don't know. Wrongness, mebbe. Feels like the forest is alive around us, like it's watching."

"You figure somebody's spying on us?"

"No." A hesitant smile flitted across the woman's mouth. "Can't explain it, lover. Just don't get the feeling we're welcome here."

"We get plenty of that most places we go," Ryan said. "I'd be worried if you got the feeling someone was going to roll out the red carpet hearing we come to town." Still, he used his peripheral vision to scan the closest brush. The shadows, though leaned out and stretched thin by the moon and the added illumination from the reflection off the frost, still had plenty of places to hide ambushers.

"How far have we come in two hours?"

"Mebbe five, six miles. Been hard getting that distance under these conditions." Ryan had kept them heading west. Not because it seemed like the direction to go, but subconsciously they all knew it was a step in the right direction.

"And in that time we haven't seen sign of a trail or civilization, past or present. How likely does it seem to you that Walker and his unknown allies would put in a hidden retreat so far from anywhere? Especially if they were doing computer theft or fraud?"

The thought had been bothering Ryan, too, but he had no answers. "Got no choice," he

said quietly. "We're in it now. We'll have to see it through to the end." He gave her a brief hug, letting her feel the love that he held for her.

They went back to the others and got the hike under way again. Twenty minutes later they found the dead men.

Chapter Ten

There were three of them, all dead for days and showing the beak marks where the birds had been at them. The carrion eaters hadn't been limited to the winged variety.

The youngest man looked to have been in his teens, and the oldest perhaps forty. They were dressed in a combination of homespun clothes and manufactured coats and vests that had obviously been handed down a long time. Gray duct tape, repeatedly applied, covered both elbows of the youngest man's jacket.

"Dark night," J.B. breathed.

Ryan waved them into defensive positions, settling in behind a tall oak tree himself.

They were quiet then, waiting to see if it was a trap they'd stepped into. The back of Ryan's neck prickled tight as he searched the darkness clinging to the forest. Nothing moved.

"Cover me," he said.

The three men hung from the trees in a clearing that looked to have been used as a campsite. Upon closer inspection the oldest and youngest resembled each other enough to have been related. Ryan felt they were possibly a father and son, or brothers. The third man was black, but his right cheek was puckered and pink from an old burn scar, possibly caused by acid.

All of them looked as if they were no strangers to violence.

The stench around the corpses was nearly unbearable. Ryan took a rag from his jacket pocket and tied it around his lower face. The material cut down on some of the stink, and breathing through his mouth helped, as well.

His stomach was tight as he walked into the clearing. Moonlight shafted through the tree branches and washed over the faces of the dead.

Standing almost within arm's reach of the men, the first thing Ryan noticed was that they hadn't died from being hanged. All three men's pants had been torn or cut open. Blood crusted the material around their flies, frozen where it had crept down their thighs.

Ryan used a self-light to take the guesswork out of what he was seeing. In the pale golden glow he held protectively in a cupped palm, he saw that all three men's cocks had been hacked off. The wounds weren't nice and even as if they'd been done with a knife or an ax. They were jagged and irregular, with puckers showing where flesh had been pinched together in the jaws of scissors or snips of some kind.

All three men had their hands tied behind their backs with vines. Their faces were marred by blood as well. Frozen crimson tears hung on their cheeks and stubbled jaw-lines. Small forked oak branches the length of Ryan's longest finger had been wound with single strings of mistletoe laden with white berries, then shoved through each man's eyes, puncturing the lids and penetrating deeply. The amount of blood testified they'd been alive when the sticks had been pushed through their eyes.

The self-light burned down to Ryan's fingers. He waved it out, then stuck the burned wooden stick into the frost to take away the heat. He pocketed it once it was cool, conscious of leaving no trail at all.

"It's safe enough," he told the others.

All of the companions surged forward. J.B. and Jak stayed long enough only to satisfy their own curiosity, then set up a loose perimeter guard.

"These corpses were left as a definite message to someone," J.B. said.

"Yeah, that's what I figure, too," Ryan replied. "Somebody marking territory. Bastard hard about drawing the lines when they went about it."

J.B.'s grin in the dark was white and mirthless. "No mistakes that way."

"That's a mean way to kill a man," Mildred said. Her face was stony as she looked impassively at the corpses. She worked a rag loose from her own pack and bound it around her mouth and nose. "Unless you had reason."

Ryan forced himself to go through their pockets. He turned up a few coins that he wasn't familiar with. Some looked manufactured, but there were a half dozen that looked as though they'd been hammered out by hand, often more oval than circular.

"From the way it looks," Krysty said, "some kind of justice was meted out here."

"Hunters," Jak commented. "Look clothes. Scuffed from going through brush. Crawling on ground. Mud stains on chest and knees. Pants double stitched, and legs tucked in boots keep crawling things out. Bags at waist. You look close. Game bags, mebbe."

Krysty gave the older man's corpse a push, causing it to swing around at the end of the rope. The branch it was tied to creaked overhead, protesting the shift in weight. Shards of ice rained down for a moment, slamming against the ground and dropping across the companions.

"Jak's right," Krysty said, lifting the back of the man's coat with the tip of her knife. She pointed to the canvas bag at the man's back hanging from short leather thongs.

"Could I see those coins?" Doc asked Ryan.

"Sure."

Doc took them and dropped them through his hands, examining them with animation.

"Somebody go to the trouble to leave a note like that," J.B. cautioned, "they might be inclined to wait around to see who comes checking on it. They don't, mebbe they come back to check on it regular."

"A couple minutes more," Ryan said, "and we'll be out of here. What's in the bag, Krysty?"

The red-haired women opened the drawstrings and peered inside the bag she'd taken from the dead man. "Looks like some kind of tubers." She took one out. It was wrinkled from dehydration and bent at almost a ninety-degree angle in the middle, the color of pumice

and shot through with dark green veins. She sniffed it and started sneezing at once. "It's not like anything I've ever seen."

"Can I?" Mildred asked, reaching out a hand.

Krysty dropped the tuber in her hand.

"Upon my soul, friend Ryan," Doc said, glancing up. "These coins are English shillings. A half crown. There's a florin here that was out of manufacture though still in usage in the 1990s when I was around."

"I saw, Doc," Ryan said.

"Then we're back." Doc closed his hand around the coins and looked out at the landscape. "We're in England."

"Mebbe," Ryan said. "Don't get your hopes up. And if we are, getting back home's going to be tough."

"Do you mind if I keep these?" Doc asked.

Ryan shrugged. "Don't see as how I can use them."

Reaching into his pocket, the old man produced a weathered and scarred coin purse. He dropped the new coins in with a clink, then jingled it. "Now, there's a happy sound."

Even in the near-darkness, Ryan could see Doc's eyes glowing with the familiar light of the occasional madness that traveled with him. Being trawled through time, bereft of family, and thrown into situations that would have been impossible for most people to deal with had left its scars.

"'Let all the learned say what they can, 'tis ready money makes the man,'" Doc quoted. "William Somerville, Ryan." He put the coin purse away and walked on toward the edge of the clearing. "Have you ever had a pint of English ale?"

"No," Ryan said. He signaled Jak to stay with the old man.

"We should look," Doc said. "Where there's an Englishman's pockets with coins in them

for spending, there has to be a pub. The first dram is on me when we find it, and the loser of a gentlemanly game of darts shall buy the second." He turned at the far end of the clearing, barely visible in the gloom despite the frost and the moonlight. The deep breath he took was audible, then he expelled a gust of gray vapor. "Breathe in that clean English air. You've never had such nectar."

Jak remained in the brush, but hovered over the old man.

"Not food," Mildred said, inspecting the tuber. "Not even when it was fresh." She pinched off a small bit, crushed it between her forefinger and thumb, and smeared it against the inside of her lower lip. "Damn!" She doubled over and spit repeatedly.

"Poison?" Ryan asked.

Mildred made retching noises for a moment, then shook her head as she straightened. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. Her eyes were reddened and watery. "Far from it," she said in a hoarse voice.

Krysty popped the top on a ring-pull and passed it over.

Taking it, Mildred drank gratefully. "That," she said, holding the tuber out, "is some kind of narcotic. If I played with it enough and had access to a lab—even a modestly supplied one—I could make anything from a local anesthetic to a righteous, foot-in-your-face recreational drug that would open up whole worlds for your amusement."

"Drugs," Ryan said.

Mildred nodded. "A mean one, too. Somebody fooling around with that stuff would have to be real careful, because the line between recreation and rigor mortis has got to be a thin one."

"Also means we're close to a civilization," Ryan announced. "Probably a large ville. Something like what you're talking about, people got to have time on their hands to build up enough fear and paranoia to use. Small ville barely making ends meet, left on their own, they won't put up with that kind of shit."

"There were more bags on this man's belt," Krysty said. She lifted the cut end of a small rope. "Somebody took them off."

"Whoever killed them," Jak said. "Protecting territory."

Ryan nodded. "Figures they won't be very hospitable to us if they find us poking around. J.B., head us out of here. I'll take the rear."

The group fell into line and began moving. Doc was slower than the others, still acting as if he were having trouble keeping things together.

They hiked through the dense forest for two more hours. Though fatigued, Ryan didn't hear any complaints from the others when he kept them moving. He changed positions with Jak first, then J.B.

They were through the valley now, heading uphill at a sharper grade.

Ryan maintained the lead, followed by Krysty, who was watching over Doc. The old man had teetered back from the abyss a while back, but the internal struggle had physically drained him, and he had to lean heavily on his swordstick.

The landscape continued to be thickly forested, but thinned somewhat as they traveled upward. The frost held a harder crust now, facing the windward side of the mountain.

Ryan signaled a breather, not for himself so much as for Doc. He found a flat shelf of rock sticking out from the mountainside and hunkered down to present a smaller target to the wind. He leathered the SIG-Sauer and pulled out the Steyr, holding on to it with both gloved hands and leaning on it for support.

The others went to ground less than fifty yards away, almost hidden from view by the tree line and the brush.

Jak crossed the distance to Ryan, covering the incline in an easy stride. The albino's cheeks were pinked from the cold, and his white hair blew in wild disarray. He dropped into position ten feet from Ryan, setting himself behind a gnarled pine tree that clung tenaciously to the mountainside.

"Doc not make it much more," Jak said.

"I know," Ryan replied. "I'm thinking mebbe we can find a place up a little farther. Someplace mebbe we can have a fire and get thawed out proper and be protected. I reckon we've come far enough that we're out of whoever's territory that was back there."

"Hope so."

"Come morning, I think we're going to find out. One way or the other." Ryan stood.
"Want to scout the situation a little farther up with me?"

The youth nodded. "Stay still get cold. Don't like it." He stood and shook himself, tight and coordinated like a big cat.

"J.B."

The Armorer held up a hand.

"Take ten more," Ryan said. "If there's soup, drink it, but stay away from the heavy stuff. Don't want anybody getting sleepy from overeating. Me and Jak'll recce and be right back."

Ryan took the lead, holding his jacket a little more tightly to his chest. The sound of his feet breaking an iced-over puddle sounded incredibly loud to him, but he knew the wind wouldn't let it carry far.

"CAVE," JAK SAID.

Ryan looked into the shadows where the albino pointed. The frost wasn't as prominent at the top of the mountain range, but with the irregular surfaces and the sharp angles, details were blurred.

They'd climbed steadily for almost fifteen minutes by Ryan's chron. The incline had become steeper as the bite of the wind had grown steadily.

"Careful," Ryan admonished as the youth walked toward the area.

The brush and trees had been torn and twisted by the elements until they looked like mutie versions of themselves. That was one of the things bothering him: they were at an area with a redoubt, yet the area was relatively free of the nuke destruction that was usually apparent around such spots. No scabbies. No stickies. The three men they'd found hanging looked perfectly normal except that someone had cut off their cocks with scissors and run mistletoe stakes through their eyes.

There was kind of a sick relief in that, he realized. Even though the nuke-blasted terrain seemed to be missing, reminding him constantly that they weren't in Deathlands, the common denominator of savagery and brutality remained. It would have been a hard thing, he told himself wryly, to have lost all forms of familiar security.

Jak walked nice and easy, as if he were out for a stroll instead of a recce. Ryan knew, though, that the appearance could be deceiving. He'd never seen anyone move as fast as Jak Lauren when danger threatened.

Ryan could see the mouth of the cave now. Tall enough for a man to pass through on his feet, it gaped like a wound in the wind-blasted stone. Shadows twisted at the core of it as they approached, but there were no signs of life.

Something flickered at the corner of his vision. He turned quickly and looked back down the mountain, freezing in his tracks. He wasn't sure what had alerted him.

At first he was going to acknowledge the itch across the back of his neck as a combination of fatigue and imagination, and the result of the mat-trans jump.

Then three flashes of light blossomed near the area where they'd found the hanging corpses.

Ryan froze, but no sound reached him. Another couple flashes splintered through the thick foliage, then they died away. He waited, letting a slow, careful breath seep through his teeth, the wind snaring the gray mist of it and razoring it to shreds that evaporated.

The growl drew his attention immediately.

Ryan spun, bringing the Steyr up before him, gripping the barrel in his other hand. Ahead of him Jak suddenly moved backward, one hand lifted up defensively while the other sprouted one of his leaf-bladed throwing knives. A gray-furred, muscular body followed him, growling, the ivory fangs slashing from out of thin black lips.

"Fuck!" Jak snarled as he went backward. His left hand had slid in behind the wolf's neck and gripped a handful of hide and hair. He wasn't able to restrain the beast, but he pushed it away enough that the jaws crashed together on empty space over his shoulder rather than his face.

As Ryan started forward, intending to help, the wolfs mate exploded from the cave with a

deadly grace.

Wheeling, Ryan brought up the Steyr, placing it between the bitch's slavering jaws. Teeth crunched against the barrel, and the weight of the animal shoved him backward. He lost traction against a patch of frost and started to go down. The wolf stayed with him, loosing her hold on the rifle and making another attempt to sink her fangs into his flesh.

Ryan kicked out, fighting to keep her hind legs from ripping into his belly. He slammed a forearm into her face, creating some breathing room. Free of her for the moment, he rolled away, releasing the Steyr and pushing himself to his feet.

The wolf was already on him, launching herself like a gray arrow at his face.

Braced and ready, knowing he couldn't turn his back to her and that firing his blaster would draw the attention of everyone in the area, Ryan reached out and seized her front legs. Before she could bite him, he shifted his weight and used her momentum against her to throw her behind him.

The wolf landed in a twisting sprawl in the frost. Whirling in a frenzy, howling in impatience, she lunged back to her feet.

"No gun," Ryan said. He didn't have time to check on Jak. The panga came free in his hand in a heartbeat, and the wolf was on him. He didn't try to finesse her. He met her charge standing, knowing it would be over for one of them before the next breath was drawn.

Keeping his left arm crooked in front of his face, Ryan waited until the moment of impact, felt her slam against his chest and her breath hot against his left cheek. Then he levered his forearm up under her muzzle. A fang ripped skin along his left temple, but the rest missed him, chomping tight, the sound echoing in his ear. Working his weight from his hips, he spun and put everything he had into a vicious stab that arced around to the wolf's side.

The panga penetrated easily, hot blood spilling onto Ryan's palm and making his hand slick. He kept the grip, forcing his forearm up against the wolf again. Ruthlessly he dragged the panga across the animal's underbelly to the other side of the rib cage. Steaming loops of entrails flipped free of the abdomen and dropped onto the ground, scattering blood over Ryan's clothes.

He held on to the wolf until the fight for survival turned into spasmodic quivers. Yanking

his knife free, he wheeled, ready to help Jak.

The albino was already on his feet. Beside him the great wolf was stretched out on a battlefield of blood, gutted. A deep incision started at the center of the beast's throat and ran straight back along his belly. Everything in between had spilled out in twisted coils.

Jak wasn't even breathing hard. His ruby eyes were glowing as he regarded Ryan. "No more."

"You sure?" Ryan checked the mouth of the cave, but it was silent and empty.

"Yeah."

Ryan knelt and cleaned the panga on the coat of the wolf he'd killed. He sheathed it and drew his blaster, then looked down into the valley.

"What?" Jak asked.

"Thought I saw something."

Jak looked with him, but the flashes didn't appear again. "Nothing now."

"Mebbe," Ryan admitted. He moved cautiously into the cave. The animal stink was intense. Taking a self-light from his cache, he struck it against the side of the cave.

The flame flared, then settled down to a cheery nimbus that filled most of the pave. It was about five paces across by four deep. The roof was low enough that Ryan had to stoop to keep from banging his head. At the back a chasm sank into the wall. Before he could get there to investigate, the self-light had burned down to his fingers. He lit another one and moved forward again.

The chasm ran back farther than he could see, but there was no animal smell in it. The flickering flame revealed a gentle breeze coming in through the cave mouth and blowing back through the chasm.

"Wolves not live there," Jak said. He sniffed again. "Nothing live there."

Ryan touched off one more self-light and examined the crack as much as he could. The

sides were smooth, but had a rough texture, shaped by the elements rather than the hands of men. He took that as a positive. The passage appeared to narrow at times, but it remained big enough for him to walk through as long as he minded his head.

"Even if something else did live here," Ryan said, "if we post a guard, it'll have a hard time getting in." He dropped the self-light. "We need a place to hole up and get a few hours' rest. This is it as far as I'm concerned. Let's go get the others. We can bring up some wood for a fire."

Chapter Eleven

"You should be getting some sleep, Doc."

"I will in a minute, my dear Ryan. Right now I just want to look up at the heavens and see if I recognize the constellations."

Ryan had volunteered for first watch after the others had settled in. He'd brought a blanket to wrap up in, hoping to block some of the chill. It provided enough warmth to feel almost comfortable, but not enough to make him relaxed enough for sleep. He sat a dozen paces to the left of the cave mouth, where he could easily see along the way they'd come. He kept the Steyr across his knees.

Doc carried a blanket with him, as well. It was as thin as Ryan's, and folded compactly enough to fit in a shoe box.

Hunkering down, his knees poking up in the air on either side of him, Doc sat and gazed at the stars with his white hair blowing around him. He pulled the blanket up to his chin.

"Morning's going to come bastard early, Doc."

"I know," the old man said in a voice that was strangely gentle. "I am excited, I suppose." He looked at Ryan and smiled.

"With everything I have been through—pardon me, *we* have been through—I guess I had

never really thought I would make it back here."

Ryan looked at Doc for a long minute. "We don't know you're back anywhere yet."

Doc nodded. "You may not be so certain, dear man, but I am. As you would know your home, so do I. This, whatever may remain of her, is Britain." He pointed into the sky. "See that group of stars by the Big Dipper? Those are Pollux and Castor, part of the group that make up the constellation Gemini. And there, that bright one? That's Regulus, a heavenly gem set in Leo's mane. It is always best seen in the spring. And there is Arcturus, part of Bootes, the Herdsman. And between him and Leo is fair Virgo. Her crown jewel is Spica. No, dear fellow, I am not imagining things."

"Even so," Ryan said, "things may not be as you remember them."

"And what, pray tell, in this land of horror upon horror, is?"

Having no answer, Ryan remained silent.

"If we are able," Doc went on, "I would like for us to find out if London still stands, if the hand of royalty still guides her destiny. To see if God saved the Queen."

"If we can, Doc. If we can."

"CONTE."

"Sir."

"What's your situation in there, mister?" Major Drake Burroughs stared into the collapsed tunnel. A trio of baby spotlights had been rigged up using alternate power sources. A dusty haze obscured much of the scene, but enough clarity remained that he could see the broken rock and buckled steel plating that blocked passage.

"The mat-trans unit's back on-line, Major," Conte replied. The radio link was tenuous through the piles of debris, interrupted periodically by white noise.

"You'll be able to make the jump, then?"

"Yes, sir. Turley believes so, sir."

"Your equipment, soldier?" Burroughs paced, keeping the anger in check so it wouldn't disturb his ability to command. He was still in a rage that no one had known about Walker's bolt hole, and worse, that no one had a clue about where it might lead.

When he'd first been given the security assignment over the White Sands R&D complex, he'd thought the job was just a means of shelving him from the battlefield for a while. There'd been a certain zealous General McGuire, who had accused him of taking a few liberties with the rules of the Geneva Convention during the Bosnian action.

Then the general had dropped the charges. Before all else, Drake Burroughs had always put his country first. His father, a career military man, had done the same. Before he'd gone off to the battle that had claimed his life, the elder Burroughs had given his son a hug, then stood and saluted him, saying that he was leaving the future of their country in his hands until he returned.

Drake Burroughs had taken the assignment seriously. When the destruction had rained down in 2001, he'd shown no hesitation about taking over the complex, then using Project Calypso to ensure he'd be around with enough time to rebuild.

"Our equipment is in good shape, sir."

"All of you?"

"Yes, sir. We've got a few rations, but if there's a way to live off the land wherever we end up, we'll do that."

"Until you find Ryan Cawdor and his people," Burroughs said. "Then you get your asses back here however you can as fast as you can before I decide to declare you AWOL."

"Yes, sir. Turley says we're green at this end."

Burroughs knew he had the attention of the rest of his squad, some of whom thought he was sending Conte and the others off to die. The future that remained open to them, though they'd tried to prepare for the worst and had managed to see some of it on a local level when they'd been able to hook up video links with the outside world almost thirty years ago, had been far more disastrous than any of them could have imagined. The stories were still coming in from the scouts that reported in irregularly, journeying past

the limits of the radio equipment.

"Then be about your mission, soldier," Burroughs said. "And do your unit proud."

"Yes, sir."

Burroughs snapped to full attention, his hand cocked sharply against his right eyebrow. Immediately the rest of the unit around him emulated the gesture.

The soft pop that drifted over the open radio channel let him know Conte and the others had gone.

Finishing the salute, Burroughs turned on his heel, shouting orders to shut down the area. He bellowed instructions to relevant officers for reports on the wounded, the dead and the material losses they'd incurred.

Ryan Cawdor and his people may have escaped for the moment, but Burroughs knew it wouldn't be long before Conte and his men caught up with them. The special-ops team would kill them where they found them—after asking questions about the gateway, of course—and find a way to return to White Sands. Or not.

That was a soldier's duty.

In the meantime Burroughs had another item on the agenda, which Cawdor's arrival had interrupted. There was a ville in Texas that the major had his eye on.

Rebuilding a world, he knew, started with taking over the first objective, then following with the others. And he was going to find a way to do it. Project Calypso had given him all the time he needed.

TARRAGON CLAPPED a hand over his mouth and lay still. The ground was cold against him despite the warm clothing he wore, and he was finding it hard to mask the gray fog wisps of his breath because his lungs were still laboring from the run.

He heard the men behind him, beating through the brush with their swords and staffs. Their lanterns looked like burning, baleful eyes as they swung from their handles. The men called down all kinds of curses on him and Bean.

At fifteen years of age, Tarragon believed in curses and dark gods and the fact that nature was stronger than anything man could create. What he didn't believe in was the Prince's decision to start the Time of the Great Uprooting.

He breathed in through his nose and out through his mouth as his father had taught him. Foxglove had been one of thorp's best druids, full of the fey gift, having only to put his hands upon a man, woman or child of the village to know what to give them for their sickness.

His father had also been one of the Prince's most ardent opposers. Two weeks ago Foxglove had been found dead in the nearby stream. It was supposed to look as if he'd slipped on a wet rock and smashed his head in.

Maybe he had. But when Tarragon had put his hands on his father and held him and cried, he'd *known* his father had been murdered. That was his gift: the knowing. Only he couldn't control it enough to convince others that what he saw was always true.

He knew that at least one of his father's killers was among the men who hunted him. This night, with the help of Bean, the stable boy, he'd managed to *know* that.

But they'd been discovered. Cut off from returning to the thorp, not even knowing for sure whom they could turn to, they'd fled into the forest. They hadn't counted on the men following.

Tarragon straightened and put his back to the tree. He was breathing more regularly now despite the way his heart thundered in his chest. He gazed wildly around the thick copse. Demons and witches were reputed to live within their boundaries. The Prince had tried to quiet such talk when he'd learned of it earlier, but it proved impossible. Children loved stories of terrors and monsters, and despite the fact that they grew up into adults, those tales continued to haunt them, turning into beliefs.

The bark was hard in his fingers, iced over from the cold and the frost. The hunters continued to close in, and he counted perhaps as many as a dozen of them. Maybe there were a few more or less. It didn't matter, because there were more than enough to kill him. And Bean.

He swallowed hard. He'd lost the other boy in the last break. Wildroot was a good three hours back the way he'd come. He'd felt certain the Prince's seed heralds would have given up before now. "Bean!" he whispered hoarsely. "Bean!" There was no response.

Steeling himself, fighting his fear, Tarragon moved into the open. The hunters were twenty yards away, following a path that led through the trees, only partially visible.

He muttered a quick prayer to Lugh Silverhand as he slipped through the trees. "Bean!"

"Here, Tarragon." The voice was listless and papery thin.

"Where?" Tarragon asked. "I can't see you."

"Ahead of you. Follow my voice."

"If you talk any louder, everyone in the forest is going to be able to find the way to you."

"I'm sorry." Bean's voice sounded very weak.

A glance over his shoulder showed Tarragon that the hunting party was still heading away from them. He almost stumbled over Bean when he turned back around.

The boy lay in the brush, breathing rapidly. He was three years younger than Tarragon, but had the same dark hair and pale, aquiline features that marked him as being from the same tree. He was dressed as Tarragon, in homespun breeches and a thick shirt, with a patchwork coat hanging down to mid thigh. His deerskin boots still carried the smell of the stable on them, and it was a wonder the hunters couldn't track them by that alone.

The thing that jarred Tarragon was seeing the arrow that jutted out of Bean's belly.

"In the blessed name of Lugh the Life-Giver," Tarragon said hoarsely. He opened the fertility pouch at his throat, working the drawstrings until he could pour out a pinch of the seeds inside. His prayer was by rote. He couldn't depend on himself to try anything of his own. When he finished, he blew the seeds out, ending the prayer.

"I'm afraid," Bean said, "that Lugh will not be giving life tonight. Should he show up, I fear it will be only to take one." Perspiration beaded his forehead. He reached out a bloody hand and clasped Tarragon's forearm. "They've killed me, my friend." He coughed, and a ragged, bloody phlegm covered his lips.

Tarragon checked on the progress of the hunters, wondering if the sound of the cough had traveled far enough to reach them. However, the lantern lights didn't change directions, though they had come to a milling stop.

"Help me, Tarragon. I'm really frightened, and getting so chill."

"I'm here, Bean." Tarragon held the other boy's hand tightly. He thought he could already feel Bean's flesh growing colder, but it might have been his imagination.

"Don't leave me." The boy held on with a grip that threatened circulation.

"I won't." Tarragon knew he was lying, though. If the hunters came for him before Bean died, he had to leave. Cardamom and the others who'd been loyal to his father needed to know what he now knew.

In the distance the hunters had taken on movement again. A single man led them back the way they'd come, holding a lantern aloft. "They're gone, Pepper," someone said. "Couldn't be. Two saplings like that, there isn't any way they could vanish."

"That boy Tarragon," another man mused, "now, he's got one seriously whacked version of the gift. What if there's more neither his father nor him bothered to mention to us about everything he could do?"

"A bolt between his eyes," Pepper said, "that would show you all you needed to know about him."

"Hey," one of the men said. A lantern stopped moving, then the owner made some adjustments to the aperture. "There's blood here."

In seconds a skirmish line had formed around the area where Bean's blood had been spotted. Tarragon turned back to the younger boy. "Bean," he in a frenzied whisper, "I've got to—" sightless eyes stared up at the moon.

"Got one of the bastards," Pepper said proudly. "Told you I thought I did. Now, which way is the blood going?"

Wordlessly Tarragon released his friend's limp hand and leaned down to kiss his forehead. "Sleep well, friend Bean. I shall sow for three years in your honor, and my firstborn shall be named for you." He closed the dead boy's eyelids and pushed himself up. Ice from the branches fell around him, stirred by his movements and the wind.

"There!" someone shouted.

For a time Tarragon ran without direction, aware he was making plenty of noise for his pursuers to hear. He was counting on his speed to work against them, though, because if he picked up the pace they'd have to run to keep up with him. When they did, they'd hopefully make noise that would mask his own.

His breath burned in his chest as he lunged between trees. A quarrel hissed through the air near his head embedded itself in the bole of an oak less than two feet' from his face. He reversed, spinning across the frost-laden ground, then made for a thick patch of brush.

Pepper had forbidden pistols and rifles after the first barrage. They made too much noise, Tarragon knew, and the woods might have been filled with poachers encroaching on Celtic lands. Those men knew they took their lives into their own hands when they encroached in search of the tangler vines; they wouldn't hesitate to try to kill Pepper and the whole group of seed heralds.

Tarragon's foot caught on a dead branch as he crash through the brush into a clearing. He pushed himself up, hands sliding in the cold mud, his lower face smeared with it.

Three shadows hung before him. He recognized them between heartbeats. They were the raiders from New

London Pepper had caught trying to get sap from tangler vines almost two weeks earlier.

Tarragon had been spying on the seed herald then, and had watched the brutal executions of the men. He'd had nightmares about it for days afterward.

Moonlight pooled in a depression in the land before him. There, at its outermost corner, was a footprint. He knew the footprint was fresh. On his knees now, hypnotized by the promise the imprint held, he shoved his bare palm against the muddy footprint, seeking his gift.

There was a feeling, like the tumblers of a lock dropping into place, and he knew more. The print had been I made by a big man almost three hours earlier. Surely no more than five. He and his party had gone west, southwest. The man had seen the butchered bodies hanging from the ropes, and he hadn't approved.

For now, it was enough for Tarragon. He stood and broke into a full run as two quarrels from crossbows hit the ground near his feet. He pushed his way through the hanging

bodies, hoping the movement would create more problems for the archers.

Tarragon ran, ignoring the pain in his side and pushing himself past it. Only when he'd put a hundred yards between himself and the clearing did he look back.

A circle of lanterns had formed around the pocket of melting water he'd seen. The men held their lights close, panning over the area. They'd seen the footprint, as well. Tarragon watched Pepper, knowing the other seed heralds would take their lead from him.

Bathed in the glow from the lanterns, standing with smaller men, Pepper looked like one of the old gods come to life. He was almost an ax handle broad at the shoulders, with a lean physique. His long blond hair hung down his back in a ponytail, and he wore a full beard and mustache.

There was no mistaking the way Pepper pointed in the direction he wanted to go. After only a little hesitation, the others followed, except for two men who stayed with Bean's body beyond the clearing.

Tarragon sincerely hoped they would take Bean back to the thorpe so his family could mourn for him properly, Marjoram would be deeply affected; Bean had been his only child, and the first of his generation to have been born of man.

With his face to the west, Tarragon felt the connection between himself and the man who left the footprint strengthen. It was so intense, he felt if he squinted his eyes just right, he might be able to see the line of power that ran between them.

He didn't know what he would do when he found the man. He'd only intended to try to use the raiding party he thought was from New London as a means of dissuading Pepper and the other seed heralds to break off pursuit.

Now he wasn't so sure. The man had a destiny that was going to intersect with the future of Wildroot at the Time of the Great Uprooting.

Tarragon just knew it.

Chapter Twelve

Ryan woke after four hours of sleep. Natural light filled the cave. Even with the uninterrupted sleep, his body felt drained and stiff.

Before opening his eye, he explored the cave with his other senses. Being temporarily blind not so long ago had reiterated how important those senses were.

There was a tang of something citrusy in the air that didn't belong to the pines outside the cave. He figured it was from one of the self-heats that had come with a dessert side. Logs crackled on the fire, and smoke burned his nasal passages. The blankets were smooth against his skin, and not as cool as they'd been during the night, but he was aware of the empty space where Krysty had been.

A foot scraped across the rough floor.

Automatically Ryan's hand curled around the blaster under the jacket he'd used as a pillow during the night. He brought it out and opened his eye.

"Me, lover." Krysty stood on the other side of the cave.

No one else was in the cave.

Ryan flipped the blaster's safety back on. "Morning."

"Yeah, it is," Krysty agreed.

"Where's everybody else?" Ryan pushed himself up from the floor, hurting in almost every muscle and joint. The battle yesterday and the hike in the cold all night had taken its toll.

"Jak's hunting," Krysty said as she lifted a small coffeepot from the camp fire. She'd packed it at the redoubt, and no one had grumbled about the extra weight or the coffee bag. The coffee sub came in premeasured bags, but even running them through again as drip, they weren't going to last as long as everyone would have wished. "Mildred went with him. More to stretch her legs than anything. I can't see her being an asset to Jak's hunting."

Ryan grunted his agreement and took the cup of coffee sub Krysty offered.

"Jak thought he saw some deer tracks during his rounds this morning."

"Fresh meat would be good," Ryan said. "If we have the time." He raised his eyebrow when he looked at her.

"J.B. stood last watch this morning," Krysty said. "He didn't see anything."

"He and Doc?"

"Trying to get their bearings. J.B.'s got his sextant and Doc's looking for signposts."

"Come up with anything?"

"J.B. says England, or at least Western Europe."

Ryan nodded. "What time is it?"

"A half hour after dawn. Mebbe a little more. Why? There something you need to do?"

"Just look things over a little. See what needs doing." Ryan set his chron, guessing dawn to be around six o'clock in the spring no matter where they were.

"Think mebbe it can wait awhile?" Krysty asked with a smile. "I haven't told you about my surprise yet."

KRYSTY TOOK THE LEAD through the fissure at the back of the cave. "I kept feeling like there was more moisture inside the cave than there should have been. Even taking the frost and wet weather into account. So I took a peek through here."

Ryan followed her, trailing a free hand along the rough sides of the fissure. It was a tight fit with his broad shoulders. There was a gradual downgrade.

Krysty carried a torch, and the flickering flame nibbled at the fissure sides above them. Ryan couldn't tell how far up it went. He lost sight of it in the encroaching darkness.

Less than twenty yards farther in, Krysty suddenly had room to step aside. "What do you think?"

The cavern was close to thirty feet across and almost circular. A hole in the roof forty feet up let in a weak cone of light that mostly stayed on one of the limestone walls and showed the various strata that indicated erosion. In its center was a natural cistern filled with the bluest water that Ryan had seen in a long time. It was still and placid, looking like a jewel's planed surface.

"It's heated, too," Krysty said. "It must be linked to an underground stream somewhere."

"How deep?" Ryan had noticed that her hair was soaking wet.

"I couldn't find the bottom," Krysty replied. "You want to try?"

Ryan grinned, indicating his bloodstained clothing. "Yeah. Mebbe do a little laundry at the same time. Have you told the others?"

"Not yet. Felt kind of bad about it, too, but they're busy doing their thing. Figured we'd have time for all of us. Somebody has to go first. To test the water, so to speak."

"All right." Ryan made a neat pile of his clothing at the edge of the pool and stuck his blaster out of sight between the folds. He put a foot in the water, surprised to find it pleasantly warm.

"Didn't want to get out once I got in," Krysty said. "Had to make myself. Shamed myself for being selfish."

Ryan eased his body into the water and let it close over him. "Easy to see why you'd have problems getting out." He let go of the side and swam, exalting in the feel of the water against his body. He dived under for a moment, following the stray beams of sunlight bouncing off the limestone wall and streaking down into the pool until he couldn't see them anymore. By then his lungs were near to bursting.

By the time he reached the surface again, black spots were whirling in his vision. He floated on his back.

Krysty swam to him. "It's not so deep over here, lover. Want to join me?" Her smile made promises.

Ryan went with her willingly. From what he could see, the pool went mostly straight down to where it probably joined with an underground stream.

"Now we're alone," Krysty reached out for him and pulled him in. Her breasts were only partially submerged and looked like pale globes in the blue water. Her pink nipples were high and tight.

Ryan took her into his arms and pulled her close. They stood in what felt like loose sand. She kissed him hotly, and he could feel the need on fire inside her, matching his own.

"Next time," Krysty said, "we'll go slower, but for now I want you inside me." She broke the embrace and pulled him toward the bank. They were on the other side of the pool. "Since I found this spot, I've been thinking about this."

At the edge of the pool, the water was only a little above knee-high. The air felt cooler now that he was outside the water, but just enough to prickle Ryan's skin without becoming uncomfortable.

Krysty pulled him against her, leaving her back to his front. Ryan felt his erection slide through her parted thighs, gliding against her skin. He pumped slowly, teasing her by letting his cock rub across the lips of her vagina without penetrating. He cupped her breasts in his hands and squeezed them with just the right amount of pressure as he nibbled the back of her neck.

Krysty moaned in pleasure, pressing into him with her hips. "Don't wait." She freed his hands from her breasts and bent forward, resting her upper body on the stone bank. "Now."

Ryan moved into her, thrusting forward, sinking his length into her, Krysty meeting him stroke for delicious stroke.

Ryan's orgasm welled up in him, and he held it back as long as he could. But Krysty had to have felt it, too, because she redoubled her efforts. Then he felt her inner contractions, and he exploded, filling her.

They stood there on trembling legs, their passion finally spent.

It wasn't until the second shot sounded that Ryan was certain that he was still hearing the

echoes of the first.

MILDRED SAT in the tall grass on the mountainside and watched Jak work. At least, she tried to. The albino, however, was as elusive as smoke.

She wore the coat she'd taken from the redoubt and wrapped her arms around her knees. It wasn't too cold, but she hadn't quite brushed off the chill she'd gotten from rereading sections of the journal she'd found. Drake Burroughs, U.S. Army, was one sick, crazy bastard. That was her professional opinion, as well as personal one.

She was glad to be shut of him and hoped it stayed that way.

Down the mountainside a deer appeared only a few feet from the tree Jak had climbed into. He'd positioned himself over a watering hole formed in a depression in the mountain stone. Hoof prints and paw prints had offered mute testimony to the fact that it was frequented by the local wildlife.

The deer was a male, showing an impressive rack as he raised his head, scenting the air, then moving in a little closer.

Mildred watched tensely, hugging herself. She'd never really favored deer hunting back in the twentieth century. But then a lot of hunters had stalked deer for trophies. Jak was hunting this one to feed them. It meant survival.

The deer walked to the edge of the pool and froze, head cocked as he listened.

Mildred's breath was tight in her lungs as she watched. All morning long she'd read of the murders committed by Burroughs and his people in the redoubt. Toward the end there'd been mass executions until Burroughs had reduced the populace of the complex to a number he could easily control.

Watching the sleek animal drop his muzzle to the water and start to drink, she found that part of her wanted to scare it away, but the realistic part knew and accepted what had to be done.

Jak dropped from the tree like a cat. One gleaming leaf-bladed knife was in his hand as he fell. His free hand swung around the animal's neck and caught the chin as the buck raised his head.

The deer fought to shake Jak off, yet the youth clung to him fiercely, avoiding the sharp-tipped horns that raked toward his face. Lying alongside the deer's back, Jak sunk the knife into his neck and severed the throat.

Bright blood spilled to the ground as the buck continued to struggle to break free. Jak hung on, his face tucked up under his shoulder protectively. Within seconds life left the animal. His legs shivered and would no longer take the weight, then the buck collapsed.

Mildred watched as the teenager pushed himself up from the deer. He started to clean his knife in the grass nearby, then froze.

Shoving the journal in her pocket, Mildred stood and drew the ZKR 551. The albino, she knew, wasn't given to false starts. She scanned the terrain, wondering what had set Jak on edge. But then she felt it, too, like silent talons running down the back of her neck. She knew someone was out there watching them.

Whoever their stalkers were, Mildred knew they were good, because they'd gotten to almost within a hundred paces of Jak before he had them on his sensory radar screen. The youth drew his .357 Colt Python and fired a shot down the mountainside.

Abruptly green-garbed men scattered from the area, leaving one of their number sprawled on the ground clutching his leg. The others quickly found positions behind trees and outcroppings.

The return fire, from blasters and crossbows, drove Jak to ground. The teenager didn't light in one spot, though; he just hunkered down and kept covering distance.

Four of the green-clad men broke from their positions at the urging of another, all of them chasing Jak.

Mildred steadied herself against the nearest tree, the Czech-built pistol at full extension. She cracked off three rounds in quick succession. At least one of them went through one man's face, and another went spinning away. The others dived to the ground.

Jak vanished.

Mildred knew they had only a couple minutes to make an escape before the attack party overran their position. She finished off the other three shots, then ducked as bullets slammed into the tree and cut through the grass and brush around her. Breaking open the

cylinder, she reloaded quickly.

She pushed away from the tree, already figuring out the path she was going to take to get back to the cave. Jak would get there ahead of the others, so they'd know she was coming.

Keeping her pistol close to her, Mildred used her other hand to slap branches and brush out of the way as she ran. She didn't think she had much of a chance of outrunning the men behind her, but she had to try.

An attacker came out of the brush ahead of her with his pistol already raised.

Without hesitation, firing on the fly, Mildred put a bullet into the man's throat. He went over backward, blood gouting out the front of his neck.

Two shots cracked around her. At first she thought she'd been hit. But there was no pain, no numbness. A heartbeat later a green-clad man dropped from a tree in front of her. He landed in a loose-limbed sprawl, the top of his head missing.

"Jak," she said, because it had to have been him. The fear was working in her, feeding her adrenaline as the fight-or-flight instinct kicked in. She vaulted the dead man in front of her.

Before she had time to touch down on the other side, a man hurtled from the brush, driving a forearm deep into her side. Her breath came out in a rush, and it felt as though her ribs snapped. She slammed against the ground, but she managed to keep her fist tight around her blaster. Rough bark and splintered branches lacerated the side of her face. Blood spit into her eye as she tried to roll over on her stomach and bring the .38 up at the same time.

"Alive!" a deep voice snarled.

Mildred moved, trying to find the man who'd blind-sided her. She spotted one man almost twenty feet away, hidden by the tall grass. Knowing he couldn't have been the man who'd given the order or the one who'd hit her, she still set herself for the shot.

Then a foot came out of nowhere and smashed into her face. An inky black cloud formed in her vision and took her away.

JAK SPILLED the empty casings from the .357 and slammed home a fresh 6-round load as bullets continued chipping away at the tree and boulder he was using as shelter.

Footsteps pounded at him, and he knew enough of a team had reformed to set a trap for him. He glanced around and sized up the terrain. His position wasn't ideal, but neither was it without resources.

He fisted one of the leaf-bladed knives and waited.

The running man hesitated for a moment. Jak's keen ears could detect the break in the rhythm. He guessed the man was puzzled by his prey not trying to flee or fight. The albino slid the .357 into leather and flipped the restraining thong over the hammer, securing it into place.

The hunter came around the boulder cautiously.

Jak was flattened back against it, the knife low and ready in his fist. He waited for the man to notice him, depending solely on his speed and skill.

Jak took in the bolt-action Remington in the man's hands at a glance. Uncoiling lithely, the youth batted the rifle barrel to one side with his free hand and slid up behind his attacker.

"Help me!" the man yelled.

The albino pressed the teen edge of his blade over the man's carotid artery. He used the man as a shield, blending in to his back like another layer of skin. He was only a couple inches shorter than his victim, and holding him in that position was uncomfortable.

"Move with," Jak warned in a low voice, "not against. You choose against, you die." He pulled the knife in meaningfully.

"Yes," the man said. "By Lugh Silverhand, I shall not try anything. Just please don't kill me."

"Like you didn't kill my friend?" Jak asked. He'd seen Mildred go down and stay there. Men had swarmed in on her position, then vanished. There'd been nothing he could do to help. They'd been overrun too quickly.

Beyond the boulder, eight green-clad men stood up, keeping their eyes and weapons on Jak. Several of them were talking to one another, and a few made what had to be religious gestures.

"I didn't kill her," the man said.

He held his hands up to the others. He raised his voice to plead. "Don't shoot, he'll kill me."

For the moment that seemed to be working as fine as Jak could have hoped. Trouble was, it left his back unprotected. He tugged backward, making the man walk with him. He'd chosen his spot deliberately. Here the terrain butted up against a flat face of the mountain range, and there was no way up for almost twenty feet. Jak was hoping that it would buy him enough time to rejoin Ryan and the others. The gunshots couldn't have gone unnoticed.

"What you want with us?" Jak asked. The green-clad men were staying back, their weapons trained on them.

"Looking for a boy," the man gasped. "Tarragon."

"Don't know him."

"He came this way," the man insisted. "Spent all night out looking for him."

As the other men started to follow, Jak kept the blade at his hostage's neck and drew the .357 with his free hand. Without hesitation, he put a round through the heart of the man nearest him. The others dropped back into hiding.

"Oh, blessed, sweet Lady," the man whimpered, touching his forehead with his fingers, "be gentle as you take me into your embrace."

"Ain't dead yet," Jak said, pulling back again. "Just him." A quick glance at the mountain face behind him told him he was less than twenty feet away. "Who are you people?"

"Celts."

"Not heard of you." Jak slid the .357 away. He glanced back where he'd seen Mildred go down, but he still wasn't able to see her fate.

"You're poaching on our lands," the man said. "That deer you took wasn't yours to have."

Jak didn't waste his breath arguing. Anyone claiming to own such obviously free land had to be out of his mind. Even the most power-hungry baron never tried to lay claim to a bigger ville than he could control. That was triple stupe. So was the man's thinking.

"Pepper!"

Jak heard a mixture of fear and relief in the man's tone. He glanced back down the incline.

A blond-haired giant of a man strode through the clearing between the skirmish lines. He carried a huge ax over one beefy shoulder. A stainless-steel-finished machine pistol was in the man's hands.

"Don't, Pepper," the captured man yelled. "He means it. He'll kill me. I didn't come out here to die."

"Just to kill someone?" Jak whispered in the man's ear.

He didn't say anything.

Feeling his way with his feet, the teenager continued backing toward the wall. He kept his eyes on the big man, but Pepper kept coming, the machine pistol held at waist level.

"Let him go," Pepper ordered.

"Fuck off," Jak said. He hoped Ryan and the others had heard the exchange of gunfire. "Where's the woman?"

"Alive."

"Not believe you." One more step, and Jak was against the wall. He pulled his captive close.

Pepper kept coming, slow and easy, ready to move. "Let you live, too, if you want."

"Listen to him," Jak's prisoner said.

Instead, the albino hefted the .357 and tried to line up a shot. His prisoner moved, helping throw off his aim.

Pepper moved with grace and speed, hurling himself into the brush and gaining another five yards on Jak's position. The wicked snout of the machine pistol poked out and suddenly started chattering a death song.

The bullets struck the man in front of Jak and twisted him violently, pulping the center of his chest but not going through. Jak hung on tight, riding out the dance of death.

"He cut his throat!" Pepper yelled. "I saw him cut Douglas's throat! Kill him!"

The dead man stumbled back against Jak, almost overpowering him with deadweight. Moving quickly, the albino dropped the .357 into his holster. The leaf-bladed knife went back where it belonged. Before the corpse's brain could cut off muscle control, Jak vaulted to the top of the man's shoulders, driving them into the stone wall behind them to gain even more support.

With all the skill and derring-do he could muster, Jak jumped from the man's shoulders as the legs and back broke their locks. His hands were out before him, seeking the nearest branch above him that he thought might hold his weight. His open hand clutched a branch as big around as his thigh, and he slid his other arm over the top. Twisting his body, he flipped himself up onto the branch as bullets cut the air where he'd just stood. Gouges erupted from the stone wall, flying in all directions.

The teenager took a couple steps forward, then bounced on the end of the tree limb. There was enough spring to aid him in the next leap up the tree. Bullets ripped through the tree bark and sheared away smaller branches around him.

He grabbed the next branch and went up quickly, continuing until he ran out of tree that would support him. Then, without a second thought, he threw himself at the ragged face of the cliff.

His fingers and toes found uneven places where he gained barely enough purchase to keep from falling. He held on through sheer strength, his cheek pressed into the rough surface hard enough to hurt.

Below him, Pepper shouted orders, urging them all to kill him. Bullets pounded into the cliff face below Jak, chopping their way through the trees and into the rock.

The albino reached above him, stretching his legs to achieve another couple inches. His back burned with the effort of supporting his weight so close to the rock with so little to work with. He sensed movement on top of the cliff almost within arm's reach now.

Then his left foot shot out from under him as the rock face crumbled. He flailed in a last-ditch effort to seize the top of the cliff as a man's head appeared over the edge—and missed. Jak knew the long fall was only a moment away.

Chapter Thirteen

Ryan took the scene in at a glance. He saw Jak's face pale with the realization of the inevitable fall, but there was no other emotion.

Krysty stood behind him. Both of them had left the cave immediately, throwing on their clothes and seizing their weapons in haste. Neither knew for sure where the others were. They'd merely followed the sound of the gunshots.

Throwing himself on the ground, his upper body out over the edge of the cliff, Ryan caught a stout-looking bush growing at the top, then extended his other hand toward the falling albino. "Jak!"

As lithe and quick as a big mountain cat, the youth managed to twist his body in the air and grab Ryan's proffered hand.

"Hang on," Ryan growled. But it was as much to himself as Jak. The weight, though expected, was more than he'd thought, and his center of balance wasn't the best it could have been for making such an effort. His arm and shoulders burned as he lifted Jak toward the top.

Prone beside him, Krysty used the M-16 she'd taken from the redoubt to deliver a barrage of fire into the group assembled below. Even firing 3-round bursts, the assault rifle

emptied in seconds. She followed up with the .38.

The group broke up, and the shots became sporadic.

Ryan hauled Jak in close enough for the albino to seize the brush and pull himself up. Black spots were whirling in Ryan's eye. "Fireblast, that was close."

"Know," Jak agreed. "Lot men, too."

"Doc and J.B.?" Ryan asked.

Krysty slapped a fresh magazine into the assault rifle.

Jak pointed. "Last saw there."

Ryan squinted in the distance, looking for the Armorer and the old man. He didn't see them. But that wasn't surprising because they'd probably gone to ground with the sound of the first gunshot. "Mildred?"

The look in the albino's eyes was stony. "They took her."

"Dead?" Ryan's throat tightened as he asked it. The group had lost people before. Death wasn't a new experience for any of them.

"Not know. Mebbe tried to take alive. Disappeared with man on top her. Couldn't do anything. No gunshot. Mebbe knife, but man had gun in hand."

"They weren't trying to take you alive." Ryan took point, holding the Steyr in both hands, and headed back toward the cave. If J.B. and Doc weren't captured and didn't know where any of the group was, it was logical they'd return there as long as none of their attackers had taken up a position there.

"Who are they?" Krysty asked.

"Man say Celts," Jak answered.

"Celts?" Ryan asked, making sure he got it right. Something stirred in the back of his mind, but he couldn't nail it down. He was sure he'd heard the name before, but he

couldn't figure if it was past or present, or put anything else with it.

"Yeah. Man tell me they own land. Say we're stealing and trespassing."

"I didn't see any signs," Krysty said.

"Yeah, you did," Ryan replied. "The men hanging in the tree were the kind of advertising these people probably do. Covers pretty much all they need to say." He followed the line of the land, going downhill slightly as they made for the cave. There was no sign of the green-clad men. "You hit, Jak?"

The albino brushed at the blood covering his chest. "No. Took deer. Right before they showed up."

The cover offered by the trees and brush disappeared forty yards before they reached the cave. Broken stone littered the hard ground, still frozen in the shady areas.

Ryan held up a hand and halted the group at the edge of the tree line. He scanned the landscape ahead of them. Nothing moved. However, if he'd been in charge of a large group laying siege to the mountain and had known of the cave's existence, he'd have directed a flanking action to come up on this side, as well.

"Nothing to do but try it," Ryan said. "Hold steady here."

Jak nodded.

"Be careful, lover," Krysty said.

Ryan went low and fast, which saved his life. Bullets popped into the ground around him immediately. He doubled back at once, throwing himself back to cover.

More bullets slammed into the foliage around them and ripped leaves free.

Bringing the Steyr to his shoulder, Ryan peered through the telescopic sights. When the cross hairs fell over a man reloading his single-shot hunting rifle, the one-eyed man squeezed the trigger.

The Celt, if that was what he was, died the heartbeat it took for his head to go to pieces.

The splatters dropped on some of his companions, causing them to flinch and break their concentration.

Ryan worked them, not giving them a chance to recover. He managed to hit three more before they pulled back. Two of them were out of the action, but he was certain he'd only winged the other man.

Jak and Krysty added their firepower to his, and for a moment broke the rhythm of their attackers' response.

"Ryan!"

Looking up the mountainside to the cave, Ryan saw the Armorer briefly wave his fedora out the entrance. "J.B.," he acknowledged.

"Bit of a tight spot," the Armorer said.

"Been there before."

"You want to join us, or do we join you?"

"We go with them," Krysty said. "The place where I found the pool?"

Ryan nodded.

"The fissure goes on through the other side. It'll put us on the other side of the mountain, give us some running room for a while."

"Okay." Ryan glanced back at the skirmish line waiting farther down the mountain. For all they knew, reinforcements had been sent for. Staying in one place could get them dead. Alive, they had a chance to return for Mildred. "J.B."

"Here."

"We're coming."

"Come ahead. Say when."

Ryan looked back at Jak and Krysty. Both of them nodded. "When!" Ryan yelled.

J.B. opened up with the full-throated snarl of the Uzi, raking a blistering line of death across the Celts' positions.

Without hesitation Ryan slung the Steyr over his shoulder and broke cover. Jak and Krysty ran ahead of him, staggered so they didn't overlap to present a single target. Ryan had the SIG-Sauer in his left fist, firing steadily at the Celts as he drove his legs hard against the ground. He felt every single heartbeat it took to get from the tree line to the cave thudding in his chest. He threw himself through the entrance and went skidding on his stomach into the burned-down coals of the camp fire.

The embers singed the coat he wore, and he felt some of the heat through the padding before he brushed the clinging bits away as he got to his feet. J.B. and Doc had already gotten their gear squared away, and it sat in packs against the wall.

"Where's Mildred?" the Armorer asked. His eyes were flint and his voice noncommittal.

"We think she's alive," Ryan replied, "but they've got her."

J.B. reached up and settled his hat more firmly on his head. Gunfire continued to pelt the front of the cave, but their attackers didn't try to gain any ground. For the moment the companions had a stand-off working.

"So what's the plan?" the Armorer asked.

"We get away," Ryan said. "Then we figure out who these bastard coldhearts are and come back for her."

"Could be they'll kill her while we're gone," J.B. said stonily.

"Mebbe," Ryan replied, knowing his old friend had a war going on inside himself at the moment. J.B. wasn't going to stand idly by and let any harm befall the woman he loved. "If we buy the farm, there's no way we're coming back for her."

J.B. gazed out the entrance of the cave, then nodded slowly. "Know that to be true."

"Something else to think about," Ryan said, shrugging a pack over his shoulder. "Give them long enough, somebody's going to get the bright idea to trot Mildred out of

wherever they've got her and use her against us. Then we got no options at all. We surrender and probably die. Or we put a bullet through her brain to save her some misery."

J.B. grabbed a pack up by the straps. "Let's move."

KRYSTY TOOK THE LEAD with a torch. In places the natural light streaming into the fissure from the cave and the hole at the top of the second chamber was enough for than to navigate by. But in other areas it was darker than night.

Beyond the chamber containing the cistern, the fissure narrowed and shortened almost enough to make Ryan walk stooped over. The smell of bat guano made it hard to breathe even with cloths tied over their lower faces. Several times they brushed against the brown-furred bodies clinging upside down on the ceiling, sending some of the creatures into a flapping frenzy.

Ryan estimated they were sixty yards or better into the second leg of the fissure when they came across the boy.

He sat huddled up in the fissure, a cloak pulled over his body. Blood smeared his pale face, and he looked up at them in fear.

"Don't kill me," he begged.

The voice and look reminded Ryan of Dean as he peered at the boy over the SIG-Sauer's open sights. "Secure the area," Ryan said. "We're on triple red here."

J.B. took another torch from his pack and lit it from Krysty's. He held his shotgun at the ready as he went forward. Jak took rearguard.

"The boy's been shot," Krysty said.

Ryan could see the blood covering one side of the cloak. "Yeah, but he's also dressed like one of them." He waved the blaster at the boy. "Stand up. Keep your hands where I can see them or I'm going to shoot you through the head. Understand?"

"I understand," the boy said weakly. "I'm not yet ready to be reaped." He struggled to push himself up, but finally made it. He listed badly to one side and had to keep

correcting his balance.

"Anyone with you?" Ryan asked. He moved forward and searched the boy while Krysty held the torch and kept him covered.

"No. I'm alone. They killed Bean." The boy's eyes were fevered and tormented. "It was my fault. I shouldn't have asked him to help me. But the Time of the Great Uprooting is wrong. My father and the others knew this. They killed my father, too. Smashed his head with a rock."

Ryan turned up a short knife with a worked wire handle that showed care. A cornstalk had been designed into the wire with green metal. Yellow stones had been placed into the design to represent ears of ripe corn.

"What are you doing here?" Krysty asked.

"Hiding. They'll kill me, too, if they can find me." He opened the cloak and showed them the wound in his side. The cloth had been torn, and efforts had been made to make a compress. Clots of dark blood hung in the material. "They've already tried."

"Who?" Doc asked.

"Pepper and his men."

"Who's Pepper?" Ryan asked.

"Pepper is the Prince's most favored seed herald," the boy answered. "He reaps who the Prince says should be delivered from our people, those whose paths have made them wander too far from the one vine."

Ryan struggled to understand the boy's words. Most of the meaning was clear, but the terms were nothing he was familiar with. He looked at Doc.

The old man shook his head. "I do not know, dear Ryan. From the cut of his clothes, I'd say they're homespun, very well done. As to the seed-herald titles and reference to reaping and wandering too far from the vine, I'd say we're dealing with an agrarian society. The seasons were at the whim of the gods—therefore sacrifices, often animal or human, were offered to appease them."

"Who are you?" Ryan asked the boy.

"My name is Tarragon," he answered, "son of Foxglove, the druid."

"Druid?" Doc repeated.

"Yes. He was one of the finest of healers."

"Who are your people?" the old man asked. His concentration was total as he inspected the boy again, reaching up to capture Krysty's torch and bring it closer.

"We are Celts," Tarragon said. "Lugh Silverhand created us to retake the earth in his name after the great freeze."

"By the Three Kennedys," Doc said, squatting on his bony haunches to study the boy more closely. "You *are* a Celt."

Ryan could tell from Doc's pose that he was intrigued by the announcement. A torch flared into view ahead of him as J.B. rounded the corner.

"Clear," the Armorer said. "Walked to the mouth of the fissure. Nobody there. He came alone."

"Not alone," Tarragon insisted. "Bean was with me. He got killed. Someone put a quarrel through his belly. I held his hand as Ivory Ginnifer harvested his soul."

"Who's Ivory Ginnifer?" Doc asked.

"Lugh Silverhand's mate," the boy said. "As Lugh breathes his life into a seed so that it may blossom, Ginnifer is the one who takes us back." His brow wrinkled in consternation. "There is so much you don't know. And the Time of the Great Uprooting is upon us."

"And what, my lad, is the Time of the Great Uprooting?" Doc asked.

"Death time," Tarragon said. "When all shall be consumed—"

"They come," Jak said when he returned. "Find out we not in cave and rush in."

"Enough questions, Doc," Ryan stated. "You can try again later. We're taking the boy with us." He motioned with the pistol, indicating Tarragon should move forward with J.B.

The boy stumbled slightly as he went, but managed a good pace. Ryan felt bad for the kid. He was banged up and hurting, that was obvious. But leaving him there for the other Celts to find was a death sentence. And the one-eyed man thought grimly, just maybe they could work out a trade for Mildred. Whatever troubles the kid had, they were mostly his and none of their affair.

"Who's he?" Jak asked from the back.

"Name's Tarragon," Ryan explained. "He's one of them."

"Tarragon eh? Man chilled by that big long-hair say they looking for a boy named Tarragon."

"It makes you wonder what's so important about him, doesn't it?" Krysty asked.

Truth was, Ryan admitted, it did.

A VLINDING WHITENESS met them on the other end of the fissure. Ryan looked over the terrain, unconsciously pulling his coat tighter as the wind ripped over him. This side of the mountain hadn't seen the sun yet, and dark purple shadows lay across days-old snow, protecting it. During the night a layer of ice had formed, making a crust.

"How'd you get in the fissure?" Ryan asked the Celtic boy.

"I walked over the top," Tarragon said.

"You knew the cave was here?"

The boy nodded.

"Pepper and his bunch know?" Ryan asked.

"I don't know."

"Why didn't you come in the front?"

"I knew you were there."

"How?" Ryan asked. "Did you see us?"

Tarragon shrugged, his eyes holding the glaze of fever. "I just knew, is all."

"Fireblast," Ryan said. He looked at the others. "Before we make it to the bottom, that bunch of coldhearts will be heating up our backtrail and picking us off. We try to make a stand here, hold them back in the tunnel, we're only fighting a delaying action. And if they come over the top of the mountain like the boy did, we're in trouble."

"Then we're going to have to get to the bottom of the mountain quicker, lover." Krysty reached into her pack and pulled out one of the lightweight blankets. "These are water-repellent. Bet they're awfully slick against that layer of frost and snow." She held up the blanket.

"Guess we're going to find out," Ryan said.

There wasn't any special skill needed in navigating the mountainside of snow, the companions discovered. They gripped the blankets tight as they could in two fists and threw themselves forward. Gravity and the lack of friction did the rest.

Krysty went first, spread-eagled across the blanket as it glided across the uneven snow. She managed to keep from smashing against the outcrops that thrust through the layer of snow and ice, then vanished into the forest. When she reappeared and waved that she was okay, Jak and Doc were already in motion.

Ryan ordered Tarragon to go next, letting him use Mildred's blanket. The boy seemed a little reluctant. Then J.B. said he heard movement coming from the fissure. Ryan heard, it, too, and spun to face the approach of the attackers.

"If you're going to go," the one-eyed man said, "you better get to it. Don't look like we're going to be waiting."

The boy nodded, then held the blanket before him and fell forward. He slipped across the

icy crust at once.

"You next," J.B. said.

"Don't waste time," Ryan advised. Agreeing was faster than arguing, and there was no reason for the Armorer to go next any more than him.

"Be the next breath drawn behind you," J.B. said.

Ryan leathered the blaster and glanced down the incline.

Tarragon was halfway down the mountainside, gaining speed, arms and legs waving frantically as he struggled to stay on top of the blanket. Out of control, he couldn't veer away from a rotted log canted up out of the snow like an arrow shot into the side of the mountain. The impact had to have temporarily knocked the boy senseless, because he lay motionless, sprawled on the blanket.

Bullets split the air near Ryan as he pushed himself down the mountainside. It felt as if he were flying, except for the occasional roughness when the blanket skidded across a rock stabbing up from the snow or a tree branch that hadn't quite been buried.

Ryan worked to gain control over his impromptu craft, finding it easier to work with all his bodyweight rather than trying to steer with his hands. The mountainside hammered against him as he picked up speed. He zipped down the incline like a hawk riding out a thermal.

A glance over his shoulder showed that J.B. had been as good as his word and took to the snow only seconds after him. A line of Celts stood along the brief precipice in front of the fissure and fired down at them. Bullets pocked the snow, throwing up brief flurries that whirled in their own little cosmos.

Suddenly one of the Celts fell back, a bloodred rose blossoming between his eyes.

Switching his attention forward, Ryan saw that Jak, Krysty and Doc had found positions in the tree line and were managing covering fire.

Shifting his weight, Ryan aimed his descent toward Tarragon. Bullets chewed into the dead log where the boy lay and punched holes in the blanket.

Ryan knew he would only have one chance at any kind of rescue. He held the edge of the blanket in his fists, felt the ice against his stomach and groin through the blanket and clothes as the ground raced by in a blur.

For a moment he thought he was going to smash up against the log, as well, then he reached out and grabbed a tight fistful of the boy's blanket. As he passed by, the boy's weight slewed him around. But the blanket and its burden came away from the log, and they went sliding down the mountainside in a disorganized heap.

J.B. reached bottom before they did. The Armorer was up with the Uzi snarling and spitting brass in an instant.

Ryan released the boy's blanket and covered his head as he went charging into the brush. Twigs and branches broke as he smashed through. He impacted against a tree with enough force to lose his breath. Numbness spread down his left arm as he got to his feet.

"Lover?" Krysty's face was a study in concern as she came racing back to him.

"Standing. Been better, though." Gunfire continued to crack and echo down the mountainside as he made his way forward. He drew the SIG-Sauer. "The boy?"

"Jak has him. He's not in any worse shape than he was."

Ryan nodded. Gazing back up the hill, he saw a body come slithering down the pristine whiteness of the slope, streaming scarlet in its wake.

The snow and ice thinned out inside the forest area. Black earth wet with dead leaves and struggling grass turned to mud underfoot.

"Jak," Ryan called.

The albino looked up. He had Tarragon by the collar and was pulling the boy to cover.

"You got point. Move us away from here. We've got a short lead, and I don't want it blown."

Jak nodded and moved off.

"Krysty, you and Doc give the boy a hand. If he slows you down too much, leave him behind."

"Ryan, my good fellow," Doc objected, "that would be most inhumane, given the circumstances, and—"

"Leaving him behind takes care of us," Ryan gritted. "He's got a heart of ice himself. Admits to leading these fuckers here when he knew we were here. He hadn't done that, Mildred would still be with us."

Krysty didn't look happy with Ryan's call, either, but she didn't waste time disagreeing. "Let's go, Doc."

"Lead on, my lady, and I shall not tarry."

Ryan turned his attention to J.B., who was hunkered down behind a tree and feeding a fresh magazine into the Uzi. "You need a long gun. Doc, let J.B. borrow that CAR-15 Krysty gave you."

Doc turned and tossed the rifle at the Armorer, who caught it easily, then the bag of ammo that followed. "Have a care with that, John Barrymore. I shall be wanting it back."

"Will do, Doc." J.R slung the Uzi with a full load, then checked over the assault rifle.

He gazed up at Ryan. "How do you want to handle this?"

"We fall back in stages." Ryan pulled the Steyr to his shoulder. At the top of the mountainside, a man crouched low and tried to navigate the expanse on foot. Ryan stroked the trigger once and sent a 7.62 mm round coring through the man's head. All motor control gone, the corpse tumbled and fell, ending up thirty yards down, a foot caught in a tangle of brush that held it upside down.

"Cover the others as long as we can," Ryan directed. He spaced two more shots across the fissure front, not hitting anything, but letting his targets know he could if they got out into the open long enough. "We should be able to keep them pinned for a while."

The Armorer nodded.

"Fifty yards out and down," Ryan said, "then set up a position while I fall back. Stay

along the tree line so you'll have a clear field of fire. If we get lucky, mebbe we can add another two or three hundred yards to what we've already got."

J.B. touched his hat, then jogged back.

Ryan felt they had a chance, depending on what lay farther out. He tracked the scope across the precipice and managed to find a man's kneecap with the cross hairs. He let out a half breath, then squeezed through. The rifle bucked against his shoulder.

A split second later the bullet shattered the man's knee and drew him out into the open. Ryan put the next round through the wide, screaming mouth, blowing the dead man back over his cohorts.

"Ryan," J.B. called, "come ahead."

Staying within the shelter of the trees, Ryan turned and sprinted back. He spotted the Armorer fifty yards away, but couldn't see the others. He was almost even with J.B. when he heard the sound of engines up ahead.

Chapter Fourteen

"They were here."

Sergeant George Conte, once of the United States Army, gazed at his corporal's findings.

Whittaker rubbed carbon build-up from the wall across his fingertips, spreading clumps of it in thick smears. He was a ratty-looking little man, even with the spit-and-polish appearance Burroughs insisted on for all the troops. "Maybe only a few hours gone."

"That lantern could have been there for a long time, Corporal."

Whittaker revealed a thin, mean grin and adjusted his thick glasses. "This stuff's still soft, sir. If it'd been here as long as the rest of the materials around here appear to have been, it

would be a hell of a lot harder."

"Okay." Conte nodded. He didn't like the other man, and had surprised even himself by working past the hate over the past hundred years. On some days he was astonished that out of all of them, Whittaker was still alive. The man rubbed everybody wrong.

Except Burroughs. And maybe that was the answer in itself. Whenever the major had given a shit-duty detail, Whittaker had been there to handle it, especially the killing. Interrogation had been another skill that the little rat man had mastered. Whittaker hadn't minded using the knife or getting bloody as he pried every secret Burroughs needed from reluctant captives.

"I'll take a look around," Whittaker offered.

"Do that," Conte said. "Take Henderson and Aames with you. Set up a loose perimeter guard."

Whittaker flipped him a nonchalant salute and went toward the other room, where they'd found the ladder leading up to the cave.

"Cruse," Conte yelled.

"Sir?"

"I could've chewed a hole through the roof of this redoubt in the time it's taken you to find and light a lantern, mister."

"Got it, Sarge." Cruse walked back into the room with a lighted lantern between his hands. The flame was weak and didn't cast much light.

Conte took the lantern. "Forgot you were a city boy, soldier." He removed the glass and made adjustments to the wick, then put the glass back on.

The room lit up appreciably.

"Put away the flashes, people," Conte ordered. "Let's save the batteries."

All the flashlights winked out.

"Found some rechargers in the back," Cruse said. "Also a vehicle."

Conte handed the lantern to Turley, who was still working on the gateway unit. From the looks of things, according to Turley, the mat-trans station was pass-coded to make it proprietary and couldn't be used to jump them to other gateways they knew to be in existence.

"Where?" Conte asked.

Cruse led the way.

The unit of soldiers had been inside the redoubt at the other end of the jump for less than twenty minutes. When they'd arrived, Turley had pointed out the crushed barrel of the .50-caliber machine gun that had been blocking the doors. There'd been no sign of Ryan Cawdor or his people, except for the carbon Whittaker had discovered.

Conte played his flash over the vehicle, raking it from stem to stern. "Is it driveable?"

"Should be," Cruse replied. "I'll have to look it over some before I know for sure."

"Get it done, and let me know." Burroughs had made sure his team had been cross-trained in a number of areas over the decades, and there wasn't a man in the group who couldn't fix most of the vehicles they had. The major had burned it into memory that without mobility, they didn't stand a chance of rebuilding the nation.

"Yes sir."

Conte returned to the main room. He was of average height, but broad shouldered. His blond hair was longer than regulation length, but Burroughs hadn't commented on it.

Turley was buttoning up his tool kit, a disgusted look on his face.

"What have you got, Mike?" Conte asked.

"Cranky bastard's still operational," Turley said, hooking a thumb back over his shoulder toward the mat-trans unit. "But you climb in, you get a one-way back to White Sands. Directional programmings been gutted. Just like I thought."

"Any idea where we are?" Conte had tried the radio as soon as he'd arrived. Nobody was in range that he could pick up, except for his own people.

"None." He let out a long breath. His brow was furrowed as he looked up over his cupped hands and lit a cigarette. "No way to tell from this piece of shit, sir."

"Disable it," Conte said, "just in case. Even if the unit's only a receiver with one point of delivery, I don't care to think about what may come through after us."

"Yes sir. Hadn't thought about that."

"That's why they made me sergeant." Conte went into the other room containing the cryo units. He glanced at the dead man. "Wish I knew who the hell you were and what you were doing here. Cut down on some worry."

A hundred years, he thought sourly, and maybe they had a lead on the information leak they were supposed to have been guarding against in their initial assignment. He went up the ladder to the cave. Someone had gone to a lot of trouble to establish a beachhead of sorts wherever they were. It was irritating not to know why. That was one of the reasons Conte had always liked military life: everything was pretty much spelled out for a guy, leaving no empty spaces or idle wondering.

He paused in the mouth of the cave and looked at the footsteps only partially covered by snow. Then he lifted his gaze to the valley, sweeping across it. Ryan Cawdor was out there somewhere. It might take some time, but he knew they could track the man down and terminate him with extreme prejudice.

After all, if Cawdor wasn't going to throw his lot in with them, he was a dangerous enemy of the United States of America. One thing Sergeant George Conte didn't abide was a traitor.

THERE WERE FOUR WAGS, all four-wheel drive and rigged for off-road travel. Two of them had started their lives as pickups, the third had been a van and the last a military jeep still bearing insignia that had almost faded out.

The jeep was in the lead, bearing down on Jak, Krysty, Doc and the young Celt. Two men rode in the back, hanging on behind a machine gun that was bolted to a crossbar. The whine of the straining transmission drowned out all other noise.

Doc and Krysty went to cover at once, dodging behind trees. Jak grabbed Tarragon and pulled him behind a boulder. His .357 Magnum was settled across the top of the big rock before Ryan had time to draw another breath.

Ryan moved behind a shelf of rock and brought the Steyr to his shoulder, scanning the new arrivals through the rifle's scope. None of them appeared to be dressed in green, but they weren't easy-living men, either. Scars and weapons were worn like badges of office.

The jeep came to an abrupt halt less than fifteen yards from Doc and Krysty's position.

A short, broad man dressed in a leather flying jacket and aviator's cap and goggles stood up in the driver's seat and held on to the front windshield. He reached up and took a well-chewed cigar from the corner of his wide, thick-lipped mouth. "Well, bloody hell, people," he yelled. "These effing rescue efforts only go so effing far. Now shit or get off the bloody pot."

"Who the hell are you?" Ryan shouted back.

"Blackjack Gehrig. These are my boys, devil take 'em if they ain't."

"What's your interest in us?" Ryan asked. Over to his right he saw Jak reach out and snare Tarragon, who was suddenly trying to go back the way they'd come.

"You got those bloody tree-huggers chasing you, like to set your arse on fire if they catch you," Gehrig stated, "You figure a bloke needs much more in this day and age than a common enemy?"

"I do," Ryan answered.

Footsteps sounded at his side, and J.B. was suddenly there. "We're between a rock and a hard spot if they're against us, too."

Ryan nodded. "Make them pay for the privilege, though."

Gehrig waved at the machine gunner. The heavy assault gun came around and pointed up the mountainside. A loud barrage pealed across the valley, and white smoke from the heated barrel twisted into the slight breeze and disappeared. Brass spewed out over the ground.

The line of .50-caliber bullets smashed into the mountainside. Two of the Celts went down, and the others found cover wherever it was available.

"You're a bloody fool if you don't take the hand that's offered," Gehrig said. "Never had anybody turn down a bona fide rescue before." He bent his head and struck a self-light, holding it to the end of his cigar.

"Still looking for the strings," Ryan said.

"Take a look at what you have to trade," Gehrig suggested. "I'm no frigging stoneheart, 'cept to those fucking would-be dryads."

Ryan didn't know what a dryad was, but the term didn't sound complimentary. "Mebbe I'm not exactly convinced we need rescuing."

"Give it fifteen minutes," Gehrig promised. "Then you'll be convinced all to hell." He hooked a thumb over his shoulder, back the way they'd come. "Had some trouble ourselves. There's a search party after us. Could be they'll take it out on you and yours when they can't catch us."

"What he says is true," J.B. said. "We don't exactly have a lot of choices here."

Ryan saw it that way, as well. He read Gehrig and his party as scavengers of some type, though not necessarily as killers. Gunfire from the mountain was picking up, beginning to strike the four wags now.

"Your call, mate, but this train's leaving now."

Ryan stepped out from behind the rock and jogged toward the jeep. "Where do you want us?"

"You heading up this outfit?" Gehrig asked.

"Yeah."

"You're with me." Gehrig turned to one of the men in the machine-gun team. "Carson, find another spot."

The man shot Ryan a sour look, but quickly scrambled out of the vehicle.

"Rest of you find places in that wag." Gehrig pointed at the nearest pickup truck. "Settle in tight as you can. Gonna be bumpy before it gets better."

Ryan waved his group forward.

Jak was struggling with Tarragon. The young Celt obviously preferred being left behind to going with Gehrig and his crew. Ryan joined them, grabbing the wounded boy by the shoulder. "What's the matter with you?"

"If I go with you," the boy said, "they'll kill me."

"You stay here, Pepper and his little group will kill you," Ryan replied.

Jak held on to the boy with difficulty, gripping a fistful of the back of his shirt.

"Let me go!" Tarragon shouted. He took a step to one side and launched a fist at Jak.

The albino moved around the blow easily, then nearly got caught with a faceful of dust the young Celt blew off his other palm.

Ryan rapped the butt of the SIG-Sauer against Tarragon's forehead with enough force to stun the boy without badly injuring him. He watched the boy's eyes roll up into his head as he crumpled to the ground. He felt bad about hitting the wounded boy, but there was no way he was going to leave him behind while Mildred was held prisoner.

He bent down, grabbed Tarragon's clothing and ran to the wag Krysty and Doc had already climbed into. As Ryan shoved the boy into the back of the vehicle, he glimpsed movement on the ridge back along the tracks the wags had made coming down into the valley.

Horsemen crested the hill. A rider in long green robes with a silver brocade led them.

"It's him!" one of Gehrig's party shouted. "Prince Boldt himself!"

Krysty took the unconscious boy's shoulders and pulled him under the bench seat that ran down the side of the pickup bed. "I've got him," she told Ryan. She peeled back an eyelid.

"Don't worry about him. Bringing him was probably the best thing you could do for him."

"You don't know if that's the Prince," another man shouted. "Not with the way these tree-huggers can bend a man's vision around with their magic."

An argument ensued, but it was swallowed by the roar of the revving engines.

"Got us an effing tree-hugger right here," said a bearded man with a ragged scar through his lower lip. He stood up in the back of the wag and approached the unconscious boy. "Easy for the killing." He slipped a hooked knife from his belt, then reached down and grabbed the boy's hair.

Ryan moved in a blur of action, lifting up the Steyr, then butt-stroking the man in the face.

With a groan of pain he fell over the side of the wag as if he'd been poleaxed. Before he landed, the other men in the wag were grabbing for weapons.

"Stay down!" Gehrig ordered. "Stay down, the lot of you mangy dogs!"

Ryan and his group had already drawn their weapons, and lines had been drawn between the two groups.

"You got something special in your heart for that bloody tree-hugger?" Gehrig demanded.

"Lost one of my people when the Celts opened the ball on this," Ryan stated, his eye roving over the assembled chilling crew Blackjack Gehrig ran. "This boy's our prisoner. Could be he's the only thing that'll help us get our friend back."

The machine gunners were burning rounds by the belt, and the drivers were screaming for the order to move.

"I can understand that," Gehrig said, looking at Ryan. Then he turned his attention to his men. "And if I can understand it, then you dogs can, too. I say this once, so clean your effing ears out and listen—any man touches that boy, he answers to me, then he answers to his maker. And that's all I've got to say about that."

There was a good deal of grumbling, but the tension drained from the situation.

Ryan looked at Krysty. "Have a care, lover."

"You, too."

Gehrig waved the wags into motion.

Sprinting, Ryan caught up with the jeep and pulled himself in behind Gehrig. He settled into the seat, then belted up. Empty brass rolled around his feet.

The Celts on horseback approached at a gallop, their weapons blazing. Motorized vehicles had joined the pursuit, and a half-dozen wags now threaded their way through the horses along with motorcycles.

Ryan kept his head low as bullets whacked branches over their heads. "Where are we headed to?"

"New London," Gehrig said. He craned his head around the seat. "You're not from around here, are you?"

IT WASN'T A ROAD so much as a trail they followed. Ryan watched with interest. Gehrig's men were obviously well versed in scooting along the treacherous terrain, not panicking when soft ground gave way beneath them and sent the wags whining yards out of the path they'd chosen.

Gehrig stood and turned to look over his shoulder, shouting at someone behind them and waving enthusiastically as they approached a narrow notch in the mountains. To Ryan, it looked like a gunsight carved between the rocky slopes.

"Here's where it gets lovely," Gehrig said, dropping back into his seat. He waved his driver over to the left. The man steered away, then held his own in the rough terrain as the full-sized van came rattling up to pass them.

Ryan, sitting behind Gehrig, had noticed now that the steering wheels for the wags were on the opposite side than he was used to. He remembered from bits and pieces of conversations between different drivers he'd known while traveling with the Trader, and books he'd looked at and read, that the people of England and a few other countries drove on the other side of the street. It felt alien to him, but the vehicle handled admirably.

"If the effing Prince found out straightaway that we were visiting," Gehrig said, "then he's bloody well had time to station some snipers along the ridge. We're lucky that's all. One time he had felled trees across the gap. Lost a wag that time out, and a good dozen men before we fought our way free."

The van shot by them. The nose of the wag had been altered by adding a triangular battering ram pointing out. It looked like something from a locomotive Ryan had seen.

"We've been waiting to try out Betsy," Gehrig said. "She's a tough old girl."

The wags roared up the incline to the gap, pushing the envelope of control. Ryan spotted the collection of logs blocking the juncture. The timber lay in a crisscross fashion like a fence.

"Give him leave," Gehrig told the driver.

The man laid on the horn, and the rolling squall of it echoed around them. The van driver honked back, then sped up while the jeep dropped back to about four wag lengths.

"They're waiting up there," the driver shouted over the grind of machinery. Then one of the first shots punched through the windshield and reduced the corner of Gehrig's seat to cottony tatters.

The next bullet went in below the machine gunner's left eye and exited through the back of his head, dumping red-and-gray gore at Ryan's side. He followed the trajectory of the round and saw green-garbed men clinging to the sheer face of the cliffs above them. Ropes were around them, holding them in place while they fired.

"Sniper!" Gehrig yelled. He lifted a boot and kicked the windshield forward, then brought up a semiautomatic sniper rifle Ryan didn't recognize. The recoil was obviously tremendous, pushing the man back when he fired.

Pulling himself up, Ryan grabbed the .50-caliber machine gun as it spun on its pintels. He kicked the belt clear, then started firing. Brass flipped from the breech as a line of autofire chewed into the right cliff face and scratched Celt snipers free.

The lead wag smashed into the stack of logs and almost came to a standstill as the rear wheels lifted from the ground because of the impact. The engine roared, and twin rooster tails of dirt, grass, snow and stone spit out across the jeep, caking Gehrig, the driver and

Ryan with congealed cold.

A belt jammed in the machine gun. Abandoning it, Ryan took up the Steyr. The wag was almost at a standstill behind the lead vehicle, and he knew they were sitting targets for the Celts.

More of the enemy came from around the trees at the base of the gap. Ryan knew it would be only seconds before they were overrun. He leaned forward and grabbed the driver's shoulder. "Ram the wag ahead of you, dammit! Give it more weight! Do it now!"

The driver let out the clutch and steered for the back of the wag.

Ryan braced himself as well as he could, but the impact was jarring. Metal buckled on both vehicles, and the jeep's engine joined the van's in the rough grunting as eight tires struggled for traction.

Then, almost imperceptibly at first, the wag inched forward, shoving logs out of its way. The driver cut the wheel, following the path of least resistance as the jeep pushed from behind. The weight of the blockage gave way all at one time, and the lead wag skidded along the length of the logs.

Two Celts were almost on the jeep, screaming and firing revolvers.

Ryan whirled and filled his hand with the SIG-Sauer. He fired into the center of both men as the jeep jumped forward and nearly pitched him from the seat. The Celts went down.

The jeep rode the logs hard, slithering along the length for a short time before finding the open area beyond the blockade. It jerked as it smashed against the heavy tree trunks, knocking them out of the way.

The last wag through had no trouble getting past the logs, but several large stones were pushed from the top of one of the cliff faces and came crashing down. Ryan caught sight of the wag taking damage and bouncing from the impacts as he worked the jammed belt in the machine gun free.

The land on the other side of the notch was all mountain. Beyond it was the emerald green of an ocean, stretching out as far as the eye could see.

"THE ENGLISH CHANNEL," Doc said, standing on a promontory overlooking a sheer drop to the water below.

Ryan stood a little down from the old man, peering hard at the whitecapped waters battering the base of the cliff more than a hundred feet below.

"We're only hours from London," Doc announced, his voice wistful as he surveyed the half-familiar landscape.

"London?" Blackjack Gehrig asked, walking up from where his men were replacing a tire on the van. He carried his sniping rifle over one shoulder. "You're talking about New London, now, aren't you, mate? The only London there is, is New London about two hours north and east of here. During the nukestorm the original London was hit all to bleeding hell by the bombs."

"I beseech you, sir, to tell me how bad the damage was."

"There used to be a river that ran through it," Gehrig said.

"The Thames." Doc nodded. "I knew it well."

"They tell me in the old days, it flowed through the city and emptied into the North Sea. Used it for shipping and the like. I've seen some pix of London. Must have been quite a place to see in its time. But it's mostly all gone now. When those bombs hit, they caused a rift in the land that drank London down and brought the North Sea into the heart of England. Put the whole place forty and fifty feet underwater. Almost cut this lower section of the island off from the rest of the country."

" 'Tis a shame dear man."

"Yeah, I suppose it is."

The old man moved off, heading back to the wag where Krysty and the others were.

"Doc was kind of close to this part of the world. He was hoping to visit what was left of old London," Ryan explained.

"Is that what brought you out here?" Gehrig asked.

"No," Ryan replied.

"We're going to have to talk about that. And what you're planning on doing with that young Celt you brought along with you."

"Yeah." Ryan knew they would have to talk. If Gehrig had had repeated experiences with the Celts and knew the land they lived on, he was going to need that knowledge for any rescue attempt the companions might make to get Mildred back with them. However, that didn't mean giving the man all of the truth. "How far to New London?"

"A couple hours' hard driving."

"What kind of setup is there?"

"It's a big thorpe," Gehrig said, leading the way back to the wag. The men working on the van were already letting the jack down after replacing the tire. "A bloke named Taylor Henstell runs things. He's got three men working with him to keep things running smooth. Bobby Krieger, who's the thorpe's shipmaster—"

"Shipmaster?" Ryan asked as he crawled into the back of the wag.

Gehrig nodded. "Krieger's sire built the first clipper ships based on some blueprints his grandfather had saved over the years. They come from sailing stock, all of them."

"What're the ships being used for?" Ryan asked.

"Defense mainly. It took Krieger a while to get Henstell to back his plans. Those ships cost a lot. But they're starting to pay for themselves. He's set up a regular trade route with the French, who haven't gotten their shit together enough to build a canoe, much less a boat. Breed like effing rabbits over there every chance they get, pox take the lot of them." Gehrig spit over the side of the jeep. "But there's a few who work salvage operations and bring things to Krieger's crew that we can use in New London. Then there's some diving starting to go on where old London went under. Krieger's found this big bell he lowers into the water and lets the swimmers work out of that instead of diving from the top. Still only have a couple minutes they can work the bottom before they come up for another breath of air, though. Getting a few things back from there, too."

Ryan listened to the words, and images danced in his brain, seeing men swimming across the broken surface of a city that had gone to a watery grave. "I'd like to see that."

Gehrig shrugged. "Not me. Like it just fine on dry land. Got some nasty sharks in that area that come up out of the ocean for a snack. Great whites, big enough to swallow a man, they tell me, in one effing bite. Some kind of mutie strain, Krieger thinks."

"That's Krieger," Ryan said. "Who else?"

"Graham Adams," Gehrig said. "General of the militia. Hard, hard man. Ran a thorpe of his own before Henstell persuaded him to throw in his lot."

"How?"

"Adams is a hell of a man when it comes to rules and regs. His thorpe was filled with laws, and those that didn't toe the line were dead or kicked out. But Henstell pointed out the fact that there was safety in numbers. Basic military concept that Adams didn't have a problem understanding. His place was getting by, but it wasn't self-supportive for the number of people he had. Primarily he was Robin Hooding neighboring thorpes. Ended up getting quite a few people properly pissed at him. Including New London. A few had banded together for protection. Just before they were ready to march off to chill Adams and his raid crew, Henstell made Adams a deal."

"You said there were three men," Ryan said.

Gehrig grinned. He took a twisted cigar from a pocket and jammed it into the corner of his mouth. "Me," he said. "I'm the third man. Henstell, like I said, is a bright guy. Every thorpe you want to name that starts getting fairly large and complex, you're going to have a certain amount of black-market traffic. Me and my boys, we were smash-and-grab razors cutting into New London everywhere we could. Henstell offered me a deal, too. I manage the crime in the thorpe and give him and the others a cut. Also, I get immunity from the little raiding parties I send out to other places."

"Like the Celt lands," Ryan said.

Gehrig let out a thick stream of smoke. "Exactly like the Celt lands." He flicked ashes from the cigar. "Now, you and me, we're going to deal. You can start with where you're from and why you're here."

Chapter Fifteen

Mildred Wyeth woke with a pounding headache and a disagreeable taste in her mouth. She was tied to a chair in an empty room that looked as if it had been hollowed out of a giant tree. The walls were coarse and dark, with age rings and grain running through them in various shades.

A dim light filled the room. She turned her head, seeking the source. On the walls, in three different places, were growths that looked like molds and were as big as heads of cabbage. They glowed a greenish blue and were the source of the light. As she watched them, they looked as if they pulsed, as though they were breathing.

She tested her bonds, but they were tight.

Glancing down at herself, she saw that she was still wearing her own clothes. She felt relieved. Rapists, as a general rule, didn't bother putting their victims' clothes back on after they were finished. So there had to be another reason for the headache and the bad taste in her mouth.

She hawked up a gob of phlegm and spit it on the floor near her right foot. She was able to move her foot just enough to smear the blob of liquid across the sanded floor. Most of the wood was even, leaving only a few depressions.

Without warning, something slammed into her side. The sudden jolt sent fresh pain corkscrewing up her back. She screamed, which she found out quickly enough, wasn't a good idea at all, then moaned as she banged onto the floor on her side.

"What the hell is going on?" she shouted, letting her anger get ahead of her fear. "If you're going to kill me, get on with it!"

She twisted her neck, trying to see. Shadows were moving there, shifting against the walls.

"Get her up," a cultured voice said.

"At once, Prince Boldt. But I thought she was going to do a scrying spell."

A big man, wearing the same green homespun clothes as the group she'd seen earlier, stepped in front of Mildred. Without preamble he reached down for her and yanked her roughly upright again. He settled the chair on the floor with a thud.

Mildred spit into his face. If they hadn't killed her yet, after she'd killed some of them, chances were they weren't going to kill her for a while. She couldn't get away, but she didn't have to make it easy on them.

The big man roared in rage, swiping a big paw over his face. "You bitch! You'll pay for that!" He drew back his hand.

"Bodb, leave her alone or suffer my wrath." The words were delivered coldly.

Bodb hesitated, torn between the threat and his own rage. He straightened, then dropped his hand to the hilt of the broad-bladed knife sheathed at his waist. "Going to be another time, witch. And when there is, you're going to go out cursing your mother for ever bearing you. I swear that by Lugh Silverhand's eyes."

"Leave us," the other man ordered.

The big man hesitated, then turned and stamped away.

Breathing in through her nose and releasing it through her mouth, Mildred made herself remain quiet. She didn't try to look over her shoulder to see the other man.

Clothing rustled behind her, and the light from the glowing mold changed. "What makes you so certain we won't kill you?" the man asked.

"The hell with you," Mildred said. "You aren't doing me any favors."

"No? Without my intervention, Bodb would have had the head from your shoulders."

"You saving me for yourself, then?"

"Your speech is pathetic. I had been expecting more from someone as trained as yourself."

Mildred made herself relax in the chair. She'd have new bruises on her arms and legs where the ropes bound her. "Must be all the inspiration I got around me at the moment."

"Do you know who I am?"

"Our buddy Bodb called you Prince, so if that isn't your name, it must be a title. You take it for yourself, Prince? Didn't like the idea of a barony?"

"I inherited the title," the man said. "From my father. Along with his sacred mission."

Mildred let that pass.

"So you don't know who I am?"

"Let me guess," Mildred said. "This isn't Sherwood Forest."

"No."

"Means you aren't Robin Hood or Errol Flynn."

The man laughed sarcastically. "Nor even Douglas Fairbanks, Jr."

That caught Mildred's attention, causing her to fall silent. Not many would know the movie stars of the pre-dark age.

"That made you think, didn't it, Mildred Wyeth?"

Mildred sat back in her chair, relaxing as much as she could. If the chance presented itself to take any action, she would. But until then, she needed to know where she stood in the present scheme of things.

"Yes," Boldt said. "I know your name. And I know you were a doctor."

The man stepped around in front of her. He was tall and lean, sallow in complexion, and looked like a poster child for a famine. His clothes were jeans and hiking boots, a sleeveless jade sweater over a yellow Oxford with the collar neatly buttoned down. His cape was a silvery material that reflected the weak light and seemed to glow from an inner source, hanging to the tops of the hiking boots. A crown wrapped around his head,

gold braid intricately woven into various leaf shapes, sporting a large purple crystal that hung on his broad forehead between his eyes. He held a staff as tall as he was, the top of it forming an oval where the main body of the shaft split, then became one again, leaving an open space slightly over a foot in length and nearly that in breadth. Metal wires were worked into the polished wood, sometimes on top of the polished grain and sometimes just under it.

"You drugged me." Mildred dragged her foot across the particles she'd spit out in the phlegm.

"There are some who call what I do—magic."

"I'm not one of them." Mildred managed to spit out a small piece of something in her saliva. Her eyesight was better now, and she was able to see the porous cells in the piece. "Mushroom?"

"Toadstool," Boldt corrected. "Poisonous rather than simply hallucinogenic. A great degree of skill is necessary in order to keep from crossing that thin line of death." He walked closer to her, and the shadows peeled away from him, revealing the .44 pistol he had snugged in shoulder leather. "I do hope you'll prove more civil now that you've had a chance to vent your rancor. I would like to talk to you, especially now that I know you're from the predark times."

Mildred just studied the man.

"But," he said softly, "I am just as unforgiving as Bodb. And I am the Prince here at Wildroot. There is no one to say me nay and stay my hand." He raised his eyebrows. "Do we understand each other?"

"Sure," Mildred said. "Clear as a goddamn bell. But you haven't told me why I should worry about dying later instead of dying now."

"Because," Boldt said, "I've not decided whether you should die at all. Yet. You amuse me, and you represent a gateway, of sorts, to the past. A link to the world my father knew and hated." He snapped his fingers.

Two guards stepped into the room, dressed in green but wearing silver-worked patches on their blouses. One of them drew a knife and slashed at the ropes that bound her to the chair.

"Come," Boldt said imperiously, turning his back and striding down the hollowed-out hallway. Another guard stepped in front of him, uncovering the bull's-eye of a large lantern and banishing the darkness in the blue glow.

Mildred rubbed circulation back into her arms as needles of pain tracked through her legs when she stood. She wanted to ask about J.B., Doc, Ryan and the others, but she had the feeling the man wouldn't reply. Instead, she followed.

NEW LONDON RESEMBLED a growth sprouting out of dead scars. What Ryan guessed was the center of the ville featured leaning and broken stone buildings sometimes as high as five and six stories. Most of them had sheared off somewhere around their midpoints, leaving broken and blunted fangs pointed skyward.

He studied the ville from the back of the jeep as Gehrig lit another cigar. Ryan felt all talked out from the past two hours of constant grilling by the raider captain. The jeep continued following the well-traveled dirt road leading into New London, passing horse-drawn wags and ox carts going both ways. Most of the wag drivers and cart drivers got over readily enough, but none of them appeared especially glad to see Gehrig or his men.

"Thorpe started from survivors gathering in the ruins," Gehrig said over the roar of the jeep's transmission. He shifted in the seat, putting a foot up against the dashboard and heaving out a long streamer of smoke. "Right after the nukestorm. When I was a kid, I talked to some of the old men who lived through those times as small brats themselves. Children were considered a liability in those days. Not many of them made it. But the ones who did, mate, they can tell some stories."

Ryan ran his eye over the area. A ten-foot wall surrounded the ville, put together with metal scraps, stone and wood. Barbed wire curled along the top of it.

"Not much food to be had here for a while," the raider captain said. "Thorpe's founders turned to cannibalism for a time. Started 'finding' a lot of dead kids who'd perished from one misadventure or another. According to the old-timers, it was easier for a young sprout to have a misadventure than some middle-aged, distrusting soul armed with a blaster of his own."

The jeep rumbled across the road and came to a stop at a heavily guarded checkpoint. Steel barricades blocked the entrance.

Glancing up, Ryan saw the guard posts were heavily occupied. "Ville seems capable of

supporting a lot of people now."

"Yeah," Gehrig agreed. "Took some time. Way things worked around here, most of the foodstuffs were canned and dried right here. Close enough to the sea that fish was a staple, but there was a number of bios weapons that got ruptured in the nukestorm. Leftover bastard shit from World War II that was never claimed because of international treaties about the stocking of such things, then couldn't be gotten rid of easily without embarrassment. When the bios ruptured, they poured mists and fogs down into the low places that lasted for months and sometimes years. Wiped out the fishermen, and the folk left over had to relearn most everything. Drove all of the fish deeper out into the seas, too."

The post guards scanned the caravan. Ryan watched as the twin .50-caliber machine guns and a 20 mm cannon farther up the wall stayed trained on the vehicles. A half-dozen guards came from under a trapdoor in a berm and created two groups of three, working their way hurriedly down the sides of the caravan.

When they finished, the man in charge came up beside Gehrig. "Have a nice run?"

"Well enough," the raider captain replied.

"You vouching for the new people?"

Gehrig nodded. "If that changes, I'll let you know."

"That include the dryad?"

"Yeah. He's their pet for now. Prince Boldt seized one of their own. These people are hoping to set up some kind of swap."

The guard grinned coldly. "Fat chance of that. Boldt's got all the followers he needs. More than likely, their mate has already been killed outright. Who's in charge of this group?"

Gehrig jerked a thumb at Ryan.

"Going to be holding you responsible for that little bugger," the guard said. "He gets out, does anything he's not supposed to do, it's on your head. We don't go easy on things like that here in New London."

"I understand," Ryan said.

Gehrig clapped his driver on the shoulder. The jeep rocked forward as the gates opened.

"They keep things tight around here," Ryan commented.

"Like the underpants on a fat woman," the raider captain agreed.

Additional buildings, most only one story tall, had been constructed from the wreckage of the previous ville. Farther along, more of the buildings showed signs of polish and craftsmanship, using shaped stone, as well as wood. Only there did the spaces between the ramshackle buildings grow from twisting, narrow allies to full-size roads.

The caravan wound through New London. Gaily painted signs decorated shop windows. Different goods were behind glass panes, arranged for persuasive viewing. The road remained primarily dirt, but a lot of effort had gone into setting broken stone into the ground—probably during the rainy season, Ryan supposed—to create streets after a fashion.

Along the outer hub of the ville, the buildings rose two and three stories, all built with verandas and upper walks that peered out over the streets. Some of it was for decoration and enjoyment, the one-eyed man knew, but he also knew snipers waited along the way. He could feel them staring at the back of his neck.

"Those men up there on the buildings," Ryan said.

Gehrig looked at him curiously.

"They yours, or do they belong to somebody else?"

The raider captain smiled broadly. "They belong to me. You spot one of them, mate? 'Cause if you did, I'll have the hide off any man caught slacking."

Ryan shook his head. "Didn't see them. Just felt them."

Gehrig looked at him, as if trying to decide whether to believe him. "If you don't find a way back to your Deathlands, I can always use a man like you here, mate."

Ryan nodded, not wanting to offend. He wasn't being polite; he was just concentrating on survival. Gehrig was a man with an ego, and getting it all ruffled up wasn't a wise thing to do. "I'll keep that in mind."

"You do that."

But Ryan knew it would never happen. The Trader was the last man he'd ever willingly follow. And that time was done, too.

The jeep came to a stop in front of a wooden building three stories tall. A hand-painted sign over the double doors announced The Bent Rose.

"I'll stand you to a pint of the best beer to be had, mate," Gehrig said. "If you're interested."

Ryan nodded. As soon as he was able, though, he intended to get off to himself with his friends and see to planning what they were going to do about Mildred.

Boosting himself out of his seat, Gehrig landed with a jingle and a thud against the hard-packed earth, spooking the three horses tied up in front of the building. He reached back into the jeep for his assault rifle and took it with him.

Ryan vaulted out of the vehicle, too, grateful to be standing instead of all cramped up in the back seat. Krysty and J.B. managed Tarragon between them, while Jak and Doc took care of watching their backs.

Enough of Gehrig's men apparently didn't have anything to do except follow the companions, and Ryan knew they weren't going to be trusted.

The one-eyed man walked back to the truck and took out one of the equipment packs they'd prepared and slid it over his shoulders, then he fisted a second one. He kept the Steyr at hand, the safety off.

"What's going on?" Krysty asked in a quiet voice that didn't carry.

"Man's going to buy me a beer," Ryan said.

"What are you going to do?"

"Me? I'm going to let him."

"Ryan, this boy needs some attention. He's burning up with fever."

Nodding, Ryan said, "I'm going to see to that, too." He started up the steps after the raider captain.

Gehrig led the way inside the building.

Ryan already knew from the smell and the lively music coming from inside that the Bent Rose was a gaudy. He didn't worry about Krysty being offended by what was inside, and if there'd been rules against women coming in, Gehrig would have said something.

The interior was fanciful, decorated with daringly colored chiffons and silks and other fabrics Ryan couldn't identify. A stage, raised above the hardwood floor by three feet, was flanked by two bars at three o'clock and nine o'clock. Men in clean white shirts worked behind the bars pushing drinks at scantily clad women.

On the stage a dancer performed a languorous striptease act in front of the midafternoon crowd, which hooted enthusiastically. She was tall, blond and statuesque in a way that defied gravity, with breasts as big as melons.

"Upon my soul," Doc said reverently, taking the woman in at a glance with difficulty, "if dear old Isaac Newton could only see this vision before us, I daresay he'd have to do some refiguring."

"Close your mouth, Doc," Krysty said dryly. "You're going to strangle on a fly."

"This is my place," Gehrig said proudly. "One of them, anyway." He led the party to a booth in the corner that was conspicuously empty.

"Your seat," Ryan said.

"Always." The raider captain's men spread out around the room, effectively sealing off all exits. The crowd readily gave way to them.

Ryan swept the accommodations with a glance, keeping his face impassive. "Got the distinct feeling you're wanting to keep me underfoot."

Gehrig waved to a booth across from him as he sat. "I'm a blunt man, mate, and I've got the feeling you're pretty much the same. I believe your story about the Deathlands and how you come to be here, but I've got a lot here to protect."

Ryan nodded. "I've come to see over the years that the more a man takes for himself from others, the more he worries that some others are going to come along and take from him. Doesn't make for an easy mind."

" 'Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown,' " Gehrig quoted.

"That is Shakespeare," Doc said.

The raider captain looked at the old man. "You know of the Bard?"

Doc brushed dirt from the lapels of his frock coat. "Indeed I do. Tell me, then, have all his works survived?"

"I don't know about all of them," Gehrig said. "But a lot of the street people keep his stuff alive down at the Globe."

"The Globe? Surely it cannot be the same theater where so many of the master's works were first trod upon the boards."

Gehrig shook his head. "No. This is just a small place, mostly kept alive by the locals."

"True art," Doc said, "will always out." He glanced at Ryan. "Friend Cawdor, if I may?"

Ryan nodded. He wasn't Doc's keeper, and it was good to see the old man excited about something again.

Doc didn't waste any time clearing out. The afternoon crowd surrounding the center stage summoned up a lively round of applause as the dancer finished her set and a lean brunette covered with body tattoos took her place.

A woman came over from the nearest bar carrying a tray full of drinks. She slipped them onto the table and walked away.

"Sit," Gehrig said.

"I need a room for us," Ryan stated.

Gehrig lit a cigar, then leaned back and pushed a plume of smoke through his lips. "There's rooms upstairs, and there should be some empty."

"How much?" Ryan asked.

"We can discuss that later."

Ryan shook his head. "I'm a man believes in settling up as I go along."

Rubbing his chin, Gehrig kept his eyes locked on Ryan. "You helped my men and me escape the trap the Prince laid for us today at the gap. You spend the day and the night in one of those rooms, or as many rooms as you like, drink and eat what you will of the fare offered here, and I figure we're even."

Ryan didn't hesitate over the deal. But he knew that there was the underlying threat that the raider captain wouldn't feel beholden anymore, either. "Done."

"Good enough." Gehrig snapped his fingers, and one of the waitresses hovering nearby came over. "Take them upstairs and get them settled in."

The woman appeared hesitant. "Even the dryad?" She acted as if she couldn't believe it.

"Yeah," Gehrig said, turning his burning gaze on her.

She looked away hurriedly. "At once." She retreated a little ways off, then stood nervously waiting.

"Go on up," Ryan told Krysty. "I'll be along after a while."

Even though most of the people watching wouldn't have seen her glance of disapproval, Ryan knew that was exactly what she'd intended him to see. Without a word she shifted the unconscious boy's weight across her shoulders, then she and J.B. turned toward the waitress.

Ryan halted Jak with a hand signal. The albino looked up expectantly. "Doc," the one-eyed man said.

The teenager nodded, then strode out of the gaudy and into the street. Keeping Doc when he wanted to go wasn't an option. However, keeping an eye on him was.

Ryan slid in behind the polished table, feeling the smooth material of the tablecloth against his fingertips. He set the Steyr to one side on the booth, where it would be easy to get to.

Gehrig passed over a beaten tin mug. "To your health, mate."

Taking up the mug, Ryan returned to gesture, then drank down the contents. It was strong and sour, almost acrid to the taste. He set the mug back on the table. "Something you didn't exactly talk about during our little chat while we were on our way here."

"Name it."

"What were you and your men doing in the Celt country if you're such bitter enemies?" Ryan asked.

"DeChancie, go get one of those baskets out of the truck."

A man peeled off from the group and exited through the door. While he was gone, a waitress deposited a large bowl of fried meats and breads on the table.

"Squab," Gehrig said, taking a small breast for himself. He tore the white meat from the bone and popped it into his mouth. "Eat up. When's the last time you had something that didn't come out of a self-heat?"

"A while," Ryan acknowledged. He picked up a piece of meat and started working on it, finding it easy to separate from the bone. It was covered in spices, too, gentle things that encouraged chewing and tasting.

In a few minutes DeChancie returned with a basket. It was wicker, almost two feet across and nearly the same deep. Rope bound the lid on it, wrapping securely around projections that had been designed for just that purpose.

For a moment Ryan thought the man was shaking the basket, then realized it was only

reflecting the movements from whatever was trapped inside.

"Sit it down and open it up," Gehrig said.

DeChancie clearly wasn't happy about the idea. But he put the basket down. Men cleared out from around him. The basket shifted restlessly, sometimes rocking violently as something struck the wall from inside. Taking his knife from the sheath on his hip, DeChancie sliced the ropes holding the lid down, then tried to jump back.

Before the man could get away, though, snakelike appendages exploded out of the basket and wrapped around him.

Ryan had only a moment to take it all in, then his attention was focused on the tentacle streaking toward his face. He was grimly aware of the vicious stinger at the end of the tentacle as it lashed at him.

Chapter Sixteen

"How did these tunnels get here?" Mildred asked. Despite her fear and anger, her scientist's mind wouldn't allow her to ignore the miracles she was walking through.

The chambers were evidently underground, their walls always covered with fibrous bark, letting her know she was walking through an organic thing. Sounds were more muffled here, didn't carry as far.

"They were grown," Boldt stated, "for the people."

"As dwellings?" The guards on either side of Mildred stayed close, making sure the distance was great enough there would be no mistaking if she made a try for their weapons.

"They were intended as primary dwellings only," the Celt prince said. "When the roots grew, the inner core of them was very soft, easy to work. But when combined with lacquers that were also specially designed, they became as you see them now. Nothing

will easily get through these walls. My father intended for his people to live outside once it was safe. No matter how long it took. They were supposed to reclaim the land the spoilers had so carelessly thrown away."

Mildred trailed after the prince, examining the designs etched into the walls of the tunnel. Most of them seemed heroic in nature, carrying out a theme of men armed with blasters and swords taking a stand against great, roaring machines that resembled dragons and other fearful beasts.

The machines were manned by demihumans, fully as frightful and twisted as any mutie she'd ever seen.

"Who were the spoilers?" she asked.

"Your kind," Boldt stated. He paused at the bottom of a twisting corkscrew of a staircase that led up inside a hollow shank of fibrous growth. "The kind who took from nature but never returned anything to her. The ones who poisoned the air and the seas, defiled the land, killed the creatures who lived upon and within it without a second thought save for profit."

"You sound like something out of Greenpeace," Mildred said.

"Greenpeace," Boldt said, "lacked vision that included a real response against the spoilers." He went up into the staircase. "Had the world not ended, that was coming. My father was not a man who gave up easily."

Mildred followed, a guard in front of her so she couldn't make a sudden lunge at Boldt. She studied the steps as they twisted and went up. They were carved out of the wood, just as the tunnels were, leaving no joints. The exposed surfaces were smooth, showing the work of hours of sanding and years of wear.

"I wouldn't say that," she replied. "We had our share of ecoterrorists even back then."

"By inference you're saying I'm nothing but an ecoterrorist."

"Am I?" Mildred watched the figure ahead of her. Boldt gave no sign of being offended. His movements remained the same, confident and sure.

"It doesn't matter. Our mission here is sacred."

"And what is that mission?"

"To repollinate the earth," Boldt said, "and bring her into the future that was to be ahead of her before the greed of the spoilers nearly destroyed everything."

"Sounds like something out of the Old Testament," Mildred said. It irritated her that Boldt's words were uttered with the same flat conviction of a zealot.

"Rubbish," the man said. "That book is filled with promiscuous behavior and larcenous murder. The story of David alone is enough to turn most sane men from it. David went from the Christian God's favorite, smiting the mighty Goliath with just a pebble, to an adulterer who conspired to kill his lover's husband by placing him at the front of a battlefield. Still, the Christian God watched over him."

"So it's not a pretty story."

"What do you know about the Celts?" Boldt asked.

Mildred had to search through dusty memories of university to come up with anything at all, but she found more than she thought. "A couple hundred years B.C., they were one of the largest cultures in Europe. But they never built an empire or organized areas the way the Romans did. The tribes were linked only by language, religion, art and a respect for nature. Once the other civilizations began to grow, they got the shit kicked out of them by the Romans, Germans, Angles and Saxons."

"A simplified version," Boldt said, "and somewhat false. The Romans in particular practiced genocide against the Celts. Yet we managed to survive. We even managed to survive the nukestorm that shattered the world."

Mildred listened to the fire in the man's words. At the top of the next turn of the stairway, she came out onto the mouth of a tree that opened over a cul-de-sac.

Small buildings littered the land before her, spilling down the gentle grade toward a twisting stream that glinted in the afternoon sunlight. In between each dwelling and every road, a garden grew, sometimes on different levels as vines and growths were curled up along strings instead of being allowed free run along the ground, optimally maximizing the available space. All of them looked luxuriant. Carts and oxen appeared to be the major form of transport. Men on horseback in green garb and wearing the silver patch of Boldt's personal army cycled within the populace. They gave the appearance of being

more oppressive than defensive.

Mildred immediately recognized the presence as martial law. People walking along the streets beside the men on horseback didn't look up, just kept their gaze directed toward the ground and kept on moving.

"This is Wildroot," Boldt said.

If she'd been viewing the countryside under other circumstances, Mildred admitted to herself that she might have thought she'd walked into a child's fantasy story. Everything that had been built in Wildroot had been designed to blend into the countryside, not really to camouflage it.

"Would you care to see it?" Boldt asked.

Mildred glanced at him. "Sure you're not just talking me into following you along to my own public execution? I saw those men in the forest."

"Those men in the forest only got what they deserved," Boldt said. He waved to one of the men below, then followed the narrow steps carved into the gnarled tree roots and stone beside him.

The man below nodded and quickly raced to bring a cart and horses into view, then stood waiting, holding the horses' halters.

"They were poachers trespassing on our lands," Boldt said. "They raid us frequently. My people have never been into New London except to exact vengeance. Besides the poaching, those men have also taken our women and children into slavery, to be used in brothels. Apparently their tastes are not so discriminate. I've even heard stories about the liberties they take with beasts."

"Don't sound like friendly souls, do they?" Mildred believed what the Celtic prince said, but she also kept in mind the fear she saw in the faces of the people around them as the man descended the stairs. For his part Boldt didn't seem to care about the terror one way or the other.

"The New Londoners are not." Boldt stepped up into the cart. One of his guards took the reins and sat beside him.

Mildred was sandwiched in the back between her two captors. Both kept their shoulders ahead of her, where they could easily pin her by simply leaning back.

"Your friends are with them now," Boldt said.

The guard snapped the reins against the horses' backs, and they stepped into a quick trot. The cart's wheels rattled as they turned.

"I don't suppose you'd tell me if your people happened to kill one of my friends," Mildred said.

Boldt turned to look at her, his face looking more like a skull than before. "I'd tell you. Honesty, I feel, is something you and I are going to need between us before your part is done."

Mildred turned the cryptic statement over, not liking any of the directions it led. She glanced back up the hill at the trees that crowned the crest, which didn't look much different from the other trees surrounding Wildroot. Yet she knew they had to be. If the trees around the ville possessed root systems like the ones they'd walked through, there would have been no way the gardens would have grown.

"I take it your father worked with the environment," she said.

"It became his crusade," Boldt agreed. "My father's successes weren't commercial. He was a brilliant geneticist and dedicated his life—and the fortunes of his father and grandfather before him—to his cause."

"Awfully generous of him."

"Yes." Evidently Boldt heard none of the sarcasm in her words. "He was a selfless man."

"Even having you when he was young," Mildred said, "it's kind of hard to believe that you're as youthful as you are."

"I was born back then," Boldt said. "As you were. I was nine years old when the world ended. My father placed us in cryo sleep. So you are not the only traveler through time."

Mildred watched a pair of men tilling the ground by hand, working with long-handled tools that looked like overambitious hoes. "Where is your father?"

"Dead," Boldt said. "He died in the cryo chamber."

"So you've been alone." For a moment Mildred almost felt empathetic for the loneliness she heard in the man's voice. "I'm sorry."

"I have my memories of him. And I have his work to carry on."

"How many of these people were in cryo sleep with you?"

"None. Just my father and I. There was supposed to be another man who joined us. Henry Walker."

"Colonel Henry Walker?" Mildred asked.

Boldt turned to eye her curiously. "You know him?"

"Not personally," Mildred said. "My friends and I found his body in the place I was in before I got here." She quickly explained about the corpse the companions had found in the White Sands redoubt. Giving Boldt the information couldn't hurt anything, and it would suggest that she was trying to deal with him honestly.

"Too bad," Boldt said. "He helped my father build Wildroot."

"How?"

"Walker worked with the United States," the Celtic prince said. He switched his attention to a small field to the right. An old woman dressed in a dark green dress that had been patched over many times sat on her folded knees before a couple dozen vine beds. She was singing, and her voice carried over to the cart.

Mildred didn't recognize all the words or the music, but the song itself was captivating, speaking of cold mornings and high places, of the will to survive.

"At the time," Boldt continued, "the United States was involved in a number of research projects. You've heard of the Totality Concept?"

"Yes."

Boldt regarded her. "I thought you might have. If you knew about the mat-trans units, you'd know about the Totality Concept."

"Walker worked for the Totality Concept?"

"No. For another like it. You must remember, in those times no one fully trusted anyone else. The organization Walker worked for, the Lydecker Foundation, was a shadow of the Totality Concept, exploring many of the same interests as the researchers in the Totality Concept, but working independently."

"Cross-referencing their findings."

"Yes." Boldt signaled for the cart driver to stop. "Sometimes the research followed along the same lines as the other redoubts'. Sometimes it took new paths."

"Like Project Calypso."

"I've never heard of that." Boldt stepped out of the cart. "Come with me."

Mildred got out and followed. Her guards stayed close to her.

"Colonel Walker was in charge of the funding and disbursements of the foundation," Boldt said. "He created the means and managed the money my father needed to build the seedings of Wildroot."

"Why?"

Boldt gestured toward the vine spread out over the ground. "Watch."

The old woman kept on singing, though she had to have known of the others now watching her. Her eyes were closed in concentration. Slowly, beseechingly, she lifted her hands.

As if to mimic the movement, the vines suddenly started lifting, as well, digging themselves free of the earth and standing at rigid attention. The old woman swayed her body back and forth, and the vines mirrored her movements.

"Tanglers," Boldt said. A smile carved his lean face. "One of my father's chief successes. They have become our defense, a source of clothing in their fibers, and food, because they bear three different varieties of fruits and vegetables."

Hypnotized, Mildred reached out toward one of the delicate vines. None of them was over six feet in length. They looked like thin rope, hard and twisted.

"No!"

Boldt's shout galvanized the guard nearest Mildred into action. He slapped her hand away just as the vine came speeding toward it, just before she saw the thorn suddenly jet out the end of the vine, dripping ichor.

The vine twisted and curled anxiously, searching for her. It caused the vines next to it to become unsettled, as well, and they went on the defensive, too.

The old woman opened her eyes and started to back away, her face paling in terror.

Boldt grabbed her roughly by the back of her dress, not letting her rise from the ground. He knelt beside her. "Sing to them, damn you!" he roared.

"They will not listen. They need to be given time."

"There is no time," Boldt said.

Mildred saw that his actions had drawn the attention of several people in the area. They all stopped their work, and their faces were filled with hate and loathing.

"Sing to them!" Boldt repeated.

The vines swept back and forth like cobras scenting the air. One darted out, almost faster than the eye could see, streaking for the Celtic prince.

Using the flat of his hand, Boldt turned the attacking vine away. The thorn buried itself in the loose folds of his robe. "Sing to them, old woman! Or I shall let the next crop of tanglers sort through your body for mulch! I am not going to lose the plants!"

Haltingly the old woman began to sing. Boldt continued to hold her, only inches from the

menacing tangles.

Mildred felt tense and angry. She wanted to do something for the old woman, but there was nothing she could do without endangering both of them. It took hard work to keep her face from showing how she felt.

Gradually the singing calmed the tangles, and they started to droop.

"Good," Boldt said. "Very good." He released the old woman and moved away.

Tears leaked out of the old woman's frightened eyes, but her voice never faltered.

"She's one of my best singers," Boldt said. "The seedling tangles recognize her before any other."

"Good thing for her," Mildred said in a neutral voice.

"It's a good thing for all of Wildroot," the Celtic prince said. "These plants are the lifeblood of our community."

"They kill."

Boldt nodded. "And devour, given the opportunity. Children are taught at a very young age to stay away from the tangle beds."

"And if they don't?"

"They die. The thorns of the tangles are very poisonous."

Mildred watched the way the tangles danced in quiet syncopation to the singer's song. "Your father made these things."

"They are very useful, as I've said. We derive food and clothing from them, and they are a defense."

"Once you get them on your good side."

"They can be trained," Boldt said. "During cryo sleep something must have happened to

the seedlings. There was some radiation seepage in the main vaults. They must have mutated."

Mildred filed away the mention of the vaults, not wanting to show too much interest. "Your father died during cryo sleep."

"Yes."

"And you were the only two in the cryo chambers."

"Yes."

"Then where did these people come from?" Mildred gazed around them as they walked back to the cart.

"He had frozen embryos obtained from med centers he had access to. He chose only the best genes available to remake the world. There are cloning chambers below, as well. After I was awakened, Merlin set about bringing the first people to fruition."

"Merlin?"

"The computer system my father had built. He did most of the parameter programming himself."

Back in the cart, Mildred glanced over the populace of Wildroot. "When did Merlin cause this to happen?" The insidiousness of what had occurred, coupled with Boldt's cold telling of the particulars, made her skin want to crawl.

"I am fifty-one," Boldt said. "It was forty-two years ago."

"Many of these people look older than that."

"Take us back," Boldt told the driver. The man pulled the horses around in a tight circle, and the stomping of their hooves and the jingle of the harnesses slowly drowned out the old woman's plaintive singing. "Many of these people are older than that. Merlin brought them out of the pods full-grown."

"What about their memories, their education?"

"All given to them," Boldt said. "Merlin had several templates available to it, and my father's guidelines gave the quotas for each."

"How many people?" Mildred asked. She made herself cold and distant, reminding herself that every scrap of information she garnered would aid in her escape attempt. And there was no doubt of the necessity of an escape.

"In the beginning," Boldt said, "one hundred."

"Your father knew how to do this, too?"

"The Lydecker Foundation," the Celtic prince replied. "Some knowledge was borrowed."

"Then these people started having children of their own?"

"No," Boldt said. "It was forbidden by my father's edicts. He wanted each individual in this community to be placed as carefully as a seedling, each to perform its function and design."

Mildred watched the parents huddled around the children so protectively as they drove past.

"The people, though," Boldt said with rancor, "weren't able to view the children as a harvesting. They became—attached. And when I placed some of them in charge of the human seedlings, they carefully concealed the fact that some of the people in the thorp were having children of their own."

Mildred was stunned.

Boldt nodded. "I see you're surprised. So was I. Some of Merlin's programming managed to deduce what was happening. Our food surplus, our seeds, all these things are carefully measured. I was alerted to what was going on. It took months to figure out who was behind it. When I did, I killed the responsible parties."

Mildred refused to let herself say a word. Nothing she could have said would have been what the madman sitting in front of her would have wanted to hear.

"I couldn't believe the betrayals," Boldt said. "These people were given a taste of heaven,

unfettered by what was going on in the outer world. In turn they tried to foul everything they'd been given."

"What of the children?"

"Those I had killed, as well. The ones I could find. But some of them must have been carefully hidden."

The cart stopped at the foot of the mountain overlooking the ville.

Boldt got out and ascended the stairs. "My father had visions of a new world, one filled with perfection, a pedigreed selection of the finest the old world had to offer. These people, they've spit on his dream and introduced hybrids. Some of those hybrids have manifested esper powers. The ones with obvious physical deformities were destroyed. I myself examined every child."

"And killed the ones that didn't measure up."

"Yes. When you're growing a garden, you don't allow weeds in," Boldt said. "They have a tendency to try to take over and choke the life from everything else. You can think of me what you will, but my father's way is the only path to the salvation of this world."

Mildred followed the man back into the mouth of yawning root, through the corridors, walking through new twists and turns that she was sure took her farther and farther into the depths of the mountain. "That's your plan?" she asked.

"The salvation of this world?" Boldt asked as he led her into a vast chamber hollowed out in a space thirty feet in height and easily three times that in length. Computer hardware lined the cavern, seemingly on the verge of being absorbed into the root walls, the fibrous bark highly polished and reflecting the lights and the sheen of the machines. "My father's plan would have allowed nothing less."

"Do you have any idea what is waiting out there?" Mildred asked. She couldn't help herself, couldn't rein in the disbelief.

"Yes." Boldt walked to the end of the room, his staff in his hand as he sat in the sculpted wood throne at the head of a conference table. "I've sent seed heralds out into the world. Past New London, past the chunnel, where some gaps yet remain that a man might make it from here to the European mainland under the sea. The way is arduous, of course, but it

can be made. I've even allowed some exploration through the mat-trans unit."

Unconsciously Mildred scanned the room. She spotted the familiar lines of the mat-trans unit in the softened shadows against one of the far walls. "Where have they been?"

"Over most of what remains of the British Islands," Boldt replied, waving her to a chair.

Mildred sat, steeling herself to appear relaxed.

"To Europe and even as far as the Russian climes. Through the mat-trans we've been to what's left of the United States. Deathlands, as you people seem so fond of calling it."

"Not my idea," Mildred said, "but it fits."

"Yes. Quite appropriate."

"Did all your seed heralds return?"

Boldt leaned back in the throne. "Most but not all. Never all. That is a vicious world awaiting us out there."

"How many didn't return by their own choosing?"

Boldt's smile was cold, cruel. "None. They were given an inducement to return. Before any of them left, an explosive device was implanted deep into muscle tissue by med-bots under Merlin's watchful eye. If, after sufficient time for their journey to have elapsed, they did not return, the devices exploded. Managed by an internal clock." He paused. "I am quite thorough."

"Yes." Mildred felt the presence of the guards at her back even though they stayed out of her sight.

"More of the human race survived the bombing and the nukestorm than my father had anticipated."

"Your father knew the war was going to happen?"

"You were there," Boldt said. "Given the circumstances, was there any other way for

things to end?"

Mildred held her tongue. There were dozens of other ways events could have gone. But they hadn't.

Boldt waved to encompass the room. "My father planned to restock the world after it destroyed itself. Using the money he borrowed through his contact with Colonel Walker, who was also in agreement, with enough biological material set aside to continue the future of this planet."

"Only they wanted things to be different," Mildred said. She looked into the lean man's eyes and saw the fanatical lights burning there. For a moment she lost herself in her imagination, wondering what it had been like for a nine-year-old child to wander through the complex by himself. She found herself wanting to know when he'd first had human companionship again.

"Of course they wanted things to be different. The human race, such as it was, was a cancerous growth on this planet."

"Was he a Celt?"

"No. My father... was my father." The lack of reply indicated that the nine-year-old boy had never known his father at all. "He chose the Celtic way of life for his people. All of the ones who were fast-grown in the vats were imprinted with the beliefs and values of the Celts. They revered nature, and wanted to be one with her. Not like the generations spawned afterward."

"Not overly appreciative of your father's grand designs."

Again the cruel smile flashed. "They shall be sorry, though, in the end. And it is nearer than they think."

Mildred didn't like the ominous sound of that at all, and when Boldt continued, she liked it even less.

Chapter Seventeen

As fast as the striking vine was, Ryan Cawdor was faster. He avoided the flashing thorn dripping ichor, and seized the attacking plant limb just behind the scabrous attachment. It bucked in his hold, stronger than he would have thought possible.

Gehrig guffawed with laughter, nearly doubled over at the table. "You know, that shit usually gets everybody the first time."

Ryan eyed the raider captain coldly. "You want to have somebody put this thing away before I decide to pass it along?"

At least ten or a dozen other vines had leaped from the confines of the wicker basket and wound their way around the table, chair legs and other men. Two of the waitresses screamed, and the hypnotic trance created by the naked brunettes working the double-headed dildo on the stage was rudely shattered. The shrills of a faked mutual orgasm petered out.

Gehrig waved the knife he'd been using to carve bite-size hunks from the meat in front of him.

Three of his men responded at once, grabbing the rooted pod in the wicker basket and fighting the tentacles back into place.

"Effing tree-huggers call those things tangles," Gehrig said. "They're a combination pet, watchdog and source of food and clothing. That's what we're getting out of our little raids," Gehrig said. "The tangles have poison in them, you see. Harsh stuff. Takes long minutes to kill a man, and there's no antidote that we've been able to come up with. We've got some predark body armor that comes in handy for capturing these little gems."

Ryan watched as one of the hard thorns suddenly stabbed into the back of a man's neck. He cursed hoarsely in response, his face blanching white with the pain and shock of it. Another man reached out a gloved hand and plucked it from his flesh. A thin stream of blood threaded its way down into his collar. Back on stage, the two women were moving against each other again, and the crowd had turned away from Gehrig and his men.

"These we bring in with us are milked," the raider captain said. He reached inside his blouse and brought out a vinyl pouch on a clip around a chain on his neck: "This—" he poured out a greenish powder onto the tabletop, "—is worth its weight in blasters, gold or

any kind of money you'd care to name."

Ryan glanced at the powder. The granules were large, shaped like dry rice, only a quarter the size.

"Dreamsand," Gehrig said in a low voice. "Every little piece of it an experience like no other. Takes you just this side of death, brings you nightmares and dreamings the like you've never had before. Found out about it from a dryad seer I had chance to talk to. Had a bag of this stuff hanging around his neck." The raider captain made an open gesture, offering the dreamsand to Ryan.

The one-eyed man shook his head. Nothing that put him out of touch with being able to take care of himself sounded at all good. But he was aware of the lust emanating from the men around him.

"This dryad seer," Gehrig went on as he scooped the dreamsand back into the pouch with his little finger, "was on the run for his life. Seems he'd started a little business for himself back in Wildroot. That's what the tree-huggers call their thorpe. Prince Boldt didn't take kindly to self-enterprise. He sent his seed heralds out after the seer, probably intending to sacrifice him on one of those altars he's got tucked away out in the woods for those times when he really wants to make a point. Anyway, it didn't take me long to convince the seer to part with his information about how to make the dreamsand. Especially not since my mates and I had saved him from the seed heralds."

Ryan had the feeling that Gehrig's generosity hadn't extended much past the learning of that secret.

"After we milk the tanglers," the raider captain said, "we harvest some of them. Many as we can get. Bastard vines don't do so well transplanted here, but we can usually get another milking or three out of them before they drop dead. Then we turn them into mulch. Never have been able to get them to seed properly, but they grow everywhere in the dryad lands. And you should see these things moving when the dryads sing to them."

"They sing to them?" Ryan asked.

"Yes. Blighters can make the tanglers slither and dance, too."

"The vines got intelligence?"

"Or close to it." Gehrig rubbed his little finger against his lower gum.

Ryan saw the drug take effect almost immediately, lending the raider captain's eyes a glow.

"You don't want to try to take those vines on when you got a dryad around," Gehrig said. "What those bastard tanglers can't think of on their own, the dryads will. A man going up against them in the dark, he's best off killing any dryads within seeing distance, and even then could be better off just forgetting the tanglers because they'll be all stirred up by the tree-hugger getting himself killed."

"Tell me about Boldt," Ryan suggested.

Gehrig leaned back against the booth and let out an expansive breath. "He's smart and he's harsh. Has no qualms about killing his own people if it comes to that. Any one of them crosses him, he and the seed heralds—that's his raid squad near as I can figure—take that person out. Sometimes those people will just turn up dead. Sometimes he offers them on the altar, sacrifices them to the pagan gods those people hold near and dear. Lugh Silverhand himself, and a goddess, but I don't recall her name at the moment."

"What does he do with strangers?" Ryan asked.

Gehrig's eyes gleamed like a cat's. "Thinking about your missing woman?"

Ryan nodded.

"It's a fool's errand you'd be on if you went after her. More than likely, he's killed her already."

"Either way," Ryan said, "I'm going to have to know the lay of it. Got a habit of going home with the ones I brought to the dance."

"I like the cut of you," Gehrig said, his eyes sleepy with the power of the dreamsand. "You speak your mind, and you aren't afraid to back it up, either."

Ryan ignored the compliment, getting to the heart of the matter. "How long has Boldt been around?"

"Forty years? Fifty years?" Gehrig shrugged. "Hard to say. I can't remember a time when

he wasn't there. Since there were dryads in the forest, Boldt's been there guiding them."

"How many other nasty surprises does he have?" Ryan asked. "Other than the tanglers."

"The tree-huggers are a strange lot. As you could see, they dress all in green, worship pagan gods who demand blood sacrifices upon occasion, and have strange powers."

"Powers?"

"Scrying and the like," the raider captain said. "Premonitions. Fortune-telling. Like that. Once in a while some of my boys will come staggering out of that forest somewhat worse for wear. It seems Boldt is fighting against a little insurrection within his borders. He controls the weapons and only the ones who support his rule get them."

Ryan thought about the boy who'd intercepted them in the mountain range, on the run from the Celtic forces. "Any idea why they're not so happy with him?"

"Rumors," Gehrig said. "Whispers about something the dryads call the Time of the Great Uprooting. Some shit like that. Never impressed me. But the insurrection gave me the idea to branch out some. Figured if I could meet up with some of those rebel tree-huggers, I could start up an arms deal with them. They could give me tangler poison, and I could give them guns."

"They go for that?"

"No. Bastards have got their standards. I set out some of my team as bait and managed to capture a couple of them. Laid out the deal. Even let them see the guns I was going to be trading in. Told them they could take them with them, sort of on loan until I got my first delivery. Then they'd be like a signing bonus." Gehrig let out a disgusted breath. "They were so bastard narrow-minded they turned me down."

"Why?"

"Said the tangler plants were sacred to them."

"But they didn't have any problem going up against Boldt?"

"He's not sacred. He's just in control, according to the way they see things. What they want is to start a country of their own."

"Boldt won't let them."

"No. They're under a death sentence. Any of them who get found out."

Ryan wondered if that was how Tarragon fit in.

"So we play our little games at night," Gehrig went on. "I take a raiding party into the dryad lands, Boldt's raid teams try to run us to ground when they catch us and the rebels try to mug us for our weapons, without getting caught by Boldt's raiders at the same time. Course, the shoe's on the other foot, too, because they don't mind offing Boldt's people and framing us for it if they get the chance."

Ryan drank his beer, thinking. "Nobody knows where Boldt came from?"

"There are those who think those green bastards were always there, that the nukestorm just shook them out of whatever hiding place they'd set up for themselves. They got powers, Ryan, like I said. I've even heard stories of them flying through the trees, changing their shapes to those of animals, shrinking down to the size of ants."

"But never seen it?"

"Fuck, no! Those people, they've got some mutie powers, but it isn't anything more than that. I'd stake my left nut on that."

"Ever been into the dryad ville?" Ryan asked.

Gehrig acted as if he didn't want to answer the question at first. "Don't like the idea of anybody going out to throw his life away."

"The better informed I get," Ryan argued, "the less likely I'd be to throw my life away. And if I find out enough that going in doesn't seem a likely prospect, I won't go."

Gehrig stared at him hard, running his little finger across his gums again. "You'd do that?"

"If I knew she was dead, or was going to be and there wasn't anything I could do about it."

"You're a hard man."

"Just mebbe bright enough to see the difference between the possible and the impossible."

"I'm telling you now that going in after the woman is impossible."

Ryan nodded. "Mebbe. But I'll have to sort that out for myself."

"You owe her?"

"As much as anybody."

"You owe me, too, Ryan." Gehrig's voice was soft and low, but carried an edge to it.

Ryan didn't see it that way, but didn't argue. He let the silence between them build.

The raider captain leaned forward and took a pencil from his pocket. The lead was greasy and heavy. He took a moment to whittle it sharp again with a pocketknife. "I've had people scout the perimeter, but never inside." He sketched a horseshoe shape on top of the table. "He's got a fortress up in the mountains. It's all ringed by trees. One way in." He tapped the pencil point against the gap in the horseshoe.

"What about up the mountains?" Ryan asked.

"Be a real bitch to do. That spot was well-chosen. Easy to defend. Mountains are full of wolves, and they keep tangler plants all along the sides."

"That where you get most of yours?"

Gehrig looked at him.

"Didn't figure they'd leave them just sitting out for you to come along and take whenever you wanted."

"Yeah. That's where we get them." Gehrig laid the pencil against the left leg of the horseshoe. "Here."

"So they're conditioned to you coming up that way."

"It's easier. I get snipers up in the trees with silenced rifles, we can take out the perimeter guards, get sometimes an hour, hour and a half to work before any of the dryads get wise."

"How do you take the tangles?"

"With the armor. Just wade in and get them, throw them in the baskets. Sometimes we have to kill three plants just to get one. They plant them pretty tight."

Ryan nodded. "Raid teams. Tangles. Wolves. Anything else?"

"If by some lucky chance you were able to get inside the thorpe, Boldt's primary fortress is high up. In the trees here." Gehrig tapped the bow of the horseshoe.

"Is it a building?"

"Underground. Lives in the root systems from what I've been told."

"Who told you?"

"Dryads I've talked to over the years. They weren't in any shape to lie."

"Boldt lives in the roots? Not caves?"

"The roots," the raider captain insisted. "From the sound of them, they've been gineered."

"So were the tangles," Ryan said. "Something like that, does all them things, food, clothing, protection and the like, didn't just happen because of some mutie strain."

"I agree."

"How much tech does Boldt have?"

Gehrig leaned forward, eyes alight with the drug and larceny. "The way I hear it, Boldt has computer systems down there from predark days."

Ryan knew that meant the security didn't end with flesh-and-blood guards, wolves or plants. Still, leaving Mildred there without knowing one way or the other how things stood wasn't an option.

And if there was predark tech there, perhaps there was a mat-trans unit that would take them back to Deathlands, as well. The possibility drew him in.

"Boldt is bastard crazy," Gehrig said. "He starts some of the stories on his own. He's got him an idea that he's some kind of knight risen up to strike vengeance at the rest of the world. Every so often you can see him out there on a horse, wearing this black armor and waving a sword, swearing to bring new life to this barren world. Those are his words. Says Lugh Silverhand himself assigned him to bringing this about."

Ryan didn't comment. Since he'd been wandering Deathlands, he'd come across his share of religious wackos. With life in Deathlands ground back down to the basics, sometimes the things people chose to believe in the most were things they could touch, weigh and measure the least. It reminded him of the desert muties and their allegiance to the giant spiders.

"I'll keep that in mind," the one-eyed man said. "Right now I think I'm going to take advantage of that hospitality you mentioned."

"You do that," Gehrig said. He pulled a cigar from his pocket and lit up. "And you keep in mind what I said. You get a bug up your butt to go venturing into the dryad lands, you check with me first. I could help."

Ryan glanced at the flat stare the man gave him, knowing the raider captain wouldn't do anything that he didn't figure benefited him first. For the moment Gehrig wanted whatever he could get from Ryan—without a direct confrontation. But the one-eyed man also got the impression that none of them was free to leave New London without Gehrig's permission. Even to save Mildred. "I'll keep that in mind," Ryan said.

DOC WANDERED the streets for most of an hour, drinking in the sights. He consciously stayed within the inner hub of New London, taking in the lines of the collapsed buildings, remembering what things had been like. They were more like the life he'd known.

A small shop, the windows filled with curios, caught his attention. He crossed the street, avoiding the horses and the carts, the clapping of the hooves echoing between the

confines of the tall buildings on both sides. The window display was arranged on four wooden shelves wider than Doc could stretch his hands apart.

In the middle of the second shelf, next to a box kite done up in bright blue paper, was an old-fashioned wooden top. The string, obviously bleached but still looking gray, was wound tightly around the top.

Doc leaned against the window and felt the pain. He'd given such a top to his children, had spent a few delightful evenings playing with them while Emily watched on, saying how she had three children instead of the two.

His breath was tight in his chest, and he was close enough to the panes that it frosted the glass when he exhaled. His vision blurred with the tears as he whispered their names. Reality blurred with it, and he was only shaken out of it by the tapping against the glass.

Pushing himself back, noticing the gray old man his ghostly reflection assured him he'd become, Doc glanced at the source of the noise.

The shopkeeper stared at him from inside the store, with close-set, inquisitive eyes like those on a small bird. The test of the man reinforced the impression: thin and gangly, narrow shoulders humped up like folded wings.

"Are you all right?" the shopkeeper demanded as he opened the door. One hand stayed out of sight under the leather carpenter's apron he wore.

It was a sad time, Doc reflected, when toy sellers had to go armed, as well. "I'm fine. Just a bit fatigued, my friend. I saw the toys in your window and got lost in a few memories."

The shopkeeper appeared to consider that for a moment. He shifted restlessly from foot to foot, then seemed to arrive at a decision. "I've got some tea brewed. If you've an interest."

"English tea," Doc said in delight. He felt his smile tight on his face. "Sir, you're a gentleman and a scholar."

"It's not Earl Grey," the shopkeeper said as he ushered Doc in. "And I've a few biscuits and a bit of honey, as well."

"Sounds like you've a well-laid table," Doc said. He introduced himself and offered his hand.

"George," the little man said. "George Ellison. And the honey is first-rate. Not many beekeepers in this part of the country now, you know. But I've a little arrangement with a lady in the ville who has a number of children. A hardworking lass, she is, but there are few toys for the children without a bit of bartering."

Doc stood at the high counter in the back of the store. The place smelled of woods and paints, varnishes and lacquers, wood smoke and pipe tobacco. It was a man's place, untouched by the finesse of a woman.

"Your place?" Doc asked.

Ellison nodded. "And my father's before me."

"Both toy makers?"

"Aye. A slim trade, but an honest one. Not an easy thing to find in these times."

"I will warrant not," Doc agreed, taking the cup of tea the other man handed him. He also made a selection from the tray of small biscuits that had been kept under a glass cover on a flowered plate.

"You're one of the newcomers."

"News, I see, travels fast here."

"What little of it there is," Ellison agreed. "I myself have not laid eyes on someone from outside New London these past seven years."

"That is a long time for a man to go without seeing new faces."

"We don't get many visitors." Ellison sipped his tea. "I've been told you're from across the water, but not one of the European countries."

"True." Doc found the tea strong, dark and good. The biscuits, as best he remembered them, were a little dry. "I'm from a dark, dark place once called the United States of America, but now appropriately named Deathlands."

"Tell me about it."

And Doc did, spinning out the stories, glancing frequently at the racks of toys on the shelves around them, enjoying the quaintness of the shop and the manners of the little man sharing the tea and countertop with him. Only every now and then did the guilt visit him about the predicament Mildred was in. Ryan would rescue her, though, if it was possible—without his help, should it come to that.

Then he brought the conversation back around to London, the original city. "I had friends in England," he said, "before the nukestorm blew into the world and caused the Lantic to drink down the cities."

Ellison raised his eyebrows. "You've been to Great Britain before?"

"A long time ago," Doc said. "So many things have changed during those years." He let the man go on thinking that he had been a small child when it happened. "I was wondering if there was anyone who had archives available to them regarding who might have lived in London after the disaster. Perhaps even before then."

Scratching his stubbled chin, Ellison said, "There's a man. A privateer who sails the coastal waters. He's called Long Johnson by friend and foe alike, though that's not his name."

"Is he playing on the sobriquet of Long John Silver?" Doc asked.

"No." Ellison held his hands apart almost two feet in front of him. "Man's reputed to have a shank on him this big."

"By the Three Kennedys!"

Ellison dropped his hands and nodded. "And a rough cobbler with it, too, I've heard tell. Sometimes, they say, it doesn't matter to him whether it's a rooster or a hen he's a-mounting."

"Sounds positively Neanderthal," Doc commented.

"On the one side, sure. But on the other, Long Johnson is a man of letters. Educated in one of the European schools and from a baron's brood. Found him a life on the sea and a thirst for robbery. He does some business here in New London because we're the biggest

thorpe around. He and Blackjack Gehrig are close."

"I have met Mr. Gehrig." Doc sipped his tea, waiting.

"Man also collects books," Ellison said. "Every kind of book imaginable. Long as it's paper and in one of the four languages he speaks. He has regular stops up north, where Old London used to be, and regular agreements with the mariners who swim along the bottom and bring up whatever they can that might still be salvageable."

Doc nodded. "Mayhap he has some files, or old telephone books that could contain the information I'm looking for."

"He'd be the only man I could think of to send you to," Ellison said. "But you'd be taking your own life in your hands when you talked with him. He's not an easy man to talk to, and totally crazy."

"Where would I find him?" Doc asked.

"Luck is with you," Ellison replied, "though whether good or ill, I can't say. But the pirate is in town."

Though he knew it was a long shot, Doc felt himself grow more excited. "Do you know where?"

Ellison glanced up at the cuckoo clock over the Mickey Mouse display behind the counter. It was a little after two in the afternoon. "The Globe opened up for a matinee at one-thirty. Knowing the captain, he'll be there since he's in New London. It's the only place where he can fulfill both his natures."

Doc wondered at the grimace that twisted the man's face as he made the pronouncement. "Could I beg directions from you?"

Ellison was silent for a moment. "Long Johnson will have a murderous crew with him. If he should decide not to take a liking to you, you'd not be surprised to find yourself suddenly the butt of his ill humor."

"I shall keep that in mind, my friend."

"This, then, is that important?"

Doc eyed the man squarely. "Yes, it is, friend Ellison."

Grudgingly the toy maker gave him directions. "Best you watch yourself in there. The Globe is not a good place to be," he warned.

Chapter Eighteen

J.B. was catching a quick catnap when the intruders tried to break into the room where he guarded Tarragon. He sat in the corner of the room, across from the small bed where the boy lay, wrestling through a fever that had turned him burning hot.

The scratching at the window didn't carry far into the room, warring with the noise of the three-piece band below and the yelled encouragement of the men as they watched the dancers.

J.B. had already turned down two women who'd offered to entertain him, not only because Milly was his woman and because he was watching over the boy, he also hadn't missed the angry stares of the men who'd watched him walk the boy up to the room with Krysty.

Ryan and Krysty were next door. The companions had been offered two rooms and had taken them both.

The Armorer pushed himself into a standing position, taking up the shotgun he'd been holding across his knees. He adjusted the fedora, reseating it. Personally he was glad for the action. The last while he'd spent too long thinking about Mildred.

He'd positioned a mirrored chest of drawers across the room from him, angled so that the reflection covered the room's only window.

A grizzled bear of a man with a yellow-orange beard drooping down to his chest was working the heavy blade of a bowie knife under the window. He slipped the knife through as quietly as he could, then started pulling up.

J.B. figured they were standing on the narrow walk outside the rooms. He'd noticed it earlier and had closed the window in spite of the heat because of it. Glass might not keep an intruder out, but it made a good alarm system.

There were three men behind the bearded guy, and all of them were armed.

With a creak and a splintering that left fracture lines running across the glass, the window rose inches at a time.

J.B. wanted to make a positive and direct statement. None of the men seemed inclined to use a gun, and the boy wasn't in direct line of fire. The Armorer had seen to that.

Moving more quietly than one of his bulk should have been able to, the big man started easing into the room, turning his head from side to side.

J.B. let the guy get just a glimpse of him. Not enough time to move out of the way. Then he swung the shotgun around in a hard, tight arc that caught the man full in the face.

Blood exploded from the man's nose, cascading over his face. Propelled by the blow, as well as his own efforts, the big man went stumbling back, crashing through the balustrade and going over the edge of the roof with a piercing scream of fear.

The Armorer dropped the shotgun at waist level, covering the other three men while they froze in surprise. "Easy or hard," J.B. said in a casual voice. "You hum a few bars of it, and I'll join right in."

The three men raised their hands and put them on the tops of their heads. All of them declined, then started moving back down the way they'd come.

J.B. shut the window again. He picked up the broad-bladed knife the big man had dropped and used it to jam the window from being opened from the outside again.

Ryan and Krysty came through the door of the adjoining room, both with their blasters in hand.

"Problem?" the one-eyed man asked.

"Overly interested parties," J.B. said. "I convinced them to find new hobbies."

"The boy?"

The Armorer nodded.

"There's no love lost in this ville," Ryan said. "That's for sure."

"I'm beginning to think there's none to be had," J.B. stated. "Seems like Gehrig has taken a shine to our company, though."

"Mebbe so," Ryan said. "But that's one commitment I'm not interested in."

Krysty crossed the room and placed a hand against the boy's forehead. "Burning up with fever."

"I know." J.B. removed his glasses and wiped the blood spatters away on the tail of his shirt. When he'd hit the big man with the shotgun, blood had sprayed in all directions. "He was awake a little while ago. Got a pouch around his neck. He took something from it, swallowed it down, then asked for a glass of water." He hooked a thumb at the pitcher and basin sitting on the floor. "I've been giving him a drink every so often and been wetting his face down with a cloth."

"Even if this place had a medic," Krysty said, "I don't think it would be in the boy's best interests to call him up."

Ryan shook his head. He walked forward and took the pouch from the boy's neck. When he loosened the ties, he poured the contents out into his palm. "Gehrig showed me some stuff downstairs, when he was making his pitch to me. Stuff he called dreamsand. Some kind of drug. But this isn't it."

Krysty poked among them with a forefinger. "These look more like herbal medicines."

"Could be he's doctoring himself," J.B. said. "He even put some kind of powder on the wound last time he was conscious."

"Infection doesn't look as bad as it could be," Krysty said. "Only problem seems to be the fever."

"He mentioned something called the Time of the Great Uprooting when we first saw him," Ryan said, looking at J.B. "Has he said anything else about it?"

"He's mumbled a few things about it," the Armorer replied. "Mostly he sounds like it's something he's afraid of. Talks like it's going to be the end of everything."

"Kind of what Gehrig said about it downstairs," Ryan said. "But he thinks it's just an old wives' tale. However, I also found out Boldt has got his hands on some predark tech back in his underground fortress. Mebbe even a mat-trans unit."

J.B. glanced out into the street. Two of the big man's friends had him by the arms and were pulling him out of the street while a couple dozen people looked on. "When are you planning on heading out that way?" he asked.

"Tonight," Ryan said.

"Gehrig's going to be on the lookout for that, lover," Krysty told him.

"Yeah." Ryan put the pouch back inside the boy's blouse. "So we'll need a diversion. In a ville like this, it shouldn't be too hard to arrange. We stay any longer, it's going to be harder to make the break. And Gehrig, he doesn't appear to be a man to wait around for answers long. He left a question sitting on the table when I headed up here." He glanced at the Armorer. "Why don't you go take a bath? Some of the women brought up heated water. There's a tub in our room."

J.B. glanced down at his blood-spattered and dirty clothes. "Mebbe I'll do some laundry while I'm at it."

THE GLOBE THEATRE was in the bottom floor of a crumbled building near the center of New London. All of the windows were boarded over, and even though it was mid-afternoon drunks were sleeping off benders on the cracked and ruptured sidewalks.

A sandwich board, the crimson letters faded and hand drawn with only a little care, announced The Globe Theatre And Repository Of Fine Arts.

It jarred Doc a little to see *repository* spelled incorrectly, even more so than the crude lettering. Still, he straightened his frock coat in an effort to make himself more presentable, then knocked the travel dust from the material.

Four men in greaspaint lounged near the entrance to the theater. As Doc watched, patrons chatted briefly with the men in greaspaint, then dropped coins in the water bucket hung on the wall just beside the entrance.

Inspecting the contents of his coin purse, Doc found a couple silver coins that he felt certain would pay his entrance fee. He would probably be overpaying the fee. But this was a play from the Bard, and surely worth the expense.

He plucked the two coins from the purse and put it away. Without turning around, he lifted his voice. "Jak, be a good lad and come out from hiding, please." He heard no sound, but a heartbeat later the albino stood beside him.

"How you know I there?" Jak asked. "Know you didn't hear me."

"No," Doc agreed. "And that's how I knew you would be there, lad. Ryan, I daresay, is a tad overprotective of his little band. With Mildred already numbered among the missing, it would only stand to reason that he wouldn't let me simply go away on my own. No matter how good they are, I'd have seen Krysty or John Barrymore. And Ryan wouldn't have put himself away from the crux of the action or the boy."

"Left me."

"Precisely." Doc moved the coins so they caught the light. "What I'd like to do, my fine, young friend, is further your education somewhat and broaden your horizons if I may."

"Too many men in building, Doc."

"Nonsense. It's only for a short time. Why, the show's probably halfway over." Doc gestured toward the sandwich board, where another hand-lettered sign hung from a hook. Rome and Juliet was emblazoned on the second sign, in blue letters this time, but in the same crabbed style. "One of the Bard's most poignant dramas ever written. How can you miss something like this?"

Jak looked uncomfortable already.

Doc eyed him squarely. "I am not just here on a lark, young Jak. There is a man inside I must see if I am able. Mayhap he will be able to help me locate the descendants of some dear friends. But he is a dangerous man, as well. I would appreciate your watching my back."

Jak didn't appear any happier with the situation, but he gave a short nod.

Throwing his arm around the youth's shoulders, Doc headed them in the direction of the theater. The coins were more than enough to gain entry into the building. Doc didn't like the lustful glances the greasepainted men gave him.

The stage area was in the basement of the building. The upper floors were still pretty much wreckage, filled to overflowing with garbage that looked as if it had been trucked in from other buildings.

Torches hung on the walls and threw out a weak pallor that barely illuminated the large room. Most of the three hundred or so seats available were filled, the audience sounding raucous and bold as its members called out to the actors.

Doc found five seats together in the back of the room and led Jak that way. "Sit back, boy," Doc urged. "Let yourself get caught up in this passion play of unrequited love and familial pathos." In terse sentences he brought Jak up to speed regarding the story line. As he did, though, he noticed there were some inconsistencies with Shakespeare's original drama. The story progressed faster, the philosophical soliloquies were cut to bare bones and the audience roared with laughter each time one of the characters stepped to the forefront of the stage and delivered the lines.

"Women ain't women, Doc," Jak said.

And it was true. Doc had already noticed that, as well. "In the playwright's day, acting wasn't a respectable profession for a woman. Evidently these people are conforming to the spirit of those days."

"Mebbe so," Jak replied. "But you look around, you see mostly men in here."

Doc did look and found the albino's observation uncomfortably on the nose. Then the play took a very sadistic bent, becoming more and more violent. Romeo and Mercutio massacred the guards that came at them. Crimson blood spurted from the swords, covering the actors, victors and victims. The iron-based smell of the crimson liquid told Doc that the blood was real. He sat stunned as the play wound down to its conclusion, which was entirely different from Shakespeare's version.

With flashing moves, Romeo cut the pants from Juliet, then bent the man roughly over

the bed. The actor's pale rear end jutted up. Using his free hand, Romeo whipped the man's butt in feverish excitement.

"Enough," Jak said, leaning back and looking away from the stage.

Doc couldn't take any more, either. He looked away and saw the man who could be no other than Long Johnson, the pirate captain. The man stood nearly seven feet tall, and was broad across the shoulders. His full beard hung to nearly midchest, balanced by his long, flowing hair that spilled down his shoulders. The hair and beard were both glazed with oil of some type, adding a shiny luster to them that was further emphasized by the slow-burning fuses twisted up in the curls. The fuses spit and sparked from the orange coals at their centers.

The pirate captain was dressed as a dandy, the suit he wore evidently the work of an accomplished seamstress. He carried a thick briarwood cane. His face, even in the gentling of the shadows, was a harsh canvas depicting decades of hard living. A livid purple scar nearly bisected his left cheek, looking like a fat worm laid just under the flesh.

"Long Johnson!" Doc bellowed through his cupped hands.

The pirate snapped his head around, tracking the voice. His eyes narrowed in the gloom. Around him the half-dozen men and women wearing sailors' loose clothing produced weapons and took up defensive positions.

"Do I know you?" Long Johnson asked.

Doc pushed himself up out of his seat and strode across the room. He knew Jak would be behind him. "No," the old man answered, "but I'd like a word with you if I could."

"About what?"

"You're a collector of books?" A few feet farther on, Doc had no choice but to pull up, unable to ignore the menace of the pistols in the hands of Long Johnson's lackeys.

"Yes. You think you have something that might interest me?"

Doc shook his head. "Captain, I believe the interest may well be going the other way."

Long Johnson remained within the protective enclosure of his people. A sawed-off double-barreled shotgun was in one huge fist. "Do I know you?"

"No, sir, you do not. My name is Theophilus Algernon Tanner. I come to you—"

"Tanner!" Long Johnson's voice was rolling thunder inside the room. "I know you, you spawn of the devil!"

Doc didn't back off. "Then you have the advantage of me, sir, for I know you not at all."

With a mighty sweep of one oak-sized arm, the pirate captain moved the man and woman in front of him. "But I know much about you. Operation Chronos ripped you from your time, from your family."

Doc stared at the man, trying to see any indications of why the man would know what he did.

"Don't try to deny it."

"I am not."

"Never," Long Johnson declared with passion, "had I thought I would have this opportunity."

Jak stepped in front of Doc protectively.

"What opportunity?" Doc asked.

"For revenge."

"For what?" Doc asked. "I do not even know you."

"Not me," the pirate captain said. "But someone else. Did you really think that after the taskmasters at Operation Chronos had their success with you that they would quit?"

Doc looked at the man. "Are you suggesting that you were plucked from your own time, as well?"

Long Johnson laughed insanely. "You don't even know. Or are you lying?"

"No," Doc said in a steady voice.

"It doesn't matter," Long Johnson stated. "Everyone else is already dead. But you were the catalyst for her pain and suffering. You shall pay!" He brought up the double-barreled shotgun.

Doc couldn't believe what was transpiring. He stood in frozen shock. Then Jak whirled, grabbing the lapels of the old man's frock coat and pulling them over a line of seats.

The double-aught blast cut through the air where they'd been standing. Men and women behind them went down, screaming in pain and fear.

Two of the pirate captain's bodyguards started forward, pistols at the ready.

Jak moved as fast as heated quicksilver. His right hand flashed forward twice.

Doc watched the two bodyguards go reeling back. One of the albino's blades had sunk deeply into the woman's left eye, while the other had buried itself in the hollow of the man's throat.

The theater crowd was up in open rebellion, weapons appearing as if by magic. Bedlam ensued. Unsure as to where the shotgun blast had originated, dazed by drugs and alcohol, the theatergoers fell on one another in a fierce bloodletting.

"Come on, Doc," Jak said. "Not good place to be."

"No," Doc said fiercely. "I must find out what he means."

"You and yours, Tanner," Long Johnson said over the din. "I'll have my vengeance *and* hers on you and yours."

"Wait," Doc cried.

The pirate captain brought up the sawed-off shotgun again and ripped off another blast that blew the top from the seat to one side of the old man. He broke open the shotgun, and ejected the spent casings, then thumbed fresh shells into the chambers. "Your family,

Tanner! I'll find them wherever they are, and when I do, they're going to die!"

Anger galvanized Doc, not in his own defense, but for his family. He wasn't sure what Long Johnson was talking about, but the threat was naked and certain between them. Perhaps the information existed and was already in the pirate's hands. Doc had no way of knowing from Long Johnson's words. But there was no mistaking the intent in them.

He brought up the Le Mat blaster and fired. The .63-caliber pistol rocked in his fist. A heartbeat later a pellet cut locks from Long Johnson's hair and very nearly caught his left ear.

Then the crowd of theatergoers became a raging tide, sweeping toward the two exits.

Doc tried to stand his ground, batting aside a screaming woman with an ice pick who tried to drive the weapon into his chest. He squeezed the Le Mat's trigger again, watching as the pirate captain grabbed one of his men by the back of his shirt and used him for a shield.

The .63-caliber shotgun spread exploded the man's head, throwing blood and gore over Long Johnson. In three quick strides the pirate captain had gained the exit on the other side of the room.

"Another time, Tanner," he bellowed from cover, whacking down a thin man who tried to scramble past him. "Make no mistake that I'll find you. Wherever you hide." Another step, and the pirate was gone, along with most of his band.

"Got to leave," Jak said.

"Yes," Doc said, feeling the fear dawn in him. "Get us outside, dear boy. There's a chance we could catch that rogue." He didn't know if he had family out in what was left of the world or not. Maybe it was only wishful thinking, a delusion pursued by a desperate old man. But the fact remained that Emily—and he prayed it wasn't so—could have remarried and raised their children without him. She would have had no choice. His children could have had children, and their children after them. And just maybe one of them had emigrated to England.

Generations had passed since then. But perhaps something yet remained of the Tanner family even after it had been sundered by Operation Chronos.

Jak led the way out of the building, heading for the doorway they'd entered. The albino kept a blade in one hand, using it to menace anyone who got in their way. Twice he brought down men who tried to turn on them.

In seconds he and Jak were out on the street, gasping for breath. Doc glanced up and down the road, but there were so many alleys, warrens and shadows even in the light of the closing afternoon that it was impossible to know where Long Johnson and his crew might have gone.

"Got stay moving," Jak said. "Mebbe someone care about this, mebbe not. Can't take chance."

"You're right, lad." Doc kept the Le Mat blaster in his hand, tucked under his frock coat.

"Mebbe go see Ryan and others. Safety in numbers."

"You go on ahead if you wish, dear boy, but I have to find that wicked man and put a bullet through that hard stone heart of his if I'm lucky. The game's afoot." From his earlier excursions, Doc knew in what direction the port had to be. He headed west, certain he had to run into the sea before long.

"IT'S GOING TO BE dark before long." Ryan sat in the claw-footed bathtub in the other room. J.B. had already finished his bath and laundry, and was sitting back with the Celtic boy in the adjoining room.

"I'm getting worried about Doc and Jak," Krysty said, stepping out of her pants and shrugging out of her shirt. "They've been gone a long time."

Ryan watched her appreciatively, noting the lithe muscle. He'd run his hands over his lover's body countless times, knew her the way a blind sculptor would know one of his works, and he never tired of looking at her.

She reached behind her and loosened her bra, bending forward slightly to drop it from her breasts. Hooking her thumbs in the waistband of her panties, she lowered them as well. She stepped toward the tub.

"They're all right." Ryan shifted in the tub, enjoying the feel of the water against his skin.

Krysty stepped into the water cautiously. Steam still rose from its surface and it took some getting used to. Gradually she lowered herself onto Ryan's thighs. "And what makes you so sure, lover?"

"If something had happened to them, Gehrig would have told me." Ryan reached out to run his hands over her breasts, feeling the nipples tighten in response. His erection broke the water surface between them. Krysty closed a fist over it, tight enough to get his attention, but gentle enough to draw an involuntary spasm of desire from him.

"What makes you so sure?"

"Because he's trying to make points with me," Ryan said. "And because him knowing so damn fast would be mebbe intimidating, too. He'd hope."

"Why would he know?"

"Because he sent a couple men to tail them."

"Did they know?"

"Jak, probably. I don't see how he could have missed them. They were good, but nothing like him."

Krysty slid forward, moving her mons into contact against the underside of his erection. She smiled at him as he bucked gently against her. "Do you think they're safe?"

Ryan nodded. "For now. Gehrig has a lot of pull in this ville. He'd want them safe for a while, until he figures what he wants to do with us."

The red-haired woman kept her hand moving on him, working his lust up to its most potent. "The boy's fever felt like it was breaking when we left."

Ryan nodded, dropping a hand between them to return the direct stimulation favor. He felt the firm, wet bulge of her against the softer tissues, his efforts drawing a gasp.

"Hope so," Ryan said. "We'll have to move in a couple more hours. By tomorrow night Gehrig will know more about what he wants to do with us, and the security will be tighter than ever."

"What if the boy's not ready to move?" she asked.

"Then we leave him."

Krysty's mouth became a hard line, but she didn't release him or turn away. "He's about Dean's age."

"Yeah, but he's not our concern. Boy would have already been dead if it wasn't for us. And if he's got no home where he came from, and staying here isn't safe, I don't think taking him along with us is going to be any kind of answer."

"I know."

"And if he does go with us tonight, we're going to be heading right back into territory he was trying to get away from."

"What about the rebellion Gehrig told you about?"

"Guess that's the boy's only chance," Ryan answered truthfully. "Mebbe Mildred's, too."

Krysty tugged on him. "You didn't get much sleep last night, lover, and it's been a busy day. You could get in a couple hours before dusk."

Ryan grinned up at her, putting all the doubts of the upcoming dangers out of his mind. If the dangers weren't the ones he was expecting, there'd have been others. There was no other way for him to live life. No other way for any of them.

"Mebbe after," he said, pulling her close and kissing her throat. He nipped at her flesh, just hard enough to feel her pulse beat in her jugular while she reached between them and joined them.

Chapter Nineteen

The final port was in the northwest section of New London. The sun was setting when Doc and Jak arrived, spreading a pool of orange and gold across the rolling, whitecapped waves of the green ocean. They'd already been through three other port areas, two of them bigger than this one. New areas had become necessary as the ville spread and the population increased along with the trade.

Ships lined the docks, from small rowboats to large freighters that had to have been used to haul goods and people across from the islands to the mainland. Doc recognized a number of languages spoken by the sailors and dockhands, but the majority were English.

Jak remained at his side, though the albino made it clear that he thought they should have given up the chase. He kept his hands out of sight near his clothing, but there was slim chance that his fingers weren't within an inch of one of his blades at all times.

Doc breathed hard, his lungs laboring to keep up with the physical demands he'd placed on his body. He paused at the railing. Spotting a man hobbling along on a wooden leg that looked handcarved and splintered from rough use, Doc yelled over to him. "Sailor."

The man glared in his direction.

"I have a question, my good man, and I think you should be able to help me."

"Got no reason to," the sailor said gruffly, resuming his stride and moving away from the old man.

Doc slipped a silver coin from his purse. He flipped it toward the sailor with his thumb and offered an encouraging smile. "I did not mean to imply that I was going to take liberties with your time. I shall gladly pay."

The sailor bit the coin experimentally and seemed satisfied. He made the coin disappear. "If I can."

"Long Johnson's vessel," Doc said. "Where is she?"

The sailor turned around and pointed out to sea. "There. Call her the *Tail Twister*. Bastard's got a dark sense of humor about him. Course, you'd have to know about his appetites to understand the nature of the joke."

"I just saw him at the Globe," Doc said. "However, I did not get the chance to speak with

him. The audience became somewhat unruly."

The sailor grinned knowingly. "Never been there myself. I don't cotton to that sort of business. But I've heard tell there's a lot can go on." He shaded his eyes against the setting sun. "If you're wanting to talk to Long Johnson, though, mate, you're shit out of luck. The ship's pulling out of port now."

Doc turned and scanned for the ship.

"There," Jak said, pointing.

Following the albino's pointing finger, Doc spotted the ship moving out under full sail, heading north around the outer horns of the port area. "Long Johnson's aboard her?"

"That ship," the sailor said, "never goes anywhere without her captain."

Gripping the railing, Doc watched the *Tail Twister* pull away, disappearing into the glare of the sunset. So many unanswered questions danced around inside his head, sucking at his consciousness. What ties bound him to the pirate captain, and what were they to inspire such vehemence? He had no answers.

"Doc," Jak said, gently, "staying here's no good. Better we get back with Ryan."

"You are right, lad." Doc made himself move away. Already he felt the hot gazes of the cutthroats and robbers who would fill the walks along the port with the hookers once true dark drained the light from the dregs of the day. "There is safety in numbers."

But he didn't see how he was going to leave New London without learning more about the pirate captain. And whatever descendants he himself could have had that might have made it through the destruction of this country.

SERGEANT GEORGE CONTE crept out of the shadows near the ville and grabbed the sec man by the face from behind. He administered a cool crimson kiss with his Kabar fighting knife across the man's throat, and held the bucking man while he died.

Once the body was totally limp, he dragged the corpse into the brush and laid it out of sight. Squatting next to it, he took time to wipe the blood from his hands.

Fifteen yards away Abner Whittaker licked his own blade clean. The little rat man had already accounted for the sentry he'd been assigned to. His grin was thin and frigid.

Conte held up a hand, briefly stepped out into the moonlight so he could be seen by the rest of his team, then closed it into a fist and pumped it twice. At a count of three, the six men burst from cover and raced for the ville's wall.

Turley, broad and muscular, took the anchor. Henderson, the tallest of the group, scrambled up on top of the private and stood with his boots on the other man's shoulders. When he reached up, he could manage the top of the wall with relative ease.

Squatting in the shadows pooled at the bottom of the wall, Conte covered his team with the silenced H&K MP-5 submachine pistol.

Whittaker was the next man up, running along the backs of the first two men easily. He vanished over the top of the wall, a shadow ghosting along on an invisible wind. Cruse followed as quickly, but running a slightly larger profile.

Conte kept a mental count going in his head. One set of numbers was for the time since they'd taken out the security guards, and the other was for the time they were spending scaling the wall.

For a time during the battle along the mountain ridge, the team had lost sight of Cawdor and his people. But the tracks of the vehicles had been easy enough to take up. They'd made the outskirts of the town almost two hours before sundown.

After a recce through binoculars, Conte had spotted the dearth of guards hanging around a tavern visible from their vantage point among the trees almost three hundred yards distant. The tavern was called the Bent Rose, and the heavily armed vehicles in front of it looked a lot like the ones that had intercepted Cawdor and his group.

It had been enough to warrant further investigation. And if Conte found Cawdor, he fully intended to see the man dead before morning.

The vehicle they'd taken themselves from the small redoubt they'd arrived in was secured almost five miles back. Getting around the men on horseback had been tricky, but they'd been focused on the invaders who'd taken Cawdor. During that time Conte had also seen that the green-garbed people had taken the black woman among Cawdor's band prisoner.

That was a loose end that would have to be taken care of later. Possibly. From the looks of things, it might only require ascertaining the woman was no longer a threat.

Aames went next, vaulting up Turley and Henderson with only a little trouble. He halted at the top long enough to flash Conte the all-clear hand signal, then vanished.

Conte broke cover, sliding the H&K MP-5 over his shoulder to hang by its sling. In swift strides he was beside the two men against the wall. Without breaking his rhythm, he climbed up.

He lay flat on the roof, resting lightly against the blanket Whittaker had put down to cover the jagged pieces of glass mortised into the stones. A quick glance assured him the three men on the ground had the situation well under control. None of them was visible.

Conte reached down and helped Henderson and Turley over the wall. Then he dropped over the edge himself. He held up a hand and signaled his team. Whittaker took up point and Turley brought up the rear, then they were moving down the alleys they'd chosen for their approach on the Bent Rose. In the next few minutes, if everything went well, Ryan Cawdor and his people would be dead and they'd be looking to link back up with Major Burroughs.

"YOU FEELING BETTER?" Ryan looked down at the boy on the bed.

"Yes. Thank you." Tarragon lay quietly, one hand against his forehead above his fever-reddened eyes and the other touching the pouch at his neck.

"Think you're ready to move?"

"We have to, don't we?"

Ryan gave it to him straight, laying the ace on the line. "Yeah."

"We're in New London, aren't we?" The boy looked around at the walls.

Ryan nodded.

"I thought so. I've never been inside a building like this except for the abandoned ones farther out from the thorpe." The boy struggled to bring himself to his feet.

Ryan reached down and took the boy by the shoulder, steadying him as he brought him into a sitting position.

"Have you friends here?" Tarragon asked.

Before Ryan could answer, the boy reached up and touched his hand, gripping to bring himself upright. Tarragon's flesh was still hot, but not as hot as it had been. Then an electric charged seemed to ripple through him.

"No," the boy said. "I guess you don't. You're strangers to this land." He fixed Ryan with his bloodshot gaze. "The Prince has taken one of your own, and you intend to get her back."

Ryan broke the grip and took a step back. "Mutie?" he asked the boy.

"I don't recognize the term," Tarragon replied.

"The way you know things."

The boy hesitated for just a moment. "I've always been different. The Prince has made a habit out of killing anyone who was different, but my father kept me very well hidden."

"Your father?" Krysty repeated.

The boy nodded. "Foxglove. He was a healer. One of the best. Pepper killed him, though, at Prince Boldt's request."

"Have you any other family?" Krysty asked.

"None by blood. But there are those who will take me in if I manage the return home."

"Why didn't you go to them?" Ryan asked.

"I would have endangered them. Pepper and his seed heralds were following too close to me. And Bean."

"So you chose to endanger us instead?" Ryan asked.

"I thought perhaps you were raiders. If I could get close enough before Pepper and his seed heralds overtook me, I planned to lose them during the skirmish. But by the time I reached you, I'd been wounded and was barely able to stand, let alone escape."

Seeing the pain buried deep in the boy, Ryan felt he had to take away some of the brunt of his accusation. "It was a good plan. Mebbe it would have even worked."

"They killed Bean before we had the chance to reach you."

"We're sorry to hear that," Krysty said.

"I'd expected more of you. In numbers, I mean."

"Looks like it worked out anyway," Ryan said.

Tarragon looked up at him, his eyes filled with old grief and fresh guilt. "Except that the woman in your group is now missing."

"What are the chances that she's still alive?" Ryan asked, not pulling any punches. There wasn't time.

"They took her alive?"

Ryan nodded.

"Then the chances are very good. For a time. Prince Boldt usually kills anyone he finds who stands against him."

"Why was your father killed? For protecting you?"

Tarragon shook his head. "That wasn't discovered until later. Wildroot is fragmenting." The boy shivered.

Krysty reached down and pulled the blanket around his shoulders.

"Thank you," Tarragon said.

"You said Wildroot is fragmenting," Ryan reminded him.

"Yes."

"What is Wildroot?" Krysty asked.

"What they call their ville," Ryan answered. "By fragmenting, you're talking about the rebellion?"

The boy nodded. "You know about this?"

"Gehrig told me." Ryan knelt and picked up one of the boy's boots. It was knitted of some fibrous growth, the strands thin and seeming to be tough and supple at the same time. He eased the boy's foot into it.

"Gehrig?"

"The raider captain."

"We never knew his name."

Once the boot was on, Ryan tied it, trying not to think about the fact that traveling tonight could kill the boy before morning. J.B. was out now procuring horses for their escape. Ryan was still working out the details of that, but he figured with enough plas-ex, anything could be accomplished.

"Are you part of the rebellion?" Ryan asked.

"My father was." Tarragon lifted his other foot weakly and shoved it into the boot Ryan offered.

"That's why he was killed?"

"Yes."

"Pepper found out."

"The Prince did, but he sent Pepper out to kill him."

"Is that going to stop the rebellion?" Ryan asked.

"No. It can't. Prince Boldt is trying to bring about the Time of the Great Uprooting. If he is successful, it will be the death of us all anyway. Our only chance to live is to destroy him first. Before he can enact it."

"What is the Time of the Great Uprooting?" Krysty asked.

"It's a plague," Tarragon answered in a voice that was just above a whisper. "It was designed by Prince Boldt's father. It was supposed to be set free in the world in the event the Celtic peoples were threatened from without. The seeds of rebellion were already sown in Wildroot." The boy shook his head. "The Prince's ways are too harsh. Living things need space to grow. He's allowed our people none of that."

"Why?" Krysty asked.

"To keep our stock true to our roots," Tarragon answered. "So that we may breed true and be the best of what is in our natures."

"The people of Wildroot haven't done that."

"No. There were some who wanted children of their own instead of the vat-grown offspring Prince Boldt gave out in exchange for hard work and diligence."

"So they had them," Krysty said.

Ryan looked at his lover and saw that her hair had crept in on itself, lying tight against her scalp. He spared a glance out the window. The only light in the room was a small oil lantern in the back. From where he was standing, the moonlight outside was more revealing.

Without electricity the streets below were dark. Light from the front of the Bent Rose spilled out into the avenue and over Gehrig's wags parked outside. The eaves blocked part of the view.

Glancing east, Ryan searched for sign of J.B. The Armorer would post a red lantern once he'd secured the horses. Then Ryan and Jak would take care of the rest. Provided the

albino and Doc returned any time soon.

"Yes," Tarragon said, "they had children. And they loved them. Some, the ones that the Prince could ascertain—and even some he wasn't sure of—were put to death, their bodies burned so that they weren't even allowed the dignity of becoming part of the growth cycle."

"Why hasn't anyone chilled this prince?" Ryan asked.

"He is too well guarded," the boy replied, "and we have no weapons. No blasters, anyway. The seed heralds know their futures depend on the prince's well-being. If they fall out of his favor, they won't be granted immunity from the plague."

"What will the plague do?" Krysty asked.

"It's specially designed. My father was able to look at some of the plans for it. He was high up in the Prince's hierarchy. When it is released, the plague will replicate itself, killing everything remotely human that it touches."

"Including muties?" Ryan asked. "Some of those can be hard to kill."

"Mutations were expected," Tarragon said. "With the amount of nuclear radiation involved in the war, Prince Boldt's father knew the surviving humans would be radically affected. He feared monsters. When the raiders came among us, killing the bands of pollinators and caretakers, and raping the women among them before putting them to death, my people felt certain only the vicious had survived the end of the first world."

"That's not always the case," Krysty said.

"But more often than not, it is." Ryan wanted the boy to get it straight. "If Boldt releases this plague, how does he plan to survive it?"

"There are cryo chambers beneath his castle. He and his chosen few are supposed to go there and wait out the effects of the plague."

"How long?"

Tarragon shrugged. "A generation. Two. Perhaps longer."

"Why didn't your father and the other people dissatisfied with life around Boldt leave?" Krysty asked.

Tarragon looked at her, his feverish eyes opened wide. "There is no place to run to that the plague will not reach. It was designed to cover the entire world in a decade or less. Wind-borne, waterborne, even spread by carriers that will later die, it will be everywhere."

Ryan felt chill with the knowledge. It wasn't just Mildred in the line of fire now. So was Dean. And so were his friends. "What about an antidote?"

"There is none," Tarragon answered hoarsely.

J.B. FOUND ONE of the stable boys leaning over a section of fence inside the barn that had been made from one of the older buildings. He reached out, unseen and unheard, and seized the dozing boy.

The stable boy started fighting at once. He was beefy and strong, twenty pounds heavier than the Armorer. But J.B. was relentless. The Armorer kept his grip on the younger man's carotid artery, shutting off blood flow to the brain only long enough to cause unconsciousness and not death. He kept his other hand clapped over his victim's mouth to prevent shouts or screams.

When all struggle had died away, J.B. eased the boy to the ground amid the straw covering the concrete floor.

The barn housed about forty horses. All of them seemed to be well cared for, and all of them belonged to Gehrig or Gehrig's people. Ryan had found that out during a brief trek down to the kitchens for their evening meal.

The structure was dimly lit by oil lanterns that hung on support posts lining the paddocks. Saddles, bridles and blankets hung from shelves on one side of the barn.

"O'Neil?" a male voice called out.

J.B. froze, his hand gliding to his hip where he kept his flensing knife.

"O'Neil, where the bleeding hell are you, mate? I got the bottle."

Footsteps came closer as the Armorer took cover beside a paddock. The horse inside whickered and stamped its hooves restlessly.

The boy came forward, carrying a whiskey bottle by its neck, the dark liquid sloshing inside and catching light from the lanterns. He looked enough like the other boy that they could have been brothers.

Reversing his knife, J.B. waited until the boy had passed him, then stepped out of hiding and brought the hilt of the blade crashing into the boy's temple. He muffled the groan of pain with his free hand, at the same time catching the boy's sudden slack weight.

J.B. dragged the second stable hand over by the first. He returned to the saddles and other gear. In minutes he had six horses saddled, tied together and ready for travel. Getting down the alley on one horse while leading five others was going to be no easy thing, but it was worth the risk, since riding out of the ville was a better option than escape on foot. Stealing one of the wags had been an alternative, but Gehrig kept guards posted on them. One of them went missing, the raider captain would know immediately.

A hissing cat that had been plundering the garbage bins streaked away as J.B. led the horses through the alley.

Then he saw the two shadows moving on the other side of the Bent Rose. He caught only a brief glimpse in the moonlight, but he was sure the man he'd spotted was one of the military people that had followed them into the mat-trans unit in White Sands.

Muttering a curse, the Armorer stopped the horses and pulled himself into the saddle, the leather creaking as it took his weight. Taking up the lantern he'd brought, he struck a self-light and lit the wick.

When he had the flame burning well on its own, he keyed it up, then wrapped the red homespun napkin he'd stolen from the Bent Rose around the glass. The light turned red. He held it up, looking toward the window where Ryan was.

A self-light flared inside the room, briefly tracking illumination over the one-eyed man's face. He shook it out.

J.B. waited, hoping. Two self-lights meant that Doc and Jak had returned. There was no other light. And there was no time, because the Armorer knew Burroughs's team was closing in on Ryan.

With a quick heave J.B. sent the red-wrapped lantern smashing into the wooden side of a dentist's office. The oil splashed over the dry timber, catching fire with a whoosh.

Ryan would know they were up against it now, and the fire might buy them a little time.

J.B. kicked his heels into his horse. The animal bolted forward immediately, ready to get away from the spreading fire already twisting up into the upper rafters of the dentist's shop.

Behind him J.B. could hear the first strident yells of consternation. By then he was riding hell for leather, guiding the horses into the alley behind the Bent Rose.

Chapter Twenty

"No one will be spared, of course."

Mildred sat across the table from Prince Boldt, listening to the man casually talk about murdering a world. Or, at least, murdering what was left of it. "You're insane." And that was her professional opinion, as well as her personal one.

Instead of being angry about the pronouncement, the Prince seemed amused. "You would," he said, "naturally see it that way at first glance."

"First, second and as damn many as you want to give me," Mildred said.

"Really?" Boldt eyed her.

"Yeah."

Boldt leaned forward. "How many people have you met since your return to this world that you would want as your neighbors?"

"I had neighbors I didn't like back before I got frozen."

"Haven't you ever wished you could block out a certain segment of society, start it over in another image so it wouldn't be as wasteful or destructive, whether toward others or itself?"

Mildred weighed the question in her mind, wondering how much she'd told him while under the effects of the mushroom narcotics. The men who'd killed her father, the people who believed as they did, who painted the world in colors and decided which ones were good and which ones were bad, those she'd be tempted to change or eradicate.

"No," she lied.

Boldt didn't confront her about it. "What about this world you find yourself in now? From your testimonies earlier, I'd say you and your companions haven't found much peace in Deathlands, as you call it."

"Not much," Mildred replied. "I've killed more folks than I've made friends with."

Boldt pushed himself out of his chair with ease and walked over to the computers built into the sides of the fibrous tunnels that made up his fortress. "I've got the power to remake the world."

"By destroying the one that exists now."

"Yes." Boldt didn't flinch from the declaration.

Mildred turned the situation around in her mind. There were two ways to play it. If she went along with Boldt, he might tell her more about how he was going to do it. But she had the feeling he'd know she was feigning support. "That's not the answer."

"But it is. When my father prepared the beginnings of Wildroot, he wasn't sure anyone would survive. He had computers set up to handle everything. Nothing was supposed to be left. The human race would start over. However, I was already born."

"So he made sure to make a place for you."

"Yes. You're thinking that was selfish?"

Mildred settled back in her chair, thinking. She chose another tack, letting her tactics form in her mind. "Where's your mother?"

There was a brief hesitation. Boldt turned away from her, putting his hands together behind his back, still holding on to the curiously shaped staff. "She died."

"How?"

"She was killed."

"By whom?"

"It no longer matters."

Mildred scented blood and went for it. "Who killed her?"

"I said it doesn't matter."

"How did your father feel about her dying?"

"He was—saddened."

"I'd imagine so," Mildred said. "Here's this great scientific mind, about to reinvent the world in the image he's chosen, which is pretty damn perfect by his account, and he can't even keep his own wife safe. Sounds like pretty sloppy work already to me."

"My father was a great man!" Boldt roared. "Don't you ever suggest that he wasn't!" His face darkened with rage.

"Would a great man allow his wife to be killed?" Mildred asked, knowing she was putting the man to the wall and risking death herself.

Boldt crossed the room, getting within arm's reach of her. "You bitch!"

Mildred stood, aware of the guards shifting behind her, coming out of the shadows where they'd been. "He was careless."

"She was a whore!" Boldt screamed. "She was cheating on my father, having affairs behind his back. She didn't believe in his dreams, didn't think anything of the sacrifices he was making by challenging so many of the department heads."

"What happened to your mother?" Mildred asked. "She deserved to die."

"So he killed her? Your father killed her?" The creative jump in logic felt right to Mildred, and she went with it.

"Yes."

Mildred paused, keeping her features composed, showing nothing of the fear and anger she felt.

"I saw him do it," Boldt said. "She made him so angry, so furious. When he told her he'd managed to get the funding from America and that Wildroot was becoming a reality, she threatened to go to the prime minister himself."

"England didn't support your father's ideas."

"No. They wanted his research, his engineering of the plant life he'd worked on, but they didn't see that the world had become unredeemable."

"Your father had the plague ready before the nuke-storm, didn't he?" Mildred asked, cold with the realization. "He was prepared to use it."

"Yes." Trembling with emotion, Boldt backed away. "The computer systems were ready to go. There were only a few things that remained to be done."

"What?"

"My father had friends he wished to bring with him to this new world. But he had to do it quietly. He hadn't brought all of them into his confidence. A few of them had turned him into the corporation he was working for when he did so much of the developmental research. They never got the opportunity to learn the full extent of what he was planning. Instead of being recognized as a hero, he was fired. He'd never felt so betrayed."

"Except by your mother."

"Yes."

"No one found out he'd killed her?"

"No. Killing her almost broke him. I remember him sitting in the floor beside her body, holding his head in his hands and weeping as if he were the child, not me."

Mildred took advantage of the man's reverie. "How did you feel about your mother?"

"She was weak. She deserved what she got."

"And no one ever knew?"

"No. An investigation was starting up, but so was the war. We were at the Wildroot lab when the bombs started to fall. There was hardly any warning. My father was barely able to get us into the cryo chambers before everything was destroyed."

Mildred made herself resume her seat at the table. "What is this plague?"

"A gem of genetic research," Boldt said. His smile was wide and proud. "My father took a variant of the bubonic plague. You remember it?"

"Destroyed a lot of European cities in the Middle Ages." A chill touched Mildred as she imagined wagons rolling through cities, loading up the dead like so much cordwood, then townsfolk burning them in massive pits.

"Right. Do you know why?"

"Rats spread the disease."

"They were the carriers," Boldt agreed. "But not the reason so many people died."

Mildred remained quiet.

"They died," the Prince said, "because they were dirty and they were stupid. They didn't know what to do with their own filth. They lived in their own excrement, didn't take care with how they treated their homes, their children, their possessions. Do you see the parallels between this world and that one?"

Mildred did. So much knowledge had been lost in the hundred years since the nukestorm. While ranging with Ryan's band, she had seen a number of cultures that were barely out of the Dark Ages themselves. If something like the black death was released into those communities, people would die in droves.

"What are you using as your carrier?" she asked. "Even people these days are smart enough to stay the hell away from rats."

"That's the beauty of it," Boldt said, growing more animated. "My father reworked the design for the plague as well, tying it to the plant world, as well. It's tied to human DNA. It can be carried on spores across the land, through algae in the water, through the fish that feed on the algae and the larger fish that feed on them. It won't be deadly to the fish, but it will infect the people who eat them."

"Not everyone lives beside coastal waters." Mildred wasn't sure if she pointed that out more to be argumentative, or to convince herself such wholesale slaughter couldn't be accomplished.

"No," Boldt agreed. "That's why the plant spores will be wind-borne. And that's why I'm sending out the dark seeds."

Mildred refused to ask.

"Dark seeds," Boldt went on as though she had asked. "They're going to be human carriers of the plague. Part of them will be acolytes who believe in their sacrifices for the greater good. They'll be able to live for as many as a half-dozen years before the plague matures enough in them to kill them. They will be able to cover all of Europe and Asia, what remains of them, by traversing the chunnel. Others will spread to Deathlands and South America by joining the crews of sailing vessels that are brave enough to cross the ocean."

"Why?" Mildred asked. "Why bother? Most of those people out there are intent on destroying each other anyway."

"We were not meant to be here," Boldt said. "Not like this. We were destined for so much more. Can't you see that?"

"Where do I fit in?" Mildred asked. As daring as that was, laying the ace on the line, she

figured it was better than wondering how long she had left to live—half a day, or half an hour?

"I need help with the cryo chambers," Boldt answered. "They haven't been used in decades. My father's failed. You have experience with cryogenics."

"Those systems could be too different," Mildred protested. "I may not know enough."

Boldt raked her with his harsh glance. "I hope that's not true. Merlin can manage them without your help. I wanted you as a fail-safe. If you assist me, I'll make sure there's a cryo chamber for you when the time comes to release the plague. If you're of no use to me—" he shrugged, "—I'm taking no extra baggage with me."

"TROUBLE," RYAN CALLED out to Krysty and Tarragon. He stepped back from the window as he watched the flames from the shattered lantern spread up the side of the building across the street. The fiery tongues licked and lapped up the dry wood, already biting deep into the roofline.

"J.B.?" Krysty asked tightly.

"Coming around back with the horses." Ryan picked up the Steyr in one hand, then slung the straps of two of their packs over his shoulder. "Take the boy and come on." He grabbed another pack.

Krysty took up the remaining two in both hands, urging Tarragon forward.

Ryan shoved through the door into the hallway. The lights were dim. Most of the oil was being saved for the entertainment still going on down below. A few yells of alarm punctuated the music and the catcalls of encouragement.

"Hey, somebody's set the dentist's office afire!"

"You laddie bucks grab up some buckets and come on!"

"If we don't get that fire contained, it could burn that whole section of the thorpe!"

Ryan knew the confusion would only add to the cover they'd have as they tried to leave New London. But it cut the amount of time they'd have to do it. The die had been cast,

and it remained to be seen who caught the last train west.

He kicked open the door of the room across the hall. From the way the building was designed, he figured it had a window view of the alley behind the Bent Rose.

One of Gehrig's men was on the bed, naked except for a shoulder holster and a knife sheath down the back of his neck, bucking away between the bent knees of one of the gaudy sluts. The guy twisted as the door flew open, hardly breaking the rhythm he'd established. When he saw Ryan with the packs in his hand, he went for the pistol in his shoulder holster in a flash of reflex.

"Gehrig!" the man shouted as he brought the blaster around to point at Ryan. "Gehrig!"

Without breaking stride, Ryan pointed the Steyr with one hand, aiming by instinct at the center of the man's chest. A bullet whipped by the one-eyed man's face as he squeezed the trigger. The rifle report was loud inside the room.

The round caught the man in the chest and knocked him away from the woman, sprawling his corpse halfway off the bed and onto the floor. The gaudy slut started to scream, covering her face with her arms but still gaping at Ryan.

"Rough business," Ryan said in a cold voice. "Men come and go all the time. Should be used to it." He motioned with the rifle. "Now stop screaming and get the hell out of that bed."

The woman ceased the noise immediately and crawled off the bed while Ryan shoved it against the wall and cleared the space in front of the window.

Peering down into the alley, Ryan saw J.B. gentling the horses and bringing them to a halt. He opened the window, ignoring the creak as it went up the runners reluctantly.

The Armorer turned, leveling the Uzi before him. "Ryan," he acknowledged.

"J.B.," Ryan responded. "Looking for a big send-off? Could have used a little less fanfare."

"No help for it," the Armorer replied. "The troops Burroughs sent for us damn near closed the distance."

"In the ville?"

J.B. nodded. "Already targeting the Bent Rose. Figured stirring the pot some might slow them down."

Ryan tossed the equipment packs onto the eaves overhanging the alley. They slid over the split shingles and dropped onto the ground. He kept his eyes on the gaudy slut. She'd been a little braver than he'd counted on, hunkering down still naked and going through the dead man's pants. She gave him an uneasy smile over her shoulder. The woman definitely had a cheeky turn to her.

J.B. slid out of the saddle and gathered the equipment packs.

"I'm sending Krysty and the boy to you," Ryan said. "Get them out of here. Head for the gate. I'll be along as soon as I can. Got to take care of the wags, otherwise they're going to be on top of us before we get a mile gone."

J.B. nodded. "Doc and Jak?" he asked.

Ryan shook his head. "Not yet. We can't wait here."

After finishing her looting, the gaudy slut scampered out of the room, not bothering to grab her clothes.

"You make it?" Ryan asked the boy.

Tarragon gave him a tight nod. "One way or another," he said as he stared down the short, slanted length of the eaves. "It's got to be better than the prospect of staying here."

Ryan helped him through the window, grabbing hold of the boy's shirt for just a moment as he wavered unsteadily. When the boy had his feet under him, Ryan let go.

"May Ivory Ginnifer smile warmly on you," the boy said, "and not reap you tonight."

"Thanks," Ryan said, not really knowing what the hell the boy was talking about but understanding the general gist of the words. "You keep your head low."

Krysty followed him, tossing the equipment packs through first. They slid over the edge,

only inches from the Celt.

"Staying behind, lover?" she asked.

"Only long enough to buy us some time." Ryan let his hand drift down to check the small belt pack of plas ex he'd kept.

"You get back with us soon as you can," Krysty said. She took his face roughly between her hands and kissed him hard on the lips. Then she was out on the eaves, a lithe shadow.

Ryan hurried out of the room, hearing the gaudy slut screaming for attention below.

"My God! Somebody come quick!" the gaudy slut said. "That fucker's already killed Wieringo!"

Ryan eased out of the room, heading back to the room they'd been given. Men were already rushing up the stairs in answer to the woman's announcement. They aimed at him and fired on the run. Bullets crashed into the walls of the hallway as Ryan streaked through, tearing leaden fingers through his clothing.

"He killed Wieringo!" the gaudy slut continued. "And robbed him, too!"

Inside the room Ryan set himself alongside the door for just an instant, then whirled around, bringing the Steyr to his shoulder. He squeezed off several rounds, riding the recoil and keeping the rifle centered on the men surging forward.

The 7.62 mm bullets drilled into the lead man and knocked him back, breaking the momentum of the crowd of raiders around him.

Ryan took better aim, then cracked the skulls of two more pursuers, already in motion before the dead men dropped to the middle of the hallway. One of them broke through the railing overhanging the stage area below and went crashing down, ripping the chandelier of candles from the ceiling.

Reaching the window and knowing he had no time to waste, Ryan threw himself through it. Glass broke around him, falling over his shoulders and back. He landed on the eaves with a thud that drove most of the breath from his lungs.

He rolled toward the edge and dropped over a heartbeat ahead of the bullets that shattered

the edge of the eaves.

Chapter Twenty-One

Jak drew his .357 Magnum pistol and dropped into the shadows of the building down from the Bent Rose, warned by the sharp reports of gunfire.

"Who is it, lad?" Doc asked.

"Not know," the albino called back. Doc was at his back, the Le Mat blaster in a hard-knuckled fist. "Gunning for Ryan, though." He knew that from the flickering gunfire racing through the room atop the tavern that lighted up the one-eyed man's face briefly.

A moment later, J.B. erupted from the alley atop a horse, followed by Krysty, who held the reins of the horse bearing the Celtic boy.

"Move," Jak told Doc.

The old man was slow to react, following the albino to the edge of the sidewalk. J.B. spotted them first, bringing his horse to an abrupt stop, wheeling it around in the center of the street and causing it to rear up.

Two men rushed from the front doors of the Bent Rose and started firing.

Managing his horse with his knees and one hand yanking on the reins, the Armorer brought his mount around. The Uzi stuttered sudden thunder in his hand, chopping into Gehrig's men and spilling their corpses across the street.

Krysty threw the reins of one of the extra horses at Doc. "Mount up," she said. "We've got some hard riding to do."

Doc caught the reins and looked up at the red-haired woman. "I might have a lead on at least one of my descendants."

"Here, Doc?" Krysty asked.

"I do not know. Perhaps."

Krysty controlled her nervous mount with difficulty. The animal stamped its hooves and tried to turn in circles, its eyes rolling wide and white in fear. "We've worn our welcome out here. You can't do anyone much good if you're dead."

"John Barrymore," Doc said, looking at the Armorer.

"Lady called it," J.B. replied. "That's the ace on the line. Gehrig wasn't going to let us take a free ride on this one anyway. And those soldiers from that unit in White Sands are here, too. I don't get the feeling they're here to ask a bunch of questions. Come another time, Doc, mebbe we can take another look around this ville. But not now."

Jak put his hand on the old man's shoulder, urging him toward the skittish horse. "Go, Doc. Long Johnson not man to hide easy. He not have all answers, either."

Reluctantly Doc put a foot in the stirrup with the albino's help, then pulled himself into the saddle. More gunners were pouring from the Bent Rose, taking up positions in the street.

"Ryan's going to need help," Krysty said to Jak. "He had this set aside for you."

The albino caught the pouch the red-haired woman tossed him. A brief check inside showed him plas-ex charges already set up with time detonators.

"Gehrig's wags," Krysty said. "He's got some out back. Ryan's got the ones in front of the Bent Rose."

Jak slid the pouch strap over his shoulder, then caught the reins J.B. threw to him. "Ryan?"

Before anyone could answer, Ryan came crashing through the window over the eaves of the tavern overhanging the street. Glass caught the moonlight and splintered it into bright sparks.

Jak was already in motion, grabbing the saddle pommel in one fist and yanking himself

onto his mount. A second horse's reins were looped around the pommel, and he knew the horse was intended for Ryan.

"Take care of him," Krysty called as the four riders broke into a full gallop. "And take care of yourself."

Jak didn't answer. It would have been a waste of words. He yanked the reins, bringing his horse in a tight circle that the second horse had to step quickly to emulate.

Ryan was already in the street, the blaster in his hand hammering out a death song for Gehrig's people. The one-eyed warrior stayed in motion, sliding under one of the wags in a diving lunge.

Then Jak lost him, cutting down the alley J.B. and the others had come from. He rode the horse tight, hanging on with his knees rather than depending on the stirrups to handle his weight.

Two wags were behind the tavern, both of them outfitted with the oversize tires that indicated Gehrig and his people took them on their raids into the Celtic territories on occasion. The albino reached into his pouch and grabbed up the first plas-ex charge, setting the detonator for thirty seconds. As he tossed it into the window of a truck, the mirror on the side exploded as a bullet ripped through it.

Jak's horse shied away from the noise and the flying debris, and it took him a moment to regain control. He brought out the second explosive pack and set the timer, getting it somewhere between forty and fifty seconds before his attention was seized by the stiletto that suddenly appeared with a shiver near his crotch at the base of the pommel.

The blade sliced the thin flesh webbing between his thumb and forefinger. Blood immediately trickled down into his grip, causing him to lose control of the second explosive. It went tumbling down and dropped into the sunbaked alley a dozen yards from the second target wag.

Jak turned in the saddle, hunkering down low as he did. An irregular shadow along the eaves drew his attention. He made out the man with difficulty—small and rat faced, wearing glasses and bringing up a machine pistol. The man's uniform gave no doubt about his connection to the military force from White Sands, New Mexico.

Evidently the man had been trying to take Jak down without alerting anyone to the fact. To manage the knife throw downward onto a man on horseback and come as close as he

had, the albino knew the soldier was deadly.

Crossing the man's target zone, Jak flicked two of the leaf-bladed knives toward the soldier. They glimmered in the moonlight for just a second. The dull thunk of a blade sinking into wood told Jak one of them had buried itself in the eaves, but the other had to have found flesh.

The rat-faced man cursed and curled in on himself for an instant. The machine pistol in his hands chattered briefly, cutting a staggered line of bullets into the street and chipping away at the rooftop.

Counting down the seconds in his head, Jak brought the horse around. An irregular line of gunners had formed at the far end of the alley. Kicking his heels into his mount's sides, he rode back the way he'd come, knowing he was a moving target for the man on the rooftop.

He searched the alleyway for the second explosive, then spotted it in a lopsided rut that had been cut through the hard ground. Bullets rent the air around him.

Relying on his acrobatic skills, knowing he had only seconds left before the first plas-ex package went off, Jak shoved himself out of the saddle. He ripped the knife loose from the pommel base and gripped it, sliding it expertly through his fingers until he got it in a throwing hold.

Both legs on the left side of the saddle, his right foot in the stirrup, Jak dropped his free foot and kicked the plas ex. The pounding horses' hooves swallowed whatever sound there might have been. The package flew from the rut, then slammed into the rear tire of the second wag and bounced underneath. Jak figured the curb or the back of the tavern would stop the explosive somewhere beneath the wag.

A beefy man with a shotgun stepped from the back door of the tavern ten yards in front of the bolting horse. He raised his weapon to his shoulder.

Seeing the danger, Jak whipped his arm back and let the knife fly. The keen blade lodged in the man's throat a heartbeat too late.

The shotgun belched out a twisted orange-and-white blossom.

Jak heard the meaty smacks of the pellets slapping into flesh an instant before he felt the

heat of the horse's blood spread over him.

Knowing the horse was dead or dying from the shotgun blast, the albino dropped from the stirrup, managing a staggering run beside the faltering animal just long enough to free one of the leaf-bladed knives from its hiding place. He swiped the keen edge across the reins securing the second horse to the saddle pommel of the first, then caught them up as they fell loose.

Tugging on the reins, he guided the animal to the other side of the alley, knowing the first explosive would be blowing at any second. Gehrig's raiders who'd taken up positions on that side of the alley were caught off guard. Jak buried the knife he held between the ribs of one man and watched the guy go stumbling away, his face suddenly waxen with pain and surprise.

The youth hooked a foot in the stirrup as controlled bursts from the machine pistol in the hands of the man on the eaves across the street took out the windows of the hardware store. He drew the .357 Magnum pistol fluidly and hunkered down so he could fire from beneath the horse's neck.

He fired four rounds as quick as he could trigger them. The horse flinched, but it never broke stride.

The rat-faced man went to cover, breaking loose shingles that rained on the men below. Alerted to the fact that someone was above them, Gehrig's raiders suddenly found themselves with two targets.

The rat-faced soldier was in a worse way than Jak was, but the albino couldn't find a bit of sympathy in himself. He fired his last two rounds in the face of another raider who was in the shadows ahead of him.

As the raider went stumbling backward, already losing motor control, the first explosive blew. The roof ripped off the wag, and shards of glass went spinning out in a deadly hailstorm.

By the time Jak made the corner of the alley, he was in the saddle again, shaking the brass from the .357 and reloading. He kicked the horse's sides, urging it forward. He was scanning the street for Ryan when the second wag exploded behind him.

SERGEANT CONTE DECIDED the stealth operation had gone to hell. He didn't know

exactly where things had gone wrong, but they'd been mistaken in thinking that Ryan Cawdor's presence in the tavern was wholly by invitation.

The sergeant dropped the machine pistol to waist height and sizzled out a blistering arc of 9 mm rounds that tore two gunners from the entrance of the Bent Rose. He took cover behind a rain barrel set in place to catch freshwater runoff from the roof.

Return fire smashed the glass panes from the windows above him and to the side. Mannequins, dressed in refurbished clothing, performed a jerking dance, then vanished over the railing behind them.

Cawdor was in motion around the wags, but Conte couldn't tell what the man was doing. When the first explosion pealed through the night a moment later from somewhere behind the tavern, he knew.

He also knew Cawdor had taken advantage of the squad's sudden appearance to make his escape. The men inside the Bent Rose who'd evidently been there to help hold Cawdor and his band under loose house arrest was suddenly returning fire on all fronts.

Conte tagged the headset radio. "Cobra One to Cobra Team. Pull back. Now! We've stepped in it here."

The other members of his team quickly responded, counting down and letting him know they were all still viable.

"Regroup," Conte ordered. "Cawdor's making a break. He'll head for the gate more than likely."

His men leapfrogged back, not drawing much pursuit.

"Ryan!"

Conte looked over his shoulder and saw the white-haired youth suddenly gallop around the side of the Bent Rose. Cawdor was in motion at once, running for the albino and the horse. Whipping around, Conte brought his H&K MP-5 to bear, thinking he could at least put Cawdor down. Then the jeep in front of the Bent Rose suddenly exploded, bathing the area in a blinding flash of light that caught Conte unprepared.

RYAN DIDN'T HESITATE about approaching Jak. Most of the concussive force from the first charge he'd set was just catching up to him in a searing blast of heat. He knew the second blast was going to be even closer, and it was coming hot on the heels of the initial detonation.

The albino's hand closed around the one-eyed man's wrist with wiry strength. Ryan gripped the teenager's hand and swung himself up behind the saddle. The horse staggered for just a moment under the sudden change in weight, then surged forward.

Bullets chopped pocks in the hard earth of the street.

Jak urged the horse forward, drumming his heels into its sides.

Swinging around behind the albino, Ryan drew a bead on one of Gehrig's men lying in a prone position on the front eaves of the Bent Rose. The SIG-Sauer in his fist cracked three times in quick succession. Two of the rounds found only the shingles, but the third caught the gunner in the face.

The body pitched from the eaves and landed on top of the second wag in time to be blown straight up again as the plas ex touched off. Some of the raiders had started to get to their feet in front of the tavern, recovering from the initial blast. Many of them went down with the second detonation, hit by the flying debris. The extra fuel tanks aboard the wag became a flaming wave that crashed on the shoals of the Bent Rose's exterior, bathing it in fire.

"The other horse?" Ryan asked.

"Dead," Jak answered.

"Krysty and the rest?"

"Go to the gate."

"Going to be some argument there, too."

The albino nodded, reining the horse to the right and taking the corner.

Ryan scanned the shadows along the street. Gehrig's raiders weren't the only threat the companions had to be concerned about. But he didn't see any of the soldiers from the

White Sands redoubt.

Looking back, Ryan saw the fire had engulfed the front of the Bent Rose, the flames already eating through the eaves and bringing them down in sheets. The raiders spread out into the street, firing at will.

Two riders approached, leading another half-dozen horses. Blackjack Gehrig was one of the first men mounted, wheeling the horse around as he pulled himself into the saddle.

Then Ryan lost sight of their pursuers. He roped his free arm around the albino and held on.

After hard riding and a number of turns, Ryan saw the gate ahead of them. The doors were already open, and at least three dead men lay in the vicinity.

Jak whipped the horse lightly, moving it into a full gallop. He rode low over the animal's neck, the .357 Magnum pistol in his fist. "Soldiers," he said.

Ryan had already noticed the men. Two of them, dressed in military fatigues, were just inside the shadows. He lifted his blaster and started firing. "Head for the gate," he growled. "We don't make it, that's how it goes down."

The two soldiers ducked, seeking cover to return fire. Before they could get set, though, Gehrig and his men galloped into view and started firing, as well. The combined barrage proved too much, and the soldiers suddenly found more interest in trying to stay alive.

Jak guided the horse through the gate, keeping to the left. The horse balked only for an instant as it gathered itself to vault over one of the sec men's corpses.

Ryan shook his empty magazine free and jammed another one home, holding on to the horse with his knees. He almost slid off when the animal bolted forward again, but caught the back of the saddle with his free hand and held on grimly.

The horse dashed through the gate. Bullets cut the air over Ryan's head as Jak headed the animal up the incline to the left. Once they were in the tree line, they'd be more difficult targets.

A shadow moved to Ryan's left, and it was more instinct than sight that made him swivel to his blinded side. A rider was in the shadows, the horse stamping impatiently.

Moonlight flashed on J.B.'s glasses as Ryan covered him with the SIG-Sauer's open sights. "Ryan," the Armorer said laconically.

"J.B.," Ryan replied.

"Going-away party favor." J.B. held up a remote-control detonator they'd found in White Sands. He kicked his heels into his horse's sides, drawing up to Jak and Ryan easily.

An instant later explosions ripped through the night, echoing among the trees. Looking back, Ryan saw the gate come apart along the side they'd rounded, blowing debris over Gehrig and his riders. With the accumulated stone and mortar, and other metal parts that had gone into the building of the wall, the gate became a deadly weapon, as well. Strands of barbed wire whipped out and coiled around the riders.

The pursuit literally died away.

Ryan couldn't tell if Gehrig was among the dead scattered in the wreckage. A moment later the forest closed around them, closing New London off from sight.

Krysty Wroth and the others waited in a small clearing up ahead. Tarragon was leaning over the pommel of his saddle, a thin line of drool slicking out the side of his mouth. He had a gray pallor.

"Take horse," Jak instructed, handing the reins back to Ryan. "I ride with boy. Mebbe help. The weight of us two not so much for horse."

Ryan took the reins as the albino kicked a leg over the saddle and slid off. Jak put both hands on the horse's rump and heaved himself aboard behind Tarragon. The albino wrapped an arm around the boy and helped him sit up straight. "His fever back."

"We're going to have to push on," Ryan said. "J.B. mebbe slowed them down some, but they won't give up. Not for a while."

Tarragon fumbled for the bag of medicines fastened around his neck. He opened it and shook some of the contents out into his palm, then put them in his mouth and started chewing. Jak unstopped a canteen and helped the boy drink.

Ryan recharged the SIG-Sauer from loose rounds among his gear, then refilled the clip

he'd emptied during the escape. He holstered it and unslung the Steyr.

"Once those people get reorganized," Doc said, "they will come for us again. Gehrig does not appear to be a Christian soul. Forgiveness, doubtless, is not part of his itinerary."

"No," Krysty agreed. "Jak, can you take care of him?"

The albino nodded.

Ryan glanced at the Celtic boy as his horse shifted beneath him. Tarragon was their ticket into the Celtic ville and a chance at rescuing Mildred. If the woman was still alive. He moved his horse forward, getting into a position where he could look back toward New London. He took the night glasses from his back and studied the terrain as it fell away from them back toward the ville.

Shadows were moving down there, but they were cautious. Ryan couldn't tell if it was Gehrig's people or the White Sands soldiers.

"Those soldiers tailed us to the ville," J.B. said. "I figure it was to chill us."

"Mebbe," Ryan replied.

"If worse comes to worst, dear Ryan," Doc said in a quiet voice, "there are ships that cross the oceans."

Ryan didn't like the idea of being trapped in the worm-infested bilge of some boat or ship that presented only a fair chance of returning to Deathlands. Something like that, over that kind of distance, he'd have to trust his welfare and that of his friends' to someone else. That wasn't restful thinking at all.

But if it was the only way to get back to Dean, then he'd see it done.

"J.B.," Ryan said, "you got the rear. I'll take point. Krysty, you're after me. Then Jak and the boy. Doc, you're next."

He kicked his horse in the sides, pointing it east, intending to keep angling up the incline to keep the terrain working against whatever followers they might have. Krysty rode up next to him and passed over his pack, followed by his coat.

"It'll be cold out here, lover," she said. "And we're going to be in it for a while."

Ryan shrugged into his jacket as he rode, transferring the Steyr from hand to hand while he got it done. He gave her a wan smile, then reached out briefly to touch her face. "What with all these coldhearts out aiming to chill us, we're coming up between a rock and a hard place."

"We've been there before," Krysty said. "They'll find us ready."

Ryan leaned forward long enough to brush his lips across hers, then set the Steyr across the saddle pommel with the safety off and got moving. He figured they could get back to the Celtic ville by early morning, hopefully prelight. His chron showed that it was a little after 9:00 p.m.

He kept a weather eye peeled on the area behind him out of habit. J.B. was as good as they came, and he knew the companions were in good hands. Concentrating on the forest stretching out before him, he kept his senses alert, knowing possible death dogged the group every step of the way. And he was sure it lay in wait at the Celtic ville, too.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Ryan led his horse, the Steyr hanging loose and comfortable in his right hand. In the past six hours the companions had put a lot of miles of hard terrain behind them. The animals were getting badly worn by the constant pace and from the cold ghosting across the land under the pale quarter moon.

He glanced back and saw that Krysty was staying about fifty yards behind him. Close enough to cover him if she needed to, and far enough back that she stood a chance of escape in case he was brought down.

Ahead of him the land gradually rose, losing itself in the trees and brush and thick gray fog that had coiled in from the sea. Seventy yards up, it seemed to drop off.

Ryan tied the reins to a sapling, leaving them in a slipknot he could disengage with a

yank. He stepped away from the horse and signaled to Krysty to send Jak up and let J.B. know they were holding their present position.

Krysty passed the message back. In less than a minute the albino was at Ryan's side.

"The boy?" Ryan asked in a low voice.

"Fever broke," Jak replied. "Couple, three hours ago. Keeps water down now. A little bread. He'll live."

"Good. We're going forward for a look-see. Horses will make too much bastard noise."

"Boy says we get close."

"Kind of figured it that way myself." Ryan moved forward. "Fifteen feet apart, always able to see each other. On double yellow. Quiet as we can make it."

Jak nodded, blades naked in his fists.

Ryan kept his grip on the Steyr. It wasn't silenced, but it made a mean club if he needed it to. And the stopping power of the 7.62 mm slug at close range was nothing short of formidable if keeping silent wasn't possible. He moved through the brush without making a sound, as much a night predator as anything hunting around him.

They were almost at the lip of the drop-off when he heard the shushing noise. It was the only warning Ryan got. He stepped back and brought up the Steyr. A vine flashed by his face, then coiled with a snap around a tree that was close enough for him to reach out and touch.

He kept moving, swiveling his head to track the continued motion. For an instant he thought a snake had dropped from the trees because there was so much action. Keeping the Steyr up to block if there was a need, he slipped the panga free.

"Plants," Jak said.

Another tendril whipped at Ryan, the deadly spur exposed in the vegetable flesh and dripping ichor. Moonlight vanished against the dark sheen of the poison. Crouching and twisting to avoid the lunge of the tangler, Ryan raked the panga through the green tentacle, lopping off a good two feet.

The amputated tendril flopped to the ground and writhed in wicked animation, thick sap mixing in with the dirt.

"Fireblast," Ryan said, stepping back farther, suddenly aware that the forest around the companions was alive with the things. He shrugged out of his backpack and took out an oil torch wrapped in plastic. "Burn them," he told Jak. "Keep them back off us."

The albino drew out a torch, as well, moving like a white wraith in the shadows.

Ryan wasn't pleased with the turn of events. Setting half the hilltop ablaze above the Celtic ville was going to tear hell out of any element of surprise.

"Wait, lover," Krysty called.

Ryan hesitated, the tanglers spreading their vines through the trees like giant pythons. He had a sudden and newfound respect for Gehrig and his men. Taking the things by surprise had to have been difficult. And the one they'd shoved in his face at the Bent Rose had evidently been one of the smaller tanglers.

He glanced back at the red-haired woman, saw her helping Tarragon forward. The boy had more color in his cheeks now, and his eyes didn't look so feverish.

"He says he can help," Krysty said.

Ryan shifted, allowing the boy to pass, but keeping a self-light at the ready beside the torch. With the dew glistening on the ground and the patches of snow around them, he knew the brush wouldn't burn well, but it might buy them some time.

Tarragon went forward among the darting limbs of the tanglers. His voice, weakened by his fever and sickness, burst forth in low song.

Even yards away Ryan felt the hypnotic pull of the ululation as the boy's voice rose and fell. He moved a step closer, unwilling to let the young Celt sacrifice himself if the tanglers failed to react.

The tangler vines whipped into a frenzy, snaking through the trees and the brush to sail at Tarragon. The boy held his hands up slowly, keeping very still. Some of the tanglers threaded around his arms, sending smaller tendrils wrapping through his fingers. All of

the plants kept their spurs bared, a dozen of them hovering only inches in front of the boy's face.

"Upon my soul," Doc breathed at Ryan's side.

Ryan glanced at the skinny old man. "Ever seen anything like that?" Even after Gehrig had told him the Celts could talk to the plants, he hadn't been prepared to see it actually happen.

"Never," Doc replied. "I had always heard that talking to plants improves their performance, but never anything like this. Dear Ryan, this is full communication, going both ways. The things these people must be able to do." He shook his head in wonderment.

Tarragon touched a number of the tangles, soothing them. Docilely the plants pulled back but remained within striking distance.

"It's all right," the boy said, turning to them. "They'll let us pass now."

Ryan didn't much like the idea even after he saw the boy standing there unharmed. "Mebbe there's another way around."

"No," Tarragon replied. "Wildroot is surrounded by the tangles. They are there to keep others out."

"Jak," Ryan said softly.

"Ready," the albino replied.

Carefully Ryan went forward, telling the others to stay behind. He kept the torch and the self-light in his hands, walking on the balls of his feet so he could dodge instantly.

The tangle vines scrambled around him, digging through the loose brush and leaves, slithering through the snow patches. They touched his feet, then turned and ran up his boots.

"Don't act hostile," Tarragon advised. "They sense emotions. They know you're not one of us."

Ryan moved slowly, bringing the torch level with his face as the tanglers roped around his chest and skated for his head. Three of them drew level with his eye, the poisonous spurs bared and threatening.

"Don't move," Tarragon said in a quiet voice. "It's your only chance."

Ryan felt his own heart beating at his temples and his neck. He made himself think of Dean, of how getting through the tanglers might allow him to get back to the Deathlands and his son. He thought of Mildred, too.

Tarragon started singing again, and gradually the grip of the tanglers loosened. The spurs dropped away and the vines uncoiled, going back into the shadows and the hiding places they had there.

"They'll know you now," Tarragon said. "If you should pass this way again."

"How?" Doc asked, obviously intrigued.

"Scent," the Celt boy answered. "They've been bred to respond to pheromones."

"Pheromones? Then the more frightened someone is of them—"

"The more vicious and unrelenting their attack would be on a victim." Tarragon nodded.

"Nasty little buggers, then," Doc observed.

"Each of you come on through them," the boy said. "One at a time until I get them used to you."

Ryan stepped away from the tangler area, feeling the cold sweat dappled along the back of his neck. "Unsaddle the horses," he told the others. "We can't take them any farther. And leaving them here is no option, either. Anybody's tracking us, they'll know where we came through. If Boldt's got guards out—"

"He does," Tarragon said.

"They would notice horses tied up out here real easy," Ryan finished. He walked back to join J.B. while Krysty walked into the deadly embrace of the tanglers.

The Armorer was already unsaddling his mount. "Somebody's out there."

"Seen him?" Ryan asked, digging out his night glasses.

"Yeah. Couple times. Being right quiet about it, though."

Ryan trained the night glasses back along the declining terrain. He spotted nothing but the twisted shadows strewn across the brush and trees.

"Flash every now and then," J.B. said. "Most likely moonlight on metal."

"Careless," Ryan commented.

"Not if they want us to know they're there."

"Putting the squeeze on us?"

"Could be. They probably figure we aren't going to get a welcome from Prince Boldt."

"Mebbe they got it inside their heads that the boy's leading us into a trap. Plan on catching us as we're trying to make a getaway from here."

The Armorer took his glasses off and cleaned them. "If there isn't a mat-trans unit inside that fortress, could be exactly what happens."

THE LAND HOLLOWED OUT over the ridge, becoming a giant cup. A thin stream wound through the flat bed of the cul-de-sac, catching glimmerings of reflected moonlight. Guards moved around the area, too, but none of them appeared especially alert. By his own admission, Gehrig had never penetrated the Celtic ville's defenses.

Most of Boldt's patrols seemed to be concentrated around the houses that stood close together along the stream. Fragrant breezes blew back from the gardens. Dawn was still almost two hours away.

Ryan, lying prone and watching out over the ville, reached out and grabbed Krysty's hand. "Need you to stay here with the others while me and the boy go on ahead. Make

sure we get welcomed instead of chased."

"We'll be here, lover." The red-haired woman gave him a tight grin. "As far as sec guards go, these men haven't impressed me." She leaned forward and kissed him. "Be careful. Rebels aren't always so brave close to home where they can't hide their crimes."

Ryan nodded, then crawled up beside Tarragon. "Let's go."

"Quietly," the boy admonished. "These men know me by sight. If they see that you're with me, it will mean death for both of us."

Ryan followed the boy's lead, crawling through the brush for another sixty yards, waiting until clouds scudded across the face of the moon. He breathed in through his nose, keeping his senses on edge as they headed across open territory.

"There." The boy pointed at one of the small houses in the back of the row in front of Ryan. They'd made their way around a quarter of the cul-de-sac and were close enough to the stream that Ryan could hear the gurgling as it flowed over the rocky dam that had been built up to make a small reservoir.

The house was a single-story frame building. A narrow chimney stuck through the roof at an angle, belching a streamer of gray smoke across the dark sky. Like all the other homes, this one had a small garden in the back, as well as an even smaller fenced-in area occupied by a goat, chicken coops and rabbit hutches.

The waxed-paper windows glowed with the cheery warmth of oil lanterns. Occasionally shadows moved across them.

"Okay," Ryan said. "Move out."

Tarragon took the lead. Ryan followed him, hunkered down and carrying the Steyr in both hands. In seconds they were at the back door of the little home.

Ryan fell in beside the door with the assault rifle at the ready in front of him. Though the boy was certain he could trust the man inside, Ryan didn't hold that belief.

The goat bleated a little, causing some of the other animals to shift and call out nervously.

Tarragon knocked quietly. "Cardamom," the boy called softly, "it's Tarragon."

"Tarragon?" The man's rough voice sounded querulous and doubting.

"Yes, sir," Tarragon replied.

"I'd heard you were dead, boy."

"Nearly was," Tarragon said. "Pepper and his band killed Bean."

The door opened slightly, and a thin, wizened man peered out. His eyes were close set, and his nose was a third again longer than it had any need of being. "I know they killed Bean, lad. Pepper brought that boy's body back this morning, then burned it out in the open in front of his father and mother. Kept him from becoming part of Lugh Silverhand's blessed cycle."

"I'm sorry."

"You're not to blame." Cardamom laid a gentle hand on the shoulder of the boy, just then glancing up to see Ryan standing at the door. He didn't look away as their eyes met.

"I shouldn't have let Bean follow me," Tarragon said.

"He was nearly as grown as you. Would have been nigh impossible for you to have stopped him, and him not wanting to be stopped. Why don't you introduce me to your friend?"

Ryan noticed the old man's voice never shifted out of being friendly, but Cardamom also reached behind the door. Ryan figured it to be a knife or some kind of short sword. From what Tarragon had said, only Boldt's sec people went armed with blasters.

"Ryan Cawdor," the Celtic boy said. "He's here to try to take back his friend. The Prince has her."

"You're referring to the black woman?" Cardamom asked.

"Yeah," Ryan said. "She's still alive?"

"As of this afternoon, yes." Cardamom kept his hand on the boy's shoulder. "Where'd you

meet up with this man, Tarragon?"

Ryan could tell from the way the old man was gripping the boy that he was prepared to use him as a shield against any attack.

Quickly Tarragon related his adventures from the time Bean had been killed and how he'd ended up with Ryan and the companions in New London.

"You're an enemy of the Prince's, then?" Cardamom asked Ryan when the boy had finished.

"No," Ryan replied honestly. "But the boy's told us about the plague. I got people back where I come from that I wouldn't want to see anything happen to. We're going into that fortress, come hell or high water, to take Mildred back if she's alive, and chill the people responsible if she isn't. I'm figuring if we work it right, Boldt is going to catch the last train west when we're done. And if there's a way to be done with this plague, then we'll see to that, too."

Cardamom eyed the Steyr with respect. "You have weapons?"

"All of us," Ryan answered. "And a few more besides."

"We've been kept to knives," the old man said. "None longer than from our elbows to the tips of our fingers."

"Makes the guards harder to kill," Ryan observed grimly.

"That it does. But there's some of us got staffs ready to hook the knives to. They make mean spears. And we've got bows and arrows." Cardamom looked out over the dark terrain. "How many are you?"

"Me and four more."

"Not hardly the army the Prince has at his beck and call."

"When he's dead, I figure mebbe some of the threat goes with him," Ryan said.

"Probably true."

"He got a second-in-command?"

"Boldt doesn't believe in laying the groundwork for a rival," Cardamom said. "The closest there is to a second is Pepper."

"Met him," Ryan replied. "Briefly, and in passing." He faced the man more directly. "Tarragon suggested there might be some help in this for me and my people. Since we're both aiming on chilling the same person, mebbe something mutual could be worked out."

Heated lights gleamed in the old man's eyes. "I figure something can be arranged. The Time of the Great Uprooting is nearly upon us. We've all seen how the Prince is behaving of late, and we know he's been getting ready. The last raid really put him on the defensive. He was hardly out of his fortress at all today, which isn't usual for him. Come on inside."

Ryan signaled for the others and covered them as they threaded their way to the house while watching out for the roving guards. In only a few minutes they were all together.

"IT WOULD MEAN DEATH if these cellars were discovered," Cardamom said as he pushed the hand-carved dining table and chairs aside in the small kitchen. He'd dimmed the lantern and thrown a towel over the room's only window. "Boldt has his sec people search regularly."

"You haven't been found out?" Krysty asked.

Ryan knew all of the companions were feeling slightly claustrophobic, closed in as they were in the small house in the heartland of their enemy with potential death roving outside. He kept his hand close to his blaster.

"No." Cardamom counted boards from the side of the house, then put his heel down on one of them. "Things aren't quite as you think, lass." He added weight to the foot. The wooden plank creaked a couple times, then it sounded as though something popped into place. "Spending all this time with Prince Boldt, we dissenters have had to become a bit more clever over the years. Only a handful of people know about the digging we've done over the years. After tonight it's not going to matter anymore. We can't wait any longer, either."

The old man walked out of the dining room and into the tiny bedroom. His wife, lean and

angular, her long gray hair pulled back out of her ruddy face in a ponytail, stood at the wall to the left of the sway-backed bed. A long, double-edged knife was partially hidden in the folds of her dress.

Ryan gazed around the room, noting the lack of personal items. The existence the Celts had under Boldt was stripped down to essentials.

Cardamom's wife hooked her fingers behind a wall and pulled it open, revealing a narrow set of stairs that corkscrewed down into the earth beneath the small house.

"In the kitchen," the old man explained, "the floors may creak a bit, but the Prince's soldiers have never found this."

"Counterweights?" Doc asked.

"Yes," Cardamom answered, taking up a torch from where it hung on the wall just inside the small entryway.

Ryan followed the old man down into the tunnel. It went on much farther than he'd guessed. "Surprised you didn't hit water," he stated. After J.B. brought up the rear, the old man's wife shut the door behind them. It locked with a dry click.

"In some places," Cardamom assured him, "we did. A few of them we were able to shore up with rock and keep dry. But it wasn't possible with others."

At least twenty feet below the surface, the winding staircase came to a fairly level point. Cardamom kept the torch ahead of him, not having room to raise it above his head.

The trapped smoke burned Ryan's eye and caused it to tear. He kept his hand on his blaster. It was a bad place to be if the sec men came across them. A little plas ex in the right places, and they might as well have crawled into their own graves.

"Boldt doesn't know about these tunnels?" Krysty asked.

"No. We keep our secrets. They're all we have left these days."

"If Boldt has only been around for the last forty years," Doc asked, "how is it you're so old?"

"My wife and I were both among the original clones that were accelerated past our childhoods and adolescence."

"You missed some very magic times, friend Cardamom," Doc said.

"We thought we'd stolen some of it back when we had a child of our own twelve years ago," the old man said. "He was one of the children ferreted out by Boldt's spies. He wasn't quite two years old when the Prince discovered his existence—along with the existence of other children—and had him drowned publicly by his raid people. Their bodies were given to the beasts that haunt the forests beyond our border."

"I am truly sorry," Doc said.

Ryan studied the men waiting on their arrival. None of them appeared happy about the meeting.

"We were not so united in our purpose in those days," Cardamom said. "Some of us would have died for our children. But we were not allowed. Our own friends and neighbors guarded Boldt from our rage and need for vengeance because they feared he would turn on all of us. In spite of the deaths of the children, they felt him capable of mercy."

A man easily fifty pounds heavier than Ryan and a couple inches taller was evidently the spokesman for the trio. His tangled auburn hair was streaked with silver, as was the fierce beard that hung down to his chest.

"Cardamom," the big man rumbled, "what is the meaning of this?"

"Forgive his rude and abrupt manner," Cardamom said. "These past years have made us all lax in our social graces." He set the torch into a sconce near a flue built into the ceiling. "Basil, this is Ryan Cawdor and his companions. They're here to free the woman."

"Her name is Mildred," Ryan said. Giving the other rebels the woman's name would perhaps put them at ease, let them know Mildred meant something to the band. He introduced the others briefly.

The other two men with Basil were Sage and Marjoram.

"Why should we trust you?" the big man grunted. His eyes were narrow slits.

"If we were here to hurt you or just find out about these tunnels," Ryan stated, "it'd already be done. Us finding these tunnels, not much could be worse. You think it would take Pepper—even as stupe as he looks—long to figure out all he'd have to do to find the main part of the rebellion effort was to track down these tunnels and kill whoever he found at the other end?"

Basil looked at the other two men, then at Cardamom.

"And I don't see us keeping quiet for the moment to mean we're afraid of you. Besides being outnumbered six to four, you boys brought knives to a gunfight—if it come to that sudden-like."

Basil crossed his hands over his broad chest. "What do you want from us?"

Ryan hooked a thumb at Tarragon. "Boy seems to think you people have a back way into the Prince's fortress. I want to know where it is. If you're up to it, and mebbe you got a few friends, could be we can put a raiding party together while we're at it."

"You could be leading us to our deaths," Basil said.

Ryan let a cold grin twist his mouth. "If that was the case, you'd already be there. And the deal is, me and my people go into the fortress ahead of you and yours. In case you got any traitors in your own nest."

"Besides," J.B. spoke up, "we're without a doubt a lot better at skulking and chilling than you people. I never lived a day of my life in subjugation. Got a natural disinclination against the whole system."

The word might have been big, but Ryan knew the Celts recognized it from the bright spots of anger that suddenly flamed their cheeks.

"You're suggesting that none of us could keep up with you once you're inside the Prince's fortress," Basil replied.

"Smart man," Ryan commented to Cardamom. "Fireblast, you get a couple dozen more like him, you people might have stood a chance against the bastard Prince without us."

Basil stepped toward Ryan, sliding his knife into the open, his face knotted in anger.

Ryan didn't flinch. Before the big man could blink, he was staring down the barrel of the SIG-Sauer. "I figure I could put a round through your eye before you could make a move with that knife. Want to find out?"

"No." Basil froze in place, but he breathed in great drafts, barely restraining himself.

"You're one paranoid son of a bitch," Ryan said. "I don't blame you. But don't be a triple stupe. Me and mine can do what you people have only been dreaming of doing for years. Or mebbe come closer to it than you ever would have. And we're properly motivated. Mildred is one of us. We don't leave our people behind. You understanding that?"

Reluctantly the big man nodded.

"How about you put the pig-sticker away and I'll put the blaster away?" Ryan suggested.

Basil pushed the knife back into the sheath under his jacket. "You're not an easy man to get along with. Or even like."

"People tell me I got a rough side to me," Ryan said agreeably, putting the blaster away. "But I always stick to what I say. So when I tell you I'm here for a piece of Boldt and to get my friend out, that's how it is."

Basil nodded.

"I figure we got enough problems with this Time of the Great Uprooting you people are concerned about," Ryan said, "without adding to it."

"You're right."

"I know it." Ryan swept the four Celt men with his gaze. "Now, about that back way into Boldt's fortress..."

Chapter Twenty-Three

Mildred tried sleeping off and on, but it didn't work. Her mind stayed busy, putting things together: like how the plague would string a new line of death everywhere it touched. That was a recurring thought.

The guards had given her a feather-stuffed pillow and a thin blanket. She'd gotten to keep her clothes, but her weapons were gone. The temperature inside the Celt Prince's fortress remained stable, so the blanket was more for modesty than for comfort.

Mildred glanced back through the bars set into the floor and ceiling and caught the guard staring at her, his mouth hanging open.

When the man saw she'd spotted him watching her, he hurriedly looked away.

Making herself grin instead of giving in to the sick feeling that knotted her stomach, Mildred kept staring at the man. She could tell that he felt her gaze upon him.

The cell was Spartan. Besides the cot built into the wall, the pillow and the blanket, it contained only a bucket that she could relieve herself in. So far she'd passed on that, but her bladder was protesting fiercely.

She looked at the guard, thinking back on her tour of the ville, about how everyone living there had been white European stock. "You've never seen a black woman, have you?" she asked the guard.

He was young, surely no more than a teenager, twenty years old at the most. "No," he said.

Besides being an egotistical murderer, evidently the elder Boldt had been something of a racist. "You knew there were black people?" Mildred asked.

"I'd heard," the sec man said.

"You got anything against black people?"

"No." The guard shrugged. "Why should I?"

"Thought maybe it went against something the Prince taught you people."

"When I first heard about you," the guard said, "I thought you were a mutie. You know, on account of your skin color."

"Not hardly."

He nodded. "I see that now."

Mildred studied the youthful face before her. "Still, you're curious. Aren't you?" She recognized the look now, having seen it through much of her college years. "Wondering what it might be like to have sex with a black woman?"

"No." But he said it too hurriedly for it not to have been on his mind.

Tossing the blanket off, Mildred sat up, wondering if there was some way she could manipulate the weakness within the sec man. "Sure you are. I can see it in your eyes."

He looked at her more reluctantly. "Are you some kind of mind reader?"

Mildred laughed, and only part of it was forced. "Not me. I just know lust when I see it."

"The Prince would kill any man that raised a hand to you," the guard told her. "Unless you were about to somehow make your escape."

"I don't think that's going to happen any time soon," Mildred said. "Do you?"

"No." He shook his head adamantly.

"What's your name?"

"Clove."

"Clove," Mildred said, "before the Prince could do anything to anybody, he'd have to know somebody touched me. Right?"

"I guess so."

"So, if I don't tell, that presents us with possibilities."

"What are you talking about?"

"You aren't the only one been looking," Mildred said, lying. "I've been getting hot just looking at you this last hour. Bet you're a real killer with the girls, huh?"

"No. The Prince forbids unassigned fornication."

"Unassigned fornication?"

"Yes."

"Then what," Mildred asked, "is assigned fornication?"

The sec man shrugged. "Every year the Prince has the ceremony of the gathering, to spite the long reach of Ivory Ginnifer."

Mildred already didn't like the sound of it. "What's that?"

"Twelve females from the populace are plucked by the Prince when they come of age. Usually somewhere between their thirteenth and sixteenth year. Their eggs are removed and placed in frozen storage, so that there may always be seeds to carry on the Celtic peoples in spite of Ivory Ginnifer's touch of death through aging."

Mildred had difficulty restraining herself from commenting.

"After they're harvested," Clove went on, evidently not reading her expression through the shadows stringing across the cell, "the women are given to the guards to use as we wish. They're barren, of no use to anyone, really, even if children were allowed that weren't initiated through artificial insemination."

"You like women, Clove?"

"A lot. At first. Not so much when they kick and scream. But when they talk, I like that. They always try to convince me to help them get away. I tell them that I will, but after a while they know I'm not going to, and they get just like the other women that have been there for a while."

"Just lay back and take it, right?" Mildred asked. She made herself hard, knowing she could do what she'd set before herself.

"Yes."

"That's no fun, is it?"

"Not much. Still, it beats masturbation."

"Anything does," Mildred agreed with enthusiasm. Then she pulled the blanket from around her and started unbuttoning her blouse, her eyes locked on those of the young man, watching them widen.

RYAN WAS IN THE LEAD, Krysty right behind him, followed by Jak and Doc. J.B. brought up the rear. He climbed the terrain, sure-footed, and carried the SIG-Sauer in one hand. The Steyr was slung barrel down over his back.

The wind was more vicious now, bringing a razor-edged chill with it that whipped through the surrounding trees and brush. More snow was starting to fall, dropping in big, fat flakes that coasted across the landscape.

Finding the gnarled, lightning-blasted oak that Basil had described, Ryan went to it. According to the information they'd gotten from Basil and Cardamom, the trench twelve paces to the northeast of the gnarled oak had a section of the roots that contained the fortress only a few inches below the ground. They should be able to cut their way in with ease.

Ryan measured off the paces, then dropped into the trench. "Root's here somewhere. Let's get it found." He took one of the digging tools they'd gotten from Cardamom and shoved it at the wall of earth in front of him.

The curved blade sank easily. Once the root was found, the digging would go fast. Ryan pulled the shovel free, smelling the deep, rank smell of the loam.

"Got some dead buried in here," J.B. commented. He stepped back from his place farther down from Krysty and dragged a skeleton out of the wall by a bony foot. As the skeleton came free, it opened up a chasm in the soft earth. It also increased the general stink

hovering inside the trench.

"Cardamom said there was," Krysty reminded him. "They bury them all around the ville, adding to the compost. According to their beliefs, it helps return the nutrients to the soil, paying for the ones they took out."

J.B. dropped the skeleton into the trench on top of the two freshly dead men, then went back to the wall, walking farther along.

"Here, Ryan." Doc pulled his trenching tool free of the wall on the other side of the trench, spilling clods of dirt over his boots.

"You sure?" Ryan asked.

Doc swung the shovel home again. This time they all heard the dull thunk of contact being made.

Ryan brought his shovel over, adding his efforts to the old man's. "Do it. We're going to need a space wide enough we can walk through." He wielded his shovel with a vengeance. Dirt fell at his feet, moist and crumbly.

"Lover."

He glanced back at Krysty. The beautiful redhead's face held a troubled expression. Her hair was standing out from her head, moving restlessly, and it wasn't propelled just by the wind. "What is it?" Ryan asked.

"Something." Krysty shook her head, obviously having a hard time finding the words or the certainty. She walked forward and placed her hand on the rough surface of the root, spreading her fingers to cover as much of it as she could. "This root's alive. Alive in a way much like those tangles."

Ryan knew Krysty's mutie senses put her beyond what normal people could decipher about all the intricacies of life. And she didn't imagine things. "Meaning what?"

"Voices," she said, as if her attention were focused on something far, far away. "I hear voices."

"Whose voices?" Ryan asked.

"The voices of the roots," Krysty replied. "I can hear the roots talking. To each other." She put her other hand on the spot Doc and Ryan had cleared. Her brow wrinkled. "And something more. Some... Other."

She paused, then shook her head irritably. "I can't say, lover. I just know that the Other is there, and is aware of itself even in the tangle of voices coming from the roots. It's something different."

"What about Mildred?" J.B. asked.

"I can't tell." Krysty remained with her gaze fixed on the exposed root. "There are people inside. A lot of them. The roots know they are supposed to keep them protected."

Ryan looked at his lover, noting her sudden pallor. "You going to be okay in there, or are you going to have to stay out here?"

Krysty hesitated before answering. "I'll be okay, lover, but the power of these roots is very strong. I can feel the spirit of Gaia in them. They've connected with something very old, or maybe they've been a part of it all along." She took her hands back from the root. "One thing I am sure of—when you cut into that root, it's hooked up to an alarm system of some sort that will warn Boldt."

"You sure?" J.B. asked.

Krysty nodded. "I got a glimpse of it while I was feeling out the power of the roots."

"Know what?" Jak questioned.

"No. But it felt alien from the roots, separate but connected."

"Perhaps the roots are wired into one of the computers," Doc conjectured. "There was some experimentation along those lines that I saw when I was back in the Totality Concept labs."

"So he's going to know we're coming," Ryan said.

"Someone's coming," Krysty corrected. "I don't think he'll know who."

"If he does," J.B. said, "and if Mildred's still alive, it could go hard on her."

Ryan nodded and scratched an itchy place near his empty eye socket under the patch.
"Got no choice about going in, J.B."

The Armorer adjusted his glasses. "I know it. Just putting it out there to be mindful."

"No alarms yet?" Ryan asked Krysty.

"No."

"Boldt going to know where we're at, or just that his sec integrity's been violated?"

"I don't think he'll know where."

Ryan slipped a camp ax from his pack. "Doc, you and Jak keep widening this gap. I'm going to chop our way in. J.B., you and Krysty got lookout."

The companions spread out. The Armorer and Krysty took up positions at the opposite ends of the trench, their rifles in their arms. Jak took up the shovel Ryan left sticking in the dirt at his feet and started attacking the earthen wall with Doc.

Setting himself, Ryan swung the ax. The blade bit deeply into the pulp of the root. Dark sap oozed out in sticky patterns, clinging to the ax like death blood.

VICTOR BOLDT, Prince of the Celts and ruler of Wildroot, stood in front of the computer system, watching the images relayed from the concealed cameras to the twenty screens inside the room. More than half of them were working, though some of them only just. Screens two and nine were fuzzy, and the colors were off, painting images in garish greens.

"Is there nothing we can do to the cameras?" Boldt asked irritably. His understanding of the camera equipment was rudimentary at best. Had his father lived, though, he was certain he would have known everything about them. His father would have taught him. That was one of the things he missed most about the man.

"Not without physical restoration and repair at those ends," a deep, sonorous voice

responded. The voice belonged to Merlin, the computer Boldt's father had set up and programmed to bring Wildroot online after the nuclear war or plague. "You've been notified of this."

He watched over the shadowed terrain. His feelings of paranoia had increased of late, making periods of restfulness hard to come by. The only times he had any release were during periods of high emotion, times when he was in the thick of physical activity.

"Someone is at the door," Merlin said.

"Who?" Boldt asked.

Screen one cleared and showed a view of Pepper standing in the hallway. The seed herald looked bored.

"Subject—Pepper," Merlin intoned.

"Allow him," Boldt said. He turned and shook his cape out, preparing to meet the seed herald.

Pepper came into the room, holding his assault rifle in his hand. "I've got men out there everywhere, Prince Boldt. So far they've seen nothing."

"Then they're missing it," the Prince insisted. His paranoia assured him he was right. "The rebels know the Time of the Great Uprooting is near. They're not going to accept it like a bunch of sheep."

"Yes, sire. But all I can report to you is that things remain quiet."

"Given time, I think they will act. Before they do, I want to strike first."

"Then let us do it now," Pepper said. "We're ready. Come first light, we could be among them before they had a chance to get prepared."

Boldt studied the big man's chiseled face, seeing the bloodlust color the seed herald's features. Pepper was a tool he loved to use. But that tool only garnered the best results when wielded dispassionately. Besides, in order for the plague to be activated to its full potential, the Celts would have to be first infected, then broken and driven from their homelands into the outer regions.

"No. It's enough that we are not taken unawares." Boldt resumed his study of the monitors. "What about the New Londoners?"

Pepper approached one of the screens and tapped it. The light washed over him, leeching the color out of his garments and turning them gray. "For the time being, they remain here." His forefinger traced a tree line.

"How far away?" Boldt thought he knew from the past times he'd ridden that way.

"A quarter mile."

"They're close, then."

"Well out of arrow shot," the seed herald replied, "and beyond the range of the first tangles. They won't be moving against the tangles. Not in the dark."

"What about the boy?" Boldt asked.

"I don't know what's become of him," Pepper admitted.

"He appeared to be going willingly with those people you confronted."

Pepper dropped his head uncomfortably.

"If he's working with them," Boldt stated, "he could sing a song to get any number of New Londoners through the tangles unharmed."

"Yes, sire."

"Do not assume we are safe here," Boldt said. "We've got enemies within and without."

"I understand."

Boldt glanced at the screen and tried to puzzle it out. "Never before have the New Londoners gathered like this. Usually when they come in to steal the tangles and attack us, they're in smaller numbers. Much quieter." He wished the picture on the monitor were clearer. "Now they're here in force. Have you been able to find out why?"

"We haven't been able to capture one yet," Pepper said. "They're staying too close together."

"They're afraid."

"That's the way it looks to me."

"But not of us, given their past performances. What about the strangers? The ones you encountered who were with the black woman?"

"We've not seen them yet."

Boldt looked at the seed herald. "Neither they nor Tarragon have shown up. Yet it seems half of New London is encamped on our lands, preparing to lay siege to our community. Don't you find something wrong with that?"

Pepper rubbed the back of his neck uncomfortably. "There's some talk—we haven't been able to confirm it yet, at least, I haven't—that Gehrig and his people are here following the strangers."

The paranoia returned in full force, slamming into Boldt, twisting his stomach. "Ivory Ginnifer take you for not telling me this sooner! If Gehrig and his people have camped there, waiting, don't you realize that means they've followed the strangers at least this far?"

Pepper didn't have anything to say.

"Get out there," Boldt ordered, "and find those people. Kill them when you do."

"Yes, sire."

Boldt struggled hard to contain the anger he felt. Breathing more rapidly, he studied the views afforded by the cameras set within the Wildroot region. They were out there somewhere. He knew it now. Gehrig wouldn't be chancing a confrontation with the Celts without good reason.

"Red alert!" Merlin said. "Sensors attached to the fibrous roots systems are picking up an

attack made on the outer hull."

"Give me the inner-camera systems," Boldt said, walking toward the monitors. "Bring on the defensive systems and show me where they are."

Chapter Twenty-Four

Mildred knew she had the young guard's attention as she continued working the buttons on her blouse.

Clove stared at her in rapt attention, his mouth hanging slightly open. His crotch tightened up immediately, visible through his patched homespun breeches.

She pitched her voice low, not going for sexy, just trying for elusive, teasing. "Like what you see, Clove?"

"You're a right handsome woman," the young man acknowledged in a strained voice.

Mildred didn't pull her blouse open any more. Totally revealing herself would answer too many questions, take away too much of the mystery.

"Why are you doing this?" Clove asked, face against the bars now and his eyes nowhere near meeting hers.

Mildred steeled herself. She didn't feel sexy, and she knew she was putting her ego on the line. But there was nothing else she had to use for bait. "Because I want you, Clove."

"You want me?"

"Yes."

Mildred stood, letting her blouse hang open to reveal the bra and the tops of her breasts. She showed him a mocking smile, full of challenge with just a hint of disdain. "Why do

you want me?"

"Didn't say that I did."

As she approached the bars, Clove backed away. He tightened his grip on the bolt-action Enfield he carried. "I can tell by how tight your pants are getting," Mildred said, "that you want me."

Clove didn't answer, stopping just out of arm's reach.

"So I know you want me," Mildred said. She licked her lips. "Do you know how to tell if a woman wants you, Clove? I'm talking about a real woman, not one of them used-up girls you're used to."

"I suppose they up and just tell you," the boy said nervously.

"I'm telling you," Mildred said, "and you don't seem to believe me."

"Got no reason to. You could be trying to trick me into letting you out of that cell."

"Then what?" Mildred asked. "I'll wander around inside the Prince's fortress? I don't see that getting out of here really puts me any closer to escape. Do you?"

"No."

"I'm a stranger to these parts," Mildred said. "In case you hadn't noticed, we don't appear too welcome around here. This could be my last night alive. I've been thinking about that for hours. Dawn isn't too far away."

Clove looked at her eyes then, and there wasn't really compassion in them. But there was a gleam of sudden understanding of the possibilities.

"Maybe I wouldn't have picked you under normal circumstances," Mildred said in a quieter voice. "I don't usually pick boys when I got men around me. But there's you here, and dawn coming too soon."

Still, Clove didn't react.

Mildred walked back to the cot. "Guess it's your decision. You're the one got the key to this bird's cage." She stood there, letting him think about it for a couple minutes. Then she walked over to the pot she'd been given to relieve herself in.

Keeping her gaze on the burning eyes of the young guard, Mildred lowered her pants and squatted over the pot. She used her hands and the loose folds of her blouse to maintain her privacy.

"You know how to tell if a woman really wants you?" she asked Clove.

"No," he repeated, his voice breaking.

"She'll be wet inside," Mildred said. "Can't help herself. A woman gets around a man she wants, her body just naturally starts trying to open itself up to him. She gets wet enough, she can't hold herself together at all, like a flower reaching for the sun, all covered with dew." She lowered her voice and spoke slower. "Anything at all gets near that hole in the center of herself—anything, even a finger—it just naturally slides on in." She closed her eyes and smiled in satisfaction, moving her hand back and forth slightly.

Clove was back at the bars again, staring hard into shadows he couldn't see through.

Mildred opened her eyes and looked at him. "So what's it going to be, Clove? You just going to wonder about it? Or are you man enough to come find out?"

"CAWDOR AND HIS PEOPLE are going inside the root."

Sergeant Conte listened to Whittaker's report over the radio, hunkered down behind the windbreak he'd found amid the trees. "Any sign of engagement?"

"No. Looks like they're getting in clean. Got lights visible through the hole they made in the root system, but nobody's there."

Conte moved along the trees, getting to a better position to view the strange community below. On first glance it seemed the location in the valley would have been detrimental to the security of the area. But that had been before they'd discovered the plants ringing the valley. Only Whittaker's killer instinct and fast reflexes had saved him from certain death. Turley and Cruse were rigging flash-bangs they'd taken from the small redoubt they'd jumped to after leaving White Sands.

Thinking about the plants, watching how they'd reacted as the unit had lobbed stones and branches into the area, he'd realized they responded to sound. Then Henderson had managed to get one of the things with a machete, then drag it clear of the others. A brief examination had shown no eyes, nor anything that could pass as them. Visual targeting wasn't an option.

Conte had it figured that if enough sound got pumped into the area at one time, the noise would "blind" the plants, allowing them to run through. If they had to. That was one thing he still wasn't certain about.

From the way they were acting, Cawdor and his people had no welcome at the community. Conte had to believe they were there solely to rescue the black woman, since none of his men had seen her in New London, and a rescue attempt was the only explanation for the strangers' return to the community.

"Damn stupid of them going to all this trouble for that woman if you ask me," Whittaker said. "Me, I'd leave her. No sense in risking the unit just to get her back. They get inside that structure, there isn't going to be an easy way of getting back out."

Conte quietly agreed with the assessment. Unless the woman was particularly necessary to Cawdor's plans, rescuing her now *was* foolish. He understood it from a human side, though. But it was a side he'd long put distant in the aftermath of the destruction of the world and those long, lean years inside the White Sands redoubt. Compassion wasn't something easily afforded.

"Henderson," Conte called over the radio.

"Go," Henderson called back.

"The activity of the force from New London?"

"They seem content to stand pat, Sarge."

Conte had been aware of the pursuit from the town as soon as it had begun. They'd had to work their way through the forests and the harsh terrain back to the jeep. A number of the people who'd been chasing Cawdor's band had died in the explosion when the gate had blown up. It had taken only minutes to regroup and mount another effort, though. Conte didn't know whom Cawdor had angered in New London, but the man had done a good job of it.

The sergeant shifted his night glasses toward the Celt village. All he could see were shadows.

"Local militia's starting to turn out in force," Whittaker commented.

Conte scanned the terrain, overlooking the writhing, twisted shadows of the hunting plants. Turley and Cruse were close enough to aggravate them without setting them into a frenzy.

Beyond them he spotted the sec guards spilling out of the doors of the underground fortress. A number were on horseback, carrying torches.

"Not content to go quiet anymore," Whittaker stated. "They want to make an impression."

Conte watched, wondering if the show of force was for the army camped just outside the reach of the plant barrier or if it was because of Cawdor's actions.

One thing Conte was certain of—judging from the DNA experimentation evident among the guardian plants, the way the gardens were laid out to effectively use every square inch of land and the few glimpses they'd had of the interior of the giant roots—there had to be a treasure load of high-tech apparatus in there. The small redoubt they'd arrived in had to have been a staging area, a stronghold to retreat to for secret meetings between whoever had set up this enclave and the man who'd sold out the White Sands projects.

Besides terminating Cawdor and his people, Conte knew one of his objectives was to destroy as much of the underground fortress as he could. It posed a threat to their beachhead.

And hopefully it held another mat-trans unit.

Conte keyed up the radio. "Cruse."

"Go."

"Tell me those explosives are ready."

"Done," the man replied. "On yur go."

As he watched, the horsemen deployed, kicking their horses into gallops. They streaked for thatched homes that were evidently part of a preselected target group. In seconds the first of the houses was aflame. Only a few heartbeats after that, villagers rushed out into the narrow roads between the buildings, obviously not believing what they were seeing.

However, some of the villagers hadn't been caught so flat-footed. Fully a dozen and more came charging out of their homes and out of rabbit holes that had been dug along the roadsides. Evidently the rebellion by the people in the community had gone well past preparation stages.

A small war had started in the village.

Glancing back toward the New Londoners, Conte saw their ranks shifting and reforming. The pursuit group hadn't missed the outbreak of hostilities, either. Vehicles broke away from their hiding spots, taking up new positions.

"They're not going to miss the party," Whittaker said.

"Neither are we," Conte replied. "Cruse, blow those explosives." He covered his ears and peered through slitted eyes, not looking toward the path they'd chosen.

Turley and Cruse had linked the flash-bangs together along a length of cord, then threw them out at prescribed distances, farther and farther. Most of them had stayed in a straight line. An instant after Conte issued the order, the flash-bangs went off in quick succession.

The sergeant bolted through the forest, heading on an interception course with the jeep. Aames was behind the wheel, rolling over everything that got in his way, staying away from the things too large to roll over. The high bumper plowed over small trees and brush.

Conte reached out and swung into the front passenger seat. Turley swarmed out of the shadows and stepped up onto the running board, holding his machine pistol loose but at the ready. His face, like all of the unit's, was tiger-striped in combat cosmetics, barely allowed the moon's light caresses.

The other three members of the unit piled into the rear deck.

Gazing toward the impact area, Conte saw the flash-bangs had done their jobs for the most part. Flames still hugged the ground and burned in patches in the branches above.

Some of the plants were on fire, or blown free of the ground. Many others were writhing in pain, trying to pull away from their rooted stand.

"Go," Conte told Aames.

The man gave him a short nod, then directed the jeep at the narrow corridor they'd made through the deadly plants. Branches and the bones of small animals, earlier victims of the carnivorous plants, splintered under the tires like pistol shots.

Conte held on as the vehicle dug into the hillside, all four wheels gripping the earth and propelling it forward. Cold sweat clung to the back of the sergeant's neck as he raked the forest around them with his peripheral vision. Without warning, one of the plants whipped out of the darkness and smashed against the jeep's windshield. If the glass hadn't been there, it would have sunk its barbed talon through his skull.

Then they were through the danger area, cresting the hill and beginning the incline leading down to the Celtic community.

"Being followed," Whittaker grunted.

"The people from the city?" Conte turned in the seat, glancing back at the armed force that had been encamped beyond the reach of the plants.

"Yeah. We lit up the top of that hillside, and they got it figured they can just pop on through the door we opened."

Conte glanced at the uneven terrain before the jeep as Aames struggled with the wheel, guiding them toward the area where Cawdor and his group had chopped their way through the root. Some of the Celtic horsemen were already wheeling in their direction, yelling warnings to other sec men.

"Let them come," the sergeant yelled above the whine of the jeep's engine. "It'll pull some of the heat off us, give us a better shot at Cawdor and his followers."

Getting out would be another problem, but only one that would have to be faced if a mat-trans unit didn't exist in the underground fortress. For the moment Sergeant Conte had only the last orders he'd been issued by his commanding officer, and that was enough.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Only the strident hiss of lubricated metal speeding along metal saved Ryan Cawdor's life. That, and the combat reflexes he'd developed from living for years in Deathlands.

As he stepped through the hole he'd chopped in the side of the root, the rough edges of the fibrous skin-hull plucking and tearing at his clothing, he heard the hiss above and in front of him. His eye hadn't adjusted to the darkness inside the subterranean complex.

Instinct found his target for him as he moved into a protective position beside the hole. Doc was squeezing through the hole behind him.

Ryan lifted the SIG-Sauer, drawing it smoothly. The shape in front of him was a shadow flitting through the air. As his finger curled around the blaster's trigger, a bright orange flame of gunfire spit from the ovoid shape hanging from the guide rail along the ceiling.

He felt the bullet burn along just beside his face. By that time he'd fired four times himself, and the bullets smashed into the sec drone, reducing the guide rail to a hundred broken pieces.

Sparks leaped from the remains of the drone, and it jumped its tracks, hanging precariously on the lip.

"By the Three Kennedys," Doc said, "it appears the Celtic Prince has a fully functional defensive system."

The sec drone still spit and sputtered as surges of electricity pounded through it. Ryan moved forward, listening to the slight sounds of J.B. and Krysty as they eased into the root tunnel behind him. Jak made no sound at all, suddenly appearing at Ryan's elbow. "We share point."

The albino nodded.

"If you see somebody who looks like they know what's what here," Ryan said, "we need him alive."

"Done."

Ryan glanced back at the other three companions, used hand signals and put Krysty at the rear. J.B. came next, the first line of defense in case Ryan and Jak had to double back.

The two men led the group, working in tandem. The way was only partially lit by glowing fungus pods jutting from the walls around them, bathing everything in a lambent blue light.

"Lover," Krysty whispered only loud enough to reach Ryan's ears.

He turned, glancing back in her direction, knowing the albino had them covered. He followed the line of her pointing finger and saw the cameras embedded in the root flesh of the ceiling. Two more were visible behind them, sliding quietly along tracked gimbals.

It tore away even the illusion that they might be sneaking up on Boldt.

"Triple red," Ryan growled. "They'll be expecting company."

The corridor turned left, leaving the far corner in the shadows, just beyond the reach of the light cast off by the glowing fungus. Ryan waved Jak on, taking the corner for himself. Already impaired somewhat by the monocular view of things, he took advantage of his peripheral vision, approaching cautiously.

A sec man was in hiding there, trying to remain out of sight in the recessed door he stood guard over. The man was obviously reluctant to engage the enemy creeping through the underground fortress, though whether by his own reticence or by order Ryan didn't know.

The one-eyed man kept moving, staying loose and ready to move. The other companions kept going, following Jak. When he was sure he was out of the sec man's field of view, Ryan doubled back, quick and quiet.

At the edge of the recessed doorway, the SIG-Sauer blaster hard in his hand, Ryan paused, waiting. When the companions passed from the sec man's sight, the guard wasn't able to resist peering out to confirm they'd gone.

Ryan brought the blaster around in a tight, fast arc, crunching the butt into the man's forehead. Bone shattered, giving way before the pistol.

The man bleated in pain, trying to bring his assault rifle up to defend himself.

Blood sprayed over Ryan's hand as he hit the sec man again. He moved up quick, not giving his enemy a chance. There was no doubt that the pain-filled screams had been heard by Ryan's companions or anyone who was on the other side of the door.

Ryan went in fast, using his body weight to slam the sec man against the door. He swung the blaster once more, dropping his adversary with a blow to the temple. If the impacts against his forehead hadn't killed him, the sec man would recover.

Movement sounded on the other side of the door.

Knowing he was expected, Ryan gripped the doorknob, twisted and followed it in. He dropped into a prone position at once, the blaster out before him.

Light spilled out of the room, coming from the small fungus positioned overhead, as well as from the monitor screens along one wall. Two men were in the room, scrambling for their weapons as they retreated to the door sliding open at the back wall.

Ryan brought up his blaster, firing at once. He put four rounds into the lead man, dropping him in his tracks, then another three into the man behind. Both seemed to be dead.

Ryan grabbed a swivel chair in front of one of the monitors lining one wall in the sec station. Whipping his body to use his weight as well as his strength, he threw the chair at the closing doorway at the back of the room, knowing he wouldn't have been able to cover the distance on foot. And even if he had, struggling with the door would have left him an open target for hostile guns on the other side.

The chair sailed on target, clanging and ringing against the metal loudly when it slammed into the gap. Steel crunched when the door closed on the chair. A red light went on over the doorway, bleeding out letters that read Error—Door Malfunction.

The space left in the gap was large enough for a man to slip through if he was careful.

Ryan entered the room with the blaster in his hand. "J.B."

"Yeah."

"You got our retreat."

"Count on it."

Stooping, Ryan lifted a flashlight from one of the dead men in the room. A small wind gusted from the open doorway, shifting his hair. It was dark beyond, but there was enough light to see that a tunnel continued on.

Krysty and Doc went to the sec-monitor station and started looking over the controls. Jak brought up their prisoner and quickly tied his hands behind his back with a length of chewed rawhide.

Ryan switched on the flashlight, standing at the edge of the door so he wouldn't be highlighted by the bright yellow beam. A cone of light was cast down the tunnel, sending shadows scurrying. He followed his sweep with the blaster.

No one was there.

Ryan kept watch over the tunnel. Just because no one was there now didn't mean it would stay that way. "What have you got?" he asked Krysty and Doc.

"A satellite system, Ryan," the old man replied. His long fingers played across one of the keyboards in front of him. Scenes altered on the monitors, creating new patterns of light that filled the room. "It operates off a mainframe computer."

"Can you find Mildred?"

"We're looking, but it appears this system is tied in with outside viewers, as well."

"I'm looking for a master list," Krysty said. She was at another keyboard, her brow wrinkled as she studied lines of programming on the monitor in front of her. "This system isn't as simple as the one back in White Sands. And there's a number of lockouts on different areas."

"We don't have a lot of time here."

"I know, lover. If we can't turn something in the next minute or two, we'll give up."

"I'm going to hold you to that." Ryan glanced at the man Jak had dragged in.

The albino squatted beside the guy and uncapped a canteen. He poured water over the man's face, sluicing away some of the blood, which was quickly replaced by more gushing from the wounds Ryan had inflicted.

The sec man groaned in pain and shock. His eyelids snapped open, and he blinked to clear the water from his vision. He started struggling at once, crying out in fear.

Jak leaned in close and shoved one of the leaf-bladed knives under the man's jaw, with almost enough force to break the skin. "Not talk," the albino said in a low voice. His ruby eyes sparked with threat. "Not yell. Not breathe if told you no."

The sec man fell silent.

Jak held the knife in place a little longer, his gaze never faltering. Almost reluctantly he took the knife away. "Breathe."

The man exhaled loudly and noisily, his jugular pulsing madly along his neck. A white spot still showed where the knife blade had been pressed.

Ryan walked over and looked down at the guard. "The black woman," he said. "We want to know where she is."

"In the lockup," the guard said hoarsely. He had trouble focusing his eyes on Ryan.

"How is she?"

"Prince Boldt didn't want her hurt."

"She's in one piece?"

"Yes."

"What's she doing there?"

"The Prince was talking to her. Wanted her to do something for him. Pepper might know

all of it, but I don't. I swear."

"Where's the lockup?"

"Through that door," the man replied. "You go down, follow it around to your left awhile. Take the second left you come to. Follow that tunnel straight through, and you'll be there."

"Men on guard?"

"Yeah."

"How many?"

"Three. Four. I don't know for sure."

Ryan nodded and looked at Jak. "Gag him."

The albino made the leaf-bladed knife dance along the man's forearm, then removed a strip of cloth from his shirt. Working quickly, Jak gagged the prisoner.

J.B. stepped quietly and quickly into the room, pulling the door closed behind him. "Company," he said, resting one hand on the door while holding the shotgun in the other.

"More guards?" Ryan asked.

The Armorer shook his head. "Soldiers from White Sands. Looks like they were blazing along our backtrail and followed us into the complex through the hole we made. If we get lucky, mebbe they won't see this door the way you did."

Ryan took another glance down the opening beyond the jammed doorway. Mildred was waiting somewhere at the other end of it, at least, one of the ends, and perhaps a mat-trans unit that would take them back to Deathlands.

"Lover."

Ryan looked up at Krysty.

The red-haired woman pointed at the monitors in front of Doc. The old man regarded them with his hawkish gaze.

"Looks like somebody opened the ball for the rebel Celts," Krysty said.

Scanning the monitors, Ryan had to agree. The light-amplifying programs in the outside cameras picked up most of the action. The Prince's seed heralds attacked the ville populace without mercy, slashing at them from horseback with swords, and shooting them down with rifles and pistols. Many of the homes were already ablaze, creating even more confusion in the sudden battlefield.

As Ryan watched, though, one of the seed heralds got too close to a tangler bed. Without warning, the plants reached out for rider and horse, snaring them, then dragging them into reach of even more of the deadly vines.

Another monitor showed two of the soldiers from White Sands. They skulked down the corridor just outside the sec room, their machine pistols leveled before them.

"Lock won't hold them long," J.B. stated, "should they figure on breaking through."

Ryan knew it.

"Upon my soul," Doc breathed.

The camera he'd shifted to showed a spill of vehicles roaring down the steep sides of the bowl-shaped valley. Muzzle-flashes from mounted machine guns were clearly visible.

"Gehrig," Ryan said.

"It appears he found a way into the ville," Krysty said.

Ryan felt a little bad for the people of Wildroot. Trouble was, he figured it was just like anywhere back in Deathlands: folks that were smart enough, hard enough and didn't mind killing enough, they'd make it out of the engagement—no matter who was gunning for them.

"We got directions to Mildred," Ryan said. "We find her, then we'll figure on a way of getting out of here."

J.B. slid his glasses up his nose with a finger. "Problem is, a man could get plumb lost inside these roots."

Ryan nodded. "We stick together, we'll get lost together. Find ourselves, too."

"You're forgetting about the plague, lover."

Ryan glanced at Krysty. The red-haired woman felt more compassionate about the greater whole than he did. "I'm not forgetting," he replied. "It just isn't our problem."

Krysty's mouth hardened. But she knew better than to argue with him. Mostly. "You remember what Tarragon said, about how it could spread across the water, even to Deathlands."

"I remember," Ryan said in a harder voice. "I also know a dead man can't do nothing about it. We fuck around in here too long, we'll be dead sure as bunnies pop little green turds."

For a moment Krysty looked like she might argue. Thai she only nodded.

Ryan looked away, shining the flashlight back down the tunnel. "That plague's over a hundred years old. Might not even work." But a cold fear knotted up in his belly like lumpy gravy. If the plague did get loose, maybe he was only buying time to get back to Dean. But part of him knew they were all only living on borrowed time in Deathlands.

Going after Boldt in this twisted maze of roots was stupid. Nothing else could be said about it.

Then a speaker crackled to life. "Who are you people?" an imperious voice demanded.

Glancing back over his shoulder, Ryan saw Boldt on the monitor in front of Doc. Ryan had never seen the man close up before, but he remembered enough of him from the earlier battle that he knew whom he was looking at.

"You were with the black woman, weren't you?" Boldt sneered at them. "If you're here to try to stop me from loosing the plague and ending this pale shadow of a world, you're coming way too late. You'll only be the first ones to die."

"Doc," Ryan said.

"He found us when the sec team stationed here didn't check in," the old man said. "I tried to respond, but evidently I did something wrong, Ryan."

Abruptly the monitor with Boldt's features scowling at them vanished.

"It's okay." Ryan dropped a hand on the old man's shoulder. "We were getting bastard lucky anyway."

"If he sets that stuff off while we're inside here," J.B. argued, "could be we'll get infected and take it back with us."

Ryan nodded. "Something else I noticed. There was a mat-trans unit behind him. Couldn't hardly see it for the computer equipment."

"Saw it, too," Jak said.

"That's our way out," Ryan said. "Man's standing on the tracks when the train's coming through." He looked at Doc. "You know where Boldt is?"

Doc tapped the keyboard. The monitor in front of him cleared, suddenly shifting to a multilayered map. A bright blue dot was in one of the rooms. "There we are, Ryan."

An emerald dot flared to life in the upper right corner.

"And there is Prince Boldt."

Ryan studied the map, committing the twists and turns to memory. "Jak."

"Yeah."

"You remember how that guard said to find Mildred."

"Yeah."

Ryan touched the monitor. "Once you, Doc and J.B. get her, you figure you can find your way here?"

"Probably."

"I'm going to be counting on it."

Jak nodded.

"If he's got that place too well defended," Ryan said, "could be we'll come to find you."

J.B. rocked back on his heels, pointing the shotgun in the direction of the door. "We're found." Even as he was talking, the door started to shake.

"Let's go," Ryan growled. "Getting pinned down here isn't going to do any good. Like as not, Boldt's probably already got sec teams headed in this direction." He turned and led the plunge into the darkness, his headlong pace just short of suicidal. The tunnel inclined, taking them deeper into the mountain.

Then, without warning, the monitors in the sec room behind them suddenly exploded, sending out showers of glass to slam against the walls of the room. A heartbeat later the door was ripped from its hinges, followed immediately by the sound of gunfire.

Then Ryan took the second left fork ahead of him, pausing only long enough to wave a brief salute to J.B.

"See you on the other side of this run," the Armorer said.

"Do that," Ryan replied. He turned and raced into the tunnel, Krysty only a half step behind him.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Clove passed through the gate warily, easing through the sliding iron bars. His eyes burned as he stared at Mildred. Then, as he drew closer, lust and curiosity stamped out all

other feelings and emotions.

Mildred let him come, quelling the instinct inside herself to recoil from the young Celt's advances. She didn't want him touching her, nor did she especially like what she had planned for him. However, getting out of the cell required both.

Reaching out to her, Clove cupped one of her breasts timidly.

"Like what you got hold of, Clove?" Mildred asked. She let the desperation inside her block out any remorse or humiliation.

"Yeah," Clove said huskily.

Mildred remained in her seated position, not wanting to do anything to startle the boy. "You just be patient, though. Let me take care of you."

Clove shook his head. "There's no time. Someone could come—"

Mildred grinned up at him as she reached for the front of his breeches and opened them. "*That* is the idea." Then she had his cock in her hand, stroking it firmly.

"Oh, blessed Lugh," Clove said, suddenly sucking in his breath, "that feels so good."

"You ain't felt nothing yet," Mildred promised, shifting.

BOLDT FELT THE PANIC rise in him. The strangers were inside his fortress. Never in all his years had the complex ever been invaded. He allowed in only those whom he wanted in.

"Merlin, close down the nerve center."

Steel plates clanked down over both doors, closing them off from the two points of egress. Farther out in the underground root system, other sections would be shut off, as well.

"Done," the computer responded. Boldt studied the monitors before him. He could easily identify Gehrig's men among the battling seed heralds and Celtic populace. Leaning on

the machines, he forced his breath in and out, maintaining the adrenaline rush. Strong emotion had always been an addiction for him. It was when he most felt like his father.

Boldt searched the screens, watching as the skirmish lines Pepper and his men had set up suddenly gave way in front of the New Londoners' vehicles. "Reference—the people who first breached the integrity of this complex."

"Searching." One of the monitors suddenly started cycling images as Merlin flipped through the banks and cameras available to him.

Boldt watched the carnage unfold on the screen. The fires had spread across the houses, whirling infernos that at once covered over and backlit the struggle. One of the jeeps from New London got too close to a tangle bed. A plant shot out, and as the cameras outside picked up the motion and cataloged it, Boldt saw the poisonous thorn ram deep into the man's throat.

The dead man lost control of the vehicle. It skidded and overturned, flipping and tearing through one of the burning homes. Embers and flaming debris were scattered in all directions, setting off even more fires.

"There are three groups," Merlin replied in the mechanical voice.

"Where?" Boldt demanded.

A map formed on the monitor that the computer had been directly accessing. Boldt recognized the layout at once, realizing the strangers were closer than he'd imagined.

"Sec post 8 has been breached," Merlin said. "Uplinking video now."

"Has the system been shut down at that sec post?"

"Affirmative. Less than five seconds ago. Following primary security programming."

Boldt followed the maze of lines, locating the two groups of bright dots—one paired, the other in a triangular grouping—that were headed in opposite directions. The three were closing in on the cell where the woman was being kept under guard.

The pair was making the turn at the far end of the corridor that would bring them to the outer door walling off the nerve center where Boldt stood. Somehow they'd found him.

"Are there any video uplinks for the other two groups?" the Celt prince asked.

"No. Surveillance is managed by sensor implants in the root walls."

Boldt looked at the approaching two lights. They were too close now for any other defenses to be used to shut them out. Unconsciously he turned and glanced at the steel door closing the room off from that direction. It would hold. Even if they had explosives, it would hold.

And he wasn't going to be there anyway.

He glanced back at the monitor. A window had opened up, showing him strangely garbed men whom he'd never seen before going through the firepit left in the sec post. The way they set up told the Celtic prince that they were no friends of the earlier groups. They looked to be more interested in defending themselves from the strangers who'd been with Mildred Wyeth.

It was all too much for Boldt to puzzle out. None of it would matter after the next few minutes anyway, not once the plague had been set free. The Prince glanced back at the monitors displaying the bloody action taking place out in the valley. With the flickering firelight and the muzzle-flashes from the various weapons, it was impossible to say who was winning.

In the long run the battle was more than Boldt could have hoped for. Ideally the plague would have been released only on the people staying in the valley. But with the seed heralds trapped outside when he released it, as well, and the fact that both the seed heralds and the villagers would know that the valley was no longer inhabitable, they would spread in opposite directions. Their enmity wouldn't die.

The presence of the New Londoners was a gift from whatever gods there might be. Win, lose or draw, the survivors from the battle would flee back to the thorpe, spreading the disease around the British Isles even faster than the fleeing Celts would have. The pestilence would take hold firmly. Boldt knew from his spies that New London was a port city. The plague would have a good chance of establishing itself in a number of areas before anyone even knew it was among them.

"Sound the general alarm," Boldt commanded, "and open the cryo vault."

A harsh Klaxon siren suddenly rent the air in great whoops. The Celtic prince walked forward and stepped through the passageway that appeared in front of him. The tunnel was long and narrow, lighted by the glowing fungus pods. He went into it.

Whoever won the battle outside would have no bearing on his world. Once he was inside one of the cryo chambers, the years would roll away while the plague did its job. The planet would become a blank slate again as far as human life was concerned.

And this time it would be done right. Victor Boldt would see to it himself.

"NO SIGN OF THEM, sir."

Conte had to agree with Turley's assessment. Scanning the interior of the security room, all he saw were the bodies of the guards working at the underground complex. He glanced at Whittaker. "You're sure you heard their voices?"

The rat-faced man looked sullen. He didn't like being doubted. "Sure as I'm hearing you now."

Conte himself had heard nothing. He waved at the smoke obscuring his vision. Tears ran down his face from the burning, but he ignored them. The complex proved Cawdor knew more about high-tech areas than they'd at first surmised. The man was decidedly dangerous.

"Sarge," Henderson called, "I found a tunnel over here."

Conte went over to join the man and found himself peering down the opening barely illuminated by their hand torches. "Cawdor?"

"No sign of him, sir."

Conte flicked his torch back over the dead men in the room, then the empty frames of the computer monitors.

Someone had killed the guards and jammed the door to slow them down.

"People coming," Aames said from his position at the door.

Conte looked at Henderson. "You've got point. The rest of you follow in single file. Aames, you've got the rear." The sergeant was second man through the opening, feeling the downward grade of the tunnel kick in. Getting out was going to be a bitch. But following Cawdor served two purposes. If he caught the man, Conte was determined to see him dead. The up side was that the sergeant didn't figure the Deathlander to be stupid enough to head into a blind alley. Cawdor had to know security would be breathing on his heels. The man thought he had a way out. Conte was sure of that.

KRYSTY FELT Ryan slow before she saw it. So attuned was she to her lover, that she knew there'd been an unexpected obstacle.

"Fireblast!" Ryan swore as he swept his flashlight over the steel surface in front of him.

Metal sang in a heated rush behind them. Fast as she was, her mutie sense giving her an edge her lover didn't have, Ryan was faster.

He brought up the SIG-Sauer in a two-handed grip, firing at the barely discernible motion humming along the ceiling. Brass spilled out, spitting and striking the wall before tumbling to the floor and slithering away.

Less than twenty yards distant, another of the sec drones went to pieces in a flaming gust. It was the third one they'd encountered since taking the latest branch of the corridor.

"There'll be more of the bastard things," Ryan said, turning his attention back to the steel door blocking their progress. "If we stay here, we're sitting ducks until one of them chills us. And we've blazed a trail for those White Sands soldiers to follow if they've a mind to. Don't much care for our chances, but we'll make the most of them all the same."

Krysty approached the door, her blaster still in her hand.

"You remember another way?" Ryan asked. "A way around, mebbe?"

She shook her head. Her hand slid across the smooth, chill surface of the steel. It felt greasy, solid, with real depth. "No." Her voice was hoarse even in her own ears.

"Then we've got no choice. We'll go back, see if the others got Mildred, then try to get the hell out of here."

"What about the plague?" Krysty asked.

"Can't chill what you can't get to," Ryan replied. "And a man nine days dead himself can't do much of anything at all."

But the red-haired woman knew her lover was upset, as well. He was just more pragmatic in his outlook, knew where his reach ended and didn't try to foolishly exceed it. "All those people out there. Not even knowing what this monster has in mind." She felt her rage growing inside her.

"I know. Mebbe there's another way."

"Yeah, but possibly no time." Krysty curled her fingers inside the crack where the steel plate met the door frame. There was barely enough room for her to force her fingertips inside. It was painful keeping them there, and the pressure was complete enough to cut off circulation.

"We can try," Ryan said.

"Gaia, help me," Krysty whispered forcefully, drawing on the secret teachings her mother had given her. "Give me the strength to protect the Earth Mother and the innocents who succor her."

Krysty was never able to adequately describe how the power came into her. But it did come, rolling in to fill her with liquid fire until it was a part of every fiber of her being.

She set herself, holstering her blaster, then placed one foot against the door frame and shoved the other hand to join the first in the crack. The pain was the first thing to go away. She pulled with all her strength.

With a shriek that sounded like a lost and tortured soul, the steel door began to peel back. Light flooded into the dark tunnel.

CLOVE WAS IN A STATE of bliss, and Mildred knew the time had come. The sudden squall of the Klaxon siren sounding the alarm almost caught her off guard, though.

Startled, the young Celt started to pull away. "What's going—?"

Mildred closed her hand tight over his hard cock, making sure she had his scrotum. With only a little guilt, she squeezed his balls tightly together. It wasn't enough to rupture them, but it was enough to bring severe pain to the guard.

With a shrill scream of fear and incredible pain, Clove reached for his trapped cock.

Mildred didn't release it. Her escape depended on it. She gave a final squeeze that rendered the younger man unconscious.

Pushing herself to her feet, Mildred hiked up her pants and streaked for the door. Clove had left his rifle there, and she took it up at once, slipping off the safety.

Mildred figured guards would show up in short order. There was an ammo belt for the rifle on a chair against the wall. She pulled it over her shoulder, then tried to open the cabinet where she'd seen an earlier guard store her pistol.

The cabinet was locked.

Moving back, she shouldered the rifle and aimed at the lock. She squeezed the trigger smoothly, taking the recoil expertly against her shoulder.

Sparks jumped from the cabinet. The bullet left ravaged metal behind as it whined out the other end of the row of cabinets.

This time the door opened after she yanked on it. The ZKR 551 Czech pistol was inside, wrapped in her gun belt. She wasted no time in draping it around her hips.

Footsteps warned her of the approaching sec men. Two of them entered the lockup area as she faded to the side of the room and dropped the rifle into position. She didn't try anything fancy, just dropped the sights over the center of the guard who entered first.

The lead man took in the unconscious form of Clove lying in the cell, both hands holding on to his genitals as if for salvation, and the open cell door. He came around, going into a crouch as he brought the gun in a sweep with him.

Mildred fired without hesitation.

The bullet caught the lead man in the abdomen with enough force to bend him over and send him stumbling back into his partner. Both men went down in a confused tangle of

arms and legs.

"Throw the blasters away," Mildred ordered, "or I'll chill you where you lay." She kept them covered with the rifle.

The second man tossed his pistol away without objection. The injured man kept his arms wrapped around his stomach, blood glistening on his clothing. "You shot me, Ivory Ginnifer take your soul and damn your eyes!"

"Do it again if I have to," Mildred promised. "Breathing or chilled, it doesn't make any difference to me. I count three and you're still carrying, you're dead right there."

The second man reached forward and stripped the other man's weapon, then threw it away, as well.

"Get into the cell," Mildred ordered. Common sense told her it would be better to chill all three of the guards, including Clove, before she took off. It would have at least tipped the odds in her favor a little. But with the cell handy, she had the option.

The uninjured guard had to help the wounded one inside, dragging him. A blood slick smeared behind them.

Once they were inside, Mildred slammed the door shut. She turned and ran down the hallway, cursing because she should have searched the guards for a light.

Unexpectedly a torch beam flashed over her, blinding her. She brought up the rifle, intending to go down shooting. She aimed for the center of the light.

Then J.B.'s voice said, "Don't shoot, Milly. Last I heard, we were on your side."

Suddenly Mildred found herself laughing, and it surprised her that tears were running down her face as she hurried to her friends.

VICTOR BOLDT HAD only been in the cryo vault a half-dozen times since he'd reawakened into the world to find his father dead.

Computers and machinery covered two of the walls, extending up every inch of the twenty feet until they met the ceiling. Stainless steel gleamed, reflecting a panoramic

rainbow of colors from dials, switches and buttons. Most of them he couldn't fathom at all. The systems were controlled through Merlin, and through that cybernetic intelligence, ultimately by Victor Boldt.

The cryo chambers were built into the third wall, to his right and behind him. All he had to do was activate the plague program, then crawl into the cryo crypt and let Merlin put him away for the next few decades.

He walked to the fourth wall, which held a hydroponics vat that stretched nearly a hundred feet back, carved from the rock walls outside the root branch. Thick, nutrient-rich liquid filled the various chambers, throwing out smells that were both intoxicating and repellent.

The vats were seven feet deep, the bedding grounds for so many of his father's hybrids and creations. The liquid was soupy, greenish black and sometimes bubbling white froth.

Boldt climbed the ladder beside one of the glass sides, ignoring the churn of vegetable matter only inches from his face. At the top he stepped out onto the narrow runway going across the heart of the hydroponics vats. Hoses and nutrient tubes depended from the ceiling in a spiderweb of chemical support.

The hydroponics experiments had been his father's greatest love. It was here, in this self-contained world, that he'd had control over all the variables that turned life into a thing of chance and random mutation.

Boldt stood out over the genetic stew. He could feel eyes upon him, knowing his arrival had been noticed, then feeling guilty because his visits had been so few. But he'd been told to stay away, to leave things alone.

And, in truth, knowing what lay here, he'd been happy to do that.

He gazed down into the swirling organic mix and fought the urge to wretch. The old fear, from the time he'd been a child looking at some of his father's creations, returned. He felt it crawling under his skin.

"Father," he said, "I have come." He waited. The lights were dim across the hydroponics tanks, mimicking a night cycle. Mostly long shadows lay undisturbed.

At first it seemed as though nothing would happen. It was possible. Years had passed

since the last time he'd been here. Still, Merlin would have notified him if something had gone wrong.

Then, incredibly, a vine-veined bubble oozed to the top of the hydroponics glop. It popped at the surface, throwing root-haired tentacles into the air ten feet up. In a matter of seconds the tentacles wrapped themselves into a vaguely humanoid shape, complete with a head, chest and arms. The legs were hinted at by definition, but bled back into the hydroponics glop. Chunks of the glop shot up the tentacles, fleshing out the hairy root infrastructure.

The thing looked nothing at all like the elder Boldt, but there was a presence that had always been there. It had been one of his father's most macabre experiments, even by the precedents already established: a combination of plant cells and the elder Boldt's own DNA, fired by solar energy stored in the hydroponics tank and aided by a computerized memory dependent on Merlin. It was intended to be the first evolution of an environmentally correct life-form. If successful, the elder Boldt had intended to replace humankind altogether.

"I am here, Victor," the plant-thing said.

Boldt's mouth was dry. "The plague, Father. It is time to set off the plague."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Ryan peered through the gap in the steel door Krysty had left. Already the mutant rush of incredible strength was leaving her. Spots of high color dotted her cheeks, and her arms trembled.

Often, the aftermath of calling on the power left her depleted of strength. Occasionally it hadn't seemed to affect her at all.

"You okay?" he asked gruffly, raking his gaze across the computer systems.

"I will be, lover," she said in a shaky voice. "We've got to be moving."

"Can you?"

"Yeah."

Ryan nodded, then stepped through the gap. The only movements were the lights racing across the machinery and the images flickering on the monitor screens. He spotted the door against the far wall with his second look, his perspective blunted by the equipment.

Ryan crossed the room, his eye smarting some with the adjustment to the greater light in the nerve center. He switched off the flashlight and slipped it into a pocket.

The mat-trans unit was in the corner where he remembered seeing it in the monitor view. All it would take was a matter of minutes to get the others. Then they could make the jump back to Deathlands, leave this mess behind.

Except there was the matter of the plague.

A heartbeat later he was down the tunnel, going slower than he would have had Krysty not been so exhausted. He'd just reached a sharp corner, where the tunnel sloped down, when the bullet tore through the air above his head and bounced off the roof, scarring the fibrous surface.

Ryan turned, taking three quick steps back to bring Krysty down with him. Her reflexes were slowed, coming back online with real effort. He squeezed off quick rounds, backing off the sec guards who suddenly filled the mouth of the tunnel they'd passed through.

The bullets sent the sec crew dodging back. "Can't stay here," Ryan said. "You're going to have to move on. I'll cover you." He didn't like it that she was going on unprotected, either, but there seemed to be a shortage of choices.

"I know, lover."

Ryan fed a fresh magazine into the SIG-Sauer and snapped the slide to strip the top round. "You tell me when." He hefted the Steyr and managed to snap off a round that caught one of the sec men in the chest, driving the guy back and down.

Krysty dropped to her knees, her eyes rolled back in her head. "Oh, Gaia, he's talking to the Other! The Other is going to set loose the plague! We've got to stop him!"

Ryan fired two more rounds, covering the red-haired woman with his body. He felt her convulsing against him, her strength almost more than he could handle.

"Gaia, Ryan, can't you sense it? Can't you sense the Other?"

Ryan didn't know what she was talking about. But one thing he did know—they were definitely between a rock and a hard place. Death lay ahead and behind them.

"I SEE THEM!" Turley radioed. In the empty silence filling the tunnel, his voice carried more than Conte would have liked. Of course, there was the matter of the lights they were carrying, too.

The sergeant scanned the intersection up ahead, trying to see which way Turley was looking. "Where?"

"Up ahead and to the left."

"How far?"

"Seventy, eighty yards."

"They know you're there?"

"Don't appear to."

"Okay," Conte said, "let's follow them, see if we can box them in somewhere and terminate them." In a way he was surprised Cawdor was going to make it this easy. "How many of them do you see?"

"Four."

"Cawdor?"

"Doesn't appear to be among them."

"Close in. He can't be far." Conte moved with his team, listening as Whittaker tracked the

sec teams that were vectoring in on them. If Cawdor didn't have a way out figured, the sergeant knew it was possible they were all dead men.

"BEING FOLLOWED," Jak said.

"Already noticed them," J.B. replied. The Armorer was running point position, but the group was so close, a couple of strides and he could have reached back and touched the albino.

"I, too, thought I saw them," Doc said. "And now, John Barrymore, what is to be done about it? Should we try to make some kind of stand?"

"No," the Armorer said. "Won't help Ryan or Krysty. For now we got a lead on them. We work on keeping it."

Another turn, though, and he found the way partially blocked by the buckled steel door. A sudden wash of gunfire coming from inside the room beyond whipped over him.

The companions went to ground, drawing their weapons. Mildred came up close beside J.B., leaving Doc and Jak paired off. The gunfire trapped inside the room continued.

J.B. got close enough to look through the open space of the buckled door. There were five sec men inside the room. Another was stretched out holding his stomach, dying slow, but getting it done just the same. The Armorer didn't need two guesses to figure who the guards were shooting at. He lifted the M-4000 scattergun to his shoulder and sighted in, ready to take advantage of the fact the gunners didn't know they were around. Yet.

"Shoot ahead," Jak whispered, "know behind."

"Yeah, but I'm aiming to shoot us out of a cross-fire situation," J.B. said. "Providing it can be done. 'Sides, those White Sands soldiers start blasting at us, could be the guards up ahead will think there's more of us."

Jak nodded.

"You just stand ready to take up some slack at that end," the Armorer said. "Things look like they're about to get a whole lot more interesting. Doc?"

"Ready, John Barrymore."

J.B. settled his finger over the trigger, taking up slack. "Mildred?"

"Yeah." The woman had been curiously quiet after they'd gotten her moving in the direction Krysty and Ryan had gone.

J.B. wasn't a man to pry. She wanted to talk about it, she would. He'd never ask. "Ready?"

"Sure."

"I got the man at twelve o'clock standing in the doorway. Going to work my way left."

"I'll take the right." Mildred took a two-handed shooting stance.

"There'll be no time for a reload."

"I won't need it," she replied.

Settling the sights, J.B. stroked the trigger. The load of flechettes streaked forward. The man's head exploded like a pumpkin, spraying blood over the walls and his comrades. Though they were shocked and caught off guard, it didn't take long to react to the threat that had formed on their flank.

Then there wasn't anything left to do but the dying and the killing.

"THEY'RE HERE!" Boldt shouted, looking back down the tunnel. He gripped the railing of the platform overlooking the hydroponics vats.

The plant-thing turned its head. Something wet and viscous, centrally located in its face as eyes would be, glimmered for a moment as if it were focusing. "There is one among them who knows. This person is a part of the earth, chained to her rhythms. We had not expected this. She senses us somehow."

"Merlin!" Boldt screamed.

"On-line," the computer's mechanical voice answered.

"Kill the intruders!"

"Affirmative." Gun ports opened up along the walls, revealing the wicked snouts of weapons.

Boldt watched as two shadows came stumbling into the vault room. The wall-mounted machine guns opened fire, blazing a line of bullets toward the two targets.

"The plague countdown has begun," the plant-thing said. "Five minutes and counting."

Boldt glanced over his shoulder, seeing the red LED numbers flicker into being on the computer ahead of him. He shifted his gaze back to the cryo chambers, then threw himself over the railing.

RYAN HELPED KRYSTY RUN, taking almost half her weight as he pushed hard, shoving them through the other end of the tunnel and into the room beyond. The machine gun fire that greeted them wasn't totally unexpected.

The bullets slapped against the steel floor. He charted the movement of the man leaping from the cabinets of water to his side, and the red LED readout ahead of him— 4:55. It didn't take a genius to figure out the why of it.

On his knees, bringing up the SIG-Sauer, Ryan protected the red-haired woman with his body. He sighted on the machine gun sweeping toward them. The thing was mounted on gimbals, and possibly they were the weak point.

He fired through half the clip, chipping away at the gun port and leaving scars on the edges. Abruptly the machine-gun fire dropped away, sliding out of the groove it had been following.

"Krysty!" he yelled, surging up from the floor. From their present position, none of the other weapons could hit them.

"I'm here, lover," Krysty said, but her voice was so low it was barely audible above the boom and crash of the weapons fire. "Can't help much. The Other's here, too. He wants in. Wants inside my head. Gaia, it's so hard to keep him out. Trying to put down roots."

Ryan didn't want to leave her, but he had no choice. The running man had covered half the floor, and there was still the threat of the sec men that might come pouring from the tunnel. Ryan had recognized J.B.'s and Mildred's handi-work at the other end, emphasized by the shotgun flechettes that suddenly sprouted from the wall after passing through the first man's head.

Shoving the blaster behind the nearest computer bank, Ryan gripped the other edge with his free hand and started yanking. The Steyr banged against his side, hanging from its sling.

It took real effort, but the computer bank came tumbling down. Sparks flared into bright, brief life as the connections parted.

Ryan shoved the hunk of machinery around, creating a shield that Krysty could take cover behind. He pulled her behind it, feeling the metal shudder under the impact of bullets from another machine gun.

"Fireblast!" Ryan swore, glancing at the LED readout—4:03. He glanced at Krysty. "I've got to go."

"Go." She held a hand to her temples, her other hand still on her pistol.

He didn't hesitate, picking up the motion of the other man immediately. He swung in pursuit. Before he took two steps, he felt as if he'd jumped out in front of a fully loaded wag. His breath left his lungs, but he turned, fighting for balance, feeling the blaster leave his fingertips in the sudden onslaught of pain.

A bellow of rage rocked hot and heavy in Ryan's ear, punctuated by gunshots that could only have been near misses.

Staggering, letting his reflexes take over for him, Ryan pushed himself back. He levered a forearm under the bigger man's chin hard enough to break teeth.

"Fucker!" the man screamed as blood dribbled down his chin. He brought his pistol around, still trying to center on his target.

Ryan threw his arm up, hearing Krysty's .38 pistol bang in quick succession, and blocked the big man's gun. The weapon went off with deafening reports.

The big man was Pepper, head of Boldt's seed heralds. Ryan recognized him now. He gripped the coldheart's wrist, keeping the weapon pointed away from him. The bullets passed within inches, then the hammer fell on empty brass.

Water, thick and syrupy, splashed against the backs of Ryan's legs when he moved back. A brief glance showed him the seed herald's bullets had blasted holes in the sides of the hydroponics tanks.

"You're going to die, little man," Pepper promised. He shifted his hand on his weapon, preparing to use it like a club.

Ryan drew the panga smoothly. He rocked on his feet, neatly avoiding the bigger man's swing. The flat crack of the gun barrel slamming into the vat tank was drowned out almost immediately by Pepper's screams when Ryan opened his abdomen up with the slick kiss of the panga.

Intestines slid out onto the floor and coiled around Pepper's feet. Still, his reflexes made him dangerous. One of his huge hands came out and suddenly gripped Ryan by the face.

Ryan brought the panga up in a flashing arc, unable to quickly disengage from the big man. He felt the sharp blade bite into Pepper's wrist, and a torrent of blood washed over him. He tried to set his feet but slipped on a length of intestine before he could regain his balance. The back of his head smashed against the hydroponics vat with enough force to shove it through.

Cottony blackness threatened to overwhelm Ryan's senses while the thick, vile water, slightly warmer than human skin, poured over his body. The taste was noxious, almost as salty as blood and a lot more greasy.

He barely made out the shape of the big man through the bottle green coloring of the water. The edges of the break in the glass were sharp, uneven, jagged teeth waiting to rend his flesh. He couldn't simply duck back through.

Pepper was still bellowing in pain, one arm looped around his waist trying in vain to hold his guts in. He was a dead man walking and he knew it.

Without warning, wet and slimy tendrils wrapped themselves around Ryan, then started to pull him more deeply into the container, sucking him into the ooze. He kept his mouth shut and slit his eye. He felt as if he were being dragged through too-warm molasses.

Already his lungs were aching for his next breath.

The glop poured out around him, slicking his clothing and making it easier for the tendrils to pull him inside the hydroponics chamber. He fought against the strong pull, grabbing fistfuls of the gelatinous tendrils. They felt like phlegm even in the water, breaking easily. But there were always more, sucking, wrapping and writhing around his chest.

As he twisted and tried to break free, he saw a sudden matting cover the hole that he'd been pulled through. In heartbeats the leak had been plugged. Other tendrils stopped up the scattered bullet holes. The watery nutrient level had dropped almost a foot, judging from the mark on the glass wall just out of his reach.

Ryan raked the panga through the tendrils. His efforts were slowed by the immersion in the liquid. But the tendrils parted at the touch of the blade, floating loose and limp once they'd been amputated. Righting himself with a sweep of his hand, he put his feet against the bottom of the vat and shoved himself up and forward, trying for the nearest wall.

He came up out of the nutrient bath in a rush and managed to loop one arm over the side of the tank. The LED counter showed 3:27.

"Ryan!" Krysty yelled. She stood, her gaze fixed hypnotically on the hydroponics chamber.

A slithering sound turned Ryan's head. The plant-thing hovering on its stand of vines came closer, seeming almost to fly in the shadows.

Krysty fired the .38 pistol in measured beats, emptying the cylinder. None of the bullets missed the plant-thing. Also, none of them did it any harm.

Ryan stared into the viscous eyes, saw the alien intelligence radiating hatred at him.

Suddenly the plant-thing opened its mouth. A razor-edged thorn, like the ones on the tangles, came shooting out, hissing straight at Ryan's face.

He dropped under the nutrient level. An instant later the thorn splintered the glass where his head had been.

Ryan swung the panga, and the blade easily sliced through the vine. A two-foot length

dangled down the side of the glass, floating on the liquid.

Breathing hard, having a difficult time sucking in air that wasn't filled with droplets of the nutrient-laden water, Ryan grabbed the edge of the tank again, then heaved himself onto the metal platform running around the edge. His hands, feet, elbows and knees were slick, making it hard for him to get upright.

The plant-thing was already shifting again, regrouping itself. The time was down to 3:07. A wicked smile seemed to take form on the plant-thing's lower face, splitting the vines and mucus material. Another thorn materialized, edging out in preparation to be propelled.

J.B. rushed into the room, followed immediately by Mildred, Doc and Jak. Krysty was dropping fresh rounds into her pistol.

"The glass wall," the red-haired woman said to the companions. "Take it out. In order to stop the plague, we've got to kill the Other."

The Armorer set to at once, blasting out rounds from the scattergun. Huge chunks of the glass wall disappeared at once. Mildred added her own firepower, then Doc upped the ante with the .63 scattergun. Jak guarded the tunnel, firing measured shots back down the way they'd come.

Huge sections of the glass wall disappeared, shattered into gleaming shards. The carnage was too complete to allow the plant-thing to dam up the holes. It shifted, turning its malignant attention onto the puny humans that had dared attack it.

There was a brief pause, then the nutrient bath erupted in a foaming spray of activity. Dozens of rooted tentacles broke the surface, an army bearing thorny weapons.

"Dark night!" J.B. breathed, thumbing fresh rounds into the shotgun.

Doc took deliberate aim, then fired the Le Mat blaster. The .63 shotgun charge took the plant-thing in the upper left chest but didn't seem to do any damage. "By the Three Kennedys!"

A tidal wave rose up over the metal platform where Ryan stood, forced by the sudden surge of the plant-thing tearing itself loose from the root bed. He went with the water, vaulting over the side. Once he landed, almost on top of the gutted seed herald, a quick

step left him with the SIG-Sauer in his fist again.

He shook out the nearly depleted clip and shoved another one home as the noxious water swirled around his boots. Keeping the plant-thing in sight, he narrowly avoided being impaled by another thorn that came rocketing out of its mouth.

Ryan fired three shots, spacing them across the plant-thing's chest. Even in the uncertain light, he could see the holes appear in the greenish black flesh. In an eyeblink they covered over.

The clock read 2:51.

The spilled nutrient bath rolled across the floor, shorting out some of the computer banks when it touched them. The plant-thing drew away from the sparks, bringing an arm across its incomplete face.

It had a weakness. The realization filled Ryan with a savage satisfaction. "Jak," he called.

The albino looked at him. Conversation was made difficult by the roar and splash of the nutrient waters and the collapse of the computer systems.

"The flare gun you found at the White Sands redoubt," Ryan said. He held out an empty hand.

Jak reached into his pack, then flipped the waterproof case for the pistol toward Ryan.

Leathering the SIG-Sauer, Ryan caught the case, bringing it in close so he wouldn't drop it. With the rush of waters swirling through the room, it could wash away and be lost in a matter of seconds.

The LED readout was down to 2:41.

Ryan opened the case. Inside was the flare gun and three cartridges.

"The Other won't rest until we're dead, lover." Krysty was less than a yard away, her haggard gaze resting fully on the approaching plant-thing. She was reloading her pistol methodically.

"We aren't dead yet," Ryan replied, snapping the flare pistol closed. "Just you hang on." He spun, leveling the weapon before him.

The plant-thing was twenty yards out and closing, bristling with the thorned appendages that came with it.

"The bastard thing wants me, lover. I can hear its thoughts inside my head. Somehow it knows about my mutie powers. It knows."

Ryan aimed for the center of the plant-thing, then stroked the trigger. The flare leaped free of the barrel, streaking across the distance in an eye blink, trailing out a smoky haze behind it.

Once the flare embedded in the plant flesh, it burned white-hot. Computer-amplified screams from the plant-thing filled the chamber. It stopped all forward movement, wilting in place. Tendrils shot out of its chest, dipping down to start sucking up the water around it. The flare hissed.

Reloading quickly, Ryan fired the remaining two flares into the thing's chest. They burned more holes and added to the screams. The plant-thing wilted even further, but gave no indication of dying.

Ryan glanced at the clock—2:31. "Boldt," he said, looking at J.B.

"Don't know," the Armorer said. "Wasn't here when we got here."

"Who's in the tunnel?"

Jak was still trading lead with someone, though the forays weren't very industrious.

"Those White Sands soldiers," J.B. replied.

"They are a tenacious lot, Ryan," Doc commented. "Filled with vim and vigor."

Across the room the plant-thing showed signs of regaining its strength. Ryan watched it, his stomach cold and hard. A glance at Krysty at his side showed that she was pale, covered with perspiration that ran in large drops.

"It wants me to help it," Krysty said. "Wants me to kill you." Her pistol trembled in her hands. "Gaia, help me, Ryan, but I don't think I can hold it off much longer." A fine trickle of blood ran down her upper lip from her nose.

Ryan saw the sheen suddenly dilate inside the red-haired woman's eyes. Without warning, Krysty brought the gun around toward him.

"I'm sorry, lover," she said in a barely audible whisper.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Reacting instantly, Ryan slapped the woman with the back of his fist, catching her flush on the jawline.

Krysty dropped, unconscious.

"Take her, Doc."

"Of course." Doc knelt and took up the woman, struggling with her weight and dragging her to safety as much as carrying her.

"Fools," the plant-thing said. "She will be mine. She has an affinity for me and my kind that you will never understand." It approached but seemed leery, as if afraid of the burning flares that could possibly still strike it.

"Can't stay here," J.B. said.

"I know." Ryan swiveled his head, looking for options.

The LED continued without falter despite the ruin scattered around the room—2:20.

Ryan took Krysty by one arm, leaving Doc the other. "Fall back while it's scared." He started forward, heading farther back into the room.

The plant-thing gathered its strength, getting more confident.

Ryan concentrated on the cryo chambers. So far they seemed still operational. He didn't much figure they would hold the plant-thing off, but they could give the group a more defensible position.

"No closer!" a voice roared.

Ryan froze in his tracks, barely able to make out Victor Boldt's features in the shadows.

Blood traced the patrician looks, and his hair was plastered to his head. Madness gleamed in his eyes above the sights of the pistol he held. "You people have destroyed everything," he snarled. "Do you realize what you've done?"

"I reckon we've stopped you from killing some folks," Ryan said grimly.

"You haven't stopped anything, you pathetic moron. As long as my father is alive, that plague is going to be released anyway. You've only succeeded in killing me along with you."

"Somehow," Ryan said, "I can't rightly say I feel too bad about that. Mildred."

"Say when," the woman replied.

"Stop it!" Boldt roared. "Or I'll shoot you right where—"

"When," Ryan said.

Boldt got off one round, which cut through the loose material of Doc's frock coat. Then a single round from Mildred's pistol punched a hole through the man's forehead. Only a small amount of blood appeared as the slack body dropped into the foot-deep, swirling water.

"No!" The ululating cry echoed within the vault, cracking some of the speakers used to translate whatever means the plant-thing had to communicate. The emotion was raw, blistering in its intensity.

"Move," Ryan ordered. There were no more rounds left in the flare gun to hold it at bay.

The water level in the room had stopped gaining, and now swirled around their legs just below the knees. Machinery and computer components continued shorting out, unleashing myriad bright sparks that soared like streaking comets.

"Door," Jak said, indicating the steel door that almost blended into the wall at the side of the cryo chambers. It was partially open, water lapping at the dark interior.

"Check it out," Ryan replied. He left Krysty in Doc's care.

The clock read 1:53.

They were all running out of time. He glanced at the freezing reservoirs. "Those are full of liquid nitrogen."

J.B. nodded.

"I'm figuring that bastard plant won't like the cold any more than it liked fire."

"Could be," the Armorer said. "But we're going to need a can opener to get into it."

"Mebbe I can get one."

"Ryan."

He turned back to look at Jak.

The albino jerked a thumb upward. "Trapdoor. Goes to mat-trans above."

Ryan worked the spatial in his head, discovering that the way the room turned put them under the room above. The tunnel had twisted and dipped down as it progressed. "Been there?"

"Been there. Door opens easy. Soldier boys there, though."

"Can you get up inside without being seen?"

Jak looked at him reproachfully.

"Get it done, then. Lock those people out."

Jak vanished.

"Somebody figured themselves a hidey-hole," the Armorer said.

"This whole Byzantine complex with its secrets and the prejudicial nature of the society that was constructed clearly shows evidences of a paranoid mind at the helm, dear Ryan," Doc said. "A secondary route to the mat-trans unit, easily the most powerful of escape routes, should come as no shock at all."

Ryan didn't even try to puzzle it out. The general gist was that the old man agreed. Ryan looked at J.B. "Get everybody up there, ready to go in but not where you can be seen."

"What are you going to be doing?" J.B. asked.

"Trying to cut a deal with the devil we know," Ryan replied. "Put the ace on the line and see if we can't deal out this plant bastard." He was moving before his friend could argue.

The plant-thing had halted beside Boldt's corpse. Tendrils formed, sprouting from the main body, and picked up the dead man.

"Victor!" The computerized voice carried true anguish, but there was a feeling of distance in it.

Ryan ran, splashing through the water, knowing he was going to attract the creature's attention. He was drenched by the nutrient-laden water. He didn't let himself think about what kind of bacteria might be invading his body even now.

The LED now read 1:27.

He paused near the corner of the tunnel mouth, leading back out to where the White Sands soldiers were holed up. The crash and thunder of gunfire indicated they had problems of their own. The seed heralds didn't know Boldt was dead and were continuing the fight.

Peering down the tunnel, Ryan saw that the water level stopped twelve yards up the incline. The tunnel also twisted enough to provide some cover—as long as the White Sands team didn't decide to suddenly charge down.

The plant-thing came at him, sprouting more of the thorn-tipped tendrils from its body. The rage it expressed was inarticulate, but forced a booming, buzzing hum from the speaker system. It surged through the water, aiming itself at Ryan.

Unlimbering the Steyr, Ryan headed into the tunnel, which didn't leave him much room to maneuver—especially if he was wrong about the plant-thing's ability to leave the fluid environment.

The bend he was aiming for was thirty yards up. Ryan hoped none of the tendrils the plant-thing exuded would reach that far. If it stretched that distance, the weight of the tendrils should work against the thing. Maybe.

Ryan hunkered down against the bend in the tunnel. Seconds were passing, and the LED was counting them down—1:09.

The plant-thing advanced, whipping its tendrils in a frenzy, continuing the pained wailing. The slithering tendrils slapped all around Ryan, and he kept the panga bared and at the ready. But it halted at the water's edge, obviously reluctant to step away from the nutrient fluid. Though it tried to shoot the thorn-tipped tendrils out to reach him, gravity and the distance were too great. They fell yards short of the mark.

Ryan turned his attention in the other direction in time to see one of the White Sands soldiers break cover and attempt to sprint down the corridor. Bracing the Steyr across his other forearm, with the panga at the ready, Ryan ripped off a half-dozen shots all around the soldier, intentionally missing him.

The soldier looked almost comical as he halted his headlong plunge and reversed direction.

Ryan fired three more rounds, close enough to let whoever was watching know he could have taken the runner down at any point. "It's Ryan Cawdor!" he yelled.

There was a moment of hesitation. "What do you want, Cawdor?"

Ryan watched the plant-thing. It held its position, blocking the way back. "Who's in

charge at that end?"

"Conte," a man's voice called back. "Sergeant Conte."

"Well, Sergeant, it appears you've got your tit in the wringer."

"How do you figure? From here it looks like we got you pinned down."

The gunfire at the other end of the tunnel had died down slightly. It was possible the White Sands team had pushed the sec men back, or perhaps killed enough of them to make the others find business elsewhere.

"I can see how you'd think that," Ryan said. "Problem is, the guy who ran this place has got a plague device programmed to deliver its payload in less than a minute."

"You're lying," Conte countered.

"Wouldn't waste my breath or the time," Ryan replied. "You noticed the civil war breaking loose outside when you came in?"

There was no answer.

"Boldt was going to save mebbe twenty or thirty people when he set the plague loose," Ryan said. "The rest of them were going to die from it, used as carriers to spread it even more. The men holding the short straws they'd been given didn't much like the voting arrangements."

"Given that what you're saying is true," Conte said, "why are you talking to me?"

"I need something from you."

"What?"

"Plas ex. If you got any."

"Plas ex?"

"Explosives."

Conte laughed. "Sounds to me like I'd be financing your escape. The way I see it now, we've got you pinned down in that room. The mat-trans unit you need is in this room. I don't know why you're there."

"The plague," Ryan reminded him. "If it gets loose, a lot of people are going to die."

"Didn't figure you for the moral philanthropist, Cawdor."

"No reason you should. But some of those people getting killed could be mine. I don't hold with that."

"How can I believe you?"

"You taken a glance down this tunnel, Conte?"

"A peep, now and again."

"Take a good, long one now."

"How do I know you won't take my head off when I do?"

"Could have killed your man just a minute ago. I chose not to."

"What if you're just waiting for a shot at bigger game?"

Ryan glanced back at the tangled mass of the plant-thing. "I get hard up for some big game, got all I need already here. How about I step out first? Show of faith."

"It'll be a start."

Ryan forced out his breath, dropping the muzzle of the Steyr alongside his leg. The others should be ready to take over the mat-trans unit back in the upstairs room. Either way it played for him, they had a chance of getting away.

He stepped out into the open, feeling the gun sights settle over him. The plant-thing roared its rage behind him.

"I'm here."

A slim brown-haired man stepped into view farther up the tunnel.

"You're Conte?" Ryan asked.

"Yeah."

"You see that thing over my shoulder?"

"Yeah."

"Somehow it's wired into the computer systems in the room back this way. You see the LED readout?"

"Sure."

"When that hits zero, the plague will be jettisoned into the underground water running from here to the oceans. There's no cure. Stuff's left over from the predark days, and tempered to be mighty vicious. If it does what it's supposed to, within a generation all human life on this planet will be chilled. I don't figure your CO would want it to go that way."

"Then kill the damn thing."

"Tried. Bullets don't faze it. Flares shook it up a bit."

"And explosives? Are you hoping to blow it up?"

"No, but I got a plan."

The other man stood quietly, thinking despite the occasional crack of small-arms fire behind him. "And if I don't have the explosives?"

"Then I guess we're both shit out of luck," Ryan said.

"What have you got?" Conte demanded.

Ryan let him have it. If the man hadn't asked, it meant there were no explosives. But Conte was playing it safe, buying in. "Liquid-nitrogen tanks," Ryan answered. "I set the explosives, the tanks rupture, and that bastard plant gets a dose of instant Ice Age."

"Where does that leave you?" Conte asked.

"Right where I am already."

"You've still got to make it past me," the sergeant said. "I don't intend that you should do that."

"Kind of had it figured that way," Ryan said. "But you're going to have to shit or get off the pot. Chron's ticking."

"We've got some explosives, but if you think about using them against us, you'll be dead before you can."

"We wouldn't be having this little chat if I wasn't serious about the plague," Ryan said. "Me and mine, we'd have already used that mat-trans unit and gotten the hell out of here. That cross your mind any while you been thinking?"

"Some."

"What's it going to be?"

Conte gestured to one of his men, then took up the backpack he was given. "You've got your explosives, Cawdor." He threw the backpack.

The canvas bag made it most of the way down the tunnel, then hit the floor and started skidding.

Ryan stuck out a foot and stopped it. His guts knotted up as he squatted and caught it up, his hands diving inside. It wouldn't have been hard to just blow the bastard thing up once it got near him, and maybe it was something he would have done himself.

Inside, though, the plas ex was unwired. A single detonator was in the side pocket.

"You can't give the bastard that stuff," one of Conte's men said.

"Shut up, Whittaker," Conte ordered. "There's no reason for that man to be out there unless what he says is true."

"No fucking plague is going to kill us. Not after what Calypso did to us. It might kill everybody else, but not us. We could start the world over. The major would take that tack. If there is a disease, it would wipe out any opposition we'd face."

Ryan didn't wait to hear any more. Whatever internal problems the White Sands team was having were theirs. He raised his voice, ducking back into the protected area. "One other thing I'd like to ask, Conte."

"What's that?"

"I need to get by this bastard thing." Ryan settled the backpack over his shoulder, clutching the detonator in his fist.

"You said bullets don't hurt it."

"No, but I noticed earlier you people have got grenade launchers on those rifles of yours. Figure if you hit it with a round of white heat, it might at least be distracted."

"You're standing damn close to the impact area, Cawdor."

"That's my problem." Ryan readied himself, watching the curling and snapping tendrils. "And there isn't much choice."

"I've got phosphorus rounds."

"Tell me when you're ready." Ryan inhaled deeply, pulling as much oxygen into his system as he could, preparing for the increased demands he was going to put on his body.

The plant-thing was lunging at him, and thorn-tipped tendrils whipped through the air.

"Ready," Conte called.

"Do it," Ryan told him. He heard the basso whump of the M-203, then the 40 mm

warhead detonated against the plant-thing. White fire wrapped around it, casting off enough heat that it came close to baking Ryan with it.

The plant-thing shrielled in hurt and terror, collapsing in on itself and curling into the water.

Ryan knew it wasn't going to be enough to kill the mass, but the white heat would hopefully leave it disoriented long enough for him to get by. He pushed himself out of concealment, running for all he was worth, the Steyr and the backpack thumping against his back and sides.

His senses, honed in the Deathlands, warned him of the approaching carnage from behind. He leaped, throwing himself into a dive, arching his body to take him under the brackish, nutrient-laden water.

No sooner did the liquid close over him than a second explosion hit the surface just to his left. If he hadn't veered his course, it would have caught him dead center.

The phosphorus round sent an angry cloud of heat and light coiling through the liquid, hot enough to scald Ryan and bright enough to blind him had he kept his eye open. He swam deep, clawing his way along the stainless-steel floor, letting his memory be his guide.

He found the corner marking the entrance into the cryo chambers. He shrugged off the backpack, gathering the straps in his hand. He didn't know if Conte had betrayed him at the end, or if it had been a subordinate breaking command. It didn't matter.

He glanced back at the LED readout, visible through the entrance to the chamber—0:11.

The plant-thing recovered, coming out of the boiling and steaming water. The screams sounded alien, threatening to burst Ryan's eardrums.

The detonator was in his hand as he shoved the backpack at the edge of the liquid-nitrogen tanks. The LED read 0:08. He tried to set the detonator for three seconds, ended up with five, and knew there wasn't a chance of resetting it. He keyed it to live.

By the time he got into motion again, the plant-thing was almost on top of him. The tendrils whipsawed around his head. One of the razor-barbed thorns ripped through his jacket.

The LED readout was counting down: 0:06,0:05...

Ryan ran, streaking for the trapdoor leading to the mat-trans unit above. He closed his hand around the Steyr. He slipped on the water, ramming his knees through it, forcing himself on.

At the ladder to the trapdoor, three of the tendrils snaked through the water and wrapped around his leg. Ryan turned and used the Steyr to block the first of the speeding thorns, figuring he'd just bought himself a ticket on the last train west.

Ryan brought the Steyr to his shoulder and yelled, screaming out his rage; pulling the trigger time and time again. The bullets ripped into the space between the viscous black eyes, staggering the creature.

The LED clock was remorseless: 0:02, 0:01—

The plas ex blew in a thunderous cacophony. The liquid nitrogen jetted out, spraying the plant-thing.

On the ladder, Ryan was high enough to avoid all but a light spray. Deafened, still vibrating inside from the intensity of the explosion, he continued to fire. He was only dimly aware of the change in the plant-thing.

A white frost formed on it, slowing it almost immediately, then freezing it into place. Ice, clear as glass, formed in the water around it, becoming a solid sheet that extended in all directions.

Some of the tendrils broke off under their own weight and were falling even as Ryan's final bullets from the clip suddenly shattered the ice statue that the plant-thing had become.

The creature disintegrated into a mass of shards that hit the frozen surface around it. They skittered, spilling in all directions.

The tendrils weren't frozen, but they went slack as the icy part of them attached to the main growth went to pieces.

Free, Ryan yanked his foot from the freezing water lapping at the ladder. The liquid

nitrogen from the cryo chambers continued to spread out into the room. He glanced up at the LED.

It was frozen into place: 0:01. A heartbeat later it died, becoming a series of wagon wheels that signified dysfunction.

Ryan rammed a new magazine into the Steyr, then pulled himself up the steps. He took a last glance at the icy spikes jutting above the frozen surface that were all that remained of the dead plant-thing.

At the top Krysty and the others waited for him, tucked in an antechamber just below the level of the mat-trans unit. Jak was visible through the door, staying below the level of the armaglass windows.

"Didn't know if you made it or not, lover," the red-haired woman said. Her lower lip was puffy and bleeding.

"Wasn't sure myself," Ryan replied. "You okay?"

She nodded. "Whatever it was, it's gone now. I'm glad, too. Never felt anything like that, Ryan. Took over my mind, and all I could do was watch from somewhere outside myself." She shivered. "Would have chilled you if you hadn't stopped me."

"But you didn't." Ryan touched her face tenderly, then looked up at Jak. "The White Sands soldiers?"

"Looking for you. Down tunnel."

"The mat-trans unit?"

"Ready."

"Let's do it," Ryan said. He led the way up into the mat-trans unit through the secret door.

It didn't take long for Conte and his people to notice them inside the mat-trans unit. Two of them fired at the armaglass, causing the others to duck the ricochets. Bullets weren't going to get through.

"Everyone get ready," Ryan said, "we're getting the hell out of here."

Conte approached the armaglass, peering through, just as Ryan closed the door to start the jump mechanism. "Your round, Cawdor."

The words were barely audible coming through the thick armaglass. Ryan nodded.

"What you said about the plague," Conte asked, "that was real?"

"Yeah."

"Did you stop it?"

"I think so."

Conte nodded. "I'm glad."

The mat-trans unit powered up, humming and throbbing, the familiar fog beginning to fill the chamber.

"I didn't give that order to shoot you," Conte said.

"Figured that," Ryan replied. He'd already noticed the rat-faced man crumpled in the corner of the room unconscious.

"Won't stop me from hunting you down and killing you when the time comes," Conte said. "I got my orders."

"Figured that, too."

"Just so there's no misunderstandings."

Ryan nodded, then sat on the floor, taking his place next to Krysty. The fog blurred everything, but he heard J.B.'s voice coming from somewhere close.

"Probably would have been better off killing him," the Armorer said. "You look in his eyes, you know that's one dedicated man."

"I know," Ryan said. "And mebbe I would have tried if there'd been a way clear."

"Somehow, though, it wouldn't have felt right."

"Yeah."

Krysty slid a hand through Ryan's, then the mat-trans unit took them out of there.

Epilogue

Ryan sat and watched the sun come up. During the night the companions had managed a few hours of sleep in the uninhabited redoubt they'd arrived in. He'd set up shifts and they'd rested as well as they could.

The redoubt was small, already raided. They'd been unable to find anything worthwhile and had been forced to rely on the self-heats and ring-pulls they were already packing.

Now, though, Jak was roasting some trout he'd caught before first dawn in a nearby stream coming out of the mountains over an open fire pit that only gave off a thin stream of ash-gray smoke. Ryan had figured it safe. No one was around for miles from the look of things.

The big man sat on a rocky outcrop, watching the horizon take shape as the shadows lifted. There was nothing to fear from Conte or the White Sands coldhearts. After their arrival, Doc had rigged the controls in the mat-trans unit to send on any new arrivals to another destination. The old man hadn't a clue where Conte and his people would end up if they did use the one back in Wildroot, but he was certain it would be nowhere near.

"Trouble, lover?"

Ryan looked up and saw Krysty coming toward him. Her hair was mussed and her eyes looked haunted. She'd had nightmares about the Other that had tried to crawl inside her brain.

"Mebbe," he said.

"What?"

Ryan gestured at the landscape. "Know where we are?"

Krysty stared outward.

Using his fingers, Ryan stripped more meat from the fish Jak had cooked. He ate without appetite, fueling the machine.

"East coast."

"Yeah. Got a long hike ahead of us to get back where we started."

"Might not be *so* bad," Krysty said hopefully, "if Nathan Freeman's still Lord Cawdor and we're somewhere close."

Ryan wasn't sure about that. Too many memories of his father and his treacherous brother, Harvey, remained for him to be comfortable with the thought of being anywhere near the family estates. All the old debts had been paid, all the old fears and doubts laid to rest.

But it wasn't home.

And Nathan Freeman, now called Cawdor, Baron of Front Royal? Mebbe it would be good to see him, time permitting. But Ryan didn't hold out any hopes. Things changed in the Deathlands. The only certainty was death.

When Krysty sat down beside him and wrapped her arms around his waist, seeking warmth from the early morning chill, though, it was hard not to hope for something more. He threw the fish bones away and put his arms around her. For now, they had the sunrise, and somehow at the minute, it seemed like enough.

