

It was a hard battle, but the hordes of muties grew less

The Amazons raced forward to gain ground, treading on the corpses of their chilled foes and driving the remaining stickies back. Surveying the carnage, Ryan gave a sigh of relief and exhaustion. "Fireblast, I thought they'd never stop coming."

"They'll need to regroup, too," Gloria stated, "if they're going to attack. So we should have some time." The Gate queen directed her people to make camp, clear the chilled and tend to the few minor wounds the warriors had received.

Ryan gathered together his people. Speaking softly, he said, "It's not the stickies I'm worried about." Doc noticed the puzzled look that Jak gave the one-eyed man, and spoke. "If I am not mistaken, my dear Ryan, you allude to the fact that our little mutie friends were genetically altered?"

Ryan nodded. "And if we're approaching the place you've heard of, then..."

"Then the danger may not be from the stickies," Mildred finished.

Amazon Gate

#59 in the Deathland series

James Axler

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AMAZON GATE

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Sometimes I wondered if it was possible that the whole structure of government wasn't just some sort of absurd joke, and that underneath it all, underpinning the whole structure and fabric of our society, there was a covert and secret society that had it all nicely arranged for their own ends. After all, if Adam Weishaupt had gotten his way, then the Illuminati would be running the world. Maybe they were. The only consolation is that they'd bomb themselves out of existence, which isn't much of a consolation, is it?

—Paul TrewThe Secrets of Power **Swine Press**

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## THE DEATHLANDS SAGA

This world is their legacy, a world born in the violent nuclear spasm of 2001 that was the bitter outcome of a struggle for global dominance.

There is no real escape from this shockscape where life always hangs in the balance, vulnerable to newly demonic nature, barbarism, lawlessness.

But they are the warrior survivalists, and they endure—in the way of the lion, the hawk and the tiger, true to nature's heart despite its ruination.

Ryan Cawdor: The privileged son of an East Coast baron. Acquainted with betrayal from a tender age, he is a master of the hard realities.

Krysty Wroth: Harmony ville's own Titian-haired beauty, a woman with the strength of tempered steel. Her premonitions and Gaia powers have been fostered by her Mother Sonja.

J. B. Dix, the Armorer: Weapons master and Ryan's close ally, he, too, honed his skills traversing the Deathlands with the legendary Trader.

Doctor Theophilus Tanner: Torn from his family and a gentler life in 1896, Doc has been thrown into a future he couldn't have imagined.

Dr. Mildred Wyeth: Her father was killed by the Ku Klux Klan, but her fate is not much lighter. Restored from predark cryogenic suspension, she brings twentieth-century healing skills to a nightmare.

Jak Lauren: A true child of the wastelands, reared on adversity, loss and danger, the albino teenager is a fierce fighter and loyal friend.

Dean Cawdor: Ryan's young son by Sharona accepts the only world he knows, and yet he is the seedling bearing the promise of tomorrow.

In a world where all was lost, they are humanity's last hope...

## Chapter One

Something was wrong, but for the life of him—and it could mean that—Jak Lauren was unable to work out exactly what it was.

The albino hugged the ground, smelling the rich loam as it filled his nostrils with a heady scent. The roots and leaves of the plants mixed into a rich aroma that still couldn't hide the stench of death, the rancid aroma of rotting flesh and dried blood that permeated his clothes and into his very skin.

He blinked, his red eyes stung by the sweat that trickled into them. Despite the irritation, he resisted the temptation to reach up and wipe the liquid away, loath to move his arm and disturb the foliage around him. Until he was sure what was happening, even the slightest movement was a danger. Even the merest whisper of a rustle could bring death down on him.

Jak's long white hair was lank and loose around his face, strands of it plastered to his skin while other loose hairs tickled and poked at the corners of his nose and mouth. Like the sweat, he ignored the irritation.

Instead, he focused on what was around, straining every nerve end, concentrating his senses so hard that he could almost hear the blood pounding in his veins, the hissing of his own central nervous system.

None of that did anything to waylay the gnawing at the pit of his stomach. Jak knew fear; despite his always seeming calm in the middle of a firefight, his stillness when hunting and stalking, his almost stoic acceptance of every dangerous situation he had faced in his journeys across the Deathlands, Jak knew fear, recognized and embraced it. Embraced it, and yielded to it rather than fight it and set his body at war with itself. It was only by knowing fear and accepting it that he could gain the calm to find space in which to act rather than react, to take control and win.

Jak knew fear, and this wasn't fear. The nagging, insistent feeling was more akin to anxiety, to a fear of the future, to a knowledge that there was something awful and awe-filled around the corner. Something large and unknown that would leave him with no indication of how to defeat it.

It was then that he realized what the gnawing was. It wasn't fear; it was the terrible knowledge that he couldn't win. The inevitability of the great chill.

His breathing stilled until it had almost stopped. He returned the center of his attention to the immediate surroundings. It was still and calm, with no life or movement around him. The smell of death was now old, no longer immediate.

Jak knew it was time to move. With an infinite degree of care, he moved his sinuous muscles, bringing his limbs to a position where he was able to lift his prone body in one swift and flowing movement, rising

to his feet in a fraction of a second, hair and skin like the white tip of a suddenly peaking wave. At the apex of his rise, he shot a glance around before dropping to his haunches. There had been nothing in view, no movement of any kind. Unusual for that alone—no sign of bird or animal life, no predators or scavengers moving in on the chilled corpses. Now, hunkered in the grass and foliage, partially sheltered but still able to keep a clear view for a full 360 degrees, Jak took stock of his thoughts and tried to remember what had happened.

He frowned, the scarred and pitted white skin of his face puckering in displeasure. He had no memory of anything before this point. He had never blacked out and lost his memory in a firefight before, so it was something that disturbed him. Almost as an automatic gesture, he drew the .357 Magnum Colt Python that was his preferred blaster. He sniffed; it hadn't been fired recently. There was a shell in the chamber, and it was fully loaded. Reaching into the pockets and concealed holes of his patched camou jacket, moving probing fingers gently past the small shards of metal and glass that were also sewn onto the fabric, he could feel that he still had a full complement of ammo, and all of his leaf-bladed throwing knives were still in their concealed positions.

Puzzled, he realized that whatever had happened in this place, he had taken no personal part in the firefight.

So what had happened? How had he ended up here, and who were the chilled he could smell so strongly around him, their stench drowning the surrounding scents?

Jak's frown deepened. There was one possibility that he didn't want to consider.

Fighting the rising tide of horror that choked his throat with bile, Jak rose slowly to his feet and took a long, slow survey of the land around him, certain now that he was alone for the immediate vicinity.

He was in the middle of a veld that stretched for at least a mile in each direction. There were distant stands of trees, stunted and blackened with leaves that hung as heavy as drops of blood in the clear, bright sun. The sky was a deep blue, tinged with just the faintest hint of chem-cloud purple. Traces of wispy cumulus broke the unrelenting block of color, the sun hazy behind the chem-addled atmosphere. The sun was orange, beating down with a heat that was oppressive, causing the smell of the charnel house to hang still in the air.

Despite the heat and lack of cloud, he figured that the area had to have a good rainfall, as the earth on which he had been resting was moist, the loam soil rich smelling. And furthermore, the grass was a lush green, not dry and spiky. The flowering plants were still in bloom, their thick and twisting green stems looking healthy and not starved of water. They grew to a height of between two and a half and three feet, thick enough in places to form small banks of color that showed the indents of fallen bodies even though the corpses themselves were hidden from view.

In other places, Jak could see the signs of violent struggle more clearly. There were glimpses of fallen fighters, blood smearing the grass and earth around, the stained clothing and ragged and torn flesh clearly visible.

With a sense of terrible inevitability, Jak counted the number of corpses.

There were six.

He moved across the veld, his light and instinctive footing leaving no trace of his passing, the barely disturbed grass and plant stems rising as the pressure of his tread was released.

The first corpse was a woman. A black woman. She had no face anymore, the exposed bone and pulped flesh a mass broken only by the distorted position of her unseeing eyes. The braids that still hung limply around her head identified her as surely as the Czech-manufactured ZKR pistol that hung from her lifeless grasp. Dr. Mildred Wyeth, the freezie who had defied skydark by being cryogenically frozen after a reaction to anesthetic and who had been revived into the post holocaust world her generation had engendered, had finally come up against one too many odds. As if the injury to her head hadn't been enough to buy the farm, she also had a large gash across her chest, cutting through the layers of clothing to tear clean through to the rib cage, exposing it to the air.

Just a few yards away lay J.B. Dix, the Armorer. His eyes stared sightlessly from behind his wire-framed spectacles. His beloved fedora lay a few feet from his chilled corpse. His close cropped hair was soaked with blood from a deep gash across his forehead. But it wasn't that wound that had killed him. Rather, it was the fact that his head had been cleanly severed from his body, bloodied veins and vertebrae still hanging from the remains of his body, which lay only a few inches from the head. The body was untouched in any other way.

Jak knew that whatever had taken out the Armorer had been swift. J.B. was a wiry and tough fighter, with lightning reflexes, yet his Uzi was still strapped across his body, his M-4000 Smith & Wesson scattergun with its deadly load of barbed metal flechettes still across his back, the stock poking awkwardly from beneath the fallen corpse. The Tekna knife that he used in close combat was still sheathed, and the vast amounts of ammunition and grens that he carried about his person and in the canvas bag that lay to one side of him were untouched.

Moving farther over the veld, Jak came across the third of the chills. A youth on the cusp of his teenage years, with a strong jawline and a mop of thick, black, curly hair. His blaster—a 9 mm Browning Hi-Power— was still in an outstretched hand. Even at this distance, Jak could smell the cordite where the blaster had been discharged. But not enough to save the boy, who had been hit eight times across the torso with shells that looked, from the entry wounds, to have been high caliber. The front of the boy's clothing was soaked in blood.

Jak didn't bother to turn the corpse over, but knew that such a number of entry wounds, and of such a caliber, would probably have left exit wounds that had taken away more than half the boy's backbone and flesh. As if this weren't enough, there were two further entry wounds, one on each knee. It suggested he had been brought down and then savagely chilled when he had used up all his ammo. The boy was Jak's friend, Dean Cawdor.

Moving soundlessly across the veld, Jak came to the next chill. A woman, voluptuously curved and with a shock of long, Titian hair that had curled around her skull and neck, hugging close in death to her skin, framing the contorted agony of her death throes, now frozen on her once-beautiful face. The hair had been sentient, curling close to her when danger beckoned, a visible sign of her mutie heritage, fostered in her home ville of Harmony. The warning had obviously not been quick enough, as her body had been hacked into ribbons by multiple blade wounds. Fragments of bloodied cloth merged with flayed flesh, white bone showing through. The earth around her was stained dark with her blood. Her .38-caliber Smith & Wesson 640 revolver lay by her side, unfired. She had once been Krysty Wroth, one of Jak's traveling companions and lover of Ryan Cawdor, the leader of their group. Now she was nothing more than carrion.

With a dreadful inevitability, Jak trod into the longer grass, where the last two corpses were concealed, their positions notable only by the gaps they created in the wall of green.

The first corpse was an older version of Dean: taller, harder, leaner in the sense of having more finely honed muscles. Over six feet in height, he lay stretched to his full length, his throat an open wound. One startling blue eye stared sightlessly to the sky, and where the other eye should be there was a patch covering an empty socket, the long, puckered scar from that socket running the length of his cheek, distorting the rugged features. About his person was a SIG-Sauer blaster, a Steyr rifle and a razor-honed panga that was still sheathed to his thigh. Apart from the gaping wound at his throat, there was little sign of a struggle. The chill had come quick and fast to him.

Not so to the last member of the party, whom Jak found a few yards to his left. Doc Tanner was a thin, scrawny man. He looked old and weather beaten, with a mane of gray-white hair that framed a lined face. Yet Doc was only somewhere in his mid-thirties, his apparent age the result of an incredible experience. Tanner was the only successful subject of a predark project known as Operation Chronos, part of the Totality Concept with which the old U.S.A. had prepared itself for the all out nukocaust that had led to the formation of the Deathlands. Theophilus Algernon Tanner had been a family man and academic, snatched at random from his own time period in the 1880s, and pulled through the 1990s by the whitecoat scientists of Chronos. He had been so obstreperous that the whitecoats, tiring of him, had catapulted him forward in time, thus inadvertently saving his life, albeit plunging him into what was a living hell until he was rescued by Ryan Cawdor.

The immense stresses on the man's body and mind had aged him physically and made his grasp on sanity fragile. And yet Doc managed to keep himself together at crucial moments and made it through the dangers. Until now. Doc's death was the worst of all. He had put up a fight, as there was still the smell of burned powder about the ancient LeMat percussion pistol he favored, and both the shot and ball barrels had been discharged. The LeMat lay a few feet to his left, and his left hand still clutched the unsheathed swordstick with the silver lion's head that also supported him as a walking stick in his weaker moments. Dried blood coated the glinting blade. Whatever else, Doc had fought the fight of his life, for his life.

But still he had been unsuccessful. His tongue and eyes bulged vilely from his purpled face, the color distorted like his features by the length of chain that was around his neck. Rusted metal with small links, it was double wrapped and had been pulled tight...so tight that it had cut into the skin of his throat and left him with some of the links lodged under his flesh. From the shape of his neck, it seemed obvious that the vertebrae had been crushed, and his head had been pulled to a grotesque angle by the tension on the chain. Blood seeped from between the links.

The final indignity was that his body had been cleaved at the waist, so that Doc's torso had been detached from his legs, the two halves lying within inches of each other. The lack of blood told Jak that the butchery had taken place after Doc had already been chilled, his blood stilled and so only seeping onto the earth.

Jak turned and walked away from the carnage. He didn't look back. He didn't think about where he was going. He simply began to walk and kept on walking. He didn't think about his direction.

He just wanted to get away. He didn't understand how he had gotten there or why he could remember nothing of the fight or how he had arrived at this point. He didn't care. He just knew that the doomic feeling in his guts wouldn't go away, despite the fact that he had now faced the inevitable and seen what it could do and what it could mean.

Distracted from his habitual vigilance, Jak was taken completely off guard.

The albino was pitched forward, head over heels, by a sudden and heavy impact in the small of his back. Recovering quickly, he relaxed his body into the momentum of the impact, and turned a sudden fall into a



roll that brought him back onto his feet, crouched around toward the source of the attack. Part of his mind raced, running a series of mental checks that were completely instinctive. He could feel no blood down his back, no sharp internal pain, no uneasy sensation in the areas of his vital organs. He ached like hell in the pit of his back, but it was purely the force of the blow. There was no damage—of that he was sure.

He didn't waste time wondering what had attacked him. Instead, he focused simply on locating the enemy so that he could attack it. This was easy, as his enemy made no attempt to disguise himself. He couldn't have, not on the open veld.

As Jak drew his .357 Magnum Colt Python blaster with one hand and palmed a leaf-bladed knife with the other, he weighed the odds. They weren't pretty. On his side, he was just over five feet tall, slender and quick, with his blaster and knives, as well as sinuous strength and a cunning hunting instinct. But his opponent...

The man in front of him stood about eight feet in height, with broad, heavily muscled shoulders that rippled under the bright yellow one-piece bodysuit. It was made of a material that Jak recognized from one place only: the raiding party they had encountered some time back on the road to the villes of Samtvoegel and Raw, when they had tangled with the cult of the Sunchildren. The raiding party with the laser blasters had appeared suddenly, indulged in a brief firefight and then disappeared. Ryan believed them to be part of the Illuminated Ones, a secret society from predark times that had somehow survived and might hold secrets that could lead them to a peaceful, tranquil land of legend.

"Would" have lead them. Jak had to remind himself that his companions lay dead on the veld. And unless he acted swiftly, he would be joining them.

He ran a swiftly assessing gaze over his opponent. The giant had a laser blaster slung on a strap over his left shoulder, but he didn't seem inclined to use it— instead, he held a chunk of rock in the vast paw of his right hand, which he swung loosely and easily at waist level. The heavily muscled shoulders and arms tapered to a comparatively thin waist, with thighs that looked well muscled and strong, but considerably less so than the upper torso.

So the giant would have a fairly high center of gravity, and once toppled would be unable to help himself from falling. That gave Jak a possibility. But why didn't he want to use the blaster? That would make for a quick chill.

But then again, remembering the chilled corpses he had seen, Jak figured that a clean chill was the last thing that the giant wanted. He liked to inflict pain. That thought was emphasized for him by the memory of the wounds in Dean's knees, and the sight of an old handblaster holstered in the small of the giant's back as he and Jak began to circle each other. The blaster looked absurdly small nestled into the shiny material that covered the vast back, but allowing for the giant's size and the wounds he had seen, Jak figured that it had to be a fairly high-caliber weapon, perhaps a .357 Magnum blaster similar to his own.

The thought vanished from his consciousness as soon as it flitted across. It was pointless to speculate right now. The only thing that mattered was defeating the giant, preventing himself from getting chilled.

They circled slowly, the giant's face red and shiny with sweat in the sun, eyes glinting with blood lust and lips drawn back over his strong white teeth with a leer that bespoke his intent only too well. He shuffled around in a wide circle, large feet crunching and rustling in the undergrowth.

Why hadn't Jak heard him approach? He was so bastard clumsy and loud that the albino should have

been able to hear him from half a mile away.

The nagging feeling in Jak's gut increased as this thought flitted through his mind. The odds were stacked heavily, and he felt as if he were playing a game where no one had bothered to tell him the rules.

That wouldn't be the first time. He had to make sure it wasn't the last.

The giant's shiny one-piece costume shimmered in the sun. Because of its tight fit, and the kind of material it was, it inadvertently telegraphed his movements to Jak.

With a deft and wickedly fast flick of his thick wrist, the giant sent the rock skimming through the air toward Jak's head. It was a sharp-edged flint, and at that velocity could have opened his skull and spilled his brains on the grass.

Could have—if the lightning-fast reflexes of the albino hadn't already read the movement. By the time the rock reached the point in space where Jak's head should have been, the wiry albino was already executing a roll to bring himself out of the sideways leap that had carried him out of the rock's flight path.

"Fuck," he swore as his shoulder struck a stone in the earth at the very apex of his shoulder joint. He felt the sudden jarring down his left arm as the nerve caught fire and then deadened temporarily.

By the time the word had escaped his lips, he was up on his feet again, trying to hide the temporary disability from his opponent.

The blood-lust sneer turned to a snarl of anger as the giant followed Jak's path. Missing with the stone and finding that his opponent was more than a little faster than he had imagined had done nothing more than anger Jak's opponent. And from the sudden glimmer in those animal eyes, Jak knew that the giant had registered Jak's injury.

With a roar, the giant sprung at the albino teen, using all the power in his thighs and calves to propel himself through the air from a standing position. He would have gained momentum by stepping forward first, but what he lost in this way he more than gained in surprise and valuable fractions of a second.

Jak swung himself to one side, unwilling to play odds on another jarring blow from the ground. He spun away from the flight path of the giant, enough to prevent the man driving him into the ground, but not enough to stop himself from receiving a glancing blow that took his spin into an uncontrollable tumble. Even that glancing blow, hitting him just below his injured shoulder, was hard enough to drive the air from Jak's body and make his head reel.

He hit the ground on his back, explosions of light and dark passing rapidly before his eyes as he gasped in pain, his head hitting soil that no longer seemed so moist and yielding.

The giant had also landed heavily, which bought Jak a little time. Expecting his sudden move to take out the small albino, the giant had been unprepared for the swift movement, and so had been unable to protect himself when he crashed into the ground. His size had worked against him, as his sheer weight hitting the ground winded him.

Jak winced, scrambling to his feet. This was no time for finesse. He had to chill the bastard and quick. He drew his .357 Magnum Colt Python and leveled the barrel, taking an easy and instinctive aim at the prone giant.



The man was floundering, trying to turn and rise quickly, his large frame uncomfortable on the ground.

His movements were slow in comparison to Jak's, and the albino gently increased the pressure on the blaster's trigger, squeezing in what seemed to be slow motion. The liquid flow of time slowed to a sluggish drip as Jak's attention focused on his adversary, still clumsily struggling to regain an upright position.

Then time stopped altogether. It stopped with a sudden, heart-jerking brake.

Jak's finger tightened all the way, the pressure squeezing the trigger of the Magnum blaster and firing it.

At least, that's the way it should have been.

Instead, Jak was greeted with a dry click as the mechanism of the blaster failed to work.

He knew that the blaster was well maintained. It was a matter of simple survival to keep one's weaponry in good condition. Besides which, J.B. had made it a matter of routine for everyone in the party to keep their blasters in good order. It was a matter of pride to the Armorer.

Had been a matter of pride. The Armorer was now dead, and lay somewhere behind him, with his head severed from his body.

That fraction of a second—the shock of the blaster failing and the sudden memory of J.B.—gave the giant all the time he needed. With a speed that could only be born of the knowledge that he had escaped being chilled by only the merest whim of fate, he was on his feet and across the veld to Jak with a lung-bursting roar.

Already the albino had slipped the blaster back into its secure holster and had palmed two of his knives, so that one sat easily in each hand, perfectly weighted for hand-to-hand combat.

The giant reached him in three long, loping strides. The fourth footfall brought him toe-to-toe with Jak, and his large arms encircled the albino, pinning the teen's hands to his sides, the pressure of the bear hug causing his hands to close on the knives, the blades slicing into his own palms.

The pain was sharp and intense, of the kind that only a very minor injury, slicing the nerve endings that were close to the skin, could bring. It was the kind of pain that concentrated the mind. Jak switched off from the constriction he felt, the crushing weight that sought to expel all breath from his body, and let all his muscles contract and loosen. The vital inch he gained in space enabled him to wriggle down from the grip, sliding down against the shiny yellow material of the giant's clothing, the lack of friction enabling him to ease himself from the grip before the giant had a chance to adjust and tighten his hold.

As he slipped down and away, Jak slashed with his left arm, the razored edge of the leaf-bladed knife slicing across the giant's abdomen, cutting through the material of his bodysuit and scoring the skin. A thin line of blood appeared across his stomach, spreading out to stain the material.

The giant sprang away from Jak with a pained yell, clutching in surprise and shock at his stomach.

Jak was thrown off balance by the force of the spring, and he rocked on his heels. His head was still light from both his fall and the lack of oxygen where he had been the recipient of the bear hug. Ordinarily, the albino's fighting instincts would have led him to finish off the giant with a well-aimed throw, as the big man was still standing stupidly, staring at his bleeding abdomen, his body completely open to attack. He made

no attempt to cover the areas of his vital organs as he stood there.

But Jak wasn't one hundred percent. He, too, was suffering from the effects of combat, and he shook his muzzy head to clear it, cursing himself for the seemingly slow movement of his limbs as they failed to respond rapidly to his brain's instructions. His blood was apparently replaced by molten lead that flowed sluggishly and powered his muscles in a similar fashion.

The knife in his left hand came up and made to throw. But if the giant had been opened up a moment before, he recovered his attacking poise with a greater rapidity than the albino. Before Jak could power his throw, the giant scooped up a handful of earth and threw it at the youth, temporarily blinding him.

The knife left the albino's hand, but his aim was affected just enough for it to fly past the giant's head, grazing air instead of penetrating the carotid artery that had been its target.

Before Jak could clear his eyes, he felt the giant's arms around him again. This time they lifted him cleanly from the ground, raising him high in the air before throwing him. Jak felt the sudden weightlessness of flight and braced his body for the inevitable fall.

Despite his best attempts, he still felt all the breath driven from his body by the sudden and jarring impact. His head struck the earth, sparking off more explosions. He landed on his side and rolled over to his back, ready to spring.

The sight that greeted him made him freeze. The giant was standing a few feet away, gazing directly at him. The blood lust had disappeared from his visage, replaced by a calm concentration. The reason for his concentration was immediately apparent: the laser rifle had been unslung from across his back and was now in his hands, the length and bulk of it dwarfed in his grip. He was aiming directly at Jak Lauren.

So this was how it was all to end, the chilling of his comrades unavenged and his own chill coming in circumstances that still eluded him. The doomie feeling nagged at him.

It nagged at him that this wasn't the end. But what could save him?

"Hey, stupidworks...get to fuck."

The voice was husky but strong and firm. It was also female. An expression of puzzlement crossed the calm concentration of the giant's face, and he turned away from Jak almost involuntarily to find the source of the call.

Jak, feeling as he did so that it was a stupe thing to be doing, followed the giant's gaze, completely failing to take advantage of his opportunity to rise.

The source of the voice was immediately apparent. She stood several yards away, her calves lost in the lush grass. How she had managed to come upon them without disturbing them up to this point was something that Jak didn't even bother to think about. Too many strange things had gone down since he had regained consciousness.

She was smaller than Jak, mebbe five foot one or two, and her sharp and clearly defined features were handsome, her high cheekbones framing clear blue eyes that pierced through both men. A mane of flaming red hair, lighter than Krysty's but of a similar flowing length, cascaded over her slight shoulders.

She was slim, finely built with a delicate bone structure that pulled into a narrow waist and slim hips. Her

breasts were small and firm, hidden beneath the torn and patched material of a T-shirt. She wore cutoff jeans that were skintight and cut high up the thigh. Her skin was a golden brown from repeated exposure to the sun, and the amount of it she had left exposed served to show off the incredibly toned musculature that clothed her delicate skeleton. The muscles rippled on her thighs and calves, her flat stomach glistening with a light sheen of perspiration. The muscles on her arms were whip taut, one hand resting easily on her hip, within swift grasp of the panga that was strapped to her thigh. The other arm was out in front of her. In her small hand she held a Vortak pistol. The lightweight blaster seemed enormous in her grip, but Jak knew from J.B. that it was an excellent handblaster, light and accurate. He wondered if it was the 11-shot .45 ACP, the 17-shot .40 Smith & Wesson or the 20-shot .38 Super configuration. Not that it mattered right now. She needed only one shot, and that was mebbe all she'd get.

"Are you deaf, boy? Get to fuck," she repeated.

The giant blew out his cheeks, as though appalled at the nerve of the tiny woman to try to interfere in a private fight. He raised the laser blaster.

"Asshole," the woman muttered before squeezing off a rapid succession of shots. Jak tried to keep count, but lost it in the rapidity and figured she squeezed off nine or ten. The gas-buffered recoil system that was specific to the Vortak meant that she was able to steady and adjust as the giant jerked and fell under the onslaught, her aim following him down to the earth so that each slug hit home exactly where she wanted it.

The giant was chilled before his body even touched the earth, the impact muffled by the grass and foliage. She holstered the blaster in the small of her back and smiled at Jak, a wry, lopsided grin that began in her large blue eyes but spoke of an injury to one side of her face, paralyzing some of the muscles. She walked over to where Jak still lay and reached out a hand to him.

"C'mon, honey. Time to move on," she said softly.

Jak took her hand and felt the tremendous strength in her tiny yet wiry frame as she lifted him to his feet. "What fuck going on?" he asked simply. "Not doomie, but feel it. Not remember anything of friends chilled. Not hear him coming," he continued, indicating the chilled giant, then added, "or hear you. Not add up."

She made a small, warm noise in the back of her throat that could have been a chuckle, and began to walk across the veld toward the trees in easy strides. Jak fell in beside her.

"Soon you'll understand, sweets. Nothing ever happens without reason, even though you may never know why. Although you don't knew me yet, in some ways you always have done and always will do. Mebbe I appear like this now, but not at other times."

"Make less sense than Doc," Jak grumbled.

She stopped and turned to the albino, raising her hand and cupping his cheek in her palm.

"Trust me, and remember me. It's my gift to know before times, and to reach out. Remember what you've seen and remember me," she repeated again before brushing her lips against his. "I've got to go. But remember..."

Jak stood and watched her as she continued into the trees without looking back, her hair swinging across her shoulders and down her back in rhythm with her stride.

Part of him wanted to follow, yet another part of him knew that now wasn't the time. Now was something else.

The doomie feeling gnawed stronger. Suddenly, it stabbed, doubling him in pain. He felt a familiar wave of nausea replace the anxiety, and blackness rose before his eyes. He sank to his knees, welcoming the relief of oblivion.

## Chapter Two

Jak could feel the strings of bile, bitter and choking in his throat, as he regained consciousness. Every muscle, tendon and nerve ending in his body ached. Not with the pain of combat, but with the strange feeling that it had been deconstructed and then put back together again under an enormous pressure. Which was what had happened, in a way. He always felt this way after a mat-trans jump.

As he spit the bile from his mouth and wiped the thin trickle of blood from his left nostril, he blinked in the dim light of the chamber. The armaglass on this chamber was a smoky turquoise hue, and let in little light from outside. The only illumination was the low-level lighting and the fading glow of the disks that patterned the floor of the chamber. There were no tendrils of mist left from the fog that enveloped the chamber immediately before and after a jump, so it was easy for him to figure that he had been out for some time, which was usual. But not the dream.

Was it a dream?

Jak was a man who lived entirely in the present and the real. He was a born hunter and predator, his attention and mind focused only on what was going on around him. He didn't dream often.

The only dreams he could ever remember were those that involved his dead wife and child, Christina and Jenny. Terrible dreams, dreams where they were close to death and he was always prevented from saving them, condemned for all eternity to relive their deaths in an infinite variety.

If that was dreaming, then Jak didn't want it.

And now there was the woman. Who was she? And why had he seen his friends chilled and spread around the veld? Why had he survived?

Jak could recall every detail of it as though it were real. He could taste and smell the ground, the death, the woman...

If he was becoming a doomie, then he didn't want to know. It disturbed him, and Jak was rarely disturbed. He acted and reacted to stimulus, and didn't stop to think. It wasn't what he did.

But now Jak did think. Should he mention the strange dream, the like of which he had never experienced before during a jump? Would it unsettle his companions before they even knew what they had landed in this time around?

Jak didn't realize how distant this made him seem until he was aware of Mildred standing over him, bent

forward so that her plaits were dangling before her.

"Jak, are you feeling well enough to move?"

THE JUMP HAD BEEN better for most of the companions than usual. Why that should be, no one had any idea. Come to that, no one cared. Using the mat-trans was a good way of moving from one area of the Deathlands to another in the constant search for that indefinable something, perhaps somewhere to settle, to build lives away from the constant struggle until a person bought the farm.

At least, that was what they all told themselves in their own ways. The truth was that no one wanted a hundred percent to admit that there was probably no escape from this life, as it was all they knew and all that there was.

Ryan was usually first to come around after a jump. He was the strongest and seemed to weather the jump better than the others. It was always bad at first, like a hangover from jolt or bad shine. But this time had been marginally better. His head still thumped as if it had been kicked by a mutie mule, but it cleared quickly, and his limbs felt less sluggish as he rose to his feet and checked himself.

Krysty was also soon conscious. Her hair flowed freely, suggesting that they were, for the time being, safe. She was so surprised by how good she felt that she even remarked on it to Ryan as she rose to her feet, stretching aching muscles and massaging life back into her limbs.

J.B. and Mildred were also rapidly up to speed, the Armorer checking his weapons and adjusting his spectacles so that he could make sense of his surroundings while Mildred went to check Doc. It was unspoken, but all worried that one day there would be one jump too many for Doc Tanner. His fragile psyche had received far too many shocks of this kind before they had even first encountered him, and the physical effects of having been trawled through time were all too obvious. But even Doc had taken this jump well. He was still unconscious when Mildred went over to him, but he wasn't muttering to himself in delirium, as sometimes happened after a bad jump. He showed no sign of distress, and he soon came around.

Dean was quickly on his feet. Like a younger version of his father in every way, it was only the lack of stamina engendered by his youth that prevented him from being one of the first to recover. Like the others, he remarked on how well he felt compared to a regular jump.

That left only Jak. The whip-thin and small albino had an incredible strength and stamina for his frame and size, but the mat-trans took no account of that and seemed to drain him of strength. It always made him vomit and bleed, and feel as though he had been ripped out from the insides and then put together again roughly, which, in a sense, he had been.

But whereas the others had recovered more rapidly than usual, Jak seemed to take longer, which was why Mildred leaned over him and voiced her concern.

"Yeah...okay, bad jump," Jak answered her, wanting to keep his strange vision to himself.

Mildred looked at him askance. "Are you sure? We all recovered fairly quickly. Do you want me to give you a quick examination, just to check?"

Jak nodded. "Mebbe not bad thing," he replied, for different reasons than she could interpret.

While Mildred checked the albino, finding that his pulse and respiration had recovered as usual, and that

there were no other physical signs as to why he should have taken the jump differently to the rest of them, Ryan and J.B. prepared to secure the redoubt.

Ryan glanced over to Krysty, who shook her head almost imperceptibly. Ryan and the Armorer had already discussed their instinctive sense that the redoubt was empty. Caution was still necessary, but both men had been fighters and survivors too long not to have a sixth sense about danger in a new situation. And the one-eyed warrior always relied on Krysty's mutie sense of nearby danger. He checked with her, noticed her hair flow freely as she moved her head. That was a good sign. "Let's do it," Ryan said softly. J.B. nodded silent agreement and waited as Ryan opened the armaglass door.

Keeping close to the floor and moving swiftly, the two men moved out into the anteroom, eyes scanning the area for the best cover. They moved on, into the control room beyond.

The air conditioning hummed as it had for a hundred years. The computer terminals in the room were on freestanding bases. A few notes were scribbled on the 2001 wall planners, but the different colored inks had faded over the years.

Ryan and J.B. secured the room, then continued to recce the corridors and rooms immediately adjacent. All were silent.

When the two men returned to the control room, Jak had fully recovered and was waiting with the others outside the mat-trans chamber.

"Don't think I've ever seen anything like this."

Ryan said as he and J.B. joined their companions.

"It's empty, and there's no sign of any real damage."

"That means I should be able to get some medical supplies to take along," Mildred said, almost to herself. "It's about time we had some luck there."

J.B. allowed himself a rare smile. "Also means the armory should be intact. Mebbe I'll even be spoiled for choice."

"Well, my dear Ryan, perchance we can tarry a few days in exploration."

Ryan turned to where Doc was standing. The old man had moved away from the group, drawn toward the maps and charts that were pinned to one wall. As Ryan watched, Doc turned back to the map he had been studying and tapped a point toward the northwest of the old United States with the end of his swordstick.

"According to this map, we are not far from the ruins of old Seattle, near Raw and the mysteries of the Illuminated Ones. We are headed in the right direction for the mysterious horn of plenty."

"Hot pipe! Horn of what?" Dean asked. "C'mon, Doc, speak some kind of language I can understand!"

Doc indulged the youth. "My dear young Cawdor, a horn of plenty is that which is full to overflowing with that which you most desire...in this case, our departed friend Trader's mythical land of stockpiles. Something keeps drawing us back to this area."



"Yeah, the mat-trans," J.B. drawled.

Jak said nothing, but suppressed a shiver at the mention of the ville of Raw and the Illuminated Ones. Coincidences like that didn't fit with his view of the world, and he didn't want to think about his dream.

"That may not be as funny as your intention, John Barrymore," Doc chided. "It could possibly be that there are automatic settings on the mat-trans units that tend to direct traffic here if the units are fully functional."

"You mean like an electronic beacon or computerized homing pigeon?" Mildred ventured.

Doc inclined his head gracefully. "Exactly, and so aptly put, my dear Dr. Wyeth. It would make sense, would it not, for any computerized devices to have an emergency setting. And what could be more of an emergency than the mat-trans being used after skydark—albeit several decades too late?"

Jak felt twitchy. He'd felt that way since Doc had pointed out their location. "We sleep, then move?" he queried.

"Why move on so quickly?" Mildred asked, puzzled. Like the others, she had picked up that Jak was worried. It was obvious from his demeanor.

Jak shrugged in reply. "Not been in redoubt yet without trouble."

Ryan fixed Jak with his steely blue eye. "But outside also means trouble. This is a good place to rest up for a few days, mebbe replenish our supplies. No, we're not going yet."

Jak shrugged, shrinking into an uneasy silence.

THE ALBINO'S UNEASE had created a tense atmosphere that could only be dispersed by their leaving the control room. Ryan sent Jak along with Dean and Doc to check out the dorms and kitchens, to look for fresh clothes and food. Mildred and Krysty went to the dispensary to see what medical supplies they could find that were still of some use. Meanwhile, the one-eyed warrior joined J.B. in checking out the armory.

As they had suspected, the redoubt was in full working order and almost untouched by the devastation that had occurred a hundred years before. There were plenty of self-heats in the kitchen, a set of fully working showers, clean uniforms, bedding and plenty of medical supplies that were usable. Even some of the drugs left in the dispensary could pass muster as painkillers and antibiotics...although what use they could be against the post skydark mutated viruses was debatable.

Most important, the armory was fully stocked, with the hardware, grens and ammo still freshly greased and boxed.

"It seems a shame to leave all this here," J.B. said sadly as they loaded up with ammo.

"You know what Trader used to say—you can have the best blasters in the whole of Deathlands, but if there's so many that you can't untangle them in a firefight—"

"—then you might as well have none at all," J.B. finished. "Guess he was right. Still seems a damn shame, though."

"I'm with you on that," Ryan agreed, "but at least we know where this place is, and it doesn't seem that anyone else does. And if we ever jump back here, we'll have our own little stockpile."

"I'll have to be satisfied with that," J.B. agreed. He added ruefully, "Let's get out of here and eat before this breaks my heart."

Ryan led the way and said nothing, although he was smiling to himself. It was the closest he had ever heard his taciturn friend get to expressing emotion, and it was inevitable that it would be about firepower.

THEY PASSED a comfortable night in the redoubt, and the next morning Dean and Mildred devoted themselves to trying to find some useful information on the comps while Ryan and J.B. decided to check out the exits from the redoubt.

The one concern Ryan had was that the redoubt would be completely cut off from the outside world. If a landfall or earth shift of some kind had led to the upper levels being damaged, and the elevator shafts and emergency stairwells were blocked, then they would have no choice but to jump. If, however, they were clear, then the fact that the redoubt had been left alone for so long suggested that they were in an area that was sparsely populated. Venturing above ground would be that much easier.

The elevators were working, and the men discovered that the upper levels were as well preserved as those that housed the mat-trans chamber, the dormitories, kitchens and armory.

"We could learn a lot about the redoubts from all this," Ryan remarked as they inspected the array of offices and workrooms.

"Would it matter?" J.B. asked.

Ryan pondered. "Mebbe, mebbe not. Guess it's mostly my own curiosity."

"Well, remember that Jak doesn't share it," J.B. remarked pointedly.

"Yeah, me and Krysty were talking about that."

Ryan said quietly after a pause. "She figures that something happened during the jump, mebbe some kind of doomie feeling that he doesn't want to talk about."

"Jak isn't a doomie."

Ryan grimaced. "Neither is Krysty, but sometimes you can't tell with mutie blood. Mebbe it can hit you just once."

"In which case I'd listen to it," J.B. said grimly.

Following their recce, the two men returned to the mat-trans control room, where Dean and Krysty were in conference over one of the comp consoles, with Doc looking on.

"Well?" the Titian-haired beauty asked, looking up as they entered.

"It's all in working order, and the upper levels look as untouched as down here. My guess is that we're in an area that hasn't got any villes nearby, and is off any trade routes."

"Will not that make leaving here on foot a little risky, to say the least?" Doc asked.

Ryan shrugged. "Everything's a risk, Doc. If we take enough supplies for a few days, and it looks impassable or too desolate, then we come back here and jump."

"If we have to do that, I wouldn't give you much for the chances of picking a destination," Dean said without tearing his gaze away from the console. "Looking at this is just telling me how little I actually learned at the school. There's so little old comp tech that I've seen...just too much to pick up quickly."

"He's right, Ryan," Mildred added in answer to Ryan's questioning gaze. "This is so complex compared to what even I learned back in the day."

"Okay. We leave tomorrow on foot."

"That will please young Jak," Doc remarked. "He's been a trifle restless since we arrived."

"As if we hadn't noticed," Krysty said. "I'll be glad to move if only because it'll calm him."

"Where is he right now?" Ryan asked.

"I asked him to gather everything together from the dispensary and the kitchens," Mildred replied. "He was driving me nuts just sitting around looking miserable."

THEY SPENT one more night at the redoubt, a night that was used to get some necessary sleep in a good bed, and in peace. There was no knowing when the chance might arise again, as it was completely unknown territory beyond the entrance doors.

The next morning they ate in silence. Jak was happier, but there was still the general air of tension that preceded the journey into the unknown outside world, which had been exacerbated by his earlier depression. The elevator took them to the top level, and they walked in silence along the corridor toward the exit doors, opening each sec door from the code scratched into the metal plate above the keypad. This was a common feature of redoubt sec doors, where enlisted men feared forgetting codes in an emergency and so scratched the sec number on the inner side of the door. They couldn't have known how useful their precautionary measure would be in an unimaginable future.

Finally they stood before the outer door.

Ryan paused before punching in the final code. He was concerned that they had gotten this far with everything going so well. What if the actual entrance was blocked on the outside by a landfall, or that sec door was buckled or warped and so permanently stuck?

He turned to the others. "Triple red, people. Been too good so far...can never be too safe." With that he punched in the sec code, and Dean pressed the lever. The door opened smoothly...

### Chapter Three

There was no landfall outside the main sec door. Neither was there any sign of human or mutie

habitation. The entrance to the redoubt was in a shallow valley, thick with lush green foliage and trees that grew tall in spiraling shapes of mutated wonder. Like redwoods modeled on pretzels, they cast shadows across the floor of the valley in roller coaster shapes that reminded Ryan and Jak of the old rides they had seen in the Greenglades Theme Park in Florida, once ruled over by the baron called Larry Zapp. That had seen them come up against another cult leader—Adam Traven—and the chain of thought led Jak to remember the Sunchildren. He quickly dismissed the thought from his mind.

Doc was lost on another road of memory altogether. The height of the trees reminded him of the redwoods he had seen on a family holiday with his beloved Emily, Rachel and Jolyon. All long before the days when he had been trawled by the whitecoats of Chronos and thrust into the nightmare that was now his life. For a moment, Doc wondered if his children had grown strong, and if they in turn had children of their own. Did he have any blood that faced the nukocaust? Were there any vestigial remains of a Tanner family somewhere in the Deathlands even now? He hoped not. He would cope with this life, but he wouldn't wish it on anyone.

"Dark night, an ambush dream," J.B. mouthed softly to Ryan as they entered the valley from the redoubt.

The one-eyed warrior nodded. "String out, stay triple red. Doesn't seem as though there's anything out here, but it's so fireblasted dense you couldn't tell anyway."

Krysty, feeling no sense of imminent danger, still thought to add, "It's not just human danger, though, lover."

Ryan nodded silent agreement. As he took the lead, with J.B. dropping back to cover the rear and the others stringing out into line automatically, he withdrew the panga from its sheath on his thigh. There was no actual path away from the sec door, which suggested that no one had been around to beat such a way for a long, long time. But the large flowering plants and shrubs, the tall mix of differently seeded grasses and the imposing shadows of the twisted trees presented their own dangers. Some mutie plants had a form of sentience, and were predators of small animals. Some were armed for their own defense with poison that could be fatal to humans. And the cover was dense enough to provide shelter for any host of bird and animal life that may be predatory. Even if it wasn't, the idea that they may just stumble across some form of life that would defend itself with a savage ferocity born of fear was enough to keep them alert.

Mildred, three back in line, looked up to the sky.

It was a fairly clear blue, with only a light dusting of purple across the scattered cumulus cloud cover to suggest any chem disturbance in this area. She figured the shadows cast by the trees couldn't be that heavy, as there was such an abundance of plant life in the valley. In fact, it could be that the shadow helped this growth, keeping off the worst excesses of the sun, which was burning orange in the sky.

Mildred looked behind her, merely intending to pass on her observations, but was stopped dead by the look on Jak's face. The albino was directly behind her, and it was difficult for his scarred and pitted white face, with the fall of long, stringy white hair that framed it, to ever look anything other than solemn and fierce. It took a lot to raise a smile, but even by his standards, Jak looked intense. There was a worried mien about him that seemed to actually weigh down on him, driving his small stature close to the ground.

"Jak, everything okay?" she said softly.

"Yeah...kinda," he answered shortly. "Feel like know this place."

"Like *deja vu*?" she asked. Noting his blank and puzzled expression, she added, "Just an old expression from French. I would've thought you'd know a little French, from your people."

Jak raised a halfhearted smile. "Everything change after skydark, even talk."

"Does this have anything to do with what happened to you during the jump...with whatever's been bothering you?" she continued, trying to press home a possible advantage.

Jak screwed his face into an indeterminate expression as though he were wrestling with his own conscience, which, in a sense, he was. Should he mention the strange dream-vision now, especially as the sky was so reminiscent of that he had fought and nearly been chilled under?

But it was just something that he couldn't bring himself to do. He said, "Something weird, can't remember well."

Mildred turned back to face the front and continue, leaving Jak to his thoughts. She didn't believe that he couldn't remember, but knew that it would be pointless to pursue the matter. She only hoped that it wouldn't distract him too much if there was any need to be on the defensive.

The thick undergrowth filled the air with a sickly-sweet scent, the exaggerated and mutated pollens attempting to attract the myriad insect life that swarmed through the valley. J.B. felt as if he'd never seen so many bugs in his life. Not that they particularly bothered him, but insect bites were one of those ridiculous small irritations that could sometimes cause a person more annoyance and discomfort than any other kind of injury or situation. He knew that Mildred had plenty of medical supplies should he be bitten, but he still hoped to avoid the eventuality. Large mosquitoes and horsefly-derived insects hovered in the air, their wings humming ominously. Large stag beetles in an array of bizarrely luminous colors, changing as the stray rays of sunlight that filtered through the trees hit them, scuttled over his combat boots. Brushing the leaves of the overhanging plants and bushes from his face as he followed the others, he disturbed caterpillars and ladybugs of enormous size. Wasps and hornets the length of his index finger buzzed around the flowers, beaten in size only by bees so fat and large that it was a miracle of aerodynamics that they stayed aloft.

While the Armorer struggled with the insects, Dean had turned his attention to the array of birds and mammals that populated the valley. It seemed that the shallow basin had become a haven for the local fauna, as ratlike creatures and squirrels with bushes three times the size of their shrunken bodies could be seen on the floor of the valley and in among the trees. They were keeping well out of the way of the large intruders in their territory, and from their behavior and large numbers, Dean felt it was safe to assume that there were no larger mammalian predators in the valley. Not that he was prepared to relax his own vigilance. If nothing else, the swooping birds that ducked and dived between the branches of the trees, picking insects from plant leaves and pulling ponderous, orange berries from vinelike growths, were a constant danger by their sheer disregard for anything that may get in their way. Certainly everyone in the line had cause to dodge an unconcerned feathered missile as the birds focused on their objective of feeding to the disregard of all else.

The shallow basin in which they found themselves stretched for approximately a quarter of a mile from the entrance of the redoubt to the horizon, which was the lip of a gentle incline that presumably led to a plain beyond. Perhaps the forestlike undergrowth stretched on indefinitely. At that stage it was impossible to tell. Ryan had picked a path that veered at a ten-degree angle from a straight line, as that seemed to be slightly less dense in growth than the alternatives.

Away to each side, and behind the outcrop that allowed entry to the redoubt, it seemed that the foliage

was even more dense, with the trees forming in places a barrier even more impassable than the dense blanket of green broken by violent color. Ryan figured that the slightly less dense area in front of them was what remained of the old road to the redoubt. The fertile growth had obviously spread over it during the past century, but there was still enough dead ground caused by a road surface to slow that growth and leave it just spare enough to allow him to hack a way through. Not that a person could ever tell it had once been a road surface. There was no trace of macadam left beneath their feet, the rich soil having long since been churned up to the surface by the insistent pushing of plant and tree roots.

Progress along their self-made path was slow and punishing. The sickly-sweet scents and the humidity of being in among so many plants under such a sun, even under the shadow of the twisted trees, meant that they were dripping with sweat and breathing heavily within half an hour of leaving the redoubt. Mildred thought of the showers with their carefully regulated water temperature, and allowed herself a rueful smile. Business as usual, she figured.

Ryan kept on hacking at the growth, creating a path. The muscles on his arms bulged as particularly stubborn growths refused to budge, or he hit a knot in a tree branch. Taut whipcords stood out on his arms as he gritted his teeth, sweat running into his good eye and making it sting, the salt gathering to no effect in the empty socket beneath the patch over his right. He wondered if they should turn back, allowing himself a glimpse at the position of the sun in the sky. Even though they had taken their time from the old chrons down in the redoubt, and those had told them that it was still early in the morning, there was no guarantee that they had been correct. The last thing he wanted was to have his people caught in the middle of such a jungle when night fell.

The sun was almost dead center in the sky, which was probably why it was so hot. But at least it told him that the old chrons had been accurate, and that they had plenty of time to reach the edge of the valley before nightfall, even at this appallingly slow rate. Time enough to scout over the lip and see what lay beyond.

RYAN REACHED the top of the valley's lip and stood surveying the territory that spread out below them. The valley was formed in a small crater so that it sloped gently away from the lip and out into a plain. The plain was covered by vast forests of trees similar to those in the valley, linked by velds of grasses that reached taller than a man. Ryan waited for the rest of his party to reach the top, then turned to J.B.

"Want to check our position according to the map, just to get the right bearings?"

The Armorer nodded and produced his minisextant from one of his capacious pockets, pulling a map he had taken from the comp control room along with it. He sighted the sun and checked their position by the map before pointing across to their left.

"That's northwest. Not much left that way these days, but it does head toward the old Seattle area. So mebbe..."

"So mebbe we should take that direction," Ryan finished. "Good as any. It looks deserted as far as I can see, but those forests could be deceptive. I figure we skirt around those, stick to the plain as much as possible, mebbe use the fringes for shelter at nights."

There was a general agreement, Ryan was the unofficial leader, and his word was the final one, but he was always willing to listen to a well reasoned opinion that could influence and inform him. This time, however, he had immediately suggested the only real option.



Jak looked down at the veld. "Mebbe should be careful...more careful," he said softly.

"Never anything else," Ryan replied, shooting the albino a puzzled glance. Whatever was bugging Jak, the one-eyed man wished he would let it go and tell them all. Dismissing the thought and returning to more immediately pressing matters, Ryan stared up at the sun. It was over in the sky, and he figured they had a three-hour trek before it started to fall, and the time came to look for night shelter.

"Head there," he said shortly, indicating a stand of trees that seemed to be about three miles to their left. The way ahead was across a plain that was little more than long grass. Any dangerous mammalian life would be easily spotted, and although it would leave them fairly exposed, it would also expose any enemies that might come across them. More to the point, it would be easy for them to traverse with speed.

They set off down the gentle incline and across the plain. Jak felt his guts turn as they hit the grassland, yet for the life of him—and on the lives of his comrades—he didn't see how they could be surprised on such territory.

THE SUN BEAT DOWN upon them as they crossed the veld, heading toward the trees Ryan had indicated. The grass came up to their knees at most, and the soil was surprisingly easy under their feet. Instead of the bone-jarring crunch that they expected with each footfall, the yielding earth was comfortable and springy beneath them. It was hot, but not oppressively so, and although they shed their coats to prevent too much moisture loss through perspiration—they had refilled their water supplies before leaving the redoubt but were, as always, loath to waste water—none of the party felt as though they were burning beneath the chem-shrouded rays.

The insects were lesser over the veld, although there were swarms of midges that buzzed in small clouds, causing them to bat uselessly in front of their faces to try to stop the insects from blocking their noses and stinging their eyes. But the swarms were few and far between, and at an easy pace it didn't take them long to reach the shelter and shade of the trees.

They remained silent on the trek, strung out in formation with Ryan in front and J.B. at the rear. Although still maintaining observation on a level that went beyond the conscious to almost a sixth sense, the lack of sound or activity combined with the heat, which was dry and dull without becoming noticeably oppressive, caused their minds to wander as they made their way through the valley jungle.

It was only when Ryan reached the edge of the trees that he spoke.

"Okay, let's rest for a few moments," he said, dropping to his haunches before continuing. "That sun is too hot to risk sunstroke skirting around this. Change of plan. Let's see what it's like through there and mebbe go through rather than around. If not, we stay here for the night. So rest up out of that sun while someone carries out a recce. I'll take the west part of the forest. Jak, you take the left."

The albino nodded. It would suit him fine to recce before they continued, as his sense of unease was unabated. He felt better that they'd crossed the veld untouched, but a stand of trees like this could hide anything. Even a giant in yellow clothing.

J.B. arrived at the rear of the column and dropped to his knees. "Dark night, if I have to pick another midge out of my mouth..." He spit, disposing of a few insects to prove his point.

"If that's the worst we've come across, then it's not too bad, John," Mildred chided him.

Doc smiled wryly. "Ah, but is not it always the way, my dear Dr. Wyeth, that it is the smallest things in life that can cause the greatest irritation?"

Mildred returned the old man's wryness. "Why, Doc, if I didn't know better, then I'd say you were setting me up perfectly."

They laughed easily, the relative ease of the trek so far putting them in good spirits. Leaving the others to relax, Jak and Ryan set off into the trees, following their respective courses, to recce the area.

JAK HAD THE FEELING that something was about to go I wrong, but he couldn't tell if that was just his dream or not. It clouded his usual crystal clear sense of danger in a way that worried him. One thing was for sure—if there was any real danger on the sector of forest that he was scanning, then he sure couldn't find it. The tall and twisted trees grew to more than fifty feet, with their branches starting at about fifteen feet, leaving them with plenty of headroom. The branches themselves were thick and overlapping, with the leaves forming a canopy that, in some areas, reduced the level of light to zero and made it hard to see where he was going. Fortunately his red and pigmentless eyes were better adapted to the dark than to bright light, so he was able to find his way around a little better than any of the others.

The trees grew close together, in some places so thickly that there was little gap between the trunks. For such large trees to take root so close together was unusual, but they had a complicated root system that seemed to tie them together into one large organism, feeding and strengthening off one another. This became obvious where the knots and intertwined roots broke the surface, rising up in clumps that could be ankle-shattering if caught by an unsuspecting foot.

Jak skipped over them with a fleetness that betrayed his excellent night vision. He noticed that there was little life beneath the trees bar some fungi encouraged by the cool and humid air trapped beneath the canopy of leaves. With little plant life, there were no small mammals to speak of, and little in the way of insects and grubs. Unlike in the valley, they would be untroubled by the bird life, which would keep to its own level.

The albino saw the break in the trees, leading onto another plain. He estimated that the depth of the forest was about two and half miles by the route he had taken. He turned and headed back, wondering how Ryan had fared.

He didn't recce completely to the edge of the trees...

WHEN JAK ARRIVED back at the far end of the forest, he found that Ryan hadn't yet returned. He waited until the one-eyed man returned before he relayed his findings to the group.

Ryan nodded slowly. "Guess that route curves less than mine. Parts of the forest are so dense that I had to take a series of twists and turns that took me to about four miles. There's not much here for us..." He looked up at the position of the sun, then consulted his wrist chron. "Not long until sundown so I say we make it through to the far side of the trees, then set up camp for the night. The usual watches."

"Sounds good to me," Krysty said. "That heat was starting to make me feel drowsy, and I think we'll all be ready for some rest after tackling the woods."

In general agreement, they gathered themselves together and headed into the forest, following the route Jak had taken. The albino led the way, slowing his previous pace as he knew the others would take longer to adjust their vision to the relative darkness. Ryan followed, with Krysty, Doc, Mildred, Dean and J.B. following close on his heels. It was imperative that they stick together.

"Watch roots. Wrong foot and ankle break." Jak remarked as they reached the densest part of the path, where the entwined and knotted system of interdependent roots broke the surface. Slowing to almost a crawl, Jak picked his way over them, leading the others by example. His path was so surefooted that even Doc had little trouble in negotiating the trickier stages.

"Hot pipe, I wouldn't like to come up against anything in here," Dean muttered as they reached the mile-and-a-half mark of their trek. "There's no room to fight."

"No room for anything," J.B. replied, "which is mebbe why there isn't anything here."

Dean shot the Armorer a look, not sure whether he was being mocked. J.B.'s face was deadpan behind his spectacles.

"Okay, so I'll think before I open my mouth next time, all right?" Dean said acidly.

J.B. remained deadpan, despite the muffled laughter from the others—even from Dean himself.

Despite the difficulty of the path, there was an almost lighthearted feeling within the group as they trekked through the heart of the forest. It was true that they were maintaining a vigilance, but the entire trip so far had been so devoid of anything remotely resembling a threat that even their collective subconscious was starting to lose concentration...

THE OPENING at the far end of the woods was in sight. It lay about three hundred yards away, a small natural inlet into the trees, which grew up around it but for some reason hadn't closed perfectly, allowing two hundred yards of grassland to invade the bare earth and root system. The sun shone through the gap, lighting up the grasslands with an almost luminous glow as the rays shot low across the ground.

Jak was fifty yards into the sun when he caught a movement that was almost beyond the periphery of his vision. It was instinct rather than eyesight that told him something was moving, something that wasn't a bird or foliage, something that was bigger than either.

Krysty's instincts jolted her out of her reverie at the same moment. "Ryan!" she blurted.

The one-eyed man's reaction was razor sharp. The Steyr was off his shoulder and into both hands within the blink of his single eye, the bolt back and the chamber loaded, the stock cradled into his elbow and finger already pressuring the trigger. Behind him, at the rear of the party, J.B. had already unslung his Uzi, bringing it into position on rapid fire, and automatically covering the opposite side of the clearing to Ryan.

The one thought that crossed Jak's mind, before his fighting instincts overtook it, was that their attacker was as silent as the yellow giant in his dream.

Except that the attack wasn't by a single figure. It was much worse than that: a large group of stickies swarmed from the lower trees and bushes that fringed the clearing, where the lack of cover and root system had allowed smaller foliage to survive.

There had to have been close to forty of them.

And they had the element of surprise...

## Chapter Four

There was no time to act, only to react. The stickies were on them before they had a chance to form a defensive formation or even clear their weapons for action.

Like all stickies—a particular form of mutation distinguished by their razor-sharp teeth, thin and shapeless skin and the suckered pads on their fingers and toes that gave them their name—they were hideous and screeched incoherently as they attacked. But what gave them that element of surprise was their stealth and also their seeming intelligence. They had observed the approaching group and gathered themselves on either side of the clearing, keeping silent until their target was within range.

That wasn't the usual cowardly and noisy behavior of stickies. There was one thing that this group had in common with others, though—they attacked in a large group, taking no chances on being outnumbered.

"Fireblast! So many of the fuckers!" Ryan yelled, loosing off a shot that ripped through the stickie that was nearest, tearing a chunk of flesh away from its rib cage and splintering bone, the flight path of the bullet pushing a fragment of bone into the creature's heart and stopping it. The stickie's expression changed from one of blood lust to a kind of dull surprise, before the light went out in its dark eyes, and it dropped to the ground.

That was one less, but they were still outnumbered about six to one.

J.B. rattled off a series of shots that chilled three of the stickies and grazed the flesh of several more. But instead of driving them away, as it would have done with stickies they had encountered elsewhere, it only served to make the creatures more crazed. They attacked with a greater fervor, and J.B. found himself flung to the ground by two of the wounded stickies, who had launched themselves through the air. The Uzi was knocked from the Armorer's hands by the impact, the strap still twisted around his wrist. Unfortunately for J.B. that only hampered him even further, as one of the stickies landed on top of the blaster, his body weight pulling the strap taut and causing the blood flow to stop, deadening the Armorer's hand and leaving him with only one arm to defend himself.

Ryan, meanwhile, had turned the Steyr in his hands, now wielding it as a club to try to clear space for himself by taking out as many stickies as possible with one swing. He counted on the fact that the stickies were so crazed in their attack to help him that they rushed blindly into the heavy stock of the rifle, their own momentum increasing the force with which it hit them at head level. There was the sickening sound of cracking bone and the squelch of soft flesh as two of the stickies died, their skulls crushed, brains pulped. At the extreme end of his swing, Ryan looked back to the forest. If they could get some space and move back, would they be able to take cover and establish a position of strength back there? The darkness hid the root system, and there was every chance that they would be tripped by the raised knots, and so make themselves even more vulnerable than they were now. He couldn't credit stickies with having planned that aspect of the ambush, but if nothing else it proved that lady luck had a mutie face that day.

While Ryan and J.B. were trying to deal with the stickies that had headed for them, the others were dealing with their attackers with varying degrees of difficulty.

Inevitably Jak was faring the best. Despite his initial shock at the silence with which the stickies had waited, allied to his sense of foreboding, his instincts and life of fighting kicked in with a vengeance. His

white hair whipping around his head like pale flames, he turned and spun among the group of stickies who had approached him. They were being held at bay by the swift kicking of his heavy combat boots, and the razor-sharp whirl of the leaf-bladed knife that he held in each hand, wrists supple and twisting to angle the blades with each thrust at any exposed white and sickly flesh that came within range.

Many of the stickies attacking him were nursing wounds and trying with pitiful little wails to staunch the blood that flowed through their papery skin. But despite the fact that he was seemingly on top of the situation, he was only too well aware that he was doing no more than containing the situation. They couldn't get to him yet, but inevitably he would tire sooner or later, and with the large number of stickies surrounding him, he couldn't as yet see a way to change defense to attack.

While Jak puzzled on that with a portion of his mind that wasn't occupied with defense, Krysty was on the other side of Ryan, her hair clinging close to her head and her mouth set in a grim line as she dealt with the forces attacking her.

She held her .38 Smith & Wesson in one hand, but was using the barrel as a club, her arm moving in an almost beautiful economy of effort to whip the barrel against the flesh of any stickie that was within range, the sight on the end of the snubbed barrel cutting through tender flesh and drawing blood and cries of pain from its victims. Those stickies who got past the barrel found that Krysty had a superb sense of balance, as she used one foot to anchor herself, and the other to shoot out a series of gracefully executed yet rock-hard kicks, the silver tips on the toes of her blue Western boots striking home hard. One stickie who got past her guard and right up to her felt the hard bone of her elbow as she drove it back and into its face when it tried to grab her from behind. The stickie's cheekbone shattered under the impact, the compression forcing one eyeball from its socket to dangle wetly on its cheek as it fell backward, screaming with a piercing, high-pitched shrill.

A small victory for the Titian-haired warrior, but she was as aware as Jak of the fact that she was only keeping them back, not making headway. And soon she would start to tire.

Farther back in the line, Dean was encountering problems. His Browning Hi-Power had taken out a couple of stickies with accurate shots that had removed chunks of scalp and cleaned most of the brainpan. But once again, he had discovered that the sheer weight of numbers was telling against him, and the Browning slipped from his grasp when a stickie had cannoned into him from behind, driving him forward and causing his arm to drop. Another stickie grabbed the fallen arm and bit into it, drawing blood with the needle-sharp teeth and making Dean scream with the sudden pain. His arm temporarily deadened by the pain, he dropped the blaster, which was lost beneath an onrush of bodies.

Dean found himself weighed down by four stickies: one behind and three attempting to drag him down from the front. With his free arm, he jabbed and caught one of his attackers beneath its ribs, doubling it with pain and causing it to fall back. Twisting, he flung the stickie on his back over his shoulder, trying to pinball it into at least one of the pair that still clung on to the front of him. But although the stickie on his back rolled over his shoulder and hit the ground with a bone-jarring shudder on its shoulder joint, dislocating the right shoulder, it failed to connect with either of its intended targets. Which left the young Cawdor in grave trouble. The momentum of his twist had unbalanced him, leading him right into the grasp of the stickies that clung to his front, enabling them to pull him to the ground, where he landed face first. He felt the suckers on their fingers pulling at him through his clothes, and he lashed out with his leg, hoping to catch one of them a glancing blow with his heavy boot. But he could only hope for assistance before the agony of having his flesh ripped and eaten by the stickies.

Assistance that Mildred would have given if she, too, was not under dire threat.

When the stickies burst from the bushes and down from the trees, Mildred had tried to draw her Czech-made ZKR target pistol, but found that a sharp-eyed stickie—with considerably more cunning and intelligence than could be expected from such a mutie—had picked up a stone and skimmed it with remarkable accuracy. It caught her between the thumb and index finger, dealing her a blow that was at first acutely painful, but within a fraction of a second numbed her hand, causing the pistol to drop from her fingers. Before she had a chance to recover, the group of stickies was upon her.

Mildred struck out with her hand, pushing with power from the shoulder, her fingers outstretched and rigid. She caught the leading stickie in the throat, causing its eyes to bulge and a bubbling, strangled cry to escape from its throat. The only drawback to this first blow was that her iron-hard fingers penetrated the thin skin and soft flesh of the stickie, catching in the tangle of veins, arteries and tendons that crowded the throat. A sickening sucking sound emanated from the already chilled mutie as Mildred tried to pull her hand free.

It disabled her at a crucial moment, especially as the increasing deadweight of the mutie dragged her forward and off balance, no matter how hard she dug in. It was all the encouragement the others needed, as they swarmed over her and pulled her even more off balance.

Mildred stumbled forward, her free arm flailing to strike out and away at as many as she could, her plaits whipping around her head and blurring her vision as the fetid breath and sharp teeth nipped at exposed flesh.

How she would get out of this, she had no idea, but she refused to panic, knowing that as long as she retained some kind of calm and kept striking out she could get lucky, remove enough of them with one good haymaker to give her the time to scramble back to her feet. Maybe.

Doc, on the other hand, was faring better than perhaps would have been thought. He was wily, and the very fact that he always teetered on the brink of sanity meant that he was sometimes better equipped to keep hold of his reflexes in moments of great stress. This was one of those times.

Although Doc carried the LeMat percussion pistol, the shot charge of which would have ripped the life from a fairly large group of stickies with little problem, his racing mind realized that he wouldn't have enough time to draw the large blaster and then discharge it accurately before the group was upon him. He decided within the blink of an eye that his only option was to trust the blade.

Eschewing his blaster, Doc drew the swordstick from the silver lion's-head cane that had been assisting him in his passage. The blade of tempered Toledo steel, finely honed and gleaming in the late afternoon rays of the sun, cut through the air in a preparatory series of shapes that betrayed Doc's fencing skills, and seemed to have a temporarily mesmerizing effect on the group of stickies who had singled out the old man.

It was for less than a second, but it gave Doc enough of an opportunity to take guard and size up the potential targets. Five of them were directly in front of him, with one off to his left and attempting to flank him. It crossed his mind that a stickie with intelligence was a rare thing...a thought that he dismissed with a sudden pivot of the heel and a thrust and parry that inscribed a slashed arc across the white flesh of the stickie's throat. Hot blood gushed out onto the grass, staining it a dull crimson.

It was no longer that most dangerous of things, a clever stickie...now merely chilled.

Doc turned his attention to the main group. They attacked as a mass, and Doc swept an arc of the blade across them, trying to inflict the maximum damage with the minimum of effort, realizing that the one thing



he, of all the companions, couldn't afford to do was waste effort and energy in such a battle.

Although he inflicted flesh wounds that made the stickies yell and squeal in agony, he was unable to deliver a chilling blow. The fact that they attacked in such a mass meant that they—perhaps inadvertently—protected one another, preventing him from piercing vital organs. He was able to keep them at bay, but for how long? He grinned in a humorless, vulpine sneer, his white teeth exposed in grim determination. Doc hadn't come this far to be defeated easily by a bunch of stickies. If the whitecoats of Operation Chronos couldn't see the end of him, if Cort Strasser couldn't see the end of him, if every human enemy they had encountered couldn't see the end of him, then he would be forever damned if he would let a bunch of stickies finally snuff out the life of Dr. Theophilus Tanner.

It was a thought that would keep him going: the question was for how long.

And where would help come from?

THE ANSWER to Doc's silent question—the question that all of the companions, in their own way, had asked themselves—came from an unexpected source.

The noise of their battle had obscured all else, and they were unable to hear the progress of a large group of people through the forest. Now they emerged, both from the path that Jak had picked out for his group, and also from the bushes and treetops that the stickies had so recently used. Using the noise of the fight in the enclosure to mask their own progress, they formed a pincer movement that also saw them close off the open end of the enclosure, cutting off any escape the stickies might try to make into the open veld beyond.

They attacked the stickies with a series of hollered cries and screams that seemed to also be a series of signals to one another for a battle formation, as they followed one another in a chanted pattern.

None of the companions could get a clear glimpse of the group who had joined the fray. Were they friend or foe? What did they look like? It was hard to tell, as Ryan's party was being forced to their knees—in some cases literally—by the onslaught of stickies.

Nonetheless, they all took heart from the rapidly realized fact that the newcomers were targeting the stickies, and seemed to be coming to their assistance. "Goodness me, I should have realized that the concept of the fairer sex no longer existed, but this is beyond me," Doc muttered to himself as the newcomers aided him in driving back the stickies.

Ryan and Jak, also still on their feet, were taken aback by the identity of their rescuers, as indeed was Krysty—but not, like Doc, by their sex.

Ryan and Krysty knew that women could be as competent in combat as men, but were surprised by the fact that every one of the Amazons who were whirling around them in battle was slight in stature. Not a single one they could see clearly appeared to be above five and a half feet in height, and neither did any of them appear to be heavily built. In fact, all of them were slight of build, although their muscles glistened with the perspiration of effort and the slick blood of their enemies, showing a glinting definition. If Ryan Cawdor had come across them in an idle moment, he wouldn't have thought them capable of such sustained ferocity.

But it was Jak who was the most surprised, and for a reason that none of the others could ever have guessed. For, approaching him in a whirling dance of coordinated kicks and arm movements that allowed the panga she wielded to cut through exposed stickie flesh, came a woman who was all too familiar to

him. She was only about five feet—smaller than many of her companions—but carried with her an air of controlled ferocity and authority that set her apart from the others. Her hair was a flaming red, yet lighter than Krysty's, and flowing like liquid fire in the slanting rays of the fading sun. It spun around her in perfect time as she moved, with a hip-swaying easy grace, screaming high-pitched cries that contained a husky note that Jak found familiar. She wore a T-shirt tied beneath her small breasts, exposing a bronzed midriff that ran flat and muscled into a pair of cutoff shorts. Thonged sandals, laced up her taut calves, allowed her to arch her toes into points that hit home with as much power and force as the straightened fingers of her free hand, the blood splashed panga whirling in the other.

The group of women fighters had eschewed the use of blasters in such circumstances, the close-quarters fighting making it a risky option. Instead they were using a variety of pangas and machetes that were obviously well honed, to judge by the way in which they were chopping through the opposition. The turn of the tide in favor of Ryan and his people increased their determination by turns, and they fought back with renewed vigor. The stickies dragged from the now prone bodies of J.B., Mildred and Dean allowed these three to recover some ground, and use their superior strength and fighting intelligence to go on the offensive.

Doc found himself back-to-back with a blond Amazon, matching every slashing movement of his Toledo steel blade with her own blood-slicked machete. She was up to his shoulder, reaching about five-six, and her blond mane, hacked into a rough bob, flicked against his cheek as she protected his left side, lashing out at a crazed and brave stickie that flung itself at the pair of them. For its blood lusting bravery it was rewarded by having its head cleaved in two by one hefty blow.

"It is an honor to have you at my back, madam," Doc commented as he slashed yet another scar upon a stickie torso.

"Don't say that until you've proved yourself, sweetie," she replied with a crack in her voice that gave the words sinister import.

Doc raised an eyebrow, but was too concerned with protecting himself from the last few stickies to answer immediately or to ponder on what she may have meant by that last remark.

Meanwhile, Jak had been almost fatally distracted by the appearance of the woman in his dream. He had been grappling hand to hand with a stickie who had launched itself straight at the albino. Jak's left hand formed a cup that smacked under the stickie's chin, forcing its head back and up, while the albino's other hand fished for a leaf-bladed knife, those he had previously held having been lost within the guts of now-chilled stickies. Producing one from within the myriad folds of his patched camou jacket, he used it to gut the stickie as calmly and efficiently as he would gut a fish. He released his hand when he felt the stickie's head cease to resist against his arm, instead falling to a deadweight in his palm.

As this stickie dropped to the earth, the whirling dervish that was the dream woman came nearer, and for a second their eyes made contact. Her features were as sharp and defined as he could recall, and her eyes as large, blue and piercing as had been impressed on his memory. So piercing and hypnotic that it seemed that time had stood still for a second. There was no sign of recognition in those blue pools, but instead a warning.

A warning Jak heeded a fraction of a second too late. A yelling stickie leaped at him from just to the rear of his right shoulder, catching him enough off guard to prevent his using the mutie's momentum to roll it harmlessly away from his body. The wild creature cannoned into him, knocking him off balance and making him stumble to his left, his feet skipping across the grassy earth in an attempt to keep balance while he twisted his upper body and tried desperately to get a hand beneath the stickie's body to try to

jab beneath the ribs and dislodge it from him so that he could get in a killing blow. He could feel the suckered fingers of one hand become entangled in his hair, pulling at it and reaching for his scalp to try to tear at the skin. His face was close to that of the stickie, its dark and characterless eyes glittering with hatred into his red orbs, its teeth bared in a triumphant snarl as its breath enveloped him in a noxious cloud that made him want to puke.

And then there was another smell in the air, a scent that was warmer, sweeter and more earthy. The smell of flaming red hair and glistening skin. A breath colored by nuts and berries.

"Hey, stupidworks...eat this, you fuck," husked a voice, followed by a deafening explosion.

Jak saw the stickie's head dissolve in close-up before his eyes...eyes that blinked as gray brain matter and red, hot blood showered over him. The woman had drawn a handblaster and had discharged it into the stickie's ear. At such close range, the sound of the blaster almost parted Jak from his hearing, and the smell of cordite obscured the stench of flesh and blood violently torn asunder.

Jak staggered back a couple of paces, wiping the gore from his face with his sleeve so that he could see again, despite the remnants of the stickie's head that dripped from the ends of his hair. He looked from the corpse of the chilled stickie, lying prone with nothing that could be recognized as a head, to the slim and beautiful warrior woman who stood in front of him, a Vortak precision pistol in her hand. As he had seen in his mat-trans dream, it was a perfect example of the art of Fred Craig, the designer whose predark handblasters J.B. sometimes spoke of in hushed tones. It had a unique look, but was obviously based on an update of the John Browning 1911 design that had set the tone for such blasters. The gas-buffered recoil system had allowed the woman to shoot at such close range and know that she could have maximum accuracy at a range where even the slightest recoil could have altered the trajectory of the shell and also taken out the albino.

Jak was only aware that he was standing and staring at her when she holstered the blaster in the small of her back, arching her hips for ease. She smiled, slow and easy, with a lopsided grin.

"I know I'm beautiful, sweets, but looking at me like that is liable to get you chilled one day...just like it nearly did."

Jak looked away. She didn't seem to recognize him—why should she?—but he was confused by her turning up in such a manner. Even more bewildering, did this mean that they would somehow come across the Illuminated Ones? They knew that the secret group, who still seemed to survive in some underground form, had been based toward the northwest of the Deathlands. Had that been part of the meaning of his doomie dream?

He was unable to ponder that, as the flame-haired warrior woman took several steps away and then turned. Glancing around, he could see that all the Amazon women had moved away from his companions.

Ryan also noticed that and said, "Thanks for the assist. We were in serious trouble, there. Mebbe we should all introduce ourselves." He held his hands well away from his weapons as he spoke, only too aware that he wouldn't have the time to draw.

Seemingly ignoring him, the warrior woman turned to her tribe, yelling, "Eh-la, eh-la," in a singsong tone.

It was a signal that the other women took immediately. All drew their blasters, training them on the group in the middle. Glancing around like his companions, Jak could see that the women surrounded them,

standing among the slaughtered stickies.

"Told you," the blonde said to Doc with a smile that was almost as white as his had been earlier, and almost as cold.

"Shut it, Margia," the flame-haired warrior woman snapped, before returning her attention to Ryan. "Now then, honey, I think it mebbe would be nice if you told us just a little bit about yourselves, before we have to chill you."

## Chapter Five

Ryan shot a glance across the line. At the far end, J.B. was frozen in a half-inclined attitude, his eyes fixed on the Amazons directly in front of him. They were both holding handblasters. The smaller woman with wiry blond hair had a 9 mm Hi-Point Comp blaster with four-inch barrel and 10-round mag with muzzle-break compensator. The taller of the two, who had long, curling auburn hair and was younger than most of her compatriots, clutched a 9 mm Kahr Mk 9 7-round pistol with a three-inch barrel.

The Armorer took in the condition of the blasters and the manner in which the Amazons were holding them. He slowly and carefully turned his head toward Ryan, and almost imperceptibly indicated with a shake that he believed the women to be well equipped and too good to take on from their current position. The sinking sun glinted off the wire frames of his spectacles as he confirmed for the one-eyed man all that he had suspected.

The exchange was noted by Doc, Dean, Krysty and Mildred, all aware that the new arrivals currently had the upper hand but willing to follow Ryan's word if he decided to attempt resistance. Jak alone didn't notice the exchange, as his gaze was still on the Amazon leader.

But if Jak didn't notice it, others did.

"I'd follow what Four-eyes there says," murmured the blonde who had been addressed as Margia, her voice loud in the sudden silence. "I look after the blasters, and I can assure you that anyone who doesn't take the best care of their own personal store gets fucked hard."

"I believe you...and I admire your dedication," J.B. said quietly to her, touching his fedora.

The blonde smiled smugly. "Thank you, sweetie."

The red-haired Amazon leader sighed. "Shut it, Margia...you're too easily taken in by this shit—and don't you dare fucking say it isn't," she added, noticing that J.B. was about to speak. She continued, "I've been friendly about this so far, but I may not be much longer."

"You call this friendly?" Mildred questioned with a raised eyebrow.

The Amazon leader smiled her lopsided grin. "I didn't let the bastard stickies get you, did I? And I haven't blasted you to hell...yet."

Ryan raised his hands. "Okay, point taken. But you've got to understand that we're as wary of you as

you are of us, but we are grateful for your help with the stickies. We were seriously outnumbered there. What's more worrying is that I've never come across stickies that could think tactics like that before."

The Amazon fixed him with an appraising look. "Funny you should say that, boy, because we've traveled across this foul little land, and we've never seen them behave that way before. Have we?" She directed the question toward the surrounding Amazons.

Amid the chorus of agreement for their leader's words, Mildred raised her voice. "Can I take a look at some of the bodies? It may tell us something."

"You some kind of medicine woman?" the flame-haired woman asked. When Mildred nodded, the leader pursed her lips. "So you've traveled, and you've got a wide range of backgrounds." Seeing Ryan's look of wry surprise, she continued, "You've got a boy, a mutie, two soldiers, a medicine woman and a wise man... Oh, and a warrior woman who really needs to lose some of those rags and loosen up to fight," she added, indicating Krysty. "On top of that, you've obviously traveled like us, because you know stickies aren't always like these."

"Very impressive, but not the whole story," Krysty broke in. "By the way, I'm quite happy with the clothes I've got, thanks. Some of the places we've been are too cold to wear as little as you."

"Fair point," the leader conceded. "So, what is the whole story?"

Ryan paused before speaking. Would it be wise to give away what they were doing to these people? On the other hand, what did they have to lose at this stage?

Finally he spoke. "We've been traveling for quite a while. How we came together is neither here nor there, but I guess we aren't a tribe like yours. Mebbe we're just people who don't fit in elsewhere. Me and J.B. there used to travel with Trader across the Deathlands, until things began to fall apart and it was time to look elsewhere. We've heard stories about a land to the north where there's a stockpile, and where there might be a chance to build a life in peace. If that's true, then there's chance there to escape this life that we might just want to take. Guess we find out little bits here and there, but not enough to really get there yet."

The Amazon leader nodded. "That sounds fair enough to me, honey. I don't think that you'll be too much danger to us, as you're on a quest like we are. You're not out to take anything from us. I guess you can be easy—we won't chill you if you don't fuck with us."

Ryan smiled, his hard jaw broken by the grin. "If I wasn't so sure you could do it, I'd be tempted to laugh at that, be a bastard and say how generous you were."

His smile was returned by the Amazon leader's lopsided grin. "If you weren't so bastard cheeky as to say it like that, I'd chill you where you stand," she said.

Krysty, vaguely irritated by the woman's attitude in a way she couldn't explain, broke in once more. "So you know something about us, but you haven't told us anything about yourselves. I'd say a fair exchange of information was called for here."

The Amazon leader nodded, taking the chance to introduce herself. "Guess that's fair enough. They call me Gloria, and I'm the queen of the Gate. That's us—" she indicated the other women, none of whom had as yet lowered their blasters—"and also the backup who are on the other side of the clearing by now, heading for camp. They knew we'd either bring you back or leave you here chilled with this

scum—" she indicated the chilled stickies "—so they followed their orders to the letter and returned to camp, where our men are waiting. They know better than to fuck around. It's only by being strong that we've survived and thrived."

"You are a nomadic tribe then?" Doc asked, leaning forward on his cane, which he sheathed before their actions had been halted.

"If you mean that we're travelers, then yes," Gloria answered.

Doc indicated assent. "My apologies, dear lady, for using terms that are unfamiliar to you. I shall endeavor to speak more plainly in future."

Gloria laughed. "I like you, old man. You make me laugh. Guess it might be fun to have you around. But yes, we are travelers, and we have our own quest. As leader of the tribe, and hereditary queen, I carry with me the gift of far-seeing. A seer by birth, it's my duty and privilege to carry with me the legends and purpose of the Gate people. Since the days of skydark, we have known that there is a gateway to the future, to a world beyond the one we know and is yet not of the realms of the chilling. This land will be free from the disease and hurt of the Deathlands, and from this our people will build a new and better life."

"This gateway," Doc prompted, "do you know what it is and where?"

Ryan watched the old man and also the warrior queen to try to work out what Doc was getting at: he could see that there was a light shining in the old man's eyes, and wondered if he was sharing Doc's thoughts.

What if the gateway to the future of which the woman spoke was a remnant of Operation Chronos? And if this was the case, then what else could possibly be waiting in this mythical place?

Could it, in fact, be the place in the north of which they had learned fragments? Gloria's next statement left Ryan in little doubt that was a strong possibility. "The legends say that it comes from the predark times and is left over from the evils that were perpetrated by the white men of the secret orders. Some of these white men and those who held dominion over them are still in control, but they are small in number and our righteousness shall overcome them. They are in the great pit to the north, and the gateway to them is in the shape of a pentacle. It was the greatest of all old symbols of power, and it is the symbol that they still carry with them."

Doc, noting that the sudden change of tone in her voice, from her normal husky tones to a slightly higher, singsong pitch, meant that she was almost trancing herself to recite the legend that had been passed down to her as seer of the tribe.

"Do you know how you must get there?"

Gloria looked at him. Her piercing blue eyes seemed to cut through him like cutters made of ice-blue polished diamonds.

"We must follow the markers. The old ones left a trail of secret sites that we cannot enter until we reach the final gateway, and yet these sites tell us all we need to know. They give us the direction we need to follow."

Ryan tried to contain his excitement, and took a long and steady look at his friends to see if they had



drawn the same conclusions. From the expression on their faces, he could see that they had: the secret sites that Gloria had spoken of had to be the redoubts, and although the Gate tribe never actually used the mat-trans units, they somehow had some way of knowing the manner in which the mat-trans network linked all the redoubts, and they had been following these lines for generations in search of the last refuge of the predark authorities. Ryan had read in some old scraps of books about whitecoat theories on how birds were able to migrate from continent to continent in the days when there were still recognizable continents. These theories suggested that there were lines of energy—the magnetic fields, they called them—that crisscrossed the earth, and the birds followed them, using them as guides.

What if there was some mutie trait in the Gate tribe—or at least in the line of queens to which Gloria belonged—that allowed them to see the lines of energy that linked the mat-trans devices in the redoubts? Knowing from their own bitter experience how screwed-up these lines of communication were, it came as no surprise to Ryan that it had taken them several generations to come this far north.

"Thank you, my dear. You have told me much, although you may not realize it," Doc said quietly. He didn't look to his companions, for he knew that they had all drawn the same conclusions as himself.

Gloria looked askance at Doc, and when she spoke again her voice had returned to its normal timbre.

"I get the impression that mebbe you people now know more than I do. That won't last for long. I'll make you an offer. It seems to me that we're both searching for something, and that mebbe that something is the same thing. So mebbe it would be good for us to join together, at least for a while, and see if our goal is the same."

"And if we don't agree?" Ryan asked as neutrally as he could.

Gloria shrugged. "You don't seem to mean us harm. And so what if you do? We outnumber you and you're mostly men. You—" she added, addressing Mildred and Krysty—"shouldn't let the one-eyed man here lead you. Sisters are better suited to go in the front, and so it has always been. If you come with us, then that's more or less the way it will be. Though I will, out of deference, let the men travel with us instead of manning the supplies as is their place."

"Mighty generous," J.B. said with a poker face. To his friends, his satirical intent was obvious. But such was his ability to deadpan that Gloria merely acknowledged him gracefully.

"You seem to have earned it, Four-eyes. And now for you, medicine woman," she said, turning to Mildred. "Before we travel on and leave these scum to return to the earth and slime that birthed them, do you still want to examine them?"

"I certainly do," Mildred muttered, taking a few paces to a fallen and chilled stickie and dropping to her knees to examine the corpse. She had chosen one that still had its head intact, and was examining the skull area minutely.

"May I?" Doc asked Gloria, indicating with his stick where Mildred was kneeling. When the warrior queen granted her assent, Doc moved forward and joined the doctor.

"Guessed what I'm looking for, Doc?" Mildred murmured to Tanner.

"I suspect that you are in search of some sign of surgery around the area of the brainpan."

Mildred nodded. "Got it in one, Doc. It'd be a cold day in hell before a stickie ever learned how to fight

tactically and arrange an ambush, unless it was some kind of superstickie, with enhanced brain power."

"And somehow I do not think Darwin's theories ever held much of a council with the notion of such a rapid development, even taking mutations into account. If anything, I would expect it to go in reverse in such a case as this," Doc muttered.

"Exactly," Mildred replied, her hands stretching the repulsive and elastic skin searching for outward signs and also probing the area beneath the skin for signs of surgery, such as sudden ridges of bone. She grimaced with disgust at the feel of the chilled mutie in her hands, but the grimace turned to a small grin of triumph as her fingers traced a small growth of bone at the base of the skull. Pulling the skin tighter, and turning the heavy head in her hands to better examine the area in question, she found a small, puckered scar.

"I believe that answers that question," Doc said quietly.

"Sophisticated technique, too," Mildred said with a touch of professional admiration creeping into her voice, an all too rare reminder of her past before the days of being a freezie and of skydark. "This is keyhole surgery, probably laser. Whoever did this had access to some pretty damn good equipment, and what's more, equipment that was in good working order."

"I suggest we examine a few more of the corpses, if we can find any with heads undamaged enough," Doc said quietly.

Mildred nodded. "Check as many as possible." Both she and Doc rose to their feet and, disregarding the puzzled or interested stares of those around them, examined as many of the chilled stickies as they could find with enough skull intact to warrant investigation.

When they were done, they conferred briefly before Mildred addressed Ryan and Gloria.

"It's just as I suspected. These are no ordinary stickies. All of those who still have enough skull left to examine have shown signs of surgery. I suspect that their brains have been tampered with in some way—perhaps a smart drug slowly released into the cerebellum, perhaps some kind of laser modification or direct genetic engineering. They were talking about that kind of activity before skydark, so maybe whoever is left..."

She let the sentence tail off. Ryan understood immediately. Anyone capable of doing this has to have some damn good tech, and in the best of repair. That suggested a stockpile or redoubt that was near, and in working order.

Gloria, not having the experience of the one-eyed warrior, was a little slower on the uptake, and she quizzed Mildred. "You mean the old ones of legend may have done this, and that we may finally be nearing them?"

"I wouldn't say that exactly," Mildred replied, choosing her words carefully, "but it is highly possible that a fully equipped surgery is relatively near, which would suggest a redoubt or installation of some kind—" she noted the blank look from the warrior queen and clarified "—a secret site, as you call it. Perhaps even the one we're all searching for."

Gloria's eyes lit up. "Could it be that finally, after all this time, we're within sight of our goal?"

Krysty spoke gently. "Don't get too excited yet. It could just be another marker on the way."

"When such wonders are being performed as to make stickies smart?" Gloria shook her head, her flaming hair swaying gently around her finely boned features. "Na, na, na, this is the place. We are finally near."

"So need be triple red," Jak blurted, finally speaking. All through the exchanges, he had been staring at Gloria, trying to reconcile reality with his mat-trans dream. If it was a doomie precognition, then he needed to get clear in his own head exactly what it all meant. But seeing the beautiful woman of his dream standing before him as flesh was perplexing. He had been frozen until one thought had stabbed through into his brain, one thought that saw his instincts for danger show through even the deepest confusion.

All turned to look at him, but it was Gloria who spoke first, in a voice that was edged both with concern and fascination.

"Why would that be, honey?" she whispered, as though he were a frightened child.

Jak looked directly at her. There was no recognition in her eyes, but something else—a light that he couldn't define.

He spoke slowly. "Remember whitecoat things from past. Always like watch experiments. How they know where stickies go out here? Also remember hunting herds, stalk for long time before go for kill. Mebbe..."

Doc smote his forehead with the palm of his free hand, the knuckles of the other turning white as he gripped the silver lion's-head cane.

"By the Three Kennedys! How could I have been so stupid as to not see it! The lad is, of course, right."

"Right about what, Doc?" Ryan questioned with an urgency in his voice. An agitated Doc was always inclined to take the long way around to the point, and yet the very fact that he was agitated suggested that there was little time for a long ramble through Doc's mind.

"My dear Ryan, let me take you back to the early days of my youth, when I attempted to study the migratory and hunting patterns of small mammals near my home in the beautiful hamlet of South Strafford, in what we used to call Vermont in those halcyon days—"

"Skip the travelog, Doc," Mildred snapped.

The old man shook his head as though to clear it. "Of course, of course. I apologize for my distress. It is just that I feel like a fool for not seeing it before. I used to tag animals of different species and then follow them, to see where they went. I could always spot them by the tag."

"I don't get it, Doc. What's this got to do with the stickies?" Dean asked in a puzzled tone.

"Simply this, young Cawdor—the stickies have been altered and then released. Why, if not to track them and see what they do?"

"Fireblast! In which case they'll be marked in some way, and whoever performed the surgery will be out for them soon enough," Ryan finished.

The warrior queen had been listening intently to them, all the while keeping one of her piercing blue eyes

on the albino. Although some of their speech had passed her by, she had grasped the gist of it and said hurriedly, "If we're under threat here, then we move now and get back to camp. That's far enough away to give us time and shelter, and we have numbers there."

Ryan nodded. "That's good, but it doesn't account for what you want to do with us. We coming with you or making our own way?"

Gloria flashed him a smile that showed strong white teeth that reflected the sparkle in her wild eyes. "I thought that was settled, sugar. You come with us and we look together. I'm not leaving you behind now."

Both Krysty and Mildred noticed that the woman's eyes strayed to Jak when she spoke the latter sentence.

"Then we can relax and get the hell out?" Ryan asked.

"What are you waiting for, sweets?" Gloria said before turning to her warriors and speaking once more in the singsong "eh-la, eh-la" chant that was obviously a signal.

This time there was a different intonation to the chant, an emphasis on the second syllable rather than the first, and it was this that gave the cue for the warrior women of the Gate to holster their blasters in the small leather pouches they kept in the small of their backs.

Jak looked across at Ryan, who was puzzled by the expression on the albino's face. There was something there that Ryan couldn't recall having ever been part of Jak Lauren in all the time that he had known and fought with him. It wasn't fear, neither was it apprehension. It was something that fell into the gray area between the two.

Jak recognized the question in Ryan's steely blue eye. "Why go with them?" he asked simply.

"Makes sense," Ryan replied carefully, aware that Gloria could hear every word.

"Better on own. Something go wrong when people strange."

"Mebbe. But mebbe not this time," Ryan said guardedly. "This could help both of us, and this is land where we may need help."

"Better on own," Jak said hoarsely with an agitated shake of his head.

"You've got nothing to fear from us, honey," Gloria said softly, aware that she was intruding but feeling it was important to make her point.

Jak fixed her with his glowing red orbs. "Not you. Something beyond. Not to trust anyone... anything. Can't explain, but—"

"You a doomie?" Gloria asked him.

Jak gave a curt head shake. "No, but had strangest feeling."

"I know there's been something—something you haven't been able to talk about," Ryan said quietly, "but this is necessary for both of us. We go with them, and that's final."

Jak shrugged.

Gloria smiled at him. "We're not that frightening, sweetie. And we've got this far in one piece."

Mildred was once more aware of the way Gloria regarded Jak before she turned to her warriors and snapped her fingers twice.

With an understanding that could only have been born of traveling and hunting for so long, the group that had been covering the companions dispersed into the veld and the surrounding bush, while Gloria raised a hand to stay Ryan and his people when they made to move. She waited, with her head raised and a distant look in her eyes. Her nose quivered gently at its upturned tip as she sniffed the early evening air.

From the distance came the sound of whistles, differing in pitch and length. Jak could tell that they came from five different mouths, and from an equally differing number of locations. Each whistle told Gloria something that she needed to know, and when the last whistle had died away on the darkening air, she nodded her approval.

"Okay, we can move out now. Follow me, and stay together."

"I think we've got some idea what to do," J.B. murmured laconically to Mildred as he watched the warrior queen stride out onto the veld, hair swaying in time with her hips. She made no attempt to stealth, so confident in the abilities of her scouts that she felt no danger.

Mildred turned to the Armorer. "I feel as diffident about this as you, John, but we'll just have to go with it for now."

The Armorer nodded. "Ryan's right to go with it right now. I just wish we knew more about them."

The party left the confines of the charnel house clearing and entered the veld, strung out in a line behind Gloria. As soon as they were out into the open, the atmosphere lightened. They were clear of the stench of death and the oppressive enclave of trees. The veld itself was a beautiful sight by the light of the setting sun, the last rays of the day stretching fingers of opaque orange light across the grassland. They were walking directly into the sun as it sunk beneath the horizon, and the warrior queen was outlined in silhouette, a shadow fanning out behind her to cover the first two of the party that followed—Jak being in the lead, as he had still been at the head following the initial exit from the forest.

Mildred found a strange significance in the fact that the albino was absorbed by the shadow of the woman, and she headed toward Krysty, catching up to her.

"Is it me, or have you noticed the way that Gloria keeps looking at Jak?" she whispered into her friend's ear.

"Yeah, and that could cause us problems, right?"

"If you're thinking what I am, then it surely could," Mildred replied. "I don't know what the hell is bugging Jak, but it has to do with whatever happened in the mat-trans jump, and somehow he thinks it involves Gloria. Because he sure as shit hasn't been looking at her the way she's been looking at him."

"Right," Krysty agreed, "and if she comes on to him and he freaks, then that could really put us right in the shit. Which is exactly what we don't need right now."

"So you think someone should mention this to Ryan? Just in case he hasn't noticed..."

"I'll talk to him about it when we're alone. He knows something's up, but whether he's picked up on this aspect..." She tailed off, before adding, "Well, he'll know soon enough."

IT WAS an uneventful trek across the veld. As they continued along the trail, the light faded slowly into twilight, and the temperature dropped. The hum of insects decreased in the night air, and the companions followed Gloria across the plain.

The woman walked at a steady pace, seemingly untroubled by the possibility of any attack from man or beast as darkness fell, her trust in her tribe sisters total and born of long experience and the natural arrogance of one born and bred to lead. It was reflected in the lazy hip sway of her walk, which Ryan realized was deceptive when he looked back over the territory they had covered.

As they traversed the plain, the warriors of the tribe who had dispersed to scout the territory assembled around their queen, forming a party that flanked the companions, offering them protection but also—if looked at it in a certain light—hemming them in.

Both Ryan and J.B. noted, with admiration and also for future reference, that the female warriors seemed to glide across the veld and slip in and out of the shadows, seeming to join up with the main party as though from the very air itself. They were obviously well trained and possessed a natural grace that had become a tribal trait through sheer necessity and survival over the years.

Margia, the blond armorer of the tribe, was the last to join, appearing from the shadow of a nearby outcrop and falling into step beside Doc.

"Madam, may I congratulate you on your companions' ability to deceive in the darkness," the old man murmured with an inclination of his head.

Margia chuckled. "You're a strange man, old one. You make me laugh, and I like that. It's going to be good to have you around. Most men are dullards and are only useful as packhorse or for stud."

"I fear that both functions may find me past my best," Doc commented.

Margia chuckled once more, a harsh, throaty sound that echoed across the plain, its resonance making it carry more than its volume.

Gloria looked over her shoulder. "Shut it, Marg," she snapped. Then she caught Jak's eyes as he studied her from behind.

Her tone softened as she said to him, "Whatever's worrying you, sweets, don't think about it until we reach camp."

Jak looked away without answering.

They continued in silence for another twenty minutes before they came within sight of a clump of trees. It was a smaller wooded area than the forest the companions had traversed earlier in the day, and barely visible in the darkening sky were small tendrils of smoke from a campfire.

Gloria tsked. "Stupidworks men. They never learn, never. The only safety is in invisibility."



"What do you expect?" Margia murmured. "Only good for two things."

"Don't be too harsh," added the tall tribe member with the auburn curls, her voice fluting and melodious against the harsher tones of the blond armorer. "Petor and Jon are in trust with the fires, and they're still only boys."

"Tell that to us when we have our bastard throats cut," Margia rejoined.

"Enough," Gloria snapped as they approached the woods. "I'll deal with it soon enough. Best just to get home first."

They had reached the edge of the woods, and the warrior queen gave a sharp whistle that pitched up in tone toward the end of its duration. As it died away on the night air, two women appeared to materialize from the shadows, leaving their posts to acknowledge the return of their queen.

As the companions entered the wood and the relative safety of the Gate camp, each wondered in turn what they would find there.

## Chapter Six

The camp was set within a clearing that had been hacked into the heart of the wooded area. Taking a naturally clear area, the Gate tribe had carefully enlarged it enough to form a space large enough for them to set up camp.

Apart from the few telltale wisps of pale smoke that curled into the black of the night sky, there was no indication of the camp until they were actually in it. The clearing was lit by oil lamps and blazing torches, but those were shielded on one side by small baffles of metal and foil that reflected light inward and also prevented it from leaking beyond the boundaries of the camp. In the same way, the fire that warmed the cold night air was protected by a series of canvas baffles that kept the heat within a small area and also directed the smoke into the woods rather than directly upward. For this reason, the fire was on the opposite side to where they entered the camp, allowing the baffling to form a chimney that twisted off to one side and over the lamps.

The Gate themselves were gathered near the fire, apart from those who were keeping watch. They were nowhere in view, but from the way the warrior women they had seen so far had melted in and out of the shadows, Ryan and his people all knew that there was a strong guard presence, invisible in the darkness outside the camp. All the women were dressed in the same way as those they had seen: brief and practical, but in such a way as to leave no doubt that they were all highly trained and fit, with rippling musculature and fine bone structures. Few women were over five and a half feet, and many of them showed the same fine bone structure and svelte petiteness of their queen. The men, on the other hand, looked of sturdier stock. There were, at first glance, about half as many men as women in the tribe, and all the males were heavily muscled, with well-developed leg and arm muscles from their tasks as the heavy workers. They seemed to have a wider gene pool than the women, as there were Slavic and Celtic features spread about the group, as well as dark Mediterranean types.

Observing this, Doc was formulating a few ideas about the tribe, which he imparted to Dean in a

murmur.

"My dear boy, this is a lesson in practical survival among a nomadic people. From the look of the women, I would say that they have a common heritage. By rights, this should make them slaving inbreds by now. But when you examine the male makeup of the tribe, you will observe that they come from a wider range of racial types. I suspect that the women have always been dominant, and by some instinct of received knowledge have realized that they need to keep a wide range of types within the tribe, and so have picked up these men along the way to stop their race degenerating.

"Furthermore, you'll notice that the women are more heavily armed."

That was true, as the women all carried machetes or pangas and their handblasters, all holstered in the small of the back, whereas the men carried only knives or pangas, which were slung on their belts for ease, rather than sheathed for combat like those of the women.

"And their musculature is formed by combat training rather than heavy work. I would surmise that they are the warriors, and that the men are subordinate and used purely for maintenance. It is interesting that the men are content with this, which is something you don't often find... Oh!"

Doc stopped short as he realized that his lecture to Dean had become too long and rambling, and had attracted the attention of others. As he looked around, he could see that several of those gathered around the fire had turned to him. Ryan was watching with a wry smile, while Mildred was trying to hide her obvious exasperation. J.B. and Krysty were both pretending to look elsewhere, while the Amazons who had accompanied them into the camp were trying not to laugh, and were looking to their leader for their cue. Gloria was watching Doc with her lopsided grin, and it was only Jak who appeared not to notice. The albino was too concerned with taking in his surroundings, oblivious to all except his own concerns.

Margia nudged Doc. "Hey, not bad for a man. You've got something up here, if not down here," she said, tapping his head and then his crotch.

Doc was outraged. "Madam, as if it were not enough that you listen in to a private conversation, you then have to make free with portions of my anatomy that you have no right—"

"Okay, Doc," Ryan said easily, "we get the idea."

"Yeah, but he's right," Gloria countered, acknowledging Ryan's right to speak out of turn to her. "Marg's always out of order with newcomers. It gives her a feeling of power, right, sweetie?" she directed at the blonde.

Margia shrugged. "It's just a bit of fun."

"Yeah, well, it can wait until later," Gloria said. Then she turned to the tribe gathered around the fire. "These newcomers are good warriors. They have a quest, and they will join us for part of the journey. May they find their own path as we find ours. Mebbe the paths converge, mebbe they part company. Until such time, they will be with us. Make them welcome."

Turning back to Ryan and his companions, she added, "Come, sit and eat, then we'll talk."

They followed her to the fire, where they were welcomed into the loose semicircle formed by the tribe members. There were about thirty seated around the fire, and from the conversation Ryan was able to estimate that there were another six or seven women who were hidden in the woods, keeping watch.

They would shortly be relieved and take their place by the warming fire.

Looking around, Ryan could see how they had managed to construct their camp. They kept some pack animals, as he could hear the whinnying and hoof-stamping of mules or horses stabled somewhere to the right hand side of the camp, away from the fire. A large pot hung over the fire, issuing an aroma that was mouthwatering, and the food they were given in light plastic bowls consisted of a stew that was made from the roots and small mammals—mostly rabbit—of the woodlands, flavored and spiced from herbs picked wild. It certainly made a change from self-heats, which was what they had initially intended to rely on for the first part of the journey.

There was a number of tents in the camp, laid out in a horseshoe formation that began at the edge of the seating area by the fire. A path break had been left down the center of the encampment, down which they had been led on entry. The tents were a mixture of plundered predark camping tents and some constructed from material scavenged and bartered along the way. Canvas and artificial materials had been dyed and painted in dark colors to blend into the twilight of the camp. Tubular frames made of lightweight aluminum and toughened plastic supported the tents, which were mostly for habitation, but a few of which were obviously used for storing what supplies they carried and for the armory.

J.B.'s wire-framed spectacles glinted in the firelight as they ate, and Ryan could tell from the slow rhythm of the reflections that the Armorer was also casting an appraising eye around the camp. These people were their allies for now, but to know their strength as allies or foes was equally important.

When they had eaten their fill, Gloria turned to Jak.

"You feel safer now, sweetie?" she asked him in a gentle voice.

The albino shrugged. "Never feel safe. Safe means chilled."

"That's one way of looking at things. I guess we don't quite see it that way. We're safe in here because we have trust in our scouts. We have to have trust in one another, because our community lives and dies by that. That's the way we've always lived."

"We trust one another," Ryan said softly. "We've been through a lot. But we don't know you, which is why mebbe Jak doesn't trust you."

"Do you?" the warrior queen asked him.

"Would you?" Ryan countered. Gloria's icy blue eyes, matching the piercing blue gaze of the one-eyed warrior, sparkled in the firelight. "I'd be pretty stupe if I did, so that's okay. Mebbe I should tell you something about us. You already know what we're looking for, but you don't know how we got this far. Then you tell us about you. Deal?"

Ryan nodded. "Deal."

Gloria raised her head, staring into the night sky, beyond the glow of the campfire and out into an infinity only she could see. Her nostrils quivered as she began to breathe in a rhythm that took her into a trance state, her eyes misting over as she began to speak in a singsong tone.

"Long before the time of the great darkness, when the old ways became too complex for those that had created them, and the moment of ultimate truth came, the Illuminated Ones spoke from within the great shelter and told of the disaster to come. There were few who listened to them, but among them were our

forebears. A small community we had always been, living in the hill countries and living by our wits and our beliefs. The end times were coming and so we were ready. We had food and water, and the power necessary to survive the long, dark winter.

"Our people went into hibernation for generations, only reentering the world when the air was once again clean, and the waters flowed like spring. Then we found that much had changed, and yet much had stayed the same. There were people as before, and people that were new. And there were still those who wanted the return of the old ways. They would guard their secret sites with jealousy, keeping us at bay with the rays of light. They were more colorful than the drabness that had enveloped the land, and yet their very brightness was a mark of the hope to come. For they would lead us to the promised land, the gateway to the future.

"For generations we have traveled the Deathlands in search of the gateway. It has been a long path, but one which is forever fulfilling, for each step of the way we learn more about ourselves, preparing ourselves for the first step into the gateway and the world of wonders that lie beyond."

She paused, breathing heavily, her mind switched into oratory mode, the words handed down to her coming from her mouth with a perfect inflection.

While they waited for her to continue, all the companions dwelled on what she had said. Mildred had spent most of the meal prior to Gloria's recitation observing the way the warrior queen had been looking at Jak. It was obvious that the woman was fascinated by the albino, both for his appearance and also for the reticence with which he had approached the whole meeting. It was obvious that Jak was holding back something, and this fascinated Gloria. Mildred was still worried that whatever was worrying Jak would make him reject even the most innocuous of advances from the warrior queen. If that happened, how would she react, and what would this mean for the rest of the companions?

But, like the others, Mildred had been jolted from her reverie by the mention of the Illuminated Ones. The secret society from predark who had prepared for the Apocalypse and built its own redoubts was a force that they had only obliquely crossed, but enough so to realize that it could hold the key to both what the Gate was looking for, and to what Ryan and his people were searching for.

Gloria continued briefly. "The manner in which we have traversed the land, and the many battles that we have seen, would take an age to detail. It is enough to say that we have remained as we have begun, a tribe led by women against the darkness caused by men, and a tribe dedicated to the new age and the new ways."

She breathed deeply, exhaling seemingly for minutes before resting her chin on her chest. Then, after a short while, she raised her head again, and looked toward them with eyes that were piercing and clear.

"So what about you?" she said simply.

"Us?" Ryan answered. "I think we're all fascinated by what you just told us. Because we have experience of the Illuminated Ones, as well."

And as simply as he could, Ryan related the events surrounding the companions landing in a private redoubt and finding documents pertaining to the secret order of the Illuminated Ones. About how they had trekked across a desert and encountered the strangely clad warriors with laser blasters. About the ville of Raw, which had been founded by those who had left the Illuminated Ones, and of how they believed the order still existed, maintaining a redoubt and stockpile hidden in a secret location.

"And perhaps this is the place we seek. It certainly sounds like the gateway that's your quest."

J.B. spoke in the pause, his voice quiet but carrying in the silence of the camp. "I'd love to get my hands on one of those blasters that works. We've seen what those rays of light can do, and that's some firepower. The ones we found were missing the power source, but if I could find that—"

"It'd be some kind of blaster, eh, honey?" Margia said, speaking from the shadows. J.B. looked over to her and could see that the blond Gate armorer was looking at him with a renewed respect in her eyes. "You're a man who knows his trade—am I right?"

J.B. had no ego on most things, but when it came to weaponry he took a quiet pride in his knowledge and skills. He nodded. "I like to keep blasters good, to keep plas-ex and grens to hand and in working order, and I like to find new weapons and learn about them. You can never stop learning."

Margia eyed him with an admiration that Mildred found almost as disturbing as the way in which Gloria had been looking at Jak.

"I like your attitude, boy. I think you and me are going to get along just fine."

Before Mildred had a chance to say anything, Ryan spoke to Gloria.

"Seems to me that your quest is our quest. We'll join with you."

AFTER MORE swapping of stories designed on both sides to sound out the fighting properties and attitudes of both the Gate and Ryan's people, the companions were allotted their quarters for the night. A large tent made from a polyethylene-and-nylon sheet molded around flexible tubing, it was roomy enough to house all seven without too much difficulty.

When she was sure that no one from the Gate was near, Krysty spoke to Ryan in tones hushed enough to be heard by the rest of the companions, but not outside the tent.

"Are you sure we should join them so soon? How do you know we can trust them?"

"I don't. Not any more than they know they can trust us. Not any more than we could trust anyone. But I do know that I don't want to have to fight them right now. And I also know that we have a common goal. Mebbe there'll be problems later on, but right now we need to travel with someone. There's always safety in numbers when you're in unknown territory."

Jak had been silent the whole time, but now he spoke: "Gate also unknown territory..."

## Chapter Seven

Despite Jak's fears, the next few days moved at an easy and uneventful pace. Doc and Ryan consulted with Gloria over the direction she had chosen for the tribe to proceed. The two men had spoken at length of the northwesterly direction in which they believed the hidden stockpile to be located, and it would seem that whatever hidden energy line the instinct of the warrior queen was following was also running in a similar arc. Ryan called upon J.B. to take readings with the minisextant, and the result was that the

Armorer believed Gloria's direction would lead them past the vast emptiness where once had stood the old predark capital of Washington State and trace its course around the outskirts of the Seattle area, which was the scene of their previous encounter with the Illuminated Ones.

The consultation between Ryan and Gloria occurred on the second evening, as the men of the Gate tribe assembled camp for the night in a small clearing. Despite the fact that they had encountered nothing more dangerous than a few low flying birds or a swarm of mosquito derived insects, the women of the Gate kept up their vigilance, not allowing the quietude to lull them into a potentially dangerous sense of security.

The camp was built around the spot where the four people, including J.B. and Doc, were seated on a groundsheet, with a few scraps of paper spread around them. The papers consisted of a map Doc had carried with him from the redoubt, and some faded and almost parchmentlike maps that Gloria carried. When she didn't consult them, they traveled in her few belongings, parceled carefully and carried on a pack mule led by Petor, a young man of the tribe that Gloria favored.

"I never birthed any child of my own, and his mother, Kaya, was a good friend. When she died in combat, I swore to take him on as my own, and so it has been," she explained. Certainly Petor was a testament to the caring side of Gloria, as he was a tall youth with sleepy eyes and a deceptive quickness of wit and limb, who had already bonded with Dean. Petor knew the honor that Gloria had bestowed upon him, and so was fastidious in his care of her belongings... particularly the documents that she carried, as these were sacred to the tribe and had been handed down. As Gloria explained to them when Petor brought her the documents and laid them out carefully on the groundsheet, "These are all that remain of the documents that define us. They were carried from the underground when our people emerged into the light, and they are both guide to the future and reminder of the past."

The documents were faded and worn, with almost nothing readable along the creases where the documents had been folded for many years, even though Petor now kept them in a metal cylinder, rolled to prevent further damage. The ink had faded over time, and the pulped paper yellowed, so that the maps were sepia, with some color tones blending into a faded mush that made parts hard to read.

However, there was enough still legible for Ryan and Doc to be able to trace the route they had so far journeyed, and also to tell that the map carried on it details of old U.S. government redoubts, and also another set. Doc pointed out one that lay near a city marked as Seattle, in the northwest corner.

"Dear boy," he remarked softly to Ryan, "I have the strangest feeling that somewhere in the darkest recesses of my foul imaginings, there is something to do with our course and these redoubts that I once heard of. Something that I should recall but that remains as ever elusive as the merest wisp of a dream."

"To do with the Illuminated Ones?" the one-eyed warrior prompted, aware that pushing Doc for answers would only make the old man fret and lose his grasp of his own mind.

Doc frowned, as though the very act of concentration were physically painful. "I think—no, I'm sure—that it has a connection, but perhaps not directly. If only I could..." He tailed off with a sad shake of the head, the frustration showing in the distraught gaze he cast upon his friend and leader.

J.B. cut in, his voice barely a whisper. "Dark night, with maps like this, it should be easy to find the place you're looking for," he said to Gloria. "I don't get why you haven't just read the maps and gone. Why the following of energy lines?"

Gloria smiled, which carried both sadness and amusement. "You think we wouldn't have done that



generations ago if we could?" she said. "Why don't you think we did?" she asked, her fingers unconsciously trailing over the paper.

Doc looked from the paper to the face of the warrior queen and her piercing blue eyes. Then it came to him. She had been tracing the map with her fingers all the while they had consulted, but had never once actually looked at it.

"By the Three Kennedys! You are unable to read the map," he exclaimed.

The warrior queen nodded. "A strange affliction that infected our tribe soon after the coming out. All the newborn of one generation were unable to distinguish the letters and words as anything other than a jumble, although they could feel impressions. Some say that it was a rad-blast sickness, others that it was a sign from the exalted ones that we must learn on the journey, and so it could not be quick. Either way, we became wanderers unable to divine from our own maps in the space of less than two generations."

Ryan looked her in the eye, his single icy blue orb meeting with her piercing diamond blue stare. "Well, we can read these, and if our current direction is anything to go by, your time of learning may just about be over..."

OTHER ALLIANCES and enmities were forged in the quietness of the journey. Krysty found herself spending time with the young Amazon who had a mass of tumbling auburn curls. She was taller than the rest of the tribe, and was glad to find in the statuesque Krysty someone of a similar size. The woman was named Tammy, and was barely out of her teens, yet already she had proved herself in battle and explained to Krysty how the girls in the Gate tribe were trained from birth to carry the wisdom and fight of the tribe. Although the men did many of the everyday tasks about the camp, the secrets of medicine and healing were carried down the female line. The young girls of the tribe were schooled in camp every day on the techniques for both healing and harming, and Krysty watched Tammy take a class of younger girls in unarmed combat, while Margia taught them the skills of handling and maintaining blasters.

Remembering her own youth with Mother Sonja in Harmony, the Titian-haired warrior was keen to discuss the secrets of healing with Tammy, who was herself learning the skills of being a medicine woman. They spent much time discussing the skills of herbal medicine and healing, finding that both had the natural earth touch that enabled them to locate injury and heal with the body's own natural energy and force. Tammy had the bubbling enthusiasm of the young for the skills she was learning, and was keen to learn from Krysty. Mildred, who had spent her time since awakening into the Deathlands learning natural healing skills to augment what she knew from predark, was also interested in learning from Tammy, as anything that could supplement the meager resources of scavenged predark medicines and drugs was to be welcomed. It also took Mildred's mind off something that was bugging her more and more.

Tammy took great pleasure in the attention that the two women paid her. She also noticed the looks she was getting from Dean as he occupied himself with Jon and Petor.

The young Cawdor had made himself known to the two friends when, on the morning after the companions' arrival in camp, he had happened across Jon and Petor wrestling. Rising early, he had decided to take a look around the camp while the others were barely stirring, and his attention had been drawn by the sounds of scuffling from behind a tent in the far corner of the camp.

Not stopping to wake anyone, Dean ran to the tent, keeping low and as light of foot as possible, skipping over the few guy ropes that secured some of the more primitive tent constructions.

As he approached the source of the noise, Dean crouched closer to the ground, his hand snaking to

where the Browning Hi-Power was holstered. In an almost unconscious and instinctive gesture he checked that it was easily to hand, the holster unhindered by any obstruction. He knew that the safety was on and that the blaster was fully loaded as he had checked it before turning in the night before. But hopefully he wouldn't need it. The struggle sounded like no more than two people, and was possibly only a fight between Gate people rather than an intruder from outside the camp. From what he knew of the tribe, Dean reckoned that it would have to be an incredibly good guerrilla fighter to get past the guard patrols.

Dean edged closer to the edge of the tent, peering around to get a view of the struggle.

Two young men were wrestling behind the tent, their noise subdued by the fact that both were concentrating intently on the matter in hand, and also by the fact they were so evenly matched as for there to be no distance between them in ability. Dean recognized one of them immediately as Petor, the adopted son of the queen, who attended to her personal tent and belongings. He also had a position in the armory, working under Margia.

The other combatant was also a worker in the armory. Dean had seen him around the camp and knew that his name was Jon, but hadn't had any contact with him. He had seen both young men together, and so relaxed when he realized that the wrestling match wasn't hostile, but was an exercise of their skills. Dean straightened and stepped out from behind the tent, the better to observe, arms dropping easily to his sides, hand away from his blaster.

The two young men didn't see him. Their attentions were focused on their own contest. They were both standing, thigh and calf muscles straining under the tensions of their efforts. Jon was attempting to trip Petor, and throw him across his body while still retaining a grip on one arm, so that he could follow through with an armlock. However, because of Petor's strength he was finding it hard to get the advantage, and was unwilling to give an inch in order to gain momentum, as he knew that Petor would immediately take advantage.

For his own part, Petor had height over Jon. Although Petor was wiry where Jon was stocky, with a broad face that was as open and honest as his fighting stance, Petor was a couple of inches taller, so their difference leveled the playing field. Petor's main disadvantage was in having his arm potentially locked if he should yield an inch to his friend and sparring partner. Even though it wasn't in serious combat, such a move on Jon's part could break Petor's arm.

So they were deadlocked. Dean cocked his head, examining their respective stances and positions. Then he spoke.

"Foot behind on his left leg, then flick. He'll loosen his grip instinctively to save his balance. It'll only be for a fraction of a second, but that's all you need."

The sound of Dean's voice had an unexpected result on the contest. Both Jon and Petor looked up in surprise, their shock causing them to lose balance with each other, tumbling in different directions and pulling each other into a heap of tangled limbs on the floor.

Dean suppressed an urge to laugh at the ridiculous sight, not wanting to anger them for something that had been his fault. "Sorry, guys," he said simply. "I thought you heard me walk up."

"No, stupidworks, of course we didn't. Think I'm going to let this bastard beat me 'cause I'm listening for someone?" Jon said, picking himself up and dusting himself off, indicating Petor with a brief inclination of his head.

"Fuck you, asshole," Petor replied with a grin as he picked himself up.

Then he said to Dean, "So you think you could do better, then?"

"Mebbe," Dean said, eying Petor. Both the young men were about four or five years older than Dean, and he gave them a little in height and weight. Ranged against this was his certain knowledge that he had more vital combat experience than them, and that just from his observation he could tell he knew more about hand-to-hand techniques.

"Wanna try?" Jon asked.

Dean nodded.

"Okay," Jon shrugged, shuffling his feet.

But although it was Jon who had spoken, it was Petor who moved. Hoping that his friend's actions had deceived the young Cawdor, the lanky youth sprang forward to grab Dean by the arm and pull him into a neck lock.

At least, that was the idea. Dean saw it differently, and with the ease of a striking cobra he swerved his torso and struck out with the flattened edge of his hand, avoiding the main thrust of Petor's body and landing a blow just above the elbow and deadening all feeling and response in Petor's arm.

Petor gasped at the sudden jarring of the blow, and his momentum carried him forward. Unable to use his deadened arm to protect himself, he rolled uneasily onto one shoulder as he hit the ground.

Dean had already turned his attention to Jon, knowing that the stocky youth would follow up the initial attack. When he focused his attention, Jon was already in full flight, hoping to catch Dean off guard and drive him off balance with a shoulder charge. But Dean was aware of the move too quickly, and pivoted on his heel, turning as Jon began to pass him, using the older youth's momentum to push him onward. Not encountering the obstruction of Dean's body that he was expecting to block his progress, Jon was unable to check his own forward momentum, let alone compensate for the push by Dean, and so he tumbled forward, arms and legs flailing to retain balance. Despite his best efforts, he found himself tumbling into Petor as the lanky youth attempted to regain his feet. The two young men collapsed into a heap of tangled limbs for the second time in minutes.

Dean stood over them. "You guys are strong and keen, but no one's taught you anything, have they?"

Jon looked up. "We're just the men. We don't get to fight like the true born warriors."

Dean scratched his chin. "Seems pretty stupe to me. You can never have too many fighters. Would it be all right if I taught you guys how to use what you've got? I mean, I wouldn't be causing trouble, would I?"

Petor shrugged as he climbed to his feet. "Gloria wouldn't mind, I know that. Nor would any of the others, except mebbe Margia."

Jon looked anxiously at his friend as he, too, rose to his feet. "That's worth bearing in mind. I've got to work for her all the time, and you know what a bastard of a temper she's got when she gets going."

Dean raised an eyebrow. "She hard to work for?"

Petor shrugged. "Sometimes she's okay but she gets these moods where nothing's right, and then she gets really bad. She beat the fuck out of Jon once just because one of the other women got the man she wanted. She said it was because he was slacking in his work, but that's not the case. He might be a lazy bastard for some things, but he loves the armory."

Jon nodded, wincing at the memory of the beating. "True enough. I was so glad to be selected for the armory, 'cause I love blasters and taking them to bits to clean them. That hurt more than the beating, the fact that she said I was neglecting my work. But she's a weird one sometimes. Not like the others." He shook his head, biting his lip. "When she really wants something, then you'd better not get in the way."

"I'll remember that," Dean murmured softly. Then, in a louder voice he added, "So let's get wrestling. It really bugs me that you couldn't get out of that armlock move."

Since that morning, Dean had spent much of his time with the two young men, and had learned much about the everyday habits of the tribe from Jon and Petor, who shared in their close comradeship the habit of watching the eccentricities of the other tribe members. They also shared an obsession with the statuesque Tammy that Dean rapidly understood as he watched her with Krysty.

He also noted with interest that Jak was becoming more relaxed in the tribe. The albino's obsession with whatever he had seen in his mat-trans vision was receding further and further into memory as the Gate's warrior queen seemed to take a personal interest in making sure that Jak felt comfortable.

As queen of the Gate, Gloria had less of the day-to-day activities of the tribe to fulfill, leaving that to the men and to the lesser Amazons. Much of her time was spent in personal training, sparring with the other warriors to maintain her sharpness and speed, and also in trancing herself to recall the wisdom of the ancients. Despite this, she had noted from the first the way that the albino had been looking at her—at first in open disbelief that the vision of his dream had come to him, and then surreptitiously when he realized that she was becoming aware of him.

Jak was fascinated by Gloria. In moments where he allowed himself pause to stop and think about the mat-trans dream, the sight of his friends' chilled corpses spread across the plain came back to him, and made the blood run cold in his veins. He could see as clearly as the view in front of him the giant warrior and the Amazon queen, could hear her voice as she told him some portent of the future, the voice that matched exactly the woman who was head of the Gate tribe.

Jak was a man of action and reaction, not of reflection and reasoning. He watched Gloria closely, hoping for some sign as to what his dream had meant. But none was forthcoming. Instead, Jak found himself being pulled into the training routines of the Amazon warriors. It began when Gloria was working out one morning with two other Amazons, practicing their swiftness with their pangas.

It was only an hour or two past sunrise, and the sky was still tinged purple with the last remnants of the night. The morning was cool, and there were still only faint wisps of chem clouds to diffuse the light from the low sun.

Jak had left the tent where he and his companions were billeted, emerging restless into the morning. Despite the early hour, there was already some activity in the camp. The Gate tended to move with the sun, and already the day's activities were under way. The albino had been unable to sleep well, his rest disturbed by the fevered visions of recurring dreams in which Gloria and he were besieged by the Illuminated Ones and his friends were slaughtered in a thousand different ways.

Emerging into the cool morning air, sniffing the warm and sweet wood of the fires as they burned to cook the first meal of the day, Jak felt washed out. His ruby-colored eyes were now red rimmed by his lack of sleep, and his poise was shot. He slumped as he walked, feeling his own body weight go out of balance.

Three days without anything to keep him alert, to hone his instincts. Three days with nothing to occupy his mind except the daily march through the empty plains and then the setting up of camp. Nothing to occupy him except the recurring dreams, and the vision of one made flesh walking easily at the head of the column, her red hair swaying down her back like tongues of liquid fire.

As this thought crossed his mind, his attention was drawn to the clearing in front of the now extinguished fire that had warmed and lit the camp during the hours of darkness. Three women of the Gate stood at oblique angles to one another, forming a triangle. One of them was instantly recognizable as Gloria by the mane of fiery hair and by the poise with which she stood. Another, with her back toward Jak, was the younger Tammy, her mass of auburn curls and her height making her stand out. The third warrior stood almost face on to Jak. He had seen her about the camp, and knew her name was Jess, but hadn't seen her in action or had cause to talk with her. She was from similar stock to Gloria, and had long, jet black hair tied loosely behind her. Her face was of a similar delicate bone structure, and she was only about five feet in height. But she was just a little more stocky, with the musculature of her legs being more pronounced than her queen's. There was a formidable air of power about her.

Gloria chanted, a paean to whoever it was that the Gate worshiped, wordless but sweet on the morning air. Then all three women took their handblasters from the soft leather holsters in the small of their back and placed them on a cloth in the middle of the triangular space their stance had created. This done, they stepped back a pace to make a larger space, before drawing their sheathed blades.

Gloria carried a panga similar to that used by Ryan, except that the hilt was a blood-rust color, the grip stained by the many combatants who had met their end. The blade, however, glinted even in the weak light of the early morning, and even at such a distance could be seen to be finely honed.

Tammy carried a machete, the blade thicker in width, but still seemingly as finely honed. The grip was bound with strips of cloth that carried stains of battle like trophy colors. She weighed the blade in her hand, unconsciously genuflecting her wrist to tilt the blade back and forth.

Jess carried a much smaller blade. At first, it seemed that she pulled a small black plastic grip from her sheath. But with a discreet click that was only discernible on the morning air because of the relative quiet, the blade unfolded at the flick of a powerful thumb, testament to the power in her small hands. Jak recognized the blade immediately, even at a distance. Somewhere along the way, Jess had picked up an Emerson CQC-7, the razor-sharp chisel-ground blade only the length of the small grip, but nonetheless deadly for close-in fighting.

Fascinated, Jak drew closer. It was obvious that they were about to embark on a training routine of some kind, and the albino was interested to see how they would handle the blades in a situation that was to resemble conflict, yet by its very nature couldn't be too real.

At a word of command from Gloria, the three warrior women began to juggle the blades between themselves. Throwing the knife, panga and machete across the gaps between them, they finely judged the amount of force needed for each weapon as it spiraled through the air. It began slowly, then speeded up gradually as the three women took rhythm and pace from one another. The simple pattern of tossing the blades around in a clockwise direction began to change, shifting into a series of seemingly random changes that became faster and faster, until the blades became a whirling blur of metal, bone, plastic and

wood, spiraling through the space between them.

Jak was impressed by the speed and assurance with which they handled the blades, judging the weight and speed of each weapon in flight as it came to them, adjusting their stances to receive the blade by its grip before sending it spinning across the space between them with a delicately controlled movement of the wrist, the muscles on their forearms as taut as cord, the seeming ease of their stance belying the concentration of will and physical power that went into each throw.

At a whistled command from Gloria, they stopped dead, the last throw of each blade returning it to its owner.

Jak, standing and observing with fascination, had failed to note that Jess was watching him.

"Hey, Whitey, you seen enough yet?" she called to him.

Gloria turned, flashing him a smile as she recognized their audience. "You want to join in, sweets?" she said to him.

"Not my people. Not my rhythm," Jak replied simply.

"I wouldn't say that," Gloria replied. "I saw you against those stickies, remember? You're a natural warrior, and anyone with the gift can pick up the rhythm. Join us, yeah?"

Not allowing Jak the chance to answer, she tossed her panga through the air, spinning it wickedly with her wrist so that it seemed to curve elliptically in its flight pattern. Without even pausing, the albino altered his stance to curve with the flight and plucked the panga out of the air with his right hand, bringing it down to his side and killing the momentum. At the same time, his left hand snaked into one of the hidden openings in his patched camou jacket, producing a leaf-bladed throwing knife that he sent flying toward the warrior queen. It flew straight and true toward her head, and Jak noted with admiration the way in which she stood perfectly still, not moving a muscle until the knife was within a fraction of an inch of removing her left eye.

Then, with a movement so quick that it was beyond even a blur, she plucked the knife from the air, her reflexes so sharp and precise that she was able to trap the blade between the middle and index fingers of her hand, sweeping her arm away from her body to diffuse the speed and forward motion of the knife. All the while, she was unblinking, her diamond blue eyes fixed on the albino who stood before her, the rest of her body rock solid.

"One all," she whispered huskily as her arm came to rest. "You're very good, honey. Mebbe we could learn a lot from each other. So you want to join us."

"If all as good, then yeah," Jak said, his scarred face breaking into something resembling amusement for the first time in days.

The albino was accepted into the triangle, which became a circle, and after a short while juggling the blades—one of his own knives now joining the whirling blades as they crisscrossed the open space—they turned to combat training. Jak was surprised to see Tammy and Gloria begin to fight, circling each other, thrusting and parrying with their blades, with no concession. It was quite possible that the Amazons could injure or even kill each other.

Which was something he kept very much to the forefront of his mind as he stepped into the circle to



contest with Jess.

"No holding back, Whitey, 'cause I won't," she said simply and without malice.

Jak nodded agreement, and they began to fight. Circling each other in slow, light steps, both parties drew their blades. The Emerson was smaller than the leaf-bladed knife that Jak held easily in his palm, but it had a sharp cutting edge honed onto both sides, a refinement that Jess had obviously customized since taking possession of the blade.

She feinted, and Jak moved to his left, all the while expecting her to make her next move, which was to follow the feint with a thrust to her right that should have taken the blade into the space now occupied by Jak's ribs. But the albino had already shifted direction, and allowed the blade to pass harmlessly past his camou jacket, all the while preparing his own attack, which was to her left side, now open to attack by the movement of her body, leaving her defenseless down that side.

Or so it seemed. Jak's blade came so close to Jess's naked torso that it could almost have shaved the top layer of skin from between her second and third ribs. Instead, it passed her, his momentum carrying him just forward enough for her to move in close and grip his arm with her free hand.

The grip closed above the muscle and tendons just below Jak's shoulder, Jess's small, bony fingers gripping like iron bands and numbing any feeling or response that he could muster. Jak felt his arm go dead and the pull of her body weight as she attempted to unbalance him and take him to the earth. She expected resistance, so Jak did the opposite. He pitched himself forward, knowing that the deadened arm would be useless, and so allowing himself to roll and bring Jess across his body as her own balance was lost, and she fell onto him.

As she moved across him, Jak pushed off the ground with his thigh and dug the heel of his combat boot into the earth, the force of his wiry muscles digging a ridge from which he propelled his foot, thigh and, gaining in momentum all the while, his body, so that he swung over on top of Jess, pinning her knife hand with his left knee, and using his still functioning arm to hold her other hand down. His right leg was diagonally across her body, pinning her to the ground.

"Neat move, Whitey," she said calmly. "How about we do that again, this time in slow-mo, and you show me just how it's done..."

JAK BECAME a regular part of training after that, Gloria observing him with a growing interest as the albino's character emerged fully. Jak was a good teacher, and was also keen to learn from the Amazons when they came up with techniques that he hadn't encountered before. The time between, Gloria kept Jak more and more to her, drawing from him stories of his youth in the Louisiana swamps and of his travels across the Deathlands with Ryan Cawdor and his people. He also told her of his wife, Christina, and daughter, Jenny, and the way in which they had been chilled on his ranch while he was absent. Gloria found the albino fighter fascinating, and it occurred to Mildred that this could cause problems.

Particularly as Mildred could feel problems growing for the group—and herself—in other directions.

When he wasn't in consultation with Ryan, and Gloria, J.B. had been spending a lot of time with Margia, the tribe's armorer. Being a man whose life, hobby and preoccupation was the history and maintenance of blasters and weaponry, J.B. found the Gate's armory unique.

Always, whenever he found the opportunity presenting itself, J.B. read old predark material about blasters and explosives, particularly grens of all varieties. He was no great reader, but would struggle

through any old texts that presented themselves along the way. Because of the very nature of the Deathlands, there were very few blasters now manufactured, and these mostly of the unstable, homemade variety. As a result, any blasters that could be found were prized. There had been large stockpiles of U.S. Army hardware looted from redoubts and bases soon after the restoration of some kind of life across the tattered remnants of the continent, but there were also blasters that would be considered museum pieces that had been looted from collections and restored to some kind of action. There were also those blasters that seemed to come from nowhere, like the laser blasters that they had found in the redoubt near Raw. They had been nonoperational, but some examples obviously were, as they had been used in the attack on the companions by a raiding party some short time after they had left that redoubt.

As for grens and explosives, there were a real variety of grens, both immediately predark and also much older, that proliferated in sec forces across the Deathlands. Most explosives that were in use were of the plas-ex variety, but even these differed in composition and stability, with the result that J.B. felt the need to study closely any he came across, lest he one day use the wrong fuse and timer at the wrong moment.

J.B. was a perfectionist, or at least as much of one as he could be in the environment he lived and worked under. And as such, he believed in an armory having a variety of weaponry, for every eventuality.

Which was why he found the armory that Margia maintained so fascinating. Because the Gate tribe seemed to believe in the exact opposite theory.

Margia kept her armory in a tent to one side of the encampment, and slept in a smaller tent that stood behind. The armory itself consisted of boxes and crates in which were carried ammo and blasters, along with an array of greasing and cleaning materials that had been looted on their travels. Other boxes carried a supply of grens and plas-ex.

Although he was impressed by the way in which Margia and her team, consisting mainly of Jon and Petor, but with a few others of the male Gate contributing when time was at a premium, maintained the condition of the armory, it was really the composition of it that fascinated him. For although there were a few rifles and machine blasters—some Lee Enfield .303 rifles, a Sharps, a couple of Uzis and some H&Ks—the vast majority of the armory consisted of handblasters.

The smaller blasters were obviously better suited to both the average size of the Amazon warriors, and also the way in which they carried them. It was the range that impressed J.B. There were blasters that ranged in age and style from the early days of the American West through to the last days predark, as in the case of Gloria's personal preference, the Vortak. The Armorer was curious as to how Margia had assembled these weapons, how she obtained the ammo and replaced worn parts and how much she knew of the history of each manufacture of blaster.

For her part, Margia had never met anyone who had the depth of knowledge of J.B., and she quickly came to enjoy his company. So much so, in fact, that the wily blonde began to wonder if it might possibly be a good idea to try to add the Armorer to her staff permanently. And not just for his knowledge and expertise. Margia was without a mate and had appetites that needed to be filled.

So the blond armorer decided to make things a little uncomfortable for Mildred. She had seen that there was something between J.B. and Mildred, and if she was to achieve her twin goals of luring J.B. into service as both armorer and mate, then she would have to get the black woman out of the way.

So it was that she began to undermine Mildred. At first it was relatively subtle. She began by asking J.B.

questions about Mildred, to learn all she could. This wasn't easy, as the Armorer was laconic to the point of almost being silent on some matters, particularly his relationship with the doctor, and Margia felt sometimes that it was like drawing blood from a stone as she tried to extract information about what exactly their relationship was and how long they had been together, while at the same time trying to deflect J.B. from the one matter on which he could talk freely and at great length: an armory.

Eventually J.B. had told Margia all there was to know about Mildred and what had happened since he had known her, although J.B. himself was unaware that he had so much as mentioned the slightest thing.

Now Margia began her plan of action.

THE FIRST MOVES CAME casually enough. While seeming to go about her business, the blonde would happen upon Mildred while she was learning or teaching medicine with Tammy and Krysty. Casually Margia would drop into the conversation a few of the facts she had learned about Mildred's past, making passing references to her being a freezie and about J.B. talking of her. She would also remark on Mildred's medical status, questioning obliquely if a predark doctor was really suited to coping in the Deathlands. On one such occasion, when Margia had left them, a sly grin to herself revealing her satisfaction in leaving Mildred seething, Tammy watched the blond armorer retreat and then remarked, "Watch her... She knows her job but resents the fact that she is just an armorer. And she has a temper that blows up on her, making her do rash things. She schemes. Be careful, Mildred, but don't let her get the upper hand."

Unfortunately there was no way that Mildred could prevent Margia from gaining the upper hand with her next move.

This came when Mildred was engaging in target practice with Dean and Tammy. The use of blasters for practice was seen as a necessary evil, as it increased accuracy but at the expense of valuable ammo. So when it occurred, it became a highly competitive event.

A small enclosure had been set up just outside the boundaries of the camp. While the men of the tribe dismantled the camp in order to begin the day's march to a new position, the women elected to begin shooting practice. An area of three hundred yards was marked out in the dirt, and targets made of a soft wood that had possibly once been beech, but had mutated into a spongy form over the years, were placed at one end. For each group of shooters, a sheet was placed over the target to make the clusters of landed shots stand out more clearly. The group of women taking part divided themselves into seven pairs, there being twelve members of the Gate, plus Krysty and Mildred. Krysty had a nasty feeling that something was afoot as soon as she caught sight of Margia, and her hair tightened almost imperceptibly to her skull. She glanced across at Mildred and noticed that she was scowling.

"Who's contesting?" the blond armorer said with an air of studied nonchalance.

"Split into pairs as usual," Jess replied as she checked her blaster, a .38 Smith & Wesson SPL Air-weight M-12 snubbie. She spun the cylinder to check that it was fully loaded, then clicked the cylinder back into place.

"So who are you contesting?" Margia asked Mildred outright.

"As we're outsiders, Krysty and myself are going to fire against each other. We don't want to intrude on your own—"

"Or you don't want to be beaten and shown up," Margia said casually, her offhand manner masking the

sly timing of her interruption.

Mildred knew what Margia was trying to do, as did Krysty. The mutie could feel a sudden increase in the tension, her hair creeping closer to her neck. She shot a glance at Mildred, almost willing her not to rise to the bait. She had guessed from some of the things Margia had said over the past couple of days that the blonde had gained a more than reasonable knowledge of Mildred's past life, and so would know of her Olympic experience as a target shooter in the days before skydark. And she would know that Mildred had pride in her ability. Normally Mildred would be able to keep a cool head, but after the niggling provocation of the past couple of days, it was to prove almost impossible.

"It's not a question of winning or losing," Mildred said in an icy tone, trying to keep her voice flat. "It's a matter of shooting straight, that's all. Out there, the only winner is whoever keeps alive, and that's all."

"That's all?" Margia mimicked. "I'd say it's because you don't want competition."

"No," Mildred replied simply.

But walking away from the challenge wouldn't prove that simple. Of the Gate Amazons who were clustered for the shooting, only Tammy had some idea of what Margia was doing and how she had been behaving. The others took all that was said at face value, and as Margia wasn't the most popular member of the tribe, they felt inclined to press Mildred into accepting the challenge she was trying to avoid.

It was Jess who voiced their feelings. The raven haired woman holstered her blaster and looked Mildred in the eye. "Take her up, babe. She may keep the blasters, but believe me, she can't shoot them that straight. You'll take her out, no trouble."

Krysty noticed the frosty and hostile look the blonde shot toward Jess, and figured that here was another score for Margia to settle at a later date.

For Mildred to back down now, in the face of so many, would be disastrous for her companions, as well as herself, and she knew it. She had no choice. "Okay," she said in a measured tone. "We contest."

Margia smiled, her strong white teeth bared in something more snarl than good humor. "Fine," she said simply.

The contest began. Margia claimed business at the armory, and asked that she and Mildred shoot last. The others agreed to this, and the woman walked off with an arrogant stride, leaving Krysty and Tammy feeling that something devious was abroad.

"You take my place," Tammy said quietly, "'cause we've got uneven numbers now that she's butted in. I want to follow her, see if she's planning anything."

Krysty nodded her assent and turned her attention to the contest and Mildred, while Tammy followed Margia at a distance.

The blonde returned to the armory, where Jon and Petor were cleaning the machine blasters, a three day turnaround task that didn't take them long, but insured that the sometimes delicate mechanisms hadn't suffered in transit between camps. J.B. was also at the armory, using some of the cleaning materials and grease to work on his M-4000. He looked up as Margia approached.

"Hey, boy," the blonde greeted him amiably, "you're at it early."

"Just a small task, but one I don't want to put off," he answered her.

"Always the best way," she said approvingly. "Say, me and Mildred are contesting each other in shooting practice. Want to come and look?"

J.B. pushed his fedora back on his head and scratched at his forehead. "Should be interesting. Mildred's a fine shot."

"Exactly why I wanted to shoot against her," Margia replied. "So why don't you get over to the contest and check it out. I just need to get my blaster."

"You're not carrying it?" J.B. asked with surprise.

Margia shook her head. "Just needed to clean it earlier, so it's still in there," she said casually before entering the armory tent.

Tammy, following at a distance that wouldn't seem suspicious, saw Margia enter the tent. Unlike J.B., who hadn't seen the blonde's back, she knew that Margia was in fact carrying her blaster, but she hadn't heard the exchange between the two armorers.

As J.B. finished the M-4000, Tammy approached the tent, intending to see what Margia was doing. But that wasn't to be, as the boys had stopped their appointed task when they saw her approach.

"Hey, Tam, shouldn't you be at the contest?" Jon asked.

"She don't need a blaster to shoot out any target she wants," Petor added obliquely.

"Shut it, boys," Tammy said abruptly, irritated by their poor timing. She went to pass them, but they blocked her path.

"What's the matter?" Jon said in a mock-hurt tone. "You don't want to talk to us all of a sudden?"

"Mebbe we're just too lowly," Petor mocked. "It's not that. It's just that I wanted to see—"

"Wanted to see what?" Petor questioned, puzzled by the suddenly flat tone in Tammy's voice.

"It doesn't matter, stupidworks," she answered bitterly, watching as Margia left the armory and headed toward the contest, smiling coldly at Tammy as she passed her.

By the time both Margia and Tammy had arrived back at the contest, most of the shooting had taken place. The contest wasn't in itself a competition. It was just something that the Amazon warriors used to spice up the otherwise dull target practice. There was an air of good humor about the shooting, and J.B. found the different stances and shooting styles of the contestants fascinating. So much so that he hadn't even noticed that Mildred had refrained from talking to him.

But even the laconic armorer noticed the change in atmosphere when Margia returned. She headed straight for Mildred.

"What do you shoot with?" she asked casually.

"ZKR 551, Czech made."

Margia raised an eyebrow. "I don't think I've ever come across one of those," she said easily. "What caliber?"

"It's a .38," Mildred answered.

Margia held out her hand. "Can I see?"

Mildred shrugged. Standing right in front of her, and in front of the others, there was nothing that the blonde could do to Mildred's blaster.

But Margia had timed her question carefully.

"Your turn," Jess said to them.

Mildred went to take back her blaster, but Margia had produced her own from the sheathed holster in the small of her back. "Mind if I shoot with yours? It'll be fair if I give you mine, 'cause we'll both have unfamiliar blasters."

Mildred wavered for a second. She knew this was a trick of some kind, but couldn't for the life of her work out what Margia was pulling. To refuse and cause a scene would mean loss of face in front of J.B. and the other members of the Gate. J.B. she could put in the picture later, but the Gate...

"Okay," Mildred assented with a deceptively casual shrug. "And God help you if you're setting me up, lady," she muttered to herself.

They walked to the line in the earth from where the target practice would begin. Margia took position first, and sighting carefully along the barrel of the ZKR, rattled off five shots in quick succession. From their position on the sheet covering the target, it could clearly be seen that the shots had clustered around the center.

"You now," Margia said with a smirk that made Mildred's spine crawl.

She sighted along the blaster Margia had given her, a Kimber .45 ACP pistol. The compact blaster had a barrel that located directly into the slide, and it held seven rounds. Mildred loosed them in a smooth repeating squeeze of her trigger finger, but even as the first round left the barrel she knew that something was wrong. The weight of the blaster felt wrong, as though something had somehow thrown it out of alignment. The discharged rounds kicked back in an asymmetric manner, causing the spread of hits to be wider than Margia's by no small degree. Even without looking, Mildred knew that her performance had been the worst of the contest, and even as she seethed at the deception of the blond armorer, so a part of her kept cool and looked at the blaster, searching for the cause of the problem.

"Not quite what I expected," Margia said quietly, keeping the exaltation out of her voice. She looked over to J.B., and said, "Mebbe you'd better think of joining up with us on a regular basis, if this is the best you can do."

Mildred looked across at the Armorer. He was phased by Mildred's poor show. She knew that the last thing he would do was blame her, but that didn't alter the fact that she had let her friends down—albeit by a treacherous hand. Her gaze returned to the blaster in her hand.



"Don't blame the tools, sweetie," Margia said in an acid tone, swiftly removing the Kimber from Mildred's grasp and replacing it with the ZKR.

Margia left Mildred impotent with rage and humiliation, left to questioning stares from Tammy and Krysty and left the others reflecting on the poor performance of the much-vaunted sharpshooter.

Left with the Kimber nestling against the small of her back, holding fast its little secret—the delicate work on the barrel that threw its alignment and made it Margia's secret weapon for anyone in the tribe, or out of the tribe, who might cross her.

## Chapter Eight

The period of peaceful travel was coming to an end. It was inevitable that this would happen, but the manner in which it occurred was something that couldn't have been predicted, for all things seemed to coincide and began not with an infringement from outside, but from within.

They spent three more days traveling. The climate was still warm, but there were occasional bursts of rain that fell warm upon them from the heavy chem-stained clouds that hung overhead. It wasn't the scarring acid rain of farther south, but still had a tinge of chem that made their skin soapy if they stayed in it too long, the top layers of the epidermis softening like a clay putty as the rain soaked in. When the showers hit, it was hard to find cover and the Gate would gather into a protective circle, with the men using plastic sheeting and tarpaulins hauled from the wagons to cover the tribe as a whole.

They were having trouble finding cover because the terrain was changing around them. The vast plains with the crops of trees glading them had gradually lessened, the foliage and plant life spreading out into the grassland, the grasses encroaching onto the wooded areas, until there was no longer any clear delineation. The trees that still dotted the landscape were smaller. No longer the twisted descendant of redwoods, they were now smaller, like stunted beech and silver oak, with gnarled trunks that harbored small mammals and nests of birds.

In some areas, the foliage would grow thick, with twisting plant stems and root systems for the trees that would make progress difficult. Instead of the steady pace they had previously maintained, it was now a question of hacking a path through territory that was virgin to travel on foot. At the head of the tribe, Gloria would hack her way through, her flames of hair swaying to the easy rhythm of her movements, still gentle and unhurried even in these circumstances, like the movement of a coiled spring that was deceptively easy yet carried with it an immense energy. Ryan joined her at the front, his panga swinging in time to hers, his muscles rippling under the effort and glistening with sweat under the humidity of the rainy heat.

Margia had kept up her campaign of sly sideswipes at Mildred, saying nothing and everything by the tone of her voice, constantly referring to Mildred's failure in the shooting competition-cum-practice, but always in a conciliatory tone. She was deliberate in not being openly antagonistic, not wanting J.B. to notice any hostility on her part.

Mildred was having trouble keeping her temper. J.B.'s attitude to her hadn't changed, but she did notice other members of the Gate looking at her as though she had somehow failed a test. Whether this was because of her failure against Margia as a marksman or because she wouldn't rise to the obvious bait the

blond armorer was laying before her, Mildred couldn't be sure. But of one thing she could be sure: her patience was thin and stretched beyond the point where she could back down. It was only a matter of time before she snapped.

PREPARING CAMP WAS harder now, as the Gate and Ryan's people had to hack back swathes of foliage to clear space for the campfire and for the tents. The baffling that had served so well in wooded glades had to be more securely planted in the earth to prevent the cold night winds from driving it down, and it was harder for the guards to keep hidden in the lack of cover during the still watches. Despite this, they were still able to set up a reasonable resting post on each night.

On the third night, as darkness fell, Ryan and Doc conversed with the Gate queen.

"I would hazard a guess that we are headed toward the area where the old capital was once located," Doc said, studying both the map he had taken from the redoubt and the faded parchment that Gloria carried. He indicated a location on both, each in turn, with a long, bony finger that trembled slightly in the cold night air, despite their closeness to the main fire.

"That's where the main nukes would have hit," Ryan said quietly. "It's still a complete no-go area, what little of it is left. Trader had never seen it, but like he used to say, 'You don't have to see the shit to know that it smells.'"

"Picturesquely put, my dear boy," Doc murmured with a wry grin of amusement, "and probably just about accurate. There was the strong smell of corruption stinking out those corridors, the corruption-of-power madness, the insanity of pointless violence and the acquisition of power for the sake of it, with no goal or reason other than to glory in the utter futility of being master of the void."

Gloria cast a puzzled glance at Ryan. "Is he always like this? I'm sorry, honey, but I can't understand a word you say," she added to Doc.

He gave a look of infinite sadness. "Madam, if you had seen the void, you would understand. I could see it in those whitecoat eyes. If nothing else happened in the days of skydark that was good, then at least it cleaned out the canker eating at their souls."

"Doc," Ryan said, trying to bring the old man back on track, "if we're not going to the old capital, then where are we headed?"

Doc looked blankly at the one-eyed warrior, for a short moment lost somewhere inside the hell that he carried within him, the things that he knew but would rather had never crossed his consciousness.

"To oblivion, dear boy," he said softly. Then, in a stronger voice, "Inevitably, as must all men. But right now I would say we were going to scout around to the northwest of the continent. Strange, is it not, how everything seems to pull us this way. I remember a story from the whitecoats, a rumor only half-heard through an office door, but nonetheless..."

Doc, however, was not to repeat the rumor right then. There was a more pressing problem, as evinced by the sudden sounds of argument that cut him off and caused them to look around.

"Mildred..." Ryan whispered.

"Margia..." Gloria replied in a resigned tone.

"IT'S ABOUT TIME you came out with what you meant, lady, 'cause I'll tell you one thing—you wind a spring too far and it snaps. You pull that elastic too taut and it snaps. And that's me, girl."

Mildred squared up to the blond armorer, shrugging off Krysty's hand as she tried to restrain the angry woman. Margia had finally taken that one step over the line. And it was the simplest trigger of all: Mildred's color.

Mildred Wyeth had encountered race hatred and discrimination all her life. Her father had been burned to death in his chapel, a victim of racism. Racism hampered her career as a doctor, despite her success. In the days before skydark, she often wondered if she would have achieved greater success if she had been white. Waking up from her freezie state to an alien world, it might have been an unreasonable dream, but not beyond the bounds of probability, that the harsh demands of a postholocaust world would cause the survivors to forget about race and band together to try to survive. Instead, she found merely that survival increased the tribalism and hatred.

Margia had drawn this inference from J.B.'s oblique answers to her questions about Mildred. And having judged that now was the right moment, she chose to bring this card into play. Passing Mildred where she sat with Krysty and Tammy, the blonde paused to mutter a comment about Mildred sitting too close to the fire, in case she got burned, like her father, adding, "but then, I suppose J.B. likes burned meat."

It was at the same time both banal and vile, and it certainly had the intended effect. Like the last straw on the clichéd camel's back, it broke the line of resistance that Mildred had kept up for days. The reference to her father, along with the racial slur, was well timed by the blonde.

And now they stood face-to-face, Mildred seething with anger, Margia retaining a detached and almost ironic calm.

"What do I mean?" she said with a deceptive sweetness. "Why, Mildred, I don't bother to hide things."

"That's true," Mildred snapped. "I don't know exactly what you want—to make me look bad in front of John, in front of everyone. To take him for yourself in some way I don't understand... just to play some motherfucking stupid game for all I know. But you've gone too far now."

Margia had expected the strike, and was ready for it. Mildred jabbed with a straightened hand, fingers rigid, powering the blow from the elbow so as not to telegraph, aiming for just under the blonde's ribs with an upward thrust. If the blow had struck home, it would have driven the breath from her body and been a hammer blow to her heart, despite the hard muscle that ridged her torso.

But Margia was quicker, her anticipation adding fire to her reflexes. Her right arm swept down, deflecting Mildred's arm by redirecting its own momentum, and she shot forward her left arm, with her hand turned palm up, driving it into Mildred's face.

Mildred snapped her head back before the full force of the blow could hit her, but still there was enough for her to see stars as the heel of Margia's hand brushed against her. Mildred toppled back, and knowing that she couldn't prevent her fall, she relaxed into it so that she would be floppy as she hit the earth, and would not jar or break anything. She hit the ground, tensing her calf and thigh muscles to propel herself back upward, but found that Margia had already anticipated this move.

Instead of staying on her feet to deliver the next blow, as Mildred had expected, Margia had followed Mildred down, dropping to her knees so that she caught Mildred on the way up, her bony knees

smashing into Mildred's ribs, driving her back to the earth and pinning her there. The blonde's hands snaked out for Mildred's throat, and there was a gleam in her eyes that bespoke of blood lust.

It was only because Mildred was a fraction quicker than Margia thought that she managed to prevent the grip taking hold on her throat. Mildred brought her hands up, pulling her arms together so that they wormed in between the blonde's. She pushed her arms out, taking Margia's forearms away from her prone body, and turning her hands so that her palms gripped around the blonde's forearms in a viselike grip that pinched the flesh and felt hard bone beneath. "You won't beat me," the blond armorer whispered, her voice husky with excitement. "You'll tire before I do."

And although she desperately refused to admit it to herself, as this would destroy her own fighting confidence, Mildred knew deep in her gut that Margia was right. Mildred was a good fighter, learning from her companions and adding this to her basic drive and determination, but for all that, she knew that she was ultimately no match for an Amazon warrior who had been born to the life and trained almost from birth. Margia would be stronger over the distance, have more stamina, and would have an almost genetic disposition to combat.

Mildred was in deep trouble, and she knew it.

By this time, members of the Gate had started to drift toward the fight. An internal skirmish of this sort was rare among the tribe, and rather than any sense of urgency there was an over whelming feeling of curiosity among the onlookers. Krysty desperately wanted to intervene, but a shake of the head from Tammy told her that it would be a breach of protocol that could endanger the status of their entire party.

Dean, Jon and Petor had also homed in on the fight, after hearing the initial argument.

"Shit, Mildred doesn't stand a chance," Jon said matter-of-factly.

Dean shot him a sharp glance. "Mildred's a good fighter," he replied. "Margia's gonna have to be good to take her out."

Petor shook his head. "Doesn't matter how good a fighter she is. She sure as shit ain'tel loco , and that's what Margia is."

Jon agreed. "That's the problem. She'll keep going until she wins, even if all the flesh is flayed from her hide. She just gets this wild fire in her. I've seen her before."

"Then why isn't anyone stopping her?" Dean asked, indicating the Gate members who were gathering around the fight.

"Two reasons," Jon said softly. "The first is that you never interfere with a fight between two women... not in this tribe. It's the worst breach of law you can think of."

"Hot pipe! I can't let that get in the way of stopping this," Dean said angrily, moving away from Jon and Petor and moving toward the fight. "I can't let Mildred get—"

Petor grabbed his arm. "Second reason, Dean— Margia is an evil bitch, and you know that she won't rest until she's either the victor or the vanquished. This'll run until she dies or emerges victorious, and believe me, my friend, if you get in the way she'll take you out, as well."

Dean made to pull away, but found Petor's grip was firm. Jon took Dean's other arm. "Believe him," Jon

said simply. Dean looked on helplessly while Margia pummeled Mildred. She had beaten away Mildred's arms, loosened the grip that Mildred had on her forearms, and was swinging punches and chops at the prone woman. People were slow to make their way from the corners of the camp, or from over by the fire, and Ryan, Doc and Gloria were nowhere to be seen. Neither was J.B., who was at that moment in the armory tent, putting the finishing touches to his Uzi, which he had lovingly stripped and cleaned.

But there was one man who was close enough to the fight to see almost immediately what was going on, and one man who had no one to tell him not to intervene.

Not that mere words could ever stop Jak Lauren when he was determined to see something through.

Jak had been outside the camp when the fight began, having just taken a walk in the surrounding scrub to feel the cold night air on him. He had sharpened his eyes and hearing in the gloom, taking in every movement in the undergrowth. Sharpened so much, in fact, that it went beyond the immediate area, and beyond the five senses into something that could reach out beyond. Almost as if he could scent trouble on the air.

Which is exactly what happened. Jak turned suddenly back toward the camp, sensing a change in atmosphere. For a fraction of a second, he paused, assimilating in his subconscious all that his senses were telling him. And then he began to run. Mildred was by now almost insensible. Margia had landed a chopping blow to the side of her neck that had made her see a whirl of colors in the night air, a thousand firecrackers exploding in her head. Despite all she had experienced over the years, Mildred had always firmly believed that the idea of exploding lights and fireworks in the head were a cliché. Now she knew that wasn't so, and knew at a moment when it was imperative that she remain alert.

But somehow she couldn't. The blow had stunned her severely, and caught a nerve cluster that spread a deadening effect up her face and into her head. It was almost as though her head were becoming disassociated from her body, and would no longer respond to her commands. She wanted to lift her arms and defend herself, but they stubbornly refused to obey. She was painfully aware that this left her completely open to attack, and Margia was keen to exploit that.

The blond armorer landed blow after blow, not in a hurry, but with the calm assurance of one picking her spot. She had caught on quickly that Mildred was incapacitated, and that it was now merely a matter of taking her time and finishing the job properly.

A chance that she wouldn't get because of her arrogance.

Jak came streaking through the crowd, white hair flowing out behind him, his face pale and ghostly in the distant light of the campfire. He shouldered aside the Gate members who blocked his path, unheeding of their dissent, and took in the situation at a glance.

He jumped, launching himself into a flying drop kick that hit Margia on the side as she was about to land another blow. Her arm was raised, and Jak's combat boots hit her under the ribs and in the soft hollow of her armpit. The blonde grunted in shock and pain as she was driven sideways onto the ground, and off Mildred. Jak rolled beside her and got to his feet as she gathered herself and rose to attack the new threat.

"Fight one, fight all," Jak said simply, arms hanging loose by his side, weight balanced on the balls of his feet, ready to fight but unwilling to give away anything by his stance.

Margia's eyes glittered with animal hatred and anger. "You little shit, you'll learn," she grated, launching

herself at the albino.

Jak was ready for the assault and adjusted his balance so that he could take the brunt of her attack side on. In her sudden flaring anger, she had lost some of her cunning, but Jak was still calm and collected. He countered her blow and used her own force against her to drive her back to the ground. She snarled as she sprang to her feet once more, her hand snaking down her thigh to where she had her panga sheathed.

Jak was ahead of her. He moved into her with the speed and slither of a snake, palming one of his leaf-bladed knives and using a swift downward motion to cut through the straps that held the sheath to her thigh. The panga dropped away from her thigh before she had secured her grip on the hilt. While she tried to fasten her grip, tilting her body slightly to snake her hand farther down, Jak took advantage of this sudden shift in balance to upset her totally, driving one combat boot outward so that it caught her bare ankle, barely protected by the simple thonged sandal. She yelped in involuntary pain as her ankle gave way beneath the driving force, and she crumpled to one side.

Jak followed her down, the knife in his palm. He secured her at the shoulders with his knees, locking his feet around her knees so that she couldn't kick at him from behind his head.

He held the knife to her throat. She was completely silent, although her eyes gleamed with a desire to kill him.

"Give one reason why not," Jak said softly.

"Because I say so," a voice answered from behind.

"Not enough," Jak said in a louder voice, over his shoulder.

Gloria stepped around until she was in his view. Ryan was with her. Jak knew that the one-eyed warrior would back him, as he would back any of his people, but he was also aware that Ryan would show deference to the Gate queen, as they were her guests. "Because she's my sister, and as much of a bitch as she can be, and as stupidworks as any man, she's still blood."

Gathered around the scene, both Dean and Krysty started when they heard that. Both, in their own ways, had wondered why Margia could get away with so much in a society that otherwise wouldn't have tolerated her attitude. Now it was clear: she was under the queen's sufferance.

Jak looked Gloria squarely in the eye, leaf-bladed knife still at the blonde's throat. Then, with the barest of nods, he slipped the knife back into its secured hiding place and rose from the supine woman.

"Check Mildred," he said simply, turning to where his companion lay, starting to recover full consciousness while she was tended by J.B., who had ignored the continuing fight to come to her aid.

The encampment returned to normality quickly. Margia was led off by her sister, and the companions took Mildred back to their billet to tend to her. There was a subdued atmosphere, despite things continuing as on a normal night, and a gradual silence descended on the city of canvas and plastic. So it was with some surprise that Jak, not yet asleep, heard his name called softly from outside the tent. He looked at his companions. They were sleeping, and as usual Jak was the only one still to be awake. Sleeping was always hard, for when the dreams came they were violent and he was helpless as his wife and daughter were killed time and again in front of him.

So sometimes Jak didn't sleep, and was glad of distraction. He rose and went out of the tent.



Gloria stood before him, framed by the light of a still burning lamp.

"Thank you for not chilling my sister," she said simply.

"Your tribe—you deal." The albino shrugged.

Gloria didn't answer. Instead, she just smiled her lopsided smile and held out a hand. "Come on, honey," she said in a soft, sibilant tone, "come and join with me this night. I want you."

Jak took her hand without a word and followed her back to her tent. Once inside, she turned to kiss him, and he felt a charge run through him as their lips met, a feeling like stepping off into the void of infinity. It had been a long time for him, and it had taken someone like Gloria to awaken those instincts within him once more.

DEAN HAD AWAKENED when Jak had moved in the tent and watched Jak and Gloria leave. He also saw something that they missed: the figure of the blond armorer, limping heavily, lurking in the shadows of the tents. Remembering what Jon and Petor had told him, and figuring that being bedded by her sister would add to Margia's hatred, he decided that he had to put his father in the picture as soon as morning came.

Things could get very difficult, if Margia wanted it that way...

## Chapter Nine

They sat around the fire, the entire tribe gathered together—apart from those who were on watch—joined by Ryan and the companions. They sat in the flicker of the dying flames to hear Gloria as she spoke in a resonant and singsong voice, relating the stories that were passed orally from generation to generation of Amazon queens.

"At the time before the great darkness, they came in droves to tell of the secret gateways that were around the country. They were all, in their manner, defectors from the path of darkness who wanted to come into the light. They mapped the path for us, us who would be the inheritors and who would have the chance to right all wrongs and build once again.

"But there were those who would be against us and would seek to maintain the old ways. They would be illuminated under the moon of dark and would stay that way for many generations before coming once more into the newborn light.

"And yet still they would be shadow, for they would shadow the old ways in both the figure and the literal. And this would be the way that we could find them..."

Silence descended. All that could be heard was the deep, rasping breath of the Gate queen as she started to surface from her trance. The rasp diminished as her breath became more regular and she neared the surface of her consciousness.

No one spoke until Gloria had blinked several times, the faraway gleam in her eye being replaced by a

sudden awareness and wonder of her surroundings. She always felt the same when emerging from a trance, telling Jak that it was like waking from a dream but not having slept, and seeing the world for the first time.

Now it was safe, Doc spoke. "I find your tales from within the trance most interesting, my dear. Allegory and fantasy to hide the truth from those on the outside and keep it within the chosen few."

"But we're the 'chosen few,' as you put it, sweets, and we don't know what it means."

Doc smiled slowly. "That's because you've lost the key to the puzzle somewhere along the way. That's something I would reckon whoever devised the legend never foresaw. But I believe it means that the thing we seek is somewhere to the northwest of what we used to call the United States, back in the days when there was an innocence in the air."

"Everything seems to point that way, so that's nothing new," J.B. said, puzzled. What was it that made Doc so certain?

The old man seemed to sense the unspoken question. "My dear John Barrymore, I have not just plucked it out of thin air. I base my assumption partly on that which is already known, and partly on what we have just heard."

"What part?" Dean scoffed. "C'mon, Doc, you can't tell me that you got anything out of that."

"On the contrary, my dear young Cawdor, I obtained plenty of information from the lovely Gloria to support my assumption. For instance, she spoke of the Illuminated Ones, whom we already know—of them being illuminated in a manner that suggests they stay underground, something that we already know. Perhaps more importantly, she spoke of them being a shadow to the old ways, in both a literal and figurative sense." Doc paused like a ham actor, for effect.

"So?" Dean prodded, succumbing to the lure.

"So simply this—figuratively, the Illuminated Ones wish to set up a system via their central redoubt that will rule the Deathlands in the way that their forebears did before skydark."

"They must be pretty stupe, then," Jak commented. "Don't notice them ruling anything."

"Of course not, my dear boy," Doc replied patiently. "Obviously, in the same way that the Gate have lost sight of some things during the ensuing years, then so have the Illuminated Ones...to what degree, we have yet to find out."

"Literally, then," Ryan said. "Shadowing literally?"

"Most ingenious," Doc muttered, nodding to himself in admiration of the fable's imagery. "I believe I may have mentioned in passing about the ideas of a second center of command, something I heard the whitecoats talk of during the time when I was held by them. I wonder if the idea of shadowing literally means that there is an identical center of command hidden somewhere in that area, modeled on the way things were so that it could smoothly take over the running of the military and economy when things returned to—shall we say?—normal."

"Nice idea, but wouldn't it have been blown to shit by the nukocaust if it was too close to the old D.C.?" Ryan posited.

Doc nodded appreciatively. "If it was that close, that would be a reasonable assumption. After all, there is little enough there now. But there is still plenty of life around Seattle, as we have found to our cost in the past. And that's not too far away...and, perhaps more significantly, it would tie in with what we already know."

Gloria studied the old man intently. "You know as well as I do that we're headed that way. Do you really think that we could be within sight of our goal?"

Doc shrugged. "I have seen too much, experienced more than you would ever wish to know, to say yea or nay that simply. All I can honestly say is that it is possible that we may be nearing a solution to the many puzzles that beset us."

Gloria looked at Ryan. "Is that a yes or no?" She laughed.

The one-eyed warrior shrugged. "Don't expect me to understand everything Doc says—I've only known him for years!"

IN THE MORNING, J.B. fixed their position by his mini-sextant and established that their winding path was taking them toward the northwest. It was becoming more obvious, too, in the changes that were occurring in the foliage around them. The plains and jungle were blurring into one more and more, the trees spreading out and the vines and creepers the companions had encountered on an earlier trip to the northwest becoming more plentiful.

There were also larger and more predatory animals, as became evident in a sudden attack that almost took them off guard.

It happened after they had been traversing a thick patch of jungle for several hours. Ryan and Gloria led the way, hacking a path through a dense patch of foliage, where the trees grew in a stunted and twisted thicket so that branches overhung and overlapped, cutting out much of the light—but also, mercifully, the heat. Despite this, it was still oppressively hot beneath the canopy of leaves, and the thick clouds of midges and hoverflies were distracting, making it difficult to breathe.

The initial path through was being cut by the two leaders, with members of the Gate tribe, augmented by Jak, Dean and Krysty, joining them in widening the path to admit the whole tribe and, more significantly, the mules and carts that contained the majority of the equipment that the nomadic tribe carried with them.

In such a patch, the attention needed to stay clear of the insects and also cut the path took up the vast majority of everyone's concentration. There was also a large degree of noise involved in cutting the path, added to which the birds and small mammals that they knew to populate the jungle were disturbed by the arrival of the Gate, and so were raising hell as they tried to escape the onslaught.

All of which shouldn't have made it surprising that a larger predator would be able to attack them. Nonetheless, when it happened it came as a shock.

Mildred and J.B. were hanging back toward the rear of the caravan, traveling near the wagons and mules. This was partly because both sought to keep as much distance between themselves and Margia as possible—something that Gloria had realized, playing her part by keeping her sister at the front of the party, near to her—and partly because Mildred wanted to be near Doc. She had become concerned as they had entered the denser jungle by the way that the insects and the humidity had affected Doc's breathing. Doc himself had expressed a similar concern to her, speculating that the strain on his

respiratory system imposed by the repeated trawls through time and the effect on his physiology had left him with a lower tolerance than he would have wished.

So Doc was traveling at the back of the caravan, occasionally hitching a lift from Jon and Petor, who were leading the armory wagon.

And it was Doc who had the first intimation of the attack. He was discussing the ritual mating habit of birds with Petor—or, rather, he was talking at him about it while the youngster maintained a polite but baffled silence, when he suddenly stopped.

"What is it?" Petor asked, jolted awake by the sudden cessation of speech and noting the faraway look in Doc's eyes.

"An odd noise, my boy. Not like the general hubbub, and headed this way."

"Which direction?"

"To the left," Doc said hurriedly, reaching out with his silver lion's-head cane to tap the Armorer on the shoulder. "John Barrymore—" he began urgently.

But J.B. had already heard the noise and had half turned to where the noise was emanating. "I hear you, Doc," he said, unslinging his Uzi and easing the action to short bursts. He stopped moving, the better to concentrate. It was getting louder, and at rapid speed. But such was the thickness of the jungle at this point that he still couldn't see it.

He was taking no chances. "Incoming," he yelled. "Over to the left, back of the column. It's... Dark night!"

The thing that heaved into view caused J.B. to stop dead and exclaim in awe and horror.

In the gloom of the undergrowth, it seemed at first to have no shape. Moving among the foliage at a rapid rate, spraying broken stems and flowers before it, it seemed to shift from a vaguely square shape to a long, rectangular shadow that loomed forward. It was only when it came fully into the light that leaked through the dense jungle that the reason for this became apparent. For the creature was a mutated bear of some kind, its black furry coat dotted with scaled sores and thick scar tissue. The eyes were wild and yellow, matched by the large, yellowing fangs that protruded from its slavering jaws. It seemed to change shape for the simple reason that it moved by placing its weight on its forepaws while the stronger, heavily muscled back legs propelled it forward in a loping half jump, half run.

It was moving at a phenomenal speed for something that looked so uneven and strange. Even so, the Armorer's reflexes were up to the task. His sudden shock at seeing such a creature going forward at speed was outweighed by the combat skills that had seen him make it this far down the line without buying the farm.

Without pause and in one fluid motion, J.B. brought the Uzi around and up in an economic arm motion, leveling the barrel with an area around the chest of the beast. His instinct told him to go for this shot first simply because the erratic loping motion of the creature would make a chest shot harder.

His finger tightened on the trigger, slow and easy despite the adrenaline pulsing through his veins, making the blood in his ears roar so loudly that it drowned out the cries of the beast as it scented the sudden fear in the group of people before it.

It roared so loudly that it almost drowned the insistent chatter of the Uzi as the short bursts of fire rang out. Its voice rose in pitch to match the sudden upright posture it adopted, screaming in anger more than pain as the bullets from the Uzi seemed to make little mark, thudding harmlessly into its thick fur coat, raising nothing more than dust. One hit a scaly sore, puncturing the crust and causing a little blood and pus to dribble gently down into the already matted fur.

"The beast must be armor plated," Doc muttered to himself, drawing his LeMat from its position beneath his coat and bringing it up to take aim. With the attention of the creature focused on J.B., Doc had the precious few fractions of a second to take a better aim. As the creature reared upright—more in indignation than pain—at the impact of the Uzi slugs, Doc aimed for the head, discharging both barrels of the LeMat, so that the charge of shot was followed in rapid succession by the ball.

Doc had aimed for the gaping maw of the creature, having already registered that apparent thickness of its hide. If he could get his pistol to fire into the yellow-and-red maw, then it would tear into the soft tissue and do an endless amount of damage, perhaps even ripping up into the brain area.

Unfortunately for Doc, he misjudged the rise of the creature by a fraction, not surprising under the circumstances, but enough to deflect his original aim. Instead of the LeMat scoring a hit in the one known exposed area of the creature, the shot ripped across the left-hand side of the creature's neck, tearing at the fur and causing small gouts of blood to shoot out at the point of impact. It made the mutie bear roar louder, its yellow eyes taking on a bloodshot tinge of red raw anger. The ball fared little better, embedding itself somewhere in the fur of the neck without seeming to do much damage... except to make the creature more angry.

In the time this had taken, the entire caravan had turned to the rear in order to face the menace. Ryan and Gloria had left their positions at the front, and were now headed toward the rear, blasters ready.

As other members of the Gate took aim and fired, it was obvious that the handblasters were useless against the mutie creature. Its hide was far too thick, covered in who knew what kind of armored and crusted skin in those areas where the fur still grew, for the smaller-caliber bullets of the handblasters to penetrate. Ryan had already unslung his Steyr and was raising it as he ran back, skipping between the tribe members who were trying to both meet the menace and also avoid getting in one another's way—a problem that was very real in the enclosed space of their hacked path.

"J.B.!" Ryan yelled as he brought up the blaster. "I'll draw it, you finish the fucker!"

Not pausing to see if the Armorer heard him amid the din of the enclosed firefight, Ryan stopped and planted his feet on the floor of the jungle, raising the Steyr and blocking out everything around, so that all he could see or hear was the mutie that threatened the column.

The one-eyed warrior loosed a round, aiming at the side of the creature's head. From such an angle, he knew it would cause no great damage, but he hoped that it would be enough to draw its attention away from the rear of the column, and perhaps give his old friend the shot he needed.

The bullet drilled into the side of the bear's head, tearing at its ear and making rivulets of blood run down into the fur, matting those parts not already matted by filth and pus.

The bear screamed in pain—the pain of an irritation rather than a mortal wound—and its instinct made it turn toward the source of this irritation.

Which was exactly what J.B. wanted. The creature was now at an angle to him, its head raised to its full height as it sought the source of the pain among the melee in front of it. For an all important fraction of a second, it was still and at the apex of its rise.

The head was tilted at a twenty-five-degree angle, the mouth open in full roar. J.B. could see the yellowed fangs and the red flesh of the mouth as though they were the only things that existed. He moved his body with a swift and sinuous movement, altering his stance so that his blaster was at an oblique angle to the creature. He had reslung the Uzi, and now held his M-4000, which he aimed at the exposed vulnerable area.

He had one shot, and he had to make it count. He squeezed on the trigger, hitting the right balance between speed and haste.

Suddenly there was no noise for him except the loud explosion and roar of the M-4000 as its load of barbed flechettes shot from the barrel. There would only be time for the one shot, and it had to count.

The mutie bear turned by just a fraction of an angle in the millisecond between hearing the M-4000 explode and feeling the load of flechettes with metal barbs hit home. It was luck for the Armorer that this turn was in the right direction, and assisted the intent of his excellent shot. The open maw of the bear suddenly disappeared in a welter of blood, pus and fur as the load hit home, ripping into the soft flesh of the palette and jaw, splintering bone and pulping tissue, some of the hot metal shooting through to the brain, where it met no resistance from gray matter already reduced to mush by the flechettes. The exit wounds from the wild card of metal and bone exploding inside the brainpan were large, ripping apart the skull so that it disintegrated in a slow motion explosion of fur, pus and bone, showering the immediate area.

The final roar of the creature was strangled in its throat, allowed no exit by the sudden disappearance of its mouth and head.

The body of the bear stood erect, already chilled, but without anything to tell it to lie down. It teetered for a moment before crashing to the earth.

There was an eerie silence and stillness that descended over the party. It lasted for a short moment, before Gloria's husky tones, tinged with anger, cut across the silence. "Who the fuck let that big fucker through? Why wasn't he spotted? Who should have made the call?"

Her piercing blue eyes ran over the assembled Gate members and Ryan's people. She was scanning to see which of the outriders, scouting the territory on each side and ahead of the path, was responsible.

"Shit—woman down," she whispered, noting that Jess was missing.

It was all too easy to find out what had happened to the small, dark Amazon. All Gloria, Ryan and Jak had to do was follow the trail left by the now chilled mutie bear. They traveled as a trio for cover while the rest of the party regrouped and prepared to continue. Ryan and Jak both carried grens, in case the mutie had a mate who would be less than pleased to see them. But it seemed that the mutie bear had been a loner, perhaps the last of its type. Its lair was roughly a half mile from the path they had hacked into the jungle. It took them no time at all to reach the location, as the bear had destroyed enough undergrowth in its rampage to make the trail easy to follow and the path easy to traverse.

It seemed to them that Jess had been scouting when, her instinct for danger somehow deserting her momentarily but at a crucial point, she had stumbled across the small gathering of trees and ferns that the



mutie had gathered as a bed. There had been no time for her to take any action as her blade was still sheathed and her blaster lay beside her outstretched hand. A hand that was immaculate and spotless, a contrast to the rest of her chilled corpse. The mutie had obviously taken her completely by surprise, as her rib cage lay exposed in the dim light, ripped by the talons of the creature to expose bone. There was little left of her innards, and the bear had seemingly used her for sustenance to fuel its rampage. She was nearly severed at the torso, her legs mangled and useless at an obscene angle to the rest of her body. Her head was barely recognizable, partly because of the obvious bite mark that obscured one side of her face, showing where the creature had attacked her.

"Fireblast," Ryan whispered. "Have to be triple red if there are any more fuckers like that around."

Gloria shook her head sadly. "Waste of a good warrior. But there are always reasons, and we must draw from this, so that she was not chilled for no reason."

"Learn well," Jak echoed, before adding, "but no mate here, so mebbe we look for them on own?"

Ryan assented. "It's a fair bet that rad-blasted fuckers like that are loners. And bide well," he added.

"Something to look out for," Gloria agreed. She turned to them, her icy blue eyes now clouded over with an infinite sadness. "But first we take Jess back to the Gate. We have to say goodbye to a warrior, bid her farewell."

Without comment, Jak lifted Jess's remains in his arms, marveling at how light she now was, and carried her back to the tribe, walking between Gloria and Ryan.

THE CEREMONY WAS simple. While Ryan and his companions stood back, the men of the tribe constructed a funeral pyre for Jess, clearing ample space lest the pyre cause a forest fire. While they did this, the Amazons laid the chilled corpse of their fellow warrior on the ground. They chanted around her, a wordless wail of anguish for a fellow lost, and a celebration of a life laid down for others.

When the pyre was ready, they carried her to it and laid her on top. The pyre was sprinkled with some of the precious oil and gasoline they carried with them, and Gloria set light to it. Then they chanted more, a rising crescendo in the late afternoon, speaking in tongues of a soul now set free from the Deathlands to soar, a farewell from those left behind to carry on.

The fire burned swiftly, and they waited until it began to die. It was extinguished by the men of the tribe, and the last remains of Jess were buried the next morning, a temporary camp being set up on the spot for the night, so that a vigil could be maintained over the cooling pyre. And so they moved on...

THERE WERE no other disturbances from the outside for the next few days of the journey. Gloria gathered her scouts and warned them of what she, Ryan and Jak had seen when they recovered Jess's chilled corpse, and the outriders of the Gate were on triple-red alert for more of the mutie bears or for any other danger that might be lurking. But it would seem that the mutie that had chilled Jess was a loner, perhaps long since departed from its pack, or even just the sole survivor. Certainly, from the state of the stinking carcass, which they had moved before starting the funeral ceremony for Jess, it had been decomposing slowly while still alive.

The only danger seemed to come from within the tribe, and was directed at Jak. Three times he was nearly injured or chilled during the following few days, and each time he was pretty sure he knew where the attack came from, although each time his "accidental" assailant avoided detection.

The first attempt to chill the albino came on the day after Jess's remains were buried. It was while the outriders for the day practiced with their blades, target throwing. Jak stood by, watching the different throwing techniques with interest. Tammy turned to him.

"Jak, take a turn," she yelled.

Unable to resist the challenge, the albino came forward, scarred visage already set hard in concentration.

Palming three of his leaf-bladed knives, he threw quickly and with an instinctive accuracy, taking out one of the machetes that rested near the center of their makeshift target by deflecting the first blade off the handle with enough force to dislodge it, and landing the next two in the dead center of the target.

"Wow," Tammy breathed, "you'll have to teach me that!"

Jak allowed himself a smile as he loped forward to remove his knives and pick up the first blade and the machete as they lay on the ground. It was fortunate that he bent at the moment he did, as a blade thudded into the target only inches above his head.

The albino whirled, his eyes flashing and a knife already in hand. He was confronted by the group of Amazon outriders, all as perplexed as himself, looking around for who had thrown the knife.

He was sure he could see a blond head at the back of the crowd, moving away.

Jak didn't pursue the matter, as the Gate women were as outraged as he, but he did remember what Dean had told him about Margia's temper after he had stepped into her fight with Mildred, and he resolved to keep his eyes open.

Even so, there were two other occasions when the albino suspected that accidents were caused by the blond armorer. The first came when they took target practice. Tammy fired the shot that nearly chilled Jak, the kickback on the .38-caliber Smith & Wesson Airlite Ti she had been given causing the weapon to buck and the shot to stray sideways toward the area where Jak was whetting his knives on a stone. It could have been an accident, if not for the fact that Tammy had only just been given the blaster by Margia, who had persuaded her to try it there and then—to see if it was suitable for her needs—on a target that the armorer had placed herself with some care, perhaps working out the angle necessary for the slug to catch Jak.

The second occasion was more blatant. Jak was passing the armory when a shot rang out. With lightning reflexes, the albino hit the ground in a roll, the bullet whining harmlessly into a tree some twenty yards behind him.

Rising to his feet in anger, and reaching the armory in two strides, Jak flung open the tent flap to find the interior empty, apart from a still warm AirLite—the same one Tammy had been given a few days prior. A close examination revealed that the blaster had been tampered with, the chamber and stock revealing signs of metalwork being shaved, perhaps the same work that had previously caused it to buck so badly in Tammy's hands.

Hearing the rustle of canvas behind him, Jak turned to see Margia enter. The blonde raised a quizzical eyebrow.

"Trouble?" she asked. Then, sniffing the air and catching the cordite, she added, "You've got a habit of being too close to blasters that just go off."

Jak said nothing. Pushing past her, he left the tent before his temper got the better of him. He could feel her eyes bore into his back as he walked away. Her time would come. It would be the two of them if necessary. He had no quarrel with her, but if she felt differently, then he would see it through.

## Chapter Ten

As they progressed, it became apparent that they were traveling down an incline that was gentle and barely noticeable, but nonetheless had an effect on the surrounding jungle. Over a period of three hours, they found progress easier in terms of both exertion and the amount of foliage that had to be chopped back to supply a path.

"Valley of some kind," Gloria said to Ryan. "Different soil, too. Look at the change around us."

The one-eyed warrior looked around. The stunted trees were more prevalent than the creepers and shrubs that had crossed their path prior to this point. The root systems of the trees had also retreated farther into the ground, making the way underfoot less treacherous. There was still a canopy of leaves and branches that made the light filter through in shafts and blocks rather than as a clear view of the sky, but even this was more evenly distributed than before.

Gloria raised her panga, pointing to the treetops. "See how they're spread out more, sweets? That's because they're more deeply rooted, growing strong and straight. Which means we're coming into a place where the water and goodness lies deeper in the soil. Which isn't what I'd expect in a valley."

"Mebbe this is leading downward into something larger," Ryan suggested, "like mebbe we're coming down from a plateau?"

Gloria chewed her lip. "No news from the outriders on big changes in the landscape. Wonder what I could see from above?"

And before Ryan had a chance to answer her, the Amazon queen had left his side and scaled the nearest tree, sheathing her panga and stretching her sinewy arms up to grasp a lower branch, pulling herself upward and over onto the limb with a feline grace. She disappeared into the canopy of foliage.

Krysty joined Ryan. "Gloria scouting the land?"

He nodded. "If this is a valley, then we need to know what the hell the incline's like. If it isn't, then what does it end in?"

"Trouble," the Titian-haired woman answered quietly.

Ryan turned to her. The strands of long, flaming hair that usually hung loosely over her shoulders were coiled in tight to her neck.

"What is it?" he asked softly, not wanting to alert any of the Gate to Krysty's doomie sensibility until he himself knew what she was thinking.

"Not sure," she replied in an equally cautious tone. "It can't be too near, as the Gate scouts haven't reported anything, but since we started to go downhill and the landscape started to change, I've had this growing knowledge that we're headed into trouble. I just wish it wasn't so vague."

"Better vague than nothing," came a voice from just above them. Both Ryan and Krysty looked up to see Gloria hanging from a tree limb, having moved across the trees with the stealth of a tree monkey.

The woman flipped off the branch, landing effortlessly on her thonged feet.

"I couldn't see much from up there," she continued, "but one thing is for sure—there's enough hiding places. I couldn't even spot my own outriders. Which is okay, 'cause they'd be in deep shit if I could! But there could be anything in there, and there are a couple of spots where we'd be very vulnerable."

"Like?" Ryan queried.

"My guess is that we're in an area that was sacred in some way, and hidden from the view of the world. There are some areas where camouflage was used, and the years have worn it away. Mebbe ten miles from here there's a settlement of some kind. No fires or signs of life I could see, but at this distance it's too soon to say." She shrugged. "But before we get that far, there's a plain in the middle of this that stretches for about a mile. Why the hell it should be there, I don't know. It doesn't feel right."

"Mebbe that's what's worrying me," Krysty said. "It could be something residual that's giving me this, rather than any real danger."

Gloria shook her head. "Never ignore a doomie, honey. What I mean is that the plain looks like it was man-made in some way. This is a decline into a lower ground level, not a valley, and with this around—" she gestured to the woodlands around them "—then there's no reason in nature why that plain should suddenly be there. It's kinda weird, and that worries me."

"How far to the plain?" Ryan asked.

"About half a mile," Gloria answered.

The one-eyed warrior nodded, his mouth set in a grim line. They had to advance, and if there was a settlement ahead that was deserted, then it could prove instructive. But to get there...

"Triple red, without a doubt," he said. "Reckon we should call in the outriders, as well. If they haven't seen anything out there, then mebbe whatever's waiting—if it is—is too smart to be caught out that way. Besides which, this is their territory."

"Agreed. I'll call them back and we proceed with extreme caution. The unknown is a worse enemy than anything you see," the Gate queen murmured before turning and letting out an earsplitting screech that was a signal to her outriders.

J.B., Jak, Dean, Mildred and Doc moved through the stilled procession of the Gate until they were level with Krysty, Ryan and Gloria. While the tribe was content to wait for their queen to inform them of what was happening, the companions were more anxious to know. Krysty and Gloria filled them in on what had been discovered and discussed.

"I wonder," Doc mused, almost to himself. "Could it really be so, after all?"

"Could what be so?" Mildred prompted.

Doc looked at her as though she had completely missed the plot, even though it was a story that had been running only in his own head for some time now. "My dear Dr. Wyeth," he said in amazement, "why, surely it's obvious."

Mildred raised an eyebrow. "Not to me, you crazy old coot. So come down off that cloud and fill me in. Pretend I'm stupid, okay?"

Doc raised a smile. "As if I could ever believe that, my dear madam. I merely surmise that this could be the place for which we seek, and the place that I dredged from the recesses of my poor, addled memory, which, I may add, I do know to be not the most reliable of sources. No, my dear madam, I do indeed wonder if this is the shadow capital of which I heard talk, and which seems so well to fit in with the legends of our dear friend here." With which he indicated Gloria with a sweeping flourish.

J.B. polished his spectacles on the corner of his shirt, focusing his thoughts with each movement of his thumb and forefinger across the surface of the lens.

"If that's the case," he said slowly and deliberately, "then we're gonna have to be right there for the Illuminated Ones, 'cause we know they're still around."

Gloria, who had been listening intently, nodded. "That's why I want us all together. I don't want to lose outriders just 'cause they're alone. Safety in numbers, now."

By this time, all the outriders had responded to the signal and were back with the tribe. Gloria gathered them together and filled them in on what was known and what was surmised. There was a buzz of excitement that passed through the tribe at the thought that they may be the generation to attain that for which they had spent so long searching.

Gloria held up both hands. "Wait," she cried in a tone of voice that none of the companions had heard her use before. There was a harsh edge to it that seemed almost alien. She continued, almost imperious, "If we are to be the chosen ones who reach the promised places, then we must do it properly. I want none of us to lose our chance to be there because of the slackness of others. We are all together—we are all one. Remember that and remember well."

There was a silence that hung over the tribe as they considered this.

Gloria broke the silence. "Okay, we've got half a mile to the plain. Then we need vigilance. Let's go—and keep it sweet, my people."

She turned to Ryan and his companions.

"Let's do it, babes," she said simply.

ON TRIPLE RED, the tribe and the companions made their way through the last stages of the jungle growth. As they neared the beginning of the plain, it became apparent that the vast expanse of grassland was basically a disguised passive defense. Although it seemed innocent enough, it was wide enough to make circling it and staying in the cover of the forest growth a tedious and drawn out task. The easiest route forward was to move across the plain, and although it was large enough to make the journey safe because any attack could be seen from some distance, it also made any party moving across that plain equally visible.

"This is not ideal," Doc commented as they set foot onto the plain.

"No, but it's the best option, as long as we stay together and stay on red," Gloria answered. "And I'll tell you something else, honey—this is no natural plain."

"How can you tell?" Krysty furrowed her brow. The plain seemed to be natural enough, the scrub stretching out to the trees, far flung on each side.

"Two things," the Amazon queen replied. "First thing is the way that the grassland ends suddenly at the edges of the plain. Even the most squared of natural plains has little hollows and indents into the trees. This hasn't."

Krysty followed the sharp, penetrating blue eyes of the Gate queen as she surveyed the outer edges of the plain. It was true; the plain was sharply defined at all sides, rather than bleeding naturally into the woodland.

"Second thing is this—look at the grass. No way is that natural, babe. This is regularly fired and burned to keep it to stubble. That doesn't happen by accident... not regularly, right?"

"So we could be being watched, right, Glo?" Margia grimaced sourly. "That's really good to know."

"Shut it, Marg," her sister replied. "Mebbe we can be seen, but we can also see."

"Always better to avoid trouble. I thought you'd know that, even if others don't," Margia snapped, with a glare at Jak that could have dropped the albino where he trod, if Jak Lauren could be affected by such things.

Gloria, who had spent some time since the fight between her sister and Mildred keeping them apart, didn't bother to answer. She looked at Jak, whose eyes met hers with the message that Margia couldn't rattle him. The Gate queen accepted this, and was about to ask her sister why she had strayed to the front of the column rather than stay back with the armory wags when her attention was distracted by a cry from Tammy.

"On the edge—right hand, just to the rear... Dunno what, but there's a lot of it."

Ryan spun at the same moment as the warrior queen, and could see that there was movement on the edge of the plain.

"Not just there, over to the left, too." J.B. called, pulling binoculars from the canvas bag he was carrying. Focusing them, he whispered to himself, "Dark night, what the fuck are they?"

Ryan's monocular gaze tried to penetrate the vast distance and pick out detail, but even with the piercing gaze of that blue orb, the exact detail of the mass movement was still indistinguishable.

"J.B., quick," he snapped, holding out his hand. The Armorer handed him the binoculars, and Ryan raised them to his eye and the useless socket. "Fireblast! I don't believe it—more of the fuckers, but worse than before."

"More of what fuckers?" Mildred asked.



Gloria, shading her eyes with one hand and focusing her sharp blue gaze on the far side of the plain, said simply, "Stickies. More mutie than before."

Ryan handed Mildred the binoculars, and the woman looked through them. To her, it appeared that the massed group of stickies had been in some way surgically or genetically altered like the ones they had encountered on their first meeting with the Gate. The shapes of the heads seemed bulbous on some, and others had a stronger musculature than the average stickie.

"Well?" Doc asked. He was now leaning in close to Mildred.

"Like the others, maybe more so." Doc nodded, agreeing with himself on some point that he wouldn't share. "That would make sense. Let the first ones go as a field experiment, then keep the new batch closer to home, easier to observe...and to act as guard dogs."

"At least this gives us time to prepare our defenses," Ryan observed. Then, to Gloria, "Well?"

The Gate queen gave the one-eyed warrior her lopsided smile. "My show, then?"

"Your people," Ryan answered. With a brief nod, the woman turned to her people. She signaled them with a series of whistles, conveying her messages and instructions at high speed.

The men of the tribe formed the wags into a circle, protecting the armory, the food stores and the sacred papers and writings of the tribe. Jon and Petor passed out rifles and machine blasters to the other men, while the women of the tribe took formation around the wags. There was little cover that could be afforded to them, but they had the advantage of blasters, while the stickies who were advancing at speed across the plain from all sides carried only sticks and sharpened flints and stones. Glancing around at the advancing horde, Mildred noted two things. First, the stickies were also advancing from the area where the tribe had just emerged onto the plain, which suggested that they had the cunning of the previous horde of stickies, something added by surgery and genetic manipulation to the stickie psyche. Second, and perhaps more worrying in an immediate sense, was that the tribe and Ryan's people were vastly outnumbered. Even with their superior strategic sense and their blasters, there was still a chance of the stickies breaking through and overwhelming them on sheer numbers.

It wasn't going to be an easy battle.

"Hold fire until they're in range," Margia cried. "Every bullet must count."

The tension was acute as the women of the Gate and Ryan's people stood firm, blasters ready but holding back until the last moment to begin fire. They were fanned out in a circle, but kept it tight and close to the wags.

Gloria stood upright beside Jak, who held his .357 Magnum Colt Python, his red eyes fixed on the approaching horde. Gloria had her Vortak raised, clasped easily but firmly in both hands, steadying herself for the jolt of the first shot. Despite the tension that coursed through her frame, fueled by adrenaline, she stood as easy as the albino at her side.

"Ready, sweets?" she murmured to him.

"Now," Jak answered without moving his white head.

Gloria let out an ear-piercing scream that acted as a signal for the onslaught to begin.

The distant rumble of the approaching horde, running and tumbling over one another in their crazed blood lust, chattering excitedly at the prospect of blood and flesh within their grasp, was suddenly drowned by the roar of massed blasterfire as the Gate and the companions started to fire. J.B. chose his Uzi, set to short, controlled bursts, over his other blasters. Ryan used the Steyr, sighting carefully so as to not waste a single shell.

And it was because of this that he noticed that these stickies were less vulnerable than any others they had encountered.

"Problem, people," the one-eyed warrior shouted over the noise. "These fuckers are gonna be really hard to chill."

"Why?" Gloria yelled back. "See through the sights," Ryan replied shortly. "Unless you blow the fucker's head off, it doesn't wound easy. They don't fucking bleed!"

"Shit—genetics," Mildred screamed above the noise, "work on the clotting agent."

"My, this will be fun," Doc remarked to himself, reloading the LeMat and attempting to sight yet another stickie for a full load of shot, this time raising his aim for a head shot. A body blow might not stop them, but at least a stickie with no head would find it impossible to keep moving.

The old man fired the LeMat, the charge catching one of the advancing muties full in the face. It was about twenty yards away when the grapeshot hit, and even at that distance Doc was able to discern the way the mutie's features blurred and distorted beneath a mist of blood as the shot spread across the head, traveling at a high velocity. Where the sharp, pinprick eyes and the needlelike teeth had previously been the prominent features in a bland, papery face, now they disappeared beneath a hail of metal and ripped flesh, the teeth smashed beyond repair and the eyes burst so that the viscera spread back into the sockets, driven back by the force of the shot as it ripped through the soft bone and softer flesh.

The head of the stickie—noticeably distorted at the rear of the cranium, Doc was able to note quickly before that cranium was ripped apart by the charge from the LeMat—vanished in a haze of blood, bone fragments and shredded flesh. The mutie, short of what little brain it possessed to power its motor functions, stumbled in its run and fell to the ground, crumpling like an old sheet dropped from a moving wag.

Doc was satisfied that it was one less, but knew with a sinking feeling that it wasn't enough. Even in the time it took him to reload the LeMat, having loosed the ball prior to the charge for once, the advancing stickie horde had gained ground. There were simply too many of them for a blaster such as his. With a sigh, he holstered the large percussion pistol and drew the swordstick from its silver lion's-head cane.

If it came to close combat, then he would be ready.

And he knew that it would.

Around Doc, the rest of the Gate warriors were reaching the same conclusion independently. The men behind were firing over their head with the machine blasters and rifles, standing on the wags to clear their own people, but the fact that—as men—they had little battle experience was showing up badly in the few stickies they could stop. The vast majority of ammo that was discharged caused some wounds to the advancing horde, but there were few shots that bit home to chill. The rapidity with which the stickies stopped bleeding meant that they were able to keep coming, some of them on their knees or in loping,

stumbling runs where legs had been rendered useless by shots severing tendons or smashing bone. The lack of pain or blood loss meant that the injury didn't register in their mutie brain.

The horde advanced, leaving chilled stickies scattered around, but not enough to make much of a dent in their number.

The Amazons were discovering how handblasters could be excellent close fighting weapons, but relatively ineffective at longer distances. The lack of accuracy over the greater distance was telling now. As the stickies got closer, more of the women's shots were hitting home fatally, but the fact that the stickies had been able to get so close in the first instance meant that there were too many to chill with blasters alone.

Jak, Dean, Mildred and Krysty also had that problem. The albino's .357 Magnum Colt Python was an exceptionally powerful handblaster, but even he couldn't reload and fire quickly enough to chill all the advancing enemy. Dean's Browning Hi-Power, Mildred's ZKR and Krysty's .38-caliber Smith & Wesson were good blasters, and highly accurate, but couldn't cope with the sheer bulk of the enemy—especially an enemy that couldn't easily be stopped except by a chill shot.

Ryan and J.B. were faring better. The Armorer had pushed his Uzi to one side and hauled out the M-4000, letting fly with several charges of the viciously barbed metal flechettes that he used in his shot. The hot metal had spread over a relatively wide area, aimed at head height, and had taken out several stickies in one shot by spreading some splattered brain around the plain. Ryan had reverted to his SIG-Sauer, having realized that he needed to create a little more damage in the mutie ranks than the Steyr would allow him. The rifle was extremely accurate, and he had a good chill rate with it, but he felt compelled to try to make more of a dent in the vast numbers of the opposition.

Margia tried to wipe out a section of the horde on her side of the battlefield with a gren. A shrapnel gren of a vintage long predark, she pitched it into an area where there seemed to be a high concentration of the muties. It exploded with a muffled whomp, spreading earth from the large gouge it created in the otherwise flat plain. It took out a couple of stickies, and the blond armorer felt pleased to see so many go down. . .not so pleased a few seconds later, when she saw them start to drag themselves to their feet and continue—or, in the case of those whose legs were useless, just drag themselves onward.

Gloria and Jak stood back to back, picking off the stickies with single shots that inflicted maximum damage while still preserving as much ammo as was possible.

"Hand-to-hand soon," Jak murmured. "Too close to blast all."

Gloria cast him a glance over her shoulder. She smiled lopsidedly, her strong white teeth almost feral. Her piercing blue eyes shone wildly with the heat of battle.

"Suits me, babe," she answered him. "They'll have to go a long, long fucking way to get the best of us, right?"

Jak spared himself a grin, cold against the white of his skin. "Chill them before get that far."

The warrior queen holstered her blaster and unsheathed her panga in one smooth motion, left hand replacing the blaster while the right pulled the blade from her thigh. Stepping away from the albino, she raised her head high and let out a series of piercing whistles that formed a signal, before screaming loudly, tossing her fiery mane back in the heat and wind of battle.

For a moment, it was almost as if that scream had created an oasis of silence and calm around it. To Jak, holstering the Python and palming a knife for each hand, it seemed for just a fraction of a second that the whole world had been stopped by that scream. There was a frozen moment that heralded a turning point, and the next stage of the battle.

And then it passed. The silence—if it had ever been there—was broken by the yells and screams of the Amazons as they all followed their queen, holstering their blasters and drawing their blades.

"Dark night, this is going to be bloody," J.B. murmured to himself, safely storing his blasters before unsheathing his Tekna knife. The Armorer ran a practiced eye over the encroaching horde of stickies as the words escaped his lips. If their numbers were consistent on all sides, then there were three or four of them for each member of the tribe and the companions.

Well, they'd had worse odds before now, although perhaps not with an enemy that refused so stubbornly to lie down and die.

The hand-to-hand battle began in earnest as the first wave of muties reached the advancing Amazons, who moved forward to meet their foe, gaining momentum in their movement for the first strike.

First blood went to Tammy. A stickie that had somehow made it through the onslaught without even picking up a clotting scratch was upon her, waving a sharpened tree limb that formed a pointed stake in one fist, the suckered fingers of its free hand reaching for her throat. She could feel its hot, fetid breath as it came within arm's length of her.

The young warrior gave the boiling fear in the pit of her stomach no thought, but merely sidestepped the charge and brought her blade across the stomach of the mutie as it lay open to attack. She knew from observation that a mere wound would be little use, so she drove the blade as deep as it would go and sliced across, splitting the stickie's abdomen in twain and spilling its intestines onto the plain. They hit the grass in a steaming, twirling mass. Tammy pulled her hand, hot and red with the stickie's viscera, from out of its stomach and followed her initial thrust with a slash across the throat. The blood slick blade sliced through the soft, soapy flesh, splintering the soft bone, mashing the bone, flesh and tendon into a pulp that caught on the razor honed blade, tangling as it reached the spinal column.

The young warrior knew the only safe way to insure the kill was to sever the head or sever an internal organ. With a rebel yell that rang through the air, she exerted all the power of her young muscles, the tendons standing out on her knife arm as she held the stickie back by the shoulder with her free hand.

The mutie's spinal column was made of bone as pliable and soft as the rest of its neck and throat, and with one mighty heave the knife scored through it, severing the nervous system and taking its head off—if not cleanly, at least completely.

With a whoop, Tammy flashed the blade toward the next attacker, stickie blood showering off the end, while the corpse of her first kill slid harmlessly to the ground.

All around, there were similar scenes. Doc hacked and slashed with the swordstick, eschewing its usual function as a rapier-like blade in order to inflict the maximum damage. Unlike the pangas and machetes used by those around him, Doc's blade was of the finest tempered Toledo steel, and hadn't been manufactured to hack and slash. Rather, it was a weapon of accuracy.

But not here. A simple wound that would disable or cause enough blood loss to kill a normal human being or stickie wouldn't be effective on these genetically altered muties. So Doc had to forego his

instincts and use the blade in a bludgeoning manner quite unlike that for which it had been designed.

And he was doing pretty well. His eyes glazed over as the blood of his enemies splashed on him, his white hair flying in the momentum of his movement, the tails of his frock coat whirling behind him. In reality he was in the Deathlands, with altered muties falling before him. But in the mind ravaged by time trawling and torture, unbalanced by the unimaginable experience of having existed across a period of three centuries, Doc was fighting battles that would take place after he should have died, and yet had taken place years before he was alive. The stickies in front of his eyes became Native Americans falling before the U.S. cavalry, became British soldiers falling beneath the pioneers, became the Vietcong falling beneath the Green Berets, became the Japanese falling beneath the U.S. Marine in the second of the three world wars, became Saxons falling before Vikings in the faraway lands that had birthed his ancestors, became the first Bronze and Iron Age tribes falling beneath each other's blows in the quest for better land, in the quest for survival.

In the ravages of his mind, Doc became all men, in all history, fighting for survival. There was no here and now anymore, only the instant where one man faced another knowing that it was kill or be killed.

Elsewhere, the battle raged on in a present that all involved knew could end for them at any second with just one wrong move.

Both Krysty and Mildred weren't renowned for their skills with knives, and both women were finding the going tough. They had blades with them, handed out earlier in the trip by Margia, but they weren't the experts that the Gate warriors had trained to be. Somehow, by some instinct the stickies could sniff this out, almost as if they could smell the apprehension coming off the women.

The larger proportion of stickies they attracted left some of the Gate warriors free to chill their attackers quickly and with a ruthless efficiency. Pangas and machetes hacked at heads after first disabling the attackers by severing their suckered hands with one swift blow of the highly honed blades. The Gate women were thus able to dispose of the stickies almost on a production line of chilling, and it wasn't long before some of those closest to Krysty and Mildred were able to assist them in disposing of the vast numbers they had clustered around them.

Dean and Ryan were fighting back to back, the older Cawdor slashing at his enemies with his panga, cleaving skulls and arms with ease. At his back, his son fought with an equal savagery, only his age and relative lack of experience showing in his lower chill rate. He held a machete that he wielded with an economy of effort that showed he had studied the methods of Jak Lauren when he had watched the albino practice. Behind his father, Dean could almost have been a shadow, with the same sculpted musculature and broad shouldered build, smaller only because he hadn't yet reached maturity, the curly hair glistening and dripping with the sweat of exertion. The only thing to separate the two was the livid and puckered scar down one side on Ryan's face, disappearing into the empty and patch covered socket, while Dean still had both eyes.

J.B. was fighting alone, his Tekna knife wielded with a scientific accuracy that marked him as a mechanically minded man. The savagery of his strokes was controlled, directed at the most vulnerable points on his attackers so as to disable and kill with the minimum of effort. His wiry frame crackled with an electricity that made his usual mild-mannered appearance disappear, and he seemed almost to grow in stature as he fought. The Armorer knew the strong points of his weapon as an attack blade, knew the best way to angle each stroke so as to inflict the maximum amount of damage, and cut through his assailants as though they weren't there.

The Gate were faring well against the army of stickies. So far, there had been no fatalities, as the stickies

had been unprepared for the way in which the tribe had stood its ground, and for the manner in which the women had fought. The muties might have outnumbered the Amazons, but they didn't have blades or blasters, and although they surrounded the Gate on all sides, they couldn't easily break through their strong defensive formation. There was a number of minor injuries among the Amazons, but nothing that had disabled any of the warriors enough to bring them down and make them vulnerable to chilling.

Out in front, Gloria and Jak were setting the best possible example. The soulmate warriors who had forged a strong bond over the course of the trip were fighting superbly together. Each knowing that the other was there to cover their back meant that they could take chances that would otherwise have been too risky.

Jak's hands were a blur of movement, the lethal leaf-bladed knives slicing through the soft flesh of the stickies with little or no resistance, cutting through to vital organs and severing them so that no amount of rapidly clotting blood could prevent death, penetrating eyes and soft flesh to cut into the even softer tissue of the brain. Those stickies who managed to dodge the flashing blades were met with kicks from his heavy combat boots that snapped necks and limbs, disabling them long enough to fall prey to Gloria's panga.

The Gate queen herself was dispatching more than her fair share of stickies. Knowing that Jak was at her back gave her the confidence to take the offensive against the horde of muties, rather than lie back in defense and wait for them to come to her. Launching herself forward in a series of flying kicks, she snapped necks and knocked the muties to the ground, following this with a series of slashing moves from her panga that severed heads with ferocity. Her eyes blazed like the sunlit sky, and her mouth was opened in a roar of fury that echoed her movements.

It was a hard battle, but by degrees the horde of muties grew less and less, the Amazons moving outward to gain ground, treading on the corpses of their chilled foes and driving the remaining stickies back and back.

Eventually even the enhanced brains of those remaining stickies got the point, and they retreated back across the plain, fleeing into the woodland.

Surveying the carnage, Ryan gave a sigh of relief and exhaustion.

"Fireblast, I thought they'd never stop coming. For a moment, I thought there were more and more coming out of the trees."

"Mebbe there were," J.B. pointed out. "We need to be more than triple red now. We're tired and strung out, and they may have fuck knows how many in there." He indicated the area of woodland circling the plain with a sweeping gesture.

"We beat them once, we can do it again," Gloria said, adding, "But only if we rest up now. Make camp and set up a guard. They'll need to regroup, too, if they're going to attack. So we should have some time."

With which she directed her people to make camp, clear the chilled and tend to the few minor wounds they had received.

While this transpired, Ryan gathered together his people. Speaking softly, he said, "It's not the stickies I'm worried about."



Doc noticed the puzzled look that Jak gave the one-eyed warrior, and said, "If I'm not mistaken, my dear Ryan, you allude to the fact that our little mutie friends were genetically altered?"

Ryan nodded. "And if we're approaching the place you've heard of, then—"

"Then the danger may not be from stickies," Mildred finished.

They were prophetic words.

## Chapter Eleven

Night fell on the carnage surrounding the Gate encampment. The chilled corpses of the stickies had been gathered and piled together along with kindling to start two large blazes that would cremate the remains of the muties and also act as warning beacons for any who might still be lurking in the woodland. Gloria was aware that the flaring fires would alert anyone watching as to their position and camp, but as she told Ryan, "If the stupidworks don't know where we are by now, they're no danger anyway!"

And so the camp was set for the night. The canvas and plastic sheets that acted to keep in the heat and reflect light were set up around the small city of tents and wags. Forming as they did a barrier of darkness against the moonlight that reflected across the plain, they were useless as camouflage, but then, that wasn't their intent. They enclosed the camp and allowed the sentries to keep guard at all points while the rest of the tribe and the companions rested within. The guards themselves were exposed to the elements and to any threat of attack, as there was nowhere to hide or cover on the flat plain, but there was nowhere for any approaching enemy to cover and make a sneak attack.

It seemed that the Gate warriors were assured of a quiet night's rest after battle, before continuing their journey back into the woodland and toward the seemingly deserted settlement.

But it wasn't to be. In fact, it was on the third watch, deep into the night, when the attack came. The best time for any night maneuver, as the opposition were almost certainly assured to be in a state of unpreparedness. Even more so as the crematory fires that had lit up the dusk had now died down to little more than embers deep within the piles of ash and fat that comprised the remains of the mutie hordes.

The third watch saw Margia, J.B., Dean and Tammy covering the four points. The Gate queen had been unwilling to let her sister stand watch with the Armorer, considering that her now forgotten infatuation with him had been the original source of the feud between the blonde and Jak. J.B., however, had been unconcerned by this, reasoning that as long as he and the blonde took diametrically opposed areas to cover, then there would be no chance of friction.

In this he was correct, yet even the laconic Armorer, with his sense of the bizarre that all too rarely broke the surface, couldn't have foreseen the irony that was about to occur—for it was both he and Margia who simultaneously raised the alarm.

For J.B., it happened when he was squatting about twenty yards from the plastic and canvas wall joint of the camp. He was looking out in a southwesterly direction, back across the path they had traversed along the plain. The night had been cold and quiet since he had been roused from sleep to take his turn at the watch, and the boredom was lulling him toward sleep.

He wore only a shirt and camou pants, unwilling to wrap up too warmly against the night cold lest he should succumb to the desire to nap in the boredom. The chill edge kept him awake and alert.

Nonetheless, as he squatted with one hand resting on the cold earth, the short grass bristly beneath the pads of his fingers, the fingers of his other hand rubbing at eyes raw from sleep and the dryness of the air, he became aware of a vibration that ran up through his fingers and along his arm. Perhaps, in the business of day, he wouldn't have noticed something this slight. But in the absolute still of the night, it took just that to make him aware.

J.B. rested his other hand on the ground, palm down. The vibration was faint, but growing harder with every second. Straining his ears, J.B. could hear a faint rumble that he was able to identify immediately: the tone and pitch of a diesel engine powering a wag that had tracks on the back, possibly an old military sec wag, or at least one that had bastardized pieces of such equipment.

Rising smoothly to his feet, the Armorer could no longer feel the vibration—not through the soles of his boots. The faint rumble was still there, but not growing appreciably louder.

Turning, he ran back toward the encampment, not wanting to raise the alarm by shouting, in case there were scouts ahead of the wag who were on the fringes of the woodland who would hear him.

As he reached the hooded entrance to the plastic and canvas wall, he almost ran into Margia. The woman was grim faced, her white teeth and blond hair shining in the reflective light of the moon against the dark of her tanned flesh, barely covered even in the cold night.

"Something's up, honey," she said to the Armorer. "Some way off, but—"

"A wag? Mebbe old predark sec?"

She nodded briefly. "How d'you know, sweets? Same your end?"

"Yeah, so it's at least a two-pronged attack."

Margia looked around. Dean and Tammy hadn't yet joined them, and so were presumably at their posts. "The young ones aren't here, so unless they're not as aware—"

"Unlikely," J.B. cut in.

"Precisely. I guess they're just going to try to pull us in opposite directions. One from where they come from, and one from where we came from."

"That's assuming that they come from the settlement," J.B. pointed out.

Margia shrugged. "Good assumption as any. Anyway, stop arguing and let's get everyone up."

Inside the camp, all was still and quiet, the fire that warmed the camp now dying, the lamps now stilled apart from the muted lights that prevented the camp being in total darkness. Both armorers moved toward the queen's tent, joined on the way by Tammy and Dean.

"Guess you know what we're here for," the young Cawdor said wryly to J.B.

"Anyway, we could see you and Margia move past us, so we knew before it became obvious," Tammy added with a toss of her auburn curls, catching the dim light and making her eyes sparkle with the light of oncoming battle.

The Armorer assented. "Need to get everyone together as soon as possible."

Margia arrived at the tent first, where Petor rose from out of the shadows. As always, he was guarding his queen and mentor.

"Trouble?" he asked, already wide awake and alert.

"Wags approaching on the southwest and northeast," Margia said briskly. "Not much time, boy, so tell Glo I said we need to move—"

"Nobody tells Petor what to do, even me," Gloria snapped as she emerged from her tent, interrupting her sister's officious flow. Despite only being awakened by the discussion outside the tent a few moments before, the warrior queen had already brought herself around to full consciousness, and was pulling on her clothes as she emerged. She smiled at Dean as she caught his expression on seeing her firm breasts before they were covered. "When you're older, son," she said to him before returning her full attention to J.B. and Margia. "How big are the wags?"

"Hard to tell for sure," J.B. mused. "I'd guess they were at least six-tonners because of the tracks. The rumble was low enough to suggest they were really digging into the ground. Could mean a lot of men—or a lot of firepower."

"How come they're getting through that jungle?"

The Armorer shrugged. "Could be old rail cattle grids to move the foliage. It wouldn't be that dense under that much weight. I've seen it done before. But that will make them harder to attack, give them some serious armor."

"Blind-side gren attack," Margia said dismissively.

"If you get the blind side," J.B. murmured.

But the blonde didn't hear him. Her attention was taken by the sight of Jak Lauren coming out of Gloria's tent, not fully clothed and checking his Colt Python.

"Still playing, then, Glo?" she mused.

The woman shot her sister a warning look, her blue eyes icy and piercing, even in the dim light of the camp.

"Leave it, Marg," she husked in a low voice that carried all the more menace and authority for being quiet. "We'll sort this between ourselves...later. Now we've got more important things to see to."

"They always are," Margia said dismissively, turning on her heel. "I'll get the armory opened up— that's if you can spare at least one of your little proteges..."

Petor colored at this parting shot and looked at his queen.

"Ignore the bitch. You and Jon know what to do," Gloria said, inclining her head to indicate that he should follow the blonde.

As Petor left, Ryan and Krysty approached. They were closely followed by Doc and Mildred. The companions' tent was near enough to Gloria's in the new camp for them to be awakened by the exchanges, and they were already partly aware of what was happening. J.B. filled them in on the rest while Gloria dispatched Tammy to wake the other warriors and prepare them for battle.

By now the air outside the encampment was carrying the sounds of the wags as they approached. Sentries posted by Tammy called back in relay that the wags were approaching at speed now they were on the plain.

"Plan?" the one-eyed warrior asked the Gate queen. He was prepared to follow her lead until such time as they were out on the battlefield and initiative became imperative.

"Rock and a hard place," she replied. "If we stay in here, we're sitting targets, and if we move outside, then we're in plain sight to be picked off. At least outside we can scatter and distract."

"Mebbe a pincer movement with the fastest outriders to act as fire drawers," Ryan mused.

"It'd be a suicide mission," Gloria replied.

Ryan shrugged. "Mebbe, but not necessarily. If each group then splits and maintains a zigzagging pattern, they can draw fire into empty spaces. After all, chances are that whoever this is hasn't had a real combat situation, unless you count coming up against their own experiments in the woods."

Gloria considered this for a moment, then nodded decisively. "Eh-la, eh-la," she called, once again adopting a different tone and intonation for the syllables that acted as a call to her warriors.

The roused and alert women drew close to their leader, and Gloria outlined the situation in a few words. There was no shortage of volunteers for the outriders, and the fastest were soon dispatched, while Margia, Jon and Petor passed among the warriors, handing out extra blades, blasters and ammo to those who requested them.

Ryan gathered his people around and spoke while they all checked their personal weapons and took grems passed out by J.B.

"You know the plan. It's the only one that's possible for any of us right now, but I don't think any of us like it. So stay frosty, and look for ways into the wag." He fixed his good eye on Jak. "You've got the best throwing aim of any of us. If you can get a gren in any gaps they may leave..."

"No need to say," the albino muttered. "One hole, many dead..."

Ryan nodded. "Okay, let's do it."

NOW THAT they were both clear of the woodland and out in the open, it was possible to see that the wags were six-tonners—as J.B. had surmised—with armor plating and caterpillar tracks behind the radials of the front wheels. The front of each wag carried a large, shaped metal grid that formed into a point and was sharpened in order to cut through and disperse the foliage of the woodlands. A clear path was visible behind each wag as it sped out of the woods and onto the flat plain.

Despite the sudden lack of obstruction, neither vehicle noticeably increased its speed, preferring to maintain a steady pace. It would seem to the observer that the intention of both drivers was to arrive simultaneously at the Gate encampment. This was to the tribe's advantage, as it enabled them to get their outriders onto the plain and toward the wags before the vehicles themselves were in a position to begin an attack.

Ryan and the companions were the next party to leave the encampment. Where there had been only the one entrance originally, two had been cut into the sheeting by the men of the tribe to enable access onto those northeasterly and southwesterly sides of the camp from which the danger threatened.

Splitting from the middle of the camp, Dean followed J.B., Mildred and Doc onto the southwesterly side, in company with an Amazon group that included both Margia and Tammy. His father, Jak and Krysty went in the group that was led by Gloria. As soon as they emerged, it was obvious why there had been a lack of firefighting from the outside of the camp. The outriders were proceeding at pace toward the approaching wag without meeting resistance.

"Stupes!" Ryan breathed. "How the fuck do they expect to attack head-on with a wag that has any possible blaster points on its front blocked by something like that?"

That was true. To Ryan's amazement—and that of the others—the grille that had cleared the woodland for the wag was also so large that it precluded any positioning for a machine blaster on the front, making a head-on attack risky at the best of times.

"Don't knock that stupidworks piece of ironmongery, sweets," Gloria breathed. "I'm all in favor of it if it evens our odds."

Would it even them enough, though? Ryan thought to himself. Certainly the wag coming toward them was heavily armored, and even if it was unable to blast at them from the front, it was well enough secured to make any access from the outside virtually impossible.

The initial party of outriders had now reached the wag, and was circling it with a zigzag movement, the riders making themselves as scattered and difficult to hit as possible.

Then the firing began.

"Fuck! The swords of light," Gloria breathed, stopping momentarily in her tracks as a beam from a laser rifle cut through the night air, drawing a straight line of brilliant light in the darkness, scorching the earth around the feet of an outrider with a crackle that raised small plumes of smoke. Fortunately the aim was poor, and the woman at whom the beam had been aimed was able to dive easily out of the way.

But the sudden entry into the fray of the pulsing beams of light caused confusion in the outriders, who began to lose speed and falter in their maneuvers. Gloria saw this immediately and put her hands to her mouth, shaping her lips into a piercing whistle that changed tone three times. It was a signal and reminder to her warriors, and was possibly the spur they needed to bring them back into focus.

"If they fire out, must be way in," Jak barked at Ryan and Gloria before breaking away from them and heading at speed to join the outriders. Gloria watched him go, streaking low across the plain, cutting between the Gate warriors, his pale skin and stringy white hair showing against the darkness both of his clothing and the surrounding night. Her face betrayed the mix of emotion within her.

Ryan's concern was much more simple. He was concerned at what would happen should Jak get hit by

a laser pulse before he had a chance to pitch a gren into the wag. Jak was far and away their best chance to immobilize the wag in this way. The one-eyed man couldn't see there being another option.

After all, it was unlikely that the Illuminated Ones would be stupe enough to leave the security of the wag.

ON THE SOUTHWESTERN side of the camp, the outriders had followed a similar pattern, moving out ahead of the main parties on a zigzagging course. And they, too, had been taken aback by the laser pulses.

J.B., Mildred, Dean and Doc were in the main party with Margia. In the heat of the battle, all animosity between the blond armorer and Mildred had been forgotten as they pulled together in this common cause. And as the first pulsing beam of light shot from the side of the wag, Margia hissed in a mix of admiration and fear.

"Sweet mutie fucker, that's one hell of a blaster, whatever the fuck it is!"

"Seen them once before," J.B. said, "in action, and found some that were inoperable. Weird old tech, but erratic."

"No accuracy?" Margia raised an eyebrow. "Why use them, then?"

"Why not when they're such an unknown quantity?" Mildred answered. "The shock value alone is worth it...and when they hit home, they're really nasty."

"Is that so?" Margia mused.

J.B. and Mildred exchanged a look. The thought of the blond armorer in charge of a laser blaster wasn't a pleasant one, and J.B. made a mental note that if they got through this in one piece, then he would try to make sure she was unable to get any of the weapons.

But first they had to fight off the attack, something that seemed to be an impossibility as the first Gate casualty was claimed by the laser blasters.

The outrider was small, even by the general standard of the Gate tribe, and she had a mane of black hair that flowed down her back as she ran. She was stocky and moved close to the ground, seemingly too fast for the erratic laser fire to hit. But there were always moments of fate, turning points, where one wrong move could change destiny. And perhaps the moment when her ankle turned on a divot of loose earth was such a turning point. As she went down, a pulsing beam of laser fire shot along the earth in a line, scorching all in its path. Reaching her as she tried to rise to her feet.

She was too late. The beam of light scored into her body, touching her outstretched foot and searing the flesh, making it burn and blacken beneath the beam. Her scream of fear and agony cut through the noise of the attack, growing in pitch and intensity as the beam reached up her leg, roasting flesh and raising smoke as the tendon and muscle crackled obscenely, like roasting meat. By the time the beam had reached as far as her torso, the cries had ceased, as she passed out from the pain, the blissful oblivion of unconsciousness sparing her the agony of her own chilling.

"Shit," Margia whispered, "what I could do with one of those..."

Mildred and J.B. exchanged another look. The outriders had stopped dead, losing their momentum in



seeing one of their own fall. If they didn't start moving again, they would be easy meat for the Illuminated Ones, and the notion of Margia gaining a laser blaster would be complete fantasy.

"Dark night, we need to act fast, Millie," J.B. snapped.

"Already there, John," Mildred replied shortly, beginning to run toward the wag as the Armorer started into motion. Dean, sensing their plan with an instinct born of his heritage as a Cawdor, followed them. Only Doc held back a little, and merely because he knew he was unable to match their pace at that moment.

It seemed a bizarre sight on the battlefield. For a second, it was as though only four people were moving, and a certainty that the Illuminated Ones would be able to wipe out the Gate from the safety of the wag.

Then, on both sides of the camp, something happened that changed the course of the firefight. Something that Ryan, reflecting afterward, could only put down to the one weakness he had hoped for in the opposition. They had no practical battle experience. It also confirmed his suspicions that their tech was in good order, as there had to have been communication between the two wags.

For both suddenly ground to a halt, and the laser blasters were withdrawn from their portholes in the sides of the wags. On the northeastern side, Jak pulled up sharply. With the portholes now closed, there was no target area for him to pitch a grenade. And something within his gut told him that the tide of the battle had, without the Gate having actually done anything to change it, shifted perceptibly.

"What...?" Ryan furrowed his brow seeing this.

Next to him, Krysty felt her sentient tresses move and loosen on her skull, flowing and moving with the agitation of change in the air.

"They're coming out," Gloria said, expressing something that was now plainly visible in a voice that spoke of her disbelief. "Why the fuck are they—?"

"Doesn't matter," Ryan snapped. "We've got them on our terms now."

The one-eyed warrior and the Gate queen had no idea why the Illuminated Ones had changed their battle plan, but they knew that the odds had now tipped their way.

On both sides of the camp, the backs of both wags opened, and seven Illuminated Ones spilled from the tailgate, each clutching a laser rifle. They were dressed much as the companions remembered them from their previous brief encounter, back near the villages of Raw and Samtvogel. The colorful one-piece battle suits of a shiny fiber, each suit a different color, were topped by opaque glass helmets that obscured their faces.

The Gate warriors were stilled in their tracks, taken aback by the sudden apparition that stepped from the war wags. The companions, however, knew exactly what to expect.

The Illuminated Ones spread out in a fan formation and raised their blasters. They moved swiftly and took advantage of the surprise their sudden appearance had caused.

On the northeastern side, Jak was already within reach of the outriders, and could see that their surprise had made them sitting targets.

"No! Move!" he yelled, raising his .357 Magnum Colt Python on the run, and letting off a shot that rang over the heads of the stunned Gate outriders.

Audible in the sudden quiet on both sides of the camp, it was a shot that broke the silence and spurred all into action.

The first laser blasts were deadly, crackling beams of light, intensely bright in the darkness, that scored the air and caught some outriders, raising shrill cries of pain and chilling. The night suddenly reeked of charred flesh and death.

But the Illuminated Ones had lost the edge of surprise. As soon as Jak's shot rang through the darkness, it snapped the Gate warriors back to a reality where they were up against a seen enemy rather than an unknown quantity. The fact that this enemy had strange weapons rather than the usual blasters or blades was unimportant. All that mattered was that there were more of the Amazons than the Illuminated Ones.

And numbers counted.

Gloria, covering the ground in long, swift strides that belied her size, soon reached Jak.

"You've fought them before," she breathed rapidly. "Tactics?"

The albino snapped a shot at one of the figures clad in bright material. In the reflected light from the wag, the material made the Illuminated Ones an easy target. The heavy slug tore at the material of the figure, ripping the brightly colored fabric at the shoulder and raising a spray of blood where it gouged a lump of flesh. The gunner screamed and dropped the laser blaster.

"Blasters not always shoot straight, can't always control," Jak snapped. "Keep moving, not let them take aim, hit hard."

"Simple enough," Gloria replied before letting loose with a string of cries and whistles that signaled tactics to her warriors. A series of instructions that could faintly be heard on the other side of the camp by Margia, who amplified her sister's orders by repeating the signals to the warriors on her side of the divide.

Whooping, the Gate Amazons used their handblasters to pick off the Illuminated Ones who were distracted by shots from Ryan's Steyr. Two were chilled immediately, while another was hit in the left leg and arm. With so many down from their small number, the remaining fit warriors realized that there was nothing for them to do except to effect a retreat into the safety of the war wag.

One of them started to strafe the area with the laser rifle, sweeping the pulsing beam of light in a wide arc.

"Down!" Gloria yelled as she hit the earth, the beam sweeping over her head so closely that she could feel the heat of it as she fell.

It was unnecessary for her to cry—more instinct than conscious thought—as most of her warriors had already hit the ground, as had Ryan, Krysty and Jak. Krysty raised her Smith & Wesson blaster and took aim at the enemy rifleman who was laying down the covering fire. She squeezed gently on the trigger to keep recoil to a minimum and maximize her chances of an accurate shot at the distance and visibility she had. By a quirk of fate, the man was saved by the way in which he was firing, as Krysty's slug was

prevented from hitting him in the chest by the arc of his own fire, cannoning into the metal of his laser rifle and wrenching it from his grasp. The blaster flew harmlessly away to his right, and he grasped at his wrist, broken by the impact and force with which the rifle had been torn from him.

The Illuminated Ones were now wide open to attack, but covering fire had given them enough time for the uninjured members of the wag's crew to gather in the injured members of their party. A force blast from a laser rifle shot from the back of the wag and into the encroaching members of the Gate tribe, stopping them from taking out the last man in—the one whose covering fire had caused them so many problems.

On the other side of the camp, things had gone even more in favor of the Gate. Doc, catching up with the main body of the attack as it was delayed by the laser fire, raised his LeMat and loosed the scattergun charge in the direction of the wag. The shot spread out over the longer than usual range, and didn't have the lethal effect that could have been hoped for. It did, however, cause enough damage to disable two of the Illuminated Ones' soldiers and cause them to drop their laser blasters.

Following suit, J.B.—who was a little closer to the wag than Doc had been—dropped to the earth and shouldered the M-4000, letting fly with a charge of the wickedly barbed metal flechettes, which tore into the group of Illuminated Ones, causing laser rifles to drop to the ground. One warrior—in a blue one-piece that became purple as blood spread across the blue material—received several hits to the chest and was thrown backward into the wag.

Margia whooped and gave a harsh, throaty cry, leading the charge on the wag. Those Illuminated Ones who still held their blasters showed the lack of battle expertise that Ryan had suspected by becoming erratic in their fire, the rifles cutting out as they managed to jam the delicate mechanisms in their panic.

"Got them on the run," Dean yelled to J.B. and Mildred, his eyes alight with the fire of battle. He raised his Browning Hi-Power and took careful aim, finishing the life of an Illuminated One who was attempting to fumble his rifle back into life.

As with the wag on the northeastern side of the camp, those of the warriors still uninjured, and those crew in the wag itself, pulled their wounded and chilled back into the vehicle while an arc of covering fire was laid down.

Both wags secured from the fire of the Gate warriors, which now bounced harmlessly off the armored sides of the wags, they effected retreat. The wag on the northeastern side of the camp reversed and skidded in a 180-degree turn, roaring off in the direction it had come, while the wag on the southwesterly side of the camp sped forward, arcing around the encampment and following the other wag toward the northeast and the seemingly deserted settlement Gloria had seen from afar. As quickly as it had begun, the battle was over.

AS DAWN BROKE over the camp, Gloria and Margia sat around the remains of the campfire with Ryan and his companions. There had been two Illuminated Ones left behind, both chilled. Mildred had examined them and found that they were seemingly healthy and unmutated specimens. Both had been chilled by bullet wounds. They were ritually cremated as fellow warriors with the eight Gate Amazons who had been chilled in the battle. Each of the Gate had been burned badly by the lasers.

There were four of these lasers left behind, and Margia now had them at her feet.

"These will be useful," she said almost to herself.

"Too erratic to be trusted," J.B. remarked.

Margia raised an eyebrow. "Depends on who uses them, honey," she said archly. J.B. and Mildred both saw trouble ahead with the laser blasters.

Gloria and Ryan weren't listening. Instead, along with Jak, they were staring into the remains of the fire.

"So that is to be our destiny?" the Gate queen mused.

"Or who stands in the way," Ryan replied.

Jak shook his head. "Lucky this time. Mebbe not when more of them than us."

Gloria smiled at him. "Then we'll just have to be triple frosty, sweets. 'Cause there's no turning back now."

## Chapter Twelve

Ryan wasn't the only one of the party to be glad when they had finally crossed the plain. By the time it was full daylight, the camp had been disassembled and the wags packed. The Gate had carried out their farewell burial ceremonies for their own people, and also for the chilled Illuminated Ones who had fallen in battle. The remains were buried on the plain, a square of turned earth in the grassland marking the spot where their remains came to rest.

The Gate and Ryan's people set forth across the remains of the plain, Gloria in front as always. Jak and Ryan followed close behind her, along with the first guard of Gate women. In the middle of the party came the wag that carried the young of the tribe. The children were always well protected and kept from harm, and the fact that they had hardly been noticeable on the journey spoke volumes for the abilities of the tribe's menfolk to keep the young safe under pressure. But this day was different. Two of the eight Gate Amazons who had been chilled in battle had children among those on the wag, and the three children—two girls and a boy—were visibly distressed by the passing of their mothers, even though they showed relatively little sign of this by most children's standards. Dean traveled with them on this morning, the memories of his mother, Sharona, strong with him. Krysty accompanied him, empathizing with the emotions she could feel coming from him.

Doc was traveling at the rear of the caravan, along with Jon and Petor.

"I'll be glad when we get out of the open and into some cover," Jon muttered.

"Better to see them coming, like last night," Petor mused.

Jon shook his head. "No, at least in cover we can send out outriders and take our own cover. Out here we're exposed."

"Harder to ambush, though," Petor added.

Doc smiled, his unusually strong white teeth gleaming in the sun, and a light sparkling in his eyes. "I think,

my dear boys, that you have discovered one of the great dichotomies of warfare—that for every advantage there is a disadvantage. It is all a case of swings and roundabouts, mountains and valleys. What you lose on one hand you gain on the other, and so on and so forth. In other words, my dear boys, there are no winners or losers ultimately, because it all depends on which side of the fence you stand and which part of the half-empty and half-full glass you examine."

With which he sat back on the top of the wag and smiled serenely while Jon and Petor gave him bemused stares.

Mildred and J.B. were just in front, and heard Doc Tanner's discursive lecture. Looking back at the two confused teenagers, Mildred laughed.

"You crazy old buzzard, you want to confuse these poor boys so that they don't know if they're coming or going?" she called back to Doc.

The old man continued smiling serenely, and merely stated, "Life is confusion, a harsh lesson that I learned the hard way. If I can make it a little easier for someone else, then I shall be a happy man."

J.B. pushed back his fedora and scratched his head. "If that's making things easier, Doc, I'd hate to be around when you made them difficult."

Meanwhile, at the front of the caravan, Gloria had approached the beginnings of the woodland. The division between the plain and the woods was sharp, emphasizing that this was an artificial division. She slowed her pace as she reached it, her spring-heeled walk slowing and the flowing red mane of hair bouncing less and less. When she reached the edge of the plain, she turned and held up her arm.

"Okay, time to get triple red again," she called. "You know what to do, so do it."

Ryan and Jak arrived beside her, both glad that they were able to slow their pace under the burning sun.

"It'll be good to get out of this fireblasted heat," Ryan said, casting his good eye to the skies.

"Too true. I hate traveling when it's this blasting," the warrior queen said.

"Not look like it," Jak said humorously, eying the nut-brown and tanned skin of the Gate leader.

"Well, mebbe a bit, then, sweetie," she said with a lopsided grin.

While this exchange had been taking place, a group of outriders had moved into the woodland, spreading out to cover all points in front and to the side of the path the Gate queen intended to take. She unsheathed her panga and tested the edge with the ball of her thumb.

"Time to start the work," she said softly, inclining her head to catch the sound of whistled signals from within the forest ahead.

"Then let's do it," Ryan said, unsheathing his own panga.

And so began the next phase of the journey. They were out of the plain, and now only a few miles from the settlement that appeared on the surface to be devoid of life, but that they knew to somehow house the Illuminated Ones—probably in a redoubt of some kind.

When they had made camp for the night, Doc sat with Ryan, Krysty and Gloria, musing on this.

"It presents us with a whole series of thorny little problems, doesn't it?" he asked rhetorically. "If the Illuminated Ones are in a redoubt, then why have they never tried to travel around the Deathlands? Or at least, not to the extent where we have ever come across them before, or heard mention of them until recently."

"Mebbe, if they are the ones of which our legends speak, and they are the guardians of the gateway, then they have greater knowledge," Gloria mused, running loose earth through her fingers and watching it fall to the ground as she spoke. "Mebbe they have a way of regulating their travel through the old tech—yourselves have spoken of how you cannot control where you land. Well, mebbe they can."

Ryan and Krysty exchanged sharp glances. They, and the others, had been careful not to speak too much of their travels through the mat-trans in front of any of the Gate. Did this mean that Jak had been speaking to Gloria about these things without telling the others? There had been no set rule about this, but it had been assumed by all that it would be best to keep this quiet until or unless it was necessary.

Doc also noticed this, but chose to ignore the apparent oddity and keep his own counsel...as ever. "A good point, my dear lady. It would seem that it was the merest accident that tapped us into the previous Illuminated Ones' redoubt that we encountered. If they have their old tech in good working order, they may be able to use other redoubts and block their own ones from receiving any, ah, unwanted visitors, shall we say?"

"Well, they may be getting them now," Gloria said quietly, with a sly grin to herself.

Doc seemed not to notice this. He was staring over Gloria's head at some point far off in the middle distance, where there was something that only he seemed to see.

He continued in a faraway voice. "It was a strange thing, to be pitched into the middle of an alien time and to hear so much that seemed to make sense only with the benefit of hindsight. There were rumors of a secret society that was ready to take over the government and use it for its own ends if the end time came. And yet, in one of those strange dichotomies that seem to occur so often when power and intrigue become inextricably entwined, it was also rumored that this society was funded by the black operations budget of the very government that it sought to overthrow. Indeed, it was rumored that the security agencies of that government had infiltrated the secret society to such an extent that it was, in fact, operated by the government itself and was no more than a failsafe device for retaining power if civilization collapsed around its ears...which, of course, it did. Ironical, then, is it not, that this very society is now little more than a footnote to the saga of the Deathlands, existing in its own little void somewhere in the northeast of what used to be a so-called United States?"

There was a pause, then Gloria said, "Nice story, honey, but what does it have to do with what we're after?"

Doc seemed to snap back from his own private world, and for a moment looked at the Gate queen with eyes that were wide and innocent, uncomprehending of the world. And then her words filtered through, and a look of amazement spread across his face. "Why, is it not obvious? If the Illuminated Ones and the government of the old predark United States were one and the same, in effect, then doesn't it make sense that the shadow center of government that I heard rumors about will be the very place where the secret society will be based? Where the gateway you seek, and where the possible entry to the stockpile and peace which we seek... Well, where they will be?"



Ryan fixed Doc with a steely gaze from his icy blue eyes. "Are you saying what I think you're saying, Doc?"

The old man nodded. "I believe so, my friend. Welcome, indeed, to what is left of the constitutional government of the United States of America. And believe me, you really are welcome to it..." he added bitterly.

AS THE NIGHT DREW in, Gloria gathered her people before the campfire. Only the guards outside the encampment were out of sight and hearing.

The Gate queen sat with her back to the fire, no more than a backlit shadow as she spoke, the light from the fire illuminating the halo of her red mane, making it glow like the fire from her soul as she began to breathe slowly, steadily and deeply, trancing herself to begin another retelling from the legends of her people. A retelling that was to be saved especially for a moment such as this, a moment when the great aim of the tribe was to finally be within their grasp.

Her voice was huskier, deeper and more sonorous as she began to recite from her trance.

"When the time came for the world as we knew it to end and for the people to begin over, it was said that the only way to preserve the past and begin the future was to preserve that which had made the past great, that which had helped to keep the power within.

"And so they made the place of hiding in the shape of power. Five-sided and like a pentagram but yet not, it was built in secret to mirror the power as perceived. Within and below, the power would now be centered within the shadow and like unto a mirror. It would be magnified and increased through the years until it was ready to be reclaimed...reclaimed at a point where the future was ready for the next rising.

"Those who would be a part of this reclamation of power were the chosen ones, the warriors who had been trained through the ages to use that power wisely and well. They would have to search, and on that search they would learn, so that when they arrived it would be the right time. Not before, and not after..."

The incantation continued, but Ryan glanced across and noticed Doc deep in thought. So it was that, after Gloria had finished and the Gate were dispersing for the long watches of the night, Ryan called his people together and sat them before the fire.

"So, Doc," the one-eyed warrior began, "tell me what you think."

"About what?" he replied, adding, "Unless you mean what I think you mean..."

"I do, Doc. She's talking about the Pentagon, right? I read about it when I was growing up in Front Royal. It all points to that, and it all ties in with what you were saying before. My guess is that the Gate were some kind of offshoot of the Illuminated Ones, mebbe a breakaway group of some kind. I knew there was a lot of dissension before skydark, a lot of strange cults and religions that thought the world would end with the coming of a new millennium. And my guess is that each of these groups would have supporters and believers who had some kind of power somewhere, or some kind of it to that power."

Doc smiled wryly. "Ah, now that I would not know much about, my friend. Remember, I was not around in that time for too long. Come to that, most of the time I was there they were too busy trying to keep me quiet and out of the way. I only know the rumors—"

"Yeah, well, I lived through it, Doc, and it sure as shit sounds that way to me," Mildred said, shaking her head bitterly so that her plaits shook around her head. "The funny thing is that most of us didn't believe that there would be anything in it."

"Yeah, but that's all history now," Dean cut in. "It doesn't really matter where the Gate came from, does it? It only matters that this place is what they've been looking for, and it's what we're looking for—"

"And that it's going to be heavily protected and a bastard to get into," J.B. said softly.

"Right. Hard fuckers," Jak murmured. "We need be triple red or chilled."

Ryan nodded. "True enough. But we need to know as much about their history as possible. Knowing where they come from and how they think will give us an advantage. If we can get into their heads just a little bit, it'll be an advantage when we're on their territory. Otherwise we're totally blind, and that can only be a bad thing."

"I agree with you there, lover," Krysty said. Her hair, although flowing and not tight to her head, still twitched a little as she spoke. "This isn't going to be easy. I don't like those laser blasters. They're not easy to fight against. We've been lucky so far because of numbers. But we don't know how many of them there are down there."

"You're right," J.B. agreed. "The laser blasters could be good weapons if they were in the right hands. So far the people who've been using them haven't been good fighters. That's been our luck. That could change. Besides, if they have those, what the hell else do they have waiting for us?"

"It will be interesting to find out," Doc commented wryly. "At least between us we should have an idea of how the settlement is laid out, seeing as it seems to be a replica of the Pentagon."

"Have we?" Mildred said. "Shit, Doc, I lived through all that, but I don't think I could tell you what it looked like apart from the fact it had five sides!"

"Good job I try to read those old papers we find once in a while," Ryan said. "'Cause I've read a few things about it."

"It's not the settlement that worries me," J.B. muttered darkly, "or their weaponry. It's ours. Too many small-caliber handblasters, and the laser blasters we've got. Margia's too keen to use them."

J.B.'S WORDS WERE prophetic, as the blond armorer produced one of the captured blasters next morning, as camp was being drawn. She interrupted a brief target practice to test the weapon.

Examining the blaster from all angles, the blonde noticed that J.B. had come to watch.

"You know how to work these?" she asked him.

J.B. shook his head. "The only ones we ever found were broke. And hell, watching the way the Illuminated Ones fucked up with them, I'd guess that they're not that great."

Margia smiled, and for a second resembled her sister as one side of her mouth rose in the lopsided grin that the sour armorer was less inclined to favor than her warrior sister. "Mebbe you just couldn't work it out anyway, sweetie," she said. "Just mebbe I can do it better. Wouldn't that be something, if I could outdo the great J.B. Dix?"

He refused to rise to the bait, even though he was aware that all the Gate warriors gathered there were watching for his reaction. "Mebbe you can make it fire out here. Does that mean it's reliable in a firefight?"

"We'll have to see," Margia said. "Okay, let's do it."

She stepped up to the line drawn for the target shoot and raised the rifle to her shoulder. Fumbling a switch on the side, she squeezed the trigger and released a recoilless blast of light that scorched through the target, raising a gasp of interest from the assembled warriors.

"Pretty fucking good, even though I do say so myself." She smiled at J.B. "Guess mebbe I can just do this shit better than you, honey."

Although the slur annoyed the Armorer, he was more concerned by the fact that Margia would now be certain to use the laser blasters in combat when he was sure that they were unreliable. It was the one thing he dreaded.

J.B. turned and walked away without a word, aware that there was nothing he could do. If he went to Gloria, then it would mean a possible rift at a crucial time. And even if he told Ryan, then there was nothing much that the one-eyed warrior could do.

It was an additional problem that they didn't need as they entered such dangerous territory.

## Chapter Thirteen

The journey through the rest of the woodland was ominously quiet. To get so close to the settlement, and to know that the hidden inhabitants knew they were close, yet to have no obstructions thrust in their path kept both the Gate tribe and Ryan's people in a state of constant tension. Not that that was necessarily bad. It helped them to stay triple red and frosty even when all around was quiet. But somehow the suspense was fraying their nerves and attention, making it sure that sooner or later they would snap.

So it was a relief to reach the end of the woods. As with the plain, the division wasn't natural. The woods ended abruptly, with a division that suggested a carefully maintained watch on nature encroaching too far onto what, on the surface at least, seemed a deserted and long since abandoned ville. This was belied by that careful maintenance.

Gloria dropped to her haunches as they emerged from the woods, holding up a hand to signal a halt. She pawed at the earth, taking a handful and sniffing it. Ryan crouched beside her.

"Tell you anything much?" he asked.

"Tells me enough, sweets. Tells me that it's been turned recently, and that it wasn't the first time. Woodland like this should spread easily. At the very least there should be saplings for the next hundred yards where the trees reclaim the land. And there's nothing wrong with the soil. This is good, rich earth, and the texture and moistness suggested that it's been turned regularly. If this was recent, then it would

still have dry crust in it. This is loose." She crumbled the remnants of the soil in her hand through her fingers, sieving it gently and letting it fall until her hand was empty. "See?" she added. "Nothing left here." She held out her empty hand.

"So they keep the area clean but otherwise don't use it, and want anyone coming too close to think that it's deserted," the one-eyed warrior mused. He cast his eye to where the old wire fencing forming an enclosure around the ville had long since vanished. A row of evenly spaced concrete posts, reinforced with steel rods, now corroded and covered with the grime of decades, stood for as far as he could see in either direction, like an endless row of rotten teeth in the mouth of a seemingly harmless mutie...one that could still take your head off if you didn't pay heed. The electrified wire that had ran between the posts was little more than a memory.

But Ryan was aware that this was a facade. They had already encountered the forces that had to surely live beneath the seemingly dead surface. Furthermore, they had seen and fought the results of the experiments these people had perpetrated on stickies.

His hard, steely blue left orb caught sight of a lone concrete pillar, seemingly undamaged. Set deep into the concrete was an opaque lens: a sec camera. The pillar was too high, at this angle, to get a good look at the deep-set camera, but the impassive blue-black lens stared unblinkingly ahead, refusing to tell him whether it was dead or unobtrusively recording their arrival at the edge of the settlement.

Gloria followed his gaze. "Soon find out," she said simply, realizing what was passing through the one-eyed warrior's mind. "Just have to prepare for a reception committee."

"Whatever form it takes," Ryan murmured.

Both leaders rose, and Gloria turned back to her people. She whistled a series of low-pitched commands barely audible in the quiet of the ville but still carrying back to the rear of the caravan, where Doc gave Jon and Petor an amused stare. He waited until the last of the whistles had died away on the quiet morning.

"I can see the use of such a system—after all, who but you would be able to define its meaning—but by the Three Kennedys, it must be a devil of a job to learn."

Petor shrugged. "It's always been there, since we were little. Just like learning to talk."

"That's all it is," Jon added, "just different talk."

Doc shrugged. "And to think that when I was young they tried to wipe out races with such a complex system of communication, calling them primitive. Yet who thrives now?"

Jon and Petor looked at each other. Once again, Doc had lost them. But it was no matter, the movement of the caravan in front of them meant they were spared the possible long winded explanation that would follow asking him what the hell he was talking about.

The Gate had begun to enter the settlement that might be the place where they met with their destiny.

THE FIRST LEVEL BEGAN more than a hundred feet below the surface. It was a warren of small offices and work spaces, divided and soundproofed to enable the chatter and hum of electrical and computer equipment to stay muted, and not to build to an intolerable level of noise. Within these small units, a single operative monitored a single camera, with a vid machine recording on slow speed—with a

jerky, almost surreal playback when required—any activity.

There was hardly any activity that took place on the outside, and most of the tapes used in the vid machines had been recycled so many times that watching the relatively dry and warm outside on tape playback became transformed into watching a winter scene, dappled with the snow of overused tape. Not that it mattered much, as the most they ever recorded was a bunch of altered stickies returning to where they had been released, hungry and tired and trying to find a way back into the womb that had birthed their even more mutated mutie forms.

The watchers worked in shifts, and were allocated other tasks every few calendar months so that they didn't burn out to the point where nothing on the screen could register anymore on their vid-fried synapses. They had a full life—or at least, as full a life as was possible when most of their existence was beneath ground.

And that was just as well, for when they were on sec-monitor duty they had to endure the most cloistered and mentally debilitating of environments. They sat in a molded chair, in front of the vid screen, the only sounds the loud whir and clank of the ancient vid recorders. Over the decades, these had grown louder and the machines more erratic. There were priorities, and even though there were plentiful supplies to keep the settlement in good condition, they existed in a perpetual state of emergency where only the things deemed necessities were allowed to be kept in A-1 condition. The rest existed in a make-do-and-mend state. And because there had been so little threat from aboveground for so long, the sec-vid machines had slipped further and further down the priorities list until they had almost disappeared off the bottom.

Which was why sec-vid observer Simon Rack sat impassively in front of his monitor, in a darkened room lit only by a dull red glow, humming tunelessly to himself to try to blot out the noise of the machine. If this one machine had not been separated by the partition walls, and the noise had been amplified by that of the other vid machines, then the hideous racket would have been enough to drive a man to insanity. As it was, Rack felt sometimes close to the edge just in his small room, hemmed in by walls that were drab and barely visible in the semidarkness, the only distractions from the screen being the intercom system that connected him to the main sec force control room, the small chemical toilet in the corner of the room and the jumble of wires emerging from a cavity in one corner of the room, leading into a shaft. Sometimes, when he was really bored, Rack wondered what the jumble of wires had been connected to and why it had been removed. But as that had occurred long before his time, it was idle speculation, with nothing on which to base any guess he might try to make.

The toilet was in the room because the operative placed in the room was secured, locked in until the shift was over. It was something the operatives accepted, even if they didn't like it. The job was so tedious, so mind-numbingly boring, that an unlocked and open door might have proved an overwhelming temptation.

So he sat, humming noisily and badly, bored, and wishing that his shift would end. There was never anything to see, anyway.

Rack was passing the time thinking about how he would spend his leisure hours, those precious few that were allotted at the end of each shift for rest and recreation. Perhaps he would use the VR chamber and enter a scenario where he, for once, could be in charge of his own destiny. The VR chamber was among those items in the settlement kept in excellent working order. And with good cause, as the release it afforded the frustrated and strung-out lower orders such as Rack enabled them to still operate efficiently and toe the party line. They weren't fools, they knew that this was why the equipment was kept in such good order, but didn't object. How could they? Brought up in the order, they knew that it was essential that they all fulfill their tasks and keep the ideals alive.

The thought of what would happen when those ideals became a reality, and they were able to emerge from beneath the ground to take their rightful place up above caused him to wander off into an even deeper reverie, so deep that he almost didn't notice the emergence of a group of people on the edge of the clearing covered by his camera. They were led by a small, barely dressed red-haired woman and a muscular, bronzed warrior with only one eye.

It had been so long since Rack had actually seen anything other than the odd stickie on the sec vid that it took him a moment to take in what was happening.

"Oh, shit," he breathed as it struck home. This had to be the group that had taken out Sharofsky's men a few nights back. And now they were here. Well, they'd pay for that.

Rack punched the button on the intercom in front of him. The speaker crackled into life, and a disjointed voice seeped through the static.

"Main room. What is it, Si?"

"Al, you're not going to believe this, but even after that little warning they've come here."

There was a pause, then the voice said, "You're shittin' me, right, Si? I mean, no one comes here. Everyone knows this is nowhere, right? That's why it's so safe. That's why it was built, right? Jeez... Okay, let me deal with this."

The intercom went dead, and Rack lost his sense of urgency. Let Al deal with it now. He would just sit here and watch, same as ever.

THE CARAVAN consisting of the Gate tribe and Ryan's people entered the settlement. Once beyond the remnants of the wire fencing, there were other posts with ominously still cameras that littered the few hundred yards until they reached the point where the settlement began in earnest. They had entered at a tangent to the main entrance, and as such it was some distance to the first of the roads that crisscrossed the compound.

As Doc had suspected from the stories he had heard, the compound was military-industrial in design, and was modeled on the area surrounding the old Pentagon, long since wiped out in the nukocaust of skydark. And although this area had escaped the complete desolation of what had once been the state of Washington, it had received some residual damage. Many of the buildings that dotted the way along the roads showed pockmark and burn damage, exacerbated by the fact that they had been left empty in the years since.

The settlement seemed long dead, and the traffic signals at junctions that indicated that at one time there had been much traffic around the compound were now dead. A camera was mounted on each signal. As they progressed slowly through the compound, Dean kept an eye on the cameras. They, too, seemed long dead, but he couldn't shake the idea that they were moving—just slightly, almost imperceptibly, but enough to justify his paranoia.

The Illuminated Ones would surely know that they were coming, and it was almost certain that they would have some kind of surveillance system in operation. After all, they seemed to have a much better set of old tech than any other sec force that the companions had come across in their travels. And they seemed to be able to travel using the mat-trans units, a system that few people, other than the companions, had ever discovered.



But despite the tech and despite the fact that they knew from their previous encounters that the Gate caravan was on its way, the Illuminated Ones seemed quiet. Too quiet.

There was little sign of any action within the compound except that of the Gate themselves. Gloria had dispatched a series of outriders to traverse the avenues and freeways of the compound, dodging between the buildings and checking the alleyways for any signs of life. It was a large compound, and the Gate progressed at a snail's pace while the outriders went on their mission, quartering the areas directly ahead and combing them thoroughly. Small groups scouted even farther ahead, running preliminary checks without endangering themselves or the tribe.

Blasters were drawn, and nerves were taut.

Jak held his .357 Magnum Colt Python with the barrel down to the ground and his arm rigid, the tendons stretched as tight as his nerves. He walked beside Gloria and Ryan. The warrior queen held her Vortak grasped in both hands, barrel to her left-hand side. Her icy blue eyes darted around her, her piercing stare attempting to cut through the surrounding buildings and see any lurking danger.

The outriders returned, Tammy among them. The auburn-haired, statuesque woman approached her queen and reported.

"I don't know how they're doing it, but they're up here somewhere and trying to direct us."

Gloria held up her hand to halt the caravan, then said, "Direct us? What do you mean, sweets?"

Tammy looked back in the direction she had come, as though searching for inspiration. She grimaced, bit her lip, then shrugged. "It's kind of hard to put into words, and it may sound really stupe, but I'm sure that there were some intersections blocked on the way back that hadn't been when I went on the way out."

"Are you sure?" Ryan asked.

Tammy shook her head distractedly. "Sure? What does that mean? I couldn't swear an oath to say that it was so, but it does seem kind of odd. For instance, there's all kind of junk littered about here, right?"

She waited for an answer. It was true that the compound was littered along the road with the remains of old vehicles. Some old armored wags, some automobiles, and the remains of motorbikes lay on the sidewalks of the compound streets. They were rotten hulks, rusted and stripped of anything that might have been of use. Many of them showed fire damage that suggested a long-ago fire. They stood mostly on the sides of the wide streets, and hadn't impeded the progress of the Gate caravan as it entered the compound proper.

"Okay, so there's a shit-load of old wags around the place. And?" Gloria prompted, shrugging and smiling at the young warrior to encourage her into expounding her theory.

"And this—you see how they're all on the sides of the streets, right?" Tammy answered, indicating the wrecks that were nearest to the caravan. When her queen assented, Tammy continued, "Okay, well, I was sure that they were all like that when I was scouting out. But when I was coming back from the far quarter—" she swept her arm back in the direction she had come—"it seemed to me that some of the wrecks had been moved so that they were across intersections, making it kind of hard for us to make our way down some of the streets."

"That's interesting," Ryan murmured to Gloria. "They must have figured that we wouldn't leave the wags behind and go on foot down some places."

"So mebbe we should do that, to head them off?" the Gate queen queried.

Ryan grinned. "If we keep a skeleton to cover the wags, it could throw them into confusion, although—"

"I know," Gloria interrupted him. "Do we really want to split our forces when we're not sure how strong they are?" When Ryan nodded, she continued. "Yeah, mebbe we should just go their way and see where it takes us. Mebbe they'll figure we won't have tumbled to their little plan."

"Mebbe," the one-eyed Warrior agreed. "If not, then so much the better for us."

"I'll gather the outriders, and we'll play their little game," Gloria decided. "That way, whatever they intend we don't get any of our people left isolated and without backup." With which she gave a series of piercing whistles that rent the air.

The signal elicited a swift response. A series of calls and whistles returned through the eerie quiet of the seemingly isolated settlement, drifting in as answer to their queen.

"We wait here for them to return and then we proceed. Triple red, triple frosty—and let's just see what these fuckers have got ready for us." Gloria grinned, her eyes sparkling with relish at the thought of combat.

Ryan couldn't help but return her good humor. "Somehow I don't think they've got the first idea what they've let themselves in for." He laughed, casting his eye back over the gathered tribe behind him, including his own people.

"FOR CRYING OUT LOUD, what is the matter with these people? Can't they make up their fucking minds what they want to do?"

The voice was muffled through the visor of the helmet worn by the gray-clad figure as he watched two of the outriders meet at the intersection he had just helped block. The two Amazons had skipped over the pile of rotting junk that now stood across the roadway. It wasn't enough to prevent the passage of an individual, but enough to prevent the wags carrying the camp and armory to pass.

"None of the modules prepared us for this bunch." Another voice crackled through the speaker in the gray man's helmet. He turned to face his colleague clad in scarlet who stood beside him at the third-floor window, looking down at an oblique angle at the sidewalk and road below. They were certain that they couldn't be seen this way. Indeed, they knew that one of the Amazon outriders who had just passed beneath them had, on her way out, scouted the building at ground level, and they had been ready to chill her if she discovered them.

The gray man shrugged. "What d'you expect," he said in a resigned tone. "The modules are all predark. We've only got a limited idea of what it's like out there now. Jesus, that's an unpleasant thought."

His voice, muffled as it was in the open through the thickness of his visor, carried across clearly via the built-in microphone that was connected to the small speaker through which he had heard his companion. The speakers crackled, but otherwise were as clear as hearing voices in the open. The two men looked at each other when they talked, even though all each could see was the opaque black visor on the other's

helmet.

"So you reckon they'll have tumbled what we're up to here?" asked the man in scarlet. "I mean, they'd have to be pretty fuckin' dumb if they didn't."

The gray man shrugged. "Jeez, how the fuck should I know, Frank? Maybe they did notice the wrecks on the way out. Maybe they think they've come back by a different route. I can't read their minds, can I?"

"Lou, I was just asking," Frank said calmly. "Don't lose it. Not now. Let's get the last two intersections done and then get the hell back down. There's only two of us, and we don't have the hardware to go up against any of them."

"Yeah, we'll let Al's boys worry about it," Lou replied calmly. "After all, they've got a score to settle."

Frank nodded his agreement, and without another word the two men made their way down the stairwell of the ruined building to emerge on the sidewalk. A thin patina of dust stirred in the light breeze, just enough to cover any tracks made either by themselves or by the outriders who had passed. It also covered the tracks made by the ruined wags as they had moved around on the road and across to block the center.

"Pretty good maneuver, even if I do say so myself. I'll lay you odds that none of the other roadblocks are that good. I've got the touch, and with a touch like that we can't lose, right?" Lou said proudly.

Frank laughed shortly, a grating sound through the rad static in the helmet speaker. "Yeah, you keep thinking that and keep your confidence up, boy. Meanwhile, us men got work to do."

"Funny, like real funny," Lou rejoined. "Let's cut the crap and get to the next intersection point."

Frank nodded in reply, and the two men set off at a dogtrot to their next assigned point.

Illuminated Ones Frank Christie and Lou Verlaine were trained in the operation of microelectronics, and emerged aboveground at regular intervals to maintain and test the microelectronic equipment that had been installed two generations back to provide a camouflaged defense. The principle was simple enough: all the rotting hulks of old wags and motorbikes were genuine, and had been there since the surface of the encampment had been scoured by the nukocaust of skydark. However, since they had been able to surface and use the desolation of the upper level to disguise the activity that continued down in the redoubt, the Illuminated Ones had sought a way that they could utilize everything that remained aboveground as a sec measure.

The ruined wags and bikes were all at the sides of the roads, and afforded a clear entry into the heart of the encampment. So it was that it had struck the sec council of the Illuminated Ones that it would be a good concealed defense to articulate the wrecks, so that they could be moved to block the sidewalks and roadways, and so hem in any intruders. To that end, the many microelectronics that were carried in one of the redoubt's labs were utilized and fitted to every rotting hulk, complete with a hydraulic platform that could lift the hulk and move it on regularly oiled and maintained casters, with only the very minimum of noise. Thus it was reasoned that any incoming opposition force could be directed in whatever direction the sec council wished without even realising that this was the case.

It was a reasonable notion, and in the hands of techs like Frank and Lou it was carried out swiftly and efficiently. The microelectronic circuits and hydraulic lifts were regularly maintained, the casters kept oiled

and greased. And when the time came for the defense to be used, operatives that included Frank and Lou in their numbers were able to come above ground from concealed elevator shafts that were housed in a number of the settlement's buildings from predark days.

Frank and Lou were about to position the last set of rotting hulks that were in their section of the settlement—each team being assigned a particular area and set of streets.

Lou flattened himself against the side of one building while Frank scouted around the corner, where lay two old armored wags and a personal wag, spaced about fifty yards apart, one wag on the left-hand side of the road, the other two hulks on the right.

It was clear. "Go," Frank whispered into the helmet microphone, and Lou emerged from cover. Without another word, each intent on his task, one man took each side of the road. Kneeling beside the armored wag on the right-hand side of the road, Frank lay flat and reached beneath the wag, his fingers feeling gently for the small panel of microelectric circuitry that would activate the hydraulics. His gloved fingers brushed over the panel, his index finger tensing as he sensed it beneath him, the pressure activating the circuitry. Scrambling to his feet, he ran with a light step to the vehicle, which was twenty yards from the wag he had just activated. Dropping to the sidewalk once more, he repeated the procedure.

Meanwhile, Lou had sprinted to the solitary wreck on his side of the road, which lay farthest away. He, too, activated the circuitry in a similar manner. Rising to his feet, he saw that Frank was about to rise.

"Okay, let's do it," he said quickly and quietly.

"Uh-huh," his partner returned.

On the right arm of each suit, the men wore a small microelectric control panel. Running the fingers of their left hands over their respective panels, they activated the control mechanisms for the wags. With a minimum of hydraulic noise and friction, the three hulks began to rise and move.

Selecting a frequency by deft touch, Frank guided the wag into the center of the roadway, settling it down. Lou took one of the armored wags and guided it into position at a right angle, so that it spilled onto the sidewalk, leaving barely enough room for a single column of people to proceed. While he did this, Frank completed a similar maneuver.

The street was now blocked, with no sign of movement remaining as the tracks of the casters, narrow gauged as they were, disappeared in the swirling dust and breeze.

"Right, let's get to where we're safe, and let Al's boys deal with the rest of it," Lou said.

Frank nodded, and the two men turned and headed for a building on the far corner of the street. Once inside, they took the service door to the basement, where the elevator to the redoubt was hidden in the false front of a boiler that had supposedly, in the distant predark days, supplied the building with central heating.

Once they were in the elevator and headed for the heart of the redoubt to report to the sec council, Frank and Lou removed their helmets. Frank was a thickset man, with reddish-blond hair that was thinning at the crown, and a red-veined complexion. Lou was thinner, with deep-set brown eyes and thick, curly black hair that tumbled onto his shoulders.

Both men looked visibly relieved to be out of the front line. As far as they were concerned, they had

achieved their aim without the opposition being aware of their actions.

They hadn't bargained on Tammy's powers of observation.

WITH THE LAST of the outriders now returned to the main body of the caravan, Gloria made her intentions known to her people. When Ryan pointed out that they had no idea if the cameras were also joined by hidden microphones, so that an address to the entire caravan could be a problem, the Gate queen agreed and relayed her instructions to Ryan, Jak and Margia, who had joined the front of the caravan to see what was happening. The four then dispersed among the rest of the caravan, quietly relaying the instructions on how to proceed.

Which was, in essence, quite simple. Although they knew they were being manipulated and directed, the Gate would play along, using their advantage to gain the element of surprise when the time came for battle.

When the caravan was ready to move, Ryan gathered together his people.

"Anything we should watch for?" he asked of the collected warriors.

"Margia," J.B. replied promptly. "She's too keen on the laser blasters, and I don't think she realizes how erratic they can be. If she wants to use them when the time comes to fight..." His voice died away, the point being obvious.

"Attack from unexpected places," Doc added.

"Meaning?" Ryan quizzed.

"Well, my dear boy, I would surmise that if the Illuminated Ones have somehow been arranging these roadblocks, then it would suggest that they have a myriad of entries and exits to their redoubt. Now, as this—" he swept his arm expansively "—is modeled on the very mother of all U.S. military mother lodes, then it would not, I should say, be unreasonable to expect that there would be a veritable warren of hidden passages and elevators leading to the heart of the beast."

"Very picturesquely put, Doc," Mildred murmured, "but a good point. I'd add to that the fact that the Gate don't have the knowledge we do about these people. I know we've told Gloria about them, but I don't know if she's really taken it all in."

"Gloria not problem," Jak put in, "but rest of Gate? Mebbe not believe what she say because it come from us and not from what see."

"Yeah, that's what I mean," Mildred agreed. "The best thing is practical experience, and no amount of telling is going to change that."

"So we watch their backs, as well as ours," Krysty said. She huddled into her coat, despite the warmth of the day. "You know, I do get the feeling from them that they think it's going to be easy. They're such good warriors that they have trouble believing anything other than total victory."

"Only way fight," Jak said. "Doubt and you chilled."

Krysty smiled wryly. "Mebbe I mean something else, then—caution and not underestimating your enemy."

"What is there to underestimate?" Dean spoke for the first time. As he stood in front of Ryan, his face grimly set, he could have been the mirror image of his father were it not for the scars and wounds his father bore.

"How do you mean?" his father asked.

Dean shrugged. "You don't estimate, you just deal with it and keep triple red. There's always a curve ball, so you just try to hit it..." And he grinned wolfishly.

"That's right." Ryan showed a half smile. "Let's do it."

THE GATE CARAVAN moved off, all those who were a part of it aware that they were on the verge of battle.

Because they were looking for it, Gloria and Ryan were aware of the way in which the roads had been blocked. Every road that led off to the right was now impassable for the wags, forcing the caravan to take left turns at intersections or proceed ahead until the forward path was also blocked.

"The little sweeties, they're not very subtle, are they?" Gloria murmured to Ryan as they turned left once more, passing a right-hand turn that had a ruined wag across the center of the roadway.

"They don't have to be," Ryan replied. "After all, would we think that if we didn't know?"

"Fair point," Gloria murmured. "But where does it lead us?"

"That's the big question," Ryan mused. "I think the turns are partly meant to disorient us, so we don't know which direction we're headed."

Gloria's face lit up with her lopsided grin. "Stupidworks bastards. The day they fuck with my sense of direction is the day they can burn me, 'cause I'll be better off chilled. We're going straight for the center. They're leading us exactly to where we want to go."

"Then they're going to have a warm reception waiting for us," Ryan warned.

"We can deal with it," the Gate queen said simply.

Another turn came up as she spoke. At the end of the road ahead lay a large expanse of open concrete, leading up to the front of a flat building, the facade of which stretched beyond the perspective of the roadway, hemmed in by the old buildings.

"Now, if I were so dumb, even I wouldn't bet that the stupidworks building down there isn't five sided," Gloria murmured as Ryan clicked back the bolt of his Steyr.

Behind them, the Gate prepared for battle. In the midst, Mildred chambered a slug in her Czech-made ZKR target pistol while J.B. switched his Uzi to rapid fire.

"Dark night, talk about into the jaws of the lion," he murmured, ignoring Mildred's astonished look at such a poetic outburst. As an afterthought, he added: "Guess I've been around Doc too long..."



## Chapter Fourteen

"This is it," Petor breathed from the rear of the caravan with Jon and the armory wag. Margia hurried back to them.

"Get the laser blasters ready. We won't use them yet, but if things get too crazy they may give us the edge." There was a gleam in her eye that suggested she wanted badly for things to get that crazy.

At the front of the caravan, Ryan and Gloria advanced beyond the last line of cover into open space, with Jak, Krysty and Tammy on their heels. The taller Gate warrior, with her mass of auburn curls framing a face taut with tension, had risen swiftly in the ranks, and Gloria now trusted her implicitly. It was unspoken, but the manner of her acting had promoted the younger woman in the ranks of the Gate warriors so that she was now almost second to the queen in battle.

The last line of cover itself was a small wall that ran around the last row of buildings before the vast concrete expanse. It was roughly 150 yards in itself, but vast enough when the lack of cover made every inch a potential death trap. The wall was only two and a half feet high and would have been little use as cover in a firefight, but nonetheless it marked a boundary, and Krysty shivered when one foot went beyond that boundary. Her hair closed around her neck. The tendrils that snaked down into her collar spoke volumes of the imminent danger.

"I feel completely naked like this," Gloria whispered to Ryan.

"So do I," the one-eyed warrior replied, "but there's nothing we can do about it. They've directed us here. Why haven't they picked us off if they can move about the ruins that easily without being seen? Mebbe they want to capture us more than kill us."

"You hope..."

Ryan gave a small shrug. "Mebbe. Just keep triple red and shoot on sight. They won't be expecting that."

Gloria spared him a glance, smiling with that lopsided grin he was getting used to. "You hope..." she said with a dry humor.

"Wish they start," Jak added from just behind. "Getting itchy."

As if on cue, the first attack began, and from directly in front of them.

Emerging into the open forum in front of the building that lay at the center of the complex, it was clearly visible that this was indeed a replica of the Pentagon. The building had the classic squared design to its facade, leading off to diagonal walls that took it around in a five-sided shape. The open area of concrete, designed specifically for clearing a no-man's-land space all around, stretched away from them on all sides, curving around the diagonal walls and forming a circular shape where the decorative walls in front of the last line of buildings were shaped away from the line of the blocks.

It was a hell of a large space in which to be chilled.

The Pentagon look-alike in front of them had few windows on the airless facade, and those that there

were had long since been blown out. But they expected the building to be empty aboveground. At a signal from their leader, some of the Gate warriors raised their handblasters to cover the windows above ground level, in case a few sec men fired from above.

It was what Ryan or Gloria would have done. The building provided cover, and the height gave a wider angle of fire. But whoever was in command of the Illuminated Ones' sec force either hadn't thought of such an option, or had a plan that precluded this move, for the windows were as lifeless as they had been since the nukocaust.

On the ground level, the Gate and Ryan's people found that they had emerged at the front of the building. If they had been given pause to consider, it would have been an obvious move—bring them into the open right in front of the main entrance to the building. It revealed something about the mindset of whoever was in charge of the sec attack.

And yet, although things were about to happen too fast for rational and conscious thought, the sight of the front entrance triggered survival and combat instincts in Ryan and Gloria—and their respective forces—that had been honed in long years of battle.

The front of the building consisted of a series of false windows along the length of the wall at ground level. They were shaped into the facade like the windows on the upper levels, but were bricked in with decorative stonework that had eroded and faded into a series of seemingly random shapes. A main entrance arch framed iron double doors that were much more primitive than those on the original Pentagon building. Like everything else on this copy, it was a rough sketch with the emphasis on solid security rather than on accuracy. So the double doors had no subtlety, but were solid enough to withstand even the most hardened firefight. Set along the wall at regular intervals were four other sets of doors, flush to the wall with no arch or buttress to shelter them from the elements. The hinges to the doors were protected by being laid back behind the main shell of the door, indicating that they had to open outward.

So, it was obvious from the lack of sec force on the upper levels, and from the fact that they had been brought out to the front of the building, that this was where the attack would stem from—an assumption that was proved correct as the large double doors began to swing open with a speed that indicated a regular maintenance.

"Dark night," J.B. shouted. "Five fronts—get them covered."

The Armorer had been watching the other sets of doors while Ryan's and Gloria's attention had been focused on the double set. He had seen the four doors begin to open as one, and he was in motion before the first thought in his head had finished forming into his shouted warning.

J.B. wasn't the only one to notice this.

"I'll take left," Tammy yelled, moving in the opposite direction to the Armorer, and showing her natural talents as a warrior. Like J.B., she had observed the doors, and had also caught sight of the wiry man in the fedora leveling his Uzi and peeling away from the main body of the caravan.

Galvanized into action by the two shouts of command, the Gate Amazons split into three with a natural grace that made the body of warriors seem like a flowing river spilling around a rock. Fanning out into three streams, they then spread farther apart to make themselves a harder target to hit.

Mildred and Dean followed J.B. to the right, while Krysty and Jak moved off to follow Tammy, their

direction dictated by their proximity to each shout.

Doc, however, didn't move forward. His mind was racing. He recalled only too clearly some of the dangers Ryan's warriors had discussed in their short briefing. As Doc had been some way back in the caravan, having been in the process of moving up from his previous traveling position on the armory wag, he had seen the beginning of the firefight with a perspective denied those at the front.

Why? The single thought raced through his mind. Why would the Illuminated Ones' sec force, on home territory, not utilize the advantage of the upper levels in the building, allowing them a clean sweep of the concrete area? Unless their forces, which weren't infinite at any rate, were to be split in some way. Split, perhaps, because the exits that had been used to access the wrecks and block the road were to be used again to mount an attack from the rear, as his companions had considered a possibility.

More than a possibility. Just the briefest of glances told Doc that the Gate warriors were focused on the front, and even the men leading the wags, armed as they were, hadn't yet considered to glance behind them.

"By the Three Kennedys, this could be appalling!" Doc muttered to himself, turning on his heel and racing back through the dispersing Gate Amazons.

Seeing Doc rush toward them, Jon and Petor both felt confusion. They hadn't known Doc long, but although they considered him quite mad, they would never have thought of him as a coward.

Doc saw their faces, and yelled, "No—behind! Look behind."

There were two groups of wags at the rear of the caravan. The first consisted of the camp materials and the armory, and was still standing in the roadway they had just traveled. The second housed the children of the tribe and the food supplies. These had already been moved into what little cover was supplied by the buildings facing the open area. Both groups of wags were manned by the men of the tribe, carrying rifles and machine blasters. None of them looked particularly at ease with the blasters, and none of them seemed too pleased at Doc's garbed words.

Petor spun on the top of the armory wag and caught just the briefest glimpse of a gray uniform as it flitted from the cover of one doorway to another.

"Fuck, he's right. They've got behind us!" the young man yelled as a breathless Doc caught up with the armory wag.

"Secret exit...how moved old wags...should realized sooner..." Doc gasped, trying to climb up and join them on the armory wag.

"Don't worry, you thought of it soon enough," Jon said, helping Doc to mount the side of the wag. "Sooner than us stupidworks bastards would have." He turned his attention to the other men of the tribe and snapped out the order, "Watch all the sides. Try and save ammo, but shoot the fuckers as soon as you get a chance."

He spoke not a moment too soon, for as his last words rang out on the air, a beam from a laser blast scored the air past his shoulder, plucking at the thin material of his shirt and making it smolder.

"Fuck!" he exclaimed, dropping from his upright position onto one knee.

Beside him, Petor took careful but swift aim with his Lee Enfield .303 and snapped off a shot that shattered the visor of the purple-clad Illuminated One sec man who had stepped out to take the shot. Soundlessly, any cry muffled by his helmet, the sec man crumpled, dropping his blaster.

"Thanks," Jon said simply.

Petor smiled grimly. "Good thing we did that target practice behind Margia's back."

Meanwhile, back at the front line, things were beginning to heat up.

The Gate had spread as the doors began to open, expecting at the very least for a wag to come from the large double doors. However, instead of the armored and fortified front line they expected, they were greeted by a procession of sec men on foot, charging from the open doors with their laser blasters raised.

"Hot pipe, they must be triple-stupe muties," Dean breathed, leveling his Browning and picking off the first man out with a shot that penetrated the chest cavity with little problem.

AT THE FIRST LEVEL beneath the subbasement of the building, and the uppermost level of the redoubt, Simon Rack was seated in front of a bank of monitors next to Al Jorgensen. Rack had been selected to monitor the attack through the series of cameras planted around the building to record any movement in the vicinity. There were more cameras within these few hundred yards than in the rest of the deserted compound, and the monitors were banked together instead of separately in order for one operative to assist the head of sec in building an overall picture. Rack had been chosen because—despite his efforts to lay low—he was good at his job.

The thickset, jowl-heavy man by his side was in his late fifties, and had been head of sec for the past fifteen years. During that time, apart from a few skirmishes with stickies and one brush with a trading convoy that skirted the outer reaches of their territory, there had been no hostile activity or combat. Jorgensen hadn't raised a blaster in anger for more than twenty-five years, and although he did the simulations, read the manuals and kept his people up to scratch in target practice, he was only too well aware that the lack of actual combat experience was telling.

Simon cast a glance at the man beside him. Al sat forward in his chair, hands gripping the armrests, posture stiff and rigid. Sweat beaded his upper lip, and his forehead was slick with moisture. The headset that crossed his cropped scalp was loose with the slippery state of his skin, and the mouthpiece quivered over his lips, parted slightly in disbelief as he watched the monitor in front of him.

The Gate had been taken by surprise by the speed at which the sec force had spilled out of the doors. At least, that had been Al's hope. Despite the beating his people had taken on the plain, he had put that down to the greater numbers of the Amazon women, and had gambled that a roughly equal number of his own force spilling out the front would be a greater match.

Looking at it from his point of view, the facts were simple. He had an equal number meeting the Gate head-on, and a skeleton force attacking from the rear. His forces were armed with blasters that were far superior to anything that the Gate might carry. In terms of numbers and arms, his force should be able to counteract and eliminate the intruders with ease, especially as it had been so easy to fool them into following the path he wanted.

But now, watching the firefight unfold on the screens in front of him, while his attention directed every now and again to a particular screen where something was occurring by a word from the impassive Simon Rack, Al felt the world begin to cave in on him. A flurry of crackling voices rang in his ears, tinny

and distorted through the rad interference and the size of the headphones. And all asked the same thing...what do we do?

Simon looked at Al. The older sec chief seemed almost frozen in...not fear, exactly, but a kind of indecision.

Oh, great, Simon thought, that was just what they needed.

OUT ON THE CONCRETE expanse that had become a battleground, crowded with bodies, blood and the sound of sizzling laser blasts punctuated by the staccato bursts of blasterfire, things were rapidly moving forward.

The sec forces who had moved out into the open had found that they had as little cover once they were in the open as the Gate warriors they were supposed to chill. They spread out as much as possible, but were already on the defensive, having lost the element of surprise as soon as the doors had finished opening and the first of their number had spilled out. The biggest problem had been with the single doors. Those sec soldiers behind the initial charge had been unable to lay down the covering fire they had hoped, for the simple reason that the narrow width of the door hadn't afforded them the angle necessary to fire without actually cutting through their own people. That had allowed the Gate a free shot at those emerging sec men as they leveled their laser blasters to fire.

The air was filled with the piercing screams and cries of the Gate warriors as they either flattened to the concrete or raised their blasters on the run and let off the opening volley of shots. The cries served a dual purpose. Part of the self-trancing process by which the women psyched themselves up for battle and moved into a berserker mode; they also struck terror into any opponents by their sheer primal savagery.

Ryan, on the concrete with the Steyr snug in his shoulder, picking off sec men, noticed that there was a male note in among the screams. Jak, caught in his bond with Gloria and the closeness with the Amazons that he had developed while training with them, was also screaming as he moved across the concrete, snapping off shots from his Colt Python as he moved. Gloria was beside him, her eyes cold and hard, glittering with the dark fire of battle as she used her Vortak to pick off her targets, sinuously moving to avoid the erratic beams of laser fire that emanated from those Illuminated Ones who were still able to fire.

Even those brave sec men were handicapped by yet another problem not foreseen by Jorgensen. The blasters were erratic in combat when away from the confines of a target shoot. And so the sec men who were able to put up a fight found themselves let down by blasters that either jammed and cut out, or shot laser fire that moved erratically away from their aim.

At the fringes of the fan formed by the Gate, things were also happening. To the left of the main thrust, Tammy had led her phalanx of warriors until they had covered the entirety of the building's length and spread around one of the diagonal sides. Those women who had achieved that were then able to use the oblique angle of the side of the building to shelter themselves from the emerging Illuminated Ones and pick their shots at them. The auburn-curved Gate warrior—no longer a girl but now a full-blooded Amazon—led her troops with a series of blood curdling shrieks as she circled the area in front of the doors, taking her time to pick her shots and standing upright and unafraid, her berserker instinct now to the fore. The adrenaline coursed through her veins, and if she was capable of rational thought at that moment, then she truly believed that she was invulnerable.

On the right-hand side, the Gate women led into battle by J.B. were faring as well, if a little differently in approach. The Armorer led from the front, teeth ground tight together in concentration as he leveled the Uzi, switched to continuous fire and let fly with a stream of lead at the emerging sec forces. Regardless of

the ammo that was wasted in the process, he sprayed along the front of the building so that some slugs flew harmlessly into the stonework, ricocheting off and throwing out small slivers of sharpened stone and little clouds of dust. It was worth these wasted slugs for the time it saved him in aiming, firing small controlled bursts, then switching direction to aim and fire at the other doorway. The fractions of seconds saved in each sweep may have wasted ammo, but made it easier for J.B. to keep momentum in his attack, and prevent as many as possible of the sec force from emerging.

Some were chilled. They fell as they reached beyond the doorways—not enough to block them, but enough to make it harder for the next soldier out to negotiate the exit with ease while raising and aiming their laser blasters. Often it was easier for the man to stay back in the safety of the doorway and attempt to take a blast with the laser from inside, even though it narrowed the area of fire, even though it was still a clearer shot than if a fellow soldier had been in front, as some of the chilled sec men had found to their cost when they had blocked their own covering fire.

J.B.'s firing pattern had prevented a swarm of the sec force from emerging out of the doorways to his side, and enabled the Amazons to gain good positions for firing at their enemy.

Jon and Petor were hunched down on the armory wag, their tender years and the reality that they were men in an Amazon tribe belied by the fact that they were both calmly and assuredly issuing battle orders to the other men clustered around the two groups of wags.

Those men who were guarding the children of the tribe had formed a small arrowhead formation around their wags, and were firing in a regular pattern at any sec forces they could see. The other men, who were in the cluster of wags that included the armory wag with Jon, Petor and Doc, were taking shelter behind their wags as they were in a more exposed position, and were also picking off shots at any uniform that heaved into view.

"Doc, take three men and track back to the end of the road, just behind the last line of Gate," Jon said over his shoulder. "Mebbe these sneaky fuckers will try and get some sec behind the wall and between us and the warriors."

"In which case we'll have our backs exposed," Petor added.

"Gentlemen—for you are no longer boys—I tip my hat to you. Or at least, I would if I was at present in possession of such an article," Doc murmured. "A splendid idea..."

With which, Doc slid down the back of the wag, reloading the LeMat percussion pistol as he went. He beckoned three of the Gate men to him.

"Gentlemen, we have the hordes pinned down to the front, but mayhap they will try to inveigle their way to our rear, between ourselves and the main battle, thus creating not only a bridgehead for themselves but a very sticky situation for ourselves."

One of the men, a swarthy, squat man with a beard and deep brown eyes, looked puzzled. "Cut to the chase, Doc, and tell us what the fuck we're supposed to be doing."

"Of course, of course," Doc replied, his wandering mind suddenly sharpening as the necessity for speed in such a situation suddenly hit him. "Forgive the foolish ramblings of a man old before his time. You two—" he indicated the two who hadn't spoken "—take that side and make sure that none of the Illuminated Ones try to get at our rear from around the sides.



"As for you," he said to the swarthy man who had questioned him, "you come with me and we'll take the other side." Doc indicated each side he spoke of with a flourish of his silver lion's-head cane. "Now, get to it, and swiftly, for there may not be much time," he snapped.

As the two parties went their separate ways, the Illuminated Ones to the front of the wags attempted another surge forward. It was doomed to failure...

Jorgensen's tactic had been simple and could have been ruthlessly effective. A small group of sec men would come up through the hidden exits into the compound and converge on the point where the men and wags of the Gate tribe were waiting for the Amazons to finish battle. Their attention would be focused in the opposite direction to the surprise attacking force, and it would be simple for the Illuminated Ones to blast the menfolk and take cover from any retaliatory fire by taking shelter in the doorways along the sidewalk.

The flaw in that being that Jorgensen hadn't accounted for the Gate menfolk having an idea that the attack was about to take place and opening up as soon as his people were in view. Then, the shelter in the doorways became the only place where they could avoid an instant chill, and what should have been protection became a prison where the only escape was to move out into the arms of a chilling.

Beneath ground level, observing this on the banks of monitors, and acutely aware of the sidelong glances coming his way from Simon, Al stammered the order for a small group of sec to detach from the rear of the action and circle around on each side, coming up between the main battle and the rear of the wags.

Even as Al spoke, Simon stared at the monitors in disbelief. He had seen Doc and the swarthy man leave the rear of the wags and make their way toward the junction where the sec force would attack. Checking another monitor, he could see that another two men from the wags were conducting a similar maneuver in the opposite direction.

"Er, Al..." Rack said quietly, tapping the sec chief on the arm with an index finger and using the same finger to point at the two monitors. "Al, are you certain about that? Maybe you didn't..." He let his words dangle, unfinished, in the air.

"Shit," Al muttered, seeing all too clearly that he was sending his people to their chilling.

While he watched, the front line of the attack rounded the corner of a building and entered a hail of fire from the Gate forces, the two men with rifles repeating fire from their Sharps and Lee Enfield .303 to cut down three men before the others following fell back, yelling into their microphones a cacophony of garbled confusion that came in red static through Al's headset.

On the other side, Doc loosed a charge of shot that ripped into the chest of the first person to confront him, the woman's uniform shredding like her flesh and the splintered bone beneath as she was thrown backward into the man behind. That saved him, as the ball shot was next, flying harmlessly over his head to shatter the visor and helmet of the third warrior in line, whose microphone cut off with a violent crackle as he gurgled a voiceless scream.

Simon leaned across and gripped Al by the arm. "We're getting slaughtered out there. Let them come to us here, where we can really fuck them over." Casting a glance back at the monitors and the carnage outside, he wasn't sure if he really believed that, but he had to say something to jolt Jorgensen from his frozen and disbelieving stupor. Even as he looked, the Illuminated One who had been saved from Doc's second shot by the falling body of the chilled soldier in front of him had managed to scramble to his feet, only to be taken out by a blast from the blaster carried by the swarthy man beside Doc.

Jorgensen shook his head, unable to believe that his tactics had gone so wrong. "This is a fuckin' nightmare," he whispered before craning forward over the monitors and yelling into the mouthpiece of his headset, trying to cut across all the noise from his confused, wounded and dying sec force.

"All units, all units, listen! Fall back. Just get the fuck out and regroup at base. Fall back now."

"THEY'RE FALLING back, John," Mildred yelled over the shrieks of the Amazons and the roar of blasters. She was standing in a combat shooting stance near the Armorer, both hands steadying her Czech-made ZKR as she took careful aim at the exposed Illuminated Ones.

"Yeah, but it may be a blind," J.B. shouted back over the chattering sound of his Uzi. "I reckon we should keep firing until the last of the bastards have disappeared."

"I'll second that," Dean yelled, training his Browning Hi-Power on an open door, "but I reckon Mildred's right."

It soon became apparent that Mildred was correct, and the firing from the Amazons and Ryan's people soon slowed to nothing as it became apparent that the Illuminated Ones had withdrawn into the building.

Keeping their blasters ready, the Gate gathered in the center of the forum to hear their queen.

"Looks like we win this round," she said, "but if we're going to follow them in there, well, they've got the drop on us, then."

"A suggestion," Ryan put in. "Mebbe we establish a bulkhead just inside the building, secure it so that we aren't in the open but we've also gained ground. Then mebbe we can get an idea of the layout before we go any farther."

Gloria nodded. "Good. Tammy, get the wags out here, see how the men have fared."

Then, turning as the auburn-haired warrior set off for the trailing caravan, the queen turned to her sister. "Get their blasters, Marg. Detail some to help. Then we gather the chilled."

Jak and Dean helped Margia and two of the Amazons to gather the blasters. There were twenty-three dead Illuminated Ones around the five exits, and all the blasters had been left behind. In contrast, there were only three chilled Gate warriors.

Tammy arrived with the wags. Jon and Petor had, at her behest, gathered the blasters from the chilled Illuminated Ones that the menfolk had accounted for, giving the tribe another twelve laser blasters.

"Add those to what we've already got and we've damn near got enough for every one of us," Margia enthused. "I say we hand them out when we set up inside."

J.B. and Mildred exchanged worried glances. Gloria caught sight of it, and without having to ask knew why they were worried.

"Let's just get ourselves sorted first, Marg," the queen stated simply. "We can worry about their blasters later. Shit, we haven't done too badly with what we've already got." And she turned to supervise the disposal of the dead Gate warriors, leaving Margia to fume to herself.

Jak and Tammy scouted through the front of the building, reporting that the lower level was now empty although the ways into the redoubt were obvious. The only conclusion could be that the Illuminated Ones would defend their base from the lower level, trying to lure the Gate into a rash attack that would entrap them. There was also a large lobby in the center of the floor from which a series of corridors ran. While that provided many avenues of possible attack, by its very openness it also gave them a chance to secure their base from all angles.

The companions stood guard with some of the Gate warriors while the others conducted a simplified version of the cremation ceremony, something that had obviously evolved over the years for a situation such as this. Dousing the chilled corpses in gasoline and oil, they were fired with flares that Margia told Petor to fetch from the armory wag. The magnesium flares were obviously rarely used for their original purpose, and had been stored especially for such an unorthodox use.

When the ceremony was concluded, Gloria turned to the rest of the tribe.

"Let's get ourselves settled into the building. Secure camp in the middle of it and then we'll start to plan our next move. Right, friend Ryan?"

The one-eyed warrior nodded. "Sounds good to me."

## Chapter Fifteen

"Set up and take up defensive positions. We wait here and plan. Needs must, sweeties..."

Gloria's voice rang out over the general hubbub as the Gate caravan entered the double doors, easing the wags through the large gap in the front of the building. Once they got inside the empty stone circle that formed the centerpiece of the lobby, their voices, footsteps and the ringing of the mules' hooves on the marble floor echoed up into the high cavern of the ceiling.

"Look for any cameras that you can see," Ryan said to his people, who were clustered around him in order to be able to communicate easily with one another. "Take out anything that could be an old tech surveillance device with a handblaster. And spread that among the Gate so that we don't cause panic when we shoot."

"That's if they can hear us above this damn noise," Mildred added wryly.

"Or the blasters," J.B. finished, almost to himself.

The companions spread out among the Gate, telling those warriors they passed what they were doing. Jak was the one to tell Gloria, as he passed her. She smiled and agreed with Ryan's decision before devoting herself to the task of organizing her people.

As he went about his task, Doc mused on the size of the building as a whole. The area in which they were making a temporary base was approximately a hundred yards square, with an elevation of something like 150 feet. Once upon a time, in the days before skydark when it had been a working military—or, at least, paramilitary—base, the hall in which they were now encamping would have contained functional office furniture and be used as a reception and meeting room, coming as it did at the

junction of many corridors. Doc suspected that this would be the largest part of the web of offices, rooms and corridors that ran the length and breadth of the building.

If his suspicions were correct, then this would be the largest single room in the building. Instead of a large central point from which the spokes of corridors and smaller offices and rooms ran off like the interweaving strands of a spiderweb, this would be like the fixed point from which the corridors radiated out and along and up, like the fine lines on the petal of a flower would radiate from a point near the stamen. This was the stamen. Why not? Anyone attacking from outside—particularly if it was an aerial attack—would assume that the largest point, and point of control, would be central. Thus deceived, it would put their attack off kilter and enable those inside the building to defend from a stronger position.

All of which made alarm bells ring deep in the recesses of Doc's mind. There was something about this design that was familiar to him. He had seen it somewhere. And somewhere recently. Through the labyrinthine corridors and avenues of his mind, he searched for where this sighting had been. So much so that he very nearly missed one of the hidden cameras, about twenty feet up and hidden behind a dust and begrimed pillar that had once been adorned but was now starkly desolate. It was this starkness that allowed the camera to show where once it would have been hidden.

Doc raised the LeMat and fired, the heavy metal smashing the deep-set lens of the camera and twisting the metal casing, raining shards of loosened glass into the arena below. It crashed harmlessly to one side of the armory tent, watched by Jon and Petor.

"Nice shooting, Doc," Petor remarked, "but try to look where you're landing it, yeah?"

"My apologies, dear boy. I was temporarily distracted," Doc replied with a grin, one that spread farther as he suddenly recalled, memory spurred, where he had seen a similar interior building design.

Around the large central hall, which was beginning to sound less empty as the Gate filled it and built their base camp with defenses that deadened the sound of the empty stone and baffled them against echo and attack, the air rang with solitary spaced shots, as Ryan's people took out the sec cameras. Mildred relished the task, leveling the Czech-made ZKR at regular intervals, lining up along the barrel sight and picking a spot dead center to the small, opaque lens of each camera. Shutting out the noise and bustle around her as she stood deathly still, her plaits loose around her shoulders and her feet rock solid on the floor, she was almost back at the last Olympics before the nukocaust, competing in another time, another place. It was only a temporary escape, but it helped her to focus herself. It created within her an oasis of peace. It also enabled her to take out her targets with ease.

On the other side of the hall, Krysty and Dean had taken a section of the wall and high ceiling space to themselves, and started side by side, then worked slowly away from each other. Dean's Browning Hi-Power was a better target pistol, and perhaps better suited to the task than Krysty's .38 caliber Smith & Wesson blaster. Nonetheless, the Titian-haired beauty was no less accurate than the young Cawdor, just of necessity slower as it took fractionally longer to sight on the Smith & Wesson for the higher cameras.

Jak had disdained the use of his Colt Python. The blaster was an excellent man-stopper and could cause considerable damage, but wasn't the right handblaster for the task at hand. He had handed the Python to Gloria and requested the use of her Vortak. It had a larger round capacity than the Python, and the smaller caliber shot along with the gas-buffered recoil system enabled him to shoot with a greater swiftness and accuracy over longer distances. The speed was a necessity as they had to knock out as many cameras as possible before the enemy in the redoubt below had an opportunity to make a clear overall picture of what exactly the Gate were doing. And the accuracy was needed for those cameras

that were secreted high in the vaulted ceiling of the chamber.

"Dark night, this is like one of those old churches I've seen in pics," J.B. murmured to Ryan as the two men stood side by side in the sector of the chamber that they had elected to clear.

"Mebbe it is," the one-eyed man replied. Then, noticing the puzzled look in the Armorer's eyes, Ryan expanded. "Some people believed in a god who would bring them salvation from the shit around them, and some people believed in blasters and bombs bringing them salvation from the shit around them. Same old shit, different solution. So why not the same kind of building for the same kind of faith?"

"Whatever." The Armorer shrugged. "The only thing that mattered was who could beat the shit out of who when the going got tough. Blasters and bombs would sure help then."

"It's a point of view," Ryan commented, sighting the Steyr on a camera that was high in the vaulted chamber, partially hidden behind a small buttress that ran off a pillar to the high ceiling. Squeezing gently, he let off a shot that whip cracked in the air, echoed almost immediately by a similar—though deeper—crack as the camera shattered under the high velocity shell.

J.B. sighted Ryan's SIG-Sauer on a camera that was more within handblaster range and loosed a shot that took out the lens with a minimum of effort and fuss—a typical J.B. Dix move. His very movements were easy and laconic, with an ease that belied the razor sharpness behind the move. He and Ryan had elected to take their sector together as the Armorer had been swift to point out that target shooting with handblasters would be efficient for those cameras that were within easy view—but those that lay farther up in the ceiling and walls of the chamber presented a problem. To take them out was hard enough. To even spot them in the first instance might require a magnified sight such as that on Ryan's Steyr.

The one-eyed warrior agreed, and so he accompanied the Armorer and was sighting higher and farther up than his friend, taking out those cameras where a single handblaster shot might not be enough. It would be stupid to waste ammo on two SIG-Sauer shots where one from the Steyr would suffice.

Taking out the cameras in J.B.'s allotted sector gave Ryan some idea of what he was looking for, and he soon left the Armorer behind, moving swiftly around the chamber, joining the other members of his party and covering their areas at the higher level, picking out those sparsely but carefully concealed cameras that occupied the upper levels.

Eventually he was satisfied that all the sec cameras had been taken out. There was always the possibility that there might be one or two that had escaped detection, but the sight on the Steyr was so powerful that the odds were against that.

"We're as secure as it's possible to be," he said to his assembled crew. He dispatched Jak to tell Gloria, and the Gate queen responded by informing the albino that the base camp was also secured and guarded at all points leading off the large hall.

"Now we've got ourselves really dug in, I think we'd better talk about what the fuck we do next, don't you, honey?" she said to the albino.

Jak allowed her a smile. Rare on his scarred visage, he found that the warrior queen had an ability to inspire them in him. "Sure. Can't stay here forever," he replied. "You and Ryan need talk tactics."

"Then talk we'd better. Eat, as well. I don't know about you, sweetie, but there's nothing like a chilling to work up an appetite. I'll set the stupidworks men to it." She added, before smiling, "Not that it includes

you, of course."

DOWN ON THE FIRST level, where the sec monitors were set up, the Illuminated Ones were unaware of the ease that had descended over the Gate camp. Al and Simon were standing in front of another bank of monitors, these all in darkness. The monitor system for the interior hall was like that for the sec cameras on the exterior of the building. Whereas the vid systems and screens for those cameras that were dotted around the compound—and also on the corridor system in the interior of the building—were sectioned off into individual rooms to allow the vid watcher to concentrate his attention entirely on his sector, the monitor systems to cover the exterior and main hall of the central building were set up in a bank that would provide an overall picture of proceedings and enable a sec chief and a trained observer to pick out tactical points and direct a defensive or attacking action.

Except that this strategy didn't allow for the cameras to be taken out. From their position on the upper level of the redoubt, Simon and Al watched in mounting horror as screen after screen went dark, watched each time as one of Ryan's people was caught full in the camera eye as they lined up the shot, then vanished in a blink as the mechanism was shattered and the vid link severed.

Simon looked at Al from the corner of his eye, not wanting the sec chief to realize that he was being stared at. The older man was red in the face from a mixture of tension and suppressed rage, except around the tightly set lips, which were white from the pressure of his clamped jaw. His eyes bulged as he kept his anger and rage within, and Simon was certain he could hear Jorgensen's teeth grinding, even from a distance.

"So what do you want me to do, Al?" Rack asked in a voice that came out much smaller, and more timid, than he would have liked.

There was no answer, and Rack passed an awkward few seconds wondering if he had been heard. He was about to ask again when Al replied in a strangled voice that seemed to be forced from the back of his throat.

"Do nothing, Simon. This is my baby. And they'll learn soon enough."

With which, Al turned on his heel and strode rapidly from the room, leaving Rack in front of the darkened bank of monitors. The observer felt awkward. Should he stay and await further orders? Should he attempt to follow Jorgensen so that he, too, could report? Or should he just try to get the hell out of the way before all hell broke loose, as it surely would.

For Simon knew that Jorgensen was making a complete mess of the situation. He was only an observer, but even he—without training—could see that the situation was absurd. They had a vastly superior arsenal and greater manpower, and yet they now had this group of savages almost inside their base. Things couldn't get worse than this, could they?

THE REDOUBT WAS HUGE. It ran to seventeen levels, burrowing deep into the earth, each level heavily reinforced to secure it against the pressure of the level above and the earth and rock surrounding. It had taken years of work in the two decades before the nukocaust to complete, and even then there were some areas where work had been stopped by skydark, and was only now being resumed and finished with what materials were at hand. It had been a vast undertaking by the secret cabal known as the Illuminated Ones, and the knowledge of how a black budget within the U.S. military-industrial complex had been set up and diverted to insure the completion of this and the other bases of the cabal had been handed down from generation to generation to insure that the importance of security and secrecy was emphasized and maintained.



Which was why Al Jorgensen felt distinctly uncomfortable when he entered the chamber where the central council met. A quorum of eight people—four male and four female—served as the central council. The tasks and divisions codified within the pseudo-military setup of the Illuminated Ones had been established before the nukeraust, and maintained in order to keep a structure during the long years of being hidden from view. Although these structures were rigid, the young ones born during those generations weren't immediately assigned tasks by heredity.

Rather, they were educated, assessed and then allotted their sections according to whatever gifts they might possess. Thus, unlike any other pockets of predark old tech and old ways that might have existed the Illuminated Ones had insured that their redoubt ran smoothly because of competence.

Those who served on the quorum were from the administrative and comp-tech branches of the redoubt. These people had revealed a knack for their tasks during the years of education, and took turns of six months on the leading quorum before returning to their regular tasks until such time as their rota decreed they serve again. Like everything in the redoubt, it was ordered and streamlined to serve as efficiently to the cause as possible. Competence was the watchword, and with their desire to prolong and extend resources for as long as possible, the worst crime was incompetence.

Which was also why Jorgensen was so uncomfortable about facing them. He wasn't a stupid man. In fact, in simulation he had revealed himself as far and away the best for his task. He prided himself on his ability to manage a job. And the fact that he now stood before them as a failure who was endangering their existence was something that hurt his pride deeply. He wasn't afraid of what they would do to him for his failure. In truth, in his eyes he deserved whatever they might decree. The primary shame was that he had failed himself as much as he had failed the cause.

He stood before the quorum in the sparsely furnished room, loosely at ease and staring at a fixed point above their heads. He couldn't bear to look any of them in the eye.

The black metal tables and chairs, padded in black leatherette, absorbed all the light and sound in the room, so that even under the fluorescent glare the lighting seemed subdued, and the multihues of the one-piece uniforms worn by the eight quorum members in front of him seemed to be as muted as the mood evinced by his entrance.

"You don't look happy, Al," said one of the women on the quorum. She leaned forward in her chair, her long, fine blond hair falling over her forehead. "So I take it that it's not good news."

Jorgensen sighed. "I've failed. Maybe you should appoint a replacement taking effect immediately."

"That would be impossible, and you know that," she replied, but with a tone of sympathy in her voice rather than reproach. "Is it really that bad?"

"Maybe worse," Jorgensen said, bringing his gaze down from the fixed point so that he could look her in the eye. "I've fucked up big style, Eve. When it came to it, I just wasn't up to the task. And it's put us all in danger."

Eve Goulden—head of the quorum by virtue of it being her turn, and a comp tech who had a friendly relationship with Jorgensen—shook her head gently. "What's the situation, Al? Put us in the picture and let us be the judge of what's going on."

So he outlined all that had occurred since the Gate tribe and their allies had entered the compound, not

flinching from a single detail, including the massacre of his sec force in front of the building, and the fact that the sec-vid cameras had been shot out so that there was now no way of knowing what the invaders were doing until they—perhaps—came in range of a camera secreted in one of the myriad corridors.

"Of course, that assumes that they proceed in such a fashion and don't know exactly where they're heading."

"Which would be?" Goulden questioned.

Jorgensen shrugged. "The elevators and shafts down into the redoubt. I've given up thinking that they know nothing, and maybe should just think that they know everything. Shit, at least that way there's less chance of them taking me by surprise. You know what I'm saying?"

"It's a fair point, I guess," Goulden mused. "But why the hell would they know about the redoubt?"

"Come on, they've been heading in a direct line for us. They knew what they were doing when they were in the compound. I'm certain my attempts to direct them just played right into their hands. And the way they spotted the sec cameras and shot them out when they got in here? No, I can't believe that's all just blind luck. They knew what they were doing. And I reckon they may just have been heading for us."

Goulden looked at the other members of the quorum. "This is worrying, people. We've been working away without figuring on anyone out there knowing we're here, let alone wanting to come after us."

"But why would they? What possible use could we be to them as they are?" asked one of the male quorum members.

It was Jorgensen, shrugging, who answered. "Equipment, stores—it's all hard currency out there these days. We're relatively sheltered here, but I've heard tales of other skirmishes. Could be they got wind of us from one of those trading parties that have passed by, maybe put two and two together and come up with the magic number. Sure as shit they aren't stupid, right?" he added with an edge of bitterness.

Goulden took in her fellow quorum members with a sweeping glance. "Well, if worse comes to worst, then we move on. Right?" She waited until they had all nodded their agreement—a couple of them with some reluctance. "Good," she said finally. "The way I see it is that we don't really have much of an option. But our best hope is to make sure that it actually doesn't come to that."

"How do we do that?" Jorgensen asked her helplessly.

"Well, what do you suggest, Al? After all, you're our sec chief here, right? We have that much faith in you."

Jorgensen's visage brightened visibly. "Well, if it comes to that, I guess the best thing to do is secure all entrances into the redoubt, posting guards with heavy armament. Also, I would suggest we go to high alert status and prepare for an immediate evac. We shouldn't have to do that, but I'll be fucked if I'm going to let myself be responsible for the possibility of a screwup that big."

Goulden smiled at him. "You've calmed down and cheered up a lot already, Al, and I think it's helped your thinking. Between us all, we can see off this challenge. After all, who do these people think they are, for fuck's sakes?"

"YOU WANT TO WHAT?" Ryan asked incredulously.

Doc shrugged uncomprehendingly, unable to grasp why Ryan was so bemused.

"I believe I made my request quite clear. I wished to—"

"Yeah, you wished to examine all the old documents that Gloria carries in her personal belongings. Doc, why the hell do you want to look at all that now? When we're going to have to work out what the hell our next move is going to be? What the fireblasted hell could you want—?"

The one-eyed warrior suddenly broke off into silence. Could it be that Doc had dredged something from his memory that tied in with something in the documents? He fixed the older man with a penetrating gaze from his icy blue orb.

Doc immediately divined his meaning. "Exactly, my dear Ryan. It was only when I exchanged some friendly repartee with the young men Jon and Petor that the proverbial penny dropped for me. This building and the way in which it is laid out appear somewhere within the old documents that the queen carries with her...presumably for such a moment as this. Perhaps, in times past and when the legends were better remembered, before the inability to read entered the gene pool and swung them away from a straight and true path on their mission, the documents were known to be kept for such a purpose." Ryan looked at Doc, delaying an answer while he added the whole thing up in his mind. Doc's reasoning would make sense, and as for his assertion that the documents held a map of this shadow Pentagon... Well, Doc might have fragile grasp on reality that could, at times, falter into the realms of madness, but he was also capable of mental feats that would leave lesser men grasping at reason.

When Doc had approached Ryan, the one-eyed warrior was sitting apart from the rest of the group, accompanied only by Krysty. They were discussing what they would do if they got through the coming battle without being chilled, and Jak decided to go with the Gate when the two groups parted company. Losing Jak would be a wrench, as he was a good fighter and a good friend, but it wouldn't be the first time, and somehow their paths always seemed to cross again. So it was that, even when Ryan raised his voice in surprise, it didn't attract anything other than idle curiosity from Dean, J.B. or Mildred. Jak—almost as if to prove the point Ryan and Krysty were discussing—was with Gloria, as the Gate and their traveling companions took some much needed R and R, guarded on all sides, before settling on a battle plan. Although on enemy territory, they felt secure as the very thing that made the corridors difficult to negotiate as an attacking force also made them easy to defend.

Krysty broke the silence. "I think Doc may have a point, lover. If there is something in those papers, then it could change whatever plans Gloria may be making at this moment, or whatever we may be thinking of doing. It won't be hard to get access to them, as Petor always keeps Gloria's things to hand. I think we should ask her."

Ryan nodded decisively. "Yeah, of course you're right. I just wish your timing was a little better, Doc," the one-eyed warrior added with a grin.

Doc returned the favor. "I do not do it on purpose, my dear boy. I think that sometimes my mind just refuses to work as I would wish."

Ryan rose to his feet. "Okay, let's go and ask Gloria if we can see the documents, and if you can find the one you remember."

"Oh, it is there. Rest assured that it is there," Doc murmured decisively.

Before approaching Gloria, Ryan went over to where J.B., Mildred and Dean were resting, and told them all that had transpired between himself, Krysty and Doc.

"Then we'd better be with you," J.B. said as he placed his fedora firmly on his head and pushed his spectacles back up onto the bridge of his nose.

Rising to her feet, Mildred agreed. "When Doc finds what he's looking for, then I think we need to see it to make up our own minds about what it means."

Dean also scrambled to his feet. "Yeah, not just that," he said with humor, "but I've just got to see Jon and Petor's faces when they realize that Doc's not as crazy as they think."

Doc wrinkled his brow. "It is actually a debatable point, I suspect," he said distantly.

"What is?" Dean asked, puzzled.

Doc looked at him, wide-eyed. "Why, whether I really am as crazy as they think," he answered disarmingly. Then he added, "By their terms, at least."

Mildred shook her head, plaits waving wildly around her head. "I know what my answer would be, you old fool, but crazy is maybe the only way to get by around here these days. If you're right, there's no way they're going to make a fuss about whether you're all there in the head."

"There is only one way for us to find out," Doc said brightly. He turned to Ryan. "Lead on, dear boy, lead on."

The party made its way through the resting crowd of Amazons and their menfolk. The lobby of the building where they had set up temporary camp was large, but not so large that the combined numbers and bulk of the Gate and their caravan hadn't actually filled the space to an extent where, while they were at their ease, it was actually hard to move around freely.

So it took a few moments for the companions to cover the short distance to the point where Jak and Tammy were seated with Gloria, discussing possible tactics for attacking the Illuminated Ones—once they could find a way into where their enemy was based. As the companions approached, Krysty could hear Jak trying to explain the concept of the redoubt and how it worked to the two warrior women, but his lack of vocabulary and narrative skill was making it difficult. From the looks on the faces of the two women, they were having more than a little trouble grasping what exactly he meant.

"Jak, Doc's had an idea that could help you out here," Krysty said as they came near.

The albino looked up, relief in his eyes at this burden being lifted. "Glad hear. Words not strong point," he said.

"Everyone has their own ways, sweets," Gloria added softly. "Yours are more practical, is all."

"And so is Doc's suggestion," Ryan said, hunkering down. "We really need to go through all those papers that you carry with you."

Gloria fixed him with a puzzled stare, her own icy blue eyes penetrating Ryan's singular diamond-blue orb. "My heritage? They're precious, honey, and this is neither the time nor the place to start fucking with our history."

"Madam," Doc cut in softly, but with a tone of authority in his voice that betrayed in its weary edge the experiences of someone who had led a unique and unbelievable existence, "I realize the sacred importance of the words and pictures you carry with you. They have the weight of your history and destiny in them. But I believe that the history and destiny has arrived. This is the time and place of which those documents speak. This is perhaps that for which you have spent so long searching, and within those papers—handed to your forebears so long ago when they embarked on this quest—there is the key to our current situation."

Gloria grinned her lopsided grin and reached out to Doc, ruffling his mane of white hair with a suddenness that caught him completely by surprise and off guard, so much so that he almost looked embarrassed.

"You, on the other hand—you're very good with words. So good that you almost lose me in them. So you think some of the sacred texts are about here?"

"In the proverbial nutshell, madam, if that old saw is something that makes sense in these times. Yes, I believe that when you showed us those papers some time back I was privy to witness no less than a map of this very place. For reasons that would take too long and would be too, too bizarre to unveil right now, I had heard of such a place as this before. It took some time for my addled and frankly decaying synapses to make the connection, but I believe that— if I am correct—then we will have discovered the way to access the bolt hole of the Illuminated Ones."

Tammy blew out her breath loudly. "Shit, you can't be that crazy, 'cause I never heard anyone who was use words like that! What do you think, Glo?" the auburn-curled Amazon asked her queen.

"I say that mebbe crazy men aren't as stupidworks as the rest of their kind."

She smiled, then called out, "Petor, get over here, honey."

The gangling youth who was the queen's bearer appeared at her side as if from nowhere, showing that the secret training he and Jon had undertaken to be better warriors than the majority of Gate menfolk had been of some benefit, which Gloria duly noted.

"I'm going to have to watch you," she murmured with a raised eyebrow, "'cause that was pretty warrior-like for a man. Anyway, get the chest from my things, sweets. We need to look at the sacred writings."

Petor disappeared into the crowd without a word, reappearing a scant few minutes later with the battered tin trunk in which the writings and maps that were sacred to the Gate were stored. He put it down before Gloria and handed her the key, which he kept secreted away where only he and the Amazon queen knew. It was among the belongings that traveled with the trunk, but inaccessible to anyone else, and he had extracted it before removing the trunk.

Opening the old tin box, which was rusty and battered on the exterior but carefully lined and cleaned on the inside, leading Ryan to the conclusion that the exterior decay was a blind to prevent the box being stolen by anyone who might think it important, Gloria carefully extracted the maps and documents, placing them before Doc.

"All yours, sweetie," she said quietly. "See if you can find it, but be careful."

Doc lifted the first piece of rolled paper and gently straightened it on the cold marble floor of the lobby, his eyes scanning its contents. As he did this, he murmured, "My dear woman, I would not dream of anything else. I shall treat it as I would my own aged, fragile bones."

A silence descended over the group as they watched Doc. It was almost as if the rest of the camp disappeared and a bubble of complete calm had enveloped the nine people clustered around the hunched figure of Doc Tanner, shutting out the rest of the Gate, the building in which they were situated, the compound, even the very Deathlands itself. Everything was focused on Theophilus Tanner.

And Doc was determined to find the right document. Muttering to himself, he unrolled paper after paper, laying it out flat and examining it carefully. Those that were full of text were immediately rerolled and stored back in the box. Those that were maps or diagrammatical in design were carefully examined, Doc poring over the detail, particularly on those that seemed to be of buildings rather than areas.

Gloria looked across at Jak, questioning in her glance. Had she done the right thing in allowing Doc access to these sacred writings, or was he just as crazy as he seemed? Jak read this in her glance and shook his head. He knew that sometimes the crazier Doc seemed, the more likely he was to be onto something.

"Hot pipe, I wish he'd find it," Dean murmured softly to Petor, "because I don't think I can take much more of the suspense."

Petor resisted the urge to laugh aloud at his new friend's comment. "Maybe he's not as stupidworks as he seems. Looks to me like he knows what he's after."

"Oh yeah, he does," Dean replied offhandedly, "but the trouble with Doc is he's likely to get sidetracked and then remember that he found it ten minutes ago."

Doc was oblivious to the stares and muttered commentary. His attention was focused solely on the papers in front of them, his lips moving soundlessly as he ran through his mind the images and words he could recall, trying to match them with each document as it unraveled before him. Had he really seen the map he remembered, or was it just a fevered imagining?

Doubts crept into the corners of his mind, black tendrils of hopelessness that his sanity had once again slipped... No, not now, not when he was so close to finding that which would help so much.

Doc unrolled another scrolled document. It was a map. Peering closely, banishing the doubts and fears beyond the furthest corners of his mind, Doc concentrated his attention on the paper in front of him.

He looked up with a smile spreading across his face. "I do believe I have found it..." he said slowly.

AL JORGENSEN was briefing his sec force. Down three levels from his meeting with the quorum, he was standing on a raised podium in a large, hangarlike room that was functional rather than decorative. The rock from which the redoubt had been hewn was still visible between the metal girders and struts that held the roof in place, and large neon tubing lights hung from thick-linked chains, bathing the vast hangar in a brilliant white light.

The podium on which the sec chief stood was in front of a large vid screen that, right now, showed a larger image of Jorgensen standing in front of a vid screen showing part of a larger image of Jorgensen. It was supposed to show the sec force what was going on in a potential area of combat, to acquaint and acclimatize them with their potential enemy and the territory in which they were moving. Unfortunately for



the sec chief, the sharpshooting of Ryan Cawdor and his companions had rendered this option impossible, and so Jorgensen was forced to rely on words and some diagrammatic maps of the ground floor that lay above them.

He fixed his eyes on the faces in front of him. He knew almost all of the sec force by name, and he felt as if he had let every one of them down. Taking a deep breath and exhaling slowly, he began.

"People, this isn't easy for me to say. You know we've been put on emergency standby to evac if necessary. It's our job to make sure that it isn't actually necessary. They've got us on the back foot for now, but we can turn that around.

"I know that I've failed—" he raised his hands to still a murmur of dissent from those in the sec force who had served longest under him "—no, hear me out. I've failed because we've lost a lot of people we shouldn't have. I underestimated our enemy, and my tactics were a crock. The only explanation I can give to you for the deaths of your comrades—and this is no excuse, mark you, but a search for a reason why—is that the simulations and manuals are no substitute for real live experience. We haven't had that, and just maybe we should count ourselves lucky that we've been left in peace so long. But the downside to this is that we got our asses kicked out there today. The only thing we can do now is learn from it and go back to kick their asses.

"They're clever. I'll give them that. And brave. They only have primitive weapons, although some of our laser rifles are now in their possession. They shouldn't really have had the chance to train and use them, but we can't be certain. What they do have is courage and a fighting instinct. They're also adaptable. It seems that the women are solely the fighters, apart from a small group of five men who are with them. They are most likely from another tribe or group, and this may be useful to us as their methods of fighting may be different and may cause some dissent and distraction in the heat of battle.

"They have a good grasp of tactics and a knowledge of some technology. The reason I have no footage to show you of them and their current position is because they've located and shot out the cameras in the lobby of the Pentagon. As far as we know, they're resting up there right now. Any move outside of that we can pick up on existing cameras.

"We do, however, have some footage of them taken earlier. Watch and digest, people."

Jorgensen sat down while the lights snapped out and video footage of the earlier journey through the compound played on-screen. It wouldn't be particularly instructive to the security team in terms of battle strategies, but it would, Jorgensen figured, give them some idea of the number and hierarchy of the opposition.

When the footage had finished, and the screen had gone blank, Jorgensen's amplified voice rang out from the mike attached to his one-piece suit.

"So that's what they look like, and this is where they are right now with all possible avenues of pursuit covered."

A diagrammatic map appeared on the screen. It was the ground floor of the building above. The entrance elevators and shafts to the redoubt below were marked in red.

"You can see where the danger points are, and where we will cover," he said briskly. "The important thing to remember now is that although we begin from a defensive position, we have an advantage in numbers, we have a knowledge of the layout that it's doubtful they have—though I stress we must never

underestimate them—and we now have an all too clear knowledge of how they make war." He paused to let this sink in, before adding, "We can't let them through. We have to wipe them out."

A COUPLE HUNDRED yards above the sec force, Gloria and Ryan were at Doc's shoulder as he hunched over the map.

"Are you sure about this, honey?" Gloria asked softly.

"As definite as it is possible to be," Doc said firmly but equally softly.

"I'm not getting at you, sweets, just remember that I can't read at all. None of us can," the Gate queen reminded him.

Doc favored her with a smile. "Of course, dear lady. I should not let my own creeping paranoias get in the way of what is, after all, a crucial point. But yes, let me reiterate for you that this is, without a shadow of a doubt, the thing I have sought. Herein lies the key to our attaining the promised land. If it is so, then indeed this is truly a sacred text."

Ryan put his hand on Doc's where the old man's lay upon the paper, obscuring part of the map.

"Time for the talking later, Doc," the one-eyed warrior said. "First of all we need to get acquainted with the layout of this place."

"Very well," Doc replied brightly, withdrawing his hand.

The map that lay beneath his hand was of the Pentagon—but not the one that had once stood in Washington and had long since been blasted to dust by the nukocaust. This was of an amended Pentagon, a "doppelganger" as the scribbled note on the edge of the yellowing paper described it, a shadow Pentagon with an altered floor plan and hidden extras, all of which were carefully marked on the diagram.

"Dark night, this is just what we need," J.B. said softly as he peered over Ryan's shoulder at the map. "It's got every shaft and elevator marked, and it even gives us sec camera positions."

"It's enough to make you believe in God—if he hadn't put us here in the first place," Mildred added.

Ryan's scarred and craggy face cracked into a grin as he looked first at Gloria, then at his people gathered around. "'Who gives a shit? This gives us an edge over the Illuminated Ones. After all, they're going to think we're stumbling around up here like children in the dark. And an edge is what we need, 'cause they've got the secured positions and the manpower."

"Yeah, maybe, honey," Gloria added, "but we've got destiny."

## Chapter Sixteen

Gloria stood before her people, Ryan to one side of her. Despite the fact that the one-eyed warrior, muscular and broad shouldered, stood more than a head taller than the Gate queen, her authority and

sense of purpose made her seem his physical equal.

"The time is near. This could be our moment of destiny, and at this moment it's vital that we keep it frosty and know exactly what we're doing." Her piercing blue eyes lit up with a zealous fire as she said, "This could be what we've waited for all these years. We could be the generation of Gate who actually reach the gateway itself. For this chance alone we should be thankful, and should not squander it lightly. It is thanks to our friends from outside that we have the little knowledge we possess of those who stand in our path, and it is also due to them that we are able to glean information from the sacred texts that may help us."

She glanced across at Doc. "Doc Tanner has deciphered the meaning of one of our old maps, and it is from this that we know the ways into the underground lair of those who guard the gateway. Together with Doc and Ryan Cawdor, I have worked out a plan of battle."

Moving forward into the throng of Gate who waited anxiously on her every word, the warrior queen began to single out some of her Amazons, tapping them on the arm or shoulder and murmuring one syllable commands in a tongue Ryan didn't recognize. The warriors thus selected split into small groups, obviously picked by the queen so that they would be able to fulfill specific tasks in the forthcoming battle. Some of the smallest and wiriest of the women were singled off into groups that would be able to traverse the smallest of spaces, while the larger and more heavily muscled were selected for a head-on attack.

The small groups continued to divide until there were eight of them, each consisting of five or six warriors. The men of the tribe were directed to keep base camp defended and the young of the tribe safe from harm. This, as ever, was the task they were trained and best suited for, especially in such circumstances that would demand close fighting and combat skills.

The companions divided up so that they, too, would travel with each of one of the groups. As the slightest in stature and musculature, Jak and Dean were singled out for two of the groups that had the smallest of the Amazon warriors. Mildred, J.B. and Krysty each took a group. Ryan would be with Gloria, and knew already from their discussions that he and the warrior queen would lead the main assault on the elevator shaft that should—if the plans were correct—lead directly into the lair of the Illuminated Ones.

Doc would travel in a group with Margia, and already he was eyeing the easy way in which the blond armorer was toying with a laser blaster.

"Do you think you will really get the chance to use that?" he asked with a raised eyebrow.

"I hope so, sweetie. If not, well, I just may have to make that chance." She smiled. It was a cold smile, the eyes stone hard.

Doc bit hard on his cheek to avoid giving anything away in his expression, but made a note to keep an eye on the blonde, even in the heat of a firefight. The laser blasters were erratic enough in the hands of those who knew how to use them, let alone in those of someone like Margia, who had no practical or combat experience with the weapon.

With the groups now divided, Gloria once more took her position at the head of the camp, with Ryan and Doc close at hand.

"Now that we're in combat groups for the battle ahead, it's time to talk tactics. We're lucky enough to

have discovered—via Doc Tanner—that we have a map to this building that lets us see all the entrances into the places below ground where the guardians of the gateway have based themselves. They don't know we have this, but they know we're here, so we'd have to be complete stupidworks to assume that they don't have every entrance guarded, except maybe for these..."

She beckoned to certain groups—those including Jak and Dean, and those consisting of the slightest and most petite members of the tribe—to gather closer to where she and Doc held the old map. The other groups moved in behind, but allowed those indicated to gather at the front, as that was obviously of the most concern to them.

"Right, pay heed, and pay it well," the warrior queen began. "There are passages marked out on here that have nothing to do with the elevator shafts and emergency stairwells that the guardians will expect us to find. They're, well, what did you say they were, Doc?" she asked, turning to the old man.

With a gentle inclination of his head to acknowledge her request, Doc indicated the faded blue ink that marked some passages on the aged map.

Tracing with his index finger, Doc began, "Every redoubt, which is what they called these places in the days before the nukocaust, was equipped with its own air conditioning and purifying plant with which to take in contaminated air and clean it up for the consumption of those living beneath the surface. Although the plant itself should obscure the way into the redoubt, this is not actually the case as the supposedly airtight seals dividing some sections of the shafts are not exactly that airtight. It is strange," he continued, looking into the distance with a wry smile, "how the greed that could cause skydark could also cause those who created it to overlook the simplest of safety precautions. One backdraft and the air purification system would be shot to shit, as they used to say. Ah, the vagaries of the human condition never cease—"

"Big words, Doc. Stick point," Jak cut in pithily.

Doc's smile grew, and he shook his head. "Of course, dear boy, of course. My apologies, my friends. The point being, of course, that it is possible to break through the partitions and gain access through from here—" he indicated one shaft on the map "—to here." His finger sharply pushed along the faded and cracked paper to a parallel shaft. "And by entering this shaft we find ourselves in the interesting position of being among the maze of service shafts and tunnels that run between the levels of the redoubts and behind walls. These will allow the selected groups to move freely along and around the forces below ground, using the service grilles as points of observation and exit, and leaving plenty of scope for surprise attack on the enemy."

"That's why I've selected those of you who are the most petite," Gloria added. "The shafts and the access to them will be pretty difficult, and no one's pretending that it's the best way to enter combat. But as you all know, there's no easy way to fight, and your size will enable you to access areas that others can't. The gods alone know that I'd join you, sweeties, if not for the fact that my position as queen makes it incumbent on me to join my fellow warrior Ryan Cawdor at the head of the firelight."

"I appreciate that," the one-eyed warrior said, "and if it's okay with you, I'll outline the rest of the plan."

"Go ahead, sweets," the warrior queen said with a smile. "It's your and Doc's plan more than mine. You guys know these places, and we don't."

Ryan nodded briefly and turned his attention to the assembled warriors, fixing them with his steely gaze.

"These are the access points," he said briefly, pointing out the shafts and stairwells. "The stairwells have heavy sec doors, and the elevators are large with sec locks. They move fairly rapidly, but the one thing we have to do is check for sec forces hiding on the roof, ready to fire on us through the access and service hatch. Hey, we know about this because we've done it to other sec forces," he added, looking across the crowd to J.B. for confirmation. The Armorer gave a brief smile in agreement.

"Number one rule—if there's a sec hatch, then check the fucker before getting into the line of fire," he said.

"Right," the one-eyed warrior agreed, his single word drawing the attention of the assembled Amazons and his own people back to the map in front of him. "The stairs will probably be guarded at the blind spots in their curves, and the elevators open onto corridors that will have perfect cover points for the defending force. So we have to be careful. These will demonstrate," he continued, taking two pieces of paper from Doc, on which the old man had made brief maps of one stairwell and one elevator opening. "These are general, but the design of these places is such that they hardly ever differ from level to level, redoubt to redoubt. Don't take this as the absolute truth, but heed the general lesson."

He took some time to explain the different angles of defenses and attack, making sure that he was understood on each point. Finally he was ready and indicated that to Gloria.

"Right, my people," she said briskly. "It's time for us to take our destiny in both hands. Don't fuck it up. Remember what the battle plan is, but always be open to the moment. Let us prepare."

The women linked hands, so that they formed a chain that ran around the camp, leaving out the men and the companions. Then Gloria began to chant. High, wild and keening in tone, it ran over three repetitive notes that rose and fell in a round that was taken up by other members of the tribe so that the notes ran over one another in rippling waves of sound. Listening to the women, and watching the expressions on their faces, rapt and caught up in a mass display of emotion that swept them up into a wave of power, Krysty felt her spine tingle, and her sentient hair begin to ripple and wave like the sounds around her. There was the intimation of the danger to come, and yet also an exultant feeling that it could be overcome.

Gloria stopped the chant, and the ripples died away as one by one the voices of the Amazons fell silent. It was as though they had counted the number of notes they had chanted, each voice stopping when it had reached the allotted number. When the Amazons were silent, Gloria spoke quietly.

"We're ready."

THE MAIN PARTY LEFT the lobby area that had been used as base camp, Ryan casting over his shoulder a terse reminder to the raiding parties headed for the service ducts and entrances to shoot out the sec cameras as they went down the corridors. It was possible that anyone watching might guess their intent, but it would be stupe move to let them actually see it through a camera left carelessly working.

Gloria and Ryan headed their party of warriors down the main corridor, as it was wider, with the remnants of plush marble fittings now dulled with age lining the route toward the sec doors at the far end. It was obvious that this was the main corridor if only from the fact that walls delineating it were bereft of any other doors, with no offices leading off as there were from the lesser corridors.

There were only three sec cameras along the 150-yard route, all spaced at regular intervals, and all of them fairly low and visible, with little attempt to hide them.

"They want us to know that they know we're coming, a pretty stupidworks move if you already know that," Gloria remarked as she shot out the first camera with her blaster.

"And we do know it," Ryan murmured in reply as he leveled the Steyr to take out the second at a longer distance.

The third camera was claimed by Gloria's Vortak, by which time they were almost on top of the elevator.

Gloria and Ryan exchanged glances as they reached the elevator doors. The warrior queen assented with a brief nod, and Ryan tapped in the sec code that was used in all military installations to open the elevator doors within a redoubt. It was a gamble that the code would also serve for a surface elevator, but not so much of a gamble that the military codes would also be used by a group like the Illuminated Ones. From their previous encounters with the group, Ryan knew that they used old military ways because many of them were working within the military-industrial complex, as well as serving as part of the covert organization.

Once the code had been entered, the sec doors swept open with a hiss of compressed air and whirring transistor circuits strained into life.

"Up on our level—lay you odds that's not by chance," Ryan muttered with his jaw set in a grim line.

"Best leave nothing to chance, then," Gloria said softly.

As one, Ryan and Gloria stepped into the empty elevator car. It was large and had recesses to each side of the door. Gloria swiftly covered these with the Vortak, but both were empty. Ryan had meanwhile reached up and thrust hard with the Steyr at the service hatch on the roof of the car. It gave way easily at the blow and was knocked backward on its hinge so that it hit the roof of the car with a dull thud that echoed inside.

He waited a fraction of a second and there was no response. Instinct told him that any reaction to the hatch flipping back would have been instantaneous, so he took that as his cue to go up and look. The height of the elevator car was only half a foot above Ryan's head, and he could easily reach up and grip firmly on the ledge around the hatch entrance. Flexing his powerful biceps and forearm muscles, he was able to lift himself up, springing up from his toes to propel his shoulders through the hatch, taking his free arm, still gripping the Steyr before him.

Using his elbow to pivot, he swung his head and shoulders through almost 360 degrees.

The top of the car was empty. With a grim smile, he dropped back to the floor of the elevator car, where he was greeted by Gloria.

"So they missed on that chance, yeah?" she said.

Ryan nodded. "So far, so good. Let's hope they get that slack all along the line."

Gloria beckoned to the rest of the attack group waiting in the corridor. They entered the elevator car and stood uneasily.

"Better get ready now," Gloria said briefly. Ryan waited until the warriors had drawn their handblasters and had their blades in hand, then keyed in the sec code for the elevator on the keypad that was situated



to the left-hand side of the inner elevator door. The doors hissed shut, and the elevator began to drop at a steady rate, registering to the assembled party as the merest pressure. But it was enough for some of the Gate warriors—not used to such tech—to exchange glances.

"It's the speed we're falling," Ryan said, catching their mute exchanges. "Don't think about it. Concentrate on what's about to happen..."

The elevator hit the first level, just as Ryan had punched in. It slowed suddenly, causing the stomach to lurch, but smoothly, too. Ryan inclined his head toward the warriors at his rear.

"This is it," he said simply, turning back to face the doors, giving Gloria a brief glance on the way. The Gate queen favored him with her lopsided grin, her eyes bright with the anticipation of battle.

The doors hissed and began to open.

"KRYSTY, YOU TAKE the door as you know the codes. Shit. I really hate old tech!" The Titian-haired beauty grinned as she passed Tammy and punched in the sec code on the door. Both women headed an eight-strong party that had taken one of the lesser elevators to the rear of the building. Along the way, they had taken out a number of sec cameras. "Shit, the number of cameras we've shot out, they're gonna know exactly where we're headed," Tammy said at one point.

Krysty shrugged in reply. "The good thing is that we'll know they'll be waiting for sure—no doubts, just decisive action."

And now, as Krysty keyed in the sec code and the doors of the elevator slid open, Tammy murmured, "Decisive action. That's exactly what we need. This waiting is getting to me."

Krysty turned to her. "Just stay frosty with it, Tam, and we can outfight these bastards. They don't know what they're up against."

Tammy laughed, tossing back her auburn curls. "Say that again, sugar. Now, let's get this bastard thing secured." She stepped into the elevator, blaster leveled for possible opposition, nerves on a razor edge.

THE PARTY INCLUDING Doc Tanner and Margia had already secured their elevator and were headed toward the first level. Doc had the LeMat loaded and the swordstick unsheathed from the cane that was both its disguise and protection. His eyes were wide, fueled by the adrenaline that pumped around his skinny frame. Doc was only too well aware of the frailties that his body could be prone to at the most inopportune moments. He prayed to himself that he would hold it together at the times when he most needed to, then looked across at Margia.

The blond armorer was staring at a fixed point just in front of her, and above the head of the Amazon warrior who would precede her out of the elevator. She had a Browning Hi-Power in one hand, and the other held a panga that she had taken especially from the armory. Similar in appearance to the blades carried by both Ryan and Gloria, the blonde had taken this panga and honed the edge to a point where it was razor sharp, and was almost as thin and sharp as the most finely honed scimitar. If Margia had been able to find a piece of silk, she would have tossed it in the air and swished showily at it with the blade to rip it and demonstrate the skill with which she had honed the blade.

Instead, she contented herself with matching Doc's gaze steadily. "Sweetie, anyone gets in the way of this, they're going to wish they'd run in the other direction," she told Doc, raising the blade slightly in the crowded elevator car. There was a manic gleam of blood lust in her eyes, but it wasn't the panga that

was causing Doc any worry. Rather, it was the captured laser blaster that lay across her shoulders, hanging easily on its strap. The blonde had insisted on bringing it along, despite the attempts of J.B. and Doc to dissuade her. Indeed, if anything, their imprecations had the opposite effect, making her more determined.

Margia may have been hyped up for battle, but this only made her more observant, and she noticed the direction of Doc's gaze.

"Yeah, babe, and if they get too far away for a nice piece of honed steel, then it may be a nice idea to just cook 'em up some. Yeah?" she questioned with a cackle.

Doc looked away, not wishing to answer. Margia's laughter, still tinged with the edge of madness, rang in his ears.

As the elevator hit the first level and stopped smoothly, it crossed Doc's mind that this was going to be interesting.

THE SHAFT WAS narrow and dark. There was enough room for Jak to move his elbows fairly straight and use them to help himself slither along, but not enough that he didn't, from time to time, scrape them on the metal walls. It was only the thickness of his camou jacket that stopped them bruising and grazing, and it flittered briefly across his mind that the Gate women behind him needed to be careful. They didn't have the protection on their arms that he had, and to dull their reflexes with stiffened muscles and tendons at this time could be disastrous.

But he said nothing. It wasn't his place. Besides which, this was a tribe of warriors whose instincts were honed and trained from birth and by experience, much like his own. He trusted that they would think the same as himself and take precautions immediately. The fact that there were no cries of suppressed pain from behind him bore mute testimony to that.

They had entered the shaft from a corridor on the ground level of the building, shooting out cameras along the way. In order to deflect attention from the point at which they actually entered, Jak had led the group through another two junctions, shooting the sec cameras along the way, before doubling back to the point where the access to the shaft lay. It was a simple matter to pull away the grille that was set low in the wall. The screws had succumbed to rust, the threads being nothing more than oxide that crumbled under the slightest pressure. Once the grille was removed, Jak took the lead and was the first to slither into the darkness.

Head and shoulders into the opening, he paused momentarily to define the best direction to take. He relied on the currents of air that still moved through the shafts to work out which direction would lead down. The air was being sucked gently into the cleansing and purifying plant that lay somewhere below and serviced the redoubt. To follow the current would take them downward to a point where they could break through to the service ducts for the redoubt.

Jak's red eyes shone in the darkness, adjusting to the slightest source of light. There was nowhere he had ever been that was totally dark. It was just a matter of adjusting to how little light there may actually be. Yes, if he went to the right, that should lead to a downward shaft, as the air would be to the rear of them, moving past. Jak slid the rest of his lithe frame through the narrow hatch.

Setting off without a word, he began to propel himself forward. He trusted the abilities of the Gate warriors to follow, even at the speed he was setting for them.

The first drop had to come soon. The light was so poor that even with his eyes adjusted to the almost total blackness, picking out more than normally pigmented eyes would be capable of, Jak found it hard to see where the darkness of the cold concrete floor became the darkness of an empty space.

Except that there came a point where the draft from the shaft behind them became mixed with the eddying current of air that was traveling from the opposite direction. These currents met in a swirl that bespoke of one thing alone—a shaft leading down toward the purification plant.

Jak slowed his pace, aware that a wrong move could plunge him headfirst down a sheer drop, with not enough room to twist and save himself.

"Wait," he said softly to the party at his heels.

The Gate warriors slowed to a halt while Jak edged forward to the point where the air currents appeared to meet.

His fingers felt in the darkness and found the uneven and slightly jagged lip of a shaft. Inching his torso forward, he peered down, the crosscurrents of gently rippling air making his hair swirl gently around his head, white even in the lack of light. He couldn't discern anything beneath. There was only a total blackness.

"This way down. Not know where lead, so be careful," he said softly over his shoulder, eliciting the barest murmur of agreement from those to his rear. Aware that any sound would travel along the shafts, and perhaps even be amplified by a trick of acoustics, all were concerned with keeping noise and communication to a bare and essential minimum.

Jak contorted his wiry frame, straining muscles so that he could bring his knees up beneath his chin and pivot on his tailbone, ignoring the temporary pain on the hard surface. He wanted to turn his whole body in the narrow shaft, so that his feet instead of his head would hang over the lip of the downward shaft.

He could feel the sweat gather in a pool down the small of his back, could feel the camou jacket scrape against the concrete walls, the metal patches sparking with the force of their contact, could feel the muscles in his thighs cramp and burn as he pushed his body around so that he was facing the direction he wished.

Finally he was there. He paused to exhale slowly and deeply, allowing the adrenaline pulsing through him to calm, and for the fire in his tortured muscles to subside. He knew they would soon be protesting again, and for far longer and a far better reason.

Breathing slowly and deeply, Jak extended one leg across the shaft. It was about three feet wide, and would be about the right width for the maneuver he planned. Sliding over the edge of the lip, and bringing his knee up so that it tensed and supported his back against the wall that slid up behind him as he began his descent, Jak began the slow and painful descent toward the next level. From previous experience, he knew that the downward shafts were always staggered, so there was only the slightest chance that he was taking them down into the purification plant. If the shaft led straight down, there was no way anyone's muscles would last the distance. It was a necessary risk.

"NEARLY THERE," Dean whispered to the Gate warriors descending from above him.

Like Jak, Dean had led a Gate party through the shafts. He had felt a sense of unease as he entered and began the trek. The last time he had been in such a situation also involved the Illuminated Ones—or at

least, a connection to them—when he escaped from the mad mutie queen Jenna and her tame sec chief back in the ville of Raw. That time, Dean was weakened by the torture that Jenna had put him through in the name of her experiments with genetics. This time he was rested up and at a peak of fitness. But still, all the old fear came flooding back to him as he made his way through the narrow concrete shafts.

Ultimately it made him more determined to focus on the task ahead, and when Dean came across the first downward shaft, he didn't hesitate in negotiating it. Unlike their opposite party, Dean's band of Gate warriors was lucky in coming across two downward shafts soon after entering the maze of the air conditioning. As a result, they made good time and were now close to the point where the air conditioning and purification shafts ran parallel with the first level of service ducts for the redoubt.

Dean's left foot moved downward and hit empty air. He almost lost balance, as he had on the first downward shaft, but recovered with ease, extending his foot to judge the drop to the bottom of the shaft below. His toe touched without too much of a stretch, and he followed it, letting his other leg fall and taking the impact lightly.

"Bottom," he whispered up the shaft above him, preparing his fellow travelers for the drop.

Crouching to one side of the shaft, Dean could see nothing in the complete blackness. Unlike Jak's pigmentless eyes. Dean's orbs were at full dilation and yet could still see nothing. He could, however, feel the air brushing his cheek and rippling the down of hair on his forearms. From this, he knew the direction in which the air was being drawn, knew this would take them toward the heart of the redoubt.

It was the best direction to take. The farther they got into the redoubt, the better the chance of finding a panel connecting the air shafts and the service ducts.

"This way," he whispered, crouching lower and beginning to walk on. This far down, the shafts had grown taller and wider, and progress was easier, a byproduct of their need to be bigger in order to incorporate the necessity to pull in more air and dissipate the resulting pressure.

There was still no light, but Dean used his fingertips to feel along the walls. He was searching for a point where the cold roughness of the concrete was replaced by something icier and smoother—the panels connecting the two openings that were supposedly airtight, and had been placed in all the redoubts for purposes of service and maintenance.

He walked only a short distance when his fingers brushed across something that felt like the rounded end of a rivet or smooth nut. The roughness of the concrete ceased and was replaced by the cold smoothness of metal.

"Found it," he breathed, stopping. Sensing him halt rather than seeing him ahead of them, the rest of the party slowed until they were clustered behind him.

"So this is it, babes," whispered the Gate warrior nearest to him. "Tell ya something—if we've kept quiet for them up to now, there ain't no way that we can keep this next bit quiet."

Dean grinned at her, even though he was sure that she couldn't see him. "Who gives a shit," he said in return. "This is where the action begins."

J.B. HAD BEEN ALLOTTED to a party that would take one of the stairwells. Because of his experience in combat of this sort, the others in his group deferred to him. As one of them remarked, "You don't get sec stairwells and shit like that in the jungle, honey."

J.B. adopted a slightly different tactic than the other parties with regard to the sec cameras that lined the route to the hidden sec entrance. He and one of the Amazon warriors had gone ahead of their party and shot out all the cameras and then returned to their companions. The Armorer then held them back for a short while.

"They'll have been expecting us straight away, as soon as the sec monitors went down. We hold back, and their nerves will be shot to shit."

Timing himself on his wrist chron, J.B. counted in his head, then finally nodded. The taciturn Armorer didn't bother to offer instructions beyond what the Gate tribeswomen already knew from the briefing.

"Just follow and watch, stay frosty," was all he offered them.

It was all there was to say.

They made their way briskly but without hurrying to the sec door that stood between them and the stairs that spiraled hundreds of feet down into the earth. They had no idea where there would be a sec defense waiting for them, only that there would be, inevitably, at some point.

There was only one thing to do. J.B. punched in the code and heard, in the tense silence, the soft click of the sec lock as the door became accessible. The Armorer shifted his Uzi onto continuous fire and looked over his shoulder at the Gate women behind him. He gave a brief nod that was partly a gesture to them, and partly an affirmation to himself.

He pushed open the door, flattening himself to the wall, the rest of the group following suit. When there was no immediate chatter of blasterfire, or the coruscating beams of the laser blasters raking the now empty center of the corridor, J.B. waited a couple of seconds before inclining his head toward the empty stairwell and leading the war party.

AS J.B. HEADED OUT, Mildred was already halfway down to the first level, leading her party down the twisting concrete spiral that was lit in a dim glow by recessed fluorescent lights placed at regular intervals. Some of the tubes had blown out over the years, and Mildred was surprised that the sec force hadn't thought to either shoot out the rest of the lights or simply to turn them off at source. But she was glad that they had overlooked that, as it made progress easier.

One of the warriors, close by Mildred's elbow, leaned over a little farther and whispered in her ear.

"Guess they're waiting at the bottom for us—a last line from the first."

"Best not to assume that, girl, but I reckon you could be right. Just what the hell are they playing at? It's almost like they want us to walk into there."

"Could be 'cause we can't really go back," the woman replied. "You and me would make more fight of it, but mebbe they figure they're like spiders, and we're the willing flies."

Mildred looked down at her Czech-made ZKR. "Then we'd better be the kind of flies that have a nasty bite."

## Chapter Seventeen

"Fireblast! What are they doing?"

Ryan's bewildered yet triumphant cry cut through the sound of blasterfire and acted as a rallying call to the rest of his party. The triumphant whooping of the Amazon queen at his shoulder bolstered the spirits of the attack party yet more, and they tore into the opposition with relish.

As the elevator doors had opened, Ryan flattened half of the party into the recesses at the left-hand side of the car, while beckoning Gloria to do likewise on the right. As the doors opened with a gentle hiss of hydraulics, a crackle of laser blasts rent the air, and the beams uselessly hit the back of the car, scorching the metal and making it glow white with heat. The party within the car was hit by the wave of heat as it spread around the metal of the car, and huddled as close to the metal as they dared without actually touching it.

But this initial blast was followed by a confused silence as the secluded defense force on the outside wondered what to do.

Ryan was loath to put that down to incompetence, and felt it safer to figure on a plan that would lure the attackers away from the elevator car and into a trap. There was only one course of action. Pulling a gren from one of the vest pockets stuffed with ammo and weaponry, he pulled the pin and stepped back a pace, enough to give him an angle to toss the gren out into the corridor without revealing enough of himself to be a blaster target.

The gren sailed through the air almost in slow motion. Using a gren in such a confined area was a risk. A quick enough reflex could pick it up and toss it back into the car before it went off, leaving the inhabitants of the car entirely at the mercy of shrapnel in the explosive charge.

The one thing he hadn't bargained for was what happened next. Instead of trying to clear the gren, someone in the defending party thought it would be a great idea to shoot it out of the air.

A laser blast ripped through the empty space between the elevator car and the concealed position of the defense force. Unfortunately for the sec man who chose to fire, it took him too long to level his laser rifle and take aim. So long, in fact, that by the time the laser blast reached the gren it was already too close to the defense nest. The laser hit the gren full on and caused it to explode before the fuse had expired. The shrapnel within the explosive charge was charged white hot and molten by the extra heat of the laser as it hit home, and the resulting shower and spray of semisolid, semiliquid metal, spread out over a wide arc by the explosive charge, came down on the defense force.

It could have been worse for them, but not by much. The defense post was situated behind a support pillar, like any of those that were built into the corridors of a standard redoubt to support the circular structure of the tunnels. It wasn't wide enough to shelter the full complement of the party, and so a makeshift barrier against standard blasterfire had been built up from old sandbags that were usually used to shore up those parts of the redoubt that hadn't been properly finished before the nukecaust and so were prone to leakage from the earth beyond the walls. The material encasing the sand was porous and fibrous, and the shower of hot metal set fire to the thin covering. Although the sand underneath would rapidly extinguish the fire, it wouldn't do it quickly enough to stop the spread of the flames onto the one-piece uniforms of the sec crew.



Originally all the suits worn by the Illuminated Ones had been coated with a fire-resistant chemical that was a safety measure. Unfortunately for the sec force right there and then, the coating had worn over the years, leaving the artificial fibers of the suits prone to catch fire at the slightest spark.

The cries of the sec men hit by the molten shrapnel, or suddenly finding themselves on fire, acted as the spur Ryan needed.

"Now!" the one-eyed warrior roared before stepping into the middle of the elevator car, Steyr raised and finger flexed on the trigger. It was then that he exclaimed as he saw the devastation outside.

The triumphant Gate warriors didn't stop to question the poor tactics and spontaneous idiocy that had led to the sec force ruining their own sec post. They rushed past the startled Ryan, leaving him—for once—lagging a split second in the wake of his fellow warriors as they blasted those Illuminated Ones who were still able to raise their laser blasters.

It crossed Ryan's mind that if it was to be this easy, there had to be a catch somewhere. Fate never made anything this simple without some kind of payback.

THE DIMLY LIT STAIRWELL was empty, and echoed even to the soft footfalls of the attacking party.

"They have to be beyond the lower level door," J.B. murmured as quietly as he could to those behind him. "The one way to do this is to trigger the sec door and then fan out two at a time, heads down, with those at the rear providing covering fire."

There was a general murmur of agreement from those behind him, and the Armorer continued down, a step at a time, until he reached the final bend before the first-level sec door. The lights below had been either shot out or had burned out over the years—all of them. Something twitched inside J.B.'s gut, and he stopped the party's progress with an outstretched arm. For all the lights to be gone at such a crucial spot was a little too much of a coincidence for his liking, a growing suspicion that was enhanced when, after everyone had stopped, the sudden lack of footfalls in the shaft made whoever was waiting get a little too daring.

To the Armorer's amazement, the glint of a laser blaster cut through the darkness, the leaking light from the upper level of the stairwell catching on the metal of the barrel for a fraction of a second.

They were actually waiting on the stairwell, at a point where they would have to come into the open to attack, and from below. It crossed the Armorer's mind that the rad-blasted children of pox-ridden gaudies would have had more sense than that, but he wasn't about to let a golden opportunity to get the enemy pass him by.

J.B. raised his Uzi and without a word of warning to the Gate people behind him let fly with a stream of blasterfire that raked the darkness below. Because of the bend in the stairwell, he judged that it would be harder for the sec force below to fire back from seclusion than it would be for his attackers. J.B. could rake a wide field of fire with the Uzi, and also use the concrete walls to ricochet shells into the angle beyond the line of fire. He couldn't shoot with accuracy, but that wasn't necessary. It would cause confusion and retreat, and that was enough at this stage. For the one thing that immediately sprang to his steel trap of a mind was this: the laser blasters could only fire straight, and if they hit the concrete walls surrounding his party, then they would score the walls with their laser heat, but they couldn't ricochet. As long as his people stayed back and out of direct line, there was nothing the sec force could do except step out directly into the line of fire to get at them.

The Amazon warriors behind J.B. didn't need to be told what was going on. Seeing the way in which he angled part of firing sweep, two of them used their blasters to try to ricochet off the walls. The others held back as the line of firing would be too crowded, and would necessitate their coming out into the open. They could hear cries of pain from below as blasterfire bit home.

The area below was suddenly lit as the sec door to the first level was keyed open, and light from the corridor beyond filtered into the darkness.

"Hold fire," J.B. cried, ceasing his own efforts. The echoes of the bullets died away, and the attacking party could hear the sounds of a hurried retreat into the corridor below, along with the moans of those members of the attacking party who hadn't been chilled, but had been wounded enough to necessitate their companions dragging them to safety.

"Forward—triple red," J.B. commanded. "They may have time to get into a defensive position, so tactics as before, but hit the bastards hard. With luck they'll be right open."

THE SERVICE HATCH into the corridor was cobwebbed on the inside, the dust motes reflected in the beam of artificial light that bled through the grille and into the narrow duct where Jak was crouched, almost bent double.

On the other side of the hatch lay a corridor that should, if his sense of direction was as good as he believed, be on the first level of the redoubt. The tortuous climb down the shafts and the blind gropings in the direction of the airflow had led them to a point where the concrete of the walls had been replaced by smoothly riveted metal. Tight, but of a questionable thickness, the rivets had given way quite easily under pressure and a few well-placed kicks from Jak's heavy combat boots. Having made it thus far with little noise, it seemed almost absurd to then create such a loud disturbance. However, there was no option, and at least they were now in the final leg of the journey. By the time any noise was detected, located, and forces sent to intercept, they should be out into the open and ready to fight.

It was a notion that didn't bear too much examination, but so far it was holding up.

Jak looked through the grille onto the corridor outside, twisting his neck until the muscles screamed at him for relief, trying to wring every last degree of turn and view out of the restricted window.

The corridor was empty. And quiet.

Could it be that their breakthrough had been undetected? Jak sniffed at the air, trying to separate the scents that drifted through the grille. There was no fear, no sweat that was fresh. No smell of oil or cordite, no smell of tingling ozone, which he'd noticed faintly after the laser blasters had been fired. And the sound: there was quiet and there was silence.

Jak's ears were those of a highly attuned hunter, and his sense of sound was heightened by the compensation for the lack of pigment and oversensitivity of his albino eyes. They were ears that could hear the scuttle of a cockroach at a hundred yards, and pinpoint its direction.

There was something; not near, not yet, but moving his way. Whether to intercept them or by chance he couldn't tell. That didn't matter. He judged they had time to get out of the duct and into the corridor.

He spoke as he began to probe the edges of the duct with busy fingers, information gathering on its strong and weak points.

"Corridor empty, but sec on way. From quarter mile at double speed. If can get this fucker..."

As he spoke, his fingers found the nuts that secured the grille on the inside to metal brackets. They weren't set exactly in the corners, but indented slightly. The nuts were loose, the screws oxidized over the years by air that was more contaminated than the redoubt's designers would have wished.

Strong white fingers gripped the nuts, taking two at a time. The tension and power in his grip made what little color there was in his skin bleed out at the knuckle joints, so that in the dust-moted beam his fingers seemed to glow incandescent. Under such pressure, the nuts gave easily, and Jak shuffled back, kicking at the grille with a force muted by the constrictions of space. He hoped that the screws securing the outer part of the grille were also in such poor condition.

The grille crashed to the floor, and Jak propelled himself forward and out onto the corridor floor, snaking upright with a grace and ease that made of it one sinuous movement. The Gate warriors in his party followed, each of them displaying the same grace and ease of movement, belying the strain of being cramped in the shafts for so long.

"Sec from down there," Jak said tersely, indicating the corridor leading off to a T-junction on the left. "We take these pillars as cover. Sound like just running—hit fuckers hard."

With only the briefest of acknowledgments and the maximum of speed, the Amazons joined the albino in taking cover behind the pillars, the same tactic used by the sec force itself in the detachment that, at that moment, was being decimated by Ryan and Gloria's war party.

"This too easy," Jak breathed, almost to himself. It was part triumph and part disbelief, a sense that something had to surely go wrong. If not in battle, then in their ultimate aim. For a split second, the mat-trans dream that had seemed to spark off this whole sequence of events went through his head. His friends chilled, and Gloria walking off in another direction. Could that have some meaning, some hidden truth? Jak was a simple man in that way. He didn't deal in symbols. But nonetheless, something could screw up, now that they were so close to what both parties wanted so badly.

He shook his head to clear it and focused instead on the sound of running feet as they came toward him. He could even hear the heavy breathing of the running sec force, unused to such exertion.

In a flash, he could see that was their problem: no real combat, probably in their lifetime. No wonder progress was so easy. He smiled, lips drawn back over his sharp white teeth, his hunting and predatory instincts taking the foreground.

"Ready to chill," he whispered to the Amazons. He could feel them around him, their instincts also heightened. The air was full of the scent of the hunter, discernible only to those who were born to chill.

He raised his Colt Python, clicked back the hammer, his finger taut on the trigger, ready to apply pressure at just the right time. He was hidden from the junction by the pillar, and as the sec force rounded the corner, he let them advance a few yards into the corridor, so that the rear of the party, which, at a quick head count, revealed twelve in a loose formation of threes, was around the angle of the junction and unable to duck back easily. Without even bothering to give instruction, he knew that the Amazons would also sense the best tactic and hold their fire until the last sec man was clear.

Jak cleared the pillar enough to raise and sight his blaster. A scream of pent up fury escaped his lips and rent the air as the first shot boomed from the Magnum blaster. It hit the middle sec man in the front row

full in the chest, leaving a bloodied and ribboned mess of flesh and bone where an orange one-piece suit had once been. The man jerked back, his own forward, running momentum countered by the superior momentum and force of the slug.

Around the albino the sound of fire from the Amazon's handblasters rent the air, a volley of continuous explosions that filled the air with the bitter smell of cordite.

It was over in a matter of seconds. The entire sec party was wiped out without a returned shot of any kind. Like pins in a bowling alley knocked out by a ball of infinitely greater force than they could imagine, the sec team had been taken by surprise and their reaction time found wanting.

And this was no exercise.

Jak skipped over the chilled bodies, checking that none was alive, and also to see if any had a conventional blaster that he could use to augment the Gate's own weaponry.

There were only the laser blasters, and Jak gave a sharp glare at one of the Amazons who followed him and picked up one of the rifles.

"Margia's got some, and she reckons they could be okay," the small blond warrior said to him. She had short, sparse hair framing large eyes that were questioning even as she spoke. Jak had trained with her and knew she would accept his word.

"No, Cat, not in real firelight. Seen it, can't trust it. Better with what know right now, with what reliable." He patted the Colt Python that he still held.

"Fair point. I dunno about you, but I don't want to get this far, then fuck up because of some stupid blaster," she said, dropping it to the floor and offering a cue to the other Amazons, who had been eying the laser blasters with interest.

"Okay." Jak grinned. "One thing sure. Know we here now. Keep frosty, stay together." He stopped and raised his head like a wolf on the hunt as the sounds of another firefight caught his ears. He located it, then turned to this party. "More trouble— mebbe need our help. C'mon..."

THE WAR PARTY LED by Krysty and Tammy was now out in the open and making rapid progress. It had been a simple matter for them to outblast a sec defense party that was slow and unimaginative. A simple two-pronged pincer movement on the sec force when the soldiers were too slow to position themselves defensively meant that the Amazons were in among them before they had a chance to position themselves for a blast at the attackers. Swinging wildly in several directions, and with no one to lead, the sec force managed to chill one of the Amazons by accident, catching her in the side with a laser blast that seared through and fried her intestines. But in the process they also chilled two of their own number by the same expedient.

For in-close fighting, where the laser blasters became unwieldy by their size, it was a simple matter for the Amazons to use their blades to carve up the sec men, preserving ammo and using the sharpened pangas and machetes to slice through material, flesh and bone with ease, leaving the soldiers to perish in a river of blood, agony and cries of pain.

Krysty joined them, using the blade she had been given by Margia. She swung the cutting edge through the air in short, jagged arcs that cut quickly and painfully, causing incapacity rather than instant chilling, but softening up the opposition so that it was easy to chill them without the risk of injury being returned.

Finally the Amazons stood in pools of blood and mangled flesh and bone.

"One group down, bring on the next," Tammy breathed heavily, her eyes glittering with the light of battle.

"That's okay," Krysty said carefully, "but we should still go triple red."

The auburn-curved Amazon looked askance at Krysty. She could see the woman's Titian hair was curled close to her head, and knew what that meant.

"Hey, is that just because we're in combat, or is there something serious just around the corner?" Tammy asked in a softer tone.

Krysty licked her upper lip, listening to the rhythms and feelings inside her before answering. "Mebbe a bit of both, but more because we're going to run into some trouble soon. An ambush, mebbe."

"Sound advice. I'll listen to you any day, girl," Tammy said, trusting Krysty's gut sense. "Guess the best thing to do is search it out before it finds us, take the fuckers by storm. So which way does your gut sense say it's lurking for us?"

Krysty allowed herself a smile. "It tells me that it's around that corner," she said, indicating the junction at the farthest end of the corridor from where they now stood.

"Well, I guess it'd make more sense to head the other direction, but hellfire and damnation, we've got to get rid of these fuckers if they're gonna be hanging around trying to chill us. So better now than later, right?"

Without pausing, she whistled a series of commands to the warriors with her. Krysty looked puzzled for a second, then figured that it was better for Tammy to do it this way, in case they could be overheard by whoever was waiting.

Following the auburn warrior, and trusting her instincts to help her take her cue, Krysty followed the party as it spread down the corridor toward the junction. They moved swiftly, flitting in pairs from covering pillar to pillar, their petite frames using the concrete supports to the maximum as cover from any opposition fire.

Tammy was in the lead, and when she reached the last pillar she looked back at Krysty. Her eyes flickered from side to side, mutely asking which direction the danger was waiting. Krysty indicated to the left, and Tammy nodded her understanding.

The auburn-haired Amazon paused for a moment, weighing her options. The corridor ended as a T-junction, as did so many in the design of the redoubt. Across from Tammy stood another pillar. It would provide cover if she could bridge the gap swiftly enough. But the cover would only be valid if she landed on the right side, the one sheltered from enemy attack.

Krysty closed her eyes for a moment and breathed deeply. She concentrated her senses. If she made the wrong call here, she was almost certainly condemning Tammy to be chilled.

Opening her eyes wide, suddenly getting the answer she was searching for, she locked her gaze on to the auburn-haired Amazon's and flicked her eyes to the left. With the briefest of nods, Tammy turned away and flung herself across the gap so that she would land on the right-hand side of the pillar, sheltered

from possible attack.

It was a beautifully executed dive and tumble that propelled the woman across the space. To the rest of the attack party it seemed to take place in slow motion. Tammy hanging in the air for an interminable moment. In truth, it was over in a fraction of a second as she sailed, then hit the ground, shoulder dipped to take the impact and roll her frame up against the far wall.

She was fast, but almost not fast enough. The mode of attack was one that even Krysty couldn't have suspected. For, as Tammy rolled, she was almost clipped by the wheels of a motorcycle that suddenly roared into life and leaped across the gap. A lone rider, clad in a black one-piece suit and with a laser blaster across her back, traversed the gap too quickly for any of the stunned Gate to take a shot at her.

"What the fuck!" Tammy grated as she flattened against the wall. The problem was that she was now on the wrong side of the pillar to provide any defense, as the rider had crossed over. For a split second, the two faced each other. Tammy could see the fear and hate in the light blue eyes of the long haired blond rider. She was a large woman with a hooked nose and a strong, prominent jaw, probably a good hand-to-hand fighter. But there was no chance of her engaging in a battle of that kind, as she would waste too much time dismounting the motorcycle. Neither could she fire on Tammy, as the laser rifle was too far out of reach.

The only thing she could do was charge again. She throttled the engine, and the powerful bike rose, front wheel in the air, as the back tire screeched on the concrete and the engine noise filled the confined space almost to the point of pain.

Tammy's brain raced and came up with something. If she was to be squashed against the wall, then the rider would also be chilled as she would ride full speed into the pillar. So Tammy would have to break into the open and run for it. That was obviously what the rider wanted, figuring that Tammy's fear and surprise would make her run.

The auburn-haired warrior was made of sterner stuff than that. As the bike started to race toward her, she knew instinctively that the rider would have to veer off at the last moment to avoid her own chilling. That sudden knowledge spread ice into Tammy's veins, and she stayed her ground, leveling her blaster as the bike neared. She knew she wouldn't have time to snap off a shot as the bike approached, but on the turn...

As she had thought, the rider had to veer away at the last moment, and Tammy followed the line of the turn as her blaster came up. At the point of the turn, where the rider was still for the merest fraction of a second, Tammy's blaster was at the optimum height.

The auburn-haired Amazon snapped off a shot that caught the blonde on the right temple, boring a small hole just above her hairline. The exit wound on the other side of her head was larger and messier, spreading bone, blood and brain across the corridor. As her grip loosened on the throttle, the engine of the bike stalled, and a sudden silence hit the air, broken only by the clatter of machine and rider as they tumbled sideways and bit the concrete floor.

Krysty and the rest of the attack party were already in the corridor, checking the direction in which the rider had originally come. It was empty.

"She must have been a lone scout," Tammy said, joining them and breathing slowly and deeply to calm her racing pulse. "A brave warrior. I hope her chilling was quick."



"Seems so," Krysty replied. She glanced up and down the corridor, and could feel her hair relax around her nape. "Guess that's the immediate danger dealt with."

"Good," Tammy said decisively. "We need to get on, try to link up with the others. If they're doing as we are, then the objective should be in sight."

"Let's hope so," Krysty said, experience lending her a note of caution.

It wasn't over until it was over.

MILDRED'S PARTY HAD MADE its way down the service stairs and out into the corridor beyond. Tapping in the sec code to open the door, Mildred was uneasy at how quiet the descent had been. Leaving cover to survey and take up defensive positions in the corridor beyond, her unease had grown to a kind of jumpiness.

"What the hell are they doing?" one of her companions whispered. "They must know we're here."

"Playing the waiting game," Mildred said simply. "They lay right off us, drawing us farther and farther into the open and into their territory. We get more and more tense until the point where we make mistakes and then we become easy meat."

"Shit, but we can't just stay here."

Mildred smiled, a grimace with no humor. "That's why it's such a good plan, girl."

The party began to advance, their light footfalls sounding hollow in the empty space of the concrete tunnel. The walls were painted white, and the harsh fluorescent lighting up above seemed to do nothing more than starkly highlight them against the emptiness of the space.

Mildred hoped that something would happen soon.

Her nerves were stretched taut, and the adrenaline coursing through her veins made her guts churn with the need for release.

There was a T-junction a few hundred feet ahead. An Amazon looked back at Mildred and gestured with her blaster at each side of the junction, indicating her belief that any ambush would lay beyond.

It seemed reasonable. Mildred moved forward until she was beside the woman.

"We need to see if there's anyone there, and on which side, to draw their fire," Mildred whispered. "No way can we recce without losing whoever's fool enough to volunteer."

The Amazon, a small black woman with plaited hair like Mildred's, nodded her affirmation. "Question is, how do we draw that fire?"

Mildred didn't answer at first, but rummaged around in the pockets of her jacket. Despite its apparent clumsiness in a firefight, she had opted to keep it with her because it contained—besides her spare ammo—some of the medical supplies she carried with her and a few things J.B. had given her.

"Now, this may just do the trick." She smiled, producing a small canister that she held out, cradled in the palm of her hand.

"What the fuck is that?" the woman asked.

"It's a distress flare. It came from one of the redoubts we were in a long time back. It's not as big as the usual outdoor distress flares, and what the hell use it is if you're stuck somewhere I don't know, but that's not why it's going to be useful right now, is it?"

A slow smile spread over the Amazon's face. "I guess it isn't," she said, suppressing the urge to laugh. "So which way do we send it?"

Mildred considered that for a second. "Send it to the right. It'll either draw fire from the left or take them by surprise and make them give themselves away. Or maybe show that there's no one there and that they're making us sweat even more than we could have thought."

"Don't even suggest that," the Amazon murmured. "So, will you or shall I?" And she gestured at the flare.

"Let me," Mildred said. With which she left the Amazon behind the concrete pillar and edged forward to the point where the junction began. Pulling the pin on the flare, she tossed it to the right, a deft flick of the wrist taking the flare on a spinning course that described a wide arc in the air. A laser blast, aimed at the object, missed and hit a point where a concrete support met the ceiling of the corridor, flaking the white paint and blackening the surface.

"Well, well, what do you know?" Mildred murmured, looking back to the rest of the party, who had all moved forward. "Now we know where they are. All we've got to do is get them."

"But how?" asked the plaited Amazon, more as a question to herself than to the others.

Mildred was about to make a suggestion when she was distracted by handblaster fire from beyond the ambush party. "What the hell is going on now?" she asked no one in particular, baffled.

WHAT WAS GOING ON was simply the arrival of Dean and his party of Amazons into the fray.

Having made their way through into the service ducts with ease, it was then difficult to find a service grille through which they could get out and into the redoubt itself. Dean figured that they were extraordinarily lucky to get as far as they had so quickly, and with little in the way of obstacles. That luck came to an end. The service duct was tight and dark, and seemed to stretch into infinity, a twisting, winding maze that showed no light ahead from a grille leading out into the redoubt.

Dean led his party onward, his muscles aching and cramped from the constriction of the service duct. He fought against the growing sense of claustrophobia, and hoped that the Amazons to the rear of him weren't suffering from the same problem.

"Hot pipe, how come there isn't an exit anywhere in sight?" he muttered to himself as he came to a point where two ducts crossed. Stopping, he looked ahead and to each side. There, to the left, was a filtered ray of light. It looked to be a good five minutes away, and there was no way of knowing where it would bring them out, but it was all they had.

Taking a deep, decisive breath, Dean headed off toward the light, knowing that the rest of the party would be following to the rear. It was a trip that seemed all the slower and more tortuous because there was now an end in sight, but eventually they made it to the grille.

"Oh, great. This is just what we need," Dean murmured as he looked through the grille. About twenty yards to the left of the opening was a group of sec men ensconced behind a barrier of metal-and-plastic strips that had obviously been constructed for such a defensive purpose. Their attention was focused ahead of them, so they hadn't heard or seen what was going on behind the grille. In the light coming through from the outside, Dean could see that the grille would be easy to dislodge. But would they all be able to clear it before the sec force had a chance to turn and attack?

Dean's question was answered for him when the flare lit up the corridor outside and drew some fire from the soldiers. In the intense light, Dean cast a quick glance back at the Amazons behind him. Their faces, hungry for battle, told him all he needed to know.

While the enemy's attention was distracted, Dean twisted his body and kicked at the grille. It gave way and clattered onto the concrete floor. Before it even hit, Dean tumbled out, followed by the Amazons.

Their reactions were sharper than those of the Illuminated Ones. They began firing before some of the enemy even began to move.

It was then that Dean saw Mildred, over the top of the barrier, come charging around a blind corner at the head of a party of Amazons.

DOC'S WAR WAS as he had expected. Hard, and a war of attrition rather than swift movement. Once out of the elevator, the party he was attached to dug into the corridor beyond, and were as firmly entrenched as their enemies. Blasts of laser fire and stray shots were exchanged, but a stalemate had been reached.

Doc was secreted behind a pillar on the opposite side of the corridor to Margia, and he looked across at her.

"My dear lady, I fear this will continue in stalemate unless someone finds a way to break the deadlock. I regret to say that I am bereft of both ideas and weaponry for this, but perhaps you are carrying something. A gren, mayhap, would scatter the enemy to the winds, and make them easier to deal with."

Doc's attention was focused on the bag of ammo, flares and grens that the blond armorer carried on her back, strapped to her shoulders. However, he realized from the sly grin that spread across her face that her mind had traveled along another track.

Margia unshouldered the laser blaster she had been cradling so lovingly since they entered the elevator some time before.

"Well, honey, if you think this is the right time," she said in a teasing tone of voice to Doc.

He shook his head urgently. "No, that was not what I meant at all. I do not think—"

But he was cut off from any further comment as Margia swung herself out into the middle of the corridor, leveling the laser blaster and firing a beam into the heart of the opposing forces. She swept the laser rifle in an arc that covered the width of the corridor, the beam tracing from one side to the other, spreading a line of heat death.

She caught three of the defending party by surprise, searing into limbs and torsos, causing them to fall writhing to the floor in agony.

The confusion caused by the sudden appearance of one of their own weapons among the opposition caused the sec force to cease firing. Those who hadn't been chilled or injured scattered, heading for the nearest junction and a chance to regroup and plan.

Watching them run, Margia cackled wildly before turning to her party. "Come on, sweeties, this is going to be piss easy," she yelled before whooping triumphantly.

"I wish I could share such sentiments," Doc muttered to himself worriedly.

THE MAIN QUORUM watched on monitors as their forces were ravaged by the attacking Gate war parties.

The main vid rooms on the highest level of the redoubt had long since been rendered useless, and were now past the area captured by the Gate. But on each level there were rooms where the ruling elite of the Illuminated Ones—whoever may be in that office at the given time—could observe an overall picture of the redoubt from a series of smaller screens that were in constant action. Many of these, representing the higher levels of the redoubt, were now blank, the casualties of war.

Simon Rack still stood with Jorgensen, acting as trained observer to point out anything the sec chief might miss. It pained him that the only things he could point out were disasters for the sec chiefs troops.

"What are we going to do, Al?" Rack asked, not wanting to point out another setback as the party led by Gloria and Ryan advanced farther into the redoubt.

Jorgensen shrugged. "What we should have done all along—immediate evac. I doubt if they could follow us through the mat-trans, especially if we use the fail-safe program. Should have done it straightaway," he added softly, a note of sadness in his voice. Turning to the quorum, he said, "That's my suggestion. Immediate evac. There's no way we can beat them now. All we can hope to do is hold them back until evac is complete. I'm sorry."

"Don't be, Al," said one of the quorum. "You did your best. That's all we can ask. Hell, we've all been secluded here too long. At least we can learn that from this debacle. Well, you're in charge in a situation like this, Al, so I guess it's up to you to give the order."

Jorgensen nodded sadly and left the room. To think that it had come to this made him want to give up now. But at least he could insure that the contents of the redoubt, and those people his so-called leadership hadn't chilled, could evac to another location.

Down in the main comp room, he relayed his orders and keyed in the code that would alert the receiving mat-trans. When the last figure had been entered, he heaved a sigh of relief. No turning back now.

The evacuation began.

Procedures were centered around the area that was the object of the attack—the gateway of which the ancient tribal documents spoke. This lay at the lowest level of the redoubt and consisted of three large mat-trans chambers, large enough to accommodate two six-wheel wags full of people and objects.

The idea of the evacuation was to clear the redoubt of anything that might provide some information to the opposition, and also to preserve the treasures that were part of the reason for the Illuminated Ones' existence. To this end, the first wags to go through the mat-trans and be transported to their new location were full of old books, videos, recordings and floppy disks of information and culture from before the

final war. This material had educated those born into the Illuminated Ones' society, and reminded them of their reason for existence. It was the raw material from which they would build the new world when they emerged from beneath the ground.

Also in the wags was as much of the tech as could be dismantled and packed away quickly. This included weaponry and everyday objects and electronics. The quorum had always felt it important to keep as much of their tech as possible out of outside hands. Whoever gained it might not be able to understand it, but even the slightest glimmering of understanding could be dangerous to the great plan. That which couldn't be dismantled was to be smashed.

It was a race against time for Jorgensen, and one that he was aware he was losing. Even more so when Simon Rack joined him on the mat-trans level.

"Al, I hate to tell you this, but they're only two levels away."

"Shit!" Jorgensen's jaw was set in a grim line. "We may just about do it. Fuck. I hope we get the chance to cross them again, when we've learned what we can from this. I feel like our whole lives have been fucked over by them."

"Maybe, Al, but we can worry about that later. Unless we can defend this area, we won't even have lives to be fucked over."

Al nodded. "Yeah, you're right. I'm sorry, Simon. I shouldn't be so self-pitying. Let's nail these fuckers to a tree while we get ourselves straightened out."

## Chapter Eighteen

The combined forces of the Gate made progress more rapidly than either Ryan or Gloria would have thought possible, and that wasn't just because the Illuminated Ones had, for all their supposedly superior tech, been found grievously wanting in terms of battle experience. It was also because Jorgensen had taken the step of withdrawing all but a few of his people to the central chamber located at the very bottom level of the redoubt. Only a skeletal force remained active, to delay rather than stop the progress of the attackers.

Down in the central chamber, the sec men of the redoubt were racing against time to try to get the evac completed before the intruders reached the bottom level. People raced around the cavernous room, loading and restocking supplies and tech into wags that were then driven into the mat-trans chambers to be transported to their new location.

Jorgensen oversaw it from a point a hundred yards from the first of the chambers, where the control comps for the mat-trans units stood in banks, attended by people who didn't dare look up for one second, such was their intense concentration.

"Think we'll do it?" Jorgensen asked one of them. Strangely all the fear and sweat of his earlier defeats had gone from him. He was calm in accepting defeat and retreat, and his mind had clicked into a more relaxed state, concentrating only on those matters that seemed to be the most pressing.

The technician answered without looking up. "If your people can just hold them long enough, we're onto the last relay of transfers. We just need time to boost power levels and get the coordinates set."

Jorgensen nodded. He wasn't too sure what that actually meant in practical terms, but it seemed to imply that he might just have got away with it.

"ALL ROADS LEAD to Rome, as they once said. I believe it to be a universal truism, in one sense or another," Doc said calmly, letting the barrels of the LeMat droop slightly, and the weariness of battle for one brief moment wash over him before he summoned the next wave of energy.

"I don't know what the hell you're talking about, honey," Margia said to him with a puzzled expression, "but something tells me you've got it just about right."

Their war party had experienced no resistance on its descent to this level. Despite that, they had maintained a triple-red alert, and so were ready when they ran into another war party descending from another route, then another.

The last party to join was that led by Ryan and Gloria. Now, while the Gate warriors rested for what appeared to be the last push, the leaders of the parties met for a last tactical consultation.

"We've pushed them right back—that much is obvious," Ryan mused. "The question is, what do they get from it? They've given so much ground that they can't beat us now. Unless..."

"Unless this is the gateway, and the guardians will take that gateway to another place," Gloria added, her piercing blue eyes fixed on Ryan Cawdor.

The one-eyed warrior nodded his agreement. "They intend to make a run for it, and are hoping we don't overrun them before they get a chance to make good a complete escape."

"I don't get it," Tammy said, puzzled. "Where are they going, and how?"

"It'd take too long to explain, my dear, and I doubt that any of us knows for sure, but my supposition is that they will leave the gateway, as you call it, and travel to that place they are guarding, using old tech. And if we don't get to them before they go, the chances of finding out where exactly this place is and being able to either follow or even journey with them in some way will be greatly reduced," Doc replied.

"Yeah, right," Tammy said uncertainly. "Anyone care to make that clearer?"

Mildred laughed and shook her head. "As usual, Doc's dressed it up in big words. They travel to their destination using old tech. They might put it out of commission before they go. So we need to get to them before they get that opportunity."

"In which case, why are we standing here?" Margia asked angrily. "Let's chill some fuckers."

"Will you shut the fuck up, Marg?" Gloria snapped at her sister. "Shit, it's easy to see why I was the daughter to be queen, and not you. Keep that hot head of yours under wraps, sweetie, or it'll get us all chilled. We need to think about this. Like what it means to all be in the same place."

"Exactly." J.B. spoke for the first time. He had been standing silently, weighing odds and strategies in his mind. "Doesn't it seem strange that we all end up here, and that there's no other route into the last level?"



"It's not a question of us being channeled here. It's just that they seem to narrow it down to the one entry level," Krysty said.

"Must be some service ducts that lead down, though, or an emergency shaft of some kind. Hell, there must be an elevator."

Ryan shook his head. "There may be maintenance shafts, but we can't mount an attack through them, not even if we could find them quickly. It'd be too constricting and make us easy meat. Count that out."

"I would say that the reason there is only one way down, and it is not an elevator, is simple," Doc said softly. A silence descended as they all looked to the old man to continue, but he was lost in his own thoughts. It was only after a few seconds, when he noticed the silence and looked up in surprise that Doc realized that they were waiting for him to expand. "Why, I would have thought it was obvious."

The old man stepped away from the small party of group leaders and gestured expansively to the long, winding tunnel that led down from where they were positioned. It was much wider than any other they had encountered in the redoubt, and was sloping in a fairly gentle gradient, which was presumably why it was doglegged rather than running in fairly straight lines.

"If they are what the Gate call the guardians of the gateway, then I would make the supposition that this gateway is either a large mat-trans or a series of mat-trans chambers. I believe that it is large enough to encompass a number of wags, and that they are used on this lower level to transport materials to and from another redoubt. Therefore, to have an elevator would be impractical, and this is such a low level beneath the surface of the earth that it is stable enough to build these sort of tunnels rather than have to reinforce and build on a horizontal level."

J.B. pushed back his fedora and scratched his head. "Yeah, I'll buy that, Doc. But there's one thing that still gets me. Why is this so open? One way in and out? That's just plain stupe."

Doc shook his head. "Not stupid so much as simple arrogance and overconfidence, my dear John Barrymore. Quite simply it never occurred to whoever built this redoubt that any enemy would have the skill and sheer audacity to get down this far. And if that was the case, then why bother to waste precious time and effort on an alternative exit?"

"That's so dumb it might just be right," Dean blurted out. Doc's expression as this unintended backhander broke the tension with a wave of laughter: the laughter of relief rather than humor, as it was now obvious that the next assault would be the final action.

"Okay, so what do we do about this?" Gloria said to Ryan, recovering her composure rapidly.

"I'd like to work out some plan of action other than just a headlong charge," Ryan stated. "If we can get as much old tech as possible, then mebbe we could answer some questions about the mat-trans."

"Yeah, and if we leave it too long they'll all be gone and we won't be any the wiser," Gloria replied. "We're only getting the one chance at them, and this is our destiny. I say we hit hard and we hit now."

Ryan and Gloria stood face-to-face, the battle scarred veteran looking down on the wiry Gate queen. Both were born leaders, both had won glorious battles and both had wills of iron.

But Gloria had the greater numbers. Ryan was aware that he had only his party of seven, whereas the Gate warriors outnumbered his people by about six to one. In the end, he would have to defer to Gloria,

simply because she could go ahead and do whatever she wanted.

Ryan stepped back from her. "Okay, I don't agree, but I see your point. We hit now, and we hit hard."

THE MASSED RANKS of the Gate warriors made their way down the sloping tunnel, scouts checking every bend. It was empty and seemingly undefended, the tension among the warriors growing with each undefended turn.

"We must be near the bottom by now, for fuck's sake," Tammy murmured to Krysty.

"Keep it frosty," the Titian-haired woman replied gently. "None of us can afford to lose our grip at this stage." Especially when they were going headfirst into their defensive position, she added to herself.

A chorus of whistles from up ahead, just around a corner, was followed by the scouts sprinting back to cover as a volley of laser blasterfire scorched the walls.

"At least we know we've hit the end of the trail," J.B. muttered before dipping into the canvas bag slung around his shoulder and producing a handful of shrapnel grens. "These should do the most damage," he said, tossing two to Ryan and two to Jak, keeping two for himself.

Each man pulled a pin on a gren and threw it with a curve around the corner of the corridor. They then hit the ground, gesturing the tribe to follow.

The grens exploded with a deafening concussion in the enclosed space, spreading shrapnel around a wide radius of the three areas of impact. Some of the shrapnel was propelled far enough along the tunnel to ricochet against the laser scarred turn of the wall, clattering with a high pitched whine around the edges of the Gate tribe. The vast majority of it, however, exploded with a deadly impact into the defending party of the Illuminated Ones, and the wailing screams of the injured and dying sec squad mingled with the sound of the explosion.

The aftershock of sound was still ringing in their ears when the attackers picked themselves up and advanced to the bend in the tunnel. Beyond, there was nothing more than an eerie silence where the entire defending squad had been wiped out.

Gloria gave a high-pitched scream that ululated around the corridors, announcing the arrival of the attacking Gate tribe. The way into the main chamber was now undefended, decorated with the chilled corpses of the sec force.

With wild cries, the Gate warriors swept forward into the chamber, the force of their attack pulling Ryan and his companions with them. The one-eyed man would have preferred a more considered and tactical attack, as there was old tech that he would prefer to keep intact for observation, but he realized that the chances of that happening were now nonexistent, and instead contented himself with going along with the flow.

SINCE THEIR FIRST meeting, Margia had, in her spiky and awkward manner, maintained a soft spot for Doc Tanner. As they charged into battle, she took hold of him.

"Stick with me, sweetie," she yelled, "and I'll see you all right."

As they entered the chamber, they came on the Illuminated Ones at the tail end of their evac. The wags were gone from the mat-trans units, and the main hall itself was stripped of all except the junk that could

be allowed to remain, smashed to useless pieces. Only a skeleton sec force remained, headed by Jorgensen himself, who had elected to stay. They were overseeing the evac of the last of the Illuminated Ones, with themselves to follow if possible.

The Gate charged in with their blades ready to taste blood, and their handblasters firing at anything in a brightly coloured one-piece uniform.

The Illuminated Ones were outnumbered, and up against a superior fighting force, but they still had their laser blasters, and these were causing the most problem. The erratic firing hadn't as yet claimed any Gate lives, but they were causing them to scatter and not be able to take good aim.

Margia, with Doc at her side, skidded to a halt.

"They think they can get the better of me, do they?" she screamed belligerently at Doc, shouldering the laser blaster she had already used to some effect. She leveled it and squeezed the trigger.

But her luck had just run out. The blaster spluttered, and the nose glowed white hot before the whole length of the object seemed to implode in her hands, engulfing her in a sudden and violent shower of intense white light. Doc saw her scream, but didn't hear the sound as it was buried beneath the screech of white hot metal rending unto flesh.

For the briefest moment it seemed as though the whole world stopped down in the main chamber, frozen in action by the incredible sight. And then the moment was broken.

Gloria howled in anguish and pain. She might always have been at odds with her sister, but blood was thicker than anything, especially in a tribe like the Gate, and the sight of her sister being claimed by the tech of the enemy—albeit at her own hands—was more than the Amazon queen could bear.

Her panga became a whirl around her head as she strode into her astonished enemies, drawing blood with every vicious sweep of the razor sharp blade. A whirling dervish of violent chilling, she claimed the lives of many of the remaining Illuminated Ones, ripping through their flesh and flimsy defenses with ease.

Spurred on by the sudden intensity of their queen's attack, the Gate and their allies strode farther into the attack. J.B. used his Uzi, set on short bursts, to chop into the packs of sec men. Mildred, Dean and Krysty took aim and picked off individuals with their ZKR, Smith & Wesson 640 and Browning Hi-Power respectively. Meanwhile, Doc used the LeMat to wreak havoc on a small group while Ryan strode into the remnants with his panga running as red as that of the Amazon queen, and as fiery crimson as her hair, which flowed like ribbons of blood from her wildly tossing head.

There were other casualties among the Gate, but nowhere near as many as those suffered by the Illuminated Ones. Not least among those to fall was Petor. Both he and Jon, as the only Gate men to join the attack, were in the thick of the action. But their lack of training was beginning to tell, and when a laser blast was aimed in their direction, Petor was just a little too slow to twist away. The beam caught him full in the ribs down his left-hand side, frying the flesh through to the bone, charring internal organs and searing nerve endings for a second before killing him with burns that went too deep to cause pain.

The young man screamed and went down into his friend's arms.

"Petor? Fuck it, man. Don't die on me," Jon screamed as the light in Petor's eyes dimmed and faded. Looking up at the group from which the laser blast had come, Jon no longer saw reason. Screaming wildly, he let Petor's corpse drop and charged forward.

Dean had seen the death of his friend, and also saw the laser rifle leveled again, this time drawing a bead on Jon, who was too distracted and raw to see what was happening.

Without thinking, Dean showed the warrior instinct that marked him as a true Cawdor. Throwing his body weight behind a change in direction, he snapped off a shot with the Browning that hit the laser sharpshooter directly between the eyes, drilling into his frontal lobe and negating any threat he might pose. At the same time, to save Jon from any further threat, Dean threw himself across the young man's path, charging him onto the concrete floor.

The violent jarring of the fall seemed to snap Jon out of his anguished trance, and he looked up at Dean.

"What the... Shit, I really lost it there."

"Just don't again," Dean snapped. "Bad enough Petor chilling, without you, as well. C'mon, let's get the bastards."

Meanwhile, Jak was cornered. Carving his way through a group of Illuminated Ones, he had caught his foot on a piece of twisted metal from a comp storage frame that had been dismantled by the wrecking crews. His heavy combat boot caught on the upthrust metal, and his momentum carried him just that little too far off balance. Normally Jak would be able to roll with the fall and spring to his feet immediately, but this time fate intervened. A sec man who had been driven backward by Gloria cannoned into the albino, knocking him over into the group he had just skipped through.

Jak fell into the midst of a melee and felt hands grab at him, fists pummel into him. Temporarily off guard and flailing, Jak tried to defend himself but found his eye closed by a blow that opened up the flesh over his brow. The blood spilled down into his eye, blinding him.

Jak knew he was in trouble, but was saved by the wild eyed Gloria. Screaming wildly, she flew into the midst of the crowd, slashing away at the hands that plucked at Jak's clothes and skin.

Jak pulled himself to his feet, hitting out at the Illuminated Ones around him, turning back-to-back with the wild and flaming warrior queen. Together they chilled four of the Illuminated Ones, and watched the others turn and flee into the inner chamber, where the rest of their sec squad were in the process of retreating.

Gloria turned to Jak, her eyes red and flaring like her hair. Jak felt a flash of electricity between them, knew that they were bonded by blood and fire.

"They're going away!" Tammy's voice rang out over the general noise of the Gate warriors as they clustered in the chamber.

Ryan and Krysty ran after the last of the sec men as they headed for the mat-trans. Jorgensen, standing at the camp console, keyed in the last code and joined the last of his people, slamming the door of the mat-trans chamber as Ryan raised his Steyr.

As the sound of the door echoed, Ryan let the blaster drop. It was too late. The Illuminated Ones had escaped.

IN THE ANTICLIMAX of the empty chamber, Gloria cursed.

"They've done it. The bastards have got away from us and snatched our destiny."

"Not necessarily," Doc said, his eyes moving intently over the flashing lights and digital displays on the comp banks.

"Why?" Ryan asked, striding over to where Doc stood.

The old man gestured to the comp bank. "Everything looks as if it is still set for where they were headed. All we have got to do is get ourselves into the mat-trans and close the door. And if that fails, we still have the last destination button. We just need to be ready to come out fighting."

Gloria had joined them while Doc was speaking, and she looked nervously at Ryan. "None of us have ever done this before. What's it like?"

Ryan took a deep breath and tried to describe the experience of a jump to the Gate queen. It wasn't easy, as he didn't want to dissuade her from the jump, but he was only too well aware that there would be an enemy at the other end, and it was important that the Gate be prepared for a firefight as soon as possible.

Gloria listened intently, then whistled. "Shit, that sounds nasty, honey. But if it's what it takes... This is our fate, and we've got to follow it through."

The warrior queen turned to Tammy and sent her to the ground level with a small party of scouts and instructions to fetch the men, children and belongings of the tribe. While this happened, she briefed her warriors on what they were about to do.

Ryan gathered the companions.

"Walking into the belly of the beast," Doc commented when Ryan explained their plans.

"Mebbe," the one-eyed warrior countered, "but then again, better to know what we walk into than just stumble, like we usually do."

"That's a fair point," Mildred mused. "The thing that worries me is how they'll cope with the jump. We're used to them, and find it hard enough."

"Only one way to find out," J.B. remarked in the kind of blunt tone that refused argument.

Waiting for the Gate to assemble, the companions took the chance to strip and check their blasters after their recent heavy use. It was a good feeling to know that, whatever else, the weaponry would be primed for use when they arrived.

The Gate were finally gathered in the large chamber, and Gloria assembled them to explain what their next move was to be. There was a ripple of apprehension about the mat-trans jump, particularly when she detailed the possible effects as outlined by Ryan. But the Gate was a tribe that couldn't back down on their destiny, and they willingly backed their queen.

Gloria turned to where Ryan and the companions were waiting.

"We're ready," she said with a decisive nod.

"Okay," Ryan replied. "Your people take the largest of the mat-trans units. That way you can all travel together. We'll take the smallest."

"You won't come with us?" the warrior queen asked.

"Better if we spread ourselves over two chambers. It'll divide their forces," Ryan explained.

Gloria bit her lip and assented. "Seems fair." She looked across at Jak. "You coming with us, honey?"

The albino allowed a rare smile to flicker across his face, so brief as to be gone before it could even be truly noticed.

"Like to, but place now with Ryan and friends. Fight as unit, mebbe important when arrive."

"Yeah, that's a good point, sweets. I'll get us into the chamber. What happens then?"

"The settings are automatic," Doc explained, indicating the comp banks. "As soon as you close the door and the lock slips into place, it triggers off the destination and the jump begins. If that does not happen, press the button marked LD."

"Okay. Can't pretend I'm not shitting myself at the thought of it, and I guess the rest of us are, too, but it's got to be done, yeah?"

With that, she turned and directed the Gate to move into the mat-trans chamber. It took a couple of minutes for the wags to be maneuvered in, and for the men and children to load up. Then the women entered the chamber, ringing the wags and children that stood in the center of the chamber. The formation was such that, when they arrived, the Amazons would form a line of defense around the supplies and the children as soon as they recovered consciousness.

Ryan and the companions waited until the tribe was fully positioned within the chamber before they entered their own mat-trans. Once inside, they prepared themselves for the jump, knowing that a swift recovery on the other end would be a necessity.

As Ryan made to close the door to the chamber, Jak stayed him. "Let me," he said simply.

The one-eyed man assented and took his position on the floor of the unit.

Jak looked out from the door of the mat-trans, across to where the larger unit stood. Gloria was standing by the door, waiting.

"Ready?" Jak asked. Gloria replied with a brief nod, her piercing blue gaze steady on the albino's. It crossed his mind that the premonitory dream he had on the last jump hadn't come true. They were all alive and were traveling on together. "See on other side," he said simply to the queen.

"You bet, sweetie," Gloria replied with a grin as Jak closed the door of the mat-trans and assumed his position on the floor, having seen her disappear into the interior of the larger chamber.

The disks on the floor began to glow, and the tendrils of mist that both preceded and came in the aftermath of a jump began to rise and swirl around them.

What neither party could see was the sudden change in the figures on the comp banks. The lights



flickered, and the digital numbers on the LCD displays for both chambers began to change, coming to rest on different combinations that would send the parties in different directions.

The fail safe procedure Jorgensen had initiated earlier had been triggered. The Gate would be separated from Ryan's people, and neither party would land at the new base for the Illuminated Ones.

Jorgensen might have lost the battle, but he had given his people some peace.

At what cost to his pursuers?