



JAMES AXLER

DEATHLANDS

Eden's Twilight

A struggle for survival
in a savage new world...

The deal was on the table

“Come along with us to Cascade. Lend a blaster if there’s any chilling to be done on the way. The healer helps patch any wounds, and talks to the old-timers, and the six of you get a fair share of every trade I make,” Roberto stated.

Having done something similar a hundred times before during his years traveling with the Trader, Ryan was impressed. It was a fair offer. And the chance to see a predark city. Ryan got a flutter of excitement in his guts. He glanced at the others. Were they interested? Hell yeah.

“Deal,” Ryan said, offering a hand.

Looking coolly at the man he had wanted to ace only a few hours earlier, Roberto marveled at the strange complexities of life. Friends became enemies, and enemies became friends, often in less time than it took to load a blaster.

“Done, and done,” he growled, and they shook.

**Other titles in the
Deathlands saga:**

Chill Factor
Moon Fate
Fury's Pilgrims
Shockscape
Deep Empire
Cold Asylum
Twilight Children
Rider, Reaper
Road Wars
Trader Redux
Genesis Echo
Shadowfall
Ground Zero
Emerald Fire
Bloodlines
Crossways
Keepers of the Sun
Circle Thrice
Eclipse at Noon
Stoneface
Bitter Fruit
Skydark
Demons of Eden
The Mars Arena
Watersleep
Nightmare Passage
Freedom Lost
Way of the Wolf
Dark Emblem
Crucible of Time
Starfall
Encounter:
 Collector's Edition
Gemini Rising
Gaia's Demise

Dark Reckoning
Shadow World
Pandora's Redoubt
Rat King
Zero City
Savage Armada
Judas Strike
Shadow Fortress
Sunchild
Breakthrough
Salvation Road
Amazon Gate
Destiny's Truth
Skydark Spawn
Damnation Road Show
Devil Riders
Bloodfire
Hellbenders
Separation
Death Hunt
Shaking Earth
Black Harvest
Vengeance Trail
Ritual Chill
Labyrinth
Sky Raider
Remember Tomorrow
Sunspot
Desert Kings
Apocalypse Unborn
Thunder Road
Plague Lords
 (Empire of Xibalba Book I)
Dark Resurrection
 (Empire of Xibalba Book II)

JAMES AXLER

**DEATH
LANDS®**

Eden's Twilight



A GOLD EAGLE BOOK FROM
WORLDWIDE®

TORONTO • NEW YORK • LONDON
AMSTERDAM • PARIS • SYDNEY • HAMBURG
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The world was all before them, where to choose
Their place of rest, and Providence their guide:
They hand in hand with wand'ring steps and slow
Through Eden took their solitary way.

—John Milton,
1608–1674

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....

Prologue

Alone, the man stood on the edge of the cliff, the cool wind blowing over the rocky escarpment weakly stirring the dry leaves around his boots. A thick growth of ivy covered the ground like a living carpet.

Resting a hand on the automatic pistol holstered at his side, Dale MacIntyre gazed thoughtfully down into the foggy chasm. A cool mist rose from the thundering river below to moisten his face and clothing, the white-water rapids sounding like the distant thunder of a perpetual storm.

Had skydark sounded something like that, MacIntyre wondered, when a rain of nuclear bombs destroyed civilization in only a few hours? Possibly. But there was no way to know. That had happened a hundred years earlier, and not even the founding fathers told about such things in the doomsday book. Facts were few and far between. Nobody knew how the war started, why, how it ended, or even if it had ended. Perhaps the last remnants of the predark military were still battling ancient foes in some forgotten corner of the world. The fighting never seemed to cease. The fathers thought they had stopped the killing, but all they had done was postpone it for a few decades, nothing more.

Shaking his head to dispel the dark thought, MacIntyre shifted his stance a little farther away from the edge of the crumbling cliff. The Barrier River at the bottom could be heard, but it had never been seen since Last Day, when it changed from a gentle creek into a savage torrent of deadly

whirlpools, hot water geysers, jagged boulders...and creatures. Huge indescribable things of teeth and tentacles that lurked at the bottom of the river patiently waiting for somebody to cross, and then they would strike. The unstoppable lurkers moved lightning-fast, and the poor victims were still horribly alive when dragged below the churning water to vanish forever. Nothing could get across the Barrier River. Especially with the bridge gone.

Jutting from the opposite side of the chasm were the remains of a predark bridge, the broken steel beams extending for only a few feet before ending abruptly in ragged ends, the metal twisted and partially melted. The sagging girders were covered with rust and festooned with vines, the crumbling asphalt dotted with potholes and covered with moss. There was absolutely no sign of the bridge on this side of World's End, every trace of it carefully removed decades earlier. Then hundreds of trees had been lovingly planted by hand to create an artificial forest that completely hid the isolated farming community. The little town of Cascade was invisible, and unreachable.

We live in a damn castle, MacIntyre noted dourly, hitching up his gunbelt, with mountains for walls, the river as a moat, muties for guard dogs...and me as the gatekeeper.

Dressed in the blue-and-gray uniform of a City Protector, MacIntyre wore his wavy brown hair cropped short, the black boots shiny with fresh polish. There was a discolored patch on his face from being caught in the acid rain as a teenager. The flesh puckered into a gnarled ruin, and the left side of his mouth curled back into a permanent snarl. A great many women found the disfigurement oddly attractive, as if it were some kind of badge of honor. A touch of the savage in their peaceful world. But MacIntyre considered it only a badge of shame. It was his own damn fault he'd been caught in the downpour. He had been drunk that night, using a full year's ration of whiskey in a single evening to try to burn out the

terrible memory of learning the truth about his hometown, and the locked back room of the sheriff's station. It was a shock to discover that everything he believed was a carefully sculpted lie. Some folks leaped off the cliff after the ceremony of adulthood, while others quietly went into a tub of warm water and slit their wrists, but the gaunt teenager had merely gotten royally drunk, permanently scarred and then joined the Protectors the next morning.

Now I'm the chief, MacIntyre thought, clenching a calloused fist at his side. His nails cut into his flesh, the pain strangely reassuring. And it is time for me to do a Harvest. Harvest! What a hideously deceptive word.

Suddenly there came the crunch of loose gravel from behind.

Ignoring it, MacIntyre didn't turn. There were no muties, coldhearts or slavers in Cascade. No warlords, kings, dictators or despots. Stingwings were the only real danger to Cascade, and the strong mountain winds that kept out the acid rains also served to repel the winged muties. Most likely, the isolated mountaintop community was the only safe place left in the world. The last bastion of civilization. I'm the most dangerous thing in Cascade, a natural-born killer, and they've asked me to leave.

"Have you made a decision yet?" a familiar voice said gently.

Glancing over a shoulder, MacIntyre frowned at the mayor of Cascade. Technically the woman should probably be considered the de facto president of the United States, as she was the only elected official in existence. But to claim the leadership of a nation that no longer existed would be the height of foolishness, and Henrietta Spencer was anything but a fool.

Dressed in a forest-camouflage-pattern military jumpsuit, the woman wore comfortable sneakers and a gunbelt that holstered a large-caliber revolver, the blue metal glinting dully in the afternoon light. Known as Etta to her friends, the middle-aged woman had gentle touches of silver highlighting

her long auburn hair, and a wide generous mouth. A very generous mouth, as he remembered. Etta possessed the most amazingly blue eyes he had ever seen, and her lush, womanly figure was completely covered with freckles. The childhood friends had become lovers over time, but had been forced to end the romance when they became the mayor and Chief Protector. Cascade was a democracy, and having the two most powerful people in town living together was getting a little too close to the creation of aristocracy, something the townsfolk would never tolerate. Now, in an odd twist of fate, she was sending him to his death.

Possible death, MacIntyre corrected. I might return alive. Others have before. Not all of them, but a few, so why not me?

“Well, old friend?” Etta asked softly, resting a hand on his shoulder.

Her warm touch brought back memories of youthful fumbling in haystacks, and then more adult pleasures in a soft bed before a roaring fireplace. Wine and laughter, an intimate touch, smooth bare skin, a heartfelt sigh. But that was too much to say, so the man simply nodded.

“When will you leave?”

He shrugged. “Tomorrow morning.”

Etta started to say something but stopped and wordlessly turned to start walking back into the trees. She did not enjoy being out in the open for too long. It seemed like tempting fate.

Listening to her leave, MacIntyre drew his gun and dutifully checked the load before holstering it once more. The man was glad she had not asked to stay the night. He might have accepted, and that would have only made leaving that much more difficult. And he already had enough on his mind planning for the harvest.

Studying the broken bridge for a while longer, MacIntyre turned away from World’s End and started the walk back toward Cascade, his thoughts full of violence, betrayal and bloody death.

Chapter One

The howling sandstorm filled the Ohio desert like a boiling ocean of dirt and salt, making it impossible to tell where the land ended and the thundering heavens began. The dull red sun was long gone, swallowed whole by the tempest, the only illumination coming from the endless volleys of sheet lightning flashing in blue-white fury across the tumultuous sky.

Brutally pounded by the savage winds, six masked figures stumbled through the maelstrom resembling animated corpses freshly escaped from the grave. Ratty blankets were tied around their bodies as crude protection from the stinging grit, and torn strips of cloth were wrapped tightly around their faces to make breathing possible, only a tiny slit left open in front for them to dimly see through. Moving in a ragged line, their arms were linked together, only the combined weight of the companions keeping them on the ever-shifting ground.

In every direction sand dunes rose and fell like cresting waves on the ocean to briefly form yawning valleys that filled as quickly as they were formed. Hopping across the desert, a large mutie rabbit was caught in a depression and vanished beneath the flowing sands to never emerge again. Easing the grip on their blasters hidden under the whipping blankets, the companions turned away from that area and grimly kept moving. They hated losing all of that meat, but to try to harvest it now would only get them chilled.

Only this morning they had arrived at a peaceful ville on

the Kentuck River and traded a handful of live brass for an old horse and new wooden cart. A doomie warned them not to venture into the Great Salt until after nightfall, but they had been eager to reach the Ohio redoubt to the north, and departed anyway. Only a few hours later, the roiling sandstorm had come over the western horizon like a tidal wave of destruction. The terrified horse had choked to death before they were able to rig a mask for the poor animal, and the companions had been forced to abandon their precious supplies to make a desperate journey back to the ville. But it was impossible to go against the hurricane-force winds, and the companions were resigned to traveling blindly to the east toward the unknown.

Without warning, a woman in the middle of the line yelled as the sand flowed out from under her boots, leaving her suspended in midair, supported only by the arms of the other companions. Tightening their hold on her, the people moved quickly away from the whirlpool until she was back on the ground once more. The woman shouted something at the others, but if it was advice, or her thanks, nobody could tell, the words lost in the deafening sandstorm.

Hunched low against the fierce wind, the big man at the front of the line slowed as something appeared out of the storm ahead. But a moment later he saw that it was only the wreckage of an ancient APC, an armored personnel carrier. The metal chassis was stripped bare of paint from decades of erosion, the hood buckled back to expose a corroded engine block, the wiring and rubber hoses lashing about like a nest of snakes.

As the companions shuffled past, the wind kicked up to briefly clear off the windshield, and behind the badly scratched plastic they could vaguely see a grinning skeleton strapped into the driver's seat, the tattered remains of a blue-and-gray uniform hanging off the bleached bones. At the end of the line, a stocky woman hugging a lumpy canvas bag

bowed her head for a moment in silent prayer, and a tall man with silvery hair made a brief sign of the cross.

Suddenly the leader stumbled over something buried in the ground. At first he assumed it was a part of the APC. But the obstruction extended for several yards. Bending low, he cupped a hand protectively around his eyes and could just make out the regular pattern of predark bricks. It was part of a wall. There could be ruins nearby! If even pieces of the buildings were still erect, the companions could get out of the bastard storm for some much-needed rest.

Wordlessly tugging the others to follow, he moved along the ancient barrier until he found the end. A huge concrete eagle rose defiantly to face the storm, wings outspread as if about to take flight. Everybody took heart at the sight and quickly stumbled around the statue onto cracked pavement. As they crouched behind the brick wall, the force of the wind noticeably lessened, and they all took a moment to catch their breath before noticing the rusty remains of a car. This was a parking lot! Which meant they were very close to the ruins. Eagerly rallying, they charged back into the full power of the sandstorm.

Temporarily blinded by the windblown grit, the companions were forced to proceed more slowly, until a large dark shape loomed before them and once more the wind eased. Shuffling closer, they could make out the rough shape of a large cinder-block building. This side was solid, without any cracks, and a row of intact milky-white windows sat just under the roof. Nuking hell, could the whole damn place be intact? That raised their hopes again, but unfortunately there were no doors in sight nor any windows low enough to reach.

Hurrying around the corner, the group discovered a concrete loading dock fronted by a row of huge metal gates, the louvered steel sandblasted to a mirror polish. This was some sort of garage or warehouse! Scrambling onto the dock, the companions tried the handles, but the gates refused to

budge. They were locked tight, with no keypads or keyholes in sight. However, searching along the wall, they soon found the mandatory fire exit. This door was also made of steel, without any handle or visible lock. But the companions had seen enough of these to know the weak points.

Moving closer to the door, a small person knelt as the others clustered around him as protection from the wind. Expertly running his fingers along the jamb for any traps, the wiry youth finally grunted in satisfaction, then hurriedly rummaged under his blanket to produce a small wad of grayish clay and a stubby black stick. Slapping the lump of C-4 plastic onto the fire door exactly in the middle, he stabbed in the timing pencil and snapped it off at the twenty-second mark.

As he stood, everybody moved to the far end of the dock. A few moments later there was a hard bang and the door violently swung aside, exposing the dark interior.

Moving fast, the companions scrambled through the doorway, loose sand billowing along with them like gritty smoke. As soon as they were all inside the building, the big man grabbed the door and forced it closed against the buffeting wind by sheer determination.

“Find something to block this!” Ryan Cawdor yelled, the words muffled by the dirty strips of cloth covering his face. “I can’t hold this bastard shut forever!”

Nodding, Krysty, Mildred and Doc rushed to obey, while J.B. and Jak put their backs to the cinder-block wall and pulled out blasters just in case they were not alone.

In spite of the soft light coming through the sand-blasted windows, the interior of the building was murky with shadows, and the two men watched the pools of darkness for any suspicious movement. Slowly their sight adjusted to the gloom and they could see that the garage was a single huge room, about one hundred feet wide. The floor was smooth concrete, the faint remains of painted lines still dimly showing through the thin covering of sand and the long passage of time. The

nearby wall was Peg-Board covered with hanging tools, while a workbench in front was littered with assorted small pieces of machinery. Heavy chains dangled from the overhead rafters and clumps of equipment stood scattered around, the hulking metal shapes dotted with shiny plastic controls.

"Nine o'clock is clear!" J. B. Dix shouted, easing his grip on the S&W M-4000 shotgun. He would have preferred to use the 9 mm Uzi machine pistol hanging under his blanket, but there was probably loose sand in the works and he would most likely only get off a few rounds before the rapidfire jammed. However, the deadly 12-gauge scattergun should be more than enough for anything they encountered in here, norm, mutie or droid.

"Three is same!" Jak Lauren added, watching the other direction. A big-bore Colt .357 Python was tight in the albino youth's hand, a leaf-shaped throwing knife held loosely in the other. If there had been anything waiting in the dark, the pale teen would have used the blade first, before spending a live round. When the horse died, the companions had been forced to choose between carrying extra food or ammo. No choice there. As his father had always liked to say, rice is nice, but brass will save your ass. True words, and there was always something trying to ace a person in the Deathlands.

As if in reply to the thought, the wind moaned louder through the ragged hole in the door, the stream of loose sand blowing across the murky garage. Pushed back slightly, Ryan grimly dug in his boots and slammed the door shut again. "Knife!" he bellowed.

Understanding what he meant, Jak stepped closer and rammed the blade between the door and the floor as a makeshift stop. Still holding the shotgun, J.B. joined them and together the three men put their shoulders to the trembling metal.

"Dark night, this is like trying to wrestle a grizzly bear!" J.B. cried out, angrily curling his chapped lips. There were red

marks on his nose where glasses normally rested, and the wiry man was squinting against the windblown grit peppering his face. Without his wire-rimmed spectacles, J.B. was terribly nearsighted, but that wasn't really a problem inside the building.

"Worse!" Jak snarled through clenched teeth, his ruby-red eyes glaring hatefully. "Could always ace bear!"

Suddenly a sharp whistle sounded and everybody turned to see Krysty Wroth standing in a rectangle of window light, a wrapped hand resting on top of a large fifty-five-gallon steel drum.

"This one is full!" the woman shouted, tufts of crimson hair sticking out of her wrapping, the prehensile filaments moving defiantly against the acrid breeze.

Abandoning their own searches, Mildred and Doc hurried closer, and the three companions tipped the heavy container to awkwardly roll it across the garage, the loose sand crunching underfoot. As they approached, J.B. and Jak got out of the way and the five of them set the barrel firmly against the door. Easing his stance, Ryan grunted in satisfaction as the fire exit rattled slightly but stayed in place.

"That'll do," the one-eyed warrior said grudgingly. "But we better get another." Irritably, Ryan rubbed the back of his hand against the leather patch where his left eye used to be located. Sometimes in nightmares he could still see his brother's knife descending and feel the terrible stab of pain that haunted him for so many years afterward.

"And find something to block that nuking hole!" J.B. added, blinking repeatedly. He started to reach for the glasses in his shirt pocket, but forced himself to stop. These were his only good pair—his spares had hideous purple frames—and he could not risk getting them damaged.

"Will this serve?" Doc Tanner asked in a deep stentorian bass, gesturing at a piece of corrugated steel lying on the floor.

"Yeah, looks good," Ryan growled, lumbering that way. He

was tired and sore from battling the storm, but there was a lot to do before any of them could rest.

Each taking a side, Doc and Ryan tried to lift the ramp, but the thick plane of steel proved to be a lot heavier than it looked, and it took all six of the companions to clumsily hoist the corrugated sheet off the floor. As it moved, a grease pit was exposed, the shadowy depths lined with shelves filled with plastic bottles of lubricant, oil filters and miscellaneous objects.

Wary of where they stepped, the six companions moved carefully around the deep opening, and hauled the protective cover across the dark garage. Wiggling it between the shaking door and the barrel neatly sealed the hole, and the stinging wind died away completely. However, the companions added another fifty-five-gallon drum to the barricade, and then a third, before they were finally satisfied.

Lighting some candles, the companions dutifully checked their blasters, then did a second recce of the garage just to make sure they were truly alone. More than once they had entered a supposedly empty building only to be attacked by coldhearts hidden in a closet or to have a mutie drop down on them from the rafters. However, they took heart at the fact that there were no unusual smells in the air, just the expected reek of old grease, rust and decaying rubber.

There proved to be nothing lurking in the bathroom, utility closet or even hidden inside the refrigerator, the insides of which resembled a high-school lab experiment gone bad. There was a wooden desk in the corner, but the drawers contained only requisition logs, order forms, time sheets, pencils, paper clips and other assorted effluvia from the old world. Even the tools on the Peg-Board were only rusty ghosts, rendered into outlines from the sheer passage of implacable time. The garage was clear of anything dangerous or useful.

Gathering in the corner farthest from the blocked door, the companions gratefully undid the caked strips of cloth from

around their faces, then loosened the ropes holding the blankets in place and gratefully dropped them to the floor.

“Never saw a bastard storm hit this fast before,” Ryan growled, stretching his tired muscles. “If we hadn’t found this place, we’d all have been on the last train west by now.”

Tall and heavily muscled, the big man had a deeply scarred face, with a leather patch covering the puckered hole of his left eye. A bolt-action Steyr SSG-70 was strapped across his lumpy backpack, and a 9 mm SIG-Sauer blaster was holstered at his hip, right next to the curved sheath of a panga.

“Got that right, lover,” Krysty agreed, listening to the thunder booming outside. A split second later lightning flashed outside the windows, casting the people in the garage into stark relief. “However, when I saw that concrete eagle outside, I knew we’d be okay.”

A strikingly beautiful woman, Krysty was tall with ample curves and bright emerald eyes. Long crimson hair hung past her shoulders, the animated filaments flexing and moving around with a life of their own. A canvas-web belt of ammo pouches circled her waist, the checkered grip of an S&W .38 revolver jutting from a holster on her right hip. A large Bowie knife was sheathed on the left. Her worn blue cowboy boots were embroidered with the silvery outline of falcons, and a tattered bearskin coat hung over her shoulders.

“Yeah, me, too,” Ryan said, almost smiling. “National Guard bases are always good boltholes. I read once they were designed to hold back rioting mobs of people. The ones Trader found were usually in good condition.” He paused. “Not always, but usually.”

“Gaia must have been guiding our steps,” Krysty said, removing the cap from her canteen. She took a small sip, sloshing the water in her mouth before spitting it into the grease pit, and then took a long draft from the container. The water was tepid, flat, but tasted like ambrosia.

“Gaia, eh? Mebbe she did help at that,” J.B. added, removing

the glasses from his pocket and sliding them into place. "Because I sure couldn't see the compass, or sextant. We could easily have gone deeper into the desert and ended up as bones in the Great Salt."

Short and wiry, J.B. was wearing loose neutral-colored fatigue pants, U.S. Army boots, a brown leather jacket and fingerless gloves. An Uzi submachine gun hung off his left shoulder, an S&W M-4000 shotgun was slung across his shoulders and at his side was a munitions bag bulging with assorted explosives. Their old teacher, the Trader, had nicknamed him "the Armorer" long ago, and the title fit John Barrymore Dix perfectly. There wasn't a weapon in existence the deadly man could not fix, or repair, in his sleep.

"Nonsense, John Barrymore, luck favors the ready," Doc said, trying to brush the loose grit from his clothing. However, he only seemed to be making it worse, so the man abandoned the effort. "Indeed, observe our current locale! This is a perfect sanctuary from the Dantean *fimbulvetr* rampaging outside!"

Lean and muscular as a racing whippet, Professor Theophilus Algernon Tanner seemed incongruous in his frock coat and frilly white shirt, clothing from a time when the style of a man's clothing was vitally important. A huge .44 LeMat pistol was tucked into a wide gunbelt, the canvas ammo pouches full of black powder, lead and cotton wads for the massive Civil War handcannon. An ebony walking stick was thrust into his belt like a medieval sword, and his backpack hung empty and flat across his back.

"Stop mixing mythologies, you crazy old coot," Dr. Mildred Wyeth shot back irritably, stomping the dust off her combat boots. "Dante's hell was blazing hot, while the Norse legend of the *fimbulvetr* said it was freezing cold!"

Short and stocky, the physician was wearing a red flannel shirt and camou-colored fatigue pants, her ebony hair braided into beaded plaits. A Czech-made ZKR target revolver was snugly holstered low on her hip, and a patched canvas bag hung

from her shoulder bearing the faded word *M*A*S*H*. It held the bare essentials: boiled water sealed in plastic bottles, sterilized cloth in plastic bags, two sharp knives, sulfur to dust wounds, flea powder from an animal clinic, eyebrow tweezers from a hair salon, pliers from a dentist, long fingers recovered from an autobody shop and some tampons reserved for deep bullet wounds. It wasn't much, barely the basics, but it was a start.

"Indeed, madam, but Dante's hell was also frozen in the center," Doc countered, raising a finger. "So who is to say the two frigid dreamscapes were not connected somehow in a sort of cosmic abettor?"

Scowling, Mildred started a reply then merely snorted instead, simply too exhausted to argue with the scholar. Besides, she thought, maybe he was correct.

"Hot, cold, not care," Jak Lauren noted pragmatically, taking a long pull at his canteen before closing it tight. "Long as we inside and storm out."

A true albino, the teenager was the color of snow, hair and skin alike. He wore loose fatigue pants that had seen better days, a T-shirt that bore a picture of a wolf and a battered jacket covered with bits of metal, glass and feathers. Sewn into the collar were a dozen razor blades, a terrible surprise for any enemy who tried to grab the youth by the neck. A huge Colt .357 Magnum Python rested in a policeman's gunbelt. At least a dozen leaf-bladed throwing knives were secreted in his jacket. A combat knife was sheathed at his left hip, and the handle of a dagger jutted from the top of his right boot.

"You can load that into a blaster and fire it," Ryan growled, fisting the leather patch that covered his missing eye. Some of the bastard sand and salt had gotten through the wrapping and were making the empty hole itch like crazy. Turning away from the others, he lifted the patch and carefully poured some water onto his face until the sensation ceased.

Outside the garage, the howling wind increased in volume, the hard-driven grit sounding like winter hail on the roof.

Then something heavy slammed into the side of the garage, the impact shaking loose a light rain of dust from the steel beams supporting the ceiling.

"The storm seems to actually be getting worse, if that's possible." Krysty frowned, casting an anxious glance at the barricaded door. "We must be near a rad pit, and a really mucking big one." She did not fully understand the science behind the atmospheric phenomenon the way Mildred and Doc said they did, but the woman knew from experience that the rising heat from a nuke crater could change the local weather in any manner of odd ways; burn a forest into a desert or turn a desert into a swamp. Skydark did more than simply destroy people and cities, it altered the world in ways the whitecoats couldn't have predicted.

Instantly both Ryan and J.B. checked the rad counters clipped to their lapels, but each of the devices registered only the usual background levels.

"We're clear," J.B. announced in obvious relief. "No rads worth mentioning."

Just then sheet lightning flashed outside in a continuous barrage and thunder rolled for several minutes, making speech impossible.

"Well, we're not going anywhere until this ends," Ryan stated, rubbing his unshaved jaw. "Might as well settle in for the night. The ceiling is high enough for us to start a fire, and we can use the desk for kindling. What's the food situation?"

Taking a seat on a wooden bench, Mildred answered without even looking in her backpack. "We lost a lot of it in the storm," she said with a sigh. "But I managed to keep about three pounds of dried beans, four self-heats of mushroom soup, some beef jerky that probably won't crack our teeth too badly, and six cans of...uh, dinosaur."

The physician tried not to blush at the word. *Dinosaur* was her private term for cans of dog food. She wanted to call it beef stew, goulash, any damn thing else, but the companions could

read and knew better. They didn't care, food was food, and as a physician she had to grudgingly admit that the...dinosaur...was perfectly edible, tender meat, rich vegetables and a thick gravy fortified with vitamins. Very healthy stuff these blighted days. But until she had removed the labels and started calling it something else, Mildred had simply never been able to stomach the stuff. She tried not to shudder. Dinosaur stew.

Understanding, J.B. patted her on the arm. "Well, at least it's not boot soup," he said in consolation. Once, the companions had been trapped underground and were forced to eat their leather footwear to stay alive. It had worked, but the unique flavor was something none of them would ever forget.

In spite of herself, Mildred had to smile at the memory. "You're right, John, anything is better than that." She chuckled.

"Not one MRE?" Jak asked hopefully.

"Sorry." Mildred shrugged. "We had the last one yesterday."

The teen frowned. "Damn." Those were his favorite.

The letters *MRE* were military speak for Meal Ready to Eat, predark army rations. Each envelope was a complete meal, and the pack included a main course, snack, cigarettes, candy bar, dessert, coffee, sugar, moist towelette, chewing gum and even a small packet of toilet tissue for use afterward. The food was incredible: spaghetti with meatballs, veal Parmesan, beef Stroganoff, chicken and dumplings, eggs and bacon, even pancakes and waffles. The meals were fit for a baron. Best he'd ever had! Well, aside from possum, Jak acknowledged. The MRE packs were worth their weight in ammo, and harder to find than a friendly stickie.

"Well, it's my turn to get the wood," Krysty said, picking up a heavy wrench from a toolbox on the floor and starting for the desk.

"Rest first," Ryan ordered brusquely, then softened his tone. "We're not going anywhere soon, lover."

With a nod, the tired woman sat again and placed the wrench aside for later.

“Well, if we have naught to do until the anger of Thor is appeased,” Doc said lugubriously, pulling a worn deck of cards from a pocket of his frock coat, “would anyone be interested in a nice game of Whist?”

“Mebbe later, thanks,” Ryan said, going to the workbench.

Taking a seat, he cleared an area, then drew the SIG-Sauer and dropped the clip as a prelude to thoroughly cleaning the dirty weapon. Joining his friend, J.B. laid down the Uzi and started pulling tools from his munitions bag, along with a small bottle of homogenized gun oil.

“Whist?” Mildred scowled.

“Fair enough, then. How about Canasta?” he asked hopefully. “Or mayhap pinochle?”

Crossing her arms, Krysty looked at the tall man and said nothing.

Seeing it was hopeless, Doc sighed in resignation. “All right, poker again.”

“Now talking!” Jak grinned, cracking his knuckles.

Moving their candles to the sandy floor, the companions sat in a circle and Doc started neatly shuffling the plastic-coated playing cards when the thump sounded again, even louder this time. Then it came three more times in rapid succession. In sudden comprehension, the startled companions realized that the noise was not coming from the sandstorm outside, but from a blank section of the cinder-block wall near the refrigerator.

Scowling darkly, Ryan began to rise from the workbench when the wall visibly moved, a spiderweb of cracks radiating across the rows of cinder blocks as several of them broke into pieces and fell away, leaving a ragged hole. But instead of the howling storm, there was only cool blackness on the other side.

Then something large shifted position in the Stygian dark, the reflection of polished metal gleaming in the dim candlelight.

Chapter Two

“Get razor, people!” Ryan snarled, pulling the Steyr SSG-70 off his back and working the bolt to chamber a 7.62 mm round for immediate action. “We’re about to have company!”

Muttering curses, J.B. started to reach for the Uzi, then turned away and swung the S&W M-4000 around. Working the pump, the Armorer kicked out the first cartridge, then quickly thumbed it right back into the receiver to help break apart any clumps of sand that might clog in the mechanism. The scattergun would probably have worked just fine anyway, but better safe than aced, as the Trader always used to say.

Moving fast, the rest of the companions spread out to not offer an enemy a group target. Setting their candles high and out of the way to not reveal their positions, the companions took cover behind a lathe, drill press and other pieces of heavy equipment just as the cinder blocks violently shook, the cracks spreading wider, and a host of small tools falling off the Peg-Board landed in a ringing clatter.

“Shit,” Jak drawled, turning the word into two syllables as he thumbed back the hammer on his Colt Python. “Big ’un. What be, mutie?”

“I most assuredly hope so,” Doc replied, tightening a finger on the trigger of the LeMat, his free hand poised over the weapon to fan the hammer. “Because if not—”

But the scholar was interrupted by the unexpected sound of working hydraulics. The wall bulged in the middle, the blocks shattering to spray loose debris across the garage. Even

before the broken pieces of masonry hit the floor, the companions bitterly cursed and opened fire at the shadowy figure standing in the irregular gap.

The cylindrical body of the machine was shiny and smooth, the low head only a rounded dome sporting two red crystal lenses that never stopped rotating. The flexing arms were thick ferruled cables, one equipped with a pounding pneumatic airhammer, and the other tipped with a spinning buzzsaw, the razor-sharp disk only a whining blur, the noise oddly reminiscent of a predark dentist drill.

“Sec hunter droid!” Krysty growled, using both hands to steady her S&W Model 640 revolver.

In a ragged barrage, the companions cut loose with their blasters, but the soft-lead rounds only ricocheted harmlessly off the armored body of the droid as it continued to enlarge the hole in the wall. Then the shotgun boomed, and one of the red eyes shattered into a million pieces.

Instantly turning in that direction, the droid extended the buzzsaw arm. Already in motion, J.B. got out of the way just in time, and the spinning blade slammed into the workbench instead, dislodging dozens of tools. Ducking under a lathe, J.B. turned and fired again just as the buzzsaw hit the machine, throwing off a corona of sparks. Stepping in close, Ryan fired point-blank at the robotic limb, the barrel of the longblaster actually touching the rotating blade. As expected, the copper-jacketed round rebounded, but the buzzsaw was momentarily thrown out of alignment, jammed in the yoke and violently shattered, the steel slivers going everywhere.

With a cry, Mildred dropped the ZKR target pistol and clutched her right arm.

“Have at thee, Visigoth!” Doc bellowed, fanning the LeMat like a Wild West gunslinger. The .44 miniballs hit the droid like flying sledgehammers, badly denting the domed head. Hydraulic fluid started leaking from one of the depressions in the manner of watery blood.

Flailing its damaged limb madly, the droid smashed chunks out of the wooden workbench. Dodging out of the way, Ryan fired twice at the machine, then stepped behind a cluster of hanging chains. The limb started that way, paused and then retreated, unwilling to risk getting tangled in the steel lengths.

Working the bolt on the Steyr, Ryan grunted at the sight. Fireblast, just how smart was this tin can?

Crawling behind a pile of rotting tires, Mildred fumbled in her med kit for a length of boiled cloth to tie a tourniquet around the wound as a temporary field dressing. The blood was coming fast, but not spurting, which meant there was no damage to a major artery. Plus, it hurt like hell, which was also a good sign. Life-threatening wounds almost always went numb to protect the body from shock. This felt like a nice, clean, flesh wound.

Moving like a ghost in the darkness, Jak concentrated his Colt Python on the ruined eye of the droid, the .357 Magnum rounds denting the dome. But the machine rotated the weakened section safely out of harm's way.

Reloading while on the run, J.B. aimed and fired, always keeping in motion. The 12-gauge didn't have the range of the Uzi and he had to get closer to do maximum damage. There was a pipe bomb in his munitions bag that should reduce the droid to smoking wreckage. Unfortunately the garage was too small to use explosives. The concussion would also ace the companions. They would have to take this nukesucker down the hard way.

Going for the remaining eye, Ryan fired his longblaster as fast as he could work the bolt. When the clip was empty, he dropped into a crouch to hastily insert a fresh one. This was a triple-bad place for a prolonged fight, and he cast a furtive glance at the blocked fire exit. They may have nailed the lid on their own bastard coffin with that barricade, but there was nothing he could do about it now.

Holding the end of the crude bandage in her teeth, Mildred

ignored the pain as she cinched the tourniquet tight. She watched for any leakage, and when no fresh blood appeared, she fumbled for the ZKR with her left hand and grimly stood to begin snapping off rounds at the droid. The first few bullets went wild, then she grew calm as if performing surgery, and once more started to hit the machine with deadly accuracy. However, the sec hunter droid seemed to be ignoring the companions now, and was using both arms to batter down the last section of the cinder-block wall.

Feeling her blood run cold at the sight, Krysty snapped shut the reloaded cylinder of her S&W Model 640 and started to fire again. Gaia, she thought, if the machine got into the garage it could move freely among them and this fight would be over in only a few minutes. The companions had to keep the droid from getting through the wall at any cost! Spotting a welding tank near the breach, she took a gamble and shot it twice. But both of the pressurized tanks only weakly hissed for a few moments before going silent, the explosive mixture of oxygen and acetylene having leaked away completely over the long decades.

Firing in unison, Doc and Jak battered the machine with their big-bore handcannons as the last few cinder blocks fell away and the droid triumphantly entered the garage.

Cursing vehemently, J.B. dropped the shotgun, a misfired cartridge jammed in the ejector port. Grabbing a sledgehammer, he awkwardly swung it around in a circle over his head and let go, but the droid dodged the clumsy missile and lashed out with both limbs to crush four of the flickering candles set on top of the old machinery.

Instantly the garage darkened noticeably, and the companions slowed their attack, no longer able to clearly aim at their inhuman enemy.

Realizing what the droid had in mind, Ryan knew they were out of options and made a fast decision.

“Gren!” the Deathlands warrior bellowed, dropping the longblaster and insanely charging at the droid.

Pivoting, the machine lanced out with the pneumatic hammer. Diving under the snaking limb, Ryan reached the droid and drove his shoulder into the metal chassis, actually lifting it off the ground a little as he exerted all of his strength to drive the machine back a yard until it went over the edge of the floor and dropped into the grease pit.

Hitting the concrete, Ryan rolled away quickly as the droid lashed its telescoping arms around to try to right itself and J.B. tossed the hissing pipe bomb into the pit.

The companions took cover and braced themselves for the blast, and just as the domed head of the sec hunter droid rose into view, the one red crystal eye spinning insanely, the metal arms reaching out, the bomb detonated.

The confined explosion was deafening, and the entire building shook from the violent force of the blast. Channeled by the concrete sides of the grease pit, flames and smoke formed a volcano straight upward, carrying along numerous broken pieces of the droid. Several of the windows noisily shattered, and the raging sandstorm poured into the smoky garage with unbridled fury as the thundering column of destruction slammed into the roof. Down came a rain of wiring, gears, solenoids, assorted junk and hydraulic fluid. A robotic arm smacked onto the refrigerator and the crumpled head hit the desk, splintering the ancient wood.

All of the companions were peppered with refuse, but they resolutely stayed in place, hands covering their ears, as they waited for the ringing force of the concussion to dissipate. Sand and windblown grit began to sprinkle down from the smashed windows before they finally rose, stiff and sore, to check their weapons and stumble toward the hole in the wall. Where there was one droid, there were often two, and sometimes more. A lot more.

Judiciously, Ryan worked the bolt on the longblaster and checked the clear plastic clip in the breech of the Steyr. Four shots remained. Removing the partially loaded cylinder, Ryan

slipped in a full clip and worked the bolt again to chamber a round for immediate use. In a fight, a single round often made the difference between walking on the dirt or wearing it as a blanket.

Gathering in front of the dark opening, the companions waited, fingers on triggers, their clothing riffing from the salt wind. The candles were extinguished, so Jak and Doc flicked butane lighters into life, the small blue flames throwing out weak nimbi of illumination that barely penetrated the darkness.

Reaching into her med kit, Mildred pulled out a small survivalist flashlight and pumped the cracked handle a few times to charge the old batteries. The device had been a gift to the physician from the captain of a steamboat for saving the life of his only child. It had served her well, but these days the weakening batteries took more and more pumping to charge, and the beam was becoming less pronounced. Soon it would be useless and she would be reduced to tallow candles and rope torches once more.

Thumbing the switch, Mildred aimed the pale yellow beam at the irregular gap. Swirling sand and salt sparkled in the air like fireflies, and she could only see a bare concrete floor on the other side. Nothing more.

With blasters at the ready, the companions waited for a reaction from the other side of the wall. But there was no sign of movement, only darkness, the stillness almost palpable.

When nothing happened after a few minutes, Ryan leveled his longblaster and assumed the point position, easing through the break, his head moving steadily back and forth so that nothing could approach from his blind side. The 12-gauge primed, J.B. followed close by, flanking his friend, one covering the other until they were in the next room. The sound and fury of the storm was less pronounced in this new section of the National Guard base. Assuming defensive positions, the two men stood guard while the others crossed over, butane lighters held high, blasters leading the way.

“If anything moves, anything at all, take no chances,” Ryan ordered gruffly. “Just spend the brass and save your ass.”

The others nodded their agreement. The companions did not have an official leader, but they usually followed the lead of the big one-eyed man, as he was right nine times out of ten.

In the feeble yellow beam, they could see that this was another garage. Bigger, but not much different than the other one—tools on the Peg-Board, more chains, another grease pit. From the size of the equipment and tools, this garage was clearly designed to handle military wags, 4x4 trucks, armored personnel carriers and such. But that was not what riveted their attention. There were more sec hunter droids. Dozens upon dozens of them.

The army of machines was scattered across the floor, extending far beyond the feeble glow of the flashlight. Loose wires and burned circuit boards lay everywhere, the piles of smashed wreckage reaching over a yard high in some spots, the bent and twisted metal reflecting the yellow beam like a golden treasure. Dried puddles of hydraulic fluid dotted the graveyard, as if the machines had been savaged by wolves. But the droids were not alone.

Still defiantly standing over the field of destruction were a couple of robotic spiders. At the sight, Ryan almost instinctively fired, then realized it wasn't necessary. The flickering butane light had simply given them the momentary illusion of life. These droids would never harm anybody ever again.

Most of the spiders were reduced to only three or four legs, instead of the usual eight, and every one had its guts ripped out, the computerized workings dangling loosely like metallic intestines. Even the dreaded belly-mounted lasers drooped impotently, the slim barrels bent or hammered flat.

The companions had encountered the spiders before and aside from a single belly-mounted weapon, the machines had no other offensive capabilities. They were one-hit wonders, as

Mildred liked to say—unlike the sec hunter droids, which seemed to be made out of weapons.

“Droids fighting droids,” Ryan muttered uneasily, testing the words as if they were rotting floorboards to see if they would hold his weight. “Must have been a nukestorm of a fight.” The warrior tried to reconstruct the battle in his mind. There seemed to have been pockets of resistance, as if the machines were holding positions to guard something, or somebody, in their midst.

“Looks like draw,” Jak snorted, easing down the hammer of his Colt. There was nothing dangerous here anymore. Only ghosts of the past.

“Most assuredly, my young friend, a genuine Pyrrhic victory,” Doc agreed, holstering the LeMat. “Although I would theorize that our earlier, ahem, guest, was in fact the sole survivor of this internecine conflict.”

“And it broke through the wall to attack us the moment it heard voices,” J.B. said slowly, using the shotgun to tilt back his fedora. “Yeah, that makes sense, in a droid sort of way.”

Mildred shook her head in disbelief, her beaded plaits clacking. “It stayed on guard, alone, in a black room, for a hundred years.”

“Just droid,” Jak replied, dismissing the matter.

“Wonder what they were fighting over,” Ryan said cagily. “Could be something useful.” The companions were low on food, almost out of water and on foot. Almost anything would be helpful at this point. The only thing in their favor was that the group did have plenty of ammo for once. But that was dwindling fast.

“Probably just wanted control of the base,” J.B. said with a shrug. “Who can figure out the logic of a droid?”

“Actually, I think the answer is over there,” Krysty said in a deceptively soft voice. She was looking into the far darkness, her long red hair flexing wildly.

Swinging the flashlight in that direction, Mildred revealed

a cluster of Hummers parked in a protective circle around something really big that was covered with a sheet of canvas. The Hummers were carrying M-60 machine guns, and were literally torn to pieces from laser fire. Two of them had obviously caught fire and burned to the floor. Even worse, the white bones of human skeletons were strewn about the wags, many of them missing arms or heads. Rusty longblasters gleamed dully in the pale light, and spent brass was everywhere. These had clearly not been innocent bystanders, but participants in the battle. A few pieces of their aged uniforms were visible among the burned boots, torn body armor and cracked helmets. The troopers seemed to be from every branch of the armed services: army, navy, air force and marines. Only their patent leather belts seemed completely unaffected by the long passage of time.

“A pickup squad,” Doc said, resting a hand on the silver lion’s head of his ebony walking stick. “Forced recruits taken from whoever was handy when the convoy was formed.”

“What think is?” Jak asked suspiciously.

“In a predark convoy? Could be anything,” Mildred replied with a sigh. “Top-secret documents, high-ranking politicians, all sorts of useless things.”

“Or it could be a convoy of supplies for the Ohio redoubt,” Krysty said in subdued excitement. “Thousands of MRE food packs, tons of live brass, med kits...”

“Boot polish, toothpaste, laundry detergent,” Mildred continued unabated. “Uniform insignia, letterhead stationery...”

“Only one way to find out,” Krysty countered.

“Agreed. Watch for traps,” Ryan said, kicking the dome of a sec hunter droid out of the way with his combat boot as he headed for the vehicles. From long experience, he knew that some folks died hard, clutching a primed gren in their hand in a desperate hope of taking out their killers. Death kept their fingers on the arming lever, but a careless boot could knock that loose and chill the lot of them faster than a live droid.

Staying sharp, the companions watched the shadows for any suspicious movements. Unfortunately the blue flame of the butane lighters made everything seem alive in motion.

Reaching into his jacket, Jak pulled out his only flare. Thumping the end on a raised knee, the top sputtered and a sizzling dagger of flame formed, the brilliant white light banishing most of the gloom. Holding the flare high to avoid the reeking clouds of bitter smoke, Jak took the lead with Ryan and J.B. on his flanks.

Moving easily through the assorted destruction, the companions watched where they stepped, wary of the jagged metal sticking up from the wreckage like thorny brambles. Now they could see that some of the spiders had been equipped with needlers, the bodies of the sec hunter droids riddled to pieces from the superfast 1 mm fléchettes. They found the weapon cut in two by a buzzsaw, the spinning blade buried deep in the sleek machine. Pity. Sometimes those were found in working condition.

“How’s the arm?” J.B. asked, glancing at Mildred.

“Just a flesh wound, nothing serious,” the physician replied, hefting the ZKR. “When we get the chance, I’ll bandage it. I can still shoot just fine.”

“Sure, sure.” The wiry man heard the words, but looked at her hard to see if they were true. Noticing his concern, Mildred gave a game smile and bumped him with a hip. J.B. smiled in return, and they walked alongside each other until reaching the Hummers.

The military wags were wrecks, tires flat, windshields shattered, the chassis deeply scored by the lasers, the engines hammered into crumpled wads of metal.

Sidling past the aced transports, Ryan used the barrel of the Steyr to carefully lift the canvas sheet to take a gander underneath. At first he scowled, then grabbed the material and hauled it down in a single motion.

A cloud of dust rose from the canvas, obscuring whatever

it had covered, but the salt breeze from the other garage thinned that out quickly, and the companions found themselves looking at a titanic wag of a type they had never seen before.

More than twenty feet long, and about half that wide, the colossal machine was clearly a transport of some kind, with eight tires that stood an easy six feet high. The angular chassis was composed of a smooth armor painted a dull tan, and the symbol of the U.S. Marine Corps was painted on the side. Large windows ringed the passenger section, each one equipped with a blasterport. Strangest of all, there were large hydraulic lifters set on each side attached to a sort of hinged fork; each of the tines was a foot wide and ended in sharp tips.

“Holy mackerel, that’s one of those urban combat vehicles!” Mildred gasped in astonishment, reaching out to touch the machine as if it were about to vanish in a cloud of fairy dust. “I saw a TV report on them just before I went in for my surgery!”

The others knew the rest of that story. The predark physician had gone under the knife for a simple operation, but there had been serious complications, and the attending physicians had had no choice but to cryogenically freeze Mildred in a desperate attempt to save her life. A hundred years later, Ryan and the companions freed Mildred from her icy prison, and she had been with them ever since. Her illness was mysteriously in remission, but she lived in growing fear that one day it would return to finish the job started so very long ago.

“I’d heard that the UCV program was only in the testing phase,” Mildred continued, walking around the massive wag. On the side was a brass plaque that read, Mark II. “This must be the next model!”

“Looks like tank, without gun,” Jak said, neither impressed nor disappointed.

“That’s pretty damn close.” Mildred smiled. “Looks like these things could literally drive through a brick building

without slowing down. Aside from not having a cannon, this is a tank, it even has the same size motors, Allison transmission, everything!"

"Why no blaster?" the teen asked quizzically.

"Money, probably," Mildred said.

"Those windows some sort of Plexiglas?" Ryan queried.

"Lexan plastic, tough as cast iron, and it looks like the blasterports are arranged so that you can actually see what you're shooting at, unlike a LAV-25, T-80 or Bradley Fighting Vehicle."

"So there was no need to expose yourself to enemy blasters to fight back," J.B. said, stroking his jaw. "Pretty sweet. Those blades in front for stabbing folks or carrying supplies like a forklift?"

"Oh no, the program said they were for digging up buried land mines. And see the bottom? The armor is shaped to deflect the force of the blast outward, instead of taking it flat. Even the tires could take a 40 mm gren without going flat."

"Madam, please," Doc said skeptically. "Are we also to believe that it can fly to the moon on gossamer wings?"

"No, honestly," Mildred continued. "This thing has got so much reinforced armor, packed on top of armor, that most of the wag is engine and fuel tanks. It only holds a crew of eight."

"Eight?" Krysty asked, craning her neck to try to see inside. But the windows were a good six feet off the floor. "This thing should hold thirty troopers easy."

"Nope, only eight. See for yourself!" Reaching out, Mildred tried a door handle, but it was locked solid. Damn!

"Let me try," J.B. said, passing Doc the flare and pulling out some tools. A few minutes later the Armorer had to admit defeat. None of the armored doors could be picked or forced open. The military vehicles did not have mechanical locks, but alphanumeric keypads hidden under sliding steel plates, very similar to the ones the companions used to gain entry into a redoubt. There were millions of possible combinations, and

it would take them years to try every one and any attempt to rig a short circuit or to hack the lock would probably trip a self-defense charge and weld the doors closed forever. On a whim, he tried the access code to enter a redoubt, but nothing happened.

“Forget it. This baby is sealed tighter than a crab’s ass at a bean-eating contest,” J.B. reported, tucking away his equipment.

“Pity,” Doc said. “It would have been nice to ride to the next redoubt in comfort.”

“Really think still function?” Jak asked incredulously. The companions sometimes found working predark vehicles stored inside a redoubt, but those were sealed deep underground, far from the rads, acid rain and thieving coldhearts.

“Probably not,” Ryan started, but then changed his mind. The canvas sheet that had been covering the vehicle was filled with holes from blasterfire, needlers and the laser weapons of the droids. Yet the wag didn’t have a scratch, and shone as if freshly polished. Could it be self-repairing like a redoubt? Fireblast, what a find that would be!

“Then again, it never hurts to do a recce,” Ryan said, shouldering the Steyr. Going over to the nearest Hummer, the Deathlands warrior climbed on top of the tilted wreck and found that he was now high enough to see directly into the urban combat vehicle.

“Well, I’ll be a son of a bitch,” Ryan muttered, scowling.

“Trouble?” Jak asked, a pale hand going to his blaster.

“Come see for yourself!”

In short order, the others soon joined the big man on top of the aced Hummer. The flare threw strange shadows inside the UCV, but they could still see that there were no bodies or skeletons inside the vehicle, no mounds of supplies or crates of weapons. However, lying nestled between the back row of jumpseats were three large white containers, the exposed control panels twinkling with colored lights, alive with power.

“Cryo units,” Mildred whispered, clutching her med kit. So this was what the droids had battled over, ownership of the cryogenic units! They had to contain people from her own time, fellow scientists, or even the technicians who had helped build the redoubts!

“John, we must get inside and rescue them!” she said excitedly.

“Don’t see why, they’re sure not in any danger,” J.B. stated callously, adjusting his glasses. “However, I can clearly see U.S. Army backpacks tucked under the front seats, and those always contain MRE packs, spare ammo, medical supplies, lots of good stuff.”

“Food...” Jak said, putting a wealth of emotion into the single word.

“Not to mention the fact that we have some serious mutie territory between us and the next redoubt,” Ryan added, feeling his own stomach rumble at the notion of eating. “Sure be nice to have some steel around us for a change.”

“Indubitably, sir!” Doc said, inhaling as if to say more when the flare sputtered and died.

In the wan glow of Mildred’s old flashlight, the companions dug out some spare candles and got them working. Outside, the storm continued to rage, but the sounds were softened and less threatening this deep in the base.

“Okay, any ideas on how to get inside the wag?” Ryan asked pointedly, tucking away his butane lighter.

“Well,” Krysty said slowly, her hair flexing thoughtfully. “Mebbe we can use the droids to get inside.”

“They busted to drek!” Jak stated. “How use?”

The redhead smiled and started walking. “Come on, I’ll show you.”

Chapter Three

Weakly, the dull red sun shone down upon the frozen landscape of western Pennsylvania, the tainted light reflecting off the blanket of snow covering the ground to almost blinding levels.

Tall mountains rose in the far distance, the jagged peaks lost in listless clouds of toxic chems and radioactive isotopes. Softly, a low breeze whispered across the arctic landscape, rustling the needles of the pine trees and kicking up some flakes that swirled around the U.S. Navy battleship lying on its side on top of the mesa. Icicles hung off the long barrels of the cannons, the decks thickly coated with frost, and bird nests festooned what little rigging remained. Inside the bridge, several corpses lay in a pile jammed against one corner of the sideways room; nearly every bone visible was cracked into a jigsaw puzzle. The complex bank of controls was dark and lifeless, only the gauges for the nuclear power plant buried in the hold still registered any activity. The massive navy powerplant was still dutifully generating electricity for a crew, machines and engines no longer in working condition.

Caught in an offshore nuclear blast, the crew had perished instantly as the huge vessel was sent hurtling through the sky to finally crash into the western woods, leaving the vessel lying in a crude patch of bedrock.

A low rumble shook the forest, disturbing the serene tranquility like a stone dropped into a lake. The sleeping birds were roused, conies popped their heads into view, elk raised their antlers high, and something stirred in one of the lifeboats

of the great ship. A human eye was pressed to a hole in the canvas covering the sideways boat, and it glared with hostile intent.

Just then, throwing out a wide contrail of black smoke and loose snow, a convoy of armored war wags thundered over the horizon.

The flanking vehicles were modified Mack trucks, the bodies made of overlapping sheets of iron, steel, aluminum, tin, whatever could be scavenged in the ruins of Deathlands. A dozen blasters jutted from blasterports, and each vehicle was topped with a pneumatic catapult, a brace of .308 machine guns and edged with coils of barbed wire. They were war wags, death machines, armed escorts.

However, they looked like toys compared to the massive lead vehicle. It was longer than an express train engine, and equipped with a dozen oversize tires, the burnished metal hubcaps edged with razor-sharp spikes to keep people and muties away from the vulnerable rubber. The angular chassis was smooth steel, scored, scraped and dented from countless fights, but never penetrated.

The sides of the rolling fortress bristled with the long vented barrels of .50-caliber machine guns, along with the stubby barrels of 40 mm grenade launchers. The curved roof of the military wag was studded with rows of spikes, and festooned with multiple coils of concertina wire. At the front was a fat cylinder of unknown function, the end capped with an insulated lid held in place by hydraulic lifters. At the rear of the machine was the more conventional metal box of a U.S. Army rocket launcher, the honeycomb of tubes full of deadly warbirds, the louvered rear vents deeply scorched by chemical fire. Claymore mines ringed the entire chassis, along with halogen spotlights and loudspeakers.

A sturdy cage of welded iron bars covered the front of the Herculean wag like the barbican of a medieval castle, the gridwork edged with more concertina wire. Behind the pro-

tective barrier was a wide sheet of Plexiglas. There were several deep gouges in the window, along with a score of small-caliber bullets and arrowheads deeply embedded into the resilient material like flies in amber. Behind the windshield, the interior lights were turned off, effectively making the window a one-way mirror. The Plexiglas reflected the moonlit snow and trees, and it was impossible to see who, or what, was in control of the horribly beweaponed behemoth.

On top of each vehicle was a flexible pole crested with the white flag of peace adorned with a large letter *S* with two vertical lines running through it, the universal symbol of a trader. Although, nobody knew the origin of the ancient symbol these days.

At the sight, a scream of rage came from the lifeboat, and the insane hermit living there scrambled from his filthy nest of human scalps to scamper like a monkey across the vertical deck to reach a depth-charge catapult. He checked the homemade charges—made from the massive stock of fulminating guncotton in the ship's armory—then hastily spun a small wheel, setting into motion a complex series of gears, and the catapult began to smoothly rotate.

“Mine! All mine!” he screamed, his eyes wild, the unkempt lengths of greasy hair matted in his own filth. “Nobody can cross Thunder Valley! Nobody!”

The crazy wrinklie was dressed in a bearskin, held closed with toggles of carved bones, and around his throat was a grotesque necklace of dried ears: norm, animal and mutie.

Checking the angle and direction through a built-in telescope, the cackling hermit tracked the approaching trio of vehicles invading his private domain.

“Just a little bit more, fools...” he whispered in excitement. “Come on, just a little more...yes!”

Yanking in the lanyard, he fired the catapult. With a dull thud, the device sent a depth charge arching high into the crisp moonlight, and then down it hurtled straight to the convoy of wags.

Instantly, the vehicles became covered with stuttering flames as dozens of rapidfires cut loose, filling the air with hot lead. Then the M-60 started to chug, and the Fifties spoke in short burst.

Riddled to pieces, the depth charge exploded in midair, the blast shaking the entire valley and knocking snow off the pine trees.

“No!” the hermit screamed, clawing gouges in both cheeks with his ragged fingernails. “No, this ain’t happen! Ain’t!”

Going to the catapult, he quickly reset the machine and fired again, but the results were the same, and by now the convoy was dangerously close to the dead battleship, the headlights starting to catch details of the hull and deck.

Once more a depth charge flew, and this time it was destroyed so close to the battleship that the hot wind of the explosion buffeted the hermit and shrapnel tinkled on the metal deck.

Shrieking insanely, the hermit abandoned the launcher and raced to another lifeboat, one that he rarely entered. Ripping aside the protective canvas sheet, he unearthed a bulky Vulcan minigun, the deadly tribarrel rapidfire covered with animal hides as protection from the evening chill. Throwing switches and pressing buttons, he fed the machine power, and the triple-barrels swung up smoothly, responding to fingertip pressure. The hermit then climbed into the sideways seat he had carved from human bones, and engaged the last belt of 40 mm shells into the superblaster.

“Gonna get aced now!” he screamed, flecks of white foam dotting his chapped lips. “Thunder Valley belongs to me! Do you hear that? It’s mine, mine-mine-mine!”

“Yes...” The word floated up from the loudspeakers of the lead war wag, rolling across the snowy fields like the moan of a ghost. “We finally do hear you, and now know exactly where you are.” There was a pause. “Goodbye.”

A scintillating ray of starkly unimaginable power lanced out from the top of the lead war wag. It hit the frosty deck, in-

stantly vaporizing the snow and ice to the sound of a million windows cracking. The steel warped, buckled and then exploded into steaming plasma, throwing out white-hot gobbets of molten steel.

The entire battleship groaned from the uneven heat expansion. The hermit screamed in terror as the laser moved along the vessel, igniting the ancient rigging, setting fire to the lifeboats, detonating the depth charges before it swept across him, the massive stores of 40 mm shells all cooking off at once.

The predark ship bucked like a wounded animal, pieces of wreckage forming a geyser over the shaking trees. Something inside the ship ignited and secondary explosions began hammering the craft from within, tearing off chunks of deck and stairwells in wild profusion. Streamers of flame lanced out in every direction, then the main ammunition stores detonated and the battleship vanished in a silent explosion of white light.

Seconds later, hearing returned to the men and women in the convoy and the concussion arrived, brutally rattling the vehicles. Blasters fired indiscriminately, dishes broke in the galley, a toilet surged, windows cracked and a man cried out as a swinging door slammed him in the face. Loose ammo spilled dangerously across the trembling floorboards, a spray of electrical sparks erupted from a bank of comps, the radar screen winked out, a missile launched from the aft pod all by itself.

“Haul ass!” a man commanded into a hand mike, his voice repeating in every vehicle. “Get the frag out of here!”

Lurching into motion, the war wags charged backward from the writhing fireball filling the valley. They barely made it to the treeline when an avalanche of snow arrived, mixed with hundreds of small woodland animals. Birds, conies and squirrels pelted the escaping armored vehicles like a shotgun blast of life. Then came the wreckage from all of the other vehicles destroyed by the madman, wooden cart wheels, tank

treads, rubber tires, engines, bicycles, car hoods, motorcycles, horse saddles, everything and anything imaginable, along with a graveyard collection of gnawed human bones and horribly decomposing body parts.

Rolling below the crest, the wags dropped out of the hell-storm but kept going until the roiling force of the detonation eventually began to diminish and then fade away.

With ringing ears, the crew of the lead war wag stared blankly at the blood-smeared windshield, each of them lost in private thoughts.

Unbuckling his seat belt, Roberto Eagleson stood, then grabbed a ceiling stanchion to sway for a moment before regaining his balance. The big man was heavily muscled, but his long arms hung loosely at his sides as if taken from another body. Wearing blue jeans and a leather jacket, his clothing was spotlessly clean and without patches, an unheard-of condition these days. But the trader believed in the power of advertising. Look tough and a lot of coldhearts would simply step aside and leave the convoy alone. And for the coldhearts not impressed, Roberto carried an S&W .357 Magnum blaster in a fancy shoulder holster, and a sawed-off shotgun rode at his hip, his shirt pockets sewn into cartridge loops for the deadly alley sweeper.

Reaching up for a mike clipped to a ceiling stanchion, Roberto thumbed the switch. "Goog..." He paused to cough and clear his throat. "Good shooting, Tex," he said, the words echoing slightly along the metal hallway. There was the faint trace of an accent in the words, a whisper of his Spanish ancestry. "Quinn, I want a damage report in ten. Abduhl, check the tanks to make sure we don't have any leaks. Eric, Suzette, check over the comps and get us up and running again pronto. Jimmy, check the laser for any cracks in the lens, and you better bring a rag and a bucket, it's pretty messy out there."

The control room crew chuckled weakly at the joke, their hands moving across the array of controls, checking electri-

cal systems, water, air, fuel, tires, motors and the all-important blasters.

“Well, that was fun,” Jake Hutching said, forcing his hands to release the steering wheel. The pulped remains of small animals covered the front windshield to mix with the melting snow to form a ghastly pink sludge that oddly resembled human brains.

“Kind of nice to know what skydark looked like, eh, boys?” Jessica Colt said, trying not to grimace, both arms wrapped tight across her chest. The pretty woman barely reached five feet tall. Dressed in tanned buckskin, her long blond hair was tied back in a loose ponytail. Knives jutted from the top of each of her boots, and a hulking big Russian T-Rex .44 revolver rested on a shapely hip.

“What’s wrong?” Roberto demanded, noticing her odd posture.

His second in command might be small, but she had generous breasts, and they bunched up like a gaudy slut on the prowl for business with her arms in that position.

“Nothing, just a bruise...” Jessica started, then saw his stern expression. “I busted a rib.”

“Healer to CNC,” Roberto said, thumbing the mike again. “Shelly, on the jump, we have injuries!”

“I’ll be there as soon as somebody removes whatever the frag is blocking my door from opening,” a woman replied from the intercom on the wall. “I swear that this... Okay, I’m free. On the way, Chief!”

“Acknowledged,” Roberto said.

“Nuke that drek,” Jessica shot back, hobbling to the corridor door. “I can still walk.”

Roberto glared at the woman, but she just glared right back defiantly, and he dismissed her with a curt wave. The man had never met a woman more aptly named. She resembled a Colt blaster in every way: small, cold and deadly, yet

smooth to the touch of the right man. She was even a pistol in bed, too.

Shying his mind away from those kinds of thoughts, Roberto hung up the mike and pulled a walkie-talkie from a recharging unit set into the metal wall. "*Scorpion* to *Big Joe*, what's your status?"

"Alive and undamaged," Scott Gordon replied from War Wag Two. "We just have to clean what used to be a moose off the windshield and we're good to go."

"Acknowledged," Roberto replied, feeling a knot of tension ease in his guts. He took every conceivable safeguard to protect his crew. They were like kin. The one time he had been reckless, Kathleen got aced. He would never forgive Ryan Cawdor for his part in the loss of the *Lady Trader*, even if it was accidental.

Just then, the ceiling speaker crackled.

"This is *Tiger Lily* to *Scorpion*," Diana Dunn said in a thick Southern accent. "We're undamaged and hot to trot. Say the word and we're good to go!"

"Roger that, *Tiger Lily*, we just have to patch some ribs," Roberto replied, sitting again to ease the pain in his stiff leg. "We should be back on the move in an hour."

In less than half that time, the three war wags rumbled into motion and started carefully forward, zigzagging through the steaming wreckage filling the valley. The explosion had toppled over trees and uprooted boulders, which was not really surprising, but mixed with the gigantic chunks of the battleship, the combination made for difficult and treacherous passage. Several times, crews had to plant explosives to blow clear a path, and once, Roberto was forced to unleash the laser again. At such a short range, the beam didn't just punch through a target, it damn near vaporized the steel, and then the convoy had to wait for the pool of bubbling metal to cool enough for them to cross without risking the tires. This was going to take longer than expected. But the prize on the other side was worth any effort. Civilization.

Chapter Four

Hopping to the floor, Krysty started looking among the piles of wreckage, turning over this and that. The others joined her and tried to stay out of the way.

“What exactly are we looking for, dear lady?” Doc asked, using his ebony stick to nudge a partially melted hunk of droid.

“This,” Krysty said, lifting a laser from the piles of loose rubble. The weapon was in good shape, with only a few scratches on the barrel, but the lens at the end reflected the candlelight like a mirror. “Now all we need is some wiring and a live battery!”

“Burn through mil armor?” J.B. cried out. “Unless we find a nuke battery, I don’t think we’ll have that kind of power. Mebbe a shot or two, but not much more.”

“That might just be enough,” Ryan muttered, studying the UCV. “Not on the doors, but on the roof hatch. The lock is probably made of regular steel, nothing special. If they were trying to save jack, why armor something nobody is ever going to reach?”

“Makes sense,” Jak said hesitantly. “But how shoot something inside locked wag?”

Mildred burst into laughter. “How? We shoot it through the window!”

“Exactly,” Krysty declared, hugging the laser.

Long ago, when the companions were battling a robotic tank armed with a laser cannon, Mildred had told them how

a laser worked on light absorption. A green-colored laser did very little damage to a green target, or a blue laser to a blue target, and so on, which was why most military lasers were polycyclic, able to shift through the entire spectrum every second. That way they always did maximum damage. Back in high school, Mildred had seen a demonstration of the principle. Her teacher had inflated a blue balloon inside a clear one, then zapped it with a blue-colored laser. The blue balloon popped, but the clear one was unharmed.

If the Lexan plastic was clean enough and could take the heat expansion, Mildred thought, then the energy beam should go through the window as if it were empty air. It had been an interesting demonstration, one of her favorites, and now it was coming in handy to unlock a tank.

Placing the laser on the flattened hood of a Hummer, J.B. and Mildred checked the weapon to make sure it was in working condition. The rest of the companions scavenged through the assorted wreckage and hauled out a wide variety of batteries and power couplers. Each droid seemed to have a unique power source, almost as if they had been individually constructed. It was a ridiculous concept, but nothing else made any sense.

Wrapping his hands in some dry cloth, Ryan went through the batteries, checking the power level by touching the terminals with a piece of wire and studying the resulting spark. Most simply gave a weak crackle, but one flashed like a miniature lightning bolt.

"All right, this one will do," Ryan said, unwrapping his hands. "It's full of juice."

"Nuke?" Jak asked curiously.

"Don't think so, more likely it's just an accumulator, with a limited amount of stored power."

"Which means only a brief test shot before we try to burn the lock," J.B. muttered, attaching dif gauges of wire together to try to regulate the voltage. "This may take a while... Nope, we're ready. Okay, here goes nothing. Fire in the hole!"

When the others were out of the line of fire, J.B. touched the ground wire to the main terminal of the droid battery. At first nothing seemed to happen, then the laser began to softly hum, rapidly building in volume and strength. A scintillating beam shot from the end across the truck garage to hit the far wall. The cinder blocks exploded from the thermal expansion, then the already weakened section tumbled down in a cloudy avalanche of powdered concrete, sand and salt.

“Excelsior!” Doc grinned, brandishing a raised fist. “A weapon fit for Ra himself!”

“How aim?” Jak asked, kneeling to squint along the device. Instead of a smooth barrel like a blaster, there were rings, metal fins and all sorts of odd stuff to block a clear view.

“Couldn’t aim, not really,” J.B. replied, laying aside the wires. “I had to shoot from the hip. How’s the arm, Millie?”

“Still pretty sore,” she said suspiciously. “Why? You...you don’t want me to fire this Frankenstein monster, do you?”

“Sure. Aside from me, you’re the best shot,” Ryan said in blunt honesty. “And you’ve had a bastard lot more experience with lasers.”

“Plus, madam, with such limited resources,” Doc continued, displaying his oddly perfect teeth, “the task may require, if you will excuse the pun, surgical precision.”

“True enough,” Mildred said, hefting the weapon to guess the weight. “There’s not much play on this power cable. Can you make it any longer?”

“No prob,” J.B. said, reaching down to rip a handful of high-voltage cable from the guts of a spider.

Going to the UCV, Mildred found the roof hatch, and with the assistance of Krysty and Doc built a low mound of debris to stand on. Then taking supplies out of her med kit, the physician cleaned a section of the Lexan plastic until it sparkled. Sadly, there was nothing she could do about the inside surface, other than hope that the laser would burn away any fingerprints or smudges. If not, the beam might reflect and go wild,

possibly even coming right back into her face. It was a chilling possibility.

Just then, Ryan appeared on top of the vehicle. "Anytime you're ready," he said, waving a pry bar.

Nodding, Mildred went back to J.B. and got the laser. It now had several yards of wire attached, and she could move the cable freely.

Returning to the UCV, Mildred stood on the mound of debris and raised the laser, aiming carefully at the ceiling hatch. Briefly the woman wished that she had a laser pointer to check the angle. Then again, I might as well just wish for the door combination, Mildred thought.

"Everybody better get back in case of a ricochet," Mildred warned, raising the laser. It felt light, not bulky enough to be a proper weapon. A gun had heft; you knew you were holding something deadly. This felt more like a toy, which was a good thing as her arm was kind of weak. But she could handle this small weight without undue effort.

"All clear!" J.B. shouted from far behind.

Centering herself, Mildred banished any distractions and felt herself slipping into the mind-set for surgery. There was no outside world, nothing else existed except her hands, the scalpel and the patient. Easy now...gently. Taking a deep breath, she held it for a few seconds, then exhaled and fired.

The rainbow beam shot through the window, and there was a brief flash as something was burned off the inside surface. Oddly, the Lexan plastic darkened slightly, as if trying to repel the beam, but it only lasted for a second, then the laser hit the roof hatch, missing the locking bar by an inch. Changing the angle, Mildred smoothly moved the beam back and forth along the slab of metal, breathing steadily as it turned bright red, then began to melt, white drops of molten steel dripping onto one of the cryo units. That almost made her falter, but the physician did not allow herself to react, and kept at the job. The Lexan plastic window was beginning to move, warping

from the heat of the beam passing through, and she could feel the power cables growing uncomfortably warm against the back of her hand, but she was almost through the resilient handle when the beam abruptly died.

“Now, lover!” Krysty shouted.

On the roof, Ryan stepped to the hatch, shoved the pry bar into the thin crevice edging the smooth hatch and heaved with all of his might. For a long second, it seemed as if nothing was going to happen, then the muscles on his neck and arms started to distend, the bar started to bend slightly...and with a loud crack, the hatch flipped back to crash onto the roof.

Caught off balance, Ryan stumbled and nearly fell, but caught himself just in time.

“You did it, Millie!” J.B. laughed. “We’re in!”

“Hallelujah!” Doc cried, and Jak gave a whoop.

“Don’t go inside yet!” Mildred commanded, forcing her hands to release the laser. There was smoke trickling from the heat vents, and a silvery metal was dribbling from a melted hole in the side. The laser was aced beyond any conceivable repair, but it had done the job. “It’s been decades since this wag was open! Let the old air out first!”

“Way ahead of you,” Ryan said, dropping a burning piece of cloth through the open hatch. The fire went out before the fabric reached the floor, but the next one landed intact, the flames steady.

Satisfied, Ryan crawled through the hatch and landed inside the vehicle, his boots oddly silent on the cushioned flooring. Now he could see that everything seemed to be cushioned, floor, walls and ceiling. Even the jumpseats. Having once been inside a damaged APC as it rolled sideways down a hill, the man appreciated the need for the cushioning. Whoever built this thing knew about combat, that seemed for damn sure.

Lightning flashed past the milky windows of the garage and thunder softly rumbled as Ryan sidestepped past the softly

humming cryogenic freezers to reach the rear of the wag. Undoing the restraining bolts, he pushed both of the armored doors open wide. Holding candles, the rest of the companions were already waiting there, and everybody clambered inside.

But as they did, something in the ceiling of the wag flickered, and the UCV became brightly illuminated. Thankfully blowing out the candles, the companions could now see that the interior of the wag was spotlessly clean, as if it had never been used before. There was an area in the back for cargo, with rings set in the walls for restraining straps. Just past the cryo units, both walls were lined with cushioned jumpseats, spacious gaps between them allowing for access to the numerous blasterports set in the wide windows. Each jumpseat was equipped with a safety harness, and a hinged bodybar that could be brought down from above.

Bypassing the cryo units, Krysty and Jak went straight to the front of the vehicle. As she slipped behind the wheel, the teen began digging under the gunnery seat.

Studying the dashboard, Krysty found a row of meters and indicators showing the ready status of the engines. She had to check again to make sure it was correct. Mother Gaia, there were two engines! A tandem set of power plants. This monster had to consume fuel like it fell free from the sky! Mebbe they could only use one engine at a time. Leaning closer, she found the appropriate controls, but touched nothing. First and foremost, they had to decide what to do with those cryogenic units. Her curiosity wanted to see them open, but she was getting an uneasy feeling. Had the droids been fighting to gain possession of the units, or to try to destroy them?

“Well?” Ryan demanded from the rear.

“She’s hot,” Krysty replied, swiveling around in the mobile chair. “Plenty of power, and juice.”

“Excellent!”

With a cry, Jak triumphantly unearthed a pair of military backpacks and opened them on the spot, pulling out a ball of

socks, mosquito netting, a cloth cap, a paperback book and finally an MRE food pack.

“Got dozen!” the teenager cried happily.

But there was no reaction from the people clustered around the bulky devices filling the rear of the war wag. The devices were roughly shaped like coffins, but each stood over three feet tall. The units were connected to power outlets set in the base of the jumpseats, obviously still drawing nuke power after all these decades. On the side of each was painted the bar-’n’-star of the U.S. Air Force. Nobody considered it odd that the marines were hauling air force equipment.

“Fascinating,” Doc said, both hands on the head of his ebony walking stick. “I wonder who is inside. Another civilian like our dear physician?”

“Not with this sort of protection,” J.B. answered, tilting back his fedora. “More likely some big-time politician, mebbe even the president.”

“If it is, I shall have strong words with the man,” Doc muttered, twisting the handle on the stick to withdraw a few inches of the Spanish steel hidden inside, then slamming it shut again.

“Gonna kick his ass?” J.B. smiled tolerantly.

Doc pursed his lips. “Mayhap just a little.”

Silently running her hands over the complex controls, Mildred inspected the indicators showing the vital signs of the occupant. However, the readings were coded, the numbers meaningless to her.

“Wonder how we figure out what to do,” Mildred said.

“How about this.” Ryan rammed the stock of his long-blaster directly onto the control panel.

There was a shower of sparks and the displays scrolled wildly. Then everything flashed brightly, and there came a hard series of sharp clicks, followed by a low hiss. The interior of the urban combat vehicle got cold as the gases vented, a white mist crawling across the soft floor. Then the lights began

to strobe, rapidly increasing in tempo as a second control panel came online. The quivering needles of digital gauges swung into the red zone, then winked out of existence, closely followed by a fast series of hard clunks. The lid rose slightly, paused, then swung open all the way, revealing only a swirling cloud of icy fumes.

Rushing over, Krysty and Jak joined their friends as the inert gases slowly thinned away to expose an inhuman figure. Roughly the size of a man, the creature was a bizarre mixture of feline and canine characteristics, a doglike body topped with a cat head sporting two saberlike fangs over black lips. There was a hump on the shoulders, and the thing possessed a pair of long tails, each of them tipped with barbed hooks. The paws had claws on the front and spurs on the back.

“Hellhound...” Jak whispered in shock.

At the word, the supine creature trembled and slowly opened its yellow eyes.

Instantly the companions drew their blasters and fired nonstop into the beast. Still sluggish, the hellhound feebly tried to crawl out of the cryo unit, but it was hopeless, and soon the monstrous creature was torn to pieces by the hail of hot lead.

“Fragging mutie bastard!” J.B. snarled, wiping yellow blood from his cheek.

“Not mutie, biowep!” Jak retorted.

Yeah, he knew what those were. The predark government hadn't been content to just unleash nukes upon the world, they had been developing various bioweps, living biological weapons genetically designed to terrify the enemy and keep fighting through the hard rads of skydark. Only the bioweps were tougher, and smarter, than the whitecoats figured. They got free, went feral, and began feasting on anybody they could find. In a world gone mad, they were living nightmares.

“What about other two?” Jak asked, thumbing fresh brass into the smoking Colt Python.

“Could be other hellhounds,” Mildred admitted grimly. “Or merely the handlers, the folks in charge of the things.”

“Or something even worse,” J.B. suggested.

“I say we let these sleeping dogs lie,” Doc added, waving the LeMat to disperse the thick fumes wafting from the muzzle.

“But if the handlers know how to control the hellhounds...” Krysty began hesitantly.

“Frag ‘em. We can’t take the chance,” Ryan declared roughly, tucking the spent clip from the Steyr into a shirt pocket. “Doc and Jak, you two stand guard. If either of these control panels change color, start blasting.”

“Consider us Gog and Magog, sir!” Doc replied, blaster in one hand, bare sword in the other. “No mortal shall reach the golden shore!”

“Fucking A,” Jak added with feeling.

Ryan merely grunted at the literary allusion. “J.B., check the engines and see if this wag can still roll. Mildred, take care of your arm! We might need you soon. Krysty and I will check the Hummers for anything useful, juice in the tanks, oil, whatever. We meet back here in five. Now, haul ass!”

Heading off in different directions, everybody moved with a purpose.

“Need a hand, Millie?” J.B. asked, partially turned toward the front of the wag. “The angle is kind of hard to reach.”

“I’ve done worse, John,” she said, smiling gently, taking a seat far away from the open cryogenic freezer and its ghastly inhabitant. “But thanks for asking.” Everybody could patch a minor bullet wound these days, the skill was as common as the ability to change a car tire from her time.

“No problem,” J.B. said with a nod, and took the driver’s seat to start examining the controls.

The man was unfamiliar with this type of vehicle, but like all military wags, the controls were simple and straightforward, designed for soldiers to operate quickly in the thick of battle,

or when wounded and confused. Setting the gearshift into neutral, he pumped the gas pedal a few times to prime the fuel lines, and pressed the ignition button. There immediately came a low whine, several muffled explosions, then a loud backfire, and the tandem engines revved wildly almost out of control. Quickly, he managed to turn one of them off, and the urban combat vehicle settled down to a low purr of controlled power.

“What’s the fuel situation?” Mildred asked through gritted teeth, her hand moving slowly as she sewed the slash in her arm shut. The curved needle had come from an upholstery store, and the line thread was lightweight fishing line. Soaked in alcohol and used with care, the combo always did a fine job. Most of the companions had some of her fine stitching in their skin.

“We have plenty of juice,” J.B. answered, tapping the fluttering gauge with a finger. “Nearly half full.”

“That much?”

“Yep.”

“Must be condensed fuel,” Mildred grunted, using a knife to cut the fishing line. It hurt, but pain was life. Only the dead felt nothing.

“That’d be my guess,” J.B. agreed, cutting the engine to save juice. Obviously the vehicle had nuke batteries, and those could generate power virtually forever. The tanks had to hold that weird condensed fuel they had found in the redoubts. The stuff worked equally well in gasoline or diesel engines, and it flatly refused to evaporate. Incredible. Some amazing major scientific advances had been made just before the world blew up.

Experimentally, the man tried the radio, but it only crackled with background static. Then J.B. switched on the radar, and it gave a steady monotone that puzzled him until he realized it was registering the ring of wrecked Hummers around them. Snorting a laugh, he turned it off. Well, at least it worked. There also was a joystick and video monitor set directly into the dashboard in front of the gunnery seat. Had to be for

something mounted on the roof. The Fifty? Fragging excellent, J.B. thought.

A few minutes later, Ryan and Krysty arrived with their arms full and laid the items on the soft floor.

“What this?” Jak asked, kicking a large lump wrapped in canvas. The edges were ragged, and it took him only a moment to figure out that the swatch had been cut from the giant sheet used to cover the UCV.

“That is a .50-caliber machine gun,” Ryan said. “I saw the stanchion when I was on the roof, and knew that one of the Hummers had to be carrying the rapidfire. The soldiers probably took it down when driving through town to not frighten the civilians.”

“And brass?”

“Not for the Fifty,” Krysty answered, setting the toe of her cowboy boot into a recess set in the door and using it to climb into the wag. “But we have a dozen rounds of 5.56 mm for an M-16 rapidfire, and a couple of 9 mm rounds for the Uzi. Plus some rope, couple of maps and some magnesium road flares not too badly corroded.”

“No grens?”

“I think they used all they had,” Krysty said stoically, looking over the panorama of the chilled.

“Here, take this,” Ryan directed, proffering the end of a thick rope.

Jak started to ask what it was for, then smiled and dragged the heavy rope to the nearest cryogenic freezer and looped it around the box.

“Tough break for the folks inside,” Mildred added. “If they are people, and not muties, or, well, something.”

“But, madam, will they not perish without power?” Doc asked in pensive concern, then he relented. “No, forgive me, we have seen such things before. Disconnected from their power source, the units will automatically open.”

“Exactly,” Ryan said, climbing inside now that he was free

from the weight of the rope. "Only we want to be far, far away when that happens."

"Just in case they are norms," Krysty added, "we've left them some army boots, a candle, a butane lighter and a knife. After that, it's up to them. We can't spare any food or water."

"What mean?" Jak asked, taking the rope and looping it around the busted handle of the roof hatch, then lashing it to a cargo ring on the floor. "Left behind hellhound. Good eating!"

"If you say so," Ryan muttered, wondering just how hungry a person would have to become to eat one of the things raw. And right out of the box, too.

"So, what's the plan?" J.B. asked from the front. "We drop off the sleeping beauties and haul ass?"

Taking a jumpseat, Ryan buckled on the safety harness. "Now that we're no longer at the mercy of the bastard winds, we can head due north, straight to the next redoubt."

"Works for me!" J.B. said, hunching forward slightly and turning on the engine. The ceiling lights brightened slightly and the dashboard came to throbbing life.

"By Gadfrey, I dislike going back into the storm," Doc said, pulling out a bodybar and locking it firmly into place. "But if another sec hunter droid shows up now, or worse, a spider with a working laser, we would be the proverbial sitting ducks."

"Spam in can," Jak corrected politely, taking the gunnery seat alongside the driver.

"Don't worry about the vehicle," Mildred said confidently, patting the chassis as if it were a well-trained horse. "I heard that these things are rad proof, bomb proof and were built to drive through nerve gas and napalm. I think she'll do fine against sand."

"Only one way to find out," J.B. said, shifting into gear. "You folks ready back there?" There came an answering chorus of assent. "Okay, here we go!"

Letting the engine idle for a few moments to warm the

seals, J.B. slowly eased the UCV forward. Behind them, the rope wrapped around the top cryo unit grew taut, stretching straight to a hoist on the front of a wrecked Hummer. Moving at a crawl, J.B. straightened the vehicle slightly as the unit began to be dragged out of the war wag, pushing the other two units ahead of it. As they got close, Ryan unplugged one freezer, Krysty did the other, and the units were pulled out of the wag to crash onto the floor of the garage. Instantly, the control panels started strobing brightly, and there came the telltale sound of hissing.

Reaching out, Ryan and Krysty grabbed the handles on the aft doors and slammed them shut.

Watching in the rearview mirror, J.B. needed no further prompting to stomp on the gas. Shoving aside a wrecked Hummer, the man drove directly to the nearest louvered door. Switching on the second engine, J.B. lowered the fork until it was scraping along the floor, throwing off bright sparks. It slid neatly under the door, and J.B. flipped another switch. Nothing happened for a moment, then the fork began to rise to the sound of crunching metal. In squealing protest, the garage doors were pushed upward, the louvered steel bending and folding like an accordion, until ripping free from the guides in the cinder-block wall with a crash. Instantly, the storm flooded the truck garage and the windshield darkened to a blue color.

“How do?” Jak asked, sitting upright.

“Not me,” J.B. replied, throwing switches. “The damn wag did that by itself!”

“The windshield is polarized,” Mildred explained, unable to take her eyes off the three cryogenic freezers. “It’s a chem reaction, nothing mechanical involved.” One of the units had fallen sideways, the aced hellhound spilling onto the floor. But the other two freezers were still right-side up, the control panels blinking wildly, the vents issuing white clouds.

As the vehicle trundled into the sandstorm, she lost sight

of the units and felt something tug inside her chest as if they were emotionally attached to each other. Men or monsters, the occupants were from her time period, and she felt a strange connection to them that she could not really explain. Just a touch of homesickness, that's all, she rationalized, turning away. Nothing more.

In sympathy, Doc patted her knee. "I also miss my home," he whispered, the words meant only for her.

Mildred took his hand and gave it a squeeze in understanding and thanks.

Outside the wag, the companions could see the storm raging, but there was only a faint whisper of the sand hitting the roof hatch. The rope was taut, but apparently the seal was not hard anymore. But no grit or salt was coming inside, and that was good enough for now. Once they reached a redoubt, Ryan and J.B. could weld the lock into place, sealing the hatch airtight once more.

J.B. turned on the wipers, then tried the headlights, but if they worked, the beams were not strong enough to penetrate the clouds of dirty sand. "Dark night!" the man cursed. "This sure as hell is one nuke storm of a—"

"Dark night?" Jak supplied.

The two men exchanged glances and broke into laughter as the trundling vehicle moved past a dune and was hit by the full force of the maelstrom. The wag began to slide sideways from the sheer force of the wind, but the eight huge tires dug in hard, throwing tall arches of sand into the air. With a lurch, the vehicle gained a purchase and began lumbering along once more.

"Keep the radar working," Ryan suggested, pulling out the SIG-Sauer to start the cleaning process again. "If a droid comes this way, that'll give us enough of a warning to get away."

"No prob," Jak answered, and flicked a switch. Born and raised in the backwoods of the bayou, the teen hadn't known

much about tech until traveling with the companions. Now he was an old hand at such things. The radar swept around on the luminescent screen, showing nothing dense enough to register.

“National Guard bases are always near a city, so there should be something nearby,” Krysty said, looking over the ruins. Aside from the garage, the rest of the complex was only broken walls, open to the acid rain and wind. “We came from the south, and there is only desert to the west, so do we go north or east?”

“Nor’east,” Ryan decided. It was just like using a blaster that you were unfamiliar with. Never try for any sharpshooting the first time, just go for the heart. That way, if you’re too low and you hit the belly, or too high and hit the face, either way, the other guy is eating dirt.

“Fair enough,” J.B. said, shifting gear and giving the engines more juice. They obediently revved with power.

“Hummers, armed troops, sec hunter droids,” Krysty said, her hair coiling around her face. “I wonder if those were safeguarding the occupants of the three cases or escorting them somewhere special to be safely disposed.”

“Like the National Guard base?” Ryan asked, suddenly alert.

“Could be.”

Nobody had an answer to that, so the companions began to tend to the mundane aspects of travel, first cleaning their weapons, then preparing a meal of MRE packs. Impervious to the storm, the UCV rolled through the tempest, rising and falling like a ship at sea, the brutal winds hammering against the armored wag far into the long dark night.

AS THE UCV CRESTED THE HORIZON, it passed the mandatory safety zone. The two cryogenic units in the National Guard base activated, the lids smoothly rising as thick clouds of swirling mist rose into view. The slumbering occupants took their first breath as they sluggishly began to awaken.

Chapter Five

Once past the wreckage in the snowy mountain pass, the convoy of war wags moved swiftly through an array of jagged tors, the irregular spears of cooled lava brutal reminders of a nuke-volcano.

As the traders left the region and headed south, crystal shards rose from the ground like a forest of mirrors, so War Wag One took the lead, the armored prow creating a trail for the smaller war wags by simply smashing through the delicate formations to the never-ending sound of shattering glass.

In the control room of War Wag One, the crew stayed alert for any further dangers. They were approaching difficult territory. No convoy had gotten past the Hermit on the Hill, only individuals who crept past in the thick of the night. And even then, some of them didn't escape from the high-explosive death of the crazy wrinklie.

Inside the cramped control room, Jake was at the wheel dodging obstructions with consummate skill, Quinn watched the radar and Jimmy listened intensely to the Ear, a patched set of headphones attached to a dish microphone mounted on the roof. When the conditions were right, the Ear could listen in on conversations more than a thousand yards away, although it usually was only good for a couple of hundred yards, and even less if there was a lot of ambient noise, like a waterfall.

Over by the periscope, Jessica watched the horizon for anything suspicious while Roberto sat in the command chair,

checking over some predark maps and keeping weight off his bad leg. The cold was making it ache more than he wanted to admit, but keeping off his feet helped.

Softly, the radio crackled with static as the tires rumbled over the loose shale covering the ground like oily dinner plates. Down the hallway leading to the engine room, gunners were alert at the .50-caliber machine guns, hands on triggers. The evening guards were asleep in their bunks, somebody was singing in the shower, and Matilda was in the galley frying onions and something spicy for the evening meal, the delicious aroma mixing with the tang of ozone from the humming comps and the smell of diesel exhaust from the engines.

“Mmm, smells like rattlesnake surprise,” a crewman said, sniffing happily. Nobody made a comment. “Surprise, it’s rattlesnake again!” he said, waiting for a laugh. When none came, the crewman sighed and went back to sharpening the bayonet on the end of his AK-47 rapidfire. Some folks simply had no damn sense of humor, he thought. It was a real ass-kicking joke, so he only told it ten, mebbe twelve times a week, to keep it fresh.

Off in the corner of the control room, a tall man was sitting on the floor with his legs crossed, humming a wordless tune. His skin was dark black, but his long hair and beard were silver, the same as his strange eyes. In spite of the cold mountain air coming in through the vents, he was dressed in only light clothing, his shirt open to expose a muscular chest covered with the scars of a hundred knife fights, along with an irregular pattern of circles that boasted of surviving a stickie attack, an event so rare it bordered on the miraculous.

Glancing at the doomie, Roberto remembered seeing Yates once stop a bar fight by merely revealing his chest and letting everybody see the incredible scars. The drunken rage of the ville sec men turned to awe, and Yates spent the rest of the night telling his tales of survival over and over again, as the

crowd poured endless glasses of shine until dawn arrived. The damn scar was almost a protective charm, as if escaping from the last train west, Yates could no longer be a passenger. Pure shit, but still, Roberto felt better when Yates was around to guard his flank. Not his six, of course. He only trusted Jessica that much.

Just then, the radar beeped, as if detecting another unit somewhere, then it went silent, so the crew ignored it and continued in their assorted tasks. It had to have just been some static from the background hash, nothing more.

Over the long miles, the shale-covered ground began to slope more and more steeply, and the speed of the convoy sharply accelerated until the vehicles were almost careering down the steep slope.

“Easy now,” Roberto warned, neatly folding the useless map. According to it, they should be in the middle of a fragging lake. “Take your time, we’re in no hurry...”

“Tell that to the fragging tires!” Jake shot back, working the brakes and shifting gears steadily. “There’s so much loose rock covering the ground we’re losing traction and starting to slide.”

“I sense danger...” Yates intoned, his eyes closed, his head turned toward the windshield as if he could still see.

“Tell me something I don’t know, ya fleeb!” Jake shot back petulantly.

“The wall approaches!” the doomie cried, raising both arms.

Suddenly the radar started to beep, the tones coming faster every second.

“Son of a bitch, there’s something dead ahead!” Jake shouted over the noise of the device. He tried the brakes and the war wag started to slip sideways. Knowing that would only make them flip over, the driver eased off the pedal and fed the engines more juice, accelerating their speed, but straightening the vehicle. “If we crash into something, at least it’ll be head-on!”

“Should I toss out the anchor, chief?” Jessica asked, going to a corner and resting a hand on a large lever.

“We’re going too fast,” Roberto growled, studying the landscape rushing past the wag. “It’ll only snap off, or worse, rip us in two!”

Breathing hard, the woman removed her hand from the lever. “Then what are your orders, sir?” she demanded.

Roberto caught the honorific and understood that was her way of saying she had no idea what to do next. But that was okay, because he did. Reaching over, he tapped a button on the intercom. “Eric, are you ready?”

“As ever, Chief,” came the smooth reply. “Just say the word.”

The radar pinged away, the noise almost a continuous tone by now. Speeding over a low swell in the ground, there was suddenly a rocky cliff directly ahead of the charging wag. A dark rill of cooled lava, studded and jagged. A wall of death.

“Wait for it...” Roberto commanded, listening to the radar and watching the rill rapidly approach. It if was thicker than a yard, their journey ended here and now. “Steady...no rush, plenty of time...and fire!”

There came the thud of the missile pod opening, then the crunching-paper sound of a rocket building power, immediately followed by the whoosh of a launch. Something flashed ahead of the wag, trailing smoke and fire. Then a tremendous explosion rocked the world and the radar stopped beeping.

Everybody tried not to hold their breath as the war wag plowed into a cloud of dark smoke, and they could dimly see the shattered remains of the thin rock wall on either side for less than a second, before they were through!

Jouncing over some uneven ground, the wag seemed to go airborne for a few seconds before crashing back down. The entire vehicle shuddered, loose items flying free, then there was the sound of shattering glass, a muffled cry of pain.

The war wag leveled out smooth and true once more, and there came the low hum of tires rolling along on a paved road!

“A road!” Jessica exhaled, one arm hugging her chest, the other wrapped tight around the periscope. “We’re on a predark road!”

“Just like Yates predicted!” Jimmy shouted in delight, beaming a smile at him.

Wordlessly, the big doomie nodded as if all was right in the world.

“That’s gotta mean we’re near the Nowhere Bridge,” Roberto said confidently, reaching out a shaking hand to retrieve a ceramic cup from a recess in the wall. The contents had slopped about some, but he didn’t give a damn. They had made it through and were still sucking air.

“Request permission to piss in my pants, sir,” Quinn said with a rueful grin. “Aw, too late, again.”

The tension broke in the room, and everybody laughed, bodies relaxing now that the worst of the trip down Hellfire Mountain was behind them.

“Get that man a mop!” Roberto commanded with a grin, taking a sip from the mug. Blind Norad, it was awful, but he swallowed the stuff anyway. He wished to hell there was coffee sub, but the convoy had run out of that months ago, and there’d be no more until they reached the stockpile near Tumbledown.

This muck was just some of the homemade brew that Matilda concocted back in the kitchen out of burned bread-crumbs, chicory and who knew what else. It smelled like coffee, and tasted sort of similar. Okay, it tasted nothing like the real stuff. However, it was hot and eased the chill on his leg, which was all that really mattered. Locked inside the safe under his bunk was a sealed can of the real stuff, predark Colombian dark roast, but that was being saved for a special occasion. Like finding Cascade.

“You sure we’ll find it there?” Jessica demanded, returning to her chair near the blaster rack. She slung a leg over the arms and sat sideways. “This is a hell of a gamble we’re taking.”

“It’d be a much bigger gamble to try for Cascade without any fragging proof,” Roberto replied, sipping the tepid brew.

“The proof exists.” Yates spoke in a hollow voice, making a vague gesture. “The box is red, and near a stone of fire.”

“Does that mean lava, or coal?” Jessica demanded, but the doomie would not, or could not, say any more.

Easing the velocity of the war wag to a more manageable level, War Wag One took the lead, and the other convoy vehicles assumed a standard triangular formation as it rolled along the ancient roadway. The median was full of tall weeds, and they passed a car on the side of the berm, the wreck alive with bees. Several miles down the road, the wags had to go around a toll station choked solid with cars, trucks, buses and army tanks smashed together, forming an impassable barrier of rust, weeds and old bones.

The countryside was gradually leveling out, the steep foothills becoming rolling hillocks. Made of concrete instead of asphalt, the highway was in much better shape than expected.

However, a murky shadow began to creep across the world as the red sun slowly moved behind Firestorm Mountain. Suddenly darkness covered the land, yet the cloudy sky was still bright with the orange and purple of toxic chems. It was as if the convoy had gone underwater. Jessica turned on the halogen headlights, and the beams cut bright swatches through the gloom.

“Hold!” Yates said, raising a hand. “It is near!”

Pneumatic brakes hissing, gears grinding, Jake slowed the war wag, and soon it crawled to a gentle stop. The artificial night enveloped the convoy, the only sounds coming from the big diesel engines. With the warmth of the day gone, a phosphorescent mist rose from the ground, moving across the cracked expanse of highway, seeming almost alive.

“Report,” Roberto demanded.

Going to a rad counter, Jessica checked the background levels. “Clear,” she announced. “It’s just mist.”

“Glad to hear it,” Roberto muttered. “Quinn, work the arc.”

Flipping several switches on the control board, the bald man eased the power up on the arc lamp until a searing beam of light stretched ahead of the wag for hundreds of yards. They had discovered the hard way that the electricity had to be increased gradually on the arc lamp, or else the carbon elements blew, and it took days to whittle out new ones. Even then, the lamp had a short life, but there was nothing brighter. The electric arc made the vaunted halogens seem weak as tallow candles.

Using a joystick, Quinn moved the brilliant beam across the wags in a circle, then started exploring farther and farther away, until a pair of massive concrete pylons came into view. Angling upward, the lamp revealed what they had come for—the Bridge to Nowhere.

“Jesus, Buddha and Zeus,” Jimmy whispered, making an ancient protective gesture.

Whatever the bridge had been connected to in predark was long vanished. Now, the colossal structure stood in the middle of a grassy field, the four concrete-and-steel towers supporting a half mile of roadway some fifty feet off the misty ground. Whatever was on top could not be seen, but if the doomseer was correct, that was where the key to the future was hidden, a map to the greatest treasure of the predark world.

Hunching forward, Roberto clenched and unclenched his fists. “Black dust, we can’t see a damn thing from this angle,” the trader growled. “We’re gonna have to do a recce on foot.”

“My boys are ready,” Jimmy said, standing and taking an AK-47 assault rifle from a wall rack. The barrel was actually from an AK-101, the magazine from a Chinese QBZ long-blaster, and the stock was hand carved, but the mismatched rapidfire worked fine.

“Everybody take extra brass,” Jessica directed, opening a small box and extracting a flare pistol. The woman passed it to the crewman, along with a couple of waxy cartridges.

“If you see red...” Jimmy began, tucking the items into his pocket.

Interrupting the man, the radio moaned with modulation, and then briefly cleared.

“*Tiger Lily to Scorpion*,” the ceiling speaker crackled. “*Tiger Lily to Scorpion*.”

Taking down the mike, Roberto thumbed the transmit switch. “*Scorpion*, here, *Tiger Lily*,” he replied. “Spot something moving?” The codes were not necessary in this desolate area as there were probably no other working radios for a hundred miles, but practice made perfect. In a firefight, a single wrong word could ace everybody.

“Nothing important, just wanted to remind you hotdogs that according to the duty roster, this recce is mine,” Diana stated. “And my boys are itching to find out if what the doomie says is true.”

Yeah, mine, too. Privately, Roberto wanted to countermand the woman, but that would only make her lose face in front of the crew. No choice, then. “Confirm, *Tiger*, the job is yours,” Roberto said, a narrowing of his eyes the only sign of what he was feeling.

Rubbing his chin, Jimmy started to object, and Jessica shut him down with a stern look. Rules were rules, and Roberto was the leader here, end of discussion.

“Move slow, and stay low,” the trader said into the mike. “Anything twisted, have your people run like their pants are on fire. And that’s an order. You savvy?”

“No prob, Chief,” the commander of War Wag Three replied with a laugh. “I even took away their combat boots, and issued ’em sneakers.” There was a brief pause before the woman added, “Any idea what they’ll really find up there?”

Salvation.

“You tell me, *Tiger Lily*,” Roberto said. “Look for the box, but come back alive.”

“Roger that, *Scorpion*. *Tiger Lily* out.”

Releasing the button, Roberto kept the mike in his grip, ready to relay instructions. Then he reluctantly returned it to the wall hook. He either trusted his people or he did not. There was no third option.

“All right, you lucky bastards, Diana is taking care of this one,” Jessica said loudly, looking around the control room. “So you apes stand down.”

Unhappy grumbling filled the room, and several members of the crew shifted their shoulders to glance at the hallway door as if they were going to go outside anyway. Then they relented, flicked the safeties back on and started dropping clips as a prelude to returning the rapidfires to the wall racks.

“And what the frag are you assholes doing?” Jimmy replied, placing his fists on his hips. “Keep that iron in your mitts in case Three needs cover fire!”

The frowns became grins, and the crew rushed to the blast-erports. If there was any trouble, Two and Three would do what they could, but any serious chilling would be handled by War Wag One and its heavy weaponry.

Roberto touched the intercom. “Eric, get the L-Gun hot in case Tex has to burn some crystal.”

“Will do, Chief,” Suzette replied. “The comps are running five by five, no glitches or hitches. We’re good to go.”

“Nice to know. Where the frag is your husband?”

“Checking the flamethrower on Two. Just in case.”

The trader had to smile at that. There was a predark word he had heard once in Two-Son ville, para-something... What was it again? Oh yeah, para-annoyed. It meant you suspected everything of doing anything. That was Eric. The only thing that kept the twitchy little tech sane was Suzette. “Fair enough. Just let me know when he’s back.”

“Will do!”

“*Scorpion* out,” Roberto said, and clicked off the device.

“And there they go,” Jake announced, his hands folded

over the steering wheel, both boots flat on the floor mat. The disappointment was clear in his voice.

A group of people climbed out of War Wag Three and walked into the chilly mist. Their shapes were lumpy with backpacks and shoulder bags, their hands cradling longblasters and torches.

Roberto nodded at that. Smart move. Even the arc lamp couldn't shine a beam around corners.

It took them only a few minutes to reach the bridge. Trudging to the nearest end, they stabbed the torches into the soft ground, then aimed crossbows upward and fired. The hooked quarrels arched high and sailed over the edge of the elevated roadway, only to slide off and come tumbling back. It took several tries before one of the hooks snagged something, but it was only a tire rim. A dozen tries later, the members of the crew hooked something strong enough to support their weight.

Divesting themselves of everything but rapidfires, they slowly climbed hand over hand to reach the top, and disappeared from sight.

"Okay, people, what do you see?" Roberto said into his mike. There was only static for an answer, and he increased the power to maximum.

"...repeat, can you hear us?"

"Now, we can. Proceed."

"Okay, it's a right mare's nest up here, Chief," a man replied, the radio crackling with static. The range was less than a hundred feet, and the megatons of nuke trash in the air still garbled the communications slightly. Anything over a mile and even the most powerful radio was useless these days.

"We've got cars and trucks piled three, four layers high," the crewman continued. "And everything is covered with bird shit, and ivy, loose leaves and...wait a sec..."

A minute passed, then another.

"Nuking hell, the doomie was right!" the voice on the radio

called. "We found a truck crashed into an ambulance, making a sort of natural shelter. Somebody used it as a campsite, there's the remains of a fire, empty tin cans and the whole shebang."

"What about the box?" Roberto asked, unable to keep the eagerness out of his voice.

"It was right near a rusted-out old Caddy, and guess what? The name on the tires was Firestone."

"Son of a bitch," Quinn muttered, casting a furtive look at the doomie. But if Yates heard, or cared, there was no indication.

"What's inside?" Jessica demanded into her own mike.

"Tell you soon," the crewman replied. There was a brief crackle of static and the words were lost.

"Say again, what did you find?" Roberto demanded.

"Well, hang me for a mutie, Chief," the man replied excitedly. "I'm holding the damn thing in my hand! It's true. The legends are all true!"

"Well, get your butts back down here," Roberto said, grinning widely. "I wanna see for myself!"

"Break out the good shine, we're on the way... What the frag?"

There was no noise from the radio, but tiny flashes of light could be seen coming from on top of the bridge. Blaster fire!

"What the frag is going on up there?" Diana demanded loudly over the radio. "Jefferson, report, goddamn it! Have you been jacked?" But there was only a thick silence.

Then there came the dull thud of a gren, and a body tumbled over the edge to hit the misty ground with a hard thump.

"Holy shit, that was Jefferson!" Quinn cried out, standing at his station.

"All right, let's go!" Jessica directed, grabbing an AK-47 and stumbling for the hallway.

"You stay!" Roberto boomed, gesturing with the hand holding the mike. "Jimmy, go get our people!"

Paused alongside the exit door, the woman radiated a controlled fury as the other crew members grimly streamed outside. Silently, the trader and his second in command held a private conversation, and she grudgingly limped back to her chair, an arm cradling her bandaged ribs. Just because he was right, didn't mean she had to like sitting on her ass.

As the crews from War Wags One, Two and Three rushed toward the ropes dangling off the bridge, they could see more flashes on top and heard the telltale boom of another gren. The recce squad appeared, scrambling along the outside edge of the bridge, firing their rapidfires at something unseen above and behind them. The crewmen on the ground raised their longblasters, but there was nothing in sight. What the frags were the others shooting at, thin air?

Reaching the rope, the recce squad grabbed it one after the other and insanely dived off the structure, swinging wildly as they slid down the nylon length with smoke rising from their gloved fists.

As they got close to the ground, the first crewman released the rope and jumped away, the others arriving only moments later. Most landed hard, but came up running. However, one crewman went sprawling and there was an audible crack of breaking bone. Grimacing in pain, he rolled onto his stomach and started crawling for the wags. Pausing in their flight, two of his companions went back, grabbed the wounded man under the arms and hauled him along, their faces pale with fright.

“Vine puppets!” a running crewman yelled, his shirt covered with blood. “The whole fragging bridge is infested with vine puppets!”

The words sent cold knives into the guts of everybody present, and they looked up just in time to see a row of naked people appear along the edge of the bridge. Incredibly, the men and women simply stepped off the edge. But they did not fall. Instead, they gracefully eased downward as if gliding on invisible wings.

However, as they got closer, the crewmen on the ground could see the leafy vines embedded throughout their nude forms, the mouths slack and drooling, the wide eyes horribly alive and shrieking in wordless torment.

Snarling curses, the crew cut loose with concentrated blasterfire from the Kalashnikovs, the 7.62 mm rounds tearing the naked people apart. But instead of red blood, a thin green sap oozed from the gaping wounds, along with hair-thin tendrils resembling pale roots.

Then the puppets landed, and the tattered corpses began walking toward the norms, the flexing ivy still connected to the animated corpses.

As the crew hastily dropped back, the M-60 machine guns of Two and Three cut loose, the big .308 rounds chewing the bodies into pieces. Shaking off the lumps of flesh, the green vines snaked out after the fleeing norms, catching the crippled crewman in the back. Instantly he went stiff, his eyes rolling in unimaginable agony.

Releasing his arms, the other crewmen fired point-blank, blowing out the back of his head, the pink brain already full of wiggling tendrils.

Not bothering to open the backpacks on the misty ground, the panting crewmen peppered the canvas bags with blasterfire until the Molotov cocktails inside ignited. Engulfed in flames, the puppets kept walking onward until the ivy blackened and jerked out of the bodies to lash around madly. Throwing off charred leaves, the greenery began to shrivel, then the vines snapped in two, the undamaged sections retreating to the bridge, the rest of the hellish plant consigned to deadly flames.

Only now more vines came snaking down from the bridge from every side, some with puppets attached and some without, obviously on the hunt for new slaves.

“Fucking mutie!” Jefferson screamed, blowing thunder at the moving greenery.

Throwing down more Molotovs, the crew tried to form a wall between them and the vines, and the plants disappeared. But then vines erupted from the ground well past the conflagration and surged forward.

Any semblance of organized resistance disappeared at that, and everybody took off, firing and running in a near panic.

Pausing to pull the arming ring from a gren, a crew member dropped her explosive charge as a vine whipped around her throat and entered her cursing mouth. Gagging, she tried to chew it out, then went oddly stiff and turned to face the other norm fumbling to work the gren in his clumsy hands.

Ruthlessly, the others cut her down, then ran for their lives.

Charging out of War Wag One, Abduhl strode into view, the pressurized canisters of a portable flamethrower strapped to his back.

As the other norms streamed past, he rained fire on the plants, forcing them back, clearing a safe zone for his brothers, then the ground below him sprouted a leafy green that went straight up between his legs. Shuddering all over, Abduhl sent a column of fire high into the sky, then he paused to turn and sweep the burning lance of lambent chems across the other crewmen. Two of them were engulfed, and instantly became screaming human torches. But even as they fell, the vines arrived, and the cooking flesh rose once more to shamble toward the open door of War Wag One.

Now, the big Fifties started working, flame and hot lead vomiting in gouts from the long vented barrels. Golden arcs of spent brass flew high, and the high-velocity barrage of combat rounds tore the walking carrion apart, intestines spilling onto the dirt. But the vines merely withdrew undamaged, and this time snaked directly toward the door.

Stepping boldly into view, Jessica smashed a Molotov on the short ladder leading to the war wag, and the vines paused, temporarily stymied. Then they began to crawl up the sides

of the great machine, seeking new avenues to reach the rich, red meat inside.

More crew members poured from Two and Three, blasting away at the thrashing vines, and crashing Molotovs onto the armored hull of War Wag One. The vines retreated, and again the big .50-caliber machine guns chattered and yammered away at the mutant greenery. But as the vines shriveled, more ivy wiggled over the predark bridge. The supply of them seemed endless.

Starting its engine, War Wag Two moved forward with the flamethrower on top sending out streams of annihilation. The bastard mix of gasoline, kerosene, coal oil and shine covered the descending vines like napalm, and the plants lashed furiously, trying uselessly to dislodge the sticky chems.

Then the honeycomb pod on top of War Wag One angled around to point straight up, and launched a full salvo of missiles. The fiery warbirds streaked away, disappearing into the starry night only to return a few heartbeats later and impact directly on top of the mutie-infested bridge.

The detonations lit up the sky, cars and flame creating a hell flower. Visibly swaying, the entire bridge groaned, cables snapped, steel beams buckled and both pylons cracked.

Slamming shut the hatch, Jessica cut off the nightmare scene and threw the lock so hard she gasped in pain. Looking down, she saw the bandages around her chest staining red again, but she really didn't give a damn. The door was closed, and no ivy had gotten inside. Thank...well, thank everybody who watches over idiot norms, and gives a flying frag about our little lives. Amen.

"Well?" Roberto bellowed from his chair.

"We're tight!" Jessica replied over the growing noise coming from outside. Stumbling to the control room, she saw through the windshield that the bridge was crumbling, huge pieces falling like burning meteors.

“Time to book, Chief,” Jake said, his hands tight on the controls.

“No, not yet,” Roberto replied, leaning forward in his chair. He seemed to be waiting for something to happen.

More assorted destruction rained down, bodies, cars and chunks of burning pavement, the molten asphalt dripping off like black blood.

“Sir...” the driver urged, stressing the word.

“We’re not leaving yet!” the trader barked furiously.

Just then, something large fell from the bending trestle of the fiery bridge. It landed hard, indenting the bloody soil, and hundreds of wriggling vines extended to haul the huge shapeless form away from the mounting destruction.

“Light it up, Tex!” Roberto commanded into the mike.

Once more, from the top of the war wag a shimmering beam of cohesive diamond light stabbed out to pierce the leafy blob completely through. Something inhuman screamed as every vine went stiff, then began to shrivel from the intense heat of the mauling power ray. The main bulk of the mutie plant obscenely squirmed as wisps of steam appeared from inside, then the whole thing burst into bizarrely colored flames. The inhuman cry of unbearable anguish sounded again, then faded into nothingness.

“Did we recover everybody chilled?” Roberto asked, leaning back in the chair with obvious satisfaction.

“Yes, sir, that is, everybody who still had...”

“A body. Yes, I understand, Jess,” the trader said, closing his eyes. “Have Shelly check ’em over for any sprouts, and recover what we can, boots, blasters and such.”

“Already being done,” the petite blonde replied, taking her assigned chair.

“All right, Jake, move us out,” Roberto commanded, painfully rising from his chair and starting down the hallway. “I want to see what we bought for so much blood.”

“Better be worth it,” the driver said, shifting into gear and

angling the war wag away from predark ruins. Behind them, the Bridge to Nowhere was still coming down, the tons of metal and concrete burying the corpse of the vine master forever. At the thought, Jake gave a little shiver as if he had just gotten a brief glimpse of the future.

“Never did like bridges,” he muttered to nobody in particular, increasing their speed into the misty night.

Chapter Six

Side by side, the two hellhounds loped across the sandy ground in hot pursuit of the redflesh.

Upon awakening in their freezer units, the bioweaps had been assailed by the reek of human sweat, their genetic coding making them berserk with rage.

Utterly ravenous, the creatures consumed the body of their deceased mother, then charged into the swirling sandstorm. Almost instantly, the salty wind purged the smell of human from their senses, but they found the physical tracks of a vehicle and took off in that direction. The genetic coding seared into their brains would not allow the living weapons to abandon the hunt until the enemy had been found and consumed. That was the very reason they had been created in the terrible white labs. To hunt and kill, nothing more.

Sooner or later, the redflesh would be found again. It was only a matter of time...

STRONG WINDS SHREDDED the storm just before dawn, and J.B. drove the urban combat vehicle into a clean new day. But that didn't last very long, and soon the usual black clouds covered the world once more, oily and thick with toxic chems, the sun only a fleeting memory of warmth and light.

During the night, each of the companions had taken a turn behind the wheel to become familiar with the controls. This was no steam truck hammered together by some ville baron, but a predark military wag, and it was equipped with GPS, a

satellite uplink, multichannel encoded radio, radar scrambler, infrared defuser, massive proximity sensors for finding land mines, and a host of devices unknown to the companions, including Mildred, and it was from her time period. At the moment, Krysty was driving, with the rest of the companions settling into the routine of life inside a steel can.

“This is the life!” J.B. said, lounging in the gunnery seat of the wag. “Reminds me of our days with the Trader, eh, old buddy?” His warm boots were resting on the dashboard, and his shotgun was neatly tucked in a wall clip that seemed to be designed exactly for the blaster, the Uzi resting in his lap.

“Better than walking,” Ryan agreed, dry shaving with a knife. The deadly panga stayed sheathed at his hip; the long curved blade was perfect for slitting throats, not shaving them.

Just then, something smacked hard into the window near Krysty, and she drew her blaster with lightning speed before lowering the weapon. “Well, I certainly like these windows,” said the redhead with a thin smile.

Clinging to the Lexan plastic was the crumpled body of a stingwing, its head pulped beyond recognition. As the wag took a dip in the ground, the mutilated corpse began to slide down the window, leaving behind a gory trail of brains and blood until it was gone. Only seconds later, hairy black mosquitoes converged on the window, hungrily cleaning away the precious fluid.

“Not know window there?” Jak asked in contempt, his pale hands busy reassembling the huge .50-caliber machine gun.

“They probably can only see in the infrared spectrum,” Ryan said unexpectedly. “Just like night goggles. Anything not generating heat is something they can’t eat, so they’re not interested.”

“Make sense,” the teen replied cautiously, considering the matter. “But then, why no hit tree when fly? That not hot.”

“Mildred?” Ryan asked the woman.

“Beats me,” the physician replied honestly.

“Mutie,” Jak snorted as if that settled the matter, and went back to his work. They were out of the good homogenized gun oil, but there had been plenty of motor oil. Filtered through a piece of clean cloth, it worked well enough for the present. There was no ammo for the big-bore blaster, but a clean weapon also got a better price than a dirt hunk of junk.

Glancing in the rearview mirror, Krysty saw a dozen snakes battling over the aced stingwing, then an alligator charged out of a salt pit and attacked them all, stingwing and snakes alike going into the toothy maw of the ravenous reptile.

“Oh yeah, this is much better than walking,” Krysty added out of the corner of her mouth, feeding the main engine a little more juice.

Once they were out of the storm, J.B. had aced the second engine to try to save fuel. But the UCV was still consuming juice at a prodigious rate. They were already down to a quarter tank, and had only traveled about eighty miles. Unfortunately, without knowing how many gallons were in the fuel tanks, she couldn't calculate their mileage. She could only guesstimate that they were getting ten or twelve miles per gallon. Which was pretty impressive for a century-old machine that weighed about ten tons.

Just then, another stingwing hit the wag, making Doc jump. He scowled as it fell away. “Nature red, in fang and claw,” the scholar mumbled.

Slowly the day progressed, the sandy desert gradually yielding to a barren grassland. At first, there was only a random tuft of green sticking out of the sterile soil, then patches, small islands and now long fingers of black loam and living plants were stretching outward, slowly coming together to form a proper forest. It was like watching a wound close and heal.

Soon the grassland boasted flowering bushes, then saplings and finally trees, tall and stately, although the species was unknown. They were thick as oak trees, but with a white bark

like a birch. Spanish moss hung from a few thick branches, but most were adorned with festive flowering vines that were simply beautiful. That was until Mildred saw a robin land on a vine and start pecking at a juicy fruit.

In a flash, the vines were around the startled bird, squeezing out the life, blood and feathers falling away. Then, as it went limp, the pretty flower closed over the corpse of the songbird to begin a long slow digestion. The woman felt her heart go out to the poor thing, and hoped the bird was dead and not merely stunned. As a physician, pain was her natural enemy, and she never gave it a willing victory.

"How far is the redoubt?" Mildred asked, trying not to scratch at her arm. The wound was much better after a night inside the warm vehicle. With her bedroll spread out in the back, the cushioned floor had made for a pretty comfortable sleep.

"That depends," Ryan said, tucking away his knife and running a hand over his jaw to check for missed bristles. "There's a redoubt down in Kentuck, and another near the Pennsylvania border. Both are a good distance to travel."

"That one is near Rock ville," J.B. added, "where we ran into the Sons of the Knife, and that mutie ivy."

Absentmindedly rubbing her arm, Mildred remembered the biker gang, as well as Rock ville, the predark prison that had been made into a fortified ville. The nearby redoubt had been guarded by Ranger, a robotic tank, but that was aced. However, both of the redoubts were empty of food and brass.

"My vote is for Rock ville," Krysty said, shifting gear to take a low hillock. "The redoubt had plenty of fuel in storage, and then we can head for Front Royal and trade that Fifty for food at some local ville along the way."

"As long as we stay far away from the Wheel," Ryan voiced sternly. "I don't want to tangle with that mutie ivy plant again."

"And this time, we have no flamethrowers," Doc added.

Keeping a tight grip on the steering wheel, Krysty shivered at the memory of her captivity inside the giant plant.

“Sounds okay to me,” Jak drawled. “Mighty good hunting in Shens. Lots of possum and conie.” His hands and face were streaked with grease, but the big-bore rapidfire he was cleaning shone like a fresh sin.

“Ah, pan-fried conie,” Doc said softly, his sight lost in private reverie. “My dear wife Emily liked to fry the rabbits in cornmeal, but always burned them no matter how hard she tried. However, I ate them anyway, beaming a happy smile. She knew how terrible they were, but we were young and in love...” His voice trailed away and Doc stared blankly at the sword stick in his hands, the reflected light playing across his unseeing eyes.

The other companions remained silent. Nobody blamed Doc for fading away now and then after the horrible tortures he had endured at the hands of Cort Strasser and the lunatic whitecoats of Operation Chronos. He usually snapped back to reality if there was any trouble. The man looked sixty, but was actually only about thirty-eight years old and possessed a wiry strength. Doc was a valuable asset to the group, not a liability.

Just then a soft beep sounded from the radar.

“There’s something big to our left,” J.B. said, studying the glowing screen. “It’s kind of hard to tell with all the trash in the air...but I’d say, a thousand yards, mebbe two.”

“Something moving this way?” Ryan asked, finishing lacing his boot and quickly pulling on the second.

J.B. watched the screen for a minute. “Nope, it’s not moving at all. Must be ruins, or mebbe a ville.”

“Sounds good.” Krysty grunted and sent the vehicle in the new direction.

Less than a mile later, the companions rolled through a wall of brambles to see a jet plane sitting in the middle of a field of grass. The plane looked in perfect condition, and there was a human body lying facedown on the ground nearby.

“A sky fighter!” Krysty exclaimed, shifting gears and applying the brakes to stop the wag. “Haven’t seen one of those in years!”

“Not just a plane, that’s a Harrier jumpjet!” Mildred exclaimed, needlessly pointing. “Or whatever it is the U.S. Navy called the things! It carried more bombs and missiles than a dozen other jetfighters!”

“That’s mighty interesting,” J.B. said, putting his boots down on the floor and grabbing the S&W shotgun. “Think it might have a survival pack for the pilot?”

“Worth doing a fast recce,” Ryan agreed with a smile, taking up the Steyr and walking to the rear doors.

As J.B. joined him there, the men checked over their weapons before throwing the bolt on the heavily armored door. Instantly, both of their rad counters started clicking wildly. They quickly pulled the door shut again, ramming the bolt back into place. With pounding hearts, they waited as the clicking slowly eased and then stopped.

“Fireblast, it’s triple hot out there,” Ryan growled, checking the now silent rad counter again just to be sure. “We’d have been aced in seconds if the door had opened all the way.”

On closer inspection, he now could see that the aircraft’s tires were flat, and small vines had grown over the body, holding it motionless to the ground. The plane and pilot had been lying in the exact same position for countless years.

“Poor bastard must have caught an airburst nuke and died of rad poisoning just after landing,” J.B. said with a snort. Dark night, he could see the missiles under the wings! The thing was a treasure trove of blasters and tech only yards away, but even if they could reach it, the items would only bring a long, painful death.

“Thank Gaia the our vehicle is rad proof,” Krysty said, starting the engine again and moving away from the plane. Then she sharply changed direction and headed into a wild thicket of thorny bushes.

“Smart,” Ryan acknowledged, reclaiming his jumpseat. “If the pilot was trying to reach an airport, there should be something in his last direction.”

“We’ll know soon enough,” Krysty agreed, crossing a small creek.

Hours passed and the UCV survived a dozen more stinging attacks before the winged muties finally gave up and the war wag rolled on through the growing jungle in relative peace. Colorful birds sang from the trees, and swarms of bees buzzed over fields of brightly colored flowers.

At noon, the companions shifted positions, Ryan taking the wheel and Krysty going to the back to eat some hundred-year-old military chicken chow mien right out of the Mylar envelope.

It was late afternoon before they found the outskirts of the city. The landscape was rough and irregular, and there was a lot of young corn growing in abundance, far too much of it to be anything but a cultivated field gone wild. Scattered among the plants were sagging wooden buildings, slowly returning to the earth from which they had been raised. Then a section of asphalt appeared through the grass, and a hundred feet later came a highway sign sticking out of a huckleberry bush, followed by more asphalt, loose piles of rubble. As they crested a low hill, the radar began to steadily tone as a predark city spread out in front of them.

Switching off the device, Krysty slowed their speed and proceeded carefully toward the ruins.

“Alas, Babylon,” Doc sighed.

Crumbling buildings extended in every direction, a few of them reduced to bare metal bones, the steel beams making cubist designs in the darkening sky. Most of the rooftops were covered with green moss, and several had small trees growing out of the windows.

“Looks pretty good,” Ryan said, drawing the SIG-Sauer.

“Not sure,” J.B. said, scrutinizing a plastic-coated map

from his munitions bag. "There are a couple of cities near this area, but nothing marked as this big. Then again, whole continents shifted during skydark, so this could be a few miles out of place, or something from the next state. I'll know for sure once we stop and I can use the sextant."

Keeping to the main roads, Krysty drove the UCV through the suburban jungle, only twice having to use the fork to shift aside wrecked cars or trucks. There were a lot of potholes, but the depressions did little to jar the occupants of the eight-wheeled war wag.

The empty eyes of dark houses stared at the companions in passing, the yards tangles of brambles, cars in the driveways reduced to sagging lumps of corrosion, telephone poles tilting at crazy angles, dead power lines dangling like leafless vines. Only the small fiberglass satellite dishes perched on the occasional roof seemed undamaged, the receivers still patiently looking at the sky for encoded signals that would never come again.

The rotting houses changed to burned-out stores, and then decaying office buildings rose around the companions. Parking the armored vehicle in the middle of an intersection, Krysty made sure there was clearance on every side, and that she could see anything coming.

In every direction, dry leaves covered the cracked asphalt, cresting into small windblown mounds reaching three feet tall. Most of the store windows were gone, the glass broken a long time ago, either from looters or the weather. Both would have destroyed anything usable inside.

At the end of one street, a swinging sign marked the former location of a library, but now there was only flat ground marred with a few loose piles of broken bricks.

"Krysty and Jak, guard the wag," Ryan said. "Everybody else with me. No solo exploring. We keep this tight! We need supplies. Food is the goal, so keep that in mind."

Working the bolt on the aft door, Ryan waited for any

reaction from his rad counter. When it remained silent, he opened the door a crack, his hand tight on the handle to slam it closed again. But there still was no reaction. Satisfied, he swung the armored slab aside and breathed in the cool evening air. There was a strong smell of plants, along with the reek of mildew, but that was pretty standard for eastern ruins.

Gathering in a loose group, the companions waited near the vehicle for something to attack, then nodded to Krysty and Jak inside the wag and headed off on foot. Behind them, they heard the door swing shut with a muffled boom, and then lock tight.

“Okay, we work in groups of two, with J.B. as the anchor,” Ryan directed. “Nobody goes anywhere alone. If you gotta piss, the other person holds it for you. Savvy?”

Nodding, the others started across the old pavement, the dried leaves crunching underfoot as if the companions were crossing a field of cornflakes. A soft breeze blew more leaves off the rooftops and stirred the few tattered curtains hanging in broken window frames. Ryan noticed some tiny movements near a gutter, but it was only some mice consuming a dead lizard.

Staying in a loose group, the companions moved across the intersection. Sitting on their bare-steel rims, the rubber tires eaten long ago, dozens of wags were parked along the side streets, a huge collection of them all mixed together at a crosswalk, grinning skeletons peering out from the dim interiors, one of them still wearing sunglasses and a backward baseball cap.

Staying a safe distance away, Ryan stood guard while J.B. went to a police car to check the door. It was closed, but unlocked, and he covered his mouth and nose before opening it wide. Waiting a few moments for the fresh air to circulate inside, he then checked the ragged clothing of the chilled officer behind the wheel. The ammunition in the desiccated corpse’s gunbelt was discolored, useless, the pistol missing.

Typical. The whistle looked in good shape, and the handcuffs were perfect. Having no use for either, he passed them over.

Forcing open the trunk, Doc discovered a weapons rack holding a pump-action shotgun. The weapon was dull with age, the wooden stock deeply cracked. Checking under the floor mat, he found a lockbox and retrieved the keys hidden there to unlock the rack and free the weapon. The pump did not want to move, so Doc used a pocketknife to turn the screws and disassemble the blaster. Soon there fell out four 12-gauge cartridges, the red plastic firm, the brass bottom shiny and unblemished. Doc passed them over to the Armorer, and they were gratefully accepted.

"Funny to think of the ammo sitting there for a hundred years," Mildred said, shifting her med kit to a more comfortable position. "How many people walked through these ruins, right past a baron's fortune in ammo?"

"Can't find what you don't know exists," J.B. said philosophically, tucking the cartridges into his munitions bag.

The rest of the wags were piled with luggage and cartons, toys and blankets, people fleeing the city with whatever possessions would fit into their vehicles. There might have been something usable buried deep among the goods, but the companions continued the recce for the time being.

Past the jumbled collision was a flatbed eighteen-wheeler that had crashed into the side of a hardware store. If there had been any bodies, they were gone by now, consumed by time, mice and insects. However, J.B. found a couple of road flares behind the front seat in fairly decent shape, and Jak unearthed the windfall of a full box of .38 bullets in the glove compartment, the plastic wrapping still sealed. If the driver had been carrying a blaster, it was nowhere in sight. Probably taken by looters too stupe to look for spare brass.

"Huzzah!" Doc cried, hauling a thermos out from under the seat and tucking it into his frock coat. The contents would be putrefied, if not mummified, but with some very careful

washing, using a great deal of strong soap, the thermos could be safely salvaged.

Going to a cab, Mildred glanced through the windows at the desiccated driver and passenger. The dead man in the back was still holding a cell phone, the bearded driver resting a clawed hand on top of a box of doughnuts. The woman almost salivated at the sight. *Doughnuts*. The very word filled her mouth with sweet memories of gentler days.

Most of the stores nearby had their display windows smashed open, the interiors filled with leaves and rubbish. But even if they were intact, the companions would not have wasted time doing a recce on a tanning salon, weight-reduction clinic, ice-cream parlor, real-estate office or Madam Olga, the psychic adviser. However, across the street was a gun store.

With the 9 mm SIG-Sauer in hand, Ryan assumed the point position. The protective grille had been torn loose and, as expected, the interior was absolutely empty, the wall shelves and glass display cases containing only dust, packing and the stiff oily paper that most handguns were wrapped in as protection during shipment, nothing more. There was a small gun range in the rear, but the usual barrels of spent brass had been taken. Pity. A lot of folks knew how to make black powder, but not how to make the primer that went into the bottom of the brass to ignite the powder. More than once they had found a gun store or police station looted to the walls, but the precious brass left behind for them to scavenge and reload at a redoubt.

“Now, pray tell, what in the world is this?” Doc asked, arching an eyebrow. The tiny pyramid-shaped glass container was full of a bright red paint, but it was too small to cover anything larger than a blasterport. “A free sample of some kind?”

“No, that’s fingernail polish,” Mildred said, resting the blaster on her shoulder. “It’s something the women of my time used to put on their nails to make them look pretty.”

Quickly, Doc placed the container down as if it was rad hot. "I see," he muttered. "Then I should assume that it was an accoutrement for, ahem, soiled doves?"

Soiled doves? "No, it was not for whores, or gaudy sluts," Mildred replied, chuckling. "In spite of what your General Hooker might say on the matter. It's just fingernail polish. Most of the women in my time used it daily. I did, too, on occasion."

"Indeed," Doc muttered, turning slightly red in his cheeks. "Then, pray tell, what is nail polish doing in a gun store?"

"It's for the blasters," J.B. replied, checking under the counter near the register. He found a clip for a handgun, but the weapon was gone. Ah well. "On older blasters you'd add a touch of red fingernail polish on the sight to help you aim."

"But—"

"I know, the SIG ZKR, Colt and the rest have radium dots on the front blade. But before the gun manufacturers started putting those on, folks used nail polish." J.B. paused. "Not the ancient stuff like your hogleg LeMat, that barely has any kind of a sight at all. I mean the blasters made from just before World War One to just after World War Two."

"A narrow window of opportunity for such a curious oddity," Doc noted, then surreptitiously slipped the bottle into his pocket. He had been darkening the front blade on the LeMat with spit and spent black powder, but it kept coming off. This polish idea seemed to have some real merit.

Leaving the store, the group started down the street, the UCV rumbling into motion and following along behind. Krysty was at the wheel, Jak in the gunnery seat, his Colt Python tucked into a blasterport searching for targets.

Pausing at a battered soda machine that had a bird nest on top, Ryan shot off the lock, then yanked open the buckled cover. All of the cans inside had burst apart over the decades; the few intact cans bulged dramatically from the gases trapped within. Ryan avoided even touching those. It was triple deadly

stuff if you were feeb enough to try a sip. But something shiny caught his attention at the bottom, and he reached down to retrieve a couple of plastic bottles of mineral water, the contents still crystal clear.

“Eureka!” Doc chortled.

The next block of stores had been burned to cinders, only blackened timbers and bare concrete columns remaining of whatever had once been there. After that was a parking lot, now full of low bushes surrounding the squat white structure of a commercial drugstore.

With a squeal of brakes, Krysty parked the armored vehicle a safe distance from the building while Ryan and the others proceeded inside carefully. This was exactly the sort of place that stickies, and other muties, liked to hibernate inside, patiently waiting for norms to come to loot the goods on the shelves, only to become fresh meat for the slaving monstrosities.

Pausing at the shadowy entrance, Ryan started to say it was getting too dark to risk scavenging the place, when bright lights exploded from behind, filling the store with light to noontime clarity. Turning, Ryan raised a hand to shield his eye and vaguely saw the outline of Krysty waving from behind the dashboard, the four halogen headlights throwing out blue-white beams of blazing illumination.

The security gate was down and locked in place, but that trifle took J.B. only a few seconds to get through with his assortment of tools. Raising the gate dislodged a rain of dirt and dead bugs, and the dusty bell above the front door jingled merrily as they entered with weapons at the ready. The silence in the store was thick, the air tasted stale, with no hint of spoor or sweat, and there were no footprints on the linoleum flooring.

Weapons at the ready, Ryan and J.B. stayed near the front entrance while Mildred started moving among the moldy shelves, muttering curses and grabbing assorted items. Doc

stayed close to the busy woman, the LeMat held in both hands, the hammer cocked and ready.

This kind of place was tailor made for the physician. What might look like crap to the others would prove to be life-saving meds in her trained hands. The first time Mildred looted an art-supply store, the companions thought she was crazy. But then she unearthed something called a box cutter that proved to be just as sharp as a scalpel and a hundred times keener than a knife or razor blade. Perfect for battlefield surgery. Next, she acquired some soft plastic tubing from a pet store to use for draining pus from wounds, and as breathing tubes for an unconscious patient. After that, anything the stocky woman requested, the other companions would get for her, no questions asked.

A few minutes later Mildred appeared pushing a shopping cart packed full of assorted items, one wheel loose and wobbling badly. "I don't think this place has ever been looted!" she cried, beaming in delight. "I found bandages, aspirin, iodine, razor blades, a new bulb for my flashlight, even some superglue!"

"And what medical use does that have, if I may ask?" Doc queried.

"It closes small wounds without stitching," she replied. "So there is no scar. Also good for adding to a Molotov cocktail to make napalm."

"Does it? Exemplary, madam! Well done, indeed."

"Yeah, good haul," Ryan complimented her.

Leaving the drugstore, the companions piled the medical supplies into their vehicle and decided to call it a day. There were a lot of predators that only hunted at night, and it would be wise to get away from the concrete jungle of the ruins before they came out looking for prey.

Driving outside the ruins, Krysty chose a campsite along a babbling creek. There were some apple trees in bloom, the water read clean of rads and there was a lot of firewood available.

In short order, they had dinner simmering in a dented tin

pot, beef stew from the MRE packs and some green leaves that Jak had collected stewing in a fry pan.

“What is it?” J.B. asked, sniffing. The smell was very familiar, but he could not quite recognize it. “Collard greens? Dandelions?”

“Kudzu,” Jak said laconically, using a green stick to stir the contents of the pan.

“I thought that was a weed,” he admonished with a frown.

“Is weed,” Jak replied, sprinkling some salt onto the fat leaves. “But eats good. Take off vine if want, but cooked is best.”

Incredibly, the kudzu was quite tasty and went rather well with the beef stew. After the meal, Doc washed the pots in the creek, with Mildred standing guard. Then everybody took seats around the crackling campfire, sipping plastic cups of instant coffee from the MRE packs, eating apples and listening to the sounds of the night.

“Now, about naming our new wag...” Doc started out of the blue.

“Do we have to name it, ya old coot?” Mildred inquired.

“What coot anyway?” Jak asked, interrupting a potential argument. “Some sorta mutie bug?”

Caught with a mouthful of apple, Krysty snorted a laugh and started to choke, then paused and spit out the unchewed food. She stood, her long hair flexing and moving against the breeze.

“Something wrong?” Ryan asked, lowering his cup, a hand going for the SIG-Sauer at his side.

“Yes. Everybody into the wag,” Krysty said quietly, her voice thick with urgency. She drew the S&W and clicked back the hammer.

“Droids?” Jak asked, rising to his feet. The Colt Python was already in his hand. He strained to hear anything, but there were only the usual sounds of the night, nothing more.

“It’s not droids,” Krysty whispered, edging toward the armored vehicle.

There came a soft padding from the darkness as if a soft rain was falling on the thick grass. Then there came a telltale hoot, followed by another, then dozens more from every direction.

“Stickies!” Doc bellowed, rising to draw the LeMat and start firing at the inhuman shapes loping toward them through the starry night.

Chapter Seven

Leaving the burning bridge far behind, Roberto had the convoy stop on the crest of a small hill to bury their dead, then Jessica fired a charge of precious explosives to cause an avalanche and cover the graves with tons of shale and basalt. No animals or muties would ever feast on the crewmen of the trader. End of discussion.

Heading south, the war wags rumbled along the uneven ground, the big tires rising and falling like pistons in a steam engine. But inside, they were warm and comfortable. The battle had been fought, the prize won, the aces buried. Life continued.

Footsteps sounded in the corridor, and Shelly appeared at the entrance of the control room. Her hair a wild corona, the woman was dressed in the dark green of a healer, and slung over a shoulder was her med kit, embroidered with the mysterious word *M*A*S*H*, exactly like the bag belonging to her teacher, Mildred Wyeth.

“Just wanted to tell you that Jimmy will be okay,” Shelly said, looking over the others for any sign of injury. The crew sometimes hid their miseries from her, not out of foolishness or false bravado.

“Will he be able to walk?” Roberto asked, looking out the windshield. The convoy was heading for some predark ruins just past a big rad pit. Kathleen had a cache of diamonds hidden there in case of an emergency, and after their last couple of fights, he wanted every crystal possible stored away for the long journey east.

"Absolutely," Shelly answered, taking the command chair, looking over the controls and weaponry. She liked machines. They never bled, screamed or died under your knife. Nice as summer rain, were machines. "Oh, he's not going anywhere without a crutch for a couple of months, but Jimmy shouldn't even have a limp afterward." Then the woman paused in embarrassment.

"Glad to hear it," Roberto said, unconsciously rubbing the stiff limb. "Wish we had you when I busted mine." Then he noticed Jessica making a strange face. She had taken over the Ear until Jimmy was back on duty. The tough little man didn't need a working leg to listen to fragging headphones.

"Something coming our way?" Roberto asked, moving closer.

"No, but I'm getting blasterfire just to the southwest of us," Jessica replied slowly. "Rapidfires, wheelguns, some kind of black powder cannon, all kinds of dreck, and it's coming from the ruins we're heading for."

Rapidfires? That was interesting. Hardly anybody had that kind of firepower anymore. "Anything on the radar?" Roberto said, casually glancing over the control board.

"Bet your ass there is, Chief," Quinn replied curtly, looking up from the glowing green screen. "Some kind of a wag, really big, and it's made of metal. Not iron strips nailed over wood, but the good stuff like us, predark armor."

Armor? His interest piqued, Roberto returned to the windshield and picked up a pair of binocs to scan the darkness ahead. He easily found the firefly sparkle of rapidfires near the river, then saw the other wag. It was big, with huge-ass windows, some sort of big chilling fork in front, and the whole thing was painted a bright yellow instead of a sensible camou.

"How the frag can you tell what kind of metal it is?" Jake demanded incredulously.

"The thicker it is, the darker the shadow it throws," Quinn replied brusquely. "Chief...rapidfires and armor, do you think we have some competition?"

“Another trader in this area?” Jessica asked scornfully.

“I agree. Everybody we know is on the other side of the Deathlands,” Roberto said, adjusting the focus. “That fat bastard Hammerstein, Olivia, Fat Stephen, Broke-Neck Pete, all of ’em are pretty nuking far away from here.”

Sitting in the corner, Yates tilted his head at that last name, but said nothing.

“No, it must be another trader,” Jessica retorted. “No gang of coldhearts, or baron, has this much live brass. These folks are throwing it around like lead grew inside apples!” She flipped a switch and the ceiling speakers came to life with the sound of blasters, cursing and a deadly hooting.

“Stickies!” Jake growled, and started to suggest using the L-Gun, but then realized that even if it had the range, there was no way to aim tight enough to hit the muties, and not also chill the norms.

Lowering the binocs, Roberto hung them on a wall hook and limped quickly back to his chair. Norms fighting norms was not his business, but Kathleen would have helped anybody being attacked by stickies, so he also did, to honor her memory. Well, anybody except the nuke-sucker Ryan Cawdor. Sweet blind Norad, just to have the son of a bitch in the range of his L-Gun one more time...!

“All right, get sharp, people,” Roberto said, tightening the seat belt. “I don’t know if we can get there fast enough to save these norms, but we can at least burn out those stinking muties!”

“Pack ’em and rack ’em, boys!” Jessica said into a mike, her words echoing throughout the three war wags. “We’re going to stick it to the stickies!”

Eagerly, the crews shouted their approval and started slapping clips into longblasters, preparing for the coming slaughter.

SCRAMBLING AWAY from the campfire, the companions fired their blasters at anything that moved, desperate to reach the

UCV only a few yards away. But the stickies were everywhere, loping low across the irregular ground and charging through the bushes. Cut off from the armored wag, the companions retreated from the muties, firing every step of the way.

Running low and fast across the hard-packed sand, the muties charged straight for the companions, sucker-covered fingers outstretched eagerly, and Ryan saw a group of them lumber out of the river. The bastards had sneaked up on them from behind! That was pretty smart for a stickie, and for one terrible moment, Ryan wondered if these might be more of those smart stickies created by Delphi. But even as heaced one, Ryan could see the mutie had nothing in its misshapen hands but suckers, no spears or clubs. Good enough.

“Head for the ruins!” Ryan bellowed, triggering a round. The SIG-Sauer barked and the 9 mm copper-jacketed bullet took a stickie smack in the temple, blowing out the back of its skull across the others in a grisly spray of bones, brains and blood. Already deceased, the mutie kept running for a few feet before limply collapsing to the ground.

Lighting a road flare, J.B. tossed it aside, and several of the stickies converged on the sizzling magnesium, clawing at the light in mindless fascination. When a few more joined the group, Jak tossed over his one gren. The clump of muties was blown sky-high, the tattered bodies sailing away into the night. One hit the shore, another splashed back into the river, but the concussion only excited the others to a fever pitch, and the muties raced even faster for the companions.

Working the selector pin on his LeMat, Doc switched to the smooth-bore 12-gauge and triggered the mini-shotgun. The blast completely removed the head of a female stickie, and she stumbled past the scholar, arms outstretched, her sagging breasts flapping obscenely.

With the other companions maintaining defensive fire, J.B. tossed two more flares. One died on impact, but the other

stayed lit, rolling along, throwing off smoke and hellish light. As the stickies gathered around again, Krysty rolled in her gren, and once more the creatures were annihilated.

But more and more of them were steadily coming out of the river, and there were no more grens or pipe bombs.

Dangerously low on ammo, the companions reached the outskirts of the ruins and scrambled up a slope of loose masonry, trying for the second floor of an office building. Ryan and Mildred took out the first wave of muties as the others grabbed moldy pieces of predark furniture and threw them together as a crude barricade. Then J.B. sent down a withering hail of 9 mm rounds from the Uzi, while Ryan and Mildred rejoined the group.

With their back to a wall, the companions could now concentrate their blasters in a single direction, and they started taking turns chilling the monsters and reloading. Doing so again and again.

Holstering the empty SIG-Sauer, Ryan swung up the Steyr and started taking out stickies, the long 7.62 mm cartridges going through one mutie and also chilling the one behind. However, he knew this was only a holding action. There seemed to be a lot more stickies than the companions had brass, and when they ran out it would all be over but the screaming. There was more ammo in the UCV, but how to reach it with the muties in the way? Looking around frantically, he saw how close the next building was to the one they were in now, and evolved a fast plan.

“Cover me!” Ryan shouted, turning away from the fight and running deeper into the dark ruins.

Maneuvering purely by the silvery moonlight, the Deathlands warrior went to a couple of windows before finding one that overlooked an alleyway. It was a ten-foot drop onto loose rubble. Perfect.

Kicking out the few pieces of glass still in the frame, Ryan grabbed a warped closet door and yanked it off the rusty

hinges. Awkwardly, he placed it on the sill and slid it across the alley and into another window. Thumping the makeshift bridge with a hard fist, he decided it should hold, and sharply whistled for the others. Rummaging in his pockets for loose rounds, he hastily reloaded a clip for the SIG-Sauer as the rest of the companions came running with the stickies close behind, hooting insanely.

“Bridge!” Ryan bellowed, placing his shots carefully, trying to block the rush of the muties with their own corpses. He succeeded, until the stickies started crawling sideways along the moldy walls like mottled insects.

The companions needed no prompting to scurry individually across the creaking door to the next building. Slinging the Uzi, J.B. thumbed a couple of the new cartridges into the scattergun and rained hellfire on the muties, giving Ryan a few seconds to get across, and then the one-eyed man used the Steyr to hold back the stickies as J.B. joined them.

Once he reached solid footing, the Armorer kicked the door off the sill, and it fell away, clattering between the two buildings before crashing on the ground to the sound of splintering wood.

Almost instantly, an inhuman face appeared in the other window and launched itself straight for Ryan. But the thing only got halfway across the empty space before dropping away to land with a sickening crunch.

Pushing the others out of the way, Mildred pulled a knife to cut her finger and smear the window frame with the fresh blood. Driven mad by the smell, the stickies swarmed to their deaths, determined to reach the delicious norm flesh at any cost.

Using a precious minute to reload their blasters, the companions broke for the hallway, only to find it missing, the entire center of the building gutted by fire.

“Now what? Some of them are going to survive that fall,” Krysty said, her animated hair coiled tightly against her head. “The dead ones cushioning the fall of the last few live ones.”

“Then I strongly suggest we put another alleyway between us and them,” Doc said, removing the single 12-gauge cartridge from the LeMat and inserting a new one.

“Sounds good,” Ryan said, sliding a replacement clip into the SIG-Sauer and working the slide to chamber a round. “Spread out, and find the fragging stairs!”

It took the companions only a few minutes, but the stairs were also gone, eaten by termites, time and acid rain. Searching quickly, they found another pair of rooms with matching windows, and used another door to cross over to a third building. This one was in much better condition, and they raced up the creaking wooden stairs to easily reach the sagging rooftop, their weapons out and ready.

The stars were out, twinkling merrily in the ebony firmament, and they could hear the excited hoots of stickies from somewhere in the earthly darkness.

“They got across,” Jak drawled, his head tilted slightly, a pale fist hefting the Colt Python.

“Then we better move faster!” Mildred urged, trying to tighten the bandage around her wounded finger. The trick had seemed like a good idea at the time, but now she realized that the smell of blood would only draw the stickies to them like bees to honey.

Suddenly, Doc plunged a hand into her med kit and withdrew the tube of glue. Thanking him with a curt nod, she wiped the bloody finger clean with the bandage, then tossed it away, and spread the sticky fluid along the small cut. It stung for a moment, then the pain vanished and the bleeding ceased completely.

“Any more grens or pipe bombs?” Ryan asked, concentrating on thumbing fresh rounds into a clip for the Steyr.

“Nothing. We’re out,” J.B. said tersely.

Inserting the clip, Ryan worked the arming lever and slung the longblaster over a shoulder. Five more shots and he’d be down to the panga. “Then we run,” he commanded.

Hopping over to the next building, the companions raced across the roof, and did it again. Finding themselves in a parking garage, they charged to the far side and crossed the street, then started going from office building to apartment complex, again, but this time they were heading back toward the UCV.

Reaching the last building on the block, the companions studied the moon shadows below for any signs of the stickies. It had been a while since they last heard hooting, but these river muties seemed to stay quiet until charging in the chill.

"I can just see the wag," Krysty said, squinting into the night. "There doesn't appear to be any stickies nearby." Just then, the night wind brought the distant rumble of a diesel engine, but before she was sure it vanished again on the breeze.

"Let's chance it," Ryan stated. "Move slow and quiet until we reach the street, then give it everything you've got. The first one to reach the wag gets the doors open, and covers the others."

"Don't bother starting the engine," J.B. added, removing his glasses and tucking them away safe into a pocket. "Just concentrate on getting some steel between us and these nuke-suckers."

"Let's go," Ryan ordered, leading the way.

Easing down the old stairs, the companions paused at every floor, straining to hear any movements from the blackness, but they seemed to be alone and reached the ground without incident.

Now, the norms broke into a full run, dashing pell-mell for the safety of the armored transport. They barely got out of the city and back onto grass when the hooting sounded again from behind them—and there came an answer from in front of them.

Redoubling their sped, the companions could soon see the flickering campfire shining on the side of the war wag, the

Lexan windows reflecting the crimson light back onto the area so it seemed bathed in blood. There were a score of aced bodies scattered on the ground, and Ryan felt sure a couple of them were still very much alive and playing possum.

Dropping a flare, J.B. kept running, but after a hundred feet or so, he stopped and turned, with the Uzi primed for action. Black shapes were silhouetted in the magnesium light, and the Armorer sent a long burst from the machine pistol into their midst, moving the rapidfire in a sideways figure eight. A dozen of the muties dropped with hoots of pain, but the rest continued on relentlessly.

Swinging around the Steyr, Ryan took out five of the stickies, then turned and ran again. That was it for ammo.

Moving ahead of everybody else, Doc reached the vehicle first, but paused at the rear doors to crouch and check under the wag first. A pair of inhuman eyes stared silently right back at him from the gloom, and the old scholar removed them from this world with one thundering stroke of the trigger.

Working the latch, Doc climbed inside and threw both of the aft doors open wide. Then holstering the LeMat, he twisted the lion's head atop the ebony stick, and withdrew the shiny Spanish sword nestled inside.

The hooting of the stickies was noticeably louder, and Doc began to wonder if his friends had fallen, when they suddenly appeared out of the darkness with a dozen stickies close on their tail.

As the companions reached the doors and scrambled inside, Doc grabbed the S&W M-4000 from J.B. and discharged it into the night. Three of the stickies faltered, watery blood staining their rags, but they did not fall.

Yanking the tall man out of the way, Jak slammed the doors shut and the stickies smashed against the armored chassis, hooting louder than ever before.

Shoving the heavy bolts into place, Krysty made sure the doors were securely locked while Ryan strode to the front of

the wag and got behind the wheel. The engines started instantly, the dashboard coming to life with winking lights and glowing indicators.

Ignoring all of that, Ryan tromped on the gas and shifted the gears, lurching the vehicle into motion. If it was possible, the stickies started making even more noise, frustration and hunger making them animated in their anger.

“Noisy fuckers,” J.B. muttered, expertly reloading a clip for the Uzi, then doing one for the SIG-Sauer. Reaching over, he yanked the blaster from Ryan’s holster, inserted the clip, worked the slide and shoved it back into place.

“Thanks,” Ryan said as he tried to coach the lumbering transport on to greater speeds.

Hooting wildly, the muties boiled out of the cool darkness and rushed directly into the blinding headlights of the UCV. Snarling a curse, Ryan revved the big Detroit engine and sent the armored wag hurtling into the mob. The vehicle didn’t even tremble as it crashed into the stickies, crushing their malformed bodies and sending the broken corpses hurtling away.

But now, more stickies rushed out of the darkness, throwing themselves onto the wag, clinging like bloated leeches, their disgusting suckers pulsating as they crawled across the Lexan windows.

Mumbling vehement curses, Jak thumbed a single round into the empty Colt, shoved the weapon out a blasterport and fired. Its guts blown to the wind, a stickie fell away, but another took its place and tried to reach through the blasterport with a questing finger. With a surly expression, the teenager sliced off the digit, and kicked it away under the jumpseats.

The UCV jounced as it rolled over some of the muties, faint hoots coming from directly below the soft floor.

Assuming an odd stance, Krysty leveled her blaster and fired. A stickie crawling past the blasterport jerked from the arrival of the deadly hollowpoint round, then went limp. But

the lifeless body stayed in place, blood and other fluids trickling into the wind behind them.

Crawling onto the windshield, a stickie looked directly into Ryan's eye, the lipless mouth hooting steadily as it wiggled around trying to reach the man, unable to fathom why it could not. Without a blasterport to use, Ryan couldn't figure out any way to get rid of the bastard creature, and restrained himself from trying the horn or wiperblades. That would be sure to only make it more crazy, if that were possible. Then inspiration hit, and he executed a sharp turn and headed back toward the ruins.

Unexpectedly, there was a sharp twang, and the rope holding the rooftop hatch into place snapped. As the hatch slammed aside, a stickie dropped inside the wag, looking around and hooting in delight. Moving fast, Doc lunged forward, his sword skewering the creature directly through the chest. The mutie convulsed in agony, but still reached out for the norm with both deadly hands. Caught totally by surprise, Doc recoiled, trying to pull his sword free, but that only dragged the stickie along and the thing got hold of his arm.

"Die, motherfuck!" Jak snarled, stroking the trigger of his Colt Python, the big-bore handcannon booming louder than a tac nuke inside the confines of the wag.

The head of the mutie literally exploded, and the stickie dropped to the floor, pumping out thick, viscous fluids, but still holding on to the sleeve of Doc's coat. With a foul expression, the man used the sword to slice off a piece of the fabric and regain his freedom. But the other muties now seemed aware of the breach in the armored hull, and were eagerly crawling for the roof.

"Close that nuking hatch!" Ryan roared, twisting the steering wheel to try to fishtail the massive machine. The plan was to throw off the stickies, but the shock absorbers and springs of the predark military wag did their job too damn well, and the UCV only gently swayed, maintaining an even keel.

Aiming upward, J.B. put a long burst from the Uzi into the open hatch, and an aced stickie fell inside to land sprawling on top of the headless corpse. But there also came the terrible sound of a ricochet, and a 9 mm round zinged wildly inside the transport to finally slam into the driver's seat.

Jerking forward, Ryan braced for the onslaught of pain, but he only felt something smooth and mildly uncomfortable pressing against his spine. Son of a mutie bitch, even the fragging inside of the UCV was armored!

Hooting curiously, two stickies appeared in the open hatchway and started easing bonelessly inside. Shooting upward, Krysty and Mildred cleared the opening, while Doc and Jak rigged more rope and hauled the hatch back into place. But almost immediately, it started jerking and moving, as the stickies tried once more to get it open.

"If you got any clever ideas, old buddy, now would be the time!" J.B. called, keeping the Uzi pointed at the shaking hatch. There was no way to ace the stickies on the roof without exposing the people inside, and sooner or later the muties would rip open the hatch again.

"Working on it!" Ryan shot back, shifting gears as the wag raced along the main street of the predark ruins. He was virtually driving blind by now, there were so many stickies covering the windshield. Every time Ryan shifted position, they did, too, always looking directly into his good eye and flapping their mouths in endless hooting.

Reaching an intersection, Ryan saw the drugstore flick past, and sharply banked the wag onto the next street. He had only seen the thing briefly in passing, but if he was right...

And there it was! A skyscraper of some kind, the entire outside composed of shiny glass windows.

"Hold on!" Ryan bellowed, giving juice to the roaring engine. "I'm going get rid of the damn stickies right fragging now!"

Quickly figuring out what was coming, the companions

scrambled for the jumpseats, pulled down the bodybars and those who believed in a higher power said a little prayer.

Engaging the second engine, Ryan threw the UCV into high gear and charged straight for the skyscraper at maximum speed. In the beams of the halogen headlights, the Deathlands warrior could see the reflection of the onrushing war wag, the stickies and himself hunched over the wheel in the towering wall of predark glass. Then he plowed into the ground-floor window with a noise louder than the end of the world.

Chapter Eight

Huffing slightly, *Thunder* and *Lightning* sat alongside each other in the middle of an open field, the low grass stirred by a gentle wind. The bulky machines stood over fifteen feet tall, the double row of truck tires inches deep in the soft ground from the tremendous weight of the armored behemoths. Attached to the rear of each massive engine were three long trailers, the sides covered with thick wood planks, the tops bristling with broken glass and barbed wire.

Sitting on a folding canvas chair, Olivia Parker was getting her curly hair trimmed by the new healer, who was going as slow as possible to make sure he did a good job. Nearby, a fat cook was frying sausages over a small campfire while her assistant was cutting up wild turnips.

A short distance away, several muscular crewmen without shirts were industriously chopping wood, their axes rising and falling with dull monotony, and another group knee-deep in a stream was drawing water with plastic buckets, then filtering it to remove as many impurities as possible. The predark steam engines were tougher than boiled hate, but the delicate brass valves that regulated the internal pressure were pernickety little bastards, Olivia thought, and absolutely demanded clean water. Back at her home base in Topeka, the trader had a full installation for turning out endless gallons of chem-free water, the stuff so fragging pure you could literally drink it like shine. But out here in the wilds, bedsheets would have to do for a while.

That was the best thing about the colossal machines, Olivia mentally noted with swelling pride as the shearing continued. *Thunder* and *Lightning* ran on wood and water. Not juice or shine. Just plain wood and water, available damn near anywhere! Well, except for the Great Salt, but there was nobody there worth trading with, and nothing worth looting.

Recovered from a railroad museum, it had taken Olivia close to a full year to get the antique steam engines running again, and then another to mount them on truck tires. The axles had been the hard part, as the metal kept bending under the colossal weight of the railroad engines. That problem had been solved by simply adding more tires, and then even more tires. But now the armored, thirty-six-wheel steam trucks were unstoppable juggernauts, fully capable of crossing the worst sections of the Deathlands at staggering speeds of over sixty miles per day. Sixty! It was incredible, but true.

Leaving the mudhole where she had been born, the former bartender had slowly built up her business, first by hauling logs to make new walls for damaged villes, then by carrying pilgrims through hostile mutie territory, and then by actually trading goods. Jerked fish from the West drew a high price in jack from landlocked villes, many of whom had never even seen a fish before, and steel recovered from predark ruins was as valuable as brass in a blaster. Veggies for shine, shine for lead, lead for seed corn, corn for black powder, black powder for veggies. Round and round, on and on, season after season, the circle of commerce never stopped for anybody smart enough to get a wag rolling and tough enough to not be aced.

So far, this had been a particularly good season for the lady trader, but now with the discovery of Cascade, it promised to be the best ever. An untouched predark ville! She could not even begin to imagine what they had to trade!

“Chief?” a crewman asked, ambling over. “Hey, Chief!”

Olivia raised a hand to stop the cutting. “Anything wrong?” she demanded.

“Can't really say,” the fellow said hesitantly, shifting the longblaster slung over his shoulder. “But there's something funny going on at the top of a tree to the south of here.”

Feeling her hackles rise, Olivia frowned. “Define ‘funny.’”

“Little flashes of light. Kind of on and off. Weirdest thing I've ever seen.”

“Show me,” the trader commanded, yanking the towel from her neck.

Dutifully, the crewman passed over a pair of binocs.

Adjusting the focus on the binocs, Olivia scanned the south side of the field and easily spotted the tree in question on the other side of a ravine. There was somebody nestled in the upper branches, doing something with a reflective piece of glass or metal. Mebbe a mirror? Could be. But whatever the fellow was doing, it was no threat to her trucks. The tree was a good quarter of a mile away, and no blaster in existence could shoot that far. Even if the feeb was trying to summon stickies—unlikely, but possible—it would take the muties hours to cross the ravine. Stickies were rather similar to her former bedpartner, fast at the start, kind of sloppy and slow to finish.

“Excuse me, Chief,” the healer said. “But I think that's Morse code.”

The flashes were a code? “Can you read it?” Olivia asked curtly.

“A little, yes, ma'am.”

Olivia passed over the binocs. “Show me.”

“That's strange,” the healer muttered. “This is just a string of letters, but they don't spell anything.”

“Show me.”

“S...t...m...e...n...g...d...w...n...a...t...t...k...n...w,” he said. “Then it repeats. Nope, now it stopped.”

“Sounds like gibberish,” the crewman said with a sniff. “Just some kid playing with a piece of glass.”

“In a tree?” Olivia asked with a scowl.

He shrugged. "Sure, why not?"

"On the other hand, it might just possibly be words spelled by somebody who is not very well educated," the healer stated.

Brushing some loose hair off her cheek, Olivia scowled. She didn't like the sound of this. Was it badly spelled words or actually a code within the code? Starting to get uneasy, the lady trader repeated the letters to herself, then tried to pronounce them as words. "Sta...me...nug...dew...won...at...tick...nawa." *At tick...attic?* She tried again. "Stame nug dew...dune. Dune attic nawa." Or was that new? "Dune attic new." That almost sounded like *attack now...*

Suddenly the letters rearranged themselves in her mind, and she read the coded message in growing horror. *Steam engines down, attack now.*

"Red alert!" Olivia bellowed, pelting for the steam trucks. "Coldhearts on the way! Get the blasters! We're going to be jacked!"

But even as she said the words, a pair of contrails appeared high in the azure sky, the white streaks tipped with fiery little arrows. Knowing it was already too late, Olivia grimly pulled her blaster and started blowing lead at the sky, as the missiles crested an arch, then came hurtling straight down for the motionless steam trucks.

A few seconds later the missiles hit and a terrible light violently filled the universe, throwing Olivia backward into a pool of inky blackness that seemed to have no bottom.

THE UNIVERSE EXPLODED into sparkling chaos, and the stickies were horribly sliced to ribbons, their mottled forms brutally grated off the speeding UCV. Crashing onto the marble floor of the lobby, Ryan held on for dear life as the armored transport slammed into a reception desk, plastic plants and little name badges flying in every direction. Careening off a marble pillar, the war wag rammed through another set of glass doors, removing the last of the stickies, then it steamrolled over row

after row of work desks, a blizzard of ancient documents and dust exploding around the unstoppable urban combat vehicle.

Cubicle partitions were smashed aside, the particleboard violently returning to its original components. Skeletons in suits and dresses crunched under the military tires, and a large copier erupted into electrical wiring and a strange black dust. Using all of his strength, Ryan managed to just avoid a head-on collision with another marble pillar, scraped past an elevator bank, cleaved some kind of an art exhibit in two, and hurtled into another glass wall.

Landing on the sidewalk with a bone-jarring impact, Ryan crushed a mailbox and destroyed a newsstand before speeding across an empty parking lot. The stickies were gone from the windshield, but their bodily fluids still coated the Lexan plastic to murky levels, and Ryan only spotted the group of startled people sitting around the small campfire just in time to avoid smashing them to pieces. However, the horses tethered nearby were not so lucky, their death screams and red blood filling the night air.

“Dark night!” J.B. cursed furiously.

“If any of the stickies follow after us...” Krysty didn't finish the sentence.

The pilgrims would be at the mercy of the enraged muties, Ryan realized in grim certainty. For one long moment the one-eyed man seriously debated just to keep driving. The outlanders in the parking lot were not kith nor kin. He owed them nothing. Except that I aced their bastard horses, and that's the same thing as chilling them myself. The decision made, Ryan worked the gas and the brakes while shifting gears and twisting the steering wheel.

“Get ready!” he bellowed, cutting off one of the engines. “We're going back!”

But as Ryan turned the huge transport around, the headlights illuminated a scene of horror. A mob of hooting stickies had followed after their vehicle and was attacking the

pilgrims. Still reeling from the arrival of the war wag, the norms offered no organized resistance and were brutally slaughtered as they tried to draw blasters and load cross-bows.

Even before the last norm fell, the muties started eating, gobbling and hooting in delight as they ripped off chunks of warm flesh, a few of the fallen norms still weakly trying to flee.

A cold anger filled his mind at the sight, and Ryan flipped a switch to lower the bomb scoop, the steel forks leveling a couple of yards off the ground. Stomping on the gas, he engaged the second engine, and the UCV roared with barely controlled power as it plowed into the feasting stickies, their hands and mouths full of steaming gobbets of flesh. There was scarcely a jar as the megaton machine rammed through, leaving behind bloody ruination.

Circling once around the chilling field, Ryan could not see any more stickies, and angrily tromped on the brakes, bringing the huge transport to a rocking stop.

“All right, recce for any survivors!” he commanded, pulling out the SIG-Sauer. “J.B. is the anchor. I’ll stay at the wheel.”

“My dear sir, do you honestly think any of these poor people are still alive?” Doc asked, sheathing his sword with a click. The parking lot was strewn with body parts and intestines, norms and horses mixed together indiscriminately. Apparently the stickies preferred internal organs over arms and legs.

“Somebody may have escaped into the ruins,” Ryan offered hesitantly, feeling the swell of rage begin to fade.

“Not likely.” J.B. sighed, tilting back his fedora. “But we gotta take a look. I wouldn’t leave a cannie at the mercy of the stickies.”

“No need,” Jak stated, his face pressed against the dirty window. “There six saddles, six horses, six men.”

"Which means there are no survivors," Krysty added gently.

"Damn," Mildred whispered, the word preternaturally loud inside the armored war wag.

For a long moment nobody spoke, and there was only the soft rumble of the powerful engines in the moonlit night.

"All right, spot anything we can scavenge?" Ryan asked without any emotion. There was nothing he could do to help the aced outlanders, so his job now was staying alive.

"Not really," J.B. said, studying the corpses. "We're wearing better boots, and their blasters are crap, old stuff held together with iron wire."

"Lots of horsemeat," Jak drawled. "But it covered with stickie blood."

"I'd rather starve," Doc intoned, his hands busy purging the LeMat. He was using a brass brush to clean out each firing chamber, the spent powder sprinkling to the floor like black snow.

"Then let's get out of here," Ryan relented, shifting the war wag into gear once more. "We'll try for the redoubt to the north, and see how far we can get before running out of juice."

As the urban combat vehicle started to pull away, Mildred muttered something in the weird language she called Latin, and Krysty said a brief prayer to Gaia.

"Ashes to ashes," Doc added out loud. "Dust to dust..."

Suddenly the radar gave a soft ping, closely followed by another, then the tones started coming fast, and down the block a side street was filled with the harsh glare of electric lights. Incredibly, three war wags turned the corner. Two of the vehicles were converted Mack trucks, probably just cargo carriers. But the third was a monster, covered with armor and blasters, and easily ten times the size of the urban combat vehicle.

"I know that wag," Ryan said in astonishment. "It's War Wag One!"

"Impossible, sir!" Doc retorted. "That vehicle was de-

stroyed by Gaza in the Great Salt! So unless... Oh my dear God..." His face flushed, then went deathly pale.

"Theophilus, we have not traveled back in time," Mildred said clearly, trying to reassure the trembling man. "This is just a similar war wag, nothing more."

"Are you sure?" he asked in a ghostly voice, hugging the LeMat to his chest.

"Absolutely."

Nodding, the man visibly relaxed and concentrated on reloading his black powder blaster as if it were the most important thing to do in the world.

"Sorry, Millie, you're wrong."

Mildred turned. "John?" she asked.

"That thing is not similar to War Wag One," J.B. stated firmly. "It's exactly the same. I remember the details of wags and blasters, and this is the same damn machine that fought the Scorpion God. Same size, same color. Dark night, it even has a chem laser on the roof!"

"Then who are they?" Krysty asked, leaning forward, a hand resting on her blaster. "Hopefully not kin of the deceased, or else we're in for a hell of a fight."

Angling off the street, the three war wags stopped at the far end of the parking lot. The drivers did nothing for a while. Then arc lamps slowly brightened in power, the spotlights sweeping the parking lot, looking over the bodies, the UCV and the predark office building behind.

"Get ready to run," Ryan said, slipping the gears into reverse. The other wags were big, but that much armor would make them slow, while the UCV was lightning fast. Their own armor would offer some protection against the machine guns and the rockets from the others, but that laser—if it worked—would cut them down in a heartbeat with the UCV's huge windows.

Just then, the radio crackled with static, and the ceiling

speaker came to life with a squeal as it automatically matched frequencies.

“*Big Joe to Scorpion*,” a man said. “Any idea who the frag these assholes are?”

“*Tiger Lily to Scorpion*,” a woman added. “What in nuking hell are they driving? I’ve seen a lot of weird-ass wags in my life, but that thing has more glass in it than a greenhouse!”

In the gunnery seat, J.B. looked meaningfully at Ryan, and the one-eyed man nodded in agreement. *Scorpion*—as in the *Scorpion God*. Yeah, he knew who they were dealing with now. That was both good and really bad.

“Mebbe it’s a converted schoolbus,” *Big Joe* growled. “No, wait, look at the building behind them. They drove that thing straight through!”

“Then those windows aren’t made of glass, or Plexiglas,” *Tiger Lily* said thoughtfully. “Or any damn thing else I’ve ever heard of.”

“It could be Lexan plastic,” a new voice commented. “If we have to ace these outlanders, try not to damage the windows. We could really use that stuff.”

Lifting the mike from the dashboard, Ryan thumbed the transmit switch. “Weird-ass wag to *Scorpion*, unless you’ve got lots of spare diamonds, you’re going to have a triple bitch of a time taking us down with that iron pig.”

“What in the... Who the frag is that?” *Big Joe* demanded hotly. “And how did they know about the diamonds?”

“Holy fuck, it’s them!” *Tiger Lily* cried out. “They’ve got a working radio!”

“And know our frequencies?”

“Must have an autolock,” the new voice growled in displeasure. “*Scorpion* to armored vehicle. All right, outlanders, let’s talk. We saw you go back to help the pilgrims, and that buys you a lot of my goodwill. But don’t test it too hard. Our blasters are hot, so unless you like the taste of lead, stay right where you are.”

“Fair enough,” Ryan replied, brushing back his hair. “By the way, I see that you’ve made some changes to this version of War Wag One. Looks good.”

There was no reply, only static.

“Is Eric still with you? Mildred says hello.”

“Yeah, I thought that I recognized that voice,” Roberto growled, the words thick with dark memories. “I swore to chill you the next time we met, Cawdor.”

“Yes, you did,” Ryan said, his hands poised to engage the second engine and throw the big wag into reverse. “But that was a bastard long time ago.”

“I wasn’t thinking any too clear at the time,” Roberto admitted honestly. “I had to blame somebody, and Gaza was aced, so that left only you.”

Again there was only static, and a full minute passed, then another.

“Hot blood cools over time, and since then I’ve heard good things about you from folks I trust in Two-Son ville,” Roberto continued, his tone softening. “I’m willing to call it quits, if you are. We’ll never be drinking buddies, but my finger is off the trigger. Savvy?”

“Fair enough,” Ryan said, shifting into neutral and killing both engines to save juice. He was glad the matter had been settled peacefully. And who knew? With a little bit of luck, he might be able to get some fuel from the fellow, although exactly what the companions could use for jack was pretty limited at the moment. No, wait, they had the brand-new Fifty cal, but no ammo. That should get them at least a hundred gallons.

“Care to do some business?” Ryan said into the mike, trying to sound casual. “We could use some fuel and—”

“Sorry, none to spare,” Roberto answered curtly. “Goodbye, Cawdor. *Scorpion* out.” Black smoke puffed from the louvered exhaust of War Wag One, and it started to lumber around a corner.

“Shit,” Jak drawled, giving the word two syllables.

But then the convoy of wags stopped and the radio crackled on once more.

"Mebbe we *can* do some business," Roberto said smoothly. "Did you say that Mildred was still with ya?"

"Yes, I'm here!" The physician shouted to be heard.

Turning, Ryan passed her the mike.

"What is the nature of your medical problem?" Mildred asked, grabbing her med kit. "Was somebody touched by a stickie?"

"No, nothing like that. Here, somebody wants to talk to you."

"Hello...Dr. Wyeth?" a young woman asked.

That caught Mildred totally by surprise. Doctor? Nobody had called her that for many years. "This is Mildred Wyeth," she said carefully. "Do I know you?"

"Oh no, but I'm so honored to finally meet you, ma'am!" The other person sounded thrilled. "My name is Shelly Bolivar, a black healer from Two-Son ville."

"A... What was that again?"

"A black healer," Shelly said proudly. "After you left, we decided to start calling ourselves that in your honor, ma'am."

"Did you, now," Mildred muttered, not quite sure if she was pleased about that or not. "So tell me, how do you save a man from choking if his tongue is swollen and has completely blocked the throat?" She had taught that skill to the locals, using the most basic terminology.

"You cut a breathing hole in the throat between the second and third rings," Shelly replied promptly. "Then insert any kind of a hollow tube, as long as it first has been immersed in boiling water for longer than you can hold a single breath. I really am a healer, ma'am."

"I guess you are, at that," Mildred said with a grin, feeling an unaccustomed rush of pride. "So, what do you want to talk to me about?"

“Please, ma’am, I have heard—we need to know—are you really a freezie?”

Freezie, contemporary slang for a cryogenic test subject. Mildred looked at Ryan, who nodded. “Yes, it’s true,” she said. “I was born before skydark.”

Excited murmurs could be heard in the background over the radio.

“Then we really do need to talk,” Roberto stated, taking over the conversation. “I give you my word as a trader, you’ll be free to leave whenever you wish.”

“So, what is this about, anyway?” Ryan asked suspiciously. “Why do you need a freezie?”

“Follow me outside of the town, and I’ll tell you,” Roberto said as War Wag One started moving again.

STAYING HIDDEN IN THE shadows, the two men watched the four war wags roll away from the carnage-filled parking lot and disappear into the ruins. With a sigh, they dropped the load of tree branches and rubbed their stiff arms. They had been afraid to move with the trader so close by. Rumor said that he had some kind of predark machine that let one of his techs hear conversations from miles away. It was probably mutie shit, but then again, with somebody like Roberto Eagleson, it never hurt to play it safe.

“What are we gonna do now?” Billy asked plaintively. “Everybody is aced, and we got no horses!”

“We still have the radio,” Delacort said, patting the pocket of his leather jacket. “But we have to wait for Pete to contact us. Can’t ever call him first.”

“Why?”

Not having an answer for that, Delacort slapped the boy up the back of the head. “Shut up, and do as you’re told! All we have to do is wait until dawn, we can call then and ask for instructions.”

“D-dawn?”

“Don’t sweat it,” Delacort said, draping a friendly arm over

the shoulders of the smaller man. "There aren't any stickies left in this rad pit. Those outlanders chilled 'em all."

"Hopefully," Billy mumbled uneasily, glancing at the crumbling buildings. "Hey, think he'll let us have that redhead for a while? It's been a long time since I rode me some crimson."

"Probably not," Delacort said, drawing a wheelgun and rotating the cylinder to check the load. Five live rounds, all of them predark brass, no homemade reloads. "If Roberto is taking on coldhearts as outriders, we gotta play this triple smart. No torture or rape. Just wait and watch until the time is right, then ace 'em in the dark."

"Fast and silent," Billy whispered, pulling a long, thin knife from a tapered sheath on his belt and examining the edge in the silvery moonlight. His grandpa had called the thing a stiletto, and it was so sharp that most folks never even knew they had been stabbed until they saw the blood. And by then it was much too late.

"Fast and silent," Delacort agreed, smiling tolerantly at the small man. Billy was not very smart, almost a feeb, but there was nobody faster, or better, with a knife. "After that, amigo, we join up again with Broke-Neck Pete and head for Cascade!"

"Cascade," the boy exhaled, his face shiny with excitement. That was where the blood would really flow. Gallons and gallons of it, rivers and lakes, wide oceans of red-red death. Mine, all mine! He could practically hear the screaming now.

Chapter Nine

Assuming a loose combat formation, Ryan followed the other three war wags out of the city and into the crumbling suburbs. Their goal was soon obvious, a large burned section of land where nothing grew anymore. The field was large and flat, with nothing a mutie, or coldheart, could use for cover to get close to the machines.

Parking in a protective circle, each of the wags could train their blasters on the other to ride in their defense if necessary. The fact that the UCV was completely unarmed bothered Ryan and J.B. a lot, but there was nothing they could do about it at the moment.

Leaving Jak and Doc to guard the vehicle, the rest of the companions walked over to War Wag One. The promise of an adversary was spent brass, but the only real commodity a trader possessed was his rep. Roberto and his people would not touch the companions this night. The following day was another matter, but that was many hours away.

As the companions approached the wag, a side hatch loudly unlocked. The door swung down from the curved chassis amid the sound of pumping hydraulics to reveal a short flight of steps built into the thick slab of steel.

As it touched the ground, a small blond woman strode into view, a black scarf wrapped around her neck against the evening chill and a massive wheelgun balanced on a hip. She looked like a child armed with the blaster of a parent, but from the confident way she walked, Ryan was of the opinion that

the diminutive woman was more than capable of handling the oversize manstopper.

“So you’re Ryan,” she said as a greeting, thumbs hooked into her gunbelt. “Well, I’m the second in command, Jessica Colt.” Without waiting for a response, Jessica started up the stairs. “Come on, the chief wants to see you in the galley.”

“Far away from the control room,” Ryan said, to gauge her reaction.

Briefly, Jessica paused at the comment but kept walking.

Passing a wall vent, Krysty caught the scent of living greenery. In the middle of a burned field? There had to be some sort of air-cleaning system working. That certainly made sense. With this many people stuffed inside a steel shell, the wag would soon smell like a gaudy house on free shine night.

“Big wag,” Ryan said, maneuvering past an ammo bin. “How many crewmen can you carry?”

“Enough,” Jessica replied vaguely, quickening her pace.

Pushing aside an accordion door, the woman entered the galley with the companions close behind. At the far table, Roberto was spooning sugar into a mug of something that steamed. A few tables over, a crewman was disassembling a .50-caliber machine gun, laying out each piece on a clean white cloth as a prelude to a thorough cleaning.

“Watch out for that recoil spring,” J.B. said in passing.

The crewman looked puzzled for a second, then realized the other man was joking and smiled in reply. The big Fifty didn’t have a recoil spring. That was a joke expert gunners played on newbies. Drove ’em crazy until they figured out the truth.

“Here they are,” Jessica announced, resting a leg on the corner of the table, a boot dangling free. It did not seem to be a very comfortable position. Then Ryan saw that it put her gunhand only a few inches away from her blaster. His estimation of the woman went up a few notches.

“Help yourself to the coffee-sub,” Roberto said, lifting his

mug to take a sip. “There’s some sandwiches, too, if you’ve got strong teeth.”

“Mebbe later,” Krysty said, pulling out a chair and turning it around before sitting.

Leaning against the wall, Ryan could see a plump woman washing plastic dishes in a small sink, a teenager using a towel to dry. The two people looked so much like each other, they had to be relatives. Mother and son, most likely.

“All right, we’re here,” Mildred said, resting both arms on the table. “Now why do you need a freezie?”

“First, let me ask you a question,” Roberto said, leaning back in his chair and sipping the steaming brew. “Anybody ever heard about a place called Cascade?” There were only negative responses.

“All right, for a deuced long time, my people have been hearing the damnedest rumors,” Roberto said, cradling the mug in both hands. “Wild stuff about a predark city that wasn’t destroyed during skydark, or by the rioting afterward. The name changes from coast to coast, but the name we hear most often is Cascade.”

“The lost city? Dark night, we hear that sort of crap all the time,” J.B. said, crossing his arms. “The streets are paved with bullets, it rains shine, and all the woman are naked and double-jointed—”

“No,” Roberto interrupted sternly, his expression darkening. “These are tales of a predark city that never fell and managed to maintain its tech. They have libraries full of books, and they can make all sorts of things that we can’t. Including new steel.” He paused. “Not just smelting of scrap, mind you, but turning wagloads of rocks. They know how to make steel. A tough, more resilient material than anything that ever came out of the Deathlands.”

“You wouldn’t be telling us this unless there was some sort of proof,” Ryan said slowly, testing each word as if it were a

crumbling bridge under his boots. Was the trader talking about a predark city...or a redoubt?

"Yeah, I got proof," Roberto said, reaching under the table and pulling into view a small cardboard box, the lid stained with what looked like plant sap and blood. Cutting the string with his panga, Ryan removed the lid and folded back the layer of oily cloth. Instantly he stopped because there lay a brand-new revolver, the metal shiny and smooth.

"So some gunny never got off a shipment before the Big Bang," Ryan muttered, "and now is claiming to be able to make blasters. Unless you got better than this—"

"Turn it over," Jessica said, unwrapping a stick of gum and folding it into her mouth. "Go ahead, have a look."

He did, and there was no maker's mark.

"Be a triple bitch to remove that," J.B. said hesitantly, pushing back his hat. "Mind if I take it apart?"

"Go right ahead," Roberto said. "But there is no serial number. And I don't mean some gleeb filed it off, there never was one."

Weighing the blaster in his hand, J.B. looked hard at the weapon. He'd never seen anything like it before. The blaster had a conventional J-frame, like a Smith & Wesson, but the barrel was hexagonal like a Webley, and there was the double-action trigger of a Glock.

"Seems heavy," the Armorer muttered, and suspiciously opened the cylinder. As expected, it was chambered for Magnum rounds, which meant it could fire both .38 and .357 bullets, doubling the type of ammo you could use. However, there were nine chambers...just like Doc's hogleg LeMat.

"This is impossible," J.B. whispered, turning the weapon over and over, spotting a dozen other small bizarre details. It was as if something had taken all of the good aspects of every wheelgun ever made and combined them to create the ultimate blaster. Taking it in his hand, J.B. felt the butt snug against his palm and marveled at the balance. It was damn near perfect!

Studying his friend, Ryan could see the man's obvious confusion. "Mebbe some master gunny took apart a lot of damaged blasters," Ryan started, then stopped. This nameless blaster was no homemade Frankenstein, cobbled together out of whatever was handy. This was a masterpiece. The gun metal was blue to reduce reflected light and thus not give away the shooter's position. The works had nylon bushings, so it would never have to be oiled. This blaster seemed to be made for combat in the Deathlands. Now how the frag did some predark whitecoat invent a weapon for a specific world that didn't yet exist?

"We've traveled the cursed earth from one side to the other, from the Washington Hole to the Western Islands," J.B. said. "And I've never seen anything like this before."

"Never?" Mildred asked.

"Never. You could buy a whole ville with this," J.B. said, aiming the blaster at the wall and dry firing it a few times. The hammer only traveled half the usual distance, cutting almost a full half-moment off the firing time. Sweet.

Unable to stop himself, the Armorer pulled out some tools and took off the grip. Inside was a massive recoil spring, bigger than any he had ever seen before, along with a spring clip to hold two spare rounds.

Looking over his shoulder, Krysty gave a low whistle. "Wish mine had one of those," she said. "I can't tell you how many times it would have come in handy."

"John, could you make one of these?" Mildred asked.

"No," he said bluntly, the word seemingly ripped out of his guts. "This is far beyond anything I could ever do."

Wordlessly, J.B. offered the blaster to Ryan, but the one-eyed man waved it aside.

"Okay, you've got us convinced that somebody is making new blasters," he admitted. "But an untouched predark city is a mighty long jump off that short a cliff."

"Well, a factory needs mechs and techs, running water,

electricity, mines for ore, coal for smelting... You don't whittle a blaster out of wood like a soup bowl. A whole lot goes into making a new wheelgun, especially one like this!"

"If it isn't a predark city," Jessica added, "then it's close enough."

"Sweet Jesus, is that the plan?" Mildred demanded, rising from her chair. "To find this city, and steal everything you can carry away?"

Confused, Roberto looked at Jessica, but she only shrugged in return. Steel? Oh, she meant jack! Damn, she really was an old-timer. "I have no intention of harming these people in any way," Roberto said. "We want to trade with them. If they're willing, I'll make Cascade our new home base."

"Better us than Hammerstein or Broke-Neck Pete," Jessica added. "They'd jack the place to the walls, then burn it out of existence."

"Pete is bad crazy," the crewman working on the Fifty said unexpectedly. "And meaner than a mutie on wolfweed."

"Fair enough," Mildred muttered, somewhat mollified. If the city had a hospital of some sort, hell, of any sort, even a country doctor's office, or a veterinarian, think of the instruments she could get! She blushed. The allure of so much wealth was almost irresistible. God, even I'm thinking about jacking the place!

"Where did you find it?" Ryan asked. The blue-steel blaster lay in the middle of the table, the anchor for their thoughts and plans.

"At an abandoned campsite," Roberto said. "Along with a journal penned by a sec man from Cascade. He was doing a recce of the outside world, trying to find out how much things had changed. Changes in the language, new words being spoken, crazy stuff like that. Unfortunately, he got aced by some mutie ivy."

"Any chance we could read the journal?" Mildred asked hopefully.

“Nobody but the chief and I have done that,” Jessica declared. Taking a sip of the coffee-sub, Roberto smiled politely.

“There might be some things in there you can’t understand, while I can,” the physician insisted. “Could be a big help.”

“I’ll keep it in mind,” Roberto said coolly. These folks had a sterling rep, but that was a long way from being a member of his crew.

“New words... Fireblast, that’s why you want a freezie,” Ryan realized. “Somebody who can talk to the people at Cascade.”

“Sure, they’re gonna speak like old-timers, not proper English like us,” Jessica explained. “So it only makes sense they’d trust somebody from the predark world more than an outlander.”

Leaning forward, Roberto thumped his chair on the floor. “So, here’s the deal,” he said. “Come along with us to Cascade. Lend a blaster if there’s any chilling to be done on the way, the healer helps patch any wounds and talks to the old-timers, and the six of you get a fair share of every trade I make.”

“You in or not?” Jessica asked, a smile playing on her lips as if this were already a done deal.

Having done something similar a hundred times before during his years traveling with the Trader, Ryan was impressed. It was a fair offer. And the chance to see a predark city. Ryan got a flutter of excitement in his guts at the concept. He glanced at the others. Were they interested?

“Deal,” Ryan said, offering a hand.

Looking coolly at the man he had wanted to ace only a few hours earlier, Roberto marveled at the strange complexities of life. Friends became enemies and enemies became friends, often in less time than it took to load a blaster.

“Done, and done,” the trader growled, and they shook.

“Okay, I’ll assign you folks quarters in War Wag Three,”

Jessica said. "They lost a lot of folks recently, and have plenty of room. Haul your stuff over, and we'll hide that wag of yours in the ruins. Mebbe pick it up on the way back."

"Why leave it behind?" J.B. asked, his grin vanishing. "Four wags are a hell of a lot more impressive than three when traveling through coldheart territory." He also didn't like depending upon the friendship of folks who'd had blasters aimed at them only hours ago. The UCV would give them added protection from a nightcreep, and let them leave whenever they wished.

"She's a brute," Ryan added. "Probably has more armor than even War Wag One."

"I agree, which is why it has to stay behind," Roberto said, annoyed that he had to explain the obvious. "That behemoth is gonna burn juice like crazy. There is no way we can haul along enough to keep that thing rolling all the way to..." His mouth closed with a snap.

"All the way to Cascade," Jessica finished lamely, trying to cover the gaffe of her chief.

Without comment, Ryan looked at the other companions, getting their opinion on leaving the vehicle behind. From their carefully blank expressions, he could readily see that nobody was warm to the idea of trusting Roberto and his crew that much, that fast. As the Trader always liked to say, a friendship was like stew, it got better over time.

"Okay, how about this," Ryan suggested. "Tell us where you'll be camped tomorrow night, and we'll meet you there with enough juice for a dozen trips."

"And exactly where the hot fuck are you gonna find—" But Jessica stopped there. Of course, these folks had hidden caches of supplies. Just look at their damn blasters!

"A convoy of four wags would help keep the chilling to a minimum," Roberto agreed thoughtfully, rubbing his bad knee. That was, unless these folks were planning a nightcreep. It was unlikely, but possible. Hell, everything was possible. "Any chance ya got a working compass?"

“Sure. Good one.”

“Nice to know. All right, travel due east from here until coming to a tox lake. That’s Thunder Bay. Don’t drink any of the water! It’ll ace you faster than kissing a howler.” Everybody laughed, breaking the tension, just as the trader expected. Cutting a deal was like fishing, it took either great patience or high explosives.

“Now head south and you’ll find some steam geysers,” Roberto continued, shifting in his chair to straighten his leg. “Just follow the run-off stream and it’ll take you directly to a little ville called Newton.”

“Never heard of the place,” Ryan said honestly.

“There’s no reason you should,” Jessica admitted. “It’s smaller than a worm’s dick, and the baron doesn’t allow folks to drink shine. Considers it as evil as skydark.”

“No drinking at all?” Krysty asked in surprise.

“None. The first time, they whip you as a warning. The second time, you get thrown over the wall.”

Crossing his legs at the ankles, J.B. snorted. “Damn, I’m surprised the people haven’t gotten a good thick rope and invited the baron to a necktie party.”

“Us, too, but they love his ass. Go figure.”

“We’ll wait for you folks until nightfall,” Roberto stated, looking directly at them to drive home the point. “Nightfall, but no later. When I see silver in the sky, we roll, whether you are there or not.”

“We’d be sorry to lose the healer, but she’s not the only crowbar in the tool kit,” Jessica added, thinking about Yates. The doomie was safely tucked away in the engine room, far from the outlanders.

“Rather fond of her myself,” J.B. said, jotting down the directions on a scrap of paper and removing his fedora to tuck it into the sweatband.

“See you in Newton,” Ryan said, standing. It was already way past midnight, so the companions did not have a lot of

time remaining to reach the Ohio redoubt, refuel the wag and find the ville. The sooner they departed, the better.

"Any chance we could get an advance on our pay?" Mildred asked, casting a glance at the crewman in the corner working on the machine gun. If the convoy had a Fifty, then they had to have ammunition.

"Don't really like paying for things I haven't gotten yet," Roberto said cautiously, his voice flinty. "What did you have in mind?"

Taking a deep breath, Mildred charged. "We'll be a bigger asset to the convoy with a couple of belts of brass for our Fifty."

That caught both Roberto and Jessica by surprise. The outlanders had a working Fifty? This deal was starting to sound better all the time.

"Well, I might let you have a couple of belts of empty brass that you could reload yourself," Jessica offered tentatively.

"But then we'd never reach Newton in time," Ryan countered. "How about four live belts?"

"Two."

"Three."

Roberto paused. "Three, but only reloads. Nothing new."

Feeling this was as good a deal as he was going to get, Ryan agreed, and the companions soon departed carrying a bulging duffel bag that jingled with every step.

"I hate to risk all of that brass," Jessica asked, watching the outlanders walk down the hallway and exit into the night.

"More than worth the gamble," Roberto said, spying Matilda in the kitchen and waving her over. "I've seen Ryan fight. He's a chilling machine. You really do not want to be on the wrong end of his blaster. Plus, the healer will be a major asset when we reach Cascade."

"If we reach it," Jessica corrected. "What if they book?"

"Then we're only out some brass," the trader said as the plump cook refilled his mug. He thanked her and took a sip,

savoring the feeling as the hot brew seeped down deep into his bones. The evening chill was hurting his leg more and more these days. “However, if they arrive at Newton pulling that old gag of pretending to be chased by a gang of coldhearts so that they can get close enough to us to try for a jack...”

Just then the armored door boomed shut at the end of the hallway and a crewman threw the bolts locking it tight.

“Then they’ll find out that we included a little something extra in the duffel, along with the brass.” Jessica smirked. “And that’ll be the fragging end of Ryan Cawdor.”

Chapter Ten

Padding through the moldy ruins of the ancient city, the hellhounds were delighted to find the piles of rotting flesh in the parking lot. Several stingwings and vultures were already feeding on the carrion, but the desert scavengers retreated quickly from the approach of the Stygian black hunters, abandoning the wealth of food for life.

Feasting upon the humans, horses and stickies, the hellhounds stuffed themselves to capacity in almost feral gluttony. The two bioweeps clearly smelled the fear of the two redflesh hiding in the nearby shadows, but they were not the targets, so the hellhounds saw no reason to kill the humans at this particular moment. Later, perhaps, if they met again when the biological constructs were hungry, but not right now. First things first. *Kill the thieves*. Until that happened, the screaming inside their skulls would never stop.

ROLLING ACROSS A SHALLOW RIVER, Ryan saw that the wash was cleaning off most of the filth covering the urban combat vehicle. Which was fine by him. The one-eyed man had been concerned about a flock of vultures circling the sky above the pungent war wag and revealing their location to the world. But now the windows sparkled! A stickie eyeball was attached to the end of a wiperblade, but then, nothing was perfect.

With a low moan, Krysty rolled over in her sleep, unconsciously stretching and straining her full breasts against the

fabric of her shirt. Ryan allowed himself a private smile. Okay, almost nothing.

As the vehicle lumbered up the far bank and onto dry ground, Ryan risked opening a vent and in came a delicious rush of sweet, clean air. If there had been any spare time, he would have turned around and driven the war wag through the river a couple more times to make sure the job was done right. Mildred had told him how folks before the nuke war used to relax on the weekends washing their cars. Ryan could only assume it was some sort of hold-over from the days when they owned horses. Currying a horse was a bonding experience between a person and an animal. Doc had said that was where the phrase *to curry somebody's favor* came from. Made sense, he supposed. Back when he was a kid growing up at Front Royal, washing the baron's wags was a punishment detail, not a reward. Washing the car for fun. Ryan snorted. Nope, no matter how many times he said the words, it still sounded crazy.

Sprawled on the cushioned floor, the rest of the companions were under blankets, softly snoring. Doc was in the gunnery seat, his head bowed, eyes closed. Ryan didn't begrudge the man a short nap. He wanted to do the same thing himself, but first they needed to get a safe distance away from the ruins before heading for the redoubt.

WITH THE COMING OF THE DAWN, the world began to awaken around the speeding transport. The grasslands were sodden from a recent rain, the few trees still dripping with excess moisture. Listening to his stomach rumble, Ryan briefly regretted not getting some food from Roberto, but they were only a few hours away from the redoubt. They could eat then. Maybe even wash their clothes and grab a hot shower before getting right back on the road again. Time was short if they were going to make the rendezvous at Newton.

The companions had discussed the plan to find Cascade the

previous night while cutting down some tree limbs and lashing them to the rear of the UCV to help remove any tracks the heavy wag made in the ground. It was not out of the realm of possibility that Roberto might have a crewman trail them to find out what the companions did before joining the convoy. No way in nuking hell they could allow that to happen. The existence of the redoubts was the biggest secret in the world.

Built by the predark government long before skydark, the redoubts were colossal underground bunkers designed to withstand the direct hit of a nuclear weapon. Powered by a nuclear reactor, the redoubts were safe havens of clean air and clean water, with barracks for hundreds of soldiers, plus kitchens, library, garage and an armory for tons of supplies.

However, sometime just before or after skydark, all of the military personnel in the redoubts left for an unknown destination, taking most—if not all—of the supplies with them. These days, the companions usually found only the occasional half box of live brass, or a handful of MRE packs left accidentally behind. But that was enough to give them a fighting chance for survival. And sometimes they hit the jackpot.

Even more incredible, the redoubts were connected by a network of mat-trans units, fantastic machines that could send people and equipment from one redoubt to another. Unfortunately, the secret of a controlled jump had been lost over the long decades, so every journey the companions undertook was completely random.

It was around noon, and Mildred was driving, when the armored vehicle came out of a thick field of weeds, sputtered and died.

“Damn, I was hoping we could get a little farther,” the physician growled, trying the ignition several times before admitting defeat. “Okay, we’re out of gas. Time to walk.”

“Not prob,” Jak said, pointing. “See there!”

Set into the side of a grassy hillock was a flat expanse of

seamless black metal. It could have simply been a piece of a buried wall, but the companions knew better. That was the front door of a redoubt.

“Hot damn, made it!” Jak beamed in delight.

“Close enough,” Ryan said. “Come on, let’s haul out a couple of gallons, then drive this monster the rest of the way inside.”

“Well, we’re sure not going to push it,” J.B. snorted, putting on his fedora, then straightening the brim.

“Anything on the radar?” Doc asked tersely, squinting into the horizon. Funny, he could have sworn something moved in the bushes near a copse of trees. But there was nothing in sight now. It had to have just been his imagination.

“Clear,” J.B. replied, fine-tuning the controls. “There’s nothing out here but us and the bus.”

“Good,” Ryan said, opening the side door and hopping down.

Krysty was right behind the man and together they walked across the sodden field, the damp grass squishing under their boots.

“Us and the bus?” she asked out of the corner of her mouth.

Grinning, Ryan could only shrug in reply.

While the one-eyed man stood guard, Krysty easily found the disguised keypad and tapped in the 3-5-2 entry code. There was a brief pause as if the ancient machinery were debating the matter, then the colossal black slab trembled and there came a series of hard clunks.

Slowly, the blast doors rumbled aside to reveal a huge spider droid, the belly laser sweeping back and forth for targets. With a curse, Ryan and Krysty threw themselves flat against the hillock to get out of the way of the energy beam. But nothing else happened. The droid simply stood there, the soft hum of the laser mixing with the gentle murmur of the breeze in the trees.

Inside the UCV, the rest of the companions were flat on the floor with blasters in hand. At this range, the spider could burn

them out of existence, the polarized windows offering virtually no protection.

“What do?” Jak demanded. “No juice, and not loaded Fifty yet!”

“Why in blazing hell not?” Mildred demanded.

“We can't with the wag in motion,” J.B. answered, working the pump on his shotgun.

“Then we shall do nothing,” Doc stated forcibly. “The blast door will automatically close in a minute, and then we can figure out what to do before opening it again.”

“Sound good.”

However, after the minute passed, Mildred risked a peek with a small pocket mirror. The spider was still in plain sight, the blast doors wide open. She checked again in a couple more minutes.

“We need a new plan,” Mildred said, chewing her lip. “That thing is here for the duration.”

“Mayhap we can slip out the aft doors and start a fire,” Doc offered. “Divert its attention so that Ryan and Krysty can get away.”

“After a rain?” J.B. shot back. “Dark night, we couldn't get this grass to burn if we used napalm!”

“Okay, do hard way,” Jak said grimly, thumbing back the hammer on the Colt Python. “Exit rear door and start blasting. Droid give chase, we lose in bushes, circle back, hide inside redoubt.”

“Indeed, and how shall we refuel this vehicle?” Doc demanded, then comprehension dawned. “Yes, I see. The plan to hunt for Cascade is no more. We get inside the redoubt and jump to another.”

“It sure would have been nice to see Cascade,” J.B. said wistfully, thinking about the volumes of technical knowledge the townspeople had to own. “But I'd much rather be sucking air.”

“With that sentiment, I wholeheartedly agree!”

Just then, there came a crackle of static on the radio and a small red indicator blinked into existence on the dashboard.

“What is, radar?” Jak asked in concern.

“I have no damn idea,” Mildred said, looking over the controls above them. The red light seemed to be connected to the radio. After a minute, Mildred touched the button.

“Authorization,” a flat robotic voice said from the ceiling speaker.

The companions exchanged puzzled expressions.

“That be droid!” Jak whispered excitedly, the Colt Python tight in his pale hand. “Talk on radio?”

“How odd, we used the proper entry code to access the blast doors,” Doc grumbled uneasily. “What more does this tin Cerberus wish of us?”

“Authorization,” the monotone voice repeated.

“Maybe I know what it wants,” Mildred said thoughtfully. “Remember that sign above the door just outside of a gateway?”

“Sure. Said that entry was authorized only to B-12 personnel.”

She nodded. “Now there’s no way somebody could possibly know that code without having been inside.”

“Do you think our steely arachnid will accept that as our bona fides?” Doc asked.

“Worth a try,” J.B. said, taking down the mike. “But if this goes into the rad pit, hit the door running and don’t stop.”

Wetting his lips, the Armorer chose his words carefully and pressed the transmit button. “Authorization B-12.”

There was a brief pause.

“Pass,” the droid said.

Feeling a rush of excitement in her stomach, Mildred used her mirror for a quick glance. Incredibly the spider had moved aside, clearing the way for the UCV to enter inside the redoubt.

“Millie, which of us looks the most like military personnel?” J.B. asked.

“None of us,” she replied. “We’re wearing bits and pieces

of uniforms, but nobody is carrying an M-16 assault rifle, and that was the standard weapon.”

Jak jerked a thumb. “What about U.S. Army Fifty?”

A short while later, J.B. walked into view from behind the UCV. His munitions bag was replaced by Mildred's med kit with *M*A*S*H* on the side. His beloved fedora had been left behind, and he was hauling the .50-caliber machine gun across his shoulders.

Forcing his face to remain neutral, it seemed like a thousand miles instead of a hundred feet to reach the entrance of the redoubt. As he walked past Ryan and Krysty, the Armorer gave a subtle cough, then stepped over the threshold and proceeded down the concrete tunnel. The spider watched his every move until the man walked around a corner and went out of sight.

Only a few minutes later J.B. reappeared carrying a plastic bucket that slopped out fuel with every step. Casually strolling to the armored vehicle, he poured the contents into the pull-out funnel of the fuel tank, then climbed inside the UCV.

“Here we go,” Mildred muttered softly, trying the big diesel. The engine groaned but would not start. “Damn it, we need to prime the lines!”

“Got two,” Jak stated. “Only the one ran dry.”

“Here goes nothing...” Switching engines, Mildred tried again and the war was started with a roar of power.

Shifting into gear, she rolled to the blast door and paused, giving Ryan and Krysty enough time to scamper through the aft doors, while J.B. quickly ran out to tap in the code to close the blast doors. Once they were safely inside, Mildred started forward again at an easy 25 mph. Speeding could be a violation of a safety regulation.

The tunnel was large enough to admit the passage of an Abrams battle tank, so the UCV moved along easily. The ceiling was lined with bright fluorescent tube, which kept snagging the radio antenna, so Mildred slowed their progress to prevent any

breakage. The physician knew that any deviation from standard military protocol could invoke the spider's wrath.

"Ease to a crawl," Ryan commanded, watching the spider disappear behind the first turn. "But leave that engine running."

"Whatever you're gonna do, make it fast," J.B. advised, checking the fuel gauge. The needle was on empty, the half gallon of juice not even registering.

"Check." As the vehicle slowed to barely creep along, Ryan stepped down and walked to the first turn. He couldn't hear anything over the rumble of the UCV, so he pulled out his panga and slid it past the edge, trying to angle the shiny metal for a surreptitious look. The spider was right back where they had originally found it, standing guard in front of the closed blast doors.

Accepting their good luck, Ryan moved silently backward until clear, then broke into a trot to catch the others. The last time they had been here, the garage had been full of disassembled vehicles, scavenged by coldhearts to make a nuking-big war wag. Then the idiots aced one another over control of the machine, giving it to the companions when they arrived via the mat-trans unit.

Just for a moment, Ryan debated whether they should go down to the fifth level and jump to another redoubt. But the allure of finding an intact predark city was too strong. He was in for a full magazine, the whole thirty. Case closed.

However, as he went around the last turn, Ryan could see that it was just as well he had scrapped the idea. The redoubt had been cleaned. All of the old military wags were gone, the garage was now scrupulously clean, everything polished, shiny bright and empty as a mutie's pockets. Damn! Somehow one of the walls had been breached, letting in looters.

"All right, people, the spider is standing guard at the exit, but let's move fast in case that thing decides we're not who it thinks we are," Ryan said. "Doc, stand guard. J.B., get that

Fifty working. Mildred and Jak, refuel the wag. Krysty and I will do a fast recce of the lower levels to see if there is anything useable.”

Nobody bothered to reply, they just started working.

Heading for the elevator, Ryan pressed the button to summon the elevator, while Krysty eased open the door to the stairwell. If there was anybody below, they'd hear the elevator and go to investigate, giving the two companions a clear path down the stairs.

“Galley?” Krysty whispered as they passed the second floor and headed for the third. Her stomach felt like a rad pit, hot, vast and steamingly empty. The few forkfuls of beef stew she'd had for breakfast only served to sharpen her hunger, not diminish it.

“Armory,” Ryan stated. “If that spider gets itchy, we'll need something big to scratch with.”

Reaching the sixth level, they paused at the door to listen for any conversation from the other side. But there was only a deep silence. Proceeding through the door, the pair started down a long corridor, the walls lined with doors. Most of them were ajar, showing small bedrooms. But there were no sheets, blankets or pillows, just the bare frames of the bunkbeds, nothing more.

At the far end of the corridor was a large metal door, hinges visible on both sides, which made absolutely no sense. But the companions knew better. It was merely a diversion to hinder thieves from knowing which side to blow open. In spite of the fact that the predark military seemed to go crazy near the end, a lot of what they built and planned worked perfectly. Sometimes it seemed that Mildred was right, genius was just a beat away from madness.

Going to the door, Ryan tapped an access code onto the keypad. There came the low growl of electric motors buried inside the walls, and the door smoothly opened to reveal only darkness.

Stepping over the threshold, Ryan and Krysty waited for

the systems to respond to their presence and turn on the lights. As the fluorescent tubes strobed into life, the two companions inhaled sharply—and began backstepping out of the room.

The armory was full of sec hunter droids, rows upon rows of them, dozens, perhaps hundreds, along with a score of the small cryo units, their control-panel lights twinkling merrily.

As they began moving out of the room, Krysty reached out to touch Ryan's arm. He turned and scowled. Over in the corner was a plastic pallet stacked with military backpacks, supplies for the soldiers who occupied the redoubt. Every pack had an M-16 rapidfire, bedroll, canteen and sheathed knife hanging from the straps. A couple of them also had satellite uplink radios, and a few sported the fat plastic tube of a light antitank rocket.

With their hearts pounding, the pair eased closer to grab whatever they could, then moved back into the corridor to work the keypad again. Waiting to be attacked for the theft, Ryan and Krysty didn't exhale until the door silently closed and locked firmly.

"Fireblast, that looked like some kind of staging area!" Ryan muttered, slowly easing his grip on the Steyr. "Not a recce force, but a fragging army!"

"This...this must be where that convoy came from that we found in the National Guard base!" Krysty whispered, her hair flexing and twisting. "Lover, we have got to get out of here fast. We could barely stop one droid. If all of these activate—"

"We'll never reach the outside alive," Ryan stated grimly. "Agreed. Frag the galley. We're gone."

As swiftly and silently as possible, they returned to the garage level and burst out the door at a good clip.

Doc was at the entrance to the tunnel, the LeMat held in a hand. J.B. was putting a box of spare parts into the rear of the wag, Mildred was holding a fuel hose to the UCV, and Jak were nowhere to be seen.

Just then, there was a crackle of bright light from the roof, and Jak rose into view wearing protective goggles and gloves, holding a welding torch.

“Done!” the teenager announced, turning off the torch. “Solid as rock!”

“Glad to hear it!” Mildred replied, removing the hose from the armored vehicle. “It always makes me nervous to pump fuel when you’re welding something.”

“Not blown up yet.” The teen smiled, removing the goggles.

“Told you it was safe, Millie,” J.B. said, dusting off his hands. Then he saw Ryan and Krysty hurrying over with the backpacks. “Hey, back already? What’d you find?”

“Trouble,” Ryan stated as he and Krysty dumped the packs into the vehicle. Then they briefly explained.

“Hundreds?” J.B. echoed. He turned to climb into the driver’s seat and start the engines. “Okay, time to haul ass!”

Everybody scrambled into jumpseats, and the UCV was rolling before the rear doors were closed. Pausing briefly to take on Doc, the war wag speedily maneuvered through the zigzagging tunnel, then was forced to pause when the spider came into sight. Impatiently, J.B. sat with his hands on the controls, ready to ram the droid against the blast doors if it turned hostile. But apparently the machine had enough memory to recognize the urban combat vehicle, and simply stepped aside to allow them passage.

Moving fast, Mildred hopped down to work the keypad, and once the blast doors were open, J.B. engaged both engines and tromped on the gas pedal. With a roar, the UCV raced out of the tunnel and across the grasslands, the Armorer pushing the war wag to its top speed, trying to get as far away as possible.

“Next time we jump, and see colors for Ohio redoubt,” Jak declared, “just jump again. This place trouble!”

“Agreed, my young friend,” Doc said, breathing a sigh of

relief as the spider disappeared behind the blast doors, and closed them. "If the Alaskan redoubt is our cornucopia, the horn of plenty, then this wretched place is Pandora's Box."

"All right then, Bullfinch," Mildred chided. "In this new mythology, what is Cascade? Shangri-la?"

"It's Salvation," Doc whispered, the word almost lost in the rumble of the war wag wheels.

Chapter Eleven

The man came out of the shadows and into the porchlight. “Mayor,” he said as a greeting.

Laying down her knife and fork, Henrietta Spencer waved the deputy onto the wooden porch. “Come on up, Ted,” she said with a tolerant smile. “I’m just finishing dinner. There’s plenty of fried chicken and cornbread if you’d like some.”

“No, thanks, Your Honor, I ate before my shift,” the man said, stepping onto the porch and respectfully removing his hat.

In the corner, an electric bug-zapper crackled occasionally, and from inside the house came the soft melodious music of Hank Williams singing about home and a lost love.

Wiping her mouth clean on a napkin, Mayor Spencer politely gestured toward a pitcher covered with condensation. “Fair enough, how about some iced tea?”

“Well, now, that’s different.” Deputy Ted Ellison grinned and took a chair. Pouring himself a glass, the man raised it, then paused. “Ah, Madam Mayor, this isn’t—”

“No, Ted, it is not Long Island Iced Tea.” She chuckled. “I obey the edict about no drinking alcohol before a Harvest the same as everybody else. It’s just plain iced tea mixed with sugar and lemon and a sprig of mint.”

Smiling his thanks, the man took a small sip, savoring the delicious flavor of the rare treat. The town stores were low on tea bags. As well as coffee, sugar, powdered milk, lemons, flour, toothpaste, toilet paper and just about everything else

but ammunition and weaponry. The sheriff's department of Cascade had been preparing for a fight since Zero Day, and so they were very well stocked in everything from crossbows to antitank rockets. Food was the only real problem.

As the deputy sheriff, the man knew about the forbidden food hidden under the high-school gymnasium. Food that was never to be mentioned or joked about in any way. Food that the good people of Cascade would never even know about when there was no other choice but to feed it to them mixed in with the chicken and the pork. He had been in the dark bunkers and smelled the rich, smoky air, and seen the hanging rows of...food. And had gotten drunk, and been sick, and gotten over it, like every other deputy, sheriff and mayor in the history of the town. The food had never been used, thank sweet Jesus for that! But it was there, hidden among them like a cancer, waiting silently in the dark. A cancer that would save Cascade someday. Save them and damn them forever at the same time.

The man shook his head, dispelling the dark thoughts. Thank God, we're a long way from eating long pig, and...and when the Harvest comes in we'll be fine again for years and years! Just fine. Completely fine. Oh God, let there be enough food this time...

"Well, out with it, Ted. You didn't come here just to mooch a drink," Henrietta said, rocking back in her chair. From the man's somber expression, she could guess what he had been thinking about. It was the reason there was so much fried chicken left on the table. Whenever food got low, her thoughts also turned to the high school.

"No, ma'am, I didn't," the deputy agreed, laying aside the cool glass tumbler. The ice cubes tinkled softly. The music of civilization.

"Any chance you're here for a Harvest Time kiss?" the woman chuckled, leaning forward to set her boots on the floorboards. "It's tradition, I can't refuse you. Hell, son, a strapping big boy like you, I wouldn't refuse you anytime!"

"And if I thought you actually meant that, I'd give you a Harvest Kiss right here on the dining table that would last all night long," the deputy said with a chuckle, his face and mood lightening. "But I'm here to tell you that a pigeon arrived from Sheriff MacIntyre. The convoy is on the way."

"Well, hallelujah," the mayor said without much emotion. "Sure took him long enough. I was starting to think he had gone native...or worse."

"Yeah, me, too," the deputy admitted. "The pigeon is marked number five, which means the first four never made it back here alive."

"Really? Shit, how close is the convoy?"

"Week, maybe less."

The woman frowned. "Damnation, son, we better get on the ball! Is everything ready at Bluestone?"

"Damn near. There's some minor trouble, but they swear the grid will be up and running when the time comes."

"Do they now?" Henrietta grimaced. "Well, get your ass up there and make sure. If that grid falls, we are shit out of luck. And check with Tripwire, just in case."

"Yes, ma'am," the deputy said in a businesslike manner. Touching two fingers to his hat in salute, he sauntered off into the night.

Pushing herself out of the chair, the mayor dropped her napkin over the plate of food to keep away the bluebottles, and walked over to the carved wooden railing of the porch. Listening to the eternal song of the cicadas in the grass, she looked long and hard at the distant moon, then turned to gaze lovingly at Cascade.

The mountain town spread before her like a diorama in a big city museum: twinkling streetlights, smoke wafting from chimneys, a man on a bicycle riding along Main Street. Lights were flickering in the VFW Hall, and she tried to recall what movie they were showing, but failed. However, it was almost always a Western before a Harvest. The First Families had

started that tradition, and it stayed fast. The public library had possessed a good collection of classic films when Zero Day arrived, and while the 16 mm films were a little faded, and spliced in spots, they were the marvel of the ages to townsfolk. Now, the chief librarian himself had owned a rather vast stock of adult movies, but those were reserved for smokers or bachelor parties. Private stock, not for public viewing.

Breathing in the cool mountain air, Henrietta let it out slowly. Life had not changed very much in Cascade in the past hundred years. She knew that for a fact. As the mayor, it was part of her duties to read the private journals and personal diaries of the First Families, to learn what life had been in the before times so that she had a goal to reach, and maintain. However, she always seemed to read and reread the Last Days, when the whole world ended and nobody in Cascade knew a damn thing about the nuclear war for over twenty-four hours...

THE SNOW LAY HEAVY on the ground, a thick white blanket of pristine cleanliness. The plows had been hard at work since dawn, and all of the main roads through Cascade Falls were clear, sprinkled with a good coating of sand and salt.

There had been distant flashes of light the previous day that everybody assumed was just heat lightning. However, at exactly the same time, broadcast TV, cable television and radio went off the air. A few minutes later, every cell phone died and every Internet connection was cut. The local radio station still worked fine, as well as the landline phones and CB radios. Everybody was uneasy, but nobody was frightened, just more curious than anything. This was all just a weird coincidence, sure, it had to be, because the only other explanation was beyond unthinkable.

It was late in the afternoon when a car came speeding over the Huckleberry River Bridge and raced into the town. It was a fancy European sports car, the one where nobody was exactly sure how to properly pronounce the name, or which

end was the front. It was packed as solid as a piñata with luggage, a bird cage, blankets, canned goods and just about everything else a person could think of. Crouching behind the wheel was a pale man in an expensive suit. He was unshaved, and so pale that the folks he passed on the road almost thought he was an albino.

The sports car screeched to a halt at the Swifty Mart, and he scrambled out to fill the tank with gas, then stumbled inside to grab some oil and candy bars. Behind the counter, Mary-Lou Buckerson accepted his credit card for the purchases, which seemed to startle him immensely. Sure, the wireless modem was down, but that had happened before after a thunderstorm, and Mary-Lou simply wrote out the slip by hand. Excited by that for some reason, the man bought extra cans of fuel that he strapped to the outside of the compact car, and then drove across the street and tried to bribe Ed Swanson in the gun store to sell him a handgun without the three-day waiting period. Ed refused, the stranger drove off and everybody breathed a sigh of relief. But the expression on the driver's face stayed with the townsfolk. Scared. The rich man had been scared to death.

Less than an hour later, more cars arrived, some of the passengers wearing work clothes or only pajamas. They also headed straight to the gas station, filled their tanks, bought all of the spare cans there were, plus emptied the convenience market of everything in cans. No fresh food, just cans. When they went to the gun store, Ed refused their credit cards, and they paid cash for a brace of shotguns, and a hundred boxes of shells, all types.

Everybody in town was getting more than a little scared at this point, and a lot of the stores closed. The elementary school teachers sent the kids home early, but the high-school principal decided to stay open for the coming football game. Slowly, the stadium filled with people eager to forget all the weird events and to watch the Falcons beat those damn Wildcats!

But the other team never showed, and everybody nervously

left the deathly quiet stadium, the fright openly talked about, and for the first time people started using the word *war*:

As the skies darkened into evening, the word came down that the long-lines from across the Huckleberry gorge were not working; the entire community was being powered by their small hydroelectric dam. Again, this had happened before because of the hard winter snowstorms, and everybody knew the drill. They turned off unnecessary electric devices to reduce the demand on the transformers operated by the boys at that dam, and then folks hauled out their kerosene lanterns. Dinner was cooked over charcoal grills, music was played over car radios from the local station and a thousand CD players, kids played video games, couples watched romantic movies on DVD players. But when the families were asleep, a lot of husbands went to the gun store to buy extra ammunition. These were friends and family, people Ed had known all his life, and the three-day waiting period had nothing to do with them. Bob wanted a Remington 30.06 he'd been eyeing for years. Sure, sign here, ol' buddy. The clerk from the bookstore was a little short on cash? No problem, you could pay next week. Nobody in town was refused a gun or ammunition.

Secretly, the police chief had a meeting with the mayor and the town council. In hushed whispers, they laid out plans for a prolonged... well, siege. If there had been a disaster of some kind, the town might have to take care of itself for a couple of weeks, maybe even a month, before the government would arrive and set things straight again. The town elders checked the level of the water in the reservoir, how much grain was in the silos, how much gas in the tanks, propane, how many crates of dynamite there were stored in the sheds just outside of town, and a hundred other miscellaneous things.

The mayor and town council were still making lists and checking inventories when the first busload of men arrived. They crossed the bridge at top speed and almost crashed into the Swifty Mart. Piling out, they started taking spare gas cans

and propane tanks, then shot Mary-Lou in the face. But they didn't empty the cash register, just took food and gas and left hell-bent for leather, squealing to a stop in front of the gun store. Bursting inside, they started grabbing stuff off the shelves, and Ed fired a warning shot with his S&W revolver, which was the last thing he ever did.

The sheriff and his deputies got there too late. The two bodies were laid out on the street for the ambulance. Ed's wife and daughter had been in the storeroom, but had come out when they heard the gunshot. The men beat the women, raped both of them, then blew off their heads with a shotgun. Then they'd left with all the ammunition their car could hold.

As word of the brutal murders spread, a large group of men gathered in the town square with hunting rifles, rope and pickup trucks to go after the dirty sons of bitches and lynch 'em from the nearest tree! Stepping boldly in front of the truck, the sheriff tried to talk some sense into the furious men, when several cars careered into the town across the Huckleberry Bridge, the vehicles packed full of people like rolling sardine cans. The armed mobs of townsfolk converged on the Swifty Mart just as the strangers were smashing open the control box to make the pumps work without paying. The sheriff fired a warning shot into the air, the out-of-towners drew guns, and the seasoned hunters mowed them down with a concentrated volley of high-velocity steel-jacketed rounds.

Afterward, it was discovered that many of the new arrivals had died with the safety catch still engaged on their weapons, as if they had never fired a gun before. Oddly, one of them carried the pistol of a state highway patrolman.

Inside the convoy of cars, the sheriff found a couple of people wrapped in blankets, too weak to move, coughing up blood, with their hair falling out. Since they had done nothing wrong, the poor souls were taken to Our Lady of Mercy Hospital, where the doctors soon confirmed that all of them were dying of radiation sickness.

In the hushed still of the snowy winter night, the townsfolk of Cascade heard from the dying people about the nuclear war. Washington was gone, blown off the face of the earth, and there had been hits in or around New York, Los Angeles, Dallas, Boston, every place that anybody had ever heard about. What small towns remained, the rampaging mobs were raiding for food. People were turning against one another.

Madness filled the streets, and guns were being bought at unbelievable prices, one man trading a gasoline truck for a revolver and a box of ammunition. He ran off only minutes before the screaming mob arrived to steal the gas and ruthlessly kill the lone policeman who bravely tried to stop them. The hospitals were filled with the dying, fires raged unchecked, police were overwhelmed and the military was decimated. The rule of law was gone. It was dog eat dog, survival of the fittest, the law of the jungle.

As a light snow fell from the stormy sky, Mayor Gordon called an emergency town meeting while the sheriff got his deputies and used their patrol cars to block the bridge. Aside from an abandoned mining road that even at the best of times required a major four-wheel drive to traverse, the Huckleberry Bridge was the only way in or out of the isolated farming community.

However, the meeting barely got started before gunshots rang out, followed by the dull thud of a distant explosion. Hurrying outside, the townsfolk paused on the snowy streets at the sight of the thick plumes of smoke rising from the direction of the bridge. Charging over on foot, they found the sheriff and his deputies dead in the street, right next to a school bus for the Central City Wildcats. The bus was full of canned food, guns, ammunition, medical supplies and a dozen dead men still wearing their prison uniforms. The cops and the convicts had died killing one another, the last man bleeding to death alone on the road in the strobing lights of the patrol cars.

Declaring martial law, Mayor Gordon impounded the bus and all of the supplies, dispatching them to the VFW hall for temporary storage. The bodies were sent to the hospital morgue. Then every small child was sent home with their mother, the men and single women standing guard on the Huckleberry River Bridge, while farmers hauled over bales of hay to form a wall across the bridge as a temporary barrier. A trucker named MacIntyre who lived in the town between hauls suggested draping the bales with barbed wire and backing them with parked cars, so that folks couldn't smash through or climb over. The mayor offered him the job of sheriff on the spot. MacIntyre agreed, hesitating for a moment before pinning the bloody badge of the fallen sheriff to his plaid shirt. Then he strapped on the gunbelt.

Reinforcing the barricade as best they could, the sheriff and the army of deputies prepared for the fight of their lives, gathering everything that could be used as a makeshift weapon: crowbars, fire axes, chainsaws and matlocks.

Dawn was just starting to lighten the eastern sky when the armada arrived, the terrified people riding in cars, taxicabs, station wags, limousines, fire trucks, police cars, motorcycles, anything that could roll. The staggering array of vehicles was covered with a bizarre assortment of possessions, as if the drivers had simply grabbed whatever was handy and tied it to the roof. One car was stuffed completely full of money, the driver behind the wheel hysterically laughing nonstop, his eyes wide with insanity.

Using a bullhorn from behind the barricade, Sheriff MacIntyre denied the outsiders access into town and was immediately shot by a crazy woman dressed in filthy rags and diamond jewelry. The wound sent him to a knee, but the sheriff blew her open like a can of spaghetti with a Remington 12-gauge. That started an all-out battle between the townsfolk and the invaders. The fight lasted for three bloody hours, and when

it was over, what remained of the invaders streamed back over the hill and out of sight.

Recovering their dead, the sheriff had the barricade taken down, and everything on the opposite side that was of any conceivable use was appropriated: cars, shoes, guns, knives and forks. Then the barricade went back up just in time as more invaders came over the hill. Once more, they were forced to retreat, but again they returned, larger, stronger and more savage than before.

Three more times the insane mob was repelled, but they kept returning, ever stronger, more wild and desperate.

Finally the sea of people broke through the barricade to find only the sheriff left alive. As they poured across the bridge, the bleeding man lowered his handgun and fired at a wooden box lying amid the dead and the dying.

The dynamite was only farming grade, sixty proof, designed for blowing up tree stumps and cracking boulders. But the one hundred sticks obliterated the Huckleberry River Bridge, along with all of the invaders. When the smoke cleared, the carnage spread for over half a mile.

Working fast, the mayor directed the people of Cascade to erect a new barricade on their side of the gorge, an orderly array of cars and trucks all facing the destroyed bridge as if trying to get across. The corpses of the people from the hospital morgue were placed behind the steering wheels. Next, every light in town was turned off, piles of rubbish were set on fire at strategic locations and the townsfolk waited, praying to God and loading their rifles.

Only a few hours later, more dying strangers arrived, saw the destroyed bridge, the cars of dead people on the other side of the deep gorge and turned away, too tired and hungry to do anything but keep running toward some imaginary salvation.

That evening the first of the ash storms began, the black flakes covering the wintry landscape and turning clean white snow into a dense gray mud. But that only served to aid the

illusion, making Cascade seem as desolate and ruined as every place else. As the sky darkened and incredible storms filled the heavens, the townsfolk stayed hidden for months, moving only when absolutely necessary. Eventually, there were no more survivors from the big cities, and the cleaning began, a systematic purge to remove every trace of the town's existence from anybody standing on the Edge of the World.

Billboards and street signs were removed, then the curving road itself torn to pieces, carried away by hand in wheelbarrows. Telephone poles were cut down, water towers lowered, the tower for the radio station disassembled, and the high-tension power lines from the dam buried underground. Soon, there was nothing visible past the dense pine tree forest.

Preparing for what was coming, the people of Cascade quickly built greenhouses and planted crops just in time before the brutal arrival of the long nuclear winter, and any further work had to be suspended for years until the world began to have seasons once more.

During the decades of darkness, an occasional straggler would wander into Cascade from the mountain trails. If the newcomer possessed useful skills, such as bricklaying or plumbing, or was a healthy woman, he or she was allowed to stay; if not, the person was summarily executed. The people of Cascade were not soldiers, and the town was not a fortress. They simply could not stop the never-ending tidal wave of humanity blindly streaming across the countryside. That was flat-out impossible. But they could hide, and let the starving thousands of diseased killers go elsewhere to rape and loot other towns on their way to a slow, painful death by radiation poisoning.

Over time, the townsfolk learned a new way of life, keeping careful books on who married whom to avoid any potentially devastating effects of inbreeding. The old coal mine was reopened to produce coal oil for the lamps and fertilizer for the greenhouses. Then the exhausted tunnels were painstaking-

ingly expanded into subterranean workshops to produce fuel, tools, medicine and weapons. Trapping became prevalent, and people started wearing a lot of fur and leather. Children were taught to recycle everything, and elderly people trapped pigeons to raise them in coops for the nitrogen-rich waste products that could easily be converted into black powder and eventually a crude form of gunpowder.

To save precious ammunition, folks became good shots with crossbows, and armed guards walked the city streets at night to keep a careful watch for any of the winged muties that sometimes made it across the gorge, horrible, twisted things, living nightmares that flew fast and killed even faster.

Life became harder, tougher and more crude. Belt knives became as commonplace as wristwatches had been before the war, boots replaced sneakers and every home had a fully functioning fireplace out of sheer necessity.

However, the schools remained open, and when the old textbooks began to wear out, the town elders found a way to make paper and ink, and new editions were crudely printed. There were still organized baseball games, church socials, community theater, a Fourth of July picnic and a winter pageant decorated with both menorahs and a manger. Everybody used soap, everybody could read, there hadn't been a rape in over a century, and most folks died in their beds of old age.

“TO DIE IN BED, that alone is worth killing for,” the mayor muttered, trying to steel herself for the coming task. Thomas Paine once said that the tree of liberty needed to be watered with the blood of patriots now and then. True words, indeed. If this was her day, so be it. That was part of her job as the mayor of the town.

Pulling out her Cascade Deluxe, the woman dutifully checked the load in the 9-shot cylinder, then closed it with a

practiced snap of her wrist. They had to be ready. Everybody in town had to be ready for whatever was coming. A convoy was on the way!

All too soon, it would be time for the Harvest.

Chapter Twelve

The air was thick and heavy above the polluted lake, the water almost gelatinous with oily waves lapping the barren shoreline. Scattered among the pitted rocks were animals skeletons, mostly birds fallen from the sky, and irregular piles of rust that may have once been machinery of some kind, but at this point that was purely speculation.

As the UCV rolled along, the companions covered their mouths with handkerchiefs in an automatic gesture, in spite of the fact that at the first burning whiff the vehicle had slammed shut every air vent and window. There was no smell of the lake, but being this close to the toxic chems made the companions' skin itch anyway. There were no animals in sight, no birds or stingwings in the sky, no signs of life. There was only the horrid lake and the distant glow of a hot rad pit behind a low mountain range. It was as if they were the last humans alive.

"Yeah, it's a bomb," J.B. said, lowering his knife. The cut he had just made in the cushion from the bottom of the duffel bag showed a small radio receiver wired to two sticks of dynamite. "Clever little thing, I must say."

"Why they try boobie?" Jak demanded from behind his mask.

"I'd guess the bomb was just insurance," J.B. said, detaching the wires and tucking the dynamite into his munitions bag. "In case we tried to use the brass on them to get more." Rolling down the window, he tossed away the cushion. It sailed off to land in a puddle and sink from sight.

“Fragging Roberto,” Jak growled. “No, was probably Jessica. From what told, she triple hard.” The implied insult angered the youth, then he remembered a line from some oldie play that Doc liked to quote about smiling villains. True enough. A show of teeth usually only meant that the other fellow was getting ready to bite.

“Can’t really blame them for taking precautions,” Mildred said from behind the wheel.

“I can,” Ryan said, adjusting the cloth over his face. “A trader is no damn good if he can’t tell who to trust.”

“Amen to that, brother,” J.B. said. “I just wish that we could test the Fifty. Until we fire off some of that brass, we’d better not count on it working.”

“But we did fire off a round,” Krysty said, strips of fabric wrapped tight around her mouth. “Well, we fired off one round, but it worked.” She paused. “Unless you think a couple of cartridges might be live and the rest dummies filled with dirt.”

“It’s unlikely,” Ryan admitted. “A trader only does business on the rep of his word. Then again, he might consider me a special case.”

“I also opened the last cartridge on each belt,” J.B. added. “It was filled with silvery powder, not crude black powder, or the dull gray of gunpowder, and when I touched it with a match, the stuff flashed, but there was no smoke.”

“Silvery and smokeless,” Ryan mused. “That sounds like predark military propellant, all right. I half expected them to give us black powder or old cordite.”

“What about the primers?” Mildred asked.

“Primers seemed okay. I tossed the empty brass into a campfire, and they cooked off after a couple of moments,” J.B. replied succinctly. “As near as I can tell, that brass is live.”

Then the Armorer frowned. “Only thing I’m worried about is this remote control. Being able to fire the Fifty from inside the vehicle is a sweet deal, but there’s no way of telling if the

damn sights are still aligned. We could aim for a stickie and easily end up shooting nothing but sky.”

“Guess we’ll find out eventually,” Ryan replied philosophically. “You never have to wait in a convoy before something tries for a jack.”

“You got that right, old buddy.”

Slowly leaving the rocky shore of the toxic lake behind, the UCV reached a wide expanse of white soil, the heavy tires leaving wide depressions in the ground. The soft material wasn’t sand, or even ash, but simply dead earth as devoid of life as the surface of the moon. The deadly fumes wafting off the lake apparently had a considerable reach, as the sterile zone extended for hundreds of yards, only slowly darkening to a normal color, and then tiny tufts of grass appeared like tropical islands in a smooth black sea.

“Egad, a blind man could follow this Brobdingnagian trail!” Doc snorted in disdain. There had been tree branches tied behind the war wag to wipe out their tracks, but those had rotted away shortly after approaching the putrid lake. Even the rope was gone, the tattered remains falling away as loose, pale fibers.

“Nothing we can do about it,” Mildred replied with a shrug. “We could go around, but then we’d lose too much time.”

“Think droids follow?” Jak asked.

“Nothing on the radar,” Krysty replied. “We’re fine.”

“As you say, dear lady,” Doc acquiesced, but he kept looking behind them as if expecting the droids to appear over the horizon at any moment.

A few miles later, a dull thumping could be heard in the distance, sort of like cannon fire. Then the companions spotted white plumes briefly appearing above the treetops, and smiled in relief as they came upon the hot water geysers.

Proceeding through the explosive array, the urban combat vehicle was hit several times by the spray. However, when they

emerged from the steaming field, the outer chassis was sparkling clean.

“Sanitized for your protection!” Mildred chuckled in delight.

The downfall created a multitude of rainbows until even the black and orange storm clouds overhead seemed somehow beautiful.

“Magnificent! Hell and heaven side by side!” Doc exclaimed. “If the symmetry was any more perfect, I do believe I might have cried.”

“Just water,” Jak sniffed, but it was clearly bravado.

“Plus, they’re kind of small,” Mildred added.

“Small or not, there are hundreds of them,” Krysty added. “And combined, they are breathtaking. I’m surprised that Roberto didn’t mention it.”

“Hell of a landmark,” Jak agreed.

“Mebbe he didn’t know it was here,” Ryan said gruffly, rubbing his jaw. “Which means that either we’re on a wild-mutie chase to nowhere, or this is brand new.”

“I think it’s new,” J.B. said, watching one of the smaller geysers sputter and die, the ground then collapsing into the steamy hole. “Probably be gone by next week.”

“*Sic transit gloria mundi*,” Doc said, bowing his head respectfully. “Thus passes the beauty of the world.”

“Wish I had a camera.” Mildred sighed, her hand touching the journal in her med kit. Recently she had started making notes about anything useful or interesting the companions discovered in their travels. The rainbow garden was magnificent, but transitory, a very brief flicker of beauty in a cold, dark expanse.

Following the runoff stream from the hot water geysers, Mildred drove the UCV into a growing wilderness of bushes and trees. Soon they had to leave the forest, the trees too densely packed for the wag to drive through. Straddling the waterway, the vehicle trundled along, the six tires throwing back a misty spray that masked the steaming field of rainbows.

As the external temperature dropped, the vents opened by themselves, admitting a wealth of cool air carrying the rich smell of green plants. Bushes laden with berries covered both shores, and the trees were heavy with ripe fruit, the branches bowing down to nearly touch the ground.

“Bear!” Jak cried in delight, grabbing a recently cleaned M-16 rapidfire and working the arming bolt. “Stop and I get dinner!”

“And then we’d have to skin it, cut out steaks, make a campfire and cook the bastard,” Ryan replied gruffly, the disappointment thick in his voice. “Sorry, we can’t spare the hours.”

“But bear in apple orchard!” Jak admonished, rubbing his stomach. The backpacks they’d rescued from the redoubt had been full of MRE packs, but each Mylar envelope had been riddled with tiny corrosion holes, the dehydrated food as inedible as dung.

“And a bear in an orchard is good?” Mildred asked over a shoulder, dodging a small boulder in the stream.

The teenager scowled in disbelief. “Not have bear and apple stew?” He snorted. “Thought came from civilized time!”

“So did I, once,” Mildred said with a sigh, shifting gears.

The creek flowed to a delta, where it joined over waterways to become a shallow river, clear water slow and stately. The rad counters read clean, and fish could be seen swimming in the shallows, along with crabs and some black eels.

Moving onto a grassy bank, the companions soon saw signs of a nearby ville: a torn fishing net tangled in the branches of a submerged rock, a crude attempt at plowing a field, a bloody rope dangling from a tree limb where a deer or some other animal had been gutted. Then, following a gentle curve, there was Newton.

Low tree stumps dotted the ground for a hundred feet before reaching the outer wall, clear ground for the people inside to easily pick off invaders. There was a path to the front

gate, but it curved several times before reaching the entrance. Obviously it was designed to slow an enemy charge, making it easier for the sec men to aim.

Unless you were stupe enough to go over the tree stumps, Ryan noted. He felt certain the field was filled with pits, traps and buried explosive charges.

The wall itself was the usual mixture of red bricks, cinder-blocks, sidewalk slabs, logs and concrete, with large boulders being used as sturdy cornerstones. Smart move. The top of the barrier was studded with sharp sticks, broken glass and a few rusty strands of barbed wire. The gate was more impressive, overlapping sheets of metal from whatever could be found—stop signs, billboards, car hoods, manhole covers...

The hodgepodge was dented in numerous places and streaked with the telltale gray of countless ricochets. Clearly, the imposing barrier had withstood numerous attacks. Several wooden guard towers stood tall behind the wall, in the distance fluttered a flag of murky colors and off to the side was a tall gallows, the dangling noose empty. It was a message any outlander could easily understand.

“Good wall,” J.B. said in admiration. “No sign of cannons, but I’ll bet it’d be a real bitch to get through that gate.”

“Unfortunately, there’s no sign of Roberto,” Ryan said, looking around. There were no tracks in the ground, oil stains, or any other indications that a wag had been here recently.

Krysty frowned. “Could we have gotten here first?”

“If we did, he must have been jacked somewhere along the way,” Ryan said, pulling his blaster to check the clip. “We’ll get some food and wait until dark, but after that we’ll go hunting for them.”

“Gave word,” Jak agreed. “We part convoy. They lost, we find.”

“A noble sentiment,” Doc said. “However, I truly cannot imagine that anybody could deter those three juggernauts.”

“Anybody can be taken,” Ryan said coldly, “if you want them bad enough.”

Braking the war wag a respectful distance from the front gate, Mildred heard the clang of an alarm bell, and a dozen sec men appeared along the top of the wall, armed with axes, blasters and crossbows. Then a small door in the gate opened briefly, and some sec men slipped through. Their clothing was mismatched, predark fabrics, new leather and crude woven material, but all of it had been dyed a smooth uniform black. Plus, every one of them wore a blaster on his belt, and had a longblaster slung across his back. Ryan grunted at the sight. This was a rich ville. It had to do a lot of business with traders.

Keeping in a tight group, the sec men walked toward the war wag and stopped halfway. Understanding the procedure, Ryan and J.B. climbed out of the UCV and ambled over to meet them on neutral ground, within the range of everybody’s blasters.

“Hell of a wag you got there, outlander,” a bald sec man said as a greeting. “That be some kind of a tank?”

“No, just something we whittled out of a tree,” Ryan joked, and was rewarded with several smiles. “Any chance Roberto the Trader is here yet? We were supposed to meet with him at moonrise, but arrived early.”

“Not by much,” a sec woman said, glancing at the darkening sky.

“You part of his convoy?” the sergeant asked. “Never saw you folks before, and sure as shit never saw anything like that wag!” He could not take his sight away from a huge metal fork resting on top of the machine. Clearly, it was for ramming other wags. And possibly a ville gate.

“We’re newbies,” Ryan replied.

“Lucky number four,” J.B. added.

That made the sergeant hesitate. It was the right number, but these could be coldhearts who had watched Roberto arrive

at the ville from the bushes. "Hey, you ever met his wife?" he asked. "Black dust, that woman is fat!"

"Sorry, Roberto isn't married," Ryan said calmly. "His second in command is Jessica, and she's small enough to stuff in your hip pocket."

"But meaner than a gator with a toothache," J.B. added. "I swear that woman was born to chew steel."

"Yeah, you know Colt, all right." The sergeant chuckled, somewhat easing his stance. "Come on inside, and welcome to Newton."

As the group of sec men started back toward the ville, Ryan saw the sergeant make a complex hand gesture to the wall guards, and they lowered their weapons. Suspicious folks. He had a feeling he was going to like these people.

It was a tight fit getting the UCV through the front gate, but the wag made it without damaging the wall. Past the gate was a fieldstone wall with two large cannons ready to repel any invader.

The guns were probably set in stone, Ryan realized, and could not be turned to fire at the ville. Smart. Razor smart. The local baron was no fool.

To the right were the stables with a corral for horses, and to the left was a flat area of bare ground for the wags. War Wag One was parked there, with the Mack trucks nearby in a triangle formation to give each other maximum cover with their blasters. There were some oldies smoking pipes across the street, talking about the wags with a pregnant woman rocking in a wicker chair, her bare feet barely touching the ground.

Angling into the corner, Mildred parked the UCV and turned off the engines. To the locals, the arrival of any trader was pretty much like a space shuttle landing in a small town during her time. Everybody knew the things existed, but to see one only a few feet away was both terrifying and exhilarating.

On guard duty, J.B. stayed behind and locked the doors after the others decamped. Then he moved to the gunnery seat and turned on the Fifty, the heavy, vented barrel turning this way and that as he worked the joystick. A lot of the townsfolk moved away from the parked wags at this point, but they were soon replaced by others.

The ville was pretty standard; the companions had seen other small towns just like it countless times before. The winding streets were paved with predark bricks, the homes were mostly log cabins, squat and sturdy, the roofs a mixture of anything that could keep out the acid rain and winter snow: floor mats, plastic sheets, tar paper and patched canvas. The evening air was scented with the rich smell of horse manure, hot cooking oil, cooking soap, the stink of tanning leather and tangy wood smoke from a hundred stoves.

From a two-story building came the sound of raucous laughter, and the tinkle of a piano clearly announced it was a tavern. Lounging on the second-floor balconies were gaudy sluts smoking hand-rolled cigs and plumping their wares to anybody who seemed interested.

On the ground, cackling chickens ran underfoot, and a gang of children raced by in hot pursuit of a squealing piglet. In the gutter, a mangy dog was chewing an aced rat, while a fat cat was sleeping on a barrel. From somewhere nearby there came the steady clang of a blacksmith at work, some men sang a work song to the sound of sawing wood, and there came the crack of a whip closely followed by a scream of pain.

In the middle of the ville was a low hill, natural or artificial, it was impossible to tell from this distance. Sitting on the crest was an ornate two-story building, surrounded by squat fieldstone bunkers. Without a doubt, that was the home of the baron.

Over by an artesian well, Roberto and Jessica had set up some folding tables and were trading with the townspeople, exchanging a pair of repaired shoes for a bushel of turnips, an

arrow for a live chicken, a hammer for string of smoked fish, a fistful of nails for a skinned raccoon, a single brass for a tattered paperback book. Business was brisk, there were a lot of smiling faces, but armed sec men walked through the crowds, their hands holding crossbows and longblasters.

Suddenly, Jessica tugged on Roberto's arm, and he looked up to see the companions. He smiled briefly, then went back to work, talking, laughing and cutting deals.

"Okay, here's the download," the sergeant said in a bored voice. "We got a new baron, so the taverns are open again. That is the good news. But he don't allow anything else, and that's the bad. Wolfweed gets you thrown out of the ville, jolt gets you an air dance." The man rattled off the list as if he repeated it a hundred times a day. "We castrate for rape and blind ya for theft. Unless it's a horse, then we beat you to death and feed ya to the pigs. Basically, if a sec man says frog, you jump. Oh yeah, if you have any silver, talk to the baron, and he'll issue you ville jack. Don't trade any with the villagers. He don't take kindly to that, and neither do we."

"Fair enough," Ryan said. "Any place we can get some chow?"

"Howard's is the best," another sec man drawled, jerking a thumb at the tavern. "Jus' don't order a pie. They taste great, but always make ya sick."

As the sec men walked away, the companions waited before talking among themselves.

"What was that about silver?" Mildred muttered, shifting her med kit. Professionally, she was pleased to see the latrines placed far away from the well and the horse stable. There would be no cholera or typhoid here.

"Perhaps the baron knows how to make fulminating gun-cotton," Krysty said, looking at some greenhouses farther back inside the ville. She had a strong dislike for those ever since running into a baron who fed people into a woodchipper to make his loam.

Ryan agreed. "That type of explosive takes a lot of time to make, but the more silver you have, the faster it goes."

"Indeed, sir," Doc added, twirling his ebony stick to finally rest it between his shoes. "One can never have enough good friends, or high explosives."

"Frag it, mebbe he just likes shiny," Ryan growled, heading for the tavern. "Food is at the top of our list." He had already caught a whiff of onions frying with bacon, and he only hoped it wasn't some kind of pie.

"HE'S HERE," LINDA SAID, the words momentarily visible as she exhaled sweet smoke. Then she took another drag of the homemade cigarette, and filled her lungs to the point where her huge breasts nearly fell out of her loose bodice.

"What was that?" the man asked across the bedroom, looking up from putting on a boot.

"Your friend is here," Linda repeated, puckering her painted lips to blow a smoke ring. The gaudy slut was reclining in a chair on the balcony, her skirt hitched up high, and she flashed a peek of the treasure within to any man, or woman, who showed interest. Linda was no prude like some of the sluts. Tongues and fingers did it for her just as well.

"Who... Describe him," the man demanded hastily, tugging on the second boot, then grabbing suspenders to pull up his pants.

"Happy to." Linda smiled around the cig. "Big fella, and I do mean big. Curly black hair, scar on his face, eye patch, fancy blasters. He's with a redhead with tits almost as big as mine, a healer, I can see her med bag, an albino and a wrinklie in weird clothing walking with a stick." She chuckled and scratched an armpit. "That's gotta be him, honey. Now where's my reward?"

Walking quickly to the entrance of the balcony, Delacort looked down upon the bustling ville and spotted Ryan instantly, heading straight for the tavern, and it wasn't even

night yet. The damn fools weren't supposed to get here before dark. This was going to ruin everything!

"I asked about the reward," Linda repeated, her silken tones taking on a hard edge.

Ignoring the slut, Delacort rushed over to the bed.

Sprawled naked under a damp sheet, Billy was sound asleep, his gunbelt hung over a newel only inches from outstretched fingers. Nudging the bed with his knee, Delacort stepped back fast, and the boy came awake with a leaf-shaped throwing knife in his hand.

"They're here," Delacort growled. "So we gotta take 'em now. Right now. No choice."

Rising naked from the warm bed, the boy yawned and sheathed the throwing knife to draw the stiletto. Smiling at the thin blade, he tested the needletip on a thumb, then licked off the bright red drop of blood.

"No prob," Billy whispered, his face shiny with excitement. "I'll take care of them, you handle the slut."

"Fair enough."

"What are you talking about?" Linda demanded suspiciously, a hand slipping into her bodice to touch a razor blade hidden there for emergencies. But before she could draw the blade, Billy made a jerking motion, she turned around fast and Delacort slammed the barrel of his blaster into the back of her head. Wiping the wheelgun clean on the slut's lacy dress, Delacort holstered the weapon. "Now let's go have some real fun."

Chapter Thirteen

Entering the tavern, the companions were greeted by a wave of warmth reeking of new shine, old sweat and sex. Across the room, a busty woman wearing only a feathered robe was leading a young sec man up the stairs. She was giggling, he was blushing, and nobody else paid them any attention whatsoever.

Sitting on a stool at the end of the bar, a young girl of Asian ancestry was wearing a pale green dress slit up the side to show a lot of thigh, the neckline low enough to almost expose her pert breasts. Touching her ebony hair, the slut pointedly ignored Doc, but smiled warmly at Ryan. He looked back coldly, and rested an arm on Krysty's shoulder. Accepting the rebuff, the slut turned her smiling attention to J.B., but Mildred already had a hand tucked into his rear pocket, the universal signal of sexual partnership. With a sigh, the woman glanced briefly at Jak, then shrugged and lit a cigarette.

"It seems that the young lady at the bar thinks you are a mutie of some kind, Jak," Doc said to the unconcerned teen.

"Good," Jak replied. "I like riding, but prefer wild filly, not ville swayback."

"Well said, my young friend! So faithful in love, so gallant in war, I daresay there was not a knight like the young Lochinvar!"

Some of the locals looked up at the shout, then decided it was not the start of a fight and went back to their drinking.

Easing the grip on their blasters, a group of sec men over

by an open window continued to play cards, live brass piled on the table instead of chips or jack. A wrinklie was softly snoring on top of a table, a mug of shine still tight in his hand, and a scrawny kid was sitting alone at a table, industriously eating soup with a wooden spoon, her bare feet dangling inches off the floor. A dog lay nearby watching intently and eagerly wagging his tail.

"The locals seem a little jumpy," Krysty said softly, her hair moving forward to hide her words. "Almost as if they're expecting trouble from us. But they must know that we're with Roberto."

"Yeah, I know," Ryan said, giving the woman a squeeze to bring her closer. "Let me know if you feel anything coming our way. A half-second warning can make all the difference."

She nodded in response.

The walls were heavily decorated with faded posters of Mexico, Australia and the Bahamas, obviously looted from a travel agency. Mildred noted that there were no posters of Switzerland or Colorado, but that only made sense. For folks living in the middle of a cloudy mountain range, the sunny beach was probably their dream of heaven.

The windows were a mix of clear glass and oiled paper where an irreplaceable pane had been broken. The work was expertly done. However, the floor of the tavern was a patchwork of wooden boards and irregular pieces of linoleum. Shoddy workmanship at best.

Had to have been different owners of the tavern over the years, Ryan thought. Some cared about the place, while others did not. That made the man uneasy, although he could not tell why, and he decided to stay on his guard. There was something wrong about this ville, in spite of what Roberto said, something terribly wrong. Ryan could feel it in his bones.

Finding a table in the corner where they could watch the front door, the companions took chairs, then placed their blasters in plain sight. A couple of people who had seemed

pleased at their appearance turned away from the companions and concentrated very hard on doing something else. The sec men paid more attention to the blasters than the companions, as if registering type, style and condition, then they went back to playing cards and ignored both.

“That worked well,” Mildred said under her breath, settling the med kit on her lap.

“Always does,” J.B. agreed thankfully.

A bucktoothed waitress came over for their order and left looking bored and disinterested.

“Bony,” Jak noted in displeasure. “Not good sign about food.”

“Too true, my young friend,” Doc agreed. “One should always be wary of a skinny cook, a drunk banker, a sweaty cop and a happy mortician.”

“Cop?”

“An old term for sec man.”

“Ah. Gotcha.”

In short order, the food was served, fish stew in wood bowls, sliced black bread and a tin pot of stewed apples. Nothing was said for a while as the companions dug in and concentrated on just eating. The stew was watery, the apples bland, but the bread smelled like heaven and tasted even better, although there was a strange aftertaste.

“Don’t eat any more of that,” Mildred said, pushing away the plate of sliced bread. “There’s some sort of contaminant. Mold, lead, I don’t know what. The cook probably just had dirty hands, but the last thing you want is a case of cholera.”

“Damn,” Jak muttered, putting back a slice. He had eaten the first few rounds so fast he wouldn’t have noticed if the bread possessed tentacles. “Stew okay?”

“Fine.” She smiled. “If there’s anything bad in there, I can’t taste it.”

“While I can barely taste it at all, madam,” Doc added,

pouring a spoonful of the thin stuff back into his bowl. "I do believe that I have told lies thinner than this ethereal broth."

Reaching into a pocket, Krysty started to offer the scholar a packet of salt from an old MRE envelope, when she noticed that Ryan was not eating, but oddly inspecting his spoon.

"Something wrong, lover?" she asked, resisting the urge to look around the room. If he was planning something, that might tip his hand.

"Don't know yet," Ryan replied, watching a drunk stumble across the tavern, bumping into people and mumbling apologies. The drunk was young, with tousled hair as if just awoken. However, the teenager didn't seem disoriented enough to be really drunk, and the one-eyed man mentally classified him as a thief, colliding with the patrons to snatch what he could from their pockets. It was a dangerous ploy in a room full of armed people. Unless he was only pretending to be a thief, the same way he wasn't really drunk.

His combat instincts on the alert, Ryan moved his chair away from the table. As the hiccupping youth staggered their way, Ryan turned and thrust out a stiff arm to shove the fellow away. But as he did, there was a brief sensation of warmth across his chest and suddenly his shirt was darkening with blood.

"Razor!" Jak snarled, jerking an arm toward the stranger.

Thwarted of an easy chill, Billy moved lightning fast out of the way of the thrown blade and it thudded into the counter, quivering from the force with which it was thrown.

Sweeping his arms across the table, Ryan sent his bowl of stew into the face of the teenager and Krysty kicked an empty chair off the floor. It hit the youth and down he went, only to roll back up, a knife in one hand, a remade blaster in the other, the barrel lumpy and patched with gray tape.

The companions dived aside as the weapon barked, the window shattered and somebody screamed from outside.

Everybody in the tavern was moving now, pulling blasters,

throwing axes and clubs, but unsure of exactly what was happening. Taking advantage of the confusion, Billy stood behind the card players and fired again at the companions. A wooden mug of shine exploded in front of Jak, blinding him with foam and splinters. Doc pulled him low, and Mildred returned fire, catching Billy in the shoulder, spinning him, blood spraying everywhere.

Trembling all over, Krysty dropped her blaster from splayed fingers and began to scream in mindless agony as a small clump of her hair snipped off by the round gently floated away on the breeze from the window.

Raising a chair as a shield, Ryan charged, and Billy dived over the counter to belly shoot the bartender and burst out a side door onto the street.

His combat boots thumping on the floorboards, Ryan was close at hand, even though he knew it was a trap. Turning upward, he saw the second coldheart on the balcony taking aim with a rapidfire. Ryan fired just as a knife flashed past his face, scoring a bloody furrow along his cheek, then the balcony exploded into blood and dust as the .50-caliber machine gun on the UCV cut loose with a hellstorm of hot lead, the heavy-caliber rounds tearing the coldheart apart and sending him flying through the glass doors behind.

Ignoring the dead man, Ryan took off after the teenager, with Doc and Jak close behind. However, Billy kept moving through the confused crowd, making it impossible for them to get a clear shot. He fired twice back at them, but the first round hit nothing and the second hammered a water barrel. Dozens of townsfolk had blasters out, some running away, some looking confused, others grinning, ready for a chill.

Suddenly finding himself facing a wall of grim sec men, Billy shot a young woman in the face and grabbed the infant from her arms before it hit the ground.

“Back off, or I ace the kid!” he screamed, spittle flying from his mouth. Clearly the teenager was terrified. The plan had

gone wrong with lightning speed, and without Delacort for guidance, he had no idea what to do next. Except grab a hostage, get outside the wall, then run. Somewhere in the woods he'd find Pete. Then he would be safe. Yes, that was it, find Pete and everything would be okay!

Without pausing in his stride, Ryan leveled the SIG-Sauer and fired once.

A neat black hole appeared between Billy's eyes, and the back of his head jerked as it erupted, the spray smacking wetly on the wall of the blacksmith's shack. Already aced, the teenager worked his mouth as if trying to speak, the last impulses of his pulped brain still commanding his body, then his arms relaxed and he folded to the ground. Howling loudly, the infant rolled onto the hard bricks and started making even more noise than before.

Several women rushed from the mob to gather up the infant and carry him away from the bloody carnage.

"Nuke me!" a sec man exclaimed, lowering his scattergun. "That was a hell of a shot, One-Eye!"

"I wanted him alive," Ryan said, holstering the blaster. "Kid okay?"

"Looks like. Kin of yours?"

"Nope."

"You spent brass on a stranger?"

Just then a large man appeared out of the crowd, closely flanked by several armed sec men. His clothes were clean, and he carried a predark machine pistol, the deadly weapon gleaming with oil. Nobody had to say that this was the ruler of the ville; the man wore his rank like a mantle of authority.

"All right, what the frag is going on here!" Baron Kirkland Conway demanded, a hand resting on the holstered 9 mm Ingram rapidfire. "Davis, did you see what happened?"

"Yes, sir, baron," the sec man said respectfully, giving a crisp salute. "This coldheart came out of the tavern with One-Eye over there chasing after him like a starving mutie. Some

guy on the balcony was waiting for them and popped a shot at One-Eye, then that war wag opened up with a Fifty and put the sniper on the last train west. The running guy fired a couple of times, hitting nothing, and before we could grab him, the nuke-sucker shot Rhonda and grabbed her babe. Next thing I know, the coldheart is looking at forever and One-Eye is holstering his piece.”

“That fast?” Conway asked, raising an eyebrow. “He shot while running?”

“Yes, sir. Never seen anything like it!”

“Me, neither,” the baron admitted. “What started the fight in the tavern? Somebody cheating at cards? Grab the wrong ass?”

“Hell, no!” one of the tavern’s sluts declared, fists resting on plump hips. “This pinhead charged down from Linda’s room, poured a beer over his head, then started staggering around like he was wild drunk.”

“He was pulling a filch?”

“Yes, sir. The outlanders called him on it, blasters started banging, and the aced guy ran behind the bar, chilled Hobart, and ran outside.”

“Hobart got aced?” the baron demanded, his voice taking on a new tone.

The slut nodded. “Deader than DeeCee.”

An angry murmur rose from the attending crowd and somebody spit on the cooling corpse.

“Anybody else hurt or aced?” the baron demanded.

“Linda,” the slut said, her tone softening. “Somebody... somebody beat her with a blaster. She’s...she’s...”

“That’s okay,” the baron said with surprising gentleness. “I understand, Yurizane.” Looking at the second story of the tavern, he saw that there was blood dripping off the ruined balcony. “Probably the coldheart that popped a cap at One-Eye,” the baron guessed, hitching up his gunbelt. “Well, the Fifty took care of him, so that debt is paid. Is the baby hurt?”

“Just bruised a little,” a wrinklie said, proffering the infant for inspection.

The baron waved her off. “I’m no healer,” he said. “You say it—she?”

“He, my lord.”

“If you say he’s okay, then I take your word.” Looking down at the chilled mother, Conway sighed. “Well, I know that Rhonda has no family, so...anybody want the kid?”

“I’ll take him,” the blacksmith said, advancing from the shadowy interior of the shop. “My wife passed away last month, and I got no other kin.”

“Now you do,” the baron stated. “This is your new son...” He waited.

“Daniel, Baron. Daniel Stewart.”

“Raise him right, or I’ll hear about it. Savvy?”

“Yes, my lord!” Stewart said happily, taking the squalling infant in his colossal arms. “Thank you!”

“Fine, fine, you’re welcome,” the baron said, turning his attention to Ryan and the others. “Okay, my sec men say it was a fair fight, so his boots and blasters are yours. But not the brass. That goes to the ville.”

“Give them to the blacksmith,” Ryan said. “The boy will want a blaster when he gets old enough.”

“You turning down the spoils?” a sec man gasped.

“Don’t need them,” Ryan said with a shrug. “Got better.”

“You heard him,” the baron said, and a sec man gathered the bloody items and took them into the livery.

“Now as for you outlanders,” Conway continued. “You can go about your business. But I want you gone at dawn. Savvy?”

“No problem,” Ryan said, finding himself starting to like the man. He ran a tight ville and wasted no time on posturing for the crowd. “However, our dinner is ruined, and I don’t think we’ll be welcomed back.”

“You got that right.” Conway laughed. “Innocent or not,

Howard is gonna want you to pay for all of the damages, and if things get red, I'll be backing Howard. Savvy?"

"Savvy."

"How many folks you got?"

Ryan fought the urge to lie. There was little point with those huge windows in the UCV. "Six."

The baron said nothing for a moment, looking over the crowd waiting to hear his decision. "Corporal O'Malley! Give these folks six rations of traveling bread."

A skinny sec man frowned but nodded in agreement and took off at a run. He returned shortly and tossed a burlap bag to Ryan.

"Gone at dawn," Baron Conway repeated, turning away and heading toward the greenhouse.

Down the street, Krysty stumbled out of the tavern, supported by Mildred. The redhead was pale, the front of her shirt stained with vomit. As he started to head for them, Ryan was stopped by the slut.

"I want to thank you for taking out the bastards that aced my friend," Yurizane said, throwing herself into his arms and kissing him passionately all over the face.

More than slightly annoyed, Ryan tried to force her away when the busty woman breathed warmly into his ear. "Don't eat the bread."

That stopped him cold, and Ryan kissed her back, then grabbed her plump ass, putting on a good show for anybody watching. "Why not?" he whispered into her scented hair. It smelled like fresh roses, stale cigarettes and old shine.

"Drugged. Gonna do nightcreep," Yurizane murmured, then pulled back to grab him between the legs. "My, my, that's a nice big caliber, but I think I got the well-oiled breechloader to handle it!"

The crowd of townsfolk and sec men burst into laughter, then started to wander away. The fight was over, and there was work to be done. Life continued. Its mouth still open in shock,

Billy's corpse lay in the gutter. In a few hours the night gang would haul it off to the garbage dump.

Releasing Ryan, the slut batted her eyelids at Doc and Jak, then sashayed away, rolling her hips in the well-trained manner of a professional.

"If I did not know you better, my dear Ryan, I would think that lewd performance was real," Doc muttered. "However, I do know you, so what was that actually about?"

"A warning," Ryan replied, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "I'll tell you later. But first, let's get inside the wag."

Quickly joining Mildred and Krysty, the one-eyed man took the redhead in his arms and carried her to the urban combat vehicle. Ryan gently placed her on a bedroll while Doc and Jak locked the armored doors.

"Will she be all right?" the big man asked, his voice thick with emotion.

"Yes, she's just in shock," Mildred said, wiping the sweat off the woman's brow. "Krysty losing hair is like us having fingers removed. But she'll be okay in a few hours or so."

"If she needs anything..." Ryan began.

"Just sleep," Mildred said gently, covering the woman with a second bedroll. "That's all, just some sleep." Then she added, "And let me know when I should clean that cut across your chest."

Ryan looked down at the wound as if seeing it for the first time. If he hadn't been moving, that knife would have opened his belly like a self-heal. "Never felt a thing," he muttered, gingerly touching the bloody scratch.

"Stiletto," Jak said, pulling the blade into view. "Razor-sharp, good as scalpel. Was planning return to owner, but you aced first."

"Sorry," Ryan said, a weak smiling playing on his lips.

Tucking away the slim dagger, the teenager shrugged. "S'okay."

Watching the unconscious Krysty for a few minutes, Ryan forced himself away and called the other companions closer to tell them about Yurizane.

“She could be lying,” J.B. said, tilting back his fedora to scratch his head. “But I’ll be damned if I can figure out why.”

Opening the bag, Jak took a hard sniff. “Seems okay,” he said. “But then, if smell bad, no eat.”

“True, and if it is a soporific, taking a bite will do nothing immediately,” Mildred added. “If the first person to eat a loaf fell over, nobody else would have any. The drug must be designed to put us into a deep, natural sleep tonight so that the sec men can come slit our throats, one by one, without waking the others.”

“Ghastly, effective and diabolical!” Doc declared angrily. “Is there any way you can check this theory, madam? Run some sort of chemical analysis of the bread?”

“With what?” Mildred demanded curtly, waving a hand at the interior of the wag. “We’re lucky to have blankets! I seem to be fresh out of thermal distillation units, spectrometers and gas chromatographs!”

“Ah, fair enough, dear lady,” the scholar demurred. “But surely there is something we can do?”

“Yes, there is.” Ryan went to the front of the war wag and grabbed the mike. “*One-Eye to Scorpion*,” he said loudly. “*One-Eye to Scorpion!* We have a priority message for *Scorpion!*”

“*Scorpion* is busy, *One-Eye*,” an unknown voice replied. “They all are. This is Blackbeard. I saw what you did before, and regret not being able to lend assistance. The events were...unforeseen.”

The word sent a chill down Ryan’s spine. Roberto had a doomie? That explained how he knew how to find that weird blaster and where Cascade was located!

“Well, here’s something else you might have missed,” the one-eyed man growled. “It looks like the food may be

drugged. We go to sleep tonight and wake up tomorrow with red smiles! I'd guess the reason we never heard of this ville before is that nobody ever leaves. Especially not traders."

"This is not possible," Yates muttered apprehensively.

"Your throat, amigo," Ryan snapped. "But we are not eating anything we didn't bring here, and unless you're feebs, you'll do the same."

"But if this is a trap, then shouldn't we simply leave right now..."

"With half your crew scattered across the ville?" Ryan shot back furiously. "If we start rolling, they'll be the first aced. Or worse, taken hostage. We can't do squat until they come back."

"But with our weaponry..."

"If these mutie-suckers have been jacking convoys for years, who knows how much major ordnance they have? Rockets, land mines, mebbe even a laser of their own."

"A laser!"

"Not to mention all that guncotton," J.B. guessed.

"I—I shall tell *Scorpion* immediately."

"Damn right you should!"

"However, it is my crew that is at risk," Roberto said unexpectedly. "You folks are free to leave anytime."

"Mutie shit, we signed on as part of the convoy," Ryan replied bluntly. "So we're here to the end."

"Cascade or bust!" J.B. added from off-mike.

There was a brief crackle of static.

"It seems that Kathleen was right about you the whole time," Roberto said, a new tone in his voice. "All right, we'll take on these coldhearts together. How are you fixed?"

"Never enough brass," Ryan said, glancing at the fire-control panel for the Fifty. "But you can't send any over or Baron Conway will know what we're planning, and your folks'll get taken as hostages."

"Yeah, I figured that. I meant chow."

"We're chewing air. Got anything in storage?"

“Not enough to reach Cascade. But that’s tomorrow’s problem. I’ll send over Shelly with a basket. Empty bellies make minds wander, and we gotta stay razor.”

“Agreed. Gonna be a real bloodbath when they finally come.”

“You can load that in a damn blaster! A lot of my crew will be groggy from drugged food when they return, so I’m going into this shorthanded.”

“Pity your pet doomie didn’t see this coming.”

“How did you...” Roberto started, then gave a hard laugh. “Frag it. Find me a doomie who never makes mistakes, and I’ll be in charge of the world by spring. They’re triple-special folks, but everybody drops a clip now and then.”

“True enough,” Ryan agreed, studying the peaceful-appearing ville around the four wags. “Now, just in case these bastards have a working radio, this had better be our last transmission until the hammer falls. Too much chatter and they’ll get wise. When it’s time to roll, we will follow your lead.”

“Confirm, *One-Eye, Scorpion* out.” The radio clicked off.

“And now we wait,” Ryan said, hanging up the mike.

“That hard part,” Jak drawled, smiling at a passing citizen. The man waved in greeting, and Jak waved back, feeling like a feeb.

“Always is,” Ryan agreed, reaching for a canteen.

“Now, what puzzles me,” J.B. said, turning his back to the windows, “is why Conway tried to ace you in broad daylight, if he was going to drug our food? Sounds like there are two different groups, each of them after the jack in our wags.”

Washing the taste of the stew from his mouth, Ryan swallowed. “Then we’ll just have to chill ’em all,” he growled over the ache in his belly. “Every fragging one of them.”

Chapter Fourteen

Night descended slowly over Newton, the streets gradually clearing of townsfolk and sec men. The crew of the convoy straggled back to the war wags.

Slowly, a full moon rose in the sky and the ville became a flickering checkerboard of candles and cook fires. The sole exception being the mansion of the baron. It stood cold and dark, merely a black outline against the twinkling stars.

“Think they’re watching us?” Mildred asked from inside her bedroll.

“They would indeed be fools not to,” Doc replied from a jumpseat, a blanket draped over his shoulders, his head bowed as if in sleep.

An arm resting on top of the steering wheel, Jak was slumped forward. Feigning sleep, the teen was watching the darkness near the ville wall. When trouble came, it would be from that direction.

Just before dusk, a wrinklie had set fire to some pitch torches set into wall niches in the ville square, lighting the way to the well. But as the torches died away, the thick shadows came ever closer.

The bargaining tables were gone, the flat expanse of ground around the parked wags totally empty. Earlier, Shelly had come over with a wicker basket of food: two cans of baked beans and some beef jerky that was damn near tough enough to use to patch holes in the tank armor. But it was food, and filled their bellies enough for combat. If you knew a fight was

coming, nobody sane scarfed down a big meal. That only slowed your reflexes, and more often than not ended up on the ground, coming out one end or the other.

“Brave girl,” Jak said, watching the young healer walk into the night and disappear, only to reappear in the running lights of War Wag One.

“Kind of pretty, too,” Krysty said mischievously. “Well, if you like them skinny.”

“What talk?” Jak replied hotly, rising to the bait. “She pretty!”

“Oh, is she?” Krysty said, her voice smiling in the dark.

The teenager felt himself blush. “Yeah.”

“Well, let me tell you, healers make the best bed partners,” J.B. said from under his hat. “They know things about what men like.”

“Take my word for it, amigo,” Ryan whispered, his chest slowly rising and falling. “All women know that secret. It’s why the human race still exists.”

“Yeah, well, I just wish she’d stop looking at me as if I could turn rad pits into gardens.” Mildred sighed.

Just then, an owl hooted from outside. The soft noise made everybody alert.

J.B. forced himself to relax. Stay loose, stay calm, stay focused, he mentally commanded himself. Don’t waste energy worrying. When the chilling starts it won’t be with a murmur, but a shout.

“Here come,” Jak whispered.

Suddenly, dim figures were silhouetted by the silvery moonlight between the wags and the wall. Their faces were streaked with mud, their hands carrying knives, the steel blackened to near invisibility, and two of the sec men carried blasters, the barrels tipped with bulky, homemade silencers.

Softly snoring, the companions did nothing as the cold-hearts glided ever closer. The man in the lead seemed to be

checking the ground for something, traps maybe. But after a moment he continued onward, the others close behind.

As they eased past the windows, Ryan counted six of them. One for each companion. Smart move, he thought. Take out everybody at the same time and never give the victims a chance to fight back. He only hoped they could do the same to the invaders.

Reaching the aft doors, the coldhearts scratched softly at the metal, and the unlocked doors swung aside on hinges dripping with fresh oil. Even as his hand slid to touch a weapon, J.B. had to admire their style. These bastards had done this sort of chilling a lot to get this fragging proficient. He had hated leaving the doors unlocked, but if they could not get in, the sec men might have planted a bomb under the wag that would have chilled a lot of people.

As silent as ghosts, the masked men oozed into the UCV, their swaddled boots softly padding on the cushioned floor. Each chose a companion and raised his knife to strike.

Lunging forward, the companions attacked first, their knives burying deep in the groins of the coldhearts, severing the major artery in the thigh. Shrieking in pain, the thieves dropped their blasters and knives to claw at the hot blood gushing from between their legs. Then the companions slashed open their throats, ending the matter.

Without turning on the engine, Jak flicked on the headlights, the brilliant beams catching twenty or so coldhearts crouched around the three war wags. As if waiting for that, weapons fired from every blasterport, and the coldhearts were ruthlessly slaughtered.

Even as Jak turned on the big Detroit engine, J.B. grabbed the mike and threw the switch for the rooftop loudspeaker. "Triple red, invaders on the wall!" he said, the words blasting across the supposedly sleeping ville. "Invaders on the wall! All crewmen to their posts!"

Going to a blasterport, Ryan looked along the barrel of the

Steyr and waited for targets. The locals knew these were their fellow sec men, but pretending it was invading coldhearts gave them the perfect opportunity to swarm over the wags and force their way inside. Unless we drop the hammer, Ryan thought.

Soon there were armed sec men running along the nearby wall. All of them facing inside the ville, and not the other side.

Instantly the machine guns of the four war wags thundered into action, the barrage of hot lead sweeping the wall clear, the .308 rounds from the M-60, and the .50-caliber rounds from the heavy machine guns tearing the sec men apart, the pieces thrown out into the night. As broken longblasters and bloody clothing tumbled down onto the UCV, Jak threw the vehicle into reverse and stomped on the pedal.

Surging with power, the war wag lurched backward, crashing through the split-rail fence and ramming into the sec men stationed at the cannons. They died shrieking under the spinning tires.

Rumbling into life, the big diesel engines of the other three wags blew gouts of black smoke from louvered exhaust pipes, and the armored convoy vanished within a blinding nimbus of halogen headlamps and arc lights. The ville was coming alive with window lights, and a gong began to sound from one of the tall wooden guard towers.

In a rush of smoky flame, a warbird launched from the pod on top of War Wag Two, and the stout log pillbox on top of the guard tower violently disintegrated, the blast illuminating the night and silencing the gong forever.

Charging out of the corner tavern, a squad of sec men headed straight for the cannons, while every window in the second floor of the gaudy house flashed with the fiery flowers of muzzle blasts. The hail of lead ricocheted harmlessly off the UCV, and the companions gave a lethal response.

“Here go!” Jak yelled, lowering the fork to the sound of

thumping hydraulics. Then, shifting gears, he drove the steel tines under the cannons and flipped a switch.

For a moment there were only the sounds of miscellaneous blasters, the tandem engines and pumping hydraulics. Then the cannons cracked free of their concrete beds and went tumbling through the darkness to land in the ville square with deafening clangs. Jumping out of hiding behind the well, a sec man tried to get away, but the cannons smacked into him with a sickening sound and he fell boneless to the brick roadway, dark fluids erupting from his slack mouth.

A rain of hissing objects plummeted from the tops of the buildings across the street, the pipe bombs and predark grens detonating on the war wags and throwing out deadly halos of shrapnel. But the charges proved ineffective against the thick armor, and the machines rumbled into motion, their blasters spitting flames.

Stepping out of a doorway, a sec man lit the rag fuse on a Molotov and prepared to throw.

"Tempus fugit!" Doc bellowed in Latin, a chattering M-16 assault rifle tight in his grip. The rapidfire had much better range than the LeMat, and the discharge wouldn't deafen everybody inside the wag like the Civil War handcannon.

The sec man was stitched from knees to forehead, the perfectly imbalanced tumblers coming out of his body on random vectors. As what remained of the corpse fell back into the house, the Molotov fell to the floor and flames whooshed into existence.

Grinding gears, War Wag Three charged down the street to ram headlong into the thick telephone-pole-size legs of the second guard tower. The wood shattered into splinters and the pillbox tilted, then hurtled down to crash alongside the armored vehicle. Callously, the driver sent the machine jouncing over the wreckage, the wounded sec men trapped among the timbers screaming briefly, then going silent.

Dropping a clip to reload the M-16, Ryan saw a figure in

an alleyway lift a long tube to his shoulder, then swing it toward the UCV. Shitfire, he thought, that was a bazooka! Releasing the empty rapidfire, the Deathlands warrior drew the SIG-Sauer and sent five fast rounds winging that way. Recoiling from the arrival of the subsonic lead, the sec man slumped, and the bazooka fired straight at the bricks below his boots. The street erupted with thunder and flame, a corona of broken bricks flying away to smack into doors, walls and windows.

Driving the war wag onto the main street, Jak broke into ragged coughing. The inside of the UCV was starting to reek from the exhaust fumes of the blasters, and the bodily fluids of the aced sec men. But there was no time to dump the bodies. They had to keep this can sealed tight and keep fighting. That was the only way out of this trap. Chill tonight, breathe tomorrow, the teenager grimly promised himself.

Just then, a second gong began to clang from the third guard tower. Now close enough, the crew of War Wag Two sent a burning stream of homemade chem arching out from the flamethrower. The support timbers ignited and started burning upward like old fuses. The sec men in the pillbox stopped ringing the alarm and began to fire down at the war wag, bullets and crossbow quarrels hitting the windshield with amazing accuracy, but failing to break through.

As the flames reached the pillbox, one sec man tried to scramble down the ladder, and only served to set himself on fire, the human torch stubbornly climbing down another few rungs before falling away. Trapped, the rest of the sec men stayed put, shooting nonstop until the pillbox was engulfed and they could only shriek in agony.

Resting a boot on the sec man sent to ace her, Krysty shoved the fluted barrel of an M-16 through a blasterport and hosed a long stream of 5.56 mm rounds at distant shapes running along the wall. One of them fell into the ville, going through the roof of a building, while the other tumbled over the wall. A split second later, there came a tremendous explo-

sion from the other side, a writhing fireball rising upward resembling a miniature nuclear blast.

“Dark night, that was guncotton!” J.B. cursed, triggering short bursts at a group of sec men running along the streets. “That would have opened us like a self-heat!” One of the armed thieves fell sprawling, but the other kept going and vanished around a corner.

“Looks like the baron finally realized that the nightcreep failed, and is breaking out the real weapons,” Ryan snarled, taking out a sniper in a window. The sec man fell back, minus a face. “Ace anybody carrying a large sack or bag. It could be more guncotton, or worse, a C-4 satchel charge!”

Stumbling out of an alley, a harried-looking sec man waved a white flag attached to a stick. Stopping himself just in time from chilling the man, Doc noticed that the flag was in remarkably good condition for something supposedly cobbled together in the middle of a battle. Feeling a surge of insane anger at the trick, the old man shot the limping norm in the belly. Losing the flag, the sec man doubled over, the sizzling pipe bomb in his other hand clattering to the ground and rolling away before detonating harmlessly near a water trough.

“Beware of Greeks bearing gifts,” Mildred snarled, hastily reloading the Czech ZKR. The woman had to be very careful of where she stood. The floor was slippery with blood and spent brass.

“Indubitably, madam,” Doc muttered, working the arming bolt on the rapidfire to clear a jam in the ejector port. “Or as the Scottish would say, fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, go frag yourself!”

“Amen to that, brother!”

On a nearby roof, a sec man appeared with a pipe bomb and threw it at the urban combat vehicle. It hit the roof and bounced off to explode harmlessly in midair. Jerking the joystick, J.B. peppered the edge of the building with the Fifty, the rounds chewing a path of destruction along the brickwork

and throwing off an opaque cloud of red dust, but there was no cry of pain or secondary explosion.

“Fuckers getting smart,” Jak cursed, shifting gears. Hit-and-run tactics were the only sensible way to fight an armored wag. Aside from trapping one in a pit. After that, you simply built a bonfire and cooked the people inside like apples in pie. Now, the albino teenager closely watched the road ahead for suspicious shadows or unusual depressions.

Suddenly there was a bright flash from the pillbox on top of the last guard tower. The radar started beeping as a streak of flame reached down to impact directly on the front of War Wag One. The entire vehicle disappeared inside the roiling fireball...only to reappear a few seconds later dripping flames. A tire was flat, flopping loosely on the spiked rim, and a side door was missing, a human arm dangling from a hinge, but the machine kept fighting. Roberto understood that this was no test of strength, but a full-blown Deathlands showdown. Winner takes all, loser gets buried. A lot of people were getting chilled this night, but that wasn't the trader's concern at the moment. Survival was. His crew was family, and kin protected kin. End of discussion.

Another rocket streaked down to just miss War Wag One, the blast blowing a chunk out of the ville wall. Moving into the square, War Wag Three and the UCV both targeted the pillbox with their machine guns, doing minimal damage. Then War Wag One unleashed the laser again, the beam slicing across support beams. With a sound of splintering wood, the pillbox slid free to crash onto the hard street with grisly results.

In the distance, the last guard tower was on fire, sec men jumping to their deaths rather than be burned alive. On the streets, townsfolk were dashing everywhere, drunken cobblers, naked gaudy sluts, wrinklies, a young couple cradling an infant. Again and again, Jak had to slow down to not slaughter the people. But each time, the sec men used the pause to retreat to better positions or unleash more rockets.

“How’s the ammo?” Ryan shouted, firing single rounds at any large item in the street. A wooden bucket jerked skyward to crack in two, a wicker basket tumbled away, spilling out tatters, then a shoebox abruptly detonated, bent nails zinging outward in every direction, several of them embedding in the Lexan windows.

“Last belt!” J.B. replied, burping the Fifty to conserve ammo.

He paused as a herd of terrified horses raced by, then cut loose at the gang of sec men trying to sneak up on War Wag One by using the animals as cover.

A glass bottle crashed onto the windshield of the UCV, and orange fire covered the thick Lexan plastic. Temporarily blinded, Jak stayed on course. With nothing to feed upon, the flames soon died. With a curse, Doc tossed aside the exhausted M-16 and pulled out the LeMat. Now he would have to open a window and invite return fire. Then inspiration hit, and he holstered the blaster to rummage through the clothing of the aced men on the floor. In triumph, Doc unearthed a pair of 9 mm Heckler & Koch pistols and spare clips. Removing the homemade silencer from one of the blasters, he tucked the other away, then returned to his blasterport.

By this time, the ville was in total chaos, the dead and the dying everywhere, the air thick with smoke, a score of buildings behind the war wags blazing with wildfires. Converging blasterfire came from a dozen windows, but wherever it did, the grimy crews of the war wags replied with bursts from the machine guns, the steel-jacketed rounds punching clean through the ancient bricks and the men behind.

Unexpectedly, the radio crackled.

“*Scorpion* to convoy,” Roberto said calmly, the sound of a discharging fire extinguisher in the background. “Our flank is clear. Repeat, the flank is clear. Time to go for the hill!”

“Confirm. *Big Joe* takes the point!” Scott declared, and the war wag lumbered to the front. War Wag One and the UCV

assumed flanking positions, and War Wag Three covered the rear, the flamethrower sending burning sprays at anything coming from behind.

Advancing along the main street of the ville, blasters crackled at the convoy from nearly every window, and pipe bombs rained down from the rooftops. But the convoy ignored that and concentrated on moving faster and reaching the baron. That would be where the real fight would start. They all knew it was possible to leave at any time now, the ville was in flames and the wall guards were aced or running. Nothing barred their exit. However, Baron Conway had violated the one unbreakable rule in the Deathlands, never jack a trader, and now he had to pay the price.

Rumbling along, the four war wags maintained a diamond formation, their blasters sweeping for targets. However, the night was quiet, and there did not seem to be any activity near the baron's fortress, which made Roberto and Ryan uneasy. The baron had either run away, or they were heading straight into an ambush.

A rocket streaked from the ville to miss War Wag Three by only inches. However, Diana withheld return fire as there was no way to tell where the attack came from. Twice more, rockets zoomed out of the darkness, then the convoy was among the greenhouses and the attacks stopped. Rolling through the eerie calm that always filled a pause in battle, everybody took the opportunity to reload their blasters.

In the urban combat vehicle, the companions also got rid of the aced sec men, relishing the rush of fresh air from the open doors as it removed the stink of blood, cordite and gunpowder from the mixed rounds. But then the war wags moved past the rows of greenhouses and there was only flat open ground extending all the way to the somber fortress on the hill.

Instantly, the four drivers turned off their headlights and drastically slowed their advance, letting their sight adjust to the dim glow of the moon. The darkness would offer them some degree of protection from incoming fire, but it also made

them extremely vulnerable to traps. This was another shatter zone, just like the one outside the ville wall, a chilling field to slaughter invaders.

There was a loud bang from underneath War Wag One, and the whole vehicle shook as a tire was blown off.

"Land mines!" Roberto cursed over the radio. "Frag it, these defenses are too good. Everybody head back to the front gate! We're leaving."

"Then wait for us outside!" Ryan snarled into the mike. "The UCV is bomb proof. It was made for this sort of combat! Follow us and we'll plow you a path straight to that mansion!"

"This is *Big Joe*. Are you insane?" Scott demanded, the words almost lost in the crackle of background hash. "You aren't a fragging tank!"

"Yeah? Just watch and see," Ryan shot back, then hung up the mike and grabbed a ceiling stanchion. "Okay, Jak, let's see what this steel monster can do!"

"Yee-haw!" the teenager yelled, lowering the fork and accelerating to the front of the convoy.

As the thick metal tines dug into the soil, the UCV slowed, the angled steel throwing the dirt to the sides like a ship cutting through waves. Almost immediately, something loudly exploded, the blast obscuring the hill, and a hail of shrapnel peppering the prow. Then they were through the fiery smoke and still moving.

"Any damage?" Ryan asked, looking around anxiously.

"Not a scratch!" J.B. replied with a sideways grin, studying the monitors of the dashboard. "Dark night, this thing really is a fragging tank!"

"Look at that, they took a mine without even slowing!" *Tiger Lily* shouted over the ceiling speaker. "Hot damn, we're back in business!"

"All right, form a queue to hell!" Roberto commanded. "*One-Eye*, you have point!"

Rollicking over the uneven ground, Jak saw the fork

detonate two more mines, the charges as ineffectual as spitting on the military juggernaut. Then the whole wag jerked, throwing everybody hard against the bodybars as the fork unearthed a tree stump. But even before the teen could touch the controls, the tandem engines revved, and the fork ripped the obstruction out of the ground and sent it hurtling away into the night. Before the fork could lower again, a blast went off directly under the right wheel. The UCV tilted alarmingly, then automatically righted itself and kept going, the tines digging in deep once more and throwing aside barbed wire, pungi sticks and what resembled bear traps. But they were gone so fast that nobody got a good look.

In tight formation, the other wags stayed right behind the UCV, their blasters chattering away to give protective cover. A rocket streaked by the UCV, the flash of the launch momentarily silhouetting a kneeling sec man and a horse loaded with spare rounds. With ruthless accuracy, Wag War Two responded with the long spray from the flamethrower. The sec man cursed as the horse was engulfed in liquid fire, then the spare rockets detonated, both man and beast vanishing in a thunder-clap.

Unstoppable, the UCV triggered five more land mines, and then there was only silence. Now there were only a hundred yards to the hill.

Squinting into the night, Jak held the wheel in tight hands, ready to instantly react to anything in their path. Long moments passed, and the only discernable sounds were the military tires crunching the soft ground, the low crackle of hash over the radio, and the monotone beep of the radar.

“*Scorpion* to convoy, looks like we’re through!” Roberto said over the radio. “Okay, does anybody know if the baron has a family?”

“*Tiger Lily* to *Scorpion*,” Diana replied. “That’s a negative. There is only him and the Thirty, his personal gang of sec men.”

“*One-Eye to Scorpion*,” J.B. said into the mike. “I heard the same thing. Not even his sluts sleep there.”

“Good news. Ready...aim...*fire in the hole!*”

Seemingly even brighter in the Stygian darkness, the shimmering beam of the powerful chem laser extended from the top of War Wag One, but the lambent ray barely touched the fortress before it winked out.

“Black dust, we’re out of crystal!” Roberto growled, the frustration thick in his voice. “Evasive maneuvers!”

Quickly, the four wags darted away from each other just as a rocket soared upward from the fortress to explode in the sky, filling the field with the bright white light of a magnesium flare. Promptly, the mansion twinkled with blasterfire, then a huge gout of flame belched from one of the fieldstone bunkers. Half a heartbeat later, something rushed past the UCV with a low hum, closely followed by the dull report of a black powder cannon.

“By the Three Kennedys, that was a Napoleon!” Doc cried. “Can this vehicle survive the impact of a six-pound iron ball?”

“Not if it hits a window,” Ryan snarled, one hand wrapped tight around a ceiling stanchion.

“Okay, Jak, run the gauntlet! We gotta get close enough to use the fork and flip those bastard cannons!”

Hunching forward in his seat, the young man remained silent as he engaged the second engine and tromped on the gas. There was a whine as the Allision transmission adjusted, and then the UCV lurched forward with renewed speed.

The cannon spoke again in lolling fury, but the deadly Napoleon had clearly been loaded for coldhearts, not war wags, and this time a spray of bent nails and small rocks blasted across the three machines, doing scant damage. Not a tire blew, or a window cracked.

Overhead, the Fifty chattered and then stopped.

“Dark night, we’re out of brass!” J.B. fumed, releasing the useless joystick.

“Then let them eat steel!” Doc declared, drawing the sword from within his ebony stick.

“Cry havoc!” Mildred shouted, carried away by the adrenaline rush of battle. “And let loose the dogs of war!”

In the darkness ahead, a cannon fired, deeper, louder, the force almost palpable, then several boomed in unison. Suddenly an iron ball glanced off the side of War Wag One, denting the armor deeply. The M-60 machine guns yammered steadily and a cannonball smashed off the flamethrower on Two, pink fuel from the ruptured line spraying toward the stars.

Spotting a suspicious dark area on the ground, Jak savagely twisted the steering wheel to the left. Another sec man armed with a homemade bazooka was visible for only an instant before going under the massive wheels with a sickening crunch. As if in reply, flames appeared from straight ahead. Jak dodged to the right and a cannonball hummed by exactly where the wag had just been.

Clutching the jumpseats, the rest of the companions desperately wanted to help in some way, but even if they miraculously managed to hit the bunkers with their blasters, the soft lead rounds would do nothing to those fortifications. Their chance would come when the wag stopped and this fight went on the ground.

Another cannon boomed, and even as he jogged to the right, Jak mentally marked the spot of the muzzle-flash. As the ball hummed by, the albino teen cut loose with a rebel yell, and charged straight for the cannon, gambling that the UCV could move faster than the gun crew could reload. Vague details of the bunkers and hilltop mansion started to come into view. Oddly, there did not seem to be a lot of activity for a place that was about to be invaded.

“Ready...aim...” the ceiling speaker crackled. “*Fire in the hole!*”

Checking the clip inside the Steyr, Ryan frowned. Funny, he had thought Roberto was out of diamonds for the laser.

“Oh hell,” J.B. said in a worried tone. “You don’t think he’s crazy enough to—”

Bright lights flashed from on top of each of the trader’s three war wags, and a sizzling trio of warbirds leaped away into the blackness.

“Brace for impact!” Ryan shouted, dropping the long-blaster and pulling down a bodybar. It clicked into place just as the missiles violently slammed into the fieldstone bunkers. The overlapping explosions ripped the buildings apart, sec men and cannons tumbling through the darkness, the entire hill vanishing in a blinding flash.

Slamming on the brakes, Jak tried to turn away from the coming maelstrom, but it was too little, too late. A split second later, a deafening concussion arrived, and the armored wags were buffeted aside by the sheer force of the blast, headlights shattering and loose pieces of armor ripping off. The entire world seemed to be shaking, roiling, heaving... then a shotgun barrage of shrapnel: broken stones, cannonballs and grisly human remains pounding the wags. The barrage of debris built in force and fury, until it seemed the wags would be torn asunder. Then, just as suddenly as they began, the volcanic reverberations abruptly stopped, and there was only a loud ringing silence.

Dripping mud, blood and fuel, the four wags stood motionless in the smoky darkness, their hot armor creaking softly as loose stones rolled along the churned earth, and a classic mushroom cloud began to form above the fiery remains of the hilltop fortress.

Chapter Fifteen

Bitter smoke lay heavy and oppressive across the battlefield, like a winter fog. Long minutes passed before any sign of life returned to the dented war wags: shapes passing behind windshields, blasters withdrawing from blasterports, muffled curses and low groans of pain. Only the heavily battered War Wag Three stayed dark and still.

“Fireblast... A-anybody aced?” Ryan growled, blinking a few times to clear his vision.

“Don’t think so,” J.B. mumbled, glancing around the interior of the vehicle. There was no blood showing, or at least none that hadn’t been there before. The wag was filthy from the residue of the aced sec men, some of their knives still lying on the sticky floor.

“No damage that I can see,” Mildred said, pushing up the bodybar of her jumpseat. There only seemed to be the expected array of bumps and bruises. Fair enough. The companions would be sore in the morning, but that was always a lot better than waking up dressed in pine. Then she scowled. “Doc, are you hurt?”

“No indeed, madam, I am not,” the old man replied, brushing at a dark stain on his frock coat. “This is from the assassin I terminated. He perished easily, but seems to have been...well, particularly juicy.”

In spite of herself, Krysty snorted a laugh, then cringed as her wounded hair tried to flex in response to her emotional state. The memory of the bullet passing through her hair came

unbidden to mind, and for a moment the woman thought she might lose what little she had eaten for dinner. Gaia, it had hurt worse then getting shot! Krystry knew that she would be fine in the morning, her kind healed fast, but right now she had a nukestorm of a headache, her temples pounding so hard it blurred her vision.

“What happened?” Jak mumbled, wiping blood off his mouth. The safety harness had kept him from going through the windshield, but not from smacking his head against the steering wheel. It was cushioned like the floor, but there was still a core of steel in the middle and his teeth had darn near broke finding that out the hard way.

“Those damn missiles must have set off the stores of black powder,” J.B. said, squinting into the smoke outside. Even with the halogen lamps, it was difficult to see anything past the glass. The beams simply sank into the swirling fumes and disappeared.

“Black powder, gunpowder, cordite, grens, brass, dynamite, and everything else Conway had jacked from traders and travelers over the years,” Ryan added grimly, releasing his safety belt. He stood uncertainly, then realized it was the UCV that was slightly tilted, not him.

“Serves him right for storing everything in one location,” Krysty said in a throaty whisper, her fingertips massaging her temples. “The legacy of a fool is always disaster.”

“Triple stupe,” Jak agreed wearily, flexing his hands to restore the circulation.

“Or perhaps, merely overconfident,” Doc suggested, using his ebony stick to flick aside a boot with a foot still inside. “As the good book says, pride goeth before the fall.”

“That Chinese?”

“Good Lord, no! It is from the Holy Bible, Mr. Lauren. Haven't you ever read it?”

The teenager shrugged. “Can only read some. Not good. Not lot books to practice.”

Checking his pockets for spare clips, Ryan said nothing. Peace and forgiveness was all right in theory, but that turning-the-other-cheek crap was for another time and another world. If there was a heaven, then the world was hell, and commandments of a long-past God didn't apply anymore to the damned. The only rules in the Deathlands were: keep your blaster loaded, keep your word, protect kin and stay alive.

Striding to the door, Ryan worked the latch and stepped outside. The smoke moved around the big man like a living thing, and slowly Ryan was able to make out shapes and details. The bunkers were gone, wiped clean off the face of the world, along with the hilltop mansion. There didn't seem to be anything remaining above the ground, except for some scraggly bushes and the bare trunk of a tree, the leaves, branches and even the bark completely removed.

"By the Three Kennedys," Doc gasped, looking out a side window. "John Barrymore, get on the radio and call the *Tiger Lily* at once!"

"Why?" the Armorer asked, turning. He inhaled sharply. Only a few yards away was War Wag Three. Every window was shattered, there was firelight playing on the ground under the engine of the Mack truck, and a cannon was sticking out of the rear grille, a rivulet of blood trickling off the pitted metal.

"*Scorpion* to *Tiger Lily*, what's your status," Roberto demanded over the ceiling speaker. There was a pause. "War Wag Three, report! Is anybody alive?"

"*Big Joe* to convoy, don't bother, they're gone," Scott said woodenly. "That nuking cannon cored them like an apple. I sent out a couple of my people to check, but...wait a second."

The second became a minute, then two.

"Okay, they're aced," Scott continued softly. "There were no survivors."

"Are you sure?" Mildred shouted to be heard over the mike. Turning, J.B. passed it to her.

"There are many injuries that can make a person seem aced," Mildred began, but was cut off.

"They're fragging pulp!" Scott retorted. "There ain't no bodies, just ooze with teeth. Savvy?"

"Yes, of course," Mildred said quickly. "My apologies."

"We can mourn the aced tomorrow," Ryan growled, stepping back into the wag to grab the Steyr. "But right now we should do a recce for any survivors in that mansion. If we wait too long, they can get away."

"Get away... Hot pipe, man, are you crazy?" Scott demanded incredulously. "The blast damn nearly chilled us all, and we were a hundred feet away behind steel. There's a dent in my port armor bigger than a horse!"

"No, *One-Eye* is right. We have to check," Roberto said, the signal coming in loud and clear over the static. "*Big Joe*, stay here and watch for stragglers. Take no chances, burn down anybody coming this way."

"The flamethrower is busted to drek," Scott replied curtly, "but my crew is already reloading the missile pods. We'll be hard in a few minutes."

"Good enough. *One-Eye*, meet me at the bunkers in five."

"Roger, *Scorpion*, see you there," J.B. replied, and clicked off the mike.

Side by side, the two war wags turned and rumbled back to the ruin of the bunkers. They parked just at the edge of a large depression, the undamaged headlamps shining brightly down into the murky depths. The craterlike hole was yards deep, the blackened sides lumpy with fieldstones, splintery logs and the grisly remains of people, the limbs still steaming from the hellish heat of the explosion.

"Okay, Jak and Mildred, stay with Krysty," Ryan said, working the slide on the SIG-Sauer. "Burn anybody who tries to get inside without the name code. J.B. and Doc, with me."

"Consider me Porthos, my dear Ryan," Doc said, sheathing his sword in the ebony stick.

“Millie?” J.B. asked, holding out a hand. The physician tossed him a small item and he tucked it into a pocket.

“Watch your ass, lover,” Krysty said, shielding her eyes from the glare of the headlights. The red filaments were tightly coiled to her head, revealing how much pain she was suffering.

“I sound horn, come running,” Jak ordered with a scowl. “You hear twice, we on way.”

Nodding, the three men climbed out of the UCV and proceeded carefully through the assorted destruction, the ground slippery in spots from cooked organs. The smell was disturbing, appetizing and revolting at the same time.

As the companions reached the crumbling edge of the blast zone, Roberto and Jessica arrived with a dozen of his crew.

“I really didn’t think the baron would be stupe enough to store everything together,” Roberto said. “What a colossal waste of supplies.”

“Might be something in the house,” Ryan suggested, checking the action on the Steyr. “At least we don’t have to worry about any more land mines.”

“Why not?” Jessica demanded, then her face softened. “Right. The blast would have set them off.”

“Angelo, Phillip, stay here, and guard our rear,” Roberto commanded, thumbing back both of the hammers on his sawed-off shotgun. “Let’s see what the good baron stored in his cellar, other than ammo.”

The steep slope of the hill was difficult to traverse. Clearly there had once been a flight of wooden stairs, but those were long gone, and the loose soil constantly shifted under their boots. The group was almost out of the headlight beams when the arc lights of War Wag One hummed into operation and swung upward, clearly illuminating the way. Warily keeping out of each other’s shadow, the group eventually reached the top and paused, weapons at the ready. But there was no need. The titanic blast of the bunkers had razed

the mansion to the ground; nothing was visible above the soil. Starting across the lawn, Ryan saw quite a few gaping holes, showing where land mines had been buried, the explosive charges triggered by the brutal shock wave of the gargantuan blast.

Proceeding around the summit, the group found what remained of the house scattered down the far side of the hill: chunks of walls, wooden beams, roof tiles, carpeting, pots and pans, broken chairs, a bathtub and numerous bodies. The limp figures lay amid the wreckage, all of them wearing the black uniform of a sec man, but none of the corpses were quite intact enough for them to be able to identify it as a man, woman or even norm.

There were also quite a few bent pieces of metal tubes that Roberto and Ryan easily recognized as homemade bazookas, antiwag rockets.

"I don't know if those are strong enough to punch through our armor," Ryan stated, resting the Steyr on a shoulder. "But there sure as shit are enough of them to do the job!"

"Firepower and friends," J.B. declared poignantly.

Several of the crewmen muttered agreement. Yep, you could never have enough of either of those.

"Okay, let's make sure those assholes are chilled," Jessica directed, pointing with the barrel of her big-bore Russian .44 T-Rex. "Everybody knows the drill. Hunt and chill. Don't get too close, watch for grens and don't waste brass just because we have plenty. Use your knives."

"We could use rocks!" a crewman stated bluntly, kicking over a corpse. The boneless body flopped over to obscenely jiggle for a while.

Uncaring, the tiny blonde shrugged. "Whatever you like. Just get it done." The job was handled swiftly.

Afterward, the group reformed and finished the recce around the hill, then moved inward to check the rest of the mansion. A flower bed surrounded the crumbling foundation,

the plants reduced to bare stems, the leaves and petals gone with the wind.

Checking the dark earth for mines, the group reached the stoop and finally looked down into the basement. However, there was only darkness. The headlights of the wags were unable to reach into the recess because of the angle.

Surprisingly, several of the crewmen pulled out plastic mirrors to reflect the lights down into the basement.

Rather impressed, Ryan upped his estimation of Roberto and his people. Triple smart. There were unbreakable shaving mirrors in the U.S. Army backpacks they had found in the redoubt, but he hadn't thought to bring one along.

While the crewmen moved around the small squares of light, accomplishing next to nothing, J.B. pulled out Mildred's survivalist flashlight, pumped the handle a few times and clicked it on.

The powerful beam stabbed down into the gloom, revealing a relatively undamaged basement. Furniture was randomly scattered, chairs, sofas and tables, but none of the pieces seemed to be harmed in any way. There were several doors set into the walls, one of them locked with a wooden bar, and in the corner were brick stairs that seemed intact enough to risk, with a good chance of reaching the lower level alive.

"Why isn't all of that stuff in splinters?" a crewman demanded suspiciously, frowning her brow. The longblaster in her hands was a rebuilt Remington, the wooden stock bound with gray tape, but the long barrel gleaming with fresh oil.

"Shear factor," Ryan explained. "The blast was so strong that it cut flat across the hill, unable to slow enough to reach down into the basement."

"Sort of like blowing the froth off a beer," a crewman said.

"Exactly."

"Bloody hell, that means there could be survivors down there," Roberto muttered, drawing the S&W .357 Magnum blaster with his free hand. Testing the balance, he hefted both

of the blasters. "All right, I'm on point! Jessica stays up here as the anchor, Ryan and his crew with me."

"Yes, sir!"

With the flashlight showing the way, the mixed group descended the stairs and picked a path through the array of furniture to reach the first door. Inside they found a torture chamber, the iron hooks and screws on the walls horribly familiar.

Moving to the next room, they unearthed a mechanical pressing machine, the hopper full of mutie ivy, a ceramic jug under the flow spout catching a slow drip.

"Bet that's the drug he put in our food," Jimmy sagely guessed, crinkling his nose. There was no smell, but somehow he felt unclean just being near the mutie drek.

"Better save some of it," Ryan suggested. "Mildred is always saying how shine isn't enough for real surgery, and we've never been able to successfully cook something she calls ether."

"Yeah, my healer says the same thing," Roberto admitted. He disliked the idea of using the foul stuff, but anything was worth a chance if it saved the life of a crew member. "Jimmy, take two jugs. Ryan, the rest is yours. We'll torch this pesthole on the way out so it can't be used on anybody else."

"Fair deal," J.B. said, giving his highest compliment.

The third room was full of canned goods, a treasure trove of predark food, each precious container coated with a thick layer of wax to keep out the corrosive damp. Wicker baskets would have to be retrieved from the war wags, and the goods hauled away to be inspected by both of the healers. Nothing in this pesthole could be trusted at face value.

The next room was empty, the wooden wall racks designed to hold the homemade bazookas and bags of rockets. After that, the group found a different type of torture chamber, the wooden tables covered with leather straps to hold the victim firmly in place, legs spread wide.

"Sweet Jesus, we wouldn't be able to chill that bastard

baron anywhere near enough,” a female crewman said with a dark scowl as they left the room.

Heading for the last door, everybody braced for an attack when it suddenly swung aside with a loud creak. Then a battered sec man stumbled into view, his face and clothing covered with blood. He was a living nightmare; both eyes were completely crushed, the gelatinous sludge oozing down his bruised cheeks, red snot dripping from his broken nose and dark blood running freely from both ears.

Blind and deaf, the pitiful thing staggered past the armed group, his trembling hands feebly clawing the air.

With a very solemn expression, Doc aimed the LeMat, then lowered the handcannon. “My sincere apologies, Roberto,” he said. “This odious task is yours to fulfill. You lost kith and kin to these foul brigands, while we did not.”

“Thank you,” Roberto said in a deep growl, extending the S&W .357 Magnum blaster until it almost touched the face of the pitiful thing that had once been a man.

“Don’t waste the lead, Chief,” a crewman growled, pulling out a wicked knife. “I’ll do it for you.”

“We don’t torture, newbie,” Roberto stated, cocking back the trigger, the tiny noise seeming preternaturally loud. “You got an enemy, you chill him. Torture only makes you worse than them.”

“But my sister was on Three!” the crewman growled, taking another step forward. “My kid sister, Beth!”

“As well as many of my crewmates,” Roberto said in a monotone, and triggered the blaster.

The muzzleflash of the Magnum round actually touched the chest of the whimpering sec man. Hit point-blank, the man jerked from the impact of the hollowpoint round, staggered, then dropped to the floor. Feebly, the sec man tried to rise, then went still.

“A debt of blood has been paid in blood,” Roberto said, cracking the cylinder to extract the spent brass. “You can

have his blaster and boots. Leave the rest for the stingwings. Satisfied?"

"Never," the crewman snarled, sheathing the blade. "But it's enough for now."

Suddenly there came the sound of running boots and a score of crewmen charged down the stairs, blasters leading the way.

"Trouble, Chief?" Jessica asked, her Russian blaster in one hand, a crackling torch in the other.

"Just finishing the job," Roberto said, sliding in a live cartridge and closing the cylinder with a snap.

"Any chance it's the baron?" Jessica asked hopefully.

"No, just a wounded sec man," he answered, tucking away the blaster.

"Pity," the woman muttered, coming closer and lowering the torch for a look. As the mutilated face came into view, she inhaled sharply. "Nuking hell, I know this man!"

"How?" Ryan demanded, his hand unconsciously tightening on the checkered grip of the SIG-Sauer.

"It was five, no, six years ago," Jessica muttered, kneeling closer to the corpse. She reached out to touch his hair, then withdrew her hand, wiping the fingers clean on her pants. "We met once on the docks at the Hollywood Islands. We played cards until dawn and spent the night together." She stood, her face bright from the firelight. "Sir, his name was Emile Thornton, and he rode with Broke-Neck Pete."

"Are you serious?" Roberto asked, his words dripping scorn. "He was crew?"

"A chief mech, yes, sir. Emile knows...knew machines like Eric does comps."

"Interesting," Roberto muttered thoughtfully, rubbing his jaws. "Then he's not somebody Pete would ever let go willing."

"No, sir."

“Well, he wasn’t a prisoner, that’s for damn sure,” Ryan stated, gesturing with the Steyr. “He’s packing iron.”

“Mayhap he was a spy?” Doc offered uncertainly.

“Well, of course he was a fragging spy. The question is, who did he work for?” Jessica demanded. “We know that Conway liked to jack travelers, so was Emile here to learn more about the ville to help Pete take it down, and loot the armory?”

“Or was he working for the baron to try to lure in Pete to get jacked himself big time.”

“No loss there.” Jimmy sniffed, leaning against the wall. “Broke-Neck Pete is the biggest son of a bitch I ever met. Cheats on deals, sells blasters to slavers and cannies, and even trades brass filled with dirt if he ain’t coming back to your ville.”

“He ain’t nothing but scum on wheels,” a crewman added emphatically.

“Yeah, jacking the ville makes sense,” Ryan said slowly, thinking out loud. “Unless Pete was actually waiting here for you folks to arrive.”

“What for?” Roberto asked, creasing his forehead. “To join my crew as a mech, and learn where I hide my caches of supplies?”

“That’s sounds like Pete, sure enough,” J.B. stated, tilting back his fedora. “He’s been known to do it before.”

“Has he?” Jessica asked sharply. “I never heard that.”

“Oh yeah. Pete once tried to sneak a spy onto Trader’s convoy...the original one, I mean,” Ryan added diplomatically.

“Dark night, when Trader found out, he went Magnum, full-auto!” J.B. said with a hard laugh. “He shoved a gren in the mouth of the damn spy, pulled the pin and heaved the bastard off a cliff!”

“Then he tracked down Pete and hung the son of a bitch from the blaster turret of his own war wag,” Ryan added.

"But..." Jimmy started to ask.

"Yeah, of course, Pete lived. He's a tough little bastard, I'll give him that much," Ryan relented grudgingly. "But his neck has been crooked ever since."

"Trader did that?" Roberto asked in surprise.

"Bet your ass," J.B. stated with pride.

"Indeed, a most disreputable blackguard," Doc said, leaning on his ebony stick. "It is only logical that Pete must be after your hoard of supplies."

"Damn straight!" a crewman agreed.

"Unless, of course, he was trying to obtain that journal you have locked away somewhere in War Wag One."

Everybody stopped talking at that, and the night suddenly felt much colder as a hard wind blew into the open basement, carrying the reek of powder, diesel fumes and death.

"What...what did you just say?" Jessica whispered.

"Why, nothing of import, madam," Doc demurred, slightly askance from her overreaction. "I was merely postulating on the remote possibility that—"

"Nuke-sucking hell, that must be it!" Roberto interrupted, his face contorting in a feral snarl. "That lily-livered piss-pants Pete would never have the brass to risk crossing me, unless the stakes were massive! Unbelievably huge!"

"And there's nothing bigger than Cascade," Jessica agreed.

"The problem is," J.B. contributed, "if Pete is seeking allies in this..."

"Then the secret is out," Roberto finished roughly, running stiff fingers through his hair. "God's tits, we're going to have every fragging trader alive on our ass all the way to Cascade, plus an army of coldhearts, mebbe even the triple-damn slavers!"

"Then we don't go," Jessica said simply. "If we can't get there safely, we don't even try. We can try again next spring."

"Do you really think Pete will lose his hard-on for Cascade after only a couple of months?"

“No,” she admitted honestly. “But someday he will.”

“But what about all those new blasters!” a crewman asked.

“Frag it,” Jessica sniffed, hitching up her gunbelt. “We have enough.”

“Unfortunately, we have to go,” Ryan stated in a clear loud voice, drawing everybody’s attention. “You don’t have the only doomie in the world, and if somebody else has learned where the predark city is hidden, it could be ashes when we get there next year. Hell, next month!”

“Yeah, I thought of that, too,” Roberto said unhappily. “Just wanted to see if anybody else reached for the same can of beans as me.”

“Besides, if Broke-Neck Pete, or any of a dozen other rat-fuck traders, ever got their hands on unlimited ammo and blasters,” J.B. added brusquely, shifting his munitions bag, “it would be the start of a nukestorm across the whole damn continent that would make the Mutie Wars seem like a fucking Sunday afternoon tea in a gaudy house.”

“Orders, sir?” Jessica asked, snapping a salute.

“We bury everybody in Three,” Roberto directed. “Recover anything that can be repaired, Molotov this fragging basement, and leave. Time is short, and we better haul ass.”

“Check!”

“You forget one thing,” Ryan added. “We need to make sure that Pete can’t get supplies here anymore.”

Already walking toward the stairs, Roberto stopped to turn around. “Yes, I know,” he said softly, the words almost lost in the wind.

“My dear Ryan!” Doc cried in shock. “Are you suggesting that we smite the entire ville as retribution?”

“Have to,” Jessica replied curtly. “We have got to send a message across the Deathlands that nobody can try to jack a trader, any trader, and live.”

“It’s unconscionable! Barbaric!”

“But there’s no other choice. It has to be done! There’s not

much civilization out there, and traders doing business are the only thing holding it together. If we fall, it's over."

"Fair enough," Ryan acknowledged. "So how about something worse than chilling every person? A lot worse. Something that'll strike fear into every fat gut of every baron, in every ville, from the Washington Hole to the Western Islands."

"Sell them to the cannies?" Jimmy guessed wildly.

"Even better than that," J.B. replied with a smug grin.

Frowning deeply, Roberto started to ask a question, then comprehension dawned and the big norm slowly stood taller, the crushing weight of a hundred graves removed from his back.

"Yeah, that'll do just fine," he growled, almost smiling.

Chapter Sixteen

Loping across the countryside, the two hellhounds almost lost the scent at the water-which-burns that came from the ground with an angry roar, the air clean of any smell whatsoever. But the physical tracks of the enemy vehicle were plainly discernable in the soft mud, and the hunt continued.

Both of the proto-animals were burned deeply in numerous spots, from trying to get into the metal cave. Opening the black wall had not been hard. They had found a small box of pebbles set into the wall, and several of them smelled of target, while the rest did not. Dimly remembering this procedure from their training session in the white-place-of-pain, the genetic constructs used their tentacles to press only the pebbles that had been touched. Nothing happened for a very long time, and the sun was low in the sky before there came a dull thud, a series of clicks, and the mammoth black wall split apart to grant them entry.

But before they could set paw into the cave, the bioweeps had been attacked by a Class Two guardian, and the constructs had been forced to retreat, licking their wounds. With no other way into the cave, the hellhounds had gone to default hunting techniques, and circled the earthen dome, ever spiraling outward until suddenly relocating the bitter smell of the enemy once more.

Following a cool stream of water, the bioweeps came upon a prime specimen of *ursus arctos horribilus* munching apples. The grizzly bear was ten times their size and weight, but its

teeth and claws were no match for their vast arsenal of killing tools, and soon the Hellhounds were feasting upon the rich, tender meat. It was good, oddly flavored with the sweetness of apples, but it was nowhere near as satisfying as the screaming redflesh of the enemy.

Eating their fill, the hellhounds washed in the stream to remove any trace of blood and thus reduce the possibility of being detected by the pungent copper smell. The urge to hunt was almost overwhelming in their minds, but the hellhounds had been programmed to sleep for two hours every night, even when on a mission, and so they unwillingly obeyed, each one taking a turn to stand guard while the other was temporarily vulnerable.

The moon was high when the second hellhound awoke, refreshed and rejuvenated, its wounds completely healed. There were a great many scavengers finishing off the ragged carcass of the *ursus arctos horribilus*, and they greedily consumed several of the smaller creatures before charging down the muddy banks of the little babbling creek. The smell of the metal box was sharper now, fresher, and twice they found the spoor of the enemy behind some bushes.

Growing more and more excited, the bioweps raced faster through the night, the darkness bright as day to their augmented sight, the urge to feed upon the enemy growing stronger with every passing minute.

RATTLING SLIGHTLY FROM THEIR loose armor, the three war wags drove into the center of Newton and parked in a triangular formation where their blasters could easily cover one another. The UCV's Fifty was fully supplied now, some of the linked brass coming from *Tiger Lily's* wreck.

The ville was dead quiet, with nobody in sight. To the companions, it seemed that half of the ville had been damaged in the fight. Several of the larger buildings were gone, reduced to smoldering ashes. Most of the smaller fires had burned out

by themselves, or been extinguished by civies using buckets of water from the well.

Incredibly, the dead sec men had been lined up in neat rows, all of their blasters and boots still in place. Baskets near the bodies were filled with the spent brass from the fight.

“These aren’t townspeople, they’re slaves,” Mildred muttered hatefully, a fist pressed against the scratched window of the UCV.

“Not anymore,” Ryan said from the driver’s seat, his hands resting comfortably on top of the steering wheel.

“Now hear this,” Roberto’s voice boomed from the loudspeakers on top of War Wag One. “Now hear this, ya slack-brain feebs! Everybody in the square in five, or I start blasting.”

Mere seconds later, a wide assortment of people swarmed out of doorways and alleys like half-dressed cockroaches. A few were holding torches, the pitch crackling and spitting; the rest were carrying landels, a candle placed inside a drinking glass to protect the flame. The combination was surprisingly effective, and in the flickering light the companions could easily see the absolute terror in the eyes of the people obediently gathering in front of the massive war wag.

“All hail the new baron!” a wrinklie shouted feebly, waving a skinny arm, the flesh hanging loose underneath. “Hurrah for Baron...uh...Baron...”

“Hurrah for the trader baron!” the blacksmith supplied, and the townspeople erupted into wild cheering.

With the sound of working hydraulics, the armored hatch of the wag lowered, and out stepped Roberto, his face as grim as death. Impatiently, he waited for the noise to die away.

“Eagleson,” the trader growled, climbing to the ground. “The name is Roberto Eagleson, and you damn well will never forget it again!”

“Y-yes, my lord,” a woman said, giving a curtsy. “All hail Baron Eagleson!”

The uneasy crowd took up the cry again, clearly trying to appease his wrath. Tolerantly, Roberto let them continue for a few minutes before snapping his fingers.

In unison, every machine gun in the convoy cut loose, firing streams of hot lead into the sky, the muzzleflashes overwhelming the torches and candles, the military fusillade sounding louder than the destruction of the bunkers.

Instantly, the townsfolk stopped cheering and cringed.

“All right, enough of that bullshit!” Roberto said into a hand radio, and the blasters stopped.

His boots patting on the brickwork, the trader walked closer to the mob, and placed fists on his hips. “Baron Conway is aced,” Roberto announced loudly. “Along with most of the sec men. There is nobody here anymore to protect you, no more law and order, no more control.” He paused. “Only me.”

In the front of the crowd, a young girl began to openly cry, and numerous others hung their heads in abject submission, waiting to hear what new doom was about to fall.

“On the other hand, I’m also not your new baron,” Roberto continued, watching the looks of amazement and confusion grow on the multitude of faces. Young, old, man, woman, there were a lot more people here than the measly hundred he had previously guessed. Good. So much the better.

The words seemed to echo across the decimated ville, punctuated by the crackle of the countless small fires and the occasional bark of a black powder round cooking off from the mounting heat.

“My lord?” a young boy asked, a clenched fist holding up his ragged pants.

“I said that I’m not your fragging baron,” Roberto repeated, driving home the point. “And I never wish to see this fragging pesthole of a ville again! Do you have any idea how many of my crew I lost tonight? One of them even died from eating too much bread.” For a moment, the trader let his anger slip loose, his voice rose to a bellow. “Aced by a loaf

of bread! Is that any way for a motherfragging trader to board the last train west?"

Breathing heavily, the townsfolk bowed their heads and said nothing, the wind coming in from the hill carrying the faint smell of destruction and death.

"Only one of you showed the juice to give us a warning," Roberto continued, slightly softening his tone. It was an old negotiation trick. Start hard, rattle their cage, push the other fellow to the wall, then step back, give a little, and get everything you wanted.

"Only one of you bastards showed the wisdom of a baron, and the guts of a seasoned sec man!" Roberto continued, then raised the radio and pressed the transmit button. "Will the woman called Yurizane come to the ville square! Yurizane, front and center!"

There was a commotion among the civies, the confused people moved aside, and the busty gaudy slut shuffled out of the crowd. Her cheeks were smudged black, her loose bodice burned through in spots, showing dimples of flesh.

Obviously she had been helping to fight the fires. Roberto approved. Ryan was right, this was no ordinary slut.

"What do you wish of me, my lord?" Yurizane asked uneasily, her soot-stained fingers toying with the hem of her dress.

"You tell me." Roberto smiled, crossing his arms. "Because, as of this moment, you're the new baron in Newton."

The pronouncement galvanized the crowd, ripples of excited murmurs running quickly through the astonished people. Some blinked stupidly, others raised disbelieving eyebrows, a few scowled in outrage and damn near everybody looked as confused as a stickie in a revolving door.

"Is...this a joke?" Yurizane asked hesitantly. "Hell, I'm not even the madam of the gaudy house!"

"And now you never will be," Roberto said, placing a hand on his chest and giving a little bow.

“Are you out of your fragging mind!” a fat man screamed, unable to restrain himself. “A slut as a baron? Blind Norad, I’ve fucked that bitch, and now I’m supposed to kowtow and salute! To die at her whim?”

Without warning, the heavy machine guns of the war wags fired a brief burst into the air once more, then lowered the hot barrels to point directly at the assemblage. The people went stock-still, their expressions ranging the full spectrum of emotions.

“You better obey her commands,” Roberto said, radiating malice as he pulled out the sawed-off Remington. “Or else start walking out the gate with the clothes on your back.”

A sea of anxious faces turned in that direction. “Beyond the gate” was another way of saying chilled. Outside the ville was the abode of coldhearts, muties, slavers, cannies and much, much worse.

“In fact, everybody in this ville has to kneel before the new baron and swear loyalty, or I level this shithole here and now!” Thumbing back a hammer, Roberto grinned without humor. “Your choice!”

There was some shoving among the townsfolk, a few muttered curses, and then Stewart lumbered forward. Walking to Yurizane, the huge blacksmith knelt. “Blood, honor and obedience,” he said formally.

Wordlessly, the woman nodded, and Stewart stepped aside to glare defiantly at the others. The skinny waitress from the tavern followed next, then a couple of other sluts, a cobbler, then the wife of an aced sec man. That opened the floodgates, and one by one, everybody knelt and pledged allegiance to the pretty woman in the dirty dress, until there was only one plump man left, the dissenter from before.

“Never!” he snarled hatefully, drawing a derringer from a pocket. “I’ll never bend a knee to a filthy little—”

Yurizane darted a hand into her bodice, and Roberto went for his blaster, but Stewart moved faster and jerked a hand

forward. The thrown hammer slammed into the face of the fat man, teeth and blood spraying outward from the powerful blow. Staggering about, he triggered the derringer into the ground, then the handle of a knife was suddenly jutting out of his belly. Groaning, he collapsed to the street, trembling and soiling his pants.

“Finish it,” Yurizane commanded, her face flushed.

“By your command, Baron,” Roberto said, and triggered the shotgun. The buckshot and bent nails tore into the dying man, flipping him over to expose his riddled guts to the stars, then with a soft gurgle he stopped moving.

That stopped the cheering for a moment, then it came back louder than ever.

“Got a last name?” Roberto whispered, reloading the sawed-off. “Some don’t. I didn’t. Chose Eagleson for myself.”

“Hinchey,” she answered softly, nervously running stiff fingers through her volumes of loose hair. “Yurizane Hinchey.”

Closing the blaster, the trader shouted, “Newton! I present to you, the most noble Baron Hinchey!”

The machine guns cut loose a third time, the spent brass raining down to musically ting-a-ling on the brick street. Raggedly, the crowd broke into wild applause, and a few repeated the earlier cries and huzzahs.

Keeping his features neutral, Roberto knew this was a terrible waste of ammo, but if the woman, a girl, really, had half a chance in hell, this was the only way to secure her power. It was either this, or blow the ville off the map. One way or the other, he was spending brass tonight. Better it went to save lives than take them.

Through the windshield of the UCV, Ryan and the other companions watched the trader weave his deal. There was nothing they could do to help at the moment but act as part of his crew.

“One heart, one mind, one life, one goal,” Doc said in his stentorian bass. “Peace. Blessed, blessed peace.”

“And revenge,” Jak added with a smirk.

While the cheering continued, Roberto draped an arm over the woman and pulled her close. “Okay, got somebody you trust?” he inquired. “Trust with a loaded blaster to your back?”

“My brother,” Yurizane replied promptly. “Marine.”

“Where is he?”

“Out hunting.”

“When he comes back, that’s the chief sec man. What about the rest?”

“Who do you suggest?” Yurizane asked, trying to sense a trap.

He scoffed. “Nuking hell, woman, they’ve been in your bed! Nobody should know these folks better.”

“Yeah, I suppose so,” the new baron muttered thoughtfully. Most of the menfolk were liars and cheats, nothing new there. It was probably the same thing the whole world over, she supposed. But there was her brother, that blacksmith, a few women that she could trust. Not many, but some. That was enough for a start, anyway. The decision made, Yurizane decided to handle this new position just like any other of her old work, assume everybody was a liar and get the jack up front.

“How about blasters?” Yurizane asked, straightening her shoulders. “What’s left in the armory after your take?”

Roberto tried not to grin. Now she was negotiating! “We didn’t take a thing. We’re also not leaving you anything. If this is to be your ville, you have to make it work.”

“Fair enough,” she said. Lord knows, there was enough on the ground to get the ball rolling.

At that thought, Yurizane walked to the line of corpses and looked them over carefully. Choosing the least damaged weapons, she took a bolt-action longblaster from one and a big-bore auto-loader from another. Returning to stand by

Roberto, Yurizane retrieved her knife from the fat man, wiping the blade clean on his shirt. Clumsy in bed, stupid in life.

Draping the gunbelt across her chest like a bandolier, Yurizane positioned the blaster in the middle for an easy draw, then abruptly tossed the longblaster to Stewart. The blacksmith made the catch in a huge hand and worked the arming bolt to chamber a round.

“Baron Hinchey!” the giant bellowed at the top of his powerful lungs.

Now the entire ville went absolutely insane, hooting and laughing and really cheering, the sound completely different from the earlier platitudes.

Studying the heartfelt reactions, Roberto nodded in satisfaction. Almost there. Time to seal the deal.

“All right, I’m leaving now,” Roberto said over the radio, the words relayed through the loudspeakers. “But I’ll be back by the new moon. If I roll into the ville and discover that the new baron has fallen down a well, been eaten by stingwings, or died of the Red Cough...” He didn’t bother to finish the threat, leaving the dire results of what would befall the townsfolk in that eventuality to their imaginations. From the pale expressions on their faces, it seemed that they were doing a much better job of scaring themselves shitless than he ever could.

Turning, the trader climbed into the war wag, but paused in the door to motion Yurizane closer. She approached with a determined walk, the blacksmith following close behind.

“Mind a little advice?” Roberto asked, addressing her from the steps.

She looked up. “All I can fragging get.”

Smart woman. “Choose four assholes that everybody hates, and four decent folk. Ace two of the assholes tomorrow morning, and reward two of the nice people in the afternoon. Then do it all over again the next day. Savvy?”

“Reward and punish. Like training a mule.”

By Stephen, mebbe she would make a good baron after all!

Somebody inside the wag handed Roberto a radio, and he passed it to the young baron. "Doesn't work," he muttered. "But they won't know that."

Nodding in understanding, Yurizane moved clear of the ramp, then paused. "I heard that another trader name of Broken Feet, or One-Eye Pete, some damn thing like that—"

"Broke-Neck Pete."

"That was it. Well, he's after your ass. If he comes here, what would you like for us...for my sec men to do?"

"Trade with him, or not, your choice," Roberto said. "But don't trust him any more than you would a slaver, and if I ever hear of you harming a trader, even one I hate, I'll fucking gut you myself."

Now she grinned. "Wouldn't want to waste the bread," the new baron answered resolutely. "However, no wag but yours will ever see the inside of this ville ever again. Fair deal?"

"Fair deal."

She offered a hand and they shook.

Looking over the crowd one last time, Roberto moved back and let the armored door cycle shut and lock.

"All right, let's get this convoy rolling!" he shouted over the rumble of the diesel engines. "We've got thirty miles to the next fuel cache!"

"And then?" Jessica asked.

"Straight on to Cascade!"

Black fumes belched from the louvered exhaust pipes of War Wag One, and it started forward, the Mack truck and the UCV close behind. Parting quickly, the townsfolk got out of the way, and the convoy rolled past the destroyed cannon emplacement and stopped in front of the gate.

At a command from the young baron, the townsfolk swarmed to the walls and got the portal open wide enough for the armored transports to squeeze through.

"Think we'll beat Pete?" J.B. asked from the gunner's

chair, his fingers tripping the controls for the fully loaded Fifty. In the rear of the UCV were plastic crates full of spare ammo, food, water, grens and a single precious jug of the mutie ivy juice nestled in a thick cushion of green hay.

“Don’t know for sure,” Ryan admitted, watching as the ville receded into the darkness. “But you can bet live brass that once he hears about Newton, Pete is gonna to charge for Cascade hell-bent for leather.”

“Good.” Jak grinned, studying his new knife. “Angry enemy, easy chill.”

“Usually,” Ryan amended. “But not always.”

The convoy moved forward into the starry night, leaving behind dead friends and solemn promises. But the promise of a new future lay ahead, and there was always tomorrow. Even in the heart of the Deathlands, there was always a tomorrow.

Chapter Seventeen

With a low grating noise, a boulder rolled aside, and Baron Kirkland Conway stumbled out of the rough-hewn tunnel and into the night. Close behind him came five armed sec men carrying oil lanterns and heavy backpacks. The fat moon was directly overhead, flooding the box canyon with a cold silver glow. A stout wooden gate closed off the far end of the small canyon, the top frothy with coils of barbed wire.

“Dark night, that was close!” a bearded sergeant wheezed, leaning against the rough rock wall of the canyon. “I thought that son of a bitch was going to ace us for sure, until you opened that panel in the torture room.”

“That’s why it was there,” Conway retorted, looking over the canyon to make sure everything was exactly where it should be. Nothing seemed to have been touched since his last visit. The fuel drums were still in place, as well as the distillation unit needed to turn silver into nitric acid for making gun-cotton, and off to the side were huge canvas bags sewn shut to protect his most valuable treasure. Five fully restored predark motorcycles. They were a gift from Broke-Neck Pete, an advance payment for chilling Roberto Eagleson. Of course, since he’d failed, Pete would want them back, but that wasn’t going to happen.

“What next, Baron?” a private inquired, hefting his long-blaster. Two bazookas stuck out of his backpack like insect antennae.

Furious, the baron turned on the man. “Next?” he raged.

“Next we go after the coldhearts that jacked my ville! My ville! I want to slit the throat of Roberto, and bathe in his blood! That’s what we do next!”

“What for, sir?” a corporal asked, lowering a canteen and wiping the water from his mouth on a dry sleeve. “We tried for a jack, the trader burned us out, but we escaped. It was just business, nothing personal, eh?”

With a snarl, Baron Conway pulled the Ingram machine pistol from his belt and fired, the high-velocity 9 mm rounds punching through the startled sec man and ricocheting off the boulder behind him. The water in his stomach mingled with the gush of blood from the hideous wounds, and the corporal toppled over sideways.

“Everything is personal!” Conway snapped, holstering the smoking blaster. “You there, Private, you’re now a corporal! Get his weapons and backpack. Sergeant, cut out the bikes! Private, check the batteries. And you, defuse the land mines under the gate. I want to be back on the road in an hour!”

As a cloud covered the moon, the exhausted sec men bristled at the command, but said nothing. Conway was a murdering lunatic, but they had served worse. And until this disaster he had always been a top-notch source for blasters and brass. Besides, everybody served somebody. It only made sense to work for the most vicious dog in the pack.

“Why so soon, Baron?” the sergeant asked, pulling out a knife and testing the edge.

“You heard the blast, man!” the baron declared. “Damnation, it almost collapsed the tunnel! There’s probably nothing left of the mansion, so after raping the sluts and torturing any of my sec men unfortunate enough to still be alive, the trader will torch the ville and leave. We’ll have to hurry to catch his trail.”

The mention of torture did not bother the sec men much. That was just part of the job when you donned the royal black uniform and strapped on a blaster. A gaudy slut named

Yurizane had once joked that sec men probably knew more about the innards of people than any healer as they saw them more often. True words.

“Beg pardon, Baron, but how are we going to take four war wags with a half dozen bikes?” a young sec man asked carefully, trying not to incur the infamous wrath of the noble.

“With guncotton and poison!” Baron Conway boasted proudly. “We’ll force them into the mud lake and slaughter them like newborns!”

“Are we going to become traders, sir?” the private asked.

“Traders?” The baron said the word as if expelling a piece of rotten fruit from his mouth. “No way in hell. We’ll use those war wags to take over another ville, a better ville, with stronger walls, weaker muties, older shine and younger sluts! And the name of the place is Cascade!”

“Yes, my doomie said that you would renege on our deal!” somebody said loudly, the amplified words booming over the canyon.

Spinning in horror, the baron and his sec men saw bright lights swelling into existence from the other side of the fence, then the barrier fell forward to crash on the rocky ground.

Advancing steadily from the blinding light came a small man and a large woman, backed by a dozen crewmen armed with rapidfires. Behind them was the hulking *Road Dragon*, several delivery vans and a massive steam truck bristling with weaponry.

“Pete!” Baron Conway smiled disarmingly, spreading his arms wide as if to embrace an old friend. “I was just talking about how you and I were going to—”

The strident roar of the 12.7 mm chain gun from the *Dragon* interrupted the baron, the barrage of hot lead making the people jerk around like mad puppets, chunks of their flesh smacking into the cold stone walls. After a few moments, Pete raised a hand and the chain gun stopped firing.

“Okay, take everything useful,” Pete commanded. “Especially those bikes. They might come in handy later.”

“We should hit Roberto next,” Helga growled. “Our slat armor can stop his missiles!” The M-60 in her hands visibly radiated waves of heat from the vented barrel.

“True, but not his laser, my dear,” Pete corrected grimly. Already his mind was shifting components, altering the plans as poison, motorcycles and bazookas were added to the equation. A hundred possibilities came streaming into existence, and the twisted man chose one with the least amount of personal risk. He had taken a wild gamble once and paid a terrible price. The man touched his uncomfortable leather collar. Hellfire, he was still paying that price to this very day! So now expediency was his watchword, covertness his armor, and stealth his sword.

“Let’s go,” Broke-Neck Pete commanded, heading back to the *Road Dragon*. “And don’t forget those land mines!”

A FEW DAYS LATER, the UCV was steadily crashing through a dense forest of bamboo, the other two war wags moving directly behind like fish on a stringer.

The pale stalks were only a few inches thick, but they grew over fifty feet tall and in wild profusion, closer together than blades of grass. All of the wags were covered with watery sap as if doused with green blood, and the endless snapping of the stalks against the armored fork of the urban combat vehicle was unbelievably loud, rendering conversation inside the war wag flat-out impossible.

With bits of waxed cloth stuffed into his ears as protection, Ryan was crouched behind the wheel of the UCV, trying to drive in a straight line. However, there was nothing to see, no features of any kind to use as reference. There was only the high bamboo on every side. With no other choice, the Deathlands warrior was depending entirely upon the dashboard compass to keep them going in one direction, and hopefully not curving around to become forever lost in the pale clattering forest.

After the battle of Newton, Roberto had been forced to make a brief stop at one of his more remote caches for some desperately needed supplies. During the night, nobody slept, coffee-sub was made by the gallon, and the arc welders worked nonstop. Now, the convoy was repaired, refueled and grimly racing to make up for the lost time.

The longest delay had been a gamble on the part of Roberto, but one that he deemed absolutely vital to the success of the voyage. Since Ryan and the companions had fought side by side with his people, that meant they were now considered crew, and should reap the full benefits of that exalted status, which included receiving some heavy iron. The UCV was now armed with the spare rocket pod from the *Tiger Lily*. Recovered with a crashed LAV-25 in the Dakotas, the 6-shot honeycomb fit snugly in the railings on top of the urban combat vehicle, and control wiring clicked together as if designed for easy installation. But then, since the MRL pod and the war wag were both military machines from the same time period, maybe they were intended for each other.

With the pintail-mounted .50-caliber Remington machine gun set directly between the driver and gunnery seat of the UCV, the rockets could launch in any direction but straight ahead, which was only a minor inconvenience. The additional firepower had been deemed a sensible precaution by everybody. If Broke-Neck Pete was out to stop Roberto from reaching Cascade, the only thing the crew could be sure of was that when the little bastard struck, it would be hard, fast and with everything he owned. Pete was well known for not believing in mercy, and not giving anybody a second chance.

Just then Ryan saw a brief glimmer of light from between the stalks ahead, and suddenly the UCV exploded into bright daylight. As the tandem engines revved with power, Ryan downshifted and cut a motor to allow the other wags to catch up with them. A few moments later, the vehicles emerged

from the bamboo so heavily covered with sap that they appeared to be painted with camou colors.

“Thank Gaia that’s over!” Krysty exclaimed, yanking the cloth off her ears. “A few more minutes of that noise and I think I would have gone permanently deaf!” Realizing that she was shouting, the woman lowered her voice to a normal level. “Sorry,” she muttered.

“Hell, I agree!” Ryan snarled, using one hand to remove the cloth plugs. The man worked his jaw a few times to clear his ears. “Gotta admit, though, it’s clever to hide a supply cache in the middle of a bamboo grove.”

“Nothing grows faster than bamboo,” Doc agreed from the gunner seat, tucking the waxed cloth into a pocket. As a child, the scholar had been trained to never waste anything, and it was a habit now that had saved his life more than once in the Deathlands. “Under the right conditions, the plant can achieve over a foot a day! In less than a week, there won’t be any trace of our passage through that vast, primordial grove!”

“Nob blad atoll,” J.B. agreed, the words mumbled around a toothbrush. Lowering the window, he gargled and spit outside. “I got to hand it to Roberto, not even the Trader ever had a self-erasing entranceway!”

“Wonder what Cascade has?” Jak said with a frown, his hands busy sewing shut a bullet hole in the collar of his leather jacket. “How hide entire ville for hundred years?” With all of the razor blades hidden among the metal and feathers, it was dangerous work and even he had to be exceptionally careful.

“Guess we’ll find out soon enough,” Ryan stated, shifting gears to slow down and maintain position. Now that they were out of the bamboo, War Wag One had assumed the lead again. However, possessing a pair of tandem engines, the UCV was a lot faster than either of the hand-built war wags. The others were hurtling at their absolute top velocity, while the UCV was tooling along at barely half speed.

“Be mighty nice if Yates could tell us more,” J.B. com-

plained, tilting down his fedora. "But then, I've never met a cooperative doomie in my life."

"Genius always borders on insanity, John Barrymore," Doc gently reminded him in a scholarly fashion.

"When figure out which Yates is, let know," Jak snorted in disdain, fastidiously continuing the fine needlework.

Returning to the original directions in the leather journal, Roberto had War Wag One assume the lead, and Ryan moved the UCV to the rear of the convoy, the two sets of radar constantly sweeping the empty landscape for any dangers. But there was only the flat grasslands, marked by occasional islands of trees and scraggly bushes. High overhead, dark storm clouds filled the sky, heat lightning flashing bright in rumbling majesty, but there was no telltale smell of sulfur in the turbulent air to announce the coming of acid rain.

As the day passed, the companions used the free time to catch up on their sleep and to cook a meal over a small can of fuel in the rear cargo area. Beef jerky soup and pan biscuits, the bread mix coming from the private stores of the trader. Afterward, Ryan briefly stopped the UCV near some bushes, then hurried to rejoin the rest of the convoy. War Wag One and Two both had the luxury of onboard lavs, while the UCV only possessed wide spacious windows. It was the only real drawback of the armored behemoth.

A few hours later black smoke appeared on the distant horizon. Extending straight up, the plume slammed into the storm clouds, pushing them away, only to have other clouds flow in to fill the gap. The turbulence churned the atmosphere for miles, making it appear as if the sky above was boiling.

Maintaining a safe distance from the phenomenon, the people in the convoy could soon see that the smoke was gushing out a large hole in the ground, the surrounding stones cracked and partially melted. Soon, they could hear a low rumble coming from the ground below, and the urban combat

vehicle began to shake slightly. As the faint smell of smoke arrived, the vents of the UCV automatically slammed shut and the air recycling system surged into operation.

“Dark night, an underground coal fire!” J.B. exclaimed, leaning closer to the window. “Never seen one this big before! I’ve heard that some of these are actually from before skydark, been burning for years and years.”

“Just smoke?” Jak asked in wonder. “Never seen anything like before.”

“No coal fires in Louisiana?”

“No coal.”

“Fair enough.”

“Hell of a landmark,” Ryan noted, angling away from the scorched earth around the roaring giant. “A nuking blind man couldn’t miss that big bastard.”

“Wonder if natural,” Jak mused. “Or if Cascadians set?”

“Why would they do that?” Krysty demanded askance.

The teen shrugged. “Help find way home.”

“Out of the mouths of babes and fools.” Doc smiled, toying with the lion’s head of his ebony stick.

“Come again?” Jak muttered, tilting his head forward so that his snowy hair fell across his face.

“Ah...babes, fools and stalwart Louisiana warriors!” Doc quickly corrected. “My mistake, Mr. Lauren.”

Jak nodded. “Better.”

“Well, at least you didn’t call him Lochinvar again,” Mildred said with a snort.

Just then the radio came alive.

“Okay, we’re getting close,” Roberto said over the ceiling speaker, the radio broadcast oddly clear of the usual static of background ionization. The grasslands must be a clear zone, a place where the nukes never fell. “From here we head due east for those mountains. Watch for a railroad bridge crossing a river valley!”

“Roger,” Scott replied.

“Better have your people get hard,” Ryan suggested. “This would be the perfect place for Pete to—”

Suddenly there were tiny flashes of fire from a stand of trees on the horizon, and the radar began wildly beeping, the tones sounding faster every second.

“Shitfire, those are missiles!” Scott cursed over the radio. “Full reverse! We gotta try to outrun them!”

“Frag that!” Roberto commanded. “Fire all blasters! Take them out!”

Instantly the .50-caliber machine gun of War Wag One cut loose, filling the smoky air with streams of copper-jacketed lead. A split moment later, the M-60 machine gun of Two opened fire, yammering away in short bursts as the gunners tried to track the incoming warbirds. Grabbing the joystick of the Fifty, J.B. added the firepower of the UCV to the massive outpouring of destruction.

For several seconds nothing seemed to happen. Then the protective hatches of the big laser dropped and the cylinder swung around, waves of heat visibly rising from the primary reaction chamber. But suddenly there came a tiny puff of gray smoke in the air, followed by the dull thump of an aerial explosion.

“Got ’em!” Scott cried in triumph.

“Not yet,” Ryan growled, working the controls of the MRL to center the crosshairs on the monitor on a stand of trees set off by itself. Savagely, he touched the release and there was a low rush from above, then flames washed over the UCV as a rocket launched to streak away, almost too fast to follow.

The copse of trees became alive with the twinkling firelight of blasters. But where the convoy succeeded, the others failed, and the entire island of trees was violently removed from the landscape.

“Least know Pete cheap,” Jak stated with conviction.

“Five or six,” Mildred agreed, removing her ZKR from a blasterport. A lot of folks seemed amazed that the compan-

ions were such deadly shots, but there was a perfectly ordinary reason for that. They used their weapons a lot, while most barons and coldhearts never wanted to use brass unless absolutely necessary. The end result of which was that the companions lived and the coldhearts died. Back when she was trying to qualify for the Olympics, the physician spent several hours at the gun range every day for months. One of Ryan's favorite sayings was that it was better to spend five brass and learn how to make the last one hit, than spend six and end up in the ground.

"Five or six," Krysty stated grimly, removing an M-16 rapidfire from another blasterport, and dropping the empty magazine to insert a fresh one. "Pete may be cheap, but he is persistent."

"Indeed, madam," Doc said, lowering his own rapidfire. "His range of dirty tricks is most impressive. Drugged food, spies, ambushes, land mines, snipers and now a missile attack!"

"Wonder what he's going to hit us with next?" Ryan growled, shifting into gear and putting the UCV in motion.

Two hours later, the companions found their answer, when the convoy reached the river valley and discovered that the bridge crossing over the chasm was gone.

Chapter Eighteen

As the convoy rolled to a halt a supposedly safe distance from the cliff, something exploded under War Wag Two and the machine tilted slightly as a tire was blown off the armored rim. Backing away, the wag stayed within its own tracks until on rocky ground, then Roberto and his crew climbed out to replace the tire with the last spare. Afterward, everybody gathered between the three hulking machines as protection from possible snipers.

“Well, we’re shit out of luck now,” Jessica drawled, cradling a Remington bolt-action longblaster in both hands.

“Seems so,” Ryan agreed, the Steyr resting on a shoulder, a finger on the trigger.

Although it was out of sight from this angle, the man could clearly hear a white-water river crashing and thundering at the bottom of the wide gorge. No mist rose from the waves below, so the yawning crevice had to be good and deep. However, the real problem was that the bridge was gone. Not wrecked or smashed apart, but removed. There were drag marks on the opposite cliff, where the entire structure had been forcibly hauled away.

“Olivia! This must have been Olivia!” Roberto declared, thumping a fist against his stiff leg. “Only her bastard steam trucks are strong enough to drag a damn bridge!”

“The damn thing is probably just out of sight, past the next hill,” Jessica said, craning her neck. “Dragged just far enough away that we can’t even try to sink a harpoon into the trestle and haul it back with our winches.”

“That would never work!”

“Yeah, but we would have tried!”

“Chief, do you think Olivia is working with Broke-Neck Pete?” a crewman asked hesitantly.

“Not willingly,” Roberto answered gruffly. “Those two hate each other more than stickies and howlers.”

“I...did not foresee this,” Yates muttered uneasily, tugging on his black beard. The doomie constantly shifted his stance, as if trying to dodge invisible bullets from snipers. “My sincere apologies, sir. I have failed you, once again.”

“Never thought you were infallible,” Roberto snarled, staring hard at the bridge. There were grappling hooks in the armory of the *Big Joe*, but even if they could get close enough through the land mines planted around the moorings on this side of the cliff, not even all three of the wags working together could drag the bridge back into position.

“And even if we got it here, what are the chances Pete, or whoever did this, hasn’t rigged the bridge to collapse with us in the middle, or mined the other side,” J.B. added, obviously thinking along similar lines.

“Yeah, this is a dead end,” Ryan agreed, casting a look around the countryside. “Unless there’s something in the journal about another way across. What’s that to the south?”

“A dried lake,” Roberto said, scowling in that direction. “At least, it’s supposed to be there, according to the journal.”

“But that sounds splendid, sir!” Doc cried out happily.

“Not really,” Roberto snorted, pulling the slim volume out of his shirt pocket. Briefly, he thumbed through the yellowed pages. “Yes, here it is. The lake...no name, is dry only a few weeks out of the year, the rest of the time it’s a mud pool, impossible to cross.” He closed the journal and tucked it away once more. “There are mountains to the north. No way we could ever drive the wags up there. Those big bastards are hard enough to climb on foot, even if we find a logging trail or predark highway.”

“Not to mention there will almost definitely be more bridges to cross,” Krysty added, her hair flexing angrily.

Roberto nodded. "Unfortunately, yes."

"Plus, by the time we got to Cascade, Pete would have already been there for weeks," Ryan added, sucking a hollowed tooth. "Exactly how long is War Wag One?"

"Exactly? Grill to spikes, a hundred and twenty-two paces," Jessica replied promptly, then her face darkened. "Hot pipe, are you smoking jolt? We are not, repeat, not going to ram our wag across the gorge as a makeshift bridge and then cross over on foot! Put that right out of your motherfragging mind!"

"Agreed," Roberto stated, crossing his arms. "Besides, I'd say that we're a couple of feet short, anyway."

Raising both eyebrows, Jessica said nothing in reply, but her body language clearly said that in her opinion, even considering such an action was beyond sacrilege.

"Time is short!" a voice decreed.

Everybody turned to face Yates.

"Even now Pete approaches Tumbledown!" the doomie exclaimed, reaching out blindly to try to touch the sky. "Soon, he shall reach the Lost Road, and then... Hurry! We must hurry... if we...are to...to reach the..." His strained voice faded away at that point, and the bearded man slumped as if totally exhausted.

"Get him to a bunk!" Jessica snapped, jerking a thumb. "The poor bastard always falls asleep after doing that."

Several of the crewmen rushed to the doomie's side, and helped him stumble toward War Wag One. Feeling the weight of time pressing down upon them, the rest of the group mentally shifted through dozens of possibilities, each less likely than the one before, until they unanimously reached an unspoken conclusion.

"Okay, we have no choice here," Roberto muttered unhappily. "We have to divide the convoy. Scott, take the *Big Joe* back for wood from those trees we blew up by the geysers and try to jury-rig some sort of bridge. Ryan and the UCV stay with me."

"What about the mines?" Scott asked with a scowl.

“We’ll take care of them before we leave,” Ryan said. “At least, on this side of the gorge.”

“Fair enough,” the wag chief said. “We can blow a safe passage through the other side with grens and blasters.”

“Better use knives,” Jessica corrected sternly. “You may need that brass to handle Pete, if we get chilled.”

Grimly, Scott nodded. Digging up the land mines by hand would take forever, but the crew of the *Big Joe* had just been made the spare tire in this fight. Fair enough.

“We got your six,” Scott declared resolutely. “If we find Pete alive, the last thing he’ll ever see is our tires in his teeth.”

“Do twice, make sure,” Jak said. “He slippery.”

Grinning humorlessly, the wag chief nodded and shot the teenager with a stiff finger.

A bald crewman frowned. “How could steam trucks cross a mud lake?”

“Can’t. But Fat Stephen has delivery vans that are light enough to do it,” another crewman suggested. “Mebbe he’s working with Pete.”

The companions exchanged glances. Fat Stephen, that was a name they had not heard in some time. Long ago, they had been forced to travel with him across mutie territory, and it was a bloody journey none of them would ever forget.

“More likely he’s been aced, and Pete now owns his wags,” Jessica guessed. “The little bastard is gambling everything on this one trip. He has got to seize control of Cascade, because after the news of this spreads, his word is going to be pure crap, and a trader lives by his rep.”

“Only now he is a traitor, madam, not a trader,” Doc said, stressing each word.

She curled a lip. “You can load that into a damn blaster, old man.”

“Whoever gets to Cascade first, help guard the ville, and warn them about Pete,” Ryan stated, returning to business. “I hate to say this, but it’d be better if their baron doesn’t trade with anybody than let Pete get his hands on unlimited brass.”

“That’s for damn sure,” Roberto agreed, pulling out the radio and pressing the transmit button. “Heat ’em up, boys, we’re moving out!”

Using the armored fork, it took the UCV only a few minutes to clear a wide strip of earth around the concrete bridge abutments, the few unexploded mines dumped over the cliff to detonate below in the churning waters of the nameless river.

As the *Big Joe* disappeared into the west, Ryan took the lead and rolled due south, War Wag One staying close behind in case of any more surprises. From the other side of the gorge there came a few bright flashes on the top of trees that might have been signal mirrors, or sunlight reflecting off the telescope of a longblaster, but there was no way of telling for sure. Unwilling to spend a rocket on an imaginary enemy, the two wags did nothing, and soon the suspicious flashes were left far behind.

Over the long miles, the ground sloped gently downward until reaching the same level as the river, the rushing water spreading out to cover the land in a shimmering expanse of unknown depth. Advancing slowly, Ryan dipped the fork and used the steel tines to gauge how deep the water was ahead of them. The armored prongs dug easily into the soft muck, plowing aside mounds of moist earth.

The gooey mixture was alive with small fish and frogs, but thankfully there were no signs of gators, swampies or anything else more dangerous than the occasional snapping turtle.

Riding high above the watery quagmire, the urban combat vehicle made good time at first, but then had to slow down to let War Wag One keep pace. Set much lower to the ground, the heavy armored wag was almost a good foot under the dark water, the thick mud spraying out sideways from the sixteen tires like black wings.

Spotting a low island of relatively dry ground rising from the shallow lake, Ryan rode over the land to give Roberto a

chance to clean his wheels and get better traction. But the moment the UCV reached the weedy crest, the soggy dirt detonated in a loud series of sharp explosions from a cluster of hidden land mines. The combined blasts shook the wag hard, but Ryan saw nothing on the dashboard go into the red and doggedly kept on driving. However, Roberto wisely kept his war wag in the mud and slogged around the tempting island.

“Clever. They’re trying to force us into the deep mud,” J.B. said, watching the smoky landmass recede.

“Fireblast, I think it’s working!” Ryan snarled, looking at the rearview mirror. Falling rapidly behind, War Wag One was now moving at a snail’s pace, the whole vehicle shuddering as the studded tires began to spin freely in the soupy ground.

“*One-Eye to Scorpion*, hold on!” J.B. said into the mike. “We have a tow chain and can haul you out in a jiffy.”

But there was no reply, only the crackle of static.

“Shitfire, we’re in a dead zone,” the Armorer cursed.

“They’ll figure it out,” Ryan said, braking to a halt. But as the one-eyed man started to leave the driving seat, the UCV listed slightly and there came a distinct sinking sensation. Quickly getting back behind the wheel, Ryan revved the tandem engines and got back into motion. The war wag struggled for a few seconds, then lurched forward and continued on smoothly.

“Dark night, we can’t stop, either!” J.B. cursed vehemently. “How the frag are we going to get the chain to them now?”

“Circle. I bring chain,” Jak said, shucking his jacket and unbuckling his gunbelt.

“Good heavens, what are you doing, lad?” Doc demanded.

“Stripping. What think?” the teenager replied, bending to unlace his combat boots. “Old bayou trick. Mud stick to clothes, bring you down.”

“And it won’t cling to your skin?”

“Not if he’s wearing a good layer of this,” Mildred said,

passing over a square plastic jar. "Use it carefully, that's all we have."

"Make do," Jak muttered, opening the container and digging out a large translucent gob. Carefully, he started spreading the petroleum jelly over his pale legs.

As Ryan slowly drove back to the trapped war wag, Krysty threw open the rear doors and Jak jumped out to sink waist-deep into the black ooze. Wading forward, the teen was halfway to War Wag One when the UCV made another pass and Doc heaved out a bulky duffel bag directly in front of the pale youth. Moving fast, Jak grabbed the canvas strap of the bag before it sank from sight, then started forward once more, awkwardly dragging the heavy bag behind him.

Alert to the new presence in the lake, several snapping turtles began going for the semiclothed teen, but the big-bore .50-caliber machine guns of War Wag One triggered a brief salvo, the heavy rounds blasting the turtles apart, spraying out gobbets of pale flesh and watery blood. The rest of the turtles instantly changed directions and converged on the tattered corpses of their fallen brethren.

Reaching the trapped war wag, Jak opened the duffel and took out a coiled length of steel chain. Setting a hook onto the front grille, he jerked as the horn sounded, and behind the windshield Roberto shook his head and pointed to the prow. Nodding in understanding, Jak waddled directly in front of the wag, trying very hard not to think what would happen if the wag suddenly found traction now. Well, at least it would be quick.

Fumbling under the heavy grille, Jak found a metal hoop sticking out slightly, and mentally praised the trader for thinking ahead. Dropping the hook into the eye, Jak hauled the chain away from the shuddering vehicle and waited for the UCV to pass by again.

Going as slow as he dared, Ryan fishtailed the wag near the mud-encrusted youth and felt a hard jerk as the chain went

taut. Shifting gear fast, he pumped the gas and the tandem motors struggled under the new load, several of the gauges on the dashboard swinging into the high numbers, but not quite reaching the red zone. Their speed noticeably decreased, then began to gradually pick up.

“This seems to be working,” Mildred announced, her face pressed against a window. “But how do we get Jak back on board?”

Even as she asked the question, a side door of War Wag One cycled down and the filthy teen threw himself onto the angled stairs. Then Quinn appeared and bodily hauled the albino teen inside, the door closing right behind them.

“Jak’s safe!” Mildred exhaled in relief.

“Glad to hear it! Now somebody turn on the bastard radar!” Ryan ordered, both hands tight on the trembling wheel. “We need to reach the shore triple fast!”

The engine temperature was creeping upward, and the man tried the old trick of turning on the defroster to try to draw some heat off the engines. It worked, but then the windows fogged solid, making it impossible to see. Suddenly, Krysty appeared by his side and cleaned the inside of the Lexan plastic with a handkerchief. Ryan grunted in thanks and concentrated on his driving, keeping away from the small islands or any calm surface that could mark the presence of a sinkhole or deep water.

“Okay, there’s something large just ahead of us,” J.B. announced, bent over the glowing screen. “It’s either dry land or a mucking huge island.”

“Either one would do,” Ryan snarled, the tendons distended in his arms, both hands clenched white on the vibrating steering wheel.

“I just hope that we are not under observation,” Doc mused out loud, looking over the Stygian landscape. “This very moment would be the perfect opportunity to attack us again.”

"Not gonna happen," J.B. said without looking up from the radar. "We're in a fragging swamp, so there's nothing for a sniper to hide behind, and by now Pete knows that we can shoot down his damn missiles. I don't know what he's packing, but there's no fragging way he could possibly have more missiles than we do live brass."

"Damn well hope so," Mildred growled, checking the load in her Czech ZKR target revolver.

Just then, the radar began to tone steadily.

"What is it, another missile?" Ryan demanded, hunched over the wheel. He could see the distant shore through the foggy windshield. They couldn't be more than a thousand yards away, maybe ten or fifteen minutes.

"No, this is something in the lake," J.B. said in growing disbelief. "It's big, and coming fast."

"It's probably just War Wag Two," Doc said hopefully, squinting into the distance. There was an island in the lake that he did not recall being there only a few moments earlier.

Since Ryan and Krysty were busy, Mildred reached into the man's jacket and extracted his navy telescope. Extending the device to its full length, she swept the flat landscape and soon found the new island. Oddly, it seemed to be coming their way. The physician had no idea what it could be. The thing was much too large to be a swampie or an alligator, and the water was way too shallow for a submarine or sailing ship. Maybe a rowboat or a canoe, but those were much too small to be mistaken for an island. What the frag was it, a beached whale? That was about the right size.

Suddenly the radio speaker in the ceiling crackled briefly into life, the garbled transmission lost in the background static. Then it crackled again, this time a single word coming through loud and clear: *kraken*.

Chapter Nineteen

“Fireblast!” Ryan snarled, stomping on the gas pedal and throwing the wag into high gear. The tandem diesels revved in power and the dashboard flashed with meters flickering into the red zone. But the chained wags moved slightly faster across the oozing morass of watery mud.

Flipping switches, J.B. armed the five remaining missiles while the rest of the companions shoved the barrels of their weapons out the blasterports, and waited with pounding hearts for the gigantic mutie to get within range.

“Anybody know where to shoot the thing?” Mildred demanded, icy calm flooding her body and mind as if about to go into surgery. “Where’s the heart, or brain?”

“Don’t know that a kraken has either of those!” Krysty answered, wiping the windshield clean of condensation. Her crimson hair flexed wildly, then coiled tightly to stay out of her eyes.

“Indeed? Has the abomination never been dispatched before?” Doc asked, his sight riveted on the approaching creature. It was like watching a train coming out of the night, growing larger and more menacing with every passing second.

“There’s always a first time!” Ryan shot back, trying to urge the struggling wag on to greater speed. Everything but the transmission was at the red line, bordering on failure. The combination of the mud and dragging the munitions wag behind them was almost more than the vehicle could handle.

At any moment the wag was going to stall, leaving them helpless before the onrushing colossus.

Without releasing the wheel, Ryan bumped Krysty with an elbow. She nudged him back with a hip, the silent communication between the two lovers saying more than a thousand hurried words.

Coming straight across a small island, the kraken was engulfed in a brief flurry of explosions from buried land mines. The detonations hardly slowed the beast, and it loudly roared like the fevered delusions of a madman come to horrid life.

With a rush of white smoke, a missile launched from the aft MRL pod of War Wag One. The sleek warbird streaked across the watery swamp and slammed into the kraken, the blast blowing away the moss and sticky mud to reveal a leathery form advancing on a writhing nest of jointed tentacles. The bulbous head possessed multiple eyes, like some kind of an insect, while the mouth was a yawning pit full of the needle-sharp teeth of a carnivore. Everybody else in the Deathlands might call the thing a mutie, but the companions felt sure that when a kraken bled, if it could bleed, that the fluid would be the telltale yellow of another triple-damned biowep. The giant seemed designed just for chilling, which meant that it probably had been built in some predark lab for just such a purpose. Nature designed animals to live and breed; only humanity built creatures for the sole purpose of sowing death.

Another missile launched from the chained war wag, and J.B. added one of their own. The missiles hit the kraken dead-on, but did scant damage, the wounds closing almost as fast as they were formed.

At that chilling sight, every machine gun chattered into life, and rapidfires yammered into operation from every blasterport. Streams of lead hammered the onrushing kraken, but the bullets merely sank into the mottled flesh and disappeared.

Seeing how far away the shore was, Ryan decided to take

a gamble, and lifted the fork from the mud. With that removed, their speed increased exponentially, and the kraken dropped behind slightly. As if infuriated by the escape, the huge creature redoubled its efforts and rapidly closed the gap, the lashing tentacles reaching out to slap the armored hull of War Wag One with ringing force. A blaster was snatched out of a blasterport, fingers caught in the trigger guard coming along. The vented barrel of the Fifty was bent, the chattering machine gun instantly backfiring; a piercing shriek of pain came from the armored blister, then red blood flowed freely from the air vents.

Positioned directly in front of War Wag One, it was difficult for the companions to aim at the kraken, so they switched from full-auto to single shots, and went for the eyes. One of the orbs burst, then another, but then the kraken raised a tentacle in front of its face in a protective gesture.

“Sweet Jesus, how smart is this thing?” Mildred demanded, dropping a spent clip and slamming in a reload.

As the question did not seem to need an answer, none of the companions responded. They simply kept shooting.

Unexpectedly, a roof hatch crashed open on the aft wag, and Jessica scrambled into view holding a Molotov cocktail, the rag around the neck of the bottle already burning. She threw it at the kraken, but the container merely bounced off the leather hide and fell into the lake to disappear into the mud.

Stretching out a tentacle, the kraken tried for the woman, but Jessica dived back into the hatch...only to reappear a split second later holding a machete and a gren.

Grabbing a gren, Doc stepped away from the blasterport, then bitterly cursed at the sight of their roof hatch welded tightly into place. Rushing to the aft doors, he threw the bolt and kicked one open, weaving back and forth, trying to get a clear view of the kraken. Then the scholar coldly smiled at the explosion from just behind War Wag One, and a severed tentacle went flying off, gushing yellow blood.

Moving away from War Wag One, the kraken started toward the UCV, and the companions stopped firing, urging the creature to come closer. It was almost upon them when there came a sharp whine from the laser on top of the war wag, and a scintillating beam of coherent light stabbed outward to slice across the kraken, opening the body wide, intestines slithering into the mud, along with a great rush of golden blood.

Screaming louder than a thousand steam calliopes, the creature spun and the laser fired again, piercing the kraken completely through. It sagged, then rallied and threw itself on the front of the transport, the tentacles slithering along the sides, seeking any purchase or entry. Weapons were hastily withdrawn and the blasterports slammed shut as the kraken began to tighten every tentacle, inhuman muscles bunching as the creature began to squeeze the armored vehicle, the metal audibly creaking from the incredible pressure.

No longer in danger of shooting a friend, the companions gathered at the rear doors and cut loose with a barrage of blasterfire at the biowep, the big Fifty on the roof chattering nonstop.

With the added weight of the kraken, the UCV slowed again, but Ryan could now see the edge of the lake. Dry land was only fifty feet away. Once there, they could drop the chain and simply outpace the thing, leaving it easily behind. To stay alive, they had to reach the shore, but to reach the shore, they had to stay alive. Unbidden, the recipe for rabbit stew came to mind. Step one: catch a rabbit.

“Use the Molotovs!” Ryan bellowed over the sounds of battle.

Pausing in her furious wiping, Krysty gave the man a puzzled look, but the others understood. Lighting a rag fuse, Doc gently lofted a firebomb bottle at the creature. As the bottle landed, Mildred triggered the rapidfire, shattering the glass. Flames spread across the kraken, and it howled even

louder than before, then again as J.B. aimed the Fifty at the flames, trying to pound the blaze inside the accursed thing.

“Whatever you did, do it again!” Roberto yelled over the radio, the signal coming through much clearer than before as they approached the edge of the lake. “Keep this thing busy for a couple of minutes, then get ready to release the chain!”

“Never! We will not abandon you!” Mildred snarled over the chattering rapidfire. The spent brass arched from the ejector port and bounced musically off the armored doors to splash into the black muck.

“Just tell us when!” Krysty shouted, reaching out a hand to grab the release lever for the winch.

As Doc tossed another Molotov, Mildred was caught off guard by the unexpected remark and almost missed the bottle. But as the firebomb exploded across the kraken, she suddenly understood and grinned fiendishly. That just might work!

With a lurch, the UCV surged ahead, and the prow began to rise from the lake. “We’re at the shore!” Ryan shouted.

“Not yet!” Roberto answered. “Not yet!” There was a terrible grinding noise and numerous voices were cursing or shouting orders. Oddly, no blasters were firing.

As the front tires of the UCV dug into the firm soil, the tandem engines loudly revved and Ryan was forced to hit the brakes in order to not snap the tow chain. It was made of thick steel, but nothing had ever been designed to handle the double load of wag and biowep.

“Now!” Roberto shouted over a crackle of static. “Cut us loose!”

Instantly, Krysty yanked the release lever and the chain went free, snaking away into the air. Freed of the awful drag, the UCV raced forward, and Ryan let the wag get a few yards away from the lake, then turned the wheel and braked hard, turning the UCV to directly face the machine and monster. Flipping a switch, Krysty lowered the fork to what she hoped was a killing height. J.B. swung around the rocket pod, while

Doc and Mildred leaped out of the wag with firebombs in their hands.

But before anybody could act, the kraken screamed insanely as a wild corona of blue sparks crawled over the creature. With a few of its tentacles still in the lake, the kraken became a conduit for the massive electrical discharge coursing through the armored hull of War Wag One. Literally galvanized motionless, the kraken could only shudder as wisps of steam began to rise from every pore and orifice. The cooking eyes turned solid white, piss-yellow blood started pouring from the convulsing mouth, then flames erupted from the bubbling skin. The dirty water around the war wag began to churn as pieces of the animal blackened and fell off to reveal the rosy muscles, various internal organs, a strange flexible skeleton and finally a large pulsating brain, obscenely dripping golden fluids.

At the sight, the companions banged away with everything they had, riddling the throbbing mass until the lead began to ricochet off the windshield of the vehicle. Standing in the control room, Roberto yanked a switch set into the wall, and the lethal surge of power was terminated, the electrical discharge fading away in cycling stages. Fried alive, the last remaining pieces of the kraken limply slid off the grille and prow of the armored machine to splash impotently into the filthy lake.

With every tire still spinning madly, War Wag One slowly moved toward the shore, then lurched ahead as the wheels finally touched solid ground. Erupting from the mud lake, the transport braked to a rocking halt only a few yards away from the UCV.

“Behold!” Doc exclaimed joyfully, brandishing his rapid-fire. “Odysseus escapes from the island of Calypso!”

And for once, Mildred could only look questioningly at the old man as she honestly had no idea what in the world he was talking about.

Whooping and cheering, crewmen poured from the wag, led by a muddy Jak, wearing a pair of pants several times too large. The companions joined them on the shore.

“What fight!” the albino teen declared proudly. “Didn’t think anything could ace kraken but nuke!”

“Neither did I,” Ryan admitted. “What happened to your laser? I would have thought you’d use that as often as possible before doing something as risky as electrifying the hull.”

“We had no choice in the matter,” Roberto growled, limping closer. “All of our diamonds are gone.”

“Thought you folks had gotten a whole bag full from the last supply cache,” J.B. said curiously, tilting back his fedora.

“We did!” Jessica answered with a snarl. “They’re gone, all of them!”

It took a moment for Ryan to realize what was not being said. “You had a mole,” he said simply.

“Yates!” Roberto barked, expelling the name as if it was made of human waste. “When Eric went to load the reaction chamber, the diamonds were gone. Every damn one of them! Then he found Tex missing.”

“When Shelly went to check on Yates, she found Tex lying in his bunk with his throat slit,” Jessica finished. “Don’t take a whitecoat to figure out he stole the diamonds and did Tex.” She looked across the fetid expanse of the mud lake with open revulsion. “It must have been before we started across the lake.”

“Obviously, Yates was secretly working for Broke-Neck Pete,” Doc espoused thoughtfully. “A dastardly Quisling, a wolf in sheep’s clothing set to make sure we never reached Cascade alive!”

“Never did trust a healthy doomie,” a crewman snarled hatefully, balling a fist. “If I ever find the mutie-loving freak, it’ll take him a week to die! Two weeks. Tex was a bud!”

“More importantly, he was crew,” Roberto stated. “Which means that Yates belongs to me!” Then the trader smiled

without any trace of humor whatsoever. "However, there will be plenty of him left over for everybody else to have a...taste."

The furious crew growled their approval of the idea, several of them pulling out knives to test the edges for sharpness.

"Is everybody else all right?" Mildred asked, looking over the assemblage of angry men and women for any wounds. "I saw somebody lose fingers when their blaster was yanked away."

"That was Chuck. Shelly already has him in sick bay," Roberto said, dismissing the matter. "Ryan, how's your wag? Is it fit to roll?"

"Just have to let the engines cool down some," Ryan said warily. "Why, did you take damage?"

"Plenty." Roberto sighed, his exhaustion showing for just a moment, then he stood tall once more. "We have structural damage, a cracked blister, jammed doors, radar aced, busted fuel lines and a cracked housing on the transmission. It was sheer luck that we made it out of the lake!"

"How soon till you're mobile again?" Krysty asked, keeping a careful watch on the lake for any additional moving islands.

"Don't know if the wag will ever roll again," Roberto said truthfully. "But Scott and the *Big Joe* will be here once they get the bridge built." He frowned. "However, by then Pete might've already destroyed Cascade. So...here." He thrust out something at Ryan.

Without comment, the one-eyed man took the leather-bound journal and tucked it into his gunbelt. He didn't have to ask if the big man had made a duplicate. No trader worth his brass would ever rely upon a single map.

"Quinn is hauling over some belts for your Fifty," Roberto said. "As well as replacement rockets for the two you launched." Then reaching into a pocket, he pulled out a gren. "And you might need this, too."

Slightly confused, Ryan wondered if the gren was some-

thing special to the trader, then he saw the markings. “Son of a bitch,” the man muttered in surprise. “An implo gren! I haven’t seen one of those in a long while.”

“It should be enough to take out those steam trucks,” Roberto stated with marked satisfaction.

“Steam trucks? Dark night, that will compact an army tank down to the size of a soup can!” J.B. exclaimed, reaching out to reverently take the ferruled sphere. It lay lightly in his palm, giving no indication of the staggering destructive power that was harnessed within the high-tech piece of ordnance. He should have suspected that the trader would have something like this tucked away. If you lived inside a steel can, it only made sense to have a can opener available in case of trouble. That gave the man pause, and J.B. made a mental note to keep a sharp watch out for whatever Pete had stashed away for an emergency inside the *Road Dragon*.

“You will never know how close I came to using it on the kraken,” Roberto said softly. “And there’s a price.”

“Pete,” Ryan said without prompting.

“No,” came the astounding reply. “Cascade. Protect them at all costs. We can handle Pete, and Yates, too, for that matter.” Roberto pointed at the companions. “You folks save Cascade.”

“Done and done,” Ryan said with a nod.

Just then a dull boom sounded in the distance.

Instantly everybody pulled blasters and looked around for danger, but only the two wags were visible on the shore of the vast mud lake.

With a hydraulic sigh, a door to War Wag One swung down and out walked Eric, his face a mask of consternation. Like most techs, he wore a vest covered with tiny pockets full of tools, but there was also a big-bore .44 Webley handcannon at his side.

“What’s wrong?” Roberto demanded, the sawed-off blaster still in his grip.

“Chief...” Eric paused and changed his demeanor. “Sir, we

have received a coded message from Scott Gordon of the *Big Joe*," the man reported formally, then swallowed hard. "They have been ambushed and...and they..."

"And they did a sixteen," Roberto said, slowly holstering his piece.

"Y-yes, sir. They did."

Jessica closed her eyes.

"If I may ask, what has happened?" Doc said in his most gentle voice.

"It's not always possible to get a full message through the radio," Roberto said tightly, "so we use a number code. Nine means this, nineteen means something else. Saves a lot of time and trouble."

"Never heard of that before," Ryan admitted.

Jessica frowned. "You don't know half of our secrets, newbie."

"And what does sixteen mean?" Krysty asked, although she already knew the answer from their dark expressions.

Rubbing his sore leg, Roberto turned away and started toward the wag. "It means Scott was ambushed, the *Big Joe* disabled," the big man said over a shoulder. "And rather than be taken alive to be tortured for information...or worse... they..."

"Blew up the wag while still on board," Mildred finished for the man.

"Traders and crew don't go into chains," Jessica stated proudly, holding her head high. "We live free, or die."

Several of the crewmen in the crowd repeated the phrase as if it was a holy mantra, and one of the women fought back tears.

"Live free or die," Ryan said in agreement.

"*Pax vobiscum*," Doc added solemnly in Latin.

Stiffly climbing onto the stairs set into the metal door, Roberto rested a hand on the armored hull of War Wag One as if drawing strength from the massive machine. "Well, what

the fuck are you gleebs waiting for, the summer solstice?” the trader bellowed, not looking in their direction. “Get that fragging piece of drek moving! We’ve...got repairs to do.”

Knowing anything they could say would be pointless, the companions silently returned to the urban combat vehicle and got the mud-splattered wag rolling, no longer quite so sure of the success of the long journey ahead of them.

Chapter Twenty

Gradually, the muddy shoreline changed into flat grasslands, and then a scraggly forest of pine trees. Once the mud lake and War Wag One were out of sight, the companions stopped in a small gully and held a fast war council. First and foremost, they decided that for the rest of this trip, their name code was to be reversed; *Charlie* no longer meant that it was clear, but “chill me.” *Able* did not mean an ambush, but that it was “all clear,” and so on. Ryan and the others liked the gruff trader and trusted him more than most people, but these were unusual circumstances, so they needed to be especially wary.

Next, they got busy with knives and rope, trimming off branches and attaching them to the UCV until it was thickly covered. The windshield and tires were still exposed out of necessity, but from a distance the parked vehicle would hopefully appear to be only a pile of fallen branches and not an armored war wag.

With Doc and Jak standing guard, Ryan and Krysty put the finishing touches on the camouflage. Walking into the dull sunlight, J.B. pulled out his minisextant and watched the clouds overhead until there was a brief break in the cover. He quickly shot the sun to get their exact position. Jotting down the figures, he consulted the journal and then the battered old map he carried tucked inside his munitions bag. Hmm, they were currently in... West Virginia. Yeah, the man had kind of assumed that from the sheer size of the mountains. At the moment, the UCV was parked in what had once been the small town of Buena Vista.

“How’s it coming?” Ryan asked, washing the sticky pine sap off his hands with a rag dipped in fuel.

“Okay, I have plotted us a course parallel to the way described in the journal,” J.B. said, tucking a pencil behind his ear. “We’ll have a rougher ride in these damn hills. West Virginians must have been part mountain goat even before skydark, but with luck we might just slip right past Pete without him even knowing we’re here.”

“Sounds good,” Ryan said, tossing away the rag, then cleaning his skin with a moist towelette from an MRE food pack. The one-eyed man had once seen a green sec man trigger a blaster with gasoline on his hands. The resulting explosion of flames and flesh was not something Ryan would ever forget, or risk happening to himself.

“How can you be sure?” Mildred asked.

“Easy. Most of this region is exactly the same on the map,” the Armorer replied. “I don’t think any nukes fell around here. Just a lot of tumbledown and acid rain.”

“Plus, the winter.”

“Yeah, the long dark night. That must have been a triple bitch to live through.”

“Did you find Cascade?” Ryan asked, looking over the predark map.

“No, there’s nothing here with that name, or even anything close,” J.B. replied testily, folding the map before tucking it safely away once more. “And that kind of worries me some. If the locals changed the name of the place, then they’re trying to hide their location.”

“But then why send out folks to contact traders?” Jak asked suspiciously.

“Only one way to find out,” Ryan said, drying his hands on his shirt. “Let’s go ask them.”

Dragging some branches behind the wag to try to erase their tire tracks, the companions started across the pine barrens to eventually reach a proper forest of dogwood, weeping

willows and huge oak trees, the branches so intertwined the dim sunlight could only dapple the rocky ground, the tiny streams of light creating the classic cathedral effect.

Trying to keep out of sight, Ryan stayed amid the trees whenever possible. Occasionally he would find the rutted remains of an old logging road, but every time, it became clogged with poplar trees, which was suspicious to say the least. The only plant that grew faster than poplar was bamboo, and it almost seemed as if somebody had deliberately planted the trees to seal off the steep mountain trails.

Fording a river, Ryan was not worried when the currents rose high around the UCV, cresting the windows until the companions could actually see fish swimming by underwater. Vastly amused, Mildred felt like a kid at an aquarium again, watching the schools of trout and colorful minnows darting about the waving strands of kelp, broken chunks of concrete and the oddly shiny remains of supermarket shopping carts.

As the wag trundled out of the river, Ryan drove it into the deep woods, following bear paths and dried creeks whenever possible. When not, he simply plowed through the bushes and thickets, hoping the wag was not making so much noise that they would get noticed. This was to be a nightcreep in broad daylight, and everything seemed to be against them.

The land steadily became steeper, the rocks soon becoming boulders larger than the UCV. Several times, the companions had to use the winch to clear away fallen trees, and then once to haul the vehicle itself up a rocky slope to reach a section of paved roadway that otherwise would have been impossible to achieve.

Now making excellent time, the companions drove on through the day and into the night, using only the bright moonlight to follow the snaking roadway. It was around midnight when Jak cried out and pointed to their left. Down at the bottom of the valley, the headlights of a motorized convoy

were moving through the darkness, and they faintly heard the prolonged whistle of a steam engine releasing excess pressure.

“Steam trucks. Bigger than hell, but slower than drek,” J.B. said from behind the wheel. “Oh, they got some good points, but I prefer a nice, quiet diesel better.”

“Quiet?” Mildred asked, then she relented. “Well, relatively so, I guess. At least they’re less noisy than a damn locomotive!”

“Better keep a sharp watch for scouts and outriders,” Ryan warned. “Pete’s not a fool.”

“More’s the pity,” Doc rejoined, running a whetstone along the edge of his Spanish sword.

Continuing onward, J.B. stopped around dawn to give the wheel to Doc, who then exchanged seats with Mildred at noon. The companions took a short break after lunch to use the bushes, then to refuel the wag with the last of the spare juice. Moments later, they were on the move, continuing straight on through the day, piling on the miles.

Night had fallen again when Ryan got behind the wheel again. The UCV went around a curve in the old road and a wide valley came into view. Bathed in the waning light of the moon, this might have been farmland long ago, the hundreds of acres covered with a smooth expanse of dark clover. Ryan knew that was something farmers used in the autumn to enrich the soil and make it ready for planting crops in the spring. Except that there was no sign of a farmhouse, a silo, barn or any other type of building or structure, much less an entire ville.

Parking on a relatively smooth patch of pavement, Ryan let the main engine idle softly as he rested both arms on top of the steering wheel, and looked down at the sea of green below.

“Okay, where’s Cascade?” Ryan asked, squinting. His navy telescope was in a pocket of his coat, but there was nothing in sight to point the longeye at. Just those wide fields of clover.

“John, are you sure of the directions?” Mildred asked point-

edly, brushing back her beaded plaits. "Maybe we took a left past that river, when we should have gone right?"

"Of course I'm sure! That valley is supposed to be the town of Cascade," J.B. insisted, pulling out his map. "Want to check my figures?"

"No, we trust you," Krysty said, chewing a lip. "The journal must be wrong for some reason. Mebbe the explorer just wanted to hide the location of his home until he was sure a trader was coming, and not an army of coldhearts."

"Now got both," Jak retorted with a scowl.

Opening a window, Doc let in the cool night air, along with the smell of the clover and pine trees. The valley was beautiful, yet there also seemed to be an ominous presence covering the landscape, an unnerving feeling that something was terribly wrong, but it remained unseen in the shadows, around a dark corner, standing directly nearby. Annoyed, the time traveler shook off the sensation of being watched. It was just a touch of paranoia. After being in so many battles, Doc was beginning to assume that another fight was always around the bend. For a brief moment, he longed for the peace and quiet of his little home in Vermont, then set his resolve to the task at hand. The path to hearth and home led through the fiery heart of the Deathlands.

The engine turned off, silence filled the urban combat vehicle for the first time in days.

"Okay, something is definitely wrong here, so we'd better do a recce," Ryan decided. "J.B., got those traps ready?"

"Sure thing."

"Good. We leave the UCV here, and I want it well protected. If somebody is expecting wags, then we go in on foot. Standard two-on-two defensive formation. Krysty and I are on point."

Leaving the disguised war wag where it was parked, the companions got ready, then proceeded carefully down the sloping sides of the valley, traveling along the natural path of

winter runoff water and rockslides. It was well past midnight before they reached the valley floor and began to move along the edge of the clover field, avoiding the thick plant growth purely on general principles. When you weren't sure of a situation, you always assumed the worst. Nine times out of ten, that was what usually happened.

At the far end of the valley, Ryan paused as a large black area came into view on the rocky slope, and he gradually became aware that it was actually a cave. Easing closer, Ryan and Krysty checked for traps or alarms, but there was only the bare stones. In the silvery moonlight, they seemed fluid, almost alive.

Slipping into the cave, the companions waited for their sight to adjust to the dark, then were forced to have Mildred use her flashlight anyway, the powerful beam dimmed by a wad of cloth. The interior walls were roughly hewn, but with the unmistakable markings of explosives and machine tools. This was no crude passage made by hand.

Advancing past a curve, Ryan softly cursed as he saw that the cave ended at a flat wall of stone. This was no tunnel through the mountains, but a deadhead, just an abandoned mine shaft that went nowhere.

Then a section of the supposedly solid wall moved silently aside and a man stepped out wearing a pair of U.S. Army night-vision goggles and carrying a sleek black autoloader. The startled men stared at each for half of a heartbeat, then both raised their weapons. The SIG-Sauer roared first, and the stranger was thrown back against the wall with most of his throat gone. Gagging on the torrent of blood gushing from the hideous wound, the man dropped to his knees, hands at his throat to try to staunch the ghastly river of life, then he slumped and fell to the floor of the cave.

Not trusting so easy a chill, Ryan put another 9 mm round into the man's chest, and the stranger twitched, a derringer falling from a limp hand to clatter on the hard stone floor. The

blaster was made of new steel and stamped with the name *Cascade*.

Looking at the open doorway, Ryan debated conflicting courses of action. There were a million important questions to ask, and only one source of information. The decision made, he pointed at the other companions, issuing silent orders, then knelt to check the body while Doc and Mildred took defensive positions on either side of the open doorway. But aside from the goggles and the derringer, the man was carrying nothing except a ring of keys. With a grin of satisfaction, J.B. took the keys, and Krysty took the derringer, checking the .44 hollowpoint brass inside before tucking it into her cowboy boot.

Going to the doorway, Ryan started to slip on the goggles, but paused for Mildred to click off her flashlight. Nodding his thanks, the one-eyed man donned the device, the strap still warm from its prior owner. As expected, the goggles were set to Starlite mode, the faint moonlight streaming into the tunnel illuminating the interior crystal clear, although everything was colored different shades of green.

The door was expertly made, almost a perfect match to the surrounding rocks, and in passing it would have been undetectable. Assuming combat positions, Ryan took the lead with J.B. close behind, resting a hand on the big man's shoulder for guidance. Everybody else did the same.

There was only a narrow passage past the door, barely wide enough for a single person, and it meandered through the solid rock, abruptly ending at an iron gate. Ryan passed the goggles to J.B. and he checked for traps, disarming a claymore mine. In the tight confines of the passageway, the military explosive would have damn near blown all of them into vapor.

As expected, the keys unlocked the gate and the companions probed deeper into the mountain, their every sense straining against the impenetrable blackness.

Two more booby-trapped gates hindered their advance

along the serpentine passage until J.B. entered a small grotto with three other corridors branching off in different directions. Checking his compass, the Armorer then switched the goggles to infrared, and easily spotted a warm handprint on the wall of the left corridor from a recent touch. He started that way, then cursed and swung up the Uzi, stopping himself at the last second from triggering the weapon. What the frag?

Advancing curiously, J.B. probed at a bizarre jellylike creature clinging to the roof of the corridor. It was a flapjack, one of the most deadly muties in all of the Deathlands. Except that this one was made of plastic. Gingerly checking behind the fake, he found another claymore. Using pliers to neatly clip the arming wires and render the explosive charge inert, J.B. grunted in admiration. Anybody trying this tunnel would spot the mutie and instinctively fire, setting off the claymore. Smart. Almost too damn smart. Any more boobies like this, and the companions would have to leave.

Starting forward even more slowly than before, J.B. discovered several more traps: a spring-loaded bear trap with the crushing steel jaws colored a dull reflectionless black, and a deadfall rigged to release tons of rocks that could have aced anything alive in the corridor and blocked it solid, offense and defense combined into a single lethal action.

Turning a corner, J.B. found another locked iron gate, but beyond this one was a brick bunker, a narrow slit set at chest level, the vented barrel of the .50-caliber machine gun pointing his way. The Armorer paused at the sight and quickly checked his compass, but the needle stayed pointed toward north. His heart pounding wildly, he slowly tried the keys, attempting to make as little noise as possible. None of the keys on the ring worked this lock, so J.B. hauled out a lock pick and got it open in less than a minute.

Oiling the hinges, just in case they had been deliberately overtightened to squeal, J.B. silently swung the gate aside and led his friends to the bunker. Peering through the blaster-

slot, J.B. exhaled in relief at the sight of the empty interior. There was also a door set into the left wall.

Going to that side of the bunker, he ran his fingertips along the rough brick for several minutes until locating the release button set high on the top course. Holding his breath, the Armorer pressed the button. There was a pause, then a dull click, and a section of the brickwork slid into the wall.

Entering the bunker, J.B. passed the goggles around to let the others have a fast look at where they were. Aside from the machine gun, there were also a couple more pairs of night-vision goggles hanging from hooks set into the brick wall, as well as a wooden rack full of shotguns, boxes of ammo and a plastic milk crate full of grens. Ryan scowled at the proliferation of weaponry. The Fifty was more than enough firepower to stop an army of coldhearts from getting through the iron gate. All of the other weapons were completely unnecessary, the sort of thing an amateur would do in ignorance. Whoever built the bunker and tunnel had a lot of military hardware, but no damn combat experience at all. That was interesting.

A metal door in the bunker lead to a stone wall and yet another iron gate. But beyond that was merely a dirt road cutting through a field of tall corn, the young stalks stretching for hundreds of yards into the night. In the far distance came the glow of electric lights from behind some kind of a high wall.

As J.B. removed the goggles and stuffed them into his munitions bag, Ryan pulled out his navy longeye and extended it to the full length. Through the telescope, he could see that there were brick guard kiosks set at regular intervals along the top of the wall, the intervening space thick with coils of barbed wire suspended from glass knobs. Electrified? Damn.

Standing uneasy in the moonlight, the companions could faintly hear sounds coming from the ville: excited voices, the cadence call of marching troops, raucous laughter, as well as the soft twang of an expertly played steel guitar. Mildred was

shocked to recognize the voice as a country singer from her own time period. She could not recall the name, but she knew the tune well, a funny song about trucking, "Wolf Creek Pass." Jerry Reed? Tom T. Hall? Hank Williams? No, those weren't right, and for some odd reason she could not remember what the famous musician looked like, all that came to mind was some sort of a hat and a pair of sunglasses. With a shrug, Mildred dismissed the mystery as unimportant.

Tucking away the telescope, Ryan pointed at the companions, telling them what to do, then advanced to the iron gate. It was closed with a heavy steel chain and a combination lock. While the others stood guard with their blasters at the ready, J.B. first checked the area with his compass, then cracked the lock and eased off the chain, laying it softly down in the nearby grass.

"Welcome to Cascade," J.B. whispered, pushing open the metal gate.

Chapter Twenty-One

Holstering his blaster, Ryan pulled out the panga and knelt. Gingerly probing the earth with the blade, he was rewarded with the soft clink of steel on steel, and laid a spent brass on that spot to mark the location of the land mine. He would have left a clear zone around the gate to trick invaders into a false sense of security, and then laid out a thick minefield.

Forming a line behind the man, the others also got busy with their knives, and soon they reached the drainage ditch edging the cropland. Stepping over the shallow trench, Ryan relaxed with the thick tangle of roots under his boots. There could be no land mines here.

Sheathing his panga, Ryan listened to the gentle rustle of the stalks and the distant strains of recorded music mixing with the muted voices of the guards on the wall. They were discussing what to do with the new harvest. That was puzzling to the man, as the corn was many months away from being ready to be gathered. Then he heard them comment on the new trucks, computers, laser cannon...and the many women.

In a surge of uncontrollable rage, Ryan felt a red fury fill his mind as he realized the brutal truth. Fireblast, they were talking about jacking the trader. War Wag One was the harvest! The beautiful field of clover was just a lure to pull the trader in close, make him enter the tunnel, and...what? Would they collapse the entrance and seal him inside? Release poison gas? Flood it with water? Suddenly he understood that Yates was not a spy for Pete, but for Cascade. That was the only

possible explanation for the stolen keys. Son of a bitch! Now the recce took on a pressing urgency. The companions had to know more, real fast, to try to save their comrades.

“Jak, take the goggles,” Ryan said, pushing them over. “Go back to the UCV and use the radio. Try to warn Roberto that this place is a trap.”

The albino teen donned the goggles. “What if not work?”

“Then fire a missile at him.”

Jak grinned. “That do the job!”

“If Pete arrives first, fire two missiles,” Krysty suggested. “Hell, fire all of them!”

With a nod, the youth moved off to merge with the night and disappear.

“What if these folks can listen to his radio transmissions?” Doc asked tersely in a worried tone.

“Oh, they might hear us, but there’s no way they can know what the name code means, or triangulate on Jak’s location,” Mildred replied confidently. “That would require special equipment and several broadcasts. Jak is safe as long as he doesn’t talk too many times, or for too long.”

“That is never a problem for the taciturn Mr. Lauren,” Doc said in obvious relief.

“Brevity is the soul of wit,” Mildred agreed, awkwardly shifting the M-16 rapidfire in her grip.

The physician much preferred the deadly accuracy of the ZKR over the spray-and-pray of the military assault rifle. But the M-16 had ten times the range of her revolver, and thirty rounds of something were a lot better than six of nothing.

“Okay, we really should split into groups to do a fast recce of this place, and get out of here double pronto,” J.B. said, straightening his fedora, preparing for combat. “But I think we should stick together. Safety in numbers.”

“Agreed, John Barrymore,” Doc replied, tying a dark cloth over his silvery hair. “The more I find out about these folks, the less, and less, I like these dastardly palliards!”

Keeping to the rows between the tall stalks of corn, the companions moved swiftly through the cropland, J.B. constantly checking the compass in his hand. They were about halfway to the stone block wall when there came a low thumping noise and water sprinklers came into action, spraying a fine mist over the crops.

Stopping in her tracks, Mildred was flabbergasted at the display. A modern-day farm in the Deathlands? The technology needed to achieve such a simple action was staggering. Cascade would need a steady water supply, regulated pressure, valves, pumps, electricity, storage tanks, timers... The list was endless! In an uncharacteristic swell of greed, the physician ravenously considered what they had to have in their hospital and how much she could haul away without actually breaking her spine.

Cursing vehemently, Doc shoved the LeMat under his coat and sprinted forward, hunching over to try to protect the weapon. The sprinklers lasted for only a few minutes, then cut off. Coming to a halt, Doc withdrew his blaster and sighed at the sight of thick black fluids dripping from the damp cylinder. Until thoroughly dried and reloaded, the Civil War handcannon was now only an oddly shaped club.

Without comment, J.B. passed over the S&W M-4000 shotgun. Nodding his thanks, Doc worked the pump to eject a 12-gauge cartridge, then shoved it back inside. The two weapons had about the same range, and the shotgun was actually less noisy than the thundering LeMat.

Less than an hour later, the companions approached the end of the farmland and crouched low among the rustling plants to study the area ahead. There was an open expanse of grass about a hundred feet wide separating the crops from the city wall, with a smooth asphalt road going through the middle. A pothole had been recently filled, the new macadam much darker than the rest of the roadway.

Nobody had to tell them that was for the armed war wag,

as well as the big combine harvesters needed to handle a farm of this size. The wall itself was made of large granite blocks clearly mined from the surrounding Blue Ridge Mountains. It was a formidable barrier even without the electrified barbed wire, searchlights and heavily armed guards.

“Wonder where they get electricity from?” Krysty asked, her hair flexing and waving. “I don’t see any smokestacks for a steam generator. Think they might have a nuke plant?”

“It’s possible,” Ryan admitted. “But more likely they have a hydrodam of some kind. That would be easy to build with all of these rivers and cliffs.”

That was when the one-eyed man saw that the sec men on the wall were wearing air-force-issue bulletproof jackets and carrying M-16/M-203 combos, devastating mixtures of M-16 rapidfires and 40 mm gren launchers. Fireblast! Cascade seemed to be wealthy beyond belief, which raised the question of why they would risk exposure to jack Deathlands traders. Mebbe the comps and wags and blasters were merely a fringe benefit, and the real goal was the women, fresh blood to enrich their families and prevent inbreeding. That was a chilling thought, and the companions redoubled their determination to finish this recce and get out of this pesthole as fast as humanly possible.

The dirt road through the cropland joined the paved road a couple of hundred feet to the right and arched around a corner of the high wall, going out of sight. That was probably the location of the front gate, so Ryan headed to the left. The Trader had once taught him that since most folks were right-handed, they automatically went to the right most of the time. So a smart man should stay to the left to get behind the other fellow. The trick didn’t always work, but near enough to make it sound advice.

Reaching a small clearing amid the corn, the companions saw a water pump rising from the ground like a hunchback gnome. Clearly, there were underground feeder pipes.

There was a soft thumping, and the companions took another shower, then moved on again, very thankful that all of them didn't have black powder blasters. Any invading cold-hearts carrying those would find themselves unarmed every ten minutes. Or...was that the point? Just because these folks were amateurs, did not mean they were feebs.

Continuing around the walled ville, several more outriders rode by the companions, oddly watching the sky more than the cropland.

"They must get hit by stingwings a lot," Krysty guessed. "What else could get past those mountains?"

"Not much," Ryan agreed.

Crossing into the next field, the companions saw a large bird coop set outside the cropland on the side of a nearby hill. The building was huge, the roof made of tin, or some other sheet metal, the walls made of strong chicken wire. However, inside the coop were only countless pigeons, fluttering about, cooing, picking at lice, or with a head tucked under a wing sound asleep.

Past the coop was a thick forest of poplar and pine trees, the trunks packed together so closely it was impossible to see anything on the other side. But there faintly came the crashing sounds of a white-water river.

"Well, I see that Cascade has some very good chemists, if nothing else," Doc remarked casually. "Obviously, they did not slaughter their whitecoats and scientists like the rest of humanity. This is deuced clever, indeed."

"Pretty smart," Mildred agreed, reluctant to give the locals praise in any way.

"Really?" J.B. asked, frowning. "I would have thought those were, you know, just for food."

"Pigeons?" Mildred said with the marked scorn of any former city dweller. "Good heavens, no! There is nothing more dirty, filthy or nasty than the common pigeon."

"They're just birds," Ryan said.

“No indeed, sir, these are part of their armory,” Doc explained. “Back in the Middle Ages, kings kept armed guards around their pigeon coops, not to protect the birds, but to protect their...excrement.”

“And what in hell can you make from pigeon crap?” J.B. demanded.

“Gunpowder,” Mildred replied. “You dry the feces and extract the nitrate crystals. That’s step one for making black powder, which can then be made into the much more powerful gunpowder.”

“Are you serious, Millie?”

“Absolutely, John.”

“Gunpowder from shit, that’s a new one on me,” Ryan admitted, moving onward. Mildred and Doc knew the damndest things.

“Okay, that gets you the nitrates for saltpeter,” Krysty said. “But what about the sulfur?”

Doc started to reply when they heard the sound of a horse galloping along the paved road, the clip-clop of the iron hooves heralding the advance of the rider and mount long before they came into view.

Closely studying the cornfield, a young woman was in the saddle, her long blond hair tied in a ponytail and covered with a dark cloth to reduce the shine. She was dressed in denim, shirt and pants, both with quite a few patches, and worn combat boots. But she was also sporting a bulletproof vest, tied in front with lengths of green rawhide. There was a blue-steel wheelgun holstered in her gunbelt, the loops full of brass, and the stock of an AK-47 rapidfire was sticking out of a leather boot set alongside the pommel of the saddle. A few moments later, she disappeared around a corner of the wall, the sound of the hooves fading into the distance.

“If that’s an outrider, somebody the ville can afford to lose, then we are out of luck,” J.B. whispered, removing his hat to

wipe the sweatband inside with a handkerchief before replacing it. "We'd need a fragging army to take this place!"

"Don't need to ace the whole ville," Ryan replied grimly. "Just find out how they plan to attack Roberto, and then haul ass. No need to ever come here again."

"You got that right, old buddy!" J.B. whispered, but then paused as the needle of his compass began to spin madly. Dark night, proximity sensors!

"Run!" he yelled, the need for secrecy over. "They know we're here!"

Instantly, weighted nets came crashing down, driving the companions to the ground with stunning force.

"Got 'em!" somebody shouted in glee.

Savagely fighting to free themselves, the companions found the actions only seemed to make the tangle of ropes and cables contract tighter. Then a harsh blue light filled the world and the companions stiffened in agonizing pain, several of them firing their blasters as their hands spasmed into gnarled fists before a tingling warmth overwhelmed their ravaged senses and they fell into a terrible inky blackness...

Chapter Twenty-Two

Sluggishly, Ryan awoke with a major headache, throbbing and pounding like badly tuned machinery.

The room was pitch black. There was an awful metallic taste in his mouth and a dull pain just to either side of the small of his back, near his kidneys. The one-eyed man knew what that meant. These were the exact same sensations as that time in the South Pacific when he had been electrocuted. The nets had to have been wired. And unless he missed his guess, they were now on the other side of the wall.

A low moan sounded from somebody nearby. Ryan tried to turn his head, but the exertion was almost more than he could bear. Every muscle ached, and he was blind. Stone blind! A brief panic filled the man, then he snorted in annoyance and used his bound hands to push the leather eyepatch to the left side of his head. Probably just a little joke from the captors.

Now, Ryan could see that they were in a small brick room. There was no window, and a single cot was bolted to the wall. There was a toilet and a sink in the corner, and a large metal door without visible hinges, doorknob or lock. It was a predark jail cell.

The other companions were nearby on the cold stone floor, and everyone was stripped down to their underwear.

“A-anybody hurt?” Ryan croaked softly, his throat raw.

Coughing and trembling, the companions began to stir, their motions stiff and awkward, but they were awake and moving.

Just then, footsteps could be heard coming from the other side of the closed door, and the lock rattled. Immediately, the companions lay back on the icy floor and pretended to be unconscious.

As the door swung open, Ryan risked a peek from his good eye and saw a big man wearing a baseball cap enter the room and softly close the door behind. Holding an oil lantern, the sec man was carrying a ring of keys, and there was a wheelgun tucked into his gunbelt, along with a set of handcuffs, a can of mace and a large knife.

“So, how they doing?” somebody yelled from down a hallway.

“Still out!” the sec man replied, nudging Jak with the toe of his boot. “Hell, they’ll be out until dawn after the voltage we zapped ’em with!”

“Then leave ’em alone, and come back to the game!” a third voice suggested. “At least let the condemned have a decent night’s sleep before we start the interrogation!”

Ryan felt his muscles tighten at those words. So they were condemned, eh? Bad move, fleeb, Ryan thought.

“Yeah, guess so,” the sec man said, gently nudging Mildred with his boot.

At the touch, the physician rolled over and arched her back, wantonly thrusting out her breasts. The man stared at the display, then J.B. grabbed his blaster, Jak snatched away the lantern, and Ryan lashed out with his bare foot to bury a heel in the stomach of the sec man. Breath exploded out his mouth in a rush, and he doubled over. Ryan grabbed the man by the hair with iron fingers and rammed his knee into the man’s face again and again, to the sound of breaking bones. Then he twisted the head sharply, and the sec man went completely limp.

Looting the corpse, the companions took what weapons he had, and Ryan went to the door with the cocked blaster in his grip. Listening for a moment, he turned and pointed at the others. They nodded and quickly assumed positions.

Jak and Doc hid the corpse under the bunk, while Mildred lay on the cold floor and faced the door. Quickly donning the cap and pants of the dead guard, J.B. knelt between Mildred's legs while the others went back on the floor and feigned being unconscious. Turning the lantern to the lowest setting, Ryan placed it on top of the bunk to mask the body underneath, then bundled the shirt of the aced man into a ball and held it tightly to the barrel of the S&W .38 blaster. A small part of his mind wondered why the guards would have a predark blaster when Cascade could make new blasters.

At a nod from Ryan, J.B. started thrusting between the physician's legs, and Mildred began moaning and groaning.

After a few moments of no reaction from outside the cell, the Armorer began slapping her thigh, miming the classic sounds of rough sex.

"What the fuck was that?" a muffled voice asked.

"Sounds like Jimbo is already interrogating one of the female prisoners." The other man chuckled. "Probably that redhead. You see those big tits?"

"Sure as hell did. Gave 'em a squeeze when nobody was looking, too."

"You dog!"

"Flesh is flesh." He chortled. "Even that of stinking outsiders."

Sprawled on the floor, Krysty's animated hair began to writhe furiously, then with an iron effort of will she commanded it to be still. Gradually, the movements slowed and the filaments went still.

"You know, the mayor's gonna be madder than a wet hen if she finds out old Jim been riding a prisoner," the second voice stated.

There was a pause, then the sound of a wooden chair scraping across a stone floor. "Yeah, guess so."

"You gonna stop him?"

“Nah, just bring a bucket of water to make him wash her out afterward!”

The two men roared in crude laughter, and Mildred paused for a moment in the pretend rape, her pretty face distorting into a feral mask. Looking down at the woman he loved, John Barrymore gave a snort, and she fixed upon his eyes, and the two lovers nodded in unison, then started making more noise than ever before.

“Aw fuck, the folks outside are gonna hear that shit,” the first voice complained unhappily. There came the jingling of loose keys on a ring. “Hey, Jimbo, cut out the noise, old buddy! You’re gonna get us into trouble!”

“Goddamn, stupid ass, son of a bitch...” the voice outside the closed door grumbled, keys jingling. Then the lock rattled and the door opened slightly, admitting a slice of light across the dark cell and the people on the floor.

Instantly, Ryan fired, the report of the wheelgun greatly reduced by the wad of cloth held to the barrel. The two slugs hit the guard in the belly, and he folded over with a groan, exposing the other sec man sitting at a desk with playing cards in his hands. His jaw dropping, the man threw away the cards and clawed for his blaster. Firing from within the cell, Ryan got the guard in the face, blood, eyes and teeth flying away to splatter on a corkboard covered with maps of the ville.

Easing out of the cell, Ryan swept the stolen blaster around the office, looking for more targets, when there came the sound of a toilet flushing, and an elderly sec man stepped out of a bathroom, drying his hands on a small towel.

Ryan fired, but the old man dived out of the way and came up with a sleek black automatic pistol. He aimed and pulled the trigger, but nothing happened. Muttering curses, the man fumbled with the safety. Ryan almost felt bad as he shot the sec man directly in the heart, and then again in the head to make sure the job was done. These people were total amateurs.

The sec men probably hadn't been in a real fight their whole lives. Well, he thought, that was about to change triple fast!

Doing a fast recce to make sure the rest of the small building was empty, Ryan found four more cells like the first, and one more with a wooden chair bolted to the floor, the armrests and back covered with leather straps and hooks for chains. There were no knives or screws or other torture instruments on the walls, so he guessed the locals did their questioning the old-fashioned way. Simply punch the victim long enough, and eventually he or she would talk. Once when he had been captured by a mad baron out west, Ryan had seen an outlander last four whole days of just such a brutal beating before finally breaking and telling the baron where he had hidden the precious cache of stolen machine parts. When death finally came, the poor bastard had seemed honestly pleased. Most barons could find a lunatic eager to disassemble folks, but vital information was often lost that way as the madman lost control.

Past the interrogation room, Ryan found a large supply closet full of ammo, blasters, bulletproof vests, several LAW rocket launchers and a lot of assorted grens, the different types separated into individual milk crates: thermite, shrapnel, stun, white phosphorus and so on. It was an impressive collection. Only the implo gren was missing, which meant that somebody had recognized the advanced technology. There was also a small safe, but the steel door was locked. Sagely, Ryan guessed that was the location of the implo gren. From some of the faded wanted posters on the walls, it seemed clear that this had once been the evidence room for a sheriff's office, but now it was the armory for the ville sec men.

Rejoining the rest of the companions in the front office, Ryan set down a crate of grens. The others were already looting the dead men for clothing and blasters, but Jak gave a soft whistle from the corner, and the companions saw their belongings spread out on a large table. Everything was present,

but had been searched: pockets turned inside out, knives removed from sheaths, spare socks unrolled, even the brass had been removed from the blasters, a dozen rounds opened and the powder spilled for inspection.

Retrieving their own personal weapons, the companions spent a tense few minutes reloading while Ryan stood guard with the stolen wheelgun, closely watching the front door for any sign of motion. Thick wooden shutters covered the inside of the windows, and he could guess that was partially to offer the sec men protection in case they were attacked, but mostly to afford them privacy for brutal interrogations.

“Here you go, lover!” Krysty whispered, tossing something to him.

Deftly, Ryan made the catch with one hand and, working the slide on his SIG-Sauer to chamber a round, the one-eyed warrior stood a bit easier with two weapons balanced in his fists.

When the others finished dressing, Ryan did the same, then helped J.B. and Doc drag the bodies into the cell and lock the door. Reclaiming the bathroom towel, Krysty poured what smelled like real coffee out of a thermos and wiped the floor clean. Hopefully, that would mask the telltale copper reek of fresh blood.

“That real coffee I smell?” J.B. asked hopefully.

“Thermos full,” Ryan said, jerking a thumb. “Help yourself.”

“What are these?” Krysty asked, lifting a brown sugary ring from a pile on a small plate. The smell was heavenly, almost narcotic, and the woman wondered if the sec men had been indulging in some sort of narcotic binge of drugs and cards, working themselves up to the bloody job of torture.

“It’s called a doughnut,” Mildred said. “Nothing but fat, sugar and salt. Just what we need to keep us going after being fried like chicken nuggets in that damn net.”

Seeing the others hesitate, the physician took one and

stuffed it whole into her mouth. "Iz goof!" she mumbled happily.

After a hesitant nibble, the rest of the companions agreed and cleaned off the plate in a few minutes.

"In regard to the time we were unconscious, perhaps it is not my place to inquire, but... I... That is..." Doc blushed crimson. "Have either of you ladies been...harmed in any way?"

"Never better," Krysty said, giving him a puzzled look. "Just sore as hell in my damn kidneys. Why? Don't we look okay?" Then comprehension flared, and she gently smiled at the time traveler. "No, we're fine, Doc. Nobody actually rode us while we were asleep."

"Glad to hear it," J.B. growled. "Now I only want to ace these bastards, without taking them apart first."

Using the heavy desk to block the door, the companions raided the small armory, taking everything they could comfortably carry, especially bulletproof vests and the rocket launchers. They were very lightweight, only ten pounds or so, and came with a strap for carrying them across the back.

Next, J.B. went straight to the safe, but the combination dial proved to be his match, and the Armorer finally relented with a dark expression.

Spotting a first-aid box on the wall, Mildred hurried over eagerly, but it only contained things she already had in her med kit: plastic bags of clean cloth for bandages, leather strips for tourniquets, sterile water for washing wounds, plus a few tiny bottles of tinctures and jars of unguent. Just homemade brews and field bandages. Damn.

"These assholes have been stealing everything they could for decades," J.B. whispered, stuffing his munitions bag with grens.

"Not that it did them any good," Doc snorted, working the slide on a .44 Desert Eagle piston. The handcannon and spare clips went into the pockets of his rumpled frock coat.

“Now what?” Mildred asked, taking down a lever-action Winchester. Although it was the terror of the Old West in its day, now the longblaster was considered slow and cumbersome. However, it was the only thing in the armory equipped with a telescopic sight. That could make a big difference.

“Now we find out if the war has started yet,” Ryan stated, heading back to the front office.

Turning off the lanterns, the companions let their sight adjust to the darkness, then eased open the shutters to peek outside. Rows of armed men and women were across the street in the town square, receiving a speech from a woman standing inside a small gazebo. Behind the sec men was a mob of women with wheelbarrows full of wicker baskets.

“Christ, I feel like I’m going insane,” Mildred whispered, rubbing her temple. “A mowed lawn, water, sprinklers, bird baths, parking meters for God’s sake!? Never thought I’d ever live to see such things again.”

“Nor I, madam,” Doc said uneasily. “A gazebo in the Deathlands is staggeringly disingenuous!”

“Shut the frag up. I can’t hear what they’re saying,” Krysty said softly, straining to hear the muffled voices.

Chapter Twenty-Three

“Yes, killed, only feet away from where we stand!” Mayor Spencer shouted to the crowd from the stage. “Deputy Ted Ellison, cowardly stabbed in the back by the very outsiders that we have locked in our jail!”

The armed mob roared its approval.

“Death to the busriders!” a woman screeched, waving a shotgun. “Hang ’em! Set them on fire, and hang ’em!”

Once more, the crowd voiced its approval, and the cry of “busriders” was repeated several times. Nobody was quite sure what the phrase meant anymore, but it was considered the most foul curse imaginable.

Standing tall, Mayor Spencer appreciated the fervor of the people, but did not want this to become a lynching again. There were a lot of questions the outsiders had to answer before being allowed to die. “Ted Ellison is dead. He died so that we may live!” the mayor continued, hooking thumbs into her gunbelt. “So I want everybody to be extra careful about all the hot metal and the slippery floors. Gloves and shoes, remember that. Gloves and shoes at all times!”

“Move fast, and it’s your ass!” Sheriff MacIntyre added, walking onto the stage.

Some of the people in the throng chuckled at that; a few seemed shocked at the rough language.

“Furthermore,” the sheriff declared, rubbing his freshly shaved face. “You must be doubly sure to never, ever—”

“Mayor?” The radio clipped to her belt crackled into life.

“Your Honor? This is Station Nine to the mayor! Come in please!”

Turning away from the villagers so that they could not hear her over the microphone, Henrietta Spencer pulled out the radio and thumbed the button. “This is the mayor. Go, Nine,” she commanded crisply.

“Ma’am, there’s a...a... Hell, I don’t know what the fuck it is!” the deputy bumbled, close to panic. “The damn thing looks like a steam locomotive, and it’s coming this way!”

“Look, there are no tracks in the clover...”

“It’s got wheels!”

“Okay, we’ll still steam them in the tunnel like all of the other invaders,” the mayor snapped. “Why are you wasting my time about—”

“It’s not in the fucking clover!” the deputy snarled. “This thing is on the other side of the Barrier River! It’s coming from the east! Did you hear me, the east!”

With a struggle, the major held her temper. “Okay, it’s to the east. Who cares? Unless they have wings, or brought along a bridge—”

“They did!”

“Come again?” Spencer whispered, suddenly feeling very small. “They did what?”

“A bridge! The people operating the locomotive brought along a motherfucking bridge! It sort of looks like the box trestle from the Mud Lake, and they’re trying to shove it across the Barrier to reach our side!”

“They dragged the whole bridge here?” the mayor asked, glancing over a shoulder to the east. Nothing was in sight but the high school, the library, a playground and rows upon rows of neatly tended homes.

“Yes, ma’am, and they’re trying to push it across! Plus, a lot of other vehicles, too! Every goddamn one of them carrying machine guns and all kinds of military hardware. They’re gonna be on our side in only minutes!”

“It must be Broke-Neck Pete,” MacIntyre growled.

“I swear, if this is some sort of a joke,” Spencer began in a menacing tone.

Just then, a fiery dart shot into the eastern sky, and everybody turned to stare in growing horror as the missile came streaking down to violently impact on a side street. The blast ripped apart that section of the street, a dozen windows shattered from shrapnel, and the concussion rolled louder than summer thunder over the entire village. Hundreds of lights appeared in the darkness. Yelling people began running around madly in the streets, dogs started howling, and the deputies on the wall cut loose with their assault rifles at something on the other side of the granite barrier.

“Jesus Christ, ma’am, I think that was a missile!” the deputy gushed over the radio.

“Shut the fuck up!” the mayor snarled, changing channels. “Command and Control, this is Spencer, give me audio. Repeat, this is Spencer, give me audio now!” The last few words came from the public address loudspeakers set on telephone poles around the green.

“Now hear this,” the mayor said in forced calm, her words booming across the village. “Now hear this. Red alert. Repeat, red alert! This not a drill! All mothers get your children into the bunkers! All children to the bunkers immediately! The village is under attack!”

Sheriff MacIntyre spoke into his radio. “Everybody else, to your post! Arm all weapons systems and prime the defensive grid! Repeat, this is not a drill. The goddamn busriders are coming over the bridge, boys! It’s time to bale or fail!”

A few of the armed men cheered at the prospect of battle, but the rest simply took off running into the night, intent upon reaching their assigned posts. Sirens began to howl, the noise rapidly building in volume, and on the wall huge searchlights crashed into operation, the intense beams sweeping the land outside the village, looking for targets.

“STEAM!” KRYSTY SAID, turning fast. “They’re going to ace Roberto with steam!”

“Millie, can they do that?” J.B. asked with a worried expression.

“Hell, yes!” she responded grimly. “If the boilers can build enough pressure, they could blow War Wag One out of that tunnel like spitting out a watermelon seed, and the heat would parboil the crew, acing them while still inside the wag!”

“Without harming the brass or fuel,” Ryan said out loud. Fireblast, that was why the tunnel had been so fragging clean. It had to get used on a regular basis! This whole thing had been a jack from the very beginning, Cascade sending out Yates...or rather MacIntyre, as a phony doomie to confirm the fake journals. A double lie. They had to have sent out dozens of the damn things, mebbe hundreds, hoping to draw in a trader or two. They had caught a lot more than that, and now it was time for the harvest. Harvest. The word burned in his mind like a white flame of hate.

Suddenly, heavy machine guns opened fire from the wall as another missile rose high to arch back downward again. However, this time it hit somewhere on other side of the wall, merely throwing up flaming gouts of cornstalks and several outriders.

“Pete is trying to get the range of the wall,” Doc muttered, hefting his blaster. “Once he does, it will come down faster than the fabled walls of Jericho!”

“That’s when the rads will really hit the Geiger,” Krysty stated, her hair waving and flexing.

“Not our problem,” Ryan shot back, walking across the office and flicking a butane lighter alive to study the blood-stained village maps on the corkboard. “Let Pete keep these bastards busy while we find the boilers and shut them down! Mildred, any idea where they could be located?”

“No idea whatsoever,” Mildred replied peevishly, chewing a lip. “City hall must have a big furnace, and the high school

an even bigger one. Not either of those should have the sheer volume needed to take out a convoy of war wags!”

Minutes ticked away as the companions ferociously studied the map. There was nothing there marked command, or defense grid, or steam generator, or anything useful.

“Gaia, I know where the damn thing is!” Krysty cried out. “Remember the dirt road that cut through the cropland? The bare dirt road that went straight from the tunnel to the ville wall?”

“Dark Night, that must be the feeder pipe!” J.B. declared. “The heat killed the grass and crops along the whole length, so they just turned the bald section into an access road!”

“Then the boilers must be right on the other side of the wall,” Mildred added, reviewing their journey in her mind. “Which would put them—”

“Right there!” Ryan stated, stabbing the map with a finger. “Smack between the grain silos and the water reservoir.” There was a large square there, but no name or description.

Going to the desk, Mildred opened the top drawer and hauled out a phone book. She started flipping through the street index.

“Careful, Millie, those pages are mighty yellow!” J.B. warned.

“Always were,” the physician muttered, then grinned triumphantly. “Okay, that is the location for Cascade Shipping and Delivery. That’s why you couldn’t find it on the map, John. Cascade is the name of the local truck depot!”

Pushing back his fedora, J.B. nodded. “Makes sense. When skydark hit there was probably more canned and frozen food stored there waiting to be shipped out than in all of the homes and markets combined! The depot would have meant life itself to the locals for decades.”

“While the world starved, they supped on a cornucopia of frozen TV dinners,” Doc said, clearly offended.

“Exactly!”

“And now it’s their military headquarters,” Ryan growled, checking the action of the rapidfire.

“Which means it will be full of armed sec men,” Krysty said, scowling, adjusting the strap of a LAW.

“Not anymore, dear lady,” Doc corrected. “They will all be on the wall fighting off Broke-Neck Pete. The enemy of my enemy—”

“Is still my fragging enemy,” Ryan interrupted. “But one fight at a time. First we save Roberto and his people, then we’ll decide what to do about Pete.”

“Do, sir?”

“After what we’ve seen, he can fragging have Cascade,” Ryan rasped, shouldering the longblaster. “Hell, the bastards deserve each other.”

Just then, another missile hit, the detonation rattling the window shutters. Several buildings were ablaze downtown, the ringing clang of fire engines arriving at the scene startling both Mildred and Doc.

“Wait, a moment, I’ve got an idea!” J.B. shouted, running down the corridor. “Be right back!”

A few moments later there came a loud whomp, and soon a smoky J.B. returned, patting his munitions bag. “Okay, let’s go,” he said with savage cheerfulness.

On the streets outside, the companions stayed in the shadows as several Jeeps raced by, the grim crew inside each military transport armed with an M-60 machine gun, LAW rocket launcher or a flamethrower.

Alongside the office was a carport containing a large camou-colored Hummer. Ryan took out the overhead light with a hip shot, the bark of the SIG-Sauer lost amid the general turmoil of the building conflict.

Incredibly, the door was unlocked, and the companions piled inside quickly. Sliding behind the wheel, J.B. reached

under the dashboard and yanked out some wires, then touched them together until the engine started with a soft purr.

Lying curled on the floor mat, Mildred passed up a cigar box she found below the front seat. "It'll help hide your face," she explained.

Gratefully, the Armorer pulled out a homemade cheroot and lit up with a deep sigh of satisfaction. Nobody ever really gave up smoking, you just stopped for a while, that was all.

Suddenly a rocket came streaming down to slam into the stone wall. The granite blocks shook visibly, a score of sec men thrown to the ground.

Quickly donning the cap and sunglasses of an aced deputy, J.B. backed out of the carport, and began to head across town for the large, well-illuminated building surrounded by a barbed-wire fence, guard dogs and concrete pillboxes.

"Fireblast, there's no way we can get through all of that in time!" Ryan swore, glancing over the fortifications. "We'll have to try another way. Okay, head for the wall! We gotta find some stairs and fast!"

"Going at attack from the roof?" J.B. asked, stomping on the accelerator and turning a corner at full speed.

"Something like that," Ryan replied, pulling a gren from his pocket and removing the tape from around the arming lever.

A group of deputies running along the sidewalk looked curiously at the racing Hummer, and one of them started talking into a radio.

"My dear sir!" Doc gasped in shock. "How will attacking the roof gain us access to the boilers in the basement?"

"It won't," Ryan said gruffly. "And that's the whole damn point."

Chapter Twenty-Four

The sounds of machine guns filled the night, sizzling green tracers extending from the distant wall of the ville, and reaching out from the heavy weapons of *Thunder* and *Roadhog*. Rockets streaked out from both sides, but most were caught in the streams of hot lead and exploded harmlessly in midair.

The moment that the box trestle had been shoved across the river gorge, Pete had sent over the lightweight delivery vans as a vanguard. As expected, most of them disintegrated in the field of land mines, but a few reached the forest only to be halted. There was no pathway or road through the dense grove of pine and poplar. It was a solid barrier, a living wall of wood more than a hundred feet wide.

“Again!” Pete commanded from the cupola of the LVTP-7. “Hit ’em again!”

Once more, the homemade bazookas from Newton launched, sending rockets spiraling into the trees. They exploded among the foliage, sending a spray of shrapnel and flame in every direction.

In the rear of the massive APC, a dozen crewmen were preparing their blasters for the coming fight, a large dark-haired woman standing among them.

“Remember what I told you,” Helga directed, slinging a canvas bag full of spare ammo belts and the M-60 rapidfire over a shoulder. “Once inside the ville, no more chilling. Wound or blind only, but no chilling! We need these folks alive to talk.”

“Yeah, we’ll make ’em talk, Chief,” a greasy crewman said with a sneer, obscenely rubbing his crotch.

The other men laughed in lusty agreement while doing a final check of their brand-new flak jackets, rapidfires and grens.

“Sure, have fun, rape all you want,” Helga stated, fixing the men with a hard stare. “But only after we have control of the ville. Only then! Anybody dies before then, and I’ll sell your asses to the cannies. Savvy?”

“Yeah, we savvy,” a burly crewman muttered, attaching a bayonet to the end of the Kalashnikov. There were neat rows of scratches in the wooden stock to mark each person he had personally gutted, and it was almost time for a new stock, the old one nearly worn through in spots. Any damn feeb could shoot someone from a distance. Where was the fun in that? Ah, but you had to get up close and personal for a gutting. Then you could look into their terrified eyes and watch the actual life fade away. That was a lot better than rape. Oh yes, much, much better than that.

Wrapped in a thick blanket, a doomie child sat alone in the corner on a wooden crate of MRE envelopes. With infinite patience, the mutie waited for the swirling whirlpool of events to finally coalesce into a single moment of clarity. The future was in motion again, forming and changing like warm quicksilver, each pattern new and distinct, but all of them rich with the terrible red hue of human suffering. Untold hundreds would perish tonight, and the child privately wished that he could be among them to end the long years of forced servitude to his horrible master.

“Again!” Broke-Neck Pete commanded, his face shiny with avarice. “Use every rocket! But bring down those fragging trees!”

By now, most of the grove was on fire, the flames raging unchecked. Once the way was clear, Pete would personally drive *Roadhog* to the wall and punch through with his small supply of CeeGee missiles. That wasn’t the name of the

predark weapon, just what he personally called them. There did not seem to be any designation for the oversize launchers except the name of the manufacturer, Carl Gustav. But that was okay, what predark blaster didn't have somebody's name on it?

But more importantly, the massive 87 mm rockets packed twice the punch of a slim 66 mm LAW, and completely blew apart every war wag he had ever encountered as if it were made of window glass instead of welded steel. The trader had only three of the CeeGee launchers left, but they should be more than enough to open a crack in the wall around Cascade, and then the pipe bombs stolen from Two-Son ville would finish the job. Pete had been hoarding the heavy antitank launchers for years, hoping to use them against the Trader. But now he was offered an even better target than revenge, the combined tech of the predark world. And it was all waiting for him behind a simple stone wall. Broke-Neck Pete, the first emperor of Nuke America!

Soon, oh so very soon, the city of Cascade would be his. It was only a matter of minutes...

SCREECHING TO A HALT at the base of the wall, the companions charged out of the sheriff's van and started up the enclosed stairwell leading to a guard kiosk. A deputy sat on the steps smoking a cheroot, and his eyes went wide at the appearance of Ryan and the others. As he fumbled with an M-16 rapidfire, Ryan shot the man in the throat and ran past him without slowing. Mercy was a luxury they could ill afford at the moment. Time was short.

The one-eyed man encountered no more guards on the zig-zagging stairs, and he paused to catch his breath halfway up the tower. Damn electrocution had taken more out of him than he wanted to admit. Glancing out a narrow slit in the brickwork, Ryan cursed at the sight of several Jeeps full of armed people stopping near the van and surrounding the vehicle.

They seemed to be shouting orders, then all of them opened fire, the fusillade of rounds tearing the apart the vehicle until it whoofed into flames.

“So much for protect and service,” Mildred snorted, hefting the Winchester. “They’ll be coming up the stairs next, John!”

“Already on it,” J.B. replied, kneeling on the concrete. Stretched across the landing, a dark string was looped around the iron-pipe railing of the stairwell and attached to the pin of a gren with the arming lever already removed.

“Anti-pers?” Krysty asked.

“Willie peter,” the Armorer answered smugly. “That chem storm will make a wall of fire and stop anybody from coming this way for quite a while!”

“Thermite would be better,” Doc stated, thankful for the short break.

“True. But I’m saving that for Pete.”

“But what about the implo gren?”

“We have other plans for that,” Ryan stated, starting up the stairs once more.

Reaching the top landing, the companions angled their rapidfires upward and put a long burst through the closed wooden door at the top of the stairs. They were rewarded with howls of pain, and then the door was blown apart by a deafening shotgun blast.

Ryan charged up the last few steps and swept the kiosk with the rapidfire, catching two deputies in the act of closing their bulletproof vests. They died on the spot, but he’d only wounded a third man wearing his vest and sitting at a table. The impact of the 7.62 mm rounds spun the startled guard around in the wheeled chair, and he fell out firing a big-bore handcannon, a lance of flame extending from the muzzle. As Ryan stitched the guard with the rapidfire, he staggered from the brutal impact of a large-caliber round, and felt the sharp pain of a rib cracking. Fireblast, the vests were shit! No damn padding at all.

Ignoring the dull throb in his chest, Ryan stumbled to a

mounted gun and worked the arming bolt to then sweep the top of the wall with a steady hail of .50-caliber rounds. Men and women screamed from the unexpected attack from behind, and fell away into the darkness of the night. Meanwhile, the other companions started shooting their M-16 rapid-fires down at the guards walking patrol on top of the depot with similar bloody results. As the clips emptied, Krysty and Mildred dropped their weapons and took the combo blasters from the dead guards.

When the belt ended, Ryan released the hot blaster and went outside, walking swiftly along the top of the wide stone wall, keeping a good distance from the coils of electrified barbed wire.

“By the Three Kennedys!” Doc cried, pointing outside the ville.

Expecting a new attack, Ryan glanced in that direction, but only saw a fiery warbird climbing high into the starry sky, going almost straight up. Mutie shit, that was rising from the west, not the east! It was the signal from Jak, which meant that Roberto was already here. Redoubling his speed, the one-eyed man triggered the rapidfire at anything that moved in the darkness ahead, brutally clearing the way until standing above the depot.

Maintaining flanking positions, the rest of the companions stayed close, emptying clips in mere seconds, grabbing replacements from the dead and the dying. Carefully placing her shots, Mildred used the telescopic sight of the Winchester to pick off anybody coming their way with heavy ordnance.

Turning away from the defense complex, Ryan shot off the strands of barbed wire, sparking electrical cables sailing away. Now looking down, he could see the dirt road going directly from the ville to the craggy foothills in the west.

Just then, machine-gun chatter came from a nearby kiosk, the hum of the passing bullets clearly audible. Ruthlessly, Krysty crouched to point her M-16 that way and trigger the

40 mm gren launcher. It loudly thumped, and a split second later the brick kiosk exploded in a fireball, shrieking figures running around inside the inferno and waving their arms.

As if in response, a blinding searchlight swung around to trap the companions in a deadly zone of visibility. Everybody discharged their rapidfires at the source of the light, and immediately came the sound of shattering glass. The searchlight winked out.

Ensnconced in blackness once more, J.B. hauled out the implo gren, pulled the pin and simply dropped the bomb over the outside edge of the wall. The ferruled sphere vanished into the gloom below, and the companions dropped, holding on tight.

Running people were hurrying along the top of the wall, coming ever closer, when there came a brief flash of light from below, closely followed by a hurricane of air rushing downward. Caught by surprise, the deputies were hauled into the barbed wire, the electrified strands crackling and sizzling as the men wailed in agony.

The second that the wind eased, Ryan stood and dropped a willie peter gren off to the side. As it detonated, the flaming chem storm revealed a huge crater in the dirt road, ten, maybe twenty feet deep. But there was no sign of the feeder pipe.

Then, from the depot, there came an odd thumping sound, rapidly building in volume and in strength.

“Gaia, they’re getting ready to release the steam!” Krysty shouted.

“Use the rockets!” Ryan snarled, tossing aside the rapid-fire and pulling the LAW off his shoulder. “All together! We have to hit it all together.”

Moving fast, everybody obeyed, spreading out slightly to assume a firing position. From within the depot, the mechanical thumping got louder and machine guns yammered nonstop from the eastern wall. People were shouting in the streets, blasters firing randomly. Halfway up, the stairwell leading to

the guard kiosk exploded into writhing flames, and a second searchlight swept the wall to stop directly on the poised companions.

“On my mark!” Ryan bellowed, lightly placing a finger on the button, the plastic launch tube cool against his sweaty cheek. “Three...two...one...mark!”

In tight formation, the antitank weapons discharged, a stiletto of white flame stabbing out from the front, while a volcano of smoke and hot exhaust vomited from the rear. Streaking straight down, the rockets barely had enough time to arm their warheads before hitting the soft ground and detonating.

The overlapping explosions sounded louder than a nuke storm, and huge volumes of dirt were thrown aside in a dark tidal wave...along with several large chunks of curved steel pipe.

Suddenly the depot stopped pounding, and from the smoking depression a thundering geyser of white steam erupted, reaching for the stars, quickly spreading like a blossoming hellflower to send a boiling mist across the ville and cropland. Already halfway back to the kiosk, the companions cried out from the stinging deluge and barely made it inside to slam the door shut and take refuge inside the weapons closet.

However, not everybody was so fortunate. Anybody caught out in the open began to howl from the boiling rain, and most of the people were scalded alive, falling limply to the muddy ground long before they were able to reach any kind of protective cover.

As the force of the titanic geyser dissipated, the rain of boiling death slowed and finally stopped. An eerie stillness covered the sodden village, hot water dripping off the rooftops and trickling down the rain gutters, wispy tendrils of steam rising from the hundreds of bloated, red bodies covering the sidewalks and streets.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Long before the fires were completely extinguished in the barrier forest, the steam truck *Thunder* crashed into the charred branches, smashing them aside to create a path for the other wags. In tight formation, the LVTP-7 *Roadhog* came next, closely followed by the speedy little delivery vans, the halogen headlights throwing out overlapping cones of bright illumination.

Rolling through a wide cornfield, the steam truck reached the city wall without incident and stopped just short of touching the paved road encircling the ville.

“Strange,” Pete muttered, fingering the leather brace supporting his neck. “You would think the sec men would be firing at us by now.”

“Mebbe they’re all chilled,” Helga guessed. “That boiling rain must have aced anybody out in the open.”

“Possible, but I strongly dislike coincidences,” Pete said uneasily. He turned to address the doomie, but the child was crooning softly to himself, rocking back and forth, lost in the secret world of his mind. Bah, blasted freak was useless half of the time, and more cryptic than a Chinese VCR manual the other half. He really should have aced him years ago.

“All right, let’s circle the place and find the gate,” Pete directed, edging forward in his chair. “Have *Thunder* and the vans go left, we’ll go to the right. Whoever finds the gate, radio the others before trying to gain control!” Who knows? Maybe he could take the place intact and use it as his new base, rather

than merely looting the tech and hauling it hundreds of miles to his home outside Saint Louie.

“What about the CeeGee launchers?” Helga asked, trying not to sound disappointed. She had really been looking forward to blasting down the wall. There was a funny sensation inside her mind, almost as if she could see something...somebody around the corner. There was a murky impression of red hair blowing in the wind, but nothing more.

“Keep them ready in case Roberto made it across the Mud Lake,” the little trader commanded with a sneer. “But with any luck, he’s in the belly of a kraken by now.”

“Along with the triple-cursed lass!”

As Helga issued the orders into a mike, the five wags quickly separated and took off in different directions.

EXITING FROM THE DRIPPING brick kiosk, the companions stumbled along the wall, the granite slippery with small puddles, the dense air heavy with moisture and difficult to breathe. Their ears still rang slightly from the stentorian keen of the steam explosion.

The top of the barrier had been cleared of everything: corpses, blasters, brass and blood, and most of the barbed wire along the western side of the wall was gone, the tangled strands ripped free from their insulated moorings. However, the ville below was strewn with bodies, norms, horses and dogs, the sagging trees dripping water, the shiny streets misty with steam. Every torch and oil lantern had been extinguished, only the electric streetlights were still functioning, the stark white glow harshly displaying the stark desolation. Cascade was a city of the dead.

Nothing was moving for as far as the companions could see, aside from rivulets of water flowing into the storm gratings of the street. The scattered fires were extinguished, dark smoke rising upward to merge with the starry sky. Then dozens of doors slammed open in the houses and stores, and

out poured armed townfolk. They milled around aimlessly at first, unsure of what to do or where to go. Then the mob surged toward the ville square, converging upon the gazebo like iron filings drawn to a powerful magnet. A stocky woman took the wet stage and began to shout orders too faint to hear from atop the wall. But the crowd took heart and rushed to obey. First, the dead were checked for ammo and grens, then every vehicle was started and driven to the massive southern gate to form a curved line in front of the portal. More cars were added, along with Jeeps, trucks and, oddly, bales of hay, until there was a wide span solidly blocking the main street. Then the civies took defensive positions behind the makeshift barricade and waited for the coming invaders.

“That isn’t even going to slow down Pete,” Mildred stated with conviction, thumbing fresh rounds into the side port of the Winchester.

“Don’t think it’ll have to,” Ryan replied, pointing with the M-16 rapidfire. “Look there!”

A large group of people stood at the iron gate of the bunker, the golden hair of Jessica Colt visible even from this great distance.

“Jak must have told them how to find that trick door!” J.B. realized in unabashed delight. “It’s nice to have reinforcements, but I’m not really sure how fifty more folks on foot are going to stop war wags.” Squinting, the Armorer rummaged in the munitions bag for the navy telescope. “Are they carrying bazookas?”

“Don’t need them,” Ryan said confidently.

Studying the rough granite exterior of the foothills, Jessica spoke into a radio, then directed the others to take cover. A few seconds later the face of the rock violently exploded outward, and War Wag One rolled through the jagged opening, the rocket pod trailing smoke. It was closely followed by the UCV and *Big Joe*.

“War Wag Two is still alive?” Mildred gasped. “Excellent!”

"Thought so," Ryan said, almost grinning. "Option sixteen, my ass. No trader ever gives up without a fight."

"This will help a lot," Krysty said tersely. "But without the laser to even the odds Roberto is in for a hell of a fight."

"No problem there," J.B. stated, taking a small leather pouch from his bag. "I found this in the safe of the sheriff's office." He pulled on the drawstrings and opened the pouch. "These are the diamonds that Yates stole."

"Superlative, John Barrymore!" Doc cried, then scowled. "But however can we get these to him? It's a thirty-foot drop to the ground, and impossible to get through the ville and the gate."

"We can check the kiosks for some rope," Mildred said, starting back inside at a run.

"Don't worry about it, Millie!" J.B. stated confidently. "See here on the pouch? It's marked 'War Wag One.'"

"So what?" Krysty asked with a frown. "Isn't that the pouch taken from War Wag One?"

J.B. smiled. "Yep, sure is!"

"But then...oh."

"But then why would it be marked that way," Mildred said slowly, comprehension brightening her face. "Unless there were more diamonds in the other wags!"

"Only a fool keeps all of his brass in one pocket," Ryan stated, resting the Steyr on a shoulder. "Especially for something as important as a can opener."

"By Gadfrey, the man said that we would never know all of his secrets," Doc said in dark admiration. "And it seems that Roberto is a man of infinite resources."

"Traders are trickier than a bent-dick dog," J.B. added, tucking away the pouch.

"However, knowing Pete, it's still a long way from a fair fight," Krysty declared uneasily. There was something in the wind that she didn't like. A disquieting feeling of being watched by unseen eyes.

“Mebbe we can do something about that,” Ryan said, unlimbering the rapidfire. “J.B. and Mildred, go left, find some more LAW rockets in the other kiosks. Doc and Krysty with me! The last thing either Roberto or Pete will expect is help from the sec men of Cascade.”

“Let us away!” Doc shouted as a war cry, and everybody took off at a full run.

Staying off the dirt path and safely in the field of corn, the convoy of wags crushed a wide path through the plants until reaching the paved road, then they paused, and headed in different directions, the UCV and *Big Joe* going left, War Wag One heading to the right.

Glancing across the ville, Ryan wondered if Pete was doing the same thing, then dismissed the matter and concentrated on finding some rocket launchers. There was movement in the first kiosk they came to, so the three companions used the M-16 rapidfires through the small blasterports. Men cried out from inside, and kicking down the door Ryan found only dying norms and a crate of grens. Both of those were useless at the moment. There was a radio near a blasterport, but it was soaked and only gave off sputtering crackles.

Inside their first kiosk, J.B. and Mildred came upon a .50-caliber machine gun and some twitching corpses. The Fifty was too heavy for just two people to carry, so they left it behind and kept going.

Down in the cornfield, the UCV and the *Big Joe* turned the corner of the wall and instantly launched missiles at the distant headlights of the huffing *Thunder*. The steam truck promptly responded in kind, and fiery warbirds lanced through the darkness, machine-gun fire chattering nonstop from all of the wags. The missiles detonated harmlessly in the air, and now the wags turned off their headlights and revved their engines to race across the cropland, heading toward the enemy.

Unexpectedly, a group of Cascade outriders stood in the corn carrying the lumpy canvas bag of a U.S. Army satchel

charge, a sizzling fuse dangling from the side. As the UCV headed directly for the people to run them over, *Big Joe* unleashed a flamethrower and the deputies were engulfed in the arching spray of burning fuel. Swiftly, the urban combat vehicle darted away from them, and the satchel charge violently detonated, throwing arms and legs toward the stars and flattening the rows of cornstalks for a dozen yards.

On the other side of Cascade, the door to the next kiosk was suspiciously ajar, and Ryan had the others stop outside. He tossed in a gren with the safety tape and arming pin still securely in place. There came a startled cry, and then the sound of running boots. Hosing the interior of the kiosk with their rapidfires, the three companions cleared out the ambush, then checked for any LAWS. They found two lying near the blasterports, the plastic tubes riddled with ricochets.

Continuing along the wall, Ryan and the others reached the corner just in time to see an outrider astride a horse launch a LAW rocket at War Wag One. Instantly, Roberto responded with a dozen machine guns. The rocket exploded in midair, then the outrider and her horse were torn apart by the hammering streams of copper-jacketed lead.

Just then, *Roadhog* came into view from around the distant corner. There was barely a tick of the clock before both war wags cut loose with everything they had—missiles, rockets, blasters and flamethrowers. The cornfield erupted into violent warfare.

Chapter Twenty-Six

With the radar still down, Roberto had to aim by sight alone. Again and again, the shimmering laser stabbed out, but each time it missed *Roadhog*, and only burned a deep groove along the granite wall.

The driver turned off its headlights, and dark smoke began to gush from the squat machine attached to the rear of the LVTP-7. Forty millimeter gren launchers started pumping out fat canisters that landed among the rustling plants only to issue volumes of additional smoke in a variety of colors.

Once more, War Wag One tried the laser, but if it hit anything it was impossible to say. In only moments, the cornfield was a roiling cloud bank, the thick chemical fumes merging with the West Virginia night until it was impossible to see anything more than a few feet away.

Farther down the wall, a powerful searchlight began to sweep the field, the beam dimly piercing the cloud bank and highlighting War Wag One. Promptly, *Roadhog* launched a salvo of homemade rockets, and Roberto lurched his wag into reverse, moving deeper into the swirling smoke. Firing in unison, Ryan, Krysty and Doc aimed their weapons at the searchlight until there was the sound of shattering glass and the darkness returned.

Briefly the machine guns of both war wags chattered away, the stuttering flames strobing the misty gloom. Then the traders stopped shooting, and there was only the sound of cornstalks snapping and crunching under the armored transports as they blindly searched for the reclusive enemy.

Ducking inside a brick guard kiosk, J.B. and Mildred found several moaning deputies lying on the wet floor, their hands and faces covered with pulsating blisters. While J.B. grabbed a bandolier of 40 mm shells off a particularly large deputy, Mildred paused for only a moment to look down at the wounded men. She placed a bottle of soothing calamine lotion taken from the sheriff's office into the groping hand of one, forced herself to step past them to check the closet and was rewarded with a brace of LAW rocket launchers.

Rushing outside, the man and woman unleashed their weapons at the colossal *Thunder*. But both the 40 mm grenades and the 66 mm rockets failed completely to penetrate the massive armor of the lumbering steam truck.

Unexpectedly, there was a rebel yell from the loudspeakers on top of the urban combat vehicle, and Jak revved the tandem engines to charge toward a delivery van. The civilian wag tried to escape, the people inside firing a variety of predark and homemade blasters, but it accomplished nothing. The steel fork of the UCV slammed into the sheet-metal chassis, skewering it like a fish. Still in motion, Jak cycled the fork upward and behind until the crumpled van full of screaming men fell off, landed with a crash and rolled through the cornfield gushing blood.

Sounding their whistle, the crew of *Thunder* headed straight for the UCV, grimly intent on a fast chill, their machine guns chattering nonstop. However, the rounds only ricocheted off the composite armor of the predark fighting vehicle. Easily outdistancing the steam truck, Jak destroyed the second delivery van and chased the third directly into the guns of *Big Joe*. Freed from the distraction of the vans, the UCV and the *Big Joe* started circling *Thunder*, raking the sides with machine-gun fire. The huge steam truck fired two more rockets, but then stopped, its small stockpile depleted.

“Dark night, they were trying to do that!” J.B. cried. “Most

of the space in a locomotive is taken up by cords of wood to fuel the engine. The damn thing is finally out of rockets!”

“They still have plenty of brass,” Mildred said, tracking the big machine with the LAW. “And if all else fails it can simply ram the UCV and smash it like an empty can.”

“The bastards gotta catch him first!” J.B. replied, firing a long burst from the M-16 at the steam-powered monster, then pumping a 40 mm gren at the smoking flue. Amazingly it hit the small opening perfectly, but bounced off, the flue well protected by a wire screen.

Deciding to try for the wheels, Mildred aimed the LAW, but heard shuffling boots from behind and looked backward to see the horribly blistered deputies lurching out of the kiosk, their faces smeared with the pinkish lotion and shaking hands holding blasters and knives. Grimly the physician turned the aft end of the LAW toward the men and pressed the launch button.

In a loud exhalation, the military rocket streaked away into the night, heading for the distant Blue Ridge Mountains, but from the aft the fiery exhaust tore off arms and legs and sent the tattered bodies sailing away into the ville below, tumbling and turning like broken ragdolls. Only a single deputy somehow managed to stay on the wall, his blaster gone, his hair on fire, bones showing through his burning uniform, a broken leg caught in the doorway of the kiosk.

Casting away the spent tube, Mildred drew her ZKR target revolver and mercifully dispatched the poor bastard as J.B. turned away from the slaughter to begin firing the M-16 combo again at the apparently unstoppable *Thunder*. On a hunch, J.B. blew up a water pump, sending a frothy column of cool water shooting into the air. But if the cold deluge affected the hot engine of *Thunder* in any way, it wasn't readily apparent.

Lowering the fork until it was nearly touching the ground, Jak spun the UCV crazily, then charged for the steam truck.

“What in blazes is he doing!” J.B. demanded over the chat-

tering rapidfire. "Jak can't dent that steam truck, it must weight a hundred times more than the UCV!"

"That's not the plan!" Mildred growled, firing steadily at *Thunder's* viewports. Briefly, she remembered her elementary-school Archimedes and wished the young man luck. He was going to need it.

Machine guns rattled at the urban combat vehicle and shotguns boomed, a 12-gauge deer slug slamming so deep into the Lexan windshield that Jak could actually see the metal tip. Crouching low, the teenager fishtailed away from the blazing guns and slammed into the side of *Thunder*. Only skimming the ground, the fork went under the thick armor and stabbed three of the military tires, deflating them instantly. Twisting the steering wheel and braking sharply, Jak managed to rip the tires completely off, the spinning steel rims now several feet off the cropland.

Charging back into the night, Jak cycled the fork behind the UCV to rub the tires off the fork, then lowered it to the former position and hit the massive steam truck again, this time taking away only two tires. However, the overweight *Thunder* was starting to list and it slowed considerably.

Encouraged, Scott swung *Big Joe* far around the two combatants, then charged in from the right, just as Jak successfully stole one more tire. Moving at its maximum speed, the armored Mack truck hit the locomotive in a deafening crash of metal on metal, headlights shattering, Plexiglas cracking and men screaming.

The vehicle tilting dangerously to the side, the driver tried desperately to correct the angle, the steam engine hammering to full power. As stubborn as a bulldog, the big Mack truck stubbornly clung to the job, loose dirt and cornstalks flying out from under the spinning tires. Then from out of the darkness, the UCV also rammed into the steam truck right alongside *Big Joe*, the fork raised as high as it could go. The tine bent against the thick armor, but the impact proved to be

the final straw. In slow majesty, the colossal *Thunder* leaned over to crash onto the corn, inertia forcing the huffing engine onward, plowing up a mountain of dirt as steam began erupting from a hundred cracked and distorted pipes.

Speeding away from the toppled giant, Jak raced for cover as *Big Joe* swung around fast and launched its last missile straight down the smoking flue. The warbird busted through the protective screen as if it were gossamer and disappeared down the fiery gullet of the steam truck. A split second later, *Thunder* violently exploded from within, steam, fire, smoke and engine parts spraying across the bedraggled cornfield in a deafening display of destruction.

But even before the concussion faded, the UCV and *Big Joe* reached the paved road and were racing around the ville, with J.B. and Mildred dashing along the wall in hot pursuit. Four down left only one to go. Specifically, Broke-Neck Pete in his unstoppable juggernaut, *Roadhog*.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Endlessly racing around each other in the thick smoke, War Wag One and *Roadhog* charged through the dark cornfield, smashing aside the green stalks, their machine guns chattering constantly and gren launchers thumping steadily. Explosions filled the night, but the laser stayed mute and no missiles or rockets were launched. Those big punch weapons were wisely being saved for a clear target.

Pelting into the next kiosk, Ryan, Krysty and Doc found only dying people and a flamethrower, the butane pre-burner softly hissing below the main barrel. It was a top-notch weapon against people, but utterly useless against a war wag. However, the closet yielded the unusual prize of a Stinger missile. Designed to destroy airplanes, the device had a fantastically long range, and more importantly was a heat-seeker and should be able to zone in on the hot engines of the hidden war wag.

“Gaia, this damn thing is useless!” Krysty fumed, shaking the Stinger.

“Indeed, madam,” Doc agreed dourly. “It could just as easily terminate Roberto instead of Pete! It has no way of knowing which wag we want chilled!”

“Not if we launch it close enough,” Ryan replied, fumbling fingers turning on the old circuits. There was a long pause, and for a moment the man thought the built-in comp was aced, or maybe the batteries, but then the indicators came sluggishly alive, the ready lights flashing brightly.

Returning to the outside, Ryan, Krysty and Doc stared into the swirling fog, trying to find *Roadhog*, when a shot rang out from farther down the wall and the Stinger was jerked out of Ryan's grip to tumble away and detonate harmlessly in the chemical fog.

Spinning in unison, the three companions triggered their blasters, but the soft lead rounds merely impacted harmlessly on the brick exterior of next kiosk. It was larger than other guardhouses, with no door in front to allow access to the wall, and wide sheets of steel were bolted to the brickwork as additional protection. There were two .50-caliber machine guns jutting from firing slots, along with a flamethrower, and what looked like a missile pod on the roof. Its honeycomb was missing, the torn electrical wires sparking and crackling with power. This was Cascade's main defense post.

Just then the disfigured face of MacIntyre briefly appeared in the blasterport, his mottled skin covered with ugly blisters, one eye completely closed from a sagging fold of seared flesh. Instinctively, the companions dived for cover just as a .50-caliber machine gun cut loose, sending out a stream of hot lead and sizzling tracers. The rounds ricocheted off the granite top of the wall, missing them by only inches, then tried to track after them, but apparently the kiosks had been designed to prevent people in one from firing upon the other. A seemingly wise precaution against invaders that had just bitten the locals in the ass.

Crawling back into the kiosk, Ryan, Krysty and Doc used their M-16 rapidfires to send a hail of 5.56 mm rounds at the sheriff, but the perfectly imbalanced tumblers did even less damage to the armored brickwork than the soft lead rounds from the blasters.

"We will never ace him from here," Doc snarled, slapping a spare clip into his M-16. "Krysty and I will keep him busy while you use the stairs and get him from behind!"

"Got a better idea," Ryan growled, standing with the flame-

thrower in his hands. Shoving the fluted muzzle out the blasterport, he squeezed the firing lever and a roaring stream of jellied napalm lanced out to completely engulf the other master kiosk, liquid fire dripping off the brick and entering through every tiny crevice. Screaming horribly, MacIntyre covered his face with both hands and fell from view.

Waiting a precious minute to make sure the sheriff wasn't faking, the companions rushed over to the master guardhouse and looked in through a firing slot. The walls were lined with rapidfires and missile launchers, as well as wooden racks filled with grens of all types. A dozen aced men were lying on the ground, their blistered hands and faces showing how they had painfully bought the farm. But there was no sign of Sheriff MacIntyre.

"Bastard escaped again!" Ryan raged, pounding a fist against the brick wall.

"The man is a Houdini!" Doc grumbled hatefully.

Krysty started to reply when she was nearly overwhelmed with an imposing sense of danger. Moving her blaster slowly, she tried to feel the direction of the approaching trouble, but she could barely concentrate from the noise of the blasters, grens and those damn sirens! Gaia, she thought, I wish they would just shut the fuck up! But the howling continued unabated.

BARELY SLOWING, the rear doors of *Roadhog* opened and Helga jumped out carrying a CeeGee launcher. Landing in a run, the woman raced away from the war wag, a second launcher bouncing uncomfortably on her back. If the little doomie was right, all she had to do was to stay right there, and when Roberto rolled into view she would put a missile straight through his fragging windshield and end this death dance once for all.

But as she assumed a firing stance, Helga felt her animated hair flex wildly as if there was danger nearby, and she swung

around to face the murky ville. She could only dimly see the high wall through the dense clouds, but her gut told her that was the source of the real trouble. Without hesitation, Helga aimed the CeeGee and blindly took aim.

“KRYSTY?” Ryan asked, reaching out a hand.

Without answering, the scowling redhead fired a long burst from her M-16 into the smoke. As the clip emptied, she dropped the rapidfire and added the five rounds from her S&W revolver.

Tensed for combat, Doc could see nothing, then something detonated on the ground, creating a fireball that momentarily pushed back the cloud bank to expose the aft end of *Roadhog*. Instantly, Ryan triggered the flamethrower, and covered the armored war wag from stem to stern in blazing napalm.

SILHOUETTED IN THE FLAMES, *Roadhog* became starkly visible, and from out of the fog came a shimmering beam of translucent power that struck the armored prow. Superheated in under a split second, the bolts and welds broke and the armor cracked free, even as the headlights exploded and the Plexiglas viewports fogged into impenetrability.

Cursing vehemently, Broke-Neck Pete charged for the exit, but the little doomie reached out to cling to the man with a death grip. Savagely, Pete backhanded the child away, and he hit the bulkhead hard, his thin skull audibly cracking from the cowardly blow.

But even as his eyes closed in death, a smile touched his lips as a single moment later, Roberto fired the laser once more, this time sweeping it across the cornfield, cutting off the tufted tops of the cornstalks and neatly slicing *Roadhog* in two.

The massive stores of hoarded ammo and fuel promptly ignited, banishing the night in a hellish explosion that rocked the cropland in a trip-hammer blast, the powerful concussion

nearly shaking Ryan and Krysty off the distant wall. Fiery streamers shot high into the sky, grens and land mines detonating in wild pandemonium, spare rockets whizzing out in every direction, creating a staggering display of military firepower unseen since the fall of civilization.

Not completely satisfied, Roberto launched one last salvo of missiles at the smoking pile of wreckage, but the double explosion of the powerful C-4 warheads was barely noticeable among the staggering cacophony of the cooking ordnance.

Epilogue

Driving the dented war wag to the front gate, Roberto stopped the armored vehicle a few yards away from the suspiciously smooth sand in front of the wide portal.

Experimentally, Jak flashed the headlights and beeped the horn a few times. Surprisingly, the gate swung ponderously aside and there stood Mayor Spencer holding an oil lantern. The woman was soaked to the skin, and her right arm was in a sling, her hand covered with thick white bandages. Close behind her was a mob of armed men wearing flak jackets and carrying a wide assortment of blasters, but all of them were either teenagers or wrinklies.

With a hydraulic sigh, the side door to War Wag One cycled down and Roberto stepped into view, Jessica and Quinn flanking the big man, rapidfires filling their hands.

“All right, you win,” Spencer stated bitterly. “The village belongs to you. Come on in.”

Roberto nodded. “Thanks. But if you think I’m feeble enough to drive my wag through the gate, then you’ve been smoking wolfweed,” he replied. “You folks can generate electricity, and I’m betting live brass that there is enough hard current running through the entrance to fry a kraken like a catfish.”

There was an uneasy stir among the villagers.

“That’s pretty smart for a busrider,” the mayor said grudgingly.

“I can say the same thing for you, too, Baron.”

“Baron? I am not some inbred noble!” she responded hotly. “But a duly elected representative of the people!”

“That sounds pretty fancy,” Roberto said in forced politeness, rubbing his sore leg. “Me, I’m just a trader. And you’re the...president?” It was the only term he knew for a politician.

“Mayor,” the woman supplied proudly.

“Fair enough. The name is Roberto Eagleson.” He paused. “But you already know that from your spy.”

Scowling darkly, the mayor said nothing for a long minute.

“Etta. Henrietta Spencer,” she finally replied, then quickly added, “And you should know that the whole damn village is mined. Packed with enough TNT and dynamite to blow us to the moon!”

“Better a clean death than to fall into the hands of stinking busriders!” an old man shouted from the crowd, brandishing a BAR longblaster. Other oldsters muttered in assent and shifted their grips on their weapons, preparing for battle.

“Sounds like a mighty wise precaution,” Roberto replied, crossing his arms. “However, now that Pete is aced, we control the bridge and tunnel. So while we can’t get in, you can’t get out.”

“Stalemate,” Jessica stated gruffly.

The mayor snorted in reply. “Why should we leave? Don’t need to leave. We’ve got plenty of stores! Enough to last for decades!”

“Well, you suckered us here with a lie and a spy,” Roberto said bluntly, trying to look mildly apologetic. “With the obvious idea of jacking my wags. Now, the plan worked so slick that I’m guessing that this was not your first time.” He smiled tolerantly, like a parent to a misbehaving child. “Which tells me the ville is dangerously low on supplies.”

“Except for blasters,” Quinn added. “Damn, you folks got a lot of heavy iron, I’ll give you that!”

The crowd took heart at the compliment, which was the general idea. Brass was a lot harder to make than a fair deal.

“We can defend ourselves,” the mayor replied smugly, trying to sense if this was some sort of trap to make her reveal her defense secrets.

“As can we,” Roberto said, patting the scarred hull of the war wag. “I’m sure that you’ve seen our laser in action. We made it ourselves.”

“Bullshit!”

“And why should we lie about that?” Jessica demanded.

Spencer did not reply, considering the matter.

“None that I can think of,” she conceded honestly.

Now that the conversation was heading in the right direction, Roberto went to close the deal. “You’re tough, we’re tough, everybody here is harder than boiled steel. Fair enough. That means it would be triple stupe for us to fight anymore, so...let’s talk.”

Suspicious again, the mayor frowned. “About what?”

“Business,” Roberto said with a smile. “My business is buying and selling things. Blasters, brass, shine, juice, tech, books, food, you name it, I have it or can get it for you.” The trader walked forward, letting them see his pronounced limp. “Everybody needs something. Mebbe we can cut a deal.”

Another slow minute passed, then a second.

“What kind of a deal are we talking about here?” Mayor Spencer asked warily. “What do you want?”

As he had done before a thousand times in his many journeys, Roberto Eagleson spread his arms wide. “What have you got?”

A ROSY DAWN SLOWLY CAME over the Blue Ridge Mountains, the sky gradually changing to a rare clear blue, carrying the promise of a better tomorrow.

Standing on the sooty edge of the wide hole, Mildred kicked a piece of charred wood into the smoldering rubble and tried not to weep. Gone, it was all gone.

“You okay, Millie?” J.B. asked gently, laying a hand on her shoulder.

“Yes, John, I’ll be fine,” the physician replied woodenly, unable to take her sight off the terrible destruction. The village hospital had been hit by a missile and burned to the ground. There was nothing remaining of any conceivable use to anybody but the gravediggers.

The remainder of the night had been spent in lengthy negotiations between Roberto and Mayor Spencer, and then the careful exchange of goods scrupulously watched over by numerous armed guards from both sides. Cascade got all of the food that Roberto could spare, while he received ammunition, fuel, a lot of books and a laundry list of assorted items that the mayor wanted: seeds for crops, fertilizer, batteries, salt, whiskey, something called Freon, silver jewelry and good-quality bedsheets. The last two items the trader privately knew were essential for making fulminating guncotton, a tremendously powerful explosive, as he used the same things for the same purpose himself. The locals also agreed to build a new bridge over the gorge at Mud Lake. A wooden bridge that could easily be burned by either side if it was deemed necessary.

Blood had been spilled on both sides, so there was an awkward peace between the trader and ville that could change at any moment, especially if the locals obtained some major firepower. He would have to make sure that they did not. Scott Gordon and *Big Joe* had already agreed to establish a post in the field of clover to monitor any visitors. The bridge over the Barrier River was already down, accidentally destroyed by a random missile, which saved him from blowing it apart and pretending that one of Pete’s crew had done it as a last act of revenge on the ville.

Personally, Roberto wanted everything to be square and on the level. However, Cascade had lasted a hundred years by stealing from other traders, an unforgivable sin from anybody else except these isolated hermits. Jacking outlanders would be a hard habit for them to change. Cascade was a ticking time bomb, but one packed with the most priceless treasure of all,

knowledge, so Roberto accepted the gamble. Taking risks was merely part of the job of being a trader.

Washed and cleaned, the UCV was parked in the town square taking on the last of their cargo. As the companions' part of the deal, they got the UCV completely refueled by the local juice extracted from coal, and the war wag was packed solid with cases of preserves, an encyclopedia, a LAW and a well-cushioned box full of pigeon eggs. In exchange, the mayor got the radio and the radar. It was considered by all to be a fair swap.

"So, where are you folks headed?" Jessica asked, ambling over to rest a boot on a park bench. "Don't have to go solo. You're more than welcome to roll with us."

"Thanks, but we need to see some old friends at Front Royal," Ryan said, closing the rear doors and dusting off his hands. The man was moving stiffly from the layers of tape wrapped around his chest to hold the broken rib in place. "They'll want to know about Cascade, maybe set up some regular trade. Front Royal could send over food and raw materials, and Cascade could use their machine shops to convert the metal into needed engine parts, chains, gears and such."

"Any sign of MacIntyre?" Jak asked, leaning heavily on a longblaster in lieu of a crutch. His left boot was off, the sprained ankle swaddled in bandages.

"No, he's long gone," Jessica snorted. "Along with a lot of explosives. The mayor has ordered him to be shot on sight." She shrugged. "I guess nothing ticks off a former thief more than getting jacked."

Checking the seal on a keg of black powder, Doc barked a laugh. "Cervantes would most certainly agree, dear lady. He said that to steal from a thief is not a crime, merely irony."

"Guess that all depends on whether or not it was your stuff in the first place," she noted pragmatically.

"Too true, dear lady! Well said!"

"Anyway, the chief wanted to say goodbye, but he's busy

with the mayor," Jessica said, scratching the back of her neck. "Now if the truth be told, I won't mind seeing you disappear over the horizon. You folks attract trouble the way blood does stingwings." Then she grinned. "But I wish you luck, and if we ever cross paths again, the first shot of shine is on me."

"Good to know," Ryan said with a smile, and they shook hands.

As the companions dutifully climbed into the UCV, J.B. took his turn behind the steering wheel and Ryan went to the gunner seat. After checking the gauges and controls, J.B. shifted the main engine into gear and started for the front gate and the tattered cornfield beyond. It was a long journey to Front Royal, but there was brass in their pockets, food in the backpacks and juice in the wag. In the Deathlands, that was as good as life ever got.

However, in the far distance, dark clouds were beginning to gather over the Blue Ridge Mountains, heralding the approach of a storm. The high winds were increasing and sheet lightning was already slashing at the jagged mountain peaks.

STUMBLING OUT OF THE SEWER, Sheriff Dale MacIntyre collapsed on a rock on the shore of Mud Lake trying to catch his breath. There was a cloth tied around his head to cover his ruined eye, every inch of his body was bruised, and he was bone-weary, too damn exhausted to run anymore even if chased by the Devil himself.

At least I got out of the city, the sheriff reminded himself, shrugging off a backpack full of stolen canned goods and ammunition. When Roberto and his coldhearts took over, the very first people they would have hung would be the mayor and the sheriff. Maybe his ancestor had been the hero of skydark, but Dale was a lot more practical. Unless he got something out of it personally, the man saw no reason to help anybody else.

Just then, MacIntyre saw a flicker of motion out of the

corner of his eye. He spun with his blaster ready, then paused in horror at the sight of the massive hellhounds, the tentacles sprouting from their muscular backs waving as if tasting the air.

Growling softly, the bioweeps started forward, but then stopped abruptly at the sight of the badge on the man's uniform. A star! That was the symbol of the Makers. This was clearly one of their creations, or perhaps even a Master himself!

Sweat dripping off his blistered face, his blaster hand trembling, Sheriff MacIntyre could barely believe it when the giant monsters bizarrely cowered on the ground like a pair of obedient dogs and softly whimpered. What the fuck is going on here? he thought.

"Sit," the man said on a whim.

Incredibly, the hulking things did as he commanded, then patiently waited for further orders.

His heart hammering painfully in his sore chest, MacIntyre walked hesitantly toward them and reached out a hand to let the monsters sniff his scent. Then he scratched both of the things behind the ears and was rewarded with a low purr of pleasure and a friendly lick.

"Good boys, good dogs," MacIntyre said gently, already thinking of ways that he could use the massive escorts now that he was out in the world. The sheriff had always wanted a hunting dog, but none had survived the long winter years in Cascade without ending up as a roast on somebody's dinner table. Even the damn pigeons had been eaten almost to the point of extinction.

However, the sheriff now had two faithful companions, and from the looks of them, these were real killers. Whatever the hell they were. Obviously muties of some kind. Their former owner had to have gotten himself killed and they'd gone wild, but not feral, and had simply attached themselves

to the first person they encountered. It was pure luck that it had been him.

Retrieving a flat-bottomed canoe from where it had been hidden in a pile of dead bushes, the sheriff loaded the supplies and started across Mud Lake, the two hellhounds obediently following, the sludge rising to their chests, but not sticking to their smooth coats.

Once he found a new village to use as a home base, the sheriff planned to track down the one-eyed man and repay the man for removing his eye. Then MacIntyre would turn what remained of the bastard over to the dogs for their dinner. That should be hugely entertaining, the sheriff thought. For about three or four seconds. Roberto was the key. He would have to die first. But after that, the death of the one-eyed man was assured.

In a soft rumble of thunder, a hard rain began to fall, and the sheriff paddled on through the deluge, savagely working out the details of his bloody revenge.

The Wyeth Journal—Cascade

Pausing to gather her thoughts, Mildred began to write in her private journal.

The City of Buena Vista, West Virginia, better known as Cascade to the locals, was the final victim of skydark. Yet even as it fell, it rose again to a new life, and hopefully a much better one. But only time would tell for sure.

Taking a sip of coffee, she went on.

Beware of a healthy dooie, as they're most likely a fake and out to chill you.

Incredibly, kudzu is edible, and really quite tasty. The leaves are as sweet as cactus pulp. Honestly, I will never get over that. Between the mutants, monsters and maniacs, this strange little bit of news is still the most bizarre that I have ever encountered.

Also, pigeon crap can be used to make saltpeter, the basic ingredient for black powder. Later I'll write down the instructions for converting black powder into gunpowder, which is safer to store, more powerful, and really a bitch to make, but well worth the effort. Trust me, your patience will be rewarded. That's all for now. My turn for guard duty.

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EDEN'S TWILIGHT

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