

The door to the hut burst open, sending Ryan tumbling across the floor

A shaft of light pierced the gloom as the door flew off its hinges, but the pale rectangle was swiftly blotted out.

The man who filled the doorway stood at least eight feet tall. He'd stooped to enter the hut, and his head now scraped the rafters. His rad-ruined face showed all the intelligence of a fencepost and all the friendliness of a cornered rattlesnake.

The mutie bared his teeth, flexed his hands and reached toward the invaders of his squalid domain. He roared, and the sound was accompanied by billowing waves of stinking breath that made Ryan wince.

"Mine!" Jak shrilled, recovering his balance and launch-ing himself at the human monolith.

The mutie never moved. Feet planted wide apart, he swatted the boy away from him as if he were merely an importunate gnat.

Ryan snarled his rage and squeezed the trigger of his P-226. The baffle silencer did its stuff. There was a muf-fled sound, and a thin trace of smoke trickled from the barrel.

When the Russian didn't even rock on his heels, Ryan felt the first tremor of unease....

Red Equinox

#9 in the Deathland series

James Axler

A GOLD EAGLE BOOK FROM WORLDWIDE

**TORONTO • NEW YORK • LONDON • PARIS • AMSTERDAM •
STOCKHOLM • HAMBURG • ATHENS • MILAN • TOKYO • SYDNEY**

Everyone needs a hand to guide,
an arm to support.

A light in the darkness
and a best friend.

This one, as before and for always,
with all of my loving,
is for Liz.

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I cannot forecast to you the action of Russia. It is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.

—Winston Churchill, October 1, 1939

Chapter One

Western wind, when wilt thou blow,
That small rain down can rain?

DOC TANNER WAS truly happy. The assorted horrors that had blighted his mind and brought him teetering to the far edge of madness had faded away from him like the dew in the morning.

Oh, if my love were in my arms,
And I in my bed again.

It was a fine summer afternoon in Omaha, Nebraska, in the year 1896.

He was twenty-eight years old and had been married for just a few weeks over five years.

"Such happiness, Emily," he said in his rich, deep voice, smiling at her.

His wife smiled back and reached out to him, squeezing his hand between her fingers. She wore a dress of flowered gingham, with a bonnet trimmed in white lace. Her high button boots had picked up shreds of dry grass and seed from the meadow where they'd come for their picnic.

The children played on a patterned blanket close by. Two-year-old Rachel, toddling bravely on stumpy little legs, laughed as she vainly reached out to capture a bright but-terfly. Her baby brother, Jolyon, approaching his first birthday, was content to lie on his back and kick his bare feet at the soaring golden ball that floated in the perfect blue sky. An angled parasol protected his sensitive skin from the direct heat.

Oh, if my love were in my arms,
And I in my bed again.

Emily had a beautiful voice, a trained contralto that thrilled the air.

The remains of their meal lay spread over the damask cloth: some slices of honey-roasted ham; three different jars of pickles; half a new-baked loaf, and some butter wrapped in damp muslin to help keep it cool; a bowl of lettuce and tomatoes, wilting a little now; and a crock containing several different cheeses.

"You always like cheese, don't you, dearest?" Doc said. "I mean that you *used* to like it, didn't you?"

Emily turned to him, her smile sliding away into bewilderment. In the distance Doc could hear the faint sound of rumbling thunder. Clouds were gathering along the horizon of the prairie, threatening a storm. The horse that stood patiently in the shade of a clump of live oaks, freed from the traces of the wagon, whickered softly.

"Why do you say that I used to like it, my darling? I still do. Most truly."

Doc blinked. For a moment his vision blurred and he shook his head. His wife's face, better known even than his own, seemed to shimmer as though a fog had dropped between them.

"Emily..." he began, but a clap of thunder drowned out his words. The clouds were coming swiftly toward them, changing color from white to leaden gray to a peculiar pinkish-purple hue. They resembled a livid bruise, he thought.

"The children, beloved," Emily said. Yes, it was Emily. It *was* her.

"Indeed. Let us take them to the carriage and get shelter from the storm."

"I'll gather everything up. Ready for next time." She looked at him, and it was as though a great dagger of smooth ice had been thrust into his heart. "Because there will never be another time, Theo, my dear."

"I know that. By the three...! I fear that I disremember what."

All around him, the grass was growing, sprouting faster, so that baby Jolyon had already vanished. And Rachel's head barely showed above the waving tips.

"Oh, help me, Papa, for I am frightened," she cried in a lisping, squeaky voice.

Western wind, when wilt thou blow,
That small rain down can rain?

But the voice wasn't that of Emily. It was a different, younger voice. Doc knew that he recognized it.

"Quickly, my dearest!"

"Help me with the children, Emily. I can't see them. The grass is so long that they have simply vanished from sight."

Smoke.

Now he could smell smoke.

Behind him the horse whinnied and tossed its head, snapping the bridle and galloping away, eyes rolling, hooves pounding like thunder.

"Emily! Emily!"

Doc dropped to his knees, fumbling in the grass, feeling it moving over his skin like sentient human hair. He couldn't feel the children, but he could hear them, giggling together, their bubbling laughter seeming to come from all around.

The smell of smoke was growing ever stronger, and now he could actually hear the crackling of flames.

His wife was no longer to be seen. Through the mounting horror, Doc remained calm. He stood on the tips of his toes to try to spot Rachel and Jolyon, but now the grass was as high as his shoulders. The grove of live oaks had gone, and in their

place stood a mound of earth, with a circle of stone pillars at its heart. And there stood—

"Emily!" he shouted, voice cracking. He started to run toward her, recognizing the mane of golden hair that hung to her waist, the bright crimson skirt, halfway up her long thighs, the high scarlet boots and the sound of tiny spurs, like silver bells, tinkling as she walked.

Flames, dazzling yellow and orange, were swooping across the skyline, exploding through the tops of the grass.

The wagon, horse, children...all were gone. All that was left was Emily.

"Emily?" Doc called. "Emily!"

"Lori," Doc said. "Oh, if my love were in my arms." He reached out as he stumbled toward her.

The tall teenager turned at his shout, beginning the familiar, gentle smile that had brought him such happiness for so many months. They were nearly close enough to touch.

Smoke billowed into Doc's face, blinding him and making him cough, but he felt his arms close around Lori.

Emily.

Lori.

He opened his eyes again, his ears filling with the roar of the fire, his skin scorching, his clothes beginning to smolder from the heat.

Doc experienced the illusion that his body was shrinking, becoming brittle and frail. His bones were layered in dust, his skin tight and dry.

He was holding Emily, Lori, Emily, Lori, closely to him. Doc began to smile reassuringly at her, but the smile died, stillborn. His mouth filled with bile as bitter as wormwood and he began to scream.

Doc held a log of charred, blackened wood, shaped like a human being, smoking, with parts of the flesh still glow-ing like tiny rubies. The scorched ends of whitened bone protruded here and there through the roasted meat. A stubble of hair remained on the seared skull, like a corn-field after the fires of autumn have cleansed it. There were no eyes in the bubbling sockets, and the mouth was a sigh-ing cave of agonizing death.

"My love is in my arms," a voice whispered in Doc's ear.

He dropped the corpse, stepping back from it, and saw that it still lived. The burned branches of arms and legs still moved in feeble, uncoordinated motion, like a willow near a shaded pool as the breeze touches it.

"Die," Doc begged.

But it wouldn't.

It was even struggling to rise, fingerless hands reaching plaintively toward him in a mockery of prayer.

"For the love of God, Montresor," Doc moaned, wav-ing helplessly at the creature with his swordstick, the silver lion's head gripped firmly in his gnarled fist.

The mouth opened. "And I in my bed again," it croaked.

Doc Tanner began to scream, and the noise woke the other five people who lay sprawled around the mat-trans chamber.

Chapter Two

RYAN CAWDOR OPENED his eye.

The walls of the gateway they'd jumped from had been dull gray armaglass. That redoubt had been situated in the quake-torn remnants of what had once been known, nearly a hundred years ago, as California, way back before the Great Madness when the skies grew dark and a civilization died. A world had almost died, as well. The surface of the earth was now dotted with no more than small, inbred, isolated settlements, often with a high rate of bizarre mutations.

On the far side of the six-sided room, Doc Tanner was sobbing to himself very quietly, like a tiny cornered kitten. His mouth sagged open and a thread of spittle dangled into his lap. One hand still gripped the silver lion's head hilt of his ebony swordstick. Ryan could see that the old man had been crying, with gobbets of tears clinging to the gray stubble on his cheeks and chin.

The sudden, shocking death of Doc's girlfriend, Lori Quint, had horrified them all. The rushing fire had dashed all hope of a rescue. There had been no chance even of a decent burial. Bearing in mind the fragile state of Doc Tanner's mind, it wasn't out of the question that he'd slipped straight into a catatonic madness.

Ryan sighed, massaging his temples with his fingers. Making a jump was like having some crazed mutie with iron gloves rummaging around inside your brain. Ryan had once been fed some jolt that contained a quantity of synthe-sized spin. His head had felt like it was being sucked dry and sandblasted all at the same time. Using a mat-trans gateway was much worse.

He coughed and reached down automatically for his G-12 caseless Heckler & Koch assault rifle, fingers stroking its smooth body. Ryan shuffled himself to a more up-right position, wincing as the butt of his handblaster dug into his hip.

To clear his scrambled mind he ran through a check on the specifications of the pistol.

"Schweizerische Industrie-Gesellschaft Sauer of Ecken-forde, model .226, 9 mm. Overall length is 7.62 inches. Barrel length is 4.41 inches. Weight, loaded, is 25.52 ounces. Fifteen rounds. Push-button release."

"You didn't mention the built-in baffle silencer," J. B. Dix called from the opposite side of the chamber.

"I was coming to it." Ryan grinned at the diminutive armorer.

"Sure you were. Rad-blast it! These jumps still make me feel like throwing up." J.B. carefully unfolded his wire-rimmed glasses from a pocket of his worn leather jacket and wiped them on his sleeve. He held them up to the ceiling lights then placed them on his nose. He looked at Doc, who sat next to him.

The old man's eyes were closed and he was still weeping, but the mewling sounds of his distress had ceased. J.B. caught Ryan's eye, and he tapped his own forehead meaningfully. "Could be Lori's chilling's pushed him into the back room for keeps."

"Could be."

Krysty Wroth, next in line to Ryan, was also awake. She brushed a hand through her fiery mane of scarlet hair and sniffed. "Thought I was going to float around in the dark forever. There has to be a better way of traveling a thousand miles in a couple of seconds." She looked across at Doc. "Hope you aren't right, J.B., about him. The old-timer's hold on what's real and what isn't was never too, strong. Lori dying like that... It's enough we got a sick freezie on our hands without Doc going slack-mouthed on us."

The freezie was lying on his back next to Krysty. A thin, trickle of blood seeped from a corner of his lips, through the black stubble of his sprouting beard. His horn-rimmed glasses lay on the floor on one of the glowing metal disks.

Ryan Cawdor looked at the man.

When Richard Neal Ginsberg had gone into the cryo center in October of the year

2000, only three months before sky-dark, he'd been thirty years old, and a top scientist and electronics expert, working on aspects of the mat-trans chambers known as gateways. He had also been suffering from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis—"Lou Gehrig's disease"—an incurable progressive disease that leads to unsteadiness, wasting of the muscles and exhaustion.

Rick Ginsberg had been woken from his long freezing, expecting to find himself in some future world of wonderously advanced medicine and science that would cure his ailment. Instead, he'd been jerked to life in the Deathlands, still terminally ill, though the sickness was prone to periods of remission.

"Hell's bloody bells!" Rich moaned, turning on his side and beginning to retch.

"Know how feels," Jak said, the last of the six to recover. "Head's like gaudy-house shit-bucket." The boy stood up, staggering slightly, pressing his pale hand against the armaglass. "Wonder where fuck are this time?" he asked, as laconic as ever.

Jak was fifteen years old, as skinny as whipcord and one of the best hand-to-hand fighting machines that Ryan had ever seen. And he'd seen some good ones in his time. Jak had hair as white as the driven snow on the Sierra peaks, and eyes as red as a laser death-sight.

Ryan forced himself to stand, hating the dizziness and weakness that a jump always brought on. He leaned against the wall, glimpsing his own reflection: a tall man with long, curling black hair, a patch covering his left eye. A vivid cicatrix seamed his right cheek from near the corner of his eye to the corner of his narrow, cruel mouth.

"I look like a one-legged whore could spit in my face and knock me down," he muttered.

"No different from usual, lover," Krysty replied, reaching up for his helping hand.

He pulled the woman to her feet, aware of the lithe strength in her body. He felt a surge of passion for her, a passion that he knew in his heart was closer to love than

anything he'd ever known in his thirty-five years.

"Doc," she called.

The metal disks that patterned ceiling and floor had finally lost their glow, fading to cold, dull metal. Everyone except Doc and Rick had gotten up from the floor. The freezie was on hands and knees, breathing hard through his open mouth.

Krysty walked across the chamber and knelt by Doc's side, holding his hand in hers.

"Doc?" she repeated.

He blinked and managed to sit up, with her arm around his shoulders. "I fear that I have been crying, my dear," he said, wiping at his red-rimmed eyes with trembling fingers. "Made the most awful ass of myself, I expect. But I dreamed, you see."

"It's all right, Doc," Ryan said. "We all got dreams some of the time. You don't have any dreams, then they can't come true."

"Not that sort of dream, Ryan, my dear fellow. Oh, my head is splitting. More of a nightmare. I was on a picnic with my dearest Emily and the two little babes. But there was—" He stopped suddenly and looked around the gateway.

"What is it, Doc?" Krysty asked.

"Where is my... Where is Lori? Where has she gone, my own...?"

"Fire, Doc," Jak told him. "Fell and got burned. No-body could've helped. No fucking chance."

The old man looked puzzled. "Then, she *is* dead. Ah, the dream contained the... Then, what year is this, my comrades? For a moment I thought I had ascended to Heaven."

"Hell, Doc," Rick said, pulling himself to his feet with the aid of a stout bamboo walking stick.

The old man clutched Krysty and began to sob again, shoulders quivering, the ragged noise of his crying the only sound in the total stillness.

Ryan bit his lip. If Doc was going to give up on them, then there would be a hard decision to make. He liked the old man very much, but the safety of the group came first.

He knew something of Doc's past and knew that his mind had improved since they'd plucked him from the liv-ing death of Mocsin and its hated sec boss, Cort Strasser. But it hadn't been the ville of Jordan Teague that had stripped a few notches from Doc's mental equipment. For that you had to go way, way back—more than a hundred years.

In the 1990s, scientists working on Overproject Whisper were researching the possibility of time travel—"chron-jumps" as they were known. The gateways hidden within max-sec redoubts were part of Project Cerberus, and the scientists working in that area of the project were devel-oping matter-transmission.

Several experiments were carried out in "trawling" someone from the past. The failures were indescribably horrific. There was, as far as was known, only one suc-cessful trawl—Doctor Theophilus Tanner, a young mar-ried scientist from 1896.

But Doc proved to be a damnably difficult and uncoop-erative guinea pig. After several attempts to chron-jump himself back to his wife and family, the men and women working on Overproject Whisper finally jumped him for-ward, only weeks before sky-dark. Nearly a century into the future, he arrived in the ville of Mocsin, up in the Darks, where Ryan Cawdor had helped to rescue him. Two chron-jumps and two hundred years of disorientation had physi-cally aged the man and reduced his brain to a mixture of oatmeal and pearls. When Ryan had first met him, there hadn't been that many pearls.

And now?

Rick was taking deep breaths, swaying on his feet. "Bastard things, these jumps. They always bad as this?"

Doc gave a croaking laugh. "Upon my soul, Master Ginsberg! Mostly they are much worse than this!"

The freezie shook his head. "I'm not sure I can live with this kind of traveling. I'm so shook up it feels like my guts are in tomorrow and my brain's in yesterday. Or the day before."

"Where are we?" Jak asked. "Room's smaller than most."

Ryan hadn't noticed it, but the teenager was right. The chamber was slightly smaller than any of the others they'd jumped from. Not by a lot, maybe three-quarters the size.

J.B. nodded. "Yeah, and the air's not that good, either. Stale. Like the conditioners not working properly."

Krysty licked her lips, tasting. "It's like old air. And the light's weaker than in the other redoubts we've been in."

"How about it, Rick? You're the gateway expert in the group."

"Don't know, Ryan. I can give you the batting stats for the Yankees back to the Second World War and the rush-ing stats for the Giants for the same period. But I don't know squat about where all the gateways were or if any of them deviated from the standard norm."

"One way find out," Jak said, moving to the heavy door of the chamber. The albino began to heave at the control handle.

Nothing happened.

Chapter Three

"FUCKER'S JAMMED!"

Everyone had tried it, pushing, heaving and lifting. Even Rick had leaned against the armored door, ear pressed to the lock, fumbling at the handle while everyone else kept silent and waited to see what happened.

"Nothing," he pronounced.

It was only then that the grim reality of their position struck Ryan Cawdor.

The controls of a gateway were triggered in one simple way. After the numerals and letter coordinates had been set on the coded panel in the outer room, the closing of the door initiated the technical process of the jump. If you couldn't open the door, you couldn't start a jump.

"We're trapped here," J.B. said quietly, reaching the same conclusion as Ryan.

"Looks that way."

Rick sat on the floor with a sigh. "This is all my fault, isn't it?"

"How d'you figure that?" Krysty asked.

"I worked on these goddamned gateways, didn't I? I knew about how they functioned."

"But you never knew all the transmit codes, did you?" Doc asked.

"No, but I knew the codes to make sure you didn't hit a damaged gateway, and the thirty-minute automatic recall code." Rick shook his head, lips trembling, on the edge of tears. "And now I forgot them. All that bullshit I put up with for years

about sec clearance. If I could've remembered that, we'd be on our way out of here real soon. But I can't... can't remember it. I think it started with a... No, I can't recall any of it."

"No point talking," Ryan said. "Wastes breath. Wastes time. Mebbe you'll remember it one day. Mebbe not. Either way, it doesn't help us any stuck in here now."

"Blasters?" Jak asked.

"Ricochet," J.B. replied.

It was true. The armaglass walls of the chamber would bounce back bullets from their blasters with lethal effect.

"Got some plas-ex," suggested J.B, the armorer of the group, just as he'd been the armorer to the Trader during the years that he and Ryan had ridden the war wags together.

Ryan shook his head. "Last resort time. Same as bullets. Any kind of explosion in here and we'd be picking bits of wall out of our bellies. Gotta be a better way."

"Over, under or around," Krysty said. "Isn't that what Trader used to say when there was a real serious problem?"

"Yeah. Trouble is, lover, we got the same kinda stuff all around us. And over and under, too. It's the door or it's nothing."

"I could use the Earth Mother's force," she said after a long pause.

Nobody said anything. Rick looked up at her. "Earth Mother? What's that, Krysty? Sounds like something out of San Francisco in the good old flowery sixties."

"You know what it does to you," Ryan warned, ignoring the freezie's question.

"Got a better idea, lover?" she replied, smiling at him. "I'll be all right. Just need a rest after I've done it."

"Take no notice of Richard Ginsberg. Pretend he's not there. Bloody invisible man, that's what I am," Rick complained.

"Sorry. From when I was a skinny sprat, back in the ville of Harmony, I was being trained. Taught certain... well, powers, I guess. My mother, Sonja, always told me to strive for life. Now, if I go inside myself, I can sometimes... get the power. I can't describe it any other way, Rick."

"Let me try the door one more time," Ryan suggested. He'd only seen Krysty use the mysterious power on a few occasions, but he'd seen how his woman was devastated by the aftereffects.

The handle moved an inch or so, then it stopped solid. The doorframe looked as if it had been twisted and warped, probably the result of the earth-shifts caused by the massive nuking.

"No," he said, "not going to move."

"I'll try it. Might as well sit down a while. It takes a little time."

Ryan hunkered down next to Rick, while the other three ranged themselves around the six-sided gateway. Doc managed a half smile in Ryan's direction, then folded his arms on his bony knees and lowered his head onto them.

Krysty turned away and leaned against the cool glass wall, closing her eyes, relaxing her whole body. Her arms hung loosely at her sides and her lips moved as she began to psych herself into the mystic depths of her arcane power.

"Gaia, aid me! Send me the blessed strength of your power. Draw it from the earth, and the sea. From the mountain and the valley. From the sky, the sun and the moon. From the cold stars. From the desert and the lake. From the chem storm and from the tumbling wind."

Her voice was becoming dulled and flat. She swayed back and forth, fists clenching. Ryan watched her closely, seeing the trickle of crimson blood from her hands, where her own nails were gouging half-moons from her skin. Krysty moved a few steps to her left, until she was pressed against the door. Her flaming mane of hair shifted uneasily, coil-ing at the nape of her slender neck.

"Gaia! Gaia, help me. For Mother Sonja and all her wisdom. For nail and skin. For eye and tooth. And for the blessing of the blood. Gaia, help me for the blessing of blood!"

She was trembling as though a fever possessed her. Through the thin material of her shirt, Ryan could see that her nipples had hardened. She was breathing faster, the words coming more harshly. The climax was close.

"Gaia! Oh, Gaia, help me! Give me the power, the power, the power! Now!"

She seized the lever in both hands, putting all her strength against it. Ryan could actually hear her muscles cracking with the enormous strain. The soles of her boots creaked against the floor. Veins stood out across her temples like throbbing cords, the sinews in her jaw tightened.

"Judas H. Priest!" Rick breathed with an almost reverential awe.

"Gaia..." she moaned. The door handle still hadn't moved.

"Can't do it," Jak whispered.

"I thought it... No, wrong I guess," J.B. muttered.

Doc yelled out loud, making them all jump. "Yes, yes, Miss Wroth. *Epur si muove*. Galileo was right. Yes, it *does* move!"

"ONLY PROBLEM IS, Krysty bent the handle and ripped the lock apart. Could be difficult to get the little booger patched up ready for when we want to jump out of here."

Wherever 'here' is," Rick concluded as he finished his examination of the broken lock on the chamber door.

Krysty lay on the smooth floor, her head cradled in Ryan's lap. The sentient hair had gone limp, seeming to lose its bright color. Her eyes were closed and her skin was parchment pale. Ryan was chafing her hands between his.

The supernatural effort of wrenching the jammed door open had carried her over the brink of total exhaustion. Her pulse was fluttering and irregular, her breathing shallow. As soon as the metal had crunched apart and the chamber entrance had begun to swing open, she had let go her hold and slumped semiconscious to the floor, where Ryan had been just in time to catch her.

"How long before the sweet child has recovered sufficiently for us to continue with our perilous voyage of exploration?" Doc asked.

"Hour or so," Ryan replied, smoothing Krysty's forehead with his long, muscular fingers.

"Make that a day or so, lover," she said, opening one eye and managing a weak smile. Krysty licked her lips. "Could do with a drink. Anyone got any prenuke brandy? Uncle Tyas McCann back in Harmony had a dozen bottles. Used to have a sip on special occasions. Best I ever had."

"I guess that means you're feeling a whole lot better." J.B. grinned.

"I feel like I might not die after all," she replied. "But I'd surely like some eats and some drink. Calling on the Earth Mother always drains me right down."

Ryan glanced at J.B. questioningly. "Ready to move?"

The armorer nodded. "Why not?"

Everyone was standing, except Krysty. She shrugged off Ryan's hand and pulled herself to her feet, with a little help from the gray wall. She shook her head.

"Something's not right. Don't know what, but I can feel it. The air or... Don't know."

"Let's go," Ryan said, leading the way, blaster cocked and ready. Everyone else had their handguns drawn, except Rick. Despite all of Ryan's efforts, and the urging of the others in the group, he'd steadfastly kept to his old nineties peacenik beliefs. Shortly before they'd left Snakefish, Rick had been forced by circumstances to finally use a blaster against another human being. But he'd hated the experience and hated his new friends who had compelled him to pick up a loaded gun and squeeze the trigger.

He was unarmed now, except for the heavy bamboo cane.

Ryan knew what to expect beyond the damaged door to the gateway. There would be a small room about twelve feet square, probably completely empty. Most of the buried and hidden redoubts that they'd discovered so far had been de-serted and abandoned.

Beyond the antechamber would be the main control room for the mat-trans unit, filled with flickering lights and humming computers. All of the massive fortress complexes had been run by independent nuke-power plants. Most of them still functioned even after a hundred years of ne-glect.

And beyond that control room would be the locked sec doors that sealed the gateway off from the rest of the re-doubt. Normally, if there was danger, it came when those doors were opened.

Ryan stepped outside the chamber, pausing and glanc-ing quickly around.

"Not the same," he announced.

There was no small anteroom. The armaglass door swung back to reveal a control room, but it was tiny com-pared to the others that they'd seen—barely twenty feet across, with a single, simplified master console. Ryan rec-ognized some of the basic command units from other re-doubts.

"Why so small?" Jak asked wonderingly.

"Experimental?" J.B. suggested. "Or a real small re-doubt."

"There's some state-of-the-art technology in here," Rick said, limping heavy-footed around the comp-displays. "A lot of real costly miniaturization and laser-tech boards. Not experimental, J.B. No way, Jose."

"This place is inordinately clean, is it not?" Doc observed, running a finger along the top of one of the desks, showing it untouched by dust. "And I do believe... Yes." He stooped and peered underneath. "I think we should exercise a little care in what we touch in this place."

"Why?" Krysty asked.

Ryan knelt down and looked where the old man pointed, straightening slowly. "See what you mean, Doc."

"What is it?" the woman repeated.

"Place is boobied. Nice little packets of plas-ex, some shiny detonators and plenty of red wire and green wire and even some blue wires."

"Sabotaged, you mean?" Rick said, puzzled. "Who would do that? And why? It isn't as if the good old U.S. of A. was in any danger of being invaded. Who were they hoping to catch?"

"Could be demolition charges. Could be they were just taking precautions." J.B. scratched the side of his nose, looking carefully at the wiring, but not touching anything. "No. Definitely antipersonnel. Not big enough to blow the building. Take your head off in a messy kind of way."

"Cut 'em?" Ryan asked.

"Not a lot of point. Nothing on the deck here we need."

"We have to repair that door," Krysty reminded them, "or we don't get out of here again."

Rick had been looking at the damaged portal to the gateway. "Not easy, lady. Not easy at all. The main con-tacts need some serious electrical work."

"Can you do it?"

"Sure, Ryan. I might be dying and my memory's got more holes than the Jets' defense, but I can still do me some wiring." He paused. "But it'll take some time, Ryan. A couple of days heavy work, the way it looks to me."

"We'll take a look around first. Then make a decision on what you do. And when. First thing's to get us some food and drink."

"Leave this?" J.B. asked, gesturing to the wired-up ex-plosives.

"Yeah. Plas-ex that old might blow if you look at it wrong."

"Do you suppose trying to use the gateway again trig-gers the boobies? Then I fear that we would find ourselves in the deepest ordure."

"We all gotta go sometime, Doc." Ryan grinned. "Let's cross that overpass when we come to it."

Krysty was standing still, staring vacantly into space across the control room. She shook her head. "Something bad here. It doesn't feel like any redoubt I've ever been in."

"Danger?" Jak asked.

"Not immediate. But... Can't find the handle for it."

"No point sticking around. We'll worry about that bro-ken lock when we're ready to leave, Rick. At least the main doors don't look like they've been tampered

with."

The hugely strong sec doors were painted a very light shade of green. The control lever was a darker green.

And it was in the Open position.

"Think it's mined?" J.B. asked.

"Probably," Ryan guessed.

Chapter Four

Jak spotted the wire.

"Look!"

A thin pale blue length of wire ran into the crack in the wall, behind the massive sec-steel hinges. J.B. traced it with a cautious finger, watchful for any mercury tremblers or prox-fuses. But it was a very straightforward piece of plas-ex plus detonator. The actual explosive was concealed on a ridge above the top of the doors.

"Nobody been in here since sky-dark," the Armorer said.

"Could be recent."

J.B. shook his head at Ryan's suggestion. "No. Not stuff wired this way. It's crude, and it's also old. Besides, it would've blown if anyone had tried to enter."

"Cut it?"

"Yeah." J.B. dragged over a wooden chair and stood on it, drawing his Tekna knife and easing the needle point behind the wire.

"Everyone take cover," Ryan ordered, crouching behind one of the consoles in the corner of the strangely cramped room. Krysty knelt beside him, with Jak, Doc and Rick farther along, near the wall.

"What if it blows?" the freezie asked.

"Keep tight and small on the floor, hands over your ears, eyes shut. And keep your mouth open. That way you keep the blast damage to a minimum."

"Thanks, Ryan. Thanks a lot."

"Stick head between knees and kiss ass goodbye," Jak sniggered.

"Everyone ready?" J.B. yelled. "Then here we go."

The snick of the knife cutting through the wire was followed immediately by the deafening boom of the explosion.

Despite having followed his own instructions, Ryan felt the pressure against his eardrums, the blast blowing and filling the room with noise and fine white dust.

"Fireblast!" he coughed. "J.B.! Hey, you all right there?"

Jak moved first, darting toward the entrance doors, ducking under the blinding cloud. "He's here, out cold. Blood on him."

Ryan was the second one there, stooping alongside the white-haired boy, seeing the slight figure of John Barrymore Dix lying like a child's discarded doll, one arm crooked, legs doubled under him. His glasses were hanging on one ear and his

beloved fedora had vanished. Blood oozed from J.B.'s ears, nostrils and open mouth. The Tekna was still gripped firmly in his right hand.

"Breathing," Jak pronounced, feeling for the pulse beneath J.B.'s right ear. "Strong beat."

"Roll him onto his side so that he doesn't risk chok-ing," Doc suggested.

"Leave him be!" Krysty demanded, leaning over Ryan to look at J.B.

"Shoulder's out," Jak observed. "Put back now or big problem. See it 'fore."

J.B.'s eyes flickered open and rolled in their sockets. "Kid's right. Put back now, Ryan. Do it for me." His eyes closed again and his body tensed, anticipating the pain to come.

"Could be he's snapped a rib or two," Rick said worriedly. "Try anything and you could hurt him real bad."

"Already hurting real bad, freezie," J.B. muttered, keeping his eyes shut. "Listen, Ryan, before you do it. There was a second charge. Never seen it. Cut the wire and it blew. Must've lost most of its power. Should have taken me off at the shoulders. Okay. Now do it."

Riding with the Trader, Ryan Cawdor had seen most every kind of wound or sickness or injury known to man or to woman.

Traveling over rough terrain, often on broken-down highways corrugated by the ripple effect of nukings, meant some bumpy journeys. A sudden turn or lurch could cause sprained wrists, broken ankles and, often, dislocated shoulders. The cure for that was fairly simple.

Painful, but simple.

While Doc and Krysty each held a leg still, Jak took the Armorer's other arm and

locked it tight in his hands. Ryan sat on the floor, putting his right foot into J.B.'s armpit, gripping the wrist of the damaged arm in both hands. He wriggled around to get comfortable and make sure he had enough purchase to do what had to be done. If it was left more than a few minutes the repair of the dislocation was going to be a major operation and could leave J.B. with a permanent weakness.

"Ready?" Ryan asked.

"Do it, Ryan," J.B. gritted from between clenched teeth.

Ryan braced himself and tugged hard on the wrist, feeling the damaged joint snap back into place with an audible click.

Ryan let go and stood up. "How's that?" he asked. But J.B. didn't answer him.

"Fainted," Jak said. "Shouldn't have called me 'kid.' Told him."

FORTUNATELY, apart from some pain and stiffness in his shoulder, the Armorer wasn't too badly damaged. His ears were ringing and his head ached. The blood from his mouth was the result of biting through the tip of his tongue as the explosion hurled him off the chair. He was bruised around the kidneys and down the outside of the right thigh.

"Good news is that my hat's fine, glasses aren't broke, and pants aren't torn. Never got much good at mending. And all the weapons are fine."

"And the doors are open," Rick finished.

Ryan laughed. "They were open before J.B. got to playing with them."

The Armorer gave him the finger.

In all of the other redoubts they'd entered, the ponderous double set doors had always opened onto an expanse of wide, brightly lit corridor that was part of the main military complex.

But not this time.

Ryan cautiously pushed the left-hand door, careful to make sure that the previous tenants hadn't left yet another plas-ex calling card to greet them.

"Fireblast," he spit.

"What is it?" Krysty asked at his shoulder, her own Heckler & Koch P7A-13 blaster at the ready. "What?"

Ryan loudly sucked in air. "This fireblasted triple-rad tooth of mine gave me a crack. Gotta get it pulled some time. Hole feels bigger than a three-hundred-pound gaudy whore's—"

"Ryan," she warned, lifting the barrel of the silvered pistol.

"Well. Hole feels big, and that's the truth, lover. It's bad."

"Never mind your black-dust tooth, Ryan! What's out there?"

Ryan looked around the edge of the door, turning back to face the others.

"Not a lot."

The walls were made of dirt, not concrete—dusty brown earth, packed tight, supported by thick wooden beams. Up in what once had been Pennsylvania, Ryan had come across an abandoned coal mine. It had been used as an emergency nuke shelter, but the bombing had caved in the entrance. A century of wind, rain and shifting land had opened it up. Ryan had never seen so many desiccated corpses, piled and tangled one upon another. The corridors had been supported in the same way as the room outside the gateway control.

There was no illumination at all, but Ryan spotted a neat plastic box-switch by the doors. He clicked it down and a few bulbs flickered into hesitant life. The room

was barely eight feet across, with a ceiling that couldn't have been more than seven cramped feet in height. Some sort of barred gate was set in the far wall.

"Looks like the first redoubt ever built," Krysty said.

But Rick disagreed. "No. Can't be. I know this looks like someone's backyard but the mat-trans technology is...like I said. It's state-of-the-art. Miniaturized circuits, the works. So, this stuff outside doesn't make any sense."

The air tasted cool and damp, like the cellar of a long-abandoned house, a smell of kerosene and old bicycles, of empty bottles and piles of rotting newspaper tied up with twine.

"What do you feel, lover?" Ryan asked. "Anything bad around?"

Krysty shook her head. Her long red hair was still curled tightly around her nape. The effort of forcing the door had taken a toll, and she could barely stand unsupported.

"Don't know, lover. Truth is, I don't feel anything but bushed out. Sorry."

Ryan nodded. "Sure. Let's go find a way out of this tomb."

He led the way, blaster probing the air in front of him like the tongue of a cobra.

The barrier in the far wall was high-quality vanadium steel, made from bars as thick as a man's index finger, with a space between them of less than a half inch. The cross-bars were set three inches apart. It was an impressive security device, its quad-lock and bolts set in a steel insert drilled right through into concrete. There was no gap in the door, either at the top or bottom.

Cautiously Ryan reached out and pushed it, and the barred door swung silently open.

"Unlocked," he said, unable to hide his relief. It wouldn't have been easy to blow.

Beyond it was another wall switch. He considered the possibility that this could also have been wired, but re-jected the notion. The charges planted back at the gateway had all the hallmarks of a last-minute decision. Maybe in the final minutes of the withdrawal from the redoubt someone with a few yards of wire and a handful of plas-ex decided to make it tough for anyone trying to break into the mat-trans section of the complex.

The overhead neon strip stuttered into life. They were all in a small stone-walled chamber, ten feet square. The smell of damp was much stronger, and the earth beneath their boots was moist. The walls were streaked with fungus and slime-green lichen.

"Look." Jak pointed to a rusted metal cabinet screwed to the wall by the barred door. "Open it?"

"Yeah. Slow and easy," J.B. said.

The door wasn't closed and the boy levered it open with his fingers, wincing at the screech of corroded metal from the hinges.

"Blaster," he said, hooking it out and holding it to show the others.

"Smith & Wesson .38," J.B. observed. "Or what's left of it."

The penetrating damp had reduced the handgun to a fragile orange skeleton. Jak dropped it to the floor where it crumbled apart, the brass-jacketed rounds spilling out.

"I never seen a redoubt like this one," Ryan said to no-body in particular.

"That way?" Rick asked, pointing to a plain door on the far side of the small room. "Stupid question, Ginsberg. Where the hell else are we going to go? Back to the torture chamber again? Thanks, but no thanks, guys."

Ryan gripped the handle and pressed it, part of his mind waiting for the starburst

of an explosion that would tell him he'd made a poor calculation. There was the click of the lock turning and the door opened. Light spilled from the room behind him, illuminating the bottom of an iron spiral staircase, the treads and rails coated with a patina of reddish rust. There was no other exit or door.

"Up," he said.

"Wow!" Rick panted about five minutes into the climb. "This is what we used to call a whole lot of no fun."

He and Krysty were finding the going very hard indeed.

Ryan tested the stairs, worried that a hundred years of the bone-chilling damp might have rotted the iron. Though the surface flaked away, the main structure seemed sound. The light switch at the bottom of the ladder didn't work, so they ascended in almost total blackness. It wasn't even possible to see how far they had to climb, or if there was any way out once they reached the top. Ryan sympathized with the freezie's comment. It *was* a lot of no fun,

"FIFTEEN MINUTES." J.B.'s voice echoed around the concrete stairwell. "Reckon we've climbed around two hundred feet, allowing for the stops."

"You talking about me, J.B.?" Krysty asked, pausing for breath.

He didn't reply.

"Can't... sorry, folks. I'm utterly... I'm fucked up hill and down." Rick sat on the cold steps, nearly weeping, his face a pale blur in the darkness. The others gathered around him. Krysty was also near the outer limit of exhaustion, head in her hands. Doc was bearing up surprisingly well, his cane tapping away on the sonorous metal, ringing in the sighing space below them.

Ryan, J.B. and Jak were capable of climbing on forever.

But it was an eerie feeling. The light from beneath had almost vanished, just a tiny

circle of palest yellow, so faint that to blink was to lose sight of it.

"I swear that this is akin to swimming in the ether, lost between heaven and earth," Doc muttered.

"Reminds me of Pontchartrain Causeway," Rick said, fighting to gather breath. "Long bridge that brings you into New Orleans. Guess I should say that it used to bring you in. Must be gone now. It was so damned long that when you were driving across and you were around the middle—" A coughing fit cut off the words. "Sweet Lord! Oh, bet-ter now. Yeah. In the middle you could look to both sides and see nothing but water. Look ahead and you couldn't make out the city. Just water. And you looked behind and the land vanished. Just more of the same water. Scared the shit out of me when I was a kid."

Ryan leaned on the rail, feeling it give a little under his weight. He straightened, looked down, then up, trying to make out an ending of the spidery staircase. "Yeah, Rick. Know what you mean."

"Here!" Jak called, his faint voice floating down from the angelic heights far above the others.

"Door?" Ryan shouted.

"Yeah. Can't move. Shall... ?"

"No. Wait for the rest of us!"

He climbed swiftly, J.B. at his heels, leaving the other three to fumble their way up after him as best they could.

There was a platform, big enough to hold a dozen men, but as Ryan set his foot to it, he felt the tremor of move-ment and turned to the Armorer, behind him. "Stay there! It's swaying some."

"They can't have done this trip every time they wanted to use the gateway," J.B. said, no more out of breath than if he'd taken a stroll around a garden on a spring

morning. "Got to be an elevator someplace here."

"Could be it got wrecked during the nukings. They put this in as a standby."

"Mebbe. Tell you, Ryan, this is the damnedest place I ever did see."

Doc was closing in on them, his voice ringing like a cathedral bell. "Oh, if my love were in my arms..."

"Take it easy," J.B. called, silencing the song. "Platform here's not that safe. Tell the others behind you."

They heard the old man relaying the message down the spidery staircase.

Ryan felt his way toward the albino boy, grateful for the avalanche of snowy hair that guided him like a beacon.

"Got it. There's..." He ran his hands over the whole door, feeling two small sec bolts at top and bottom. He slid them both open, turned the handle and pushed the door away from him.

A rush of biting cold air swept over him, air so fresh it almost brought tears to his eye.

"We're out," he said, looking into a wintry night.

From the delicate coral pink of the eastern sky, dawn wasn't far off. The six friends huddled together for warmth. Ryan, arm around Krysty, looked around and tried to make sense of what he saw.

The door had been cunningly concealed as a part of a chimney flue, so cleverly camouflaged that it was no surprise it had been hidden for a century. But this was no re-doubt.

They were in the ruined attic of a large house, almost a mansion from what they

could see of it. Some of the roof tiles had disappeared, revealing the star-spangled heavens, though scudding clouds made it impossible to recognize any of the constellations. Snow came in fine showers between the stark rafters, piling under the eaves.

Jak was all for exploring, but Ryan told him to sit still and not risk moving around in the dark. *Ordered* him, pointing out that the state of the outer roof spoke of serious damage. And who knew what worse damage was lower down.

Doc and J.B. fell asleep and Krysty dozed a while in Ryan's arms. Jak was sulking at being told off. Rick, on Ryan's left side, was still awake.

"What d'you figure?" he whispered.

"Fucked if I know, Rick. It's no official redoubt, that's certain."

"Could be a private sec center. I heard some rich folks— seriously rich, you understand—had their own cryo cen-ters."

"Private freezies?"

"You hear of someone called Walt Disney?"

Ryan nodded. "Course. Invented Mickey the mouse. Seen old vids."

"Sort of. Well, the word was old Walt had himself fro-zen—he had the big "C—and he was kept on ice in a sort of fun fair, in Sleeping Beauty's castle. Kind of appropri-ate, isn't it?"

"Sure." Ryan had no idea what Rick was talking about.

Soon as the first light of the sun appeared, J.B. took out his minisextant and computed where they were.

He repeated the procedure and shook his head. He did it again. And again. By now

they were all awake and watch-ing, puzzled. Ryan asked the question.

"Where are we?"

J.B. swallowed hard. "Something wrong with this," he said, shaking the sextant. "Either that, or we're smack in the middle of Russia. Somewhere near their old city of Moscow."

Nobody said a word.

Chapter Five

"COULD BE."

"Never."

"Why not?"

"My dear Richard, it must surely be obvious even to someone whose brains have been addled and whipped into a cold collation."

"Up yours, Doc. Just tell me why we couldn't be in Russia."

"A gateway!"

"Yeah. A gateway. A mat-trans unit. Jumps for the making of. Why not?"

Doc shook his head, the rising sun glinting off his sil-very hair. "Because it's absolutely out of the question, Richard, that's why. You hardly think our

Communist brethren would have allowed such a thing, do you?"

Rick nodded. "Yeah. As a matter of fact, I do."

Ryan interrupted the quarrel. "Come on, Rick. I wasn't there, but I've seen and read enough to know that there wasn't too much love lost between them and us."

"They started sky-dark," Jak added.

"Sure they did," the freezie agreed. "But you gotta look back a while. Back to the late eighties. A guy called... Oh, shit! What was his name? Khrushchev? No. Something that ended like that. Gorby? Gorbachev. Yeah, I think that was it."

"Oh, him. But we all know what happened to him, don't we? And his plans for...let me see. There was a buzz-word, was there not? Glasnost. An ending to the cold war. Scrap all missiles. Eternal peace and love and brother-hood. I remember that, my dear Richard. Indeed I do."

The freezie stood up, clapping his hands together. "Jeez! It's cold enough to freeze the balls off a polar bear. Cold enough for Russia, J.B., I'll give you that. But listen. Dur-ing glasnost there was an opening of frontiers. Barriers came down for a while. Now, suppose this had once been some kind of American embassy or whatever."

"And they built a gateway inside it," Krysty said. "Se-cretly."

"Sure," Ryan agreed. "Look at that hidden door. Even with the sun coming up, you can't see it. If we hadn't come through it, we'd never know it was there. Stairs go down inside that fake chimney, I guess. Secret's lasted a hundred years."

"Could be," Doc admitted grudgingly. "Shouldn't take us long to find out. Or for them to find us out. Would you not say?"

Once there was sufficient light for them to find their way around, Ryan led a recce party.

It had obviously been a very large house, a positive mansion. They could now see that about a quarter of the original roof had been destroyed. The blackened and charred beams told their own story of the fire. Ryan wrig-gled cautiously to the edge, peered down and saw that the building had originally been four stories high.

"Lots trees," Jak observed, lying flat on his stomach alongside Ryan, the chill wind tugging at his fine white hair.

It was a fair comment.

As far as Ryan could see the house was surrounded by a rambling forest, reminding him of his own birthplace back in the blue-topped Shens of Virginia. But these trees were mainly conifers, huge, nodding pines and firs, with larch and spruce dotted among them. And the whole scene was blanketed in soft, rolling banks of snow.

Ryan eased back, conscious of the way his breath plumed out into the morning air.

"See anything, lover?" Krysty asked.

"No."

"Think J.B.'s sextant's right?"

"You mean, do I think this is Russia? How should I know? I've never seen Russia. Not much on old vids. Trees and snow."

"Could be the Shens," she pointed out.

"I just thought that. I guess we better find a way down to the ground and see what we can see. Doesn't look like nuke damage."

"No. Would've brought down the chimney. Gaia! It's cold."

Picking their way over the beams and joists, they even-tually found a trapdoor

with a broken bolt that took them down a ladder onto a narrow, dark landing. The steps were missing every other slat, and hung crookedly to one side.

"Boy!" Rick exclaimed. "This place sure took a pounding. Looks like a New Jersey street gang's been us-ing it for practice."

"You said it could be some place near to Moscow, my dear Mr. Dix?" Doc asked.

"Could be. I don't know the references outside Deathlands. Not that well. But it sure as black dust is Russia."

"Why, Doc? Why d'you ask?"

The old man stood in a pool of sunlight where the ceil-ing had been brought down. He rubbed a finger along the side of his nose. "Because, my dear Ryan, there is a little something that nags at my memory. Yet...?" He shook his head.

"Something about this place?"

"Yes. The name of Peredelkino comes to my mind and—"

"How's that?" Rick asked.

"Peredelkino."

The freezie nodded. "Hell's bells. That brings it back, all right."

"What, Rick?" Ryan asked.

"One of the things I guess you don't know about me is my college career. I majored in electrophysics, specializing in circuit miniaturization and genetic computer coding."

"And?" Krysty prompted.

"And I took a minor in Russian. Did some basic language and a bit of history. Nothing too deep. Enough to be able to ask the way to the American Embassy and kind of skating over Ivan the Terrible and Rasputin. I guess I've forgotten most of it. But when Doc mentioned that name, Peredelkino..."

"Something to do with Stalin, was it not?" the old man asked.

"Right on, Doc. Twenty miles southwest of Moscow it-self. Originally it was some kind of commune for the acceptable writers and artists who toed the Stalinist line. Collection of very nice dachas, set among woods and lakes. Rural idyll. Kind of a pat on the back for being a good guy. Or a good gal."

"A dacha's a kind of house, like this?" Ryan asked.

"Yes, yes, of course!" Doc exclaimed, rapping on the worn boards with the ferrule of his swordstick. "During glasnost, was it not? A gesture of brotherly affection from Mother Russia to Uncle Sam. We were given our very own dacha."

"And this is it," Ryan concluded.

"Well, I guess it could be. But to believe that the gateway could possibly have survived in working order for a hundred years! It's bullshit! Come on guys, come on!" Rick leaned his hand against the dull plaster of the wall and shook his head sadly.

"J.B.? You sure about the reading? If we're stuck in Russia and the gateway's fucked for us to get out, then we're in the *deepest* shit."

The Armorer rubbed his hands together, eyes invisible behind his glasses. He looked away from Ryan, along the shadowed corridor, hesitating before he replied. "No way around it. Machine can't lie, Ryan. Even friends can, but not a machine. What Doc and the freezie said makes a kind of sense. That stair was real well hid. After the nukes dropped over here, there can't have been many of the Commies eager to search out anything that well concealed. No, I guess this old house could once have been a little part of America."

It was an uncharacteristically long speech for J. B. Dix.

"Food," Jak said. "Fucking hungry. This place dust-dead."

It didn't look all that promising.

The house had no furniture, no carpets, no drapes to cover the broken windows. The floorboards were warped and cracked, and fine dust hung in the cold morning air, dancing in the bright spears of sunlight. On either side of the passage, doors opened onto totally empty rooms. In fact, most of the doors were actually missing.

"Surprised the whole place hasn't been burned down," Krysty said, walking cautiously into one of the rooms.

"Look." Ryan pointed up to a corner where a small metal bracket remained. "Sec vids were there. Seen them in the corridor."

"In here," Doc called.

"What?" Ryan replied, following the sound of the old man's voice. He found him in another room, looking at a faded drawing on one of the walls. It was a sketch of some balloons, held in the white, gloved hand of a circus clown. Beneath it was a line of neat lettering: Hi, from your friend Penny wise.

All six of the group stood and looked silently at this cryptic message from the long-dead past. Ryan broke the stillness.

"Anyone understand it?"

Nobody replied.

Doc coughed. "Private joke of some sort, I guess."

"Rick?" Ryan asked.

"Pennywise the clown? Sorry, brothers and sister. No. Doesn't mean a thing."

"Let's go down," Jak suggested, leading the way out of the ravaged room, along the corridor, to the top of the main staircase that led down to the first floor of the house.

THE DEVASTATION WAS at its worst at ground level. Every door and window had been smashed, and a cold wind blew in from every direction. Fine snow was piled softly in the corners, drifted in. The floorboards were largely rotted, making walking dangerous. Ceilings had fallen, and the walls bore the marks of sledgehammers and the dark scars of fires. It was amazing that the structure was standing.

"There's not going to be any food at all around here, lover," Krysty said quietly.

Ryan nodded. "I know it."

"So?"

"So we'll have to go out and find us some. If this is Russia, and not the Shens in a cold-out, then we have to get the gateway working."

The woman glanced behind them at the man leaning heavily on his walking cane. His face was pale, his eyes sunk cavernously dark.

"You mean Rick has to get it working?"

"Yeah. Not going to be easy. Then again, lover, nobody ever said it would be easy."

THERE WERE DAUBS of heavy, tarlike black paint in the largest room at the front of the house, strange signs that were like recognizable letters, yet oddly different. They partly covered another piece of graffiti, which was difficult to read in the gloom.

"Shall I open the doors?" Rick asked, moving un-steadily into the wide, echoing hall.

"Careful," Ryan warned. "When we were up on the roof anyone could've seen us from miles off."

J.B. coughed. "We have to make a fast decision, Ryan. No food here. Mebbe a ville near. But if the Russkies know we're Americans..." He allowed the sentence to drift away into the bitterly cold silence.

Ryan sniffed. "Yeah, but the gateway's well fucked. Gotta look around some. We don't find anything in a day's march, then we have a problem. Keep looking and mebbe starve. Come on back here to the gateway..."

"And mebbe starve," Krysty concluded quietly.

"My view, for what little it may be worth, is that we should hazard a trip into the great outdoors," Doc said. "Better to try and fail than not to try at all."

"Nobody this side," Jak reported from near the broken windows on the eastern flank of the large room. "Just lotta snow."

Doc was still trying to read the daubed-over lettering. "I just can't make it out. It's so fearfully faded."

"I'll open this door," Rick called, heaving at the handle. He put his frail weight against the rusted hinges, making them squeal angrily in protest. But the door opened, letting in a dazzling shaft of morning light.

"Uncle Vanya Sucks!" Krysty read.

"What's it mean?" J.B. asked. "Sounds like a Russkie name."

"My memory is not what it was, but I believe it was the nickname for the Communist leader Stalin," Doc offered.

Rick laughed. "No, it's a play. Chekhov. It's the name of—"

The bullet smashed into the door beside Rick Ginsberg, and he toppled into the hall, flat on his back.

Chapter Six

"I TRUST that the behavior of my manservant has not in-convenienced you unduly."

The man shook his head and whistled through his teeth. It made damnably little sense to him. He kept his thumb on the page and slowly read the phrase out again.

"I trust that the behavior of my manservant has not in-convenienced you unduly."

He closed the book and laid it on the scarred top of his desk. The cover was torn, but the title could still be read: *The English Tongue for the Benefit of the Russian Gentle-man Abroad*.

It would have been nice if he could have found a phrase book that had been published a little nearer to the time that was called, in his country, "the long grayness." In the frontispiece was the date 1911. That was almost two hundred years ago, but it was still better than nothing.

He heard someone walking along the corridor outside his office and he quickly slid the frail book into the center drawer of his desk and locked it. Though he could prob-ably have formulated a defense for possessing it, he pre-ferred to keep his arcane knowledge as secret as possible.

The feet paused and there was a cautious knock on the door.

"Enter."

The blond, cropped head of Clerk Second Class Alicia Andreyinichna appeared around the wood-painted frame.

"Forgive me, Major-Commissar Zimyanin, for inter-rupting you."

"Come in, Alicia Andreyinichna. What is it?"

The secretary wore a plain skirt that fell just below the knee, in the dull maroon material that was the uniform color for Internal Security, Moscow.

"A message from your wife, Anya, Major-Commissar."

"Yes?"

The girl coughed nervously. It was common knowledge that all wasn't wonderfully well between Gregori Zimy-anin and his tall, heavy-hipped wife. There were often an-gry calls on the telephone, generally ending with the receiver being slammed down and some colorful cursing from the senior officer.

"She wished to know what time you would be returning home tonight, sir."

"By the anvil and the hammer! She knows I'm going to be late. I told her this morning over first food. I told her!"

He remembered telling Anya, remembered her expres-sion, remembered that she had mentioned something about an invitation they had for last food to an apartment in the adjoining block on Begovaya Ulitsa. He couldn't even re-call the names. Some woman who worked in the offices of Pensions and Domestic Debts with Anya who had a buck-toothed, stammering husband with a secret taste for deca-dent music. Zimyanin had arranged to have them investi-gated. You couldn't be too careful who you knew.

"Can't be too careful," he said.

"What, sir?"

He smiled. "I didn't mean to speak out loud, Alicia An-dreyinichna. My apologies. Tell her, as softly as you can, that it will be after eleven." An afterthought struck him. "And offer my deepest regrets that I must miss our last-food date."

"Yes, Major-Commissar."

He managed a smile, though his wife's constant harry-ing was becoming increasingly tedious. The girl smiled back and withdrew, closing the door carefully behind her.

Zimyanin leaned back, putting his high boots of tanned hide on his desktop. He had been married to Anya for only six weeks. It had only been ten weeks since his promotion from plain major and his arrival at the center of the gov-ernment, the spiritual and historical home of Mother Rus-sia.

"Anya," he murmured to himself. Perhaps an acciden-tal fall from the high balcony of their apartment? Perhaps a sudden seizure while she was in the bath. His strong fingers flexed at the thought, imagining how it would feel to close them around her soft, fleshy neck, pressing her with an inexorable power under the scummy water. Eyes open. Mouth open. Tongue protruding, purpling, blackening.

He drew out the phrase book and flicked through, looking for the page he wanted. There it was.

"I regret deeply that my lady wife will not be able to attend your soiree on account of her sudden indisposition."

The officer straightened then buried himself in a pile of reports and documents. The spring thaw would soon begin to release the city from the clawed grip of General Winter. There would be much to do, work parties to enlist and press into reluctant action.

A thick red folder on a shelf across from the desk was marked with the single word "Subbotnik." In the old days, Zimyanin knew from his researches, the citizens of Moscow would have to give up their free time to work for the city. This was Subbotnik, the Saturday when you "volunteered" to help with manual labor. Things had changed.

During the cleansing days of the megacull, great swathes of Moscow had been laid into perpetual dust by the nuking missiles of the hated Americans. Little of the center had been rebuilt, but the suburbs survived—after a fashion. But there was so much to do. A century later and there was al-ways so much to be done.

Subbotniks now tended to refer to people snatched by armed patrols of sec men and forced to perform the me-nial, essential tasks.

And the time of the spring thaw was the worst for that. The thought of the melting ice brought back a memory to the officer.

Another phrase from his well-learned book. "I am de-lighted to have made your acquaintance." He paused, his totally bald brow wrinkling with the effort of concentra-tion. "But I do not believe we have been formally intro-duced."

They hadn't.

But he could still see the face of the mysterious Ameri-can across the frozen sea that nestled against the Kam-chatka Peninsula and touched the land of the Americans in the region they called Alaska. It had been there, not far from a hamlet called Ozhbarchik, following the brutish killing band known as the Narodniki.

"*Hozhdenie v narod*," Zimyanin said to himself. It meant to be going to the people.

The leader had been called...? "Uchitel," whispered the officer, nodding his head. The Teacher. That had been the name of the psychopathic slaughterer.

It came back.

The defeat of the Narodniki had been a triumph for Major Zimyanin, his passport away from the icy waste-land beyond the tumbled ruins of Yakutsk. He returned to Moscow with a promotion and thanks from the grateful Party.

"Americans," he said, half smiling.

He had never been sure how many there had been. Even with his precious Zeiss binoculars he hadn't been able to make out their numbers, but he had seen the missile they had ready. That had all been reported to the central of-fices, an indication that the remnants of the United States weren't yet ready to fall into the hands of Russia.

He'd met four of them face-to-face: a tall black man; a short, fat man with the cold eyes of a born slayer; a woman, handsome with the reddest, most fiery hair that Zimyanin had ever seen.

And their leader...

"I am desolated to see that you have been incapacitated by an accident, sir," he recited.

His gaze moved to the far wall of the small office, near the window, jammed with brown paper to stop it rattling in the winter gales. A rifle hung there on two rusting nails, his own weapon, an old SVD Dragunov sniper's blaster with a PSO-1 scope sight. It had been given to him by the marks-man in his unit out east, Corporal Solomentsov, when Zimyanin had received his promotion.

He ran a finger down the furrows of his pockmarked cheeks, thinking about that adventure and the blood that had flowed.

There was a cautious knock on the door again and his clerk stuck her head into his office.

"I am sorry, Major-Commissar Zimyanin, but I'm afraid that—"

"My wife has called again and she wishes to speak with me," he guessed.

"Yes," she replied, surprised at the accuracy of his guess. "She said to tell you—" She stopped as the officer held up a weary hand.

"Don't, sister-comrade. I'm sure I can imagine what my dear..." He gestured for her to leave, watching as she turned in the doorway. The material of her skirt stretched tight across the firm buttocks; her muscular thighs slid down toward her polished boots. Zimyanin sat for a moment after the door had closed, allowing his sensual imagination to run on for a while, imagining himself locked in a sexual embrace on a soft feather mattress with Clerk Second Class Alicia Andreyinichna.

But the vision faded with the certainty of how shrill his wife's voice would sound when he called.

Gregori Zimyanin reached for the Bakelite phone, part of his mind still recalling the leader of the American guerilla group—the man with the scarred face and a patch over his left eye. A face he would never forget.

Chapter Seven

"CLOSE BASTARD DOOR!" Jak yelled, his heavy satin-finish Magnum in his right hand.

"No, leave it!" Ryan countered. "Anyone out there could have an angle to put a bullet through someone going near." He looked sideways at the freezie, who lay flattened against the wall of the long hallway, his bamboo cane just out of reach. "Rick? You all right? You hit?"

"No. I'm terrific, Ryan. Great shape. Popper of amy'd be down the white line."

His voice changed suddenly, louder, more shrill. "Course I'm not all right, you dumb-ass bastard! I damned near turned my Jockeys brown."

"Sounds like he's okay, lover." Krysty grinned.

"I believe that the firearm sounded like something from my childhood," Doc called, crouching at the bottom of the stairs.

"How's that?" J.B. said.

"A musket. Black powder. A percussion cap from the flatness."

The armorer glanced around at Ryan and nodded, the light from the half-open doorway glinting off his eye-glasses. "He's right. Not a modern blaster. Some old Ken-tucky musket. Or whatever they call 'em over here."

Ryan had thought the sound of the gun, bursting at them from the snowy wilderness, had indicated a cap-and-ball kind of weapon. One round, the bullet ripping a long splinter of white wood from the leading edge of the door.

They lay in the dim light for about five minutes, but there was no further shooting. No voice, no sound of movement. Trader had taught Ryan that the worst thing you could do when you suddenly found yourself under blaster fire was to start rushing around carelessly.

"Chickens without heads," Trader had said, in that calm, measured way of his. "Think of a chicken skittering around a yard, blood gushing out the windpipe. Hold that in your mind, and it might—just might—stop you doing something real foolish one of these hot days."

Gesturing to the others to hold their positions, Ryan crawled toward the door, eased his good eye around it and peered out into the stark morning light.

The view was the same as it had been from the roof. Just a little more limited. Snow lay everywhere, piled deep against the trunks of some of the trees. There was no sign of life.

"Jak, cover the rear. Just look, don't shoot. J.B., take the east. Krysty, the west. Doc, go slow up the stairs and see what you can see from the second floor. Slow and easy."

"How about me, Ryan?" Rick asked.

"Sit still, stay quiet and keep a tight grip on your ass."

Ryan stayed where he was, watching the wilderness of tree-scattered white. If it had been a shot from an antique musket, the chances were that the attacker was within a hundred paces. He had come across a beautifully pre-served Sharps .50-caliber buffalo rifle a year or so ago. In the right hands, the weapon was capable of putting a man on his back from half a mile away.

He waited for something to happen.

They had cover in the house, although an assault by anything over a dozen might be tough to hold off. One shot. A warning? Too close to Rick for that. It had been aimed to hit. To chill.

Ryan caught a flicker of movement a hundred paces away from the front of the house—an elbow, knee or a shoulder, a dark triangle that showed for a splinter of a second, like the fin of a cruising shark amid the snowy billows.

At the same moment, he heard Doc's voice, harsh with excitement, from the room directly above the main entrance.

"A man with a long gun is moving slowly in a crouched position in a narrow draw, eastward."

The warning drew J.B., snake-silent, to Ryan's elbow. "Could be a trick. Bring us out while the others start blasting."

"Doesn't feel like that to me. You?"

The Armorer shook his head. "Nope. Go after him? You and me?"

"And Jak. Get him. Others watch the sides. Leave the rifles behind for them."

In less than twenty seconds the three men were outside, picking their way through the drifted banks of snow, the heels of their boots crunching through the thin layer of ice that crusted everything.

"East," Ryan said, leading.

He glanced once behind them and saw that Krysty was at the second-floor front, framed by the broken casement, arm pointing directly to where she could still see the escap-ing figure of their assailant. The bright morning sun danced off the vivid flames of her hair, making her an unmissable target if there were any more murderously inclined locals around.

"Back trail?" Jak asked.

Ryan nodded. "Sure. Gotta be over...yeah, down here."

The sniper's nest was unmistakable: a patch of tram-pled, muddied snow; a gnawed knuckle of what looked like a mutton bone; the spaced indentations of the elbows on the ridge, overlooking the front doors; the shape of the body, legs spread-eagled. A couple of steps away was a small area of yellow, smearing the white, where the man had taken a leak.

Jak stopped, tossing his fine white hair from his eyes. He picked at something on the ground and held it up to show them. A blur of gray stained his long pale finger.

"Black powder," he said. "Fucker's got shaky hands."

"Let's go," Ryan said.

"Easy as tracking a war wag down a main street at high noon," J.B. whispered,

lips peeling off his neat, even teeth, in his hunter's wolfish grin.

Though their prey was obviously trying to move cautiously and fast, the trail couldn't have been more obvious. From the blurring of the footmarks, it looked as if the man were dragging a bag of some sort behind him.

It took only six or seven minutes to close in on him.

The man was stooped, scurrying along the narrow ditch with his musket slung across his shoulders. He was pulling a pile of furs, and he never once looked back.

Jak gripped the butt of his pocket cannon, gesturing toward the hunched figure ahead.

Ryan shook a warning finger. In a winter wasteland like this, food wasn't going to be easy to come by. If they could take the man alive, they might be able to somehow find out where the nearest ville lay. From the clumsy, halting gait of the man, it looked as if he was old, or maybe a crippled mutie. Either way, the three of them should be able to take him.

They'd only been out of the shelter of the house for a few minutes, but Ryan could already feel the biting wind numbing the skin tight across his cheeks, making his eye water. Without better clothing, a man would soon lie down and sleep in such an iron cold.

The three friends could only go in single file on the cramped path. If the man turned suddenly and had a good handblaster, he could probably get an ace on the line at them. Ryan had his own pistol, the SIG-Sauer P-226, drawn and ready, finger on the trigger.

They were only thirty yards behind, close enough to hear the fur-shrouded man grunting and mumbling to himself with the effort of heaving along his bundle. Then he paused and straightened. Ryan was half a heartbeat from chilling him with a bullet through the back of the skull, but the man hawked and spit a green ball of phlegm to the side of the trail.

Twenty yards.

Fifteen.

And the man turned.

Without a moment's hesitation, Ryan shot at him. But the old man was already falling to the snow, dropping his bundle, hands reaching for the sky. Only Ryan's honed re-flexes saved the stunted little figure from a 9 mm bullet through the throat. Seeing, even as he fired, that the man was surrendering, Ryan was able to switch his aim higher, the shot singing harmlessly into the blue sky.

"Fireblast!" he said. "Close."

Jak and J.B. had fanned out on either side as best they could, fighting for a footing in the deeper snow.

The figure in front of them was lying facedown, fists clenched, feet kicking up a storm of powdered white, all the time maintaining a muffled series of inaudible and incom-prehensible moans. Ryan cautiously stepped in closer, kicking the bundle of pelts out of the way. Jak took the far side, keeping the old man covered, while J.B. stayed back a few paces, watching carefully.

"That Russian?" the boy asked, head on one side, lis-tening to what sounded like a croaking string of gibberish.

"Could be. Can't recall having heard much Russian spoken. Only time was..." His mind leaped back to an-other frozen wasteland and conjured a short, stocky man with a pockmarked face and a long, drooping mustache, bald head under a fur cap that carried a single circle of sil-ver. If he tried, the name would come back, as well. The Russkie had introduced himself.

"Was when?" Jak asked, interrupting his train of thought.

The name slipped away. "Zim," something or other. The name would slide again into his memory when he didn't need it. There wasn't much chance of ever

meeting the man again. The Kamchatka Peninsula was around four thousand miles away.

"What's he saying?" J.B. said, moving a single step closer, the barrel of his Steyr blaster never deviating from the cringing man's spine.

"Sounds like 'pomegat,' or some such," Ryan replied. "We could use the freezie here to do us some translating."

"Looks like shitting himself," was Jak's comment.

The old man was gradually quietening, risking a glance up from the snow at his captors when he realized that they weren't going to send him off to buy the farm.

The fur hood had slipped down over his forehead, so that his glittering blue eyes barely peeped beneath the fringe. Snow caked most of his face, like a clown, the lips red, the scarlet cobra of his tongue flicking nervously out. He fixed on Ryan and began to crawl very slowly toward him.

"Neschastni sluchai."

None of this had the least bit of meaning to any of the three men.

"Wish he'd get up," J.B. said. "Looks like he's rad-blasted scared."

"Should be. Trying to chill Rick like that. Guess it could have been a mistake. Saw movement and just let it go."

Ryan, standing with legs slightly apart, looked down and saw in the trampled snow and earth a tiny bunch of yellow and white flowers, delicate as a baby's breath.

The old man had wriggled closer.

His hand touched against Ryan's ankle, stroking the damp material of the combat

pants. The words had ceased and there was just the whistling of heavy breathing. Ryan stared, still not letting his concentration waver.

Now the face of the old man was between his feet, on top of the little cluster of flowers, hiding them. Both hands gripped his ankles, and Ryan could feel pressure against his foot. He moved a half step sideways to see what was happening. The Russian was placidly licking his boots, the long tongue wiping at the snow and clotted mud.

"No!" Ryan shouted, pulling away, stumbling clear.

"Sure wants to live," J.B. observed.

The old man crawled after Ryan, flat on his belly, left hand reaching out imploringly, the right hand busily burrowing somewhere beneath all the layers of fur. The effort of wriggling through the snow pushed the hood completely off the old man's head, revealing his face.

Revealing the old woman's face.

"Fireblast! He's... It's a woman."

Despite the deep, dirt-crusted furrows, and the straggling downy mustache, it was unmistakably a woman's face, staring beseechingly up at Ryan.

"Doesn't make no difference," J.B. said calmly. "Get her up and find out about a ville and food. If she won't tell us, then we chill her. It doesn't make no difference."

Ryan stood back, gesturing with the barrel of his pistol for the woman to get to her feet. Hesitatingly, slowly, she obeyed him, eyes locked on his face. Her left hand tremblingly brushed snow from her lined face.

She looked totally pathetic, abject and defeated. She shuffled her ragged boots and edged a little closer to Ryan, who half turned to J.B. to help him question their prisoner.

His eye caught Jak.

The face of the albino was a distorted mask, lips pulled back, sharp teeth grating. The teenager's red eyes were wide, staring past Ryan. His white hair was caught in the cold wind, floating around the angular head like mist beneath a high waterfall. The Magnum dropped from the boy's fist, landing silently in the soft snow.

"What?" Ryan began, shaken by the boy's horrific expression. Jak reached behind his neck and withdrew a bone-hilted, leaf-bladed throwing-knife. His wrist whipped the feathered steel toward Ryan's throat.

"Don't move!" Jak yelled.

Then Ryan knew. Despite the warning, he started to turn toward the Russian woman, knowing he would be too late, too slow, a last curse bursting to his lips.

He heard the whirring of the knife as it missed his carotid artery by a couple of inches, heard the unforgettable thunk of steel finding its mark in flesh and bone.

Their prisoner had drawn an old walnut-hafted straight razor from somewhere under the furs and layers of rags, and she was slicing it through the frosty morning air toward the back of his neck.

Jak's aim was true.

Ryan had seen the ruby-eyed boy at his daily practice with his hidden knives, and marveled at his almost blasphemous accuracy. He'd seen him put three blades into a space the size of a man's hand at twenty paces, all three knives seemingly spinning in the air at once.

He realized, as he began to turn to defend himself, that his own bulk had shielded the old woman, leaving Jak the smallest of targets—a part of her face and one eye.

One eye.

The left, he realized with a momentary pang of sympathetic revulsion.

As she staggered, the white hilt bobbed like the body of some obscene insect that had attacked her, launching itself with a venomous accuracy into the gleaming orb of her left eye. There was little blood, but the force of the throw had driven the sharp point deep through cornea, iris and lens, clear into the central retinal artery, piercing the brain.

Her mouth opened and closed like a stranded fish, her hands waving, becoming claws. She was crying, a piteous, feeble sound.

"Done." J.B. holstered his own blaster and turned away, no longer interested in the old woman, knowing that she was down and dying.

Ryan also turned away, ignoring the moaning, kicking thing that thrashed around in the trampled snow and dirt. There were more important things to worry about now.

"Get knife," Jak said, stooping and plucking the blade from the Russian woman's eyeball, sliding it out with a sickening, sucking sound. He wiped it clean on the wad-ded fur cloak she was wearing. "Could use warm clothes," he added.

"Let's find where she came from. Could be furs, and could be drink and food." Ryan climbed a few paces out of the narrow draw and looked in the direction that the old woman had been heading. Very faint, like a smudge of gray against the blue, he could make out smoke "That way."

Chapter Eight

THEY DREW NEARER, following the meandering draw as it widened. They could see clearly the tracks of the old wom-an's boots, marking her outward journey. The large house was now far out of sight behind them, partly concealed by a dip in the land and by the trees that grew in random, scattered clumps.

Jak stopped dead and sniffed at the air, catching the taint from the smear of gray smoke that the breeze carried in to-ward them. "Cooking meat."

"Sounds good." Ryan nodded. His own sense of smell wasn't subtle enough to distinguish the scent of roasting meat at a distance of half a mile.

They crossed the rippled remnants of an old blacktop, its surface molded like corrugated paper by the shock waves of the massive nukings that had touched every country of the world, back in 2001.

"Glad to see our folks hit some good licks," Ryan said, rubbing at the highway with the toe of his combat boot, seeing the way the snow lay evenly in the shallow hollows.

J.B. was blowing on his hands, trying to warm them. "Yeah. Doc told me all about the Totality Concept, the thing he was on the edge of. Sounded real simple. They hit you and you hit them back." His breath feathered out around him as he spoke. "Worked even if they got in a sneak attack. It'd trigger your buried nukes, launch them at the Russkies, even after..."

"After our side was all chilled," Ryan finished for him.

Now Ryan could taste meat cooking over a smoky open fire.

The smell brought a beading of saliva to his lips, and he wondered what price they might have to pay for food. In a barren, wild place like this, he knew that the price could well be blood.

"THERE. BEYOND BUSHES." Jak was lying flat on his belly, wriggling through a grove of stunted larches until he was close enough to be able to spy on the small

hut.

Ryan and the Armorer joined him. The sky was cloud-ing over, and the air tasted like cold iron. It was a feeling that Ryan associated with the threat of snow, remembered from his time in the Darks and up in what had once been Alaska.

"Anyone?"

Jak shook his head at the question. "No." There was a tumbledown shed behind the hut and a pen with a broken gate where animals might once have been kept. The place was silent and looked deserted, but the trail of the old woman led to the front door. And if there was meat roast-ing, someone must be there to watch over it.

Ryan whistled quietly through his teeth. The cold was biting at the small cavity that had appeared in one of his back molars.

"What's wrong?" J.B. asked.

"Nothing. Just that... You and me both seen lots of old books and vids about Russia and the dangers of the Com-mies. Now we're here. Unless there's some real weird mis-take, we're *here*. In the middle of Russia!"

THEY FOLLOWED the usual plan of attack. Ryan and J.B. crept cautiously, keeping low, around either side of the clearing, settling into their positions. There was still no sign of life.

A tattered nightshirt in faded pink danced on a line at the rear of the building. Ryan, from his side, could make out what looked like a path that wound away toward the northeast, vanishing over a rise in the land.

As they moved, each of the three companions had been counting on a slow, rhythmic beat, something that they'd synchronized before parting. They agreed to begin closing in when their individual count reached one hundred and twenty.

Blaster firmly in his hand, Ryan finished his count and broke cover. There appeared to be two windows in the hovel, on opposite sides. The rear of the cabin had only a ramshackle door that hung crookedly off a single leather hinge. There was a narrow gap at the top where a man could be sighting at him along the barrel of a rifle.

He glimpsed J.B. making his own move, darting in at an angle, crouched, pistol probing in front of him, glasses re-reflecting what little sunlight remained.

Out at the front, white hair streaming behind him like a crazed bridal veil, Jak would be now be flattened against the wall by the door, his own cannon filling his hand.

"Time to move," Ryan whispered, taking a slow, care-ful look all around him and seeing nobody. At that mo-ment it struck him that he hadn't seen a single living creature since leaving the mansion. Not a bird nor an ani-mal—nothing but the ragged old woman who had led them here.

He braced himself as he moved away from the tar-painted wooden wall and kicked in at the flimsy door, rip-ping it off its single hinge. Almost simultaneously he heard a crash as the albino boy burst through the front.

The hut was less than twelve feet square, and nobody was in there.

He faced Jak, eyeball to eyeball, across the stinking squalor of the cabin. They were joined a brace of heart-beats later by J.B.

"Nobody?." the Armorer asked, immediately answering his own question. "No. Nobody."

"Got to be someone close by," Ryan said, pointing at the open hearth where a haunch of meat, vaguely resembling venison, was cooking on a spit. The outside of the meat was already blackened and scorched in a couple of places.

On the corner of the fire was a trivet that held a filthy and chipped enamel pot containing a mix of bubbling veg-etables. Ryan licked his lips at the delicious

odor that filled the hut.

"One bed."

"Big enough for two," Ryan amended.

"Two plates on table," Jak agreed. "Two spoons. Two mugs."

"One corpse," J.B. added.

THE RECCE TOOK only a couple of minutes.

Jak remained by the front door, watching for anyone coming along the same trail that had brought them to the hut. Ryan went one way and J.B. the other, checking the shed and the outhouse. The latter was empty. The former was packed with bales of furs, some of them already sewn into crude coats, cloaks and hats. The shed also contained a large smoked ham and some dried fish. A well at the rear of the property provided sweet water, achingly cold.

"Gotta be someone else around," Ryan said.

"Wind's shifted dry, loose snow. Covered any tracks out the rear." J.B. sighed. "Reckon we should eat what we can, then load up food, furs and water and head back to the others."

"Good sense. I'll watch. You two eat what you can get down. I'll eat, and you can guard and start pulling some furs together."

"Iron-runnered sledge behind the crapper," J.B. suggested.

"Easy for three of us. Carry more that way."

Ryan wished that Krysty had been with them. Apart from her strength and support, the mutie side of her genetic makeup would have been invaluable. She

could "see." Not the way a doombie could make out the grim elements of the future, but she could often feel if there was an imminent threat of danger, even confirm that a place was deserted. It would be helpful to know the location of the person who used the second spoon and plate.

"Don't like it," Ryan muttered, rubbing the back of his hand across his stubbled chin. He looked around the room. "Hairs at the nape of my neck are prickling. It's close. Man or woman. It's real close."

Jak, moving as light as quicksilver, darted from window to window, rubbing at the cobweb-covered glass and peering out. "Nothing."

Ryan moved to the front door. "I'll go and keep looking around. You two get into that meat. And leave some for me." His hand was on the carved wooden latch. "And I'll—"

He didn't get to finish the sentence.

The door burst open, sending him tumbling across the room, knocking the legs from under J.B. and pushing Jak off balance. A shaft of light pierced the gloom as the door flew off its hinges, but the pale rectangle was swiftly blotted out.

"Fireblast!" Ryan shouted, fighting for breath.

"Dark night!" J.B. exclaimed.

"Bastard!" Jak yelled, voice cracking with shock.

Chapter Nine

ONE OF THE LONGEST-LASTING by-products of the destruction of ninety-five percent of all humanity was the endless chain of genetic mutations that resulted from the poisonous rad clouds that drifted clear around the globe. This was made infinitely worse by the inbreeding that followed in the myriad small villes and hamlets that survived: cousin lay with cousin, brother made love to sister, father to daughter and mother to son. And the spawn of these blasphemous couplings carried the taint on and on for every succeeding generation, on down the line. The curse lingered, like the malevolent smile of a habitual poisoner.

And muties came in all shapes and sizes.

What came in through the door was either a Russian version of a Rockies grizzly bear, or the biggest mutie that Ryan Cawdor had ever seen.

The man—this time there was no possibility of any mistake—stood at least eight feet tall. He'd stooped to enter the hut, and his head now scraped the rafters. Since he was wearing layers of fur, it was difficult to judge his weight, but Ryan's instinctive guess put the mutie at around seven hundred pounds.

His face showed all the intelligence of a fencepost and all the friendliness of a cornered rattlesnake: his eyes were like tiny chips of malachite, scarcely visible behind the rolls of puffy fat that swelled from his cheeks; his nose was a raw hole in the center of his face, edged with dribbling candles of green snot; his ears, under the fringe of straggly blond hair, were mutilated lumps of red gristle.

The man bared his teeth, his cracked lips surrounded by a downy mustache and beard. His huge hands flexed angrily, reaching toward the three invaders of his squalid demeane. He roared, the sound accompanied by billowing waves of stinking breath that made Ryan wince.

The cramped cabin wasn't the best place in the world for hand-to-hand combat with someone of that size.

"Mine!" Jak shrieked, recovering his balance and diving at the human monolith. He aimed a lethal kick at the giant's right knee.

The mutie never moved. Feet planted wide apart, he swatted the boy away from him as if he were merely an im-portunate gnat.

His hair like an explosion of frost around his face, Jak bounced off two walls, hitting a table on the way down. He landed near the fire and lay still, eyes closed.

"Fuck this," Ryan snarled, drawing his 9 mm pistol.

The mutie peered down at the neat blaster, threw his head back and bellowed with laughter. Used only to work-worn single-shot muskets, the giant was telling Ryan he thought he was holding a toy.

Ryan squeezed the trigger on the P-226.

The built-in baffle silencer did its stuff. There was a sound like a nun coughing discreetly during Compline, and a thin trace of smoke trickled from the end of the barrel.

Ryan had used the gun quite a few times and was used to seeing men go down when they were hit. For a mind-toppling few seconds he actually thought that the auto-matic must have misfired. He knew there was no way on the good earth that he could have missed the mutie at such close range. It would have been like missing a barn wall when you were shooting from the inside.

The Russian didn't even rock on his heels. He stopped his shout of rage and looked at Ryan with a puzzled expres-sion. Slowly his right hand reached out and he touched himself in the lower part of his chest, where Ryan had aimed. In the gloom of the hovel it was impossible to make out any sign of the bullet's entry on his matted fur coat.

"Again," J.B. urged, his own blaster also drawn.

"Yeah." Ryan felt the first tremor of unease. The Deathlands was full of stories of muties, always someplace over the next hill, who were invulnerable. It was hard enough to waste a stickie, but a good head shot would send them off on the next ferry.

He got off two more rounds, feeling the satisfying kick of the pistol against his braced wrist.

The huge figure took a half step backward, into the doorway. He clutched his chest, this time his hand coming away smeared with bright blood.

"Fireblast!" Ryan shifted his aim higher, seeing that the full-metal jacketed rounds weren't having much more effect than a spitball at a war wag.

Two more shots, one in the center of the throat, and blood sprayed from the torn exit wound at the back of the giant's neck.

The fifth round, delicately placed, whipped clean through the mutie's open mouth, barely burning his lips. The slug then sliced the creature's tongue along its length, angling upward off a broken back tooth. It began to tumble and distort, tearing the soft palate apart in rags of flesh, breaking the side of the top jaw. The round tore through the brain, exiting at the top of the man's head and taking with it a fist-size chunk of the skull. A gulp of pinkish-gray brains and blood splattered over the greasy ceiling of the hut.

Appallingly, the mutie colossus *still* didn't go down. When he lurched into the doorframe his shoulders got jammed, holding him upright as gouts of blood flowed down over the face.

His eyes were still open and his hands, as big as plates, waved helplessly in the cold air like someone in the last stages of drowning.

"Again?" J.B. asked, the edge to his voice showing his own unease.

"Waste of good lead," Ryan replied. "He's chilled, but he just doesn't know it yet." He shook his head in wonder. "Sure is... Hey, best see to the kid."

Jak's lips moved as they leaned over him. "Don't call me fuckin' kid." They knew he was all right.

BY THE TIME they'd got Jak on his feet again and shared a hasty meal of the now well-roasted venison, the mutie's corpse had sagged immovably into the doorway, blocking off the light from the front of the hut. Since the back door was torn off its single hinge, there was some light from the rear. Ryan and J.B. took turns stepping outside into the leaden cold to carry out a swift patrol, though neither expected to see anyone else. The cabin had obviously only held two occupants, and both were unarguably chilled.

"Mutie shit stinks," Jak growled, wiping drips of fat from his narrow chin.

"Generally do when they're alive," Ryan agreed. "Being dead never made them any sweeter."

"BEST MOVE." Ryan stood and led the way out of the hut, across the crisp snow, toward where they'd found the sled. "Others'll be wondering where we've gone."

The sky seemed to be sinking closer to the earth, like the canopy over some murderously suffocating four-poster bed.

The wind was still rising, and flakes of bitter white were carried in its teeth. From the dark horizon, it looked as though a bad storm could be on the way.

They loaded up quickly with what they wanted: fur coats—enough for everyone in the group; the gnawed remnants of the warm meat and the pot of turnips. There had been some rough black bread in a cupboard and a pitcher of sour milk. Jak discovered some canteens in the shed, stenciled over with what could once have been Russian military markings and numbers.

"That it?"

J.B. looked around. "Looks that way. Jak, put on the dried meat and fish so we can go."

"Not yet," the albino said, looking past Ryan and the Armorer.

They both turned and saw that they had company.

Ryan had guessed that the lane at the back of the filthy cottage could well lead, eventually, to a hamlet. Maybe even to a ville. The presence of food like fish and milk spoke of barter.

The three stocky men on shaggy ponies had come in from that direction, the noise of the wind swallowing the sound of their arrival.

They sat, fetlock deep in the powdery snow, about fifty paces away, each shrouded in furs from head to boots. The men rode bareback, and muskets were slung across their shoulders. As far as Ryan could judge, they simply seemed to be mildly surprised at the sight of the trio of strangers with the loaded sled. Certainly, none showed any signs of menace.

"Could lead to ville," Jak muttered, his fingers twitch-ing near the butt of his .357.

"Could send us to buy the farm," J.B. added grimly.

Ryan weighed the odds. It now seemed as if there was a ville of some sort not too far away. That could mean food and shelter. He didn't know much about how the Russkies felt about Americans, but his guess was that they wouldn't welcome them with open arms. The old mansion was der-elict, which made it a good place to hide.

If the word got around that there were three outlanders on the rampage, then life would be measured in hours. No more.

He glanced at the sky.

"Be serious snow within the hour," Ryan said quietly. "Cover any tracks."

J.B. nodded. "Chill 'em."

"Middle one," Jak whispered.

"Left," the Armorer chose.

"Right." Ryan selected the nearest of the silent horse-men. "Now!"

It took four bullets. Two booming rounds exploded into the stillness from the teenager's pistol, the second needed after the first hit his man high in the shoulder, kicking him over his animal's back. He landed on hands and knees in a flurry of white.

Both Ryan and J.B. put their targets away with single head shots.

"And the horses."

Obviously trained to remain still under gunfire, the three ponies had barely moved as their masters toppled dead into the snow. Ryan moved in a few steps closer, briefly recon-sidering his own order. It wasn't a situation where they needed to conceal the killings. The wind and rising bliz-zard would hide their tracks. If there was a small ville nearby, they'd know where the riders would have gone and find the bodies easily enough. There was no way in a fro-zen land that a man could bury three horses.

"No, leave them," he said. "By the time anyone comes out here, we're long gone."

IN HIS SHORT TIME with the group, Rick Ginsberg had commented on several occasions about the way everyone seemed to have an almost uncanny sense of direction.

"I don't get it, guys," he'd say. "I need my fax to tell me which subway stop I want."

Krysty had replied the last time the subject had come up. "You miss a stop on your underground wags, Rick, and what happens? You have to go back. You miss a stop in the Deathlands and one of your friends gets to sprinkle dust in your face."

All the others were able to find their way around, either by the sun or the stars. Or without either of them. That was a vital skill as the storm descended, the wind screeching in from the Urals, one of the most rad-touched regions on the planet. It carried blinding snow across its shoulders, visi-bility dropping from a half mile to a dozen yards within seconds.

Trees bowed like dowers' wands and a man's footprints disappeared within seconds. Ryan and J.B. stooped to the traces on the sled, chests heaving, heads down, while Jak picked his way just ahead of them, guiding them through the instant whiteout.

They stumbled past the corpse of the old woman, now a low hump, snow-buried. Every few minutes they'd change places. Ryan would take the lead while Jak pulled along-side J.B. Then the Armorer would take a breather out front, and Ryan went back to pull with the albino boy.

The noise of the wind rose and became deafening. To communicate it was necessary to put your lips close against the other man's ear and shout at the top of your voice. The furs they wore became heavy with ice. The temperature had dropped fast, and Ryan was aware of the uncomfortable feeling of the hairs inside his nostrils becoming coated in frozen condensation. The skin across his cheeks felt taut and numbed—the first whispering warning, he knew from previous experience, of the threat of frostbite.

All landmarks vanished.

After an hour's straining against the frozen ropes it crossed Ryan's mind that there was a possibility that they weren't going to make it. He'd heard men who had nearly died in snowstorms say that it wasn't a bad way to go. You just got more and more tired, lay down and fell sleep.

And you never woke up again.

It was a relief to make out the rectangular bulk of the mansion, looming before them out of the murk.

Chapter Ten

THE FIRE CRACKLED MERRILY, the wood blazing and spit-ting sparks. Steam rose from the fur coats of Ryan, J.B. and Jak.

The boy stretched out and rubbed at his swollen stom-ach, belching his delight at the surfeit of food that they'd all enjoyed. "Eaten. Warm. Good times. Good."

Krysty smiled. She was lying on the floor, resting on the gray fur coat she'd picked out for herself. "You're right," she agreed, looking around the large room, watching the shadows that danced into the corners and alcoves. Outside the windows the storm still raged, well into the late after-noon, rattling the broken glass and breathing drafts along the bare boards.

"We got enough food to keep us all going for a few days," J.B. said, loosening the brass buckle on his belt by a single notch.

"Or a few of us for a couple of weeks." Ryan leaned back against the wall, picking at his teeth where shreds of the venison had lodged. The discomfort from his cavity had eased away again.

Rick was dozing. While the three had been out hunting, the others had climbed down into the hidden staircase to check the damage to the gateway. The freezie's report had been a whole lot less than encouraging.

"It can be mended. Krysty surely doesn't know her own strength."

She'd shaken her head and whispered, "You're dead wrong about that, Rick."

"If I had access to my laboratory then I could have it fixed in a half hour. If I had

stores facilities I could simply order up the new parts and change them over. If I—"

"If the little dog hadn't stopped for a piss, then he would most surely have caught the little rabbit," Doc finished.

"How long without anything, Rick?" Ryan had asked him.

"Without anything? No tools or..." He shook his head. "No. I need some basic tools. Hammers, wrenches, stuff like that. Then—maybe then—it could be fixed in a week or so. But it's a bastard hard job. You have to realize I'm—"

"We'll get tools," Ryan said. "Don't worry, Rick. Just don't worry about it."

"It's not just that, Ryan. My sickness... I've been through a sort of period of remission since you thawed me out. I've got a feeling that's over now, baby blue. Over."

Bleak tidings indeed.

But now that had been pushed to one side while the companions ate and grew warm. The wood for the fire came from the less damaged timbers of the attic floors, which had been broken up and piled high in the open hearth.

Now was a time for relaxing.

Doc, who sat beside Rick, sang quietly to himself.

Western wind, when wilt thou blow,
That small rain down can rain?
Oh, if my lover were in my arms,
And I in my bed again.

"That's nice, Doc," Krysty said. "This is definitely one of the good times."

"Reminds me of Christmas at Granny Laczinczka's, feeling stuffed with food. All we need is some of those wafer-thin chocolate peppermints and some orange-and-cinnamon punch. Oh, those were..."

Rick's words faded away and Krysty leaned forward. "Go on. Tell us. I know. A game we used to play back at Harmony ville. You think what's the best ever moment you can remember. Let's do it. Who'll go first? Doc? Rick?"

The freezie thought for a moment. "Yeah. January, late nineties. My sickness hadn't begun to bite all the way, and I had some furlough owing to me. I'd watched the final two games in the World Series. Last time it was played at the old Yankee Stadium up in the Bronx. Guys calling 'Yo, beer,' all around. A three-run homer in the top of the sixth clinched it. But then it was the Superbowl. Don't remember where. West Coast. San Diego?" He shook his head, "I can't be sure. But it was the Giants. *My* Giants, following on the win of *my* Yankees. They were playing against the Anaheim Colts. Used to...can't recall. But we won it, and I was there, a young man full of living and the sun and all those people. That was the best I can remember."

The room had been quiet during his memory.

A length of joist, burning clear through, broke in two in a noisy rustle and a burst of bright orange sparks.

"How about you, Jak?" Krysty asked.

"Me? Best time ever? Seeing Tourment fucking die. Best."

Rick had closed his eyes, exhausted with the effort of visiting the perilous land of Nostalgia. Now he opened them again. "What?" he said. "Did I miss something? Who is...?"

"Before your time," Ryan said. "Man called Tourment chilled Jak's old man. Got himself chilled. End of story."

"Short and sweet. Krysty? What's your best moment ever?"

She considered the freezie's question for many long heartbeats, her hand across Ryan's arm.

Finally, "Mother Sonja was still alive. I was... I can't remember how old I was. I know it was summer. It was al-ways summer then. Harmony lay amid a bowl of gentle hills, heather-covered, sweet and protective to me as a young girl. I broke fast early on fresh wild strawberries and cream and new-baked bread. Walked alone up to a high waterfall, closed in a narrow valley with polished boulders clustered together at its foot. The purple-and-pink chem clouds were gone that day. I often used to go there when I was on my own. There was a pool, deep and clear and pure as crystal. I peeled off and plunged in. It was... was so good. I swam around for a while and then pulled myself out on a flat rock, sun-warmed. I slept—rested and slept and cleaned my mind of all the... what Uncle Tyas McCann used to call excess baggage. I always remember that day because I thought a lot about the earth force and Gaia. There were some odd little black flowers up there, soft and delicate."

She stopped, her mind turning inward with the memory. Jak threw a couple of pieces of fresh wood onto the fire, bringing a new burst of flame that highlighted Krysty's flaming hair.

The young woman continued.

"The day trickled past me, filled with the distillation of peace. I have never felt so calm and so sure of myself. Not ever before—" she looked at Ryan, "—and not ever since. There've been some good times... course there have. But nothing like that. When I walked back, barefoot, to Harmony ville, Mother Sonja met me and hugged me to her. She said that I had gone out that day as her little girl, and I'd come back to her as a woman, grown."

Doc nodded and clapped his hands quietly. "A good tale, my dear. Oh, yes. So sweet a time, so gently recalled. It does you the greatest of credit."

"Thanks, Doc."

"I got a question, Krysty."

"Yeah, J.B.?"

"We known each other now for a good while, haven't we?"

"Sure."

"You talk some about your mother."

"I don't..." she began, trying to interrupt him. But he continued.

"What about your father, Krysty? How come we never get to hear anything about him? You never speak about him. Never."

"And I never will. That's the end of it, J.B., under-stand? Right. Doc, how about you? Best moment of your life."

"The best. The happiest. Though I confess that my memory is sometimes a little errant, that is one of the eas-iest questions that I have ever been posed. The happiest moment of my entire long and seemingly endless life was when my beloved Emily said 'I do.' The seventeenth day of the month of June in the year of Our Lord 1891. Oh, much the happiest."

He turned away from the brightness of the fire, but the sudden choking to his voice and the glistening of tears in his pale eyes told their own unmistakable tale.

Krysty picked up the moment. "How about you, J.B.? Best moment of your life. And don't tell us it was when you got given your first blaster at the age of eighteen months! Or whenever it was."

He shifted his feet, the toes of his combat boots scrap-ing on the splintered floor. The red flames danced off his glasses, hiding his eyes. His beloved fedora was at his side, and he ran his fingers through the cropped stubble of his pale blond hair as he stared thoughtfully into the fire.

"A ball game. A chilling. A kind of growing. And a marrying. Four big moments. I don't think I got anything to match any of those."

"Quit dodging the question," Ryan teased, relishing the warmth and the feeling of a full stomach. And Krysty close by him.

"Best?" J.B. mused, biting his lip. "Guess it was the time—you recall this, Ryan—out near the rad lakes on the lower Miss. Got myself in a hole in a corner. Rock on one side and a damned hard place the other. For reasons that don't concern here, I hadn't got any of my usual weapons, but I had a beautiful Colt Navy. A .36, redrilled so's it'd take a .44. Still cap and ball. Up against five redneck drunks. All got Saturday night specials. Little .32s and the like. Killed four with six shots. Never got a scratch my-self."

"Knew it'd have something to do with blasters," Krysty whispered loudly.

"I'll ignore that. Problem was, there was still one of the shit-eaters left. Figured I was out of ammo. Colt Navy holds six. I fired six. He still had three or four in his pocket Beretta. One door in the place and he was in front of it. Didn't even have a nail file on me. No blade at all. Fat son of a bitch, he was. Stood up, grinning. I can still see him. Patches of sweat rotting under his arms. Fat hand like a side of mutton, and this stupid toy popgun. He was going to chill me."

"Did he?" Jak asked.

"Course he..." J.B. began until he saw the joke. He grinned coldly at the teenager. "Nice one, kid. I chilled him."

"How?" the boy asked.

"With the Colt Navy."

"You said out ammo. Can't reload quick cap and ball."

"Right, Jak. But I killed him with it. Stood up slow. He was coming across the

room, oozing delight that he got the ace on the line for me. No place to run. I was holding the pistol, down, by the barrel."

Ryan remembered the occasion. He'd gotten to the drinker too late, but he could still feel the stickiness of all the blood on the soles of his boots.

"Threw it at him underarm, real hard. Lovely gun. Best balance of any. One and a half turns in the air. Butt clubbed him across the top of the nose. Noise like a ripe apple un-der the heel. Down he went, pistol flying any which way. I walked over, picked up my blaster and hit him twice, just behind the right ear. Skull went soft after the first blow. Softer after the second."

He stopped speaking as abruptly as he'd begun. The room was silent until Rick Ginsberg spoke. "And that's it?"

J.B. nodded.

Ryan was conscious of everyone waiting for him to speak. He knew that the cup would eventually pass its way around the circle and reach him, and he'd been thinking of what to say.

"Lover?" Krysty prompted.

"Been thinking about the best time. I can think of a lot of good times. Think of plenty of bad times, as well. Plenty."

"I do not believe that you can wriggle away, my dear fellow," Doc said. "Not good enough."

Ryan looked around the circle of waiting faces—old friends, new and newer friends.

"Good fire. We're secure with the storm out there. My gut's filled with meat, and I'm with people I know and trust." Ryan squeezed Krysty's hand. "And I have love. This moment's about as good as any I ever knew."

Chapter Eleven

THEY ALL SLEPT in the same room. Anyone who woke up at any time would toss another piece of dry timber onto the slumbering ashes of the fire. Outside the storm continued to shriek its wrath, plucking at the weathered walls, shaking the roof, trying to find more loose shingles to rip free and hurl into the whirling air.

Ryan and Krysty lay together, using the newly won fur coats as an extra covering. The hardness of the floor was no deterrent to a good night's sleep. Over the months that they'd been together, Ryan and Krysty could almost count their nights in a proper bed on the fingers of both hands.

As the fire sank lower and the wind began to ease, Ryan was awakened by a hand crabbing across his stomach. It inched its way lower, unbuckled his belt and eased his pants down over his hips. For some time Ryan tried to pretend that he was still sleeping, but Krysty's fingers on his body made him betray himself.

"Waking up, lover?" she whispered, stroking him, rousing him with the insistent rhythm.

"Looks that way," he replied, rolling over onto his back so that she could fondle him more easily—so that he could reach her more easily.

"Gently," she murmured, lips brushing his ear. Both of them were aware of the sleeping sounds of the other four: Jak moaning and scratching his nails across the floor; Doc muttering a name that might have been his long-dead wife's; Rick, restless, his breathing fast and shallow; and J.B., on his back, hands down at his sides, like an em-balmed corpse, his weapons within easy reach.

Tired by the effort of dragging the sled through the blizzard, Ryan found it difficult to begin the lovemaking. But Krysty's insistence and skill quickly

overcame his reluctance and he managed to match her questing rhythm.

They climaxed close together, scant seconds apart. Ryan felt his whole body stiffen, eye closing, teeth clenched with the overwhelming power of the orgasm. He clutched her so tightly that he was vaguely aware of her muscles creaking.

In her turn Krysty gripped him, fingers leaving weals across his shoulders. She pressed herself so hard against him that it almost seemed as if she were trying to make them into a single, fused entity. She gave a little cry, burying her face against his shoulder to muffle the sound.

Afterward they slept again, close like a pair of spoons, his flaccid manhood nestling into the cleft of her firm buttocks. She wriggled back with a murmur of pleasure, the slight movement sufficient to set him off again along the same road.

"Thought you were tired, lover," she whispered over her shoulder as he slid into her from behind.

"Never done it in Russia before. Thought I'd check and make sure I enjoyed it as much as I did the first time."

"And?"

"Even better."

THE DAWN CAME UP with a sullen, gray reluctance that barely lightened the large room, showing them a scene outside of utter bleakness. Snow now lay two feet thick over the land.

Jak was up first, poking at the ashes of the fire, crouching over and blowing through cupped fingers to try to revive the heat. He carefully put on a few dry splinters to coax the specks of glowing crimson embers into flaming life.

"Could use pyrotab," he muttered, flicking his hair away from his face. "Get fucker burning."

"Freshly squeezed orange juice followed by eggs Bene-dict on an English muffin. Side order of whole wheat toast and boysenberry jelly. And a jug of coffee, hot and strong enough to float a horseshoe," Rick suggested, leaning on one elbow to watch Jak's successful efforts to revive the fire.

"I believe the mixed grill, or perhaps a lightly poached haddock might suffice. A pot of Earl Grey tea and some Oxford marmalade would slip down a treat," Doc added, carrying on the freezie's joke. "When you have a moment, of course."

"Eat mutie shit, lazy mother!" Jak snarled, brushing smuts from his long white hair. "Got fire. Get own fuck-ing food!"

"Watch your mouth, Jak," Ryan warned. "Don't for-get there's a lady here."

"Sorry, Krysty. But done bit. Someone else get food."

"Fair enough," Ryan agreed. "There's smoked fish or meat. That's about all."

They held their council after everyone had eaten their fill. During the previous afternoon, before the storm blew in, Krysty had done a little exploring around the grounds of the old mansion and found a large lake, frozen over with ice thick enough to support a convoy of fully laden trade wags. More importantly, in a small courtyard at the rear of the house she'd come across a well. With a little effort she'd succeeded in reconnecting the drawing chain, enabling her to throw down the leaking copper bucket and haul up a supply of sweet, clean water.

"Least we won't go thirsty," she said.

"And there's food enough for a while," Ryan added.

"Can't be far to the ville that those horsemen came from." J.B. rubbed at his chin thoughtfully. "Night raid could top up the food. When we need to do it."

"But what about repairing the damaged gateway?" Rick asked. He'd been moving awkwardly around the building since dawn, trying to keep his ailing muscles in

some sort of condition.

"We'll have to find the tools you need," Ryan agreed. "No choice. You can't trigger the system any other way?"

The freezie shook his head. "No way. We stay here or we mend the door. Mending doors makes good neighbors, someone said."

"No, he did not, my dear Rick," Doc argued. "It was walls. Walls, not doors."

"Let it pass, Doc," Ryan said. "Just try and focus on the problem."

Doc brightened. "Surely. And what would that problem be, my dear Ryan?"

"Door's fucked, Doc. Can't jump. Mend door, jump. Don't, stay. Get it?" Jak told him.

"Succinct, but perfectly comprehensible, my snow-haired compatriot. Of course."

Rick coughed. "I just figure I should say that even if I get the tools, you all have to realize I can't guarantee I can patch it up. I can try. I *think* it'll work. But it's no more than that. It's a long shot."

J.B. spoke for all of them. "Rick, it's the only shot we got."

THEY TALKED TOGETHER for a little over an hour. There was general agreement that their best hope was to head in the general direction of where Moscow itself had once been.

Most of the big urban centers in the Deathlands had been razed, but suburbs were often new centers of population.

The only area of disagreement lay in who should go and who should stay.

Rick had to stay, and with his illness and the possibility of further hostile attacks, he needed two to stay with him. The problem was who it would be.

Grudgingly Jak agreed that his hair made him look too distinctive for safety in a foreign land.

"And I am too decrepit, I suppose," Doc said. "But I would dearly have loved to see the Kremlin. The galleries and fine buildings."

J.B. laughed. "C'mon, Doc. Our boys did their jobs, and all you'd get to see in Moscow is a big, big pile of rub-ble."

Rick described carefully what he wanted, but his inability to communicate some of the finer technical details frustrated him. "Hell's bloody bells!" he exploded. "A bypass multiple cell adaptor! You must know what it is."

Ryan shook his head. "Drop the rads, Rick! You gotta remember that all the technical science and everything folded up one long, dark day a hundred years ago. We'll do what we can. If worse comes to worst you'll have to come hunting with us."

"Sure. Let's all play 'catch the gimp,' huh?" Rick's eyes behind the thick-lensed glasses blinked rapidly. "It's all I can do to... Oh, let it go, Ryan. Get what you can and I'll give it my best shot. When d'you go?"

"Later, around noon. Give us some good traveling time. Trouble is, anyone looking for those guys on horses'll see us easy."

"Like a hog on ice," the freezie said. "Like a tarantula in a peach melba. Like a pile of buffalo chips on a bridal gown. Like—"

Ryan interrupted him. "I get the picture, Rick."

"Yes, we see. Sorry. Me, the kid and the old-timer'll hold Fort Apache for you. To the last round, *mon colonel*. We die, but we do not surrender. We'll never give up the ship." Ryan walked slowly away, leaving Rick to babble to himself and laugh

at his own private jokes. And wonder-ing about the stability of the freezie's mind.

MAJOR-COMMISSAR Gregori Zimyanin was taking his midday break. A sour-faced woman in a stained pink overall pushed around a dented iron food cart, and people were able to buy items from her wide selection of culinary goodies.

"What is it today, Nadia? Any of those spiced her-rings?"

"Red cabbage and green cabbage. With vinegar and pickle." She delved into one of the containers on her trol-ley. "No, no pickles. That young cretin with the harelip in Child Registration took the last one."

"Not an egg?" He knew it was a long shot. The last egg seen around the office of Internal Security had been back before the first snows of winter. But now the thaw was be-ginning—should be beginning, despite last night's heavy snowfall.

"You want an egg, Comrade Major-Commissar?"

He experienced a moment of unexpected, bright hope. "Yes. Yes, I do."

"Then drop your breeches, squat and see if you can lay one. Because I sure as gold angels have none."

"Then I'll have red cabbage, Nadia."

She softened a little at the expression of disappointment on his face. She rather fancied the new major from out in the ultimate east where they had no gas and everyone rode a horse. Despite his pocked face and totally bald head, he was still a fine, muscular figure of a man.

"I have kept two slices of sugared bread for you, Major-Commissar Zimyanin." The woman offered it to him with what she thought was a pleasant simper.

For one blinding second he looked up and thought the miserable bitch was about to tear out his throat with her remaining teeth. Then, fortunately, he recognized it

for an attempt at a smile and relaxed.

"Thank you, Nadia. Most kind."

"Always a delight to please you, Major-Commissar. I would do anything you wanted, as you know."

A phrase from his book came to the mind of the officer. "I am most grateful, but I do not think that I shall be tak-ing you up on your kind offer." He smiled at the woman. He'd been warned about her as soon as he came into the office: "Lifts her skirt and drops her drawers for any man."

After she'd left him with a bowl of cooling cabbage and the promised slices of sugary bread, Zimyanin began his exercises. Out on the Kamchatka it hadn't been necessary. The bleak life kept you fit. Here he resented the softness he saw everywhere, and he was determined not to fall into the same trap.

Three times a day he did one hundred sit-ups, feet hooked beneath the rail of his desk. He lowered himself slowly back until the muscles of his stomach began to cry out for relief, then fifty press-ups on fingertips, bouncing and clapping his hands off the floor between each of the last ten.

Every other day he worked out with weights in the base-ment of the Internal Security building, knowing that it gained him some odd, sideways looks from some of the other desk pilots. Why did you need to get so superfit, Major-Commissar?

Because he wanted to, was the answer. A man must al-ways be ready, be at his best. Though he had to admit that life in and around the capital of The Party seemed quiet enough.

"Too quiet," he panted, leaning on the wall after fin-ishing his press-ups, looking with distaste at the congeal-ing dish of vegetables. The knock on the door made him start.

"Come in, Alicia Andreyinichna."

"A note from southwestern region sec patrols, Major-Commissar. You did ask—"

"For anything out of the ordinary," he finished. "In-deed I did. Go on."

"Probably a tribal matter, or some illicit liquor still at the center of... Three men from a ville out near Peredelkino."

His eyes went instinctively to the crudely inked map of the city and its sprawling maze of trails to dotted villes. He located Peredelkino and nodded for her to proceed.

"They disappeared. Can't be found. They were on horseback." His eyes brightened momentarily at that. "And there's talk of an old crone and her giant son also having vanished. Or killed. The line from the southwest wasn't that clear this morning."

"There was all the snow. Drunks caught in it. Witches and ogres! Really, Alicia Andreyinichna, that wasn't what I meant by interesting." When he saw the look of disap-pointment on her face, he relented. "But it may prove of some interest if they don't return at all. Keep me in-formed. I can send out Aliev to try and help them."

"Yes." The syllable held a wealth of meaning. When Zimyanin had come to the city he'd brought a reputation for extreme toughness. He also brought his Dragunov rifle and a 9 mm Makarov pistol. And Aliev, who was under five feet tall and had the slanted eyes that betrayed his Mon-golian ancestry. He also showed some of the typical facial mutie malformations that Zimyanin had seen often out in the country. Gross and hideous. And the office workers of Internal Security had never seen anything like Aliev's face. Most stepped aside when they heard his hoglike snuffling breath approaching them. Girls who saw him burying his nuzzling face, which had no lower jaw, in a platter of minced meat and gravy-sodden bread, had sometimes been sick. Sometimes fainted.

So had some of the men.

But Aliev was unmistakably the finest tracker in all of Mother Russia. His skills

had made him shunned by other sec men, whose inbred superstitions told them the mutie was a warlock. Nobody could be so miraculous at track-ing.

Yes, Zimyanin decided. If there should be any more talk of missing horsemen out at—he checked the map—out at Peredelkino, he would send Aliev and a patrol.

It was a pleasing thought. Zimyanin took up the bowl of cold cabbage and began to grimly pick his way through it.

JUST BEFORE RYAN LEFT the house with Krysty and J.B., the freezie caught him by the sleeve and pulled him to one side.

"Yeah?"

"A private word, Ryan."

"What?"

"Not for the others."

"Sure."

Rick shook his head. "I mean it, Ryan. Not a word. Not even to Krysty. You have to give me your word of honor."

"Honor? Oh, yeah. Honor. You got it, Rick. What's the problem?"

"The problem is amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, friend."

"I know it. Lou Gehrig's disease. Why you were frozen in the first place. We all know you got the illness."

"When you get sick, Ryan, real sick, one of the things a lot of folks do is sort of immerse themselves in their disease. Read up everything you can. Look

desperately for any oddball, freakish miracle cures. I did that. I knew there wasn't. That was why I agreed to be a cryo guinea pig. And you thawed me out. And here we are."

"So, what's the point, Rick? We have to make some miles before dark."

Behind the freezie Ryan could see a pallid sun breaking through and bouncing off the immaculate spread of snow.

"The point is I've been in remission. Now the disease is entering another phase. I can feel it. Recognize it."

"What phase?"

"Terminal, Ryan. Very definitely terminal."

"When?"

"Soon."

Chapter Twelve

"DID HE SAY how long he meant by 'soon,' lover?" Krysty asked.

"Mebbe weeks."

"Months? Could be more remission."

"No, J.B., I don't figure so. You see how bad he looks. Walks stiff. Loses his

balance. I guess the guy knows his own body. He says weeks if it goes well. Only some days if not."

It had never even occurred to Ryan not to tell Krysty and the Armorer the bitter news about Rick. Screw honor when it came to hiding things from friends—your life could de-pend on their knowledge. In many ways the news didn't make a whole lot of difference.

They still had to get the gateway door and the linked triggering device repaired. To have any chance of return-ing to the Deathlands, they had to make a jump. The alter-native was to cover thousands of miles across country, over a bitterly hostile land through bitterly hostile people. With no idea of the language.

All of them wore the swaddling coats and hats of mixed furs that served the dual purpose of keeping them warm and concealing their identities. Ryan and J,B. had left their long-barreled guns behind, as well as all the ammo. If the mansion should come under attack, Jak and Doc would need the long-distance firepower.

The companions also carried packages of dried meat and fish, and a canteen of water, though with so much snow around it would be hard to die of thirst.

Their farewells had been brief. There was no possible way of knowing how long they might be gone, or even if they would return. Living in the Deathlands taught a man that partings had a habit of becoming permanent.

Walking was difficult. The layering of snow was much deeper than it had been the day before. In the exposed open spaces the wind had swept the ground clear and bare, but in the dips and hollows it had banked up in drifts, often two or more feet high.

Ryan led the way, retracing their steps toward the cabin of the old woman and her monstrous son. Or husband. That was something they'd never know. The woman's body had disappeared from where Jak had killed her. From spoor around the place, Ryan guessed that it had been wolves. A little scattered blood marred the pristine white-ness of the snow, and a few gnawed splinters of bone poked upward from the ground.

When they reached the hut, they discovered that the three ponies had disappeared. But the corpses of the men remained, jumbled under a kindly shroud of snow. And the body of the giant was still wedged in the doorway.

"We figure the ville has to lay over there." J.B. pointed toward the faint smudge of a trail behind the cabin.

Ryan clapped his hands together, trying to sustain circulation. To his disappointment the biting cold air had sought out the cavity in his tooth, making every breath a sharp pain, and the empty socket of his left eye was weeping copiously in the cold, tears trickling over the numbed skin of his cheeks.

He was also concerned about the language problem. Any stranger or outlander in the Deathlands was regarded as a suspicious threat. But at least a person could hope to talk his way out of a dangerous situation. He'd asked Rick to try to teach him a few useful phrases, but the freezie had pointed out a little knowledge could well be worse than none at all. Once someone started to speak, then there would be pressure to continue. They'd do better to fake deafness or pretend to be mutes.

The morning brightened into afternoon. The curtain of gray lifted, folding away toward the south and leaving a sky of pale blue behind. The clouds didn't seem to have the livid chem colors of clouds in the Deathlands, looking more like clouds in the few surviving old vids that Ryan had seen.

"Feeling warmer," J.B. panted as they slogged along, forced to lift their boots high to keep them clear of the crusted snow.

"If the time of year's right, then I figure this could be the spring. Maybe it'll start thawing real soon."

Krysty nodded her agreement, pushing back the hood of her gray-speckled cloak, shaking out her long red hair. "Definitely warmer. Look. It's melting off the branches of the trees. In another couple of hours we'll be plowing our way through mud."

A belt of tall pines soon appeared in the northeastern horizon, in the general

direction of where they believed the remains of Moscow lay. And they encountered fresh tracks of horses.

"Smoke," Krysty announced, sniffing the air.

Ryan couldn't detect it, but he didn't doubt that Krysty was correct.

"That way?" he guessed, pointing to the northeast.

"Right. Wood smoke. Not cooking. Although..." She hesitated. "I think there's also bread at the baking. Yeah, bread. Could be the ville."

J.B. drew his blaster and worked the action, relishing the oiled click as it moved. Ryan knew that the Armorer would already have checked the action before going to sleep the previous night, and once again before leaving that morn-ing. It was as much a habit as breathing to J. B. Dix.

"How far off, lover?" Ryan asked.

"Difficult to tell. Wind's veering and dropping all the time. I'd guess it's around three to four miles off."

As the breeze fell away, the temperature began to rise. Within the next half hour it climbed at least a dozen de-grees, making the walking slightly easier but much more unpleasant.

The dry frozen layer on top of the drifted snow was melting, softening and losing its pristine sheen. As the companions stepped through it their boots sank into a wa-tery mush like cold oatmeal that rose above the knee if someone was unlucky enough to hit a deep hollow. The path meandered alongside a narrow stream. As they'd joined it, the water had been fringed with a delicate trac-ery of cobwebbed ice, stretching out from both the banks to meet in the middle.

Now that was gone, broken up and whirled away. The stream widened and ran faster, swelling with the inrush of meltwater. By the time the three friends came within sight of the ville the noise made conversation difficult, and the narrow

stream had become a full-blooded river.

The trail had also widened into a horse trail, well tram-pled and thick with a sticky orange mud.

There was a sparse belt of trees ringing the hamlet. The houses appeared to be made mainly of packed earth with a roof of some kind of thatch. Ryan crouched behind a stunted larch, cursing as its branches dripped water down the back of his neck. Krysty and J.B. knelt on either side of him, all staring intently at the afternoon activity in the small ville.

The well at the center of the cleared patch of dirt, which seemed to be the village's square, was clearly the social fo-cus for the community. Women, all seemingly identical in ragged furs and filthy boots, gathered there, drawing wa-ter and engaging in chitchat. A few men appeared every now and again, as well as a scattering of muddied chil-dren. A number of scrawny mongrel dogs slunk about the place, nuzzling for scraps, occasionally bickering noisily among themselves.

"Bastard dogs," J.B. hissed. "One of them scents us and goodbye'll be all she wrote."

Ryan nodded. It was true that animals around a strange ville were a difficult obstacle to try to overcome.

"Which way to Moscow?" Krysty whispered. "Looks like a wider road out the far side there. It's in the right direction."

J.B. pulled out the miniature sextant and compass, an-gling it to the light that filtered through the branches of the trees. He read off the direction. "Northeast by a half east. That could be about right. Yeah."

While they watched and waited, Ryan considered what scant knowledge he possessed of Russia, realizing that it was abominably little. After sky-dark, as far as he knew, there had been no communication at all between what re-mained of the Russians and the survivors of Deathlands. The only thing that was certain was that there was a bone-deep hatred of each other's country.

Having traveled around the edges of the rad-blasted devastation that had been New York, he figured Moscow wasn't likely to be a whole lot better. But there had to be suburbs. From his experience around the rebuilt villes of Deathlands, Ryan knew that most life flourished in what remained of the old suburbs.

"Nothing here," Krysty said.

"Nope. Nothing. Lot of dirt and stink and suspicion. Nothing we need."

J.B. flexed his shoulders. "Agreed. Let's move on around."

IT WAS J.B. who killed the dog. They were three-quarters of the way around, picking their way cautiously between the patches of cover, checking that nobody from the ville was coming their way. They'd just negotiated a part of the woods that had been particularly unpleasant. From the copious evidence all around it was obvious that the wretched ville had no sanitation arrangements. Everyone simply came out and did what they had to among the trees.

Krysty began to giggle quietly to herself as they picked their way carefully onward.

"What's the joke, lover?" Ryan asked.

"Carl Lanning, the smith's son from Harmony. You know?"

"Yeah. What about him?"

"He always said I'd end up in the shit. He finally got it right."

All three of them laughed, laughter that was snapped off clean when the dog appeared from the far side of a small clearing.

It wasn't a particularly large animal, no more than two feet tall at the shoulder and probably weighing less than a hundred pounds. But it wasn't carrying much fat.

Waves of muscle rippled over the squat shoulders and it stood four-square, lips folding back off savage teeth. A thin trickle of yellow foam clung to its underslung jaw. In the sudden silence they could hear a faint snarl, rumbling deep in its belly. The sunken eyes were rimmed red.

"Gaia!"

Ryan took in a slow, whistling breath, leveling his SIG-Sauer P-226, finger taut on the feather-light trigger. He held his fire. If the dog barked they could have the whole ville teeming about their ears within seconds. If he shot the animal, even with the baffle silencer, there was a good chance of someone hearing the muted report of the blaster. Same result.

There was always the hope that the cur might simply take it into its head to turn and run, allowing them to move on unhindered.

That hope died the moment he saw the head go back and heard the first beginning of the howl of warning.

J.B. never hesitated.

He drew the Tekna knife left-handed and threw it underarm at the dog. The needle-sharp blade spun across the clearing, glinting in the sun. The point buried itself in the creature's throat, beneath the ruff of its muscular jowls. The yelp died, stillborn, and the dog staggered a few steps sideways, collapsing with a feeble, bubbling attempt at a bark. Blood oozed from its open jaws, tinting the froth, and its powerful legs kicked and scabbled at the carpet of snow.

J.B. walked across and stooped to retrieve the heavy knife, jerking his hand away as the dying animal made a determined attempt to take a few of his fingers with it into the long stillness.

"Bastard," he muttered with no anger, waiting a half minute until the mongrel's eyes filmed over and it lay dead. Then he withdrew the Tekna and wiped it in the ground before resheathing it.

RYAN HAD FIGURED that the bodies of the three horsemen might have been found by now. What he didn't know was the extent to which rural Russia was subject to sec patrols. Generally in Deathlands sec men were visible in any num-bers only near a large ville run by a powerful baron.

They'd only been in the country for a few hours and they'd already managed to kill five Russians. And a dog, Ryan added. There wasn't going to be any way they could throw themselves on the mercy of their unwitting hosts and took for anything better than a hemp collar and a short dance on the air.

The path had become a trail and now widened to the width of a two-lane blacktop. Most of the snow had al-ready melted from its surface, the potholed pavement showing through. The river ran alongside it on the left, pounding over huge tumbled boulders, its noise now deafeningly loud. On the right side of the road the forest had thickened and darkened, massive pines gathering close to-gether with barely room for a man to squeeze between the trunks.

"Don't like this!" J.B. shouted, looking behind them. "Can't see a quick way out if we get ourselves caught here."

Ryan nodded and stopped. He looked at the metallic gray of the icy water and knew that nobody could hope to sur-vive in among the rocks for more than a handful of sec-onds. "Have to be the forest!" he bellowed back.

There wasn't too much of the day remaining. Clouds were bunching over the low hills ahead of them, where the trail disappeared. Ryan was thinking about when they should stop to find a hiding place for the night.

Because of the noise of the rushing river, none of them heard the clattering engine of the jeep until it roared around the corner right in front of them. It was filled with five armed sec men.

Chapter Thirteen

MAJOR-COMMISSAR ZIMYANIN flicked through the re-port, one of dozens that landed on his desk every morning of every working day. He glanced through it, stopping as his eye caught the familiar name.

"Peredelkino," he muttered, running the flat of his hand over the polished dome of his skull.

Only the day before there'd been something about a hamlet out that way, in the southwest sector of the grid.

"Peredelkino." There'd been three men missing. According to this report, they hadn't been located yet. But there was a mysterious corpse of a very tall mutie. "Stuck in a doorway," mused the officer. It sounded sufficiently bizarre to be interesting.

But what was even more interesting was the account of the motorized sec patrol that had been driving out on the river road and had come across three strangers.

"The missing horsemen?" he asked aloud. He immediately answered himself. "No." They'd all been male. One of these had been a woman. The descriptions had been amazingly sketchy. "Wearing furs. Who doesn't at this time of year? Shortish man. Glasses. Tallish woman. Maybe with red hair. And a tall man with only one eye. All of them could have been deaf muties?"

He pushed the report from one side of his desk to the other, recalling another phrase from his English book. Deaf muties. "Could you possibly repeat that? I regret that I am a little hard of hearing."

Still, the three seemed to have escaped, so that was the end of that.

The descriptions didn't ring any bells at all for Zimyanin. Shortish man. Redhead. Man with one eye. Nothing uncommon. In the country of brutality, the one-eyed man was common.

"BLACK DUST!" J.B. exclaimed as the jeep came skidding around the bend, braking hard only forty yards in front of them.

Ryan had once spent some time in a stinking prison close by the Lantic. So close that the rising tide each day flooded the cell to within a couple of feet of the ceiling. An old man was dying there; indeed he finally slipped away in Ryan's arms. Before his death he passed on to the young one-eyed man his sole piece of wisdom. One on which he had not acted himself.

"When you get took prisoner...you gotta know you get more chance of breakin' away in the first five minutes than you'll get in the next five years."

Ryan had always remembered that.

And there wasn't a mess of choices.

The patrol had rifles, looking at a distance mostly like Kalashnikov AK-47s. It was highly unlikely that three handguns could chill the five uniformed sec men without taking losses.

The track stretched behind them, fairly straight, for over a hundred yards. Plenty of time for the rifles to put them down in the melting slush.

And the river was death.

"Trees! Now!" Ryan yelled.

The sec men weren't used to that kind of speed. Illegal drinkers, mutie hunters, an occasional small band of rag-ged guerrillas. That was the limit of their experience.

The three fur-wrapped peasants moved far too fast for them to react. By the time any of them had their blasters unslung, the track was deserted. One of the sec men was a secret Christian and he surreptitiously crossed himself, suspecting that they might have encountered a trio of for-est ghouls. His mother had warned him of

such creatures. They had long tongues that rotated like steel drills and in-sinuated themselves into every orifice of the human body, draining all your precious fluids.

In among the endless rows of conifers, Ryan ran and dodged, never once looking back. The trees were so close together that his shoulders brushed on both sides as he twisted and turned. On either flank, just a little behind, he was aware of Krysty and J.B., following his headlong dash.

Ryan had reacted so quickly that not a single shot was fired from the men in the jeep. By the time the Russians clambered down from the vehicle and ran to the place where the trio had vanished, there was no sign of them.

The woods were lonely, dark and deep.

"WE GOT MILES TO GO," Ryan said, crouching against the bole of a dead spruce tree.

"Back to the house?" Krysty panted, throwing off her furs, wiping sweat from her forehead.

"No choice. If the freezie'd been with us we could have bluffed our way. I heard one warning shout from the guys in the jeep. Once you stop, you're dead. Mebbe they'll think we don't hear too good. Or we're scared by the way they appeared."

J.B. was trying to clean his glasses on a kerchief from one of his capacious pockets. "Yeah. We have to go back. Be stupid to get holed up like that. Now we know they got sec men out. See the badge?"

Ryan shook his head. "No."

"Like you described those troops up in the snows. The Russkies. Single silver circle. No doubt about it."

"If they're regular soldiers then they could have radio communications. Call up reinforcements. Sooner we get away from here the better. That door to the

gateway's well hidden, but not good enough if we finished up trapped in there. Few pounds of ex-plas'll bring the place on our necks."

"Back to the trail?" J.B. queried. "Figure it's the only way. We try and circle around and we're in trouble deep."

"They could be waiting," Krysty said, replacing her pis-tol in its belt holster.

"This wood's so thick that we could get close enough to chill 'em from cover," J.B. suggested. "Long gun like those Kalashnikovs...great in the open. Useless in here. Can't see more than six feet in any direction. Knife's more use."

"Time's wasting," Ryan said. "Longer we wait, the more they got to cut us off. Let's go."

THE APPROACH OF EVENING brought a return to the colder weather. But it was not nearly as lethally chill as it had been the previous day. The temperature slithered down toward freezing, but the mixture of mud and thawing snow re-mained semiliquid. It was difficult and treacherous to walk through.

There was no sign of the jeep along the track, though a set of double wheel marks showed it had driven as far along as the miserable little ville, and then returned in the general direction of Moscow.

Ryan led the way around the hamlet, taking care to keep out of sight, guessing that the sec men could have given some sort of warning about strangers in the area.

The dog's corpse had been dragged away from the killground.

"Going to be a struggle to get to the house before full dark," J.B. warned. "Still a good few miles to go."

"No point trying to hole up. It's the best place we got," Ryan replied.

They heard the wolves when they were within the last mile, far off, almost at the

edge of hearing. The howl was a susurrating ghost of a sound, rising and falling, like the keening of a mother for her dead child. Across a distant valley, the noise echoed back from unseen hills, making it difficult to judge where the pack was running. Ryan put the direction some way behind them and to the south. But the noise was coming closer. Louder.

In the century since doomsday, many wild creatures had come back from the brink of extinction: cougars and rat-tlers, grizzlies and wolves. During the tired embers of the 1990s the creatures had been illegally poached and hunted into the remote high country and the desert fastnesses.

It hadn't taken long for them to realize that their most bitter enemy, man, was all but gone from the land. So they returned. And they bred and they flourished. And, in some cases, they also mutated.

"How far away, lover?" Ryan asked.

"Five miles. Getting nearer."

"Hunting pack?"

Krysty nodded. "Sure. Moves around fifteen to twenty miles in an hour if they're on a warm scent. And if they're hungry. If it's been, a bleak winter in these parts, they could be real hungry."

The sun was long gone, with only the palest hint of its passing tinting the western sky. A three-quarter moon was sailing calmly through tattered relics of cloud. During the warmth of the day a surprising amount of the snow had melted away, patches of white remaining only in hollows and shadowed places.

"Don't want to lead them to the others," Ryan said.

"Can keep 'em out easy of that place. There was shut-ters against the broken windows on the first floor. Doors were sound."

Ryan agreed with the Armorer. "Sure. But if they set outside for a while, it could

kind of attract some attention to us."

"If we were closer to the hut we could have cut some flesh off the giant mutie. That would have sidetracked them."

J.B.'s suggestion was a good one, but the loping wolves could be on top of them within fifteen minutes. Ryan looked at the narrow stream, at that point less than a dozen feet in width.

"Come on," he said, wading in, gasping at the coldness as it soaked instantly through his breeches. It was nearly waist deep on him, and came up over the belt of J. B. Dix, who took off his fur coat and removed the blaster before stepping into the fast-flowing stream. Krysty Wroth came last, whistling between her teeth at the biting shock.

"Gaia! All I need. Perfect end to a fruitful, perfect day."

"Tomorrow we do it again with Rick to field the questions. Crazy to think about doing it this way," J.B. panted.

"Long as the freezie don't die on us," Ryan added, stepping cautiously over a submerged branch.

The old trick worked. Without it they could have found themselves fighting the wolves off from the very steps of the American country dacha. They heard the high, nerve-rending cry of the hunting pack drawing closer, the animals running at an easy pace, devouring the miles on their wide-padded paws.

Just as Ryan and the other two reached the grounds of the mansion, they heard the sound of the wolves change suddenly. From eager anticipation to confusion. The note became lower, individual animals howling this way and that as they scoured the swift stream for some sign of where their prey had gone.

"Nice one, lover," Krysty murmured, smiling at Ryan in the moonlight and squeezing his arm.

"Hope they're gone by the time we set out again tomor-row."

"Right," J.B. agreed fervently.

THE OTHERS WERE SURPRISED to see them back the same evening. Rick had already gone to bed. Doc was sitting near him, tending the small fire in the open hearth. Jak was on watch, patrolling the second floor of the rambling build-ing. He spotted Ryan and the others as soon as they broke cover and ran down to the main doors to greet them.

"Freezie's ill," he said, speaking, as he nearly always did, only to Ryan. He virtually ignored the other two.

"Bad?"

"Fucking tired."

"See anyone, Jak?"

The albino boy shook his head. "No. Heard wolves. After you?"

"Yeah. We sidetracked them. Doc okay?"

"Sure. Happy. Forget Lori."

Krysty spoke for the first time. "Maybe not forgotten, Jak. Just put away into one of those back rooms in our mind where we store things we don't care to think on too much."

He considered that. "Could be. Yeah. Could be right." Krysty smiled. It was as near as she got to praise from the teenager.

They didn't bother to wake Rick to tell him he was trav-eling the next morning. Time enough for that.

Chapter Fourteen

"NO WAY, RYAN."

"No choice, Rick."

"Go and piss up a rope, you monocular son of a bitch!"

"Sure. But you still have to come with us. There's no—"

The freezie was angrier than any of them had ever seen him. He shook his head so violently that his heavy glasses nearly became dislodged.

"I'm sick, you ice-hearted bastard!" Suddenly he was near to tears. "Christ on a cross! I got this shitty illness and I'm dying and I get fucking frozen. Supposed to be woken up when it's time for the doctors to cure me! And you did it too early."

Krysty tried to calm him. "Rick, it wasn't too early. You know that. The world you knew got blown to hell on Jan-uary 20, 2001. There won't be a cure. There won't *ever* be doctors like you knew, hospitals. Nothing like that. Just the Deathlands forever and ever."

"Amen," Doc muttered.

"So, why go on? Why fucking bother, Krysty? Let's just give up now. Right now!"

He was weeping, leaning on his stick, tears streaming down his thin cheeks. Ryan realized how frail and ill he'd become in the past two or three days.

Krysty laid her hands on his shoulders, trying to steady him. "Why? Why don't we all just sit down and give up?"

"Yeah." He wiped his eyes with a clumsy hand. "Yeah. Why go on?"

Outside the sun shone with a hard, facile brilliance, from a faultlessly blue sky. The snow had virtually disappeared, and there had been no sign of the wolf pack.

Krysty's emerald-bright eyes fixed the man with a cold, inexorable stare. Rick actually took a stumbling step away from her flaring anger.

"I can't mend that damaged door. Ryan can't. Nor can J.B. or Jak or Doc. If it doesn't get fixed we stay here, Rick. We stay here and we all get chilled. Sure, we can hold out for a few days. But in the end, though we're good, they'll track us down and chill us. You sit down on your ass and give up and *you* chill us. Just as surely as if your finger tightens on the trigger of the Kalashnikov."

The sun-splashed room was very quiet. The others were all standing, listening to the argument. No one inter-rupted.

Rick nodded slowly. "I see that, and I guess I'll do what I can. But after that? Why do you keep trying, Krysty?"

She smiled then, and kissed him gently on the cheek. "Tell you the truth, Rick, I sometimes wonder about that myself."

SOMETHING HAD AWAKENED Zimyanin from a deep sleep. He eased himself away from the hoggish bulk of his wife, wondering if it was the newborn twin baby boys in the apartment immediately above who disturbed his sleep. They bawled endlessly.

But it wasn't that.

Something in his sleep. "The bed was exceedingly comfortable. Thank you for asking," he whispered to himself.

Anya Zimyanin rolled onto her back and farted long and loudly.

He swung his legs out of the bed, wincing as his feet made contact with the cold plas-floor. There was some of the weeks' ration of chay left. If the power was high enough he could boil a pot of water and make himself a cup of tea. The idea appealed to Zimyanin. But he still couldn't quite remember what it was that had woken him in the first place.

The cramped kitchen seemed smaller than usual. Dirty dishes and cutlery remained piled on the counter by the sink. It hadn't been a bad meal. Anya had bought some smoked sprats for the appetizer, serving them with buck-wheat pancakes.

Zimyanin knew the old conventions about meals and made sure they were observed whenever possible. He in-sisted that Anya prepare *pervoe blyudo* and *vtoroe blyudo*—fish for the first main dish then meat for the sec-ond main dish.

Minced pike was followed by some indeterminate meat that his wife had sworn was mutton. Unless they were put-ting horseshoes on sheep, he'd permitted himself to dis-agree with her. Out east he'd eaten enough horse meat to be sure. A young recruit had once asked him why he hadn't called his horse by any name. He'd replied that he wouldn't give a name to something he'd probably end up having to eat.

For dessert they had consumed a store-bought cake, sticky with honey and raisins. Anya had gotten up from the table and kissed him drunkenly, her mouth oozing sweet-ness. Someone had given her a bottle of heavy Moldavian red wine, and it had gone to her head.

Zimyanin slept naked and he looked down at his body with a shudder of revulsion. The mute evidence of their loveless coupling was matted in the wiry nest of dark curl-ing hairs that covered his groin. While the kettle simmered he walked quietly through to the tiny bathroom and washed himself.

The overhead light was flickering and dim. Power often fell away during the night. He glanced at his face in the mirror, seeing how the erratic shadows gave

the illusion that his mouth and nose had merged into a single dark cavern.

"Ah," he muttered.

That brought back the dream that had jerked him from sleep.

Aliev had been in it. He and Zimyanin had been walking through the grim wastes of the Kamchatka Peninsula, hunting the Narodniki, following their trail of bestial violence and murder.

The weather had been appalling. A chem storm had howled in from the distant purpled mountains, driving acid rain across the barren land, rad-high enough to strip a man's flesh from his bones if he couldn't find cover fast enough.

The sky seemed full of trails from old chunks of nuke waste as missiles burned down through the atmosphere. They'd passed three men on horseback, all of them so wrapped in heavy furs that their faces were obscured. Zimyanin had shouted to them to beware of the lethal weather, but they'd taken no notice. They'd ridden slowly on into the eye of the storm as though they were deaf. Aliev had snuffled and grunted at his side, pointing toward a ruined building that seemed to stand on the edge of the world.

The hurricane screamed at their heels as they closed in on the old house. But the door was locked and coated with a glittering layer of titanium steel. A tiny ob-slit was cut into its center.

Zimyanin pounded on the door with the butt of his Makarov, the noise ringing like a fist beating on a shield of bronze. But nobody came. Aliev had fallen whimpering to his knees, arms locking around the legs of his superior. To try to free himself from the grip of the tracker, Zimyanin reached down and pulled at his head. But hanks of coarse hair came away in his hand, and strips of flesh peeled whitely away from the wretch's face. Bone showed through, and Zimyanin saw to his horror and disgust that it was carved in tiny, delicate figurines of copulating men, women and animals.

He knocked again on the door and heard footsteps above the screeching of the chem storm, combat boots that marched slow and steady. A bolt grated and the ob-

slit moved back on its hinges.

Part of a face appeared and studied the major-commissar for a long, long moment. Then the panel slid back again and Zimyanin could hear the steps receding.

As he sat at the table in the kitchen, Zimyanin remembered the bowel-tearing feeling of helpless horror as the lethal storm had enveloped him.

Though he'd been able to see only a small part of the man's face behind the bolted door, he'd felt that he somehow recognized him. Now, all the major-commissar could recall was that the man had been scarred. And had one eye.

RYAN, KRYSTY and Rick were making slow progress. Even with his walking stick the freezie needed to stop every half mile or so to sit down and recover, his head sunken on his chest, his breath rasping with a shuddering force. His lips turned a frightening shade of pale cyanotic blue.

"Time was I could hike the glacier with the best of 'em," he said. "Now I'm limp as overcooked pasta. That's what my grandmother used to say. This is crazy, Ryan. By the time we get to anywhere we can find some tools, I'll be bloody dead."

"If there hadn't been an armed sec patrol we could have risked the first plan. But without someone who can speak a little to any Russkies we meet, we'll be deader'n these coats."

"Sure, sure." Wearily he climbed to his feet again, sighing heavily. "At least most of the snow's gone today."

The weather was beautiful. The temperature was cool enough to need the coats, but not so cold that it gnawed at exposed skin. The stream chattered to itself as it tumbled over the boulders in its scoured bed.

The giant mutie had been removed from the cabin. Ryan risked a quick glance inside and saw that it had been completely stripped. The three bodies of the

horsemen had also vanished. From the odd fragments of bone and torn cloth it looked as if the wolves had gotten to them before the search party from the ville.

Once they'd successfully circled around the community, the companions stopped for food. Ryan and Krysty ate sparingly of the dried meat and fish, and sipped at their canteens, replenishing them from the adjacent river. Rick hardly touched his food, but he drank heavily, draining the canteen and nodding his thanks as Ryan topped it up for him.

"You have to eat, Rick," Krysty urged. "And you should harvest the water. Might not be any where we're going."

"Food makes me wanna puke, and I get so dry I could—"

"You still have to eat."

"Why?"

"Just to keep your strength."

"What strength is that, lady?" He laughed bitterly. "One round with My Little Pony'd put me into rehab for a month."

"Little pony?" she asked, puzzled.

"Forget it."

"But I'm interested in the past and things like that, Rick."

He shook his head. "You wanna play, you gotta pay, Krysty. Be there or be square, like the man said. Radio said they was just refugees. Don't let the sun catch you crying." His eyes were closed and he seemed to have slipped into a weird kind of trance.

Krysty turned to Ryan, who shrugged his shoulders. "Don't ask me, lover. Guess

it's like Doc. Some things a man just doesn't get over. Not all the way, all the time."

Rick stopped mumbling to himself and looked up at Ryan. "Truest thing you ever said, good buddy. Let's get moving again."

RYAN'S TOOTHACHE was becoming much worse, hurting to such an extent that he didn't even want to risk breathing in cool air through his mouth. But the effort of the long walk, often having to help Rick along, made him pant.

"Fireblast! What's the Russkie word for 'dentist,' Rick?"

The freezie paused. "I think it's *zubnoy vrach*, but I'm not really sure. I guess you just pull a face and point at the tooth that hurts and the guy'll draw it for you. Not a lot different from visiting the fang factory up in Queens."

"Great. Thanks a whole load, Rick. Do the same for you one day."

They kept moving for most of the day. By keeping to the sides of the roads they were generally able to dodge into the trees and scrub if they saw or heard anyone coming.

Rick's Russian was only put to the test once.

Toward the end of the weary afternoon, as the setting sun threw their elongated shadows down a narrow, winding blacktop, they saw a wooden-wheeled cart coming slowly toward them, drawn by a pair of oxen. They were being driven by an elderly peasant with a long grizzled beard. Nobody else was with him, and the wagon was clearly empty.

Krysty and Ryan exchanged glances. One man, alone. They'd seen a number of small farms and cabins on both sides of the road, set back among tilled fields, mostly sur-rounded by groves of trees. Men and women were working in the drying mud, taking advantage of the change in the spring weather. Most wore assorted furs and rags, and none showed any particular interest in the trio of

strangers. But a shot could bring them running in seconds.

"No point in running, lover," Krysty whispered.

"Nope. Rick? Mebbe time for you to do your stuff for us."

"What?"

The freezie was patently at the end of his tether, both physically and mentally. His face was as white as water-scoured bone, and he staggered. A dozen times he'd have fallen if it hadn't been for either Ryan's or Krysty's help-ing hand.

"Russkie. Get your talking head on, Rick. Just say as little as possible. 'Good day,' or 'Hi, there,' or whatever."

"Hell's bloody bells! I've just this second forgotten every goddamned word of Russian that I ever learned in my en-tire life."

The wagon was nearly on top of them and they all stepped aside to give it passage. Ryan and Krysty tried to keep their faces turned away, both holding a cocked blaster under their long furs.

The old man looked down at them from his high seat, tugging on the reins so that the cart began to slow. Fearing this could indicate the beginning of a lengthy conversation on the price of corn or the recent disease among young pigs, Ryan risked a glance at Rick, who was swaying back and forth like a man entering a deep trance.

"Talk, you triple-stupe bastard!" Ryan growled in a low, urgent voice.

Rick offered, "Good day," in Russian and was greeted only with a suspicious silence. "The sun is warm and the snow is gone."

The wagon was still moving, at barely walking pace. "Too late for the sowing as ever!" the peasant moaned, flicking out at the oxen with the tip of a long whip.

Rick didn't risk any further attempts at social chatter. He stepped to the side of the track and slumped down on a large boulder, shoulders shaking. It wasn't until they reached him, having watched the cart rattle on down the road, that Ryan and Krysty realized the freezie was laughing.

"Sorry. Nervous relief. Felt like a character in a made-for-TV spy movie. I said, 'The sun is warm and the snow is gone.' I had this feeling he was going to reply something like, 'And the count is frying turbot with my grandmother tonight.' Then we'd exchange microfilms. Oh, Jesus! All he did was moan about the fucking weather."

Ryan and Krysty joined in his laughter. It was a good moment.

Chapter Fifteen

MAJOR-COMMISSAR ZIMYANIM was becoming puzzled— puzzled and a little intrigued.

"Who's in command out at Peredelkino, Alicia Andreyinichna?" he asked.

"Lieutenant Ulyanov, I think. Why? Is something wrong out there?"

"No. Yes." He paused. "Possibly. Just these reports he keeps sending me."

"What about them, Comrade Major-Commissar? Is it trouble?"

He shuffled the files. As he looked down at them, the morning sunlight bounced off the top of his polished skull.

"Three men missing. Horses found. No, two found. It's believed wolves took the other one. Bodies found. All shot at medium range by heavy-caliber handblasters. Good observation that! Bright boy. Could go far. Old woman's missing. Never found her. Bones. Figures the wolves again. And her mutie son found dead, standing upright in a doorway."

"Guerrilla band?" the girl suggested.

"No. Food taken, he thinks. And some furs. Why would killers steal furs and food with spring coming in fast? Slay five people? Why? Then the jeep patrol saw a trio of strangers. One-eyed man, redheaded woman, short man in glasses. I checked that. Rimless glasses. They were in furs. Stolen furs, would you say, Alicia Andreyinichna?"

"Could be. But there isn't much out that way now, is there?"

"Now?"

She blushed at the sudden sharp look he threw her. With the pockmarks and the drooping mustache she realized he looked like old pictures of the Tartar gallopers who had ruled the steppes centuries ago.

"Yes, of course. Once, I think, there were many rich houses. Dachas built by the wicked Stalin for his friends. Later used by others. Even the Americans had one there."

Zimyanin picked up a pencil and rolled it between finger and thumb, nodding.

"So? Interesting. And then a kulak driving his ox cart sees three strangers on the road to the city. Man with one eye, tall woman with red hair—very red hair, he says to Lieutenant Ulyanov—and a third person. Pale of face. Dark glasses. He walked slowly with a stick. A sickly cripple, thought the old peasant. But this one spoke a kind of Russian."

"A kind of Russian?"

"Precisely. Not like someone from that region, nor, he thought, like someone from the city. So, it means he could have come from a different part of the land."

"Have you asked the Bureau of Internal Movements if they know of—"

Zimyanin waved a finger at her. "No, no, no. This does not concern them. It is a problem for us. And we will solve it. But it is surely a great mystery. Most odd."

"Most odd," Clerk Second Class Andreyinichna echoed dutifully, knowing that such agreement was essential if she was to rise to the exalted position of Clerk First Class.

"Odder than you would think, my dear," he replied, smiling.

"Why?"

"Many months ago I encountered some of the Americans. You know this?"

"Of course, Comrade Major-Commissar. Everyone knows of the story."

"I met several of them. But among them was a man who had only one eye. His left eye was gone, and his face was scarred. I was threatened by one of the butchers of the Narodniki. My life was spared by a woman of the Americans. She had red hair. *Very* red hair."

"But you don't..."

Zimyanin laughed. "The same man and woman! Of course not. Impossible. Americans in Moscow! That's a good joke, Alicia Andreyinichna, is it not?" The laughter ceased as quickly as it had begun. "But, it is certainly very odd."

THERE WAS considerable evidence that the Americans in the final, and briefest, world war had used a significant proportion of neutron weapons.

Ryan had a miniature rad counter, but it stayed consistently low in the green-to-yellow margins. Once or twice he noticed it flickered well up into the yellow, but it never went anywhere near the limit of orange.

But the true story lay in the mute evidence of structural damage.

They passed through regions where the nuking had blasted everything out of existence. The devastation had been total. But they also encountered regions where many of the buildings were visibly older. As they began to reach what had been the outer suburbs, they found whole streets of perfectly preserved houses. Occasionally they saw damaged roofs, but most structures were sound. There were few signs of inhabitants. Any they did see were busy about their own business, scurrying along with heads down, avoiding eye contact with anyone else.

"Not many stores," Krysty commented.

"Not like the edges of big villes back home," Ryan agreed.

Rick was exhausted, so they found a house in a quiet side street. Its interior had been stripped, but it was dry and secure. There were so few people around that Ryan didn't bother to keep guard during the night. He bet their lives that nobody had seen them go into the overgrown garden.

WHILE THE COMPANIONS ATE a breakfast of smoked fish and dried meat, washed down with some of the spring water, they made plans.

From the front window they could see a tumbled apartment building, rusting strips of iron protruding from the shattered concrete. Window frames of torn iron hung loose from the crumbled walls, and scorch marks etched deep into the south wall indicated where the main blast had come from.

From the side window they could see a towering wall of what must have been some sort of a factory. Still visible, after a hundred years of Russian winters, were the remains of a giant mural. It showed a man, a worker, holding a huge unfurled flag, the crimson toned down to a dusty pink. He seemed to be leading a group of

adoring men and women up a hill toward a glittering palace of white stone.

"Art on a heroic scale," Rick observed.

"What's the message?" Krysty asked, flattening her nose against the cold windowpane.

"The original one says something about how the brave workers of Govorovo will forever carry on the fight against the paper tigers of American aggression and imperialism. Kind of catchy, huh?"

"How about the painted stuff underneath?" Ryan pointed to some smeared letters in runny black paint. Rick put his head to one side, trying to make it out.

"Difficult. Kind of slang, I guess. Nearest I can get is that one day's fucking is better than a hundred days of la-bor for the Party. Guess I'll drink to that."

There were more people in the streets than there'd been the previous evening. The sky was overcast, but the day felt warmer. Since they depended on the furs for disguise and protection it wasn't good news.

"Best try and pick our way closer to the middle of the ville," Krysty suggested.

But Rick raised an objection to that. "I don't know what it's like now, but in the old days—my days—you'd have needed passes to pick your nose in a sec-sensitive region. You saw that patrol. Suppose there's sec men out here? Suppose you need some kind of a pass to get to certain re-gions? It wouldn't be that surprising, would it?"

Ryan chewed his lip. "Guess not. No. Fireblast! Never thought it'd be this difficult to pick up a hammer and screwdriver." He hesitated for a moment, uncharacteristi-cally. "Still, I figure we have to move on. If we... What's that?"

A whooping, ululating sound cut the air, resembling the cry of a hunting animal. That was Ryan's first impression, and it proved close to the truth.

A ragged, limping man, well below average height, hob-bled around the corner of the street, looking wildly from left to right. Everyone else on the street immediately turned away from him, moving briskly off in every direction. Some of them broke into a clumsy, jogging run in their anxiety to get away.

"Something's after him," Rick said, moving back from the window as the fugitive's face turned toward their house.

"Someone. Lots of someones." Krysty cocked her head. "Sounds almost like a gang of kids in a playpark."

Like magic, the suburban road was deserted, as if some staggering leper, bright with rad glow, had come scream-ing into a church social.

"Here they are," Ryan said quietly. "If he comes in here, we move fast and quiet out the back. Could be bad."

There were around a dozen in the screeching group that was trailing the cripple. Most had knives or long-handled hatchets, while one or two carried nail-studded clubs. They wore an assortment of skirts and pants, but all wore bright red berets with a single silver circle embroidered on the front. From behind the dusty window it was hard to tell, but Ryan's guess was that none of the pack was older than twelve.

Their prey had given up. He'd fallen to his knees, partly hidden from Ryan, Krysty and Rick by a spreading yew tree. He was holding his hands up imploringly as the chil-dren ringed him. They shuffled around the helpless figure, almost dancing. It wasn't possible to hear, but from the pattern of the words, it sounded like they were singing. As they moved around the circle they made mock cuts at the kneeling man, forcing him to cringe from them.

Rick spit with disgust. "Can't we... ? No, don't answer that. Course we can't. But that poor little gimp..."

Their game didn't last long. Like all children, the pack was easily bored.

The freezie turned away and walked across the bare boards of the long-dead room, his bamboo cane rapping furiously on the floor. Ryan and Krysty watched. It wasn't very different from other things they'd seen in other places. Just a few changes in the small details. Nothing more.

The gang beat the middle-aged man to the ground, kick-ing and punching at him. But the blows didn't seem designed to cause serious injury, and none of the blades were used.

Once they had him down, they kept him down. Two of the kids held each leg, forcing the man's feet far apart. Two others went to each arm. Despite their youth and size, it was obvious they were strong and skillful in their craft. Apart from tossing his head from side to side, the cripple was held totally still. The gang had stopped their whooping and chanting, and the only sound was the moaning of their victim.

The leader was a girl of about thirteen, tall and as skinny as a lath. She stood between the man's spread feet, grin-ning down into his face with a crack-toothed leer.

Ryan winced in anticipation, but she ignored the oppor-tunity to inflict devastating pain. The girl was businesslike in the way she stepped astride her victim, hoicking at her skirt and squatting on his chest.

"How's the kid going to...? Oh, I see." Krysty also turned away from the window, not wanting to see the ma-cabre ending to the minidrama.

Ryan continued to watch, seeing no good reason not to.

The girl had pulled a length of narrow whipcord from inside the leg of her bottle-green panties. It had a thicker, softer piece of rope knotted to each end to make the grip that much easier.

With an experienced hand she adjusted a loop around the victim's neck, settling herself more comfortably on his chest. She then glanced around to make certain her co-horts were ready.

With a whoop of delight she began to heave on the ends of her garrote, tightening it. She leaned back to apply more pressure, so that the waxed cord vanished into the scrawny flesh, biting deeper, drawing blood that ran dark onto the sidewalk. From his viewpoint high above, Ryan could see how fiercely the crippled man struggled for the last chok-ing breaths of life. But the gang of street brats were too many and too strong.

The girl was good at it, and Ryan wondered idly just how many times she'd performed this obscene ritual of public execution. As the ending came near she braced herself by pushing her booted feet against the side of her victim's throat, sawing at the strangling cord to make it cut deeper.

There was a convulsive jerking from the man that the children found hard to contain. Then a gout of blood erupted as the whipcord sliced through the artery close to the ear.

With a shriek of satisfaction the girl stood up, uncoiling the murderous length of thin rope and tucking it back into her panties. She stood astride the corpse and leaned over to spit delicately into the open, boggling eyes. It was ob-viously some sort of a ritual with the gang, as they all fol-lowed her example before filing off down the tree-lined street, just like any other bunch of kids.

"Why that way?" Krysty asked.

"Cheaper than a speeding bullet," Rick replied, then retreated to a corner of the room where he was quietly sick.

"Welcome to Moscow," Ryan said quietly.

Chapter Sixteen

"Zup, " Rick repeated, making appropriate gestures. He mimed a pain in his jaw, then clamped an imaginary pair of pincers on the recalcitrant tooth. He heaved it free, managing a broad smile to indicate his relief from pain.

The Russian stared blankly at him from behind a posi-tive forest of gingery facial hair.

Ryan watched the pantomime with mixed feelings. Al-most immediately after seeing the butchering of the cri-p-ple, for God only knew what malefaction, the pain from his damaged back tooth flared up alarmingly. Ryan Cawdor was a man of extreme physical courage who had endured more suffering in his life than most people could begin to imagine. But he gasped at the shock from the exposed nerve. It was like having someone probing into the mar-row of his jawbone with a white-hot steel needle. Sweat broke out on his forehead, and he pressed his fist against the side of his jaw.

"Mother Sonja used to say that a distillation of the oil of cloves was an aid to that sort of tooth pain," Krysty said.

"Got any?"

"Course not!"

"Then keep your rad-blasted stupe mouth shut, will you?"

She stared hard at him. "There're times I make allow-ances for you behaving like a hamstrung pig, lover. Luck-ily for you, this happens to be one of those times."

Now they were wandering around a big street market, only a mile or so farther into the ravaged suburbs of the huge ville. They'd crossed over the remains of a massive freeway, several lanes in either direction. A collapsed over-pass had been partially cleared away and there were two lanes working. Ryan and Krysty had stopped and stared in amazement. Neither of them had ever seen such an amaz-ing volume of gas-powered transport, buzzing and roaring past them: heavy wags, painted in a dull olive-green and a number of autowags; two-wheelers by the dozen. And at least two vehicles out of every three sported the silver cir-cle that

they recognized as being the insignia of "the Party."

The market wasn't very difficult from innumerable similar ones that Ryan had seen all over the scattered villes of the Deathlands. Trestles made from old doors, propped up by makeshift hunks of hacked wood, sold everything under the sun.

"Everything except weapons," Ryan observed.

Though some cautious barons controlled how blasters and blades were peddled in their villes, most markets in the Deathlands would have several stalls selling arms: long-bows, crossbows, lethal cattles made from steel and plaited cords of elastic, hunting spears, knives long and short. And blasters—Colts, Smith & Wessons, Mausers, Webleys, Lugers, Winchesters, Deringers and Derringers, Adams and Rugers, flintlocks and percussion cap blasters, muskets, rifles and carbines. Automatics and semiautomatics, single action and double action. Grens and launchers.

But in the Nikulino street market there wasn't even a blunt knife on offer. Ryan also noticed that nobody appeared to be carrying any kind of weapon, at least not openly, except for the parading sec men and women, all of whom carried either pistols or rifles—Stechkins, Tokarevs and Makarovs. But, most commonly, the old versions of the Kalashnikov rifle.

The market offered everything else.

Food was scarce and, compared to some of the other items, expensive. Potatoes were plentiful, but the stalls peddling carrots, turnips and small amounts of hothouse fruits and tomatoes were sparse and the produce was costly. There was plenty of meat, with old women sitting behind their displays, rhythmically fanning away the hordes of buzzing blowflies. Mutton and horsemeat were most common, as was a surprising quantity of good fresh fish.

A few stalls sold prenuke memorabilia, like books and small household items. But the prices posted seemed ludicrously high compared with other things, and there seemed to be few takers.

One ramshackle table held only an array of false teeth, gleamingly pink and white

and infinitely macabre. An-other stall sold false teeth made from metal and wood, which seemed to cause Ryan's pain to surge again.

Clothes were sold in the largest number of stalls in the market, most of them crudely made and based on furs. One old woman had some finely worked hand-embroidered kerchiefs for sale, but nobody was buying. The stall next door was piled with secondhand rubber boots, and fifteen or twenty people were jostling to purchase them.

One section of the market was set aside for various crafts. A slim boy with only one leg pumped at a foot-operated drill and offered extremely fine engravings on glass of birds and butterflies. Another boy was selling tiny creatures of folded, colored card, attracting a good crowd to admire his skill. A chubby woman standing next to Ryan said some-thing, gesturing to the boy's creations. Hoping he was right, Ryan muttered "Da" and smiled. She smiled back, so he figured he'd guessed right.

Some of the craftsmen had signs hung up to advertise their particular skills. It was Krysty who spotted the enor-mous golden tooth, carved from a single piece of wood, indicating the dentist.

It was only when Rick was deep in the miasma of trying to explain Ryan's condition that they realized they were at-tracting a crowd.

"Zup!" shouted the freezie, sweating with the tension. He looked worriedly at Ryan.

Since the pain from his ravaged tooth had miraculously vanished, it seemed a good moment to make their excuses and leave. But the kopeck had finally dropped and the open-air dentist grinned broadly. He pushed Ryan into a battered iron chair.

As the man smiled through the forest of ginger hair, Ryan was alarmed to see that he was totally toothless. Not a jag-ged stump remained anywhere.

He beckoned Rick to him, hissing in his ear, "Tell the triple...tell him I want only

one tooth out and I'll point at it."

The freezie stumbled through an explanation, which seemed to amuse both the dentist and the growing crowd of watchers. Ryan was becoming less and less comfortable at being the center of attraction, but Krysty reassured him.

"Folks are the same everywhere," she whispered.

"What?"

"Love watching pain. Give 'em a good show, lover. Don't disappoint them."

It was only as the Russian started to poke around in Ryan's mouth that the one-eyed man realized he was being treated by a mutie. As mutations went it was comparatively slight and very common—variations in the numbers and placing of digits on hands and feet. In extreme cases you might see a mutie with thirty or forty tiny, feeble toes on each bare foot, like the stubby tentacles of a sea anemone.

The Russian had only two digits on each hand. But to make up for it, they were huge. The thumb and index finger were like the claws of a massive lobster. The skin was immensely thick, like horn, and there were no nails.

Ryan opened his mouth as wide as he could, leaning back, hands folded white-knuckled in his lap, and closed his eye. He swallowed hard and tried to steady his breathing, feeling an obscure and pointless wave of patriotism, which wasn't something that happened very often when a man lived in the Deathlands. But Ryan didn't want to behave badly in front of the mugging crowd of Russians. He didn't want to let himself and his country down by appearing to be a weakling, even though none of them knew he was one of the hated breed of Yanks.

The man, whose breath stank of vinegar and stale cabbage, turned and said something to Rick.

"Says he'll have to pull it out. Thinks he can see which one it is."

Ryan didn't much like the sound of the word "thinks," but he nodded anyway. He also didn't care for the way the red-bearded man was looking curiously at Rick. Because he was so close to Ryan, the freezie hadn't been able to pre-vent his hearing the quick burst of a foreign language.

Rick said something to the "dentist," which Ryan as-sumed was simple a "go" command. He opened his mouth wider and braced himself.

The pincering thumb and finger closed on the afflicted tooth, making him start at the shock of fresh pain.

It happened very fast.

The man's left hand pressed hard against Ryan's chest, keeping him still in the chair, and he felt an overwhelming sense of pressure. To his surprise, the first movement was one of pushing, then a squeezing, crushing feeling. There was comparatively little pain, but he heard a dreadful cracking, rushing noise, as if part of his jaw were being forcibly sucked out through his ears.

Ryan was aware of tendons creaking under the strain. Then blood gushed from the torn socket as the tooth was ripped free. It flooded into his throat, making him choke and gag. He pushed the Russian away from him and sat up, gobbing a great spray of thick blood into the dirt of the street.

Ryan's performance won a round of cheers from the cir-cle of onlookers. He noticed that the driver of a small-goods wag had stopped his vehicle, leaving the engine run-ning as he climbed from the canvas-topped cab to join in the fun.

The dentist, if such a description was appropriate for the claw-fingered butcher, held up the damaged tooth, show-ing the crimson root, bringing yet another round of ap-plause.

Ryan stood up, holding his jaw in both hands, and moved it experimentally and cautiously. He grinned at the realization that the stabbing shocks of icy pain were gone. On an impulse he reached out and shook the Russian's hand.

The man beamed and said, "*Dyengi*."

Ryan turned to look at Rick, whose face had gone paler than pale and whose mouth was sagging open. Whatever *dyengi* meant, it didn't look like it was going to be the best of news.

The man repeated the word, this time the smile making itself scarce. His voice was louder, his eyes narrowing.

Rick licked his lips. Ryan noticed that the muscles of the freezie's arms were twitching and jerking, and speech seemed hard to come by. He raised a quizzical eyebrow at Krysty, who shrugged.

The Russian opened his left palm and tapped it with the claws of his right, shouting the same word.

"Money," Rick finally said faintly. "We never figured on... He wants some bread for pulling the tooth, Ryan. What the... What fuckin' steps do we take now, Ryan?"

"Long ones! Go!"

"AGAINST ALL REGULATIONS and orders of the transport department, the driver had left his wag unlocked with the engine running. He has been subsequently arrested and will be charged with offences under sections..."

Major-Commissar Gregori Zimyanin tutted and laid the typed report on his desk, looking up at Alicia Andreyinichna. "So many facts and so few of them of any inter-est to me."

He skipped a few lines of coded letters and numbers. The fate of the wretched wag driver was of no concern to him.

"It goes on, "The three perps broke away and escaped in the above-mentioned wag. One seemed ill and was helped by the tall woman with the red hair, hair that

I must report was the reddest it has been my privilege to see. I conducted an investigation into the crowd and could not find anyone who would admit to ever having seen hair of such a bright hue. One man, whose details are appended below, said at first that it was not the reddest hair he had ever seen. Sub-sequent and diligent inquiries revealed he was color-blind and thought that spring grass was also red. By the ham-mer and the anvil!"

For a second time the crinkled, recycled folder smacked on his desk. The woman took a nervous step backward. There were so many rumors about Gregori Zimyanin and the barbaric easterly wilderness where he had made his bubble reputation.

"Never have I seen a man who will not use ten words when he can make do with a hundred. But, despite all of... there is still much here. Again, on the southerly and westerly edge of our city. Again three strangers. This time sounding like the three that the kulak encountered. The same dark glasses. Described again and again in statement after... Red hair. And this man who has one eye, when most show a preference toward a pair." It was an at-tempted joke, but Alicia Andreyinichna was too fright-ened of him to notice. For this was a new and a different Major-Commissar Zimyanin.

There was a fire smoldering in the eyes. Twice already she had seen the way his face turned to the long sniper's rifle hung upon the office wall, as though he wanted to take it down and go rushing out after this mysterious trio.

"And he is also missing a tooth. Who is he? Who is the woman? The sickly second man? They draw so much at-tention to themselves rather than pay the peasant a hand-ful of copper. The witnesses mostly say they feared them. Why do they...? Ah, there is something here, little one."

He got up and paced across to the map, his boot heels clicking on the floor. His finger darted out and stabbed at the name of Peredelkino, hesitated, then moved again and hovered over Nikulino.

"The market was here? Yes. Pins, Alicia An-dreyinichna. Little flags. Let us plot our strangers and see where they have come from and where they are going."

While the clerk bustled out to her office, the sec officer stared blankly out the window at the spring day. But his thoughts were slipping back, however absurdly, to a hunt over packed snow and ice. And some Yanks, one of whom—

The phone tinkled uncertainly and Alicia Andreyinichna picked it up. After a few words that he couldn't catch she came back.

"They've found the wag."

"Where?"

"Ramenki. There." She pointed a mile or so farther in from the outer suburbs.

"Ah, good, good. Very good. Now, the colored flags."

While she rummaged through her desk, Zimyanin gazed at the map, smiling to himself. His lips moved. "Thank you for giving me that information. It was most useful. I shall offer you a gratuity for your help, if you do not find such a thing offensive."

His secret language practice was interrupted as Alicia returned.

"Here." She handed him a dozen or so pins with little colored squares of paper attached.

He took them and looked again at the map. "Peredelkino. There. Then where the old man and his cart saw... good. Then the market and the escape in the wag. Finally where it was found dumped by them. Good."

"Is there anything else, Comrade Major-Commissar?" she asked.

"A thread or some cotton."

He waited until she reappeared, giving him a length of dark blue cotton. He tied it neatly around the most south-erly flag, looped it around the next one and the next

then adjusted it around the last little flag. The line wasn't straight, but it definitely showed an unmistakable progression. Zimyanin extended the remains of the thread in the same direction and nodded to the girl.

"Yes. See, Alicia Andreyinichna. Whoever they are, they are coming our way. We must prepare to greet them."

Chapter Seventeen

BACK AT THE BIG HOUSE the three men waited for the others to return. In their planning discussions Ryan had suggested that if all went very well, they might possibly return within a week or so.

The same meals of smoked fish and dried meat began to get very boring after the first day, and with the rise in temperatures the food began to smell. So Jak took Doc on hunting expeditions along the trail by the side of the stream to scavenge around the edges of the small hamlet in the trees.

They went out either early in the morning or late in the evening. J.B. would watch them move off into the half light as he leaned against the empty window frame on the second floor, the slight figure of the boy, his stark white hair flowing about his narrow shoulders like living spray and Doc, stumping along after him, the ferrule of his sword-stick rapping on the stones of the path.

While they were gone, the Armorer would sometimes climb to the ruined loft and slip through the hidden door and go down the spiral staircase. He'd wander silent and alone through the chattering consoles, pausing to wonder at the supernatural strength that had enabled Krysty Wroth to devastate the lock. It had saved their lives by freeing the gateway door, but also trapped them in the middle of a hostile continent.

By the time he returned to the first floor, Jak and Doc would be on their way back from the miserable ville.

To steal from a small community was always danger-ous. If too much was taken, the locals would take the trou-ble to hunt you down.

Jak was very clever at it. He'd returned to the house with a sack containing eggs, potatoes and other root vegeta-bles. A few slices of meat hacked off a ham dangling in a barn helped to complement their meals.

Doc kept smiling at the boy's cunning.

"Upon my soul, he is such a rascalion. When we took the meat and the eggs, he stole more than we have brought with us and left a clear trail to an outlying cabin, deliber-ately dropping a couple of eggs and a slice of ham so the owner would follow the tracks and suspect his neighbor. And we would thus escape quite free of any taint."

J.B. was pleased with that. But the arrival of Jak and Doc the following evening with a small dog in their sack didn't please him. Not at all.

"Give it to me and I'll break its neck. Quick and easy. Won't hurt it."

Doc held the shivering little animal against his chest, looking down at the damp nose and worried eyes. "I re-gret, my dear John Barrymore, that I would attempt to prevent you from doing that."

"What?"

"I believe that you heard me clearly."

"Stop me?"

"Yes."

J.B. shook his head. "Doc, you are one double-cute old bastard. Stop me! Fine. Keep the mongrel. But if there's a moment that the dog risks us, I'll chill it soon as look at it. Your responsibility, Doc. Yours."

* * * * *

"Let us help you. Fireblast!" Ryan's temper was beginning to flare out of control. Rick's wallowing self-pity put them all in danger. If one of the many sec patrols saw them, they'd stop. Rick was in no shape to try to speak Russian to them, and that would be that for them all. "Get up or I'll hurt you."

"Kick a man when he's down, eh, Ryan? Come on, man. Leave me. We're in the bottom of the ninth. Seconds to the gun. Near the tape. One last free throw." He stopped and shook his head, the tiredness overwhelming him, the pet-tish anger gone. "Bend down, Ryan, and listen."

"What?"

"Bend down. Please, Ryan. Krysty?"

"Yeah?"

"Give us a minute, will you?"

"Sure." She walked a few steps away, looking up and down the tree-lined avenue, finding it almost unbelievable that this was Russia. This was Moscow. These houses had been homes in the year 2001, filled with families. Then the nukes had come, coughing out their neutron sleep. And the world had died. Behind her, Ryan had knelt in the dusty road, head down, listening to Rick Ginsberg.

"Go on, Ryan," the freezie whispered, breathing hoarsely.

"Gonna tell me why? "

"I'm sort of... ashamed."

Ryan couldn't hide his surprise. "Why? What have you...?"

"My sickness. When I'm real tired like now and I lose control of my muscles and... Hell's bells, Ryan! Can't you guess? I've shit myself. Couldn't help it. Gotta clean my-self. Won't take that long. Find a house and look for me. I'll make it."

"If I had a handful of jack for every man and woman I know that shit themselves, I'd be the richest baron in the Deathlands. Sure. Go ahead, Rick. We'll wait for you up there."

"Don't tell Krysty."

"Sure."

But he told her anyway. Why not?

MAJOR-COMMISSAR ZIMYANIN wasn't the happiest of sec men. The message was unequivocal, signed in red ink with a scrawled, testy signature that had creased and nearly torn the paper: Marshal of Internal Security, Josef J. Siraksi, one of the top-ranking officers within the Party and a man tipped, when his turn came around and he lived long enough, for the supreme position of leader.

Request denied. Insufficient evidence of any security risk. Int-Sec forces will maintain normal holding and patrol patterns. If felt necessary, then descriptions of the three suspects (the word was heavily underlined) may be circulated on condition yellow. But no higher.

There was a postscript in the marshal's own hand. "Do not look for terrorists beneath every stone, Comrade Ma-jor-Commissar. Moscow is not the Kamchatka."

"Your advice is much appreciated, my dear sir, and I shall follow it to the letter," Zimyanin said, having first checked the phrase he wanted in his battered phrase

book.

He made sure that the door was firmly closed between his office and that of Alicia Andreyinichna. Then he stood up, face tight with anger, and walked to the window to look out over the bleak prospect, toward the shapeless worm of the Moscow River. He pressed his lips to the glass, whispering his rage.

"May rad cancer rot them all. May their wives fuck pigs. May they fall with their asses bleeding fire. May their noses rot and..." That brought him to another idea. "Aliev," he murmured.

The tracker could hunt a flea through a sandstorm.

"I want Aliev on twenty-four-hour standby!" he shouted at the closed door, and heard the young woman's muffled squeak of assent.

He looked out the window again. "Get my wag ready from transport requisition. I'm tired of this stuffy office. I'm going out to taste the air and see what I can see."

Chapter Eighteen

RICK HAD RECOVERED a little after a decent night's sleep. The twitching of the muscles in his arms and legs had eased, but he still complained of a pins-and-needles sensation in his fingers and toes. And as they ate sparingly of their shrinking food supplies, he was clearly having problems swallowing. Twice he gagged on the strips of dried meat, reaching for the canteen to wash the blockage out. He managed a weak smile.

"Sorry, guys. One of the problems with ALS is that it eventually hits all of your muscles. That includes the ones that do the swallowing for you." His voice was

croaking, the words slightly slurred and stretched. Rick was also conscious of that. "Speaking gets tougher, too. Once I'm warmed up I shouldn't be so bad."

It would take some time for any of them to become warm. During the night the temperature had dropped sharply, and there was ice on the insides of the few unbro-ken windows in the house where they'd slept.

When Ryan looked out across the bleak suburbs of Moscow he saw a dusting of snow coating the surrounding roofs and chimneys. A small lake set among trees on the far side of the road was covered by a gray sheet of ice.

While Krysty and Rick sat talking quietly together, Ryan climbed up to the elegant staircase to the top floor of the house and found a small room that faced northeast. The door stuck and he had to set his shoulder to it. The lock snapped as it opened inward.

The corpse that lay on the narrow single bed had almost certainly been there for a hundred years. Untouched and undisturbed, the dry air within the room slowly turned the remains into a leathery, mummified length of brown sin-ews and pale bone.

Ryan wasn't particularly surprised or even particularly interested. There were millions of houses throughout Deathlands that had remained virtually undamaged by the nukings. The Russians had also been well supplied with neutron-type missiles, which slew the living, but left all structures standing. In his life Ryan had seen uncountable corpses like the one on the bed.

The room contained little: a table in one corner, with a wad of folded paper supporting a broken leg; a few dust-dry Russian paperback books that crumbled in Ryan's fin-gers when he tried to open them; a vase holding some frag-ile dried flowers; a wardrobe, door ajar, revealing the ragged remains of the dead person's clothes; and two pairs of boots on the floor. Ryan picked one up, trying to guess whether the corpse had been male or female, but the boots were of an indeterminate middle size. A single golden ring glistened in the gristly remains of the right ear, and a cheap metal digital watch circled the left wrist. The person had been wearing blue jeans and a shirt of some sort.

The skin had dried over the bones, tight, like stretched leather, and the skull lolled to the right, toward the door as if the body waited patiently for a visitor who was a little late.

On the floor on the far side of the bed was a white enamel bowl, stained and crusted, black around its bottom. Again, it was something Ryan Cawdor had seen many times before: a victim of neutron bombing, dying, guts torn, brain reeling, had crawled back to its lair to die. Retching, the victim had brought up blood and dark bile. He had been unable to eat, teeth loosened in bleeding gums; his sight had dimmed and his skin had erupted. The bodily functions all failed.

The empty round bottle of dark green glass clutched in the skeletal fingers and the water glass on the bedside table told their own story of a last and merciful release from the endless suffering.

Ryan looked out the window.

The ground sloped toward what Rick had said was the Moscow River. It marked the inner ring of the old city. Beyond that he could see a haze of smoke, and a variety of buildings looming through it. Ryan tried to open the window, managing only a couple of inches. But the fresh air cleared away the musty smell of old, dry death and replaced it with the scent of hundreds of wood fires as the citizens of the ville fought the last desperate troops of General Winter.

THEY LEFT the security of the house and began to move slowly through the streets, making sure they were well wrapped in their furs. Everyone else out and about that morning was dressed the same.

Ryan's biggest worry was trying to figure out where they might find the tools they needed.

He'd warned Rick that if the right opportunity came along, the freezie would have to risk his fragile Russian and ask some questions.

By a stroke of good luck, their opportunity did come along in the shape of a stout, middle-aged woman pushing a squeaking baby carriage with odd-sized wheels. As

she walked toward the three friends one of the wheels simply rolled off and the carriage lurched to one side, nearly tip-ping the red-faced infant onto the sidewalk.

Ryan snatched the wheel as it bowled past him, stepping in quickly and smiling reassuringly at the woman. He prayed to himself that Rick was in at his heels to pick up any linguistic fastballs. Ryan saw immediately that a split pin hadn't been inserted properly and it took only a few seconds to carry out the simple repair.

The woman said something to him, but he didn't look up from the job, whistling tunelessly to himself. He heard Rick's voice speaking slow, halting Russian.

Ryan straightened, steadying himself on the freezie's shoulder. "Ask where we can find tools," he hissed.

"Have done," was the reply. "Now shut the fuck up, Ryan."

Ryan did what the man said and stood patiently with Krysty, trying to prevent the woman from seeing his face too clearly without appearing to be actually hiding it.

Eventually, with much nodding and smiling, the woman went on her way, the infant in the carriage gazing solemnly at the three strangers. As soon as she was out of earshot, Ryan and Krysty began to pump the freezie.

"Well?"

"Yeah. Good."

"What'd she say?"

"How the weather had taken a turn for the much colder."

Krysty tapped him warningly on the cheek with her fin-ger. "Come on, Rick. You know what we want to hear."

But he was determined to relish his moment. "She said what pretty hair you had,

Krysty. Said she hadn't seen a color like that since—" He broke off when he saw the light of anger beginning to flare in Ryan's eye. "All right, all right. But she was amazed at your stopping to help her with that broken wheel. I said we were strangers on a visit to the great city of Moscow that our fathers and our fathers' fa-thers had told us so much about. That kind of stuff."

"Good," Ryan said.

"She started off on a long spiel about how in the old days, before what she called the long grayness, Moscow had been the center of the world. Mentioned Yanks and nukes. At least I think that was what she was saying, but she had a heavy accent and I didn't get all of the words. Seems the middle was wasted. Totally. Just rubble. She said rats lived there, but I think she meant something more than rats. And she bitched about gangs of kids running around for the Party and killing anyone they didn't like the look of."

"Yeah," Krysty said quietly.

"I kind of got the feeling that there's sec men all around, the nearer you get to the middle. She used a phrase that means something like thick as blowflies on horse shit. Then I said that the ville I came from needed some good tools, and I asked where we should go."

"And... ? Come on, Rick. She could whisk on us to the next sec man she sees. We gotta get moving away from here."

"Sure, sure. Don't get ink on your ceedee, Ryan. Just take it easy. She says there are places only a quarter mile or so from here. As far as I could understand she says there are places you can kind of hire tools, and one or two where you can buy them. But she said that the price was..." He stopped and rubbed his forehead. "She used some expres-sion that meant, like the sun and the stars came cheaper than some of the prices they charged for these tools."

"Gaia! We already had trouble once over being jack-short," said Krysty. "Looks like we need to get us some rubles."

Ryan shook his head. "Difficult, lover. Way Rick tells it, we'll need some heavy

jack. Have to thief it. Dangerous. Might as well steal the tools. Mebbe less risk."

"Still could use some cash," Rick said. "Buy food and stuff."

Ryan nodded. "Yeah, makes sense. Find someone to roll for small change."

Rick grinned. "That's an expression I haven't heard in an age, Ryan. Small change. That current Deathlands slang?"

"No. Got it from an old song somebody on War Wag One used to sing. Song about someone called Small Change getting himself rained on with his own .38. I always liked it. Remembered the words. Found out they meant a hand-ful of low-jack."

Krysty looked up and down the quiet side street. "Got a feeling, guys. Time to move on from here."

Around the next corner they walked straight into a large sec patrol, stopping everyone who tried to pass.

THE WOMAN with the baby carriage reported the three strangers as soon as she was able to find a public phone that hadn't malfunctioned. Fortunately for Ryan, Krysty and Rick, that took her nearly an hour. Then the baby was bawling so loudly that she had to stop and feed it before making the call to the headquarters of Internal Security.

By the time the message had filtered on through the various levels of bureaucratic incompetence and reached Major-Commissar Gregori Zimyanin on his crackling pocket radio, the three strangers were long gone and it was near evening.

Zimyanin wasn't pleased.

RYAN AND KRYSTY played mute, shuffling their boots in the slush and mud, gazing vacantly around. Both had their trigger fingers locked in place on their

blasters under the furs.

Even without Rick's whispered, worried translation, it was fairly obvious what was going on.

There had been no warning, just a line of men in dark maroon uniforms, some with rifles slung over their shoulders, blocking off the street. For a razored microsecond Ryan considered their chances of turning and making a break for it. His mind told him that he and Krysty could almost certainly have made it, with the maze of derelict buildings and overgrown gardens. In the same instant he knew that it would mean abandoning Rick to definite arrest.

"Cool. If we have to chill them, then we take out as many as we can," he had time to hiss to the other two.

But he quickly saw why they'd been stopped, why every-one out walking that morning along that particular street was being stopped. The melting snow had flooded storm culverts, and a wide drainage ditch had overflowed, leaving a spreading pool of filthy, freezing water seeping over the road. With the exception of the very elderly or young children, everyone was directed to a flat-topped wag piled high with shovels, picks and forks.

Nobody tried to resist the armed militia. They simply took the tools that they were given and plodded into the water, above the knees, and shoveled the icy sludge from the ditch. The three friends joined them.

"This is fucking crazy," Rick muttered. "This wasn't what I was supposed to do—ending my days in a shit-filled river in Moscow! Listen, Ryan. I tell you I can't do this. You and Krysty leave me. Go for it and have a dry martini in Harry's Bar up on Fourth Avenue."

"Keep your mouth shut and stay on the far side of me. Go through the motions of digging, and I'll try and cover for you. But don't try to talk, Rick."

Fortunately for all of them the work took only a few minutes.

A ragged cheer went up as a skinny young woman heaved out a length of wire netting, tangled with weeds and torn plastic. Immediately there was a bubbling surge of water, and everyone scrambled hastily out of the ditch. Krysty grabbed Rick's arm and hauled him with her, slipping in the stinking mud and nearly falling. Once the blockage was cleared, the water drained away quickly, seeping off the road. Everyone shuffled to the wag and returned their shovels, nodding solemnly to one another. The sec men were smiling, one of them kissing the skinny woman on both cheeks and slapping her on the shoulders. A sour-faced young officer beckoned her over and counted out a number of silver and copper coins into her hand. The rest of the crowd looked enviously at her reward.

She set off alone, down a winding side street. Ryan beckoned to the other two. "There goes our jack. Come on."

THE RUSSIAN WOMAN never knew what hit her. Krysty walked quickly past, overtaking her, then turned suddenly with a bright and friendly smile. The girl returned her smile, head slightly to one side as she waited to see what Krysty wanted.

Moving soft as a midnight shadow, Ryan glanced around once, making sure the road was deserted. He stepped in and hit her a clubbing blow with the edge of his clenched fist, just beneath the left ear. He caught her as she dropped like a rock to the uneven sidewalk.

"Jesus, Ryan!" Rick protested. "You really have to...?"

"Yes, friend," Ryan snarled, suddenly angered. "Yeah, I did have to."

"She'll be fine in a few minutes," Krysty said reassur-ingly. "Ache in the head and empty in the pockets. Better than being dead."

Rick didn't reply. He hobbled down the street, leaning on his bamboo cane, not looking back at the other two.

"It's like being with a dumb kid," Ryan muttered. "A big dumb kid."

ZIMYANIN RETURNED to his office and worked late that afternoon. Reports of street muggings rarely came to his desk, since they were a matter for Highway Incidents. But an alert officer had seen Zimyanin's circulated memo and had phoned in the report.

"How pleasant to again make your acquaintance," the pockmarked man said, tugging absently at his drooping mustache. He shook his head as he returned *The English Tongue for the Benefit of the Russian Gentleman Abroad* to his drawer.

The assailants were "a mean-looking man, with only one eye, a tall, attractive woman with very red hair and a shambling, crippled man wearing thick eyeglasses." They were the same people he was seeking. Now they were closer to the sensitive center of the ville.

Chapter Nineteen

"READ IT BACK to me, Alicia Andreyinichna, if you would?"

"Are you sure that... ?"

"I am sure. I am also sure that it will be many long winter's days before you rise to Clerk First Class, Alicia Andreyinichna, unless you learn quickly to do what you're told." Seeing the way the girl's face dropped, sensing her disappointment, Zimyanin pasted on his best smile. "I am sorry, child. I had a brief falling-out with my wife, Anya. By the hammer and the anvil! She has a mouth sharper than the best polar bear trap! I should not take it out on you."

"I only worried in case Comrade Marshal Siraksi reproved you for stepping beyond your commission. That was all."

"Perhaps he will. Let us send the letter to him and find out, with copies to all members of the Internal Security Presidium."

She cleared her throat. "Having noted your last communication, I respectfully point out to the Comrade Marshal that there have been new sightings of the three mysterious outlanders. Now there is definite crime, proved: an assault on a decent and honest citizen of Ramenki, and theft. Who are they, Comrade Marshal? Why do they come here? Only one speaks our tongue, and that badly and with an accent that nobody can place with any surety. I repeat my request for the condition to move from yellow to orange at once, and that condition-red reserves be warned.' He might agree...Gregori," she said, blushing at her bold-ness in using his first name.

"Add one more line, Alicia, which may cause him to foul his breeches."

"What?" Her pencil was paused over her ring-bound notepad.

"I have reason to believe that these three strangers might be American terrorists, bound on violence and sabotage. Go on, girl. Write that."

For a moment he genuinely thought that Clerk Second Class Alicia Andreyinichna was going to faint dead away.

JAK WENT OUT ALONE the next morning to scout for food, only to find that the small ville had taken some precau-tions: a deadfall trap had been cleverly concealed among the woods, as well as a couple of spring traps that fired sharpened lengths of pine at anything that triggered them. There was even a massive old iron bear trap with jagged, broken teeth. If Doc had been with the boy, there was every chance that he would have stumbled over one of the devices.

The villagers had a guard out, though the middle-aged man playing the part had fallen asleep against the wall of a hut, near the smoldering remains of a banked fire. Now that they knew that someone from the outside was stealing from the ville, there was no point in planting any more red herrings. Jak went in, lifted as much food as he could possibly carry and left the place in the opposite direction. He splashed through the stream and then dou-bled back to throw off any potential

pursuers.

He reported the change to J.B., who agreed it was an ominous development. They decided that they would now have to keep a constant and careful watch, splitting shifts with Doc. The old-timer would do two hours at a time, and Jak and J.B. would alternate four hours each. "Closing in," J.B. said.

IT WAS A BLEAK DAY, with low clouds scudding on the teeth of a biting easterly wind. Flakes of snow mingled with pat-tering hailstones, making walking a bitterly unpleasant chore.

Rick Ginsberg had suffered from a kind of fit during the night, crying out so loudly that Ryan had considered knocking him out. He eventually settled for pressing his hand down over the gaping mouth to muffle the sounds.

The freezie's wasted muscles had jerked and twitched, sending him thrashing about on the dusty boards of the third-story room in the abandoned house.

They had managed to get across the Moscow River the previous evening, over a bridge that seemed to have col-lapsed and been rebuilt a dozen times. The river itself was a ponderous gray snake, swollen with the spring meltwater. It surged at the piles of the bridge, carrying all manner of detritus. Tree trunks, scoured of their branches and bark, gleaming like huge skinned eels, rolled their way to-ward the distant ocean. A dead cow drifted past them, legs stiffly in the air, its bloated belly keeping it afloat.

The house they'd found was more ravaged than any of those a mile farther out in the 'burbs.

As Ryan had suspected, the sec patrols were thicker on the ground. Some traveled in open-topped multiwheel wags and some on foot in groups of three or four. By keeping a careful watch around, the three friends had managed to avoid any more direct confrontations with the sec men.

Rick's seizure lasted nearly ten minutes and left him drained of energy. It was obvious to both Ryan and Krysty that he wasn't going to be able to keep moving

for very much longer. Already Ryan had decided that they would have to steal a wag to transport the freezie and any tools to their hiding place out in the wastelands.

"Better leave me here, Ryan. You and Krysty go look for what we want."

"It's no go, Rick," she replied. "Once we got the stuff we can high-gear it out of the ville back to the others. Un-til then we have to keep you with us. One question from a sec man and we could all be on the first wag to prison. You have to really try, Rick."

"Sound like my gran. Best foot forward. Shoulder to the wheel. Chest out. Feet together. Take it on the chin. Pick up the beat. And don't forget your fog, your amphet-amines and your pearls!" He started to cry. "Oh, this is such bullshit, isn't it? I didn't want to... I'm sorry, guys. Real sorry. I'll be fine when I get..."

Ryan laid a hand on the sobbing man's shoulder. "Let it out, Rick. You have to keep on. That's what makes the difference. It's going on when you don't reckon you can. Come on. Let's go."

Once they got outside, huddling into their furs against the dreadful weather, Rick had another brief crisis when he couldn't recall the woman's instructions to find the places selling tools. He took several deep breaths, turned away from the others then faced them again with a broad smile. "It's okay," he said. "I remember now. Past the ruins of the sports stadium, then hang a right past a gas depot. On by a market and there's a line of white buildings."

"Right. Keep together. Rick, keep watching for any sec men. Don't forget. We're outlanders and me and Krysty can't talk or hear."

"Sure. The woman also said something about looking out for some sort of a... I don't know. She used a word, *pamyatnik*. Means a memorial of some kind. She said it was good for outlanders to see and remember the struggle and the fight for eternal vigilance." He smiled and shook his head. "At least I think that's what she said. You gotta remember it's around a hundred years since I learned Russian and it's gotten a bit rusty since then."

They soon came across another compulsory work gang, but Krysty spotted the men early enough for them to duck back up a side alley and loop around the detail. The tumbled wreckage of what had once been a massive sports arena told them that they were moving in the right direction. At last, in the distance, they could see the line of white buildings that the woman had described to Rick.

"That's it," Ryan said. "All we got to do now is to go on in and pick out whatever it is that we need."

"What's that?" Krysty asked, pointing to where a long line of people seemed to be waiting patiently around one side of an ancient, yellow-stone building, dotted with ornate windows and a carved portico.

"There's a sign," Ryan said.

"Where?" Rick blinked. "Got this goddamned sleet all over my glasses."

"Above the main door. It's in that Russkie writing. Can't make it at all."

"Wait." Rick fumbled under his fur coat for something to wipe the smeared lenses, finding a length of stained cotton waste. He bent over and sheltered the glasses from the wind, putting them back on his beaky nose when they were clear. "Oh," he finally said. "I see."

"What?"

"Pamyatnik."

Krysty gripped him by the arm, making him wince. "Just tell us, Rick. That was the word you said before, isn't it?"

"Yeah. Now I know what it means. I was nearly right before. Memorial. I was real close to it."

"And?"

"Amazing. It's a sort of museum about the struggle of the Russian people against the warmongering United States."

Ryan looked at the freezie, wondering if he was joking. He saw by the expression on his pale face that he wasn't. "Kind of museum of the last war, you mean?" Ryan was unable to conceal his own utter disbelief. "Let's all go and take a look." Ryan glanced at Krysty, seeing his own inter-est reflected in her face.

She shrugged. "Hell, why not? Let's tag on the end of the line."

THE TALL FLANK of the old building sheltered the queue from the worst of the wind. As they all shuffled slowly on-ward, various street traders came along the line offering various kinds of food and drink. All three of the friends were tempted by the delicious smells that came from the little carts.

It took the companions the better part of an hour to get close to the front of the line. Every now and again a bored female sec guard marched slowly along the line. Ryan noticed that nobody would meet her eye, so he did the same, staring at his feet, hoping that she wouldn't notice the steel-toed combat boots that peeked from under the trailing hem of the stolen fur coat.

"What'll be inside?" Rick whispered. "Pictures of cap-tured nukes?"

Ryan shook his head. "Wait and see. I just wonder why so many folks are lined up in shit weather like this."

Rick tapped the young man in front of them on the shoulder and asked him a question. The Russian looked puzzled and Rick spoke quickly, gesturing with his hands. The young man nodded and smiled, speaking quickly to Rick, who smiled in return, showing his understanding of what was being said.

Once the Russian had turned away again, Rick gave them a hasty translation. "First off, he was kind of curious how come we didn't know why so many were standing in line. Like *everyone* knew that, dummy! I said we were outlanders. That was okay. Seems you get no choice. Everyone in the ville has to come here

every three months to get the date stamped on a card. They have to turn up."

"Card?" Ryan asked worriedly.

"Yeah, but relax. You don't have to show it. Guy said, what was the point? Nobody came unless it was their day."

Ryan pulled the freezie nearer to him. "Listen, Rick and listen hard. You don't ask that kind of question unless I tell you."

"Sure. But it's all right."

"Mebbe. Mebbe not. We keep as quiet as we can. Don't draw attention. Right?"

Rick nodded. "Sure. Read you loud and clear, boss. From now on it's low-profile city."

MAJOR-COMMISSAR ZIMYANIN had been allocated one of the better wags run by Internal Security. It had once been a Mercedes saloon, but the rear end had been crushed in an accident. The rebuilding had been done by various hands at various times and now little remained of the original auto. But it ran well and the heater worked.

Zimyanin was on his way to talk personally to one or two of the witnesses who'd seen the trio of strangers. The let-ter to the marshal had worked even more dramatically than he'd hoped.

The call had come through direct on Zimyanin's per-sonal sec line. He'd picked up the cracked Bakelite re-ceiver and held it to his ear without saying anything, guessing who his caller might be.

"Are you there?"

"Yes, Comrade Marshal?"

"Your letter! Have you lost your mind, Major?"

Zimyanin didn't reply for several seconds. Then, "No."

"No! Is that all you have to say?"

Again a careful pause. "Yes."

"But, but... You can't... Do you realize what a letter like this means?"

"It means I believe we may have a full condition red."

"Americans! There hasn't been any proved evidenced of Americans within our country for more years than I can recall."

"I think they are here now."

"Proof?"

Zimyanin smiled. It was the concession, the sign of weakening that he had guessed would eventually appear. Siraksi couldn't take the chance, however remote, that the suspicion might prove correct.

"Once I take them, you will have the proof, Comrade Marshal."

"If you do not take them?" The senior officer was slowly recovering his control. "Then what?"

"Then you'll be correct and I will not, Comrade Mar-shal."

There was a long, hanging silence. "You think you know them?"

For the first time, Zimyanin hesitated for a moment before replying. "I think it is possible that I have once met that one-eyed man and the woman."

"Your adventure in the Kamchatka? The same man, Comrade Major-Commissar? Could they have invaded us from the far northeast and trekked all the way to Mos-cow?" The voice was considering its own question. "Yes, yes, it is possible. You have my authority to go to condition orange and put any sec forces you need on red standby. Where are you going to search for them?"

Zimyanin was going to play a hunch. "Their trail leads directly to the heart of the ville, Comrade Marshal. Through Govorovo and Nikulino, into Ramenki and up to the river. I suddenly thought what lay in their path, what they might not be able to resist. You know?"

"What?"

"Pamyatnik," Zimyanin told him,

"Of course. Yes, of course. Brilliant, my dear boy. Brilliant! The Museum of the Peoples' Struggle Against the Oppressors of the United States! Yes, I'm sure you're right."

"I'm going there myself."

RYAN, KRYSTY AND RICK had finally reached the front of the seemingly endless lineup, enduring the biting cold and the flurries of fresh snow, as well as the hectoring and bullying of the patrolling female sec guards.

Just as he passed under the portico of the building, Ryan glanced out into the wide street. A maroon passenger wag drove by and slowed down. The passenger was speaking to the driver, a uniformed man, bareheaded, totally bald, with a long drooping mustache.

Ryan was struck by the man's close resemblance to the Russian they'd met in Alaska, though the name eluded him.

"Zimyanin," Ryan finally whispered.

Chapter Twenty

IT WAS one of the most amazing buildings that Ryan Cawdor had ever seen.

Over the years he'd watched a number of scratched old vids, and some of them had been set in big churches and huge, stately edifices, the like of which no longer existed in the Deathlands. The anti-American memorial was that kind of building. Though it did show some evidence of the sky-blackening nuking the ville had suffered, it was still in in-credibly good shape.

The entrance hall soared several stories high, with a vaulted roof, one corner patched and marred with a tangle of metal scaffolding. Several of the windows on the north-ern flank had been destroyed, but some of the others re-mained intact. Panes of colored glass were bound about with lead strips. Despite the dull weather outside, the stained glass glowed with the richness of the hues—azures and scarlets, deep cobalts and pale greens.

The pictures were what Ryan recognized as being reli-gious subjects, though he'd always believed that the Rus-sians had been a godless people. Here were old men with snowy beards and circles of golden light around their heads, little babies in white robes, tiny silver wings sprouting from between their shoulders.

The sound of the villagers' shuffling feet echoed through the hollow mausoleum, like the faint clapping of an im-measurably distant host. Once they were inside, the pressure from the sec forces eased. The maroon uniforms were replaced by a dull green, worn by a number of elderly men and women who seemed to function as both ushers and guides. They shepherded the throng along the winding corridor, following the route marked out by a sequence of black arrows.

Overhead was a booming, crackling voice, so distorted by the echo that it was

barely possible to make out any words. Ryan looked inquiringly at Rick, who shrugged his shoulders. He put his head to one side and tried to concentrate, listening to the message repeating itself several times before he moved in close to Ryan and whispered in his ear.

"Yeah. It just welcomes us to the Memorial Exhibition, tells us to keep to the left and keep moving, not block corridors, where toilets are and... all that kind of stuff."

Krysty had been listening to Rick. "Where are they?" she asked.

"What?"

"The toilets, you stupe!"

"Oh. I think he said they were on this level, at the bottom of the main flight of stairs up into the first exhibition hall. Yeah. Look, there they are. See the signs?"

That was something that hadn't changed at all since before the long grayness.

Ryan and Rick waited together in the main hall while Krysty picked her way between the lines of people, vanishing into the doorway marked with a childlike drawing of a female figure.

"What kind of stuff's going to be in here?" Rick asked.

It was Ryan's turn to shrug. "Who knows? I guess there would have been a kind of American... what's the word I want?"

"Embassy?"

"Yeah. That's it. There'd have been one of them in the ville. Russkies could've raided things from there."

Rick nodded. "Guess so. Maybe some propaganda movies and posters as well. It

seems to me as if this place is almost like a shrine. There's sort of a religious feel to it."

"Like a church, you mean?"

"Yeah. But instead of being dedicated to love and hu-manity, this looks like it's probably devoted to keeping the flame of hatred still burning bright and hot."

They were talking quietly, trying to keep out of people's way. But one of the old men came up to them and said something sharply, pointing to the flight of stairs and the first of the arrows.

Rick nodded and pointed to the sign for the ladies' rest room, grinning at the usher and making a, "Women! What can you do about them?" sort of gesture with his hands. The Russian's face cracked into an understanding smile and he walked away, leaving them alone.

At the top of the stairs Ryan could just make out some huge black-and-white portraits, at least thirty feet high. They'd been daubed with great smears of bright vermilion paint, looking like fresh blood.

"Who're they? I recognize that one in the middle. Ken-nedy, isn't it?"

The freezie peered up. "My eyes aren't so good today, Ryan. Yeah, that's Jack. And there's Teddy, Harry, Dwight, Richard and... and all of 'em."

"Who's that fat, ugly one at the end? With the kind of scar on his cheek?"

"You're kidding me, Ryan."

"No. So much red paint I can't recognize it at all."

Rick shook his head. "Him of all men! So soon you forget! After the nineties and all the political in-fighting..."

You know who suddenly came popping out of the closet like the old wooden nickel, don't you?"

Ryan looked again at the seamed face, the hanging jowls and the hunted, darting eyes. "You don't mean that...!"

"Yeah, who else?"

"But I thought there was some kind of—"

"Scandal?" The freezie grinned like a hungry wolf.

"Sure. Didn't he...?"

One of the elderly men in green uniforms was wander-ing toward them again and Ryan closed his mouth, pre-tending a sudden interest in the vaulted stucco of the high ceiling.

Krysty chose that moment to reappear, flashing a smile at him. "Hi, lover," she whispered. "Ready to go check out the show?" Arm in arm they moved slowly up the massive staircase, Rick panting at their heels, hanging on to the wide brass balustrade.

The arrows led them along the corridors, a part of the silent, shuffling throng of patient Russians. When they reached an exhibit, Rick would pause and gather his breath, translating what the captions and slogans said in a low voice.

It was a confusing blur of fact and fantasy. Ryan's own knowledge of the years immediately preceding sky-dark was limited to some old vids and a few crumbling tabloids that he'd seen among the ruins. Krysty was a little better in-formed, but Rick had lived it all and he was able to distin-guish for them what was true and what was not.

Much of the exhibit was in the form of posters, some of them running all the way from floor to ceiling. And there were whole rooms covered in painted slogans. Rick read them silently, occasionally reciting some part to the other two.

Once he shook his head and sighed. "Something's hap-pening here, but I don't know what it is, do you?"

In the center of the building was a huge atrium, with patched and broken skylights, and balconies ringing it at every level. Here they had a chance to snatch a breath and relax a moment. Most of the locals around them took the opportunity to smoke roll-ups, plucking them from pock-ets in their ragged furs and cupping them in their hands, like children breaking school rules.

"It's amazing," Rick said, glancing around to make sure nobody was close enough to overhear their conversation.

"Yeah. Figure we should be out and looking for the tools we want."

"Patience is the greatest of all virtues, Ryan, my friend. This is a once in a lifetime chance for me." He paused, continuing ruefully, "And you gotta remember I don't have all that much lifetime left."

"Is it just a way of keeping the old fires of hatred glow-ing?" Krysty asked. Ryan noticed that her sentient hair had curled in, tight and defensive, against her nape.

Rick sniffed. His face was pallid and there were dark rings around his eyes. "Yeah. The way they tell it, it was us that started the nuking. Sneak attack, like Pearl Harbor. Posters say that the whole of the North American conti-nent was vaporized and sank without a trace, no survi-vors, hundred percent chill. Zero. Zilch. All gone."

"But if their barons claim that everyone got chilled, why bother with all this shit?" Ryan waved his hand around the echoing hall. "What's the point of it, Rick?"

"The Party says remember. Says to remember is never to make the same mistakes again."

"What mistakes?" Krysty asked.

"Posters say that they tried for friendship in the eighties and into the nineties."

"True?" Ryan asked.

"Sure. Called glasnost. But peace is a two-way street. We went along it, then the guys running the store on Mockba Boulevard began to get cold feet. Folks in equivalent positions in the Pentagon got to feeling the same way. All downhill from there. Wrongs on both sides. Men with the guns had the loudest voices. I marched and demonstrated and all that stuff. It didn't make a hoot or a holler of difference. Cold got colder. Shutters fell and frontiers closed. Hell, you guys know the story. I guess we could open a place like this in the ruins of Washington and tell the same twisted truths and torn lies."

It was one of the longest speeches they'd ever heard Richard Neal Ginsberg make.

Ryan noticed that a slender woman in a green uniform was looking at them, head on one side, as if something about them rang some kind of bell for her. It was enough.

"Let's go," he said quietly, hand dropping automatically to the butt of the SIG-Sauer blaster.

They trailed on into the depths of the vast, rambling building.

OUTSIDE, Zimyanin had left his wag and walked briskly through the watery spring sunshine, up the stairs to the entrance of the museum. He showed his sec pass to the woman on the doors and explained his mission to her. She switched on her lapel voice-trans and passed the message about the three outlanders the sec force was to look for.

"One-eyed man, red-haired woman, one other male. Orders from—" Zimyanin interrupted her, and she altered what she'd been about to say. "Do not apprehend. Notify main sec control at front entrance."

"How many other exits, Comrade Sister?" he asked her.

She pointed them out to him on a faded map, beneath a worn sheet of clear plastic. Zimyanin looked carefully at it and nodded, snapping out orders to have all the exits covered.

"It will take several minutes, Comrade Major-Com-missar," she replied.

"Quick as you can. I do not think a few seconds one way or the other will make very much difference."

Which was one of the rare mistakes made by the stocky, pockmarked sec man.

ABOUT A HUNDRED YARDS AWAY, Ryan and the other two were staring disbelievingly at some glass cases in one of the halls.

Rick glanced around them, but nobody seemed very interested. Dust lay thick on the shelves, smudging the outlines of what was on them.

"Tools," Rick breathed. "Hell's bloody bells! Everything we could need."

"What's the notice say?" Krysty asked.

"Just that these were found in the imperialist's dacha in the country, and that they were used for purposes of espionage."

"Espionage?"

"Spying, Ryan. But they're mat-trans tools, just what we need to fix the doors. That movable wrench and those there, and that and that."

"Wouldn't like them all, would you?" Ryan whispered sarcastically.

"No. Just those five I pointed at."

"Attracting some attention, friends," Krysty whis-pered. "And I'm getting a bad feeling. Better move on. We could come back and lift this after dark. No sec locks anywhere."

"Who'd want to steal this old junk?" Rick asked, eyes wide with delight. "Just us."

They were near the end of the unguided tour, and they could actually taste fresh air after the humidity and stink of sweat and damp clothes. There seemed to be just one more room to visit. It had a large notice at its entrance, and they had become aware of a new liveliness among the Russians, all wearing smiles of anticipation.

"What's it say, Rick?" Ryan asked.

"Don't know."

"Guess?"

"It's something about a place where feelings can be shown, and patriotic anger demonstrated for the Party."

"Oh, Gaia!" Krysty breathed, first in line into the vast room, which displayed only a single glass case at its center.

The sides of the glass were slick with a torrent of human spittle, almost obscuring what rested inside the case—a tattered Stars and Stripes.

Chapter Twenty-One

THE SCENE HAD NO REALITY. Ryan recalled a dreadful nightmare that

the Trader had once shared with him.

"When I was a knee-high brat, I was in this shack in some frontier pest-hole ville. Looked out the window and I saw myself. But I was a real old man, stooped over and bent. White hair. Lined face. Dribbling eyes. What was so bad was that I had this vision that one day I'd be an old man, just like that. And I'd be outside a house in some frontier pest-hole ville. I'd look at the shack and see some-one at the window. A young kid's face, scared and horri-fied beyond any believing. And it'd be me."

Ryan had never forgotten that story, with its frightening and bitter flavor of unreality. That moment in the Moscow museum had that same appalling taste.

There was an armed guard at each corner of the case, watching each man and woman as they filed past. The line ran between faded crimson ropes that were hooked over metal stands, but it was moving fast and eager, jostling in the push and hurry to get to the front and have the mo-ment.

One by one they would pause in front of the scorched and ragged flag, hawking up saliva as they got ready, then spitting it out so that it splattered against the filthy glass, hanging there before sliding toward the shallow metal trough that ran all around the case.

"No," Rick said quietly, looking around for some means of escape.

"Yes," Ryan hissed. "Us getting chilled won't help Old Glory."

"Can't," the freezie insisted.

The one-eyed man reached out and gripped him by the arm *very* casually, fingers tightening like chromed steel clamps.

Rick whimpered, legs weakening, and he nearly fell. Only Ryan's hand held him upright. "Please," he begged.

"We go and we do it. Do it good. Then we get out. And we think of some way of

getting back in here, Rick. Un-derstand?"

"Yes, yes. Just let go of... Oh, that was real shitty."

"Saved three lives, friend. And one of them was mine."

"But not the flag," the freezie muttered. "That's the bottom of the fucking tube, Ryan."

"When we come back after the tools, lover," Krysty suggested, "mebbe we could collect the flag at the same time."

"Could be." Ryan nodded.

With the narrowed eyes of the guards scanning every-one's face, there was no way of cheating. Ryan swallowed hard as he neared the head of the line, feeling the dryness in his mouth. He eased Krysty ahead of him, staying close to Rick in case the freezie lost his nerve at the last mo-ment. If that happened, he'd already decided to push him aside, grab Krysty and make a run for it.

But the line moved so fast that the moment had come and gone almost before they realized it.

Ryan concentrated on looking at the flag. There was a large card notice, barely readable, which he assumed told the Russians where the Stars and Stripes had come from. By the burn marks along one ragged edge he guessed it could have been from the ruins of the U.S. Embassy in the ville.

Ahead of him, Krysty snarled, hawked and spit vigor-ously.

Rick hesitated for a cold fraction of a second, then managed a creditable amount of spittle. Ryan performed blankly and unemotionally, moving to follow the others across the hall toward what he guessed must be an exit.

Out of the corner of his eye he noticed one of the guards take the small black

voice-trans from his lapel and press it against his ear, obviously finding some difficulty in hear-ing what was said in the center of the echoing building and speaking urgently into it. He listened again, then snapped his head around, eyes raking the crowd.

Ryan knew.

One of the reasons he'd lived as long as he had in the Deathlands, on the sharp edge, was that he never ignored a hair-prickling feeling.

He moved a few steps ahead, collecting Rick with one hand, bumping into Krysty, brushing aside the angry mumbles from the people in the line.

"Think they got an ace on the line at us," he whispered. "'Out. Fast."

ZIMYANIN TAPPED his gloved fingers gently against the edge of the desk, his voice deceptively soft as he talked to the quivering official in charge of the museum.

"One minute, you say?"

"No more, Comrade Major-Commissar. I promise you of that."

Zimyanin nodded. "And your people are sure? Sure of these three?"

"Oh, yes. Yes indeed. Yes, there is no doubt of it, Com-rade Major-Commissar."

"My own patrols were on the streets. Threw up blocks. But no sign. Perhaps they are still in here? No?"

"No, Comrade Major-Commissar. We closed it imme-diately and it has been searched from top to bottom and from bottom to top and from side to side and from..." His voice faded and died as he realized he'd run out of op-tions.

"I believe you, Comrade."

The official was more terrified than he'd ever been of this bald man with the long mustache and eyes like chips of river ice who strutted in his office, his voice caressing like a silken whip. The room seemed too small, the air too thick and choking. The man wanted desperately to go to the rest room, but didn't dare to mention it.

Zimyanin ticked off the points. "Tough-seeming outlander. One eye. Tall woman with very red hair. A third man. Nobody noticed much about him. One woman said she thought he nearly fell over, and two of the visitors said they thought they heard the outlanders talking in—" he glanced down at his notes, "—ah, yes. Talking in a strange way. And they've vanished like smoke. Such a shame your communication system worked so slowly and so badly, Comrade. Such a great shame."

"Indeed, yes, Comrade Major-Commissar. I shall make sure it's improved."

"No."

"No?"

"No."

"But it is not good and you..." The words again drifted into stillness. The pressure on the official's bladder was becoming intolerable.

"You have good furs, Comrade?"

Was this a trick question? "I think so, Comrade Major-Commissar," he replied cautiously.

"Good. The winters out on the Kamchatka Peninsula are cold, Comrade. The summers are also cold. But the win-ters... ah, they are *very* cold."

"Why would... you don't surely... ?"

"It's bleak work scraping frozen shit out of the middens of the mutie camps, Comrade."

"But..."

Zimyanin rarely indulged himself in anything approach-ing a joke, but he was feeling good, certain now that his intuition had been correct. There *were* Americans in the ville. He would find them and capture them.

"Yes, Comrade, the middens. But you must look to the bright future."

"The future? Bright, Comrade Major-Commissar?"

"Yes. After ten years of good behavior they will allow you to use a brush."

It was only as the sec officer walked from the room that the official realized he had pissed himself.

"CLOSE ISN'T THE WORD, Ryan." The freezie panted, dou-bled over against a tumbled brick wall, fighting for breath.

"Then what is the word?" Ryan replied. "Don't see your problem, Rick. We got away with six or seven seconds to spare. Roadblocks came down and we were at least ten yards up the highway from them."

"How'd they get on the trail, lover?" Krysty asked, pushing back an errant fiery curl from over her right eye.

"I don't..." Ryan rubbed his finger along the side of his nose. "I just saw, when we were outside the main en-trance... I could have sworn on heart's blood that I saw that Russkie again."

"Who?"

"His name was Zimyanin, Gregori Zimyanin. Mean-eyed son of a bitch. Met him once. I'll tell you about it, Rick. Put you in the picture. If it was him, then it could mean trouble. He knows me, and he was some kind of sec offi-cer. Best hide up till dark. Make us some plans. Then move at night."

Chapter Twenty-Two

"BALD-HEADED CRETIN!"

"True, dear Comrade Sister Anya. I can't deny it."

"Pock-faced imbecile!"

"No doubt at all, Comrade Sister Anya. Your vision is as sharp as ever."

"And stop agreeing with me!" Her voice was so shrill that Gregori Zimyanin feared that the window panes in their apartment would shatter.

"Whatever you say, Comrade Sister..."

The cheap mug his wife held, crudely painted with the words A Happy Memory of Leningrad, shattered against the wall a few inches from his head, splinters showering him. He winced away from his wife's raging fury.

"That was a gift from old Uncle Fyodor," he protested. "He would be so upset to think that we didn't treasure his kind present to us."

"Fuck Uncle Fyodor!" she screamed.

"If you wish me to, Comrade Sister Anya, though I think the old man might vigorously resist my advances."

For a wonderful moment he thought that his wife was going to fall stricken to the threadbare carpet. A vein throbbed at her temple, and she actually slapped herself on the forehead in her anger.

With a valiant effort of will Anya controlled herself. She stood staring him down, hands on her heavy, peasant's hips, eyes narrowed deep in the sweating slabs of her face.

"Gregori Zimyanin."

"Good." He gently clapped the tips of his fingers together. "After barely six weeks you have mastered my name."

"Six of the worst weeks of any woman's life. They have worn me to a shadow."

Despite the cold anger that surged through his body, Zimyanin couldn't help smiling at his wife's words.

"A shadow. A shadow that weighs the same as a loaded sec wag, wouldn't you say, Comrade Sister Anya? Huh?"

"My mother warned me."

"Ah, yes, your mother. The prize sow of Terechevo! You should have heeded her warnings, my dear wife, should you not?"

Anya Zimyanin owned a polished .32-caliber blaster, thrown together in one of the small industrial units around the back of the Museum of the Peoples' Struggle. And he'd even taught her how to use it. His own 9 mm Makarov was in its holster, which hung on the back of the door. But he had a slim-bladed skinning knife

sheathed at the small of his back.

The woman made an obscene gesture to her husband, using the little finger of her left hand, curving it as an in-dication of what she thought of his sexual prowess.

He replied in kind, carefully placing the tips of his mid-dle fingers together as well as the tips of his thumbs, creat-ing a large circle.

"Like a tunnel, dear Comrade Sister," he mocked.

"Better than a peeled shrimp, Comrade Brother Gregori."

It was stalemate, a Kiev Standoff as they called it in Russia.

He shook his head and turned away, intending to take a shower—if there was any warm water in their heater—when his wife delivered her parting salvo.

"You're a failure, husband, a failure and a shit-stinking coward." He turned to face her, eyes blank and emotion-less. Anya took a clumsy, stumbling step away from him, holding up a hand to ward off a blow that hadn't even been threatened.

"Slut," he whispered, his voice so quiet it barely dis-turbed the dusty air of the apartment. "Slattern. Whore. Bitch. There are many things that your tongue can slide to that I can ignore. But not *coward*. No, not that, dear Anya."

"I did not... Please, husband..." Her mouth was working in terror, her face becoming distorted with her own fear. Anya had been pleased enough when the sec officer had appeared in her social circle, less than two months earlier, with a reputation for bravery against undesirable social elements in the far, far east. Despite his slightly odd appearance, he had a definite charisma, an aura of some-thing different in the safe world of Moscow petty official-dom. She had set out to bed him and then wed him.

It had seemed a good idea at the time.

Not now.

A thin-bladed knife glittered in Zimyanin's long, strong fingers, held point upward.

"Not coward, wife."

"I beseech you, husband."

He nodded. "I have had many men—and women—beg to me." His eyes were gazing into some far-off time and place. Anya Zimyanin was more terrified than she had ever believed possible, knowing with an utter certainty that he was going to kill her.

"Anything?" she whispered, throat dry.

He paused. "What?"

"Anything."

"I don't hear you, Comrade Sister Anya. Say it again."

"Anything, Comrade Brother Gregori. I'll do anything if you don't cut me."

"I've been offered a lot of things, wife. But I've never been offered anything. Let's stand a while and think about that."

The dusk gathered strength outside their windows. In-side the apartment the husband and wife stood, six feet apart, time crawling past them. Zimyanin was calmer now, completely in control of himself and his surging tide of anger. He was certain now that he wouldn't butcher the large, ungainly woman in front of him.

Anya felt the tension slipping away and her breathing began to return to normal. But her husband checked it once more when he took a half step toward her and

spoke.

"Anything?" She nodded cautiously, fearful that her neck might snap if she moved too vigorously.

"Good. My men will call here if there's any news of our three visitors, so we have plenty of time. You and I have all the time in the world, my dear Anya. We can make a start now."

"A start, husband?"

Gregori Zimyanin smiled at her, very patiently. "Go into the kitchen, Anya. Put a large pan of water on to boil. Bring me the potato peeler, the roll of strong cord, your best darning needles, the short scissors with the serrated edge. I have my own knife."

"Then?" Tears bunched at the corners of her eyes.

"Then you may come in here. Remove all of your clothes." He paused. "And kneel down just in front of me. And then we shall begin."

For Anya Zimyanin, the night was both long and mem-orable.

Chapter Twenty-Three

FOR RYAN CAWDOR, the night was both busy and memo-rable. After their razor-edged escape from the museum, their flight had taken the companions around the rear of one of the single-story industrial units only a couple of blocks away. With the wails of sirens already ripping at the air, Ryan hadn't hesitated in setting his shoulder to the bolted door, springing the lock and knocking it back on

rusting hinges.

It had only taken moments for all three of them to slip inside, wedging the door closed again. There, in the cold, damp darkness, they waited until they were sure the search had passed them by.

"Move at around one in the morning. Lift the tools and then—"

"And the flag."

"Sure, Rick. And the flag. If we can get away with it. Return here. They'll be looking for us to make a clean break. Might not search this close. Best plan I got. Then a couple of days later we lift a wag and head out for the gateway. You fix the door, Rick, and we all make the jump. How's that sound to you two? Good?"

"Better than good, lover," Krysty agreed. "If it works it sounds miraculous. If it doesn't, we all get to buy the farm together."

RICK FELL ASLEEP quickly, lying on one side, curled up like a young child, arms wrapped around himself. The street-lights outside the building came on with the night, and they cast a feeble glow through the cobwebbed glass. Krysty stood looking down at the slumbering man.

"Gaia! He's so ill, Ryan."

"I know it. Can you feel how bad he is?"

She knelt and touched him very softly on the forehead, her long gray fur coat sweeping the floor.

Krysty looked up at Ryan. "I think the shadow is clos-ing in fast," she said quietly.

Rick stirred in his sleep, swallowing hard. His lips moved, but neither Ryan nor Krysty could make out any words.

"Soon?" Ryan asked.

She straightened, shaking her head. "Depends on what 'soon' means, lover. If you mean in the next hour... or if you mean in the next week or so."

"Let's take the next week or so."

She nodded. "Think so. Could be his sickness might go into remission again. But it looks to me like he's near the wire."

"If he loses the race before we get the door of the gate-way fixed..." He didn't need to complete the sentence.

"Then we get to live what's left here in Moscow. I know that. So we best get those tools tonight and try and make sure Rick's fit enough for the journey back."

"And the flag," Ryan added.

"Oh yeah." Krysty smiled. "And the flag."

RICK HAD A KIND of fit around midnight. He began to moan loudly, until Ryan found a length of cotton rag and jammed it between his jaws to silence him. This time they'd been able to distinguish words. Sentences. Rick had been babbling about his parents who had lived in the ville of New York, on what had been known as the Lower East Side.

"Jack can't bring home the beef and Naomi hates the street gangs. Fears all fears. The subway and Central Park, mugging and dark places and being alone among millions, and shadows and sudden noises. Rats and roaches and Re-publicans. Porn houses and there goes the neighborhood. Serial butchers and men who pulled out—"

That was when Ryan finally shut him up, fearful that his echoing screams would penetrate into the dark ville be-yond.

But Rick wasn't done.

His body suddenly flexed and tensed, his legs jerking spasmodically, heels beating a rattling tattoo on the concrete floor.

"Hold him!" Ryan called. "Fireblast! Keep him quiet, Krysty!"

Despite Ryan's great strength and the freezie's ex-hausted frailty, the man was still proving too much of a handful. His arms thrashed, catching Ryan a glancing blow on the side of the face, making his teeth ring. Another punch hit him on the upper arm, numbing the muscle.

Rick's eyes were wide open, seeming to float in blood-filled pits, staring up sightlessly at the damp-stained ceiling. He kept rolling his head, trying to dislodge the gag. Bubbling, muffled screams tried to burst from his throat.

Ryan clung to him, keeping him pinned, coughing as their struggle kicked up clouds of acrid dust. Krysty stood for a moment, looking down at the two thrashing, tangled figures, trying to work out how best to help Ryan.

"What can...?" she began.

"Put him out," Ryan panted. "Quick. Out!"

Krysty didn't hesitate. She balanced on her left foot and swung back the right, kicking with a careful aim and considered force at the freezie. The toe of her dark blue leather boot hit him just behind the ear with a soft, dull thud.

He immediately went limp, allowing Ryan to roll away from him. "Thanks." He eased the unconscious freezie onto his right side and removed the hunk of cotton from his mouth so that the man wouldn't choke. "Hope you haven't chilled him, lover."

"Little poke with my toe? He'll be fine. Well, I don't suppose he'll be fine." She bent down and began to run her hands along Rick's arms and legs, probing at the

layers of sinew that coursed beneath his pale skin. Krysty shook her head as she straightened. "Tone's real bad. Seems like the muscles are plain giving up. I can feel fluttering un-der... kind of like everything going into spasm. Bad."

Rick blinked and his eyes twitched open. He looked from face to face, unfocused. A thin trickle of blood dripped out of a corner of his mouth. He blinked again.

"Oh, hi guys," he said. "What happened?" His fingers explored the lump behind his ear. "Ow! Did I fall?"

"I kicked you in the head," Krysty told him. "You went jolt-wild. Couldn't hold you, and you were making a lot of noise."

"I see. I recall the doctors saying that I might lose some control when it came to...you know. Sorry, guys. I'm fine now. Truly. We ready to rescue Old Glory?"

"Not 'we,' Rick," Ryan corrected. "I am and Krysty is. You pointed out the tools we have to get."

"But..." the freezie began, until Krysty stopped him with an angry stare.

"You got an excuse for being sick," she said. "Doesn't give you a reason for being double-stupe, does it?"

With an effort he managed to heave himself to his feet, sniffing and wiping away the blood with his sleeve. He finally met Krysty's eyes. "No. Guess it doesn't, does it? Gimp like me'd slow you and Ryan down."

"Yeah," Ryan agreed. "So you stay here. Keep outta sight and wait for us. If we don't make it back by sunset tomorrow, you're on your own. Try for the ruined house, southwest of here."

"Keep outta sight. Sure. Outta sight, man. Right on. Too much." He turned away, voice breaking. "Too fucking much."

THE GUARD WAS an old man, closing in toward sixty, married with three children and eleven grandchildren. The youngest had been keeping him awake for the past week, and he was desperately tired.

Dmitri Olgarchev, the senior museum orderly, had passed by on his rounds an hour ago, with his usual admonition to keep a careful watch on everything, in case the Americans came in to thief. Every night for the past twenty-three years he'd said that. Sometimes Sergei wanted to strangle him. But this particular night, with the whole ville a seething nest of rumors about American spies, Dmitri hadn't said it. He'd just nodded curtly and gone on his way.

Sergei didn't believe anyone would ever break in. No-body had ever broken in, in all the years he'd worked there. As far as he knew, nobody in the history of the world had *ever* broken in.

Why should they?

He'd found his usual spot in the corner of the narrow gallery that had dummies hanging from sets of gallows—each was dressed like some hero revered by the Americans. There was an alcove beneath a window that opened onto a rusting iron flight of steps. Sergei had been told that it had been built to help people escape if there was a fire. Now it was so corroded and fragile that it would probably collapse if three men got on it at once. Under the window was a pile of material, drapes that had long fallen from the wooden poles.

Sergei curled up and fell instantly into a deep and dreamless sleep.

THE LADDER HAD CREAKED alarmingly as Ryan led Krysty up the rungs, but the main securing bolts seemed solid enough under the red lace of thick rust. Heckler & Koch in hand, the one-eyed man had darted from shadow to shadow, around the back of the towering mausoleum to the place he'd spotted during their propaganda tour—a vulnerable window above a quiet alcove, filled with a bundle of material.

Ryan had figured it would provide them with a soft, quiet landing when they jumped down off the windowsill. He landed like a cat on the pile of discarded

drapes, but his nostrils suddenly filled with the stink of sweat and stale to-bacco. As he began to move down to the floor he tripped over the old man, and dropped his pistol.

It was too quick to be called a fight, more like a fumbling scuffle. Ryan knew immediately that he was up against a frail old man whose heart had leaped into his throat with terror, nearly choking him.

In some predark vids, Ryan and his friends had been amused to see the way that enemies were treated. Regardless of what kind of threat they might pose, they were generally left unconscious or tied up. Either way, they often escaped.

Things usually didn't happen that way in the Deathlands.

The old man was an enemy whose muffled yell could be enough to put a noose around Ryan's and Krysty's necks.

As Sergei fought for survival, breath rattling in his throat like water down a drain, Ryan clubbed him on the side of the head with his forearm, stunning him. He locked the scrawny throat into the angle of his arm and used his other hand to apply the strangling pressure. After thirty seconds he felt the body jerk to stillness, the pulse that fluttered against his wrist halting, starting again for a handful of beats, and stopping.

"Ryan? You all right, lover?"

"Yeah. Got us another Russkie."

"Can't hear anyone else," she whispered, picking her way through the darkness to stand beside Ryan. "You?"

He laughed quietly. "You know bastard well that if you can't hear anything I'm not going to hear anything either."

To their surprise, the glass cases that held the American equipment and tools weren't even locked. The simple handle and catch opened easily at a touch.

There'd been a number of discarded sacks and bags in the abandoned workshop where they'd left Rick. Ryan had brought one of the strongest, tucking it inside his long fur-trimmed coat. Now he loaded it with the various tools that the freezie had managed to point out to them. He placed them inside the bag one at a time, trying to avoid making any noise.

"Ready?" Krysty whispered.

"Nearly. Hear something?"

"Two of them. Don't think they're coming this way. Sounds like they're mebbe a floor above us."

"Done," he said, carefully snapping the case shut.

"The flag."

"Sure. Through here. Keep to the side of the halls, in the shadows."

"I know."

"I know you know." He grinned at her in the dim light, teeth gleaming.

Ryan had an almost perfect memory for places and directions. He could recall most of the villes he'd ever vis-ited, and what the trails were like, in and out. Despite the twisting corridors and linked rooms and stairs, he led the way with unerring skill to the huge chamber where the flag was kept.

Before moving to the center of the room, he waited with Krysty in the pools of darkness that floated beneath the overhanging balconies, studying the glass case carefully.

"Can't seen any sec men," he whispered.

"Me neither."

The glass case wasn't locked and he opened it, wincing at the unpleasant stickiness of the slimed glass on his fingers. The material on the precious banner was dry and dusty as he touched it, lifting it off its pedestal.

He heard the faint click too late, the click that triggered the lights and the klaxons.

Chapter Twenty-Four

RYAN WASN'T A MAN to stand and waste time cursing. The flag had been se-bugged, and that was that. No point in putting it back again.

Old Glory was attached to a short length of aluminum tubing, no more than a couple of inches around. The banner itself was about five feet by three feet—at least what was left of it. One edge was burned and torn and felt to Ryan like it could easily come apart in his fingers.

Folks around the Deathlands didn't fly the Stars and Stripes that much. Now and again you'd find a baron in some tear-ass raggedy ville who thought the flag might give his place a touch of class. But it appeared often enough in the books and magazines and vids of the predark days.

Ryan felt a strange pang run through him, like the hum of a live wire badly insulated under the earth, a sort of a shudder. Just touching the flag gave him the odd tremor of hidden emotion. Then the klaxons started to sound and the lights flickered on in the hall. The moment was gone.

But he still gripped Old Glory.

They were close to the farther exit of the museum, but they both knew it would be locked and guarded by the sec forces. Without a word passing between them, Ryan and Krysty turned around and raced flat out for the window that had given entry to the building.

"Give me the flag," Krysty urged, half turning as she sprinted along a narrow passage. "You got the tools."

Ryan wasn't disposed to argue. The sack rattled and banged against his hip as he ran, and carrying the scorched flag made him clumsy. He handed it over to Krysty like a sprinter passing a relay baton, seeing her grasp it firmly.

The alarm was slowly triggering the lighting system throughout the museum, the harsh ceiling strips shimmering on, seeming to pursue them. The peeling of the electronic warning signal was deafening, but it stopped as suddenly as it had started, bringing the realization that men's and women's voices were echoing from all sides, behind, above and below, in the maze of vaulted corridors.

And ahead of them.

The firefight was brief, bloody and one-sided. The sec guards were mainly elderly, and not one of them had ever had to draw a blaster in anger. Since the appearance of the terrifying Comrade Major-Commissar Zimyanin, the numbers on duty had been doubled. But nobody had warned them that they were going to get shot at—shot at and chilled.

The confrontation took place in the gallery where the rows of dummies were hanging in their hemp collars. As the first of the guards appeared at the far end, Krysty dived for cover into an alcove, drawing her H&K P7A-13, the silvered finish gleaming in the stark overhead lighting. Ryan slid across the other side of the wide passage, blaster already in his hand, squinting around the angle of the wall to judge the threat of the opposition.

There were six of them, strung out in a line, with only a couple having bothered to draw their pistols. The rest held truncheons of dark wood.

It wasn't a moment for discussion. Ryan and Krysty needed to get past the guards,

and get past them quickly. Every second would make it harder to break through and escape.

Ryan didn't need to tell Krysty what she had to do. Her gun was unsilenced and its sharp crack filled the corridor. Ryan felt the satisfying thump against his wrist as he fired the silenced 9 mm blaster. Two shots from each put down four of the Russians, all dead or dying.

Krysty's first snatched shot hit a lean woman a finger's breadth above the sternoclavicular joint, tearing her lungs to rags of tissue, chipping the spine as it exited just below the left shoulder. Her second shot caught a man immediately behind through the throat, sending him skidding sideways, drowning in a welter of bright arterial blood.

Ryan aimed carefully. The range was less than twenty paces, under good light, but that wasn't any reason to get careless. One bullet passed through the gaping mouth of a younger man with a heavy mustache. He went down spit-ting teeth, blood and bits of his tongue. His hands reached to his face as though there were some way that he could pluck the full-metal jacket from the ruined depths of his brain.

A fraction of a second later Ryan chilled the woman immediately behind the dying man, a small part of his mind registering the fact that she had only one eye.

The other two sec guards skidded to a halt, paralyzed by the totality of the slaughter around them. They stared unbelievably at the four flopping, jerking, bleeding bodies strewn about their feet.

Krysty neatly killed the man on the left with a bullet between the eyes. Ryan chilled his man with a single shot that entered just below the jaw, ripping through the larynx, emerging as a twisted hunk of lead.

The redhead was ahead of Ryan, hurdling the jumbled bodies, nearly slipping in the lake of spilled blood as she landed. She stumbled but recovered her balance and hared along the passage, Ryan at her heels. Above them, the grotesque dummies of Washington, Lincoln and Kennedy gazed blankly down at the crimson shambles.

Behind them they could hear shouts and an occasional scream. Ryan caught the distant noise of a shot being fired from a small-caliber handgun, but the bullet came no-where near them. The body of the old man, crumpled in the pile of drapes, lay where it had fallen, beneath the broken window that opened out onto the rusting fire escape.

The flag streaming behind her like a banner of fire, Krysty jumped up and scrambled through the window, pausing on the narrow sill to grab the sack of tools from Ryan. She vanished into the night while he vaulted up behind her.

The air was black and cold, with streaks of sleet dashed across it.

A volley of shooting erupted behind Ryan as he stepped on the corroded iron steps. A pane of glass shattered at his back.

"Getting closer," he shouted, following Krysty's scarlet hair down the escape.

The retaining bolts that fixed the ladder to the outside wall of the museum groaned in noisy protest as they scrambled quickly down toward ground level. This was the point of maximum threat to their safety. Ryan knew that if the sec guards had been quick enough off the mark they'd have the perimeter covered and he and Krysty were as good as chilled.

Despite Zimyanin's warnings, life had been cozy at the establishment for far too long. The theft of the old American flag had never even been considered. Indeed, hardly anyone on the staff even knew that the banner was linked to any sort of automatic sec device. So the lights and Klax-ons sent everyone into a panic.

The exterior security system hadn't been tested within living memory. It was supposed to function as a part of the internal warnings, but the wiring was old and rotten. One single floodlight came on reluctantly, but it served only to illuminate a corner of the roof, effectively blinding a sec guard armed with an assault rifle.

By the time the new director of security at the museum had nervously called up Zimyanin, Ryan and Krysty had reached safety.

"THOUGHT YOU'D BOTH taken the last train to the coast," Rick said, greeting them with a weak smile.

"What?"

"Means chilled, lover. I heard Uncle Tyas McCann say that, back in Harmony."

A sec wag went roaring by outside, a revolving red light flashing on its roof. The three friends froze a moment, but the vehicle didn't stop.

Ryan put down the sack of tools and squatted on the floor beside Rick, letting out his breath in a long sigh of relief. Krysty laid the torn remnants of the Stars and Stripes beside him and sat, shaking her head.

"Wouldn't want to do that too often," she said quietly.

"Bad?" Rick asked, reaching out to touch the tattered hem of the flag.

"Not good. Had to do some chilling. Six, was it, lover?"

Ryan was silent for a moment, replaying the firefight. "Six with blasters, and the old man I had to throttle. Seven."

"Good Russkies are dead Russkies," the freezie said, summoning up another smile.

"Like fish in a barrel," Ryan replied. "Mostly old or feebs. Never got off a shot at us. Six rounds and we laid all six in the dirt."

Krysty opened up her fur coat and leaned against the wall. "Could do with some sleep. Make our move tomor-row night."

"Guess so. It'll be like a broken ants' nest out there for the rest of the night. Yeah, I'll close my eye for a while."

Rick touched Krysty on the arm. "Thanks for saving Old Glory. And you, Ryan. I know it was an extra risk. But you had to waste 'em."

"You figure?" Krysty slipped quickly toward sleep, vaguely aware of Rick muttering to her.

"They'd have killed you if they could've." He repeated his solo conversation with an added emphasis. "Yeah, they'd have killed *you* if they could've."

Chapter Twenty-Five

"THE BEST LAID PLANS of mice and men often go wrong," Doc misquoted as the sun came hesitantly over the eastern horizon. Ryan, Krysty and Rick still hadn't reappeared.

"Why mice?" Jak asked. "Men and woman, Doc. No mice."

The old man smiled. "Figure of speech, my milky-headed young man. It's just a way of saying that it's be-ginning to look as though something could conceivably have gone awry with Ryan's strategies. Would you not concede that possibility?"

The albino teenager shook his head, his breath smoking out in the damp cold. "Don't get, Doc. Just say short."

"Ryan's in trouble," J.B. interrupted, walking soft-footed down the main staircase of the dacha. "Been a day too many for things to have gone well."

Doc sighed. There had been increased activity around the nearest hamlet, with sec wags buzzing along the trails of melted slush. So far nobody had bothered to come as far out into the country as the ruined mansion, but all three men knew that it

could only be a matter of time. Hunting had become dangerous, and their food stocks were run-ning low. At least the stream that flowed through the grounds meant that fresh water was no problem.

"We go after them?" Jak asked.

The Armorer took off his glasses and polished them as-siduously on his sleeve, peering at the morning light to check them for smears. He considered his reply to the boy.

"Ryan said to wait. We wait. We don't have any place else to go."

Each one of them had climbed several times to the windblown attic, easing their way through the concealed door and down the steep spiral staircase to look at the ruined gateway. Each had come away again, saddened by the confirmation that the damage was beyond any of their talents to repair.

During that day it drizzled, cutting down the visibility to less than fifty yards. The three of them had to keep watch from different sides of the big house. It also became colder again, and the temperature dropped to freezing around dusk.

After dark they reverted to taking turns on guard. Doc had the shift from eight until midnight and was leaning against the sill in the main second-floor room, which com-manded the best view across the land toward the tiny ville. His thoughts slurred into one another as his eyes kept flut-tering shut. He was on the far edge of sliding into sleep, and his various pasts were becoming mixed and confused.

The near dreams had him under the deep blue sky of Montana, with Emily laughing on his arm, striding out through a thick pine forest, alongside a crystal waterfall. An elk bounded across their path and they both stopped to watch it. The air was heavy with the scent of sun-sodden balsam from the trees. A man was walking through the woods, staying just within sight. Doc couldn't see his face, but he knew who it was—Cort Strasser, with his skull-face and sunken bloody eyes.

And faces came swimming up to the dozing man, sepia faces from ancient

photographs. Whatever happened to the faces in the old photographs?

For some oblique, unguessable reason, Doc found him-self thinking back to the boys who stood knee-deep in the Johnstown Flood.

"Boys! Hell, they were men," he cried, the sound of his own voice waking him up.

He squinted out across the sleeping land, shaking his head at the continued realization that he was in Mother Russia, land of Tolstoy and Chekhov, the land that had been for so long the traditional enemy of the United States of America. Now he was within a few miles of the heart-land, of Moscow. And he, with just five friends, was bit-terly alone.

The rain had stopped, but the earth was covered by ghostly shreds of fine white mist that seemed to lurch across the sparse fields, between the clumps of stunted trees. Doc watched the night, feeling an iron depression settle across his soul. If only Lori hadn't died. She'd have cheered him up. The blond girl could always do that for him.

"Hey," he said quietly. "What's that?"

One of the pockets of gray fog had suddenly become more solid, and it was moving slowly toward the house. Doc's sight wasn't that keen, and he rubbed his eyes, man-aging to make out that it was something with silvery fur, like a hunting wolf. Yet somehow not quite like a wolf. It was definitely heading toward the dacha.

Doc stood upright, his knee joints cracking like muted pistol shots, staggering a little as sensation came back to his legs. He stumbled down the stairs, hanging on to the rem-nants of the banister, calling out to J.B. and Jak in a low, urgent voice.

"Something coming this way."

By the time he'd reached the main hall, both the Armor-er and the boy were there, blasters drawn, fully alert.

"What?" J.B. asked, managing to appear both tense and relaxed at the same time.

"Wolf? I confess that my vision in darkness is far from the best."

Jak eased the front door open an inch and flattened his face against it. Then he looked back at the other two men.

"No," he said.

"No what?" Doc asked, puzzled.

"Not wolf."

J.B. edged him out of the way and looked for himself. "It's not a wolf."

"Then, what is...?"

"It's Krysty, and she's alone."

The woman was beat. They helped her in and laid her on the floor of the back room. She didn't wait for them to ask the obvious question. Fighting exhaustion, she panted out the pertinent details.

"Got tools. Rick's triple-sick. Can't make it out here."

"You and Ryan couldn't bring him?" J.B. asked.

"Whole ville's on sec-red. Takes two to help the freezie and one to scout. Ryan slipped out after food and nearly got trapped by street patrols. He wants you and Jak to go in. I'll tell you where. Me and Doc'll hold the fort here."

"An old man can't be trusted when the chips are down," Doc said bitterly.

"Don't be stupe." Krysty licked her lips and sighed. "Too blown to argue, Doc."

You know J.B. and Jak can do the job better."

He nodded. "My heartfelt apologies, my dear Krysty. You are, as ever, completely correct. I shall bring you back to the freshness of full health by the time the others return safely. And then we can all flee this bleak land."

Krysty dozed, and woke sometime later with a start.

Something wet and slimy was touching her, smearing her with some foul...

"Zorro! Heel, you naughty pup," Doc called, urging the little dog away from Krysty, stopping it from licking her face.

"Where's Jak and J.B.?" she asked, bone-weary.

"Gone while you slept. John Barrymore Dix carried the map you'd sketched for them. Both had their firearms primed and ready." He hesitated, kneeling to pat the wiry little dog as it rolled happily on its back at his feet. "I fear that this dreadful place will be the ending of us, my dear. The good Lord knows that Deathlands is bleak enough. But this Russia is tainted with blood and with dying, layered with far too much hatred."

"Ryan'll be all right. Takes more than a handful of Russkies to chill him."

Doc sighed. "I do agree, Krysty, my dear young lady. But the sad truth is that they are up against far more than a handful of the enemy. Ah, yes. Far, far more."

Krysty tried to keep her interest going, but sleep was too pressing.

She closed her eyes.

KRYSTY'S DISTINCTIVE red hair had been spotted twice on her journey out of the center of the ville. Zimyanin had three separate reports on his desk by the time she reached the dacha. With the flimsy sheets of recycled paper in his hand, he walked across his office and looked again at the map. He touched the small flags

that Clerk Second Class Alicia Andreyinichna had supplied not even a week ago and saw that the redheaded woman seemed to be moving back in the same direction—southwest.

"Peredelkino," he said, tugging pensively at his mus-tache.

"Did you call, Comrade Major-Commissar?" the young blond woman asked nervously, sticking her head around the door. In the past few days life had become unbearably tense in the offices of Internal Security, Moscow. There were too many messages and too many senior officers coming and going. And there was whispered gossip about her boss, about Gregori.

"Nothing, Alicia. Nothing. Thank you for responding so quickly."

She nodded her head and withdrew, finding she was trembling with nerves. A friend of hers shared an apart-ment with a man whose sister worked in the offices of Pen-sions and Internal Debts. Anya Zimyanin hadn't been seen for three days, and there were stories of a closed car and a suspicious bundle in a black plastic body bag being toted away from a certain door at five in the morning. That had been the day that Gregori had been in such a good mood, though he'd jerked away from Alicia's fingers when she had tried to point out some small marks on his face, near the hairline, dark brown spots that indicated he'd been splashed with some sticky liquid.

Behind her, the sec officer was in the best of spirits. Gradually the pieces of the jigsaw were beginning to come together: three spies, one who must be wounded or sick; the robbery of tools and the flag. Proof if ever any was needed that they were Americans. Now the woman had fled the ville.

"Alone," he muttered, not wanting the clerk to appear again.

Which meant that the one-eyed man and his other com-panion were still around. Close to the museum was Zimyanin's personal guess, waiting a chance to escape. Or waiting for other American spies to join them. Extra pa-trols had been posted on all roads to the southwest to watch for strangers coming out of or into the area.

He unlocked his desk drawer and took out the dog-eared copy of *The English Tongue for the Benefit of the Russian Gentleman Abroad*.

"Having heard so much about you from mutual friends, it will be a great pleasure for me to finally make your ac-quaintance," he said.

Zimyanin nodded to himself, pleased with what he had just learned. He put the book carefully back in the desk drawer and locked it. For many weeks he'd worked hard at trying to master the complexities of the American tongue. Soon, very soon, he hoped to have the chance to practice what he had learned.

Chapter Twenty-Six

RYAN WAS AWAKENED by a soft, whispering sound. Some-one was easing open the broken door at the side of the warehouse where he and Rick were hiding.

He lay in the midnight darkness with his finger on the trigger of the SIG-Sauer and waited.

There were two intruders. One was trying to press him-self through the narrow gap at the side of the door. The rudimentary gas lighting outside cast enough of a golden glow for Ryan to see the shadow—a man, small-built, with the darting reflection off the metal of a handgun.

The other man was already somewhere inside the con-crete vault. Whoever he was, he was good. Ryan had checked out the building a dozen times and had thought that all of the windows were secure. Now he knew that one of them wasn't.

The intruder near the door was short, lightly built and had long blond hair. Ryan still couldn't precisely locate the other man. It was difficult to concentrate, with Rick breathing heavily and moving restlessly in his sleep.

If there were only two of them, Ryan thought he should be able to take them out. But if they were part of a larger gang, then he figured it might be time to abandon the freezie and make his own getaway.

Also, if they were merely a couple of local killers trying their chances, it would be dangerous to use the powerful blaster.

Reluctantly Ryan holstered the pistol and drew the long panga from its soft leather sheath on his hip. Hand-to-hand fighting in almost total darkness wasn't among Ryan's favorite occupations. He wished that Jak was with him. The white-haired teenager was the best at close-contact butch-ery that Ryan had ever seen.

It crossed Ryan's mind that the two men who had crept in on him in the small hours of the morning could, possibly, be J.B. and Jak. The one he'd glimpsed near the door was the right kind of height, as well as having light hair.

Ryan edged away from the pile of rags that he'd been using for a bed. He'd calculated that Krysty's best speed through hostile country wouldn't have been good enough for anyone to have returned from the dacha. So, logically, it wasn't Jak and J.B.

The wooden haft of the panga was warming in his fingers. Ryan held the long blade down at his side to try to avoid the steel catching and reflecting the street light.

He deliberately slowed his breathing and controlled his heartbeat, moving only with infinite patience. The two men didn't seem in any hurry to get to him, and Ryan wasn't in any great hurry to get to them. Rick's mumbling and snoring were the only sounds audible in the large building.

Though he had a nagging doubt that Jak and J.B. might have crept in and were checking the place out, Ryan was ninety-five percent sure it wasn't them. The Armorer had known him long enough not to play triple-stupe by creep-ing up on

him in the dark.

He heard a shuffle of feet toward the rear of the building, where there had been rows of empty closets and shelves. The floor was sprinkled with a number of rusted nails and screws, and the intruder had disturbed one of them.

Ryan waited.

"Patience never killed anyone," the Trader used to say. And the converse was equally true. The man who rushed blind into a fight often finished looking up at the sky.

Ryan waited.

Rick had a coughing fit and muttered under his breath. Ryan listened, hoping that the freezie wouldn't wake up and call out for him. The light in the part of the room where they'd been sleeping wasn't good enough to reveal how many lay there. As long as the two men didn't know that Ryan was up and ready, the advantage of surprise rested with him.

The other danger in Rick's mumbling and restlessness was that it could drown out the sound of someone moving in the darkness. Ryan wished that his fighting sense of hearing was better. If Krysty had been there she'd have pinned down the intruders like a ruby laser.

He waited.

There!

The nerves of one of the men had finally given way and he made his move, coming up out of a crouch against the rear wall, holding what looked like a sawed-off 10-gauge at his hip. The guy was silhouetted for a half second against the yellow light of the front window.

That was all Ryan needed.

He covered the distance between them in eighteen short steps, balanced on the balls of his feet, moving like a graveyard wraith.

He took the intruder from behind, when he was still several yards from the sleeping freezie. It wasn't like trying to take out a sentry without any alarm being raised. In a quiet room, there was absolutely no possibility of chilling the one intruder without the other man hearing the death. The best bet was to take him down fast, and move away into the deeper shadows.

When Ryan had obtained the panga from a 285-pound mutie woman who didn't need it anymore, the weapon had a round, blunt end to it. He'd honed it down so that both sides of the blade were sharp, and it tapered to a strong, needle point. It could be used equally well for either cutting or thrusting work.

The blow was a straight thrust from behind, delivered with all of his strength. The tip of the heavy panga penetrated the man's flesh, slicing it open like a razor through silk. Ryan felt hot blood spurt over his right hand and wrist and felt the shocked jerk of the body.

The blade was eighteen inches long, and the point erupted a handbreadth out of doomed man's chest, tearing through his heart on the way. Blood pattered onto the stone floor.

Oddly Ryan's victim didn't cry out. He merely inhaled sharply, strangely like a sigh of sexual pleasure.

The blaster rattled on the concrete, followed by the slow tumble of the corpse. By the time the body lay still, Ryan was on the far side of the building, kneeling against the wall with the window. He guessed he wasn't far from where the lightly built blonde was lurking.

It would have been inhuman if the second intruder hadn't been pushed into movement by the sound of the scuffle and the unmistakable noise of sudden, violent dying. There was a single hissed word. "*Apasnost?*" Apparently the man was asking his now-dead companion if there was danger.

It was sufficient for Ryan to locate his second target, who was more or less where he'd imagined, just to the right of the partly open door, already starting to move around the outside of the room.

Now, eye fully accustomed to the scant light, Ryan could make out the flicker of movement. Like a python sliding noiselessly from its den, Ryan went after the short figure, blood-slick blade probing the air ahead of him,

"What the fuck was that? Ryan? Ryan, are you there?"

Rick's voice, deafening in the silence, nearly put Ryan off his attack. The freezie blundered to his feet, trailing lengths of the torn cloth that he'd been using as a blanket. In the ghastly yellow light he looked like some wild-eyed corpse, dragged from its tomb, still bound with the ragged cere-cloths.

"Ryan! Where... Oh, Jeeez!"

He'd fallen over the outstretched hand of the corpse, tripping and landing facedown in the spreading lake of warm blood.

The muzzle-flash of a handgun lighted a small area by the door, and Ryan heard the whine of a bullet as it ricocheted off the far wall in a flare of sparks.

"Fireblast!" he muttered, hoping that the noise of the shot wouldn't bring some inquisitive sec guard on the run. Now, time was vital. The attacker had to be put away.

Fast.

"Help me, Ryan!" Rick shouted, floundering on the floor, becoming tangled up with the body. "There's a dead man down here."

In the passing stillness Ryan caught the faint click of a blaster being cocked again. He hurled himself across the building, aiming at where he knew the small blond man was waiting for him. It wasn't a situation for a cunning and subtle approach.

The long-bladed panga made contact, a yelp of pain and shock exploded from the darkness. But the feel of the blow was enough to let Ryan know he'd delivered only a glancing wound.

He rolled over on one shoulder in a breakfall, coming up in a classic knife-fighter's crouch. His lips creased in a mirthless smile. Now he could hear his opponent clearly, quietly sobbing to himself less than a dozen feet away. Ryan's night sight was way behind Jak Lauren's, but it was still better than most men's. Now he could see the dark silhouette of the intruder.

"Ryan?" Rick whined. "I'm scared, Ryan. Help me."

Outside, Ryan heard the rumble of a convoy of large transport wags moving along the road. The lights of the first vehicle shone coldly through the frosted glass, bouncing off the far wall of the workshop, providing enough illumination for Ryan to see the wounded Russkie. He did indeed bear a passing resemblance to Jak Lauren. Slight of build with a shock of blond hair that glowed white in the reflected glow of the wags' headlights, the youth had a narrow, pinched face, with hollowed cheekbones and deep-set eyes. He was holding a crudely made zip-blaster, not much more than a .22 caliber. It was in his left hand, pointing toward the floor. Dark blood flowed down his right arm, from a deep stab wound near the elbow.

"*Nyet*," he said, seeing Ryan at the same moment. He shuffled a couple of steps to his left, away from the one-eyed man with the panga.

Rick saw them both at more or less the same time, opening his mouth to yell, then closing it again.

Ryan considered throwing the panga, but it was a crude weapon for accuracy. The little gun continued to hang toward the dusty concrete, almost as if the young Russian had completely forgotten that he was holding it.

"*Nyet, nyet. Druk.*" He pointed to himself, trying to convince the terrifying specter that he was a friend, which was a real uphill battle.

But the begging tone was unmistakable. Ryan shook his head, smiling gently at the terrified boy. "*Nyet*," he repeated, closing in on him, never taking his eye off the blaster.

The noise of the passing line of trucks was almost deaf-ening, and their lights made the interior of the building as bright as day.

The blood changed from black to brown to red as the lights hit it, trickling steadily down the youth's forearm, over the wrist and plopping off the tips of the trembling fingers.

"*Nyet*," he stammered.

"No." was one of the handful of Russian words that Ryan had learned from Rick. One of the others was "Yes."

Now he was within reach. "*Da*," Ryan whispered.

He opened the Russian's throat with the singing edge of the butcher's knife in a forceful backhanded cut. The gun fell, bouncing off the young man's foot, so that it landed almost soundlessly. Ryan moved back quickly to avoid being dappled by the spray of blood that gushed out of the hewed gash across the pale throat.

A voice from near the door broke the stillness in the room, rising above the noise of the passing wags. The voice of J. B. Dix.

"Knew you were a mean son of a bitch, Ryan," he said.

Ryan laughed. "Good to see you, J.B. And you, Jak. Good to see you both."

Rick stood up, very unsteady on his feet. "I'll sec-ond... that, Ryan. I'll second..." And he fainted.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

"SO," RYAN CONCLUDED, "that's the situation we got here. Rick's heading west. Only a matter of a few days at best."

J.B. glanced across to where the freezie now lay sleeping quietly. The fainting spell had slithered into another spas-modic fit, with Rick's fingers clenching, his arms and legs jerking convulsively. The three of them had managed to hold him still and tried to make him relax. Rick had been seized by a frightening attack of coughing and choking, as though he weren't able to swallow properly, something that Ryan figured was probably another aspect of the muscular illness running its course.

"He reckon he's closing in to the last round?" J.B. asked.

"Yeah. Needs help walking more than about a hundred yards."

"Steal wag," Jak suggested.

"Sure," Ryan agreed. "Takes firepower. Three of us might pull it off." He glanced across the empty room, past the two corpses to the window. Dawn was lightening the sky. "Not now. Tonight." He whistled between his teeth. "Don't like the waiting. The Russkies know we're around the ville. Longer we stay the better chance they got of find-ing us. Good tracker might find us."

"Must be ways of stealing food around a ville like this," J.B. said.

"Patrols everywhere. Gangs of murderous kids. Hard, J.B., very hard."

"You got food and drink?" Jak asked. "Need for gettin' out."

"Try this evening. There's a market spread out around the top of a big flight of

steps. Must date way back before sky-dark. Hundreds of stairs. Market closes at dusk. Reckon I could get in there and try and buy us something when they're all ready to close up. Any sec men around could be relaxing then."

"Buy?" J.B. asked.

"Yeah. Got us some local jack. Whole area's on triple-alert. Could be easier to buy than steal. We'll know in a fistful of hours."

"And on the road in a few hours more," J.B. added.

As Ryan had good knowledge of the maze of side streets and alleys around the building, it was agreed that he should go out alone to buy the provisions they'd need.

The day wore on with a slug-footed weariness. At Ryan's suggestion they posted a watch in case the two dead thieves had friends. While not keeping guard, the others slept most of the day. J.B. spoke to Ryan about the risks of staying in the dacha and the problems they'd been having in stealing food. He also mentioned the sec patrols that they'd seen as they made their way through the outskirts of the ville.

"Someone's pushing in some plugs around the place," J.B. concluded.

"Remember that Russkie in the snow?"

J.B. nodded. "Sure. Pocked face, mustache, a stocky guy, well-muscled. Carried a Makarov PM blaster. His name was...?"

"Zimyanin."

"Yeah. Captain in their sec regs. Looked a good man to have on your side from what I recall."

"I got a feeling he's not on our side this time around."

"You've seen him?" the Armorer asked, surprised. "Here? In the ville?"

It was Ryan's turn to nod. "Yeah. Long way from home, isn't he?"

"Thousands of miles. You sure it was him you saw? I mean he—"

"Sure enough. And if it was him, it could be he remembers us. They must have dozens of eye-calls on us. Me and Krysty... You see us and you remember us. Know what I mean?"

ZIMYANIN OPENED the window of his office, leaned out into the late-afternoon sunshine and drew several deep breaths. Having Tracker Aliev in the same room was a test for anyone's stomach. Though the officer had known the diminutive Mongolian for several years, he had never managed to get used to the stench of rotting flesh that seemed to cling to him.

At least he could now look him in what remained of his face without wincing and turning away. Aliev was very sensitive about his looks and was easily offended by any insult.

There was obviously a strong mutie strain somewhere in the background of his breeding stock. That accounted for the fact that he'd been born with no lower jaw and no nose. He habitually had a scarf wrapped around what was left of his mouth, though the material was always ragged and sodden with stinking threads of green mucus. Aliev couldn't speak, but Zimyanin had learned how to communicate with him, managing to interpret his snuffles and grunts.

"So! There was nothing left for you to track? The fools had run around and trampled any sign of the Americans?"

Aliev nodded vigorously, his slant eyes fixed on Zimyanin's face.

"Don't worry, my old friend," he said, steeling himself to move close enough to pat the man on the shoulder. "They must eat. Our young wolf packs are all on double-red watch."

The tracker clapped his gloved hands together and made a hideous gurgling sound deep in his throat, which Zimyanin knew indicated enthusiasm.

"We'll be there fast, Tracker Aliev, you and me. And then we'll see. Yes, they have to eat. Someplace, some-time."

THE DAY WAS nearly done.

Despite the intensive blanket nuking of the center of Moscow, a few cherished remains of the old Kremlin still stood. The smaller dome of the Archangel Cathedral glit-tered in the distance, its silver roof tinted crimson by the sinking sun.

Ryan had slipped out the door of the abandoned work-shop, pulling the fur hood up over his tangled mane of curling black hair, trying to keep his face concealed. As he'd hoped, everyone was preoccupied with getting home before darkness closed in. They bustled along the muddied sidewalks—women dragging bawling children, old men and women, clinging arm in arm, weighted down with loaded shopping baskets of provisions.

Ryan checked his pocket, making sure he still had the handful of silver and copper coins. It had crossed his mind to leave the SIG-Sauer with J.B. and risk being able to bluff his way through a stop-search. If they found a blaster like that, then his meager cover was instantly blown. But, on balance, he figured that his chances of passing a check-point were minimal. Without a handgun, they were a big zero.

The streets buzzed with sec patrols, but they were ob-viously bored and tired, waiting for the end of their shift. The day was over and the stalls of the raggle-taggle market were closing down. Ryan had timed it right.

To his left he saw the long descending flight of wide steps that he'd noticed on a previous recce. A few feet away, near the top of the steps was an elderly woman pushing a rick-ety baby carriage, with a red-faced baby nearly buried un-der a heap of dried, crusted turnips. The woman was deep in conversation with another old woman wearing round-rimmed glasses. A group of sec men were lounging on

the steps, near the bottom, their blasters resting against their knees. It was precisely the scene that Ryan had hoped to find.

He went straight to the nearest stall, which sold smoked and preserved meats of all kinds, piled in a variety of plastic tubs that looked as if they'd been around since sky-dark. The man in charge was a cripple who hopped around on a pair of crutches, already beginning to scoop up the contents of the tubs and pour them into larger bins. He looked up as Ryan approached him, not even bothering with a smile or a word of greeting.

Ryan pointed at his own mouth and then to his ears, hoping this simple mime would indicate he was a deaf-mute. He pointed to what he thought looked like strips of jerky, cupping his hands together to try to show the sort of quantity he wanted.

The Russian looked at him suspiciously, and Ryan felt his own fingers itching for the butt of his P-226. To his dismay, his ruse had worked too well. Believing him hard of hearing, the stall-holder raised his voice in a bull-like bellow. Ryan shrugged his shoulders, aware that he was already becoming the subject of some interest. The Russkie tried again, this time rubbing thumb and forefinger together. It was a gesture that Ryan recognized, and he hastily held out his hand with the money. This time he received a grudging nod from the man.

One thing Ryan hadn't thought about was bringing something to carry the food. He took the handful of dried meat and shoved it into one of the coat pockets. Ignoring the stall-holder's attempt to convey how much he owed, he simply held out the money and allowed the man to pick what he wanted, knowing from the foxy grin that he was being robbed blind. As long as a few coins were left, he didn't mind. There wasn't much that he could do about it.

He turned on his heel and moved away, walking toward the top of the steps, eager to finish his shopping and get away from the watching eyes. Behind him he heard a shout from the man in the meat stall, and a ripple of laughter from the people around him. He guessed that the joke was aimed at him.

Ryan quickened his pace. When a hand tugged at his sleeve he glanced down, expecting to see a beggar. Instead, he was confronted by a skinny girl of about

thirteen, backed by a dozen more children of similar age. All wore red berets with a single silver circle.

Ryan's stomach tightened with an unfamiliar feeling. Of fear.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

HE REALIZED IT WASN'T the same gang that they'd watched a few days earlier butchering the limping man in the sub-urban side street. But they came from the same mold: pinched faces and glowing, excited eyes; chapped lips and red tongues that kept flicking out like lizards'. The whole body language of the junior wolf pack was taut with the desire to maim and to kill.

The girl held Ryan by the arm and stared intently up into his face, screeching something and waving at him with her free hand. She gestured for him to throw back the hood.

Ryan hadn't the least doubt that the sec forces would have circulated his description throughout the ville. Any one-eyed man would be suspect, and once they had him...

The two women by the carriage had stopped their chat-tering to look across at him. Ryan saw in the veiled eyes the certainty that he was dead.

The whole marketplace seemed frozen. All conversations had ceased, and the small groups gathered in the dusk watched the drama of the stranger and the children in silence.

Ryan guessed that the sec men would also be beginning to show some interest in

what was happening at the top of the steps.

The girl tugged at him harder, surprising Ryan with the vicious strength of her ragged-nailed fingers. He looked down at her, seeing nothing in her sluttish blank eyes, nothing but a smoldering excitement, sure that she'd picked right.

The frozen second of time was followed by thirty seconds of desperately frenetic activity.

Ryan half turned and pulled the girl closer to himself, partly shielding what he was doing from the rest of the pack. He drew the SIG-Sauer and pressed the muzzle into the girl's neck, close under the angle of the jaw. She felt the touch of cold metal and started to recoil from it.

He squeezed the trigger.

With the built-in silencer, and with the end of the barrel rammed into the teenager's throat, the explosion of the blaster was no louder than a muffled belch.

The girl's body jerked as though she'd been kicked. The 9 mm bullet tore out the back of her neck, and exited at a slight angle, hitting a metal lamp support and whistling off the cobbles. It eventually struck one of the women by the carriage in the fleshy part of her thigh.

She screamed and fell over, knocking the brake off the carriage and allowing it to roll slowly toward the top of the steps.

Ryan pushed the dying girl away from him. As she fell limply to the stones, a small part of Ryan's brain registered what fell from her open hand—a short length of narrow, stained rope, with a knot at each end.

"Murderous bitch," he breathed.

As soon as he moved away from her body, everyone saw the pistol, and all hell broke loose.

The SIG-Sauer P-226 carried fifteen rounds. Good quality 9 mm bullets were hard to obtain in the Deathlands, and Ryan normally tried to use them sparingly.

But not this time.

He fired six spaced shots, sending everyone around diving for cover. Four of them killed members of the gang of young killers, each going down with a clean head shot. One took out a stall-holder who'd popped up holding a wire-bound scattergun. The sixth round chilled a sec guard who'd been walking near the top of the steps.

The woman with the leg wound was screaming hysterically, grabbing at the skirts of her elderly friend, preventing the woman from snatching the chromed handle of the carriage, which rolled to the brink of the wide stone steps. It paused a moment at the edge.

Eight rounds remained in the heavy blaster.

Someone threw a large green cooking apple at Ryan. The aim was good, and it dealt him a glancing blow on the left arm. He looked sideways and saw the thrower staring at him, mouth open to cheer his own skill. Ryan shot him through the open mouth, the bullet striking the young man's mother, who was hiding behind him. One round, chilling two.

Seven left.

A revving engine caught his attention and he spun around to see a small open wag roaring toward him, weaving between the abandoned stalls. A sec man hung on to the passenger seat, trying to balance and aim a Kalashnikov rifle.

Ryan paused, steadying his right wrist with his left hand. He snapped off two more bullets and watched as the windshield of the wag starred into diamond splinters. The second shot plucked the uniformed sec man out of his seat and threw him onto the cobbles behind the lurching, reeling wag. Ryan didn't wait to see the vehicle finally crash.

Five rounds remained.

Though he'd cleared the area immediately around him, Ryan had hardly moved from where the girl had snared him. It was way past time to get his legs working.

The market square held at least a hundred Russians and beyond them lay the tangled web of small streets and alleys. Normally Ryan would have tried for that, but the odds were too high against him to risk being trapped and run down.

The only other alternative was down the stairs.

As he sprinted toward them, the unwounded elderly woman tried to snatch at his legs. But he clubbed her across the ear with his pistol, smashing her glasses into her eyes.

Five bullets were left in the gun. He had another couple of mags in his capacious pockets, but to stop and reload would be to go down.

The carriage began to bounce and jolt down the steps, the baby bawling at the top of its lungs. The load of tur-nips skittered out at every stair.

The sec patrol on the stairs had been alerted and had formed a line across the steps, rifles ready, prepared to tackle the solitary intruder. The toppling carriage appearing over the dark skyline threw them into some confusion. One or two men began to ready themselves to try to catch it, while others were obeying the bellows of the bearded sergeant for them to stand firm and ignore it.

Ryan, gun drawn, saw the confused tableau and decided instantly to charge through. He was so far committed that retreat was impossible.

Shooting on the run, he killed the noncom and took out the two men on each side of him, leaving a gap for himself—a gap that opened directly in front of the careering baby carriage.

The SIG-Sauer held only two rounds.

Panicked, one of the sec men jerked on the trigger of his rifle. Bullets sprayed everywhere. The blaster was out of control, spitting fire across the steps, chilling the woman with the leg wound.

Before the sec men realized what was happening, Ryan was on top of them. With only two bullets left it wasn't a time to get careless. He followed the carriage, the squeal-ing of the baby rising above the rest of the bloody cacoph-ony.

A sec man stood in front of him, rifle at his hip, braced and ready.

Shooting from above and on the run, Ryan was pleased to see the sec man tumble backward, blood flowering from a wound in his upper chest. The dropped blaster nearly tripped the fleeing man, but he managed to vault it, keep-ing his balance. He overtook the rocking, rolling, jolting carriage, now three-quarters of the way down the immense flight of steps.

Ryan could see thirty or forty people near the bottom, but none seemed to be in uniform and they were all mak-ing desperate efforts to save themselves. No one seemed as though he were interested in trying to stop the one-eyed man with the smoking blaster in his fist.

Then Ryan was at the bottom of the steps, seeing his avenue of escape opening to his right—the fringes of an ancient nuke site, broken buildings leaning and tumbling against one another. It was a place where nobody lived, a place where he could run, dodge and hide, eventually working his way back toward the row of workshops where his friends were waiting for him.

He heard a bumping, clattering sound behind him, and turned to see that the carriage had miraculously made it all the way to the bottom. It pitched over the last two stairs, the red-faced occupant still screaming its head off.

A stout sec man, with faster reflexes than the rest, was halfway down the steps, and he leveled his AK-47 in Ryan's direction.

The last round from the SIG-Sauer hit him below the left armpit and drilled through his chest, shattering ribs. Shards of edged bone sliced through the man's

heart and lungs. As he fell, the sec guard's finger locked on the trigger, sending a final burst of lead fanning across the bottom of the steps.

The carriage had just bounced to a stop, a few feet clear of the last stair. The baby was still strapped in place, shocked but alive. The turnips were all gone, tumbled to the four winds.

Half a dozen of the bullets from the Kalashnikov exploded into the carriage, shattering its hood and sides, killing the child instantly.

Ryan clutched his empty blaster and sprinted away from his pursuers.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

THE NEWS TOOK a half hour to reach Major-Commissar Zimyanin. He'd been working out that evening in the seedy gymnasium beneath the monolithic building that housed the ville's principal sec offices. He hadn't left word where he'd gone, as he intended to be out of his room for only a few minutes. But the weights had beckoned to him, and he'd been pushing himself harder and harder. He added more disks of iron to the polished bar, pressing greater and greater poundage, his muscular body streaming with sweat, veins throbbing at his temple.

A young clerk eventually tracked him down, peeping cautiously into the weight-lifting room.

"Comrade Major-Commissar Zimyanin?"

At that moment the officer was struggling to bench-press 120 kilos, straining to raise the heavy bar. His teeth gritted in determination, he hardly even heard the muttered, nervous query.

"Comrade Major-Commissar Gregori Zimyanin?" the clerk said a little louder.

"Yes!" The word was spit out with a ferocious venom that nearly sent the young man rushing off down the ill-lit passage.

"Message... There's a... Sir, a message for...for you."

Zimyanin eased the bar back onto its rests and slid out from under it. He sat up and wiped himself with a clean towel. "What message? The Americans? What is it?"

"The man with one eye, Comrade Major-Commissar. He has been seen."

Zimyanin's face didn't change expression, and he kept his voice flat and neutral as he turned to look at the clerk. "How many dead, Comrade?"

"Dead?"

"Dead! How many?"

"How did you know there were people killed, Comrade Major-Commissar? The news has only just reached the of-fice and—"

"I have met this man once before. I know that where he sets his foot, flowers die. Where he breathes, the little bird drops out of the sky. So, how many dead?"

"Nineteen, Comrade Major-Commissar."

Despite his steel self-control, Zimyanin couldn't quite conceal his surprise at the total. "Nineteen! On his own? No companions with him? Nineteen dead? With a Stechkin machine pistol? With a grenade of some...? No?" The young man had shaken his head. "With a broken stick, Comrade?"

"A single-shot handgun, they said. The dead include sec men, a woman of eighty winters and an unweaned baby."

Slowly, very slowly, Zimyanin stood, stretching like a great cat until his muscles creaked. He sighed and shook his head. "And he escaped?"

"In a way, Comrade Major-Commissar."

"In a way? *In a way!* What does that mean, you slaver-ing imbecile?"

"Yes. Yes, he escaped. Yes, Comrade Major-Com-missar. I am very sorry, but he escaped."

Zimyanin smiled. "You have no need to be sorry, boy. It was not your fault. If it had been I would have hung you from that beam there, taken out a very thin knife and peeled the skin from your entire body, beginning at your heels and finishing with your pretty little face." He threw the towel to the floor, suddenly impatient to be moving. "I shall be in my office in four minutes and thirty seconds. I will read the full report then."

"Yes, Comrade Major-Commissar." The man vanished through the wing doors, reappearing at Zimyanin's bel-low. "Yes, Comrade Major-Commissar?"

"Make sure that Tracker Aliev is ready to move imme-diately."

"A CRYSTAL PRISM used to hang in the front window of my Aunt Zelda's apartment in the South Bronx. Funny the way that became *the* place to live in the 1990s. Just before that it'd been like Pits City. Anyway, this crystal prism used to hang there, and it would catch the sun. When I was a kid I'd sit and watch it like it was magic. The colors would all streak the white ceiling. Aunt Zelda would say it was a wizard's paintbrush." Rick smiled at the gentle memory. "God Almighty, Ryan, those were such good days. I was around twelve. I never had such good days as when I was twelve. Does anyone?"

"Twelve wasn't a happy time for me," Ryan replied. "Not with my brother."

"I'd killed a man by the time I was twelve," J.B. pon-dered.

"I'd killed 'bout fifteen," Jak said. "Mebbe twenty. Couldn't count good."

Rick lay back on his makeshift mattress, eyes closed.

Ryan looked at him, trying to remember how the freezie looked when they'd first seen him, trying to read the hol-lows around the eyes and the deep lines carved around the dry-lipped mouth. The genetic spillage from the nukings a century ago still meant a very high mortality rate from dis-ease throughout the Deathlands. It wasn't unusual to see people dying of illness. Ryan must have seen thousands in his life. Once the Reaper laid his talons upon a shoulder, the signs were unmistakable, and Rick carried all of those signs.

J.B. caught Ryan's eye. He looked down at the dozing freezie and shook his head, motioning for Ryan to join him on the far side of the building, near where the corpses of the two thieves were already beginning to ripen and smell.

"Have to be tonight. And that could be too late for him," he said. "I never saw many a man so close to death who was still breathing." He shook his head. "But the Russkie bastards'll be as thick as flies on horse shit."

"Yeah. Gotta try for it. Least there's the chance of bet-ter food at the old house." Ryan glanced around at Rick. "No tools, no hope of mending the door. Even with him alive. We get there with the tools and Rick goes into the valley...least we have an outside chance of repairing it. We have to go, and real soon."

JAK LAUREN WAS a prince of thieves. Covering his white hair with a fur hood, he sneaked out into the night, to scavenge and recce around. He returned in less than a half hour with news, good and bad.

"Seen wag. Easy steal. Two sec bastards. Chill 'em easy. Close by."

That was the good.

"Triple-hot. Sec bastards everyplace. Hundreds. Start-ing fucking scan-search.

Roads blocked. Saw big sec man, bald and mustached. Shouting and pointing. Real grim fucker."

"Zimyanin," Ryan said quietly.

That was the bad.

Just before midnight J.B. and Ryan stood on either side of Rick, ready to support him. The Stars and Stripes had been peeled off the metal stanchion, and the freezie had insisted on carrying it himself. He wrapped it carefully around his middle, using the leather belt on his coat to keep it snug. Ryan and J.B. had divided the tools between themselves, leaving Jak free to scout on ahead of them and take out the sec men.

"Time to go," Ryan announced.

Rick looked around the empty building that had been home for a couple of days. "Goodbye to our freeway re-treat," he said, lifting his hand in a mock salute. "I shall return. No way I will."

The albino teenager went out first, glanced all around and beckoned to the other three to follow him into the cool, damp night.

ALIEV WAS EXCITED, grunting and snuffling, on hands and knees, scampering around like a hunting dog, face to the ground, head twitching from side to side.

The rest of the sec men had drawn back into a cautious circle and watched the Mongolian tracker with a mixture of religious fear and rank disgust. Most of them were ap-palled and frightened by the sight of the little man.

Major-Commissar Zimyanin watched his protege with a pleased, far-off smile. Comrade Marshal Josef Siraksi would have mixed feelings at the news of the massacre. The descriptions of the one-eyed man and his unique blaster, combined with the theft of the American flag, couldn't possibly be ignored now. Nor could Gregori's suspicions be derided.

"I trust that you are now convinced of my probity in this matter," he whispered to himself. It wouldn't be long now before he could practice his hard-learned English.

Aliev looked up at the officer, rubbing his hands together in a gesture that meant he had found the trail. Despite the numbers of people who had been around the bottom of the Isenstien Steps, the track of the one-eyed man wasn't that difficult to locate. And once Aliev had the spoor, nothing would turn him from it.

Zimyanin glanced at the cheap and unreliable chron on his left wrist. It told him that the time was closing in on the middle of the night. However far and fast his prey might have run, he would still be caught and taken. Perhaps by the morning.

"By the dawn's early light." Zimyanin smiled.

RYAN TOUCHED HIS TONGUE to the socket where the trou-blesome tooth had been, finding it still felt tender. But that dreadful nagging soreness had gone.

"Gotta rest," Rick panted. "Sorry, Ryan, sorry."

"Don't keep saying 'sorry.' It's getting to be like a rad sore you have to pick at."

The freezie looked at J.B. "I don't mean to keep... I'm sorry... I mean. I guess I should never apologize. It's a sign of weakness." For some reason that brought a weak grin to his parchment-pale face.

"Jak's been gone a long while," J.B. said to Ryan.

"Yeah. Quarter hour. Mebbe you or me should have gone with him."

"Only two sec men, he said."

"Could be more."

"Three. Four. Still back the kid to take 'em easy."

Ryan leaned against the tumbled wall of the long-ruined house and looked up at the sky. The low clouds that had dominated the night an hour or so back had cleared. The temperature had dropped, and he could see uncounted stars glittering with a ferociously cold gleam.

"Guess so. Give him another five then I'll go see what's up."

Less than a minute later the teenager appeared out of the darkness, waving the others to move forward.

As they each put an arm around Rick's waist to help him up, they saw Jak—holding his knife—gesture toward his own throat. He repeated the motion twice more.

"Three sec men," Ryan said.

"Where?" Rick asked worriedly.

"Dead," Ryan replied, "of course."

THE WAG WAS PERFECT. It was impossible to tell what it might have been when it started out its life. It had been modified, customized, and chopped and altered so many times that only a few inches of metal might have been original.

The tires were worn almost down to the canvas, but the engine looked sound. Homemade armor plating had been fixed to the front and sides of the cab. The seat was wide enough to take all four of them.

And the tank was three-quarters full of gas.

"Who drives?" Jak asked.

"Can you handle it?" Ryan asked. "Don't fuck around if you can't, Jak. There isn't time. Can you manage?"

"Sure. Four front and one back gear. Easy. Where you and J.B. ride?"

Ryan considered the question. No use having them all jammed in the cab for the breakout from the dangerous center of the ville.

"We'll take the back. Watch over the sides for any sort of trap."

"What if road's blocked?"

"Over, under, around...or through," Ryan replied, amending one of the Trader's sayings. "In this case it'll be around or through."

"Wish I had a gun," Rick said, surprising everyone. "Could pull my weight. Even a dying man can squeeze a trigger."

Ryan looked at him. "You stupe! We could've brought the blasters from the chills in the workshop! Why didn't you say?"

"Didn't think at the time. Sorry. Just didn't think."

"Too late now," J.B. said. "We gotta get moving."

When they helped the freezie up into the cab, his foot slipped on the wheel hub and he nearly fell back into the dirt. Jak swung into the driver's seat, glancing once over the controls. He gestured with his thumb for J.B. and Ryan to clamber into the open bed of the armored wag.

"Ready?" he called.

Ryan tapped on the metal plate at the rear of the cab. "Let's go."

GREGORI ZIMYANIN DIDN'T WASTE any time with the two corpses in the abandoned workshop. He tugged Aliev by the arm to attract his attention. "How many?"

The tracker considered, finally fluttering his fingers at lightning speed in the code that Zimyanin had taught him.

"Five? Four? No, slower. I don't understand what you're... There were three. Then two. Then four? Is that it?"

The Mongolian nodded then slid a finger behind the dripping mask covering his nose and mouth to remove a stubborn lump of blood-flecked phlegm.

"The three? Two men and a woman? One man sick? Yes?"

Aliev again used the sign language, telling Zimyanin that the woman had gone a couple of days ago. The sick man and the other had stayed, and they'd now been joined by two more men. One young and light on his feet, the other older. Aliev used his hand to indicate their heights. Around five-foot-four for the young one, four or five inches taller for the other man. Now all had gone.

"I can see that for myself, you whore-spawn mutie mongrel," Zimyanin snarled. "How long ago? How long? A half hour. Then we are closing. Outside." He called to the corporal in charge of the sec detail, "Keep your blun-dering imbeciles away from any prints out there. We're going to get them."

JAK KEPT THE HEADLIGHTS dim and picked his way through the rubble of the most deserted back streets. Ryan guided him as best he could, trying to maintain a rough course to the southwest of the enormous ville.

They glimpsed sec patrols, both on foot and motorized, but none came close enough to cause any serious worries for them. Until they were well into the suburb called Nikulino.

Now the roads were better maintained, busier. As the buildings began to thin out

toward the country, there were fewer options to keep the wag from being spotted.

Around two-thirty in the morning, with a steady rain beginning to fall, the inevitable happened.

Chapter Thirty

THE WAG SHUDDERED to a stop, the engine ticking over quietly. Jak opened the door on the driver's side and leaned half out, looking back at Ryan and J.B., who were peering around the armor plate.

"Yeah," Ryan told him. "I see it."

The road, lined with plane trees, stretched ahead for a quarter of a mile, houses scattered at intervals on either side. Just where the pavement began to bend to the right, with the silvery gleam of water visible, was a roadblock.

Two small four-wheel wags were angled across the center of the road, with a gap between them of less than a dozen feet. Twenty or thirty heavily armed sec men had ranged themselves around the two vehicles.

"Haven't seen yet," Jak said. "Moment pull out from trees, spot us. Fucking lot."

The teenager was correct. Their wag was parked under an overhanging bushy tree, and the driving rain had already reduced visibility. But as soon as they began to drive at the roadblock, the guards would have about thirty seconds of clear shooting at them. It was much too long.

J.B. pointed to where the old houses stood a little closer together. "Good chance we could work our way down there. You and me. Hit those stupes from the side.

Mo-ment we start shooting, Jak revs up the wag and hits that gap in the middle."

Rick's voice chimed in feebly. "Then we stop and pick you guys up and head for the dacha? That the master plan?"

The silence from the other three slapped him in the face. It was Ryan who put it into words.

"No, Rick. If you get through, you keep going. We'll try and give you a good head on them. That way, there's a chance—just a chance—that you and Jak could make it. We'll try and follow you when we can. But you don't stop. Jak knows that. If we make it, we'll make it. Watch for us."

"You play mean pool, Ryan," the freezie said, pulling his head back inside.

"First shot, Jak, you lay the metal flat. Aim for the middle and keep your head down. See you later." Ryan and J.B. slipped away into the streaming darkness.

The pounding rain drowned out any possibility of the sec men hearing the cautious approach of the two men. Con-versely it meant that they might not hear any sec men moving their way.

Ryan took the lead, his reloaded SIG-Sauer drawn and ready. Water streamed down his face, seeping behind the patch covering his left eye and flooding the socket. His coat was sodden and heavy, trailing around his knees.

J.B. trudged along at his heels, head down, cursing the rain for covering his glasses, making it hard for him to see where he was going.

Ryan picked a route that took them around the rear of the nearest house, then along an alley that paralleled the road. When he judged they were close to the sec block, he cut through into the overgrown, dank front garden.

"There," he said.

"Rad-blast this dark-dusted weather! Couldn't see a stickie at five paces! Wait, Ryan. Gotta clean my glasses or we're chilled meat."

The battered and much-traveled fedora that J.B. always wore had reappeared from under the furs that he'd been wearing, and now clung to his head like a wet sponge.

Ryan waited, peering out through the dripping yew bushes that stood between them and the group of sec men.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Sure. Now that I've cleaned my glasses, we'd better start shooting fast before I go blind again."

A vivid claw of purple lightning tore the sky apart a mile or so to the north of them, followed by a stunning peal of thunder, the sound rolling on and on. Ryan chewed at his lip, realizing that an electrical storm would make it difficult for Jak to see when they started blasting.

But the single flash wasn't repeated, though the rain pelted them with a redoubled ferocity. The air seemed full of water, and Ryan had the illusion that if he tipped his head back he might drown.

Both men were soaked through to the skin, and cold water had trickled down their legs to fill their boots. Ryan had read some books about old-time battles, when they had flintlocks and matchlocks. Rain like this could wash out two entire armies. Despite the streaming weather, he had every confidence that his blaster wouldn't let him down.

A wooden gate, hanging by a single rusted hinge, opened onto the leaf-covered, rain-slick sidewalk. The lights of the wags used to form the roadblock glittered through the spangling rain, and they could see the sec men now, all wearing bright yellow oilskins. Somehow the slickers made them less menacing, more human.

Ryan shook his head to try to clear his hair from his eye, then glanced at J.B. to

check that his friend was ready to start the party.

J.B. nodded his agreement. And the shooting began.

ZIMYANIN SPIT on the ground near one of the corpses. The rain had washed away the blood that had gushed from their slit throats, leaving the wounds like bulging white mouths in the bleached skin.

"Too late," he muttered, fighting to maintain his calm in front of nearly a hundred sec men, several of whom were senior officers.

"They took a wag," his corporal informed him.

"Ah, I hadn't considered that possibility," he replied with a ferocious quiet. "I had believed that the American eagle had flown in from Newyork and picked them up in its beak."

Nobody else offered the major-commissar any helpful suggestions.

Aliev stood waiting, panting slightly from his exertions, waiting for further orders. Normally he would have been able to follow the wag without any difficulty. But the cloudburst had washed away the tire tracks and swilled the air free of any scent. It was a cruel blow.

"A stolen truck can't be that difficult to trace," Zimyanin said. "Contact every roadblock we have out and tell them to watch out for..." The Captain Third Class who he was speaking to suddenly held up a hand and bent his head to listen to the faint crackling of the talkie clipped to the lapel of his oilskin.

Everyone watched intently, looking for some clue that the news might relate to the fleeing Americans—and maybe get them off the barbed hook of the major-commissar's wrath.

The junior officer nodded, muttered something then listened. He asked for clarification, listened to the response and signed off.

Zimyanin had managed to contain his impatience by turning his mind to different and happier thoughts, like the contents of the garbage bags that he'd seen off the premises of his apartment. And his dear wife, Anya, and her sudden decision to go on vacation. A vacation that Gregori guessed might be somewhat extended.

"Well, Comrade Captain?" he finally asked.

The young man smiled, revealing a mouth of the most rotten teeth Zimyanin had ever seen. "Yes, Comrade Major-Commissar. The main roadblock southwest at Nik-lino reports being under attack. They say they are returning fire."

"The stolen wag?"

"They said..." His transceiver began to squawk and hiss again and he listened to it, head cocked to one side.

When he turned back to Zimyanin the smile had disappeared as though struck from his face by lightning. "Bad news, Comrade Major-Commissar."

"LIKE TAKING JACK from a blind mutie," J.B. said as he and Ryan ran through the deserted gardens, keeping the swollen river on their right side. The thunderous rain had abated to a steady, gentle drizzle.

The plan had worked perfectly.

The sec men had no idea what was hitting them. All they knew was that they were being picked off, one after another. Two or three made a halfhearted attempt to defend themselves, kneeling by the parked wags and firing a few hesitant rounds into the blackness.

Ryan didn't want to waste too much ammo on a point-less blood-letting. That wasn't the idea. All they needed to do was deter the sec patrol from stopping Jak and Rick in their own armored wag.

Four hundred paces up the street, Jak could make out the sudden confusion and panic among the sec men as the bullets began to cut them down. He engaged a low gear, raced the engine and pushed down on the gas, feeling the heavy wag shudder as it built up power and speed. It roared through the streams of rainwater toward the gap at the center of the sec block.

"Holy sheeet!" Rick screamed, squinting through the reinforced windshield.

Jak's hair streamed behind him like a crazed magnesium flare, his red eyes fixed on the two wags dead ahead. As they closed within a hundred yards he realized that the space wasn't quite as wide as it had appeared from down the road—it was barely the width of their wag.

Only one of the sec men braced his legs and tried to shoot at them, managing to get off three or four ill-aimed rounds from his Kalashnikov before he was hit simultaneously through the chest by bullets from Ryan and J.B.

There was a grinding sound and a burst of sparks as the wing of the thundering wag caught one of the sec vehicles, slewing it sideways in a tangle of torn metal. But the armored truck's greater weight and speed carried it clear through and away, on down the road into the southwest, away from Moscow and toward the dacha and safety. Leaving Ryan and J.B. behind to make their own way out.

"HOLD IT, RYAN," J.B. said.

"What's up?"

"Glasses again. Sweat and rain don't mix well. Won't be..." The words disappeared as he bent his head over the spectacles.

"Reload now," Ryan suggested. "Can't hear any pursuit."

They were a mile past the roadblock, following the winding, heavy river. Its sullen rumbling was the only sound they could hear, though there'd been sirens and a scream a few minutes back.

It was looking good.

"Reckon the kid should get the freezie on through," J.B. said, checking his reload then snapping the mag snugly into place.

"Sure. Jak's good. Better than he knows. Those dam-aged wags'll block the road off for their own vehicles. He can get close enough to go in on foot. Help Rick where he needs it."

"This rain could stop. Make tracking them easy over the last mile or so."

The Armorer had a fair point. It was one of the reasons that time was vital.

"Yeah. Could be we travel in the light. What d'you reckon?"

J.B. shook his head. "No. Too many eyes and ears about. We'd stand out like a knife in an eyeball. No. Do what we planned. Make some miles. Stop around dawn."

At one point the route out of Moscow ran along a nar-row embankment. All around there were signs of the dev-astating nuking of a century earlier, and the old track lay buried beneath a vast, stinking swamp. The heavy rains had washed away one edge of the road.

It was close to dawn, and Ryan and J.B. waited on the ville side of the levee, deciding whether to cross it now or wait for the next evening. They could see that a gang of men was already at work repairing the rain damage. But there was a sinuous mist oozing from the morass on either side, and it was difficult to make out any details. The dif-fused glow of a bank of arc lights made it even harder to see what was going on.

Ryan stood with J.B. in the shelter of a clump of young conifers, weighing the odds. Behind them, they could hear the noise of several wags laboring up the rise toward their hiding place.

"Farther out we get before first light the better," J.B. reminded his friend.

"Yeah. If they've found the bodies where we lifted the wag, they could have an ace on the line for us if they got a good tracker. I say we risk it."

J.B. nodded. "Yeah. Looks like they're all kind of busy out there. Walk steady and keep moving, blasters hid."

As they neared the center of the raised causeway the mist cleared a little, and they began to appreciate that it might not be so easy. But they were committed, and behind them they could now see the lights of a half-dozen sec wags. They had to keep going.

At least fifty men worked at repairing the earthslide, using shovels and iron buckets, most of them already slimed in thick mud. And a dozen or more armed and alert sec men kept them company.

"Fireblast!" Ryan whispered. "Best get ready, J.B. This could be a bad one."

They kept walking until they were level with the first of the guards. Then they stopped.

Chapter Thirty-One

JAK DUMPED the stolen wag among the trees. He helped Rick out and supported him as they crossed and recrossed the narrow river twice. They eventually reached the big house a little after four in the morning. The boy was close to exhaustion, barely managing the bag of tools and the dying freezie.

Doc Tanner saw them coming. He'd been dozing on the second-floor landing, and

had been awakened by the ex-cited barking of Zorro.

Krysty moved quickly to open the sturdy main doors, running out across the sodden turf to where Jak was struggling with Rick. Doc strode along at his best pace and between them they managed to get the sick man into the house. On the threshold Rick elbowed them aside, standing unsupported for a moment. He reached inside his mud-stained coat and unfurled the torn flag.

"Good to be back in the land of the free and..." He slipped to the parquet floor, deeply unconscious.

RYAN AND J.B. STOPPED. Just as they thought they'd succeeded in slipping past the work patrol, one of the sec men turned around and spotted them. He leveled his rifle and called out.

"Don't draw!" Ryan ordered. "Better prisoners than chilled in the dirt. Fake deaf."

He smiled at the Russkie, shrugged his shoulders and shook his head. The man shouted again and gestured with the muzzle of the elderly 7.62 mm Tokarev.

Both Americans managed a nervous smile for the sec man, trying to convey their willingness to do whatever it was he wanted, without actually having to do it.

The Russian stepped closer and lifted the butt of the rifle in a menacing gesture, pointing to a pile of picks, and forks and spades that lay in the trampled mud.

Ryan nodded, walked forward and picked up one of the shovels, followed by J.B. Just for a moment their apparent resistance had turned the heads of several of the other guards. Now, seeing their obedience, they went back to watching the members of the *subbotnik* work group, laboring to restore the roadway.

Ryan risked provoking more anger from the stocky guard by glancing behind him, over to the ville side of the embankment where the group of wags had stopped. He wondered if this was the pursuit from Moscow. If it was, then it looked like their freedom was going to be measured in racing heartbeats.

He and the Armorer had both pulled up their hoods as they tried to pass the work gang, concealing their faces from the sec man who'd first stopped them and ordered them to start laboring.

At J.B.'s elbow, as they made their way to the bottom of the slippery path, Ryan talked quickly and urgently.

"I think Zimyanin could be close. These shit-dippers didn't spot us. Pocket your glasses and do whatever I do."

It was a long and desperate shot.

Ryan paused for a moment, then reached up and slipped the leather patch from his left eye, wincing at the unfamiliar feeling of cold air and rain on the puckered, empty socket. At his side, J.B. palmed his glasses and dropped them into one of his pockets.

The mud beneath their boots was slick and greasy, making the descent difficult. Several of the local Russians pressed into the work detail stopped for a moment to watch the two newcomers making their delicate way down to join them. Ryan had noticed that the mud at the edge of the river was particularly deep and noisome.

Behind him he heard the screech of brakes as one of the pursuing wags came skidding to a halt at the earth-fall. Doors clicked open and slammed shut again. There was a loud, confident voice, sounding as though it was used to command.

"HOW LONG HAS this road been blocked, Comrade Corporal?"

"Just over an hour, Comrade Major-Commissar. We have a work unit pressed into repairing it."

Zimyanin tugged at the dripping ends of his mustache. This was a holdup he couldn't possibly have anticipated, but it could prove a massive hindrance to his plans to capture the Americans.

"You know about the stolen armawag?"

"Yes, Comrade Major-Commissar. It has not passed along the road since we have been here. The blockage would have stopped it. Since then nothing has gone past us. Indeed, I said to my friend here, who also happens to be the sister of my wife's second cousin and—"

"Your mouth, Corporal. Close it."

"Yes, Comrade Major-Commissar."

Zimyanin's attention had been caught by a couple of lo-cal peasants, who he assumed were the latest "volunteers" for the *subbotnik*. They were trying to get down to the bottom of the earthslide, toward the surging and swollen river. The way they kept staggering, it looked as though at any moment they might go tumbling into the sticky mud.

BRACING HIMSELF, and holding his breath, Ryan deliberately allowed himself to lose his footing. He waved his arms, dropped the shovel and uttered a great bellow of shock and terror. He contrived to snatch at J.B.'s arm, bringing him down with him.

The water was bitterly cold and he rolled into it, immediately becoming soaked to the skin once more. There was a great splash as the Armorer also slid into the freezing water. He heard the delighted roar of laughter from the other workers, and most of the sec men.

Half turned from the group on the road and avoiding the glaring arc lights, Ryan struggled to pull himself out, succeeding only in toppling facedown into the clinging, stink-ing ooze.

The waves of laughter were overwhelming, almost deaf-ening.

Gregori Zimyanin didn't laugh as he watched the two clumsy men staggering about, both eventually falling face first into the mud, though he permitted himself

a momen-tary thin smile.

As they emerged, the roars of amusement from the other workers and the sec guards were redoubled. They were like the clowns who occasionally appeared with their crude street theater around the streets of the ville—until Internal Security had them removed for labor training and educa-tion.

The taller of the two had thick curly hair, but it was matted to his skull with the mud, his face totally vanished behind a slimy mask. Only the whiteness of his teeth as he grinned sheepishly at his own discomfiture broke the dark image. And his companion, the shorter man with cropped hair, was no better.

"Comrade Corporal," Zimyanin said quietly, finding to his mounting irritation that he needed to repeat himself, this time with a snap of anger in his voice. "Comrade Cor-poral!"

The man saluted, merriment vanishing from his face like butter off a hot knife. "Yes, Comrade Major-Com-missar?"

"The joke is over, Corporal. Get them back to work im-mediately. This road must be opened again so that we can pursue the American terrorists and saboteurs. Immedi-ately!"

"Yes, Comrade Major-Commissar. Immediately, Com-rade Major-Commissar. Whatever you say, Comrade Ma-jor-Commissar."

The note of panic was clearly audible to Ryan and J.B., who stood only a few yards away from the sec men and Zimyanin.

"Sounds like a brown pants job there," whispered the mud-caked J.B.

"Sure does. Guess we best start doing us some dig-ging."

"Yeah."

The main object of the exercise was to avoid any attention. Don't dig too slowly and don't dig too fast. Don't do anything else to attract Zimyanin's eyes.

Ryan worked away, putting his back into the labor, shoveling up loads of the thick, wet earth. He threw it up the bank where other men moved it higher, filling the gap in the road—a gap that had already been narrowed nearly enough for the leading wag to squeeze on by. He noticed that the first vehicle was a passenger wag that looked like the front half of an old Mercedes with creative welding adding some unrecognizable parts onto the rear.

He paused for a moment to wipe sweat off his face, careful not to disturb too much the coating of mud that hid his empty eye socket.

The back nearside door of the wag opened and a bizarre figure came scuttling out, shambling along the trail to stand near the pacing Zimyanin.

The mutie was very short and had a filthy length of cloth wound around his lower face. Ryan was sure he recognized the man from Alaska.

He glanced at J.B. and saw that the Armorer had also noticed the small man, nodding at Ryan's unspoken query.

Zimyanin had eyes as sharp as a hunting falcon's. He spotted the exchange of glances between the two mud-caked men and wondered what it was that they'd seen. It also crossed his mind that they seemed unusually well muscled and healthy specimens of the local peasants. And they dug in a measured, professional way. It was odd to see them so nimble on their feet when they'd been falling over each other a few minutes ago. It was almost as if they'd—

Aliev came slinking in from the drizzling rain and plucked at his sleeve, making him lose his train of thought.

"What? Soon. I *know* the rain will make it difficult to follow them." He edged a few steps away from the tracker. It was appalling enough having to share the warm, damp wag with him.

Dawn wasn't too far off and already the weather had hamstrung his plans. They would have been right on the trail of the Americans, but the stolen wag had broken through the barricade and was gone. One thing still plucked at his mind. The statements of the patrol had all insisted that the wag had kept moving, not stopping while still in sight. Which meant that the gunman, or men, might have remained behind, planning to follow on foot and join the wag later.

"Another few minutes at the most, Comrade Major-Commissar," the young noncom said, thinking what a re-lief it would be to see the taillights of the sec wag vanishing over the horizon.

"DONE, Comrade Major-Commissar. It's wide enough for your wag if you drive ahead with care. Good luck in the chase." He snapped a smart salute to Zimyanin.

"Thank you, Comrade Corporal. The Party thanks you and your men for their efforts. Give those diggers a five-ruble food voucher each."

"Yes, Comrade Major-Commissar." Another crisp sa-lute. "And good riddance, you pox-faced murderous-eyed bastard," he muttered.

Aliev hopped into the back of the wag and Zimyanin climbed into the driver's seat, shouting orders to the red-headed officer in charge of the other military wags in the convoy. The exhaust spouted plumes of blue-grey smoke as the engine revved up.

"Going," J.B. whispered out of the corner of his mouth.

Ryan watched the vehicle, hearing the gears crashing. It jumped and jerked its way along the repaired embankment for nearly a hundred yards before it stopped in a squeal of brakes.

"SIT STILL, may your eyes rot! Don't keep touching me like...! What?"

Zimyanin stamped so hard on the brakes that the old autowag slewed viciously

sideways and nearly slipped into the muddy river.

The tracker was out of the vehicle before it had skidded to a halt. He paused at the top of the embankment, level with Ryan and J.B., and pointed down at them with a clawed finger.

Zimyanin joined the tracker and drew his Makarov pis-tol, holding it negligently in his right hand. He called down to the Americans in his best English. "I should have been able to guess the truth. Too nimble to be so clumsy. That is the word? 'Clumsy'? Yes. Come and join me, gentle-men, or I shall perforce pepper you with lead."

Ryan threw down the shovel. "No need. You got us cold. Pleasure to meet you again, Zimyanin. Real pleasure."

Chapter Thirty-Two

AS THEY PICKED their way up the slippery slope of the em-bankment, Ryan whispered a single word to his friend, which was barely audible.

"Soonest."

That was all.

But it was enough for J.B. to understand Ryan's ap-praisal of the situation. They were about to be locked tight in the sec cage, and once inside, it would be close to im-possible to get out.

It was soonest or it was never.

ZIMYANIN CLENCHED his fists in delight, so hard that the crescent nails drew tiny semicircles of blood from his palms. The squall of driving rain didn't bother him, and everything around him seemed to have receded into a gray blur. Aliev, the sec men, his wag with its engine still run-ning, the watching workers... everything had faded away at his moment of supreme triumph.

American spies. Comrade General Josef Siraksi would come fawning around, begging for the chance to press his tongue against Zimyanin's ass. The Party would rise as one and applaud his brilliance. No decoration would be re-fused him, no medal with oak leaves or platinum circle would be withheld from Hero Gregori Zimyanin.

Supreme Marshal Zimyanin.

The small matter of his wife's unexplained disappear-ance would not be discussed. It would be something to be swept smilingly beneath the bureaucratic carpet.

First Secretary Zimyanin.

The two Americans were nearly on the road. The teem-ing rain washed the mud from their faces, revealing the dark pit of shadow where the taller man had lost an eye.

Party President Zimyanin.

"NEARLY DAWN," Jak announced, easing the stiffness from his narrow shoulders.

"Rain way off to the north, falling from the gray bellies of those low clouds. Ryan and J.B.'ll be getting wet. Again." Krysty brushed a stray tendril of curling red hair behind her ear. In the room beneath them, Doc and Rick were both sleeping—the sleep of the elderly and the sleep of the terminally ill.

"Soon be time get freezie working on broken door," Jak said.

"Leave him a while longer. He doesn't have that many more mornings left."

Jak sighed and leaned on his elbows. In the opalescent glow of the dawn, the albino teenager looked absurdly young and innocent. And in dire need of sleep.

"Wish Ryan was here," he muttered.

Krysty smiled at him. "Me too, Jak. Yeah, me too."

"I AM DELIGHTED to make your acquaintance again, gentlemen. I am Major-Commissar Gregori Zimyanin. And you are... ?" He paused as the book on conversation and etiquette had advised him, holstering the unnecessary blaster.

"I'm J.B. Dix."

"Ryan Cawdor."

"We will have so much to discuss. I trust you will be able to accept my hospitality?"

Everyone was standing around in a puzzled, frozen tab-leau, puzzled at the way the sec officer seemed able to communicate with these saboteurs in their own drawling, gobbling language, frozen at the ease with which the ma-jor-commissar had penetrated their cunning disguises.

The shorter of them was pulling out a pair of glasses and placing them carefully on his nose. The other was tying a patch over the socket of his missing eye. Neither looked to be very dangerous.

"Pride comes before a fall," Zimyanin stated, delighted at his own linguistic cleverness, half bowing to the man called Ryan Cawdor.

"And the man who laughs last gets to laugh the longest, Major," Ryan replied, drawing his blaster in an unflurried, undramatic way. He leveled it at the sec officer's stomach. "Get in the fucking wag, Russkie. Now!"

J.B.'s Steyr AUG filled his hand, the muzzle weaving like the head of a cobra, seeming to menace every man there. He had moved in close to Zimyanin, using the sec man's stocky body as cover. There was a still moment, such as when the crystal goblet seems to hang for an eternity between the careless hand and the implacable flagstone.

"Tell them to move away and not try anything stupid, Gregori," Ryan ordered.

"Nyet."

"Da. Tell them or we all die."

Putting it that way, Ryan removed the only card that the Russian could have played.

"They do not have the gift of the English language as we do," Zimyanin objected, keeping an icy calm that concealed the blazing oven of his rage. To have them safe and then for this to happen! He wanted to turn on them and rend the flesh from their effete American faces.

"Russian then. Tell them to back off. We three take the wag. We'll watch behind us. First sign of a chase and you get a bullet in the belly and one in each knee and elbow. Make sure your passing's the pain you deserve. Under-stand?"

Zimyanin understood enough. The words were fast and harsh, but he could catch the gist of it. The muzzle of the powerful, silenced SIG-Sauer pressed uncomfortably hard into the flat, muscular wall of his stomach. The American's finger was white on the narrow trigger of the blaster.

Speaking slowly, voice raised so that everyone could hear him, Zimyanin did what Ryan had told him to do. More or less.

"They can not escape for long," the Russian told his forces. "But if we take them now, many will die. I will go with them in the wag. You must not follow close or they will begin shooting. Wait until we are out of sight. Then follow. In time, we will catch them and they will pay the final price for their acts of hatred and of blood."

"He preaching a sermon, Ryan?" J.B. asked. "Best shut him up."

"Yeah." Ryan jammed the pistol harder into the stomach of the Russian security officer, making him gasp in pain and end his flow of instructions.

"I have done everything that you wished," the Russian grunted, struggling for breath. He privately promised himself the pleasure of slowly executing the tall, curly-headed American.

"Then get in the car. Front passenger seat. I'll drive. J.B., cover from the back seat."

"Sure."

It was going to work.

The men standing knee-deep in the sludge at the river's edge were hardly likely to risk interfering. They'd already been plucked off the streets and from their nearby homes to do a filthy job for the Party, working at gunpoint. It didn't matter that much to them who was behind the gun.

The security men out in the rain, and those who still lurked in the heavy eight-wheel wags behind, wouldn't risk doing anything that would jeopardize a senior officer such as Zimyanin. Their discipline and their lack of independence made that certain.

And Gregori Zimyanin, with the barrel of a 9 mm pistol shoved hard against his abdomen, was going to be very cautious before he made any sudden moves.

And that was all.

All but one.

Tracker Aliev had been sheltering in the lee of the auto-wag, trying to protect his ruined face from the chilly rain. Now he saw his beloved master being taken away at gun-point. If Zimyanin was taken, then Aliev knew his shield and protection would be removed.

"In the wag," Ryan repeated, eye raking the watchers, making sure nobody was going to try anything particularly stupid or dangerous. He kept his free hand lightly on the Russian sec officer's shoulder, feeling the tightness of the man's muscles, ready to detect even the slightest move-ment.

Zimyanin looked as if he were going to cooperate, but Ryan was surprised and impressed by the rippling power he could feel in the man's upper body.

J.B. was halfway in the vehicle, holding the door open against the rising wind when Aliev came out of the darkness.

He attacked on Ryan Cawdor's blind side in a snuffling, howling, sideways shuffle, reaching out with his horn-tipped fingers to tear the face off the man who threatened his master.

"Ryan!" the Armorer yelled, hampered from shooting by the door of the wag.

But his shout of warning was enough, giving Ryan the edge of time that he needed. He spun around and put a bullet through Aliev's face, a couple of inches above the sodden rag that covered his missing nose and jaw.

The little man's feet skittered out from under him and he slid in the dirt, rolling twice by Zimyanin's feet. He ended up staring sightlessly into the driving rain that bounced off his blind eyeballs. Death gave Aliev a serenity that he had never enjoyed in life.

The sound of the pistol was muted by the silencer, and it was some moments before everyone realized that Ryan had shot and killed the Mongolian tracker.

Then there was a burst of angry chatter. The sec men looked at one another, nervously fingering their rifles. They glanced at Zimyanin in case he was somehow able to give them some fresh orders.

"Tell them to be careful, Major," Ryan warned.

"I am sorry to have lost the poor dumb beast. He was always steadfast, loyal and true," the Russian said sadly.

"Tell them!"

Zimyanin called out to his men. "Do what I told you. Don't attempt anything foolish."

"Didn't want to chill the little guy, Major," Ryan said, easing Zimyanin backward toward the wag.

"He was very wretched. It was always hard to find enough rubles to pay a woman of the streets to lie with him. Such is life."

"Move it. Drop that blaster in the dirt before you get in. Good. Watch him, J.B., while I get in."

The engine sounded rough as Ryan revved it, and he was worried that the ceaseless rain might make it stall. But it picked up as soon as he trod on the gas pedal a few times.

Zimyanin sat quietly as they drove away. The wheels slid sideways toward the river, and Ryan corrected the drift. J.B. kept his pistol at the Russian's nape, glancing through the rear window to make sure there was no pursuit.

"You told them to start after us as soon as we're out of sight, Major?" Ryan asked.

"Your assumption is correct, Mr. Cawdor. Indeed I did."

"Black dust!" J.B. exclaimed. "The Russkie speaks more like Doc Tanner than Doc Tanner does!"

"Is my English less than impeccable? Must I apologize for its deficiencies?" Zimyanin asked.

"You speak good, Major, Better than me or J.B., and that's the truth." Ryan checked the mirror, unable to see anything in the rain.

"How come you're in Moscow, Major?" J.B. asked. "You were in Alaska."

"I hated the coldness, and I never relished the life with horses."

"Don't blame you," the Armorer agreed.

"And now you will transfer me to the choirs ethereal?" the Russian asked.

"How's that?" Ryan asked, swerving to avoid a rag-gedy child leading a patient donkey along, the side of the road.

"I shall be going to a far, far better place than I have ever known. You see that I am familiar with the work of your Mr. Dickens."

"Oh. You mean you think we're going to chill you?" Ryan said.

"Of course."

Ryan hadn't honestly given it that much thought. His main purpose had simply been to escape from the work gang and get back to the dacha to help fix the gateway and make the jump, if all went well, with the others.

But now that he did think about the problem of the pris-oner, it seemed that the easiest thing would be to put a bul-let through his brain and dump him by the side of the road. A dead enemy would never come after you in the dark hours of the night.

Then again, he didn't actually have any personal ani-mosity against Major-Commissar Gregori Zimyanin. He was a Russian, but that didn't necessarily mean that he was an evil person.

And bullets cost jack.

"I reckon not," he said eventually. "What d'you fig-ure, J.B.?"

"I figure bullets cost jack. There's nobody behind us, Ryan. Mebbe the major's ridden far enough with us right now."

"Yeah," Ryan agreed. "So long, Gregori. Guess we won't ever meet up again."

"You will not cause me any dying?"

"No." Ryan slowed the wag to little more than a walk-ing pace and peered through the windshield seeing that they were coming to an area of dense forest on both sides of the blacktop.

"You wish me to disembark?" Bewilderment was evi-dent in Zimyanin's voice.

Ryan couldn't avoid a smile. "Yeah, Gregori. We want you to disembark. Right now would be a real good time."

Zimyanin opened the car door, letting in a gust of damp, fresh air. He glanced behind him at J.B., then across at Ryan as though he were making sure that their faces were well fixed in his memory. Then he jumped. Despite the puddles and the mud, he succeeded in keeping his balance, running a few steps, then standing still.

J.B. gave a casual wave out of the back window of the wag, but Zimyanin didn't respond. He knew that some of the sec-troop wags would be along shortly, but he didn't look around for them. He stood and watched the spot on the highway where the Americans and the stolen wag had vanished.

His face showed no expression at all.

Chapter Thirty-Three

RYAN AND J.B. eventually reached the ravaged mansion in the early hours of the evening. Both were soaked to the skin from the rain, which had continued to pound the country-side throughout the morning and afternoon. As they'd gotten closer to the dirt-poor ville, they'd decided to abandon the wag so that they wouldn't attract unwanted attention.

Krysty greeted them at the open front door, hugging Ryan with a sudden strength that took his breath and made his ribs creak.

"Fireblast! You'll snap my spine, lover." He kissed her on her warm cheeks with his cold, wet lips.

"Good to see you again, lover. Gaia! But it's so good."

"How about me, Krysty?" J.B. grinned and eased himself out of his sopping furs.

"Hell, I knew you'd make it. Uncle Tyas McCann used to say it was often the runt of the litter that survived."

"How's Rick? They made it safe?"

"Yeah. Jak was beat. Nearest to the line I've ever seen him. Slept ten hours straight through. He's up now with Doc, looking at the gateway and trying to figure out how those tools can help us."

Ryan let go of her and took a half step back. "You still haven't said how Rick is, lover. Guess that must mean bad."

She nodded. "Bad. I've tried using the healing skills that Mother Sonja taught me."

"No good?"

"No."

"He's not dead?" J.B. asked after pushing the door closed, having taken a good look around the dusk-gray fields.

"Close. Doc wondered about trying to help him down those stairs so he could talk us through the repairs."

"He conscious?"

"Some of the time." She hesitated. "Not all of the time."

"How long?"

Krysty shook her head. She, too, looked close to ex-haustion. The flaming crimson of her hair was dulled and coiled flat against her head, not tumbling free and fiery over her shoulders as it usually did. There were dark rings beneath her startlingly green eyes.

"Way I see it, it's coming down to hours, lover. Only hours. The muscles are all failing, like a machine where every part quits at once. He's having a real hard time swallowing."

"Best go see him."

"In there." She pointed across the hall to the main shuttered chamber.

Rick's eyes were open as Ryan, Krysty and J.B. walked in on him. He was lying in a corner of the room, under piles of furs, barely visible.

"Hi, guys. You made it." His voice was slurred and slow.

"How is it?" Ryan asked.

"That's like... like askin' Mrs. Lincoln if she liked the play." He croaked a laugh, like a raven, very far off.

"Listen, Rick." Ryan knelt down at his side, Krysty and J.B. standing behind him. There was the sound of footsteps, and Ryan turned to see that Doc and Jak had also entered the room.

"Go ahead, man. Speaking's getting harder, but I can still listen real good."

"We got clear of the ville. But we faced up with that sec man, Gregori Zimyanin. Mebbe we should have chilled him. I don't know. There's too many throats to try and cut them all."

"You fear that the Russians might try to pursue us?" Doc asked.

"Yeah. Their tracker got wasted. But Zimyanin's not a stupe. He got a map and he'll have sec reports. Food stolen from villes around. Won't take him that long to start drawing some lines and find that they all connect close by here. Then it's only an hour or so before we get visitors."

Rick swallowed several times, as though he were trying to summon up strength to speak, coughing to clear his throat. A shimmering ghost of a near-smile appeared and hung on his lips for a few heartbeats, then vanished.

"You mean get my finger out of the hole, Ryan. Time's a wasting. Sure. You get me down to the gateway and sit me comfortable and... Hell's bells, it hurts... Help me get there and we'll save the ship."

"When, Ryan?" Jak asked.

"Now."

"THERE WERE SOME KILLINGS. Some men disappeared. I want the request taken to my office. Clerk Second Class Alicia Andreyinichna will know. I must know as soon as possible. While we wait, I want men to sweep every stinking hovel for twenty miles around. I want word of food or clothes being taken. Word of any strangers. Word of hearing blasters. Tracks. Wags. Anything that's even a breath away from the ordinary. Anything at all. Understand? Good. Then get on with it. I'm sure we're close. I want to be closer."

WHEN THEY HELPED RICK to his feet, Ryan saw that the tattered and scorched American flag was neatly folded at his side. The freezie was almost helpless, unable to stand unaided. Outside, the skies had cleared and the temperature had dropped below zero. Krysty had suggested a fire to keep the glow of life in Rick, but Ryan vetoed the idea. The smoke from the chimney would carry for miles and would lead any pursuers to them as surely as a bank of floodlights.

Zorro was underfoot as they began to move Rick up the main stairs of the house. Ryan nearly tripped over the puppy and kicked out at it.

"Fireblast, Doc! Keep the bitching dog out of the way or I'll snap its neck."

"Stow it, lover," Krysty protested. "It's only a little dog."

Ryan turned quickly and faced her angrily. "I meant what I said. This isn't some double-easy kids' game. I figure we have to be out of this place one way or another by the end of tomorrow. Probably sooner. Or the Russkies'll pick us off easy as a bear plucking ripe thimbleberries."

ZIMYANIN WAS ONLY a handful of miles away from the dacha by sunset of the same day. He'd enlisted one of the gangs of teenage wolverines from the nearest suburb, knowing that their blind loyalty to the Party and their in-satiable relish for cruelty and death made them the perfect instruments of terror.

It had taken irritatingly long for the information he wanted to be transmitted from his office in Moscow. When it came, nobody had a decent map of the area. Zimyanin was finding that his patience was slipping from his control like sand through an hourglass. Everything was going wrong. If Aliev had still been alive he was confident that Cawdor, Dix and the rest of the spies would already be dangling from a convenient branch. If his bosses hadn't ordered them back to the ville for some popular show trials.

Now they were still at liberty and he didn't know where.

The news was beginning to filter in to him from the wolf pack.

A lad of twelve, with webbed fingers, brought word of food disappearing from some wretched collection of hov-els to the southwest.

Always to the southwest.

Another boy, who seemed incapable of not picking his nose, said there was talk of a giant lone wolf that was raid-ing some of the hamlets, stealing food.

"Southwest?" Zimyanin asked, already knowing the answer. He wasn't surprised when the boy nodded his agreement.

By evening the local sec commander had finally been lo-cated. He had been off on a secret mission that involved some illicit cheese and beef, which he was taking a per-centage of. His sister-in-law had tracked him down with the sickening news that some stone-eyed bastard of a senior sec officer wanted him urgently.

Pausing only to change his undershorts, the man rushed along to meet with Zimyanin. To his enormous relief the Muscovite didn't seem concerned about where he'd been or even what he'd been doing. Zimyanin simply wanted to draw on his specialized local information, briefing him on the situation and asking him for his thoughts.

"They are hiding," Zimyanin concluded.

"Yes, Comrade Major-Commissar. But you do not think that they might have simply kept running? That their base is farther out?"

Zimyanin had taken off his cap with the silver circle, and he rubbed his hand over his bald skull. He considered the suggestion, but swiftly rejected it.

"No."

"But they—"

"No. I plotted all reports. All of them. They began a few miles from here. No farther. And now they go back by precisely the same route. They are hiding someplace close by. I saw a name on a map. The name was Peredelkino."

The sec commander nodded thoughtfully, his brain sharpened by his fear that his black-market dealings might be discovered, and honed further by relief that they hadn't been.

"Peredelkino? Yes, I know it. The stories are that Stalin provided large houses there. In fact, I believe that the Americans were given one."

"You are sure? A dacha that was once owned by the Americans, at Peredelkino? Then we have them, Mother Russia! We have them!"

"We must mount an attack," Zimyanin continued. "Not a massive attack. It might come to that, but I want to try to take them by surprise. Send me the vicious little bastard who runs the pack."

Chapter Thirty-Four

"YOU SURE ARE one powerful woman, Krysty," Ryan said, shaking his head as he saw again the full extent of the damage done to the locking mechanism of the gateway door.

"Not my strength," she replied. "I can only do that by calling on the Earth Mother. You know that."

"Sure."

He looked at the twisted metal, with entrails of the lock hanging out. Doc was at his elbow, peering at the wreck-age.

"A sorry sight, my dear Ryan. Depressing to see the cunning works of man's hands laid so sadly low, is it not?"

"It is, Doc."

"I confess that I have spent some totally unprofitable hours while you were away, down here in the bowels of the earth. I was trying to work out some way whereby we might bypass the lock and trigger the jump mechanism from within."

"Nothing?" Ryan asked.

"It is a poor craftsman who blames his tools. I had no tools to blame."

"How about now," J.B. suggested, "with what we brought?"

Doc scratched the side of his nose in a vaguely rumina-tive manner. "Perhaps. And, then again, perhaps not."

"Yes," Rick muttered. Then, much louder, "Yes, we can!"

"Sure?"

There was a sudden, startling and hectic glow in his sunken eyes. "We can, Ryan.

Don't doubt it, buddy. Just get the guys lifting barges and toting bales and all that shit. It'll take us the best part of six or eight hours." Another fit of hideous, racking coughs shook his whole frail body. "If we're lucky, that is."

THE BOY WHO LED the pack of sec brats was only a year or so younger than Jak Lauren. He had the same sharp planes to the bones of his face and the same blank killer's eyes.

He wore a cut-down woman's jacket in pale blue artificial silk, the sleeves hacked out and the front daubed with maroon circles of paint. The pants were small sec-issue, tucked into a worn pair of canvas boots. The ubiquitous strangler's cord—the badge of the leader in a wolf pack—was tucked into the narrow belt.

The gang was a little larger than most. Zimyanin had counted eighteen of them, about half girls.

"You understand what I want you to do?"

For several seconds the boy said nothing, his face showing as much emotion as a slab of weathered stone. The officer wondered if he might be deaf, or very simpleminded and was about to repeat the question. But the kid's mouth clicked open and words came out slowly.

"Yes, Comrade Major-Commissar." Another long, long pause. "We will approach and enter the large house there. We will kill all we find. If we are seen and stopped, we come back and we report to you."

"No, no, no! Don't kill them *all*. I want the one-eyed man, the cripple and the woman with red hair spared and taken alive. Alive! You understand what that word means?"

"It means not dead, Comrade Major-Commissar. Not dead."

"Good."

"But, Comrade Major-Commissar," the boy continued, "if we have to make them all not alive, what then?"

"Then you make them all not alive. But I most earnestly want that one-eyed man not dead. Him more than the others."

"Yes," he replied, nodding.

As the boy walked slowly away to pass on the orders to his gang, Zimyanin watched him. "What a strangely gifted child," he said quietly in English. "Such a credit to his parents. Not that anyone would ever claim the credit for having birthed that monster."

THE WRENCHES WERE a hundred years old, the metal corroded and frail. To try to use them with a man's full power behind the effort would mean a handful of twisted rust. Everything had to be done so gently and cautiously.

Ryan was only too conscious that every hour sliding past doubled the threat from the Russian security forces. He was already regretting leaving Gregori Zimyanin alive. It would have been worth the price of a bullet to remove him from the game. But regrets were a valueless currency, and Ryan didn't waste much time thinking about it. But he did make sure that anyone not working down in the cellars of the mansion was up top, watching for the inevitable attack.

After two hours of intensive labor, Rick said that he felt that they were actually making some real progress.

"Got most of the lock opened up. Damage isn't as bad as it might have been. Bring me in closer. Gotta be able to see real good. And help me to a drink, one of you."

His swallowing was painful to see and hear. The disease was now racing so fast through his body that he needed continuous support. He was sweating constantly, though the subterranean rooms were bone-cold.

"How much longer do you figure, Rick?" Krysty asked as she took the mug of

water from the freezie's lips.

"How long's a piece of string, lady? How high's up? How when's now? Just gotta keep doin' it my way. Suck it up and spit it out. I'll sit this one out, if you don't..." A coughing fit choked off the slurred, rambling words.

ZIMYANIN CALLED OVER the elderly captain who was act-ing as liaison with the local militia. "While the wolves go in, I want something in reserve."

"The little ones will not fail you, Comrade Major-Commissar."

"I do not believe they will succeed, but I am prepared to take that chance, Comrade Captain. I think that they will find themselves outmatched."

"They have removed many undesirables from these parts," the other officer protested.

Zimyanin gave a harsh barking laugh. "A mongrel might kill a hundred rats and think itself czar of the world, Com-rade Captain. Then it will meet a bear."

"I understand. The Americans are dangerous, Comrade Major-Commissar?"

"Do the lakes freeze in winter, Comrade Captain? Yes, I believe they are more dangerous than anyone you will ever again encounter. Which is why I want all the reinforcements possible. Send men and roust out every male peasant between thirteen and fifty for ten miles around."

"You want me to...?" the older man began, his face puzzled.

"In olden times generals used the words 'cannon fodder,' Comrade Captain. I want as many bodies as I can to throw against that house. Better to have fifty men too many than one too few."

RYAN WAS TAKING A BREAK, squatting on the floor near one of the long

elegant casements on the second story, keeping watch out across the silent fields. It had become colder, and his breath hung around his mouth like lace.

There were two races going on: one to repair the gateway before any sec men tracked them down, the other to repair the gateway before Rick Ginsberg slipped from the present into the past.

He'd walked slowly around the mansion with J.B. an hour ago, trying to guess where an attack might come, where there were weak points and where they might hope to make some kind of a defense.

"Like stopping a war wag with a sheet of wet paper," had been J.B.'s comment.

Ryan hadn't argued with it.

What they'd agreed was that they couldn't hope to fend off a serious assault on the house. There were too many ways in and not enough people to defend them. On the plus side, it was a solidly made building and it would take some hi-ex to take it apart. But if the Russians brought along gren launchers, then it wouldn't take that long to bring the walls down, though the secret stairs and the basement area would be difficult to penetrate and destroy.

Ryan glanced around the room and out onto the landing at the top of the stairs. That was where they might hold them up for a while. There had been a second flight of steps from the first floor, but it had been burned out years ear-lier. If the Russians wanted to take them, they would have to come up the front stairs.

J.B. had suggested the possibility of burning them out, as well, but the smoke would have attracted too much in-terest too soon. Better to let them come in and chill as many as possible.

Seeing friends fall, and being splashed with the blood and brains of companions, often acted as something of a deterrent.

THE INTRICATE WORK on the inside of the mat-trans lock was being carried

out by Doc Tanner, working with a small screwdriver and a soldering unit while Rick watched every move. Krysty was the nurse to Doc's surgeon, handing him the tools he needed and acting as a third hand when some particularly complex and delicate maneuver was called for.

The comp-units still chattered quietly to themselves and panels of colored lights flickered and danced across the display boards.

At one point Rick turned to Krysty. "Don't forget. There are two more cryogenic complexes. Could be folks frozen like me, but maybe not so sick. Ryan knows where they are. I told him what I knew."

"I know, Rick," she replied. "One in south Texas, one up near where the Lakes were."

"Duluth, Minnesota. Ryan knows as near as I could tell him. Could be worth a look."

RYAN WALKED around the second floor, carefully check-ing out of every window, keeping himself flattened against the walls so that nobody outside would see him. It worried Ryan that the land was so much in deep shadow, with ditches and folds in the ground creating blind spots.

He stepped out of the most westerly room and saw four skinny kids approaching the top of the main stairs.

"Fireblast!" he roared.

Chapter Thirty-Five

RYAN FIRED four quick shots at the invading wolf pack. One was a clean kill through the side of the head, sending the young girl tumbling down the wide staircase.

One clipped the leader of the gang in the left shoulder, spinning him around as he uttered an eerie shriek of pain. The boy grabbed at the wound and dropped the garrote in the dust.

The other two rounds missed completely. Streetwise fighters almost from birth, the kids' reflexes were startlingly fast. One microsecond they were there, the next they disappeared. It flashed through Ryan's mind that the young 'uns were cut from the same cloth as Jak Lauren—reared as killers, with no fear and no pity.

Before the tangled corpse of the girl had reached the hall below, two out of the other three had darted to safety. The leader, despite his shoulder, slid down the oak balustrade, tumbling into a somersault to vanish into the shadows of the first floor. The other girl vaulted the rail and dropped lightly to land on her feet and race away. The second boy was marginally less agile. So he died.

He stumbled as he landed, twisting his ankle. Ryan shot him through the back of the neck with a single round from the SIG-Sauer.

Apart from the breathy death rattle of the boy below, the house was suddenly, creepily silent. Ryan crouched near the top of the stairs, assuming he would hit them before any of them had managed a bridgehead on the second story. But he had no idea at all how many of the marauders were lurking on the floor below him.

Ryan's normal fighting calm and confidence had been shaken. It had never occurred to him that the enemy could infiltrate the house so easily, without being spotted. He'd imagined that there would be time enough to climb into the ruined attic and shout down to the others at the bottom of the winding stairs. But now...

It was a classic horns of a dilemma. If he risked going up to warn J.B., Krysty and Jak, then the gang might come swarming up after him and he'd be overwhelmed by num-bers.

If he stayed where he was, the kids might bring in reinforcements and take him out before J.B. and the rest even knew there was danger.

Being the man he was, Ryan picked the third option. Blaster in hand, he slowly began to pick his way *down* the stairs, toward the ground floor where the wolf pack was hiding.

"NOT MUCH MORE. Check that the color-contacts are all connected, slide the replacement board in and cut the element force chips. Crosscurrent on the supplementary command and instruct modules. Good. Hell's bells! Let me down a little. Lay me against those gas cans. Support my back."

Rick was well into borrowed time.

Krysty was astounded at the delicacy of touch that Doc showed as he worked with microfibers and contacts, deftly repairing broken circuits where possible and looping around them when the damage was too severe. Without his scientific skill she doubted that the work would ever have been completed successfully.

But now they were nearly done.

She'd been concentrating all of her attention on helping Rick and trying to flood him with her own healing powers. Now, for a moment she could relax and open her mind.

Krysty felt it immediately.

"Gaia!" she shouted.

"What?" J.B. asked, swinging around to face her, eyes widening in concern when he saw her shocked expression.

"They're in. Oh, Ryan, lover..."

RYAN RACKED HIS BRAIN, trying to remember whether any of the street brats in the gang they'd watched in the ville had been carrying blasters. Certainly none of the four at the top of the stairs had been toting guns. There'd been enough moonlight through the cobwebbed windows to see clearly, and Ryan's night vision had always been good.

But a knife could chill you just as surely as a full-metal jacket. And it was a knife thrown from the darkness of one of the rooms that confirmed Ryan's suspicion that the pack hadn't fled the building.

His eye caught the flicker of movement and he ducked, hearing the steel whisper through the cold air. The blade thudded point first into the paneling that flanked the stairs.

It wasn't a good idea to be caught halfway up and halfway down. Feather-light on his feet, Ryan ran down the last few steps into the hall and knelt, waiting for someone to make a move.

Despite their reflexes, the children weren't all that good at this kind of game. Give them a mutie gimp to mock, chase, trip and throttle, and they were experts. But put them in a silent house, against a man with a silenced blaster, and their nerves began to turn ragged.

Ryan tested what he could hear, smell and feel, using all of his hunter's senses: shuffling feet and a faint whisper from the large back room, the smell of sweat and fear, rank and heavy, from the same place.

And the feeling.

Ryan had lived through hundreds of such moments all over Deathlands, with friends and alone—the feeling that the scythe hung suspended in the air above your neck, that people would begin to die within a handful of heartbeats.

That feeling was as familiar to Ryan Cawdor as breath-ing. But the street gang wasn't used to it. They were urban hunters and chillers, used to running down weaker prey through ruined alleys and using their superior numbers to take them

out.

This was different.

Two of them already lay dead, out in the stillness of the shadow-laked hall. Their leader, Dmitri, was wounded, blood leaking from the bullet hole near his shoulder. And there was an avenging angel waiting for them, still and patient. They huddled in the cavernous corners of the big room, gripping their knives and razors, trying to hold their breath.

There was the faintest creak of a floorboard behind Ryan. Someone descended the stairs. Moonlight flickered off something like polished metal or glass.

"Ryan?" The word was softer than a sigh.

"J.B.? In main back room. Could be five or six, probably more. Kids. Figure they're all shit-scared by now. Mebbe no blasters."

The voice of the Armorer was so quiet that it scarcely disturbed the tiny motes of dust that floated in the spears of moonlight. "Then let's go get 'em. I gotta mag-gren. Blinder. Been saving it for something like this."

"Ready," Ryan whispered.

That was all he needed to say.

ZIMYANIN HAD BEEN WATCHING the house through a pair of borrowed field glasses. He pulled away the eyepieces with a curse. "What the...!"

A sudden dazzling flash of burning white light had erupted somewhere inside the dacha. Even at that distance it was enough to almost blind him, making him blink and rub his eyes to try to remove the tiny specks of crimson that blurred his vision.

Then came a spattering of spaced shots, some desultory cries and a single scream,

which was followed by darkness and silence.

"That's it," Zimyanin crowed in triumph.

THE MAG-GEN WAS only the size of a hen's egg and made of dull metal. A colored strip ran around its top to differentiate it from shrapnel, implodes, frags and stuns.

Ryan closed his eye, covered it with the flat of his left hand and turned his head away from the impending explosion. The effect of a mag-gren at close range was, quite literally, blinding.

J.B. lobbed the small grenade across the hallway, under-handed. It bounced once into the rear chamber, then exploded with a muffled plopping sound.

Despite all his precautions, Ryan was conscious of the burst of stunning light that the mag-gren released on impact. It filtered through his hand and through the closed eyelid, like the glow of a distant forest fire. He could hear J.B. counting in a quiet, controlled voice.

"Four and five and six and seven and eight. That's it, Ryan."

He opened his eye, stepping to one side of the doorway. The grenade had blazed through its phase of devastating white light, and was now burning with a steady red glow. J.B. moved into place on the other side of the doorway.

The gutter brats were all there. Ryan counted around a dozen, scattered about the room. All were crouched and huddled, hands pressed against streaming, blinded eyes. If you weren't ready for a mag-gren, the intensity of the light could literally burn out your retinas. Some of the kids were crying, others staggered about, waving their weapons helplessly in the empty air. Not one of them posed any sort of threat to J.B. or Ryan.

"Bullets cost," the Armorer reminded him.

"Fuck that," Ryan snapped. "No different than chill-ing a pack of rabid dogs."

The executions took less than a minute. Each man walked carefully around the chamber, avoiding the desper-ate lunges of the children with their homemade knives and boned razors. Getting behind them, one by one they put them away with a single round through the back of the head.

The leader was last to go. Hearing the single, spaced shots, and the thumping sounds as the corpses of his gang hit the floor, he retreated into a corner. Blood leaked, for-gotten, from the wound to his shoulder. Eyes squeezed tight, he waved a bone-handled knife with a serrated edge toward the sound of the approaching men, trying to hold them off.

"Like a trapped polecat." J.B. leveled his blaster and squeezed the trigger once.

The 5.6 mm round hit the teenager through the temple, kicking his skull back against the wall. As the boy slid sideways, he left a smear of dark blood and brains in a gruel on the faded paint. Tiny splinters of bone gleamed white against the crimson.

"Thats it," Ryan said.

"Like fish in a barrel," J.B. agreed. There was no regret in his voice for the bloody massacre. He knew why the children had creepy-crawled into the old mansion. He and Ryan had beaten them by being much better. It wasn't a game, not when losing was terminal.

"Gren's near finished," Ryan observed, carefully re-loading his pistol.

"Caught in the floor." J.B. walked across the room, stepping over one of the corpses, the soles of his combat boots peeling stickily from the blood-soaked wood. He nudged away the molten remnants of the grenade with his toe, stamping out the circle of glowing charcoal.

"Don't want the whole place going up in smoke," Ryan said, holstering the silenced blaster at his right hip.

"Not yet. Mebbe when we get out of here. After the jump. Be good way to leave it for the Reds. Handful of ashes."

"How's the gateway?" He paused. "And how did *you* know there was trouble?"

"I felt it," Krysty said from halfway down the stairs.

"How's the work?"

"Getting there." She walked into the hall and looked into the back room, where the grenade had almost burned out. "Gaia! Seems like you chilled a whole kindergarten in here."

"Them or us, lover."

ZIMYANIN WAITED another thirty minutes on the chance that someone might come from the dark bulk of the man-sion and tell him what was going on. But in his heart he knew what had happened. Ryan Cawdor and his terrorist gang had been far too good for the wolf pack. He felt no grief for the murderous gang of young thugs.

"They who live by the sword shall surely perish by the sword," he said to himself in English. His 1911 phrase book had a section devoted to popular proverbs and say-ings.

"What are we to do, Comrade Major-Commissar? We have collected many local villagers, as you instructed."

Zimyanin tugged thoughtfully at the drooping ends of his mustache. "Time to remove the glove of velvet and use the fist of steel. We will attack in force."

Chapter Thirty-Six

"NOT THAT LONG TO DAWN," Doc said, glancing at the sky through the crooked timbers of the roof. Old beams, fire-marked, some with the original shingles, were still nailed in place.

Nearly a half hour had passed since the explosion of the mag-gren and the butchery of the killing pack of teen-agers. There'd been no sign of any further hostile activity from the dark fields, though Ryan was certain that there was a sizable force hiding out there. Probably less than a mile away.

Only Krysty remained down in the basement with Rick. The work on the gateway was nearly done. The main wir-ing had been repaired, and the damaged metal hammered and pressed back into something approximating the proper shape. Some final work remained replacing lock plates and checking the fittings on the main gateway contacts. Krysty could handle that with some guidance from Rick.

Jak and Doc had joined J.B. and Ryan on the upper floors of the rambling dacha, each with his blaster at the ready. Both J.B. and Ryan had fetched their assault rifles, hoping to deter an initial attack before it got too close.

"Light'll help us more than them," Jak said, squinting at the distant village. He was wearing his fur coat, and his white hair floated about his shoulders like living frost in the cold wind that winnowed in from the east.

"Sure. We can pick them off from cover. If they don't use any heavy-ex they'll have to get close to shift us." Ryan glanced at the secret door, knowing that once they re-treated inside it, their options became limited.

They could make the jump successfully, surrender... or die.

"SEND THEM IN," Zimyanin ordered. "Hold the sec pa-trols in reserve back by

the wags. I want to keep the chillings to a minimum among our men. Tell them to hurry. It'll be first light before long. Then the advantage will lie with them."

"HERE THEY COME," J.B. said. "From toward the river. Anything on any other side?"

"Nothing," Jak replied from the rear.

"No." Doc's voice floated from the attic. "Not a creature is stirring. Not even a mouse."

"Nothing this side," Ryan added. "Looks like a one-in, all-in attack then. How many?"

"Around thirty or forty, straggling. Can't see sec men. Most got muskets and old blasters. Don't seem in too much of a hurry."

Ryan walked around to the front and called Jak to join him and J.B., leaving Doc to watch the other sides from the roofless attic.

"Zimyanin's using stupes as a first wave to draw fire, use up ammo. Mebbe take one or two of us out if they're lucky. Cold bastard!"

Zorro, tucked inside Doc's fur coat, whimpered.

The peasants were strung out across the field in a rough skirmishing line. They had proved so reluctant to follow the wolf pack toward the sinister dacha that Zimyanin had been forced to use a handful of his precious trained sec men to push the villagers along with the threat of a bullet in the back.

He watched them begin to advance, then turned to order the heavy wags to warm up their engines and to have the two gren launchers broken out and set up. He suspected that they might soon need them.

"TIME TO SLOW 'EM," J.B. said. "They're inside six hundred paces."

"Close enough," Ryan agreed.

His Heckler & Koch G-12 caseless rifle bragged a laser-enhanced sniper scope. He pressed the butt into his shoulder and squinted along the barrel, seeing the slow-moving serpent that wound its way toward them. A faint mist was rising from the river, drifting lazily across the fields. It enveloped the feet of the advancing Russians, rising to their waists, so that they seemed to be wading through water.

J.B. fired his H&K MP-7 SD-8, the integral silencer making each round sound like a dainty sneeze. The rifle also had a laser-optic sight that made the targets as clear as day.

Both men had their long-range blasters set on single-shot, not wanting to waste any ammo on triple-burst or full-auto. At less than half a mile, against such passive victims, single shots were all it took.

"BY LENIN'S TOMB! They will kill them all, long before they reach the house."

Zimyanin nodded. "I think so. I hadn't known they had rifles. Such men would be skillful with such weapons. Yes, Comrade, I think you are right. Pass the order."

"To retreat, Comrade Major-Commissar?"

"No. To advance on the double."

"But—"

"But what, Comrade?" His voice was like a steel blade caressing the jugular.

"They are being smoothed away by the blasters of the terrorists."

"Correct. And the terrorists will not have that much ammunition. The more they waste on that stinking offal, the less they will have to shoot at our sec men when they go in. Carry out my order, quickly, will you, Comrade?"

"Yes, Comrade Major-Commissar."

"And bring up the gren launchers. We shall be needing them soon. Very soon."

THE BODIES FLOPPED to the freezing mud at regular inter-vals. Zimyanin's planning was partly correct. Neither Ryan nor J.B. had a limitless supply of ammo. Both men found it hard to believe that the Russians kept on coming. In-deed, after a couple of minutes they began to move faster, their ambling walk speeding to a clumsy trot. And they be-gan to return fire with their antique muskets, though none of the shots reached the dacha.

In the first two and a half minutes, firing steadily and taking careful aim, Ryan and J.B. had put down over a dozen of the peasants, most dead before they hit the ground.

"How much longer before they quit?" the Armorer asked as he paused to wipe his glasses.

"I figure we'll chill every one of them before they get close enough to do us any serious harm. Looks to me like the sec men are driving them on."

"Mebbe we should lay them down first?"

"More we chill, the less there are to come at us again. Let them come, J.B., and we'll oblige them with a trip to the coast."

RICK HAD BEEN SLEEPING for several minutes while Krysty ran up to the top of the stairs to recce the situation. The freezie woke to the sound of her boot heels clattering on the steps as she came back down into the gateway control room.

"We winning?" he asked.

The woman told him what was happening and he nod-ded and smiled.

"Remember the Alamo," he croaked, coughing with the effort of speaking. "Ryan Crockett and J.B. Travis. Guess I'm like Jim Bowie, wounded down here. But I'm ready to take some of the bastards with me. Blow these gas cans to hell and back. Got a pyrotab, Krysty? Give it me."

"Don't be triple-stupe," she replied. "When we go you come with us. You don't need a pyrotab for anything."

The smile of the dying man grew broader, tearing at Krysty's heart. "Now who's... who's triple-stupe, lady? I know where I'm going, and...there won't be nobody on the road with me. Give me the firelighter. I can just make it, even with my fingers fucked."

Krysty reached in the pocket of her pants and handed him a small pyrotab. All Rick had to do was flip open a catch and he'd have instant ignition. With an effort Rick managed to grip the tab in one trembling hand.

"Thanks, sister. Hey, Santy Anna, we're killin' your soldiers so near, so the rest of Deathlands'll hear. And re-member... remember..." Another coughing fit made it impossible for him to carry on. Krysty knelt and helped him take a sip of water.

"THEY'RE RUNNING."

"Stop shooting," Ryan ordered. "Once they're broke, there's no profit in chilling any more of them."

The dawn's pale light was creeping across the misty land, throwing shadows ahead of the fleeing men and boys. By now the fog had filled in all of the hollows, so that most of the corpses lay invisible in the swirling whiteness.

"How many dead, Comrade Corporal?" Zimyanin asked. "You watched through

the glasses?"

"Yes, Comrade Major-Commissar," answered the young, smooth-chinned noncom. "I counted twenty-three fall, of which all but one failed to..." He lost the thread of his sentence through his fear of the blood-eyed officer.

Zimyanin smiled thinly. "You mean that twenty-two are dead and one wounded?"

"No, Comrade Major-Commissar. The wounded man rose and was shot immediately and fell again. He did not rise a second time."

"Thank you, soldier. Time for the final wave of the at-tack, I believe. Bring up the wags and ready the gren launchers. They are to fire only at my personal com-mand."

"THEY COME AGAIN?"

"Course they will, Jak," Ryan replied. "It's coming down to the gun. Russkies know we're here. Know we can't run."

"But we can jump," J.B. said. "Now the gateway's nearly ready."

Doc had been listening from the damaged floor above them, with Zorro cowering at his side. "The door is nearly completed, gentlemen. That is perfectly true. But I fear that it doesn't mean we will necessarily find the chamber work-ing when we attempt it. The only way to test it is to use it."

"What could go wrong, Doc?" Ryan asked.

"Who could know that, my dear friend? Who knows the face that launched a thousand ships and something some-thing the topless towers of somewhere or other? If you take my meaning."

"No."

"Tarnation! The mat-trans might simply not function at all and we shall look pretty fools sitting there waiting for our Communist friends to pop us in their bag. Or, it might work a little."

"Then fucking what, Doc?" Jak asked.

"Then we might all occupy a little space somewhere between the stars. A smudge of displaced molecules positioned roughly between eternity and infinity. I do not believe there would be much pain in such an ending."

"Thanks, Doc," Ryan said. "Sure gives us all something to chew on for a while."

"You're most welcome, my dear chap."

"SEND THEM BACK to their hovels. I want them out of the way before the final assault."

"They are unhappy, Comrade Major-Commissar. So many lost."

"They are not lost, you mumbling, fish-fucking cretin! If they are simply lost we can wait until the sun rises properly and burns away the mist. Then they will be found again. They are *not* lost! They are out there dead."

"The claims for..." the local commander continued, torn between fear of Gregori Zimyanin and the knowledge that the survivors would probably assassinate him for his part in the massacre.

"It will come under Industrial and Allied Pension and Personal Injury Claims, Comrade. Arrange for the appropriate forms to be handed out tomorrow."

"Yes, Comrade Major-Commissar."

"And tell the sec patrols we attack in precisely fifteen minutes. I want the one-eyed American in my hands within the hour."

Chapter Thirty-Seven

"NEXT TIME'LL BE the big one," Ryan predicted.

"Yeah," J.B. agreed. "Won't be a bunch of kids. Won't be a suicide squad of dirt-poor stupes. It'll be the sec men, and they won't give up easy."

"I can hear something," Krysty said, leaning against the window, head on one side. Doc had taken her place in the deep basement, checking over the last connections to the gateway. Rick had said that it should finally be ready within the hour. Ryan's worry was that they might not have that long before the Russians broke in.

"Wags?"

"Yeah. Four or five. There."

They could all see them, four wags that had come all the way from Moscow. Three of them had heavy armaplate on the front, protecting the cabs and the beds from ordinary bullets. Ryan guessed that they'd all be packed with armed sec men. They'd drive straight at the front of the house, and there was nothing the defenders could do to stop them.

"Any armapiercers, J.B.? Or any grens?"

The Armorer sniffed. "Nope. Not enough to stop them. You?"

Ryan shook his head. "Nothing. Could take out the tires when they get closer. Pick off one or two when they break for the house."

"Burn big stairs," Jak suggested, eagerly handling his huge cannon of a blaster. The teenager was frustrated that, so far, he'd been able to contribute nothing to their de-fense.

"Could. Trouble is, start a few flames in the center of the house and the whole place could go. Last resort, mebbe."

Krysty touched Ryan on the shoulder. "Didn't tell you what the freezie wants, lover."

"What?"

"He's ready for death. Welcoming it. Insisted I gave him a pyrotab, and he's sitting there with the cans of gas. Says that as soon as we jump, he'll blow the whole place. Him-self with it. He means it, lover. I know."

"Fine. I'm not going to stop him. Couple of gallons of gas down there would come up the stairwell like a blasting nuke. Be a hell of a good way for a man to go." The ad-miration rode high in Ryan's voice.

"Long as he doesn't light it too soon," J.B. warned.

"They got a gren launcher," Krysty announced, shad-ing her emerald eyes from the bright cutting edge of the rising sun.

"Then it's time we moved," Ryan growled. "Get ready for Cawdor's last stand."

UNLESS THE DENFENDERS had some secret cache of nukes, Zimyanin knew his men couldn't fail to destroy the dam-aged building. They could pound it with high-explosive rounds until it was only rubble. Or they could napalm it and roast the Americans alive. But that would leave vital questions unanswered. Questions that Marshal Siraksi would be asking in the next few hours.

Who were these terrorists?

What were their aims?

Did they have allies within the homeland?

How did they get into Mother Russia?

What did the age-old dacha hold that was so important to them?

Zimyanin's own promotion would depend on how many of those questions could eventually be answered. And if he simply chilled them all, the answers would be few and far, far between.

He had commandeered the small wag of the local sec commander, and driving the vehicle himself, followed behind the line of lumbering armawags. The whole advance would stop at his order when the gren launchers were set up and ready.

"Instructions requested, Comrade Major-Commissar, for opening fire."

The voice came crackling from the talkie on the seat next to him, the reception surging and fading as it always did.

Zimyanin picked it up, feeling a rush of excitement. He waited a moment before pressing the Send button. A phrase from his English handbook came to him. "I have great pleasure in declaring this event to be well and truly open." He pressed the button. "Zimyanin here. I want three roads of low-ex grens from each launcher. Aim at the left and right flanks of the building, the ground floor."

"Shall we open fire, Comrade Major-Commissar?"

"Yes."

"Repeat, if you please, Comrade Major-Commissar. I say again, please repeat order."

Zimyanin controlled his swelling anger with the greatest possible effort. He held down the Send button with his in-dex finger and kept his voice calm. "Fire. Fire!"

Two of the grenades failed to explode at all. One only traveled about twenty yards before burying itself in the damp earth, sending a cascading fountain of mud over the lead wag when it finally detonated.

A third missile sailed high over the dacha, vanishing into the bright morning sunlight and landing on the far edge of a deep swamp, sinking out of sight without exploding.

One of the remaining pair of low-ex grens clipped the right-hand corner of the building and exploded with a deep-throated roar of noise, bringing down some of the exterior woodwork in a shower of torn splinters.

The last gren was more successful.

Ryan and the others spotted the firing of the launchers and had time to throw themselves to the floor, hands over ears, eyes closed, braced for the explosions.

It was the sixth gren that landed plumb on target, striking the broken window at the lower left corner of the imposing facade. It bounced across the empty room, and exploded in the back room, where it caused extensive damage to the corpses of the wolf pack.

Chunks of the ceiling fell down in a fog of white plaster. The building trembled under the impact, but it had been solidly built and suffered little structural harm.

"Worth a few shots at the guys with the launchers?" J.B. asked.

Ryan considered the chances. The parked armawags partly blocked a clear sight line. The fog was dissipating fast, lying only in a few hollows and covering fewer of the bodies that seeded the field.

"Not worth it. Figure they'll soften us up from a distance, then send the sec men in under cover of the grens. Our best chance is to hit them, mebbe once, when

they're inside. Bottom of the stairs. Fire the place, like Jak said."

Krysty brushed dust from her hair. "That door to the gateway is real well hidden, lover. How about we try and chill some of the first wave in? Then fire the stairs and pull back into the attic. Close the door."

"They'll move fucking slow thinking bullet from any-where." Jak grinned hugely at the prospect of more of a firefight.

"Could work," the Armorer mused.

"Not sure about burning the stairs. Better leave them a way up and then chill the shit out of them when they try to use it," Ryan suggested.

"More grens," Jak warned.

"BY THE HAMMER and the anvil!"

Gjegori Zimyanin had lived long enough under the Rus-sia ruled by the Party to be aware that not everything worked properly. But one and a half hits out of six grens was devastatingly poor, even by those low standards.

He grabbed again for the talkie at his side and pressed the button to transmit his orders to the rest of the command.

"Gren launchers! Three more rounds each. Repeat! Three more rounds each."

"What target, Comrade Major-Commissar? Repeat. What...?"

Zimyanin interrupted the speaker, jabbing his finger an-grily on the button. "Just attempt to hit the rad-rotted house!"

The second volley was marginally more successful than the first.

Only two grenades either failed to detonate or misfired. Three struck the front of the mansion, exploding with a dull rumble, while the fourth soared skyward in a sweep-ing rainbow trajectory and landed just behind the dacha.

"They going to wait out there and bring the walls down around our ears?" J.B. asked. "From the noise, they're firing low-ex at us. Take them all morning to shake some-where as solid as this."

"Still take us all out with a fluke shot," Ryan reminded him.

"Could circle and hit 'em behind," suggested Jak, still eager for action.

"No. Triple-no! Best we got's here. Let them come at us. We'll move out to the back room. Should be safest there."

Ryan led the way, making sure that they could still keep an eye on the stairs. The main door was closed and the hall was in darkness. Anyone who came in that way would let in a flood of sunlight. They all crouched and waited.

MOVING WITH EXTREME caution, aware of the range of the long guns the Americans had, Zimyanin eased himself around the side of the wag. He surveyed the front of the dacha with the glasses, raking the magnifying lenses from left to right.

He nodded to himself. "The structural alterations are virtually completed," he said, smiling in a self-congratulatory way at his memory for the English phrases. The far left of the building was devastated, with the corner of the roof tilting drunkenly over the tumbled wreckage.

"No more grens," he ordered into the talkie. "But stay ready in case I need backup. All armawags engage low gear. Prepare to move."

His throat was so filled with excitement that he could scarcely breathe. It had been days, and then hours. Now it could only be minutes.

"COMING," Krysty announced.

Moments later they all heard the distant rumble of the wags' engines throbbing into life, coming closer through the bright morning.

Ryan shook his head. "This could be hard. They got enough numbers they can rush the stairs. We get caught in a tight place, we'll never all make it up into the attic and through that door."

The woman smiled. "You want to play hero again, don't you, lover?"

He laid his hand gently on her shoulder, smiling into her eyes. "Talk about this later. For now, I'll stay near the stairs. Everyone else down into the basement. Check Rick's ready for... for whatever it is he's going to do. And get the mat-trans on standby. When I come down, there won't be a whole lot of time left. Go to it."

Krysty kissed him lightly on the cheek then led the others across the hallway toward the attic. Ryan checked that his blaster was on semiautomatic and hunkered down to wait for the Russians.

THE EXHAUSTS JETTED great clouds of choking blue-gray smoke into the sunlight, which drifted across the wind-shield of Zimyanin's vehicle. He eased a few yards to his left, trying to keep clear and find a position where he could see the house, now less than two hundred yards away from the lead vehicle.

He was touched with worry because there had been no further attempt at defensive firing from the dacha. Suppose they'd escaped, or been killed by one of the greys? The place was ringed tighter than a goose's ass and the greys had all been low-ex. No, they were in there. Waiting.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

"NOW I LAY ME DOWN to sleep and pray the Lord my soul to keep. And if...if I die before I wake...I pray...pray..." Rick shook his head in desperation. "Can't recall what... Yes. Pray the Lord my soul to take. That's it. It's done."

Apart from Ryan Cawdor, watching the top of the stairs in the main part of the dacha, everyone else was down in the gateway control room, circling Rick Ginsberg. The freezie lay on his back, furs across his legs, body wrapped in the poor remains of the Stars and Stripes. The pyrotab rested between his trembling hands, and the two large cans of gasoline were at his side.

Doc Tanner had gone straight to the lock to check that the handle worked. He pumped it up and down, doing everything but close the door to the actual chamber, which would trigger the whole device, assuming it still did function.

"You have done well, Richard," he praised in his deep, sonorous voice. "Exceedingly well, if I may make so bold."

"Thanks, Doc. Just don't test it too hard. If it works the once, that's all it—" A coughing fit prevented him from finishing the sentence.

Zorro kept close to the heels of Doc's worn and cracked knee boots, his belly flat to the floor, head low as though it knew that things were tough and getting tougher.

RYAN CAWDOR AND HIS H&K G-12 assault rifle, with its fifty-round mag of special 4.7 mm bullets, waited together for the final assault of the Russian sec men.

It was still cold inside the big house, despite the hard spring sun outside. Ryan sat on the landing, ready to bolt for the steps to the attic. He waited and listened, trying to detect the change in the noise of the engines that would indicate the vehicles were about to stop. Then there would be the clatter of opening doors, the thud of boots on the veranda and the splintering of wood as the door was

smashed in.

If Ryan fired the blaster on full-automatic the mag would last about one and a half seconds. Great for wiping out a room packed with enemies. Not so great for trying to deter a mass of men charging a staircase. Triple-burst would do that job more effectively.

The engines slowed and the wag doors banged open. Ryan put his finger on the trigger and took several deep, slow breaths, hoping that Gregori Zimyanin would be the first Russian to appear in the center of his sights.

ZIMYANIN WAS OUT the door of the autowag and flat against the front wall of the dacha ahead of any of the slower, clumsier sec men. He beckoned them urgently to attack the main entrance and smash it in.

As they poured through the door, Zimyanin was at their heels, bunking at the sudden darkness. But there was enough illumination coming through shattered windows and skewed shutters for him to immediately see the room at the rear of the building, with its jumble of wrecked corpses.

It took a handful of seconds to establish that the first floor had been abandoned by the Americans.

"Up the stairs!" Zimyanin roared, unaware that his lips had peeled back off his teeth in a hideous grin of blood rage.

Ryan had positioned himself with great care, so that he was in almost total darkness, within two short paces of the steps to the ruined floor above. He had a perfect eye-line down the wide corridor to the top of the staircase.

There was just enough room for three sec men at a time to come up onto the landing. Ryan took a chance and waited until he saw nine of them, herded nervously together, looking around. They were unable to spot him in the dim light.

He squeezed the trigger of the G-12 four times, spraying the opposition with twelve rounds.

Instant carnage.

Zimyanin, poised at the bottom of the stairs, caught the sound of the muffled blaster and glanced into the darkness of the second story. He hesitated a moment, then leaped backward, down into the hall once more. He narrowly avoided the cascade of bullet-riddled, bloodied corpses. Ryan hadn't bothered to try for a clean kill on any of the sec men, realizing that the effects of the spraying rounds would be devastating.

Gut-shot men screamed in agony, pulling down others in their shock and pain. Blood gushed from a dozen wounds, making the smooth wooden steps as slippery as ice.

It was like a madman's charnel house. Only a couple of the sec men were chilled outright by the four bursts of triple-fire. But at least fifteen others were hit with varying degrees of severity, some rounds penetrating clean through flesh and muscle, then ripping into the man behind.

Zimyanin bit his lip in frustrated anger, trying to avoid the kicking, fighting, panicked tangle of men. A sudden cold terror gripped him, that somehow the Americans were going to pull off some magical vanishing trick and avoid him. Blinded by that fear, he clambered over the dead, dying and injured, his high boots slithering in a soup of blood and brains, snapping bones in his desperate desire to get at Ryan Cawdor.

If it hadn't been for the Russian's paranoid desire to capture or kill, Ryan would have been able to buy them all a little more time.

But Zimyanin, for all his muscular bulk, was very fast. He reached the second-floor hallway just in time to spot Ryan disappearing up the rickety steps into the attic, silhouetted against the sun that burst through the exposed beams and rafters. The Russian even managed to snap off a shot from his Makarov, missing the fleeing American by less than a foot.

"Come on, you lazy bastard dogs!" he screamed at the disorganized rabble of men behind him. "Come on, after me!" His voice cracked in his lust to pursue his prey.

Ryan picked his way between the joists to the door that J.B. had left slightly ajar for him. He slid through and slammed it firmly shut, vanishing into the central stone chimney of the dacha. He then ran down the steep, endless spiral staircase to join the others.

Zimyanin reached the attic five seconds too late to see the door close, but his keen ears heard the sound of its shut-ting. His eyes pierced the dappled patterns of light, immediately spotting that the whole vast roof void was empty. There was nowhere for the American to have hidden.

Nowhere except...

"The chimney."

RYAN FOUND THE OTHERS gathered around the dying freezie, all with blasters drawn and ready. Rick looked up as he heard Ryan's running feet on the stairs, clattering through the main control room. "Hi, man," he whispered. "You made it."

"Yeah. Don't know how long it'll take them to break through up there. Not long. Guess it's time to go."

"Can you...open the cans? Then I'll take a few with me."

"You're sure you want it this way, Rick?" Krysty asked.

"Isn't any other... other way."

"Okay. Jak, can you...?"

"Sure, Ryan." The teenager stooped to unscrew the cans of gasoline, his white hair tumbling over his red eyes.

"One other thing." Rick coughed.

"What?" They were all conscious of a faint and distant hammering noise above them. Rick also heard it.

"Know time's racing. Sounds silly but... the flag. Like to hear *The Star-Spangled Banner* one more time. Just once. Then in the gateway you... and away. If you could manage...?"

Jak broke the silence in the room. "Don't know it. Sorry, bro."

"Me neither," J. B. said.

Ryan looked at Krysty. "How about you, lover? I only know the last bit."

The woman sighed. "Uncle Tyas McCann tried to make me learn it in Harmony ville. I said what was the point? I'd never need it. Gaia, Rick, I'm so sorry."

The freezie managed to shake his head. "Don't worry. You... better move. No goodbyes. Just..."

Doc Tanner cleared his throat noisily, bringing all eyes to him. The banging sound from the top of the stairs seemed louder.

"I fear that my voice is not of the best," he said. "But I'll gladly give the old anthem a try."

Chapter Thirty-Nine

O say can you see by the dawn's early light,
What so proudly we hail'd at the twilight's last gleam-ing,

DOC TANNER'S VOICE started light and nervous, barely au-dible. Slowly it began to gather volume and richness. Rick held the pyrotab in his right hand, the shaking fingers of his left gripping the hem of the scorched flag. His lips moved silently in unison with the old man's singing.

Whose broad stripes and bright stars, through the perilous night,
O'er the ramparts we watch'd were so gallantly streaming?

Powerful and moving, the thrilling words filled the small, low-ceilinged room. Krysty found herself suddenly on the brink of helpless tears. Rick lay pale and sickly among his only friends, a single tear easing from the corner of his right eye. Doc was unashamedly weeping as he sang the old song of patriotism.

And the rocket's red glare, the bombs bursting in air,
Gave proof through the night that our flag was still there

Then, on the last two lines, they all joined in, all of them, even Jak Lauren, discovering that they did, after all, know the swelling climax. The gateway control unit was filled with the sound of their singing.

O say does that star-spangled banner yet wave
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave?

Ryan rubbed at his good eye, conscious that some smoke or grit had gotten into it.

He smiled down at Rick and knelt to shake his hand. "Good send-off, friend. Now all..."

He stopped, then gently laid Rick's hand across his chest, carefully closing his sightless eyes. Ryan stood to face the others.

"That it?" Krysty asked.

"Yeah, lover. That's it. He's gone."

"How 'bout fire?" Jak asked.

"Sounds like they're through the door at the top," J.B. warned.

"Then let's go." He bent and took the pyrotab from the unresisting fingers. "Jak, spread the gas. I'll light this at the last moment before shutting the chamber door. Be a blast, then a steady fire. Better than a shit grave for Rick."

"Like a Viking chieftain," Doc added. "I do believe he would have liked that."

"Hope the jump works," Krysty said quietly. "If it doesn't, we're roast meat."

ZIMYANIN'S HEART WAS in his throat with the fresh excitement. Who knew what amazing secrets might be hidden behind the door? There was obviously a long-lost staircase within the central chimney of the dacha, something that had clearly been there since before the long grayness.

Something that was cunningly concealed, and therefore valuable.

At last the door crashed open and they could all see the top of some metal steps. For a surreal moment Zimyanin imagined that he had heard the sound of far-off singing, but it stopped and there was only a great silence.

"Come on!" he called to his men.

DOC TRIPPED the reactivate button outside the actual gate-way chamber. He picked up the trembling Zorro, and stuffed him inside his fur cloak and stepped quickly into the hexagonal room.

The air was heavy with the fumes of gasoline. Jak had sprinkled it everywhere he could—around the bottom of the stairs, and all over the main control room, soaking the pile of old cloth and furs where the corpse of Rick Gins-berg lay.

The albino boy heaved the empty cans into a corner and joined Doc Tanner, sitting cross-legged on the floor.

"Go on, lover," Ryan urged. "They're on their way down." Krysty smiled and stepped in.

J.B. darted to the bottom of the stairs and fired off a dozen rounds, spraying the bullets upwards. Then he moved quickly into the gateway.

Ryan glanced a last time around the small complex and hoped that igniting the gas wouldn't blow any of the mat-trans circuits before the friends were well on their way with the jump.

Footsteps were pounding closer and he heard the voice of Zimyanin, urging his men onward.

Other than Ryan, everyone was in the chamber, sitting on the metal disks set into the floor. The walls of thick armaglass would protect them from the fireball or Russian bullets. For long enough.

"Ready?" Ryan asked. He stood in the open door of the chamber, his finger on the flip top of the pyrotab. He pulled the door half-shut. Once it was closed the jump procedure would begin.

Ryan ignited the tab, threw it outside and slammed the door.

ZIMYANIN WAS at the bottom of the stairs, having pushed his way to the front of the frightened sec men by sheer brute strength. The ricocheting bullets had slowed down the pursuit, leaving half a dozen men injured. But it hadn't slowed Gregori Zimyanin.

A small control room of some sort confronted him, filled with all manner of arcane mechanical devices that chattered to themselves while tiny colored lights danced and flickered. Zimyanin had seen books from before sky-dark in the ruins of the big library in Yakutsk, with pictures of installations like this. But to see them here... and work-ing...

"I was right," he shouted.

At that moment a hand reached around a door and threw something into the room. And Zimyanin realized that he was surrounded by the thick smell of...

"Gasoline," he whispered.

RYAN HEARD THE CRUMP of the explosion, and then the roaring of flames. He sat down next to Krysty and faced the closed door, watching the shimmering fire through the thick glass walls. The disks started to glow, and the familiar humming sound began. Ryan became aware of the beginnings of the awful feeling of his brain being sucked out, and he knew that the darkness would soon descend over them all. For a moment he thought of Rick Ginsberg and the burning flag.

"We made it again," Krysty said, holding his hand. "We won through, lover."

ZIMYANIN HAD DIVED for cover behind a bench as the huge roar of the gas combustion passed over and around him. The fireball exploded out of the room and soared up the chimney of the staircase, instantly incinerating most of his force. Apart from slightly scorched hair and clothes, the Russian sec chief was unhurt.

Fire danced all around him, lapping at the control con-soles. The door through which the American had vanished was closed, a thick glass door, with a light glowing inside it. And above the noise of the flames and the screams of the doomed and dying, was an insistent humming sound.

The Russian holstered his Makarov and powered him-self through the fire, holding his breath. He reached the glass door. Out of the corner of his eye he saw what looked like a body, wreathed in flames. In a bizarre fraction of blazing time, Zimyanin thought that he could also see an American flag, with its stripes and its stars, burning across the corpse.

He touched the door handle, wincing at its heat against his bare flesh.

DOC AND JAK HAD already slipped into unconsciousness. J.B. was relaxed, his glasses neatly folded in a pocket, eyes closed.

"See you back... in... Deathlands," Krysty muttered.

As the blackness forced its way behind her eyes and into her mind, she had the momentary illusion that the door of the gateway chamber had opened and someone had come in. But the jump was too far advanced, and she took that fantasy with her into the infinite night.

Ryan was the strongest of the group, and the effects of the mat-trans process overtook him last of all. His eye was still open, though the inner vision was clouding. But he saw the door swing open. A bulky figure entered, kicking the entrance closed behind him.

A smell of burned cloth and hair.

Circle of silver and bald head.

Pocked skin.

A voice breathed in Ryan's ear. "You who are about to die..." The rest

disappeared. Hands, like clamps of high-tension steel, jammed around his throat.

Breathing became difficult. Ryan wanted to struggle, but the jump had sucked away all his power to resist.

Someone laughed, the hands on his throat remorselessly strong.

Laughter.

Blackness.

Blackness.

Black.