

The rider removed his steel mask and bowed deeply

The crowd jumped to its feet, cheering.

Amid the tumult, something on the far side of the center ring caught Ryan's eye. Something flashed behind the mirror wall of the facing trailer. And for a fraction of a second, the silver reflective glass became vaguely, hazily transparent, as if through a pall of oily brown smoke.

Then it was over.

In that frozen moment Ryan glimpsed a ghostly figure whose afterimage was burned deeply into his brain. Spindly-limbed. Slouching. Menacing. Even if he hadn't seen the glare of the light on the steel, he would have known who it was.

The Magus.

Damnation Road Show

#62 in the Deathlands series

James Axler

A GOLD EAGLE BOOK FROM WORLDWIDE

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O eyes, no eyes, but fountains fraught with tears;  
O life, no life, but lively form of death;  
O world, no world, but mass of public wrongs,  
Confused and filled with murder and misdeeds.

—Thomas Kyd, 1558-1594

First edition June 2003

ISBN 0-373-62572-3

## DAMNATION ROAD SHOW

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Printed in U.S.A.

## THE DEATHLANDS SAGA

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Prologue

Evening hung dead still and oppressively humid over the shallow, five-acre, seep-fed lake, the lavender dome of sky perfectly reflected in its mercury-smooth surface. Encircling the muddy bank was a fringe of stripped, bleached skeletons of trees. The intense quiet was neither peaceful nor serene; the very air seemed to vibrate in anticipation and dread. Terrible forces of nature were about to make themselves known.

Swish-swish.

Swish-swish.

From the north end of the lake came a rhythmic sound.

Not a bird, not an insect. Sensing the impending hell show, the birds and insects had gone to ground. A tall human figure stood on the bank in hip boots, waving a nine-foot-long, flexible rod back and forth. And as he did so, he sailed a bright-yellow line through the air, forward and back, forward and back, in a tight loop, out over the purple mirror of sky. The man wore a long, pointy, black goatee and his black hair was loosely tied in a ponytail, which hung to the middle of his back. On his head was a tatter-brimmed straw cowboy hat. His eyes were hidden behind wraparound sunglasses.

What face was visible was long, gaunt, perhaps tragic, certainly suffering, certainly world weary.

As the man cast, the water in front of him swirled and gurgled. The head of a huge mutie lungfish appeared in the middle of the ripples. The fish looked up at the man, then struggled out of the pool, walking on the bony spikes of its pectoral fins. Greenish-gray on the back with a light cream-colored belly, the mutie was easily five feet long and weighed more than sixty pounds. As it dragged itself from the world of fish into the world of men, its large, rubbery lipped mouth and its gill covers opened and closed, breathing air. Grunting from the effort, the lungfish crawled up beside the man. An odor rose up along with it—the smell of a slaughterhouse in August.

"You have no fly on the end of your line," it said in a strange, gravelly voice that was half croak, half belch. "You can't catch anything that way."

"I'm not fishing for anything," the bearded man said as he continued to cast far out over the smooth water, in the direction of the evening star.

"You're fishing for nothing?" the lungfish said.

"That's right."

"Are you catching any?"

"I'm catching and releasing nothing," the man replied.

As he continued to cast, to his left, a two-wheeled cart drawn by three men appeared over the rim of the slope. The lake sat on a stairstep rise in the land. Above it was mountainside; below it, the ground—mostly bare, eroded limestone—angled three hundred feet down to a broad flat spot between surrounding peaks. There, in a grove of low, scrubby trees, stood the remote ville. Even by Deathlands standards, it was a scab-assed place: dirt-floor shacks and lean-tos built up against the outer wall of the ville's only permanent structure, a predark concrete blockhouse. Most of these shanties were big enough to house one or two people, and not tall enough to stand in.

The three men took axes and a heavy-bladed machete from the cart and started hacking away at its contents. They laughed as they sprayed one another with flying gore. After a few minutes of extreme effort, they paused to catch their breath, then started throwing human arms, legs and quartered torsos into the water. The erratic splashes broke the metronomic swish-swish, swish-swish of the fly rod.

The lungfish turned back from the commotion and asked the bearded man, "Am I real to you?"

The man let his line fall and settle. He pushed his sunglasses down the bridge of his nose, looked at the talking fish and said, "Nothing is real."

As more body parts landed in the pool, swirls appeared in the water near the splashes. Other lungfish were rising to feed.

"That dinner looks pretty real to me," the fish said. "Eat my body, become my body..."

"Yeah, yeah," the man muttered distractedly.

As the lungfish slithered back to the water and to its share of the chow, it half turned and said, "Try some bait next time, Baron Kerr."

The bearded man remained silent and threw a loop into his floating line that allowed him to sweep the entire length of it back into the air.

Swish-swish.

Suddenly the entire surface of pool shivered before him, the lavender mirror shattering into a billion fragments. Like guttering confetti, the first spores of the evening lifted gracefully into the air. It was just the overture. In seconds, dense clouds of the freed genetic material boiled up from the water. Pale-green fingers of fire crackled and sparked from the pool's undulating surface, making the clouds glow and shimmer from within.

As the ministorm grew in intensity, the blood-spattered men hurried down the slope with their empty cart, determined to get under cover before spore fall.

Swish-swish.

Swish-swish.

The heat from the electrical discharge made the air temperature jump twenty-five degrees and sent the spore clouds billowing upward. The higher they rose, the more ferocious the strange lightning storm

became: blistering, eye-aching bolts fired up from earth to sky, their prodigious thunder rattling the ground.

Baron Jim Kerr quickly wound in his line and headed downhill for cover. He recognized the evening's ominous signs. The much heavier than normal spore hatch. The absolute frenzy of bioelectric discharge. That told him the food supply was dwindling, even now barely sufficient for survival. Something would have to be done, and soon. He knew better than to frustrate the burning pool. He remembered what had happened the last time.

## Chapter One

A little girl in a faded cotton dress sat atop Bullard ville's dirt-and-concrete defensive berm, watching distant plumes of yellow dust spiral up from the vast, barren flood plain—manmade tornadoes back-lit by the hard glare of the late afternoon sun. She sat with her skinny, sun-browned legs drawn up, her elbows propped on scabbed knees. The hand-me-down garment she wore was way too big for her. Every time she moved, it slipped off one or the other of her thin shoulders.

During the hour that Leeloo Bunny had been keeping vigil, the ville's other children had joined her at intervals, scrambling up the back side of the berm for a look-see. After less than a minute of quiet reconnoiter, the pushing and pinching started. Squealing, they raced back down to resume an extra frantic, extra shrill game of Chill the Mutie.

Only Leeloo had the patience to stay, to sit in silence and allow the promised miracle to unfold. She wanted to be first to see it, and to be able to remember every second as long as she lived.

Nothing this exciting had ever happened in Bullard ville.

It was without a doubt one of the two most dramatic moments in Leeloo's eight years of life.

It towered above sneaking peeks through the windows of the gaudy house to see the mostly naked men and women fight on the pallets laid on the floor. Leeloo had sometimes watched her own ma, Tater Bunny, fight men on those mattresses. It was a safe bet that one of Tater's adversaries was Leeloo's father; there were a lot of candidates for the distinction, but no one had ever stepped forward to claim the little girl as his own.

Because Leeloo didn't fully understand the aim of the gaudy house mattress fights, she had yet to figure out how to judge winners and losers. To her it seemed the combatants usually parted on friendly, if not affectionate terms. Some of the women fought ten or twelve men a night, and didn't seem the worse for wear, at least not any place that showed.

It was a different story for her ma. Tater Bunny had died more than a year ago when a drunken drifter choked her a bit too hard.

That was Leeloo's life-changing, dramatic event number one.

The man who'd chilled her ma had tried to run away afterward, but the ville's menfolk caught him and dragged him back. They hung him from an old basketball stanchion with his pants pulled down around his

boot tops and his willy sticking out. Leeloo had sometimes gone to look at the man who chilled her ma, to look through the hot, blurry screen of her tears and throw rocks at him as hard as she could. After a while, she had to stand upwind because the smell got so bad. The ville's men cut down and buried the corpse only when they needed the stanchion to hang someone else.

Leeloo Bunny had no interest in eventually following in her ma's professional footsteps. Not because of the nature of the work, which held no particular stigma in Bullard ville, or the danger of injury, which was considerably less than other jobs to be had, but because of the required confinement. Leeloo liked to be outdoors in the sun, not indoors, lying in tangled, sticky bedding. She liked planting seeds in the raised beds under sheet-metal awnings and tending the young plants until they grew big enough to eat. She liked picking bouquets of the bitter-tasting, little wild daisies that seemed to pop up everywhere. She made delicate ornaments for herself out of them by knotting the stems together. This day, she was decked out with a daisy circlet on the crown of her head, and tiers of bracelets dangled from her slender wrists.

Her anticipation of specialness on this day had begun three weeks earlier, when the carny's advance scout had roared up to the berm gate in an armored Baja Bug.

The little wag had outsized knobby tires and a roll cage around the driver's seat made of heavy pipe. Over the empty front, rear and side window frames were hinged, blasterproof metal shutters that could be dropped during an attack, leaving only a view slit for the driver to steer by.

The carny scout had called himself Azimuth. A giant with cascading woolly dreadlocks, every muscle and sinew was visible beneath his glossy ebony skin. He wore a sleeveless vest of mutie coyote pelt, turned hair side out, and gray army pants tucked into the tops of scuffed and scraped, steel-toe-capped, lace-up, shin-high, black leather boots. Grimy goggles hung around his wide, muscular throat.

Leeloo could close her eyes and recall how the man smelled: a sweet, feminine perfume mixed with sharpish body odor. Azimuth had either slathered himself with great quantities of the flowery scent, or he had been in a prolonged fight with a gaudy slut who had. Leeloo also remembered the way his front teeth were filed to points, top and bottom, and that the inside of his mouth was as red as blood, as was his tongue and the insides of his nostrils.

Azimuth had been greeted by Bullard ville's most important people, including its headman, the lumbering, overweight, perpetually sweating Wilbur Melchior, who had adopted Leeloo right after her ma died. The black giant's mission was to determine whether the ville would be willing to pay for the privilege of seeing Gert Wolfram's World Famous Carny Show. If so, Azimuth said, the troupe would stop there for a night or so en route to another engagement. He quoted them a steep price for this entertainment, in water and fresh food.

When asked by Melchior what the show consisted of, Azimuth threw back his head and let out a howl that so startled the delegation of dirt farmers, they stepped back and grabbed for their blaster butts.

But there was no threat.

It was a howl of sheer exuberance.

When things calmed down, Azimuth assured them that Gert Wolfram's World Famous Carny offered genuine miracles and wonderments, gathered at great expense and hazard from the farthest corners of the Deathlands and beyond, all for their private amusement and edification. On his long, thick fingers, he listed some of the various, incomparable attractions: singing, dancing stickies; fantastical mutie beasts trained to do amazing tricks; feats of norm superstrength and daring; the most beautiful norm women this

side of Hell walking around in next to nothing; unparalleled exhibitions of music, comedy and drama.

Something to tell your grandchildren about, Azimuth said. A once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

At that point, Melchior and the other leaders of the ville withdrew to the shade of a nearby sheet metal awning and conferred. Leeloo edged close enough to overhear their conversation. Her adoptive father said it was a matter of pride, that Bullard ville deserved this admitted luxury. Their hosting the World Famous Carny would indicate to anyone with half a brain that the remote agricultural enclave had finally come into its own. Around the circle, heads nodded in agreement.

The only word of caution came from the gaudy master, Skim O'Neil. He said there could be a big risk in letting so many strangers inside the berm at once. The protest fell on deaf ears. Melchior spoke for the rest when he bragged that Bullard ville wasn't afraid of anything that walked. Mopping his sweat-beaded jowls with a big wad of cotton rag, he reminded O'Neil how they had turned back the attempted takeovers of two different barons and chilled their sec men. A vote was taken, and it was unanimous. When they returned to where the scout waited, Melchior put his hand out and told him that he had a deal. They shook on it. Then Melchior and the other leaders took Azimuth on a guided tour of Bullard. Leeloo tagged along behind, unnoticed.

As was common in Deathlands, the isolated ville had sprouted up at the edge of a ruined interstate highway. The overpass that had once connected high-speed travelers with an oasis of fast food and fast gas had collapsed across four lanes of traffic on the day the world changed. The center of Bullard ville was formed around the shambling remnants of those predark fast-food franchises. Their dilapidated plastic signs still beckoned: Mergen's Family Restaurant, Taco Town, Burger Stravaganza, Fish 'n' More—now the gaudy house.

The four-lane highway had once paralleled a lush river valley that stretched for many hundreds of miles, bordered by rugged, steep, dark mountains to the east and rolling hills to the west. The flat valley, postnukecaust, was parched, burned yellow, turned to dust by sun and chem rains. Postnukecaust, the slow, meandering river that had watered trees and grass and cultivated fields decided it no longer liked the looks of things and burrowed deep underground.

The river's disappearance saved Bullard ville from extinction. Of course, there were no more prebreaded steaks, fish fingers, burger patties or ice cream novelties to lure tired, hungry travelers to Bullard. Yet the travelers still came and stopped and parted with whatever valuables they had, because there was water. The underground river ran right under the ville. Hand operated pumps provided water for drinking, for very occasional bathing and for travelers to take away.

Grub could be had, but it was whatever was on hand. Travelers ate whatever bush meat the residents' could chase down and kill. Usually mutie jackrabbits, or snakes, or birds of all sizes, from sparrows to turkey vultures. These were either spit-roasted over an open fire or parboiled in cauldrons made of salvaged, fifty-five gallon oil drums.

With the virtually endless supply of clean water, the ville folk grew a variety of edible crops year round, under the shelter of metal awnings to keep off the chem rain. For fertilizer, they composted and used their own excrement. They cultivated beans, hot peppers, onions and garlic. They grew corn primarily for the sugar, which was used to make joy juice. There wasn't enough surface area inside the defensive berm to produce food for mass export. And there weren't enough people in Bullard to defend an expansion of crop growing outside the barrier.

Considering the miserable, hammered-down state of the world, the little hamlet was doing quite well.

During the tour, Melchior hinted as much to Azimuth, but as Leeloo noticed, he gave no specifics.

As she well knew, the treasure of Bullard was safely locked away in the basement of Mergen's Family Restaurant, under twenty-four-hour armed guard. It consisted of miscellaneous objects of value traded for water: weapons, ammunition, canned food, predark medicine, first-aid supplies, wag fuel, oil, grease, batteries, transmission fluid, antifreeze, tires, matches, clothing, boots and shoes, hand tools, auto parts, various bits of repair material, duct tape, bailing wire, nails, screws, rope and electrical wire. There was no jolt, though. The ville leaders drew the line at hard drugs.

The contents of the warehouse were tangible proof of the water's worth. And anything worth more than a few drops of piss in Deathlands was worth chilling someone over. Two barons had tried and failed to annex Bullard ville, which stood in disputed border zone at the edges of their respective territories. Neither baron could muster and transport a large enough force to defeat the villagers. Every person over the age of twelve carried a loaded blaster all the time, whether working on the crops or sleeping. The youngest ones packed well-cared-for .36-caliber, black-powder, Italian-reproduction Colts. They wore the 5-shot, 1862 Police models in canvas, snap-flap hip holsters. The entire volunteer sec force trained regularly in marksmanship and tactics.

Leeloo Bunny was too young and still too physically frail to control a blaster that weighed more than a pound and a half, unloaded. But she was very much looking forward to the day when finally she got her own blaster. Not because she wanted to shoot anything in particular, but because it was a symbol of her growing up.

After the guided tour, the ville's leaders fed Azimuth a massive meal, got him stinking drunk and then let him fight three women at once in the gaudy.

All free of charge.

Melchior had called this extraordinary generosity "the famous Bullard ville hospitality."

As the dust plumes on the plain grew closer, Leeloo could just make out tiny, dark shapes at their bases, and her heart leaped. The shapes became more and more distinct until she could see the gaily painted wags, racing with strings of bright pennants whipping from their radio masts.

A man standing at the berm gate shouted, "The carny's here! The carny's here!"

Every man, woman and child dropped whatever they were doing and rushed to the ville's entrance, forming a dense double line, a gauntlet of well-armed Bullard ville welcome.

The fifteen-wag caravan slowed to a crawl as it approached the defensive berm. Leeloo saw that some of the wags were towing big tarp-covered cages on flatbed trailers. Then the music started.

Taped music, scratchy with age and thousands of playings. Loud enough to wake the nukocaust's dead, a powerful male baritone boomed above the insistent crash of cymbals and drums. The words he sang rolled like thunder. Leeloo had taught herself to count to a hundred, so she knew what "76" signified. She wasn't sure whether a "trombone" was animal, vegetable or mineral, but the raucous, cheerful beat of the predark music thrilled her to the core. As the dust clouds drifted away to the south, with the convoy slowly advancing, men began to jump out of the wags. They threw back the tarps covering the trailered cages, revealing the collection of creatures within.

Leeloo sucked in an astonished breath. It was more wonderful than her wildest imaginings! Behind the



bars of the first cage lurked a two-headed scalie. One head was normal sized; the other looked like a baby's. The next trailer cage held a gaggle of stickies, naked but for plastic collars in bright colors, like open flower petals.

They showed their needle teeth and dilated their flat nostril holes as they took in the scent of the ville. Another cage contained a huge mutie mountain lion with scythe-shaped horns jutting on either side of its neck. It raised its head and yowled balefully along with the marching song. On the trailer behind the mountain lion was the biggest desert rattler Leeloo had ever seen. The thing was mebbe ten feet long, and its body was as big around as her waist. Its flat, triangular-shaped head was even wider, and the mouth could have easily swallowed two of her whole.

There were lizard birds with leathery wings and fangs so sharp they scored the steel bars of their cages.

Leeloo turned her attention to the carny folk walking alongside the trailers. The men wore slitted masks over their eyes. Their leather jerkins and shorts exposed bulging arm and leg muscles. They all carried bullwhips, which they smacked against the bars of the cages, making the mutie creatures howl in complaint. The carny women were long legged, their faces and heads concealed by brightly sequined hoods. But for thigh-high, high-heeled boots and a tracery of string over their privates, they were naked. The women also used whips to stir up the rolling menagerie.

Once inside the berm, the caravan of wags circled twice, to Leeloo's way of thinking, most majestically. Then it stopped.

A tall, muscular man in a worn red satin tailcoat, and with tight white pants tucked into hard-used black riding boots, climbed out of the largest wag. On one hip he wore a holstered, blue-steel, .45 Government Colt blaster; on the other he carried a coiled black bullwhip. His short, wiry hair was a rusty red, as was his six-inch-long goatee. A jagged ring of scar marked the left side of his face, perhaps made by a broken neck of a bottle, or Leeloo thought, by an attack from one of his ferocious muties.

As the tailcoated man walked toward the ville's leaders, a tiny stickie, not more than four years old, trotted along at his left heel. It was naked and barefoot, and there were bruises all over its pale body. Around its neck was a choke chain dog collar that wasn't tethered to a leash.

"Welcome to Bullard ville," Melchior said, extending a damp, callused hand to the carny master. "A pleasure to have Gert Wolfram and his famous troupe as our guests."

"I speak for my entire company," the tailcoated man stated, "when I say we are most honored to have the opportunity to entertain you."

The young stickie, eyes as dead as black stones, sniffed through the two holes in its face, taking the measure of the overweight Melchior. And having done that, the baby mutie made soft kissing noises in his direction, and began to drool copiously. Melchior's right hand reached across his pendulous chest and came to rest on the rubber butt of his shoulder-holstered Ruger Single Six.

"Oh, don't worry about Jackson," the carny master said, stroking the creature's hairless skull. "Unless you corner the little tyke, he's not the least bit dangerous."

At the hand-to-head contact, the immature stickie closed its eyes with pleasure; its jaw gaped, exposing tightly packed rows of needle teeth.

"When is the show going to start?" Skim O'Neil asked.

This question was met with wild cheers and whistles from the assembly.

"It takes us a while to stake out and set up the main tent," the carny master said.

"I'm afraid it's already too late in the day to get started on it. With your permission, we'll set up camp inside the berm tonight, then start raising the tent tomorrow morning. That will give my people a chance to rest up, too. They need a break before they perform. We've been on the road three days getting here."

Leeloo was crushed to hear this. She wasn't alone. A chorus of groans rippled through the crowd.

"Couldn't you give us a little taste of what's to come?" Melchior asked. "We've all been waiting for this day for weeks and weeks."

The carny man scratched his red chin beard, briefly considering what taste he might offer. "All right," he said, "I'll give you fine folks a preview of what's in store for tomorrow. But I warn you now, once you see it, you won't sleep a wink tonight."

He looked down at the baby stickie and said, "Sing!"

As the order echoed off the berm walls, the people of Bullard ville blinked at one another in amazement. It was common knowledge that the mouth parts of stickies were so primitive, so unevolved, that most could barely make mewling noises, let alone make music.

Yet, at its master's command, the little stickie opened its round, practically lipless mouth, threw back its bald head and sang, in perfect pitch, in a high, clear soprano, a predark song even older than the one caught on tape. "Ave Maria" burst forth from between rows of mutated needle teeth.

Most of the folks in the crowd closed their eyes and simply listened to the exquisitely pure tones, like bell chimes. Each word of the lyric was perfectly formed and enunciated.

There were no cries of sacrilege because no one understood the words, which were in Italian. Even if the Deathlands dirt farmers could have translated the lyric into English, its meaning and references would have been a mystery to them. Despite the yawning gap in the audience's understanding, the music itself was so moving that by the time Jackson finished the a cappella performance, there were tears of wonder in the eyes of men and women alike.

While Bullard ville rendered wild applause, the carny master patted the little stickie on the head, and it nuzzled its cheek against the side of his riding boot, leaving behind a shiny smear of saliva.

After the tumult had died down, a beaming Melchior pointed out a likely spot for the company to spend the night. The carny master thanked him, then returned with Jackson to the biggest wag, which pulled out of file to lead the convoy to the campsite. The marching music started up again as the wags and trailers rolled forward. Dust boiled up from their tires, swirling in thick, yellow clouds through the open gate of the berm.

Out of the corner of her eye, Leeloo caught more movement on the plain. Shadowy figures advanced through the man-made dust storm, making for the ville's entrance. They were hard to see with the all dust and the sunlight slanting hard behind them.

She counted seven.

Mebbe stragglers from the carny? she thought.

When they stepped out of the cloud, Leeloo knew at once they weren't carny folk. They were hunters. The man in the lead carried a scoped longblaster on a shoulder sling. He was tall, with dark hair falling to his broad shoulders. A black patch concealed his left eye socket. As he came closer, she noticed the color of the other eye.

It made her think of a cloudless morning sky.

Infinite blue.

Infinite cold.

## Chapter Two

Ryan Cawdor shifted the sling, transferring the weight of his scoped Steyr SSG-70 sniper rifle from his right shoulder to his left. Six dusty companions followed single file behind him, heading for the crude gate cut into the twelve-foot-high berm wall. For the last third of a mile, they had been breathing and eating the drifting grit thrown up by the wag caravan. For the last third of a mile, they had been listening to the predark marching music, its sprightly cheerfulness like a dull dagger jammed in their guts, then twisted. For the last third of a mile, it had taken every bit of Ryan's self control not to break into a dead run. Just as it now took all of his inner reserve not to sprint up the face of the perimeter barrier, drop belly down on the summit with the 7.62 mm longblaster and start bowling over the carny folk.

Suicide wasn't part of the plan.

The plan was to make damn sure what they all suspected was true, and then to act in stealth, lowering the odds from eight to one against before showing their hand. The mechanics of the operation had been hatched over four days of one of the hardest forced marches Ryan and the others had ever endured. They had approached Bullard ville from the west, cross country, over seemingly endless rolling hills and scrub forest, breaking their own trail, sleeping only a few hours each night. They had pushed themselves mercilessly because they didn't want to risk arriving too late and uncovering another horror.

For the thousandth time, the image of the hand came into Ryan's mind. A grisly, ruined, black hand jutting from the earth in the middle of long patch of churned-up ground. The flesh had been torn away by teeth or beak, or both. Three fingers were missing down to the knuckles. Right off, he knew it was a woman or a child's hand because it was so small and slender. Somehow, whoever it was had survived long enough to claw up through the smothering clods of earth. It had to have taken a superhuman effort.

They had discovered why after they had carefully scraped back the top layer of soil.

Cradled in the young woman's other arm was a dead infant.

Her strength had come from desperation.

The companions peeled back more dirt, exposing other bodies. Many, many bodies piled on top of one

another. Both sexes, old, young, strong, weak. As soon as Ryan saw the tangle of limbs and torsos, he sent his twelve-year-old son, Dean, away from the pit to recce the rest of the ville. The boy left gratefully, but he would have remained to prove to his father and the companions that he was made of the same rock-hard stuff that they were. Ryan had no doubt about the boy's stuff; as far as he was concerned, Dean had nothing to prove.

There were close-range blaster wounds on a few of the corpses, but most were unmarked by obvious acts of violence. They never did find the bottom of the mass grave. The stench of death rained like hammer blows against the sides of their heads, and they staggered from the trench, bent over, retching.

"Bastards chilled the whole ville," Krysty Wroth gasped as Ryan put a strong, gentle hand on her shoulder. The titian-haired, long-legged young woman was his lover and soul mate. They had seen many hard things during their wanderings over the hellscape, but rarely had they seen such wanton wholesale slaughter as this.

"Not all, mebbe," said Jak Lauren, pointing at the cluster of shabby dwellings. It was a false hope. And from the expression in the albino's ruby red eyes, he knew it. But Jak, like everyone else, wanted to be away from the pit and its rotting horrors. A thorough search showed the nameless little ville had been looted of everything of value, just like the dead folk buried in the ditch. The huts and lean-tos had been stripped, the underground storage pits emptied. All that remained was the trash in the ville's midden too heavy to be blown away by the howling wind.

Uncovering the mass grave had flipped a switch in Doc Tanner's head. He had stopped talking the moment they found the bodies of the mother and child. Which was unusual, because normally Doc never shut up. At the time, Ryan figured the discovery had triggered memories of Doc's own terrible loss of his long-dead children and wife, of the time-trawling whitecoats from the future who had snatched him from the natural course of his life in the year 1896, then played with him before bumping him further down the timeline, to the living' hell called Deathlands.

Doc hadn't participated in the speculation about what had happened in the ville, about who could have committed such a bastard evil deed, and how the deed was done. Nor did Doc vote when it came time to decide what in rad blazes they should do about it—if anything.

Some hours later, as Ryan and the companions tracked the overlaid tire prints of many heavy wags leading out of the ville, Doc had suddenly started walking stiff-legged, like a tall, scarecrow zombie in his frock coat and high boots. After he had taken several hard falls, despite the support of his swordstick, J. B. Dix had safety-lined him to his waist with a fifteen-foot length of rope to keep him from wandering off and breaking his neck.

A week had passed since they came on the looted ville and the mass grave. A week of walking, first in the wheel ruts of the presumed chillers to the ville of Perdition, then overland to try to intersect the path of the already departed convoy. In that time, Doc hadn't improved, and J.B. still towed him, out of duty and friendship.

The peeling sweat on J.B.'s face cut stripes of clean skin through the caked yellow grime; his wire-rimmed spectacles were smeared with a mixture of both. The stocky man wore his precious fedora hat screwed down on his head as he strained forward. Seeing the determination on his face made a flicker of a smile cross Ryan's lips. He had known John Barrymore Dix since their wild and woolly days with the legendary Trader. J.B. had been that operation's Armorer, a nickname that had stuck. They were best friends then, as now.

J.B. never said he was sorry when he wasn't.

And he never gave up.

As Dr. Theophilus Algernon Tanner was dragged along, he railed at a god who was either absent, or oblivious, or malevolent. Or some of each. Doc was an educated man. He used big words. Complicated arguments chased his thoughts, rather than vice versa, like angry wasps trapped inside his skull. He made leaps in logic, dropping out pivotal points, speaking from opposite points of view. At times he seemed to be taking on the persona of his own grand inquisitor.

The only companion with the background to unscramble his philosophical ravings was Mildred Wyeth, and she had long since given up the game. The solidly built black woman was a medical doctor, and aside from Doc, had the most formal education of any of them. She had been cryogenically frozen after a botched surgery just before skydark, and reanimated by Ryan and the others nearly a hundred years later.

Mildred's diagnosis of Doc's current condition was grim. She had said his overwhelmed mind had twisted in on itself. Anger reflecting anger, which led to agonizing flashbacks, which reduced him to sobbing into his palms. The man was suffering from an unspeakable, unending ordeal—a price paid for no crime of his, other than the exquisite bliss of his former life. The life he had been born to live, and had been denied. In Mildred's medical opinion, Doc's rambling, often shouted, diatribes to imaginary gatherings of Oxford dons allowed him to flee the crushing reality of the present, where he was doomed to exist without his beloved wife and children.

Though Mildred sometimes acted as if she had little love for the old man, it was plain to Ryan that she found it hard to watch and be helpless to slow his further mental and physical disintegration.

The one-eyed man remained cautiously confident that Doc would come out of the tailspin eventually. As he always had before.

As they neared the ville entrance, Ryan saw a little girl in a loose-fitting, faded cotton print dress staring at them from inside the gate. A very pretty little girl with a headband of daisies. Her gaze swept past Ryan to rest upon Dean. The boy sensed he had a rapt audience of one. Though exhausted, he drew himself to his maximum height and flashed a smile at the girl. Ryan was amused to see that his son managed a bit of a manly swagger, with the 9 mm Browning Hi-Power blaster prominently strapped to his hip.

Krysty gave Ryan a nudge. "Like father, like son," she commented.

A trio of armed men in bill caps stood behind a pile of concrete boulders and rubble that served as both a checkpoint and traffic barrier. Beyond them, Ryan caught his first glimpse of Bullard ville: an oasis of brilliant green that sprouted miraculously from the sunbaked yellow earth. In rows of raised beds, under slanting, corrugated metal roofs, the crop plants grew lush and tall. On the far side of the beds, simmering in the valley heat, predark plastic-and-metal signs on tall poles dangled precariously above a line of low buildings.

"Man, oh, man, could I ever go for a cheeseburger and a strawberry shake," Mildred said.

Ryan grinned. "We'll be lucky to get a plate of beans and a swig of green beer."

"I know, I know. But a girl can still dream, can't she?"

As they stepped up to the checkpoint, one of the bill caps shouted in an unpleasantly high voice, "And just who might you folks be?" Without giving them time to answer, he asked a second question. "What is your business here?" The two other sentries held sawed-off, 12-gauge, double-barreled shotguns at waist height. The range was such that, by discharging all four stubby barrels at once, they could cut the strangers not so neatly in two.

Ryan showed the guards open hands. "We're just travelers on the long road north," he said. "Come to water and rest, and willing to pay for it."

The head sentry, a very short man with a full brown beard, gave them a hard once-over. He looked especially long at their complement of weapons, appraising them for possible threat and commercial value. When he came to Doc, he couldn't help but notice the slack rope that connected him around the waist to the man with the smeared eyeglasses.

"What's with the geezer?" the guard leader chirped. "He sick? He looks sick to me. He better not have the fucking oozyes!"

Ryan and the companions knew he was referring to an incurable, mutated brain virus, much feared and believed to be transferred by cannibalism. "He's just old," Krysty said. "Very, very old."

"Oughta leave him to meet his maker, then."

"Ain't his time, yet," Ryan said, the look on his face telling the guard to mind his own bastard business.

Unable to contain himself any longer, one of the shotgunners excitedly blurted out, "We got a carny come to town."

"That so?" J.B. said.

The sentries shared wide grins.

"Best rad-blasted carny in all the Deathlands," the head guard added. "Big show's tomorrow."

"We'll have to stick around, then," Ryan said. "Something like that you don't see every day."

"You'd better believe it," the shotgunner said. "Gert Wolfram's carny only plays the most important, big-time villes."

"You can stow your gear over where the carny is putting up camp," the head guard said. "As long as you got something to trade, you got the run of Bullard ville. There's food, water, joy juice and the best damn gaudy house this side of Perdition. When you run out of trade goods, we will escort you out of the berm. We don't give no charity here. And we don't take no guff from those who don't belong."

With that warning, the guards lowered their scatterguns and allowed the companions to enter Bullard ville.

Once inside, there was no mistaking the proposed campsite. Not with fifteen wags parked in a broad circle on the baked yellow dirt. On the side of the largest wag was a crudely painted sign that read Gert Wolfram's World Famous Carny Show. Lots of ville folks were standing around gawking while dozens of carny roustabouts worked to set up camp. The heavy protective tarps were pulled back from the

trailed cages so the gawkers could see in. Only from a goodly distance, though. The newcomers appeared to have set up a kind of invisible perimeter that the ville folk weren't crossing. Mebbe they'd been warned to steer clear? Mebbe they didn't need to be.

As they approached the mob of spectators, a strange sound split the air. Two very loud tones, a high note sliding to low. Only Mildred made the connection to a foghorn; none of the others had ever heard one. To them it sounded like a baleful howl.

Beside Ryan, Jak cranked his head around and stiffened, as if ten thousand volts had just shot through him. The youth's reaction surprised the one-eyed man. It was just an animal noise. A very large animal.

Before Ryan could raise a hand to stop him, the albino took off, running at full tilt for the cages. Some of the carny folk saw him coming and tried to block his way with widespread arms, but he fainted, swinging his white head one way, then squirted past them. Staring at his rapidly accelerating back, the empty-handed roustabouts yelled for someone to get him.

"Dark night," J.B. muttered, "we were supposed to go in nice and quiet, and recce first."

"Better back his play," Ryan said, waving the companions after him.

J.B. pulled Doc along like a stubborn calf.

Suddenly the howling got a whole lot louder, and it changed in timbre. Instead of coming from deep in a huge set of lungs, it came from high in the throat.

It went from misery to absolute joy.

Then it stopped altogether.

There was no one left to try to turn back the companions. All the carny folk had rushed over to one of the traileered cages.

And with good reason.

It appeared that the agile intruder was getting eaten alive.

Jak had his head stuck between the bars of the cage, holding on to them with both hands. For a split second, Ryan's heart dropped in his chest. He thought the young albino was a sure goner, his head half inside the great carnivore's open maw. But then he saw Jak wasn't getting chewed.

He was getting licked.

The mutie mountain lion's tongue slathered his face so hard that even holding on to the bars with all his might, Jak couldn't keep his boots on the ground.

The great cat made a loud purring sound, like a wag's big diesel engine fast idling, as it scrubbed the albino's face and neck with a wide pink tongue that had to be a foot and a half long.

"What the nuking hell?" J.B. exclaimed as he came to a stop beside his one-eyed friend.

"It's the lion, J.B.," Ryan said. "They've got the lion."

The companions—except Doc, who was still wearing the thousand-yard stare—needed no further explanation. Some time ago, Jak had been made a prisoner in Baron Willie Elijah's mutie zoo. He had been caged up with a mutie mountain lion. After an initial, violent and lengthy misunderstanding, the two had got on famously. They were both wild things, so well matched physically and spiritually that they could communicate without words, with their eyes and with touch. Brother beasts of the hellscape.

Once freed, the big lion hadn't run off, but had followed Jak and the companions. Only when it refused to enter a mat-trans unit was it left behind.

This, it seemed certain, was that selfsame noble beast.

"A captive again," Mildred said glumly.

"Unlucky," Krysty said.

"Mebbe," J.B. stated. "Mebbe not."

"What do you mean?" Krysty asked.

"Found Jak again, didn't he?"

"Step back from the cage, mutie," one of the roustabouts shouted as he shouldered up to the bars. He was a big, thick-bodied man with a heavy blue-black shadow of beard stubble, and matted black hair on the tops of his shoulders and the backs of his arms. He outweighed Jak by more than a hundred pounds.

The albino paid him no mind. "I said, step back!"

With no one to stop them, the ville folk pressed forward for a good view of the action. The show was starting a day early.

Jak pulled his head out from between the bars but didn't move away. His fine, shoulder-length white hair was plastered to the side of his head.

"Let cat out," Jak said, his ruby-red eyes glittering.

"Yeah, right," the roustabout replied sarcastically.

Then he turned to address the gathered carny people. "Turn loose a thousand pounds of man-eater on your say-so."

This remark was met with peals of laughter from the ville and carny folk alike.

"Let him out," Jak repeated. His voice was flat, calm, controlled.

The smile melted off the hairy man's face.

"Get closer," Ryan told the others.

Even as they began to move, the hairy guy snarled, "You're begging for a major ass-kicking, Snowball." He looked around to make sure he had backup, then added, "And by skydark you're gonna get it!"



Before the hairy roustabout and his pals could take a step forward, the albino's right hand was up and full of .357 Magnum Colt Python. He showed them all the dark hole in the crowned muzzle, the hole where death slept, until called.

Jak spoke again. This time it wasn't a polite request; it was a threat. "Open cage now..."

Ryan lunged and used his momentum to throw a shoulder into the hairy man from behind. The blind-siding impact sent the roustabout stumbling to his knees, hard. He cursed as he immediately jumped back to his feet. He was very nimble for a big man.

In the next instant, weapons were out all around.

The carny folk waved nine mil semiauto blasters, mostly KG-99s and Llamas. Blue-steel, high-capacity cheapies, in excellent condition.

Ryan held his scoped Steyr SSG-70 rifle at waist height. Krysty had her Model 640 Smith & Wesson .38-caliber revolver in a double grip. Dean likewise braced his Hi-Power. Mildred one-handed her .38, a Czech-built, ZKR 551 target pistol. J.B. balanced his 12-gauge Smith & Wesson M-4000 pumpgun against his hip. Seeing the deadly turn of events, the ville gawkers turned and ran, scattering for the cover of the plant beds like so many jackrabbits. The tense moment stretched on and on. No one on either side wanted the shooting to start. They were standing way too close to each other to miss. Once the blasting began, there weren't going to be any survivors. Nobody moved. Nobody even blinked.

Then, from over by the circle of wags, someone shouted, "What in the rad-fucking-blazes is going on here?" A tall man in a red tailcoat stormed out of the side door of the biggest wag. At his side was a naked, three-foot-tall, immature stickie.

The tailcoated man and his little shadow slowed their charge as they approached the fracas.

With his KG-99's sights locked on Ryan's chest, the hairy roustabout explained the deadly stalemate. "Snowball there," he said out of the corner of his mouth, "wants us to let the nukin' lion out. Started waving his blaster in our faces."

As if it understood what the albino was trying to do, the mountain lion reached a huge paw between the bars and placed it lightly on his slim but powerful shoulder.

"Not gonna happen, son," the red-haired, red-goateed carny master told Jak. "That's one smart cat. The smartest, meanest, damndest mountain cat in all of Deathlands. He's playing you for a triple stupe. Open that cage door and he'll gut you from windpipe to goobers with one swipe of that big old friendly paw of his. Then he'll carve up the rest of us, just for fun, before we can do jack shit about it. Same way he chilled three of my best handlers over the past two months. One second they were alive, and the next they were torn clean in half—legs here, the rest of them way the fuck over yonder." To illustrate, he gestured over his shoulder with a hooked thumb.

Ryan sidestepped over to Jak and whispered in his ear, "It's not the time for this fight... we got other business first."

The albino youth didn't give a flying fuck for the wishes of most other human beings, but he always paid close attention to Ryan Cawdor, whose battle smarts had never proved wrong, and whose courage never failed.

Ryan stared hard into the bloodred eyes and nodded, to underscore his point.

Jak smiled, then swung the ventrib sights of the Python across the chests of his adversaries, counting and marking targets, left to right. Prep for a rapid-fire, cylinder-emptying fusillade.

A visible shudder passed through the pack of roustabouts.

Having made his point, Jak holstered his blaster.

After a pause, all weapons were lowered.

"You ain't Gert Wolfram," J.B. said to the man in the tailcoat.

The baby stickie started making kissing sounds at the Armorer, who shifted and planted his back foot, bracing himself to swing up the shotgun and take the sucker-fisted squirt's spongy little head off at the neck.

"What makes you say that?" asked the carny master.

"Gert Wolfram is fat, fifty and fucked," J.B. replied. "Last time we saw him, he had two broken ankles and his stickie slaves were pulling him apart like a sweet dough pudding."

"Even if Wolfram survived the appetites of his pets," Mildred added, "he couldn't have lost twenty years in age, two hundred pounds in weight and gained six inches in height."

"You got me there," said the red-haired man with a disarming grin. "Actually I never claimed to be old Wolfram. People just assume that it's so. Sure doesn't hurt the business to let them keep thinking that. I'm committed to keeping the show's original fine reputation. I'm called the Magnificent Crecca, for obvious reasons." He reached down to adjust the soft but prominent bulge in the front of his white pants. Then he leered at Krysty.

"Do we call you Magnificent, or just Crecca?" she asked.

"I answer to either, or to M.C., or carny master, or in your case—" he leaned closer to her to add "—to lover man."

Krysty's prehensile hair reacted to the unwanted advance, drawing up into tight coils.

Crecca's eyes widened when he saw this. "My, my," he said, "aren't you the special one?" He pulled at his chin beard, looked her up and down salaciously, then said, "Wonder what else you've got hidden away for me?"

Krysty put her hand on the butt of her wheelgun. "I've got six hollowpoints, all for you," she said, staring him down.

For a second Ryan thought things were going to escalate out of control again, but Crecca just looked amused. "I hope you're all going to be here tomorrow so you can see the carny show," he said. "You'll never forget it. I promise you that."

Neither will you, lover man, Ryan thought. Neither will you.

### Chapter Three

"Ain't you never heard about the man with the black eye patch?"

From the luxury and comfort of an executive office chair bolted to the sheet metal floor—the rips in the brown leatherette on the arms, seat, and headrest repaired with overlapping strips of frayed duct tape—the Magnificent Crecca gestured impatiently for the big man breathing wolf-nasty in his face to take a step back. Something more easily ordered than obeyed.

Floor space in the carny master's cabin in the big wag was at a premium, largely because its side walls were lined with built-in, sway-proof racks and shelves. Jammed on these shelves were select items taken either in trade for performances, or looted after a mass chilling and burial. Among the more important trinkets were unfired, Brazilian-made hand-blasters still wrapped in their protective Cosmoline; several .223-caliber, full-auto, military carbines; a scoped Remington 700 longblaster; and factory-loaded ammo in their original metal boxes. There were tall bottles of the very best joy juice and plastic bags of uncut jolt. There were lidded glass jars packed with bright bits of jewelry and dozens of cardboard boxes full of single-serving-sized containers of predark candies. There was also a barely functioning mini-TV and VCR, a small number of video-and audio-tapes and a black boom box. The electricity to power the carny master's home entertainment center came from movable solar panels on the wag's roof.

Along the front wall, below the room's only decoration, a quartet of flyspotted, discolored, girly magazine centerfolds, was Crecca's narrow bunk. Jackson lay curled up in the corner in a nest of rags. A pale, sleeping pillbug. His choke collar was chained to an eyebolt in the wall. The cabin smelled strongly of unwashed male, cigar butts and paper trained stickie.

Of course Crecca had heard about the man with the eye patch.

Every triple-stupe droolie who wasn't deaf had heard about him.

The gaudy houses up and down Deathlands were full of stories about that particular coldheart. About how he had run with Trader in the bad, bad old days. About how he had matured into a full-blown, human chilling machine. Norms. Muties. It didn't matter to him. Rumor had it, because of that rad-blasted single blue eye, he could only see things one way: his way. Not a man to cross, unless you were looking to book a quick ride on the last train west. More convincing than the always exaggerated whore-shack gossip, Crecca knew that even the Magus, Gert Wolfram's steel-eyed, half-mechanical former business partner, wanted no part of him.

Showing no emotion, the carny master said, "So, you think he's One Eye Cawdor?"

"Damn straight!" Furlong exclaimed. "Right down to the zigzag scar on his eyebrow where the knife cut took his peeper!"

His outburst disrupted the rhythmic, wet snoring coming from the corner behind him. Furlong jerked his head around at the sound of chain rustling on the floor, making double-nuking-sure he was out of reach of the little stickie's needle teeth and sucker fists. The relief on his face when he turned back was almost comical.

Crecca had to admit that the latecomer fit Cawdor's description. "What would he want with us?" he asked.

"Mebbe he knows what we've been doing," Furlong suggested. "Mebbe he wants to take our booty."

"With a force of seven?" Crecca said incredulously, stroking his red chin beard. And seven was being real generous, considering one was old and brain-fucked, and another was so young his balls hadn't even dropped yet. On the other side, the carnny master had a virtual miniarmy, fifty-nine-strong, all hand selected and personally trained by him, hardened, efficient chillers who took pride in their work.

Only one creature in all of Deathlands had the power to make that bloodthirsty bunch wet their pants. And do his bidding.

The Magus.

The Magus had done things to people that gave even Crecca's chill crew wake-up-sweating nightmares. Things that made the objects of his unwanted attention squeal like pigs and offer their own children's lives in exchange for a quick and merciful death.

If the Magus had ever had an ounce of mercy in him, he had had it cut out a long time ago. Cut out and replaced with clockwork metal gears.

The new and improved carnny operation was large scale, large profit and held together by fear and greed—the hellscape's twin wellsprings of motivation.

That someone was after the accumulated spoils of mass murder came as no surprise to the Magnificent Crecca. With a setup as sweet as this one, he'd known it had to happen, sooner or later. It had happened later rather than sooner due to the fact that Deathlands folk generally kept their heads down and minded their business. They had more than enough trouble just making it through another night, without looking for a little something extra that belonged to strangers.

"I think we ought to take them out tonight," Furlong said, his dark, close-set eyes eager beneath bristling black eyebrows. "I can send a couple of my best boys to chill them all while they're sleeping."

Being the head roustabout in the most famous carnny in Deathlands didn't require much in the way of smarts—just straightforward, dependable brutality. The Magnificent Crecca sometimes wondered if Furlong could tie his own bootlaces, or if he had to bully someone else into tying them for him.

For years prior to his promotion to carnny master, Crecca had worked for the late Gert Wolfram, but never as a roustabout. He had been an advance scout and collector of specimens for the fat man's menagerie of living oddities. He trapped wild muties in the Darks, using rope snares or pitfalls. In and around the villes, he bought or kidnapped the tame ones. He'd find a particularly disgusting freak that he knew old Wolfram would like, then he'd shove a bag over its head and steal it from the bosom of its loving family. If the family caught him in the act and objected too strenuously, he chilled the whole lot of them. He was paid by the pound in those days. Wolfram had a thing about the size and weight of his attractions, said "the big uns" drew better crowds—a rule of showmanship that the new carnny master still followed. While on the road, Crecca often had to force-feed his severely depressed captives at blasterpoint to maintain their redemption value. If they still wouldn't take nourishment, he ditched them to make room for more profitable cargo. Dumped them in the middle of nowhere to starve or be eaten. Their lives weren't worth the price of a centerfire bullet or the trouble of resharpening a bone-nicked

knife blade.

"What are you going to do with the bodies afterward?" Crecca asked his head roustabout.

"Drag the pieces of shit outside the berm and bury 'em on the plain."

"And tomorrow morning nobody's going to notice seven people who upped and vanished?"

Furlong shrugged. "Somebody might notice, but there'd be no proof, so what could they do?"

"What if one of them yells out as your boys attack or gets hold of a blaster? What then?"

Furlong was silent under knit brows, straining to come up with a good answer. He might as well have been trying to explain gravity. But he was too stupid to see the futility of the effort.

"Bullard ville's gonna be the best pickings we ever had," Crecca told him. "If we try anything on One-Eye and his crew and it goes sour, it will queer the whole deal. And I won't risk that."

The hairy man started to restate his case for a surgical strike, but Crecca cut him off. "Do nothing," he said. "Do absolutely fucking nothing. Understand?"

It took a long moment for this to sink in, but Furlong finally, reluctantly nodded.

"Get out," Crecca said, dismissing him with a wave of his hand.

After Furlong left, the carny master assured himself that even if One-Eye had come to pay them a visit, that even if he knew about the spoils of mass murder, it didn't matter. Cawdor didn't know how the chilling was done. He couldn't know because there had never been a single survivor left to tell the tale. Cawdor and his six fellow travelers would die like dogs along with the rest of the Bullard ville hayseeds.

Crecca twisted the ends of his goatee into a point. It was too bad about the bitch, though. Her mutation—the squirming strands of flame-red hair—wasn't flashy enough for her to make a sideshow attraction, but she had real potential as a sex slave. Ah, well, the carny master thought, sex slaves, even ones with legs as long as hers, could be had anywhere.

He reached in his tailcoat side pocket and took out a small beige cardboard box. On the box were printed the words Choco Duds. He shook a few of the predark candies onto his palm. They looked like ossified rat turds. Their milk-chocolate coating had crystallized to a floury white. More than a century of storage had turned once soft caramel centers to amber glass, unchewable by norm teeth and jaws.

Crecca flicked one of the Choco Duds across the cabin. It hit Jackson on the cheek with an audible whack. The stickie's eyes popped open at once. It sniffed the air, mewled in delight, then rooted in the heap of rags until it found the treat.

Jackson had no trouble eating the pellet. The dead eyes begged for more.

"First we've got work to do," Crecca said, getting up from his chair. He put a videocassette in the player and powered up the TV.

Jackson watched his every move with rapt attention.

Loud, hard-driving, backbeat-heavy music erupted from the speakers, and bright colors and dancing females appeared on the screen. Crecca fell into step with the lead singer-dancer—a dewy-eyed, teenage blonde with a bare midriff—and her troupe of four bare-bellied dancers. Their moves were complex and violent. And there wasn't much room to work. Tails of red satin coat flapping, the carny master pivoted left and spin-kicked right.

"Come on, Jackson," he called, teasing the creature with the offer of another treat. "Let's go!"

The stickie began to follow along with its master. Singing, sort of. Unable to precisely vocalize the new words, which dealt with virginal angst, Jackson soprano-droned along with the video's megastar. Dancing, sort of. The stickie waved its spindly arms, snapped and ground its narrow hips, a hair behind the beat.

"Good stickie," he said, smacking the creature on the forehead with another well-aimed Choco Dud.

It was part of the Magnificent Crecca's job, and the real, chilling-robbing operation's cover, to keep audiences in the larger villes coming back every time the company circuited through Deathlands. This required the invention of new and ever more spellbinding acts. The carny master's latest idea for a big-top finale was an all-stickie rock-dance number, with music and routines lifted from the video, and Jackson singing and dancing in drag—long blond wig, bare belly, tight miniskirt. As a Tiffany-imitator, the stickie had a long, long way to go.

"That's okay, Jackson," Crecca said patiently, after the little creature's spin move went awry, and it crashed into the wall. "Let's take it from the top..."

## Chapter Four

The Clobbering Chair smiled and waved at Baron Kerr, beckoning him to come sit. To take the load off.

The plain piece of metal office furniture stood in the middle of the ville's tiny, pounded-dirt, central square. It had been dragged out of the low blockhouse across the way. Leather straps hung from the armrests and looped around its front legs. Leaning against its back was a club made of three and a half feet of heavy iron pipe, one end wrapped with strips of rag to form a handle.

For a shimmering instant, the baron could see a smiling victim seated there. A smiling executioner, standing behind, club in hand. A smiling audience surrounding all, patiently waiting its turn.

Baron Kerr had long since given up trying to keep the faces of any of them separated. For him the individual members of the army of the dead blurred into one another, and into the few still living, who were just as eager as those who had gone before to feel the weight of the falling club.

Kerr never had visions of the ghosts of those carted up to the pool, quarter sawn and chucked in. But often, living people appeared to him—indeed, everything that he saw, heard, touched, tasted and felt—as puffs of colored smoke rising up in front of a wall of infinite blackness. At other times, the baron experienced just the opposite perception, that everything that existed was unified, a universe-spanning, living singularity that invaded and permeated the void like the tendrils of a rad cancer. When in this latter

mode, as he was now, the clear divisions between objects, the boundaries between animate and inanimate, between human and tree and stone no longer existed.

He dimly remembered that there had been a time—or he imagined that he dimly remembered—when his perception of things had been different, when he was someone else, somewhere else. Though the details were beyond him, he could recall that creatures like those of the pool and surrounding woods hadn't always spoken to him in his own language, and that the earth and water and sky hadn't always heaved and shuddered with stirrings only he could see and understand.

The world, itself, hadn't always been entirely alive.

The pale-yellow snow of spore fall, as fine as table salt, lay in scattered drifts as Kerr trudged across the square, toward the dirt-floor shacks and lean-tos built against the outer wall of the blockhouse. A half-dozen people stood around a fifty-five-gallon fire drum, watching their dinner cook on a red hot steel grate. One of them turned over the sizzling, pale, roast-shaped blob with a sharp-pointed stick. The baron's grimy, raggedy, bright-eyed subjects all grinned and nodded a subservient greeting to him as he passed.

Kerr didn't acknowledge their presence. He walked down the short, narrow flight of concrete stairs to the below-ground-level blockhouse entrance. The door, a massive, welded-steel bulkhead, had been twisted and wrenched away from the frame by crowbar and chisel. Scraped back on its sprung hinges, it no longer closed; it had never closed for as long as Kerr had been resident royalty in the blockhouse palace.

Though there were no windows, it wasn't dark inside. Greenish light coruscated from the beads of condensation sweat on the concrete-block walls. It glowed from the accumulated puddles along the floor seam of the central hallway. Most of the acoustic tile ceiling lay scattered about on the floor. The low ceiling's fluorescent light fixtures dangled lopsidedly from rusting chains and rotten wires.

Four of the seven small rooms off the main corridor were packed with squat, yellow-enameled, inoperative machines of unknown function. These machines were lagbolted into the floor. Thick nests of pipes of varying diameters fed into and out of them, and vanished into holes cut into the block. Dials and gauges with cracked faces and missing indicators dotted the walls of these rooms.

Kerr's quarters were in the largest of the blockhouse's three offices. He made his baronial bunk on the gray plastic laminated top of the built-in desk that ran the full length of the back wall. His pallet was a duct-tape-patched, flaccid, plaid-flannel-lined Coleman sleeping bag that hadn't been cleaned since skydark. The work space's computers, printers and monitors had been pushed off onto the floor and left there in a shattered heap.

Though the building looked like a pump house complex connected to the shallow lake on the mountain ledge above, it had been much more than that. The baron couldn't read a lick, but even he realized the framed diplomas and certificates screwed into the walls of the offices meant whitecoats had worked there. Heavy-duty whitecoats. And the machines and electronic gear and miles of perforated computer spreadsheet covered with rows of numerical data meant government research jack. The bales of used printout paper were just about gone. For many years, the ville residents had used sheets of it to start their cook fires. Because of this, the site's original purpose would probably always remain a mystery.

The baron hung his straw cowboy hat on a wall hook next to the neatly arranged predark fishing gear he had found in a metal cupboard. He figured it had belonged to one of the whitecoats. Rods. Reels. Aluminum boxes of tiny flies. Wiped down. Oiled. Polished. Cased. They were the only items in the

place so meticulously tended.

His evening meal had already been set out on a crude wooden platter on the end of the desk. The mound of sliced, roasted fungus was crispy and brown on the outside and still white, creamy, almost molten in the center. From it arose a delicious and intoxicating smell of cardamom and cinnamon spice.

Kerr wasn't hungry, but he ate. He ate every bite. And as he ate, he looked down at himself from somewhere near the ceiling, watching as his body satisfied the hunger that wasn't his own. It was eating of the body by the body—its flesh, his flesh, inseparable.

After he was done, he felt the familiar weight of exhaustion descend, infiltrating his limbs, his torso and finally his brain. On the desktop, his sleeping bag quivered in anticipation of holding him. The surrounding walls of concrete block maintained their slow, steady breathing. Kerr let himself fall back onto the pallet, and there began to weep. Tears spilled out from under his wraparound sunglasses and trickled into the edges of his beard. Overhead, the partially collapsed ceiling flinched and grimaced in sympathy.

If the baron, too, yearned to sit in the Clobbering Chair, he had learned long ago that the burning pool would never let him. Of all those it had drawn unto itself, he was different.

Chosen.

Pampered.

Held apart.

For reasons that were unfathomable, James Kerr had been made baron of an ever changing, joyous, obedient flock that was oblivious to its cruel poverty, its physical suffering and the absolute certainty of its doom.

There was nothing his subjects wouldn't do for him.

Except chill him.

And for as long as he could remember, that was all he had ever wanted.

## Chapter Five

Ryan and the companions laid down their packs and bedrolls in the slanting shade of one of plant bed awnings, a good distance from the carny's campsite. Doc knelt on the ground, tethered by his waist to one of the awning's support posts. The old man's eyes were vacant, and his fingers raked furrows in the yellow dirt. As Ryan watched him, he felt a growing sadness in his heart. If the old man didn't snap out of his stupor, there would come a time for a mercy chilling. And he would have to be the one to do it. It was his responsibility as the undeclared leader of this group of friends.

A sound from the circled wags behind them made Ryan look over his shoulder. Blocked from view by the angle of its cage and trailer, the lion began to howl mournfully—strange, high-pitched, flutelike noises.



Ryan glanced at Jak, and his stomach tightened into a hard knot. The albino was staring in the direction of the mutie cat. He stood flat-footed and rigid. The sinewy muscles in his dead-white, bare upper arms twitched from the strain; his hands were clenched into fists. The shock of each piercing cry rippled through his whipcord body like a wave.

Ryan sensed that if the tension wasn't released, and quickly, his young friend was going to shake apart. "I go..." Jak announced to no one in particular. With that, he loped away from the companions, crossing the pounded dirt in long, easy strides, making for the ville's defensive perimeter. When he reached it, the slope didn't slow him. The sun flashed once on his mane of white hair as he disappeared over the top of the berm.

"What's with him?" Mildred said in dismay. "Where's he off to now?"

Ryan shrugged as he smoothed out his bedroll and carefully set down the Steyr SSG-70. "Got some private business to attend to, I guess."

"Are we going to have trouble with Jak?" Mildred asked him point-blank, hands braced on her sturdy hips. "Is he going to lose it on us? Has he already lost it? That's the last thing we need."

"Mildred, keep in mind that Jak has saved your life more than once," Krysty cautioned her.

"And vice versa," the black woman replied. "Jak and that mutie mountain lion have a connection that's downright spooky. It's been so long since we parted ways with that horn-necked monster, I'd almost forgotten just how spooky. It reminds me of the psychological case studies I've read about the psychic bonds between human twins. Only in this case it involves creatures of very different species. It isn't natural, Krysty. It doesn't make sense, biologically or physiologically."

"You're talking like a whitecoat."

"I can't help that," Mildred said. "I was trained to think like a scientist. And the scientist in me says, we have no way of predicting with any sort of confidence what Jak is going to do next. Think about it. We no more than got inside the berm and he had us facing off against a dozen blasters...all over that mutie cat."

"She's right about the trouble," J.B. told Ryan as he took off his glasses and polished the lenses with the hem of his shirt. "The big question is, can Jak keep to the plan we made? Or is he going to blow it for all of us by trying to get that critter out of its cage?"

"As it stands," Mildred added, "this whole deal is balanced on a knife edge."

J.B. nodded in agreement. He slipped his glasses back on. "Every one of those carny chillers over there has a centerfire blaster," he said. "The odds were bastard bad even before we lost Doc. If the rest of us aren't at one hundred percent, and on the same page, we don't have a chance in hell here. We're all gonna end up in a shallow hole with dirt in our faces. Mebbe the smart thing would be to slip over there once it gets dark and put a slug in the back of that big cat's head."

"Jak won't let us down," Ryan said with conviction. "He never has and he never will. He knows what we have to do, and why." The hard edge to his voice said for the time being the discussion was over.

Inside, Ryan was as concerned as Mildred and J.B., and for the same reasons, but he couldn't show it. His confidence had to shore up theirs; it was a simple matter of survival. He had to be the calm in the eye

of the storm.

He sat cross-legged on his bedroll and with a scrap of lightly oiled rag began to brush the dust from the scope and action of his treasured predark longblaster. In silence, the others started going through the contents of their packs, sorting and gradually assembling a small pile of trade items so they could all eat and drink at the ville's hostelrys.

Ryan's hands moved over the rifle automatically, his fingers programmed by countless repetitions of the same vital task. Trader had taught him that a fully functioning weapon was the difference between being dead and cold by the side of the road, and walking on. As he worked, Ryan thought about their long journey, about how they had followed the wheel tracks from the looted hamlet to Perdition ville. The trail ended on the outskirts of Perdition where they found a wide circle of deep holes pounded into the ground, holes made by carny tent's massive stakes. Exactly the same circle they had found in the looted ville.

From a stooped old man poking around in the pile of worthless, half-burned trash the show had left behind, the companions had learned that the Gert Wolfram show had spent three days and nights entertaining the good folks of Perdition. The trash picker had described the strange and wonderful acts, the rousing music, the feats of strength and daring.

There had been a terrible joy and satisfaction in his rheumy eyes as he told them about his favorite part of the show: the part where the two-headed scalie ate a live goat from both ends at once.

Legs first.

If the troupe hadn't stopped over for those extra days, Ryan and the companions never would have caught up to them. The question was, why were the folks of Perdition still breathing air, and not buried in a ditch?

Compared to the unnamed ville where the mass chilling had been done, Perdition was a major metropolis. Which led Ryan to speculate that mebbe it was just too big for the chillers to tackle, and that's why they had left it alone. Or mebbe they just skipped some villes along their route to throw any possible pursuit off the track.

The carny's performance schedule had been posted on the side of a fire-gutted, semitrailer near the circle of tent holes. It turned out that the circus company was heading to a large ville several days southwest of Perdition before moving up the long, dry valley to an engagement at another big hamlet at its northern end.

The companions had taken the difficult, cross country shortcut to try to intersect the caravan's route. The hills and mountains that framed the dry valley were impassable by wags; once the carny entered at the southern end, the only exit was far to the north. When Ryan and the others had seen the towering spirals of dust in the distance, they knew they had found their quarry.

By the time Ryan had finished detailing his long-blaster, the mound of trade goods on Mildred's bedroll had grown impressively. She had put in a few .38-caliber cartridges. J.B. had added two empty mags and a mini toolkit for an M-16—a weapon they didn't carry. Krysty had tossed in a pair of compact binocs with a cracked left lens, and Dean had given up a plastic-handled can opener that was near mint. J.B. scowled at the carny's circled wags and said, "Mebbe the Magus himself is hiding over there. Like a nasty old spider, waiting for the fun to begin."

"Be just like him," Krysty said. "Crouching in the deep shadows while his puppets do all the dirty work."

"The Magus may not have anything to do with the carny anymore," Ryan said. "Not since Wolfram went west."

"From what it looks like the carny is doing," J.B. said, "it seems right up his street to me."

"Mebbe," Ryan said. "But looting the odd, shit-poor ville would be a big step down for him. The Magus has always been into mass slavery of muties and norms, mostly to support his mining operations and his jolt factories, but also for breeding stock." The companions all knew the Magus was into animal husbandry. He specialized in the careful crossbreeding, and perhaps bioengineering, of new mutie races. Rumors abounded that he had "made" the first stickies. It was also rumored that he had acquired the power to travel forward and backward in time. That he had done evil deeds long before any person now alive had been born, and would do evil long after they were dust.

Deathlands was a place of little certain truth and much wild speculation. The only thing anybody knew for sure was that the Magus was a league of chiller above and beyond the run-of-the-mill, gaudy house backstabber.

"He's back!" Dean exclaimed, pointing at the berm gate. "Jak's back."

The albino trotted across the compound at the same easy pace. Over his shoulder, its short front and long back legs trussed, was a skinned, dressed-out, thirty-pound mutie jackrabbit.

There had been no gunshot echo rolling over the valley. Ryan figured Jak had used one of the many leaf-bladed throwing knives hidden on his person to dispatch the rabbit.

"Why did he bring us dinner?" Dean asked his father. "I thought we were going to eat at the gaudy?"

The lion let out a blood-curdling roar that put an end to conversation.

It became clear that it wasn't their dinner the albino had brought when he turned hard left and made a beeline for the row of trailered cages. Ignoring the crudely lettered Danger: Don't Feed The Muties sign, Jak passed the fresh carcass through the bars to his brother beast.

The mountain ate the offering greedily, crunching up the bones with no more effort than he used to chew the flesh. A thirty-pound jackrabbit was a mere snack for an animal his size—it was gone in a few seconds. But it had to have been mighty tasty if the diesel-wag purring noise the cat made as it licked the blood from its huge paws was any measure.

"Say, Dean," Ryan said, nudging his transfixed son with a gentle elbow. "I think someone's trying to catch your eye..."

Dean turned to look. Instantly, a wide smile lit up his face.

Standing at the far end of the plant bed was a sun-browned little girl in a too big cotton dress with a crown of daisies in her golden-streaked brown hair. She smiled back at him, tooth for gleaming white tooth.

## Chapter Six

"My name's Leeloo. What's yours?"

The twelve-year-old boy beamed down at her. "Dean," he said.

"That's a great blaster you've got, Dean."

He glanced at the blue-steel weapon strapped to his hip. "It's a 15-shot, nine mill Browning. Want to hold it?"

Leeloo nodded enthusiastically.

Dean dumped the staggered-row magazine onto his palm. Then he cracked back and checked the breech for a chambered round. After making sure the weapon was safe, without a second thought, he handed over what she knew had to be his most prized possession in all the world.

Leeloo very carefully took the Browning Hi-Power from him and held it in both hands, making a shaky, wavering attempt to aim. "Oh," she said in dismay, "it's heavier than I thought."

Dean stepped around behind her and helped her raise the blaster to firing position. "You want to hold it about here," he said.

Something new happened to Leeloo Bunny as young Dean reached his arms around her, enfolding her. In kindness. She felt suddenly safe and protected; she felt the urge to lean back against his chest, to feel the strength and the energy he gave off.

It was an urge she didn't allow herself to give in to.

With great patience, Dean showed her how to work the Hi-Power's safety. He made her adjust her stance to brace herself for the recoil. And he showed her how to hold her finger outside the trigger guard until she was ready to fire.

Nobody had given her any blaster training before. And certainly not with such a sophisticated and deadly predark weapon. She wasn't old enough. Dean Cawdor, whose long, dark hair tickled the back of her neck as he leaned over her, thought she was. He cocked back the hammer with his thumb and told her to dry-fire the Browning.

"Go ahead," he said, "squeeze the trigger."

The firing pin made a twig-snap sound.

"Does it make a lot of noise when it really shoots?" she asked him.

"Sure does."

He took back the blaster, lowered the hammer with his thumb, put the safety on and reholstered it.

"My ma got chilled," Leeloo told him.

Dean looked at her for a long minute. She wasn't sure whether she had said something bad without meaning to. Something that would make him not like her anymore.

She was about to apologize when he said, "Mine, too. She died of cancer. She was sick a long time. What happened to your ma?"

"My ma got choked in the gaudy while she was wrestling."

"Wrestling?" Dean said, puzzled.

"On the bed."

"Oh," Dean said.

Leeloo stared at him closely, and as if she could read his mind—or heart—said, "Did your ma wrestle in the gaudies, too?"

"Sometimes," the dark-haired boy said, staring down at his dusty boot tops. Though his lips moved, his face was expressionless. "But only when we didn't have anything to eat, or nowhere safe to sleep. She was so pretty she could always find work in a gaudy."

"They strung up the geezer who chilled my mom," Leeloo told him. "I saw them do the whole thing. They yanked his pants down first. When his neck broke, it made a loud crack and his willy stuck out, like in wrestling. One time, before they cut him down, I clonked it good with a rock."

"What about your dad?" Dean asked.

"Never had one that I know of. You're lucky 'cause you've got one. And a good one, too. I can see that from the way he looks out for you."

"Who takes care of you, then?"

"Fat Melchior, the headman of the ville. He took me in after Ma got chilled."

"Is he nice to you?"

"Sure. But there's not enough nice to go around. He has too many other kids of his own and the cabin is small."

"You sound sad, Leeloo. Are you sad a lot?"

"I try not to be. I do things that make me happy, mostly by myself."

"Me, too," Dean said. "I like scouting ahead for the others when we're on the move. Jak, he's the one with the white hair, he's teaching me how to read signs. He doesn't say much, but I think I'm starting to get good at it."

"You must have wonderful adventures with your dad and your friends. I'm still too young for adventures, I guess."

"You'll have some, though. Mebbe even better ones."

"Do you really think so?"

"I'm sure of it."

From the other side of the compound came the sound of her name being called. "Leeeee-looooo Bunny!"

"Dinnertime," she said, destroyed at the prospect of being pulled away from something so exciting and extraordinary by something so boring and ordinary.

"You'd better go, then," he told her. "Don't want to be late, not with all those other kids at the table. You won't get anything to eat."

"Are you staying for the carny?" she asked him.

"Sure."

"Then mebbe I'll see you tomorrow?"

He smiled at her. "Of course," he said. "I'll look for you in the morning."

With a totally mystifying combination of pain and joy sitting upon her heart, Leeloo Bunny descended the berm. She had never had a crush on a boy before. Had never wanted to kiss a boy before. In part, this was due to the awakening of her physical self; in part it was due to the fact that none of the ville boys interested her in the least. And for good reason. After watching the goings-on through the gaudy windows, the older ones got all panting and grabby handed, trying to insinuate their dirty fingers into very private places. Other girls in the ville, some even younger than Leeloo, let them do that, and more. Not Leeloo, though. The younger boys in Bullard ville were even more dismal crush prospects. They all had snot caked on their cheeks, and their breath smelled like creamed corn.

When she got back to Fat Melchior's cabin, the chaos of dinner for ten was well under way. She didn't compete for food, hardly ate any to speak of, and later, when she finally curled up on her tiny cot, she found she couldn't sleep a wink. And the cause, strangely enough, wasn't her excitement over the carny.

## Chapter Seven

With Jackson trotting at the heels of his jackboots, the Magnificent Crecca headed back to the rear of the big wag, down the narrow, windowless, low-ceilinged corridor.

As the carny master approached the closed metal door at the far end, he felt a wave of the familiar, powerful unease he always felt just before entering the Magus's lair. Gert Wolfram had been afraid of the Magus, too. At the time, Crecca had thought it hysterically funny to see that huge mountain of blubber tiptoeing around, trying to avoid even the most incidental contact. Wolfram had never shown his fear to the Magus's face, if what he had could even be called a face—more like the jumbled contents of butcher and machine shop trash cans. The Magus loved to induce terror. And when he saw its first tender sprout,

he nourished it and made it grow. Crecca was much more comfortable when the puppet master wasn't along for the ride. The carny picked him up and dropped him off at different locations on the route. No explanation was ever given. They never knew where he went or how he got back. All they knew was that he was privy to ultrasecret, predark whitecoat technology, and that he had developed some unique refinements of his own.

The Magus had a distinctly unpleasant smell. Crecca had always figured it had something to do with the unnatural combination of flesh and stainless steel. The worst thing by far, though, were the eyes. Like a pair of chromed hen's eggs, with pinhole pupils. You could never tell for sure what they were looking at. Crecca ordered Jackson to sit and stay outside the door. The Magus had been known to bite the heads off baby stickies on a whim, and Crecca had put in far too much time on this one to start over. He raised his balled fist and pounded on the door.

"Come!" said a strange, thready voice from the other side.

When Crecca entered the wag's rear salon, he was slammed by the odor of machine oil, fried brake linings and spilled blood. The dim, smoky room was surrounded by one-way, blasterproof, glass windows. It was five times the size of his cabin, and it had a hundred times more junk in it. Unsorted junk. Littering the floor were piles of gears, pipe, wire, housings, glass beakers, lamps, conduit, parts of wag engines and computer motherboards. Sitting on the salon's built-in rear-window sofa was living nightmare cast in decaying flesh and stainless-steel struts.

One of the rules of survival with the Magus was to not let him catch you staring.

Crecca tugged hard at his red chin beard, pretending to study with interest the vivisection that had been left abandoned on a crude wooden table. It was impossible to tell whether the half-dissected body was norm or mutie, as its layers of skin and muscle were now peeled back and tacked down to the tabletop, exposing a great yawning hole in the middle of its chest, lungs that still labored, a heart that still beat desperately.

"What do you want?" the Magus demanded. "As you can see, I am fully occupied at present." He was screwing together a contraption made of plastic tubing and metal fittings. He kept turning the thing over in his hands, then holding it up to the gaping chest as if measuring its fit.

What the gizmo's angles and ridges might do inside that tortured anatomy the carny master had no clue. He shifted his boot soles and felt the stickiness underfoot. Gear grease or guts, he couldn't tell. Crecca cleared his throat before he spoke, afraid his voice might break. "I just wanted to let you know that the valve problem on the canisters has been repaired," he said. "It was a rubber gasket that failed. We jury-rigged replacements. You said you wanted to be kept informed."

The Magus got up from the sofa. Lurching forward on knee joints made of Teflon and titanium, he wasn't a pretty sight.

Even though the carny master knew that to turn and run would have meant the end of him, it took every ounce of nerve to stand his ground. And as the creature clicked past him, he couldn't help but let go a sigh of relief.

The Magus had to have heard the exhalation.

He stopped in midstep, his head rotating as if on massive ball-bearing swivels, his eyes spearing the carny master's very soul.

Crecca opened his mouth, but no sound came forth. All he could see was the pupil holes in the chrome eggs narrowing to tiny pinpoints. He felt as if he were falling into them, drawn down as if by a whirlpool into spinning metal blades.

"So One-Eye has come for the world famous show, has he?" the Magus said. "And brought his spawn to see it, too? How very, very convenient for me. To finally dispense with both the infuriating cyclops of a father and the annoying simp of a son. Poof!"

Crecca said nothing.

"Make sure he gets a good seat," the Magus ordered. "Make sure his son is sitting beside him. And make sure they don't get out of the tent."

"Of course, Magus."

"Death comes to all of us," the Magus said brightly as he moved to the dissection table. "Well, most of us, anyway." Then he threw back his head and made a noise.

Because Crecca had been the creature's pawn for so long, he recognized the racket as laughter and stifled the urge to cover his ears. To anyone else, it would have sounded like a wag engine throwing a piston rod—shrieking, clanking, before rattling to a stop.

The Magus reached a steel-claw hand into the chest cavity and took hold of the beating heart.

"This ville is fat and ripe for the plucking," the Magus said, weighing the pound of wet muscle on his palm. "There can be no mistakes."

Crecca nodded.

"Mistakes will be costly."

To prove his point, the Magus crushed the heart in his fist, making hot blood squirt in all directions. The body made a grunting noise, then its heels began to drum on the tabletop. Working in an absolute frenzy, the Magus fit the plastic-metal contraption into the ravaged chest. Muttering to himself, he seized a soldering iron and plunged the red-hot tip into the cavity. The smell of scorched flesh and burning plastic billowed from the gash.

He had no more time for carny masters, or canisters.

As the Magus began to hum—not from his throat, as a flesh-and-blood person might do, but from his round, spider belly—Crecca carefully and quietly backed over the piles of junk and out of the room.

As soon as he shut the door, Jackson jumped up and started licking the spatters of blood from the toe of his boot. Still a bit dazed, Crecca watched the little monster feed for several moments before back handing it hard against the wall. Jackson ended up on its butt on the floor, face slack, vacant eyes slowly blinking.

Stickies had to be treated with firmness, and all instructions had to be repeated countless times before they sank in. Crecca was in charge of when, how and what Jackson ate. Left to its own primal instincts, the immature mutie would have chewed right through the tip of the boot, and once it tasted his blood,



Crecca would have had to put a slug in its head to stop the chomping jaws and needle teeth. Safely back in his own quarters, the carny master rushed to a waiting jar of joy juice and had a long, steadying pull. It was only then that he realized he had crapped himself.

## Chapter Eight

Ryan and the companions were among the throng of ville folk watching the roustabouts lay out rolled sections of the big tent on the ground. Predark music blared from a row of black speakers on the roof of one of the wags. It was the same raucous show tune Ryan and the others had marched to the day before. The head roustabout shouted orders over the insistent drumbeat. One of his men made measurements using a long piece of chain bolted to a stake that had been driven into the yellow dirt. The fixed length of this device allowed him to draw a great circle. As he moved the chain around the center stake, at even intervals he tapped in perimeter stakes. When the floor plan had been laid out, two other men began digging a narrow, deep hole at the midpoint to act as a footing for the tent's main upright support.

When this was done, the roustabouts hauled the tent sections into final position, like the spokes of a wheel, and began snapping them together and folding the double, overlapping seams. From the strain and sweat on their faces, the rolls were very heavy. In a matter of minutes, the big tent began to take shape on the ground. Easily two hundred feet across, it was striped in gay red and white, and made of some heavily coated fabric.

The cheery music and the festive colors made Ryan's skin crawl and his trigger finger itch. As did the expressions of delight he saw on the faces of the onlookers.

Like lambs led to slaughter.

Ryan was by no means a do-gooder, and life in Deathlands was survival of the fittest. But some things just had to come to a stop.

A worker with a wheelbarrow passed out tent stakes to men who waited at the perimeter markers with sledgehammers. The thick, cylindrical metal spikes were almost four feet long. The roustabouts grunted and swung in time to the music. The twenty pound heads of their hammers sent showers of sparks flying as they slammed the spikes deep into the earth. When the broad ring of side stakes was set, ropes were tied, loosely connecting them to the tent's lower wall. A seventy-five-foot-long steel pole, also made up in shorter sections, was assembled, then eight men crawled inside the flattened bag with it.

At the hairy roustabout's direction, a heavy rope was attached to the tent's peak. A dozen workers then yarded it over the top of the tallest wag as the men inside the tent angled up the center pole in a series of steps timed to the music's beat.

The crowd of bystanders sent up a wild cheer as the pole's butt slipped into place and the tent was finally raised. Red-and-white pennants on the peak of the roof and around the top of the side wall hung down limply in the still, already scorching air.

"There's only the one exit," J.B. said to Ryan. "And no window vents that I can see."

"It's like we thought," the one-eyed man said. "Whatever it is that they're doing to folks, it all happens

inside the tent."

"And nobody's getting out," Krysty added.

"From the looks of the fabric," Mildred said, "the tent could be a Kevlar weave, or something like it. But with a plasticized coating on the outside. If it is made of Kevlar, even blaster slugs won't tear it. With those double seams, it's got to be virtually airtight."

"A candy-striped, portable death house," Krysty said softly.

"All the evidence we've seen points to an inhalant," Mildred went on. "They've got to be using some kind of poison gas."

"Mebbe we don't want to go in there, Dad," Dean said, his voice tight with concern.

"The boy's right," J.B. said. "Once we're inside that tent, we're trapped along with everybody else."

Ryan grimaced. They had gotten themselves in a bind; that was for sure. But it wasn't unexpected.

They had known that once they entered the ville, circumstances would be fluid. That whatever plan they had hatched over the long march might have to be thrown out.

A key part of it already had.

The original idea had been to take out some of the chillers in the night, using their knives to quietly reduce the odds. But once they were on-site in Bullard ville it became clear that plan wouldn't work. For one thing, the caged sideshow muties acted like an army of watchdogs, alerting the carny folk with squeals and bellows when anyone approached their circled wags. For another, the dispatched roustabouts would have been missed on the work crews that morning. Search parties would have been sent out. Perhaps the shallow graves would have been discovered. Either way, the companions' hands would have been tipped. Outnumbered as they were, without the element of surprise, they had no chance at all.

Having caught up with the traveling troupe at last, and having gathered a sense of the people involved, Ryan had no doubt that it was the carny doing the mass chilling. The moment he had looked into the Magnificent Crecca's eyes, all other possibilities vanished.

To loot an entire ville down to the pots, pans and shoelaces called for manpower, which the carny had. To loot an entire ville required heavy duty transportation for all the stolen goods. The only tracks of sufficient number and size leading from the place had belonged to the carny. To chill that many people at once called for confinement, isolation, no escape.

Which the tent provided.

After they had examined the bodies in the unnamed ville, Mildred had guessed that a poison had been used, but she couldn't tell what kind or how it had been administered. Though some of the victims had been shot in the head, most had no evidence of wounds. The bullet holes were either mercy shots or the result of a pack of chillers taking random target practice on a pile of corpses. It made sense that the lethal weapon would be a gas, although where it came from and how it was delivered was still a puzzle.

There was, of course, also still the possibility that the carny would just do its show and move on, without

chilling anyone. As it had done in Perdition, and elsewhere.

Ryan thought this outcome was unlikely, as did the other companions. Bullard ville was made-to-order for another mass wipeout. It was isolated. It was unknown, except for being an established water stop along a very long, very dry road. If all the residents vanished overnight, the travelers up and down the valley would just conclude that the water supply had finally dried up, forcing folks to abandon their huts and disperse. No one would care one way or the other. No one would look any deeper.

Once more, Ryan took in the excited faces of the crowd. It wasn't just made up of kids, but people of all ages, and the leaders of the ville, too. Dirt farmers, cooks, housewives and sluts had deserted their work in order to gawk at the wonder of Wolfram's World Famous Carny. Their rapt expressions said this was the biggest thing to ever hit Bullard ville. Unless something was done, it was also probably going to be the last thing to ever hit Bullard ville.

"We've got to go in," Ryan told the others. "We've got no choice. We've got to go in with everyone else, just like nothing's up. It's the only way to make sure we get everyone out alive. We've got to keep a low profile until the time comes to make our move."

"If we wait just a tetch too long, Ryan, things could get bastard ugly in a hurry," the Armorer said.

For a long moment there was silence between them.

The silence indicated a mutual understanding of the situation, and a mutual consent to proceed as exactly as Ryan suggested.

It was only broken when Dean looked around, and said, "Where's Jak?"

OUT OF THE COMPANIONS direct view, around the curve of the sideshow trailers, Jak once again had his head thrust through the bars of the mountain lion's cage. Once again that great, hot tongue lovingly washed his face and neck.

The pale, ruby-eyed youth had few words to describe even the simplest moments of his violent and tragic life. For Jak, things were good or they were bad. He was happy or he wasn't. Hungry or not. Loaded or reloading. The complexity of his feelings at that moment was impossible to translate into a neat, black-white duality.

Only the lion understood what he felt.

And that was because he and the lion shared.

Everything.

Without words.

Jak pushed back from the bars and wiped the viscous slobber from his cheek with the back of his forearm. He took in the enormity of dense, soft, beige fur; the long, lashing tail as big around as his bicep; the fat, black-fringed ears, rounded beautifully at the tips. Jutting from the sides of the creature's massive neck was the pair of curving, pointed horns that served to protect the throat against attack from the sides, and as offensive weapons. The canine fangs exposed by the lion's wide grin were longer than the blade of Ryan's panga; the lion's claws were cruel black gut hooks, fully extended in pleasure now, cutting shallow, bright grooves into the steel floor of its cage. The smell of meat breath and musk gusted over

Jak's face.

He couldn't explain how the creature's thoughts and emotions came into his head, or how he knew that likewise the lion experienced what he experienced. It was as if an invisible tunnel connected them, and through the tunnel ran a torrent of exquisite tenderness.

The albino gripped the bars again and stared into the beast's huge, pleasure-slitted, yellow eyes. The sound of its purring rattled the steel in his hands like an earthquake. The tremendous heat given off by its body blasted him like a black basalt boulder sitting in the midday sun.

You free soon, he thought. Then we hunt.

Jak's mind was slammed with gratitude and joy, and then a caress, a voiceless voice, a soundless sound that resonated in the very pit of his stomach: I know you will free me, Little Brother. I know you will.

## Chapter Nine

After the companions' meeting broke up, Dean went looking for Leeloo Bunny. He found her standing in front of one of the trailered sideshow cages.

"Hi, Leeloo," he said as he walked up.

"Hi, Dean." From the light in her eyes, she seemed real glad to see him. She had put a crown of fresh daisies in her shining hair.

"What're you doing?" he asked.

"Just looking at this one," she said.

The painted nameplate on the bars read Baldoona, The Two-Headed Scalie. The male mutie inside the cage sported a pair of heads that sprouted side by side in the middle of its wide shoulders. Shoulders that seemed to stoop from their combined weight. One head was full sized, as if from a grown-up person. It looked mebbe forty years of age. Its coarse, gray-blond hair was matted and greasy, its face florid, beardless and unlined. Bloodshot eyes glowered at them from beneath a heavy, eyebrowless ridge of bone.

The other head was a baby's, small, bald and perched on a short neck. Its skin was flushed with infantile frustration. The eyes on the little head were black and glittered behind squinty, puffy eyelids.

The scalie was exhibited stripped to the waist. It had a massive torso, wide and thick, and there were big muscles under the layers of sagging fat. As it moved slightly, the angled light caught the rows of tiny scales that covered its skin, giving it an iridescent grayish cast.

The cage was fouled by the smell of urine and excrement; brown mounds of the latter lay clumped along the cage's rear wall. Clouds of flies buzzed amid the miasma.

"Do you think they like each other?" Leeloo asked Dean.

"You mean the two heads?"

"Uh-huh. They don't look like they like each other at all."

When Dean examined the creature more closely, he saw that it was true. The baby head was scowling. The normal head was scowling. And they were glancing sidelong at each other, out of the corners of their nearest eyes, which were separated by no more than eight inches.

"I wonder if they both get hungry at the same time?" he said. "Do you think if one head eats, the other one gets full?"

"If one has to pee, does the other one, too?" Leeloo added, grinning.

The adult head glared at her. "Pipsqueak gets hungry every four hours," it said, its voice deep and liquidy in the wide chest. "Wakes me up in the middle of the night with his squalling. And then thanks me by pissing and shitting in my pants. A pain in the ass that you wouldn't believe. I'd have had someone take an ax and chop him off me years ago, but the shock of doing that would chill me, too. Our nervous systems are all grown together."

Dean and Leeloo stood there, flatfooted, stunned that the thing before them could actually talk and make sense.

"Close your mouths," it said. "You're going to catch flies...and you know where they've been."

When neither of the children said anything, the creature continued, ever more irritated. "What are you two looking so surprised for? Just because my captors keep me sitting in my own shit and feed me with a shovel, do you think I'm some kind of wild animal?" Baldoona held up its powerful but flab-encased arms and let the sunlight play and flash on the rows of tiny scales. "My brain isn't mutated," it said, "just my skin."

Dean couldn't help but glance at the baby head, which was like a huge, purpling mushroom springing from its shoulder.

The scalie noticed what he was looking at. "Of course there's the other head," it said, "but that's something that could have happened to anyone—even you—under the right conditions."

Dean wondered if Baldoona knew about the mass chilling. The only way it could keep from knowing was if the cage was covered up with a tarp during the murdering and burial.

As one of the roustabouts came down the line of cages toward them, the scalie shut up and slumped into a sullen slouch.

"Keep a good ways back from them bars, you two," the carny man warned them. "That lizard-skinned piece of nukeshit ripped the arm off a kid in Perdition, sat there and ate it in front of the parents while the poor little critter bled himself to death."

Dean looked at the scalie, who shrugged sheepishly, as if to say, "Ah, well...there you go..."

After the roustabout had moved on, Leeloo said to the mutie, "You're a mean thing to have done that to a child. A cruel, mean thing."

"And your point is...?"

"Dean should put a nine mill in the middle of your big, ugly face. Not the baby's, though. It's kind of cute the way it fusses, and it can't talk."

The scalie's double sets of eyes turned on young Cawdor. It gripped the bars in both hands, and the adult head said, "Well, Deanie boy, you gonna do it, or what? Shit or get off the pot."

The baby head mewled along in high harmony, echoing the other head's sentiment, even if it didn't know how to form the words.

The mocking contempt in the mutie duet riled Dean in a big way. He didn't like the idea of being insulted, and definitely not in front of Leeloo Bunny.

Dean drew himself up to his full height, then brought the Hi-Power out of hip leather in a blue-steel blur. He raked the handblaster's fixed front sight across the scalie's exposed knuckles, making him yelp from both mouths and jump back to the rear of his cage, where he raged and hopped in pain, clutching his damaged hand.

The baby was still squealing as the adult head snarled at the top of its lungs, "I'll get you for that, you little bed wetter! See if I don't! I'll eat the flesh from your bones!"

"Shut up," Dean told him as he reholstered the Browning. "Can't you see you're scaring the baby head?"

"Yeah," Leeloo chimed in. Then she slipped her thin arm in his and said, "Come on, Dean, let's go look at some of the other cages."

Dean liked her a lot, he realized with a start. Not in a sexual way, but he liked how she looked at him. As if he were her hero. And she wasn't any sort of quivery-lower-lip girl either. The kind who was afraid of spiders and sorrow. Leeloo was a little girl, but Dean could tell she was as hard as flint. And in a strange way, she reminded him of Krysty. It was something about her certainty, something in the way she carried herself. He could tell even now that she was going to grow up to be a stunningly beautiful woman. Strong. Proud. Compassionate. Honest. It made him feel absolutely wonderful to be looked up to by her. It made him want to protect her.

As they walked to the next cage, he started to think about the tent, and what was going to happen inside, and it made his face go dark with worry. He wanted to tell Leeloo to skip the performance altogether, to just go someplace out on the plain and hide there until it was over, but he knew he couldn't do it. Everything depended on secrecy and surprise. Though he instinctively trusted her with his life, he couldn't place the lives of the companions in her hands.

Which left him only one alternative.

"Where are you going to sit for the show?" he asked her.

"Dunno. Anywhere I can, I guess."

"Would you sit next to me and my dad if I asked you to?"

Leeloo's face lit up instantly. "Are you asking me?"

"Yes. I want to watch the show with you."

Though it seemed impossible before it happened, her face lit up even brighter. "That'll make it extra good," she said.

## Chapter Ten

With both hands on the steering wheel, Azimuth wound out the Baja Bug on the long straightaway, loving the way the oversize off-road tires juddered, the vehicle's independent suspension gobbling up the ruined highway's ruts and rills. The engine howled at redline; in his rearview mirror was a wall of yellow dust. He had his APC-crew, polarized goggles up. The hot valley wind pressed against his face like the palm of a great gritty hand. Gobs of dried white spittle were stuck in the corners of his grinning mouth.

In his lap was a predark portable CD player, one of the perks of traveling with the carnies; the headset earphones clamped down over his dreadlocks. His head juked and bobbed to Bob Marley's greatest hits. From playing the same compilation CD over and over, he had picked up some curious and archaic mannerisms of speech.

One of the best parts of Azimuth's scouting-advance-man job for Gert Wolfram's World Famous Carny was having plenty of wag fuel to burn in the Bug, no boss man hanging over his shoulder and the right to go as fast as he pleased. The other good parts happened when he arrived at the performance sites, where he was fed and liquored bastard well, and then fucked seven ways from Tuesday, all for free. This day, he was headed up valley, to Perdition's sister ville of Paradise at the northern end, where in two days the carnies' next scheduled performance was to take place. Paradise was renowned for having the best gaudy sluts west of the Shens, both in terms of talent and raw enthusiasm.

Azimuth didn't see the rude barricade that completely blocked both sides of the road until he was almost on top of it. Made of a pile of broken chunks of concrete, it had a sign propped up in front of it.

"Fuckin' B!" he growled, taking his foot off the accelerator and locking up the brakes. As the Baja Bug slewed right, its rear end swinging out, he steered into the skid with one hand. With the other, he yanked the KG-99 handblaster from its leather scabbard under the dash.

The Bug was like an extension of his big, hard body. He could make it do whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted.

Clutch in, hard, shifter dropped into third gear, as smooth and silky as a gaudy house sex sandwich, clutch popped out.

Its engine screaming an octave above redline, the Baja Bug's nose dipped sickeningly from the sudden deceleration, and Azimuth's stomach likewise lurched forward.

With the blaster's vented barrel sleeve braced against the rim of the missing windshield, and the Wailers still wailing sweet and mellow in his head,

Azimuth howled at the male figure standing beside the sign, "Doan mess wid me, mon!" He brought the

Bug to a sideways skidding stop right in front of the tall, bearded man in wraparound sunglasses and a tattered straw cowboy hat. The skid made the big knobby tires dig in, and sent a wall of dust flying over the lone sentinel, who neither backed away nor jumped aside.

Azimuth jerked down his goggles and ripped off his headset, holding the sights of the KG-99 on the man. He poked the weapon out the passenger door's windowless frame until the dust cleared. "What you up to, mon?!" he shouted. "What you fuckin' wid me road for?"

The man in the sunglasses and straw hat raised his empty hands and started to walk slowly toward the passenger door. The sign leaning against the barricade was a delaminating, irregular chunk of plywood, a painted arrow pointing to the right. "There's a problem up ahead," he said.

"There be a bigger problem right here, mon, if you doan clear me way, and quick like."

"Got cave-ins up ahead," the tall man said. "The old highway has been undermined by the river."

"Ain't no river here, mon."

"Youcan't see it anymore, It runs underground now, in some places right below the road. Up ahead, the flowing water has eroded all the earth from under the road metal. Just the thin skin of concrete is left. It won't take the weight of your wag. The road will fall out from under you, and you'll either die in the crash or drown as you drop in the river and get swept underground."

"Fuckin' C!" Azimuth said, killing his engine and scrambling out the driver's door. He swung the handblaster up over the little wag's roof, and its welded-on bar of high-intensity floodlights, to keep the bearded guy covered as he moved for the front bumper. "Stay where you be, goddammit!"

He stormed over to the barricade and stared down the road, keeping the barrel of the KG-99 pointed at the sentinel's chest.

"I doan see no fuckin' holes, mon."

"Around the curve," the bearded man told him. "By the time you'd have made the turn, it'd would have been too late. You'll be rolling over rotten ground. We lost an entire caravan this morning. Eighteen people and five wags. Swallowed up and gone in the blink of an eye."

Azimuth looked at the man carefully for the first time. He noticed how gaunt his face was under the beard, and how even though the sunglasses completely hid his eyes, they couldn't hide the suffering he radiated. Perhaps from losing family and friends to the sinkholes. Despite this, the scout remained suspicious. It was his job.

"Andyon be in charge of warnin' people?" Azimuth asked dubiously. "You come from another planet, mon? Or mebbe you just lose your fuckin' mind?" He raised his left hand and pinched his index finger and thumb together. "I come dis close to chillin' you, mon."

"Someone had to mark the detour," the man in sunglasses said.

"Detour?"

He pointed to his left, to a two-rut track that ran perpendicular to the highway, leading off in the direction of the darkly forested, savage-looking mountains to the east.



"Looks like de wrong bloody way to me," Azimuth said. "And narrow as worm shit."

"The road loops up through the foothills and comes back to the highway on the other side of the cave-ins," the man said.

"Shit! I got me a whole damn carny mebbe a day behind on the road. Big wags. Trailers. Heavy loads. How dey gonna make it up dat pissy little track?"

"I'm no expert on that," the man said, "but I suppose it would depend on how good the drivers were. I'll tell you this, though, there's no turnarounds once you start up that way. You've got to go all the way to the end before you can come back."

"Fuckin' D!" Azimuth snarled as he lowered his weapon. Part of his responsibility as carny scout was to make sure the roads were passable for the convoy. The standard operating procedure in a detour situation like this, given the opportunity for ambush and robbery, was for him to leave a marker at the turn-off, which would indicate to those who followed that he had tested the alternate route, returned and marked it safe. Unknown to head roustabout Furlong and carny master Crecca, to increase his enjoyment of the many perks at the other end of the journey, what Azimuth actually did most of the time was to mark the route as safe, and if it wasn't, he would turn back and retrieve the sign.

When he leaned into the back seat of the Bug, Azimuth wasn't thinking about the potential risks to himself and his caravan: He had never heard of a problem along this stretch of road. The lack of water, the crushing heat, and the sheer distance kept organized chillers and robbers from setting up shop. And it would take a highly organized and large crew to threaten the carny. As he leaned into the back of the Bug, he was thinking about the various attractions of the Blue Moon gaudy in Paradise, and specifically a set of quadruplet sisters, aged nineteen, who worked in tag-team fashion, around the clock, until the customer cried for his or her uncle. On the Bug's floorboards was a collection of smooth, white quartzite rocks. He selected one of about three pounds and placed it at the foot of the barricade, next to the detour sign.

"What's that for?" the man in sunglasses asked him as he straightened.

"To let me people know I've gone ahead."

"How many folks are in the carny?"

"More dan sixty," Azimuth boasted. "And dat's widout countin' all de sideshow muties. It be de biggest damn carny in all de hellscape."

"Maybe I'll get a chance to see the show," the man said.

"You woan be disappointed, dats for sure," Azimuth said as he climbed back in the Bug's driver's seat.

Azimuth climbed back in the Bug and rescabbarred the KG-99. He cranked over the engine, then backed up to give himself room to make the right turn.

"Mebbe I'll see you den in Paradise," he shouted gleefully to the bearded man as he slowly drove past him. "Look me up at de Blue Moon gaudy. I be under a pile of blondes. Ha!"

The man just tipped the frayed brim of his cowboy hat in salute.

Azimuth pulled up his goggles and pulled on his headset as he rolled off the roadway and onto the track. He got the Bug into second gear, and had to keep it there as the trail wound back and forth through a series of tight switchbacks that climbed up and away from the predark interstate.

The bearded man hadn't been shitting him about there being no place to turn around.

Although the one-wag road was wide enough for even the biggest carny vehicle to pass, no way could even Azimuth back the Bug down it by himself. The turns were too tight and road's downward angle was too steep. Getting back down in reverse could be done, but it would take a very long time, at virtual crawl speed while men walking behind shouted directions for brakes and steering.

And if one of the wags in the line broke down, it would bottleneck the whole caravan.

Azimuth drove on doggedly, and didn't start to get an antsy feeling until he was about half an hour from the highway, and he saw the lower fringe of the forest ahead. He stopped the Bug in the sunlight, set the parking brake, ripped off his headset and got out.

Above him were towering, densely packed coniferous trees. The two-rut track made a turn just inside the edge of the forest and vanished in among the shadows and the dark, massively thick trunks.

"Bloody hell!" he shouted up at the wall of trees.

When he turned around to look for the highway, he saw it was the thinnest of thin ribbons running down the middle of the valley.

"You'd best no be fuckin' wid ol' Azimuth, mon!" he roared in what he knew to be the general direction of the barricade and the bearded man. "'Cause I be backin' down dis bloody snail trail an' fuckin' wid you right back!"

Kicking at the dirt with his steel-toe-capped boot, he hopped back in the Bug and headed into the shadows. In order to see, he had to switch on his headlights and roof lights. The road continued to climb and twist and turn around the huge trunks. Occasionally low branches whipped across his empty windshield frame. So far there was no problem with getting the big wags up the road.

The question was, would it ever return to the interstate?

As he continued on, Azimuth kept thinking that on the next turn, the track would wind back on itself and start to descend, but it showed no inclination of doing anything of the sort.

"You be takin' me to da summit, you rat bastard!" he cried out the driver's door window frame.

Azimuth told himself if that was the case, he would go no farther than the crest of the mountain. And once there, by hook or by crook, he'd find a way to get the Bug's nose turned the way he'd come. And when he got back to the sign and the barricade, he would pick up the bloody three-pound marker rock and use it to bash in the bearded man's head.

It occurred to him that there were no animals in these woods. No birds. Not even bugs. The heat was smothering, and there didn't seem to be enough air to breathe. Beyond the range of his head- and floodlights was a wall of darkness. Then he saw sunlight breaking through ahead. The backlit trees sent a wave of relief passing through him.

"About bloody time!" he said.

When the Bug crested the top of a rise, it rolled into the open. Azimuth stopped the wag and got out. Just below him was a small lake, surrounded by a dead zone of stripped, barkless trees and muddy bank. On the hillside below the body of water, on a shelf of flat land, was a small ville.

There was plenty of room to turn down there.

And as he watched the jumble of shanties and lean-tos, he saw a few people moving in and out. Folks he could ask about the best way to get back to the highway.

Feeling much better, Azimuth put on the headset and drove down to the lake. He paused at the shoreline to lean out the driver's door and look over the placid water. The sky reflected in it without a ripple.

Then something caught his eye.

A quivering shadow.

At first he couldn't tell whether it was something in the water or something in the sky reflected by the water.

It was in the water.

The spot of darker color began to grow, and as it grew it bubbled and churned. Silvery bits, like tiny mirrors, started to rise from the water, forming a churning cloud. Then came the pale green lightning, shooting the wrong way, from the surface of the churning water to the underside of the cloud.

"I be damned," he said, unable to take his eyes off the phenomenon.

The cloud got larger and larger and the lightning became more and more violent. When the strange ministorm started to drift across the lake toward him, Azimuth decided he had seen enough.

Even as he reached for the parking brake, the first of the pale spores swept over the Bug, angling in through the glassless window frames. They made a rustling, scratchy sound as they rained down on the sheet metal.

Azimuth sniffed at the air, once, and it was all over. His brain exploded in vibrating waves of color, color so pure and so intense that it obliterated everything else. He couldn't feel his body, which had gone rigid with shock.

The carny scout sat there for the better part of ten minutes, his eyes rolled back in their sockets, quietly convulsing. Ten minutes, ten hours, ten years, the concept of passing time ceased to be part of his mental framework.

When the deluge of colors finally faded, Azimuth came to. Out the empty windshield frame he saw someone appear out of the twinkling cloud and the falling, fine, pale snow. The someone was walking toward him. He automatically started to reach for the KG-99, but it wasn't there anymore. In the scabbard, instead, was a tropical flower with heavy, waxy red petals, a golden stamen and a perfume so rich and heady it made his mouth water.

When he looked up from the dash, the approaching man was close enough to make out. A thin black man with a snake nest of dreads and a baggy, crocheted, red, yellow and green hat. He was smoking a fat, foot-long, ganja stogie. Azimuth madly scabbled on the floorboards at his feet for the CD's protective case and, finding it, stared at its much faded color picture.

"Fucking Z!" he exclaimed, tearing off the headset. He hardly noticed that even without it, reggae music was still hard rocking inside his brain.

"What's shakin', mon?" Bob Marley asked, leaning his skinny elbows on the window frame of the driver's door.

"You are, mon. You are."

"Soon you be, too," Marley said, laughing as he took a tremendous pull on the stogie, and then blew a fog of thick ganja smoke straight into the carny scout's upturned face.

The hot smoke blinded him and made his eyes run with tears. Over the sound of his own strangled coughing, Azimuth clearly heard Bob Marley say, quite close to his ear, "You gon sit dere an' cry like a lil girl, or come meet de fellas in de band?"

## Chapter Eleven

The Magnificent Crecca chained Jackson to one of the tent's steel stakes, then raised a flap at the rear of the candy-striped enclosure and ducked under it. Before him was a short tunnel made of the same airtight fabric as the main tent. The passage ended in a flight of metal steps that led up to a door set in a sheet-steel wall. A heavy rubber gasket and metal plate sealed the seam between the wall and the edge of the tunnel.

As he mounted the steps, the carny master felt that special unease once again. Fighting back a combination of vertigo and nausea that accompanied absolute dread, he knocked twice on the door.

From the other side, the familiar, thready voice called for him to enter. Crecca opened the door and looked in on the Magus's private viewing box. The twelve-by-eight-foot room sat on a trailer inside the perimeter of the main tent. The box wall that faced the crowd was made of one-way mirror glass, painted around the edges of the frame with a scene of predark clowns and lion tamers. The center of the picture window was clear; beyond it, in the bright lights of the main tent's floods, the people of Bullard ville were filing in to their doom. Seated before the window in a fully reclined reclining chair, his metal-and-flesh legs comfortably crossed, was the steel-eyed monster.

"Don't just stand there," the Magus barked. "The light's ruining my view. Come in and close the door."

The carny master did as he was ordered. Being trapped in an airtight box with the creature was much, much worse than being in the same wag salon with him. The unusual smell given off by the Magus—scorched machine oil and fleshly decay—was a thousand times more concentrated. That, coupled with his proximity and the fact that there was nowhere to run, made Crecca go soft in the knees. Conscious of that fact that the last time he had been in the Magus's company his body had betrayed him, the carny master made an extra effort to maintain a tight sphincter.

On the other side of the mirror window, Ryan Cawdor and his party were being ushered down to the front row by a pair of nearly naked female roustabouts. There were no seats. The audience sat on plasticized tarps spread on the ground. This made the cleanup much easier. The red-haired beauty sat next to Cawdor. On his right sat his son and a young girl from the ville. Beside the girl was the albino, then the black woman, the man in the fedora and the old one.

The Magus swiveled in his recliner. As he turned to face Crecca, his wide smile, half white bone and half stainless steel, curdled the carny master's blood.

"I want this to be a very special performance," the Magus told him. "I want the entire crowd on its feet, cheering at the moment the lights go out and the music swells."

Crecca knew the Magus could see in the dark. He had had some kind of microminiature infrared sensors built into his steel eyes. So as not to miss a thing. Even the Magnificent Crecca, a born chiller, a leader of other chillers, a man who had personally opened the nozzles on the poison-gas canisters more than once, couldn't stand to watch the final agonies of so many. The times he had been forced to remain in the viewing box, to stand beside the laughing thing in the recliner, to wear a pair of predark, Soviet night-vision goggles, he had shut his eyes tight against the horror. Because of the goggles' lenses, the Magus couldn't see his lack of enthusiasm.

The carny master had often wondered about the source of the Magus's horrendous appetites, which were as much a mystery as everything else about him. Did they spring from his being able to move back and forth through time? A consequence of some expanded, vengeful-godlike perspective he had acquired? Or were they the result of a progressive dementia brought on by the physical changes of decades of such travel? And then again, Crecca knew, it was possible that they had nothing whatsoever to do with time jumping. But rather, with the replacement of his various human parts with gear boxes and servo mechanisms. It was possible that as the Magus became less human physically, he became less human spiritually.

That the creature demanded the carny audience always received a rocking good show before they were chilled was a case in point.

Crecca knew there was no strategic need for this deception, this extra effort on the part of his crew. As soon as all the residents were seated, the tent entrance could have been sealed and the gas released. No pain, no strain. But because the Magus understood, and it seemed to the carny master, even fed off the dark, dark energy of human despair, he insisted that the exits remain open, even though the rousties not involved in the show were already systematically looting the ville; he insisted that the crowd be lifted up to the heights of joy before being dropped into the abyss.

Only at the grand finale, when the floodlights in the tent suddenly went out, when the canisters were opened, when the center ring performers made their hasty exits; only when Mozart's Requiem began to boom at deafening volume from dozens of surrounding speakers, would the stunned audience realize it was all a trap.

And that there was no way out.

With glee, the Magus rubbed his palms together, his steel fingers clicking like castanets. "Oh, this is going to be good," he said. "This is going to be very good."

## Chapter Twelve

Leeloo Bunny looked up at Dean, who sat close beside her, cross-legged on the ground. As the carny folk rushed around making last minute checks of their equipment, the boy seemed to be scanning everything and everyone with those intense eyes of his. She sensed a coiled tightness in him that she didn't really understand and couldn't put a name to. His mood under the circumstances seemed strange to her, though. For sure, it wasn't the same wild excitement she felt in the big tent with the big show about to begin.

Dean caught her staring at him, and smiled.

Oh, my, she thought as her heart melted into a small, throbbing puddle in the center of her chest.

"Everything's going to be fine," he said.

Leeloo felt a twinge of confusion. Since when was there any question that things were going to be fine?

Then the recorded overture started up. Through surround speakers, "Tah-Rah-Rah-Boom-Ti-Ay" blared forth. No one in the audience knew the long history of the song, nor did anyone recognize this particular version as belonging to the Grateful Dead.

The red-haired carny master jumped over the low bumper of the center ring and into the spotlight. Behind him trailed a naked baby stickie on a long chrome chain fastened to a choke collar.

"Huzzah!" the Magnificent Crecca shouted a greeting to the crowd, throwing his arms open wide. "Welcome, Bullard ville, to Gert Wolfram's World Famous Carny!"

The Dead's shambling, sour-note-filled opus swelled deafeningly, then faded to a whisper.

"This afternoon," the carny master went on, "you will be treated to miracles and wonderments beyond compare. You will experience sights and sounds that you will take with you to your graves. Bullard ville, I give you the Fearless Flying Stickies!" Music up. Through the tent's loudspeakers, a live-recorded Jerry Garcia noodled up the chromatic scale, more or less, while eight male stickies in a line crossed into the center ring. They were all naked, except for broad, limp, brightly colored plastic collars that draped over their shoulders, chests and backs. The stickies did three turns of the ring, high-stepping in unison, skinny arms pumping in unison, genitalia flopping in unison. While they were strutting, roustabouts lowered a trapeze bar from the tent's peak. It wasn't lowered very far—just enough to allow it to swing freely.

"What is that?" Leeloo asked Dean, pointing at the wheeled contraption being pushed forward from the wings by a half-dozen roustabouts.

"A cannon," Dean told her. When she still looked puzzled, he added, "Like a giant longblaster. Shoots big slugs."

Not in this instance, it turned out.

The smallest of the eight stickies raced over to the muzzle and climbed down it, feet first. The music suddenly stopped and was replaced by a loud, recorded drum roll as the roustabouts used a hand-wheel

to crank up and aim the barrel at the tent's peak.

"Should we do it?" the carny master asked the audience. "Should we blow the little mutie bastard straight to hell?"

The answer from the assembled residents of Bullard ville was a resounding "Yes!"

Leeloo flinched when the cannon roared and flashed. Out of a cloud of dense gray smoke shot the little stickie, its spindly arms thrust forward. The pale, living missile arced high in the air. When the stickie's sucker fingers made contact with the trapeze bar, they locked on. It hung suspended, seventy-five feet above the center ring.

"Hoopa!" the Magnificent Crecca said, again throwing his arms wide. "If one was fun, folks, how about three?"

Bullard ville was all for that.

As the trio of muties climbed, one by one, down the cannon barrel, packing themselves in on top of one another, the carny master baited the crowd. "I have to warn you, good people," he said, "this trick doesn't always come off exactly as planned. A little too much blaster powder. A bit of a breeze. Too much humidity in the air. Those of you sitting in the front row should be ready to move quickly if it starts to rain stickies."

Leeloo flinched again when the cannon discharged. Even though she knew it was coming, she couldn't help herself; it was that loud. To her amazement, the three muties came out of the barrel in a living chain, the second and third stickies having fastened their sucker hands onto the pair of ankles in front of them. As the trio rocketed up into the air, the audience let out a single gasp.

It didn't look as if they were going to make it.

It looked as if they were going to come up mebbe a yard short.

But the lead stickie stretched and stretched and somehow made contact with the feet of the little one hanging from the bar, and then all four of them swung from the trapeze, connected at the ankles.

"Whew, close one!" Crecca proclaimed, flicking an imaginary drip of perspiration from his forehead. "Shall we go for four?"

The audience shouted its assent.

"Lower the sights," the carny master commanded his gun crew.

The remaining naked stickies scrambled down the still smoking barrel as the roustabouts changed the point of aim to the legs of the lowest of the four suspended muties, some fifty feet above the center ring.

Again, the cannon boomed and jolted, and another living chain of bodies vomited from its muzzle and hurtled toward the tent's peak. The crowd groaned in unison as the first stickie missed the legs of its target by a good five feet. The groan stretched on as the four-car, runaway mutie train arced past the steel tent pole and, veering off to the right, crashed sideways into the far wall of the tent. Still stuck together by sucker and secretion, the stickie quartet crashed in a heap on the ground. For a long moment, none of the muties moved. Then, one by one, they stirred, untangling and unsuckering

themselves.

Stickies were bastard tough to chill.

A few in the Bullard ville audience—perhaps those who had lost loved ones to this particular subhuman species—actually booed the miraculous survival, but everyone else cheered the spectacle. Some folks rose to their feet to clap as the entire acrobatic troupe took their wobble-weenie bows in the spotlight.

As thrilled as Leeloo was by the performance, in the pit of her stomach was a small knot of dread. She couldn't tell if the cannon miss had been on purpose or not, but she thought it hadn't. And that gave her the distinct feeling that the outcomes of the carny's acts weren't set in stone. That anything at all could happen, at any time, this afternoon. It was scary, but the fear made it all the more exciting.

The carny master waved an arm toward the wings. Grunting from the strain, masked roustabouts pulled and pushed a trailer bearing a tarp-covered cage into the center ring. Alongside the trailer, four beautiful, long-legged women danced and mugged for the crowd. From the rear, their nearly invisible costumes made it look as if they were naked but for thigh-high, high-heeled, black leather boots.

"Lesser carnies drag around carloads of snakes," the Magnificent Crecca bellowed. "They brag about how many deadly reptiles they've got and expect you to part with your hard earned jack. I'll tell you this for free. Numbers don't matter. It's size that counts. There's only one snake in this carny. It's been here since the very first ticket was sold. Bullard ville behold, Wolfram's Worm!"

The tarp was thrown back, revealing the twelve-foot-long, three-foot-wide mutie rattlesnake. Worm slithered into a vast, diamond-backed coil and, hissing like a volcanic steam vent, struck at the inside of the bars. At the impact, the cage rocked on its trailer. The snake's dripping fangs looked like a pair of back-curving, yellow scimitars jutting from its upper jawbone.

"The good thing about Worm," the carny master said as he jumped on the front edge of the trailer and tiptoed along it to the middle of the cage, "is that he only eats twice a month." He had to shout the last part over the buzzing roar made by the snake's huge rattles.

Leeloo sucked in and held her breath as Crecca took hold of the pin that held shut the cage door.

Everyone in the audience saw him grip the pin, and everyone knew what was going to happen next.

They couldn't believe their eyes, but they knew it was going to happen.

"The bad thing," the carny master said, "is that it's a week past his dinnertime."

With that, he jerked the pin from the hasp and leaped out of the way as the barred door swung open. Worm was a lot faster than he looked. He was out of the cage and on the ground before anyone could even scream.

Then everybody was screaming.

Bullard ville's mothers grabbed for their children; Bullard ville's menfolk went for their blasters.

The folks closest to the rear started to run for the exit.

Dean was up in the blink of an eye, thrusting his body between the huge snake and Leeloo. With his feet



shoulder width apart, he held the cocked, nine mill Browning in both hands.

"Don't shoot!" the carny master yelled over the din. "Everyone stay right where you are! Stay where you are and no one will be hurt. Everything is under control. The snake charmers are in position."

With that, the recorded music changed to something slow and sinuous, flutes and drums, drums and flutes.

Even the spectators halfway out the door stopped and turned to look.

Leeloo grabbed hold of Dean's arm; she couldn't help it.

The four beautiful norm women had surrounded the giant rattler, which now sat coiled in the middle of the center ring, its yard of rattles raised, buzzing mightily, its flat boulder of a head shifting as it tasted the air with a black forked tongue as long as a bullwhip. The snake charmers never stopped moving, never gave Worm a solid target to lock on to.

Even so, perhaps out of anger and frustration, the snake struck anyway. It launched itself forward, mouth agape, hollow fangs oozing thick streamers of poison.

The charmer that Worm had targeted did a hip feint and reverse, and with long legs jumped well out of the way.

The crowd cheered the clean miss.

Worm regrouped in the center ring, rattles buzzing even louder. The four women then took turns rushing at the flat, scaly head, drawing gaping strikes, and as they dodged and ducked the fang points, gasps rose from the audience. If there was so much as a stumble, if there was the slightest hesitation, one of the lovely women was going to die before their eyes.

Every time the snake struck, it extended itself to its full length on the ground. As it lay outstretched, after a dozen or more futile launches, a pair of the charmers ran right up the middle of its back. The one in front held a contraption made of chain link and padlocks. Before the snake could draw its body back beneath itself, the women had their long legs astraddle its neck, and with their combined body weight drove its chin into the dirt.

The crowd jumped to its feet, cheering.

The charmer in front slipped the chain muzzle over Worm's broad snout, the muscles in her back jumping as she dug her heels in the ground and hauled back hard to seat the device behind his eyes. She locked the muzzle in place and dismounted with a flourish, pirouetting away hand in hand with her sister charmer.

They got out of range just in time.

Unable to open its mouth and free its lethal weapons, Worm went crazy, rolling and thrashing like a flesh-and-blood cyclone. It took many minutes for this display of animal power and fury to wind down. When the great snake had finally exhausted itself, with help of four burly roustabouts, the charmers dragged the defeated Worm back to its cage by the tail.

As the cage rolled away, the carny master vaulted over the center ring's bumper and cried, "Bring on the

swampies!"

Leeloo had never seen a real swampie before, only heard tell. How dirty they were. How bad they smelled. How bastard mean they were. She was surprised at their small stature. They were heavily built for their size, though, with stout, stumpy legs, wide, blocky hips, stocky torsos, thick arms and hands, and big, bony heads. The weight of the bone of their foreheads and brows gave them all, male and female, a perpetually sour, scowling appearance.

Even as they tumbled and rolled around the ring to sprightly, upbeat music of clarinets and cymbals, there was nothing playful or lighthearted in their performance. Somersaults, cartwheels, handstands, headstands, mutie pyramids, all were delivered with the same dour distaste.

Crecca let the mirthless gamboling continue for a few more minutes, then stepped back into the center of the ring and waved his arms. The swampies stopped tumbling and circled around him. "Time for some juggling!" he announced. "Not red-hot coals. Not flaming torches. Not razor-sharp swords. But these..."

He held aloft in either hand a clutch of small, round, flat-black-painted metal objects.

"Frag grens," Leeloo said. "Those are frag grens."

"Probably not real, though," Dean told her.

As if the carny master had heard the words, he pulled the pin on one of the grens and lobbed the armed explosive toward the tent's only exit. The crowd ducked... as if ducking would do any good. A roustabout at the exit caught the grenade and pitched it outside.

"Three, two, one..." Crecca counted aloud.

The ground under Leeloo rocked from the explosion.

"Now, let's have some real fun," the carny master said. With that, he pulled the pin on a grenade, then tossed the gren one way and the pin the other. Swampies on the opposite sides of the circle caught the thrown objects. The one who'd grabbed the gren quickly flipped it to the one who had the pin. That swampie put the pin back in, disarming the explosive.

"Get the picture?" Crecca asked his audience. Then he started yanking pins and throwing the armed grens and pins around the circle. In a moment or two, all five were flying back and forth.

It made Leeloo dizzy to watch.

And she was plenty scared, too.

She was in the front row.

Everything was okay for a while, but when the juggling act fell apart, it did so on a grand scale. Somehow, all the pulled pins ended up on one side of the ring, and all the armed grens on the other, at the feet of a particularly grouchy looking swampie.

He threw back his matted head and bawled, "Mama!"

All the grens all blew with a loud whack! Instead of steel splinters, multicolored confetti flew through the

air, drifting down onto the audience.

When the crowd settled down, the Magnificent Crecca wound in the long chain that connected him to the baby stickie. He put the palm of his hand on the mutie's hairless head, and said, "Sing, Jackson!"

Once again, the little stickie opened its lipless mouth, and beautiful music rushed out. Every a cappella note was in perfect pitch. Every word of the predark song was perfectly clear, and it was all in English.

After the first couple of bars, Jackson had the whole audience locking arms and swaying along in time.

Leeloo and Dean swayed, too, arm in arm.

The music was lovely and haunting, but the lyrics puzzled Leeloo.

She knew what the color blue was, but she had no idea what was meant by a "bayou."

## Chapter Thirteen

As the tent's house lights went up and the carny intermission began, Ryan rose to his feet, as did the other companions. So far, there were no obvious signs of danger, yet he could whiff it, like the scent of a miles-distant cook fire riding on the wind. Only about half of the carny folk were visible and directly involved in the performance.

What the rest of the chillers were doing he could only guess.

And when he studied the roustabouts as they stared at the milling audience of farmers and shopkeepers, he saw both contempt and glee on their faces. The carny folk thought they knew what was going to happen to every person inside the tent, and they delighted in that secret, terrible knowledge.

It didn't cross Ryan's mind to wonder how human beings could be so callous and so unfeeling. He had lived in Deathlands all his life; he had seen and done things nearly as bad as what was planned for Bullard ville. Because he'd been there, because he, too, had wallowed in it, he understood the place of manifest evil, the heart of darkness. The difference between Ryan Cawdor and the carny chillers was that he had found his moral center, his personal bedrock, and he wouldn't be budged from it. Not even in the face of ten to one odds. "As soon as the show starts," he told Krysty and Mildred, "move for the exit. No matter what else happens, you've got to keep it open."

"Got it," Mildred said.

Krysty nodded in agreement, then said, "There may be other escape routes for the carny folk. Secret ways out that we don't know about."

"Makes sense," Ryan agreed. "It means that you're going to have to clear the way inside and outside the tent. Otherwise, they'll just chill us with blasters as we come through the exit."

"Mebbe Jak should come with us, then?" Mildred suggested.

Ryan looked at the albino, who was staring in the direction of the lion's cage, which was outside the tent. "No," he said. "We're going to have our hands full in here when the shooting starts. Can't do the job with less than four blasters."

"Some of the ville folks aren't gonna make it to the exit," J.B. said softly. "One way or another, either from poison or stray slugs, innocent blood is gonna flow."

"Some is better than all," Krysty said.

"Way better," Mildred agreed.

As the theme music resumed, Ryan swept his one-eyed gaze over the assembled crowd, their joyful faces, their anticipation of even more spectacular events to come. As they took their seats on the ground, some glanced at the windowless, rubber-coated walls of the tent without really seeing them, without understanding the implications of "airtight." They had no clue that this was meant to be their death chamber.

"Stay together," Ryan told Dean and the others. "Stay together, stick to the plan, and we'll all get out."

The Magnificent Crecca and his pet stickie once again entered the ring. "I trust you all enjoyed our first act?" he asked the seated mob.

Bullard ville applauded and whistled enthusiastically.

"Well, the second act of our show is even better. Without further ado, I give you the ever popular, always satisfying, Deathlands Last Man Standing! You all know the rules. No closed fists. No bared claws. And biting is optional."

Over the years, Ryan and J.B. had seen versions of this particular entertainment many times before. Troupes of professional hand-to-hand fighters toured the larger gaudies along the main trade routes, giving exhibition bouts and offering paying spectators the chance to bet on the outcomes.

What made this particular bout different were the gene pools of the combatants who faced off. It wasn't norm against norm, as was usually the case in the gaudies. In Wolfram's carry, it was norm against mutie.

The first bout featured a giant of a man with a shaved head and spiraling, concentric brandings over his shoulders and upper back, the raised welts like an angry red shawl. His mutie opponent was a head shorter, but as powerfully built. He was completely hairless. Cascading down the back of his skull and along the ridge of his spine were thousands upon thousands of pale, six-inch-long, tentacle-like growths. This mane of flesh had erectile function, the individual, dermal villi moving in response to stimuli, rippling like a field of strange wheat.

Crecca gestured for the fighters to come together in the middle of the ring and shake hands. When they touched bare knuckles, the mutie's mane flared instantly upright, like a spiky sail.

Which made the crowd ooh and ahh.

The contest consisted of three rounds, the standard for Deathlands Last Man Standing fights. The first three minute round was "contact optional," which meant that the fighters could move, feint and land open-handed blows whenever the opportunity presented itself. The second round was "contact mandatory." Which meant that each fighter could move at will, but had to match the other blow for blow

or be disqualified. The last round was toe-to-toe, with no moving whatsoever. If one of the combatants shifted his feet as he struck, or was staggered as he and his opponent traded full power, forehand and backhand bitch slaps, the contest was over.

The final round was always bloody, always ugly and always a big crowd pleaser.

This case was no different.

A minute and a half into the third round, both fighters' faces were drenched in gore from numerous shallow cuts on foreheads and cheekbones, their eyes swollen to slits. The bigger man seemed to have the upper hand, and was in fact grinning a wide, bloody-toothed grin as he smacked the mutie on the side of the head and made the creature's mixed spittle and gore erupt in a pink mist. The mutie's mane sagged lifelessly; his eyes were dull and vacant. It looked as if he was going down. The giant cocked back his arm for the finishing blow.

When the tables turned, they turned in an eye blink.

As the hand shot forward, the mutie's mane sprang fully erect. When the hand reached the target, the target had moved. Juking his head, the mutie caught the giant by the wrist and gave a perfectly timed pull, using the bigger man's weight and momentum against him. The norm lost his balance and stumbled forward.

Contest over.

Well, not quite.

As Crecca rushed up to declare the winner, the giant let out a furious growl and scrambled up from his knees. From his expression it was clear the rules were off the table. But before he could rise to his full height, the maned mutie landed a wicked, cracking elbow shot to the middle of his face, which sent the giant to the ground, hard on his butt. He sat there for an instant, fists clenched at his sides, face contorted, trying to keep from passing out. Trying and failing. He slumped to his back, his arms and legs spread wide, his mouth drooping open and drooling blood.

The two other matches that followed were cut from the same melodramatic cloth.

Powerful fighters.

Lots of blood.

Sore losers.

In the last bout, the sore loser chased the winner out of the tent swinging a length of heavy chain.

Ryan hardly noticed. His attention was elsewhere. Whenever a roustabout came or went, he tracked him or her to see what was being carried. Whenever a trailer moved in or out, he watched it closely. So far, everything that had come into the tent had gone out again.

Well, almost everything.

The only trailer that hadn't moved sat on the other side of the center ring. It had been there, in the same spot, when the companions had entered the tent— an oblong box on a wheeled bed, with a facing mirror

wall on which was painted a mural of predark circus scenes.

When the competition ended, the carny master announced the next act. "Friends, prepare yourselves to witness the strangest thing you will ever see. Something so unusual, and so startling that I guarantee you will never forget it as long as you live." Then he waved to the wings and gave the order, "Roll in Baldoona."

The cage containing the two-headed scalie was dragged on its trailer into the center ring. When it was in position, one of the moving crew tossed Crecca a long, metal-tipped pike and he used it to viciously prod the great lump of scale-covered flab.

In outrage, Baldoona's heads snarled and squealed respectively.

"Bastard fat, isn't it?" Crecca said to the crowd. "And if you're all wondering how it got that way, you're all about to find out." He turned to the wings again and shouted, "Bring in his dinner!"

Two roustabouts trotted in a half-grown pig that weighed roughly one hundred pounds. It walked like a dog beside them, with a long, coiled leash of rope around its neck. The men used some kind of white grease from a tub to coat the pig's body head to foot, then they tied the end of the rope to a stake that had been pounded deep into the dirt. When they walked away, the pig tried to follow them, but was brought up short by the end of the rope.

"I don't want any of you to panic when we let out the scalie," the Magnificent Crecca told his audience. "Pig is its favorite food, so it won't pay you any mind until it's done. And there's another thing... old Baldoona knows there's a time limit." On cue, a pair of roustabouts carried what looked like a giant stopwatch to the tent pole and hung it from a hook there, in plain sight of all the seated spectators. Obviously predark, it had a black minute hand and a thin red hand that counted seconds.

"Baldoona has to catch and eat as much of the pig as it can before the clock's alarm goes off," Crecca continued. "Once the bell starts ringing, it knows it either steps away from the carcass, or it gets the shit kicked out of it by my rousties."

With that the music swelled, a different theme now, a happy but tension-building, tick-tock song. One of the crew very carefully opened the scalie's cage door, and the carny master started the time clock.

There was much laughter and thigh slapping from the crowd as the obese mutie pursued the greased but tethered pig around the center ring. The act's opening antics were undeniably comical, but once Baldoona got a firm grip on the animal's left rear hock, things quickly took a turn in a different direction.

Some things are harder to watch than others.

Baldoona ate the pig from the feet up, its adult head attacking at the front, baby head working on the rear, both mutie mouths gobbling for all they were worth, with the pig shrieking like a steam whistle the whole time. It didn't stop shrieking until the adult head bit out its heart.

When Ryan looked over at his son, Dean was shielding the face of the little girl from the ville against his chest, a gentle hand resting on her slender shoulder. The boy wasn't looking at the macabre spectacle; he was glaring at the carny master.

A look that Ryan knew well.

It was his look. His legacy.

Cold fire.

The two-headed scalie, its faces, necks and massive, flabby chest smeared with gore, was threatened back into its cage by four roustabouts with clubs and the carny master with his long prod.

As Baldoona was rolled out, it gripped the bars in both hands and belched sonorously in defiance. Then another tarp-covered cage was rolled in.

"You all have heard the legend of the Wazl bird," Crecca said. "A ferocious mutie strain found only in the darkest, grimmest mires of Deathlands. Half crocodile, half condor. All chiller. The legend says the Wazl can't be tamed, can't be taught, can't be defeated. It lives only for the joy of tearing apart living flesh and drinking living blood. It drops out of the night sky like a meteor and takes the unwary from behind with talons and teeth. It is my honor and privilege, dear Bullard ville, to present to you, the Wazl!"

Crecca threw back the tarp, exposing a pair of huge, featherless bird creatures. Their bodies and wings were covered with what looked like thin, aged, well-tanned leather; their long, straight, reptilian beaks were lined with tight rows of serrated teeth; their tri-talons black and curving like great fish hooks. As the two creatures took in the crowd, and the crowd's fear, their eyes were full of savagery and insane fury.

First one of the muties opened its maw and let out a shrill, sawing cry, then both of them were doing it. The noise required no explanation from the carny master; its meaning passed through the ears and into the marrow.

It was the Wazls' call to taste blood.

A moment later, a large, strangely attired figure stepped into the center ring. A steel-mesh fencing mask concealed the man's face and head, his body was protected by a chain-mail suit, his hands and arms by mesh gauntlets. He wore a monumental black codpiece strapped to his hips.

Of all the bad ideas ever come to fruition, letting the Wazls out of their cage was right up there with the nukocaust.

But from what had gone before, Ryan knew, as did everyone else in the crowd, that that was exactly what was going to happen. The only question was, how? Six roustabouts used long metal poles to trap and pin the Wazls against the inside of the bars. The bird creatures' screams of outrage drowned out the music from the tent's speakers, and made many of the Bullard ville folk cover their ears with their hands. Once the Wazls were securely pinned, the cage door was opened and the man in the steel helmet and suit stepped inside.

The mutie birds wanted him.

They snapped their beaks and hissed in blood lust.

The man bent, spread his arms and took hold of the birds' ankles, trapping both feet of both birds in his gauntleted hands.

The Wazls didn't like that one bit, and it was all the roustabouts could do to keep them hard against the bars.

"Are you ready?" the Magnificent Crecca asked the man in the cage.

His reply was a nod.

"Then fly!" the carny master cried.

The instant the roustabouts let off the pressure on their prods, the two mutie avians exploded out the open cage door, their long, leathery wings snapping like unfurled sails caught in a shifting gale. Behind them came the man, out of the cage and into the air.

Chaos erupted inside the carny tent.

The Wazls shrieked even louder. Dragged down by their two-hundred-pound burden, they flew low and fast, circling the walls of the tent. The man's heels, as he was carried aloft, grazed the heads of the stunned spectators.

People screamed.

People threw themselves flat on the ground.

The lizard birds beat the air, raising clouds of dust from the dirt floor. As they flew, they tried to bite their rider, cocking their heads this way and that, looking for an opening to wound, to maim, to chill. The gauntlets protected the man's hands and arms, and the birds couldn't get at his head and continue to fly. Their instinct to fly away was stronger than their need to be rid of him.

Around and around, the three of them circled. Ryan marveled at the man's grip strength and stamina. They were all that kept the Wazls from feasting on the audience.

Gradually, the birds' frantic, sweeping spirals grew narrower and dropped in altitude. Their cries became desperate and despairing. As the man was borne around, his boot heels cut furrows in the dirt. When the Wazls were finally exhausted, they just dropped from the air, crash landing in the center ring. The man took a hard landing, too, bouncing forward on his face and chest. He didn't loosen his grip, though.

Before the Wazls could recover from the impact, a dozen roustabouts set upon them with long poles and ropes, trussing their beaks and legs together, then carrying them on the poles back to their cage.

Their rider removed his steel mask and took a low bow.

The crowd jumped to its feet, cheering.

Amid the tumult, something on the far side of the center ring caught Ryan's eye. Something flashed behind the mirror wall of the facing trailer. And for a fraction of a second, the silver, reflective glass became vaguely, hazily transparent, as if through a pall of oily brown smoke.

Then it was over.

In that frozen moment Ryan glimpsed a ghostly figure, whose afterimage was burned deep into his brain. Spindly limbed. Slouching. Menacing. Even if he hadn't seen the glare of the light on the steel, he would have known who it was.



## Chapter Fourteen

When the Magnificent Creeca opened the door to the Magus's private viewing booth, a crack of light from the tunnel speared the gloom, flaring off the wall of glass. Before the carny master could get the door shut behind him, the half-metal monster who was his lord and master snapped around in his recliner, steel eyes glaring.

"Sorry," Creeca said. His words hung in the air, the half whispered apology unaccepted. He kicked himself for saying anything at all. Over the years he had learned that silence was always the best response. Contrite silence.

With the viewing booth's door closed and darkness surrounding them, the one-way mirror again became transparent from their direction.

"I see you brought your goggles, as I requested," the Magus said. "Go on, put them on."

Creeca hefted the massively overbuilt ComBloc infrared sensors by their wide head straps. They were powered by a radium battery, and came installed with a small warning plate in Russian that the carny master couldn't read. Translated, the warning said: Extreme Radiation Hazard. He placed the heavy instrument on top of his head, with the stubby goggle lenses pointing up at the ceiling like antler buds.

On the other side of the glass, roustabouts were pushing the Wazls' cage out of the tent. A moment after they disappeared through the lone exit, another trailer entered, this one tightly tarped over and dragged forward by men in black masks that covered their heads from crown to throat.

The masks protected them from the effects of a chemical gas, the death producing agent known as Zyclon B.

How the Magus had discovered the stockpile of lethal gas was unknown. Creeca presumed that he had found the canisters during his wanderings back and forth through the timescape. Somehow he had arranged to steal it, and had left it in a place where it could be recovered more than a century later. There was no way to prove this, of course. However the Magus had come by the information, he had led the carny right to the burial spot.

The carny master watched the one-eyed man stare at the cage and at the masked men pushing it. His blood ran suddenly cold.

"He knows!" Creeca exclaimed. "Cawdor knows!"

"Of course he knows," the Magus said, chuckling.

The noise grated on Creeca's nerves, like stripped gears grinding.

"That doesn't worry you?"

"No," the Magus said, "it doesn't. What it does is make what is about to happen all that much sweeter. The one-eyed man knows, and there is absolutely nothing he can do about it. Nothing he can do to save the good and innocent people of Bullard ville. Nothing he can do to save his traveling companions, his

own son or even himself. Ryan Cawdor has a date with death today that he isn't going to miss." After a pause, the Magus said, "I hope you impressed on our looting teams the need for speed and selectivity."

"They know what to take, and they're already taking it," Crecca assured him. "By the time we're filling in the burial pit, they'll be done with the sacking, and all the booty will be safely packed away."

In the tent's center ring, one of the masked roustabouts loosened the edge of the tarp that covered the trailered cage. He ducked out of sight under the flap to open the nozzles of the pile of poison-gas canisters.

"Get ready to cut the lights and bring up the Requiem," the Magus told his carny master.

As Crecca reached for the switch box beside the door, the creature added a warning, "And if I catch you closing your eyes this time, I'll pluck them out and feed them to the Wazls."

On the other side of the center ring, at the front row of spectators, there was a blur of movement, then came star-burst muzzle-flashes and staccato blasterfire. Before the Magus could move from his recliner, the mirror glass wall before him exploded in a wild spray of bullets.

Crecca threw himself out the door and down the steps, nearly crushing Jackson, who sat chained to the foot of the rail.

## Chapter Fifteen

At the signal from Ryan, Krysty and Mildred broke ranks from the cheering crowd and sprinted for the tent's exit, which was guarded by three big, bare-chested men in full-head, black masks. All three carried blue-steel 9 mm KG-99s on lanyards. As the two women bore down on the exit, one of the guards stepped up to meet them, his empty hands raised with palms out, pressing forward.

A slow-down-and-stop gesture.

Mebbe because of the mask's narrow eye slits, mebbe because he was looking at Krysty's long, scissoring legs, mebbe because he had started to take the outcome of these special performances for granted, the roustie didn't notice what she had in her right hand until it was too late.

As she charged, Krysty raised the short barrel of the .38-caliber Smith & Wesson and pointed it between his hairy pecs, straight at his heart.

The Model 640 cracked twice, and the man staggered backward, fingers clutching frantically at his chest as if trying to plug up the small, dark holes to keep the gout of blood inside.

Behind him, the other masked men were already untying the flaps of the exit, getting ready to seal the death chamber nice and tight. The sounds of the blastershots made them freeze. Blastershots weren't part of the show, not until later when there would be a few survivors to dispatch.

As Krysty vaulted the masked man's slumping form, a blaze of blasterfire erupted from near the center ring. Blasterfire and breaking glass. The flurry of rounds could have been either Ryan or Dean, or both.

The baritone boom-boom-boom was definitely J.B.'s pump shotgun, and the mind numbing roar of Jak's .357 Magnum blaster was likewise unmistakable.

Mildred had meanwhile dropped to one knee. With her gun hand braced, she squeezed off two groups of two shots, quick but well aimed. The first pair of jacketed .38 slugs caught the guard on the left just under the point of his chin, and turned him. He twisted sideways into the tent wall and, leaning against it, hands to his throat, slid to the ground, kicking and jerking.

The second guard was already moving, already halfway out the exit, when Mildred brought her Czech target pistol's sights to bear. The first shot hit him in the left shoulder; the second smacked into the tent fabric.

It plucked mightily at the rubberized cloth, but made no through-and-through hole. As she had thought, it was Kevlar. By the time Mildred was up and running, Krysty was already at the exit. They both knew they had to control the way out, and they had to control it now.

There would be no second chance. Their commitment to the task at hand was total. Without slowing, without considering what might have been waiting for her on the other side, the redhead dived through the opening, hitting the ground in a low shoulder roll, and came up kneeling with her blaster tracking in the direction the wounded roustie had fled.

He wasn't moving very fast, and his left shoulder hung down like the broken wing of a bird. He had his blaster clutched in his good hand. Hidden around the curve of the tent in the direction he was going were the circled carny wags. Reinforcements.

Krysty didn't hesitate. She shot him in the back once, below the shoulder blade. A clean chill shot, right through the center of the heart. He fell on his face in the dirt and didn't move again.

From inside the tent came the sound of a raging gun battle, a battle sawing back and forth, and people screaming.

As Mildred and Krysty knelt beside the opening, the folks of Bullard ville started spilling out into the daylight, their eyes wide with terror.

They didn't understand what was going on, what had been about to happen to them, how close they had come to horrible death. All they knew was that some strangers in the audience had opened fire on the carny crew, and that the crew had returned the favor.

And that they were caught in the middle.

THE MOMENT RYAN SAW the men in the black, hoodlike masks enter the tent, he knew the waiting was finally over and the time for action had come. He knew because he'd personally looted antichem warfare gear from stockpiles when he was traveling with Trader.

When push came to shove, there wasn't all that much you could do to disguise a mil-spec gas mask. Ryan glanced over at J.B., who was looking at him. The Armorer knew, too. He had seen it at the same instant Ryan had. He put his hand on Jak's shoulder and the albino nodded.

Dean noticed this gesture and response, and immediately looked up at his dad, concern on his face. Ryan gave him a smile, which the boy instantly returned. Whatever happened next was in speed of hand, and in the hand of fate.

And what flowed between father and son in that second before battle was wider than the widest river. A great, brawling planet and its circling, perfect moon.

There was no reason not to smile. He who had everything, who wanted nothing, had nothing to fear.

When the tarp-covered cage was in the center of the ring, one of the masked rousties loosened a tie-down, raised the edge of the tarp and ducked his head and shoulders under it. The other masked men waited, their arms crossed over their chests, for him to finish.

The Bullard ville audience waited for the Magnificent Crecca to reappear before them and in his dulcet tones to announce the next amazing act, to tear back the tarp and reveal the caged wonders concealed beneath.

In the trailered box on the other side of the ring, behind the wall of mirrored glass, a creature half of flesh, half of steel waited for his victims to start, dying. Ryan Cawdor waited for no one.

With his shoulders squared on the chosen target, he cleared the SIG-Sauer P-226 from its holster.

A pair of .38-caliber blastershots popped from behind, from the direction of the tent's exit. The heads of the masked men in the center ring jerked around in surprise. At the same instant, the predark weapon in Ryan's fist bucked as it fired.

The bulge of tarp concealing the head and torso of the masked roustie took three tightly spaced rounds at its upper end. A millisecond later, the half concealed man dropped out from under the flap, dropped as limp as jelly to his knees, and then fell forward. Inside the black hood that could fend off the terrible corrosive power of Zyclon B but that offered no protection from full metal jackets, what little remained of his head rested against the hub of the trailer's wheel.

Without pause, even as the last of the trio of 9 mm slugs thumped flesh and bone, Ryan swung his aimpoint and to the right and fired repeatedly.

As fast as he could pull the trigger, he poured round after round into the front of the mirrored box, hoping to nail the unspeakable spectator, the force behind the evil that was planned for Bullard ville.

The creature known as the Magus. Bullet holes stitched across the mirror's silver surface.

From across the center ring, the tiny dark holes looked like pinpricks. Pinpricks that cracked and crazed into each other, dropping and shattering huge pieces of glass.

Under his ravening fusillade, the entire mirror wall crashed from its frame, allowing him to see inside. Among the litter of silver shards, there was an overturned armchair, its backrest pocked with many slug holes, the stuffing blasted out the back in handfuls. The door to the rear of the viewing box stood open. No corpses littered the floor.

Beside him, the other companions opened fire, the din of the simultaneous shooting making his head reel. Dean had the little girl standing behind his back. She clung to his narrow hips as he blasted away, scattering the masked rousties. Jak bowled over one of the running men with his .357, sending him flying end over end.

The rousties were more disciplined than Ryan had figured. They didn't try to make a beeline for the exit,

spraying random fire to clear the way. With their blasters out, they dashed behind the cover of the tarped trailer.

The plan was obvious: release the gas, chill the opposition and everyone else in the tent.

Ryan couldn't let that happen. He turned and shouted to the astonished audience, "Everybody out! Everybody out, now!"

J.B.'s scattergun roared, drowning out the one-eyed man's words before he could repeat them.

It didn't matter.

Bullets from the concealed roustabouts whined over his head. From the back of the crowd came a high, shrill cry of pain.

In seconds, the 150 or so residents of Bullard ville were madly stampeding for the exit.

Ryan signaled for Jak to circle wide, while he charged the near corner of the cage. J.B. kept blasting the dirt under the front of the trailer's frame, with his scattergun, keeping the rousties from firing at them from beneath its undercarriage. Dean likewise provided steady covering fire as Ryan closed on his targets.

If there hadn't been poison gas in the tarped cage, Ryan would've shot right through it to hit the men on the other side. But as it was, he couldn't risk blind fire. He had to wait until he rounded the end of the trailer.

One of the rousties was hoping he'd do just that.

As Ryan neared, the man stepped out, his KG-99 barking. The stick mag held a lot of rounds, and the roustie was trying to burn them all. He took wild, barely aimed shots that sailed high over Ryan's head or skimmed the dirt at his feet. The one-eyed man didn't slow, didn't blink.

Sometimes the first shot didn't win the contest.

Sometimes not even the tenth shot.

Ryan put a single slug from the P-226 into the middle of the black mask. The roustie crashed to his back and stayed there.

The other gas-masked men crouching behind the cage had thrown up the tarp in back. They couldn't get inside the barred box because the cage door was on the other side, and exposed to J.B.'s and Dean's fire. As Ryan cleared the corner of the trailer, he saw two of the men frantically trying to pull around the nozzle ends of the pile of long, gray canisters so they could open them.

Before Ryan could fire, one of the two men took a ricochet hit off the dirt from a load of double-aught buckshot. The blast shattered both his shins. Howling in pain, he fell away from the cage and tried to crawl away. The other man had his arm through the bars. His hand was on a nozzle, and he was turning it.

Jak's Colt boomed twice from the other end of the cage. Two of the rousties jerked as if flicked by a giant finger, and were slammed sideways and down. Ryan drew a bead on the man who had his hand inside the cage. Hand in the cookie jar. Hand drawing back. Ryan couldn't see the roustabout's smile

because of the mask, but he knew the chiller was smiling. He couldn't hear the hiss of the deadly gas escaping from the canister, or see it in the air, but he knew that's what was happening. Both he and Jak shot the last roustie at the same instant, their shots angled so no matter how the bullets deflected off bone, neither of them would be hit by friendly fire. The combined impact ripped the man off his feet and sent him crashing to his face on the ground. His legs were still kicking as Ryan closed the gap to the canisters.

"No!" he shouted at Jak. "Stay back! The poison is loose! Get out! Get everybody out!"

The albino stopped, and for a moment it looked as if he were going to protest or defy the order, but he thought better of it. He turned and ran back the way he'd come.

Ryan sucked down a quick breath and rushed over to the spot where the roustie had been standing. What with the screaming and shouting in the tent, he couldn't detect the hiss that might have told him which canister had been opened. Standing with his chest pressed against the bars, he reached through and ran the palm of his hand in front of the nozzles turned toward him.

Nothing from the first.

Nothing from the second.

Cold.

Cold that burned like a blowtorch.

He jerked his hand back. Ignoring the blisters that had been instantly raised on his palm, ignoring the growing, burning pain in his chest, he screwed down the wheel that sealed the nozzle.

Then he spun away, running around the trailer for the exit. He could see the tent was almost empty of people. Dean and the little girl, J.B. and Doc and Jak were bringing up the rear, driving out the stragglers.

How far did he have to run to be safe?

How much gas had escaped?

How much would it take to chill him?

Hand of fate, he thought. Hand of fate.

He ran until his legs gave out, and that wasn't far. Fifteen steps. Mebbe twenty. Just over the center ring's bumper, he dropped to his knees. Should have taken a deeper breath, he told himself. Then he gasped for air and choked on a lungful of razor blades.

## Chapter Sixteen

Strong hands reached under Ryan's armpits and pulled him to his feet.

When he opened his eyes, he stared into irises the color of blood.

Jak ducked his head under the one-eyed man's left arm. J.B. did the same on the right, and they half carried, half dragged him to the exit. As Ryan labored to breathe, it felt as if Baldoona the scalie were jumping up and down on his chest.

Outside the tent, while he sat on the trampled earth beside the entrance, Mildred quickly looked him over, testing his pupils, pulse, and examining the inside of his mouth.

"Your mucous membranes are blistered from some kind of corrosive poison," she said. "If you'd gotten a little bit bigger dose, it would have turned your lungs to rags."

As Ryan fought to catch his breath, he focused on the berm wall opposite the tent entrance and about 150 feet distant. On this side of the big top, the people of Bullard ville were nowhere to be seen. And there weren't any carny chillers in evidence, either.

From the ville, out of sight on the far side of the tent, came a sudden crackle of blasterfire. The hollow booms of black-powder blasters mixed with the sharp, rapid reports of automatic weapons. People started yelling and screaming. Then a gong sounded, over and over.

The Bullard ville call to arms, Ryan had no doubt.

He knew a running firefight when he heard one. So did the other companions. And this battle quickly increased in intensity.

"What's happening?" Leeloo asked Dean, her eyes wide. If the little girl wasn't afraid before, she was afraid now. The blasterfire wasn't part of any show. It was real.

In a few clipped phrases, Dean explained it to her. The poison gas. The mass chilling that had been in store for every man, woman and child, all to allow the robbing of the dead.

"They're gonna be sorry they ever started this," Leeloo said angrily. "Everybody in the ville knows just what to do, even the kids too young to carry blasters. We train all the time to drive off chillers and robbers. Sometimes we drill in the middle of the night. We use real bullets, too. Whenever that bell rings, everybody is ready to fight."

"How many rousties did we get?" Ryan asked J.B., his voice cracking and hoarse.

"Six or eight."

"Plenty left, then." He hawked and spit to clear his throat.

"'Fraid so," J.B. answered.

"The Magus is behind this whole operation."

Ryan said. "And he's here. He was watching the show, sitting there like a big fat spider, waiting for the gas to be released."

"You saw him?" Krysty asked.

"Just for a second. I had a shot at him, but I couldn't make it. He got away."

"The Magus isn't gonna let us quietly slip away after what we just did to his plans," J.B. commented. "He never lets things like this slide."

"The carny chillers are going to regroup and come after us, that's for sure," Krysty said.

"We can't count on the ville folks for any help, either," Mildred quickly added.

"They don't understand what happened in the tent. All they saw was us shooting first, without provocation. They don't know what we saved them from. And there's no way to tell them now. They're going to be as eager to blast us to pieces as the roustabouts."

"In a situation like this, as far as the locals are concerned, every outlander has a target on his or her back," Ryan said.

At that moment, blasterfire barked at them from the top of the berm. Well-concealed and well-protected shooters lying prone along its ridge sent a volley of bullets smacking into the sides of the tent, forcing the companions to scramble for cover.

There was no telling to which side the attackers belonged.

And under the circumstances, it didn't matter a nokin' damn.

J.B. and Jak put up covering fire, spraying the face of the berm with buckshot and Magnum slugs as they all ducked inside the protection of the tent entrance.

"Is it okay for us to be in here?" Krysty asked Mildred. "Aren't we going to get poisoned?"

"Very little of the gas got loose," the black woman said. "And what was released has been diluted by the volume of air in here. It shouldn't hurt us, except for maybe minor skin rashes and burning eyes."

"It might be safe to breathe in here, but we can't stay," Ryan said. "We've got to make our break, and we've got to make it now, before the other sides get themselves organized."

"Mebbe they are already organized," J.B. speculated. "Could be those shooters along the berm out there are set up to herd us into an ambush."

"That's a chance we've got to take," Ryan said. "We've lost the element of surprise, and that was our only advantage. We're way outnumbered and way outgunned. The folks who live here can defend themselves against the looters. But all we can do at this point is beat a fighting retreat. We've got to get out of this ville."

"And we sure can't do it on foot," J.B. added. "The rousties will run us down in minutes with their wags."

"Our only hope is to steal a fast one and roll out of here in it," Ryan agreed.

"If we can, we'd better find a way to disable the other wags before we take off," J.B. added. "Otherwise, all we're doing is changing the location of our funerals."

Ryan drew a broad circle in the dirt with his fingertip. "Tent," he said, marking the entrance with a slash. "The shortest route to the wags is to the right, past the rows of sideshow trailers, over here."



"If I was planning an ambush," Mildred said, "that's right where I'd set it up. With hard cover for my shooters from the berm and the trailers, and the targets caught out in open ground between."

"Sounds like we've got to go the other way, then," Krysty said. "The long way."

"That puts us in plain sight of the ville and whatever's happening there," J.B. said.

"From the sound of it," Ryan said, "everybody in Bullard is pretty well occupied. Let's just hope they stay that way."

"What about Leeloo?" Dean asked his father.

The little girl stood beside Dean, her back straight, her eyes unblinking, her crown of daisies slightly tilted.

"He's right, Ryan," Krysty said. "We can't just leave her here with all these chillers on the loose."

"We'll find a way to get her safely back to her people," Ryan said. "But first, we've got to deal with the shooters from the top of the berm so we can circle around the other side of the tent."

"I draw fire other way," Jak said, already moving in a blur.

"Jak, wait!" Ryan cried, reaching for him.

Too late.

The albino slipped out of the tent, his Colt Python raised in his fist. No sooner had he vanished than a torrent of slugs slapped the wall of the tent in the direction he had fled. The direction of the mutie menagerie.

"Move!" Ryan shouted to the others. "Move, now!"

J.B. burst out the exit first, his scattergun thundering at his hip, dragging the zombielike Doc behind him.

JAK COULD RUN like the wind.

Something in his genes had given him coiled steel springs for legs, with just the right balance of muscle to bone, just the right kind of muscle. As he ran, sucking air all the way down into his boot tops, bullets flew at his head like angry wasps and whacked the side of the tent, raising puffs of dust. He ignored them. The curve of the tent loomed before him; the curve was cover if he got far enough, fast enough.

From behind him came rocking, consecutive blasts of J.B.'s scattergun. For an instant, the blaster-fire aimed at him stopped. An instant was all he needed. He rounded the perimeter of the tent, out of the line of pursuing fire.

If there were more shooters along the berm in front of him—and from the way his scalp and neck were prickling, Jak felt sure that there were—they were keeping their heads and blasters down. He figured they were holding fire, waiting for the rest of the companions to blunder into the killzone.

As the rows of trailered cages came into view, the lion roared. Joy exploded in Jak's chest??

Joy shared.

The lion knew he was coming.

Jak sprinted to close the gap between them. The great cat awaited him, pacing wildly back and forth in its cage. He holstered the Colt and used the hub of a wheel to scramble onto the trailer's bed.

Freedom. The thought exploded in the albino's mind like a frag gren. And then a wave of tremendous emotion swept through him—gratitude to the nth power.

He unbolted the cage door and pushed it wide open. The mutie mountain lion jumped out, landing softly on the dirt despite its tremendous weight. When Jak hopped down from the trailer, the cat gave him a swat with a huge, soft paw. The blow drove Jak hard to his knees. Then a hot, scratchy tongue slathered his face and neck.

There are others, close, Little Brother. They lie in wait.

Jak could almost sense their terrible confusion and panic. It had never occurred to the chillers hiding on top of the berm that upon reaching safety the first act of their adversaries' pointman would be the release of a half-ton of man-eater. They didn't know whether to open fire to protect their comrades concealed among the trailers from the lion, or to wait for the rest of the designated targets to appear, according to the plan. It was a problem they had no time to consider, let alone solve.

Jak felt the rage building in the great cat's body, the rage and the raw power, unquenchable and bottomless. The carny master's words of warning about the true nature of this super intelligent, super cunning predator beast flooded back to him. And through him to the mind of the lion. Don't be afraid of me. I will never hurt you. Not afraid. Good. Now we hunt.

The lion ducked under the trailer that supported its cage, out of the line of sight of the berm shooters. It pulled itself forward with its front legs and claws, belly dragging on the ground. Jak followed on his knees, the Colt Python in his hand. On the far side of the trailer's undercarriage, in the aisle between the first and second rows of cages, Jak could see legs. Seven sets of legs. Five belonged to men and two to women. Seven pairs of feet shifted anxiously. Jak ducked his face lower and got a glimpse of the semiauto handblasters the ambush crew held. High-capacity stick mags jutted from the blue-steel weapons' receivers. Big-time firepower—210 rounds versus his six.

Me first, Little Brother.

The thought came to him in the same instant the lion moved.

Jak lost the cat in a cloud of dust as it sprang out from under the trailer. The albino thrust himself forward, the cocked .357 Magnum blaster in front, seeking targets.

Before he could do that, staccato blasterfire roared, as the roustabouts and snake charmers, caught standing practically shoulder to shoulder, tried to put bullets into a tornado of fang and claw moving way too fast to track. The beige blur, five feet tall at the shoulder, slipped between them, wound around them, brushing them electric with the tips of its soft fur and its black-tasseled tail. The ambushers' volleys of wild shots banged into cages and trailers, and set the trapped sideshow muties screaming. Jak saw Baldoona the scalie throw himself into a corner and cover both his heads with his arms as slugs sparked off of and rattled the bars of his cage.

Jak held his own fire. There was no need for him to shoot. The lion hadn't even scratched the carnal chillers, and their ship was already sinking. Maybe they had seen what the lion had done when it had gotten loose before, he thought. Or maybe just the idea of what the beast was capable of made them crazy with terror. Bottom line: semiauto, high-capacity weapons, blind panic and no clear firing lanes were a recipe for self-inflicted disaster.

One of the rousties, his eyes bulging with fear, squeezed the trigger of his KG-99 over and over as he whirled, spraying a tight string of single shots through the chest of the man standing flatfooted and helpless in front of him. The multiple, close-range impacts lifted the guy off his feet and set him down four feet away, a look of astonished horror on his face. As his knees buckled and his shirtfront bloomed red, he managed to return fire. His two shots went wide of the guy who'd accidentally blasted him, but they hit one of the leggy women in the hip and thigh. She twisted away and dropped, unable to stand with a shattered pelvis. She writhed in the yellow dirt, her face ashen with shock, her mouth open, screaming.

The lion still didn't chill. Ignoring the blaze of blasterfire, it played with the surviving five like a house cat with a brood of very stupid, very slow mice. One by one, it swept their legs out from under them, or batted them on the back of the head just hard enough to stagger them. It let them run a few yards toward cover, then hooked a single cruel claw in the back of their waistbands and dragged them back into the middle of the aisle. With dismissive, precise blows of its paw, it flattened them, one after another, facedown on the ground. The battering went on for several minutes until finally, all five chillers were on their hands and knees, unable to rise. Having lost their weapons, they gasped and sobbed, tears streaming down their cheeks.

Jak could see it in their eyes: they knew they lived or died at the whim of something far more terrible, far more merciless than they. Theirs were the faces of people lost at sea, floating far from shore. Doomed.

But the lion didn't take their lives. It stood over them for a moment, panting softly, its long tail lashing, then it sat back on its haunches and began to clean itself. It wet the top of its huge paw with its tongue and rubbed it against its cheek and brow. As it did this, the idling-wag-engine sound rumbled up from its throat.

After a few seconds, one of the rousties began to stir. Jak drew a bead on the slowly moving man with the Python, but held his fire. He could see the chiller was unarmed and had no fight left. Head down, the roustie crawled over to Baldoona's trailer and meekly climbed into the cage. After he pulled the door shut, he threw himself belly down in the semi-solid piles of scalie shit on the floor and tried his best to become invisible.

The four who were left on the ground were playing possum. Seeing one of their number make it to safety, realizing that this was their last opportunity to escape, they struggled to their feet and staggered away. Jak and the lion followed them around the end of the trailer. They watched the beaten quartet limp across the compound. As the chillers neared the foot of the berm, they started yelling at their comrades hidden along its ridge. They yelled for them not to shoot, then started clawing their way over the rubble to the top.

Jak raised the big Colt in a two-handed grip, bracing himself to take out targets of opportunity as the other group of ambushers laid down covering fire for their friends. Heads and weapons popped up, all right, but there was no shooting.

Wait.

Jak had already let off pressure on the wide combat trigger. He sensed that none of the rousties on the berm wanted to fight the lion. They didn't even consider taking cover and massing their fire because they knew they couldn't defend themselves. All they wanted was to get as far away as they could, as fast as they could. The berm-top shooters abandoned their hide and set out across the plain on a dead run, with their injured companions trailing behind.

I can't talk to them the way I can talk to you, Little Brother. That's the problem. I can't explain to anyone else what I am. I can only use this physical form to dominate. A weak form of communication, at best.

The lion smiled. But things could be worse, I suppose. If I were a daisy, I couldn't communicate at all.

A baleful moan from the trailers behind them made Jak pivot, weapon up and ready. He looked at the roustie cowering on the nasty floor of Baldoona's cage. The man was alone in the enclosure; the sideshow mutie was nowhere to be seen.

What happened to scalie? the albino thought as he stepped closer.

Then he saw the door standing slightly ajar and the spawl of a bullet impact—a bright splash of lead where the cage's locking bolt had been.

## Chapter Seventeen

Ryan raced out of the tent after the Armorer and Doc. As J.B. sidestepped, squaring his shoulders to the target, scattering flechettes across the top of the berm, Ryan ran past him, turning left around the candy-striped tent's perimeter, taking the point.

The sounds of concentrated small-weapons fire rolled over him in waves. As he rounded the curve of the big top, clouds of black-powder gun smoke interspersed with sickly yellow muzzle-flashes obscured his view of the ville. Bullets whined across the compound, ricocheting and kicking up dirt.

Ryan could make out three carny wags parked in the ancient road that ran between the first of the rows of raised, awning covered plant beds and the building that had once housed Burger Stravaganza. The wags were predark RVs, Winnebagos refitted for the hazards of Deathlands. Rousties fired from behind the steel-armored wheel wells and from around the massive I-beams that were replacement bumpers, front and rear. The carny chillers were absorbing fire from a small group of ville folk strung out along and shooting from the low cover of the plant beds. The ville folks had their backs turned to the tent, and to the companions.

Even though he was running full tilt, Ryan could see dead and wounded rousties on the ground around the wags. The loot they'd been carrying when they were hit lay in the dirt beside them. Caught with both hands in the Bullard ville cookie jar. The ville had dead, as well, some of them shot to pieces.

Other rousties, blocked from most of the sec force's fire by the wags, were still moving booty from the jumble of cabins and shacks built alongside the prenukecaust fast-food restaurant, and hurriedly loading it into the rear of the Winnebagos.

At first glance it was hard to say which side was winning the war. One thing was for sure, though—the

looters were concentrating all their attention on the ville people, and vice versa.

There was no safety for the companions along the tent perimeter; the stakes that held up the guy wires were the only cover, and they were useless. If the ville sec men caught them trying to sneak past in plain view, it was going to be instant chilling. Ryan broke away from the tent wall, leading the others across the stretch of open ground to the far side of the first row of raised plant beds. They bellied down behind the protective berm.

Two rows over, through the lower branches of overgrown tomato plants, Ryan could see a small portion of the ville sec crew systematically popping away at the looters with handblasters. From the care they were taking with their shot placement, and the number of bodies already strewed around the wags, they were no doubt the most skilled marksmen in Bullard.

Ryan and the others ducked as a wave of return fire from the rousties behind the wags trimmed clumps of leaves and stems and exploded ripe tomatoes above their heads.

Crawling to the end of the bed, Ryan saw where the rest of the ville sec force was headed. With covering fire from their sharpshooting pals, they were carefully filtering through the rows of beds at the far end of the compound. From there, they were crossing the ville's main street and the leaders of the pack were already circling the other fast-food buildings to outflank the looters and attack them from behind.

As Leeloo said, they knew what they were doing.

The fighting force of Bullard ville advanced like a seasoned army, leapfrogging with precision from hard cover to hard cover. The younger kids carrying black-powder blasters were keeping well to the rear, in a position to put up shielding fire if the folks forward had to suddenly pull back.

Ryan glanced along the row they were in. Right off he could see the companions needed to move to two beds down, as that would block the sec men's line of sight of their only route to the convoy of parked wags, and escape.

Ryan led Dean, Leeloo and Krysty across the five-foot gap between the beds. They made it without a problem. When J.B., Mildred and Doc followed, all hell broke loose.

One of the sec men shouted over the din of the shooting, "It's the other ones! They're tryin' to get behind us!"

As J.B. shoved Doc facedown in the dirt, withering fire poured onto the front of the bed. The range was only about forty feet. In the hail of bullets, half the sheet-metal awning ripped loose and tumbled onto Dean and Leeloo. Ryan kicked it aside. He and Krysty could only fire blindly over the top of the bed; they didn't dare raise themselves up to take proper aim. Slugs from the opposition were chewing great hunks of wood out of the top edge of the frame inches over their heads. Ryan stopped firing and pulled back the SIG P-226. Down the row, J.B., Mildred and Doc were likewise pinned. In the space of a few seconds, everything had gone to shit.

"Ryan, what are we going to do?" Krysty shouted as she jammed a speed loader into her Smith & Wesson's open cylinder. "These people want our heads."

"The sec force is about to flank the looters," he told her. "Once they close in and lower the hammer, the carnies are dead meat. And when that happens, we're going to have a whole bunch more pissed-off folks waving blasters in our faces. I'd say we've got four or five minutes, tops, before that

happens."

"But what are we going to do?" Krysty repeated.

By way of an answer, Ryan turned to his son and said, "Dean, make a break for the circled wags. Take the little girl with you. We can't leave her here. She'd be cut to pieces. Find Jak. He's there somewhere. Go with him, get out of the ville. Even if you have to go on foot. We'll track you down and meet up later."

The last part was very unlikely, given the circumstances. The boy's face dropped. "But, Dad..." he began. "No argument, son. When we commit ourselves, it's going to be all out, everything on the line to get you to the wags. You've got to take Leeloo and run. Don't stop for anything. You wait for my signal, and then you go. You understand?"

With great reluctance, unable to conceal his hurt, Dean answered, "Yes, Dad."

"Good boy."

Ryan reached over and gave his son's shoulder a gentle squeeze. Then he signaled to J.B., pointing at Dean and the girl, then behind them in the direction of the tent and the parked wags. J.B. got the picture at once, and nodded in agreement. He spoke to Mildred, who looked at Ryan and also nodded. The Armorer then took out his Tekna knife and with a single swipe cut himself free of Doc. The old man was down on his hands and knees, swaying back and forth, mouth in constant motion, seemingly unaware of the hellstorm that surrounded them.

That J.B. and Ryan would attack the ville shooters from opposite directions went without saying. It was their standard skirmish procedure since the days with Trader. The intent was to divide the opposition's fire, to come from unexpected angles, to startle and confuse them.

There was no time for goodbyes.

Ryan and Krysty shared a look that only lasted an instant, but said everything that needed to be said.

The one-eyed man held up his hand so J.B. could see it. Five fingers extended. Then four, then three. On none, he rolled to his right and came up running.

"Now, Dean!" he cried, rounding the end of the bed.

Krysty was right on his heels as he charged into the wide aisle that separated the rows.

The ville shooters hiding behind the bed in the next row gave up their cover to get a clear shot at the rapidly closing targets. As they popped up over the greenery, they had expressions of righteous fury on their faces. Nobody was going to steal from them; nobody was going to bushwhack them; nobody was going to trick them.

If Ryan felt sympathy for the people of Bullard ville, he had to crush it, to bury it under the weight of his own determination to survive. This wasn't the fight he had wanted, not the fight he had intended. But survival was on the line for him and the companions. If he ended up chilling the very folks he'd come to help, it was because he was left no choice in the matter.

Crossing the strip of open ground, Ryan wondered why the Bullard ville sec force hadn't kept to its cover. There was such a thing as being too confident; there was such a thing as mistaking dumb luck for

skill, letting a few successes go to your head. And there was such a thing as liking the heat of battle way too much. No matter how you spun it, jumping up to shoot was a bonehead move.

As the sharpshooters' blasters blazed, so did Ryan's. He ignored the hot lead roaring past his ears. The SIG in his fist bucked and cycled, bucked and cycled as he pulled the trigger as fast as he could. It was impossible to shoot fine and tight while sprinting for your life. The best he could do was to lob slugs at the sec force. A 9 mm slug from his handblaster ripped a big chunk out of a tall man's upper arm. For a split second, a mist of red hung in the air around his shoulder. The tall man stopped firing and twisted away, clutching at himself, his hand on the wounded side dangling uselessly at his hip. Ryan's next shot hit him in the right cheek, just below the eye. The decompression shock as the back of his head blew away popped the eyeball from its socket.

A fraction of a second later, a guy in patched bib-front overalls standing next to him absorbed a center body hit, doubling over around the bullet impact, clutching at his stomach and showing Ryan the bald top of his head. The one-eyed man was already tightening down on a followup shot as the man started to bend over. He put the second round in almost the same place relative to the ground, but because the man had moved while the bullet was in flight, it crashed through his skull instead of his mid-section. As the bib-front guy toppled backward, a torrent of blood rushed from his nose and mouth, and it geysered high and red out the top of his head. Two strides later, Ryan was vaulting the still kicking bodies and cutting around the end of the bed. As he did so, Krysty's .38 barked in rapid fire.

Six hollowpoint slugs clipped through the greenery—two sailed on, high and wide, but four made solid thwacks as they hit flesh and bone.

The flesh and bone belonged to the whoremaster of Bullard ville and two of his best gaudy sluts. The women were all dressed up for the carny show in long, shiny ball gowns, their bosoms bare to the nipples, their faces feverishly rouged, lips thickly painted. Suddenly single, small, round beauty spots appeared near the centers of each of their foreheads, and big cratering holes in the backs of their skulls where the mushrooming hollowpoints exited. The sluts dropped their battle-scarred Walther PPKs and made stiff, awkward curtsies as their knees buckled. Their bottoms struck the ground at almost the same instant, dead before they hit the dirt.

The whoremaster O'Neil was slammed twice in the chest, .38 slugs coring both lungs. As he fell, he discharged his mini-Uzi into his own boots, pinning the trigger on full-auto, sending up flurry of yellow dust mixed with blood and bone chips.

Ryan rounded the end of the bed. As he did so, Melchior and two other ville bigwigs, having stood up to confront their attackers, were now backing up at top speed, trying to retreat to the cover of the next row, firing wildly as they went. Melchior's ponderous bulk lurched to the side as a blast from J.B.'s scattergun caught him in the torso, under the left arm. The Armorer had loaded the weapon with lead pellet rounds, and the impact made the flab of the headman's face shudder. He lost his grip on his Ruger revolver, and it went flying, end over end. A smaller man would have gone flying along with it.

Before Melchior could recover his balance, he was struck again, this time at the knees. Clutching at his ruined legs, he went down, the scattergun's roar drowning his cries.

As J.B. advanced, he worked the M-4000's butter-smooth slide. Holding the trigger pinned, he hammered the other two bigwigs, sending one pinwheeling into the plant bed headfirst, and blowing the other off his feet with a center chest hit.

Kneeling at the corner of the bed, Mildred followed up on three more retreating figures—an extremely

heavysset woman in a shapeless gunnysack of a faded, calf-length, print dress, and two lanky boys in their late teens. The heavy woman was packing a .32 Beretta blaster. One of the teenagers carried a Government Colt remake, the other a .38 Smith & Wesson with a five-inch barrel. As the trio backed up, they fired without aiming, hoping to somehow hit J.B., Ryan, Krysty and Mildred with lucky shots.

Mildred, on the other hand, took very careful aim. She fired three quick rounds from her ZKR 551. The first hit the heavysset woman high in the flabby forearm of her gun hand. The little .32 tumbled from fingers numb with shock. Mildred hadn't been trying to hit bone, but bone had been hit. And shattered. The second round passed through the Government Colt boy's bicep. The third clipped the shoulder of the other teenager. Two more gunhand hits. Both boys managed to hold on to their weapons, but neither could raise them to return more fire.

Realizing they were helpless to defend themselves, all three turned and ran. Mildred was pleased to see them able to run. The other companions drew beads on their retreating backs, easy shots to make, given the distance, but no one fired. It was obvious that these three were no longer in the contest.

Ryan glanced over his shoulder at the tent and was relieved that Dean and Leeloo were nowhere in sight. Whatever else happened, at least they had made it safely to the circled wags.

As he turned back to the action, blasterfire erupted from beside the looter wags. Dirt puffed up all around the fleeing woman and two boys as they tried to cross the ville's main street and rejoin their people. They went down in a tangled heap in the middle of the road, the heavy woman crashing on top of the teenagers.

"Shit!" Mildred cried, returning fire. Krysty joined in, as well. As J.B. scrambled back to retrieve Doc, Ryan unslung the Steyr longblaster and flipped up the lens protectors on its telescope. With the forestock braced against the frame of the plant bed, he swung the sight post over the nearest looter wag. A roustie peeked around the front bumper, KG-99 in hand, looking for something else to chill. Ryan held the top of the post way low to adjust for the short distance to target, and squeezed off a shot.

The man kneeling behind the bumper jerked upright as if flicked by a giant, invisible finger. Arms flying wide, he did a midair half twist and hit the ground hard. He wasn't dead. Back arching, he kicked his legs and thrashed his arms.

Nobody rushed out to help him.

Ryan was searching the line of wags for a second target when he saw bullet impacts from the opposite direction kicking up dust. The ville folks' flanking attack had begun. The carny chillers were about to get themselves sandwiched. He flipped down the lens caps on his scope. He didn't need ten-power magnification to see what was going on downrange.

The ant line of looters moving between the cabins and the wags disintegrated as small weapons fire swept over it. From the hard cover of Taco Town, the ville sec force sent volleys of lead down the narrow lanes between the low shacks, through the walls of the shacks themselves. The blasting was indiscriminate; the folk of Bullard were in an outraged frenzy at having their personal belongings taken. The looters caught flatfooted by the barrage dropped where they stood, hit by dozens of rounds at once. Arms heaped with clothing, tools, utensils opened and spilled what they held. Other rousties managed to dump their booty and run, only to be cut down after taking a few steps. The only chillers who had half a chance were the ones closest to the wags. At least they could dive into the wags for cover.

Bullets rained down on the three Winnebagos.



"These folks aren't going to be satisfied until they've chilled every outlander," Krysty said to the others. "They're going to grind up the rest of the rousties and then they're going to roll over us."

"Time for us to try and pull back, Ryan," Mildred said. "While we still have a prayer of making it."

"It's now or never," J.B. agreed.

Before Ryan could speak, the engine of the second Winnebago roared to life, and an instant later, with spinning rear wheels, it swerved out of line. It accelerated, fishtailing wildly.

"Fireblast!" Ryan growled as the driver regained control and the looter wag shot across the road.

As if it was locked on a target, the RV barreled down on them.

## Chapter Eighteen

Baldoona's adult head peeked out from the shadows between a pair of trailers. The boy and girl had stopped running, but were still moving its way. If they continued on their current course, they would pass within a yard of its hiding place. The adult head ducked back, out of sight.

The baby head was drooling and chuckling. It had been drooling and chuckling like that for more than forty years. It had always been a baby head. The adult head had started out that way, but it had matured along with the rest of the body.

For more than forty years, Baldoona had lived in a cage. Even among scalies, the birth of a huge, two-headed infant was altogether too frightening and bizarre.

When Gert Wolfram's scouts had spotted the young scalie, they'd attacked and captured the freak of nature. None of the pack had tried to defend the youngster against its kidnappers.

Despite the adult head's whining complaints about the unsanitary accommodations and rough treatment, despite the fact that it was momentarily free of its cage, it had no intention of ever escaping from the cary. The adult head wasn't smart by any stretch of the imagination, but it was smart enough to understand that freedom for Baldoona the Two-Headed Scalie meant a slow death by starvation. Baldoona had never made its own way in the world. Chow came to it regularly, instead of it having to chase down the chow, which because of its weight it could never catch unless said chow was staked and tethered, or blindsided. The two tender young morsels walking his way were a case of the latter. If it could surprise and stun them, it could have them. As Baldoona's adult head drew even deeper into the shadows, it considered the moist, succulent flesh, the sweet blood, the crisp bones. It wiped the drool from its chin, then from the baby chin.

Contemplating at extreme close range the ruddy, contorted face of its shouldermate, the puffy eyelids, the ever-wet-from-snot upper lip, the perpetual puke breath, the adult head allowed itself to admit the real reason that it hadn't somehow arranged to have the ugly, messy knob chopped off decades ago. The baby head, whatever else it was or wasn't, was the adult head's only friend in the world. Even though it couldn't talk, even though it woke him up four times a night, even though it crapped in what the adult

head considered its pants, even though it regularly barfed all over the adult head's shirtfront, without the baby head Baldoona would have had to actively make its own living in the world. It would have been just another big, fat, dumb scalie.

The adult head could hear the footfalls of its quarry drawing nearer; it could hear the children whispering to each other as they approached. It prepared itself to spring.

As it continued to slobber a bubbling waterfall, the baby head started making a funny noise. A kind of soft, rhythmic chirping from deep in its throat. It was the same noise it made whenever they got their hands on a live pig or a goat.

"Quiet," the adult head warned its counterpart, nose to nose. "If we do this right, we can eat them both."

"Goo," whispered the baby head.

## Chapter Nineteen

The Magnificent Crecca hurried down the command wag's narrow corridor. In his arms was a bundle of ghastly, cold limbs. A violently twitching bundle of limbs. A head too heavy for its size leaned against his shoulder. The rest of the Magus's body was as light as a feather, this a product of hollow stainless-steel replacement bones and Teflon joints. Having to actually touch the creature he so feared, to feel its cold metal and its feverish flesh, made his skin crawl. In order to keep from vomiting at the smell, Crecca had to make a conscious effort to suck in every breath through his mouth.

Sounds of blasterfire raging outside accompanied them to the salon-workroom. The Magus, who was fully awake as Crecca deposited him on the autopsy table, paid no attention to the battle, or what it portended for the future of this incarnation of Gert Wolfram's World Famous Carny Show. His only concern was ending his own pain and insuring his own immediate survival, which was in jeopardy.

The steel-eyed monster hadn't completely escaped the dozen or so steel-jacketed handblaster rounds that had imploded his private viewing box's mirror. Momentarily frozen in his recliner chair, he had been caught in the hail of lead. Through the glittering whoosh of shattered glass, Crecca had seen the sparks fly and heard the ricochets whine from bullet strikes on the creature's tempered metal parts. In the midst of the surprise barrage, the Magus had managed to turn and bail from the chair. He had hit the floor with a dull thud, barely able to crawl hand over hand, and spurting vile-smelling internal fluids of various colors and densities.

Because of his boss's unnatural, composite physiology, as Crecca had looked back from the doorway, he couldn't tell whether any of the wounds were fatal. If the carnny master had been sure, he would have left the Magus to die alone on the floor of the box. Even now, Crecca would have chilled the monster himself if he could have been certain of pulling off the deed. Though the Magus was obviously seriously injured, there was no way to judge his ability to defend himself. It was widely rumored among carnny folk that once his metal jaws clamped shut on something they could never be pried loose; they would hold on like grim death until the second coming of skydark. In the end, what stayed Crecca's hand was his fear of failure and its consequences, which were too terrible to imagine.

"Roll the tool cabinet over here," the Magus commanded, his voice unusually high-pitched, like a tape

recording played too fast.

Crecca unlocked the wheels of the tall, red, multi-drawer toolbox and quickly pushed it to the side of the table. As he did so, he saw that the Magus was using both hands to compress one of the prominent, artificial veins that festooned his chest. Between his fingers, the steel flex-piping oozed what looked like dirty transmission fluid.

More disturbing to the carny master than the spreading brown goo was the erratic movement of the creature's left leg. A mechanical servo located above the synthetic knee joint had been damaged by a bullet hit. There was a deep dent at one end of its titanium housing, and it leaked an oily green liquid mixed with blood. The injury made it impossible for the Magus to control the leg. It jerked and spasmed madly, donkey kicking in the air. In its cage of stainless steel, the Magus's human calf muscle seized up into a rock hard lump, sinews straining, real veins bulging, then it relaxed, then it seized up again, as if it had a mind of its own.

A demented mind.

The tense-relax cycle was reflected, most horribly, in the few remaining human features of the Magus's face.

The spectacle of human-machine interface gone awry might have been funny to Crecca if he had been watching from say, forty or fifty yards away, while hiding behind a large boulder, and if a battle royal for control of the ville hadn't been going on just outside the wag. As it was, the carny master could only stand there in the shambles of the big salon, grim faced, trying not to show his impatience and growing concern over the deteriorating tactical situation, while he awaited further orders from his commander in chief.

He didn't have to wait long.

"Give me a speed wrench!" the Magus cried.

Crecca handed over the adjustable crescent.

With wet steel fingertips, the Magus fitted and tightened the jaws of the wrench over the coupling nut on the ruptured steel-mesh vein. "Replacement tubing," he snarled. "Third drawer of the cabinet. Fast! I'm losing pressure to my head!"

The carny master didn't see fit to point out that there was also an alarming knocking sound coming from inside his boss's torso. He grabbed a twelve-inch length of preassembled tubing from the drawer and ripped it free of its hard plastic shrink-wrapping.

The Magus loosened the nuts at either end of the broken vessel. "Finger, here," he ordered Crecca, indicating the lower end of the vein, where it joined a stub of rigid steel pipe.

When the Magus freed the bottom coupling, Crecca jammed his thumb over the threaded hole, stopping the gush of tranny fluid.

The Magus fitted the new coupling and vein to the top, torquing it down. After he had Crecca move his thumb, he attached the length of tubing at the bottom. This repair completed, the steel-eyed monster turned his attention to his madly jerking leg.

To Crecca, the problem didn't seem life-threatening, or even important—a painful inconvenience,

mebbe—but when he suggested that perhaps he was needed to supervise the rousties in the battle for Bullard ville, the Magus would have none of it. "Let Furlong deal with rad-blasted dirt farmers!" the creature snarled. "I need your help to deactivate the servo's internal power supply. I can't afford to lose any more of my calf muscle."

The Magus rarely explained anything, so the carny master was somewhat surprised when he continued. Carefully, as if to a slow child, he said in the unusually high-pitched voice, "There is a balance, precarious at best, between my living and my nonliving parts. I know you think that eventually I will become an entirely mechanical being, but that just demonstrates your profound ignorance of the energy dynamics of biological systems. The steel and plastic parts I have accumulated over the years allow me to survive, but they are clumsy and inefficient, and the replacements are only useful below a certain number. Above that total number, they become a serious liability. My ratio of human tissue to mechanism is already so low that if I exert myself to any degree the nutrient supply to the living flesh is challenged, and I risk massive cell death of my remaining tissue."

Though the Magnificent Crecca very much liked the sound of "massive cell death" when it was applied to the Magus, he understood nothing else of what had just been said. Because he understood nothing, he didn't dare make a sound or even a facial expression.

When he made no response, the Magus barked more orders at him, demanding a succession of tools from the rollaway box. The titanium housing on the servo had been partially crushed by the slug impact, and two of the retaining bolts had been badly twisted. Because of this, and because the Magus couldn't keep his leg still, the removal of the outer case not only required Crecca's hands-on assistance, but that he sit on the ankle to pin it down on the autopsy table while they worked.

The bent case bolts proved difficult to extract with hand tools. As the moments stretched on, and the din of blasterfire continued, Crecca's urge to look out the window grew until it became almost intolerable, but he couldn't leave the operation. As the Magus worked on one of the two bolts with a socket wrench, he cursed Ryan Cawdor. "He did this to me! That one-eyed son of a swampie jolt whore!"

In Crecca's opinion, unasked for and unexpressed, the Magus had done it to himself by insisting that One-Eye and his son sit in the tent where he could watch them die with the farmers. And he had done it to the rest of the carny by insisting that the looting begin before the mass chilling was over. The Magus had been obsessed with the idea that in the case of Bullard everything had to happen quickly, the ville cleaned of its extra large cache of valuables, the bodies buried and the caravan moving on, all before a bunch of new travelers along the long, dry road wandered onto the scene and complicated things.

If Crecca knew nothing of biology, from his life experience roving through the Deathlands, he had acquired a fine grasp of what made people tick. It didn't take much to realize that the Magus took an unholy pleasure in playing the puppet master. The steel-eyed monster's idea of fun was diverting and deceiving the doomed suckers in the gas tent while his crews stripped their humble cabins of furnishings, clothing, tools, food, utensils, weapons and ammunition, and tore up floor- and wallboards looking for other predark treasures. The Magus had assigned twenty-five rousties to this task, supervised by Furlong.

Dividing the force had been a big mistake, but it was understandable.

The carny had run this operation successfully so many times that once the crowd was seated, the canisters in position and exit guards in place, all the rest seemed a sure thing. The tent was Kevlar and couldn't be cut or torn with anything less than a blowtorch, and there were armed rousties to seal off the only way out. The Magus hadn't even considered the possibility of a mass breakout of his intended

victims, so he hadn't been prepared to defend against it. Nor had he considered the consequences to follow with all the ville sec men alerted, and everyone older than twelve years packing a blaster, and the good folk of Bullard catching the rousties in the act of looting their cabins and storehouses.

Given the switch in odds, which was suddenly three to one against the rousties, and the fact that these farmers had trained to defend themselves and had been successful doing so in the past, it was no surprise to Crecca that the whole thing had gotten way out of hand in a hurry.

Some of the carny crew had been chilled in the tent by Cawdor and his bunch, which left another twenty or so to guard the wag convoy. And that was before the shooting from the ville folks started. There was no way of telling how many rousties were still alive. Certainly not enough to beat back the farmers. In which case, the best Crecca and the carny survivors could hope for was to exit Bullard with whole skins. Which meant abandoning pretty much everything to escape, and doing it before they were overrun.

As the carny master finally wrenched free the bent bolt, it occurred to him that even now the Magus was jerking his strings, making him act against his own interests. And that there was nothing he could do about it.

Once the cover to the servo was off, the Magus attacked the leads to the microminiature nuke battery that powered the unit. The ruined device couldn't be replaced; there was no spare on hand. A new one needed to be machined from titanium bar stock, something that couldn't be done in Bullard. Or anywhere else in Deathlands that Crecca knew about. There weren't any functioning precision machine tools readily available. Even if there were, no one was alive who could figure out how to run one. In the present, all the Magus could do was shut off the unit. When the connection to the battery was broken, his calf muscle relaxed, but without the servo to coordinate its movements, the half-steel leg was just so much deadweight.

The Magus didn't seem worried. One leg or two, he always managed to get away. Jumped dimensions or time traveled, or whatever it was that he did.

To get himself a new servo made, Crecca thought as he hurried to the salon's rear window, mebbe the Magus would jump backward in time, to before the nukocaust.

One glance across the compound told Crecca his worst fears had come true. Everything had gone wrong. Most of the looter crew lay sprawled on the ground. As the ville sec force advanced on the three parked wags, blasters blazing, one of the wags swerved out of line and came roaring his way.

## Chapter Twenty

"What the fuck is that?!" Furlong snarled from the Winnebago's swivel-mounted driver chair.

The man who was about to dump an armload of spoils into the stripped RV's built-in booty bins froze as the head roustie lurched out of the shabby throne and bore down on him.

Furlong snatched a crudely framed object from the top of the load. It was a hair painting, made of twisted and braided lengths of human and animal hair in different colors, knotted into flowers and vines. It was stuck to a square board with little globs of translucent yellow glue.

"This is worthless shit!" he said, tossing the painting out the open rear cargo doors. "So is this...and this...and this..." Furlong grabbed other items from the roustie and tossed them out onto the ground, as well. Handmade wooden eating utensils, raggedy clothing, holed-out boots. In a matter of seconds, he had stripped the man of his loot.

The only items Furlong didn't throw out were a handful of dubious predark trinkets: a broken metal wristwatch without a band, a pair of thick glasses with scratched lenses and some junk jewelry with stones missing from the settings. Gesturing at the heap on the ground, he told the roustie, "Haul back another bunch of crap like that, and you'll be digging graves. I'm not gonna warn you again. And you tell the others the same. We only want tradeable stuff. No more of that garbage." As Furlong lumbered back to the captain's chair, he heard familiar music faintly drifting over from the big top. The swivel throne was turned to the rear so he could oversee the grunt-and-carry work of his subordinates. Overseeing was what he did best. Every time rousties returned to the RV, he gave them the hard once-over, looking for suspicious lumps under their clothing, making sure they weren't hiding valuable items on their persons. And he kept his eye out for anything especially nice and concealable that he could appropriate for himself when all backs were turned.

So far, there'd been nothing worth the risk. The pickings from Bullard ville had been pathetic.

The clothing liberated from the cabins was patched and threadbare, and even when apparently clean, reeked of composted human manure. The flatware used by the dirt farmers was roughly carved from tree branches. The hand tools and edged weapons were made of rebar chipped out of the fallen highway overpass, and of salvaged, ground-down wag leaf springs. The farmers' personal grooming items were likewise homemade: corn-cob-and-pig-bristle hairbrushes, snaggle pronged bone combs, toothbrushes that were nothing more than furred-out twigs. Hut furnishings consisted of small, irregular pieces of mirror, faded predark photos, handmade wooden toys, curtains made of strung small and large animal vertebrae. The predark "keepsakes" consisted largely of broken small electronic items and parts of same; plastic and metal odds and ends that 150 years earlier would have been tossed aside. So far, no weapons or ammo had been found. The dirt farmers had all carried their blasters and cartridge belts into the tent.

Furlong figured a ville this well organized had to have hidden away all the good stuff in a safe place, probably under armed guard. The roustie crews just hadn't uncovered the main storehouse yet. Because Bullard ville was the carny's biggest target so far, both in terms of population and the number of buildings, the plan was to work systematically, moving from one end to the other, ransacking every hut and lean-to along the way. The looters were under orders to take only the choicest stuff; otherwise the wag bins would get filled up with worthless junk, which would just have to be dumped once they hit the motherlode.

In the wake of their previous mass chillings, booty other than food, blasters, ammo and fuel, the stuff they couldn't use in the near term, they had either stashed in caches well off the main roads along their performance circuit or carried to one of Deathlands' primitive trading outposts.

Gert Wolfram's World Famous Carny wasn't the kind of operation that could make a roustie rich. Nobody in Deathlands was getting rich, except mebbe the barons. And the Magus. But the carny folk sure weren't starving, and that set them apart from most other denizens of the hellscape. They had two square meals a day, a shelter over their heads and some regular excitement. Each chiller got a share of the profit, the share determined by the carny master. This was taken out in stolen property, allowing the rousties to occasionally upgrade their blasters and stabbers, and to maintain their jolt and joy-juice habits.

The chillers' other options for gainful employment, given their skill base, were slim. They could work for a baron as part of a sec force, or work as solo robbers, ambushing and picking off the weakest individuals, or join a band of coldhearts that could occasionally tackle and overpower a small wag convoy, or attack a remote single-family cabin.

Furlong had tried the sec man job for a while. It didn't work out. He liked to use the stick too much, and he liked to steal whenever the opportunity arose. In short order he had made enemies of the very ville folk he was supposed to protect. Personally, he considered the itinerant-robber lifestyle too dangerous, even in a band of coldhearts. Robber packs were usually only a half-dozen strong. When it came to chilling for a living, there was safety in numbers. Big numbers. In organization. In the kind of deception and cover the carny provided.

When the first crackle of blasterfire erupted from inside the carny tent, Furlong didn't think anything of it. A few times before in other targeted villes, right after the gas had been released, when the folks in the front rows started foaming at the mouth, going into convulsions and dropping dead, some of the suckers at the rear had guessed what was going on. They had held their breaths and charged the exit with drawn blasters. What with the poison circulating inside the tent and the armed rousties in gas masks, the shooting had never lasted more than a minute.

This time the blasterfire didn't stop.

It dwindled momentarily, then resumed in a frenzy of back-and-forth reports.

"Nukin' hell!" Furlong snarled, even as his stomach sank to somewhere around his boot tops.

Something had gone wrong with the plan.

A few heartbeats later, bullets started slamming into the side of his wag that faced the tent. They passed completely through the Winnebago's cargo compartment, thundering on the metal walls above the armor plate, punching ragged holes in the thin sheet steel. A looter caught standing at the rear of the box was hit by many slugs at once. The top of his skull exploded spectacularly as he was hurled backward, into and over the edge of a bin. His upper body was hidden, but his legs, which stuck up in the air, kicked reflexively as they absorbed more impacts from the hail of lead. The bastard couldn't feel the slugs plowing into and ripping chunks out of his calves. What was left of his brains dripped down the side wall in a pink smear. The two other rousties working in the back managed to dive to the deck and the safety of the low wall of tempered-steel plate, covering their heads with their hands.

Furlong immediately dropped the louvered steel shades that protected the front and side windows of the RV's driver compartment. Through the slats, amid the flurry of dust puffs kicked up by the waves of bullet strikes, Furlong watched his looting crew fall dead in their tracks, cut down by withering blasterfire from the rows of plant beds.

The head roustabout jammed the front half of his Llama 9 mm semiblaster through the driver's-side window shade's gun port and fired back. The opening was so small that he couldn't look down the blaster's sights. There was just enough room for the action to cycle. To aim the weapon, he had to peer through louver slit eight inches above the firing hole.

Because Furlong had put in a lot of practice shooting through the port, it only took him two bracketing rounds to find the range to the nearest occupied plant bed. The dirt farmer shooters crouching there had found him, too. Their bullets spanged harmlessly off the outside of the armored window shade. Grinning, Furlong pumped slug after full-metal-jacketed slug into the stand of nearly ripe corn, aiming at the

muzzle-flashes that winked at him from between the densely packed stalks.

After the fifth shot, a bib-front-overall-clad dirt farmer came tumbling out from behind the curtain of green. He crashed through the stalks, flattening them as he fell, arms outstretched, handblaster slipping from his fingers. He hit the ground and lay sprawled, head down, over the lip of the bed for a moment, then as he regained consciousness, started thrashing his arms, struggling to get out of the line of fire. Struggling in vain.

Furlong shot him again. The bullet plucked at the fabric of his T-shirt six inches below the base of his skull, just above the crisscross of his bib-front straps. The arms stiffened and then went limp.

An instant later, the head roustie was surprised to see the body scoot backward a foot, back between the corn stalks. Then he realized that someone had hold of the dirt farmer by the ankles and was trying to drag him back behind cover. Furlong dropped his aimpoint and touched off five more rounds. Ears of corn exploded juicily, broad leaves went flying, and the stalks parted for a second, revealing a second bib-fronted man, spurting jets of red from a devastating head wound as he slumped over the legs of his dead pal.

Autofire from behind the front and rear bumpers of the wags mowed down the six or eight ville sec men trying to advance to the closest of the plant beds. The rousties whistled and taunted the surviving sec men, even as their friends twitched in the dirt, trying to make them mad enough to charge into the killzone. Nobody charged. The farmers had discipline. After that, there was a lot of random shooting from both sides. A lot of gray smoke drifted about, but no chilling.

Everyone had taken hard cover.

There were no clear targets for Furlong out the gunport, so he held his fire. It appeared that only a few of the ville folk were attacking them. Less than a dozen shooters were hidden behind the beds. He was relieved at that. He couldn't see out the windshield more than ten feet because of the wag parked in front of him. He had no way of knowing that the driver of the lead wag hadn't gotten his steel shades down quickly enough, and had been hit several times in the face and neck by high-powered slugs, and was unconscious and rapidly bleeding out on the floor of the driver's compartment. Because the lead wag completely blocked Furlong's view of the main road ahead, he couldn't see all the armed, angry folks slipping across it, then filtering between the predark buildings in order to circle behind him.

How a few of the dirt farmers could've escaped the death tent puzzled the head roustie, but it didn't worry him much. Once the other carny folk had figured out what happened, they would close in from the rear and wipe out the stragglers.

The looters weren't all that worried, either. The two guys in the back slipped off to resume their robbing. Because the carny chillers were partially protected by the three parked wags, blocked from the view and aim of the shooters, the flow of stolen goods from the huts continued to trickle into the rear bins. If anything, the rousties worked a bit faster because of the threat of being hit by random fire.

Gradually the shooting from the beds and the thunk of bullets rattling through the wag's rear compartment slowed to a steady trickle.

Then the potshots stopped altogether.

When Furlong first saw the ville folks breaking from cover and firing the other way, he thought for sure the carny side had finally launched an overdue counterattack. Several dirt farmers dropped in their tracks



and three others sprinted away, two boys and a fat woman in a baggy dress.

"Now you're gonna get it!" he shouted over the roar of looter blasterfire that had already begun. He angled the muzzle of the Llama toward the fleeing trio suddenly caught in the middle of a cloud of yellow, bullet-raised dust.

Furlong aimed at the fat woman and fired four quick shots. What with the flying dirt and all the other bullet strikes, he couldn't tell if he'd hit her. Not that it really mattered. In the space of a heartbeat, all three lay in a dead heap in the middle of the road.

The shooting from both sides stopped.

The head roustie expected the counter attackers to show themselves then, to stand up and wave the all-clear. When that didn't happen, he was again at a loss to explain it.

Then three things happened almost simultaneously: a hollow thunk came from the left front bumper, a mist of red sprayed through the Winnebago's windshield louvers and a heavy-caliber roar erupted from the far side of the plant beds.

Furlong jerked back from the gun port, choking on the coppery smell of blood mixed with cordite. When he glanced down at himself, the gunshot still echoing through the compound, he saw the dense black hairs on his forearm were beaded with tiny drops of blood.

Not his.

Longblaster, Furlong thought at once. From the sound of it, a 7.62 mm. Firing from the cover of the beds, the rifle had picked off one of his guys with surgical precision, which meant there had been no carry counterattack on the dirt farmers. Furlong could remember seeing only one rifle like that in Bullard ville, and it had belonged to Ryan Cawdor. Only someone who'd practiced long and hard with a scoped longblaster could put the first slug in the ten ring. Furlong knew instinctively, deep in his guts that the one-eyed man wasn't only alive, but had also caused the disaster that was unfolding.

Even as that realization hit him, bullets started slamming into his wag from the other direction. Furlong hopped into the passenger chair to look out the louvers on that side. Whatever slim hope he still had of things working out evaporated in that instant.

There had to be a hundred ville shooters. They had the wags completely flanked and were massing their fire from the hard cover of the Taco Town building. Meanwhile, Furlong's crews were dumping their booty and returning wild fire as they ran for their lives.

Bullets rained down on his rousties in a hellstorm. They had no chance against so many blasters. Those caught out in the narrow lanes between the huts were hit by dozens of slugs. Those ducking into the huts in search of cover found none. The dirt farmers shot through the flimsy walls of their own cabins, nailing the looters crouching there. The Bullard ville sec men knew exactly what they were doing. Under the barrage of blasterfire, they pushed forward to the edge of the rows of shanties and the back side of the Burger Stravaganza.

As far as Furlong was concerned, the handwriting was on the wall. The opposition was too strong, and they were too well armed and trained. As he flipped up the driver's ob port and cranked over the engine, a pair of ashen-faced rousties jumped in the back of the RV. He didn't wait for them to shut the rear doors. Revving the engine, he cut the steering wheel hard over, then dropped it into gear. With a roar, the

Winnebago lurched around the end of the wag in front. There was a jolting hop on the right side as the big wag's front wheel crunched over a fallen man, then Furlong accelerated, heading for the tent and the circled wags.

The first row of plant beds came up in a hurry.

Through louvered shade's ob port, Furlong caught a blur of movement to his right as people standing there scattered. He glimpsed the scoped longblaster first, then the black eye patch and dark curly hair. At the very last instant, he swerved the Winnebago at Ryan Cawdor, who was caught flatfooted in the open, with nowhere to run.

The look on the about-to-be-dead-man's face burned into Furlong's brain. There was no fear in it. No panic.

Nothing but calm.

The head roustie didn't give a damn how Cawdor took being squashed to a pulp.

"You're mine now!" he cried, pinning the gas pedal to the floor. "You one-eyed, fucking bastard!"

WHEN RYAN SAW the middle wag pull out of line and start heading their way, he knew it was a golden opportunity, and that it might be their last. It all depended on the driver seeing a way to rack up an easy last chill while he beat feet. "Spread out and take cover!" he ordered to the others.

"Here!" he shouted to J.B., as he tossed the Steyr longblaster to him.

With the companions scattering out of the way and the RV bearing down, Ryan just stood there like a mutie jackrabbit frozen in headlights.

He couldn't see the driver because of the armored screen that completely covered the windshield. Of course, that meant the driver couldn't see him that well, either, trying to steer while peeping out of the narrow ob port. At a glance, from the size and position of the slit, Ryan figured it had to have a blind spot to objects up close. At least that was what he was hoping for.

When the RV was ten feet away, he dived to his right, beyond the reach of the front bumper, rolling and coming up in a crouch. As the Winnebago rushed straight past him, he leaped for the driver's-side mirror strut. His left hand closed on the steel tubing, and the Winnebago's momentum whipped him around. His body weight broke the grip of the adjustment nut and the entire mirror assembly swung back, slamming him so hard into the outside of the driver's door that he concaved it.

Somehow he held on.

As the wag picked up speed, Ryan managed to get a toehold on the narrow step below the bottom of the door frame. In the middle of the louvers over the side window was a round hole, about two inches across. He yanked the SIG-Sauer P-226 from its holster and rammed its blunt nose through the blaster-port. As fast as he could pull the trigger, Ryan fired into the driver's compartment, swinging the weapon's muzzle in a narrow arc. The driver started to swerve wildly back and forth to try to throw him off.

Ryan held on and kept shooting.

Because of the angle of the louvers he couldn't see if he was hitting anything. He could hear the sickly whine of ricochets zigzagging inside the armored box. The RV suddenly swung even more crazily, first to the left, then the right. It glanced off the end of a plant bed, tearing away twenty feet of corrugated chem rain awning and tipping over onto two wheels for an instant before slamming back down.

The impact almost threw Ryan off the door. It forced him to stop firing. Before he could resume, the Winnebago started to slow down, as if the driver had taken his foot off the gas.

After ten yards, the heavy RV was barely crawling along, which allowed the companions to catch up to it. It was still rolling as they rushed the open rear door. There was no hesitation on their part. They knew it was all or nothing, that the wag was their only hope of getting out of Bullard ville alive.

As the furious, close-range shootout raged at the back of the RV, Ryan tried to get the driver's door open, but it was locked from the inside.

He heard J.B.'s scattergun boom, and the sharp reports of Mildred's and Krysty's handblasters. The trapped rousties returned fire with their autopistols. With blasterfire pouring in through the open door, the steel plate that lined the box was a big negative. Buckshot and .38-caliber slugs cat's-cradled back and forth between the side walls.

After mebbe fifteen seconds, the shooting stopped.

"We got 'em," J.B. shouted to Ryan from inside the driver's compartment. The one-eyed man hopped down from the door's step.

After a moment, the driver's door opened and Ryan stared up at the Armorer's sweaty face and smeared glasses.

He climbed into the RV, and he and his old friend dragged the driver out from between the seats. The head roustie was paralyzed but alive, his spine shattered, the wounds in his hairy back leaking red. They dragged him out of the Winnebago like a roll of old carpet and dumped him on the ground, leaving him there to stare up at the sky, his mouth moving and the weakest of sounds coming out.

If Furlong had some famous last words, nobody was interested in hearing them.

Ryan climbed behind the steering wheel, which was no longer circular, having been almost half blown off by a load of buckshot, it was more a U shape. He glanced to the rear to see that everyone was okay. Mildred and Krysty nodded to him. Doc sat with his back against the crudely welded, quarter-inch steel plate that lined the lower third of the interior wall. His chin sagged to his chest, his eyes were closed, but he was breathing. Above Doc, the wall of the RV had so many bullet holes in it, it looked like a cheese grater. The wag had been completely stripped on the inside to make room for stolen cargo. The rear door was another crude bit of customizing; it was wide enough to get really big things inside. From the looks of things, the built-in bins contained more dead carny chillers than Bullard ville loot.

"Dump those bodies," Ryan said as he quickly eyeballed the controls of the RV.

"What about the loot the bastards collected?" Krysty asked him. "What should we do with it?"

"Keep the food and the ammo," he replied. "Everything else, shove out the back." He put his foot down on hard the gas pedal, heading for the big tent and Dean, Jak and Leeloo.

As Krysty and Mildred heaved the last of the three corpses over the back bumper, the sec men who had moved up to Burger Stravaganza finally found the range, and bullets started spanging into the rear door.

## Chapter Twenty-One

At his father's command, Dean grabbed Leeloo's hand and they broke from cover on a dead run. Blasterfire blazed behind them as they sprinted across the stretch of open ground between the plant beds and the red-and-white-striped tent. Dean followed his dad's orders to the letter and didn't look back, no matter how much he wanted to. This wasn't the first time he'd been sent away from danger because of his age and his lack of experience. Usually, there was never anyone to look after but himself. This time his feelings of helplessness over leaving his dad and his friends to their fate and allowing them to sacrifice themselves were made easier to swallow by the responsibility he had been given. It was his job to get Leeloo Bunny to safety.

He took some comfort from the knowledge that the companions had always managed to beat the odds before. Someday, he thought, his father wouldn't make him go when things looked blackest. Some day, there'd be no question of letting him stand and fight with the others.

Dean ran hard and Leeloo ran stride for stride beside him. She was fast and strong for a person of her age. As they neared the side of the tent, slugs whined low overhead. He slowed and ushered her in front of him, shielding her from bullets with his own body.

The blaze of shooting wasn't the only ruckus going on.

The clatter of the pitched gun battle had sent the mutie zoo creatures into a panic. The Wazl birds shrieked like shattering plate glass. The Worm hissed and shook its rattles. The naked stickies mewled in a terrified chorus. The swampie jugglers yelled for help, begging at the tops of their lungs to be released from their dung encrusted cage. The entire Wolfram menagerie seemed to sense, and rightly so, that there would be no justice and no mercy if they were abandoned to the care of the revenge seeking Bullard ville norms.

Dean was relieved to hear the din they made. The way the muties were all carrying on at once, no way could they sound an alarm over the presence of him and Leeloo. How many armed carny folk were still lurking among the wags? The boy had no clue. His plan was simple: slip under the trailers. He figured he and Leeloo could crawl below the rows of cages and stay out of sight until they found Jak.

As Dean and Leeloo raced past the first trailer, a great, flabby arm lunged out from the shadows, and before they could duck or dodge, it clotheslined them both. Dean ended up flat on his butt, with the muzzle of his Hi-Power blaster rammed deep in the soft yellow dirt. The impact of bone against bone, of forearm against chin made him see stars. He shook his head to clear it, looked over between the trailers, and his blood froze.

Baldoona, the two-headed scalie, its massive bulk seated on the ground, held Leeloo Bunny at arm's length, snatched up by a handful of hair, like a plaything. An unhappy plaything. The little girl was fighting like a demon, but her nails couldn't scratch the glittering, reptilian skin, and her kicks were futile against the creature's well padded exterior.

Dean jerked up his handblaster, giving its slide a quick, hard thump with the heel of his hand to clear the barrel of dirt. Then he dropped the safety and put his finger inside the trigger guard, and drew a careful bead on the adult head. "Let her go!" he shouted.

By way of answer, the mutie soundly backhanded the wildly struggling child once across the face. It was a hard blow. Leeloo went instantly limp, a rag doll held off the ground by sixteen inches of light brown hair.

"Bastard!" Dean snarled, thumbing back the blaster's hammer and jumping to his feet. "I said, let her go, you sack of shit!"

The two-headed scalie did nothing of the kind. Instead, it gathered up the unconscious girl in both hands, holding her by the wrists and ankles, and raised her to its mismatched mouths like an ear of roasted corn.

"Try to bite her and you're dead meat!" Dean warned.

"Do you really think you can chill me before I chill her?" Baldoona's adult head asked him with a smirk. From the way the baby head was lopsidedly grinning, it, too, was amused at the idea.

Dean said nothing. His finger tightened on the trigger, taking up the slack to the break point. The cap was about to snap.

"Think you can stop me with just one shot?" the adult head went on. "Because that's all you're going to get. And it won't be enough. In case you forgot, I've got two brains, Bed Wetter."

Dean grimaced, sighting the Browning first at one nasty drooling head, then the other. From the only shot angle he had, he couldn't hit both with a single 9 mm slug, through one head and into the other, which was the only hope he had of taking out the scalie before it could hurt the girl. He racked his brain, trying to think of what his father would have done in the situation, and came up with a gigantic blank. There were no options as long as the monster had hold of Leeloo.

Baldoona's adult head licked the unconscious girl's cheek and ear, tasting her skin, and then smacked its lips appreciatively. "Cinnamon spice, very nice," it said.

The baby head gibbered and chattered excitedly, puckering its mouth, stretching its neck to the limit, trying to get its lips and then its tiny teeth wrapped around one of the little girl's bare feet, her sun browned toes, which were just out of its reach.

"No, don't!" Dean cried, lowering his weapon. "Don't!"

"Don't?" the adult head said, giving him an irritated look. "I'm about to eat this tender little morsel's face off, and you think I'm interested in your 'Don't'?"

"Let her go and take me instead," Dean told the monster. "You can eat me. I'm bigger than she is. There's more meat. I won't fight you, I promise. Just let her go."

"Yeah, sure..." the adult head said dubiously, opening its mouth, moistening its lips as it prepared to take the first bite.

"Look," Dean said, "I'll prove it. I'll put down my blaster." He carefully placed the weapon in the dirt at

his feet. Parting with the Browning under these circumstances was one of the hardest things the boy had ever had to do. But the memory of what the scalie's two heads had done to the live pig in the big top was still very fresh in his mind. Dean couldn't bear to witness it doing that to Leeloo. He needed the scalie to put the girl down. That was step one.

Baldoona smiled with both its wet mouths. "You got yourself a deal, Piss Pants," the adult head said. The scalie then gently set the still unconscious Leeloo on the ground, smoothing her faded dress, then securely trapping her there by laying its grotesquely fat thigh across the small of her back. It extended both its arms to Dean, then snapped its fingers impatiently at him. "Chow time for Baldoona," it said.

There had never been a doubt in the boy's mind that Baldoona would try to double cross him, that it would eat them both, if it could.

Dean's plan was born of desperation. Get in close enough and use his legs and feet. Get inside the creature's guard and kick for the heads. Boot the adult head first, then the baby head. Boot them until they were knocked out.

But before he could plant his back foot and get off a kick, the scalie had him fast by the scruff of the neck. It was much quicker than it looked. And much, much stronger. As the fingers vise gripped his neck, Dean realized the monster could break his spine with a sudden twist, like a dog with a rat. And when Baldoona squeezed a little harder, cutting off the blood flow to Dean's brain, all the strength went out of his legs.

The baby head started to coo as its suddenly helpless, living meal was drawn tantalizingly closer.

Dean smelled the mutie's huge, and hugely soiled, underpants as Baldoona grabbed his right hand by the wrist and raised to its adult head. The jaws opened wide, exposing short, wear-blunted fangs and a mossy, vaguely reptilian tongue. Dean tried to draw back his hand, but the scalie increased the pressure on his neck, and his arm went dead in the creature's grasp.

In the near distance, over the sounds of the shooting, Dean heard the engine of a big wag starting up, then getting louder and louder as it rumbled his way. Something hot and wet slithered between and around his fingers. The scalie was licking him. Dean cringed, anticipating the horrible pain to follow.

But Baldoona didn't start crunching on his fingers. The scalie's grip suddenly slackened on Dean's neck. Below him, Leeloo had regained consciousness, and was trying to claw her way out from under the weight of the mutie's thigh. It snagged Leeloo's slender shoulder, dragged her back under its leg and sat on her.

"Get out of here!" Baldoona's adult head bawled. "This is mine! All mine!" Dean turned his head and glimpsed a huge beige shape poised, as still as a statue, not five feet away.

The mountain lion, uncaged.

Its stare was locked on the scalie, and the stare was having its desired effect.

Dean saw that Baldoona was paralyzed. Both heads knew it couldn't run and hope to escape from the lion. Both heads knew it couldn't fight the lion and win. But neither head wanted to give up the food it had captured. The monster's four eyes glittered with fear. With gluttony. With anger.

Given its show stopping bigtop act, the scalie had had considerable practice in eating live prey against

the clock.

In a flash it made up its minds.

But before it chomp down on either of its captives, the lion sprang. A beige blur rushed past Dean. Its front paws landed high on the scalie's sagging chest, knocking the air from its lungs and bowling it over onto its back. Dean was slammed to the ground but rolled free as Baldoona lurched up to defend itself from the attack of the giant cat.

Defense was futile, comical even, and certainly brief.

As big as the scalie was, as quick as it was, it was no match for this adversary. Baldoona lunged for the lion's horned throat, and its fingers closed on air. Dean blinked in amazement. The big cat was standing behind the scalie, whose hands were clenched together, strangling nothing. With a single blow of its paw, the lion sent Baldoona crashing onto its hands and knees.

Dean had witnessed mountain lion kills before, but always at a distance, through the telescopic sight on his father's longblaster. Dog style was the position lions preferred for chilling man or beast.

It offered access to the prey's throat. In this case, it had a choice of throats.

Dean had no idea how big the lion's mouth was until it opened wide. It was so big that it could wedge the scalie's adult neck between its back teeth. As the lion squeezed down its jaws, cutting off air and blood and shrill cries of terror, the adult head turned a deep plum purple, eyes bulging out of their sockets, quasireptilian tongue protruding obscenely. The baby head, stabbed by the cat's stiff whiskers, began squealing, not unlike the live pig it had so recently consumed.

The lion didn't use its prodigious fangs on Baldoona. It used its back molars and started sawing, grinding away with them, twisting its thousand pounds of muscle and bone, digging into the dirt with its claws for added leverage, this while the scalie frantically bucked and jerked.

Dean grabbed Leelo by the arm and pulled her away from the struggle. As they stood, Jak appeared from between the trailers, his Colt Python raised in a two-handed grip. The albino lowered the .357 blaster at once; it wasn't needed.

The power of the big cat's bite was in those back teeth, where the muscles of its jaws and neck could apply the most pressure. The vertebrae of the adult head's neck made a crunching sound as they shattered, and Baldoona's body went rigid, as if touched by a high voltage wire. A thick spurt of blood escaped from the corner of the cat's mouth. The lion then turned its head slightly and with slitted eyes kept chewing, angling the points of its molars to shear the sinew and gristle that was all that was holding the head to the body. The severed adult head of Baldoona dropped to the dirt between its feet.

The baby head, suddenly all alone in the world, and facing at close range a nightmare of gory saber fangs, squealed even more shrilly. Six inches from the tip of its button nose, blood from the neck stump, a rude knob of red meat and bone, sprayed in a superfine mist, sprayed in time to the pounding of its no longer shared heart. The terrible crushing power of the lion's jaws had at least temporarily sealed off the clusters of severed arteries and veins.

The mutie cat made no move to bite off the little head on the big body. It stood there, watching, as the great, flabby scalie lurched to its feet and tried to run. Baldoona took a single step before falling to the ground. It lurched up again, the baby head grimacing from the effort.

And fell again.

"Look!" Leeloo said. "The baby head doesn't know how to walk."

It was true.

Baldoona struggled up again, its monumental bulk teetering horribly for a second, arms flailing for balance, then it crashed to its knees and started to crawl. The exertion and the repeated impacts broke open the compression sealed vessels in its neck stump. As the baby head tried to pull itself away from danger, a gusher of gore spewed forth, bathing the side of its face, splattering into the dirt before it. The blood loss was massive. Baldoona managed to crawl only a few more feet before collapsing in a heap.

The lion burped, licked its paw, then scrubbed at the side of its face where blood had spurted, seemingly oblivious to the armor shuttered Winnebago coming full speed around the curve of the tent.

As the RV bore down on them, Dean pivoted and swung up the Hi-Power, preparing to fire.

"Not shoot," Jak said, clamping his hand over the blaster's slide and pushing it away, "Ryan. See him take wag."

The albino wasn't the only one who'd seen it. Bullard ville sec men charged out from the cover of the plant beds, firing wildly at the RV as they ran.

The Winnebago skidded to a sideways stop ten feet from Dean and the others, shielding them from the bullets. The rear door opened at once. Krysty waved everyone in from the back bumper. She didn't have to tell them to hurry.

Dean followed Leeloo into the wag. The girl, uncharacteristically it seemed to him, immediately sought shelter in Mildred's open arms. Mebbe her close call with Baldoona had really scared her? he thought. She was tough, but she was still just a little girl.

The mountain lion hopped in last. Even though it did so almost silently, on its huge soft pads, the wag's springs and shocks creaked and the entire cargo box shifted from the additional half ton of weight. If any of the companions objected to its presence, no one said a word.

As the wag began to move, Dean climbed forward to the driver's compartment and braced himself between the driver's and front passenger chairs. His father accelerated past the doomed menagerie, cutting around the perimeter of the circled wags. A flurry of bullets sparked and zinged off the steel shutter that protected the windshield. Blasterfire from the rousties still scrambling about, Dean presumed.

"How many of the carny wags did you wreck?" J.B. asked Jak from the shotgun seat. "Cut tires on eight," Jak said.

"That's all?"

"No time more."

"Shit," J.B. said.

"We have to let the girl off before we bail on this place," Mildred said.



"She's right, Ryan," Krysty said from beside the rear door. "Leeloo needs to stay here with her own people. We can't take her with us."

"We can put her out on the other side of the tent, near the entrance," Mildred stated. "She should be safe there."

"Come over here now," Krysty said to the girl. "We aren't going to be able to stop for long. You're going to have to jump out quick."

Dean and Leeloo shared a look as she stood up. He smiled at her and nodded; she nodded back. Then Leeloo moved beside the rear door with Krysty.

As Ryan slowed to a stop near the tent entrance, Krysty opened the door. She held Leeloo's arm as the girl prepared to jump off the back bumper. Before she could do that, once again bullets sang all around them. The ville sec men had anticipated their exit route and circled around the far side of the tent. They were lined up in a double row, massing their fire to catch the RV as it came around the curve of the tent, and before it could head for the break in the berm wall.

"No!" Dean cried.

But Krysty had already pulled Leeloo back inside.

"Everybody on the floor back there!" Ryan shouted over the clatter, stomping the gas pedal. "Get behind the armor!"

Bullets rattled the sides of the stripped Winnebago, howling as they passed through and through overhead, slamming into the tempered steel plate with solid whacks.

Ryan steered for the berm entrance as the RV picked up speed. The Winnebago vibrated over the rough ground as if it was going to come unriveted, unscrewed and unglued.

"Fireblast!" Ryan swore as the break in the perimeter wall came into view of the ob port.

No further explanation was necessary.

Bullets rained down on the armored shutters. The ville sec men had already manned the top of the berm wall on either side of the only exit, and now they were cutting loose with everything they had. The shooters' angle of fire meant that their slugs cut through high in the walls and roof, and sliced into the middle of the cargo box's deck. The companions pressed their backs hard against the armor to keep from being cut to pieces.

Ryan didn't give the sec men time to correct their aim. When he passed through the gap and the choking pall of black powder smoke, he was going seventy-five miles per hour.

For a full thirty seconds, as Ryan made for the ruined interstate, bullets whined at them. Then the shooting suddenly stopped. The range from the berm was better than a half mile and growing, and the sec men had realized they were just wasting bullets.

As Dean released his pent up breath, Ryan and J.B. raised the armored shutters, letting in the glare of bright sunlight. The rutted highway stretched ruler straight for miles ahead. Over the engine and road

noise, there was a crackle of small-arms fire from the ville behind them.

"Suppose they're finishing off the last of the rousties," J.B. speculated. "Mebbe the sideshow freaks, too."

"So much for Gert Wolfram's World Famous Carny Show," Krysty said.

"Good riddance," Mildred added.

Ryan reached over and tapped the twin fuel gauges with a fingernail. Dean noted that one was dead empty, the other jiggling above the one-third full mark. His father eased off the gas. Dean knew he was trying to conserve as much fuel as possible, and put the maximum distance between them and Bullard ville before the tank ran dry.

"What are we going to do about the girl now?" Mildred asked.

"We can't take her with us," Krysty said. "She's too young. She's got to go back to her ville."

There was no argument from the other companions. Not even from Dean. "I can't just stay?" Leeloo asked him.

Dean shook his head. She was much safer inside the berm.

The little girl heaved a sigh.

"Trouble is," J.B. said, "how do we get her back to Bullard without getting ourselves all shot to hell?"

"We can wait until the smoke clears," Ryan said.

"Let everybody back there settle down. She can stay with us for a week or two, then we'll sneak her back."

Leeloo looked pleased at the idea.

"Uh-oh, Ryan," J.B. said as he glanced into his side mirror. "We got company."

Dean peered over his shoulder into the dirty glass, past the dust cloud they were raising. About a half mile behind them was a second dust cloud, and in the middle of it was an RV just like the one they were riding in.

"I count four carnies chasing us," the Armorer stated, "including the biggest wag in their convoy."

"Who's driving them?" Mildred said. "Did the carny folk manage to escape, too?"

"Can't see," J.B. told her. "They're still too far back to tell. Probably got their armor down, anyway."

"Rousties or sec men," Ryan said, "it doesn't make much difference. You can bet they're after our hides." He pressed the accelerator to the floorboard and held it there.

Even so, the trailing wags were closing distance. Dean could see that Ryan was unable to make the RV go faster than seventy-eight miles per hour. The front end started to shimmy and shake. It didn't like

going that fast, particularly on a chem-rain-etched roadway. The Winnebago sounded as if it was about to come apart. The engine noise was tremendous, as was the whistling of the wind through hundreds of bullet holes.

"Start looking for a place to make a stand," Ryan shouted to J.B.

The flat plain offered little in the way of defensive prospects. With the river gone underground, there were no trees or even bushes. They had to keep going. Soon the lead wag was close enough to try to shoot at them. Dean could hear muffled blasterfire, but the bullets weren't making contact.

Yet.

"We got trouble ahead, Ryan!" J.B. cried.

Dean could see it. A pile of big chunks of concrete rubble stretched completely across the four-lane road. And was coming up fast.

Too fast.

His father cursed and slammed on the brakes. The Winnebago skidded on the rotted tarmac, its rear end fishtailing to the left.

Dean held on to the seatback with both hands as the world slewed sickeningly and clouds of dust boiled through the holed-out walls.

The RV hit the rubble barrier sideways, and in what seemed like slow motion, bounced off and came down with a jarring crash beside the crude arrow sign. Ryan punched the gas pedal, and the wag roared off the roadway. He had no choice.

"Dark night!" J.B. exclaimed when he saw the narrow track before them.

Which matched Dean's thoughts exactly.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

The rutted lane was just wide enough for the RV. It ran flat and perpendicular to the interstate for thirty yards or so, then it started to climb up the steep slope. The series of switchbacks had been hacked out of beige sandstone bedrock.

"Got to be what's left of a predark road," J.B. said.

Ryan grunted in agreement. There was no road grading machinery in operation post skydark. Highway departments worldwide had gone spinning down the toilet along with everything else. And as far as Ryan knew, in Deathlands there was no army of slave laborers large enough to carve even this crude one-lane track.

"Could have been some kind of service road," Mildred suggested. "For firefighters. Or power line

crews." She pointed at the blue dark forest and mountains towering above them. "Had to have been National Forest up there. Could have been part of that."

Whatever its original purpose, the detour was an endurance course for the aged and now shot-up Winnebago. The hairpins were tight and the grade in some places was forty-five degrees, which forced the companions to brace themselves against floor and walls, or end up in a pile of tangled arms and legs in front of the rear door.

Negotiating the zigzags took some very careful driving on Ryan's part. Keeping the wag's momentum going with an automatic tranny was tough, and if he gained too much speed and lost control, there was no margin for error—he'd drop a wheel off the edge of the road. The unpaved track was badly rilled out in spots. The weight of the RV caused these parts to crumble, and the spinning rear tires cut deeper potholes and ruts. The lion sitting over the back wheels helped big time as far as traction was concerned.

As the Winnebago climbed, Ryan and the others could hear a chorus of engines below, roaring ominously as they lumbered up the track after them. They couldn't see the wags, though. They were about a quarter mile behind. Any hope of the pursuit giving up once they saw the grade and the narrow road had long since evaporated.

"Whoever they are," Krysty said, "they sure got a giant bug in their butts over us."

"If they were ville folk," Mildred said, "you'd think they would have turned back long before this. After all, they won the fight, even though a few of them got chilled in the process. Seemed like they would write it off as part of the cost of doing business... and building their reputation as a big-time, take-no-shit ville."

"Makes me think it's got to be the Magus who's after us," Ryan said. "We caused him a good bit more trouble than we did the farmers. We didn't just upset his plans for Bullard ville—we put an end to his carry operation. Mebbe forever."

"And Magus doesn't give up until he's dead square even," J.B. added. "That's a proven fact."

As the grade continued to steepen, the RV lost so much speed that they probably could have outpaced it on foot, but abandoning their wheels at this point was out of the question. If they did that, once the ground flattened out, or turned downhill, the pursuers in wags could run them down. Nor was there any discussion of some of the companions getting out and trying to slow down or stop the miniconvoy with small arms or hastily rigged deadfalls. They were already outnumbered and outgunned. To have split up their force would have been suicidal.

Ryan was keeping an eye on the fuel gauge, as was J.B. Because of the angle of the road, the tank sensor was misreading the level. They both knew it had to be wrong. It showed more gas now than when they'd started.

"Look up there," Dean said, pointing out the side window. "We're almost at the edge of the forest."

All that separated them from the wall of hundred-foot-tall trees were a few switchbacks.

"What do you think, Ryan?" J.B. asked.

From J.B.'s tight lipped expression, Ryan knew the two of them were on the same wavelength. In a few minutes, the RV's fuel tank was going to run dry and they'd end up stopping somewhere, but not by choice. And mebbe not in the right spot to permanently slow the pursuit.

"I think the next hairpin is as far as we go in this wag," he said. "I'm going to wedge it across the road. Make our friends down below come after us on foot. Everybody get ready to bail out."

He had to park the Winnebago so it couldn't be budged, rammed or dragged out of the way. He knew the other wags couldn't back up without going over the edge, so there was no way they could pull it free. The lead wag could only push it. And the road leading up to the hairpin was so steep, there was no traction to do this. "Everybody out!" Ryan shouted when he reached the spot he was looking for. "Head up the road for the tree line. Triple quick!"

As the companions ran ahead, he turned the front wheels hard over, put it in reverse and goosed the gas pedal, backing up until he bashed the rear end into the facing slope. Then he shifted into Drive, cutting the wheels as far as they'd go the other way, and moved forward a half yard. He put it in reverse again and repeated the process. After shifting into forward gear, he very carefully edged the nose of the Winnebago off the road, dropping it hard onto its front axle, with its rear bumper brushing the sheer wall on the other side.

Foot traffic could pass, if it hopped over the bumper.

But nothing else.

Below him, the sounds of the other wags' engines were getting louder. Ryan climbed out the driver's door, slung his Steyr longblaster and beat feet up the road, past the last switchback, up to the edge of the dense forest where the others were waiting.

As he approached the wall of trees, he sensed something unnatural. Ryan had come across a few other forests like this during his wanderings, lifeless except for the tightly packed trees. In this case some kind of mutated evergreen. There were no other types of trees, or vegetation for that matter. There was no undergrowth. Just pale gray dust that shaded the seemingly endless sprawl of trunks. Smothering heat and silence. No air. Little light. It was the kind of place that gave children wake-up-screaming nightmares, and that grown men and women avoided like the bloody flux.

The rumble of engines coming up the grade suddenly stopped.

"They're at the barricade," Ryan said. "Let's go...we've got to hurry now."

He waved the others up the road that vanished into the immense stand of trees. J.B. went first, pulling Doc behind him on a tether. Mildred followed, then Dean and Leeloo and Krysty. Everyone but Doc and Leeloo had a weapon up and ready to fire. Jak stood beside the mountain lion, who hung back at the edge of the darkness, as if reluctant to set foot in the woods. Its huge nostrils flared, as if it had caught the scent of something filtering down through the trees.

"What's the matter with your pet?" Ryan asked Jak.

"He's afraid," the albino said.

The Magnificent Crecca plowed the biggest of the carny wags through the quarter-mile-long dust cloud swirling in the wake of Ryan Cawdor's RV. The red-haired, red-bearded man had lost virtually everything. Three-quarters of his convoy's chillers and wags had been left behind at Bullard ville. As had all of the mutie menagerie collected by Gert Wolfram and him over the years, except for Jackson, the singing stickie, who sat on the floor at his hip.

Not that Crecca had feelings for the collection of nukercaust-deformed critters—he didn't even have them for Jackson, who followed him around like a dog. What irked him was the wasted effort and missing income. In the blind rush to escape the wrath of the ville folk, all of the carny gear had been abandoned; it represented the sum total of his working life. Crecca had gone from being somebody important, from carny master, to master of nothing, in the space of a couple of hours; from anticipating the biggest score of his life to the kind of devastation he had only in his worst, sweat soaked nightmares dreamed possible.

Much of the blame for his current predicament he laid at the feet of the creature who sat coiled across from him in the Winnebago's duct-tape-patched shotgun chair. The Magus was arrogant, parasitical and evil beyond imagining. And it had been his hubris and lust for the pain of others that had allowed Cawdor to turn the tables and beat him.

The steel-eyed monster's calf muscle continued to spasm intermittently, despite their disconnecting the damaged leg sensor. The contortions of his half-mechanical face in response were gruesome indeed. A once-human spirit was trapped in layers of metal and plastic, layers that seemed suddenly fragile. Yet, even wounded, he couldn't be disregarded.

The Magus was still in control of the situation. Crecca knew he had the capacity to replace all that had been lost. The wags. Gear. Muties. Chillers. But the Magus could also just limp away, jump into the past, or wherever it was that he disappeared to, and leave the Magnificent Crecca to a less than magnificent fate. As much as Crecca wanted to, he couldn't take his rage out on the Magus.

He didn't dare.

His was not the only anger boiling over in the Winnebago's driver's compartment. The Magus didn't like to be thwarted, in even the smallest, the least important of things. One-Eye Cawdor had been a thorn in his side for a long, long time. That Cawdor had out thought and outfought him, even though he and his friends had been trapped in the death tent, that Cawdor had perhaps managed to cause the Magus some permanent physical damage, wasn't something that would ever be forgotten or forgiven.

It was something that demanded retribution. ASAP.

It had been the Magus who, after they had escaped Bullard ville's perimeter, had ordered Crecca to turn and chase the hijacked wag toward Paradise ville. It had been the Magus who had ordered the rousties to begin firing on the RV ahead, even though he had known it was out of range.

Old Steel-Eyes had wanted to let Cawdor know a pack of wolves was howling up his backside. Wanted to make him and his companions afraid. It was more of the same, Crecca realized. It was the same primitive urge. Answered in the same way. The carny master was no whitecoat, certainly. He had no education whatsoever. And he possessed only the most rudimentary understanding of human psychology. But having dealt with robbers and chillers, and having been one himself for most of his life, the Magnificent Crecca thought he knew what drove the creature to do what he did: the Magus had to instill fear in others in order to quiet his own. Crecca found himself wishing that Ryan Cawdor had nailed

the monster in the head with that sideways rain of full-metal-jacketed slugs, turning the brains and gears inside to a pile of bloody metal shavings.

"Rad blast!" the carny master said as a couple of hundred yards in front of him Cawdor nearly ran head-on into the concrete barricade across the highway. Crecca tapped his brakes, slowing in plenty of time to keep the wags behind from plowing into his rear end, and to make the hard right turn. As he did, he saw the white signal rock below the detour sign.

So did the Magus.

"Your scout's been up the detour and back, and left his mark," the monster said. "Which means there's probably a way out for Cawdor. Go faster! You've got to catch him!"

The big wag was a tight fit down the two-rut, dirt road. And things got even dicier as the track started to climb through a series of tight switchback turns. And as Winnebago gained altitude above the valley and the interstate, as the road grew ever steeper, Crecca's hands began to sweat on the steering wheel. Beads of perspiration ran from his wiry red hair, down the sides of his face and along the scar on his cheek. Wet marks appeared under the arms of his ringmaster's coat.

There was no going back. There wasn't enough room on the track for even the smallest of the four wags to reverse course, let alone turn. The drop-off at the edges of the unpaved road was precipitous. And there was nothing to stop the big wag if it tumbled over and started to roll. The RV and its occupants would be turned to scrap by the time it stopped at the bottom of the slope.

Jackson sensed its trainer's terror, even if it didn't understand the reason for it. Sitting between the driver's and front passenger throne chairs, it gazed up at Crecca with black, dead eyes and began to whimper softly. Clear snot bubbled and popped at its nose holes.

"Shut that thing up, Crecca," the Magus said, "or I'll damn well strangle it."

Crecca had no doubt that his boss could and would do just that. "Jackson!" he snapped at the little mutie. "Get in your bed!"

With a chastened, hangdog expression, the stickie retreated to the pile of stiff rags behind the driver's seat.

The trio of rousties sitting on Winnebago's bench seat gave Jackson their full attention, hands on pistol butts. The needle-toothed critter was wearing its choke collar, but it wasn't chained up.

"Where is this blasted road going?" the Magus said. "We're headed up over the bastard mountain! I swear I'll cut out Azimuth's heart if he foxed us on this."

You'll have to stand in line for that privilege, Steel-Eyes, Crecca thought. He'd already started to wonder if his scout had even tried to tackle this road before setting down the all-clear marker. In the back of his mind, the carny master had begun to envision a further narrowing of the already too narrow track. And somewhere up ahead, mebbe just around the next turn, a collapse of the roadway, brought on by wash water from the chem rains and the weight of Cawdor's RV. Mebbe Cawdor and company were already down at the bottom of a ravine? Mebbe the RV was lying on top of Azimuth's crushed Baja Bug.

That would end the chase, but leave them in a sorry fix. They'd have no way to retreat, except on foot.

Which meant the stinking Magus would have to be carried.

Crecca knew he'd have to do the nasty job himself. The Magus would demand it of him, because he knew how much touching him filled Crecca with fear and loathing.

The carny master gave the creature in the shotgun seat a quick sidelong glance. He looked away before the Magus could catch the flat, murderous expression in his eyes. Before he'd touch that hideous contraption of metal and flesh again, he vowed he'd put a .223-caliber tumbler in the back of its skull and boot it off the side of the mountain.

"Shit! Shit!" Crecca exclaimed as he negotiated a hairpin and suddenly came upon the stolen RV, turned sideways with its front wheels hanging off the road. He braked hard. "Could be an ambush!" he shouted over his shoulder to the rousties. After setting the parking brake, he reached up and deftly dropped the steel louvers that protected the Winnebago's cab.

There was no blasterfire.

It wasn't an ambush.

It was a blockade of the road, and it was perfect.

"What are you waiting for?" the Magus demanded of him. "Go on, clear the road. Push that damn wag over the edge."

Crecca released the emergency brake and crawled the huge RV up the grade. There was no question of his building any real speed to bump the other wag. There wasn't enough distance between them, and he couldn't back up any farther because of the turn and the wags stopped behind. On top of that, the grade was too steep, and the road surface too loose to get good traction. So Crecca merely crept up and nudged the smaller wag. His front bumper bit the middle of the cargo box. The back end of the wag tipped a bit, but not the front, which was sitting on its axle. He gunned the engine and the abandoned wag moved a little, its undercarriage scraping over the sandstone bedrock. Then it stopped. The back wheels of the big wag started to spin, and its rear end swerved toward the drop-off.

Crecca let off on the gas.

"What are you waiting for?" the Magus howled. "Ram it!"

Much easier said than done.

Crecca let the RV roll back fifteen feet, as far as he could go without hitting the wag behind, then he tromped the gas pedal. The Winnebago struggled up the slope, banged into the wag, deeply denting the sidewall, but didn't budge it out of position even an inch. If anything, the blocking RV seemed to be wedged more firmly into the face of the uphill road.

"Get out!" the Magus cried. "Get out and find a way to move the damn thing!"

Crecca ordered the three rousties out first. They exited with their blasters ready. The carny master waited a minute or two, then followed with a chain-clipped Jackson at his side and an M-16 in his hands.

Crecca carefully watched his young stickie, who stretched out its neck and sniffed at the air. From Jackson's lack of blood lust, he knew that Cawdor and his pals were nowhere around. He waved for the



other drivers and rousties to exit their wags. All in all, just fifteen chillers had survived Bullard ville, not counting the Magus.

A brief look-see told Crecca that they couldn't use the other wag to push or pull the obstacle out of the way. He climbed into the abandoned wag's driver's compartment and tried to start the engine. It cranked over, but when he put it in gear and tried to power forward, all he managed to do was dig holes in the road with the back wheels. Then the engine died, and he couldn't restart it. The gauges on both fuel tanks read empty.

The Magus wasn't happy when he got the news that pursuit of Ryan Cawdor would have to proceed on foot. With his bad leg, he couldn't walk, let alone run to keep up with the others. And if they carried him it would only slow the chase.

It meant he would miss the fun, unless the fun was brought to him.

Standing in the RV's open passenger doorway on his good leg, the Magus gave Crecca his marching orders. "I want three rousties to stay here with me. Take the rest and all the excess ammo, and track down Cawdor and the others. I don't care what you do to his friends, but I want you to bring Cawdor back here alive, even if he's barely breathing." He paused for a pain spasm to pass, then added, "And his kid, too."

Crecca chose three men to stay behind. As twelve of his rousties hurried to gather up the surplus ammo, the carny master stared at the lucky ones who weren't going ahead on foot. They were trying hard not to look too relieved. Though it had gone unsaid, he knew their job was going to be carrying the Magus to safety if he and the others didn't make it back. If Ryan Cawdor chilled them all, the monster left himself an exit option.

With Jackson securely leashed, the carny master led his men past the roadblock and up the road. He could see the wall of blue dark forest ahead, and above the tops of the nearest trees, the savage looking ridge of the mountain.

Tactically speaking, Crecca knew the situation had changed. In the terrain ahead, the rousties' advantage in numbers was negated. Once inside the woods, they would be open to ambush. To hit-and-run strikes. To that scoped longblaster Cawdor carried.

Crecca payed out the full length of Jackson's chain, letting his mutie bird dog enter the forest first. Jackson strained hard at the leash, sniffing the air. Long strands of drool swayed from its chin as it made soft kissing sounds.

The stickie had caught Cawdor's scent.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

From his vantage point, some six hundred feet above the ruined interstate, Baron Kerr watched and waited. The secondary fire road on which he hunkered ran over the top of the mountain and down its

west-facing slope, intersecting the ancient freeway a quarter mile from the barricade, on the Paradise ville side. Parked in the shadows behind a large sandstone boulder a short distance uphill was the Baja Bug Kerr had commandeered from the carny scout. From the direction of Bullard, he could make out a series of dust devils, twisting high into the windless afternoon sky.

The promised convoy approached the barricade.

The baron looked over at his three helpers, men whose names he had never bothered to learn. He had long since given up such formalities. Their hair, their faces and their hands were black with encrusted grime. As were his.

Their clothes hung in greasy tatters, showing peekaboo filthy knees and elbows. As did his.

All three were grinning at the line of onrushing wags, but in the backs of their eyes was a terrible, hooded fear.

Kerr didn't ask himself if the terror he saw in their faces was real or whether he was just imagining it. He knew it was real because he felt it, too, the fluttering in the depths of his heart. It was the same paralyzing fear that kept him from taking the Baja Bug, which had more than enough gas to get him to the safety of Paradise ville, from just driving away and leaving the burning pool and all its horrors behind. The part of him that had been born James Kerr, the pre-burning pool James Kerr, wanted more than anything to make his break while he had the chance, or failing that, to simply die. But that part of him no longer had control over the body it inhabited. That James Kerr had shrunk in size and influence, until it had become like a lone passenger on a cruise ship commanded by someone else. By something else. The something else could steer the ship. Could make it run faster or slower. Could, on a whim, run it aground on some rocky shore, or scuttle it over bottomless seas. And it did all this by manipulating reality.

Or to be more precise, by manipulating the glandular secretions that determined his reality.

Kerr understood none of this, and not just because he was ignorant of the complex biological principles that were involved. His brain had been permanently rewired by its long term exposure to the spores' mutagenic chemicals. This rewiring had dug deep circular ruts in his already limited powers of thought.

The surviving scrap of the original James Kerr saw the burning pool as a conscious, malevolent force that had swallowed him alive, a whirlpool of impossible power and perfect evil that had held him trapped, that had manipulated him like a puppet for longer than he could remember.

The larger portion of himself, the vast fleshy ship that carried him and that he observed with what seemed to be some degree of emotional detachment, had a much different view of the situation. The SS James Kerr found indescribable peace and contentment in living close to the pool and its lovely, twinkling spores. That James Kerr found serenity in tending the fungus in its moist grottoes, in following the pool's grisly, unspoken commands, in being one with its infinite majesty.

It was this larger James Kerr who, standing on the edge of the fire road, felt the crushing fear of separation and loss. He longed to be back in the pool's all-encompassing embrace.

Though passenger Kerr could only vaguely remember it now, there had been a time when he had been a whole, undivided being. He remembered traveling from Paradise ville to the pool and the blockhouse and the shanties. He had come on purpose, and he had brought many others with him. Like minded others. Kerr had belonged to an extended family-religious cult of nearly a hundred members who had migrated from the east in a handful of rusted-out school bus wags. They came in search of a new eden, unpolluted

land and water, freedom from the moral depravity that typified Deathlands, and personified Paradise.

In their view, the thriving ville, with its rows of scabrous, twenty-four hour gaudies and its lice infested flophouse shacks, with its thieving, murderous residents, was nothing short of hell. After many weeks of enduring the indecencies and indignities of this postnuclear Sodom, Kerr had located and purchased a crudely drawn map that, according to the traveling trader who had sold it to him, purported to show the way to exactly the sort of place the members had come looking for: isolated, protected, unsullied.

Kerr had then taken the map around the better sections of Paradise, in search of someone trustworthy who they could pay to lead them to the hidden high mountain valley.

No one trustworthy in Paradise would have anything to do with the journey. On seeing the map, most of the prospective guides just spit in the dirt and walked away. The few who would talk to Kerr repeated gruesome campfire stories about what went on in those cruel, dark mountains. About people going up there and never being seen or heard from again.

Because Kerr and his fellow cult members believed they were righteous in their faith and that their god wouldn't lead them astray; because they were desperate to leave Paradise, they chose to ignore the ominous signs and set out to find the place marked on the map on their own.

Inside of ten minutes of their arrival at poolside, the green lightning began to crackle and the spores fell upon them in a pale yellow blizzard. It was so beautiful, so remarkable that the people cheered and rejoiced on the bank, taking it for a sign from God. Afterward, they had wandered down to the deserted shacks, to the ready-made, if shabby, little town. Within half an hour, the Clobbering Chair had been dragged out of the blockhouse and into the center of the ville's pounded-dirt square. The first victims had laughed as they pushed and shoved one another to win a seat and be strapped down. There was more cheering and rejoicing from these morally upright folk as the lead pipe smashed down and brains began to fly.

That day Kerr himself had swung the bloody pipe and led the cheers, and had supervised the butchery that followed on the muddy banks. His curse from the very beginning had been his receptivity to the pool's needs. It was what kept him alive. Even when he no longer wanted to be.

"Only five," one of the men standing near him said.

The words snapped Baron Kerr out of his dismal reverie. He refocused his eyes and saw that that was true. Just five wags. One was a ways ahead of the others. It was a much smaller convoy than the scout had described, but there was no way of knowing how many people were inside each one. There was room for sixty, for sure, if they were packed in tight.

Once all five wags had taken the detour and turned up the main fire road, Kerr led the three men back to the Baja Bug. He drove them down to the valley floor, then to the barricade across the interstate. At his command they got out and started dismantling the barrier, throwing the chunks of concrete onto the shoulder. It was the work of a couple of hours to pull it apart.

The baron didn't remember how many times he had temporarily diverted traffic in this way, but he had always diverted just enough to fill the pool's needs. Only so many could be accommodated in the ville. Only so many could be nourished by the fungus.

How long would sixty fresh souls last in the hidden valley? Kerr no longer tried to predict such things. Survival time was different for every individual. And sometimes, for reasons beyond his understanding,

the pool chose to gorge shamelessly, taking a dozen or more unto itself in a single day.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

Jak peered around the bend in the downhill road, squinting his ruby-red eyes to slits as he listened hard for the sound of pursuit. All he could hear was the rasp of his own breath in his throat. The oppressive and airless stillness of the deep forest pressed against the sides of his head; it felt as if his ears were plugged up with cotton. The albino shifted the Colt Python to his left hand and wiped the sweat on his right palm on his pants leg. His mission wasn't to fight a rearguard, delaying action, but to verify that the carnary chillers had abandoned their wags and come after them on foot. And to try to get a head count if he could.

Jak had been the natural choice for the job because he was the fastest runner of the companions. But he was as slow as molasses compared to the lion, who sat on his back legs on the road beside him, its huge head cocked, its round ears upright and at full attention.

They are coming, Little Brother, the big cat said without making a sound, the words appearing in Jak's mind.

Knew would be, Jak thought back. How many?

Fourteen pairs of feet.

That all? We seven, eight with you...

I cannot help you fight them.

Jak was astonished by this revelation.

Only men with blasters, he thought. You stronger. You faster. Is it this place? Bad place?

It has nothing to do with them, or with these woods. It is what's coming, what waits for you all over the mountaintop.

The lion gently placed its huge paw on his shoulder. Little Brother, I am not afraid. I just know how it ends, and I know I have no part in it.

How know? How can know if hasn't happened yet?

Time as we know it is an illusion. It's an artifact of the physical forms we currently inhabit, of their hardwiring, if you want to look at it that way. The truth is, everything that has ever happened, that ever will happen, is always happening. All of history takes place in the same endless instant. There is no past, no present, no future.

If can see it, tell what happens.

I cannot tell you.

I live? You live?

It doesn't matter. Don't you understand? Nothing ever dies, Little Brother.

Wife Christina, baby? Jak thought at once, a great lump rising in his throat.

They are with you, and with me.

The albino shook his head, grimacing. They weren't. If he knew anything, he knew that much. He had buried them with his own hands.

Not understand.

But you will, Little Brother. Listen. They are close now.

A second later, Jak heard footsteps crunching on road. Many men were running uphill in a skirmish line.

We go, Jak thought as he holstered his handblaster. He ran soundlessly up the road, sprinting on his toes and high kicking. The lion loped easily along a few steps behind.

When Jak rounded a turn and glanced back over his shoulder, the great cat was gone. Simply gone.

There was no crashing noise as it plunged deep into the tangle of deadfall.

No twinkling dust trail spiraling up into the slanting rays of sunlight that pierced the forest canopy.

No goodbye.

"IT'S JAK," Dean called softly to his father's back.

Ryan stopped jogging and turned in the middle of the road, as did the others, watching as the albino raced up to him, out of breath. The lion was nowhere to be seen.

The one-eyed man said nothing about the lion; he had other, much more important questions. He listened, grim faced, to the answers Jak gave. They were pretty much what he had expected. The carry chillers were still pursuing them. They were on foot and about a quarter of a mile behind. There were as many as fourteen in the band.

Ryan had three choices, as he saw things. The first was to lead the companions over the mountain at top speed and keep on running, figuring that the coldhearts would eventually wear down and abandon the chase. That outcome was something he knew he couldn't count on, especially with the Magus giving the orders. There was also the problem of his not knowing the terrain; with a full-out run there'd be no time for rescue, and he could get his people boxed in.

Permanently.

His second choice was to find the highest ground and spread his force out to defend it. This would work, he knew, but only if they had enough ammo to do the job, and enough time to reach the peak. Ryan couldn't tell how far off the summit was because of the densely packed trees. It was possible that the pursuit could overrun them before they reached it.

His last option was to locate a suitable place for an ambush and bushwhack the murdering bastards as they came up the road. That seemed the best course of action to him. At the very least, it would reduce the number of the opposition, and the massed fire might scatter, or even turn the rest back. There was also the possibility that the companions might nail them all—the odds were only two to one. It also gave him the choice of the chilling ground, which was a big plus as far as he was concerned.

"Okay, let's move," he said, waving the others up the road after him.

They jogged in a single file along the steeply angled track, which wound back and forth through the clustered trunks. There was dust underfoot, and there was stifling heat, but there were no signs of life other than the trees. Here and there, shafts of light speared through breaks in the canopy of branches, spotlighting the blue-gray, bone-dry litter of fallen needles and limbs.

As he trotted up the road, despite the suffocating heat, a chill passed down Ryan's spine, and he felt a sudden tension at the back of his head, as if the skin had drawn drum tight. It was the same feeling he had experienced when they uncovered the death pit in the nameless ville.

In the grim, eerie forest, he sensed the presence of the dead. Multitudes of the dead, swarming around him.

With an effort he shook off the sensation. He had more than enough flesh-and-blood trouble on his plate without worrying about legions of ghosts. J.B. ran behind him, straining to pull along the roped Doc. After Doc came Dean and Leeloo, then Mildred and Krysty. Jak brought up the rear. Ryan dropped back to jog alongside the Armorer.

"Got to quickly find us a place to chop down these bastards," Ryan said in a low voice to J.B.

"Anyplace along here will do," he replied as they rounded a right-hand bend that led to a long, dark, uphill straightaway. "Split up on either side of the road. Sandwich 'em."

Ryan held up his hand, signaling for the column to stop. "This looks like a good spot for an ambush," he told them. "We let 'em get to the straight part, then cross fire them from behind. If we work fast, we can keep them from getting to cover in the trees."

"They'll be tracking us, for sure," J.B. said. He pointed at the jumbled footprints in the soft dirt of the road.

"By the time they figure out we've doubled back on them," Ryan said, "they'll be caught in the kill-zone."

He then split up the companions, sending Dean, Leeloo, Mildred and Krysty to the left side of the road. He led Jak, J.B., and Doc to the right, into the stand of trees on the inside of the bend.

He didn't have to tell any of them to make their shots count.

Underfoot, the dry twigs and branches snapped and crackled. Puffs of talc-fine dust rose like smoke into the shafts of light.

From the other side of the road came a tiny squeak of a smothered sneeze.

Leeloo, Ryan thought as he watched Jak and J.B. slide belly down in the litter beside the dark trunks.

The Armorer made Doc lie down beside him, then followed Jak's example and pulled some of the crumbling forest litter over them both, creating a double wide hide.

Before burrowing into the deadfall himself, Ryan carefully placed the Steyr longblaster behind a tree. The range was going to be too close to use it, and the bolt action was way too slow for the shootout he envisioned. The idea was to keep the chillers from reaching cover, and that meant cyclic rate. He dropped the SIG's magazine into his palm, making sure it was topped off. Then he set out a second and a third full mag in front of him, hoping to hell he wouldn't have to reach for them.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

As he trotted up the road, the Magnificent Crecca carried his .223-caliber assault rifle by its plastic pistol grip, with his trigger finger braced outside the trigger guard, just behind the thick curve of the 30-round magazine. The rifle's fire selector switch was on full auto. The carny master was ready to whip-saw with hot lead anything that moved among the seemingly endless ranks of tree trunks.

Nothing moved on either side of him, nor on the road ahead.

Not yet, anyway.

Even after his eyes had become adjusted to the darkness of the forest, the road before him was dim. Fifty feet ahead, it blended in with the dismal shadows. There were a few bright patches where sunlight penetrated the branches, but they actually made things worse. They made the surrounding shade seem even darker, more impenetrable.

That's why he had brought Jackson along. What the little stickie couldn't see, it could sniff out.

Because Crecca had been concerned about Jackson's breaking free and running off to hunt solo, he had reeled in all but five feet of the leash, keeping the mutie on a short lead. He kept the rest of the chain coiled in reserve. He could pay it out if the creature made a sudden lunge, taking the strain off the leash, but still keep the stickie under control.

Sensing the excitement of his trainer and the impending bloodshed, Jackson was no longer the singing, dancing puppet that so fascinated the hicks and hayseeds. Under conditions of the hunt, the real Jackson, the pure stickie, bubbled to the surface. The raw chiller instinct that could never be beaten away.

Eyes bulging, whipcord muscles straining, needle teeth bared, it was a perfect example of a stickie on the prowl, a thing that drops from a tree limb into your path with sucker tipped fingers reaching for your face; a thing that crawls through the half-open cabin window and makes soft kissing sounds under your bed before it crawls in with you, who are too scared to move or cry out.

If either of the prevailing legends was true, if the Magus had constructed the stickies using predark whitecoat technology, tinkering with the minute components of human sperm and egg, or had simply snatched a few breeding pairs from the future, then he had peopled—monstered was a better word—the nightmares of every Deathlands child.

As the carny master and Jackson rounded a turn, the stickie made a sudden surge forward. It dropped

onto all fours and scabbled madly at the dirt, trying to break free, straining at the chain. The prey was close. Very close. Despite the pronged choke collar, it was hard for Crecca to hold the stickie back with his left hand. To get Jackson's full attention and cooperation, Crecca had to forcefully apply the butt of the M-16.

Twice.

He then drew his men together on the right side of the road. They were all breathing hard and dripping with sweat from the heat and the uphill run. They weren't scared; Crecca could see that. These were hard-eyed, hard-bitten, longtime professional chillers. They had willingly dug mass graves, administered mercy bullets to the survivors of the poison tent and robbed the huts of the still warm dead. They'd gotten all pumped up for the big chilling at Bullard, but had been denied their fun and their spoils. Like Crecca, they had lost everything in the debacle. Not just gear and livelihood, but friends and lovers, too. And the blame for all of it could be laid at the feet of Ryan Cawdor and his pals.

The rousties wanted payback. As did he.

Crecca spoke in a hushed whisper, so softly that the chillers had to huddle around him to hear. "From the way the stickie's acting," he said, "looks like Cawdor and company are waiting for us up around the next bend. They've probably got both sides of the road covered, expecting us to walk into their sights. Not gonna happen that way, though."

The carny master drew a rough sketch in the dirt with a fingertip. It showed the right-hand turn in the road that they could see the start of from where they stood. He pointed at the three best shots of his crew. Each had a high capacity, semiauto handblaster. "I want you to sneak up to the edge of the bend on this side of the road," he said, pointing at his sketch. "Don't show yourselves until you hear the first shots. Then move out around the curve and nail anyone running down the road." He tapped the point of the curve. "From this spot," he said, "you've got control of the KZ. If no one breaks and runs, locate the shooters in the cover on the left side. For sure, they'll be potshooting at us from across the road. Pin 'em down and chill 'em."

Crecca waved for the other men to huddle even closer. "The rest of us are going to work our way through the brush and get behind the shooters on the right. It's going to be tough for us to move quietly through all the fallen branches. Go slow and watch your step until we're in position. When I give the attack signal, we'll charge them from the rear—the more noise we make the better, and either we kill the bastards outright or drive them onto to the road, where they can be picked off easy by our sharpshooters."

As Crecca straightened, Jackson let out a soft whine. The mutie was quivering, head to foot, with excitement. That wouldn't do. Not at all. The carny master showed the stickie the rifle butt.

Jackson immediately dropped to its back in the dirt and offered its trainer its soft underbelly.

"That's better," Crecca said. He unclipped the chain from the choke collar and pointed at his heel.

The little stickie meekly obeyed.

Crecca shouldered his M-16, then stepped off the road and into the trees. The thick, rough barked trunks were unevenly spaced. Some grew only inches apart while others were a double arm's length from their closest neighbor. Blocked from sunlight, most of the lower branches had withered and fallen off. Around the base of each tree was a ring of rotting debris: a rat's nest of dusty needles, twigs and small



and large limbs. Some of these brush piles stood as high as Crecca's waist.

By staying as close as possible to the trunks, he avoided most of the tinder-dry material. He was forced to advance at a snail's pace, watching the placement of each step, occasionally toeing a rotted branch out of the way when he couldn't safely see past it.

The nine carry chillers moved in a widely spaced line behind him. They followed his trail exactly, keeping close to the tree trunks, stepping in his steps. Because they were pros at both chilling and stalking, they made only the slightest rustling noise as they advanced; Crecca could hardly hear it over the thudding of his own pulse in his ears.

The carry master couldn't see the road because of the wall of trees, but he knew that he had to be close to it—no more than thirty or forty feet away. He also knew that he had to be just about on top of Cawdor and the other ambushers...if they were really there.

As Crecca paused for a moment, his back pressed to a tree trunk, Jackson started acting nervous. The stickie wasn't whimpering or mewling; it was making the softest of soft kissing sounds while gazing warily at the butt of the M-16. The expression on the little stickie's face said it was trying hard to keep quiet but couldn't.

Cawdor was near, all right.

Crecca turned around the trunk, holding the assault rifle at hip height, his finger inside the trigger guard, lightly resting on the trigger. As he brought down his right foot, something unseen crunched under his heel. With the weapon poised, he froze, scanning the row of trees in the gloom directly ahead. He saw nothing, and was about to make another jump forward when, not ten feet away, leaning against the base of a tree, he caught the shape of the scoped Steyr longblaster.

A hair-raising jolt of adrenaline coursed through his veins.

As Crecca opened his mouth, before he could get out a warning shout, a hand appeared from under the pile of debris, grabbed the sling and snatched the rifle away.

RYAN LAY BURROWED under a brush pile of his own making, with a peekaboo view of the empty road. From his position, he couldn't see Krysty or any of the others on the opposite side. The heat under the debris was sweltering. Beads of sweat ran down his spine and trickled in rivulets over the sides of his rib cage. Dust mixed with body oils and perspiration had turned the backs of his hands ash-gray.

Ever since he and the others had taken cover, he had been counting the elapsed time in his head. He had figured it would take the chillers mebbe four minutes to close the quarter-mile gap if they were moving at a quick pace. And under the circumstances he couldn't see them doing anything but double time to catch up. At that rate, they should have been in his sights more than two minutes ago. With every second that passed, his concern grew.

It wasn't a sudden noise that first alerted him to the danger they were in. It was an awareness. A vague presence. A pressure. From behind. He had been counting on the dry deadfall to give them plenty of advance warning of an enemy approach from the rear. Listening hard, he could hear the rustle of branches not twenty feet away. The enemy was closing in, and there had been no alarm. He picked up a twig and flicked it at J.B. to get his attention. The Armorer immediately reached over and nudged Jak, who turned to look Ryan's way. Doc looked at him, too, but his eyes were unfocused.

Ryan jerked a thumb toward the woods behind them. The gesture was urgent and emphatic. And to the companions the meaning was obvious.

They'd been foxed.

J.B.'s jaw dropped in disbelief, but he recovered at once, grimacing as he thumbed his wire-rimmed glasses back up the bridge of his nose. Ryan pointed across the road, toward Krysty and Mildred's position. J.B. and Jak nodded in agreement. The ambush was scrapped. They had to rejoin their forces, and quickly.

Ryan gathered up his extra mags and tucked them inside his waistband. As he started to reach back to grab the Steyr, a branch cracked ten feet away. No way was he going to leave his precious sniper rifle behind. He caught hold of the longblaster by its shoulder sling and jerked it away from the tree, using his momentum to roll up onto his knees.

A fraction of a second later someone shouted, "Get 'em!" Then all the chillers were yelling as they crashed through the brush. Ryan brought up the SIG. He couldn't make out any targets, but as gunshots barked and bullets thudded into the trunks all around him, he returned fire, spraying a line of 9 mm death in front of him at waist height.

Behind him, the rocking boom of J.B.'s scattergun was followed by the roar of Jak's .357 Magnum blaster.

The yelling abruptly stopped. The attackers broke off their charge and took cover.

Ryan waved for Jak, J.B. and Doc to beat feet. He caught up to them as they reached the road. As they started to cross, three rousties appeared around the bend and, dropping to kneeling positions, opened fire on them.

"Go!" Ryan said as bullets whined overhead. "Go!"

He and the others returned fire on the run.

The roustie on the far right took a slug very low in the chest. From the way it blew him off his pins, it had to be one of Jak's .357 Mags. It lifted and slammed the man onto his back. Screaming, kicking, he clawed at his guts as the companions dived into the cover of the trees.

Blasterfire from Krysty, Dean and Mildred sent the two survivors scurrying back around the bend.

Ryan cupped his hand and shouted to them, "Frog it!"

It was their signal for a full-out, fighting retreat, which meant the two groups would retreat by leapfrogging each other, one group defending the bend while the other ran up the straightaway to take up a firing position at the next turn.

They were already in high gear up the road by the time the chillers got themselves reorganized. As they withdrew, the companions used sparse blasterfire to keep the opposition back at least a hundred feet. They weren't trying to make perfect shots. The gloom of the forest made pinpoint accuracy next to impossible. The idea was to stall the enemy until the companions could reach a place they could successfully defend. And they were trying to use up as little ammo as possible in getting there. J.B. didn't shoot at all, but concentrated on keeping Doc moving uphill; there was no point in wasting his scattergun

rounds on a long distance delaying action.

As Ryan raced past Mildred, she knelt at the side of the road and fired her Czech-made target pistol from a braced stance. Her skillful potshotting brought a shrill yelp from the shadows far downslope. Then a wail filtered through the forest She had nailed one of the chillers with a .38 slug. Nailed him good, from the racket he was making.

The flurry of answering gunshots echoed off the trees. As Ryan made for the next bend in the road, bullets spanged into the surrounding trunks and clipped off branches. The road above them continued to wind back and forth among the dark trunks. There was no choice but to keep on running until they reached the summit. Which, he knew, couldn't be far away now. Then the opposition shooting slowed. Two possibilities occurred to Ryan as he knelt, the SIG's sights aimed downhill. Mebbe the chillers had realized that the running gun battle was burning up ammo that they were going to need when they caught up to their quarry. Or mebbe they had finally figured out that if the companions made the summit they might have a defensive position too strong to overcome no matter how much ammo they had.

When a moment later the shooting stopped altogether, Ryan knew the chillers were concentrating on closing the distance before the companions could reach the high ground.

"Forget the frog!" he told Mildred, Dean, Leeloo and Krysty as they dashed past him. "Straight to the top! Triple fast!"

Ryan sent J.B., Doc and Jak up ahead of him. The albino grabbed Doc under one armpit and J.B. took the other. They half carried the old man as they ran. After three more bends, the track straightened. Ryan could see the light breaking through the tops of the trees above them. The road rose even more steeply as it approached the summit. By the time he reached the edge of the tree line, Mildred, Krysty and Jak were on their bellies on the crown of the road, sighting their handblasters down the straight stretch. He moved past them and joined J.B. who was already doing a recce of the summit.

There was no hardsite for them to defend. The crest of the summit was rock, all right, but it was as flat as a pancake. The densely forested ridge bracketed the top of the road, which continued steeply down on the other side of the crest.

Words weren't necessary between the two longtime trail buddies.

It was bad.

Bastard bad.

They both knew the chillers could filter through the ridgetop trees and flank them if they tried to make a stand on the summit.

"Get up!" Ryan told the others as he turned back from the table of rock. "We can't stay here. We've got to keep running. Cross the summit and take the road down the other side."

One hundred fifty feet below him, at the start of the straightaway he'd just climbed, four rousties tried to cross the road.

In a single, fluid movement, Ryan shouldered the Steyr, dropped the safety and snap fired.

The longblaster boomed like a cannon under the canopy of tree branches.

A heavy-caliber bullet skipped harmlessly off the road between the chillers, but the near miss made them throw themselves headfirst into the brush. And, Ryan thought, as he broke from the crest and ran after the others, it would give them something to worry about as they worked their way up through the trees.

As he sprinted down the descending road, he got his first glimpse of the little lake. From the high angle of view, it looked like a predark painting or advertisement—serene, pastoral, inviting.

What appeared to be steam or fog hung over part of its mirrorlike surface. With chillers at his back, Ryan had no time to examine the placid panorama more closely. He raced to catch up with his companions, who were already nearing the muddy shore.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

Thick brown muck sucked at Mildred's boot soles as she struggled around the denuded perimeter of the lake. She couldn't run through the mud; it was too deep. And trying to run made her boots sink in past her ankles, which slowed her even more. She wasn't alone; the other companions had the same problem.

Inside the dead zone of the lake's shoreline, the few remaining trees were long dead, barkless, bleached, eroded smooth. Like gigantic, stripped bones jutting from the wet earth.

What could have caused it? she wondered.

Something to do with the lake, obviously. Some localized toxicity or disaster perhaps springing from skydark. It occurred to her that the lake might be sitting over a volcanic vent. But there was no telltale aroma of sulfide. The smell was of intense biological decay. Not just swamp, though. Latrine. Abattoir.

She noted other scattered boot prints and the deep wheel tracks in the soft ground. Someone else had been here, and recently, she thought. So the place was probably safe enough.

While the other companions trudged slowly ahead, Mildred paused for breath. She turned and glanced up at the summit. She saw Ryan coming down the steep road in great strides, his longblaster in his hand. There was no sign of the chillers yet. She took the opportunity to lever open the cylinder of her ZKR 551 target revolver and dump out its two spent shells. She thumbed in a pair of live bullets, then snapped the cylinder shut. This done, she stuck her hand back in the bag pocket of her fatigue pants and counted the loose .38-caliber cartridges. There were eight left.

Mildred felt no wave of panic at this discovery. She wasn't afraid of dying, and she wasn't afraid of pain. She had already lived through both.

And through resurrection, thanks to Ryan and the companions.

Though she didn't fancy dying again, she had hopes of a different kind of resurrection the next time.

Then she caught a flash of green out of the corner of her eye, out over the smooth surface of the lake, green that seemed to climb from water to sky. Even though she heard the crackle of the electrical discharge, she thought she had imagined it. She shook her head to clear it. Lightning didn't travel in that

direction. Not normal lightning, anyway. Perhaps the heat and the exertion were making her mind play tricks she thought.

But there were more flashes, much stronger ones. Even in broad daylight, they underlit the clouds of dense fog or mist that were rising like steam from the placid surface. The zapping sound of electricity was followed by a baritone rumble of thunder that she could feel in her guts.

"Did you see that?" she said to J.B., who had stopped twenty feet away with Doc at his side.

"Yeah, I saw it. Don't understand it, but I saw it. What's going on out there?"

Krysty, Dean, Leeloo and Jak had momentarily stopped, too, and were staring at the micro-weather system.

"It's kind of pretty," Leeloo remarked. "I like the green lights."

"Look!" Jak said, pointing at the water under the cloud.

A strange sort of disturbance had appeared directly under it. A riffing on the water. A dark, churning circular patch about 150 feet wide, as if billions tiny fish were schooling. Or large predatory creatures below were herding them into a vast, panicked ball.

Something wasn't right.

Something definitely wasn't right.

"Everybody," Mildred said urgently, waving her arms, "move back from the water."

The others didn't move. They all seemed mesmerized by the strange, localized electrical storm. All of them but Doc. The old man wasn't even looking at the lake. He was staring fixedly at his own muddy boot tops and mumbling to himself.

Then a blast of withering heat sucked Mildred's breath away as the low hanging clouds began to surge toward them.

"Triple red!" Mildred cried over the fresh round of rolling thunder. "Triple red! Run!"

Still nobody moved.

Deep shadow swept over them as the clouds blocked the sun.

Cursing, Mildred slogged over to Leeloo and Dean, grabbed their arms and tried to pull them away from the shoreline.

Too late.

The snow came down slanting, driven sideways by the scorching wind.

The pale yellow precipitation was the size of snowflakes, but it wasn't snow, she realized at once. It was hard. More like tiny hail. Or bird shot. Hard enough to bounce a foot in the air as it hit the mud. The deluge of spores peppered Mildred's plaited hair, head, face and shoulders. Instinctively she held her

breath.

Dean and Leeloo went rigid under her hands. Though she used all of her strength, she couldn't budge them. They seemed to weigh a thousand pounds each, their feet rooted to the earth. When Mildred took in the expressions on the children's faces, she was horrorstruck. Their mouths hung down slack, their eyes open wide, the pupils hugely dilated.

There was something in the snow, she thought, or whatever the hell it was. Something bad.

Mildred knew if she was going to help Dean and Leeloo, if she was going to help any of her friends, she had to get clear of the downpour. She had to escape its effects and regroup. The deep mud sucked at her boots as she tried to run from the bank, which made her exert more energy and burn more of her limited air.

The cloud moved with her, tracking her.

And along with it came the pale snow.

Mildred looked back over her shoulder and through the blizzard saw Ryan coming, on the double. He had reached the start of the shoreline and was hurling himself through the muck. She wanted to wave him off, but what with the thunder and the heavy downfall, he was still too far away for her to warn. And he was way too far away to help her.

She managed another few steps before her legs gave out. On her knees in the mud, with tears of rage running down her cheeks, her last thought before she inhaled was Oh, fuck!

Then she sucked down air.

And her brain melted.

AS RYAN CHARGED DOWN from the top of the road, he took in the desolation surrounding the tiny lake. He also saw the companions standing there on the bank. Doing the opposite of what they were supposed to be doing, which was running for hard cover. Instead, they were gawking.

Under the strange clouds forming over the small body of water, something twinkled, then flashes of green reflected in the lake's mirror surface. Over the thuds of his footfalls, he heard the snap and crackle of lightning. A fraction of a second later, there was thunder.

Big time thunder.

The unnatural was natural in Deathlands. The unexpected was to be expected. But this storm brewing in miniature caught Ryan completely off guard. The lightning was green and blindingly bright. It didn't spear down from the clouds to the lake; it traveled upward, from the water to the billowing mist. The savage intensity of the electrical discharge filled him with dread. It appeared that he had done the last thing he had wanted to do: he had led his friends into something far worse than a box canyon.

"Nukin' hell!" he swore, running faster.

As fast as he ran, he couldn't beat the clouds. Blown by a jet wind from hell, they rushed from the lake to the land. Waves of pale yellow snow sheeted over the companions, who, except for Mildred, still didn't move. The stocky black woman was trying to drag Dean and the little girl away from the shoreline.

After a moment, she gave it up, and before Ryan could reach her, turned to run for the edge of the lower slope. The snowstorm engulfed her. For an instant, she disappeared behind a pale curtain. When the curtain shifted, she reappeared. Ryan saw her stagger and fall. She didn't get up.

By the time Ryan got to the bank, the snowfall had already stopped. The earth around the waterline was heaped with foot-high yellow drifts, which seemed to shrink even as he walked through them. The tiny particles crunched like rice underfoot. They were rapidly dissolving into nothing. Over his head, the clouds dissipated into fine cottony wisps. Along the bank, the smell was of a slaughterhouse, of ancient, multitudinous butcheries.

The storm had been short lived but devastating. All of the companions had been struck to stone, either left standing, riveted to the boggy ground, or facedown in the muck, like Mildred.

His own heart trip-hammering, Ryan checked Dean's throat for a pulse. As he felt the steady beat under his fingertips, a gunshot cracked from high above. A slug slapped the soggy ground two feet away.

When he looked up, he saw a half-dozen chillers spilling over lip of the summit, charging down the road toward him.

More gunshots rang out from the rim. For the chillers' short-barreled blasters, the range was extreme. They couldn't hit the side of a barn. Bullets smacked into the mud, plunking into the water. Ryan glanced over his shoulder to see if anyone had been wounded. It was hard to tell. One thing was certain, though. If the companions were still alive, they weren't going to be for long. The rousties were rapidly closing the distance.

Ignoring the hot lead screaming by him, Ryan slogged over to the nearest dead tree. He flipped up the lens caps on his scope and used a forked limb as a shooting rest.

Aiming the Steyr uphill, Ryan took a stationary lead on the man running in the middle, holding the sight post way low to compensate for the shooting angle. He tightened down on the trigger, and the longblaster bucked and barked. He rode the rifle's recoil wave, cycling the bolt action to put another live round under the hammer, recovering his target as it ran headlong into the heavy caliber bullet. The chiller's arms flung wide and loose. His handblaster went flying as he was hurled backward and down. Ryan glimpsed the soles of his boots as his legs bounced limply in the dirt.

Stone dead.

The rest of the chillers kept coming, as if the danger hadn't sunk in yet.

Ryan aimed low and fired again.

His second target had to have realized he was in trouble, as he slowed a fraction of an instant before the firing pin snapped. Instead of running into the arc of the speeding bullet and meeting it square mid-chest, he met it square midshin. His right leg buckled under him, the long bones shattered and he sprawled on his face in the road.

The others took cover then, scurrying behind the boulders on either side of the road.

As Ryan cycled the Steyr's action, he was hit from behind by an intense blast of heat and another wave of rolling thunder. He looked back to see that the strange clouds had already reformed in the middle of the pool and were rushing toward him, pushed by the hot wind. As the yellow, snowlike substance began

to fall over the lake, Ryan rushed to Dean's side. The boy still stood like a statue, seemingly as dead as one of the stripped trees. Ryan was trying to scoop him up into his arms when the spore blizzard swept over them, making a rattling sound as it bounced off the earth, and off his head and shoulders.

Ryan took a breath.

And he smelled flowers.

A billion flowers.

It was as if he had been dropped into fields of ripe blossoms that stretched in all directions as far as the eye could see. The concentrated sweet perfume overloaded and short-circuited his nervous system.

No longer aware of the flurry of bullets zipping past him, Ryan dropped the Steyr muzzle-first into the mud.

With the enemy longblaster controlling the short stretch of road leading up to the summit, Crecca and crew had had no choice but to bust brush. After the carny master split the rousties into two groups, they circled through the trees from opposite sides of the road, coming out on the flat bit of table rock that was the mountain's peak.

Cawdor and company were nowhere in sight.

Peering over the edge of the summit, Crecca saw their quarry, by now already a good distance away, down by the shore of the little lake. He paid no attention to the clouds, nor to the thunder and lightning. He immediately dispatched six of his chillers to go after the bastards. He kept the best long-range shots with him, and ordered them to fire, but sparingly, from a prone position along the peak, this to keep Cawdor and the others pinned along the shore.

Even though the carny master was expecting the longblaster to bark again, when it came, he flinched at the boom. Out the back of one of the rousties on the road beneath him came a puff of red mist. His shredded lungs and heart gusted from a fist-sized exit hole, spraying over the side of a boulder. The big-bore rifle slug exploded against the sandstone.

Before Crecca could react, before the other men on the road could react, the longblaster spoke again. A second chiller was hit in the leg and fell to the ground. The rousties ducked for cover as the wounded man crawled after them, screaming. Then the sharpshooters Crecca had lined up along the summit resumed firing, with gusto, at the man behind the dead tree. The roar of their weapons drowned out the thunder from below.

Crecca saw Cawdor drop his weapon. The carny master completely misread what was going on beside the lake. Because all of the companions were standing still or were down, he thought they'd given up, that they were surrendering.

"Stop!" he shouted at the men on either side of him. "Stop firing!"

They obeyed, albeit grudgingly.

"But we've got 'em cold!" one of the rousties complained. "We can cut 'em to pieces from here!"

"The Magus wants Cawdor and his son alive," Crecca told the man. "He's made big plans for them. Do



you want to tell the Magus how you spoiled his fun?" The chiller's face blanched, and he shook his head.

Truth be told, Crecca wanted to take them alive, too. He intended on doing some serious, prolonged, but nonlethal ass-whipping before he turned them over to the whims of old Steel-Eyes.

The carny master yanked Jackson to its feet and led his men down the hill, stepping over bodies of their fallen comrades. The man wounded in the leg had already bled to death. For the first time, Crecca really took in the run-down shanty ville below the lake. It looked deserted, and he wondered why Cawdor and the others hadn't tried to make it down there. They could have at least made a fight of it then. As Crecca neared the lake, he warned his men to keep their blasters ready and the targets in their sights, in case it was some kind of trap.

Thunder rolled from the clouds over the lake. Crecca ignored it. Jackson, on the other hand, became highly agitated at the noise, more agitated than Crecca had ever seen it. The stickie started hopping about nervously, from one foot to the other, and it strained at the limit of the chain, digging furrows in the mud as it tried to get closer to the water's edge. It sputtered and coughed on its own outpouring of saliva.

Crecca gave the little stickie a hard, snapping jerk on the choke collar to bring it back in line. By way of answer, Jackson turned and bit him, a single savage, needle-toothed chomp and release.

"Bastard!" the carny master cried, wrenching back his torn and bleeding left hand and dropping the end of the leash. He managed to keep hold of his M-16, but no way could he shoulder it and take aim at the fast-moving little mutie. Jackson made a beeline for the lake, dragging the length of chain behind it. Without a pause, it jumped in, feet first, and then started to run, thrashing into deeper water, toward the minisquall that was forming.

Crecca had never seen the stickie swim before.

And it turned out it couldn't.

After Jackson had battled its way to neck height in the water, its hairless head slipped under, popped up and went under again, ever farther from shore, as if the stupe creature were trying to continue to walk along the bottom. It was then that big swirls appeared all around it. Brown back and tail fins knifed up through the surface. The smallest of the fish circling Jackson looked to be about six feet long. As Crecca watched, the little stickie was buffeted and knocked about by lunging fish. Jackson surged backward, its head throwing a bow wave, as it was half lifted into the air by something huge beneath the surface that had hold of it.

"They're eatin' the ugly little fuck!" one of the chillers exclaimed. "Tearing the living shit out of him!"

Crecca cradled his injured hand. The needle teeth had punctured the webbing between his thumb and forefinger. It looked as if it had been caught in the gears of a machine. He was lucky not to have lost a few fingers. On the other hand, his investment in Jackson was a total write-off. Only a triple-stupe droolie, or someone contemplating, suicide, turned his back on a stickie that had tasted human blood.

"They can have him," Crecca said. "It'll save me the cost of a bullet."

The carny master walked away, leaving Jackson to its fate. As he moved closer to Ryan and the companions, he waved with his assault rifle for the chillers to follow.

"Are they dead, or playing dead, or what?" said the man beside him.

The carny master didn't answer. His quarry seemed to be frozen in position, but he could see the slight rise and fall of their chests. They were breathing, and they were making little movements of the face: their closed eyelids twitched, as if they were asleep on their feet and dreaming.

"Not dead," Crecca announced.

He moved in for a closer look at Cawdor.

"What are you and your pals playing at, One-Eye?" the carny master asked.

There was no response.

Crecca jammed the muzzle of the M-16 against Ryan's cheek.

No response.

"They sick?" a chiller asked. "If not, I'll make 'em sick." With that, he slammed J.B. in the lower back with the sole of his boot. The Armorer grunted at the impact, which knocked him off his feet. He fell into the mud near the waterline, but didn't move.

Out on the lake, another storm was brewing. Green lightning crackled and lit up the bleached trees.

Crecca was so preoccupied with Cawdor that he didn't bother to look over his shoulder. Because of that, he missed seeing Jackson pushed ashore by the pod of lungfish. The little stickie crawled out of the shallows on its hands and knees, sputtering and gasping.

"Let's have a peek at what you've got under this," Crecca said, reaching out and flipping up Ryan's eye patch.

"Rad blast!" exclaimed the chiller peering over his shoulder.

The carny master grinned. "Now that is what I call—"

A wave of scalding heat slammed Crecca's back. Then it started to snow spores, and the carny master not only forgot what he was about to say, but he also forgot who he was.

SLOWLY, RYAN BECAME aware of his surroundings. He had no idea how long he'd been unconscious. It could have been a minute or an hour. But no longer than that because the sun was still high and hot.

He remembered the perfume, and remembering brought a flashback of the amazing sensation it had wrought. An instantaneous, almost orgasmlike disconnect of his normal consciousness, as if sheared away by a blow from a longblade. He recalled drifting upward, joyous, freed of his body and all its restraints.

Though he was certainly back in his body now, some of the detachment remained. He felt like a spectator. And he couldn't summon up the strength or the desire to fight what was happening to him, to return to the way he was, before the perfume.

Ryan's head turned, though he had no sense of having willed it.

And couldn't stop it.

He saw the others around him. Not just his companions, but the carny chillers, too. As his head moved, things appeared to him in a series of freeze-frames. Instead of shadows on faces, he saw bands of beautiful pure colors. Lavender. Blue. Yellow. He wanted to pull his SIG from its holster, but he couldn't make his hand reach for it. The failed effort was exhausting. He didn't need the blaster anyway. No one was fighting. Everyone looked dazed and barely able to move.

Dean stood right where Ryan had left him. And the little girl was there, too, by his side. Their eyes were open and blinking. They appeared to be all right. A sound intruded on his thoughts, a banging noise, as if a muffled gong was being struck over and over.

As this was happening, he caught a whiff of a wonderful scent riding on the breeze. Not the flowers' perfume again, but the aroma of food. Delicious food. Until he smelled it, he hadn't realized how hungry he was. And then the gnawing ache in his stomach was more than he could bear.

Ryan wasn't the only one so affected.

Companions and chillers alike roused themselves and began shuffling away from the lake. The violent storms over the water had subsided. The lightning was no more. The low-hanging clouds had vanished. Its surface was a gentle, rippleless mirror of sky.

As Ryan walked beside his son, a hand gripped his shoulder from behind. A weathered hand. Doc stepped up alongside him. Words came out of the old man's mouth in a language that Ryan didn't understand. They angered him. He shrugged off the hand.

Ryan, Dean, indeed everyone marched in time to the gong beat echoing up from the ville below. Ryan felt disjointed and clumsy, as if he had great soft pillows for feet. Though they were all famished, no one hurried to be first. They all moved at the same rate, which was dictated by the rhythmic banging.

The lake sat on a plateau of sorts. Beyond the mud bank was a long incline of limestone bedrock. Ryan and the others climbed carefully over the moss and tufts of spike grass that rimmed the edges of the deep, crumbling fissures and yawning holes dotting the slope. There was flowing water, too. It seeped steadily from the bottoms of the fissures and the cracks. It was as if the whole face of the hillside leading down to the ville were weeping.

When he and Dean reached the bottom, Ryan ignored the little hamlet. He followed his ears and his nose to the center of the pounded-dirt square, where a black man with dreadlocks was hammering on the side of a fifty-five-gallon steel barrel with a chunk of firewood. As he drummed, he danced, shaking his hips and bobbing the tangled mass of his woolly curls to the backbeat. He had a raging hot fire burning in the barrel, and a metal grate was pulled over the flames.

Heaped on the grate like a stack of cannonballs were the sizzling sources of the delicious aromas.

"Gome on, now, doan be shy," the cook sang as the new arrivals approached. "I got plenty here. It's real Jamaica jerk, an' that's no lie. Getcha good stuff while it's hot!"

Even though Ryan wanted what was on that grill more than he'd ever wanted anything, he didn't push. No one did. Everyone seemed to be in the same state.

Able to move, but rockily.

The detached part of him knew that things were very wrong. That he should have long since gone for the eighteen-inch panga sheathed below his knee, and started cutting chiller throats. That his companions should have been doing likewise. But the proximity of their mortal enemies no longer seemed to matter to any of them. The need for revenge and the need to stop the butchery had become irrelevant. They were possessed of only one desire: to eat what was being offered. For all the black smoke coming off the grate, and the folks standing in line in front of him, Ryan couldn't even see what he was waiting for.

That didn't matter, either.

The line slowly advanced. Dean reached the head of the line in front of Ryan. The boy shuffled off without a word, juggling between his hands a smoking, char-roasted glob that his father barely got a glimpse of.

It was big, though.

The size of a ripe melon.

Using the piece of firewood, the cook rolled another glob out of the flames, across the grate, this time in Ryan's direction. It looked like a twenty-pound meteorite that had just crashed to Earth. "There you go, mon," he said. "Best you'll ever eat."

Ryan grabbed it up with eager fingers. It burned him, but he wouldn't let it drop. He, too, juggled the smoking glob and sat in the dirt beside his son. Dean was already tearing into his food, as was the little girl from Bullard. They were making animal noises of pleasure.

The first bite made Ryan groan. It was roast beef. And more succulent than any he had ever eaten. The outer part was crispy and tasted as if it had been rubbed with spices. The charred flesh came off in juicy shreds under Ryan's teeth. Inside, the roast was so tender it melted in his mouth.

The more he ate of it, the more he wanted. The thought that mebbe it was too much to consume in one sitting, of mebbe saving some for later didn't even enter his mind. Ryan ate the whole thing and when he was done he licked the sweet grease from his fingers. Stomach bulging, he lay back on his elbows. Dean curled up on his side, unable to budge after packing so much into his gut. Everyone else was on the ground, too. Most were flat on their backs with their eyes closed.

Ryan was no longer hungry, but he was getting sleepy. In a disinterested way he took in the immediate surroundings. The only building of note was the low concrete blockhouse across the square, which was obviously predark. The rest of the ville was a shit heap of ramshackle, dirt-floored lean-tos barely tall enough to crawl into. Clouds of black flies swarmed over the open latrines and trench sewer.

In a corner of the square stood a predark metal chair. It had straps looped around both arms, and on the chair back was a dark, broad stain that looked like dried blood. Flies hovered over it, and over the long piece of iron pipe that leaned against it.

Ryan dozed off to the seesaw, droning buzz. He was awakened with a start a few minutes later by a sound that he couldn't place. He sat up and looked around; others were stirring, as well.

He realized that the noise was coming from a wag engine when he saw the approaching Baja Bug. To him it sounded as if it were underwater. And it had a strange, shimmering halo, or aura around it, a

purple-and-rose glow that had nothing to do with its flat gray paint job. When the Bug stopped beside the square and the driver got out, Ryan's jaw dropped in astonishment. He opened his mouth to speak, but words failed him. He thought he'd never see Trader again.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

When Doc awoke, he was standing by the fetid lakeside, tethered by the waist to John Barrymore Dix with a length of nylon rope. He felt that a terrible burden had been lifted from his shoulders, if only temporarily. It wasn't the first time that he had shaken free from a nightmare of grief and personal tragedy.

Nor the hundredth.

Even when he was fully functional, Dr. Theophilus Tanner walked an emotional tightrope.

The whitecoats of Operation Chronos had trawled him from the bosom of his family, from his wife, Emily, from his young children, Rachel and Jolyon, in November 1896. They had removed him against his will to the year 1998, and had kept him prisoner while they experimented with him. He was never to see his loved ones again or to know their fates.

After two years of poking and prodding, of drawing blood and giving him electrical shocks, the whitecoats had decided to be rid of him and his infuriating truculence. In December 2000, just before the world flamed out forever, Doc was sent forward in time to a destination unknown. The grim future he found himself trapped in was called Deathlands.

In terms of his own biological age, Doc Tanner was still in his thirties, but he looked twice that old. A man could only take so much pain, so much loss, so much truth about the real nature of existence. The lack of control over anything that mattered. Once that limit was reached, the only refuge was the abyss of madness. And it was over that bottomless chasm that Doc's tightrope was stretched.

Though his memories of the most recent events were largely blurred, he retained a few clear images. He recalled the nameless ville the companions had happened upon, and the pit of the dead marked by the upraised hand of the female corpse. He recalled the infant and its mother, whose final, desperate agonies had shocked him into reliving his own mind-shattering loss.

Less clearly, he remembered the start of the companions' long overland pursuit of the carny villains, and how with every step along that trail, his anger at being trapped in a universe so infinitely perverse seemed to build, and finally to turn inward. More vaguely, he recalled J.B. towing him and caring for him like a child.

Gradually, over the next few minutes, Doc's full power of thought returned to him. He was a man with a classical education. A highly accomplished scholar of the nineteenth century, a trained scientific observer. As such, he saw that all of his companions seemed to be stricken by the same malady: Ryan, Dean, J.B., Jak, Krysty and Mildred appeared dazed and confused, as did the little girl. And the others, the coldhearts from the carny, were in the same state. The immature stickie was in the worst shape of any of them. Doc had never seen a terrified stickie.

It was an unnerving sight.

He untied the rope from his waist and reached down to help J.B. up from where he lay sprawled in the mud. For his trouble, he was roughly shoved away.

"What's wrong, John Barrymore?" he said with concern. "Are you injured?"

As he rose, the Armorer pointedly turned his back on Doc.

Doc tried to thank the man who had saved his life, who had protected him, but the Armorer refused to acknowledge his existence. Behind his wire-rimmed glasses, J.B.'s eyes were narrowed to slits, and his jaw was set hard. Doc looked at Mildred and Krysty, hoping to get a more friendly reception, if not some sympathy or an explanation for the rejection.

"Dr. Wyeth, Krysty, what in heaven's name has come over John Barrymore?" he asked.

Evidently the same thing had come over them.

Neither of the women would speak to him. Not a word. They looked through him as if he weren't even there.

Muttering to himself, Doc bent and retrieved his precious ebony swordstick. J.B. had dutifully carried the antique weapon for him this far, only to let it drop on the bank when he felt its ornate silver lion's-head handle had landed in the mud along the waterline. He carefully wiped it clean on the hem of his frock coat. Doc then removed himself from the company of his infuriatingly silent friends and leaned against the trunk of one of the stripped trees. For a painful moment he considered the possibility that what he was experiencing was just another mental aberration, another waking nightmare, that this time he had perhaps slipped even more deeply into madness. He was jolted by the memories of seeing the yellow snowfall and the bizarre storm on the lake—snowfall and storm that no longer were in evidence. Memories that supported a diagnosis of insanity.

Doc had to know whether he was still dreaming. He unsheathed the sword hidden in his stick and drew its razor edge ever so lightly across the back of his middle finger just above the knuckle. The blade tugged at his skin, then cleanly sliced through. He grimaced at the pain. And the wound bled.

He wasn't dreaming. This was all real, all horribly real.

From the distance there came an insistent, repetitive banging. It was accompanied by an odor that Doc couldn't place, but something unpleasant was burning. The combination of stimuli seemed to animate both the companions and the carny chillers. Everyone started moving slowly away from the bank, in the direction of the banging and the caustic smell.

Doc caught up with Ryan as he, too, fell into line.

Taking hold of his broad shoulder, Doc said in a pleading voice, "Ryan, dear boy, can you understand me? I fear we are all in terrible danger. We must get away from this place at once. Can you hear what I am saying?"

The one-eyed man roughly pushed his hand away. The expression on Ryan's face made Doc draw back. Ryan had never given him a look like that. It said Touch me again and I'll chill you.

As hurt to the core as he was puzzled, Doc let all the others shuffle past him like zombies. Why was he alone unaffected? he wondered. He could come up with no answer to the question.

Bringing up the rear, Doc followed the ragged line down the mountainside. The steep limestone slope had fractured into huge, smooth blocks, and it had been eroded from within, hollowed and honeycombed by centuries of seeping groundwater. As Doc descended, he kicked loose an avalanche of rock that tumbled into one of the gaping potholes. After a few seconds, he heard splashes and clunks as the stones hit bottom. It was a long way down, and a hard landing.

At the base of the slope was a ville of sorts. To Doc it looked like a trash midden heaped up around an ancient concrete blockhouse. Ahead of him, the others crossed the dirt square and lined up in front of the flaming burn barrel and the wildman pounding on its side with a round chunk of firewood. Doc stepped wide to the right and moved closer so he could get a better look at the goings-on.

Shouting and dancing to his own erratic rhythms, the black giant bent to pick up a big gray glob from a pile sitting in the dirt, and threw it on the grate where other globs sizzled and smoked. The objects being seared were the size and shape of predark bowling balls. Or adult human heads. The black flies seemed especially partial to the ones on the ground.

When Doc's turn came to partake, he quietly gathered up his share of the charred stuff. He wasn't hungry, just curious. Moving away from the others, he used his swordstick to cut the glob in two. Even on close inspection of one of the halves, he couldn't identify the material as animal or vegetable. It had a slippery, rubbery texture like raw liver, and it was laced with branching veins and tough sheets of sinew. The powerful aroma of urea it gave off so turned his stomach that he had to hold it at arm's length.

Then something moved on the cut surface.

"By the Three Kennedys!" he exclaimed. "What have we here?"

With the edge of his fingernail, Doc pried loose a translucent, wormlike creature. Eyeless and spineless, it was eight inches long when fully stretched, and when released, it sprang back into a tight coil.

Doc dropped the parasite in the dirt and with difficulty—it was tougher than it looked—crushed it to a pulp under his heel. He pushed the two halves of the glob back together and rolled them into the doorless entry of a lean-to made of tattered, opaque plastic sheeting.

Turning back to the square, the sight of his dearest friends eagerly gorging on the contaminated food made his skin crawl. He hurried over to Krysty and tried to take her half-eaten meal away from her.

"It's full of parasites!" he said as she mightily resisted.

For his concern, Doc received a quick, hard punch in the solar plexus that doubled him up and sent him staggering away. As he gasped for breath, Krysty tore off another greasy chunk with her teeth and poked it into her mouth with her fingertips.

Chastened and humiliated, Doc retreated to the scant shade along the front of the blockhouse, where he could observe and absorb, and perhaps form a plan of action. It appeared that his companions were suffering from some kind of sudden-onset mass mental illness. They all presented the same symptoms, which could have been caused by a shared trauma or by exposure to some infectious agent. Doc knew he had to uncover the cause before he could come up with a cure.

After the huge, if monotonous meal, everyone in the square except for Doc and Jackson fell asleep where they lay. As it turned out, the only other creature who wouldn't eat the awful stuff was the young stickie, which was most curious. A picky stickie was something Doc had never seen nor heard tell of. The naked mutie stood resolute guard over its snoring, red-coated master.

After a few minutes, Doc heard the sound of a wag approaching from the north, apparently traveling a different route than the one he and the companions had taken.

A battleship-gray Baja Bug rumbled over a rise and roared over to the square. Like a pack of dogs, the sated diners stirred from their beds in the dirt. They rose to their feet as the Bug stopped. Its doors opened and four men piled out. Doc's attention was drawn and held by the driver, a tall thin man in a tattered straw cowboy hat and scratched wraparound sunglasses. He wore his dark hair in a long braid and had a snaggly goatee beard. His clothes were ripped and filthy. His hands were filthy, too.

From the way the black cook prostrated himself in greeting the driver, Doc assumed that he had to be the hammered-down ville's headman.

Doc was struck by the way the faces of the companions and chillers lit up in his presence. Everyone seemed thoroughly delighted to see the man for no reason that Doc could fathom. As far as he knew, none of them knew him from Adam.

If Ryan beamed at the driver as if he were a lifelong hero, Mildred's response was even more surprising, and unsettling. The middle-aged black woman sidled up to the man in the cowboy hat and slipped her arm around his lanky waist. She fawned on him in an overtly sexual way that was absolutely contrary to her nature, as Doc thought he understood it. The Dr. Mildred Wyeth that he knew was a self-contained and self-sufficient human being, whose stoic and clinical reserve was the stuff of legend, and she never fawned over anything or anyone.

While Doc pondered this development, the crowd moved away from the Baja Bug, leaving it unguarded. With no one to stop him, the old man wandered over to the driver's door and looked inside the open window. There were no keys in the ignition. Keys weren't needed. The ignition had been pulled apart, leaving the ends of two bare wires hanging under the dash.

Doc straightened and looked over the Bug's roof. Before anyone could stop him, he knew he could easily slip behind the wheel, start it up and drive away. And once he got rolling, he was free. Doc had the means to escape, but he made no move to do so. He couldn't abandon his friends to whatever fate had in store. No more than they could leave him when he was out of his mind.

The situation he faced was much more difficult, however. He couldn't simply lasso the companions and tow them away. There were too many of them. And it appeared from recent events that they would resist his intervention, and do so with all their might. His predicament was colossal, yet he was determined to succeed. From the middle of the square, the driver addressed the rapt crowd in a soothing voice. "My name is Kerr," he said. "I am baron here. Now that you have been fed and rested, there is work to be done. Most rewarding work, as you will soon discover. Follow me."

The throng set off to the foot of the limestone slope. Everyone but Doc was animated, even cheerful at the prospect.

Baron Kerr stopped at a wide gash in the rocky hillside, the entrance to a natural tunnel. "Everything comes from the burning pool above us," he said. "It is the wellspring of our existence here. Its flesh becomes our flesh, and our flesh becomes its flesh. Our meaning and destinies are intertwined.



"Everything you will see inside the caves belongs to the pool. It lives both inside and outside the mountain. Its miraculous filaments wind through solid rock. Growing. Nourishing. Enlightening."

From his academic experience at Harvard and Oxford, Doc guessed that they were being treated to a stock speech that had been given many times before. The baron was like an aged professor droning out the same lecture for decades. Kerr's deadpan delivery didn't bother any of the others; on the contrary, they hung on his every word and appeared eager for more.

Kerr removed his sunglasses and seated them firmly on the brim and crown of his straw hat. It was then that Doc noticed the man's eyes were different colors, one yellowish-brown, the other blue, which gave him a decidedly deranged look as he waved his arm and led the flock into the huge grotto.

Jackson refused to enter the cave. No one tried to coax the stickie in. No one seemed to care or notice his extreme agitation. Doc found it difficult to feel sympathy for the creature, knowing full well its genetic predilection for violence and bloodshed. Like the others, he wished the stickie would just go away.

Inside the cave, what with the white limestone walls and the fissures in the ceiling, there was plenty of light to see by. Water steadily trickled across the floor; in the depressions it pooled ankle deep. Along the right-hand wall, caught in a shaft of sunlight, was a stack of wooden implements. They reminded Doc of flensing knives, the tools used in the whaling trade to carve blubber. Only these had short handles. The outwardly curving, scimitar-like blades were sharpened on one edge.

"These are your tools," Baron Kerr said. "With them you will tend the bounty of the pool. They are made of wood because the touch of metal taints the bounty and makes it unfit to eat. Take one and come with me."

Doc was the last to pick up a tool. He tested the edge, which was barely sharp and nicked in many places. Whatever it was meant to cut was very soft indeed. He and the others tracked the baron deeper into the hillside. The passage grew narrower and much darker. So dark that Kerr paused to light a torch, one of many that lay on a ledge well above the waterline. After more torches were lit, they proceeded down the winding tunnel.

Beads of strange, faintly luminous moisture appeared on the cave walls. Doc felt a tightness building in his chest that had nothing to do with the torch smoke or the dank-smelling cave or the rapid rise in the air temperature. He sensed that he was walking into the core of something more powerful and more evil than his mind could grasp. An evil that cast a shadow in the darkest corners of the dripping cave.

The only thing that kept him from turning and running for daylight was the knowledge that his companions walked ahead of him, unaware, perhaps bewitched, and at the mercy of that selfsame evil.

Deep under the mountain, the cave widened into a low-ceilinged antechamber that was roughly circular. It was there that Baron Kerr stopped and gave instruction on the harvesting of the pool's "bounty."

Only when the baron actually pointed out the tendrils did Doc see them. They were mottled gray, and in the dim and flickering torchlight, they blended in with the colors of the stained and shadowy bedrock. The glistening, interlacing, tapering growths pushed through splits in the stone; they encased the walls and roof of the antechamber. Some were as big around as a man's waist, others the size of little fingers.

At least at present they were immobile, and Doc was thankful for that.

"Go on and touch them," the baron urged the crowd. "Feel the pool's majesty."

When Ryan, Krysty, J.B., Mildred, Jak, Dean and Leeloo laid hands on the tentacles, they uttered gasps of delight. The carnal chillers had exactly the same reaction.

Doc touched one, as well, to satisfy his scientist's mind. He got no particular thrill from the contact. He found the tendril moist to his fingertips, either from something secreted through its pores or from the water dripping down the wall, and the outer skin was coarse, like shark hide. When he pressed on the tendril, the flesh beneath yielded, but it didn't contract or in any other way respond to his touch. From this, he concluded that it was either vegetable or fungal in nature.

The baron brandished his wooden flensing knife and said, "This is how we tend the bounty."

Carefully he used the edge of the knife to pry a thigh-sized tendril free of its grip on the rock. He lifted it up and draped it over his shoulder in order to show his audience the thousands of tiny, hairlike, adhesive-coated fibers on the underside that allowed it to cling to and grow along the solid surface. Thin strands of clear liquid drooled from the broken fibers, soaking through the back of his shirt. At the place where the tentacle exited the rock there was a large nodule. Doc recognized it as one of the globs.

"For the bounty to form and fully ripen," Kerr continued, "the filament must be freed. Part of your work is to search the caverns for mature filaments of this size and loosen them from the rock."

Heads nodded all around.

"The other part of your work is to harvest the bounty," the baron said. "In doing this, you must be careful not to damage the filament. The edge of the blade should slide in this way." He placed the knife along the underside of the tentacle he had freed, then pushed its edge against the join of nodule. "If the bounty is ripe," he continued, "it will come off easily. Like this."

With a wet pop, the glob separated from the tendril and Kerr caught it in his free hand.

A sudden waft of highly concentrated urea filled the antechamber. Doc averted his head and smothered a cough with his fist, but the sharp, unpleasant stench brought smiles to the faces of the others. Clearly, Doc thought, something had altered their most basic perceptions.

The baron held up the tentacle and showed the throng how the circular wound seeped the same viscous, clear liquid, then gradually puckered closed, sealing itself.

"Take only one ripe bounty for yourself," Kerr told them. "It is your ration. Spend the rest of your time in these caverns identifying and tending the filaments."

That was the end of the training session.

The baron didn't invite questions from the floor. He simply turned and walked away, leaving companions and chillers to fend for themselves.

Though there were many things Doc wanted to ask him about the pool, the snow and the tendrils, he knew better than to open his mouth and draw attention to himself.

His hard experience at the hands of the predark whitecoats, and at hands of Jordan Teague, told Doc how to lay low until the right time came.

If it ever came...

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

Ryan's face hurt from smiling as he listened to Trader's explanation of how things worked in the caverns. Trader had been like a second father to him. He had taught him leadership, discipline and how to surpass his own limits.

Now Trader was teaching him the way. The way that answered all questions. It was so clear. So clean. So simple.

Even as Ryan took in the details of the harvesting, of his responsibilities to the burning pool, the shrunken, the virtually incapacitated part of him— Ryan Cawdor the indomitable fighter, the hard-eyed realist—insisted that the Trader he knew and loved was lost to him, mebbe chilled. Trader and Abe. That diminished Ryan insisted that he couldn't be seeing him or hearing his voice.

But the evidence of his single eye told him that he was.

And the light that shone from Trader's face was like a beacon in the darkness.

It wouldn't be denied.

Ryan took up his wooden flensing knife and a lit torch and set off down a passage that twisted and narrowed until it was barely wide enough for his shoulders. All along the corridor, the filaments hung from the dripping walls, as gray and thick as tree trunks.

The larger part of him saw that Trader was right, that there was much important work to be done here. Much love to impart. Much care. Being in the caves was like being in fields of blooming flowers.

So much beauty.

On all sides.

Ryan chose a mature filament and began loosening its grip on the cave wall. The hairlike fibers made faint snapping sounds as he broke their connection with the limestone with the blade. The gray tentacle came free from its delicate, pointed tip to the wide root that exited from the rock face. The severed hairlets bathed his hands in their ooze.

He lifted up the freed tendril, but there was no ripe bounty at its widest spot, the place where it emerged from the stone. Instead he found a small, hard nodule no bigger than his fist. The fruit of the pool needed time and room to grow.

As Ryan the cruise ship stood there admiring the bud, Ryan the passenger, the spectator, had a sudden sense of the burning pool as an individual creature, of its mountainous vastness, of its hundreds of miles of intruding, interlacing filaments.

Of its infinite hunger.

Of its infinite evil.

"There is nothing to be afraid of, Ryan," said a familiar voice behind him.

A gruff man's voice.

Ryan smelled cigar smoke. He turned and Trader was standing there beside him. His old friend's face seemed younger than Ryan remembered. The hair wasn't quite as grizzled.

"You're not dead," Ryan said. "Thought Abe and you might have bought the farm."

"Mebbe I am dead," Trader said.

Ryan picked up the torch and held it closer to get a better look. "You're a ghost?"

Trader laughed, but he didn't answer. "I brought you here for a reason. I brought you here to show you that there is joy beyond all the hard living. That beyond the gate, joy awaits you."

Ryan's cheeks suddenly felt as if they were going split, his grin was that wide. Why in rad blazes am I smiling? Passenger Ryan thought. None of this is real.

"We are all here to show you..." Trader said, gesturing down the narrow tunnel behind him.

Ryan saw then that Trader hadn't come alone.

Behind Trader in the passage were many figures, half in shadow and half in dancing torchlight. All of them were smiling; all of them he knew. Some were people Ryan had loved, while some were people he had chilled. Friends and enemies alike. His father, Baron Titus Cawdor, was there, as was his mother, Lady Cynthia, and his brothers. Lori Quint. Cort Strasser. Bessie and Cissie Torrance. And so many others. A line of familiar faces that stretched off into the darkness.

All dead.

All very happily dead, it seemed.

He could tell from their expressions that none of them blamed him for anything that he had done to them or hadn't done for them. They forgave him completely. They understood him completely. They had overcome the shortsighted yearnings and judgments of the flesh.

In their gleeful faces was an invitation to join them, an invitation that held the promise of ultimate redemption.

Until it was actually offered to him, Ryan hadn't known that he even desired such a thing. But now, while searching the eyes of those who had gone before him, he felt the same sort of intense, uncontrollable yearning that he had felt for the roasted globs: a marvelous scent on the wind drew him closer and closer, like a puppet on a string, to death.

Below the decks of the great, storm-tossed ship called Cawdor, a tiny voice screamed, "No!"

LEELOO BUNNY WALKED hand in hand through the caverns with her mother, Tater. Neither carried a burning torch because it wasn't dark in the narrow passage. Their winding path was lit by hundred-foot-high bright tentacles in orange, pink, red and yellow. The rock walls and ceiling had turned transparent; all Leeloo could see were the filaments. And she could see them twisting all the way up to the summit, like the root ball of some enormous plant with the dirt knocked loose. The tendrils blurred and shifted, and became candy trees and popcorn bushes. In the distance, she could faintly hear cymbals and brass playing a lively marching song.

"Please don't leave me again," Leeloo said to her mother.

"But I never left you."

"I couldn't see you. We weren't together. I was lonely."

"We will always be together now."

"And Dean?"

"You like him, don't you?"

"Uh-huh."

"He's your Prince Charming."

"He's wonderful. He's brave and smart. I don't want to lose him. Can he come with us? Please?"

"He'll be with us, too. When you get released, and he gets released, we'll all be together."

Leeloo understood without being told that "released" meant being freed from her body. "But what happens then?" she asked.

Tater Bunny put a hand on her daughter's head.

Leeloo beamed up at her adoringly.

The facial resemblance between mother and daughter was uncanny. Daughter could have been mother at age eight. Mother could have been daughter at age twenty-six. And their expressions mirrored each other exactly, reflecting absolute joy.

"You will climb," Tater said, "like a cloud of smoke. Straight up into the sky. You will be everywhere at once. Flying."

"Like a bird?"

"Much better than a bird. Faster. Freer. There will be no wind you can't fly through. No height you can't soar to. No place you can't go by just thinking about it."

"You can do all those things?"

"I can. And so will you."

"Will I have to wait long?"

"No, my darling. Not long."

"And will I always be safe?"

"Always."

Leeloo reached up and with her wooden tool pried free a huge lollipop, the flat disk of candy much bigger than her face. It was red and green and white, the colors swirling in a pinwheel shape. She closed her eyes tightly and touched it with the tip of her tongue.

"It's peppermint!" she exclaimed.

Leeloo eagerly licked the scratchy gray skin of the nodule, the clear sap from its cut surface sheeting off her tiny chin.

JAK SENSED that he was being stalked, and by something big. He advanced alone through the dark cave; the light of the torch he carried dwindled away fifteen feet ahead of him and fifteen feet behind. Deep inside the mountain, there were no openings to the sky to let in light or air. The farther and deeper he went, the warmer it became. The cave he had picked to follow angled down into the earth. The water that trickled over the cave floor ran in the direction he was headed. He paused to listen for his pursuer. Although his hearing was very sharp, it picked up no scrape of boot on rock, no rustle of dirt as a body brushed a wall. There was only the steady hiss of the burning torch in his hand, and the babbling-brook sound of the water flowing around his boots.

Jak pressed on, looking for what he had been told to look for and was eager to find. Whether it was called "bounty" or "dinner," what he'd been given at the burn barrel was some of the best roast pork he'd ever eaten. He was looking forward to stuffing himself with more.

After he had traveled perhaps ten yards, the sensation of being followed returned. He felt it as a tingling at the back of his neck and across his shoulders. It didn't make him nervous that he was being trailed. It made him curious. He adjusted the ride of the Colt Python in its holster.

When he found a likely looking tendril, he stuck the end of the torch in a cleft in the rock and started prying on it with the wooden tool. It didn't take him long to break the thing free from the wall. Under its armpit was a bounty the size of his head. As he plucked the ripe nodule, he knew that someone or something was watching him from behind. He put the bounty on the floor and picked up the torch. Holding the flame out in front of him, he took several steps toward it.

"Who there?" he demanded.

There was no answer.

Then in the shadows of the next bend in the walls, he saw something shift. It was big. The same size as the lion. As he advanced on it, whatever it was retreated out of the reach of the torchlight.

"That you?" he said.

He recognized the voice that entered his mind.

Of course it's me.

Said couldn't come, Jak thought. Said knew how ended and you not part of it.

I just wanted to surprise you. Are you surprised?

Yeah, guess so. You help me fight?

Fight who?

Carny chillers.

There is nothing and no one to fight. Not anymore. You've got to get your mind around that. You've got to put the lid down on your killer instinct. It will only get in the way from here on.

How?

This isn't Deathlands. This is the border of someplace else. Someplace far better. If you want to cross over, you've got to stand in the snowstorm, and eat your bounty.

Why want go someplace else?

So that you can see Christina again.

Dead.

There's no such thing. I've tried to explain that to you many times before. You don't listen.

Listen. I not understand.

Life as you know it doesn't exist. Life as you know it is an illusion. You must shed the scales over your eyes. You must know the truth. You must see the other side. I can help you. Come closer to me.

No.

Jak's right hand automatically reached for the Python, but his holster was empty. His fingers dipped under his shirt. The leaf-bladed knives were gone, too. Jak felt a shiver of fear. Unaccountable. He wasn't afraid of the lion.

Come to me.

Jak's legs began to move, stiffly. He couldn't stop them. As he approached the bend in the cave, and the thing that waited for him there, he could see that the details of the shape were wrong. The ears were long and stiff and pointed. The eyes were small and luminous green. The skin was hairless, as was the tail. A pair of leathery wings lay folded along the jutting knobs of the spine.

Not lion, Jak thought. Enemy.

No, I am the victor.

With a great effort, Jak managed to retreat a step, then two. Then he turned and ran.

Don't forget your bounty!

Cruel laughter rolled through Jak's head as he stopped and scooped it up.

## Chapter Thirty

It was getting on into evening when Doc followed the others out of the caves and back toward the ville. The sun was just starting to dip below the fringe of trees along the ridgeline; from the mountain above came a threatening growl of thunder. Everyone was carrying their "bounty." Everyone but Doc. He was starting to get hungry, but he knew he'd never be that hungry.

All around him, his friends and the rousties were talking, but not to one another. They spoke only to themselves, or to imaginary companions. Each was wrapped up in his or her own world. Some were agitated to the point of shaking their fists. Some were beatific. Some were morose.

They reminded Doc of inmates of an insane asylum, out for a bit of exercise and fresh air.

There was more thunder as the others deposited their wormy prizes on the ground beside the already roaring drum fire. The rumbling grew steadily louder and louder. Doc could feel the storm's intensity building. In a matter of minutes, a bank of churning clouds appeared above the ville. Darkness descended. There was no lightning, but there was a blistering wind and snow. Sideways sheets of yellow snow as fine as table salt swept down the mountainside and over the square.

It was dry.

It wasn't cold.

It stung Doc's face like windblown sand. He hunched his shoulders and turned his back to it.

The others in the square made no concessions to the strange downpour. They leaned against the driving wind and let it hit them straight on. The tiny granules bounced off their heads and shoulders.

And then the clouds dropped lower and grew even thicker, the snow came down even harder and it became difficult to breathe. Doc was forced to take refuge in one of the nearby scabrous lean-tos, crawling on elbows and knees over the pounded-dirt floor.

Outside, the storm crescendoed. The winds whipped the tattered plastic sheeting and crudely lashed cross members above Doc's head, threatening to flatten the flimsy structure. The nearly constant thundering shook the ground beneath him. The snow came down in a blizzard of yellow, rapidly building into ankle-deep drifts. Doc's visibility out the lean-to's entrance dropped to five feet or less. Then, as quickly as it began, it was over. The thunder stopped, as did the snowfall. The darkness lifted.

When Doc crawled out of the hut, he saw a clear, turquoise sky above and the sun dipping below the tree line. The ville's square was peopled by living statues, everything dusted with pale yellow.

All around him, the snowdrifts were visibly shrinking. He bent and scooped up some in his hand.



It wasn't made of flakes, as he had thought, but individual grains. Like pollen. Or crystals.

In seconds, the pile of stuff on his palm grew smaller. He could see it wasn't melting into a liquid; nothing was dripping off the heel of his hand. It was just disappearing, which was impossible. Doc knew the basics of physics and chemistry. He knew that matter couldn't disappear, couldn't be created or destroyed; however, it could be made to change form. In this case, it appeared that solid matter, the snow, was turning into a gas, perhaps upon contact with air. According to the laws of physics, this required the application or release of some kind of energy. But the material wasn't hot.

What he was observing seemed to violate the most fundamental principles of science.

Doc dumped what was left of the snow on the ground and brushed off his hands.

Moments later, he began to notice a tingling numbness in his fingers and feet. It spread rapidly to his mouth and lips. He clenched his fists, heart pounding up under his chin as he anticipated being turned to stone like the others. But the numbing sensation didn't travel any farther. He quickly rubbed back the circulation in his hands and face.

Doc hurried across the square, walking between the rigidly upright human forms. The snowfall had produced immediate and total paralysis in every other person present. Even the baron, the black man who had tended the cookfire and three who had come out of the Baja Bug were frozen.

When he reached Ryan, Doc laid his hand on his friend's chest. The one-eyed man was breathing, but only just barely. His heartbeat was very slow, but steady. The pupil of his eye was dilated, and its blink reflex was stifled. Doc took hold of Ryan's arm and shook him, then he shouted in his ear.

Nothing.

No response.

It was the same with all the companions. He couldn't rouse them from their stupor.

Doc retreated to the front wall of the blockhouse, despairing and at a loss as to how to help his friends.

After a few minutes passed, he was relieved to see the paralysis starting to wear off. Gradually everyone began to stir. As they regained their faculties, there was a noticeable change in their behavior. They were all quiet, tranquil and smiling. Behavior that the circumstances hardly called for. It seemed to Doc they were now all suffering from the same variety of madness. He sensed that whatever was influencing them had reestablished complete control. The evidence so far pointed to some chemical in the snow.

Doc reflected on what the baron had said about the pool being the source of everything here. He had no doubt that a complex system was in operation. A living system. Its size, its power and its menace were almost tangible. If it existed as a single entity, as the baron had suggested, it was the largest creature Doc had ever encountered, indeed had ever heard of. Of course, the baron's view wasn't necessarily accurate. He was as impacted by the snow as the others. And he was not trained as a scientist.

If the tendrils were fungal, as Doc had speculated, then the snow would be fungal spores. If they were vegetable, the snow would be plant pollen. Either way, they were the entity's genetic material.

Doc could recall no sign of anything growing in, on or around the pool. That didn't mean much. Fungi

and plants could be living out of sight and in profusion on the pool's bottom. Because fungi were such simple structures, and tended to grow so closely together, it was sometimes difficult to separate one individual from others of the same type in the same area. Whether it was one gigantic creature or a population of ten thousand smaller ones, the danger was palpable.

Doc asked himself why he hadn't been paralyzed by the spore fall. Was it because he was already stark raving mad when exposed to the stuff? It seemed to have had the opposite effect on him as it had on everyone else: it had straightened out his thinking instead of confusing it. And the spores had only brought a mild numbness to his hands, feet and face. Perhaps he was immune to the chemicals they contained. Perhaps that immunity had something to do with his time travel. With the rearrangement of his atomic structure. Perhaps everyone else's susceptibility had to do with skydark-produced mutations in their genetics. Mutations that he didn't have since he had been born one hundred and forty years before it had occurred. None of these speculations satisfied him.

As the others turned to face the baron, Doc pushed away from the wall and moved to the back of the crowd.

"Bring out the chair!" Kerr said.

Two of the men who had ridden in the Baja Bug with the baron pulled a metal office armchair out into the middle of the square. The third rider placed a long pipe with the rag-wrapped handle in a four-wheeled cart and pushed it near the chair. Everyone pressed in closer until they were shoulder to shoulder, ringing the center of the square. They seemed expectant and eager, as if they knew what was coming. They all wore stiff, unnatural grins on their faces.

Doc wasn't grinning. He didn't understand what was about to happen, but he had a very bad feeling about it, a premonition that turned out to be well-founded.

Baron Kerr waved the black man over to his side and slapped him in the middle of his broad, muscular back.

"The burning pool is hungry," Kerr said to the circled crowd. "And we must feed it. As it feeds us. Eat the body. Become the body."

Doc was taken aback when the audience, without prompting, immediately picked up the chant, "Eat the body. Become the body. Eat the body. Become the body."

Even the notoriously closemouthed Jak added his voice to the chorus, his ruby-red eyes wide with excitement.

"This evening we celebrate three departures," Kerr said, pointing at the men who'd been passengers in the Bug. "The road to where they're going starts right here." The baron patted the back of the chair. Then he asked, "Who's going to be first to take the load off?"

The question started a shoving match between the three men to see who would take the seat. The pushing escalated into full-power punches and kicks. When one of the men fought his way to the chair, the others stopped wrestling on the ground and quickly strapped down his wrists and ankles. The winner smiled as this was happening, showing his bloodied teeth to the crowd. The black man with the dreadlocks took the iron pipe from the cart and made a whistling practice swing. Overhead and down, he drove the end of the pipe into the dirt.

Doc watched as the cook then moved to the back of the chair. Planting his feet, he reared back on one leg and swung the pipe over and down, putting all his weight behind the blow and grunting from the effort.

Like pounding in a tent stake with a twenty-pound mallet.

At the last second, Doc instinctively averted his gaze. But he didn't have time to stop up his ears. He heard the hollow whack of the pipe and the sound of crunching bone.

Dean, who stood next to him, flinched at what he saw, but didn't look away.

From the crowd there was a unison gasp of amazement.

I am imagining this, Doc thought, shaking his head to clear it. This can't be real.

But when he looked back, there was no doubt that it was. The top of the seated man's head was caved in, his body jerking and kicking against the restraints. The old man's stomach heaved mightily, and he knew he was going to be sick. As he gritted his teeth, stumbling to the side of the blockhouse to vomit, the others were just standing there, staring at the horror that sat quaking in the chair, and smiling. It was as if they were seeing something completely different than he was. Leaning against the blockhouse with a hand, Doc retched into the dirt. He didn't have much to retch.

He was still bent over, dry heaving when one of the two remaining men pulled the body out of the seat and dumped it over backward into the waiting cart. The third man took the opportunity to slip past the other and sit in the chair, firmly gripping the arms and wrapping his shins around the front legs. When the second man couldn't drag him out of the seat, he buckled down the wrist and ankle straps. The man in the chair beamed at the audience as if he were about to be crowned king of the world.

Instead of being simply crowned.

AS RYAN MADE his way out of the caves, the entourage of people from his past trooped alongside and behind him. Their happy chatter began to fade as he approached the exit. And when he turned to look at Trader and his father, he saw their shapes rippling, then disintegrating like campfire smoke in a breeze. A terrible sadness struck him. He didn't want them to go, but he couldn't make them stay. Outside the cave, Ryan the passenger became Ryan the captain, the sole commander of his own body. Fully conscious as he filed along with the others toward the square, he understood that he had been hallucinating, that he had been talking to ghosts, to imaginary presences. That he had been utterly lost in those hallucinations. It was worse than any jump nightmare he had ever suffered because it was real. And because he knew without a doubt that he was being held against his will, and made to perform like a puppet or a mutie in the zoo.

He wasn't alone.

Krysty, J.B., Mildred, Jak and Dean stumbled along beside him, lost in their own inner worlds, raving to themselves.

Something terrible had gripped all of the companions, and it was toying with them.

Ryan knew he had to gather Dean and the others and get out of there while the getting was good. Even as he shook free of the leadenness that still hung upon his limbs, thunder boomed at his back, then came the hot wind, then the sting of the pale-yellow snow.

He stopped walking and turned to face it.

The initial jolt this time, the plunge into the perfume of the flower fields, was less shocking to his system. He slid into it like a well-worn pair of boots. And almost at once, he had a profound sense of well-being. All the wrinkles, the doubts were smoothed away.

He stood there, eye shut, head tilted back, mouth wide open, letting the spores fall on his tongue and dissolve there. They tasted like grains of sugar. Time passed, the snow drifted over his ankles and up to his shins, but he didn't care.

He was happy. He was content.

Trader and his father, Baron Titus, were by his side again.

Passenger Ryan knew this couldn't be. But the body in which he was trapped felt their presence, their physical warmth. It even smelled Trader's cigar smoke. When everyone moved in close to the chair, Ryan's body moved along, too. When they grinned and chanted, it grinned and chanted. It knew that bloody murder was about to be done.

In all his days, in all his battles, Ryan had never seen men fight each other in order to be the first to die. He had never seen men rejoice at the prospect of their own destruction. Passenger Ryan felt the body rejoice, as well, and was disgusted. Not only did he have no control over the emotions that it felt, but also they weren't and never could be his emotions.

He wanted to look at the others, but he couldn't make the head turn; it was locked straight ahead, at the man scrambling into the chair. Ryan sensed that his friends were feeling the same thing that he was, that they were smiling like he was. The insanity was like an infection. Not just out of character. For the companions he knew, it was out of the question. And yet none of them could break free and stop the horror.

The man strapped in the chair was filthy and raggedy, beard matted. His eyes burned like blue coals in his head; he was missing most of his front teeth. With all the dirt that encrusted him, it was hard to guess his age, but he was probably somewhere between twenty and thirty years old.

It all happened very quickly. The black man stepped behind the chair, cocked himself, then brought down more than a yard of metal pipe. The impact drove the man's head between his shoulders. His skull crunched lopsidedly. Brains flew. Blood sprayed. And his right eyeball popped out of its socket and dangled on his cheek.

Along with everyone else, Ryan let out a gasp.

From the cratering wound twinkling points of light streamed upward, circling mebbe five feet above the body, building in volume and turbulence. The light continued to stream until the corpse heaved its last jerk. Then the pinpoints drifted farther and farther apart, until they finally disappeared.

Ryan the passenger was stunned by the detail and realism. Had it been a hallucination? Or had he witnessed the spirit flowing out of the dying body, the soul freed?

After dumping the corpse in the cart, the two men left squabbled and struggled over who would take the seat next. The guy who won was strapped down by the guy who lost. The lucky winner glanced over his shoulder at the waiting black man, a gleeful expression on his face. Then he turned back and shut his eyes

as if he was in store for a pleasant surprise.

The black man swung the pipe down again. At the impact Ryan was jolted to the core, as if he had been the one who had been struck. And again, from the devastating wound, he witnessed the streaming of nonsubstance, of ectoplasm, of soul.

"This is the real carny," Trader whispered into his ear.

THE MAGNIFICENT CRECCA grabbed the bloody end of the pipe with one hand and gave Azimuth a hard shove in the chest with the other. "Give it to me," he said. "I want a turn swinging the pipe."

The black man refused to let go of the weapon.

"In case you forgot, you work for me, Azimuth," Crecca said, giving him another hard push. "Me and the Magus." He put a heavy emphasis on the last two words.

"I used to work for you, mon," the carny scout said. "No more. Now I do just whatol' Marley says."

Crecca glared at Baron Kerr, who stood with his arms crossed over his chest. Then, without warning, he ducked forward and head-butted Azimuth. The black man's nose crunched under the blow, and bright blood gushed from his nostrils. As the carny master tried to wrench the pipe away, his scout fought back. Azimuth landed a hard right to the side of Crecca's head, then jammed the end of the pipe into his solar plexus.

Crecca doubled over and went down, but he pulled the off-balance Azimuth along with him. The two big men crashed to the ground and began rolling around in the dirt. Over the next thirty seconds, they each had their moments. Crecca hammered the black man's face with consecutive rights and lefts. Azimuth got his big hands around the carny master's throat and squeezed until his face turned purple. It was the baron who finally broke up the scuffle. He picked up the pipe that Azimuth had dropped and gave each of the men a solid whack in the legs with it.

Crecca got to his feet first. "I want to take my turn on the last guy," he said to Kerr, holding out his hand. "Azimuth has already done two."

The baron stared at him hard for a few seconds, then half smiled in a strange, sad way. "I like how he handles the pipe," Baron Kerr said. "A sweet swing."

With that, to Crecca's fury, he handed the weapon back to the black man. The carny master was then forced to watch with the others as Azimuth wound up and hit another long ball. When the shuddering from the chair had stopped, he shouldered in beside the black man to help him load the last body into the cart.

"You're dead meat," he warned his former scout.

"We're all dead meat, mon," Azimuth said with a laugh.

The baron threw a couple of axes and machetes and a tree-limb saw on top of the corpses. Then he set off across the square, gesturing for the crowd to push the cart after him.

On the north side of the ville was the start of a narrow track that led up the mountainside in a series of winding switchbacks between the fallen blocks of limestone. From the wheel ruts, which were deep and

matched the tires perfectly, the cart had been the only vehicle to traverse it in a very long time, and had traversed it often.

Crecca didn't do any of the cart pushing. He walked a short distance behind, and he stopped to look back when the procession was halfway up the slope. What he saw wasn't what Ryan or Mildred or Doc saw.

There were no shabby huts below, no open sewers, no mind-numbing poverty and starvation. What Crecca saw instead was a place of enormous wealth and luxury homes, a suburban development that had apparently, miraculously been left untouched by the fires of skydark and the ravages of the decades of nuclear winter that followed. And for the most part it was deserted.

All there for the taking.

And there was only one person keeping Crecca from taking it: Baron Kerr. The last of Kerr's men lay dead in the cart.

So far the job of baron looked butt simple to Crecca. Much simpler, and much less dangerous than running a carny and mobile gas chamber.

Pick some bounty.

Slam some heads.

And the last bit was especially easy since the folks getting their heads slammed wanted it to happen.

He stared at the low concrete-block building at the foot of the slope. It was the most secure structure in the ville, and where he knew its most valuable treasures would be kept. He recognized the building as a predark pumphouse because he'd come across others like it before. From the oblique and downward angle of view, he could see the huge pipes running down the mountainside to the back of the building. No doubt they had something to do with the pool's water level.

A tug at the tail of his ringmaster coat made Crecca turn. He looked down to see Jackson staring up at him with dead black eyes.

"Get away from me," the carny master said.

The naked stickie started to sing and dance, to try to make up for biting the hand that fed it. Jackson did a rendition of the Tiffany music video that they had been rehearsing in the big wag, complete with head jukes and hip thrusts.

The singing sounded like screeching to Crecca, and the dancing wasn't like dancing at all, more like a perpendicular grand mal seizure. The carny master wasn't amused and wanted no part of it. He hauled off and booted the stickie in the backside, sending it tumbling down the road.

When Jackson didn't go away, but rather resumed its irritating caterwauling and pelvic thrusting at a safe distance and with a pleading look on its pale face, Crecca reached down and picked up stones, with which he pelted the creature.

Struck and bleeding, Jackson slunk away over the hillside, still in its choke collar and trailing its chain leash.

With Crecca bringing up the rear, the procession crested the rise, then followed Baron Kerr downhill to the muddy bank beside the pool, where he signaled for them to stop. When the baron handed out the cutting tools, Crecca was first in line to take one of the axes.

The job was messy, but not difficult, because the tools had been honed to razor sharpness.

After the first body had been chunked, Kerr started lobbing the pieces into the pool. Almost at once the huge lungfish rose to the bait, swirling and splashing on the surface as they fought over their dinner.

Crecca enthusiastically returned to the chopping. As he did so, he noticed Kerr staring at him. The carny master smiled at the ville's headman as he brought down the ax.

You're next, Baron, he thought.

## Chapter Thirty-One

Baron Kerr had learned not to trust rays of hope. Like everything else in his ever shifting world, they had always proved to be illusions, cast by the burning pool for its own inexplicable ends.

Yet, as he watched the man in the red coat struggle on the ground with the black scout over the right to brain the strapped-down-and-beaming sacrificial lamb, he had the first inkling of what might be possible. While it wasn't unusual for people to fight for the right to be next to sit in the Clobbering Chair, and so to sooner exit the grasp of the pool, no one had ever before demanded the right to be executioner. To test his suspicion, he had given the pipe back to the black man, then studied Red Coat's reaction when it was used shortly thereafter to crush the victim's skull. Kerr saw fury in the man's eyes. Fury at having been denied pleasure. Fury directed at him, the denier.

Which was good.

Which was very good.

If the anger the baron had witnessed was real, and not some figment of his own imagination, it was also a first. The spores and the bounty had always produced slaves who were compliant. Not demanding.

Not impatient. And above all, not envious. They would take up the pipe and wield it joyfully when the time came, but only when ordered to do so.

The black man had only battled to keep the pipe because the pool entity, speaking through Kerr, had commanded him to use it.

Assuming that the pool had absolute control of Red Coat, a safe assumption under the circumstances, it was making him behave differently than anyone else ever had, allowing him an element of personality that it had refused all the others. Whatever his hallucinations were, they, too, had to be markedly different than anyone else's.

The baron kept his eye on Red Coat as he led his flock and the corpse cart up the zigzag trail to the

pool. He noticed when the red-haired man paused and looked back at the ville. The expression on the newcomer's face was one of desire, of greed, even.

What was he seeing down there? Kerr asked himself. Or, more properly, what was the pool making him see? It had a way of finding the weakest point in a human being's psychology, and attacking it. How it did this was a mystery. As far as the baron could tell, the pool wasn't capable of thought; it just did the things it did.

It was.

As Kerr moved up the grade, he swam in a sea of the dead. Vague floating specters surrounded him, drifted through him, over his head. These were the innumerable ghosts of the pool; he could see them through closed eyelids. He couldn't match names with faces, but every one of them had drawn his or her final breath in the Clobbering Chair. Every one bore the mark of the iron pipe on their skull.

Although the baron's world and this spectral world of the pool's victims overlapped visually—he could see them, but they could not see him—they didn't overlap tangibly. There was no sensation of contact as the gauzy forms passed through or brushed against him. Kerr had become so used to the horrors of these hallucinations that they had become nothing more than an annoyance. Especially when the sun was going down. The angled, softened light made it difficult to see through the randomly shifting apparitions.

Though the pool could be subtle in its manipulations, it wasn't in this case. His visions of the legions of dead were meant to demonstrate how close the ones who had gone before were, how close freedom was, and yet always just beyond his reach. It was a constant, minute-by-minute reminder that he who wanted more than anything to escape could not. Once Kerr had had a life, though he could barely remember it. Once he had had faith, though that was dead to him. The pool had taken everything. It had taken his soul.

When the procession reached its denuded bank, the pool was quiet. It reflected the peach and turquoise of the sunset, and the black fringe of the trees along the ridgeline above.

The flock looked to Baron Kerr for further instructions.

"The body is never alone," he told them. "It has gathered and keeps a web of creatures around it. A family connected by the chain of life. Each member of the family performs a different task, or set of tasks, all to insure the body's health and well-being. And the body, in return, insures the health and well-being of all its family members."

He pointed at the tools in the cart and the corpses under them. "As loyal members of that family, we have one more job to perform. The dead must be cut up in small pieces, so the fish in the pool can eat them."

Several of the newcomers grabbed the implements and immediately set to hacking up the corpses into chunks. Red Coat showed a particular zeal for the task, and he kept looking up from the gruesome work, wiping the spattered blood from his face with his coat cuff, and shooting Kerr a look of absolute hatred.

"Do you really think that one's your ticket on the last train west?" said a croaking voice from the waterline behind him.

Kerr glanced down and saw a six-foot-long lung-fish bobbing in the shallows. Its back and tail were



three-quarters out of the water as it rested on its pectoral spikes, and breathed air. "Could be," the baron answered. "If nothing is possible, then anything is possible."

The lungfish chuckled, lowering its head and making a bubbling noise underwater that Kerr found most irritating. "You've got to be kidding," the fish said. "How many times have you thought you had a way out of this place? A hundred? A thousand? Face facts, the pool is never going to let you go, Baron. You're its A-Number-One Boy, forever."

"What do you know?" Kerr snapped back. "A talking fish? You might not even exist. You might be just another hallucination."

"Well, this hallucination is getting mighty hungry. How about tossing me some chow?"

Kerr walked over to the cart, picked up some of the pieces that had fallen on the ground and flung them as far out into the lake as he could.

"You could have just handed me one," the lung-fish complained. Then, with a swish of its wide tail, it turned away from the shore and swam to join the feeding frenzy that had already begun.

The baron watched Red Coat continue to work on the remaining bodies, and to shoot him more of the evil looks. Despite the lungfish's prediction of another failure, Kerr became more and more hopeful that the man with the red hair had the right stuff for a much more difficult job than quartering a torso, that he had both the homicidal tendencies and the unique brand of delusion necessary to end his own intolerable suffering.

Standing there, Kerr had a sudden, chilling realization. After killing him, Red Coat would most certainly throw him into the pool.

The baron had never considered the likely consequences of his being chopped up and fed to the fish. All he'd wanted was to be dead and gone. But now that he saw that dying might really be possible, it became clear to him that dying might not mean escape.

The lungfish were the intermediate processors, the predigesters of the pool's food. Their guts broke the tissue and bone into a simpler form. What they excreted, and what drifted down, was what sustained the fungal entity that carpeted the bottom and sent fingers of itself worming down through the mountainside. If his life force was consumed by the pool, assimilated by it, Kerr realized he could still be part of it. Conscripted into the army of ghosts that swirled around him. If that was the case, the fish was right—he would never get away.

When the chopping and feeding were completed, the baron waved the crowd back down the trail to the ville. As they began to move, he cut overland, climbing over the fallen blocks of stone. Kerr had a goal in mind, if not an exact plan. He made for the edge of one of the deepest of the hillside's potholes, a circular opening more than thirty feet across. When he reached his destination, he stopped, picked up a rock from the ground at his feet and dropped it into the hole. It took seven seconds for the stone to splash.

The blackness below him promised what he sought: true and eternal oblivion. If he stepped off the edge, there was no way his body could be recovered by Red Coat and turned into fish food. And even though the filaments of the pool probably decorated the walls of the yawning cavern, they couldn't dine on his corpse. The tendrils had no feeding apparatus; they were the fungus' fruiting bodies, whose only function was to produce bounty. And even if they did have a way of digesting things that he was unaware of, without the intercession of the lungfish, his body was in the wrong form for them to use.

Kerr stood on the edge, poised to end his life, but he didn't take the fatal step.

He couldn't take it. His legs wouldn't move forward.

If stepping off into one of the potholes and chilling himself had actually been possible, Baron Kerr would have done it long, long ago. It was impossible because the pool would not allow him to injure himself. It kept him safe because it needed him.

Kerr heard the sounds of rocks shifting and the scraping of boot soles. Someone was coming up behind him.

"You've got a pretty sweet operation going for yourself here," said a voice to his back.

The baron turned and faced Red Coat, who was smiling in an unfriendly way.

"Mebbe it's too much for you to handle," the red-haired man suggested as he moved closer. He reached up and scratched at his scraggly red goatee. "Mebbe you need a partner."

"I don't need a partner," Kerr said, letting Red Coat get within arm's reach. The pool forced him to shift to the right; Red Coat countered. And when he did that, the baron had no place left to retreat to. His heels were a foot from the edge of the pothole.

"How about a hostile takeover, then?" the red-haired man suggested, leaning closer still.

It was then, and only then, that Kerr smiled back. The broadest, most infuriating smile he could muster.

Red Coat's arms came up, and the heels of his hands slammed into the baron's chest. As he went off balance, the pool made him flap his arms to try to regain it.

But the push was too hard.

James Kerr went over backward, somersaulting into the blackness.

His victory cry lasted exactly seven seconds.

## Chapter Thirty-Two

Crecca stood on the rim of the pothole and listened as the echoes of Baron Kerr's final cry and splashdown faded away. Then he did a celebration dance, loosely adapted from the choreography in the Tiffany video, complete with head jukes. Nothing stood between him and the baronship.

Nothing.

"I am Baron Magnificent Crecca," he shouted into the cavern below, the words booming.

He liked the sound of it so much that he shouted it again.

It was an announcement to the world, a taunt to his newly dead predecessor and a self coronation.

The triumphant Baron Magnificent Crecca no longer had a human—or partly human—overlord he had to answer to. No more Magus. No one to be afraid of. No one he had to hand over the lion's share of the spoils to. The pool had shown him his heart's true desire, his true mission; his entire life he had been waiting for, and working toward this very end. All he had ever wanted was to rule over his own private kingdom. Not some fly-by-night gypsy tent carny, but a real kingdom, with real territory and real influence that he could build on and expand. He had never had the means to get what he wanted before. He had always had to compromise his desire, to give up dominion in order to seize a small part of his dream. Now he had all the power he needed to make it happen.

All the power and then some.

He peered into the darkness of the pothole and couldn't see the bottom, or Kerr's body. It angered him that the former baron's corpse was lost to harvest because the pool was still very hungry. Even with his eyes averted, Crecca could sense its lingering agitation. He felt it as a prickling sensation on the back of his neck and a faint fluttering in the pit of his stomach. Without looking he knew that from the surface of the water, a mist was starting to rise, and mixed in were twinkling bits of silver confetti.

Another spore fall wouldn't be long in coming.

Crecca knew instinctively, and with absolute certainty, that the pool's unappeased appetite had to do with its having been semistarved for weeks. He also knew that the previous baron had allowed the ville's human population to slowly dwindle. Of late, Kerr hadn't done a good job of recruiting new residents, and he had phased out the sacrificing of the people that were here. It was almost as if he had wanted the pool to suffer.

That was all going to change now.

Under Crecca's stewardship, the burning pool would never be hungry again. If it needed more bodies to satisfy the hunger it had built up under the Kerr regime, it would have them. At once.

When the new baron looked back to the trail, he saw the crowd had gone on without him and was already almost at the bottom of the hillside. The evening light that surrounded him was turning purple and beginning to fade to night. He traversed the blocks and circled the yawning pitfalls of the slope, regaining the crude road and descending it at a trot. He caught up with the others shortly after they reached the square.

Azimuth was standing behind the burn barrel, busy cooking the fresh bounty. Flames leaped from the barrel as he rolled the gray globs into position on the grate with a block of wood. The crowd stood in a long, orderly line, waiting for the meal to be handed out.

They would have to wait a little bit longer.

The pool demanded to be fed first.

The former carny master picked up the iron pipe and stepped onto the seat of the Clobbering Chair. He banged the pipe on the chair's arms to get their attention. All heads slowly turned his way.

"Baron Kerr is dead," he told them. "I have been chosen to be the new baron of this place."

There was no reaction from the crowd. No groans of shock or sadness upon hearing of the old baron's demise. No cheers or applause at the announcement of a new leader to take his place. Their smiles were the same, before and after the announcement.

As Crecca reviewed his grinning subjects, he wondered if the information he'd just imparted had even penetrated their spore-and-bounty-befuddled brains. And if it had penetrated, how had their brains translated and interpreted his words? How had the meaning been distorted by their individual delusions? In the end, it didn't matter. The line of people accepted him as their new ruler as they accepted everything else: without blinking an eye.

"The body isn't satisfied," he said. "The body needs more." He tapped on the arm of the chair. "Who would like to volunteer?"

Everyone, it seemed.

The food line broke up, and its members encircled the Clobbering Chair and the baron. From the mountain above came a roll of thunder and faint flashes of green light. Azimuth left a clutch of bounty to burn to cinders on the grill, threw down his block of wood and joined them.

"You!" Crecca said, pointing at the black man with the end of the yard-long pipe. "Come over here and take the load off."

The choice of sacrifice had nothing to do with any lingering bad feelings Crecca had over their struggle earlier in the afternoon. In fact, he had no lingering feelings, one way or another, about the incident. The choice was made on the basis of seniority. The choice had been made by the pool itself. Azimuth had been in the ville longer than any other surviving person. He had inhaled and ingested more spores, eaten more bounty; he was the best prepared—having undergone a kind of a mental and physical tenderizing—to meet the very specific needs of the body.

The carny scout thrust both arms above his head, danced in a circle and cried, "Yes!"

As if he had just won the big prize.

Bingo!

Crecca hopped from the chair, making room for Azimuth to take his seat. As the big man sat down, he rounded the back of the chair and got into position for the clobbering.

Some of the rousties rushed in to buckle down the wrist and ankle straps. As they did, Azimuth slapped out a reggae rhythm on the chair's arms, bobbing his head and shaking his dreads.

"I never thought I'd ever get to sit in with you, my brother," he said over his broad shoulder, addressing the new baron. "It's my biggest dream come true. I am so bloody stoked, mon."

Crecca gripped the length of pipe like a baseball bat. It was much heavier than a bat, though. And when he took a practice cut with it, the thing whistled through the air and slammed into the dirt.

"Play that tune," Azimuth entreated him with a grin so wide that it showed every one of his hand

sharpened yellow teeth. "Wail on me, Marley!"

Crecca swung from the soles of his boots, putting the full weight of his body behind the blow. The impact jolted up his arms and deep into his shoulder joints. The pipe sounded a dull clunk as it bounced high off its target.

Baron Magnificent Crecca stepped nimbly aside as blood from the massive scalp wound he had inflicted jetted in a fine spray three feet in the air.

Azimuth's body convulsed violently. It jerked so hard and so erratically that it set the chair rocking, then tipped it over sideways. Both the chair and the body hit the ground in a cloud of dust. For a long moment, the unconscious black man spasmed in the dirt.

Then Azimuth's eyes popped open, and he began to scream. As he fought against the straps, his shrill cries were blood curdling.

Crecca moved forward and hit him again.

And again.

It took a half-dozen full-power blows of the pipe to dispatch the huge man. And by the time it was over, his head from the ears up was an undistinguishable mass of shattered bone, brains and dreads.

Puffing from the effort he'd expended, the former carny master lowered his head and leaned on the handle of the pipe for a couple of minutes. He was the only one in the audience who was resting. His rousties unfastened the straps holding down the scout's body, then lifted the corpse and dumped it headfirst into the cart. When he'd recovered his breath, Crecca bent, grabbed the fallen chair by an arm and set it upright. Azimuth was a big man, but he wasn't quite big enough to fill the pool's requirements. As the baron looked over his beaming subjects, he said, "Who's next?"

The crowd edged closer. Everyone wanted to be next.

Crecca's glance swept past, then returned to the young son of Ryan Cawdor. He was just the right size. He aimed the bloody pipe at the boy. "How about you, then?" he said.

Crecca didn't have to ask twice.

Dean raced over to take a seat in the gore splattered chair. He looked very, very happy as the rousties cinched him down.

Crecca put a hand on the boy's shoulder and said, "I promise to try to do a neater job of it this time."

### Chapter Thirty-Three

Doc hung back at poolside while the others started back down the hill with the empty cart. When they were out of sight over the lip of the slope, he slogged over to where Ryan had dropped his longblaster. He pulled the Steyr from the mud and used the tail of his frock coat to wipe some of the dirt from the

barrel, scope and stock. The weapon had gone in muzzle first, so he had to assume the bore was blocked. There was no time to clear it. And he had nothing to clear it with. He slung the bolt-action rifle over his shoulder and hurried down the trail. By the time he caught up the rest of the group, they were lining up in front of the burn barrel to get another ration of the wormy chow. His own stomach growling, Doc carefully hid the Steyr against the wall at the far end of the blockhouse.

As the old man walked across the square to join the others, the carny master climbed on the bloody chair and banged on its arm with the metal cudgel to get everyone's attention.

Doc had hoped that the chilling was over for the day. He had counted on having the entire night to work out a plan for getting his companions away from the gruesome horror of this hellhole.

But it wasn't to be.

The red-haired carny master announced a coup d'etat and proclaimed himself baron. Looking at the man, Doc had no doubt that he had dispatched the former ruler personally. Because both men were in the control of the pool, because both were coldheart chillers of the lowest order, it didn't matter who was baron. The agenda was the same.

Doc's heart leaped into his throat when the new headman said the pool wasn't satisfied and called for volunteers. Of which there were plenty, including his own dear friends.

Doc's window of opportunity was rapidly slamming shut.

The simplest course of action was to break the spell of the pool, but he had tried that without success. There was nothing he could do to the companions themselves to snap them out of it. He had noticed that their respective dazes seemed to wane at times, that they appeared to be struggling against the reins. He also noticed that their resistance to control ended with the paralysis that followed each spore fall. If this wasn't an illusion on his part, it meant that the confused state of mind was temporary, and maintained only by regular redosing with spores, and perhaps with bounty. From the thunder and lightning coming over the ridge above, another downpour was imminent, as was another meal of fungal nodes.

If Doc couldn't shake them out of their state, and he couldn't remove them forcibly, then he knew he only had one course left. And that was to try to chill whatever it was that lived in the pool.

On the face of it, a much more daunting undertaking. The thing was vast and inconceivably powerful. Still, Doc knew he had to try.

As he racked his brain to come up with something, anything of use in that regard, the carny scout volunteered to sit in the chair.

The black man was all smiles as he let himself be strapped down. It was difficult to tell for certain, but he seemed to have a change of heart when the first blow landed and it didn't kill him outright. Lying in the dirt, he wasn't screaming words; he was just screaming. Doc had the feeling, though, that the shock had awakened him at the last instant, when it was already far too late to do anything about it.

Tanner turned away from the follow-up mayhem and stared at the low concrete blockhouse. The blows were still sounding behind him when he started to put the whole thing together.

He was fairly sure that for whatever reason, for pure science or to develop a new military weapon, predark whitecoats had created the pool and its ecosystem. And that they had done it from the ground

up.

He asked himself why then had the laboratory been sited here, so far below the pool. Certainly, it made more sense to build the lab next to the system they were studying. That told Doc the whitecoats probably knew it was dangerous, and that they wanted to be a safe distance away. Which offered support for the bioweapon hypothesis. But that wasn't the whole story.

He could see that the laboratory was connected to the pool through the pipes at the base of the slope. As there were no pipes in evidence at the lakeside, at least none that he had seen, they had to be in place under it. Which supported the idea that it wasn't a naturally occurring body of water. The pool had been created. But that didn't explain what the pipes were there for. Could the whitecoats have used them to sample the pool's contents? Doc thought that unlikely. A pipe five feet across was overkill for taking samples. As he examined the base of the hillside, he noticed two other structures that seemed to be artificial. The rounded humps looked like culverts that had been buried by rock and dirtfall. They were twice as big as the blockhouse pipes.

What was all the underground plumbing for? Doc asked himself. Was it because the whitecoats knew even in the planning stages the potential danger of the pool? Was it because they wanted their fingers on the trigger of a fail-safe device that could deactivate or terminate the project?

From the position of the blockhouse and the pipe connections, Doc had a clue as to the function if not the exact construction of the device. It involved draining the lake above. Draining it suddenly and completely. The trouble was, they hadn't designed it as a dead man's switch. The nuker had taken them by surprise, as it had everyone else.

Doc grimaced. It was all supposition, of course.

As he started for the steps leading to the blockhouse entrance, the rousties pulled the body of the dead scout from the chair and pitched it into the cart. When he looked back he saw young Dean taking a seat in the death chair.

It stopped him cold in his tracks.

"By the Three Kennedys!" he cried, and he broke into a run, not for the bunker, but for the boy. Doc threw himself between the numbed spectators, trying to reach Dean and drag him free before harm could be done.

Powerful hands roughly grabbed Doc by the arms and hurled him back. The crowd closed in more tightly around the chair, effectively blocking another attempt on his part.

Doc gripped the handle of his swordstick, but he didn't draw the blade. He knew he could skewer more than a few of the bodies before him, but he could never chill enough of them to free Dean in time. And in the process, he would have had to mortally stab his friends, even Ryan, who appeared to be willing to stop him from rescuing the boy.

The old man reversed course and sprinted across the square. He ran down the blockhouse steps and through its open door. His boots splashed in the faintly glowing puddles on the floor of the central hallway. As he ran, he ducked and dodged the dangling, rusting light fixtures. The smell of mildew and rot was almost overpowering.

Doc charged into the first room he came to, skidding on the concrete floor. Before him was a row of

squat, heavy-looking machines. They looked like pumps of some kind. In the dim light, he quickly examined them. Yes, they were definitely pumps. He located the starter switch on one of them and depressed it. Nothing happened.

He tried the others with same result. He kicked aside some of the debris from the fallen tile ceiling and saw the thick electrical cable on the floor. They were electric powered.

There was no generator in the room. The wall opposite the hallway was laced with rows of heavy pipe. He scanned the various dials and gauges set at intervals along the wall. Some had cracked faces and missing indicators. All the others read zero. The system was off-line, either because it was simply broken, or because of the lack of operating power.

Doc was slammed by a crushing sense of hopelessness. Without a blueprint or a schematic of some kind, how was he ever going to figure it out? He smothered the thought and moved on. If there was a generator in the building, he had to find it.

And quickly.

It wasn't in the next room he checked, but in the one after it. There was no mistaking it, either. It was the size of four refrigerators, stacked one on top of the other. Doc located the ignition switch, pressed it and got nothing. If there was a battery in the system, it was long dead. The pull-start rope produced nothing, although the engine did turn over.

He found the generator's gas tank and discovered the root of the problem. It was empty.

"Hell's fire!" he cursed, slamming his fist on top of the tank.

He knew that whitecoats sitting on a biological time bomb wouldn't leave themselves a single way to deactivate it. They wouldn't completely depend on electrical power that could be shut off at a critical moment by any number of mechanical failures. There had to be a more direct method. He thought about the lake above, and the pressure of thousands of tons of water. Perhaps the deactivation system was gravity powered. Perhaps it could use the water pressure to physically or hydraulically move a barrier out of the way.

Doc rushed on. Now that he had a clue what he was looking for, he wasted no time on the offices where it appeared people had been living. The last room in the corridor had more of the squat pumps, and the pipes along its wall were much bigger in diameter.

When he saw the red steel wheel, and the sign above it, he knew he had found the drain plug. The wheel was part of a massive valve set in a bend in a thick pipe. The peeling red-on-white sign was stained with rust but it was still legible. It read: Extreme Danger: Emergency Use Only! System Test and Certification Required Every Thirty Days. Secure Escape Route And Evacuate All Downstream Personnel Before Operating Valve.

There was a dusty clipboard hanging on a hook below the valve. The faded top page was a maintenance record. It'd been almost a hundred years since the system had been checked and certified.

Not that that mattered. It either worked or it didn't.

And there was no way to evacuate anybody.



Doc untwisted a loop of steel wire that locked the rim of the wheel to the valve. When he tried to turn the wheel, it wouldn't budge. He jammed his sword-stick through the spokes and used it like a lever.

With a crack and a creak the wheel moved an inch or two, then the turning became easy. From somewhere on the other side of the wall came a squeal. The squeal grew louder as he spun the valve open.

Then something boomed. The floor rocked violently and the air was ripped by a deafening noise. The roar sounded as if he had just unleashed Niagara Falls.

Everything continued to shake, and as it did, to shake apart. Concrete dust streamed from the ceiling above him; he knew it was going to come down, and before he could reach the doorway, it did. Doc lost his grip on his swordstick as the debris buried him.

## Chapter Thirty-Four

Ryan the passenger watched from the wheelhouse of the S.S. Cawdor as Baron Crecca beat the scout's head to a pulp. He was standing close enough to be hit by some of the back splatter, brains or blood, or both. He could feel it dripping down the side of his face, but he couldn't make his hand move to wipe it away.

The hallucinations of his father and Trader had faded into the gathering darkness, so he knew that the combined effects of the spores and the bounty were wearing off. However, the odor of the bounty that was roasting unattended on the burn barrel was making his mouth water. His body wanted its share. Passenger Ryan fought against the urge. Fought successfully.

Thunder rolled and flashes of green lit the slope above the ville. The sky started to spit a few tentative spores.

It was coming again, he knew. The pool was about to reestablish control over its slaves.

Ryan forced his fingers to move. A twitch was all he could muster, but it was a start.

Then Crecca called for another volunteer, and Dean stepped forward. Ryan wanted to cry out a warning, but couldn't. His hands closed into fists at his side. Dean took a seat in the chair and allowed himself to be strapped down. There was a commotion to his left. He managed to turn his head far enough to see Doc Tanner fighting to break through the crowd and save his son from execution. Ryan tried to help, but only got a step or two in the right direction before the rousties seized Doc and threw him back.

The other companions were struggling as he was; Ryan could see that from the strain and anguish in their faces.

Ryan turned the full force of his effort to reaching the chair and the red-coated chiller before he could bring down the pipe. It was like walking through molasses. He had to beat back the heaviness and lethargy that infused his limbs. But with each step, it got a little easier.

The new baron watched his slow-motion approach with amusement. "What do you think you're doing,

Cawdor?" he said. "Do you think you can get here in time to stop me?"

Ryan didn't answer. He didn't want to waste his energy or divert his focus from what he had to do.

"Well, you'd better hurry up, then," Crecca told him. "Get a fucking move on."

It took minutes for Ryan to cross the short stretch of ground. Minutes while the former carny master watched and waited with a leer on his face, confident that he had the upper hand, confident that he could smash the boy's skull with a single blow, even as his father reached out to save him.

Sweat poured off Ryan's face, chest and back. Though it hadn't started to snow in earnest yet, the tiny granules were peppering the square, and the thunder was an almost constant rumble.

He was still ten feet away, and moving at a crawl, when Crecca lightly tapped the top of Dean's head with the end of the pipe, measuring the range to his target. Then he reared back, cocking the bludgeon over his shoulder, coiling himself to swing for the center field fence.

A deep growl shook the ground, making Crecca stagger and lose his balance. He caught himself on the chair back to keep from falling.

Earthquake! Ryan thought as he continued to move.

But it wasn't.

With a howitzer-like boom, water and dirt exploded from the base of the mountain, about one hundred yards from where they all stood. Ahead of the twin plumes of black water, flying through the air like artillery shells, were chunks of broken limestone. As the rock crashed down and bounced around them, the water's howl grew much louder. Seventy-five feet from the mouths of the hidden culverts that had unleashed them, the two torrents coalesced, funneling, twisting together, plowing headlong into the earth with their combined might. They blasted through, sending a wall of water and debris ten feet high racing downhill toward the square.

Baron Crecca was no longer intent on caving in the back of Dean's head. Riveted by the sight of the onrushing wave, he didn't seem to notice Cawdor closing the distance between them, either.

Ryan could feel his strength and his physical control returning. For the last few feet, his legs drove forward with real power, as if their overdrive had suddenly kicked in. His right hand did his bidding, unsheathing eighteen inches of panga from its scabbard below his knee.

As the one-eyed man reached the foot of the chair, Crecca bolted away from it and the boy, cutting across the square toward the blockhouse entrance, well ahead of the leading edge of the flash flood.

There was no time for Ryan to hack through the four leather straps that held Dean pinioned. Grunting from the effort, he picked up the chair by the arms and started lugging it and Dean away. He'd gone no more than few yards when J.B. caught up to him and grabbed one of the arms. The two of them then ran with the chair and the boy between them.

Mildred and Krysty ran ahead, as did Jak, who had picked up the girl, Leeloo, and was carrying her in his arms. The companions raced to their left, away from the water, beyond the far end of the square, and along the curve at the base of the mountain.

When they were far enough away to be safe, Ryan and J.B. stopped, put down the chair and looked back.

The wall of water had gouged its own deep channel in the dirt, dividing the square and separating its occupants. The rousties who could run had gone the opposite direction and were out of sight. Those still partially paralyzed by the spores managed to move away, but slowly, like their legs were encased in ice—a feeling Ryan and his companions would never forget. The edge of the flood-choked channel eroded away at the chillers' heels. As the undercut bank gave way beneath them, their bodies twisted and fell, disappearing into the churning blackness. The main thrust of the torrent had swung past the front of the blockhouse, missing it entirely. But it was rampaging full-tilt into and through the hammered-down shanty ville. With falling darkness, it was impossible for Ryan to see clearly, but it looked as if the entire place had already been washed away, scoured off the landscape. He looked up at the sky and saw that the spore fall had stopped; the threat of blizzard was gone. The thunder, if there was any, was drowned out by the roar of the draining lake.

Beside him, Jak and J.B. were busy unstrapping Dean from the chair. Mildred and Krysty were comforting the little girl. Ryan was relieved to see them working as a team again.

"Is everybody all right?" he yelled over the noise of the cataract. He counted heads as they each nodded, and came up one shy.

"Where's Doc?" he shouted at them. "Did anybody see what happened to Doc?"

BARON CRECCA STOOD transfixed by the sight of two monumental gushers exploding from the hillside. Twin streams of water ten feet in diameter jetted through the air before burying themselves in the earth, sending dirt and spray flying. The sound it made was like some gigantic engine running wild. It took a second or two for the full import of what he was seeing to sink in.

Then a cold finger touched the center of his heart.

The source of the water was the burning pool.

It had to be.

The pool was being emptied.

Without the protective layer of water, without the lungfish who lived in it, the entity at its bottom couldn't survive. Without entity's continued existence and assistance, Crecca's was going to be one of the shortest lived baronies in Deathlands history. He had to stop the drop in water level, before the pool was completely drained.

Crecca left the boy in the chair and sprinted toward the blockhouse. He was almost there when a ripple passing through the earth made him stumble over his own feet and fall. As he scrambled back up, to his right he saw the flash flood rip a fifty-foot-wide trench in the ground.

Somewhere behind him in the fairing light, his handful of subjects were running for their lives. If they were screaming in terror, he couldn't hear it over the water's roar.

Crecca dashed down the stairway and into the corridor. Inside the hallway, the effect of the ground shaking was much worse. Plaster and concrete dust rained on him from the remains of the collapsed ceiling. As he ran down the corridor, splashing through the puddles, the back-and-forth tilting of the floor

made him careen into and bounce off the walls.

The baron had known from the get-go that this catastrophe couldn't have been an accident. Hallucinations or not, massive floodgates didn't just open by themselves. Not suddenly, after a hundred years. Someone had to have done it on purpose. Since he hadn't seen anyone come out of the blockhouse, he was fairly sure that the someone was still inside. He had to find him or her and reverse whatever had been done.

Pipe in hand, and ready to clobber, he ducked his head inside the first few rooms along the hall. The dim light was made even dimmer by the airborne dirt and dust, but he saw no one.

In the last room, ninety-five percent of the ceiling had fallen onto the floor. It lay in a jumbled heap, from wall to wall. In a far corner something caught his eye.

Something bright and reflective along the back wall.

He climbed over the piles of rubble to reach it. The silver lion's head was on the end of a wooden walking stick that had been thrust through the spokes of a red metal wheel. The kind of a wheel that opened or closed a valve. Crecca read the warning sign.

Or a floodgate.

He pulled out the stick and flung it aside. Then he started to crank the wheel over clockwise, shutting the valve.

"Not the best of ideas," said a loud voice to his right.

Crecca whirled to face a glaring scarecrow of a man. He recognized him at once as one of Cawdor's party. It was the old, babbling bastard who had to be led around on a rope. The baron's laughter was muffled by the dull roar coming through the walls.

"So, old man," he shouted back, "looks like you've got your brain on straight...just in time for me to beat it in." To demonstrate he bashed the end of the pipe into the concrete wall.

His adversary scampered over the rubble and out into the hall. He had picked up the stick Crecca had tossed aside.

"You aren't going to get away from me!" the baron called to him as he followed.

The old man was waiting for him in the corridor. "If you think I am trying to escape, you are sorely mistaken, sir," he yelled. "I just require some room to work." With that the old bastard did something to the silver handle, and the wood sheath of the stick came away in his left hand, revealing a long, tapering, double-edged blade of steel.

"I don't have time for games," Crecca shouted. And then he charged, holding the pipe out in front of him like a lance.

The tremors that still rippled the floor made his course erratic at best. As he veered toward his target, a fluorescent light fixture hanging by a thread gave up the ghost and crashed down in front of him, spoiling his aim.

The old man was more agile than he had any right to be. He sidestepped the charge and pivoted, and as Crecca rushed past him, the baron felt something molten-hot lance through the back of his tall boot and into his left calf.

"First blood!" the old man cried. With a back-and-forth slash of the sword, he cut down the light fixtures that blocked his view.

He now stood between Crecca and the room with the wheel. To reach it and stop the draining of the pool, the baron was going to have to go through him. The former carny master realized he had been outmaneuvered and outfoxed. Infuriated, Crecca made a blind thrust with the end of the pipe, aiming for the old man's face.

The sword parried the blow, metal scraping metal, then before the carny master could withdraw, he felt the sharp bite of razor honed steel deep in his right shoulder. "Fucker!" he howled as blood flowed down his arm. He banged the pipe on the floor in frustration.

"Is something wrong, sir?" the old man demanded. "Would you like to pass by me?"

Crecca charged again, this time swinging. He brought the pipe around at waist height, slashing from right to left, figuring the bastard couldn't possibly escape the blow.

The end of the pipe threw a shower of sparks as it hit the concrete wall.

The wall was all it hit.

The old man stepped back into the doorway, out of range, and as he did, with an ease that a man of his apparent age shouldn't have been able to muster, he squatted low and thrust upward with his sword.

The point plunged into Crecca's right thigh, a quick in-and-out stab that wrung a scream from his throat. He staggered back, flailing with the pipe to keep his opponent from following up with a second thrust.

"You look surprised, Baron," the old man yelled.

The Magnificent Crecca clapped a hand over his most recent injury and scowled at him.

"Why should it surprise you," Doc hollered, "that a man carrying a weapon like this—" he paused to flourish it "—could actually use it?"

Time was running out.

With his good leg, Crecca kicked the fallen light fixture into the old man's chest and lunged with the pipe. His opponent blocked the hunk of metal and glass with his sword, sweeping it aside, but before old man could bring the blade's point back, Crecca was on top of him.

The former carny master never saw the blow that felled him.

He was within a few inches of getting his big hand wrapped around the old man's scrawny throat when he caught a flash of silver from below, as the sword's heavy carved metal handle snapped up in a crisp, accurate, backhanded strike that he couldn't deflect.

He heard the crunch of his own cheekbone shattering and felt hot blood spraying down his suddenly

numbed face. Falling forward as his knees buckled under him, he took another blow from the sword's pommel, this time on the crown of his head. For a second it made him see black. He crashed to the floor on his knees, knowing there would be more, and much worse to come, and unable to raise his arms to defend himself.

The third blow nailed him square in the back of the head. Everything went black.

Crecca toppled to the floor on his face.

DOC CRADLED the palm of his right hand, which bled from a long, shallow cut that he'd given himself by gripping the swordstick barehanded. There had been no time to get the blade's point around, so he'd had to make use of the pommel.

Effective use.

And once he'd gotten started, he'd had to follow up with successive, similar blows before the baron could recover.

Doc took a soiled linen handkerchief from the pocket of his frock coat and tightly bound his wound, then knelt beside the fallen man. There was blood everywhere. Crecca's blood. His blood. He tried to locate a pulse in the man's neck and couldn't find it.

As he leaned over the baron, the ceiling tiles on the floor around him started to move. They were floating, bobbing. The water in the corridor was no longer standing in puddle; it was flowing in a current. It was already an inch deep. Doc looked toward the hallway's entrance and saw the steps had been turned into a series of low, feeble waterfalls. The river he had created was starting to flood the blockhouse. He dashed into the room behind him and spun the red wheel, reopening the emergency drain valve as far as it would go.

When he returned to the hallway, the water had risen over the prostrate baron's mouth and nose.

The Magnificent Crecca wasn't blowing any bubbles.

Doc splashed down the corridor and up the stairs. As he climbed out of the entry well, he glimpsed the destruction he had wrought. A deep, dark torrent had gouged away the ville and the square and was undermining the near edge of the blockhouse. He could see no one moving, and a terrible thought struck him: had he drowned the very people he had been trying to save?

He drew his Civil War-era handblaster from its holster, the LeMat, and ran along the face of the building, away from the rushing water. Doc found the Steyr longblaster where he had hidden it. As he shrugged into its shoulder strap, he saw shadowy figures hurrying toward him from the base of the mountain. He primed the LeMat's shotgun barrel, ready to spray any enemies with smoking shrapnel.

"Do not come any closer!" he warned, aiming the old blaster at the running figures.

"Doc! It's us!" someone shouted back.

"John Barrymore," Doc said with relief, lowering his weapon. "And Ryan! Is everyone else all right? Did they all make it away safely?"

"We got lucky," Ryan told him. "Just scrapes and bruises. Come on, see for yourself. They're waiting for

us."

"I trust our carny friends were not so fortunate," Doc said as they moved toward the hillside.

"We saw a few of them go down in the flood," J.B. said. "The rest are somewhere on the other side of all that water."

"The baron is probably under it by now," Doc said. "He is no longer a matter of concern." The old man unslung the Steyr and handed it over to its rightful owner.

"Glad you picked that up," Ryan said, giving the stock an affectionate slap. "I feel naked without it."

"Do not try to fire it before you check the bore," Doc warned him. "The muzzle is probably blocked with dried mud."

As they neared the foot of the slope, figures rushed out of the shadows to greet them. Doc received a hearty slap on the back from Mildred and a kiss on the cheek from Krysty. Jak nodded to him, a silent yet eloquent acknowledgment of his courage and heroism.

When the congratulations were over, they got right down to business.

"Are we still danger?" Krysty asked. "Should we try to move out of here tonight?"

"The pool seems to have stopped its activity, at least for the time being," Mildred said. "No more storm clouds. No more spores. But there's no guarantee that it won't start up again before it's run completely dry."

"How long before the lake is empty?" Dean said.

"That could take all night," Ryan said. "There's no way of telling how deep it is."

"We can't leave here," J.B. told them. "Not in the dark. Not knowing the terrain. Not knowing where the rousties went. We've got to hunker down and ride it out until sunrise."

"J.B.'s right," Ryan said. "We'll take turns standing watch. Dean, Leeloo, Doc and Krysty can sack out first. We'll wake you in three hours. We move out at dawn."

Doc stood with Ryan and watched young Dean escort the little girl to a safe, relatively comfortable place among the boulders. After they had sat down, the boy removed his coat and draped it over her shoulders. She curled up with her head against his chest and his protective arm over her.

"The reports of chivalry's demise appear to be greatly exaggerated," Doc said.

"He's a good boy, with a good heart," Ryan agreed. "And he's going to grow into an even better man."

Chapter Thirty-Five

At first light, Ryan led the companions to what little was left of the ville's square. The roaring river had become a feeble creek. The shantytown was gone; the blockhouse full to the ceiling with standing water. They jumped down into the muddy channel the torrent had left behind, and moved in fighting formation with weapons drawn to the other side. When they climbed out of the riverbed, they found nothing to shoot at.

There was no sign of life.

Ryan and the others had been hoping that the Baja Bug had survived the flood. The little wag, even if overloaded with bodies, would have made it much easier for them to get back to the interstate. But the Baja Bug had vanished. Somewhere downstream it was overturned, perhaps buried in mud.

The companions had no choice but to walk out, to return Leeloo to Bullard. They voted unanimously to take the route past the burning pool. When they reached the bank where the evil had first touched them, they stopped and stared for a long time at what was revealed. The bottom of the lake was gray, a solid mass of lusterless gray that followed the contours of the bedrock beneath.

There were small standing puddles on its surface.

It didn't move. Nothing on its surface moved.

"But it's just goo," Leeloo said.

Then a high-pitched sound filtered down from the forest above. Because it was intermittent, Ryan didn't recognize it as singing at first.

But it was.

A familiar bell-like soprano drifted through the dense trees along the ridgeline, and it grew stronger and more distinct: "'Baby, baby, it's a wild world...'"

The companions strained to hear, barely breathing, until it faded to silence.