An arrow hissed through the door, clattering against the back wall of the control room. Ryan and J.B. dropped to their knees behind the last row of desks, the one-eyed man glancing to the rear to see that everyone else was in the chamber, standing, blasters ready.

Trader often said that life generally came down to two choices a bad one and the other one. If he and J.B. turned and ran for it, jumping into the chamber and slamming the door, it would give the natives precious seconds to come after them and trap them before the jump mechanism operated.

So there was the other choice.

"Get on the floor," he yelled to his friends.

"Ready," Krysty called a few moments later.

"We stay," he said quietly to J.B.

Ryan rose onto hands and knees and powered himself forward to slam the armaglass door, triggering the jump mechanism. "Wait for us," he yelled. "Be along when we can."

A long arrow struck the door, so close it nicked Ryan's sleeve. He dropped to the floor, crawling back to join the Armorer.

Behind him he knew that the metal disks in the floor and ceiling of the chamber would be glowing, and fine tendrils of mist would be gathering near the top of the six-sided room. In less than a minute his companions would be somewhere else.

He and J.B., oldest and best of friends, hunkered in their limited shelter, blasters ready for the inevitable attack.

** ** Ruby sparks from a pinon fire, soaring into the black velvet of an Albuquerque sky. The best of memories. This is for Carla and Jim Wright, with much love and great affection. The best of friends.
Deathlands

28 in the Deathlands series
James Axler

First edition October 1995

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* * * The art of the Incas, the Aztecs and the Mayas is amongst the most beautiful in
the history of mankind. Sadly those civilizations also produced some of the most
barbarous and inhuman cruelties the world has ever known.
From The Sun, the Pyramid and the Knife, by Jedediah Alnwick, published by The
Free Press of Corrales, NM
Chapter One

The sick darkness was passing.
Ryan Cawdor steadied his breathing, conscious that the jump had been one of the easiest that he could remember. There had been none of the hideous gibbering dreams that sometimes swam out of the black horror of a bad jump.
He felt slightly sick, there was a throbbing pressure behind his eye and his stomach felt as though it had gone ten rounds with a rabid mule.
"Fireblast," he whispered to himself, still not risking opening his eye.
Ryan was conscious that his hand was still being gripped by Krysty Wroth. That in itself was a sign that the mat-trans unit had functioned well.
All he needed to know now was whether everyone was all right and where the jump had taken them.
He breathed in slowly, aware that the air felt very hot and moist. And green.
Ryan opened his eye.
Chapter Two

When civilization was blown apart in the massive nuclear holocaust of 2001, the world had been geared for all kinds of military action, most of it supposed to be top secret at the highest level. But many people had heard about the Totality Concept, the cover-all policy that ranged from time travel to self-supporting space stations packed with laser-guided hardware.

One of the subsections of the Concept was called Overproject Whisper, and one small part of that was Operation Chronos, which was concentrating on the largely doomed research into time traveling, or "trawling," as it had become known. The idea of pulling targets from the past or pushing them into the future was interesting. But in practice there were less than a handful of successes.

One of them, Dr. Theophilus Tanner, was recovering in the mat-trans chamber across from Ryan Cawdor.

The matter transmitter had been developed in a laboratory complex in Maryland and was one of the limited successes of the Totality Concept. The mat-trans units were often an integral part of the secret military complexes known as redoubts hastily and secretly built all across the United States, with a few elsewhere in the world. These "gateways," as they were called, were developed in those shadowed, paranoid days that closed the twentieth century, and made it possible for people to be sent instantly from one location to another.

"How're you feeling, Doc?" Ryan's voice sounded flat and hollow in the hexagonal chamber. The color of the armaglass walls varied from place to place. This time they were an odd shade of pallid green.

The old man ran a hand across his face, smiling and showing his oddly perfect set of gleaming teeth. His light blue eyes twinkled at Ryan.

"Upon my soul, dear friend! Relative to a rare good day, then this is still some way less than adequacy. However, compared to an average mat-trans jump, I feel as frolicsome as a dog with two tails. Or a monkey with six paws. Or an elephant with three trunks. Or a"

"I get the picture, Doc. Not a bad jump, was it?"
The silver-haired old man fumbled in one of the capacious pockets of his frock coat, so ancient that the black material had a strange greenish patina that Doc swore stoutly wasn't mold. He pulled out a blue swallow's-eye kerchief and mopped his brow.
"By the Three Kennedys! The jump was passing fair, but the heat here puts me much in mind of the botanical gardens in London, at Kew. There was some verse, but I confess that its remembrance seems to have dodged away from my poor corroded old brain."

Doc had been a leading academic back in Omaha, Nebraska, in November of 1896, living a happy and contented life with his beautiful young wife, Emily, and his two beloved children, Rachel, who had been three years old, and Jolyon, barely past his first birthday.

The white-coated scientists, whom he had come to detest with a bitter loathing, had
plucked him from the past and drawn him forward to 1998, as part of Operation Chronos. It was then discovered that their success with Doc had been a freakish event, with virtually all of their other experiments failing horribly.

Doc himself was such a stubborn and recalcitrant time traveler that the scientists, in December of 2000, propelled him many years into the future into the post holocaust United States, which had become known as Deathlands. Most of the time his mind functioned reasonably well, but stress sometimes sent him spinning off onto some alternative thought beam that was all his own.

He reached out to retrieve his lion's-head ebony cane, which concealed a gleaming rapier of Toledo steel, stretching his long, skinny legs in their cracked knee boots. Then his hand automatically went for the unusual handblaster that was holstered at his hip.

It was an ornate Le Mat, a weapon that dated back to the early days of the Civil War. The blaster was engraved and decorated with twenty-four-carat gold as a commemorative tribute to the immortal memory of James Ewell Brown Stuart, the greatest cavalryman of his country. The massive cannon, weighing over three and a half pounds, had two barrels and an adjustable hammer. It fired a single .63-caliber round, like a shotgun. As well, a revolver chamber held nine .44-caliber rounds.

At any range around twenty feet it was devastatingly lethal. At much over fifty feet it was fairly innocuous in the old man's hands.

The Armorer was also sitting next to Doc, feeling for his neatly folded spectacles in a pocket of his worn leather jacket, finally perching them on the bridge of his narrow nose. Five feet eight inches tall, and just about one-forty when soaking wet, John Barrymore Dix was Ryan's oldest friend. They had both joined the legendary Trader and his armored war wags when they were young men, filled with sand and gall. And they had learned many things from Trader, mostly about surviving, about mistakes not made.

J. B. Dix was undeniably the greatest authority on weaponry in all of Deathlands. His own armament consisted of a 20-round 9 mm Uzi automatic machine pistol, and an unusual scattergun. The Smith amp; Wesson M-4000 didn't fire ordinary rounds. It held eight Remington 12-gauge cartridges, each with twenty flechette darts.

J.B. grinned at Ryan and picked up his beloved fedora with his left hand, blowing dust from the crown and placing it carefully on his head.

"That's one of the best jumps I ever had," he said. "But it's hot and wet, isn't it? Where in the black dust have we jumped to this time?"

He turned to look at the stocky black woman who sat next to him, reaching out to hold her hand as she jerked back into consciousness.

Mildred Winona Wyeth was in her middle thirties, the daughter of a Baptist minister who had been burned to death by Klans in a firebombing back in 1965. A leading expert in her field of cryogenics and cryosurgery, she was also a brilliant shot with a pistol and had won the free-shooting silver medal in the last Olympic Games of all time, in Atlanta in 1996. The event four years later had been canceled due to the terminal deterioration in world politics.

Three days before the end of the year 2000, Mildred had been admitted to hospital for
a minor operation. Unpredictably the anesthetic produced a near-fatal reaction. In a desperate bid to save Mildred's life, her doctor had, ironically, frozen her, putting the woman into suspended animation in a nuke-powered hospital, hoping to revive her at some future time from the coma that had claimed her. There she had stayed in an endless, dreamless sleep, until Ryan and the others, ragged Prince Charmings, had come along and awakened her from both the coma and her suspended state. The tiny beads in Mildred's plaited hair rattled as she moved her head. "Guess I don't feel too bad," she stated. Mildred was wearing a quilt-lined denim jacket, and reinforced military jeans tucked into black calf-length boots. On her hip was a Czech-made target revolver, the ZKR 551, from the Zbrojovka works in Brno. It was a 6-shot blaster, chambered to take a Smith & Wesson .38-caliber round, with a solid frame-side rod ejector and a short-fall thumb-cocking hammer. Mildred used to claim she could take out a gnat's eye at forty paces with the weapon. She wasn't joking.

Next to her, still sleeping, was eleven-year-old Dean Cawdor. He had his father's dark complexion and shock of black, curly hair. It was only in the last year or so that Ryan had ever known that he had a son, the result of a single sexual encounter with a woman named Sharona. The boy and his mother had roamed Deathlands until she had died, rad sick, handing over responsibility for Dean to a friend who had eventually met Ryan and the companions in a chance encounter in Newyork.

"Gaia!" The voice belonged to the flame-haired woman sitting next to Ryan. "Wonders never cease. I actually don't feel sick, lover. It's hot in here."

Krysty Wroth was Ryan's partner, lover and friend. Her long red hair was strangely sentient and reacted to a threat of danger. Now her tresses were curled tightly and defensively at her nape. The woman herself had a mutie quality, being able to sense the presence of other life forms and identify them as a possible menace, though she wasn't a full-fledged doomie, able to pinpoint what was going to happen.

She yawned and stretched, catlike and graceful, looking around at the others and seeing that Dean was the only one not yet back with them. "Air feels triple moist, like being in a Hopi sweat bath," she said.

"Must be somewhere south," Ryan replied. "Down the keys or the bayous."

The seventh and last of the group of traveling friends uncoiled himself from the corner of the chamber, next around in the circle from J.B.

Jak Lauren was sixteen years old, standing a bare five feet four and tipping the scales at a little over one-ten. He had the lean body of a trained acrobat, and wore a ragged collection of cotton and leather clothing. His obvious weapon was a satin-finish .357 Magnum Colt Python, holstered on his hip, but Jak wasn't keen on blasters and preferred to rely on his hidden arsenal of leaf-bladed throwing knives.

But the first thing that everyone noticed about Jak was his mane of hair, as white as a magnesium night flare, then his eyes glittering like molten rubies. The young man was a true albino.

Jak had traveled with Ryan and company on two separate occasions. They'd first encountered one another in the swamps of Louisiana, when they'd helped him against the vicious Baron Tourment, murderer of his father. Some time later Jak had met and married Christina Ballinger and they'd had a daughter, Jenny, sharing a brief happiness on their New Mexico spread. Happiness in Deathlands was something you grabbed at as it rode by. And it didn't often last long. It wasn't all that many weeks since Jak had
buried his wife and child. And now he was back with Ryan and the other companions. Dean was finally coming around from the effects of the mat-trans jump, blinking open his dark brown eyes and looking immediately for his father. "All right, Dad?"
"Yeah. All right. Seems to have been a good jump. How do you feel?" Dean sniffed and raised a hand to his face, coming away with a smear of blood on his fingers. "Nose," he explained. "Think I must've banged it on my knee or something. Apart from that I feel like a real hot pipe."
Ryan nodded, though he still made no effort to get up. His brain felt the feathery, tumbling sickness that always came from a jump, but the discomfort was nothing compared to the usual bone-deep nausea.
"Everyone take it easy for a few minutes," he warned. "Don't get fooled into thinking that we're all aces on the lines, just because we haven't thrown up or stuff."
While he sat resting in the locked gateway chamber, Ryan checked out his own array of weapons.
The eighteen-inch panga was sheathed on his hip, its tip like a needle, its double edge honed to a whispering sharpness. On his other hip was the powerful SIG-Sauer P-226. It had a four-and-a-half-inch barrel and held fifteen rounds of full-metal-jacket 9 mm bullets. The built-in baffle silencer was no longer as efficient as it had once been, but it still muffled the sharp explosive crack when the trigger was squeezed. His Steyr SSG-70 bolt-action rifle fired ten lethal 7.62 mm rounds. It also had a laser image enhancer and a Starlite night scope.
As Ryan looked over his weapons, he noticed out of the corner of his eye that the Armorer was doing the same with his own blasters.
Once he was satisfied, Ryan glanced around the six-sided chamber. "We all ready to move on?"
There was a nodding of heads and a muttering of agreement from everyone.
"Double red," Ryan said. "Here we go."
Chapter Three

The pale green armaglass door clicked open.
"Phew!" Dean exclaimed. "Even hotter. Think the place is on fire, Dad?"
Ryan shook his head. "No." But his forehead wrinkled in puzzlement. "Never known it quite as hot and humid as this. Not even in the bayous."
"We are aware how the long-term effects of the nuclear wipeout have included major changes in climate," Doc said in his best lecturing voice. "Not counting the volcanic action and the nationwide earthquakes. Perhaps we are in a region that has become tropical."
Doc was right about the changes between the old United States and Deathlands. Though there weren't the scientists of the laboratories to verify it, there were rumors that the planet had actually been tipped a few degrees on its axis by the war that truly did end all wars.
The weather changed radically and became more extreme. First had come the long winters, which completed the 99.9-percent recurring megacull of human life that had commenced in the missile-hungry days of skydark.
Though the mighty San Andreas Fault was one of the first to let go, the world was seamed with tectonic activity. California virtually disappeared into the Pacific, and volcanoes erupted from Seattle to Mount Washington. Acid rain fell, strong enough in the first years to strip the flesh from a man's bones in a matter of minutes. There were ferocious chem storms with brilliant purple-pink lightning and endless thunder. High-rad detritus constantly tumbled from the skies, the useless relics of the world powers' attempts to use space for military purposes.
Nearly a hundred years had passed since the nukecaust had been triggered and civilization had died, but the repercussions were still everywhere in Deathlands. Not just in the weather and the landscape. There had been horrific genetic damage among the few survivors, resulting in amazing mutations of every sort among every level of life birds, fishes, reptiles, insects.
And human beings.
Particularly in human beings.
"Smells like swamps on hottest day ever," said Jak, standing behind Ryan with his blaster drawn.
The usual procedure in mat-trans units was to find the gateway opening into a small anteroom, generally stripped bare during the evacuation at the time of skydark.
This time was much like the others room eight feet square, with two rows of empty shelves and a backless chair. Nothing else.
Through the next doorway they could all see the main control room to the unit, containing rows of desks, comp screens and keyboards, endless banks of dancing colored lights and flickering crystal displays.
And beyond it was the familiar sight of the closed vanadium-steel sec doors that sealed the gateway off from the rest of the military redoubt.
"If the doors are clamped tight, then how come the air feels so hot and damp?" J.B.
looked around. "And how come there's no mold or nothing like that?"
"Anything," Mildred corrected.
"What?"
"You should say that there's no mold or anything like that, love," she repeated.
Ryan grinned back at the Armorer. "Nice to see someone else getting their knuckles rapped for a change for not speaking proper."
"Properly," Krysty corrected.
"Fireblast!" He pulled a face at her. "Anyway, I reckon that the basic air conditioner's folded. But the stuff they pump through to chill germs has kept the place clean."
Doc nodded, reaching out and rubbing his hand down the wall of the anteroom. "It is most fearfully moist. But no trace of any sort of sphagnum growing here."
"Wonder what the redoubt'll be like?" Krysty said. "Could do with some decent washing facilities. And if there happened to be some canned food"
" Noticed that the control room is smaller than usual?" J.B. asked.
Ryan nodded. "Right. Mebbe it's a smaller redoubt, as well. No reason they should all be the same."
"Can I open the door, Dad?"
Dean stood by the lever at the side of the hugely strong sec door, one hand resting on it. From previous experience, they all knew that the green lever, pointing downward, would open the door when it was lifted.
"As usual, son," he said. "I'll get on the floor and look out underneath as it rises. Rest of us fall back in a loose skirmish line. Stop it rising when it's about six inches up to let me check the corridor outside. Drop it like goose shit off a shovel if I shout to you. And don't take it up any higher until I tell you."
"I know all that, Dad, don't I?"
Ryan smiled grimly at his son. "I hope you do. No point in waiting until there's been serious grief for all of us to find out you'd forgotten something important."
"Sure, Dad. Sorry."
"Never apologize," J.B. began, starting to quote one of the Trader's favorite sayings. "It's a sign of weakness," everyone else chorused, including Dean himself.
"There appears to be something written on the wall, just here," Doc observed.
"Graffiti?"
"I think so, my dear Krysty. But it is carved small and my sight is not, frankly, quite as good as once it was."
The woman moved across to look at the spidering scratches in the cream-painted concrete. Everyone else waited, Dean with his hand already gripping the lever.
" ' Un lobo no muerte a otro,'" Krysty read slowly. "Is that some sort of Mex?"
"Read it again," Doc said. "I believe that it might be Spanish."
" Un lobo ... That's a wolf, isn't it? No muerte a otro. Muerte is death."
Doc put his head on one side as he considered the graffiti. "A wolf will not kill one of will not kill another wolf," he said finally.
"Funny seeing a foreign saying," Mildred looked around at the others. "Any of you ever seen anything like that before in any other redoubt?"
Ryan answered for all of them. "Not like that. I guess it means that you don't turn on your own kind. Man doesn't chill his own brother."
"Yeah." Krysty stared at it. "Must've been done in the last days before skydark."
"Last hours," the Armorer suggested.

"Least no sign of Japanese killers."

Ryan looked at Jak. "True. Won't have to watch out for an ambush with sword or arrow from those What was the name you said they had, Doc?"

"Samurai. Professional warriors with a strong code of honor. I remember their names. Takei Yashimoto had his bow broken by Dr. Wyeth here. And I think I wounded him in the face with the Le Mat. The one that trusty Ryan slew was called Tokimasha Yashimoto, brother to the first named."

"This might be a part of Deathlands that they haven't reached," Ryan said, "though we've been hearing rumors of these Oriental bandit gangs all over the store."

It was only on their recent jump to Washington Hole that they had seen clear proof that the rumors were true. The companions also had an overwhelming suspicion that the murderous samurai were also using the gateway network.

The graffiti was forgotten.

"Ready, Dad?"

Ryan crouched, holding the cocked SIG-Sauer in his right hand.

"Take it away," he said.

The lever moved upward. "Quite stiff," Dean hissed. "Doesn't seem to Yeah, it's going."

They all heard the familiar sound of gears beginning to operate, perhaps for the first time in nearly a century, working in their sealed unit, using hydraulics to lift the enormous weight of the sec door.

"It's so massive," Mildred whispered as the first tiny crack of daylight appeared.

"Take a low-yield, high-penetration nuke missile to blow it open," the Armorer replied. "Nothing less than that would have any effect on it."

"Stop," Ryan ordered. "Hold it there, Dean." The movement ceased immediately, leaving a gap of about six inches between the bottom of the sec door and the concrete floor.

"What do you see, lover?" called Krysty, crouched behind one of the rows of control consoles.

"I see green."

"Green?"

"Yeah. Just like that was the very first thing I noticed when I came around from the jump. That smell in the air was warm, wet and green."

"You mean green paint? Or green plants and stuff?" J.B. called.

"Plants and stuff. But" Ryan flattened his face against the gritty floor, pressing his good right eye to the gap. "I don't see any corridor out there. No sign at all of any walls or even a ceiling."

"Must be covered with lichen," Mildred suggested.

Now, even through the narrow crack at the bottom of the door, they could all taste the strong flavor of humidity and green vegetation.

"It is damnabley reminiscent of the tropical hothouse," Doc said, breathing deeply.

"Perhaps we have found ourselves in a redoubt that had its own green conservatory. It is not beyond the bounds of possibility."
"I guess not," Ryan agreed, still lying on the floor, trying to puzzle out what he was seeing. "But there's what I'd swear was filtered sunlight. No sort of roof up there, unless it's made of glass."

"That'd fit in with Doc's theory." Mildred smiled innocently at the old man. "It would be so wonderful if one of Doc's theories actually came true."

Doc took off an imaginary hat and dropped the woman a deep bow. "May the bird of paradise fly up your nose, dear lady."

"Hold the noise," Ryan called. "I don't know about this. Looks like the outdoors. Dean?"

"Yeah, Dad."

"Just take it up another six inches, will you? Then stop it. And keep on triple red to drop it at my signal."

"Sure. Here goes."

The hidden gears hissed and the door trembled for a moment, then moved up smoothly another six inches. Ryan still held the SIG-Sauer at the ready.

There were several seconds of silence.

"Well?" Krysty queried. "Come on, lover. The suspense is chilling us."

Ryan moved to a kneeling position and dusted off his hands. "I don't know."

"But what do you see?" J.B. asked. "Is that indoors or out of doors?"

"Out. Definitely out."

"Should I take it all the way up, Dad?"

Ryan stood. "I guess so. Just wait a moment, though."

He turned to the rest of the companions in the main control room of the mat-trans unit.

"There's so much lush vegetation out there that you can't see very far. It's not like anything I ever saw before. Don't recognize half the plants. So I don't know where in the dark night we've jumped to."

"Time jump?" Jak asked.

Ryan looked at the albino. "I don't Hadn't thought about that, Jak, but I guess it's not out of the question. Fact is, nothing's out of the question so we'd best all stay on triple red until we know a bit more. Okay, Dean, take her up, but keep on the edge of dropping it again."

The boy nodded, lifting the green handle and gripping it in both hands.

The sec door slid inexorably upward, settling into place at the top of its rise.

"By the Three Kennedys!" Doc was the only one to break the silence as all of them finally saw the amazing sight outside the entrance.

Directly in front of the door, there seemed to have been some effort made to clear away the rich bank of vegetation, but on either side the wall of greenness soared a hundred feet high. The smell was overwhelming, the moist emerald scent overlaid with the sweetness of flowers. Great trees could be seen, their massive, moss-covered trunks wound with lianas and flowering vines.

They could hear the cheeping of insects and the sounds of other distant creatures, howling, barking and snarling in the undergrowth.

Mildred giggled. "Sorry," she said. "Can't help it. I just thought that we should be real careful. It's a jungle out there."
"I don't believe we're in Deathlands," J.B. said quietly. "I don't even recognize those trees or the bushes. Could be we're in those islands out in the Cific."
"Hawaii?" Krysty stared out at the alien landscape. "Suppose that would make some sense."
"Perhaps the most practical move would be for John Barrymore to use that quaint little sextant of his and try to locate our actual position," Doc suggested.
Ryan shook his head. "Not for a minute, Doc. Like Mildred said, it looks more like a jungle out there. Could be all sorts of dangers we aren't ready for. Gotta take this one a single careful step at a time."
Everyone stood and waited, stupefied by the abundant array just outside the open sec door. Gradually, as their eyes became accustomed to the richness, it became possible to note some of the details.
The green canopy was dotted with color.
To the right was a shrub that bore brilliant tiny red flowers, like points of living fire. One of the vines that clawed its way around the trunk of the tallest tree, whose crown was out of sight among the other vegetation, had cuplike flowers of ivory pink, attracting hordes of small turquoise insects.
The ground was covered with mosses, so dazzling a green that it almost hurt to look at them.
"Definitely someone been here recently," J.B. said, pointing. "See the hacked ends of some of the bushes where they've kept open that narrow path."
"Place like this'll close up in couple days," Jak said. "Reminds me of home."
Doc stood next to the teenager and patted him on the shoulder. "It puts me in mind of an old verse, dear boy, about an old road through the woods. But wind and rain have undone it again, and now you would never know that there was ever a road through the woods. Something like that. I disremember the exact wording."
"Look at the butterflies." Dean had left the control level locked in the open position and had joined the others, his Browning Hi-Power cocked in his right hand. "Dozens of them. They're beautiful. Know what kind they are?"
Doc peered out through the doorway. "Well, they are certainly tropical. The brown ones with the eyes are owl butterflies. Brassolidae family. The pale one with the black freckles around the wings is a green morpho."
"Wow! What about that one black and green and splashes of red and white? The big one?"
"I believe that's called a southern cattle heart, Dean. You know, there's something very odd here. None of them are indigenous to the United States. They all come from either Central or South America."
"Look at this one." Mildred pointed at a butterfly, larger and more beautiful than any of the others, that had come hovering inside the control room. "What's it called, Doc?"
It had an overall width of at least eighteen inches across, and its wings had elongated, feathery tips that added another six inches to their length. The leading edge of each
wing was brilliant vermilion, shading into dark crimson. Then came a strip of golden white that darkened into the trailing tips, which were a rich purple color. Doc shook his head as the butterfly danced around them, circling, rising, falling, flying closer to Dean, who watched it with a hypnotized fascination. "Don't know. Some kind of a swallowtail. But I never saw one with that coloring, and I am certain-sure that I have never in my life seen a butterfly of that extraordinary size. Positively giganticus."

"Seems to like you, Dean," Mildred said, watching the butterfly hovering nearer and nearer to the boy. Dean was smiling up at the delightful mutie creature, holding out his hand for it to perch. But the whirligig of serendipity color seemed to be flirting with him, swooping lower, brushing his curly hair with its wings, then rising high toward the ceiling of the control room.

"So beautiful," Krysty whispered, as though she were frightened of scaring the butterfly away.

One moment it was over in the far corner of the room, hanging in the air like a living splash of painted colors, next moment it had come diving in toward Dean, fastening itself onto the side of his throat, just below and behind the left ear.

At the last moment the boy cried out, waving his hand at it, ducking away, meaning that the attack missed the carotid artery by less than an inch.

Ryan reacted fastest.

There had been something unearthly about the staggering beauty of the large butterfly, something that had brought a pricking to the short hairs at his nape, a sure sign that his combat instinct was giving him a warning. A warning that all wasn't well, a warning of possible danger.

The moment the butterfly folded its beautiful wings and dived at Dean, Ryan was already moving, his mouth open to start a shout of alarm.

The SIG-Sauer was switched to his left hand in a flicker of movement, and his right hand reached toward the butterfly, where it clung to Dean's neck like a bizarre piece of living jewelry in stunning colors.

As he grabbed at it, Ryan was surprised by the fluttering power of the long wings beating against his fingers. But he closed his hand, wrenching the creature from the pale skin, seeing the blotch of brilliant crimson that it left smeared behind it, as though a part of its magical coloring remained behind on the boy's throat.

"Kill it, Dad," the boy cried, his voice high and thin and ragged with shock.

Ryan crushed the mutie creature and flung it to the floor, lifting his foot to stamp on its dying struggles.

"No!" Krysty called. "Let me look at it."

Dean had turned and clung for a few moments to his father, arms locked around Ryan's waist, his whole body trembling. "Thanks a lot, Dad... That fucker"

"You all right?" Ryan rubbed his finger at the trickle of blood, seeing how close the bite was to the artery. He carefully examined the small wound, seeing what looked like the injection mark of a hypodermic syringe.

"Might be poisoned," Jak warned.

Krysty was crouched over the butterfly, opening up the bruised, shattered wings with the short barrel of her blaster, peering cautiously at it. "Gaia."
"What?" Mildred asked.
"Bastard's got a stinger about six inches long, just like a needle. Hard, like steel. Looks more like something to poke in and suck blood rather than anything for pumping out poison," she said, pulling a disgusted face.
"Best not take a chance." Ryan lowered his head toward the circular bleeding wound. "Watch him, Dean," Doc warned. "Ryan has probably been a vampire all along, just waiting for his moment to suck your blood and turn you into one of the undead. Listen to the creatures of the night!"
"You haven't got any sores in your mouth, have you?" Mildred asked, ignoring the old man's teasing. "Doctor friend of mine tried this on a woman who got bitten by a moccasin snake down on the Brazos. Forgot he'd got a little ulcer in his lip. Woman lived and he died."
Ryan hesitated a moment. "No."
He placed his lips against the warm flesh, sucking gently, tasting blood and spitting it out on the concrete floor. He repeated the procedure, harder. This time he was sure there was a strange, metallic taste in with the salt blood, and he spit out more quickly. He sucked and spit a third time. "You all right, Dean?" he asked. "Reckon so. Thanks again, Dad." Ryan squeezed the boy's arm. "Done good." Mildred looked anxiously at Ryan. "Sure you got no problems from that?"
"No, not really. Thought there was an odd taste and my tongue and lips are a bit numb."
"Bad?"
"No. Wearing off already."
"Loc an," said J.B., who'd been looking at the butterfly over Krysty's shoulder.
"Paralyze its victims."
"Yeah. Guess so."
Krysty straightened. "Evil-looking thing. So pretty, so deadly. If that had struck an artery, it could easily have done some serious harm."
She lifted her booted right foot and slammed it down on the feebly fluttering butterfly, crushing it into the floor.
"There," she said.
Ryan looked outside. "Shows us the hidden dangers. Still don't know where we are, but it's a strange and hostile place. Let's keep it on triple red, friends." As they readied themselves to leave the gateway, Mildred glanced back, seeing the dull smudge on the gray stone. "It always amazed me that creatures could manufacture something like a local anesthetic in their bodies. Ah, the way of nature! Still, it's a pity. It was so pretty," she said.

RYAN WENT FIRST, the others following him in a close skirmish line, J.B. bringing up the rear. Everyone had blasters cocked in readiness, all of them aware of the dangerous strangeness of the place.
A narrow path between the trees showed the same signs of having been recently cut from the lush wilderness with machetes.
The sun was bright, occasionally visible, filtered in golden shafts through the overwhelming green of the forest's twining branches. The heat was oppressive, and all
of them were quickly soaked in sweat.
"Can you use your sextant, J.B.?"] Ryan asked. "Doesn't make that much difference,
but it'd be good to know where we are. I swear I've never been here before. Wherever
'here' is."
"I can try it." The Armorer reached for the miniature scientific instrument, one of the
rarest examples of surviving predark navigational gear. He squinted through it at the
sun, having made all the necessary calculations and settings, then looked at the dial
and shook his head.
"Well?"
"Nothing, Ryan. It's either malfunctioned or we aren't in Deathlands anymore."
"Well, we ended up in Moscow that one time," Ryan said. "Can you change the
settings to give us an idea?"
"Sure. But I can't give any real kind of accuracy at all. Even if I try and reset all the
base parameters on it. Let's see If we"
They stood still, waiting. A skinny monkey swung past overhead, its pelt a leprous
yellow. It paused and stared down at them from red-veined, protruding eyes.
J.B. sniffed. "Well, near as I can figure it, we're someplace like the middle of the
Amazon jungle. But there's one lateral reading that doesn't seem to register properly. I
guess we could be on the narrow bit between Deathlands and South America. Could
be."
"The isthmus of Panama," Doc suggested. "Home of the great canal and every kind of
disease-bearing insect known to humanity. The white man's grave."
"Farther south is more likely." J.B. put away the minisextant. "Best bet is that we've
jumped to some kind of secret base that got built in the jungles of Brazil or a place like
that." He took off his glasses to clean away a blur of perspiration. "Have to admit that
my geography's not too hot once you get south of the Grandee. And we're way south
of that."
Ryan glanced behind them. They'd all checked out the exterior of the building that
housed the mat-trans unit. The one thing that seemed certain was that it wasn't a
normal redoubt. It was too small for that, though it was built of the same nuke-
resistant materials.
Some scratches and deeper gouges marred the reinforced walls at the side of the open
door. Instead of the usual lever to close the door, there was the kind of protected
number-and-letter digital-display pad that was normally on the outside doors of big
redoubts.
Taking a chance, based on previous experience of exits from sealed redoubts, Ryan
had keyed in the numerals 2 and 5 and 3.
It had worked, and the massive sec door had slid closed. There were more shallow
scratches and minor dents on its outside, as if attempts had been made to break inbut
totally ineffectual attempts.
"Like the one in Russia," J.B. had observed. "Just the mat-trans unit hidden away
without a major redoubt to guard and protect it."
"There goes my hopes of a hot shower," Krysty moaned. "With this soaking heat I
need it even more."
"Me, too," Mildred agreed. "Maybe we'll find a nice limpid crystal pool somewhere
close by."
"Probably will," Jak said. "Filled piranhas."

THE PATH RAN for about a hundred yards. Doc called for a halt. "Might I ask a short and simple question?"
"Since the gateway was sealed and had obviously not been opened since the days of skydark, what is the point of this path? It appears to lead through an otherwise impenetrable region of dense forest to a locked door."
"Good question."
They all stood and pondered it. Apart from the narrow path, there was no other sign of the existence of human life, though the undergrowth was so thick that there could have been a sixteen-lane highway just a hundred yards away and they wouldn't have known it.
"Mebbe part hunting trail," Jak suggested. "Plenty game around."
"Could be." Ryan wiped sweat from his face, pulling away the patch from his missing left eye and mopping the puckered socket dry.
"What are we looking for, Dad?"
"Don't know until we find it. Somewhere to get some food. Just move on a ways until we come across some sort of ville."
Less than thirty seconds later they encountered the locals.
Chapter Five

Ryan had just started moving again when the path came to an abrupt end. The wall of forest opened into a wide clearing, hacked clear and kept cropped. Immediately opposite was a wider track, winding toward the west. But what immediately caught Ryan's eye was the trio of men standing by a large circular block of stones at the center of the clearing. They were dark skinned, with short hair that was covered in some kind of oil or grease. Two of the stocky men wore cotton shirts and pants, the third a beaded loincloth that barely covered his genitals. All of them had necklaces, and dangling rings through their ears. Bows were slung across their shoulders, as were quivers of feathered arrows. Two of them also had blasters. One was carrying what seemed to be an ancient Mauser rifle. The other had a pistol tucked into the waist of his pants. It wasn't a model that Ryan recognized at all.

They were arranging the body of what looked like a small antelope on top of the block of stone, but they stopped at Ryan's sudden appearance from the surrounding greenery. None of them made any effort to draw a weapon.

The one-eyed man had already hissed a warning to his companions, but the natives didn't seem to present any major threat. He had the SIG-Sauer drawn, but didn't open fire. The men were about fifty feet away from him, close enough for him to have felt confident in taking out all three.

Ryan led the way as the friends filed into the clearing, all with blasters drawn. The trio of locals watched, muttering at the sight of the red hair. Mildred's dark coloring also seemed to fascinate them.

But total amazement was reserved for the last but one of the party.

Jak Lauren.

When the albino, with his shock of pure white hair, walked into view, the men were galvanized. They dropped the bloodied corpse of the animal in the grass and actually staggered backward, clutching at one another.

"Watch it!" Ryan warned, wondering what kind of danger the reaction might mean. But the natives didn't seem to have any thought of attacking the seven strangers. They stood there, slack jawed, repeating a word that sounded to Ryan like blanco. He knew enough Mex talk to know that the word meant white, and he assumed it had to be some sort of reference to the teenager.

Though you didn't call it body language in Deathlands, it was an important part of survival to be able to read the way a man stood and acted.

It was obvious to Ryan that the trio of locals were torn between fear and aggression and something else that he couldn't identify, something like an unusual kind of respect mingled with understandable suspicion against outlanders who had suddenly appeared in their hunting grounds.

"We don't intend trouble," he called, holding up his empty left hand in the universal