

Survive or perish in the dark heart of tomorrow

JAMES AXLER

**DEATH
LANDS**

Atlantis Reprise

ALTERED STATES
BOOK TWO



GOLD EAGLE 62582

HERRING

“You know what you’re saying, don’t you?”

Lemur nodded. “I am well aware.”

“If this was a definite plan to sneak in, snatch Doc and Krysty and take them back to Atlantis,” Ryan stated, “then he knew they were here, he knew what made them of interest and he knew how to get past your sec patrol and into the ville. He knew exactly where we were. There’s only one way he could have known all that.”

“Spies,” Mark said. “Wretches who claim to want freedom but are nothing more than dogs.”

“Who are they?” Ryan asked. “Mark, you trained as a Crawler and you knew nothing of spies?”

Mark returned Ryan’s stare, unblinking. Finally Ryan nodded. “I believe you. You’ve put too much in here to be a traitor. But someone is, and if they know about us, then they know about everything you do. If we’re gonna get my people back, and get rid of Odyssey, then we’re gonna have to move fast—before the information has a chance to find its way back to Atlantis.”

He pulled himself to his feet. “Are you ready?”

Lemur shook his head. “No...but we have no choice.”

Other titles in the Deathlands saga:

Pony Soldiers
Dectra Chain
Ice and Fire
Red Equinox
Northstar Rising
Time Nomads
Latitude Zero
Seedling Dark Carnival
Chill Factor
Moon Fate
Fury's Pilgrims
Shockscape
Deep Empire
Cold Asylum
Twilight Children
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Shadowfall
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JAMES AXLER
DEATH LANDS®

Atlantis Reprise



A GOLD EAGLE BOOK FROM
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Of all the causes which conspire to blind
Man's erring judgment and misguide the mind,
What the weak head with strongest bias rules,
Is pride, the never-failing vice of fools.

—Alexander Pope,
An Essay on Criticism

THE DEATHLANDS SAGA

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Chapter One

The ruins lay smoldering in the valley below them. Worn down by the fight, caught by the searing heat of the fires that had spread through the ville on the wings of the swirling zephyrs, there were few survivors. Not many that were people. A few mules and horses, some dogs—those that had managed to slip their bonds and scabble their way up the steep slopes, their fear powering their limbs as they attempted to outrun the devastation.

Ryan Cawdor, Jak Lauren, J. B. Dix, Mildred Wyeth and Krysty Wroth had prevailed, with them, Doc Tanner—or possibly not Doc Tanner. Who could tell, in his currently unconscious state, whether he would wake to once more be Dr. Theophilus Tanner, or if he would be Joseph Jordan, the reincarnated or transferred soul of a Scottish trapper from the centuries before the nukocaust?

For now, it didn't matter. Like all of them, Doc was beyond caring about such matters. While he was still wrapped in the velvet oblivion of unconsciousness, the others began to stir. They had managed to escape from the holocaust that raged beneath them, but the effort had rendered all of them too exhausted to take another step, all sinking into their own sleep of exhaustion.

Yet this wasn't the place to succumb to such measures. The heat rising on spiraling air from the inferno beneath was enough to warm the air around and the earth beneath them, to take the edge from the ever present howling gales that swept unfettered across the barren plains of rock and ice that surrounded them. It was enough to keep them from freezing to an early chill. But it wouldn't sustain them for long: the cold would bite, the fires below subside. When that happened, then the sudden drop in temperature would take a swift and exacting toll.

Should they even survive this, then there was the greater problem: where did they go from here?

First things first. The most important thing was to survive as long as possible, from one moment to the next, until these moments ran together to make a long stretch of time. And to survive, they had to be on their feet and moving.

Ryan was the first to surface from the blackness. Something deep inside him nagged and impelled him to come around from the comfort of oblivion. He was tired, aching, and felt as though he could settle into the arms of Morpheus forever, never to be bothered again by the rigors of having to survive. And yet still there nagged a voice that told him to face the pain and the cold. It wasn't just about him. When he became the leader of his small group, then he undertook the duty to try to guide them through adversity to whatever it was that they had spent so long searching for. That obligation wouldn't allow him to take the easy way out.

Ryan dragged his aching limbs, his legs still suffused with lactic acid burn from their flight, and used his less battered and more responsive arms to propel himself upward, into a kneeling position. It took a moment for him to gain his bearings. He looked out over the empty plain, the daylight already beginning to fade, then back toward the valley, the air around the rim glowing as though casting a benign radiation into the darkening skies.

But there was no mistaking the odor that drifted across the short distance. Cutting through the ever present sulfur burn that always made the air taste sour, there was the smell of roasted flesh, sickly sweet and mixed with the ashes of the woods and brick that had once constituted the ville of Fairbanks.

A glorious folly. Doc had used those words once, when he was Doc. He had been quoting some kind of old song or poem at them, something to do with six hundred men riding into a valley. Mebbe

that was why he could think of it now, why it cut through the fog that still partially clouded his mind.

Not knowing what else to do, Ryan hauled himself to his feet and half walked, half stumbled across the short distance to the rim of the valley, so that he could see what was happening below.

Nothing.

Not, at least, in terms of action or life. There were still tongues of fire that whipped across the remains of the ville, crisscrossing over the rubble that was all that remained of the streets and buildings. If anything had managed to stay alive in there, it was trapped and buying the farm in a long, slow, agonizing way.

Not that Ryan cared. Those mad Inuit bastards would only have chilled them after they'd burned the inhabitants of the ville. With only a very few left back at the settlement, he guessed that this meant the end of the Inuit tribe.

Fuck them, they would have taken out his people.

His only concern about who lived was based on the assumption that any still down there may come after them. And if his friends felt anything like he did right now, then they were in no fit condition to take on anyone.

He turned his back on the mayhem below and trudged wearily to where the rest of the companions lay on the ground, some now beginning to show signs of life.

Mildred and Jak had managed to reenter the real world and were no longer blearily staring around them, struggling to make their aching limbs respond to the messages their befuddled brains were sending. By the time that they were able to lift themselves to their feet, J.B. and Krysty were also beginning to respond to their surroundings.

It left only Doc, blissfully unaware of the perils from which he had been rescued, and the perils in which he now reposed, oblivious on the cold, hard ground.

The shock of the cold beginning to hit them as the night crept on and the fires in the valley subsided rapidly, casting up less heat, was enough to focus their minds.

Mildred checked Doc. He was unconscious, but seemingly unharmed apart from a few contusions and cuts, which was no more than the rest of them had suffered during the brief and brutal battle. There was no reason that she could define to explain why he was still unconscious while the others had all managed to recover sufficiently to function.

'What the hell do we do now?' J.B. asked Ryan as the two men stood surveying the wasteland around them. 'Can't go on to Ank Ridge. We don't know where it is, don't know how far and mebbe couldn't even pick up the trail.'

'Even if we could, they'd have some idea of what's been going on, and how the hell could we explain away the trail of devastation the Inuit left behind them? We're all that's left. We'd have to shoulder all the blame and the shit that would come with it,' Ryan added grimly. 'I don't know about you, but I'm sure as shit not up to another firefight right now.'

J.B. cast a glance back over his shoulder to where Mildred was still tending to Doc. 'Not if we've got a passenger, as well. Whoever the hell he's going to be next,' he said simply.

'So, a rock and a hard place. Fireblast, whoever thought that one up must have been thinking of a place like this,' Ryan murmured. 'J.B., we don't know what lies off the trails, and we don't know how far anything is in any direction except one. We've only got the two choices.'

'Go back past the slopes, all the way back to the redoubt, and then jump.' It was a statement rather than a question.

'That's only one choice. What's the second?'

Ryan shrugged. 'Lie down, go back to sleep and buy the farm.'

FACED WITH A CHOICE that stark, even the most tired of limbs, the slowest of dulled reactions, couldn't fail

to click into gear. Mildred made Doc as warm and comfortable as was possible and then joined the others in their mission under the fading light.

There were animals roaming, lost around the rim of the valley. Some of the dogs still had sleds or partial sleds attached to them. The companions' task was to round up as many of the animals as they could, taking care not to spook them. Easier said than done, as the events in the valley had set a wave of fear trembling through those creatures that survived. But they, too were exhausted, and so, with a little patience, the companions were able to round up the surviving livestock and tether it as best as possible.

The plan was simple: from the partial and whole sleds that survived, they would attempt to cobble together enough transport to hook up to the beasts. That would enable them to tackle the distance between their position and the redoubt perhaps faster than they would on foot, and certainly enable them to preserve their energies. The remainder of any salvaged wood they could use for fires along the journey, to warm them and their pack beasts in the darkest, coldest watches of the night.

The beasts could be used to pull the transport. They could also be slaughtered along the way to provide food for both the companions and for those beasts that survived. The slaughter would perhaps put fear into the beasts, but that would be countered by their intense cold and hunger, which would make them perhaps more malleable than usual.

By the time that they had collected the livestock, made a fire for the now imminent night, and begun to hammer together enough sleds to carry them and any animal carcasses they would slaughter for food back to the redoubt, they were exhausted. Unwilling to begin the slaughter so soon and to face a sleepless night with the unsettled livestock, the companions resorted to the remaining self-heats. Whatever else occurred, J.B. and Mildred always insured that they could keep their essential stocks close to hand. It wasn't even something they thought about: it was a second nature.

The food was foul, but it was nutritious enough to justify forcing it down rather than throwing it to one side in disgust. Their stomachs full, they settled to rest, Ryan opting to force himself awake to keep first watch.

As his companions and the beasts slept soundly into the night, Ryan cast his eye around him. The valley was now a distant glow, the fires finally burning themselves out. Nothing more had emerged from the ruins, and nothing was likely to have survived. Just the six of them and a smattering of livestock.

The one-eyed man wondered at how his friends were able to drag themselves from precipitous situations, coming back time and again from the brink of being chilled. One day their luck would run out, but until then there was little they could do except to keep moving.

But to keep moving across this plain that they already knew to be so hostile? With the sleds and the livestock, they had increased their chances of survival. Nonetheless, it was going to be a hard ride.

THE JOURNEY WAS LONG and hard. Started the next morning, it took two days and well into a third before the area of the redoubt hove into view. They stuck to the trail proscribed by the traffic between villes now reinforced in view by the detritus left a few days before by the Inuit as they had passed. The pace they set was steady. To go too fast and risk burning out the strength left in the livestock would have been ultimately self-defeating. Nonetheless, it was important that they cover the ground quickly. The wood for fires, the livestock for food—neither would last for very long. Moreover, it was vital for their state of mind that they traverse the trail with speed and get out of that godforsaken territory.

It was almost a pleasure for them to be able to relax and to rest weary and torn muscles as the beasts pulling the sleds took most of the strain. They still had to be steered, which sometimes took its toll on wounded biceps and shoulders. A small price to pay for such a rapid and relatively easy progress.

Along the trail, the few landmarks that existed seemed to come upon them so much faster than before—inevitably, given their mode of transport, but vaguely disorienting after the rigors of the outward-bound march.

The deserted settlements, ripped apart by the plas-ex detonations of their previous visit, stood alone and desolate, their keening loneliness speaking more of the isolation and vast tracts of empty space than the companions could have cared to be reminded of, reliant as they were on exhausted beasts on a trail to nowhere. They were a stark reminder of how close the companions had come to being chilled themselves in such a manner—not once, but several times during the expedition. Even now, they weren't out of danger. The weather had been holding for more than forty-eight hours, the heavy yellow-tinged chem clouds pregnant with rains and snows that could engulf them, lose them in the roaring blizzard, and soak and chill them to the bone, with no shelter within view where respite could be sought.

There were, in the distance, the occasional glimpses of deer or bear as the packs and herds went about the business of trying to survive. They could be a danger if they approached, but hopefully held too much fear of the sleds and those pulling them, based on past experience, to come too near.

The ice and snow plucked from the rock and swirled in the never-ending flurry of winds still numbed and chilled when coming into contact with exposed skin. Despite the layers of skins and furs that still swathed them, the companions were chilled to the bone by the constant crosswinds, this time without the exercise of marching to warm them in any way. It was all they could do not to succumb to the ravages of hypothermia. How ironic if their attempt to increase their speed was to cause their demise. However they chose to make their flight, it seemed as though they faced nothing but life-threatening obstacles.

Two nights huddled by fires built—on the second night—from some of their sleds caused them to double up for the last day, and to put more strain on the livestock—livestock that was becoming more and more unsettled as Jak slaughtered some to feed the others and to feed the companions. Ryan had been correct in his assumption that the creatures would be too hungry and cold to be that distressed by the slaughter, intent as they were on eating their chilled companions to appease the hunger gnawing at their guts; however they were still unsettled enough for their pace to be upset on the following day's trek.

The trail took them along the base of the volcanic slopes that housed the Inuit village. They skirted the rock-enclosed passage and didn't take the trail as it wound up into the wooded slopes, choosing to avoid a possible firefight by keeping to the base of the slope. Ryan hoped that the few remaining Inuit wouldn't be hunting at that point in the day. The way he had it figured, they'd have enough trouble keeping the settlement going, and it was too early for them to be sniffing around for any sign of their warriors returning.

After passing the volcanic region, and watching it recede peacefully into the distance, it was only a matter of a few hours by sled before they reached the area where the redoubt was hidden.

All the while, Doc hovered between conscious and unconscious. Mildred tended to him, but could still find no reason why he shouldn't be fully aware of what was occurring around him. It seemed to her almost as if he were surfacing, taking note of his surroundings, then retreating into his own mind after deciding that he didn't like what he saw.

J.B. took what sightings he could in the appalling conditions, trusting the accuracy of the minisextant and his own skill to attain an accurate reading. Ryan hoped that the Armorer's sense of direction under these conditions was accurate. They couldn't last for much longer without some respite from the weather.

He didn't care where they might end up when they made the mat-trans jump. Anywhere had to be better than this...although, he realized with bitterness it was probably how he'd felt before they ended

up in these icy wastes.

~~J.B. motioned them to change direction and a familiar outcropping came into view. The end of their quest was in sight.~~

It was almost as if Doc knew. He surprised Mildred by raising himself up on one elbow and looking at her with a quizzical air that was at once all too familiar to her.

A suspicion confirmed when he opened his mouth and said, in a voice that was distinctly his own 'My dear Doctor, what on earth are we doing out here in these appalling conditions? And why, pray tell, do you look as though you've been on the losing side of a fight?'

Chapter Two

Although nothing had changed within the confines of the redoubt since they had last set foot there a few days before, the atmosphere that greeted them was totally different. Where there had previously been an air of gloom and foreboding, now there was nothing but a sense of relief. Despite the memories that had been stirred by their last incursion, there was no trace of remorse or remembrance. The strange atmosphere that had seemed to drape itself over them, penetrating to their very souls and painting their emotional world a darker shade of black, had now lifted.

Perhaps those ghosts that had been stirred had now dissipated, blown away by the experiences of the past few days. Perhaps those ghosts had never really existed and were just random memories that had fed a deeper malaise triggered by the act of a mat-trans jump. Or perhaps they were still here, but were now kept at bay by the fatigue that ate into their very bones, deadening all thought and all feeling in the effort just to keep moving until they were in a position to fall unconscious with exhaustion.

Ryan punched in the sec code once they were on the inside of the heavy entry doors. The remaining beasts had been freed from the sleds and driven away from the entrance. They lurked at a distance, unsure of what to do and where to go. Born into service, they were wild but with muted survival instincts, wanting to stick close to humans they saw as a source of food. There was only a slim chance that they would survive in the harsh environment, finding their way back to the remaining Inuit if they were lucky. It might have been kinder to have chilled them all, putting them out of their misery quickly and efficiently, yet it would have required an effort that none would have felt they had the energy to discharge.

As the door closed on the lurking beasts, on the snow and ice carried on chill winds and on the barren rock landscape, they felt a collective relief. The slightly musty recycled air, heated to a bearable temperature, kicked in, driving the cold from their bones. It was all they could do to keep from collapsing in the tunnel.

Except, perhaps, for Doc, who seemed filled with a new vitality.

‘By the Three Kennedys, I don’t know what’s been going on—nor, come to that, why I am still with you when I appear to have been in some sort of coma all this time—but I do know that whatever it is, it appears to have taken a hefty toll upon you all.’

‘Hefty toll,’ Mildred repeated with a short, barking laugh. ‘Doc, you mad old freak of nature, I don’t think you even know how funny that is.’

‘Funny would appear to be a strange word for it, given the condition in which you find yourselves,’ Doc replied, a little perplexed.

‘You know, it kind of depends on what you mean by funny, I guess,’ Mildred answered him. ‘I mean, do you see me laughing?’

‘That would seem to be the last thing that you are capable of doing right now,’ Doc threw back at her with all seriousness.

Mildred fixed him with a shrewd look. ‘I don’t think you’ve got the slightest idea what’s been going on, have you?’

Doc opened his mouth, but no words came forth. Only Mildred now stood at the end of the corridor with him. The others had wordlessly made their way down the corridor, headed for the showers and the dorms. They moved slowly and with the grim determination of those only kept awake by sheer willpower, a dogged one-foot-in-front-of-the-other approach all that kept them going. Mildred

followed the direction of his gaze, read the complete confusion in his eyes.

‘No, I don’t suppose you have,’ she murmured more to herself than to the bewildered old man. Then, in a louder voice, she added, ‘Doc, I can’t tell you everything now. I’m just too damn tired and aching. Another few hours aren’t going to hurt. We just need to rest and clean up before we jump.’

‘We’re using the mat-trans again, so soon? But surely we should be looking for—’

‘Doc, just don’t,’ she interrupted, holding up a hand to silence him, then turning away to follow the others. She threw a parting shot over her shoulder. ‘Just wait, keep it all in until tomorrow, then you’ll understand.’

Doc stood watching her, a frown furrowing his brow. Whatever had happened out there—whatever it was that he couldn’t remember—it had some kind of effect on those people he called his friends. The only friends he had in this godforsaken land in which he had been forced to strive for survival. Even in the few short minutes that he had been conscious he had noticed that there was some kind of distance that had arisen between them.

Why? He could recall being here and leaving to strike out toward Ank Ridge. But then? He could recall depression, and he could recall a storm that mirrored his mood, a blizzard that obscured the landscape in the same way that his feelings had obscured his ability to observe and function what was happening around him...and after that? A blur of ideas, images and emotions that he couldn’t grasp.

The distance he felt was mirrored by the way in which they had left him at the head of the tunnel. As Mildred disappeared around a dog-leg bend, leaving him isolated by the entrance, he felt that the physical distance was nothing more than a mirror.

Reluctantly—for he had no idea what he would face when the others had rested—he followed on from them. By the time that he had reached the showers, they were stripped and washing the filth, ice and blood from their battered bodies.

Doc sat quietly as they finished and dried themselves. Only the barest necessity of communication took place, no more than a few words in each exchange. It was almost as though they were too tired to even acknowledge one another’s existence. Certainly, none seemed to acknowledge Doc’s presence.

Before too long he was left alone in the shower room, the others having gone in search of washing machines. Automatically, he stripped and washed himself, noting with an almost detached bemusement the signs of combat, the scars of recent wounds and the discoloration of contusion on his body. How he came to have these, he had no idea.

Frankly, he didn’t care. It was with no little sense of foreboding that he eventually joined the others in the dorms, where he tried to settle to sleep.

The redoubt was silent and still. Doc tried to will himself to sleep, but his mind was racing. Fragments of what might have occurred, and of the thoughts that had plagued what, to him, seemed like a distant dream, ran through his mind, tripping over each other in the race to assume order and to make some kind of sense.

Eventually the effort of trying to make sense from chaos was enough to tire him and he fell into a fitful, uneasy sleep.

DOC AWOKE the next morning to find that the others had risen before him. Despite the unease with which he had first fallen into sleep, it had proved to move from fitful to deep and dreamless, and he now felt refreshed and less apprehensive. He rose and dressed, going in search of the others. In the quiet of the redoubt, the hum of unmaintained machinery the only breaks in the silence, it wasn’t difficult to determine where they were.

Doc’s sense took him to the kitchens, where the others were attempting to construct some kind of appetizing and nutritious meal from what they had left in the stores before leaving the last time. Which was very little. But they were in no condition to be fussy about what they would eat. Even the

remains of the stores beat charred and burned mule or dog meat when it came to a contest.

~~‘Doc, I didn’t want to wake you, so I left you,’ Krysty said on catching sight of him. ‘Hope that was okay. How are you feeling?’~~

‘Do you mean generally? Or are you being more specific—as in, do I feel quite insane today?’ Doc queried with as much of a grin as he could muster.

‘It wasn’t what I meant, but I guess it’s a fair question,’ Krysty mused. ‘I don’t know what you remember, but you kind of lost it for a while there.’

‘I’ll have to take your word for that,’ the old man answered, settling himself among them. ‘I have no recollection of any events after first leaving here and being caught in a blizzard.’

Ryan had been watching Doc carefully and had no doubts that the old man was telling the truth. There was something disingenuous about the old man. It was always easy to see when Doc was entering one of his mentally fragile phases, and equally it was easy to see when he had clarity of thought. Now was one of the latter times and Doc seemed genuinely confused about events. If nothing else, Ryan was glad to see the back of Joseph Jordan, whoever or whatever he may have been.

‘Dark night, there’s a lot that happened since then,’ J.B. said with a degree of wry understatement. ‘Where do we begin?’

Doc sat entranced while the events of the past few days were relayed to him. The trek across the wastelands, followed by their discovery by the Inuit hunting party when Doc tried to escape them. Their captivity in the Inuit settlement and near sacrifice in pagan- and Christian-inspired ritual to insure the fertility of the waning tribe. From this, the sudden emergence from fever of a new personality within Doc—that of the reincarnated Joseph Jordan. When the story reached this point, he watched Doc closely for some flicker of recognition, yet there was none. The only emotion to register on his face was that of astonishment.

From here, the old man’s astonishment mounted as they unfurled his plans to take on the ville of Fairbanks as a large-scale sacrifice to their Lord, and of the war party he had helped to prepare.

By the time that Mildred and Jak were relaying to him the doomed attack on the ville, and the manner in which they had almost been trapped within the burning streets, Doc’s face was ashen. Racing through his mind were thoughts of how his own insanity had nearly doomed his companions. Thoughts that jostled for space within his mind with others, that were darker and more introverted: how fragile was his mind, his personality, that it was able to be submerged so easily into some kind of disguise? How easy was it for him to sink into a kind of oblivion where he was able to threaten the very existence of those he valued most with no impunity?

‘Doc, Doc, are you okay?’

‘Eh?’ The old man shook himself from his reverie to see that the others were studying him closely. He realized that their story had ended and he had seemed not to acknowledge this.

‘I’m sorry,’ he began haltingly. ‘I just find it hard to comprehend. That I could have seemed to have functioned so clearly and yet to be advocating such madness. In fact, actively pursuing it.’ He shook his head slowly. ‘I have no recall of any of the events you have outlined, not even in the sense of a dream from which I was detached, merely the observer. What I recall is so much...less...’ He petered off, not quite sure where to begin.

In the ensuing silence Ryan scanned the companions as they sat around the kitchen of the redoubt. Mildred and Krysty, who seemed to have a better grasp of the complexities of Doc’s psyche than anyone else, were on edge, waiting for the old man to try to explain what had happened to him in his own mind. It was vital information for them, as they would be able to try to assess just where he was coming from...and perhaps where he was going to.

Jak was impassive. His scarred albino features were as grim and unreadable as they always were. Very rarely did any emotion escape the mask that he used to shield himself from the outside world.

But he would be taking it in and making his own assessment.

J.B. looked like Ryan felt—as though he wanted to know what was happening with Doc but doubted that he could assimilate it. The two men had been friends for so long that Ryan was sure that J.B. felt the same way as he did. They were men of action and only used their sharp minds when action was called for. This was something beyond that range of experience.

Doc began again. ‘In my mind, I felt as though I were not here. Everything that I experienced on our journey to the Inuit ville was part of some test. I was back in the time from which I originally came. I was insane, locked in a padded room and going through these experiences as a kind of mental exercise. It was as though I were a rat in a maze, running blindly at the behest of some celestial scientist who had a purpose in mind for me, and if I reached the end of the maze I would be rewarded. Not with candy or cheese, but with the truth. A revelation that would explain why I was going through this whole experience...not just since landing here, but in the entire time since you, my dear friends, first saved me from the hands of Cort Strasser.

‘It seemed to me that in order to do this, I had to go through some kind of change, some kind of rebirth. I had to be like the butterfly that emerges from the chrysalis...even if that change meant that I had little or no knowledge of the life that I had experienced before that moment.

‘I suspect that that was the moment at which this man Jordan first made an appearance. I could not tell you who or what he was, only that once he appeared, I receded not just in your eyes, but in my own mind, as well. I have no recall of anything that happened after that, and only one fleeting memory from then until I awoke on the sled as we approached this place once more.

‘If I think about it, I can remember, just for a moment, standing in a log cabin staring at you all, wrapped in furs and skins. I tried to speak, but somehow the words would not come out. It was as though I were watching you through a gauze, as though I could hear you through a fog of white noise. My chest was constrained, making every breath something for which I had to fight, every syllable something that had to be forced from my lips. The words were there, but they would not come out.’

‘But it is fleeting, momentary, and after that there is nothing. Nothing until last evening, when I awoke to find myself on a sled, aware that something had happened, but not what that may be.’

Doc stuttered to a halt and shrugged, not knowing where to go.

‘I think that being here triggered things you didn’t want to remember and made you withdraw into yourself,’ Mildred said slowly. ‘Strange thing is, although it may sound like madness, it’s more a way of clinging on to your sanity.’

‘But at what cost?’ Doc spit bitterly. ‘What does it benefit me if I save sanity at the expense of losing identity? What use is it if I close down whenever things get too much? How does this settle with the notion that I am in some way a useful member of this group. Good heavens, Doctor, if I am to retreat into my own head at the drop of a hat, what possible use could I be to you? In fact, I could be nothing except a complete liability. And this is not a world in which to carry passengers.’

‘That’s for us to decide,’ Ryan cut in.

Doc shook his head firmly. ‘I cannot be responsible for such an eventuality.’

‘Then what do you propose to do about it?’ Krysty asked in a reasonable tone. ‘You want to stay here, alone? How long will you cling to your sanity then? You had a set of circumstances that are unlikely to occur again. I can’t see why you—’

‘But that is not the point,’ Doc shouted over her. ‘It may have been a one-off occurrence, but I cannot know that for sure, any more than you can. I cannot risk it happening again.’

‘Doc, the only way any of us can avoid a risk like that is by buying the farm right here and now, and that’s just stupe,’ J.B. said. ‘It’s this fucking place—it messes with our heads. Let’s just get the hell out and see what we feel like when we land somewhere else.’

It was a view with which all could agree, even Doc, who approached the idea with some

trepidation, yet could see through his own fears how the redoubt may be, once more, exerting its pernicious influence.

They effected the quickest evacuation of all their redoubt experiences. In next to no time, they had collected what little they had to take with them, replenished from the few supplies left in the stores and were in the mattrans chamber.

Ryan stood by the door while the others filed into the chamber. As he entered and closed the door Krysty settled on the disk-inset floor next to an apprehensive-looking Doc. She could feel the oppressive atmosphere that had once again been creeping upon them begin to lift, as if carried on the trails of white mist that began to spiral around them.

Chapter Three

Jak wretched and sent a thin stream of bile across the floor, where it settled at Ryan Cawdor's feet.

'Jak's coming around,' the one-eyed man muttered, watching the stream of liquid congeal at the toe of his heavy combat boot. He couldn't think much beyond that, having only just managed to clamber to his feet. His head still spun wildly and it was at times like this that he was almost thankful for monocular vision, as it spared him the worst excesses of vomit-inducing blurred and double vision after a jump.

'It's not him I'm worried about,' Krysty slurred, shaking her head as she tried to clear it. The movement only made things worse and she slumped forward from her kneeling position. She felt terrible. Like the others, she had been concerned that with little opportunity to recuperate after a traumatic firefight and flight, the jump would be too much of a strain. Jak always suffered after a jump, but it was the ever-fragile Doc who was the cause of most concern.

She'd worry about him later, though. Right now, her primary objective was to make sure that she was functioning.

J.B. and Mildred had stirred, and while Ryan tried to make out shapes through the opaque armaglass walls of the chamber, Krysty helped the pair of them to their feet. Jak, as ever, eschewed all help, waving away Krysty's proffered hand to drag himself upright. He spit out a sour ball of bile and looked over at Doc.

'He okay?'

Doc lay motionless, on his back.

'I don't know,' Mildred muttered unnecessarily as she made her way over to him. The reflex reply had been necessary to cover her own concern. To all intents and purposes, Doc looked as though the trip might have been one trauma too much. He was so still, looked so peaceful, that at first she suspected that he had bought the farm while being reconstituted. It was only when she was kneeling over him that she could see he was breathing shallowly. There was still some life in the old bastard.

Something he confirmed by suddenly opening his eyes. They were wide, staring and alert, with none of the muzziness that he—or, indeed, any of the others—usually experienced after a jump.

'Why, hello, my dear Doctor. How pleasant to see you. I must say, you don't seem to be at all well. I, on the other hand, feel as though I have had a most refreshing rest.' He propped himself up on one elbow and looked at the others, adding, 'It's most strange. Usually I feel terrible after a jump, but I feel as though I could fight an army.'

'Doc, the way I feel, that might be a good thing,' Ryan commented wryly. 'But right now, let's just get our shit together and secure the immediate area.'

He had seen nothing in the vague shapes lurking beyond the opaque armaglass of the chamber to suggest that there was any kind of life in the redoubt. However, triple red was the only way to approach evacuation. When they were sufficiently recovered to make a move, they exited the chamber one by one, assuming positions of cover.

It was a futile exercise. The room beyond the anteroom was in semidarkness, where some of the fluorescent lighting had failed and the constantly blinking lights of the comp desks were all the life that appeared to exist.

Despite the fact that the air-conditioning and recycling plant should have kept a constant temperature, there was a distinct chill in the air, suggesting that it was more than just the lighting that

was failing. The air itself was breathable, but carried a dank undertone, suggesting that areas of the redoubt might have been breached by outside elements. The one reassuring thing it did have, though, was that indefinable air of complete desolation. There seemed to be no human life here.

Still keeping their blasters to hand—instinct told them the redoubt was empty, but intellect still counseled caution—they left the chamber room.

The redoubt was in some disarray, not from any looting or ransacking from outside, but from the gradual breakdown of its own systems. At some time, probably during the immediate aftermath of the nukocaust, a breach had occurred in the walls of the structure. An earth movement strong enough to rupture the reinforced, thick concrete walls had caused enough damage to let outside elements creep in. Wherever this was located—and at present they couldn't be sure—it was beneath the local water table, as damp had suffused the very atmosphere. Great stretches of corridor were unlit where the lighting had shorted. The same could be said of sec doors that had started to close when the circuits shorted, but had been stayed by warps in the wall and were now jammed half open, half shut, a monument to the breach in supposedly safe defenses.

Rats had infiltrated the cracks, as had insect life. The winged insects buzzed around them, trying bite. The red eyes of albino rats, almost twice the size of normal, glowered at them before the creatures scuttled for the safety of complete darkness. Here and there were small, stagnant pools where the damp had gathered enough to drip down the walls through the thin cracks that suffused the concrete. There were gatherings of moss and slime on the walls, delineating watermarks where there were occasional floods when the water table rose. Thankfully the mat-trans and anteroom had been just above this level.

As they rose higher, the signs of damage grew less, and there was less insect and rodent life hardy enough to brave the comparatively great distance from dank security. The electrical systems had still suffered, however, and some of the rooms were closed to them, sec doors failing to respond.

Eventually they reached a place where maps were displayed, revealing to them that they had landed on the Eastern Seaboard, beneath what had once been an area known as New Jersey.

'Not usual to have a redoubt so near a heavily populated area,' Krysty mused, indicating the above-ground map that revealed an expanse of predark urban growth.

'It was a heavy industrial area, probably one of the places they would have wanted to land some nukes first of all,' Mildred commented. 'I'd guess this redoubt was built so that they could have a base near to a big population, and near to some military factories that were located hereabouts. And you've got to say, it looks like it must have been hit really heavy up there for the damage that's come this far down. But then, there were a lot of nuke power plants along this coast—one not far from here, if my memory serves. You unleash a ton of nukes on top of that, and the only thing I'm surprised about is that this place is still here.'

'We've been along this coast before,' J.B. said, running his finger along the coastline. 'Remember? We got ourselves fouled up with that evil bitch captain...'

'Don't remind me.' Ryan shuddered, remembering the whaling queen who had looked like a man and had had designs on the one-eyed warrior. 'Fireblast, still gives me nightmares.'

'Nonetheless,' Doc mused, 'I see the point John Barrymore is making. Although we have not been in this particular spot before, we have been in the general area, and thus have some idea of the landscape we should encounter. We also know that the area is capable of supporting human life and it is likely that we will be able to come across some groups of survivors. Furthermore, if we find the area somewhat uncongenial, we will have an escape route of some kind planned. If all else fails, we should head for the coast.'

Krysty laughed. 'Doc, I don't know what's happened to you, but Ryan had better watch out. I can remember the last time I saw you like this.'

‘I shall take that as the compliment it appeared to be,’ Doc said gravely, with a mock bow. ‘I am, you might say, feeling myself again.’

‘That’s good to hear,’ Ryan agreed. ‘But instead of standing around telling each other how damn good we are, I suggest we see what there’s worth plundering here and then get the hell out. It doesn’t look like there’s an immediate danger, but I don’t feel comfortable underground when I know the mainframe’s falling to pieces.’

Ryan had done little more than voice a concern that had been lurking at the backs of all their minds. When the support systems of a redoubt began to crumble they could take years to fail, or one short could start a chain reaction to close it down in minutes.

Time, then, was of the essence. The upper levels of the redoubt hadn’t been damaged too badly by the earth movements. There were cracks in some of the walls, but nothing like the fissures on the lower level. The main problems were caused by the shorting of electrical circuits that had closed some sec doors and effectively sealed them by refusing to respond to the codes. Many of these were in areas where the companions would seek to plunder: the armory, the kitchens and food stores, and stores for clothing and footwear.

J.B.’s task was to open the doors without risking further damage to the potentially delicate balance of the redoubt. Under any other circumstances the task would have been simple—plas-ex applied to the points of balance, and then retire to a safe distance. But now he had to be careful about the amounts he used, much more so than usual.

Carefully, the Armorer weighed out the plas-ex and attached a detonator, making sure that, at all times, the companions would shelter from the blast in a position that would leave them on the right side of the explosion for the main exit should the need to flee arise.

In the eerie quiet of the deserted redoubt, the tension hung heavy over J.B. as he prepared each explosion. The first two were small—more pops than blasts—but by his careful positioning the charges were enough to bend the doors, giving the companions the leverage they needed to open them manually.

The kitchen and clothing stores came easily. Despite his looks of apprehension at the roof overhead when the charges detonated, J.B.’s judgment proved sound. In the clothing stores they were able to kit themselves out in some fresh clothing, still packed in polyethylene, that replaced the tattered rags they had worn from the north.

Likewise, the kitchen stores hadn’t been raided, although there was some evidence that rats and insects had been able to use the service ducts to get this far up the redoubt levels, driven onward by the scent of foodstuffs. As there was no knowing what may or may not have been contaminated, they stuck to self-heats and some foods where the packaging hadn’t been tampered with in any way or was far from evidence of rats such as gnawing and droppings. The huge walk-in freezer compartments were still stocked and sealed. There were three, and although the power had failed in two, the third still contained some deep-frozen perishables that could safely be eaten when defrosted. They stocked up on as much as possible, preferring to keep the inedible self-heats for emergencies.

The third door J.B. had to open was the one that gave him most concern: the armory. Tricky enough to have to blow the door on an armory at the best of times, lest the explosive materials within be triggered by the explosion. But when they were up against a structure riddled with flaws that may give under such stress, it became a much harder task.

J.B. set the charge and looked nervously up at the ceiling before retiring to cover.

‘If this fucks up, it’s been interesting,’ he said wryly in the moments before the small charge detonated. He closed his eyes and held his breath...nothing. Opening them again, he could see that the door had been blasted away from one side of the portal and that there appeared to be no residual damage within the room itself.

They advanced and opened up the room. It was exactly as it had been left before the nukocaust. At some point, there had to have been an evacuation, as there still lay in one corner an open crate and a clipboard and pen, as though the room had been deserted partway through an inventory of the ordnance.

Wasting little time, they equipped themselves with spare ammo, grens and plas-ex from the store. J.B. regretfully looked at the crates of unopened and undisturbed blasters. There were rifles, SMGs and handblasters, any of which may have replaced their own favored arms, given time to test them in the ranges.

But time was one thing they couldn't allow. The redoubt may be fine for another century, or it may start to crumble at any moment.

Equipped, they left the armory—J.B. casting it a backward glance that was part wistful longing and part a hard-headed knowledge that they could have gleaned so much if given time—and headed toward the exit door.

The lighting was erratic along the stretch leading to the exit ramp, and all had cause to wonder what they might find beyond the final sec door. Had the circuits cut out because of the water damage in the lower levels or because there were other stresses operating outside the walls on this upper level? Would the sec door open to reveal that they had been blocked in by a landfall?

The latter was something that Ryan hoped wouldn't be the case. They needed to get out. The redoubt was too unsafe for them to stay and a jump would be too risky. Out was their only option.

'Here goes nothing,' he said to the others as he punched in the sec code, lifted the lever and leveled his Steyr. The chances of anyone lying in wait were next to nothing, but that wasn't zero.

The door raised slowly to reveal a landscape that was lush but strange. Everything was green, but low-level, as though it were made for small people. The grasses were close to the ground, plants were half size, the trees stunted. But it was a clear day and it was good to breathe fresh air untainted by sulfur as it swept into the musty tunnel mouth.

Ryan stepped cautiously out into a bright, sunny morning, with the sky clear but for a few fluffy white clouds. He looked around. The surrounding area was clear and there were no sounds of bird or animal life within earshot. He beckoned the others to join him.

'Gaia, it's like paradise compared to where we've just been,' Krysty said, breathing in deeply to savor the air.

'Yeah, even if it is a kind of half-pint paradise,' Mildred muttered.

'Not fucking cold.' Jak smiled.

'So far, so good,' J.B. agreed. 'What d'you think, Doc?'

It was when he turned to elicit the old man's opinion that J.B. was astounded to see Doc retreating backward into the redoubt, with the door closing on him, cutting him off seemingly at his own behest.

Chapter Four

Who am I? Is the real me the man who now posits these questions, or is the real me the man Jordan who they say I became for a short while? It does, does it not, raise many questions as to the nature of identity? Is all of this through which I move an artifice, the mere whim of my own imagination, or is it real? But then, what is reality?

Of all the things I remember, of all the things that have occurred within the confines of my own mind over the past few days, there is only the one constant: the search for some kind of truth. Whatever I am, and wherever I am, there is a part of my mind that is still active and still seeks to find an answer of some kind for what has happened, and what is continuing to happen. If I am to ascertain the truth, then I must follow that course through to the end. That quest is the only one which matters. Wherever that leads.

Am I in a padded cell? Am I here? Am I Theophilus Tanner? Am I Joseph Jordan? There is only the one way in which I can find an answer. I must follow my gut feeling. When the consciousness is confused, then intellect alone cannot be trusted. In order to find the answer, then I must follow what instinct tells me.

And yet what it tells me to do is something that I cannot share with the others. They would not want to go back to Fairbanks. Why should they? They lived that nightmare in a way that I cannot comprehend. By the same token, they could never comprehend the compulsion that drives me onward.

I have said nothing. I shall continue to say nothing. If I hang back in the tunnel, I can slip away while they walk out into the new lands. If I close the door behind me, then by the time they have noticed my absence, reopened the redoubt and tried to find me, I will have traveled back.

Oh, I know only too well that the settings on the mattrans are random, but that is the point. Whatever happens to me next will be a large part of the journey. If fate—or the workings of my own imagination masquerading as fate—decrees that I end up back in the frozen north, then it shall be nothing more than another sign that I have taken the right path.

These are not times for plans. Plans demand intellect; intellect is confused by the workings of insanity; the gut is the only true arbiter.

But I shall miss them. I dimly recall thinking of them as angels at one point in my madness. Perhaps they are, in a sense. Guardians of ideal qualities created by my mind, perhaps based on those I have known at some point. Or mayhap they are real, and this world is my reality. In that case, then they are angels of the best kind: firm friends in the face of adversity.

I salute them...

‘WHAT THE HELL does he think he’s doing?’ Mildred yelled as she turned and ran toward the closing second door, Doc now nothing more than a darkness in the shadows as he moved out of sight.

‘Millie, wait,’ J.B. yelled. He cast a glance at Ryan, wondering if his friend would want to follow Doc. The old man was still suffering from some kind of psychosis, and the last thing they needed—friend or not—was to become embroiled in more games.

But J.B. need not have wondered. Already, Ryan was catching up to Mildred and passing her on the way to the second door.

‘Bastard won’t start to open until it’s fully shut, even if you punch the code in,’ he yelled breathlessly. ‘We’ve got to get through it and get him, let the others wait.’

Mildred didn't bother to answer, saving her breath to try to keep pace with Ryan's longer stride. Particularly if she was going to make it under the door. They were now about twenty feet from the entrance and the door showed less than a foot of space. It was going to be incredibly tight.

Ryan was a crucial few feet ahead of her and he flung himself into the gap, flattening himself as much as possible and bracing for the impact as his flying body connected harshly with the floor of the tunnel. He winced in pain as his shoulder jarred, a tingling numbness momentarily shooting down to his fingers. He ignored it, concentrating on rolling so that he could get the hell out of Mildred's way as she came through.

Cursing loudly with her last desperate exhalation of breath, she took a flying leap at the ever-narrowing gap, feeling the edge of the door bite as it closed the gap uncomfortably. She threw herself with as much force and momentum as possible, the foot-long thickness of the tunnel almost catching and trapping the toes of her boots as she slid past, ironically just enough to kill her speed and insure that she didn't hit the floor as hard as Ryan.

The one-eyed man was already on his feet and headed down the tunnel as she picked herself up. 'That damn fool old buzzard. We should just leave the old bastard to do what the hell he wants,' she muttered darkly as she hauled herself to her feet and set off in pursuit.

They knew exactly where they were headed, and as they were stronger and faster than Doc, they might just have time to catch him before he entered the mat-trans unit. Once the chamber door closed it would be impossible to open it until the process had been completed.

Neither of them wasted time looking to their rear. They knew that the others would follow as soon as they could get the sec door opened once more. It was more of an imperative to reach Doc.

Their choices were justified. As they thundered down the lower corridor, heavy footfalls echoing around the dank and scarred walls of the lowest levels, they knew Doc could hear them. But it didn't matter. Speed was more important than stealth. Something that was proved when they entered the comp room to find Doc about to grab the lever to the unit's door. He was almost crying with frustration as his shaking hands and trembling fingers, fraught with anxiety, seemingly refused to grasp the lever.

He looked up as they approached.

'Please. I did not want you to follow me. Allow me to do this.'

'To do what, Doc? To send yourself off into God knows where?' Mildred asked.

'It's something I must do,' he replied as firmly as he could.

'The hell it is,' Ryan snapped.

Doc looked at him, momentarily distracted. 'How the hell would you know?' he retorted angrily. 'You have no idea what I am trying to do, or why.'

'Then why don't you tell us?' Mildred questioned in as reasonable a tone as she could muster.

Doc sighed. 'It would take too long, and you would not want me to do it. I do not think you could understand—'

'Too stupid, is that it?' Mildred countered.

'No, it is not that. What's the point, you'll only stop me anyway,' he added with a resigned sigh, standing back from the door.

In the distance, they could hear the others approaching.

'C'mon, Doc, I really don't want to talk about it in here,' Ryan said softly. 'Let's go topside, and then you can explain. Mebbe we'll understand, after all.'

'I somehow doubt that that very much,' Doc murmured, 'but I suppose I should give you the chance.'

If nothing else, Mildred could treasure the confused looks on the faces of J.B. and Krysty when she, Doc and Ryan calmly walked out of the mat-trans anteroom. There was even a flicker of

confusion crossing Jak's albino visage.

For the second time, they exited the redoubt and stood in the glorious morning. But there was little attention to be paid to the landscape or the blazing clear sky. The first thing was to try to sort out the problem with which Doc now presented them.

A few hundred yards from the entry to the redoubt was a small clump of trees, twisted and stunted with thick growth on their boles, but enough canopy to provide shelter from the heat and brightness of the sun. They took refuge beneath these and Doc started to explain what had caused him to turn back.

It was a long, rambling tale. Sometimes he had to stop and go back on the story, as though there were parts that he even had to explain for himself. Which was no surprise, as what had made so much sense when mulled over within the confines of his own head now seemed to be disjointed and absurd when spilled out loud. He could see from the faces around him that they were having trouble understanding the questions he had to ask himself and the non sequitur answers that had caused him to take his instinct-led course of action.

He finished up weakly, shrugging and telling them that he didn't expect them to understand, but that it was something that he had to do.

'Doc,' Ryan said softly after a long silence, 'you weren't with us when that ville went up. Well, you were, but you were this other person. And then you were unconscious. You didn't see what happened to it. There was no way anyone could have got out of there. The whole tribe, except for mebbe those who stayed behind at the ville, were wiped out. There is no one for you to go back to, even supposing that, by some miracle, the mat-trans took you back to the right redoubt and you could find your way on foot from there without freezing. We only made it as a group because we could support one another. You'd have no one to lean on if you had to.'

'Yes, I understand completely what you're saying,' Doc stated, 'but can you not see that it makes no difference? This is not about being rational. This is about following an instinct because I cannot trust that which I see and hear around me. As far as I know—in an empirical sense—you may not even exist.'

'A what?' Krysty asked. 'Mother Sonja told me about some old ideas from before nukercaust, but that's a new one on me.'

'Doc,' Mildred said, deciding to try her luck, 'I've listened to what you've said, and although I can't totally understand, I ask you to trust me on one thing. As far as I'm concerned, I know I'm here. And knowing that, I trust my senses. And what they tell me, as a trained physician, is that you've been through an immense trauma from fever, followed by a concussion. From my perspective, this is real, and the things in your head that make you doubt yourself are the symptomatic results of a definite medical cause. It would be wrong of me as a doctor to let you follow your instinct at the risk of your own safety. I would recommend that we take you with us, even if we have to, at this stage, do it by force.'

Doc's face hardened as he looked around. He was met with features as determined as his own.

'I have no doubt that you would do that. I am outnumbered, and I have little choice but to acquiesce. Be warned, if I have the chance, I will try to get back to the redoubt and jump.'

'Mebbe so,' Krysty said softly. 'But consider this—mebbe part of your journey is to find another way back, and that is why we were allowed to catch up with you and stop you.'

Doc's face cracked into a wry grin. 'That's very good, my dear. In truth I have no answer to that. I am not allayed, but you have, nonetheless, set me a logical quandary that I must ponder.'

'That mean we get fuck out here?' Jak asked, disgruntled and a little lost.

J.B. rose, stretched and yawned. 'Soon as we find which way's the best way, then, yeah, I guess so. Right, Ryan?'

Ryan shrugged. He felt uneasy that he hadn't quite grasped where Doc now stood, somehow angry.

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