

A MAN WITH NO COUNTRY

The book cover features a stylized illustration of a man in a white, form-fitting suit walking across a yellow-orange desert landscape. The man is seen from the back, with a long, dark blue cape trailing behind him. The background is a dark blue sky with several yellow and orange celestial bodies, including a ringed planet in the upper right. The overall aesthetic is minimalist and modern.

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The man shielded his eyes as the light was shined in his face. Joe Tanner waited until the man's eyes had recovered and shot the agent by the door a questioning look. Tanner had seen many bizarre things in his twenty years serving with the FBI, but never anything like this. The agent shrugged.

Tanner scrutinised the man as he fidgeted with the buttons of his jacket, avoiding his gaze. Tanner sorted through the objects on the desk. They had been taken from the man as soon as he'd been detained. There were the usual items; keys, phone, wallet. There was even a pack of cigarettes, although there was only one left. Tanner picked up the packet and tapped it on the table.

'You do realise that smoking on aircraft has been illegal since 1987?' he asked.

'Haven't smoked since I bought the packet, sir.' Tanner pulled out the cigarette and placed it in front of the man.

'You must have. There's only one cigarette left.'

'Only ever needed one.' The man started chuckling to himself.

Tanner ignored him and slid the cigarette back into the packet, placing it back down on the table. He picked up the man's passport. This was the reason Tanner was here at ten thirty on a Friday night. It looked just like any other passport, except for the crest on the front. Tanner had never seen it before in his life. He opened the passport examined it. Everything looked in order until he flicked to the identification page.

'So, tell me-' Tanner looked down at the passport. 'Tristan... Cooper, I've heard a lot of things in my time but-' He looked down once again. '*Ebrela*. You care to tell me where you're *actually* from?' Cooper gave him a funny look.

'It says on my passport' he said.

Tanner stared him down.

'Skip geography class in school did we son?'

'What are you talking about?'

'Don't play games with me son. I'm tired and am in no mood to deal with shit like this.'

'I'm afraid you're just not making any sense. *Ebrela* is not a fake country, I have lived there all my life.' Tanner stared him down. He pulled up a world atlas on his phone and spun it around to show Cooper.

'Alright then. Show me on this map where this "*Ebrela*" is.' Cooper smirked at him as he looked at the screen. Tanner watched the smirk slide off Cooper's face and panic start to set in.

'No, this can't be possible... how could this have happened?' Cooper murmured. His eyes widened as the realisation dawned on him. 'Oh god, I went through the wrong one... I went through the wrong one and now they're going to come get me.' He buried his head in his hands. Tanner leaned closer.

'If you tell us who's after you, we can protect you.' Cooper looked up at him, his eyes consumed by fear.

'You can't protect me. I'm as good as dead.' Cooper was shaking as he murmured to himself. 'You should forget you saw me, forget you ever heard of me. Because if you chase me, they'll find you too and there is nothing you can do.' He began to weep, cradling his head in his hands.

Tanner stood up and left the room. He spoke to the agent at the door.

'Put that nut up at the Clarion Inn for the night. Maybe we'll get some answers out of him in the morning.'

The next morning Tanner walked into the Clarion Inn and rang the bell at the front desk. The receptionist appeared from a back room. She was young and seemed to have a permanent smile on her face.

'Hello there sir, welcome to the Clarion Inn. How may I help you?' She asked. Tanner flashed his badge at her.

'FBI ma'am. I'm enquiring about a guest of yours in room twenty-five. Has he left at all today?'

The receptionist frowned.

'Oh, I didn't realise you FBI people needed to talk to him again.' She said. 'He was such a weird fellow. Not that I've never seen any weirdos or creeps here but he was something else. Kept saying something about his having to get back home before they found him. Whatever he was talking about I had no idea but then I try not to get too nosy around our guests' business. Is there anything else I can assist-'

Tanner held up his hand.

'Wait. What do you mean again?'

The receptionist's smile reappeared.

'Well they were dressed in a similar manner to you sir. They said they needed to talk to him. I didn't see them leave but I had to take a quick five-minute break so I don't really know-'

Tanner took off sprinting across the lobby. He ran for the elevator, skidding to a halt as the doors slid closed. Tanner jammed the call button but abandoned the idea as he noticed a fire escape. He ran over to the escape and slammed through the door. Tanner took the stairs two at a time. He reached the first floor and kept going. Reaching the second floor, Tanner flung the door open and raced down the hallway to room twenty-five. He slowed as he noticed the door ajar. He slipped his gun out of the holster and entered the room.

'Tristan Cooper, this is the-'

The instructions died in Tanner's throat as he stood in shock at what he saw.

The hotel room was a mess. Bedding and clothes were strewn everywhere, power sockets were blackened and smoking and the lights flickered on and off.

However, that wasn't what caught Tanner's attention.

What caught his attention was the swirling circle of blue light in the middle of the room. Tanner stared at the circle and saw nothing but piercing blue light staring back at him. Tanner picked

up a pen and threw it into the circle. The pen disappeared into the blue abyss. He turned away and searched the small bathroom partitioned off from the main room. There was no sign of Cooper. A gust of wind blew past Tanners ear as he crossed the room and something came flying out of the circle. The object bounced off the far wall and fell to the floor. Tanner walked over and picked it up.

It was the pen.

There was paper tucked under the pens cap. Tanner pulled out the paper and unfolded it. A cold hand of fear closed around him as he read the messy scrawl on the paper.

You should have stayed out of this Mr Tanner... The portal calls for you now.

Tanner began to turn as he noticed a dark shape moving in the corner of his peripheral vision. Turning around, the shape moved with him, staying in his peripheral vision.

A cold chill ran up Tanners arm as he was pushed towards the portal. Another dark shape emerged from the portal, grabbed Tanner by his shirt and hauled him back through the portal.

Tanner tumbled end over end through the portal before landing on his back with the air knocked out of him. The first thing Tanner noticed when he opened his eyes was the deep blue, almost black sky with clusters of stars scattered along the cosmos. Despite himself, Tanner smiled at the beauty of it. However, as he stood up fear wrapped back around him as he took in his surroundings.

The world had no detail to it, just vague shapes and colours. The ground beneath him was yellow like sand, constantly swirling and shifting so that Tanner's eyes could not focus on one point. Looking to the horizon, the yellow seamlessly bled into a bright red which then faded into the deep blue of the sky. Tanner turned back to see the portal collapse in on itself and disappear.

I told you to forget about me Mr Tanner. The portal sensed you. The portal tasted you. The portal demands you.

Tanner pressed his hands to his ears as the voice reverberated around in his skull. He fell to his knees and watched as the yellows and reds of the landscape crackled and a small white dot appeared on the far horizon. The white dot grew closer, spreading out and taking a humanoid form as it stood in front of Tanner. The figure had no distinguishing features, just a smooth, fluid surface.

You were never meant to be here Mr Tanner. The portal knows this. The portal demands this wrong to be righted.

Tanner tried to speak but words escaped him as the white form split into four separate figures. Three of the figures reached out and touched his chest. Tanner felt an immense pressure on his chest and windpipe. He reached for his throat and realised he could no longer feel his throat. Looking down, Tanner saw black goo spread across his chest and advance all over his body. Panic rose inside him as the goo kept spreading until it everything except his eyes. The fourth white figure reached into its form and pulled out a familiar object.

A single cigarette.

The form clicked its fingers and a tongue of flame danced along their fingertips. It lit the cigarette and waited as the other three figures melted into the ground.

The portal demands a sacrifice and like I said... I only ever needed one.

The figure flicked the cigarette at Tanner. The goo covering his body ignited as Tanner screamed wordless terror into the empty void. As the flames engulfed him, Tanner slumped onto his side, trying to extinguish the flames before his movements slowed and he lay still.

The white figure turned away as Tanner's body melted into the shifting yellow ground. It walked off towards the horizon, watching a cluster of stars slowly fade into the ever-encroaching darkness.

THE END