

Devil Strike

#8 in the Blade series

David L. Robbins

Dedicated to ...

Judy, Joshua, and Shane.

To Sue and Mary and all the fine folks at Golden Gull.

And to Barney, who is warming my lap and purring even as I type this: Where's a gas mask when I need one?

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Prologue

What were all those vultures doing there?

Horace Greeley applied the brakes and gazed out the windshield, his brown eyes riveted on the dozen or so vultures circling high in the air less than a quarter of a mile away. By his estimation, the vultures were soaring above Jacumba. He thought of the town's population, 63 men, women, and children, and dread seized him.

The presence of vultures could only mean one thing!

Alarmed, Horace floored the accelerator, and the old green jeep jumped forward, its engine coughing. Black puffs of smoke trailed from the tail pipe. He glanced at the loaded Taurus Model 83 on the seat beside him, and wished he had a more powerful handgun than a .38 Special. If worst came to worst, he'd need all the firepower he could muster.

The jeep rounded a curve, and there lay the quaint, tranquil community, sweltering in the intense July heat. Not a soul was in sight.

Horace kept the jeep under ten miles an hour as he approached the outskirts of the town. Even on such a hot day, he reasoned, there should be folks strolling about and kids at play. He wondered if he should make a U-turn and head for help, but decided he needed concrete proof before he could alert the authorities. Vultures were an ominous omen, to be sure, but a slim possibility existed that there might be a perfectly logical explanation for the presence of the carrion-eaters.

Several of the big, ugly birds sank lower and lower and disappeared below the rooftops.

Horace slowed when he came within a hundred yards of the westernmost structures, his anxiety mounting. He might be biting off more than he could chew, he told himself. After all, he made his living as a carpenter, not a policeman or a soldier. He'd served a two-year stint in the Free State of California Army, but his enlistment had occurred 29 years ago, when he was 18.

More of the vultures were sinking to the ground, apparently in the center of Jacumba.

His palms sweating, his mouth dry, Horace stopped 40 yards outside of the town and surveyed the buildings. Most were in need of a paint job. Roofs sagged, windows were missing, and walls were cracked. The dilapidated state of the town typified the conditions found in practically every community located in extreme southern California 106 years after World War Three. Paint, nails, lumber, and especially glass were all hard to come by. The people had to make do as best they could.

A huge white dog, four feet high at the shoulders, materialized between two houses and stared at the jeep.

Horace leaned out the window and waved at the dog. "Hi, there, fella," he called out.

The white dog stood motionless, regarding him coldly. "Where's your master?" Horace asked. With a curt bark the dog wheeled and ran off. "Wait," Horace urged, but the canine ignored him and bounded around the corner of a green house. Horace drove slowly forward, scanning the road and the sidewalks ahead. At the very edge of Jacumba he slammed on the brake pedal. *Son of a bitch!*

Sprawled across the sidewalk on the north side of the highway, 30 feet off, partially hidden by a metal trash can on the curb, lay a body, a woman in blue pants and a green blouse.

Horace licked his lips and felt his pulse quicken. Any lingering doubt that a calamity had befallen the town were gone. He could haul butt to the authorities now. He could turn around and retrace his route, head east until he reached Ocotillo, where the Army maintained a garrison. He could, but he didn't.

He wanted to know the answer.

Overcome with curiosity, Horace continued into the town. He stopped alongside the trash can and leaned to the right to stare at the woman. She was prone, her arms outflung, and her forehead rested in a pool of her own blood. Her black hair sagged over her cheeks, screening her features from view. He debated whether to climb out of the jeep and check the corpse, to see if the body was still warm or whether the woman had been dead for hours. Prudence prompted him to stay in the vehicle.

He might be curious, but he wasn't stupid.

Horace squared his shoulders and drove further into Jacumba. He saw more bodies the further he went. Men, women, and even children dotted lawns, driveways, sidewalks, streets, and alleys. Victims were lying in stores and other buildings, visible in the doorways or on the other side of shattered windows. The business establishments had been looted, and discarded merchandise littered the ground.

Raiders maybe?

Whoever had attacked Jacumba had done a swift, thorough job, sweeping through the town before an effective opposition could be mounted. Here and there were indications that a few of the residents had tried to put up a fight. In front of a hardware store near the center of the town a makeshift barricade had been hastily erected, and eight defenders had died on the spot. Further on, a police car had been doused with gasoline and torched, and the smoldering wreck partly blocked the highway on the south side.

Horace skirted the patrol car, staring at the black lettering still readable on the front door on the passenger side. JACUMBA POLICE. SERVICE AND DEDICATION. Near the car, on his back, his arms above his head and handcuffed at the wrists, was a police officer. His legs had been chopped off below the knees, and blood still trickled from the stumps. A red sea enveloped him.

Dear Lord!

Shocked by the atrocity, Horace began to drive past the officer when the impossible occurred.

The policeman's eyes flicked open, he glanced at the jeep and his mouth moved soundlessly.

"Damn!" Horace exclaimed, and he halted on the spot. He shifted into park, slid out, and took two strides. His right shoe stepped into the pond of blood and he hesitated, horrified. "Please," the police officer croaked. Suppressing his loathing, Horace moved to the officer's side and crouched. "What can I do? I don't know what to do," he blurted out.

"Doesn't matter," responded the policeman, a young man in his twenties with brown eyes and hair. His pale complexion gave him a ghostly aspect. "I can go for a doctor," Horace offered. The officer groaned softly. "No time. Nearest doctor is in Mountain Spring. Never make it."

"Oh, God. I wish there was something I could do," Horace said, feeling supremely helpless. "Can you get word to my parents in L.A.?"

"Anything. Anything at all."

"Merrill and Edith Garforth," the officer said. "Balboa Boulevard. Give them my love."

"I will," Horace pledged, and nodded vigorously. He glanced down at the stumps, at the blood seeping from the severed veins and arteries, and realized with a start that the rest of the man's legs were missing. From the knees to the feet, both were gone. As if the officer could read Horace's mind, he said, "The dog dragged them off."

"The dog?" Horace repeated, stunned. "The bastard's white dog."

The white dog! A shiver tingled along Horace's spine. "Who did this to you? Who attacked Jacumba?"

A severe coughing fit racked the officer before he could reply. Blood-flecked spittle dribbled from the corners of his mouth. When the fit subsided he closed his eyes and breathed shallowly. "Garforth?" Horace said, and touched the policeman's right cheek. The man seemed to be on fire. "Damn it all," he muttered, realizing the officer wouldn't last too much longer. Garforth had lost too much blood. So what should he do? Horace gazed to the west and spied a large concentration of bodies at the very heart of Jacumba, evidently where the citizens had made their last stand. As he scrutinized the carnage a peculiar fact became obvious.

All of the vehicles were missing.

He straightened, scanning the street. Why hadn't he noticed it earlier? He'd been through the town on previous occasions, and he knew at least 15 residents had owned either a car or a truck. Except for the squad car they were all gone. Where to? Had the raiders taken the vehicles? He looked at Garforth, mulling what to do.

Something growled.

Horace swiveled to the left, in the direction of the sound, his eyes widening in fear when he saw the white dog less than 20 feet distant, eyeing him balefully, its lips curled up over its glistening fangs. He could see the animal's face clearly, and he shuddered as he perceived the dog's left eye was missing. A discolored, shriveled socket existed in its place, heightening the aura of menace the dog radiated.

The canine growled again.

Stark panic welled up within Horace and he stood frozen in place. He wanted to make a break for the jeep, but he couldn't get his limbs to cooperate with his brain.

The white dog took a stride toward him.

"Run. Don't let the mongrel get you."

Horace glanced at the officer, surprised to find Garforth awake and alert. "I have a gun in my jeep," he said.

"Go for it," the officer stated.

Horace looked at the dog, then at the policeman. "I'll carry you to the jeep."

"Forget me."

"I can't just leave you lying there."

"You don't have any choice," Garforth said weakly. "I'm done for anyway. Save yourself."

"No," Horace responded, amazed at his own obstinacy. He'd served as a clerk in the Army and had never seen a day of combat. The prospect of tangling with the huge dog terrified him.

"Please," Garforth urged, and coughed. "Don't put your life on the line for me. I'll be dead within a half hour."

"I don't," Horace began. He stiffened when the white dog stalked slowly forward.

"Please," Garforth reiterated. "I failed the people I was sworn to protect. I don't want to have your life on my hands too." He paused. "Please."

For a moment Horace wavered, torn between his fear of the dog and his desire to aid the officer. He knew he wouldn't stand a prayer against the dog without a weapon, but he couldn't bring himself to desert another human being in a time of need. His resolve, however, evaporated the next instant. The white dog charged.

Pivoting, Horace ran for the jeep, his gaze locked on the onrushing canine. Although the dog had almost 20 feet to cover and Horace only eight, the canine streaked with the speed of an arrow while Horace seemed to be plodding along in slow motion. He expected to feel those viselike jaws clamp on him at any second, and they would have if not for Officer Garforth's bravery.

Rallying all of his rapidly fading strength, Garforth lifted his head and arms and bellowed at the dog, "Try me, you prick! Try me!"

Uttering a feral snarl, the dog swerved, going for the policeman.

Horace reached the jeep and glanced over his right shoulder just as the white dog pounced on the officer. His hand closed on the steering wheel at the same second the dog's sharp teeth closed on Garforth's throat. Mesmerized, Horace saw the officer's flesh rip apart as if the skin was no more than soggy paper.

Garforth voiced a strangled, raspy scream. The dog snarled.

And Horace clambered into the jeep and slammed the door shut. He simply sat there, quaking, watching the animal vent its primal fury by shaking its head from side to side, ravaging Garforth's neck. The officer's eyes swung toward the jeep, and only then did Horace remember his gun. He grabbed the revolver and pointed the handgun at the dog, reluctant to squeeze the trigger because he might hit the policeman. Instead, he elevated the barrel and fired at a business across the street.

The shot galvanized the canine into action. It whirled and dashed off, making for a nearby alley.

Horace tried to get a bead on the racing beast, but he wasn't a marksman and the dog reached the safety of the alley before he could fire again. Disappointed at his performance, he climbed out and hurried to Garforth.

He needn't have bothered.

The white dog had torn the flesh wide open from the base of the officer's jaw to the bottom of his throat. Jagged strips of flesh rimmed the wound. Garforth's lifeless eyes stared blankly at the heavens.

"Dear God," Horace said softly in dismay. He backed to his jeep, unable to tear his gaze from Garforth. He'd heard stories about the vile atrocities committed by raiders, scavengers, and occasional packs of mutations, but he'd never witnessed the aftermath of a raid firsthand. He knew about the dangers associated with living and traveling along the California-Mexico border, about the riffraff and degenerates who dwelt south of the border and who conducted periodic forays to the north which was the reason he carried the gun in his jeep. And he'd seen his share of victims, usually lone men or women caught by one of the variety of wild mutants so prevalent since the war, and invariably well after the fact, at their funeral. Never, though, had he beheld a sight as ghastly as the white dog killing Garforth.

The dog!

Horace halted beside the jeep and nervously surveyed the town. If the dog hadn't left, did that mean there could be raiders somewhere in Jacumba? The thought caused him to shiver in terror. He quickly got in and rode westward. Several hundred yards from his position towered a series of poles connected by cables or heavy gauge wires, and it took a few seconds for his dazed mind to recognize the poles and wires as belonging to a telephone system.

World War Three had effectively disrupted all types of mass communications, and virtually destroyed every major public utility in the country. The Free State of California, one of the few states to retain its administrative identity after the war, had restored marginal service to its major urban centers such as Los Angeles and San Francisco, but the phone lines in rural areas were few and far between. Subscribers had to contend with poor service and constant problems. Subscribers also had to be financially well-off, because the cost of phone service was a luxury most postwar rural families could not afford.

Horace wondered if the phones in Jacumba still worked, or whether the raiders had cut the lines outside of town to prevent the residents from phoning for help. He decided to follow the wires and locate a phone. By staying in the town he risked capture or worse if the raiders were still about, but he could shave hours off the time a rescue team would take to get there if a single telephone operated properly. There might be residents who were injured seriously but still alive, and the sooner help got there to assist them, the better. Up ahead vultures flapped skyward.

He came to the very center of Jacumba, where a small town square and a park, once the gathering place for the peaceful inhabitants, had been transformed into a site of unbridled butchery and bloodshed. Bodies were every where. Many of the women had been stripped naked and abused. Puddles of blood shimmered red in the bright sunlight.

Horace stopped, his stomach queasy. He stepped to the asphalt and pressed his arms to his abdomen, afraid he would lose his breakfast. He stared at a woman who had been shot in the forehead at point-blank range, and felt bile rise in his mouth. His gaze shifted to a man whose skull had been split in half, and gagged. Then he looked toward the park and saw the ten stakes. His eyes narrowed as he tried to identify the objects impaled on the tops of the stakes. Thirty seconds later he did.

And lost it.

Chapter 1

How many would die this time?

The giant clasped his brawny hands behind his back and stared absently at the azure sky, reflecting on the sequence of events resulting in his return to California. Had it only been nine months ago that he'd decided to temporarily disband the Freedom Force? So much had happened in those nine months. He'd fought the Union, the Russians, the Chosen, and others. He'd attempted to come to terms with his dual responsibilities, with being the head of the Freedom Force and the top Warrior. But more important than all the battles and the emotional turmoil were the nine precious months he'd enjoyed with his wife and son. True, the periodic threats had intruded into their lives, had interfered with their happiness. Even with the dangers, he would always cherish the nine previous months as a special interlude during which he'd gotten to spend most of his days and nights with Jenny and Gabe.

He sighed and stretched, his seven-foot-tall frame rippling with raw power, his bulging muscles swelling in prominent relief. A black leather vest covered his broad torso. Green fatigue pants adorned his stout legs. On his feet he wore black combat boots. Strapped to his waist, one riding in a leather sheath on each

hip, were two Bowie knives, the weapons that had become, in a sense, his personal trademark. He brushed at the comma of dark hair hanging above his right eyebrow, his gray eyes focused on the ribbon of road leading to the south end of the Force facility. The new volunteers were due any minute. He frowned, thinking of the previous volunteers. The original idea, conceived of by the Freedom Federation leaders, had called for each of the seven factions comprising the Federation to send one volunteer to serve on the Force for a period of one year. In a ten-month span five volunteers had died. Now they were going to give it another shot. Worry assailed him, worry about the fate of the new recruits, and he suppressed his anxiety by turning his thoughts to the Freedom Federation. With most of the country, if not the entire world, plunged into barbaric savagery by the war, the Federation stood as humanity's best hope for a future free from tyranny. If humankind was ever to recover from the nuclear holocaust, if the despots, mutants, and assorted raiders were to be overthrown, then the Federation must stand firm in the face of overwhelming odds.

Of all the Federation factions, the Free State of California possessed the greatest military might. The state had sustained only two nuclear strikes during the war. March Air Force Base at San Bernardino and San Diego had both been obliterated. The prevailing winds in the upper atmosphere had blown most of the fallout away from other populated centers, which had allowed the Californians to recover reasonably quickly. After the United States government had collapsed, the leaders of California had reorganized the state into a sovereign entity. The state had seized all U.S. Army, Navy, Marine, and Air Force equipment and material within its borders, and promptly formed the Free State Army. Ever since, California had served as a beacon of progress in a world gone mad. And California wasn't the only beacon of hope. The second strongest faction was the Civilized Zone, the official title for the area embracing the former states of Nebraska, Kansas, Wyoming, Colorado, New Mexico, and Oklahoma and the northern half of Texas and part of Arizona. The U.S. government had evacuated hundreds of thousands of citizens into the region during the war. Denver, Colorado, had become the new national capital. But after the government fell apart, a dictator had arisen who'd renamed the area the Civilized Zone to distinguish it from the Outlands, the primitive regions where a centralized government didn't exist, where the only law was the survival of the fittest.

The remaining Federation factions were considerably smaller and lacked the mechanized forces possessed by California and the Civilized Zone. In their own right, though, they were formidable adversaries.

In the former state of Montana the Flathead Indians had assumed control. Free, finally, from the yoke of the white man, the Flatheads were living as their ancestors had lived prior to the coming of the first explorers, and they were determined to never be subjugated again.

A tough legion of superb horsemen, the Cavalry, now ruled the Dakota Territory. Their lifestyle resembled that of the frontiersmen of old, and they were as fiercely independent.

In north-central Minnesota, in a subterranean city that had started as an underground fallout shelter and grown over the decades, resided the secretive Moles. Of all the Federation factions, they were the least reliable. The giant suspected that the Moles weren't entirely committed to the Federation. Why else would they have sent such an inept volunteer the last time?

The sixth faction definitely was committed. The Clan lived in the small town of Halma in northwestern Minnesota. Originally refugees from the Twin Cities, they had moved to Halma to be close to the last faction, the one to which the giant belonged.

The Family.

In a 30-acre survivalist compound constructed by a wealthy filmmaker named Kurt Carpenter shortly

before World War Three, located on the outskirts of the former Lake Bronson State Park, dwelt the smallest member of the Federation, numerically but the one with the most influence in Federation councils. The Family, as Carpenter had dubbed his followers, were renowned for their wise leadership and their fearless Warriors, the 18 Family members responsible for the defense of their compound, which was known as the Home. Thanks to the reputation the Warriors had established, the Federation leaders had approached the top Warrior with the offer to head the elite tactical unit they were forming to combat any threats to the Federation's existence.

"And if I'd had any sense," the giant reflected wryly, "I would have told them to take a flying leap off the nearest cliff." Because accepting their offer had turned his life topsy-turvy. Between the two jobs he seldom had time to devote to his wife and son, and the strain on his marriage had drained him emotionally. After losing three Force members within a few days of one another, he'd decided to disband the Freedom Force until after he set his personal life in order, until after he recovered from the ordeal.

Now here he was, about to stick his neck out again.

He must be a glutton for punishment.

The Warrior cocked his head, listening to the distant growl of vehicle engines. Soon, very soon, the jeeps bearing the six volunteers would arrive at the facility built especially for the Force. The governor of California, the man who had initially proposed creating the elite unit, had ordered the headquarters to be constructed north of Los Angeles, near Pyramid Lake. The Force compound encompassed 12 acres. An electrified fence, topped with barbed wire and patrolled by regular California Army troops, enclosed the perimeter. A small runway, a concrete pad 50 yards square which was used by the two VTOLs, occupied the southern sector. Next to the pad stood a hangar. In the middle of the compound were three concrete bunkers aligned in a straight line from east to west. The bunker to the east served as the barracks; the bunker in the center was the command HQ; and the bunker on the west contained supplies. To the north of the bunkers, to be used for training purposes, the land had been preserved in its natural state. A gate situated in the center of the south fence afforded access to the installation.

The noise of the approaching vehicles grew louder.

How many would die this time? the giant asked himself again. He hoped, he prayed, the volunteers would all be competent fighters who would tolerate the discipline he had to impose. The last time around, several of the recruits had given him nothing but trouble.

He thought of his beloved Jenny and young Gabe, and he anticipated his trip to the Home in two weeks with relish. Gazing to the south, he spotted one of the VTOLs resting on the concrete pad. If not for the two extraordinary aircraft, his monthly visits to the Family would be impossible. Actually, without the VTOLs the Freedom Force itself wouldn't be able to operate. The two jet aircraft were the pride of the California military. Modified so they could carry five passengers and the pilot, and outfitted with extra fuel tanks to extend their range, the jets were used to transport the Force to hot spots. Thanks to their vertical-takeoff-and-landing capability, the VTOLs did not require the lengthy runways utilized by conventional aircraft. The VTOLs could land and take off like helicopters, yet fly with the supersonic speed of a jet.

The giant ended his reflection and placed his hands on his hips. He glanced over his right shoulder at the command bunker, ten feet to his rear, then faced front.

Three jeeps were rapidly approaching.

He remembered the five Force members who had died in the line of duty. Spader, Kraft, Sergeant Havoc, Thunder-Rolling-in-the-Mountain, and Athena Morris had lost their lives so that others might live.

Despite the individual shortcomings of a few of them, they had served with distinction when the chips were down.

The three jeeps angled toward the HQ and slowed. A stocky officer seated in the first jeep, in the passenger seat in the front, saw the giant and waved.

The herculean figure nodded in response. General Miles Gallagher didn't qualify as one of his favorite people. A bulldog of a man with brown eyes and crew-cut brown hair, noted for his tenacity and popularity with those under his command, the general had vigorously opposed the formation of the Force. Gallagher had asserted that California could take care of its own problems, that the Force wasn't necessary, but he was too good a soldier to buck his superior, the governor of California, Governor Melnick, who'd appointed the general to be the official liaison with the Force.

Seconds later the three vehicles braked.

General Gallagher hopped out and walked over to the giant, his right hand extended, smiling broadly. "They're all here, Blade," he said to the Warrior.

"You seem to be in a good mood," Blade noted, shaking the general's hand.

"Why shouldn't I be?"

Blade let go and motioned at the jeeps. "You never were very keen on the Force. I imagine the prospect of reforming the unit has you a bit upset."

"Not in the least," Gallagher replied. "After the Pipeline Strike, as that writer called it, I've come around to the governor's way of thinking."

"You have?" Blade said skeptically.

"There are times when the Force is necessary."

"I must be dreaming. Either that or you had a quart of scotch for lunch."

The general grinned. "I don't drink on duty. You know that."

Blade gazed at the jeeps. "What are they waiting for?"

"I want to introduce them one at a time," Gallagher said, and gestured at the first vehicle. "You didn't make out half bad this time around. And you're in for a couple of surprises."

"Surprises?" Blade repeated.

"You'll see," the general stated enigmatically, and chuckled.

A lean figure emerged from the foremost jeep, a man attired in a black frock coat, black pants, and black boots. In contrast he wore a white shirt. A black, wide-brimmed hat crowned his head. His hair, clipped close to his ears, was brown, his eyes hazel. In height he stood a shade under six feet.

"Blade, I'd like you to meet the volunteer from the Cavalry," General Gallagher said.

The man in black strolled up to the Warrior and offered his hand. "Howdy. The name is Madsen. Doc Madsen. Most folks call me Doc."

"Doc," Blade said, measuring the man and liking what he saw: honesty, courage, and self-confidence. But

then, the Cavalry was noted for producing self-reliant men and women.

"I've heard a lot about you from Boone," Doc Madsen mentioned, referring to the previous Cavalry volunteer.

"He's a close friend," Blade said. He glanced at Madsen's waist, at a gunbelt riding high on the man's hips. "What are you packing?"

Madsen pulled his coat aside to reveal a pearl-handled, nickle-plated Smith and Wesson Model 586 Distinguished Combat Magnum in a brown leather holster on his right hip.

"Is that the .38 or the .357 Magnum version?"

The Cavalryman smiled. "You know your guns. And this is the .357 Magnum. I like the stopping power."

"You'll have a chance to demonstrate your skill later," Blade told him.

"Why not now?"

"Now?"

Doc pivoted and pointed at a rock lying 40 feet to the east. "See that?" he asked, and drew, his right arm a blur. The Magnum swept up and out and boomed.

Blade saw the rock spin into the air. Madsen's revolver blasted a second time, splitting the rock in half. He looked at the Cavalryman. "Not bad."

"There aren't many better," Doc said. He twirled the Smith and Wesson into its holster. "I've even tied Boone in shooting contests."

"I believe it," Blade said.

A second person climbed from the jeep, an Indian dressed in beaded buckskins. He stared in the direction of the shattered rock, then came forward. Although only five and a half feet tall, he possessed a powerful physique. His wide shoulders and muscular arms hinted at latent strength. Both his shoulder-length hair and his eyes were dark, the hair black, the eyes a deep brown. Dangling from the left side of his leather belt was a large hunting knife in a sheath. In his right hand he carried a spear.

"Hello," the Warrior said, greeting him. "I'm Blade."

"I know," the Indian responded. "My name is Sparrow Hawk."

"Welcome to the Force."

Sparrow Hawk gazed at the bunkers. "I was a friend of Thunder's. His death greatly saddened our tribe. He was highly respected."

"Thunder was my friend too," Blade said sadly. "No one wanted him to live more than I did."

The Flathead regarded the giant for a moment. "I'm honored to be working with you, Warrior." He stepped to the right.

Blade saw someone sliding from the second jeep and he tensed, thinking of Athena Morris and how he had resisted having her on the Force, thinking of how her death had profoundly disturbed him.

A red-headed, green-eyed young woman walked toward him. Clad in plain black pants and a brown shirt, her hair trimmed below her ears, her skin pale from her life underground, she presented the perfect picture of innocence. Five feet eight in height, she walked tentatively toward the giant, gazing up at him in frank astonishment.

"Hello," Blade said.

"Hello, sir," she responded in a soft voice.

"What's your name?"

"Raphaela, sir."

"Call me Blade," the Warrior directed, his brow knitting in bewilderment. "You're from the Moles, I take it?"

Raphaela's mouth slackened. "Yes. How did you know?"

"A lucky guess," Blade said dryly, studying her from head to toe. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-one."

"Did you volunteer for this assignment?"

"Yes, sir."

Blade pursed his lips. "Have you ever killed anyone before, Raphaela?"

She averted her gaze, and her answer was barely audible. "No, I haven't."

"Do you have experience handling weapons?"

"Not much."

"Be specific," Blade instructed her.

"I've used a hatchet to chop wood," Raphaela said sheepishly.

General Gallagher burst into laughter. "A hatchet?" he declared, and laughed even harder.

A crimson tinge crept into Raphaela's cheeks and she clenched her fists at her sides. She looked into Blade's eyes. "I'll pull my weight around here. I promise."

The Warrior folded his arms across his chest. "Why did you volunteer to join the Force?"

"My reason is personal," she responded.

"You do know this is a *combat* unit?"

"Of course," Raphaela stated.

"I take it that you don't have any combat experience," Blade deduced.

"None. But I'm eager to learn."

Blade sighed and gazed at the sky so she wouldn't detect his anger. The Moles had done it again!

Specifically, the autocratic leader of the Moles, the vain, temperamental man called Wolfe, had once again failed to send a competent recruit. The first volunteer from the Moles, Spader, a reluctant recruit coerced into joining by Wolfe, had been the first Force member to die.

"Teach me what to do and I'll do it," Raphaela vowed.

"We'll discuss this in my office later," Blade told her.

"I won't go back."

"That decision is up to me."

"I won't," Raphaela insisted.

The Warrior stared at her, surprised at the resolve her countenance conveyed. He read supreme determination in the set of her jaw, in her tight lips, in the flash of defiance in her eyes. "We'll see," he said. "The final decision is mine."

Raphaela frowned and walked to the left.

General Gallagher leaned close to the Warrior and whispered, "Dump her."

Before Blade could comment, a newcomer joined them.

"Whoa, bro! You're the biggest mother I've ever seen!"

Blade glanced at the speaker, a husky black man dressed in a black leather jacket, blue shirt, jeans, and knee-high black boots. Several inches shy of six feet tall, he packed at least 190 pounds onto his athletic form. His features were handsome, his hair styled in an Afro. "Who are you?"

"Leo Wood, at your service," the black said, and extended his right hand. "My friends all call me Lobo."

"Unusual nickname," Blade remarked, shaking.

"I got it back in my gang days in the Twin Cities, before you and those other Warriors bailed our butts out of that stinkin' cesspool," Lobo stated.

"Which gang were you in?"

"The Porns, dude. Who else?"

"As I recall, the Porns were the meanest of the bunch," Blade said.

Lobo shrugged and smirked. "Hell, man. Ain't nobody perfect."

"That's a cop-out."

"Say what?"

"That's an excuse for those who are too lazy to make the effort to improve themselves. We weren't put on this planet to be imperfect, to wallow in our own ignorance," Blade said.

Lobo did a double take, then chuckled. "If you say so, bro. But that mumbo-jumbo is way over my head. All I care about is stayin' alive. Perfect or imperfect don't hardly matter."

"Why do you want to join the Force, Lobo?"

"I'm hopin' to see some action. Livin' in Halma was gettin' downright boring."

The Clansman's words reminded Blade of the previous volunteer from that faction, an immature psychopath who'd delighted in killing, who'd thought only of himself until almost the very end. His mouth curled downward. "Is that the only reason?"

"No. I happen to believe in keepin' the Federation intact. Your Family did a big favor by lendin' us a hand when we were down and out. This is my way of repaying the favor."

Blade's estimation of the Clansman rose several degrees. "Have you had much combat experience?"

"I snuffed a few bozos in the Twin Cities," Lobo stated matter-of-factly. "I'm a whiz with my NATO."

"Your what?"

Lobo reached into the right front pocket of his jacket and withdrew a long, slender black object. "My NATO," he said. "I found this in the ruins of an old knife shop in Minneapolis." He flicked a switch and a gleaming four-inch blade automatically popped out a slot at the top.

"May I?" Blade asked, and held out his left hand.

"Sure, but if you break it I get one of those swords you're packin'," Lobo quipped.

Blade took the knife and examined the craftsmanship. On the black handle, imprinted in white letters, were the words NATO MILITARY. The spring-loaded blade retracted snugly into the slot, where the handle concealed it from view, and flicked out again at a slight press of the switch. "Nice knife."

"Damn straight," Lobo said.

The Warrior gave the automatic back and glanced at the third jeep. A soldier had emerged and was walking forward. Blade's eyes narrowed. The man's features were oddly familiar, and unsettling.

General Gallagher cleared his throat. "Blade, I'd like you to meet the volunteer from the Free State of California."

Recognition struck the giant with the force of a physical blow, and astonishment left him momentarily speechless.

Gallagher nodded at the robust trooper. "His name is Havoc."

Chapter 2

Havoc!

The name brought a flood of memories to Blade, memories of the valiant noncom who had given his own life to save the life of another Force member. Of all the recruits on the first Force, Sergeant Havoc had been the most experienced, a professional soldier whose dedication and discipline were superb. General Gallagher had personally selected him.

And now the general was introducing a man by the same name? A man who bore a remarkable likeness to the original Havoc. A man in a Special Forces uniform with the insignia of a captain on his collar. A man endowed with exceptionally broad shoulders and the build of a classical Greek wrestler. A man with short blond hair and clear blue eyes, who stood two inches over six feet and weighed in the neighborhood of 210 pounds.

"Blade, say hello to Captain Mike Havoc," General Gallagher said. "Sergeant Havoc's older brother."

"I never knew he had an older brother," Blade noted absently, and held out his right hand.

Captain Havoc halted. "Pleased to meet you, sir," he said formally without a hint of emotion on his face. He took the Warrior's hand and squeezed.

Blade shook, feeling Havoc's fingers close on his own, impressed by the officer's strength. The pressure kept building as Havoc squeezed harder and harder, and for a moment Blade wondered if the man was testing him, measuring his might. But the pressure abruptly abated and Havoc released his hand.

"I'm ready for duty, sir," the officer declared, and saluted.

"Welcome aboard," Blade responded, returning the salute.

"I've been eager to meet you," Captain Havoc stated flatly. "I've heard so much about you."

Blade gazed into the officer's eyes. "I'm sorry about your brother. He was a good man."

Havoc grimaced and quickly glanced down at the ground. "Jimmy was the best, sir," he said, his tone laced with anguish.

The Warrior opted to change the subject. "I recall reading in his file that he had several brothers."

"There are two others, sir, both younger. And we have a sister living in Eureka," Captain Havoc said. He recovered his composure and straightened, standing at attention.

"Captain Havoc is ideally suited to be on the Force," General Gallagher interjected. "Like his brother, he's a career military man with an outstanding record. He's a qualified marksman and holds a black belt in karate. As an added bonus, he's been through Officers Training School. Until nine months ago he was Regular Army. He switched over to Special Forces and has been getting high marks from his superiors."

Nine months ago? Blade scrutinized Havoc's visage, strangely bothered by the news. The captain must have switched over to Special Forces shortly after the death of his brother.

"Jimmy was more skilled in hand-to-hand combat than I am," Captain Havoc commented fondly. "He had black belts in karate *and* judo, as well as a brown in aikido. Few men could match him."

"Your family has a strong military tradition, doesn't it?" Blade observed.

"Yes, sir. Our grandfather and father were both career soldiers. We were raised to be patriotic, to be loyal to the Free State of California. We were typical Army brats. Except for our sister, all of us entered the military."

"Well, I'm happy to have you on the team," Blade said.

"You have no idea how much joining the Force means to me," Captain Havoc said. He snapped another salute and moved to the right.

The Warrior glanced at General Gallagher. "You were right about my being surprised."

"The surprises aren't over yet."

"What?"

"I -said you're in for a couple of surprises, remember?" Gallagher reminded him, then pointed at the third jeep.

Blade looked, and surprise wasn't adequate enough to describe his reaction. Amazement would barely fit. Total consternation came close. And all he would think of, as the thin form ambled toward him, were two words, repeated over and over: Not again!

Six feet in height, slim as a rail, walking with a graceful, light-footed gait, the last recruit was distinctly different from all the others. He was part feline. The creature that now halted in front of the Warrior and yawned as if bored, the creature attired only in a black loincloth, the creature with a reddish coat of fur all over his body, with a relatively small, oval head and rounded ears, with eerie green eyes distinguished by vertical slits in the center, and with razor-sharp teeth, was a hybrid, a genetically engineered mutation endowed with human and bestial traits in equal measure. "So this is where I'm expected to live for the next year?" the creature said disdainfully, surveying the facility. "Oh, well. I gave my word." He yawned again.

Blade struggled to regain his composure. The last team had included a mutation too, a querulous character by the name of Grizzly who had been a constant source of trouble. Although the Warrior and Grizzly had become fast friends, the aggravation the mutation had caused, stemming in large part from Grizzly's hatred of all humans, had been an unnecessary burden on Blade's shoulders. He hardly wanted to go through all of that again.

"Jaguarundi is the name the damn Doktor gave me," the mutant disclosed, his tone low and raspy. "I prefer to be called Jag."

"Pleased to meet you," Blade said, recalling the infamous geneticist the Family battled years ago.

The Doktor had been perhaps the greatest genetic engineer of all time. Prior to World War Three, genetic engineering had been the rage of the scientific establishment. Many of the scientists involved had wanted to be the first to develop new species. The government had even granted patents for such creations, and tremendous amounts of money had changed hands. The genetic engineers had been able to tamper with a human embryo, to combine elements in a test tube and produce crossbreeds. By editing the genetic instructions encoded in the chemical structure of molecules of DNA, the Doktor, decades after the war, had bred an assassin corps of animal men and women.

Other mutations stemmed from more conventional sources. The massive amounts of radiation unleashed on the environment scrambled the genetic codes of the wildlife. Animals were born with two heads, or three eyes, or six legs, or any other bizarre combination of warped traits. Equally grotesque were the mutations resulting from the toxic chemicals employed during the war. In particular, the chemical clouds were responsible for transforming ordinary reptiles, amphibians, and mammals into hideous monsters known as mutates. Their bodies covered with pus-filled sores, they stalked the land seeking fresh flesh to consume.

"Are you really?" Jag responded sarcastically, intruding on the Warrior's train of thought. "Pleased to meet me, I mean."

"Why wouldn't I be?" Blade asked.

"Most humans have a difficult time accepting my kind," Jag noted.

"I'll vouch for Blade," General Gallagher said. "He's not prejudiced against mutants."

The cat-man leaned toward the general and smiled, exposing his pointed teeth. "If you don't mind, I like

the term hybrid better. Mutant sounds sort of demeaning, don't you think?" he said pleasantly, but there was an edge to his voice.

Gallagher shrugged. "If you want to be called a hybrid, we'll call you a hybrid. It doesn't matter to us."

"It does to me," Jag stated. "Just call me Jag and we'll get along wonderfully."

"Were you one of the hybrids who rebelled against the Doktor?" Blade inquired. A number of the Doktor's creations had opposed the madman's oppressive rule, had resisted his domination of every aspect of their lives, and been slain or tossed into prison for asserting their independence.

"Yeah," the cat-man said. "The lunatic locked me in solitary confinement, and I wasn't released until after your Family won the war. I've been living in the Civilized Zone."

"Why'd you decide to enlist in the Force?"

"You had a hybrid on this team before, didn't you?"

"Yes. Grizzly."

"If being on the Force was good enough for Grumpy, then it's good enough for me," Jag said.

"You know Grizzly?"

"We bumped into one another a few times," Jag replied, and gazed intently at the Warrior. "Whatever happened to Grumpy anyway? He never came back to the Civilized Zone after his hitch here was up."

"He went into the Outlands," Blade divulged.

The cat-man blinked a few times. "The Outlands? Why the hell would Grizzly do that? The wackos in the Outlands hate hybrids."

"He told me that he wanted to get away from everything," Blade explained. "He knew how dangerous the Outlands are, but I don't think he cared anymore."

"Why not?"

"Because the woman he loved had died."

Jag appeared startled by the revelation. "Woman? Do you mean Grumpy found a foxy hybrid to take as his mate?"

Blade frowned. "No. Grizzly was in love with a human."

A belly laugh erupted from the mutation. "A human? No way, mister. I knew what he was like. Grumpy hated humans. He thought you were all scum."

"I know," Blade said softly.

The cat-man's expression sobered and he uttered a low hissing noise. "You're really not putting me on?"

Blade shook his head.

"Damn," Jag declared.

Saddened by their conversation, by the discussion of Grizzly and Athena Morris, the Warrior glanced

absently to the west, and as he did his eyes happened to alight on General Gallagher.

He saw the most baffling combination of emotions he'd ever seen on the pugnacious officer's face, a curious mixture of apprehension and outright panic. The instant the general realized Blade was looking at him, he forced a smile on his face and stared at the cat-man.

"Mind if I ask you a question?" Gallagher inquired.

"Be my guest," Jag said.

"What kind of mutation are you exactly? I mean, I know the Doktor mixed human and animal embryos together somehow to concoct his pet killers. Grizzly was made by mixing a human embryo with a grizzly bear embryo, or some bullcrap like that," Gallagher said. "Are you part jaguar? I thought jaguars have spots or dots or something. Your coat doesn't have a mark."

Jag took a half-step toward the officer, his arms coming up to his waist, revealing the inch-long tapered fingernails rimming his hands. "I won't tell you this again. *Don't* refer to me as a mutation. I'm a hybrid. Got it? A hybrid."

"Hey, I didn't mean to insult you," General Gallagher retorted defensively.

"No offense taken. *This* time," Jag said, and relaxed his arms. "As far as your question is concerned, I'm part jaguarundi."

"What the hell is that?"

The cat-man's flattened nostrils flared. "Anyone with half a brain knows that jaguarundis are big cats found mainly in South America and Mexico, although their range extends as far north as Texas and Arizona. They're famous for their speed and stealth. And just so you'll know, they don't have a spot on their bodies after they outgrow their kitten stage."

"I just asked."

"And I just answered you," Jag stated, his green eyes narrowing.

Blade took a stride forward, then rotated to face the recruits. "All right. I want you to form a line in front of this bunker."

"In any order, sir?" Captain Havoc queried.

"It doesn't matter," Blade told him. In short order they were arranged as required, with Havoc to the west, then Jaguarundi, Doc Madsen, Lobo, Raphaela, and Sparrow Hawk. They watched Blade expectantly. "I'll make this short and sweet. All of you were probably informed about the Freedom Force. You undoubtedly know that the Force is an elite combat unit designated to respond to any and all threats to the Federation. But you might not have learned that five of the previous Force team perished." He paused. "I don't want to have a repeat of that statistic."

"Who does, dude?" Lobo joked.

Blade stared at the Clansman. "I want to make several aspects of your new life crystal clear. First and foremost, I will not tolerate any breach of discipline. When I give you an order, you will obey it right then and there without griping. When you're in formation, like now, and I'm speaking, you will keep silent unless you request permission to speak."

Lobo swallowed hard.

"Second, this is a military unit. You'll undergo extensive training, and you'll be expected to adhere to certain standards of conduct both on and off duty. If you don't like the idea of regimentation, of taking orders, then the Force isn't for you. You can change your minds now without any hard feelings. No one will think less of you if you don't want to subject yourself to all this."

No one moved or spoke.

"Third, our mission, essentially, is to kill or be killed. We'll frequently be going up against overwhelming odds. If you have any qualms about combat, if you don't think you can kill another human being in the line of duty, then now is the time to head on back to whichever faction you're from and everyone will understand," Blade stated, and looked at Raphaela.

The Molewoman returned his gaze without flinching.

"Does anyone have any questions?" Blade asked them.

"I do," Doc Madsen said. "Do we get to keep our own weapons? I'm partial to my Combat Magnum."

"You'll all be allowed to carry whatever weapons you favor," Blade replied. "You'll also be issued whatever additional arms and gear will be needed on each assignment."

"I've got a question, man," Lobo said.

"What?"

"Where are you hidin' the John? If I don't get to take a leak real soon, I'm gonna piss in my pants."

Blade sighed and bowed his head. There could be no doubt about it. He *definitely* was a glutton for punishment.

Chapter 3

"You're puttin' us on, dude."

"I'm serious, Lobo," Blade responded. He walked to the center of the mats and gazed at the six recruits lined up on the south side. "I did this with the other team too. It's a great way to judge how well you can handle yourselves. So who wants to be first?"

The volunteers exchanged glances. They'd enjoyed a restful night and a hearty breakfast. An hour after their meal the Warrior had instructed the recruits to bring the four gray mats from the supply bunker and arrange them in front of the HQ. Now they looked at one another, each waiting for the other to step forward first. With a notable exception.

Captain Havoc glanced at his teammates, snorted, and strode onto the mats. "Hell, sir, I'll go first."

"Ready when you are," Blade said, and assumed the horse stance.

Havoc adopted the Shumoku-tachi, a T-shaped stance, and brought his arms up, his hands in the Nakayubi-ippon-ken position, clenched into compact fists with the second joint of the middle finger protruding. "No holds barred, sir?"

"No holds barred," Blade confirmed. "The purpose is to simulate an actual combat situation."

"I understand that you fought Jimmy and won," Havoc mentioned.

"We sparred. I came out on top."

"You won't come out on top this time," Captain Havoc declared, and then added, as an afterthought, "sir."

"Begin," Blade ordered, and a second later Captain Havoc flew into him, raining a series of hand and foot blows. Blade retreated several paces, blocking or countering every strike, assessing the officer's ability, and within a minute realized that the captain had been unduly modest. The man might only hold a black belt in karate, whereas his brother, Sergeant Havoc, had attained proficiency in three martial arts systems, but Captain Havoc exhibited a mastery which his sibling would have been hard pressed to match. Blade rated the officer as one of the best he'd ever encountered.

On the sidelines, Raphaela shook her head in disbelief. "They're moving too fast. I can't keep track of their hands and feet."

"I can," Jag said. "They're almost as quick as I am."

"You're rather high on yourself, aren't you?" Doc Madsen asked.

"I have reason to be," Jag stated smugly.

"I wish I did," Lobo said. "If that honky expects me to take him on, he's nuts."

"There is something wrong," Sparrow Hawk commented.

"What?" Doc queried.

"I'm not sure," the Flathead responded. "But the officer is trying too hard."

"Hey, bro, when you're going up against a guy the size of a friggin' tree, you try as hard as you can," Lobo remarked.

"What's happening now?" Raphaela asked.

Captain Havoc had backed the Warrior into the northwest corner and seemed to be on the verge of knocking Blade off the mat. He executed a devastating roundhouse kick, a *Migi-mawashi-geri*, and had it landed on the Warrior's temple the fight would have been over.

Blade instinctively brought his left forearm up to block the kick, then, before Havoc could pull the leg back, he clamped his left hand on the officer's ankle, using the Eagle Claw technique, and whipped the leg around, using Havoc's own momentum to swing the officer in a semicircle. His hands whipped out and caught Havoc in the back, propelling the captain into the middle of the mats.

Lobo laughed.

The captain stumbled and almost fell. He recovered his balance at the last instant and whirled.

Having taken the measure of his sparring partner, Blade walked toward the officer, about to compliment Havoc for a job well done. Instead Captain Havoc came at him with the fury of an unbridled thunderstorm; every kick cracked like lightning and every hand blow buffeted him as mercilessly as cyclonic winds. Blade resisted the onslaught with considerable effort, bringing all of his might and speed to bear, and as he fought he thought that perhaps, just perhaps, Captain Havoc was being a bit too aggressive. If he didn't know better, he would swear that Havoc's strikes were intended to slay him.

But that couldn't be.

Blade decided to end their contest, and he allowed two blows to land on the left side of his chest and doubled over, in pain but not in *that* much pain, not enough where he couldn't function, not enough to prevent him from suddenly uncoiling when Captain Havoc stepped in to deliver a swordhand chop to the neck. He drove his right hand into Havoc's midriff, a palm-heel thrust into the breadbasket that doubled the officer in half and caused Havoc to sink to his knees.

"Wow!" Raphaela declared.

"You're quite skilled, Captain," Blade stated, catching his breath.

His arms covering his stomach, breathing in great gasps, Havoc looked up and scowled. "Not talented enough, sir."

"You're easily as talented as your brother."

Captain Havoc averted his eyes, took a deep breath, and rose to his feet. He stood at attention, despite the agony lancing his abdomen. "I can understand why you beat Jimmy, sir," he said. "I doubt anyone could best you in hand-to-hand combat."

"There are others better than I am," Blade informed him.

"That's not possible," Captain Havoc replied.

"It's true," Blade asserted. "There's another Warrior at the Home by the name of Rikki-Tikki-Tavi who has beaten me at sparring a number of times. And I met a Thai once, a particularly vicious gentleman called Kan Tang, who was my equal in every respect. I'm sure I'll meet others from time to time who will be in the same class, and I can't afford to let my expertise go to my head. The day I start to think of myself as the best there is, that's the day someone better will come along and make my wife a widow."

The officer did a double take. "You're married?"

Blade nodded. "And I have a son named Gabe."

"I didn't expect you to be married," Captain Havoc said lamely.

"What difference does it make? Why are you so surprised?" Blade inquired.

"I'm not. It's just that. . ." Havoc mumbled, then abruptly regained his composure and bowed to the Warrior as a token of his respect. "Thanks for the lesson, sir. I learned a lot."

"We'll do it again soon," Blade said. "I can always use a good sparring partner."

"I can hardly wait, sir," Captain Havoc said. He performed an about-face and walked to the south side of the mats.

"Who's next?" Blade asked.

"I'll go," Doc Madsen stated. He unstrapped his gunbelt and gently laid the holster and Magnum on the edge of the mat.

"I know that many in the Cavalry pride themselves on their boxing ability," Blade mentioned. "Are you a boxer?"

"I'm a fair hand at it," Doc acknowledged, coming closer and raising his clenched fists.

"Are you adept at any of the martial arts?"

"I don't go in for any of that fancy dancing," Doc replied. He wagged his fists. "Let's get this over with. And try not to kill me."

They engaged, exchanging jabs and punches, never really connecting, merely gauging their respective prowess, circling and flicking uppercuts, hooks, and crosses.

On the sidelines, Lobo leaned toward Raphaela and whispered, "Why don't you go next, foxy?"

"The name is Raphaela to you," she responded, "and you can go next."

"How about you, Sparrow Hawk? Why don't you go?" Lobo prompted.

"Please, call me Sparrow," the Flathead said. "And I wouldn't think of depriving you of the honor to be the next one. You must be eager to test your mettle against the famous Warrior."

Lobo studied Sparrow's features for a moment. "Are you jivin' me, dude?"

"What does jivin' mean?"

The Clansman snorted and shook his head in amazement. "Jive means to feed somebody a line."

"A line of what?"

Lobo snickered. "Bro, they sure grow 'em dumb where you come from," he said, then added, "No offense, red man."

"Thank you, my black brother," Sparrow stated solemnly.

"They're done," Raphaela interjected.

Blade and Doc Madsen had finished their sparring and were shaking hands.

"How'd I do?" Doc asked.

"Not bad. I'd say you could hold your own against most opponents," Blade said in praise.

Doc walked over and retrieved his holster. "Will I be learning any of that martial-arts junk while I'm here?"

"When we're not off on a mission there will be daily practice sessions in unarmed combat. Whether you learn anything or not is entirely up to you," Blade said. He smiled at the others. "Okay. Who wants to give it a shot?"

"Sparrow does," Lobo declared, and gave the Flathead a shove, causing Sparrow Hawk to stumble onto the mats.

"I guess you're next," Blade remarked, and grinned.

"Evidently," Sparrow agreed, and glanced back at the Clansman. Lobo seemed to have developed an intense interest in a cloud floating overhead.

"You won't need the spear," Blade mentioned.

Sparrow hefted the finely crafted weapon, consisting of a polished wooden staff six feet in length to which a sharp steel head, triangular in shape, had been affixed. "This belonged to my father, Red Horse. I used it to slay the mutation that killed him."

"My father was also killed by a mutation," Blade divulged somberly.

"How old were you when it happened?"

"Twenty."

"I was only twelve, a boy whose head was filled with childish notions, a boy who didn't realize how hard this life can be," Sparrow said. "I was forced to grow up quickly."

"Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

"Two of each. I'm the oldest."

"What about your mom?"

"She's alive and well and living in Kalispell. Once a month, rain or shine, winter or summer, our family gets together at her house for a feast and fun," Sparrow said, and sighed. "I'll miss those family affairs."

"Your tour of duty is only for a year. You'll be back enjoying their company before you know it."

"Unless I suffer the same fate as Thunder," Sparrow responded. He deposited the spear at the edge of the mat and faced the giant. "Like the Cavalryman, I'm not an expert at unarmed combat. I can wrestle and box a little, but that's about it."

"Then we'll wrestle and box," Blade proposed. "Your objective will be to pin me on the mat. Ready?"

"Why do I suddenly wish I was tangling with a grizzly bear instead of you?" Sparrow joked, and closed in.

Blade grabbed at the Flathead's right wrist, but Sparrow deftly sidestepped and lunged at the Warrior's ankles. Blade felt arms encircle his legs, and he swayed and almost tottered over when Sparrow tried to upend him. He bent down and got his hands on the Flathead's shoulders, and together they tumbled to the mat and wrestled in earnest.

"Go, Sparrow!" Lobo shouted encouragement, then looked at Raphaela. "That midget doesn't stand a chance."

"Sparrow isn't a midget," she replied.

"He's the smallest one here. That makes him the midget of our group," Lobo stated.

"And what are you? Our official mouth?"

Lobo took his eyes from the grappling pair on the mats and faced her. "You're not as wimpy as you pretend to be, lady."

"I've never pretended to be a wimp, Lobo."

"That's how you came across yesterday. But I figure you're a real sassy momma when the going gets rough."

"If Blade tries to ship me back to the Moles, he'll find out how sassy I can be," Raphaela vowed.

"Well, since you're such hot stuff, foxy, you can take him on next."

"You go."

"Ladies always go first. Haven't you heard?"

"If you had any manners, you'd be first," Raphaela countered.

Jag unexpectedly hissed lightly. "I'll take him on. The two of you can stand here and twiddle your thumbs."

"What's gotten into you?" Lobo asked.

"Nothing a couple of earplugs wouldn't cure," Jag answered.

On the mats, Blade and Sparrow tussled vigorously, rolling over and over, back and forth, each applying hold after hold in vain. The Warrior broke free of every lock, using his superior strength to thwart Sparrow again and again. And although he tried his best, Blade couldn't get a grip on the twisting, wriggling, contorting Flathead. He'd never fought an adversary so slippery, and he was about to call their match a draw when Sparrow tripped over his own feet while scrambling erect. Instantly Blade wrapped his right arm around Sparrow's head, seizing the Flathead in a basic headlock. "Got you!" he said.

"Think so?" Sparrow asked, and wrenched his body in a tight arc at the same second he applied pressure on Blade's arm. Although he couldn't pry the Warrior's arm all the way open, he did succeed in forcing Blade's forearm an inch from his chin. With a backward jerk he popped free and straightened.

"Not bad," Blade said, rising. "You're slipperier than a slug."

"Thanks. I think."

"What are your other strong points?"

"I'm a competent hunter and tracker. And I know herbal medicine, remedies taught to me by the tribal shaman."

"I'm happy to have you with us," Blade said sincerely, then swung to the south. "Next."

Jaguarundi walked onto the mats. "So much for the amateurs. It's time to take on a pro."

"So you're a pro?"

"I'm the best fighter on the team. Go ahead. Test me. Any way you want."

"Fair enough," Blade stated, and waited for Sparrow to reclaim the spear and rejoin the others. "Your objective will be simpler than Sparrow's was."

"Don't go easy on me. You'll regret it," Jag promised.

"Prove you're as good as you say."

"How?"

"Let's pretend I'm an enemy. Your objective is to slash my throat before I lay you out."

The cat-man blinked a few times. "Pick another objective."

"What's wrong?"

"If I get carried away, you're liable to look like shredded venison."

Blade smiled. "You'll never lay a finger on me," he said.

"Pick another objective," Jaguarundi insisted. "You don't stand a chance against my speed."

"Prove it," Blade reiterated, and smirked, deliberately taunting the hybrid.

"Don't say I didn't warn you."

"I won't, *mutant*," Blade stated, emphasizing the last word distastefully, hoping to test the limits of the cat-man's self-control.

Apparently there was none.

Jaguarundi came at the Warrior exhibiting all the primal fury of his namesake, his arms a blur as he tried to rake his fingernails across Blade's neck. A low growl escaped his lips as he fought, growing in volume.

Blade backpedaled a few yards, blocking swing after swing, then stood firm, countering every swipe, focusing exclusively on the hybrid's hands, reacting instinctively. A claw nicked his left wrist and drew a trickle of blood, but he ignored the cut, continuing to block, block, block. His extra foot of height gave him an advantage, compelling Jaguarundi to extend those flashing arms to their limit, making the hybrid work harder. The power in the mutation's limbs astonished him. Though he was seemingly thin and frail, under Jaguarundi's skin flowed sinews of steel. Every blow jarred Blade's arms, and he had no doubt that the hybrid could rip those tapered nails through flesh as easily as one of his Bowies could cleave a wax candle.

As the seconds passed and became a full minute, then two, Jaguarundi became increasingly frustrated by his failure to penetrate the giant's guard. He swung harder, recklessly, his growl a feral vocalization of his simmering rage.

Blade's arms were beginning to tire, his concentration starting to flag. To win, he needed to take the hybrid by surprise, to do something totally unanticipated. Jag undoubtedly expected him to continue standing there, blocking until he was too tired to lift his arms. But what if he did the exact opposite? What if he lowered his guard for just an instant? Would the hybrid be able to check his swing in time?

Perhaps sensing weakness in the Warrior, Jaguarundi pressed his attack with renewed intensity.

And Blade let him. He let Jag swing all out, let those nails come within inches of his face and throat, let the hybrid extend those streaking arms to the limit, and blocked each blow. He blocked a left, an arching right, and another left. Then, as the right lanced toward him, he did the unexpected. He lowered his arms and took a half step backwards, and he saw the stunned expression on Jaguarundi's feline visage as the hybrid's right hand swept downward, missing by half a foot. Before Jag could retract that hand, Blade's hands flicked out and grasped the mutation's wrist. He pivoted, yanking on Jag's arm, throwing his whole body into the motion, sending the hybrid sailing.

Jaguarundi flew to the north edge of the mats and dropped, about to land hard on his back. In midair he executed a graceful flip, his chin tucked into his chest, his arms and legs drawn in tight to his body. When he completed the flip, he uncoiled and alighted on his feet, his arms extended, his green eyes on the giant.

Blade smiled and placed his hands on his hips. "You were a little slow, but I think you'll improve with time."

"And you're all right yourself, for a human," Jag said. A grin creased his thin lips.

"Tell me something, and be honest."

"What?"

"Are you like Grizzly? Are you as prejudiced against humans as he is?"

"Not quite."

"Can you elaborate?"

Jaguarundi walked toward the Warrior. "As I pointed out a while ago, Grumpy believes all humans are scum. I don't go that far. To me, you're all a bunch of meatballs. Crazy, yes. Obnoxious, yes. But I don't hate you."

"That's a relief," Blade said, and chuckled.

Jag halted and regarded the giant in admiration. "You took a chance goading me on. I like a man who's willing to take chances. It means you're not afraid to take life as it comes. I'm looking forward to working with you."

"The same here," Blade acknowledged, and turned to the south again.

"Uh-oh," Lobo muttered.

The Warrior glanced from the Clansman to Raphaela. "Which one of you is next?"

"She is," Lobo declared.

"He is," Raphaela stated.

"Either one of you will do," Blade told them.

"Do I get to use my NATO?" the Clansman inquired hopefully.

"Sure."

"Really?" Lobo replied, beaming happily. He went to reach into the right pocket of his jacket.

"And I'll use my Bowies," Blade added.

Lobo's smile transformed itself into a frown. "No fair, dude. Those knives of yours would hack me to itty-bitty pieces."

"Then why don't we stick to hand-to-hand combat?"

"Why don't you take the chick first?" Lobo suggested.

Blade took two strides toward them, his eyes narrowing. "I don't care which one of you spars with me. But one of you had better step out here now!"

To the surprise of everyone, the Molewoman ventured onto the mats. "I'll go first. If you wait for

chicken-heart, we'll be here until nightfall."

Doc Madsen, Sparrow, and Jaguarundi all laughed.

The Warrior scrutinized her from head to toe, then sighed. "Do you know anything about unarmed combat, Raphaela?"

"A little."

"Do you know how to box?"

"No."

"Do you know how to wrestle?"

"Not really."

"Have you ever fired a gun?"

"What's a gun have to do with sparring?" she asked testily.

"Answer the question."

Raphaela winced, as if in physical pain, and sadly shook her head. "But I can learn. I'm a fast learner. I promise."

"I was hoping to get a volunteer with more experience," Blade stated bluntly. "Our training program is thorough, but we can't wait for you to master every aspect before sending you out on missions. And if you make a mistake in the field, it could cost you your life."

"I won't go back to Wolfe!" Raphaela declared angrily. "I deserve to receive the same treatment as the men. Or don't you think women should be in this line of work?"

"Some of my fellow Warriors at the Home are women, women I recommended for the post," Blade disclosed, nipping her argument in the bud.

Raphaela glared up at him. "I demand the right to be tested like everyone else. I want to spar."

"How long do you think you would last against me?" Blade queried softly.

Her eyes roved over his towering physique, over his bulging, contoured muscles, and she frowned. "Not very long."

"Then sparring with me wouldn't be much of a test, would it?"

"I guess not," Raphaela admitted reluctantly, and bowed her head.

"So how about if you spar with Lobo?"

"Say *what!*" the Clansman blurted.

Raphaela looked at the Warrior, incredulity on her countenance. "What?"

"I can use a rest after taking on the other four. How about if you spar with Lobo? Show me what you can do against him, and maybe I'll let you stay on the Force for the time being," Blade said. "Is that fair enough?"

She grinned and glanced at the Clansman. "All I have to do is beat him?"

"That's all."

"I'm ready," Raphaela declared eagerly.

"Well, I'm not," Lobo stated, sounding miffed. He joined them on the mats and pointed at her. "This is an insult, dude! Why should I do your dirty work for you? I'm a lean, mean, fightin' machine, and you want me to take on this fluff? Give me a break!"

"Who are you calling fluff?" Raphaela demanded, clenching her fists.

Blade inhaled deeply, suppressing an impulse to laugh, and stared at Lobo. "You don't want to spar with her?"

"No way, man."

"You'd rather spar with me, right?"

There was a slight pause as Lobo struggled to move his lips. "Damn straight I would. A woman ain't no challenge to a guy like me."

"I can imagine how much of a letdown it would be to spar with her," Blade said sympathetically. "And it wouldn't be fair to you. Okay. You've made your point. You can spar with me right now."

Lobo's mouth moved but no words came out.

"It's too bad you feel this way," Blade commented. "You would have done me a favor by sparring with her."

"A favor, huh?"

"Yep."

"If you put it that way, how can I refuse?" Lobo declared. "I'll spar with the bimbo."

"Bimbo!" Raphaela snapped.

"But let me get this straight," Lobo said. "If I spar with her, do I have to spar with you?"

Blade pretended to ponder the question. "No, I guess not. If you spar with her, you won't need to spar with me today."

Lobo looked at her and snickered. "You've got yourself a deal, man. I'll stomp this momma into the ground." So saying, he began shuffling his legs and swinging his arms, moving from side to side, boxing an imaginary foe. "Do you see this, woman? Do you see these moves? Nobody messes with Leo Wood," he bragged, and shuffled some more.

"Is that a fact?" Raphaela responded.

"You bet," Lobo stated, moving faster, boxing rings around her. "If you know any prayers, now's the time to say 'em."

Raphaela glanced at the Warrior. "If I beat him, I'm in?"

"That's the deal," Blade replied.

"You can forget beatin' me, dingbat," Lobo advised her, weaving and punching, gliding and sliding, a shuffling fiend if ever there was one. "You're history, bitch."

And he was still shuffling away when Raphaela planted the instep of her right shoe between his legs.

Chapter 4

Blade sat in a gray metal folding chair behind his desk in the HQ bunker, going over the forms he had to fill out on each recruit. He lifted his head when the sound of a vehicle braking to a stop outside reached his ears. The outer door creaked open, then slammed shut, and footsteps thumped on the stairway leading down to his office. "Come on in, General," he called out.

The office door opened and there stood General Gallagher, a black briefcase in his left hand, a mystified expression on his face. "How did you know it was me?"

"You always slam doors. It must stem from your childhood."

"My childhood?"

"Yeah. You were probably assaulted by a doorknob when you were an infant."

Gallagher entered the office, his forehead furrowed. "Not that I recall," he said seriously, then broke into a grin. "How's it going, Blade? It's been a week already."

"It seems like a month."

The general took a seat in one of the two chairs in front of the desk and placed the briefcase on the other chair. "How are the new people doing?"

"Okay," Blade replied.

"Just okay?"

"Each of them has strengths, areas of expertise, they can contribute to the team. They're eager to learn, and they're not as temperamental as the first group."

"Break them down for me," General Gallagher said.

The Warrior leaned back and locked his hands behind his head. "If you want. I'd say that Captain Havoc is the best all-around recruit, which is understandable considering his prior experience. He's just as lethal as his brother was, and he's bigger and stronger. He also has the added plus of being an officer, of having command seasoning. But . . ." He hesitated.

"But what?"

"There's something about him that bothers me," Blade divulged.

"What?" Gallagher asked, leaning forward.

"I can't put my finger on it."

"Is he being insubordinate?"

"No."

"Creating problems with the others?"

"No. They tend to look up to him because of his military background and they respect his judgment," Blade said.

"Then I don't see what the problem is," General Gallagher said, puzzled.

"Anyway, I'm thinking of making Havoc my second-in-command. I didn't appoint one on the last team and I should have."

"Mike will be honored, I'm sure."

"Then there's Jaguarundi. Thank the Spirit he's not like Grizzly! He gets along well with the others, although he does think he's better than everyone else. He has sensational speed, his vision is twice as good as ours, as is his hearing, and he can track by scent. He'll be invaluable," Blade said.

"What about the Cavalryman, Madsen?"

"Doc is steady and reliable. He's fast on the draw and he's an accurate shot with a handgun or a rifle."

"What did he do before he volunteered to join the Force?" Gallagher queried. "Was he a rancher like Boone?"

"He was a gambler."

"A what?"

"Doc gambled for a living. The VTOL brought a one-page letter from Kilrane, the leader of the Cavalry, on the last shuttle flight. He provided a few details about Doc's past. It seems that Madsen has a reputation as a gunfighter."

"I don't know if I like the idea of having a gunfighter on the Force," General Gallagher remarked.

"We're in the business of killing, General. A gunfighter fits right in."

"But gamblers are shiftless sorts. Why would a man like him want to enlist?"

"Maybe he's tired of being shiftless," Blade speculated. "I don't know. But I'm not about to object to having him. I believe he'll do fine,"

"And the Indian?"

"Sparrow is an exceptional tracker and hunter, and next to Jaguarundi he's the best at living off the land. He's honest and dependable, a lot like his predecessor," Blade said.

"What about Leo Wood?" Gallagher asked.

Blade grinned and shook his head. "Lobo is the wild card. He's erratic. He never seems to know when to keep his mouth shut. And if I don't know better, I'd swear the man is a coward."

"You don't think he is?"

"No. For several reasons. The Clan wouldn't send someone who was unreliable. I know their leader, Zahner, well, and I had a long talk with him after the first recruit they sent, Kraft, turned out to be an immature psychopath. Zahner promised me he wouldn't repeat the mistake," Blade said. "Lobo has potential. We've sparred a couple of times now, and he's a natural-born fighter. His reflexes and timing are exceptional, and he's good with that knife of his."

"Then what's his problem?"

"The man will always take the path of least resistance. He goes out of his way to avoid doing work, to avoid expending effort of any kind. And where there's an element of danger, he'd rather flee than fight."

"And you want him on the Force?" Gallagher questioned skeptically.

The Warrior smiled. "Yeah. I do. He'll be my balancing factor."

"You're what?"

"The voice of caution."

"Hmmmph," General Gallagher muttered, evidently unconvinced. "It's your show. Do what you want." He paused. "How do they rate on the firing range?"

"Havoc, Doc, and Sparrow are the best shots. Jag has never used a weapon in his life, but he's learning fast. Lobo couldn't hit the broadside of a barn with a bazooka. Raphaela is fair. She's been practicing every chance she gets."

"What about her? Do you intend to keep her on the Force?"

"Yes."

"Even though she's the worst of the lot?"

"Yes. Initially, I was all set to give her the boot. But the more I've observed her, the more I believe she can do the job. The lady has spunk, General. True grit, as a buddy of mine named Hickok would say. She'll stay," Blade stated.

"I hope you don't live to regret your decision," Gallagher said.

"Time will tell. Speaking of which, it's nice to have the time to train them properly, to hone their skills. If you remember, the first team had to go out on a mission on short notice and we lost one man," Blade said.

General Gallagher cleared his throat and gazed at the ceiling.

"I couldn't believe it when you walked in here last time and told me I had two weeks to prepare the unit," Blade went on. "At least I'll have all the time I need to train this team, right?"

The general didn't answer.

"Right?" Blade repeated, his hands lowering to the desk.

"Well ..." Gallagher said.

"Don't say a word!" Blade declared, and held up his right hand. "I don't want to hear it."

"Look, we both know the best training is actual experience in the field," Gallagher said.

"I don't want to hear it," Blade reiterated.

"I have this terrific idea."

"Go tell it to a great white shark."

"At least listen to what I have to say," Gallagher urged.

"I'd rather not."

General Gallagher sighed and gestured with both arms. "Look, I'm not about to suggest that you take the Force into a combat situation."

"You're not?" Blade said suspiciously.

"No. What good would it do? You have the final authority on whether the Force accepts an assignment. The only reason I was able to persuade you to send out the first Force prematurely was because of the urgency of the mission. This new idea isn't urgent in any respect."

"It's not?"

"No. So will you hear me out?"

The Warrior scowled and rested his chin in his hands. "I know better, but go ahead."

"Thanks," Gallagher said. "What I have in mind is more of a scouting and tracking assignment. Before I can explain, I have to provide some background."

"Be my guest," Blade stated halfheartedly.

"For decades, ever since the war almost, California has had problems with raiders along its southern border. There are checkpoints on all the roads and highways, and fence has been strung along certain sections. But it's impossible and impractical to fence in the entire border."

"I can imagine," Blade remarked listlessly.

"Raiders are constantly coming up from Mexico and attacking our communities and towns," General Gallagher disclosed. "Our Army patrols and border guards can't be everywhere at once. No matter how hard we try and we try, believe me bands are always slipping across the border, conducting raids, and returning before we can apprehend them."

"Why doesn't the government of Mexico do something?"

"Because there isn't a centralized government in Mexico anymore. According to the records, the Mexican government fell to pieces about a year after World War Three broke out. There were massive riots in Mexico City when the food shortages drove the populace over the edge. And there were insurrectionists stirring everyone up, Communists and other jerks. The government couldn't handle the mobs, especially after widespread panic set in. For all we know, Mexico isn't even called Mexico now. We just call it that out of habit," Gallagher elaborated.

"How does all of this tie in with your mission for the Force?" Blade inquired.

"About two weeks ago a bandit gang, the worst of the lot, came across the border and attacked a small town called Jacumba. A California resident named Horace Greeley, who was on his way from Brawley to visit a friend living west of Jacumba, drove into the town shortly after the raiders left. He found a police officer barely alive and saw the white dog "

"The white dog?" Blade said, interrupting. "I'll get to the dog in a bit," Gallagher said. "Greeley found all the residents dead, butchered. Most of the women had been raped. Even the kids were killed." The Warrior's features clouded.

"In the center of Jacumba, in a small park, Greeley found the evidence we needed to identify the leader of the band," Gallagher related. "What evidence?"

"Ten stakes with female breasts impaled on them." Blade straightened, his hands slowly lowering to the desktop. "What kind of sicko could conceive of such a thing?"

"The bastard responsible for the raid on Jacumba is a Mexican bandit called El Diablo. The Devil. His followers are known as the Devils of Baja. El Diablo has been conducting raids for the better part of twenty years, and he always leaves his calling card at the scene after killing everyone and looting to his heart's content."

"The breasts of women impaled on stakes?" General Gallagher nodded. "What else do you know about him?"

"Informants have told us there are upwards of ninety men and women in his band. His real name, by the way, is Celestino Naranjo. What he did before he took to murdering innocent people is anyone's guess. He's reportedly in his late forties. And for the past eight or nine years he's been traveling with a white dog, a huge beast that's missing its left eye."

"Why haven't you sent in a team of Rangers or Special Forces commandos to take care of him?" Blade asked.

"Don't think we haven't tried. Twice we sent special units across the border on his trail. They never came back."

"Then you certainly don't want the Force to tangle with the Devil. We're not ready yet."

"No. But I'm hoping you'll agree to try and find where El Diablo has his headquarters," General Gallagher said.

"You're kidding."

"Hear me out," Gallagher said quickly. "This wouldn't be a combat mission. All you would have to do is track El Diablo into Baja California, locate his base of operations, and report back to me. Once I know where the son of a bitch holes up, I'll convince Governor Melnick to send in an air strike."

Blade shook his head. "Too risky. The new recruits haven't been together long enough to mesh as a unit, and they'd need to be in top form to take on the Devil."

"But that's my whole point. I'm not asking you to take him on. I don't want the Force to engage the Devils. All you have to do is track El Diablo to his lair. How hard can that be? After all, you have a mutation and an Indian on your team. And Captain Havoc is no slouch in the tracking department either."

"I don't know," Blade said uncertainly. "What if something goes wrong?"

"You'll take a radio along. At the first sign of trouble, send out a message. I'll have the VTOLs waiting near the border to fly in and retrieve you. What more could you want?"

The Warrior leaned back and pursed his lips.

"This could be an ideal training exercise for your new people," General Gallagher stated. "You'll be in the field, where you can put the volunteers through their paces, without any danger. Or virtually none."

"I like the idea of a field exercise," Blade admitted, "but this still sounds too hazardous."

"Think it over. Take a few days to decide."

Blade-tapped his left hand on the desk. "Didn't you say the raid on Jacumba took place two weeks ago?"

"Yes."

"There you have it. We'd never be able to follow a two-week-old trail. We'll have to pass on the mission," Blade said.

"The trail would be impossible to follow if the Devils traveled on foot, but they don't. El Diablo's band uses souped-up, stripped-down, converted cars and trucks. He takes every vehicle he can lay his grimy hands on and has them converted into makeshift dune buggies," Gallagher detailed.

"Into what?"

"Dune buggies. They're real popular at the beach, and they work like a charm on desert terrain. They're rugged and as lightweight as possible, and they're outfitted with oversized tires. Dune buggies can go practically anywhere," Gallagher said. "Even though the trail is two weeks old, there are bound to be enough tracks for Sparrow and Jaguarundi to track."

"Why don't you send in another Ranger or Special Forces team?"

"They're good, but there are very few Indians in either and no mutations whatsoever. The Force has an edge in that respect."

Blade frowned, striving to formulate another valid objection. "When would you want us to depart?"

"Whenever you felt you were ready. I wouldn't take longer than a week to decide, though. I doubt even Sparrow and Jag could follow a trail over three weeks old."

"I just don't know."

Sensing he had won, General Gallagher gazed at the floor and grinned. When he looked up, he displayed a straight face. "I've brought maps of the area in the briefcase and the intelligence file on El Diablo and the Devils. Read it. Study the maps. Whatever you decide will be fine by me." He rose and clinched his argument with the appeal he had saved for last. "I hope you'll agree. Just think of all the lives, all the innocent men, women, and children we could save if we can eliminate El Diablo. He killed twenty-six kids in Jacumba alone."

Blade thought of Jenny and Gabe and wished he'd stayed at the Home.

Chapter 5

"Where the hell are we, dude?"

"In Baja California."

"I know that," Lobo stated stiffly.

"Then why'd you ask?" Captain Havoc responded.

"What are you giving me a hard time for? All I want to know is where exactly we're at?" Lobo said, stepping over a large rock in his path. He gazed at the camouflage backpack riding between the officer's broad shoulders and waited for an answer.

"We're approximately ten miles south of the border," Havoc told him.

"Is that all? I feel as if I've been hikin' for days," Lobo grouched.

Havoc consulted the watch on his left wrist. "We've been hiking for three hours and ten minutes. At a snail's pace, I might add."

"Who asked you?"

Captain Havoc glanced over his left shoulder. "Do you ever wake up in a good mood?"

Lobo hefted the M-16 he carried and eyed the officer resentfully. "What's that crack supposed to mean?"

"All you ever do is complain."

"I do not," Lobo declared. "And you shouldn't be bad-mouthing me, sucker. I'm not the kind of guy you want to mess with, not if you want to stay healthy."

"What will you do? Pay Raphaela to beat me up?" Havoc said, and laughed.

"The only reason the bitch won is because she cheated," Lobo declared angrily.

"She sure nailed you good."

"Don't remind me."

A soft chuckle came from behind the Clansman. "You may never be able to have kids, pardner."

Lobo looked back at Doc Madsen, who followed five feet to his rear. "My balls are made of iron, man. That sneak kick of hers hardly fazed me."

"Then why were you on your knees on the mat, holding yourself and begging her to spare you?" Doc responded.

"It was all an act. I didn't want her to get me riled. I was afraid I'd lose my temper and stomp her butt," Lobo said.

"You're amazing," Doc stated.

"You bet your ass I am."

"Yep," Doc stated, and nodded. "You're truly amazing. I've never met anyone like you. How do you sling so much bull and keep such a straight face at the same time?"

Captain Havoc snickered.

"What is this? Pick-on-Lobo day or something?" the Clansman snapped. "Why is everyone always on my case?"

"Because you ask for it," Havoc said.

"You're nuts," Lobo replied. He wiped his left hand across his perspiring brow and squinted skyward at the blistering sun. "Damn, it's hot. I've never been anywhere as hot as this."

"It's called a desert," Captain Havoc quipped. "And what are those mountains over there?" Lobo

inquired, pointing to the east at the barren foothills and arid peaks beyond, not more than a mile distant.

"That range is known as the Sierra San Pedro Martir," Havoc answered.

"They seem to be gettin' closer," Lobo observed.

"Boy, you don't miss a thing, do you?" Havoc cracked. "Yeah, the mountains are getting closer because we've been angling to the southwest for the past two hours."

"Do you think this El Diablo has his base in those mountains?" Lobo asked.

"It wouldn't surprise me," Havoc said. "This section of the Baja is sparsely populated. Except for a few scattered villages, there are thousands of square miles in which a smart bandit could hide his headquarters."

"What if we bump into him?" Lobo queried nervously.

"Our mission is to track him to his lair, remember?" Havoc reminded the Clansman. "We're not supposed to engage the Devil."

"But something could go wrong. His band might spot us," Lobo said. "What then?"

Doc Madsen snickered. "You wouldn't have anything to worry about, Lobo."

"Why not?"

"I reckon Raphaela would protect you."

The Cavalryman and the officer laughed uproariously. Both were looking at the Clansman, and failed to notice the giant blocking their path until Havoc sensed his presence and abruptly halted.

"Fill me in on the joke," Blade stated, his hands on his hips, an M60E3 general-purpose machine gun hanging by a heavy leather strap under his right arm. A pair of ammo belts crisscrossed his massive chest. Under his left arm, in a shoulder holster, rested a Colt Stainless Steel Officers Model 45. Secured to his back was a camouflage backpack identical to Havoc's. Attached to his belt at the small of his back was a full canteen. The Bowies, as ever, were on either hip. Crammed in both front pockets were grenades.

"We were just havin' a little fun," Lobo said.

"Advertise our location, why don't you?" Blade declared, his tone laced with sarcasm.

"You didn't tell us not to talk," Lobo defended them.

"We're in enemy territory, hunting for a guy who takes pleasure in mutilating others, who has been responsible for the deaths of hundreds. Should I have to tell you to keep the noise down? I mistakenly assumed you were smart enough to figure that out for yourselves," Blade said, and glanced at Captain Havoc. "You should all know better."

The officer bit his lower lip, his features hardening, and gazed down at the ground. "I'm sorry, sir. I assure you it won't happen again."

"The same here," Doc Madsen said. He reached up and pulled his hat lower over his eyes. "I guess the heat is making us a bit careless." His fingers tugged on the strap to the M-16 suspended over his left shoulder. Like the others, he wore a backpack, only his was twice as long and half again as wide.

"Do you want someone to spell you with the radio?" Blade asked.

"Nope. I'm doing fine," Doc said, "although I wish I'd taken your advice and worn a pair of those Army boots instead of my own. Mine were made more for riding than walking."

"Live and learn," Blade remarked. Consistent with his longstanding policy of permitting the Force members to wear their own clothing unless the circumstances dictated otherwise, he'd not made an issue of their attire. He'd required each one to bring an M-16, and they all had Colt pistols except Madsen and Jag. Blade's clothing consisted of his vest and pants. Lobo had his leather, and Doc his own clothes. Captain Havoc, naturally enough, had opted to wear fatigues, as had Raphaela, who now stood at the rear of the line, her face caked with perspiration, an M-16 held loosely in her right hand, her weariness transparent. "How are you holding up?" Blade asked, looking straight at her.

"I won't have to worry about losing those five pounds I wanted to lose," Raphaela replied, and grinned. "I feel like I'm being roasted alive. How do animals live in this heat? And how can those two wear coats?" She nodded at Madsen and Lobo.

"It's easy," Doc informed her. "My frock coat and Lobo's leather jacket help to keep us cool."

"Cool? You guys must be sweating like pigs."

"Yeah. But the sweat evaporates, and the evaporation cools our bodies," Doc said.

"I guess I should have brought a coat," Raphaela cracked. "Silly me."

"We'll take a break as soon as Jag and Sparrow return," Blade let them know.

"Hallelujah, bro," Lobo declared, and gazed past the Warrior. "Here they come now."

Blade turned and spied the hybrid and the Flathead emerging from a ravine 500 yards to the southwest. They were running side by side, conversing as they ran. Both wore backpacks and had M-16's slung over their arms. Sparrow also carried his prized spear.

"Maybe they found the Devil's hideout," Lobo commented hopefully.

The Warrior watched the pair approach, silently sharing the Clansman's expectation. The mission had progressed satisfactorily so far so far but he felt uneasy, a feeling he attributed to his apprehension over taking the new Force into the field with just two weeks' worth of training under their belts.

The seven days since General Gallagher first proposed the assignment had passed quickly, perhaps too quickly. There had been drills and training exercises every day from dawn until dusk. Marksmanship, hand-to-hand combat, military strategy, calisthenics, weapons-familiarity classes, and other activities were crammed into the schedule. Every day at four in the afternoon the team studied survival techniques. The basics of military discipline were instilled in them.

They'd learned well, Blade had to admit. Captain Havoc, of course, had breezed through the classes. Doc Madsen and Sparrow had applied themselves industriously. Jaguarundi, although he viewed some of the exercises as a patent waste of his time, had cooperated without argument. Raphaela had worked the hardest at mastering the techniques and learning the lessons. Predictably, Lobo had adopted a disinterested attitude and expended only enough energy to get each job done.

And then, only last night, the two VTOLs had flown the Force to a point at the border southwest of Jacumba where General Gallagher waited with a convoy of soldiers. A temporary base camp, consisting of four dozen tents, had been set up to serve as Gallagher's command post. After a briefing and a night of

fitful sleep, the Force had assembled before dawn. As the first rays of light etched the eastern horizon, they'd departed on the trail of El Diablo.

Now here they were, deep into the domain of the bandits, sweltering in the Baja desert, hot but alive. Blade held the M60 at his left side and waited for his point men. He stared at the large tire impressions imbedded in the earth to his left, recalling the information Gallagher had imparted about dune buggies. The vehicles were supposedly lightweight, but whatever made those prints had been gigantic.

What could it have been?

Sparrow Hawk and Jaguarundi drew closer, and finally halted in front of the giant. Sparrow's buckskins were coated with dust. A layer of sweat coated Jag's fur.

"Did you find the Devil's stronghold?" Blade inquired immediately.

"No," Sparrow replied.

"The trail leads up into the mountains," Jag said. "We followed the tracks for four miles and found a water hole where they made camp. They continued to the east."

"There's a water hole four miles from here?" Blade said, and scratched his chin. "We'll make camp there too. What have you learned about their forces?"

"There are fifteen vehicles. Eleven are the size of an average car and they leave light prints. Four vehicles are huge and heavy. They leave the biggest tire tracks I've ever seen," Jag stated, "and that includes the tracks made by the convoy trucks back at our base camp. The vehicles responsible must weigh tons and be enormous. I can't imagine what they could be."

"I've noticed the same tracks," Blade remarked. "They're quite puzzling." He paused. "Did you see anyone? Any raiders?"

"We saw no one," Sparrow responded. He gazed out over the flat expanse of desert, then at the mountains to the east. Both were bisected by periodic gullies and ravines. The vegetation consisted of scrub brush and stunted trees. Boulders dotted the landscape. "All we encountered were a few birds, snakes, and lizards."

"Do we get that break you promised?" Lobo interjected.

"I've changed my mind," Blade said.

"Figures," the Clansman mumbled. "Since the water hole is only four miles off, we'll keep going until we reach it."

"Any chance of you carrying me piggyback?" Lobo asked. Blade ignored him and glanced at Captain Havoc. "Contact General Gallagher and inform him of our plans."

"Yes, sir," the officer said, and walked over to Doc Madsen. "Let me have the radio."

The Cavalryman slipped the oversized backpack from his shoulders and gently eased it to the ground.

"There you go." In less than a minute Havoc had the radio out and was adjusting several dials. He flicked a silver toggle switch and raised the square microphone to his lips. "Bravo-Echo. This is Lima-Oscar-Victor-Echo."

Static crackled from a small speaker on the right side of the housing.

"Bravo-Echo. This is Lima-Oscar-Victor-Echo," Havoc repeated, and scanned the dials, insuring the settings were correct.

"Maybe they're not listening," Lobo said. "Our frequency is being monitored constantly," Blade told him. "General Gallagher is ready to send in the VTOLs at a word from us."

Lobo made a snorting sound. "All he has to do is *hear* the word."

"May I make a suggestion, sir?" Captain Havoc queried. "Go ahead."

"We shouldn't be standing out in the open like sitting ducks. Why don't you head on out and I'll catch up as soon as I raise the general?"

"I don't want to leave you alone." Havoc smiled. "I can take care of myself, sir. It shouldn't take more than a few minutes."

The Warrior cradled the M60 and surveyed their barren surroundings. "All right. But you have five minutes and no longer. We'll go slowly." He paused. "Give your backpack to Doc." Havoc complied, then squatted next to the radio. "See you in a bit."

Blade motioned with his right arm and the Force hiked to the southwest.

"Be careful," Raphaela warned the officer as she passed him.

"Always," Captain Havoc replied. He fiddled with the dials while surreptitiously watching his teammates leave. When they were 30 yards away and well out of hearing range, he spoke into the microphone again. "Hotel-Alfa-Victor-Oscar-Charlie here."

"Report, Captain," barked the stern voice of General Gallagher through the speaker.

"We're heading for the water hole, sir," Havoc informed his superior.

"Any sign of the Boob Boy yet?"

"Negative, sir."

"What about the Goons?"

"Negative again, sir."

"Damn."

The speaker crackled for several seconds.

"Has the Jolly Mean Giant displayed any suspicions?" Gallagher asked.

"No, sir. He doesn't suspect a thing."

"Don't be too sure, Captain. Never underestimate him. His mind is the equal of his muscles."

"If you say so, sir," Captain Havoc said crisply.

"I mean it, Captain. I'll hold you accountable if he discovers the real reason for this mission."

"He won't, sir," Havoc stated. "And if you don't mind my saying, sir, you give him too much credit."

"How so, Captain?"

"If he's so damn great, how come he let my brother die?"

A sigh came from the speaker. "I know how close Jimmy and you were, Mike. But don't allow your feelings to interfere with your better judgment."

"You know me better than that, sir."

"If I didn't have complete confidence in you, I wouldn't have selected you for this job," General Gallagher said.

"I know, sir. You have my gratitude. I want revenge so bad I can taste it."

"Control yourself, Captain. We'll do this my way or not at all."

"Yes, sir."

"If my plan succeeds, you'll avenge your brother and I'll finally be rid of the Force for good."

Captain Havoc grinned. "I can hardly wait, sir."

Chapter 6

Blade didn't like the location of the water hole.

Situated in the mountains on the south side of a spacious clearing, at the base of a sheer 200-foot cliff, the oval depression in which spring water had collected was 15 feet across and appeared to be eight feet deep. The north side of the clearing bordered a steep incline composed of loose rock, too steep to be easily scaled. Only from the east and the west could the water hole be approached. To the west, the route the Force had followed, a wide gully meandered from the base of the foothills to the clearing. To the east the gully continued up a slight grade. Four hundred feet from the water hole was a low crest obscuring whatever lay on the far side.

The Warrior glanced at the cliff, then the steep incline, bothered by the feeling of being hemmed in. If the Force should be attacked now, their mobility would be severely impaired. He squinted up at the top of the cliff, wondering if there were enemy eyes up above spying on them.

"Is everything okay?" Raphaela asked.

Blade looked to his right, where she stood with her canteen in her hands, and nodded. "Relatively speaking, yes."

"I get the impression you're worried."

"This whole mission worries me," Blade said, and gazed at the other Force members. Doc, Lobo, and Sparrow were lounging next to the water. Jaguarundi stood a few yards to the east, scrutinizing the terrain. Captain Havoc was standing a few feet to the Warrior's left, listening intently.

"Why, sir?" the officer inquired.

"Because I still have doubts about our readiness for an assignment of this nature. Most of you are quite capable in your own right, but we haven't learned how to mesh as a team yet. Until we can, every time we venture into the field we take our lives in our hands. In our line of work inexperience and a lack of coordination can be fatal, and I don't want to lose any of you," Blade stated.

"Is that a fact?" Captain Havoc responded, his face impassive.

"It's nice to know you care about us," Raphaela said to Blade.

"In the final analysis I'm responsible for your lives," Blade said. "My decisions can determine whether you live or die. I lost five members of the first Force, and I don't intend to repeat that tragedy."

"How did the others die?" Raphaela questioned.

"They all gave their lives in the line of duty. Most died in combat. One, Athena Morris, a highly respected journalist who wrote reports on our missions for the newspapers, died accidentally when she fell out of a hospital window."

Raphaela's forehead creased. "She fell out a window?"

Blade nodded. "She was under sedation at the time. Athena had been injured during our assignment in Alaska, and the doctor gave her strong medication. Apparently she opened her window to get fresh air and slipped." He frowned. "She was on the seventh floor."

"And she wasn't pushed?" Raphaela asked.

"No," Blade replied.

"They're certain of that?"

"Yes." Blade stared at her. "Why?"

"Oh, I don't know," Raphaela said, and shrugged. "It just seems strange that she would simply fall out a window. She was a regular member of the Force, right?"

"Yeah."

"Then she went through training, didn't she?"

Blade nodded. "She even trained with the Rangers before joining the Force so she would qualify."

"Then she must have been in top condition. Even though she was drugged, I can't see her falling out a window."

The Warrior sighed. "I had a hard time believing it too. But General Gallagher assured us they had conducted a thorough investigation and there was no hint of foul play."

"General Gallagher wouldn't lie. She must have fallen then," Raphaela conceded.

Blade stared at the sky, recalling the funeral, the sight of Athena's coffin being lowered in her grave. Unfortunately, due to the damage done to her head and torso, the coffin had been sealed at the viewing prior to the burial. He remembered the tormented expression on Grizzly, the hybrid who had loved her. Now poor Grizzly was somewhere in the Outlands, an outcast in a savage land, filled with remorse and anger. Someday soon, Blade decided, he would hunt Grizzly down.

"How long will we stay here, sir?" Captain Havoc inquired.

"It's about noon now. We'll rest for an hour," Blade replied. He walked to the east, heading for the crest. "I'll be right back,"

"Mind if I join you?" Jaguarundi asked, coming alongside the giant.

"Be my guest," Blade said. He studied the ground underfoot as they ascended the rise, noting the overlapping tire tracks. "El Diablo uses this gully on a regular basis."

"That'd be my guess," Jag concurred. "The walls conceal his vehicles. He can travel all the way to the desert without exposing his band."

"And by using the gully he makes aerial observation extremely difficult," Blade noted.

"He's one devious son of a bitch."

Blade twisted and gazed at the rim of the cliff, disturbed by the sensation of being watched. "This setup stinks."

Jag glanced at the Warrior. "You too, huh?"

"Yep."

They covered a hundred feet in silence.

"You know," Jag commented, "I don't much like having to wear a backpack and tote an M-16. I'm best at infighting, where I can employ my nails."

"Your nails wouldn't do you much good against a machine gun," Blade said.

"True, not unless I could get close," Jag said. "How did Grizzly take to using a weapon and wearing a backpack?"

"He liked to rely on his strength and claws and he hated wearing anything."

Jag chuckled. "That sounds like Grizzly." He licked his dry lips. "Gallagher told me there are hybrids living at the place you come from, the Home."

"Gremlin, Ferret, and Lynx. They've been at the Home for nearly six years."

"What do they do there?"

"They were selected to be Warriors," Blade divulged. "Do you know them?"

"Not personally. I heard about Lynx, about the time he tried to assassinate the Doktor. He was famous. But there were fifteen hundred hybrids in the madman's Genetic Research Division, and I didn't know them all."

"You should visit the Home some day. I'm sure Lynx, Ferret, and Gremlin would like to meet you."

"Maybe I will," Jaguarundi said. "What's it like there anyway? I've heard stories about your Home being a Utopia."

"Utopia? Sir Thomas More would probably disagree. The Family does live according to certain spiritual ideals, and the Home is the ideal environment in which to live, but we have a long way to go before we attain perfection," Blade stated. "We are trying to live harmoniously, though, which is more than can be said about ninety-nine percent of the world."

"Are you religious?"

"Yes."

"Really?"

"Why do you sound so surprised? Are you an atheist like Grizzly?"

"I'm surprised because I never expected a guy with your reputation to believe in any of that metaphysical stuff. As for me, I don't know what I believe. Most of the hybrids in the Genetic Research Division didn't believe in any spiritual jazz. Why should they? All of them were created in a test tube," Jag said. "When a person discovers they were whipped together in a little glass vial, it distorts their outlook on life in general."

"Are you speaking from your personal experience?"

"Yeah. It blew my mind when I was told the Doktor created me. I felt artificial, alien, as if I didn't belong on the planet. I wanted to crawl under a rock somewhere. And my attitude wasn't helped much by the fact that most humans looked down their noses at us. Some of the hybrids became intensely bitter."

"Like Grizzly."

"Like Grizzly," Jag agreed. "I couldn't quite bring myself to hate humans because I saw that many of you were in the same boat we were, living miserable lives, drifting from day to day, under the thumb of the dictator, Samuel the Second. Of course, that was before your Family and your allies defeated Sammy and the Doktor."

"So now you view us as a bunch of meatballs," Blade said.

"Most humans are."

They neared the crest.

Jag grinned. "But I'll make an exception in your case. You're all right for a human."

"Gee. Thanks," Blade said, and slowed as the rim became visible. The ground curved downward from the crest rather abruptly. A patch of green became visible on the far side, then grew larger until a sea of green foliage came into view. He stepped to the top and gazed in fascination at a lush, verdant valley, an oasis of life ringed by high, dry peaks.

"Wow," Jag commented.

Blade estimated the valley to be 20 miles from west to east and half that distance from north to south. His vantage point afforded him a bird's-eye view. In the middle of the valley, beckoning like a shimmering blue beacon, was a sizeable lake. Less than a mile from the crest, wafting heavenward on the breeze, were a half-dozen thin gray ribbons. A dirt road started at the base of the grade, swung slightly to the south, then bore due east.

"Do you want me to investigate that smoke?" Jag asked. "It might be El Diablo's campfires."

The Warrior pondered for a moment. Scouting the valley made sense. He didn't want the Force to blunder onto the enemy stronghold. And none of the others, including Sparrow, were as stealthy as the hybrid. "Find out where the smoke comes from," he directed, "but stay alert. It goes without saying that the Devils are dangerous."

"If I find them, I'll bring back one of their heads as a souvenir," Jag boasted.

"Just get back in one piece. We'll wait at the water hole for you."

"On my way," Jag said, and jogged toward the trees. "I should return within an hour."

"Don't rush. And don't get caught."

"Never happen."

Blade watched the hybrid until Jag was lost from sight in the trees. Then he turned and walked toward the water hole. The others were talking and, from the harried look on Lobo's face, poking fun at the Clansman. A smile creased Blade's mouth and he nodded in satisfaction. This new team was a distinct improvement over the old unit in terms of their getting along together. The first Force volunteers had been prone to constant bickering and petty squabbles. These people were relating marvelously, and he hoped nothing would transpire to disrupt their accord.

What was that?

A flicker of movement drew Blade's attention to the north, to the incline covered with loose rock. He spied something perched on top, something huge and reptilian, and it took a second for his stunned mind to belatedly register the magnitude of the creature.

Dear Spirit!

A hideous lizard of gargantuan proportions squatted on four short, thick limbs, its baleful eyes fixed on the unsuspecting Force members by the pool. A blunt, black head, sinister in aspect, reared above a stocky body. The tail, tapered and clublike, twitched from side to side. Both the body and the tail were yellow with irregular black bands and were covered with prominent scales. From the tip of its nose to the end of its tail the lizard measured ten feet in length. Its head was poised six feet above the ground. A long red tongue darted from its mouth and retracted.

In a flash of insight Blade recognized the creature. He'd seen photographs of such lizards in books in the Family library when he was younger, and he'd always been intrigued by the species. Not many lizards were venomous carnivores. And only one kind was known as Gila monsters.

An ordinary Gila monster reached two, maybe three feet in length. The enormous specimen staring hungrily at the Force was a byproduct of World War Three, a consequence of having the biological chain tainted by gene-warping radiation and chemical-warfare toxins. Cases of giantism had become quite common. Everything from cockroaches to alligators now came in a jumbo size.

Blade pivoted and went to yell a warning to his teammates, but even as he did the Gila monster launched its bulky body from the top and hurtled down the incline. "Look out!" Blade bellowed, and gestured at the monstrosity.

The five at the water hole glanced up at the Warrior, then swiveled to the north. Lobo and Raphaela gaped in astonishment. Doc and Sparrow started to unsling their M-16s. Only Captain Havoc reacted instantly by raising his M-16 to his right shoulder and dashing toward the incline.

Blade raced to intercept the mutation. He saw the Gila monster gain momentum as it slid down the slope, its heavy body stirring a swirling cloud of dust into the air.

Captain Havoc fired on the run, making a beeline for the beast, the backpack containing the radio bouncing on his shoulders.

Still too far off to shoot effectively, Blade covered the grade in prodigious leaps. The dust cloud

enveloping the Gila monster shrouded all of the lizard except for its head, but the thing was clearly picking up speed as it slid lower and lower.

Havoc reached the base of the incline and sighted on the monster's head.

"Get out of the way!" Blade shouted, realizing the Gila monster wouldn't be able to be stopped in time.

Heedless of his safety, Havoc stood firm and squeezed off a burst. The lizard was a mere 15 feet from him when he threw his body to the right, away from its path. But the next second the mutation changed direction, slanting toward the officer, and before Havoc could fire again the creature pounced.

Chapter 7

He loved the forest.

Jaguarundi followed a narrow game trail in the direction of the spires of smoke. His keen ears noted the chirping of birds and the buzzing of nearby insects. To his nostrils came dank, earthy scents and animal odors: rabbit, squirrel, coatimondi, deer, and others. If the odors, sounds, and the tracks on the trail were any indication, the valley was a wildlife paradise. He skirted a tree, saw a straight stretch ahead, and ran full out, not fatigued in the least by the trek across the desert. He reveled in being able to exercise, to use his muscles, and in the incredible speed he could attain.

The Doktor had once arranged a contest to determine which of his many hybrids was the fastest. He'd gathered all of those endowed with exceptional fleetness of foot and raced them around a regulation track, running them six at a time and clocking their speed. After four hours, after the slowest were eliminated, the Doktor had lined up the six best and fired his signal gun.

Jag relived that race as he sprinted through the woods. He'd tried so hard to win, to achieve special recognition, to prove to himself that he was the best hybrid in at least one category. And he'd almost succeeded. The puma-man had given him trouble early on, had stayed with him for a third of the race, and then, as with wild cougars, the puma-man had folded, unable to maintain his top pace for the long haul. Cougars could outrun deer, but only for short distances. So Jag had blown him away and left him far behind. By all rights Jag should have won. Should have.

But didn't.

After he had passed all the others, after he had outlasted the puma hybrid, when he was halfway around the course and no one was ahead of him, seemingly out of nowhere streaked the one mutation even he couldn't beat, the one capable of running at a top speed of 70 miles an hour, the one who would be honored as the fastest hybrid alive: the cheetah-man.

Jag recalled his intense disappointment at coming in second. Oh, the Doktor had praised him in front of the assembled Genetic Research Division and told everyone that he had been clocked at 52 miles an hour. Fifty-two. Eighteen less than the cheetah hybrid. But being second had upset him, deprived him of any sense of accomplishment. To his way of thinking, those who succeeded in life were the swiftest and strongest. Life went to the sure and the quick. Those who came in second were left with table scraps.

One small consolation, a source of much pleasure, was the fact he could run faster, jump farther, leap higher, and track better than any human alive. He might not be the best, the strongest, the swiftest hybrid alive, but he could run rings around every human in more ways than one. And since humans generally distrusted or despised genetically engineered mutations, he felt considerable satisfaction at knowing he excelled them physically. Only once in his entire life had a human bested him.

Blade.

The enigmatic giant.

The Warrior who, incredibly, did not appear to be prejudiced against hybrids. One of the few humans Jag had met who could look him in the eyes without betraying a trace of uneasiness or bias. One of the ...

The chattering of automatic rifle fire erupted to his rear.

Jag began to slow and looked over his right shoulder, alarmed, realizing his teammates must be under attack. He took three more strides and started to rotate, to hasten to their aid.

Something grabbed him.

A constricting loop tightened about his left ankle, throwing him off balance, and although he attempted to right himself and jerk his ankle free, although his reflexes were outstanding, he couldn't prevent whatever held him from hauling him from the ground and whipping him 20 feet into the air. The M-16 slipped from his shoulder and fell into the brush. Upended, he swayed back and forth. A trap!

He'd been caught by a damn animal trap! Jag craned his neck to see a rope around his ankle. Someone had placed a snare along the game trail, probably a hunter hoping to bag a deer. The rope dug into his fur and skin, causing him minor discomfort. From his ankle the rope rose nine feet to a stout limb overhead, over which it looped and then slanted down to the top of a bent sapling, where it had been securely tied, ten yards to the north. A lousy snare!

How stupid could he have been!

Jag relaxed, hanging limp, trying to control and reduce the swaying. He gazed at the trail below, listening to the continued gunfire from the vicinity of the water hole. Terrific! His companions were fighting for their lives and he was stuck in a snare. Frustrated, he waited for the swinging to subside. How quickly he could escape depended on the toughness of the rope. His fingernails were quite sharp, but he would need precious time to saw through the strands. Perhaps he could snap the rope. The drop to the ground didn't bother him. A fall of 20 feet was child's play.

A twig snapped to the east.

Jaguarundi twisted and searched for the reason. He didn't have to search very hard.

Eighteen feet off stood a boy of 12 or 13 dressed in a white shirt, white pants, and sandals, armed with a machete in his right hand. His dark eyes gawked upward. "*El tigre!*" he exclaimed, and began to back away. "Cut me loose, kid," Jag snapped. The boy's mouth opened wide enough to swallow an apple whole and his eyes tried to bulge out of their sockets. He switched the machete to his left hand and quickly crossed himself. "*Madre de Dios!*" he cried, and burst into a string of words in Spanish.

"Look, kid, do you speak English?" Jag asked, keeping his voice calm and friendly.

The boy only stared.

"Do you speak English?" Jag repeated.

"Si, *senor*," the boy said softly. "A little."

"Good. Do you hear those gunshots? My pals need me. Cut me down."

"What *are* you?" the boy asked in awe.

"Never mind that," Jag said impatiently. "Just cut me down so I can go to my buddies."

"No, *senor*."

"What?"

"I can't cut you down. I must tell *mi padre*."

"Don't tell anyone," Jag stated. He smiled and motioned for the boy to come closer. "Look, kid. I won't hurt you. Cut me down and I'll be on my way."

"No, *senor*," the boy responded, and unexpectedly spun on his heels and raced to the east.

"Come back here!" Jag shouted. "Don't leave me like this!"

But the boy didn't even look back. In moments he was out of sight.

"Damn it," Jag muttered. He didn't know how long it would take the kid to tell his father, but others were bound to show up soon. He had to escape from the snare and fast. Slowly, tensing his abdominal muscles, he bent in half at the waist and raised his arms, reaching for the rope. Endowed with a slim, supple form and capable of contorting his body in a manner that dazzled most humans, he easily flattened his chest against his legs, lunged, and grabbed his left ankle. An inspection of the rope confirmed that it would be extremely difficult to cut with his nails. Since there wasn't any time to lose, he took hold of the rope and pulled himself upward, climbing higher until he was vertical again. And still he climbed, all the way to the overhead limb, where he paused.

Now how should he go about this?

Jag wrapped his left arm around the limb, then his right, and gracefully swung his legs up. He reclined on top of the limb and listened for more shots, but the guns had fallen quiet. Concerned, he eased his left leg up and his left hand lower until he could loosen the rope and slide his ankle free.

All right!

Elated, he stared at the grass and weeds far below and debated whether to simply jump or use the rope to slide down. Since time was critical he decided to jump and rolled from the limb. The vegetation blurred as he plummeted, and he landed on his feet with his thigh muscles absorbing most of the impact. He straightened and took two strides.

"Stop!"

The barked command brought Jaguarundi up short and he turned, amazed to discover the boy had already returned. The youth wasn't alone. Three men stood 30 feet away, and all three had rifles trained on him. Like the boy, the men were dressed in plain white cotton shirts and trousers. All three wore wide-brimmed straw hats. The tallest of the trio also wore a red poncho.

"If you move we will shoot!" the tall one warned.

Jag hesitated, and glanced at the trees and brush to his left and right. He could probably duck into cover before they could fire. Probably. But there were three guns, and if just one of the Mexicans made a lucky shot it would be all over. He frowned and elevated his arms to demonstrate his peaceful intentions. "I don't mean you any harm."

"It's true!" the man in the red poncho exclaimed. "What Miguel told us is true. *El tigre* speaks English!"

The shortest of the three men spoke at length in Spanish and gestured at Jag several times.

"Look, I don't have time for this," Jag declared. "I must go to my friends."

"You are not going anywhere," stated the man in the poncho. He walked forward, the others flanking him, regarding their prisoner intently. "What are you? You look like a cat but you talk like a man."

"I'm a hybrid."

"A what?"

"Do you know anything about genetic engineering?" Jag asked.

The tall man shook his head, his gaze roving over Jag's features in astonishment.

"No, you wouldn't know much about science, would you?" Jag muttered, and sighed in frustration. "I'm part man, part jaguarundi."

"You are a demon," the man declared.

"Be serious, mister. What's your name anyway?" Jag inquired hoping familiarity would breed friendliness.

"I'm Emiliano, Miguel's father."

"My name is Jag."

The Mexicans halted 10 feet from him, their rifles still leveled.

"You have a name?" Emiliano responded in surprise.

"Why wouldn't I? I'm a person, not an animal."

"We don't know *what* you are," Emiliano said.

"I'd like to go now."

Emiliano shook his head. "That is not possible. We must take you to our village."

A scowl twisted Jag's mouth. He wanted to dart into the forest, but those three unwavering rifle barrels deterred him. There hadn't been any more gunfire to the west, which was good, but the rest of the Force could well be dead for all he knew.

"You will come with us, *senor*," Emiliano said. "We don't want to shoot you, but we will if we must."

"How far is your village?" Jag asked.

"Not far," Emiliano replied, and jerked his head to the east. "We were out setting traps for game." He glanced at the dangling rope. "We set that one fifteen minutes ago, and were working on another one a little ways up the trail when my son ran to us and told us about the talking cat-man." He shook his head in wonder. "I would never have believed it, but Miguel is a decent boy. He always tells the truth."

The little snot! Jag thought, but he wisely kept his opinion to himself.

Emiliano wagged his rifle, a Winchester Model 70. "Now you will walk in front of us to our village. If you try any tricks we'll shoot."

"How about if we compromise?"

"Senor?"

"There are companions of mine at a water hole to the west. They might be in trouble and I'd like to go see. Take me to them and I promise no harm will come to you," Jag proposed.

Emiliano turned to the other two and apparently began translating the request.

Jag watched expectantly, anxious to return to Blade. If the peasants refused to take him to the water hole, he was determined to make a break rifles or no rifles.

The shortest Mexican started shouting at Emiliano while the third one shook his head.

"I'm sorry, *senor*," Emiliano said, facing Jaguarundi. "Were it up to me, I might be tempted to trust you. But my compadres are not so inclined. They say we should take you to our village and show you to the *patron* when he returns."

"The who?"

"Our master, *senor*. The one who rules our village. Some of his men are there now," Emiliano said, his tone oddly strained, as if talking about his master upset him.

"I can't go with you," Jag said.

"We will kill you if you don't," Emiliano warned.

"You'll try," Jaguarundi corrected him, and then Jag made his move, hoping the Mexicans wouldn't be as quick on the trigger as professional soldiers would be, hoping also that the conversation had lulled the trio into a state of complacency, that their trigger fingers were relaxed instead of tense and ready to squeeze. He plunged into the undergrowth on the south side of the game trail, and the vegetation closed about him as the three rifles cracked. Bullets ripped through the foliage, but none struck him. Instantly he poured on the speed, dodging trees and dense thickets, vaulting over logs, small boulders, and other obstructions. He planned to travel due south for several dozen yards, then cut to the west. He doubted the peasants were competent enough to track him, but they knew he wanted to head west and might try to intercept him. By swinging to the south and looping westward, he could easily elude them. Another shot sounded to his rear.

Jag grinned. It was probably the short one venting his spleen and wasting a round. He went around a tree and up a low knoll. At the top he paused to glance back. As he'd anticipated, there wasn't any sign of pursuit. The trio and the boy must be on their way to the village to relate their harrowing encounter with the fierce El Tigre! He snickered and continued his circuitous route to the water hole, thinking of the term Emiliano had used to describe him.

Demon.

Funny, wasn't it, how humans were so quick to condemn anyone different from them? How the mere sight of a hybrid could drive an ordinary human into a raging fury or terrify the human witless? At the very least, most humans reacted with fear and suspicion to all hybrids, which to Jag's mind was highly ironic when he considered that human scientists were responsible for the creation of the genetically engineered creatures the humans feared. But then, human logic always had eluded him.

There seemed to be a clearing up ahead.

Jag checked to the north once again, but the three Mexicans still hadn't materialized. He wondered what would have happened if he'd allowed Emiliano and company to take him to the village? Would he have been stoned as a vile abomination? Set ablaze and consigned to some human hell?

The trees abruptly thinned.

Jaguarundi slowed, realizing he'd been mistaken. There wasn't a clearing; it was the dirt road. He weaved past a huge boulder and a tree and ran to the middle of the road. Now he would be able to make good time.

"What the hell are you?"

The harsh words brought Jag around, his features creasing in consternation when he discovered an armored vehicle, a camouflage-painted dune buggy, parked alongside the trees on the north side of the road approximately 30 feet to the east. Four burly men in camouflage fatigues, each armed with a machine gun, were standing in front of the dune buggy.

One of the quartet, a man sporting a full brown beard, swung his machine gun to cover Jaguarundi and sneered. "Twitch and you're history, you son of a bitch!"

Chapter 8

Captain Havoc saw the Gila monster spring at him, saw the lizard's mouth swing wide, and knew in the next second that he would feel the beast's iron jaws clamp into his body. And they would have too, if not for the loose rock underfoot, because on his next step, as he frantically threw himself farther to the right, he slipped and fell, sprawling onto his stomach, his arms outflung. Something heavy brushed against his backpack, and dirt and dust whirled all around him, obscuring the ground.

A dull thud came from behind him.

The thing had missed! Havoc exulted, and he began to push to his feet. He got to his hands and knees, and then what felt like a battering ram smashed into his left side, lifted him from the ground, and sent him sailing through the air to crash onto a jagged boulder.

Excruciating agony lanced Havoc's chest and his right arm became momentarily limp, forcing him to release his M-16. He doubled over, clutching his side, in torment, dreading that his ribs might be busted. He gasped and struggled to compartmentalize the pain, to do as the martial arts instructor at the Special Forces Academy had taught him.

Other M-16's were firing now, punctuating the dust with muzzle flashes and lead, and somewhere in the cloud the Gila monster hissed and snapped.

Havoc managed to get to his knees. He heard Lobo shout excitedly.

"Watch out for its tail! Watch out for its tail!"

A gun boomed, not the metallic burp of an M-16 but the deeper blast of a large-caliber revolver. Doc Madsen's Magnum.

Gritting his teeth, Havoc heaved to his feet and glanced around for his M-16. But all he could see was the swirling dust, dust that now caught in his throat and nostrils and made him cough and gag. He shuffled forward, feeling the pain begin to subside. Maybe his ribs weren't broken after all.

A huge form loomed in front of him and a guttural growl rent the air.

The Gila monster!

Havoc backed away from the mutation and drew the Colt Model 45 on his right hip. He steadied his arm, took a bead on where he imagined the beast's head should be, and fired three times.

An enraged bellow greeted the shots, and suddenly the Gila monster materialized less than eight feet from him, its head perforated with bullet holes and oozing streaks of strangely dark blood.

Havoc bumped into a boulder, the same one he had landed on, and halted. The mutation took a lumbering step toward him. He emptied the clip into the creature, going for the eyes, thinking he might be able to kill the monstrosity if he could plant a slug in its brain.

But the lizard came on. Slowly. Inexorably. Its gaze was riveted on the officer.

Havoc braced for the final attack. He had a 15-inch survival knife tucked inside his right combat boot, and although the knife would hardly dent the mutation's scales, he resolved to fight until his last breath, and crouched so he could draw the weapon from its sheath.

A towering figure suddenly ran between the officer and the lizard and cut loose with the M60 clasped in his steely hands.

"Blade!" Havoc blurted out.

The Warrior didn't bother to acknowledge the greeting. He fired into the Gila monster's blunt head, round after round after round, and the mutation recoiled and hissed, its tongue protruding from between its bony lips. More rounds ripped into the sensitive tongue and drove the brute over the edge. Hissing horribly, it thrust itself at the Warrior but was met by a wall of lead. Blade kept the trigger depressed, stitching the creature's forehead, noting that its movements were becoming sluggish and uncoordinated. Just when he thought the ammo belt would go dry, the Gila monster wheezed and collapsed two yards from his combat boots.

Blade ceased firing.

For all of five seconds there was silence.

"Blade? Havoc? Sparrow? Where is everybody?" Raphaela called out from close at hand.

"Havoc and I are here," Blade responded, lowering the smoking barrel. The dust started to clear and he could see her approaching. But where were the others? If the Gila monster hadn't chomped on them, a stray bullet might have caused a casualty.

"Here I am," Doc Madsen said, moving toward the Warrior.

Captain Havoc stood and walked to the Warrior's right side. "Thanks. You saved my life."

"You'd do the same for me," Blade replied.

Havoc pursed his lips and stared at the dead creature. If not for the damn mutation, the Warrior wouldn't have saved him. Thanks to the Gila monster, he was now in debt to Blade, and the last thing in the world he wanted to be was in debt to the man responsible for the death of his younger brother. He would have to put his scheme for revenge on hold. His sense of justice demanded that he repay the obligation to the Warrior before he repaid Blade for Jimmy's life.

"That is the *ugliest* sucker I've ever seen," Lobo declared, joining them. "It reminds me of a date I had

once with Big Butt Biddel. The woman could break rocks just by lookin' at 'em."

"Such a feat isn't possible," Sparrow chimed in, coming around the rear of the lizard.

"Why do you take everything so literal?" Lobo asked.

"Why, Lobo, I didn't know you knew the meaning of the word," Doc joked. "Do you mean to tell us you've been hiding some brains between those ears of yours?"

Raphaela, Havoc, and Sparrow laughed lightly, dispelling the tension from their harrowing experience.

Lobo chose to ignore them and glanced at Blade. "Hey, dude, where's the kitty-cat?"

"I wouldn't call Jag that to his face, if I were you," the Warrior advised. "I sent him to scout the valley over the rise. We spotted smoke."

"El Diablo, you think?" Doc asked.

"We won't know until Jag returns," Blade said, and scanned them. "Is anyone hurt? Anyone nicked?"

"I'm fine," Raphaela said, and the rest nodded.

Except for Lobo.

The Clansman looked down at his pants and did a double take. "Well, I'll be damned."

"What?" Blade inquired.

"I thought for sure the sucker ripped my pants when it tried to gobble me down," Lobo stated, and kicked the carcass. "There I was, rushin' to help Havoc, when the thing came at me, hiss'n and roarin' and shootin' fire from its mouth "

"Did he say roaring?" Doc asked, interrupting.

"Did he say fire came from its mouth?" Raphaela chimed in.

"I believe Lobo must have mistaken the Gila monster for a dragon," Sparrow said. "This area is famous for its dragons."

Lobo stared at each of them in turn. He shook his head and tilted his nose in the air. "Fine, turkeys! Just be this way! If you don't want to hear how I barely came out of the fight alive, I won't tell you."

"We don't want to hear," Doc said.

"Ingrates," Lobo snapped, and headed for the water hole.

"Get set to move out in one minute," Blade instructed them. He saw an M-16 lying on the ground to his left and retrieved the weapon. "Who does this belong to?"

"That's mine, sir," Havoc said, taking the assault rifle.

"Why are we leaving when Jag hasn't come back yet?" Raphaela asked.

"Because someone in the valley might have heard all the gunfire. If so, they'll send a party to investigate. We don't want to be here when they come, so we'll take cover in the forest on the other side of the rise and wait there for Jag."

"But how will he find us?"

"We'll stay at the edge of the trees where we can keep our eyes on the crest. He has to come that way to reach the water hole. We'll spot him, don't worry."

"Good. I wouldn't want to lose him. He's been nice to me and I like him," Raphaela said.

Blade glanced at her, her words bringing to mind the romance that had blossomed between Athena Morris and Grizzly and the tragic conclusion of their relationship. He speculated on whether a similar situation was developing between Raphaela and Jaguarundi, and decided he was making a mountain out of the proverbial molehill. Just because Raphaela liked the hybrid as a friend didn't necessarily indicate she was falling in love with him.

He hoped.

"Was the radio damaged, Captain?" Doc inquired.

"I don't know. I'll check," Havoc responded. He knelt and unslung the backpack. A hasty inspection verified the radio to be intact and functional. "It's okay," he announced.

"We wouldn't want to lose our link with the outside world," Blade commented, then looked at Sparrow. "Let's head out. You take the point."

"On my way," the Flathead said, and jogged toward the top of the grade.

Blade turned his attention to the officer. "Trade backpacks with Doc again. He'll carry the radio for a while."

"I can manage, sir," Havoc said.

"The Force isn't a debating team," Blade stated, and grinned. "That Gila monster roughed you up a bit. Doc will take the radio and give you a breather."

Captain Havoc started to protest, but changed his mind. The Warrior only had his best interest at heart. Which stunk. Because Havoc was trying as hard as he could to despise the man, and Blade kept doing things that caused him to admire the Warrior more and more.

"You can bring up the rear," Blade said.

"Glad to, sir," Havoc dutifully replied. He took Doc's backpack, gave the Cavalryman the radio, and waited while the others headed for the crest. After a last scrutiny of the Gila monster he started up the grade, his eyes on the Warrior's muscular back, mulling his dilemma. What was he going to do?

He'd been on an assignment in northern California, involved in operations against a wicked drug lord futile operations at that when he'd learned about the death of his brother. Because of the remote location and the clandestine nature of his activities, the word didn't reach him until four days after Jimmy had been buried. He'd requested an emergency leave and rushed to Los Angeles, to the Force Facility, where his brother, the woman journalist, and the Indian had been buried. Except for the perimeter guards, no one else was there. The grave site, on top of a low hill in the northern sector of the facility, had seemed so desolate and inappropriate as the resting place for a man once so full of life and vitality.

General Gallagher had arrived while he was at the site, and from the general Havoc had learned that, due to a flat tire on a stretch of secondary road between L. A. and the Force compound, Havoc's mother and two other brothers hadn't arrived in time for the burial. The thought of Jimmy being lowered into

eternity without a single family member on hand to mourn his passing was profoundly disturbing.

But not nearly as disturbing as the additional information Gallagher had imparted.

Havoc had been stunned to learn his brother had died on an unauthorized mission in Canada, of all places. According to General Gallagher, the Force had been en route from Alaska to California when the pilot of their VTOL intercepted a distress signal and pinpointed the approximate location. And although Canada was not a Freedom Federation member, although the team had fought long and hard in Alaska and needed a rest, Blade had ordered the pilot to land so they could aid whoever was in distress.

How unprofessional.

Captain Havoc frowned, remembering the details of his brother's death. Jimmy had given his life to save the life of another member of the Force, the former volunteer from the Cavalry, a man named Boone. Such a sacrifice would have been typical of his brother, a supreme example of Jimmy's dedication, a fitting end for a man who devoted his life to safeguarding others.

Except that if Blade had adhered to procedure, if the Warrior hadn't needlessly endangered the lives of the unit by violating proper military protocol, if the Force had returned to California on schedule instead of becoming involved in a battle with pirates, Sergeant James Havoc would still be alive. As the head of the Freedom Force, Blade bore the responsibility for the life of every man and woman on the team, and the Warrior had made a serious mistake in judgment by deciding to land in Canada, a mistake that had cost Jimmy his life.

Mike Havoc gazed absently at the ground.

General Gallagher, on that chilly day nine months ago, had stressed the injustice of Jimmy's death. The general had also emphasized how he felt the Force was a waste of manpower and resources, how California had managed quite well for a century without the need of a tactical strike team. Gallagher had sympathized with Havoc, and had even gone so far as to imply Blade was directly to blame for the loss of five members of the unit, not just Jimmy. But even though Gallagher wanted to close the Force down, he couldn't do so unless he could gather proof of the Warrior's incompetence to present to the Federation leaders.

Havoc remembered saying, "I'll get the proof you need, General."

"How?" Gallagher had asked.

"By joining the Force when it regroups. I'll volunteer to be California's representative on the team, and I'll watch over Blade like a hawk. As soon as I catch him in a slipup, as soon as I can gather concrete evidence, we'll kill two birds with one stone. You can persuade the Federation leaders to disband the Force, and I'll avenge Jimmy's death in a small way by forcing Blade to step down in disgrace."

General Gallagher had beamed triumphantly.

The plan had seemed so simple, so perfect.

But now Blade had saved Havoc's life and displayed concern for the Force team. The man obviously, genuinely cared about his people.

No wonder I feel guilty! Havoc told himself. He had to suppress the feeling and concentrate on exposing the Warrior as too inept to handle leading the Force. After all the trouble General Gallagher had gone to in prevailing upon Blade to take the team into the field prematurely, thereby increasing the likelihood of a disaster that would demonstrate conclusively that the Force wasn't needed, Havoc couldn't let the general

and himself down.

Yes, sir.

One way or the other, he would have his revenge on Blade.

One way or the other, the Freedom Force was finished.

Chapter 9

Talk about going from the frying pan into the fire.

Jaguarundi froze and watched the quartet walk toward him. He'd been able to evade several peasants armed with rifles, but he knew he'd be no match for four experienced bandits carrying machine guns. They'd nail him before he could cover ten yards.

"Can you talk?" demanded the guy with the brown beard.

"Just because someone is covered with hair doesn't mean they're a Neanderthal," Jag quipped.

The quartet stopped and regarded the cat-man in amazement.

"It's one of them muties," declared the man on the left.

"I didn't know mutants can speak like us normal folks," observed the lean one on the right.

"I've heard about some that can," said brown beard. "They're bred in little glass bottles."

"You're puttin' us on," stated the man on the left.

"El Diablo told me about them," brown beard said.

"Where'd he hear about 'em?" inquired the lean one.

"A deserter from the Civilized Zone Army joined us for a while about ten years ago, I think he was the one who told El Diablo."

"And this is one of those critters. Mercer?"

"Yep," Mercer replied, and wagged his machine gun at the mutation. "Am I right?"

"I never dispute a man who has a gun pointed at me," Jag said.

Mercer's eyes narrowed. "Am I right, sucker?"

"You're right," Jag answered.

"Why is that thing wearin' a backpack?" asked the lean one. "Is it animal or human?"

Mercer advanced and jabbed the barrel of his weapon into the cat-man's abdomen. "Do you have a name, gruesome?"

"Gruesome? I happen to think I'm rather adorable."

Anger contorted Mercer's features, and he raised his Heckler and Koch MP-5 and took a bead on the mutant's nose. "Don't play games with me, asshole. The next time you mouth off, you're dead. If you

think I'm kidding, just try me." Jag said nothing.

"Now what the hell is your name?"

"Jag."

"What's in the backpack?"

"Rations. Plastic explosives. A first-aid kit. Spare ammo."

"Ammo for what?"

"My M-16."

Mercer stared at the creature quizzically. "I don't see an M-16. What'd you do, lose it?" he cracked.

"Yeah."

The lean one took a step closer. "What kind of rations do you have?"

"Cans of disgusting crud known as K rations. Personally, I'd rather eat hog swill."

"Take off the backpack," Mercer ordered, "but do it real slow or you'll have to round up a new nose."

The three others snickered.

Jag slowly removed his backpack and held it out.

"Give me that," the lean one snapped, and grabbed the backpack. He knelt, opened the flap, and rummaged inside. "It's just like the critter said." He withdrew a can of K rations. "Let's have us some food."

"You know better, Wells," Mercer said, stepping away from the captive and lowering his MP-5. "We turn all of that stuff over to El Diablo."

"He won't miss a few lousy cans of food," Wells remarked.

"You know the rules," Mercer stated.

Wells looked at the pair behind him. "What about you two? What do you say?"

One with a balding pate nodded at Mercer. "He's right, Wells. We turn the backpack and its contents over to El Diablo. He'll distribute the goodies among the Devils. You know the way it works."

Wells jiggled the backpack. "But there's not that much in here. We might not even get a share. Let's take some now."

"No," Mercer said.

"What a bunch of chickens," Wells grouched, and dropped the can into the backpack.

"I'd rather be a live chicken than a dead jackass," Mercer declared. "You haven't been a Devil very long, Wells. You're not as committed as the rest of us."

"Committed? I won't kiss El Diablo's shoes, if that's what you mean," Wells responded.

"El Diablo takes care of his people," Mercer commented. "Each of us gets an equal share of the proceeds from the raids. None of us ever goes hungry. We have clean clothes on our backs and a roof over our heads. Any woman we want is ours for the taking. And all we have to do is waste a few turkeys every so often. Do you realize how good we have it?"

"I thought I did when I joined six months ago, but after the raid on Jacumba I'm not so sure."

"Why not?"

"Did you see what he did to those women?" Wells asked, and grimaced at the memory.

"El Diablo has his reasons," Mercer said.

"I'd like to hear them," Wells stated.

"Whatever you do, don't ask him about it," Mercer advised. "Not unless you're tired of living."

"Speaking of asking questions," Jag interjected, "do you mind if I ask a few?"

"Yeah. Keep your mouth shut," Mercer replied.

"What harm can there be in a few questions?" Jag persisted brazenly, striving to concoct a ruse he could use to trick them into lowering their vigilance enough for him to attempt an escape. "Besides, I heard you mention El Diablo."

"So what?" Mercer queried.

"He's the reason I'm here."

"What?"

"I came to this valley to see El Diablo," Jag said, and smiled to assure them of his sincerity. "I've heard a lot about him and I'd like to join his band."

"*You* want to join the Devils!" Wells blurted out.

"Why not? They let you in, didn't they?" Jag retorted with just the right dash of sarcasm.

Wells glared, then took a step toward the hybrid. "Why, you rotten freak! I'm going to pound you to a pulp."

Mercer moved between them. "Cool it, Wells!" he directed. "You're not laying a hand on this mutant. We'll hold him until El Diablo gets here, and he'll decide what we're going to do with him. Hell, El Diablo might even let the freak join."

"El Diablo is on his way here?" Jag inquired, thinking of the atrocities perpetrated in Jacumba and endeavoring to keep his voice calm at the prospect of meeting the man referred to by the residents of southern California as the Butcher of the Baja.

"Yep," Mercer said, and jerked his left thumb in the direction of the armored dune buggy. "We were on our way to our post at the water hole near the entrance to the valley. You must've passed it on your way in."

Jag nodded.

"Well, our engine crapped out on us. I think the carb is on the blink. It's been giving us a hard time for a couple of weeks," Mercer related. "We radioed in for instructions and were told to sit tight until the mechanics got here. Next thing you know, we hear all this shooting to the west and the north." He paused. "You wouldn't happen to know anything about that, would you?"

"No," Jag fibbed.

Mercer shrugged. "El Diablo will get the truth out of you. We called in about the shooting and he's on his way with reinforcements. They should be here any minute."

As if in confirmation of the man's statement, Jaguarundi's keen ears detected the distant growl of vehicle motors approaching from the east. Frustration welled within him. If he didn't escape before El Diablo arrived, he might *never* see his companions again. But there was nothing he could do as long as the quartet had him covered. He frowned and glanced to the north, thinking that he'd be better off being the prisoner of the peasants.

Thirty seconds elapsed before Wells cocked his head and said, "Listen. I hear them coming."

"I hope it doesn't take the mechanics very long to fix our wheels," Mercer mentioned.

"What happens if El Diablo asks about Higbie and his crew?" asked the balding one.

"We tell him the truth," Mercer responded. "I like Higbie, but I'm not putting my butt in the slinger for him."

"El Diablo will have a fit," Wells predicted.

"Excuse me," Jag interjected.

"What is it?" Mercer asked.

"Do you ever call El Diablo by his real name? Somebody told me it's Celestino Naranjo."

Mercer's forehead creased. "Where'd you hear that? Not many people know his real name."

"I heard it from an old man in Mexicali," Jag lied, referring to a town on the border, thankful that Blade had required each Force member to study a map of the region before they departed their facility.

"Yeah, I guess some of the old-timers would know about it," Mercer said. "But whatever you do, don't use his name around him or you'll be sorry you did."

"Why?"

"The last jerk who accidentally used his name was skinned alive and staked out for the ants."

"But why?"

"I can't say. Just take my word for it."

Jag digested this new information, listening with growing anxiety to the vehicles drawing ever nearer.

Wells motioned at the mutation and laughed. "If El Diablo skins this bastard, I'm going to ask for the pelt and give it to Rosita."

"You've been spending a lot of time with that whore," Mercer commented.

"She's special," Wells said.

"Bullshit. She's a lousy *puta*."

"I'm warning you. Don't insult her."

"How can you insult a whore?" Mercer responded.

Wells reddened and his lips compressed. For a moment he seemed to be on the verge of springing at Mercer, but the timely arrival of six dune buggies compelled him to check his anger.

Jaguarundi stared at the vehicles as they came around a curve to the east driving in single file. All six were roofless and outfitted with makeshift armor plating, and each one had been painted in a brownish camouflage pattern. Dust, sand, and mud coated them. Four men rode in each vehicle.

The lead dune buggy braked within ten feet of the quartet. Out vaulted an imposing figure of a man dressed all in black. He straightened to his full height of six and a half feet and rested his immense hands on the pair of stainless-steel revolvers strapped around his thick waist. A wild mane and bushy beard of black hair framed a craggy face bronzed brown by constant exposure to the sun. Clear blue eyes scrutinized the four men, then shifted to the hybrid without betraying a hint of surprise.

With a tremendous mental effort, Jag willed himself to stay composed, to return the man's penetrating gaze without evincing any nervousness, acutely conscious of the power and authority the man radiated.

"What have we here?" demanded the newcomer in a deep, booming voice.

A large white dog, perhaps the biggest dog Jag had ever laid eyes on, jumped from the dune buggy and moved to the left side of the man in black. The dog's left eye was gone.

"We caught him, sir," Mercer explained. "He's one of those mutants."

"What was your first clue?" El Diablo responded, and walked right up to the cat-man. "*Habla espartor?*"

"He speaks English, boss," Mercer said.

"Does he indeed?" El Diablo stated.

"Fluently," Jag boldly declared. "On occasion I also meow." To his relief, and to the apparent astonishment of the four Devils, El Diablo threw back his black mane and laughed uproariously.

"*El gato* has a sense of humor!" the man in black stated. "I like that." His features abruptly hardened. "What are you doing in *my* valley, cat-man?"

"He said he wants to join the Devils," Mercer said.

El Diablo frowned and stared at the underling until Mercer shifted uncomfortably. "Did I ask *you*, Tim?"

"No, sir."

"Then keep your mouth shut. You'll have a chance to speak in a minute."

"Yes, sir."

Jaguarundi scanned the faces of the quartet, and in every one he saw the unmistakable trace of

suppressed fear.

"You want to join the Devils?" El Diablo asked suspiciously, his cold blue orbs boring into the hybrid.

"If you'll have me," Jag answered.

"Where are you from, cat-man?"

"The Civilized Zone. I was created by a genetic engineer called the Doktor twenty-one years ago."

El Diablo nodded. "I know about the Doktor. I know he made a lot of mutations for his Genetic Research Division."

Jaguarundi blinked a few times. El Diablo was remarkably well informed, more so than Jag would have considered possible given the man's life as a border bandit in a remote region of northern Mexico. He had to be careful what he said. "Then you probably know the G.R.D. disbanded after the Doktor died. I've spent the past six years drifting across the Southwest. I heard about you and decided you might be a man after my own heart."

"Is that right?"

"You're a man who isn't afraid to take whatever he wants. You've established a reputation as a smart leader, someone worth working for, a guy who knows his business. You've been raiding California for something like two decades and haven't been caught yet."

"And I never will be caught," El Diablo asserted. He reached down and patted the white dog on the head. "What do you think, Pancho."

The dog growled, its baleful right eye fixed on the hybrid.

"Pancho doesn't trust you, cat-man."

"He doesn't know me," Jag responded, attempting to project a casual tone.

El Diablo grinned. "True enough. But I don't trust you either, *amigo*. What's your name?"

"Jaguarundi."

"Well, cat-man, you amuse me. I will allow you to live a while longer until I decide whether you are telling me the truth. For now you will keep quiet and do exactly as you're told."

"Yes, sir," Jag said.

"To business," El Diablo stated, and turned to Mercer. "I'm most puzzled, Tim. Perhaps you can enlighten me."

"Boss?"

"You called in to say you were having engine trouble, correct?" El Diablo said in a condescending manner.

"Yes, sir. It's the damned carburetor," Mercer said, and pointed at the parked dune buggy. "We got that far."

El Diablo scratched his chin, then nodded. "I can see how far you got. What puzzles me is how you can

be here when Higbie is back at the cavern."

"Sir?"

"Higbie and his crew were on watch at the water hole and you were supposed to relieve them," El Diablo said. "Your dune buggy broke down, so by all rights Higbie should still be at the water hole instead of at the base." He paused, his voice lowering ominously. "Do you follow me so far?"

"Yes, sir," Mercer replied promptly.

"Did you tell Higbie to leave his post without waiting for his relief?"

"No, boss, I didn't."

"How fortunate for you. So he took it on himself. Did you speak to him when he drove by on his way to the cavern?"

"I told him the mechanics would be here to fix our buggy in fifteen minutes," Mercer divulged.

*"But Higbie didn't turn around and go back to the water hole, did he?"

Mercer looked at the ground. "No, sir."

El Diablo placed his left hand on Mercer's shoulder. "I appreciate your honesty. Higbie was the one who didn't follow procedure, so Higbie is the one who will pay the price."

Perplexed, Jag listened attentively. He gathered that another dune buggy crew had been posted at the water hole, but they'd left before being properly relieved by Mercer and company. He couldn't comprehend why El Diablo was making such a big deal out of the shift relief and ignoring the report of gunfire.

The black-haired leader glanced at the second vehicle and waved his left arm. Two men in gray coveralls, each carrying a metal toolbox, climbed out and hurried to the disabled dune buggy. "I'll have another squad take your place at the water hole," El Diablo told Mercer. "And I hope you won't ever make the same mistake Higbie has made. You know how I feel about those who fail to adhere to regulations."

"I know. Believe me. But what about those shots we heard?"

"What about them?"

"Don't you intend to investigate, boss?"

"Why should I when I'll receive an accurate report from the Cocopas?" El Diablo rejoined. He looked at Jaguarundi. "Were you involved in the shooting?"

Jag hesitated. If he lied to El Diablo and the man found out, he'd be terminated. But if he could continue to string the butcher along, could continue to buy time, the odds of getting away with his life rose dramatically. "I don't know anything about the gunfire to the west, but several peasants tried to kill me north of here."

Mercer scowled. "You told me that you didn't know a thing. You lied to me, you son of a bitch."

Jaguarundi shrugged. "Sorry, but I didn't want a trigger-happy flunky to blow me away before I had a chance to talk to El Diablo. And I'm not about to lie to him."

"How nice," El Diablo said dryly. "Should I be flattered?" He snickered and patted his dog. "I think he's lying, Pancho. How about you?"

Again the white dog growled.

"Let's find out," El Diablo stated, and gazed past the prisoner.

Jag turned, stunned to discover two men standing ten feet to his rear at the edge of the forest on the south side of the road. Both were Indians, but they were as different from Sparrow Hawk as night from day. Instead of buckskins they wore simple tan loincloths. Each had a hunting knife on his right hip, and each was armed with a bow and a quiver full of arrows on his back. Their black hair hung to their shoulders. They stood about five feet in height and were stocky in build. He studied them, annoyed that they had managed to get so close without his hyper-senses detecting them.

El Diablo walked over to the Indians and conversed with them in a guttural, melodic tongue. The Indians spoke impassively, their arms at their sides.

Jaguarundi wanted to run for the trees. His intuition blared a warning in his mind, and he felt an overwhelming foreboding of impending peril.

A minute later El Diablo returned, smiling, relaxed, his eyes twinkling. "Do you know who they are?" he asked Jag.

"No. How could I?"

"They're Cocopah Indians. Their tribe has lived in this territory for hundreds and hundreds of years, and they'll probably still be here long after we're gone. I have a treaty with them. For a few weapons, utensils, and food each month, they've agreed to post guards to keep an eye on the western approach to my valley," El Diablo related. He turned and pointed at the 200-foot-high cliff located to the south of where the water hole lay. "Do you see the escarpment there?"

"How could I miss it?"

"Believe it or not, there's a narrow path to the top. Only the Cocopas know how to climb up there, and they keep two men watching the gully at all times. If anyone approaches the valley, they signal. It's impossible for any enemy to take me by surprise," El Diablo said, and paused. "Not that enemies haven't tried. Twice soldiers from California came for me, and each time I gave the gringos a taste of their own medicine."

Jag's mouth suddenly felt very dry.

"We have a system set up. They use hand mirrors to signal my crew at the water hole or me. Just a while ago, for instance, they signaled that an armed party was coming up the gully. Just now they told me that this party wasted a mutation, a Gila monster. Then the six members of the party went into the woods."

Relief soothed Jaguarundi's nerves. At least the other Force members were still alive.

"Do you know what else they told me?" El Diablo inquired.

"I have no idea."

"Guess."

Jag looked at the bandit leader, wondering if he was joking. A fake grin curled the man's thick lips.

"Come on. *Por favor*. Guess."

Acting on the spur of the moment, refusing to be intimidated and angered by the mocking visage in front of him, Jag smirked. "They told you that I'm one of the party they saw."

"Right the first time," El Diablo stated gruffly, and struck.

Jaguarundi never saw the blow. He felt excruciating agony in his stomach and doubled over, gasping for air. A brittle laugh fell on his ears, and then his left temple exploded in a combination of pinwheeling lights and exquisite torment. He sank to his knees, only dimly conscious.

"Sweet dreams, *bastardo!*" El Diablo said.

He never felt the third blow.

Chapter 10

"I think I saw two men," Sparrow Hawk whispered. "You *think*" Blade responded, glancing to his left at the Flathead.

"They moved like shadows," Sparrow explained. "They were there one instant, gone the next."

"Where?" the Warrior asked.

Sparrow motioned with his spear to the south. "Near the dirt road. They were traveling eastward."

"To the east?" Blade repeated, perplexed. If two men had been sent to investigate the shooting, they should be heading to the west, to the water hole, not in the opposite direction.

"Hey, dude," Lobo said from his position six feet to the right of the giant. "How long are we waitin' here?"

"Until Jaguarundi returns," Blade replied.

"What if he doesn't?"

"Then someone six months from now will find our moldy bones right at this spot," Blade quipped.

"You're warped, man. Totally warped."

"Coming from you, that's a compliment," Blade said.

"Huh?"

"Never mind. And keep your mouth shut until further notice," Blade instructed the Clansman. He looked past Lobo at Raphaela and Captain Havoc, who were strung out in a line to the north, then gazed to the south beyond Sparrow at Doc Madsen. He'd arranged them in a skirmish line, certain the occupants of the valley would dispatch someone to check on the gunfire. But minutes had elapsed and no one had appeared.

Very strange.

Blade leaned his back against a tree and pondered his strategy. By all rights, if El Diablo used the valley as a base of operations, the Force should have encountered guards and patrols. He was particularly surprised there hadn't been a single guard at the water hole, the logical spot to post one. Either El Diablo was incredibly lax in his security precautions, which seemed highly unlikely since the raider had operated

successfully for decades, or the security setup must be ingeniously elaborate. He gazed at the rise to the west, thinking of the water hole on the other side, and wondered if he had missed something.

"Blade!" Sparrow stated in a hushed voice.

The Warrior swung around.

"Someone is coming," Sparrow declared, and nodded to the east.

Blade listened and heard the hurried footsteps of several people approaching rapidly. He extended his left arm, palm down, and wagged his hand toward the ground. Immediately the team dropped flat and he followed suit. None too soon.

Four people dressed in white came running along a game trail. Three were adult males, the fourth a young boy. The three men wore white sombreros and one had on a red poncho. All the men carried rifles, the boy a machete.

Blade saw them run between Sparrow and himself to the edge of the forest, less than ten feet away. There they stopped and stared at the grade leading to the crest, evidently mystified to judge from the expressions on their faces as they surveyed the trees and the grade. They began talking in Spanish. Could *these* be the guards?

Blade crawled toward them, creeping with all the stealth of a crafty, hungry fox after succulent game, adapting his body to the flow of the terrain and screening his passage with the intervening vegetation. He drew within two yards and rose slowly to a squat, then clutched the M60 and straightened. "Don't move!"

The four Mexicans spun, shocked by the ghostly advent of the giant, and two of them pointed their rifles in his direction. But they promptly lowered their weapons when five other figures stepped forward armed with assault rifles.

"Don't kill us!" cried the man in the red poncho, who took a protective stride in front of the boy. "We won't shoot!"

"Drop your guns," Blade commanded.

The man in the poncho snapped directions to his compadres, and all three let their rifles fall to the grass.

"I take it you speak English?" Blade said to the apparent leader.

"*Si, senor.* I do. My name is Emiliano."

"Where are you from?"

"Our village is about a mile east of here, *senor.*"

"What are you doing here?"

"We were chasing *el tigre.* A cat-man."

Blade recalled the rifle shots his team had heard earlier, while crossing the crest, and he tensed. "Did you shoot at the cat-man?"

"Yes, *senor,*" Emiliano answered honestly, and suddenly wished he hadn't when an angry black man stalked toward him and aimed an M-16 at his head.

"This sucker shot Jag?" Lobo declared. "I say we waste the bum."

"I'm in charge," Blade reminded him stiffly, "and I'll decide our course of action. So clam up."

Lobo stopped and glared at the peasants.

"Do you know *el tigre*?" Emiliano asked timidly.

"He's our friend," Blade divulged.

"I don't think we hit him, *senor*. We're simple farmers, not *solados*. We hunt and trap game to put food on the table for our families, but only because our *patron* takes most of the grain and vegetables for his men. We are not very good shots."

"Where did you see the cat-man last?" Blade probed.

"He ran to the south. But we knew he wanted to go to the water hole, so we came this way to try and catch him."

"Why would simple farmers take it upon themselves to capture a hybrid?" Blade questioned, and stepped closer.

"To please our *patron*. He might pay us for such a creature or let us keep more of the food we grow for our families," Emiliano said.

"Who is this *patron* of yours?"

"El Diablo, *senor*."

"El Diablo takes your harvest for his men?" Blade asked, elated at the discovery. If the village turned out to be the bandit's base, once Jag returned the Force could make tracks for California with the mission successfully accomplished.

"Yes, he does," Emiliano replied. "El Diablo barely leaves enough for the people of my village to live on. And as his band grows, he takes more and more each year."

"You don't sound too happy about it."

"Would you be, *senor*?"

"No," Blade acknowledged. "I guess I wouldn't. Why haven't your people revolted?"

Emiliano spoke in Spanish to the other two men and all three laughed lustily.

"Did I say something funny?" Blade queried.

"Forgive us, *senor*. My people have wanted to rebel for many years. But Celestino is too strong now. We would be wiped out."

"Do you know how El Diablo got his start?"

"Yes, *senor*. Celestino was born in our village."

"And the village is his base of operations?" Blade inquired hopefully.

"No. His base is a vast *caverna*. I can show you where it is located."

The Warrior sighed and gazed to the east. So much for concluding the assignment anytime soon. Finding the exact site of the bandit's headquarters was essential to the projected air strike. His only recourse lay in having Emiliano guide him there. He stared at the peasant and saw the boy peeking at him from behind Emiliano's legs. "Your son?"

"Yes, *senor*. His name is Miguel."

"I have a son about half his age."

"Where are you from, *senor*, if I may ask?"

"You may not," Blade replied, "but I will tell you this. We're not your enemies. We won't harm you or anyone in your village. All we're interested in is El Diablo and the location of his base. If you cooperate with us, we'll let you go."

Emiliano studied the Warrior for several seconds, assessing the giant's character. "I believe we can trust *you, senor*. We will do as you say."

"Fine," Blade said, and glanced at Lobo. "Collect their rifles and bring the guns along."

"Me? Why do I have to lug them around?"

"Because I told you to do it. You can carry them in your arms or crammed up your nose. Take your pick."

"I'll carry them," Lobo said sullenly.

"Sparrow, take the point. Havoc, you're rear guard. Get cracking, people," Blade ordered, and waited for the Flathead to advance ten yards along the game trail before he gestured for the peasants to proceed.

Emiliano took Miguel's hand and they led off, followed by their two friends.

The Warrior fell in alongside Emiliano. "I have some questions to ask you."

"To be expected, *senor*."

Blade watched Doc, Raphaela, and Lobo form a single file behind the Mexicans, then focused his attention on the trail ahead. "Do you know El Diablo well?"

"Very well. We grew up together in Jalapa, our village. Celestino and I played and laughed and enjoyed many good times in our childhood. Back then our village was peaceful, a great place to raise a family. Most of the men farmed or tended goats and sheep and cattle. This valley is very fertile, just right for growing crops. We don't get much rain each year, but the water hole, the lake in the middle of the valley, and our springs are all fed by an underground source," Emiliano detailed, and smiled. "Before Celestino turned bad, this was heaven."

"Heaven?" Blade repeated, recalling his discussion with Jaguarundi about Utopia, and grinned. Why was everyone always looking for a heaven on earth when the true source of happiness sprang from within them?

"That is the right word, isn't it, *senor!*" Emiliano queried. "It has been years since I talked much in English."

"Where did you learn to speak the language?"

"From our priest, Father DeCamillo. He was a very kind, wise man.

"Was?"

"Si. Celestino killed him."

"Why?"

"Because the priest spoke out against him. Father DeCamillo publicly branded Celestino as evil and tried to stir the people up against him, so Celestino made an example of the priest. The Devils dragged the father into our town plaza, lashed him to a post, and whipped his flesh down to the bone. They left him there to die a slow death."

"And no one tried to help the priest?"

"What could we do, *senor*? This took place almost twenty years ago. Celestino had fifteen or twenty men in his band then, and there were only forty or so people in the whole village. Half were women and children. Of course the men of my village wanted to help Father DeCamillo, but Celestino's men had machine guns and we had a few lousy rifles. We would have thrown our lives away," Emiliano said sadly. "Now there are seventy-two in our village. We have grown stronger, but so has Celestino. He has eighty-seven Devils at his command, and they have enough guns and explosives for an army."

"I'm surprised El Diablo hasn't driven your people from the valley," Blade commented.

"Celestino wouldn't do that, *senor*. He has a soft spot in his heart for the village where he was born. His men are forbidden to kill any of us. He needs us, needs the food we grow to feed his band. And too, he needs houses for his *pittas*."

"His what?"

"His whores. He has brought in dozens of women from Mexicali, Tijuana, and elsewhere to service his band. He doesn't permit the *putas* to live at the *caverna*, although many of them spend the night there when the Devils want them."

"How far is the base from your village?"

"That depends on whether you take the road or take the path through the forest. You see, *senor*, there is a lake eight miles to the east of our village. Five miles north of the lake, in the cliffs overlooking the valley, is the *caverna*. The road goes from our village to the lake, then to the *caverna*. That's thirteen miles. But if you cut through the forest it is much shorter," Emiliano said.

"Will you show me the path?" Blade requested.

"Si, *senor*. But you would be wise not to take it."

"Why?"

"The path is how do you say it? booby-trapped with mines and guns and such."

They hiked in silence for a minute. Blade felt happy at finally knowing the exact location of El Diablo's headquarters. Now all he had to do was verify what Emiliano had told him. The peasant seemed to be reliable, but he'd learned from experience not to be too trusting, especially when the lives of the Force members were at stake. "What turned Celestino Naranjo bad?"

Emiliano sighed. "There is a sad story. He was nineteen or twenty at the time, and he'd been married only

a few months to a lovely woman from our village, Maria. Celestino had always wanted to live in California, and he took Maria and packed all of his belongings in a cart pulled by two burros and headed north."

"I don't understand," Blade interrupted. "Why did he want to live in California?"

"Because of all the stories he had heard from his grandfather about how *magnifico* California was. His grandfather, *senor*, was a gringo like yourself but with red hair."

"A Californian?"

"*Si*. He got into some trouble with the law and fled south, and by luck he happened on our valley. We knew nothing of his past and let him live in our village, and he turned out to be a good man. He married one of our women and had several children, and they grew up to be decent folks, hard workers. The eldest son and his wife gave birth to Celestino. All during his younger years, Celestino was urged by his grandfather to go live in California, the land of promise, where very few people are truly poor and a man can get rich if he works hard. So Celestino took his new bride to the land he had dreamed about for so many years."

"And what happened?"

"A tragedy, *senor*. Maria was killed by some gringos. Celestino came back a changed man, filled with hatred for California and Californians. Shortly after that he started his band. He went to the border towns and recruited the roughest men and a few women to be his *soldados*. He formed his own little army, and ever since he had been raiding across the border, killing Californians."

So now Blade had a motive for El Diablo's actions. In a way he felt sorry for the man.

"Twice before, soldiers from California came to destroy Celestino, and each time they were caught and executed in a horrible manner. If he catches you, *senor*, I would advise you to tell him you are from somewhere other than California. You might live longer."

"Thanks for the tip," Blade said. He looked ahead and saw that Sparrow had halted and was gazing at something above the trail: a rope, one end of which had been draped over a tree limb and the other end tied to a sapling. "What's that?"

Emiliano coughed lightly. "A snare we set this morning. The cat-man was caught in it, but he escaped."

"Are there other snares along this trail?"

"We were setting up a second one when Miguel told us about the creature we had caught."

"So we don't have to worry about stepping in an animal trap?"

"No, *senor*. There are no more traps on this trail."

Blade took several strides. Suddenly he perceived movement in the vegetation on both sides, and the next instant armed figures attired in camouflage fatigues burst from cover and trained their weapons on the Force.

Chapter 11

An exquisite pain caused him to groan.

Only then did Jag realize consciousness was returning slowly. His temples throbbed. A dull ache in the pit of his stomach reminded him of the sucker punch delivered by the cruel prick with the black mane, and his eyelids fluttered as he struggled to rouse himself.

"Hey, this turkey is comin' around," declared a low voice to his right.

"Should we let the boss know?" asked a second person, a woman.

"He doesn't want to be disturbed."

The woman snickered. "Can't say as I blame him."

As Jag's feline eyes snapped open, he became aware that his arms were tied above his head and that his body was sagging against a hard surface. He blinked in the bright sunlight, taking stock. The Devils had lashed him to a wooden post imbedded in the ground in the middle of what appeared to be a village square. All around him were single- and two-story buildings made of adobe. Small balconies on the upper stories fronted the square. On a few of the balconies and staring out many of the windows were men, women, and children who regarded him with intense interest.

"Welcome back to the land of the living, freak," said the man on his right.

Jaguarundi twisted his head and found a beefy man in camouflage fatigues standing a yard off. He glanced to his left to find a raven-tressed woman similarly attired. Both held machine guns.

"You've been in dreamland, ugly," the woman commented.

Jag licked his lips. "I'd say this is more like a nightmare."

"Would you like anything?" inquired the man.

"Water would be nice."

The Devil looked up at the sun, then wiped his left hand across his sweating forehead. "Wouldn't it, though?" he responded.

Both guards laughed.

Jag straightened and stretched his leg muscles, his lips a thin line, and gazed overhead. Strips of leather had been used to bind him to a metal ring secured near the top of the post.

"Don't go gettin' any ideas," the beefy man admonished. "We were ordered to blow you away if you try to bust loose."

"And we'll do it too," the woman added.

"Where am I?" Jag asked, and surreptitiously set to work flexing his fingers and insuring full circulation was restored to his arms.

"In Jalapa," the woman said, and ran her right hand through her black hair.

"Where?"

"A village."

"In the valley?"

"Yeah."

The man chuckled and leaned toward Jag. "And don't think we'll let you grow lonely either. Your buddies will be here before too long. Of course, they might not be in one piece."

Jag stiffened. "What do you mean?"

"After El Diablo flattened you, he sent ten Devils into the forest after your friends. He gave them instructions to bring your buddies back alive, if possible, for questioning," the guard disclosed. "But he told Mercer and the boys not to sweat it if they have to blow your pals away."

Apprehension seized Jaguarundi for all often seconds, until he thought of Blade's unparalleled prowess at dispensing death and the fact the others weren't exactly pushovers either, with the possible exception of Lobo. He grinned.

"You think it's funny?" the guard asked in surprise. "The Devils are as mean as they come, jerkface. The ten El Diablo sent in will make mincemeat of your friends."

"Care to make a bet?"

"You ain't got nothin' to bet, stupid."

"He's playing with our minds," the woman interjected. "He knows his buddies are as good as dead."

A commotion broke out on the east side of the square. Jag turned his body and saw El Diablo emerging from a building, laughing and swaggering. In each arm he had a pretty woman. Trailing behind him came eight Devils. The group ambled toward the post, chatting amiably. Jag glanced to the north and spotted the six dune buggies parked along a side street.

"So *el gato* is awake?" El Diablo stated boisterously, and shoved the woman aside. "Has he given you any trouble?"

"None at all, boss," the beefy guard responded, and snickered. "He thinks his buddies are going to waste the squad you sent after them."

"He does, does he?" El Diablo said contemptuously. He halted ten feet from the post and sneered. "In addition to being a liar, you're a braggart and a fool."

"Takes one to know one," Jag said, for lack of a better retort.

The mirth displayed by the group promptly evaporated and the two guards edged away from the post.

El Diablo took two strides forward. "Yes. You definitely have a big mouth and an attitude problem. I think it's time that someone taught you a lesson, mutant."

"Hybrid."

"Huh?"

"I prefer to be called a hybrid."

The white dog appeared, weaving through the Devils to stand at the bandit leader's side.

"Who cares what you want, mutant? I sure as hell don't," El Diablo said. Then he rested his hands on his big revolvers. "Do you know what a bullwhip is, *amigo*?"

A knot formed in Jag's gut and he clenched his hands.

"I didn't hear you?" El Diablo remarked mockingly.

"Yeah," Jag answered.

"You do? Good." El Diablo held out his right arm and snapped his fingers. A tall Devil stepped over and placed a coiled bullwhip into his grasp. He beamed and allowed the whip to unwind slowly onto the ground. "Can you guess what comes next?"

"Touch me and you're dead."

El Diablo laughed. "What?"

Jag stared directly into the butcher's eyes and spoke in a raspy growl. "If you use that whip on me, I'll kill you. Somehow, some way, I'll get you."

"Tough talk, cat-man, for someone who is tied to a whipping post."

"Mark my words," Jag stated harshly. "No one lays a hand on me and lives."

"Now you have me trembling in my boots," El Diablo said, and the Devils cackled. His countenance sobered, became a grim mask. "I need answers, *amigo*, and you're going to provide them."

Jag deliberately turned his back to the raider and waited, endeavoring to calm his jangled nerves, to keep his body relaxed.

"Who sent you?" El Diablo asked. He waited several seconds for a reply, then snapped impatiently, "Where are you from?"

Jag kept silent, scarcely breathing, the hairs on his back tingling.

"Who sent you?" El Diablo repeated.

"Your mother," Jag responded, and then inadvertently cried out and arched his spine as the most intense anguish conceivable flooded his brain with tidal waves of torment. He dimly heard the crack of the bullwhip.

The assembled Devils sniggered.

"You were sent to kill me, weren't you?" El Diablo queried.

Jag gulped and braced his body, or thought he did, but there was no defense against the burning lash slicing deep into his left shoulder blade. He automatically pressed into the post, and his sensitive nostrils registered the stale scent of dried blood.

"Look, *amigo*, I can goon like this all day," El Diablo stated. "Why not make your life easier and tell me everything I need to know?"

"Get screwed!" Jag hissed.

"I just did," El Diablo said, and guffawed.

"Give it to the bastard, boss," the beefy Devil urged.

"I intend to, Garvey," El Diablo replied, and lit into the mutation with a vengeance, his steely right arm

wielding the bullwhip effortlessly. Again and again and again he struck, until he lost count of the number of times. The crack-crack-crack of the lash attained a regular cadence.

His teeth gnashed together, his body quivering and trembling in unadulterated agony, Jaguarundi fought with every iota of his willpower to prevent crying out. Each stroke of the whip, each time the lash cut into his flesh, seared him to his core. He gripped the metal ring and held on fast, his legs threatening to buckle. A moist sensation, undoubtedly his blood seeping from his wounds, crept down his back. He closed his eyes and breathed in great ragged gasps, hoping the torture would end soon.

But it didn't.

El Diablo flicked the whip over and over, observing with glee the spreading red stain matting the mutation's fur.

Jag's legs were becoming weaker and weaker and his back seemed to be on fire. Until that very moment he'd never known the true depths of suffering. Slowly, despite his efforts, his body began to slip downward.

Some of the Devils were making coarse jokes and laughing.

Please let it stop! Jag mentally shrieked. He knew El Diablo must be deriving pleasure from the whipping, and the insight gave him an idea. Would the butcher exert himself on an unconscious victim? He went completely limp, dangling from the ring, shamming unconsciousness. The lash bit into him once more, then again. He resigned himself to a third stroke.

It never landed.

"The tough guy passed out!" Garvey declared, and cackled.

"Strange," El Diablo commented. "I didn't take him for a weakling."

Jag heard footsteps approach.

"These mutations must not be as formidable as I was led to believe," El Diablo stated. "The wild ones have more *cojones*."

"What should we do with him, boss?" Garvey inquired. "Want us to waste the son of a bitch?"

"No. He hasn't answered my questions yet. Untie him and we'll take him with us."

"Yes, sir."

Jaguarundi felt hands slip under his arms from behind, and became aware of someone else working on the leather straps.

"Be careful," said the man to his rear. "I don't want to get blood all over my uniform."

"What's the big deal over a little blood?" Garvey responded. "You can always have a *puta* wash your uniform."

"I don't want the freak's blood to touch my skin. Who knows what it'll do? It might give me a rash or make hair grow all over my body."

"On you it would be an improvement, Carlos."

"Up yours, *amigo*."

Jaguarundi could feel the leather straps loosening, and he let his arms drop, his mind racing. The objective of the mission was to locate El Diablo's base of operations so the California Air Force could conduct an air strike and wipe the scum out, and apparently El Diablo intended to take him to the base. Provided he lived long enough, he could always try to escape later and find Blade. But what if and the thought brought on an adrenaline rush what if he took care of Celestino Naranjo right then and there? Would the Devils disband if their leader died? He had no way of telling, and he really didn't care very much if they disbanded or not. All he wanted was to sink his nails into El Diablo, to repay the bandit chief for the indignity of the whipping. All he desired was sweet, sweet revenge, and he might never have a better opportunity.

"Should we dump this wimp in your buggy, boss?" Garvey asked.

El Diablo nodded. "Place him in the back seat."

"Yes, sir."

Jaguarundi cracked his eyelids as the man supporting him started to turn. He saw Garvey in front of him. Off to the right, conversing with several Devils, stood El Diablo, the bullwhip coiled in his right hand. Off to the left was the female Devil.

"Give me a hand, Garvey," Carlos said. "This freak is heavier than he looks, *compadre*."

"You're gettin' soft in your young age," Garvey responded.

"You're a fine one to talk," Carlos quipped.

Jag inhaled, filling his lungs, and when the beefy guard went to reach for him, when none of the Devils were paying attention, he straightened and swung his right arm, his fingers hooked into rigid claws, and slashed his fingernails across Garvey's neck, splitting the man's beefy neck from one side to the other. He glimpsed Garvey's shocked visage and a geyser of blood spraying from the severed throat, but there wasn't time to witness more because he was already tearing himself loose from the other Devil, Carlos, and spinning, his left hand coming up and around. His nails raked Carlos's face, gouging both brown eyes and ripping through the nostrils, and the Devil screamed and frantically stumbled backwards.

"Look out!" someone shouted.

Jag pivoted toward El Diablo, gratified to see the hint of incipient terror in the man's eyes, and he took a bounding stride, intending to reach Naranjo before any of the Devils could intervene.

But intervention came from another source.

A hurtling white form, snarling savagely, flashed out of nowhere and smashed into Jag's chest, bowling him over. Glistening teeth fastened on his right forearm. He rolled to the right, his own growls mingling with Pancho's, and buried his left hand in the white dog's throat. Battling furiously, they continued to roll back and forth, the dog striving to tear Jag's forearm apart while Jag endeavored to shove the canine from him to give himself room to maneuver.

"Shoot the freak!" a man yelled.

"No!" El Diablo bellowed. "You'll hit Pancho."

Jag winced, racked with pain, the dog's jaws grinding his flesh to the bone. He realized he wouldn't be

able to dislodge the animal and instantly opted for another tactic. If he couldn't separate them, he'd close in. He leaned forward and sank his tapered teeth into Pancho's neck, tasting the hair and the salty skin and tangy blood. His jaws clamped shut and he wrenched his head backwards, tearing a three-inch gash in the canine's throat.

Undeterred but enraged, Pancho released the hybrid's forearm and snapped at his face.

Jag jerked to the right, barely evading the crimson-caked mouth. He swiped at the dog's good eye, but missed. Pancho scrambled erect and Jag did likewise, his concentration totally focused on his feral opponent.

Which was a mistake.

Arms looped around Jag's own as someone tried to pin them. He twirled, throwing his adversary off balance, and the female Devil sprawled to the ground at his feet, on her hands and knees. Jag pounced, his left hand grasping her chin, his right behind her head. He viciously yanked and twisted and heard her neck pop. Before he could straighten, Pancho was on him again, leaping in from the left and barreling him from his feet. He managed to get his hands on the dog's blood-soaked neck, and then he came down hard on his back and shoulders with Pancho's bestial features inches from his nose. Fetid breath assailed him as he heaved, sending the canine flying. Instantly he leaped erect, or tried to, and a thin, cord-like object wrapped itself around the base of his throat.

The bullwhip!

Jag took hold of the whip and tugged, but already he was being pulled to his knees. He grimaced and attempted to unwrap the lash from his neck, sensing he was too late, knowing he'd blown his chance, that the delays had been too costly. A boot thudded into the small of his neck, causing him to arch his back, and he saw something, a machine gun stock maybe, sweeping at his head. The blow staggered him and he reeled crazily.

Not again!

Another machine gun stock came down on him with all the force of a ten-ton meteorite and the lights went out.

Chapter 12

Blade reacted instantaneously. He leveled the M60 and fired from the hip at three figures on the right side of the game trail, catching the trio before they could squeeze off a shot, the rounds perforating their chests and flinging them into the undergrowth. He dived for the ground and barked, "Take cover!"

Bedlam ensued. The Force members and the seven remaining foes in fatigues cut loose at one another while the four peasants tried to find shelter from the flying lead.

Blade saw Sparrow Hawk dart behind a tree, then glanced over his left shoulder in time to see the two Mexican men get hit. So did Lobo, who dropped the three rifles and clutched at his chest while falling and screaming at the top of his lungs. Raphaela and Captain Havoc dove into bushes.

Leaving Doc Madsen still on the trail. An enemy had popped out less than two yards from the Cavalryman and trained a machine gun on him. Doc instinctively raised his arms, his M-16 in his left hand, and cast the weapon away. In that millisecond, as the machine gunner's eyes were watching the M-16 fall into the weeds, Doc's right hand dropped to his Smith and Wesson in a blur of motion. The machine gunner perceived the danger and his finger began to apply pressure on the trigger, but in the

fraction of time it took for his brain to send the mental signal to his hand and his finger to start to squeeze, Doc's Magnum came up and out and boomed.

The machine gunner took the slug squarely in the forehead and catapulted rearward.

Doc spun and dashed toward a nearby thicket, but he was still three yards off when a machine gun chattered and a half-dozen rounds smacked into his backpack and flung him to the earth.

Damn!

Blade rolled into high grass and scanned the surrounding woods. Everyone had gone to cover. If his count was correct, there should be six adversaries left. Logic told him they must be Devils. He crawled stealthily to the east, searching for targets.

A desperate, gurgling shriek wafted from up ahead, from near the tree Sparrow had ducked behind. The shriek ended abruptly.

Blade's eyes narrowed as he studied the wall of vegetation. Had that been Sparrow or one of the Devils? He spotted a bush moving on the opposite side of the trail and tensed.

A woman in fatigues appeared, crouched over, holding an assault rifle, an AK-47.

The Warrior angled the M60 at her, but someone beat him to the punch. An M-16 chattered and the woman flung her arms out and fell. He looked back and realized the shots came from where Raphaela had disappeared. The lady certainly pulled her weight, as she'd promised.

An eerie hush descended on the forest. Even the birds and the insects were silent.

Blade moved to a towering tree and eased his body up, pressing his left side against the trunk. There were four Devils remaining, and he wondered, hopefully, if they would withdraw now that they were outnumbered. He peeked out.

No such luck.

A tall Devil materialized 20 feet to the north, a Colt AR-15 pressed to his shoulder, and fired three times.

The Warrior ducked back and heard the bullets thud into the trunk. He eased to the edge of the tree, intending to return fire, but the sight he beheld rendered retaliation unnecessary.

Captain Havoc stood behind the tall Devil, his left arm wrapped tightly around the man's throat, his right burying a survival knife in the Devil's chest. Once. Twice. And twice more. The Devil collapsed, spurting blood, and Captain Havoc lowered him to the ground. The officer looked at Blade, grinned, and vanished into the forest. Three to go.

Blade crouched, and sidled away from the game trail into a patch of shoulder high growth. He spotted a shadowy form creeping among a stand of saplings 20 feet from his position, and froze.

The Devil hadn't seen him!

The Warrior flattened, never losing track of the man in the stand. He let go of the M60 and inched his right hand to the corresponding Bowie on his hip. The knife slid clear easily, and he held the hilt firmly and waited.

Casting anxious glances in all directions, the Devil walked from the saplings, cautiously nearing the hidden giant.

Blade held his breath and stayed motionless. He spied someone moving a few yards to the Devil's rear, and Sparrow came into view holding the spear in his right hand. As if sensing the Flathead's presence, the Devil pivoted. Sparrow let fly with the heavy lance, his powerful body unwinding in a supple, practiced motion. The spear sped true, its steel point penetrating the Devil's chest on the right side, and completely transfixing the bandit's torso. The man grunted, released his machine gun, and clutched futilely at the lance. His legs buckled and he sank to his knees, blood pouring from both corners of his mouth.

Blade rose slowly, smiling in appreciation of Sparrow's skill. The Flathead saw the Warrior and nodded. His eyes strayed past Blade and suddenly widened in alarm.

Knowing that one of the Devils must be behind him, Blade threw himself to the right, twisting as he did, sliding the Bowie into its sheath as he elevated the M60 with his left hand. Ten yards to the west, grinning confidently in anticipation of mowing him down, were two Devils, one sporting a full black beard, the other on the lean side, both with their weapons leveled and ready to fire. Blade braced for the impact of their bullets. Which never came. From behind *them* an M-16 discharged a short burst and the tops of their craniums erupted skyward, spraying flesh, hair, and brains over the vegetation. In unison the men toppled, landing side by side on their stomachs.

Blade gazed at the brush to their rear, expecting to see Captain Havoc or Raphaela. Instead, to his amazement, he discovered Lobo kneeling beside a bush. "You!"

"Me, dude," the Clansman said, rising with a smirk on his face. "Those two were the last of the bunch, right?"

The Warrior nodded absently. "Aren't you hurt? I saw you go down."

Lobo strolled forward, beaming slyly. "I faked it."

"You pretended to be shot?" Blade asked in disbelief.

"Sure. I figured those creeps weren't about to waste any more ammo or pay much attention to somebody they thought they'd wasted."

"Quick thinking," Blade complimented him.

"Of course," Lobo said. "Like I keep tellin' everybody, I'm a lean, mean fightin' machine."

"You're not all that lean, partner," interjected a newcomer, as Doc Madsen came through the brush. Tucked under his left arm was the large backpack containing the radio. Blade walked over to the Cavalryman. "Are you all right?"

"I was nicked in the side," Doc said, and lowered the backpack to the ground. "One of them had me dead to rights, but he shot at me from an angle and the radio took most of the rounds. It's ruined."

"Now we can't call for help," Lobo declared. Blade frowned, then looked up from the punctured backpack. "Where are the others?"

"Right here, sir," Captain Havoc stated. He emerged from the woods to the north with Raphaela a few feet to his left. "Are you both okay?"

"We're fine," Raphaela answered, studying the Warrior's features. "How'd we do?"

"You did outstanding," Blade replied.

She smiled and hefted her M-16. "That wasn't so hard. Bring on El Diablo."

Blade glanced at the officer. "I want every Devil checked."

"Right away," Havoc replied, wheeling. "Give me a hand, Raphaela," he said, and they moved together.

"Without the radio we might as well head home," Lobo remarked. "If you ask my opinion."

"I didn't," Blade stated. He looked over his right shoulder and observed Sparrow Hawk drawing the blood-soaked spear from the hapless bandit. The loss of the radio irritated him immensely. Now they couldn't rely on the VTOLs to bail them out if they got into serious trouble. They also couldn't radio in the location of El Diablo's base. If they found the headquarters, they would have to trek all the way to the border to relay the news. He sighed.

For a mission that wasn't supposed to involve combat, they were seeing a lot of fighting. If he hoped to avoid further conflict, his best bet was to head for California right away. But they couldn't leave without Jaguarundi. Besides, the ten Devils had been waiting for the Force, an ambush undoubtedly devised by El Diablo himself. After all the gunfire at the water hole, the bandit leader, and everyone else in the valley for that matter, must know the Force was in the vicinity. So running away wouldn't do any good. El Diablo might send his dune buggies after them and run them down in the open desert.

What a mess.

Blade scratched an itch next to his right ear and mulled his options. Since heading for California was out of the question, and since they were stranded in enemy territory anyway, he decided the wisest course of action entailed striking directly at the raider chief. The survival of the Force depended on eliminating El Diablo and decimating the Devils. He looked around. "Has anyone seen Emiliano and his son?"

"We are here, *senor*" the farmer announced, approaching from the south with Miguel. "We ran as fast as our legs would carry us." He scowled. "My *compadres* did not run fast enough."

"I know," Blade said.

"I am so sick of El Diablo and his *asesinos*."

"How would you like to see them driven out of your valley permanently?"

"That would be a dream come true for all of my people," Emiliano replied. "But who is to do it? You? I admire your bravery, *senor*, but you do not have enough *soldados*. Celestino still has seventy-seven Devils. You are greatly outnumbered."

"We don't have any choice. Either we attack him, or we wait for the Devils to hunt us down. Personally, I'd rather take the fight to El Diablo," Blade stated.

"I'm with you, Blade," Doc declared.

"Count me in," Sparrow added.

Lobo gazed from one to the other. "Let's not do anything hasty, dude. Can't we talk about this?"

"No," Blade said, and faced Emiliano. "What about you? Will you help us? Feel free to say no. You have a family, and they might suffer if we don't succeed."

Emiliano placed his right hand on Miguel's shoulder. "I am tired of all the killing. I am tired of never having enough to fill our bellies while Celestino takes most of our crops. He was my friend once, but no more. I

will do whatever you want."

"Thank you," Blade said sincerely. As a husband and a father himself, he could readily appreciate the supreme risk Emiliano was taking. He glanced at Lobo. "I want you to collect all the weapons from the dead Devils and pile them right here."

"All by myself? Can't Chicken Hawk lend me a hand?"

"Get cracking," Blade ordered, and motioned with his right arm.

Grumbling under his breath, Lobo walked off.

"Do you have a plan?" Doc inquired.

"We'll take this a step at a time," Blade answered. He stared at Emiliano. "Does El Diablo keep Devils posted in Jalapa?"

"There are Devils there all the time, but I don't know if they are posted, as you say. They mainly come to the village on their days off to spend time with the *putas*. Sometimes the *putas* go to their base."

"How many Devils are at the village at any one time?"

Emiliano shrugged. "It varies, *senor*. Sometimes only a few. Sometimes a dozen or more. And there are days when almost all the Devils flock into Jalapa for special celebrations."

"Have you ever been to their headquarters?"

"No. Celestino does not allow any of the villagers except the whores into the *cavema*. The base is well guarded all day and all night."

Blade pondered the information. "Okay. The first step will be for you to lead us to your village."

"Gladly, *senor*."

The Warrior spotted Captain Havoc and Raphaela walking toward him. "Are all of the Devils dead?"

"As doornails, sir," Havoc replied.

"Help Lobo collect all their weapons," Blade directed them, and turned to Emiliano. "Will your people join us in our fight against El Diablo?"

The farmer stared at the bandits Lobo had slain. "I honestly can't say, *senor*."

"Aren't they as tired of El Diablo as you are?"

"*Si*, most are. But as I told you before, we are not skilled at killing. Celestino knows we do not pose a threat to him, which is why he lets some of us keep our rifles for hunting and protection from the monsters."

"How many rifles are there in Jalapa?" Blade inquired.

"Fifteen or so, I think."

"That's more than enough. Follow me on this. I have six competent fighters with me. If we distribute the weapons we're confiscating from the ten Devils to villagers who don't own a gun, then add in fifteen riflemen, we'll have thirty-two people. El Diablo only has seventy-seven left. We could finish him once

and for all."

"Perhaps. But seventy-seven is still more than thirty-two. The people in my village will not like the odds."

"The odds may never be better," Blade told him. "You've been waiting for almost two decades for a chance to destroy the Devils, but they keep growing stronger and stronger. El Diablo is too powerful for your people to topple by themselves. Now you have us to aid you. With our assistance, under our guidance, we can defeat him."

Emiliano scrutinized the giant's rugged, honest features. "I believe you, *senor*, but I can not predict how my people will decide."

"Lead us to your village. Call a meeting and present the issue to them. Put it to a vote. I hope your people will join us, but if they don't we'll do the job ourselves. It's El Diablo or us," Blade said, and paused. "To the death."

Chapter 13

He became aware of the loud metallic growl of an engine and felt a swaying motion, then realized his wrists and ankles were bound securely. Pain dominated his being: pain in his head, pain in his right forearm, and pain all up and down his back. He opened his eyes to find himself in the back seat of a modified dune buggy.

"You're a tough bastard. I didn't think you'd revive so soon."

Jaguarundi glared at the smirking countenance of El Diablo, who sat in the front passenger seat a mere foot away. "You should have killed me when you had the chance."

"You'll die soon enough, cat-man," the bandit chief stated confidently.

Jag glanced at the driver, then at the Devil seated on his left with an M-16 pointed at his side. "Where are you taking me?"

"To my headquarters," El Diablo replied.

Jag twisted and stared at the dust swirling into the air from the vacant dirt road to their rear. "Where are the rest of the Devils you had with you?"

El Diablo grinned. "I left them in the village as a reception committee for your friends, just in case they get past Mercer and his squad."

"They'll get past Mercer."

"Don't underestimate my Devils, *amigo*. They caught you, didn't they?"

"Only because I was careless, because I wasn't watching where I was going," Jag said, and gazed at the stretch of road ahead. The blue lake he had seen from the western crest lay a quarter of a mile off.

"Where is your headquarters?"

"You'll find out soon enough," El Diablo said. He reached out and patted the dash. "What do you think of my dune buggies?"

"The bigger the boy, the bigger the toys," Jag quipped.

"My dune buggies are not toys, mutant. I got the idea when I visited California. My mechanics have built

my fleet of buggies almost from scratch, modeling them after the kind I saw on the beach. I used the same general design, but I have a back seat installed in each vehicle and lightweight armor plating fitted to the doors and hood. They're fast and they get great gas mileage."

"Where do you obtain the motors, tires, and all the other parts you need?"

"From the vehicles I steal in California."

Jag looked at the driver, his brow knitting. "But how do you bring your stolen vehicles to his valley? An ordinary car or truck wouldn't make it across the desert, and you certainly don't have time to strip the vehicles at the border."

"True," El Diablo said. "You'll understand once we reach my headquarters."

"With all the raiding and killing you do, I'm surprised you found time to visit the beach," Jag mentioned sarcastically.

El Diablo's features clouded. "I went to the beach with my wife on my first trip to California."

"You're married?" Jag asked in surprise.

"I was," El Diablo said sadly. "But I made the mistake of taking my beautiful wife, Maria, to California. My grandfather had always told me that California was the land of opportunity."

He snorted derisively. "And fool that I was, I believed him. Maria and I were in Los Angeles two days two lousy, stinking days when we took a picnic lunch to the beach."

"What happened?" Jag prompted.

El Diablo stared at the floor and frowned. "A group of young gringos in dune buggies drove up to the spot we had picked. There was no one else around. They taunted us, these gringos did, both the men and the women. They insulted us, called us spies and greasers. One of them, a woman, called Maria a whore." His voice lowered. "Maria tried to keep me calm, but I lost my temper and hit the woman. All of them attacked me and I was knocked out. When I came to, I found Maria nearby. She had been raped. Each of the men had taken a turn with her." He stopped and took a deep breath. "They'd beaten her as well."

"Did she die?" Jag asked softly.

"*Si*. She was damaged inside. I sat by her side in the hospital for a day and a half, holding her hand and watching her fade."

"Did the police catch the ones responsible?"

"Are you kidding?" El Diablo snapped, his head coming up, "Do you really think the *policia* cared about the death of a Mexican woman? Do you think they gave a damn what happened to a greaser?"

Jag said nothing.

"Needless to say, I did not remain in California, the land of opportunity," El Diablo said contemptuously. "I came back to my village filled with hatred for all Californians."

"And you've been venting your hatred ever since."

El Diablo glanced at the hybrid. "Do you blame me?"

"No," Jag said, thinking of the prejudice and bigotry he had encountered. He'd lost count of the number of humans he'd met who hated him simply because he was different, who'd detested him because he was a mutation. If he had a gold coin for every time a human referred to him as a freak or with some other equally unflattering term, or for every time a human gave him that certain glance hinting at concealed revulsion or dislike, he'd be able to open his own bank. He'd learned to accept the fact that humans were a naturally intolerant species, although he'd never fully appreciated that their intolerance extended to one another. The irony made him want to laugh. Humans were equal-opportunity haters. They even despised each other.

As if El Diablo could read the hybrid's mind, he leaned toward his prisoner and said, "You should be able to understand the way I feel, *amigo*. You're a mutant. I bet you've had to put up with bigots all of your life. Am I right?"

Jaguarundi nodded.

"You may not believe this, *amigo*, but I admire you. You and I have a lot in common. More than you can know. And when I saw you come at me back in the plaza, I knew you were also brave. I respect bravery, in a friend or in a foe."

"And you kill them anyway."

"A man does what he has to do. But I'll tell you what. From here on out, even though I'll kill you in the end. I will not insult you by calling you names. How is that?"

"Damned decent of you. I'm all choked up."

El Diablo glanced at the driver and sighed. "Do you see, Stimson? You try to be nice to some people, or whatever he is, and all they do is hand you sarcasm."

"I see, boss," Stimson responded.

"Why don't you stop?" Jag asked.

"What?"

"Why don't you stop conducting your raids? You've avenged Maria many times over. What can you hope to prove by continuing to butcher innocent men, women, and kids? Agree to disband the Devils and give up raiding border towns, and the authorities in California will stop sending teams down here to eliminate you," Jag said.

A crafty grin creased the bandit chiefs lips. "So you admit you are from California!"

"I haven't admitted a thing."

El Diablo chuckled. "But you have, *amigo*. I now know that your friends and you were sent by the rotten gringos in California to kill me. As I suspected." He laughed and slapped the top of his seat.

"We weren't sent to kill you."

"You protest too much, cat-man," El Diablo said, his eyes twinkling in delight. "I knew my little sob story would draw the truth out of you."

Jag's eyes narrowed. "You made up the whole story?"

El Diablo shook his head. "Every word I spoke was true. And yes, I have been avenging Maria ever

since. I will continue as long as there is breath in my body. For nearly twenty years I have killed gringos because they are a blight on the earth. Gringos are worse than a plague of locusts. It was gringos who violated my wonderful Maria, who treated her as if she were filth. Gringos took the love of my life away from me, and for such an atrocity I will make them pay until my dying day."

"But the ones you're killing aren't the ones who assaulted Maria and you."

"What do I care? Gringos are gringos. I hate them all."

"Which makes you no better than the scum who raped Maria," Jag commented.

El Diablo's right hand flashed out and smacked the hybrid across the mouth. "How dare you!" he roared, his face livid. "How dare you compare me to those murdering swine!"

Jag tasted his blood in his mouth and licked his sore lips. "The truth hurts, huh?"

"I thought you understood me. I was wrong," El Diablo said. "Your impudence will cost you, *amigo*."

"One of us will have to pay a price," Jag stated. He gazed at the landscape on his side of the dune buggy, the wind whipping his fur. If his hands and feet weren't tied, he would have vaulted from the vehicle and risked being shot before he could hide. He wondered how Blade and the others were faring, and he hoped they wouldn't try anything foolish such as trying to rescue him. He'd gotten himself into the fix he was in, and he'd get himself out.

He hoped.

The dune buggy drew close to the lake, then followed the curving road to the north. The woodland had thinned out as they neared the lake, and now the countryside consisted of scattered stands of trees amidst rolling fields of lush green grasses and wildflowers. Herds of long-horned cattle grazed at random. The idyllic, pristine setting belied the evil breeding in the valley.

The road straightened, and the driver pressed on the accelerator. Larger clouds of dust spewed from the oversized tires, leaving a billowing wake to mark their passage.

Jaguarundi sat quietly, savoring the opportunity to replenish his energy and recover slightly from his wounds. He speculated on the possible fate El Diablo had in store for him, positive the bandit leader would devise a gory end. He longed for the chance to use his nails on the son of a bitch. If the Devils slipped up just once, if they untied him and he was anywhere close to El Diablo, he resolved to terminate the bandit no matter what the cost.

After several miles the grasses were supplanted by forest again. Magnificent peaks formed an irregular wall on the northern horizon.

Jag stared at the mountains, deducing their destination must be in the range ahead. His hunch was verified minutes later when a fortified compound appeared.

"Home, sweet home," El Diablo announced.

The dirt road led to a massive iron gate situated in the center of a 12-foot-high chain-link fence. Two guards stood in front of the gate, machine guns slung over their shoulders. Beyond the fence, perhaps 50 yards distant, reared a cliff the equal of the one situated near the water hole. But with a major difference. The lower third of the cliff, eons ago, had been washed out by the erosive flow of a river long since dry or torn out by a geologic upheaval of cataclysmic proportions, leaving an enormous cavern. The opening alone rose 100 feet and was 70 feet wide. Inside the cavern, visible through the fence, were dune

buggies, wooden buildings, and dozens of Devils engaged in various tasks. All the ground past the fence had been paved.

El Diablo looked at his prisoner. "Surprised?"

"Impressed. No one could spot your headquarters from the air unless they knew exactly where it was," Jag replied.

"Even then it would be hard to find," El Diablo said. "And a plane or helicopter couldn't fly too close to those peaks up there anyway, because of the wind and updrafts."

"Very shrewd."

"Thank you, *amigo*. My grandfather told me all about aircraft, and I learned my lessons well, no?"

"Yes."

The driver braked as they drew closer to the gate.

Jag watched the two guards hurrying to throw the iron barrier wide, and a question occurred to him. "Where did you find the camouflage fatigues the Devils all wear?"

"We took them from an armory in California, near El Centra. To me, California is one big store. I take whatever I need when I need it. Clothes, fuel, weapons, you name it."

The gate swung out and the driver drove into the compound.

Astonishment rippled through Jag when he spied the three tremendous vehicles parked just inside the cavern, in the shadows on the right-hand side. They were gargantuan in size, enormous double-decker trailers attached to truck cabs so immense that each one of them could fill a small house. The cabs and the trailers were supported by tires larger than a dune buggy. All three cabs had been painted brown. The trailers were a dull gray.

"What are *those!*" Jag asked.

El Diablo chuckled. "You wanted to know how I bring the vehicles I steal in California to-my base? Now you know. Those are my transports. I load the cars and trucks onto the trailers and transport them here. They're not as fast as the dune buggies, but they can negotiate any terrain. They are *magnifico*, don't you think?"

"I've never seen anything like them," Jag admitted. He saw two tanker trucks parked on the other side of the three transports. "Is there fuel in those tankers?"

"Of course."

Occupying the middle of the cavern were the green buildings. Two long, low barracks were situated toward the opening. Behind them was a two-story structure. Along the left wall were 14 dune buggies.

"The *caverna* extends back into the mountain for two hundred yards," El Diablo said. "At the rear is a spring that supplies our drinking water. My Devils have all the comforts of home in the barracks. And we have enough weapons and explosives stored in the tall building to repel the California Army if necessary." He smiled and nodded in self-satisfaction. "I picked the perfect base."

"So it would seem," Jag said, and happened to glance off to the right at the fence. Forty feet from the gate, at the base of the fence, hidden in a bowl-shaped hole scooped out of the earth, was a

50-caliber-machine-gun emplacement. He shifted and gazed to the left. A second machine-gun emplacement, located the same distance from the gate, insured that anyone attacking the compound would be caught in a withering cross fire.

El Diablo noticed the direction of Jaguarundi's gaze and grinned. "Even if your friends manage to get this far, none of them will ever see California again."

Chapter 14

Not so much as a fly stirred in Jalapa.

Blade crouched in the shelter of a tree, the M60 in his hands and ready for action, and scrutinized the small town. There should be people abroad, but there weren't any. There should be children playing in the streets and dogs yipping, but there wasn't a child or dog in sight. Jalapa resembled a ghost town.

There could only be one explanation.

It was a trap.

The Devils were waiting for the Force, Blade deduced. He looked to the right at Captain Havoc, Lobo, and Raphaela, who were all behind trees of their own, then to the left at Sparrow Hawk and Doc Madsen. They were watching him, waiting for the command to move in. He hesitated, apprehensive over the likely outcome if he was overestimating the team's ability. They'd survived one ambush, but the remaining Devils weren't about to roll over without a fight. The battle was just beginning.

He stared at the flat roofs of red tile, his mind on Emiliano and Miguel. They were waiting in a clearing 50 yards to the west and guarding the weapons confiscated from the ten Devils. Emiliano had wanted to come along, to take part in the fight, but Blade had put his foot down and flatly refused to bring the farmer. He regarded Emiliano as too valuable a contact to gamble losing the man.

The warm afternoon sun on his face brought the Warrior out of his reflection.

Girding himself, Blade motioned with his right arm, and took off across the narrow field separating the forest from the village, a 40-foot-wide strip of grass and shrubs. He zigzagged, darting from shrub to shrub, his eyes scanning the buildings for any hint of movement.

No Devils appeared.

No gunshots sounded.

Puzzled, he came to a dirt street and dashed across it to the front of a house, flattening against the wall next to the closed door. A window, lacking a glass pane, was to his right. He saw the others reach the cover of adjacent homes, then ducked down and peered in the window. Simple furnishings adorned an empty room. He was surprised to discover the floor consisted of hard-packed dirt.

Where were the inhabitants?

Blade straightened and glanced to the south, wondering if the Devils had evacuated the villagers. Hundreds of yards away, bordering Jalapa's southern boundary, were tilled fields ranging for as far as the eye could see, fields in which corn, wheat, beans, sundry vegetables, and other crops were growing.

The Warrior moved around the northwest corner of the home and proceeded into the village, hunched over, his eyes constantly probing for enemies. He passed empty building after empty building.

"Where is everyone?" Raphaela whispered from right behind him.

"Your guess is as good as mine," Blade replied.

"The Devils are expecting us, aren't they?"

"Either that or the villagers took the day off to go skinny-dipping in the lake," Blade said, and abruptly halted as the noise of a vehicle engine arose to the east. He listened for several seconds as the noise gradually receded, indicating the vehicle must be departing Jalapa on the road Emiliano had mentioned.

"What's that?" Raphaela asked.

"Beats me," Blade said, and looked back to check that everyone was still with him.

Raphaela smiled up at him, then suddenly tensed and threw herself at his chest, knocking him aside as she raised her M-16 and trained the barrel on the upper window of a building on the left side of the street, not more than 25 feet off. She squeezed off a burst.

A strangled screech came from the window, and a moment later a man dressed in camouflage fatigues toppled out, his arms outflung, his face peppered with red dots, his machine gun falling from limp fingers. He fell to the street with a pronounced thud.

Blade glanced at the dead Devil, then at Raphaela. "Thanks. You saved my life."

She smiled sheepishly. "I saw the sun gleam off his barrel."

The others converged on them, each one alert for another sniper.

"Damn! That was close!" Lobo commented.

"It's a good thing you didn't send her back to the Moles," Doc remarked with a grin.

Blade nodded. Raphaela was turning out to be a major asset to the team. Which proved that the old cliches were invariably correct. What was that one again? Oh, yeah. Never judge a book by its cover. He gazed at them and wagged the M60. "Remember your training. Don't bunch up. Spread out. Give yourselves room to maneuver. Don't make it easy for the opposition to bag us."

They promptly obeyed, fanning out.

The Warrior advanced farther into the village. There were bound to be more Devils lying in ambush, and he strained his senses to detect them before they sprang their trap. He came abreast of a squat house and looked inside through the open door. A pot and a thin, flat, circular piece of dough were lying on the floor near the doorway. The occupants, evidently, had departed in haste.

Another motor roared to life to the east, only this one was much closer.

Blade halted and surveyed the street ahead. At the end there appeared to be a public square of some sort. Even as he looked, a dune buggy swung into the street from the square and raced toward the Force.

"Look out!" Raphaela shouted.

Two grinning Devils were in the dune buggy. The guy on the passenger side leaned out with an AK-47 clutched in his hands. He smirked and leveled the weapon.

"Take cover!" Blade bellowed, and dove into the house on his right. He heard the machine gun open up as he came down on his elbows and knees, heard rounds smacking into the walls, and he scrambled erect and faced the doorway.

The dune buggy was just speeding past.

Blade stepped to the door and sent a dozen rounds after the vehicle, gratified to see the shots rip into its rear end. The thundering engine reverberated in the confined space between the buildings. Combined with the blasting of the M60, the din was enough to drown out every other sound.

Which almost cost the Warrior his life.

With his attention on the dune buggy racing to the west, Blade didn't realize there was imminent danger from another source until he glimpsed Sparrow Hawk framed in a window across the street. The Flathead was gesturing frantically with his right hand, *pointing to the east*. Blade spun, and he barely registered the sight of a second dune buggy hurtling toward them when the Devil on the passenger side cut loose with an assault rifle.

Damn!

Bullets plowed into the outer wall on the right side of the doorway. Instead of retreating into the shadows, Blade automatically did the unexpected; he stepped into the center of the street, trained the M60 on the dune buggy, and let them have it. The big machine gun bucked in his arms as he poured a veritable hailstorm of lead into the grill, hood, and driver. A short swing to the left stitched the pattern of slugs into the other Devil, and the man screamed as his chest was transformed into a series of miniature crimson geysers.

The driver slumped over the steering wheel and the dune buggy veered into a house on the right, smashing through the wall and coming to an abrupt rest as a portion of the roof collapsed upon it.

Blade whirled and saw the first dune buggy returning for another run. He planted his feet firmly and fired.

Three blocks off, the driver gunned the engine and came at the giant head on, undaunted by the rounds puncturing the front of his vehicle.

Captain Havoc suddenly materialized in a second-floor window a few dozen feet in front of the buggy. He looked down, smiled, and pulled an object from his right front pocket.

Blade knew what was coming. He saw Havoc pull the pin, and he pivoted and dashed to the doorway, his eyes on the hand grenade the officer tossed directly onto the onrushing vehicle. His head and shoulders were just clearing the jamb when the grenade went off. The explosion rocked every building on the street, rattling cabinets and causing dishes to crash to the floor. Blade sprawled onto his stomach and rolled, seeing flaming fragments sail past the doorway. He surged to his knees and peeked out.

The concussion had flipped the dune buggy what remained of it onto its back. Fire engulfed the twisted wreckage. Bits of the two Devils were scattered about. A severed arm lay a few yards to the east. Near the corner of a house a smoldering leg leaned against the wall, propped upright, as if waiting for the owner to reclaim it.

Blade surveyed the street. Satisfied the Devils were momentarily holding back, he moved into the street.

The other Force members joined him, each one tense, each one primed for combat. They kept at least a yard between them.

"I guess we taught those wimps," Lobo commented when they were all assembled.

"Yeah. *We* did," Havoc said, and chuckled.

"Move out," Blade instructed them. "And stay frosty."

"You don't have to tell me twice, dude," Lobo responded.

They headed for the center of Jalapa, warily checking every house they passed. An unnatural silence hung over the village. Behind them the burning dune buggy crackled and hissed as the flames consumed the vehicle.

Blade stopped a few yards shy of the town square and scrutinized the layout. In the center stood a wooden post. Adobe structures ringed the plaza. There wasn't a living soul in sight.

"I don't like it," Doc Madsen said. "We're being watched. I just know it."

The Warrior nodded. He felt the same way. But if he wanted to lure the Devils out into the open, if he wanted to wipe out every last bandit in the village, he had to take calculated gambles. Such as boldly striding into the square. The short hairs at the nape of his neck tingled as he walked toward the post. His unit followed. All except one.

"This definitely sucks," Lobo mentioned softly. "After all we've been through, I'd better get a month off when we get back to L.A."

"Dream on," Raphaela said.

Blade glanced over his left shoulder, noting their positions. Lobo and Raphaela were right behind him, then Havoc and Sparrow. Surprisingly, Doc Madsen had hung back and was standing near the corner of the last building, scanning the roofs.

Why?

The Warrior received his answer seconds later when the Devils set the next phase of their trap into motion. Four bandits, each on a different roof, one to the east, south, west, and north, popped up and opened fire on the exposed Force members at the same instant that two dune buggies sped out of a street at the northeast corner of the plaza.

"Scatter!" Blade barked, and swung to the northeast, focusing on the dune buggies and hoping the others could take care of the Devils on the roofs.

He needn't have worried.

Out of the corner of his left eye Blade saw Doc Madsen spring out of the side street. The Cavalryman's M-16 was slung over his left shoulder, and as he came into the open he drew his Smith and Wesson Distinguished Combat Magnum.

The other Force members were returning fire while running a serpentine course for cover.

On the roofs, the four Devils were concentrating on the racing figures near the middle of the square. Not until it was too late did they awaken to the fact that another man had entered the fray.

Doc held the Magnum low, next to his waist, and as he ran clear of the buildings to the west he twisted and fired without consciously aiming. The Devil on a roof three doors up threw his hands to his head and fell from view. Doc spun, beginning a complete revolution, and as he faced north he fired again, the shot

unerringly accurate, catching the Devil to the north in the throat, and still Doc spun, now facing to the east and snapping off his third round, and he continued his turn, coming around to the south, the Magnum booming once more. The Devil to the east and the one to the south dropped simultaneously.

Leaving the dune buggies.

Blade tracked them with the M60 and was about to squeeze the trigger when they parted, the first bearing to the right, the second to the left. The Devils began firing, foolishly sweeping their weapons back and forth, spraying lead wildly instead of trying to nail a specific target. He bent in half and dashed to the wooden post. It wasn't much cover, but it would have to do. He leaned against it, scarcely noticing the fresh blood stains on the wood, and watched the dune buggy on the right as the vehicle swept around the square. He waited, hearing total bedlam rock the west side of the plaza as his teammates poured their concentrated fire into the second vehicle.

The Devil in the front passenger seat of the first dune buggy got off a few hasty rounds, trying to hit the giant next to the post.

Blade ducked as the shots hit the post, chipping off slivers, and dove straight out, flattening on the ground and firing as he landed. Both the driver and the other Devil thrashed and jerked when their bodies were punctured again and again. The driver released the wheel and the dune buggy slanted to the right, ramming into a two-story structure and grinding to a halt with its engine running.

What about the other one?

Blade rolled onto his back and leaped to his feet.

The two Devils in the second dune buggy resembled sieves. Scores of holes dotted their heads, necks, and torsos, oozing blood. Both of them were sitting with their heads tilted back and their mouths hanging open. The vehicle had coasted to a stop mere inches from a wall.

Blade surveyed the plaza. Havoc and Raphaela were to his right, rising from the ground. Doc Madsen was reloading his Magnum. Lobo and Sparrow were off to the left, slowly approaching. "Anyone hit?" he called out.

"Me," Havoc responded. He walked over, his left arm pressed to his side, a spreading red stain on his left shoulder.

"How bad is it?" Blade asked.

"It stings like hell," Havoc said, and grunted.

"Let me help you," Raphaela offered, slinging her M-16 over her right arm, "I'll bandage the wound."

"That's not necessary. I can manage," Havoc responded.

"Let her help," Blade directed, then glanced at Doc Madsen. "Take Lobo and Sparrow with you. Check the whole village. Make sure there aren't any more Devils lurking around."

"I doubt it man," Lobo spoke up. "We whipped their butts but good."

"Go anyway," Blade said flatly.

"You've got it," Doc said, and led the other two to the north.

Captain Havoc had dropped to his right knee and was allowing Raphaela to assist him in removing his

backpack and fatigue shirt. "Looks like this isn't my day," he commented.

"You're still alive," Blade reminded him. He stepped closer to inspect the bullet hole. A round had penetrated the fleshy part of the officer's shoulder, just above the collar bone, and gone completely through. Muscles and sinew had been torn, and the hole was bleeding moderately, but the wound wasn't life-threatening.

Raphaela removed her backpack and rummaged inside for her first-aid kit. "I'm pretty good at patching people up. I have four younger brothers and three younger sisters, and I've had to tend them more times than I care to remember."

"That's quite a family," Havoc remarked.

Blade scanned the buildings ringing the plaza. "Bandage him quickly, Raphaela. The Devils could return any minute."

"Yes, sir."

"I tend to agree with Lobo, sir," Captain Havoc said. "Call my feeling gut instinct, but I don't think they'll try and take us out for a while."

"You hope."

"There's something I don't quite understand," Raphaela mentioned as she laid the first aid kit on the ground and opened it.

"What's that?" Blade asked.

"Now bear in mind I don't know a lot about guns and bullets and whatnot," Raphaela stated, removing a bottle of antiseptic and a box of bandages, "but I distinctly recall you telling us that those dune buggies have armor plating on them."

"True," Blade said.

"Then how come your shots bored right through that armor as if it was paper?"

"Two reasons," Blade replied, pleased by her inquisitive mind, by the interest she displayed in her new line of work. "First, the armor plating on the dune buggies isn't the same type you'd find on, say, a tank. It's not as thick, not as heavy. The Devils put lightweight armor plating on their vehicles so the dune buggies wouldn't lose any speed or maneuverability. You've got to remember that El Diablo is a quick-strike artist. He likes to sweep into a town, kill everybody in sight and grab whatever he needs, then pull out before the Army arrives. Speed is essential to his operation."

"What's the second reason?" Raphaela asked, using a wad of gauze to dab at the blood on Havoc's shoulder.

"The armor plating on the dune buggies is mainly intended to stop rifle and small-arms fire, not heavy machine guns. My M60, for instance, uses a variety of ammo. It takes ball, tracer, armor-piercing, and even blank ammunition if I want. I can mix and match as I desire. And since I knew El Diablo relied on modified dune buggies, every third round in my ammo belts is armor-piercing."

"Thanks for explaining. I think I understand now."

Blade heard footsteps to the north, and swiveled to find Lobo running toward them. "What's up? More

Devils?"

"Nope," the Clansman responded, slowing as he neared them. "Doc sent me back to tell you what he found."

"Which was?"

"A dune buggy parked on a side street."

"Does it run?"

Lobo glanced at Raphaela and Havoc. "It's in one piece. There's no key, but that won't stop me. I can hot-wire the sucker, if you want."

"I want. Drive it back here."

"Okay, dude." Lobo wheeled and jogged off.

Captain Havoc stared at the Warrior. "What do you have in mind, sir?"

"We need transportation."

"Are you thinking what I think you're thinking?"

Blade looked at the officer and nodded. "We're going to attack El Diablo's base."

"What?" Raphaela exclaimed, pausing in her ministrations. "Just the six of us?"

"I hope the villagers will help us, but one way or the other we're eliminating that butcher and his band."

"But the odds," Raphaela said. "Wouldn't it be smarter for us to head for California and get reinforcements?"

"No. I doubt El Diablo will allow us to leave this valley alive, and even if we did escape he'd undoubtedly send his dune buggies to catch us on the open desert, where we wouldn't stand a chance. So we take the fight to him now, when he'd least expect us to go after him."

"You *hope* he's not expecting us," Captain Havoc noted. "If he is, he'll prepare quite a reception."

"That's a risk we'll have to take," Blade said.

"What about Jag? Shouldn't we wait for him to return?" Raphaela asked.

"I am thinking about Jag. We should have met up with him by now. He was supposed to check on the source of the smoke we saw, which was this village. The people were fixing their midday meal."

"Maybe Jag is hiding in the forest," Raphaela guessed.

Blade shook his head. "He's not the hiding type. After he got away from Emiliano, he would have circled back to us. He would have had no trouble picking up our trail and overtaking us."

"What do you think has happened to him?"

"I suspect the Devils have him," Blade stated, and turned to the north once again when he spied Doc and Sparrow approaching on the double. "What is it? Where's Lobo?"

"He's working on the dune buggy," Doc answered. "We found something we figured you should know about."

"Tell me."

The pair stopped.

Doc pointed to the north. "There are two bodies in a building about a block from the plaza. One is a woman, the other a guy. They're both Devils."

"How did they die?"

"The woman had her neck broken," Doc answered.

"And the man?"

Sparrow responded this time. "His throat was slashed. The incision, though, is too ragged to have been made by a knife. I've seen such cuts before on deer slain by a mountain lion."

"Jag," Blade said.

Sparrow nodded. "I believe so."

"Then the Devils do have him," Blade declared harshly, and gazed to the west. "This settles it. As soon as Lobo gets the dune buggy running, we're going after El Diablo."

"Jag could already be dead," Raphaela said.

"Maybe. Maybe El Diablo will toy with him for a while," Blade said. "In any event, we're not leaving a single Devil alive."

Doc nodded. "I wouldn't have it any other way."

The Warrior ran his right hand through his hair and sighed. "Our orders were to track El Diablo to his lair and avoid engaging the enemy. Well, due to circumstances beyond our control we don't have any choice. And since we don't, since we're dealing with scum who have slaughtered hundreds of innocent people over the years, since those scum have captured and probably killed a teammate, the standing order of the day will be short and simple." He looked at each of them. "No mercy whatsoever. Is that understood?"

Everyone nodded.

Blade noticed Captain Havoc staring at him with a strange expression. "Is anything wrong?"

"No," the officer said. "I was just thinking that you're a man after my own heart."

"You sound surprised."

Captain Havoc nodded. "I am."

Chapter 15

What do you think of my little army, eh?" El Diablo asked proudly.

"Offhand, I'd say they suck," Jaguarundi responded defiantly, then smiled sweetly at the four Devils who stood to his right with their weapons trained on his torso. "Present company included, of course."

"You shouldn't push me, cat-man," El Diablo said. "Your end will come that much sooner."

"Maybe I can't stand the suspense," Jag quipped. He gazed at the four rows of Devils standing at attention in front of the barracks, their backs to the cavern, then to his left at the bandit leader. "What's with the formation? Are you planning to give them a pep talk?"

El Diablo had planted himself a few feet from the middle of the first row, facing the Devils, his hands clasped behind his back. He glanced at the hybrid. "Have your fun while you can. In a little while you won't feel like laughing."

"Promises, promises," Jag said, and for the umpteenth time surreptitiously tried to snap the rope binding his wrists. But the rope held fast. At least his legs had been untied, so his scheme to eliminate El Diablo before the Devils finished him off had a slim hope of succeeding.

"Do you want us to shut this creep up?" one of the guards asked.

"Let him prattle," El Diablo replied, and turned to the assembled Devils. "Higbie, front and center."

A weasely man with oily dark hair stepped from the second row and came around to stand in front of El Diablo. Over his left shoulder hung an M-16. "Yes, boss?" he asked nervously.

"Did you pull a shift at the water hole today?"

Higbie licked his lips and mustered a feeble smile. "Yeah, boss. You know I did. I was in charge of the morning shift."

"Did you wait to be properly relieved?"

Jag almost laughed when he saw the color drain from Higbie's face. He observed that every Devil was watching the proceedings intently.

"Sort of," Higbie answered.

El Diablo glowered. "What the hell does 'sort of' mean?"

"I waited ten minutes past the time I should have been relieved, then I went to find out why my relief hadn't shown up," Higbie responded.

"And what did you find?"

"Mercer's dune buggy had broken down. He told me the mechanics would be there to fix it in fifteen minutes."

El Diablo lowered his hands to his sides. "And what did you do then?"

Higbie swallowed hard. "I figured we'd come on back. Mercer wasn't that far from the water hole, and I assumed he'd be at his post in thirty minutes at the most."

"You *figured!* You *assumed!*"

"I didn't think a few minutes could make that much of a difference."

"You didn't?" El Diablo said sternly. "Then allow me to explain the consequences of your negligence." He twisted and pointed off to the west, at the escarpment visible above the trees. "Why do you think I went to so much trouble to seek out the Cocopas and arrange for them to post men on top of that cliff? For

my health?"

"No."

"Could it be because the only approach to the valley is from the west? Could it be because anyone who is after us has to pass by the water hole and that cliff?"

Higbie shifted nervously. "Yeah."

"And why do you think I keep a crew posted at the water hole twenty-four hours a day?" El Diablo questioned.

"So the Cocopas can signal them and the crew can intercept anyone who tries to enter the valley."

"Brilliant!" El Diablo said. "Now follow me on this next part. Intruders came to our valley today. The Cocopas saw them coming. But the Indians couldn't signal the crew at the water hole because *it wasn't there*." He paused. "You'd already left. You'd already deserted your post."

Higbie said nothing.

"Fortunately, they could still signal *me*. I'm lucky it isn't cloudy today. I'm also lucky Mercer heard all that gunfire and radioed in."

"Everything turned out for the best," Higbie ventured.

"Did it?" El Diablo responded skeptically. "Then why are the intruders still loose in my valley? Why haven't I heard from Mercer or the squad I left in Jalapa?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know," El Diablo repeated mincingly.

"I'm sorry, boss. I really am," Higbie said.

"Being sorry doesn't cut it," El Diablo declared. "You deserted your post, pure and simple. I can't blame the three men who were there with you because you were in charge. The fault is yours."

Higbie started to speak, but he seemed to experience considerable difficulty in mouthing his words.

"What are you going to do?"

"What do you think?" El Diablo replied, and placed his hands on his revolvers.

Jag saw Higbie flinch and take a step backwards. Suddenly El Diablo drew those stainless-steel revolvers, and they had to be two of the biggest revolvers Jag had ever laid eyes on. The barrels alone were 12 inches in length, tilted upwards at Higbie's head. Both guns thundered, the twin blasts deafening, sounding for all the world like the roar from a cannon. The bullets bored into Higbie's forehead and burst out the top of his cranium, spraying his hair and brains on the Devils in the foremost row. Higbie stiffened, his mouth moving wordlessly, and pitched onto his face.

None of the other Devils moved.

Jag watched blood and brains seep from the gaping cavity in Higbie's head.

"I won't tolerate fools," El Diablo stated. He swung toward Jag and extended his arms. "What do you think of my handguns?"

"They'd come in real handy if you ever tackle a dinosaur."

El Diablo grinned and hefted the revolvers. "I took these from a rich *bastardo* in California. Have you ever heard of the .454 Casull?"

"No," Jag admitted.

"They were manufactured before the war, *amigo*. The Californian told me these are the world's most powerful handguns," El Diablo boasted.

"Higbie would probably agree."

The bandit leader laughed and slid the revolvers into their holsters. "Now to our next piece of business," he said. "The contest."

"Contest?" Jag didn't like the sound of that.

"Yes," El Diablo responded, then turned as a brown-haired man wearing glasses and a white smock hurried toward him, skirting the Devils on the left. "Yes, Doctor?"

"Carlos will live. I can repair his nose, but his eyes are another matter," the physician said in a deep voice.

"Screw Carlos. What about Pancho?"

"Your dog will be fine. I've stitched the wound in his neck. In a month Pancho will be as good as new."

"Excellent!" El Diablo stated happily, and glanced at the mutation. "Where are my manners? Doctor Vankellen, I'd like you to meet the son of a bitch who tore up Pancho and Jarrod. This deviate is Jaguarundi."

"A genetically altered monstrosity," Doctor Vankellen said. "I've always believed his kind are an abomination and should be exterminated."

"My sentiments exactly," El Diablo agreed, and chuckled. "Leave the extermination to me and go tend to Pancho."

"Do you want me to keep him sedated? He's coming around."

"No sedation, Doctor. I'll need Pancho in a while. I intend to give him the chance to get even with the freak."

"As you wish," Doctor Vankellen said, and departed.

El Diablo glanced at Jag. "I found the good doctor in a bar in Mexicali, stone drunk. He'd just had his medical license taken away for a few minor infractions and leaped at the chance to become wealthy working for me."

"You're a regular humanitarian."

"Why are you so-bitter, *amigo*. You're not dead yet."

"But I'm sure you'll remedy that soon," Jag remarked.

"As soon as Pancho revives," El Diablo said. "Poor Pancho. You hurt him, hurt him bad. He was lucky you didn't tear open an artery or a vein."

"How'd the mutt get here? He didn't ride with us."

"No, I sent Pancho and Carlos on ahead with my best driver as soon as you were knocked out. I was worried Pancho might die."

"But you weren't worried about Carlos?"

El Diablo shrugged. "Why should I be? He's one of my men. He knows the risks."

Jaguarundi scrutinized the Devils for several seconds. "You know, I just noticed that two-thirds of your Devils are from north of the border. Why?"

"It amuses me to use gringos to destroy gringos."

"And they don't care that you hate gringos?"

El Diablo nodded at the Devils. "Those who join me are in it for the gold and silver they receive, for their share-of the loot, or just because they like to kill and rape. They couldn't care less about my personal feelings as long as I treat them fairly. Besides, my Devils are not the social cream of the crop. Any one of them would shoot their own mother if the price was right."

"So they're all as warped as you are."

"They all know that if a person wants something out of this life, the only way to get it is to take it."

Jaguarundi scanned the four rows of hardened faces and scowled. "Yeah. Birds of a feather flock together. Isn't that the saying? You all deserve to die together."

"And who's going to kill us, cat-man? You?"

"The ones who will come after me."

"Do you really believe your friends will survive the ambush I set for them in the village?" El Diablo asked.

"Yep."

"Such confidence is touching. You must know them very well."

"No," Jag said. "But I think I know the man who is leading them, and if I'm right he won't rest until you're six feet under. He's not the kind to leave a job half finished."

"Who is this formidable hombre?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" Jag retorted.

The bandit chief made a few smacking sounds with his tongue. "Such nastiness is uncalled for. I can see that you are eager to begin the contest. What a pity. Just when we were having such a marvelous *conversation*. Oh, well."

"I'm not in much of a mood for a contest right now," Jag said. "Maybe tomorrow we can play a game of chess."

"I'm partial to Russian roulette myself. And the contest I have in mind is one a creature such as you will find more interesting than a dull game of chess."

"What kind of contest is it?"

El Diablo grinned and gazed at the Devils. "*Machetazo*, front and center! Pronto!" he bellowed.

Jag saw a tall figure move from the fourth row of Devils and move briskly forward. The man who stepped into view stood well over six feet in height and was endowed with a barrel of a chest and thick arms. His hair and mustache were black, his eyes an icy green. Several scars marked his cheeks and chin. Oddly, the man wore a machete on each hip. He halted and saluted.

"*Si*, El Diablo?"

The bandit chief gestured at the hybrid. "How would you like to demonstrate to the cat-man why we call you *Machetazo*?"

"It would be my pleasure," the man said, and sneered at Jaguarundi.

"Do you need time to prepare?" El Diablo asked.

"A few minutes to apply the oil."

"Then go. But hurry back."

Machetazo did an about-face and headed for the nearest barracks.

"What was that business about oil?" Jag inquired.

"You will see, *amigo*," El Diablo said, and laughed. He abruptly barked a series of orders in Spanish.

Jag watched the four rows perform a drill they must have practiced many times. In precise military fashion, the first row marched to the left while the second tramped to the right. The two rows went a few dozen yards in a straight line, then executed a right-angle turn so that both columns were marching to the south. Twelve yards farther away both turned again, toward one another, and in no time at all the two rows met and halted. The third row then followed the first, and the last row took off on the heels of the second. When their maneuvers were completed the Devils had formed into a large square with Jag, El Diablo, and the four guards in the middle. The Devils all faced inward and stood at attention.

"I've trained them well, no?" the bandit leader commented.

"They can march without tripping over their own feet. Big deal," Jag cracked.

"Why do you persist in mocking me?"

"I'd rather tear your throat out, but at the moment I'm rather . . . tied up," Jag said.

"You must have a death wish, *amigo*."

"I wish you'd untie my hands."

"They will be untied as soon as *Machetazo* returns. But you would be well advised to restrain yourself. Should you try to attack me, those four men will slay you instantly. You had better concentrate on the contest."

Jag stared at the four Devils, at their weapons. "I guess you have the upper hand, for now."

"For now and forever," El Diablo said. "I did not become the most feared and respected *bandido* in the Baja by being careless."

"Respected? Don't make me laugh. I doubt your own mother respects you."

El Diablo's lips compressed and he took a stride toward the mutation. "You dare! Don't ever mention my mother again."

The enraged intensity of the raider's reaction surprised Jaguarundi. After the beating and the whipping, after the treatment he'd received from El Diablo and the Devils, Jag took particular delight in baiting them. He longed to pay them back for the pain he'd suffered. At that moment he recalled the advice Mercer had given him concerning El Diablo's real name, and he decided to provoke the bandit chief even more. "Why not, Celestino? Is your mother sorry she raised a dirtbag like you?"

Bright scarlet flushed El Diablo's features. He sputtered and seemed about to go berserk. Instead, he brutally lashed out with the back of his right hand.

Jag felt the blow land on his mouth, snapping his head around. He stepped backwards and shook his head, clearing his thoughts. "Is that the best you can do?" he asked scornfully.

"No one speaks that name in my presence!" El Diablo declared. "Celestino Naranjo no longer exists. He died the day Maria Santiago died."

"I wonder how Maria would feel if she could see you now," Jag commented.

"Silencio!"

"What are you going to do if I don't shut up? Kill me?" Jag asked, and laughed.

El Diablo's hands swooped to his revolvers and he started to draw. The barrels were almost out of the holsters when he froze, his eyes gleaming fanatically. "No. This would be too easy. I want you to die a slow, lingering death." He gazed past the hybrid, then smiled. "And here is just the man to do the job."

Jaguarundi pivoted.

Striding toward them was the man called Machetazo. He had removed his fatigue shirt, revealing an awesome physique rippling with layers of well-developed muscles. His chest and arms glistened; they were covered with oil. In each hand he held a gleaming machete.

El Diablo chortled. "Now the contest can begin!"

Chapter 16

"How far do we have to go?" Doc Madsen asked.

"It's five miles from the lake to the base," Blade answered, his eyes on the dirt road ahead as he steered the dune buggy into a curve to the north.

Doc looked at the tranquil lake and spotted ducks swimming near the western shore. The scene reminded him of the beautiful rolling hills in the Dakota Territory and the many hours he'd spent hunting and fishing. Next to gambling and dallying with the ladies, he especially liked to spend hours in the woods or on a pond or lake after game. "Will we get some time off when this is all over?"

Blade glanced at the Cavalryman, who sat on his right, and nodded. "Most likely. Why?"

"I've been on the Force less than a month and already I need a vacation," Doc quipped. "I'd like to get some fishing in."

"I'll gladly go with you," Sparrow offered. He sat on the Cavalryman's right, his right hand on the roll bar, the spear clasped between his legs. "I enjoy fishing."

"You've got a deal, partner."

"What about you three in the back?" Blade interjected. He twisted and stared at Havoc, Raphaela, and Lobo, who sat from right to left across the rear seat.

"I've never been fishing. I wouldn't know what to do," Raphaela said.

"That wasn't what I meant," Blade said. "How are you holding up?"

"It's cramped as hell back here," Lobo grouched. "I can barely move. I feel like one of those little smelly fish I saw in a tin can once."

"We'll be there soon," Blade said.

"Not soon enough," Lobo responded.

Blade swerved the dune buggy to avoid a pothole. He straightened the steering wheel and gazed at a mountain range in the distance. How could he have allowed General Gallagher to talk him into accepting such a dangerous assignment? he asked himself. After what happened to the first Force, he should have known better. If Jaguarundi died, and odds were that the hybrid had already been slain, then he had to accept the responsibility. The full responsibility. He possessed the authority to turn down any mission Gallagher proposed, and he should have learned his lesson from his experiences with the first team. Never-never, never, never take a unit into the field until after the unit has been thoroughly trained and functioned flawlessly together.

"I have a question, sir," Captain Havoc announced.

"Ask it."

"You gave us several reasons for taking the fight to El Diablo. Which one, to you, is the most important? Is it because the Devils *might* have Jag as their prisoner? Is it because you know we can't get back to the border without the dune buggies catching us? Or is it because you simply want to put an end to the butcher once and for all?"

"Which reason is the most important?"

"Yes, sir. To you personally," Havoc stressed.

"Strange question."

"I'd just like to know. If you don't object to answering, sir," Havoc said.

"I have no objections," Blade stated, and glanced quickly at each of them before returning his attention to the road. "All of the factors you mentioned are important considerations. But by far *the* most important reason is that the Devils may have caught Jag." He paused. "Whether he's alive or dead is, in a way, irrelevant."

"You don't care if the kitty is alive or wasted?" Lobo asked.

"Of course I do. I want to find Jag alive. I never want to lose another Force member again. If he's still in one piece, we'll rescue him. If the Devils have killed him, then we'll make sure they pay for the deed," Blade said.

"You bet we will," Doc vowed.

"The point I'm trying to make is this," Blade continued. "You're all part of a team now. I know that most of you have never worked as part of a unit. This is a whole new experience for you. But I expect each and every one of you to adhere to a basic directive where the Force is concerned."

"Which is?" Captain Havoc inquired.

"The Force comes first," Blade replied. "The welfare of your teammates must be the single most important issue to you, what matters the most at any given time. Whether we're on duty or off, whether we're on a mission or at the Force facility, you must put loyalty to the other Force members above all else."

"What about my mom, dude?" Lobo quipped. "I'd say she comes in first."

"This isn't a joking matter," Blade admonished. "I'll use an illustration. As all of you know, I'm from a survivalist compound in northern Minnesota known as the Home. Eighteen of us have been selected as Warriors, and it's our responsibility to protect the Home at all costs. The Warriors are a very tight-knit group. We're always ready to back each other up, to lend a hand when needed, to go the extra mile. Any one of us would gladly walk on burning coals to save the life of another Warrior."

"You want us to walk on coals?" Lobo asked.

"Not literally, but the same principle applies," Blade said. "We must stand by each other through thick and thin. We must never abandon a fellow Force member, never leave them in the lurch, never desert a teammate or leave them behind. A mission isn't over until all of us have been accounted for. And this is the main reason we're going to hit El Diablo's base. We're not leaving this valley until we find Jaguarundi. We've only known him a short while, but Jag is part of the Force. No matter what it takes, we're going to locate him."

A silence greeted his comments.

Blade waited for them to respond. Their next statements would prove crucial in determining their inherent fitness for the Force. An elite tactical unit had no place for overly individualistic, egocentric members.

"Sounds fair to me," Doc Madsen spoke up. "I hitched aboard this outfit for the duration, and I want all of us to last the whole year."

"I would not think of deserting my companions, my brothers and sister in combat," Sparrow Hawk said solemnly.

"Count me in, man," Lobo chimed in. "I know I wouldn't want any of you turkeys to leave me behind somewhere."

"I'll never run out on any of you," Raphaela promised.

Blade looked back at the officer. "And you?"

Havoc averted his gaze and coughed. "I feel the same way you do, sir."

"I trust I've answered your question satisfactorily," Blade remarked.

"Better than I would have hoped, sir."

The Warrior started to speak, then changed his mind. An element about Havoc's attitude bothered him,

but he couldn't isolate the cause. His intuition told him the officer was testing him in some manner. But how? And why? Did Havoc doubt his competence to lead the Force? If so, for what reason? If Havoc didn't believe him to be an able leader, then why had the officer volunteered for the Force? Captain Mike Havoc possessed an impeccable military record and, on paper at least, rated as the best of the new recruits. But Blade felt compelled to view the officer as one big question mark.

"So what's your plan, dude?" Lobo queried. "Are we gonna drive up to their base and ask for El Diablo?"

"We'll play it by ear," Blade said.

"Excuse me for bringin' this up, but aren't you supposed to be the genius at strategy?" Lobo asked. "All you can say is that we'll play it by ear?"

"Since I don't know the layout of the base, I can't plan an attack, now can I?"

"Well, if you want to quibble, I guess not," Lobo conceded.

"What about the villagers? Do you figure they'll throw in with us?" Doc Madsen wondered.

"The villagers have been under El Diablo's heel for decades. Rebelling against him will be difficult for them to do," Blade said. "I don't know if Emiliano will be able to convince them to join our cause."

Lobo snickered. "Convince them? First the turkey has to find them! Those jokers probably headed for the hills when all the shootin' started."

"You can't blame them for wanting to stay out of the line of fire," Blade observed. "They're farmers, not fighters."

"Ain't that the truth."

"Why must you be so critical all the time?" Raphaela asked the Clansman.

"Who's critical, lady? I'm being realistic, is all," Lobo told her.

Blade stared at the mountains ahead, searching for any sign of the bandit headquarters. Emiliano had instructed him to be on the lookout for a cavern situated at the base of a cliff. A thought occurred to him and he tensed. Would El Diablo post guards on the cliff? Or would the raider be too complacent after so many years without any trouble except for the two teams sent in by California? In any event, the dust from the dune buggy could probably be seen for quite some distance.

The Warrior slammed on the brakes.

"What's wrong?" Doc inquired.

"Why are we stoppin'?" Lobo wanted to know. "We're not there already, are we?"

"No," Blade said. "Everybody out. We're going the rest of the way on foot."

"Say *what!*"

"You heard me. Everyone out of the dune buggy," Blade stated. He lifted the M60 from the floor beside his seat. "We have a few miles to cover on the double."

"Do you mean we have to run?" Lobo asked.

"You can crawl if you want," Blade said. "Just so you keep up with the rest of us." He shifted into park and uncrossed the loose wires dangling under the steering column. The engine promptly sputtered and died. "You did a great job of hot-wiring this buggy, Lobo."

"Why'd I go to all the trouble if we have to run halfway there?"

"The exercise will do you good," Blade stated. He climbed from the vehicle and stretched.

The others followed suit, the Clansman grumbling under his breath.

Doc Madsen gazed at the peaks rimming the valley to the north. "We shouldn't have more than a mile or two to go. We'll be there in no time."

"Just a mile or two, huh? I'll hardly work up a sweat," Lobo cracked.

Captain Havoc chuckled. "If you expend half as much energy moving your legs as you do flapping your gums, you'll be the first one to the base."

The Warrior motioned with his right arm. "Let's head on out. Stay alert. And remember the order of the day. No mercy." He turned and led off.

Lobo waited until the rest were already jogging northward before he reluctantly trailed after them. He stared at the mountains and rolled his eyes. "Just my dumb luck! I get hooked up with a fitness freak."

Chapter 17

"The rules are simple," El Diablo said, and laughed. "There are no rules, cat-man. Either you kill Machetazo or he kills you. You fight until you drop. And if you're thinking that you'll try to escape once we untie your hands, think again. The Devils will mow you down if you try. *Comprende, amigo!*"

"Yeah," Jag responded sullenly.

The bandit chief turned to his assassin and intentionally spoke in English so the hybrid would understand. "I don't want him finished right away, Machetazo. Toy with him a while. Cut him a hundred times. Make the freak suffer before he dies."

"As you wish," Machetazo said.

El Diablo looked at one of the four guards standing near Jag. "Garcia, take these three and drive into Jalapa. The men I left there should have radioed in by now. See what happened."

Garcia, a lean man sporting a short, neatly clipped mustache, saluted. "We will report back promptly."

The quartet departed.

"And now to the fun and games," El Diablo stated eagerly. "Whenever you are ready to begin, Machetazo, do so."

"What about my wrists?" Jag asked, extending his bound arms. "This won't be much of a contest if my wrists are tied."

"They won't be," El Diablo assured him. He grinned and walked over to the row of Devils forming the eastern side of the square.

The assassin looked at Jaguarundi. "Would you care to make your peace with your Maker?"

"The Doktor is dead."

"What?"

"Never mind," Jag said.

Machetazo shrugged and held out his right machete. "Align the rope under the blade."

Jaguarundi complied, noting the keen edge on the weapon. Each machete measured two feet in length, not including the black handle. The Devil handled them with supreme ease. "What's with the oil you smeared all over yourself?"

"In case you get close."

Before Jag could elicit more information, Machetazo rested the machete on the loops of rope binding his wrists and sliced back and forth gently, once in, and out.

The ropes parted and fell to the asphalt.

"Damn!" Jag exclaimed. "That thing is sharp."

"There are none sharper," Machetazo bragged, and lowered the machete to his side.

"I suppose you've hacked quite a few to death with those overgrown butter knives?"

"Your insults will not work."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Jag said innocently.

"You hope to anger me with insults," Machetazo said. "You hope I will lose control and become careless." He grinned. "I *never* lose control."

Jag shrugged. "You can't blame a guy for trying."

"And to answer your question, I have disposed of twenty-nine foes with my machetes. You will be number thirty."

Jag rubbed his wrists to restore the circulation and backed away several paces, giving himself room to maneuver. He heard a dune buggy kick over, and a moment later Garcia and company were bypassing the assembled Devils en route to the front gate. He idly watched the guards throw the gate wide, then frowned as the dune buggy roared toward the lake. There went four more Blade would have to contend with.

A glimmer of light came at him from the right.

Jag threw himself backwards, realizing his momentary preoccupation had given his adversary an opening. A stinging sensation lanced his right shoulder, and then he was in the clear, blood pouring from a nasty slash, his fingers hooked into claws and ready to strike.

Machetazo had made no effort to press his advantage. He smiled and raised his left machete, staring at the dripping blood. "You should never take your eyes off your enemy," he admonished.

"You caught me with my guard down. Try me now," Jag hissed.

"I will," Machetazo said, and flew into the hybrid with the speed of a whirlwind. His arms flashed and

whipped the machetes in a dizzying pattern of shimmering silver as he advanced slowly, step after measured step, never overreaching himself, as methodical as a machine.

Backpedaling hastily, Jag evaded the swinging blades, conscious of El Diablo and the Devils watching from the sidelines. They were waiting for him to slip up, for the assassin to deliver another cutting stroke. Because Machetazo was under orders to prolong the contest, the fight might go on indefinitely, increasing their pleasure.

True to his boast, Machetazo exhibited superb self-control. He swung the machetes too fast for the eye to follow, always maintaining a distance of four feet between the hybrid and himself, close enough so he could connect if the hybrid slipped, yet not so close that the mutant could slip under one of his swings and pounce. Slowly, inexorably, he drove his opponent toward the southeast corner of the square.

Jag evaded swipe after swipe, ducking and dodging and twisting and spinning. Once a blade brushed his left ear. Twice he was nicked on the arms. His enhanced reflexes enabled him to avoid a crippling thrust. He racked his brain for a ploy to gain the upper hand.

Something.

Anything.

But as long as he fought on the defensive, as long as Machetazo had the initiative, as long as he conducted the fight according to *their* rules, he couldn't expect to come out on top.

To win, he had to capitalize on *his* strengths, to compel the assassin to fight on *his* terms.

How?

The answer was so obvious, he grinned.

Surprised, Machetazo abruptly stopped swinging and halted. "You are amused?"

"Yeah," Jag replied. "You're a funny guy, Seymour."

"My name isn't Seymour."

"Sure it is. Seymour Stupid. I'll call you S.S. for short."

"In a few minutes you won't have a mouth to use to call anyone names," Machetazo declared arrogantly.

"I'm just getting warmed up, yo-yo," Jag said, and did the unexpected. He whirled and raced directly at the line of Devils, many of whom started to unlimber their weapons, mistakenly thinking they were being charged, but at the last possible second Jag spun again, reversing direction to dash at the startled assassin.

Machetazo raised his right machete, intending to split the hybrid in half.

But Jaguarundi had other ideas. Six feet from the assassin he vaulted into the air, his steely sinews propelling him in a high arc, his momentum carrying him clear over Machetazo.

The assassin swung but missed by a foot and a half.

Jag saw the glistening machete sweep underneath him. He held his arms out from his sides and performed an acrobatic flip, his supple body uncoiling gracefully, and landed lightly two yards from his foe. He wheeled and smirked. "How was that, Seymour?"

"I have never seen the like, freak."

"And you never will again."

"Why is that?"

"Because I'm tired of letting you second-rate psychos walk all over me. It's payback time," Jag stated.

"We shall see, *bastardo*," Machetazo said, and rushed the hybrid.

Jag retreated, covering the ground twice as swiftly as the killer, and when he was almost to the line of Devils he halted and repeated the same tactic: running toward Machetazo and sailing up and over as if endowed with the power of flight. He alighted and turned, amused at the budding frustration on the assassin's face. "What's the matter? Do you prefer your victims weak and helpless?"

Machetazo glared. "No one makes a fool out of me."

"Why should anyone else bother when you do such a great job all by yourself?"

The Devil hissed and sprang forward, both machetes upraised, going for a double slice.

Which was the careless mistake Jag had waited for, the blunder that would cost Machetazo the battle. With a rapid bound Jag ran at the assassin and held his arms out, as if about to execute another spectacular flip, only this time he didn't flip, this time he simply pretended to leap skyward but instead angled his legs down and in, his knees locked and his feet stiff, and struck his brawny foe in the chest, bowling Machetazo over.

Curses erupted from the surrounding Devils.

The blow brought the assassin down hard on the asphalt, on his back, jarred to the bone, and he immediately started to rise again, placing his clenched hands on the ground to shove upward, and in so doing left himself wide open.

Jaguarundi landed to the assassin's left. The instant his feet touched the asphalt he closed in, sinking the sturdy nails on his right hand into Machetazo's neck, tearing through flesh and blood vessels effortlessly, then wrenching his hand out.

Blood, skin, and gore spattered the ground as Machetazo bellowed in fury and surged erect, swinging his left machete wildly.

Jag retreated out of the range of the machete and smiled. "Slowing down in your old age, huh?"

"My neck!" Machetazo snapped, pressing his left forearm against his wound in a futile attempt to staunch the flow of blood. He uttered a string of obscenities in Spanish.

"Ready for round three?" Jag asked.

A familiar voice suddenly intruded from the direction of the row of Devils to the east. "Enough!"

Machetazo pivoted. "No, *patron!* He is mine!"

El Diablo came toward them, his hands on the world's most powerful handguns, scowling. "The contest is over, Machetazo."

"No! *For favor, patron!* I have a little scratch, that's all."

"You are bleeding to death, *estupido*."

"Please!" Machetazo begged. "Don't shame me in front of all the Devils."

El Diablo halted and gazed at his band. He pondered for several seconds, then sighed. "All right, my friend. You have served me well for many years. I grant your request. But don't humiliate me by losing or you will wish you had never been born."

"Thank you, *patron*. I will honor you with my victory," Machetazo declared.

The bandit leader returned to the line of Devils.

"And now, mutant, we will end this farce," Machetazo vowed.

"You've got that right," Jag responded. "You're boring me to tears." So saying, he raced toward the north side of the square, moving at his maximum speed, his body almost a blur. The Devils standing in the north row stood firm, expecting him to repeat his earlier strategem of turning and attacking Machetazo. Only this time he didn't. This time Jag had another idea in mind. This time he intended to lose himself in the vast cavern until he could devise a means of escaping.

The Devils in the northern row awoke to the ploy too late to stop him.

Jag grinned and winked and launched his lithe body aloft, flying over their heads and coming down before even one of the Devils had so much as turned. He took off, racing toward the parked dune buggies, hoping the Devils would be reluctant to fire for fear of damaging their vehicles.

"After the son of a bitch!" El Diablo thundered. "I'll have your hides if the cat-man gets away!"

Jag weaved from side to side just in case, and the precaution saved his life. One of the Devils squeezed off a short burst, the bullets thwacking into the asphalt within inches of his legs.

El Diablo came to his rescue. "Don't fire, you idiots! You'll hit our buggies. Surround him. He can't go anywhere. The fool is trapped in here."

Hoping the bandit chief was mistaken, Jag bounded ever nearer to the row of vehicles. He glanced back. The Devils were pounding in pursuit, but they were 30 feet away.

"Faster! Faster!" El Diablo commanded.

Jag gritted his teeth and channeled all of his energy into rivaling the wind with his seemingly winged feet, flying over the ground as if he was a literal embodiment of greased lightning. He came to the dune buggies and darted past the first three, then ducked between the next pair and hunched down, pausing for a second to look at the oncoming Devils, wondering how he could possibly evade so many. True, the cavern was enormous, but there were dozens of bandits and they probably knew every nook and cranny.

"Get him!" El Diablo urged on the Devils.

Jag growled and resolved to resist with his dying breath, if necessary. His fiercely independent nature wouldn't let him submit without a fight. His pursuers were now 20 feet off, shouting and yelling as they bore down on the buggies. He started to turn, about to run deeper into the cavern, when the first explosion rocked the base.

Chapter 18

"That's Jag!" Raphaela whispered in alarm.

"No foolin'," Lobo responded. "I thought it was an alley cat."

"Quiet," Blade ordered, his eyes on the clash between Jaguarundi and a Devil armed with two machetes: He counted the four rows of bandits enclosing the combatants and discovered there were 53. Which meant, according to his calculations, that most of the Devils were at the base. Perfect. He didn't want a large body of reinforcements to arrive after the battle was joined.

"Blade," Sparrow said softly.

The Warrior glanced to his right. The Flathead, Doc, and Havoc were crouched in the nearby undergrowth. To his left were Lobo and Raphaela. They were 20 yards from a chain-link fence and about the same distance to the west of an iron gate. A pair of Devils stood outside the gate, their attention on the fight. "What?" he responded.

"Look real closely at the bottom of that fence, about forty feet from the gate on both sides," Sparrow said.

Blade did as the Flathead suggested, and for several seconds he saw nothing unusual. Then he detected movement on the east side, a head moving from right to left for a few feet. The head faced inward. Whoever it was, the man must be watching the match between Jag and the muscular Devil.

"Trenches, you think?" Doc speculated.

Frowning, Blade looked at the same point on the western section of fence and spied two heads, both turned toward the fight.

"My guess would be machine-gun emplacements," Captain Havoc commented. "From where they're situated, they have a perfect field of fire."

Blade nodded slowly. "We'll have to take them out first."

"What about the dune buggy that passed us a ways back?" Doc inquired. "Do you think it will come back?"

"With the way our luck has been runnin', it'll come back with a zillion more Devils," Lobo whispered. "We were just lucky we saw the sucker comin' and hid in the woods."

"They'll find the dune buggy we abandoned," Raphaela mentioned. "What if they radio in to the base?"

"We don't have much time," Havoc said.

"I know," Blade agreed, aware that every one of them was regarding him intently, waiting for him to decide on a plan of attack. He motioned for them to converge in a huddle. They obeyed quickly and quietly. "All right," he began. "We have to hit them fast and hit them hard. Havoc, take Doc and Sparrow with you. Use grenades and take out the machine-gun emplacement on the east side of the fence. I'll take care of the other one. When it goes, you do yours."

"What about those two guards at the gate?" Captain Havoc asked.

"I'm getting to that. Sparrow will dispose of them at the same time we hit the machine guns. Once those emplacements are out of commission, we go through the gate. Kill as many Devils as you can. Do as much damage as possible. Above all, remember that we don't leave without Jag."

Lobo looked toward the compound. "We'd best boogie. The dude with the carving knives is givin' Jag a hard time."

Blade looked at each of them. "Okay. Let's do it."

Captain Havoc, Doc Madsen, and Sparrow headed to the east, crawling on their elbows and knees, skirting the bushes and trees in their path.

"I would have liked to have gone with Havoc," Raphaela remarked wistfully.

"He doesn't need you to hold his hand," Lobo said.

Blade gazed at the fence. The gate guards and the machine gunners were still preoccupied with the duel. He saw Jag vault clear over the Devil swinging the machetes and marveled at the hybrid's prowess. If only Jag could keep the fight going for a few more minutes! "Follow me," he directed, and slid forward under cover toward the west gun emplacement.

A black-tailed jackrabbit darted from a patch of weeds ten feet to the left and leaped off to the northwest, the brush crackling and rustling with its passage.

The Warrior glanced at the guards and the machine gunners, but not one of them appeared to have heard. He relaxed slightly and advanced to within 15 yards of the western emplacement, then halted. Havoc and the others would require at least two minutes to get into position, maybe longer considering they had to cross the dirt road to enter the forest on the east side. His gaze shifted to the match.

Jag and the Devil were conversing. Suddenly the hybrid raced at his foe and performed another graceful high jump, sailing up and over the Devil.

Blade grinned. The jackrabbit he'd seen could take jumping lessons from Jaguarundi. He slid his left hand down and reached into his pocket for a grenade. The metal felt cool on his palm.

There was a flurry of activity in the compound. Jag delivered a flying kick to the Devil, knocking the man down, then sank his nails in the man's neck.

The Warrior held the hand grenade in front of his face and stared at the circular finger hole at the end of the metal pin. He deposited the M60 flat on the ground and transferred the pineapple to his right hand.

All set.

A lot of angry shouting came from the other side of the chain-link fence.

Blade gazed at the Devils. A man dressed all in black, wearing a revolver on each hip, exchanged words with the machete-user. Could the guy in black be El Diablo? All of the other bandits wore camouflage fatigues, and it made sense that the leader might wear distinctive apparel.

Jag unexpectedly dashed to the north.

What was he doing now?

The Warrior tensed when he intuitively perceived that the hybrid wasn't going to stop, and he almost laughed aloud when Jag flew over the row of Devils and headed for the dune buggies. He rose to his knees, hefting the grenade, and watched the Devils give chase. No one, absolutely no one, was paying the slightest attention to the area outside the fence. He couldn't have asked for a better opportunity.

Now!

Blade pulled the pin, then swept his arm in an overhand arc, flinging the hand grenade outward and upward. The sun glinted off its metallic surface as the grenade sailed over the chain-link fence and descended into the machine-gun emplacement.

Someone vented a gruff oath.

The Warrior flattened and placed his arms protectively over his head, and the next second the grenade detonated with a thunderous whomp, showering dirt and machine-gun parts and body fragments in all directions. Instantly Blade pushed erect, the M60 leveled, and sprinted toward the iron gate. He saw Sparrow Hawk pop up within a dozen feet of the guards and blast both into eternity with his M-16.

A second explosion tore apart the machine-gun emplacement to the east.

"Party time, dude!" Lobo yelled excitedly.

The idiot! Blade thought, and then there was no time for thinking because he came to the gate, stepped over the pair of perforated guards, and grabbed the bar securing the barrier. He wrenched the bar aside, hurled the gate open, and stood framed in the entrance.

Almost in unison, the Devils in pursuit of Jaguarundi had stopped and whirled at the sound of the detonations. They gaped at the smoke and dust-shrouded fence in consternation, belatedly comprehending that their base was being attacked.

El Diablo's bawling voice spurred the bandits to action. "To the fence, you assholes! The Californians are here! Move!"

Blade advanced several strides into the compound. Lobo, Raphaela, and Sparrow came in behind him and fanned out to the left. Moments later Havoc and Doc entered and moved to the right. "Find cover," Blade instructed them. "I'll draw their fire."

The Devils regained their composure and surged in the direction of the iron gate.

With a lopsided grin creasing his lips, Blade walked toward them through the swirling dust, his finger caressing the trigger, eager to cut loose. And cut loose he did when he spotted the foremost Devils jogging straight at Jiim. The machine gun boomed and bucked, and he let his massive arms absorb the recoil as he whipped the barrel from right to left. Screams of despair and agony arose from the bandits as the heavy slugs tore through their heads, torsos, and limbs.

Eight, nine, ten dropped with the initial burst.

And still the Devils charged, their confidence stemming from their superior numbers. They fired as they ran, concentrating on the giant figure near the gate.

Blade flinched when a searing pain lanced his right shoulder. He grit his teeth and ignored the torment, continuing to sweep the M60 from side to side, mowing more foes down.

Captain Havoc suddenly materialized on the right, his right hand hurling a grenade into the midst of the Devils.

A flash of brilliant red and orange attended the concussion that ripped asunder five of the onrushing bandits. An acrid aroma filled the air. Most of the remaining Devils scattered, seeking shelter. A few knelt and fired from where they were.

Another grenade went off. Screeching Devils were sent flying. A severed arm flopped to the asphalt, the

fingers reflexively fluttering.

Blade hunched over and angled to the right, firing from the hip, felling another Devil. He saw several gray canisters tumble end over end out of the dust and land on the ground near the spot where he had been standing, and he dove and came down prone, his chin tucked to his chest, his left arm over his face, expecting multiple deafening blasts. Instead, he heard a loud hissing sound and looked at the canisters.

Smoke bombs!

Some of the Devils has tossed smoke bombs!

A curtain of enshrouding smoke spewed from each of the three canisters and spread out rapidly, blanketing the immediate vicinity. Other smoke bombs descended out of the murky cloud on all sides.

Blade's brow knit in perplexity. What were the Devils trying to accomplish? Gunfire crackled all around him, indicating the bandits were still resisting mightily. By throwing up a screen of smoke, the Devils only made it harder on themselves to spot the Force members. The Force would also have a hard time of it, but the smoke would work to their advantage because they were outnumbered.

So using the smoke was stupid.

Unless . . .

Unless someone planned to use the smoke screen to effect an escape.

But who?

El Diablo?

The Warrior rose and ran into the smoke, swinging the M60 back and forth. A pair of Devils, both women, appeared directly ahead and he squeezed the trigger. The rounds bored into their midriffs and hurled them to the ground, the one on the right convulsing violently. Blade paused to get his bearings, worried about the possibility of a stray bullet accidentally striking one of his own unit. Maybe there was a method to the Devils' blunder after all. If the Force couldn't

A heavy body rammed into Blade from the rear, slamming into the small of his back and driving him forward onto his knees. He twisted, striving to bring the M60 to bear, but a pair of husky hands gripped the barrel and yanked the machine gun free before he could tighten his hold. He shoved to his feet and spun.

A couple of yards away stood the Devil Jaguarundi had fought, a man endowed with a tremendous build. Blood trickled from a ragged wound in his neck. His green eyes seemed to mock the Warrior, and his hands hung next to his machete handles.

Blade went to draw the Officers Model 45 in his shoulder holster, then hesitated when the Devil made no hostile moves.

The Devil grinned and gestured at the Warrior's waist, at the Bowies. "Man to man, eh, *hombrel* Just you and Machetazo."

The Devil was offering him a fair fight! For a second Blade wavered, tempted to take the man up on his offer but keenly aware that his companions might need his assistance, might be in dire need of the firepower he could supply with the M60, and in that second of indecision he gave the Devil the opening to close in.

Machetazo's right machete streaked out of its sheath and whisked at the Warrior, only instead of going for a death stroke, the Devil aimed his blow at the giant's right hand, forcing the Warrior to lower the hand or lose it at the wrist.

Blade backpedaled and drew the Bowies as Machetazo quickly slid the left machete free and took the offensive. Blade countered a flurry of savage swipes, the Bowies and the machetes clanging when they connected. He blocked a side slash from the left, then parried an overhand thrust at his head. The Devil displayed a masterly skill, almost the equal of the Family's renowned martial artist and self-professed "perfected swordsman," Rikki-Tikki-Tavi.

Almost, but not quite.

The Bowies and machetes connected with increasing frequency as the tempo of the combat increased. The steel weapons clashed and peeled without breaking or chipping in testimony to the superb craftsmanship exhibited in their construction.

The greater lengths of the machetes compelled Blade to slowly retreat while seeking a means of dispatching his adversary. But every swing of his was checked, every intricate pattern designed to penetrate the Devil's guard thwarted.

Machetazo suddenly pressed his onslaught with renewed vigor.

Blade took a stride backwards, foiling a double underhand thrust at his abdomen, deflecting the machetes outward and for a heartbeat leaving his opponent's stomach unprotected. He stepped swiftly in between the Devil's arms, drove his arms down and in, and buried his Bowies to the hilts in Machetazo's stomach.

For several seconds the tableau froze, suspended in time, the two of them silhouetted against a backdrop of billowing smoke.

Blade felt the Devil sag as crimson spittle flecked Machetazo's mouth. He pulled the Bowies out and moved away, watching blood and abdominal fluids seep from the knife holes.

Incredibly, Machetazo grinned and shook his head. "You are quite good, *hombre*," he said weakly, and tottered to the right. His legs gave out, bringing him to his knees, and he released the machetes. "Finish me. *For favor.*"

His features hardening, Blade wiped the Bowies on his pants, replaced them in their scabbards, and scanned the asphalt for the M60. The smoke limited his visual field to two and a half yards at best, and he had to take several paces to the right before he found the machine gun, which he promptly scooped up.

Machetazo gasped and swayed. "Hurry. Please."

Blade walked over to the bandit, stuck the barrel of the M60 in the Devil's left ear, and fired.

Chapter 19

Jag wanted to shout for joy when he saw the charging Devils halt and whirl. The two explosions along the fence had drawn the attention of the bandits away from him. He edged to the front of the closest dune buggy, exhilarated by his deliverance. All he had to do was circle around the Devils and rejoin his teammates, and with that goal in mind he padded into the open, heading for the buildings in the center of the cavern. He hoped none of the bandits would notice him. A glance at the iron gate showed him the Force members were entering the base. More explosions occurred.

He felt like cheering.

Instead he ran to the corner of the second barracks and ducked from sight, then turned and peered out. The Force and the Devils were firing furiously, creating a strident din. The noise rendered his usually acute ears ineffective in detecting soft sounds.

Such as the patter of canine feet on asphalt.

Jag heard the throaty growl and tried to rotate, but the white dog sprang from behind him and fastened its razor teeth on his right shoulder, tearing the fur and the skin and hauling Jag onto the ground.

Pancho snarled and leaped clear.

Jag rolled to the right, endeavoring to put space between the mongrel and himself. He managed to get to his knees, and the white dog came straight at his chest and tried to bite his face off. Jag threw his arms up and caught hold of the dog's neck, preventing those slavering jaws from ripping into him.

Frustrated, Pancho went beserk, thrashing and kicking and snapping in a frenzy.

With the dog's fetid breath assailing his nostrils, Jag felt his own rage mounting. He lanced his nails under the folds of Pancho's fleshy neck and squeezed. If he could only sink his teeth in as well! But Pancho fought with a desperation born of animal cunning. The dog had been hurt once before and wasn't about to repeat the mistake by giving Jag a shot at its neck. He lunged to the left, carrying the entire canine to the asphalt, and tried to slide his body on top of Pancho's.

The white dog writhed from under the hybrid's legs and strained to stand, its sole good eye balefully fixed on its enemy.

Its sole good eye?

And suddenly Jag knew how he could win, at least how he *might* win if his left hand was quicker than Pancho's jaws, and he abruptly let go of the dog's neck and speared his hand at the dog's good eye.

Pancho yelped when the sharp tips of the hybrid's nails punctured the remaining eyeball.

Jag heaved, flinging the canine to the asphalt, and jumped erect, prepared to meet another rush. But the white dog was lying down, blood pouring from the ravaged eye, and frantically wiping at the useless orb. Jag moved closer, intending to put the dog out of its misery.

"You rotten son of a bitch!"

The exclamation caused Jag to spin to the south, knowing who he would see.

El Diablo, standing eight feet away and holding both revolvers. Three Devils flanked him. Beyond them, blossoming and swelling rapidly, billowed a cloaking veil of smoke. Gunshots cracked within the hazy shroud.

"At least I'll have the satisfaction of killing you before I leave, freak," the bandit chief snapped.

"You're leaving?" Jag responded in surprise. "The great El Diablo is tucking his tail between his legs and running?"

"Those who fight and run away live to fight another day."

Jag tensed his legs, calculating the odds of reaching the raider before he fired. "I never would have

expected this," he said, stalling, buying precious seconds in which to formulate a plan. "You're a murdering, psychopathic pig, but I never took you for a coward."

El Diablo chuckled. "Thank you for the compliment. As I have told you several times, I am not a man who takes unnecessary risks. I did not think your compadres would get this far, but now that they have I must proceed accordingly. I expect they have powerful explosives with them, and if just one eludes my Devils this cavern will be blown sky high. So a few of my followers and I will drive away before the end comes, then wait down the road to ambush your friends if and when they leave."

"You don't seem to have a lot of confidence in your Devils when the chips are down. I thought you said they were good."

"They are, within their limitations. But my loyal followers are *bandidos*, low-life gangsters and criminals of every kind I took out of the gutter and gave a chance to become rich. I've trained them well. Unfortunately, they're not invincible," El Diablo said, and smiled. "So where would you like to be shot? In the head, which would be the quickest way to die? Or should I shoot you in the belly and make you suffer?"

"Why don't you holster those guns and take me on hand-to-hand?" Jag proposed.

"You must be kidding. My fists against your nails? What chance would I have?"

Jag smirked and took a step forward. "None."

El Diablo cocked the Casulls. "I have never wanted to kill anyone as much as I do you."

Jag braced for the shots. He saw four Devils racing toward the bandit leader.

"El Diablo!"

"What is it?" the raider replied, turning his head to look over his right shoulder.

"We have used the last of the smoke canisters," the foremost Devil said. "Anything else, *patron!*"

"Find the gringos and kill them."

"*Si, patron.*"

The quartet wheeled and sprinted toward the smoke.

"And now for the grand finale, eh?" El Diablo stated scornfully, and took a bead on the hybrid's chest.

A fleeting millisecond of dread seized Jaguarundi, a dread he instantaneously suppressed, his mind racing lightning fast as he stared down those twin barrels. He realized he couldn't get to El Diablo before the bastard squeezed the triggers, but he might be able to avoid being killed if he could hurl himself to the right just as Naranjo fired. "Adios, freak," El Diablo said, and grinned. Jag girded himself, his eyes riveted to the bandit chiefs trigger fingers, waiting for the first hint of movement. But the fingers didn't begin to apply pressure, and he wondered what El Diablo was waiting for, whether the raider was toying with him. The reason for the momentary reprieve became clear the next second when the white dog walked unsteadily past him and halted, whining pitifully, its right eye a grisly pool of blood.

El Diablo paused, his eyes narrowing, and the Casull barrels dipped a few inches. "Pancho?"

Pancho swung toward the sound of his master and whimpered.

"Pancho!" El Diablo cried. He took a stride toward his dog.

Jag stared in fascination at the genuine concern etched on Naranjo's features. He curled his fingers and prepared to leap, to take advantage of the distraction, when an M-16 chattered from somewhere to his rear and to the left.

The rounds thudded into El Diablo and the three Devils, the impact causing all four to stumble backwards and collapse, their chests dotted with crimson splotches. Jag blinked a few times in disbelief, then pivoted. "Are you all right?" Captain Havoc asked, running up, his M-16 held loosely in his right hand.

"Fine," Jag blurted. "Where did you come from?"

"I just set charges on two tanker trucks along the east wall. We have three minutes to locate the others and get the hell out of here before this place goes up," Havoc disclosed.

They started to head for the smoke cloud, but a strained, harsh command brought them up short. "Don't move!"

El Diablo was on his knees, the revolvers trained on Jag, red rivulets trickling from the five bullet holes high on his chest.

"I'll still take you with me, eh?" he said, and fired.

Jaguarundi had already galvanized into action, diving to the right, only not swiftly enough to beat the Casulls. An invisible hand hammered into his left thigh as exquisite pain speared through his body, and he found himself hurtling rearward to sprawl onto the asphalt on his right side. He'd been shot! Stunned, he twisted, anticipating that El Diablo would finish the job.

Captain Havoc never gave the bandit the chance. He took two strides, dropped the M-16, and launched himself into a forward roll, his wide shoulders and backpack serving as the fulcrum on which his body flipped. With impeccable execution he arched his legs down and in, his right combat boot slamming into El Diablo's face and knocking the man to the ground, dazed. Havoc completed the roll and came up on his knees next to his foe.

El Diablo, on his back with his legs bent under him, struggled to rise.

Havoc's right arm shot out in an open palm thrust. The base of his palm caught his foe on the chin and slammed El Diablo's head to the asphalt, bending the bandit's neck, exposing the throat. Havoc swept his right hand to his combat boot and drew his survival knife, then reversed direction and lanced the tip of the serrated blade into El Diablo's neck just below the lower jaw, burying the knife all the way.

Celestino Naranjo gurgled and gazed, wide-eyed, at the cavern roof. A gusher of blood spurted from his mouth and his body quivered. He tried to lift his head but couldn't. "Maria!" he cried, and died.

Captain Havoc reclaimed his M-16 and moved to the hybrid's side. "Can you walk?"

"I don't know," Jag admitted, looking down at the wound. Only one of the shots had hit him, the bullet boring into the rounded curve of his left hip and bursting out the other side. The pain assaulted his senses.

"I'll help you," Havoc offered. He slipped his left arm under his companion's right armpit and hauled Jag to his feet. "We've got to haul butt."

"I wish you wouldn't use that word."

The officer laughed, then shifted to the south at the sound of drumming footsteps.

Sparrow Hawk, Raphaela, and Lobo were hastening toward them.

"What's wrong with Jag?" Raphaela shouted.

"He took a hit," Havoc responded.

"Is it serious?" Sparrow asked.

"He'll want to go to the bathroom standing up for a while."

Jag glanced at the cloud of smoke, startled to perceive that the firing had ceased. "Did you bag all of the Devils?"

"A lot of 'em," Lobo answered. "The Devils are a bunch of wimps. They're not even in our class."

"Tell that to *them*," Jag said urgently, and nodded at the cloud.

Nine Devils were emerging from the grayish-white blanket, and at the sight of the Force members they voiced a hearty yell and charged.

Captain Havoc glanced to the right and the left. The dune buggies and the barracks were too far off. They would have to make their stand in the open. "Get down!" he yelled, and pulled Jag to the asphalt as the others flattened.

A lanky figure attired in a black wide-brimmed hat and frock coat came out of the smoke to the east of the Devils. Apparently the M-I6 in his left hand had gone empty. His right hand snaked to the Smith and Wesson Model 586 Distinguished Combat Magnum on his hip, and the blur of his arm was punctuated by three swift retorts. At each, shot a Devil fell.

The six bandits still on their feet spun and rushed the Cavalryman, squeezing off rounds as they did, but they only managed to fire a few before yet another figure appeared.

A strapping giant materialized alongside the gunman, and in his hands he held one of the most reliable machine guns ever manufactured. The M60 blasted, spitting flame and lead, a rain of death that burned dozens of holes through the outgunned Devils. They danced and jerked and screamed, geysers of gore spraying from their torsos, and perished en masse. When all six were lying still on the ground the giant finally let up.

"Damn! That dude is awesome," Lobo commented in the silence that ensued. Havoc glanced at his watch and stiffened. "Everyone out of the cavern! We have a minute and a half!" He lifted Jag and together they hastened toward the iron gate. The smoke was beginning to dissipate and a vague outline of the chain-link fence was visible on the southern perimeter.

"A minute and a half until what?" Lobo inquired as he rose.

"Until the plastic explosives on the tanker trucks go off," Havoc informed him.

"Say what?" Lobo blurted out, and raced for the entrance.

Blade and Doc Madsen jogged to meet their associates.

"What happened to Jag?" the Warrior asked.

"Save it," Havoc said. "We've got to get out of here."

"You've set charges?" Blade asked, noticing the officer's urgent attitude.

Havoc nodded. "A minute and twenty seconds until detonation."

"Then let's get in gear," Blade said. He allowed the M60 to dangle by its leather strap from his right shoulder, stepped in close, and took the hybrid from the officer, hoisting Jag into his huge arms before a protest could be lodged.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Jag exclaimed indignantly.

"What does it look like I'm doing?" Blade retorted. He sped to the south.

"I can manage, thank you," Jag asserted.

"Maybe you can, maybe you can't. We don't have time to find out."

"This ain't fair," Lobo complained, keeping pace on the giant's right.

"What isn't?" Blade responded. He glanced around to insure all of them were hard on his heels.

"You wouldn't carry me piggyback, but you'll carry him."

"You weigh more."

"Are you callin' me fat?"

"No."

"Good."

"Just chunky."

They poured on the speed, racing through the diminishing acrid blanket, bypassing dozens of corpses in their path.

Jag looked back only once. He saw the white dog standing next to his slain master, licking El Diablo's face, and he felt a twinge of regret that he hadn't finished the dog off.

"Devils!" Lobo shouted.

Jag swung forward and spied nine or ten Devils fleeing down the dirt road. Either they had witnessed El Diablo's death, or had overheard Havoc's comments about the explosives, or were simply preserving their own lives. In any event, he was glad to see them go. Oddly, for the first time in many years, he didn't feel in the mood for more killing.

The Force reached the open gate and hastened away from the sprawling compound.

Captain Havoc began a countdown. "Seven-six-five-four-three-hit the dirt!-one!"

Each one of them was diving for the ground when the initial blasts transpired, the detonation of the tanker trucks. A fireball of enormous proportions engulfed the transport trucks and the buildings, and seconds later the explosives and weapons arsenal stored in the two-story structure went off with an earth-jarring blast. The fireball grew, expanding outward, and a hurricane-force wind toppled the iron gate and the chain-link fence. More explosions followed, lesser blasts, adding to the smoke and fumes and heat. The

roof of the cavern cracked, then split wide and crashed down on the legacy left by a man whose consuming hatred had finally consumed him.

At that moment, as the cavern rumbled and thundered and crumpled, one of the Force members had an observation to make on the entire affair.

"Far out, dudes! I guess we taught those turkeys."

Epilogue

How are you feeling?" Blade asked.

Jaguarundi looked up from the nature magazine he had been reading and smiled. "I can't wait to get out of the sack."

"The doctor says you're to stay in that bed for another two weeks."

"Cut me some slack. I need to get up and move around."

"You do, and you'll open the wound," Blade said, and halted next to the bunk, one of three aligned along the north wall of the Force barracks. "If you get out, I'll strap you back in."

Jag sighed and placed his left hand behind his head. "Of all the places to be shot. I'll never hear the end of it."

"Has Lobo been getting on your case?"

"The man has a pitiful sense of humor. The thing is, he really believes he's brilliant."

Blade grinned. "Lobo does add a little spice to the new unit."

"Where are the others anyway?"

"Havoc is giving them karate lessons. When I left them, he had just kicked Lobo for a loop."

"Damn. And I'm stuck in bed."

"Has General Gallagher been in to see you yet?" Blade inquired.

"Yeah. Once. He offered his sympathy, but I got the impression he wasn't very sincere."

"The general has been behaving strangely ever since we returned," Blade said. "So has Havoc, come to think of it. He's moodier than his brother."

"Life's too short to spend it being moody," Jag stated.

"Can I quote you?" Blade quipped.

"I mean it. My personal philosophy is to make the most of every minute, to enjoy life to the fullest, to take what comes and make the best of it," Jag declared. "You can't sweat the small stuff."

Blade nodded and beamed. "You must be right. I heard Lobo say the same thing just the other day."

"Thanks heaps."