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PIPELINE STRIKE

David Robbins

Dedicated to...

Judy & Joshua & Shane.

To the memory of Roy Rockwood, who set the tempo.

To the memory of Otis Adelbert Kline, who set the style.

And to the memory of H.G. Wells, who showed us that reality and speculation can be fused superbly.

PROLOGUE

The frigid blasts of wind howled at them from out of the frozen north, chilling both men to the bone despite their thermal underwear, their green fatigues, and their insulated green parkas.

"Damn, it's cold!" exclaimed the lanky lieutenant, his head buried in his parka hood, his hands hidden in bulky gloves, as he stomped his boots to maintain his circulation.

"What did you expect, Tyler?" responded the second man, who was similarly attired except for a green scarf he had wrapped around the lower portion of his face to protect his lips from the numbing weather. He held his binoculars pressed to his eyes. Slung over his left shoulder was an

M-16.

"I knew this mission would be a ball-buster, Captain," Lieutenant Tyler said, "but I never expected it to be this bad." He slid his right hand along the leather strap to the M-16 slung over his right shoulder, his movement slightly restricted by his clothing.

"To tell the truth," admitted the captain, "neither did I."

"I wish I was back in L.A.," Lieutenant Tyler commented.

"Keep your mind on our assignment," the captain advised.

"If we make any mistakes now, we're dead."

"Yes, sir," Tyler replied dutifully.

They were standing on the southernmost of a pair of ridges bordering a narrow valley. Captain Bowen scanned the binoculars from right to left. "I hope we have the correct coordinates."

Lieutenant Tyler surveyed the snow-covered landscape below the ridge they were on, noting the sea of white with a frown. "Are you as sick of snow as I am?"

"I sort of like it."

Lieutenant Tyler snorted. "Are you serious, Captain Bowen?"

"Yeah," Bowen answered. "We never saw snow in Los Angeles. In the old days, before the war, L.A. received snow every now and then. But none since."

"World War Three screwed up the climate everywhere," Tyler remarked.

"World War Three screwed up the entire planet," Captain Bowen declared. "The climate changed. Governments collapsed. Massive amounts of radiation were unleashed. Chemical weapons polluted the environment for centuries to come." He paused. "And worst of all, the mutants multiplied like rabbits."

Tyler glanced over his shoulder at the plain of snow to their rear, at the

line of tracks they had made. "Do you think there are any here?"

"Mutants?"

"It's probably too cold for them here, right?"

"Wrong," Captain Bowen said. "There are mutants everywhere. Even in Alaska."

Lieutenant Tyler stamped his feet again to disguise his nervousness. "What *kind* of mutants?" he asked softly.

Captain Bowen shrugged. "Who knows? No one can predict how the toxins will affect embryonic growth."

"Have you ever wished you'd been born before the war?" Tyler inquired.

"No, not really," Captain Bowen responded, his binoculars fixed on the valley. "Have you?"

"At least once a day," Tyler disclosed.

"Why?"

"Are you kidding me? Haven't you heard about the life those people led? They had it easy. There weren't any mutants around back then. The criminal element was held in check by the law-enforcement authorities. A person could travel anywhere they wanted without having to be on the lookout for scavengers and raiders. If they were hungry, they went to the store or to a restaurant—"

"We have stores and restaurants in California," Captain Bowen said, interrupting.

"But they're not the same," Tyler said. "Our stores offer the necessities and very few luxuries, and even the necessities are rationed whenever there's a shortage. And our restaurants aren't as ritzy as the restaurants before the war. I was told there were some that had golden arches."

"Golden arches?"

"Yep. Had something to do with their architecture. Imagine that! Golden arches!"

"I find it hard to believe," Captain Bowen commented.

"I'm only relaying the information I was told," Lieutenant Tyler mentioned.

"Captain Bowen swiveled the binoculars to the right. "Well, I don't know if I would have liked living then. They may have enjoyed an easier lifestyle, but easier isn't always better."

"It is in my book, sir."

"You're like most people I know," Bowen said. "You believe the prewar society was some sort of Utopia. It wasn't. They had their problems too."

"Name one, sir?"

"They were a society of addicts."

"How do you mean?"

Captain Bowen lowered the binoculars and glanced at Tyler. "Study the history books sometime, and you'll see I'm right. The people suffered from countless addictions. Drugs, alcohol, caffeine, nicotine, television, and sex."

"They were addicted to sex?" Tyler asked, and laughed.

"Some were," Captain Bowen replied.

"How can someone be addicted to sex?"

"When all you think about is sex, when all you read about is sex, when every time you look at a member of the opposite gender you want to go to bed with them, then you're addicted to sex," Bowen stated.

Lieutenant Tyler smirked. "Then I must be a first-class sex fiend."

"I wouldn't doubt it," Captain Bowen said with a grin.

"Are you serious?" Tyler queried.

"Very."

"Where'd you hear about all of this?"

"From my wife. She became interested in taking night courses at the university. I guess she got tired of sitting at home, what with all our kids in their teens and seldom there. One of the classes she took was called Prewar Culture."

"Maybe everything they taught her is true," Lieutenant Tyler remarked. "Even if it is, so what? If I had a choice to make between being a sex addict and being attacked by mutants, I'd rather be the sex addict."

Captain Bowen smiled and shook his head. "You're hopeless."

Tyler gazed at the valley, then over his right shoulder at the heavy backpack containing his field rations and the radio. "How much longer do we have to look? I'm freezing my butt off."

"If we haven't spotted the Pump Station within two hours, we'll return to the rendezvous site and call for a pickup."

"Now you're talking," Tyler said happily. "I just hope they're monitoring our frequency."

"General Gallagher won't let us down," Captain Bowen said. He started to the west along the rim of the ridge. "Our main concern is the possibility our coordinates might be wrong."

"Figures," Tyler muttered as he trudged after his superior officer.

"We can't blame the general," Bowen commented. "The map we're using was printed over one hundred and five years ago, just prior to the war. The same buildings might not be standing. Maybe Holtmeyer has constructed his own facility. Who knows?"

"What do you know about the guy?"

"Only what was in the briefing papers," Bowen said. "He claims his name is Eric Holtmeyer. We know nothing concerning his place of origin, his background. We don't even know his age."

"Then why is the Federation Council taking him seriously?"

"Can they afford to treat him as a quack, considering the offer he's

made?" Bowen asked.

"*If the* guy is for real," Tyler remarked. "He could be trying to pull a scam."

"Of this magnitude?" Captain Bowen said.

"The bigger, the better."

"He'd have to be crazy to try a stunt like that," Captain Bowen observed. "He knows the entire Federation will retaliate if he tries a fast one."

Lieutenant Tyler squinted at a black speck on the western horizon, a dark dot situated in the center of the valley floor. "Maybe this Holtmeyer has a getaway all planned. Maybe he'll take off for parts unknown."

"The Federation will find him."

"What if he heads overseas? No one has traveled abroad since the war. We have no idea what's on the other side of the Pacific. The territories over there could be just like our Outlands, overrun with mutants and all types of scuzz-buckets."

"The Federation will find him if he attempts to swindle us," Captain Bowen reiterated. "They'll probably send the Force after him."

Lieutenant Tyler smiled. "Blade and company will waste his sorry ass but good."

"Let's hope Holtmeyer is telling the truth," Bowen said. "The Federation could use the oil."

"I can understand the reason California would need the fuel," Tyler commented. "California has thousands of cars and trucks and aircraft still in use. But why would the other Federation factions want in on the deal?"

"For the same reason California does," Captain Bowen answered. "California has placed a high priority on maintaining its vehicles and its copters, planes, and jets. The Civilized Zone to the east also has a large number of vehicles."

Tyler gazed at the thing in the valley, noting the increase in the

inanimate object's size as they slowly drew nearer.

"The Family, the Clan, the Moles, the Flatheads, and the Cavalry don't own many mechanical means of transportation," Captain Bowen mentioned. "But just think of what the deal would mean to them."

"Sir, do you see that down there?" Lieutenant Tyler inquired, pointing into the valley.

"I spotted it a minute ago," Bowen said.

"What do you make of it?"

"A building."

"The one we're looking for?" Tyler asked hopefully.

"Could be. We won't know for sure until we're a lot closer," Captain Bowen stated. He unslung his M-16 and held the automatic rifle in his left hand. The binoculars dangled from a strap around his neck.

"At last!" Tyler remarked.

Bowen surveyed the valley floor, seeking any evidence of conveyance tracks: jeeps, trucks, snowmobiles, sleds, anything. The snow appeared to be undisturbed.

So far, so good.

"Should I break out the radio?" Tyler queried.

"Be patient," Bowen said. "When I'm ready to contact General Gallagher, I'll let you know."

"Sorry, sir."

Captain Bowen scrutinized the opposite side of the valley, examining the north ridge for sign of movement. All seemed serene. He trudged through the knee-deep snow, oblivious to the cold, intent on completing their critical mission.

"Something moved!" Tyler exclaimed.

Bowen halted and looked at his subordinate. The lieutenant was clutching his M-16. "What moved?"

"I don't know," Tyler admitted, nodding at the valley. "I saw something move down there."

Captain Bowen faced the white vale. "Where?"

"About a hundred yards from the base of this ridge," Tyler disclosed. "Directly out from our position."

Bowen's brown eyes narrowed. "All I see is snow."

"Something moved. I swear it," Tyler stated.

"An animal maybe," Bowen suggested.

"Could have been," Tyler acknowledged. "But if it was, where is the animal now? Polar bears don't up and disappear."

"Maybe it was an arctic fox," Bowen suggested. "One would be hard to spot from up here. They're small, and their white coats would blend right in with the snow."

"This is only October," Tyler said. "Do their coats change color this early?"

"I'm no zoologist," Captain Bowen replied. "Keep your eyes peeled."

"You don't have to tell me twice," Tyler said.

Captain Bowen resumed hiking westward. The rim of the southern ridge was irregular, with sharp drop-offs interspersed with gradual, sloping inclines. The ridge varied in height, averaging 60 feet above the floor of the valley. Five hundred yards separated the north and south ridges, 500 yards of a stark, milky blanket. He came to a spot across from the structure in the valley and stopped. Below him was 50 feet of moderately angled slope.

"Are we going down?" Lieutenant Tyler asked.

"What do you think?"

"I think I should have enlisted in the California Navy instead of Special Forces."

Bowen grinned and started down, gingerly trying each step before placing his full weight on his foot.

"Something moved again, sir," Tyler declared as he followed.

"Where?" Bowen queried, checking his descent.

"Below us, and forty yards to the east," Tyler said.

Again Captain Bowen looked, and again he failed to discern any indication of life. "Your imagination is playing tricks on you."

"I know what I saw," Tyler responded.

"What?"

"I don't know exactly."

Bowen shook his head and walked toward the base of the ridge, his leg muscles tensed in case his combat boots should slip and he would be forced to jump to one side to avoid plunging the rest of the way.

"May I ask a question, sir?" Lieutenant Tyler said.

"Certainly."

"Why, exactly, did I *volunteer* for this mission?"

"You were picked because of your expertise," Bowen said, treading cautiously as his left heel slid a few inches.

"I wasn't aware I had any," Tyler responded.

"Didn't you work at one of the two refineries California has in operation?"

"Yes, but—"

"And weren't you employed there for two years before enlisting?"

"Yes, but I didn't do much. I was responsible for checking the pipes for leaks. You know. Inspecting welds and such."

"Now you know why you were selected to volunteer," Captain Bowen stated. "We could have used a civilian expert, but the governor and the general didn't want to endanger lives unnecessarily. And believe it or not, we don't have any personnel in the military who are experts when it comes to the production process. No need for them, I guess. We deal in tactical issues. So you're the best we've got."

"Then we're in serious trouble," Tyler quipped.

Bowen chuckled, the sound muffled by his scarf. "Your job is to inspect the pipe. That's all."

"If it's there."

"We'll know in a few minutes," Bowen said. "If all goes well, we can be on our way home within an hour."

"On my next leave I plan to go to the beach and lay on the sand for a week," Tyler remarked. "I'll need that long to thaw out."

Captain Bowen descended to the base of the ridge, his finger on the trigger of his M-16. The snow on the valley floor rose to his waist. Undaunted, he plowed toward the building, which appeared to have been constructed of corrugated metal.

"Do you think Holtmeyer knows about this Pump Station?" Tyler inquired.

"Let's hope he doesn't," Bowen said. "General Gallagher needs verification."

"How did we find out about the Station?"

"From an old map," Bowen revealed. "After Holtmeyer sent his emissary to Governor Melnick, the governor ordered a search to be conducted of every library in the state. They even checked every old industrial file they could lay their hands on, and in the records room of a former conglomerate they found the map."

"If we have a map, Holtmeyer must have a map."

"Leave it to you to look at the bright side," Captain Bowen cracked.

They proceeded through the snow in silence, their breathing labored. Sheltered by the ridges, the valley was spared the onslaught of the icy wind. They forged ahead steadily, enjoying the respite.

"Captain!" Tyler shouted suddenly.

Bowen spun in alarm. "What?"

Lieutenant Tyler was gazing to the east, his eyes wide. "What the hell is that?"

The hairs on Bowen's neck tingled as he stared in the same direction.

Forty feet off was a large hump in the snow, a circular mound three feet wide and two feet in height, and *the mound was moving*]

Captain Bowen gripped his M-16 tighter. Something was traveling through the snow like a shark through water, staying hidden under the surface, leaving a rippling white wake as it headed to the north.

"What is it?" Tyler asked again in a whisper.

The mysterious mound abruptly altered course, turning to the west.

Coming at them.

"Damn!" Tyler declared.

Captain Bowen crouched and raised his M-16. No known animal could perform such a feat. By the process of elimination, the creature could only be one type: a mutant.

"There's another one!" Tyler said.

Sure enough, a second, smaller mound had materialized 20 feet behind the first.

"I don't like this," Tyler stated.

Bowen glanced at the Pump Station, estimating their chances of reaching the building unmolested.

"Let's get out of here, sir," Tyler proposed.

Before Captain Bowen could reply, a loud noise emanated from beyond the south ridge, a whomp-whomp-whomp.

A gleaming golden helicopter arced into view, sailing over the ridge and dropping into the valley in one smooth motion, demonstrating the pilot's superior skill. The craft hovered 20 yards above the snow, not more than 60 feet from the soldiers.

Bowen raised his right hand to shelter his eyes from the stinging snow lashed by the copter's rotor blades. He tried to catch a glimpse of the occupants, but the chopper was a streamlined model with a tinted bubble. As he watched, a booming voice addressed them from a metal, funnel-shaped speaker affixed to the underside of the craft.

"Greetings, gentlemen. I've been expecting you."

Bowen and Tyler exchanged puzzled looks.

"Do you realize you are trespassing on private land? This property is owned by Holtmeyer Industries, International."

"That's a woman's voice!" Tyler declared.

"But of course you already are aware of the fact. Why else would you be here? Unfortunately, you've arrived too soon. We won't begin remodeling this Pump Station for another four days."

"What's she talking about?" Tyler asked.

"Your government displays a reprehensible lack of trust by sending you," the woman went on. "If I was an overly sensitive person, I'd be offended." There was a harsh laugh.

"What do we do?" Tyler whispered.

"This breach of protocol cannot be tolerated. We offered to allow Federation representatives to openly inspect our facilities, but instead they sent the two of you."

"We're official representatives of the Federation," Captain Bowen lied, shouting at the top of his lungs. "We were on our way to the Deadhorse Airfield when our plane went down."

The woman in the helicopter evidently did not hear the captain's response. There was a clucking sound, and the grating laugh. "I intended to punish you myself, but I see Nature will tend to the matter for me."

"What does she mean?" Tyler questioned.

"Have you observed the pair of humps, gentlemen?"

Captain Bowen surveyed the stretch of snow in front of them, spying the mounds approximately 30 feet away and to the left. Whatever was under the snow had started to veer away as the chopper swooped in, then froze. Both mounds were visible, but they were lower than before, as if the creatures had gone deeper, perhaps to hide from the helicopter.

"Many fascinating varieties of mutations have developed since the war," the woman in the aircraft stated. "Some are quite harmless. Others are decidedly dangerous, as you're about to discover. I bid you adieu."

The helicopter banked and soared off to the north, vanishing over the north ridge within seconds.

"Who was she?" Tyler asked.

Bowen's eyes were on the mounds, and his pulse quickened as they began moving anew. "Forget her! Get out of here on the double!" He turned toward the south ridge and ran as fast as the snow would permit.

Tyler looked at the humps and bolted, the snow flying as his legs thrashed. "I knew I shouldn't have volunteered!" he grouched, confident he could attain the ridge before the things under the snow caught him. He glanced over his left shoulder and did a double take.

The mutants were surging forward at twice their previous speed!

"They're gaining!" Tyler yelled.

Bowen knew. And he was exerting himself to the maximum, frustrated by the heavy snow, his temples pounding as he covered five yards, then

ten. The base of the south ridge was still 25 yards distant.

"Captain!" Tyler shrieked.

Bowen stopped and whirled, bringing the M-16 up.

Lieutenant Tyler was buried to his neck and shoulders, his features conveying his shock, his M-16 in his left hand, his right clawing at the snow in a futile effort to gain a purchase. "Something's got my legs!" he shouted.

"Hold on!" Captain Bowen declared, taking a stride.

Too late.

Tyler was abruptly sucked under the carpet of snow, uttering a gurgling grunt as he disappeared.

"No!" Captain Bowen cried, lunging, plunging his right hand into the snow in a frantic bid to grab his friend.

The lieutenant was gone.

"Tyler!" Bowen bellowed, probing as low as he could reach. "Tyler!"

A mound appeared ten feet to the right.

Captain Bowen straightened and fired from the hip, the stock tucked into his side, the parka absorbing the minimal recoil. A dozen rounds stitched the mound, sending puffs of snow flying, and the hump sank from sight.

Where was the second one?

Bowen backpedaled hastily, every fiber of his being alert, scarcely breathing. What *were* those things? How had they managed to snare Tyler so swiftly?

A commotion erupted less than 20 feet to the north, a flurry of snow amid an indistinct, ominous shape. Within seconds the disturbance subsided.

Captain Bowen took off for the south ridge, casting repeated glances

over his shoulders and on both sides, expecting to see one or both of the telltale humps.

Nothing.

He traversed ten yards.

Fifteen.

A smile creased his lips in anticipation of his escape from the valley. Once on the rim, he'd take his bearings and return to the rendezvous site. Even without the radio, without the signal, General Gallagher was bound to send in the VTOL. He'd be-

A hissing sounded to his rear.

Bowen pivoted and fired instinctively, sighting on a large hump bearing down on him. The slugs smacked into the snow, and as before, the mound promptly vanished.

He wasn't out of the woods yet!

Bowen jogged toward the ridge. Were his shots having any effect on the creatures? If they were flesh and blood, if they were mutants, they could be killed. Unfortunately, some of the mutants were tenacious beyond belief. They were endowed with an augmented resistance to pain, and they could sustain supposedly lethal wounds and keep coming back for more.

Five yards to go.

Captain Bowen cast a last look over his right shoulder, and as he did his right boot collided with an object in his path, an object under the surface, a yielding but firm... thing.

No!

He felt his right leg gripped, and he experienced a stinging sensation as claws or teeth sliced his pants and ripped the skin underneath. Desperate, he aimed the M-16 at the ground, estimating the mutant's position and squeezing the trigger, hoping the creature would release him when he fired a burst.

And it did.

But another one clamped onto his left leg from behind.

Captain Bowen twisted, poked the M-16 barrel under the snow, and fired. The M-16 shot four times and went empty. He reached into the left pocket of his parka, his fingers closing on one of his spare magazines.

Something started to pull his left leg down.

Bowen wrenched and strained as he tried to eject the useless magazine and insert the new one. He succeeded in releasing the spent magazine, and he was slamming the fresh one home when his leg was unexpectedly freed.

Move!

He shuffled toward the ridge and salvation, his right leg hurting terribly.

Where were they?

Why had they let him go?

Bowen wanted to shout with joy when he reached the base of the ridge. He laboriously lifted his right leg, about to clamber from the valley, when he distinctly heard a swishing behind him. His skin prickled as he attempted to rotate, and he glimpsed a pair of humps surging his way. An instant later his left leg was secured in an iron grasp, and in the twinkling of an eye he was hauled beneath the white mantle.

CHAPTER ONE

The giant wearing the black leather vest and the fatigue pants leaned back in his office chair and propped his black combat boots on the desk. His gray eyes studied the report he held in his brawny right hand. Strapped around his waist were a pair of Bowies, and he absently rested his left hand on the hilt of his left knife as he read.

Personnel Update

General Miles Gallagher:

Per your request, here is the status update on the Force personnel. This information is For Your Eyes Only.

We still don't have our full quota of volunteers. As you well know, each Federation faction was to send one volunteer to serve for a period of one year. The Moles have yet to send a replacement for their man slain months ago. Athena is filling in nicely for our missing member, but she can't be considered as the Mole's representative because she's from California. More on her in a bit.

BOONE: The Cavalryman has become increasingly moody of late, and I suspect he misses his friends in the Dakota Territory. He has adjusted to our system of training and living, but he can't wait for his enlistment to be over so he can go home.

BEAR: The Clan finally chose a competent man. His dedication to the Freedom Force and his performance have been outstanding.

THUNDER: The Flathead Indians can be proud of their volunteer. When he returns to Montana, I'll send a letter commending his service. He has been spending a lot of time with Grizzly lately, and the pair of them have been honing their tracking skills.

GRIZZLY: I'm concerned about him. Since our last mission, he has been exceptionally sullen and testy. He was making progress in overcoming his prejudice against humans, but now his attitude has taken a strange reversal. Except for Thunder, he won't associate much with the others, not even Athena. I intend to resolve this soon.

SERGEANT HAVOC: Still the finest overall recruit. Your selection, I must say, is the best of the bunch when it comes to taking orders and doing his duty. His professional military background undoubtedly helps in this respect.

ATHENA MORRIS: My initial reservations about her are gone. She has proven herself on all three of our strikes. As our Public Relations Liaison, she saves me from having to deal with the media.

Overall, our drills, practice sessions, and mock combat exercises are going well. But our ability to function as a unit will be impaired if we don't

receive an assignment soon. This is October. Five months have elapsed since our last mission. Surely the Federation Council must have a job for us? Kindly confirm at your earliest convenience.

BLADE

Blade lowered the report, his lips compressing in annoyance as he contemplated his unit's period of inactivity. When Governor Melnick of California had initially proposed forming a special strike force composed of a volunteer from each of the seven Freedom Federation factions, Blade had envisioned that the unit would continually be in the field, constantly responding to threats against any of the Federation members. The reality of the situation, however, was quite different. Except for their first three missions, the Force had spent most of its time in training. Training, training, and more training was the order of the day. He knew the drilling was important, a vital necessity if they were to learn to function as a unit. But all the practice in the world amounted to nothing if they were unable to hone their skills in combat. A target silhouette was a poor substitute for an enemy returning fire. Practice was good, but experience made perfect. Was the Force even needed?

He reflected on the formation of the tactical squad. The Freedom Federation had been in the process of admitting the former state of California into its ranks. While most of the country existed in barbaric chaos, the consequence of the widespread devastation caused by World War Three, there were now seven organized regions or outposts dedicated to preserving civilization and restructuring society.

California was the largest geographically. One of the few states to retain its administrative integrity after the war, California came the closest to resembling prewar America culturally. California maintained an Army, Navy, and Air Force. With its abundant natural resources, the general standard of living was higher materialistically than most other areas. And when California had been admitted into the Federation nine months ago, Governor Melnick, as a token of appreciation, had graciously offered to foot the bill for constructing a unique facility near Los Angeles, northwest of Pyramid Lake, to house the proposed strike force.

The heads of the other Federation factions had gladly accepted the offer.

The Flathead Indians controlled the land once known as Montana.

Freed from dominance by the white race because of the war, they had reverted to the tribal practices of their forefathers. They were determined to never be subjugated again, and they had readily assented to the formation of the Freedom Force to protect the vested interests of the Freedom Federation.

Roaming the wide plains and hills of the Dakota Territory were the rugged horsemen known collectively as the Cavalry. In a sense, the honest, God-fearing people of the Dakotas had also been freed by the war, liberated from oppressive government interference in their lives, from incessant over-regulation. Like the Flatheads, they had reverted to a simpler way of life. They ranched and farmed and raised their families to enjoy the fruits of true freedom. Their leader, Kilrane, had sent his best friend, Boone, as their representative on the Force.

During World War Three, the government of the U.S. had reorganized in Denver, Colorado, and forcibly evacuated thousands of citizens from the Midwest and East into the Rocky Mountain States. Later dubbed the Civilized Zone, this faction was second in size to California. The Civilized Zone included an unusual element in its population demographics, dozens of genetically spawned mutants. They had sent one of their mutants as a volunteer.

The last three Federation factions were all based in Minnesota.

Most reclusive were the Moles, a group living in an underground complex in northern Minnesota, the descendants of a survivalist group that had dug and utilized a network of tunnels as their survival retreat. Their recruit had been killed on the first Force assignment, and they were apparently in no great hurry to dispatch a second.

Also in Minnesota, in the northwest corner of the state, was the faction known as the Clan. They were all refugees from the ravaged Twin Cities, who had been led by the Family to a better life in a rural setting. Their first volunteer had also been slain, but they had sent a replacement, Bear, as soon as they could.

Finally, the smallest faction numerically but the most influential when the Federation leaders met in periodic Council deliberations, there was the Family. Numbering nearly 100, they resided in a walled survivalist compound designated the Home. Eighteen Family members served as protectors of the Home and preservers of the Family, and these eighteen

were called Warriors. Their reputation as fighters had spread far and wide, and contributed to Blade being selected as leader of the Force. He was also the head of the Warriors, and his extensive prior experience qualified him for the Force post when the Federation leaders opted to go along with Governor Melnick.

But was the Force needed?

Governor Melnick had introduced the idea of the Force back in January. Here it was October, and the unit had seen action three times. Perhaps, Blade speculated, General Gallagher had been right all along. The general, a confidant of the governor's and the ranking military man in California, had opposed the formation of the Force from the start. Blade frequently found the general's abrasive demeanor difficult to tolerate, but he admired the officer for his unflinching honesty. Gallagher claimed the Force was a waste of time and resources, that the individual Federation factions could function effectively without having to rely upon a special crisis team. And maybe Gallagher was correct.

Blade lowered his legs and rested his elbows on the top of the desk. He had to be careful. He might be allowing his personal feelings to interfere with his objective judgment. After all, he was weary of traveling back and forth between the Home and California once a month. He also missed his wife and son unbearably, and he longed to be with them on a full-time basis. Jenny and little Gabe had ventured to California with him after he accepted the post as chief of the Force, but Jenny's chronic depression over being separated from her loved ones and friends had proven too much for her to bear; she'd decided to return to the Home and live there permanently. Blade saw them during his monthly visits, and he had taken to extending those visits to weeks at a stretch. When he was away from them, he felt inexpressibly lonely. He often wished the Federation leaders, the Council, would select someone else to lead the Force. If missions weren't soon forthcoming, he might be able to persuade the Council that the Force was, as General Gallagher believed, nonessential. Or he could talk them into activating the Force whenever a danger loomed, and allowing the Force members to live with their respective factions until such a time as their services were required.

He placed the Personnel Update on the desk and stood, his seven-foot frame rippling with muscles. Inactivity was anathema to his personality. He wanted—he needed—action. The Warriors, in recent years, had seldom

seen a month elapse without action of some kind. Maybe he should—

Footsteps pounded on the stairs leading from the bunker door down to his office. Someone rapped three times on the closed wooden door.

"Come in," Blade directed.

The door was shoved wide, and in stepped a lanky man attired in buckskins. Six-foot-three, with shoulder-length brown hair and brown eyes, the visitor wore a matched pair of Hombre revolvers, one in a holster on each hip. His rugged features conveyed his concern as he spoke. "We've got a problem."

"What is it, Boone?"

The Cavalryman jerked his right thumb at the doorway. "You'd better get outside. Sergeant Havoc and Grizzly are about to mix it up."

Blade was around the desk in an instant, hastening up the stairs and through the outer door. Twenty feet away were the other Force members, none of whom were looking in his direction.

Athena Morris and Bear were on the right. Athena was a singularly attractive woman, even when clothed in camouflage fatigues. Fine brown hair fell past her shoulder blades; her cheekbones were prominent, her lips thin, and her keen brown eyes were fixed on the duo in the center with transparent anxiety. Beside her, a study in contrast, was the towering black man sent by the Clan. Bear's curly Afro enhanced his imposing presence. His powerful physique was dressed in black boots, brown pants, and a brown leather vest.

Standing on the left was the volunteer from the Flathead Indians. Thunder-Rolling-in-the-Mountain, like Boone, wore the typical postwar frontier garb, buckskins. Only his were fringed, and he wore moccasins instead of brown boots. His black hair was braided and dropped below his broad shoulders. An oval face, handsome by any standards, and alert, dark eyes contributed to the impression he unconsciously projected of inherent nobility.

In the middle stood the two objects of all the attention, Sergeant Havoc and Grizzly, glaring at one another.

Havoc had been handpicked by General Gallagher to serve on the Force. As a professional soldier, with experience in the Rangers and Special Forces, Havoc was eminently qualified for the position of honor. He was a qualified marksman and weapons master, and he had acquired black belts in karate and judo, and a brown in aikido. Six feet in height, he packed 200 pounds of muscle on his wiry form. His black hair was trimmed in a crew cut, his blue eyes were steely. He wore camouflage fatigues and combat boots.

Grizzly was unlike any of his peers. As a genetically created mutant, he possessed human and bestial traits in equal mixture. His name came from his bearlike features. Only five feet eight, he nonetheless radiated sheer power. His body was completely covered with light, brown fur, and his torso and limbs were exceptionally thick for his size. His arms and shoulders, in particular, were endowed with bulging muscles. Feral eyes blazed from his unique countenance; his chin was pointed, his cheeks slightly concave, his nostrils elongated, his brow receding, and his ears small and circular. His mouth, in comparison, was wide, his lips thin, and his teeth, exposed as he snarled at the noncom, were tapered.

Blade took several strides forward, his hands on his Bowies.

"—last time I'll say it," Sergeant Havoc was saying. "I didn't mean to insult you."

"Humans are always insulting others," Grizzly responded in his gravelly voice. All he wore was a black loincloth.

"Why are you making such a big deal out of this?" Havoc asked.

"Maybe it's no big deal to you, but it is to me," Grizzly declared, raising his hands, his knuckles toward the noncom. "And if you don't apologize, I'll gut you like a fish."

Blade tensed. The threat was serious. Grizzly possessed a remarkable set of retractable claws. Housed in individual j sheaths above the knuckles in his huge hands, the five-inch claws automatically slid out from under flaps of skin just j behind his fingernails whenever he extended and locked his fingers. As long as he kept his fingers locked, the claws would stay out. Incredibly strong and resilient, those claws could carve an ordinary man to mincemeat. There was only one drawback to their use. When his fingers were extended so he could employ his claws, Grizzly could not grip

anything. Once he relaxed his hand, even slightly, the claws would retract.

"Don't threaten me," Sergeant Havoc said.

"And what if I do?" Grizzly retorted. "What are you going to do about it?"

"I'll kick your hairy ass," Havoc stated.

Grizzly's nose was an inch from Havoc's. "You and what army, turkey?"

"Please!" Athena interjected. "There's no need for this."

"Butt out!" Grizzly thundered at her. "This is none of your business!"

"Yo! Chill out, man," Bear said, trying to placate the mutant.

"I'm not a man!"

Thunder stepped nearer. "What has come over you, my brother?"

"I'm not your damn brother," Grizzly responded.

"Did you wake up on the wrong side of the bed today?" Sergeant Havoc quipped.

Grizzly extended the fingers on his right hand, his claws popping into view. "Don't make fun of me, dirt bag."

"Make your move whenever you're ready," Sergeant Havoc said, adopting the Kokutsutachi, the back stance.

Blade had heard enough. He stormed toward them, his expression livid. "*Attention!*"

First to respond was Sergeant Havoc. Conditioned by his years of military service, he snapped to attention, halting a yard from Grizzly.

"I said **Attention!**" Blade ordered, halting a yard from Grizzly.

Thunder, Athena and Bear obeyed, standing stiff as boards. Grizzly, however, simply continued to glower at the sergeant.

"Did you hear me?" Blade demanded.

The mutant looked at the giant. "Yeah, I heard you," he muttered.

"Then stand at attention," Blade directed. "Now!"

Grizzly wagged his claws at the Warrior. "And what if I don't?"

"The choice is yours," Blade said, and drew his Bowies.

CHAPTER TWO

For a moment the tableau froze.

Grizzly stared at the gleaming knives, then the Warrior. He saw Boone standing a few yards behind Blade and to the right, and he noticed the Cavalryman's hands were draped near the Hombres.

"What's it going to be?" Blade demanded.

"I wouldn't really gut Havoc. After all, we're all on the same team," Grizzly said sarcastically. He slowly relaxed his fingers, and the claws slid silently into their internal sheaths.

Blade replaced his Bowies. "I want to talk to you. Now. In my office."

Grizzly nodded and walked to the command bunker, one of three bunkers located in the center of the 12-acre compound. To the east was the long bunker used as the barracks, and to the west was the supply bunker. He went inside the concrete building without commenting.

"What the hell was this all about?" Blade inquired.

No one answered.

"I asked a question and I expect an answer," Blade declared. He looked at Sergeant Havoc. "Who started it?"

"I can't recall, sir," Havoc responded.

"Do I look like I was born yesterday?" Blade queried.

"You sure don't," Bear answered. "Not unless your momma had a womb the size of an elephant's. Sir."

Everyone grinned, and the tension promptly evaporated.

"At ease," Blade instructed them, his gaze fixed on the noncom. "I'm waiting for an explanation."

Sergeant Havoc sighed and glanced at the command bunker. "I inadvertently set him off, sir."

"How?"

"It wasn't Havoc's fault," Athena chimed in. "Bear, Havoc, and I were on our way to the barracks for lunch, and we ran into Thunder and Grizzly. I invited them to join us. Thunder said yes, but Grizzly told us he was going to catch a rabbit." She paused and grimaced. "You know how he likes to eat his meat raw and bloody."

Blade nodded. "Go on."

"That's when I made my mistake," Sergeant Havoc said, continuing the narrative. "I wasn't trying to insult him. I merely suggested he'd be better off if he allowed his human self to predominate."

"The sucker blew his cool," Bear mentioned. "He went off the deep end and tried to push Havoc into a fight."

"You know how he's been lately," Blade said to Havoc.

"Yes, sir."

"I should give you my Dummy-of-the-Day award," Blade remarked with a smile.

Boone gestured at the command bunker. "What else are we supposed to do? Treat him with kid gloves all the time? Keep our mouths shut so we won't tick him off? He's been behaving like a jerk ever since our last mission against the Vampires, and he's getting worse every day. If

something isn't done, and soon, there *will* be a fight one of these days. You won't always be on hand to rein him in."

Blade pursed his lips. The Cavalryman had hit the proverbial nail on the head. Something must be done about Grizzly. But what? "I'll handle this," he said. "The rest of you go eat."

Thunder, Bear, and Sergeant Havoc headed for the long barracks.

Boone hesitated. "Do you want me to stay with you?"

"Thanks. But I don't need a baby-sitter."

Shrugging, the Cavalryman turned and ambled off.

"I'd like to talk to you before you see Grizzly," Athena said, moving closer to the Warrior.

"Do you have some light to shed on his behavior?" Blade inquired.

"Maybe," Athena responded uncertainly.

"I'm all ears," Blade said, prompting her.

Athena stared at the command bunker pensively. "Boone's right, you know. Grizzly has been acting worse and worse since the Dead Zone assignment. Until then, he was actually making progress in his relations with us. His usual bigotry against humans had subsided. At the time, he and I were the best of friends. He confided in me a lot." She gazed at the ground. "Something changed, though. After we returned from San Diego, he withdrew into a shell. He wouldn't talk to me unless I spoke first. I tried to draw him out, to discover the reason for his behavior, but he wouldn't tell me."

"And you don't have a clue?"

"Just one. As I said, we were the best of friends. But I started dating a helicopter pilot, Captain Slater. I didn't have as much time to spend with Grizzly, and I think he took it personally. I think he decided our friendship wasn't genuine."

"And you were his only friend," Blade noted. "He wouldn't open up to the rest of us."

"Exactly," Athena concurred.

"But he has been spending a lot of time with Thunder," Blade observed.

"They share mutual interests," Athena said. "Thunder has lived with nature all of his life. He knows the habits of the wildlife, and he's an expert hunter and tracker. Grizzly began spending time with Thunder after I became involved with Captain Slater." She looked at the giant. "Deep down, Grizzly's human half craves companionship. He told me so himself."

"For someone who craves companionship, he has a pitiful way of showing it," Blade commented.

Athena reached out and touched Blade's right arm. "Don't be too hard on him. Please. We must put ourselves in his position. Being a hybrid must be a frustrating experience. Half animal, half human, and not truly at home in either world."

"I'll be as hard on him as I need to be," Blade said. "I can appreciate the turmoil he must go through, but I can't allow his conduct to disrupt the Force."

"I understand," Athena stated.

"Why don't you go grab a bite to eat?" Blade suggested. "I'll take care of Grizzly."

Athena nodded and walked toward the barracks.

Intrigued, Blade watched her enter the bunker, immersed in thought.

Was it possible?

No.

Couldn't be.

Could it?

He turned and walked to the command bunker. Funny he hadn't seen the connection sooner. But then, it was the last development he would have expected. He opened the door and descended the stairs to his office. Inside, Grizzly was pacing back and forth. Blade moved to his desk and sat

down. "Why don't you have a seat?" he queried, indicating a chair in front of the desk.

"I'd rather not," Grizzly replied.

"Sit down anyway," Blade said sternly. "I don't want you to wear a rut in the floor."

Grizzly frowned, but complied. He sank into the chair with a glum expression. "We don't need to talk," he said.

"I'll decide if we do or we don't," Blade declared.

"Are you going to smack my fingers for being so naughty?" Grizzly cracked.

"No. We're both adults. Theoretically, anyway."

"Look, would it help if I apologized for what happened? I want to get out of here and go for a walk in the woods."

Blade leaned back in his chair and studied the sullen mutant. Grizzly spent most of his time in the northern section of the Force facility. While the southern part contained a hangar and the runway for the VTOLs, the northern area was preserved in a natural, wild state for training purposes. Grizzly would disappear for hours at a stretch in the forest. "No," Blade said. "We're going to talk this out whether you like the idea or not."

"See if I ever join a military outfit again," Grizzly muttered.

"I'm surprised you remember."

"Remember what?"

"That this is a military outfit. We adhere to military procedure and enforce a strict discipline. We don't go overboard, mind you. I don't require my people to wear uniforms if they don't want to, but they are expected to conduct themselves in a professional manner."

Grizzly's nose twitched. "And I haven't been?"

"What do you think?"

The mutant's fists clenched and unclenched. "My problem is personal."

"Any problem that disrupts the Force becomes my problem too," Blade said. "I want to hear about it."

"Fat chance."

"Anything you say will be held in confidence."

Grizzly said nothing.

"I thought our personnel problems were over when we lost our last troublemaker. But you, apparently, have decided to take his place."

"I'll be fine if everyone just leaves me alone."

"We're expected to mesh as a unit, to function as a tight-knit team. One bad apple ruins the bunch. I can't have you picking fights every time my back is turned. I want to know what's bothering you."

"It's personal," Grizzly reiterated.

"Does it have anything to do with Athena?"

Grizzly reacted as if an electric shock had transfixed his body. He straightened abruptly, his eyes widening in surprise. "Why do you say that?" he blurted out.

"I can add."

"Add?"

"I can put two and two together," Blade said. "You started behaving like a jackass shortly after Athena began dating a pilot. Is there a connection?"

"Of course not," Grizzly responded gruffly.

"Oh?"

"There's nothing between Athena and me," Grizzly asserted.

"You were close friends once."

"Once."

"But no longer?"

"She's too busy for me now," Grizzly said.

"Do you wish it was otherwise?" Blade asked.

The mutant uttered a low growl. "Don't pry," he warned.

"You like her, don't you?"

"I told you not to pry."

Blade scrutinized the hybrid for several seconds. "Do you have a woman in your life, Grizzly?" he inquired casually.

Grizzly came off the chair in a rush, his claws sliding out as he stepped to the desk. "Damn you!" he roared. "No one meddles in my private life!"

Slowly, calmly, Blade folded his arms across his chest.

"Stand up!" Grizzly snapped. "I won't hold back this time."

"Sit down," Blade directed softly.

"Like hell I will! Stand up, damn it!"

Blade's flinty eyes narrowed. "Sit down."

Grizzly glowered at the giant, his neck muscles quivering.

"Sit down," Blade ordered for the third time.

Reluctantly, his enraged countenance gradually returning to normal, Grizzly took his seat. His claws were grudgingly retracted.

"That's better," Blade said. "Does Athena know how you feel?"

"No," Grizzly responded, the word barely audible.

"Haven't you told her?"

"Are you crazy?"

"If you love her, let her know. It's better than simmering inside, waiting for an excuse to explode."

Grizzly snorted contemptuously. "You should hear yourself."

"I don't make sense?"

"Can cows fly?"

"I don't understand," Blade admitted.

"How could you? You're not a mutant."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

Grizzly's shoulders slumped. "Everything." He took a deep breath, his chin on his chest. "You have no idea what it's like to be a mutant, to be different from everyone and everything. I'm not fully human, and I'm not an animal. I'm somewhere in between. To the animals I'm just another predator. To humans, I'm a freak—"

"I doubt that Athena views you as a freak."

"Maybe she doesn't. But she also doesn't feel about me the way I feel about her. The idea is ridiculous."

"Why?"

Grizzly looked Blade in the eyes. "Have you ever seen a mixed couple, a human and a mutant together?"

Blade had to think for several seconds. "No," he admitted. "I never have."

"And you never will. What woman in her right mind would allow herself to become romantically involved with a walking, talking fur ball? She'd be the laughingstock of the whole damn planet. Worse, she'd be the target of every bigot around."

"As I recall," Blade said, "you have a bit of a reputation in that regard yourself."

"Hey. I've always believed humans were scum. But I haven't tried to hide my feelings. I've been up front about it," Grizzly responded.

"And now?"

"Now I'm not so sure. I've grown to like the clowns I work with on the Force. And in Athena's case, well..." He stopped and stared at the floor.

"Are you open to some advice?"

"Go ahead. It can't hurt."

"You can't keep doing this to yourself," Blade counseled. "You're tearing yourself apart."

"Tell me something I don't know."

"Whether you let Athena know is up to you. I wouldn't presume to meddle in your private affairs. But you must quit flying off the handle at every little provocation. I can sympathize with you, but I won't tolerate having the Force morale affected by your temper. You just said you like the other Force members. If you give them half a chance, you might find that they're the best friends you've got. So loosen up. Chill out, as Bear would say. Your situation with Athena will resolve itself eventually. Time has a way of resolving all problems, of healing all wounds," Blade said. "So lighten up, rocks-for-brains."

A grin creased Grizzly's features. "I guess I had that coming. I have been a pain in the ass, haven't I?"

"A monumental pain in the ass," Blade corrected him.

Grizzly smiled. "All right. I won't blow my cool again." He smiled even wider. "Unless it's for a real good reason."

"Fair enough," Blade said. "And all the best with Athena. To be honest, I don't know what I'd do if I was in your shoes. I don't envy you."

"Maybe you should shut up while you're ahead. You had me feeling okay there for a while," Grizzly quipped. He rose and offered his right hand.

Blade stood and shook.

"Thanks," Grizzly stated. "I won't forget this."

"Part of my job," Blade said.

The mutant turned and strolled from the office.

Would wonders never cease! Blade sat back down and smiled. He'd actually solved his major personnel problem, although the solution promised to be only temporary. And he was pleased at his deductive insight concerning Grizzly and Athena. If he'd been on his toes, he might have noticed sooner. Still, one problem down, a zillion to go. Foremost was what to do about the Force. Should he advocate disbanding the unit on the grounds a strike squad wasn't needed? Or should he roll with the flow and see what happened next? And what about Jenny and Gabe? He was no closer to solving his personal dilemma, and he was tired of straining his brain and coming up empty-handed.

What he wouldn't give for some action!

The sound of someone pounding down the office stairs shattered the Warrior's reverie.

Blade leaned forward, recognizing the person's distinctive heavy tread. Was it the answer to his prayer?

Without bothering to knock, General Miles Gallagher marched in. "Your vacation is over," he brusquely announced. "Enough of this goofing off. I have a mission for you."

CHAPTER THREE

The leaders of the Federation factions had selected General Miles Gallagher to function as the personal liaison between themselves and the Force. California's Governor Melnick would relay the results of the executive sessions to the general, who would promptly convey their requests to Blade. By virtue of his bulldog tenacity and his uncompromising dedication to his superiors, plus his overt concern for

the welfare of his troops, Gallagher was widely respected. He was as tough as they came, a man who believed in applying the principle of the direct approach to every assignment. He could also be devious and self-serving on occasion. His appearance tended to mirror his character. A stocky man with brown eyes and crew-cut brown hair, he possessed a square, jutting chin, and a pug nose.

"Hello to **you**, General," Blade said dryly.

"There's no time for the amenities," Gallagher declared, halting in front of the desk next to the chair. "Have your people get their butts in gear. I have a mission for you."

"So you said," Blade responded.

"Then what are you waiting for? An engraved invitation?"

"You're forgetting yourself."

"What?"

"I decide which assignments we'll take," Blade reminded the officer. Prior to accepting the post as head of the Force, he had stipulated a number of conditions: he was to be responsible for the training of the volunteers, he would instill discipline as he saw fit, and ultimately, he exercised the final say over all proposed missions.

"This one is critical," General Gallagher said. "Time is of the essence."

"Then you should have arrived here sooner," Blade replied. "Five more minutes won't matter. I want to hear every detail before I commit the Force."

Gallagher frowned. "You can be a real hard-ass sometimes, you know it?"

"So I've been told," Blade acknowledged. "Now what about this critical mission?"

The general sat down and placed his hands in his lap. "Where do you want me to begin?"

"The beginning would be nice."

"That would be three weeks ago, when an emissary from Holtmeyer Industries showed up at the capital and requested an appointment with the governor."

"Back up a bit," Blade said, interrupting. "What is Holtmeyer Industries?"

"A business conglomerate run by a man named Eric Holtmeyer. Apparently, his business connections are international in scope."

"A conglomerate? International?" Blade repeated in surprise. "Since when? I thought the war put an end to the era of the industrial enterprises."

"Evidently not."

"Why haven't we heard of him before?"

"Will you let me finish?" General Gallagher snapped. "I'll give you all the information I have, which isn't much."

"Go ahead," Blade said.

"According to Holtmeyer's representative, Holtmeyer has a business empire spanning Europe and Asia. The man specializes in huge financial ventures. He must be the last of his breed, a big-time entrepreneur. Holtmeyer wants to expand into North America, and he's presented an undertaking on a grand scale as his first venture."

"None of this makes any sense," Blade declared. "Did Europe and Asia survive the war in better shape than America? Are businesses there flourishing? What is Holtmeyer's background?"

"There you go again," General Gallagher commented. "This is the first we've heard about alleged business activities in Europe and Asia. And we know nothing about Holtmeyer's background."

"Why did he contact Governor Melnick?"

"Holtmeyer has made an incredible offer," Gallagher detailed. "He's activating the Alaska Pipeline."

"The what?"

"Do you mean there's one thing they didn't teach you at that Home of yours?" Gallagher asked sarcastically.

"They taught me how to hack off ears," Blade replied. "Would you care for a demonstration?"

The general ignored the barb. "The Trans-Alaska Pipeline was constructed decades before World War Three as part of America's plan to become energy self-sufficient. Huge oil reserves were discovered under the North Slope of Alaska, enough oil to make the U.S. independent of foreign influence and manipulation. So facilities were built near Prudhoe Bay on the North Slope, and an enormous pipeline was constructed to carry the oil to a southern Alaskan port."

"I recall reading about the Pipeline in history class," Blade mentioned.

"Then perhaps you recall the outcome of the effort," Gallagher said. "The Pipeline was never utilized to its full potential. The government, in effect, put a lid on the flow of oil with stringent rules and regulations designed to hamper production. Some people claimed the government was deliberately shutting off the Alaskan oil in an effort to bankrupt the oil companies and force them into nationalization. Others believed the government wanted to create a false energy crisis to increase government control over the population."

"Did the government really do that?"

Gallagher shrugged. "I only know what I read. At any rate, World War Three put a stop to the reduced flow of oil and shut down the Pipeline."

"And this Holtmeyer wants to get the oil flowing again?"

"So he claims," Gallagher disclosed. "He's made a deal. He'll get the Alaska Pipeline running again, carrying oil all the way to California, in exchange for one hundred million dollars in gold."

Blade sat up straight in his chair. "What?"

"That's the deal."

"He must be insane."

"He's not as crazy as you'd think," Gallagher said. "Where would California, or the entire Federation for that matter, find one one hundred million dollars in gold?" Blade queried.

"We already have it," Gallagher replied calmly. "You what?" Blade declared, flabbergasted. "Let me give you a short lesson in economics," General Gallagher stated. "California still operates on the free-enterprise principle. The state mints its own money, and we back up our paper and coin with our gold reserves. The early leaders of the Free State of California were pretty smart. They knew America's economy had gone to the dogs after the U.S. abandoned the gold standard. Any economy without a solid backing will fall apart sooner or later. So the state collected all the gold it could lay its hands on, paying exorbitant rates to private collectors and melting down gold artifacts and jewelry. Eventually, approximately one hundred million dollars worth of gold was accumulated."

"Where is the gold now?"

"Stored under heavy guard at our mint in L.A.," Gallagher answered.

"California has one hundred million dollars in gold?"

"That's what I just said."

"And Holtmeyer asked for *exactly* that amount in exchange for getting the Alaska Pipeline running again?" Blade inquired suspiciously.

"Strange, isn't it?"

"How did he know California has the gold?"

"The fact the state possesses a gold reserve is common knowledge," General Gallagher said. "The exact amount, however, is not. Only certain employees of the mint and a few government employees have been privileged to know the information."

"Would they divulge it?"

"They were all pledged to secrecy, but one of them might have turned traitor for the right price."

"Have you investigated to try and find the leak?"

"We're in the process of tracking the leak now," Gallagher responded. "It will take a while unless the idiot comes right out and confesses."

Blade scratched his chin and leaned back. "How would Holtmeyer have known which employee to contact?"

"California has Freedom of Information laws. Anyone can waltz into the Records Division and search the files."

"That's sort of careless security, isn't it?"

"If we clamped a lid on the files, the media would scream bloody murder. One of the disadvantages of living in a republic is having to put up with liberals, bleeding-heart civil rights activists, and the self-righteous press."

Blade smiled and returned to the subject at hand. "Getting back to Eric Holtmeyer. Why would he make such an offer?"

"For the gold, supposedly," General Gallagher said. "One hundred million is nothing to sneeze at. He also wants a percentage of future profits."

"Did Governor Melnick tell Holtmeyer to take a flying leap?"

"The governor is seriously considering accepting the proposal," Gallagher said.

"You're kidding."

"Do I look like I'm kidding?" Gallagher stated solemnly.

"But why?"

"Economics again. California has had to struggle over the decades to keep its cars, trucks, planes, and ships running. We've rationed our fuel since the war. Do you have any idea what an unlimited supply of crude oil and natural gas would mean to the state?"

"There's natural gas under the North Slope too?"

"Yes. But the crude oil is our main interest. If we could acquire an unlimited supply, our own industrial capacity would be able to expand tremendously. Our standard of living would rise. We could return to the lifestyle the state enjoyed before World War Three. And this wouldn't benefit only us. The Civilized Zone has a lot of operational vehicles. In the long run, this would improve the lot of every Federation faction. The possibilities are mind-boggling."

"There's something I don't understand here," Blade said. "If getting the Trans-Alaska Pipeline running again is so important, why hasn't your state done so before this? California is the Federation member with the highest technological level of development. If anyone could do it, your state could."

"The answer is so simple you won't believe it."

"Try me."

"We never thought of it."

"What?"

"Our government assumed the Pipeline was knocked out of commission during the war," General Gallagher explained. "We had no reason to believe it could be repaired and rendered functional. Besides, until twenty years ago or so, we were strictly involved with merely picking up the pieces and trying to restore the basic necessities to our people."

"So was everyone else," Blade noted.

"Another reason California never attempted to rebuild the Pipeline stems from the logistics involved. The North Slope is a long, long way from our state. We're talking in the neighborhood of three to four thousand miles. And we don't possess the tankers required to transport the crude from Valdez, the southern Alaskan port I referred to, to one of our ports."

"Does Holtmeyer possess tankers?"

"So he claims."

"Can he transport the oil from Prudhoe Bay instead of Valdez?"

"No. At least, they couldn't before the war. Too much ice. It's right on the Arctic Circle."

"I've noticed the words you've been using," Blade mentioned. "Supposedly. Evidently. Alleged. Claims. I get the impression you're skeptical of Holtmeyer."

"The son of a bitch is lying through his teeth," General Gallagher declared.

"Does Governor Melnick share your view?"

"Melnick is a politician. He'd give a convicted ax murderer the benefit of the doubt if he thought he'd get a vote out of the deal."

Blade grinned.

"Actually, Melnick can't afford to dismiss Holtmeyer outright. There's always the slim chance that Holtmeyer can do what he claims. And the governor must weigh the potential advantages to the people of the Freedom Federation if, just if, Holtmeyer can deliver."

"Has Melnick informed the Federation leaders?"

"Yes. They've advised him to proceed with negotiations and to serve as the official Federation representative in all deliberations. If it looks like a deal will be struck, a summit meeting will be called in L.A."

"Is the deal close to being finalized?"

"Not by a long shot. Verification is holding us up."

"What do you mean?"

"Governor Melnick is not about to hand over one hundred million in gold unless he can verify the Trans-Alaska Pipeline is working and Holtmeyer can supply the crude."

"Won't Holtmeyer allow verification?"

"He says he will, but he's been stalling. He wants Governor Melnick to visit Prudhoe Bay personally. Then they'll sit down and iron out the details of the agreement."

"Is Melnick going?"

"Yes."

"And where does the Force come into the picture?"

"I want the Force to be the governor's personal bodyguard while he's in Alaska."

"But Melnick already has a police branch protecting him." General Gallagher nodded. "The California Secret Service. The branch was created by the legislature about ninety years ago after one of our early governors was assassinated. The Service is patterned after the federal branch used to protect the prewar Presidents and other officials."

"Then why don't you use them?"

"They're not specialists like the Force," General Gallagher said. "Sure, they protect the governor twenty-four hours a day, but they don't specialize in killing to the degree the Force does." He mustered a rare smile. "They don't kick ass like you do."

"That's it? We baby-sit Governor Melnick in Alaska?"

"Not quite."

"I knew it," Blade stated. "What else?"

"The governor wants to do some stalling of his own. He wants the Force to be our advance site-inspection team. You'll go up first and check the Prudhoe Bay facilities."

"With or without Holtmeyer's permission?"

"By whatever means necessary, if you get my drift." Blade studied the officer. "Knowing you as well as I do, I'm surprised you haven't already tried to verify Holtmeyer's claims."

General Gallagher frowned. "I have."

"What happened?"

"I didn't want the governor walking into a trap of some kind,"

Gallagher detailed. "I doubt Holtmeyer wants to assassinate Melnick. This is too elaborate to be an assassination scheme. Holtmeyer could hire a marksman to do the job at a lot less expense, if all he wants is the governor dead."

He paused. "I decided to verify the Pipeline is working on my own initiative. I sent in two of my best men."

"What did they find?"

"I don't know. They never came back."

"Holtmeyer had them killed?"

"Again, I just don't know. We located an old map of the Prudhoe complex, and on it I found a reference to a Pump Station south of Prudhoe Bay. A computer check turned up an officer with a couple of years of refinery experience under his belt. Lieutenant Tyler was his name. His superior was Captain Bowen, one of the most reliable men I've ever known." He stopped and sighed. "A VTOL dropped them off, and that's the last we saw of them."

Blade was favorably impressed by the officer's evident remorse over the loss of the two men. "There's always the chance they're still alive. Maybe Holtmeyer is holding them prisoner."

"Maybe," General Gallagher said doubtfully, then focused on the giant. "So what's it going to be? Will you accept this mission?"

"The Arctic Circle, huh?"

"Just think, polar bears and caribou."

Blade glanced around the office and chuckled. "Darn. Wouldn't you know it. I forgot to bring my long Johns."

CHAPTER FOUR

The pride of California's military establishment consisted of a pair of exceptional aircraft, two VTOLs. Known as Hurricanes, the jets were capable of vertical takeoffs and landings. They combined the abilities of a helicopter with the aerodynamic excellence of a supersonic craft. Manufactured prior to the nuclear holocaust, the Hurricanes received special-priority treatment. No expense was spared in ensuring spare parts were always available and fuel was on hand. The VTOLs were utilized extensively, primarily as a shuttle and courier service between the Federation members and as the preferred method of transport for the Freedom Force. Each Hurricane could accommodate five passengers and a pilot. On extended flights, midair refueling was routinely conducted by tanker aircraft. The Hurricane could travel anywhere at incredible speeds. They were indispensable.

Blade thought about the importance of the craft as the two streaking VTOLs arced out of the southern sky and angled toward Prudhoe Bay.

"Everything looks so small from up here," Boone commented from the seat to the Warrior's right. The seating arrangement in the Hurricanes positioned the pilot at the forward end of the cockpit, and then came two rows of two seats apiece. Behind them was a solitary seat.

"It changes your perspective," Blade responded, glancing over his left shoulder at Thunder and Sergeant Havoc. He could see the rear seat, piled high with their gear.

"How so?" Boone asked.

"You can't have a swelled head at fifty thousand feet," Blade remarked.

Boone's forehead knit as he thought about it. After a bit he grinned. "I see what you mean. Never thought of it that way."

Blade reached up and adjusted his flight helmet.

"Whatever you said to Grizzly must have worked," Boone mentioned.

"Why?"

"The first thing he did after leaving your office was apologize to Havoc."

"Grizzly apologized?"

"Yep. Surprised me too."

"Give Grizzly some time. He'll work his problem out eventually," Blade stated.

Sergeant Havoc leaned forward and stuck his head in the foot of space between Blade's seat and Boone's. "What exactly is his problem, sir? If I may ask."

"You may not."

"Sorry, sir," Havoc said, and settled back. "I didn't mean to pry."

The Warrior looked at the noncom. "You weren't prying. Your concern is understandable. We must all depend on one another in life-or-death situations, and if one of us isn't up to par, everyone is endangered."

"Grizzly's path is a difficult one," Thunder interjected. "I am grateful to the Spirit-in-All-Things that I was not born a mutant."

The pilot banked the Hurricane to the east. Captain Peter Laslo was his name, and he was one of the best pilots in California. "I made a loop so we can approach Prudhoe Bay from the west," he announced into his helmet ComLink.

"Acknowledged," Blade replied.

"I'll decelerate when we're close to the facilities," Laslo said. "If you want to hover over anything, just say the word."

"No hovering," Blade directed. "I don't want to arouse any suspicion. Just take it nice and slow."

"You've got it."

Blade stared straight ahead and spied the blue waters of the Bay. To the north was the Beaufort Sea, which in turn blended into the Arctic Ocean. He reached into the right pocket on his green parka and extracted the copy of the map given to him by General Gallagher. After spreading the map on his thighs, he removed a blue pen from an inside parka pocket and gazed at the landscape below. According to the research papers

Gallagher had supplied, the ground in the area of Prudhoe Bay was frozen all year long. It was called permafrost. The ground was frozen to the average depth of 2,000 feet.

The VTOL settled lower slowly.

His fingers gripping the pen, Blade squinted to detect the outlines of the structures now visible a mile distant. A white blanket covered the permafrost, and the dark buildings stood out in stark contrast.

"I have never seen so much snow," Thunder commented.

"I did some skiing a few years ago," Sergeant Havoc said. "The Mt. Baldy Ski Area east of L.A. is a popular spot for skiers from all over California. I went there to learn to ski and had a great time. The state doesn't receive much snow anymore except at the higher elevations, and I had only seen snow a couple of times before I went to Mt. Baldy." He shook his head in wonder. "But it was nothing like this."

"The Dakota Territory gets a lot of snow in the winter," Boone mentioned. "Four years ago a blizzard left twelve-foot drifts, so this isn't new to me. This country reminds me of Dakota in one other respect."

"Because it's flat?" Havoc asked.

"Dakota isn't all flat," Boone said. "We have rolling hills and valleys too. No, this land reminds me of the Dakota Territory in another way. This is the kind of land that makes or breaks a person. Rugged. Hard. The kind where I was born and raised."

"Then you should feel right at home here," Sergeant Havoc remarked. "And every time you see a polar bear, just pretend it's a buffalo."

Blade smiled and concentrated on their approach to Prudhoe Bay. He surveyed the land to the south and north, and on the latter side he spotted a building. But which one was it? Dozens were marked on his map. How could he tell which was which from the air?

The Hurricane suddenly descended even lower, until Captain Laslo was flying the VTOL at a height of 500 feet.

More buildings appeared, located to the north, east, and south, situated

at varying distances from one another and connected by a network of roads. Blade studied a complex just to the north, and decided they must correspond to the cluster on his map designated as GC-2. As the VTOL continued on its slow, easterly course, the magnitude of the operation became startlingly clear. The Prudhoe Bay setup was enormous. Fortunately, the placement of the structures corresponded exactly with the coordinates on Blade's map. He recognized the Sohio OPS Center and the GC-3 buildings. With special interest he circled the Central Power Supply facility on the map.

Captain Laslo veered the VTOL to the southeast gradually.

Blade craned his neck for a better view of the roads and the structures ahead. The A.R. Company OPS Center was to the northeast. They flew over Central-Pad 1 and headed for Deadhorse Airfield.

"I didn't know the Pipeline was above ground," Boone commented.

"Part of the Pipeline is above ground, part underground." Blade said, relating information supplied by General Gallagher. "Why? Did you see it?"

Boone nodded and indicated his side of the canopy with a jerk of his right thumb. "Back there a ways."

"There's an airport," Sergeant Havoc declared, pointing ahead.

"Deadhorse Airfield," Blade informed them.

"Why would anyone name an airport Deadhorse?" Havoc inquired.

"I'd like to meet the dummy," Boone said. As a Cavalryman, he appreciated the value of a well-trained horse and had spent hours every day in the saddle. "Must be a city slicker."

"We have a reception committee waiting," Sergeant Havoc declared.

Deadhorse Airfield was a bustle of activity. A half-dozen vehicles were lined up near a section apparently reserved for the VTOL. In front of the vehicles, facing the landing strip, were two rows of men dressed in white uniforms and carrying automatic rifles. Ground-crew personnel were scurrying to and fro. To the east of the VTOL area rested three craft: a

sleek jet, a large transport plane, and a golden helicopter. No snow was on the strip.

"I'm taking us down," Captain Laslo told them. "Be ready for anything."

"That's my line," Blade said. He twisted and gazed to the rear, spying the second Hurricane a quarter-mile off and winging toward the Airfield. On board were Grizzly, Athena, and Bear. He'd deliberately placed Grizzly and Athena on the same Hurricane, hoping they might be able to discuss their relationship if they were forced to share a cramped cockpit for hours.

"I sense danger," Thunder unexpectedly proclaimed.

"Brilliant deduction, Sherlock," Sergeant Havoc quipped. "We're about to set down in potentially hostile territory, we're outnumbered a hundred to one, and you sense danger. What was your first clue?"

"The danger I sense is not the obvious danger," Thunder responded.

"What sort of danger?" Blade asked, replacing the map.

"My people believe in developing our intuition to enhance our communion with the Spirit-of-All-Things. And my intuition is impressing on me a feeling of great danger. I can not yet identify the source of this danger."

"If you do, let me know," Blade instructed the Flathead. He was feeling extremely uneasy himself.

The Hurricane slowed to a virtual stop, hovering above the landing strip, its engines roaring.

Blade glanced at Sergeant Havoc. "Pass out our weapons," he ordered. Each of them was already armed with a pair of Colt Stainless Steel Officers Model 45's, except for Boone, who preferred his Hombre revolvers. Blade wore his 45's in shoulder holsters. Each Force member had been issued a parka, and all were wearing thermal underwear under their clothes and heavy boots. Blade had reluctantly put on a fatigue shirt and annoyed General Gallagher by wearing his black leather vest over the shirt.

Havoc turned in his seat and reached into the back. One by one, he grabbed two M-16's and handed a rifle to Thunder and Boone, then slid a

third one between his legs. Grunting, he took hold of Blade's M-60 and handed the large machine gun to the Warrior. "Here you go. Leave it to you to carry a gun this size."

Blade hefted the weapon and smiled. "This gets the job done, and that's what counts." Three and a half feet in length, weighing close to 20 pounds, using standard 7.62-mm ammo, and able to fire 200 rounds per minute in the rapid-fire mode, the M-60's devastating firepower could be a critical factor in combat. Blade wore two ammo belts crisscrossed over his chest, under the parka.

"Those guys look like they mean business," Boone mentioned, gazing at the two rows of men flanking the Airfield. He counted 24 in each row.

"They're professionals, all right," Sergeant Havoc concurred. "Mercenaries, probably." He began distributing backpacks.

"Maybe Eric Holtmeyer has his own private army," Blade speculated. He took his backpack and squeezed it on.

"Is that him near the limo?" Sergeant Havoc queried.

Blade scanned the vehicles and saw a golden-hued limousine parked in the center of the row. Two jeeps and a pickup were parked to the right of the limousine, and three more jeeps were to the left. Standing two yards from the limo, between the car and the troopers in white, stood three persons. One of the trio was uncommonly tall. Before Blade could observe further details, the VTOL dropped to the landing strip. He removed his flight helmet.

"Here we go," Boone said.

"Action, at last," Havoc stated happily.

Thunder was trying to see the trio clearly.

"Thanks for flying California Air Express," Captain Laslo joked. "The fare will be one thousand dollars. Kindly pay the stewardess on your way out." So saying, he activated a toggle switch on the control panel and a small door located under the middle of the canopy on the outside of the Hurricane swiveled open. The VTOL had been specifically designed to ferry strike teams into fire zones. Consequently, the canopy was never

opened while the Hurricane was unloading. Doing so would expose the pilot to enemy fire. To safeguard the pilot, and ensure the tactical squad could reach the ground quickly and safely, the small door had been incorporated into the Hurricane models manufactured in the years preceding World War Three.

Blade hastily unfurled a green rope ladder lying on the floor next to me exit, then unhooked his restraint belt and started to slip through the doorway.

"Remember," Captain Laslo said. "We'll be back in two days with Governor Melnick if we receive the go-ahead from you." He looked at Blade with concern. "Even if we don't get the green light, we'll be making a pass over Prudhoe Bay in two days. If you can, signal us somehow. We'll come in and haul your butts out."

"You'd return for us without authorization?" Blade inquired, his head and shoulder poking through the doorway.

"We never desert anyone," Laslo affirmed. "All of the pilots feel the same way. If we drop you off, then you can be damn sure we'll be back to get you unless something unexpected delays us."

Blade thought of the time the Russians shot down one of the Hurricanes, stranding two other Warriors and himself in Florida. He fervently hoped he'd never be stranded again. "Thanks. We'll be looking for you."

"Take care," Captain Laslo advised.

With a nod, Blade clambered down the taut ladder, the M-60 clutched in his big left hand. The bottom rung of the ladder was weighted so the ladder would not sway in the wind while the strike team was descending. He dropped the final five feet and turned, cradling the M-60, then stepped to the left, out of the way of the men following him.

The rows of soldiers in white abruptly parted, the six troopers in the middle of each line closing formation to allow the trio near the limousine to advance toward the Hurricane.

Its engines thundering, the second Hurricane was coming in for a vertical landing to the east of Laslo's VTOL.

Blade kept his eyes on the three figures.

One was an extremely beautiful woman attired in tight white pants, a fur-lined white coat, and white boots. Her face was heart shaped, her lips a bright red. She moved with unconscious sensual grace, her hips swaying gently with every stride. Her green eyes scrutinized the giant intently as she approached.

The second figure was a man of average height and build. He wore a bulky, brown fur coat covering him to his ankles. On his feet were polished brown boots. His features were set in a haughty expression. Thin brows peaked a pair of piercing blue eyes. His blond hair formed a golden, curly halo. He walked with an air of arrogance, his hands in the pockets of his fur coat.

Blade studied the third figure, his finger on the M-60's trigger, experiencing a palpable sensation of menace as the man drew near.

This was the tall one, and he stood at least seven feet high, equal to the Warrior. His frame was leaner, his musculature evidently more compact. He strolled with a measured tread, an intentional economy of movement, his arms draped loosely at his sides. Of particular interest were his face and hands. His countenance was decidedly Oriental. Short, black hair crowned an impressive face with slanted eyes, narrow brows, and pronounced cheekbones. His visage was as cold as the snow bordering the airstrip.

Blade peered at the Oriental's hands.

The man possessed thick, bony fingers and blunt nails. His hands were twice the size they should be, with each digit the diameter of four ordinary fingers, and his knuckles resembled the knots on a tree. He wore a black shirt and black pants, both of lightweight construction, and seemed impervious to the chilling wind.

That was when Blade noticed the Oriental's feet.

They were naked!

Blade glanced at the Oriental's face, then the feet again. How could the man walk around at the Arctic Circle in the winter without any shoes or boots? His eyes narrowed. Like the hands, the feet were outsized,

calloused, and bony. They were virtual clubs.

"What is this?" Sergeant Havoc quipped from Blade's right elbow. "National Giant Month? That bozo looks like he'd give you a run for your money."

Blade looked to the right at Havoc and Boone, then to the left at Thunder. All three were holding their M-16s in the ready posture. He glimpsed Bear climbing from the second Hurricane, then faced front.

Just as the trio arrived.

The man in the fur coat smiled smugly and pulled his right hand from his coat pocket. "Greetings," he said urbanely. "I'm Eric Holtmeyer."

CHAPTER FIVE

Blade extended his right hand and shook, noting Holtmeyer's firm grip and unflinching gaze. "I'm Blade."

"Your reputation precedes you," Holtmeyer said, releasing the Warrior's hand. "I recognized you immediately. Men of your stature are few and far between, although, as you can see, I employ someone whose reputation is the equal of your own. Only his was established in the Far East." He indicated the Oriental with a nod of his head.

"Hello," Blade said to the man in black.

The Oriental did not respond. He simply stood there impassively, just behind Holtmeyer.

"Cat got your tongue?" Blade queried.

"He doesn't speak English," Holtmeyer stated.

"Does he own shoes?"

Holtmeyer burst into laughter, the genuine, hearty mirth of a man who appreciated a sense of humor. "No, as a matter of fact, he doesn't." He swung toward the woman. "This is my business associate. Ms. Pruty."

"Call me Lalita," the woman said softly, offering her right hand. Her hair was platinum with a blonde streak down the middle.

Blade shook, feeling the warmth she generated, his own fingers tingling from the cold. His gloves were in his left parka pocket.

"My!" Lalita declared. "The poor baby is freezing."

"We should retire to my lodge," Holtmeyer suggested. "We can conduct our business better where it's warm."

"Your lodge, Mr. Holtmeyer?" Blade repeated quizzically.

"Please, call me Eric," Holtmeyer said. "And yes, I have a lodge. The old A.R. Company Operations Center has been refurbished and converted into my personal headquarters and living quarters."

Blade stared at the rows of troopers. "You seem to have a knack for organization."

Holtmeyer nodded curtly, the act of a man confirming a fact and not extolling his ability. "Organization, Blade, is the key to success in life."

"We have jeeps waiting for you," Lalita mentioned. "If you'll be so kind, we'll escort you to the lodge."

"Lead the way," Blade said.

Holtmeyer and Lalita pivoted and headed for the vehicles, the Oriental trailing Holtmeyer like an obedient mastiff.

Blade turned around. Grizzly, Athena, and Bear had joined them. Much to Blade's surprise, the mutant had elected to wear fatigue pants, combat boots, and a parka. Blade was mystified. Grizzly *never* wore clothes, except for the black loincloth. So why was he wearing them now? Blade doubted the weather would adversely affect the hybrid. Grizzly's fur enabled him to withstand the harshest of elements. "Okay. You heard the man. Let's pile into those jeeps."

The Force members trudged off, each with a camouflage backpack snug on his back. Sergeant Havoc's backpack contained their radio.

Bear hesitated, waiting for the others to proceed. "I want to thank you, bro," he remarked sarcastically.

"For what?" Blade asked, making for the jeeps.

"For stickin' me in with Grizzly and Athena," Bear said, walking on the giant's left.

"How was the flight?"

"It sucked."

"Why? Were they quarreling all the way?"

Bear snorted. "You've got it all wrong. They hardly said a word."

"Did they sit next to each other?" Blade asked.

The black nodded. "They sat behind Captain Wilson, and I was behind them. I could hardly get a peep out of them. Athena would mumble a couple of words when I talked to her, but Grizzly was a clam. All he could say was yes or no." He paused. "I was twiddlin' my thumbs the whole trip."

"I was hoping they'd talk," Blade commented.

"Why? What's up?"

"I can't say."

"You can't tell your old buddy? I thought we're friends."

"We are, but I gave my word."

"Say no more," Bear said. "Grizzly did try to tell her something once or twice. I saw him look at her and open his mouth, but he always changed his mind. Is he warm for her form?"

"I gave my word."

"Say no more," Bear reiterated. "I was so bored, I was wishin' I had a

book. And I hate to read."

"I'll fly back with them," Blade volunteered.

"Fine by me. Just take a pillow," Bear cracked. "You know, they act as if they're lovers on the outs. Are they?"

"My word, remember?"

"Say no more," Bear declared. "You don't have to tell me twice. If it's private, it's private."

Blade smiled and looked at his companion. "If you want to know the truth, ask Grizzly."

"Are you nuts?" Bear responded. "That crazy sucker would chop off my balls if I stuck my big nose in where it doesn't belong."

"He just might," Blade agreed.

"Hey, did you see the melons on that fox?" Bear inquired enthusiastically.

"Melons?"

"Yeah. Melons. Boobies. Grapefruits. Hooters. Bazongas. Tits."

"Are you referring to the lady's breasts?"

"I ain't referrin' to her feet."

Blade chuckled. "For a man who hates to read, you're a walking thesaurus."

"A what?"

"Never mind."

"Is that good or bad?"

Blade slowed as they drew near to the troopers, all of whom were standing stiffly at attention. "It's good," he said absently.

"Really? No one's ever called me a thesaurus before."

Eric Holtmeyer, Lalita Pruty, and the Oriental were waiting near the gold limousine.

"What the hell is a thesaurus, anyway?" Bear asked.

"Not now," Blade said, scanning the row of soldiers as he passed them, registering their clean, neat white uniforms and white parkas, their hard-bitten visages, and their recent-vintage assault rifles. The configuration of the rifles was unfamiliar, and he mentally reviewed the many books and magazine articles he'd read on automatic rifles in the huge Family library in an effort to identify them. One style stuck in his mind. If he was right, these troopers were outfitted with Beretta AR 70/90s. And if he *was* right, the implications were profoundly disturbing. Were the AR 70/90s still being manufactured? If so, by whom? Where was the production facility located? Europe? Asia? Was Eric Holtmeyer's claim to ownership of an international business empire legitimate? If so, the Force would need to hoe a fine line to avoid antagonizing a possible ally to the Freedom Federation.

"Which jeeps should we take?" Bear queried.

They had caught up with the rest.

"You must be hungry after your long flight," Holtmeyer declared. "I will have a smorgasbord prepared."

"Don't trouble yourself on our account," Blade said. "We have field rations."

"Why should you eat your miserable field rations when you can enjoy my hospitality?" Holtmeyer replied. "We must get off on the right foot if we're to have a long-term business association." He nodded at the Oriental, who immediately opened the limo's passenger-side rear door. Holtmeyer leaned inside, and when he straightened a moment later he was holding a cordless telephone in his left hand. He dialed a number and raised the phone to his left ear. "Varney? Yes, our guests have arrived. I want the table in the dining room set up. We'll be there—"

A tremendous din drowned out Holtmeyer's words as the Hurricanes rose from Deadhorse Airfield.

Blade gazed over his right shoulder, watching the sleek aircraft climb into the azure sky and bear to the south. When he shifted his attention forward again, he found that Holtmeyer had replaced the phone and was staring at the departing VTOLs with a barely perceptible frown.

"They were welcome to remain," their host remarked.

"They'll return in two days if I send them a coded message confirming everything is okay," Blade mentioned.

"Governor Melnick is a very cautious man," Holtmeyer commented.

"Which is why we were sent on ahead to inspect the site," Blade said. "Once we've verified the flow of crude, the governor will arrive for the negotiations."

"Does he mistrust everyone this way?"

"You must know how much the oil means to our Federation," Blade stated. "The governor must be certain before getting the hopes of the people up."

"I meant no offense," Holtmeyer said.

"None taken."

"Then let's drive to my lodge," Holtmeyer stated. "I'll see all of you there." He eased into the limo and smiled at them before sliding to the far side of the car.

Lalita entered, and the Oriental promptly closed the door and moved to the driver's door. He yanked the door wide and compressed his towering form behind the steering wheel.

Blade looked at each of his people. There were five jeeps available, but he didn't want any of the Force members riding alone. "Buddy system," he announced. "Havoc and Athena. Bear, you'll ride with Boone and Thunder. Grizzly, you're with me. Take any jeep."

They complied.

Blade climbed into the closest jeep. The door was held open by the driver, one of Holtmeyer's soldiers. He sank into the confined rear seat and

waited for Grizzly to do likewise.

In seconds the driver had the loud motor running, and in short order the caravan was en route to the lodge.

"How was your flight?" Blade asked, too low to be overheard.

Grizzly was slumped in the seat, his head shrouded by his parka hood, his hands in the pockets. "Just peachy," he replied morosely. An M-16 was slung over his left shoulder.

"Were you able to work anything out with Athena?"

"That's none of your business."

"I'm afraid it is," Blade countered. "I was hoping you would resolve this before we arrived. I need the two of you at peak efficiency during this mission."

"I'm at peak efficiency."

"I know better."

"Who appointed you as my mother?"

Blade leaned nearer the mutant. "Grizzly, I told you before and I'll tell you again. I can't allow the Force to be disrupted, especially not now. So either clear the air with Athena tonight, or forget the whole thing until after we return to California."

"I'll think about it."

"You'll do it," Blade commanded. He gazed out the window at the barren, snow-encased scenery. The roads were paved and had been plowed. At intervals they drove past various structures, most lacking identifying numbers or letters. He recalled the information General Gallagher had provided concerning the construction of the Prudhoe Bay complex. Huge, self-contained units, virtually cities unto themselves, had been airlifted by gigantic Hercules aircraft to the North Slope. These prefabricated units were then erected on gravel pads. There were living quarters, offices, eating areas, workshops, and more.

"I couldn't do it," Grizzly said softly.

Blade looked at him. "Do what?"

"Tell her how I feel. I tried. I really did. But I couldn't get a word out."

"Then put your feelings on the back burner until we're all safe and sound," Blade advised.

Grizzly simply nodded.

The Warrior looked at the driver, wondering if he could elicit any pertinent news. "Say, driver?"

"Yes, sir?" the trooper responded, glancing into the rearview mirror.

"Is it always this cold here?"

"Only in the winter."

"You've probably seen a lot of snow. How long have you been here?"

"I can't remember, sir."

"Where do you come from?" Blade probed.

"I've traveled all over, sir. I've been to so many places that I forget where I was last."

The Warrior smiled. "And I suppose you don't know how many people are stationed at Prudhoe Bay?"

"I certainly don't, sir."

"Ignorance is bliss," Blade cracked.

"Will there be any more questions, sir?" the driver queried politely.

"No. I got the message."

"Message, sir?"

"My compliments to your training officer. He's done a superb job," Blade said.

The driver grinned. "That would be Colonel Varney. You'll meet him at the lodge."

"I can hardly wait."

Grizzly looked at Blade and spoke in a hushed tone. "Do you want me to interrogate this turkey? I can make him talk."

He held his right hand up for emphasis.

"Not yet," Blade said.

"I hate these games," Grizzly muttered.

"We can't make any overt, hostile moves until we verify whether Holtmeyer is sincere," Blade stated.

"If he's sincere, I'm Little Bo Peep."

"You don't trust him?"

"My mutant senses are hyper-sharp. I can see and hear better than you humans. And I can also sense danger at times. I feel it coming before it hits." He paused. "I have this feeling the shit is really going to hit the fan here."

"First Thunder, and now you," Blade said.

"And you?"

"And me."

Grizzly chuckled.

"What's so funny?"

"This came at the perfect time. I'm in just the right mood to rip somebody to shreds. I'm not fussy. I don't care who it is. But I can't wait to sink my claws into something."

"You may get the chance sooner than you think."

CHAPTER SIX

Blade came to several conclusions during the drive from Deadhorse Airfield to Eric Holtmeyer's "lodge." First, Holtmeyer had spared no expense in repairing and activating the Prudhoe Bay oil-production facilities. Crews were everywhere, working industriously. The network of roads connecting the wells, pads, and centers had been repaved where necessary. Power was supplied by a fully restored Central Power Supply building. Plows and dump trucks were on hand to keep the Airfield and the roads free of the intermittent snow.

Second, Holtmeyer had a large private army at his disposal. The 48 soldiers at the Airfield were just the tip of the iceberg. Blade observed dozens more on the way to the lodge, some marching alongside the road, others patrolling the perimeters of the structures, and others in troop transports or jeeps, driving here and there.

Third, Blade began to seriously doubt that Holtmeyer was attempting to deceive Governor Melnick and the rest of the Federation. The man would not go to so much trouble to restore the Trans-Alaska Pipeline if he wasn't the bona-fide article. The cost of overhauling Prudhoe Bay must have cost millions, by any monetary standard.

Which presented a perplexing dilemma.

If Holtmeyer was legit, then why were the Force members so uneasy? Was their collective intuition wrong? Was there really a danger, or were they *wishing* there was a danger after so many months of stifling inactivity? Everything about Prudhoe Bay, from the repaired roads and remodeled buildings to the private army, strongly suggested Holtmeyer's proposal was genuine.

The only recourse was to wait and see.

After following the roads to the northeast, in the direction of the Bay, they came to the converted OPS Center, a huge edifice surrounded by a

new chain-link fence topped by three strands of barbed wire. Ten troopers guarded the metal gate situated in the center of the western section. More guards, many with leashed dogs, Dobermans and German shepherds, patrolled the grounds. Four jeeps with swivel-mounted machine guns were parked in the large lot in front of the main structure, a three-story edifice.

On the outside, the lodge was no different from the other buildings, consisting of beige, prefabricated walls and a roof. Once the Force members were escorted inside by Holtmeyer's party, they entered a world of wealth and luxury.

"Wow! What a spread!" Bear said as they stood in the wide main corridor, after entering through double doors guarded by four soldiers.

"The governor's mansion isn't this opulent," Athena remarked.

Blade, standing at the head of his team, marveled at the thick gold carpet, the lustrous mahogany furniture, and the painted, gold walls adorned with works of art. He unzipped his parka.

Eric Holtmeyer, Lalita Pruty, and the Oriental stood a yard from the Warrior. Holtmeyer smiled at their comments and nodded at the corridor. "I believe a man's home should reflect his personality. My lodge reflects mine."

"You enjoy the finer things of life," Blade commented.

"Who doesn't?" Holtmeyer responded.

"Some people like a simpler existence," Blade said. "The love of their family, a roof over their head, and a full stomach is all they ask out of life."

"Fools," Holtmeyer declared. "I have no tolerance for simpletons. We are allotted a limited span on this planet, and we should make the most of our time. Those who settle for less are depriving themselves of the experience of knowing life to its fullest."

"I never thought of it that way," Blade admitted. "Are you a student of philosophy?"

"I dabble," Holtmeyer said. He motioned with a wave of his left hand. "Come. You must be famished."

"You can leave your weapons here, if you like" Lalita interjected.

"We'll hold onto them," Blade replied.

Lalita smiled, exposing her even, white teeth under those red lips. "Suit yourself. But you will not be harmed during your stay I guarantee you."

"Thanks just the same."

Holtmeyer led them down the corridor for 15 yards, then he halted beside a brown door on the left.

The Oriental quickly shoved the door open.

"This way," Holtmeyer said, beckoning them to enter.

Blade advanced to the doorway and surveyed the chamber within. He expected a moderately sized room with a modest selection of food. Instead, he found an immense chamber containing an enormous mahogany table holding tray after tray of varied foodstuffs. The aroma was tantalizing and made his mouth water. There were trays of beef, turkey, and chicken. Trays of vegetables and fruits. Trays of bread and cakes. Enough to feed 50 people.

"Help yourselves," Holtmeyer said.

Blade walked to the right and stood behind a chair. Athena came in next and took the chair to his right, and so it went around the table, with Bear, Thunder, Boone, Sergeant Havoc, and Grizzly taking seats at every other chair, leaving gaps in case they should need to maneuver in an emergency.

Holtmeyer strolled in, noted their seating arrangement, and smiled at the Warrior. "Your caution is commendable, but your distrust is misplaced."

"Trust is like friendship," Blade responded. "Both must be earned."

"True," Holtmeyer conceded, moving to the head of the table. He waited for the Oriental to pull out the chair, then sat down. The Oriental took up a post on Holtmeyer's left, Lalita Pruty on the right.

"Won't you join us?" Blade asked her as he lowered himself down and

leaned the M-60 against his right leg.

"She ate before you arrived," Holtmeyer answered.

Blade swept the table with an appreciative glance. "Your cooks whipped this up on the spur of the moment for us?"

"We've been expecting you," Holtmeyer said. "They were instructed to have adequate snacks prepared beforehand. All I had to do was inform my aide-de-camp to have the table laid out once you arrived."

"You call all of this a snack?"

Holtmeyer grinned. "My philosophy encompasses the food I eat."

"Who's your aide-de-camp?" Blade inquired casually.

"I am," declared a newcomer, and a heavysset man in a white uniform stalked into the dining room. He was six feet tall, solidly built with square shoulders and a square chin. His eyebrows and crew-cut hair were both white. Gold insignia were affixed to his collar. Oddly enough, the man was not armed.

"Ahhhh. Colonel Varney," Holtmeyer said, twisting in his chair and smiling. "Please join us."

The colonel halted near the table, to Holtmeyer's right, beside Lalita.

"Pleased to meet you," Blade stated, rising and offering his right hand.

"Likewise," Colonel Varney said, taking the Warrior's hand in his own.

Blade's eyes narrowed slightly. The colonel's grip was an iron vise. He applied equal pressure and saw the corners of Varney's thin mouth curl upwards.

Colonel Varney nodded. "You're everything I expected."

"You know about me?"

"The colonel is my chief of intelligence," Eric Holtmeyer declared. "He ran background checks on all of you."

"All of us?" Blade said.

"Of course," Colonel Varney stated, and looked at Holtmeyer. "With your permission?"

Holtmeyer gave an imperious flip of his right hand.

"The exploits of the Force are quite well known," Colonel Varney mentioned. "Thanks to the stories written by Ms. Morris, the whole world is familiar with your previous assignments."

"The whole world?" Blade asked.

"You've read my reports?" Athena spoke up.

"As part of my background investigation," Colonel Varney said. "I know you were a journalist before signing on with the Freedom Force, and I know you still write columns detailing their exploits for the California papers. You're their press agent, so to speak. And you must be quite a lethal lady in your own right, or Blade wouldn't have accepted you on the Force."

"What do you know about me?" Blade inquired.

"Where should I begin? You're the head of the Warriors and the leader of the Force. You've beaten the Russians, the Technics, the Gild, the Superiors, the Vampires, and the Reptiloids, just to mention a few—"

"I had help," Blade said, interrupting, puzzled by Varney's detailed knowledge. True, Athena had chronicled their escapades for the media, but she had only written about the missions of the Force. He'd fought the Russians, the Technics, and the Superiors with his fellow Warriors. So how had Varney learned about those missions?

"You're too modest," Colonel Varney said. "In certain circles, you're viewed as one of the deadliest, the most dangerous of men."

"Dangerous to whom?"

Varney ignored the query. He looked at Athena. "Your association with the Force stems from the time they helped you revenge yourself on the Spider."

"I covered the Spider Strike in depth," Athena acknowledged.

Colonel Varney swiveled his gaze to Bear. "And you, sir, are the newest addition to the Force. I must admit I know very little about you, except for the fact you hail from the Clan."

"Blade and I go back a long way," Bear said.

"Really?"

"Yeah. I spent most of my life in a gang in the Twin Cities. Blade and some of the other Warriors saved hundreds of us from a life of sheer hell. I owe him. Anyone messes with my bro, they mess with me. Got it?"

Colonel Varney grinned. "I understand, and I admire your loyalty." He glanced at Thunder. "You, sir, must be the Flathead. Your people must view the war as a blessing."

"We are free again," Thunder replied. "We live in harmony with the Spirit-in-All-Things."

"Freedom is cherished above all else," Colonel Varney said. "But freedom is only maintained through vigilance. Your people are living in the same manner as their forefathers, I hear. Is that wise?"

"Wise?" Thunder repeated, baffled by the question.

"An agrarian lifestyle is no match for technological might," Colonel Varney said cryptically.

"Colonel Varney," Holtmeyer declared with a tinge of annoyance in his tone.

Varney tensed. "Sir?"

"Nothing. Continue the introductions."

Blade glanced from one to the other. What was that exchange all about? Varney had said something Holtmeyer didn't approve of, but what was the significance of Varney's remarks?

The colonel turned his attention to Boone. "Are you the Cavalryman?"

"Yep."

"The gunman on the Force," Varney said. "I'm told you're as good as the Family's gunfighter, the Warrior named Hickok."

Blade straightened. How did Varney know about Hickok?

"No one is as good as Hickok," Boone responded. "He's in a class by himself."

"You belittle yourself, sir."

"I tell it like it is."

Colonel Varney gazed at Sergeant Havoc and grinned. "Ahhhh. Havoc. I've looked forward to meeting you. The papers claim you're the best man in the California military."

"Athena likes to exaggerate."

"Athena perhaps. But General Miles Gallagher was quoted as saying you're the best damn soldier he's ever known. Did he exaggerate also?"

"You know how officers are, sir," Havoc said wryly.

Colonel Varney laughed and nodded. "Spoken like a true grunt. You're a qualified marksman, I believe, and you're skilled in the martial arts."

"I've kicked a few butts, sir."

Blade was surprised to see the Oriental display a hint of a reaction to the conversation. Until now, the man in black hadn't bugged a muscle. He stood next to Holtmeyer as if he were chiseled from stone. But when Varney mentioned the martial arts, the Oriental's eyes flicked briefly to Sergeant Havoc, then focused straight ahead.

"I too enjoy the martial arts," Colonel Varney said. "I'm not the equal of my esteemed associate from the East, but I have my moments." He stared at Grizzly, who was slouched in his chair. "And you're the famous mutant."

"What of it, pal?" Grizzly responded testily.

"The newspaper accounts refer to claws you possess. I'd like to see

them."

"If you ever do, they'll be the last thing you see."

"You won't show me?"

"I don't like being treated like a freak," Grizzly stated.

"I meant no insult."

"None taken."

Blade looked at Holtmeyer. "Apparently, you know a great deal about us, but we know next to nothing about you, about your staff."

"How remiss of me," Holtmeyer remarked. He nodded at the officer. "Colonel Varney has been with me for ten years. He has extensive combat experience, and his record is flawless."

"Where did you obtain your prior experience?" Blade asked the officer.

"Colonel Varney has plied his trade on every continent," Holtmeyer answered. "Europe. Asia. Africa. You name it, he's been there."

"I'd like to hear more about the conditions overseas," Blade said. "The Federation knows very little concerning the status of the rest of the world."

"I'll gladly fill you in later," Holtmeyer stated, "but generally speaking, the rest of the world is no different than North America. World War Three caused global chaos. None of the major governments survived intact. And now different groups are struggling to achieve dominance."

"What groups?"

"You are aware of several of them. The Technics, the Superiors, the New Order of Mutants. There are many others."

"Are you aligned with any of them?"

Holtmeyer averted his eyes for a second, then smiled warmly. "I work for myself." He swiveled in his chair and indicated Lalita Pruty with a nod. "Ms. Pruty is an administrator *par excellence*. She has a knack for handling complicated business arrangements with consummate ease."

Blade glanced at the Oriental. "Does he help her count with his toes?"

"No," Holtmeyer said with a smile. "Allow me to introduce my bodyguard and manservant, Kan Tang. He never leaves my side."

"Doesn't it get crowded in the shower?" Blade quipped.

Holtmeyer grinned. "Tang is a Thai. I discovered him in Kamphaeng Phet, in western Thailand."

"Discovered him?"

"Tang is, without a doubt, the best martial artist alive," Holtmeyer boasted.

Sergeant Havoc made a snorting sound.

"I first saw him at a muay thai match. Are you familiar with the techniques they use?"

"No," Blade confessed. He had studied the martial arts under the skillful tutelage of a Family Elder. While he was adept at dealing death with his hands and feet, he wasn't the top martial artist in the Family. That honor went to another Warrior, Rikki-Tikki-Tavi.

"Muay thai is the Thai style of boxing," Holtmeyer was saying. "As we both know, there are dozens of styles of disciplines in the martial arts. Karate, kung fu, judo, savate, and many, many more. Muay thai employs elements common to all styles: kicks, punches, elbow and knee blows, handsword strikes, and others. Practitioners of muay thai specialize in one type of kick, which they call the heavy round kick. It is virtually unstoppable."

Again Sergeant Havoc snorted.

"Tang has attained the highest rank in muay thai," Holtmeyer disclosed. "His entire body is a lethal weapon. Here. Let me show you." Holtmeyer looked at Tang and spoke a few words in an unfamiliar tongue.

"You speak the Thai language?" Blade asked.

"I speak eleven languages," Holtmeyer replied. He addressed Tang again.

The Thai stepped to the table and held his hands out, palms down.

"Take a close look at his hands," Holtmeyer told the Warrior. "Go ahead."

Blade leaned over and inspected Tang's hands. Close up, they were even more extraordinary. The bottom edge of each hand consisted of a half-inch of solid callous. Each knuckle was a bony protuberance an inch in width. And every finger resembled a miniature club. Blade had never seen the like.

"His feet are the same way," Holtmeyer said proudly. "All bone and callous. He can break ten cement blocks with one blow."

"Big deal," Havoc muttered.

"Permit me to indulge in a demonstration," Holtmeyer stated, gazing at the nearest empty chair on his left. He spoke in Thai.

Kan Tang glided around his employer and moved behind the empty chair. He waited, his arms at his sides, his features inscrutable.

Blade watched with keen interest. The mahogany chair was extremely sturdy, with stout arms and a rear panel three-quarters of an inch thick. Mahogany was an exceptionally hard, reddish-brown wood. Breaking any part of the chair would not be easy.

Or so he thought.

Eric Holtmeyer barked a one word command in Thai.

Tang nodded, took a step backwards, and kicked with his right leg. The motion was a blur. His right foot smashed into the rear panel with a resounding crash, and splinters and fragments of wood flew across the table. He stood straight, breathing evenly, awaiting the next order. The panel was demolished.

"What do you think?" Holtmeyer asked the Warrior.

"I know who to see if I want firewood chopped," Blade responded.

"With all due respect, sir," Sergeant Havoc declared, "anyone can go around breaking chairs."

"Would you care to give it a try, Sergeant?" Holtmeyer inquired.

Sergeant Havoc glanced at Blade.

"Be my guest," Blade said.

Havoc smiled and rose. He removed his backpack and set it on the floor, then stripped off his parka and draped the coat over his chair. He stepped behind the empty chair between Grizzly and his.

Eric Holtmeyer placed his elbows on the edge of the table and scrutinized the noncom intently.

Blade noticed that Tang was also engrossed in Havoc's performance.

"Show these bozos how it's done," Bear urged.

Sergeant Havoc dropped into a horse stance, his fists tucked at waist height, his face a study in determination. He inhaled and exhaled slowly, focusing on the center of the rear panel. With a piercing kiai, he delivered a hammer blow to the middle of the chair. A loud crack sounded, and the rear panel split and buckled inward. Havoc straightened and stared at the Thai.

Kan Tang gave a slight bow.

Havoc returned the honor.

"My compliments, Sergeant," Holtmeyer said. "Tang seldom accords another martial artist the bow of respect. Perhaps one day the two of you will engage in a friendly contest to test your mettle."

"I'd like that," Sergeant Havoc replied.

"Well, now that the entertainment is done with, why don't we enjoy our meal?" Holtmeyer suggested cordially. "There's plenty for every—"

Holtmeyer's statement was abruptly interrupted by the blaring of a strident siren.

"What's happening?" Athena asked anxiously.

Holtmeyer stood and started from the dining room. "The lodge

perimeter has been breached. You can stay or come. It's up to you." He hastened out with Tang, Lalita, and Colonel Varney in tow.

"Let's see what's going on," Blade directed.

The Force members hurried from the chamber.

All except for Grizzly. He loitered near the head of the table, waiting for the rest to leave. Once he was alone, he faced Holtmeyer's chair and extended his fingers, enabling his five-inch claws to slide from their internal sheaths. He glanced at the doorway, double-checking, then raised both arms above his head. His hands streaked downward, his claws flashing from the top of the chair to the bottom of the rear panel. Without bothering to examine his handiwork, he turned and ran out.

A moment later the back of the mahogany chair fell to pieces.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Eric Holtmeyer sprinted down the wide corridor to the left, heading away from the front entrance. He covered 40 feet and barged through a set of double doors on the right with Tang beside him and Colonel Varney and Lalita Pruty right behind.

Blade and the Force members followed moments later.

The Warrior halted just inside the large room, amazed at the array of sophisticated electronic equipment lining three walls and filling most of the floor space. Narrow aisles permitted passage among the computer banks, monitoring terminals, consoles, and diverse apparatus. Rows of 24-inch video screens lined three walls, each displaying a separate outdoor scene, some showing the perimeter fence, others depicting roads and various buildings. Dozens of technicians, each in a white smock, manned the equipment. Occupying the middle of the chamber was a command console on an elevated platform, five feet above the floor.

Holtmeyer and his entourage dashed up a short flight of steps to the

platform.

Blade glanced at the third wall, in reality an enormous, tinted window. Beyond was the front of the estate and a flurry of activity. Soldiers were jogging in the direction of the fence, many with dogs straining at the leash. Two of the jeeps outfitted with machine guns were roaring toward the gate. Small red lights, affixed to the top of the fence at 30-foot intervals, were flashing.

"It looks like they're under attack," Athena remarked.

Blade moved closer to the platform.

Seated at the sole seat in front of the command console, Holtmeyer was flicking toggles and pressing buttons while looking repeatedly at the video displays. "Where are they?" he bellowed. "Where the hell are they?"

"They breached the north fence," a technician sitting at a computer terminal to the right of the platform replied. "Six HS and two K-9s reported down, sir."

"Where are they now?" Holtmeyer snapped.

"Unknown, sir," the technician responded.

"What about the heat sensors?" Holtmeyer asked, staring at a technician to his left.

"No readings, sir," the man answered. "They must have sounded."

Colonel Varney moved to a monitor on Holtmeyer's right and studied the screen.

"Initial readings indicate four," the technician on the left announced.

"Four? We've never had four before," Holtmeyer said. He gazed out the window, scanning the field of snow between the lodge and the fence.

"All HS are deployed," Colonel Varney declared. "K-9s are scouring the area."

"Where *are* they?" Holtmeyer queried yet again.

Blade walked to the base of the steps. "Do you mind if I ask what's going on?"

"Not at all," Holtmeyer said, and beckoned the Warrior onto the platform.

"Keep your weapons ready," Blade instructed his squad, then ascended to Holtmeyer's side.

"This happens at least once a month," Holtmeyer stated.

"What's happening? What's out there?" Blade inquired.

"You're familiar, of course, with the proliferation of mutants since the war," Holtmeyer commented.

"Who isn't?" Blade mentioned.

"Have you ever encountered a snow shrew?"

"Can't say as I have."

"Well, you're about to witness four of the reasons I was compelled to double the size of my HS staff above my early projections," Holtmeyer said.

"Your HS staff?"

"Oh. Sorry. HS is our in-house abbreviation for Holtmeyer Security, the branch of Holtmeyer Industries International responsible for all internal policing functions and external-threat eradication. Colonel Varney is their commander."

Blade's forehead creased. External-threat eradication? Translation: hired killers.

"To be quite honest, I never expected to find so many mutants this far north," Holtmeyer went on. "I should have known better. Increasing my HS contingent to provide effective security for Prudhoe Bay almost doubled the budgetary allotment I initially calculated. Excuse me, Lalita initially calculated."

Blade gazed at the window. "So what are snow shrews?"

"What do you know about shrews in general?" Holtmeyer rejoined.

"They're small. They look like mice with teeth. And they must eat twice their body weight every day or they'll die."

"Not bad. Yes, an ordinary shrew is no more than seven or eight inches long with a pointed snout, razor-sharp teeth, and five claws on all four feet. And yes, they're fierce, hyperactive hunters. Their metabolism is such that they have to feed at least every three hours, night and day. They'll eat anything they can kill, and in a frenzy they'll kill more than they can eat." He paused and scrutinized the video screens on the right-hand wall. "The snow shrews are a mutation, possibly of the common arctic shrew. Imagine a shrew about two feet high and a yard long, weighing close to one hundred pounds, and you have an idea of what we're up against."

"One hundred pounds?"

"And that's not all. These things can burrow through snow and dirt with the same ease you and I would swim through water. They're fast and deadly. I can't believe they mutated from the arctic shrew."

"Why?"

"Because the arctic shrew is a docile little animal. But my scientists claim the radiation altered the species' gene transmission and deranged their embryonic development. I'm not a scientific expert. If my scientists say it could happen, then it could happen. All that matters to me is the cost to my operation."

Blade stared through the window at a jeep patrolling the drive, coming from the front gate toward the headquarters building. "I didn't notice this window when we arrived," he mentioned.

"The window is composed of shatterproof, one-way glass," Holtmeyer said. "On the outside, it looks just like part of the wall."

"I'm getting a reading!" the technician on the left cried. "Two targets twenty feet inside the fence, approximately forty-five yards south of the gate. Depth, ten feet."

"There are heat sensors implanted in the ground along the fence and under the snow between the fence and the lodge," Holtmeyer explained to

the Warrior.

"I don't understand why you call this a lodge," Blade said idly, focusing on the general vicinity of the targets.

"Remind me to show you our game room," Holtmeyer replied.

"The targets are rising," the technician declared. "Eight feet. Six."

Blade saw an HS patrol near the spot, six men and a Doberman strung out in a skirmish line, the trooper with the Doberman ahead of the others. The second soldier in the line carried a walkie-talkie.

Colonel Varney grabbed a small microphone from the console. "Sergeant Fifer, two targets are about eight feet from you, to the south. Do you copy?"

"Copy, sir," came the reply from a square speaker near the officer's left elbow.

"Four feet and still rising," the technician announced.

"They're four feet under and climbing," Colonel Varney relayed the information to the sergeant.

"Copy."

Blade observed the patrol halt. Two of the men held machine guns, the rest AR 70/90s. The Doberman appeared to be going crazy, snarling and pulling on its leash.

"Do you hear anything?" Colonel Varney inquired urgently.

"Not yet, sir," Sergeant Fifer responded.

Holtmeyer looked at the tech manning the heat-sensor station. "Where are the other two targets?"

The tech studied a green screen covered with a grid of lines and numbers. "They don't register, sir. They may be below sensing range."

"Give a yell the second you see something," Holtmeyer ordered.

"Yes, sir," the tech said, peering at the grid. "The first pair have stabilized at two feet under and six feet from our patrol."

"They're stationary," Colonel Varney said into the mike.

"Copy, sir."

The tech stiffened. "Targets are moving again! They're attacking!"

"They're attacking!" Colonel Varney warned.

Enthralled, Blade watched as a pair of mounds materialized in the snow six feet from the HS patrol. The mounds surged toward the soldiers and the dog, each mound trailing a rippling ridge of snow as the shrew underneath burrowed at its prey.

"Look out!" Colonel Varney shouted.

The soldiers began firing into the mounds, and Blade could hear the muffled, metallic chatter of their weapons through the tinted glass. Both mounds disappeared as the shrews submerged.

"They're descending—" the tech said. "No! They're rising again!"

This time the shrews came up directly under their victims. Two of the soldiers suddenly started sinking into the snow as their legs were gripped by powerful claws. Their fellow troopers tried to aid them, but the two were sucked from sight before their companions could help.

"Damn!" Varney fumed.

"Any sign of the other shrews?" Holtmeyer queried impatiently.

"Not yet, sir," the tech answered.

The drama outside was still unfolding. Apparently not satisfied with their catch, the mutants were coming back for more. A mound crested within two yards of the trooper and the Doberman and bore down on them. The soldier released the dog, and the trained canine leaped onto the mound and commenced digging frantically. A dark form broke from the snow, its front claws slashing, and the Doberman was hurled aside, a ripped, shredded carcass. One of the HS men snapped off a few rounds, but the dark form was already sinking from sight.

"Code 99," Colonel Varney directed. "Code 99 forty yards south of the gate. All perimeter personnel will respond immediately. Repeat. Forty yards south of the gate."

Troopers and dogs were converging on the scene on the double. One of the jeeps was slewing through the white powder at a reckless clip.

"The first pair are ten feet down and not moving," the heat sensor technician said.

"They're probably feasting," Holtmeyer remarked.

The tech leaned closer to the grid. "Two new targets, sir!"

"Where?" Holtmeyer inquired.

"It can't be," the tech responded in astonishment.

Holtmeyer rose, his face livid. "Where are they?"

The tech looked at the floor. "They're under us!"

"Can they get in here?" Blade asked.

"Our floor is solid concrete," Holtmeyer disclosed. "They can't burrow their way through cement."

"They're in motion," the technician stated. "Heading for the east side of the building, seven feet down. The readings are faint and fluctuating because of all the structural mass."

"Look!" Colonel Varney exclaimed, pointing at a video monitor on the left-hand wall.

Blade swiveled. The officer was pointing at a monitor showing four HS troopers walking toward a closed door positioned five yards to the right of the surveillance camera.

"Warn them," Holtmeyer said.

"They don't have a radio with them," Colonel Varney replied.

"Where are they?" Blade inquired, puzzled by Holtmeyer's and Varney's

obvious concern.

"On the east side of this building," Varney answered.

"Sir! The targets have increased speed," the tech informed them.

Holtmeyer looked at the colonel. "Get our internal people there now."

"Attention all lodge security," Varney said, the mike an inch from his mouth. "Code 99 at rear door number seven. Repeat. Code 99 at rear door number seven."

Code 99, Blade deduced, must be the HS code word for a critical situation requiring an immediate response.

The four troopers were within ten feet of the rear door.

"I've lost the targets," the tech declared.

Eric Holtmeyer pounded the console in frustration. "No!"

One of the troopers was suddenly pulled under the snow, vanishing in the blink of an eye. The remaining three gawked at the spot where he had stood, then opened fire wildly with their automatic rifles. A second HS man was yanked beneath the powder. He dropped his weapon and tried to grab the legs of his nearest companion, but he slipped from sight, thrashing and screaming, before he could get a grip.

"How can the snow shrews dig so fast?" Blade queried, astounded at the rapidity with which the mutants could strike.

Holtmeyer was watching the final two troopers as they blasted indiscriminately at the ground. "The fools. They should head inside." He paused. "My scientists told me that a common shrew can burrow at the rate of a foot and a half per minute. Moles, which are only a bit bigger, are even faster. They can cover a foot a minute. And those are the little buggers. These things are huge."

On the screen, a third soldier was sucked under. The fourth bolted for the door and was able to clutch the knob. He tugged the door open, twisting to glance over his left shoulder, and in so doing he tripped over his own feet and sprawled forward, onto the corridor floor, his legs

protruding through the doorway, the door swinging all the way out.

"Close the door!" Holtmeyer shouted at the monitor.

The HS soldier tried. He rose to his knees and lunged for the doorknob, but a pair of brown, hairy forms broke the surface and pounced in concert, bowling the trooper over, and all three passed beyond the surveillance camera's range as the soldier was borne into the hall.

"Damn. They're inside," Colonel Varney stated.

"Heat-sensor readings?" Holtmeyer demanded.

"We can't pick them up inside the building," the tech said.

Holtmeyer glanced at the colonel. "I want you to lead the search-and-destroy squads. Get going."

Varney nodded and hurried from the room.

"Have you ever had a snow shrew inside before?" Blade questioned.

"No," Holtmeyer said. "But my men will find the creatures. There's no danger to us, I assure you."

Just then a technician entered the Command Center, and as he pushed the double doors inward, from the bowels of the building wafted a piercing, terrified shriek.

CHAPTER EIGHT

All activity in the room was suspended as the scream drowned out the subdued conversation, the humming of the computers and the terminals, and the clicking and clattering of the banks of diverse equipment.

"Close those doors!" Holtmeyer thundered.

The tech in the doorway stepped inside quickly and sheepishly hastened to his post.

"We can help," Blade offered.

"No," Holtmeyer responded.

"We're trained to handle situations like this," Blade noted. "Allow us to assist your security people."

"I wouldn't think of it," Holtmeyer said. "You're official representatives of the Federation, here at my request. I would be remiss in my duties if I exposed you to peril."

"As you wish," Blade said.

"Sir, the pair outside are on the move again," the heat-sensor technician interjected.

"Which way are they heading?"

"Toward the fence."

"Then we can forget about them for the time being," Holtmeyer said. "Try to isolate the location of the pair in the building."

"But we can't—" the tech began.

"Never use the word *can't*," Holtmeyer declared. "If you think negative thoughts, if you use negative words, you'll inevitably fail to achieve positive results. Repeat after me. I know I can. I know I can."

"I know I can?" the technician said.

"There. Remember my advice every time you're presented with a difficult task," Holtmeyer commented courteously. He leaned on the console and raised his voice. "Now locate those mutants or you'll regret the day you were born!"

"I would if I could, sir," the tech responded stubbornly. "But the heat sensors won't register life-forms inside the building."

Holtmeyer was livid. "You *dare* talk back to me?"

"He has a point, Eric," Lalita Pruty stated sharply. "The heat sensors won't pick up the shrews while they're inside."

To Blade's surprise, Holtmeyer abruptly composed himself.

"If they won't, they won't," Eric said. "Our HS will find them."

The square speaker on the console crackled. "This is Varney. I'm with a squad scouring the bottom floor. There are squads on the second and third floors too. So far, no sign of the shrews. They could be anywhere. This place has so many damn halls."

Lalita picked up the small microphone. "Acknowledged, Colonel Varney. Keep us posted."

"At least you can understand why my security costs on this project are so astronomical," Holtmeyer mentioned. "The total cost of repairing the Pipeline and activating Prudhoe Bay runs in the millions of dollars. My asking price for delivering the crude is justified."

"Why did you specify gold?" Blade quizzed.

"Gold has served as a precious commodity for millennia. Amass gold, Blade, and you amass power. And power rules the world."

"Our Family Elders teach that love rules the world."

Holtmeyer threw back his head and laughed, then looked at the Warrior and did a double take. "You're serious, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Incredible," Holtmeyer said, cocking his head to the right and studying the giant the way someone might inspect a new form of mutant. "I'm amazed that someone with your reputation believes in such an infantile philosophy."

"What's infantile about it?"

"Everything. You're denying reality if you truly swallow such a fallacy. Take a good look at the state of the world. Love is hardly the dominating factor."

"It is," Blade disagreed, "and you just don't see it."

"You're talking in riddles," Holtmeyer stated. "Elaborate."

The speaker blared to life again.

"Command Center! Command Center!"

Lalita was still holding the microphone. She pressed a button on the console. "This is Command. Calm down. Who is this?"

"Captain Emba, Exalted One."

Lalita Pruty scowled. "This is *Pruty*, Captain Emba. Do you copy?"

There was a momentary pause. "Yes, Ms. Pruty. Sorry."

"Report," Pruty directed.

"I'm on the second floor, in hall fourteen. My squad was just attacked by a shrew."

"Losses?"

"One man was killed."

"Where is the shrew now? Did you kill it?" Lalita inquired.

"Negative. It went back into the vent."

"The vent?"

"It came out of a ventilation vent, grabbed Private Grissom, and dragged him in. We tried to nail it, but it's long gone."

"Continue your sweep," Lalita instructed.

"Roger."

"How did they get into the ventilation system?" Holtmeyer asked.

"I don't know," Lalita said. "Maybe they found an open shaft Maintenance was working on. They now have access to every room in the

building."

"Can we send men into the shaft after them?" Holtmeyer wanted to know.

"No. The ventilation shafts must resemble the tunnels the shrews use. They're at home there. They have the advantage. A man would be cramped inside a shaft, and wouldn't be able to employ his weapons effectively," Lalita said, and paused. "We must draw the shrews out into the open."

"Any ideas on how?" Holtmeyer queried.

Lalita smirked. "We could use you as bait, *sir*."

"Very funny," Holtmeyer muttered.

"Could you post a squad at every vent in the building?" Blade proposed.

"I wish we could," Lalita said. "But you've seen the size of our headquarters, and there are vents in every room."

"We made a major mistake when we revamped and enlarged this building," Holtmeyer said. "We should have installed cameras inside to monitor the halls. If we hadn't already spent so much money—"

"My offer for the Force still holds," Blade commented.

"And my refusal still stands," Holtmeyer replied. "I can't allow any of you to be harmed. The Federation might look unfavorably on my request to supply oil if their representatives were harmed." He stared at the Warrior. "It's bad enough that Governor Melnick sent you instead of coming in person, although I can understand his reluctance to commit himself until he's satisfied that his negotiating party will be safe."

More shots blasted, closer this time.

"At least allow us to guard the doors to the command center," Blade proposed. "You wouldn't want one of those things to get in here." He noticed Lalita Pruty nod.

Holtmeyer mulled the matter for a bit. "Okay. Thanks. I won't need to recall some of my own men to cover the doors. But stay alert."

"I doubt any of us would want to take a nap right about now," Blade quipped. He turned and moved to his team.

"What's up, bro?" Bear inquired.

"How much longer are we going to stand around twiddling our thumbs?" Boone asked.

"Into the corridor," Blade ordered. "I'll explain there."

They tramped through the double doors and clustered about the giant.

"So what gives?" Bear persisted.

Blade glanced both ways to ensure they were temporarily alone. "I told our host we'd guard these doors," he informed them.

"Makes sense to me," Bear said. "Those shrews will probably start attackin' the doors as soon as they run out of people."

"I want Thunder, Athena, Havoc, and Bear to stay put. Grizzly and Boone will come with me."

"What? Why can't we all go?" Athena demanded.

"Someone has to guard the doors," Blade said. "And I want you to slow our host down if he tries to stop us."

"Stop us from what?" Boone inquired.

"You'll take this floor," Blade instructed him. "Grizzly, take the second. I'll go up to the third. Go from door to door, opening every one you find. Make a note of what you see, and we'll compare notes later."

"Hey," Bear commented. "How do you want us to slow Holt-face down? Shove a barrel up his nose?"

"Talk him to death," Blade said. "Just buy us as many seconds as you can. He may be so engrossed with the hunt for the shrews that he might not notice we're gone for a few minutes. I want to know what's in this building from top to bottom."

"Talk him to death, huh?" Bear responded. "Athena will have to handle

that."

"Why me?" Athena queried.

"You're a woman, ain't you?"

"What, exactly, is that supposed to mean?" she retorted testily.

"This is our cue," Blade said, nodding at Boone and Grizzly. He jogged deeper along the wide corridor.

"How will we get upstairs?" Grizzly asked.

"Find a stairway or an elevator," Blade said. "There has to be a way."

A shut door appeared on the left.

"Catch you later," Boone said, angling to the door and gripping the knob.

"Be careful," Blade advised.

Boone opened the door and slid inside.

"Holtmeyer will want your hide for this," Grizzly predicted, keeping pace with the Warrior.

"Maybe," Blade said. "But I doubt he'll retaliate in any way. If something happens to us, he knows his deal with the Federation will be on the skids."

They dashed past several closed doors and reached a brown one at the end of the corridor. Without hesitating, Blade twisted the metal knob and flung the door inward.

"A stairwell," Grizzly declared.

Blade led the way upward, taking three steps at a stride. They reached the second-floor landing without bumping into an HS patrol.

"Here's where I get off," Grizzly said, and moved to the door.

"Watch your back," Blade stated, and continued his ascent. He

bounded up the stairs to the third floor and entered a hall. The lighting was dimmer than on the first floor, and after the hustle and bustle of the command center, this floor was strangely quiet. Midway along the hallway was an open door, but no security personnel were in evidence.

Perfect.

Blade hurried to the first door on the right and opened it. Within was a small storage closet crammed with cleaning supplies. He closed the door and advanced to the next, which turned out to be filled with white uniforms hanging on a series of metal rods.

What was this?

Was the third floor reserved for storage purposes?

He took three strides and halted at a junction. A narrower hall forked to the right and the left, and he decided to investigate both forks if he had the time. Holding the M-60 in his left hand, he walked to a door on the right and grasped the knob.

Something growled.

Blade tensed and spun, bringing the M-60 up, his finger on the trigger.

The growl was repeated, emanating from the room with the open door farther down the hall.

He eased toward the door, his senses primed, striving to catch the faintest noise. A muted cracking sound arose. With supreme caution, he stepped to the edge of the doorway and halted, girding himself. Be calm, his mind urged. Exercise self-control. The snow shrews were fast, and their claws and teeth were deadly, but they were nothing more than mutations, deviate animals. They could be slain.

The cracking was louder.

Blade took a breath and whirled into the doorway, leveling the M-60, prepared for anything.

Or so he thought.

The spacious room contained row after row of file cabinets, all a dull,

metallic gray. There were also ten dead troopers, their milky uniforms spattered with blood, sprawled in the aisles between the cabinets, some of which had toppled onto corpses. On the far side of the file room, in the center of the wall near the ceiling, was an open ventilation shaft. The grill was lying on a cabinet underneath. And perched on top of the third row from the left, busily gnawing on a human arm, its body to the door, was a snow shrew, a hideous, furry beast.

Blade took a pace nearer for a clearer shot, and as his left foot came down, his heel contacted a slippery substance on the tiled floor.

Blood.

His heel produced a faint squishing sound.

With astounding swiftness, uttering a viperous hiss as it released the partially clothed arm, the shrew twirled and charged.

CHAPTER NINE

Athena Morris gazed down the corridor and frowned. "They're taking too long."

"They've only been gone five minutes," Sergeant Havoc said.

"Yeah. Unwind, sugar lips," Bear added. "They'll be fine. Those three can take care of themselves like nobody's business."

"I know they can," Athena responded. "And don't call me sugar lips."

"How about hot-to-trot?" Bear quipped.

"How about if you suck on my M-16 while I squeeze the trigger?" Athena countered.

Bear laughed. "You're one mean mamma, foxy. I'll grant you that. Grizzly and you will make a righteous pair."

'Athena did a double take. "Grizzly and me?"

"Yeah. It's as plain as the nose on your face that the two of you are havin' a lovers' spat."

"Uh-oh," Sergeant Havoc mumbled.

Athena stepped in front of Bear. "What the hell are you babbling about?"

"I saw the way you two were actin' on the flight here." Bear mentioned.

"Meaning what?"

"Meanin' the two of you are close to gettin' tight."

"Are you implying what I think you're implying?"

"I ain't implyin' dog dip. I'm tellin' it like it is," Bear said.

"For your information, Grizzly and I are friends. At least we were."

"Yeah. Sure. Right."

"Are you saying I'm lying?" Athena demanded.

"You're callin' it like you see it," Bear replied.

"Exactly."

"Which may not be the way it is."

"Make sense," Athena stated, her tone tinged with annoyance.

"Do you want it straight out?" Bear asked.

"That would be nice."

"Grizzly and you are in love," Bear declared.

Sergeant Havoc and Thunder focused on Athena, assessing her reaction.

For several seconds Athena appeared stunned, and finally she gave a brittle sort of snicker and shook her head. "Where did you ever get a crazy idea like that?"

"It's the truth, and you know it."

"I know nothing of the kind," Athena insisted. "The idea is ridiculous."

"For a journalist lady, you have a hard time acceptin' the truth," Bear said.

"Grizzly and I in love?" Athena queried, and chuckled. "In case you haven't noticed, Grizzly is a mutant."

"So?"

"So I'm a human."

"So?"

"So mutants and humans do not fall in love."

"Says who?"

"What?"

"Who says humans and muties can't fall in love?" Bear inquired earnestly.

Athena glanced at Thunder and Havoc. "Do you believe this big dummy?"

Neither responded.

"Have you ever heard such a preposterous notion in your entire life?" Athena asked, prompting them.

"Love is not preposterous," Thunder asserted.

"Oh. Great. Thanks, Blade, Junior," Athena said.

"Why do you deny your feelings?" Thunder queried.

"You too?" Athena responded, and looked at Havoc. "What about you? Don't tell me you subscribe to this nonsense?"

The noncom pursed his lips and gazed at Bear, then Thunder. "They may have a point."

"What a bunch of morons," Athena snapped.

"Now that they mention it, there could be a connection to Grizzly's behavior recently," Sergeant Havoc elaborated.

"How so?"

"Didn't he start acting up about the same time you took to dating?" Havoc asked.

Athena recoiled at the implication. "Yeah. So what? Are you saying there was more to our relationship than friendship?"

"Could be," Havoc said simply.

"You're nuts. All of you."

"You could do worse," Bear commented.

Athena glanced at the Clansman.

"Grizzly might be a fur ball," Bear noted, "but he's got soul."

"And we have company," Thunder announced.

A door 15 yards from the end of the corridor opened, disgorging Colonel Varney and ten HS men.

"Play it cool," Bear advised, staring nonchalantly at the opposite wall.

Varney and the troopers hastened toward the command center.

"The colonel doesn't look very happy," Athena remarked.

"Remember, we've got to buy Blade time," Bear said. "Stall. And no matter what, we can't blow any of these dudes away."

"Who died and left you in charge?" Sergeant Havoc joked.

"We can't start wastin' these suckers until Blade gives the go-ahead," Bear replied. "You know that. So we hang loose until he gets back. Do like I do. Be calm and collected."

Colonel Varney and company were ten yards distant.

"And if this bozo tries to ask us questions, act dumb," Bear suggested.

"This should be right up your alley," Athena said.

"What are you doing in the hall?" Varney called out.

"Hi," Bear responded, giving a wave of his left hand. "How's it hangin'?"

Colonel Varney came within seven yards of the Force members. "What are you doing out here?" he repeated.

"Gettin' some fresh air," Bear said.

"In the corridor?"

"We didn't want to stray too far," Athena said.

Colonel Varney looked from one to the other. "Three of you are missing. Where's Blade, Grizzly, and Boone?"

"They needed to use the rest room, sir," Sergeant Havoc answered politely.

"Does Mr. Holtmeyer know you're here?" Colonel Varney asked.

"He was the one who sent us out," Athena replied.

"But the nearest rest room is inside the command center," Varney mentioned. "For your own safety, don't budge." He moved toward the double doors.

"Our own safety?" Athena inquired.

"The shrews haven't been found yet," Colonel Varney said. "So for your own safety, don't go anywhere. My men will protect you."

"We don't need protectin'," Bear observed.

"You've never fought snow shrews, have you?" Varney asked.

"No," Bear responded.

"Let me assure you that there's safety in numbers." Colonel Varney said. "You're better off with my men." He turned the knob and stepped inside.

Athena smiled at the ten soldiers.

One of them, a hefty man with a Beretta, returned the smile. "Hi, there."

"Hello," she said.

The HS man glanced at Bear and Thunder, then gazed at Athena. "What's a classy broad like you doing with a mangy outfit like the Force?"

"Mangy?" Athena said.

"Yeah. How can you work with so many lowlives?"

"Lester, you'd better lighten up," a second trooper cautioned. "The colonel won't like this."

"Who's going to rat on me?" Lester demanded. "You?"

The second trooper shook his head.

"Then clam up," Lester said.

Sergeant Havoc took a step toward the hefty trooper. "Did you just call us lowlives?"

"Not you," Lester responded. "I was referring to the dirt bags you're with."

"We aren't dirt bags," Thunder stated.

"You sure are, Indian," Lester said contemptuously. "You and the Tar Baby."

"The Tar Baby?" Thunder repeated, perplexed.

"Yeah," Lester declared, motioning the Beretta at Bear. "The nigger there."

Bear shot him.

One moment Lester was smirking at the Force, and the next a round from Bear's M-16 penetrated his forehead and burst out the rear of his cranium, flinging him into the far wall and spattering his brains and blood over the gold paint and the gold carpet.

The shot triggered a general melee.

Four of the ten troopers automatically raised their weapons, but as fast as they were, Sergeant Havoc was faster. He shot each of them in turn, downing each soldier as the HS man attempted to bring a Beretta into play.

Galvanized to action by the death of their comrades, the remaining six endeavored to join the fray and were summarily dispatched. Not one got off a shot. Athena, Thunder, and Bear sprayed the troopers with fire, causing the men in white to totter backwards, thrashing and convulsing, and to collapse in perforated heaps.

"We've got to get out of here!" Sergeant Havoc cried, heading for the rear end of the hall and the doorway Blade and Grizzly had taken. What else could they do? Behind them was the command center. To the left were the double doors guarded by four troopers outside.

Veering to the right was their only option.

But not for long.

They were 15 yards from the dead troopers when the rear door opened suddenly and security personnel filed into the corridor.

"This way," Havoc shouted, reversing direction and sprinting for the front doors.

The Force members bolted, all except for Bear. He aimed and sent a half-dozen shots into the trooper at the forefront of the line.

Taken unawares, the foremost soldier tumbled to the floor.

Bear spun and dashed after his friends.

"Nail the bastards!" an HS man bellowed, and the troopers raced in pursuit, some firing on the run.

Sergeant Havoc glanced back once, then increased his speed. He didn't want to be trapped in the corridor. Although the weather was blustery cold, at least outside they would have room to maneuver. He was ten feet from the entrance when the doors swung inward.

There, framed in the doorway, were the four other guards.

Havoc threw himself to the right, to the floor, raking them as he dove, his marksmanship skills enabling him to stitch a pattern across each guard's chest, the impact flinging his targets backwards to topple into the frigid snow. Havoc rolled as he landed, coming up against the wall, and surged erect. Move! his mind commanded. He barreled through the doors and paused, surveying the field between the building and the fence.

Patrols were still searching for the first pair of snow shrews, crisscrossing the field in organized rows. Dogs barked and tugged on their leashes. A few troopers close to the headquarters were gazing at the front doors, puzzled by all the gunfire.

Havoc smiled and waved.

Athena and Thunder pounded out the doorway, followed a moment later by Bear.

Sergeant Havoc glanced at the Clansman. "Play it cool," he muttered. "Be calm and collected."

"Nobody calls me a nigger," Bear said. "Nobody."

"So much for Mr. Self-control," Havoc quipped, and jogged to the left. "This way." There were too many HS men and jeeps scouring the field. Maybe, if they swung around toward the rear of the building, they could find a place to lay low and plan their next move.

"Hey! What's going on there?" a trooper 30 feet away yelled.

"Just this," Bear said, and sent a round into the man's head.

"Damn!" Havoc quipped. "Haven't you ever heard of subtlety?"

"Suttle-who?"

They ran all out for the corner of the lodge.

"Halt!" a soldier ordered.

"He's got to be kiddin'," Bear stated.

Havoc saw ten or 12 HS men head after them, and he wondered why the troopers weren't cutting loose with the Berettas. The Force members were sitting ducks, outlined against the backdrop of the outer wall. He-No!

Not the outer wall.

The window!

With a start Havoc realized they were racing past the command-center window, the window camouflaged as a wall, the tinted window through which Eric Holtmeyer was undoubtedly looking at that very instant. He looked at it and grinned. The HS men weren't about to risk firing until the Force was past the window. True, Holtmeyer had claimed the glass was shatterproof, but a sustained volley could conceivably crack the panes. He poured on the speed, looking over his right shoulder at a loud noise from behind.

The troopers from the corridor were crowding through the front doors.

"After them!" one shouted.

The Force members were almost to the corner.

Thunder came abreast of the noncom. "What about Blade and the others?"

"They're on their own," Havoc replied.

"We can't leave them," Thunder said.

"We can't help them if we're captured. First, we escape. Then we'll return after dark."

"This mission is going badly," Thunder remarked.

"Cheer up," Havoc said. "What else could go wrong?" He attained the corner and took a sharp left.

And blundered smack-dab into a six-man HS patrol with two Dobermans.

CHAPTER TEN

Boone eased the door shut and took his bearings. He was in a small, paneled anteroom containing two chairs and a wooden rack that was filled with magazines and attached to the left-hand wall at shoulder height. He peered at one of the titles. A scantily clad young woman was depicted on the cover, licking her rosy lips and cupping her breasts in her hands. Curiosity almost compelled him to reach for the magazine, but he restrained himself and moved to a closed door across the anteroom.

Where did this lead?

Before turning the knob, he slung his M-16 over his right shoulder and shoved the already unzipped front of his green parka aside, exposing both Hombres on his hips.

Now he was ready.

Boone twisted the doorknob slowly and inched the door outward, his ears detecting a peculiar whining noise commingled with loud humming and buzzing. He peeked around the edge of the door and discovered a narrow, short hall leading to yet another door that was slightly ajar.

The strange sounds came from beyond the door.

The Cavalryman stepped softly to the next door and flattened his back against the right-hand wall. Through the three-inch gap he could see a large table supporting complicated electronic equipment. He wished Blade or Havoc was with him. They were knowledgeable about such

apparatuses; he wasn't. He knew about horses and guns and life on the plains. Electronic gizmos were as alien as life on Mars.

Someone coughed.

Boone drew his right Hombre and cocked his right ear to the gap.

"Whiskey-Hotel-Oscar," a masculine voice declared.

There was more whining and buzzing.

"Whiskey-Hotel-Oscar," the voice repeated. "Alfa-Romeo-Echo. Yankee-Oscar-Uniform."

A crisp crackling arose, and then a different, fainter voice responded. "Alfa-November. Alfa-Lima-India-Echo-November."

"Roger," the first man said.

Were they using some sort of code? Boone placed the fingertips of his right hand on the door and nudged, and he was glad the hinges worked soundlessly as the door swung inward a yard.

"Goldmane reports operation underway," stated the man in the room.

"Has the Force arrived?"

"Yes, sir."

Boone poked his head inside, surveying the ten-by-twelve-foot chamber. Seated at a hardwood table, his back to the doorway, was a man dressed in a white smock, white pants, and black shoes.

"Identify parties and factions," directed a voice emanating from a square black speaker positioned on the table to the left of the man in the smock.

"Confirming identities," the man said. "Blade from the Family. Athena Morris from California. Havoc from California. Boone from the Cavalry. Thunder from the Flathead tribe. Grizzly from the Civilized Zone. Bear from the Clan."

"Does Goldmane anticipate any delays in conforming to the time

schedule?"

"No, sir." '

"Toxin status?"

"The TX-9 will be ready in twelve hours. Mixing will commence at 0300."

"Excellent. Reiterate to Goldmane our concern over the massive expenditures this project has entailed. There is no margin for error, and failure will not be tolerated."

"Message will be relayed, sir."

"The Conclave is unanimous in its decision."

"I will inform Goldmane, sir."

"Is Janus available now?"

"Not at the moment, High Lord."

A sigh emitted from the speaker. "Very well. We will expect the next update in three hours. To the Lords of Kismet."

"To the Lords of Kismet," the man said, repeating the verbal salute.

Static sputtered and crackled for several seconds, until the man in the smock flicked a silver toggle switch on the console in front of him. He breathed a sigh of relief and sat straight in his chair. "Man, I'm glad that's over," he said aloud to himself. "Those High Lords scare the crap out of me."

"How do you feel about loaded revolvers?"

The radio operator, startled by the unexpected question from right behind him, started to turn. And suddenly he was staring down the business end of a handgun and heard the hammer click as it was thumbed back.

"Howdy," said the man in buckskins and a green parka.

"You!" the operator blurted out.

"You know me?"

"You're Boone, the guy from the Cavalry."

"I had no idea I was so famous," Boone quipped. "What's your name?"

"Winslow. Corporal Winslow."

"That was a very interesting conversation you had there, Corporal Winslow," Boone remarked.

The corporal did not reply.

"How about if you explain it to me," Boone said.

"I can't."

Boone smiled and pressed the Hombre barrel against the operator's nose. "I wasn't asking you. I was telling you."

"I can't. If I do, they'll kill me."

"Who will?"

"The Lords of Kismet. You don't mess with them. No one messes with them."

"Why not?"

"They'll send an executioner after your ass," Corporal Winslow stated. "They..." he began, and caught himself.

"You were saying?" Boone prompted.

"Nope. Not another word out of me. My lips are sealed."

Boone tapped Winslow's nose with the barrel. "If I were you, I'd spill the beans real quicklike."

"You won't do anything to me," Winslow stated.

"I won't?"

"Nope. One shot, and you'll have half the security force in here. You're bluffing."

"Am I?"

"You know it," Winslow said arrogantly.

"I like a man with confidence," Boone commented.

Winslow smirked.

"But I don't much admire a man who has the brains of a gnat," Boone added.

"Are you talking about me?"

"Do you see any other gnats in here?"

"I don't get it."

"You will," Boone said, and whacked the radio operator across the nose with his Hombre. There was a distinct snap.

Corporal Winslow doubled over in torment, blood flowing from his nostrils, and placed his palms over his nose. "Damn!" he cried, the word distorted by his hands. "You broke my nose!"

"Would you like to try for your teeth?"

Winslow glanced up at the gunman, his eyes widening in fright as he finally recognized the latent menace in the lanky frontiersman. "You would, wouldn't you?"

Boone smiled.

The corporal coughed and sputtered as the blood flow increased, and he grit his teeth as the pain intensified. "I need a doctor!" he wailed.

"You'll need a dentist too if you don't start cooperating," Boone mentioned.

"What do you want to know?"

"Who's Goldmane?"

"Janus Goldmane holds the title of Exalted Executioner for the Lords of Kismet."

"Is Goldmane here at Prudhoe Bay?"

Winslow looked at the Cavalryman. "Yeah."

"Where would I find him?"

Winslow managed a peculiar grin. "Goldmane could be anywhere."

"Who are the Lords of Kismet?"

Sniffing and wiping his nose with the backs of his hands, the corporal sat up. "You've never heard of them?"

"No."

"I thought everyone knew about them."

"Who are they?" Boone asked testily.

"The Lords of Kismet rule Asia."

Boone's brown eyes narrowed. "Asia?"

"Yeah," Winslow answered, tilting his head back and gingerly holding his nose with his right hand.

"How many Lords are there?" Boone probed.

"Seven."

"Seven men control all of Asia?" Boone said skeptically.

"I never told you they were men!"

"What are they?"

"They're the Lords of Kismet."

"Don't play games with me," Boone warned. "Are the Lords of Kismet mutants?"

"I've never seen them," Winslow replied. "But I hear they're half and half."

Boone pondered the information for a bit. "What's the Conclave?"

"The Conclave of the Lords of Kismet. That's what they call their executive council, when they all get together," Corporal Winslow disclosed. He groaned and bent over again, his left arm dropping alongside his leg, his left hand curled near the bottom of his pants.

"What's TX-9?"

"You heard that too?"

"What is it?" Boone demanded.

Winslow slid his left hand under his pants leg and gripped the hilt of the survival knife strapped to his ankle. "TX-9 is a chemical toxin."

"What's it used for?"

"To kill people," Winslow said, slowly sliding the five-inch blade free from its leather scabbard.

"How does TX-9 kill?"

"I'm no chemist," Winslow retorted.

"You know more than you're telling me," Boone said. "And you'd best begin 'fessing up, right now."

Winslow pretended to cringe. "What do you want to know?"

"I want to know how all of this ties into Prudhoe Bay," Boone stated. "Why is Janus Goldmane here? What is he planning to do with the poison? And what involvement do the Lords of Kismet have in this whole affair?"

"I'm a Communications Specialist," Winslow said. "They don't confide in me."

Boone scanned the room for something he could use to bind the operator and spied a spare extension cord coiled on the table to his right.

"What will you do with me?" Winslow inquired.

"Tie you up," Boone said. "And don't make a peep until long after I'm gone, if you know what's good for you." He moved to the extension cord and reached for the coils with his left hand.

The Communications Room was abruptly rocked by the retorts of gunfire from the main corridor.

Boone turned in the direction of the shots, and as he did he caught a gleaming streak of light out of the corner of his right eye. He shifted to the left and felt something tear at his parka, and then he saw the corporal raising a knife for a second strike.

The blade never connected.

Boone rammed the Hombre barrel into Winslow's neck and squeezed the trigger, the blast propelling the corporal backwards and sending both the radio operator and the chair tumbling to the floor with a crash.

Winslow rose to his knees, his hands clamped to his ravaged throat, vainly striving to prevent his blood from spurting over his chest and spraying the communications room. He gurgled and gasped, his terrified gaze locked on the Cavalryman. His mouth twitched and he tried to speak, but only a reddish spittle issued forth.

Boone stepped up to the corporal, touched the Hombre barrel to Winslow's temple, and fired.

The corporal flipped onto his back, convulsed for half a minute, and was still.

The gunfire in the corridor had risen to a crescendo.

Boone hurried from the radio room, examining his parka on the run. The blade had torn a six-inch gash in the fabric but had missed his skin.

He reloaded the two spent rounds as he dashed to the hall door, and then paused, listening.

All was unexpectedly quiet.

What had happened?

He clasped the knob, then froze as another round of metallic chattering erupted from the corridor.

"Nail the bastards!" someone yelled.

His companions must be in trouble!

Boone turned the knob and cautiously looked out. He could see a column of HS men racing toward the front entrance, and he stepped into the hall for a better view in time to glimpse Bear disappearing out the double doors.

What was going on?

The pack of troopers was in rapid pursuit.

Boone began to follow the soldiers, when the last one in line happened to look to the rear. He saw the man's double take, and the trooper endeavored to whirl and bring a Beretta into play. Boone drilled the man in the forehead.

Because many of them were firing at the front entrance, the majority of the HS guards did not hear the sound of Boone's lone shot. But five did, and they stopped and spun, leveling their automatic rifles.

Boone squeezed off five shots in half as many seconds, backpedaling as he did, heading for the rear door, and each shot left a soldier sprawled on the gold carpet. He bumped into the door, reached back with his left hand and twisted the knob, and darted into a stairwell.

As another column of HS troopers appeared at the landing above.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Grizzly glided down the second-story corridor, his nose twitching as he tried to detect the scent of the snow shrews. He had never hunted shrews before, and he was unfamiliar with their odor, but any scent other than that of humans or dogs would be suspect. He held his hands at his sides, his fingers loose, ready for action. The hallway was quiet.

Where was everyone?

He came to an intersection a third of the way along the corridor and, on a whim, took a left. Human scent was strong here, and he easily distinguished the odors of Eric Holtmeyer and Kan Tang. The Thai was one of the most formidable humans Grizzly had ever seen, and he wondered if he would have the opportunity to test his mettle against the Oriental's martial-arts prowess.

Not that it would be much of a contest.

What chance would Tang have against ten razor-sharp claws, each a lethal weapon, collectively able to slice through bone or wood with the same ease a hunting knife could cut through butter? His claws weren't indestructible; they couldn't put a dent in metal, and he'd broken one, once, when he attempted to hack through a metal door. The claw had taken six months to regrow, and now seemed sturdier than before.

Wait a minute.

What was that?

Grizzly was a few feet from a closed door on the right, and a peculiar scent caused his nostrils to quiver. The odor was unlike anything he knew, with an odd, musty, diffuse quality. He thought he recognized fox, deer, and bear, but the individual scents were commingled and unlike those with which he was familiar. He moved to the door and tried the knob.

The door was unlocked.

He crouched, pushed the door wide, and darted into the room to the left, staying low to reduce the target he presented to potential enemies. A quick glance verified he was the only occupant, and he straightened

slowly, his eyes widening as he beheld the dozens of glassy, lifeless orbs returning his gaze.

The chamber was spacious and homey. Gold carpet covered the floor, gold paint the walls. Plush easy chairs were scattered about, with a few luxurious sofas interspersed for good measure. Situated in the center of the north wall was a large fireplace constructed of smooth, glistening stones and gold-colored mortar.

Grizzly hardly noticed.

He walked farther into the room, his attention riveted to the wall decorations.

Son of a bitch!

So this was the reason the headquarters building was called the "lodge"!

He wanted to rip Holtmeyer's guts out.

Ringed the walls, spaced at three-foot intervals, mounted on polished wooden plaques, were 36 animal heads. Exquisitely preserved, their features and pelts intact, they presented the remarkable illusion of being alive. No two were alike. There was an arctic fox in the blue phase, a huge polar bear, a caribou with a magnificent rack, a black bear, a grizzly, a moose, a musk-ox, and a Dall sheep—a tremendous ram. Mammals from other continents were on display, including a male African lion, a Siberian tiger, a South American jaguar, a gorilla, a chimpanzee, and an orangutan. Australia was represented by a red kangaroo and, of all things, a harmless koala. Mixed in with the ordinary types were a few decidedly grotesque abnormalities; mutations of common species, such as a two-headed cougar and a wolverine with four eyes.

Grizzly went from head to head, his eyes blazing, his hands partially clenching and unclenching.

This was Holtmeyer's handiwork.

He just knew it.

Which meant that Holtmeyer must consider himself to be some kind of

sportsman, a collector of trophy game, a big man with a gun.

Grizzly grinned wickedly. He'd like to turn the tables on Eric Holtmeyer, to hunt the man down and kill him just like the bastard had slain so many innocent animals and mutants. Give the creep a taste of his own medicine. Maybe even mount Holtmeyer's head on a wooden plaque.

Wouldn't that be great!

He walked to the doorway, pausing to cast a last glance at the game room. An Indian elephant was mounted on the wall to his right, and under the head was an engraved golden marker. Curious, he strolled toward the elephant head until he could read the engraving. *To Janus: With Love. Eric.*

Interesting.

Who was Janus?

Grizzly exited the chamber and turned to the right, continuing until he found another door. He shoved it open and ducked within.

Another dead end.

The room contained 14 bunk beds with footlockers at the base of every bottom bunk. He guessed it was a sleeping quarters for some of the in-house security personnel. On the left-hand wall was a rack filled with Beretta AR 70/90s.

Not much of interest.

He was about to leave, in the act of closing the door, when his gaze fell on one of the footlockers.

What was inside?

Grizzly crossed to the locker and knelt. The lid was not locked, and he lifted the top and studied the contents. Folded uniforms were stacked on the right side. On the left were trays of personal items. He ran his left hand over the objects in the uppermost tray: a pen, a pencil, a small notepad, eight pieces of yellow candy in transparent wrappers, a green ring made from a shiny green substance, and a pile of photographs.

He sorted through the pictures. Most showed a lovely woman wearing an exotic skirt and tight top. Her complexion was dark, and in the center of her forehead was a bizarre blue dot.

What in the world?

He studied her photo, perplexed. In all his travels he'd never seen attire like hers, and he certainly had never observed humans wearing dots on their forehead. Humans were weird, but he never expected them to waltz around with decorator dots adorning their faces.

Then again, they *were* humans.

Grizzly replaced the photographs and picked up the notepad. He flipped back the brown cover and stared at a page written in a foreign language. Perhaps he had made a mistake. He hadn't paid much attention to the HS personnel, and possibly he should have noted their appearance. Like Tang, some apparently came from overseas. How many? And how did Holtmeyer recruit them? The man was more of an enigma with each revelation. He wondered...

There was a scratching noise from the hallway.

Moving quickly, he replaced the notepad and lowered the lid. In two bounds he was at the doorway, peering into an empty hall. He extended his fingers, enabling his claws to slide free.

Were his ears playing tricks on him?

He debated whether to unsling the M-16, and decided against using the weapon. He preferred his claws over an automatic rifle any day, and the relatively cramped quarters in the corridor were perfect for his fighting style.

The scratching was repeated, faintly, from the far end of the hallway.

Bingo.

Grizzly slid along the hall, his hands in front of his waist, the nape of his neck tingling. He needed a good fight to take his mind off Athena.

He got one.

Eight feet from the end of the corridor was an air vent on the left wall, within six inches of the ceiling.

Grizzly neared the vent with supreme vigilance, his eyes glued to the grill. If there was a snow shrew up there, the thing might try to come at him in a rush. He advanced to within a yard of the vent and halted, sniffing the air and listening.

The grill exploded off the vent as a heavy body hurtled into the thin parallel bars from the other side, and both the grill and the furry form dropped to the floor, the grill with a crash, the furry form with silent, supple grace.

For a moment they measured one another.

Grizzly took in the tapered snout, the serrated teeth revealed by a feral snarl, the crimson-coated claws on both front feet, and the matted brown hair in a glance. He experienced a fleeting surprise that the shrew was brown and not white, and then there was no time to think, no time for anything but ferocious, primal combat.

The shrew hissed and lunged, snapping with its slavering jaws and swinging its claws with elemental abandon. Each snap was propelled by steely muscles, each swing was lightning fast. Had its foe been human, the shrew would have disemboweled its adversary in the opening seconds of the fight.

But Grizzly was more than human. Endowed with the strength and reflexes of his namesake, Grizzly evaded the shrew's raking claws and countered with slicing swipes of his own. He backed up, intentionally giving ground, forcing the shrew to reach farther, hoping the beast would become careless and expose its neck.

No such luck.

The shrew fought with a savage intensity directed by its shrewd, bestial mind. It attacked again and again and again, but it never committed a reckless act, never allowed itself to be drawn within killing range of Grizzly's claws.

The longer the fight progressed, the more uncomfortable Grizzly felt. The parka was impeding his movement, restricting his blows. Even worse,

the combat boots were affecting his balance and speed. He was not accustomed to wearing clothing, and he wished now that he hadn't. All because he wanted to impress Athena-

Growling deep in its throat, the shrew tried to spear its opponent's left leg.

Grizzly barely avoided those flashing claws. Concentrate! he berated himself. This was hardly the time for romantic introspection. He stood firm and blocked several blows, his claws clacking against the shrew's. His adrenaline was pumping, and he could feel his muscles loosening, his ferocity mounting. He forgot about Athena, forgot about his clothes, and focused exclusively on the battle, supplanting his conscious deliberation with sheer instinct.

Their claws streaked and arced in the corridor light, and each one nicked the other over a dozen times. But neither score a decisive blow until the shrew landed a lucky strike.

The beast stabbed at Grizzly's chest with its left claws, and as its foe stepped backwards to dodge the swipe, it followed with a swing of its right. Although the shrew missed Grizzly's body, its claws snagged in the parka, ripping into the fabric and catching, and in the process causing its enemy to stumble forward and almost trip.

Grizzly flung himself to the rear, too late. He experienced a burning sensation in his abdomen, and he knew the shrew had managed a hit. Blocking another slash at his stomach, he attempted to retreat, but the shrew's claws were stuck in the parka material, and now he was locked in a life-or-death struggle and unable to retreat.

Which suited him just fine.

Grizzly slammed into the shrew, bowling the creature over, his arms whipping in tight circles, burying his claws in the hairy body repeatedly, piercing the beast's face and neck and chest. He struck in a frenzy, a chill, killing rage, and he swung and swung until his arms began to tire, until the red haze before his eyes subsided and he could see the shrew clearly, until he realized he was hacking away at a corpse. He allowed his claws to retract.

The shrew had been dead for over a minute.

He straightened, breathing deeply, observing the creature's claws still stuck in his coat. Disgusted, he removed his M-16, 45's, and backpack, then stripped off the parka and dropped the garment onto the floor. The shrew's body was a mass of slashed ribbons, oozing blood from cut after cut. Its mouth was set in a defiant growl, its eyes rapidly becoming as glassy as those on the trophies in the game room.

Damn.

He'd done it!

Grizzly stood slowly, his left combat boot slipping on a patch of crimson. His temper flared, and he stripped off the boots and the pants in short order and threw them down the corridor. He vowed never to wear clothing again. His loincloth was all he needed, all he wanted.

"You can stop right there," said someone behind him sarcastically. "We don't care to see your pecker, misfit."

Grizzly turned.

Eight feet distant, their Berettas leveled, stood a pair of troopers.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Blade squeezed the trigger on the big M-60, the machine gun bucking in his arms, the thunderous blasts music to his ears as the heavy slugs smacked into the charging shrew and stopped the mutant in its tracks. Geysers of blood erupted from its body as it thrashed and convulsed, shrieking like a banshee. He stalked forward, unrelenting in his determination to exterminate the ravenous brute and prevent it from ever killing again.

The shrew, its body riddled with gaping holes, toppled from the cabinets, out of sight.

Had he finished it?

Blade moved to the left swiftly, past three rows of file cabinets, and halted at the head of the aisle into which the beast had fallen.

Four HS corpses littered the floor.

But no shrew.

He stepped to the left and checked the next aisle.

No shrew.

Where could the mutant have gone, as hurt as it was? The thing must be on its last legs. What kept it going? A thirst for revenge?

Blade stepped to the left again and gazed down the last aisle, frowning at the empty stretch of tile. He glanced at the open vent. Would the shrew attempt to escape the way it had entered? Was it back in a corner somewhere, dying?

Neither.

Hissing horribly, the shrew rounded the fourth row of cabinets on the right and hurtled at the Warrior.

Blade pivoted and cut loose when the shrew was only two feet off. The M-60 drove the shrew to its knees on the spot, riddling the mutant again and again. Still the beast endeavored to bite its prey, crawling forward, its jaws snapping. Blade pointed the M-60 at the creature's head, watching dispassionately as the cranium was perforated and chipped away by his rounds.

The shrew uttered a final cry of defiance and slumped over.

Blade let up on the trigger and moved cautiously to the mutant's side. He nudged the beast's head with his left boot, ensuring the genetic deviate was dead. Satisfied, he straightened and scrutinized the file room for sign of the second shrew.

Evidently the mate was elsewhere.

He walked to the nearest prone HS man and crouched, examining the trooper's features in profile. The complexion was swarthy and rugged, and reminded him of photographs of Arabs he'd seen in a book on the Middle

East, one of the hundreds of thousands of volumes stocked in the Family library by the Founder. Was this man really Arabic? If so, how had he wound up in Holtmeyer's employ? Did Holtmeyer recruit his HS troopers from around the globe?

There were so many questions and not enough answers.

And he wanted—he needed—answers.

Blade rose and stared at the file cabinets to his right, reading the labels affixed to the center of each drawer. R-T. U-W. X-Z. Personnel records, perhaps? He opened the X-Z drawer and found it crammed with green files. Attached to the upper left corner of every file was a red label imprinted with a name. He flipped through them, noting the names.

Uger.

Uhrich.

Umbriaco.

Valdez.

Vancaneghem.

Vaughn.

Wakely.

Wallis.

Watanabe.

Blade closed the drawer and exited the room, contemplating the significance of the names. He wasn't an expert, but they appeared to be a cross-sampling of diverse nationalities—or what would have constituted nationalities prior to the war. The more he delved into Eric Holtmeyer's organization, the more convinced he became that Holtmeyer Industries was, indeed, international in scope.

He took a left at the next junction, and then a right, wanting to put distance between the file room and himself in case reinforcements should show up to investigate the firing of the M-60. Once he was satisfied no one

was after him, he slowed and opened the next door he came to.

The room was 15 feet wide, 20 feet long. A narrow table was positioned in the middle, ringed by folding chairs. On the far wall was an enormous map of the world, and stuck in the map were over a hundred multicolored pins, reds and blues and greens.

Was this a briefing room? Why was it located on the top floor instead of on the bottom, in general proximity to the Command Center? And what was with all the pins?

Blade crossed to the wall and peered at the map, and as he did a pattern emerged. The pins were all stuck in cities, and the majority were in Asia. Europe had only eighteen pins, Africa twelve. There were none marking South America, and only four in all of North America.

What did the pins denote?

Most of the pins in Asia were red, intermixed with a few blues and greens. Curiously enough, most of the pins in Europe were blue or green. In North America, there was a green pin in Miami, a green pin in Atlanta, another green pin in Chicago, and a red pin at Prudhoe Bay.

Why the variation in colors?

Why were the reds concentrated in Asia?

The mystery grew every second.

He scratched his chin with his left hand, pondering the map. Previous runs with his fellow Warriors had taken him to Miami, Atlanta, and Chicago. Miami was a haven for drug dealers; drugs were now legal there, and a cartel supplied the residents with an unlimited quantity of any kind the people desired. Atlanta was a city-state ruled by autocratic humanists, where free thought and expression had been replaced by strict adherence to a rigid manifesto to so-called human rights. And Chicago was in the control of dictatorial technocrats who treated their citizens as material commodities, and who had forsaken any pretense at adhering to basic, traditional values.

What connection was there between Holtmeyer Industries and those three cities?

Why were the pins in Miami, Atlanta, and Chicago green, but Prudhoe Bay's red?

Blade walked to the door and gave a last glance at the map. He wondered if the others had discovered any important clues to Holtmeyer's operation. Still musing, he closed the door and ambled down the corridor until he reached a junction.

He'd taken much longer than he should have. Which way now?

The decision was made for him by the sound of gunfire, a muted series of retorts emanating from his right. He jogged to the end of the hall, stopping between a door on either side. Opting for the left-hand door, he shoved it open to find a lounge with a picture window on the opposite wall.

The shots were louder.

He hurried to the window and stared out. Unlike the Command Center window, this one wasn't tinted. He could see a flurry of activity three floors below, with over troopers and half as many dogs converging on the building at the run.

Why?

Blade craned his neck for a glimpse of the base of the lodge, but the angle prevented him from ascertaining the reason for the tumult. Uneasy for the safety of his companions, he dashed from the lounge and tried the right-hand door, which afforded access to a stairwell. This was not the same stairwell he'd climbed earlier, he realized, and he took the steps three at a stride. At the bottom was a door with a small window in the upper panel. He was about to fling the door wide, when he happened to glance through the window and spied the three people on the other side. Instantly he ducked down, fingering the M-60's trigger.

Had they seen him?

He counted to ten and inched upward until he could see the trio again. They were engrossed in a conversation and had not observed his face at the window. He peeked in both directions, judging that he was on the north side of the wide corridor adjoining the Command Center, and about seven feet from the front entrance to the building. Soldiers were hurrying

back and forth, giving the three figures a wide berth.

What were they saying?

Blade grasped the knob and ever so slowly rotated it until he could ease the door inward a crack. He pressed his right ear to the edge and eavesdropped.

"—one of them has been captured," Colonel Varney was talking. "I just received word the mutant is in custody."

"Is that all?" Eric Holtmeyer responded.

"We're lucky we've caught even one," Lalita Pruty said. "We're not dealing with amateurs here."

"What the hell started it?" Holtmeyer queried angrily.

"We don't know yet," Varney replied.

"Who cares?" Lalita asked. "We have more important matters to concern ourselves with."

"Such as?" Holtmeyer said.

"Such as not allowing any of the Force to leave Prudhoe Bay alive," Lalita stated. "Such as adhering to our time schedule, and ensuring the first batch of TX-9 is properly mixed at 0300."

"Do you think they found out about the TX-9?" Holtmeyer inquired.

"How could they?" Lalita rejoined. "They have no idea what we're up to."

"Will the mixing always be performed at the ten-mile Pump Station?" Colonel Varney asked.

"Of course," Lalita said.

"Why don't we set up the mixing machinery at the Alyeska Pump Station?" Holtmeyer wanted to know. "It's closer."

"The mixing is a continuous operation. TX-9 must continually be

added to the crude," Lalita replied. "What if there's a mistake?"

"I—" Holtmeyer began.

"If done incorrectly, we could end up with a toxic cloud on our hands," Lalita cut him off. "Every living soul at Prudhoe Bay would be wiped out."

"But—" Holtmeyer said.

"Never forget the scope of our operation," Lalita chided. "The cost is staggering, but think of the rewards. North America will be ours after we succeed!"

"I didn't mean to—"

"We'll proceed exactly as planned, gentlemen," Lalita declared. "If we could have added the TX-9 to California's own crude, we would have done so. But we require unregulated mass production to succeed."

"Our success hinges on the Federation's acceptance of the deal," Colonel Varney commented.

"They'll accept," Lalita said.

"How can you be so certain?" Holtmeyer queried.

"They can't afford not to accept our proposal," Lalita mentioned.

"But the Federation leaders will be suspicious if the Force is killed," Holtmeyer observed.

"Not if we can come up with a believable excuse."

"Like what?"

Lalita Pruty laughed. "Must I think of everything? Can't you attend to one piddling detail?"

"There have been several polar bears hanging around the dump," Colonel Varney said. "We could arrange to have the bodies of the Force mauled."

"Only if they don't die of gunshot wounds," Lalita responded. "We'd

have a hard time disguising a bullet hole."

"Not if the corpses were partially eaten," Varney said.

"Hmmm," Lalita replied. "Your suggestion has merit. Let's wait and see if they're taken alive, as I ordered."

There was the sound of boots thumping on the floor, drawing nearer.

"Yes, Captain?" Colonel Varney said.

"I've located a witness to the initial shooting."

"Is this him?" Varney asked.

"Yes, sir," the captain replied.

"What's your name and rank, boy?" Varney demanded.

"Tech First Class Ruark," a new voice answered.

"And you saw the shooting begin?" Colonel Varney asked the tech.

"Yes, sir. I was just about to leave the Command Center to go get a new box of computer paper."

"What did you see?" Varney pressed him.

"I saw the big black guy shoot one of our men. I couldn't believe it. The black just up and shot him."

"The black Force member? Bear?"

"Is that his name? All I know is that he was a large black."

"And you're positive that he shot one of our men first?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you overhear their conversation?"

"No, sir. I only had the door open a crack, and I closed it right away. And then all that gunfire broke out. I was so stunned, I didn't know what

to do. I heard you get on the horn and order a squad to the main corridor, and seconds later Mr. Holtmeyer and you rushed past me, but by then the Force was outside. I'm sorry."

"You did well," Colonel Varney said. "You're a tech, not a trooper. You're not accustomed to bloodshed."

"You can say that again, sir."

"That will be all. Continue with the search, Captain."

"Yes, sir."

The boots hastened away.

"Why would Bear shoot one of our men?" Holtmeyer inquired, obviously perplexed.

"Why do you persist in asking such stupid questions?" Lalita retorted. "The reason for the shooting is unimportant. What is crucial is that we compensate and forge ahead as planned."

"What should we do about our prisoner?" Colonel Varney queried.

"I will question the prisoner personally," Lalita Pruty declared.

"I could handle it," Holtmeyer offered.

"You couldn't handle a wet dream."

"Why are you getting on my case?" Holtmeyer asked. "I'm doing exactly as you said."

"Yes, you are playing the part magnificently. But never forget that you are a very minor player in the grand scheme of things. My scheme. And if you foul up, I'll feed you to the polar bears."

"I won't foul up."

"We'll see," Lalita said.

There was a commotion as someone ran in from the front entrance. "Colonel!"

"Yes, Sergeant."

"The woman has been taken. Her three comrades are pinned down a mile east of here. And one of them is injured, sir."

"Excellent. Which one has been injured?"

"The black, sir."

"How fitting."

"Sir?"

"Nothing. Lead the way. I want to be there when we nail the sons of bitches."

"Yes, sir."

Blade heard Varney and the sergeant hasten out the double doors. His forehead creased as he tried to make sense of the conversation. One fact was evident and filled him with alarm; his team was in dire straits. Grizzly and Athena were prisoners, and Bear and two others, probably Havoc and Thunder, were trapped a mile away. Who should he try to help first? He had no idea where to find Grizzly and Athena, and HS troops were swarming...

He suddenly knew he wasn't alone.

A feeling of impending danger caused him to spin, to turn toward the stairs, and his pulse quickened as he spotted the looming presence of Kan Tang perched on the bottom step. He tried to rise, to bring the M-60 to bear, but his contemplation had dulled his awareness and retarded his reflexes. He saw the Thai's right foot arcing at his head.

The universe exploded in brilliant pinwheels of bright lights and dazzling hues as a ten-ton boulder slammed into his right temple, and then he was devoured by a black hole.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Sergeant Havoc took out the Dobermans first with a burst from his M-16, then whipped the barrel in a semicircle and flattened the six troopers before they had a chance to return his fire. He kept going, vaulting over a prostrate form and heading to the east.

Another group of soldiers and three dogs were 70 yards to the south and approaching on the run.

Havoc glanced back. Thunder was a yard behind him, and Athena and Bear were just rounding the corner. "Move it!" he urged them, racing all out. He could see the eastern perimeter of the fence, 100 yards to the east. If they could get past the fence, if they could get into the open, they'd be better able to lose their pursuers. The south wall of the headquarters building was 50 yards in length, so for 50 yards they would be screened from threats to the north. They were still vulnerable on three sides, but three was better than four.

Twenty-five yards were covered as the Force grimly raced for their lives.

"Behind us!" Athena suddenly yelled.

Havoc looked around, his eyes widening at the sight of a jeep sweeping around the southwest corner, its tires spinning, snow flying in a powdery spray. "Get down!" he shouted.

They dove for the ground, and not a moment too soon.

The trooper manning the .50-caliber machine gun mounted behind the driver's seat opened up, blasting at the Force as the jeep slewed to the right. The vehicle's motion caused the swivel gun to sway, throwing the gunner's aim off. His rounds punched into the wall three feet above the members of the Force.

Thunder propped his elbows in the snow, aimed, and squeezed off a single shot.

Reacting as if a sledgehammer had smashed into his forehead, the gunner threw his arms into the air and catapulted from the jeep.

Thunder fired again.

The windshield dissolved in a shower of splintery fragments, and the driver pitched to the right, slumping down. Undirected, the jeep looped to the right, its speed diminishing to a crawl.

"Go!" Havoc barked.

The Force members were up and running in an instant.

Sergeant Havoc looked to the south, concerned. The jeep had delayed them, and now the pack closing in was only 60 yards away.

"There're more behind us!" Athena cried.

"Keep going!" Havoc responded. He could hear the crack-crack-crack of the HS weapons and the loud thumps as the wall to his left was hit repeatedly. Miniature geysers of snow spewed into the air near his feet. Sooner or later, the HS men would get the range. He preferred later.

Athena and Bear spun and fired short bursts to discourage the troopers on their tail, then resumed sprinting eastward.

So far, so good.

Sergeant Havoc slowed slightly as he neared the southeast corner of the structure. There could be soldiers lurking on the other side. He abruptly ran faster, and when he was within six feet of the corner he launched himself forward, twisting to the left as he cleared the building, his finger on the trigger.

His prudence paid off.

A pair of troopers were waiting in ambush around the corner. They had their Berettas to their shoulders, ready to fire at chest-height or higher targets.

Havoc sailed into view at waist level, spraying them as he dropped, his slugs ripping into their abdomens and doubling them over. They were flung to the ground, the tallest of the duo screaming, the second clutching his stomach and blubbering hysterically. Havoc landed and immediately surged erect.

Thunder, Athena, and Bear joined him, and they paused for a second, surveying the surrounding fields, taking their bearings.

There were HS to their rear.

There were HS to the south.

And a squad of troopers abruptly materialized to the north, coming into view around the northeast corner.

"This ain't my idea of fun," Bear quipped.

"The fence," Sergeant Havoc said, and they were off.

An HS sergeant to the south unexpectedly halted and cupped his left hand to his mouth. In his right was a walkie-talkie. "Take them alive if possible! Goldmane wants prisoners!"

"Who the hell is Goldmane?" Athena asked, puffing as she ran.

"Whoever the sucker is, you owe him a kiss," Bear remarked.

"I don't owe anybody anything," Athena responded.

"Except Grizzly," Bear said.

"Don't start," Athena warned.

"How can you two idiots argue at a time like this?", Havoc asked, his legs thrashing in the knee-deep snow.

"Women can argue anywhere," Bear replied. "It's in their nature. They're a bunch of bitchy wenches."

Athena glared at the Clansman. "When this is over, I plan to bop you on the mouth."

"See what I mean?" Bear declared.

They sprinted in silence for 20 yards.

"The pricks ain't gainin' on us," Bear commented.

"They're in no rush," Sergeant Havoc said. "They know the fence will slow us down enough for them to catch up."

"Will it?" Athena queried anxiously.

"Maybe not," Havoc told her. "I have four surprises in my pockets."

"Is it food?" Bear inquired.

"No."

"Too bad. I'm hungry."

"We have an army on our tail and you're thinking of food?" Havoc said.

"He can't help himself," Athena remarked. "He's a man. All men ever think about is food and sex."

"I'm a man, and I think about more than food and sex," Thunder mentioned.

"You don't count," Athena said.

"Why not?" the Flathead asked.

"You have a brain."

"Are you sayin' I don't?" Bear demanded.

"Let me put it this way," Athena quipped, forging through the snow. "If you're ever short on cash, you can rent out the space between your ears for storage."

They traversed another 20 yards.

Sergeant Havoc looked at the fence, 30 feet distant, and then at the HS troopers bearing down on them. He estimated the nearest soldier would be 50 feet off when the Force reached the chain-link enclosure. There wouldn't be time to try and cut a hole, as he'd expected. He would have to use one of his surprise packages.

"Unleash the dogs!" someone hollered to their rear.

"I'll waste the mutts," Bear volunteered, slowing.

"That won't be necessary," Sergeant Havoc stated, and halted, his right hand reaching into his parka pocket.

The others stopped and watched him quizzically, nervously.

Havoc produced a hand grenade and smiled. "This is our ticket out of here."

"Let 'er fly," Bear said.

Three dogs, a Doberman and two German shepherds, were bounding toward the Force from the south.

"Down!" Havoc yelled, pulling the pin and lobbing the grenade at the fence. He flattened, placing his arms over his head for added protection.

"They have grenades!" one of the HS men exclaimed.

The explosion was tremendous, and shards of metallic fencing, bits of barbed wire, and snow were blown in all directions.

Havoc felt the concussion buffet his clothing, and then he was up and running for the gaping hole in the fence. He leaped over a twisted section of chain-link and turned, intending to cover his teammates. None of the HS had fired a shot since the sergeant's proclamation about taking the Force prisoner, and Havoc hoped their luck would hold.

It didn't.

The three dogs had stopped when the grenade detonated, but they now sprang toward the fleeing quartet, rhythmically rising and falling as their lean forms loped gracefully across the field. They were seasoned canines, superbly trained, and acclimatized to the wintery terrain. Barking fiercely, they seldom floundered as they narrowed the gap.

Thunder halted alongside Havoc.

"Go!" Athena urged, waving them on. "We'll take care of the dogs."

Havoc reached into his parka pocket again. "I can use a grenade."

"Save the grenades for when we really need them," Athena advised.
"Now go!"

Havoc and Thunder hesitated.

Athena spun, aimed, and fired.

Bear cut loose from the hip.

Two of the charging dogs were knocked offstride and toppled into the snow. One of the German shepherds veered to the left, unscathed.

"My dog!" an onrushing HS trooper cried, and squeezed off three rounds.

"We want them alive!" the sergeant bellowed.

Sergeant Havoc was about to resume his race for freedom. His eyes turned to Bear and he froze.

The Clansman was bent over, his left hand pressed to his right shoulder, gritting his teeth in anguish, his M-16 on the ground.

"Bear!" Havoc declared, and reached him in three strides. "You've been hit!"

"What was your first clue?" Bear asked, and winced.

"How bad is it?" Havoc inquired.

"Bad," Bear admitted. "It hurts like hell."

Sergeant Havoc looped his right arm under the Clansman's left arm.
"Come on. I'll support you."

"Get out of here," Bear said. "You'll never get away lugging me along."

"We will if we work together," Thunder chimed in, stepping close to Bear's right side and bracing the Clansman about the waist. "Let's hurry."

Havoc and Thunder propelled Bear to the east. The noncom looked back.

"Athena! Move your butt!"

She was standing in the center of the ravaged section of fence, her features grim. "Go! Get Bear out of here! I'll hold them for a minute."

"No," Havoc said.

"There's no time to debate the issue," Athena stated. "Just go!"

Havoc frowned and gripped Bear tightly. "Let's go." They bore the big man for 25 yards, and Havoc glanced over his left shoulder.

Athena was holding her M-16 at waist level, eyeing the line of soldiers cautiously converging on her.

"Shoot!" Havoc said. "Why doesn't she shoot?"

She finally did, raising the automatic rifle and firing a half-dozen rounds. Four troopers dropped. She unexpectedly lowered the weapon, staring at the M-16 in evident frustration, her left hand tugging on the magazine.

"Something's wrong," Thunder declared.

"Get out of there!" Sergeant Havoc yelled.

Athena tossed the M-16 aside and pivoted, her eyes locking on her three companions. She took several paces in their direction.

"Come on!" Bear said softly. "You can do it!"

The German Shepherd streaked out of the south, seeming to appear out of nowhere, slamming into Athena and bowling her over. The dog clamped its powerful jaws on her left wrist, holding her down as she struggled in vain, punching the shepherd with her right fist.

"Let's help her!" Bear stated, trying to move to her aid.

"No," Havoc said, forcing the Clansman backwards. "There's nothing we can do for her now. Later, maybe."

"That's what you said about Blade and the others," Bear grouched.

"And I'm right," Havoc insisted.

They hastened to the east. Minutes elapsed.

Thunder looked back, his brow furrowing. "They are not chasing us."

"What?" Havoc responded, stopping and turning his head.

"Why'd they let us go?" Bear asked.

"I doubt they did," Sergeant Havoc answered. "They must have an ace in the hole."

"Perhaps they expect the snow shrews to do their work for them," Thunder commented.

Havoc scanned the sea of snow encompassing them. "I forgot all about them. We'd better find a defensible position."

"In the middle of nowhere?" Bear said.

"If we have to, we'll build a snow cave to hide in," Havoc proposed.

They trudged onward.

"I didn't realize the land is so flat up here," Sergeant Havoc observed after five minutes.

"Flat and *cold*," Bear said. "Who would want to live in a land like this?"

"Eskimos," Havoc replied.

"Eski-who?"

"The Eskimos," Thunder repeated before Sergeant Havoc could answer. "They were the original inhabitants of this land, until the whites came along and shouldered them aside."

"Are there any of these Eskimos left?" Bear inquired.

"I don't know," Thunder said. "Perhaps the radiation killed them. Perhaps they all traveled to the south after the war."

"Or maybe Holtmeyer wiped out any Eskimos living in the vicinity of Prudhoe Bay when he arrived," Sergeant Havoc speculated.

Five more minutes expired.

"How are you holding up?" Havoc asked Bear.

"Just dandy."

"We should take a look at your wound."

"It can wait."

"Are you sure?"

"The pain ain't as bad," Bear said. "I can keep going. You can let me go now."

"Not yet," Havoc stated, and grinned. "We don't want you falling down on the job."

Thunder stopped and raised his head. "Listen."

"I don't hear anything," Havoc said.

"Me neither," Bear added.

"Listen," Thunder reiterated.

Havoc cocked his head and waited, and a second later an odd buzzing arose from the west.

"I hear something now," Bear commented. "Sounds like a herd of bumblebees."

Sergeant Havoc released the Clansman and faced their back trail. "I knew they had an ace in the hole."

"What makes that noise?" Thunder queried.

"You'll see in a moment," Havoc said. "This is as far as we go."

Thunder and Bear exchanged puzzled expressions.

Dark dots became visible to the west, rapidly growing larger as they neared the three Force members. The buzzing increased in volume, a raucous intrusion on the pristine wilderness.

"What *are* those things?" Bear asked in wonder.

"Snowmobiles," Sergeant Havoc declared.

Bear marveled at the speed the snowmobiles displayed. He removed his left hand from his shoulder and grimaced. "Looks like we're in serious doo-doo."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"Keep staring at me, you turkeys, and I can guarantee I'll rip your eyes out after I get down from here."

One of the quartet of HS troopers posted as guards laughed. "Do you hear this chump?" he asked his companions. "This jackass thinks he'll be alive when we take him down!"

All four soldiers expressed mirth at the notion.

"By the time Goldmane is done with you, there won't be enough of you left to fill a shoe box," the first guard taunted.

Grizzly gritted his teeth and glared.

"Ohhhh, my!" the first guard said in a whining falsetto. "You're scaring poor little me to death!"

"Have your fun while you can," Grizzly growled. "My time will come."

"You're out of time, stupid."

Grizzly looked down at the floor, striving to control his mounting rage. Not yet! Not yet! He was close to the edge emotionally, and he knew what

would happen if he went berserk. Patience was called for, at least for the time being. He surveyed the chamber for the tenth time since his incarceration, reviewing his capture and noting the dimensions of the room in preparation for his escape.

The pair of HS responsible for capturing him had escorted him to the nearest stairwell, wisely keeping their distance, never allowing him to get closer than eight feet. They prudently maintained a safety zone between their prisoner and themselves in case he decided to attack. They'd seen how quick he was, and they kept eight feet away to ensure they could empty their Berettas into him before he reached them. On the stairwell they'd encountered a squad of eight HS, and he was promptly taken to the first floor and confined in a chamber located east of the Command Center. The room was 20 feet by 20 and contained one item of furniture, a six-foot metal table. On the west wall, virtually invisible unless someone knew they were there, were four sets of recessed metal rings. A trooper had opened one of the drawers ringing the underside of the table and produced a pair of steel manacles with chains 12 inches in length. Nine of the soldiers had covered the mutant while the tenth applied the manacles to his wrists, then led him to the west wall and secured the ends of the chains to a set of metal rings, using a viselike oval lock designed specifically for such a purpose.

And here he was, strung up like a lamb awaiting slaughter.

Grizzly smiled and gazed at the four guards standing near the door.

"What's so damn funny, ugly?" one of them demanded.

"Your face."

The guard pointed his Beretta at the mutant.

"Don't even think it!" admonished another. "Goldmane will have you executed if you shoot him."

"He's a freak. He should be destroyed," opined the trigger-happy trooper.

"We don't touch him," directed the first guard.

"Thanks," Grizzly interjected.

"For what?" inquired the soldier.

"For not touching me. I don't want your cooties."

The trigger-happy trooper waved his Beretta. "Let me slug him. Just once. Please."

"Grow up," snapped the fourth soldier.

The door opened abruptly, and in walked Athena Morris, her left wrist in a bandage.

"Athena!" Grizzly exclaimed, straining against his manacles.

"Grizzly!" she declared, taking several strides toward him.

"Isn't this touching?" quipped the trigger-happy trooper.

Three more HS entered the chamber, the third with thin gold bars attached to his parka at the shoulders.

The quartet snapped to attention.

"What's so touching, Private?" the man sporting the insignia demanded.

"Nothing, Captain," Trigger-happy replied nervously. "We were just having some fun with the prisoner, sir."

"Your responsibility is to guard him, not have fun with him," the officer remarked.

"Yes, sir."

The captain glanced at Athena. "Wait over there," he stated gruffly, pointing at the metal table.

Athena complied, her eyes on Grizzly every step of the way. She bumped into the table and halted, eight feet from the hybrid.

"What happened to you?" he asked.

"A German shepherd," she said simply.

"Show me which one later," Grizzly told her.

Athena scanned him from head to toe. "Are you okay?"

"No complaints."

"Have you seen Blade or Boone?"

"They took the afternoon off to go fishing."

Despite their predicament, Athena smiled. She looked at the HS men, who were all standing at attention near the open door—except for the officer, and he was staring into the corridor. Then she walked over to Grizzly. "I'm so sorry," she said softly.

"For what? I'm the one who's been acting like a jerk."

"I have something I want to say to you."

"There's no need," he said.

"Yes, there is. I must get this off my chest before it's too late."

Grizzly gazed into her eyes. "Athena, I wa..."

She held up her right hand, cutting him off. "Let me have my say first. If I don't tell you the truth now, I never will." Pausing, she took a deep breath and plunged ahead. "We've both been behaving terribly. We've both been afraid to admit our feelings."

"I'm not afraid of anything," Grizzly said.

"Then why haven't you admitted that you love me?"

The blunt question caught Grizzly unawares. He blinked a few times, stunned by her unexpected frankness, and opened his mouth to speak, but closed it again.

"Well?" Athena prodded him.

"You don't know what you're talking about."

She reached out and touched his chest. "Please, Grizzly, no more

games. This might be our last chance to talk. Everyone knows we care for each other—"

"Sure. We're friends," he said, interrupting.

"We're more than friends," Athena corrected. "You started treating everyone like dirt after I began dating Captain Slater."

"Coincidence."

"Was it? I want the truth."

Grizzly averted his gaze.

"I want the truth," Athena persisted. "Everybody believes we're in love, and I need to—"

"Who says we're in love?" Grizzly snapped.

"Everybody."

"Who?"

"Bear, for one."

Grizzly made a hissing noise. "I'll teach that bozo to stick his big nose in where it doesn't belong."

"Havoc and Thunder feel the same way, and I suspect Blade does too."

"They shouldn't butt in."

Athena placed her right hand on his left shoulder. "Are they right?"

"This is a hell of a time to bring the subject up."

"Answer me," she said, goading him. "Please. Do you love me?" Grizzly stared at the floor for 30 seconds, his features reflecting an ineffable sadness. He lifted his head and looked at her, about to respond.

"What have we here?" inquired a new voice, a female voice laced with acidic contempt.

Athena and Grizzly glanced at the doorway.

Lalita Pruty was sauntering into the chamber, her hands on her hips, a smirk creasing her red lips. "Have I interrupted something?"

Athena stepped backwards, her hands dropping to her sides. "No," she said sheepishly.

Lalita snickered and moved to the right, motioning at the door with her left hand. "I've brought one of your playmates."

Kan Tang materialized in the doorway, effortlessly bearing Blade in his arms.

Athena gasped and took a stride toward them. "Blade!"

"He's alive, my dear," Lalita said. "For the moment." She looked at the Thai and nodded.

Tang walked to the west wall and deposited the Warrior on the floor within a yard of Grizzly.

"What have you done to him?" Athena queried.

"Tang gave him a demonstration of muay thai," Lalita replied, and laughed.

Eric Holtmeyer strolled into the room and folded his arms across his chest. "Three down and four to go."

"Holtmeyer!" Athena declared. "You must realize the gravity of the mistake you're committing. If you release us now, unharmed, the Federation still might be receptive to your deal."

"Surely you jest," Holtmeyer said disdainfully.

"If you kill us, the Federation will never accept your offer," Athena mentioned.

"The matter is out of my hands."

"Be reasonable. Slaying us will ruin any chance you have."

Holtmeyer sighed. "When I said the matter is out of my hands, I meant it."

"I don't understand," Athena stated.

"Of course you don't, simpleton," Lalita Pruty snapped. "Would you like a clue?"

"A clue?" Athena repeated, confused.

"A demonstration," Lalita clarified. "Watch." She looked at Eric Holtmeyer. "On your knees."

To Athena's utter astonishment, Holtmeyer promptly sank to his knees.

"Kiss my boots," Lalita commanded.

Holtmeyer shuffled to her on his knees, then leaned down and kissed her white boots.

"What?" Athena blurted out, confounded.

Lalita Pruty cackled.

Athena's eyes narrowed. "Holtmeyer isn't in charge.

"You're not as dumb as you look," Pruty said, then glanced at Holtmeyer. "Get up."

Eric obeyed and moved to the right.

"You've been playing a game with us," Athena commented.

"Not at all," Lalita replied. "I've simply taken certain precautions to ensure my true identity remained a secret. But now it doesn't matter."

"Your true identity?"

Lalita walked to within a yard of Athena. "My name isn't Lalita Pruty."

"It isn't? Why would you give us a fictitious name?"

"Because I've acquired a degree of notoriety in my line of work, a fame

commensurate with my accomplishments. In Asia my name is well known. My masters were concerned that someone in the Federation might have heard of me, so they decided I should use a fictitious name on this assignment."

"Your masters?"

"The Lords of Kismet."

"Who are they? What is their connection to Prudhoe Bay?"

The woman who had called herself Lalita Pruty smirked. "The Lords of Kismet want the Freedom Federation destroyed, and who better to oversee the Federation's destruction than their Exalted Executioner?"

Athena pressed her right palm to her forehead. "This is all part of a plot to destroy the Federation?"

"You're beginning to comprehend."

"But why? Who are the Lords of Kismet? Why do they want the Federation wiped out?"

"The Lords of Kismet govern Asia, and they have plans to extend their domination into North America. Naturally they would need to eradicate all groups capable of opposing their will, and the Freedom Federation is uppermost on their list. Your Federation is the single greatest threat to the execution of their goal."

"But what about the Russians, the Technics, and the Superiors? There are a dozen groups trying to gain control of North America."

"True. But the groups you mention are atheistic or humanistic in their social orientation. The Federation adheres to traditional values, particularly the Family. The people in the Home believe in faith in a supreme Spirit, and in the ultimate value of love and wisdom."

Athena's forehead furrowed in confusion. "What difference do their beliefs make?"

"Their beliefs make all the difference in the world," Pruty said. "I don't expect a liberal journalist like yourself to comprehend my meaning, but

Blade would. If he was awake, he could explain the reason fully. Blade, by the way, is number one on my hit list."

Athena glanced at the unconscious Warrior, then at the platinum-haired woman with the blonde streak running through the center of her tresses. "What did Blade do to deserve such an honor?"

"Blade stands for everything my masters despise."

"In what way?"

The Exalted Executioner sighed. "I'm not here to conduct a course in Fundamental Truths, or to enlighten you on the ways of the world. I have business to attend to, commencing right now." She glanced at Kan Tang. "Chain Blade to the wall."

The Thai nodded.

"And remove his weapons," the real commander of Prudhoe Bay directed. Then she turned to the captain. "Secure Ms. Morris to the table."

"Right away," the officer responded.

Smiling sweetly, the Executioner faced Athena. "Oh. Before I forget, I should introduce myself. Janus Goldmane, at your service."

Athena saw the captain and two troopers walking toward her, and she inadvertently shivered as a ripple of stark fear undulated up and down her spine.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Think fast!

"Down here!" Boone shouted. "One of the shrews is in the hall!"

The column of HS was led by a beefy sergeant. He hastened down the

stairs to the Cavalryman's side. "You say one of the damn things is in the main corridor?"

"It was a minute ago," Boone assured him. "I was lucky to get out with my life."

"We'll take care of the lousy freak," the sergeant assured the gunman, and looked over his left shoulder at the ten men behind him. "Let's go! One of the shrews is on the other side of this door." He yanked on the doorknob and dashed into the hallway.

Their faces set in grim lines, the rest of the squad followed their noncom.

Boone took off up the stairwell. His ruse had worked, had bought him a few precious seconds, perhaps a minute at the most. The sergeant would discover the truth as soon as he examined the bodies in the corridor and realized the troopers had died from gunshot wounds and not teeth or claw marks. So where should he go?

He knew Blade and Grizzly were on the upper floors. His best bet was to find them. At the second-floor landing he opened the door and scanned the hall.

Where was Grizzly?

Boone jogged along the hallway until he came to an intersection. Frustrated, he looked to the left and the right. Which way would Grizzly have taken? He opted for the right, and sprinted 15 yards to another junction. Without hesitating he took another right, and shortly thereafter he found himself opening the door to another stairwell.

The place was like a maze. Footsteps sounded from above.

Boone descended the stairs rapidly to find a pair of doors at the bottom. A door on the right afforded access to one more corridor. He opened the door on the left and blinked as brilliant sunlight and a chill wind engulfed him.

Should he stay inside or venture outdoors?

He heard the loud thumping of boots overhead, drawing nearer, and

decided on the spur of the moment to step outside and swiftly close the door. He calculated he was on the east side of the headquarters building, and he could hear gunfire arising from the south. Havoc and the others must be in serious trouble. He took several strides to the south, and then glimpsed a group of soldiers and three dogs near the southern perimeter of the fence. They were making a beeline for the south side of the building.

Boone hesitated. He doubted that the soldiers to the south had spied him yet, but they would if he remained in the open. If he tried to rejoin Havoc and the rest, he might find himself caught between the troopers coming down the stairwell and the group on the south side. His best bet was to evade capture, then find his friends. He turned and ran to the north, past the stairwell door, and covered ten yards.

Another door! This one next to a section of corrugated metal wall.

Elated, he tugged on the knob, jerking the door wide and slipping inside. His right hand on his Hombre, he pulled the door closed, leaving a crack to peer through. He saw the stairwell door open and a trooper stepped outside. The soldier looked both ways, then went back in.

Boone breathed a sigh of relief. The jackass hadn't bothered to check the snow for tracks. He could try and help his companions, but first he took 30 seconds to reload his Hombre.

Voices sounded to his rear.

The gunman spun, taking in his surroundings. He was in a dark, gloomy chamber, the exact size of which was difficult to gauge, but he judged the room to be quite large. Unfamiliar shapes loomed in the darkness. He recognized a row of stacked crates and darted behind them.

In the nick of time.

Overhead lights abruptly flicked on, illuminating a spacious concrete floor and a vaulted, corrugated metal ceiling. On the west side was a workbench crammed with various tools. Parked between the crates and the workbench were eight strange vehicles.

Boone crouched low, listening.

"—see some action at last!"

"You're a fool, Billy."

"I am not."

"Only a fool would want to see action," the second speaker said to the man called Billy.

"But we're HS. We're trained to kick ass. It's what we're paid for, Pat."

"I know. But you're young. You have a lot to learn."

"Such as?"

"Such as not being so gung ho. You need to learn to kick back and relax. Don't be in such a hurry to get yourself killed. Put in your time, and that's it. The important thing is to stay alive."

Billy snickered. "You're getting senile, Pat. All you want to do is play it safe."

"I've lived this long because I do play it safe," Pat replied. "I never volunteer for a hazardous assignment."

"I don't care what you say. I still hope we see some action soon."

"Kids," Pat muttered. "Let's check the snowmobiles, like the lieutenant told us to do."

Snowmobiles? Was that the name for those short, squat, sledlike vehicles? Boone heard the clatter of tools being used, and he risked a peek around the left side of the crate screening him. Two men in white uniforms were engaged in inspecting the two rows of snowmobiles.

"This one can use some oil," the younger of the pair announced.

"You know where it is," responded the older man.

Boone ducked from sight. Should he plug those bozos and head out the door, or wait and...

More voices arose, drawing nearer.

The gunman peered past the crate.

HS were filling into the chamber. Ten. Twelve. Thirteen in all. Half of them carried Berettas slung over their shoulders.

Were they after him?

The soldiers congregated near the workbench.

"Did you hear about the shrews?" one of them asked.

"Shrews, hell. Did you hear about those clowns from the Force?" responded another.

"What about them?" queried a third.

"I heard they took out some of our guys a few minutes ago," the second trooper elaborated.

"Why would they do that? I thought they were here on a peaceful mission."

"How the hell should I know why they did it? I'm only relaying the word I got from Freddie in the Command Center. He gave me a buzz—"

"Your friend Freddie?" said yet a different soldier, interrupting. "Fat Freddie, the tech?"

"Yeah."

"And you expect us to believe a story Freddie told you?"

"Why wouldn't you?"

"Because Freddie is known for playing practical jokes. He likes to feed gullible jerks like you a line of bull."

"No, man. He was telling the truth. He said there was a fight in the main corridor, and that the Force chumps were being chased by our security forces outside."

The skeptical trooper laughed. "You'd believe anything, you know that?"

"Then why was the alarm sounded?"

"Because a bunch of damn snow shrews breached the perimeter fence, you dope."

"Don't call me a dope, you son of a bitch."

"How would you like this Beretta shoved up your ass?"

"By you and what army?"

"Children, please!" snapped a burly soldier. "We were told to wait here for the lieutenant. If he comes in and finds us fighting, he'll be pissed off. And you know what happens when the lieutenant is pissed off at us."

"We get extra duty," remarked another.

"Right," said the burly trooper. "So don't start going at it until you're off duty."

Boone listened impatiently as the HS men began discussing their respective sexual prowess in obviously exaggerated terms. The minutes passed. He chafed at the delay, wanting to be with his companions instead of cooped up in the dank garage. The door was 15 feet away, and it might as well be at the North Pole for all the good it did him. There was no way he could reach the exit unnoticed.

He was trapped.

More time elapsed, and the Cavalryman shifted uncomfortably on his haunches, crouching in the shelter of the wooden crates. How much longer would he be pinned down, of no use to anyone? He was on the verge of making a dash to the door in a desperate gambit to reach his friends, when a newcomer arrived in the garage.

The lieutenant. He was a youthful officer, radiating an aura of self-importance and authority. "Listen up, men!" he barked as he hustled into the garage through a door situated to the left of the workbench.

With drilled military precision, the troopers quickly formed into a straight line, standing at attention.

"Three members of the Force are fleeing, on foot, to the east. We've been ordered to overtake them and return them to headquarters. Colonel

Varney is going with us, and we'll pick him up at the southeast corner. He'll ride with me. Any questions?" the lieutenant related briskly.

"Then it's true, sir?" the skeptical soldier asked. "The Force wasted some of our guys?"

"It's true, Tompkins. I don't have all the details, but Goldmane wants the Force captured. Pronto," the lieutenant stated. "To your units."

Boone watched as the HS men moved to the snowmobiles, two to a machine, except for Pat and Billy, who walked to a pair of heavy chains dangling on the far side of the section of corrugated metal wall. They started tugging on one of the chains, and to the Cavalryman's amazement the wall clanked upward. He realized the corrugated metal section was actually a huge door. Once the door was flush with the ceiling, Pat and Billy stepped to the nearest snowmobile and looked at the officer.

The lieutenant and one trooper took hold of the handlebars on a snowmobile. They slid the machine onto the snow, to the right.

A second pair of HS did the same, and in short order all of the snowmobiles were lined up to the left of the officer's. Two troopers were apparently assigned to each unit, one to serve as the driver, while the second would ride behind the driver and carry a Beretta.

Boone saw a solitary trooper standing near the crates, and he noticed that the lieutenant did not have a passenger. Of course not. The officer had mentioned he was picking up Colonel Varney, which meant one of the troopers would need to stay behind.

The drivers of each snowmobile were settling on their machines while the gunners stood at the rear of the unit, waiting.

And at that moment, as he observed the HS men about to turn their engines over, inspiration struck the gunman.

He wanted to aid his friends, and here was a golden opportunity.

But could it be done?

None of the HS men were paying any attention to the interior of the garage. The drivers were concentrating on their machines, and the

gunners were watching the drivers. Standing two feet from the crates was the excess trooper.

He could succeed if his timing was right.

Boone tensed, his eyes on the drivers. One after the other, the snowmobiles roared to life, their engines generating a strident clamor. He placed his M-16 on the cement floor, drew his right Hombre, and eased around the crates. If any of the soldiers spotted him now, he was as good as dead.

The spare trooper was calmly regarding his comrades.

Boone stepped behind the trooper, swung his left arm up and around and clamped his forearm on the man's throat, and pulled the startled soldier backwards. The trooper grabbed at Boone's arm and tried to cry out, but his inarticulate cry could not be heard above the din of the snowmobile engines. Boone hauled the man behind the crates, then rammed his Hombre into the base of the soldier's skull. "Unslung your Beretta," he said into the trooper's right ear.

The HS man let his automatic rifle slide to the floor.

"If you try to warn the others, I'll kill you," Boone warned, releasing his hold. "Don't turn around. Just take off your parka."

Eager to obey and to avoid being shot, the trooper unzipped his white parka and wriggled out of the coat. The garment dropped at his feet.

"Thank you," Boone stated, and slugged the soldier across the right temple with the Hombre barrel.

Staggered by the blow, the soldier tottered forward into the crates.

Boone bashed the man again, then once more. On the third blow the trooper sagged at his knees, then slumped over.

There wasn't time to waste.

The Cavalryman bolstered his Hombre, stripped off his green parka, and swiftly donned the white one. He zipped up the front and glanced at his buckskin leggings and moccasins. They stood out like the proverbial

sore thumb, but there was no time to put on the trooper's pants. He aligned the lower edge of the white parka to permit him to draw readily, then sauntered around the crates.

All of the machines were running noisily. The drivers were revving the engines and checking gauges. Three of the gunners were already on board. Several drivers and gunners wore goggles.

Boone walked boldly to the rear of the lieutenant's snowmobile. He raised his left leg and eased down behind the officer.

"What the—?" the lieutenant blurted out, looking over his right shoulder. "What are you doing, Private? No one is supposed to ride with me." He had donned yellow goggles.

Boone glanced at the row of snowmobiles to his left. Only two of the gunners were eying him quizzically; the rest of the soldiers were concentrating on their machines or taking a seat. He smiled and nodded at the two watching him, then faced front, drew his right Hombre, and jammed the barrel into the officer's ribs.

The lieutenant's eyes widened.

Boone leaned forward. "Do as I say or you die."

"Who the hell are you?" the officer demanded, and then did a double take. "You're one of—"

"That's right," Boone said coldly, cutting him short. "And if you open your mouth again without my say-so, I'll plug you in the head." He paused for emphasis. "I have nothing to lose."

The lieutenant digested this news, his gaze on the revolver pressed to his chest.

"Do you understand me?"

"Yes," the officer said.

"Good. Then let's head out."

"Where are we going?"

"You were hell-bent for leather to go find my buddies." Boone noted, "so let's go find them. And don't bother stopping for Colonel Varney."

The lieutenant frowned and stared to the east. He revved his machine, looked at his men, and nodded.

Boone settled back as the snowmobile surged forward. His strategy had worked! He was on his way! Now all he had to figure out was what to do when they got there.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"I count eight snowmobiles," Thunder said. "Two men apiece."

"We're outnumbered, outgunned, and we've nowhere to take cover," Sergeant Havoc declared in frustration, surveying the essentially flat ocean of snow encompassing them.

"I say we kick ass," Bear stated.

"You're in no condition to take them on," Havoc responded.

"I ain't givin' up," Bear said.

"You need medical attention, my brother," Thunder commented. "Your wound is our primary concern."

"Kickin' ass is our primary concern," Bear disagreed. "Look, fellas. We can't let these chumps take us. They've already bagged Athena, and for all we know they may have Blade and the others too. If we don't snuff these dirtballs, the Force is history."

"We should take a vote," Thunder proposed.

Bear, gritting his teeth because of the pain in his right shoulder, stared at the snowmobiles. He guessed they were still a quarter of a mile distant. "This ain't no democracy," he said angrily. "I say we waste the chumps,

and that's that."

"I vote we surrender and try to escape later," Thunder recommended.

Sergeant Havoc glanced from one to the other.

"What about you, Macho Man?" Bear inquired. "You get to decide for us."

Havoc gazed at the Clansman's right shoulder. The entry point was a neat, circular hole in Bear's green parka, but the 5.56-mm round had blown a hole two inches in diameter as it exited between the right shoulder blade and the armpit. A crimson rivulet had frozen in the process of flowing down Bear's broad back.

"What's it going to be?" Bear demanded. "I say we waste 'em."

Havoc shook his head. "I must go along with Thunder. You need medical attention."

Bear frowned, placed his left hand on the Colt Stainless Steel Officers Model 45 on his left hip, and stalked toward the approaching machines.

"Where do you think you're going?" Havoc asked.

"I'm going to fight."

"Don't be stupid," Havoc chided him.

Bear glowered at the noncom. "Watch your mouth, Macho Man." He continued to walk forward grimly.

Sergeant Havoc and Thunder exchanged glances, then moved to catch up with him.

"Bear, please be reasonable," Thunder said. "The Spirit-in-All-Things does not want you to die needlessly."

"How would you know? Do you have a private line to God?"

"No, of course not," Thunder responded.

"Then don't go talkin' for the Spirit unless the Spirit gives you the green

light," Bear said.

"Use your head," Havoc suggested.

"I'd like to pop yours one," Bear muttered.

"Are you blaming yourself for Athena's capture?" Thunder queried.
"For ours also?"

Bear halted, his chin drooping. "Athena was nailed tryin' to buy us time. If I hadn't been hit, she'd still be with us."

"And if you allow yourself to be killed now, her sacrifice will have been in vain," Thunder noted. "How will she feel when she learns what happened?"

The Clansman sighed and looked at the Flathead. "Don't you get tired of being right all the time?"

"I'm not right *all* the time."

"You come closer than anybody I know, except for Blade."

"Hey. What about me?" Havoc asked. "I'm not exactly a slouch in the smarts department."

Bear snickered. "Who're you kiddin'? You're as dumb as the rest of us. You make as many mistakes as we do."

"Blade makes mistakes," Havoc said.

"Sometimes," Bear admitted. "But in case you ain't noticed, he doesn't make many. And even when he does, he's the first to admit it."

"Sounds to me like you've put Blade on a pedestal," Sergeant Havoc remarked. "No one deserves such an honor. No one *living* anyway."

"Blade's my friend," Bear said simply.

The snowmobiles were now less than 200 yards off.

"We have all agreed then?" Thunder asked. "We will surrender?"

Sergeant Havoc tossed his M-16 onto the snow. "We don't have any choice."

"I guess you're right," Bear stated. He pulled his left 45 and dropped the handgun.

Thunder placed his M-16 on the ground and straightened. "This is the wisest course of action," he assured them. "You'll see."

"I hope you're right," Bear said morosely. "If you're not, we're as good as dead."

What in tarnation were those dummies doing?

Until a moment ago, Boone had been elated at the success of his scheme. There hadn't been one hitch until now. The snowmobiles had departed the garage in single file, and the lieutenant had angled toward a shattered stretch of fence, crossing the east field at 40 miles per hour. With consummate skill, the officer had weaved his machine among the pieces of chain-link fencing and curled strands of barbed wire, then opened the engine up once they were free and clear.

En route to the fence, Boone had looked at the southeast corner of the headquarters and spied Colonel Varney and another soldier. Varney had appeared stupefied. He'd flapped his arms and shouted, but the roar of the machines drowned out his words. Boone had smiled and waved his left arm, his right holding the Hombre tight against the lieutenant.

The ride across the Arctic tundra was an experience Boone would never forget. The frigid wind whipped his parka hood, stinging his exposed cheeks and chin. He was forced to squint, wishing he had a pair of goggles. Belying their squat contours and relatively small engines, the snowmobiles attained speeds of 70 miles per hour. The landscape seemed to sweep past in a blur. He gripped the lieutenant's left shoulder and held on for dear life. The sensation was similar to the thrill he felt when galloping across the Dakota plains on his favorite stallion.

Boone paid careful attention to the snowmobile controls, noting the precise manner in which the officer operated the machine. He was surprised to discover the speed was increased or decreased with a mere flick of the right handlebar. He was amazed at the ease of maneuverability, and enjoyed the snowy spray spewing from underneath

the snowmobile. Not only did the spray add to the excitement of the ride, but the snow partially obscured his buckskin leggings and boots.

Trailing the three Force members was a simplistic task. Their tracks were imprinted clearly in the snow, bearing due east.

Boone glanced to the rear several times, checking on the rest of the snowmobile squad. The drivers maintained a 20-foot safety gap between each unit, and they followed the lieutenant's path exactly. They were well-trained, a credit to their profession. Boone wondered if any of them had been mystified by the failure to pick up Colonel Varney. If so, and given their extensive training, they would have stayed on the lieutenant's tail and assumed there was a logical reason for not taking the colonel along.

In any event, here they were, within 100 yards of the three Force teammates.

And what the dickens were Havoc, Thunder, and Bear doing? Discarding their weapons, of course!

Boone couldn't believe the testimony of his eyes. He'd gone to all this trouble, put his life on the line, and those ding-a-lings were preparing to surrender!

Now what should he do?

The lieutenant looked at the gunman. "What do you want me to do?"

"Whatever is standard procedure," Boone said. He didn't want to alert the 14 troopers to the fact that things were not as they seemed. When he made his move, he hoped to take them completely off guard.

Sergeant Havoc, Thunder, and Bear were standing with their arms upraised, although the Clansman was holding only his left arm aloft while tucking his right into his side.

The snowmobiles closed to within 20 feet of the Force members. With a deft wave of his left hand, the lieutenant motioned for the drivers to fan out. Alternately swinging to the right or the left, the drivers stopped their machines at five-foot intervals. In 15 seconds Havoc, Thunder, and Bear were surrounded. The seven gunners stood, training their Berettas on the

trio.

Boone rested his left hand on his other Hombre. The moment of truth was upon him.

The drivers were turning off their engines.

Boone leaned forward. "Tell your men to drop their guns."

"They'll never do it," the officer said, killing the machine.

"Tell them," Boone insisted.

Sighing, the lieutenant surveyed his men. He opened his mouth to speak.

Expecting the officer to comply, Boone looked at Havoc and realized the noncom had not recognized him.

"Men," the lieutenant said nonchalantly, then unexpectedly dived to the right. "He's one of them! Nail the bastard!"

Boone threw himself backwards and to the left, drawing his left Hombre as he fell onto his back in the snow beside the snowmobile. The nearest gunner, evidently flabbergasted by the turn of events, was gaping at the frontiersman in bewilderment. Boone swiveled both revolvers at the trooper's chest and fired.

The twin booming of the 44 Magnums galvanized everyone as the first gunner was catapulted to the rear by the impact of the heavy slugs.

Boone rolled to the left, toward the next snowmobile, winding up on his back within two feet of the machine, his arms extended, his thumbs tugging on the hammers of the single-action revolvers. He fired twice at separate targets. His left-hand gun sent the snowmobile's driver, who was clutching at a semi-automatic on his hip, into eternity. His right-hand Hombre blasted and bucked, and on the far side of Havoc, Thunder, and Bear, a gunner was felled with a slug through his head.

Sergeant Havoc took several seconds to react to the sudden gunplay. For a fleeting moment he thought the soldiers were fighting amongst themselves, until he spotted Boone's buckskin leggings and perceived the

Cavalryman had switched parkas. He was dropping to scoop up his M-16 when the frontiersman sent a round between Thunder and himself, and as his fingers closed on the automatic rifle he flattened and squeezed off a burst at a pair of gunners to the south.

Both gunners were stitched by patterns of crimson dots, and both were flung to the ground, convulsing,

Havoc flipped onto his back and shot one of the gunners to his rear.

Six of the soldiers had died in twice as many seconds, but the lieutenant, two gunners, and six drivers remained.

Havoc twisted on his back and fired at the closest driver, and he saw the man's head snap back as the shot took the HS between the eyes. All of the drivers were drawing semiautomatic pistols. Havoc rolled up against the snowmobile nearest him to provide minimal cover for his body. At such close range, with so many professionals firing at once, he knew the Force members would not come out of the scrape unscathed.

But he never anticipated the tragedy that resulted.

Boone glimpsed the lieutenant rising over the snowmobile they had used, and he snapped a shot at the officer's head. A spray of blood and brains erupted from the lieutenant's cranium, and he sprawled over the machine, a useless pistol in his left hand.

Thunder shoved Bear to the snow and crouched to retrieve his M-16. He pivoted toward a pair of soldiers on a snowmobile to the south, and he managed to fire at the same millisecond the gunner did. Both went down.

Bear scrambled to the Flathead's side, totally forgetting his own safety, and as he gripped Thunder's right hand a driver fired twice into his body.

Boone and Sergeant Havoc both saw their friends hit; they both were swept by an uncontrollable rage at the same instant; and they both surged to their knees and began firing like men possessed.

Havoc killed the last of the gunners, his rounds perforating the HS man from the crotch to the sternum. The M-16 abruptly went empty, and Havoc felt goose bumps break out on his flesh as the five drivers swung their pistols toward him.

He needn't have worried.

At that moment, as Havoc's life hung in the balance, Boone came to the noncom's rescue, exhibiting the speed and marksmanship for which he was rightfully a legend in the postwar Dakota Territory. His 44 Magnums seemed to fire with the rapidity of a machine gun—Bam-Bam-Bam-Bam-Bam—and with each booming of the big revolvers a driver died.

The sudden silence was eerie.

Sergeant Havoc rose. The battle had taken less than 60 seconds, and left in its wake bloody bodies sprawled in attitudes of death on the frigid tundra. Among the motionless were Bear and Thunder.

Boone stood, his eyes on their companions. "Are they—" he blurted out, unable to complete the sentence.

Havoc didn't know. He took a deep breath and hurried toward them to find out.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

"You keep your filthy hands off her!"

"My! How touching. I wonder..."

The acrimonious words filtered into Blade's consciousness through a haze of throbbing agony. Slowly, almost grudgingly, the pain waned. He sensed the presence of many others nearby, and he knew his wrists were shackled. Three guesses by whom.

"You suck-egg bitch!" snapped a familiar raspy tone. "When I'm done with you, you'll wish you'd never been born!"

"Your infantile threats do not concern me in the least," declared the voice of Lalita Pruty. "And if you don't cease your annoying prattle, I'll

have Tang shut you up."

"I'd like to see him try!" Grizzly responded belligerently.

Blade opened his gray eyes and scrutinized his vicinity. To his left, also chained to the wall, was the hybrid. Farther to the left, in the center of another wall, was a closed door near which stood six HS troopers and an officer. Athena Morris, her left wrist all bandaged, had been strapped with leather strips to a metal table in the middle of the floor. Her head was positioned in the direction of the door. Near Athena's head hovered the malignant Ms. Pruty. On the far side of the table was Eric Holtmeyer, and on the near side, gazing silently at the Warrior, was Kan Tang. Blade's eyes narrowed as he spotted his backpack and weapons piled on the floor a yard from the Thai.

"Ahhh. You're finally with us again," Lalita stated, looking at the giant.

"I needed to catch up on my beauty sleep," Blade quipped.

"You've rejoined us just in time for the interrogation, beginning with the journalist," Lalita said.

"Don't touch her, Goldmane!" Grizzly warned.

"Goldmane?" Blade repeated.

"That's right. You've missed so much," Pruty said, and walked over to the Warrior. "He's referring to me, to my true name. I'm Janus Goldmane, the Exalted Executioner for the Lords of Kismet."

"The head of this operation," Blade deduced, based on the conversation in the corridor he had overheard.

Goldmane grinned and bowed. "I can't claim all the credit. True, I planned the scope of this operation, but I did so in obedience to my masters. The Lords of Kismet want the Freedom Federation destroyed."

Blade glanced at the Thai, and then recalled the map of Asia and those puzzling red pins. There had also been a red pin at Prudhoe Bay. "Let me guess," he ventured. "These Lords of Kismet control Asia, and they plan to expand their control, to rule every continent on the planet."

Janus Goldmane's mouth slackened. She blinked twice, her forehead creasing, then smiled. "I'm impressed. I'm beginning to understand the reason my masters have placed you at the top of my hit list. How did you know?"

"I was always fond of the old jigsaw puzzles we have at the Home," Blade replied.

Goldmane nodded appreciatively. "You have a brain the equal of your brawn. Most exceptional."

"And you?"

"Me?"

"What qualified you for the post of Exalted Executioner? Certainly not your good looks."

Goldmane looked at Holtmeyer, and they both laughed.

"You're priceless," Goldmane said. "And you're right. My elevation to the post was predicated on my previous experience."

"Do the Lord of Kismet have other executioners working for them?" Blade asked.

"Hundreds," Goldmane disclosed.

"And you worked your way up through the ranks?"

"I began my career in a Cell in Sofiya, where I was born."

"A cell?" Blade said quizzically.

"The Lords of Kismet have established Divisional Cells in eighteen European cities and twelve in Africa. Each Cell is comprised of seven assassins who foment unrest and eradicate the Lords' enemies," Goldmane divulged, then paused. "If you're competent, and if you always make your monthly quotas, you can advance through the ranks rather quickly. The Lords are always looking for new talent."

"You had a quota?" Blade remarked.

"Novices must kill three designated marks a month."

"You must have dispatched more than your fair share," Blade noted. "Your title means you're the best of the best. And you admitted that the stratagem to reactivate Prudhoe Bay as a means to destroying the Federation was essentially your idea."

Goldmane smirked. "You'll never guess how the plan works."

"You plan to mix TX-9 with the crude."

Goldmane's body appeared to go rigid for a moment, her eyes widening. She expelled a long breath, then shook her head. "Unbelievable. So you know about the TX-9?"

"I don't know everything," Blade said. "How does the TX-9 work?"

"TX-9 is a chemical-warfare toxin initially produced prior to the war. Unlike most chemical weapons, TX-9 doesn't kill those who breathe its vapors. Instead, it deranges their minds," Goldmane disclosed. She draped her hands behind her back and strolled toward the head of the metal table. "TX-9 is a brilliant weapon. Entire populations can be subjugated. Countries can be destroyed from within."

"How?" Blade prompted.

"Here's the way it works. TX-9, in its dormant state, can be added at any point in the refining process. It does not alter the normal chemical properties of oil or gasoline, and is virtually undetectable. The beauty of TX-9 lies in its activation stage. The toxin become active in an internal combustion engine, and it's released into the atmosphere through the exhaust systems of gasoline or diesel-powered cars and trucks."

"Which means," Blade said, "that if California and the Civilized Zone buy your crude and use the oil and gas they refine in their thousands of vehicles, their atmosphere will become polluted with the active TX-9 agent."

"Precisely. TX-9 works on the brain and the central nervous system as a long-term, degenerative poison. It eventually turns those who have inhaled it for any length of time into slobbering idiots or crazed killers. Their brains revert to bestial levels, and their intelligence deteriorates. TX-9 is

the ultimate biological weapon."

"Does it pollute the atmosphere permanently?" Athena inquired.

"No," Goldmane answered. "The critical infectious stage lasts approximately twenty-four hours from the moment the active agent is unleashed into the atmosphere. After twenty-four hours, the agent loses its potency." She paused. "Who would want to pollute the atmosphere permanently? What good would a polluted environment do us? This way is better. The active agents in the air are constantly replenished by the emissions from the cars and trucks. Within a year, the internal strife caused by the TX-9 will render California or any other Federation faction incapable of resisting a takeover by my masters."

"I can imagine," Blade said. "There would be mass confusion. The people would be killing one another by the thousands. Panic would keep those unaffected off the streets. The government would find its own troops affected, and the leaders would have no way of maintaining order. The result would be total anarchy."

Goldmane grinned. "Then you can appreciate the deviousness of our plan. Once our contaminated crude is being used by the Federation factions, all we'll have to do is sit back and wait for the collapse. Then the Army of the Lords of Kismet can move in and take control."

"Won't your Army succumb to the TX-9?" Athena queried.

"No. Our Army personnel will wear gas masks until the atmosphere is cleansed of the active agent, which won't take long once usage of the tainted fuel ceases."

"What's to stop the California Armed Forces from using gas masks?" Athena asked.

"Be serious. The government won't have the slightest idea as to the cause of the widespread pandemonium. Their scientists will look everywhere, but the odds of the TX-9 agent being discovered are astronomical."

"They'll put two and two together," Athena said. "If the mass insanity begins shortly after the tainted fuel is first used, they'll trace the problem to its source."

"Didn't you hear me earlier? TX-9 is a long-term poison, accumulating in the human body over a period of months until the degenerative process is triggered. California will have been using our crude for over a year before the first outbreaks are reported. No one will suspect our fuel."

"You've thought of everything," Blade said, complimenting the Exalted Executioner.

Goldmane smiled. "Thank you."

"But your plan hinges on the Federation making a deal for the Pipeline product," Athena noted. "And Governor Melnick and the rest of the Federation leaders will never agree if something happens to us."

Goldmane was within a foot of the head of the table. She stepped closer, studying Athena. "Therein lies the crux of my dilemma. I must arrange a fitting demise for the Force, a death the Federation chiefs will swallow."

"No way," Athena said.

"Where there's a will, there's always a way," Goldmane asserted. "Your deaths will delay the completion of the deal, but eventually we'll achieve our goal. Eventually the Federation will buy our crude because they can't obtain it anywhere else. They'll be suspicious after we report your deaths, but your mutilated, partially eaten corpses will go a long way towards convincing them that we weren't responsible. They'll postpone accepting our offer for a while. In the end, though, we will triumph."

"What reason will you give for our deaths?" Blade inquired.

"A pack of mutated polar bears will finish off the famous Force."

"Polar bears?"

"We have a dump located two miles west of here, for all of our trash and our garbage. The polar bears hunt for scraps all the time. We'll stake you out and wait for the bears to get done eating," Goldmane divulged.

"If you plan to kill us, why are we in this room?" Athena asked.

Janus Goldmane reached out and stroked Athena's forehead. "Surely a bright journalist like yourself can ascertain our motives? Why do you

think I went to all the trouble of having the medics bandage your arm? I didn't want you to bleed to death before the interrogation."

"I won't talk," Athena vowed.

"Oh, really?" Goldmane responded, and snickered. "My dear Ms. Morris, I'm an expert at my craft. I can guarantee you'll talk. You'll gladly reveal everything you know about California's government and military. You'll beg me to ask you questions."

"Never," Athena declared.

"You pathetic, ignorant wretch," Goldmane said. "Your conception of reality is so immature." She opened a drawer and withdrew a narrow, brown plastic case.

"What can we tell you that you don't already know?" Blade interjected.

"Probably nothing," Goldmane admitted, lifting a flap on the plastic case.

"Then why go to all this trouble?" Blade asked.

Goldmane looked at the Warrior and smirked. "What trouble? I like conducting torture sessions."

"Torture?" Athena said, aghast.

"What were you expecting? A round of patty-cake?" Goldmane quipped. She slid a six-inch silver lancet from the case.

"No!" Grizzly snarled. "Don't touch her."

Goldmane hefted the thin, two-edged instrument. "These are normally employed during surgery for opening abscesses and making fine cuts," she detailed. "But they have other uses."

"Don't!" Grizzly declared.

"One more word out of you, and Tang sends you to dreamland," Goldmane said. She smiled down at Athena. "Where should I begin?"

There was the sound of a commotion in the hall, and a moment later

Colonel Varney burst into the chamber. "I don't believe it!" he bellowed.

Goldmane looked at the officer, her features creased by annoyance. "I trust you have a good reason for this intrusion?"

"They didn't take me."

"Who didn't?"

Varney walked toward the-Exalted Executioner. "The Snowmobile Unit. I ordered Lieutenant Erdrich to pick me up at the southeast corner of the lodge so I could personally lead the pursuit of Bear and the two other Force members."

"And?" Goldmane prodded.

"And the son of a bitch took off without me," Varney said angrily. "I couldn't believe it. I saw one of his men wave."

"Erdrich is usually efficient," Goldmane remarked. "Why would he fail to carry out a direct order?"

"Beats the hell out of me. They drove from the garage to the east fence without bothering to pick me up," Varney stated. "I've tried to raise them on the radio, but they haven't replied."

Goldmane tapped the flat lancet on the table. "I don't like this. One of the Force members is still unaccounted for."

"So? What can one man do?" Varney responded.

"Plenty," Goldmane said. "I want you to check out the Snowmobile garage."

"May I ask why?"

"Just a hunch. Attend to it personally and report back here."

Colonel Varney saluted. "As you command, Executioner." He pivoted and hastened out, slamming the door after him.

Goldmane peered at the Warrior. "What are you up to?"

"Us?" Blade said innocently.

"Don't insult my intelligence," Goldmane replied. "The Force was sent here for just this purpose, wasn't it?"

"What purpose?"

Goldmane's voice hardened. "To create discord at Prudhoe Bay. To commit an act that would draw us out, make us reveal our true colors."

"We came here on a peaceful mission," Blade said.

"Is that why Bear shot one of my men without provocation?" Goldmane demanded.

"He had provocation," Athena informed the Executioner.

"What?" Goldmane queried skeptically.

"Your men insulted him," Athena said.

Goldmane scowled. "A lousy insult started all of this?"

"Yes."

"I don't believe you," Goldmane stated, and leaned over the table. "Which finger?"

"Which finger?"

"Which finger should I start with?" Goldmane asked.

"Leave her alone!" Grizzly interjected, straining against his chains.

Goldmane looked at the Thai. "I've had about enough of that fool. You know what to do."

Tang nodded and strolled to within a yard of the mutant.

Grizzly's lips curled over his teeth. "If I could get a hold of you—"

The Thai never uttered a word. His right foot swept up and in, striking Grizzly's cheek with a distinct thud. Twice more he flicked his calloused foot, connecting on the mutant's chin. He stepped back when Grizzly slumped down, barely sentient, eyelids fluttering.

"Now for some fun," Goldmane said, the lancet gleaming in the light. She moved to Athena's right side and gripped the journalist's middle finger. "This should do nicely."

"No!" Athena cried, bucking and pitching, unable to move more than an inch due to the leather restraints. "No!"

Goldmane touched the tip of the lancet to the end of Athena's finger, just under the nail. "Pay attention, my dear. You're about to discover the true meaning of pain."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Blade saw the cruel grin on Janus Goldmane's wicked countenance, he saw the blood flowing from under Athena's nail as Goldmane inserted the razor tip, and he saw Kan Tang turn toward the table to view the torture. All eyes were on Athena Morris as she opened her mouth to scream.

No one was looking at him.

He tensed and extended his arms as far as they would reach, as far as the chains would allow, pitting his bulging muscles against the steel manacles. His triceps, biceps, and torso rippled and solidified in stark relief, every sinew seemingly chiseled from stone. Gritting his teeth, he felt sweat break out on his forehead and arms. The exertion was tremendous, but he couldn't afford to slack off for a second.

Athena vented her anguish in a shriek.

Goldmane laughed.

Blade lowered his head and strained for all he was worth. One of the troopers was staring at him, but he didn't care. He applied every iota of his prodigious strength to the task at hand. His shoulders and upper arms began to hurt, but he disregarded the discomfort.

"You're not as tough as you thought you were," Goldmane taunted

Athena, easing the lancet from under the fingernail.

"You monster!" Athena exclaimed.

"That's what my mother always claimed," Goldmane stated calmly. "She was the first person I ever killed."

Athena's right hand pulsed with agony. She tried to wrench her arms loose, but the leather held her fast.

Goldmane playfully jabbed the lancet into Athena's palm. "Have you ever seen the skin peeled from a human hand?"

Blade observed Athena go chalk white, and he renewed his silent struggle. He closed his eyes, his abdominal muscles tightening, his arms quivering. You can do it! he told himself. You've broken chains before. A chain was only as sturdy as its weakest link, and every chain contained a weak link. Sooner or later, something had to give.

Had to.

And did.

The sweat was streaming from his pores, his face was a beet red, his veins protruding, when there came two loud snapping noises, and suddenly he was stumbling toward the metal table, off-balance, but free! His elation lasted a fraction of a second as he realized Kan Tang was five feet to his left and already rotating.

Janus Goldmane had glanced up at the sounds. "I want him taken alive!" she directed.

Blade checked his momentum within two yards of the table and crouched. The troopers were hurrying toward him from near the door. Eric Holtmeyer was coming around the far side of the table. Tang had adopted the cat stance. And Goldmane was eyeing him disdainfully, as if he was no more than a minor nuisance to be summarily squashed underfoot. Six feet away, at the base of the table, were his weapons and backpack, with his Bowies resting on the very top of the pile.

The Exalted Executioner abruptly stepped between the Warrior and the weapons. "What are you waiting for, Tang? Take him!" she snapped

impatiently.

The Thai closed on his adversary. Blade straightened and backpedaled. He knew the power in Tang's kicks, and he wasn't about to let another one land. The manacles were still attached to his wrists. Six inches of chain dangled from his right forearm, eight from his left.

With astonishing swiftness, Kan Tang moved toward the Warrior in an odd, shuffling gait, his naked, malletlike feet never leaving the floor.

Blade swung his left arm in an arc, the chain whipping out and narrowly missing the Oriental's face.

Tang halted, focusing on the chains.

Beyond the Thai, Grizzly was stirring, shaking his head to clear the cobwebs and clenching his fists.

"Take him!" Goldmane reiterated.

Blade's eyes flicked around the room, noting positions. The seven soldiers were five yards from the door, waiting with keen anticipation for the Thai to obey. Eric Holtmeyer was at the far corner of the table. Goldmane blocked the weapons.

No doubt about it.

He needed to even the odds.

With the thought came action, and Blade unexpectedly charged forward, whipping his arms from right to left, flailing away with the chains.

Tang attempted to block a blow. There was a sharp crack as the steel connected with one of his knuckles, and he wisely retreated, giving ground rapidly, effortlessly.

Blade pressed his advantage, lashing the chains back and forth, intending to drive the Thai past the head of the table. He came abreast of Janus Goldmane, who was standing smugly near the backpack and his weapons, and he took a stride in her direction and arced his right arm to the right.

The tactic caught Goldmane napping. She fell backwards as the chain clipped her on the mouth, landing on her side on the table, on top of Athena's legs. Her left hand reflexively pressed to her mouth and came away bloody. Both her lips were split, her upper gum was torn, and one of her top teeth was loose. Enraged, she straightened, spitting more blood.

Blade saw Kan Tang's eyes dart toward Goldmane, and the Thai's features visibly hardened. Why? The Warrior kept swinging, mulling the implications. Tang was one of the top martial artists in the world, trained to suppress all emotion during the heat of combat. So why would the Thai become furious over Goldmane's injury? Surely they—

Wait a minute!

Holtmeyer wasn't the head of this operation. Goldmane was. Eric Holtmeyer had pretended to be the brains of the outfit, as part of Goldmane's cover. Was it possible, then, that everything Holtmeyer had said about himself actually applied to Goldmane? If so, then Goldmane had discovered the Thai in Kamphaeng Phet, not Holtmeyer. If so, Tang was Goldmane's personal bodyguard, not Holtmeyer's. And if so, then there might be more to their relationship than that of employer and employee. Perhaps they were lovers.

Which gave him the opening he needed.

Janus Goldmane was leaning on the metal table, her left hand over her mouth, crimson trickling from her chin.

Blade deliberately halted and turned toward her, taking a step, pretending to be about to attack her again, hoping Kan Tang would take the bait.

The Thai reacted instantly, gliding to the right, skirting the Warrior and darting to Goldmane, positioning himself in front of her to serve as her defender, to ward off Blade's anticipated assault.

But Blade was already springing toward his real goal: Grizzly. In two mighty bounds he reached Grizzly's side, his eyes on the mutant's as he gripped the chain securing Grizzly's right arm. No words were necessary. Grizzly perceived his intention intuitively. Blade braced his left foot on the wall and wrenched on the chain, both of his brawny arms swelling as his muscles expanded.

"Stop them!" Eric Holtmeyer shouted.

In response the troopers started forward.

The chain Blade was holding quivered as Grizzly threw his weight and strength into the struggle. The manacles were designed to restrain an average man; the steel chains could easily withstand the strength of a normal prisoner. But neither Blade nor Grizzly were normal. The Warrior was a seven-foot giant, a titan with a corresponding physique. Grizzly was a genetically created hybrid endowed with the vitality of his namesake. Singly they were formidable. Together they were devastating. With a brittle crack the chain parted.

Grizzly spun toward the wall, gripped the chain binding his left arm with both hands, and heaved.

"Damn it! Stop them!" Holtmeyer yelled.

The soldiers were closing rapidly, unslinging their Berettas as they ran.

Kan Tang, realizing he had been duped, charged.

Blade moved to meet the Thai, adopting the horse stance, his arms bent at the elbows and protecting his stomach and chest, his fingers formed into tiger claws.

Tang never slowed down. He tore into the Warrior with the fury of a hurricane, his legs spinning, raining a series of kicks on the giant, seeking to overwhelm Blade quickly. Each kick was blocked, every sweep was countered.

Although he was holding his own, temporarily at least, Blade knew he was no match for the Thai in the mastery of the martial arts. Never before, in all his years as a Warrior and during his association with the Force, had he met anyone as supremely skilled as the Thai kick boxer. Two men came close to matching Tang; one was a Warrior by the name of Rikki-Tikki-Tavi and the other was Sergeant Havoc. But even those two did not possess hands and feet seemingly composed of solid bone. The Thai's blows were brutal, jarring Blade every time.

Tang redoubled his onslaught, mixing hand strikes with his kicks.

Blade sidestepped a heel aimed at his right knee, then used a circular block to deflect a fist flashing at his neck. The Thai executed a left roundhouse punch at the Warrior's temple, and Blade blocked with his right forearm. Tang pivoted and tried to deliver a leopard paw blow to Blade's solar plexus, but the Warrior used a cutting forearm chop to deflect the Thai.

A feral roar rent the chamber.

Blade skipped back several feet and looked around.

The seven HS troopers had reached Grizzly just as the last chain broke, and the mutant was tearing into them with unbridled ferocity. His claws fully extended, Grizzly had dispatched two of the soldiers and was gutting a third. The troopers were foolishly endeavoring to pin the mutant's arms.

"I've changed my mind!" Janus Goldmane declared, wiping the back of her right hand across her mouth. "I want them dead! Both of them!"

Eric Holtmeyer smiled and pulled an Uzi from under his coat.

"What are we looking for, sir?" the private asked.

"Just search the garage," Colonel Varney snapped, gesturing impatiently.

The officer and four HS stood outside the open corrugated metal door to the Snowmobile Unit garage. Obeying promptly, the quartet fanned out and walked inside.

Colonel Varney turned and surveyed the east field and the fence beyond. He experienced a nagging feeling that he had overlooked something important, but what?

"Colonel! Over here!"

Varney rotated and saw a trooper near a cluster of crates. "What is it?" he demanded.

"You need to see for yourself, sir."

Colonel Varney sighed and walked to the crates. His eyes narrowed at the sight of an HS slumped on the floor. How had this happened? Nearby

were three clues; a Beretta, an M-16, and a green parka.

"The damn Force," Varney muttered.

"Sir?" the trooper queried.

Varney knelt and felt for the man's pulse. "He's still alive."

The other three soldiers were approaching.

"I want two of you to take this man to the infirmary right away," Varney announced, rising.

A pair of troopers immediately hoisted their unconscious comrade and departed.

"Colonel!" declared the trooper who had found the man.

"What?"

"Snowmobiles, sir," the trooper said, nodding to the east.

Colonel Varney spun, his ears registering the distinctive growl of the specialized machines as he did. Speeding toward the headquarters building were two snowmobiles.

"Where are the rest, sir?" the trooper asked.

"I don't know," Varney replied, putting his hands on his hips. Had the three Force members wiped out the remainder of the Snowmobile Unit? He was beginning to believe that Goldmane had seriously underestimated the Force. The bitch always was cocky and overconfident.

The snowmobiles sped through the gap in the fence and raced toward the garage. Both drivers wore white uniforms and white parkas, but behind each driver sat slumped a figure in a green parka.

"They've bagged two of the Force," Colonel Varney declared happily.

Their engines whining, the snowmobiles were swiftly nearing their destination. The drivers were bundled in their parkas to ward off the brisk, chill wind.

"Help them with the prisoners," Varney directed his men.

The lead driver, now within 50 feet of the garage entrance, stared at the officer and the two soldiers for a moment, then angled his snowmobile to the right slightly. He braked abruptly, slewing the machine the last ten feet and sliding to a grating halt on the garage floor with the rear of the snowmobile pointing at Varney and the privates.

Seconds later the second machine coasted to a stop just inside the entranceway.

"Well done, men," Colonel Varney said, complimenting them, starting toward the nearest snowmobile.

The driver was rising and turning, and as he faced the three HS he exposed the Colt Officers Model 45's he held, one clasped in each hand.

Varney drew up short, recognizing the features framed by the parka hood. "Havoc!"

Sergeant Havoc wagged the 45's at the privates. "Lower the Berettas to the floor slowly."

They hesitated.

"Do it now!" commanded a new voice, and Boone walked toward them from the snowmobile, his Hombres cocked, his fingers on the triggers.

The soldiers were holding their Berettas at waist height. They looked from Havoc to Boone, then eased their weapons down.

"Smart move," Havoc said. "Now lie on the floor with your nose to the cement."

They complied.

"Now you," Boone said, stepping over to the colonel.

"You'll never get away with this," Varney asserted confidently.

"Watch us," Boone stated, and slugged the officer on the chin.

Varney reeled and tottered backwards.

The Cavalryman, his lips a thin line, stalked up to the colonel and slammed his right Hombre across Varney's mouth. Teeth crunched, blood gushed, and the officer dropped like the proverbial rock. Boone glanced at Sergeant Havoc. "Get going."

"Why don't you go? More of these HS creeps might show up here."

"This isn't the time to argue," Boone snapped. "Thunder and Bear are barely alive. I've told you where to find the Communications Room, and we both know that you're better with electronic equipment than I am. Get there, use our frequency, and send out an SOS. General Gallagher will be monitoring the transmission. Tell him to send in the VTOLs pronto."

Havoc nodded and hurried toward the inner door to the corridor. "Okay. But I advise you to lower the garage door. I'll send the SOS, then hunt for Blade, Grizzly, and Athena. Hold the fort until I return."

"No problem."

Sergeant Havoc disappeared into the hall.

"If either of you buzzards move, you're dead," Boone promised the privates, then dashed to the chains suspended on the left side of the corrugated metal. Holstering his left Hombre, he used his left hand to tug on both chains, testing to determine which chain would allow the door to descend. Rattling and clanking, the door settled rapidly.

The privates were imitating bumps on a log.

Boone walked to the snowmobile he'd driven and gazed at Thunder. The Flathead was barely breathing. He grimaced and looked at Bear. Both of them required prompt, expert medical attention, the kind only a hospital in California could provide. Havoc would radio for a pair of medics to be sent with the VTOLs, and a lot would depend on the ability of those medics to keep Thunder and Bear alive until the Hurricane reached California.

If they...

He couldn't bring himself to finish the thought. Instead, he scrutinized the HS uniform he was wearing. Havoc had advocated both of them donning complete uniforms, not just the parka. Boone had reluctantly

agreed, but he felt uncomfortable in the white outfit. A woman in Dakota, a lady he admired highly, had constructed his buckskins from scratch, and he would have a dickens of a time explaining their loss.

Which, all things considered, certainly qualified as the very least of his worries.

Kan Tang arrowed toward Blade and launched a terrific sweep kick with his right leg.

Distracted by the sight of Eric Holtmeyer unlimbering the Uzi, Blade failed to counter the kick. A lancing spasm racked his left thigh and he tottered backwards. The Thai had gone for his leg! He tried to lower his arms to deflect a second kick.

Too late.

The calloused ball of Tang's left foot struck the Warrior on the left leg, inches above the knee.

Blade crumpled, falling onto his right knee, his left leg momentarily paralyzed. He realized incapacitating his leg was part of the Thai's strategy; Tang wanted him incapable of evading those potentially lethal kicks and hand blows. Blade assumed a defensive posture, his hands in the Crane Style.

Tang shifted into the Bow and Arrow stance.

Janus Goldmane was laughing, expecting her bodyguard to end the fray swiftly.

Eric Holtmeyer was standing within a foot of the pile of Blade's gear, the Uzi barrel lowered, watching intently.

Grizzly and the troopers were a whirling jumble of claws, survival knives, and Berettas.

Blade sensed the moment of truth was at hand. With his left leg out of commission, the Thai would easily break through his defenses and kill him. Tang, Goldmane, and Holtmeyer all believed he was trapped, on the verge of annihilation, unable to move, pinned to the spot by his injured leg. They undoubtedly believed he would make his last stand where he

was, but they were doomed to be disillusioned. Blade's lips compressed as he girded the muscles in his right leg.

Every Warrior was subjected to intensive training in preparation for his or her career: firearms training, martial-arts training, explosives training, and training in the psychology of a Warrior. Fundamental principles were inculcated rigorously. Foremost among them was the most basic of adages related to the art of war: The best defense is always a good offense. Consequently, at the very moment when his enemies considered him relatively helpless, at the moment when they thought the battle was all over except for the trifling technicality of his demise, Blade took them completely unawares by doing the totally unexpected.

He attacked.

Blade threw his body toward the metal table, toward his gear, rolling rapidly, spinning as fast as he could, hoping Tang would take a split second to react and come after him, confident he would present a difficult target. His eyes were locked on his weapons. Instead of slowing as he neared the pile, he rolled into it and over, grabbing his Bowies as he revolved, and in the next instant he was flat on his back, his knives in his hands, staring up at an astounded Eric Holtmeyer.

Holtmeyer's amazement was short-lived, replaced an instant later by horrified agony as the Warrior speared both Bowies into his groin.

"Nooooo!" Janus Goldmane wailed.

Kan Tang was hurtling toward the Warrior.

Blade's arms rippled as he jerked them down and out, using the Bowies for leverage as he literally tossed Holtmeyer into the Thai's path. He held tight to the hilts, wrenching the big knives out as Holtmeyer sailed from him, then surged erect as Tang and Holtmeyer tumbled to the floor. Sensation was returning slowly to his left leg.

Goldmane suddenly whirled and pressed the lancet to Athena's throat.

Blade froze.

"Stop right there!" Goldmane warned. "I'll cut her! You know I will!" Athena looked at the Warrior in vulnerable desperation.

"Drop your Bowies!" Goldmane ordered.

Blade hesitated.

"Drop them, damn you!"

Frowning, Blade tilted his arms and started to loosen his grip-

Goldmane smiled wickedly. "That's a good boy," she said, baiting him.

Kan Tang was rising four feet away. Holtmeyer was lying on his left side, doubled over, clutching his genitals, crimson spurting between his fingers, his features conveying sheer torment.

Blade was about to let go. He saw the razor edge of the lancet gouging Athena's flesh, and he choked back a swelling rage, wishing he could vent his frustration by pounding Janus Goldmane to a pulp.

Someone else beat him to the punch.

A furry, blood-spattered form flashed into view from the left, pouncing on Goldmane from behind and seizing her forearms. Before Janus could finish off Athena, she was lifted bodily into the air and flung to the floor, landing hard within a yard of the Thai. Grizzly took a stride toward them, his gory claws extended, his lips curling back from his tapered teeth.

Goldmane scrambled to her feet. She reached into the folds of her fur coat and extracted a large, double-edged knife that gleamed in the light.

"I was hoping you'd put up a fight," Grizzly hissed.

"I wasn't appointed as the Exalted Executioner simply because of my wits," Goldmane stated harshly, lowering her body into a back stance, the knife in her right hand, her left in a leopard paw.

Grizzly glanced at Blade. "She's all mine. You can have the ballet dancer." So saying, he rushed at the executioner, his claws spearing at her face.

Goldmane adroitly blocked the mutant's initial swings.

Blade closed on Kan Tang, but the Thai unexpectedly turned toward the battling pair and performed a vaulting kick, his left foot connecting with

Grizzly's shoulder and knocking the hybrid aside. The Thai came down in front of Janus Goldmane, facing the giant and the mutant, then glanced once at the Exalted Executioner.

Janus nodded, and bolted for the door. Tang backpedaled beside her, never dropping his guard, protecting her retreat.

Blade and Grizzly headed in pursuit.

"Don't let her escape!" Athena cried.

They tried. Both the Warrior and the hybrid attempted to force their way past the Thai and reach Goldmane, but Tang checked them every time. The Oriental's hand and feet battered Blade's Bowies and Grizzly's claws away with graceful, deceptive ease. Six feet from the door Tang halted, holding his ground, compelling them to swing around him if they wanted to catch Goldmane.

Blade darted to the right, and he was drawing his right arm back to throw the Bowie when Janus Goldmane snatched the doorknob, flung the door open, and raced into the corridor, drawing the door shut after her.

Damn!

"She'll bring reinforcements!" Grizzly snapped, crouching and glaring at the Thai.

Tang made no move to try and flee.

"Free Athena!" Blade ordered, swiveling toward Tang.

"But—" Grizzly began to object.

"Do it!" Blade directed. "We've got to get out of here. Leave Tang for me."

Grizzly turned and sprinted toward the metal table.

The Thai gazed at the Warrior fearlessly. His hands dropped to his sides and he bowed.

Surprised by the compliment, Blade returned the honor, then slid his Bowies into their sheaths.

Tang's eyes narrowed slightly.

"It's just us now," Blade said, and raised his hands.

In a rare break in his inscrutable expression, Kan Tang smiled, squatted, and waded into the Warrior.

Blade refused to be budged, and he refused to limit himself to his martial-arts skills as he countered the Thai's first strikes. He was also an accomplished boxer and adept at wrestling. His reflexes were honed to a preternatural degree, and there were only a handful of people on the entire planet with more combat experience. If anyone should be able to hold their own against Kan Tang, he should. He was determined to finish the fight by relying on his proficiency and his instincts.

Man to man.

No holds barred.

With no more interruptions.

And there were only two witnesses to the colossal clash.

At the metal table, Grizzly sliced the last of the leather restraints, relaxed his fingers to allow his claws to retract, and scooped Athena into his arms. For a moment they regarded one another tenderly, and then he pivoted toward the doorway. "I've got to help the Big Guy," he said, and began to lower her legs to the floor.

"No," Athena said, watching the fight.

"No?"

"Didn't you see Blade's face a minute ago?"

"I was too busy cutting you loose."

"Trust me. He wants to take care of Tang himself," Athena stated.

"Are you sure?"

"Would I lie to the one I love?"

Engrossed in the struggle near the door, Grizzly merely mumbled a careless "No." He was trying to follow the ebb and flow of the battle, concerned for Blade's safety. He could see the Warrior and the Thai trading countless blows, each one delivering a veritable rain of punches, chops, and kicks. Some of their movements were too quick for the eye to follow. Grizzly marveled at the contest. Even he would be hard pressed to match the silent ferocity the two men displayed. He saw Tang land a kick to Blade's right shin, and the Warrior retaliated by ramming his massive left fist against the Thai's chin.

Tang rocked backwards.

Blade drove his right fist into the Thai's stomach, doubling his foe in half. Before Tang could straighten, Blade kned him in the face.

Kan Tang went flying, landing on his back and immediately surging erect, blood trickling from his nostrils.

The Warrior and the Thai circled one another.

"I still think I should help..." Grizzly said, then stopped. His eyes widened and he looked at Athena. "What did you just say?"

"Who, me?"

"Yeah. What did you say a second ago?"

"I don't remember," she said, grinning impishly. Then she sobered, her eyes roving his features. "God help me. I said that I love you."

Grizzly's lips moved, but no words issued forth. He closed his eyes and hugged her. "Athena," he said huskily.

"You pick a hell of a time to become romantic," she quipped.

"I don't..." Grizzly blurted out, opening his eyes again and staring at her. "The torture must have warped your brain."

Athena abruptly glanced at the combatants.

Kan Tang and Blade were tangling once more. The Thai fainted with his left foot, then arced his right at the giant's head. Blade endeavored to step backwards, but the ball of Tang's foot slammed into his chin. He tottered,

and Tang pressed his advantage by flicking a kick at the Warrior's left hip.

Blade fell to his knees.

"No!" Athena cried.

Grizzly lowered her feet to the floor. "Stay here," he said, and took a pace toward the fighters.

Kan Tang was raising his right arm for a sword-hand chop to the Warrior's throat.

Grizzly knew he couldn't reach them in time, and his gut tightened in dread at the thought of Blade's jugular being crushed. He needed a distraction, something to divert the Thai's attention, and he got one from an unexpected source.

A series of muffled explosions rocked the headquarters building. The walls shook and the floor wobbled violently.

Kang Tang looked up for an instant.

Which was all the opening Blade required. He came off his knees, his powerful thighs propelling him up and in, his right arm lashing in a tight curve from left to right, his hand flat and his fingers rigid. The outer edge of his hand slashed into the Thai's neck.

Kan Tang's head snapped back, then lolled forward, his chin touching his chest. With a monumental effort he lifted his head and stared at the Warrior in stark astonishment. He grunted, gasped, and pitched forward.

Blade stepped aside. He was breathing heavily, sweat caking his brow.

Grizzly and Athena hastened toward him.

"Are you okay?" Athena asked.

Blade took a deep breath and nodded. "What was that blast?" he queried raggedly.

"Beats me," Grizzly said.

"We'd better get out of here," Blade said. "Grab some weapons."

But the door was hurled open before any of them could move.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Boone heard the pounding of approaching footsteps and leveled his Hombres at the corridor door. Bear and Thunder were still on the snowmobiles. The pair of privates and Colonel Varney were lying on the floor near the workbench, bound tightly with black tape.

"Don't shoot!" called out a familiar voice as the door was opened, and in walked Sergeant Havoc. "We're the good guys." Blade, Athena, and Grizzly, all wearing ill-fitting white parkas, followed.

"How are Thunder and Bear?" the Warrior demanded, crossing to the snowmobiles. His parka appeared to be two sizes too small.

"They're still out," Boone answered. "Bear's been hit three times, once in the right shoulder, twice in the chest. He's lost a lot of blood, but he's breathing."

"And Thunder?" Blade asked.

"He took two shots below the left shoulder. Neither are close to the heart, and he hasn't bled as badly as Bear."

Blade frowned and pounded his right fist against his left palm.

"You can't blame yourself," Athena said.

"I can if I want to," Blade responded testily, then glanced at each of them. "All right. Here's the way we stand. Sergeant Havoc contacted General Gallagher, and the Hurricanes are on their way, but they won't arrive for a few hours. We're to rendezvous with the VTOLs a quarter of a mile to the east of this building. Havoc and Boone will drive the snowmobiles. Grizzly, Athena, and I will follow on foot."

"The HS troopers will be on our tail," Boone predicted.

"Maybe not," Blade said.

"Oh?"

Sergeant Havoc cleared his throat. "When I got to the Communications Room, I found two HS there. They must have found the one you shot. So I took the clowns out and radioed General Gallagher, then went looking for these three. Along the way I lobbed a couple of grenades into the Command Center." He paused and chuckled. "That should keep the troopers busy for a while."

"So let's head out," Blade directed.

Boone and Havoc opened the corrugated metal door, then combined to push their snowmobiles onto the snow.

Blade surveyed the east field, surprised there wasn't an HS in sight.

"It's cold out there," Athena remarked. "Can't we stay in the garage for an hour or so."

"No," Blade stated.

"Think of how the weather will affect Thunder and Bear," she mentioned.

"Would you prefer a squad or two of HS soldiers?" Blade responded. "If the troopers find us here, we won't be able to hold them off *and* safeguard Bear and Thunder adequately." He pointed eastward. "We head out and wait for the Hurricanes."

"Whatever you say, Big Guy," Grizzly said.

The snowmobiles sputtered to life.

Blade waved his arm to the east.

Sergeant Havoc accelerated slowly with Boone right behind. They started across the field at under five miles an hour.

Trudging wearily, Blade, Athena, and Grizzly followed.

"I'm surprised we haven't seen Goldmane," Athena commented. "I was

certain she'd be back with reinforcements."

"Maybe she's reorganizing the HS," Blade speculated. "If she's smart, she's on her way to Deadhorse Airfield to catch a flight out of here."

"Do you think we've seen the last of her?" Athena inquired.

"I doubt it," Blade said.

"I want to run into her again," Grizzly interjected. "I owe her."

"The Lords of Kismet will undoubtedly launch another attack on the Federation," Blade predicted. "When they do, Goldmane will be involved."

"One good thing came out of this mess," Athena said, and smiled at the mutant.

Grizzly reached out, then caught himself. Her left wrist was bandaged from the dog assault, and her right was held close to her waist, her middle finger swollen and coated in crimson.

"I won't break," Athena said.

"We need to get you to a hospital," Grizzly declared.

"Me? Thunder and Bear require medical attention as soon as possible, but I can hold out longer."

"You need medical attention too," Blade stated. "Your finger and wrist could become infected if we don't have them taken care of."

"Listen to the man," Grizzly said. "He makes sense."

"Which is why I'm sending Bear, Thunder, and you back before the rest of us," Blade informed them.

"What?" Athena responded.

"Havoc radioed for medics," Blade explained. "They'll be on board one of the Hurricanes. Bear, Thunder, and you will immediately return with them to California while the rest of us take care of business at this end."

"I want to stay with Grizzly," Athena protested.

"Does she have to?" Grizzly asked plaintively.

"Sorry, Blade said, and mustered a smile. "I know the two of you are hot to trot at the moment, but you'll have to cool your hormones for a spell."

"Hot to trot?" Athena repeated, and snorted.

"It's just like I've always said," Grizzly declared. "This guy never makes any sense."

EPILOGUE

The Hurricane banked and thundered higher into the azure sky, while to its rear the headquarters building exploded, sending a monumental fireball thousands of feet skyward.

"Beautiful!" Captain Peter Laslo shouted. "Just beautiful."

Prudhoe Bay was in flames. Every major building, the Operations Centers, and Central Power Supply, and more were in ruins. A section of pipeline was a twisted wreck. Black smoke billowed above the tundra.

"Those cluster bombs do the trick every time," Laslo gloated.

"So much for the Lords of Kismet and their plan to conquer us," Boone commented. "Right, Blade?"

The Warrior, sitting across from the frontiersman in one of the two seats behind the pilot's, did not respond. He was staring thoughtfully out his side of the canopy.

"Blade?" Boone said.

"What?" Blade replied, looking at the Cavalryman.

"Are you all right?"

"Fine," Blade responded.

"What were you thinking about?"

"What else? Bear and Thunder."

"They're tough," Sergeant Havoc chimed in from the seat to the rear of Boone's. "They'll pull through. The medics were optimistic."

"Their vital signs were stable," Grizzly added. He was sitting behind the Warrior.

"I don't want to lose them," Blade stated.

"None of us do," Boone concurred.

"I just hope Athena is okay," Grizzly mentioned.

"What's the story with the two of you?" Havoc asked.

Grizzly glanced at the noncom. "How do you mean?"

"I couldn't help but notice that the two of you were sort of... friendly," Havoc remarked.

"So?" Grizzly growled.

Sergeant Havoc shrugged. "No skin off my nose."

"It'll be more than your skin if you don't watch yourself," Grizzly warned.

"Here we go again," Boone said happily, then came to the noncom's rescue. "Say, what's with those?" he asked, and jerked his left thumb toward the pile of camouflage uniforms and green parkas stacked on the rear seat.

"General Gallagher probably sent them," Sergeant Havoc guessed. "I told him that some of us would be wearing HS uniforms when the Hurricanes arrived. I didn't want one of the pilots to get trigger happy. Gallagher must have decided to send replacement duds along. He's always been a stickler for wearing a proper uniform."

"We can change on the way home," Boone said.

"Forget it," Grizzly declared, removing his confiscated white parka. "I've learned my lesson. I'm never wearing clothes again."

Captain Laslo's voice crackled on the intercom. "Blade?" The Warrior

raised his head. "Yes?"

"I've used the last of my bombs and all of my rockets," Laslo disclosed. "I still have two Sidewinders left, but we might need those on the way back. So what do you say? Do we head for home?"

Blade looked at the eager faces of his men. "Take us home, Peter."

The Hurricane arced to the south.

"Can I ask you guys a question?" Grizzly inquired politely.

Boone twisted in his seat. "Sure. What is it?"

"Have you ever been on a date?"

Boone glanced at Havoc, then at the mutant. "A date?"

"Yeah. You know. A date with a woman," Grizzly stated, sounding annoyed at having to elaborate.

"I've been on a few," Boone admitted.

"And I've been on my share," Sergeant Havoc said. "Why?"

"How'd you ask the woman?"

"What do you mean?" Havoc responded.

"Did you take flowers? Sweets? Write a poem for the occasion? What?"

"Write a poem?" Sergeant Havoc declared, and laughed. "You've got to be kidding. Only ninnies like poetry."

Grizzly's eyes narrowed. "I like poetry."

"You do?" Havoc asked in disbelief, and laughed even harder.

Boone could see Grizzly's hands clenching and unclenching. He opted to intervene and prevent a flare-up of the mutant's temper. "If you want to ask a woman on a date," he advised, "just walk up to her and do it. It's as simple as that."

"That easy, huh?"

Sergeant Havoc was snickering and shaking his head.

Grizzly turned toward the noncom. "Do you mind if I ask you another question?"

Havoc grinned. "Be my guest."

"Do you think you could survive a fall from seven thousand feet?"