



The Beasts of Valhalla



by George C. Chesbro

From The Inside Cover

This impossible-to-put-down novel features the return of George Chesbro's splendid sleuth Mongo in his greatest adventure: a tale that marries hard-boiled detective fiction to the greatest of fantasy fiction.

The Beasts of Valhalla begins when Mongo attends the funeral of his nephew, a presumed suicide, and is asked to look into his death. His nephew was a computer genius who had invented an elaborate game based on Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, and it is there that Mongo finds his first clues of foul play. Mongo soon finds himself embarked on a fantastic odyssey, hunting—and being hunted by—a genius whose experiments with DNA have created bizarre creatures, and who in his megalomania dreams of saving mankind by destroying it. Mongo follows the trail from New York City to California's Big Sur, from a hellish underground world populated by newly created monsters to an Armageddon in an icebound fortress deep in the Arctic.

It is a novel to set beside Michael Crichton's *The Terminal Man* and William Hjortsberg's *Falling Angel*, in which dazzling inventiveness goes hand-in-hand with unremitting suspense.

George C. Chesbro's previous novels featuring Mongo (*Shadow of a Broken Man*, *City of Whispering Stone*, and *An Affair of Sorcerers*) were widely praised and successful in both hardcover and paperback.

Books by George C. Chesbro

The Beasts of Valhalla (1985)

Turn Loose the Dragon (1982)

An Affair of Sorcerers (1979)

City of Whispering Stone (1978)

Shadow of a Broken Man (1977)

King's Gambit (1976)

THE BEASTS OF VALHALLA

George C. Chesbro

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BOOK I

Game of Beasts

1.

AN August Sunday, so hot you couldn't tell sweat from tears. It was an expensive funeral, costing more than I suspected my sister and her husband could easily afford, in a bargain basement family plot inside a rummage sale cemetery. Somebody had sold my sister the Deluxe Package, silk-lined mahogany casket and an acre or two of flowers that served only to magnify the decrepitude of the small village cemetery. The rusting backhoe that had dug and would refill the grave was visible a hundred yards away, parked beside a rotting maintenance shack. The backhoe's unshaven operator was sitting in its cab, chewing the stub of yesterday's cigar and reading last month's magazine.

"Amen," the young, fresh-faced minister intoned as he finished a prayer. He sprinkled a handful of dirt over the lowered casket, wiped his hands.

"Shit," Garth murmured. We were standing a few yards apart from the rest of the family — our mother and father, Janet and her husband, assorted cousins, nieces and nephews, uncles and aunts. There were a lot of Fredericksons in Peru County, Nebraska.

"Yeah."

"How are you holding up?"

The sun was directly behind my brother's hand, forming a shimmering penumbra around thinning, wheat-colored hair that waved like a shredded, sad banner in the gentle, hot breeze that blew through this wasteland of weeds and pitted grave markers. "Why ask me? Tommy was your nephew, too."

"You know what I mean. We've been here two days now, and I thought you might be feeling the effects."

"I'm all right."

It wasn't true. Although I loved my parents dearly, wrote regularly, and had, over the years, managed to coax members of my immediate family into visiting me in New York City, home for me represented nothing so much as a long nightmare that had taken a lot of time and shrink money to kick into submission. I hadn't been back to Peru County in seventeen years, and the fragility of the scars remaining on my psyche amazed me. I felt porous, like something filled with stale air that was compacting under pressure of memory so fierce it was threatening to squeeze away and pop my center. Only something like the death of a favorite nephew could have brought me back to Peru. I knew it was a silly and unbecoming way to feel in the face

of the awesome peace Tommy Dernhelm had found, but people preoccupied with questions of self-worth are easily smothered by the trivial. The *me* that had been constructed and nurtured far from this place was gasping for breath, desperate for escape.

It was finished. We all gathered around Janet and stood in silence for a few moments, as though sheer numbers were a poultice that could absorb some of her pain. Then we started slowly back along the dusty path leading out of the cemetery. Unconsciously, like a marionette still controlled by rotten strings implanted in its soft center a long time ago, I found myself walking apart from the other members of the family, as if I were something disgusting that could only add to the shame surrounding Tommy's death. Garth, as he had always done, walked with me.

Growing up a dwarf is a real pain in the mind; you're always a foot or two, and a lot of poundage, behind the inevitable tormenters. Also, in fairness to the fun group that had tossed me around like a medicine ball in an alley behind the local movie theater one night, I wasn't exactly the mellowest kid in the neighborhood; I'd never suffered anybody, much less loud-mouthed fools, gladly. My brain had always been quick enough, and I'd been able to out-insult any gang of ten in the school. The problem, as I'd quickly learned, was (hat a sharp tongue was no defense against a punch in the mouth. The fact that Garth always thumped on the people who thumped on me wasn't enough. I hadn't needed an avatar so much as I'd needed to find my own means of self-defense and feelings of self-worth in a

world of bigger things and bigger people where I'd always felt in imminent danger of being crushed, physically and spiritually.

The love of my family, combined with Garth's muscle, had carried me through childhood and adolescence; I'd known that I was going to have to make it as a whole, if undersized, adult on my own.

I'd escaped from Peru County by means of an academic scholarship to New York University. In New York, a state of mind as well as a geographical location where just about all things great and small would be considered freaky by Peru County standards, I'd immediately felt at home, and had begun to escape from the terrible, debilitating preoccupation with my dwarfism. I'd majored in criminology, probably out of a perverse fascination with freaks of a different dimension, graduated with honors, an invitation to graduate school, and the offer of a post as a research assistant.

I'd succeeded in school— but then, I'd always succeeded in school. I had other, more pressing, hungers— other things to prove. Nature, in her infinite irony, had made me a dwarf, but with maturation I discovered that I had also been endowed with considerable, if improbable, physical skills— excellent reflexes, coordination, and speed. Being a somewhat unusual dwarf— a redundancy, if ever there was one— in need of a means of livelihood, I pursued the only logical course of action: I joined the circus, in this case one owned by a gentleman named Phil Statler— the ugliest and kindest human being I've ever known.

With the exception of my parents and Garth, Statler would become the most nurturing influence in my life. He'd seen in me possibilities as a performer that no one else, most particularly me, would ever have thought of. I'd eventually become a star attraction with the Statler Brothers Circus, a headliner as a kind of funky gymnast and aerialist bouncing and flying his way through a succession of visually spectacular stunts involving fire and ice.

I parlayed my developing physical skills into a black belt in karate, and used the money I earned to finance my doctorate in criminology. With my advanced degree in hand, I retired from the circus and took up a post as an associate professor at NYU.

By this time Garth had joined me in the city, where his own considerable talents had led to his rapid advancement in the NYPD. As for me, I'd left the circus when I was on top and was settling into a career in academia... and I still wanted more. I wasn't certain what I wanted more of, but it seemed I needed constantly to test myself against new challenges. Garth called it overcompensation, and I couldn't argue with him.

I acquired a private investigator's license, well aware that no sane person was likely to hire a dwarf as a private detective and that I'd probably never earn a penny in this particular corner of the marketplace. Surprise. I didn't get a lot of business, but the business I did get was certainly challenging; like some kind of bent, psychic lightning rod, I seemed to attract only the most bizarre cases. No matter how simple or straightforward an investigation might

appear at the beginning, it almost inevitably ended up with people shooting at me, or worse. By now I'd achieved a certain degree of notoriety, a state of celebrity which NYU looked upon with distinct disapproval. However, I was still teaching—and I was still investigating, whenever a case came my way. The dual careers had kept me busy, reasonably satisfied, and reasonably happy.

Until now.

Now it was all escaping from me. All my successes, my very sense of self, was imploding under the pressure of memory. I was losing my center, feeling like a frightened, angry, defiant—and worthless—dwarf child again.

My brother grunted softly, a kind of warning. I looked up from the ground and saw the gaunt figure standing on the hillside, partially eclipsing the sun. His features were blacked out, but the shape of the boy had grown into the shape of the man. I would have known him anywhere.

"Coop Lugmor." The name in my mouth tasted like sickness.

"The man's got a great sense of timing. I wonder what the hell he wants here?"

"I'm afraid we're about to find out."

Lugmor was over six feet, almost as tall as my brother. He was lanky, with arms too long for his torso and hands too small for his arms. His greasy black hair was long for Nebraska, and hung in strings around his long, pinched face. The smell of rotgut whiskey hovered about him like poison gas. I could feel tension spring from the group behind me, almost as palpable as a prod in the back.

Lugmor nodded sheepishly in the direction of my family, then fell into step beside me. His eyes darted nervously, slyly, all around, as if searching for hidden enemies, but never quite met my gaze. "Hello, Robby. Garth."

Garth and I said nothing.

"I sure am awful sorry about what happened."

We kept walking.

"Robby, can I talk to you?"

"Call my office for an appointment the next time you're in New York, Coop. My number's in the Manhattan directory."

A hand jerked into the air like a broken bird; grimy fingers with black nails gripped my shoulder. "Robby, I *gotta* talk to you!"

Lugmor's hand on my shoulder had much the same effect as a steep shot of liquor on an empty stomach; heat flashed across my face. I had a sudden, immensely gratifying vision of the man writhing on the ground with a broken kneecap. Then I remembered my mother and father walking behind me, my sister and brother-in-law with their grief, Tommy's corpse in the ground. I said quietly: "If you don't take your hand off me, Coop, I'll break something in you."

Lugmor laughed nervously and quickly snatched his hand away. "From what I hear tell about you, I actually think you could."

"Believe it," Garth said evenly.

"Robby? Please?"

He wasn't going to leave, and the palpable force of discomfort pushing on my back was growing stronger; I

decided that the least I could do was remove Coop Lugmor from the immediate vicinity. I nodded toward a nearby copse of ragged fir trees and stepped off the path.

"Mongo... ?"

"It's all right, Garth, I'll handle it."

"I'll wait for you in the car," Garth replied as he slowed his pace in order to walk with the rest of the family.

"They really do call you 'Mongo,'" Lugmor said nervously as we reached the chiaroscuro shade of the trees. "Just like it says in the papers and newsmagazines."

"Some of my friends call me that," I said pointedly. "Not you."

Lugmor slipped his hands into the torn pockets of his baggy overalls and looked down at the tops of his stained rubber boots. "You're still mad at me even after all these years, aren't you, Robby?"

"For heaven's sake, Coop, whatever gave you that impression?"

He winced as if my words had been a physical blow, stared at me with brown, bloodshot eyes. "We were just kids, Robby, and you were the only dwarf anyone around here had ever seen outside the county fair freak show."

My first instinct was to hit him, my second to laugh. I laughed. Coop Lugmor, one of the two great monsters caged in my memory, was beginning to seem a very small and pathetic beastie indeed. It made me wonder how much I had distorted all the other memories; it occurred to me that, if I stayed around Peru County long enough, I might find all the monsters rolling belly-up in the surf like Lugmor,

and I would go back to New York a paragon of mental health. "You always had such a way with words, Coop," I said evenly.

"I'm trying to say I'm sorry."

"Why don't you try saying why you want to talk to me?"

Lugmor slowly drew his hands out of his overalls. He balled one hand into a fist, punched his opposite palm. "Your nephew and my little brother weren't having any fag love affair, Robby, and they didn't have any suicide agreement."

"How do you know?"

Lugmor stared hard at me, frowned. "Because Rod wasn't a fag."

"Tommy was?"

"I don't know, Robby," Lugmor said evasively. "I'm not accusing Tommy of anything; I'm just saying Rod wasn't a fag."

"Coop," I sighed, suddenly very tired and very sad, "what difference does it make?"

He flushed, thrust out his lower lip. "It makes a *difference!*"

"They're dead, Coop. How they felt about, and what they did with, each other isn't important."

Lugmor shook his head like a dog trying to rid itself of fleas.

"Don't you *care* that people are saying they were fags and that they had a suicide agreement?"

"No."

"Well, *I* do! Rod was my *brother.*"

"That's your problem."

He smacked his lips in frustration, worked his mouth about, finally forced some words out. "Robby, I'm telling you Rod wasn't a fag; if he wasn't a fag, then he and Tommy weren't having a love affair; if they weren't having a love affair, then Rod didn't shoot Tommy and then kill himself."

"The county sheriff and coroner say he did."

Lugmor hawked and spat; that made me wince. "The coroner ain't no doctor, and he's a bigger drunk than me. Jake Bolesh may be county sheriff, but he's on the take. He does and says whatever that big Goddamn company wants him to."

"I thought Jake Bolesh was a friend of yours. I seem to remember the two of you as being inseparable, especially when you were beating up on me."

"He's no friend of mine anymore, Robby. I tell you he's lying!"

"As far as I know, nobody else thinks so."

"Horseshit! What does anyone around here know?! They're a bunch of farmers who'll believe anything a guy with a badge and a uniform tells them to! This ain't New York City, Robby. We don't have many murders around these parts."

"Or homosexuals?"

"Everybody just wants to forget about it as quick as possible, Robby! They want to forget it for personal reasons, and they want to forget it because the company wants them to! Nobody *cares!*"

"There were letters."

"Phony letters! That was a lot of crap they printed in the newspapers. Those letters were typed, and there were no signatures!"

"They were typed on your brother's typewriter."

"No!" It was an anguished howl.

"Coop, you think somebody else killed them?"

"Yes!"

"Who would want to kill two fourteen-year-old boys?"

He shrugged, shuffled his feet.

"Why would anyone want to kill them?"

Another shrug, and then he mumbled something I couldn't quite catch. I asked him to repeat it.

Lugmor swallowed hard. "I said, that's what I'd like you to find out."

"Me?"

"Yeah!" Now his words came quickly, bumping into each other. "There's always a lot about you in the local newspaper, Robby. You may not be interested in us, but we're sure as hell interested in you; you're the hometown boy made good. I know all about you being an important college professor who's some kind of doctor, and I know all about you being a private detective. I want to hire you. I didn't have much money right now, but—"

"To do what?"

"To find out the *truth!*"

"As far as I can see, you're the only person who doesn't believe we already know the truth. Let me tell you something straight, Coop; I loved my nephew very much, but he was nuttier than one of Jesse Braxton's fruitcakes.

Sometimes that goes with the territory when you're a very bright kid. Maybe he would have grown out of it, maybe not; we'll never know. My sister accepts the fact that Tommy and most of his friends were a little crazy. Why can't you?"

"Because Rod was no fag!"

"Oh," I said quietly. "Coop, you know how muddled a dwarf can get, so let's see if I have a line on where you're coming from. You'd like me to root around, keep the dust and *my* family unsettled, and probably end up looking like the village idiot you always thought I was, on the off chance I might be able to prove that someone in *your* family wasn't a homosexual. Have I got it?"

"Robby, I—"

"I thought so," I said, starting to walk away.

"Robby, please! Wait a second!"

Wheeling around, I placed my stiffened index and middle fingers squarely over the center of Coop Lugmor's solar plexus, pressed slightly. "Stay!" I snapped, and he did.

2.

WE finished the lunch my mother had insisted on making. My parents, Garth, Janet, and I sat in silence at the table, staring into our empty coffee cups. Sparkling motes of dust floated in beams of golden sunlight, and the muffled laughter of a horde of young nieces and nephews could be heard outside in the yard. John Dernhelm, Janet's husband, emerged from the kitchen, wiped his eyes, then went out the door. Two burly uncles sat in a corner of the adjacent

living room, talking in low voices, discussing weather and corn prices. Their wives sat at opposite ends of a worn sofa, crocheting.

My father disappeared for a few moments, then returned with a jug of corn liquor, surprising me, since I had never seen him or my mother drink so much as a glass of wine. He poured small glasses half full for everyone. My second surprise came when I drank the potion and came to an instant, complete understanding of why such stuff is called white lightning. My father offered me a second helping, and I covered my glass with a hand that already felt numb.

"To everything there is a season," my mother said softly, daintily touching a linen napkin to her thin, trembling lips.

"Amen," my father added in a voice that rumbled out of his chest like distant thunder but was also, always, gentle.

"To everything there is a season," Janet repeated in a small voice. "This, too, shall pass."

It meant that a kind of unofficial mourning period had passed, following Tommy into the ground. Now we could speak of other things. Farmers don't have a lot of time for things like grief or self-pity; there are always animals to be cared for, crops to be tended. Fences to be mended.

"I would like to say something," my mother said in a voice so low it could barely be heard. She paused, pushed back a stray, gossamer strand of silver hair with a frail, liver-spotted hand. She turned, looked at me with her faded, violet eyes, and a smile wreathed her face. She reached across Garth and took my hand in hers. "It's so good to have Garth and Robby with us. I'm sorry it has to be

such a sad occasion that brings you here, Robby, but it's wonderful to have you home after so many, many years."

"I'm sorry, Mom," I mumbled at the tablecloth.

"Your mother wasn't looking for an apology, son," my father said. "All of us understand. Nobody's ever written more letters than you, and you've brought us to New York many times. She's just saying that we love you, and we're very proud of you."

Garth, sensing that I was close to tears, came to my rescue. "Poor Mongo's just a social cripple," he said, somberly shaking his head and winking at Janet.

"Stop that, Garth!" my mother said, whacking my brother on a broad shoulder. "And what is this 'Mongo' business? Robby is Robby. You, of all people, shouldn't talk like that about your brother. You love him more than anybody, if that's possible."

That embarrassed everyone but my mother, and for a few moments we lapsed back into awkward silence. It was Janet who finally spoke. Her voice was low, quavering.

"Robby? What did Coop Lugmor want?"

Garth and I exchanged glances. I looked down at the table, shrugged. "Nothing. He was just drunk and feeling sorry for himself."

Janet sat trembling for a few seconds, then stifled a sob as she abruptly rose and rushed into a small sewing room. I went after her, closed the door. I sat down beside her on the small sofa, took her hands away from her face and kissed them. Gradually she stopped sobbing.

"Thank you for coming, Robby."

"Please don't thank me, Janet."

"I know how it hurts you. You haven't been here in seventeen years."

"It hasn't been as bad as I thought it would be." "Still."

"Tommy was very special to me. You know that."

Janet nodded. Tears welled again in her eyes, but she didn't sob. "And you were certainly special to him." She pressed my hand to her wet cheek. Long, fine hair the texture and color of corn silk fell across my wrist. "We've never been close, Robby, have we?"

"I feel close to you now."

"It was my fault. I was a snot-nosed kid, and as lousy a sister as Garth was good a brother. You embarrassed me, Robby."

"That's all right— I embarrassed me, too." She glanced at me quickly, her face clenched in hurt. Janet wasn't used to my brand of humor. I smiled, added: "What's past is past, Janet."

She leaned forward and kissed me on the lips. "What I just said has been sticking in my throat for a long, long time, Robby. I wanted to get it behind me, and I just did. I love you."

"And I love you."

She kissed me again, then quickly looked away— but not before I had glimpsed something dark, perhaps a question, moving in her eyes. I cleared my throat, said softly: "Lugmor was bellyaching about the way Jake Bolesh handled the investigation. He doesn't think Jake did a very good job, and he doesn't agree with the findings." I paused,

touched Janet's wrist. "What do you think?"

It seemed to me that Janet considered her answer very carefully. "I haven't had much time to think about anything but the fact that my son is dead," she said after some time.

"Of course," I sighed, sorry I had brought up the subject.

"Besides," she said with a shudder. "What's to think about? Why *shouldn't* Jake do a good job? They've said such terrible things about Tommy and Rodney. Why would Jake lie about something like that?"

"You'd have to answer that," I said carefully. "I don't live here. *Can* you think of any reason for Jake to lie?"

"Not really."

"Not really?"

"No. It's just that everything happened so *fast*. Tommy disappears for a week, and the next thing you know they find both him and Rodney Lugmor shot to death near the creek on Coop Lugmor's farm. Then they printed that... *stuff*... in the newspaper, and Jake was giving press conferences. Why would Jake and the reporters say such horrible things if they weren't true?" She covered her face with her hands, but her voice came through clear and bitter. "They couldn't even wait until those boys were in the ground."

I squeezed my sister's hand, but Janet no longer needed my solace; she was angry now, not grief-stricken; in some corner of her mind that wasn't flooded with tears, she *had* obviously been doing a lot of thinking. "Did you ever find out where Tommy had been for that week, or why he'd gone?"

Janet shook her head. "He called me once, just to say

he was all right and not to worry. He said there were things he had to sort out in his mind before he made a decision."

"Do you have any idea what he was talking about?"

"No." She got to her feet and began to pace. The starched black material of her dress crackled like flames from a combustible mixture of rage, confusion, and grief. She abruptly stopped pacing and turned to me. I thought she would burst into tears again, but she didn't. "Robby," she said hoarsely, "you know how to find out about things. Would it be possible for you... ? Maybe... ?"

"Janet, please sit down." She did. I stroked her back, continued: "Let me tell you what a private detective does; he runs up a big phone bill and he spends a lot of money for good shoes to walk around in. All the time he's talking to people he knows, contacts in important places like the police department, Motor Vehicle, the telephone company, and a dozen different licensing agencies. Private detectives need friends; if not friends, people who think they may be paid back someday in bits and pieces of information. You can move almost anything— certainly nations, and probably the planet itself— if you have a strong enough lever of information."

"You really believe that, Robby?"

"I've learned it. I know a secret that nations would sacrifice tens of thousands of men in order to share."

"What— ?"

"What I'm saying is that I don't even have a license to operate here, and if I did it wouldn't be worth the match it would take to burn it. I don't have any contacts here, Janet,

and the county sheriff isn't exactly an old boyhood chum. Do you understand? In Peru County I was, and always will be, a freak. When I'm here, I think of *myself* as a freak. I wouldn't exactly be taken seriously. I think you know I'd do anything for you and Tommy, but this is a situation where anything I might try to do would be counter productive. I don't mind these people laughing at me, but I wouldn't want them laughing at you and the rest of the family."

"They're already laughing, Robby; snickering behind their hands. When school starts in September, don't you think it's going to be hell for the other kids?"

Having nothing to say, I folded my hands in my lap and stared at them. I felt shriveled inside, but I knew I was right; the situation was far too delicate and serious to tolerate token gestures.

"They take you pretty seriously in New York," Janet persisted.

"That's because in New York you can't tell the freaks from the straights without a very detailed score card."

Janet looked at me for a long time. "Robby, I don't think I like your sense of humor," she said at last.

"You'll get used to it," I said with a smile. "I intend to see a lot more of you after this." I waited for a response. Janet, stony-faced, simply continued to stare at me. "I'll tell you what can be done," I continued quietly. "You have serious questions about the scope of Jake Bolesh's investigation, and that's what I'm going to tell the State Police. I'm going to find you a good lawyer. He or she will know a competent P.I. who knows the territory and can work here."

Janet slowly, sadly, shook her head. "I can do that myself, and I don't want to bring in strangers until I've had more time to think about it. I have to talk it over with John."

"Of course," I said, feeling like a trapped animal gnawing on its own leg. No matter how hard I chewed, I knew I wasn't going to get free; if I went back to New York, I would just be carrying the trap with me.

"Are you and Garth leaving soon?"

"In an hour or so," I said, glancing at my watch. "We have to catch a six-o'clock flight, and it's a three-hour drive to the airport." Janet said nothing, and it didn't take me too long to realize what I was going to do. "Janet, if you're certain it's what you want, I'll stick around for a few days and see what I can find out."

Janet slowly raised her head. Tears filled her eyes, rolled down her cheeks. She smiled wanly, nodded.

"Mongo, you sure you don't want me to stay?"

I shook my head, leaned back on the car fender, and crossed my arms over my chest. "There's no sense in both of us wasting our time, and I know you're anxious to get back on the Madden case. Besides, Jake Bolesh has your old job. He'll remember me as the dwarf he pounded on, but he'll remember *you* as the dwarfs big brother who pounded on *him*. He's a good man for you to stay away from."

"He's a good man for *you* to stay away from."

"Oh, I don't know," I replied with a shrug. "If Ben's

Country Kitchen still caters for the county jail, how bad can the food be?"

"I'm not concerned about Bolesh putting you in jail, Mongo," Garth said seriously, "I'm worried that you'll kill the son-of-a-bitch if he hassles you. The kid he used to beat up didn't have a black belt in karate."

"Your concern is touching."

"Don't forget, Robby," Garth said, pinching my cheek, "I'm the one who loves you most."

"Kiss my ass, Garth."

My brother laughed. "Very good. I'd say you're in the right frame of mind to do battle."

"You think there's going to be a battle?"

"Not really," Garth said evenly. "If I thought so, I'd stick around. I'm glad you're staying, though. It will make Janet feel better."

"You think Jake handled this properly?"

Garth took some time to consider his answer. "Like it or not, I think you have to give Bolesh the benefit of the doubt. I've been back here a few times, and you haven't. You were born here, but you're a New Yorker through and through; for you, Peru County might as well be a foreign country. These are good people, Mongo. They keep on reelecting Bolesh, so he must be doing something right."

"What about the speed of the investigation?"

Garth shrugged. "Here things like that tend to go the way the county sheriff wants them to. As much as it twists my guts to say so, Bolesh may have been doing the family a favor. It was a messy scene out there, Mongo, and Bolesh

had enough sensitivity to keep the news photographers away. Tommy took a shotgun slug through the chest; the Lugmor kid put the barrel in his mouth and pulled the trigger."

"A *shotgun?!!*"

"Guns— sometimes even shotguns— are as common with the kids out here as peashooters in New York. The gunstock had Rodney Lugmor's prints all over it, and there were the letters. It looks like the kids had something hot and heavy going, and they couldn't handle it. It had gotten completely out of hand. They were both afraid people were going to find out. At the end they got together to try and figure out what to do, and they decided that the answer was to die together. It's a bitch, Mongo, but it looks like the straight dope."

"You seem to know a hell of a lot."

"I made some phone calls, Mongo. Naturally, I had some questions of my own."

"Thanks for telling me."

"I spent maybe forty-five minutes on the phone yesterday afternoon, talking to people I trust. I didn't have a chance to get you alone, and I couldn't see the sense in stirring up any more emotion by questioning the investigation. I didn't know Janet had doubts."

"Coop Lugmor has doubts."

"Lugmor's a heavy drunk, Mongo, an alcoholic. He's been going downhill for a decade— just not fast enough to finally put himself out of his misery. The guy had nothing to begin with, and now he's gone out of his head worrying

about people calling his dead brother queer. Our merry memories aside, I think Bolesh may have simply wanted to get it all out in the open fast so it could be done with."

Annoyed, I pushed off the car and kicked at a clod of dirt. "You knew what Janet and I had talked about earlier. Why didn't you tell *her* you were satisfied with the investigation? It would have put her mind at ease, and I'd be flying my ass out of Peru County."

Garth stared at me for some time before he finally answered. "Janet came to *you* and I think that's significant. It's not going to hurt you to spend a few extra days around here, Mongo. You've got a lot of relatives you haven't seen or spoken to since you were a kid. They're very interested in you, but they're also very sensitive about your feelings. You have to make the first move, show them you're not as crazy or arrogant or whatever as everyone thinks you are."

"Is this what the NYPD calls 'sensitive social management'?"

"Classes at the university don't start for a month, and I know you don't have any big business pending because you've been goofing off for the past three weeks. Spend some time here. Ask some questions, satisfy *yourself* that everything's been done that can be done. *You* put Janet's mind at ease. While you're at it, you'll spend a lot of good time with Mom and Dad and get to know the rest of your family. They're part of you, brother. Fill in your empty spaces."

It should have been time for me to come up with something appropriately sarcastic. Instead, I said: "Okay."

"Anything you want me to do for you when I get back to the city?"

"Yeah. Check with my answering service. If I've got any important calls, touch base for me. Tell them I'll be back in a week."

"Will do." Garth smiled, tapped me on the shoulder with a big, meaty fist. "This is going to be good for you, Mongo. Now I'm going to sit with Mom and Dad for a few minutes."

3.

A quote from Edward Teller was typed on a card taped to the door.

Science Is a fable which has been made consistent.

Tommy Dernhelm's "room" was half of a spacious farmhouse basement, and he'd used every inch of it. The walls were papered with fantasy posters and artwork from what looked like every *Lord of the Rings* calendar ever published. There were multiple copies of everything J. R. R. Tolkien had ever written. The three volumes of the *Rings* trilogy and *The Hobbit* stacked next to a Radio Shack TR4100 computer terminal looked worn to a point just this side of dust. Attached to the computer terminal were a display screen, printer, and banks of arcane computer components.

"Expensive hobby," I said.

Janet walked across the room to the computer terminal, caressed the back of the rickety swivel chair sitting in front of it. "He was so bright, Robby. He never wanted to spend money on the things other kids do, so John and I wanted to help him get everything he did want. Tommy did little odd jobs for neighbors to earn money, and for the past couple of years we've had extra money from the test plantings. We believed Tommy would be a great scientist one day."

"What 'test plantings'?"

"The Volsung Corporation," Janet replied absently. "It's a private company that's trying to develop new disease-resistant strains of wheat, sorghum, corn, and soybeans. When they first started building they mailed out a brochure to everyone in the county explaining what they were doing, but I didn't understand a lot of it. It talked about DNA, gene splicing, enzymes, things like that. They had a name for what they were doing, but I don't recall what it was."

"Agrigenetics?"

"That sounds like it. Anyway, they lease a certain amount of acreage from just about every farmer in the county, and they use the plots for test plantings. I must say they pay very well for the privilege—much more than we would have asked for if they'd asked what we wanted for the land instead of making an offer straight out."

"Interesting. Where is this Volsung Corporation?"

"About twenty miles west of Duck Pond, out on the prairie. Why?"

"Just curious. What did the cops take out of here?"

"Nothing," Janet said, a look of surprise on her face. "They never even looked down here."

If Janet was surprised at the question, I was even more surprised at the answer; it was a little tidbit Garth obviously hadn't picked up during the course of his phone conversations. "You're sure they didn't even *look* down here?"

My sister nodded. Her fair hair, drained of its usual brightness by fatigue and tension, bounced listlessly on her shoulders. "Jake came to tell me the bad news, but he never really asked me any questions." She quickly put a hand to her mouth and stifled a sob. "I suppose he felt he'd found all the answers he needed out at Coop's place."

"Uh-huh."

"Everything here is just the way it was when Tommy ran away. As you can see, he was very good about keeping his room clean, and he didn't like anyone to touch anything. He stored a lot of books and magazines in a shed out back, but I think it would take you a year to go through it all."

A year was a conservative estimate. Three-quarters of the shed was stacked to the ceiling with taped cartons. I opened a couple, found textbooks, magazines, computer journals, some science fiction novels and a lot more fantasy novels and comic books. There were two editions of the fantasy game Dungeons and Dragons, with half a dozen accompanying worn manuals. I thought I could safely presume that anything that might be connected with Tommy's death was back in his room, and we returned there.

John Dernhelm was waiting for us. Janet's husband was in his mid-forties and, like most farmers, in good shape from clean air and hard, clean work. I'd met him for the first time three days before, and it hadn't taken me long to see that we weren't going to find many interests in common. Still, in light of the fact that Janet had seen fit to marry him, I assumed he had something going for him. He was a nice enough fellow, but I had a strong feeling that my dwarfism, combined with Tommy's eerie, incandescent brilliance, had confirmed his suspicion that he'd married into a family with more funny genes than the Volsung Corporation.

He was carrying a large glass tumbler filled to the brim with a delicious-looking amber fluid and lots of ice; Dernhelm was looking better and better to me.

"Janet told me you like Scotch," Dernhelm said with a thin smile, "so I went out and bought some. I meant to offer you a drink before dinner, but I forgot. I thought you might like one now."

"Thanks," I said, reaching for the glass like a drowning man clutching at a life preserver, downing a quick swallow. It was good Scotch, smooth and mellow but with just enough bite to remind you that it wasn't iced tea. My throat was still raw from the firewater my father had given me in the afternoon. I took a second sip, looked at him. He was staring at me with an expression on his face that was very difficult to read. "John, I understand you lease out some land to the Volsung Corporation?"

Dernhelm shot a quick, irritated look at his wife. His dark brown eyes flashed, and some of the color went out of his

sun-scorched flesh. "I guess that's so, Robby," he said, obviously annoyed. "Just about every farmer in the county leases out acreage. They tell me there are differences in the soil throughout the county, and they like to check every variable."

"Does each farmer tend the crop that's planted on his land?"

Dernhelm's jaw muscles clenched; he was a man who didn't like answering questions, personal or otherwise. "No," he said at last. "We sign a contract that says we won't interfere with the crops in any way. We're not even allowed to look at them. They're all important scientists connected with the place, and I guess they have their own way of doing things."

"Do you mind my asking how much they pay you to lease the land?"

He flushed, jammed his hands into his pockets. "What does this have to do with Tommy's death?"

"Probably nothing," I replied evenly.

"Then I guess I do mind, Robby," he said tightly.

"Okay, John. I didn't mean to pry."

"If you don't mean to pry, how come you ask so many questions about my business?"

I considered telling him what Coop Lugmor had said about Jake Bolesh's financial connection with Volsung, but decided it wasn't (he time to repeat what, at the moment, amounted to nothing more than mere gossip from the lips of a frenzied alcoholic— especially when that gossip involved an old enemy I was probably going to have to deal

with eventually. "I apologize, John," I said quietly.

Janet came across the room, touched her husband's arm. "John? Robby didn't mean any harm."

But John Dernhelm was worked up. "I've got something I want to get out of my craw," he said through clenched teeth. "Robby, I know you're supposed to be some hot-shot college professor and private detective; I also know that Janet asked you to poke around. I'm opposed to it, and I've told her so. We know what's happened, and it's better to just let it be. Excuse me. I'm going to watch television."

Dernhelm turned and wearily, like a man carrying a very heavy bag of sorrow, trudged back up the steps. Janet and I stood in silence for a few moments, then Janet said: "I'm sorry, Robby. I'll get you any information you need."

"No, don't go against your husband. I can get the information someplace else. And don't be sorry. John's feelings are perfectly understandable. John's not going to be the only member of our family upset if I continue."

Janet thought about it. Shadows of doubt moved in her eyes as she absently chewed at her lower lip. "I wonder if I'm doing the right thing," she said at last. I waited, suddenly finding it difficult to breathe. "What do you think, Robby?"

"From what I've learned in the past hour, I don't think you could characterize this as a lousy investigation—there hasn't *been* an investigation. Tommy and Rodney Lugmor were found early Wednesday morning; this is Sunday, and it's all over. The cops didn't even look through Tommy's things. The *least* they should have done was to question you, and check out what Tommy put on that computer."

Janet uttered a strange, hollow laugh that was at once tinged with bitterness and burnished with pride. "I suspect they'd have had one heck of a time doing that."

"Why?"

"That computer was Tommy's pride and joy. He built a lot of the components himself. In some ways he was very open and childlike, but he was very secretive in other ways. He used the computer for all sorts of things."

"Like maybe keeping a diary in it?"

Janet stared at me hard. "Yes," she breathed. "It's possible. But

I don't know how anyone can get at it. Tommy was fascinated with the problem of computer security— and how to break it. I'm pretty sure he encoded everything, and you'd have to know the code to get into the memory banks. Knowing Tommy, that would be some code." She sighed, glanced toward the steps. "Robby, what should I do?"

"You're Tommy's mother, Janet. Also, you have to live with whatever dirt I may dig up or bitterness I may cause. In a few days I'll be back in New York and just an afterthought to these people."

"You can advise me. What would you do if you were me?"

"I'd want to make sure I wasn't haunted for the rest of my life by doubts or unanswered questions," I replied evenly. "No matter what the cost, I'd want to satisfy myself that I knew as much of the truth as there was to know."

"That's what I want."

There were fourteen memory discs stacked neatly in an open-faced file next to the computer terminal, but there was no way I was going to fool with them. I wasn't even going to turn the computer on, for fear of erasing something. However, there were other things to look at.

I worked my way around the room, systematically checking between and inside the well-worn books for stray scraps of paper. Nothing. I sat down in the swivel chair and carefully leafed through the four volumes of J. R. R. Tolkien — *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy: *The Fellowship of the Ring*, *The Two Towers*, and *The Return of the King*— that had been placed on the table supporting the computer terminal.

The books had been gone through so many times that the pages were falling out. There were what appeared to be thousands of notations in the volumes— underlined passages, margin notes, notes to check certain sections of his diary, and the word *score!* written in heavy block letters in a number of places.

Pushing the books aside, I opened a drawer in the table. There was a blue plastic card with what looked like strips of magnetic tape on both surfaces and which I assumed fit into one of the many slots in the various computer components. I placed the card on top of the stack of books and turned my attention to the scraps of paper in the drawer. The first one I read startled me.

There are monsters In Mirkwood! Unclean!

"Does the term 'Mirkwood' mean anything to you?"

Janet, who had been studying me from across the room, shrugged wearily. "I think it's some evil forest mentioned in one of the Tolkien books."

"I know that. I've read them. Have you?"

She nodded. "Tommy insisted. I can't say I could really get into them; I like some science fiction, but fantasy doesn't much interest me."

"Fantasy certainly fascinated Tommy."

Janet cocked her head to one side, smiled wryly. "Tommy used to go around reciting passages from *Lord of the Rings* by heart. He said it relaxed him."

"Did 'Mirkwood' have any connection for Tommy outside the books?"

She thought about it, finally shook her head. "Not that I know of. Why?"

I showed her the paper. "That phrase— 'There are monsters in Mirkwood!— was in the last letter he wrote me. I got it about two weeks ago, which means he must have written it just before he ran away. I didn't think anything of it at the time because he was always dropping odd phrases into his letters— usually out of context; he used them to separate paragraphs. Now I'm wondering if 'Mirkwood' meant something else to him."

"I'm sorry, Robby, I just don't know. Tommy's mind could be like a laser one moment, a scattergun the next. He could

be thinking of a dozen things at one time."

I stared at the books, the plastic card, the computer terminal and memory discs— all the strange legacy of a tormented fourteen-year-old genius— and wondered what secrets they held, if any.

"Janet?" I asked softly. "Was Tommy a homosexual?"

The question didn't seem to upset her, as I'd feared it might, but she considered it for a long time. "Robby, I don't really know," she said at last. "You know how physically slight Tommy was; he was all brain, certainly undeveloped physically and socially. He didn't have any girl friends, but that was because he was so absorbed in his schoolwork, his computer, and the game. The friends he did have were brains like he was, other students in the extension program for gifted children sponsored by the university. If you'd asked me that question two weeks ago, I'd have said that Tommy was probably asexual at this point in his life. Now..." Her voice trailed off.

"What game?"

Janet raised her eyebrows. "They called it Sorscience. Tommy never mentioned it in his letters?"

"No."

"I really am surprised, Robby. As far as Tommy was concerned, you were a big part of it. I know he used you to score a lot of points."

"Tell me about it."

"I'll tell you what I know, which isn't a lot; I told you Tommy was very secretive. Sorscience was a fantasy game: magic, sword and sorcery, dungeons, dragons, wizards,

and monsters— that sort of thing."

"I've heard of Dungeons and Dragons. I saw it with Tommy's things in the shed, and I know it's very popular with college kids. I've never heard of Sorscience."

"Tommy and his friends used to play Dungeons and Dragons, but they all got so good that everyone wanted to be Dungeon Master and they eventually got bored with it. I suppose they could have invited other kids to play with them, but they tended to be very impatient with kids who weren't as bright as they were. The end result was that they made up their own game. The object of Sorscience was to find scientific discoveries, theories, or inventions that duplicated magical situations or feats of sorcery described in *Lord of the Rings*. As you can imagine, they spent hours in the library poring over newspapers and scientific journals. As I understand it, a player would score points for finding a situation or discovery, and even more points if the experiment could be duplicated or physical evidence displayed. That's about all I know."

"What did I have to do with it?"

Janet flushed, laughed. "Can't you guess?"

"I'm afraid to."

"You were Frodo!"

"Frodo was a hobbit with furry feet," I replied drily, "not a dwarf."

Janet, still grinning, shrugged. "Close enough. After all, what's a fantasy novel without a dwarf?" She paused, sighed, and her smile became bittersweet. "Tommy was so *proud* of you, Robby. He was proud that you were a dwarf,

so very proud that you were his uncle, He lived for his visits with you in New York. He couldn't wait to grow up and finish his schooling so he could move to New York like you and Garth."

"He scored points in this game because his uncle was a dwarf?"

Janet nodded. "The fact that you were a relative made you his private property, so to speak. He scored simply because you were a dwarf, and thus matched a *Rings* character, but he *kept* scoring if you became involved in a case or did something that he could correlate to action in the books." She walked slowly across the room, put her hand on my shoulder and raised her eyebrows. "You *have* been involved in some bizarre cases, Robby."

"Umm."

"Like that business with the witches' coven."

"Yeah. They were playing the game then?"

"No. The game was a recent invention, but Tommy got a ruling to the effect that, since you were 'his' dwarf, anything you'd ever done counted. You were 'Frodo the Ring Bearer.' For example, he correlated the witches' coven to Tolkien's Orcs. You entered their lair and survived. Points."

"No wonder he was always pressing me for information. I don't understand why he never mentioned it."

"He might have been afraid you'd be angry. Or maybe he just didn't want you to feel self-conscious."

"Was Rodney Lugmor a player?"

"Yes," Janet said, frowning. "Rodney was very bright, as you probably know, and he was also in the university's

extension program."

"Janet, I'd like a copy of the rules for this game. Also, a list of all the players."

My sister shook her head, then placed her hand on top of the computer terminal. "I've never seen a rule book or player list, Robby. If they exist, they're probably in here. In code."

"Secrecy is one leg of the so-called Witch's Triangle of Power," I said tightly. "Secrecy may have been part of the game, or a way to score points."

"Robby, I do know of one other player— Bill Jackson. His family has a small farm over on Arrowrun Road. Tommy, Rodney, and Bill used to meet here once in a while to discuss strategy and fine points of the game. I'll call his mother for you, if you want. He's only fifteen, so I suppose the ground should be prepared before you talk to him."

"Do that," I said, rising from the swivel chair and looking at my watch. "Janet, I'd like to fly in someone from New York to help me. I know it will be sticky with John, but I'd like this guy to be able to stay here in Tommy's room. Believe me, you'll never see him— and he'll starve to death if you don't bring him food from time to time. Can you manage it?"

"I'll manage it."

"May I use your car?"

"Of course," Janet said, slightly puzzled. "The keys are in the ignition. You can keep it as long as you like; we have the pickup. Where are you going?"

"Coop Lugmor's place. How do I get there?"

She wrote down the directions. I put the paper in my pocket, headed for the stairs.

"Call Mom for me, will you?" I asked. "Tell her I've got my key, and not to wait up for me."

"People around here go to bed pretty early!" Janet called after me. "Coop may be asleep!"

"I hope so," I said over my shoulder. "It'll be a pleasure to wake him up."

4.

COOP LUGMOR wasn't asleep, only drunk. He smelled of bad booze and filth; his unshaven face and wasted, haunted eyes were like a microcosm of the crumbling, weather-bombed farmhouse where he lived. Chest-high sawgrass and weeds were a moat around the house, and I literally had to beat a path up to the front door where Lugmor, alerted by the sound of the car's engine, was waiting for me.

"Robby?" he mumbled. "That you?"

"The ghost of Christmas past, Coop." Garth had sounded as if he were feeling sorry for Lugmor; but then, Garth had never been a dwarf. Lugmor had helped to make my childhood miserable, and I was feeling mean. "You still interested in hiring me?"

He licked his lips. Some of the drunkenness seemed to go out of him, chased by grief— or hope. "Sure am, Robby. Uh, I don't have much— "

"This is what it will cost you to have me find out things for

you. You're an old boyhood acquaintance, so you get a very special rate; it's a thousand dollars a day, plus expenses."

At first I wasn't sure he'd heard me. He continued to stare down at me in the bright moonlight, his mouth half open. "A thou—?"

"A thousand dollars a day, Coop, plus expenses. And I don't guarantee I'll find out a thing you don't already know. What I'll do is poke around and ask a few questions. You hire me, you'll be wired to any answers I get."

"Robby," Lugmor rasped, "things haven't been too good for me the last few years. I haven't got anywhere near that kind of money."

"Tough shit, Coop." I turned and headed down off the porch into the jungle that was his front yard. "Ask your own fucking questions."

Now I knew I was being really ornery, and I knew that neither my mother, father, nor my brother would have been very proud of me at the moment. Yet, I couldn't stop myself; it was as if there were a cruel stranger growing inside me, taking over. Coop Lugmor had thumped me good, and now I was thumping back in the worst way possible—I was kicking his mind.

There was a cry like the bark of a sick dog, then a thump of flesh and crash of pottery. I spun around and crouched, thinking that Lugmor might be trying to attack me. The man was sprawled on the ground; rushing after me, he'd fallen off the porch and broken his jug. He sat up and sobbed; his right hand was bleeding, and tears ran down his face collecting dirt. Feeling slightly nauseated, I walked back to

him. I'd have stooped to help almost any other creature in his position, but I couldn't bring myself to touch the horrible memory that was Coop Lugmor.

"There are awful bad things going on in this county, Robby!" Lugmor said. "That's God's truth! Nobody cares! My brother and your nephew get killed and all they do is tell lies! Somebody's got to show them we're not all robots! Somebody's got to *do* something!"

"I said I'd ask questions. You want to hear the answers, you pay my price."

Lugmor flapped his bleeding hand at me. I grimaced, took a step back. "I haven't got it!" he wailed.

"You've got land, which means you get money from the Volsung Corporation."

"They cut me off last year. I've got *nothing*, Robby! I've been living off the vegetables I grow."

"You've got the farm," the cruel stranger in me said coldly and evenly.

"You want me to sell my *farm*?"

"Frankly, I don't give a shit what you do. You came to me. I might suggest you get a mortgage. You've got a house, a barn, and a few hundred acres. It ought to be worth something."

"Holy Jesus," Lugmor moaned. "How would I pay off the loan? They'd take the farm, Robby, and I don't want to live like some animal in the woods."

"Think about it. If you change your mind, you can call me at my folks' place."

"Wait!" He struggled to his feet, swayed. "I'll do it,

Robby! I'll get a mortgage, pay you what you want!"

"Splendid."

"It'll take time!"

"I'll take a note to the effect of our agreement. Now, Coop."

Lugmor led the way into his house, a hovel that would make any woods I'd ever seen look like the Ritz in comparison. Apparently the man really was existing on nothing but vegetables, because there were scraps of rotting greens scattered about what I assumed to be the living room. A single kerosene lamp was burning something that wasn't kerosene, and Lugmor lit two others. Dirt was everywhere.

Standing in the center of the room as far away from any piece of furniture as I could get, I waited while Lugmor rummaged around for pencil and paper. He wrote something down, handed me the slip. I put it in my pocket without looking at it; it would be illegible. It was also worthless, but Coop Lugmor wouldn't know that. I wanted him crawling around in the woods; I wanted him hurt and broken the way he had hurt and tried to break me.

Now I wasn't too proud of myself. I was growing myself a monster, I thought, and the stranger was beginning to make my insides decidedly uncomfortable. He was crowding out my soul, making it hard to breathe. My heart hurt.

And there wasn't even any satisfaction.

Lugmor had wrapped his bleeding hand in a filthy rag. He blew his nose with an equally filthy rag he carried in a pocket of his overalls, then dried his eyes with the back of

his hand. "Thanks, Robby," he said in a trembling voice. "I appreciate your being a friend to me. You'll find out I'm telling the truth. Rod was no fag, and he didn't kill himself and your nephew. You want a drink?"

"No."

"Why don't you sit down?"

"You sit, I'll stand. I want to ask you some questions."

"Shoot," he said, grinning nervously as he eased himself down on the arm of a broken chair and leaned forward eagerly. "God, Robby, I can't tell you how much I appreciate this."

"At the cemetery you mentioned that Jake Bolesh was working for a company. You meant the Volsung Corporation, didn't you?"

"You got it, Robby. The Volsung Corporation. This county hasn't been the same since they built that place."

"Does Jake own land?"

"Nah. He sold his place when he was first elected sheriff. He lives in a house in Peru City."

"How do you know Jake is taking money from Volsung?"

"Everybody knows it, Robby. He's got a fancy car, fancy clothes, and he takes vacations in Hawaii. The reason nobody cares is because just about everyone around here gets money from Volsung one way or another. They get cash in the pocket if they lease land, and they get lower property taxes because of all the taxes Volsung pays. Also, Volsung donated a big park over by Polliwallow; it's got a swimming pool and everything. Folks around here think it's really something for a big company like Volsung to set up

right in the middle of Peru County. Nobody wants to rock the boat."

"You think the Volsung Corporation had something to do with the boys' deaths?"

"Nah, I'm not saying that. I'm saying that everybody wants to keep things *quiet* because that's the way Volsung wants it; they're pretty secretive about what they do down there. Murders attract attention. It's like this great big building filled with gold plopped down on the prairie one night, and nobody wants to blink or talk too loud for fear they'll wake up and Volsung will be gone."

"Why did Volsung cut you off?"

Lugmor flushed, ground the stumps of his teeth together. "Jake caught me checking out one of the plots they planted on my land; you're not supposed to do that. He reported me. The next day the plot was plowed under and I was off the payroll. Jake also made sure the word got around so that nobody else would make the same mistake." He paused, stared at me with his bloodshot, rheumy eyes. "I'll tell you something, Robby. You see a drunk in front of you, but there was a time when I was a pretty damn good farmer. I know plain old ordinary field corn when I see it."

"Field corn?"

"Yeah. If I'd had pigs or cows, I could've fed it to 'em, or I could've ground it up for silage. No good for anything else. There's nothing experimental about plain old field corn; it'll grow anywhere—which is a good thing, since most of those plots are half-filled with weeds."

"Experiments need controls. How do you know your plot

wasn't a control?"

Lugmor scowled. "I know what field corn looks like; I don't know anything about experiments or controls."

"How long has the Volsung Corporation been here?"

"A little over three years. They put the place up fast—matter of months. One minute there's nothing but prairie out there, the next thing you know there's this big building."

"Did Rod ever mention a place called 'Mirkwood' to you?"

"No, can't say that he did."

"What do you think Jake Bolesh does for Volsung?"

His eyes suddenly came to life, glittering with fear. "You're not gonna' tell Jake I've been talking about him, are you?"

"No."

"Okay. The way I figure it, Jake provides them Volsung guys with extra security. He's got patrol cars cruising around there all the time. He makes sure the farmers stay off the lands they've leased out, and he keeps an eye out for strangers nosing around— things like that. Like I said, I think he's paid to keep things nice and quiet."

"If what you say about the Volsung people being big taxpayers is true, they might figure they're entitled to a little extra security. And, considering what everyone in the county gets out of the company, I can understand why no one would object. They'd probably vote Bolesh out of office if he *didn't* give them extra service."

Lugmor scowled again. I wasn't making him happy, but I had to make an effort to see things from the points of view

of the Volsung Corporation and the people of Peru County.

"For a thousand bucks a day, Robby, I'd think you'd be on my side."

"You're paying me to try and get a fix on things, Coop, to try to find out what really happened. It may be that things are just the way Bolesh says they are. Now, who in the county actually works inside the building?"

"Nobody."

"*Nobody?*"

"That's what I said." Lugmor was grinning now, as if he'd finally cored a point in some mysterious game we were playing. "There's maybe a half dozen young guys paid to run a weeder through the plots now and then, but that's it."

"What bars and restaurants do the Volsung people go to when they come into town?"

Another grin, another score. This one he savored, smacking his lips. "They never come to town," he said at last.

"Their people never come out of the *building?*"

Lugmor nodded. "I told you it was a funny place. Oh, the shifts change every few weeks. They bring in people, supplies, and equipment in little airplanes. They got a landing strip out there. You can see the planes coming in real low over Peru City, and I saw them unloading once."

"There must be *somebody* there who handles the local contacts."

"Not that I know of; if anyone knows, it would be Jake. He's the one who tells the local boys with the weeders what to do."

"How much do they pay for the land they lease?"

"Five hundred dollars a month per acre."

"Someone must have contacted you at the beginning about leasing acreage."

"Guy never gave me his name. It was a phone call, and the guy just said he worked for the Volsung Corporation. Contract came in the mail, same as the checks."

"What was the return address on the envelopes?"

Lugmor raised his hand and cocked a thumb toward the southwest, Duck Pond and the prairie beyond.

"No other corporate address in New York? Chicago?"

"Uh-uh."

"Who signed the contract and the checks?"

"I never looked."

"You have a telephone book?"

"I haven't had a telephone for better'n two years, Robby. If it's a listing for Volsung you're looking for, I'll bet everything I've ever owned that it isn't in there."

"Coop, according to the newspaper stories I read, you found the bodies. Is that right?"

Lugmor opened his mouth to speak, but only managed to produce a gagging sound.

"Coop," I prodded, "it's important."

"Just a minute," he mumbled. He rose, picked up a flickering lamp and shuffled through a door. I heard the sound of a cabinet door being opened, and I went after him. I caught his arm just as he was raising a jug to his mouth; obviously, Coop Lugmor still managed to distill alcohol. This batch smelled raw.

"I need this bad, Robby." His eyes were wide and pleading.

"In a minute," I said, wrestling away the jug. "I have to know exactly what happened, and what the scene looked like when you got there."

He leaned forward on the greasy countertop where he had placed the lamp, bowed his head, and moaned softly as I stepped back, holding the jug with both hands like a football. Coop Lugmor wasn't going to take away until I'd found out what I wanted to know. There was almost a minute of silence. When he finally spoke, his voice was whiskey-hoarse, climbing up and down a ragged scale.

"I don't sleep too good," he whispered. "Hardly at all. It must've been two or three in the morning. It was clear, full moon like tonight; I could hear neighbors' dogs barking from three, four farms away. Then I heard the shots. Two shotgun blasts, real loud. I got my own gun, went out. I... I... I found them down by the creek."

"How far away is that?"

"I dunno, maybe a half, three-quarters of a mile straight out back of the barn. They were under a big willow. They... they... I found them..."

"Come on, Coop. Tell me *exactly* what you saw. I need to know everything in detail; I know it's hard, but I have to know. Pretend you're a camera looking back there; tell me what you see."

"They... they..."

"Goddamn it, Coop, *tell* me!"

"Tommy... his chest and stomach and guts... Rodney..."

all of his head from his jawbone up was gone. Brains and bone were splashed... *gagh! Gagh!*"

Overcoming my revulsion, I stepped forward, gripped his elbow and turned him around, shoved the jug into his hands. I counted three heavy gulps before I managed to pull the jug away again.

"They're dead, Coop," I said quietly.

"You're a pretty cold fish, Robby," he said in a strained, accusing voice. "You oughtta' be ashamed of yourself."

I was ashamed of myself, but not for forcing him to tell me what he had seen. I was ashamed of the stranger inside me, and ashamed of the things he'd said and done. There were enough rotten people in Peru County, I thought, and I saw no reason to add myself to the number. The stranger was just going to have to go back to whatever dark place in my heart he had come from.

But Coop Lugmor was still going to have to tell me what had happened.

"From the way you describe it, the boys died instantly, without any physical suffering. Think about that, not what they looked like afterward; you'll feel better. Now, I want you to draw me a diagram on paper showing everything—"

"I can't, Robby." Lugmor held up his hands; they were vibrating like bass tuning forks.

"Then you have to tell me what you saw, in detail. You said there was a willow tree. How were the bodies positioned?"

He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, looked hungrily at the jug. I retreated into my end zone. "It looked

like your nephew had been blown down next to the stream; he was half in, half out of the water. There were.. .crawfish at him."

"Where was your brother?"

"Leaning against the tree."

"The gun? You said it was a shotgun?"

He swallowed, nodded. "Remington 1100. Belonged to our pop."

"How long is that gun from the trigger to the end of the barrels?"

He showed me with his flapping hands.

"Where was it?"

Lugmor screwed his eyes shut. "They didn't suffer?"

"I don't think so, Coop. No."

"Rod was holding it."

"*How*, Coop?" I looked around, saw a broken broom lying on the floor in a corner. I grabbed it, handed it to him. "Get down on the floor and show me exactly how Rod was holding it. Pretend the bristles are the butt end."

My stomach tightened as I watched Lugmor slump down on the floor and angle into position against the broken door of a cabinet. I sighed as I saw him put his finger on the "trigger" and, with eyes popping from his head like great red moons, slide the other end into his mouth. The "gun" was short enough. I shoved the broom out of his mouth and hands, helped him to his feet.

"Coop," I said gently, "so far you haven't told me anything that wouldn't jibe with the newspaper accounts and what I've heard."

"What they say isn't true." "We come back to the letters Bolesh is supposed to have found in Tommy's pocket."

"Not signed!"

"Written on Rodney's typewriter."

"Bolesh says! Nobody around here would know one typewriter from another!"

"The police certainly would, Coop. It's a simple thing to check; it's as if typewriters have fingerprints."

He clenched his fists and shook his head.

"Just for the sake of argument, let's assume that the letters were written on that typewriter. Could anyone else have gotten to that typewriter without someone in the family knowing it?"

"That week they could've. Rod was staying there by himself, and he was probably out of the house a lot. Our folks were away at a Grange convention."

"I want to talk to them tomorrow, Coop, and they may not be too happy to see one of Tommy's relatives coming up the driveway. I want you to come over with me."

"Can't, Robby. They both went away Saturday morning, right after Rod's funeral. Took it real hard, said they couldn't stand knowing that the whole county's talking about us."

"When will they be back?"

"Dunno. They're paying a couple of neighbors to look after the place."

"Coop, I asked you this before and I'm going to ask you again; this time I want you to think very hard before you answer. Who might want to kill your brother and my nephew?"

"I don't *know!*" he wailed. "That's what *you're* supposed to find out!"

"The only thing you're really certain about is that your brother wasn't homosexual, right?"

"Yes! Barney Mason, a friend of mine who works in the drugstore in Peru City, told me he saw Rod in there one day sneaking peeks in some of those dirty magazines. Those magazines have pictures of naked *women* in them, Robby!"

"Great." I handed him the jug. As I watched him suck at its contents, I took the paper he had given me out of my pocket, tore it up, dropped the pieces on the floor. "My regular fee is two hundred a day, Coop. That's what you'll pay, along with expenses. And you *will* pay it. The first expense is the biggest. I'm flying in a hacker from New York."

"What's a hacker?"

"Never mind. You can't even take care of your own business, so don't start worrying about mine. I sure as hell don't want this farm, or any money out of it, which means that you're going to have to haul your ass out and go to work someplace so you can pay me. Maybe I'll talk to some of my relatives, see if one of them will take you on as a hired hand—which means that the nasty dwarf you 'heard tell' about will *personally* break your ass into little pieces if you drink on the job or otherwise fuck up."

"Robby, I—"

"I've been known to carry client accounts for a time, so I may not bill you until you've got a job and saved some

money. The *first* thing you do in the morning is take a bath, shave, find some clean clothes, and hitch a ride into Peru City. Go to the welfare agency. Don't tell them about me, *do* tell them you need help. Drag somebody out here; once they see this place, they'll fall all over themselves giving you emergency assistance."

He drew himself up straight, stumbled, braced himself on the cabinet shelf. "I'm not taking any charity."

"You'll do exactly as I say, Coop!" I snapped, picking my way through the garbage and heading for the door. "Otherwise, you can start thinking about mortgaging your farm. And you can be damn sure I'll check to make sure you go there."

5.

COCKADOODLEDOO.

My father had retired five years ago, sold the animals, and leased out most of his acreage. Nevertheless, he and my mother still rose at dawn; consequently, I found my parents, along with a big breakfast of ham, eggs, and potatoes, waiting for me when I went downstairs early the next morning. We made small talk in an atmosphere that was at once warm but oddly strained. I couldn't tell whether their discomfort arose from the fact that they weren't accustomed to the idea of their son the private detective tilling home soil, or anxiety in the face of all the emotions I was bound to keep stirred up. I finished quickly, went into the living room, and checked the telephone directory.

There was no listing for the Volsung Corporation, and information wouldn't even tell me if they had an unlisted number. Volsung, obviously, thought money was all the public relations they needed, and they were probably right. I borrowed a map of the county from my father and was out of the house before seven.

My first stop was Coop Lugmor's farm. Not a creature was stirring in the house, so I parked my sister's car in the driveway and hiked back of the barn in the general direction Lugmor had indicated the night before. I had no trouble finding the creek, or the area where the killings had taken place; there was only one willow tree, and there were still bloodstains on its trunk. But that was all I found. It had rained hard, twice, since the killings, and not even the depression in the bank where Tommy had fallen was left. If there had been footprints, they had been washed away. Just for form I searched around in the grass and poked with a stick in the mud, but found nothing.

Here, by myself, I sat down on a log for a few minutes and, lasting the salt of my own sorrow, honored the memory of a slight, beaming boy with boundless energy who had looked upon New York City as a vast amusement park and thought of death merely as something his uncle always seemed to be involved with.

Lugmor still wasn't up by the time I came back. I pounded on the door until I heard him shuffling around inside, then shouted something through the door to the

effect that I'd castrate him if he wasn't cleaned up and on his way to welfare in Peru City within the hour.

I got into the car, checked the map, then drove southwest on the highway toward the small town of Duck Pond and the prairie beyond. There was no indication on the map, but the Volsung Corporation turned out to be just about where my sister had said it would be, about twenty miles west of the town.

Somebody went in and out of Volsung on land; on a barely discernible dirt road cutting off the main highway there were tire tracks and crushed weeds. I drove up the road three-quarters of a mile, came over a rise, braked hard, and backed up. I turned off the engine, got out of the car and walked slowly to the crest of the rise.

Below me, perhaps three hundred yards away, was one of the strangest sights I had ever seen. The building housing the Volsung Corporation appeared to be a single windowless cube covering at least a half dozen acres and painted the color of the prairie. There were no signs, no company logo, just the brownish-green structure. To the east, I could just make out a section of a concrete landing strip, inside a double fence.

There were no guards, only the whistling of the prairie wind to challenge me as I walked down the dirt road to a mammoth steel gate that rose perhaps fifteen feet into the air. The gate was very strong, very solid; where there should have been a bolt plate or keyhole there was only a single rectangular notch.

A fifteen-minute walk in either direction convinced me

that the Volsung Corporation was impregnable to anything on legs with the possible exception of a monster kangaroo. The entire complex was surrounded by an electrified fence. There were signs, in English, every twenty yards or so warning of danger, along with skulls and crossbones for the benefit of the illiterate. There was a second fence inside the first, also electrified, topped with barbed wire. What looked like small car antennas sticking up from the ground at random intervals inside the no-man's-land between the fences made me strongly suspect that the area was laced with sensory devices. It was all very neat, very simple, very effective, and—I assumed—astronomically expensive.

I walked back to the car and drove to Peru City, the county seat. After a brief stop at what passed for the local deli, I headed for the county sheriff's office. Jake Bolesh was in.

"Hello, Robby," Bolesh said, rising from the padded swivel chair behind his desk and extending his hand. "I heard you were in town."

I hadn't really expected to see all of my old enemies brought low in the fashion of Coop Lugmor, but I couldn't help but be slightly disappointed at seeing how *good* Jake Bolesh looked. But then, I reminded myself, Bolesh had always been smarter than Lugmor. This man was not the beady-eyed, club-fisted creature that had lurked for so many years in my memories. Bolesh had lost a lot of weight since elementary and high school; he looked tough and trim in his tailored uniform. The only remnant of the sixties in his appearance was his hair; he had kept most of it, and he still

wore it in a large, wavy, out-of-date pompadour held in place with greasy pomade that gave off a slightly sweet odor. Good genes, lousy sensibility. The loss of weight made his coal-black eyes seem larger than I remembered. He still had a scar high on his right cheekbone where Garth had hit him with a two-by-four after Bolesh had worked me over in a bathroom.

"Hello, Jake," I replied, taking his hand. Bolesh was Power in Peru County, the man who probably had the answers to all my questions. There was absolutely no percentage in not accepting his gesture of truce. "It's been a time."

"Better than seventeen years, as I reckon it. I'm glad you stopped in. Sorry about your nephew."

"Okay. Thanks."

"Where's Garth?"

"He had to get back to New York." I opened the paper bag I was carrying, took out two containers of coffee, handed one to Bolesh. "Research has shown that it's impossible to remain in police work without becoming addicted to coffee. I thought you might like a fix."

Bolesh smiled thinly, opened the container. "Thanks, Robby."

"You take cream or sugar?"

Bolesh shook his head, then absently patted the sides of his head as though the motion might have messed his hair. "I like it black. Sit down, Robby."

I sat, opened my container, sipped my coffee. "You're looking good, Jake."

"You too. You've done pretty well for yourself since you left Peru County. From here to college on a scholarship, then on to star in the Statler Brothers' Circus. I saw you perform once. Did you know that?"

I shook my head.

"It was in Chicago. I was at a police convention, and your show was in town. You had a great act— especially that stunt with the rings of fire. You always were a fast little critter."

"Not always fast enough," I said in what I hoped was a neutral tone.

Bolesh shrugged. "Sorry about that. I sure was one mean son-of-a-bitch as a kid. Anyway, Garth always gave me as good as I gave you." He paused, stared at me over the rim of his coffee container. It struck me how his eyes, viewed by themselves, glowed with a strange, muted light, as though the thoughts moving behind them had nothing to do with the chitchat coming out of his mouth. It occurred to me that, for some reason, I had Jake Bolesh worried.

"'Mongo the Magnificent,'" Bolesh continued. "That was your billing, right?"

"Right. You seem to know a lot about me, Jake."

"Every time the local paper needs to fill up space, it runs a piece on the famous dwarf from Peru County. Also, I've seen you written up in *Time* and *Newsweek*. You earned your PhD while you were with the circus. Now you're a college professor. Criminology. Also, of course, you hire out as a private detective."

"You have my dossier up to date."

"Do I? It occurs to me to ask what you might be investigating at the moment."

Again I reached down into the bag at my feet, drew out a jar of honey and placed it on the desk in front of Bolesh.

"First coffee, now honey," Bolesh said with a sharp, brittle laugh. "Cute."

"I thought you'd see the point."

"Sharpen it for me."

"My family still has a few questions about Tommy's death. I'm sure you understand."

"Not really. Why didn't John or Janet come to me?"

"Maybe they would have eventually. Things have happened pretty quickly. The funeral was just yesterday, and they're still pretty much in shock."

"But you're not."

"It seems to me that it would be in everyone's interest to get some of the fine points cleared up quickly so the whole matter can be laid to rest for good."

Bolesh unscrewed the cap on the honey jar, sniffed its contents. "You carrying a gun?"

"No. Why do you ask?"

"Because it seems to me that you're doing a private detective number, even if it's unofficial, and you're not licensed in this state.

Your handgun license is no good, either, unless it's registered with me. You want to register a handgun?"

"Do you think I need a gun?"

"No. I'm just laying things out, Rob, so we both know where we stand. What would you like to know?"

"I'd like to see your raw file on the case and the coroner's report, if there is one."

"No."

"Why not?"

"It would be unprofessional."

"I'm a professional."

"You have no standing in this county. It would set a bad precedent. If I let you see things like that, who knows who'd be in to second-guess me next week?"

"Who would know that you let me see the files?"

"I would. I happen to take my job very seriously. I can tell you that it's an open and shut case of murder-suicide."

"Will there be a grand jury hearing or coroner's inquest?"

"Why should there be? There's no one to accuse, and we're satisfied that all the facts are known."

"It seems to me that you closed up shop pretty quickly."

"Did I? You weren't at the scene. There wasn't much to investigate. The kids were queer, Rob, as I'm sure you've heard."

"What would I have seen if I'd been there?"

"A mess. The Lugmor kid shot out your nephew's chest, then blew his own head off. My deputies and I went over that scene on our hands and knees, Robby; the only footprints there belonged to the two boys. Besides, no one else would have a motive. Things were just the way I reported, and if I had any doubts I'd still be investigating. I'm afraid you'll just have to take my word for that. We're not hicks here, Rob, despite what New Yorkers may think. The people in this county have seen fit to keep me in this office

for twelve years; they must think I know my business."

"Aren't you interested in where Tommy might have been the week before he was killed?"

"I know where he was."

Surprise. "Where?"

"Shacked up with Rod Lugmor. Lugmor's folks were away."

"How do you know Tommy was with Rodney Lugmor?"

"We found his toilet kit and a bag full of his clothes in the Lugmor kid's room."

"Why didn't you tell my sister?"

"You tell her. Under the circumstances, I didn't feel Janet and John would be too anxious to find out that those two kids were alone with each other for a week, bugging—"

"It may be true that Tommy was with Rodney Lugmor. What you think they were doing is just your opinion."

"Have it your way. People are close to each other in this county, Rob, and we try to respect each other's feelings. Have any other questions?"

Not at the moment, and not for Bolesh. "I guess not. You've been very helpful, Jake. I appreciate it, and I know my family will appreciate it."

"Okay, then let me ask you one. What was Coop Lugmor whispering in your ear yesterday at the cemetery?"

"Who told you about Lugmor?"

"A source. I've extended courtesy to you, and now I'd appreciate a little from you."

"He was just saying he was sorry for what had happened."

Bolesh stared at me for some time. Again, I had the definite impression that he was worried— and growing angry. I certainly didn't want Bolesh angry at me, because he could easily and quickly close me down with nothing more than a trumped-up traffic ticket. I was a long way from home, and I wanted to keep my fingers clear of the light socket that was the county sheriff— at least until I'd cut his wires.

"I don't think I believe you, Rob," Bolesh said at last, "but I'll let it pass. For now. In any case, if you've seen Coop you know he's pissed his life away. He's bitter, he's crazy, and he'll say anything just to stir up trouble. I'd hate to see him use you to try and settle some of his personal grudges."

"I'll try to keep from being used."

"Let me be straight with you, Robby. You're an old acquaintance, a private citizen with family here, and you haven't broken any laws— yet. You've got as much right to be here as anybody else."

"Thanks, Jake," I said evenly.

If he noted any sarcasm, he ignored it. "Go ahead and ask around, but I'll take it as a personal kindness if you'd be very discreet about who you talk to, what questions you ask, and how loud you ask them. This is a quiet county. Outsiders— and you *are* an outsider— could easily upset things."

"What things?"

"Something very good has happened to this county, Rob, and everybody benefits. I'm not going to go into detail because it has nothing to do with your nephew's death, and

it isn't any of your business. Even your own brother-in-law, Tommy's father, will tell you that it's better if things remain nice and quiet. The point is that you're quite a famous dwarf, Robby; if it becomes widely known that you're roaming around Peru County and investigating something sensational, it's going to attract attention from a lot of vultures in the media. It's very important that that doesn't happen here; I don't want to come to work some morning and find Mike Wallace and a camera crew camped outside my office. Understand, I'm not trying to pressure you. I'm just asking that you satisfy yourself and your family that all the facts are known, and then go back to New York. You'll be doing everybody a favor, including your relatives and yourself."

"Why myself?"

"Because a lot of people will be very pissed if you mess things up for them."

"This sounds like 'Cinderella.' Is there a golden coach parked somewhere that will turn into a pumpkin if I step into it?"

"There are a lot of guns in this county, Rob, and I can't be everywhere."

"I hear you, Jake," I said, rising to my feet.

"One more thing, Robby," Bolesh said, rising with me and staring at me hard. "We could be friends. I admire and respect you, and I'd like some respect in return. I've read your articles in *Criminology* and the *Journal of Criminology*, and I'm impressed. I wouldn't try to put anything over on you, and I'd appreciate it if you don't try to

put anything over on me."

"Okay, Jake," I said, heading for the door.

"*Because*—" The tone was sharp, meant to stop and turn me around. It did. He continued in a softer tone: "Because I'm responsible for the well-being of the people in this county. If I think you're disturbing the peace in any way, I'm going to come down hard on you. It won't be like it used to be, Rob; now I'm the law."

"A heavy threat, Jake."

"It was meant to be. I just want to make things clear now, so there won't be any misunderstanding later." "See you, Jake."

6.

JANET had called Bill Jackson's mother to make arrangements and negotiate certain ground rules for my visit with her fifteen-year-old son. I went to see him after lunch. The red and white farmhouse was close to the road, surrounded by a quaint, whitewashed picket fence. Mrs. Jackson, with her son standing slightly behind her, answered the door. She was a handsome woman, with sculpted features and alabaster skin highlighted by freckles. Her eyes were clouded with concern, but her son's were wide with excitement. Bill Jackson was a stocky, rawboned boy with reddish-blond hair and dark blue eyes that glittered with intelligence and good humor. I immediately liked him.

"Hey, you're Mongo!"

"Dr. Frederickson," Bill Jackson's mother said sternly, correcting her son.

"'Mongo' is fine, Mrs. Jackson."

"We'll compromise," the woman said, shooting her son a sharp glance. "You can call Dr. Frederickson 'Mr. Mongo.' And don't get too excited; you talk too much when you get excited." She took a deep breath, looked back at me. "Janet told you what we agreed on, Dr. Frederickson?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Aw, Mom," the boy said. "I know all about what happened. Mr. Mongo's not going to upset me."

"I'll decide what's going to upset you, Bill," the woman replied, stepping back and holding the door open for me. I stepped into the spacious house, redolent with the scent of flowers and other growing things.

Mrs. Jackson brought me a tall, cool glass of lemonade, and I went off with her son to his room which, like Tommy's, was decorated with fantasy posters and *Lord of the Rings* memorabilia. Bill closed the door, turned to me. His eyes were filled with tears.

"What happened to Tommy and Rodney was so terrible, Mr. Mongo."

Mrs. Jackson had known what she was talking about, I thought as I squeezed the boy's shoulder. "Thank you, Bill. Let's not discuss that, okay?"

"Okay." He wiped his eyes, brightened. "Boy, Mr. Mongo, it's really something to meet you. It's like meeting Frodo."

"I understand Tommy used me to score a lot of points."

"Yeah; that's because you're always getting involved with weird things. You know about Sorscience?"

"A little. I'd like you to tell me all about it. You scored points by matching real scientific phenomena with places and events in *Lord of the Rings*, right?"

"That's the basic idea, yes."

"Can you give me an example of how you'd score?"

He thought about it, shrugged. "Sure. Take Water Gel, for example. It's a clear paste that won't burn or transfer heat. If you cover yourself with it, you can walk through fire. Firemen are starting to use it."

"The correlation would be Frodo going inside Mount Doom to return the ring?"

"Right! Actually, there are a number of correlations, but that would probably be the best. Hey, you've read *Lord of the Rings*?"

"Where do you think I get my inspiration?" I asked with a wry smile.

Bill Jackson laughed. "I like you, sir."

"And I like you. What are some other examples?"

"Oh, changing lead into gold. Physicists have been able to do that in atomic reactors for years, but the process costs more than the gold is worth."

"Ah, yes, elementary wizardry; something Gandalf might do as a limbering up exercise before breakfast."

That earned another chuckle. "Yeah," the boy said, "but knowledge of the process isn't worth many points. First, none of us could duplicate it; second, Gandalf never actually changed lead into gold. You could score a couple

of points by arguing that he *could* have done it if he'd wanted to." He paused, snapped his fingers excitedly. "Here! Let me show you something! I just charged up this stuff this morning."

He opened a deep drawer in a desk and took out a capped cylinder full of what looked like water but which smelled vaguely like a dentist's office when he took off the lid. He went across the room and took a fat gerbil out of its cage. Holding the wriggling animal by its tail, he came back to the desk and unceremoniously plopped the gerbil into the solution; the animal paddled around, its pink nose sniffing the air. I started to protest when Bill pushed it under and screwed the cap on.

"It's okay, Mr. Mongo, I'm not going to hurt him. As a matter of fact, he likes this. Watch."

Sure enough, the gerbil seemed to like it. I gaped in astonishment as the animal, obviously having undergone the experience before, didn't even bother trying to come back up to the sealed-off surface; it paddled about in the depths of the liquid, to all appearances as content and adjusted as your average trout. At first I thought that Bill had somehow taught the gerbil to hold its breath, but when I looked closer I could see its rib cage moving as if it were breathing. Since that was obviously impossible, I examined the surface of the desk, the wall behind it, and even the ceiling, for mirrors. There weren't any.

"That's one hell of a trick," I said. "How's it done?"

"No trick," Bill said, beaming with pleasure. "It's Fluosol-DA, an oxygenated perfluorochemical; PFC, for short. As a

matter of fact, it's a distant cousin of Teflon. The Japanese have been making the stuff for years. It's used as artificial hemoglobin, and the FDA has approved its use for blood transfusions in certain circumstances, like with Jehovah's Witnesses. It exchanges oxygen and carbon dioxide, just like blood. As you can see, lab animals can actually 'breathe' the stuff, if it's been oxygenated."

"What purpose does that serve?"

"None. It's just an interesting phenomenon associated with Fluosol-DA."

The boy seemed to be immensely enjoying my stunned silence as he opened the cannister, plucked the gerbil from the fluid, and returned it to its cage, where it began plodding happily on its running wheel.

"How many points is that worth?"

Bill shrugged. "I think Obie was awarded twenty-eight out of a possible hundred for that. It's spectacular, and he had physical possession, but the correlations are weak. Nobody actually breathes underwater in *Lord of the Rings*. He matched it to the slaying of the Seeker in the lake. The Seeker *could* have been air-breathing, and the slayer had to hold his breath for a long time."

"Obie is another player?"

"Yes, sir. Obie— Auberlich— Loge. His father was the official scorer and arbitrator. In fact, Dr. Loge invented Sorscience."

The name Loge, Richard Wagner's God of Fire, rang a big, Nobel Prize-winning bell. Loge was certainly not a common name, and the Dr. Loge I knew of had earned

doctorates in virtually every one of the life sciences. He'd won two Nobels— one for the invention of his Triage Parabola, a statistical model used for predicting the survival rates of various endangered species. But Siegmund Loge was into animals, not plants; he certainly didn't grow corn. Indeed, Siegmund Loge didn't do much of anything any longer, except make a fool of himself. At the age of seventy-four he'd gone instant bonkers, resigned all his positions, abandoned his research projects, and when last heard of was roaming around the country as "Father," a new brand of mystical messiah preaching Armageddon and Resurrection to people in the wilderness communes he had set up around the world. At last membership estimate, he'd passed the Rosicrucians and was breathing hard on the neck of the Reverend Moon. Some people will insist on believing anything.

"Do you know this Dr. Loge's first name, Bill?"

"Siegfried, Mr. Mongo. Like in the opera."

It had to be the son, I thought. Siegmund, Siegfried, and Auberlich; it sounded like an invitation list to a cast party for Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. Rings within Rings. I made a mental note to myself to drop Garth a cryptical postcard saying that the doings in Peru County were more fun than a three-ring circus. "What does Dr. Loge do?"

"He heads the Volsung Corporation. That's all I know about his work."

"Have you ever met him?"

The boy shook his head. "No, sir. The scientists never come out of there. They're flown in and out."

"Obviously, Obie must have come out."

"Yes, sir. He was going to school here, at the university."

"The extension program?"

"No. He was a regular student. He must be nineteen or twenty. He hung around with us because we were all interested in fantasy."

"Obie boards at the university?"

"Right. But he'd visit his father on weekends. Someone would pick him up in a car, take him back and forth. That's where he got the Fluosol-DA. He brought it out to demonstrate for us so he could get a big score, and he gave it to me. It's not like there's anything secret about it; I told you they discovered twenty years ago that lab animals could breathe the stuff."

"What else can it be used for besides blood transfusions?"

"Nothing; at least nothing that I know of."

"What would a bunch of plant geneticists want with artificial hemoglobin?"

"I have no idea, Mr. Mongo." He suddenly grinned mischievously. "Hey! Maybe they're all 'pod people' in there, like *Invasion of the Body Snatchers!*"

For some reason, I didn't find the notion overwhelmingly amusing. "Did Obie ever talk about what went on in there?"

"Never— except to tell us what we already knew; the Volsung Corporation was involved with plant genetics, gene splicing, recombinant DNA." He took a deep breath, got slightly red in the face. "Recombinant DNA research is the key to the future, sir. We'll have all disease-free crops

that will grow anywhere, and even manufacture their own fertilizer. They already have bacteria that produce insulin, other bacteria that eat up oil spills."

Also bacteria that could produce human growth hormone, I thought. Unfortunately, the scientists had pieced together the little fellows too late to be of any help to me.

"We have super-wheat and super-corn," Bill Jackson continued in a voice that was steadily climbing in pitch. "It's going to revolutionize agriculture around the world! We'll be able to feed everybody! No one need ever go hungry again! They— " He abruptly stopped speaking, bit his lower lip, flushed. "I'm sorry, sir. I *do* talk too much when I get excited."

"It's all right, Bill. I'm interested in everything you have to say. Obie never even hinted at what specific projects Volsung might be working on?"

"No, sir. He never talked about specifics, and we all understood. There's a lot of top secret stuff in that industry, you know. They're always worried about industrial espionage."

Or some other kind of espionage, judging from the camouflage coloring of their building. Since General Foods wasn't likely to order up a bombing run, I assumed Volsung had to be concerned about someone— something— else spotting them from the air. Like a spy satellite.

"Bill, I'd very much like to talk to Obie Loge. Is he boarding at the university this summer?"

"No way. He was taking summer courses, but he was yanked out and flown home right after... after..."

"Take it easy, Bill," I said, gently patting his shoulder. "You want to take a lemonade break?"

He shook his head, wiped his eyes. Bill Jackson was a very sensitive, gentle, and kind young man.

"Where does Obie live?"

"Actually, I don't know. I guess I must have asked him, but he couldn't even tell me that." He cocked his head to one side, grimaced. "Of course, I never really cared. I wouldn't have wanted to visit him anyway."

"Why not?"

The boy shrugged. "Well, first of all he's a lot older than I am, and the only thing we really had in common was an interest in fantasy. He could really be a mean— excuse me — sucker when he wanted to be. A *real* sore loser. It's probably why he liked to hang around with us; he could push us around when he felt like it, and nobody his own age would put up with him."

"Bill, does 'Mirkwood' mean anything to you?"

He grinned, laughed. "Sure! You've got to be kidding, Mr. Mongo. Mirkwood's the evil forest that the Company passes through on their Quest. Don't you remember those giant spiders?"

"But does it mean anything to you in another context? Did it mean anything else to Tommy?"

He thought a long time about it, obviously anxious to please me, but ended up shaking his head. "No, sir. It doesn't mean anything else to me, and I never heard Tommy mention it outside the context of Tolkien and Sorscience."

"Bill, did Sheriff Bolesh or any of his deputies ask you questions like these?"

"No, sir."

"Did—?"

"Someone else did, though."

"Who?"

"I don't know his name."

"Would your mother?"

"I doubt it. He came up to me at the university. He didn't give me his name, but I knew he worked at the Volsung Corporation. I'd seen him around town once or twice."

"I thought you said—"

"The scientists never come out. This guy's like a chauffeur and handyman. He drives into town to pick up odds and ends, and he used to chauffeur Obie on weekends." Bill Jackson frowned, shook his head. "Spooky guy."

"How so?"

"He's kind of hard to describe. He wasn't spooky-crazy or spooky-mean; otherwise, I wouldn't have talked to him. He was just... *spooky*. He had these big brown eyes that kind of looked right through you, and you just knew he could tell if you were lying or telling the truth. He never smiled, and he was completely bald— like Yul Brynner. I'm positive he was pretty old, but I can't tell you why I think that. It was hard to tell his age."

Bill Jackson's words startled me. His description could have fit one of the two men with whom I shared the terrible secret I had mentioned to Janet, a secret that would die

with me. But the man I was thinking of wouldn't be holed up in a windowless blockhouse in Peru County doing odd jobs and chauffeuring kids. Not likely.

"Bill, as far as you know, did anyone in the county work on the construction of that building?"

"I don't think so, sir. They brought in truckloads of construction workers, and they set up tents for them out on the prairie. When the building was finished, the workers were taken away."

My watch read four thirty. "Bill, thank you for answering my questions."

"Oh, any time, Mr. Mongo."

"You've been very helpful. I have to pick up someone at the bus station. May I come back if I have any more questions about Sorscience or Obie Loge?"

"Gee, I hope you do come back, Mr. Mongo. Listen, I think there's something else you should know. Tommy was real upset about something just before he took off."

"Bill," I said quietly, "I know that, and I don't think you and I should discuss it. I promised your mother I'd only ask questions about Sorscience."

"But this *does* have to do with Sorscience. I'm sure Tommy was mad because of something that had to do with Obie Loge. They had a big argument. Rodney told me. Obie was sore because Tommy had questioned something Obie wanted to use for a score."

"What?" I asked, feeling a chill run up and down my spine.

"I don't know. Rodney was in a hurry to get someplace."

He just said that Obie was full of— excuse me— shit because nothing like what Obie was describing could ever exist in real life."

Zeke Cohen got off the bus, blinked and sniffed in the late afternoon sunlight like some lost night creature searching for New York's night air. His black hair was wrapped in a crimson bandana, worn low across his forehead. A wide-brimmed leather hat sat on top of his head; buckskin, fringed vest over red silk shirt, jeans, boots; about a pound of gold chains hanging around his neck, one small gold earring in his ear. It was a perfect disguise for traveling unnoticed around Peru County, Nebraska. Zeke was a graduate student in criminology, studying for his doctorate in laboratory sciences. He enjoyed a reputation as the fastest computer gun in the East, West, North, or South. He taught a new undergraduate class in computer sciences, and his students called him Wyatt.

"You're not carrying, are you, Zeke?" I asked as we drove across the flat farmland that stretched to the horizon in all directions. "Coke here is something that gives you cavities instead of holes in the nose, and grass is a soft green growth they cut with a machine called a lawn mower. They'll bust your ass good if they catch you with any shit."

"Huh? Oh, no. Not even a joint."

"Also, no cruising— in case you're feeling horny. There's nothing to cruise. 'Gay' here means ho-ho."

Zeke had been staring out the window; now he slowly turned his glittering black eyes on me. "Hey, Doc, what *is* that stuff out there?"

"It's called wheat, Zeke," I replied drily.

"So that's what it looks like when it's in the ground, huh?"

"You got it. You stop bullshitting me, and I'll stop bullshitting you."

He laughed loudly. "Man, I've never seen so much open space!"

"It's 'the heartland,' Zeke, m'boy."

"It looks kind of weird, you know?" He paused, glanced at me again. "You look funny here, Doc. Out of place."

"You mean, like a dwarf?"

"Yeah," he said thoughtfully. "Here you look like a dwarf." He laughed quickly, self-consciously. "Sorry, Doc. I didn't mean anything personal. I must be suffering from culture shock."

"No offense taken," I said evenly. "Here, I feel like a dwarf. But don't be too smug; you don't exactly blend into the landscape, either. Did you make those calls I asked you to?"

"Yeah. There's no Volsung Corporation listed on any of the stock exchanges, so maybe it really is a privately held and capitalized company. Just to make sure, I checked with a friend of mine in business administration who's a stock market maven. Genetic engineering is the hottest thing going, witness Genentech. If there were a new genetic sciences company that had gone public, or was about to, she'd know about it."

"Thanks, Zeke. You're already earning your money. I'll give you an advance when we get to my sister's place."

"Hey, Doc, I really appreciate this gig. Summer sessions are out, I'm tired of research, and New York is boring in August. Besides, I can use the money. Just what is it I'm supposed to do? You were a little vague on the phone."

"My nephew was big on computers; he's got a roomful of stuff. The basic unit is a Radio Shack TR4100, but don't let that fool you—and don't get careless. He's added on all sorts of goodies that he built himself, and he knew what he was doing. Basically, I want to know everything that's on the memory discs stacked next to the terminal. It's probably all encoded. You into fantasy?"

"You mean sword and sorcery stuff? Not really." He looked at me, leered. "I like detective novels. Somebody should write a huge detective saga, like one of those four-volume fantasy mothers."

"You'll just have to wait for my memoirs, Zeke. I hope you brought your glasses, because Tommy—my nephew—was up to his eyeballs in fantasy. He was particularly into the *Lord of the Kings*, which you'll find on the table by the terminal. It's almost certain that Tommy built codes from those books, so you'll have to read them. Take your time; the important thing is to make sure you don't erase anything."

"Got it."

"You'll be staying at my sister's home, in Tommy's room, so you can set your own schedule. You'll love the food. Anything you want, she or I will get for you. I'll check in with

you at least once a day, and probably more. I'll give you my parents' number; that's where I'm staying. I want to know the minute you find out anything."

"Sounds like fun."

"I'd like you to stay put in the house. If you get restless, take a cow for a walk. In Peru County, you're a walking one-man band of minority groups, and a lot of people here won't like your music. I don't want anyone to know you're here."

Another leer. "Why? You think the good folks of Peru County would hang a gay black Jew?"

"No," I said without smiling. "I'm afraid they'll hang a dwarf and his sister."

7.

IT was all I could do to stay away from Janet's home the next morning, but I knew that it wouldn't do any good to stand over Zeke and drool down his neck while he was working. I certainly wanted quick results, but pressuring Zeke would be counter productive.

I spent the morning in the Peru City library reading everything I could find on DNA research and genetic engineering. I assumed I was slightly better informed than the average layman because of my long-standing interest in human growth hormone, but I wanted to dig deeper.

It struck me how far and fast the field had expanded since the time, only a few years ago, when gene splicing had been viewed as a sure road to self-destruction, a doomsday device impossible to defuse and just waiting to swallow up, or deform, all life on earth. Many scientists had urged that all research into genetic engineering be banned, for fear of creating diseases that could not be defended against. Indeed, although a total ban was never seriously considered, DNA research was virtually the only human endeavor every scientist on the face of the earth had agreed must be carefully controlled, with strict international safeguards. Protocols had been signed.

First individual cells had been cloned, then frogs. There'd been a report of the cloning of a human, but it had been universally dismissed as ridiculous and the "clone" had never been produced; genetic research and gene

splicing with higher forms of life had proved far more difficult, and was still considered highly dangerous, if not unethical.

However, the scientists had shown that some gene splicing could be conducted safely, and gradually the controls in certain specific areas had been relaxed. A great deal of genetic research was still taboo, but work with bacteria and plants had already yielded the wondrous results Bill Jackson had alluded to. In the fields of bacteriology and botany, nothing less than new species of life were being created virtually every day. Universities with genetic research programs had toyed with the idea of setting up their own profit-making companies, and the first gene-splicing concern to go public, Genentech, had sold all its stock within minutes of its initial offering on Wall Street.

Perceptions had changed dramatically; the end of human disease and deformity was being confidently forecast; the doomsday device had become, in the view of many, the key to the Gates of Eden.

There was absolutely no reason for an outfit like Volsung to have set up shop in secret, in the middle of a midwestern prairie, behind a death fence. Not if they were doing what they said they were doing. Which, of course, I damn well knew they weren't.

Tense and nervous with growing anxiety over just how big a beast I had stumbled on, I still managed to put on a happy face for my parents while we had lunch. Exhausted, more from tension than any exertion, I lay down afterward. I'd just fallen asleep when my father came to wake me up.

Janet had called and asked that I come over right away.

Flying in Zeke had certainly brought quick results, but they weren't exactly what I'd hoped or looked for.

Jake Bolesh was standing on my sister's porch, gripping Zeke's elbow. Zeke's hands were cuffed behind his back. Two of Bolesh's deputies were going in and out of the house, lugging Tommy's computer components, book collection, and taped cartons, loading everything into a police van. Janet, looking sullen and angry, was standing at the end of the driveway, arms folded defiantly across her chest. John Dernhelm stood at the far end of the porch, looking sheepish and unsure of himself; it told me who had informed Bolesh about my conversation with Coop Lugmor, and how Bolesh had found out about Zeke. It occurred to me that most of the people in Peru County probably acted as informers for the county sheriff.

"Robby, I'm sorry," Janet said tersely as I got out of the car.

John got frightened and did a stupid thing."

"It's all right, Janet," I said, patting her on the arm as I walked past her. "I'll take care of it."

"I couldn't help it, Doc," Zeke began as I approached the porch, stopped on the first step. "This cracker barged in here half an hour ago and—"

"Shut up, nigger!" Bolesh snapped.

Like a poisonous chameleon, the old Jake Bolesh I'd known and loved had changed back to his true colors. In an

odd way, I found that comforting; as a mean-spirited, cruel, and dangerous son-of-a-bitch, he was easier to see and to defend against. The fencing, the dainty little gavotte that had begun the day before in his office, was ended. Perhaps, I thought, it was just as well.

I found it a bit unsettling to realize how much I enjoyed nursing the near lifelong grudge that was Jake Bolesh; more than anything else, I wanted to nail him for something. Anything. A character defect.

"You're in trouble, Frederickson."

"Oh? Why is that, Jake?"

"Aiding and abetting a felony, after the fact."

"Terrific charge. I love it. What's the felony? Hiring someone to index my nephew's effects?"

"How about conspiring to withhold evidence?"

I glanced at Zeke, who gave a slight shake of his head. He hadn't found out anything. I was just about to turn my eyes away when I saw him roll his eyes in an exaggerated manner, then look down at his chest and close his left eye. He had something for me in his left shirt pocket.

"What evidence?" I asked, turning my attention back to Bolesh. "You said the investigation was over."

"A murder investigation is never officially closed, Frederickson. You're a hot-shot criminologist; you should know that. If you had reason to believe there was something important in that computer, you should have told me; you broke the law when you *didn't* tell me, and I warned you what would happen if you broke the law here."

"Jake, my man, I haven't the vaguest notion what's in that

computer. I had no reason to tell you anything, and I don't even know what the hell you're talking about. I wasn't investigating any murder-suicide. I was interested in my nephew's frame of mind, looking for some clue to what could have gotten him in the mess he did. It's strictly personal family business. Isn't that what you told him, Zeke?"

"Doc, that is precisely what I told him," Zeke answered in a carefully measured tone. "No more, no less."

"I told you to shut up!" Jake shouted, yanking on Zeke's handcuffs so hard that I winced. "Don't play word games with me, Frederickson! You believe there's something in that computer or those books that could have a bearing on this case! You should have told me about them!"

"Arguable. Look, Jake, if you want to arrest and charge me, be my guest. I can't wait for the trial; I guarantee you I'll hire the loudest lawyer in the country. You have a warrant to take this stuff out?"

"Damn right. In any case, I have the permission of the dead boy's father." "Robby?" John Dernhelm said in a small voice. "What you're trying to do hasn't been right from the beginning. Tommy should be allowed to rest in peace."

"Are you arresting this man?" I asked Bolesh, ignoring my brother-in-law. "He was just doing a job for me."

"I should arrest him for conspiracy, but I'm going to give him a break."

"Then why don't you take the cuffs off?"

"When I put him on the bus to the airport."

"I'll take him to the airport."

"The hell you will. I figure you'll be too busy, starting right now, making your own travel arrangements."

"You throwing me out of town, Jake? Don't I get until sundown?"

"You figure out where you'd rather be, Frederickson; home with all the other weirdos in New York City, or in the Peru County jail facing those charges I mentioned."

"I'll give it some thought."

We glared at each other in silence for a few moments before Bolesh clumped down the steps, brushed me aside, and went to inspect the van. Zeke picked that opportune moment to suffer a severe coughing fit. Careful not to appear that I was in a hurry, I climbed up on the porch and patted him on the back as he doubled over. At the same time I slipped my hand into his shirt pocket, felt the plastic card I'd found earlier in Tommy's table drawer.

"It doesn't go with the computer," Zeke whispered. "It's a magnetic pass card. You find the right gate, and that'll open it."

8.

AH, yes, my commando costume: black seaman's cap found in the attic, black shoes, denim shirt and jeans, charcoal-blackened face and hands. I'd have happily traded the whole outfit for my snub nose, but that wasn't possible. It was time to check out what I was now certain was Tommy's "Mirkwood."

I didn't want Janet vulnerable to a valid conspiracy

charge if I were caught, so I parked her car in some tall weeds off the main highway and hiked down the dirt road leading to the building housing the Volsung Corporation. The moon was bright, but it was occasionally hidden by passing clouds.

The plastic, tape-stripped card fit neatly into the notch in the steel gate. There was a soft click, and the gate popped open about two inches. I pushed on the edge of the gate; the massive steel barrier swung open easily and without a sound. The road between the two gates was hard-packed, apparently free of sensing devices. I couldn't tell if there were silent alarms wired into the gate; since there wasn't anything I could do about it if there were, I dismissed the problem from my mind.

After repeating the procedure with the inner gate, I was inside the compound. I ran low and fast down the remaining quarter mile of road to the building itself, pressed back hard against what seemed to be a garage door. I stayed that way for long minutes, breathing hard and listening. I could hear no alarms, no signs of activity inside; there was only the chirping of crickets, the bellowing of a horny bullfrog, the faint rustle of insects and reptiles in the grass.

Nothing happened when I put the magnetic pass card into the notch on the garage door. I wiggled the card, and still nothing happened; there was no soft click, no small jump of the door, and for a moment I feared I'd reached the end of the blue plastic and black tape road. Then I thought to push on the door. It moved in slightly, and then there was the soft whir of an electric motor. The garage door lifted. I

stepped inside, leaving the door open.

I was inside Mirkwood.

There was an initial flickering when I pressed a light switch on the wall, and then soft fluorescent light flooded the spacious garage. Parked inside were a brown Toyota pickup, a red Chevrolet van, a black, late-model Cadillac.

There was a narrow stairway to my right. I went up it, pressed another glowing plate on the wall, stood and stared. The open space before me was massive, perhaps three-quarters the size of a football field, more if you counted the dozens of rooms radiating off the outer wall. The floor was all off-white tile, soothing to the eyes under the same type of fluorescent lighting installed in the garage.

It looked like some scientist's idea of heaven. There were six separate computer banks, all still now, their black tape spools staring at me like reproving eyes out of faces of glass and stainless steel. Long, rectangular, marble-topped work tables, spaced a few yards apart, marched like silent soldiers down the center of the space; the surfaces of the tables were covered with Bunsen burners, test tube racks, pipettes, microsurgery equipment, state-of-the-art microscopes, including no less than four huge, portable electron scanners.

A number of theater-size speakers, high-fidelity Bose models, hung in pairs from the ceiling, but I could not see any television monitors or electronic eyes.

There were cages, empty now but irrevocably *there* just the same. Since I'd never seen a corn stalk that required a cage, it meant they were experimenting on animals— some

of them large. A scientific no-no.

When five minutes passed and no welcoming committee arrived to greet me, I took an exploratory stroll around the perimeter of the space. At the far end a moving walkway—now still—disappeared into darkness down a long, narrow corridor. I assumed it led to the scientists' sleeping and recreation quarters, and I didn't bother going down it.

Three-quarters of the way around the circuit, on the inside wall, I found something I certainly would have gone through if I'd been able. It was a red door with a notch configuration different from that on the outer gates and the garage door. I tried the card, but it fit loosely in the slot; the door would not move, no matter how hard I pushed, pounded, and kicked. I leaned my head against the cool metal, fought against a sudden, unexpected welling of tears.

As hangar-large as this workspace was, it formed only a small part of the huge complex I'd viewed from outside. There was more, much more, on the other side of the red door.

Tommy, I was certain, had been through the red door. He and Rodney Lugmor, escorted by Obie Loge, had been into the inner sanctum; although it seemed beyond belief, the son of Volsung's director, in order to score some points in a bizarre fantasy game, had somehow been able to bypass a few million dollars' worth of security and show his two friends the "monsters in Mirkwood." It had to have happened.

My fourteen-year-old nephew had been bright and

sophisticated enough to recognize the grave danger in what he saw, decent enough to be profoundly disturbed by it. Fourteen years old, torn between a natural desire not to betray a "friend" who had trusted him and a need to shout that there was evil growing in the county— evil that could conceivably be let loose, or escape, into the land. The pressures on him had been enormous.

Tommy and Rodney Lugmor had not known what to do. They had spent a week together debating what course of action to take, wrestling with an awesome conflict that would have brought most adults to their knees. I was immensely proud of my nephew, and of Rodney Lugmor.

But it had been too late to do anything. Whether alerted by a nervous Obie Loge who had begun to have doubts, or whether the breach had been independently discovered, the darker— obviously more efficient— arm of Volsung's security operation had gone into action. The price of the tour through Mirkwood had been death.

Somebody had cold-bloodedly blown up two gentle teenagers with a shotgun; there could be nothing more twisted or monstrous beyond the red door.

For a few seconds I considered the pleasant, simple expedient of trashing the place, but realized that such an exercise would accomplish nothing except to get me very sweaty and very dead. The equipment was only money, and the Volsung Corporation obviously had all of that they needed, and more. I kept moving.

The first room I entered looked like an office-lab that was being renovated or repaired. Part of the wall had been torn

out, and the steel, cast-iron, and zinc components of a slop sink were sitting in an open case by the hole, waiting to be assembled.

The second room was a spacious office, well-furnished and elegant. There was a large desk and file cabinet against one wall, a small computer terminal on a hardwood stand. There were more file cabinets against another wall, as well as an enormous, thousand-gallon aquarium, empty now of fish, attached to complex compression and filtration equipment. A six-foot-high working model of the DNA double helix stood against another wall, looming over me like some knobby, multicolored skeleton creature unearthed on some very distant planet; in fact, the construct represented the fundamental basis of life on our own.

Although the files seemed to be arranged in the normal alphabetical indexing system, there was but a single label at the top of each file cabinet.

THE VALHALLA PROJECT

It had a logo— four thick, interconnecting rings forming a larger ring. It didn't surprise me.

Starting with the file cabinet next to the desk, I slid open the top drawer, stuck my hand in— and froze. The hairs on the back of my neck prickled, stood up. I hadn't heard anything, but suddenly I felt another presence in the room with me. I turned and found myself face to face with a

gorilla.

He was a big mountain gorilla, three hundred to three hundred and fifty pounds, a male silverback. He was sitting on his ample haunches, filling the doorway, staring at me with beady bloodshot eyes under a jutting black brow that ran across his low, sloping forehead like a cliff edge. He wore what looked like an upside-down electronic typewriter with display screen strapped to his chest. The expression on his face was almost human; at the moment he seemed bemused, perhaps by my size, more likely because he wasn't quite sure what to do with me.

Normally, mountain gorillas are the gentlest beasts imaginable, dangerous only if provoked or cornered. However, I had a strong suspicion that this fellow was an exception; he was a "watch-gorilla," and he had me cornered.

"Uh, down boy?" I flashed a great big smile and made little kissing noises.

The gorilla looked down at the machine on his chest, then slowly and deliberately punched a few color-coded buttons. When he'd finished he glanced up at me and— I was absolutely certain— arched what would pass for gorilla eyebrows while I read the message on the display screen.

?

THE WHO FUCK YOU SMALL SONBITCH

Cute as a button, I thought, the creation of an animal behaviorist with immense patience, a lot of time, a few tons of bananas, and a bent sense of humor. He'd been trained to respond to a password— or the lack of it.

"Valhalla," I said quickly, taking pains to clearly enunciate each syllable. "Wotan? *Gotterdammerung?* *Rheingold?*"

He just wasn't into opera. I was still rummaging around in my very limited Wagnerian vocabulary when he came for me. As big as he was, he was quick. I managed to sidestep his rush a couple of times, but he cut me off at the pass each time, blocking my route to the door while he lurched after me like some great hairy express train.

After five minutes of this, he decided to take a rest break. He sat in the doorway, pointing and glowering at me. I stood against the opposite wall, panting and glowering back at him.

"Valkyrie? Fafner?"

A message.

LITTLE SONBITCH QUICK QUICK

"Volsung? Siegfried? Bayreuth?"

FUCK ALL OUT TIRE

A conversationalist, smarter than the average gorilla. "Me, too. Let's you and I go find a nice quiet bar, have a few drinks, and talk this over."

?

STOP RUN

"Polly want a banana?"

BIG NOW PISSOFF

he flashed, signaling that halftime was over.

Finally he got hold of an ankle and reeled me in with what I could have sworn was a rumbling grunt of satisfaction. I flailed at him, but I knew I had as much chance of hurting him as of unhinging a heavy punching bag. I expected him to start picking me apart like a fried chicken, but he wasn't going to do anything that gross or messy. Instead he casually lifted me off the floor by the seat of my pants, grabbed the back of my neck, and plunged my head under the water in the aquarium. And he held me there.

Real panic, I discovered, was colored silver, despair brown; those were the colors of the dots that swirled in front of my eyes as I held my breath. My lungs felt ready to

explode as I used up still more oxygen futilely struggling against the black leather fingers that held me in a grip as tight and final as death.

Hope, on the other hand, smelled like a dentist's office. That was the faint odor I'd detected just before the gorilla had dunked me in the "aquarium"; the "water" I was under wasn't water.

With absolutely nothing to lose, I released the pressure from my lungs. The breath exploded from my mouth and nose in great silver bubbles. Then I played gerbil, sucking in the fluid just as if it were nothing more than good old only-slightly-polluted New York City air.

Air it wasn't. In connection with my coven of witches, I'd undergone a series of rabies shots. They'd been exquisitely painful, given directly in the belly. The sensation I'd experienced then was a feeling of swelling in my stomach and chest, of being pumped full of some viscous liquid, like silicone. The feeling of swelling now was essentially the same, without the searing pain. There was a bubbling, tickling sensation in my sinuses, as if I'd drunk warm soda too quickly, a bitter licorice taste; then the taste and sensation were gone and I was—breathing.

There was an unexpected side effect of immersion that could explain why the gerbil I had seen paddling around in Bill Jackson's jar of Fluosol-DA had seemed so content with his lot; I was getting high.

It occurred to me that this particular gorilla was going to be looking for something a bit more dramatic than a submerged, giggling dwarf. I sucked in a huge lungful of the

solution, held my breath for a few seconds, then executed what I hoped was a very convincing performance of twitches, shudders, and kicks. Then I went limp and waited.

And waited.

It looked as if I were going to have to start "breathing" again, but just as I was about to exhale my hairy attacker pulled me up out of the tank. I opened my eyes to slits and watched as the gorilla dangled me in the air by the back of my shirt and peered quizzically up into my face. I hated to hurt him, would have much preferred a long session with his trainer, but I didn't have too many options. I despised cruelty to dwarfs even more than cruelty to animals, so I poked him in the right eye with my index finger. The force of the stab wasn't hard enough to puncture his eyeball, just sufficient to produce an unpleasant diversion.

The gorilla bellowed in pain and dropped me to the floor as he reflexively let go of my shirt in order to alternately swipe at his eye and thump his chest. I jumped to my feet—and immediately ran into a problem. The gerbil had obviously had lots of practice clearing fluid out of its lungs; I wasn't so fortunate, and the transition from breathing Fluosol-DA to breathing air wasn't a problem I'd given a lot of thought to. Consequently, I began coughing and choking as the fluid spurted out of my lungs through my mouth and nose. By the time I recovered, my companion was in full, lumbering gait, heading in my direction, trailing multicolored wires from the smashed machine on his chest.

At the last moment I tumbled out of his way, and he smashed into a file cabinet. By the time he turned, I was out

the door and running; I could hear the rhythmic padding of him on all fours right behind me. I didn't know whether he could catch me over a short course, but I didn't want to risk a foot race I might lose. I sprinted fifteen yards, cut sharply to my left into the unfinished office-laboratory. I felt a leathery paw slap against my shoulder, slip off as the gorilla's momentum carried him past the entrance. He recovered, came scampering through the door.

"Me the fuck Mongo, *you* sonbitch," I said as I bounced a length of stainless-steel pipe off his forehead.

It was an immense relief to find that it was possible to knock a gorilla unconscious. Every instinct urged me to get out of Volsung as quickly as possible, rush home and do something sensible— like crawl under the bed. But if I left empty-handed, the evening's expedition would have been for nothing. Worse than nothing; unless I somehow managed to cover my tracks, Jake Bolesh and his masters in Volsung would know there had been a break-in. Bolesh would have no problem knowing who to come looking for.

What, I asked myself, do you do with an unconscious gorilla? The answer came: frame him, try to make it look as though he'd been playing house with the equipment and had hurt himself.

I went out of the office, hurried to the far end, and peered down the darkened corridor leading to the scientists' quarters. Either the scientists were very sound sleepers or their quarters were soundproofed, because the lights remained out and the walkway remained still.

The huge electron microscopes were on rollers,

obviously designed to be moved about the complex. I pushed one into the office-laboratory and used a pipe as a lever to topple it over on the floor next to the gorilla; the half-million-dollar piece of equipment smashed to the tile with a resounding crash, which spelled the beginning of the end to my evening of fun and games.

I'd hoped to be able to sort through the files at my leisure, try to understand some part of what was in them, make some copies on the Xerox machine in another office, replace the files and steal safely away into the night. I should have done it before tipping over the electron microscope, but the reassuring silence that had returned after the cacophonous bellowing of the gorilla had made me feel secure. Cocky.

Stupid.

Just as I was digging into the first open filing cabinet, I heard a distant clicking sound, then a whirl. The walkway. I grabbed three files that were thin enough so that I hoped they wouldn't be missed right away. I closed the file cabinet, then raced like hell to the stairway leading to the garage, slapping light switches on the way.

9.

"ROBBY?" my mother whispered through the half-open door.

"I'm awake, Mom. Come on in."

My mother, slippers on her feet and quilted robe cinched loosely about her waist, came quietly into my room and sat

down on the edge of the bed. The promise of dawn shone in her silver hair and softly spotlighted her face. She looked very old, very tired, very worried. She still seemed incredibly beautiful to me, as lovely as she had been in reality when she was young. Only her eyes were absolutely unchanged; even beneath a veil of anxiety, they shone like beacons.

"Coop Lugmor called twice during the night," she said softly. "Said he was calling from some pay phone out on the highway. He wants you to go over there as soon as possible. He sounded very strange."

"I'll bet he did," I said wryly. Jake Bolesh had undoubtedly paid him a visit.

"He said he had something important to tell you."

That surprised me; I'd assumed he was simply in a big hurry to cut any ties. "Okay, Mom, I'll take care of it later. I'm sorry he woke you up."

"He didn't wake me. I heard you get up, looked out the window later, and saw you leave in that funny outfit. I've been so worried about you."

I sat up in bed, took her right hand and pressed it against my lips. "You shouldn't worry," I said, kissing the translucent, parchmentlike flesh of her hand.

"Robby, there's a strange odor about you. Did you have an upset stomach?"

The Fluosol-DA I'd absorbed was still transpiring out of my system through my lungs and skin. "No, Mom. I'm all right."

"Where did you go, son?"

"Out drinking and womanizing," I said with a large grin, again kissing the back of her hand.

"Please, son."

"Mom," I replied seriously, "I've never lied to you or Dad, and I don't want to have to start now. I can't tell you where I went. It's not that I don't want to, but that I can't. I have to ask you to trust me and believe that I wouldn't intentionally do anything wrong."

"Oh, I know that, Robby, and it goes without saying that I trust you."

"I wouldn't intentionally do anything to hurt you and Dad, or any member of our family."

"You wouldn't intentionally hurt anyone."

"I'm going to ask you not to mention to anyone that I went out last night. That's important. It's not for me."

"What you're doing is very dangerous, isn't it?"

"Yes," I said after a pause.

"I heard you come in and clean up, and then I heard you moving around down in the root cellar. Did you leave something down there?"

"Yes, but it won't be there for long. I just have to figure out what to do with it."

"I won't ask you what it is, Robby. I know you're thinking of me and your father; if you don't want us to know something, it's for a good reason."

"Did Dad hear me go out or come in?"

"I don't think so. He won't tell you, but he hasn't been feeling well at all. He stays active during the day because he wants to put on a good show for you, but he's exhausted

at night."

"When this is over, the three of us will go away someplace and be together. Okay?"

My mother gently stroked my hair with both her hands, and I was startled to see tears in her eyes. "I've always loved you so much, Robby," she murmured in a choked voice. "You were God's special gift to me— so clever, so good. I've always been so proud. Every day since you were born I've thanked God for you, and for giving me Garth to protect you when you were a boy."

"Thank you, Mom. I love you very much."

Tears were flowing freely now, but she still managed to smile. I reached out to brush away her tears, but she grabbed both my hands and clasped them to her breast. "You want to hear something strange, Robby? Even with all this crazy and dangerous business you've gotten into as a private detective, I've never really worried about you. I know you've almost been killed a number of times— but I still didn't really worry about you. I believed that you were also very special in the eyes of God, and that God wouldn't let any harm come to you. There's something different happening now."

"God's a very busy woman, Mom, and I imagine I'm hard to keep track of under the best of circumstances."

"Don't be blasphemous, Robert," my mother said sternly, unsmiling.

"I didn't mean to be, Mom," I said quickly, thoroughly chastened. "Just trying to lighten up the conversation."

"I've had a recurring dream every night since you and

Garth came here," she said distantly. My mother was still weeping, still deadly serious. "It's a dream of death and destruction, the same each time. Somehow you, Garth, and a man I've never seen before are at the center of it all. There are strange creatures no one has ever seen before. God weeps over the whole earth as He holds you and Garth in His arms. In this dream both my sons are dead, Robby, and the earth is changed forever."

I pulled my hands from her grasp, cradled my mother's face, kissed her eyes. "Believe me, sweetheart, it's just something you ate."

"Robby," she sobbed, "please don't make fun of me."

"I'm not, Mom. Nothing is that serious, and none of it is worth a single one of your tears. Garth isn't even here—and I don't *want* him here."

My mother stopped crying, sighed heavily, stared hard at me. There was still love in her eyes, but there was also a hard glint, like sun on snow. "Rodney Lugmor didn't shoot Tommy, did he?"

"No," I said quietly, transfixed by her eyes and her unexpected strength. "They were both murdered—probably drugged or beaten unconscious someplace else, then taken to the stream on Coop Lugmor's farm and shot. Also, there's absolutely no evidence that they had a homosexual relationship. That doesn't mean a whole lot to me, but it may to you and Dad."

"It will mean something to Janet and John."

"Well, they can't know. I'm sorry, Mom. I'm only telling you this because you're old; I don't think even these men will

lean on you *unless* they believe I've shared information with you. I won't ask you to keep secrets from Dad, but neither of you can repeat *anything* I've said tonight to *anyone*; not even to Janet, and especially not to John."

"Do you know who did this thing?"

"I know who pulled the trigger. I know where to find the men responsible, but only one of their names."

"What are you going to do about it, Robby?"

"Probably nothing." The words tasted bitter and sharp, but they rang true. As the sun had come up, so had answers and realizations dark and cold enough to eclipse the dawn, at least for me.

"I don't understand, son," my mother said quietly.

"Mom, ever since I got home I've been lying here, thinking, trying to decide what I *can* do. I keep getting an image of a single man trying to harvest the Great Plains with a scythe."

"If these men are murderers, and you can prove it, there must be a way to bring them to justice."

"You're wrong, Mom. You see, I might manage to cut down a half acre or so; I could... punish... the man who shot Tommy and Rodney, but he's nothing more than a small, very rotten potato who was taking care of other people's business and erasing their mistakes. Knowing that, maybe I get frustrated and start shouting at the sky, telling things I know. You know what happens? A great wind comes up across all those millions of acres I haven't managed to touch. That wind howls like nothing you've ever heard before; it's colder than any winter, and it keeps gaining

velocity. It immediately drowns out my shouts and blows me away forever, but it doesn't stop there; it keeps blowing. It comes here, into this home and Janet's home, into the homes of all our relatives. People who've had any contact with me in Peru County could catch cold, Mom. Some of them could die. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Nothing that evil or powerful could exist here. This is America."

"It certainly is. God bless America."

"Yes," my mother said with a frown, obviously puzzled by my lone. "God bless America." She paused and patted my head, just like a mother. "You thought my dream was exaggerated, Robby. Well, I think your story about a wind on the Great Plains is exaggerated."

"It isn't, Mom. Believe me, it can happen if I make the wrong move. In this case, any move at all would be a wrong move."

"We have laws here. Justice."

"I can't do something that may harm the people I love, Mom. I should've got smart quicker, gone home sooner."

My mother slapped me across the face, hard. In the thirty-six years of my existence, it was the first time either of my parents had hit me. I was so stunned by her action that I didn't even feel the blow. Shocked and numb, I simply sat and stared at her as she reared back to hit me again, then thought better of it.

"That's the first time I've ever hit you, Robby, because this is the first time you've ever made me angry and ashamed of you!" Her voice, usually so soft and gentle, was

trembling with fury. "First I hear you tell me you know that your nephew and another boy were murdered, and in the next breath you tell me that you're not going to do anything about it. You won't even tell me who did it. How terribly, terribly *arrogant* of you, Robert! You're not God!"

"Mom—"

"If you've become a coward so quickly, tell *me* what you know and I'll *damn* well do something about it!"

The first time I'd ever heard her swear; it was turning into a week of firsts. I continued to sit with my lower jaw hanging open.

"Oh, Robby, Robby," she continued, whispering in my ear as she caressed the spot on my cheek where she'd slapped me. "I'm sorry I hurt you, but you can't worry about me or your dad, or about anyone else. You have to decide and do what's *right*; you have to relearn something I thought I'd taught you a long time ago. You see, God put both good and evil in the world in equal amounts in order to make us free, and to enable us to test ourselves so that we could grow and become strong as spiritual beings. At the beginning, good and evil were equally balanced. People have no control over evil, but good is different. Every time someone does something for somebody else, it creates a little piece of goodness that wasn't there before. But if a just person sees evil and chooses to do nothing about it, a little good leaks out of the world. That hurts everyone, everywhere. Don't you cause any good to leak away, son. That would make the tragedy of Tommy's death even worse."

I put my arms around my mother and kissed her. Then, resting my head on her shoulder, I heaved a deep sigh. "Reverend Blackwood tell you that?"

"My heart tells me that."

"Is Dad up yet?"

"By now, yes. He's probably shaving."

"Well, you go up and talk to him for a half hour or so. I'm going to make a phone call I don't want either one of you to hear."

Information gave me the number I wanted. I wrote it down, then sat and stared at the telephone. I had a real dilemma; the federal government rearing up in front of me, my mother behind me, and I wasn't sure whom, which, I feared most.

I'd been a little slow on the uptake. It should have occurred to me much earlier that there was only one group not included in the

Fortune 500 that could afford to piss away the kind of money the Volsung Corporation represented, and that was the merry pranksters of the Pentagon. The nation's military establishment was engaged in illegal gene-splicing experiments, secure in its belief that it was safe from discovery in paid-off Peru County, Nowhere, U.S.A. I didn't know what they were up to, didn't want to; putting a stop to Pentagon hanky-panky would be out of my league even if most of my relatives weren't living on Volsung's doorstep. I might whisper something in Ralph Nader's ear if I ever got

the chance, but the best I could hope for was to get a pass to kill Jake Bolesh personally, and assurances that the scalps of the men who had authorized Volsung's "enforcer" to kill two boys would be lifted.

How to accomplish that without bringing the roof down on everybody was the problem. The trick was to get this great, often myopic, meat eater to take a little nip out of itself and leave everyone else alone.

Finally I picked up the receiver again and dialed the number in Omaha, two hundred and thirty-five miles away. The phone was answered on the second ring.

"Federal Bureau of Investigation. Agent Randall speaking."

"Agent Randall, my name is Dr. Robert Frederickson. I'm a professor of criminology, as well as a private investigator licensed by the state and city of New York. If you don't mind, I'll wait while you check my credentials on that National Registry I know you gentlemen keep. You'll find out I'm a straight arrow. My P.I. license number is J A 044—"

"I've heard of you, Dr. Frederickson," the agent replied drily. "What can I do for you?"

"I'm calling from Peru County. I'd like you and two or three other agents to load up and pay me a visit. I need your help to nail one very crooked county sheriff who just happens to be a murderer. It's important that you get here as quickly as possible, because right now he could be in the process of destroying vital evidence."

There was a prolonged silence, then: "It sounds like a

problem for the State Police."

"Uh-uh. I'm not sure how far the corruption has spread; we're talking very big payoffs here. You're the only people I can trust, and you can slip in with a violation of civil liberties wedge."

What I didn't mention was that I feared the State Police might be plugged in to whatever Volsung really was, but there was a good chance, however strange or ironic, that the F.B.I. wasn't. The Defense Intelligence Agency, like the Central Intelligence Agency, didn't think too much of the F.B.I., and the respective agencies shared information only at the point of a cannon.

"You'll have to give me more details, Frederickson. Tell me exactly what the problem is."

I gave him a good version, some of it truth, some of it fiction, all of it designed to make the agent on the other end of the line believe I had a great deal more hard evidence than I actually did. I carefully avoided any mention of the Volsung Corporation. The F.B.I. might be temporarily ignorant of the secret government research facility, but that didn't mean Randall might not do some checking and find out if I even hinted at its existence. In my present position, I was finished if it were even suspected that I'd been inside the Volsung Corporation complex. Bolesh would kill me on sight if he found out, and the F.B.I. would probably deliver me to Bolesh if Randall ever put all the pieces together. The information I had on Volsung and the Valhalla Project, whatever that might be, had to be meted out in very small bits, if at all, only when absolutely necessary, and only in the

right company and situation. Those cards were the only hand I had, or was likely to get. Played right, they could get me what I wanted; one card laid down at the wrong time, or in the wrong sequence, could get me dead. I was balanced on a taut high wire, and the green felt was a long way down.

Randall was silent for a long time after I'd finished. "Okay, Frederickson," he said at last. "I'll look into it."

"You'll *come* here and look into it?"

"Right."

"Now? I told you he's probably destroying—"

"I'll get there as soon as I can."

"Do you have a plane or helicopter?"

That produced an irritated sigh, and I knew I was pushing too hard.

"I drive a 'seventy-five Pontiac that hasn't been tuned in fifteen months."

"We can meet at my parents' farm," I said, and gave him the address and directions.

"I'll be there in a few hours."

"Please step on it, Agent Randall. And bring some serious firepower."

10.

FROM body temperature, swelling of the ankles, odor, and state of rigor mortis, I made a very rough estimate that Coop Lugmor had been dead at least twelve hours, and probably more. He'd never made the phone calls to my parents' home during the night. If I'd been home, and if I'd

believed it was Lugmor and had come over, I'd probably be dead too.

It was a thought that prompted me to run back out the door, crouch down on the porch, and look around. There was no one outside or on the highway. I pulled Janet's car into the barn, closed the door, then went back into the house to examine the body some more.

Bolesh had, I assumed, come here and killed Lugmor right after he'd cleaned out Tommy's room and put Zeke on the bus to the airport. *How* Lugmor had been killed was another question, and the murder weapon certainly wasn't the butcher knife sticking out of his gut. There was hardly any blood around the site of the wound, none at all coming from his mouth. Lugmor's heart had stopped beating for at least a minute before Bolesh had found the knife and stuck it into the dead meat of the corpse just for the sake of appearances.

It looked to me like Coop Lugmor had been frightened to death.

He was slumped in a seated position, legs splayed at a forty-five-degree angle, against a wall in the garbage-strewn living room. As it sometimes does, rigor mortis must have set in almost immediately. Lugmor's toothless mouth gaped open in a huge O of a scream. His eyes were as open as eyes ever get, almost literally popping from his head. His arms were half raised, the fingers of the hands curled into claws as if he were clutching at something on his chest that was no longer there; the hands were at least a foot above the shaft of the knife.

I stepped closer, knelt down close to the body, and took rapid, shallow breaths as a defense against the ripeness of the dead flesh. There were small marks— some like scratches, others like pimples— on his face. Up close, I could see tiny, white crystals trapped in the stubble of his beard. There were more of the crystals on the front of his shirt, surrounded by what looked like dried water stains. There were other water stains on the peeling, faded wallpaper above his head, more crystals.

I licked my finger, lifted one of the crystals off the wall and tasted it. Salt.

When I bent back Lugmor's stiff fingers and examined them, I found little pieces of dried gray matter sitting on top of the grease and dirt beneath the nails. I stood up and shuddered. Water stains; salt crystals; terror. It was as if something had risen from the sea— or the depths of Volsung— to strike Coop Lugmor dead.

But now I had another "monster from Mirkwood" to contend with. I heard this one walk on its two legs through the door at the front, enter the living room, stop. I slowly turned to face Jake Bolesh and his leveled shotgun. He'd been waiting around a while, probably in the woods to the southwest; he was unshaven, and his eyes were bloodshot and black-rimmed; binoculars hung from a strap around his neck. His voice, when he spoke, was curiously flat.

"Old grudges die hard, don't they, Robby?"

"Hey, Jake," I said as Bolesh slammed the cell door shut on me, "have you seen the old B movie where the innocent victim tells the bad guy he won't get away with it?"

Bolesh turned and stared at me. His expression was strangely blank, his eyes dull; the gorilla had looked more human than Bolesh did at the moment. The liveliest part of him now was his hair; every strand of the pompadour was neatly combed into place, greased and gleaming.

"You're no innocent victim, Frederickson," he said at last.

"What did you use to kill Coop?"

"I didn't kill Lugmor; you did. You came back home here a hotshot hero from New York City. You always thought you were better than anybody else. Now you were upset about your nephew's death, and you decided to use the occasion to even up some old scores while you were here. I know that, because you threatened me at least three times."

"You think Mike Wallace is going to believe that?"

"I seriously doubt that Mike Wallace is going to show up in Peru County."

"Come on, Jake, use your head. I may be a lot smaller than Coop, but you'll find I won't disappear anywhere near as easily."

"No? We'll see."

"How about a phone call? I want to speak to my girl friend."

"The phone's out of order."

"People will come looking for me."

"Will they?"

"Garth, for one. You know that."

He shrugged, touched the gun in the holster at his side.

"Jake, I really feel we should discuss this problem with a

third party."

"There isn't any problem."

"I think we should negotiate what we're going to do with me."

He stepped up to the bars, stared down at me. Now, studying him, I realized I'd made a mistake in thinking that his face and eyes were blank; I'd merely been looking at the surface of a black sea. Now I could see below the surface where great tides of rage and hatred swelled.

"What do you have to negotiate with, Frederickson?"

When things get bad, a moderate amount of worry is in order; when things get *really* bad, a person might as well laugh as cry. I managed a weak chuckle. "I'll make you an offer, Jake. You give yourself up and sign a full confession, and I promise I'll appear at your trial as a character witness."

Bolesh wasn't amused. "You've got balls, Frederickson; I'll say that for you. Just like your parents."

The laughter turned hot and choking in my throat. "What about my parents?" I asked in a tone of voice just short of a plea.

"They're tough," Bolesh said, a thin, cruel smile spreading like a skin disease across his face. "I needed four men— one to grab hold of your mother, another to hold a gun on your father, and two to help me— to search their house. I'm afraid we made a mess of things. It's a shame we had to tear up the home of a nice old couple like that just because their dwarf son is a retard with a big nose who ignores good advice when he hears it."

"Seriously, Jake," I said, struggling to control a surging rage that was pumping my blood pressure up to the top of the graph, making everything around Bolesh seem red, "you're a real shit. Leave my parents alone, for Christ's sake. Even you can't be dumb enough to think there's anything to gain in hurting them."

"We found the papers you took from Volsung, Frederickson."

"Ah." My situation did not look good; it had dropped from really bad to near hopeless. "Did you read them?"

"I destroyed them."

An interesting admission, which wasn't likely to do me any good. It was time to swing down from the high wire, belly up to the green felt, and play. I squeezed up my first card, slapped it down on the table.

"Tell your people in Volsung that I want to see Mr. Lippitt."

"Who's Lippitt?"

"He's an operative for the Defense Intelligence Agency, and he's probably in charge of the silly joke they call security out there."

"Never heard of him."

"It's possible you don't know his name, but he's there. Your bosses will sure as hell know who he is."

Silence. A second card.

"Tell Lippitt I want to discuss the Valhalla Project. I may have put other files in other places; maybe I wrote some letters."

Silence. A dangerous, razor-edged joker from high up in

my sleeve.

"Tell your bosses to remind Lippitt that he owes me. If he doesn't show up here, I'm going to start shouting at the top of my lungs about a certain talented mutual friend of ours we're both interested in. Tell him there may be a lot of unmarked graves in Peru County, but the Russians and Chinese have big ears. They'll hear about our friend. You repeat every word I just said, Jake. I guarantee it will get a response, and the people at Volsung will thank you for it."

"You're full of shit, Frederickson," Bolesh said, and abruptly walked out of the cell block.

Lacking a lock pick and having absolutely nothing better to do, I lay down on the hard jail cot and proceeded to catch up on some of the sleep I'd lost the night before. I had a strong suspicion that, very soon, I was going to need all the strength and clear thinking I could muster.

I woke up to the sound of shouting. The voices were muffled by the thick wall between the cell block and the outer office, but one of the voices sounded wondrously familiar all the same.

"Goddamn it, Bolesh, I know he's in there! I want to see him now! You open that door or you're going to have more fucking lawyers in Peru City than you can fit into the town hall!"

My initial surge of relief immediately hardened into a sharp blade of anxiety that pressed against my heart. There was no way Bolesh and the Volsung Corporation were going to allow the loose cannon that was my brother to roll around Peru County.

"Garth!" I shouted, leaping off the cot and banging on the bars. "Garth, run! Get the hell out of here! Don't let them take you!"

Garth had quick reflexes, and he was good with a gun. I hoped my warning shout would allow him to get the drop on Bolesh and any of the deputies who might be in the office. There were more muffled shouts, but no gunfire. There were the sounds of scuffling, large pieces of furniture being broken or overturned; the soft, thudding *phonk* of knuckles on flesh. Curses. Whatever was happening, Garth was giving as good as he got; if the outcome were still in doubt, at least it meant that my bull of a brother still had a chance.

"Come on, Garth!" I screamed. "*Do it, baby! Heeyai!*"

There was another thump; deep, resonant. Ominous. Then I heard a heavy body fall to the floor. A few seconds later the door to the cell block opened and Jake Bolesh staggered through. His pomaded hair was thoroughly messed; it also looked slightly askew, as if Garth had pulled Bolesh's scalp down over his left ear. A toupee; very expensive, expertly fitted, but a rug just the same. Bolesh was bleeding from the mouth, and as he grimaced I thought I saw a large gap where a few front teeth were missing. His shirt was torn and flapping; all of the buttons were missing. He was carrying a fat, ugly truncheon wrapped in black leather and stained with blood.

He stood for a few moments, glaring at me, then abruptly swung the truncheon at the brick wall behind him.

Thunk! Thunk!

"Bastards!" he panted in a hoarse, sibilant whisper, the

breath whistling in the spaces where his front teeth had been. "Sons-of-bitches!"

He lunged and swung at the bars, and I just managed to snatch my fingers away in time to keep them from being crushed.

Clong!

"Something upsetting you, Jake? Having a bad day at the office?"

Clong! Clong!

"*God!*" Bolesh, white-faced and shuddering, hunched his shoulders and writhed, as if he were burning up from some unquenchable, white-hot fire blazing deep in whatever was left of his soul. "How I *hate* the two of you! *I hate you!*"

"Now, Jake, it's nothing more than a slight personality conflict. Why don't you calm down?"

Thunk! Thunk!

"Shut up, you little dwarf shit! You *fuck!* You're a *diseased* thing, Frederickson! You're *crooked!* Wait until you see what I've got waiting for the two of you!"

The last words were almost, if not quite, enough to make me want to kiss him. It meant he hadn't beaten Garth to death, and wasn't planning to— at least not in the short run. The steel fist that had been clenched around my heart relaxed slightly.

"Put the sapper away, Jake," I said evenly. "Come on in here and we'll go one on one. You're not afraid of a little old diseased, crooked dwarf, are you?"

Clong! Clong! Clong!

"You always thought you were so Goddamn smart!

Robby, the smart freak! Robby, the all-A's freak!"

Thunk!

"— and Garth the protector!"

Clong!

"— do you understand, dwarf?! *God didn't make you right!*"

My old buddy Jake had gone right over the edge, fallen a long way, landed on his head and bounced a few times. Always the optimist, I kept glancing down the corridor and hoping that someone would come running in with a bucket of cold water. Nope. If there were deputies in the office outside, they were too smart to get in the way of the rabid animal who was their boss. It didn't bode well.

Thunk! Clong!

"They're going to be looking for my brother too, Jake," I said quickly, deciding that it was time for some serious discussion. I was making an effort to sound calm, but I was forced to shout in order to be heard over his ranting. "You know how big the Volsung Corporation is! You may hate Garth and me, but you have to be afraid of them! You're running amok, and they're not going to like it!"

"Shut *up*, you diseased dwarf fuck! I don't need their permission to do what I'm going to do to you! Wait! Just *wait!*"

Clong! Thunk! Clong!

"This has become too big for you, Jake! Give yourself a break! Ask for some help, some guidance! Put in that call to Lippitt!"

"You bastard! You shit bastard! You've ruined

everything!"

"Jake," I sighed wearily, realizing that I would have had a better chance of communicating with a shark in a feeding frenzy, "you were always the once-and-future asshole. At least fix your wig. Seeing you with your hair hanging off really makes me want to throw up."

He went bone white, gaped at me for a few seconds, then clawed at his hair with his free hand. The toupee came off in his fingers, leaving strands of tacky hair glue clinging like cobwebs to his furry scalp.

"Brenner!" the county sheriff bawled. "Peters! Get in here!"

Now they came. Two pasty-faced deputies ran into the cell block, winced when they saw the snit their boss was in, stopped in front of him and stiffened.

Bolesh threw the greasy mat that was his hair into a corner, then took a key ring out of his pocket and unlocked the door to my cell. He had stopped ranting, but his hands were trembling and he was taking in great, gulping breaths, as if he could not get enough air. It was, I thought, a terrific time for him to suffer a heart attack.

He pushed open the cell door, swung the truncheon.

Clong!

"Keep your guns on him," Bolesh said to his deputies. "If he tries to fight back or get away, shoot him in the legs."

There wasn't going to be any heart attack. My initial fear was that he'd come forward and try to smash out my brains summarily, which meant that I'd have to make some kind of move; I'd be shot, but I'd damn well try to kill Bolesh before I

went down.

I sat down on the edge of the cot, planted both feet flat on the floor, and tried to look terrified—a feat that wasn't at all difficult. I stiffened the fingers of my right hand and concentrated all my attention on the spot on his thorax just below the rib cage, the gateway to his solar plexus; a blow delivered there at the right angle and with sufficient force could burst his heart. I would have only one chance, and I'd spend it if I didn't like the angle his first blow was coming from.

The deputies were in the cell now, flanking me; each was steadying his gun with both hands and aiming at my kneecaps.

The initial blow was angled away from my head, toward the soft flesh on my right side, below the rib cage. Bolesh didn't seem to be interested in beating me to death either—just close to it. I relaxed my fingers, exhaled loudly, and leaned slightly to my left in an effort to absorb some of the blow's force and pain.

There was nothing to do now but take the beating. It wouldn't be the first time Jake Bolesh had made me piss blood, but I swore it would be the last. I vowed that I would survive anything Bolesh did to me, and then—some way—I would kill him. Planning what I was going to do to *him* served as a kind of anesthetic while he worked me over. Finally he made a mistake, hit me just a bit too hard, and I passed out.

DREAMS of dragons and dungeons, tunnels and trolls, marched through my head; Orcs, elves, hobbits, and dwarfs. Magic swords and sashes. There were magnificent, sentient horses, brave Companies on heroic Quests battling against impossible odds with the salvation of the Earth hanging in the balance. There were vast treasure hordes, savage winds capable of stripping flesh from bone, poisonous spiders as big as boxcars, giant slinking beasts. There were Heroes and— of course— an abominable Prince of Evil so powerful it seemed nothing could stop his inexorable advance toward the conquest of the planet and the enslavement, forever, of its peoples. Only the Hero, usually frail and hopelessly outnumbered, could save the world; but time was running out, and the hoary legions of the Prince of Evil were closing in...

Whoopee.

And, of course, there was usually a Wizard with a magical staff around to bail the Hero out of *really* tacky situations. This particular Wizard looked like a Ku Klux Klansman in drag, but I knew he was a Wizard because his flowing black satin robe was ornately decorated with magical symbols woven out of sparkling gold and silver thread. He wore a peaked cap of black satin, and a black leather flap in which eyeholes had been cut out covered his face.

This Wizard was really Gandalf-on-the-spot, because he happened to be in my cell, bending over me and expertly probing my body for broken bones or torn ligaments and

muscles. However, I had mixed feelings about the fact that the Wizard appeared to be a mere apprentice, despite his sartorial splendor; instead of a magic staff he carried a gun.

I tried to get up, intending to jab my fingers into his windpipe. I got about two inches off the mattress, uttered an ear-splitting yowl as pain washed over and through me like a tidal wave of boiling water; the scalding liquid sloshed around my ankles, swept up through my ribs, scorched my skull. I bent double, but somehow managed to sidle over on the cot and swing my feet to the floor.

The yell had frightened me more than it had the Wizard; also, in my present condition, he was a bit too fast for me. He'd calmly stepped back and was now standing across the cell, beside an unconscious deputy who was sprawled on the floor. My little show of aggression had obviously pissed off the Wizard, because he raised his gun and shot me in the chest.

I woke up to find that my tongue had grown a fur coat and I'd acquired a drug-induced hangover to go with all my other miseries. The dart had penetrated my right pectoral muscle, and the residual pain there was like an irritating bee sting sitting on the great swollen bruise that was the rest of my body. I grunted, tried to sit up, banged my forehead on something; a steering wheel. I grabbed it, pulled myself up into a sitting position.

The car I was in was a battered Ford sitting in the shade

twenty-five yards or so off a major state highway. Cars whizzed by, their tires singing in the heat. I recognized the highway; I was at least halfway to the airport, perhaps an hour out of Peru County. In the woods to the right, a pair of jays were severely criticizing me for invading their territory. There was a note taped to the inside of the windshield. I peeled it off, waited for my eyes to focus, read it.

Peru County is no place for Hobbits; you're a dead man if you come back. Find a hole and hide in it. Nothing you can do in PC except get buried.

First I drained half the water in the canteen my savior had so thoughtfully provided. Then, holding my breath and tensing against all the aches and stabbing pains in me, I forced myself to get out of the car in order to test my moving parts. After grunting my way through a few very slow laps around the car, I was satisfied that Bolesh hadn't broken anything. Eventually I began to move a little better, and my head cleared some— although it continued to pound like a drunk beating a full set of out-of-tune tympani. I reversed direction, kept hobbling and groaning and stretching and trying to think.

The Wizard knew what he was talking about. The problem was that his magic spell had only managed to whisk me out of Peru County. Bolesh still had Garth in his possession, not to mention a county full of Fredericksons in

assorted sizes waiting to be snatched off the shelf. Somehow, the people at Volsung had found out I'd been inside their complex and had seen things. I knew of the existence of the Valhalla Project, if not its objective, and there was no way they could give me a pass now. I could take the Wizard's advice and hide. I could even go back to New York, make some noise— and then wait for the fingers, toes, and maybe an ear or two, to start arriving in the mail. Indeed, an odd digit could well be waiting to greet me when I got back.

The car keys were in the ignition. I pulled the car back onto the highway, rumbled across the grass divider strip, and headed back toward Peru County. I stopped at the first pay phone on the highway. With all the incredible luck I'd had so far, it was only natural that I continue my great roll; I found forty-three cents in the dirt and dustballs under the front seat. I used a greasy quarter to place a collect call to Omaha.

"Federal Bureau of Investigation. Agent Calder speaking."

A woman. "This is Dr. Robert Frederickson. I— "

"Just a moment, Dr. Frederickson!" the woman said excitedly. "We've been waiting for your call! I'll patch you through to Agent Randall. Just hang on. Don't hang up, all right?"

Agent Calder was making me very nervous— and I wasn't exactly the picture of calm to begin with. Calling the F.B.I. earlier hadn't given me great joy; it was simply the only option I'd been able to come up with. I trusted the

federal agency even less now, but still couldn't think of anything else to do; one unarmed, busted-up dwarf wasn't going to be much of a match for Bolesh and his deputies, not to mention whoever— or whatever— else might be waiting to jump out at me from some closet.

"Dr. Frederickson... ?"

"Mmmm."

"You're still there?"

"Mmmm."

"You'll hold on?"

"Until the bough breaks. Go ahead and do what you have to do, lady. I'm not going anywhere."

There was a series of whirs, whines, and clicks, and then Randall came on the line.

"Frederickson! I went to your parents' farm, but you never showed up! Where are you?"

"Just kind of floating around in a holding pattern. Where are you?"

"Sitting in Sheriff Jake Bolesh's broken swivel chair talking to you."

Randall sounded positively jovial. I said nothing, waited.

"Frederickson?"

"Mmmm."

"You don't sound anywhere near as happy as I thought you would."

"I've got a bruised smiler, and I'm a tough audience to begin with. Keep trying."

"It's over, Dr. Frederickson. I've got Bolesh and his deputies locked up in their own jail. Your nephew's

computer equipment hasn't been damaged, and my agents are at this moment loading it all into a confiscated van. I've been sitting here for hours, drinking too many Cokes and waiting for you to call."

"If you're telling the truth, I'll pay all your dental bills."

"Why should I lie?" Randall asked, sounding genuinely puzzled. "We got here and found Bolesh and his deputies unconscious on the floor. I still don't know the details of what happened, but Bolesh woke up and started babbling like a baby. After a few minutes of listening to him, I locked up the whole crew."

"Where's my brother?"

"Sorry, Frederickson," the agent said quietly. "Fractured skull. He's in the hospital, in a coma. He'll live, but he needs surgery. He'll be out of things for a while. Now, come on in. I know you'll want to be at the hospital when they operate on your brother, but I want to get you to Omaha as soon as possible. I've got an awful lot of questions, and you're the only one with the answers."

"Let me tell you something up front, Randall," I said slowly. "I need you, and you know I need you. But I'm not sure I can trust you. If you're bullshitting me and trying to close a trap, it's a big mistake. Too much has happened in Peru County for it to be hushed up for long, no matter how many powerful people are putting their fingers to their lips."

"You're telling me! Frederickson, listen—"

"Taking out Garth and me can't be sanctioned, Randall. If you're running a game on me, think about it some more."

"Frederickson," Randall said, exasperation creeping

into his tone. "I guess you have a right to be paranoid. You've been beat up, and maybe that's why you're not making any sense. I really don't understand what you're talking about."

"If you're lying to me, someday— somehow— people will find out about it. You'll find yourself sweating under television lights while you're taken apart by a congressional committee. Remember Watergate? I've written letters."

Randall laughed, long and hard. "*Good! Come in, Frederickson! It's over!*"

"I'll be there in an hour or so."

The moment I saw Randall's face I knew I'd lost the gamble, crapped out; but it was too late to turn around and walk out. As soon as the office door closed behind me, Bolesh and his two deputies marched out of the cell block, riot guns aimed at me.

Randall had, at least, been telling the truth when he'd told me he was sitting in Bolesh's chair. He was still sitting there — a boyish-looking man in his late twenties or early thirties, brown hair cut very short, tan suit and matching vest. I couldn't tell the color of his eyes, because he wouldn't look at me.

"Where's Garth?"

Randall wouldn't answer. The F.B.I. agent looked ashen, but Bolesh was grinning. The county sheriff's hair was glued back in place, carefully combed and pomaded.

"For Christ's sake, Randall," I continued. "This man

killed two kids, and he's going to kill Garth and me— if he hasn't already killed Garth. You don't want to be a part of this. Help me."

This time Randall squirmed a bit, but he still wouldn't answer.

"Listen to me, Randall; you lied your ass off to me, but I was telling the truth when I said I wrote letters. I can appreciate what top secret means, and Garth and I know how to keep our mouths shut. We're not interested in passing secrets, or in screwing the government in any other way. All I'm asking for is the right to take care of this crazy bastard, Bolesh, myself, and for you people to punish the men at Volsung who let him off his leash. It's not much, and it's fair. Give me those things, and our problem ends right here in this office. Tell Bolesh and his men to leave; he's not about to kill an F.B.I. agent. I'll make sure you get those letters back, unopened. We can deal, Randall."

Finally he spoke. His voice was tortured, and I could see the cords moving in his neck. "No. You didn't write any letters. You are a straight arrow; even if you'd had time to write letters, you'd have been concerned about who might have to pay the return postage." He rose, turned his head in Bolesh's direction. "Remember what you were told; I haven't been here."

The agent gave me a fleeting glance just before he walked out the door. His eyes were brown.

Bolesh pulled down the shade, took out his sap.

"Hey."

The word reverberated like a gong in the great empty

cathedral that was located just behind my eyes. Sharp metal was biting into my wrists, holding my arms back around a square wooden object that was rough with splinters. Unable to move my hands or arms, I tried my head.

"Hey. Mongo."

My head worked; at least it moved. I tried my eyes. I panicked for a few moments when I couldn't see anything, but then relaxed when I caught sight of a shaft of moonlight. It was night. Gradually my eyes became accustomed to the dim glow of moonlight, and I could see that I was sitting on matted, filthy straw, chained to a support post inside what looked like Coop Lugmor's barn. Garth was chained to a second post, about twenty feet to my right.

"Hey, Mongo. You all right?"

"Of course I'm all right. I'm just sitting here filling in my empty spaces."

"Oh, I love it. That's good."

"And wondering why Bolesh hasn't added a few more. As long as you're up, signal the beach boy, will you? I can use a drink."

"Goddamn it, *you're* all right. How about asking if *I'm* all right?!"

"Are you all right?"

"No, I am *not* all right. I *hurt*. I cracked a knuckle on Bolesh's front teeth, and with all the stomping they did on me I do believe they managed to crack a couple of ribs and break a foot. I'll survive, but it was a shocking example of police brutality."

"What the hell's the matter with you? Didn't you realize you were supposed to beat the shit out of Bolesh and his deputies and rescue me?"

"I'm tired of rescuing you; it gets boring after a few years. I figured this time I'd let the villains keep you, just to see how it turns out."

"Well, you certainly have a front-floor seat."

"Yeah. I can't wait for the next reel."

"Seriously; from past experience, I've learned to view these little setbacks as character-building, consciousness-raising events."

Garth chuckled softly. When he spoke again, his deep voice was resonant with emotion. "It's good to see you, Mongo."

"It's good to see you, brother. Do you hurt bad?"

"No. I've got a very hard head, and the foot's numb. You?"

"No. Seeing you alive is the only painkiller I needed."

"Okay."

"Okay. Mom and Dad...?"

"They were all right the last time I saw them, aside from being worried out of their minds about you. Bolesh and his crew really trashed the house, but all the relatives are over there helping to put it back together again."

"By the way, what the hell are you doing here?"

"Janet called me after Bolesh snatched Tommy's computer. She thought you might need some help."

"You're a big help. You were afraid I might get lonesome in the afterlife, right?"

"I forgive you for that thoughtless remark, the same as I forgive you for being absolutely, congenitally unable to keep your dwarf ass out of the most fucking *outrageous* situations." He paused, and I could hear him breathing heavily. When he spoke again, his tone had changed and taken on a jagged edge of real anger. "I'll tell you what I won't forgive you for, Mongo; I won't forgive you for not calling me the second you knew things here weren't right, and you realized you were in trouble. I *could* have helped then. Forget the stupidity; I'm used to you doing stupid things. I know why you didn't want me here, but you had no *right* to try to protect me. Tommy was *my* nephew, too; *my* family lives here, and you just happen to be my brother. Reverse our positions and tell me how you'd feel. It was a bad insult, Mongo."

"You're right," I replied quietly. "I'm sorry, Garth."

"Your apology is accepted." The anger was gone as quickly as it had come, the boil lanced and drained. "You don't even look like the Lone Ranger."

"Other people have commented on that."

"What would you suggest we do?"

"Aw, hell, you were right about letting the villains keep me; this is kind of exciting. Why don't we just hang around, breathe the good country air, and wait to see what happens?"

"Why not? While we're waiting, why don't you tell me what the hell's been going on?"

"Sure. How do you feel about dragon stories? I mean, what's your general attitude?"

"About the same as toward stories about giant alligators in New York's sewers."

"Mad scientists?"

"I like shaggy dog stories. Get on with it, Mongo."

"You're going to love this one."

Bolesh showed up about an hour later. He snapped a wall switch, and a single naked light bulb hanging just above our heads came on. A pigeon in the loft, startled by the light, swooped down, brushing against the electric cord. The bulb jerked, then swung back and forth, casting shifting, chiaroscuro shadows, patterns of light and dark, across Bolesh's grim face. He was carrying a black leather satchel, and I was afraid I was about to find out what had killed Coop Lugmor.

"Hi, shithead," Garth said brightly. "How's your mouth?"

In our present position, it didn't seem like a good idea to talk like that to Bolesh; I tensed in anticipation of the terrible beating I was certain Garth was going to get.

Bolesh didn't even blanch. He smiled slowly—which made me even more nervous. Then he opened the satchel, took out a pint bottle full of an amber-colored liquid. Next came a hypodermic syringe. He punched the needle through the rubber sheeting covering the mouth of the bottle, depressed the plunger, filled the tube of the hypodermic. Then he came for me, angling around toward my back so I couldn't kick at him.

"I told you God didn't make you right, dwarf," Bolesh said

in a fluttering voice that bubbled with unfinished, insane laughter. His upper lip kept catching on the edges of his broken teeth, giving him a very wet lisp. "Now I'm gong to fix you and your brother up good."

I winced and screwed my eyes shut as the needle sliced into the soft flesh of my left shoulder— reacting not to pain, but in terror of just what might be in the solution Bolesh was injecting into me, and what its effect would be; I had a gnawing suspicion it would make my memories of the rabies shots seem like morphine dreams.

Bolesh refilled the syringe, repeated the procedure with Garth. Then he went across the barn, sat down on the dirty straw about fifteen yards from us, and leaned back against another support pillar. Rolling the hypodermic like a cigar in his fingers, he drew his knees up to his chest, rested his forearms on them and stared at us with a childlike grin of anticipation on his face.

Garth and I stared back at him.

After a half hour or so Bolesh began to look unhappy. After another half hour he gave each of us a second shot. He'd emptied almost a quarter of the bottle into our veins.

More staring. Garth began to snore loudly, although I suspected he wasn't really asleep.

Finally, around what my stomach told me was lunchtime, Bolesh got up. He cursed, spat at us, then picked up his pharmaceutical outfit and stalked out of the barn.

"Hi, shithead," Garth announced in a determinedly

cheerful tone as Bolesh and bag entered the barn in the afternoon. "Good to see you, Jake. We've really missed you. How about another shot of that happy juice? That's good stuff."

Bolesh's jaw muscles clenched tightly, and his eyes narrowed to slits. He didn't seem to be able to believe what he was seeing— or wasn't seeing. He set the bag down, came over and, still being careful to stay out of kicking range, tore off our shirts and examined the flesh of our necks and torsos. He looked like he wanted to take our pants off but was afraid of what we might be able to do with our feet.

Then he obliged Garth, gave us both another injection. This time he gave the shots directly in a vein in the neck, as if he wanted to make certain the fluid was entering our bloodstreams. Then he sat down against his pillar and stared.

We stared back.

This time it took him until dusk to get impatient. He gave us both still another shot, paced around until it got dark, left.

Bolesh brought us water, but no food. It was just as well; with nothing solid going in, nothing solid came out. Our keeper obviously wasn't worried about surprise visits from state health inspectors. "It's gone, you fuckers, all gone!" Bolesh shouted as he entered the barn on the morning of the next day.

"Come on, shithead," Garth replied. "Stop teasing us. I

can see the bottle right there in your hand; there's lots of that good stuff left. Be a sport and give us another shot."

He did.

By late afternoon, something was starting to happen.

Garth had begun to suffer occasional muscle spasms which rippled up and down his body in undulating waves, causing his knees to knock and teeth to chatter. However, each time the spasms passed after two or three minutes and Garth assured me that he was all right, insisting there was nothing wrong with him that three steaks and a gallon of whiskey sours wouldn't cure.

I wasn't certain I believed him. His vicious and insistent defiance of Bolesh was no mere act of wasted macho or false bravado; it was, I knew, part of a ritual. Like a samurai, Garth was preparing to die, and refusal to give Bolesh the slightest bit of satisfaction was part of his death song.

My own symptoms were more subtle, but no less real. Although the sun was starting to go down, I noticed that I was squinting against the twilight. I realized I had been squinting all day and had suffered a hammering headache until an hour or so before, when it had begun to grow darker and cooler.

My eyes were becoming intensely photosensitive.

The symptoms were uncomfortable and distressing, but — even if Bolesh had been aware of them — I was certain they weren't what he seemed so anxious to write home

about; our host was looking for something a lot more dramatic, and he was very annoyed by the fact that he wasn't getting it.

"It's gotta' work," Bolesh mumbled thickly as he injected the last of the solution into our veins. "I've seen it work."

Finding out what would happen when the stuff "worked" was not high on my list of priorities. I was no samurai.

The next morning it was clear that Bolesh was all out of patience. He arrived with a shotgun.

"Hi, shithead," Garth said. "If you've run out of happy juice, why don't you get the hell out of here so we won't have to look at your ugly face?"

"Yeah," I said wearily. "Jake, why don't you just unlock our handcuffs and go away?" I couldn't work up much enthusiasm for Garth's ritual, or hope to match his fanciful, New York City-detective type sense of humor. I had the most absurd yet insistent urge to take a bath, smell a rose, eat three eggs boiled for exactly three minutes, and drink one cup of coffee. Not necessarily in that order.

Bolesh propped up his shotgun by the door, came over to examine us once more. No sale. He cursed, kicked at us, stalked back toward his shotgun.

Fortunately, we had a visitor. A trim but solidly built man dressed in combat boots, khaki slacks, and matching tank top stepped silent as a flesh-colored shadow into the barn. He was totally bald, with large, almost soulful, brown eyes. There had been a time when he hadn't been able to walk

around in the summer without a coat— a psychological malady caused by repeated dousings in Nazi ice baths. Our "mutual friend" had cured that. The man had to be pushing seventy, but you certainly couldn't tell by looking at his flat stomach, his toned, rippling muscles, or his eyes.

He could have used Bolesh's gun, but preferred to wield his own— a Remington 870 with modified choke and combat barrel designed to tighten the focus of a buckshot pattern. He shot from the hip. The charge caught Bolesh in the neck just below the jaw, permanently fixing his teeth as it blew his head off.

Garth's astonished shout pierced the deafening echo of the blast. "*Lippitt!*"

"Oh, yeah," I breathed, staring transfixed at Bolesh's decapitated body and the shiny mop of greasy, blood-stained hair that had somehow managed to land on a wall peg fifteen yards away. I would dearly have loved to kill Bolesh myself, but I decided I was willing to settle for the status quo. "I forgot to tell you about him. He's been playing chauffeur for the Volsung Corporation."

"Jesus," Garth gasped. "*Jesus!*" He had expected to die, had prepared himself for it from the moment he had found himself handcuffed to the post. Now, like me, he wasn't quite sure what to make of the fact that he was going to live.

"Where the hell have you been, Lippitt?" I said, still unable to take my eyes off Bolesh's twitching corpse. "You took your sweet time getting here. We've been sitting here pissing our pants in anticipation."

Lippitt stared at me hard, a single question in his eyes; he wanted to know if I had broken our pact, with Garth or anyone else. I shook my head slightly. He grunted softly, put his Remington aside, and searched through Bolesh's pockets until he found the keys to the handcuffs. He came around behind us, unlocked the cuffs.

"It took me a while to find you. You two threw Bolesh off his feed; he's been holed-up in the farmhouse."

"Where's your wizard costume, Lippitt?" I asked. "I rather liked that. Nice touch."

"Being currently unemployed, I don't need a disguise any longer."

Our handcuffs off, Garth and I slowly got up, stretched to the accompaniment of cracking joints, rubbed our raw wrists.

"Mongo's told me half the story," Garth said softly to Lippitt, a slight threatening edge to his voice. After an afternoon of smoke and gunfire a few years before on a New York dock, Garth had never much cared for Lippitt. "Why don't you give us the punch line?"

"Later," Lippitt replied evenly as he walked to a corner where Bolesh had thrown the valise, empty bottle, and syringe. He knelt down and tore the rubber sheeting off the top of the bottle. He sniffed at the inside of the bottle, rubbed his index finger around the rim, put the tip of his finger on his tongue. He spat, bowed his head, sighed. "How much of this stuff did he give you?"

"The whole Goddamn bottle," I said. "Half in me, half in Garth. I lost track of the number of shots."

"Over how long a period of time?"

"He started Thursday. This must be"— I paused to think about it— "Sunday. Three days."

Lippitt, obviously very concerned, straightened up, looked over at us and frowned. "And?"

"And what?"

"How do you feel?"

"Like shit."

"Come on, Frederickson!" Lippitt snapped. "Tell me precisely how you feel!"

"I thought I did. My eyes have become very photosensitive. You've got a halo around you— as unlikely as that may seem. Everything seems very bright, and this amount of light hurts my eyes. Garth has been having intermittent muscle spasms for about a day and a half."

"They're painful," Garth said in a flat voice. "What was that shit, Lippitt?"

Lippitt nodded toward Garth's left foot, which was raised slightly in the air. "Bad?"

Garth shrugged. "Broken metatarsal. I can hop."

"Anything else broken?"

"Cracked ribs on the right. You haven't answered— "

"Come on," Lippitt said as he abruptly walked up to Garth. The Defense Intelligence Agency operative put his arm around Garth's waist, planted his shoulder in my brother's left armpit.

I took the side with the cracked ribs, supporting Garth as best I could by his belt. Together we formed a six-legged beast that hobbled uncertainly out of the barn into bright

morning sunlight that hit my eyes and burned me like golden acid.

Lippitt had the black Cadillac from Volsung, and we drove in silence. Lippitt seemed deep in thought, and Garth and I were— for the time— content not to speak; we were intoxicated with the sensation of being alive, the feel of the wind from the open window whipping our hair and caressing our faces, the song of churchbells in the distance.

Lippitt knew exactly where he wanted to go. The ride took forty-five minutes, and we ended up in Sagemoon, the county seat of Ogden County, where there was a large and sophisticated medical laboratory complex serving doctors and hospitals in a three-county area.

Lippitt parked the Cadillac in back of the complex, opened a rear entrance with a lock pick. We went inside, walked up a flight of stairs, through a waiting room, and into a receptionist's office. Lippitt stepped behind a desk and began thumbing rapidly through a Rolodex file.

"You two go inside and get cleaned up," the agent said as he tore three cards out of the file, put them in his pocket. "There must be some clean lab smocks around here someplace that you can put on. Drink all the water you want, but don't take anything else. Rip out all the telephones; make sure you don't miss any."

"Lippitt!" I croaked. "What's wrong with us?"

"Don't call *anyone*. I'll be back as soon as I can."

"What's wrong with us?"

"That's what I'm going to try and find out," he said, heading for the stairs.

13.

LIPPITT returned fifty minutes later with three frightened-looking medical technicians, a man and two women, in tow, and a box full of new clothes which he tossed onto a chair in the waiting room. One of the women turned out to be a doctor, and the first item on the agenda was to patch up Garth. His broken foot was placed in a walking cast, his ribs and the knuckles of his right hand taped. That done, we proceeded to the serious business of the day.

From the length of the list of tests Lippitt pulled from his pocket, it looked like Garth and I were going to be padding around nude for some time. Lippitt obviously knew what he was doing; he briefed the medical personnel on exactly what tests he wanted. Then he sat down in a secretary's chair, placed a revolver on top of a pile of papers where the three people could see it, and leaned back and put his feet up on the desk.

One of the technicians began the festivities by drawing samples of our blood. Lots of blood.

"Illegal gene-splicing experiments," I said as I watched the plastic tube at the end of the needle sticking out of my forearm fill up with blood.

" 'Illegal' is a matter of interpretation," Lippitt replied flatly as he stared up at the ceiling.

"Attempts at genetic engineering with mammals."

"Right."

"Large mammals."

"Right. Let's be a bit discreet, Frederickson. We're not alone." "Looking for applications to humans?" No answer.

"You're unemployed now, remember? You don't owe them your loyalty any longer."

"Really? How do you know who 'them' are? I'm not sure myself." "You've got to be kidding. What are you, a salesman for Saks Fifth Avenue?"

"It may not be as simple as you think it is." "So? Who *is* 'them'?" No answer.

"You think I'm an idiot?"

"No. But I've had more time to think about it."

Mucous smears; nose, throat, rectum.

"Project Valhalla. *Jesus*, Lippitt! Some kind of biobomb?" No answer.

X-rays. *Whir, clickety-clunk, whir*. "What killed Coop Lugmor?"

"A star wasp. It's a jellyfish that lives in the surf off the coast of Australia. Its toxin is lethal, but most useful as a molecular probe. I suppose you'll want to know what a molecular probe is?"

"It's a chemical used to trace the passage of substances through cell walls."

"Correct. Would you care to discuss osmosis?" "I think not. A pineapple like Jake Bolesh shouldn't have been able to get security clearance to piss on a tree within five miles of the Pentagon, what's more connect up with a top secret research facility. How the hell did he get to work for Volsung?"

"Siegfried Loge hired him. Bolesh was just what Loge was looking for."

"Somehow, Jake always struck me as being a bit crude." That almost got a smile out of Lippitt, who was standing across

the room, wearing a lead apron. "You should meet Loge. He and Bolesh didn't have much in common academically, but they were blood brothers in every other respect. If you were fond of Jake Bolesh, you'd fall in love with Siegfried Loge." "I'd like very much to meet him," I said evenly. "You won't." "Why not?" No answer.

Sonar tests; lungs and stomach.

"Where did Bolesh get the star wasp and the stuff he shot into us?"

"The star wasp was probably given to him by Loge." "The director of Volsung gave him a thing like that to kill a man?" Lippitt nodded. "I told you; Loge is a prince." "The serum?"

"Lot Fifty-Six. Loge certainly wouldn't have given that to Bolesh. I don't know where Bolesh got it, but my guess would be from Rodney Lugmor's room. You're aware that

that stupid prick Obie Loge took your nephew and Rodney Lugmor into the complex?"

"I guessed. They were playing a game, and Obie Loge was looking to score some heavy points."

"That I didn't know; I never could figure out why Obie Loge would take two friends in there. A *game*?" "A fantasy game."

Lippitt thought about it, made a sound of disgust in his throat.

"It figures."

"Whatever Tommy and Rodney saw in there scared the shit out of them— enough so that they thought they might want to tell somebody else about it. Rodney may have smuggled the serum out, the same as my nephew snuck out a pass card. Rodney's parents were away, so Tommy took off to stay with his friend and talk about what they should do."

"Your nephew— and Lugmor; pretty gutsy kids." "Damn right," I said, feeling a lump rise in my throat. "I'd never realized how gutsy. Tommy wasn't exactly your Superman type." I swallowed, choked back tears, cleared my throat. "Anyway, after a few days Obie Loge knew he was up to his ass in alligators; either he told his father what he'd done, or his father found out about it."

Lippitt nodded.

"Jake Bolesh, Volsung's happy warrior in charge of doings on the outside, was told to take care of them."

"Correct."

"Did you give that order, Lippitt?"

"No."

"I didn't think so. Killing kids— or having someone else do it for you— isn't your style. What's behind the red door?"
No answer.

"*You* didn't much like what you saw either, did you? That's why you're 'unemployed.' They're hunting you, aren't they?" No answer.

Urinalysis. Tinkle-splash, fill the bottle. Wait. Fill another bottle. They wanted stool specimens, but Garth and I just laughed at them.

"I want to take time out to call our folks," Garth said in a deep voice still resonant with anger. "They'll be worried out of their minds about us." "No."

"You're not my commanding officer, Lippitt!" "It really isn't a good idea."

The doctor had Garth and me lying on twin examination tables while she listened, poked and probed and punched, then listened some more. Lippitt was standing between the tables, checking off items on the list he had made for himself. "How long were you down there?" "Too long."

"How did you come to be there?" No answer.

"You seem to have picked up some medical expertise."
"Some." A long pause, then: "I used to be a medical doctor, Frederickson. It was a long time ago."

"How did they find out so fast that I'd been inside

Volsung and had taken files on the Valhalla Project?"
"Careful, Frederickson. Ears."

"Ears, bullshit; she's working on my gall bladder. You don't care what we're talking about, do you, Doc?"

The doctor, a handsome brunette in her mid-thirties, seemed to be taking a liking to me. She gave me a slow wink, but said nothing as she continued her prolonged voyage over my abbreviated body.

"Lippitt? How did they find out I was in the unmentionable building and took the unmentionable files?"

Lippitt looked up from his sheets, smiled faintly. "Why, Frederickson, you disappoint me. I'd have thought you'd have figured that out a long time ago."

"I've been slow this week. Bad biorhythms. Give me a clue."

"The gorilla snitched on you."

It occurred to me that Lippitt had gone a little mad.

Anal and genital examinations. Sperm samples.

"Garth and I are a mite hungry, Lippitt. We haven't eaten in half a week."

"I know that, Mongo," Lippitt said quietly. "You can't eat until I'm sure we have all the blood and urine samples we need. I'm sorry."

"Not even a Twinkie?"

"Not even a Twinkie."

The idea of having catheters threaded into our hearts didn't hold great appeal for me.

"Angiograms are dangerous," I said, gripping the technician's wrist.

Lippitt just stared at me.

"Yes," I sighed at last, relaxing my grip and leaning back. "I see your point."

The spinal taps and bone marrow tests hurt. A lot.

"Where— ouch!— *did* you get the wizard outfit? *Ouch!*"

"Siegfried Loge's collection of fantasy memorabilia; Loge is obsessed with fantasy literature and 'heroic' music. I'd just heard what had happened to you, and I was in a hurry to get to the jail before Bolesh found some excuse to kill you. I was still working at Volsung, so I couldn't let Bolesh— or you— see my face. I grabbed the first thing I could find, which happened to be in Loge's closet."

"You putting me on?"

"On the contrary," the D.I.A. agent said easily. "I told you you'd love Loge. He's indisputably a genius, but he's also mad as a hatter

and cruel as... a Nazi." He paused, smiled wryly. "The whole damn place was a madhouse. You get a bunch of superscientists together, give them any piece of equipment they ask for and carte blanche to do with it what they want, and you find out they're like children loose in a toy store after all the adults have gone home. At least this crew was like that."

Lippitt, most uncharacteristically, seemed to be feeling positively chatty, and I didn't want to break his mood. I flashed a broad grin. "Sounds like a great place to work."

Lippitt grunted. "He used to play Wagner's *Ring* constantly— all sixteen hours of it at a stretch. He'd let a few hours go by, then start it all over again. He had everybody else wearing earplugs."

"I saw the speakers. I thought they were part of a PA system."

"Oh, they were that all right. You know how many times I've listened to *Das Rheingold*, *Die Walkure*, *Siegfried*, and *Gotterdammerung*? I know the scores by heart. I feel eminently qualified to conduct at Bayreuth."

"You know something, Lippitt? I actually think you're mellowing with age. That was funny."

His smile disappeared. "There's nothing funny about Siegfried Loge."

"Like father— *ouch*, Goddamnit!— like son, huh?"

Lippitt studied me for a long time. Something dark and dangerous moved in his limpid brown eyes, and suddenly I felt very uncomfortable.

"What do you know about Father?"

At first I didn't understand the question, and then I realized that Lippitt had misunderstood me. I'd been talking about Siegfried and Auberlich, just making small talk and trying to sidle up on Lippitt. He thought I'd been referring to "Father"— Siegmund Loge. The subject didn't seem to be Lippitt's idea of small talk, and my heart began to beat a little faster.

"Just what's common knowledge," I said, trying to sound casual while I watched him and tried to read his reaction. "Double Nobel winner. He got one for his work with enzymes. The second was for his design of the Triage Parabola, a complex mathematical model used to rate endangered species in order to focus the most effort and resources toward those it's still possible to save. Some called him the smartest man in the world— until his cracker barrel tipped over.

Now he thinks he's God, and a few thousand hyped-up kids agree with him. What do *you* know about him?"

No answer.

"Is *Siegmund* Loge involved with Volsung and the Valhalla Project?"

No answer.

Eye tests; for me, excruciatingly painful. I could only tolerate the bright lights for a few seconds at a time, and so — with Lippitt's permission— the doctor and technicians turned their attention to Garth. "What does Father have to do with all this, Lippitt?" No answer.

Treadmill. Gasp, wheeze, pant.

"Getting information out of you is like trying to mine diamonds with a toothpick, Lippitt."

"Later, I'd like to try again with the eye tests. We'll use a little more anesthetic."

"I'd love to know the whole story before these tests kill me. For that matter, even *you're* not going to live forever."

"What is evil lives forever," Lippitt said in a distant, cryptic tone. "Oh, good. A— *wheeze*— riddle. Let's see... we're talking about— *wheeze*— DNA research, genetic engineering. The cell lives forever." *Ahuh, ahuh, ahuh. Wheeze.* "In a very real sense, the cell is immortal; it keeps passing on bits of itself in the form of genetic information from generation to generation, and it's been that way since we all crawled out of the slime. Every once in a while there's a missed signal, and that's what evolution is all about. So, what's evil about a cell?"

Gasp, pant, wheeze.

"Just a Spanish fable," Lippitt said quietly.

Galvanic skin reaction tests.

"Is Father more than foolish? Is Father evil?" "As a matter of fact, he's one of the kindest, gentlest men I've ever met. And, as you may have suspected from all the names, a devotee of Richard Wagner." "How do you know him?" No answer.

"What does Father have to do with the Valhalla Project?"

No answer.

"Why can't you just tell us all of it, Lippitt?"

"Maybe I will," Lippitt said softly, after a long pause.

"Why *maybe*? Don't you think Garth and I have a right to know?"

"I'm still thinking about it."

"Exactly *what* are you thinking about?"

No answer.

Lippitt was becoming increasingly distracted as the tests progressed. For some reason I couldn't pinpoint—a vague tension in my empty stomach—I found that ominous.

Reflexes. Bangety-bang, twitch.

"What do you owe these people?"

"It's our country, Frederickson. There are a lot of things to be considered."

"Our country, my ass! Our beloved country killed my nephew."

"No."

"And now they're hunting you."

"No."

"Bullshit, Lippitt! *Bullshit!*"

"I don't believe these people represent the country, Frederickson. Not in the sense that you mean."

"The government is damn well responsible!"

Lippitt sighed. "The government of the United States isn't the all-powerful, omniscient bureaucracy you like to think it is, Frederickson."

"No? Well, I've had some bad experiences. So have you."

He shot me a quick, sharp warning glance. I shrugged, let the tag line alone.

"The proof of what I'm saying is the fact that the Volsung Corporation was built in Peru County in the first place." Lippitt paused, smiled wryly. "If the 'government' you keep

referring to had had the faintest inkling that *you* were associated with Peru County in *any* way, they wouldn't have come within five hundred miles of the place."

"I'll take that as a compliment, Lippitt."

"Sure."

My turn to sigh. "*Why* can't you tell us everything?" "I'm thinking about it."

My stomach flopped and tightened again. "You're making me nervous, Lippitt."

"I don't mean to."

"What's your connection with Father?"

No answer.

More blood tests. Incredible. They were draining us dry.

"Volsung had the most piss-poor security operation I've ever seen or heard of."

"You noticed," Lippitt replied drily.

"Kids wander in and out, material is taken out."

"I told you; the place was a madhouse, and the inmates were in charge."

"You were supposed to be in charge of security."

"Was I?"

"But then, you're pretty old, aren't you?" I said, watching him carefully. "They should have retired you a long time ago."

"Operatives who've done what I've done and know what I know don't retire, they just fade away."

"Clever use of the cliché."

"No cliché. 'Fading' is the term we use to describe the placing of an older or burnt-out agent into a cushy job."

"You were 'faded' into Volsung?"

"No. I was buried in Volsung. I had no real authority, and I had almost as much trouble finding out what was really going on in there as you did. In a very real sense, I was a prisoner; I was put in Volsung because I knew too much. If I'd moved around too much, asked too many questions, or made too many complaints, I'm sure Jake Bolesh would have been ordered to kill me, too. Meanwhile, it was Siegfried Loge who was really in charge of security—which was exactly the way he wanted it. Loge figured that the fences, the support of the community, the 'growing' program, and Jake Bolesh were all the security he needed."

"And Loge gave his smart-ass son the run of the place?"

Lippitt nodded. "These people had the most unbelievable contempt for people they considered less bright than they were. They thought they could take care of any problem. It was a security disaster."

"I'll grant you that it doesn't sound like the way the Pentagon likes to do things."

"Precisely. Those people cared about nothing but their work; when they got involved in something, Barnum and Bailey could have marched through there and they wouldn't have known the difference."

"But the funds—and your orders—had to come through the Pentagon."

No answer.

"Volsung isn't a box of paper clips; a very big budget item and continued flow of funds had to be approved by *somebody* in Washington, and it would have to show up in budget reports."

No answer.

"Who cooked up the Volsung Corporation and the Valhalla Project?"

No answer.

"You accepted your 'prisoner' status, not to mention all the shit going on around you, passively— at least for a time. That doesn't sound like the Lippitt I used to know."

His brown eyes searched mine. "I wasn't the Lippitt you used to know," he said at last. "First, it took me some time — too much time— to appreciate the fact that I was a prisoner. Then I realized I'd been manipulated, co-opted, by... whoever. I was feeling tired, depressed, defeated. Old. Then I got wind of this crazy dwarf who was tearing up Peru County, giving Jake Bolesh— and, incidentally, Siegfried Loge— fits. That's when I decided it was time to get off my ancient ass and do something." He paused and smiled in a way I had never seen before; it was a warm smile, lighting his eyes, softening his face. "I must say, Frederickson, you're an inspiration to an old man."

"What's behind the red door, Lippitt?"

"I'm thinking about it." The Ice Age that was the more familiar Lippitt had returned.

"You said you were 'buried' at Volsung because you knew too much. About what?"

No answer. The brown eyes were still bright, but the fire

there was now cold. Dangerous.

"What does Father have to do with the Valhalla Project?"

"Let's eat."

14.

GARTH and I kept an eye on the medical personnel while Lippitt went out to his car, returned with a large ice chest filled with fruit and juices. There were thin vanilla milk shakes for dessert. I wasn't exactly overjoyed, and Garth wasn't too happy, either.

"Lippitt, you're a real prick," my brother growled, his voice ringing with utter sincerity.

"You should eat lightly at first," Lippitt replied evenly.

"Otherwise, you'll get sick. I'll buy you a good dinner later."

"What does Father have to do with the Valhalla Project?" I asked through a mouth filled with the most delicious banana that had ever been grown.

Lippitt sipped at a container of apple juice, stared at the floor.

"If the government isn't behind Volsung and the Valhalla Project, who is?"

"Eat, Frederickson. There are still things I'm trying to sort out."

Up to this point Garth had been content to watch, listen, and evaluate while I did the interrogating. I'd been stalking the elusive Lippitt all day, but it was Garth who now fired the silver bullet.

"Lippitt," Garth said casually, picking a piece of apple skin from between his teeth, "why are you afraid of us?"

It struck him in the heart, and he started. He recovered quickly, but I had seen the unmistakable reaction in his eyes, the twitch of the muscles in his jaw and throat. A puddle of apple juice shimmered on the floor like a silent, liquid witness.

"I'm afraid for you," Lippitt said tightly.

"Yes," I responded quickly. "But Garth is right. You're also afraid of us! It's why you won't answer the most important questions. Why are you afraid of us?"

"The ring," Lippitt whispered.

"What are you talking about?" I asked, not liking the look on Lippitt's face. "What fucking ring?"

Lippitt's response was to rise from his chair and walk quickly from the room, slamming the door behind him.

Electrocardiogram.

"What's your connection with Father?"

"Don't talk; you'll disrupt the test." The Ice Man returneth.

"Then you talk to me. Do it, Lippitt. You came close before. Just think of me as your friendly neighborhood priest, and remember that confession is good for the soul. Enthrall me with the whole truth."

Lippitt stared at me intently for a few moments, then gave a curt nod to the technician who was operating the machine. The technician went into the other room where Garth, who had finished the test, was sitting. Lippitt quietly

closed the door, then took over the controls of the machine himself. He had obviously made some kind of decision.

"I was faded to a place I believe you're familiar with," Lippitt said quietly, making delicate adjustments to two knobs, leaning closer to study the inky squiggles left behind by the needles. "The Institute for the Study of Human Potential."

That piece of information must have caused quite a jolt in my personal magnetism. It was, as far as I could see, a four-knobber; Lippitt looked like he was trying to control a ship at sea.

"Relax, Frederickson."

I lay back on the cold black vinyl, took a series of deep breaths.

The Institute for the Study of Human Potential was, indeed, familiar to me. It had been founded by a friend of mine, Jonathan Pilgrim. Pilgrim, an ex-astronaut who had walked on the moon, had "died"—suffered clinical death, inasmuch as his heart had stopped for almost three minutes—as the result of a crash in an experimental plane. The doctors had brought him back, and he'd been profoundly changed by the experience. He'd resigned his commission in the Air Force, then used his name to raise money to found the Institute, located on a mountain in northern California, near Crescent City.

"Pilgrim wouldn't let a government agent set foot on his place. Not knowingly."

"You're wrong. In order to establish a research facility of the size and scope that he has, he was forced to make

some compromises."

"Jonathan takes government money?"

Lippitt nodded. "In exchange for allowing the D.I. A. to monitor his experiments. The Institute studies unusual human phenomena and exhaustively tests people with very special talents from all over the world, from musicians to Indian fire walkers"— he paused, chuckled— "to gifted dwarfs who defy all the odds to become star circus gymnasts and karate experts. Every once in a while someone with a special talent or talents comes along whom we feel warrants our attention. I was the agency's monitor."

"Father accepted an invitation to go to the Institute to be tested. He certainly 'warranted your attention,' didn't he?"

"It was two and a half years ago. He wasn't 'Father' then — just Dr. Siegmund Loge. He was there to take special, computer-generated intelligence tests. Incidentally, he went right off the charts on everything; he was— is— just about the smartest man in the world. He was a pioneer in DNA research, work with basic enzymes, and an expert in all the life sciences. Naturally, I recommended that he be interviewed by our people. He was, and he agreed to work for us in certain research areas."

"But he's been out in the wilderness walking on water for almost *two* years now. He must have had his breakdown right after he went to work for the Pentagon."

"It would seem that way," Lippitt replied in an oddly distant tone.

"Meanwhile, you were thrown out of Pilgrim's Institute

and 'buried' at Volsung. How did you fall into the shithouse?"

"Very sensitive, top secret human genetic data was stolen from the Institute, along with a collection of sperm samples taken from a variety of very unusual individuals. The data was 'leached' out of computer banks that were equipped with the latest in supposedly unbreakable lock codes."

"You were responsible for security on those items, so they held you responsible for their theft. Get thee to Volsung?"

"Right."

"There's a certain irony in the fact that you helped recruit Siegmund Loge, then ended up working for his screwball son and chauffeuring his grandson."

"You think so, Frederickson? I don't. Given enough time and support, I'm sure I could have traced the theft of the material and nailed the people responsible."

"Ah."

"I was sent to Volsung because that was the best place to contain and keep an eye on me."

"Why should the D.I.A. want to contain and keep an eye on you? You *work* for them."

"It wasn't the D.I.A. that was responsible— at least not my immediate superiors. I've had a lot of time to think about it, and I'm convinced there's a small group of very powerful men— a cabal, if you will, made up of people in all phases of government— who are responsible for Volsung and the work conducted there. They've got the bit between their

teeth, and they're up to... something." He hissed, clenched his fists; for Lippitt, one more absolutely incredible display of emotion. "They're mad, Frederickson. Mad!"

"Who, Lippitt?"

"The people who helped Siegmund Loge steal genetic data and sperm samples from Pilgrim's Institute."

Garth, Lippitt, and I stood in the darkened room, silently staring at the large X-ray negatives on the fluorescent display screen in front of us. They were pictures of my spine and Garth's. In both X-rays there were small gray blotches — shadows with small, radiating fingers, like tentacles— in the spinal fluid, just below the base of the skull.

"What are they?" I asked softly.

Lippitt slowly shook his head. "I don't know. Nothing shows up in the spinal fluid itself; only in the X-rays, under fluorescent light. Whatever is causing those shadows must have been incorporated into your genetic material at the most fundamental level. It's part of your DNA. Something might show up on an electron scanner, but frankly I doubt it. My guess is that we're looking at something caused by viroids— tiny organisms that can transform genetic material; they're much smaller than viruses, and even viruses are difficult to see."

"After all the tests we've been through, *that's* all you can say?"

"Oh, we've determined that the rods and cones on your retina have multiplied three- or four- fold."

"Does that mean I can give up eating carrots?"

It wasn't funny, and nobody so much as smiled.

"You'll notice that your night vision is dramatically improved, Frederickson," Lippitt said grimly. "Also, you'll probably be able to see further into both the infrared and ultraviolet bands of the spectrum than other people. The problem is that you'll be virtually blind— or in great pain— during the day, unless you wear very dark glasses."

"What about me?" Garth asked quietly.

"There's an alteration in the way your acetylcholine activates the nerve impulses that fire across your nerve synapses. We don't have basal tests for comparison, but I'd guess that your reflexes are now two or three times as fast as they were before Bolesh got hold of you."

My hand trembled as I raised it, touched the shadows in our spinal columns. *"That's causing it?"*

"We have to assume so," Lippitt replied in the same soft voice. "We can identify some of the symptoms, but not the precise causal effect."

"What the hell is in Lot Fifty-Six?"

"I don't know. It would take a team of biochemists to try and answer that, and I'm not at all sure they'd be able to do a final analysis."

"Father knows, doesn't he?"

Lippitt nodded once, very slowly. "I believe so. Also, perhaps, Siegfried Loge and the other scientists working on the Valhalla Project."

"Then we'll have to pay them a visit, won't we?" I asked tightly.

Lippitt just grunted.

"Lippitt, what's wrong with us?"

Lippitt thought about it, said: "As dramatic and disturbing as your symptoms may seem to you, it's what's *not* wrong with you that's important."

"Maybe to *you*. I know there's still more to this. What 'ring' were you talking about before?"

There was no response, but now Lippitt seemed not so much evasive as very distant and distracted.

"What the hell is Father up to?"

No answer.

Now Garth spoke, and there was menace in his voice. "Lippitt,

I'm giving serious thought to doing something to *your* spine. After all the good times Mongo and I have had over the past few days, don't you think we have a right to know everything?"

"I'm sorry," Lippitt said in a voice so low Garth and I could hardly hear him. "I'm still thinking about it."

15.

WE stood on the crest of the rise and stared down at the enormous black stain on the prairie. "Mirkwood" was gone; the entire Volsung Corporation complex had been expertly and efficiently destroyed, probably with hundreds of strategically placed incendiary grenades.

Despite the fact that I was wearing dark glasses, the light of day hurt my eyes and had given me a headache.

Garth was having muscle spasms with increasing frequency; he would clench his fists, throw his head back and stiffen his body until they passed.

"You knew it was gone, didn't you?" I asked quietly.

Lippitt nodded absently.

"And you weren't kidding about the gorilla snitching on me, were you?"

"I have to find Siegmund Loge and kill him," Lippitt said distantly. "I'm responsible for him."

"What difference would that make?" Garth asked, using a handkerchief to mop sweat from his face as yet another spasm passed. "You'd still have all those other scientists working merrily away someplace else. How can you even be sure Siegmund Loge is involved with Project Valhalla?"

"Every once in a while they'd run into problems at Volsung," Lippitt replied. "I wasn't supposed to know, but I've been in the finding-out business for a long time. They'd struggle with the problem for a week or so before a call would go out, in code. A day or so later a call would come back, and the problem would be solved."

"Father was feeding them information, guiding the research?"

"I'm sure of it. Without him, they'll eventually run into a problem they can't solve and work will stop."

"*What* work?" I asked. "Just what is it you think Siegmund Loge is trying to do?"

No answer.

Garth closed his eyes and clenched his fists as a new series of spasms seized him.

"What do we do now, Lippitt?"

"You and your brother must run, Frederickson, and you must keep running. Don't go near any member of your family; don't contact anyone you've ever known; don't go anyplace you've ever been. Sooner or later— probably sooner— men will be hunting you."

"What will you do?"

"Hunt Siegmund Loge."

"Where?"

"I don't know."

"Well, we're sure as hell going with you."

"No," Lippitt said in a flat voice. "Mongo, my friend, you're just a bit conspicuous. Also, the shadows in your spines are growing. I don't know what's going to happen to you, or what form the symptoms may take."

"Fuck that," Garth said, his voice trembling with rage as he came out of his seizure. "We sure as hell are not going to just run around. You say you don't know what's finally going to happen to us. Men will be after us. You're the only link we have to what's happened. You think we're just going to wave good-bye to you?"

"I'm sorry, Garth," Lippitt said evenly. "I don't have any other advice. You can't come with me for the reasons I already gave you. I'll be far more effective traveling alone. I don't know what else you can do but run. You could see some doctors, but I strongly doubt that anyone is going to be able to help you."

"Father— or his son— may be able to help us," I said. "At least they know what's wrong with us. Given that

information, we may be able to stop it— find a cure."

Lippitt abruptly turned and walked back to the car. There was nothing for Garth and me to do but follow. We sat in the back and waited for Lippitt to start the engine. He didn't. He simply sat stiffly behind the wheel, staring intently through the windshield. He sat like that for close to ten minutes before his curt voice cut through the silence.

"Get out."

Garth and I got out, walked around to meet Lippitt at the front of the Cadillac.

"You've finished thinking," I said. It wasn't a question.

"Yes."

"What is it you've been thinking about?"

"I've been trying to decide whether or not I should kill the two of you."

Garth and I instinctively stepped back and apart, ready to attack Lippitt from two sides if it looked as if he were going to reach for a gun. The D.I.A. agent gave no indication that he'd even noticed our sudden, sharp movement.

"Mongo and I are thinking that's not such a good idea," Garth said quietly. "Maybe you should think about it some more."

"I've decided not to kill you, but in a short time one or both of you may wish I had."

"Oh, hell," I said. "We'll risk it."

Lippitt stared at me for a long time, finally said: "What if I told you that your deaths— voluntary or otherwise— might benefit every human being, perhaps every living creature,

on the face of the planet?"

"I suspect I'd ask for a few details."

"Then you shall have them"

Lippitt opened the trunk of the car, took out a metal canister the size of a water pail. He unscrewed the top, and the sharp smell of formaldehyde cut through the air, causing my eyes to tear. Lippitt reached into the canister with his bare hands, withdrew two lumpy things, and perfunctorily tossed them onto the fender. They landed on the metal with a slurpy, ominous *plop*.

Garth and I stepped closer in order to see what the things were; we both cried out, lurched back. I could feel bile rising in my throat, and I fought back the urge to vomit at the sight of these monsters from Mirkwood.

"Project Valhalla seems to be about devolution," Lippitt said tersely.

One of the dead beasts was a large bird that had been a reptile — or vice versa. It had wings, a beaked head; the rest of it was a long, tubular, scale-covered body that ended in tiny webbed feet and a feathered tail.

The second creature was a rabbit with large purple gill slits on both sides of its throat.

Garth was making a desperate effort to speak, but he was caught in the throes of another seizure and could make only choked, strangling noises. Tears streamed from his eyes as he fought to control the spasms.

I wasn't suffering a seizure, but it felt as if my vocal cords were paralyzed. I could only stand and stare in horror at the dead, pathetically deformed creatures.

"As you pointed out, Mongo, the cell is immortal," Lippitt said in a hollow voice. "Each cell of every species carries within its genetic material not only directions for replicating itself the way it is, but also a complete genetic record of its evolutionary history. We're nothing more than sentient mammals, and we carry a long evolutionary history. It's why we have so many vestigial organs— the appendix is a legacy from birds, hair is fur that has not completely disappeared yet, newborn infants have a strong gripping reflex in hands and feet that comes from lower primates. Human fetuses go through a stage of development in the womb when they actually have gills. We— "

Mercifully, Lippitt stopped when I held up my hand.

"Are... we going to end up like... that?"

"I have no idea. By rights, the two of you should have been dead and looking something like that within an hour after Bolesh gave you the first injection. The stuff is incredibly fast-acting. It just tears apart the cellular structure and re-forms it, virtually before your eyes. It seems to act by magnifying the genetic information of the evolutionary past, throwing all the biological controls out of whack and commanding the cells to try to do everything at once. Naturally, the organism quickly dies as a result of the... molecular insult. I tried it on these specimens myself, I'm sorry to say, but I had to observe exactly what happened. There were many more— things— like this behind the red door in Volsung, all in various stages of dying."

"Maybe it works differently in humans," I said, my voice quavering as I squinted through a nimbus of light at Garth.

My brother hobbled over to me and put his arm around my shoulders.

Lippitt slowly shook his head. "I'm sure there's been human experimentation."

"Bolesh couldn't understand why it wasn't working," Garth said, his voice a deep rumble. "He said he'd seen it work."

"Yes," Lippitt replied. "I think we can safely assume that there's a shallow, unmarked grave by a roadside somewhere in Peru County where a hobo or hitchhiker is buried." He paused, looked somewhere over our heads. "And Father continues to organize his communes around the world."

It took a moment for the full impact of his words to strike me, and then the sweat began to slide from my pores. "But most of the communes are *here*, Lippitt, in the United States!"

"Now you begin to see the depth of *my* particular nightmare," he said, focusing his eyes on my face. "Remember; I'm responsible for him."

"If you hadn't recruited him, somebody else would have."

"Somebody else didn't recruit him; I did."

"Loge may or may not be crazy, but—"

"He knows exactly what he's doing," Lippitt said in a clipped voice. "I'm certain of it."

"Why don't you *show* these specimens to people, tell them your story?"

Lippitt smiled thinly. "Show and tell to whom? The

editors of *The New York Times* or the *Washington Post*?"

"You're Goddamn right!" Garth snapped. "For openers!"

"The story might or might not be believed; I think not. Freaks like this do occasionally occur spontaneously in nature. In any case, the government— or the men I spoke of — will come back with a heavy story people are much more likely to believe. There's my age, after all, and you see what's happened to Volsung. The same thing would happen to me. There's no other evidence."

"You have *us!*"

"So, what's wrong with you? You've developed eye problems, and your brother's become an epileptic."

"It's a bit more than that, Lippitt."

"I suspect both of you would be killed— or worse, kidnapped— within an hour after you checked into any medical center large enough to conduct the proper tests."

I glanced at Garth, then back at Lippitt. "Euthanasia aside, what would be the point in your killing us? Frankly, I'd rather be kidnapped."

"That's because you still don't understand."

"Then explain it to us!"

It was some time before Lippitt answered. Finally, he asked: "Have you read Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*?"

"Jesus *Christ!*" I exploded. "I'm getting tired of that question! What dwarf hasn't? Is *that* the ring you were talking about? What the hell does a fantasy trilogy have to do with saving the world by killing us? I think *you've* gone crazy, Lippitt!"

"In this instance, the work is instructive as an analogy,"

Lippitt replied evenly, fixing me with his gaze. "In the novels there are seven magical rings of great power. The Dark Lord has all of them— save for the one in Frodo's possession. If the Dark Lord gains possession of the last ring, he will rule the world forever. All that is good will be vanquished."

Suddenly, with a pang that clenched my heart, I recalled my mother's dream. And Jake Bolesh's words came back to me, screaming like an icy wind through the back doors of my mind.

God didn't make you right!

And I understood what Lippitt was talking about. "Garth and I are the last ring," I whispered hoarsely.

"Precisely. Let's assume that the object of the Valhalla Project is to develop a capacity to bring about rapid devolution in adult humans and their offspring in selected populations. Not kill; bombs and bullets can do that, and everybody has all of those that are needed. And, of course, there's no point in simply deforming. The process of devolution must be controlled— subtle, and virtually undetectable. Let's say a prototype serum is needed that will generate devolution just to the point where you have stupid, manageable humans— who wouldn't really be human at all. For the sake of argument, let's call it a population of human-*like* creatures somewhere on the evolutionary cusp between Neanderthal and Cro-Magnon."

"What's to prevent this 'capacity' from accidentally escaping into the rest of the earth's ecosystem?" Garth asked.

"To ask the question is to understand the potential horror," Lippitt replied. "Even to attempt such a thing is insane—and yet someone is doing it. Obviously, developing a serum that will give a controlled reaction is enormously difficult. It seems to me that the two of you are now the laboratories where the final answer Siegmund Loge is looking for can be found. You've become human Petrie dishes, and indescribable evil is growing in you."

God didn't make you right!

"Perhaps it's because you're a dwarf, Mongo," Lippitt added in a flat voice.

"Garth isn't a dwarf."

"No, but he's your brother. His genetic pattern must be very close to yours; although he isn't a dwarf, he certainly must carry the recessive gene for dwarfism. The pattern is close enough so that he too becomes a kind of living laboratory. If Father gets hold of either one of you, he may finally have the key that will enable him to produce Lot Fifty-Seven—the serum that will be effective for every human."

"Why couldn't any of my blood relatives do? Or any dwarf, for that matter?"

"It's possible they would do, but I suspect not. There can be enormous differences, even within families. The three generations of Loges are a good example; Siegmund Loge is as kind and gentle as Siegfried and Auberlich are savage. Who is to say such differences aren't at least partially genetically induced?"

"If the old man is so nice, what's he doing creating monsters?"

"A very good question. Perhaps I'll be able to find the answer before I kill him." He paused, sighed. "In any case, I don't know what all the genetic factors may be. That's another reason I decided not to kill you; they might just find somebody else."

"Thanks a lot, Lippitt. That's very thoughtful of you."

Lippitt shrugged, almost smiled. "Besides, I'm rather fond of the two of you. Frederickson, you know that's true."

Garth grunted in disgust.

"I believe this nightmare will end if I can kill Father," Lippitt continued seriously. "But you *do* see why I want the two of you to hide; you may be the only people in the world who can help Loge develop Lot Fifty-Seven— *if* he finds you, and if he discovers exactly what's happened to you. His people *will* be looking for you, because you're both loose ends; it's important for them not to find you. After a time, they may simply assume you're dead."

"We're lousy hidiers!" Garth snapped, and immediately began to shudder.

"Frodo returned the ring to Mount Doom, where it was forged," I said. "He destroyed it."

"Frodo made his journey at the risk of letting the ring fall into the hands of the Dark Lord. Since *you* are the ring in this case, the usefulness of the analogy ends."

"Not for us," Garth said through clenched teeth. "*We'll* kill the son-of-a-bitch, after he fixes whatever is wrong with us."

"You'll risk delivering to Siegmund Loge exactly what he may need to bring the Valhalla Project to completion."

"Garth and I just want to get straight," I said wearily.

"We're not into saving the world."

"Aren't you, Mongo?" Lippitt said quietly. "Think about it. Things could actually come down to that."

"If this group of men behind Loge is as powerful as you say it is, Loge's people are bound to find us eventually anyway. When they do, they'll realize what's happened. Better to take the offensive. Garth and I will hunt Loge in our own way."

Lippitt thought about it, shrugged. "Why not? Maybe it's just as well. That way, if they stop me, you may still have a shot at Loge."

"A Company," I whispered.

Lippitt laughed loudly. In the past I'd rarely seen him smile, much less laugh. "On a Quest!" Lippitt said at last, and then laughed some more. Garth and I exchanged an uneasy glance.

Finally the laughter tapered off, and Lippitt shook his head. "You realize it's hopeless, don't you?" the D.I.A. agent continued. "It's going to happen. Siegmund Loge is going to pull off the Valhalla Project, and God only knows what this planet is going to look like in two or three generations."

"*You* say it's hopeless, Lippitt."

"Well, maybe there's a million-in-one chance of finding Loge, getting through *his* security, and then nailing him before one hell of a lot of forces combine to capture or kill us. An old man, an epileptic policeman, and a half-blind dwarf who can barely tolerate sunlight. So, why do I feel like laughing?"

"Because you've set aside lifelong loyalties and given up everything in order to come down on the right side. 'Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose,' Lippitt: Kris Kristofferson."

Lippitt walked up to Garth and extended his hand; after a long hesitation, Garth took it. Not being inclined toward theatrics or emotionalism, I held back. Then, almost without realizing it, I found myself stepping forward, reaching out and clasping my hands around theirs.

16.

LIPPITT had given us a lot of cash and left the car with us, after changing the plates. Suspicious of motels so close to Peru County, we slept in the car that night.

In the morning I found a cool, swift-moving stream and took a bath. We stopped at a diner and I ate three eggs boiled for exactly three minutes, drank one cup of coffee. There was a single rose growing outside the diner, and I smelled it.

We headed north toward Wisconsin and a place where one of Father's communes was rumored to be located. Garth, with his unpredictable seizures, couldn't drive, and so I had to. Even with dark glasses the sun was hurting my eyes, so I stopped at a medical supply house for glasses with smoked lenses. When I came out, Garth was suffering a seizure. In his fury or frustration or desperation, Garth grabbed the edge of the door and yanked. The door tore off its hinges.

BOOK II

Pieces for Death and Silence

17.

THERE are a lot of cows and trees in Wisconsin, and it took the better part of three months and most of our liberated Pentagon money to find Father's commune in northern Bayfield County, near Lake Superior.

The good news was that no one seemed to be on our trail, which could mean that Garth and I were presumed dead, and any loose guns belonging to Father or the Pentagon were off somewhere chasing after an ancient, wily Defense Intelligence Agency operative. The rest was all red ink. Whatever had been injected into our bloodstreams had been absorbed into every cell in our bodies, where it was merrily cooking away in the chromosomes, canceling controls in the DNA, finding and

randomly transcribing tiny, forgotten genetic messages which had been discarded in an evolutionary wastebasket hundreds of millions of years deep, sending those messages back into our flesh First Class, Special Delivery. It had been almost two days since Garth had suffered a nervous seizure, but my right foot—the one with the scaly membrane growing between the big and second toes—itched all the time.

Naturally, it was Halloween.

We switched places a mile or so down the highway from the commune-operated fruit and dairy stand we had spotted on the first pass; Garth slid behind the wheel, and I climbed in the back. I rested my hand on the stock of the Colt automatic Lippitt had given us and pulled a blanket up over my lap; if word had been sent to Father's worldwide ring of communes to be on the lookout for the "keys to Valhalla," some unfortunate acolyte was going to find out that this particular set of keys could do a lot more than unlock genetic secrets.

Garth drove slowly up the highway, then pulled into a small parking lot and stopped close enough to the stand so that I could see without being seen, hear the conversation, and cover him. I felt vaguely ridiculous; the stand, framed by cheerful and intricately carved jack-o'-lanterns, was staffed by two young men and a woman, all of whom I judged to be in their early or mid twenties. Except for a common unisex uniform comprised of pale green overalls and matching turtleneck sweater, the three young people could have stepped off the pages of a Norman Rockwell calendar; in

Nebraska they would have been described as clean-cut and fresh-faced. The men wore their hair cut very short, and the girl wore hers in a style that nicely framed a face that was every parent's— and lover's— dream. With her firm body, sensual mouth, and flashing brown eyes, she looked like the Ultimate Cheerleader, promising paradise to some lucky member of the right team.

Here, if the information given to us by a real estate agent was accurate, the team consisted of stone fundamentalists — although the woman had not been sure exactly what it was they considered fundamental. Their theology and politics were reportedly somewhere to the right of a Philadelphia television evangelist's. They were Born-Again Christians with a few twists nobody in the region had been able to describe with any accuracy.

The three smiled in unison as Garth stepped out of the car.

"Father love you," the girl said brightly. "May we serve you, sir?"

"Father love you," Garth replied easily.

Suddenly a shudder ran through Garth's body, and he staggered backward, came up hard against the car. I tensed, put my fingers on the door handle. It seemed a poor time for a seizure; if Garth did his Hulk number, the entire stand as well as the small warming hut behind it were likely to disappear, and I didn't feel this would start us off on the right foot with the commune. But the tremors passed, and I sank back down into the seat with a sigh of relief.

One of the young men started to come around from

behind the stand. "Are you all right, sir?"

"Just a dizzy spell," Garth said as he pushed off the car and walked over to the stand. "Everything you have here looks absolutely beautiful."

The Ultimate Cheerleader beamed. "And everything is delicious, sir. We make all the cheeses ourselves, and the fruit pies were baked only a few hours ago. Also, you get a free jack-o'-lantern with anything you buy."

"It isn't food for my body that I need," Garth said. Nice. "I'd like to join your community."

The three young people exchanged uncertain glances. It was the girl who spoke.

"Do you have anything to say to us?"

Shit, I thought with something approaching religious fervor. It sounded like an invitation to play Password.

"I seek Father's peace." That only brought more uncertain, uneasy glances. Garth folded his hands in front of him, bowed his head. I had to strain to hear his voice. "Please. I've been so troubled— and I've come so far. There were words, but in my fear that you'd reject me I've forgotten them. Please allow me to serve Jesus and Father."

The girl came around from behind the stand, walked up to Garth and tentatively touched his hand. "You're one of the hundred and forty-four thousand?"

A beat. "Yes," Garth said.

A dozen beats. "I believe you," the girl said at last. Then she wrapped her arms around Garth's waist and pressed her cheek against his chest. "I hear the words in your

heart," she continued as she put her head up and covered my brother's mouth with her own. The two young men gave little yelps of joy, ran around from behind the stand and began to dance in a circle around Garth, patting him on the head, back, and shoulders as the girl continued to kiss him.

That would have been enough to give me a seizure. However, when the girl removed her mouth from his, he turned his head slightly in my direction—winked.

Even my choked-off laugh felt good; it had been some time since Garth and I had even smiled.

The mood didn't last long. Garth was beginning to untangle himself, and I assumed he was getting ready to introduce me. Then the girl unwrapped herself from around his waist, whispered something in his ear, and skipped off into the warming hut behind the stand. Garth made a small warning gesture with his hand behind his back, and I stayed put.

The girl returned from the hut, and the four of them engaged in conversation conducted in voices too low for me to hear. After about five minutes something with a broken muffler could be heard approaching on the dirt road that ran through the apple orchards behind the stand; a trail of dust rose over a sea of trees with leaves the color of blood.

A battered, brown Willys Jeep roared out of the orchards, skidded into a turn that took it all the way around the stand, and stopped with its nose almost touching our car's. The driver got out, and I released the safety catch on my gun.

The man was as tall as my brother, a little over six feet, and burly, with a fair complexion and a shock of sand-colored hair visible under a brown beret. His matching brown jumpsuit was definitely paramilitary in style, with the cuffs stuck into shiny black leather boots. He wore black leather gloves. On one sleeve of the jumpsuit was a shoulder patch with what looked like an anemic Olympic symbol— four interlocking black rings, stacked two on two, on a gold background; it was virtually identical to the logo I had seen inside the Volsung Corporation building. He also wore a shoulder holster filled to overflowing with a .38. The man had not come to kiss and dance.

The man moved off a few yards with the three young people, and I had to shift position slightly to keep track of what was going on. I didn't like what I saw. The man in the jumpsuit listened in silence as the three spoke, didn't change expression when Garth meekly approached and said something to him. Suddenly he turned his head slightly and looked at the car. I sank back into the seat, heart pounding, and stared straight ahead through my smoked glasses.

In the middle of something Garth was saying, the man abruptly turned and marched toward the car. Garth, his face impassive, followed behind. The man studied me from outside the car, but I waited for a rap on the window before rolling it down.

"This is my brother, Boris," Garth said quietly. "As I told you, he's blind."

"Who are the hundred and forty-four thousand, Brother

Boris?" the man snapped at me.

Now I turned toward him, cocked my head at an angle, and smiled benignly. His eyes, cold and appraising as he gazed at me, were set wide apart on either side of a nose that looked as if it had been broken at least once, and he had a lantern jaw that was too big for the rest of his features. "Father love you, brother. We seek Father's peace."

"Who sent you? Who's your sponsor?"

"Father's spirit is our guide."

The muscles in the man's lantern jaw clenched and his eyes narrowed to slits as he stared at me. Then he appeared to reach a decision. "Follow me," he said curtly to Garth, then turned and walked quickly to the Willys.

Garth started up the car, followed the Willys around the stand and up the dirt road through the orchards. "We seem to be missing a password," I said.

"Yeah. Incidentally, we're the Jamisons— I'm Billy, you're Boris."

"I heard. I really don't feel like a Boris, Billy."

"Well, Billy's already said you're Boris, so Boris you shall be."

I leaned on the back of the front seat, looked at my brother. The pale, late-afternoon light did not flatter his profile; in the three months that we had been searching for this commune, his nose had inexorably broadened and flattened. "It looks like we go to Plan B," I said.

Garth shook his head. "Not yet."

"I'm going to shoot Captain Midnight the first chance I

get."

"No," Garth said firmly. The Willys had disappeared around a bend fifty yards ahead of us. Garth had to grip the wheel firmly to maintain control on the deeply rutted road, and now he accelerated in an attempt to catch up with the speeding Jeep. "This commune is our only link to Siegmund Loge, and we may never find another— not in time, anyway."

"You think that's news to me, Garth?" I asked irritably.

"Just a reminder."

"I don't need a reminder."

"Plan B will never work. We have no idea how big this place is. We don't know how many members there are, and we don't even know what we're looking for. Shooting this guy isn't going to solve the problem. They have to let us in."

"There's no way we're going to bullshit our way past this guy, and you know it. He's Goddamn well taking us back here so that he can shoot us."

"I think there's still a chance we can pull this off, Mongo. This is my hand; let me play it out."

"What the hell do you know that I don't? What were all of you talking about back there?"

"This big joker's more than just a guard; he's a member of the commune. He shares their beliefs."

"What the hell difference does that make?"

"There's no time to explain now. Just keep that Colt hidden, and let me do all the talking."

We came around the blind turn and Garth had to slam on the brakes to avoid smashing into the Willys, which was

blocking the road. The uniformed man was standing next to the Willys, beret pulled down low over his forehead, gloved hands folded across his chest.

"Leave the gun, Mongo," Garth whispered.

I left the gun— in my belt, next to my spine, under my shirt. As far as I was concerned, Lot 56 had softened Garth's brain. I didn't plan on letting the uniformed man bury Garth and me in a Wisconsin apple orchard, and I didn't want us to end up looking like the squishy things we had seen splashed over the Caddy's fender. I was in no mood to horse around with anyone— or to waste time. In a way, I preferred Plan B. I was certain that, as night fell, I could infiltrate the commune, find some clue to the whereabouts of Siegmund Loge, and get out again. Garth might not be able to see in the dark, but I could. It was daylight I couldn't handle.

"Stay cool, brother," Garth continued as the man walked up to the side of the car and motioned for Garth to roll down the window.

"Get out," the man said.

Garth opened the door, stepped out onto the dirt road. I opened my door, waited for Garth to take my arm and help me out. I let him guide me around to the front of the car, where we stood like soldiers awaiting inspection.

The man raised a gloved hand, rested his index finger on the center of Garth's chest. "You're a liar."

"No," Garth replied simply.

"Who sent you here?"

"Fa— "

"You private detectives? Parents? Reporters?"

"We're pilgrims."

"You're a liar."

"No."

"Who are the hundred and forty-four thousand?"

"I told you— "

"Who's your sponsor?"

"Father."

"Have you brought an offering?"

"We have some money— "

"If you had any business being here, you'd know I wasn't talking about money."

"I've tried to explain to you— "

"You say your brother's blind. Where's his cane?"

"I'm his cane."

The man laughed harshly. "You're not only a liar, you're an idiot. No sponsor would ever send us a dwarf, what's more a blind dwarf."

Without warning the man's hand shot toward my face. Somehow, I managed to limit my reaction to screwing my eyes shut. Nothing happened. I'd expected my glasses to be torn off. They weren't, and when I opened my eyes I was amazed to find that Garth's reflexes had been quick enough to enable him to reach out and grip the man's wrist, stopping the hand in midair. I was impressed.

Rather than reach for his gun, the man brought his other gloved hand back, cocked it with the fingers straight, the edge on a direct line with Garth's temple. Garth continued to grip the other wrist, but otherwise made no move to

defend himself.

I was content to wait and watch— for the moment; if the man couldn't control his itch to strike Garth, I was going to scratch his brains with a bullet.

"Boris mustn't be hurt," Garth said evenly. "He's holy."

My brother's fingers remained locked around the man's left wrist; the man's right hand remained cocked in the air. I just remained.

"I wasn't going to hurt him," the uniformed man said at last. His tone had become slightly uncertain. "I just wanted to look at his eyes."

"That will hurt him. His affliction was cast upon him by Father personally. It's special— as is mine. Light burns Boris."

Now it was the man who seemed impressed. Slowly, the gloved hand came down. Garth released his grip on the other wrist.

Since there had been no claim of my being mute, I decided it might be a good time to do a little downfield blocking for my brother. I cleared my throat, spoke in my sweetest voice. "If this man wishes to gaze upon Father's mark, Billy, let him. My pain will be a small price to pay if it will enable us to be admitted into Father's larger family."

Garth nodded, stepped aside. The uniformed man stepped closer, reached out with both hands and— tentatively— removed my smoked glasses.

I knew what was going to happen, and every instinct screamed for me to close my eyes— but I had to leave them open long enough for our interrogator to see the lack

of iris and the huge pupils that extended vertically, like knife wounds, across the eyeballs. I managed— and paid the price. The raw sunlight poured through the pupils and smashed into my optic nerve like a bullet. Then I did go blind as the inside of my head went nova in an explosion of crimson. I bit back a scream as tears flooded my eyes and rolled down my cheeks. My hands flew to my face a split second later, but the man had seen my eyes— and the sight had apparently produced the desired effect. I heard a gasp, and then a click as the glasses dropped to the frozen, hard-packed dirt at my feet; I winced inwardly, but there was no sound of breaking glass.

I felt Garth's arms wrap around me, realized that he had gone down on his hands and knees. "Hurts, huh?" he whispered in my ear.

"Like a son-of-a-bitch," I whispered back, nuzzling my face in his shoulder and allowing him to pat the back of my head. "Speaking of sons-of-bitches— "

"Shh. If you can continue to refrain from making smart-ass remarks, I think I'm going to be able to pull this off."

"How do you know?"

"I can smell it."

That sounded pretty much like a smart-ass remark to me, but I didn't have time to reply as Garth unwrapped himself from around my neck, wiped the tears from my face, and repositioned the smoked glasses on the bridge of my nose.

Slowly, I opened my eyes. Everything was surrounded by an aura, as if I'd spent too much time in a heavily

chlorinated pool. However, the pain was beginning to ebb, and I could at least see once again. It also made me feel considerably better to see that my snake eyes had given the uniformed man a pretty good case of the shakes; even through the smoked glasses I could see that his face was ashen, and he was breathing very rapidly.

Garth stayed on his hands and knees. He shuffled around in the dirt until he was facing the other man, then clasped his hands in front of him and bowed his head. "It happened when the vision came to us," he said in a hoarse, dramatic stage whisper that would have made Laurence Olivier proud— at the delivery, if not the content. "The vision asked if each of us would accept an affliction upon our bodies if that would assure our admission into the family of Father's Children. We accepted, of course. Our afflictions were visited upon us, and we were told to come here. We were not told anything else."

It was the most outrageous line of bullshit I'd ever heard, but what was even more outrageous was the fact that it actually seemed to have an effect on the uniformed .tan. His Adam's apple bobbed up and down as he swallowed nervously, and he appeared uncertain of what to do next.

"You've seen Boris's eyes," Garth continued quietly, raising his head and looking directly at the man. "We accepted our afflictions as a test of our faith. Now it seems that we have become a test of *your* faith."

The man wiped off a glistening sheet of perspiration that had suddenly appeared on his face with the back of a gloved hand. "What's your affliction?" he asked Garth.

It had occurred to me that Garth had gone a bit too far in claiming afflictions for both of us, and now it was crunch time. His broad, flat nose was ugly enough, but it couldn't very well be described as an affliction. Unless he intended to ask the man to wait around until he had a nervous tic that would enable him to tear the car apart, I didn't understand what he planned to do.

What he did was to rise to his feet, take off his parka and throw it to the ground. Then he took off his shirt, stood half-naked in the frozen afternoon.

The uniformed man uttered a startled cry and stepped back two paces. I lowered my head and swallowed a low, tortured moan that had begun somewhere at the bottom of my soul. I wanted to weep and shout my rage at the sky—not out of revulsion, but for the brother I loved so dearly. It had not occurred to me until then that Garth had not undressed or bathed in front of me for close to a month and a half, and now I understood why.

A sleek, glistening mat of blue-black fur girdled his torso, starting at a point just below his nipples and disappearing down into his slacks.

"The vision was of Father," Garth said evenly as he slipped back into his shirt, picked up the parka and draped it across his broad shoulders. "Father said that we would find peace here. He said to trust in the faith and wisdom of the man in uniform who would meet us. Please allow us to join you."

"Wait here," the man said in a voice that cracked. "Please."

"Oh, Garth," I moaned through clenched teeth as the man walked ahead to the Willys, opened the trunk and began to rummage around inside. "Oh, Jesus Christ."

"Shut up," Garth said flatly. "You're not in such great shape yourself, and this isn't exactly the time for an extended conversation on our mutual woes. Besides, I don't want to talk about it."

Garth and I stood side by side in awkward, embarrassed silence while the man continued to rummage. I've experienced a few bad moments in my life, but this time — being forced to battle raging emotions and play a passive role when all I wanted to do was reach out and take my brother's hand— was perhaps the worst.

Finally the man emerged from the trunk and came back to us. He was carrying two heavy, pale-green robes and two pairs of sandals. Neither of the robes looked as if it would fit me, but the man had obviously made an effort to find my size.

"I'm Mike Leviticus," the man said, extending his hand to Garth.

"An unusual name," Garth replied as he took the hand.

"We all assume biblical names— first or last— when we're accepted as Father's Children," Leviticus said, then turned to me. The gloved hand he rested on my shoulder somehow felt strange, but I wasn't sure why. "Forgive me, Brother Boris, for causing you pain. It's not easy to find this place, yet some do. Most of those who come here uninvited mean to cause trouble. That's why I'm here. I hope you understand."

"I do understand, Brother Mike, and there's nothing to forgive. Uh, do some of the people who decide to leave the family tell others about it?"

Leviticus shook his head. "Nobody ever leaves. What Father's Children find here is what we've been searching for all our lives."

"Mmm."

"I realize that you've been given no instructions, so I'll give them to you now. At this point you leave behind everything from your old lives. All of your personal possessions will be sold, and the proceeds will go to the commune. Your clothes, which you'll leave here in your car, will be burned in a ritual ceremony. You'll don these robes and sandals while I wait, and then walk the rest of the way to the commune— a symbolic journey signifying that you join Father's Children with nothing, and are ready to be reborn. Even though it's cold, I think you'll find 'he walk invigorating and spiritually cleansing."

"Are you going to walk with us?" Garth asked.

"No. I've already taken the walk; this is for the two of you. I'll stay behind and check out your car. From the looks of it, we may be better off stripping it down and selling the parts.

Garth seemed tense, and I knew why; he thought the gun was in the car. He didn't know how big a problem we had. Fortunately, Garth was large enough to cover a lot of sins.

Sidling closer to and slightly behind him, I reached behind my back and took the Colt out of my belt. I pressed it against his spine so that he'd know what it was. Leviticus glanced away for a moment; Garth coughed loudly, and I

flipped the gun into some brush at the side of the road.

Because of the cold, Mike Leviticus suggested that we change in the car. However, Garth— as if in defiance of his discomfort— proceeded to strip in the middle of the road. I did the same. We donned the heavy robes and sandals, looked at Leviticus.

"The commune is two miles down the road," the man said, beaming. "I'll drive back to the stand and call ahead. Reverend Ezra and the others will be waiting for you. Welcome, and the peace of Father be with you."

18.

"THAT was the most incredible performance I've ever seen," I said, hitching up the hem of my overly roomy robe as we rounded a sharp bend in the dirt road. "I was ready to shoot the big dumb bast— "

"Mongo, help me," Garth slurred as he suddenly began to stagger.

I felt short of breath, panicky. Garth was about to suffer another seizure, and each time he was in the grip of the terrible electrical and chemical storm taking place inside his body, I feared he was going to die or break his own bones with the uncontrollable, incredibly powerful contractions of his muscles.

Garth swayed, and his entire body began to twitch spasmodically. I put my shoulder against his hip and shoved as hard as I could, pushing him off the road into the orchard; in our time on the road, we had learned that a

seizure would pass more quickly if he had some object against which to exert the force.

"Garth, there's a branch over your head!" I shouted, hoping he could hear me through whatever thick mists shrouded his mind whenever he had an attack. "Grab it!"

He didn't respond. As always, he was resisting the attack; his head was thrown back, his teeth were clenched, and low, guttural sounds escaped from deep in his chest and throat. The storm was upon him— every muscle in his body had gone rigid and was twitching. I slapped his right elbow, trying to get it up. The arm jerked and flopped, almost hitting me in the head— then shot up. The other arm whirred like a broken pinwheel until it was stopped by the palm hitting the overhead branch. The fingers of both hands curled over the branch— and stayed there.

There was nothing more I could do except stay out of Garth's way, and I went back out on the road to see if the noises Garth had been making had attracted any attention. The road was empty. Suddenly I heard an explosive crack, then the sound of something heavy falling to the ground. I ran back into the orchard.

Garth was just coming out of the brief period of unconsciousness that always followed his most severe seizures. He was sprawled on the ground, face covered with sweat despite the cool, moist breeze blowing through the trees. Both palms were scraped and bleeding, but there was no sign that the limb, perhaps six inches in diameter, had fallen on him.

"Hey, Godzilla," I said, kneeling beside him and wiping

his face and palms with the edge of my robe. "You all right?"

Garth blinked rapidly, then slowly nodded. He rolled away the huge, broken limb, then eased himself up into a sitting position and leaned back against the trunk of the tree. "Sit down a minute, Mongo," he said with a sigh.

"Garth, I'm freezing my ass off and you're going to catch pneumonia. Also, our new friends are waiting for us down the road. I know you're weak now, and I don't want to rush you, but I don't think this is a good time for a chat. We've got to get moving."

"I want you to sit down, Mongo," Garth said evenly. "This is important."

Stepping forward, I grabbed his right wrist with both hands and pulled. The notion that I could pull Garth to his feet against his will was ludicrous, but I was looking to make a point. "Garth, I can't believe you got us this far. They weren't looking for us, which is the break of our lives. That kind of luck isn't going to last. For one thing, we're carrying a whole library on genetics and evolution in the trunk of the car. Leviticus and the others are going to want to know why we're interested in such unholy things— and the answer could come with a phone call at any moment. We have to get in, find the information we're after, and get our asses out of here fast. We may need the minutes we're wasting here."

Garth twisted his wrist free, grabbed my wrist. "We can't outrace a phone call, Mongo. What with all this 'visions of Father' bullshit, Leviticus or somebody else in the

commune may already have called the people we're looking for—in which case, an unwelcoming committee is already forming and these minutes won't matter. They matter to me now, because I need to get straight with you."

Not understanding what he meant but responding to the emotion in his voice, I shrugged and sat down on the tree limb.

"I could tell you that I didn't mention the fur growing on my body because I didn't want you to worry," Garth continued in a flat tone as he released my wrist. "That would be a lie. The fact is that I was ashamed and disgusted, and *that's* why I didn't show you. I was wrong not to tell you. If there's any hope at all of us surviving this Goddamn horror show, there can't be any walls between us. I won't keep secrets from you again."

My response was to slip my right foot out of the sandal. I raised my foot, spread my toes and wiggled my web at him. "Speaking of shameful and disgusting secrets, welcome to the club."

Garth looked at the web, then suddenly burst into laughter. He pushed my foot away from his face, leaned over and put both his hands on my shoulders. "Well, our friend Jake never promised a rose garden when he shot us full of that shit, did he?"

"Now that you mention it, I don't recall that he did."

Garth rose to his feet, grabbed the collar of my robe, and pulled me to mine. "Come on, Brother Boris. It's time to work some more miracles."

The cusps of day— dusk, and the aura just before sunrise— were the most dangerous times for me, periods of a half hour to forty-five minutes when I was almost totally blind; there was enough sunlight to inflict pain on my uncovered eyes, but not enough to penetrate the smoked glasses. Now it was dusk, and I was content to close my eyes and traipse along on Garth's arm.

"Slowly turning into a beastie is a bitch, isn't it?" Garth said drily.

"What the hell are you complaining about? At least you seem to be staying with the mammals. I seem to be slipping off to join the reptiles."

"It's your sneaky, slimy nature, Mongo."

"Another crack like that and I'll pull your fucking fur."

"How's your nose?"

"One hell of a lot prettier than yours."

"Seriously. Do you notice anything different about your sense of smell?"

"No. Do you?"

"I've got another flash for you. Besides providing me with a built-in fur coat, that shit Bolesh gave us has been working overtime on my olfactory nerve. With this new schnoz, I'll go one-on-one with any bloodhound. It turns out that the world is really a pretty smelly place. Right now I can smell apples on the trees, as well as those rotting on the ground. I can smell leaves, wood, dirt."

I stopped walking, pushed the smoked glasses down on the bridge of my nose, and squinted up at the red-haloed

figure of my brother. "Back there, you said you knew Leviticus was going to let us in because—"

"I could smell it," Garth interrupted, pushing the glasses back up on my nose and pulling me along. "Don't do that again. You're supposed to be blind, remember?"

"Jesus, you were serious, weren't you?"

"Yep. No joke. I seem to be able to smell emotions— at least I have to believe they're emotions; the odors come and go quickly, and I've noticed a correspondence with people's behavior."

"Pheromones?"

"Must be. Different emotions, it seems, smell differently."

"What the hell did you smell on Leviticus?"

"Religious ecstasy."

"How would you know what religious ecstasy smells like?"

"Certainly not from sniffing around you," Garth replied drily. "Your problem is that you don't understand religion, or religious people. Deep down, you think that people who say they believe in a deity, or miracles, are just funning you. They're not. You let me handle these people, Mongo."

"I am letting you handle them. You didn't answer my question."

"I picked up the scent from the two boys and the girl when I first told them that we'd come to join the commune; at the time I didn't know what it was. At first, Leviticus just smelled of suspicion and hostility— until I told him about the vision of Father. Then he smelled like the others. These people believe in magic; they believe that it will literally rain

cats and dogs if God, or Father, wants it to. They were looking for a miracle, so I gave them one. As you see, a miracle is as good as a password any day."

"What does religious ecstasy smell like?"

Garth thought about it. "Turnips," he said at last.

"I'm sorry I asked."

"They believe that Father sent us here for some purpose."

"What purpose?"

Garth laughed. "How the hell should I know? You think I talk to Father?"

"That's great material, Garth; I love it. I can't wait to see what miracle you conjure up to stop a bullet."

"This miracle comes with a strictly limited guarantee; one phone call to or from either of the Loges, and it's canceled."

"Meaning we're canceled. With some luck, we may have a few hours. I'll go out tonight and poke around. All we need is one clue to the whereabouts of the Loges, and we'll be gone before dawn."

"We also have to get our clothes and the car back. I doubt we'll get very far on foot, dressed in sandals and green robes."

"I wonder where the hell Lippitt is?"

"He's probably dead," Garth said distantly. "Regardless of the reasons he gave for taking off on his own, he took the heat off us— and he knew what he was doing. As you know, Lippitt was never one of my favorite people— but the man had guts."

"He also saved our lives. I'm not so sure he's dead."

"He's an old man, Mongo. How long can he keep running and dodging? The Loges and the Pentagon probably have half the world looking for him."

"You saw what he can do with a shotgun. He's a *tough* old man."

"No question about that. You know, half the world's going to be looking for *us* if we manage to pull off this little commune caper. We're going to be up to our asses in alligators."

"Gee whiz, Garth, I'd hate to think we could be in any serious difficulty."

"I wish we could call Mom and Dad, at least let them know we're alive."

"No way. If there's a tap on their phone, it would only cause grief for them and us. Right now, a poll of any reasonable group of men and women would guarantee that we're dead. Let's keep it that way."

"Always the eternal optimist. Listen, brother, I'm counting on my close proximity to you to pull me through this. You've got more lives than a litter of cats."

"The problem is that I'm feeling distinctly reptilian of late."

"I guess there'd be no point in getting in touch with the folks, anyway. I mean, what would we say? Hi, Mom and Dad, we're alive, but we can't come home because we have to catch a crazy before his crazies catch us. Any day now we're likely to turn into a couple of slimy blobs, but not to worry. Oh, and by the way, do you know of anything that

will remove fur and webs between the toes?"

That set us both to laughing— but it was the laughter of desperate men, or semi-men, trying to fend off despair and tearing memories of a family in Nebraska, people who loved us and whom we might never see or speak to again.

Suddenly Garth stopped laughing and poked me gently in the shoulder. "All right, Brother Boris," he continued, "button up. The wind's blowing in our direction, and the schnoz smells people."

I buttoned up, moved closer to Garth and gripped his arm more tightly. I was at once thankful and regretful that the time for casual conversation and symptom sharing had passed. In fact, I had one secret left, a symptom I hadn't told Garth about, a feeling that filled me with such terror and a sense of revulsion that I could barely stand to think, much less talk, about it. Images of what I could become, or what I was becoming, constantly threatened to drown me in a sea of horror and disgust.

Three days before, I had awoke in the morning to find that the glands on both sides of my neck had grown painfully swollen. They had remained so, and now each time I swallowed, my saliva left behind the taste of burnt, bittersweet chocolate and produced a numbing, prickly sensation in the tip of my nose.

19.

"CAN you see yet?" "A little."

"Just don't get caught peering over the top of your

glasses." "I won't."

The last rays of the setting sun were glancing off the surface of Lake Superior, the relative darkness triggering the infrared receptors in my altered retinas, bathing everything in a shimmering glow that ranged from pale violet to crimson. It was like watching life through a tinted X-ray negative; although I'd been seeing like this for months, I still wasn't used to it. It was positively otherworldly.

But then, I was becoming positively otherworldly.

The site of the commune, which we now approached as we trudged down a long slope, was in a large, grass-covered clearing flanked by orchards and forest on three sides, and Lake Superior to the west. To the north was another large clearing which could have been a cow pasture, but was now empty. In the main clearing were a myriad of garden plots set out in a checkerboard pattern. There were perhaps a dozen buildings constructed of wood and sheets of corrugated steel.

At the end of the road and mouth of the clearing was a large wooden shack, and waiting outside the shack was a reception committee of one. I'd been expecting something a bit more festive, assuming Garth's story had stuck—or disastrous, if it hadn't. I found it a rather murky omen, and it seemed to mean that the others had either not been told about us, or had been instructed to stay away.

The man waiting for us was older than Leviticus, and had thick, dark hair that seemed to explode out of his head in unruly ringlets. His face was gaunt, his eyes haunted, his manner dark and brooding. He wore overalls like the three

young people out at the stand, but in addition he wore a gold cross around his neck that looked big enough to ward off a tribe of vampires— which, judging by the uncertain expression on his face as we approached, he may have been expecting.

It had to be Reverend Ezra.

"Father love you, Reverend," Garth boomed cheerfully as he pulled me to a stop in front of the man. "I'm Billy Jamison, and this is my brother, Boris."

The Reverend nervously cleared his throat, tentatively extended a thin, bony hand to Garth; in the light cast by two spotlights over the entrance to the shack, viewed through my smoked glasses, the hand looked skeletal. "Father love you, Brother Billy and Brother Boris. I'm Reverend Ezra. Uh.. .welcome."

"You can't imagine how happy we are to be here," Garth said as he pumped the other man's hand. "Boris and I have been on a very long spiritual journey, and this is the end of the trail."

"So I've heard," the Reverend said, obviously uncomfortable. He retrieved his hand from Garth's grasp, glanced at his watch. "Would you come with me, please? I'd like to see that you're comfortable, and we don't have time to talk now. I'm expecting an important phone call."

Oh-oh. Suddenly I didn't much care for Garth's description of the commune as the end of the trail.

"Of course," Garth said easily.

We followed the Reverend along a path to a building that resembled a large quonset hut. Two burly men wearing

overalls and uncertain expressions on their faces flanked the entrance. "Father love you," Garth said to the two men as we passed between them.

It was a spacious, neatly appointed office with a long, heavy oak desk as the centerpiece. The only items on the desk were a telephone and a large, well-worn Bible. There was a sofa and three straight-backed chairs in addition to the swivel chair behind the desk, two more doors— both closed. Above each door hung a framed painting, one of Jesus, the other of Siegmund Loge. Father.

"I think you'll be warmer here," the Reverend mumbled, not looking at us. He gestured toward the sofa. "Please sit down. This shouldn't take long."

Garth led me over to the sofa, and we both sat down. The Reverend eased himself down into the swivel chair behind the desk, then stared off into space and absently drummed his fingers on the oak. Obviously, we were to wait with him until he got his phone call. I sorely missed the Colt; punching out Reverend Ezra wasn't going to get us past the two men at the door, and it wasn't going to help us find Siegmund Loge.

It was Garth who finally broke the silence. "Reverend? Is something wrong?"

For a time I wasn't sure he was going to answer. He cast a longing look at the telephone, stared up at the ceiling for almost a minute, then finally looked at us. "Frankly, I'm not sure what to do," he said at last.

"Billy?" I said, tugging anxiously at Garth's sleeve. "Is something the matter? Father said everything would be all

right."

"We did have a vision, Reverend," Garth intoned ominously. "Was Father wrong in telling us to come here?"

"Mike told me about your vision and your afflictions," the Reverend answered in a distinctly nervous tone of voice. "Would you describe them to me, please?"

He was stalling for time, I thought, waiting for the phone to ring.

Garth launched into his vision patter, embellishing it with a few rhetorical flourishes that included descriptions of flashes of lightning and claps of thunder when Father spoke. Reverend Ezra seemed quite impressed with it all.

He was even more impressed when Garth capped off his performance by opening his robe to the waist.

"The mark of the beast!" the man cried, leaping up out of his chair and making the sign of the cross.

"The mark of Father," Garth replied evenly as he closed his robe.

"How can I be sure?"

"Who else could wield such power?"

" 'And I saw the beast, and the kings of the earth and their armies, gathered together to make war against Him that sat on the Throne, and against His army.'" The Reverend swallowed hard, sank back down into the chair. The blood had drained from his face. "The two of you have received the mark of the beast," he added in a barely audible whisper.

His words had triggered long-buried memories; I was a child again, smaller than other children, more frightened

than other children. As she did every night, my mother was reading to me from the Bible. I'd always liked Revelations; the apocalyptic visions that spilled forth from the pages had jibed with my childhood anger and sense of injustice, had given me hope that, maybe, one day things would be all right, that one morning I might wake up and find I was no longer a dwarf.

Suddenly I knew who the hundred and forty-four thousand were. "Wrong beast, Reverend," I said. "We are two of the four."

Garth glanced at me quickly, a confused expression on his face. I continued, "'And I looked, and, lo, a Lamb stood on the Mount Sion, and with Him a hundred and forty-four thousand, having his Father's name written in their foreheads.' Billy and I don't have the mark on our foreheads, Reverend, because we *are* the forehead—Father's forehead."

"Mike said you didn't know about the hundred and forty-four thousand!"

"Obviously, we do."

"'And I heard a voice from heaven,'" Garth intoned as his own memories were stirred, "'as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of a great thunder.'"

"Why were you sent here?"

"That was not revealed to us, Reverend," I said, then quoted some more Scripture. "'And they sung a new song before the throne, and before the four beasts and the elders, and no man could learn that song but the hundred and forty-four thousand, which were redeemed from the

earth.' We're two of the four beasts, Reverend; we represent Father's truth. You have been chosen to receive us. Will you hear our lesson, or is Father to send us somewhere else?"

"What is your lesson?"

"We must wait until it is revealed to us; or Father may wish us to discover it for ourselves. I think we should reason together. Don't you agree, Billy?"

"I certainly do, Boris," Garth said, giving me a pat of encouragement on the leg. "Reverend, you'd do well to listen to my brother. I think you should take that phone off the hook so there'll be no interruptions, and then we should try to work this out."

Reverend Ezra slumped forward in his chair, rested his head in his hands, and kneaded his temples with the ends of his long, bony fingers. He didn't take the phone off the hook. "It doesn't make sense," he said at last.

"What doesn't make sense?" Garth asked.

The Reverend slowly put his hands down on the desk, fixed his gaze on me. "That Father should mark two men to send us a lesson, and that one of those men would be a dwarf."

"What the he— uh, what do you have against dwarfs?"

"The choice of a dwarf would seem to mock everything Father has promised and taught us. The Great Time is very near at hand. Satan knows this, and it is to be expected that his armies are on the march. How can I be certain that the two of you weren't sent here by Satan?"

"Father would prevent it," Garth said with a broad

gesture of dismissal. "If we were servants of Satan, Father would strike us dead."

Reverend Ezra thought about it, shook his head. "Father may have marked your bodies to show that you serve Satan, then sent you to us as a challenge to see if we are worthy of His trust and teachings. If that's true, and we accept you into our family, none of us will live to see the Great Time. I need guidance."

"Who gives you guidance?" I asked. "Father?"

"Of course," the Reverend answered in a somewhat distant tone. "But Father is not always of this world. Now I must rely on the son... and the son is not Father."

Beside me, I felt Garth tense with excitement. I sat up straighter, concentrated on keeping my face impassive and my voice even. The Reverend's words seemed to suggest that it would be Siegfried Loge, not Siegmund, who would be on the other end of the line if the phone rang. If so, it would confirm a link between Project Valhalla and the communes of Siegmund Loge—a link that, up to now, only Lippitt had been absolutely convinced of.

"Where is the son?" I ventured.

The question seemed to echo in the prolonged silence that followed. One question. If the Reverend answered it, he could stop worrying about his phone call; he'd be taking a nap while Garth and I were taking our leave.

"Don't you know?" Reverend Ezra was no longer making much of an effort to hide his suspicion.

"It was Father who appeared to us," I replied, "not the son."

Suddenly the telephone rang, startling all three of us. The Reverend snatched up the receiver.

"Yes?" Reverend Ezra said, his voice nervous and high-pitched.

Garth, with disarming casualness, inched forward to the edge of the sofa and planted both feet firmly on the floor; at the first sign of distress on the part of the Reverend, the man would be even more distressed to find Garth's hands wrapped around his throat. Out of the corner of my eye I watched the front door, which had been left partially ajar. Given the element of surprise, I was confident that I could take out one of the big guards quickly and silently; taking out both of them, without raising a ruckus that could summon Mike Leviticus and his gun, was a problem of considerably greater magnitude.

Fortunately, the problem appeared to become academic when the Reverend hung up the phone and did nothing more than absently stare at the receiver. His expression displayed no signs of fear or alarm— only disappointment.

"So, what does Siegfried Loge have to say?" Garth asked in a flat tone as he leaned back in the sofa and crossed his legs.

"He's unavailable," the Reverend mumbled with obvious distaste.

"For how long?"

"They won't say."

"Why is he unavailable?"

"I don't like to even imagine. There are rumors about that

place—" Suddenly the Reverend's head came up, and he looked startled. "How do you know of Dr. Loge, Brother Billy?"

"The vision," Brother Boris answered. Garth had always been the more patient of the two of us, and Brother Boris was starting to get pissed. Somewhere under Reverend Ezra's frizzy curls was an address or a telephone number that could save Garth's and my life, and I had a growing urge to start banging the man's head on the desk top, or against a wall behind one of the two closed doors, to see what answers might drop out. "Father told us *who* the son is, but not *where* he is. That's what you're supposed to tell us."

"If Father didn't tell you, I don't think I should."

"Father forgot. He's got a lot of things on his mind these days, and everybody knows how distracting appearing to people in visions can be."

"Father never forgets anything," Garth interrupted quickly. "It's Brother Boris whose mind occasionally gets muddled these days; it's the remembered ecstasy of the vision. However, Father did say that you would tell us anything we wanted to know, Reverend."

Again, there was a prolonged silence while the Reverend pondered whatever it was he was pondering. Now fear moved across his face— but I somehow sensed that it was not fear of us. "I don't understand why you want to know about Dr. Loge," he said at last. "He's not a member of our family. He is of... them."

"Who?" Garth asked carefully.

"Warriors of Father. Dr. Loge leads them."

"Men like Mike Leviticus?"

Reverend Ezra nodded. "Mike is a Warrior, but he is also a member of our family. That's why he was assigned to guard us."

"If Siegfried Loge doesn't have anything to do with your — our — family, why do you have to check with him?"

"Dr. Loge is our... supervisor. Father has told us that we must follow His son's instructions."

"Father marked us, Reverend," I said softly. "We are Father's emissaries, so you have nothing to hide from us. Where did that telephone call come from?"

"I.. I just can't tell you, Brother Boris. Not without permission."

"Really? In that case, maybe it's time for Brother Billy and myself to do some marking of our— "

Instantly, Garth was on his feet and pulling me to mine by the collar of my robe. "Don't pay any attention to Brother Boris, Reverend; he hasn't had his supper, and he gets cranky. Uh, would it be possible for us to meet some of the others while you wait for your phone call? We're anxious to meet the people who will be our companions in the Great Time."

The Reverend thought about it as he fiddled with the telephone receiver, then finally nodded his head. "There's a Halloween party in the commons building, and I guess there's no harm in your waiting there. Brother Amos and Brother Joshua will show you the way."

"Maybe we should have jumped him, Mongo," Garth said in a low, uncertain voice as we followed the two hulking Children of Father along a narrow path on the edge of a cliff overlooking Lake Superior. "I'm starting to have second thoughts."

"Don't. You were right. With these two waiting outside, it would have been too risky. I wonder why he's letting us mingle with the others?"

"You call this mingling? Observe that these guys' instructions don't include being too chummy with us. We make the good Reverend decidedly uncomfortable, so he figured he'd let the others keep an eye on us for a while."

"Well, we'll hang out at the party until one of us gets a chance to slip away and go back for a serious discussion with the Reverend."

Garth nodded. His mouth was set in a grim line. "We'd best be quick about it— and careful."

"What did you smell on the Reverend?"

"Doubt."

20.

WITH his gloves off, Mike Leviticus could peel an apple with the side of his hand. He was too far away, and the light in the commons building meeting hall too dim, for me to see precisely how he did it, but it was a neat trick.

Standing off in a corner, feeling warm enough but rather silly in my robe and slippers, I watched as the girl from the

fruit and dairy stand came into my field of vision. With her was a tall, very thin young man who, like most of the others, looked to be in his early twenties. The girl said something to him, then pointed to me. He shook his head. She grabbed his hand, pulled him across the room to me. Even with her mouse ears and pasted-on whiskers, she looked just as gorgeous as when I'd seen her earlier. I hoped I was in for some hugging and kissing.

"Everyone's afraid of you," the girl said to me in a bright, clear voice.

Pretending to react to unexpectedly hearing a voice in my face, I started slightly, then cocked my head and fixed my gaze on a spot just between the two of them. "Obviously, you're not. Father love you."

"And Father love you," she replied with a broad smile that revealed the predictable white, even teeth. She took my right hand in both of hers, squeezed it gently. She had a nice touch. "Can I get you something, Brother Boris? A cold drink? An apple?"

"No, thank you."

"I think it's terrible the way everyone's been avoiding you. I'm Sister Esther. Brother Luke is with me. Luke just joined our family two days ago."

The man reached out to shake my hand. When I didn't react, he flushed with embarrassment and patted me tentatively on the shoulder. "Hi," he said tightly.

"Hi."

"Where's Brother Billy?" the girl asked.

Off— I hoped— pounding on the Reverend, looking for

an answer, our car, and our clothes. "I think he's in one of the other rooms, trying to circulate."

"He shouldn't have left you alone."

"I don't mind."

"You two have created quite a stir around here, the way you just popped up. We know something happened on the road when Mike was bringing you back here, but Brother Mike won't say what it was—and we've been instructed not to ask. There's talk that a miracle occurred."

"I thought miracles were what this place was all about," I said, studying Brother Luke. He looked decidedly uncomfortable, as if he wanted to bolt and run.

"Oh, that's right," the girl replied cheerfully. "For sure."

"Well, why not think of Billy and me as just two of your average, run-of-the-mill mira—" I cut myself off in mid-sentence; without Garth around to edit me with a poke in the ribs or a pull on my robe, I was going to have to watch my mouth. Garth was absolutely right; I didn't understand these people at all. "Then why should Father's Children be afraid of us?"

Sister Esther shrugged her magnificent shoulders. "I guess knowing that miracles happen and having one occur in your own backyard are two different things. Also, Reverend Ezra and Brother Mike are obviously nervous—and that makes everybody nervous. I'm not afraid because I sense you and Brother Billy have good hearts. Maybe it doesn't make any difference that you're a dwarf."

"Why should a dwarf make you nervous?" I'd lost track of Mike Leviticus, and that made me nervous.

"You don't know?"

I shook my head.

"Dwarfism is an infirmity," Brother Luke said, speaking for the first time. "There won't be any illness or people with infirmities in Great Time, the same as there won't be any niggers, kikes, spicks, chinks, japs, or Catholics— no people like that. No communists, either."

Without moving my head, I swept my gaze around the room; I hadn't taken notice before, but now that Brother Luke had raised my consciousness, it struck me that everyone in the commune was white and WASPish-looking. "No kidding?" I said.

The girl nodded agreeably. "In the beginning, Father— Who is God made flesh— created many different kinds of people. All were given a chance to accept Jesus as their Savior. Not everyone did. Father has been very patient, but now his wrath will descend on all nonbelievers. Armageddon is upon us. After Armageddon will come Great Time, in which Father and Jesus will reign supreme. Only one hundred and forty-four thousand of us will be left to enjoy it."

"All white and Christian?"

"No Catholics," Brother Luke mumbled. "They worship the Pope."

"Uh, what about nonwhite Christians?"

"Only whites can truly be Christians," the tall, thin young man explained to me. "Other races just don't have the moral strength."

"It says this in the Bible?"

"Father revealed it to us," the girl said. She hugged herself, shivered with ecstasy. "The whole world will be brand-new, and it will belong just to us. Won't it be *wonderful?!"*

"It'll certainly do wonders for rush-hour traffic." The couple exchanged somewhat startled glances, and I quickly added: "Maybe Father has sent me here to tell you that he's having second thoughts."

"No," Sister Esther declared emphatically. "It has all been promised."

"Have you actually heard Father tell you these things?"

"Not in person. Other Children of Father— leaders like Reverend Ezra— bring us the teachings. Only a very few people have actually seen Father since He revealed that He was God."

"That must be very frustrating for you," I said in a neutral tone, glancing around the room. The girl no longer seemed quite so attractive to me, and I didn't need Garth's nose to smell her companion's paranoia. I was getting tired of these loonies, and was anxious to get on with the hunt for the Chief Loony; but there was still no sign of Garth— or of Mike Leviticus.

"Oh, it is," the girl said with a solemn nod. "What were you before you came here, Brother Boris?"

"A dwarf, Sister Esther. What were you?"

"An X-ray technician," she answered hesitantly, after a pause. I could see that I was beginning to make her nervous, too, but I didn't really care. "One of Father's Children found me, looked into my heart, and saw my need."

I was invited to come here, and it changed my life. Now I know there are others who believe as I do, and we were right all the time."

"That must be a great comfort. So, now all of you are just kind of hanging around here and waiting to have a Great Time?"

That was pushing it. Sister Esther frowned, glanced uncertainly at her companion, then looked back at me. "You seem to have a strange attitude for someone who claims to have been sent here by Father, Brother Boris," she said softly.

"Sorry. It's just my manner of speaking. Dwarfism does that to some people."

"Well, we certainly haven't simply been 'hanging around,'" the girl said, a touch of pique in her tone. "Since our founding less than two years ago, we've had seven marriages. Those marriages have produced five babies, who are now with Father."

"They're *where*?"

"With Father. Our babies don't have time to make the necessary choices, and so Father personally molds their souls in preparation for Great Time."

"You send your babies off to this— to Father?"

"Of course," Sister Esther said, obviously taken aback by my open astonishment. "It is the only way our babies can be saved. In the meantime, we wait for Father's Treasure."

"Father's Treasure?"

"I don't think I should discuss that," the girl said softly.

No discussion was necessary. No matter what these

people believed, "Father's Treasure" had to be Lot 57—the next generation of genetic juice that was tearing up Garth and me. If Lippitt's information was correct, Siegmund Loge had dozens of communes like this one, ringing the world, providing him not only with infants for direct human experimentation, but with a huge test population when Lot 57 was ready. Loge was going to show these people a great time, all right, but I knew that trying to warn them of the danger would have about as much chance of success as trying to convince them that Siegmund Loge wasn't really God. Garth and I had wandered into what amounted to no more than a breeding pen for test animals, and the realization made me nauseous.

Where was Garth?

"What did you do before you came here, Brother Luke?" I asked, quite content to change the subject.

"I was a metallurgist," the young man replied tersely.

"Oh, you're being very modest, Brother Luke," Sister Esther said, smiling coquettishly at him. "He was an exceptionally gifted metallurgist, Brother Boris, a member of an elite society of knifemakers called the Anvil Ring. In fact," she added proudly, "he was the youngest person ever invited to join."

"That's nice." I was becoming increasingly distracted and wished the two Children of Father would just go away. If Garth didn't show up in another ten minutes, I was going to go looking for him.

But Brother Luke's accomplishments were obviously a

subject Sister Esther enjoyed talking about. "Tell Brother Boris about Whisper," she continued. "Tell him how it was made."

Brother Luke frowned. "It's a secret, Sister Esther."

"Oh, come on!" the girl said, pinching his cheek playfully. "You're with Father now, so there's no need for secrets like that. Share your triumph." She turned to me. "Whisper is one of the most remarkable achievements in the history of personal arms," she said primly.

"The members of our society collaborated over a period of years to create her," the young man said reluctantly.

"This 'Whisper,' I take it, is a knife?" I asked.

Brother Luke nodded. "Yes— named for the sound she makes when she's unsheathed. Whisper's made of Damascus steel, and there's no other blade like her— hasn't been for centuries. Do you know anything about knives or steelmaking, Brother Boris?"

"Not really." Five minutes. If Sister Esther and Brother Luke weren't going to go away, I was going to have to figure out a way to get rid of them.

Now Brother Luke was warming to his subject, and his eyes had taken on a strange glow. "Damascus steel was made by a secret process thought lost forever in the Middle Ages, and it's a formula I will share with Father, if he so desires. Alexander the Great had swords of Damascus steel, and the finest samurai swords were made of it. A blade made of Damascus steel can split a feather in midair, yet cut through hardwood for hours without losing its edge. Damascus steel is at once incredibly flexible and

incredibly strong. Anyway, members of my group rediscovered the secret process, and Whisper is the result. When I was invited to become one of Father's Children, I knew I had to bring Whisper as my offering to Father."

"You mean you stole it."

Brother Luke didn't much care for that. "Everything belongs to Father," he said, scowling.

"It's just that a knife seems like a strange gift to bring to Father. After all, who'll need weapons in the Great Time?"

Brother Luke flushed, turned to the girl. "He doesn't understand," he said tightly, then wheeled and walked stiffly away.

One down, one to go.

Where was Garth?

"There's no need to be rude, Brother Boris," the girl said reprovingly. "The offerings are only symbolic."

"Of what?"

"Our love. It's suggested that new Children bring certain kinds of offerings, tokens of affection and commitment. The practice is said to please Father and members of His earth family greatly."

"It wouldn't surprise me." Whatever happened to the rest of the world in Great Time, I thought, the Loges would be going into it with quite a collection of loot, some of it, undoubtedly, of considerable value.

"Brother Luke's offering has created a lot of excitement around here. It's so perfect."

I started to ask why it was so perfect, but the words stuck in my throat.

"You look very strange, Brother Boris," the girl said. "Are you all right?"

No, I was most definitely not all right—and, as I watched Garth stagger through a door and fall to his knees in a bright circle of light at the opposite end of the hall, it occurred to me that neither my brother nor I might ever again know what it felt like to be all right. The left side of Garth's face looked to be swollen to about twice its normal size, and he was bleeding from his mouth and nose. Every instinct cried out for me to go to him, but I somehow managed to stay where I was, staring stupidly off into space as Sister Esther gasped and backed away to join the other Children, who had retreated to stand against the walls.

Suddenly the hall was silent as— well, a grave.

Mike Leviticus, Reverend Ezra, Brothers Amos and Joshua came into the hall, took up positions in a semicircle around Garth, who was struggling to get to his feet. Reverend Ezra's frizzy locks were plastered to his forehead with nervous sweat. Leviticus's gloves were off, and in the bright light it appeared as if the sides of both hands were sheathed with blades of polished, bare bone that was actually growing out of the flesh.

Which, of course, was impossible.

Leviticus pulled Garth to his feet, shoved him toward me. Garth staggered, then recovered his balance and walked fairly steadily the rest of the way.

"Well done, Mongo," Garth said in a low, thick voice as he stopped in front of me. "They still don't know that you can see."

"How badly are you hurt, Garth?"

"It probably looks worse than it is. I lost a couple of teeth in the back, but the jaw doesn't seem to be broken. Brother Mike has a curious set of hands, and he definitely knows how to use them. We're in the shithouse, brother. We're now officially certified as servants of Satan."

"That much I surmised. Did you find out anything?"

"Nope. I no sooner let myself out a window than I ran into the side of one of Leviticus's hands. It took me this long to wake up."

"Satan isn't going to like this," I said in a loud voice. "I have a good mind to turn everybody black."

An alarmed murmur rose from the Children ringing the hall, and Garth grinned through his swollen lips. "I was sent to get you. Should we go quietly, or make a *beau geste* and let them beat the shit out of us?"

"Do you think they mean to kill us when they get us outside?"

"There's always that possibility, but I tend to doubt it. After all, Siegfried Loge finally got back to the Reverend, and I wasn't killed outright. No matter what other avenues of research those crazy fuckers are pursuing, it seems the two live Frederickson brothers are still considered the keys to Valhalla."

"Then let's save our energy," I said, reaching out for Garth's arm.

"SHIT," Garth said when the others had finished nailing some kind of barricade over the door of our improvised holding pen and left.

"My sentiments exactly," I replied, removing my smoked glasses and looking around.

"Where the hell are we?"

"Your marvelous nose doesn't tell you?"

"A supermarket deli section?"

"Close. A cheese-processing shed."

Although it would be pitch dark to Garth, I could see quite well by the faint moonlight spilling in through vents left open under the corrugated steel eaves of the shed. There was a space heater. I plugged it in, and Garth, shivering, came over and squatted down next to the warming cherry glow.

"You want me to turn on the lights?" I asked.

"What's to see?"

"Three stainless-steel curdling vats and a lot of rubber hosing."

"It sounds depressing; you look at it."

"For now, it seems we're still the apples of Father's eye," I said as I began slowly making a circuit of the area, looking for a ladder— anything— that could get me up to one of the vents that looked to be at least eighteen feet overhead. "That situation may not last much longer. The Loges have got themselves some raw breeding stock; these people— and, presumably, the other communes, as well— send their babies to Father."

"Oh, Jesus," Garth murmured. "The sons-of-bitches are

experimenting directly on humans."

"Yeah," I replied, completing my search of the shed and coming back to squat next to Garth. I'd found nothing. "How's your face?"

"It smarts. The edge of that big prick's hand is as hard as bone." "It is bone," I said. Now that I'd had time to think about it, I knew what I'd seen. "It's collagen."

"Collagen?"

"A while back some researchers at Harvard Medical School came up with a technique for growing bone, without rejection, virtually anywhere in the body."

"A bone graft?"

"It's not really a graft. They extract collagen from any bone, mix it with a few other nonorganic materials into a paste, then spread it over an area where they want new bone to grow. The paste has the effect of stimulating the surrounding cells into producing bone tissue. Siegfried Loge must give his Warriors' hands the collagen treatment when they complete their training. I'm sure it impresses the hell out of them."

"It impressed the hell out of my face. It sounds like Loge is still playing Sorscience."

"Yep. He's a real gamester, that one."

"You think Leviticus was told the real reason the Loges want us?"

"No. Leviticus is here because he's a member of the belief system, and they wouldn't tell him anything that would conflict with his beliefs. This place is sealed off. The only information they get is over the phone, and Siegfried Loge

is on the other end of the line."

"Other Warriors will be coming to get us."

"Sure."

"You think it would do any good to try and reason with Leviticus, tell him what's really happening?"

"You tell me, Garth. You're the one who said he smelled of religious ecstasy. You think he's going to listen to two servants of Satan?"

"Sorry. Getting hit by bone-hand must have knocked my brains loose. Incidentally, I really hated to lose those back teeth; I just had a root canal job on that side."

"Feel like having a seizure? You can bang the door open."

"Hey, I wish I could. Unfortunately, I don't have any control over the damn things. We could be paste ourselves, smears under a Loge microscope, before I have another one."

"That's what I call a really comforting thought. How about if I tickle your feet?"

Garth laughed. "That would probably get me pissed at you, but it wouldn't bring on a seizure. Sorry, Mongo." He paused, looked down as I stuffed my glasses deep into the pocket in his robe. "What are you doing?"

"Putting my glasses in a safe place. I'm splitting."

"You walk through walls?"

I pulled Garth to his feet, guided him across the concrete floor to a position against one of the corrugated steel walls.

"Look up."

"The vent? You've got to be kidding. Have you got

suckers on your fingertips to go with your snake eyes?"

"I've got a strong brother. You're going to toss me up there."

Garth lowered his gaze, shook his head. "The hell I am. You're fucking crazy."

"You like the idea of ending up paste?"

"You'll end up paste now if you miss and fall back on this concrete. I can't see to catch you. Even if you do get up and through, it's still a twenty-foot drop to the ground."

"You seem to forget that you're talking to none other than Mongo the Magnificent. I used to do tougher shit than this for a living."

"Those were your circus days, and they were a long time ago."

"Squat, and cup your hands between your knees. I'll get a running start to work up a head of steam. You'll hear me coming. When you feel my foot hit your hands, it's launch time. Don't hold back on the horsepower."

"No. We'll bide our time, wait until we're picked up. There'll be other chances to make a break. This stunt's too dangerous."

"Come on, Garth," I said, pacing to the opposite side of the shed. "We're wasting time."

Garth sighed in resignation. "Mongo," he said quietly, "if you do get out of here, I want you to keep going. You can't get me out; they've got the door nailed shut."

"Thanks, Garth. That's what I was going to do, anyway. I'm glad you'll understand."

"I'm serious, Mongo. You have to take your glasses."

"I'm serious, Garth; squat!"

He did so, and I lit out across the shed. "Now!" I shouted as I leaped off the floor and planted my right foot in the pocket of his cupped hands.

Garth didn't hold back in the muscle department. Up, up, and away I went— as if I'd been shot out of a cannon. A split second after Garth threw me I knew that making the eighteen feet to the vent was not going to be a problem; catching hold of the edge of the wall on the way down after I'd banged into the roof was the problem. I twisted in the air, absorbed the force of impact against the tin roof with my right shoulder and hip. I bounced with a mighty clang that I hoped couldn't be heard too far away, stretched. My fingers caught the sharp edge of the wall, and I squeezed. My grip held, and my body banged into the corrugated steel.

"Mongo?!"

"Uh, just a tad too much exuberance there, brother," I managed to say as I gasped for breath.

"Mongo, I'm sorry! I was afraid— "

"I'm all right, Garth," I said quickly, looking down. Garth, stricken, was squinting up into the darkness, silver tears running down his cheeks. "Really; I'm not hurt. However, I think it only fair to warn you that the next time there's something like this to be done, you're the one who gets thrown."

"Anybody outside?" Garth asked as he wiped away the tears and shook his head with relief.

"I don't know; I haven't looked yet. Let's hope not."

"Look, you little smart-ass bastard," Garth said, looking

up at me and shaking his fist, "you'd damn well better find a good way of getting down from there, because if you fall—or you get caught—I'm going to be very pissed. You hear me?"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. I've got no more time to hang around here, brother. I'll drop in later to see how you're doing. *Ciao.*"

Sucking in a deep breath, I flexed my shoulder muscles and pulled, at the same time swinging my right leg up. The heel caught, and I scrambled up and over the wall, hung down on the other side. At the moment the moon was obscured by clouds, making the green-robed dwarf hanging off the side of the commune's cheese-processing shed a bit less conspicuous; that was good. The raw metal edge was cutting through my palms, making them bleed and hurt like hell; that was bad.

For a few moments I considered taking the fast way down, dropping eighteen feet and taking my chances on a good break-roll. I thought better of it. Garth was right; the circus had been a long time ago, and there was a definite risk that I'd break more than I'd roll. Hanging first from one hand, then the other, I grabbed the hem of my spacious robe, used the material to cushion my palms. That took care of the pain and bleeding problems, but it made my grip on the edge considerably more tentative. The act was going to have to be speeded up.

Overhanging eaves prevented me from climbing up on the roof, which left me a choice of going to my left or right. I went right, swinging and sliding in the direction of another

building which looked to have been built very close to the shed.

The muscles in my hands, arms, and shoulders were burning by the time I'd covered the twenty or so yards, but the trip had been worth it; in the narrow alleyway between the two buildings, the walls were no more than three feet apart. I went around the corner, crossed one hand over the other and flipped around so that I was hanging with my back against the corrugated steel wall of the cheese-processing shed.

I'd already lost one sandal; now I kicked off the other, stretched out my leg and planted one foot against the wall of the opposite building. Pressing hard with my shoulders against the shed wall, I firmly planted my other foot, then released my grip. With my body braced between the two walls, I easily "walked" down the narrow shaft to the ground.

22.

THE door to Reverend Ezra's office was open, and there was nobody home. The first thing I did after closing the door behind me was to hop up on a windowsill, huddle in my robe, and plant my thoroughly frozen feet directly on the metal shield of a radiator. I'd grown seriously concerned about frostbite, but after about five minutes sensation returned to the toes. I rewarded myself for good behavior by letting my feet toast for another minute or so, then got down and began to search the office.

There was nothing in the Reverend's desk drawer but two well-worn Bibles, dozens of bizarre religious tracts which looked like they'd been run off on a mimeograph machine, and two sticks of Juicy Fruit gum. It was all very depressing; there were no letters, no letterheads, and no address book. So far, all Garth and I had managed to accomplish by infiltrating the commune was to get caught; even if we escaped now, our enemies had been alerted to the fact that we were alive. There were going to be a lot of men in brown uniforms with bony hands scouring this part of the country, hunting for us. We desperately needed to mount some kind of an attack, and to do that we needed an address.

It didn't help my mood to find a toilet behind the door under Siegmund Loge's portrait. I tried the door under Jesus, and barely suppressed a whoop of delight. It looked like the Big Bingo—a room used for the temporary storage

of "offerings" brought for Father by new commune members. In the center of the room was a table apparently used for sorting and repacking; on it were a number of battered boxes and bags, and a variety of articles. There was a built-in shelf running along one wall; packing boxes, strapping tape, and a postal scale. Above the scale, taped to the wall, was a large card with neat, block-printed letters.

RAMDOR
RFD RTE. 113
CENTRALIA PA

Somewhere, I'd heard or read something strange about Centralia, Pennsylvania, but I couldn't recall what it was. I didn't care; having the address was all that mattered, and I was doubly pleased to find our clothes piled on the shelf, next to the postal scale. I discarded my robe, quickly dressed, then walked across the room, went up on my toes and looked out the window.

Parked behind the building were our car and the Willys.

I allowed myself the luxury of humming a few bars of the Hallelujah Chorus.

All that remained was to spring Garth, and to do that I needed a claw hammer or a crowbar.

Fat chance.

I might have been able to find something in one of the cars, but, having come this far, I was unwilling to risk recapture by being in the open any longer than I had to be.

Instead, I began to rummage through the items on the table, looking for anything that might be used to pry loose the boards that had been nailed across the door to the cheese-processing shed.

Under a pile of Styrofoam blocks used for packing, I found a long, heavy case covered with fine-grain, beautifully tooled cordovan leather. I snapped open the case, found a huge knife in a leather-and-chrome scabbard inside. I lifted the knife out of the case, pulled it from its scabbard.

Shhh.

Whisper.

The Anvil Ring had delivered themselves of a beautiful piece of work, all right. The blade itself, almost half the size of a broadsword, was in the shape of a Bowie model. The color of the steel was an odd, very pale gray and, when viewed from a certain angle, displayed a rippling pattern of parallel lines; at first I thought the lines had been engraved into the steel, but when I ran my finger across the flat face of the blade I found that they were a part of the metal itself.

The handle was extremely heavy— black stone, probably onyx or obsidian, reinforced with steel bands, decorated at both ends with rings of diamond chips.

It was a hell of a thing to have to use for prying boards loose— Damascus steel or no, I wondered how much pressure the blade could take. However, it was the only thing on the table or in the room that looked even remotely useful, and so it was going to have to do. I slipped the knife back into its scabbard, slipped myself back out into the night after picking up Garth's clothes.

"Hey," I said, rapping lightly on the door with my knuckles. "Did you wait there like I told you?"

"Mongo?" Garth's anxious whisper was clearly audible; he'd been waiting by the door.

"You guessed."

"Did you get an address?"

"Sure did. I wish I could tell you it was in Florida, but it's not. We're going to Centralia, Pennsylvania. It looks like one of the Loges— maybe both of them— is holed up there."

Shhh.

"What's that?"

"Something I snitched from the collection plate."

"What?"

"Never mind; you'll see for yourself. Give me a chance to work on these boards."

There were two heavy planks nailed in a crisscross pattern over the door, anchored to a doorframe of paired two-by-fours. The wood was heavy and gnarled, and looked as if it would present a respectable workout for a chainsaw. I still intended to use the knife to pry the boards loose, but— out of curiosity, and as a kind of test of the blade I undoubtedly was about to snap— I took a casual whack at the edge of one of the planks.

Whisper didn't so much bite into the wood as kiss and seduce it; although I'd virtually done little more than let the blade fall of its own weight, the razor edge slid more than an inch through the wood. The resulting *thwuck* was solid, resonant, satisfying, and somehow— confident.

Whisper was a supremely self-confident knife, and to prove her prowess she effortlessly lifted out a sizable triangular plug of knotted wood when I raised her and—applying only slightly more force—slashed into the plank at an angle to the first cut.

Removing my parka and draping it over my head and shoulders to muffle noise, I squatted down on the frozen ground and began— with growing excitement and not a little reverential awe— whacking away at the planks. In less than ten minutes I'd whittled through both of them, and hadn't even worked up a sweat. I sheathed Whisper, stuck the scabbard into my belt, pulled open the door. A shivering but much relieved-looking Garth stood grinning in a box of moonlight.

"Don't spend too much time in the dressing room, brother," I said as I tossed him his clothes. "It's time to take our leave of these sweet, gentle people. Our car awaits us down the block."

Garth handed me my smoked glasses, pointed to the scabbard in my belt. "Is that what you were hacking with out here?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. This is Whisper. Observe."

Shhh.

I barely brushed Whisper against the edge of the doorframe, and a yard-long sliver of wood dropped to the floor.

Garth raised his eyebrows slightly, grunted. "Impressive," he said as he began to dress.

"That she is."

"She?"

"She has a sexy feel to her."

Garth laughed. "You've been too long in the wilderness, brother. You've always tended to anthropomorphize, but this is ridiculous."

Garth finished dressing. We closed the shed door, repositioned the planks across it as best we could, then moved around the building, keeping low and in the moon shadows.

"How much money have you got in your pockets?" I asked.

"Change."

"What about the cash in the car, assuming it's still there?"

"About forty dollars."

"We need money, or goods to barter. Whisper's too specialized an item, and she's the only weapon we have at the moment. There's more stuff where she came from—a room behind the Reverend's office. Maybe I should go back in there and look for something we can sell."

"Agreed," Garth replied tersely. "Make it fast."

"You want to wait outside?"

"No. We'll stick together."

We circled around the building with the Reverend's office, still saw nobody. We went to the front, quickly entered, closed the door behind us. I led Garth through the darkness, positioned him in the second doorway while I went to rummage around in the items on the table.

Most of the stuff was junk, nothing to even begin to

compare to Whisper, and would undoubtedly be discarded when it reached Ramdor— whatever that was. However, one item was of more than passing interest— a leather pouch filled with gold coins which must have weighed upwards of five pounds. I put the gold in the pocket of my parka along with the hard plastic case containing my glasses, then turned toward Garth.

The beam of a powerful flashlight hit me squarely in the eyes.

"Hold it right there, dwarf!" Mike Leviticus commanded.

It felt as though someone had poured molten metal into my eye sockets; I shrieked, clapped my hands to my face and slowly crumpled to my knees as white-hot rivers of neon flashed around inside my head with kaleidoscopic, searing fury.

There was a soft coughing sound, like the pop of an air gun, and something whistled through the air over my head and pinged into the wall behind me.

Intent on sneaking up on me in the darkness, Leviticus had apparently missed Garth altogether— until now. There was the thud of a fist hitting flesh, then a crash as the flashlight fell to the floor. Scuffling, muttered curses, then the sharp, ominous sound of wood breaking— that would be Leviticus swinging with the bony side of his hand at Garth's head, missing and hitting a wall.

Leviticus, I assumed, would be a heavy hitter in karate. Garth was not. The popping sound I'd heard had to be a tranquilizer gun, which meant that a Loge or Loges placed a high premium on keeping us alive. However, now that he

was being pressed, Leviticus might well feel that he could afford to kill Garth. Garth's body could be preserved... and they still had me.

Me was going to have to get rolling.

The sounds of struggle continued as Garth and Leviticus flailed blindly at each other in the darkness. Somebody fell across the table just above my head. The table collapsed, and I rolled away as various "offerings" rained down on me.

My eyes still burned with acid-heat, but I took my hands away from them and tried a tentative squint just as I heard another soft cough.

The flashlight, unbroken, had rolled across the room, and its strong beam was now focused on a small area in a corner, beneath the window. Garth, blood running from a cut on his forehead and with his left arm hanging uselessly at his side, was a few feet away, struggling to get to his feet amid a pile of junk, cardboard boxes, and blocks of Styrofoam.

Leviticus was by the door, reaching for the light switch.

I picked up a broken table leg and threw it at the bare, overhead bulb just as Leviticus threw the switch. The bulb exploded with a flash which I managed to avoid by closing my eyes and turning my head away. The movement cost me a half second. When I opened my eyes again, Garth had only managed to work his way to his knees, and Leviticus was striding purposefully toward the flashlight.

I leaped to my feet, kicked a section of broken table to the side, and sprinted across the room. I launched myself into the air and landed on the Warrior's back just as he was

bending down for the flashlight, knocking him off balance. Instantly I wrapped my left arm around his throat while I searched for his eyes with the fingers of my right hand.

Leviticus knocked my hand away, half turned and lunged backward, banging me into the wall— once, twice. The third time did it. Stunned, the wind knocked out of me, I lost my grip on his neck and ignominiously fell to the floor.

Struggling not to lose consciousness, I groped in my pocket for my glasses, found them, ripped them out of their case and put them on.

With the glasses on, I could only see the beam of light and the things it touched; it touched the tranquilizer gun, then swung around into my face and approached like an attacking sun. Desperately, I struggled with fingers that wouldn't work properly at the zipper of my parka, which seemed to be stuck.

"You two have given me enough trouble," Leviticus said in a dry, almost bored voice as I gave up on the zipper and reached under the edge of my parka. "Now I'm— "

Shhh.

Lunging forward, I swung the huge blade of Damascus steel in an arc, aiming at a point behind the light, and felt only a slight tug on the handle as Whisper cut through the flesh and bone of Mike Leviticus's wrist. Blood splattered over my face. Leviticus's initial grunt of surprise was drawn out to a soul-deep, sorrowful moan as his hand and the flashlight flew across the room and landed against the wall with sufficient force to break the flashlight. Then I heard the Warrior sit down hard on the floor.

I rolled away, sprang to my feet and whipped off my glasses, preparing to strike again. It wasn't necessary. Leviticus had apparently felt he needed only his hands and the tranquilizer gun to handle us, because his shoulder holster was empty. He was slumped against the wall, staring in my direction with eyes that were rapidly glazing over with pain and shock. The fingers of his right hand were wrapped around the stump of his left wrist as he tried to stanch the flow of blood. He wasn't having much success; the blade of bone that made his hand such a formidable weapon also made it more difficult for him to close his fingers tightly. Blood oozed—and occasionally pulsed—out of the stump. The tranquilizer gun had fallen, skidded out of his reach. I turned my attention to Garth.

Garth had never made it out of the pile of debris in the middle of the room. He was sitting with his head lolling back and forth, as if he were asleep. There was a steel dart with narrow green stabilizers sticking out of his left shoulder. I replaced Whisper in her scabbard, kicked the tranquilizer gun even farther across the room, then hurried over to him.

The cut on his forehead had stopped bleeding and looked to be minor. I pulled the dart out of his shoulder, then pulled back his parka and shirt and looked at his shoulder. There was a thin trickle of blood, but it was obvious that the thickness of the parka had prevented him from getting a full dose of the drug in the hypodermic mechanism that was part of the dart. But he'd gotten enough to pose a problem.

"Garth!"

"Mmmmmmm."

"Wake up!" I shook him.

"... sleepy..."

"Yeah, well this is no time to take a fucking nap! I Goddamn well can't carry you! The bad guys are after us, remember?"

"Guy... packs one... hell... of a punch."

I slapped him hard, twice. All he did was grin stupidly. I stood up and kicked him in the stomach— just hard enough to get his attention.

Garth's eyes opened, searched for me in the darkness. "You do that again, I'll tear off your head and hand it to you," he said in a clear voice.

I did it again. Then I grabbed two handfuls of parka and struggled to pull him up. "Get up, Garth!" I pleaded. "You have to stay awake just a little longer! Too much noise! Others will be coming!"

Garth grunted, grabbed hold of my forearms and managed to pull himself to his knees. "Yeah. I... know. Sorry about this, Mongo..."

Stepping around behind him, I draped one heavy arm over my shoulder, anchored my forehead in his armpit and shoved with all my might. Slowly, Garth rose to his feet. I shoved him in the direction of the door, and he wobbled forward. I followed him into the Reverend's office, then abruptly grabbed hold of his parka, stopping him.

"Wait here," I said, shoving him back against the wall. His head banged against the plaster, then rolled around on his shoulders— but he stayed on his feet. I went back into

the other room. I knew I was probably being incredibly stupid, considering the racket Garth and Leviticus had made, but there was some business I felt I had to attend to.

I took some heavy wrapping twine off the shelf, picked up a shard of wood off the floor, then went over to Leviticus. The Warrior was just barely conscious; in another five minutes, or less, he'd have bled to death.

"Listen to me," I said quietly as I knelt down beside him, pushed his hand away from the bleeding stump and started to fashion a tourniquet. "As my mother would say, some people will believe anything. You people have yourselves one cockamamy religion here, but I'm not going to argue theology— except to tell you that everything you believe about Siegmund Loge is bullshit. Garth and I aren't servants of Satan— even Satan can't get good help these days. The old man you believe is God heads up a project that would have made the Nazis drool with envy, and rumor has it that he's not as crazy as his son, or as mean as his grandson; these are people you and the others here think dance with angels. Can you hold this stick?"

Leviticus nodded weakly, put his hand over the stick controlling the tension of the tourniquet.

"Let go of it and you'll die," I continued, rising to my feet. "So stay awake, and think about what I said."

I hurried back into the office, tore the phone out of the wall, grabbed Garth's parka and slung him in the general direction of the door, which Leviticus had left open. Garth staggered out, and almost knocked over a startled Reverend Ezra.

Shhh.

"Uh, Father love you," Reverend Ezra said tightly as he craned his neck, went up on his toes and stared down at Whisper, which was nestled in his crotch.

"Fuck him and you, Reverend." Lights were coming on all over the place, and I had to squint. My eyes were beginning to burn. "You got a medical kit in this place?"

"Yes, but—"

"Well, I hope it's a good one. Mike Leviticus is inside, and he's hurt badly. Go get the kit. *Run*, you silly jerk-off!"

Reverend Ezra ran. I grabbed the front of Garth's parka and pulled him around to the rear of the building. The ignition keys were still in our car. I pushed Garth into the rear seat, paused to slash the front tires of the Willys, then jumped behind the wheel of our car and turned the keys in the ignition.

The car wouldn't start.

Garth had begun to snore.

Holding my breath, I turned off the ignition. I pumped the gas pedal, waited three beats, then tried it again.

Grind.

Snore.

The engine finally turned over on the third try. I gunned the motor, popped the clutch and spun around in a power slide, narrowly missing Brothers Amos and Joshua. I straightened the car out, shot up the dirt road leading out to the main highway. The car banged over frozen ridges, crashed into potholes. The door Garth had torn off, and which we'd roped back on, flew off. I hit the ceiling a couple

of times, barely managing to keep my grip on the steering wheel, and Garth rolled on the floor with a loud *clunk*.

"Huh... ? Mongo?"

"Go back to sleep," I said through clenched teeth.

Problem. Dozens of flashlight beams were dancing in the orchards to my right, and they were ahead of me; Children of Father were running through the trees, and they obviously intended to cut off the servants of Satan at the pass. I managed to dig my glasses out of my pocket, put them on. I turned on the car's high beams and floored the accelerator. I fishtailed around a sharp bend to find half a dozen Children standing in the middle of the road, arms linked, eyes closed, faces wreathed in ecstasy. More Children poured out of the orchards, lined up behind them.

Convinced they were going to pop up from the dead in Great Time, the Children of Father were obviously perfectly willing to temporarily check out of this not-so-great-time as martyrs; I wasn't willing to oblige them. I slammed on the brakes, managed to bring the car to a halt an inch or two from the closest of the Children, a teenage girl with a bad case of acne. Garth rolled around in the back. Bodies clambered up on the hood. A rock came out of the darkness, shattering the window and just missing my head, spraying glass over the back of my neck.

"Garth, upsy-daisy!" I shouted, slamming the gears into reverse and flooring the accelerator again. "Nap time is over! Wake up!"

"Yeah," Garth said groggily, pulling himself up on the back of the seat. "Where are—"

We hit a rut, silencing Garth and removing half the bodies from the hood. A pothole took care of the rest of the bodies, but behind me, flashlights jumping in their hands, more Children were running up the road.

"Hang on, Garth! When we stop, you've got to get out and run! Do you understand?!"

Garth made a sound which I hoped was a "yes" grunt. I reached over, opened the glove compartment and groped through its contents as I suddenly whipped the steering to the left. The rear of the car veered sharply, hit the frozen shoulder and took off. We soared through the air, crashing through tinder-dry brush in the raw forest on this side of the road. I kept the accelerator to the floor; the car landed, the tires bit, and we continued to shoot backwards, crashing through underbrush and knocking over small trees until we finally hit one large enough to stop us.

It felt as if my teeth were shaking loose and my brains being scrambled, but I had somehow managed to keep one hand on the steering wheel and the other in the glove compartment; now the tips of my fingers touched what I had been desperately hoping to find—a book of matches.

The air was suddenly filled with the acrid odor of gasoline.

My door had sprung open. I leaped out, ran around the car, and was relieved to see that Garth was at least halfway out—the pocket of his parka had caught on the door handle, and he was still too groggy to release it. I unhooked the pocket, helped him stand, then turned him in the general direction of the woods and pushed as hard as I could. Garth

wobbled and swayed, but he managed to stay on his feet—and he was walking away.

The lights were closing, converging on us from two directions.

I waited until Garth was perhaps fifteen yards away, then turned back to the car, squinted over the top of my glasses, and lit a match. It went out. I lit another, used it to light the matchbook; when it flared in my hand, I tossed it toward the ruptured gas tank, turned back and sprinted after Garth.

The car's gas tank had been close to three-quarters full, and when it went the concussion of the blast hit me in the small of the back like a giant fist, slamming me to the ground. Flaming pieces of metal and upholstery whistled through the air over my head, rained down to start dozens of little fires in the dry brush that surrounded us. I pushed myself to my feet, pulled the hood of my parka up over my head and ran on.

I found Garth sitting on the ground, legs splayed out in front of him, back braced against the trunk of a tree. His eyes were still glassy and half-closed, but at least he was conscious. I squatted down beside him, turned back and squinted through my smoked glasses at the conflagration I had started.

The car was a roaring inferno of orange-white flame that was rapidly spreading through the dry brush and leafless trees on either side to form a wall of fire between us and the Children of Father. The wind was blowing from our backs, carrying the fire toward the Children, who were beginning to beat a fairly hasty retreat, and the orchards on

the other side of the road. It looked like the beginnings of a fairly decent forest fire which could well reach and destroy the buildings of the commune itself.

"Hooee," Garth mumbled in a slurred voice.

"You took the word right out of my mind. Does this utterance indicate that you've decided to stay awake for a while?"

"I'm positively bright-eyed and bushy-tailed," Garth said as he tried to rise and promptly slid down the tree trunk. He made it on the second try. "Nice work, brother— whatever you did. I wish I'd been around to see it. The last thing I remember was feeling this prick in my shoulder."

"Oh, I was brilliant. Actually, losing the car may be for the best; we probably wouldn't have gotten far in it, anyway. Maybe the bad guys will think we burned up in it."

"Sure. Besides, who needs a car? How long a walk is it to Pennsylvania?"

"Oh, probably fifteen hundred miles or so, as the crow flies."

"That's good," Garth mumbled, pushing off the tree and starting to walk southeast. "I was afraid it might be farther."

As we walked through the night forest, Garth gradually became more alert. After a couple of miles I realized that he was softly whistling; when I recognized the tune as "We're Off to See the Wizard," I lunged sideways and drove my shoulder into his hip, pushing him into a bramble bush.

WE rode the rails for almost three weeks, two weeks longer than necessary, in order, as it were, to let things cool down and encourage any speculation that we might have died in the car explosion. We ate in hobo jungles, paying for our meals with a few of the gold coins I had taken from the commune. For the most part the other "bos" were friendly, and only once did Whisper have to dissuade potential thieves. During this time our symptoms did not become better; on the other hand, they didn't grow worse—and we were willing to settle for that. It gave us faint hope that the shadows in our spinal fluid were not growing larger.

We abandoned our mode of transportation when we reached Scranton, walked from the yards into the center of the city, where we found a coin dealer who was willing to put up with our smell long enough to examine our treasure with no questions asked. The coins turned out to be, literally, worth more than their weight in gold, since they were quite rare. We sold three-quarters of the bag's contents for twenty thousand dollars. We bought clothes and a few items we thought we might need for our assault on Ramdor. Then we checked into a hotel to clean up and change.

Happy time was over. With the dirt off me, I could see scales growing on the backs of my hands and feet; there were gossamer webs between all my toes, the beginnings of one between the thumb and forefinger on my left hand. We immediately checked out, bought a used van and headed for Centralia.

Viewed from the turnpike, there appeared to be a gray

cloud, in an otherwise azure sky, hanging over the section of the state where Ramdor was located. It jogged my memory, and I recalled reading how Centralia, along with a large area surrounding it, was situated over hundreds of miles of coal mines and raw seams that, almost two decades before, had somehow caught fire. The underground fire still raged, eating through the black, bituminous veins and arteries of the earth like cancer. Occasionally the fire would gnaw through the skin of the earth in and around Centralia, bursting out with blastfurnace heat approaching two thousand degrees, spewing sulphur and other poisonous gases into the air; whole houses had disappeared into sinkholes that suddenly opened overnight. It was a perfectly hellish place, and we were sure the Loges felt right at home.

A few discreet inquiries around town told us that Siegfried Loge had been able to buy up hundreds of acres north of Centralia— ostensibly for a dairy farm— some three years before, at what could only be described as fire sale prices. If the owner of Ramdor occasionally lost a dairy cow or two to the natural barbecue pits riddling his property, he did not seem overly concerned. His neighbors did not care at all; their only concern was with somehow finding a buyer for *their* property so that they could move out.

Loge had picked up a lot of cheap real estate, but reports were that he'd sunk a lot of money— probably the Pentagon's— into it. A lot of blasting and building had been going on, and this spooked the other residents, who could

not understand why anyone would want to build anything around Centralia. Also, it was said, some very strange people worked there.

We had no difficulty finding the place. A dirt road snaked off the main highway into a thick, slightly singed forest. In the distance was what looked to be an escarpment, and at the top of the escarpment, situated at the very lip, was a windowless building that gleamed in the sunlight like stainless steel. There was a heavy gate across the entrance to the dirt road, and at the gate was a brown-uniformed, black-gloved sentry. We kept going, driving around the perimeter.

A flimsy rail fence surrounded the property, and there was no sign of more guards, Warriors of the Father or otherwise. Although we passed a few meadows where, in spring and summer, diligent cows might be able to scare up a snack, Ramdor certainly did not look like a dairy farm; what it looked like was something Dante had thought up and then rejected in an early draft as too depressing. Although this part of Pennsylvania was in a heavy snow belt, there was no snow on the ground here; the earth was obviously too hot. There were numerous fissures, surrounded by wasted earth where escaping fire and poison gas had scoured away all the vegetation. In some places fire leaped out of the ground and licked like the tongue of a blowtorch at the sky; the air was filled with the smell of rotten eggs—hydrogen sulfide.

We parked the van in a ravine off the highway, some three miles from the main entrance. We prepared some

food over a portable butane stove, prepared backpacks, then got some much needed sleep. Some time after midnight we stepped over the rail fence onto the grounds of Ramdor, headed toward the escarpment.

Our plan, out of stark necessity, was starkly simple; snatch somebody. If Siegmund Loge turned out to be at Ramdor, we'd grab him and use a little gentle persuasion to force him to administer an antidote to Lot 56, if an antidote existed— or cook one up in a hurry, if it didn't. If Father wasn't there, we'd grab Siegfried or Auberlich for use as a bargaining chip, breakable, until the elder Loge was sufficiently inspired to halt the death working in us. Then, regardless of what Seigmund Loge did or didn't do, somebody was going to pay for Tommy's and Rodney Lugmor's deaths.

That was all there was to it.

Dawn found us in a copse of scrub evergreens on a knoll overlooking the main buildings of Ramdor. Considering his surroundings, Siegfried Loge had chosen the site well; it was a valley of black stone, which protected the wood-frame buildings from the fire beneath. The black-stone cliff rose from the valley floor like a periscope from hell, and at the top, inaccessible by any route we could see, was the windowless metal building we had glimpsed from the road. At the base of the cliff, built into it, was a ranch house, its stone front yard decorated with potted plants. A hundred yards to the left of the ranch house was a barn, and beyond

that a smaller building which could have been a bunk house. To the east was the forest; to the west, at the end of the valley, were green and brown patches of meadow.

If not for the owner, and if not for the ominous building—a new, or backup, Volsung—on top of the escarpment, it might all have seemed rather quaint.

"I'm really glad we have a plan," Garth said wryly as he peered down at the complex through his binoculars. Two brown-uniformed Warriors on horseback clattered past the ranch house, waved to a third Warrior standing guard at a gate. All three men wore what appeared to be machine pistols in shoulder holsters, standard dairy farmer issue.

"Of course," I replied as I adjusted the focus on my own binoculars. "Where would we be if we didn't have a plan?"

"About where we are right now, I'd say." There was anger in Garth's voice, but I knew that it was directed at the situation, not me. "Our plan is no plan. We don't even know what Siegfried Loge and his kid look like, what's more where to find them, what's more how to get past those men down there with guns, what's more—"

"You're a barrel of laughs this morning."

"We're not even certain any of the Loges are here."

"True."

"I think we should give some more thought to this."

"Fine. You can groom your new fur coat while you're thinking, and I'll tend to my webs and scales. This is the only place we have left to look. We need at least one Loge as a hostage, and I say that ranch house is the logical place to look first; after that, the building upstairs. They're not going

to come to us, Garth; we have to go to them. What else is there to say?"

"Nothing," Garth sighed.

"We'll go tonight. With luck, we'll get some cloud cover. I'll still be able to see."

"I won't."

"Neither will the guards. In the meantime, we'll sit tight and keep checking things out. Maybe one of the Loges will come out wearing a sign around his neck."

"Now *that's* a good plan."

"The place is staffed by freaks— if you'll pardon the expression," Garth observed around noon.

He was right. True to Siegfried Loge's sense of humor, or to his bizarre obsession with fantasy, the "dairy farm" was worked by genetic outtakes like myself; dwarves, fat ladies, midgets, and a variety of other men and women with congenital defects moved about the valley, in and out of the barn, performing various chores. I wondered if any of these people staffed the building on top of the cliff, thought not; there was nothing whimsical about what went on in the windowless building, and it was staffed by technicians of death. The dairy farm itself was literally just a sideshow.

"Yeah," I said. "As a matter of fact, I know the giant. His name's Hugo Fasolt. He was with the Statler Brothers' Circus. Not a particularly good omen. Hugo's not exactly the smartest giant you've ever met. He's also congenitally grumpy, and more than a little self-pitying."

"What giant?"

"The one on the tractor with the gorilla. They're just coming out of the woods."

Garth aligned his binoculars with mine, looked toward the east where the tractor and its odd riders were hauling a wagon loaded with firewood. "A big son-of-a-bitch," Garth said.

"Eight feet, three inches, four hundred and forty-four pounds when he was with Statler Brothers. And he was always on a diet."

"The gorilla the same one that doused you?"

"No. That one was a big silverback. This one's smaller, probably female."

"This one's wearing the same kind of screen and typewriter keyboard that you told me about, and she's flashing signals at the big guy. He's talking to her. You think the gorilla understands what he's saying?"

For some reason, the notion of talking gorillas bothered me far beyond the fact that one had almost killed me. I grunted noncommittally.

"The giant acts like she does," Garth persisted.

"All things considered," I said tightly, "the one that grabbed me was pretty articulate—and Lippitt as much as told me that it was the gorilla that told Loge I'd been inside the Volsung complex. But Lippitt has a jet-black sense of humor. Maybe a gorilla can be trained and conditioned to indicate simple responses, but I don't believe even the Loges can make one sentient, or teach it to communicate on a level approaching human language."

"Why not? They're doing a pretty good job of nudging you and me in the opposite direction."

"Hugo always talked to himself a lot," I replied, letting the binoculars drop around my neck and looking away.

"Damned if it doesn't look like the gorilla is carrying a portable cassette player."

"Yeah. Hugo always liked rock and roll."

It all reminded me too much of my mother's dream.

"Hey, pal. I'm down here."

The Warrior who had been standing at the gate outside the ranch house started, then glanced down at about the same time that I punched him in the groin. The breath exploded from his lungs as he crumpled to his knees, hands clasped between his legs. I spun clockwise to gain momentum, cracked him in the jaw with my elbow. I had a little bone on me, too.

Garth appeared beside me, carrying the length of rope I had retrieved during a premidnight reconnaissance of the barn. I relieved the Warrior of his machine pistol, checked the magazine; it was full. We tied the man up, and Garth dragged him back to the barn. He returned five minutes later.

"I gave him another rap on the jaw for insurance, Mongo. That one will stay put. Any others?"

"We have to assume there are always two by the gate out on the highway, but they're stationary. I've seen one night rider; he'll be back around in another twenty minutes or so."

Garth glanced nervously around him. "There doesn't

seem to be much security."

"There's probably a battalion of these jokers in the building up on the cliff, and they all may eat and sleep there. That's where the action is. This whole operation is just a little show for the benefit of the neighbors. What I'm worried about is an alarm system in the ranch house."

"That seems like a reasonable concern."

"You're the cop. How do we defeat it?"

Garth thought about it, shook his head. "We probably can't— not in the time we have. If this guy does have an alarm system, it'll be state-of-the-art. On the other hand, with the armed guards, he may not have felt the need for an alarm system in the house."

"What do you suggest?"

Garth shrugged, pushed through the gate. "Let's go. We'll find out soon enough if there's an alarm."

Garth, moving slowly and deliberately to avoid creaking steps, went up on the porch and began running his fingertips around the doorjamb. I stayed behind for a few moments to dig a hole next to one of the potted plants, buried Whisper. Then I joined my brother on the porch. Garth was on his knees, probing the keyhole with the lock pick he always carried in his wallet.

"Can you see?" I asked.

"I don't need to see to do this. What were you up to?"

"I planted Whisper in one of the pots. We've got this cannon, and I figure it's always a good idea to have some insurance against a rainy day."

"I'm glad to see you haven't lost your rather kinky sense

of humor, brother. If it rains on us any harder than it is now, we'll drown."

There was a soft click. Garth rose to his feet, sucked in a deep breath, turned the knob. The door opened. There was no sound from inside, and moonlight falling through the windows provided sufficient illumination for me to see that the huge living room was empty. I gripped Garth's hand and started to go inside.

Garth pulled me back outside, closed the door. "I know what the alarm system is," he said tightly, touching his broad nose.

"What?"

"A state-of-the-art gorilla. It washes with shampoo and uses cologne, but it's still a fucking gorilla."

"How do you know what a gorilla smells like?"

"I know what it doesn't smell like. Whatever's roaming around in there ain't no doggy, and it ain't no pussycat."

"Shit," I said with heartfelt sincerity. It was beginning to look like Volsung all over again. I debated whether or not to retrieve Whisper, decided against it. I still wanted that backup insurance, and I didn't plan on letting the gorilla get close enough for me to stick a knife in it. I took the machine pistol out of my belt, turned the knob and pushed the door open. "Let's go. Grab a handful of my parka and stay close."

"There's going to be a hell of a racket when you shoot that gorilla—which is what I assume you're going to do."

"If it comes to that, I'll hit the light switch; I've got my glasses in my pocket. We storm the barricades, and I blow

away anything that doesn't look crazy enough to be a Loge."

"Go," Garth said, resting a hand on my shoulder.

With the gun in my right hand and the glasses in my left, I slowly moved into the living room. After going a few feet, I stopped and looked around, peering into red-tinted shadows of blue and gray. There was no sign of any gorilla, and I proceeded toward a wide, winding staircase at the opposite end of the room.

Garth sniffed, and his hand suddenly tightened on my shoulder. "Behind you, brother," he said, and whirled me around.

I dropped to one knee and thrust the gun out in front of me. A large ball of black fur darted across the room, disappeared behind a sofa. A few seconds later a head poked out and two bloodshot eyes stared at me; the head quickly ducked back.

"What's happening?" Garth whispered tersely.

"She knows we're here. At the moment, she's lying low behind a sofa."

"She must have good night vision, too, because I think she knows you have a gun. She must know what it can do, because there's a strong smell of fear."

"Good," I said, keeping the gun leveled on the spot where the head had appeared. "I don't want to wake up Loge, and I don't want to shoot the animal unless I have to."

"Go?"

"Go." Without taking my eyes off the sofa, I reached behind me and grabbed hold of Garth's parka. "The

staircase is about four steps behind you. Take it slow and easy. I'll keep my eye on the gorilla."

Garth started to back up, pulling me after him— and then suddenly his parka jerked from my hand. There was a loud crash as he fell into the banister, a guttural, strangled cry. I wheeled around, saw my brother writhing on the floor. He'd torn loose a piece of the banister, and now the wood snapped in his hands like a matchstick. Saliva frothed on his lips as his body twitched, jerked, and banged around on the floor.

"Garth!"

Lights came on, blinding me and burning my eyes. I whipped on my glasses, spun around and fell on my back as I heard a muffled *paddy-pad-pad* coming up behind me. I had no choice now, and I squeezed off three shots between my upraised knees— aiming at a spot I estimated would be just above the animal's head. Then I lowered the gun a foot and waited; the instant I felt hot breath or a paw on me, the gorilla was dead.

My vision cleared in time for me to see the beast beating a hasty retreat back behind the sofa.

Getting to my feet, keeping the gun aimed in the general direction of the sofa, I turned my attention back to Garth. There was nothing

I could do except grind my teeth in frustration, nothing I could do to bring him out of the seizure or ease the pain of his horribly cramped muscles; if he got hold of me in this state, he could snap me like he'd snapped the banister.

I watched as Garth struggled to get to his feet. His eyes

rolled and he fell down again, flopping like some broken thing, tearing at his clothes.

Paddy-pad-pad.

Spinning around, I aimed the gun directly at the gorilla's chest. This time I had her—and she knew it; there was no time or place to retreat. She came to an abrupt halt a few paces away, and we stared at each other. A chill ran through me as I looked into the eyes; they were yellowish and bloodshot, but they were also eerily human—or near human. We stayed like that for a few seconds, and then she reached a leathery hand up to the keyboard-screen device strapped to her chest.

NO FUCKING KILL PLEASE

It seemed this gorilla studied from the same vocabulary list as the one I'd run into at Volsung. "Then get out of my fucking face!" I snapped. "Back off and I won't shoot."

FUCKING THANKS

She backed away across the room, meekly squatted down in a corner.

Suddenly the ceiling above my head shook with heavy footsteps; someone very large was running toward the stairs. I turned, went down on one knee, and used both hands to aim the gun at the top of the stairs. I might have

qualms about killing dumb— or even not-so-dumb— animals, but I had no qualms whatever about killing dumb humans who were trying to kill me.

With some exceptions.

"Mongo!"

"Drop the shotgun, Hugo," I said in a flat voice, trying hard to ignore the fact that both barrels were lined up on my chest. "You and I were friends once, and I hope we still are. The man on the floor is my brother, and we're in trouble. We could use your help.

I haven't got time for explanations, except to say that you're mixed up in some bad business here. I will kill you if you force me to. Don't."

The giant shook his head angrily, and his long, brown hair rippled across his shoulders. His brown eyes narrowed, and his lips drew back from his teeth. "I should be the one saying those things to you, Mongo," Hugo Fasolt said in his deep, rumbling voice. "This is a shotgun I've got on you."

"If you pull the trigger, we both die. I'm a good shot."

Paddy-pad-pad.

There'd been one gorilla too many for me to keep track of, and now long, hairy, powerful arms wrapped themselves around me, squeezing my arms to my sides. The gorilla with fur whacked the gun out of my hand. Then she lifted me in the air, turned me over, and casually dropped me on my head.

GRADUALLY, I struggled up through what felt like a sea of foul-smelling cotton to consciousness. I was lying on my back on stone, felt cold, clammy, and sleepy. Also, my head and neck hurt like hell. I opened my eyes to slits, immediately closed them again when light lanced into them.

"Garth?"

"Here, Mongo." Garth's voice came to me from somewhere just behind and above my head. His large hand felt very warm as it touched my forehead. "You all right?"

"Yeah, except that I can't see in this light. Any sign of my glasses?"

"No. What happened to you? You've got a bump on your head the size of a coconut."

"That damn gorilla dropped me on it. I should have shot her when I had the chance."

"I had a seizure, didn't I?"

"A seizure and a half. You okay?"

"Yes." He was quiet for some time, then added: "That was the worst one yet. I'm sorry, Mongo. I guess I'm responsible for us being here."

"That's ridiculous," I said, pushing his hand aside and sitting up. Pain flashed though my skull, but my head stayed on my shoulders, so I assumed nothing was broken. "It was just a lousy plan. Where's 'here'?"

Garth pulled me to my feet, then began to chuckle. "Take a guess."

"Come on, Garth. Damn it, I'm really not in the mood."

He chuckled again. "Oh, be a sport. This is Ramdor,

right? We're the guests of the Loges, those masters of fun and fantasy, right? Now, give it some thought and tell me where we are."

"A dungeon," I answered with a sigh.

"There, now; I knew you'd get the answer. It comes complete with stone walls, floor, and ceiling; the cells have genuine rusting iron bars, and it's dank and gloomy. There are blazing torches on the wall, although they may have fudged a bit there because I think they're gas-burning. There's no sign of any rats, but I haven't given up hope. It's really neat."

"Yeah. It sounds like a real sight for sore eyes."

"There are two other cells like ours, empty at the moment. There's a narrow stone corridor outside that ends at a heavy wooden door about twenty yards to our left. At the other end of the corridor is a room with walls of polished black stone that looks like marble; there's a television monitor and floodlight mounted in the ceiling, an unlit torch and short sword mounted in brackets on the wall."

"They should have put us there."

"I'm not sure what it's supposed to be. There's a knobless door cut into the rear wall, but it's open on this end. I don't like the look of it."

I turned my head to the left at the sound of the wooden door opening; it creaked quite nicely. Three sets of footsteps approached. "Company?"

"Yep. A fat, mean-looking kid who probably thinks he's a badass because he wears a machine pistol in a holster; he's got a pimple on the end of his nose, and he doesn't

like the fact that I just told

you. There's a solid, tall guy in a Warrior uniform, and he probably is a bad-ass. The third guy is about my height, angular, hawk nose, and pale eyes. He's wearing a Bayreuth Eighty-three T-shirt and a Mets baseball cap. Good morning, motherfuckers. Kill any kids today?"

"I'm Siegfried Loge— "

"The Mets cap," Garth interjected.

"The kid killer."

Epithets didn't seem to have much effect on Siegfried Loge. "Why are you keeping your eyes closed, Dr. Frederickson?" he asked calmly. His voice was slightly nasal, airy.

"I'm trying to take a nap."

"Your eyes are very photosensitive, aren't they, Dr. Frederickson?"

"Yes," Garth answered. I slapped his arm, and he put his hand on my shoulder. "They'll find out anyway, Mongo."

"Indeed, we will," Siegfried Loge said.

"My brother needs the glasses he was wearing, Loge. He can't see without them."

"Give him the glasses, Obie."

"Fuck him, Dad." Dear, sweet Auberlich. "Let him be blind."

"All right, Obie," the elder Loge replied casually. "And you can lead him wherever he has to go."

There was a silence that lasted a few seconds, then Garth squeezed my shoulder. "Put out your hand, Mongo."

I did, and felt the smoked glasses drop into my palm. I put them on, looked around. The "dungeon," including the sinister-looking black cell and the pimple on the end of Obie Loge's nose, was as Garth had described it to me.

The Warrior standing next to Loge was staring at me impassively. He had a distinctly military bearing exuding quiet self-confidence, and he looked rock solid. Like the other Warriors, he wore black gloves, and I assumed he had bone-blades on the sides of his hands. His dark hair was cropped very short, and his eyes glinted with intelligence. He held his head high, his broad shoulders back; he would easily have blended into the scenery at West Point.

Siegfried Loge, in his sneakers, jeans, T-shirt, and baseball cap, looked more like the third-string pitcher on a local saloon softball team than the scion of an ultra-brilliant scientific family, and Auberlich Loge looked like what he was— a fat teenage thug. Both Loges had the kind of pale hooded eyes that I cross the street to avoid.

Siegfried Loge absently fingered the medallion around his neck, a gold wire sculpture of the four-ring symbol the Warriors had emblazoned on their shoulder patches. "Do you know where Lippitt is?" he asked me.

"Damn," I said, patting my pockets. "I seem to have misplaced him."

The man with the close-set, pale eyes smiled wanly. "What's the most terrible thing that comes into your mind when you hear the word 'torture,' Dr. Frederickson?"

"Being forced to sit through *Gotterdammerung*."

"They don't know," the Warrior said in a flat voice as he continued to study Garth and me. "Even if they made a joint decision to split up, Lippitt wouldn't tell these two where he was going, or what he planned to do." He paused, added softly: "A very dangerous man."

"What do you think of them, Stryder?"

"I don't know what you mean, sir," the Warrior replied without looking at Loge.

"You wouldn't think one dwarf and his big brother could wreak so much havoc or be so elusive, would you? I guess it's a good thing they decided to come to us, or we'd never have found them."

"I take full responsibility for the failure of my men," the Warrior replied evenly, still not looking at Loge.

"Good," Loge said curtly. "That's what I wanted to hear. On occasion, you can be rather arrogant. I wanted to hear you admit failure." He paused, addressed Garth and me. "This is Stryder London, gentlemen. He's been described as the 'ultimate warrior,' and he leads our security forces. I find it rather amusing that the ultimate warrior and all his merry men couldn't stop you two from wrecking a multimillion dollar operation in Nebraska and burning down half the state of Wisconsin. We've got a great security force, all right; it took a half-crazy giant and a gorilla to finally catch you as you were on the way up to my bedroom."

"I wouldn't stand too close to the cell, sir," Stryder London said drily.

Loge ignored him as he glanced back and forth between

Garth and me. "It's amazing that it should come down to the two of you. Jake Bolesh should be around to see what an incredible contribution he made when he tried to kill you with those injections. You may be the only two people in the world who could have survived this long, and we have to find out what it is in your genetic makeup that allows for a controlled reaction. That's the breakthrough. There are the answers to a lot of questions in your bodies."

"What are you trying to do, Loge?" I asked. "Is it a biological weapon for the Pentagon? Spell it out. What's the point?"

"Point?" Siegfried Loge removed his baseball cap and ran his fingers through a tangle of thick, wavy black hair. Then he began to laugh; the laughter began as a chuckle, but quickly built up to a kind of nasal bray that grated against my senses like fingernails scraping a blackboard. Obie Loge glanced uncertainly at his father, then also began to laugh—but nervously. Stryder London's face revealed nothing, and he continued to stare straight ahead.

"Why does there have to be a point?" Loge continued when he had finally managed to bring his laughter under control. "Why can't science just *be fun*?"

Now Garth decided to take matters—in this instance, Siegfried Loge's neck—in hand. In a blur of motion, his right arm shot through the bars and his fingers closed around Siegfried Loge's neck. The scientist's eyes went wide and his face started to turn blue as Garth, smiling grimly, squeezed his windpipe.

Stryder London reacted almost instantaneously,

stepping forward and jabbing stiff fingers up into Garth's exposed armpit, attacking the nerve cluster there that controlled the arm and hand. Obie Loge was shouting obscenities as he engaged in the futile exercise of trying to pry loose Garth's fingers from around his father's neck.

Grabbing the bars for support, I kicked Obie Loge in the groin with sufficient force to ruin his sex life for at least a week. He dropped like a stone, mewling in a high whine as he rolled around on the floor and clutched at his testicles. I started to go for London, but the Warrior had already managed to break Garth's grip and had stepped back, out of reach. Loge had collapsed to the floor next to his groaning son and was holding his throat with both hands.

"Nice work, brother," I said.

"Likewise, brother," Garth replied as he shook and rubbed his arm to restore feeling.

Loge swallowed hard, with obvious difficulty, then took a hand away from his throat and pointed a trembling finger at Garth. "Blind him," he rasped. "Do it right now!"

The basic Siegfried Loge: gone was the soft-spoken gentility, and the nasal laughter was just an echo in the bizarre in-house prison he had built. All that was left was the mad, naked cruelty of a man who tortured animals and men, and ordered children murdered. I stepped closer to Garth.

"London, did you hear me!" Loge continued. "I want to see and hear that man's eyeballs pop! Get in there and do it now!"

"No," Stryder London said evenly.

Ignoring his stricken son, Loge struggled to his feet. His face was livid as he confronted the Warrior, and his hoarse voice cracked. "You do what I tell you to do, damn it! What's the matter?! You afraid to go in there?"

"No, sir," London replied calmly, his voice very soft. "I'm a soldier, not a torturer. I did warn you about standing too close to the cell."

"I'm giving you a fucking order!"

"I don't take orders from you, sir. Your father is my commander, and I won't do anything I feel is against his wishes or interests. If he ordered me to step into the black cell, I would; in the meantime, I must carry out my duties as I see them. I think you forget the value of these men."

"Why don't *you* step in here, kid killer?" I said to Loge. "I'll kick *your* balls up far enough to open your throat."

Loge stood trembling with fury, and for a moment I thought he was going to attack Stryder London; I would have liked to see that. Instead, he abruptly began to laugh. "Some bodyguard you are, London," he said contemptuously as he hauled his son to his feet, pushed the teenager toward the door. "Let's get out of here, super-soldier."

"In a minute, sir," London said as he studied Garth. "I have to find out something." He stepped up to the bars, motioned to my brother. "Come here, please."

"You want to talk to me at close range, London, get rid of your gun and step in here. That will put us on a little more equal footing."

"I won't hurt you, Frederickson. If that were my intention,

I'd have done it while you were choking Dr. Loge. I could have maimed or killed you in seconds, and you know it."

"Yeah, but you didn't know then how cranky this fruitcake was going to get. He said science should be fun; I wanted to run an experiment to find out how long a fruitcake can go without breathing."

"What I want is for you to try to blind me. If you can do it, it's done. There'll be no retaliation."

Garth and I exchanged glances. There was silence; even Obie Loge had stopped groaning, and was staring, shocked, at the Warrior. Stryder London was serious.

"Why?" Garth asked quietly.

"Your reflexes appear to be extraordinary. You must be kept alive, and as long as you're alive you pose a threat to the personnel here at Ramdor. It's my job to protect these people, and—as you noticed—scientists are not always as cautious as they should be. I need to test your combat skills, and in exchange for your cooperation I'm offering you the opportunity to blind me."

Garth shook his head. "You go play your games with somebody else. I've got nothing against you, pal. I'll save my energies for those people I do have something against."

London stared at Garth for some time in silence. When he did finally speak, his tone was curt, edged with anger. "People like you are a big part of what's gone wrong with this country, Frederickson. Both of you; neither of you thinks straight, and so you make the wrong decisions for the wrong reasons—usually out of sheer sentimentality. Your dwarf brother, for whatever reason, couldn't bring himself to

kill a gorilla; he couldn't even bring himself to kill a man who had a shotgun leveled on his chest, simply because that man had once been a friend. If he had been able to do these killings, Dr. Loge and his son might now be your captives— instead of the other way around. Do you see my point?"

"Uh, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure? Do unto others as you would have them do unto you?"

"You're a fool."

"I'm sorry; I'm trying as hard as I can to understand your point. A stitch in time saves nine? When in Ramdor, kill, kill, kill?"

"I am your enemy."

"Be what you want to be. What I said was that I have nothing against you."

"You have an opportunity now to neutralize an enemy, without risk. It's only simple logic that you take the opportunity. If you need emotion to make you act in a logical manner, consider that I would have killed your nephew and his friend without a second thought, if my first thought had been that the act was necessary."

"That does it, London; I'm not going to invite you to any of my parties." Garth nodded in the direction of the father and son standing by the open wooden door at the end of the corridor. "If you want to see what effect the shit Jake Bolesh put into me has had on my nervous system, send those two in here."

London shook his head, then abruptly turned and walked quickly out of the dungeon. The Loges followed, slamming

the heavy door shut behind them.

"He seems impressed with your speed," I said as we both stared at the closed door. "Me, too."

Garth turned to me, a haunted expression on his face. "It doesn't stop. We're still changing, aren't we?"

I sighed, nodded as I absently scratched the scales on the back of my right hand.

The Loges found a way to get in their licks without fatally damaging the goods.

They returned an hour later, by themselves. The tranquilizer darts they shot us with contained a little extra something— probably scopolamine, to enhance the effects of the electronic choke collars we found around our necks when we woke up. The collars were made of leather laced with wires and radio-controlled electronic components that caused the wires to contract in varying degrees in response to the movement of a joystick on a black metal control box; the farther back the joystick was pulled, the tighter the collar grew.

For an hour the Loges had at us, occasionally trading control boxes, choking us into unconsciousness a half dozen times. Finally they got tired of it and went away.

The experience, as my mother would say, took a lot of the starch out of us.

DÉJÀ VU.

X-rays. Clickety-click-click.

For some reason, Garth and I had been separated for the biological testing. Each of us had been assigned a keeper with a control box; Garth had drawn the gorilla.

"Hugo, what's a friendly giant like you doing in a place like this?"

Too big to fit in any of the chairs in the small examination room, the eight-foot giant was seated cross-legged on the floor, his back against the wall and the black box in his lap. His head was bowed slightly, and he wouldn't look at me. "I don't feel like joking, Mongo," he rumbled. "I don't like having to guard you like this."

"Who the fuck is joking?" I snapped. I was rapidly losing patience with Siegfried Loge and his minions. I managed to twist my arm around under the leather straps that held me to the table, held up the back of my hand; the scales glistened in the fluorescent light. "You think this is a *joke*, Hugo? You think what's happened to my eyes is a *joke*? Those crazy Loges are going to kill Garth and me when this is finished. You were my friend. Why should you help them harm the two of us?"

Hugo raised his head, brushed his long hair away from his eyes, and looked at me. "They said you'd say strange things, Mongo. It won't do you any good. We've all been briefed."

"*What?*"

"I know what happened."

I glanced around at the X-ray technician, who was

putting another plate in the machine suspended over my head. Except for her full beard, she was an attractive woman with a pleasant manner. "Do you know what he's talking about?" I asked.

"Please hold still, Dr. Frederickson," she said, smiling sweetly. "We understand, and we don't hold anything against you. Your brother should have known better, though."

"Uh, Hugo; refresh my memory. What happened?"

"Why do you want me to tell you what you already know?"

"Humor me. It helps to pass the time."

Hugo shrugged resignedly. "You were at Dr. Loge's first clinic, in New York City—"

"What?"

"You asked me to tell you what happened."

"Yeah; sorry. Go ahead. What was I doing in this New York clinic?"

"The clinic was for people like you and me with congenital birth defects. They did the same things there as they do here at Ramdor."

"Jesus Christ, Hugo, you think Ramdor is a *clinic*?"

"It is a clinic. The research Dr. Loge does is incredibly important."

"Research. Tell me, Hugo, are tests like this run on you people, too?"

"Of course. All the time."

"Shit," I mumbled to myself. "Loge is trying to bring Lot Fifty-Seven in through the back door."

"What?"

"Nothing. What's Garth's congenital birth defect?"

"He doesn't have one. He became accidentally infected when he tried to help you inject yourself with the experimental serum you'd stolen."

"The experimental serum I'd stolen. Oh, yeah."

"I'm surprised at you, Mongo. You were told that the serum wasn't anywhere near ready for human experimentation, and you were warned that it could have very dangerous side effects. But you got impatient— as if being a dwarf is any worse than the defects the rest of us suffer from. You stole the serum and, with your brother's help, tried to treat yourself. Now it turns out that the condition you and your brother are in may be contagious. That's why we have to run these tests, even against your will. We can't run the risk that you and your brother will infect innocent people."

"Aren't you and the others here afraid that you'll catch something?"

It was some time before Hugo answered. When he spoke, his bass voice was soft, sad. "For most of us here, our lives were over the moment we were born. Suffering in hospitals, or being forced to earn a living by allowing ourselves to be gawked at in freak shows and roadside carnivals, can't really be called living. We have nothing to lose. The least we can do is make sure that innocent children don't end up like us because of something you and your brother are carrying."

"Hugo, my friend, it's all bullshit; everything you and the

others here have been told is bullshit. The truth has been turned on its head, and you're all looking down the ass end. The truth is that the Loges are trying to make the whole world into one big freak show."

"Dr. Loge said you'd lie."

Blood tests. Ouch.

"Hugo, are you still a religious man?"

"Yes," the giant replied, apparently puzzled by the question. "Why shouldn't I be?"

"You used to be a Catholic."

"I'm still a Catholic."

"You are?"

"Of course."

"You used to believe in the Trinity— Father, Son, and Holy Ghost."

"Right," Hugo replied impatiently. "What are you getting at, Mongo? Why do you want to argue about religion?"

"I don't want to argue about your religion," I said, wincing as the technician, a fat lady who'd give Hugo a run for his money on the scales, slipped a needle into a vein for what seemed the fiftieth time; I had to be running out of blood. "I want to find out more about it. I want to know when the Trinity became a Quadrangle. There are two Fathers now, right?"

Hugo's eyes glinted dangerously. "You've changed, Mongo. You never used to make fun of people's religion."

"Siegmond Loge: don't you believe he's a god, or a new messiah?"

"Who's Siegmund Loge?"

PET— positron emission test— scan. Whirrrr.

"How long have you been here, Hugo?"

"A little over two years."

"Don't you ever read a newspaper, or watch the news on television?" "I'm not interested in what goes on in the rest of the world."

"What goes on here?"

"Research that, one day, will eliminate gigantism, dwarfism, mental retardation, and dozens of other genetic defects. You know that, Mongo. You're just trying to fool with me."

"You ever see a tall, elderly guy with long, wavy white hair walking around here?"

"No."

"That's Siegmund Loge— this Loge's father, the grandfather of the kid."

Hugo's response was a disinterested shrug.

"What about Siegfried Loge? Do you think *he's* some kind of god or messiah?"

Hugo snorted; it was a most impressive sound. "Of course not. That would be ridiculous— and blasphemous."

"Hugo, what if I told you that Garth and I just came from a religious commune where they worship Siegmund Loge as God?"

"I'm not sure I'd believe you. Even if it's true, what difference would it make? Dr. Loge can't be responsible for what his father does, or for what some people believe

about him."

"They have a solution for congenital defects, too. They believe Siegmund Loge is going to wipe out everyone in the world who isn't genetically perfect. Oh, and while he's at it, he's also going to eliminate everyone who isn't white and fundamentalist Christian."

"So what? They're obviously crazy; there are a lot of crazy people in the world. That's their problem."

"No, my friend, it's also our problem; your problem. There's a direct link between that commune and Ramdor. It was guarded by a man wearing the same kind of uniform as the guards around this place. Stryder London is their commander; they're called Warriors of Father. London answers to Siegmund Loge— and only to Siegmund Loge."

That got me an even louder snort. "Stop it, Mongo. You think I'm stupid? Stryder is just the head of security at Ramdor."

"Why does a clinic need armed security guards?"

"To discourage people from coming around and gawking at us. Also, there's a lot of expensive equipment here. That machine you've got your head in is worth more than a million dollars."

"Where does the money come from to buy the equipment?"

"Who cares? I'm just glad they have the equipment."

"What they're doing here is developing a biochemical weapon such as the world has never seen, Hugo. What's happening to Garth and me is what Siegfried Loge *wants* to

happen to other people who are targeted. You're helping him and his father find out why it works so well in us, without turning us into instant jelly. International covenants are being broken, Hugo. This kind of research, this kind of weapon, is banned in this country, and in every civilized nation in the world. *That's* what you're involved in, my friend, and that's as simple as I can put it."

Hugo leaned forward. His face was flushed as he wagged a huge finger in my face. "I'm tired of this, Mongo. I don't want to hear any more."

"I'll tell you another connection between the commune and this place, Hugo. The members bring in items— some of them extremely valuable— to contribute to Siegfried Loge, who must have quite a collection of loot by now. They think they're bringing offerings to Siegmund Loge, and they view it as a kind of religious rite. Garth and I got the address for this place off a big poster taped to a wall in a room where they pack and ship the stuff here. Did you know that?"

"It's a lie!"

"It's the truth! Look around you, Hugo. *Look* at this place; look at *you* and the others around here! He's using you for genetic research, but you and the surroundings also keep him and his kid highly amused; you feed their obsessions. Ramdor is right out of Wagner or Tolkien."

"No *more*, Mongo!" His voice was so loud that it echoed inside the steel cylinder around my head. "I don't want to hear it! You're upsetting me!"

I winced when I saw him reach for the black box, sighed

with relief when he took his hand away. "Would you choke me just because you don't want to hear what I have to say?" I asked quietly.

Hugo lowered his head. "I'm sorry, Mongo. I don't want to hurt you, but I don't want to listen to any more crazy talk. Dr. Loge warned me; the serum you took has affected your mind."

"All right, Hugo. Have it your way." Hugo was hopeless. "Is Garth all right?"

"Yes."

"Have you seen him?" "Yes."

"Why did they split us up?"

"Just to save time with the testing. You're too suspicious, Mongo. We're just trying to help you. You'll thank Dr. Loge and the rest of us when you get better and you're not crazy anymore."

Urine and stool specimens. Silence.

"Hugo, nothing's happening. It must be anxiety." "We're in no hurry, Mongo," Hugo replied from the other side of the thin partition. "We'll just wait until something does happen." "We're in the building on top of the cliff, right?" "Right."

"You have the run of the whole place?"

"No, only these test laboratories. I work on the dairy farm. Why?" "Because I'm certain that if you could see everything that goes on in this place, you'd believe my story."

"Mongo, I thought we agreed that you weren't going to

talk crazy anymore."

"Okay, okay. What's with the gorilla?"

"Gollum?"

"That's her name?"

"Yes."

"Gollum's the name of a particularly loathsome creature out of J. R. R. Tolkien. Doesn't that pique your curiosity?"

"Not really." Hugo sounded bored. "Can she really understand what people say?" "Of course," the giant replied, sounding surprised at the question. "And she can talk back with her word screen. She's really quite smart; sometimes I think she's as smart as I am."

That, I wasn't going to touch. "Who made her that way?"

"Dr. Loge."

"How?"

"I don't really know. Drugs, I suppose. It's the result of his research into cures for mental retardation. If he can do that with a gorilla, can you imagine what he'll be able to do with humans?"

"Oh, it boggles the mind; it would boggle anyone's mind, which leads me to ask why nobody— nobody at all — in the rest of the world scientific community seems to know a single thing about what's going on here. Do you find that strange, Hugo?"

"What do I know about these things?"

He had a point. "Okay, Hugo, forget everything else I said about the Loges. Just consider what Loge has done with this gorilla, and with the other one I met—"

"There are no other gorillas like Gollum, Mongo. Don't

start."

"Fine. Just consider Gollum. Twenty-four hours after Siegfried Loge took that gorilla for a walk out of here, he'd be nominated for every scientific prize there is. He'd be hailed as one of the greatest scientists who ever lived—"

"He is one of the greatest scientists who ever lived."

"True. But, on the strength only of what he's accomplished with the gorilla, he'd be famous, and he'd be rich. They'd probably turn Harvard over to him for his research; he certainly wouldn't have to hang out over a bunch of burning coal mines, or have you people leading around a few scraggly cows. Now, why hasn't a word about that gorilla appeared in any scientific journal? Why doesn't Loge take the gorilla out of here and show the world what he's been able to accomplish, Hugo?"

"I don't know, and I don't care. Dr. Loge isn't trying to help gorillas; he's trying to help people like you and me. What's your point? What does Gollum have to do with anything?"

"Jesus Christ, Hugo! I'm trying to reason with you!"

"You don't have to shout, Mongo. And please don't curse. Have you moved your bowels yet?"

"I'm telling you that teaching a fucking gorilla to communicate like that is one of the greatest scientific achievements in the history of humankind, and Siegfried Loge treats her like a toy! He doesn't *give* a damn about the gorilla, Hugo, because he and his father are cooking up some juice that could fuck up the entire human race! Are you *listening* to me, Hugo?!"

"Mongo, aren't you finished in there yet?"

Galvanic skin reaction tests.

Zap-twitch.

"Hugo, my friend, they've got all of you here by the emotional balls, but they're also shoveling out enough bullshit to cover the planet. Do you know what evolution is?"

"No. I just know it's something I'm not supposed to believe in."

"Evolution is what's made all of us— normal or not— people, and that process has taken place over millions of years. We've gone through many stages, and there are traces of those stages still left in our genes— our DNA."

"I told you I'm not supposed to believe in evolution."

"The Loges are trying to find a way to *unmake* us, Hugo. Can you understand, Hugo? Siegfried Loge isn't searching for a cure to genetic defects, he wants to find a way to inflict massive genetic damage. What he's doing endangers every animal and plant on the face of the earth. *That's* why everything is being kept such a big secret!"

"*Enough*, Mongo!" Hugo snapped. "I've had enough! I won't listen to any more of your crazy stories!"

Sonograms.

Beep-beep.

"What's a friendly gorilla like you doing in a place like this?"

FUCKING WATCHING YOU

"A narrow interpretation of my question, to say the least.
Can you really understand what I'm saying?"

FUCKING YES

"You know, you're a very foul-mouthed gorilla."

?

"'Fucking' isn't a nice word. It's unladylike."

MUST ALWAYS USE FUCKING WORD

"Why?"

MAKES MASTER FUCKING LAUGH

"Master is Siegfried Loge?"

FUCKING YES

"That figures. How did Loge teach you? What did he do to make you so smart?"

That got an unexpected reaction. Up to that point, primarily because of the bright expressiveness of the animal's yellow eyes and her facility with the screen-keyboard, talking to Gollum had seemed almost like talking to a human in a gorilla costume. Not any longer. For a fleeting instant the light in her eyes faded as if someone had turned a dimmer switch. She cowered, bared her teeth, and a rumbling snarl worked its way out of her chest.

Fearful that the gorilla might hit the joystick on the control box and strangle me by accident, I arched under the restraining straps and looked back at the technician—the fat lady. The woman shot me a hostile glance, then carefully stepped away from the controls of the machine and approached the gorilla. She reached out her hand, tentatively stroked the animal's shoulder. For a moment I was afraid Gollum was going to bite the technician, or literally knock her head off—but the animal gradually began to calm down.

Finally Gollum snorted, reached into a canvas shoulder bag she carried with her and took out a portable cassette player. Refusing even to look at me, she put the earphones over her head and turned on the machine.

"You upset her," the fat lady said to me accusingly.

"What can I say to upset you, lady? All of you here seem happy as clams, but that's because you don't have the

slightest idea of what's going on. Can I tell you?"

"You can't tell me anything, Dr. Frederickson," the woman snapped, the eyes in the great folds of flesh that was her face glinting with annoyance. "I'm not deaf; I heard the conversations between you and Hugo, and I thought Hugo was very patient with you. Paranoids can really get to you after a time, the way they keep pestering you with their stupid fantasies."

"Is that what I am? Paranoid?"

"It's the drug you stole and injected yourself with. I understand that, and it's a good thing. If it weren't for my psychiatric training, I'd have slapped you in the face for what you said about Siegmund Loge."

"You've met Siegmund Loge?!" That got a good spike out of the microphone monitoring my heart.

"Yes. A number of times."

"He comes here?"

"Yes— to this facility. Hugo's just a farmhand, and Siegmund Loge doesn't bother himself with that part of the operation. That's just to keep the patients occupied."

"'Patients.' I love it. What do you do here?"

"What you see me doing. I run tests on the patients— myself included. As you can see, I have a glandular problem."

"Have you been all through this building?"

"No, and don't you start with me. Siegfried Loge and that creepy kid of his may be no great shakes in the personality department, but Siegmund Loge is an absolute wonder. He could *never* be involved in anything that was wrong or

hurtful to anyone. He's the kindest, warmest, gentlest human being I've ever met. With people and things in the world the way they are today, it's no wonder some young people think he's holy."

Eye tests.

Howl.

There was no way my eyes could be examined without shining lights in them. It didn't kill me, despite a profound desire, but I must have done a lot of screeching, and I kept passing out.

The fourth time I woke up, the testing was over and I was apparently being allowed a rest period. There were no technicians around, and I was still strapped into the chair where they'd conducted the eye exam. The gorilla was leaning back against the wall, the cassette player cradled in her lap and the earphones over her head. She had a contented expression on her face, and occasionally she would waggle a leathery finger in time— I presumed— to whatever she was hearing.

"What are you listening to?" I asked loudly.

The question got no response on her keyboard— but she did glance at me out of the corners of her eyes. I motioned for her to remove the earphones. After some hesitation and a loud, impatient smacking of her lips, she did so.

?
WHAT DO YOU FUCKING WANT

"What are you listening to, Gollum?"

FUCKING MOZART

"Mozart?"

I SAID FUCKING MOZART

"You like fu... you like Mozart?"

MUCH FUCKING YES

"So do I. May I listen with you?"

She thought about it, finally heaved her chest in what I assumed was an indulgent gorilla sigh. She unplugged the earphone jack, and the strains of *The Magic Flute* filled the air.

"What else do you like besides Mozart?" I asked after a few minutes.

JUST LIKE FUCKING MOZART

"Why?"

MAKE GOLLUM NOT FUCKING SAD

"You mean Mozart makes you happy?"

**MEAN MOZART MAKE GOLLUM
NOT FUCKING SAD**

"You're sad when you don't listen to Mozart?"

FUCKING YES

"Why?"

FUCKING WRONG

"It's wrong to feel sad, or wrong to listen to Mozart?"

GOLLUM FUCKING WRONG

"I don't understand."

She stared at me hard, and suddenly her yellow eyes were filled with— a profound sadness. Her thick lips

trembled, and I had the distinct impression that she was debating whether or not, or how, to reply. Suddenly the fingers of both hands flew over the keyboard.

I stared at the screen in disbelief, a lump rising in my throat, tears welling in my eyes.

**GOLLUM MADE FUCKING WRONG
GOLLUM HAVE FUCKING PERSON FEELINGS
GOLLUM NOT A FUCKING PERSON
GOLLUM NOT A FUCKING GORILLA
GOLLUM FUCKING WRONG**

"Oh, my God," I whispered in a choked voice. "You understand that?"

**GOLLUM FUCKING WRONG
GOLLUM NOT FUCKING STUPID**

And she put her earphones back on.

CAT Scan.

Mmmmmmm.

Whatever else they were finding in my body, the machines would have blown out if they'd been able to measure rage. I was getting seriously pissed.

"Loge hurt you very badly when he made you wrong, didn't he?" I asked quietly.

Gollum studied me for a long time from beneath her

thick, bony brows. Finally the answer came.

FUCKING YES

"I'm sorry I upset you before. I didn't mean to."

FUCKING OKAY

"I'm also sorry Loge hurt you."

?

**FUCKING WHY
MASTER NOT FUCKING HURT YOU**

"He has hurt me, and he is hurting me and my brother, but that isn't the point. I'm saying that I'm sorry he hurt you. You didn't deserve it. Neither do Garth and I deserve to be hurt."

?

WHY MASTER HURT GOLLUM AND FUCKING PEOPLE

"Because Loge is a bad man."

?

MASTER IS FUCKING WRONG

"Loge is bad— he's evil. He likes to hurt. That's much worse than being wrong." I glanced over my shoulder, saw that the technician— a surly midget— was sitting by the controls across the room, thoroughly absorbed in an issue of *Hustler*. I turned back to Gollum, lowered my voice, "Will you let me go so that these people can't hurt me any more?"

She tensed, quickly reached for the keyboard.

**FUCKING NO
FUCKING CHOKE**

"Why not, since you know they're making me wrong and hurting me?"

**HURT FUCKING GOLLUM MORE
MASTER KILL FUCKING GOLLUM**

"Okay."

**GOLLUM SORRY YOU MADE FUCKING WRONG
GOLLUM SORRY MASTER FUCKING HURT YOU
GOLLUM SORRY SHE DROP YOU ON FUCKING HEAD**

I smiled at her, shrugged. "It's fucking okay."

GI series: Injections of irradiated barium, more X-rays.
Clickety-click.

"I'm not going to call you Gollum any longer," I announced to my watch-gorilla after a particularly nasty spasm of nausea had passed. "The kid named you that, didn't he?"

FUCKING YES

"That's a bad name, and you're a good gorilla. I'm going to call you Golly. Okay?"

**FUCKING OKAY
FUCKING SPEAK SPELL PLEASE**

I said the name slowly, and Golly tried out a series of spellings.

When she hit the right one, I nodded my head.

**?
HOW FUCKING GOLLY CALL YOU**

"Mongo," I said, and spelled it for her. The gorilla did some fast fingering on her keyboard, assigned me a symbol.

MONGO FUCKING OKAY

Rest time.

Figuring that a watch-gorilla and my choke collar were sufficient to make me stay put, my last technician had not bothered to strap me into the leather recliner while he'd gone off for a smoke. Golly was slumped in another recliner in the small lounge. She

had her earphones on, and her eyes were closed. She appeared to be asleep.

Moving very slowly, I eased myself out of the recliner and tiptoed across the room. I would have liked to try and snatch the control box for my choke collar, but that was in Golly's lap and it seemed best to let sleeping gorillas lie. I tiptoed past her, out of the lounge. I turned right and sprinted as fast as I could down a narrow, white corridor toward a swinging door. I didn't know the range of the control box, but it couldn't be limitless; if I could only get beyond it, I'd find a way to get the collar off and get down to serious business.

Halfway down the corridor, I felt the leather collar snap tight around my neck and begin to squeeze. I held my breath and kept running toward the door. My only hope was to get beyond range, or get behind something that was

shielded with lead.

Anybody who wants to learn the hard way about oxygen debt should try sprinting while holding his breath and while a leather collar is threatening to squeeze his head off. Anyway, I kept running, legs and arms pumping, trying to reach the door. At least I thought I was running. Everything was beginning to look hazy through my smoked glasses, and a giant fist was pounding my chest. My head felt ready to explode.

Still, I was somehow convinced that I was making progress, that I might still escape. I kept feeling that way right up to the point where, clawing at the leather band around my neck, I collapsed to my knees, then fell forward on my face.

26.

I'D expected that Garth and I would be killed after our biosamples were taken and safely stored away. Instead, it seemed to be game time; we were getting a tour of Ramdor, personally conducted by Siegfried Loge and his son.

"You two don't seem to be entering into the spirit of things," the hawk-nosed, pale-eyed scientist said as we paused in the middle of a long land bridge that had been constructed over an area of earth that actually glowed from the furnace heat beneath it.

"Fuck you, creep," Garth said, and yawned.

"Garth never liked to go on outings, even as a kid," I

added. "Besides, when you've seen one dairy farm you've seen them all."

Loge took a piece of paper from his pocket, crumpled it into a ball and dropped it over the railing; the paper burst into flames even before it hit the ground. "It's better than a thousand degrees Fahrenheit down there on the surface. There are a number of areas like this around Ramdor. You two are lucky you weren't fried on your way in."

It occurred to me that it might have been better for millions of people if we had been fried, or if Lippitt had killed us back in Nebraska. We'd accomplished nothing by chasing after the Loges, except to supply them with what they wanted and needed. It was precisely what Lippitt had feared would happen.

I remembered my mother's dream.

"This place is a regular Disneyland," I said, glancing around to look at Golly, who trailed behind us and held both control boxes. The gorilla had been in a snit ever since I'd tried to run off on her, refusing even to look at me. Throughout the tour she'd been off with Mozart, the thin cables to her earphones snaking out of her canvas shoulder bag. However, on more than one occasion her thumb, as if by accident, had brushed against the joystick on my control box; the tugs of the collar around my neck caused only minor discomfort, but Golly had made it clear that she felt hurt and betrayed. "Where's Hugo?"

"Hugo has chores to do," the scientist said in a tone that sounded evasive. "Gollum can easily handle the two of you in this situation."

"Let's show them the Treasure Room," Obie Loge said to his father. The teenager's face was flushed with excitement.

"Whoopee. How about showing us the exit?"

"Hey, creep," Garth said to Loge. "You've got what you wanted. Why haven't you killed us?"

It was a question to which I'd given some thought, and I thought I knew the answer. "It's because Gramps has to check the results to make certain everything's all right. That's it, isn't it, Loge?"

"Of course," Loge replied evenly. "Also, it would be senseless to dispose of you while the reaction continues in your bodies. We'll simply continue to monitor you."

"Where is the old man?"

"You'll enjoy seeing the Treasure Room. As long as I have absolute power over you, why not relax and enjoy my hospitality? Both of you are intelligent, and there aren't a great many people I can share all of Ramdor's wonders and secrets with."

"I believe that."

"Hey, Loge," Garth said quietly. "What would you think of another fun experiment in which we see if I can break your neck before this collar chokes me to death?"

"I wouldn't do that!" Loge snapped, wheeling on my brother. "Don't even think about it!"

"Why not?" Garth asked in a mild tone that caused me to wince; committing suicide didn't seem to make much sense. "You don't think that would be as much fun as ordering the murder of two boys who'd befriended your fat,

ugly son? On second thought, it might be even more fun to throw the two of you over the railing and watch you sizzle."

"Hey, fucking Gollum!" Loge shouted.

Golly jumped, snatched the earphones from her head. Her eyes glittered with terror, and her hand trembled as she fumbled at the keyboard.

?

FUCKING WHAT

"Show them the kill button."

Using the thumbs of both hands, Golly flipped open the tops on the cases of the boxes to reveal bright blue buttons.

"It's true that we want to keep you alive," Loge continued as he glanced back and forth at Garth and me, "but not to the extent of allowing you to attack either Obie or me. There'll be no repetition of what happened in the dungeon. If one of you does attack my son or me, I absolutely guarantee that the button on your box will be pushed; then it's your brains that will sizzle. Do I make myself clear?"

"You're a real spoilsport," Garth said.

"Enough unnecessary unpleasantness," Loge said, turning away. "Come. Obie wants you to see the Treasure Room and Mount Doom."

We went back to the ranch house, walked through it to the rear. Loge opened the door to what I thought was a

closet; it turned out to be the entrance to a long, unlighted tunnel that had been carved out of the rock. He removed two gasoline-soaked torches from brackets on the wall, lit them with a cigarette lighter, handed one to his son. Then they led us down the tunnel, with Golly bringing up the rear.

At the end of the tunnel was a door with its edges set flush to the rock; like the door in the black cell, there was no keyhole.

Loge, his eyes glassy in the torchlight, turned to face us. "Behold," he intoned as he removed the ring medallion from around his neck and slowly passed it back and forth over the flame.

The metal of the medallion slowly changed its configuration to the shape of a key. Garth yawned loudly.

His spirits undampened, Loge turned and passed the flame across the surface of the door; a section of metal appeared to melt and flow apart to form a keyhole. Garth yawned again.

Loge turned the key in the lock, pushed open the door. Instantly, the air was filled with the music of Siegfried's Funeral March, from *Gotterdammerung*, and the darkness beyond the door began to glow like sunrise. The torches were extinguished and cast aside as the light came up, and we followed the Loges into the room.

This time Garth didn't yawn.

The Treasure Room, bathed in soft blue fluorescent light, was a huge circular chamber blasted out of the rock. On the wall opposite the door was an enormous, Cinerama-size panel of some material on which was projected a

photomural of scenes from Wagner's *Ring*. The chamber was filled with an astonishing array of Wagnerian memorabilia. There was gold, of course, but even more impressive were other artifacts— special, undoubtedly rare, musical instruments, bejeweled swords and daggers, antique costumes, opera posters with Richard Wagner's distinctive signature scrawled across them.

"This is from a practice room at Bayreuth," Loge announced proudly as he walked across the room and sat down at an old, scarred upright piano. "Wagner himself played on it. The page on the stand here is from the original manuscript of *Das Rheingold*. Here; listen."

And he began to play. He was actually quite good, and I might have enjoyed it if not for the fact that the recital was being given by the man responsible for the fact that Garth and I were standing around there dying. Impulsively, I marched across the room and slammed my fists down on the keys. The collar around my neck tightened, but did not choke.

"You don't like my playing?" Loge continued sardonically as he smiled at me. "I'm told I have some talent."

"Save it for somebody else, Loge."

"You understand, of course, why there aren't too many people I can bring in here."

"Oh, I understand perfectly." It struck me that the medallion, which he had replaced around his neck, had returned to its original shape.

"You and your brother should feel honored that Obie and I choose to share it with you."

"Once, everything in this room was rare, intriguing and beautiful; in your hands, they're just pieces for death and silence."

"I understand that you have one of my pieces," Loge said as he rose from the piano stool. "I'm told it's an exquisite knife—which, incidentally, you used to lop off the hand of one of Stryder's men."

"It was lost in the car crash and fire."

"Too bad. I understand it was made of Damascus steel; truly one of a kind. It would have made a nice addition to my collection."

"Hey, pimple nose," Garth said to Obie Loge. "What do you play with in here? This is all Wagner. No Tolkien?"

The boy flushed angrily, but Siegfried Loge just laughed. "Relax, Obie. Remember what they say about sticks and stones. Show the gentlemen Mount Doom. It will make you feel better."

The boy hesitated, then shrugged and walked over to a panel of switches that appeared to be part of a console controlling lights, a videotape machine, and a bank of six large television monitors. Obie Loge flipped a switch. The lights dimmed, and for a few moments my eyes had trouble making the transition. I started to remove my smoked glasses, then saw a reddish glow building where the photomural had been. Garth, sensing my difficulty, put his hand on my shoulder and guided me toward the red glow.

"Behold Mount Doom," Obie Loge said, and he sounded almost as spooky as his father until he ruined it all with a giggle.

With the lights out, the projected photomural had disappeared, leaving a huge, transparent panel of what was probably Plexiglas. Standing next to Garth in front of the panel, I found myself staring out over what looked like a miniature Grand Canyon which wasn't so miniature. It was a great, stone-bounded cathedral or amphitheater with dimensions I could only guess at. The reddish glow emanated from fire somewhere far below the Treasure Room, and was swallowed up by darkness far above. On the great stone wall across the chasm, perhaps two hundred yards away, three different series of steps running in different directions from a central point high to the right had been carved out of the stone, which was pockmarked with caves. There were bones—bare, polished bones—and scraps of clothing strewn over the steps at three different sites. Even at that distance and without the evidence of the clothes, I'd have been able to tell that the skulls were unmistakably human.

"How quaint," I muttered. "I don't know why you don't show this to Hugo. He's really into clinics."

"What the hell is that?!" Garth said, shying as something big and brown flapped down out of the darkness, banged against the Plexiglas by his head, then soared on hot air currents up out of sight.

The Loges looked at each other, laughed. "We don't know," the elder Loge said. "We haven't been able to figure out a way to capture one."

I turned to look at the scientist. "You don't know what it *is*?"

"No," Loge said, grinning. "As a matter of fact, there are a great many curious things in Mount Doom. Obie likes to put things in there to see what happens. The results, as you see, have been totally unexpected; serendipity in science. What's become of the things he drops in there isn't a question that's likely to be answered soon. We've never known a man to go in there and come out again."

Wheeling around, I fixed my gaze on the apex of the three sets of steps; I could just barely make out the outlines of a door cut into the rock. "The black cell," I whispered in horror as two more of the things swooped past; the flying things were leathery, looked something like bloated pterodactyls with hair and teeth.

"Right," Obie Loge said with obvious satisfaction. "Man, you should see those fuckers attack."

"Totally unexpected," Siegfried Loge repeated in a somewhat distant tone. "There was no way to predict... I really should have paid more attention to what you threw in there, Obie."

"Aw, shit," Garth drawled. "This is really a bummer. What you need in there is a dragon. What's a Mount Doom without a dragon?"

Once again the Loges looked at each other and tittered; this time, I thought I detected more than a hint of nervousness in their looks and laughter.

"Where did they come from originally?" I asked, watching one of the leathery beasts drop down out of sight toward the furnace glow below.

"You'll see on the exit leg of the tour," Siegfried Loge

replied. "Right now, I'm sure Obie wants to show your wisecracking big brother a dragon."

Obie Loge nodded enthusiastically, turned on the videotape machine. One of the monitors on the wall came alive with fast-moving, fuzzy images. The images slowed, became what looked like a large metal pipe suspended over a mound of bones.

"You'll have to excuse the somewhat blurred picture," Loge continued. "The cameras we sunk down there are state-of-the-art and highly heat-resistant, but they've never really worked properly. What you're looking at is the bottom of a waste chute extending up through the escarpment to the laboratories above. Obie, let the tape run."

The younger Loge released the pause button on the machine; something blurred and unrecognizable plummeted out of the chute, fell onto the mound of bones. Instantly, dozens of dark shapes darted from the surrounding darkness, converging on the hapless creature that had fallen down the chute, swarming over it, tearing it apart.

"Too bad the microphones down there don't work," Obie Loge said to his father. "I'll bet we'd really hear some crunching and munching."

"As you see," Siegfried Loge said to Garth and me, "some things have survived. Now, it's the survival of the fittest down there. Nothing Obie threw down there was ever more than barely alive, yet something in Mount Doom not only arrested the process of their dying, but changed them into creatures that probably exist nowhere else. Most

interesting. It's too bad we don't have the time or resources to investigate what's happening." He paused, turned to his son. "Obie, that's enough of this crunchy-munchy shit. Skip ahead to six-eighty-nine."

Keeping his eye on the machine's tape counter, Obie Loge pushed the fast-forward control, held it down for a half minute, released it.

On the monitor, two large, black spots floated in toward the camera, hit it; the screen went blank.

Garth yawned.

"That's it?" I asked. "Some fucking dragon. Frankly, I was more impressed with your key trick."

For a time, I wasn't sure Loge was going to answer. When he did, his voice was distant. "There's something very big down there," he said, gazing out over the chasm. "That camera was sunk into a mine some distance from here, to the south. It was suspended from the ceiling, and as far as we could tell it was at least five feet off the ground, with a lighting system that was sensor-activated. Whatever passed in front of that camera broke it. Nothing even approaching that size was ever thrown down the chute; it grew to that size while it was down there. It's mutated into something huge, and— from what we know about that section of the mines— it chooses to live in total darkness. I wouldn't care to run into it."

"Oh, I don't know; I think I'd take a dragon over the Loges any time."

Loge continued to stare out over the chasm, as if in a trance, for more than a minute. Then he abruptly turned and

walked across the Treasure Room to what appeared to be the door to an elevator. "Come," he said tersely. He seemed distracted now, oddly subdued, as if his bizarre personality were suddenly shifting gears on him. "Next stop on the tour, and I think it will interest you. However, if you don't wish to see it, Gollum will take you back to the dungeon. Suit yourselves."

Garth and I exchanged glances. "We'll see it all," Garth said.

"Fine. Then let's go; I have other work to do today."

"Dad?"

"Be quiet, Obie. I'm all right." Loge pressed a button, and the elevator door sighed open. Loge pushed his son past him to the back of the elevator. "Let's go, fucking Gollum."

The gorilla was hanging back; her shoulders were slumped, and she was holding her cassette player cradled against her chest like a baby.

"Leave her alone," I said to Loge. "She's been upset all through this tour of yours, and she's obviously very upset by whatever you've got upstairs. Let her go. You and your kid can handle us with the boxes easily enough."

"Fucking Gollum!"

Golly scampered across the room, fairly leaped into the elevator, and cringed in a corner. Garth and I followed, but Loge kept the door propped open with his hand. He was staring at me, and his eyes seemed slightly out of focus.

"Gollum impresses the hell out of you, doesn't she, Frederickson?" Loge continued.

"Yeah, she does."

"Then I'll let you and your brother in on a little secret; most of it's a trick, computer-enhanced communications using random-sorting circuit boards you can buy off the shelf in any good hobby store. Oh, I've worked on her cognitive brain centers, to be sure, and she sure as hell is smarter than the average gorilla, but she has nowhere near the capacities for thought, communication, and feeling that you think she does. Most of the work is done by the computer behind the keyboard."

"You're wrong," I said flatly. "Christ, look at her."

Loge smiled thinly. "You stick to criminology, Professor, and leave the hard science to me. Artificially enhanced intelligence, yes, but she's still basically just a clever tame gorilla. I'm telling you this because I thought you'd be interested; it's part of the tour."

"I still say you're wrong."

"I know what Gollum is; I made her, and Obie designed the computer."

"I think she's your most remarkable creation, Loge."

"No. That distinction belongs to you and your brother."

"Your old man had a lot to do with making us."

Loge shrugged. "Of course."

"What'd you do to enhance her intelligence?"

"There's less than a one-percent difference between the DNA structures of man and great apes; lay slides of the structures next to each other, and you need a very powerful microscope to discern the difference. That tiny percentage accounts for all the differences between apes and us. My

father and I were able to isolate a gene chain that's responsible for much of primate cognitive intelligence. There are also enzyme pairs involved, and those chains and enzyme pairs can be stimulated and reorganized if you find the right catalyst. I used massive doses of ionizing radiation on the appropriate brain centers, specifically on what passes for a cerebral cortex in a gorilla."

Obie Loge laughed. "If you want to see something really funny, you should see a puking gorilla without fur."

I had a sudden vision of Golly with radiation sickness, naked and cold, her mind lost and whirling in a foggy world of torment between beast and something else. I badly wanted to cripple Loge, but knew that if I hit the scientist the animal he'd hurt so badly would choke—and perhaps kill—me.

"... and pain," Loge was saying.

"Huh? What?"

"Operant conditioning. Reorganizing the gene chains was one thing, but you might say that we also had to get her attention in order to teach her—as well as the one you ran across in Nebraska—what to do with this new sense of awareness."

"Torture."

"I got her attention, and I must say that she performs quite nicely. But it's still basically tricks, totally beside the point. You and your brother are the point."

There was absolutely nothing I could think of to say. I was astonished, dumbfounded, by Loge's apparently total blindness to what had happened with Golly. The man had

penetrated the most mysterious of all worlds, the spiritual, had ignited the flame of a soul in a beast, and didn't know it. He wouldn't— or couldn't— see it. Nothing seemed to exist for him outside the narrow, intense focus of his interests; he was a man who could casually order up the murder of two teenagers, then appear vaguely distressed when the uncles of one of them appeared less than enthused with his work and hobbies. He was enough to make an institutionalized sociopath look like an emotional overachiever.

Loge stepped back. The door closed, and the elevator began to rise. The shaft had been sunk through both solid rock and burnt-out mines, some of which were populated by the strange creatures which, like Garth and me, suffered chaos in their genes. The walls of the elevator were transparent; although the trip to the building at the top of the escarpment lasted less than a minute, it became a protracted, nightmare journey through black rock and backlit mines where things skittered away as we passed. It was worse than anything dreamed up by Hieronymus Bosch.

I had a pretty good idea of what we were going to see when the door opened, but that still didn't prepare me for the panorama of agony— unidentifiable creatures in various stages of devolution, all lined up in rows inside glassed-in, soundproofed cages atop steel pedestals inside a large laboratory that was all gleaming white tile. Wires from monitoring devices inside the cages snaked to the ceiling, were bundled into cables that ran along the

ceiling to a central monitoring and control panel that filled half of one wall to the left of the elevator. Garth, a tough New York City cop, was green, and I turned away as I felt my stomach turn.

What was in the cages were all variations of the things Lippitt had splashed over a fender to show us what we were up against, and why we might want him to kill us; Loge's laboratory was Lippitt's horror show multiplied a hundredfold. All of the creatures, to various extents, were "melting" into bizarre combinations of fur and feathers, fangs and beaks, claws and flippers, hide and scales.

Every living thing in the room, except for the two Loges, was dying like that.

"This is a terrible thing" was all I could think of to say, and I delivered the line rather feebly.

"So are nuclear weapons," Loge declared flatly as he stared at the cages where the creatures mewled, coughed, barked, and screamed in—to us—silent agony.

"Then it is a weapon you're developing."

"Don't be stupid, Frederickson," Loge said in the same odd, flat tone of voice. "It's unbecoming. Did you think we were making cheesecake?"

"I wanted to hear you admit it."

"This is a unique weapon. When we learn from your bodies how to control the reaction, it will be only a minor step to tailoring it so that it can be targeted against specific populations based upon membership in gene pools."

"Races?"

"Oh, it can be targeted to race, certainly. More

important, it can be targeted against nationality, as long as the gene pool is sufficiently discrete."

"It would work better against, say, Icelanders or Georgian Russians than against Americans."

"Correct, Frederickson."

"You need to control the reaction so that you can mask what's happening to the people, slow it down, make its source untraceable. The victims might not even know they'd been attacked, much less know what kind of weapon had been used against them."

"Correct, Frederickson."

"That makes it an offensive weapon."

"Right again."

Obie Loge was checking cages. When he found a dead animal, he would open a side of the cage, don elbow-length rubber gloves, then remove the animal and carry it to our end of the lab where the waste chute was located. He would pull open the large lid, drop the creature down the chute, close the lid. Then he would watch the show down below on a television monitor to the left of the waste chute.

Garth nudged me. I looked up into the profound sadness of his face and eyes, knew instantly what he wanted to do. I winked, nudged him back. Garth yawned, thrust his hands into his pockets and, under the watchful eye of Golly, began to stroll in and out of the rows of cages.

"It's illegal."

"Naivete doesn't become you either, Frederickson. Every nation stockpiles illegal antipersonnel weapons, from mustard gas, to anthrax bombs, to binary nerve gas.

Besides, it's arguable whether this research is actually illegal. The United States isn't a signatory to the Geneva protocols outlawing this kind of weaponry."

"For Christ's sake, Loge, forget what's legal or illegal; forget the question of morality. What if this— whatever it is you're cooking up in here— gets loose into the environment before you have a handle on it? It could change the face of the planet."

"Trust us."

"Dad?" Obie Loge called from where he was standing in front of the television monitor. "It's pretty quiet down there now. Can I use live ones to feed the kitty?"

Siegfried Loge nodded, held up three fingers.

"You and your father are fucking lunatics, Loge. No; you're beyond lunacy. I don't know what to call you."

"If we're lunatics, I don't know what that makes all those nice people in Washington who run this country," Loge replied mildly as he watched his son select something that quivered, carry it back and drop it down the chute. "Government people came to my father on this matter, not the other way around. You think we could throw around money like this, or enjoy the protection we do, without government backing?"

"Where is your father? I would think he'd be anxious to meet his two prize specimens." The cries of the animal Obie Loge had carried across the laboratory still echoed in my mind.

"He is anxious to meet you, and he will. He's a busy man."

"He's carrying on direct human experimentation somewhere, isn't he?"

"He's a busy man."

"Maybe he's a dead man. Lippitt had him targeted from the beginning. You're a fairly bright man for a lunatic, but you don't have the mind of your old man. Without him, Project Valhalla will never be completed. Lippitt always understood that."

Loge shook his head. "Mr. Lippitt will never find my father. It's Lippitt who will die— if he's not dead already."

The next animal spewed fluid all over the floor, screamed as Obie Loge brought it to the chute, dropped it down.

"Specifically, what's happening to us?" Garth asked in a casual tone as he leaned against one of the pedestals near the waste chute.

"Your brother, if his cells don't suddenly explode, will become a creature closely resembling a snake," Loge answered matter-of-factly. "Your changes are less dramatic, but in a way more interesting. You seem to be following a very direct evolutionary line back through the humanoids. If you don't explode, I think we'll actually be able to see what the precursor of Neanderthal and Cro-Magnon looked like. I really hope you make it; anthropology is a minor interest of mine."

"I think it might be a good idea for you to tell your boy to call it a day on the live animal thing," I said as I watched Obie Loge looking for another animal, then glanced at Garth.

Loge shrugged, smiled thinly. "He has to keep Mount Doom populated. Why should I tell him to stop?"

"I think you should tell him to stop because Garth is getting aggravated."

Obie Loge yelped as Garth's fingers closed around his throat; the boy went up on his toes, and his tongue started to protrude from his mouth.

"Wait!" I shouted, wheeling on Golly and extending both my arms. "He won't kill! Don't you! Just wait!" I tensed, holding my breath. Golly had immediately flipped open the tops on both control boxes, and her thumbs hovered near the blue kill buttons. She looked uncertainly at me, then at Loge.

"Kill the animals in the cages," I continued as I slowly turned around to face Loge. "Kill them all. Then Garth will release your son."

Loge had cocked his head to one side and was staring at me intently. "If I nod to that gorilla, your brother dies instantly from electrical shock. You know that."

"Not quite instantly, Loge. You've seen his reflexes and you know how strong he is; at the instant you're burning his brain, he'll be snapping your kid's neck. Then I go after you, and Golly will have to kill me."

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" He seemed more interested in the answer than he was in whether or not Garth killed his son. Obie Loge's face was turning blue, and Garth was grinning. "I won't let you escape. You try to escape, you die."

"You're not listening. We have a simple request; put

these animals out of their misery. Do it now. Then Garth will let your kid go. We're not trying to escape."

"What's the point? I'll have a new shipment of test animals trucked in."

"We'll take whatever victories we can find in small doses, one day at a time. You have a simple choice, Loge; kill the animals, or have your boy die and be forced to kill your two prize specimens."

"This is insane, Frederickson. You and your brother risk your lives just to make a silly, token gesture? It doesn't make sense."

"It's like you told Hugo; the shit in us has affected our minds. Do it, Loge. Then your boy can start breathing again, and Garth and I can get back to our nice, cozy dungeon."

Loge shrugged, turned and walked to the control panel on the wall. He snapped back a protective plate, began pushing a series of small brown buttons. Electric grids in the bottoms of the cages sparked; one by one, the tormented creatures in the cages stiffened and were still.

When Loge was finished, Garth pushed Obie Loge away from him.

"Choke them," Siegfried Loge said casually to Golly, and Golly did.

27.

CHORE time. Garth was put to work shoveling manure, and I got to milk cows. It was lousy busy work, but it beat sitting around in the dungeon.

Golly, who still seemed upset, had refused even to look at me for two days. On the morning of the third day I felt a leathery hand touch my shoulder. I turned on my milking stool to find Golly standing by me, her earphones draped around her neck.

MASTER ALMOST MADE FUCKING GOLLY KILL YOU

"We understand that you have to do what Loge tells you. Don't worry about it."

GOLLY DON'T WANT TO FUCKING KILL YOU

"I know."

?

WHY MAKE MASTER KILL FUCKING ANIMALS

"The animals were suffering a lot of pain."

PLEASE KILL FUCKING GOLLY

"Why?" I asked, frowning. "I know Loge hurt you before, but are you in pain now?"

**FUCKING NO
GOLLY FUCKING WRONG**

I shook my head. "If you know you're wrong, you're not that wrong."

GOOD THAT YOU KILL FUCKING ANIMALS

"That's what Garth and I thought."

MONGO AND GARTH FUCKING GOOD

"Thank you."

MONGO AND GARTH FUCKING STUPID

I laughed. "Loge thinks that it's the machine on your chest that makes you seem so smart. What do you think?"

GOLLY FUCKING WRONG

"I'm tired of milking cows, sweetheart," I said, stretching and arching my back. "How about letting me do some gardening for a change of pace?"

?

"Gardening; I want to work on those plants by the house."

PLANTS FUCKING DEAD

"No. They're like that because it's cold now, but things should be done so that they'll grow when it's warm again. I like digging around in the dirt. Okay?"

FUCKING OKAY

Whisper was where I'd left her.

Since I'd been such a well-behaved specimen, Loge granted my request for a changing of the guard. Golly was

hurt, and Hugo was surprised.

After a morning spent watching me milk cows, even Hugo seemed bored. After lunch, he accepted my suggestion that we go for a walk in the woods. We strolled, chatting amiably about the difficulties of dwarves and giants, while I kept my fingers looped in the shoulder straps of my baggy green overalls.

"Hugo," I said as we stopped to examine the tracks of some animal in the thin cover of snow, "there's something I want to show you."

The eight-foot giant peered down at me, his large limpid eyes aglow with curiosity. "What is it, Mongo?"

"Look at that tree over there."

Hugo turned to his right. "What—?"

Zip.

Shhh.

Thunk.

Hugo jumped—and a jumping giant is a sight to see. He stared, transfixed, at Whisper as she quivered in the tree trunk a few feet away. "Holy shit," he said. It was the first time I'd ever heard him curse.

"Do I have your attention, Hugo?" Still staring at Whisper, he grunted. "Go get the knife."

Hugo walked stiffly to the tree, removed Whisper from the trunk, turned the knife over in his hands.

"That wasn't a nice thing to do, Mongo," the giant rumbled, looking at me and frowning. Hugo was recovering from his initial shock, and now looked a mite peeved. "I heard this thing go past; you could have slicked off my ear."

"It's a nice knife, isn't it?"

"Where'd you get it?"

"From the religious commune I was telling you about. I told you that's how Garth and I got the address of this place."

"Mongo!"

"Shut up, Hugo. Forget your ear; I could have sliced off your head. I could easily have killed you just now, but I didn't. After killing you, I could have strolled back to the manure pile and killed the gorilla. Garth and I could probably even have killed the Loges, and then just walked off. Escaping isn't enough anymore. Loge took things from Garth and me, and we have to get them back and destroy them; if the things aren't here, we have to find out where they were sent. To do that, we need somebody on the inside— you. The fact that you're holding my knife instead of your head in your hands would seem to give me the right to hold forth for a minute or two without you interrupting to tell me how crazy I am."

Hugo narrowed his eyes. "What things?"

"Body fluids and tissue; blood, urine, bone marrow, skin tissue, muscle tissue, feces, sperm. All of it has to be found and destroyed, along with the results of all the tests that were conducted."

"Why?"

"You're not ready for that yet. Let's take a small step first. When I think that you may be beginning to trust and believe me, I'll tell you the answer to that question. The first thing is to show you that Loge is a liar. Then, maybe you'll consider

the possibility that I'm not, and that all of you are being used for purposes exactly the opposite of what you think they are."

"How are you going to do that?"

"I want to show you the room where Loge keeps all the things that are sent to him by commune members; I want to show you a place where the bones of men the Loges have killed have been left lying out in the open; I want to show you a room where animals are tortured in a way beyond anything you can imagine."

Hugo was silent for a long time, and we stared into each other's eyes. "Show me," he said at last.

"I'd like my knife back."

"First show me these things."

"If I don't show them to you, then you can take it back. You know that I have it; it's enough. You have the choke collar, and you're just a tad bigger than I am."

Hugo thought about it, flipped Whisper in his hand and held her out. I took the handle, but Hugo maintained his grip on the blade. "When are you going to show me?"

"Tonight. And I'll need your help for that, too."

"What do you want me to do?"

"It's dangerous, Hugo. I have to tell you that you could be killed."

"You claim that Dr. Loge is trying to hurt, not help, people like us?"

"It's worse than that, Hugo. Much worse."

"Mongo, if this turns out to be just crazy talk, I swear I'll be so upset that I don't think I'll be able to keep myself from

hurting you real bad."

"I'll take my chances."

Hugo released his grip on Whisper, and I replaced her in the sheath in my belt, inside my overalls.

"What do you want me to do, Mongo?"

"First, you mustn't tell Golly about this conversation, or have her find out what you're doing."

"All right."

"You and Golly live in the house, guard it at night?"

"Yes."

"With those big feet of yours, do you think you can sneak into Loge's room while he's sleeping without waking him or having Golly hear you?"

"Maybe," Hugo said after some hesitation. "Why do you want me to do that?"

"The thing he wears around his neck all the time is a key to the room I want to show you. Bring it to Garth and me tonight, along with the keys to our cell."

"Mongo, you remember that I warned you what could happen if this turns out to be crazy talk."

"I'll remember. You remember what I said about this being dangerous. Is there any way I can get you to help us get the biosamples and test results back without showing you these things?"

"No."

"Don't get caught, Hugo. If the nice people who run this place that you think is a friendly neighborhood clinic catch you at this, they'll probably kill you on the spot. I'd hate to have you learn the truth the hard way, while a bullet's ripping

through your brain."

Garth, holding a torch, led Hugo and me down the long stone corridor leading to the Treasure Room. Two floors above, according to Hugo, Siegfried and Obie Loge were sleeping, and Golly was watching "The Late, Late Show" on television while she listened to Mozart, earphones on her head; tiptoeing through the house, Garth hadn't smelled the gorilla, and we assumed she hadn't smelled us.

"Hey, Mongo," Garth whispered, "I really *was* impressed with Loge's magic key trick. As I recall, you have difficulty cutting a deck of cards."

"Behold," I said as we reached the door at the end of the corridor and I took the torch from Garth's hand. I passed the medallion back and forth over the flame, and the four rings began to curl and twist into the shape of a key. I touched the flame to the door, and the keyhole appeared. "No trick; just a little Sorscience from that sociopathic delinquent. This is made of a substance called anitol molten alloy— it's metal with a memory. The area of the keyhole is the same thing. The molecules will return to the same configuration they were in when the metal was shaped at a certain temperature. This anitol was formed into the shape of a key when it was heated to flame-temperature, then twisted into the rings after it had cooled. Heat it, and it goes back to its original shape. It's used in the newer thermostats and thermocouplings."

I twisted the key in the lock and pushed open the door.

The sound and light show began. Hugo, who'd looked rather dazed when we'd entered the corridor and lit the torches, looked even more dazed as he roughly pushed between Garth and me, ducked through the doorway and entered the Treasure Room. Garth and I followed.

We let the giant browse around for a couple of minutes, and then Garth went to the control panel and dimmed the lights. The photo-mural disappeared, and Hugo's gasp was audible. He stumbled slightly as he went across the room and stood before the clear Plexiglas shield, staring out over Mount Doom.

"Those are human bones over there," Hugo whispered hoarsely as Garth and I came over and joined him.

"As advertised, Hugo," I said.

"Don't bother asking what those flying things are," Garth said drily as two of the leathery flappers swooped across our field of vision. "Nobody seems to know. Now we'll show you—"

"You won't show anything to anybody," Siegfried Loge said.

Pfft.

Pfft.

I reached for the dart in my left shoulder, never got my arm up; a powerful, fast-acting paralytic had almost instantly erased all sensation in my body, and nothing worked. I started to collapse, was grabbed under the arms and turned around by a burly Warrior. Garth, in the same condition and supported by another Warrior, found himself helpless and unable to do anything more than stare at the

Loges, Golly, and a third Warrior who were standing by the entrance.

Golly must have grown bored with "The Late, Late Show."

Siegfried Loge lowered his dart gun, and the third Warrior slowly advanced across the room, his machine pistol aimed directly at the center of Hugo's forehead. Golly followed and, looking about as shamefaced as a gorilla is ever likely to look, took the control boxes from the giant's hand. Hugo, the bore of the gun pressed against his spine, was ushered out of the Treasure Room, and Garth and I were turned around again to look out over the chasm of Mount Doom.

"I figured I'd use synthetic curare instead of PCP in the darts this time," Siegfried Loge said as he and his son came over to stand beside us at the shield. "I didn't want to let you do anything to get yourselves killed, but I didn't want you to sleep through this show."

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Golly growing increasingly agitated.

**PLEASE NO KILL FUCKING HUGO
PLEASE NO KILL FUCKING HUGO**

"Obie, turn on the monitor and bring me the microphone."

The younger Loge, still in his bathrobe and slippers and looking rather sleep-eyed, flopped across the room and

turned on one of the television monitors; it showed the inside of the black cell. He took a hand microphone on a long extension cable out of a small recess, brought it back to his father.

A few moments later the monitor showed Hugo being shoved into the black cell. A door slammed down out of the ceiling, trapping him. The giant shaded his eyes and squinted into the floodlight and television camera, which were on a level with his head.

"Take the torch off the wall, Hugo," Loge said into the microphone. "It will light automatically when you take it out of the bracket."

Hugo pulled the torch out of the bracket, and it instantly burst into flame. Loge pressed a button on the side of the microphone; across the chasm, at the apex of the three sets of steps, a door opened in the rock. I could see Hugo in the opening, and he was shielding his face with one hand as his long hair whipped around his head. It was very hot in the chasm, with a lot of swirling air currents.

"Ohhhh... ahhhhh... my... faawwlt. Doohhnt... kill... him."

Loge ignored my rather pathetic, probably unintelligible, attempt at speech.

"The door behind you won't open again, Hugo," the scientist said. "You can wait there until you rot, or you can take your chances in Mount Doom. Choose a set of steps, try to make it to one of the caves. Who knows? You might be the first one to find your way out of there. Lots of luck, you oversize idiot."

Loge grunted and draped the microphone cord around

his neck as Hugo, his torch held aloft and his body bathed in a red glow, stepped through the opening. He chose the middle set of steps, which appeared to be the widest.

He'd gone about twenty yards before the flying things hit him.

Hugo draped one arm over his head and flailed blindly with his torch, but the brown things kept dropping clumsily but accurately from the darkness above; they bit at him with their teeth, pounded his body with the appendages that served as wings, swarmed over him like huge, murderous bats. His clothes torn and bloody, Hugo staggered to the edge of a step, slipped, and fell out of sight toward the furnace glow below.

The curare hadn't paralyzed my tear glands.

28.

STUNNED by the death of Hugo, racked by guilt, I sat in a corner of our dungeon cell and mourned in silence. Garth understood and left me alone.

After dinner we had a visitor— Stryder London. The head of Siegmund Loge's private army was out of uniform; he wore a pinstriped suit under a camel's hair topcoat—they were his traveling clothes, I decided, his "real people" disguise. In each hand he carried a cylindrical metal canister.

"What the fuck do you want?" Garth growled.

"I came to say good-bye," the man with the close-cropped hair and hard eyes replied evenly. "You both have

great courage. I have considerable respect for the Frederickson brothers, and I'm sorry things are the way they are."

"That's touching, London." Garth turned to me. "Mongo, don't be rude. Come on over here and say bye-bye to the nice man."

I got to my feet, walked to the front of the cell. I pointed to the canisters. "You've got Garth and me in there, right?"

"Yes," London answered simply.

"You're taking the biosamples to Siegmund Loge."

London did not reply.

"Where is he, London? Where does Siegmund Loge hang out?" When he remained silent, I shook my head impatiently. "For Christ's sake, London, Garth and I are probably going to be dead soon. What difference does it make what you tell us?"

"It makes a difference to me. It's a matter of security which is unrelated to the question of your survival."

"You're a pisser, London— as well as a traitor."

Stryder London stiffened. "Does it make you feel better to insult me, Frederickson? I'm not responsible for what's happened to you."

"You work for the people who are responsible. It makes me feel better to state the truth when everybody else is telling lies, even to themselves. There are no good Nazis; it's not enough to say that you're following orders."

"I am following orders, but I'm following them because I choose to. I take full responsibility for my actions."

"You *choose* to work for these homicidal maniacs? You

want to take responsibility for what goes on in Ramdor?"

"My responsibility is to Siegmund Loge, and his goals may be different from what you think they are. You shouldn't take anything anybody around here says too seriously. They're unbalanced, as I'm sure you've noticed."

That got a hoot of laughter from Garth and me.

"I knew it!" Garth said. "They *are* making cheesecake!"

London frowned. "What does that mean?"

"Forget it," Garth said with a derisive gesture of dismissal.

"What are Siegmund Loge's goals?" I asked.

Silence.

"It doesn't make any difference, London. You're still a traitor."

"You're wrong, Frederickson," the Warrior said in a low voice that trembled just slightly. "If I were free to tell you certain things, you'd understand— and might even approve of what Siegmund Loge will accomplish. It's for the good of America— the America we used to know, and the America that will exist once again."

"Oh, yeah; *that* good old America— the one that sneaks up on its enemies and turns them all— man, woman, and child— into monsters."

London shook his head. "No. That's not what Project Valhalla is about."

"Your security has already been breached, London. The demented delinquent upstairs— the one with the baseball cap— already admitted as much to us."

"Dr. Siegfried Loge is a brilliant scientist, Frederickson;

the work at Ramdor must be done, no matter how unattractive it may appear to you. However, Dr. Loge often has difficulty separating reality from his own personal fantasies. When it comes to his father's ultimate goals, he doesn't know what's he's talking about."

"Huh?"

"There will be no monsters created— except for the two of you, and that was an accident; a fortuitous accident, but still an accident."

"Accident, bullshit. Jake Bolesh was plugged into the command network of Project Valhalla, just as you are."

"You purposely miss my point, Frederickson. What Siegmund Loge is doing is for the benefit of all mankind."

"You and Hugo must have hit it off real good."

"Order, Frederickson," Stryder London said quietly. "That's what the Valhalla Project is about."

The statement wafted about in the dungeon air, went in one of my ears and out the other, then came back in and squatted; it was cold. "Genetic control of behavior," I said.

"Yes," London said evenly. "Everything that's been done, and is being done, is part of a search for the specific genes that control behavior." "You may be hunting a ghost. How can you put a net around what makes us individuals?"

"No, Frederickson; the hunt is for those genes which bind us to the group and which compel us to work for the common good under the command of leaders."

"What leaders?"

"Those men who are fit to lead."

"I note that you don't say 'elected' to lead."

"Don't play that silly patriotic game with me, Frederickson; we're both too sophisticated. Democracy is a farce. You're a criminologist, and you know it's a farce. Only fools, phonies, or idiots ever go into politics, and so only fools, phonies, or idiots are ever elected to office. Our society falls apart, and thus the world falls apart."

"Because our society should lead the world?"

"Of course. I'm a man of peace, Frederickson, and soon we will have peace; we'll have peace because we'll have order."

"Because everyone will do what the government tells them to do."

"Yes. The entire world will be a place of peace and order."

"Under the control of Siegmund Loge, your *fuehrer*."

"Under the control of Siegmund Loge, my leader, and the one man best suited to bring our species back from the brink of destruction where it finds itself."

"Is there a religious angle to any of this?"

"Not really. In an ordered, peaceful society free of stress and delusion, all men will naturally gravitate toward Christ, since Christ is God's Son, and mankind's Savior. However, Jesus taught us that it is right to render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, and unto God what is God's. We are Caesar; with us in command, Christianity will naturally flourish."

"I think I prefer the version Father feeds his flock," Garth said drily. "It has more meat to it."

"He's getting ready to experiment on those people, isn't he, London?" I asked.

The Warrior shrugged. "Eventually, yes. Since some initial experimentation will be needed, who better to use than those who will submit joyfully?"

"He already controls their behavior."

London smiled thinly. "You'd be surprised how many different types of communes there are, Dr. Frederickson."

"Nothing about any of you people or Project Valhalla would surprise me anymore. On the other hand, there may be a surprise in store for you."

"What would that be?"

"You keep forgetting Mr. Lippitt. I'm betting our old man blows away your old man, and that'll be all she wrote on Project Valhalla."

"I'm sorry to take away your last hope," London said with apparent sincerity. "There's no longer any chance of that happening. I also came to tell you that I regret what's about to take place. I don't believe in unnecessary killing, or in torture, but certain things at Ramdor are outside my areas of responsibility and control." He paused, nodded in the direction of the great wooden door. The door banged open, and two Warriors dragged a bleeding, feebly struggling, semiconscious bald man down the corridor.

"Lippitt!"

"Frederickson," Mr. Lippitt gasped as he turned his head toward me. "You must—"

That was all he was able to say before the Warriors threw him into the black cell and the steel door crashed down from the ceiling.

"Let us talk to him!" I said to London.

Stryder London slowly shook his head.

"Why the hell not?" Garth snapped.

"Security."

"Fuck security," Garth said. "He's our friend, and he's about to be killed. You're not an evil man; now try being a kind man. Let Mongo and me talk to him before he's murdered."

"I'm sorry," London said, turning toward the door. "Good-bye." Flanked by the other two Warriors, London walked out of the dungeon, and the door closed behind them.

"Lippitt!" I shouted. "Lippitt, can you hear me?!"

There was nothing but silence; either the black cell was soundproofed, or Lippitt had lapsed into unconsciousness. In the Treasure Room, Siegfried Loge and his son would be waiting to cast Mr. Lippitt into Mount Doom.

"Mongo, we owe that bald-headed son-of-a-bitch," Garth said in a low, tense voice. "Besides that, he's our only link to whatever else is going on outside here. We don't have any idea where London is headed; Lippitt may. I suggest we make a move."

"Yep."

"Where the hell is the panic button in this cell?"

Hidden under my overalls, inside my belt.

Shhh.

I slipped Whisper up between Garth's neck and his choke collar, pulled; the blade of Damascus steel sliced through the leather and wire constraint as if it were no more than a band of silk. I cut away my own collar, threw it away into a corner, then handed the blade to Garth. "You're better

at picking locks than I am; see what you can do with the tip of this."

Holding Whisper like a pen, Garth knelt down before the large, rusty lock and probed the keyhole with the blade's tip. He worked at it for more than a minute, paused to wipe sweat from his brow, then went at it again.

"Uh, I don't want to hurry you, Garth, but one could say that time is of the essence."

Garth nodded, continued to work. I could hear Whisper grating against steel, but there was no clicking of tumblers; her blade was too wide to gain the necessary penetration.

"This isn't going to work," Garth said tensely, leaning back and resting on his knees.

"Garth, it *has* to work! Our only chance is to get to Loge before he forces Lippitt out onto the face of that rock wall! Try jamming the knife and twisting!"

"That'll only make matters worse," Garth said as he flipped Whisper over in his hand, handed her back to me. He slumped forward, bowed his head as if in prayer, and planted his palms flat on the floor on either side of him. He murmured, "I'm going to try something."

"Garth... ?"

"There's an aura that precedes each seizure," he said in a voice so low I could hardly hear him. "Just before I get hit with one, I feel like I can take off and fly; there's a high whine in my head, and a cold feeling in the pit of my stomach. If I can concentrate... try to touch those sounds and feelings... maybe I can..."

"You're going to try and *induce* an attack? Garth, I don't

know. We're in pretty close quarters here; you're liable to kill us both."

His spine stiffened, and both arms started to twitch. I was afraid.

"Garth, wait! What am I supposed to— ?!"

"You.. .go," Garth mumbled through tightly clenched jaws. I watched in terror and awe as Garth, his entire body twitching, struggled to his feet. His eyes bulged, and the cords in his neck stood out like steel cables. Spittle dribbled from the corners of his mouth.

"Garth!"

"Leave... me. Kill... fucking... Loges."

Then he hit the door with his shoulder; the bars shook, and the bolt securing the door clanged in its socket. Garth hit the lock with his hip, spun around and grabbed the bars of the doors with both hands. Animal moans of agony and rage escaped from his froth-flecked lips as he shook the bars, banged against them with his shoulders, hit the rusty plate of the lock with his hips. He spun around, staggered to the rear of the cell, then turned and charged the door. At the last moment he lowered his shoulder and banged it against the plate.

The bolt snapped, the door crashed open, and Garth fell into the corridor.

Ignoring the possibility that he would snap me next, I rushed to him, rolled him over on his back and wiped the froth off his mouth. His arms were flapping around, and I lay across his chest, trying to pin him; it was a ridiculous gesture, his dwarf brother trying to pin two-hundred-and-

twenty pounds of rock-hard Garth when he was in the midst of a seizure, but it was the only thing I could think of. I didn't want him to die, and I wasn't going to leave him behind.

The flapping stopped. Somewhat amazed that I was all in one piece, I slowly eased myself off him, looked into his face. Sweat was pouring off him, and his eyes were filled with— terror. He was trembling now, but not from the seizure.

"Garth?"

"Mongo, I'm afraid. It's like... white-hot wires inside my head. I think I broke something in my mind."

"No! I'll take care of you, Garth. You'll be all right." I got to my feet, struggled to pull Garth to his. "Come on! We have to move!"

Garth struggled to his feet and, with me pulling at his sleeve, we ran down the corridor. The two Warriors who had thrown Mr. Lippitt into the black cell came through the door. Garth literally ran over one, hitting him under the chin with his elbow and knocking him very cold. I slammed the other one in the solar plexus with Whisper's handle, followed up with a kick to the groin and a rabbit punch. He joined his colleague on the dank stone floor, and Garth and I raced along the narrow, slightly curving corridor that we knew led to a short flight of stairs that led to a door opening into the ranch house, close to the corridor that led to the Treasure Room.

I didn't much care for the sounds Garth was making in his throat.

We went up the steps, through the door, and into the

house. The door in the house had been left open, and we sprinted down the stone corridor. The door at the far end was closed; without slowing, Garth smashed into it, taking the force of impact on his right shoulder. The door crashed open, and we stepped into the red glow of the Treasure Room.

Siegfried and Obie Loge spun around, saw us, and scrambled off in opposite directions. Garth hit Siegfried Loge across the back with a forearm, sending him somersaulting through the air and crashing into a wall—but not before he had pushed another button on the microphone. The lights in the Treasure Room began to flash, and somewhere a siren wailed.

Obie Loge, screeching with panic, ran around me. I had no time to bother with him, and so I let him go. I had other things on my mind, for I could see that we were too late to save Mr. Lippitt from Mount Doom. Through the Plexiglas shield, I could see the old man teetering on the edge of a ledge as he flailed with his torch at the leathery flying things that flapped all around him. He was very close to the mouth of a small cave, and could make it there if he wasn't blinded or knocked off the steps.

Garth was huddled on the floor, trembling, his arms wrapped around his body. "Mongo, I'm sorry," he said in a voice that quavered with fear. "I... can't seem to..."

"It's all right!" I shouted as I picked up a piece of sculpture and hurled it at the shield. "You're doing fine! Just hang on!"

The sculpture bounced off the shield. I picked up the

piano stool by two legs, spun around a couple of times and hurled that; it bounced back and almost took my head off.

Shhh.

Holding Whisper above my head with both hands, I charged forward, stabbed at the Plexiglas; Whisper's point penetrated the shield, and her blade slid down as easily as if I'd been slicing cheese. I cut out a window, which blew back over my head as the superheated air inside Mount Doom immediately rushed toward the cooler air and lower pressure of the Treasure Room. Instantly, my nostrils were filled with the odor of death and heat.

"*South!*" I screamed at Lippitt through the opening, holding on to the edges of the window with both hands to keep from being blown backward. "*Head south!*"

He couldn't hear me, of course, but I'd created enough of a commotion to distract the flappers—which were now riding the rushing air currents directly toward the window.

"*South!*" I screamed again, accentuating the movement of my mouth in the hope that he could read my lips. "*South! South!*"

Then I ducked as one of the flying things, lidless eyes wide and toothed jaws agape, crashed through the opening—and into the face of Siegfried Loge, who had struggled to his feet and was coming up behind me. He screamed, reeled around, and clawed at the thing that was clawing at his face.

"Mongo, fire!" Garth shouted. He had risen to his feet and was holding his head with both hands. "Fire! It's coming up! I can smell it! We have to get out of here!"

Cutting out the window had instantly transformed the Treasure Room, the open corridor and the ranch house beyond into a kind of superchimney. There was about to be one dandy of a chimney fire, and it did seem a good idea to absent ourselves; the problem was that I could hear a lot of running footsteps in the corridor.

"The elevator!" I shouted, ducking and running toward Garth as a blast of flame, smoke, and a roasted flapper shot over my head. "Hit the elevator button!"

Although he was still shaking with terror, Garth managed to press the button next to the elevator. The door opened with gratifying quickness; I grabbed Garth's shirt with both hands, dragged him in after me, punched the single button inside. The door sighed shut on a Treasure Room rapidly filling with flame, smoke, poison gas, blown-in dead flappers, and screaming Warriors.

Now that I'd transformed the neighborhood into a fairly serious inferno, it remained to be seen whether the elevator, which had to pass through that neighborhood, was going to work. Nothing was happening; there was only the one button, and on our previous trip I'd noticed that the door opened when the button was pressed a second time. That didn't seem like a good idea.

In frustration, I kicked a wall. The elevator jerked up a few feet, stopped. I kicked the wall again. Twice. Once again the elevator jerked upward— but this time it kept going, through a kaleidoscope of stone and fire, all the way to the top. I pushed the button to open the door. Nothing happened. I kicked the wall; nothing happened.

Shhh.

I jammed Whisper between the edge of the door and the jamb, jimmied her back and forth. The door opened and we stepped out into the animal laboratory, where the glass cages had already been restocked. We started toward the entrance at the far end, came to an abrupt halt when the door opened and Obie Loge and Golly came in.

Obie Loge wasn't going to fool with any tranquilizer guns; he saw us, drew his machine pistol from his holster, aimed and fired off a burst as Garth and I dove behind one of the steel columns that supported the glass enclosures.

Another burst. Bullets ricocheted crazily back and forth between the steel columns, but somehow managed to miss Garth and me. Glass shattered, and suddenly the cool air was filled with terrible smells and terrible screams; fluids sprayed over us, tormented creatures flopped to the floor all around, quivered, crawled, rolled.

Garth wrapped his handkerchief around his hand, picked up a long, jagged shard of glass, looked at me and made a circling motion with his hand; there was still fear in his face, but it was tempered now with determination, dampened by my brother's incredible courage. I nodded to him, then darted across open space to the next row of cages, crouched, and waited as more bullets ricocheted around.

The understanding between Garth and me was unspoken, but clear; whoever got the first shot at the kid and the gorilla would go for them, sacrificing his life if need be. One of us had to survive and escape Ramdor.

Project Valhalla had to be stopped.

Suddenly the firing stopped. There was the sound of something metallic falling to the floor, then another scream — this one human.

A few seconds later Golly came strolling down between the rows with a screaming, struggling Obie Loge draped over her shoulder. Garth and I straightened up, glanced at each other, then watched Golly open the waste chute and casually dump Obie Loge down it. His screams were abruptly cut off as the cover slammed shut.

If there is such a thing as a gorilla grin, that's what Golly was wearing.

GOLLY WASTE FUCKING OBIE

Yes, indeedy. And suddenly I knew how I was going to get to Mr. Lippitt, who, if he had made it into a cave in time to escape the holocaust in the chasm, could probably use a little help, as well as provide some very helpful information.

"You are the most beautiful gorilla in the whole world," I said as I went up to Golly, wrapped my arms around her neck and planted a very wet kiss on her wrinkled brow. Then I turned to Garth. "Go back to the van and wait for me. I'll see you later."

Garth smiled tentatively. "You will, huh? Where the hell are you going?"

"Garth, I *will* see you," I said as I closed my eyes, took off my glasses and put them in their case in a pocket in my

overalls. I reached out, found the handle on the waste chute cover. "You just get your ass out of here and back to the van. Don't worry; I know what I'm doing."

"Mongo, *no!!*"

"Don't worry," I repeated as I pulled open the cover and executed a rather neat little hop and roll into the waste chute. "*Ciao.*"

It was a fast track down, made even faster by slicks on the metal left by decomposing or devolving animals. I landed hard on the pile of bones, scattering them, and immediately started slashing with Whisper. But Whisper wasn't needed, at least not at the moment. The little critters who fed at the bottom of the waste chute were occupied elsewhere; there were indeed a lot of crunching and munching sounds down there, and they were all coming from a writhing mound of black hair, teeth and tentacles to my right, at the base of the bone pile. If he hadn't been at the bottom of the mound, Obie Loge probably would have immensely enjoyed the spectacle.

I rolled to my left, just in time to avoid being squashed by Garth as he came crashing into the pile of bones.

"Mongo!" he cried, groping in the darkness until he found me, then squeezing my arms so hard I thought they'd break. "Are you all right? I can't see a damn thing!"

"I'm all right, I can see, and what the fuck are you doing here?— not necessarily in that order."

He didn't have time to answer as the next tourist landed and bowled us both over. I just managed to grab her hand and pull her back as she started to slide down toward the

writhing mound— which was now starting to move in our direction.

GOLLY FUCKING HELP

"Let's get out of here," I said, grabbing Garth's hand and sliding down the pile of bones.

Golly, who could apparently also see by the faint, cold, chemical luminescence given off by fungus growing on the walls of the burnt-out mine tunnel, followed. Keeping a tight grip on Garth's hand, I ran down the tunnel, turned into the first one branching to the right. Golly loped up beside me, and I slowed to a fast walk.

"How's the head?" I asked Garth.

"I'm scared out of my fucking mind, Mongo, and it's a good thing for you I am. If I weren't, I'd probably break your back for coming down here."

"We'll get out— but I don't think Lippitt can without my help. I love you both very much for coming down to help me. I know what it cost you, climbing into that chute blind, and realize how very much you love me. Thank you both."

"Fuck you, Mongo. If we ever get out of here, and I most certainly do *not* share your boundless optimism, I may still break your back."

"Excellent. I'm glad to see you're feeling better."

GOLLY FUCKING AFRAID TOO

"That makes three of us, sweetheart."

I pulled Garth to a halt, and Golly edged closer to me as dozens of eyes belonging to dozens of nasty-looking, bow-legged, chattering things skittered toward us. I pushed Garth back against the wall, gripped Whisper in both hands, and braced for the onslaught.

FUCK YOU

The chattering, skittering mob stopped.

FUCK YOU
FUCK YOU
FUCK YOU

Apparently thoroughly frightened by the flashing green lights on Golly's display screen, the things turned and scurried away.

"Good girl," I said, giving Golly a hug.

"What the hell was that all about?" Garth asked as I again took his hand and started off down the tunnel.

"Don't ask."

"Bad company, huh?"

"Nobody promised you a rose garden when you came down that chute, brother."

"Ho-ho-ho. You told Lippitt to head south. Why?"

"Because that's where the dragon is, silly."

"What?"

"The Loges' dragon is a fucking cow— a Guernsey, to be exact. I should know; I milked enough of them to recognize the hide markings when I see them. Our dear, departed hosts were always oblivious to everything around them except for what they were doing or dreaming about. With all this fantasy shit, they managed to spook their own brains away. If a cow managed to wander into these mines somewhere to the south, then we can wander out somewhere to the south."

"You're pretty fucking clever for a dwarf."

MONGO FUCKING SMART DWARF

"Thanks, guys. I really wish you'd both waited in the van."

"Next question: How do you know which way is south?"

"I know which way is north."

"I knew before I got down here, but now I can just about handle left and... what?"

"I said I know which way is north."

"How?"

"You ready for this?"

"Damn. Another symptom?"

"There must be some homing pigeon mixed in with all my reptile— although some amphibians share the characteristic. I seem to be wired into the earth's magnetic field. For the past two or three weeks, there's been

something like a soft breeze blowing through my head; it always blows from south to north."

"No shit?"

"You'd better hope it's no shit. For some reason, I'm already tired of this place."

29.

PROBLEMS in Mount Doom.

"Gas," Garth said as I led the way up a ladder in a shaft leading to a network of mines on another level.

"What?"

"Gas," he repeated, grabbing my ankle and holding me steady. "There's poison gas somewhere up there; I can smell it. We can't go this way."

"We have to go this way. We've wasted too much time already."

"We haven't 'wasted' anything, Mongo. You can only see in the tunnels where the fungus grows, and none of us can walk through fire. We'll find another way up."

"Which could take another two hours. Lippitt's torch will be out by now, and he can't last long in the dark. We have to get to him."

"Mongo, why the hell am I arguing with you? I'm telling you there's poison gas up there. We have to find another way."

"I think you've still got a case of nerves," I said as I pulled my ankle free and started climbing again. "You and I live in New York City; we breathe poison gas all the—"

Something green and black exploded inside my head at the same time as a wrecking ball smashed into my chest, blowing my breath away along with my strength. I choked and coughed, and my fingers slipped from the rough wooden rung above my head. My knees collapsed, and I plummeted.

Fortunately I didn't plummet very far, because fortunately Garth had lunged upward at the last moment and grabbed my ankle again. I dangled in Garth's strong grip, hacking and gasping for breath, until Golly reached out and hauled me in. Grabbing a handful of overall, she turned me upright and planted me firmly on the ladder between her and Garth.

"Okay, guys," I said when I could breathe again. "I'm all right now."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. I think I'm glad the two of you decided to come along."

"Why, Mongo, that's a terribly sweet and generous thing for you to say."

"Think nothing of it."

"Now, O Great Leader, would you care to reconsider your previous decision?"

"Yeah. After thinking things over, I feel it might be better if we searched for an alternate route."

GOOD FUCKING IDEA

There was nothing in the tunnels ahead of us but fire.

Unable to go ahead or up, where I was pretty certain Lippitt would be, we went down to another level, then circled back along a route that took us, I believed, beneath the Treasure Room and in the general direction of the chasm. Hot air was blowing at a pretty good speed, and there was enough of a glow in some of the branching tunnels for Garth and Golly to see by. I put on my smoked glasses, turned into a tunnel to my left, and almost tripped over Hugo.

The giant, asleep or unconscious, lay beside a puddle of brackish water that had formed from water dripping from the ceiling. He was covered with blood, scrapes, and bruises, but I saw no deep wounds, and no twisted limbs that would indicate broken bones. The worst damage seemed to be to his legs just below both knees, which were discolored and blistered with second- or third-degree burns. The soles of his shoes had been burned away.

All things considered, I thought as I knelt down beside a head that had a circumference almost as large as my hips, giants must not cook as well as they bounce.

"Hugo?"

The giant's eyelids flickered; he opened his eyes, peered up at me. "Mongo!"

"And friends."

HELLO FUCKING HUGO
GOLLY HAPPY TO SEE FUCKING HUGO
GOLLY FUCKING SORRY SHE TOLD MASTER

"Dream," Hugo sighed, and closed his eyes.

"It's no dream, Hugo."

Again, Hugo opened his eyes; now there were tears in them. "Did Loge throw you in here?"

"No. Actually, we dropped in here on our own— and we're all going to get out after we find another man who's down here someplace. How the hell did *you* survive?"

Hugo sat up, moaned with pain. He cupped handfuls of water, splashed them on his legs. "I landed on a ledge. It knocked me unconscious. When I woke up, I was... burning. I managed to crawl in here, by the water."

"Anything broken?" I asked as I scooped water, dribbled it over his burns.

"No. At least I don't think so."

"I know these burns hurt like hell. Do you think you can walk?"

With Golly lending him her not inconsiderable support, Hugo struggled to his feet. Leaning on Golly, he took a few tentative steps, then nodded. "I can walk."

"Good. See if you can walk and shout at the same time. Lippitt is the name of the man we're looking for."

"Mongo, Garth... I'm sorry I was so incredibly fucking stupid. I don't know what else to say."

"You don't have to say anything, Hugo. We all have our deep psychological needs, dreams and fantasies; sometimes they're all we can see."

One hour, three levels, and four tunnels later we found

Mr. Lippitt. He was seated with his back against a wall, his profile sharply outlined by the fiery tunnel behind him, casually swatting with his extinguished torch at the occasional creature that scuttled out of the darkness at him.

"It's about time you got here, Frederickson," Lippitt announced gruffly as Golly chased the creatures with a few obscenities. "I've been hearing the booming voice of your big friend there for the last forty-five minutes. I shouted myself hoarse. There are some hungry little things around here. What the hell took you so long?"

"Meet Mr. Lippitt," I said to Hugo and Golly. "When you get to his advanced age, little things tend to upset you. I'd like to say that he isn't always this crotchety, but it wouldn't be the truth."

"Hello, Garth," Lippitt said, rising to his feet and taking my brother's hand in both of his. "Thanks for coming along on the rescue party."

"You're welcome, Lippitt."

"This is Hugo and Golly," I said. "Golly's the pretty one, and don't you forget it. She's very sensitive."

HELLO MISTER FUCKING LIPPITT

"Hello, fucking Golly," Lippitt said as he affectionately patted the gorilla's head. He shook Hugo's hand, grimaced when he noticed the burns on the giant's legs. "You've got some pain, Hugo. We should wrap those burns."

"If you don't mind," Hugo replied, "I'd just as soon wait

until we get out of here."

Lippitt looked at me. "Are we going to get out of here, Frederickson?"

"Hey, are you joking? Are there dragons in Mount Doom?"

"This is just about what I'd expect to find in this loony bin," Mr. Lippitt mumbled. "One dwarf, one giant, a foul-mouthed gorilla, and a New York City police detective rapidly going to seed."

Lippitt's tone was gruff, but his physician's touch was exceedingly gentle as the Defense Intelligence Agency operative knelt beside another brackish puddle and wrapped Hugo's burns with strips of cloth I'd cut from my overalls.

Although we were "camped" less than a dozen yards from a thick column of fire that shot up through an elevator shaft, the flame sucked air past us and, like so many other areas in the mines, it was quite cold. By my reckoning, it was almost dawn in the outside world. I longed to see the sun again, wondered if we ever would.

"How are we doing, Mongo?" Hugo asked tentatively.

"We're okay. We have to hang a left the next chance we get. That'll put us back on track to the south. Don't worry. There's plenty of fresh air in these mines, and it has to come from someplace."

Lippitt had asked Garth and me to describe in detail what had happened to us since we'd parted company in

Nebraska. We'd complied. Now, when he had finished wrapping Hugo's legs, he asked us both to undress. We stripped, and by the light cast by the column of fire, he carefully examined our bodies; his face was impassive as he ran his fingers through Garth's fur and stroked my scales, and he made no comment.

Next, he interrogated Hugo on the Ramdor operation, and then Golly. Not surprisingly, Golly was able to provide the most useful information on the overall operation, and Lippitt felt at all strange chatting up a gorilla, nothing in his tone or manner betrayed it; the man would ask questions in a flat voice, and the gorilla would flash the answers on her computer display screen.

"How do Garth and I look to you?" I asked Lippitt when he had finished talking to Golly.

"You look like you're still alive."

"So are the things down here."

"That hasn't escaped my attention, Frederickson. Obviously, more changes have taken place in these animals— but their general deterioration was arrested. Not only have they survived, but they've reproduced. Interesting. I wish I had a dissection kit."

"Sorry we neglected to bring one along. Let's get back to Garth and me. How close are we to cellular explosion?"

"I have no way of predicting that. What I can tell you is that Garth seems to be devolving along a fairly straightforward humanoid and ape line."

"Loge told us that."

"You, Mongo, are a mess."

"For Christ's sake, Lippitt!" Garth snapped.

"It's all right, Garth," I said. "He knew I wanted it straight. Lippitt, make an educated guess. How long can I last?"

"A pessimist would say that you could explode at any moment. An optimist might give you a couple of weeks— a month at the very most. Then, even if you don't explode, you're not going to make very good company."

"I hear what you're saying, Lippitt, and I thank you for laying it out like that. I consider you my friend. If I get too, uh, snaky, I want you to look out for me."

"I will, Mongo," Lippitt said quietly. "And I promise you there'll be no pain."

"You'll do shit unless I say so, Lippitt," Garth said angrily. "'// make any final decision about killing him."

"That goes without saying," Lippitt replied evenly.

PLEASE NO KILL FUCKING MONGO

"It's all right, Golly. Nobody's talking about doing anything I wouldn't want them to do."

"What about your mental faculties?" Lippitt asked.

Garth and I looked at each other. "No changes at all, as far as we can tell," I answered. "I don't think we're any loonier than we've ever been. Just seriously pissed."

"I agree there's been no apparent intellectual or psychological change in either of you," Lippitt said in a somewhat distant tone. "That's also interesting."

"And now I'm really glad we didn't bring you a dissection

kit. How did you find this place, Lippitt?"

"I didn't find it; a team of Warriors found me."

"Then you haven't killed Siegmund Loge?"

"Not yet," Lippitt said tersely.

"Good," Garth said. "If we can get to him, there's still a chance for Mongo and me."

"It's possible Loge knows of, or can cook up, an antidote. But one thing must be clearly understood: If we can find an antidote for your condition, that's wonderful, but nothing is more important than putting Siegmund Loge out of commission for good, because that's the only way of ensuring that the Valhalla Project will never be completed. No life, obviously including my own, matters more than stopping whatever it is Loge is up to."

"We know what he's up to. He's trying to develop a biochemical agent that will enable him to control behavior genetically— everyone's behavior. He's set himself the modest task of ruling the world."

Lippitt's reaction was somewhat unexpected; he threw back his head and laughed. "Who the hell told you that?"

"Stryder London. He's— "

"I know who he is. Stryder London is full of shit."

"Funny; that's how London described Siegfried Loge when we told him that Loge believed the Valhalla Project was a straightforward, bomb-the-enemy-into-beasties, biological weapon being funded by your friendly ex-employees in the Pentagon."

"They're both full of shit," Lippitt said casually. "Neither man knows what he's talking about. Siegmund Loge has

absolutely no interest in power, nor in ruling anyone. Also, he has nothing but contempt for the way governments perceive and treat each other as enemies."

"Then what is he up to?"

"What difference does it make? What he's doing is a threat to all life on this planet."

"It has to be funded by the Pentagon, Lippitt. Why do you have so much trouble with that?"

"The trouble is that you don't know what you're talking about, and you have an antigovernment attitude. I've spent my life working for this country, and I know something about authorized research projects. I know something about the development of biological and chemical weapons. The government authorizes research into some pretty hairy areas; it has to, because it must assume that other countries are doing the same thing. The point is not what Loge is doing— it's *how* he's doing it. The Pentagon would *never* allow this kind of cockamamy, strewn-all-over-the-landscape kind of operation. Siegmund Loge is a loose cannon, and he's a loose cannon because the people who fund him can't control him."

"Who do you think funds him?"

"My best guess is a secret cabal of politicians, businessmen, and military men. A lot of government money is being siphoned off, yes, but I'm convinced that no official committee in the military or in government has ever heard of Project Valhalla. The money men behind Loge are extremely powerful, and they probably believe that what they're doing is in the best interests of the country, but

they're renegades and traitors."

"London seems to be pretty close to Siegmund Loge," Garth said quietly.

"Oh? Closer than Loge's own son and grandson?"

"You have a point," Garth replied with a shrug.

"Let me tell you a few things about Lieutenant General Stryder London. For openers, he's listed as AWOL from the U.S. Army."

"It wouldn't be the first time the military faked a desertion, or falsified a classification, in order to put a man on a secret operation."

Lippitt dismissed my comment with an impatient wave of his hand. "London was at the Institute for the Study of Human Potential the same time that Loge and I were there. He's what the military thinks of as the model for the future fighting man, and they'd contracted with the Institute to do a complete physical and psychological workup on him. London is an awesome combat soldier— but he's also a raving fascist who has a lot of problems with people who don't share his views on what this country should be and do. What he told you about the genetic control of behavior is his fantasy."

"Loge must have told him *something*," Garth said.

"Of course Loge told him something," Lippitt answered tersely. "Loge gave him the fantasy. Loge tells a lot of different people a lot of different things, and even his funders may not know what he's really up to. He has personal presence and charisma you can't believe until you meet and talk with him. He mesmerizes people. You visited

a commune of lunatic Christians. I infiltrated three communes— one of murderous Moslems into whipping themselves with chains, another of Jewish Defense League types, and a third of Zoroastrians. Each commune was isolated. Each thought Loge was God or a messiah, and each thought Loge had come to fulfill their particular religious vision. The only person who knows what Siegmund Loge really wants may be Siegmund Loge."

"Do you have any idea where Stryder London's taking our bio-samples?"

Lippitt slowly nodded. "If my information is correct, Loge has control of the Institute for the Study of Human Potential — the best-equipped facility in the world for extracting the kind of genetic data he needs from your biosamples. If you two are the keys to Valhalla, and I believe you are, Loge may now have all he needs to open the lock. Obviously, Loge thinks you're the keys."

"The Institute," I said. "That's where it all started for you — when you tried to find out who was leaching data from the computer banks."

Again, Lippitt nodded. "It's hard for me to believe that Jonathan Pilgrim is involved in this; I would have trusted the man with my life. Loge must have found the right button of his to push, too."

For some time there was silence, broken only by the hissing of the fire column. Fire, one of humankind's oldest allies and enemies, can soothe the soul at a very deep level; everyone seemed reluctant to leave it and go back into the darkness around us, a night with claws and teeth.

"We're never going to get out of here, are we, Mongo?" Hugo said in his deep, rumbling voice.

"Wrong."

HUGO FUCKING RIGHT

"Wrong."

Lippitt laughed. "You and Hugo worry too much, Golly. Frederickson said he was going to get us out of here. If you knew Frederickson as well as I do, you'd know that he usually manages to do what he says he's going to do. He's going to take us out of here. Right, Frederickson?"

"Right." I nodded in the direction of a tunnel to my left. "Let's go find us a dragon."

30.

THE dragon was dead and decomposing—a condition that enabled Garth, following his nose, to lead us on the last leg of our journey out of Mount Doom. The way out of the final labyrinth of mine tunnels and caves was marked by a beacon of strong, fresh breezes blowing in our faces, rushing past us to feed the ravenous, fiery beast at our backs and beneath our feet.

Now we stood at the far end of the valley of black stone, watching the final destruction of Ramdor. The ranch house and barn were gone, leaving black, smoldering holes in the face of the escarpment. Somehow—probably through the

elevator shaft— fire had gotten into the laboratory building at the brink of the escarpment; black, foul-smelling smoke leaked from the seams of the windowless building, staining the morning, blocking out the sun.

Then, suddenly, it exploded.

"Jesus!" I said, startled as flaming debris rained on and scattered the odd assortment of people gathered in the valley below. "What the hell was that?"

"Probably incendiary bombs," Lippitt answered. "The same as at Volsung, in Nebraska. The people involved in this wanted to ensure there was no evidence left lying around when they finished. The easiest way to get rid of something is to blow or burn it up."

"They put incendiary bombs in a building that sits on top of burning coal mines?!"

Lippitt shrugged, smiled thinly. "How could they know you'd be along to light a match to the whole escarpment?"

I felt a tug at my sleeve, turned to look at Golly.

FUCKING THANKS FOR SAVING US

"Thank *you* for coming down to help me. If it hadn't been for you, we'd have probably been eaten."

?

GOLLY STAY WITH FUCKING MONGO

"You have to stay with me, sweetheart. Who else would put up with a foul-mouthed gorilla?"

FUCKING THANKS

"Thank you, Hugo, for believing in me and taking the chance you did," I said to the giant. "I'm sorry you were burned. The medics in the ambulance down there will treat you. I'm sure your friends will be glad to see you. One more favor: Please don't tell anyone what really happened. We'd just as soon that the people we're going to visit next didn't expect to see us."

Hugo refused to shake my hand, and he scowled a very serious giant scowl. "I want to come with you. These people used and made a fool of me."

"Being a fool is one thing, my friend; being dead is quite another. We keep right on truckin', but the chances for our survival aren't very good."

"What difference does it make?" Hugo said, his face still set in a scowl. "I heard you and Mr. Lippitt talking; if these people aren't stopped, there may not be a decent world left for anyone to live in— or we may all be dead. Let me help."

FUCKING HUGO WANTS TO COME
GOOD FUCKING IDEA TO HAVE A GIANT

"The lovely lady is right," Lippitt said, ending the debate. "Your offer of assistance is accepted, Hugo, and we thank you. Now we have to figure out a way to get some money."

"Mongo and I still have almost half a bag of gold coins stashed in the van," Garth said. "If nobody found and took the van, there's easily enough there to get us to California."

Lippitt stood looking down the valley for a long time, thinking. "We should split up," he said at last. "Garth, you take Hugo and Golly with you in the van to the Institute. Do what you can to size up the situation, play it by ear. I understand that you want to wring an antidote out of Loge, but I know that you also understand it's even more important to stop the Valhalla Project."

"Where are you and Mongo going?"

"Washington."

"Why?"

"With Hugo and Golly, the only safe way to travel is in the van. It will take at least four days of hard driving for you to get to the Institute. London's plane has probably already landed, and Siegmund Loge may be working on your biosamples right now. We're running out of time. Mongo is walking proof of the danger we're all up against; with him, I should be able to get the right people to listen to me. Then we'll have heavy help."

Garth shoved his hands in his pockets, shook his head uncertainly. "That's assuming the 'right people' you want to talk to haven't been behind this thing from the beginning."

"Right."

"That's a big assumption, Lippitt," I said.

"It's a correct one. In any case, it's the only logical move at this time. Alone, we're still up against impossible odds. This way, we at least have a chance to turn everything around. I might even be able to expose the cabal I believe exists. We can't all go, because then we risk total defeat if we're captured or killed before we sort out the good guys from the bad guys. This way, each group will have a backup in the event the other fails. Garth, Hugo and Golly attack the brain of the operation while you and I, Mongo, attack the heart."

Garth and I looked at each other, nodded in agreement.

"There's one more reason we have to split up," Lippitt continued. "Mongo and I have to see someone in New York before we go to Washington. If this man agrees to help us in Washington, it will narrow the odds against Mongo and me considerably."

Feeling the hair on the back of my neck rise, I looked at Lippitt to see if he meant the man I thought he meant. He did.

"Who?" Garth asked.

"I'm sorry, Frederickson, but we can't tell you without his permission. I told you what I did just now because I believe there's hope we can not only succeed, but survive; I wanted to share that hope with you."

Garth looked at me, hurt in his eyes. "Mongo?"

"He's right, Garth," I said, feeling an ache in my belly. "We can't tell you— not now. But it's the best reason of all for splitting. Lippitt and I have to go to New York alone."

Garth stared at me for some time. When he did speak,

the hurt had moved to his voice. "This has something to do with what happened in New York years ago—the killings, the torture, the gun fight and explosion on the waterfront. Right?"

"Yes," I replied softly.

"That's the bond between you and Lippitt— this secret you share."

"Right," Lippitt said tersely. "And don't blame Mongo for not sharing it with you; he was doing you a favor. The secret is a compact which can't be broken without the consent of all three parties— Mongo, this man, and myself. The man has lived up to his bargain; Mongo and I must continue to live up to ours." Lippitt paused, gazed hard at Garth. "This man could start World War Three. In a way, he controls a power that's as awesome as what Loge threatens to unleash."

Now Garth seemed impressed. "And you think he'll help us nail Siegmund Loge?"

"All Mongo and I can do is ask him."

Garth shrugged, smiled thinly. "Tell your man he'll be joining a pretty strange Company."

"Oh, I will. And I'll tell him we're on a pretty strange Quest." On the very rare occasions when he chose to display it, Lippitt had a rather pleasant smile.

"Where do you want us to drop you off?"

"We'll cruise the airport. If there aren't any black gloves there, maybe Mongo and I will see if we can get on a plane."

GOLLY NOT TELL FUCKING SECRET
GOLLY GO WITH FUCKING MONGO

"No, Golly," I said, patting the gorilla's shoulder. "You go with Garth and Hugo. They need a beautiful lady to keep their minds off their troubles."

Walking across the sulphurous, burning landscape back toward where Garth and I had left the van, I caught Lippitt's eye, indicated that he should join me behind the others. He fell into step beside me as I slowed my pace even further.

"What is it, Frederickson?" Lippitt asked in a low voice.

"I've got a problem, and I don't want Garth to know about it— there's nothing he can do, and he has enough to worry about."

"What's the problem?"

"After they drop us off, do you think you can rig a battery pack and heating elements inside my parka and clothing? It has to be unobtrusive; we can't afford to have me looking like an astronaut, but I have to keep my body temperature elevated."

Lippitt touched my cheek with the back of his hand. "You're going cold-blooded, aren't you?"

"Right. I'm okay now, but I'll get sleepy the moment we hit the cold."

"How long?"

"It's a fairly recent symptom— a couple of days. But it's

developing quickly. I had a real problem with the cold areas in the mines. If I fall asleep and get really chilled, I'm not going to wake up again. I want to be around to see how this all comes out."

BOOK III

Warriors

31.

NEW YORK, New York. Home— at least it had been my home in the distant past, in the time when I had been human. Now, having traveled for months in rather unusual social circles and traipsing around Ramdor and inside Mount Doom, I knew how Dorothy and Toto must have felt when they returned to Kansas.

It was also depressing, after surviving being entertained by two generations of loony Loges, to see how much the looniest Loge of all had been able to accomplish in my absence. Posters of Siegmund Loge, looking like a Norman Rockwell rendering of God, were everywhere, along with announcements of rallies and prayer meetings. Outside the isolated communes, where the members believed they possessed secret knowledge of Father's real intentions, Father's message, as proclaimed in ubiquitous radio, television, and print ads, was nothing if not general,

benign, and banal; everybody would kind of make nice with each other after April 1, when Father would deliver his "Treasure."

Not if we could help it.

"It doesn't make any sense," I said to Lippitt as we drove in our stolen car over the George Washington Bridge into Manhattan. "When's the last time anybody publicly announced the delivery of a weapons system that could turn out to be a doomsday device?"

"You're assuming 'Father's Treasure' is a weapons system. How's your heating unit working?"

"It's working fine; if I suddenly fall asleep, check it out fast. I'm not assuming that everything about the Valhalla Project has been kept secret. In fact, you're convinced it's a renegade operation."

"I am."

"You agree that 'Father's Treasure' has to be Lot Fifty-Seven—the juice that's finally going to do whatever Siegmund Loge wants it to do?"

"Yes."

"Then why announce it to the world, for Christ's sake? Are they preparing to issue an ultimatum, or are they looking for public acceptance?"

"I don't know."

"A psychological ploy for recruiting hard-core commune members to experiment on? Come April first, Loge may deliver a lovely homily to the rest of the world while Warriors are shooting up commune members with Lot Fifty-Seven."

"I don't know, Frederickson," the D.I.A. operative said

with uncharacteristic weariness in his voice. "You have to remember that everyone believes what he or she wants to about Siegmund Loge. This is February; if we don't get to him soon, it won't make any difference what he's planning to do in April. He'll have solved all the major problems, and other people will be able to carry on for him. Let's just hope Victor Rafferty is where he's supposed to be."

All Victor Rafferty did was read minds like other people read newspapers, and the existence of a bona fide telepath — only one, and an American at that— tended to create delicate problems and a crushing dilemma in all the world's espionage agencies.

Good intelligence wins wars— hot, cold, and lukewarm wars; declared and undeclared wars; military, political, and economic wars; ideological wars. All wars. Brain damage almost always debilitates; in Rafferty's case, it had somehow transformed the neurological circuitry in his brain to enable him to pick up other's thoughts, and the fact that this facility, when used, cost Rafferty dearly in terms of psychic and physical pain mattered not at all to the various intelligence agencies which viewed him as a kind of ultimate weapon, a human vacuum cleaner of the mind who, after plastic surgery and with a new identity, could assume various diplomatic posts, attend various cocktail parties, chat up various generals, ambassadors and politicians, and emerge in an hour with more ultrasensitive information than ten teams of conventional agents could gather in a

year at considerable risk to their lives.

As he was recovering from an automobile accident, a bewildered and frightened Rafferty had shared the discovery of his growing powers with his surgeon, who had in turn brought in a psychologist. The psychologist had felt it her patriotic duty to inform certain government officials of the existence of this "perfect telepath." The information had leaked, and before long every intelligence agency that knew the secret had assigned people to carry out a single mission: enlist the services of Victor Rafferty. Recruit him at any cost— through money or promises of power, if possible; through threats or torture, if necessary— or kill him, to prevent him from being recruited by anybody else.

Mr. Lippitt, from the Defense Intelligence Agency, had been America's man on the job.

Victor Rafferty had wanted simply to be free. He had won that freedom, finally, by giving up everything— his wife, his career as a very successful architect, his identity; everything. He'd faked his own death in a manner that was sufficiently spectacular to convince his pursuers— including Mr. Lippitt— that he was no longer available, or a threat, to anyone. Then, after the necessary surgery and with a new identity, he had gone to work for an old and trusted friend— the Secretary-General of the United Nations.

International diplomacy had never been the same since.

Enter a certain dwarf private detective. Working on a case involving the question of who had really designed a certain building in New York City, I started uncovering certain curious facts and questions concerning a dead

architect by the name of Victor Rafferty—who might not be so dead. I picked up Rafferty's scent, and other people started picking up my scent. Very heavy people started dropping in on me. One of these people had been Lippitt, who had assured me that Rafferty was very dead, and that people would be hurt and killed if I kept running around asking questions that suggested otherwise. I was, he'd said, acting as a kind of siren whose wail could be heard around the world. I must, Lippitt had insisted, stop my investigation.

I did not stop my investigation. People were hurt. People were killed. I was tortured to a point where I didn't want to live any longer, even after my physical wounds had healed. Rafferty, whom by this time I had flushed, had healed me—as he had earlier healed a curious but devastating psychological malady from which the D.I.A. operative had suffered most of his life. Both of us owed more than we could ever repay to the telepath, and when both Lippitt and I caught Rafferty trying to stage a second, even more spectacular, death on New York's waterfront, I had managed to broker an agreement. Lippitt certainly did not want to kill Rafferty or me. On the other hand, since Rafferty was still adamant in his refusal to work for the government, Lippitt considered it his duty to make certain that Rafferty wasn't running around loose; if Rafferty were loose, than Lippitt also had to worry about *me*, since I would be in a position to sell Rafferty to the highest bidder. All of this had led to a certain atmosphere of tension in the smoky, bullet-riddled boathouse where the three of us had ended up.

I'd offered a simple suggestion; since the three of us rather liked each other, why not try trusting each other? A pact of secrecy would never be broken by anyone without the consent of the other two; Victor Rafferty would, as "Ronald Tal," continue his work at the U.N., and would always be where Lippitt could reach and check on him. Years had passed, and the agreement had held. Now we needed the telepath's help.

Victor Rafferty was, indeed, a man who could tell the good guys from the bad guys. In Washington or anywhere else.

Except for streaks of gray in his otherwise jet black hair, Rafferty hadn't changed very much since I'd last seen him. He still looked exceptionally fit, his black eyes still glistened with intelligence, and his somewhat brooding appearance was offset by a friendly and casual manner.

"Gentlemen," Rafferty said, swinging around in his leather swivel chair as Lippitt and I entered the office suite of Ronald Tal, Special

Assistant to the Secretary-General. "I've been expecting you."

"Can we be overheard?" Lippitt asked in a low voice as he closed the door behind us.

"No," Rafferty said as he rose and shook my hand warmly. "The walls are soundproofed, and the offices are electronically swept every morning. We can talk here."

"You've been expecting us?"

"Yes, my friend," Rafferty said to me as he motioned for Lippitt and me to sit on the divan beside his desk. "You know I don't use my— talent— just to invade people's privacy; for one thing, it hurts too much. When I do scan, it's to serve some useful purpose. One gentleman I scan regularly is a certain diplomat from South Africa. By international agreement, only two facilities on earth are authorized to store live smallpox virus; one is operated by the U.N. in Geneva, and the other is the Disease Control Center in Atlanta. South Africa keeps live smallpox virus, and it isn't too hard to figure out why they keep it. I figure it behooves the millions of blacks in South Africa for me to know how nervous their white rulers are at any given moment. Anyway, a couple of months ago I scanned this joker and plugged into quite a fantasy— except that, to him, it wasn't a fantasy. He was smugly congratulating himself and his government for secretly funding our latest media guru, Siegmund Loge, in work to produce a biochemical agent that will render all so-called colored peoples happy with their lot, totally docile, and totally content to be ruled by the white peoples of the world, no questions asked. This agent would be released into the atmosphere at some point in the future— which, I assume by reading the papers, is now April first. Within days, 'colored' people would know and accept their 'place,' and South Africa's racial policies would, at long last, be vindicated. Interesting?"

"Interesting," Lippitt said.

"Interesting," I said.

"Either of you want something? Coffee? A drink?"

Lippitt and I shook our heads.

"I would have written off the thoughts as a bad daydream, except for the matter of government funding; that wasn't a daydream. This man considered himself to be Siegmund Loge's most trusted confidant, the only person to whom Loge unburdened himself and shared all his secrets."

"There are a lot of people around here with that fantasy, aren't there?" I asked.

Rafferty nodded. "Not a lot— but quite a few. There's a Russian, a West German, a Pole, and a few others—including, of course, an American. With the exception of the American, each believes that *his* government is the sole, secret source of funds for Siegmund Loge, and that Loge's work will serve the particular interests of that country."

"Why is the American the exception?" Lippitt asked in a flat voice.

"Oh, the American has his own fantasy— total domination of the world by the United States. The difference is that his group is non-official. Funding Loge isn't an official policy of the government. Some money comes from businessmen, and the rest is siphoned off from legitimate government funds. In their view, the biggest threat in this country is the press; they're afraid that anything official would eventually be discovered."

Lippitt looked at me. He had the grace not to say anything; he didn't even smile. Still, the look told me that as far as he was concerned, I'd been put in my place.

"You're being hunted by a great many people," Rafferty

continued, glancing back and forth between Lippitt and me. "They don't know *why* you're so important, only that you're important and should be captured— alive, if at all possible. It's why I was expecting you; I was hoping you'd come to me for help. Mongo, where's Garth?"

I touched my head. "Don't you know?"

"I haven't scanned you or Mr. Lippitt; I wouldn't do that without your permission. I only know what I'm able to scan from the people around here."

"Garth's on his way to California. We think Siegmund Loge may be at the Institute for the Study of Human Potential, in northern California. He's traveling in a van with, believe it or not, a giant and a gorilla."

Rafferty frowned. "Something's wrong."

"What?" I breathed as I edged forward on the divan.

"It's bad news I picked up this morning— I was waiting until we had the other things out of the way. The van was captured a few hours ago. Garth wasn't in it. There was only the giant, a gorilla, and some other animal that nobody— at least not the man I was scanning— seemed able to identify. It was wearing clothes, but it definitely wasn't a man."

I must have made a noise— a sigh, a moan, a shout, a scream. Then I must have fainted, because the next thing I knew I was on the floor with Rafferty hovering over me and Lippitt cradling my head in his arms. I remembered about the animal wearing clothes, and I opened my mouth to make another noise.

"You've got to hold it together, Frederickson," Lippitt said in a voice that was as firm as his touch was gentle. "If

Garth is past help, that's it; if not, we'll move as quickly as possible to help him. Your falling apart won't solve anything, and it will create problems. You're needed— for yourself, and to help Rafferty and me. To help all of us."

"I'm all right now," I said tersely as I got to my feet and pushed Lippitt away from me. I looked up into the concerned, brooding face of Victor Rafferty. "You know we're being hunted, but you don't know why Loge wants Garth and me, do you?"

Rafferty shook his head. "The men I've been scanning don't know."

"You'd better look," I said as I again touched my head, then removed my parka. "It will explain the smoked glasses and the battery pack around my waist."

"Scan me, too," Lippitt said.

A sensation like the tickling of a psychic feather joined the magnetic wind inside my mind as I rolled up my sleeves to bare my scales, held up my hands and spread the fingers; I'd cut away the webs three days before, but they were already growing back.

It took Rafferty less than a minute to extract Lippitt's story and mine from our minds. During that time, shadows moved in his eyes and across his face— pain, horror, pity, shock, outrage, rage, determination. Then the tickling stopped. "God," he said in a near whisper as he stepped forward and put both his hands on my shoulders.

"We want you to come with us to Washington," Lippitt said to the telepath. "You'll be able to tell us who it's safe to talk to."

"It's too late for that, Lippitt," Rafferty replied.

"Why? We need to put a stop to this, and fast. To do that, we need some big political and military guns."

"Those guns could end up aimed at us."

"But you said—"

"I said the government wasn't involved— but it might as well be. There's a large conspiracy, and many of the people involved control the levers of power, both political and military. I can find somebody for you to talk to safely, but I can't scan over the telephone; I can't scan the people that man will talk to— or, in turn, the people *those* people will talk to. At the moment there are only these Warriors after you. Go to Washington, and you're likely to have the F.B.I., the military, and every local police department after you as well. Orders will go out."

It was my turn to look at Lippitt. He looked away.

"We have to go to California right away," I said.

"No!" Lippitt snapped. His face was uncharacteristically flushed. "That's not the way! It's a miracle we've gotten this far, and sooner or later our luck is going to run out! We can't keep bucking the odds, Frederickson; now that there's an alternative, we have no right not to exercise it. Too much depends on us. We need help. We have to go to Washington."

"You go wherever you want," I said as I brushed past the D.I.A. operative and headed for the door. "I'm going after my brother."

"No!" Lippitt shouted, reaching out and grabbing my arm, pulling me back. "You're my proof, you dumb little

dwarf bast— " Lippitt abruptly released my arm, flushed again and turned away. "I'm sorry, Frederickson; truly sorry. But I need you. Without your symptoms and story to back me up, they'll just lock me away."

"Mongo's absolutely right, Lippitt," Rafferty said quietly. "Siegmond Loge has accomplished what he has through the uncanny ability to play on and manipulate people's mind-sets and fantasies. You've fallen into the same trap with your mind-set, except that you've trapped yourself. You can't believe that a country which you love so much, and to which you've devoted your life, could be involved in something like the Valhalla Project. Well, it's not, so you can take comfort in that; however, a lot of powerful people who work for that country *are* very deeply involved, so you needn't be a fool and risk playing into their hands. *Your* fantasy is that everything is going to turn out all right if you can get the right people, your people, in government involved. The chance of our succeeding alone may be hopelessly slim, but it's the only chance. You don't want to go to Washington because you think it's the best, or only, move; you want to go to validate your belief in the United States of America."

"I want to make a phone call," Lippitt said in a strangled voice.

"Lippitt, that's a really dumb idea," I said.

"One phone call— to a onetime friend who now sits on the Joint Chiefs of Staff. His name is General Baggins. We served together in World War Two, and I'd trust the man with my life."

"You'll be trusting him with a hell of a lot more than just *your* life, my friend. It's a dumb idea."

"One phone call," Lippitt said. "I'll tell him everything that's happened, try to convince him of the need for speed. He has the juice to have a battalion of Marines circling the Institute an hour after I hang up. Then it would be over: Project Valhalla would be stopped, and there might even be time left over to help Garth. Isn't that worth the risk?"

"Lippitt may be right," I said to Rafferty. "Maybe you and I are being too paranoid. There must be *somebody* in the military structure who can help, and Lippitt's general may be the person."

Rafferty shrugged, then went behind his desk, opened a drawer and took out a green telephone. "Go ahead and make your call, Mr. Lippitt— but do it on this telephone; the call can't be traced. Also, I might suggest that you don't tell him we're up here. If he insists on knowing where you are, tell him you and Mongo are at a pay phone on Roosevelt Island."

Rafferty went to a window looking out over the East River, and I sat down on the edge of the desk as Lippitt picked up the receiver and dialed a number. He got the general himself after ten minutes, and then spent almost a half hour talking to him. During that half hour I watched relief and joy spread across his face like a gentle fire of mercy, burning away a thick detritus of horror and hopelessness, fear and frustration, making him seem almost young again.

When Lippitt had finished, I spent fifteen minutes on the phone with the general, telling the same story but providing

additional details when I remembered them. The general seemed sufficiently impressed with it all, supportive, grateful, and anxious to assure me that he believed our story. He assured me that a large armed force would be at the Institute within a very short time, and that every effort would be made to guarantee Garth's safety and force Siegmund Loge to prepare an antidote to whatever was poisoning our systems. When I hung up, I was almost happy.

Neither Rafferty nor Lippitt seemed happy. Lippitt had joined Rafferty at the window. Their backs were to me, but there was something in the stiffness of their stances and the tense angle of their shoulders and necks that I didn't like.

"Lippitt, Rafferty? What's the matter?"

Neither man answered, and so I hopped off the desk and went across the room to join them. As they stepped apart to make room for me by the window, an olive-drab helicopter swooped past and rushed to join a force of a few of its brothers and sisters around Roosevelt Island, in the middle of the East River, a half mile or so to the north.

We didn't need binoculars to see what was going on.

Power boats of every description—including a couple with Coast Guard and Navy markings—were converging on the island from both north and south. Military and NYPD helicopters hovered over the island, occasionally descending to disgorge soldiers and black-gloved Warriors in civilian clothes. Residents of the apartment buildings on the island came out and stared in awe as

teams of armed men raced around the island, in and out of the buildings, searching for a certain dwarf with smoked glasses and an old, bald-headed Defense Intelligence Agency operative.

"I'm sorry, Lippitt," I said sincerely.

"Yeah," Lippitt answered with a kind of grunt. "Me, too."

Rafferty opened a wall safe, took out a .45-caliber automatic and a box of shells. He loaded the gun, put it and the box of shells in the pocket of a tweed overcoat, which he'd taken out of a closet. Lippitt and I were still staring out the window, our energy drained by entropy, our hope eaten away by despair.

"Gentlemen," Rafferty said as he stood by the door of the private elevator in his office, "it's time to go."

32.

WE descended in the elevator to the underground VIP parking garage, hurried to Rafferty's sleek black limousine. Lippitt and I got in the back, lay down across the seat.

"I have a private plane at Flushing Airport," Rafferty said as he got behind the wheel and turned on the engine. "Nobody in official circles knows about it, and, for obvious reasons, I keep it serviced and ready to go at all times. It's only a two-seater, but I think we can manage to squeeze Mongo in."

"At this point, I don't much care if you strap me to the wing."

"You're leaving?" Lippitt said to Rafferty. "Just like that?"

Rafferty laughed. "What would you suggest I say in my letter of resignation, Lippitt?"

That got a grudging smile out of the old man. "Right," he mumbled. "'Gone to save the world' might seem a bit grandiose."

We came up out of the garage, turned left on Forty-ninth Street, then south on Second Avenue. Suddenly Rafferty braked to a stop. "Roadblock," the telepath said, leaning back over the seat. "Police and Warriors; they're looking in all the cars."

"That's it," Lippitt said, opening the door on his side as I opened the door on mine. "Rafferty, we'll meet you at Flushing Airport."

"Wait!" Rafferty said, turning off the engine and starting to open his door. "I'll come with you! You may need my help!"

"No!" Lippitt snapped. "We don't need a mind reader to know what's going to happen if they catch Mongo and me in your car, or you with us. If the two of us are caught, you're the last person left on earth who can stop Project Valhalla. Stay with the car and get out to the airport."

"It's an isolated hangar on the north side of the airport!" Rafferty shouted as Lippitt and I rolled out into the street from opposite sides of the car, slammed our doors shut. "Good luck!"

Keeping low, using the stopped cars as cover, Lippitt and I sprinted across the avenue and up Forty-ninth Street.

"There's a subway station at Third Avenue and Fifty-third!" I gasped as I sprinted, pumping my arms.

"Right!" Lippitt shouted. "That's where we go!"

By the time we'd gone three blocks, we'd picked up three pursuers— Warriors. They were fast, but we were damn well motivated; we made it to the subway entrance, spun around on the metal railing and leaped down the stone stairs.

"Stop, or we'll shoot!"

With Garth in their hands, my life insurance policy had run out.

Lippitt and I bounded down the steps, knocking over two businessmen, three black-jacketed members of the Stinking Skulls, and one nodding junkie. We reached the platform just as a train was starting up, raced beside the accelerating train toward the black mouth of the tunnel, fifty to sixty yards ahead of us. A shot rang out, sharp as the crack of a giant whip in the stone and steel chamber, and something tugged at the left side of my parka. More shots rang out, whizzing over our heads and skipping off the platform around our feet.

We reached the mouth of the tunnel barely a few yards ahead of the train; now it was either stop and get punctured with bullets, or jump into the path of the onrushing train. Naturally, we jumped. I landed on the gravel with my legs pumping, stumbled, but managed to keep going, darting to my left and hugging the cold stone wall as the train roared past. I'd heard Lippitt land on the gravel just behind me, but now I was alone. I kept moving down the tunnel, sidestepping along and hugging the wall, as steel whirred past a few inches from my back.

Then the train was past, sucking sound and air with it, leaving me with a roar in my ears and a large steel wrecking ball in my chest where my heart should be. I wheeled around, took off my glasses and saw a familiar figure hugging the wall almost directly across the tracks.

"Lippitt!"

"Mongo!" The D.I.A. operative turned from the wall, held out his arms. "I can't see a fucking thing down here."

"Stay where you are!" Move around too much and you're likely to get fried!"

Taking care to avoid the electrified third rail, I went across the tracks and gripped his arm. Leading the old man by the hand, staying close to the wall, I jogged down the tracks, turned into what appeared to be a maintenance access tunnel, kept running as flashlight beams bobbed past the entrance behind us. We kept running until there were no more lights, no sounds, behind us. I stopped to allow us to catch our breath, leaned wearily against the wall.

"Shit," Lippitt said with genuine passion.

"That about says it all. I think we've got a problem. It's a long way to Flushing Airport, and we've got a river to cross. The streets of New York just aren't safe for citizens who happen to be bald-headed or slight in stature."

Lippitt stared off into space for some time, his jaw muscles clenched. "Fuck this," he said at last, pushing off the wall. "I've had enough of dark, underground places; one Mount Doom in a lifetime is enough. Let's get the hell out of here."

"Jolly good idea. It probably isn't that far to the next

station, or to a manhole. But what good will it do to go up into the streets? There are a hell of a lot of people up there looking for us."

"How's that creepy internal guidance system of yours working?"

"It's still creepy, and it's still working."

"Which way is the East River?"

I pointed to the rock wall on my left.

"That's where we're going as soon as we can get out of here."

"Christ, Lippitt, this is no time to go senile on me. The last time I looked, there were a lot of bad guys floating around in the East River."

"You let me worry about the bad guys, Frederickson. Go."

I stayed put. "What do you have in mind?"

"Cutting through all this bullshit. Find us a manhole. We're going uptown."

"Why? What's up there?"

"The heliport."

"Ah."

Nervous time as we came up out of a manhole into the middle of a street, darted across, and padded down the sidewalk toward the river. We stopped at the end of the block, pressed back against the side of a building and peered across the East River Drive at the heliport on the river where an Army Jet Ranger was parked. The pilot was

casually leaning against a wooden railing, talking with a burly man who wore black leather gloves.

There was no way we were going to get across the narrow access bridge without the men seeing us.

Lippitt picked up a sharp-edged piece of broken pavement, put it in his pocket. "Walk fast," he said, stepping directly in front of me. "Stay in step, and try to stay hidden. I'm going to kill the first man who makes a move for his gun."

Off we went, with me feeling like second banana in an old vaudeville act as I tried to stay out of sight behind Lippitt's flowing overcoat.

"We're going to make it," Lippitt said in a low voice as we reached the point on the bridge directly over the center divider on the East Side Drive. "They don't quite know what to make of me, and at the moment they're just staring. I'll take the Warrior. You see what you can do with the pilot, on your left."

What I did with the pilot, as Lippitt cracked the Warrior across the jaw with the piece of pavement, was jump out at him from the folds of the overcoat, shout, then kick him in the groin. He crumpled to his knees, then went down as Lippitt turned and finished my job with a hard, straight right to the Army captain's temple. Lippitt grabbed the men's guns, sprinted toward the helicopter, ducked under the idling rotors and leaped up into the cockpit. I ran around to the other side and just managed to climb up and close the door before Lippitt opened the throttle, pulled back on the joystick and sent us shooting into the air.

Lippitt, it seemed, was an expert helicopter pilot— at least he impressed the hell out of me as he effortlessly swooped us around, then started down the East River Drive, toward Roosevelt Island; as far as I could tell, we were flying no more than five or six feet above the roofs of the cars below us, and I hated even to think about the heart attacks and collisions we were leaving in our wake.

"See if you can spot Rafferty's Lincoln anywhere down there," Lippitt said as he hopped us gently over an elevated walkway. "If nobody saw or reported us rolling out of his car, he could be halfway to Flushing by now. If not— "

"Not," I said as we swept past Forty-seventh Street and I spotted his car pulled up onto the long, brick plaza there.

"Where?" Lippitt asked, pulling back on the joystick and sending us soaring aloft.

I told him. Lippitt made a lazy circle, eased back on the throttle, and virtually putt-putted us over the tops of a couple of buildings, then descended directly down toward the plaza. Keeping back, peering over the edge of the door, I could see a lot of upturned faces. One of the faces belonged to Victor Rafferty; he was spread-eagled across the trunk of his car, and was surrounded by police and Warriors. One of the Warriors held a familiar-looking .45 and box of shells.

As Lippitt hovered at treetop level just over the Lincoln, I rolled out of my seat back into the cargo bay, kicked open the bay door, and threw out the helicopter's rope ladder.

Lippitt threw the switch that activated the craft's PA system. "All right, gentlemen," he said in an affected,

electronic southern drawl that must have carried all the way to Central Park. "Thank you very much for your assistance. We'll take custody of this man now."

Southern drawl or not, Rafferty knew the sound of the cavalry when he heard it. While police and Warriors looked at each other, Rafferty looked up and saw me. He pushed away a Warrior, leaped into the air and grabbed hold of the bottom rung of the ladder.

"Go!" I shouted, but Lippitt had felt the tug and already yanked back on the joystick. We shot up, headed back toward the river.

The sudden movement of the helicopter had thrown me to the floor. Keeping a firm grip on an anchor line strung through pins in the ceiling, I inched forward, looked down. Rafferty was still on the ladder; exhibiting incredible upper-body strength, Rafferty had managed to haul himself up and was clambering up toward us. The problem was that someone else had exhibited great legs and incredible upper-body strength; there was a Warrior on the ladder right behind Rafferty.

Rafferty reached the top. I grabbed the back of his coat, hauled him in just ahead of the Warrior, who was now trying to brace himself against the wind drag at the same time as he aimed a pistol up at me.

Shhh.

I cut through both support strands of the ladder with one swipe of Whisper; Warrior and rope ladder entwined as both fell down toward the river.

Two NYPD helicopters, searchlights blazing in the

darkening sky, swooped down behind us. Lippitt made a tight turn, headed across the river. He dipped down behind a huge Pepsi-Cola sign, turned back. He flew under the pursuing helicopters, back across the river; he kept going, flying straight down the narrow corridor of Fiftieth Street as he entered the concrete and steel jungle of Manhattan. The two helicopters behind us, piloted by men who were obviously a lot saner than Lippitt, abruptly pulled up and soared over the tops of the skyscrapers.

Flying with his lights out just above the rush hour traffic, Lippitt hung a right on Fifth Avenue, sliced off the tops of three trees, and headed uptown. Fifth Avenue was wide enough for sane men to fly on, and the two helicopters dropped down out of the sky and resumed the pursuit. We could see another Jet Ranger approaching us. Maneuvering in an ascending semicircle across Central Park to get a proper angle, Lippitt turned left on Eighty-first. He kept going, shooting over the Henry Hudson Parkway and out over the Hudson, seemingly on a collision course with the cliffs on the other side. At the last moment he veered to the north and went upriver, the tips of his rotors just inches from the New Jersey Palisades, his landing skids just feet above the water, so as to avoid radar.

Behind us, the lights of the pursuing helicopters swooped and circled in confused patterns. Lippitt flew under the central span of the George Washington Bridge, swooped up, circled, then brought us down to a soft landing in Fort Tryon Park, near The Cloisters.

We were quite alone.

"Not bad, Lippitt," I squeaked when I could finally make my vocal cords work.

"Yes, Mr. Lippitt," Victor Rafferty added drily. "That piece of flying was almost outstanding."

Lippitt turned around in his seat. "You got any cash, Rafferty?"

"Yes. About two hundred dollars."

"Good. Mongo and I are down to change and a few gold coins, which I'd hate to have to give away for cab fare. You're dressed like a diplomat; you should be able to hail us a taxi down on Riverside Drive. I think that's safest."

"Right," Rafferty replied easily, a smile playing around the corners of his mouth. "That really was a nice piece of flying, Mr. Lippitt. Thank you for leading the rescue party."

"I've got two things I want to say. First, I'm sorry for the mess I got us into." He paused, glanced sharply at me. "Second, I trust I'll hear no more talk from you about me being senile." "Not a peep."

33.

FLYING at low altitudes to avoid radar, stopping only at remote airports to refuel, it took us three days to reach the northern tip of California, where Jonathan Pilgrim's Institute for the Study of Human Potential was located.

A former astronaut who had experienced a profound shifting of consciousness while walking on the moon, Pilgrim, a retired Air Force colonel, had spent almost a decade seeking to fund and shape an institute that would

provide the cutting edge in all the social, psychological, and physical sciences relating to humankind. He had succeeded. The Institute's sports medicine research program was second only to East Germany's, and its myriad other programs were second to none. Leading scientists from all over the world came to "Pilgrim's Mountain" to lecture and continue their own research with the Institute's state-of-the-art equipment and massive computer files on human types ranging from New Guinea pygmies to African Watusi. Research volunteers ranged from geniuses to idiot savants, prodigies in chess, music and mathematics, world record holders in virtually every organized sport and not a few unorganized ones, smart people and stupid people, altruists and sociopaths, heroes and mass murderers. Pilgrim had even done a workup on a certain dwarf who'd used his rather remarkable athletic abilities to become a circus head-liner, but I'd been there long before Siegmund Loge, Stryder London, and Mr. Lippitt.

A huge sign on the highway at the foot of the mountain bore Siegmund Loge's likeness, and the logo: FATHER IS THE ANSWER. We left the clunker we'd stolen in a plowed parking area off the main highway and, after checking my battery pack, hiked up the mountain through snow and forest, moving parallel to the Institute's access road.

Because of the many celebrities, talented and powerful people who might be at the Institute at any given time, there had always been tight security; there was still tight security, but now it appeared to be provided exclusively by Warriors.

From our position in a culvert across the road from one of the entrance gates, we watched for almost an hour; the gate, guarded by two Warriors, was open, but nobody came or went.

"Can you do anything about those guards?" Lippitt asked Rafferty.

"I'm not sure," the telepath replied after some hesitation. "It's been a long time since I've done any probing and manipulation."

"I know the layout of this place very well. If we can find a way of getting in through this entrance, we'll be close to a good hiding place we can use as a base of operations."

Rafferty nodded. "You two wait here. I'm going to talk to the guards. When you see me motion for you to come, just walk across the road and through the gate. Walk at a normal pace, and act normal. Don't speak to me or the guards. I'll follow you."

Keeping low, hiding behind the banks of snow at the side of the road, Rafferty moved off to his left, disappeared from sight around a bend in the road. Ten minutes later we saw him coming down the highway on the Institute side, walking with a pronounced limp. The Warriors watched him approach, but showed no signs of nervousness. Rafferty stopped by the gate and began talking to the men; from his gestures, he appeared to be describing an automobile accident farther up the road. Then the Warriors began talking to each other; their conversation grew increasingly animated, until finally they seemed to be engaged in a heated argument, virtually ignoring Rafferty.

Then the hand signal came.

Lippitt and I looked at each other uncertainly. Both of us had very good reason to be in awe of Victor Rafferty's powers, but it was still unnerving to think that we were now expected to leave our cover and try to stroll past two fully conscious Warriors.

But Rafferty's instructions had been explicit.

"Let's do it," I said, clambering up over the snowbank and sliding down the other side.

Lippitt followed. Keeping his hand on the gun inside the pocket of his overcoat, he walked behind me at an unhurried pace across the road, around Rafferty and the two Warriors, and through the open gate.

The Warriors were arguing with each other over which of several service stations provided the best towing service. Rafferty's face was clenched with the strain of maintaining the illusion he had placed in the men's minds; blood ran bright crimson from both nostrils, staining his lips, dripping off his chin.

I followed Lippitt down a narrow road between low-roofed buildings which looked as if they were used for storage. We ducked into an alleyway, waited. Rafferty joined us a few minutes later.

"Are you all right?" I asked anxiously.

"Yes," Rafferty answered evenly. Blood was smeared on his face where he had wiped it off with a handkerchief, but it was no longer running from his nose. I could tell by his eyes that he was still in pain.

"Did you find out anything?"

Rafferty shook his head. "I can't do the sort of thing I just did and scan at the same time."

I went to the opposite end of the alley, looked around in the dusk, saw nobody.

"Where the hell is everybody?" Lippitt said as I reported back to him.

"They're getting ready to close the place down," Rafferty answered. "That much I picked up when I first went into their minds. There's just a skeleton crew of Warriors, technicians, and a couple of researchers left."

"Working over Garth," I said through jaws that suddenly ached with tension. "Now that Loge has the biosamples, and Garth himself, he figures he's ready to go from research into production. Lippitt, let's go catch us somebody who knows where Garth is."

Lippitt glanced at his watch. "I'll do the catching—in another hour or so, when it's dark." He removed the machine pistol and three clips of ammunition from his pocket, handed them to Rafferty.

"Aren't you going to need this?" the telepath asked.

Lippitt shook his head. "I'll get another one from where that came from—I hope. I can't afford to fire a gun out there, anyway. Mongo has his own gun. If they catch me, it may all come down to how much heavy killing the two of you can do."

A half hour after Lippitt went out into the night a brown-uniformed Warrior with mud on his chest and blood on his mouth came crashing through the door of the near empty

building where Rafferty and I were holed up. The man staggered around in a circle, at which point Lippitt entered and whacked him in the chest with the butt of the Warrior's captured machine pistol. The Warrior sat down hard.

I was definitely never, ever, again going to suggest to Mr. Lippitt that he was senile; the D.I.A. agent was one tough old man.

"Stay, you son-of-a-bitch!" Lippitt snapped at the dazed Warrior. "Just sit there and answer our questions. Try to get up, and I'll kill you."

"Where's Siegmund Loge?" I asked the man.

The Warrior, a husky blond Nordic type, shook his head, looked at me. "Fuck you, dwarf," he said as his eyes came into focus.

"Now, now," Lippitt said, tapping the Warrior on top of the head with the barrel of the machine pistol. "There's no need to be rude. If you want me to kill you and go get one of your buddies, just keep it up. The gentleman of slight stature just asked you a question."

"I don't know where Siegmund Loge is," the Warrior said sullenly. "If I did know, I wouldn't tell you."

"Where are the passengers in the van you stopped?"

"What van?"

"Is Father's Treasure almost ready?" Lippitt asked.

Silence.

"Is Stryder London here?"

Silence.

Lippitt and I kept peppering the Warrior with questions. Considering his refusal to speak, we could understand his

growing bewilderment at our somewhat casual persistence; what he couldn't understand was that it was necessary only for him to hear a question and register the answer in his mind.

After about ten minutes of this I glanced across the room at Rafferty, who was standing in a dark corner, behind the Warrior. Rafferty stepped quietly out of the shadows and nodded to me. I nodded to Lippitt, who clipped the Warrior hard across the jaw, knocking him out.

"The Institute was taken over by Loge's people, with unofficial government backing, some ten months ago," the telepath said in a low voice as he slowly walked toward us, rubbing his temples. "All of the genetic computer data has been electronically leached and transmitted somewhere, but this man doesn't know where. He trained here, and believes he's a member of an elite security force of Warriors who will police the world after Father's Treasure is administered to most of the world's population. He doesn't know where Loge is, doesn't know what Loge is doing—he simply believes that whatever it is will enable him to exercise control over a great many people. Stryder London is here. If we can capture and interrogate him, then we may be able to find out where Loge is. You'll both be happy to know that Jonathan Pilgrim fought this from the beginning; they have him and a large part of the staff locked away in some southern military installation."

"What about Garth, Hugo, and Golly?" I asked anxiously.

Rafferty bent over the unconscious Warrior, removed a set of keys from his pocket. "Hugo and your hairy friend are

locked up in a room three buildings away. They're continuing to run tests on Garth in a laboratory in the winter sports complex."

"I know where it is," Lippitt said tersely.

I swallowed hard. "Is Garth... is he... ?"

Rafferty avoided my eyes. "Garth is still alive, Mongo. Hold on to that. You won't recognize him. I don't know about his mind, and I don't know whether he'll be able to understand anything you say. He definitely won't be able to speak to you." Now Rafferty looked at me, his dark, brooding eyes filled with sorrow. "He's not human anymore, Mongo."

"There isn't much human left in me, either," I said, turning toward the door to hide my tears, stoking my anger to displace what would otherwise be panic, "and he's still my brother."

The two prisoners down the block, after they'd recovered from their initial shock, seemed rather pleased to see us.

HELLO FUCKING MONGO
HELLO FUCKING MISTER LIPPITT
HELLO FUCKING MAN

"Hello, fucking gorilla," Rafferty answered without hesitation, smiling at her. After all, he'd already met Golly in my mind.

"Mongo!" Hugo shouted, and I quickly closed the door to

cover his booming voice. I was too far away to grab, and so it was a somewhat perplexed Mr. Lippitt who was forced to suffer, feet dangling a good six inches off the floor, a very serious giant hug.

Finally Lippitt managed to extricate himself. Taking deep breaths, he rubbed his chest for a few moments, then nodded toward a bemused Rafferty. "This is Ronald Tal," Lippitt said in a hoarse voice. "He's a friend of ours from the U.N."

Hugo flung his arms out to his sides, and Lippitt quickly stepped back, almost knocking me over. "The U.N.!" Hugo said. "Does that mean—?"

"No, it doesn't," Lippitt replied. "There's just Tal. But he's been a big help so far. We might not be standing here with you right now if it weren't for him."

Rafferty and Hugo shook hands, and I felt a smooth, leathery hand grip mine.

GOLLY LOVE FUCKING MONGO

"Yeah, babe. I love you, too."

"Mongo, they caught us—"

"Later, Hugo. First we get Garth, and then we hunt up Stryder London. I have a real urge to hit that man."

"Mongo," Hugo said, his voice breaking as he reached out with a trembling hand and gently touched my shoulder, "your brother... It was no more than an hour or two after you left..."

"I know about it, Hugo," I said, patting his hand reassuringly. "I'll handle it. As long as he's alive, there's still a chance Loge may have something that can reverse the process."

I had to believe that, I thought, as, with Lippitt in the lead, we slipped out into the night and walked quickly through a series of narrow alleyways in the warren of storage buildings. Without hope, there was... nothing. If Siegmund Loge couldn't heal and make us human again, then we would die. And the world would probably die with us.

And my mother's dream would come true.

GOLLY KILL FUCKING STRYDER LONDON

"No, sweetheart. At least not until we're finished with him."

FUCKING OKAY

"That's the winter sports lab," Lippitt said, pointing across a snow-covered open area to where a blue and white building sat near the lip of a deep bowl used for skiing and jumping.

Rafferty nodded. "It's the building that was in the man's mind. Garth is in a room at the far end."

"Let's go get him," I said, stepping away from the side of the building where we were pressed.

Lippitt put a hand on my chest, pushed me back into the shadows. "I don't like it," he said in a low voice. "I found the one that's tied up back there easily enough. Now there's nobody around. I know there's only a skeleton crew here, but it's still too quiet. It doesn't feel right."

"Maybe they feel there's nothing left to guard. They may be having dinner."

"It may be a trap."

"Garth's in there, Lippitt, and that's where I have to go. I'll go alone. If you hear shooting, you'll know it's a trap and you can get out of here."

Lippitt shook his head. "Unless we can find out where Loge has his main base of operations, there's no place to go, and we have no way of communicating if we separate. I think we have no choice but to go in together and take our chances." He paused, turned to the giant. "Except for you, Hugo. You stay here and act as lookout."

Hugo scowled. "I want to go in with you. You may need me."

"We do need you—and we need you here. Do you know how to use one of these pistols?"

"No," Hugo answered grudgingly.

"Right," Lippitt said evenly. "Even if you did know how to use one, we don't have an extra one to give you. Your voice will carry as far as a gunshot. If you spot trouble after we go in there, give a warning shout—and then get lost. That's the best help you can give us."

"All right," Hugo said softly, bowing his head in resignation.

Lippitt turned to Golly, smiled kindly. "You stay with Hugo, lovely lady."

**PLEASE FUCKING NO
PLEASE GOLLY GO WITH FUCKING MONGO**

The D.I.A. operative gently stroked the gorilla's jaw with the back of his hand. "If this is a trap, Golly, you'll be killed. You have no way of defending yourself against guns."

**GOLLY FUCKING WRONG
GOLLY LOST WITHOUT FUCKING FRIENDS**

"She has a point, Lippitt," I said. "There's nothing she can do out here, so she may as well come with us."

Lippitt nodded, then stepped out from the side of the building. Keeping low and spreading out to present more difficult targets, three men and an ape ran across the open area to the blue and white laboratory on the lip of the snow bowl. There was no gunfire, no warning shots.

Motioning for us to stay back, Lippitt gripped the knob of the door, then flung it open and went down into a crouch, gun aimed, into the lighted interior. There was no one inside.

Victor Rafferty took the lead as we entered the building, running down a wide corridor toward a closed green metal door at the end.

"There," Rafferty said, pointing at the door.

I pushed Lippitt and Rafferty aside and, with Golly close by my side, opened the door and stepped into the large, fluorescently lit laboratory. I abruptly stopped and probably would have fallen if Golly hadn't grabbed me and held me up. Horror wrapped its arms around me and squeezed the breath from my body, the hope from my soul.

Except for a bank of monitoring machines hooked up to a crude cage erected in the center of the room, the laboratory had been virtually stripped. Next to the cage was a stainless steel operating table covered with gleaming surgical instruments; somebody was getting ready to do a dissection.

Although he wasn't around to enjoy it, Jake Bolesh had finally gotten at least a part of what he'd wanted.

Inside the cage, rearing on its haunches on a bed of filthy straw littered with waste and food scraps as it tore at the wires attached to its shrunken, hairy body, was the bawling thing that had been my brother.

34.

"His mind isn't damaged," Rafferty said quickly as he came up beside me. "That part of Garth which makes him your brother is still there. He's been drugged, but he knows we're here."

It was true, I thought as I forced myself to walk across the room, up to the cage. My expression, whatever it was, felt frozen, pasted on, and I struggled to keep it that way; Garth

had enough of his own horror to contend with without seeing more reflected on my face. Although the cage did not allow him to stand, I estimated that he was now no more than three-quarters of his former height. He was covered with glossy black fur, except for his face and hands, which had turned the color of shoe leather. He had a jutting brow, a flat nose with extremely broad nostrils, and a massive, protruding jaw structure, which made it impossible for him to do anything but bawl, roar, bark, and scream.

But the eyes were those of my brother. At the moment they reflected horror, disgust and terror, which was to be expected, but they also reflected love. And hope.

"Shut up," I said, unable any longer to hold back tears as I reached through the bars of the cage and gripped his hairy, sinewy shoulder. "You always talked too much anyway. Also, this settles once and for all which one of us has more animal in him."

Lippitt took a key on a large ring off its peg on the wall, came over and opened the cage. Garth, trying and failing to walk upright, slouched out of the cage, and we held each other.

"Garth," I continued in a whisper, "neither of us is finished yet. I swear to you I'm going to get our bodies back, and when I do you're going to owe me all the Scotch I can drink for the rest of my life." I paused, turned to Rafferty. "Can he understand?"

The telepath nodded. "Oh, yes. He just can't speak."

I shook my head in bewilderment, squinted at Garth through my tears. "How can that be possible? Look at him."

Rafferty shrugged. "Look at you. You've also gone through all kinds of rapid and progressive physical changes, but your mental capacities seem to be intact. Obviously, something in the body— or, perhaps, the mind itself— forms a barricade to protect the brain. At least up to a point. Neither of you has reached that point yet."

It was true, I thought. I'd had so many things on my mind that it hadn't even occurred to me to be properly grateful for the fact that I still had a mind at all. I wondered what Siegmund Loge thought about this little kink in his project— if he thought about it at all. Or if it was a kink.

Rafferty was staring hard at my brother, and I could tell by the wonder moving in Garth's eyes that Rafferty was scanning his mind— and letting Garth know that he was doing it.

"Garth wants you to know that he'd really like you to get his body back," the telepath continued, turning to me, "but a case of * gin should be sufficient payment. He also wants to know if we brought aspirin; he says he's feeling just a bit under the weather."

Garth made a barking sound of laughter and astonishment, saluted Rafferty.

"Pretty good trick, huh?" I said to Garth. "You probably remember him being introduced to you as Ronald Tal, but his real name is Victor Rafferty. He's— "

"He already knows the story," Rafferty interrupted softly. "I just told him. I can also transfer my own thoughts."

"Yeah, well; what he does is the secret Lippitt and I have shared all these years. When we sic Rafferty on Loge's

head, we're going to know everything there is in there—including a cure to what ails us, if there is one."

"That's it," Rafferty said suddenly, glancing up in alarm. "They're here."

There was a chugging sound in the night outside, and a large gray canister smashed through the window; the canister exploded in the air over our heads, releasing a weighted net that abruptly began to descend. Golly grabbed Garth's arm and pulled him beyond the perimeter of the falling net, but it was too late for the rest of us.

Shhh.

Whisper shredded the net as easily as if the thick rope strands had been made of bailing twine, and in moments I had freed Lippitt, Rafferty, and myself. It was wasted effort; Stryder London and five Warriors had rushed into the room, and were aiming their machine pistols at us.

Lippitt, Rafferty, and I aimed back. It was a Mexican standoff— of sorts; the problem was that their side had twice as many armed Mexicans as our side. But then, a machine pistol can do a lot of damage, even when it's only the twitch of a dead man's finger that pulls the trigger.

"Drop your guns," London said evenly. He had his free arm wrapped around Garth's throat, and was using my brother's shrunken body as a shield; Garth, drugged and dazed, was powerless to resist. Golly was to one side of the room, crouched between two filing cabinets. Both her long arms were crossed over her head, but her head was up and her gaze was intense, darting back and forth between the Warriors and us, as she sat in silent witness.

"You drop yours," I replied.

"Why die when you don't have to?"

"We die, you die." I had my gun aimed directly at London's forehead.

"In hindsight, I guess it was a mistake for Siegfried Loge to give you back your glasses, Frederickson. You've become a real pain in the ass."

"Fuck you, General. I have nothing to lose, which makes me a very dangerous man. I'm probably going to die anyway, and it would give me great pleasure to take as many of you with me as I can. You'd better let go of Garth and back off while I'm still in a good mood."

London rested the bore of his gun in Garth's ear. "Maybe I'll just blow his brains out."

"I don't think so. Loge doesn't have it quite right yet, does he, London? He doesn't have all his answers; he still needs Garth and me, and he'd prefer us alive. If that weren't the case, you wouldn't have bothered with the net business; you'd have killed us outright."

"I'll take him your bodies."

"Somebody may, London, but it won't be you; once the first shot is fired, the chances are that everyone in this room will die."

"Where is Siegmund Loge?" Rafferty asked in a flat voice that was almost a monotone.

London's eyes narrowed as he slowly leveled his gun on Rafferty. "Who's your friend, Frederickson?"

"My name is Ronald Tal," the telepath said without taking his eyes off the two Warriors in front of him. His

machine pistol was aimed at a point equidistant between them.

"What do you do, Tal? Frederickson has some strange friends, and I suspect you're one of them."

"I ask strange questions. All of the computer data, including the information you've been extracting from Garth's body, is instantly transformed into telemetric signals and sent to some other place, via satellite relay. What are —"

"How the hell do you know that?!" The blood had drained from London's face.

"I'm a veritable mind reader," Rafferty answered drily. "What are the coordinates of the receiving site?"

"I don't think he's going to tell us that, Tal," I said, "but I do believe he's giving some thought to declaring this a draw. What do ^ you say, London? Nobody dies today. Release Garth. You and your men take a walk, and come after us another day."

"No, Frederickson. I—"

A deep, burbling sound from the doorway behind him caused London to start, then half turn in that direction; only his soldier's discipline saved him, for if his gun had wavered I'd have put a bullet in his head.

The Warrior directly in front of me moved aside and turned slightly, enabling me to see the huge form of Hugo slumped in the doorway. Somebody had slit the giant's throat, and the last of his life was dribbling out through the fingers of both hands, which he'd wrapped tightly around his neck in an effort to keep it in. Hugo's eyes were glazing, but

he had managed to stagger this far— and he was still on his feet. Now those huge feet started to move.

Blood spurted and pulsed when Hugo took his hands away from his throat. Throwing his arms wide, he uttered a bubbling roar and charged. Two of the Warriors spun around and pumped Hugo's body full of bullets a split second before Rafferty cut them down. London and the other three Warriors dove in opposite directions to the floor while both Lippitt and I fell on our backs and went for the lights.

Instantly, the laboratory was plunged into darkness that was complete except for a shaft of moonlight falling in through the broken window. I rolled to my left under a shower of falling glass and a hail of bullets, kept rolling until I came up hard against the wall. Rolling up into a ball to make as small a target as possible, I took off my smoked glasses and looked around.

Golly was still huddled between the two filing cabinets, face down, eyes closed and arms tightly wrapped over her head. Lippitt was crouched behind one of the filing cabinets, spraying bursts of fire down the length of the laboratory. Rafferty lay flat on the floor a few yards away, partially protected by the bars and base of the steel cage, returning the fire of the three Warriors, who were concealed behind heavy packing crates and another filing cabinet. Bullets flew everywhere, many ricocheting off the steel bars of the cage and striking sparks that hurt my eyes almost as much as the sharp, bright flashes from the muzzles of the machine pistols.

I did not see Stryder London— or Garth.

What I did see was a band of blue-black suddenly appear on the wall opposite me. The silhouette of a tall man carrying something over his shoulder appeared for an instant, and then the door slammed shut.

There was no way for me to make it across the room to the door without risk of being torn apart in the thundering, murderous gunfire. The nearest exit was the broken window, and that's where I headed at a dead run.

Lippitt must have caught my movement in the moonlight out of the corner of his eye. "Don't do it, Frederickson!" he yelled, his voice punctuated by gunfire. "London will kill you! Your brother's already a dead man!"

I left my feet, ducked and crossed my arms over my face, sailed through the broken window and did a shoulder roll as I landed outside in the snow. Rafferty's shout from inside just reached me.

"Greenland, Mongo! Look for the ring!"

I came up on my knees with my gun in firing position. Stryder London, with Garth slung over his shoulder, was clearly silhouetted against the night sky as he ran along the rim of the snow bowl, almost directly in front of me, thirty yards away. I braced, aiming the machine pistol with both hands, and fired off a short, low burst, aiming at his knees. My aim was too low, and bullets kicked up little showers of snow around his feet. The Warrior hurled Garth down the slope, then dove over the rim himself, disappearing from sight.

Rising to my feet, I ran forward, then slowed, dropped on

my belly and crawled the last few yards to the rim; once I looked over, it would be my head that was silhouetted, and there was no doubt in my mind that this "super soldier" would have little difficulty putting a bullet through it if he had a clear shot.

I was too cautious, had waited too long; suddenly there was a roar, and I got to the rim in time to see London on a snowmobile shoot out from an observation shelter used by both the Institute's researchers and its resident ski patrol and rescue team. Garth, apparently knocked unconscious, was crammed into a narrow space just behind London, and his hairy, naked body flopped dangerously over the side as London raced at an angle down the face of the bowl. There was no way I could fire at the Warrior without the risk of killing Garth.

Flinging myself over the rim of the bowl, I slid, rolled, and ran through the snow toward the shelter, desperately hoping there would* be a second snowmobile there.

There was, and London hadn't even bothered to take the simple precaution of removing the key from the ignition—a "lapse" that I strongly suspected had been intentional. I jumped on the seat, reached for the key, and was almost bounced out on the snow when something very heavy and furry landed on the rear of the snowmobile, rolled into the cockpit with me.

GOLLY HELP FUCKING MONGO

I didn't know what I was going to do with a gorilla, except not try to push her out. London had already reached the bottom of the slope, and I expected him to race toward the throat of the bowl, a half mile away; instead, he began climbing the opposite face. I turned on the ignition of my snowmobile and, with Golly hugging me around the waist, shot out over the snow, taking a dangerously precipitous angle in an attempt to cut the distance between the Warrior and myself.

London had already slipped over the rim of the bowl by the time

I got to the bottom and started up the face. I was almost to the top when the thought came to me that it was highly arguable who was playing cat and who was playing mouse in this chase. I turned the snowmobile at an angle where its treads would hold it on the slope, shut off the engine and listened.

Except for the distant, snow-muffled chatter of the firefight still in progress at the laboratory across the bowl, there was silence: London was waiting for me somewhere over the rim.

"Go back, Golly," I whispered as I got out of the snowmobile and snapped a fresh magazine into my machine pistol. "There's nothing you can do, and it's too cold out here for you. I don't know how long this is going to take."

"I know, sweetheart. I'm sorry. There's no reason for you to die, too. Go back and find someplace warm where you can hide."

**GOLLY FUCKING WRONG
NO PLACE FOR FUCKING GOLLY TO GO
NO ONE TO LOVE FUCKING GOLLY**

"I love you," I replied, and as soon as I'd said it knew that I'd just lost a debating point to a gorilla.

**FUCKING RIGHT
GOLLY STAY WITH FUCKING MONGO**

"All right," I said, starting up the slope. "But you stay put right there."

I crawled the last ten yards, slowly raised my head and peered over the rim. London might be able to pick up my silhouette, and he might be able to see shapes fairly well in the reflected glow of moonlight on snow— but I could see one hell of a lot better. What I saw was London crouched next to a tree in the middle of a crosscountry ski trail, slowly tracking his machine pistol back and forth across the rim. His snowmobile, with Garth still slouched unconscious over the side, was parked behind the tree.

I flung my shoulders over the rim, aimed and fired off a burst; snow kicked up around his feet and bark flew off the

tree— too close to Garth. I stopped firing.

London fired in my general direction, but he knew that he was at a deadly disadvantage in this situation; he spun around behind the tree, jumped into the snowmobile. An instant later the engine roared to life and he shot off heading west.

?

LONDON FUCKING DEAD

"Not yet, babe," I said, leaping into the snowmobile and gunning the engine to life. "I'm still working on it."

I shot over the rim. The snowmobile landed hard, bounced, and I almost lost control. I straightened it out, raced down past the tree and settled into London's tracks. I doubted that I carried any more total weight than he did, but the problem was that I had to stop frequently, turn off the engine, and listen to make certain that he had not stopped and set up an ambush.

Each time I stopped I continued to hear his engine—growing farther and farther distant. He seemed to be heading in a straight direction, away from the Institute, which suggested to me that he had a plan, a specific destination, in mind. Yet there was nothing ahead of him but wilderness— the "steppes," a savage morass of swamps in summer and bleak, frozen desert in winter, where the Institute conducted survival clinics and research, on government contracts. London would know the steppes

well.

"Shit," I said, then turned when I felt a shivering, leathery hand touch my shoulder.

?

WHAT FUCKING SHIT

"We've got problems, babe," I said, shouting in order to be heard over the roar of the engine. Not the least of our problems was that the cells in my battery pack had to be changed fairly frequently, and I knew that the intense cold had to be draining them rapidly; keeping my body temperature at a minimum of eighty degrees in zero weather required a lot of battery power. And I wondered how long Golly, still a jungle animal despite her fur coat, could last.

I wondered how long Garth could last. I wondered if my brother was already dead, from further cellular explosion or from exposure. I had to find out, and in any case had to prevent Stryder London from getting Garth— dead or alive — to Siegmund Loge.

Twenty minutes later I emerged from a copse of trees. I turned off the engine, stood up and looked out over the beginning of the six-hundred-acre steppes; before me was nothing but a vast, windswept ocean of snow— angry now, tossing from the gelid breath of what I feared was an approaching storm. Somewhere out in that frozen ocean were my brother and his captor; the difference was that the

captain of that ship knew where harbors, if there were any, could be found.

Golly patted my shoulder, and I turned to look at her; she was shivering, and her yellow eyes were clouded with misery. Her hands were trembling so violently that she could barely manage to work the keyboard of her computer display screen.

GOLLY FUCKING COLD

"I know, sweetheart. Me too. I'm sorry, but I'm afraid we're going to get even colder. Just hang in there. I'll try to find a place where I can build a fire."

MONGO FUCKING BRAVE

"You're fucking brave, too."

GOLLY LOVE FUCKING MONGO

"The feeling is mutual, babe."

GOLLY FEEL FUCKING FUNNY

"You mean you're cold?"

**GOLLY FUCKING COLD
GOLLY ALSO FEEL FUCKING FUNNY**

"You mean 'wrong'?"

**GOLLY FUCKING WRONG
GOLLY ALSO FEEL FUCKING FUNNY**

I still didn't understand what she meant, but it didn't really make a difference. What was important was how I felt—and I felt cold. Dangerously cold. My batteries were starting to fail.

I was growing sleepy.

Shhh.

Sometimes gestures, even empty ones, are important; I slowly turned back to face the steppes, held Whisper aloft and in front of me like a talisman of defiance.

One fucking cold and funny-feeling gorilla and one dwarf in imminent peril of falling into permanent hibernation were up against a super-soldier operating in his own neighborhood.

I swallowed hard, grimaced at the sudden numbness in the tip of my nose and the bitter aftertaste of burnt chocolate in my mouth. Then I turned on the engine and, with Golly hugging me for mutual warmth, slowly headed out into the steppes.

BOOK IV

Wall of Tears, Curtains of Ice

35.

AT dawn, I knew I was in a lot of trouble.

The wind had died down, but as the sun rose the field of snow before me became a blinding glare of luminescence that leaked into my eyes around the edges of my smoked glasses, causing me considerable pain and just about blinding me. I was very cold, and it was a constant battle to keep my eyes open and absorbing the pain. I shut off the snowmobile, turned to Golly.

The gorilla was a picture of wretchedness as she shivered and huddled against me, and I knew just how she felt.

"I'm sorry, Golly," I said through chattering teeth. "If it's any consolation to you, Stryder London has to be just as

cold as we are. We have to keep going as long as Stryder London; if we don't, I'm afraid we may never find him."

If I hadn't lost him already— which seemed a pretty good possibility.

GUFFLY CKIN C LD

"What?"

I Y FUGHKCG C?OL

My first thought was that the computer, even with its atomic battery, was malfunctioning in the cold. I reached out to touch Golly's face— and almost lost a finger when she snapped at my hand. I pulled back my hand and stared into the yellow eyes— which now seemed murky, their light dim. Her lips curled back from her yellow teeth, and a low snarl came rumbling up from deep in her chest.

Golly was feeling funny all right, I thought, and a rogue gorilla suddenly gone stupid and nasty wasn't exactly what I needed at the moment; I certainly wasn't going to mess with her.

Cursing softly to myself, I slowly turned around and started up the engine. I was almost glad to see that the wind had risen again, for in the gusts I could see better— or, at least, without pain— than I could against the glare.

I'd gone about fifteen yards when I bumped into the back

of London's snowmobile.

Shhh.

With Whisper in one hand and my machine pistol in the other, I leaped out of my snowmobile and waded forward through the snow, ready to put a bullet through the first thing that didn't have hair and moved.

Half frozen, disoriented in the swirling snow and very much afraid, I ducked down and looked around me, half expecting at any moment to see Stryder London emerge from the gusts to put me out of my misery.

A dark shape went past me, but it wasn't Stryder London. Golly, growling and slapping at the snow on the ground and in the air, was wallowing away from the snowmobile.

"Golly!" I shouted, struggling after her. "Don't go away! We have to stick together! If I can find something to burn, I'll start a fire!"

I managed to reach her, wrapped my fingers in her fur—and ducked just in time to avoid having my head torn off my shoulders as her arm swung around. I sat down hard, couldn't have escaped if I wanted to as she hovered over me, eyes bloody with rage. Then she shivered, turned around, and disappeared in the swirling snow.

Golly— who had saved Garth and me by throwing Obie Loge down the waste chute into Mount Doom and had then come down to help me— was going to freeze to death in a very short time unless I could get her back with me and start a fire.

Dangerous or not, I had to try and save her.

Fighting against the desire simply to lie down and go to sleep, I struggled forward toward the spot where Golly had disappeared, swinging my shoulders back and forth to gain momentum, pumping my knees up and down, thinking that being a dwarf in a snowstorm is a real pain in the ass.

Then, suddenly, it was as if I were looking through a window in the storm, and what I saw through the window, twenty yards ahead, were the bare, skeletal shapes of trees — lots of them; Golly, whatever her mental state, had known where she was going. Whimpering with both cold and delight, I half ran, half swam through the drifts and fell on my face inside the shelter of the trees.

Protected by the natural windbreak of the forest, I could see. Lying still on my belly, hugging the frozen loam of the forest floor, I looked around; there was no sign of Stryder London. Already I felt warmer.

"Golly!" I shouted as I got to my feet. "Come here! I'm going to start a fire!"

Nothing.

I ran around for a while, shouting her name, making a lot of noise. I knew that I might attract London as well as Golly, but that was the point of the exercise. Even if I hadn't been dependent for my life on a battery pack that was rapidly draining, I knew now that I could never hope to track down Stryder London. I suspected— desperately hoped— that I had one last, secret weapon in my arsenal, one that had apparently gone unnoticed even during the extensive biotesting; if anyone had detected what I considered to be my most horrible symptom, it had never been mentioned to

me. To use it against Stryder London, I had to be in physical contact, and if I couldn't find the Warrior leader, then he would have to find me.

Shhh.

Whisper made short work of cutting up deadwood on the ground into a collection of wood shavings, twigs, and a good-sized pile of logs. I gathered together a mound of wood shavings and dead leaves, stuck the muzzle of the machine pistol into it and emptied the gun. The flame discharge from the barrel ignited the leaves, and within minutes I had a roaring fire to warm me and save my batteries. I placed the empty machine pistol and Whisper on the ground near the fire where they could be seen, then sat cross-legged by the flames and waited.

I didn't have long to wait. I heard nothing and was just comfortably dozing off when I felt a circle of very cold steel touch my ear.

"Hello, General," I said. "Please don't tell me to freeze. I've already done that number."

"What the hell is this all about, Frederickson?"

"What's what about? Take that gun out of my ear, will you? It's cold."

"The shots and this fire; you must have known I'd find you."

"That was the idea, dumbie."

Keeping his machine pistol leveled on my chest, London moved around me. He picked up Whisper, lifted up the edge of his parka and stuck her in his belt. He examined the empty machine pistol, threw it away into the forest

behind him. Then he studied me through narrowed lids. "What do you think you have up your sleeve, Frederickson?" he asked at last.

"Nothing but arms."

"Show me."

I stood, unzipped my parka and spread it to show that I had no more weapons.

"What's with the battery pack?"

"I've gone cold-blooded, and I need a heating unit to keep me alive. You can check it out if you want to, but there's no trick. The game's over. One way or another, I'm going to die soon. I want to die with my brother."

"I don't believe you, Frederickson," London answered without hesitation. "You're not a quitter. I've known a lot of very good fighting men, but I've never met a man who keeps coming, no matter what the odds, the way you do. You're quite mad, you know."

"Now you sound like Garth," I replied as I zipped up my parka. "Would you take me to him, please?"

"You have no chance of defeating me or the purpose of Seigmund Loge, Frederickson. Absolutely none. You never did."

"I thought I just said that."

London used *Whisper* to slice narrow strips of bark from a tree, and he used the strips to tie my hands behind my back. Then, using a long strip as a choke tether, he led me off through the trees to the northwest. We traversed a gully, went over a couple of small hills, finally came to his camp. He'd built a solid lean-to on the lee side of a small cliff, and

there was a steady hardwood fire that was virtually smokeless. Garth, his hands and feet bound by rope, was lying on the ground close to the fire. A rope around his neck snaked away and was anchored to the trunk of a tree close to the lean-to.

Garth glanced up at our approach, and by the light of the fire I watched his human eyes fill with inconsolable grief and a sense of loss. I shrugged, managed a very thin smile.

"What now?" I asked as I sat down next to Garth.

London tied my neck tether to a tree. "I take you to Dr. Loge," he answered as he tied my ankles together with a length of rope he'd taken from the lean-to.

"He's somewhere in Greenland, isn't he? Inside a ring."

London looked up, obviously startled. "Who told you that?! How could you know?!"

"I do know. What kind of a ring is it? *Where* is it?"

London straightened up. "You'll find out where Dr. Loge is when I take you to him."

"He's going to dissect Garth and me, you know. That's what you're taking us to."

London removed Whisper from his belt, turned her over in his hands. "My job is to deliver you," he said as he hefted Whisper, then flicked his wrist and sent her flying through the air. The blade stuck in a log, quivered, the Damascus steel glinting in the firelight. "What's done with you isn't my concern. You know I have my regrets, but I have my duty."

"What's done with us may not be your concern, but it's still your responsibility."

"I'm sorry."

"When do we go?"

London looked up at the sky, which had grown very dark. "There's a storm coming— a bad one. We'll wait it out here, and by tomorrow morn— "

Suddenly Golly came flying off the edge of the cliff above the lean-to. She hit the ground, rolled, and came up charging at London. The Warrior clawed for his gun and had it halfway out of his holster when Golly hit him. The Warrior flew backward through the air and almost landed in my lap. Golly started to charge again, abruptly stopped when she saw the gun swinging around toward her, turned to her left and headed around the fire for the trees. London leaned over me, took careful aim on Golly's back and was about to pull the trigger when I leaned forward and sank my teeth into his right cheek.

London's burst of fire went over Golly's head, and she disappeared from sight as London cursed and flailed at me. I hung on to his cheek, chewing the raw flesh and working saliva into the wound. Finally he tore free, and I spat out the chunk of flesh he'd left in my mouth.

Holding one hand to his bleeding cheek, London raised his machine pistol to club me, then thought better of it. "You're not the class act I thought you were, Frederickson," he said, as if that were the best insult he could think of. Then he turned and walked away into the woods, apparently looking for Golly.

London looked more than a little peaked when he returned about five minutes later. In fact, he didn't look well at all. His face had gone gray and seemed to grow even

darker before my eyes as he staggered, caroming off the naked trees. He fell on his back in front of the lean-to, got up on his knees, crawled toward us.

Somehow, he'd managed to hang on to his machine pistol.

Garth and I looked at each other, and I could see in his eyes that he understood what was happening.

London also understood what was happening, and I could see by the look in *his* eyes that he didn't appreciate the irony of it all.

"You... poisoned me," Lieutenant General Stryder London, AWOL from the U.S. Army, whispered hoarsely as he flopped on the ground in front of me. "Kill... you... too."

Garth and I watched with more than passing interest as the hand with the machine pistol lifted off the ground; it was trembling violently, but it was moving. Toward us. Then it stopped, collapsed to the ground.

"Now *that's* a class act," I said as London twitched and died.

Garth threw back his head and uttered a long, drawn-out howl of triumph and joy.

"Don't get too excited yet, brother," I said as I tested the strength of the tether around my neck and only managed to tighten it. "There's a blizzard on the way, the fire's going out, and London hog-tied us pretty good. Can you work yourself up into one of your mighty snits?"

Garth slowly shook his head. I glanced at Whisper, stuck in the log twenty feet away; she might as well have been twenty miles away.

"Golly!"

There was no response, no gorilla— only the rising wind whistling through the swaying trees. The flames of the campfire were starting to gutter and die, and I was growing cold and sleepy. I fumbled at the knot around my wrists with my gloved fingers, got nowhere.

"Golly?! Golly! Hey, babe, we could really use a little help here!"

Inspired by desperation, I began belting out arias from *The Magic Flute* like show tunes, shouting them out at the top of my lungs, hoping I could be heard above the wind. Finally I stopped, looked around.

Nothing.

Act Two. More arias, complete with a la-la-la orchestral accompaniment. I could feel my voice going when I suddenly felt a tap on my shoulder. I yelped, looked around to see Golly standing behind me.

GO Y LOV ?UPQINGM ZAAT

"Right, babe. I love Mozart too, remember? Listen to me carefully, Golly. I want you to take the knife out of that log over there

and bring it here. I want you to cut us free. Do you understand?

More Mozart. This time I hummed a cheerful, soothing etude. Golly inclined her head, half closed her eyes, and seemed to be swaying tentatively in time to the music.

"Golly, please try to concentrate and understand," I said softly.

"I understand now what you meant when you told me you felt funny; you're losing your wrongness. But you have to stay like people just a while longer. Understand?"

FUCKING TRY

"If you can't, sweetheart, Garth and I will die. You have to take the knife out of the log and bring it here."

Golly slowly ambled over to Whisper. She cocked her head and stared at the blade for a few moments, then pulled it free. She shuffled around the campfire three times, then responded to more Mozart and coaxing, and came over to me. Half an aria, another instruction, and she cut the bark strips around my wrist.

Not knowing how she would respond, and not caring, I wrapped my arms around her neck and kissed her brow. Then I took Whisper from her hand, cut the rope around my ankles, and cut Garth free. I immediately rushed to throw more logs on the fire, and the three of us huddled around the leaping, life-giving flames.

"Listen, guys," I said, "I've got a problem. London's plan

was the best; wait here in the shelter of the cliff, by the fire, until the storm blows over. I can't do that. I've gone cold-blooded, and the only thing keeping me alive in this cold is a battery-operated heating unit. The batteries are going dead. I have to make a run for it now, hope that I can find the snowmobile, and hope there's enough gas to get me back to the Institute— if I can find it in the— "

Garth didn't wait to hear any more. He straightened up, came over and pushed me in the direction from which we had come. I resisted, clutched both his naked, hairy forearms.

"Garth, I don't know what's going to happen out there. I've lost my sense of direction; even without the storm, I'm not sure I can find my way back before I run out of gas. If you and Golly stay here, at least you have a fire, and maybe there's a chance— "

Now Garth actually growled at me, and anger flared in his eyes as he motioned for me to lead the way. I grabbed one of Golly's hands, Garth grabbed the other, and together we hurried back through a forest that had grown ominously still. Heavy snowflakes had begun to fall.

36.

A half hour after we'd dug one of the snowmobiles out of a drift and started off, I knew we were hopelessly lost. The sense of direction that had guided me so unerringly through Mount Doom had disappeared. By now the storm was hitting us in full fury, and we were wallowing in a howling,

wind- and snow-blasted world of freezing cold that had no horizon.

Even with Garth and Golly huddling around me, I kept nodding off at the controls, and it was only Garth's persistent shaking and slapping that kept me even semiconscious.

Then we ran out of gas.

My mother's dream...

Bad decision to allow Garth and Golly to come with me into the blizzard; maybe they could have made it out on their own, in the morning.

Maybe other Warriors from the Institute would have mounted a rescue party, found them; at least Garth would have been alive.

Maybe Garth's cells would have stopped exploding.

Despite his prehuman form, maybe Garth could have found Siegmund Loge on his own and stopped Project Valhalla.

While there's life, there's hope. Ho, ho, ho.

Maybe Loge, or even some other scientist, could have cured Garth.

Maybe.

April Fool's Day.

Bad decision.

My mother's dream...

Suddenly I realized that I had been asleep, and Garth's sharp pinch on my cheek had awakened me. I was in his arms, and he was on foot, struggling through snow that was thigh-deep, refusing to give up until his last strength was

gone.

My mother's dream...

All the world...

Then Garth could go on no longer. Swaying, he held me very close, kissed me good-bye, then toppled sideways with me into the snow.

Something furry and very heavy fell on top of me, driving me even farther down into the snow. I wriggled, pushed at Golly, and she raised herself just enough so that I could see her display screen.

**GOLLY LOVE MONGO
GOLLY KEEP MONGO WARM**

While there's life, there really is hope. Ho ho, ho.

Alive, Golly and her sacrifice might keep me alive for a few more minutes, at most.

Dead, her sacrifice might keep both Garth and me alive for a considerably longer time.

Shhh.

"I love you, Golly. Thank you for your life."

I sliced open her throat, killing her instantly. Hot blood gushed forth into my face, momentarily clearing my senses, melting down the snow around my head. I wriggled the upper part of my body free, wiped the blood off my glasses, then buried Whisper in the base of Golly's throat and ripped down through bone and flesh, spilling her steaming guts into the snow.

Garth saw and understood what I was trying to do, and he helped me stretch and break open Golly's rib cage. Covered with warm, life-sustaining gore, we squeezed together into more gore, huddled together with our bodies wrapped around one another inside Golly's carcass.

Dripping blood and strands of gut hanging from the ripped rib cage almost immediately began to freeze, forming a bloody, intricate, lacelike barrier of strange and unlikely beauty between us and the storm outside.

Gestures, even empty ones, can mean something. Now there was absolutely nothing left to do. But we had fought to the best of our ability to the very end, and I believed that our mother and father would be proud of our struggle, no matter what kind of world they ended living in.

Garth and I, two beasts of Valhalla, lay inside the body of another, waiting to die behind a wall of tears and curtains of ice.

37.

KNOCK-KNOCK.

Who's that tapping at my door?

Knock-knock.

Only death and nothing more?

The knocking continued, and as I opened my eyes and squinted I could see booted feet moving in clear sunlight outside the curtain of frozen blood.

Somebody was chopping away at Golly's frozen carcass, trying to get at us.

I tried to grope for Whisper, but everything around me seemed frozen solid, and I couldn't move. I could feel Garth's bulk next to mine, but he seemed so very still; I tried to speak, couldn't.

Then the prison of frozen flesh around us cracked open, and I found myself looking up into the faces of three Warriors, the fur around the hoods of their parkas being whipped about by the wash of helicopter rotors.

Thwop-thwop-thwop.

A fourth Warrior came into my field of vision, bent down over me. He was a big man, and his left sleeve was empty. His eyes were set wide apart, and he had a lantern jaw.

"They're alive!" Mike Leviticus shouted.

They're alive. Garth was alive. If there had been any tears left in me, I would have cried once again.

By helicopter, it was only a five-minute ride to the Institute, where we were taken. I could still barely stay awake, much less speak, so I didn't bother to try.

My initial elation at our surviving the storm had been dampened somewhat by my memory of the steel table and surgical instruments that had been set up beside Garth's cage.

It occurred to me that we were being thawed out simply so that the scalpels wouldn't break when they dissected us.

We weren't dissected.

Groggy most of the time, I existed in a kind of dopy torpor as teams of men and women in white coats ministered to us. I had completely lost track of any sense of time; minutes, days, or weeks could have gone by, and I wouldn't have known the difference.

Once, in one of my more alert periods, I lifted my head off my pillow and saw Garth, asleep, lying in another bed. He appeared strange to me. Or didn't appear strange. I wasn't sure which.

Mike Leviticus never spoke, but he did a lot of staring at me; there was a strange look in his eyes which I found impossible to read. Often, he absently touched the stump of his left wrist.

If, finally, Garth and I were to be killed, I strongly suspected that Mike Leviticus would be highly pleased to be chosen as our executioner.

More time passed, still impossible to measure, and I continued to float groggily through it all. Now I suspected that Garth and I were being tranquilized, but I wasn't sure.

Except for mealtimes, when we were assisted by nurses, we were allowed simply to rest. There were no needles, no X-rays, no sonograms, no biosamples taken. There was no cutting. Garth continued to appear strange to me. Or not strange.

An airplane. Now I was convinced that Garth and I were being doped up, for I continued to segue in and out of sleep, soothed by the engines' steady drone.

Garth, also asleep, was in a seat across the aisle, accompanied by a Warrior guard. My guard was Mike Leviticus, who kept staring at me and touching his stump.

Once, when I woke up and glanced out the window, I saw water. Lots of water. An ocean.

The next time I woke up we were over a vast, barren land mass, which I assumed was Greenland.

Greenland, I thought, was a perfect site for Siegmund Loge's main base of operations. It was a vast land, thinly populated, midway between Russia and the United States, and beneath a nexus of dozens of communications satellites. When the time came to deliver "Father's Treasure" to the test subjects in the ring of communes around the world, cargo planes, flying at low levels, could fly in and out with minimal risk of detection.

Another feature of the continent had also enabled Loge, using what I assumed was the latest "burnout" technology—massive steel conduits lined with reflective brick and sunk directly into a volcano's underground magma pool—to solve the problem of finding a source of energy, in this case heat transfer.

Loge certainly had plenty of power, I thought as the plane descended toward his headquarters, of which only a huge, transparent, sunlight-collecting dome was visible

aboveground. He was situated on a vast, barren plain inside a massive ring of volcanoes which I estimated to be at least ten miles in diameter.

The plane landed on the tundra, taxied toward a spot where a massive, radio-operated panel was sliding back to reveal an equally massive elevator platform.

It was only after the plane stopped on the platform and the elevator began to descend that it struck me that I had been seeing in sunlight, without pain, without my glasses—and had been ever since the Warriors had taken us out of the steppes. The smoked glasses, like Whisper, had been lost inside Golly's frozen carcass.

38.

FOR three days we were kept in obviously impromptu but effective confinement inside a locked and reinforced storeroom with an adjoining toilet. We had no contact with anyone, and our meals were delivered to us through a narrow opening cut out at the bottom of the door.

On the evening of the third day we got a special surprise for dinner, a hose instead of food trays. We were gassed.

We awoke in separate beds, in a rather cheerful and tastefully decorated bedroom illuminated by recessed lights.

"Shit, I'm shedding again," Garth said as he rose, stripped, then shook out his pajamas and brushed hair off his sheets and pillow. As his body continued its rapid transmutation back to normal size and appearance, his fur

kept falling off in thick, matted chunks.

My own pajamas even fit me, which attested to the fact that someone—presumably Siegmund Loge—had gone to a lot of trouble to see that we were comfortable. On dressers next to each of our beds had been laid out several changes of underwear, three pale blue overalls which looked appropriately sized, fine leather boots, and Adidas sneakers.

I grunted. "It always amazes me how you find exactly the right thing to say in any given situation. Here we wake up in a Louis the Fourteenth bedroom, original Picassos on the walls, and the first thing you worry about is grooming. This is the Magic Kingdom, m'boy."

"What can I tell you? I'm anal-compulsive." Garth pulled a handful of fur off his buttocks, dropped it into the large metal wastebasket next to his bed. "Sorry I'm messing up the place. Let's hope our host has provided us with a vacuum cleaner."

There wasn't a vacuum cleaner, but we weren't missing too many other things. There was a large bathroom with separate tub and shower stall—most welcome, since we were a bit gamy after sitting around in the storeroom for three days—and two sets of toilet articles. The refrigerator in the kitchen was well stocked, and there was a freezer filled with meat and frozen fresh vegetables. There was even a wet bar in the living room, also well stocked; it sat next to a Plexiglas shield, similar to the one in Siegfried Loge's Treasure Room, which cut us off from what appeared to be a very expensively equipped media room

and a rather long, narrow corridor with a door at the end.

What we didn't have in our section of the apartment, besides a vacuum cleaner, was an exit.

The man standing on the other side of the shield was two or three inches taller than Garth. He was gangling and rawboned, had large, gentle-looking hands, and appeared remarkably fit for someone who had to be in his mid-eighties. His full head of snow-white hair was longer than in his pictures or on his posters, and fell across his shoulders. His face was full, free of wrinkles, and he had eyes of the deepest blue I had ever seen; the eyes were limpid, swimming with compassion and glinting with intelligence. He was wearing a loosely belted white cardigan sweater over a blue silk shirt, finely tailored charcoal slacks, and looked like a physically fit Santa Claus, or a Sunday school God, out of costume, smoking a pipe. Simply standing still and silent, his personal magnetism was enormous; he was a man who'd successfully lied to tens of millions of people, yet I knew he was a man whose words I would trust instinctively. If I didn't know better.

"I'm Siegmund Loge," the scientist said, removing his pipe from his mouth and stepping closer to the shield. His voice, slightly amplified through hidden speakers in the apartment, was deep, rich and resonant, slightly hypnotic, the kind of voice a person can listen to for long periods of time without growing tired. "I'm most pleased to meet you at last, Garth and Dr. Robert Frederickson."

Garth and Dr. Robert Frederickson would have been most pleased to meet Dr. Siegmund Loge on more

intimate terms, and we both hurled our bodies at the Plexiglas, again and again. The shield was remarkably resilient, and all we did was manage to bruise our shoulders. I sorely missed Whisper.

"Please don't," Loge said, looking genuinely concerned as Garth and I, panting, sat down on the thick carpet for a breather. "You'll hurt yourselves."

The thought that Siegmund Loge should be so solicitous of our health gave both Garth and me a good chuckle, and caused us to redouble our efforts to get at him. This time all we managed to do was break up most of the living room furniture, and snap three steak knives from the kitchen.

Loge had waited patiently through our little tantrum. Now, as we stood and glared at him, he relit his pipe, puffed on it thoughtfully as he stared back at us, then sighed and shook his head. "This is very disturbing," he said in his sonorous voice.

Garth and I looked at each other, puzzled. It took a while, but I finally realized that Loge was referring to our recovery. "You didn't know the process could be reversed, did you?" I asked.

Loge grunted his affirmation. "Apparently severe trauma will do , precisely that, which may mean that even less severe trauma could arrest the process. I believe the problem can be solved, but I should have anticipated it."

Severe trauma, indeed, I thought— like almost freezing to death. "Don't feel bad," I said. "All the clues were right under the noses of your crazy son and grandson, in their Mount Doom, but they were too busy jerking off with their

toys, games, and fantasies to see the implications of the fact that many of the animals they threw into that heat and cold not only survived, but multiplied. Is there a chemical antidote?"

Loge slowly blinked, shook his head. "What would be the point of having an antidote?"

"What's the point of the Valhalla Project?"

Loge simply stared at us. Once he removed his pipe from his mouth and seemed about to speak, then thought better of it; he put his pipe back in his mouth and puffed.

Garth tapped on the Plexiglas in front of Loge's nose. "Mongo wants to know why a nice senior citizen like yourself wants to risk destroying the world."

Loge just continued to puff and stare; he seemed lost in thought.

"I'd say it doesn't make any difference, Loge," I said. "The whole thing looks like a bust to me. You may do a lot of damage and cause a lot of suffering, but doctors and scientists will certainly discover the temperature factor before too long. The shit you want to make may not even work anywhere outside the temperate zones, which excludes most of Russia. What do you say we all go home and forget this thing? You gave it the old college try."

Loge grunted, took a pencil and small note pad out of the pocket of his sweater, and began doodling; before our eyes, he was apparently solving the problem. "No," he mumbled. "The problem can be solved. It's in the reverse transcriptase."

"Just where I thought it was," I said, and looked at my

Chief Researcher.

"It's a genetic substance that can read RNA into DNA," Garth said. "You can inject new material into genetic programs, cause those programs to run backwards along evolutionary lines. Controlling the reaction from the reverse transcriptase is the key to this thing."

"I'm sorry I asked," I replied, and turned back to Loge. "Where are Mike Leviticus and the other Warriors who brought us here?"

Loge finished a series of equations, gave a smile of satisfaction which I found maddening, put the pencil and pad back in his pocket. "They were sent back after they wired your apartment for sound and constructed this shield."

"You didn't want us to talk to them, did you?"

"No," Loge answered simply.

"Because what we had to say might contradict some of the things they believe about you and Project Valhalla. In fact, each one of them may believe something different. No wonder you kept us drugged. Warriors are trained to be close-mouthed, even with each other. You certainly didn't want us to start them debating with each other."

"Correct. The two of you happen to be the most dangerous men on the face of the earth; yet, you may still end as the saviors of humankind."

"Oh, you're just saying that because you like us— you're going to give us delusions of grandeur. I assume you're referring to our reaction to the shit Jake Bolesh put in us?"

"Of course. Without the two of you, and your unique

reaction to that particular formulation, I might never have found the correct formulation."

"You have it now?" Garth asked quietly.

"Yes," Loge answered with a saintly smile of gratitude. "It is done, thanks to the information I was able to gain from your bodies. Also— thanks to your remarkable wills to survive, your resourcefulness and resilience— I discovered, and was able to correct, this problem of reversal outside certain temperature parameters. You are, or were, the most dangerous men on the planet because you would not stop coming at me, and I must confess that on a number of occasions I was afraid that you might actually be able to stop me from completing the project. That would have been a tragedy with dimensions you can't imagine— yet."

"Oh, woe. When do we get to know what you're really up to, so that we can try to imagine the dimensions of the tragedy we would have caused if we'd been able to stop you? Garth and I are really into tragedy."

"Soon. Not yet. When you do understand the reason for Project Valhalla, Dr. Frederickson, I don't believe you'll find things so amusing."

"Listen, Dr. Loge, Garth and I aren't exactly splitting our sides now; a lot of people find our sense of humor somewhat bizarre." To my mind, Project Valhalla, whatever it really was, still had one major flaw. But I couldn't recall ever winning a single Nobel Prize, and I wasn't about to argue with a double laureate. Also, after watching him casually doodle through the problem of reversal with a pencil and paper, I wasn't about to stimulate him with any

hints. "Who else is here?" I asked.

"Nobody. We're alone."

"Bullshit."

Loge simply shrugged. "Why should I lie about something like that? It's true; we are alone."

"No security?"

"Security against what? The only threat against us in this place would be from a Greenland or NATO force, and my Warriors couldn't defend against that. Illusion and isolation remain my principal weapons of security, as they have always been. Next week, of course, things will be different. Hundreds of people will begin arriving to prepare for manufacture and distribution."

"What about the babies who were sent to you?" Garth asked in a low, menacing tone.

"They were sent back to their parents some time ago—and I would like you to believe that, while they were here, they were expertly cared for by a trained staff. No infant suffered because of its stay here."

"They weren't... tampered with?"

"No, Garth. After I learned of your reactions to the last formulation, I knew there was no need for the work I had planned to do with the infants; you two were the work, the human experimental subjects, the living laboratories in which the solution to a correct formulation could be found. Indeed, it's arguable whether I could have produced that reaction in any other humans on earth. You were indispensable in bringing the Valhalla Project to fruition. I believe Mr. Lippitt understood this danger from the

beginning. Considering his mind set, I'm surprised he didn't kill the both of you. An unpredictable man, that one."

"What happened to Mr. Lippitt and the man who was with him at the Institute?" I asked carefully, almost afraid to hear the answer.

"They're both dead. I'm sorry."

The news hit both Garth and me like bullets in the stomach. We were alone, without allies, imprisoned and at the mercy of Siegmund Loge while the clock of the world ran down.

Seeing our reaction, Loge stepped closer to the shield. Tears actually glistened in his sea-blue eyes. "I really *am* sorry," he said. "I know they were your friends, and I understand your grief. But remember that I've lost a son and a grandson. Believe me, it doesn't make a difference. All of the death and suffering for which you hold me responsible is insignificant compared to... what would have been, and can now be prevented."

"What's it about, Loge?" I asked through clenched teeth. "Which of the dozen different versions of Project Valhalla we've heard is the right one?"

"None."

Garth and I looked at each other, then at Loge. The old man had both his hands placed on the shield, almost as if he wanted to reach through and touch us. For a brief moment, grief and loneliness swam in his eyes. Then it was gone. He stepped back, seemed to be making an effort to compose himself as he refilled his pipe from a pouch in his pocket, lit it.

I asked, "Besides yourself, who else knows what the Valhalla Project is really supposed to do?"

"Nobody," Loge answered in a voice that trembled slightly.

Garth punched the shield with his fist. "Damn it, don't you think we have the right to know?!"

"Yes," Loge murmured in a voice that was almost inaudible. "And I want you to know."

"So *tell* us, already!" I said, thoroughly exasperated.

"Soon."

"Why not now?"

"First, there's something you must see. I believe it will explain many things— my need for the isolation in which you find me, the things I think about in that isolation. Then you will understand Project Valhalla."

Again, Garth punched the shield. His face was flushed a deep, brick red. "Let's get one thing straight between us, you fucking screwball. You don't need us any longer, do you?"

"For experimentation and knowledge, no," Loge replied evenly.

"Then for what?" I asked quickly.

"Soon, Dr. Frederickson."

Garth stepped back from the shield, took a deep breath, and slowly relaxed his fists. "If you don't need us, why are we still alive? Why bother bringing us here in the first place?"

"All your questions will be answered soon, Garth. I promise you."

"Go to hell, you fucking Nazi," Garth said, and spat at the glass. "Shit, even the rest of the Nazis couldn't have thought this one up—it took the biggest Nazi of all."

Loge's face, distorted by Garth's spittle on the Plexiglas, contorted in pain; Garth's words had cut him deeply. He wiped tears from his eyes, looked down at me. "You like people, don't you?"

"Yes," I answered softly. "But I like them the way they are."

Loge nodded absently, then turned and slowly walked away down the long corridor.

We didn't see Loge for the rest of the day, and he didn't come in the morning. We tried shouting into the intercom in the living room, but it seemed to be dead. We tried shouting at the walls, where we assumed microphones must be hidden, but got no response and no Loge. We even tried shouting up at the recessed television cameras in all the rooms, but there was still no response.

We were just sitting down to a lunch Garth had prepared when the lights in the apartment went out. A few moments later we heard the haunting, E-flat opening chords of *Das Rheingold*; the sound filled the apartment and seemed to be coming from everywhere at once, vibrating in our bones as well as our ears.

Suddenly there was a glow, then a flicker at the entrance to the living room. We rose, walked into the other room—and came to a dead stop.

Standing, we didn't move for close to three hours.

Like the shield in the Treasure Room, the Plexiglas sealing off the living room could reflect images, which in this case were being rear-projected from the media room beyond. What we were watching was a series of slides and short film clips, a visual presentation precisely edited in rhythms that matched the music in the introductory opera in Wagner's *Ring* cycle.

One brief series of slides showed a soldier snatching an infant from its mother's arms, then bashing the baby's head against a brick wall.

Another series showed a soldier disemboweling a pregnant woman.

These images passed before our eyes even before the thirty-six E-flat opening bars of *Das Rheingold* were over, and were followed by other, similar images throughout the length of the opera. As horrible as were these opening sequences, the ones that followed were just as horrible, and had the same emotional impact. Although each sequence was brief, some images consisting only of the flash of a single slide, not a single image or sequence of images was ever repeated in the three hours.

None had to be. The record of human cruelty, even when presented in snippets, was easily long enough to stretch through *Das Rheingold*.

And beyond.

Each day for the next three days, beginning at precisely

one o'clock in the afternoon, another opera in the cycle was presented, each with its own accompanying slide and film show. During this time I — and Garth, too, I believed — came to understand what heretofore had been only a vaguely bemusing puzzlement when practiced or described by other people: religion and religious experience.

Siegmund Loge was our high priest, and he was baptizing us in an ocean of feeling inside ourselves deeper than we had ever imagined.

After *Die Walkiire* we began to fast. And we continued our fast.

Also, we were silent for these four days... not only during each opera and its accompanying visual presentation, but afterwards, like monks in retreat.

Tens, hundreds of thousands of slides and film clips flashed through the seventeen-and-a-half-hour length of the *Ring* cycle. Loge, the Nobel laureate, was also revealed to us now as a consummate artist as well as an ultrabright scientist. By precisely matching these images of unspeakable and indescribable horror to Wagner's masterpiece, the vast opus of a Nazi sympathizer, Loge had found a way to speak of the unspeakable and describe the indescribable; what he had done was to construct a kind of spiritual submersible, comprised of music and light, that took us to the very bottom of the ocean of evil that stains the shores of the human heart.

The onslaught of horror was so terrible that finally, with music as a catalyst, it transcended horror; it created in us a feeling of profound sadness that I realized, with a

suddenness that literally took my breath away, was a reflection, the tender and merciful grace, of my own goodness, the air supply that kept me from drowning in what I was seeing.

So our decency, too, Loge showed us, though the horror of the images never stopped. Whatever feelings Garth and I had ever felt stir in us were nothing, mere breezes on the skin of the soul, compared to what we were feeling now; Siegmund Loge was working on our souls' skin with a tattooer's needle of notes and colors.

How Siegmund Loge had lived for more than eighty years with this pain weighing on his soul without being crushed by it, I couldn't imagine, and I realized, with shame, what a very shallow human being I was compared to this very great and very sad and very compassionate old man. I believed that Garth felt the same.

Mr. Lippitt had told me I'd be impressed by Siegmund Loge. I was impressed. And I knew that whatever happened next, a sea change had taken place in my soul by the time the last sweet and haunting notes of *Gotterdammerung* had faded away.

Garth and I would never forget what we had experienced in this room, and we would never be the same.

39.

AT precisely one o'clock in the afternoon on the day after *Gotterdammerung*, Siegmund Loge came to us. His eyes were red-rimmed, as if he had been crying recently, but his

voice was steady, if soft, when he spoke.

"I've spent almost my entire lifetime compiling that—since I was seventeen. It was completed, the last pictures matched to the last bars of the music, only recently—in the morning of the day you were found. This is the first time I've experienced it as a whole, and so it's an experience we've shared together." He took a deep breath, and his voice trembled slightly when he continued. "Please tell me what you think."

"I couldn't find any fucking popcorn in the kitchen, Loge," Garth said evenly. "What good are movies without popcorn?"

Loge's face was stony as he stared intently at Garth. The muscles in his jaw began to twitch, and emotions—clear as the images in the vast montage he had assembled—passed across his eyes: bewilderment, shock, hurt, grief—rage. "How *dare* you make such a remark?!" he shouted at Garth, pounding the shield with his fist. "You have no right to do what you're doing! I've been watching you for the past four days, and I've seen your reactions! I know how my work affected you! I've seen you both sobbing, and I've seen you sitting in silence, lost in grief! I've watched the two of you tossing in your sleep! *The three of us have felt the same!* Don't you *dare* deny your pain to me! *It's our common bond!*"

Garth reached inside his overalls as if to scratch, pulled out a tuft of fur and casually tossed it into the air. The glossy black hair drifted to the floor.

"That's my brother's way of telling you we'll share nothing

with you that we don't have to," I said, scratching at the residual scales on the back of my forearm. "You've taken everything else from us from shit to toenail clippings, but you can't have our emotions. In addition to everything else, it turns out you're a nasty old voyeur. Why did you show that to us, anyway? Do we look like art critics?"

Loge swallowed hard, then stepped back from the shield. He seemed stunned, as if he had made some simple miscalculation and couldn't find his mistake. "It's my explanation," he said hoarsely.

"Your *explanation*?!" I snapped. "Do you really think you can justify or explain the murder of our nephew and his friend by giving Garth and me an emotional root canal job?! Do you think art can justify all the death and suffering you've caused?! You're part of the problem! Man, right now you *are* the problem! *You're killing the world!*"

Loge screwed his eyes shut, tilted his head back and clenched his fists. When he spoke, his voice was like a long moan. "I had hoped that you and your brother would understand, Dr. Frederickson, but you still don't. It's not a question of emotion or justification, not a matter of good or evil. It is mathematics. Our world, the world humans dominate and rule, is dying. But I'm not killing it; I'm trying to save it."

Then, suddenly, I understood—and wished I hadn't. "My God," I said in a voice I didn't recognize as my own. "It's the Triage Parabola."

Loge emitted a sigh, lowered his head, opened his eyes, unclenched his fists. "Yes, Dr. Frederickson. I do

think you now understand."

"Mongo," Garth said, gripping my arm, "what the hell are you two talking—?"

I quickly put my fingers to his lips, then pointed to Loge, who had begun to pace back and forth in front of the shield, nervously running his long fingers through his long silver hair.

"As you know," Loge said in the tone of voice some professors use when lecturing students, "the Triage Parabola has proved useful in helping to predict which of several endangered species will most benefit from human intervention, thus enabling us to focus our attention and resources where they will do the most good. To apply the formulas of the Triage Parabola to human beings is almost impossibly complex, because the number of variables in human behavior— economic, political, social, psychological— approaches infinity. However, almost a decade ago I was able to apply the formulas, using a Cray computer and a mathematics system of my own invention. I kept my findings secret; I saw nothing to be gained in revealing them, since there was absolutely nothing that could be done to alter what seemed to be inevitable— or so I thought, until I was approached at the Institute for the Study of Human Potential by certain representatives of the Pentagon."

"Mongo," Garth murmured, "tell me what this banana is talking about."

"He's saying humanity is an endangered species, that we're on the verge of extinction."

"From what? Nuclear war?"

"Maybe, maybe not," I said, recalling that in the entire visual montage accompanying the *Ring*, only two sequences, each lasting less than twenty seconds, had been devoted to the melting flesh of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. "I think what Loge is saying is even worse than that."

The scientist, who had heard me, nodded in affirmation, then resumed his pacing. "Correct, Dr. Frederickson. Thermonuclear war may destroy human life— indeed, all life— over the planet, but not necessarily so. In fact, the solutions to the equations indicate that the outside parameters for our existence may be as much as three or four hundred years. But no more. The *means* by which we destroy ourselves cannot be predicted mathematically— and are, in any case, irrelevant. It is of no value to look around for the catastrophe that will come; in an evolutionary sense, we *are* the catastrophe, a unique species of self-aware, intelligent creatures that are, as an entire species, quite insane. We are, as the Triage Parabola makes quite clear, simply an evolutionary dead end. Nature, as is well-known from even the most casual observation, is unforgiving and implacable in erasing her mistakes. On an evolutionary scale, we rose with lightning speed; we shall disappear with lightning speed. In four hundred years, or maybe only four hundred months or weeks or days or hours or seconds, there will not be a single human being left on the face of the earth. In four thousand years— a snap of the fingers in evolutionary time— there will probably not even

be a trace left of our existence."

"What's going to replace us?" I asked.

"If nothing is done to alter our course?" Loge shrugged. "Who knows? The Triage Parabola is an extremely powerful mathematical tool, but it's not a crystal ball. Data to predict the end of our existence is available; that necessary to predict what sort of sentient creature, if any, will replace us is not. The only thing that's certain is that we will be gone."

"No, it's not certain," I said, knowing I sounded slightly foolish and petulant, and not caring; I couldn't think of anything else to say. "There is also love in the world."

"It is certain, Dr. Frederickson. You have not learned the lessons of your odyssey, as I had hoped you would. First, love is ephemeral; it vanishes at the torturer's first pass. Yes, there is love, and it is responsible for much that we have accomplished that is beautiful, good, and true. But love cannot triumph over evil because, for most people, only their evil transcends tribal boundaries, not their love. The young men and women in the commune you visited *loved*— each other. They were looking forward, with ecstasy, to the death of virtually everyone else. Stryder London loved— his country, which is to say his tribe, and was perfectly willing to countenance a weapon of terrible evil as long as it would subjugate the wills of all tribes to which he did not belong. Tribes, Dr. Frederickson. Tribes. National tribes; religious tribes; ethnic tribes; family tribes; sexual tribes; cultural tribes. By swinging down from the trees, by emerging from the caves, we only ensured our

own eventual destruction. We are an evolutionary dead end precisely because we were able to replace sticks and stones with nerve gas and thermonuclear weapons without ever evolving, intellectually and morally, beyond the ridiculous, childish superstitions and primitive, tribal mind-sets that necessitated the use of the comparatively harmless sticks and stones in the first place. Once we poisoned the wells of neighboring tribes; now we poison oceans. The Triage Parabola provided me with a mathematical demonstration of our species' demise; I have given the world a practical demonstration. Of all people on earth, the Frederickson brothers have experienced the greatest overall view of that demonstration. By accident, my work touched your bodies; by design, I touched your souls. Yet you react to me as if I were some kind of mad scientist."

Garth and I looked at each other. "Perish the thought," I said quickly. "You're planning to send us *all* back in evolutionary time to see if we can't get it right the second time, aren't you? *That's* what the Valhalla Project is about, right?"

Loge slowly nodded. "Yes. Once I have tested the formulation in an initial trial run in my communes, any necessary corrections will be made, and then a second batch of 'Father's Treasure' will be delivered. This formulation will be highly infectious. Then the commune members will all be sent out into the world to await what the members of the commune you visited think of as the 'Good Time.' That time will come quickly. We will be rendered

comparatively harmless to each other, at least on a global scale, and can only hope that we will evolve in a more appropriate manner if given this second chance. It is the ultimate, most humane, use of the Triage Parabola, gentlemen, and it is humankind's only hope for long-term survival."

"Uh, Loge..." I swallowed, found my mouth was just a bit dry. "Dr. Loge, before you go ahead and do anything we all may regret in the morning, why don't you recheck your figures?"

Loge shook his head sadly, looked at me with profound sadness in his eyes. "I have rechecked them, Dr. Frederickson; I've rechecked them hundreds of times. I know you're not a scientist or a mathematician, so it may be difficult for you to understand. Without the intervention represented by the Valhalla Project, our extinction is a *certainty*."

"You mentioned that no one else had tried to apply the Triage Parabola to humans because it was almost impossible. Maybe it *is* impossible. Now, you're a fairly bright man, but you're not a god, despite what a lot of folks think. Even you could be wrong."

"No, I'm not a god," Loge said simply. "There are no gods, of course. I'm just a man, one representative of a species that, quite possibly, may be the only one in the entire universe which has such a high degree of self-awareness and intelligence. No other species anywhere may have the potential to travel to the stars to find out. Unless someone intervenes to save us from ourselves, it is

doubtful we will even have time to accomplish the relatively simple task of traveling to another planet and colonizing it. I am not a god; I can be wrong, and often have been in the past. This is not such a time. I am not wrong. The figures are correct. Someone had to take the responsibility for altering our course, and I have done it; the Valhalla Project is the only solution I could think of. I feel I've come to know the two of you quite well, through the reports that came to me of the havoc you've been wreaking. Once, I thought perhaps the two of you could appreciate my burden and understand my terrible loneliness. Now I believe I was mistaken. The Triage Parabola is correct about the imminent extinction of humankind; I was wrong about you."

"Jesus Christ," Garth said with a snort of disgust. "You don't think *you're* insane?!"

Loge said nothing. He continued to stare at us with his sad eyes.

"Damn it, Loge," I said, "don't do it. Even if you're right, there must be some answer besides the Valhalla Project."

"No," Loge replied softly. "There is no other answer."

"You didn't need us anymore," Garth said. "You still haven't explained why we were thawed out and brought here. If you consider us so dangerous, why didn't you just let us die?"

Loge sighed, shrugged his shoulders. "But I have explained. I've explained everything, only to you. I wanted to meet you. I *needed* to explain to someone, and I needed someone to understand. I'd even entertained the hope that the two of you would help me."

"Help you do what?" I asked. "Manufacture and distribute 'Father's Treasure'?"

"No. I have hundreds of people to do that. The first of the manufacturing technicians will begin arriving tomorrow."

"Then what?"

"I wanted you to help me bear witness," Loge said softly.

"I believe the two of you are now immune to the formulation; you are the only two people on the planet who will not change. I can take steps to protect myself against infection, and I will. I'd hoped that until our natural deaths, the three of us could travel over the face of the earth, safeguarding treasures when we can, but primarily bearing witness, as the last humans, to the goodness and beauty that was in our genes. Our existence, and our passage among the beasts, would serve as a kind of prayer for human salvation in the future."

"It sounds like a good idea to me," I said as Garth and I exchanged quick glances. "My brother and I are honored by your invitation, and we accept."

Loge didn't speak for some time, and I didn't like the look of the shadows that moved in his eyes. "You mock me, Dr. Frederickson," he said at last. "You *do* believe I am nothing more than a mad scientist, perhaps a paranoid schizophrenic, like my son— or simply morally corrupt, like my grandson. Do you believe I haven't seen into your hearts? You are both transparent. You believe that you can trick me into releasing you, so that you can stop the Valhalla Project— perhaps by killing me. Incredibly— despite all you have seen, and all I have told you— you still

have hope. That is *your* insanity."

Loge abruptly moved to one side of the shield, disappeared from sight. There was a soft *click*, and then an even more ominous sound in the apartment.

hisssssssssss

"I've taken great care in preparing this gas," Loge said kindly as he stepped back into view. "It is a gentle death; indeed, I think you will find it delightful. The two of you have suffered enough, and now I hope to give you considerable pleasure as you die. It's the least I can do."

hisssssssssss

The sound seemed to be coming from everywhere inside the apartment, and there was the strong smell of lilacs.

My mother's dream.

"Loge, shut off the gas," I said, making a desperate effort to keep my voice even. "We have to talk to you. You still need us, because there's still one drawback to your plan, which you don't seem to understand. The rest of the body changes, but the brain cells don't. Somehow, the brain protects itself— like in the infant diving reflex, when the brain in a drowning person conserves its own oxygen. Your stuff won't work, because the membrane of the brain filters it out. Memory, self-awareness, instinct, prejudice, love, hate— all remain. You may have a planet filled with monkey people, but their human consciousness will remain the same. You'll accomplish nothing— *nothing*, Loge, except to inflict unimaginable suffering on the species you profess to love so much. You still need us if you hope to solve that

problem. Shut off the gas."

Loge smiled gently, brushed a lock of silver hair away from his face. "I'm aware of what you just told me, Dr. Frederickson. I discovered this phenomenon when Garth was examined for the last time at the Institute. The adjustment in the formulation has already been made. All of the things you mentioned will be erased. Humankind will be able to start anew on its evolutionary path with a clean slate."

Oh-oh.

hissssssssss

My mother's dream!

"Loge, you have no right to decide alone what's best for four billion people!"

"Of course not," Siegmund Loge replied evenly. "I hope you don't think I would be so presumptuous as to take on such an awesome responsibility alone, without guidance."

"But you said nobody else knows what you're doing."

"God knows."

Loge's eyes teared, shimmered with gentleness and love.

"What?"

"I must confess that I haven't been totally forthcoming with the two of you," the old man said in a voice that was suddenly vibrant with ecstasy. "I said there were no gods, but there is God—the God of the universe, the God of us all. He first spoke to me when I was twelve years old, told me to begin collecting the pictures and film clips you saw. He has been speaking to me on a regular basis ever since,

guiding me in my work. It was God who gave me the mathematical system I needed to apply the Triage Parabola to humankind, God who urged me to take responsibility for developing the Valhalla Project. I am doing God's will. You see, gentlemen, I *am* the Messiah. Good-bye, now."

Stunned, Garth and I watched Siegmund Loge turn and walk away down the long corridor to the door, which he closed quietly behind him.

Then Garth and I really got serious about trying to break through the shield.

hisssssssssss

MY MOTHER'S DREAM!!

More broken furniture; muscles and bones near to breaking as we hurled ourselves against the Plexiglas, bounced off.

hisssssssssss

MY MOTHER'S DREAM!!

... the end of the world, all hope gone...

MY MOTHER'S DREAM!!

hisssssssssss

It seemed an appropriate time to panic, so we did— at least to the extent that Loge's happy death gas allowed us, which wasn't much. Actually, we were kind of laughing, singing and prancing around the living room when Mike Leviticus, submachine gun crooked in his one whole arm, yanked open the door at the end of the corridor and sprinted toward us. It was the funniest thing we'd ever seen, and Garth and I stood with our noses pressed against the

Plexiglas and howled with laughter. We wouldn't move, even when Leviticus frantically motioned with his stump for us to get down, so he finally fired just over our heads. The shield didn't so much shatter as disintegrate, showering powder, slivers, and shards over us.

"Fly away home, Mike, m'boy," I cackled. "Poison gas. Get out of here."

Garth, even though he was in the middle of the Toreador Song from *Carmen*, nevertheless had the presence of mind to stumble over the rubble of the shield, find the switch and shut off the gas. Leviticus, his face red from the strain of holding his breath, used his machine gun—none too gently, beating the butt and barrel on our backs—to herd the giggling Fredericksons down the corridor and out the door, which he slammed shut behind him. He managed to whack us along another corridor, steered us to the left, and plopped us down on the floor directly beneath a huge ventilator shaft. After twenty minutes, our howls of laughter had dribbled off to an occasional, high-pitched giggle; another twenty minutes, and we managed to hold it down to spasmodic grins.

"Mongo?"

"I think I'm all right, Garth. You?"

"Me, too."

"Mike," I said, grinning foolishly up at the Warrior, "how can we thank you?"

Leviticus, his lantern jaw set firmly, shook his head. "I'm the one who has to thank you, Frederickson. If it weren't for you, my soul would have been doomed to eternal

damnation."

"Huh?"

Leviticus held out his naked stump. "This was a sign, a warning— God at once punishing me for, and trying to rescue me from, my own stupidity. It's taken me all this time to realize it; thank God I realized it in time. I helped install the gas system, so I knew what Satan— when I understood a few hours ago that Loge was Satan— had planned for you."

"Good thinking," Garth said drily, then hiccuped with laughter.

"I know what the two of you have been through," Leviticus said, first staring at me intently, then at Garth.

"Yeah," Garth said with a dreamy smile, "it's been kind of a bummer."

"I saw what the two of you looked like when you were brought to the Institute... and I watched you both heal before my eyes. Only God could have done that; only God could have helped you survive all your trials, and only God's wonderful Grace could have healed you. Satan made you into beasts, but God made you human again. It was a miracle. That's when I began thinking."

"Ah," Garth said as we both began giggling again. "And not a moment too soon, dear boy."

"I realized then that I must be God's Warrior, not Satan's, at peril to my soul. It was up to me to rescue you from Satan. I picked up this machine gun, stole the plane, and came here as fast as I could." The Warrior paused, bowed his head low to us. "Please, please forgive me for my part

in your suffering, and for taking so long to understand your true mission, to stop Satan."

"Right," I said as Garth and I got to our feet, dragged Leviticus to his. "Before we split, we have to figure out a way to blow up this place. Do you know anything about vulcan technology and heat transfer?"

"No, but I think I'd recognize the main power control source, if that's what you're asking."

"Right. All of the huge pipes you see running across the ceilings carry magma to someplace where it's converted into steam to run turbines. Look for a wall filled with pressure gauges. We'll separate to save time, and maintain communications through the intercom system. If you stumble across Satan in your travels, bring him along. If he puts up a fuss, shoot the fucker in the knees and carry him. We need him alive to give us all the details of the Valhalla Project and tell us everyone who's involved."

Leviticus held out his machine gun. "You want this?"

Garth and I shook our heads. "With Loge," I said, "all we'll need is a butterfly net."

40.

"COME out, come out, wherever you are!"

"Ally-ally-in-free!"

Loge had always done things, or gotten others to do things, in a big way, and the underground complex in Greenland was no exception. We had no idea how many levels there were, and after forty-five minutes Garth and I

had not even finished exploring the level we were on, which contained apartments of varying sizes which we assumed were for the technical and manufacturing personnel scheduled to come in.

"Do you suppose he knows we're looking for him?" Garth asked.

"Sure. He must have been watching the whole show on television."

An intercom in the corridor we were passing through buzzed, and a button marked "General" lit. Garth pressed the button.

"Yeah, Leviticus?"

"I found the guts of this place. I'm down on the fourth level, in the Pressure Control Room. I'm going to bust it up."

"Wait, Mike! Don't do anything until we—!"

But the intercom had gone dead and the light had winked out. A few seconds later we heard and felt the *ratta-tatta-tatta* of machine gun fire, the vibrations carrying clearly through the massive steel magma-flow pipes overhead and the ventilating shafts.

"Shit!" I said as we raced down the corridor and stepped into the first elevator we came to. Garth hit the button marked 4, the elevator doors closed, and we descended.

On the fourth level, the doors opened and we sprinted down the corridor to our left, toward the sound of machine gun fire. We almost ran over Siegmund Loge, who was just stepping out of an office. He was holding an open

cardboard carton in his hands; in the carton was a gallon container of some amber-colored fluid. Garth grabbed the scientist by the front of his sweater, while I took the carton from his hands and gently set it on the floor.

"It's my work!" Loge cried. "It must be saved!"

The magma-flow pipes overhead were starting to make funny noises, and the temperature in the corridor was definitely rising. "Garth, take the banana back and wait by the elevator!" I shouted as I sprinted ahead down the corridor. "I'll see how much damage Leviticus has done!"

"You have to hurry!" Loge called after me. "That man has done something he shouldn't have done!"

Mike Leviticus had indeed done something he shouldn't have done; he'd shot off most of the pressure gauges from the control pipes. One steam pipe had ruptured while he was about it, and when I found him I wished I hadn't. He'd taken a blast of live, superheated steam full in the face and was now lying on the floor of the Pressure Control Room, well done and very dead.

rrrrrrrr

The walls of the room began to shake. I made a hasty departure from the Pressure Control Room and sprinted back along the corridor toward the elevator at the far end. The pipes overhead had begun to glow cherry red and were doing some serious banging. What I suspected had happened was that, with the pressure control valves on all the pipes suddenly blown away, the giant main conduits, stretching perhaps as much as half a mile underground directly into the magma pools of the surrounding ring of

volcanoes, were acting as monstrous siphons, out of control, sucking hundreds of tons of magma— here. In a very short time, the entire underground complex was going to be just one more pool of molten rock.

That was for openers. With all the displacement that was going on, there was one hell of a lot of geography moving beneath my fast-running feet.

rrrruummmmm

Blurp.

The seam of a pipe twenty feet ahead of me ruptured, and a great bubble of steaming, flaming magma began to ooze out. I dove and rolled, feeling the flames singe my hair and burn my back, heard the mass plop behind me. Sulphur gas burned my eyes and clogged my lungs. Coughing, gasping for breath, I grabbed Garth's outstretched hand and let him yank me into the elevator. The doors sighed shut and we began to ascend— much too slowly, as far as I was concerned. I had a distinctly unpleasant sense of having been here before.

Rrrrruummmmmmmmmble.

"Loge!" I gasped as fumes began to fill the elevator. "What's the fastest fucking way out of here?!"

"I already got that out of him," Garth said, brushing ashes and shreds of burned fabric off my back. "You've got a pretty good burn there, brother."

"You ain't seen nothin' yet unless we get out of here! I mean, like ten minutes ago! This place is *gone!*"

"There's an access tunnel a hundred yards to our left," Garth said, stopping the elevator on the second level. Garth

slapped Loge— hard. "Is that right, you son-of-a-bitch?"

Loge, blood dripping from the corner of his mouth, nodded, swallowed hard. "It's twenty degrees below zero up on the surface. We'll freeze to death without coats."

"Go, jerk-off!" I said, goosing Loge as the door opened and Garth sprinted off down the corridor. I wasn't about to let our resident mad scientist entertain any suicidal thoughts; he was too important to our future— assuming we had one.

We reached the huge mouth of a tunnel of corrugated steel sloping upwards. Garth slapped a button on the wall, and a door slid back far up at the opposite end to reveal a square of pale, ice-blue sky. A blast of frigid air blew into our faces, a rather unpleasant complement to the burning at our backs. I felt I knew what a minute steak feels like just before it's dropped on the grill.

"You know how to fly a plane?!" Garth shouted at me as we ran up the tunnel.

"Nope! You?!"

"Nope! Loge?!"

The old man, staggering along in Garth's firm grasp, merely shook his head.

"Garth, does this mean we're going to have to wing it?!"

"Mongo, that's the *worst* joke you've ever laid on me, and I'm never going to let you forget it!"

"What fucking joke?!"

It didn't make any difference that none of us could fly a plane, because nobody was going to be winging it anywhere in Mike Leviticus's plane.

GGGrruuuuuMMMMBLE.

The force of the tremor knocked us to the ground. We got up, stumbled out of the mouth of the tunnel into the freezing air just in time to see the jet lazily topple over and disappear into a quarter-mile-long fissure that had opened in the ground.

Flaming magma was bubbling up in the tunnel behind us, and the huge glass dome was beginning to glow.

"What now?" Garth asked. "You want to stay here and cook, or move out and freeze?"

"I'm not sure it makes a difference. I've got a feeling that one or more of the volcanoes around us is going to blow. If that happens, we could be in serious trouble."

"They will all erupt," Loge said distantly. "My estimate is that we have less than fifteen minutes. We are dead men."

"Garth," I said, "I'm going to see if I can reach Leviticus's plane. There may be some survival gear in it."

I was twenty yards out over the trembling, frozen tundra when Garth's shout stopped me. I turned, then looked toward the west, where his finger was pointing. Just above the horizon, something silver glinted in the sunlight. The plane was flying low and fast, heading directly toward us.

Ah. Rescue.

GGGrruuuuuMMMMBLE.

The problem was that the pilot couldn't land; if he did, the chances were very good that the same thing would happen to his plane that had happened to Leviticus's. The entire area inside the circle of volcanoes was shaking, cracking like glass. The glass dome had burst, and magma was

flowing out in uneven, smoking rivers on all sides.

Rescue would have been very nice, I thought, but it made no sense at all to feed one more body into the outraged earth. I staggered across the shaking ground, frantically trying to wave the plane off.

The pilot not only ignored me, but almost decapitated me as he swooped in over my head. Just before I sprawled on the ice, I caught a glimpse in the cockpit of a grimly smiling face that looked familiar.

Getting up unsteadily, shivering, I turned in time to see the plane land, skid, spin around in a couple of circles, then straighten around and taxi toward us. I walked back to Garth and Loge, stood and watched in amazement as the plane stopped and Mr. Lippitt, carrying a huge BAR machine gun over his shoulder, stepped out, hopped over a rivulet of hissing lava that was flowing beneath the training jet, then casually strolled toward us.

"Why did you lie to us about Lippitt?" I asked Loge.

Loge stared at me, his eyes filled with sadness. "I was certain he was going to be dead soon, anyway," the scientist said. "It was only a matter of time. I badly wanted the two of you to commit to me and join me in bearing witness. I knew you wouldn't do that if you maintained any hope of rescue, and so I wanted to destroy that hope."

"What about the other man?"

Loge shrugged sadly. "He escaped too."

RRRRRUUUUmmmmmmmmmm.

It was one of the volcanoes to the west erupting, throwing flame, smoke and lava a mile into the sky. The

earth shook, throwing us all to the ground. Lippitt's plane turned, one of the wings fell off, and it crashed over on its side. Lippitt didn't even bother to look back.

"I think you just lost something," I said as the Defense Intelligence Agency operative came up.

"I see the Fredericksons have everything under control," Lippitt said, dropping the BAR to the ground and hooking his thumbs in the ammunition belts that crossed his chest. "It figures."

"*What?!*" Garth and I exclaimed in unison.

"Don't worry about the plane; there are others where that came from. There's a U.N. task force on the way, and they have helicopters. Thanks to our mutual friend, Mongo, I was finally able to talk to some good guys... and our friend did a little of his mental nudging. He'd picked up the coordinates for this place from Stryder London, of course."

The horizon was growing dark with smoke and ash, and there were no planes in sight.

"Uh, Lippitt..."

"Not to worry, Mongo. They'll be here. By the way, you two are looking considerably better than you were the last time I saw you. Garth, you seem to have lost a little hair."

"Yeah," Garth said, looking nervously up at the sky.

"Any hostiles around?"

"No," I said tersely. "There's just us chickens— and I don't have to tell you what kind of chickens we're going to be if your people don't get here fast. What are *you* doing here?"

"You mean before the others? I took that particular plane

because it was the fastest one on the base. I figured you might need a little help. Of course, I was wrong. I'm glad I didn't get here any sooner; I'd probably only have gotten in your way."

RRRRRUUUUUUMMMBLE.

"How'd you know we were here?"

"You can't be serious. This is where the action is, right? This is where the evil wizard himself hangs out, right? Where else would Mongo and Garth Frederickson be?"

"You're fucking crazy, Lippitt," Garth said as we stepped aside to avoid a thick stream of lava that flowed past us, to our right. It joined the stream that was flowing to our left, encircling us in a ring of fire. "What if this place had been full of Warriors? Did you think you were going to shoot your way in, blow everybody away, and take us out all by yourself?"

Lippitt smiled thinly. "Hanging around with the Fredericksons must have made me a little soft in the head."

GGRRRROOOOOOOOOORRRRR.

"Lippitt," I said through lips that already felt half-cooked, "you don't seem to be much worried about all this, but that was another volcano that just went."

"Hell, I'm not worried because I'm with you. I've decided that you and your brother are indestructible; you wouldn't die if somebody threw you out of an airplane. As long as I'm with you two, I'm convinced everything is going to turn out just fine." He paused, glanced at his watch, continued seriously: "Don't worry, Mongo; they'll get here. Five minutes."

"Damn it, Lippitt, I'm not worried about them getting here! I'm worried about us *being* here when they get here!"

"Mr. Lippitt," Siegmund Loge said, speaking for the first time since the D.I.A. operative had arrived, "we *must* be rescued. My work can be reconstructed if I'm alive, and that work must be done. When I explain, you'll see why this is so. You can't imagine the danger humanity faces."

Lippitt took a .45-caliber automatic from the pocket of his parka, put the gun to Siegmund Loge's head and shot him through the brain.

EPILOGUE

RAFFERTY , on horseback, waved to us from the hilltop where Hugo and Golly were buried. We waved back.

"You still feel lousy?" Garth asked as he tugged at his fishing line, which had become tangled on an underwater log in the stream that ran through our parents' farm.

"Yeah." Something was nibbling on my hook, but I didn't tug on the line. I didn't feel like killing anything.

"Me, too."

"Well, we spent a lot of time with lousy people, so I guess it's going to take some time for us to stop feeling lousy."

"That's not the reason we feel lousy, and you know it. What if he was right?"

"Shut up, Garth," I said, meaning it.

"He may have been stone fucking crazy, but that doesn't mean he wasn't right. If he was right, and the Valhalla Project was the only way to save the human race, do you know what that makes us?"

"It doesn't make us anything. Even if he was right, he didn't have the right to do what he was doing. Our only responsibility is to live our own lives in the best, most honorable, way possible. Now, I don't want to talk about it anymore."

"We have to talk about it sometime, Mongo."

"Not today."

"Okay. How long have we all been holed up here?"

"Going on four months."

"When do you want to go back to New York?"

"Not today."

"I'll drink to that."

"You drink too much now, Garth. So do I."

"As long as the government is willing to pay for a ring of guards around this place to keep people away from us, we may as well just sit here and wait until we get our heads straight."

"Booze doesn't help."

"So we'll start drying out. Today."

"Today."

"You talk to your people at the university?"

"Once a week. They want me back, but they're not pressing. What about the NYPD?"

"They want me back, but they're not pressing. There are one hell of a lot of people waiting to ask us questions,

Mongo."

"What are you going to tell them?"

"I'm not going to tell a damn, fucking thing to anybody. I'm not going to make up stories about where we've been, or what happened. I'm just not going to say anything."

"Agreed. We'll let Lippitt take the responsibility for deciding who should be told what."

"I wonder what the hell is happening in the outside world?"

"I don't know, and I don't give a shit."

"Mongo, we should really start reading newspapers and watching television again."

"Not today."

Our parents and Lippitt, on their daily walk, emerged from the apple orchard across the stream. Their arms linked, they ambled slowly in our direction along the opposite bank. Garth and I might have felt a tad depressed, but our mother and father certainly didn't; they hadn't stopped grinning since the day, four months before, when Lippitt, driving a sleek government limousine, had pulled into their driveway. And they never seemed to tire of Lippitt's company, nor he of theirs. My mother looked radiant, my father looked ten years younger. Lippitt looked... like Lippitt.

"Mongo, just for the sake or argument, let's assume he was right. Maybe, if we told people, it could change the outcome."

"Loge said no. Let Lippitt decide; he's the one with the direct phone lines to the White House, Congress, and the

Pentagon. Maybe he's already told them."

"No," Garth said. "He may have told them everything else, and he's probably directing the cleanup operation.. .but he hasn't told them what the Valhalla Project was really all about. I'm certain of it. He's still mulling it over, trying to decide what to do next. The same with Rafferty. If either had made that decision, there'd be no reason for them to stay holed up here with us. Lippitt talks only on the telephone; he's no more ready to go back than we are."

"Hey, you two fishermen!" my mother called, waving to us from across the stream. "Come on back now and wash up. Lunch is in half an hour, and you're getting your favorite dessert."

"Okay, Mom," I said, starting to reel in my line.

"Xavier just *never* seems to run out of stories about the two of you." She paused, put on a mock frown. "But he says you curse a great deal."

Garth and I looked at each other, and we both started howling with laughter.

"Xavier?!"

Lippitt's frown was genuine as he stepped to the bank, put his arm gently around my mother's waist and pointed a very menacing forefinger in our direction. "I'll always be Mr. Lippitt to the two of you, and don't you ever forget it!"

"Come on," I said, rising to my feet as our parents and a stiff-backed Lippitt continued on down the bank, toward the house. "Xavier will be cranky if we're late for lunch."

"Okay," Garth said, still chuckling. "Just give me a minute to get this line free."

"The hell with the line."
Shhh.

George C. Chesbro was born in Washington, D.C., and is a graduate of Syracuse University. A resident of Rockland County, New York, Mr. Chesbro was a teacher of Special Education until 1979, when he resigned his position to write full time. In addition to his novels, he has published numerous short stories, poems, and articles and is the author of an educational sound-filmstrip series for handicapped children and adults which is widely used in Special Education classrooms across the country. His far-ranging interests include chess, music, and the infinite variety of human belief systems. He now divides his time between writing and various jobs that interest him, including working with severely disturbed and occasionally violent adolescents. *The Beasts of Valhalla* is his sixth novel, the fourth featuring Mongo. A work-in-progress, *Pieces of Night*, is based upon his experiences as a security guard.