

# David L. Robbins - Blade 01 - First Strike

*Dedicated to  
Judy and Joshua and OOPS! —  
SHANE! SHANE! SHANE!  
And to the memory of Ivan T. Sanderson, a true pioneer.*

## PROLOGUE

It was now or never!

The woman eased from the squat wooden hut, keeping her slim frame close to the south wall, her long brown hair stirred by the gusting breeze, her brown eyes wide with fright. She eased the door shut behind her and gingerly walked toward the dense forest 40 yards distant to the east.

A sliver of moon hung suspended in the heavens, well on its westward descent. The stars sparkled and flickered, animating the inky sky.

Had her gamble paid off?

The woman hunched over as she cautiously moved toward the trees. Her skin was crawling, and she expected to be challenged at any moment. She could only fervently hope the celebration had taken its toll on the inebriated guards. If they were all unconscious or too dazed from the alcohol they'd imbibed to function effectively, she stood a chance of escaping. But if just one of them was still on patrol, then she was as good as dead.

A twig snapped to her left, to the north.

Terrified, the young woman crouched and peered into the night. Nothing moved at the periphery of her vision.

Was it safe?

Motivated by her fear, she impulsively rose and sprinted for the beckoning shelter of the timber. Once she was screened by the vegetation, she felt confident she could elude the guards. The human ones anyway. And since the Hatchlings were preoccupied with feasting on the sacrifice in the tower, the human sentries were her primary concern. Out of habit, she crossed the first two fingers on each hand, a superstitious reaction to her desperate plight, her eyes fastened on the forest now 20 yards off, anxiously praying to the God her mother had told her about years before, to the Supreme Being of all Creation for her deliverance. She hoped her deduction was correct and all of the human guards were out of commission. But they weren't.

The woman instinctively dropped and flattened as a harsh cough rent the night to the north. Someone was moving out there!

She was panic-stricken, and her fingers dug into the compact earth, a sharp rock gouging her left knee just below the hemline of her crude brown homespun dress. Another cough punctuated the darkness. The woman could see an indistinct form walking slowly along the edge of the woods to the north, strolling in her approximate direction. At least one of the guards, then, was not drunk. Would he spot her lying on the ground and open fire? She held her breath, her thin lower lip quivering in fright.

The guard was wearing the customary black uniform, and there was a sticklike object slung over his left shoulder.

The woman sensed. She knew what the object was: an automatic rifle!

Ambling in a haphazard fashion, the guard was drawing nearer, but he was staying close to the trees and would miss her by a good eight to ten yards if nothing went wrong. Something did.

Her nostrils abruptly flared and she experienced an urge to sneeze. Instantly she damped her right hand over her nose, suppressing the impulse, her nostrils tingling. The guard was almost abreast of her position. She felt the tingling cease and she tentatively released her nose, assuming the urge was gone. Without warning, before she could pinch her nostrils a second time, to her utter horror, she sneezed.

The guard abruptly stopped, facing the clustered huts, his arms a vague blur.

The woman knew the sentry had unslung his weapon. Had he seen her yet? Or was she invisible to him, camouflaged by the grass and the night?

"Who's there?" the guard demanded.

The woman's flesh erupted in goose bumps.

"Jim, is that you?" the guard asked, walking several paces toward the wooden huts, toward her.

Her heart seemed to be pounding in her chest.

"Jim?" the guard repeated uncertainly, slowly advancing.

The woman recognized the voice of the guard known as the Sadist, a wicked bastard who delighted in inflicting pain and suffering on the captives, a small man with a pallid complexion and a jagged scar extending from the corner of his left eye to the tip of his pointed chin. Of all the human guards, the Sadist was hated the most.

"Who the hell is there?" the Sadist angrily snapped.

She could see him surveying the huts, evidently perplexed. Not once did he glance at the ground, at her. If only he would pass her by or resume his patrol!

"You'd better speak up or else!" the Sadist warned, but his tone lacked conviction, as if he wasn't completely positive of what he'd heard.

The woman saw him pause, and she could readily imagine his train of thought. He knew no one had ever

successfully escaped from the Spider's clutches. There had been a number of attempts decades ago, but the, Hatchlings and the human guards had tracked the escapees down and slain them. Or so the captives were told. The woman had often wondered if the guards were telling the truth or concocting lies intended to discourage any bids for freedom. In any event, no one had tried to flee during the seven years of her captivity. All of the women were acutely aware of the dire consequences of being outside their assigned hut after lights-out. So the Sadist wouldn't be expecting anyone except another guard or a Hatchling to be outdoors at such a late hour.

"Is anyone there?" The Sadist was five feet away.

The woman inadvertently trembled.

"Must be hearing things," the Sadist mumbled, looking over his right shoulder at the woods.

Two more steps and the son of a bitch would trip over her! She twisted, reaching her left hand downward and grabbing the rock gouging her knee, dated to discover it was loose and about the size of her palm.

The Sadist looked at the huts. "Maybe it was one of the bitches," he speculated, and proceeded forward.

The woman was ready for him. She saw him take one stride, then lift his left leg for a second. He was almost on top of her, his crotch directly above her head. She swept the rock up and in, lunging to her knees, driving the unyielding stone into his groin.

Startled, overwhelmed by agony, the Sadist doubled over, his right hand covering his genitals.

"Take this, slime!" the woman exclaimed triumphantly, swinging the rock in an arc and dipping him on the jaw.

The Sadist grunted, sagging to his knees in front of her.

"And this for everything I owe you!" she cried, unable to contain her pent-up emotions. Her loathing, the sheer repugnance accumulated over seven years of emotional, physical, and sexual abuse, surged to the surface. She bashed him again and again with the rock, five times in all, each blow delivered with all of her force to his chin and cheeks.

Groaning, the Sadist toppled to the left, landing on his face.

The woman jumped erect, glancing at the huts, then at the tower. No one was in sight. Yet. She raced to the forest and plunged into the trees, heedless of the limbs and the brush tearing at her arms and legs.

She'd done it!

They'd never catch her now!

A strident horn blast suddenly sounded from the direction of the tower.

The alarm! The sound chilled her blood and lent speed to her legs. The alarm meant the other guards would be after her within minutes! And the Hatchlings! Dear God! The Hatchlings!

Loud yelling broke out behind her.

The woman flinched as a branch gouged her right cheek, drawing blood, stinging terribly. She pressed onward, scared to her core, determined to put as much distance as possible between herself and the Spider's lair, forgetting, for the moment, her original plan to travel due south. Several minutes elapsed, her breathing becoming labored, the strain of her pell-mell flight taking its toll on her undernourished and fatigued body. The ground was sloping upward.

What the hell was she doing?

The thought brought her up short. She gasped for air, gazing skyward in an endeavor to get her bearings. She had to get a grip on herself! She needed a clear head if she was to survive! Shock numbed her mind as she abruptly realized she was going the wrong way! She was supposed to be heading due south, but instead was making to the east.

The east and the cliffs!

She doubled over, tears of frustration forming in the corners of her eyes. To be so close! And then to blow it because she was too stupid to head in the right direction! What an idiot!

A pronounced click-click-click wafted on the breeze, coming from the rear—an odd, eerie sound, as if someone with thick lips was smacking their lips together.

The Hatchlings!

The woman straightened and fled, still going to the east, knowing her pursuers would easily cut her off if she tried to alter course and bear to the south. Her sandals pounded on the hard ground. The chill, late January air caused her perspiration to become clammy and cold.

More clicking reached her ears.

How far to the cliffs? she wondered. She'd seen them as the plane had glided to a crash landing on the ridge seven years ago. The impact of plowing into the forest had shorn the wings from the aircraft and killed the pilot, impaling the hapless man on a jutting piece of metal from the crushed front of the plane. She had counted herself fortunate to be alive, albeit battered and bruised, and she had crawled from the wreckage confident she could signal a passing aircraft and would be home in Los Angeles within a matter of days. But that very night the Hatchlings had captured her, initiating her into a nightmare existence of slavery and torture.

Seven years of hell! Seven years of being too afraid to try and escape! Seven years of being at the Spider's beck and call! Merely thinking of the monstrosity prompted her to moan in despair.

She'd die before she'd go back there!

There was clicking off to the right.

Her legs were rapidly tiring, but she refused to give up, to surrender without a struggle. The penalty for trying to escape was death, the most horrid demise imaginable. Being consumed alive was a revolting prospect. As she dashed up a rise, she speculated on whether her final decision to flee had been inspired by suddenly acquired genuine courage, or if the knowledge she was slated to be the next sacrifice had mobilized her faltering resolve.

Click-click-click. To the left this time,

The Hatchlings were closing in. They must believe they had her cornered and weren't concerned about disguising their, pursuit.

The woman reached the top of the rise and came to an abrupt, petrified halt. In her haste she'd almost fallen to her death! She was perched on the very rim of the cliffs, silhouetted against the stars. Stiff wind whipped her hair. She crouched and whirled, debating which way to go.

A squat black form detached itself from the surrounding vegetation and stopped ten feet away.

A Hatchling!

She tensed, raising the rock in her left hand in a defensive gesture, knowing the futility of using her weapon on a Hatchling. She could see its four hairy arms waving in the air and sensed, rather than saw, its flat, dark malevolent eyes boring into her.

What was it waiting for?

The Hatchling moved toward her, its bulky body rising and lowering in the awkward gait so typical of the hybrids.

So close, and yet so far!

Furious at her failure, she drew her left arm back to toss the rock at the Hatchling. Its tough epidermis would hardly feel the blow, but she needed to do *something* to demonstrate her defiance! Her left foot inched backwards as she braced herself for the throw, and she unexpectedly lost her balance as the gravel under her left foot gave way. She tried to regain her footing, but her left leg dropped from under her and she fell backwards. Her arms flailing wildly, she involuntarily screamed as she perceived her mistake and her predicament. She had stepped too close to the edge of the cliff!

Her scream rose in volume as she pitched over the rim and plummeted into the gloom below.

PART ONE

THE TRAINING

CHAPTER ONE

The giant folded his muscular arms across his massive chest and idly gazed upward, watching the VTOL descend. A brisk breeze off the Pacific Ocean" rustled the Free State of California flag adorning the 20-foot pole atop the airport terminal behind him. He glanced over his right shoulder at the flag, speculating on the significance of the solitary red star in the upper left corner, the bright red border along the bottom, and especially the grizzly bear depicted in the center. Why a grizzly bear? he wondered. As far as he knew, there weren't any grizzly bears in California, and there hadn't been for hundreds of years.

"Which one is coming in, Blade?" asked the giant's companion.

Blade turned to the left, his massive physique rippling with raw power and radiating physical force. At seven feet in height, he towered over his six-foot-three friend. Blade's black leather vest, green fatigue

pants, and black boots seemed scarcely able to contain his imposing form.

The sunlight glinted off the hilts of the matching pair of Bowie knives strapped around his waist, one on each hip. He brushed at the comma of dark hair hanging above his gray eyes with his right hand. "His name is Spader. He's the one the Moles picked to represent them."

"What do you know about him?"

"Not much, Boone," Blade answered. "He's supposed to be one of the best fighters the Moles have."

"Which isn't saying much," Boone commented. His lean frame was clad in buckskins. Buckled around his slim waist were a pair of 44 Magnum Hombre single-action revolvers. The wind tossed his shoulder-length brown hair as he tilted his head, his brown eyes squinting as he followed the progress of the aircraft.

"I'll admit the Moles aren't known for producing top-quality fighting men," Blade conceded. "But we shouldn't prejudge this man. We'll give Spader a chance to prove himself."

"I just hope he proves himself before we go on a mission," Boone remarked. "I don't like the notion of laying my life on the line and not knowing if the other members of the Freedom Force will back me up when the chips are down."

Blade frowned. "I know what you mean," he agreed, his mind filling with a myriad of thoughts. The Freedom Force; The elite tactical squad formed to nullify any threat to the Freedom Federation. Was it only two weeks ago that the Governor of California, Governor Melnick, had proposed the formation of the strike squad? What were the words Melnick had used? They came back to him in a rush: "As allies in the Freedom Federation, we will be ready to band together should any one of us be besieged. We will stand together against any invader... Our treaty should serve to deter any aggression on a widespread scale. But what about isolated incidents? What about localized problems within the boundaries of each Federation member? I propose establishing a special strike force... a mobile force organized with one purpose in mind. Namely, to deal with just such trouble spots as we've been discussing. If a localized problem develops anywhere within the Freedom Federation, or outside of our boundaries for that matter, this strike force will be dispatched to deal with the situation."

And here I am, Blade thought, in charge of the Freedom Federation's elite fighting unit. Which meant countless lives depended on his performance, on his judgment in critical situations. All the members of the Freedom Federation were relying on him. The Flathead Indians in what was once Montana; the people known as the Moles, residing in their underground city in north-central Minnesota; the Cavalry, the indomitable horsemen' controlling the Dakota Territory, of which Boone had been second-in-command until selected to serve on the Freedom Force; the residents of the state of California, one of the few states to retain its administrative integrity after World War Three; the Clan, the refugees from the ravaged Twin Cities now living in a small town in northwestern Minnesota; the Civilized Zone, the area in the West encompassing the former states of Kansas, Nebraska, Wyoming, Colorado, New Mexico, Oklahoma, portions of Arizona, and the northern half of Texas; and, finally, his own people, the renowned Family, located in their survivalist compound in northern Minnesota. These were the seven factions constituting the Freedom Federation, and they were depending on him to train a combat unit capable of eliminating any menace to the Federation's security.

The responsibility was awesome, and he felt uncomfortable being responsible for the safety of so many. Before, it had been different. His life had been much simpler. As the Family's head Warrior, he had been entrusted with the preservation of the Family and the safeguarding of their compound, their 30-acre

retreat called the Home. Seventeen Warriors had been under his command, and together the Warriors had been accountable for protecting the lives of less than a hundred Family members. Less than a hundred. And now how many might perish if he failed in his duty? Millions. The realization was sobering and not a little distressing.

"When will the others arrive?" Boone asked, intruding on Blade's reflection.

Blade gazed at the Cavalryman. "The other VTOL is picking up the volunteers from the Flatheads and the Clan and should arrive here tomorrow morning."

"What about the Civilized Zone?" Boone queried.

Blade nodded at the descending jet. "This VTOL is going right back out and will collect the soldier the Civilized Zone is sending. He should get here by tomorrow night."

"Kind of strange, isn't it?" Boone asked, his eyes on the VTOL hovering 50 yards above the tarmac.

"What is?" Blade responded.

"This Freedom Force thing was Governor Melnick's bright idea, right?" Boone noted. "And didn't the Federation leaders figure the Force should be made up of a volunteer from each Federation faction? So why haven't we met the volunteer from Californiayet? I mean, we areinCalifornia. It was Governor Melnick's brainstorm to base the Force inL.A., right? So where's his man?"

Blade shrugged. "I don't know. But I was told we could expect him in a day or so."

"So we'll ail be together by tomorrow night?" Boone said.

"Maybe," Blade stated. "We'll have to wait and see."

"I can hardly wait," Boone commented sarcastically.

Blade pursed his lips, troubled by Boone's attitude. He had known the Cavalryman for years, and he'd never seen Boone betraying such pessimism. The Warrior determined to get to the bottom of Boone's odd behavior at the first opportunity;

Its engines whining, the VTOL was slowly settling to the ground 30 yards away. The sleek jet was an impressive testimonial to the wisdom exhibited byCalifornia's previous leaders. After World War Three, after the devastation unleashed on the environment, after the country was plunged into turmoil and the transportation systems were totally disrupted, those in charge of California had decided to concentrate on maintaining their aircraft instead of wasting precious resources in an effort to keep their cars and trucks running. BecauseCaliforniawas so large, and because travel overland was fraught with danger due to the proliferation of mutants, looters, and the Raiders, the government ofCaliforniahad opted to utilize aircraft as the principal conveyances in the state. The two VTOLs were the pride of theCaliforniamilitary, and understandably so. Modified to carry up to five passengers and outfitted with extra fuel tanks, and with their vertical-take-off-and-landing capability, the VTOLs were ideal for flying a weekly shuttle service between the Federation factions or making special trips, such as this one to retrieve the volunteers for the strike force.

Boone hooked his thumbs in his gunbelt. "I'll never get used to that contraption."

Blade knew what the Cavalryman meant. The development of sophisticated technology, with a few notable exceptions, had pretty much died out with the war. The VTOLs California possessed, were a throwback to the prewar times, to an ancient culture and an antiquated social system. One hundred and five years might not seem like a lengthy stretch of time when viewed in relation to eternity, but in the context of the drastic and radical changes inflicted by the nuclear exchange between the so-called superpowers, Blade tended to, view the prewar society as an alien way of life. He had studied the prewar civilization in the Family school, and he had been astonished by the lack of wise leadership, the moral and spiritual emptiness of the people, and the government intrusion into the lives of its citizens, whether that government was communistic or socialistic or capitalistic.

The VTOL landed flawlessly, and was immediately converged upon by the ground crew.

"Do you miss the Family?" Boone unexpectedly asked.

Blade's mouth turned downward. He wished Boone hadn't reminded him of his dearest friends, of the tightknit group he had lived with all his life, of the men and women he affectionately regarded as his brothers and sisters. He missed several of his fellow Warriors in particular: Hickok, Geronimo, Rikki-Tikki-Tavi, Yama, and Bertha. "Yes," he replied.

"I miss Dakota," Boone disclosed. "I miss my buddies in the Cavalry." He sighed wistfully. "You're lucky. At least you have your wife and son here in L.A."

The mention of Jenny and Gabe made Blade smile. "I guess I am," he admitted. The idea of being alone in L.A., of not being near his beloved wife and son, was depressing. He silently thanked the Spirit for his good fortune, and suddenly he realized what was bothering Boone.

"Here comes our recruit," Boone said.

A man was climbing down a ladder from the VTOL. He was slightly under six feet tall, slim and wiry in appearance.

Blade studied the newcomer as the man approached, noting the unkempt black hair, the pale, angular features, and the man's clearly bored expression. The recruit was wearing ragged brown pants and a faded green shirt. Black shoes with holes in the toes covered his feet.

"I figured as much," Boone muttered. "I bet he bathes about once a year."

Blade was deeply disappointed. All of the Federation leaders were fully aware of the importance of the unit he was forming. All of them had been asked to select a top fighter for the Force. Since the Freedom Force would be handling extremely hazardous assignments, the Federation leaders were supposed to call for volunteers and pick the best of the lot. Was this the best the Moles had to offer?

The Mole reached them and stopped, his green eyes roving from one to the other. "Is one of you clowns named Blade?" he asked.

"I'm Blade," the Warrior responded gruffly.

The Mole didn't appear to notice. "I'm Spader," he announced. "I was told you're the bozo I'm to see."

"I knew it," Boone quipped. "Why did the Moles send someone with mush for brains?"



Spader instantly bristled "Are you talking about me, Mister?" .

"You see any other jackasses around here?" Boone rejoined.

Spader clenched his bony fists. "I don't have to take this crap! I was sent here to join the Fart Force, or whatever the name of the chickenshit outfit is!" He indicated Blade with a jerk of his right thumb. "I know who this yo-yo is," he snapped at Boone. "But who the hell are you?"

Blade's right hand lashed out and clamped on the Mole's shirt. He effortlessly hoisted the Mole into the air, his right arm bulging.

Spader gawked at the immense Warrior. He swatted at the hand holding him aloft, to no avail. "Hey! Let me go, you asshole!"

Blade's gray eyes became flinty. "Let you go? Sure, I'll let you go!" He shoved the Mole from him and released the green shin.

Spader tumbled onto his back, landing hard on the tarmac, wincing as pain lanced his shoulders and hips. He rolled, ready to rise, when steely fingers locked onto the nape of his neck and he was hauled into the air once again. "Let me go!" he cried angrily.

Blade started shaking the Mole, and he continued shaking until Spader was pleading for mercy.

"Please! Let me go!" the Mole wailed. "I didn't mean nothing by what I said! Honest! Please!"

Blade dumped Spader onto the tarmac and stood over him. "Shut your mouth!" he commanded.

Spader, braced on his haunches, glared at the giant. "No one tells me to—" The remainder of his sentence was strangled off as the Warrior's right hand seized his throat. He gurgled and gasped for air.

Blade leaned over the Mole's reddening face. "When I give an order, you will obey it immediately," he stated brusquely.

Spader was trying to talk, but he blubbered inarticulately.

"I repeat," Blade reiterated. "When I give an order, obey it. Now shut your mouth and listen up!"

Spader wanted to strike at the Warrior, but evidently thought better of the idea. He lowered his right fist, glowering, wheezing but calm.

"Good." Blade loosened his grip and straightened. "You're not to speak unless spoken to. Do you understand?"

Spader nodded, rubbing his sore throat, enraged but unwilling to antagonize the Warrior further.

"You're learning," Blade said. "Now let's get a few facts straight. You're here to join the Freedom Force, not the Fart Force. And since I'm in command of the Force, you will do as I say, when I say it, or suffer the consequences. Do you follow me so far?"

"Yeah," Spader croaked.

"You will refer to me as Blade," the Warrior directed. "Not as a clown, or a yo-yo, or an asshole. Should you ever do it again, you'll be in the market for new teeth. Do you get my drift?"

Spader studied the Warrior's awesome physique. "I get you," he declared.

"Fine," Blade said. "Now stand up."

Spader scrambled to his feet.

"How old are you?" Blade inquired.

"What's that got to do with..." Spader began, then hastily replied, "Twenty-seven, sir!"

"Call me Blade," the Warrior admonished. "Not sir."

"Yes, si..." Spader stopped. "I mean, yes, Blade!"

"Why are you here, Spader?" Blade asked.

Spader appeared puzzled by the query. "What do you mean? I'm here to join the Freedom Force."

"But why you?" Blade pressed him. "Why did the Moles send you? You act like you're none too happy about being here."

"I'm not," Spader confessed.

"Then why are you here?" Blade repeated.

"Wolfe asked for volunteers," Spader said.

"And you volunteered?" Blade asked skeptically.

"Not exactly," Spader replied. "Wolfe called a meeting of all the Moles. He explained about this Freedom Force deal, and that one of us would need to join. But when he said the volunteer would have to travel all the way to California, there wasn't any great rush to join up."

"He paused and sighed. "So Wolfe volunteered me."

"Wolfe selected you to come here?" Blade asked.

"Yep."

"And he didn't give you any say in the matter?" Blade questioned.

"Nope," Spader said. "I wouldn't be here if he had."

Blade's lips compressed in annoyance and he stared at the ground. Now he understood! Of all the Freedom Federation factions, the Moles came closest to being run by a dictator. Wolfe, the Mole leader, was a haughty, arrogant man who ruled the Motes imperiously. It would be just like Wolfe to pick someone if he didn't get the volunteers he wanted. .

"May I say something?" Spader ventured to ask.

"What?" Blade said.

"I don't want to be here, but I can't go back either," Spader said. "Wolfe said I would have to stay here for a year. Is that right?"

"Each recruit serves for a period of one year," Blade confirmed.

"I don't have much combat experience," Spader revealed. "I know this Force is going to be flying all over the place, getting involved with more trouble than I care to think about. And I want to survive my year here. I want to make it back home again." He gazed into Blade's eyes. "I won't give you no more grief. Wolfe said we're going to undergo some training. Is that true?"

Blade nodded. "I'm responsible for your training. We will spend two months preparing for our first mission. I want us to function as a precision team, and that will take lots and lots of hard work."

"I'll do what you say," Spader said. "My life is in your hands. I didn't mean to fly off the handle the way I did. But I was really pissed off about being here. I guess I just took it out on you two."

"We won't hold it against you," Blade said. He nodded at the Cavalryman. "This is Boone. He's from the Cavalry."

Spader and Boone shook hands.

"I got off on the wrong foot, didn't I?" Spader queried.

"You could say that," Boone acknowledged.

"Where's your bag?" Blade asked.

"What bag?" Spader responded.

"Didn't you pack some extra clothing? Bring your weapons? Anything?" Blade probed.

"Wolfe said you would supply all that," Spader said.

Blade was looking forward to the next time he encountered the Mole leader. He had a few choice words he wanted to say to Wolfe.

"So what's next?" Spader wanted to know.

"We go through that terminal there," Blade said, pointing at the building to their rear. "I have a jeep parked in the lot on the other side.

We'll drive out to our training facility."

"Where are the others?" Spader inquired. "I was told there would be seven of us."

"There will be," Blade affirmed. "Two more will arrive in L.A. tomorrow morning, and another one tomorrow night. I don't know about the last one."

"Are you sure seven, will be enough?" Spader asked. "I mean, who knows what we'll be running up against?"

"California only has two VTOLs," Blade commented. "Each one can carry five passengers. What with seven of us, plus all the gear we might require, seven is the maximum number we can include in the Force."

"You've got all this worked out, haven't you?"

Blade pursed his lips. "I think so."

"I've heard about you," Spader said. "Hell. Who hasn't? I know all about your rep. I figure I'm in good hands."

Blade was rather surprised by the Mole's abrupt turnaround. One minute Spader was ready to spit nails, the next he was bending over backward to be friendly. Either the man was mature enough to own up to a mistake when he made one, or he was unstable emotionally and thus might pose a threat to the Force.

"Before we take off, is there somewhere I can take a leak?" Spader asked.

"Inside the terminal," Blade informed him. "To the left."

"Thanks." Spader hurried toward the structure.

"Well, the Freedom Force is off to a rousing start," Boone remarked.

Blade noted the sarcasm in Boone's tone, and he had to agree. Spader was not the sort of man he would want to rely on in a firelight.

The Mole was inexperienced in combat, and Spader resented his coerced service in the Force. 'Such a negative latitude would adversely affect his performance. Come to think of it, Blade realized, the Cavalryman's attitude wasn't much better than the Mole's. Boone would much rather be in Dakota, than in L.A. And although the Cavalryman had made a name for himself in the Dakota Territory, and was considered to be fast and exceptionally accurate with a handgun, what good would Boone be if his mind was distracted?

Boone walked toward the terminal. "Coming?" he asked over his left shoulder.

Blade sighed and followed;

Boone glanced at the Warrior's troubled countenance. "Is something wrong?"

"I was just wondering about something," Blade remarked.

"Like what?"

"Like why you volunteered for the Force if you didn't want to come to L.A.?" Blade inquired.

"Kilrane asked me to," Boone divulged.

Blade stared at the Cavalryman. Kilrane was the head of the Cavalry. "He only asked you?"

"No. Kilrane asked for anyone who wanted to volunteer to do so," Boone said, "But he told me he'd take it as a personal favor if I volunteered along with the others, so he could formally pick me."

"Why you?" Blade questioned.

Boone shrugged. "He said he wanted someone he could trust, someone who would serve with honor and distinction." Boone shook his head. "For some reason, he had this harebrained notion I could fill the bill."

"But I get the impression you don't want to be here," Blade commented.

"I don't," Boone said.

"Then why'd you accept Kilrane's proposal?" Blade queried.

Boone looked the Warrior in the eyes. "Because Kilrane is my best friend."

Blade nodded his understanding. The Family Eiders taught that the demonstration of loyalty to true friends was one of the higher virtues. But now he had two men on the Force, neither of whom wanted to be on it. Two out of seven. What about the rest? More to the point, what in the world had he gotten himself into?

## CHAPTER TWO

Governor Melnick had ordered a special training facility to be constructed for the Freedom Force north of Los Angeles, slightly to the northwest of Pyramid Lake. The facility would also serve as the headquarters of the Force for all future operations. While the VTOLs would be based on the L.A. airport, a runway and small hangar were built at the facility so the Force could be picked up on a moment's notice. The entire headquarters compound embraced 12 acres and was enclosed in an electrified fence topped with barbed wire and patrolled by regular California Army troops. Occupying the southern section was the runway, a concrete pad 50 yards square. With their vertical-ascent-and-descent capability, the VTOLs did not require a lengthy runway. In the center of the compound were three buildings, actually concrete bunkers positioned in a straight line from west to east. In the middle was the command bunker, Blade's HQ; to the east was the long barracks for the Freedom Force members; to the west was the supply bunker. The northern part of the facility was kept in its natural, wild state and would be utilized for training purposes.

Blade mentally reviewed the layout the next morning as he stood next to the gate situated in the middle of the south fence. The sun had been up in the sky for an hour. Birds were singing and the breeze was warm.

"Here they come, sir."

Blade grinned to his left at the speaker, one of a pair of regular Army troops assigned to gate duty. "You can call me Blade," he advised.

"Yes, sir, Blade," the trooper responded. Like his counterpart, he was standing at attention near the swivel bar in the center of the gate.

Blade stared down the asphalt roadway leading to the facility. A green jeep was rapidly approaching. Inside should be the volunteers from the Flathead Indians in Montana and the Clan in Minnesota. He hoped they would be more enthusiastic about their assignment than Boone and Spader.

The jeep slowed as it neared the gate, then braked on the far side. An officer clambered from the vehicle and scrutinized the compound critically.

Blade resisted an inclination to frown. He recognized the officer—General Miles Gallagher, Governor Melnick's personal liaison with the Freedom Force. Gallagher was a stocky man with brown eyes and a crew-cut brown hair, a bulldog of an officer notable for his tenacity and popularity with his troops. Gallagher had made no secret of the fact he disliked California joining the Freedom Federation, and he was skeptical of the elite unit Governor Melnick was forming. While he had expressed his reservations to Melnick, Gallagher was too good a soldier to go public with his disapproval. His eyes locked on the Warrior. "Morning, Blade," he greeted the giant, cordially but with a cold undercurrent.

"General," Blade said, nodding.

Gallagher looked at the two gate guards. "Open this damn gate!" he barked.

The troopers promptly obeyed, raising the swivel bar and pulling the gate wide. They stepped to one side, at attention, saluting as the general entered.

Gallagher walked up to the Warrior. "I've got two more recruits for you."

"I've been expecting you," Blade said.

"I wasn't able to meet the one yesterday," Gallagher stated. "What's the Mole like?" ,

"Well..." Blade began, searching for a tactful reply.

Gallagher chuckled. "You don't have to tell me. I can see it on your face." He gazed at the jeep and motioned with his right arm for the vehicle to drive inside. "Wait until you see the pair I've brought." He snickered.

"What's wrong with them?" Blade asked, his gut muscles tightening reflexively.

"Nothing eight weeks of basic training wouldn't fix," Gallagher said. "Oh, the Indian doesn't look half bad. He might work out. But wait until you see the moron the Clan sent!" He smirked.

The jeep braked alongside the general and the Warrior.

Blade watched as two men climbed from the vehicle. The first was the Flathead Indian. He appeared to be about 25 or so, with black hair down past his broad shoulders. Two braids, one hanging over each ear to his neck, framed his oval face. His features were handsome, almost noble in the strength of their lines and the fearlessness of his dark eyes. He wore a fringed buckskin shirt and pants and moccasins. In one respect, the Flathead Indians and the Cavalry were alike; after World War Three, with store-bought clothing a thing of the past, both had reverted to wearing the typical frontier garb so popular with their ancestors—durable, easily acquired buckskins. He carried a green canvas bag.

The second man was a striking contrast to the Flathead. He was several inches shorter than the six-foot-tall Indian, and he was heftier of build. His long hair was blond, and had been slicked and

shaped until peculiar spikes projected from his head. Silver earrings adorned his earlobes. He wore a black leather jacket with bright studs circling the edge of the sleeves, dotting his shoulders, and forming a large V on the front. Black leather pants and black boots completed his apparel. In his left hand was a brown suitcase.

"Blade, I'd like you to meet the two new members of your Freedom Force," General Gallagher announced. He indicated the Flathead. "This is Thunder."

The Flathead offered his right hand and the Warrior shook. "My given name is Thunder Rolling in the Mountain," the Indian said, grinning. "But you may call me Thunder."

"I'm pleased to meet you," Blade said.

"I have heard much about you from Star," Thunder mentioned.

"How is she?" Blade asked. Star was the leader of the Flatheads, a beautiful young woman possessed of extraordinary wisdom and courage.

"Star is well," Thunder said. "She requested me to relay her greetings."

The blond took a step forward. "Like, hey, man. When do I get to feed my face?" he interrupted.

Blade glanced at the volunteer from the Clan "And what might your name be?"

"The name, dude, is Kraft," the blond stated;

"You'll get to eat shortly," Blade told him. He looked from Kraft to Thunder. "There's something I need to know. Did both of you volunteer for the Freedom Force?"

"I did," Thunder answered first. "Twenty-one Flatheads volunteered to come here. Star put us through a series of rigorous tests to determine which one would receive the honor."

"And you came out on top?" Blade inquired.

Thunder nodded.

"What about you?" Blade questioned the Clansman.

"Yep. I volunteered. I heard a lot of stories about California. They say there are a lot of heavy-duty foxes out here. I'm looking to groove on some fuzz. You know what I mean?" Kraft said.

General Gallagher laughed.

"You came out here to find some women?" Blade asked in disbelief.

"Why not, dude? A little squeeze never hurt nobody," Kraft said.

"You *do* know the real reason you're here, don't you?" Blade asked.

Kraft nodded. "Sure, man. To waste a few stiffs for you. No big deal." His green eyes twinkled.

"Why did the Clan select you?" Blade inquired.

"Zahner, our head honcho, said he needed somebody who doesn't mind killing," Kraft said.

"And you have no compunctions about killing?" Blade questioned.

"I don't know about no compunctions," Kraft said. "But when it comes to killing, I like it."

Blade frowned. "You like to kill?"

Kraft beamed. "Sure do. Doesn't everybody?"

Blade stared at the ground, concerned his exasperation would show on his face. As if he didn't have enough problems already! This was just what he needed! A psychopath!

General Gallagher cleared his throat. "I've brought a present for you."

Blade looked up, his emotions under control. "A present?"

"Yeah. And I think you'll like it," Gallagher said. He moved to the jeep and pounded on the top. "Now, sergeant," he said.

Another man emerged from the vehicle. This one was a professional soldier, six feet tall and close to 200 pounds in weight with every inch solid muscle. He wore combat boots, fatigue pants, and a green T-shirt revealing his muscular arms and chest. His black hair was cropped close to his head. His eyes were a penetrating blue.

"Blade, let me introduce Sergeant Havoc," General Gallagher said. "He's a gift from Governor Melnick."

\*

"A gift?"

"The governor ordered me to find the best soldier I could for the Freedom Force," Gallagher disclosed. "Havoc is the man for the job. He's thirty-four, and he's been in the Army since he was eighteen. He's a qualified marksman and an expert in hand-to-hand combat, with black belts in karate and judo and a brown in Aikido. Name any weapon and he's proficient in its use. You couldn't ask for a better trooper," he declared proudly.

Blade liked the traits he saw reflected in Havoc's rugged features: honesty, dedication, and a supreme sense of duty. He extended his right hand. "I'm very pleased to meet you."

Havoc shook his grip firm and hinting at latent power. "I'm looking forward to this assignment, sir."

"You can call me Blade," the Warrior said.

"Whatever you say, sir," Havoc responded.

"Sergeant Havoc is all military," General Gallagher commented. "He goes by the book." He paused and glanced at a watch on his left wrist. "I must be heading back to L.A. Governor Melnick is holding a meeting with his chiefs of staff later and I must attend." He looked at Blade. "The show is in your hands. Don't drop the ball."



"I won't," Blade responded, a touch testily.

General Gallagher was about to enter the jeep when he stopped and gazed at the Warrior. "Almost forgot. I'll be back here tonight with the volunteer from the Civilized Zone. The VTOLs ETA is seven. -I should be here between eight and nine."

"I'll be expecting you," Blade said.

Gallagher climbed into the jeep, and a moment later the vehicle executed a U-turn and left the compound.

The gate guards dosed the gate.

"Follow me," Blade said to the others. "We'll go to the barracks. Your training session will begin in an hour. Until then you can rest or grab a bit to eat. There's a kitchen in the barracks. You'll be responsible for preparing your own food."

"We cook our own food?" Kraft asked.

"That's right," Blade said, turning to the north.

"You got to be kidding, dude," Kraft said. "I don't know how to cook."

Blade glanced at the Clansman. "How'd you get by all these years without knowing how to cook?"

"I've always had a squeeze handy for that," Kraft mentioned. "I mean, cowing is women's work, right?"

"No one is going to wait on you hand and foot here," Blade informed him. "You've got to learn to fend for yourself. Self-reliance is one of the keys to your survival."

"Well, this sucks," Kraft muttered.

Blade faced the Clansman. "You volunteered for this assignment, so you'll take the consequences without griping. From now on there will be no talking back. When in training, you will not speak until necessary."

"Hey, dude, chill out," Kraft said. "I didn't come here for this crap. Zahner never said nothing about all this military bullshit."

Sergeant Havoc's eyes narrowed.

"This bullshit, as you call it, could save your life," Blade said to the Clansman. "I don't want any more grousing out of you."

Kraft dropped his suitcase on the asphalt. "And what if I do? What are you going to do about it?"

"I'm in charge of this unit," Blade stated. "And I will enforce discipline. You will listen, or else."

"Or else what?" Kraft snickered. "You don't scare me. I can take care of myself."

"Can you now?" Blade asked flatly.

"I know you're supposed to be a real bad dude," Kraft said. "But you aren't the only one with a rep, man. I can handle a knife too, you know."

"You can?"

Kraft's right hand reached into the right pocket of his leather jacket and came out clenching a dosed folding knife. "Sure can, sucker." He grinned and pressed a small silver button, and the blade snapped out with a metallic click. The gleaming blade and the handle were both the same length, about five inches. "A switchblade, huh?" Blade said.

Kraft smiled. "My favorite, dude. I could gut you in a flash with this."

"You think so?"

"I know so," Kraft replied confidently.

"Then let's see just how good you are," Blade said. "Your training will begin right now. Try and gut me."

"Are you for real?" Kraft asked in amazement.

"Try and gut me," Blade repeated.

Sergeant Havoc spoke up. "Allow me, sir. I'll teach this punk a lesson he'll never forget:" .

Blade glanced at the soldier. "This punk, sergeant; is part of the same unit you are in. You both belong to the Freedom Force now. You must learn to work together, to cooperate, or you'll jeopardize the lives of all of us. Understand?"

Sergeant Havoc nodded somewhat sheepishly. "Sorry, sir. It won't happen again."

"And now," Blade said, staring at Kraft, "let's get this over with. Or are you all mouth?"

Kraft reddened, then lunged, sweeping the switchblade at the Warrior's midriff.

Blade backpedaled, avoiding the slashing knife. He twisted and dodged, measuring Kraft's ability. As the Clansman pressed him, he found himself grudgingly admiring Kraft's skill. The man wielded his switchblade with flair, never making any reckless moves, never leaving himself open.

For his part, Kraft was frustrated by his failure to connect. Try as he might, he couldn't so much as nick the weaving Warrior. He used every trick he knew, feinting and using reverse thrusts, always on the attack, but it was as if the giant knew his next move in advance. Only a master at knife fighting could evade an attack so deftly.

Blade admired the determination on Kraft's face. The Clansman's initial anger had subsided and been replaced by a calculating resolution. He waited another minute before making his move.

Kraft saw the Warrior stumble and fall onto his back. He closed in, grinning, thinking he had his man. Too late, he perceived the fall was a ruse. The Warrior had turned and was rolling toward him! Kraft felt Blade's legs slam into his shins, and he toppled forward onto the asphalt. His right arm was wrenched

downward, and the switchblade was torn from his grasp. He abruptly found himself on his stomach with the Warrior straddling his back and his own knife pressed against his neck.

"Now I want your word, Kraft," Blade stated. "I want your word you will obey me. Each time, every time. Without griping."

"You've got it, dude," Kraft said.

"No more of your grief?"

"No more grief," Kraft promised.

Blade rose, using his left hand to haul Kraft erect. He reversed the switchblade and extended the knife. "Here."

Kraft seemed surprised. "You trust me with this?"

"Like I told the sergeant," Blade said, "you're part of our team. We must all learn to trust one another. We have to depend on each other if we're going to survive."

Kraft took the switchblade and replaced it in his coat pocket. "I gave you my word, dude. Whatever you want, you get."

"Then let's head for the barracks," Blade directed.

"That was very impressive; sir," Sergeant Havoc commented. "I was told about you, but I had no idea."

Blade acknowledged the compliment with a curt nod. He glanced at the Flathead and noticed Thunder's forehead was furrowed, his eyes troubled. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"You wouldn't understand," Thunder replied.

"You let me be the judge of that," Blade declared. "We're a team now," he reiterated. "If something is bothering you, I need to know about it."

"You wouldn't understand," Thunder repeated.

"Try me."

"I was just wondering what I've gotten myself into," Thunder divulged.

All three recruits were mystified when the Warrior burst out laughing.

"Did I say something funny?" Thunder queried, puzzled.

"If you only knew!" was Blade's reply.

### CHAPTER THREE

Blade sat back in his metal folding chair in the HQ bunker, relaxing. The day had gone well. All five recruits had fraternized with a minimum of fuss. After Thunder and Kraft had rested from their flight and

eaten, he had called all of them outside and detailed the purpose behind the formation of the Freedom Force. They had listened in rapt silence.

The afternoon had been spent in target practice. He'd had them stake out targets, and had issued an M-16 to each man, then tabulated the results. Not too surprisingly, Sergeant Havoc had scored highest with the automatic rifle. At 100 yards, Havoc could consistently place ten out of ten rounds in the bull's-eye. Thunder and Boone had also performed in the superior range, averaging nine out of ten. Kraft had managed to hit the target near the bull's-eye about four times out of ten. With a lot of practice he could become quite deadly. But Spader had been lucky to even hit the target, and not once had he come within an inch of the center.

After the M-16 exercise, Blade had dispensed handguns. Everyone but Boone had taken a pair of Colt Stainless Steel Officers Model 45's.

The Cavalryman had stuck with his revolvers, preferring the Hombres over the automatics. With good reason. Boone had displayed an uncanny expertise with his handguns. At 25 yards, he could draw and fire ten shots with dazzling speed, clustering all ten rounds in the center of the target. Sergeant Havoc had come in a close second, averaging eight out of ten. Thunder was third. The Flathead wasn't as comfortable with a handgun as with a rifle, and he'd never shot an autoloading pistol before. Still, he'd dotted the bull's-eye or come near it about half the time. Kraft had shot the 45's on a par with his ranking with the M-16; four times out of ten he'd come close to center or hit it. Spader, again, would have been better off clubbing the target with a stout branch.

Blade gazed at the clock on his desk. Almost nine o'clock. General Gallagher and the recruit from the Civilized Zone would be arriving at any minute. He hoped the leader of the Civilized Zone, President Toland, had sent someone the equal of Sergeant Havoc, Boone, or Thunder. Someone with a knack for killing, someone who could hold their own in any situation.

His wish was granted.

The sound of a jeep grinding to a stop outside the bunker was followed by the slamming of a door and the thud of boots on the stairs leading down to the office.

Blade stared at the open doorway.

General Gallagher tramped inside. "I have your recruit," he announced, glancing around the office.

"Hello to you, General," Blade said.

Gallagher stared at the Warrior. "Sorry. I forgot my manners." He paused. "Say, you wouldn't happen to have anything to drink here, would you?"

"I do," Blade replied.

"What?" Gallagher asked eagerly.

"Water and milk," Blade responded.

Gallagher frowned. "That's it?"

"That's it."

"No hard liquor? No beer?" Gallagher asked.

"I don't drink. You know that," Blade reminded him.

General Gallagher rubbed his chin. "Pity," he remarked.

Blade sat up, his curiosity aroused. The general was behaving in an uncharacteristically nervous fashion. "Where's the recruit?"

Gallagher licked his thin lips. "I left him out in the jeep."

"Why didn't you bring him in?"

"I wanted to prepare you," Gallagher said.

Blade leaned forward. "Prepare me? For what?"

"I think you'd better see for yourself," the general stated, wheeling and striding from the office.

"Wait!" Blade called, but Gallagher was already gone. What was going on here? He stood and moved to the front of his desk, watching the doorway.

Moments later footsteps filled the short stairway.

General Gallagher entered the office first, quickly stepping to one side so the figure behind him could enter: The general was clearly jittery.

Distracted for a moment by the general's unusual conduct, Blade didn't look up until the new recruit sent by the Civilized Zone was a full yard into the room. When he did, his hands automatically dropped to his Bowies, and despite his years of experience as a Warrior, despite continually striving for total self-control, his mouth slackened in amazement and life-gray eyes widened.

"What's the matter?" the newcomer asked in a low, raspy tone. "Ain't you never seen a mutant before?"

Blade had. Many, many times. Mutants had become commonplace since World War Three, and were divided into three distinct categories. The two most numerous groups had been spawned by the weaponry unleashed during the war. Ordinary mutants were wild creatures born with their genetic code scrambled. Their condition was believed to be the byproduct of the tremendous amounts of radiation the war had saturated the environment with, producing animals with two heads and six legs or any other quirky combination of genetic traits.

The second form of mutation was the consequence of chemical warfare. These were called mutates instead of simply mutants, and they were as different from mutants as night from day. Once afflicted—and only mammals, reptiles, and amphibians had been infected so far—they transformed into hideous monstrosities with insatiable appetites. Their bodies would become covered with pus-filled sores, and like ravenous shrews they would roam the countryside seeking prey.

The third category was the smallest numerically, but the sight of one belonging to it was enough to give any ordinary person a fleeting shock, if not more, because they so closely resembled humans. This category embraced the genetically engineered mutations, created in a scientist's test tube. Genetic

engineering had been all the rage prior to the war. Scientists everywhere wanted to be the first to develop new, genetically improved species. Patents were granted. Enormous amounts of money changed hands. Headlines were made when the very first genetically engineered animal was produced, a "super mouse" to be used for research purposes. Next a "super rat" was bred, resulting in dire ramifications when a few of the super rats escaped from a lab and mated with their feral brethren occupying a sewer system underneath a major American metropolis. The result had been a new breed of nearly indestructible sewer rat with a superior intelligence and less fear of humans. Within a year the city had been overrun, and the scientists, predictably, had attempted to solve the problem by creating a breed of "super cat." And on and on it went.

Blade was intimately familiar with genetically engineered creatures. Several resided at the Family compound in Minnesota. They had defected to the Family years ago during the war against the nefarious scientific genius known as the Doktor.

"Cat got your tongue?" the new recruit queried mockingly.

"No," Blade blurted out, scrutinizing the creature before him.

The mutant was a fascinating hybrid, a cross between a human being and a bear. The genetically engineered mutations were produced by tampering with a typical human embryo, and with the right combination of elements a scientist could create any crossbreed desired: cat-men, dog-men, monkey-men, anything. This one was a bear-man, a biped with a human voice but decidedly ursine features. He wasn't all that tall, about five feet eight in height, but he was built like a powerhouse. His torso and limbs gave the impression of a certain density, a thickness derived from the possession of layer upon layer of muscles, and suggested incredible strength. The shoulders and upper arms especially were broad and endowed with bulging contours. His entire body, from head to toe, was covered with a short, light brown coat of fur. The face was singularly arresting: slightly concave cheeks, a pointed chin, elongated nostrils lightly coated with the fur, deep dark eyes, and a receding brow, all framed by a pair of small circular ears. The mutant's mouth was large, his lips thin, and when he spoke he revealed a set of tapered teeth.

Blade recovered his composure and walked up to the hybrid, his right hand outstretched. "Hello. Please forgive my rudeness. My name is Blade."

The mutant cocked his head to one side, studying the Warrior. "You're serious," he stated. "About what?" Blade asked.

"About your apology," the mutant clarified.

"Of course," Blade assured him. "I shouldn't have gawked at you. It won't happen again."

"I believe you," the mutant said, finally shaking the Warrior's hand. He was wearing a black loincloth, but nothing else.

Blade smiled. The mutant's grip was firm. He glanced down and noticed the hybrid's hands were topped by unusually huge knuckles. The fingers were unusually thick and covered with light fur.

"I'm called Grizzly," the mutant said, introducing himself.

"I wonder why," Blade said, smiling.

Grizzly eyed the Warrior. "You sure are one of the biggest son of a bitches I've ever met! You wouldn't happen to be part mutant, would you?"

Blade snorted. "No. I doubt it."

"I know some of the mutants are giant suckers, just like you," Grizzly commented.

"In my case it's a matter of clean living and lots and lots of exercise," Blade said.

"We should arm-wrestle sometime," Grizzly suggested. "I haven't met a human yet I couldn't beat."

Blade stared at the mutant's shoulders and arms. "I'll bet."

General Gallagher stepped forward. "If you don't need me, I think I'll be getting back to L.A."

"We don't need you," Blade stated. "Not unless you want to stick around until tomorrow and observe our training sessions. In the morning we're conducting stealth tests."

"Stealth tests?" General Gallagher repeated.

"I want to see how quietly the recruits can move," Blade explained. "Their lives may hinge on how silently they can move during a mission."

"I don't need no stealth test," Grizzly remarked.

Blade looked at him. "All the recruits will take the test."

"I don't need one," Grizzly reiterated. "If I wanted to sneak up on you and cut your throat, you'd never hear me coming."

"Maybe. But you'll still take the test. None of the recruits are exempted from any of the exercises," Blade elaborated.

"I can see you're different from most humans," Grizzly commented. "You don't back down. Most humans are such wimps it's pitiful."

General Gallagher turned toward the door. "I'll be back in three days to check on your training progress. If there's anything you need, any way I can help, just let me know."

"Will do," Blade promised.

Gallagher took several strides, then stopped and glanced back. "Oh. I almost forgot. I have your uniforms in the jeep."

"Uniforms?" Blade said.

"The ones the Freedom Force will be wearing," Gallagher detailed. "Camouflage jobs. There are several for each of you."

"We probably won't be needing many of them," Blade mentioned.

Gallagher turned. "What are you talking about? This is a military unit. Everyone in the Force will wear a uniform."

"I'm in charge of the Force," Blade stated. "And I'll decide what we'll wear. If any of the recruits want to wear one, that's fine with me. But it won't be mandatory."

"That's stupid," Gallagher said, frowning. "Uniforms are essential to the maintenance of discipline, to instilling uniformity in the ranks."

"I don't want to instill uniformity," Blade declared.

"How do you expect to succeed as a unit if you don't?" General Gallagher queried skeptically. "Trust me on this. The military has been my life. I've spent almost thirty-five years in the Army. I know what I'm talking about."

"And so do I," Blade said.

"How so?" Gallagher asked.

"I'll use the Warriors as an example," Blade expounded. "The Warriors have successfully protected the Family and defended the Home for over a century. The Warriors function superbly, whether individually, in their respective Triads, or as a team. As head Warrior, I continued the practices established by my predecessors. Although I worked at maintaining discipline, I deliberately encouraged all Warriors to develop their unique skills and express their personality as they saw fit. The Warriors don't wear uniforms. Each Warrior wears the clothes he or she prefers. And the same holds true with weaponry. Each Warrior uses his or her favorite weapon or weapons. We have found that Warriors can be far more effective, far more deadly, if they're able to assert their personalities." He paused. "If you stifle individuality, you limit a person's capability." General Gallagher shook his head. "I think you're making a mistake, but this is your show. The system you use at the Home has worked so well because there are only eighteen Warriors, not an entire army. The size makes a big difference."

"I agree," Blade said.

"You do?"

"Of course. I don't have an army at my disposal. There are only seven members of the Force, counting myself. I'll use the same techniques here I used on the Warriors," Blade stated.

General Gallagher shrugged, "Your choice. But don't say I didn't warn you if something goes wrong down the line. I'll leave the uniforms in the supply bunker, just in case."

"Thanks," Blade remarked.

Gallagher wheeled and departed.

"What you said makes sense to me," Grizzly commented. "I can't wear a uniform anyway."

"Can't or won't?" Blade questioned.

"Can't," Grizzly said. "You have no idea what clothing does to us mutant types. With all our fur or hair, clothing makes us itch like crazy. There's no way I'd wear a uniform."



"Then you won't have to," Blade assured him. He motioned at the door. "Why don't I escort you to the barracks and introduce you to the rest of the crew."

"Fine by me," Grizzly said.

They exited the office and climbed the stairs. The outer door swung open and they were enveloped by the cool night air.

Blade led the way to the east, the north wind ruffling his hair.

Grizzly sniffed the breeze, inhaling deeply. "I think I've found my supper."

"What?"

Grizzly pointed to the north. "There's a rabbit about twenty yards that way. After I meet the boys, I'm going to enjoy some fresh rabbit." He said the word "boys" sarcastically.

"There's food in the barracks," Blade disclosed. "There's no need to go hunting."

"I like to hunt," Grizzly mentioned. "I like the thrill of stalking and killing. And most of all, I like fresh, raw meat dripping in warm blood. Do you have any in the barracks?"

"No, Blade admitted.

Grizzly chuckled. "Didn't think so. I don't see how you humans can spoil your food the way you do."

"We spoil our food?"

"You sure do," Grizzly asserted. "You cook the meat and ruin the taste. And the sight of blood makes some of you sick! To top it off, you humans like to eat all that leafy green garbage. How disgusting!"

"You don't eat vegetables?" Blade inquired.

"I eat wild greens," Grizzly said. "Natural food. I won't eat anything you humans grow."

"Why not?"

"I've seen the gardens you humans plant," Grizzly stated. "You go to all the trouble to dig up the ground and plant a little seed and give it the water it needs, but then you spoil the whole thing by spreading horse shit or cow manure all over it to 'fertilize it,' as you call it. Yuck! How can anyone eat something grown from horse shit?"

Blade grinned. "I never thought of it that way."

Grizzly gazed at the barracks, about 40 yards away. "Where will I be sleeping?"

"In the barracks with the men," Blade answered.

"I thought you'd say that," Grizzly said. "Thanks, but no. I'll deep out in the woods."

"What's wrong with the barracks?"

"Nothing, I guess. But I tend to make humans uncomfortable. It might be better for your men if I stay outside. I don't mind. I like the outdoors better anyway."

"But you're part of a team now," Blade remarked. "You should learn to live and work together."

"Aren't you the one who's so big on individuality?" Grizzly asked.

"You can sleep in the woods if you want," Blade said. "But I'd appreciate your giving the barracks a try. The men have to get used to you, and the sooner, the better."

"I'll think about it," Grizzly offered.

They walked in silence for ten yards.

Blade looked at his companion. "I wasn't aware there were any mutants like yourself left in the Civilized Zone. I thought all of them had been killed."

"Not by a long shot," Grizzly said, somewhat bitterly. "There's a few dozen floating around."

"I'd like to ask a question, Blade said.

"What's stopping you?" Grizzly replied. "I don't want to pry into your personal life, but there's something I need to know," Blade stated.

"Like what?"

"A while back, my Family was involved in a war against a man known as the Doktor. He was a scientist, a genetic engineer. He had created hundreds, maybe thousands, of genetically produced mutants like yourself. Three of them now live at the Home." Blade paused. "I'd like to know if you were created by the Doktor?"

"Yep," Grizzly responded, his tone slightly strained.

"Do you mind telling me about it?" Blade queried.

"What's to tell?" Grizzly rejoined. "The damn Doktor made me, grew me from a cross between a human embryo and a grizzly bear embryo, or some such bullshit I don't understand exactly how he did it. But the bastard did, and here I am."

"How did you survive the war?" Blade asked.

"I was in prison in Denver during the war," Grizzly divulged. "I wasn't released until after your Family won the war, and after President Toland became leader of the Civilized Zone."

Blade pursed his lips, reflecting. During World War Three, after most of America's leaders were killed in a preemptive strike on Washington, D.C, the government had withdrawn to Denver, Colorado, and reorganized. A dictator had assumed the reins, and the area he controlled had become known as the Civilized Zone. The dictator's bloodline had ruled for a century, until terminated by the Warriors. The people of the Civilized Zone had established a representative form of government and elected Toland as

their President. As one of the members of the Freedom Federation, the Civilized Zone was a staunch ally. Blade knew Toland well. One of Toland's early acts after being elected was to release all of those unjustly imprisoned by the last of the dictators and the Doktor. "Why were you in prison?" he inquired.

"The Doktor created his merry band of mutants for one reason," Grizzly said. "To serve him hand and foot." He made a low growling sound. "Only I didn't cotton to being a slave, so he had me thrown in prison."

"Why did you volunteer for the Force?" Blade probed.

Grizzly sighed. "Because I wanted out of the Civilized Zone. I couldn't stand it there anymore."

"Why not?"

"The people were driving me nuts," Grizzly said. "Their attitude. There is a lot of resentment toward mutants because of what the Doktor and his loyal flunkies did. I could see the dislike on their faces. I could *feel* it!" he concluded bitterly.

"Do you think the people in California will be any different?" Blade asked.

"I doubt it," Grizzly said.

"But you came anyway," Blade noted.

"I figured I owed Toland for letting me out of that miserable prison," Grizzly stated. "Besides, I hear this Freedom Force will be kicking ass right and left," He smiled. "I like to kick ass."

They completed the walk to the barracks. Blade opened the door and descended to the living quarters. The building was 20 yards long by 15 wide, solidly built to withstand a direct mortar strike, constructed of concrete. Spacious accommodations were provided for the occupants.

The entrance was located at the west end. Two rows of beds were near the entrance, allowing for a swift departure if necessary. Three of the beds were aligned along the north wall, three along the south. Beyond the sleeping section was the kitchen, amply stocked, where the Force members could fix meals to their own satisfaction. The easterly portion of the barracks contained the showers and toilet facilities.

The recruits were socializing, getting to know one another, slinging the bull while seated on the ends of their respective beds or on one of the chairs scattered about the room. Blade was pleased to see them getting along. Boone was sitting on the edge of the bed nearest the doorway along the north wall. Then came Thunder. Sergeant Havoc was seated in a chair next to his bed, polishing his combat boots. Along the south wall, Kraft was closest to the entrance. Spader occupied the next bunk. The last bed along the south wall was empty. The men looked up as the Warrior entered.

"What's this?" Kraft said, speaking up. "Are you here to tuck us in?" He laughed and Spader joined in.

"What's up, Blade?" Boone inquired.

Blade stayed framed in the doorway, obscuring their view of the mutant behind him. "I'm here to introduce your new teammate," he told them.

"The one from the Civilized Zone is here?" Sergeant Havoc remarked.

Blade nodded.

"Where is he?" Thunder queried.

"Right here," Blade said, and stepped to the right.

Grizzly nonchalantly strolled in.

Blade saw everyone in the room tense up, their expressions frozen in amazement. Sergeant Havoc recovered the quickest, composing himself almost instantly and nodding at Grizzly. Thunder seemed horrified. Boone did a double take, then smiled at the mutant. Kraft and Spader were speechless, and Spader's mouth was gaping wide enough to swallow his foot whole.

Kraft came up off his bed, his right hand in his coat pocket. "What the hell is this shit, dude?" he demanded curtly.

Blade indicated the mutant. "This is Grizzly. He is joining the Force."

"The hell you say!" Spader snapped.

Grizzly swung toward them, but otherwise didn't react.

"Grizzly is a part of our team," Blade said. "I expect you to show him the same respect you'd show me."

"I don't work with muties!" Kraft declared.

Grizzly sneered at the Clansman. "The feeling is mutual, jerk-off. I don't much like working with pissant humans!"

Kraft scowled. "Look at this! The freak can talk! Can you do any other tricks, freak!"

Grizzly took a menacing step toward Kraft. "Don't call me a freak," he warned.

"I'll call you any damn thing I want, freak!" Kraft rejoined. His right hand came out of his coat pocket, the switchblade snapping open, the blade gleaming in the glow from the four overhead lights powered by a generator housed in a small shed on the north side of the barracks.

Grizzly reacted in the twinkling of an eye, his furry body a blur as he closed in on Kraft. His left hand grabbed the front of Kraft's black leather jacket and dangled the Clansman above the floor, while his right hand, the fingers and thumb rigid, swept to within six inches of Kraft's face.

Blade, standing slightly to one side, saw the Clansman's green eyes widen as the mutant's hands suddenly sprouted tapering claws.

The claws materialized from the tips of Grizzly's fingers, the nails seeming to slide out of their full five-inch length, the tips an inch from Kraft's eyes.

"Say your prayers, turkey!" Grizzly snarled.

Blade took a step toward them. "Grizzly! Don't!"

"Why not?" Grizzly retorted, his feral gaze locked on Kraft. "I want to turn his brain into a pincushion."

Kraft, ever defiant, wagged the switchblade in his right hand. "Just try it, bastard!"

Grizzly snickered. "You thinking of sticking me with that toothpick of yours? Go ahead. You won't even faze me!"

"Grizzly! Release him!" Blade barked. "And that's an order!"

Grizzly glanced over his right shoulder. "An order?"

"You're in the Freedom Force now," Blade stated. "You volunteered. Like it or not, you're under my command. And I'm telling you to let him go."

Grizzly glared at Kraft. "You're one lucky pissant, you know that?" He opened his left hand and the Clansman dropped and almost fell.

"Kraft!" Blade directed. "Put the switchblade away!"

Kraft hesitated.

"You gave me your word earlier," Blade reminded him. "Or doesn't your word mean anything?"

Kraft frowned, but he closed the switchblade and replaced the knife in his pocket.

Grizzly relaxed his right hand, and as his fingers slowly slackened the claws retracted into the tips of his thick fingers.

Blade walked up to Kraft. "What do you have against mutants?"

"What's it to..." Kraft began, then stopped.

"I want to know what you have against mutants," Blade repeated.

"Nothing," Kraft mumbled.

"Nothing?" Blade didn't believe the Clansman for a moment. Kraft's hatred was genuine. There was something eating at him inside, something concerning mutants.

"Nothing," Kraft reiterated.

"If you don't want to tell me, that's your business," Blade said. "But Grizzly is part of the Force, whether you like the idea or not. He's your teammate, and you'll treat him the same way you treat the others. If you have any problems, you'll come to me. Understood?"

"Understood," Kraft replied gloomily.

Blade turned to the mutant. "And I don't want you turning anyone into a pincushion. Got it?"

Grizzly nodded.

"And what about you?" Blade asked, facing Spader. "Why don't you want Grizzly on the Force?"

Spader scrunched up his mouth. "Mutants give me the creeps!"

"That's it? That's your only reason?" Blade demanded.

"Can you think of a better one?" Spader responded.

"I can," Kraft snapped sullenly and marched off toward the kitchen.

"I knew this would happen," Grizzly said disgustedly. He walked to the doorway,

"Where are you going?" Blade queried.

"I'm going to sleep outside," Grizzly stated. "It'll be best for everybody."

"You don't have to," Blade said.

"Yes, I do," Grizzly disagreed. He departed.

Blade placed his hands on his hips and sighed in frustration.

"This isn't like being the head Warrior back at your Family, is it?" Boone asked.

"No," Blade admitted.

"Maybe you should look at the bright side," Boone suggested.

"What bright side?" Blade wanted to know.

"This can't get any worse," Boone said.

"Want to bet?" was Blade's rejoinder.

### CHAPTER THREE

The morning sun was just topping the eastern horizon when Blade emerged from the HQ bunker and stretched. Governor Melnick, at General Gallagher's request, had designed comfortable living quarters in the east end of the HQ for Blade's use. When he'd first seen the setup, Blade had asked to be housed in the barracks. General Gallagher had nixed the idea, claiming a commander should never reside in the same domicile as the troops. Propriety and all that. Blade had reluctantly agreed, only because the barracks had been designed to accommodate six people without overcrowding.

Something crunched to his right.

Blade glanced in the direction of the sound, surprised to find Grizzly already up and about. Hie mutant was crouched on his haunches at the edge of the trees, eating something. Blade walked over.

Grizzly looked up. He was feasting on a squirrel. His lips and chin were coated with blood, as were his hands. A chunk of stringy flesh protruded from his mouth. His dark eyes locked on the Warrior, his nose

twitching.

"Morning," Blade said. "I didn't expect to find anyone up yet."

Grizzly gulped the mouthful of squirrel. "I've been up for an hour. I was beginning to think you were going to sleep the day away."

Blade grinned. "Do you always get up this early?"

"Always," Grizzly said. "When you sleep outdoors, you can feel the morning coming long before you see the sun. Haven't you noticed how the birds and other day animals are up way before sunlight?"

"I've noticed," Blade replied. "I like the outdoors."

Grizzly gazed at the forest to the north. "So do I," he stated fondly. "Sometimes I think I'd like to chuck all this civilization crap and go live in the woods somewhere."

"Why haven't you?" Blade asked.

Grizzly frowned. "Because part of me is human, and my human self wants to fit in. I consider it my curse."

Blade studied the mutant. "I get the impression you're not very fond of humans."

Grizzly laughed, a short, harsh burst. "You've got that right! Humans are the scum of the earth."

"Why do you feel that way?" Blade probed. "Because a lot of humans don't like you?"

"I couldn't care less!" Grizzly declared testily,

"Then why don't you like humans?" Blade pressed him. If he was going to effectively function as the Force leader, then he needed to know what made his recruits tick. He wanted to learn their motivations for joining. In Boone's case, it was out of loyalty to his best friend, the head of the Cavalry. Spader had been compelled to enlist. Thunder, thankfully, had volunteered. Kraft had volunteered, but only because he wanted to meet women and indulge his taste for violence. Sergeant Havoc had joined out of a sense of patriotism. And Grizzly had claimed he owed a debt to President Toland. But did the mutant have an ulterior motive?

"I don't like humans for a lot of reasons," Grizzly said.

"Name one," Blade prompted.

"I'll give you more than one," Grizzly declared, rising, forgetting about the partially consumed squirrel. "Humans think the world owes them a living. They're selfish, vain, and arrogant. I can't stand the stench of them!"

"We're not all that bad," Blade commented.

"Aren't you? Who was responsible for World War Three? Humans?" Grizzly asked.

"Humans," Blade conceded.

"So the lousy humans wiped out half of their kind on the planet," Grizzly said. "And in the bargain they polluted the world for centuries to come. How can you stand there and tell me humans aren't scum?"

"There are some rotten apples," Blade acknowledged. "But you can't judge the entire human race by the actions of a few."

"A few?" Grizzly snickered.

"Compared to the total, yes," Blade went on. "The majority of humans are fairly decent. They go about their daily lives trying to put enough food on the table for their loved ones. They don't want to hurt others."

"They did a good job, though, didn't they?" Grizzly noted, "Where were all the good humans when the bad ones destroyed their civilization?"

"The bad ones were in power," Blade observed. "My Family has thoroughly researched the period. The power-mongers ruled the people with an iron hand, and the majority of the populace didn't even know it."

"So humans are stupid as well as scum!" Grizzly declared.

"Not all humans," Blade said. "My Family has done a remarkable job over the past century of fostering the higher ideals of love and faith. We are a very spiritual group."

"Spiritual? Does your Family believe in God?" Grizzly inquired.

"Of course," Blade answered. "We are each encouraged to develop our own consciousness of the Spirit Source."

Grizzly chuckled. "And here I thought you had a head on your shoulders!"

"I don't?"

"Not if you believe in God," Grizzly said. "There is no God!"

"There is," Blade asserted.

Grizzly suddenly became angry. "Don't give me that! If there's a God, then why did we have World War Three? Where was this high and mighty God of yours when millions and millions were dying, melted in their tracks by the nuclear blasts or slowly poisoned by the radiation? Where was God when the Doktor attacked your home? Why did God let the damn Doktor create misfits like me? Part human, part animal, and we don't fit in either world!"

"You can't blame God for all the suffering in the world," Blade stated.

"Can't I?" Grizzly snapped.

Blade's forehead creased. He had inadvertently touched ft nerve in the mutant. Grizzly was furious. But why? What was simmering below the mutant's surface?



Grizzly crammed the remainder of the squirrel into his mouth, chewing noisily, his teeth crunching the bones, blood spilling over his chin.

"I'll go wake the others and we'll begin our training," Blade said. He walked toward the barracks, wondering what his day had in store.

Little did he know.

Two hours later, after breakfast and a period of rigorous calisthenics, Blade led the recruits to a knoll in the northern third of the compound.

"What are we doing here, dude?" Kraft asked.

"This is where we will conduct our first training exercise," Blade explained.

"I hope we don't have to do more push-ups," Spader commented wearily. "I'm not used to all this shit."

"No more push-ups," Blade assured him. "This will be a stealth test."

"Like what's a stealth test?" Kraft queried.

"I'm going to sit on the top of the knoll," Blade said, pointing at the crest approximately 20 yards distant. "I'll have my back to you. When I call your names, you will take turns trying to approach *me* without being heard. It's that simple."

"What will we do next?" Kraft quipped. "Play hide-and-seek?"

Blade started up the knoll. "Now remember. Wait your turn. If I hear you, I'll let you know. Come back down and wait with the rest."

"What's our prize, man?" Kraft inquired jokingly.

"You might live a little longer if you learn to reach me without being heard," Blade said.

"I was hoping for some doughnuts or cookies," Kraft remarked. "There isn't any sweet stuff in the kitchen."

"Sweets pollute the system," Blade mentioned. "They interfere with your bodily functions."

"Yeah, but they taste so yummy," Kraft said, licking his lips.

Blade walked to the top of the knoll and sat with his back to the recruits. He glanced down once, noting Grizzly was standing aloof from the group. Then he faced due north. "Spader!" he shouted.

"What?" Spader yelled up.

Blade peered over his right shoulder, his eyes narrowing. "Start up the hill!"

Kraft was laughing at Spader.

"Oh! Right!" Spader called. He moved upwards.

Blade turned away, sitting cross-legged, listening. He could hear birds to the west and the wind rustling the trees. Closing his eyes, he concentrated on detecting the faintest sound. He doubted the Mole would get very far, and a minute or two later he was proven right.

A twig gave a loud snap.

Blade looked over his shoulder, spotting Spader 15 yards away circling a dead bush. "Spader! Back down!"

Spader stared at the Warrior in astonishment. "You heard me?"

"Let me put it this way." Blade said. "An elephant would have done a better job!"

Spader's shoulders slumped and he returned to the bottom.

"Kraft! You're next!" Blade ordered, putting his broad back to the slope. He tilted his head, breathing deeply, his hands in his lap, waiting for the Clansman to betray his ascent. The minutes seemed to drag.

Something thudded to his rear.

Blade gazed over his shoulder again.

Kraft was over ten yards below. The Clansman had tried to cross a stretch of ground strewn with small rocks. He had dislodged one of the stones and sent it tumbling down the bank.

"Back down!" Blade instructed.

Kraft, clearly disappointed, ambled toward the bottom.

"Boone next!" Blade bellowed;

The Cavalryman did much better than the Mole and the Clansman. After cautiously advancing to within five feet of the Warrior, he took a hasty step.

Blade heard the crackle of a dry blade of grass and spun, grinning. "Not bad."

"It wasn't good enough," Boone remarked. "I'd be dead right now *if* you were an enemy."

"You'll do better next time," Blade said. "Send up Sergeant Havoc next."

"Will do."

Blade settled himself, straining his senses. He was saving the best for last. Boone was an outstanding gunman, but the Cavalryman didn't have much experience at clandestine maneuvers. Havoc, Thunder, and Grizzly, on the other hand, should do extremely well.

They did.

Minutes later, Blade detected the faintest of disturbances immediately behind him and whirled.

Sergeant Havoc was a mere foot away, reaching for the Warrior. Caught unawares, he straightened. "You heard me, sir?"

"I sensed you," Blade stated.

"First you handle Kraft like he's an amateur, when we both know the loudmouth is pretty sharp with that switchblade of his, and now this," Havoc commented by way of a compliment. "I'm looking forward to training under you. I think you can teach me some new tricks of the trade."

"Thanks," Blade said. "I'll do my best." He paused. "Tell Thunder to give the test a try next."

Sergeant Havoc nodded and headed down the knoll.

Blade resumed his original position, draining himself of all internal distractions, focusing on the rhythms of the forest and synchronizing his breathing accordingly. He lost all track of time, his mind drifting, his senses primed. The breeze caressed his skin. Suddenly he knew he wasn't alone on the knoll; he felt another presence close at hand and he spun.

Thunder's right hand was mere inches from the Warrior's spine. The Flathead smiled at being discovered. "The Warriors are all I have heard they are," he mentioned.

"You're as good as any Warrior," Blade said. He stared at the group below. "Would you send up Grizzly?"

"Yes," Thunder responded, "but there is a trifling matter we must discuss before I do."

"What is it?" Blade queried.

"It concerns the one called Grizzly," Thunder said.

"I saw the look in your face last night," Blade noted. "You didn't seem too happy about Grizzly being here, but at least you didn't say anything."

"I would not cause dissension," Thunder stated. "But I am troubled, and I feel I can talk to you frankly and openly."

"Why are you troubled?" Blade inquired.

Thunder gazed at the mutant. "Are you very familiar with Indian ways?"

"One of my best friends is an Indian," Blade divulged. "His name is Geronimo. He's a Warrior, like me."

"Then maybe you know about our affinity for nature, the respect in which we hold all life, and our reverence for the Supreme Being," Thunder said.

"Your people and my Family have a lot in common," Blade observed.

"My people also believe in omens and signs," Thunder stated. "And the mutant among us is a bad sign."

"Grizzly is just a mutant," Blade pointed out.

Thunder looked at the Warrior. "True, and not true. Many of my people consider the mutants to be demons. They are not part of the order of things, of the natural way. Mutants were not created by the Spirit-In-All-Things, but by white men for vile purposes. Years ago the Doktor sent his mutants against us and we were nearly destroyed." He paused. "I repeat. The mutant is a bad omen. I do not like him among us."

"I understand you," Blade said. "But I can not ask Grizzly to leave. If you want to go, though, it's okay by me. The Flatheads are welcome to send another volunteer."

Thunder drew himself up to his full height. "I will not bring dishonor to my people by leaving. I have said what I had to say, and I will say no more." He turned and walked off.

Blade put his back to the group again. Now he had three men who didn't want Grizzly in the force. What was he supposed to do? He certainly couldn't boot Grizzly out; the mutant deserved a chance to prove himself as much as anyone else. Should he send Kraft and Spader back to their homes? No. Doing so would only aggravate the problem. The Clan and the Moles might refuse to send someone to replace them. Maybe if he gave the recruits enough time they would come to accept the mutant. Maybe. But it was a long shot.

He'd better concentrate on the job at hand.

Blade closed his eyes, repeating the focusing technique he'd used before, waiting for the mutant to make a mistake. He waited. And waited. And just when he was beginning to wonder if Grizzly had decided not to take the test, someone tapped him on the shoulder.

"I knew you woke up too early," quipped a familiar raspy voice. "What are you doing? Taking a nap? I didn't think we could deep on the job."

Blade swiveled to face the mutant, grinning. "Congratulations. I never heard you."

"What did I tell you last night?" Grizzly asked.

"What I said then still goes," Blade said. "Just because you are more skillful in some regards does not excuse you from the training exercises."

"I just hope I don't get bored to death," Grizzly cracked.

"If you die, it won't be from boredom," Blade predicted.

"So what's the next test?" Grizzly queried. "Thumb sucking?"

"Unarmed combat."

Grizzly grinned. "Now you're talking my kind of language."

"I thought you'd like it," Blade said, rising.

The hand-to-hand combat session was held in the early afternoon. Blade had ordered mats to be brought from the supply bunker and aligned in front of the HQ. He deposited his Bowieson the north edge of the mat, then faced the recruits. They were seated in single file along the southern edge, Grizzly off to one side, to the east. "The purpose of this session is to see how you'd hold up without your weapons,"

Blade began. "There will be no actual training. All I want you to do is to try and hit me. Any questions?"

Kraft laughed. "All we have to do is knock your block off?"

"That's it," Blade said.

Kraft bounded to his feet. "Then take me first, dude. I want to make up for yesterday."

"Dream on," Boone interjected.

Kraft strutted onto the mat. "You know what they say. The bigger they are, the harder they fall."

"Yeah, I know what they say," Boone chimed in. "Ignorance is bliss."

Kraft chuckled. "Just watch me, smart guy." He shifted his legs apart and assumed a crude horse stance,

Blade, his arms folded across his chest, nodded. "Whenever you're ready."

"I was born ready," Kraft retorted. Evidently, he had received some martial-arts instruction. He closed in on the Warrior and aimed a vicious side kick at the giant's left knee.

Blade effortlessly evaded the Clansman's sweeping right leg. He gripped Kraft's right ankle and tugged, upending the cocky recruit and unceremoniously dumping Kraft onto his posterior.

Spader was tittering.

Kraft rose to his feet, a study in indignation. "Let's go for two out of three," he proposed.

"Take a seat," Blade directed, glancing at Spader. "You're next," he instructed the Mole.

Spader walked onto the mat while Kraft sat down. "I'm not much of a fighter," the Mole admitted.

"Give it your best shot," Blade urged.

Sadder came in swinging his fists like a wild man.

Blade sidestepped the Mole's flailing arms, then hooked his left leg behind Spader's legs and did a reverse sweep.

Spader was dumped onto his back.

Kraft cackled. "And I thought I did bad!"

Blade pointed at Boone. "Let's go."

The Cavalryman approached the Warrior slowly, his fists upraised to protect his chin and his stomach. He closed in, darting and weaving, boxing.

Blade reacted in kind, blocking the majority of Boone's blows. The Cavalryman did not wield his fists anywhere near as expertly as he did his revolvers, but he was no slouch either. Twice Blade was struck, once a glancing blow to the ribs and again a flicking jab on the chin. After several minutes Blade

disengaged, stepping to the right and smiling. "Where'd you learn to box?"

"My dad taught me," Boone replied.

"Do you know any of the martial arts?" Blade inquired.

"Never had any call to learn," Boone said. "I can use my fists, but I prefer to let my Hombres do my talking."

Blade glanced at the Flathead. "Your turn."

Thunder slowly rose and stepped onto the mat, rubbing his palms together, while Boone sat down.

"What style do you like?" Blade asked. "I am not much of a boxer," Thunder revealed. "But I do like wrestling."

"Then we'll wrestle," Blade said. "The first one to pin the other wins."

They grappled, rolling and tumbling on the mat, working up a sweat. Blade was clearly the larger and the stronger, but Thunder wrestled with a sinewy, elusive skill, narrowly evading pin after pin. Once Thunder succeeded in applying a full nelson to the Warrior. Before the Flathead could savor his seemingly inevitable victory, Blade's shoulders and arms bulged as he strained against the hold. Try as he might, Thunder was unable to retain his grip. His hands were forcibly wrenched from the nape of Blade's neck, and the next instant the Warrior whirled and bore Thunder to the mat, pinning him.

"Not bad," Blade commented, standing and offering his right hand.

Thunder allowed himself to be hauled to his feet, "if you keep this up," he joked, "you're liable to give me a complex."

Blade grinned, then faced Sergeant Havoc. "You're up next."

Havoc's blue eyes sparkled. "I've been looking forward to this. How do you want to do it?"

"Try and take me out," Blade instructed.

"Brace yourself," Havoc warned, and promptly closed in.

Blade was compelled to retreat several paces by the furious flurry of hand and foot blows Sergeant Havoc delivered. He realized General Gallagher had not exaggerated; Havoc was indeed an expert in hand-to-hand combat. But Blade's prowess was likewise exceptional. All of the Warriors had been exhaustively trained in the martial arts by one of the Family Elders. Some of them relied on the martial arts more than others in combat situations, and one of the Warriors, a diminutive Oriental by the name of Rikki-Tikki-Tavi, was the undisputed unparalleled martial artist of the Family. While Blade wasn't quite the equal of Rikki where the martial arts were concerned, he was second to no one else.

Sergeant Havoc had waded into the Warrior full of confidence and optimism. In dozens upon dozens of regulation matches and tournaments throughout California, he had proven his superiority time and again. He was virtually a legend in the California Army, and he was not accustomed to finding an opponent capable of withstanding his aggressive tactics. So when he perceived, after two minutes of sustained sparring, that he could not penetrate Blade's guard, his frustration caused his undoing.

Blade ducked and slid to the left, avoiding a spinning back kick. He expected the sergeant to assume a defensive posture, perhaps the Kokutsu-tachi or the Neko-ashi-tachi, but instead Havoc swung his left leg in a Mawashi-seashi-geri, a roundhouse kick, providing the opening Blade needed. As Havoc's left foot swished past Blade's chin, the Warrior closed in, driving his left instep against the back of the sergeant's right knee. Havoc, perched on only his right foot, was carried forward by his own momentum, falling onto the mat. He rebounded immediately, shoving himself erect. "Damn!" the sergeant exclaimed. "You did it to me again."

"I was lucky," Blade said.

"Yeah, sure," Havoc said, obviously disappointed in his performance. "I think Thunder is right. If you keep this up, you're going to give all of us a complex."

"I won't," Blade assured him. "I promise." Havoc grinned. "I hope not." He marched to the edge of the mat.

Blade turned toward the mutant. Grizzly was seated on the ground near the mat, his chin in his hands, a look of boredom on his face.

"Do you think you can do any better?"

Grizzly smirked and stood. "You must be joking." He casually strolled onto the mat. "You won't beat me."

"I will," Blade declared, his simple response laced with conviction.

Grizzly chuckled. "What did you do at lunchtime? Sniff glue?"

Blade smiled. "Do you have a style you prefer?"

"I don't go in for any of that fancy footwork," Grizzly stated. "And I'm not much for wrestling or boxing. I like the direct approach," so saying, he raised his right hand, his fingers rigid, and his claws popped into view.

"I've been meaning to ask you about those," Blade said. "How do they work, anyway?"

Grizzly walked up to the Warrior, extending his right arm. "Watch," he directed, starting to relax his hand. As he did, the five-inch claws automatically retracted into his fingers, sliding *over the fingernails*.

Blade's gray eyes narrowed. His initial observation had been wrong! The fingernails were *not* part of the claws. "I thought your nails were the tips of your claws," he remarked.

"They're not," Grizzly confirmed. "I haven't dissected my fingers or anything, you understand. But as near as I can figure this is the way they work." He tapped his large knuckles. "The claws are housed behind my knuckles. There must be tubes of some kind running from my knuckles to the tips of my fingers. Do you see this?" He used his left hand to carefully pry open a flap of skin and fur located behind the fingernail on the middle finger of his right hand, revealing a hole the width of one of his claws.

Blade understood. "So your claws are fitted into the upper part of your hand, between your knuckles and your wrist. When your fingers go stiff, the claws slid down the sheaths in your fingers and come out

those holes behind the fingernails," he deduced.

"That's the way I see it," Grizzly agreed. "It's like having five built-in knives in each hand," Blade marveled. "I've never seen anything like it."

"Me neither," Grizzly said. "I know other mutants who have claws and talons and such, but none of them just pop out like mine."

"How sturdy are your claws?" Blade inquired. "Sturdy enough," Grizzly replied. "They will break, but only under massive pressure. I broke one once when I was in prison. I tried to cut my way through a metal door."

"Your claws will cut metal?" Blade queried in disbelief. "They'll hold their own against swords and knives," Grizzly said. "But I found out the hard way they won't cut through metal. They will cut a human to ribbons."

"I can imagine," Blade remarked. He wheeled and walked; over to his Bowies, scooped them up, and replaced the big knives; in their sheaths. "Let's put them to the test," he suggested, facing the mutant. "What?" Grizzly responded.

"A little test," Blade said. "Your claws against my Bowies." "How will we tell who wins?" Grizzly asked. "If you're as good as you claim you are," Blade replied, "then you should be able to break through my guard and nick me on the arm, no problem."

"That's the craziest idea I've ever heard," Grizzly declared.

"What's wrong with the idea?" Blade countered.

"What if one of your Bowies slips? What if my claws slip? What if I miscalculate? You could lose an arm," Grizzly said. "Every day we live we encounter risks," Blade mentioned. "Some are greater, some lesser. Either way, life goes on."

"I still say you're nuts," Grizzly opined.

Blade shrugged. "That's okay. If you don't want to do the test, I understand. There's no shame in admitting you couldn't win."

"I never said I couldn't win," Grizzly noted.

"You don't want to do it," Blade said. "That's the same thing in my book."

"Oh, it is, is it?" Grizzly held his left hand aloft, then his right, his fingers tensed, and his claws snapped free, gleaming in the afternoon sun. "I was just thinking of you, dummy. I kind of like you, and I didn't want to hurt you." He stared at the Warrior. "But no lousy human challenges me like you did and gets away with it. So let's get this over with."

Blade drew his Bowies and crouched, wondering if he'd bitten off more than he could chew. His job as the head of the Force required him to assess the abilities of each recruit. Goading the mutant into a mock duel might not be the brightest idea he'd ever had, but at least he'd discover, firsthand, the extent of Grizzly's capabilities.



Grizzly grinned as he sprang for the Warrior, his claws slashing.

Blade backed up under the onslaught, deflecting each swipe of those deadly claws with his Bowies. The mutant's reflexes were superb, and Blade was hard pressed to evade Grizzly's lashing strikes. The Bowies and the claws produced a clicking and scraping noise as they met and slid apart.

"Come on, Blade!" Kraft cheered from the sidelines.

Blade concentrated on blocking the mutant's blows, seeking an opening, but Grizzly's streaking claws were everywhere. During his training for Warrior status, and over the course of his years as a Warrior, Blade had engaged in countless training exercises with his fellow Warriors. Many of the practice drills had involved the use of edged weaponry: knife fights, sword duels, ax contests, and more. Blade had fought with the best of the best. Or so he'd believed.

Until now.

Grizzly was incredible. His speed and strength was uncanny, and added to those traits was his inherent ruthlessness. The longer he fought, the more bestial he became, his visage distorted by a snarl, his eyes focal points of ferocity. Blade backpedaled, thwarting the mutant's rain of claws. In the recesses of his mind a doubt began to form, a doubt Grizzly would ever make a mistake. If he was going to win, he needed a clever strategy to turn the tide. But what? Inspiration struck a second later.

Grizzly lunged, bringing both powerful arms around in an arc, aiming a crisscrossing pattern at the Warrior's broad chest.

Blade reacted by extending his arms, his Bowies clashing against the mutant's claws and locking for a moment. The pair strained, their arm muscles rippling. And that was when Blade saw his chance. He took the mutant by surprise by doing the completely unexpected; he released his left Bowie. The abrupt letup of pressure caused Grizzly to lose his balance. The mutant started to fall forward, and before Grizzly could regain his balance the contest was over. Blade drove his left hand down and in, locking his fingers on Grizzly's throat, even as he flashed his right Bowie toward Grizzly's face.

Grizzly instinctively tried to recoil from the glittering blade.

Blade stopped his strike with the tip of his Bowie barely touching the mutant's nostrils. He grinned and tapped Grizzly's nose. "I trust you won't hold it against me if I don't draw blood," he commented.

Grizzly was dumbfounded. He gaped at the Bowie near his nose, then at the Warrior. "No one's ever beat me before," he blurted out in astonishment.

"There's always a first time for everything," Blade remarked, straightening.

Grizzly held his claws in front of his face. "I must be slowing down."

Blade chuckled as he replaced his right Bowie in its sheath on his hip. He spotted his other Bowie on the mat and retrieved it.

Someone began clapping from the sidelines.

Blade glanced over Grizzly's right shoulder.

Boone had risen and was clapping, a grin creasing his features. "That was the greatest exhibition I've ever seen," he said, commending them.

"Me too," Sergeant Havoc added. "And I've seen more than *my* share of combat."

Kraft made a show of stretching and yawning. "I've seen better," he commented. "It was no great shakes, man."

"I've never been beaten before," Grizzly mumbled to himself, sounding dejected.

"Don't take it so hard," Blade advised. "It was just a training exercise."

Grizzly studied the giant. "I know there are other Warriors where you come from. Are they all as good as you?"

"Some are better," Blade replied.

"Better?" Grizzly repeated skeptically.

"Each Warrior possesses individual strengths," Blade said. "Most of us have tended to specialize. I like Bowies. One of the other Warriors is partial to Colt Python revolvers. Another uses a tomahawk. And still another prefers a katana. They are better with their weapons than I could ever hope to be."

"I'd like to meet them some day," Grizzly remarked.

"Maybe you will," Blade said. He gazed from one recruit to the next, pleased at the expressions he beheld. With one exception, Kraft, they were staring at him with varying measures of respect in their eyes. Perfect. His plan had worked. He'd needed to garner their respect if he was to entertain any hope of leading them. With their respect would come obedience. He could have intimidated them into complying with his commands, but earning their respect was wiser. Now he would also have their loyalty, and loyalty was preferable to fear any day. Give him another two months, and he would whip them into a crack fighting unit.

But he wasn't to get the two months.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Blade was at his desk, reviewing the makeup of his team and analyzing their respective weaknesses, when he heard a jeep pull to a stop outside. He looked at the clock on his desk. Ten-fifteen. Who would be arriving at such a late hour? General Gallagher? But Gallagher had said he would not return for three days. So who could it be?

Moments later the general strode into the office without knocking. "Hello, Blade," he greeted the Warrior somberly.

"Hello, General," Blade said. "This is a surprise. I wasn't expecting you for a few days."

"And I wasn't planning to come back so soon," Gallagher stated. "But something came up." He crossed to a chair in front of the desk and sat down.

"What could be so important?" Blade asked, leaning back in his metal chair.

"How did your training go today?" General Gallagher inquired.

"Fine," Blade answered. "His recruits show promise."

"How long will you need to get them ready for their first mission?" Gallagher probed.

"Our agreement was I could have two months, minimum," Blade reminded the officer. "Governor Melnick said I could have more time, if needed."

"That wasn't what I wanted to know," Gallagher said. "How long will you need to get them ready?"

"I intend to take the full two months," Blade informed the general. "I'm not about to take these men out into the field unprepared."

"I can appreciate your sentiments," Gallagher stated. "But you don't have two months."

Blade sat up. "What? Why not?"

"Because something has come up," General Gallagher disclosed. "You'll need to get them ready sooner."

"How much time are you talking about?" Blade asked.

Gallagher hesitated before responding. "Two weeks."

Blade came up out of his chair. "Two weeks! Are you insane! I can't have them ready in two weeks!"

"You must get them ready," Gallagher said, "It's imperative."

"No way," Blade reiterated.

Gallagher sighed. "I knew you'd say that. I even told Governor Melnick you wouldn't go for the idea. But he insisted. He said the lives of dozens of women are at stake."

"What, women?" Blade questioned.

"Why don't you calm down and have a seat," Gallagher suggested. "I'll explain everything."

Blade sat back down. "I'm listening," he announced gruffly.

General Gallagher cleared his throat. "Like I said, something has come up. Something requiring our immediate attention."

"Like what?"

"Are you familiar with northern California?" Gallagher inquired.

"No," Blade admitted.

"The country is real rugged up there," Gallagher detailed. "There are a lot of mountains and rivers and the densest forest you'd ever want to see. It's all very remote, and in some places almost inaccessible. There

weren't a lot of people there before the war, and now there are even less."

"Does your Army patrol this area?" Blade interrupted.

"We patrol around it," Gallagher responded. "Going through it would take weeks, if not months. As far as we know, there aren't any Raiders operating in the area because there are so few towns to raid. There are a lot of wild mutants, and we keep them away from the inhabited outposts."

"Are there any big towns at all?"

"There are a few along the coast, but that's at the west end, and the part I'm talking about is the Marble Mountain Wilderness in the center of the state. The nearest town is called Yreka. It has a population of about six thousand," Gallagher said, then paused, frowning. "About two weeks ago a young woman was brought into Yreka by a family living in Ft. Jones, a small community of about five hundred southwest of Yreka. You see, Yreka has a doctor and Ft. Jones doesn't, and the young woman, was badly in need of medical attention. She was starving to the point of wasting away and had a touch of pneumonia. The doctor reports she was on her last legs, but she has recovered pretty much since."

"Was this woman from Ft. Jones?" Blade queried.

"No," Gallagher replied. "She was pulled from the Scott River near Ft. Jones by a fisherman and his son. She was close to drowning when they found her."

"If she wasn't from Ft. Jones, then where did she come from?" Blade questioned.

"No one knew where she was from until she was able to talk," General Gallagher said. "And this is where the story starts to get hairy. Her name is Athena Morris, and she was officially declared dead seven years ago."

"Dead?" Blade repeated, puzzled.

"Dead," Gallagher affirmed. "She was a journalist from LA on her way to Yreka to do a story when the plane she was in went down."

The CAP launched a search for the plane, but they never found a trace of the wreckage. According to her, the plane developed mechanical problems and crashed on a ridge in the Marble Mountain Wilderness, killing the pilot."

"So where has she been for seven years?" Blade asked.

"I'll get to that," Gallagher promised. "We've run a background check on her. She was a top reporter for the *Times*, on her way to Yreka to cover the extensive flooding they had there seven years ago. She had a reputation for honesty and accuracy. I've met her. She's the independent type, a very strong woman. She must be if she survived the hell she went through."

Blade leaned on his elbows, all attention.

"Morris claims she was captured and held prisoner in a secluded valley in the Marble Mountain Wilderness. She says there are other women still being held there. About two dozen," General Gallagher divulged.

"Being held prisoner by whom?" Blade wanted to know.

"I'd rather let her tell you that," Gallagher said:

"Is she here now?" Blade inquired.

"She's in LA," Gallagher stated. "If you're willing, I will come back tomorrow morning with Morris and Governor Melnick. Hear her out. Maybe let her address your men. It's their lives on the line if they go on this mission."

"Why didn't she come along now?" Blade asked. "Why wait until tomorrow?"

General Gallagher stared into the Warrior's eyes. "Because I didn't want to spring this on you cold. I could have phoned, but I wanted to see your reaction when I told you. Governor Melnick wants to rescue the other women as quickly as possible. If you could have your unit ready in two weeks, you can go in after them."

"I don't understand," Blade confessed. "Why us? Why the Force? Why not send hi some of your commandos or regular Army troops?"

"There are a couple of reasons," Gallagher mentioned. "First, we don't know the exact location of this remote valley. Morris has a vague idea where it might be, but that's it. So your unit stands as good a chance as any of ours at finding the site, maybe even better because you have an Indian with you. Thunder told me he's an excellent tracker. Secondly, another of your team is ideally suited for the job, considering what you might be up against."

"Who? And what?"

"You'll understand better tomorrow," Gallagher said.

"I have an idea," Blade observed. "Why not search for this valley from the air? Why not drop in your soldiers by parachute? Why go in on foot?"

"Because the site is camouflaged and hidden from the air," Gallagher replied. "They have lookouts on the ridge and can see a plane coming for miles. Morris doubts we could find them from the air. They'd take cover before we got there."

"I still don't like using the Force for this. Blade said, "The recruits haven't been trained to function as a team yet."

"Then that's another reason to use them," General Gallagher commented.

"What do you mean?" Blade queried.

"This mission could be extremely dangerous," Gallagher stated. "None of you could come back alive. Have you ever noticed how danger has a way of drawing people closer together? Your recruits don't function as a team now, but if they survive the mission I can guarantee they'll be one."

"Do or die, huh?"

Gallagher shrugged. "Life is rough. What can I tell you?"

"You can tell me I'm asleep and dreaming all of this," Blade said.

"Sorry. So what's your decision? Do I bring Morris and the governor up here tomorrow morning, or what?" General Gallagher asked.

"If it was up to me, I'd say no," Blade responded. "But you're right. The men must decide this one. Bring Morris up. We'll hear what she has to say."

General Gallagher rose, smiling. "I knew I could count on you. Thanks. You won't regret this?"

"I hope you're right," Blade said gloomily.

Gallagher walked toward the door. "Don't worry about it. Try and get a good night's sleep," he advised.

"You must be kidding."

## CHAPTER SIX

Athena Morris was a singularly attractive woman. Her appeal was not so much her figure, which was slim and athlete, but the quality of assurance she projected. Her fine brown hair fell past her shoulders, accenting her yellow blouse. She also wore tan slacks and brown shoes. Her alert brown eyes scrutinized the six recruits standing five yards in front of her.

Blade stood to the woman's right, his hands clasped behind his back. To the woman's left was General Gallagher and Governor Melnick, a hefty man with dark hair, blue eyes, and perpetually congenial features, wearing an immaculate blue suit. Blade gazed from the governor to Morris, appraising her profile. Her cheekbones were high and prominent, her lips thin. He thought he detected a certain toughness about her.

The six recruits were eyeing the woman speculatively, obviously wondering what in the hell was going on. Blade had told them nothing. After their morning workout and meal, Gallagher had arrived with his visitors. Blade had formed a single file in front of the HQ: Havoc was on the left, then Grizzly, Boone, Thunder, Kraft and Spader.

"So what's the deal, cutey?" Kraft unexpectedly addressed the woman. "Are you a nurse here to give us an exam? You can start with my privates!" he suggested lewdly.

Spader called.

Governor Melnick reddened, General Gallagher frowned, and Blade took a step toward Kraft.

Morris held out her right arm, halting the giant. She looked up into his eyes. "There's no need," she said. "I can handle this."

"Whatever you want," Blade said.

Morris stared at Kraft, her gaze frigid. "I am not a nurse," she informed him. "And as for your privates, I stopped playing with marbles years ago."

Boone, Grizzly, and Spader burst into laughter: Sergeant Havoc, standing at attention, couldn't suppress

a grin. Thunder smiled.

Kraft glared at Morris. "I don't think you know who you're messing with, lady."

"I'm beginning to have my doubts," Morris stated. "I was told you men are known as the Freedom Force, that you're professionals. But maybe they confused you with a grade-school class."

Boone slapped his right thigh in merriment.

"She's got your number," Grizzly said to the irate Clansman.

Spader tittered.

Blade took two strides forward, his gray eyes sweeping the line. The men promptly sobered, straightening to attention. Kraft's jaw twitched, but he stayed silent. "I don't want any remarks out of any of you until the time comes for you to speak," Blade directed. "The next one who does so will answer to me."

No one spoke.

"General Gallagher explained the situation to me," Morris said to Blade. "Do you want to start the ball rolling, or should I?"

"I will," Blade offered, his gaze still on the recruits. "This lady is Athena Morris," he introduced her. "I want you to listen to every word she has to say, because in a little while you're going to be asked to make a decision. How you decide could mean the difference between life and death for you." He paused. "Ordinarily you would not have a say in whether or not you go on a mission. You volunteered to serve for a year, come what may. But this is a special case. Governor Melnick here wants us to go on our first mission within two weeks. That's not much time to train. So whether we go or not will depend on you. It's your lives we're talking about." He nodded at Morris.

"Thank you," she said, facing the recruits. "I'll make this short and sweet. For seven years I was held captive, along with approximately two dozen other women, in a valley deep in the woods in northern California. Like these other women, I was a slave. I only recently escaped, and I want to see the party responsible punished and the other women released. That's why I'm here, to talk you into going. Any questions?"

Sergeant Havoc glanced at Blade. "You can speak now if you want," Blade said. "Any of you."

Havoc stared at Athena Morris. "There's a lot you haven't told us, Ms. Morris. For instance, how were you caught? And who caught you?"

"I was a reporter for the *LA Times*," Morris replied. "I was on assignment at the time, and my plane crashed. That's when I was taken prisoner. As for who caught me..." She hesitated, her mouth downturned. "It was the vilest, most loathsome creature you'd ever want to see."

"Creature?" Havoc repeated.

Athena Morris looked at Grizzly, her forehead furrowed, as if she was debating whether to continue. Finally she appeared to gird herself.

"I was held prisoner by a mutant," she disclosed.

Grizzly cocked his head, peering at the woman.

"This mutant is called the Spider," Morris hastily continued. "He is a monster, a tyrant. He controls all of the valley I mentioned. The Spider's Kingdom, they call it. The Spider has been there for decades. I don't know how many. His underlings roam the countryside for him, taking women as captives. These women are kept in huts in the valley. I know their lives firsthand. During the day they work in the fields growing crops. At night they're confined to their huts, all except for one. She is chosen to go to the Tower."

"What's this tower?" Boone asked.

"The Tower of the Spider," Morris said. "Where the Spider lives. He never comes out of it. All his food, anything he needs including the women, are taken in to him."

"What does he do with the women, ma'am?" Spader tactlessly inquired.

Morris frowned. "The Spider uses them for reproduction."

Boone, Sergeant Havoc, and Thunder exchanged glances.

"The Spider uses a different woman every night," Morris disclosed. "He wants them to bear his offspring, the Hatchlings. Those women who can't bear children become sacrifices."

"Sacrifices?" came from Thunder.

Morris blanched. "Those women unable to have the Spider's children are periodically sacrificed." She paused, "They are fed to the Hatchlings."

Blade saw a ripple of tension pass along the line of recruits, all except for Grizzly. The mutant was immobile, his indeterminate countenance seemingly chiseled out of granite.

Spader did a double take. "You mean these Hatchlings eat the women?"

"That's precisely what I mean," Morris confirmed.

"What's this Spider like?" Boone inquired.

"I don't quite know how to describe him," Morris responded. "He's hideous, a cross between a spider and a human. You must see him to believe it." She shuddered at the recollection.

"What about the Hatchlings?" Boone probed.

"The Hatchlings are somewhat more human than the Spider," Morris detailed. "But they're still grotesque. They have two legs, but four arms, and they have these huge fangs. Their fingers are like talons, and they can use them to communicate by clicking them, signaling back and forth. They relish eating human flesh."

"How many Hatchlings are there in the Kingdom?" Sergeant Havoc queried.

"Nineteen," Morris answered. "And that's not all."



"There's more?" Boone asked.

Morris nodded. "The Spider also employs human guards to take care of the menial chores like watching over the women. There are eleven of them."

"So the opposition includes eleven guards, nineteen Hatchlings, and the Spider," Sergeant Havoc tallied. "Thirty-one, all told. Is that right?"

"That's correct," Morris confirmed.

"Thirty-one of them and seven of us," Boone remarked. "That's what I like. Even odds."

"There will be eight of us," Morris amended.

Blade glanced at the journalist. "Eight?"

Morris nodded, "Didn't General Gallagher tell you? I'm coming along."

Blade slowly turned toward the general, his expression reflecting his disapproval. "What's this?" he demanded sternly.

General Gallagher mustered a weak grin and looked from Blade to Morris and back again. "Oh! Did I forget to mention you'll be taking Morris with you if you decide to go on the mission?"

"Such a minor detail," Blade said sarcastically. "I can see how you might have overlooked it."

"We'll discuss it later," Gallagher stated.

Athena Morris scanned the recruits. "Do you have any more questions?"

"Why use us?" Sergeant Havoc queried. "Why not locate the valley from the air and drop in Special Forces to mop up?"

"May I answer that one?" General Gallagher interjected, stepping forward. "As I already told Blade, the huts, the tower, and the tilled fields are camouflaged from aerial surveillance. They also have lookouts posted on a ridge above the valley. Finding the site from the air would be a fluke, and might take months. Sending you in on foot, we feel, increases the likelihood of success."

Sergeant Havoc gazed at the general. "Sir, is there a time limit on this mission?"

"No," Gallagher replied. "You'll go in, and you'll take as long as is necessary to get the job done."

Havoc nodded. "Then I take it, sir, this mission is TWEP?"

"It is," General Gallagher declared.

Blade looked at the general. "What does TWEP stand for? It's a new one on me."

"TWEP is an abbreviation for terminate with extreme prejudice," General Gallagher explained.

"In other words," Boone chimed in, "we don't take any prisoners."

"None," Gallagher said.

There were several seconds of silence.

"Are there any more questions?" Athena Morris asked.

"Blade said something about going in two weeks?" Spader noted quizzically.

"Two weeks should be long enough for you to learn the basics," General Gallagher mentioned. "In two weeks the VTOLs will transport you to the drop zone we've selected. You will land and proceed into the interior on foot. You'll be supplied with a radio and any other equipment you might need. We can easily airlift additional supplies to you if necessary."

"Sir," Sergeant Havoc asked, "will an aerial search for the Kingdom be conducted in the meantime?"

"Negative," Gallagher responded. "A sudden increase in aerial traffic might make them suspicious and cause them to relocate. If that happened, we might never find them."

"Any more questions?" Athena Morris inquired. None of the recruits ventured any. "There is something important I would like to add," General Gallagher said. "We wouldn't be sending you in if we didn't feel you could accomplish the assignment. Thunder is a first-rate tracker, as competent as any we have in Special Forces or the commando units. If there's any sign to be found, he'll find it." He paused and glanced at Grizzly. "You also have someone on your Force particularly suited to fight mutants. Always fight fire with fire, is my motto."

Blade stared at the mutant. Now he understood Gallagher's underlying motive in using the freedom force; the force included a mutant. If anyone could ferret out a colony of degenerate mutants, it would be another hybrid, someone with the same enhanced senses and augmented instincts as the quarry. Fight fire with fire. Fight mutants with a mutant.

"And now, men," General Gallagher proclaimed, "Governor Melnick would like a few words with you."

The governor walked up to the general's side. "I simply want to impress upon you the importance of this mission. Not only would you save the lives of two dozen women, not only would you rescue these unfortunates from an existence of torture and degradation, but you would render an invaluable service to California, indeed to the entire Freedom Federation and the Outlands."

Blade saw the recruits eating up every word. As with prewar politicians, Melnick's pitch was as smooth as silk.

"If you complete this assignment," the governor was saying, "you will be sending a message to our allies and a warning to our enemies."

The message you will send our allies is that we are ready and willing to meet any and all threats to the Freedom Federation. And you will be warning our enemies to take heed, to leave us in peace or suffer the consequences. This mission is not merely a test to prove yourselves. This mission is for the people of the Freedom Federation, for your people—for the Cavalry, the Flatheads, the Clan, the Moles, the Civilized Zone, for California and the Family. You are helping them to sleep easier at night knowing you are here to protect them." He paused. "That's all I wanted to say. May God speed you on this

enterprise."

"Okay," Blade declared. "You see what you're up against. This is the first and only time you, as a group, will decide whether we accept a mission or not. Go over there a ways," he said, pointing to the east, "and talk this over. When you have reached a decision, let us know."

"Sir," Sergeant Havoc stated. "Must the decision be unanimous?"

Blade observed General Gallagher about to speak and quickly cut him off. "Yes. We either go as a team, or we don't go at all."

Gallagher frowned.

"You're on your own," Blade told them, motioning to the east.

The six recruits moved about 15 yards away and formed a circle.

Blade swung on General Gallagher. "Now what are you trying to pull? What's this nonsense about taking Morris with us?"

"I can speak for myself," Athena Morris responded stiffly. "I am going on the mission for two reasons. One, I am somewhat familiar with the country. I can recognize certain landmarks. You'll stand a better chance of finding the Kingdom with me along."

"And what's the second reason?" Blade queried.

"It's personal," Morris replied.

"Oh, great!" Blade exclaimed in disgust, looking at Gallagher. "You want us to take along a woman out for revenge? Are you out?"

Athena Morris moved between Blade and the general. "Why are you talking to him? Why don't you talk to me, face to face?"

"Fine," Blade said, annoyed by her arrogance. "I'll give it to you straight, lady! You're not coming on the mission! You want your vengeance more than anything else, and vengefulness is hardly the ideal frame of mind for going into combat.

"What the hell is the matter with you?" Morris countered. "Of course I want my revenge after what those bastards did to me! So would you, if the situation were reversed? But I won't let my thirst for revenge interfere with my performance."

"Yeah, sure," Blade muttered.

"Give me a chance to prove myself," Morris proposed. "I'd like to," Blade said, "but I can't. We'll have enough to do without baby-sitting you!"

"Uh-oh," General Gallagher mumbled. Athena Morris bristled. She poked her right forefinger into the Warrior's stomach. "Baby-sitting? For your information, bozo, I won't need any baby-sitting! I was raised in the country! I can shoot and ride as well as *anyman*! And I know how to live off the land! So don't give me any crap about babysitting!"

Blade glanced at Gallagher for support. "You know I'm right."

"I'll tell you what he knows," Morris snapped. "He knows you don't stand a snowball's chance in hell of finding the Kingdom without me along! So if you want to save those women, you'd better think twice about taking me along!" She spun and stalked off to the west, her fists clenched in anger.

"Quite a little firebrand, isn't she?" General Gallagher commented.

"She's a regular Lynx," Blade remarked cryptically. Gallagher stared at the Warrior. "You really don't have any choice in taking her. You realize that, don't you?" Blade sighed. "I wish there was another way."

"All of this may be moot if your men decide to decline the mission," Governor Melnick noted.

"Speak of the devil," General Gallagher said, looking past Blade.

Blade turned. The recruits were returning. "That was quick," he said as they assumed their original positions.

"We have made up our minds, sir," Sergeant Havoc declared.

"So what's it going to be?" Blade asked. "Do we go or not?"

"Let me put it this way," Sergeant Havoc said. "Where can we get some first-class tickets for the VTOLs?"

## PART TWO

### THE MISSION

#### CHAPTER SEVEN

"I'm so sick of trees I could puke!" Kraft declared, pushing a limb aside as he plodded wearily along.

Blade glanced over his right shoulder. "No talking!" he ordered.

"Ahh, like who's going to hear us, dude?" Kraft retorted. "The trees don't have ears, you know." Blade halted and turned. The Force was strung out behind him, advancing through the undergrowth to the west. Spader was a few feet away, then Kraft. Beyond the Clansman were Sergeant Havoc, Grizzly, Thunder, and Boone. They all drew to a stop. "It isn't the trees I'm concerned about," Blade said to Kraft. "It's who, or what, might be on the other side of those trees."

Kraft snorted. "The only thing on the other side of those trees is some mangy bear taking a shit."

Spader was leaning on his M-16. "Can we take a break now? We've been hiking for hours!"

"Hours my ass!" Kraft cracked. "In case you can't count, we've been at this bullshit for seven days!"

Blade walked back to Kraft. "When I say no talking, I mean no talking! If you don't shut your face, I'll shut it for you."

Kraft's lips compressed and his eyes narrowed.

"What's the matter, cutey?" taunted a female voice from the front of the column. "Where's your marbles?"

Blade gazed at Athena Morris, her slim figure attired in tight fitting camouflage fatigues. He had been following her for the better part of an hour, ever since she had announced she thought the terrain looked familiar. "What about a break?" Spader reiterated.

Blade nodded. "Fifteen minutes," he informed them, moving to the head of the line, ,

Athena Morris was leaning against a tree, her back to the trunk. "I see that look in your eyes again," she told him.

"You shouldn't goad Kraft," Blade advised. "You're only making this worse than it already is."

"I can't help myself," she said. "I'm tired of all his whining. I don't see why you let him into the Force."

"I had no control over the quality of the recruits," Blade mentioned. "I must make do with those who volunteered, Ms. Kraft."

"Will you quit calling me that?" she rejoined. "How many times must I tell you. Call me Athena."

Blade surveyed the dense vegetation ahead. "Do you still think you know where we might be?"

Athena chewed on her lower lip for a moment. "I don't know," she admitted. "That ridge in the distance looks like one I saw on my way out."

"The one above the Kingdom?"

"No," Athena said. "But the next one over."

Blade peered at the ridge in question, visible through the canopy of trees. In all his travels, he'd never encountered vegetation as thick as the growth in northern California. His mind flashed back to the drop-off a week ago, when the VTOLs had deposited the Force in a large clearing adjacent to the Scott River and northeast of the Marble Mountain Wilderness. They had stuck with the river for only a few hours, until Athena had found the stream she wanted. Then they had struck off to the west, into the Wilderness, staying close to the stream. Now, after a week of pursuing the stream's meandering course to the west, he was beginning to wonder if Athena had selected the wrong tributary. He gazed to the right at the flow of cold water, not ten feet away. "Tell me about your escape again."

"You want to hear that again?" Athena queried, puzzled. "You've heard the story a dozen times so far."

"Humor me," Blade said.

Athena sighed, running her right hand through her hair, her left clutching her M-16 with the stock pressed against her left thigh. "I escaped on one of the feast nights. Whenever one of the women who can't bear the Spider's children are sacrificed, the occasion is turned into a big feast, a big celebration. After the sacrifice, the Hatchlings carry the body to the Tower to consume." She stopped, breathing slowly, dearly disturbed.

"If you'd rather not talk about it again..." Blade began.

"I'm okay," Athena said, resuming her narrative. "The human guards always overdo their celebrating. They usually drink themselves into a stupor. Most of them, anyway. I counted on that for my escape. With the Hatchlings occupied in the Tower, and the majority of the guards out like a light, I figured I could sneak from my hut into the woods and get away. But I ran into some trouble. One of the guards almost caught me. And instead of fleeing to the south until the ridge ended, then skirting to the east, I stupidly blundered straight up the ridge. The Hatchlings came after me." She glanced at Blade, her brown eyes, conveying a haunted aspect. "They would have had me too, but I fell off the cliffs bordering the east side of the ridge. Ironically, the fall saved my life. I landed in a deep pool of water at the base of the cliffs, so deep I didn't even hit bottom. I made it to the surface, and I remembered clinging to a boulder on the shore, coughing and thanking God for my deliverance."

"You had a narrow escape," Blade remarked.

"My ordeal wasn't over," Athena said. "The pool fed a stream." She pointed at the nearby brook. "That one, I believe. I knew the Hatchlings would come after me, and I knew they have an excellent sense of smell. They can track a human by scent. I reasoned my best chance was to stick with the stream, to stay in the water and follow it wherever it might lead. After all, the Hatchlings can't track a scent through water. So that's what I did."

"And the stream eventually fed into the Scott River, and you followed the river to the east until you were rescued near Ft. Jones," Blade concluded.

Athena nodded. "I almost didn't make it. I was too scared to stop and find something to eat. I was weak and exhausted, but somehow I kept going. She shook her head in amazement. "I can't believe I'm alive."

"And yet you're going back?" Blade mentioned.

Athena looked into his eyes. "I've got to go back. I owe it to all the women I left behind, and to myself. I've got to see the Spider dead. My motive is more than mere revenge. I will never enjoy another good night's sleep as long as I know the Spider and his brood are alive. Can you understand this?"

"I think so," Blade said, nodding, admiring her courage. "There is one thing I'm still not clear on."

"What's that?" she queried.

"I'm trying to envision the area we're seeking in my mind," Blade stated. "Correct me if what I say is wrong." He paused. "The ridge we're looking for runs from north to south, with cliffs on the east side and a slope on the west. Right?"

"Right so far," Athena confirmed.

"The valley, the Kingdom of the Spider, is located on the west side of the ridge," Blade said.

"Yes," Athena verified. "There is a gigantic, desolate ravine bordering the valley to the west. To the north is a series of hills and more ravines. To the south the land is essentially flat."

"And where is the Tower in relation to everything?" Blade questioned.

"The Tower of the Spider is in the center of the valley," Athena disclosed. "It stands about seventy feet

high and is about forty feet in diameter."

"What's it made of?" Blade inquired.

"Wood," Athena said. "Surrounding the Tower are the huts, ten of them, all made of wood. One hut, the biggest, is used by the guards. The rest are occupied by the women. We were forced to sleep on mats on the dirt floor. There was no indoor plumbing, so we had to cart our water from a well near the Tower. There's a creek on the west side of the valley used to irrigate the crops the women grow."

"How do they hide everything from the air?" Blade probed.

"They use these large green nets to camouflage the tilled fields," Athena detailed. "The nets are propped up on poles. From the air, the fields must appear to be covered with grass."

"What about the huts and the Tower?"

"The huts are painted green, and they were designed so the roofs form a dome instead of slanting. I'd imagine they look like mounds from high up," Athena said. "As for the Tower, I must admit they were rather ingenious. They packed earth around three-fourths of the Tower, encasing the structure in dirt up to the fifty-foot level. The rest of the Tower is painted green, like the huts, and the Tower also has a domed roof. Anyone looking down from a plane would simply see a valley of green grass with a few mounds and a big hill in the middle."

"Are there any walls or fences?" Blade asked.

"None," Athena divulged. "They don't need any. The kingdom is so far from civilization, I doubt many women have made a break for it over the years. I only heard of a few, and they were all reportedly killed."

"About these women," Blade remarked. "Where do they come from? How does the Spider get them?"

"The Hatchlings are sent out every now and then to acquire new blood," Athena related. "They range far afield. They bypass the nearest towns, like Yreka, and travel further east to steal the women they need. They also venture to the coast, and I was told they even go up into what was once the state of Oregon and capture women from the outposts and towns there. The Hatchlings aren't stupid. They don't arouse suspicion by taking more than one woman from any community, and they usually don't hit the same community again for five or six years. By selectively picking their targets, they minimize the risk of being discovered."

"I'm surprised someone hasn't noticed a pattern of some kind," Blade commented.

"Back in the old days they would have," Athena stated. "Back then almost everyone had social security numbers, or those mandatory national identification numbers the government issued shortly before the war, or some method of keeping track of the population. Missing persons were usually promptly reported to the authorities." She sighed. "But today it's different. Many of the towns and hamlets are isolated. Telephone service is generally restricted to the urban areas, and the people don't travel as much as they once did. And you've got to keep in mind how rugged this country is. Disappearances are not uncommon. So if a woman vanishes from a mountain settlement, although a search will invariably be launched, no one has any cause to suspect deviate mutants are swooping down on helpless women and abducting them."

"Incredible," Blade said.

"The Spider only wants young women, breeding females as they are called. The typical victim is between fifteen and forty years of age. If a woman reaches forty in the Kingdom, whether she's borne an offspring or not, she's sacrificed."

"These offspring," Blade observed. "Are they all Hatchlings?":

"No," Athena answered. "Many turn out human."

"What happens to them?"

Athena's expression soured. "I don't know. We were never told. I assume they're eaten."

"You mentioned something once before," Blade noted. "About the Spider killing women unable to bear him offspring. How does he know if they can or they can't?"

"Let me explain how his system works," Athena offered. "The average number of women held in the Kingdom at any one time, during the time I was there, was sixteen. For some reason, the Spider decided to increase that number a few months before I escaped. There are twenty-four there now." She frowned. "The bastard uses a different woman every night. So a captive would find herself taken to the Tower once every sixteen to twenty-four days, depending on how many women were in captivity or pregnant. Once a woman became pregnant, the Spider wouldn't touch her. With so many women at his disposal, the bastard could afford to bide his time in trying to impregnate any one woman. The standard give-birth-or-die period was seven years. If a woman hadn't become pregnant within seven years of her capture, she was sacrificed."

Blade's forehead creased. "And how long did you say you were there?"

"About seven years," Athena replied.

"Oh," Blade said softly, electing to change the subject. He gazed at the ridge in the distance. "That ridge up ahead. It's not the one we want, but it could be located just to the east of the one we want. Is that correct?"

Athena glanced at the ridge. "That's right. It's yet another barrier shielding the Kingdom from the rest of the world. The stream should cut through a gorge in the middle of that ridge. On the other side we'll find the pool and the second ridge, the ridge with the cliffs, the ridge overlooking the Kingdom."

"We'd better get going," Black declared, facing his men.

The recruits were spread out over a 20-yard stretch, resting. The past week had taken its toll on their physical condition and morale. Seven days of pressing into the virtually impenetrable wilderness, seven days of forcing their passage through inconceivably dense vegetation, seven days of constantly combating ensnaring vines, of forging through a wall of brush and limbs, had sapped their energy and affected their emotions. Spader and Kraft were particularly hard hit. Neither was accustomed to the outdoors to any great degree. Kraft was becoming increasingly irritable with each passing day.

Before leaving their facility north of LA, Blade had offered the recruits the uniforms General Gallagher had provided. He had assured them wearing a uniform was not mandatory. Not too surprisingly, Grizzly had declined. So did Boone and Thunder; they preferred their buckskins. Sergeant Havoc always wore a



uniform, although he was partial to brown, green, or camouflage T-shirts instead of a regulation fatigue shirt. Spader, whose clothes were on the shabby side anyway, opted to wear the new fatigues and a pair of combat boots. And Kraft had decided to wear fatigues on this mission instead of his usual black leather apparel. Each one had a green web belt and canteen.

The recruits had been issued ample weaponry. Each one, even Grizzly, had received an M-16, but the mutant had adamantly refused to wear a pair of Colt automatics strapped around his waist. Boone had likewise declined the pistols, opting for his Hombre revolvers, leaving Blade, Thunder, Kraft, Spader, and Sergeant Havoc to pack a pair of Stainless Steel Officers Model 45's. Blade carried his in shoulder holsters, one snug under each arm, his Bowies on his hips. In addition to the guns, each recruit carried a concealed boot knife or, in the case of Boone and Thunder, a knife tucked underneath knee-high moccasins. And Blade, as a backup to his Bowies, had slid a Panther survival knife with a 15-inch blade and a leather sheath under his belt in the small of his back. The Panther was hidden by his black leather vest and might not be discovered during a body search by an enemy should he be captured.

Each recruit was toting a backpack constructed of a waterproof camouflage material containing their necessities, their rations and one change of clothing and their explosives. As if the guns and knives weren't enough, General Gallagher had issued a packet of plastic explosive, a detonator, and a timer to each recruit. Blade had insured they were thoroughly instructed in the use of the explosive. The orders he received had been quite specific: Not only was he to eliminate the Spider, the Hatchlings, and the Spider's human henchmen, but he was to totally destroy the Kingdom, to blow the Tower, the huts, and everything else to kingdom come. When General Gallagher used the expression "terminate with extreme prejudice," he meant exactly that.

"On your feet," Blade directed. "We're moving out."

Kraft sighed. "Here we go again. I bet that ditsy bitch doesn't even know where the hell we are!"

Blade reached the Clansman in four strides. He towered over Kraft, glaring down at him. "I'm getting tired of your griping. I thought the Clan sent me a man, not a wimp. All of us are tired. All of us want to get this mission over with. But you're not helping matters with your lousy attitude. Change it or clam up. Do I make myself clear, mister?"

"Yeah," Kraft responded testily. "I hear you."

Blade returned to the front of the column behind Athena. "Lead on."

Athena nodded and tramped to the west.

Blade glanced over his left shoulder to verify his men were up and ready to go. Boone, at the rear, smiled and waved. Blade grinned in response, then followed Athena Morris.

"You haven't told me much about yourself," she commented as she skirted an enormous boulder in their path. She kept her voice low, barely audible.

"There's not much to tell," Blade said.

"That's not what I hear," Athena mentioned. "You have quite a reputation."

"People like to exaggerate," Blade said. "They enjoy telling tall tale."

"And I haven't seen many taller than you," Athena quipped.

"Healthy hormones," Blade rejoined.

"General Gallagher thinks highly of you," Athena remarked. "He said he couldn't think of anyone better qualified to lead the Force."

Blade wondered if his ears were functioning. "General Gallagher said that?" he asked in disbelief.

"Sure did," Athena confirmed.

"The same General Gallagher we both know?" Blade queried.

Athena smiled. "The same one. Why?"

"I was under the impression he doesn't much like me or the Freedom Force," Blade observed.;

"Don't let Gallagher fool you," Athena said. "He's rough around the edges, but deep inside he's a pussycat."

"Now I know we're not talking about the same man," Blade cracked. .

"So how about it?" Athena stated. "Tell me a little bit about yourself."

Blade opened his mouth to speak when he happened to glance to his right, idly gazing across at the stream at a low hill beyond.

His keen gray eyes caught a glimpse of movement in a clearing near the top of the hill. "Down!" he hissed, dropping to his knees, reaching out and pulling Athena next to him.

The men of the Force promptly obeyed.

"What is it?" Athena whispered.

Blade nodded at the hill. He could see seven figures crossing the clearing. Their features were indistinct, but one of them was definitely a woman. The other six were another story; they were squat black forms whose gait and body movements seemed oddly unnatural.

"Hatchlings!" Athena said in horror.

Blade estimated their distance at approximately a thousand yards off. The Hatchlings and the woman were proceeding in single file, the woman in the center. They were bearing to the west, toward the same ridge Athena had targeted, confirming her judgment.

"They've captured another woman!" Athena exclaimed quietly.

"Maybe she's your replacement," Blade commented.

"What?"

"Maybe she was caught to take your place," Blade noted.

Athena appeared shocked by the possibility. "You could be right," she mumbled.

Blade looked at his men. All of them had spied the procession on the hill and were watching the Hatchlings. Blade stared at the far off clearing again in time to see the Hatchlings and their captive disappear in the trees below the clearing.

"Let's go! Athena urged. "We can follow them to the Kingdom."

"Not so fast," Blade admonished her. He scanned his men, debating. Grizzly was his first choice, but no, he couldn't. Thunder could handle the job, but the Flathead was near the end of the line, lugging the radio, their sole link to civilization. Speed was essential.

"What are we going to do?" Athena demanded. Blade motioned for Sergeant Havoc, and a moment later the noncom was by his side.

"Sir?" Havoc said.

"I want you to follow them," Blade ordered, pointing at the hill. "Stay on their trail, but don't let them see you. Well come along in a few minutes. I'm relying on you to warn us if they stop for any reason." ,

"Understood, sir," Havoc acknowledged. "And Havoc," Blade said.

Sergeant Havoc was already starting to rise. "Yes, sir?"

"Don't get yourself killed," Blade warned. "No way, sir," Havoc stated, grinning. He cautiously moved to the stream, his camouflage T-shirt and fatigue pants blending in perfectly with the foliage he passed. The water was only three feet in depth. He quickly waded across and was lost to view in the woods on the opposite side.

Blade gestured for his men to join him and they hurriedly closed in. All of them were somber. Even Kraft, for once, was silent. "You all saw them," Blade said. "We're going to trail them to the Kingdom. I've sent Havoc on ahead to keep tabs on them. Thunder, I want you to take the point. Keep in sight. Don't lose Havoc's tracks. And keep your eyes peeled. If those Hatchlings stop, Havoc is going to let us know so we don't blunder into them. Get going," Blade instructed, then added, "but first hand the radio to Spader."

"Me? It was my turn yesterday!" Spader protested. "And it's your turn again now," Blade declared.

Thunder rose, unslinging the small portable transmitter and receiver from his back. The radio was designed to be carried alongside their narrow backpacks.

"I don't see why I have to be the one," Spader mumbled as he grudgingly accepted the radio.

"Take off," Blade commanded.

Thunder nodded, hefting his M-16. He walked to the stream and forded, then waited for them on the other side.

"Come on." Blade stood and led the rest, Athena right behind him, then Spader, Kraft, Boone, and Grizzly. He reached the stream, gauging the rapidly flowing current, and entered the frigid water. He was

soaked from the knees to his boots when he stepped onto the far bank.

Thunder was visible 15 yards into the trees, his eyes on the ground, tracking Havoc and the mutants.

Blade walked a few feet from the stream, watching the rest of his team negotiate their passage. Athena forged straight across, but Spader balked, perched on the bank, his green eyes showing trepidation.

"Come on!" Blade promised him.

Spader nervously licked his lips.

"What's wrong? It's only about six feet wide," Blade noted.

"I can't swim!" Spader whispered in response.

"The water is only three feet deep," Blade said. "It will only come up to your waist, if that."

"What if I fall in?" Spader queried.

"We don't have time for this!" Blade told him. "We can't let them get too far ahead."

"I don't know..." Spader wavered.

"Oh, hell!" Grizzly suddenly exclaimed. He came around Boone and Kraft, his M-16 in his left hand, and before Spader quite knew what was happening Grizzly grabbed the Mole around the waist with his right arm, bodily lifted Spader from the ground, and entered the water.

Spader uttered a strangled gasp.

Grizzly speedily surged through the current and climbed onto the bank, walking up to Blade and depositing a petrified Spader at the Warrior's feet. "Anyone want a pissant?" the mutant quipped.

Blade waved for the others to hurry, and within a minute Boone and Kraft had reached them. "Stay alert," he cautioned. "And no noise from here on out."

Thunder was over 20 yards to the west, crouched beside a log, obeying Blade's injunction to stay in sight.

Blade hastened after the Flathead.

Thunder straightened and resumed his tracking.

How far ahead were the Hatchlings? Blade wondered: At least fifteen hundred yards, he guessed. How sensitive were the Hatchlings senses? Athena had said they possessed a keen sense of smell, but what about their hearing? Blade doubted the Hatchlings would be able to detect the presence of the Force. But he miscalculated.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Sergeant Havoc crept through the verdant undergrowth, angling his pursuit to coincide with the descent of the Hatchlings. He had seen the seven forms vanish in the woods below the clearing, and he assumed

they were moving down the west slope of the hill toward the distant ridge. He hurried as quickly as possible, his M-16 held in front of his body, ready for action.

The terrain presented imposing obstacles. Gullies and ravines sliced the landscape. Dead trees littered the ground. And although the month was January, the plant growth was prolific. Large boulders dotted the earth.

Havoc bore to the northwest, hoping to cut the Hatchlings' trail, then follow them. He advanced for ten minutes and began to worry. By all rights, he should have seen or heard some sign of his quarry. But so far, nothing.

The forest was eerily still.

Havoc paused on the south side of a triangular boulder rearing ten feet into the air. He squatted and deliberated his next move.

A twig snapped.

Havoc tensed and flattened his back against the boulder. The sound had come from the far side of the boulder. He held his breath, listening intently. Had an animal made the noise? Or something else? Something far worse?

There was an abrupt spurt of clicking.

Havoc's blue eyes narrowed. What had Athena Morris said about the Hatchlings? "Their fingers are like talons, and they can use them to communicate by clicking them, signaling back and forth.

The clicking ceased.

Havoc slowly exhaled, biding his time. He counted to 50, then eased to the dank ground and crawled around the west end of the boulder. He'd hit the jackpot!

The six Hatchlings and their female prisoner were 25 yards to the west. The hybrids walked with a strangely stiff shuffle, as if their legs lacked the flexibility of a human. Their four arms were held close to their torsos. A coat of fine black hair covered every inch of their skin.

They weren't very tall, but had heavy forms.

Havoc had seen a number of mutants in the past, but the Hatchlings were markedly different. There was a perverse aura about them, an almost palpable air of sheer evil. They gave him the creeps.

The last Hatchling in line unexpectedly turned, surveying their back trail, revealing a pair of cruel, circular black orbs.

Havoc froze, afraid he'd been spotted. A small bush partially obstructed the Hatchling's view, and he hoped the monstrosity wouldn't distinguish him against the backdrop of vegetation. An eternity seemed to elapse before the hybrid pivoted and continued its trek. Havoc breathed a sigh of relief.

The last Hatchling shambled from sight around a pine tree.

Havoc rose to a crouch and carefully dogged the hybrids. They were moving at a slower pace than he'd

anticipated, which was why he had almost blundered into them and ruined the mission. But no harm had been done, and all he had to do was stick with them like glue. He discovered a Hatchling footprint in a soft section of dirt and paused to examine the print. The impression in the earth was oval, with three protruding claw marks extending for three or four inches from the front of the imprint. He estimated the length of the foot at ten inches.

A scream pierced the forest up ahead.

Havoc quickened his steps, skirting the pine tree, seeking the hybrids. Seconds later he found them, gathered around the woman they'd abducted. She was lying on her back, her hands tied together at her waist, gaping at her captors in stark fear. He noticed her long hair was a sandy blonde and she was wearing jeans and a tan blouse.

What were the hybrids doing?

Havoc stealthily snuck to within 15 yards of the creatures, concealing himself behind a great log, a remnant of one of the forest's gigantic trees.

Someone was speaking in a curiously sharp, metallic tone, the words clipped and precise.

Havoc rose on his elbows and peeked over the top of the log. With a start, he realized *one of the hybrids was doing the talking* ! Because of their clicking signals, he had taken for granted the Hatchlings couldn't communicate verbally. Obviously they could when they wanted, although their speech pattern suggested they experienced difficulty in doing so. The clicking of their talons, he perceived, might be their special, secret technique for communicating when they wanted to stay in touch with a minimum of noise, a kind of code.

"One more time," the Hatchling was saying, "and you will perish on the spot."

"I'm sorry," the woman wailed. "I just tripped! I couldn't help myself! You haven't let me rest in two days!"

"You will rest when we reach the Kingdom," the Hatchling said. "Not before."

The woman nodded. "Why are you doing this to me? Who are you? *What* are you?"

The Hatchling doing all the talking glanced at *one of his* companions. "These human wretches are pitiful."

The second Hatchling grinned, displaying a mouth packed with glistening white fangs, two of which, the eye teeth, were an inch longer than all the rest.

The terrified woman sniffled.

Sergeant Havoc frowned, wishing there was something he could do to assist the woman. But if he helped her, if he tried to take out all the Hatchlings, he ran the risk of one escaping and warning the Spider. All he could do was bide his time and keep tabs on the bastards, just like Blade wanted.

The head Hatchling leaned down and examined the trembling woman. "You will do nicely," it commented. "The Spider will be very pleased with you."

"Who's the Spider?" the woman made bold to ask.

"You will meet the Spider tomorrow night," the Hatchling informed her.

"The Spider is our father," added another hybrid.

"Dear Lord!" the woman exclaimed. "Save me!" The leader of the mutants laughed, a sort of high-pitched, flinty titter.

Havoc wondered why the six hybrids were wasting so much time in idle conversation. And suddenly his mind shrieked a silent "Look out!" as his brain belatedly registered the discrepancy in his count.

There weren't six mutants surrounding the woman!

There were only five!

Where was the sixth?

Sergeant Havoc whirled, knowing he'd been duped, perceiving the reason the other five hybrids were stalling, bringing his M-16 up, hoping he wasn't too late and mentally berating himself for his stupidity.

The sixth Hatchling was a foot away, its four arms upraised, its talons poised for a strike. Its two hairy right arms grabbed the barrel of the M-16 and wrenched the weapon from the noncom's grasp before the trigger could be squeezed.

Havoc rolled to the right as the Hatchling pounced, evading the hybrid's raking talons. He began to rise, going for the 45's around his waist, but he was way too slow.

Although only five feet in height, the Hatchling made tip in bulk what it lacked in stature. And the creature utilized its weight to an advantage as it sprang again, slamming into its adversary's abdomen and bowling the human over.

Sergeant Havoc suddenly found himself flat on his back, each wrist pinned to the ground by two of the creature's hands, the Hatchling straddling his chest. A sensation of revulsion washed over him as the mutant's fetid breath assailed his nostrils. He stared upward into the most inhuman orbs conceivable and repressed a shudder.

The Hatchling smirked, exposing its lethal fangs.

Havoc was astounded by the creature's strength. Try as he might, he was unable to dislodge his wrists from the hybrid's hold. He saw the thing lean toward him with its mouth wide, a yellowish saliva dripping from its teeth, and a fleeting flicker of panic paralyzed him. But only for a moment. The next instant his years of training and extensive combat experience came to his rescue, supplanting the incipient, uncharacteristic dread with a cool, calculating resoluteness.

The Hatchling's fangs were six inches from his throat,

"Eat this, ugly" Havoc growled, sweeping his forehead up and in, connecting with the mutant's large, thin nostrils. He felt the cartilage crunch under the impact.

Hissing, the Hatchling recoiled, its nose flattened to a gruesome pulp.

Havoc pressed his initiative, bucking his body, temporarily throwing the creature off balance. He swept his legs up, his ankles damping on the sides of the hybrids squat neck, and twisted his legs to the left.

The Hatchling tumbled to the left, springing to its feet next to the log.

Havoc was already rising, his right hand on his right automatic. He intuitively sensed a new threat to his rear and spun.

Another Hatchling was charging toward him, mere feet away.

Havoc executed a lightning left hook kick, aiming at the mutant's throat while simultaneously shifting to the right to avoid the hybrid's rush. His left combat boot connected with the Hatchling's neck below the chin, snapping the creature's head back as its feet left the ground.

The second Hatchling fell onto its right side.

Havoc drew his right pistol. He had to warn Blade! A couple of shots would do the job! But before he could fire, the first mutant pounced, plowing into the base of his spine and knocking him to his knees, the jolt causing the Colt to almost slip from his fingers. A tremendous blow was delivered to the left side of his head, above the ear, and he swayed, dazed.

A third Hatchling entered the fray, leaping over the log and ramming into the human.

Sergeant Havoc was rocked by the collision. He toppled backwards with the mutant pummeling his face, only dimly aware of his plight. His right fist instinctively smashed the mutant on the left cheek, enraging the creature.

Two more Hatchlings vaulted over the log, and in conjunction with the first three they piled on their victim.

Havoc was buried under a mass of hairy black shapes. Talons sliced his arms, chest, and legs, tearing the fabric of his clothing and drawing blood. The Colt was gone. He attempted to fight his way free of the mutants, but he was hopelessly outnumbered. They rained punch after punch upon him, effortlessly dodging his futile counterstrikes.

"We have him!" one of them declared.

Havoc knew the damn thing was right. He could feel his limbs losing their vitality and his head was ringing. Self-reproach enveloped him. He had failed Blade and the Force. Worse, he had disgraced his father and his grandfather. Both men had served illustrious careers in the military. His grandfather had passed on, but his father would hear about his blunder, would know he had sullied the Havoc name. A numbing hit was delivered to his right temple and he nearly lost consciousness. His eyes closed and he went limp, hovering on the brink of sentience.

"That's enough!" a Hatchling barked, as if through a long tunnel. "He's out."

"He certainly was a tough one!" commented another mutant.

"The son of a bitch broke my nose!" complained the one with the crushed nostrils..

"Should we kill him here and now?" queried yet another.



There were several seconds of silence.

"No," stated the apparent leader. "Disposing of him now would be a waste of prime meat. We'll take him to the Kingdom. Father will decide his fate." The Hatchling chuckled. "We may have our next feast sooner than we thought."

"Do you think there are more like him?" asked one of the other mutants.

"There could be," the leader said. "He might be part of an Army patrol."

"What would a patrol be doing in this area?" interjected the second hybrid.

"Maybe they're on to us," suggested the mutant with the busted nose.

"No way," declared the leader.

"How can you be so certain, Dox?" asked the second creature.

"How would they know about us, Syph?" Dox rejoined. "We never leave any trace behind after a raid."

"What about the human who escaped, the Morris female?" Syph mentioned.

"We don't know if she escaped," Dox said. "She was probably killed in the fall from the cliff."

"But we never found her body," Syph noted.

Sergeant Havoc was losing consciousness, his mind swirling. He tried to eavesdrop on the Hatchlings' conversation, the effort draining him even more.

"If the female escaped we still have nothing to worry about," Dox stated. "The Kingdom is too well hidden for the humans to find. The odds against the female being able to lead anyone to our valley are astronomical. The humans never venture this far into the forest."

Havoc felt something nudge his right shoulder.

"This one did," one of the mutant's commented. "And where there is one filthy human, there are more. They make rabbits look like a celibate species."

"If there are more humans nearby, whether an Army patrol or not, we can't afford to allow them to leave," Dox said.

"What should we do, big brother?" Syph inquired.

"Half of us will escort the woman and this soldier to the Kingdom," Dox directed. "The rest will wait here. If the patrol shows up, slay them."

"Who gets to go?" asked another hybrid.

"Myself, Syph, and Rhea because he has been injured," Dox said. "Siad, you and the others will secrete yourselves and await more humans."

"How long must we wait?" Siad questioned.

"Until sunset," Dox instructed. "If no humans have arrived by then,, return to the Kingdom."

"We wilt wait until sunset," Siad pledged.

Sergeant Havoc was fading fast. He strained to hear some more.

"If more humans do arrive, should we spare any at all?" asked a mutant.

"You heard me," Dox said. "Kill them. All of them."

"You don't care what we do with the bodies?" Siad inquired.

"Do what you want," Dox stated, his bizarre voice growing fainter as he moved off.

"Good," Siad commented. "I could use a snack."

Sergeant Havoc made a supreme effort to remain awake, but was enshrouded in a benighted gloom.

## CHAPTER NINE

The Freedom Force advanced ever so slowly to the west.

Blade could see Thunder crouched next to a big triangular boulder 30 feet distant. The Flathead was minutely examining the earth at his feet. Constantly scanning the dense undergrowth for a telltale hint of trouble, Blade threaded his way to the Indian's side. "What do you have?" he asked.

"Havoc was here, maybe ten minutes ago," Thunder said. "He got down on his belly and crawled in this direction." He moved around the boulder.

"Any sign of the Hatchlings' trail?" Blade queried.

"Not yet," Thunder replied. He walked a half-dozen yards from the boulder. "Ahhh. Here it is. They are heading to the west. Havoc intercepted them here, then followed."

"Take the point," Blade ordered. "Signal if you find anything."

"Will do," Thunder promised.

"And remember," Blade added. "Go slowly. We want them to get a few thousand yards in front of us, give us a little breathing space."

"I understand," Thunder said, and was gone.

Blade grinned, pleased his plan was working. By proceeding at a snail's pace, he minimized the risk of being discovered by the Hatchlings. Added insurance was provided by Sergeant Havoc, who would warn them if anything went amiss. The mission was shaping up nicely. All he needed to do was let the Hatchlings lead the Force to the Kingdom, then mop up. A few explosives, properly placed, would demolish the Spider's domain.

"Is it safe to talk yet?" Athena asked from right behind him.

Blade glanced over his right shoulder. His men were trudging through the brush to the rear of Athena. Grizzly was next in line after the journalist, then Spader, Kraft, and Boone. "It's okay to talk if you keep your voice low," Blade advised. "I doubt they can hear us this far away."

"I've been thinking," Athena mentioned. "You could have some problems up ahead."

"Like what?" Blade questioned.

"They keep lookouts posted on the ridge above the Kingdom," Athena reminded him. "They cover all the approaches. If you try to follow those Hatchlings we saw into the Kingdom, you'll be spotted."

"Then we'll follow them as far as we can," Blade said, "and go in later, under the cover of darkness."

"That's when the Hatchlings are most active," Athena divulged. "They don't come out a lot during the day. The ones we're following must be eager to reach the Kingdom."

"We go in the first chance we get," Blade stated.

"Just thought I'd let you know," Athena commented.

They marched in silence for a minute.

"You never did tell me about yourself," Athena remarked.

"Like I told you before, there's not much to tell," Blade said.

"Do you have a family?" Athena queried.

Blade nodded, smiling at the memory. "I have a lovely wife and a little son."

"What are their names?"

"My wife's name is Jenny," Blade said. "We called our son Gabriel."

"How old is your little one?" Athena questioned.

"He turned three this past December," Blade replied proudly.

"Any plans for any more?"

Blade looked at her. "Are all journalists so nosy?"

"Yep," Athena said. "Nosiness is our stock in trade. That, and a healthy dose of curiosity."

"Will you go back to being a journalist when this is all over?"

Blade inquired.

"I don't know," Athena admitted. "I haven't given the matter much thought. I can't think of anything except making the Spider pay for what he did to me."

"Do you think you'll be able to sleep easier once this Spider is dead?"

"I hope so," Athena said wistfully.

"Don't worry," Blade counseled. "Everything will work out."

"I stopped believing in fairy tales years ago," Athena mentioned bitterly.

"Don't allow the Spider to sour you on life," Blade recommended. "You've been through a terrible ordeal. There's no denying that. But you've got to look at the bright side."

"What bright side?" ,

"I have a friend by the name of Joshua," Blade said. "He's the spiritual sage in my Family, and twice a week we gather to hear him speak about truth, love, and faith. He said something once which applies to you."

"Like what?" Athena asked.

"Adversity is the crucible from which wisdom is derived," Blade quoted..

Athena snickered. "You missed your calling. You should be a preacher instead of a Warrior."

"I'll leave the spiritual teaching to Joshua," Blade said. "I'm content being a Warrior."

"Is everyone at the place you come from, the Home I heard about, so religious?" Athena inquired.

"Yes," Blade said.

"Everyone?"

"Yes," Blade reiterated.

"Amazing," Athena stated. "Tell me something. How can you believe in truth and love and all that, and go around killing others for a living? Seems inconsistent to me."

"If the spiritual do not protect themselves from the unspiritual," Blade intoned, "the spiritual will be wiped off the face of the earth."

Athena laughed lightly. "What fortune cookie did you get that out of?"

"Fortune cookie?"

"Yeah. A crisp cookie with a slip of paper inside. They're supposed to tell your fortune," Athena elaborated. "Haven't you ever had one?"

"We do not have fortune cookies at the Home," Blade said.

"The last one I had was right before I took off for Yreka and my plane went down," Athena commented. "We had stopped in San Francisco en route and I did some sightseeing. I ate at a fantastic Chinese restaurant in the Bay Area."

"What did your fortune cookie say?" Blade asked.

Athena snickered. "Detours delay the soul on its path." She stared up at the sky. "I always thought that was appropriate, given what happened later"

"You mean the plane crash?"

"What else?" Athena retorted.

"Perhaps the fortune cookie referred to your inner path not your outer one," Blade suggested.

"What's the difference?" Athena queried.

"The inner path can lead your soul to wisdom," Blade said. "The outer can lead you astray."

"Is that what your Joshua teaches?" Athena inquired.

Blade nodded. "Joshua and the Elders!"

"I wish there was a way to export fortune cookies to your Home," Athena wisecracked. "Your Family would eat them up. I'd make a ton of money."

"No, you wouldn't," Blade told her.

"Why not?" Athena asked.

"My Family doesn't own any money," Blade informed her.

Athena gazed at the Warrior's broad shoulders as he walked past a black cottonwood. "You're putting me on, right?"

Blade's attention was riveted on Thunder. "I am serious. We believe money, or specifically the *love* of money, only breeds evil. Our Founder advised us to avoid money at all costs."

"But how do you obtain whatever you need? Does your wife make all your clothes? And what about your food?" Athena questioned.

"We have a system set up where we can get anything we need," Blade detailed. "For instance, if a Family member needs new clothes, all they must do is go to the Weavers and request them. Or if food is needed, the Family Tillers will provide it. Don't misunderstand me. The Elders cultivate self-reliance in all Family members. We're taught how to sew our own clothes and grow our own food. But frequently our duties prevent us from attending to such affairs, and we can request them to be done for us."

"Incredible," Athena said. "But such a system would not work in the outside world, in the real world. When you have a large population, you need a medium of exchange."

"I agree," Blade said. "Fortunately, the Family is small enough, with less than a hundred members, that

we can operate our Home on the simple principle of sharing."

"No money," Athena marveled. "You don't know how lucky you are! Money can be a real pain in the ass. California has its own mint, you know. Without money, the state's economy would grind to a halt."

"We studied the history of money and the various economic systems in the Family school," Blade mentioned. "Money was responsible for a great deal of misery in the world. People would kill for it. Wealthy individuals were always plotting to gain more wealth. Whether the economic system was capitalistic or communistic or some phase in between, the leaders of any given country were invariably part of the affluent elite who manipulated their respective governments into taxing the lower financial classes into the poorhouse."

"I don't know if it was as bad as all that," Athena commented. "Not all the prewar leaders were greedy for money or power. There were some honest, decent ones."

"Very few," Blade said. "If there had been more honest, spiritual leaders, we would never have had World War Three."

Athena smiled, delightfully surprised. She had expected the giant Warrior to be a typical muscle-head. Instead, he was articulate and intelligent, able to discourse on religion, politics, and economics knowledgeably. Here was a guy considered to be one of the deadliest men on the planet, and he was interested in ideals like truth, love, and faith. Would wonders never cease! Too bad he was married, because she definitely wanted to get to know him better.

Blade abruptly stopped.

Athena almost bumped into him. "What's wrong?" she whispered.

"Thunder," he said.

The Flathead was on his knees, inspecting a stretch of ground near a large log, his expression reflecting concern.

Blade hastened to the Indian's side. "What is it?"

"Trouble," Thunder responded. "There was a fight here."

"Havoc?" Blade asked.

Thunder's dark eyes surveyed the tracks and indistinct impressions. "He's been captured. See these marks here?" He pointed at a pair of shallow lengthy depressions in a few feet of dirt adjacent to the log. "Havoc was unconscious. Two of the mutants dragged him off in that direction." He nodded to the west. "One other mutant went along, leading them."

"What about the other three mutants?" Blade inquired, glancing at his men. They were clustering around him, listening, their attention briefly diverted from the surrounding forest.

"Most strange," Thunder remarked. "One went to the south, one to the north. I don't know about the third. He could be anywhere."

"But why would they split up?" Blade asked, perplexed. Why would three of the Hatchlings take off on

their own? What reason would they have for separating? Were the mutants hoping to throw off any pursuit? The Hatchlings must suspect Havoc was not alone. What would he do in a similar situation? Grab the prisoners and take off? Head for the Kingdom as fast as possible? But only three of the Hatchlings had gone west. Which meant the other three might have been deliberately left behind to distract any pursuers. Or attack them.

No!

In a flash of insight, Blade perceived his blunder. He saw his men gathered in a semicircle around him, Athena in the center, and not one of them was paying any attention to the wall of vegetation hemming them in. Not one of them was on vigilant guard.

"Beats me why they split up," Thunder was saying, still on his knees, his back close to the log.

"Take cover!" Blade commanded. "This could be a trap!"

It was.

One of the Hatchlings popped up from behind the log, Havoc's M-16 in two of its hands. The hybrid hissed as it swung the rifle like a club, crashing the stock into Thunder's head and sending the Flathead sprawling even as it shifted its grip and leveled the barrel at the Freedom Force.

Blade was already galvanized into action, leaping and tackling Athena and bearing her to the ground underneath him.

The Force members started to scatter. Grizzly was the quickest, bounding into the underbrush in two streaking strides in the time it took the Hatchling to aim the M-16. Boone was turning, making for cover. But Kraft and Spader reacted sluggishly, startled by the mutant's unexpected appearance. They were standing four feet apart.

Blade saw the Hatchling cut loose with the M-16.

Spader was stitched from his crotch to his face, his body jerking as the slugs hit home. Thump-thump-thump, with blood and flesh bursting out and spraying the ground to his rear. He gurgled and staggered as the mutant continued to pour rounds into him.

Kraft finally came alive, but instead of fleeing he charged, taking three running steps and vaulting into the air, launching himself at the hybrid.

The Hatchling swiveled the M-16 toward Kraft.

Boone saved the Clansman's life. His M-16 in his left hand, in the act of racing for a nearby tree, his body twisted away from the mutant, he drew his right Hombre in midstride. His right hand streaked to the big revolver, his arm a blur as the Hombre cleared leather and boomed.

The Hatchling about to shoot Kraft was struck in the right shoulder, the impact wrenching its bulky body sideways as it squeezed the trigger. The shots went wild.

Before the Hatchling could recover, Kraft was on it. The Clansman plowed into the mutant and they toppled from view behind the log.

Blade started to rise, his eyes on Spader. The Mole was flat on his back, riddled with holes, blood drenching his uniform, his eyes open.

Boone was running back toward the log.

Blade caught a movement out of the corner of his right eye and he pivoted.

Another Hatchling, unarmed except for its talons, fangs, and prodigious strength, was coming at them from the south, closing on Boone. Although their limbs lacked the dexterity of a human, the Hatchlings were capable of supernatural speed.

Blade tried to bring his M-16 to bear.

The second Hatchling slammed into Boone from the side, bowling the Cavalryman over. They went down in a jumble of arms and legs.

Blade took a step toward them.

"Look out!" Athena suddenly shouted. "Behind you!"

Blade was jarred by a brutal attack from the rear. He felt a hurtling form ram into his legs and he was knocked off balance and fell forward, landing on his hands and knees, his M-16 clasped in his left hand, the third Hatchling on his back. Two hairy hands clamped on his neck, talons digging into his flesh, while two more swiped at his eyes.

"Blade!" Athena screamed.

Blade rolled to the right in an effort to dislodge the Hatchling. He ducked his head to thwart the talon swipes at his eyes.

The hybrid increased the pressure on the Warrior's neck.

Blade was on top now, the Hatchling pinned under his back. He tried to land a blow with his right elbow, but missed. Frustrated, envisioning the Hatchling tearing into him with those wicked fangs at any moment, he dropped the M-16 and went for his knives, drawing both Bowies as he rolled again, to the left this time, onto his side. He heaved himself erect, his leg muscles straining as the mutant clung to his neck. Once upright, he plunged his Bowies down and around, driving the gleaming blades to the rear, hoping he would connect.

He did.

The Hatchling screeched as the Bowies pierced its body, each knife imbedding to the hilt.

Blade felt a sticky substance on his fingers, and then the mutant released his neck and pushed itself away from him, wrestling loose from the impaling Bowies and falling to the ground. Blade spun, glimpsing Boone on his back with the second mutant on the Cavalryman's chest. And there was Grizzly, claws extended, going to Boone's rescue. Blade took all of this in in an instant, and then he was face-to-face with his own foe.

The Hatchling glared up at the giant, its features distorted in bestial fury. A pale yellow fluid was pouring from the knife wounds in its side. It hissed and raked its talons at the human's genitals.



Blade retreated a step, debating whether he could capture the creature alive, whether taking the mutant prisoner might yield useful information. Capturing one would not be easy. The Hatchlings weren't much over five feet in height, if that, but their bodies were very thickset and astonishingly powerful. Added to their brute force were their talons and their fangs. Taking one of them prisoner would be like trying to contain a rampaging, rabid beast; the rewards didn't justify the risks.

The Hatchling pressed its assault, its talons lashing at the human before it. Unable to reach the giant's neck or face because of his height, the mutant was trying to disembowel its adversary or dismember him.

Made retreated several yards before the mutant made a mistake, lunging too fast and too far, missing and exposing its head and throat for a fraction of a second. Which was more than enough time for Blade to angle his left Bowie in an underhand loop. He saw the point slice into the Hatchling's neck just under the chin, and he drove the Bowie all the way in and up, then promptly released the knife and stepped back.

The Hatchling stiffened, hissing and snarling, futilely attempting to pull the Bowie free. Yellow blood spurted over its hands and chest. It glared at the giant as it slowly sank to its knees, wheezing. The mouth twisted wide, baring the fangs, and it pitched onto its face.

Boone and Grizzly!

Blade twisted, ready to go to their help, but his assistance wasn't required.

Boone was still on the ground, his right Hombre in his hand, gawking at the battle royal a few feet off.

Grizzly and the second Hatchling were going at it tooth and nail. The Hatchling was trying to match its talons against Grizzly's claws, giving stroke for stroke, slash for slash. Grizzly was bleeding from a dozen wounds, the Hatchling from even more.

Blade was about to join in, to kill the Hatchling as quickly as possible, when the tide of battle abruptly shifted in Grizzly's favor. He saw the Hatchling trip.

Grizzly pounced. His razor claws raked the hybrid once, twice, three times in all, directly across the Hatchling's face, turning the hybrid's countenance into serrated strips of gory flesh and hair. The Hatchling tried to flee, starting to turn, but Grizzly wasn't about to allow his opponent to escape. He took one stride and brought his claws up in a savage arc, burying them in the Hatchling's head, one hand on either side next to the ear.

The Hatchling bubbled and thrashed, then collapsed.

Blade glanced down at Athena Morris. She was sitting up, staring at the carnage in unrestrained horror.

Grizzly contemptuously tossed the Hatchling aside. "Tough little bastard," he commented.

Boone stood. "Thanks for lending a hand," he said to Grizzly. "It caught me off guard."

Grizzly looked at Boone. "Not too surprising. Most human reflexes are as slow as sap."

"Maybe one day I can repay the favor," Boone said.

"Nothing ever catches me off guard," Grizzly stated. "But I appreciate the thought."

Blade bent down, flipped over the dead Hatchling he'd slain, and yanked out his left Bowie. He wiped the blade clean on the mutant's body, then placed both Bowies in their sheaths. He saw Thunder prone on the earth near the log, and hurried to the Flathead's side. A check of Thunder's pulse confirmed the Indian was alive.

"Is he all right?" Athena asked, rising.

"I don't know," Blade said. He squatted on his knees and rested Thunder's head on his legs, then ran his fingers over the rear of Thunder's cranium. "There's some blood and a nasty bump."

Boone came over and knelt alongside Spader.

"Is he dead?" Athena queried.

Boone, frowning, nodded. He reached out and closed Spader's eyelids. "I'm afraid so, ma'am. And the radio is shot to pieces."

Athena glanced around. "Where's Kraft?"

Blade gently eased Thunder to the ground, then stood to peer over the log. The last he'd seen, Kraft had disappeared behind the log fighting a Hatchling. But now there was no sign of either.

"Is he there?" Boone questioned, standing and coining over.

"He's gone," Blade said.

Athena joined them by the log. "But where could he be?"

Blade gazed into the forest beyond. "My hunch is the Hatchling captured him. I don't see any blood, so Kraft might still be alive."

"Now they've got Havoc and Kraft," Boone commented acidly.

Grizzly walked up. "Not only that, but the sons of bitches know we're coming. From here on out, they've got the advantage."

Blade turned, scowling. Grizzly was right. The Hatchlings did have the edge now. And all because he'd been stupid and careless. He should have been more alert. So what if he had assumed the Hatchlings were a mile ahead of the Force? He'd moronically thrown caution to the wind and paid the price. How could he have allowed himself to be distracted by his conversation with Athena? If this was the best he could do, perhaps he should consider resigning as leader of the Freedom Force. He squatted, removing his canteen from his belt.

"Do you want me to take off after them?" Grizzly asked.

"No," Blade replied. "From here on out we'll stick together." He opened his canteen, then rolled Thunder over.

"I can catch up with them," Grizzly said. "Why not let me go?"

Blade looked up at the mutant. "Because I said so," he responded irritably.

Grizzly shrugged. "This is your show," he remarked.

Blade splashed some water on Thunder's face, but the Flathead wouldn't revive. He lightly slapped Thunder's chin, with the same result.

"He could be hurt internally," Athena mentioned. "A concussion perhaps. Or worse."

Blade sighed. This was just what he didn't need! He couldn't afford to waste precious time waiting for Thunder to revive. And he wouldn't desert the Flathead. So what should he do?

"I can carry him," Grizzly offered.

"No," Blade said. "He'd slow us down, and you'd be vulnerable with him in your arms." He pondered for a minute.

Boone was reloading the spent round in his Hombre. "I'm glad you're the one making the decisions," he observed. "I wouldn't want to be in your boots."

"Sometimes I don't want to be in my boots," Blade said, rising. He reflected for a bit more. "Okay. Here's what we'll do. Athena, I want you to stay here with Thunder—"

"Forget it," Athena said, cutting him off.

"What?"

"You heard me," Athena declared. "I like Thunder as much as you do, but I'm not staying behind. Not when we're so close. You need me."

"We can get by without you," Blade told her.

"Who do you think you're kidding?" Athena snapped. "The only reason you want me to stay here is because it'll keep me out of danger. You think you're doing the right thing, but you're not. Who else can lead you straight to the Kingdom? Who else knows the layout of the Kingdom like I do? Who else knows where the lookouts are posted?" She paused. "You need me, and you know it."

Blade hesitated. Her knowledge of the Spider and the countryside was a definite asset, but he didn't want to see her harmed.

"I'll stay," Boone volunteered.

Blade glanced at Thunder. "I don't know..."

"You do need Athena," Boone noted. "And Grizzly can hold his own against those Hatchlings. I'm the logical choice. Besides, Thunder and I have become friends. We have a lot in common—"

"Okay," Blade said, relieved to be off the hook. "You stay with Thunder. If he revives and he isn't seriously injured, come after us. Otherwise, stay here until we return."

Boone motioned toward the trees. "Where can I go?"

Blade capped his canteen and hooked it on his belt. He noticed Grizzly was staring at the Hatchling dispatched by his claws, grinning. "What are you so happy about?" he asked.

Grizzly chuckled. "Did you see the way I carved that sucker up? I haven't had this much fun in ages!"

## CHAPTER TEN

Oooooohhh! His aching noggin!

Sergeant Havoc slowly regained consciousness. For a minute he experienced the illusion of being on a boat, of feeling the rise and fall of the craft on the swelling waves. And then he vividly recalled everything: following the hybrids, being played for a fool, and being captured. His eyes snapped open.

"The human is awake," a Hatchling promptly declared.

Havoc took his bearings: The Hatchlings had bound his hands and feet to a stout branch. Two of the Hybrids were carrying him, each bearing one end of the branch on their shoulder. His body dangled from the bough, swaying with every step the Hatchlings took. A throbbing pain engulfed his head. His temples were particularly sore. The front of his camouflage T-shirt had been cut to shreds. His arms sported crimson gashes, and his fatigue pants and legs had been ripped and slashed. All of his weapons were gone. So was his backpack.

The two Hatchlings halted, and the one supporting the front end of the branch half turned and gazed at the soldier. "What is your name, human?"

Havoc licked his dry lips before replying. "Up yours!" He was facing the direction of their travel, to the west, and he could see the hapless woman prisoner several yards away. Walking past her, toward him, was a third mutant. Probably the leader, he guessed.

The third hybrid readied Havoc and stopped. "I am Dox," it stated.

Havoc defiantly stared into the Hatchling's round orbs. "Who cares?" he responded.

"What is your name?" Dox asked.

"You don't get beans out of me," Havoc said.

"I do not want beans, human," Dox reiterated. "I want your name."

"Go play with a live grenade," Havoc quipped.

Dox pointed at the woman. "Do you see her?"

"Of course."

"If you don't cooperate," Dox threatened, "I'll rip her eyes out!"

The woman cringed.

Havoc hesitated. Was Dox bluffing? He couldn't afford to find out.

"What will it be?" Dox questioned. "The information or her eyes? Speak up?"

What harm could revealing his name do? "Havoc," he disclosed.

"Your rank?"

"Sergeant," Havoc answered.

"How many others came with you, Sergeant Havoc?" Dox interrogated him.

"I was alone," Havoc lied.

"If you insult my intelligence again, the female will suffer," Dox vowed. "Now, how many others came with you?"

Havoc looked at the Hatchling called Dox. "Thirty-four," he answered with a straight face.

"And why were you sent?" Dox asked.

"We heard reports of Raiders in this area," Havoc fibbed. "We were sent to investigate." The Raiders were bands of human scavengers, outlaws who preyed on travelers and small communities in isolated regions. Most of the Raiders operated in eastern California and in the mountains in the south.

"There are no Raiders in this area," Dox said.

"That's not what we heard," Havoc declared.

"You are lying," Dox said. "You came after us."

"Hell, you freak. I don't even know what you are," Havoc claimed.

Dox leaned closer. "Don't ever refer to me as a freak again! Ever!"

"Touchy, aren't we?" Havoc rejoined.

The Hatchling raised its two right arms overhead, about to strike.

"We don't have time for this!" interjected the mutant bearing the front of the limb. "We must warn Father."

"I agree," concurred the hybrid holding the rear of the branch.

Havoc craned his neck to see the third mutant. He recognized his sparring partner with the busted nose. "Hi, ugly! Remember me?"

"I remember you, human," the Hatchling responded, anger in his tone.

Dox suddenly jabbed Havoc in the ribs. "Pay attention."

Havoc grimaced, focusing on the leader.

"We are going to untie you," Dox detailed. "We can make better time if we don't have to carry you. But be advised. Any attempt to escape, any tricks at all, and the female pays the price. Do you understand?"

"I understand you, all right, creep," Havoc replied.

"And if you persist with the insults, I will tear out your tongue," Dox vowed menacingly.

"Me? Insult little old you?" Havoc taunted. "I wouldn't think of it."

Dox nodded at his two companions.

Havoc was suddenly dumped onto the ground, branch and all. A rock gouged his left shoulder blade and intense agony racked his head "Damn!" he fumed.

Dox leaned over, smirking. "Ahhhh. I'm sorry. Did we hurt little old you?" He straightened, tittering. "Syph. Rhea. Untie this disgusting slug."

Syph and Rhea bent to their task, and a moment later Havoc was free.

"On your feet!" Dox barked.

Havoc slowly rose, rubbing his sore wrists.

"Remember what I told you," Dox warned. "Any tricks, and the female bears the consequences."

Havoc glanced at the woman. "What's your name?"

"Leslie," she replied. "Leslie Reese."

"Don't worry, Leslie," Havoc assured her. "We'll get out of this mess in one piece."

The three Hatchlings laughed.

"Human stupidity never ceases to amaze me," Dox commented.

Havoc wanted to tell Dox where to go, but he held his tongue.

Dox moved to the head of the line. "There's still an hour of daylight left. We'll ascend the cliffs before dark, and we should be home in a few hours." He looked back. "Havoc, you will walk with the woman. Syph and Rhea will be right behind you."

"Can I untie Leslie's hands?" Havoc ventured to ask.

"How touching!" Dox baited the human. "No. Leave her hands tied. If she experiences difficulty scaling the cliffs, help her."

"What harm can it do to untie her hands?" Havoc said, pressing the issue.

"Don't argue with me, human!" Dox stated, moving out, bearing to the west.

"Sorry. I tried," Havoc said to Leslie.

She mustered a feeble smile.

Havoc allowed her to proceed first. He used the interlude to get his bearings. They were still in the forest, but the vegetation appeared to be thinning. He glanced over his right shoulder, spying a ridge several hundred yards to their rear. Gazing ahead, he spotted another ridge, this one with towering cliffs comprising its visible side. The crags were steep and formidable, and he couldn't believe the Hatchlings intended to climb those palisades.

"I'm scared," Leslie confided softly, giving him a fleeting look.

"Who isn't?" Havoc responded.

"You don't seem the type to be scared of anything," Leslie said.

"Looks can be deceiving," Havoc noted.

"I'm just glad you're here," Leslie stated. "I feel better having you along."

"That's me," Havoc joked. "A knight in shining armor."

They unexpectedly emerged from the trees into the bright light of day. Twenty yards distant, situated at the base of the cliffs, was a pool of blue water 40 yards in diameter.

Dox led them to the right, walking along the edge of the pool toward a cleft in the rocks.

Havoc tilted his head, staring upward. The precipice was at least five hundred feet high, mostly sheer stone. The Hatchlings had to be crazy if they expected to climb the face of the cliffs.

Dox reached the cleft and stopped, turning.

Havoc indicated the rearing palisade with a jerk of his right thumb. "You're not serious."

"Of course I am," Dox stated.

"How do you expect us to climb *that*?" Havoc queried.

Dox peered upward. "Very carefully," he responded.

"I'll never make it," Leslie interjected. She took a deep breath, her lower lip trembling.

"If you make it to the top, you live," Dox said. "If you don't reach the top..." He shrugged.

"You're not going to force her to climb with her hands tied, are you?" Havoc demanded.

"I'm not?" Dox rejoined.

"How can she climb without her hands?" Havoc asked angrily.

"You will be her hands," Dox said. "You will assist her in scaling the cliffs. I've assisted others before. You can do it."

Havoc studied the wall of rock leading to the top of the ridge. "What if I blow it? What good is she going to be to the Spider dead?"

Dox cocked his head, his mouth twitching. "And how would you know about the Spider? You claimed ignorance of our identity?" :

Havoc realized he had slipped up. Again. "I heard you talking earlier," he hastily explained. "Right before you jumped me."

"That's possible, I suppose," Dox said. "But somehow I doubt it. I suspect you know a lot more about the Spider than you're letting on. We will find out the truth."

"You think so, huh?" Havoc couldn't resist countering.

"I know so," Dox asserted. "Our father will pry the truth from your lips, human." He looked at the cleft. "We could go around these cliffs, but we're in a hurry. If neither of you fall, you'll reach the top in half an hour."

"How? By sprouting wings?" Havoc questioned sarcastically.

"By walking," Dox stated. "Follow me." He entered the cleft.

Havoc smiled encouragement at Leslie and went after Dox, Leslie stayed on his heels.

The cleft was surprisingly spacious. Even more fascinating was the narrow ledge slanting upward across the cliffs, starting in the cleft and disappearing above.

Dox indicated the ledge. "No one knows about this except us. Passage is perilous, but the ledge goes all the way to the top. Just don't look down if you're afraid of heights."

"Why should you care if we live or die?" Havoc inquired.

"I don't," Dox said. "But my father will be very pleased if you arrive in the Kingdom alive."

"We'll try not to disappoint your old man," Havoc declared.

Dox gingerly stepped onto the ledge and began ascending, his four hands dinging to whatever cracks and protuberances were available.

Havoc frowned as he eased onto the ledge. Portions of the ledge seemed a natural part of the stone, while other sections appeared to have been chiseled out of the rock. The width varied from only six inches in spots to over a foot elsewhere.

Leslie Reese stayed by Havoc's side.

"Lean inward," he advised her. "Keep your body as close to the cliff as you can. Don't look down and don't lean back. I'm right here if you need me."



Leslie nodded.

The climb was a harrowing experience. Havoc was in a cold sweat before he had gone twenty feet. He clutched at every nook and cranny he found, tentatively placing one foot after the other. The higher he went, the stronger the wind became. He kept his eyes on Leslie, his left hand never straying far from her shoulders. She tucked her chin into her chest and gamely followed him.

"You're doing fine," Havoc encouraged her every so often.

Leslie would grin in response.

Havoc forgot all about the discomfort in his head and the gashes on his body. His total concentration was focused on the arduous task of scaling the cliffs. He lost all track of time, except for noting the daylight was progressively dimming. The prospect of being caught on the rock wall when night fell was too disturbing to contemplate.

"Did I mention where I'm from?" Leslie abruptly asked when they were almost halfway to the summit.

"Don't talk," Havoc advised her.

"I've got to," Leslie said. "I must do something to take my mind off this nightmare."

"Where are you from?" Havoc inquired.

"Weed," Leslie answered.

"Weed? Is that the name of a town or did you sprout from a seed?" Havoc joked.

Leslie shuffled one foot after the other, socking by him. "Weed is a town, silly. Near Mt. Shasta. Haven't you ever heard of it?"

"Nope," Havoc admitted. A protruding spike of stone forced him to lean out from the wall as he negotiated a thin section of ledge. He paused, gripping her shoulders to brace her. "Be careful."

Leslie blanched and gulped. She nervously sidled past the spike.:

"Not bad," Havoc said. "Maybe you should take up mountain climbing as a hobby."

"No way," Leslie declared.

They continued in silence for many minutes.

"Are you from California?" Leslie inquired at one point.

"Born and bred," Havoc replied. "Why?"

"Just asked," Leslie said. "You never heard of Weed."

"Do you realize how many small towns and communities there are in California? I'm lucky if I've heard of half of them," Havoc stated.

"You'd like Weed," Leslie commented. "It's quiet and peaceful. Now and then we have mutant trouble, but mostly we go about our business without having to worry about being attacked. There aren't any Raiders in these parts."

"I'll have to visit Weed some day," Havoc mentioned.

"I'd like that," Leslie said. "I'll bake you some cookies."

"Oatmeal?"

Leslie grinned. "If you like."

"Oatmeal cookies are my favorite," Havoc explained. "My mom used to bake them when I was a kid. I could smell them in the oven miles off. They were the world's best cookies."

"Does your mother still make them for you?" Leslie questioned.

"No," Havoc replied. "My mom died when I was twelve."

"Sorry to hear that," Leslie commiserated.

"I try to visit her grave once a year," Havoc said. "She's buried in my hometown."

"Where's that?"

"Three Rivers," Havoc disclosed. "In southern California."

"Never heard of it," Leslie remarked.

"Are you sure you're from California?" Havoc asked.

Leslie giggled.

Havoc felt his confidence building. He began to believe they would reach the pinnacle without mishap,

He was wrong.

There was a scraping noise and a rustling from above.

Havoc looked up as dust and small stones pelted his shoulders. There was a large crack about four feet above his head. The crack was about eight inches wide and two feet long. Jutting from the lower portion was a profusion of dry sticks, weeds, grass, and bark. A bird nest. He knew a lot of birds constructed their nests in cliffs, talus slopes, and the like. But he doubted the nest was occupied. February was not a normal breeding month, so far as he was aware. But what had caused the dust and stones to fall? He cautiously moved past the crack, then reached for Leslie. "Be careful," he advised.

Leslie smiled at him.

Havoc's left hand was on her right shoulder, steadying her.

"We're going to make it," Leslie asserted.

A small mottled gray bird suddenly darted from the crack, its wings flapping furiously, sending a rain of dust and broken bits of nest into Leslie's face. She instinctively drew her head back, her eyes stinging, involuntarily coughing. And slipped.

Havoc's gut muscles tightened as he felt her start to go. He lunged, clutching the fabric of her tan blouse near her shoulder, trying to restrain her.

Leslie's terrified blue eyes locked on his as her upper torso tilted over the edge, her left foot sliding from the ledge.

"No!" Havoc shouted, digging his fingers into the blouse material and tugging.

The blouse ripped.

Havoc's right arm, his hand in a groove in the rock, bulged as he frantically attempted to bear her weight.

Leslie Reese screamed as she plummeted from the ledge. Her blouse tore loose from Havoc's grip, and then she was plunging toward the base of the cliffs.

Havoc, horrified, watched her fall. He saw the pleading look on her face and the O her mouth formed as she screamed. For a hopeful instant he thought she might be safe, might land in the pool at the bottom, but his hope was forlorn. The pool was too far to the left.

Too far.

Leslie was still screaming when she smashed onto the boulders below. One moment she was a living, breathing woman; the next she was a pulpy pile of gory flesh and crimson.

Havoc was shocked to his core. She had relied on him! Depended on him to see her through! He gaped at her shattered figure, his mind dazed. ,

"What happened?" demanded a grating voice to his right.

Havoc didn't bother to turn. "She fell," he said softly.

"I can see that, you imbecile!" Dox snapped. "Why?"

"A bird," Havoc mumbled. "A little bird."

"Our father will not be pleased," Dox stated. "She may have been trash, but we wanted her alive."

Havoc twisted, glaring at the Hatchling, his expression grim. He wanted to take hold of the mutant and leap from the edge. He felt he deserved such a fate for failing the woman.

"No, the Spider will not like this at all," Dox mentioned, peering downward

The Spider! The bastard responsible for all of this! Havoc sneered at Dox. If it was the last thing he ever did, he was going to see they paid for their atrocities!

"Why are you looking at me like that?" Dox asked in annoyance.

"Can't you guess, *imbecile*?" Havoc countered, his tone tainted by his rage.

"I warned you about your insults," Dox said.

"What are you going to do about it?" Havoc responded.

Dox scrutinized the soldier for a moment, then glanced over the ledge. "Nothing. For now."

"I didn't think so," Havoc said, mocking the hybrid.

Dox resumed climbing. "But there will be a reckoning, human! You can count on it!"

Sergeant Havoc nodded. "I am."

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Kraft came awake with a start, his arms aching, flat on his back.

The heavens were filled with stars and a cool breeze was blowing, refreshing him. Close by an owl hooted. He noted the moon had risen.

Where the hell was he?

In a vivid rush of memories he recalled the fight with the Hatchlings. He remembered tackling the mutant behind the log and tumbling to the turf, trying to draw his switchblade from his right pocket. A hard object had slammed into his head and he'd gone down.

That was it.

So why was he still alive?

Kraft went to sit up and discovered his wrists and ankles were tied, his hands behind his back. And his guns and backpack were missing!

He was a prisoner!

But where were Blade and the others?

An inky form materialized before him. "So, human! You are awake!"

Kraft recognized the hideous outline of a Hatchling. "Are you the one who caught me?"

"I am Siad," the hybrid stated.

"Where am I. Where's my blood?" Kraft queried.

"In your body," Siad said. "You are not bleeding.""

"Not that kind of blood, Franky," Kraft stated. "I mean my brothers on the Force. Where are they?"

"How should I know?" Siad replied.

"I don't get this, man. How come I'm still kicking?" Kraft inquired.

"Would you prefer to be dead?" Siad rejoined.

"Cut the crap, jerk!" Kraft snapped. "Come clean."

"I bathe regularly," Siad said.

Kraft shook his head. "This ain't for real! This can't be happening!"

"This is happening," Siad remarked.

"Where are you taking me, Franky?" Kraft asked.

"I told you my name is Siad," the hybrid declared. "Why do you persist in calling me Franky?"

"Can you read?" Kraft questioned.

Siad didn't respond.

"Can you read, Franky?" Kraft repeated.

"Yes, I can read," Siad stated curtly. "Although why bother? All there is to read is human drivel."

"Well, I can read too," Kraft said proudly. "My dad taught me. You see, I spent most of my childhood and teen years in the Twin Cities. Do you know where that is?"

"Who cares?" Siad replied.

"The Twin Cities are in Minnesota," Kraft detailed. "Minneapolis and St. Paul, they were called. They're a wreck now. I was raised there."

"Of what interest is this babble to me?" Siad asked.

"You wanted to know why I call you Franky," Kraft reminded the mutant. He was eager to continue the conversation, to buy time while he worked on the rope or whatever bound his wrists.

"I'm sorry I asked," Siad quipped.

"Years ago gangs took control of the Twin Cities," Kraft went on. "They were always fighting over their turf. I belonged to one of those gangs. The Porns."

Siad raised his head and sniffed the air. "I trust there is a point to all this?"

"Yeah. There is. I came across this far-out deal once in the basement of a demolished house.. It wasn't exactly a book. I don't know what it was. There were a lot of color pictures, drawings, and stuff in it, I'd never seen anything like it. Books and magazines were scarce in the Twins. Most of them had been burned, used for fuel during the winter. The one I found was a real turn-on," Kraft said.

Siad yawned.

"Part of the front page was missing," Kraft went on. He was rubbing his wrists together, striving to loosen the loops binding them. "It was titled Something-Illustrated. And the story was about this dude named Frankenstein. He was a scientist, and he put together this groddy monster. The thing was inhuman." He paused, glowering. "Just like you, Franky!"

Siad glanced down. "Don't push your luck. I'm grateful for the opportunity to escape. They'll think I'm dead. But be nice, or else."

"Be nice!" Kraft practically exploded. "I'll give you nice, shithead! Cut me loose and I'll rack your ass!"

Siad squatted next to his prisoner. "I take it you're not fond of mutants."

"Fond? Mutants are sludge! Every damn one should be wiped off the face of the earth!*I hate mutants !*" Kraft thundered.

"And I'm not very fond of most humans," Siad said. "But at least I have a reason."

"So do I!" Kraft bellowed.

"Prejudice is not a reason," Siad stated.

"It has nothing to do with prejudice!" Kraft retorted.

"Then why?"

Kraft leaned toward the hybrid, his features contorted in rage. "Because a mutant killed my sister! Is that reason enough for you?"

"Your petty feelings don't matter to me," Siad responded.

Kraft strained against his bonds, to no avail.

"Don't worry, human," Siad said. "I will put you out of your misery before too long."

"I'm surprised you haven't killed me already," Kraft noted scornfully.

"Not yet," Siad stated. "Not until I get hungry."

"I hope I give you gas!"

Siad rose and walked to a nearby tree. He sat down with his back against the trunk. "Get some rest, human."

"Why should I?" Kraft rejoined.

"Because we have far to travel tomorrow," Siad disclosed. "I have not slept for two days, or we would be traveling now."

"Where are you taking me?"

"North," Siad answered.

"You mind telling me why?" Kraft wanted to know.

"Yes. Now rest." Siad fell silent.

Kraft glared at the mutant. His arms were aching and he was chafing his wrists, but he was determined to stay up all night working on the rope. And as soon as he was free, there was going to be one less mutated monstrosity running around!

## CHAPTER TWELVE

"Thank goodness for the moon," Athena commented.

Blade gazed skyward at the bright full moon, seeming like a beacon in a firmament of starry supplicants. The lunar illumination was sufficient to light up the landscape 15 to 20 yards in every direction. He glanced over his right shoulder at the ridge silhouetted against the heavens. Athena's memory had served them in good stead. She had led them to the first of the two ridges located due east of the Kingdom, the same one they'd seen earlier. In the middle of the ridge had been a gorge. They had vigilantly moved through the rocky gorge and found a stretch of forest beyond.

"There are the cliffs," Athena mentioned.

Blade faced front. The moonlight bathed the second ridge, the one with the cliff wall comprising its eastern side, in a diffuse white glow. Once over that ridge, they would find the Kingdom.

"The pool should be up ahead," Athena said.

Blade followed her as they threaded their way through the underbrush. He looked over his left shoulder to insure Grizzly was still with them. The mutant's ability to glide furtively through the densest vegetation was astonishing. Grizzly was only a yard behind him, but Blade never heard a sound. He knew he shouldn't be surprised, not after Grizzly's performance on the stealth test.

The trio wound a path through the murky woods for several minutes.

"There!" Athena exclaimed, pointing.

Blade saw it too. A large pool of water, slightly to their left. "That's what saved my life," Athena stated. "That's what I fell, in after I went over the top of the cliffs."

Grizzly came up alongside them, scrutinizing the palisade. "How the hell are we going to get up that?"

"Is there a way up?" Blade asked Athena.

"None that I know of," Athena answered. "We'll have to go around, to the south. We can bypass the cliffs."

"But it will take us longer," Blade noted,

"Can't be helped," Athena said.

Blade stared at the rim far above. "Can the lookouts see us from up there?"

"No," Athena replied. "The lookouts are posted on the west side of this ridge, closer to the Kingdom. Their main purpose is to prevent the women from escaping. The Spider doesn't bother posting sentries on this side of the ridge. Who would be crazy enough to try and climb those cliffs? Lookouts on this side aren't necessary."

Grizzly took several steps toward the cliffs, inhaling deeply.

"Do you smell something?" Blade asked.

"Blood."

"Blood?" Blade hefted his M-16 and moved forward. "Where?"

Grizzly indicated a cluster of boulders at the base of the cliffs about 60 yards to the right. "There. I detect fresh blood."

"We'd better investigate," Blade stated.

"It's human blood," Grizzly added.

"You can tell what type from the scent?" Athena inquired doubtfully.

"The nose knows," Grizzly remarked.

"Lead the way," Blade directed.

Grizzly padded toward the boulders, hunched over, his arms at his sides, his fingers partially tensed.

"Stay behind me," Blade advised Athena.

"I can take care of myself," she responded.

"Stay behind me," Blade reiterated, hastening after Grizzly.

The mutant slowed as he neared the boulders, lifting his nose to the wind. He skirted a cluster of huge circular boulders, then stopped next to a jagged flat one about seven feet across. The top of the flat boulder was four feet from the ground.

Blade reached Grizzly's side. "Where..." he started to ask, and then he saw the body on the flat boulder. Or what was left of the body. He turned to warn Athena away, too late.

"Dear God!" she blurted out, standing to Grizzly's left.

Blade bent down, studying the remains. He could distinguish a solitary arm jutting upward from a mushy mass of pulverized flesh and broken bones.

"Is it Sergeant Havoc or Kraft?" Athena queried in horror.



"It's a woman," Grizzly divulged.

Blade spotted strands of light-colored hair at one end of the grisly remains. "It's the woman the Hatchlings abducted," he said. "The one we saw them with."

"What could have happened to her?" Athena questioned.

Blade glanced upward. "It should be obvious."

"But how?" Athena questioned. "If the Hatchlings went around the cliffs, they wouldn't go anywhere near the top above these boulders."t

"If they went around the cliffs," Blade observed thoughtfully.

"What are you saying?" Athena asked.

Blade gazed up at the rock wall. "Maybe she didn't fall from the top. Maybe there's a way up we don't know about."

"Up that?" Athena said, nodding at the cliffs. "You're nuts."

"Am I?" Blade responded. "There's no other explanation for the body being here."

"So what if there is a way up?" Athena stated. "We're certainly not going to climb up in the dark, are we?"

Blade began walking to the left. "I'm thinking about it."

"You're insane," Athena told him.

Blade grinned. "There are those who might agree."

Grizzly was examining the face of the ridge. "We could save time."

"You're insane too!" Athena commented. "*Upthere ? Atnight ?*"

Blade followed the base of the cliffs to the left, in the direction of the pool. If the woman had fallen from part way up, and not the top, then there had to be a means of ascending, a ledge or shelf of some kind. He hadn't seen any indication of hand-and footholds chiseled into the rock. But a ledge might blend in, be indistinguishable at close range.

"There's no way I'm going up there at night!" Athena said nervously.

"You can stay here," Blade suggested. "Wait for Boone and Thunder to catch up."

"I'm not staying here by myself," Athena declared.

Blade was almost to the pool! when he spied a dark space between two rocks. Curious, he crossed to the spot and discovered a deft. "Well look at this." He entered the cleft and there it was, a ledge angling up the cliffs.

Grizzly and Athena came into the deft.

"We found what we need," Grizzly said.

Athena walked up to the rock wall and studied the ledge. "This is the way to the top?"

"Appears so," Blade confirmed, slinging his M-16 over his right shoulder.

"We could wind up like that poor woman," Athena commented.

"That we could," Blade agreed.

"And you still intend going up?" Athena pressed him.

Grizzly slung his M-16 over his left shoulder.

Blade glanced at the mutant. "I've been meaning to ask you. Why didn't you use your M-16 on that Hatchling earlier? Why did you go after it with your claws?"

Grizzly grinned "I like the personal touch."

"If we make it to the Kingdom, I hope you won't be shy about using the M-16," Blade said. "And your explosives, for that matter."

Grizzly checked the straps on his backpack. "I'm not an idiot. When the odds are stacked against me, I'll use whatever is available."

"Good." Blade turned to Athena. "What will it be? Up with us, or wait here for Boone and Thunder?" Athena swallowed hard as she arched her neck, staring at the ridge far above. "Why can't we just go around?"

"I think you know the answer," Blade said. "Havoc and Kraft have been captured. There's no telling how long the Hatchlings will let them live. So the sooner we reach the Kingdom, the better."

Athena, was dearly in turmoil, torn between her fear and her duty.

Blade gently placed his right hand on her shoulder. "If you don't want to come, we'll understand. There's no stigma attached if you stay here. You're not in the Force. I don't expect you to lay your life on the line."

"But I want to be there when the Spider gets his," Athena said. "I'll never sleep at nights if I don't see him dead with my own eyes."

"Don't let that worry you," Grizzly offered. "I'll bring back this Spider's head for you, if it's necessary."

Athena stared into Grizzly's eyes. "You surprise me."

"How so?" Grizzly responded.

"You seem so eager to kill."

Grizzly smiled. "I was bred to kill."

"But the Spider is a mutant, just like you," Athena mentioned. "You don't mind killing another mutant?"

"I killed a Hatchling, didn't I?" Grizzly asked.

"You know what I mean, Athena stated.

Grizzly slowly nodded. "Yep. I guess I do. And I'll answer your question as honestly as I can. It's no secret I'm not fond of humans. By the same token, I consider most mutants superior to humans in every respect. But this Spider could prove me wrong." He paused, glancing at Blade, then Athena. "Like I told Blade, I believe humans are scum, a blight on the planet. Humans have perpetrated every manner of evil. Your species almost destroyed all the life on this world!"

"And what about mutants?" Blade interrupted. "Your record is hardly stainless. Remember the Doktor, the genetic engineer responsible for creating you and your kind? He had an entire army of mutants at his disposal, and they killed thousands upon thousands during his reign of terror. So where do you get off claiming humans are any worse than mutants?"

"Those mutants the Doktor bred, like me, were specifically reared and trained for one purpose. To kill. And you well know the Doktor snuffed out or imprisoned any mutant who opposed him," Grizzly noted. "Those mutants were merely fulfilling their biological imperative, as the Doktor liked to say. But you humans, on the other hand, weren't produced from test tubes. You weren't raised to function solely as killers. Yet that's what most of you are. Whether you admit it to yourself or not, as a species you'll kill anything and everything that gets in your way. Even yourselves, when you don't see eye to eye."

"Bull," Blade said. "Sure, we've had more than our share of mindless wars. And granted, many humans do seem ready to shed blood at the slightest provocation. But by and large the majority of humans are peace-loving, kind individuals."

"Tell that to the millions who were nuked during World War Three," Grizzly countered. "I'm sure they'd agree."

"You still haven't told me how you feel about the Spider," Athena interjected.

"He puzzles me," Grizzly confided.

"Why?" Athena inquired.

"Because if the Spider is everything you say he is, then he's no different than you humans," Grizzly said bitterly. "He's just as warped as the worst of your species. And if that's the case, then everything I believe in is all wrong. If this Spider is the scumbag you paint him to be, then I might need to rethink my outlook on life."

"Why do you keep saying if all the time?" Athena inquired "Do you think I would lie?"

"I don't know you that well, lady," Grizzly said. "All I have is your word about the Spider."

"But you saw the Hatchlings!" Athena protested, "*They* attacked us! Surely you can see how evil they are!"

"I don't see nothing of the kind," Grizzly rejoined. "For all I know, they attacked us because we've invaded their territory. They might like their privacy, and I can appreciate that."

"But they killed Spader!" Athena noted shrilly.

"Spader was a jerk," Grizzly said. "And we killed two of them. So if you ask me, the slate is about even."

"And what about the woman?" Athena demanded, her anger rising. "You saw she was their prisoner!"

"All I saw was a woman walking with a half-dozen Hatchlings over half a mile away," Grizzly stated. "How do I know she was their prisoner?"

Athena clenched her left fist and shook it at the mutant. "I can't believe you, you know that! I can't believe anyone can be so stupid!"

"Watch your mouth," Grizzly advised her.

Athena glanced at Blade for support. "What's with you? Why haven't you said anything? Did you know he felt this way?"

"No," Blade acknowledged. "Not all of it anyway." He looked at Grizzly. "I do need some clarification."

"About what" Grizzly queried.

"Your motive for coming on this mission," Blade said. "You volunteered, just like the rest of the force. But I gather your motivation might have been different. The others agreed to come because they wanted to save the women from the Spider's clutches. But you, I take it, came not so much because you want to rescue the women as you want to prove something to yourself. You want to prove the Spider isn't the despicable despot everyone claims. Am I right?"

Grizzly nodded. "That's it in a nutshell."

Athena snorted contemptuously. "Now I've heard everything! All mutants must be off their rockers!"

"Don't judge us by your standards," Grizzly mentioned harshly. "We're not the same."

"Thank the Lord for that!" Athena retorted.

"I should have known you'd be religious," Grizzly muttered.

"You're not?"

"Are you kidding?" Grizzly baited her. "I'm not that stupid!"

"Don't sell yourself short," Athena said. "You're not as brilliant as you think you are."

"Okay," Blade interrupted. "That's enough."

Athena stared at the Warrior. "You're just going to stand there and take all this crap? How can you be so calm?"

"What would you have me do?" Blade asked. "Shoot Grizzly in the head because he doesn't think like we do? Because we don't share the same beliefs? Because he doesn't have faith in the Spirit?"

"That'd be a start!" Athena suggested. "You're supposed to be so religious! Do something! Anything! Prove he's wrong! Show him!"

Blade sighed. "Athena, it's not my business to meddle in Grizzly's personal life. Nor are his beliefs my concern, so long as they don't affect the rest of the Force. I know he's wrong, but I can't beat the truth into him. He'll have to find out for himself."

Athena shook her head. "Some spiritual person you are!"

"I told you before," Blade said. "I'm not a preacher or a teacher. I'm a Warrior. Yes, I was raised in a religious environment. Yes, I consider myself a spiritual person, but I'm not qualified to preach. For one thing, I don't have the temperament. For another, I do have talent as a Warrior."

Athena laughed. "A spiritual Warrior! There's a contradiction."

"What's so unusual about that?" Blade inquired. "Read a bible sometime. Study Samson and David, to name just two. They were warriors and they were spiritual."

Athena pursed her lips, perturbed.

"Can we get this show on the road?" Grizzly inquired. "I thought I joined a military outfit, not a revival!"

Blade walked up to the cliff and stepped onto the ledge. "Let's go. Are you coming, Athena, or not?"

Athena gazed upward. "I'm not staying here;"

Blade extended his left hand. "Then take hold. Grizzly and I will help you up. One of us will always have a hand on you."

"If you don't mind my touch," Grizzly noted, "Me being off my rocker and all."

Athena gulped and took Blade's hand. "I hope I don't live to regret this."

They began the ascent.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Havoc was waiting for the perfect opportunity to make his break. Dox was in front of him, Rhea behind. They were descending the west slope of the ridge toward the valley below, toward the Kingdom. The breeze was cool and refreshing, invigorating him after the arduous ordeal on the cliffs.

"Home," Dox announced happily.

Havoc could see several lights flickering in the valley.

"Tell me, human," Dox said, mocking him. "How does it feel to be on the verge of your doom?"

"Speak for yourself," Havoc retorted.

"Too bad we lost the female," Rhea commented, his voice distorted by his crashed nasal passages.

"That wasn't our fault," Dox said. "This human is to blame."

"Up yours!" Havoc snapped.

Dox looked over his right shoulder. "I just hope I get the brains."

"The brains?" Havoc repeated, puzzled.

"Your brains when we feast on you," Dox stated. "I like brains, and I shall relish consuming yours."

"Fat chance," Havoc remarked.

"I like fat too," Dox confirmed.

Havoc debated whether to make his break. There were only two of them now. Dox had ordered the other Hatchling, a deviate named Syph, to stand guard at the top of the cliffs for a while to insure no one was on their trail. Syph had grumbled but assented.

"The Tower," Dox remarked cheerfully. "What tower?" Havoc questioned. The middle of the valley was too distant to perceive much detail, even with the full moon.

"That's right," Dox commented. "You humans can't see worth shit at night."

Havoc surreptitiously glanced to his rear, noting Rhea's position. The hybrid was two yards away, repeatedly gazing at the valley ahead as if he couldn't wait to reach their destination, Dox was the same way. Neither mutant was expecting trouble, and why should they? He had cooperated so far. They wouldn't anticipate him being rash enough to attempt to escape in their own territory, which was exactly why he should go for broke. Once they had him in that Tower, he'd be at their mercy. Getting away would be considerably harder.

"My nose hurts like hell," Rhea commented.

A dark figure unexpectedly emerged from cover 15 yards off, "Is that you, Dox?"

"Who else would it be, idiot!" Dox replied.

As they drew nearer, Havoc discovered the figure was a human guard wearing black clothing to blend in with the night. The guard carried an automatic rifle of indeterminate type.

"That's no way to talk to me, Dox," the guard stated. "We are brothers, after all."

"Don't remind me, Sadist," Dox said distastefully.

The guard, a short man with a pale countenance, came closer. "Weren't you sent after a female? And where's the rest?"

Dox did not seem pleased by the interrogation. "Who are you to question me? I report to Father. No

one else."

"I was just wondering," Sadist said

"Don't bother me!" Dox snapped disdainfully, marching past the guard.

Havoc came abreast of the man in black. He noticed a scar running down the left side of Sadist's face. The weapon he recognized as a Heckler & Koch Model HK 94, an excellent piece of firepower.

Sadist returned Havoc's glance with a threatening scowl.

"Hi there, baboon-face!" Havoc quipped. "Were you born looking like that, or did you take a self-improvement course?"

The reaction was exactly what Havoc wanted.

Angry, stung by Dox's rebuke, and now insulted by the prisoner's effrontery, Sadist impulsively raised the HK94 with the stock toward the soldier, preparing to bash the noncom in the mouth.

Only Havoc had other ideas. As the Sadist lifted the HK94, he exposed his midsection and his groin. Havoc pivoted, executing a side stop kick to Sadist's genitals, his right leg a streak as the blow connected. Even as Sadist grunted and started to double over, Havoc closed in, ramming his elbow into the guard's nose, crushing it. As expected, Sadist's grip on the HK94 went momentarily limp, and Havoc wrested the weapon from his hands. The maneuver was accomplished in the twinkling of an eye, before either Hatchling could intervene.

Rhea responded first, hissing and charging.

There was no time to check the safety. Havoc swung around, leveling the HK94, and squeezed the trigger. The HK94 cut loose. Previously convened to full automatic and outfitted with a 30-shot magazine, the HK94 stopped the mutant in its tracks, the 9-mm Parabellum slugs ripping a pattern across Rhea's face and crumpling the hybrid to the ground.

One more to go!

Havoc whirled, finding Dox not two feet away, talons outstretched. He fired, the HK94 chattering, the rounds tearing into Dox's chest and propelling him backwards, the impact sending the mutant sprawling.

Sadist was trying to rise, his left hand over his ruined nose, his knees wobbly.

Havoc swivdled, pointing the HK94 barrel at the guard.

"No!" Sadist bleated, gaping at the end of the barrel not a hand's-breath from his face. "Don't!" he gurgled.

"Stand up!" Havoc commanded.

Sadist slowly straightened, blood pouring over his mouth and chin.

Havoc backed up several strides, allowing room in case the guard tried to jump him. He glanced at the lights in the valley, waiting for a hue and cry, some indication his shots had been heard. He guessed the

lights must be a quarter of a mile off.

"What are you gonna do with me?" Sadist blubbered.

"Shut up!" Havoc snapped, listening. He waited several minutes, but nothing happened.

Sadist was breathing loudly through his mouth. "Where are the other guards?" Havoc asked, his tone grating and hard.

"There are two patrolling the area near the huts," the Sadist said. "Down there." He pointed toward the valley,

"What about up here?" Havoc queried.

Sadist wiped some blood from his lips. "I'm the only one."

Havoc wagged the HK94. "You expect me to believe you?"

"Honest!" Sadist wailed. "Just one guard is posted on this ridge!"

"Where are the rest of the Hatchlings?" Havoc probed,

"In the Tower, as far as I know," the Sadist said.

"Okay. Move your ass!" Havoc waved the barrel in the direction of a stand of trees to his left.

"I'm going!" the guard assured him, hurrying to obey.

Havoc cautiously followed Sadist into the trees. Satisfied they were concealed from view, he halted. "Stop!" he directed.

Sadist complied, his left hand over his nose. "Please don't hurt me!"

"Why shouldn't I?" Havoc demanded. "I know all about what you've done to the women here. You deserve to die, you prick!"

Sadist gasped. "please! No! I'll do anything you say! Anything you want!"

"I want information," Havoc stated. "For starters, why did you call that Hatchling your brother?"

"Because he is," the guard replied. "Or was."

"I don't get you," Havoc said.

"We both had the same parents," Sadist divulged.

"Dox and you had the same parents?" Havoc asked skeptically.

"That's right," Sadist affirmed

"The Spider was your father?" Havoc queried.



"You know about the Spider?" the guard responded.

"Why do you think I'm here?" Havoc retorted. "But how is it you both had the same parents?"

"Easy," Sadist said. "Sometimes the Spider's babies are mutants, or part mutant, like the Hatchlings. They take after the Spider. But some of the babies are human, like me. We take after our moms."

"So the human guards here are all children of the Spider? All his human kids?" Havoc asked.

"Yep," Sadist confirmed. "The Spider doesn't let all the human babies live. Only the males, and only enough to keep his guards up to strength."

"What about the rest of the boy babies and the girls?" Havoc inquired.

Sadist hesitated.

"I asked you a question," Havoc stated stiffly.

"They're... eaten," Sadist responded hesitantly.

"And you don't do a thing to prevent it, do you?" Havoc asked,

"What could I do?" Sadist said fearfully. "The Hatchlings would eat me if I objected!"

Havoc's lips curled downward, "You make me sick!"

Sadist wisely kept his mouth shut.

"All right. Here's what we're going to do," Havoc stated. "You are going to lead me to the Tower. Any problems, and I'll blow your head off. Understand?"

"The Tower?" Sadist glanced toward the valley. "You don't mean it!"

"Want to bet?" Havoc countered.

"Listen, mister, I'll take you anywhere but the Tower," Sadist said. "Anywhere!"

"You'll take me to the Tower, or you'll die right here," Havoc declared.

"*Buthe's* in the Tower!" Sadist exclaimed.

"Which is why I want to go," Havoc said. "I'm going to kill the Spider."

Sadist shook his head. "You're nuts, mister! There's no way you can kill him!"

"Haven't you heard?" Havoc cracked. "A positive attitude can do wonders for your life." He motioned with the HK94 barrel. "Get the lead out!"

Sadist shuffled down the slope. "You'll never make it!"

"Let me worry about the Spider," Havoc said. "And keep your trap shut!"

Shaking his head, holding his broken nose, Sadist descended.

Havoc was alert for the slightest hint of danger as he dogged the guard's tracks. Since no alarm had sounded, he doubted anyone had heard the shots before. Which meant he might be able to reach the Tower of the Spider unnoticed. Once there, he intended to bring the mission to a speedy resolution by terminating the Spider. If the Spider fell, or so he reasoned, the Hatchlings might be easier to dispose of. The Spider was the leader, the brains behind the operation, and without him the Hatchlings and the human guards might come apart at the seams. At any rate, his plan was worth a try.

The trees on the ridge became sparser the lower they went, the tree line fronting a wide field between the forest and the middle of the valley. Huge nets were suspended above the field on poles, obscuring the parcels titled during the spring and summer from aerial observation. Brown, dry, and broken corn stalks littered the field. On the far side a group of buildings, the huts and the Tower, were visible.

A path wound under the nets, and Sadist moved along it.

Havoc felt his muscles tense as they approached the center of the valley, the heart of the Spider's domain. He was bothered by the sensation of being watched, but he surveyed the field and the buildings beyond without spotting a soul. His instincts were prompting him to abandon his plan, to take cover in the forest and await a better opportunity. But he advanced anyway. He wanted to end the mission as quickly as possible, but he also wanted to prove something to himself and to Blade. Twice the Warrior had bested him at his own game. Twice! And one of those times had been at hand-to-hand combat, no less. His specialty! He wanted to redeem himself in Blade's eyes, to show the Warrior why he was considered the best damn soldier in the California Army!

And then there was the woman.

Havoc frowned as he thought of Leslie Reese. He'd failed her, failed her miserably, and as a consequence she had died. The sight of her lying broken and smashed on the rocks below the cliffs had been horrifying. He had felt like a branding iron had been imbedded in his abdomen. He still felt that way. To a man who prided himself on his perfection, failure was devastating. By terminating the Spider, he might atone, in some small way, for Leslie Reese's death. He might assuage his burning guilt.

The huts were starkly defined by the moonlight. There were ten of them, one much larger than the others, each with a domed roof. Only the large hut displayed any light through its windows. Light also emanated from the Kingdom's centerpiece, the enormous, imposing, ominous edifice dominating the valley: the Tower.

Havoc stepped up to Sadist and prodded him in the spine with the HK94, "Slow down," he whispered.

Sadist imitated a statue.

"Where are the women?" Havoc queried.

"In their huts," Sadist said. "They're not allowed out this late."

"In what part of the Tower will I find the Spider?" Havoc asked.

"The top," Sadist revealed. "His chamber is way up at the very top."

Havoc gave Sadist a shove, "Head for the Tower. And no monkey business!"

The ground around the huts and the Tower had been cleared of all brush. There was no place to hide, and no one was in sight.

Havoc felt more confident as they walked between two huts toward the Tower. The large hut occupied by the guards was positioned to the north of the rest, perhaps 50 yards distant. They weren't expecting an attack and their security was lax. He couldn't believe how easy the job was.

That was when another guard appeared, coming around the corner of a hut to the right, whistling softly, an HK94 slung over his right shoulder. He abruptly halted, spotting the newcomers. "Sadist? Is that you?"

Havoc nudged Sadist with the barrel.

"Sure is, Jim."

Havoc was partially screened by Sadist. He held the HK94 low so the other guard wouldn't spot it.

Jim came toward them. "What the hell are you doing here? Aren't you supposed to be up on the east ridge?"

"I had to report," Sadist said.

"Report what?" Jim rejoined, now four strides away. "Why do you sound so funny? And who's that with you?"

Havoc waited until the second guard was almost to them before he made his move. He shoved Sadist aside and performed a front snap kick to the second guard's chin, snapping the guard's head back, stunning him. Havoc instantly followed through with a jamming heel kick to the guard's right knee, then a front hall kick to the guard's face as the man doubled over. The second guard dropped like the proverbial rock.

"Damn!" Sadist exclaimed, dazzled by the soldier's speed and power.

Havoc jerked his right thumb at the Tower. "Let's go!" he prompted, concerned the commotion might draw more guards.

Sadist hesitantly approached the Tower.

Havoc constantly scanned the huts, the field, and the Tower, amazed no one else was challenging him. But after decades of operating in the valley without any trouble from outside sources, why should the Spider expect any now?

"I don't want to do this!" Sadist whined.

"Do it or die!" Havoc snapped.

"You shoot me and everyone will hear it," Sadist said.

"Who needs to shoot you? You saw what I just did to your buddy. I can kill you with my hands or my feet. Take your pick," Havoc told him.

"I'll pass," Sadist muttered.

The Tower loomed above them, dwarfing the huts, seeming to reach the stars themselves. Two windows were in evidence, one near the domed roof and another about halfway up. A flickering glow radiated from both. At the bottom of the Tower was the entrance, a huge wooden door with light seeping under the lower edge.

Havoc was within ten feet of the Tower when the chill struck him, startling in its intensity, causing him to stop and gaze upward with a tinge of apprehension. Was his imagination overreacting to the oppressive atmosphere in the valley, or was the air noticeably cooler near the Tower? He saw Sadist shiver. So his mind wasn't playing tricks on him. But what could be responsible for the drastic drop in temperature?

Sadist halted a yard from the door, trembling.

Havoc edged past the terrified guard to the door. He spied a rectangular metal latch on the right side of the door and walked over.

"Don't!" Sadist warned in a whisper.

Havoc glared at the man in black.

Quaking, Sadist lowered his chin to his chest and clenched his fists.

Havoc gingerly gripped the latch, the metal cold to his touch. The HK94 ready in his left hand, he tugged on the latch with his right, expecting resistance, assuming a door so massive would be difficult to open.

It wasn't.

The door swung wide on well oiled hinges, bathing Havoc and Sadist in a luminous golden halo. And exposing them to the 13 Hatchlings waiting inside.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"I can't believe we made it!" Athena exclaimed, inhaling deeply, grateful to be alive.

"I knew we would," Blade said.

"I knew I would," Grizzly amended. "I wasn't so sure about you two, what with you being human and all."

"Don't start that again!" Athena snapped.

Blade stared at the stars above, then at the pool hundreds of feet below. They were perched on the very rim of the precipice, seated on a rocky outcropping, resting from the exhausting ascent.

"I don't scent any guards," Grizzly remarked, his face into the wind.

"And you won't," Athena stated. "I told you before. The guards are posted on the west side of this ridge."

During the day there are two, sometimes three. But at night I think they only post one."

"Humans or Hatchlings?" Blade asked.

"Humans," Athena divulged. "The Hatchlings can't be bothered with such petty duty."

"Do you want me to go ahead and find the lookout?" Grizzly offered. "I'll slit his throat so fast he'll be dead before he realizes what happened."

"We'll stick together," Blade said.

"Can we make an exception in my case?" Athena inquired.

"An exception?" Blade repeated quizzically.

"I've got to visit the ladies'," Athena explained. "And I'll be damned if you two are going to watch."

Grizzly chuckled. "What are you worried about? You don't have anything I'd be interested in."

"The feeling is mutual," Athena countered, rising. She looked at Blade. "Give me a minute. That climb scared the piss out of me."

"Be careful," Blade advised.

Athena nodded. "I won't go far," she promised, and walked into the forest."

"I kind of like her," Grizzly declared. "She's spunky for a female."

"Females can be just as spunky as males," Blade remarked.

"Not many would do what she's doing," Grizzly observed.

"That's true," Blade concurred. He gazed heavenward, thinking of Thunder, hoping the Flathead had recovered. If the Indian had sustained brain damage, every moment they delayed in getting him to civilization, where he could receive the proper medical attention, was critical. But what other choice was there? Blade sighed. He couldn't call off the mission, not now, not when Sergeant Havoc and Kraft were prisoners or worse, not when the Kingdom was close at hand and their assignment nearly completed.

"You know," Grizzly commented, "at the rate things are going, if every job the Force is sent on is as dangerous as this one, then you'll be replacing Force members on a regular basis."

"I hope not," Blade said. "But if so, there's nothing I can do about it. Everyone on the Force is supposed to be a volunteer. They know the risks involved."

"I wouldn't want to be in your shoes," Grizzly mentioned.

"Oh?"

"You're the head of this outfit," Grizzly said. "When you get down to the nitty-gritty, our lives are in your hands. You make all the decisions. We have to follow your orders." He paused. "And I don't know as how I like that."

"Why? Because you don't like me, or because you don't like taking orders from a human?" Blade questioned.

"I never said I didn't like you," Grizzly stated. "Matter of fact, I admire you. You're the only human I've ever met capable of holding his own against me. But, no, I don't like taking orders from a human."

Blade stared at the mutant. "Listen, Grizzly, your service in the Force isn't set in concrete. If you want out, say the word. You can do whatever you want. You're not a slave like the women the Spider holds in the Kingdom."

"I'll stay for the time being," Grizzly declared. "I'm enjoying myself."

"I wish I could say I was," Blade mentioned.

"You're not?" Grizzly asked, sounding surprised.

"No."

"But why not? You're good at what you do. I saw you in action. You're one deadly son of a bitch," Grizzly said.

"Just because I'm good at killing doesn't mean I like to kill," Blade clarified. "You might laugh, but when I was younger all I ever wanted out of life was to live in peace and harmony with all creatures."

Grizzly laughed. "And then what happened?"

"I grew up," Blade stated soberly.

"Yeah," Grizzly philosophized. "Life does have a way of kicking you in the mouth every now and then, just to keep you in line."

Blade glanced down at the base of the cliffs, reflecting on the poor woman who had been killed, speculating on how his wife might react if he should suffer a similar fate. He shook his head, peeved by his morbidity, and stood. "I hope Athena hurries up," he commented.

"You don't know much about women, do you?" Grizzly joked, chuckling.

Athena was on her way to rejoin Blade and Grizzly, still 30 yards into the undergrowth, when she detected a rustling noise to her left. She paused, fingering the trigger of her M-16. Had the wind made the sound? No. The breeze had temporarily abated. An animal then? She was inclined to attribute the rustling to a nocturnal denizen of the forest, a fox or a skunk or a raccoon, because she knew the Spider did not post sentries above the cliff. But what if she was wrong? What if the Spider had changed his defensive setup? Or—and this thought produced goose bumps all over her flesh—what if it was one of the numerous *wild* mutants prowling the countryside, endowed with a ravenous appetite and inclined to attack anything moving?

She'd better get to Blade and Grizzly.

Athena hurried toward the rim of the cliffs, moving around and between all the obstacles in her path: trees, boulders, and impenetrable stands of brush.

The soft rustling was repeated, closer this time.

Athena searched the landscape to her left, but nothing was moving. Should she call out to Blade? Definitely not. She wasn't about to look like a wimp. Grizzly would never let her hear the end of it! She squared her shoulders and continued.

A boulder appeared ahead.

Athena purposefully skirted the boulder to the right, mentally chiding herself for a case of bad nerves, for creating monsters where none existed.

But one did.

She was alongside the boulder, not two feet away, when a squat shadow detached itself from the bottom and lunged at her. Athena tried to bring the M-16 to bear even as she opened her mouth to yell to Blade, but she was thwarted on both counts. A pair of hairy hands tore the M-16 from her grasp and flung the gun aside as another pair damped on her, one hand covering her mouth while another applied pressure to her throat.

"Not a word!" snarled a tinny voice.

Athena could feel talons digging into her neck. She repressed an impulse to resist, to scream, knowing she would be dead in an instant.

A Hatchling had her!

"Do not move!" the hybrid hissed. It quickly stripped her of her pistols, then the knife in her right boot. It examined every pocket, every fold in her clothing, for a concealed weapon. Once convinced she was unarmed, it hauled her to her feet. "You will come with me! If you shout or try to warn your friends, I will kill you! Nod if you understand!"

Athena nodded, shocked not only by her capture but by discovering the Hatchlings could talk! During her years of captivity, the Hatchlings had not associated with the women prisoners, except to haul the captives off to the Tower now and then—and usually the guards discharged that responsibility in addition to their other duties. The women were the Spider's property, and his exclusively. While the human guards could mistreat the women with impunity, they were not allowed to seriously harm the women or abuse them sexually. Even to the Hatchlings the women were taboo. Athena had seen the Hatchlings on countless occasions while she was a prisoner, yet not once had a Hatchling so much as acknowledged her existence. Several times, she had seen them from the window of her hut, shambling off into the night to abduct another unfortunate wretch, and heard them clicking their talons. So for seven years she had mistakenly believed they were mute, despite the testimony of some of her fellow prisoners who had claimed the hybrids could speak.

The Hatchling holding her throat pulled her to the west, deeper into the forest, away from the cliffs. After traveling 50 yards he halted and released his grip. "What I said still holds!" he threatened. "Make a peep and you're dead!"

Athena swallowed hard.

"I recognize you!" the Hatchling stated. "You're the bitch who escaped! What's your name?"

"Athena," she replied.

"Well, Athena, you must be as stupid as they come! You were free, yet you came back. And you've brought others, professional soldiers!

The Spider will not be pleased," the mutant noted.

"The Spider will be dead before morning," Athena predicted.

Snarling, the Hatchling grabbed her throat once more and led her in the direction of the valley.

Athena pondered whether to knock the Hatchling's arm aside and scream. She knew Blade and Grizzly would hear her, but she also knew the hybrid would make good its promise to slay her before they came to her aid. What should she do? Common sense dictated silence, and she opted to keep her mouth shut.

The Hatchling hurried down the west slope of the ridge, one hand always on her neck.

At the sight of the Kingdom Athena stiffened and tried to drag her heels.

"Move your human ass, bitch!" the Hatchling snapped.

Athena broke out in a cold sweat. What the hell had she done? What if the Hatchling took her directly to the Tower? To the Spider? *Any* fate would be preferable to confronting that hellish monstrosity again!

They readied the field bordering the timber and headed for the middle of the valley.

The Hatchling, confident so close to home, released his hold. "I am Syph," he disclosed. "And I will ask Father for the honor of being the first to feed on your miserable body." He abruptly stopped and faced her, scowling, displaying his fangs. "Where are they?"

"Who?" Athena blurted.

The Hatchling slapped her across the mouth. "Don't play games with me, bitch! Where are my three brothers? Siad, Rehpes, and Sonnpec were to stop you from reaching the Kingdom, yet you and your two colleagues showed up." He waved the talons on his two right hands in front of her eyes. "Where are my brothers?"

"Two of them are dead," Athena answered arrogantly. "I don't know about the third."

"Damn you rotten humans!" Syph fumed. "You'll pay for this? All of you!"

"You're the ones who will pay!" Athena ventured to respond.

Syph hissed and clutched her left wrist, hauling her after him as he stomped toward the huts.

"Where are you taking me?" Athena queried in a sudden panic.

"What a dumb-ass question!" Syph said contemptuously. "Where do you think?"

Athena gawked at the lofty structure harboring the vilest fiend alive. "Not the Tower!"



Syph cackled devilishly.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"Drop your weapon!" the Hatchling nearest the entrance commanded. "You have until the count of three."

Havoc hesitated, bewildered by the unexpected turn of events. The HK94 was in his left hand. All he would have to do was elevate the gun, sweep his right hand to the trigger, and fire.

"One," the Hatchling said.

Four of the thirteen hybrids were likewise armed with HK94's.

"Two," the Hatchling counted.

Havoc frowned. All four were pointing their weapons at him.

"Thr—" the Hatchling began.

Havoc dropped his HK94 and raised his hands into the air. "Is this any way to greet a visitor?" he quipped.

"You don't like our welcoming committee?" the Hatchling rejoined, smirking triumphantly.

"I was hoping for a brass band and some cheerleaders," Havoc cracked.

The Hatchlings beamed. "I always have appreciated the human sense of humor." He paused. "Which is why my brothers think I'm somewhat strange."

"You knew I was coming," Havoc said.

"Of course," the Hatchling confirmed.

"But how?" Havoc wanted to know.

"Father felt you," the Hatchling revealed. "Felt me?" Havoc responded, perplexed. "How? And who are you anyway?"

"Where *are* my manners?" the Hatchling asked rhetorically. "My name is Chanc."

"Where do you guys get your names?" Havoc queried facetiously. "Do you pull them out of a hat?"

"We do not wear hats," Chanc said. "Our names are bestowed on us by the Spider."

"I don't get it," Havoc stated. "If this Spider is your old man, why do you fruitcakes keep referring to him as *the* Spider?"

"Our father prefers to be addressed as such," Chanc explained.

"A great honor," Chanc replied. "You will meet our father. Follow me." He peered past Havoc. "You too, brother."

Sadist whined and retreated a step. "No! It wasn't my fault! He made me bring him!"

"The Spider is aware of the situation," Chanc said. "He wants to see you."

"Please! No!" Sadist begged.

Chanc motioned with one of his right arms, and immediately two other Hatchlings walked from the Tower and moved behind Sadist.

"You will come, won't you?" Chanc requested politely.

Sadist appeared to be having trouble breathing. He weakly nodded.

"Excellent!" Chanc commented, looking at Havoc. "And what is your name?"

"Havoc," the noncom responded. "Sergeant Havoc."

"An appropriate name for a military man, yes?" Chanc remarked. "Come along, won't you?" He turned and headed off.

Havoc entered the Tower, his skin tingling. Now he was in for it! Trapped in the lion's den, with no angels of mercy to yank his fat out of the fire! Blade and the Force might arrive at any second, but he was doubtful. Who knew where they were?

"Father is in his chambers," Chanc mentioned, walking to the right, toward a spiral stairwell. "It's a bit of a climb, I'm afraid."

Havoc's forehead creased in confusion. What was with this hybrid? Was Chanc trying to smother him with kindness? "Are you the head Hatchling?" he asked.

"Dox is," Chanc answered, "by virtue of being the eldest. But he's not here at the moment." He stopped and glanced at Havoc. "You wouldn't happen to know where he is, would you?"

"How should I know?" Havoc lied. Chanc nodded knowingly and started climbing the stairwell.

Havoc examined his surroundings, flabbergasted. The interior of the Tower was immense, spacious enough for an army, and the decor left something to be desired. From a human perspective, anyhow. Colossal beams latticed the edifice, projecting from the walls and crisscrossing the air space. Many of the beams came to an abrupt end in midair. Illumination was provided by lanterns suspended from hooks in the walls. Havoc's boots clumped on the stairwell as he ascended. Gazing upward, he spied the underside of a floor approximately 20 feet above his head. Why had they situated the lowest floor so far from the ground? Was the Tower only partially completed? Or did the beams serve a purpose?

"You are in for a treat," Chanc said over his left shoulder. "You are the first human male to lay eyes on the Spider in four decades."

"Lucky me," Havoc retorted.

"Sarcasm is so unbecoming," Chanc said.

"Why are you being so damn polite?" Havoc demanded.

"I attribute my courtesy to my genes," Chanc replied. "Your genes?"

"Certainly. As you are no doubt aware, we are the offspring of a mixed mating. Human and mutant. And our parentage is displayed in our genes. Some of us possess slightly more human attributes than the others. Some, if you will, take more after our father's side of the family, while others tend to be like our mothers, more human. I am such a one," Chanc divulged regretfully.

"You don't sound too happy about it," Havoc noted.

"I'm not," Chanc admitted. "But I must bear the pollution in my bloodstream as best I can."

"What did you mean down there?" Havoc asked. "When you said the Spider felt me coming?"

"I don't quite know if I can explain it," Chanc said.

"Try," Havoc prompted.

"Are you familiar with mental telepathy?" Chanc queried.

"I know a little about it," Havoc stated. "Isn't it the same as mind reading?"

"Close, but not quite," Chanc replied. "Telepathy is a communication between minds, sort of like talking to someone else but conducting the conversation in your head instead of with your vocal apparatus."

"And the Spider is telepathic?" Havoc inquired. "In a certain respect, yes," Chanc confirmed. "The Spider can communicate with us, with each Hatchling, telepathically."

A dozen questions fitted Havoc's mind. "Is this communication constant? Are you talking with him now? And what's the range?"

Chanc glanced over his right shoulder, grinning. "You possess a curious nature. What a pity."

"What is?" Havoc asked,

"Never mind," Chanc said, sighing. "No, the communication is not constant. The sensation is not easy to describe. When Father wants to contact one of us, we feel his thoughts in our head. By the same token, he can feel our thoughts."

"How close do you have to be?" Havoc probed.

"Father can project his thoughts to us up to a distance of fifty yards, and he can feel our thoughts at the same range," Chanc detailed. "Beyond fifty yards, we can not communicate telepathically."

"Can he do the same thing with humans?"

"No," Chanc revealed. "I don't know why. Perhaps human minds are too feeble. Perhaps humans lack the glands or whatever is necessary for telepathy. But the Spider can not project his thoughts in a human

mind, although he can register the presence of a human up to the edge of the fields."

"How do you mean?" Havoc requested clarification.

"I'll use you as an example," Chanc said. "As soon as you entered our village, as you drew near to the first hut, the Spider felt your presence. He knew you were coming, even though he could not read your mind. He felt you. That's the best way I can explain his ability."

"And once he was aware of my presence, once he felt me coming, he had you prepare your welcome wagon," Havoc deduced.

"Exactly," Chanc verified.

They had attained the lowest floor. Walls and doors appeared to their left. The walls, though, were bizarre, designed with sharp angles and slanting upward instead of being aligned vertically. The material used in the construction was a dark wood.

"Are these your quarters?" Havoc idly asked.

"Our sleeping quarters, our storage rooms, our library..." Chanc said, itemizing them.

"You have a library?" Havoc queried in surprise.

"You were expecting maybe illiterate barbarians?" Chanc rejoined,

"Where do you get your books?"

"We have established trading relations with Reptilian," Chanc answered. "The booty that scaly bastard has amassed is incredible. He'll trade anything for some prime meat"

"Reptilian? Who's Rep—" Havoc started to inquire, but paused when an uncanny wail floated down from above.

The peculiar moaning ululation persisted for over a minute, rising and falling in intensity.

"What was that?" Havoc inquired, the hairs on the nape of his neck prickling.

"Father," Chanc said.

"The Spider?"

"Yes. He can not converse like you and I do. He can not speak. The Spider can communicate telepathically and with sounds, sounds unlike anything you or I could make," Chanc stated.

"I believe it," Havoc remarked. "Which reminds me. What's with the clicking you guys do?"

"We use the clicking of our talons to communicate when we're out in the field," Chanc said. "Our system is similar to your Morse Code."

Havoc nodded. So he'd been right!

They were approaching the top of the Tower, approximately 25 feet overhead, A landing became visible 15 feet up.

"We're almost there," Chanc announced. "I thank you for the pleasure of your company. I seldom am permitted to enjoy intelligent conversation, even with a lowly human."

"Why not?"

"Because we are not allowed to talk to the Spider's women," Chanc responded. "And my brothers, sad to say, have not refined the art of polite discourse."

Havoc couldn't help but grin. Chanc impressed him as the type of person, or thing, who unceasingly flapped his gums for the sake of hearing himself speak.

They climbed the remainder of the steps to the landing in silence. Fabricated of the same dark wood as the walls, the landing was ten feet square and bordered by a gray metal railing. A large door was located across from the stairwell.

Chanc moved to the middle of the landing and turned. "I will be going in with you to act as interpreter. The rest will remain here."

Havoc glanced to his rear. Six of the Hatchlings had accompanied them up the stairwell. Sadist was staring at the door in blatant fear, his lips quivering, his eyes wide.

Chanc walked to the door and gripped the metal latch.

"I imagine it's too late," Havoc stated.

Chanc looked at the soldier, puzzled. "Too late?"

"To ask you to surrender."

Chanc tittered, shaking his head. "Definitely a pity."

"Please!" Sadist interjected. "I don't want to go in there!"

"You must," Chanc said.

"No! I've been loyal all these years! This isn't fair!" Sadist shouted.

"The Spider wants to see you," Chanc stated. "Now calm down and come on."

Sadist retreated a step. "No! Please, Chanc!"

Watching the petrified guard, Havoc was struck by a thought. "Chanc, there's something I don't understand?"

Chanc released the latch. "What?"

"Why do you go to all the trouble of stealing your women from outside the Kingdom when you could raise them here? Sadist is a son of the Spider, right? All the human guards are. And if some of the

Spider's offspring are fully human, like their mothers, why not let the girl babies grow into women?" Havoc asked.

"Because there have not been any female babies who survived," Chanc said sadly.

"None?"

Chanc shook his head. "Not a one. All of the female babies, whether human or Hatchling, die shortly after birth. We have tried everything to keep them alive, but nothing has worked."

He paused. "Even many of the male babies perish. The inter-breeding of a mutant and a human has unforeseen complications."

Havoc indicated Sadist with a jerk of his left thumb. "But he told me all the girl babies and most of the boys are eaten."

"They are," Chanc confirmed.

"But..." Havoc began.

"They are consumed after they die," Chanc detailed. "After all, as much as we want them to live, we're not about to let good food go to waste."

Havoc felt queasy in his stomach.

"The genetic differential might account for the high infant-mortality rate," Chanc elaborated. "We count ourselves fortunate that some of the males do survive. Many mutants, we have learned, are incapable of breeding with humans. Their reproductive systems are incompatible."

"So I've heard," Havoc acknowledged.

"Now we really must go inside," Chanc stated, staring at Sadist. "If you will not enter of your own volition, I will have you carried."

Sadist extended his hands in a pleading gesture. "But I didn't*do* anything!"

"Father would like to have a word with you," Chanc said patiently. He took hold of the latch and opened the door. "Inside." With a wave of one of his left arms, he indicated they should proceed.

Havoc edged to the doorway. He was strongly tempted to bolt, but outnumbered as he was—and unarmed to boot—an escape attempt would be an exercise in stupidity.

Whining, Sadist shuffled toward the door.

Havoc gingerly stepped into the Spider's quarters. He anticipated outlandish architecture resembling the floors below; what he found exceeded his wildest imaginings.

The gloomy chamber was gigantic, 40 feet in diameter, and reached all the way to the domed roof. A pungent odor hung in the air. Another landing, a carbon copy of the one outside, was attached by beams to the north wall. Unlike the first landing, there was no railing. And occupying the rest of the Spider's quarters was a fitting symbol of the mutant's name and power, the only habitation perfectly suited for a

being with arachnoid capabilities: a titanic web.

Havoc could scarcely believe his own eyes. His mind was boggled, overwhelmed by the seeming unreality of the sight before him.

The web was a dusky, dirty white circular pattern of enormous strands stretching from wall to wall. The center sagged, lending a cuplike aspect to its appearance. Each strand was as thick as a man's body, except for those nearest the walls. They were thicker. If size was any connotation, then the web was large enough for an elephant.

"Isn't it awe inspiring?" Chanc remarked to Havoc's left.

"I don't see the Spider," Havoc mentioned.

Chanc glanced up at the dome. "You will," he stated.

Havoc followed the direction of Chanc's gaze, but initially he didn't see anything out of the ordinary. The area under the dome was shrouded in shadow.

And then the shadow *moved* !.

Havoc involuntarily gasped in astonishment as a tremendous inky form descended from the ceiling, slowly lowering toward the middle of the net. Vague at first, the shape solidified, acquiring distinct contours.

The creature's body was massive and segmented, consisting of two oval sections covered with fine black hair. Eight appendages, four on each side, protruded from the mutant's segments, and in contrast to the body they were not coated with hair. The limbs were a yellow tinge, and the skin appeared to have an elastic quality which was apparent as the appendages moved up and down. They were always in motion, always rising and falling, even when the creature was still.

"Sergeant Havoc," Chanc said. "I'd like you to meet my father. The Spider." .

Havoc heard Sadist whimpering.

The Spider came to a stop abreast of the landing, dangling from the ceiling not ten feet from the visitors.

Havoc was riveted in place, staring in amazement at the Spider's visage. The skin was the same color and texture as the legs. Eight black, alien orbs returned his stare, capped by an expansive forehead. There was no nose, and the mouth was a vertical slit with two large fangs at the bottom and smaller fangs lining the gums.

"The Spider greets you," Chanc said. "What?" Havoc mumbled

"The Spider greets you," Chanc repeated. "He welcomes you to his humble abode."

"He's communicating with you?" Havoc asked.

"Of course," Chanc stated. "Telepathy, remember?"

Havoc spotted a strand of web connecting the Spider's posterior to the ceiling.

"Well?" Chanc said impatiently.

"Well what?" Havoc responded.

"You are being abysmally rude," Chanc noted. "The least' you could do is say hi."

"Oh." Havoc shook his head, striving to organize his thinking. "Tell him hi for me."

"He heard you," Chanc said. "He may not be able to speak, but he can understand us."

"He isn't what I expected," Havoc remarked.

"What did you expect?" Chanc queried.

"I don't know," Havoc said, "I thought he would be smaller. Probably because he... mates... with human women."

Chanc seemed to be listening to an inner voice, his brow furrowed, all attention. "Father says his reproductive organ is no bigger than yours."

"What? As huge as he is?" Havoc commented.

"Father says many animals and insects have disproportionately undersized organs." Chanc chuckled. "Look at the whale. If a male whale had a penis commensurate with its bulk, it would sink to the bottom every time it got a hard-on. As for humans, their egos tend to greatly exaggerate their own sexual dimensions."

"I still don't understand why he picks on human women," Havoc said.

"What other reproductive source is there?" Chanc rejoined. "Like many mutants produced by the excessive radiation bombarding the atmosphere, he is one of a kind. He has no natural mate. Father considers the idea of mating with his inferiors, with animals and lesser mutants, revolting."

"But he mates with inferior humans," Havoc interrupted.

"Father says humans are inferior physically and mentally to mutants, but humans do have one advantage. Human females, that is. They are remarkably fertile, and their wombs are receptive to interspecies impregnation," Chanc explained.

"Wait a minute!" Havoc declared, "I just thought of something." He looked at Chanc. "If the Spider is the only one who can touch the women you capture, what do you do?"

"Me?"

"You and the rest of the Hatchlings," Havoc elucidated.

"Hatchlings do not possess reproductive potential," Chanc stated.

"You can't whoopee?"



"We can't reproduce," Chanc said.

"What about the human guards?" Havoc queried.

"Periodically one of the women is sacrificed," Chanc detailed. "Before we feast on her, the men are permitted to indulge themselves."

Havoc glanced at Sadist. "You bastard!"

"Father says to thank you for reminding him," Chanc said.

"Reminding him about what?" Havoc asked.

"Three guesses," Chanc remarked.

Havoc saw the Spider swivel, its malevolent face turning to his right, toward Sadist.

Sadist uttered a wheezing sound.

Chanc took a step forward, his eyes on Sadist. "Father says he is displeased by your performance."

Sadist dropped to his knees, pressing his palms together in an attitude of supplication. "I didn't do anything!" he shouted. "Father says you led Havoc here," Chanc interpreted.

"I didn't have any choice! He would have killed me!" Sadist's asserted.

"Father requires loyalty above all else," Chanc relayed. "Father believes you lack that essential quality."

"Please! Give me another chance! I promise I won't fail you again!" Sadist wailed.

"Father says you are right. You won't fail him again," Chanc said.

Havoc tensed, expecting the Spider to make a move, to do something decidedly lethal to Sadist. But when the move came, it astounded turn.

A streak of white suddenly erupted from the Spider's hideous head, disgorged from *its* distended maw at a lightning velocity, the aim unerring. A thin, glistening strand, resembling the webbing but exceedingly slender, shot across the intervening ten feet and struck Sadat in the chest.

"No?" Sadist screamed, grabbing the strand and endeavoring to tear it from his body. But the strand, thin as it was, held fast.

"Observe this closely," Chanc casually commented to Havoc.

For his part, Havoc was fascinated by the tableau. He felt no compulsion to try and help Sadist; the son of a bitch deserved everything he got!

"Please! No!" Sadist protested. He went to remove his hands from the strand, but couldn't. "They're stuck!" he blurted in horror. "I can't get my hands loose!"

Spider uttered a protracted chattering noise.

"Father says you must excuse his uncouth manners," Chanc said to Havoc, grinning. "He is famished. He will not be able to share his repast with you."

"Fine by me," Havoc muttered in response.

Sadist screeched as he was abruptly hauled from the landing. He was pulled over the edge and plummeted toward the net below, but was brought up short by the strand adhering to his chest. The momentum of his plunge caused him to swing from side to side, a human pendulum, a tasty morsel for a hungry monster, like a fish on the end of a fisherman's line.

"Watch what happens next," Chanc stated excitedly.

The thin strand began to retract into the Spider's mouth, drawing its prey ever closer to its two-foot-long central fangs.

"Nooooooooo!" Sadist shrieked.

The retraction seemed to take forever, but in reality was a mere three minutes, as the strand ever so slowly hoisted Sadist higher and higher. Alternately whining, yelling, and blubbing incoherently, Sadist gradually drew within range of the Spider's serrated fangs.

Havoc, mesmerized, saw what was coming.

Sadist became strangely quiet when he was within a yard of the Spider's head. He gawked up at the terrible features, petrified to his core.

Chanc laughed expectantly.

A few seconds more and Sadist was within range.

The Spider's two longest fangs clamped onto Sadist's head, one on each side, the sawlike edges ripping into the man's cranium.

Havoc heard a sharp crunch.

Sadist started convulsing as his body was drawn into the Spider's mouth. Additional smaller fangs were revealed as the maw was stretched to the maximum.

Havoc saw Sadist's head ease into the Spider's maw, and then those mighty jaws closed, the Spider's razor teeth neatly severing Sadist's head from his body. Crimson spurted over the Spider's chin and mandibles,

"I wish I could do that," Chanc remarked wistfully.

Havoc was appalled. What a way to go! How many people, innocent people, not scum like Sadist, had fallen victim to the Spider over the decades? Dozens? Hundreds? Thousands?

The Spider's mouth was working as he consumed his meal.

"Father would like to continue our conversation while he snacks," Chanc said. "If that's all right with

you."

Havoc didn't respond.

"Father would like to know about you," Chanc translated. "How many more came with you? What unit are you with? Where are you headquartered? And how did you learn about the Kingdom?"

Havoc stared into the Spider's baleful orbs. He licked his lips and mustered all of his courage. "Go to hell!"

Chanc hissed. "What kind of attitude is that? Hasn't Father treated you with respect and dignity?"

Havoc glanced at the Hatchling. "Why don't you go take a swan dive off the cliffs?"

Chanc looked at his inhuman progenitor, then at the noncom. "You refuse to cooperate?"

"You're not so dumb after all," Havoc rejoined.

"How can you be so obstinate after what you've just witnessed?" Chanc queried angrily.

"*Because* of what I've just seen, you can all get stuffed! You get nothing out of me!" Havoc declared.

"And there's nothing I can say to change your mind?" Chanc asked.

"Don't waste my time," Havoc replied arrogantly.

Chanc sighed. "Very well. You have made your choice. But Father will force you to talk, sooner or later"

"Bet me!" Havoc retorted.

"Don't say I didn't warn you," Chanc commented, moving toward the doorway.

Havoc gazed at the Spider. The mutant was engrossed in its meal, blood and flesh dribbling from the corners of its mouth as it chewed. For a few seconds Chanc was not in his field of vision. The Hatchling was behind him, heading for the door.

Or so he thought.

Havoc had a fleeting intimation of impending disaster when he detected the rapid pad of rushing feet, and then something slammed into his back, knocking him forward, toward the edge of the landing. He tried to throw his body back from the brink, but his combat boots slid over the rim, and with a sickening sensation in his stomach he hurtled toward the net below.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

He was almost free!

Kraft grinned in delight as he felt the material binding his wrists about to give way. He had worked for hours, his arms developing a slippery layer of sweat to facilitate his effort.

If only the damn Hatchling would keep on sleeping!

Kraft had taken stock while the hybrid dozed. His M-16 and the Colts were gone, but he didn't know about his boot knife and his switchblade. He couldn't feel the boot knife rubbing against his skin, so he doubted the weapon was still there. The Hatchling must have searched him while he was unconscious. But, the hybrid might have missed his switchblade. When he quietly jiggled his legs, making as much noise as he dared, he felt a hard object gouging his right thigh. And the only hard object in his right front pocket had been his switchblade.

Not much longer!

The more he had worked on his bounds, the more convinced he'd become that whatever the Hatchling had used wasn't rope. The loops were too pliable for rope and not abrasive enough.

The Hatchling made a snorting sound.

Kraft renewed his frantic attempt to loosen his wrists. He could feel the material sliding down almost to his knuckles, but he couldn't quite extricate his hands. If he rolled onto his side, he might be able to apply more leverage. There was one hitch, however. If he moved, he might awaken the Hatchling.

To hell with it!

Kraft eased onto his left side, facing the hybrid. He extended his legs and peered down at his ankles. The moonlight revealed the material the Hatchling had used to bind him, a strip of camouflage fabric!

Where the...

Kraft glanced at his right leg and discovered a ragged tear in his pants. The damn Hatchling had torn two strips from his pants leg in order to tie him up!

Siad tossed in his sleep, shifting his body toward Kraft.

Was the Hatchling waking up?

Kraft held his breath, his eyes glued to the hybrid, but Siad slept on. Yeah! He grit his teeth as he exerted his muscles to the utmost, his face turning red, his veins bulging.

Go!

Go!

Go!

The fabric abruptly parted, taking him unawares, his right arm wrenching outward and his left thudding against the ground. He stared at Siad.

No reaction.

Kraft quickly unraveled a solitary loop clinging to his drenched skin, then bent forward at the waist to undo his ankles.

What an asshole!

Use the switchblade!

Kraft straightened, diving his right hand into his pants pocket, his fingers grasping for the switchblade. And there it was! His fingertips had just touched part of the knife, a smile of relief beginning to uplift his face, when the hybrid woke up.

No!

Kraft saw the Hatchling stir, its arm starting to raise as its body uncurled from its slouching position. Dammit! He swiftly laid down, on his back, his hands behind him, exactly as he'd been when the mutant had fallen asleep. Not a second too soon.

The Hatchling opened its eyes, gazing at the moon, then looked at Kraft. "Are you still here? I didn't think you liked my company."

"Up yours, Franky!" Kraft snapped.

"For the last time, my name is Siad," the hybrid stated archly.

"Sure, Franky," Kraft said, goading the Hatchling. "Whatever you say is cool."

Siad stood and walked over to Kraft. "When it comes time to eat you, I think I'll start with your tongue. You seem to have little intelligent use for it." He grinned.

"Get bent, mother!" Kraft retorted.

Siad returned to the tree and leaned down, taking hold of an object lying on the ground. When he rose, he pointed the object at Kraft.

"My M-16!" Kraft blurted out.

"And who says humans are dumb?" Siad quipped, chuckling.

"What did you do with my Colts?" Kraft demanded.

"I tossed them into the bushes," Siad answered.

"Only a mutant would pull a stupid stunt like that!" Kraft said, deliberately insulting his enemy. He needed to distract the hybrid somehow, to do something to divert the deviate's attention while he freed his ankles. Above all, he couldn't let the Hatchling roll him over. There was no telling what Siad might do if the mutant discovered his hands were loose!

Cool!

He had to play it real cool!

Siad sighed. "Why do all humans feel they must insult or kill all mutants?"

"Have you looked in a mirror lately?" Kraft cracked.

"You are a typical example of my reason for distrusting humans," Siad observed. "Mindless hatred is endemic to your species. Why do you think I discarded your pistols and the knife you had hidden in your boot? If you still had them, I'd be dead right now."

"You've got that right, dude," Kraft said.

Siad turned, staring to the north. "There must be a better place!" he declared passionately.

Kraft grinned. The dummy had its back to him! He began to slide his hands from under his back. "What are you babbling about?"

"Is it babble?" Siad asked, more to himself than Kraft. "I hope not. I've taken my life in my hands by deserting the Spider."

"Deserting?" Kraft repeated in bewilderment. "Say! Where the hell are you taking me, anyway? The Kingdom?"

Siad shook his head. "No. The Kingdom is my past." He pointed to the north. "Out there lies my destiny."

Kraft's hands were by his side. He inched his right hand toward the pocket containing his switchblade. "This is unreal! It isn't bad enough I get my butt captured by a mutant! It has to be a wacko mutant!"

"I wouldn't expect you to understand," Siad said.

"So clue me in," Kraft prompted. "I ain't going nowhere!"

Siad placed the M-16's stock on the ground and leaned on the barrel. "You're a human. You know nothing of what it's like to be a mutant. Why should I waste my time explaining my motives to you?"

"Suit yourself!" Kraft rejoined. "But you are lugging me with you, and I'm kind of curious about where you're taking me."

"I'm taking you north, into the area once known as the State of Oregon," Siad disclosed. .

"What's in Oregon?" Kraft inquired, slipping his hand into the right pocket and gripping his cherished switchblade.

"Peace, I hope," Siad stated.

"Peace? On this world? You must be dreaming!" Kraft said, taking the switchblade out.

"Maybe I am," Siad said wistfully. "But I am tired of the status quo. Living in the Kingdom is torment. The Spider rules with an iron hand, and even his children must live under his complete control." He paused. "We can't make a move without Father knowing it. He even knows our thoughts! We're slaves just like the human females we seize, only my brothers are too dense to see the truth!"

Kraft quickly sat up and bent toward his ankles. Keep talking! All he needed was a few seconds!

"There must be some place where I can live in peace," Siad went on. "Somewhere I'll be free to make

my own decisions. Somewhere where others won't want to kill me. Where I won't be labeled a mutant or a mongrel crossbreed. Part of me is human, you know."

Kraft didn't bother to respond. He'd never heard anything so ridiculous in his life! A groddy Hatchling wanting to be accepted as a person! What a laugh! He held the switchblade under his right shin to muffle the click, then pressed the release button. The five-inch blade snapped out.

"Am I asking too much out of life?" Siad was saying. "If I look long enough, I know I'll find what I'm seeking. For starters, I'll stay with Reptilian. He won't mind putting me up."

Kraft applied the knife to the camouflage fabric securing his ankles. A few short strokes, and the material dropped to the grass.

"I've heard about this city," Siad continued, "Maybe you've heard of it too. A city where humans and mutants live in harmony, as brothers. It's supposed to be located far to the north of here. Do you know about it?"

Kraft kept his eyes on the Hatchling's back. "Nope. Doesn't ring a bell." He rose to a squatting posture.

"I heard about it from a human we captured fifteen years ago," Siad mentioned. "She had lived in the city for a while, knew it well, and Father forced her to tell him all about it. Several of my brothers and I were permitted to listen in, and they all suspected she was lying. But not me. I know she was telling the truth. I know there is a city out there, a Utopia for mutants and humans alike. And I know I could learn to live with your kind if they accept me for what I am."

Kraft stood and cautiously crept toward the hybrid, his switchblade held low, near his waist.

"You probably think I'm insane," Siad said. "My own brothers believe I'm strange. Except for Chanc, of course. And the only reason Chanc understands is because, like me, his human half predominates emotionally."

Kraft grinned as he snuck to within a yard of the preoccupied Hatchling. The hybrid was a fool! Why was the jerk-face unburdening itself now, of all times? Kraft couldn't care less about the mutant's personal problems. He sensed the Hatchling was simply getting something off his chest, something it might have held inside for a long time.

"As for you," Siad stated, sighing, "I'm afraid I will be compelled to consume you to sustain myself. Whenever I get hungry, I'll take a few bites out of you to satisfy my appetite. Don't worry, though. I'll try and keep you alive as long as I can."

Kraft was two feet from his target. "You're all heart, shit-head!"

Siad whirled, stunned.

Kraft never gave the Hatchling a chance. He brought his switchblade up and in, sinking the blade into Siad's neck below the chin and slashing the knife to the right, tearing a jagged line in Siad's throat.

Siad gurgled, dropping the M-16, lunging at the human.

Kraft stumbled backwards a few feet with the hybrid's talons clawing at his face. He felt a burning sensation in his right cheek as one of Siad's swipes tore him open. Undaunted, Kraft yanked his

switchblade out of the hybrid's neck and drove it higher, going for Siad's right eye, plunging the knife into the hybrid's black orb.

Siad snarled and backhanded Kraft, sending him sprawling onto his back, the switchblade still imbedded in his eye. Doubling over in agony, Siad gripped the switchblade handle and tugged, wrenching the knife free. "My eye!" he bellowed shrilly, enraged.

Kraft rolled onto his hands and knees, knowing he had to do something and do it fast! The Hatchling was going to rip into him, no holds barred, and he was unarmed.

Siad glared at Kraft with his good eye, his lips twitching, drool dripping from his fangs. "You'll pay for this, human! Oh,*how* you'll pay!" He hefted the switchblade in his upper right arm. "I'll carve you into pieces with your own knife! How's that for irony?"

Kraft spotted the M-16 lying on the ground about four feet behind the Hatchling. It was his only hope!

Siad took a step forward. "Where should I start?" he growled. "Should I do to you what you did to me?" His mouth contorted in a twisted grin. "Or should I start with your pecker? Isn't that the word you humans use? Yes! I'll cut off your pecker and make you watch while I eat it!"

Kraft rose to a crouch, watching the arm holding his switchblade. Concentrate on the arm! his mind warned. Nothing else! The slightest slip and he was dead! He could not afford a lapse in his attention, not for a second.

Siad was wheezing, spittle frothing his lips, yellow blood flowing from his ravaged throat. "Are you ready, human?"

Kraft backed up a stride. The arm! Focus on the arm!

"Say good-bye to your pecker!" Siad roared, and charged..

Even prepared, Kraft was unable to avoid the Hatchling's bullish rush. Two arms encircled his waist and lifted him, propelling him rearward, while a third arm raked his forehead, digging deep. The fourth buried the switchblade into his left shoulder.

No!

Kraft was conscious of blood trickling over his eyebrows and onto his eyes, and of an intense stinging in his left shoulder, and then he was brutally slammed into the trunk of a tree. Vertigo briefly engulfed him as he slumped to the earth. Somewhere, someone was laughing. His awareness returned with astonishing clarity, and he saw the Hatchling standing above him, snickering,

Siad wagged the switchblade. "That's just for starters, human pig! Before I'm done, you'll plead for mercy!" He paused. "I should thank you for showing me the error of my ways! How could I ever have expected to live in peace and harmony with humans? You are all alike! You're all ready to kill at any provocation} My brothers and father were right!" Kraft was woozy, struggling to concentrate, knowing his life was on the line. It was do or die time! But what could he possibly do against the Hatchling's superior strength without his switchblade?

Siad suddenly coughed, more spittle seeping from the corners of his mouth: "Let's get this over with!" he stated.



Kraft's brainstorm struck at the very last instant. He saw the Hatchling leaning toward him, sneering, bending toward his genitals. Adrenaline coursed through his body, electrifying him, and he moved, reaching out and grabbing one of the mutant's left wrists. He yanked on the wrist even as he shifted to the right, with the desired effect.

Siad was pulled off balance, toppling forward, his other left arm carving furrows in Kraft's right forearm.

Kraft dropped onto his right shoulder, retaining his grip on the hybrid's left wrist, hauling on the wrist for all he was worth. He saw the mutant's face smash into the tree, and he released the wrist and scrambled to his feet. Move! his mind screamed. He ran toward the M-16, the weapon glimmering in the moonlight, and nothing had ever looked so beautiful as that gun, his sole hope of salvation.

Siad spun, shaking his head, snarling, then lumbering after the human.

Kraft didn't risk a backward glance. With a resolute singleness of purpose he raced to the rifle, launching himself into the air to cover the final yard, landing on his injured shoulder, and flinching as he scooped up the M-16. He twirled, leveling the rifle, releasing the safety and squeezing the trigger as the Hatchling hurtled toward him. Siad screeched as the slugs tore through his body.

Kraft's lips were set in firm lines as he emptied half the magazine into the hybrid, pouring round after round into Siad's torso and head.

Siad went down to his knees, dropping the switchblade.

Kraft ceased firing. He slowly stood, the M-16 trained on his foe. The Hatchling, incredibly, was still alive, but barely. Swaying and bubbling yellow blood, Siad was on the verge of collapse. Kraft walked up to the Hatchling. "Eat my pecker, huh? Not fucking likely!"

Siad hissed. It was his ultimate, terminal act of defiance.

Incensed, Kraft raised the M-16 and bashed the stock into the Hatchling's face. Again and again and again, until the hybrid's grotesque features were a mass of pulpy flesh and dripping gore. Winded, he stepped back.

Siad, the mutant in search of a dream, the Hatchling seeking peace and harmony, pitched over into eternity.

Kraft's legs abruptly became unsteady and his hands started trembling. He staggered away from the corpse, then sank to the dank earth. Damn! He'd done it! This Freedom Force business wasn't so hard after all! He wiped his right sleeve across his forehead to stem the flow of blood. His eyelids were caked and the corners of his eyes were filled with blood, but his eyes were clear.

Now what?

Kraft took deep breaths, slowly recovering. What should he do next? He had to find the others, but which way was the right way? He didn't know where he was in relation to the spot where he'd been captured. Not only that, he didn't know in which direction the Kingdom was located. He guessed to the south because the damn Hatchling had mentioned they were traveling north, away from the Kingdom. But what if he was wrong? What if he went south, and wound up penetrating deeper into the forest? He could get hopelessly lost in no time.

So what the hell should he do?

He rose and crossed to the tree Siad had used. Rest. He required rest. Sighing, he slid his battered, bleeding body to the ground, propping his back against the trunk. His blood loss worried him. If he lost too much, he'd never make it out of the wilderness. The prospect of internal bleeding was another factor.

Of all the lousy places to die!

Kraft laid his head back, using the rough trunk for support, and idly gazed skyward. He recalled the course Blade had taught before their departure from the Force HQ, a course on determining direction in the woods. Part of the instruction had dealt with compass reading, but his compass had been in his backpack. Blade had also provided pointers on deducing direction at night.

What was it the big guy had said?

Something about one of the Dippers.

Kraft studied the stars. He didn't know one from the other, but he knew the Dippers when he saw them. The Big Dipper was easy to find, but it took several minutes to locate the Little Dipper. According to Blade, the North Star was part of one of the Dippers, situated in one of the handles. But which one? Was the North Star in the Big Dipper or the Little Dipper? The North Star could serve as a guide if he could only remember!

He couldn't.

Exasperated, he decided to wait until daylight. All he had to do then was note the sun's position and bear in mind the basic rule: the sun rose in the east and set in the west. If he aligned his right arm with the rising sun, then his left arm would be pointing west. North would be in front of him, south to his back. Easy as pie.

Except for one thing.

He still didn't know where the hell the Kingdom was! North? South? East? West?

Shit! Shit! Shit!

Kraft closed his eyes, fatigue pervading every pore. A little snooze and he'd be as good as new. Then he'd look for some clue as to which direction he should take to rejoin the others. His eyelids drooped and within seconds he was asleep.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Athena felt the terror wetting up inside of her, and she struggled to remain calm, to stay alert. She didn't want to give the Hatchlings the satisfaction of seeing her afraid.

"Father is eager to see you again," Syph commented from her right. He was holding her right arm, hauling her up the Tower stairwell toward the Spider's chamber. Another Hatchling held her left arm.

"What a pleasant surprise having you back," mentioned the hybrid who had greeted them at the Tower entrance and introduced himself as Chanc.

"You'll get yours soon enough!" Athena asserted. "Just wait!"

"Syph told us there are two others with you," Chanc remarked. "If you're thinking they will rescue you, you're wrong. Seven of our brothers have gone to take care of them."

"Good," Athena said.

"Good?" Chanc repeated quizzically.

"Yep. That means there will soon be seven less Hatchlings in the world," Athena taunted.

"Gloat while you can, woman," Chanc advised.

"I hope father lets us have you!" Syph declared eagerly.

Athena glanced upward, swallowing hard. The revolting memories of the times she'd visited the Spider's inner sanctum overwhelmed her.

An irresistible urge to flee compelled her to strain against the hybrids..

Syph laughed. "It seems the human is reluctant to meet the Spider again."

"Humans are notorious for their lack of social grace," Chanc said.

Athena blanched when they reached the landing. Her eyes widened at the sight of the familiar door.

"There's someone inside you might like to see again," Chanc commented as they crossed the landing.

Athena assumed he meant the Spider. She tensed, her breath catching in her throat.

"Here we go!" Syph declared, opening the door and throwing it wide.

The two Hatchlings forced her inside.

Athena involuntarily gasped as her eyes alighted on the repellent fiend perched on the web on the far side of the chamber.

The Spider stirred at her arrival, shifting its body, those emotionless orbs boring into her.

Chanc smiled. "Father says it is nice to see you once more."

"Tell him to get screwed!" Athena snapped.

Syph tittered. "You've got it backwards!"

Athena was on the verge of panic. What had gotten into her? How could she have been so insane? Why had she volunteered to lead the Force to the Kingdom, knowing the risks involved as she did? She deserved the Moron of the Year Award for inanity above and beyond the call of duty!

"Father wants to know why you have betrayed him?" Chanc asked.

"Because he deserves to die!" Athena answered shrilly.

"Father is very disappointed," Chanc said. "You were always one of his favorites."

"Bullshit!" Athena responded angrily. "All any woman is to him is another womb he can use to satisfy his lust and create bastards like you!"

"Be civil!" Chanc said sternly. "Or your demise will come sooner than it would otherwise."

"Who cares?" Athena retorted. "Get it over with!"

"There's no rush," Chanc stated. "Father ate a short while ago. He's saving you for breakfast."

"Lucky me!" Athena quipped.

"First things first," Chanc commented. "I told you there is someone here you'd like to see again."

Athena didn't understand. "Who?"

Chanc and Syph pulled her to the edge of the landing.

"You do know him, don't you?" Chanc inquired, pointing downward.

Perplexed, Athena ventured a look over the side. Amazement commingled with relief washed over her. "Havoc!" she cried.

Sergeant Havoc was caught on the web. He was on his back, his limbs spread-eagled. "Ms. Morris! They got you too!"

"Are you all right?" Athena called down.

"I'm fine," Havoc yelled up. "Except I can't move?"

Chanc smirked. The surface of the Spider's web was coated with an adhesive substance. Anyone caught in the web was hopelessly trapped, doomed to die at the Spider's convenience. Only the Spider and the Hatchlings could negotiate the webbing without becoming stuck.

"Hang in there!" Athena shouted.

"You should convince your friend to cooperate with Father," Chanc said. "If he doesn't, Father may start nibbling on him soon." Chanc hoped he could attend the interrogation. One of the Spider's techniques for eliciting information from prisoners was diabolically clever and supremely effective. The Spider would have one of the Hatchlings pose questions to the captive, and every time the prisoner refused to answer, or if the Spider believed an answer was a lie, there was a dire price to pay. For every unanswered question, for every lie, the Spider would take a bite out of the captive. Not a big bite, mind, but a nibble, tearing off the prisoner's flesh in bits and pieces. Very few questions went unanswered after the first nibble.

"Talk to your friend," Chanc urged. "Well leave you alone now." He moved toward the doorway, Syph following.

Athena watched them leave, hearing the latch click and the scraping of a key in the lock.

There was no way out!

"Athena!" Havoc shouted.

Athena glanced down at the noncom, wishing she could extricate him from the webbing. But he was 20 feet below her, or thereabouts, and she had no means of reaching him. "Yes?"

"What about you? Are you all right?" Havoc queried.

"I'm fine," Athena replied, looking at the Spider 40 yards away. "So far."

"Are the others safe?" Havoc asked.

"Spader is dead," Athena informed him. "And Kraft disappeared. Thunder was hurt pretty badly."

"What happened?"

"We were ambushed," Athena disclosed.

"And the others?" Havoc inquired.

"They're okay," Athena said.

"Don't tell me where they're at!" Havoc cautioned. "The Spider can understand us."

"What?" Athena stared at the gigantic mutation, bewildered. All those years she'd spent in the Kingdom, and only now was she learning some of the best-kept secrets! She'd never known the Spider could comprehend English. But how was she supposed to know? The guards had never confided in the women. And the Hatchlings, on those few occasions when they had escorted her to the Tower, had never uttered a word. Why? she wondered. What purpose did they have in keeping the Hatchlings' vocal ability a secret?

"If that son of a bitch comes after you," Havoc yelled, "watch out for its mouth! It shoots something out of its mouth!"

More new information! The Spider had never shot anything at her. When the women were summoned to the Tower and raped, the Spider simply took them on the landing, holding them down while forcing their legs apart. But what about this mouth business? She vaguely remembered studying spiders in school. One type, if she recalled correctly, was known as spitting spiders. They possessed a pair of large glands enabling them to squirt a sticky thread at prospective victims. Perhaps the Spider was endowed with such glands.

"Don't worry, Ms. Morris!" Havoc called up encouragement. "We'll get out of this mess okay!"

"I hope so," Athena said, feeling obligated to respond that way although she was extremely skeptical. Blade and Grizzly probably knew she was in trouble, but what could they hope to do about it? Even if they deduced she was being held in the Tower, the two of them couldn't hope to defeat all of the guards, the Hatchlings, and the Spider, and then rescue her.

Could they?

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

"I don't like this waiting!" Grizzly grouched in a hushed tone.

"Neither do I," Blade whispered in response.

"Then why don't we go in now?" Grizzly asked.

"You know why," Blade said. "We don't go in until sunrise." He glanced over his left shoulder at the ridge to their rear. "It won't be long."

They were crouched behind a duster of boulders bordering the field to the east of the Kingdom. The Tower and the huts were clearly visible in the spreading light afforded by the arrival of dawn. Birds were chirping in the forest around them.

Grizzly stared into the woods. "I still think we should have jumped those seven turkeys earlier."

"I didn't want to advertise our presence," Blade explained. "They might have been looking for us, but they didn't know we were this close to the Kingdom."

"But if they can track by scent, like I can, then they'll pick up our trail at the cliffs and come after us," Grizzly noted. "They'll show up here sooner or later."

"Hopefully later," Blade said. "And by then they'll be too late. We go in shortly. We know Athena and Havoc are in there, because that's where their scent-trails lead. If they're alive, they might be in the Tower."

They waited in silence for the sun to appear.

"There's something I'd like to ask you," Grizzly whispered after a time.

Blade glanced at the bear-man. "What?"

"Why didn't you send me instead of Havoc?" Grizzly inquired.

"Send you where?" Blade responded innocently.

"Don't play games with me!" Grizzly stated. "You know what I'm talking about! When you first spotted the Hatchlings, you sent Havoc to keep tabs on them. Why him? Why not me?"

"Havoc is a skilled soldier," Blade noted. "I didn't expect him to get captured."

"That's not what I meant and you know it!" Grizzly said, peeved. "You know that most mutants have heightened senses. We can hear, see, and smell better than humans. So why did you send Havoc to watch the Hatchlings when you could have sent me? My senses are just as good as the Hatchlings'. So why send a human to do a mutant's job?"

Blade shrugged. "It seemed like the right decision at the time."

Grizzly studied the Warrior for a moment. "I'm beginning to see through you," he said appreciatively.

"Oh?" Blade remarked, arching his eyebrows.

"Yep," Grizzly affirmed. "You've got more upstairs than I gave you credit for. You're one clever son of a gun."

"You think so, huh?" Blade said.

"*I know* so," Grizzly stated. "You correct me if I'm wrong. The way I see it is this. You knew you were taking a chance by sending Havoc after the Hatchlings because of their superior senses. You could have sent Thunder, but even the Flathead can't match a mutant. And you could have sent me, but you didn't. I've been wondering about that ever since. And do you know what I figured out?"

"What?" Blade whispered.

"You didn't send me because you don't trust me," Grizzly said. "You know how I feel about mutants and humans. You didn't think you could rely on me to get the job done. You thought I might turn, go over to their side. Am I right?"

"Wrong," Blade declared.

"Oh, yeah?" Grizzly responded skeptically. "Then why didn't you send me?"

"I didn't want you killed," Blade informed the mutant.

Grizzly did a double take. "Say what?"

"I didn't want you to do something foolish and get yourself killed," Blade mentioned. "You're right about one thing, though. I know how you feel about mutants and humans. You have a low opinion of most humans, but you've set mutants up on a pedestal. Our conversation at the cliffs confirmed your attitude. You were all too ready to justify the atrocities committed by the mutant army of the Doktor."

"What's all this have to do with getting myself killed?" Grizzly queried.

"You're too willing to give mutants the benefit of the doubt, even murderous vermin like the Hatchlings," Blade answered. "If I had sent you after the Hatchlings, there was the chance you might not perform up to par. You might have been careless because you might have attempted to contact them, to talk to them, to find out if they were really as bad as Athena claimed." He paused, "I was concerned the Hatchlings might take advantage of your gullibility and kill you."

"Why should you care what happens to me?" Grizzly asked gruffly.

"You're a member of the Force now," Blade observed. "I'm responsible for your life. Besides," he smirked, "I kind of like you. I'm hoping we'll become friends."

Grizzly stared at the buildings beyond the field, his forehead furrowed. "Well, I'll be!" he muttered.

Blade gazed at the ridge behind them, pleased to note the brilliant golden glow pervading the atmosphere. "Okay. It's not nighttime anymore. The Hatchlings won't have the advantage. We're going

in."

"What about these?" Grizzly questioned, pointing at the M-16, pair of pistols, and the boot knife lying at his feet, Athena's discarded weapons, found when they had searched for her.

"I'm surprised they left those behind," Blade remarked.

"The Hatchlings might be like me," Grizzly said. "I don't like using guns and knives much, not when I have my claws."

Blade nodded at the pile. "Hand me the M-16."

"You're going to use two?"

"The more the deadlier," Blade punned.

"Here you go." Grizzly handed the rifle over.

Blade checked to insure the magazine was fully loaded, then clicked off the safety. He was as ready as he'd ever be. In addition to the two M-16's, he had two 45's under his arms, his Bowies on his hips, and the Panther survival knife under the belt circling his back.

Grizzly had an M-16 and his claws.

"All right," Blade stated. "The orders are simple. Except for the women prisoners, Athena, and Havoc, take down everyone and everything you meet. Got it?"

Grizzly nodded.

"Then let's go." Blade rose from concealment and calmly walked to the field, to a well-defined path leading toward the center of the valley.

He took the path. Grizzly dove on his heels.

A number of figures were moving near the huts.

Blade gripped the M-16's a little tighter.

"Ms. Morris!"

Athena's head snapped up, her eyes opening in shock. She had dozed off! How could she sleep at a time like this! She remembered sitting down on the landing to rest during the quiet hours preceding daylight, fatigued by the hardships of the night before: the ascent of the cliffs, being taken prisoner, and her confrontation with the Spider. She sat with her legs curled under her, her left arm braced against the landing for support.

"Ms. Morris!"

Athena slid to the end of the landing and peered down at Sergeant Havoc. She realized the entire chamber was illuminated by a diffuse light, and she glanced to the left, at a small window high up on the wall. The stars were gone, replaced by an azure sky. Dawn had arrived.



Sergeant Havoc was striving to break free of the adhesive coating the webbing. He had spent the night struggling, without any success, and he was caked with sweat.

"Hi," Athena greeted him. "Sorry I fell asleep on you."

Havoc was frantically heaving his body from side to side. "The Spider!" he shouted. "The Spider!"

Athena looked up, recalling in a rush the words of the Hatchling named Chanc the night before: "Father ate a short while ago. He's saving you for breakfast."

Dear God!

The Spider had not budged all night, had stayed perched on the web on the opposite side of the chamber, apparently in slumberland.

But as Athena stared at the massive monstrosity in stunned horror, she saw it was moving now.

Coming straight toward her!

The figures were men in black, four of them, each armed with, an automatic rifle. They had formed into a straight line between the huts and the field, facing the huts.

"Rise and shine, bitches!" one of them yelled.

Blade was 20 yards from the row of guards when the door to one of the huts opened and a weary woman clothed in virtual rags emerged. The Spirit had smiled on him *sofar*. The guards, engaged in rousing the women to another day of grueling labor, had not noticed the approach of the two Force members.

A second, then a third woman stepped from the hut. They started to form a line of their own.

This must be the typical morning ritual, Blade realized. He leveled the two M-16's in the direction of the guards, the stocks pressed against his sides,

"Move your asses!" one of the men in black bellowed. "We ain't got all morning, you know!"

The door to another hut to the left opened, disgorging four more women.

Blade was within 15 yards of the guards, their backs toward him.

One of the women in line spied the approaching giant and the mutant, and she craned her neck for a better view.

Women were coming from several huts now.

Blade reached a point ten yards from the quartet of men in black.

"What the hell are you looking at?" demanded the spokesman for the guards, gazing at the woman craning her neck.

Nine yards.

The head guard turned, wanting to discover the reason for the woman's odd behavior. His mouth went slack at the sight of the big guy in the black leather vest and the hairy bearish mutant.

"Son of a bitch!" he blurted out, trying to bring his rifle into play.

Alerted by the head guard's exclamation, the attending trio began to rotate.

Blade shot them. All four. He squeezed both triggers simultaneously, sweeping the pair of M-16's in a tight arc from right to left. His slugs stitched patterns across their chests, rupturing blood vessels, spraying crimson from their thrashing forms. They danced and tossed for a full five seconds, while the barrage lasted, and then toppled to the ground. Some of the women were screaming. Others had dropped flat at the first sound of the M-16's. A few were fleeing.

"Take cover!" Blade commanded. "We're here to rescue you!" He was grateful none of the women had been hit. Several had been standing close to the four guards, in the line of fire. He would have preferred to avoid imperiling their lives, but he hadn't had any choice. "Take cover!" he repeated.

Grizzly came up on Blade's right scrutinizing the dead guards. "I think I'll go take a nap. I don't see what you need me for."

Blade ignored the jest, making for the Tower, walking between two huts.

A guard abruptly appeared around the hut to the right, rifle in hand.

Grizzly sent a half-dozen rounds crashing into the guard's head, flinging the man in black to the dirt.

Where are the Hatchlings? Blade asked himself. The hybrids should be counterattacking soon. How many were left? he wondered. Initially, Athena had said there were 19. He'd slain one, and so had Grizzly. They'd found two more, dead, on top of the ridge, possibly terminated by Sergeant Havoc. Which accounted for four. And they'd seen seven Hatchlings climbing the ridge, heading at a rapid clip for the cliffs, undoubtedly sent to apprehend them. Four and seven made 11. So there should-be eight Hatchlings somewhere in the Kingdom.

But where?

A huge door at the base of the Tower suddenly opened, providing a partial answer.

A pair of Hatchlings charged from the Tower, rifles in their hands, firing on the run.

"Look out!" Blade cried, throwing himself to the left, diving for the ground, the Hatchlings' rounds narrowly missing him.

Grizzly had already shifted to the left, crouching and firing from the hip.

The foremost hybrid was hit in the face, its dark orbs dissolving in a shower of lethal lead.

The second Hatchling went to fire at the giant, but it neglected to verify the weapon was off of safety. In the few seconds required to recognize the mistake, it died.

Blade blasted the hybrid with both M-I6's, hearing the smack-smack-smack of the slugs, seeing the Hatchling hurled to the ground in a disjointed heap. He surged to his feet and raced to the Tower door.

Grizzly was a pace behind him.

Blade halted at the doorway and carefully peered, inside. He saw a stairwell off to the right, and he heard the hurried pounding of footsteps from up above.

"What now?" Grizzly demanded, keeping his eyes on the huts.

"One of us should stay here and hold the door to cover our rear," Blade directed, "while one of us should go up the stairs." He expected Grizzly to offer to remain at the doorway.

Instead, the mutant whirled and sprinted for the stairwell.

Blade was about to call out, to clarify his meaning, to tell Grizzly to stay by the door, when five guards pounded into view between two huts to the left.

They spotted him and charged.

What was the Spider doing?

Why had it stopped?

The mutant had circled to the left of the center of the web, bypassing the dip in the middle, traversing the thicker strands nearer the walls, perhaps because it could move faster along the outer rim.

Athena had watched the loathsome creature with baited breath.

And then, inexplicably, the Spider had halted 15 yards shy of the landing.

Havoc was like a madman, bucking and straining in a frenzied effort to break free.

Athena couldn't understand the reason for her reprieve, not until she heard the chatter of gunfire from outside the Tower.

Blade and Grizzly!

It had to be them!

Her elation was eclipsed a moment later when the Spider resumed its approach.

"No!" Havoc shouted in desperation.

Athena stood and stumbled backwards, unable to take her eyes off those eight vile black orbs.

Grizzly took the stairs two at a bound, listening to the thumping of hastening feet on the stairwell above. From the volume, he guessed there were several foes descending en masse.

"Hurry!" someone barked from overhead.

Grizzly recognized the metallic tone. Hatchlings. He stopped, planning his strategy. The spiral stairwell wasn't very wide, able to accommodate just two persons walking abreast between its rails. There wasn't much room to maneuver, which worked in his favor.

He crouched next to the inner railing, his blood racing, waiting in keen anticipation.

The drumming footsteps came closer.

Grizzly was struck by a fleeting moment of indecision. Here he was, primed to plow into some Hatchlings, some fellow mutants, without giving them the opportunity to explain their actions, to justify themselves. He'd seen the women emerge from the huts and heard the derogatory remarks made by the guards, all of which lent credence to Athena's story. Still, a flickering finger of doubt assailed him. But before he could dwell on his uncertainty, the first Hatchling was upon him.

A hybrid with a rifle burst around the curve above.

Grizzly instinctively fired, his hasty shot striking the Hatchling in the forehead and causing the hybrid to trip and plummet over the outer railing toward the bottom of the Tower, over 20 feet below.

Another Hatchling appeared, and this one was unarmed.

Grizzly deliberately dropped the M-16, rising, his claws popping out over his fingernails, wanting to give the hybrid a fair chance.

The Hatchling never missed a beat. It closed on the intruder in one vaulting stride, aiming a vicious swipe of its talons at the bear-man's face.

Grizzly's reflexes were astounding. He ducked under the hybrid's blow and came up with his claws extended, ripping them into the Hatchling's abdomen, then using his immensely powerful shoulder and arm muscles to slice his claws from the hybrid's stomach to its sternum.

The Hatchling screeched as its internal organs squished through the rift in its epidermis.

Grizzly lifted and heaved, sending the hybrid sailing over the railing after its companion.

Two more Hatchlings closed on him from above.

Grizzly spun to face them, pitting his claws against their talons in a savage, primal contest. The confines of the stairwell cramped their assault, slowing them down, as they both tried to get at him at once. He backpedaled down three steps, letting them assume he was retreating.

One of the pair, the Hatchling on the right, took the bait and lunged.

Grizzly twisted, evading the hybrid's streaking talons, and slashed his right-hand claws across the Hatchling's eyes. The hybrid drew back, covering its eyes with its hands, shrieking in torment.

The second Hatchling tried to do likewise to Grizzly.

Grizzly jerked his face to the rear as the Hatchling's talons flashed past his eyes. Before the hybrid could recover, he speared his claws into the middle of the Hatchling's neck, then wrenched his brawny arms outward.

The result was as if the neck had exploded. Flesh and hair flew every which way. Yellowish blood spurting. The hybrid gurgled and went down.

Grizzly finished them off with a quick one-two, imbedding his claws in their foreheads, impaling their brains.

Four down.

How many more?

Grizzly raced up the stairwell, alert for an ambush, but he didn't encounter another Hatchling until he reached a landing at the top of the stairs.

A solitary hybrid stood in front of a large closed door, its four arms casually folded over its chest. "Greetings, stranger."

Grizzly tentatively stepped onto the landing, his gory claws in front of him.

The Hatchling stared at Grizzly's claws. "I see my brothers were unable to stop you."

"I want through that door," Grizzly stated. "I want to look on the other side."

The Hatchling smiled. "That's not possible. Father is busy at the moment."

From beyond the door came the terrified scream of a woman.

Grizzly started toward the hybrid. "I'm warning you..."

The Hatchling unfolded its arms, holding its talons at waist level. "You will not interrupt Father."

"Who says?"

"I do. I am Chanc, and I will defend my father with my dying breath!" So saying, Chanc sprang.

Blade raised the M-16's and cut loose, downing two of the five onrushing guards in the blinking of an eye. He pivoted to shoot yet another.

The M-16's went empty,

Blade ducked into the Tower, to the left, flinging the useless M-16's aside and drawing the Colt 45's from their shoulder holsters. He darted into the open again, bent over, the pistols held in front of him.

The three guards were still coming. They opened up as soon as the giant appeared.

Blade felt a burning sensation in his left shoulder, and something creased his right side, and then he was firing the Colts, both guns together, aiming two shots at each guard.

The nearest one was hit in the head and catapulted onto his back. The second took two rounds in the chest and went down. And in a geyser of crimson, the third guard lost his nose and his left cheek.

The abrupt quiet seemed unnatural.

Blade straightened, watching the fallen guards for any indication of life. Satisfied they were dead, he turned toward the Tower, intending to help Grizzly if necessary, when a commotion to the east arrested his attention. He looked up.

The seven Hatchlings he'd seen earlier hurrying up the ridge had returned! And they were not more than 30 feet off, closing rapidly.

Athena gasped when she backed into the door.

There was nowhere to go!

The Spider had reached the edge of the landing and paused, its eyes roving over her body.

Athena placed her palms against the door, trembling, feeling dizzy. She wanted to shut her eyes, to take refuge within herself, but her fear-filled gaze was glued to the gruesome genetic deviate.

The mutant's leading appendages glided onto the landing.

"Leave her alone, bastard!" Havoc was shouting. "Take me! Me!"

The Spider slowly eased its head and front segment onto the landing.

Athena lost control. She tossed her head back and screamed at the top of her lungs, venting her despair and her terror.

Four of the Spider's limbs were now on the landing

Athena knew what was next, and she sank to her knees, tears forming in the corners of her eyes, tears of frustration and severe annoyance at herself for being dunderheaded enough to return to the Kingdom when she had been safe and sound.

Something slammed into the door, startling her, jarring the door to its hinges.

Now what?

Athena glanced over her left shoulder, perplexed, wondering what new menace was about to assail her.

And the Spider was on her, its two front limbs, capped by talons identical to the Hatchlings', grasping her wrists and dragging her onto her back, pinning her to the landing.

"No!" she cried, kicking her legs, trying to strike the Spider with her boots.

The Spider shifted its bulk, aligning its body.

Athena tensed, knowing from experience what to expect. The monster would ease its rear segment onto the rim of the landing, and a slit would open on its underside. And then its... organ... would emerge, a slender whitish rodlike affair not much bigger than a man's. Her pants would be ripped off, and the Spider would...

The landing door rocked to a tremendous blow, shaking the landing itself, and a hairline crack appeared down the center.

Athena's hopes soared. It couldn't be!

But it was.

A series of pounding thumps shook the door, the crack widening.

The Spider had forgotten its victim. The eight emotionless eyes were regarding the disintegrating door with an aloof detachment.

Athena unexpectedly found herself released, and she quickly slid to the left, to the very edge of the landing, watching the door.

"Athena?" Havoc yelled. "Athena?"

The door suddenly crashed inward, splitting into two sections. And there, framed in the doorway, awesome and mighty in his rage, was Grizzly. Behind him on the floor was a decapitated Hatchling. He glanced at Athena, then at the Spider, his eyes simmering points of fury.

The Spider moved backwards until it was balanced on the rim.

Grizzly strode onto the landing, his facial muscles twitching. "You!" he bellowed. "You're no better than the humans!"

The Spider brought its two front legs up in a defensive motion.

"I was wrong!" Grizzly practically shrieked, and then he raised his head and roared.

The Spider seemed to recoil.

Grizzly's eyes narrowed as he brought up his hands, the fingers rigid. His claws snapped out. And then he did something so strange, so inconsistent with the circumstances, that the effect was immeasurably more chilling than anything else he could have done. .

He grinned.

Athena would never forget what transpired next for as long as she lived. She saw Grizzly cover the distance to the Spider in two blurred bounds, and then he vaulted into the air, going for the Spider's head, for those eight black eyes. He landed on the Spider's face above the vertical mouth, the claws on his left hand sinking into the Spider's flesh and affording purchase as he swung his right arm again and again and again, the five inch claws on his right hand tearing the Spider's eyes to shreds within seconds. The Spider reached up with its two front appendages, striving to tear Grizzly loose, but although it buried its talons in Grizzly's broad shoulders it was unable to dislodge him.

Athena was spellbound.

The Spider's limbs were waving wildly as it tried to slide from the landing. Incredibly, it lost its footing and pitched from view, Grizzly still ripping at its head.

Athena scurried to the edge of the landing and stared downward.

The battling mutants had landed on the web about twelve feet from Sergeant Havoc. The Spider was partially on its left side, endeavoring to pry Grizzly from its head. But Grizzly seemed impervious to the Spider's rain of blows. Like a mutant possessed, Grizzly slashed and slashed and slashed.

Athena surprised herself by laughing as new tears, tears of pure joy and relief, moistened her eyes. She watched, enrapt, as Grizzly carved the Spider's head to shreds, and she knew she had never, ever, witnessed such a beautiful sight.

She laughed some more.

Thank the Spirit the Hatchlings were unarmed!

Blade aimed the Colts, the pistols booming, and the nearest hybrid was shot through the forehead. He managed to shoot two more, expending his ammunition, in the process, and he tossed the Colts to the ground and drew his prized Bowies. The blades gleamed in the bright sunlight as the four remaining Hatchlings surged toward him.

Come and get it!

Blade dodged aside as the first of the four tried to gouge out his stomach, and the Bowies flashed as he cut the side of the Hatchlings neck open with a left-hand strike, then stabbed his right Bowie into the hybrid's ear.

The Hatchling stiffened and toppled forward.

Blade wrenched his right Bowie free in time to counter the assault of the next Hatchling, parrying a swipe aimed at his groin by blocking the talons with the flat of his Bowie.

The Hatchling hastily retreated and was promptly joined by its two fellows. They wisely stayed beyond the giant's reach, slowly circling him.

Blade crouched, trying to keep all of them in his line of vision. If he could keep them at bay, he stood a chance. His greater height and reach worked in his favor. But if one of them got under his arms and tackled his legs, he was in serious trouble.

Which was exactly what happened.

One of the Hatchlings feigned an attack, pretending to step forward but stopping in midstride.

Blade pivoted to thwart the perceived threat, and one of the other hybrids leaped, springing in from the right and wrapping its four arms around his legs. Before he could hope to react, he went down, landing on his left side.

The Hatchlings were on him in an instant.

Blade became the focus of a veritable whirlwind of slicing talons and Bowies. His arms, legs, and torso were ripped again and again, but he gave as good as he got, delivering stroke after stroke. He tried to roll erect, but there was a Hatchling in his path, and he reversed direction as his right shoulder was torn open.



The Hatchlings were hissing like incensed vipers.

Blade lunged to his knees as a hybrid tried to impale his throat, and he buried his left Bowie to the hilt in the mutant's neck, then twisted the knife.

Gasping, the Hatchling jerked free of the dripping blade and tottered backwards.

Another Hatchling went for the giant's eyes.

Blade felt talons ripping into his right temple. Instead of pulling away, as the hybrid would expect, he leaned toward the Hatchling, bringing his right Bowie up and in, sinking the ten-inch blade into the hybrid's abdomen.

The Hatchling threw itself to the left, the Bowie lodged in its stomach.

Blade lost his grip on the slippery handle. He surged to his feet, holding the left Bowie in front of him.

The Hatchling with the Bowie in its gut was to his left, doubled over, wheezing.

The hybrid with the ragged hole in its neck was to his right, upright but wobbly.

And the final Hatchling was before him, seeking an opening.

Blade slowly eased his right hand behind his back, his fingers closing on the Panther. The Hatchling was watching the left Bowie, undoubtedly assuming it was his sole remaining weapon. Blade made a mock swipe with the left Bowie, forcing the Hatchling to veer to his right. The hybrid was still concentrating on the left Bowie when Blade swung the Panther in a brutal arc, driving the point into the Hatchling's right eye.

The hybrid frantically retreated, but not before the Panther was imbedded all the way into its eye.

Blade tore the Panther loose.

The Hatchling fell onto its stomach, convulsing and tittering. Blade glanced at the two injured hybrids, amazed they were on their feet. He had to finish them off and find Grizzly.

But someone beat him to the punch.

There was the blast of a heavy-caliber revolver and the crack of an M-16, and the pair of Hatchlings went down, each shot through the head.

Blade tamed in the direction of the shots, to the east, a smile creasing his haggard features.

They were standing 15 feet away, both attired in buckskins, the Cavalryman with a smoking Hombre in his right hand, the Flathead with an M-16.

"Thanks for saving some for us," Boone quipped, walking over and inspecting the Hatchlings to verify they were dead. His M-16 was slung over his left shoulder.

"Are you okay, Blade?" Thunder queried in concern, stepping to the Warrior's side;

"Fine," Blade said, realizing he was drenched with blood from a dozen wounds. "What about you?"

"I am well," Thunder replied. "The Spirit-In-All-Things was not ready for my soul. I think I had a concussion, but I am recovering."

"We've got to get inside," Blade said. "Grizzly is in there, and maybe—"

"Not anymore," Boone interrupted, motioning with his Hombre toward the Tower entrance.

Blade faced the Tower.

Grizzly was in the doorway, caked with yellow from head to toe. Gore was plastered to his fur. He came outside, surveying the littered bodies, then looked at Blade. "And here I thought you were goofing off while I did all the work."

"The Spider?" Blade asked.

Grizzly beamed. "Anyone for roast Spider for lunch?"

Havoc and Athena appeared, both squinting in the sunlight, Havoc with his right arm draped over her shoulders, supporting her.

"Are you two all right?" Blade inquired. "I'm fine, sir," Sergeant Havoc answered, releasing Athena.

Athena nodded. "Just a little weak, is all. I think everything caught up with me at once as we were coming down the stairwell." She took a deep breath. "I'm feeling better already! And I haven't been this happy in ages!"

Sergeant Havoc scanned the huts, "What's next, sir?"

Blade straightened. "We round up the women, then set our charges." He stared at the Tower. "I don't want one stick standing when we're through."

Sergeant Havoc nodded. "There won't be," he assured the Warrior.

"I wish I could have been here," Boone commented.

"I'm glad I was," Grizzly remarked, involved in picking bits of flesh and black hair from his fur. He extended the claws on his right hand and critically examined them. "Damn! Look at all this gunk on my claws!"

"Thanks for cutting me loose from the web," Havoc mentioned. "I owe you."

"And I owe you for saving my life," Athena stated sincerely.

"Don't make a fuss about it," Grizzly said brusquely. "I was just doing my job." He looked at Blade and grinned. "I like this line of work. Can we do this again real soon?"

What was that noise?

Kraft came awake with a start, momentarily confused, wondering where he was. And then he remembered and he sat up, glancing at the dead Hatchling, his eyes narrowing to minimize the glare from the bright sunlight.

Bright sunlight?

Kraft peered at the sky, surprised to see the sun well above the eastern horizon. Sunup had been hours ago! He sluggishly stood, a dull ache pervading his body. Squinting at the sun again, he mentally noted the proper directions for north, south, east, and west.

But he still didn't know which way to go.

Kraft frowned, facing north, then south, debating.

And from the south came the clue he needed. A succession of thunderous explosions shattered the stillness of the forest.

They could only mean one thing.

Kraft gripped his M-16 and hastened to the south.

## EPILOGUE

Blade was in his chair, seated behind his desk with his boots propped on the edge, reflecting on their first mission. Despite the setbacks and the blunders, they had succeeded, they had accomplished the mission.

The Force had been back at the compound for two weeks, the members enjoying a much-deserved rest-and-rehabilitation period. Blade had demanded several weeks off for everyone to recuperate, and General Gallagher had reluctantly complied.

What would be their next assignment? Blade wondered.

Whatever it was, they would face the challenge as a team, as a legitimate fighting unit. The confrontation with the Spider had brought them closer together, with one exception. While Havoc and Athena couldn't seem to compliment Grizzly enough, Kraft's resentment of the mutant was stronger than ever. Kraft had refused to talk about his experiences after he'd disappeared, and Blade was curious to learn the reason.

Even Thunder, after lengthy discussions with Sergeant Havoc and Athena, had accepted Grizzly into the ranks. Blade recalled the conversation he'd had with the Flathead about omens. Thunder had been drastically wrong. Instead of being a bad omen, Grizzly's presence had been essential to the completion of the mission.

Speaking of omens...

Blade suddenly remembered the California flag with the grizzly bear depicted in the center. If he didn't know better, he might be inclined to believe the flag had been an omen for him. But omens were only superstitions.

Weren't they?

A jeep rumbled to a stop outside.

Blade stretched, thinking of Athena. Why had General Gallagher permitted her to recover from her ordeal at the Force compound? Why had the general gone to all the trouble to have a temporary wall installed in the barracks, just so she could have some privacy and enjoy a small room of her own? Gallagher's actions didn't make any sense.

Without any advance notice, in strolled the man in question.

"Hello, Blade," General Gallagher greeted the Warrior cheerily.

"You're in a good mood," Blade noted.

"I should be," Gallagher said. "The governor is pleased at how the mission turned out. Even the Federation Council is happy with the results. And the press has been eating up the story. Having Athena supply releases to the media was a stroke of inspiration."

"I'd pat you on the back, but your hands are in the way," Blade remarked, grinning.

"What's wrong with good publicity?" Gallagher queried.

"Nothing," Blade stated. "Publicize all you want. If it will make you happy, why don't you find a writer and have a book written about our exploits?" He laughed at the ludicrous suggestion.

General Gallagher's face seemed to light up. "A book! Why didn't I think of that?"

Blade shook his head in disbelief. "I don't care what you do, so long as you leave us alone for another week. I like this peace and quiet. I get to see my family each night. And I don't want anything to ruin it."

General Gallagher cleared his throat. "I understand. But there is a little matter I need to bring up."

Blade stared at the officer. "Is it a major problem?"

"I don't see it as a major problem, no," Gallagher said.

"A minor problem then?" Blade inquired.

Gallagher shook his head. "No. You see, Governor Melnick has already cleared it, and the Federation Council say they will agree if you do." Blade sat up. "Agree to what?"

Gallagher appeared reluctant to broach the subject. "Maybe I should come back another time."

"What's wrong with right now?" Blade demanded.

"I should catch you when you're in a better mood," Gallagher mentioned. "What's wrong with my mood?" Blade questioned irritably.

"You see?" General Gallagher said. "If I bring it up now, I know you'll blow your top."

"I won't blow my top," Blade assured him. "What is it?"

Gallagher shook his head. "No. I'll come back."

Blade suddenly stood, leaning his clenched fists on the desk. "I want to know what it is, and I want to know *now*!"

"Are you sure you won't blow your top?" Gallagher asked.

"I'm sure!" Blade vowed.

"Okay." Gallagher smiled at the Warrior. "How would you feel about adding a new member to the Force?"

"Is that it? You want to add a new member to the Force?" Blade asked.

"That's it," Gallagher confirmed.

"What's the big deal? We need a new member to replace Spader," Blade said. "If you have someone in..." He abruptly stopped, insight dawning.

"I do have someone in mind," Gallagher said.

"That's why you let her stay here?" Blade questioned in amazement. "You must have planned this weeks ago!"

General Gallagher grinned. "Then you like the idea?"

"You're nuts."

"What's wrong with the idea? Athena would make a great addition to the Force," Gallagher observed.

"No," Blade said.

"Why the hell not?" Gallagher inquired angrily.

"Because I said so, and I'm the head of the Force," Blade noted. "We may receive our assignments from you, but I have the last word."

"Just give the idea some thought," Gallagher urged. "It will grow on you."

"No."

"Come on! For me?"

"No."

General Gallagher sat down in the chair facing the desk. "I think it's a great idea. And I'm going to stay right here until you agree! There's nothing you can say or do that'll make me leave!"

Blade slowly sat down, then reached for the intercom linking his office to the barracks. He pressed the appropriate button, activating a buzzer at the other end.

"Yes?" Boone responded.

"Boone, is Grizzly there?" Blade asked. The mutant had been persuaded to take up residence in the barracks.

"Yeah. He's here. Do you want to talk to him?" Boone responded.

"Send him to my office. There's a job I have for him," Blade directed.

"Will do." Boone clicked off.

General Gallagher had a worried expression. "You're bluffing. You wouldn't dare!"

Blade leaned back in his chair, smirking. "Try me."

Gallagher glanced at the intercom, then the doorway. He nervously licked his lips. "I don't see why you have to involve Grizzly in this."

Blade didn't bother to comment.

"Grizzly doesn't have any say in the matter," Gallagher noted.

"Grizzly has taken quite a liking to Athena," Blade disclosed. "They're the best of friends. I wonder how he will feel about you wanting to put her life on the line?"

Gallagher stood. "This is dirty pool."

Blade glanced at his clock. "He probably won't get here for another minute. If you hurry you'll just miss him."

"You haven't heard the last of this!" Gallagher promised, then stalked from the room.

Blade was still laughing when Grizzly arrived,

"You wanted to see me?" Grizzly asked.

Blade stared into the mutant's eyes. "Has anyone ever told you you're a good omen?"