

CHAPTER ONE

Evil forces were abroad.

Red Hawk stepped from the comfortable warmth of his family's lodge into the chill of the October night, drew his brown blanket tighter around his slim shoulders, and lifted his craggy face to the stars. A westerly breeze stirred his shoulder-length gray hair. He looked to the south, in the direction of the Fraser River, his blue eyes narrowing when he spied the flickering light in the distance. Could it be a campfire? he wondered. No. The light was too large.

The raven had been right.

He moved several yards from the cedar house, his moccasins scuffing the earth underfoot, and inhaled deeply. An abrupt, inexplicable fear welled within him, a fear for the safety of his loved ones, and he instinctively raised his thin arms to the heavens, calling on the power of the Everywhere Spirit to compose his mind and soothe his soul. He heard the door opening behind him and quickly lowered his arms, but not quickly enough. She had seen.

"Grandfather, what are you doing?"

Red Hawk turned and regarded his granddaughter affectionately, although he knew what was coming. "Getting some fresh air, Goldenrod."

"Don't call me that, Grandfather. You know I prefer Jeannie," she admonished him. In her left hand she held a lantern.

"Jeannie is a white man's name," Red Hawk said, staring at her yellow blouse and green pants, both obtained at Ostman's Trading Post, and frowning. "Goldenrod is the name your mother gave you, and Goldenrod is the name I will call you until the day I die."

"I know," Jeannie stated, and sighed. "Believe me, I know." She was a stout woman, 32 years of age, who had spent all of her life on the Canadian frontier, and whose rugged, forthright character had been forged by the hardships of living in British Columbia. "Now what are you doing out here?"

"Your mother would rise from her grave if she knew that you had forsaken the ways of our people," Red Hawk stated, ignoring her question.

"I have not—" Jeannie began.

"The Kutenai have always been a proud people," Red Hawk went on. "We have a heritage to be proud of. Even when the whites dominated us and forced us to live on reservations, we kept our traditions alive. The ways of the Kutenai will live forever."

"I'm sure they will," Jeannie said.

"In the ancient times, before the whites even came across the Atlantic Ocean in their funny boats, the Kutenai were a great tribe. Southeastern British Columbia, northwestern Montana, and northern Idaho were all ours," Red Hawk declared, "And thanks to the white man's war, all that land will be ours again one day."

"World War Three was not just a white man's war," Jeannie observed, "All people everywhere were involved one way or another."

"Not a white man's war?" Red Hawk repeated, and chuckled. "Who started the war? White men. Who fought the war? White men. Who destroyed whole cities with weapons that rained fire clouds from the sky? The whites."

"Nuclear missiles. You know as well as I do that they were called nuclear missiles and bombs," Jeannie mentioned, brushing her black bangs aside with her right hand. "Why do you insist on doing this?"

"Doing what?"

"Don't play the innocent with me. Grandfather. When will you stop living in the past? It's true the Kutenai were able to leave the reservations, after the white governments collapsed, but we will never own all the land we once did. There aren't enough of us, for one thing, and we are scattered over a wide area," Jeannie said. She glanced at their modest home. "We should be thankful for the blessings we have, for a roof over our heads, our health, and our family. Accept the here and now, Grandfather, and stop wishing for the old ways and old days to return. They never will."

Red Hawk shook his head sadly. "What is the world coming to when the granddaughter of a shaman speaks in such a manner?"

"Don't start."

"But then, I should expect such talk from someone who wears clothes made by whites, who took a white name for her own, and who took a white as—"

Jeannie walked up to him and poked him in the chest with her right forefinger. "Don't you dare insult George again! I won't stand for it. George is only half white, and you know that. No man, even a full-blooded Kutenai, could be a better husband or a more caring father. I love him, Grandfather, and I resent your attitude toward him." She paused, the lantern casting a harsh yellow glare on her angry features. "I wear the clothes I do because they're comfortable. Not everyone enjoys wearing buckskins like you do. Not everyone believes that everything the whites do, everything the whites touch, is evil. And I stopped using my given name because I never liked being named after a plant. You know all this," she concluded testily.

Red Hawk lowered his gaze to the ground.

"And now you're going to pout again," Jeannie said.

"A shaman of the Kutenai does not pout."

"Then what would you call it?"

"My heart is heavy because my granddaughter shows me such disrespect."

"In other words, you're pouting."

"Who am I to argue with one who knows all things?"

"What's the use?" Jeannie snapped. "Talking to you is a waste of time." She pivoted toward the door, then stopped. "Wait a minute. You never answered my question."

Red Hawk said nothing.

"What are you doing out here? It's late, and you should be in bed."

"I sense a great evil."

"Your shaman powers again, right?"

Red Hawk nodded. "The spirit of the raven whispered in my ear."

"And what did the raven whisper this time?"

"An evil comes on the wind from the west," Red Hawk informed her solemnly. "The lives of many will be lost."

"I trust not anyone we know," Jeannie said with a tinge of sarcasm in her tone.

Red Hawk nodded.

"I hope I'm not as morbid as you when I'm eighty-four," Jeannie remarked. She happened to look over her right shoulder. , "What's that?"

"What?" Red Hawk asked innocently.

"That light," Jeannie said, moving past him and studying the reddish-orange glow.

"We should go in," Red Hawk suggested. "The air is chill."

"It's a fire!" Jeannie exclaimed.

"A campfire," Red Hawk said, taking a stride toward the house.

"No!" Jeannie responded, "It's a fire at Ostman's Trading Post!"

"It's too far away to tell," Red Hawk commented.

Jeannie spun and hurried inside, and ten seconds later returned with her husband, a stocky man wearing a blue flannel shirt and faded wool trousers.

Red Hawk smiled. "Jeannie is seeing things, George."

George Roe stared at the light for a moment. "It's a fire at Ostman's Trading Post," he stated.

"That's what I said," Jeannie agreed.

"There's nothing we can do about it," Red Hawk said.

"I must go there," George declared.

"Now?" Jeannie asked.

"Tonight?" Red Hawk chimed in.

"It's only a mile and a quarter," George noted. "We're one of Ostman's closest neighbors. I must go."

"What about the mutants?" Jeannie remarked.

"What about your family?" Red Hawk added.

"We run the risk of encountering mutants at any time, day or night," George said. "And all of you will be safe in our house. The two of you know how to use a gun."

"Wait until morning," Jeannie urged. "The trip is too dangerous at night."

"I've lived in these woods for thirty-five years, haven't I?" George responded. "I've trapped and hunted from one end of this territory to the other, and I know this land like the back of my hand. I'll be fine."

"You are foolish to leave your wife and children," Red Hawk asserted.

"Why should I worry? They'll have you to protect them," George said sarcastically. He hastened into the ledge.

"I can see where you get your disrespect from," Red Hawk said to his granddaughter.

Jeannie frowned and gazed at the far-off blaze. "I don't like this, Grandfather. There has been talk of pirates on the Fraser."

"There is always talk of pirates on the Fraser," Red Hawk replied. "Where did you hear the latest report?"

"At Ostman's Trading Post last week," Jeannie disclosed,

"From who? One of those no-accounts who sit next to the wood-burning stove all day and swap tall tales? Their idle tongues have little better to do than spread gossip. The week before last they were all excited because a hunter thought he saw a mutant near Bear Mountain. Last week it was the pirate story again. And next week they'll be talking about a Sasquatch near Harrison Lake."

Jeannie nodded to the south. "If they're still alive."

Red Hawk's thin lips compressed. "George should not go."

"He's made up his mind."

"Stop him."

"I can't. He has an obligation to Ostman."

"He has a greater obligation to his family," Red Hawk noted.

"Ostman is our friend. He would come here if he saw a fire."

"Ostman is all right for a white man," Red Hawk admitted.

They stood silently for a minute, watching the flaring flames. "Are the children asleep?" Red Hawk inquired to distract his granddaughter from her anxious thoughts.

"Yes, Jimmy dozed off a half hour ago."

"He didn't ask me to tell him a story," Red Hawk mentioned.

"He rarely does anymore."

"Jimmy is almost twelve. He's outgrown bedtime stories."

"When I was a boy I always liked to listen to the stories my grandfather told me. He knew of the old ways, the ways of our people before the coming of the whites. He was a shaman, a man of mighty power, like his father and his father's father," Red Hawk said, and sighed. "I am the last shaman of the Kutenai."

"You don't know that for a fact. There may be others."

"Where?"

"As you pointed out, there were many Kutenai in the States before the war. Perhaps there is a shaman among them."

"I would know if there was."

"You and your magic powers."

"The powers of a shaman only seem like magic to those who are ignorant of the ancient Kutenai ways."

"Are you calling me ignorant?"

"Never. Merely uneducated."

"Sounds like the same thing to me."

Red Hawk was spared the necessity of explaining his comment by the timely appearance of George, who held a Winchester 30-30 in his left hand.

"Is that all you're taking?" Jeannie asked.

"I want to travel light," George said, and kissed her on the right cheek. "Keep the kids in until I get back. I'll try to return by noon."

"Oh, wonderful," Jeannie said, grinning crookedly. "Leave me cooped up with the three brats and Grandfather—"

"I am going with George," Red Hawk announced.

"What?" George responded.

"Did an earwig crawl into your ears and eat your eardrums?" Red Hawk queried. "I am going with you."

"Forget it."

"We will leave immediately," Red Hawk declared, draping his blanket over his granddaughter's left shoulder and stepping toward the forest.

"Hold it," Jeannie said, grabbing his left forearm. "You're not going anywhere."

"Your husband will need me," Red Hawk stated.

"Her husband has a name," George observed. "And I don't want you tagging along. I intend to travel fast."

"I am going."

"Grandfather, you're being stubborn and foolish," Jeannie said. "The woods are no place to be after dark."

"I will be safe. The Everywhere Spirit will protect me," Red Hawk assured her, and tried to move forward.

"Ned" Jeannie stated, restraining him.

"Let him go," George unexpectedly declared.

Jeannie glanced at her husband, perplexed. "What?"

"The trails are not easy to follow at night. Once he sees that he can't keep up with me, he'll come right back here."

"Are you sure?" Jeannie queried, reluctant to release her grandfather's arm,

"Trust me," George said, then turned and headed off at a brisk clip, crossing the cleared section in front of the lodge and taking the narrow path bearing to the south. Even without the aid of the moon, even in the inky gloom of the forest at ten o'clock at night, he unerringly knew the correct course to take. After covering 30 yards he came to the crest of the low ridge on which their home was situated and looked over his left shoulder, grinning at the sight of Red Hawk's thin figure dimly visible ten yards to his rear. Confident he could easily outdistance the oldster, he hiked over the crest and bore toward the Fraser River.

It was time to teach the shaman a lesson. For years George had tolerated Red Hawk's constant criticism of the white race and abided the medicine man's bragging about alleged powers and communion with the spirits. Red Hawk was full of so much hot air, and George took delight in finally having an opportunity to put the old man in his place. George respected the old ways as much as anyone. Although he could only claim direct Kutenai descent on his mother's side, he was genuinely proud of the heritage bequeathed by his ancestors. But the ancient methods did not apply to a world still recovering from a holocaust of global proportions.

His mind drifted as he wound between the trees and skirted boulders, and he thought of the stories he had heard about life prior to World War Three. There had been a unified Canadian government back then, and the citizens of the Canadian provinces had lived in peace and enjoyed a general prosperity.

How different everything was.

One hundred and five years could change a lot.

The mass panic during the war, the hysteria generated by the spread of the wind-borne radioactive fallout, the food riots in the cities and towns, and the rapid spread of anarchy had all contributed to the governmental collapse and been responsible for reducing Canada to the status of a frontier culture. Now genetic deviates, mutations spawned by the nuclear and chemical warfare toxins unleashed on the environment, were commonplace. Outlaw bands roamed the countryside. Pirates were reportedly operating all along the West Coast. Many of the larger metropolises were ravaged wastelands where savage gangs fought for control and brutally murdered anyone who strayed onto their turf.

All in all, George was grateful to be living deep in the woods, far from any major city, where he could provide for his family's needs by hunting, fishing, and trapping, and where there were fewer raiders than in the more populated areas. The nearest community of any size was Harrison Hot Springs, situated on the southern shore of Harrison Lake, approximately five miles to the northwest of the Roe lodge. There were also a dozen hardy families, mainly farmers, dwelling in Agassiz to the west,

George halted and studied his back trail, smiling triumphantly when Red Hawk failed to materialize. Chuckling to himself, he resumed his trek. After 200 yards he came to a wide field; and as he was about to step from cover he detected movement on the far side and froze. His brown eyes narrowed, and he was able to distinguish a huge form blending into the forest beyond.

A bear perhaps?

He hefted the 30-30 and forged on. Bears were more of a nuisance than a serious threat. The grizzlies were unpredictable, although they generally left human beings alone, and black bears invariably fled on sight. He doubted the bear would attack, and even if it did he could kill it easily with his Winchester. Still, his nerves were on edge as he tramped through the knee-high grass. Two-thirds of the way across he stopped and lifted his head, sniffing loudly.

What was that awful stench?

Puzzled, he attempted to identify the rank odor, which reminded him of the scent of rotten meat but was not quite the same. He shook his head and hurried to the trees, and there the stench was even stronger, almost nauseating. He'd never smelled anything like it. Nervously fingering the trigger of his rifle, he increased his pace, alert to the sounds of the night. He could hear insects, and off to the east an owl hooted. Overall, the forest was tranquil.

So why was he uneasy?

Mentally chiding himself for being a nitwit, George followed the trail to a meadow, then angled slightly to the southeast and made a beeline for the Fraser River. He lost all track of time, concentrating on reaching the trading post rapidly. Another stretch of woodland

remained to be traversed. Decades of wilderness life, of wresting a living from the forest, of surviving by his ability to move stealthily, enabled him to hike quietly toward his goal without disrupting the patterns of the night creatures.

The breeze from the west picked up.

George slowed when he came within several hundred yards of Ostman's Trading Post. The unmistakable aroma of burnt wood and smoke reached his nostrils. He proceeded cautiously. There was always the possibility that the fire had been started accidentally, but he doubted such was the case. And if the trading post had been destroyed by bandits, those responsible might be nearby.

Streaks of orange and yellow appeared ahead. Bending over, George darted from trunk to trunk, recalling the lay of the land. The forest would end 30 yards from the rear of the two-story log structure. Between the front of Ostman's establishment and the north bank of the Fraser was a sloping lawn 25 yards wide containing a corral for Ostman's four horses. At the bank was a wooden dock for canoes and boats. He approached the edge of the woods, treading lightly. At the last tree he peered around the bole and beheld the trading post in ruins, its roof gone and two walls down, with random flames shooting skyward and two enormous charred beams rearing above the wreckage. Engrossed in the fire, he didn't notice the figure standing halfway between him and the burning building until the person shifted position. His eyes widened and he inadvertently rose, shocked more by the sight of the familiar buckskins than the ravaged trading post. "Red Hawk!" he blurted out.

The shaman turned, saw him, and gave a little wave.

George ran to his in-law's side. "What are you doing here?" he demanded in amazement.

Red Hawk watched sparks spiral aloft from the embers of the west wall. "I told you I was coming, remember?" he answered matter-of-factly.

"That's not what I meant!" George declared. "How did you get here ahead of me?"

"I took a shortcut."

George shook his head in disbelief. "There is no shortcut you could have taken."

Red Hawk looked at George and grinned. "I'm here, aren't I?"

"But how did you do it?" George asked, feeling supremely frustrated and bewildered.

"Do you want the truth?"

"Of course."

"You won't believe me," Red Hawk predicted.

"I'll believe you," George said gruffly, annoyed at the game the shaman was playing. "How did you get here before me?"

"I called on the Everywhere Spirit, and a Sasquatch came and carried me."

"A Sasquatch?"

"One of the hairy giants, the race that inhabited this continent long before the first red man crossed the Bering land bridge."

"I know what a Sasquatch is," George snapped.

"All our red brothers know about them, The Bella Coola call the hairy ones Boqs. The Micmac have named them Gugwes. The Kutchin and the Slobodin know them as Nakani. The Lillooet say they are Hailo Laux. And our red brethren of Nootka Sound call them Matlox," Red Hawk detailed, and sighed. "Our forefathers tried to tell the whites about the hairy ones, but the whites didn't believe them. I have never been able to understand the whites. They won't believe anyone except other whites, and they are all the biggest pack of liars ever—"

"Enough!" George interrupted. "This is not the time or place for another of your biased history lessons. I asked you a simple question. How did you get here before me?"

"And I answered you."

"A Sasquatch brought you?"

"There must be an echo here."

"And you expect me to believe you?"

"No. I said that you wouldn't."

George glared at the shaman. "I'm tired of your tall tales. When we get home, we'll have a long talk."

"About the Sasquatch?"

"About the stories you invent. There is no such thing as a Sasquatch. I've lived in the forest all my life, and I've never seen one."

"And you will not see them until your soul is in harmony with the Everywhere Spirit."

"Like yours, I suppose?"

"Harmony is the key to the power of a shaman."

"Bullshit!" George declared angrily, and turned toward the Trading Post. "Have you seen any sign of Ostman?"

"All I see is the giant."

"Don't start with the Sasquatch garbage again."

"I am not talking about the Sasquatch. I mean the other giant."

George glanced at the shaman. "What giant?"

"There," Red Hawk said, pointing to the west.

George pivoted, the Winchester at his side, his skepticism and irritation making him careless and compounding his astonishment when he spied the titan coming toward them. "Look out!" he cried, and swept the barrel up, his finger closing on the trigger.

CHAPTER TWO

Like a thunderbolt out of the blue, George Roe was flabbergasted by two nearly simultaneous developments. First, Red Hawk batted the Winchester aside at the instant George fired, causing the shot to plow into the ground. Second, he felt something hard, something sharp, jab his neck, pricking his throat, and a low, rapsy voice spoke into his left ear. "Try that again, sucker, and you're dead meat!" George froze, thoroughly confounded, taking in the awesome sight of the giant striding toward him. The man stood seven feet tall and was endowed with a herculean physique, his bulging shoulder and arm muscles rippling with every motion, his body clothed in a black leather vest, fatigue pants, and black combat boots. In the giant's brawny hands was an enormous machine gun, and crisscrossing his broad chest were a pair of ammo belts. Strapped around his waist, each snug in a sheath on either hip, were two Bowie knives, and resting in a shoulder holster under each arm was a pistol. The flickering light from the flames revealed the giant's dark hair and gray eyes.

Red Hawk smiled and took a step forward. "Greetings, friend. I have been expecting you." The giant halted a yard away. "Expecting me?" "Yes. The spirit of the bear told me you would come to help us."

"Who are you?" the giant questioned.

"Red Hawk, shaman of the Kutenai."

"My name is Blade, and I'm the head of the Freedom Force," the giant stated, and looked at George. He nodded once.

Relief washed over George as the object pressing against his throat was removed, and he inhaled deeply.

"Drop the gun," Blade commanded.

George promptly complied, and the rifle clattered as it struck the earth.

"Who are you?" Blade asked.

"George. George Roe."

"What are you doing here?" Blade inquired.

George indicated the trading post with a jerk of his right thumb. "We saw the fire and wanted to investigate."

"Were you the ones who contacted us for help?" Blade probed.

"That was me," Red Hawk said.

"You?" Blade quizzed.

"Yes. I prayed to the Everywhere Spirit for a good to destroy the evil, and you and your people were sent."

"Pay no attention to him, mister," George stated. "He's an idiot. We didn't call you."

"Somebody did, buster," said the low voice behind Roe. George looked over his right shoulder and almost fainted.

The speaker was a mutation, a hybrid of human and bestial traits, a man with bearlike features. He was five feet eight in height, and his entire body was covered with a coat of short, light brown hair. His torso was exceptionally thick, his shoulders broad and powerful. Except for a black loincloth, he was naked. His face was startling, a fascinating combination of human and ursine characteristics; a pointed chin, elongated nostrils, concave cheeks, deep, dark eyes, and a receding brow were all framed by a pair of small circular ears. He held his right hand up and growled. "Whoever it was better have had a damn good reason," he said, exposing tapered teeth.

Stupefied, George gaped at the mutant's hand, realizing there had been more than one object pressed against his throat. The bear-man possessed five-inch-long claws, one on each finger and thumb. As George watched, the mutation relaxed his rigid fingers, slowly and the claws mysteriously retracted.

"What's the matter, chuckles?" the hybrid asked. "You look like you're about to pee in your pants."

Red Hawk snorted.

"If the two of you didn't call us, then who did?" Blade queried, raising his left arm and pumping it twice.

Two men walked into view from the north, both with M-16s trained on Red Hawk and George Roe. The taller of the duo stood six feet three, and his lean frame was attired in buckskins and moccasins. A gun belt around his midsection supported a pair of revolvers. His eyes and shoulder-length brown hair were both brown. In every aspect he resembled a typical frontiersman, but his companion was another story. The second man was six feet in height, but what he lacked in stature he more than compensated for with his 200 pounds of solid muscle. Clearly a professional soldier, he wore a uniform consisting of camouflage fatigues and combat boots. He carried a semiautomatic pistol in a holster on each sturdy top. In true military fashion his black hair was cropped short. Alert blue eyes scrutinized the shaman and the half-breed.

"What do you make of all this, Blade?" the frontiersman inquired.

"I don't know, Boone," Blade admitted. "I want the three of you to sweep the area. I'll baby-sit our... friends."

The one called Boone, the soldier, and the mutant all jogged off, heading for the front of Ostman's Trading Post.

"Where are you two from?" Blade asked once his men were out of sight.

"We live north of here," Red Hawk answered. "My granddaughter, her three children, myself,

and her husband."

"Where do you fit into the scheme of things?" Blade asked Roe.

"I'm the husband," George responded.

"Oh?" The giant glanced from one to the other, then at the fingers of fire consuming the structure. "Who lived here?"

"This was William Ostman's Trading Post," George disclosed. "Ostman and his wife lived on the top floor, and their store was on the bottom."

"Was he in there when the fire broke out?"

"We don't know," George said. "We just got here."

"So did we," Blade commented, and cradled his machine gun in his arms.

"What kind of gun is that, mister?" George inquired, hoping to keep the conversation going, trying to soothe his jangled nerves. "I've never seen one like it."

"It's called an M-60," Blade divulged.

"What about those pistols under your arms?"

"Colt Stainless Steel Officers Model forty-fives," Blade said. "But I'm not here to discuss our firepower. Do you happen to know if there was a radio in the trading post?"

"A what?" Red Hawk responded.

"Yeah, there was," George answered. "Ostman showed it to me once. A real old contraption, a shortwave radio he called it, built back before the war. He was always trying to get the thing to work. Even traded for a rusty generator. He wanted to try and reach Vancouver and find out what was happening in the outside world. But he never could make it operate."

"Evidently he made it operate tonight," Blade deduced.

"Why do you say that?"

"Because our Hurricane picked up a distress signal from this general vicinity," Blade mentioned.

"Your Hurricane?" George repeated.

"A Hurricane is a jet, a VTOL," Blade explained. "We fly in it when—"

"You fly in the eye of a hurricane?" Red Hawk said in awe, and smiled broadly. "Truly this is a mighty omen."

"No. You don't understand," Blade stated. "When the Force is sent on an assignment, we're transported by Hurricane to the trouble spot."

"You were sent here?" George asked. "We were en route from Alaska to California when our pilot received the distress call. I decided to land against my better judgment. Canada isn't part of the Freedom Federation, and the Force was specifically created to deal with any threats to Federation members. But I'm also the head of the Warriors, and after all these years of protecting lives, of dedicating myself to safeguarding others, I can't ignore a request for aid," Blade said, and looked at them. "Do you understand?"

Red Hawk nodded. "You are a guardian sent by the Everywhere Spirit."

"I think I understand," George remarked. "Except for a few things."

"Like what?" Blade queried.

"Like, what's a VTOL? What's the Freedom Federation? What's the Force? Why is there a mutant with yea?" George questioned. "Just who the hell are you guys anyway?"

"Suffice it to say that we're friendly, and we're here to help you if you need help," Blade said. "But we can't stay long. We must take off for L.A. as soon as possible."

"Takeoff what? And who's L.A.?" George wanted to know.

Blade sighed.

The man in the camouflage fatigues appeared, running around the west side of the trading post and over to the giant. He saluted. "We've found three bodies, sir."

"Were they caught in the fire?" Blade asked.

"No, sir," the soldier answered. "You need to see them for yourself."

"All right, Sergeant Havoc," Blade said, moving off. "Bring these two."

"Yes, sir," Havoc responded, leveling his M-16.

"And stop calling me sir," Blade added.

"Yes, sir."

Blade absently gazed at a sheet of flame arising from the north wall as he strolled past the northwest corner, lost in reflection. What in the world was he doing here? he asked himself for the tenth time since the Hurricane had landed in a field located a half-mile to the northeast. Oh, sure, he was dedicated to safeguarding lives, but he was needlessly exposing his men to danger when by all rights they should be winging toward Los Angeles and the Force HQ. All of them were anxious to learn the fate of their companions. The tragedy of their last mission hung over their heads like a living, malevolent specter of death.

Their last mission!

Blade winced at the profoundly disturbing memories. The Force had thwarted an insane scheme to destroy the Freedom Federation, and defeated the minions of the Exalted Executioner for the Lords of Kismet at Prudhoe Bay in Alaska, but they had paid a terrible price in accomplishing their assignment. Three Force members had been rushed to L. A. aboard another Hurricane, the second of the pair possessed by the Free State of California,

and into the waiting hands of a skilled surgical team. Two of the three were in critical condition with numerous gunshot wounds, while the third had sustained a severe injury to her hand when she was tortured. Athena Morris would survive, but she might lose the use of a finger for life. And what about the other two? What would he do if Thunder and Bear died? The mere possibility of their dying weighed on him unbearably, and he knew he would blame himself even though the blame was unwarranted. They were part of his team. As leader of the Force, he was responsible for their lives. More than that, they were close friends. He'd known the black man called Bear for years before accepting the post with the Force. If they passed on, the burden would be doubly great because of his affection for them, and the last thing he needed was more remorse and guilt. He was already feeling guilty enough over failing his loved ones.

Blade frowned as he thought of his beloved Jenny and their young son Gabe, who would be four in December. The demands of holding down two jobs, of discharging the strenuous duties of the head of the Warriors and the leader of the Force, had drained him emotionally and strained his self-control. He found himself resenting the demands of his jobs because they reduced the amount of time he could spend with his wife, and son. Maybe, just maybe, he should give serious consideration to resigning from one of his positions. But which one?

First there was his job as the chief Warrior. Thanks to a wealthy survivalist named Kurt Carpenter, who had constructed a retreat, a walled compound, in extreme northwestern Minnesota prior to the war, close to 100 people, the majority descendants of Carpenter and his followers, now lived in relative security near the former Lake Bronson State Park. Carpenter had called his followers the Family, and designated the compound as the Home. Eighteen Family members currently served as Warriors, pledged to preserve both the Family and the Home at all costs. Having been reared in the Home, and having served as the chief Warrior for years before being approached by the Federation leaders to take the Force post, Blade knew he would undoubtedly opt to remain the chief Warrior if and when the time came for a final decision..

Not that there was anything wrong with the second position, in and of itself.

For close to ten months he had also functioned acceptably as the leader of the Force, the special strike unit composed of a volunteer from each of the seven factions comprising the Freedom Federation. At least, the initial proposal had called for a recruit from each faction, but problems had arisen, Two of the recruits had already died.

Spader and Kraft.

Spader had hailed from the Federation faction known as the Moles. Like the Family, the Moles were the descendants of a survivalist. Unlike the Family, the Moles inhabited a subterranean complex in north-central Minnesota. They had yet to send a replacement for Spader.

Kraft had been the first recruit sent by the Clan, a group residing in the town of Halma in northern Minnesota, near the Family. After Kraft's death, the Clan had sent Bear to fill his shoes, a task the big black fulfilled with ease. Bear had volunteered primarily because of his friendship with Blade, and now Bear was at death's door.

The Warrior swallowed hard. Thank the Spirit the others were unharmed! There was Boone, another close friend, a rugged frontiersman from the faction controlling the Dakota Territory, the superb horsemen called the Cavalry. Widely recognized as one of their preeminent gunmen, Boone had been second in command before agreeing to serve on the Force with

Blade Every recruit was required to serve for a year, and in two months Boone's enlistment would be up. The Cavalryman could hardly wait.

Then there was Sergeant Havoc. A career military man, with exemplary stints in the Rangers and Special Forces on his record, Havoc was the official "volunteer" from the Free State of California. A qualified marksman, he possessed black belts in judo and karate and a brown in aikido. Thoroughly professional in his bearing and performance, Havoc had never given the Warrior any cause to regret his enlistment. Which was more than Blade could say for Grizzly.

The hybrid gave new meaning to the word cantankerous. Genetically engineered in the laboratory of a deranged scientific genius, Grizzly was belligerent, argumentative, and supremely sensitive concerning the subject of his creation. As a scientifically spawned mutation, he was unique in a world where mutants were as abundant as humans. Ordinary mutations involved wild animals deformed from birth, their genetic codes Scrambled by the tremendous amounts of chemical and radioactive toxins saturating the planetary biosphere. But Grizzly was different, and conscious of his difference. His physical appearance, his behavioral traits, his very consciousness had been created in a test tube. Humans tended to distrust or dislike him on the basis of his appearance alone, and he resented their attitude.

Even several of the Force members had opposed his presence on the team at first.

Thunder-Rolling-in-the-Mountain was a case in point. As the representative from the Flathead Indians, the tribe dominating the area formerly recognized as the state of Montana, Thunder had expressed reservations about Grizzly, and gone so far as to label the mutant a "bad omen." Yet after months of working together, the two had become fast friends. And now Thunder and Bear were both lying in a hospital in Los Angeles, their fate hanging in the balance. At least Athena would live to enjoy another day. Athena Morris, the only female member of the Force, had been able to join by default. She was a journalist by vocation, and her motivation in finagling a spot on the squad had been her desire to further her writing career. The people of Free Free State of California, which was one of the few states able to retain its administrative integrity after the war, were intensely interested in the doings of the Freedom Force, and eagerly read Athena's syndicated, first-hand reports in their newspapers, reports she was amply compensated for. As part of her strategy to convince Blade that she was fit to join the unit, she had even taken Ranger training.

Well, Blade mused, she'd gotten her wish.

But was it worth the price?

Blade shook his head, clearing his mind of the troubling train of thought. He hoped the Force would be able to wrap up this affair quickly so they could proceed to L. A., but he entertained doubts. Captain Laslo, the pilot of the Hurricane, was cooling his heels in the field to the northeast and watching over the aircraft. Earlier, he and Blade had both heard six words in their; headsets. The transmission had been garbled and laced with static, but the half-dozen words had been plain enough "... Post. Help... ! We're... attacked! North... Fraser..." And that was all of the message they'd been able to understand. The male voice had sounded frantic.

The Warrior sighed.

If he possessed any brains, he would have kept going.

As he walked onto the grassy area between the trading post and the river and his gaze alighted on the three bodies 15 feet away, he sincerely wished he had.

CHAPTER THREE

Boone was standing to the left of the corpses. He glanced at Blade, his expression conveying his revulsion. "Whoever did this should be hung," he commented. Blade stopped a yard from the trio, staring at them in horror, suppressing an urge to vomit. In all his years of experience as a Warrior and with the Force, he could recall few sights as grisly as this... what word did he want?... atrocity! Only a lunatic could conceive of such an act.

"I think I'm going to be sick!" George Roe announced to the giant's rear. He promptly was.

Red Hawk stepped to Blade's right, with Sergeant Havoc covering him, and scowled, "Now you know why the Everywhere Spirit sent you."

Boone scanned the surrounding ground, "Where's their skin?" he asked.

"Who knows," Blade replied.

The three victims were arranged in a neat row from west to east with their feet aligned toward the trading post and their arms folded across their chests. All three had been stripped naked. And all three had been skinned as if they were a muskrat or a beaver. From their necks to their toes, their skin was gone, exposing their networks of veins and arteries and their soft flesh. The light from the flames lent a reddish-pink hue to their tissue. Two of the three were male, and both had undergone castration. For whatever bizarre reason, not one of them had been touched from the neck up.

"That one was Ostman," Red Hawk said, pointing at the heaviest of the trio on the left. "She was his wife," he went on, referring to the matronly woman in the middle.

"And the other one?" Blade inquired.

"I think he was a miner who lived on Ruby Creek," Red Hawk said.

"He was probably in the wrong place at the wrong time," Sergeant Havoc speculated.

George Roe moved closer, dribbling spittle and clasping his hands to his abdomen. "His name was Beck. He visited Ostman often to play checkers."

Blade regarded the trading post for a moment. "Who would do this? Scavengers?"

"There were reports that pirates have been operating on the Fraser River," George mentioned.

"Pirates? But we're at least sixty or seventy miles from the Ocean," Blade said.

"River pirates," George clarified. "The Fraser River runs all the way to the Strait of Georgia, and beyond that is the Juan de Fuca Strait and the Pacific Ocean. We've heard about pirates coming in as far as Chilliwack, but never to here."

"Until now," Boone interjected grimly.

Blade gazed at the bank of the river, recognizing the outline of a small dock, and then at the expanse of water. "How wide is the Fraser at this point?"

"A half mile at least," Roe answered.

"Are there any nearby settlements on either bank?" Blade queried.

"No," George said.

Blade lifted his left hand and scratched his forehead. If pirates were the culprits, then they were undoubtedly long gone, miles from the trading post, and there was no way the Force could overtake them. He could order his men to return to the Hurricane and fly home with a clear conscience.

"Here comes Grizzly," Boone declared.

The hybrid sprinted toward them from the west, bounding with a supple grace, his loincloth swaying as he ran, a smirk creasing his face. He halted to the right of the corpses and looked at the Warrior. "Somebody must be real handy with a carving knife, huh?"

"Report," Blade directed him.

"My, my, my. A little gore and you go all to pieces," Grizzly quipped.

"Report," Blade reiterated sternly.

"There were twenty of them, maybe more. The tracks aren't easy to read at night, so I can't tally the count exactly. I do know they came by boat—"

"Or canoes," Red Hawk said, interrupting.

"Whatever," Grizzly said. "And I also know only about half of 'em split the same way."

"Only half?" Blade said.

"That's right. The rest headed to the northwest."

"Are you certain?" Blade demanded.

"Would I lie to you, twinkle toes?"

The Warrior looked at George Roe. "What lies northwest of here?"

"Harrison Hot Springs is about five miles away," George answered, "it was a famous resort before the war. Not quite a hundred people live there now, most of them old-timers who like to soak in the hot pools."

"Is there anything there of value, anything a band of pirates would be interested in?"

"Not that I can think of," George said. "There's a small trading post, smaller than Ostman's was. The guy who owns it, in fact, traded for his goods with Ostman."

"Why would the pirates be headed there?" Blade wondered.

"Maybe they're looking for women," George remarked.

"Women?"

"Yeah. I've heard that the pirates will take young women and sell them."

"The bastards are slavers," Grizzly said.

"But are there any young women in Harrison Hot Springs?" Blade queried Roe.

"A few," George said. "Fifteen or twenty, I'd guess, if you included the younger married ones." Blade stared to the northwest. "Do you think the people in Harrison Hot Springs could defend themselves from the pirates?"

"Are you kidding?" George responded. "The old-timers certainly can't, and the younger ones are mainly fishermen and hunters. They won't stand a chance."

"Damn."

"Do I take it that we're going after the pirates, sir?" Sergeant Havoc asked.

"We are," Blade confirmed.

"Say what?" queried Grizzly.

"The people in Harrison Hot Springs will need our assistance. We're trained to deal with raiders and outlaws, and they're not."

"So? Let them fend for themselves," Grizzly declared, "This doesn't concern us."

"Innocent men, women, and children will be slaughtered if we don't do something," Blade noted.

"Who cares?" Grizzly responded. "We don't owe these turkeys diddly. I mean, it's not like they're part of the Federation, so why should we risk our lives for them? It doesn't make sense to me."

"We have a duty to protect lives wherever we find them in jeopardy," Blade said.

"I signed up with this outfit to protect Federation lives, not the lives of a bunch of Canadian yokels," Grizzly stated.

"Since when have you passed up the chance for a good fight?" Blade inquired, knowing full well the hybrid's propensity for violence. When Grizzly's wrath was aroused, he was positively bloodthirsty. What could be the reason for the mutant's sudden aversion to combat?

"If you don't mind my saying so, sir, I agree with Grizzly," Sergeant Havoc said.

"You do?"

"Yes, sir. And I can hardly believe he's right for once."

"What's that crack supposed to mean?" Grizzly snapped.

Havoc ignored the bear-man. "Our primary responsibility is to defend Federation territory, and Canada isn't in the Freedom Federation. I have no objections to putting my life on the line on an assigned mission, but this is different, outside our jurisdiction. I don't think we have any business being here."

The Warrior looked at Boone. "And how do you feel?"

"Where you go, I go," the Cavalryman replied.

Grizzly snickered. "You'd better be careful, Boone, or your nose will turn brown."

Boone glanced at the hybrid. "Blade and I were friends long before the Federation was formed. I figure I owe it to him to stick by his side, whether we're on Federation business or not. His Family and the Cavalry fought side by side against the Doktor and that low-down dictator, Samuel the Second. I'm not about to desert him."

"Thanks," Blade said.

Boone shrugged. "What are friends for?"

"Anyone have a hanky?" Grizzly quipped.

Made shifted his attention to the bear-man and the noncom. "You two have a valid point. This isn't official Federation business, and I have no right to order you to help me stop the pirates. So we'll split up. Boone and I will go after the pirates, and the two of you will return to the Hurricane and wait there with Captain Laslo until we return. If a reasonable amount of time elapses and you don't hear from us, head for L.A."

Sergeant Havoc and Grizzly exchanged glances. "Is it wise for us to separate, sir?" Sergeant Havoc asked.

"We don't have any choice," Blade said.

"I've got an idea," Grizzly stated. "Why don't we all boogie to the Hurricane and search for the scumbags who did this from the air?"

"We would, if we had enough fuel to space," Blade replied. "Since we don't, Boone and I will go after the pirates on foot." He paused and stared at the body of William Ostman. "We were fortunate Laslo was able to get an approximate fix on the distress call or we wouldn't have landed. I wasn't about to waste precious fuel flying all over the wilderness."

"Lucky as," Grizzly joked.

"I may not agree with your decision, but I've never deserted anyone before and I'm not about to start now," Sergeant Havoc declared. "I'll go with you."

"Wishy-washy ding-a-ling," Grizzly muttered.

"I appreciate the gesture," Blade said to the noncom. "We'll wait for daylight, then follow the

pirates."

"Why not leave now?" Boone inquired.

"Because we don't have Grizzly's hyper-senses. Our eyesight and hearing aren't as sharp as his. We're good trackers, but we'd be hard pressed to stick to the trail in the dark. No, we'll wait until morning when we can track them and watch out for an ambush. They might cover their trail, and in the dark we'd be sitting ducks."

"And you expect me to twiddle my thumbs with Laslo while you guys are traipsing all over the countryside?" Grizzly asked.

"Your thumbs or your toes," Blade said.

"Well, you can forget it! It'll take you clowns forever to find the pirates and waste 'em, and I don't intend to wait around. The sooner we terminate these bastards, the sooner we'll get to Los Angeles. In case you dummies have forgotten, three of our buddies are in the hospital, and I, for one, would like an update on their condition ASAP," Grizzly commented.

And Blade suddenly perceived the real reason for Grizzly's reluctance to tackle the pirates: Athena Morris, The hybrid and Athena had developed a touching affection for one another during the previous Force missions. Initially hesitant to confess their honest feelings, afraid of the stigma that would attach to the pairing of a mutation and a human, they'd denied their emotions until the trauma of Athena's torture had forced them to admit their love. Blade suppressed a grin. The real reason Grizzly was so eager to leave was to reach Athena's side.

And who could blame him?

"So let's get this show on the road," Grizzly declared,

The Warrior faced George Roe and Red Hawk. "Thanks for your cooperation. We'll take over from here. I'd advise you to return to your home and stay there until the threat has been eliminated."

"You don't have to tell me twice," George Roe said. "I'm out of here." He turned and started to talk off.

"I will go with you," Red Hawk told Blade.

George stopped and glanced back. "What?"

"We can't take you," Blade said. "You should go home."

"My place is with you. One Who Rides the Hurricane. You will need me on your sacred mission," Red Hawk responded.

Grizzly cackled, "What the hell are you talking about, you old geezer? We're aiming to kick some pirate butt, not hunt for the Holy Grail."

"Any act guided by the Everywhere Spirit is sacred," Red Hawk stated.

The hybrid glanced at Blade. "Where did you find this fruit cake?"

"You must forgive him," George Roe said. "He believes he is the last shaman of the Kutenai."

"What's a shaman?" Grizzly inquired.

"A medicine man, a man of power, a man who can persuade the spirits of nature and the Everywhere Spirit to do his bidding," George detailed.

"A man who should be wearing a straitjacket," Grizzly added.

Blade placed his right hand on the shaman's shoulder. "I'm sorry, but you can't go with us. You would only slow us down and distract us from doing our job."

"You will need me," Red Hawk said.

"That's the same thing you told me," George remarked. "And I didn't need you."

"Oh? Who prevented you from firing at the one who rides the hurricane? If you had, his friends would have slain you."

"Are you claiming you knew that would happen?"

"I do not want my granddaughter to become a widow."

"How considerate," George said, and motioned with his left arm. "Let's go. I want to retrieve my Winchester and get the hell out of here."

"You go," Red Hawk replied.

"I'm not waiting around all night," George stated testily. "If you want to come, fine." He walked toward the rear of the trading post.

Blade looked at Sergeant Havoc. "Escort him to the trees."

The noncom nodded and followed Roe.

"My granddaughter's husband is a decent man, but his white blood has dulled his vision," Red Hawk commented.

"What about my white blood?" Blade asked facetiously.

"You are different. You are a favorite of the Everywhere Spirit," Red Hawk answered.

"And what about me, old man?" Grizzly queried, and laughed.

Red Hawk stared at the hybrid for a moment, then averted his eyes. "You are a child of sorrow who will find happiness one day."

"Damn right I will," Grizzly concurred. "As soon as I get to L.A."

"What about these bodies?" Boone interrupted. "Do you want us to bury them?"

"We don't have the time," Blade replied. "Every second we waste allows the pirates to get farther ahead."

"I will ask the spirit of the wolf to send a pack to dispose of the bodies," Red Hawk offered,

"You're a regular humanitarian," Grizzly quipped.

"Are there wolves hereabout?" Boone questioned.

"Many, now that the whites are so few," Red Hawk said.

"You don't seem too fond of the white race," Grizzly noted.

"I am not. The whites almost destroyed our world with their hatred and their pride. They were a blight on nature, a plague of locusts who had to be taught the error of their ways."

"A man after my own heart," Grizzly said. "But then, I've always believed that all humans are scum."

"All humans?" Blade repeated.

"Present company excluded."

"And what about Bear, Thunder, and Athena?"

"Bear and Thunder are my buddies," Grizzly said. "And Athena is..." He paused, selecting his next word carefully. "Special."

Blade focused on the shaman again. "Do I have your word that you will go home?"

"No."

"Be reasonable."

"I must do as the Everywhere Spirit wills," Red Hawk said. "You, more than these others, know the importance of being true to Spirit leadings."

Blade's gray eyes narrowed. How did the shaman know about the Family's reputation for producing markedly spiritual men and women? How could he know about the Elders and the spiritual values they instilled in every Family member from birth?

"Hasn't anyone ever told you that there is no God?" Grizzly asked the shaman.

"Were I you, gentle one, I would feed my feeble faith."

The hybrid found Red Hawk's statement hilarious. "Calling me gentle, old man, is like calling a mountain lion a pussycat!"

Red Hawk folded his arms across his chest and straightened to his full height. "I know what I know."

Grizzly shook his head. "You don't know nothing."

"Time will tell."

CHAPTER FOUR

"Do you think the old geezer will try to follow us?"

"I hope not," Blade said. "Quit worrying about him and concentrate on your tracking."

"Who's worried?" Grizzly responded. "I just don't want him making a lot of noise and giving us away."

"You're the only one making noise right now," Blade observed.

"Sounds to me like you need to catch up on your beauty sleep," Grizzly said, and leaned down, examining the ground in front of them.

Blade hefted the M-60 and looked over his left shoulder at Boone, who was five yards behind him, and then at Sergeant Havoc bringing up the rear. They were two miles from Ostman's Trading Post, not quite half the distance to Harrison Hot Springs. "How far ahead are the pirates?"

Grizzly tilted his head and sniffed the air. "Not far. Their scent is real strong. I doubt these clowns bathe more than once a year, and then only when they accidentally fall in the water."

"How far is not far?"

"What do you want? The precise yardage?"

"A rough estimate would be nice."

"I'd say they're a half mile ahead of us, and they're not moving very fast. My guess is they're taking their sweet time so they get to Harrison Hot Springs about dawn," Grizzly said, hiking up a steep rise.

Blade gazed at the star-filled firmament and brushed at the comma of hair hanging over his right brow. The cool breeze tingled his skin and caressed his cheeks, and the tranquillity of the scene reminded him of the many times he'd lain on his back on a knoll in the eastern section of the Home and pondered the meaning of life while absorbed in the celestial display overhead. After the Force took care of the pirates—and once, hopefully, Bear, Thunder, and Athena were all on the road to recovery—he intended to take a month off and fly to the Home for a much-deserved vacation, a respite from the constant strain of confronting one threat after another.

"You know," Grizzly said softly, "these mountains sure are steep."

"You're just getting flabby," Blade responded.

"I'm all muscle and you know it."

"Especially between the ears," Boone chimed in.

"Funny man," Grizzly said. "Now if only your wit was as humorous as your face, somebody

might laugh."

They climbed to the top of the ridge in silence, laboring up the rough terrain, clambering over logs and rock outcroppings and contending with dense underbrush.

"I thought the Alaskan tundra was too flat," Sergeant Havoc commented when they reached the crest and paused to rest, "but I'll never complain about flat land again. These mountains remind me of northern California, only worse."

Grizzly glanced at the Warrior and smiled. "Just as I said. Fearless Leader."

"If I didn't know better, I'd swear that you're in a good mood," Blade remarked.

"For once," Boone amended.

Sergeant Havoc grinned and nudged the Cavalryman. "Why do you think Grizzly is so happy?"

"Beats me," Boone said. "Christmas isn't for eight weeks yet."

"Maybe there's some truth to the rumor that he's in love," Sergeant Havoc said.

"Folks do all sorts of goofy things when they're in love," Boone mentioned.

"Geez. You don't suppose he'll be this way from now on, do you?" Havoc asked. "I was just getting used to him being a cranky pain in the ass."

"Love can work miracles," Boone stated, and they both snickered.

Grizzly placed his hands on his hips and stared at them. "Have your fun while you can, turkeys. I don't care anymore. And yeah, I'll admit that I haven't felt this fine in ages."

"We should give Athena a medal," Sergeant Havoc said.

"Yes, sir," Grizzly continued as if he hadn't heard the noncom's crack. "I'd be real careful if I were you not to do or say anything that might spoil my mood. And nothing would spoil it faster than having some jerk make fun of my squeeze."

Boone looked at Havoc. "What was that name again? Athena who?"

"Did I say Athena? I meant to say Agnes. Agnes Freedle Hoffer. She was my great aunt on my father's side. The woman was a saint," the noncom stated.

Blade smiled and surveyed the valley below for sign of a light, but the pirates were wisely traveling without the aid of a lantern, torch, or flashlight. Although the night was moonless, he could discern shapes and general details in a limited radius of ten yards, beyond which all was murky. Somewhere down there were ten pirates, possibly more, trudging through the dark toward...

Wait a minute.

"Have you noticed something strange about this?" Blade inquired.

"Do you mean other than the fact we're here?" Grizzly answered. "Or was that a trick question?"

"Why did the pirates split up?" Blade asked.

"Maybe they rented their boats or canoes and had to have em back by daylight," Grizzly suggested.

"Be serious. Dividing their force seems illogical when you realize there are approximately a hundred people in Harrison Hot Springs. Granted, the people there aren't professional fighters, but they could give a dozen pirates a hard time if they rallied together. By all rights every pirate should have headed for Harrison, not just half."

"We're dealing with pirates here, not physicists," Grizzly noted. "They wouldn't know how to spell logical, let alone be logical."

"Where did the other half go?" Blade wondered.

"Right before we left Ostman's I heard that wacko Indian telling you about another route," Grizzly said.

Blade nodded. "A water route. The other pirates can go back down the Fraser River about ten miles, then cross over to the Harrison River and take it northeast to Harrison Lake and Harrison Hot Springs."

"Harrison. Harrison. Harrison. Why is every waterway and landmark in this country named Harrison?" Grizzly asked. "Was he the guy who discovered southwest Canada?"

"I don't know," Blade said.

"What bothers you about the other half of the pirates taking the water route?" Boone questioned.

"Why didn't all of the pirates go directly to Harrison Hot Springs?" Blade responded. "Why did they travel up the Fraser River ten miles past the junction with the Harrison River? Now they must backtrack."

"Maybe they were out of munchies and Ostman's was the nearest store," Grizzly speculated,

"We'll try and take one alive for interrogation," Blade informed them. "Let's move out. I want to overtake them before they reach Harrison Hot Springs."

The hybrid took the lead, doubled over, his keen eyes seeking the trail, his sensitive nostrils quivering. His exceptional vision and extraordinary sense of smell enabled him to detect spoor invisible to his human companions.

Knowing they were closing on the raiders, the Force members advanced cautiously, repeatedly halting to listen and study the landscape ahead. Believing they were taking the pirates by surprise, and lulled into complacency by the reassuring sounds of insects and other animals, they became aware that the hunters had become the hunted too late to avoid the trap.

They traversed another ridge and were descending into a winding valley, with thick

undergrowth hemming them in, when the forest noises abruptly and inexplicably ceased.

A total, preternatural silence shrouded the Canadian woods.

"Hit the dirt!" Grizzly bellowed, and dived for the ground.

Blade was already darting behind a tree to his right, crouching in the shelter of the wide trunk as something thudded into the bark near his head. He ducked lower, expecting to hear the booming of firearms. Instead, he heard a swishing sound and another object smacked into the tree less than six inches from his right ear.

What type of weapon were they using?

And how did they know where to aim in the darkness?

Girding his legs, Blade leaped and rolled, coming up against a man-sized boulder. He scrambled on his elbows and knees to the far side, then rose.

Where were the pirates?

He risked a hasty peek around the boulder, searching the vegetation, but was unable to locate one of their foes. Where were they hiding? In the trees?

Something buzzed past his ear.

Blade threw himself backwards, flattening his back flush with the boulder. He'd glimpsed a long, thin shaft streaking by his head, and he suspected they were employing bows and arrows. But he still couldn't understand how they could see him. Were they wearing night-vision goggles? He'd seen such goggles demonstrated by an officer in the California military, but he never would have expected the brigands to have them. He was tempted to spray the trees with a burst from the M-60, and only the likelihood of hitting his own men dissuaded him.

A minute elapsed.

Two.

Nothing else happened.

Blade ventured another look, keeping his face as close to the abrasive surface of the boulder as he could, probing the woods for any hint of motion.

Somewhere a bug chattered.

"They've gone!" Grizzly's familiar voice announced, and the bear-man appeared eight yards to the right from the rear of a bushy shrub.

Blade eased into the open, his muscles tensed, trusting the hybrid's hyper-senses but wary nonetheless. "Where did they go?" he asked softly.

Grizzly came closer, his eyes on the trees. "I heard them sneaking off to the northwest. There were two of 'em."

"That's all?"

"Yep."

Blade scanned the forest. "Boone? Havoc? Where are you?"

"Here," Boone replied, and emerged from the trees east of the boulder. "This almost nailed me," he said, and extended his right arm. Clutched in his hand was an arrow.

The Warrior took the shaft and examined it. The length was only 24 inches, the fletching was shorter and thinner than normal, and the arrow lacked a nock. No nock? "This is a crossbow bolt," he announced, and glanced up. "Where's Havoc?"

"I haven't seen him," Boone said.

"Sergeant Havoc?" Blade said loudly.

"Maybe they wasted him," Grizzly said.

"Find him," Blade snapped. "Now!"

Grizzly did a double take, then melted into the vegetation.

"I hope Havoc is all right," Boone remarked.

Blade didn't respond. He waited with baited breath for the bear-man to give a yell, dreading the outcome. Dear Spirit! Not another one! A chill rippled along his spine at the idea of Havoc being dead. Having lost two Force members already, and with the lives of two more hanging by the proverbial thread, he couldn't stand the thought of losing yet another. And the noncom had objected to intervening in non-Federation business! Maybe he should have listened to Havoc and—

"Over here!" Grizzly called out to their left.

Blade and Boone hurried to the hybrid's side.

Grizzly was on his hands and knees, his face almost touching the dank earth. "You're not going to like this," he said, looking at the Warrior.

"Where's Havoc?"

"They took him."

"Took him?" Blade repeated angrily. "They captured him?"

"Took. Captured. Snatched. Grabbed. Take your pick," Grizzly said, and rose.

"How could they?" Boone queried. "We never heard a struggle, and no one can take Havoc down that easily."

"They did," Grizzly stated. "Whoever these bozos are, they're pros."

"Damn!" Blade vented his frustration.

"That seems to be your favorite word tonight," Grizzly quipped.

The Warrior leaned forward and glared at the genetic deviate. "I'm beginning to think I liked you better when you were always in a rotten mood." He turned and moved off several paces.

Grizzly look at Boone. "What'd I say?"

"Do we go after Sergeant Havoc?" Boone asked the Warrior's broad back.

Blade spun. "Grizzly does. Right this second."

"I do?"

"You're the only one who can hope to catch them at night," Blade said. "Pull out all the stops and rescue Havoc. Boone and I will continue to the northwest until we reach Harrison Hot Springs. After you have Havoc safe, head there, and that's where we'll meet you."

"Havoc is as good as got," Grizzly promised, and took a stride.

"And Grizzly?"

"Yeah, boss?"

"Don't let anything happen to you."

"I didn't know you cared."

"I don't. I'm thinking of Athena."

The bear-man chuckled and raced to the northwest. In seconds he was lost to view.

"It's happening again," Blade said.

"What is?" Boone queried.

"Everything is going wrong. Everything always goes wrong. Why can't my plans work out for once?"

"You wouldn't want to buck the trend."

CHAPTER FIVE

Grizzly was in his element.

He grinned as he vaulted a log in his path and sprinted up a hill, pouring on the speed, his nostrils flaring to catch the breeze. Man-oh-man! This was the life! Give him the glories of nature any day over the grimy cities inhabited by the humans. He preferred the outdoors to so-called civilization, and he was thankful Athena was the outdoors type.

Athena.

The thought of her made him want to shout for joy! To think that she actually cared for him, had even confessed her love, was almost too good to be true. Years ago he'd resigned himself to a life of loneliness, a life without a mate. The lousy Doktor, the genetic engineer responsible for creating him and countless other mutations, had deliberately refrained from producing mating pairs because of the madman's compulsion to exert complete control over his creations from the test tube to the grave. The Doktor had demanded unswerving loyalty, and he'd prudently recognized that mutants with a mate and offspring would be loyal to their loved ones first and him second. And he'd wanted none of that. So the bastard's Genetic Research Division had been composed of individual, unique, and exclusive genetic hybrids. Combinations of every conceivable type. A cat-man, a toad-woman, a bird-man. You name it. None of whom had held the slightest sexual attraction for Grizzly. He'd despaired of ever finding a suitable ball and chain.

And then along came Athena Morris. A human, no less.

Initially he'd resisted his feelings for her. The notion of becoming romantically involved with a human had been absurd, too ridiculous for words. Physically, they were as different as night and day. All he had to do was look in a mirror and the differences were glaringly apparent: the coat of brown fur encasing him from head to toe, the bulging shoulder and neck muscles that gave him almost a hunchbacked appearance, and his bearish face. His appearance was exactly like that of his, namesake, the grizzly bear. All thanks to the damn Doktor. By employing genetic engineering techniques, by editing the genetic instructions encoded in the chemical structure of molecules of DNA, by cross-fertilizing human and animal embryos, the Doktor had mixed and matched biological traits to suit his insane whimsy. And in Grizzly's case, in order to produce the perfect assassin, the Doktor had added a novel touch.

Deadly claws.

Every creature in the Doktor's Genetic Research Division had been lethal in its own right. Many had possessed talons, immense strength, or razor-sharp fangs. Grizzly's own pointed teeth could rip a man's arm off with several tearing bites. But Grizzly would rather use the claws. Each one was five inches in length, and they were housed in sheaths just under the skin behind his knuckles. Whenever he tensed his fingers and made his huge hands go rigid, the claws would slide down the sheaths and pop out from under flaps of skin located at the rear of each fingernail. Although they were excellent weapons, there were two drawbacks to using them. The claws were not unbreakable. They could carve a man or animal readily enough, and even slice through wood on occasion, but they could crack or snap off if he wasn't careful. Their second drawback was a distinct disadvantage in combat. While the claws were extended, while his fingers were rigid, he could not grip or hold anything with his hands. If he relaxed his fingers for an instant, the claws would immediately retract. Despite their shortcomings, though, he was glad he had them. They were fun to use.

Grizzly reached the top of the hill and stopped in a clearing to check the terrain ahead. There was still no sign of Havoc or the pair who abducted him. Grizzly resumed his pursuit.

When he was younger he'd often wondered if he was essentially a man in a bear's body or a bear with human attributes. Whatever the case, to humanity at large he was a freak, and early in his life he too had regarded himself as an aberration. Associating with the other deviates in the Genetic Research Division had consoled him somewhat, but he could never quite shake the feeling of being alien to both humanity and the animal kingdom. Technically, he was part of both, a hybrid of *Homo sapiens* and the *Ursidae* family. Emotionally, he never felt like he belonged to either.

In his late teens, after years of experiencing the prejudice manifested by most humans, he'd grown to resent their attitude and despise their species. He'd loathed them for the destruction their kind had wrought on the planet, for their incomprehensible stupidity in unleashing World War Three. And he'd taken comfort in the fact that he didn't belong to the breed, that he was a hybrid, a mutant with enhanced physical senses. Gradually, he'd developed a superior attitude of his own, and he'd relegated all humans to the status of scum.

Until he'd met Athena.

His hormones had started acting up the moment he'd laid eyes on her, and he had passed the feeling off as a bizarre quirk. The more he got to know her, however, and the more time they spent together, the more he'd grown to care for her. He'd tried to chalk it up as mere friendship. He'd saved her life during the first Force mission, the strike against the Spider. As fate would have it, they'd wound up together during the strike to the Outlands of Oregon. And by the third Force assignment, when they took on the vile vampires in the Dead Zone, he'd known he was hopelessly in love.

With a human.

Her admission of love for him had come as a total surprise. He'd kept wanting to pinch himself to see if he was awake. Why did she love him? What did she see in him? Athena was an intelligent, extremely attractive woman who could take her pick of any man she met. So why did she love him, a hybrid?

What the hell was he doing?

Only a moron would look a gift horse in the mouth.

But he couldn't cast off a nagging sensation of unease. What if they weren't compatible? What if her affection wore off after a while? He wasn't exactly handsome by any standards.

And what if—what if she wanted children?

Although he'd never been able to confirm the rumor, there had been a story making the rounds in the Genetic Research Division to the effect that the Doktor had deliberately made his creatures sterile. The mutations were the Doktor's creations, and he didn't want them reproducing unless he reproduced them.

The rotten son of a bitch.

On the one hand. Grizzly hated the very mention of the Doktor; on the other, he realized he owed his life to the madman's formation of the Genetic Research Division. What a paradox! To despise the one responsible for his creation! Figuratively and literally, he abhorred his only parent—if by some stretch of the imagination he could claim the Doktor was his father. Of all the warped aspects of being a genetic deviate brought into existence in a test tube, the worst, in his estimation, was not having parents. He'd frequently wished he could have had a mother and a father who'd cared for him and taught him the facts of life.

Because the facts sure sucked.

Or had, until Athena.

He was amazed at the transformation her love was forging within him. To his utter delight, he found himself enjoying life, actually relishing the arrival of a new day, anticipating the sight and scent of her and the experiences they would share. He felt genuinely happy, a state foreign to his past.

Happiness.

Who would have thought that all that was required to feel happy was a little affection?

Grizzly drew up short and grinned. Listen to him! He sounded like a pathetic human teenager in love for the first time! But he was in love for the first time, wasn't he?

Why did humans and hybrids behave like idiots when they were in love?

He came to a meadow and quickened his pace, eager to save Havoc's butt, slice and dice the pirates, and head for L. A. and the woman he cared for. If not for this unauthorized sidetracking of the Force, the Hurricane would have been almost to Los Angeles by now. He was miffed at Blade for detouring them, although he'd come to expect righteous, moral, spiritual behavior from Mr. Goody-Two-Shoes. Blade was just being true to form. But he was really pissed at the pirates for picking such an inopportune time to launch their attack on Harrison Hot Springs. If the bastards had waited one more day, he'd be winging to L.A.

Yep.

He owed them.

Owed them bad.

And he aimed to make them pay.

Grizzly was two thirds of the way across the meadow when he spied the solitary figure standing near the opposite tree line, and he slowed for several seconds as he scrutinized the form, his splendid night vision, the equal of any real grizzly's, enabling him to recognize the man and causing him to stumble when the shock affected his concentration. It couldn't be! But it was! At that moment a nauseating odor, like the stink of decayed flesh, struck his nostrils and made him crinkle his nose in disgust.

His forehead furrowing in perplexity, he bounded to within ten feet of the Indian and halted. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Waiting for you, gentle one," Red Hawk said calmly, his arms at his sides.

Grizzly glanced around. "How did you get here?"

"You would not believe me."

"Try me."

"I called on the Everywhere Spirit, and a Sasquatch came and carried me to this spot."

"What's a Sasquatch?" Grizzly asked, resisting an urge to gag, Was there a rotting deer carcass nearby?

"One of the ancient race of hairy giants."

"Hairy giants? Yeah. Right. And I'm the Tooth Fairy."

"I thought you were a mutation."

"Don't be a smart-ass," Grizzly said, and walked up to the Kutenai.

"My posterior has never exhibited any intellect."

"You're putting me on, right?"

Red Hawk shook his head. "I could not skin you and wear your hide, gentle one. I know you for the kind soul you are."

"There you go again," Grizzly said testily. "Quit with the kind-and-gentle garbage and tell me how you got here ahead of me."

"The Sasquatch can go faster than any man or mutant."

"Did the Sasquatch make this smell?" Grizzly inquired, motioning at the air.

"Yes."

"Then you should tell your Sasquatch pal to soak in a hot bath for a month or two."

"Sasquatch do not take baths."

"I noticed."

"They live in caves or holes they dig near rivers and streams, and they are fond of eating carrion. They will store a dead deer in their den until they have eaten it down to the bone," Red Hawk explained.

"Are you going to tell me how you got here or not?"

"I already have."

Grizzly sighed and placed his hands on his hips, "What am I supposed to do with you? I can't leave you out here in the middle of nowhere."

"You will take me with you to Harrison Hot Springs."

"Bet me," Grizzly replied.

"I do not gamble," Red Hawk said.

"Listen, old-timer. One of my friends was caught by the pirates, and I'm hot on their heels. I can't be lugging you all over the countryside."

"You will need me to rescue the soldier."

Grizzly's mouth dropped. "How the hell did you know Havoc was captured?"

"The spirit of the wolf whispered it in my ear."

"Has anyone ever mentioned the fact that you're about forty cards shy of a full deck?"

"Beg pardon?"

"You're looney-tunes, Gramps."

"I'm sorry, but I don't understand. What is looney tunes? I do not know that song."

Grizzly bowed his head and shook it from side to side.

"Is something wrong?" Red Hawk inquired.

"Nothing a lobotomy wouldn't cure."

"I'm sorry?"

"Never mind." Grizzly stared at the shaman. "I guess I don't have any choice. I've got to lug you all the way to Harrison Hot Springs."

"There is no need for you to carry me, I can keep up with you," Red Hawk assured him.

"How? Is another of your Crotch-Rot buddies going to give you a lift?"

"They are Sasquatch, not Crotch-Rots."

"Whatever," Grizzly said, and scooped Red Hawk into his arms before the startled shaman could object.

"What are you doing?"

"What's it took like, dummy?" Grizzly retorted, jogging to the northwest.

"This is not necessary," Red Hawk said indignantly.

Grizzly headed for the forest, carrying the old man's weight easily. "How old are you, Red Hawk?"

"Time is relative to those who are in harmony with the Everywhere Spirit."

"Give me a break. How many birthdays have you had?"

"Eighty-four."

"I admire your guts. Not many old geezers would wander in the woods at night," Grizzly said.

"The creatures in the forest would not harm me."

"Dream on. The survival of the fittest is nature's law, and you wouldn't last three minutes out here," Grizzly stated.

"I have lasted eighty-four years."

"Don't quibble. I don't want your death on my conscience, so I'm carting you to Harrison Hot Springs. I just hope I can still overtake the bozos who took Sergeant Havoc," Grizzly said.

"They will reach Harrison Hot Springs before us."

"Don't count on it. No human is a match for me. Well, except for Blade, and he doesn't count because his glands aren't normal."

"The two you are after are not human," Red Hawk remarked.

Grizzly stopped abruptly. "What are you talking about?"

"The two who look the soldier prisoner are like you, and yet not like you."

"They're hybrids? Mutants?"

"They are mutations, but not like you."

"How do you know this?" Grizzly asked skeptically.

"The spirit of the eagle—"

"—whispered it in your ear," Grizzly said, finishing for the shaman.

"Yes."

"Why do I listen to this yo-yo?" Grizzly muttered, and hurried onward, bypassing a cluster of boulders.

"What is a yo-yo?"

CHAPTER SIX

He became aware of a mild breeze on his face, and then the pain hit him, an excruciating, throbbing pang at the back of his head that caused him to bite his lower lip to prevent crying out. His eyelids fluttered as he opened his eyes and took in his surroundings.

"Rumpelstiltskin is awake," declared a gruff voice.

Sergeant Havoc squinted at the blue sky and the rising sun on the eastern horizon, then at his wrists, which were tied tightly with his hands resting in his lap, and finally at the 11 figures squatting or crouching in a ragged line five yards from his combat boots. He twisted and glanced up, realizing he was propped against a tree midway down a mountain.

"We thought maybe Elephant Ears had whacked you a mite too hard, trooper," said the man with the gruff voice, who was the closest to the noncom. "Welcome back to the world of the living—for a while, anyways."

A few of the others chuckled.

Havoc licked his dry lips and studied his captors, working to compartmentalize the agony so he could function effectively. They were as seedy a crew as he'd ever seen. Their clothing was shabby and torn, an odd assortment of ill-fitting shirts and pants, with one tall man sporting a golden earring in his left ear and wearing a woman's pink blouse. They were unkempt and grungy, their appearance matching their attire. Grime streaked their skin, and most had oily, ratty hair. To label them as slovenly would be a compliment.

All except for two.

As his blue eyes alighted on the duo, who were crouched side by side to his left, he intuitively perceived they were the ones responsible for his capture. None of the others seemed capable of taking him out soundlessly and efficiently, but the atypical pair certainly did.

They were mutations.

Both were endowed with powerful physiques, well over six and a half feet in height and bulging with layers of well-defined muscles. Each wore relatively clean brown trousers and moccasins, and that was it. No shirt or hat. Their chest, arms, and back were bronzed from prolonged exposure to the sun, and their features gave the evidence of weathering common to those who spent their lives outdoors and were daily subjected to the harsh elements. In every respect they were identical, even down to their shoulder-length black hair and square jaws, except for the singular grotesque physical characteristic each possessed. The right-hand titan had ears as large as his head; larger, if the lobes were included. A quirk of radioactive or chemical contamination in his mother while she was pregnant had resulted in immense oval ears that narrowed to four-inch lobes at the bottom. His near-twin, the left-hand colossus, had also been born deformed, although in his case his eyes were disfigured and his ears were normal. His eyes were buglike, three inches in diameter, and a deep blue.

Sergeant Havoc scrutinized the duo, amazed at their deformities.

The man who had spoken to the noncom, a lean, weasely individual in a red shirt and plaid slacks, tittered. "You don't see sights like the brothers every day, do you, mate?"

"They're the ones who captured me," Havoc said.

"That they did, bucko. Say hello to Elephant Ears and Bug Eyes," the man stated, slinging a brown pouch over his left arm.

The one called Bug Eyes smirked, while his near-twin smiled and flapped his huge ears.

"Quite a pair, ain't they?" the speaker commented. "I'm known as Fiddler Jack. Who might you be?"

Havoc did not respond.

"Oh! come on, mate. You've no reason to be nasty. You're still alive, aren't you?"

"For how long?"

Fiddler Jack scratched his stubby chin. "Whether you live or die is out of our hands, soldier.

Our skipper will decide your fate. So why don't you be a nice lad and give us a name? Otherwise we'll have to call you Shit-head all the time."

Some of the others laughed tightly.

"So what is it? Harry? Fred? Percival?" Fiddler Jack asked.

Havoc could see no harm in revealing his name. "Sergeant Havoc."

"Sure, and what a fitting name for a military sort like yourself," Fiddler Jack remarked. He picked up a rifle, a Marlin 30-30 caliber, lying in the grass at his feet. "Well, we've got to be about our business. There's no profit in dawdling."

The men all began inspecting their weapons, a variety of rifles, shotguns, revolvers, and pistols. Every man also carried a knife or a sword in a sheath on his hip.

Havoc glanced at the mutations. Bug Eyes and Elephant Ears twisted and turned toward a log to their rear. Propped against the rotting wood were two crossbows and two quivers containing approximately a dozen bolts apiece. The crossbows were black compound jobs with heavy square stocks.

"Old Elephant Ears gave you a whack with the butt of his bow," Fiddler Jack disclosed. "You're lucky he didn't cave in your skull. He doesn't know his own strength sometimes."

"I'd like to see him try it again when my hands are untied and he's facing me," Havoc mentioned.

Elephant Ears looked at the noncom while slinging his quiver over his left shoulder. "Did you hear the wimp, brother?"

"I heard him, brother," Bug Eyes replied with a grin. "He thinks he's tough."

"Red Beard will take him down a peg," Elephant Ears predicted.

Sergeant Havoc watched the near-twins check their bows. "Are we heading out?"

"Some of us are," Fiddler Jack said. "If we miss the signal, Red Beard will have us keelhauled."

"Who's Red Beard?"

"Our skipper, mate. The meanest man on two legs."

"So you are pirates?" Sergeant Havoc questioned.

"And who would be calling us by such a terrible word?" Fiddler Jack inquired sarcastically.

"You'll never get away with it," Havoc vowed.

"With what, bucko?"

"With whatever it is you're up to."

"I like a man who can be specific," Fiddler Jack joked, rising to a crouching posture and stepping over to the noncom. He gripped the front of Havoc's camouflage fatigue shirt and hauled the serviceman to a stooped-over position. "Now be real quiet and come with me, mate."

Havoc was led past the line of pirates to the rim of a tree-dotted slope. He spotted his M-16 and Colt Stainless Steel Officers Model 45's on the ground next to the pirate partial to wearing pink shirts.

"Get down," Fiddler Jack said, and pushed the noncom to his knees. "Look," he stated, and pointed.

Sergeant Havoc gazed at the scene below, taking his bearings. The pirates were on a rise situated to the south of a village, and Havoc deduced that the community below was undoubtedly Harrison Hot Springs. To the north was a large body of water, evidently Harrison Lake. The picturesque village, nestled between the mountains and the beautiful lake, presented an image of tranquility and natural splendor. Havoc could readily comprehend why Harrison Hot Springs had been a popular resort prior to World War Three. A gently flowing river meandered through the town to his left, periodically visible through the trees, adding an extra- quaint touch.

"Do you know what that is?" Fiddler Jack queried.

"Harrison Hot Springs."

"Bingo. Me and my mates are going down there. If you try to shout, to warn the folks down there, your brains will be scattered all over this grass," Fiddler Jack warned. He nodded at the pirate in pink, who promptly walked over with one of Havoc's Colts in his right hand.

"Yeah, Fiddler?"

"I want you to keep an eye on our guests here," Fiddler Jack directed. "If he makes so much as a peep to let the landlubbers know we're here, shoot him in the head, Alberni."

"You can count on me," Alberni said, squatting alongside the captive and placing the Colt barrel next to Havoc's right ear. "You heard the man."

"What are you planning to do?" Sergeant Havoc asked Fiddler Jack.

"A bright soldier boy like you should be able to figure it out," Fiddler said, and returned to his fellows. From his vantage point, Havoc could see early risers moving about the orderly, arranged streets. The houses and other structures were in remarkable condition for a postwar community, reflecting the pride the inhabitants took in their village. He dreaded the impending pirate attack, and vainly sought a method of alerting the people without getting his head blown off. "You guys are crazy," he remarked casually.

"And why's that, pray tell?"

"What can ten of you hope to accomplish against an entire community?"

Alberni grinned. "Who said there were just ten of us?"

"There's more?"

"Lots more," Alberni divulged. "Red Beard is no man's fool, Sergeant. The Skull and Bones will be coming at them folks from three directions. They'll never know what hit them."

"The Skull and Bones?"

"That's the name of our band."

"Where are you from?" Havoc inquired.

Fiddler Jack approached, bent over at the waist, with Elephant Ears, Bug Eyes, and the rest trailing him. "We're on our way," he said to Alberni. "I'm sorry you'll miss most of the fun. But you'll get an equal share, mark my words."

Alberni nodded. "Thanks. And don't worry none about the Army man here. I'll take good care of him."

"Here's salt in your eye," Fiddler Jack stated, and slipped over the rim.

Sergeant Havoc's stomach muscles tightened as he observed the pirates descend stealthily toward the heart of Harrison Hot Springs. The thought of innocent people being brutally slaughtered made him want to jump up and shout a warning, but the knowledge that his shout would not avert the carnage and would result in his needless death deterred him.

"We roam the waters from Vancouver to Anchorage," Alberni mentioned.

Havoc glanced at him, distracted by his anxiety. "What?"

"You wanted to know where we're from."

"Oh," Havoc said, staring at the village again. "You're a long way from the Pacific Ocean."

"We go inland on the rivers when the prize is right, but never this far before," Alberni commented, his tone implying he entertained reservations about this raid.

"You came in this far to steal some women?" Havoc queried.

"Not quite, Army man. There's a better prize here."

"Like what?"

"A ship."

"In Harrison Hot Springs?"

Alberni nodded at the lake. "Red Beard heard there's a fine ship on that there Harrison Lake."

"What's the big deal over one ship? Did you run out of your own?" Sergeant Havoc questioned.

"The Skull and Bones is always on the lookout for another vessel, Sergeant," Alberni detailed. "We don't build our own. We take what we find. And the seaworthy crafts on the

West Coast are few and far between. We can't afford to pass up an opportunity like this."

Havoc surveyed the placid blue water. "I don't see any ship."

"That Harrison Lake is forty-five miles long. The vessel we want could be anywhere out there."

"If you're mainly after the ship, why bother raiding Harrison Hot Springs? A few women must be small potatoes to a bunch like you."

Alberni shrugged. "Every little bit helps our profit margin."

"How will you get the ship to the Pacific Ocean?"

"Easy, Army man. We'll take the vessel out the southwest end of Harrison Lake into the Harrison River, then down to Harrison Bay, where we'll cross to the Fraser River. From there it's smooth sailing to the Pacific."

"You have it all planned out," Havoc remarked.

"Red Beard does. He didn't become the chief of the Skull and Bones for nothing."

"I can't wait to meet this genius," Sergeant Havoc quipped.

"Making fun of Red Beard is not very smart. If he hears you, you'll walk the plank."

Havoc looked at Alberni. "Do pirates really do that?"

"We do. I heard the Prince of Wales crew like to feed their enemies to the sharks."

"The Prince of Wales crew? Are they another pirate band?"

"Our main competitors. A rotten gang, if ever there was one. They're always undercutting our prices on the black market," Alberni said, and sighed. "Being a businessman is not all it's cracked up to be."

"You think of yourselves as businessmen?" Havoc asked in astonishment,

"What else? We go out of business if we don't stay in the black. We're not like those bastards based on the Prince of Wales Island, They're in it for the fun of it."

"And you're not?"

"Red Beard says profit first, fun second."

"Yep. I've definitely got to meet this guy," Havoc said.

"There he is," Alberni stated, and pointed to the west.

Sergeant Havoc faced in the direction indicated and froze. Another group of pirates, perhaps two dozen, were advancing toward the unsuspecting village, briefly visible as they filed across a clearing. In the lead was a man with flaming red hair and a red beard.

"There's a dozen more of us coming at them from the east," Alberni disclosed.

So, counting Alberni, there were about 47 cutthroats converging on Harrison Hot Springs! Sergeant Havoc frowned, infuriated by his helplessness. The poor people down there would never stand a chance! He needed to do something.

But what?

He was on his knees, with Alberni squatting on his right side and pressing the Colt to his ear. His hands were resting on his thighs, and although his wrists were bound, he retained his mobility. Surreptitiously, pretending to be absorbed in the tableau below, he shifted his arms to the right slightly.

"That Red Beard is a smart one, all right," Alberni was saying. "He and most of the band came up the Harrison River on small boats. Fiddler Jack and us came up from Ostman's. And Zack the Black took the rest by boat upriver from Ostman's and should be coming in from the east."

Sergeant Havoc inhaled, straightened his fingers, and tensed his hands.

Alberni chuckled. "This will be like taking candy from a baby. Too bad I have to watch over you. It's been two weeks since I had a piece of fluff."

"I'm going to sneeze," Havoc unexpectedly declared!

"What?" Alberni said.

"Sneeze," Havoc repeated, and faked doing just that, raising his flattened, compressed hands to his nose and bending forward several inches. He opened his mouth wide, as if about to sneeze, and for the space of a heartbeat his head was clear of the pirate's line of fire. He whipped his arms to the right, knocking Alberni's gun arm aside, then grabbed the neckline of the pink blouse and pulled Alberni toward him, ramming his forehead into the pirate's nose with all of his might. He felt and heard the crunch of cartilage and bone.

Alberni squealed and attempted to bring the gun into play.

Sergeant Havoc released the blouse, and in the next motion speared his fingertips into the pirate's throat.

His eyes widening in horror, Alberni dropped the Colt, sputtering and gasping, and clutched at his neck.

Havoc battered Alberni's hands aside and arced the flat of his calloused hands into the brigand's neck.

Blood spurted from Alberni's nose and mouth, and he gurgled loudly as he tried to rise, to flee. Instead, he pitched onto the grass, on his left side, twitching and wheezing.

From the direction of Harrison Hot Springs arose the brittle chatter and popping of gunfire.

Spying the .45 near his right knee, Sergeant Havoc clasped the pistol in both hands, jammed the barrel into Alberni's rib, and squeezed the trigger. Muffled by the pink blouse and the pirate's flesh, the shot knocked Alberni onto his back, where he convulsed for

several seconds, then was still.

More firing punctuated the dawn from Harrison Hot Springs.

Havoc took a green-handled survival knife from a leather sheath on Alberni's left side, reversed his grip, and with seven strokes of the sharp blade succeeded in parting the rope binding his wrists. Without hesitating, he scrambled to his weapons, holstered both pistols, and retrieved the M-16.

Blade had been right. He had been wrong.

There was no way he could allow harmless citizens, whether they lived in one of the territories controlled by the Freedom Federation or in a former Canadian province, to be savagely butchered without doing his utmost to protect them. He was a soldier, dedicated to preserving lives. And there were about a hundred people in Harrison Hot Springs in dire, immediate need of protection.

Sergeant Havoc hefted the M-16 and raced over the rim toward the village.

CHAPTER SEVEN

"Son of a bitch!"

"Why are you upset, gentle one?"

Grizzly glanced at the shaman. "Call me that again and I'll rip your face off." He sprinted up the slope of the mountain, his stout legs pumping, breathing heavily, his progress impeded by the dense undergrowth.

"Why are you upset?" Red Hawk repeated.

"Why don't you ask the spirit of the eagle?" Grizzly rejoined.

"Have I accidentally offended you, Man Who Is a Bear?"

"The name is Grizzly, and I'd appreciate if it you'd call me by my name."

"Certainly, gentle one."

Grizzly dug his clawlike toe-nails into the dank earth as he ascended the steep slope, his body inclined at an uncomfortable angle.

"Are you upset because of the shooting?" Red Hawk inquired.

"You can hear that too?" Grizzly responded in surprise. "I can hear it because I have the hearing of a grizzly bear, but most humans can't hear worth spit."

"I can't hear the shooting."

"Then how do you know?"

"I know because I am a shaman of the Kutenai. I know because the Everywhere Spirit

knows."

Grizzly grunted, in the act of sliding over a log the height of his waist, holding the old man higher to avoid bumping the Indian against the downed trunk. "Don't give me that spirit mumbo-jumbo," he said.

"What is mumbo-jumbo?"

"Something that makes no sense, that isn't real. Bullshit."

"The Everywhere Spirit is real, my friend."

"You sound like Blade," Grizzly mentioned, huffing and puffing, catching sight of the crest and running harder.

"Blade has learned to commune with the Everywhere Spirit. You should do the same."

"I don't believe in any spirit crap."

"Why not?"

Grizzly looked into the shaman's inquisitive eyes. "You pick a hell of a time to get philosophical."

"You are doing all the work," Red Hawk observed.

"Don't remind me," Grizzly said, estimating they were 40 yards from the top.

"I want to thank you for carrying me so far," Red Hawk commented. "And I would urge you to open your soul to the leading of the Spirit."

"Give me a break."

"What about the children you hope to have? Would you have them deny the way of the Everywhere Spirit? Would you have the emptiness fill them as it has you?"

Grizzly almost halted, he was so astounded. But the continuous discharge of firearms on the far side of the mountain propelled him higher. "You're spooky, old-timer."

"I speak the truth. A life without the Spirit is a barren life, a life of loneliness, where the only comfort is a false pride. You owe your children a better life. You owe yourself too."

"You're talking to someone who was bred in a test tube by mixing a human embryo and a grizzly embryo. I'm part human, part animal. And animals can't commune with the Spirit, as you put it."

"How do you know?"

Grizzly found a game trail angling to the summit and jogged upward.

"Yes, you have the qualities of a bear," Red Hawk went on. "You have the fur of a bear, and the features of a bear, and the claws of a bear. But inside you is the mind and soul of a man, and your soul can know the Everywhere Spirit if you try."

"Says you."

"All I ask is that you try."

Grizzly came to an open section on the flattened crown of the mountain and beheld a panoramic view of pristine Harrison Lake and Harrison Hot Springs far below. The crackle of gunfire reached his ears, and he deposited the shaman on the ground. "I've got to get down there."

"I know."

"Will you be all right if I leave you here for a while?" Grizzly asked. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

"I will join you down there."

"Are you planning to hitch another ride with a hairy fart?"

"Perhaps."

Grizzly started down, grinning and waving at the shaman. "Take care."

"May the Everywhere Spirit watch over you," Red Hawk said.

Nutty as a loon! Grizzly decided, and devoted his attention to navigating the treacherous terrain, to traversing the jumble of logs, brush, and boulders. Fatigue gnawed at his limbs, and he shook off the sensation with an effort. Lower and lower he went, until he came to a break in the trees, a flat strip ten yards wide, and spotted the body.

What was this?

He crouched, scanning the vicinity, then advanced warily until he stood over a dead man dressed in a pink shirt and black trousers. Someone had done a number on the guy and he was as dead as a doornail.

Who?

Havoc?

Grizzly continued his descent. Figures were darting to and fro in Harrison Hot Springs. Smoke wafted from several buildings. Screams and wails served as a terrified chorus to the booming beat of the gunshots. A large commotion was transpiring near the lake shore, where someone with red hair was bellowing at the top of his lungs.

He almost reached the bottom before the ground leveled off, and he sprinted into Harrison Hot Springs, into a nightmare of rampant bedlam, and stopped in the center of a cracked, rutted roadway. Bodies were everywhere. Many of the homes had been set ablaze, and sheets of white smoke swirled among the residences. Off to the right a woman screeched.

Grizzly padded into the smoke, the acrid fumes stinging his sensitive nostrils and overriding any human scents that might have lingered in the air. His dark eyes smarted and watered. The smoke negated the advantage he enjoyed from possessing the senses of a real grizzly

bear. He held his brawny hands near his waist, ready to employ his claws if necessary, the keen-edged, sturdy claws that matched a grizzly's in shape and size, their five-inch size about average for one of the enormous bears. He'd been told by Thunder that some grizzlies sported claws over six inches long. Oddly enough, although he resembled a grizzly in almost every respect, the demented Doktor had seen fit to add a feline trait to his constitution: the ability to retract his claws like a cat. He'd often wondered why, and had finally formulated a logical reason. If the claws weren't retractable, he'd be unable to accomplish common tasks like writing or eating without great difficulty, and picking his nose would be downright dangerous.

A vague form appeared in the smoke directly ahead.

Grizzly prepared to pounce, until the form stepped nearer and solidified as a weeping woman in her forties, her blue sweater torn and exposing her left breast, her brown hair askew, tears streaking her cheeks, her green eyes unfocused,

The woman realized someone was in front of her and wiped at her eyes, blinking rapidly. "Pirates!" she cried. "Pirates!"

"Are you hurt?" Grizzly asked.

She succeeded in clearing her vision, took one look at him, and whirled and raced away, shrieking hysterically. "Monsters! Monsters!"

"Dingbat," Grizzly muttered, and pressed on. So many noises and sensory impressions confused his faculties, and he strained to isolate a brigand in the wall of smoke. In ten yards he hit pay dirt.

Laughter.

Harsh, contemptuous laughter, off to the right.

Grizzly moved in the direction of the merriment, and a gust of wind dispersed the smoke in his path to reveal a pair of pirates having their version of fun with a girl of 16 or 17. They were laughing and shoving her from one to the other, while the petrified girl bounced off their probing hands, her features the color of chalk. One of the pirates had a rifle slung over his left shoulder, The second wore a revolver on his right hip. "Hey, assholes!" Grizzly said.

They turned toward him, their smiles freezing on their faces, their eyes widening in amazement.

The girl halted next to the cutthroat with the rifle, her face a copy of theirs.

"If you want someone to play with, try me," Grizzly proposed, and closed on them.

To their credit, the pirates tried to bring their firearms into play. But their human reflexes were as molasses compared to the hybrid endowed with the speed and strength of *Ursa arctos horribilis*.

Grizzly made his hands and fingers go rigid, and felt his claws pop into the filtered sunlight. He buried the five on his right hand in the neck of the brigand with the revolver, then swept those on his left hand into the stomach of the second pirate and twisted both hands simultaneously, gouging a hole in both men. Wrenching his right hand from the ruptured

throat of his first victim, he drove his left arm upward, ripping his claws through the other pirate's abdomen. He tugged his left hand free and stepped back.

Spraying blood and gore from their wounds, the pirates sagged to the ground, the one on the left whining pitifully.

Grizzly looked at the girl. "You're safe now," he assured her.

She raised her hands to her cheeks, spun, and darted off. "Help me! Help me! A mutant is after me! Save me!"

Grizzly moved past the convulsing pirates. "And you think you guys don't get any respect," he remarked.

Twenty yards beyond, lying in a pile next to a sidewalk, were three dead townspeople, all men, each slain by a shot through the forehead.

To Grizzly's annoyance, the smoke was becoming thicker. He could distinguish a structure to his right with bright flames flaring from the roof. Ten yards further on, his right foot bumped into something and he looked down.

A pirate was flat on his back, his chest perforated by a half-dozen rounds.

So somebody was fighting back!

Grizzly tried to envision the layout of the village in his mind. Harrison Lake should be due north of the town, and that's where he'd seen a lot of people congregating. Hopefully, they were pirates. He was eager to wade into the sons of bitches.

A particularly dense cloud of smoke enveloped him.

His claws still extended, Grizzly headed in the direction he believed to be north. A sudden rush of boots to his rear alerted him to an assault a moment before a strong arm encircled his neck and tried to clamp a hold on him. With deceptive ease, Grizzly hunched his shoulders and arced his torso downward, flipping his assailant over his head to sprawl on the ground. "Try these, butt-head!" he said, and lunged at his attacker, who was already rising. His claws were three inches from the man when recognition dawned, and he checked his thrust at the last instant, his superb sinews responding the millisecond his brain flashed the mental command. "Havoc!" he blurted out.

The noncom was equally jolted. "Grizzly! What are you doing here?"

"Trick-or-treating, you dipshit!" Grizzly responded angrily, lowering his arms. "What do you think I'm doing here?"

"Are Blade and Boone with you?"

"Nope. Blade sent me on ahead to save your careless hide."

Sergeant Havoc unslung his M-16 from his right arm and glanced left and right. "I thought you were a pirate."

"And you look like Mother Hubbard," Grizzly said.

"I couldn't tell who you were in all this smoke," Havoc explained. "All I saw was a dark shape."

"You're lucky I didn't skewer your dumb ass."

"I wanted to take a prisoner," Havoc stated. "Do you know why the pirates are here?"

"This is their annual wienie roast?"

"No. They're after some kind of ship."

"Couldn't the dummies just build their own?" Grizzly quipped.

"We've got to find the lake," Havoc said, turning and starting away.

"Wait for me," Grizzly said, keeping pace with the noncom.

"We've got to stop them," Havoc declared. "They're as bloodthirsty as the Vampires we fought months ago."

"I hope they have better table manners."

The smoke began to thin, and an elderly man appeared in front of them, shuffling across a tidy yard, in obvious shock. Several corpses littered the sidewalk.

"I hope we find them soon," Grizzly mentioned. "I want to waste these suckers so we can take off for L.A."

"I know how you feel," Havoc said. "I'm worried about Thunder and Bear too."

"Don't forget Athena."

"Who?"

"Remind me to belt you in the mouth when this is over."

"Okay. But don't get any of your fur stuck between my teeth."

"I love a guy with a sense of humor. You should develop one sometime."

They ran for 50 more yards, over lawns and across streets, between burning buildings and through vacant lots.

"Do you know where the hell we are?" Grizzly asked.

"I hate to admit it, but I've lost my bearings in all this smoke," Sergeant Havoc admitted.

"Did we cross over a bridge back there?"

"I don't think so," Havoc replied.

They came to a cluster of buildings. Off to the left a woman voiced a shrill cry of despair, and

they ran along a sidewalk to her aid, passing several businesses.

Grizzly glanced at the signs. D's and N's Restaurant. Mike's Deli-house. And last in the row was The Harrison Trading Post, its front window shattered and the interior seared by spreading flames. Smoke poured from the structure, and he plowed through it to find a sunny stretch of sidewalk and road, and there in the center of the street was a woman about to be raped by four pirates. One brigand held her arms to the asphalt while each of her legs was restrained by another raider. The fourth man, a leer twisting his mouth, was lowering his blue pants.

"They're mine!" Sergeant Havoc hissed, and dashed toward them.

The pirate holding the woman's arms looked up and saw the noncom approaching. "Look out!" he shouted, and endeavored to draw a pistol on his left hip.

Havoc shot the brigand in the forehead, the impact hurling the man backwards. In three strides the noncom was on them, and he smashed the stock of the M-16 into the mouth of the bandit with the pants at half-mast. The other pair was rising, unlimbering their rifles, but neither man managed to snap off a round. Havoc spun, his body a blur, delivering a flawless spinning back kick into the jaw of the taller of the pair, then he came down, stepped forward, and executed a spinning wheel kick, his left foot catching the last of the quartet on the head and flattening the man on the spot.

Sobbing uncontrollably, the woman rolled onto her left side, clutching her torn clothes to her body.

Havoc knelt alongside her and nudged her elbow gently. "Is there anything I can do for you, miss?"

She shook her head, averting her face.

"You can't stay here," Havoc advised her. "You've got to get to cover. There are a lot more pirates around."

The woman made no move to stand.

"Please," Havoc urged her. "I can't stay and protect you. You must find a hiding place." He paused and touched her neck. "What's your name, miss?"

She wiped at her eyes, sniffing, and mumbled a word.

Havoc leaned over her. "I didn't quite hear that."

"Bauman," she said weakly. "Myrtle Bauman."

"Well, Myrtle, you've got to pull yourself together and head for cover. Now," Havoc said forcibly.

Bauman glanced up at him and mustered a feeble smile. "Thank you for saving me. Those men are fiends."

"I know," Havoc said, taking hold of her shoulders and assisting her in standing. "Can you manage on your own?"

"Yes. Thank you." She began to limp off, her moist eyes straying to Grizzly. The next moment she was fleeing pell-mell into the distance.

The hybrid walked over to Havoc. "If this keeps up, I'm liable to develop a complex."

"You can't blame her. She just went through hell."

"Let's kick more pirate ass," Grizzly suggested, jogging to the right. He squinted up at the sun, verifying he was bearing to the north again.

"I hope Blade and Boone show up soon," Havoc mentioned, running on the hybrid's left side.

They were passing between two buildings. A faded sign on the wall to the west read Hot Springs Cafe.

"Who needs those two slowpokes?" Grizzly quipped. "These pirates are a bunch of wimps. We can handle 'em."

In ten strides they came to an esplanade, and beyond was the south shore of Harrison Lake, where dozens of village residents were being held at gunpoint by dozens of pirates. Several of the plunderers glanced around as the two Force members raced into sight.

"Look!" a hefty pirate shouted.

"Kill them!" bellowed another.

"Uh-oh," was all Grizzly could think of to say.

CHAPTER EIGHT

"Someone is up ahead," Boone said softly.

"Where?" Blade asked, halting and surveying the road and the vegetation on both sides. They were hastening into Harrison Hot Springs from the south, having skirted a mountain a half mile to the southwest and discovered an ancient highway that led them to the road they were on. Both the highway and the road were in need of repair, their surfaces split by narrow crevices and dotted with potholes, testimony to the fact that functional vehicles were a rarity in the postwar era, especially in the rural areas of Canada and the barbaric Outlands in the country once known as the United States of America. The Warrior and the Cavalryman had gone by a score of abandoned businesses that had once served the booming tourist industry. Blade found himself impressed by the rugged, magnificent beauty of the region. In all his extensive travels he'd seldom beheld such natural grandeur.

"There," Boone declared, pointing at a large brown shape in the brush on the left-hand side, approximately 30 feet in front of them and an equal length from the roadway.

Blade halted and elevated the M-60, his gray eyes probing the brush. There did seem to be someone, or some thing, standing in the undergrowth. The figure was immobile and appeared to have its arms upraised, holding an object aloft.

"What the dickens is it?" Boone asked.

"I don't know," Blade responded, moving forward warily., To his right he spied a recently painted sign and noted the words. Harrison Hot Springs Road.

"There's another one," Boone said.

Blade saw it too, a second figure about eight yards to the north of the first, only this one was smaller in stature and a peculiar orange-brown in color.

What could they be?

The Warrior stepped from the road, angling toward them, ready to fire if necessary, and not until he came within ten feet of the larger object did he realize they were inanimate.

"They're statues!" Boone exclaimed.

They walked over to the large one, marveling at the wooden carving of an apelike creature with an odd crest on its head and a faint bluish boulder, likewise carved from wood, suspended in the air in its thick arms, as if the beast was about to hurl the boulder at a passerby.

"Weird," Boone commented. "Do you reckon the Indians made it?"

"Beats me," Blade replied, hurrying to the smaller figure, which turned out to be the carved likeness of a bear. The wood on both statues was cracked and pitted, indicating great age, but the fact that both were devoid of dust and grime indicated someone wiped them clean regularly.

"Maybe the folks in Harrison Hot Springs put them here to scare off the mutants," Boone suggested. "You know, like scarecrows."

"Could be," Blade said skeptically, and returned to Harrison Hot Springs Road. He jogged northward, gazing at a column of smoke rising above the trees as gunfire reached his ears. "The pirates are attacking the village!" he exclaimed, and quickened his pace. The road curved slightly, and he stuck to the left edge in case he should need to seek shelter rapidly.

"We're too late," Boone remarked, running on the Warrior's right.

"It figures," Blade said.

Boone stared at the billowing smoke, thankful the breeze was blowing in the opposite direction. "I didn't expect them to burn the town."

"After what we saw at Ostman's Trading Post, I'm not surprised," Blade observed.

They neared the outskirts of the village proper.

"Damn," Blade stated.

Harrison Hot Springs was an inferno, with flames flicking high above a majority of the buildings and clouds of smoke floating and curling over the landscape. Gunshots and piercing wails rose in a strident cacophony. A family of five, three children and their parents, materialized in the fringe of the southernmost cloud, racing for their lives. The mother and

father were casting repeated glances to their rear, and the reason became obvious a moment later when two pirates appeared, both laughing maliciously as they chased the family.

Blade dropped to his right knee, raised the M-60, and fired. The machine gun bucked and thundered.

Taken unawares, both brigands were stitched in midstride and hurled onto their backs.

Rising, Blade moved toward the family. "Are you people okay?"

The father, a thin man in a green shirt and beige pants, clasped his youngest child, a girl of four or five, to his chest protectively. "Who are you?"

"We're here to help," Blade said.

The Canadian looked at the dead raiders, "The Lord knows we can use it."

Blade and Boone went over to the family.

Awed by the giant Warrior's stature, the children clung to their mother and father and gaped.

"Do you have any idea how many pirates are in Harrison Hot Springs?" Blade inquired, keeping his eyes on the smoke.

"My best guess would be dozens," the father said. "I think they attacked from several directions at once. They seemed to be everywhere, no matter which way we turned."

"Did you happen to see anything of a soldier, a man dressed in the uniform of the Free State of California?" Blade questioned.

"Sure didn't," the man said.

"How about a furry hybrid, a mutant who looks like a grizzly bear?" Boone queried.

"We definitely haven't seen anyone answering that description," the Canadian said. "My name is Parberry, by the way."

"Well, Mr. Parberry, you'd better get your family to safety," Blade advised. "We have business to attend to."

Parberry hustled his loved ones to the south.

"Let's go," Blade said, and entered the smoke, coughing lightly when he inhaled a whiff of it.

"The pirates will be hard to spot," Boone noted.

"That works both ways," Blade responded. "This smoke will give us the advantage. They won't be expecting much opposition."

The Warrior and the Cavalryman strode several hundred yards without encountering any foes, although all around them could be heard the din of insanity unleashed. They lost track of the number of bodies they spotted, and scarcely paid any attention to the corpses until

they came across a pair sprawled near the right side of the road.

Boone took one look at the grisly form of a gutted pirate, and nodded. "Grizzly."

"No doubt about it," Blade agreed.

They advanced faster.

"There's no telling which way he went," Boone remarked.

"He shouldn't be too hard to locate," Blade said. "We'll just follow the trail of bodies with their intestines hanging out."

But they proceeded for several hundred yards without so much as a glimpse of their companion. The conflagration, which was widespread on the south side of the village and in the central sections, diminished the farther north they went, and the smoke began to thin.

Blade detected the presence of a group of people ten yards in front of him and flattened, pulling Boone down before they could be spotted.

"Pirates, you think?" Boone whispered.

A gruff, imperious voice cut through the smoke. "Move it or lose it, you candy asses! Red Beard is waiting for us!"

The smoke parted briefly, revealing eight village residents with their arms upraised being herded in a northerly direction by three raiders armed with rifles.

"Do we take the pirates down?" Boone asked as the smoke shrouded the group again.

"Not yet," Blade said. "Let's follow them and see what they're up to."

They cautiously trailed the group to the end of the block, where the dispersing smoke threatened to expose their presence to the pirates. Blade and Boone darted to the left side of the road and flattened against the wall of a building on which an old, faded sign read Hot Springs Supply. Blade edged to the corner and risked a peek.

The pirates were converging on the southern shore of Harrison Lake, and in the process were gathering together every resident they had taken prisoner. Approximately three dozen raiders ringed the hapless prisoners, who had been crammed onto a strip of beach fronting two docks. Tied to those docks were eleven boats and canoes. And standing on the nearest dock, facing the captives, his hands held behind his back, was a muscular pirate wearing baggy black trousers and a white shirt. He was distinguished by his striking red beard, mustache, and hair.

"Listen up, you scurvy dogs! I'm Red Beard, leader of the Skull and Bones. If you cooperate with us, you might live. If you don't, you'll surely die!" bellowed the man on the dock.

"What is it you want?" ventured a male prisoner.

"What have we done to deserve this?" added a woman.

"What have you done?" Red Beard repeated, and laughed. "You haven't done a blessed

thing, missy, except be in the wrong place at the wrong time."

A murmur rippled through the residents.

"I heard tell about this here ship that sails on Harrison Lake," Red Beard announced. "And me and my mates want to get our hands on this ship." He paused and raised his voice. "Where is the Bowie?"

No one responded.

Red Beard shook his right fist at the captives. "I won't ask you this again. If I don't get an answer, some of you will die. Now where is the Bowie?"

"How should we know?" a man replied.

"Don't play games with me!" Red Beard snapped. "I know all about the Bowie. I know how it was used as a cruise ship before the war. I know it's still in good shape, and that there's a family living on her. The Bowie never leaves Harrison Lake, and I want to know where to find her dock."

The residents displayed a singular bravery by refusing to divulge the information.

"Get ready," Blade said to Boone. "If the pirates go to fire, we'll divert their attention."

"How?" Boone asked.

"We'll charge."

"The two of us against all of them? I like your notion of fair odds," Boone quipped.

Red Beard stepped closer to the shore. "I've tried to be on the up-and-up with you, but you won't cooperate. You have only yourselves to blame for what happens next."

Blade aimed the M-60 toward the beach. Out of his left eye he detected movement and swung to the west, and who should he see but Sergeant Havoc and Grizzly blundering onto the scene 50 yards or so away.

"Look!" shouted a hefty pirate.

"Kill them!" chimed in another.

Blade saw Havoc and Grizzly trying to backpedal to cover, and a dozen pirates breaking into a run and leveling their weapons. He boldly stalked from concealment, holding his fire for a few critical seconds to insure the residents would not be caught in the hail of lead, and when he was certain the angle was perfect he cut loose with the M-60.

With their attention riveted on the soldier and the hybrid, the pirates failed to notice the giant in the leather vest until the slugs from his M-60E3 general-purpose machine gun were tearing through their bodies and knocking them to the damp sand. Six were down in half as many seconds before the rest pivoted and sent a volley at the giant.

Blade performed a rolling dive, coming up on his knees and firing again. More pirates entered the fray, some trying to slay the giant, others going after the soldier and the hybrid.

Boone added his M-16 to the contest.

And pandemonium reined on the beach as the frantic residents of Harrison Hot Springs milled in confusion. The wise ones flattened, but many tried to flee, pushing and jostling their neighbors, yelling and crying as they milled in confusion, overcome by a frenzy of fear. A lanky pirate, seeing the residents striving to escape from the beach, started shooting them indiscriminately, forcing those nearest the esplanade to retreat.

Blade frowned and raced toward the throng. He'd hoped to prevent more spilling of villager blood, and now he could see two cutthroats shooting into the prisoners, felling one after another. He sighted on the lanky pirate, but a woman stepped between them, blocking his shot.

Sergeant Havoc fired his M-16, and the lanky raider clutched at his perforated cranium and toppled to the ground.

Boone nailed two others.

Eight pirates broke from the mass and made for the esplanade, coming directly at Blade.

The Warrior had almost reached a short rock wall separating the esplanade from the beach. To his left were the onrushing brigands. To his right was a beachfront plaza consisting of landscaped gardens, waters fountains, planters, and a stone footbridge over a small pond. There was also a roofed-over area, perhaps for sitting under on a rainy day. He angled toward the plaza as the pirates tried to bring him down, their slugs striking the walk near his combat boots or buzzing through the air overhead like angry hornets. Firing from the hip, he succeeded in slaying the two fleetest raiders.

Undeterred, the rest sprinted straight at him.

Blade ducked and weaved, reducing the target he presented, and reached the stone footbridge. He ducked behind an upright log four feet in height placed near the end of the bridge as an ornament. Several rounds struck the stone bridge, zinging when they ricocheted. Propping the M-60 barrel on the top of the log for support, he aimed at the cluster of charging pirates and squeezed the trigger. Able to fire at the rate of 200 rounds per minute in the rapid-fire mode, or up to 650 cyclic, the M-60E3 had been a favorite of the U.S. Marine Corps prior to World War Three. Its negligible weight, thanks to its thin, light barrel and other components, made the M-60 a versatile, supremely deadly weapon. And Blade demonstrated exactly how deadly the M-60 could be by arcing the barrel from right to left, his shots catching the six pirates in the midsection, stitching through them as effortlessly as a scorching knife through butter.

The brigands danced and jerked spasmodically as their torsos were ruptured, then collapsed onto the beach. The Warrior saw Boone shoot a pirate about to club a screaming woman. From his vantage point he could see over the heads of the milling villagers, and he spied the pirate called Red Beard ordering his men to climb in the canoes and boats tied to the two docks. Outboard motors sputtered to life.

They were heading onto Harrison Lake!

Blade dashed from the safety of the stone bridge, bearing toward the beach. He spotted Grizzly bounding down the first dock, which had a large sign midway along its length

proclaiming Planes and Passengers Only beyond This Point in faint white letters. The hybrid was trying to get to Red Beard, who stood at the end of the dock alongside a 20-foot craft, an outboard cruiser, barking commands to his bustling minions.

Damn!

Blade vaulted from the top of the rock wall to the sandy beach and sprinted toward the dock. In his path were the villagers, few of whom parted to permit him to pass. He was compelled to shoulder his way through, his eyes locked on Grizzly's progress. "Move aside!" he directed. "Let me through!" He glanced to his left and saw Sergeant Havoc racing toward the second dock. Behind him Boone was just jumping to the beach.

Most of the pirates were already aboard the craft of their choice. Four were standing near Red Beard, who was about to step on the 20-footer when he looked around and realized Grizzly was almost upon them.

Blade could see the leader's mouth move, and then the four raiders were turning to meet the hybrid's rush, bringing their weapons into play.

Grizzly was on them in the twinkling of an eye, his bear claws extended, raking and slashing, crimson spurting as he sliced them apart.

Struggling to press through the crowd, Blade grinned when he saw the four pirates drop. For a second he believed that the hybrid would slay Red Beard, and he watched in anticipation as Grizzly lunged at the red-maned brigand. But Red Beard was not to be an easy mark. His right hand flashed up, a revolver clenched in his palm, and Blade clearly heard the booming of the shot. Fury engulfed him when he observed Grizzly stiffen and tumble into the outboard cruiser, and he brusquely shouldered bystanders aside as he attempted to get a bead on the pirate chief.

Red Beard hopped into the boat, and at a signal from him, a wave of his right arm, all the boats and canoes pulled from the two docks, bearing to the north, into the open waters of Harrison Lake.

Blade bulled his way across 20 yards to the dock and stepped onto the wooden platform. The makeshift pirate armada was 80 feet out and sailing at a brisk clip. He elevated the M-60. and was about to fire when a sight on the 20-foot craft gave him pause.

A pair of brigands were holding Grizzly in their arms, bracing his bulky body awkwardly. To their left stood Red Beard, who was smirking and pointing his revolver at the hybrid's head.

The meaning was clear.

If the Warrior fired, Grizzly would be shot again.

Blade hesitated, torn between his loyalty to his friend and his desire to terminate the pirate leader.

Red Beard added insult to injury by waving.

"I can bag all three of them," Boone announced, arriving on the Warrior's right and wagging his M-16.

Blade knew the Cavalryman qualified as an exceptional marksman. Only Sergeant Havoc was better with an M-16. But he shook his head. "No. We won't risk losing Grizzly. There must be someone piloting that boat who we can't see from here." He paused and sighed. "We'll let them go, for now."

Boone shrugged. "I hope you know what you're doing." Blade's response lacked conviction. "So do I."

CHAPTER NINE

"Wake up you freak! Wake up!"

He wasn't sure what woke him up, the insult or the cold water thrown on his face, but he came awake with a vengeance, his feral eyes blazing, ignoring the pain racking his left temple where the bullet had creased his cranium as he sat up and blinked in the bright morning sun.

"The beastie is awake, Red Beard," declared a pirate squatting in front of him, a man wearing a red shirt and plaid slacks.

Grizzly found himself on the bank of the lake—the west bank, from the position of the sun—and surrounded by 15 brigands. The one with the red hair walked up to him.

"You must have a thick head, mutant scum," Red Beard declared.

Grizzly started to rise, and belatedly realized his wrists were bound securely behind his back. Instead, he growled, baring his pointed teeth.

"This one has no manners," said the pirate in the red shirt.

"That he doesn't, Fiddler Jack," concurred Red Beard.

"Cut me loose!" Grizzly hissed.

Red Beard grinned. "Do we look like idiots, then?"

"You'll look like mincemeat when I'm done with you," Grizzly vowed.

"Such tough talk from a freak who's helpless," Red Beard said sarcastically.

"Quit calling me a freak!"

"Would you rather we call you a deviate? A mutant? A vile abomination before God?" Red Beard asked.

"God! What do you know about God, you bastard?"

Fiddler Jack rose, laughing lightly. "My, oh, my. It seems we have us a religious freak on our hands."

"What's your name, freak?" Red Beard inquired.

"Go drown yourself," Grizzly snapped.

Red Beard crouched and stared into the mutant's eyes. "Let me set you straight on a few things, mutant. Your fate is in my hands. We're a mile from Harrison Hot Springs, and none of your mates will be coming to your rescue. We took every craft there was to take."

Grizzly gazed over the pirate chief's shoulders at the canoes and boats lining the bank.

"If you tell me what I want to know, I'll make your death an easy one," Red Beard went on. "If you don't cooperate, then you'll die hard. It's as simple as that. What do you say?"

"Go to hell."

"I probably will, but not today, freak," Red Beard said, and stood. "Who are you? What were you and your mates doing in Harrison Hot Springs?"

"Blow it out your ass."

"I'm not a man to be trifled with, freak," Red Beard warned. "And I'm not going anywhere until I get answers from you. Good mates of mine died today, thanks to your friends and you. The Skull and Bones came close to losing, and our band has never lost a fight in its one-hundred-year history. I need to know the why of it, and you're the only one who can supply the answers."

"Don't hold your breath, dipshit."

Red Beard made a smacking noise with his lips. "I've tried to be fair about this, beastie." He glanced to the right and motioned with his right arm.

A pair of pirates stepped into view.

Grizzly's surprise showed. He hadn't paid much attention to the other pirates, and he stared at the imposing duo, with their shoulder-length black hair, rippling sinews, and distinctive physical deformities in frank amazement. Each held a crossbow.

"Say hello to Elephant Ears and Bug Eyes," Red Beard said.

Elephant Ears glanced at his near-twin and nodded at Grizzly. "This one should be fun, brother."

"We've never done one like him before, brother," Bug Eyes noted eagerly.

"You're mutations, like me," Grizzly blurted out.

"No, not like you, you aberration," Elephant Ears replied. "Nature played a cruel trick on us in our mother's womb, but we're still human, beast-man. My ears and my brother's eyes are different, that's all. I can hear the drop of a pin at twenty yards, and my brother can see as clearly as day in the darkest night." He paused and contemptuously studied the hybrid. "But you're nothing but a disgusting animal. Am I right, brother?"

"You're right, brother, as usual," agreed Bug Eyes. "This flea-ridden sack of sea sludge is a monstrosity."

"Screw you. Both of you," Grizzly snapped.

Bug Eyes chuckled. "He's a regular wit, brother."

"Or witless, brother," Elephant Ears responded.

"You're both wacko," Grizzly opined.

"Get on with it," Red Beard ordered.

The brothers deposited their crossbows on the grass and unslung their quivers.

"We'll give him the royal treatment, Red Beard," Elephant Ears said as he laid his quiver beside his crossbow.

"He'll be babbling like a baby," Bug Eyes promised, doing the same.

"You wish, turkeys," Grizzly stated defiantly.

Elephant Ears moved behind the hybrid, gripped Grizzly by the forearms, and hauled him erect.

"Watch out for those claws of his," Red Beard cautioned. "You saw what he did to our four mates."

"That I did," Elephant Ears said, and twisted Grizzly's forearms as far as he could.

Grizzly stiffened, his lips curling back over his teeth, anguish lancing his arms. Between the rope on his wrists and the twisting of his forearms, the pressure was almost unbearable.

"He didn't cry out, brother," Bug Eyes stated, standing directly in front of the hybrid.

"Even an animal can display courage, brother," Elephant Ears commented, arching his back to insure his torso was a foot from the hybrid's hands.

"I'm not an animal!" Grizzly snarled.

"Who are you, freak?" Bug Eyes asked.

"Up yours!"

Bug Eyes slugged the hybrid in the stomach, whipping his body in a tight arc, throwing every ounce of his weight into the blow.

Gasping for air, nearly blacking out from the force of the punch, Grizzly tried to double over, but Elephant Ears held him in place. He shut his eyes and tried to swallow, impressed by Bug Eyes' strength.

"Who are you?" Bug Eyes repeated.

Grizzly gathered the spittle in his mouth.

"Suit yourself," Bug Eyes declared, and landed another punch on the hybrid's stomach.

At the instant the hit landed, Grizzly spat in the mutation's face.

Bug Eyes straightened, wiped the spittle from his cheeks and mouth, and went berserk. He tore into the hybrid with both fists flying, raining blow after blow on Grizzly's head and stomach, his features a livid hue. Pounding. Pounding. Pounding.

Grizzly had never known such exquisite agony. He felt his right cheek split, and his lower lip cracked. Blood filled his mouth and dribbled down his chin. His abdomen became a focal point of excruciating torment, and his consciousness seemed to float on the breeze.

"That's enough!" Red Beard commanded.

Reluctantly, breathing heavily, Bug Eyes desisted and moved back. —

Grizzly sagged forward, the blood running from his mouth, inhaling raggedly.

"Look what you've done!" Red Beard snapped. "I wanted him able to talk."

"Sorry," Bug Eyes said, but he didn't sound sorry.

Red Beard stepped in, took hold of the hybrid's chin, and lifted. "Damn your hide, Bug Eyes!"

"I said I was sorry," Bug Eyes reiterated.

"This beastie won't be talking for hours," Red Beard stated, and twisted to look at the boats and canoes. "We can't wait that long. We have the rendezvous to think of. We'll take him with us."

"Will we rendezvous before we find the Bowie?" Fiddler Jack spoke up.

"How should I know, simpleton? If we find the Bowie before the rendezvous, so much the better. We'll take the ship first. But one fact is certain, mate. We're not leaving Harrison Lake without her. Our friends will not have died in vain. Once we hit the Pacific, we'll gather new hands to replace those we lost today. We'll be back at full strength in two months."

"Are there enough of us to handle the Bowie if we find it first?" another pirate asked.

"No problem. The Bowie doesn't need more than a crew of four or five. The landlubber who told me about her, the one we keelhailed later, said a family by the name of Jones owns it now. Before the big war the Bowie was used as a cruise ship on the lake, and before that it was a Coast Guard vessel. She's sleek and trim and will give us all the speed we need," Red Beard responded, releasing Grizzly's chin and wiping blood from his fingers on the hybrid's chest. "Fiddler Jack, Elephant Ears, and Bug Eyes will come with me. The rest of you will each take a boat or canoe," He wheeled and stalked toward the craft.

"Be a nice beastie, or I'll break your arms," Elephant Ears threatened, and pushed the bear-man ahead of him.

Bug Eyes scooped up their crossbows and quivers.

Moving methodically, with the skill of those whose life was the sea, they were underway

within minutes, heading to the north, Red Beard's outboard cruiser in the lead with Fiddler Jack piloting.

Lying on his left side aft, next to the outboard motor, his head throbbing and his abdomen cramping terribly, Grizzly found his mind drifting in a state of limbo. Dear Lord, he hurt!

Did he say Lord?

He tried to lick his lips, tasting the salty tang of the blood, and grimaced. A rare feeling of helplessness welled within him, the first such experience he'd ever known. He didn't mind being captured so much, and he didn't mind the beating either. But the thought of his impending death disturbed him profoundly. He didn't want to die, not now, not when he finally had someone who cared for him, not when there was finally meaning to his life.

And to be wasted by a pasty bunch of suck-egg pirates!

The thought made him want to laugh; the pain of creasing his lips stopped him. He shut his eyes, awash in vertigo.

Life was so damn unfair.

It wasn't his fault he'd been created in a test tube by a madman. It wasn't his fault he possessed the characteristics of a human and a bear. It wasn't his fault he was an object of loathing and prejudice.

All he'd ever wanted out of life was a little happiness.

He remembered his years as an assassin in the Doktor's Genetic Research Division, and his ultimate rebellion that resulted in imprisonment in Denver. He recalled his eventual liberation after the Doktor and Samuel II were defeated by the Family and their allies, all of whom had banded together to form the Freedom Federation. He thought of President Toland, the leader of the Civilized Zone, the man personally responsible for releasing him from confinement.

Strange how life worked sometimes.

His prison experience had been the worst of his life, the emotional crucifixion of a man who'd known only bitter misery throughout his whole existence.

Did he say man?

He wasn't a man.

He was a hybrid. Part man. Part animal. And as much as he hated to admit the fact, the pirates were right. In the eyes of humanity he was a freak. Well, not all of humanity. Athena, incredibly, loved him. And Blade, Boone, Havoc, Thunder, and Bear viewed him as a friend. Why couldn't the rest of the world be like his companions on the Force? What quality did Blade, for instance, possess that most people lacked? What enabled the Warrior to treat him as a person—not a deviate? He knew of one special attribute Blade cultivated that most others did not: a spiritual character. Which had always astounded him.

How the hell could anyone be spiritual in a world where violence was the norm, where hatred and bigotry were commonplace?

Of all the men Grizzly knew, the Warrior mystified him the most by being a walking contradiction, a perplexing paradox who could slay a foe one minute and commune with the Spirit the next. Initially, Grizzly had ascribed Blade's strange nature to typical human stupidity, but the more he'd come to understand the Warrior, as they trained together, went on missions, and fought side by side, the more he'd grown to appreciate Blade's intelligence and honesty. If Blade believed that a higher Spirit source permeated all reality, then maybe there was something to that spiritual nonsense after all.

Funny that he should start thinking about spiritual garbage at a time like this.

Or maybe not so funny.

If he didn't muster his strength and escape from the pirates, they would undoubtedly kill him, and the expectation of his impending death when he was on the verge of finally achieving real happiness distressed him to the core of his being. He longed to see Athena again, to hold her in his arms.

Life was so damn unfair.

A rough hand fell on his right shoulder and he was rudely shaken. "Are you alive, beastie?" Red Beard asked.

Grizzly kept his eyes closed, breathing shallowly, weakness pervading his limbs.

"I think the freak is dying," Red Beard commented.

"Do we really need him?" Elephant Ears inquired.

"We'll interrogate the freak again after we take the Bowie," Red Beard said. "If he still won't talk, you two can finish him off."

"Our pleasure," Bug Eyes stated.

The bastards.

The lousy sons of bitches.

Grizzly felt a spark of anger flicker within him, kindled by his resentment of the brigands and his desire to rip them to pieces. A crazy scheme popped full-blown into his head, and he girded his arms and legs, preparing to rise. The longer he stayed a captive, the worse off he would be. Even if he began to recover from Bug Eyes' beating, there was no guarantee the pirates wouldn't pound on him some more before they killed him. The best opportunity to make a bid for freedom was right at that moment, when the pricks would be least likely to expect him to try and escape, when they believed he was incapable of resistance, when they were relatively close to the shore.

He should have thought of this sooner.

His feral eyes flashed wide, and he noted the positions of the brigands: Red Beard standing in front of him, with Fiddler Jack leaning against the right side, and Bug Eyes at the wheel, his brother next to him. None of them were paying any attention to their prisoner.

Perfect.

With a monumental effort he rolled onto his back. The rear of the outboard cruiser rode the lowest in the water of any part of the boat. In his feeble condition even the low rail posed a problem. He couldn't afford a misstep.

The motor purred rhythmically.

Grizzly grit his teeth, suppressing a groan as he tightened his stomach muscles and heaved to his feet. For a moment he wobbled unsteadily, staring at the cruiser's wake, feeling his knees beginning to buckle. He took a deep breath.

"Red Beard!" shouted someone in another boat. "The freak!"

Now!

Grizzly took a short step and launched himself into the air, vaulting over the outboard motor and landing in Harrison Lake with a splash, hearing Red Beard futilely yell "Stop!" as he went under. The cold, clear water shocked him into total alertness, and he arched his back and dove, kicking his feet and working frantically at the ropes on his wrists. The water actually seemed to soothe his cuts and bruises, and a portion of his bestial vitality returned. He could see the bottom down below. From overhead came popping noises, and he knew the pirates were firing at him. He dived two dozen feet and turned in the direction of the west bank, his thighs stroking powerfully, his arms thrashing back and forth.

Would they come after him?

More to the point, how far off was the shore? He'd neglected to take a look before diving.

Chump.

His head and stomach began bothering him again, and his arms and wrists were in agony. He swam on, resolved to succeed or perish in the trying. His bearlike constitution endowed him with exceptional stamina, an endurance he'd seldom put to so arduous a test. The tremendous strain on his physique rapidly drained his strength and his chest started to hurt, his lungs demanding air. The rope slackened but resisted his efforts to jerk his arms loose.

How far was the shore?

Grizzly kicked and kicked and kicked, elated at realizing the popping had stopped and he must be out of range, concealed in the depths, but also knowing he risked immediate death if he ventured to the surface too soon. The rope slackened some more, and he almost succeeded in freeing his left hand, frustration setting in when his knuckles snagged.

Keep going! he goaded himself.

You'll make it!

But would he? His lungs felt as if they were close to bursting and his legs were tired. The dizziness swamped his mind again, and he wavered on the verge of disorientation.

Where the hell was the damn shore?

Grizzly wrenched on the rope in anger and his wrists finally slid free, his elation augmenting his endurance, and he stroked his arms, his muscles rippling, cleaving the cold water smoothly.

Don't stop!

Keep going!

Dear God! How much farther?

Did he say God?

If there was a God, this was His chance to prove it. All he wanted was the strength to reach the bank. Was that too much to ask? Give me strength, God! he requested. He must be close. He must be.

Where was that shore?

Grizzly's limbs were pumping sluggishly and the burning pang in his chest was intolerable. His consciousness slipping, he angled upward, making for the surface, for a faint vault of light seemingly miles above him. Stroke. Kick. Stroke. Kick. He tried to concentrate on the essentials, on simply staying alive, but he was losing control of his body and he could barely resist an overriding impulse to open his mouth and attempt to breathe. His strength was almost gone.

He should have known.

He needed more than strength now.

He needed a miracle.

A fleeting instant of panic engulfed him as his mouth involuntarily widened and the lake water poured down his throat. He shook his head, flapping his arms weakly, his legs barely moving, knowing he should be struggling with every iota of energy left to him, yet unable to spur his limbs to respond. An odd lassitude pervaded his being, rendering him a curiously objective spectator to his own demise.

How weird.

He never thought he would buy the farm this way.

Gratefully, the pain racking his chest was subsiding and his body was going numb. He received the impression he was drifting higher, and the vault of light did appear to be somewhat brighter. Strangely enough, he didn't care. Fate had conspired to deprive him of the only joy he'd ever known, and God—if there was one—had failed him.

No strength.

No miracle.

Just death.

The world went black, and Grizzly became vaguely aware of pressure on his shoulders and

of a disgusting stench. His last thoughts were typical.

It figures.

Even death stinks!

CHAPTER TEN

"This is all you have?"

"Afraid so."

"Damn."

"The pirates took every other boat and canoe. They missed this one because it was in Wallin's boathouse over yonder. Tallin just finished repairing it yesterday. He hit a submerged log a week ago and tore a hole in the bottom."

Blade stared at the speaker—the duly elected mayor of Harrison Hot Springs, one Malcolm Abbot, a husky man with brown eyes and hair who wore black wool trousers and a green shirt—and then gazed at the canoe floating in the water alongside the former float plane dock.

"It'll seat four, no problem," Malcolm said.

"I wish there was something faster," Blade commented.

"We don't have that many outboards to begin with," Malcolm responded. "Motors are hard to come by these days, and getting fuel is even harder."

"We should be able to overtake them," Sergeant Havoc said, standing on the Warrior's left.

"Yeah," Boone agreed, on Blade's right. "They took canoes too, and they won't be able to push the outboards any faster than the canoes can go if they want to stay together."

Blade looked over his right shoulder at the village, at the many structures still ablaze. A dozen villagers were collecting bodies and placing them under the roofed area at the plaza. The injured on the beach were being tended to by their neighbors. He admired the ability of the community to pull together in a time of crisis.

"Are we going after them?" Boone asked.

"We owe them for Grizzly, sir," Sergeant Havoc added.

"We owe them for a lot more," Blade said, and stepped down into the middle of the canoe, steadying himself by gripping the dock. He glanced at the mayor as Havoc and Boone joined him, Havoc taking the stern, Boone the bow. "Do your people have firearms?"

"Rifles and such we use for hunting," Malcolm replied.

"You'd better arm some of your men and post guards all along the south shore," Blade advised. "If the pirates get past us, the guards can sound the alarm."

"They won't take us by surprise again," Malcolm pledged harshly.

"Anything else you can tell me about the ship the pirates are after?" Blade queried.

Malcolm shook his head. "Nothing I haven't already told you. The Bowie is the only ship on Harrison Lake. Pete Jones lives on her with his family, and he uses the ship to ferry cargo and passengers from here all the way up to Port Douglas at the north end of the lake. He left here a couple of days ago to do some fishing at Twenty Mile Bay, about midway up the lake. I expect that's where you'll find the Bowie."

"If the pirates don't find it first," Blade remarked, and placed his right hand on the corresponding knife. "Why is the ship called the Bowie?" he asked out of curiosity.

"Originally it was called the M.V. Bowie, back before the war. Everybody just calls it the Bowie now. She a beauty. Almost one hundred and forty feet long, with upper and lower decks and a big old smokestack. You can't miss her," Malcolm said.

Blade knelt and rested his haunches on one of the center thwarts, then deposited the M-60 near his knees.

"Here," Malcolm Abbot said, handing down a paddle.

The Warrior took the paddle and adjusted his weight, getting comfortable.

"Have you ever used a canoe before?" Malcolm asked, giving a paddle to Boone, then Havoc.

"No," Blade admitted.

"I have," Boone stated.

"So have I," Sergeant Havoc added.

"Paddling a canoe is simple," Malcolm told the Warrior. "Hold your paddle like Boone is holding his, and remember to turn the blade so the flat side faces the canoe at the end of each stroke. You'll get the hang of it in no time."

"I hope so," Blade said. "Thanks." He gazed to the north and dipped his paddle in the water on the right side of the canoe. "Let's go."

Boone and Havoc began paddling slowly, their paddles on the left side.

Blade watched them execute a half-dozen strokes, then applied his bulging muscles to the task, imitating their actions, pleased when the canoe shot forward, gathering momentum.

"Good luck!" Malcolm Abbot called.

The canoe straightened on a northerly course as the Warrior, the Cavalryman, and the noncom paddled in unison, using the J stroke, establishing a tempo. Blade's sculpted sinews more than compensated for his sole paddle on the right side. The curved bow cleaved the water evenly, and the dock fell quickly to the rear.

"Do you think Grizzly is dead?" Boone asked, voicing the question uppermost on all their minds.

"I don't know," Blade said grimly.

"I hope not," Sergeant Havoc commented. "I was getting to like that bigoted idiot."

"We almost nailed those lousy pirates," Boone remarked.

"We blew it," Blade said.

"You're becoming cynical in your young age, sir," Sergeant Havoc said.

"I know. And stop calling me sir."

"Yes, sir."

Blade sighed, gazing to the north, at the expanse of water ahead. Truth to tell, he was feeling cynical of late, due to the grind of constant combat. If he wasn't fighting enemies of the Freedom Federation, then he was taking on adversaries of the Family. He longed, again, for time off to be with his wife and son, time neither the Federation leaders or Family Elders were disposed to offer. If he couldn't bring himself to resign, what about a holiday? On his last run with two of his fellow Warriors, his best friends Hickok and Geronimo, they'd discussed taking a much-deserved vacation. After the Cincinnati mission, the Pipeline fiasco, and now this, he needed a long rest. A very long rest.

Their paddles cut into the water neatly, the sleek canoe knifing the surface effortlessly.

"Do you know what month this is?" Boone asked casually after they covered a quarter of a mile.

"October. So?" Sergeant Havoc responded, and snickered.

"In two months I'll be back in the Dakota Territory, back on my ranch, with my family and my friends," the Cavalryman said wistfully.

"I didn't know you had a family," Havoc mentioned.

"Two younger brothers and a younger sister. My mother lives with my sister and her husband on another ranch about forty miles from mine."

"What about your dad?"

"My father was killed by one of those pus-covered monstrosities that are so common on the Plains," Boone disclosed.

"Sorry to hear that," Havoc said.

"I can't say as I'll miss being on the Force, but I will miss all of you," Boone stated.

"You won't miss being on the Force?" Sergeant Havoc responded in surprise. "I will. I kind of like the outfit, although we haven't seen enough action to suit me."

"You like the action?" Boone inquired.

"You better believe it," Havoc declared. "Remember, I'm a professional military man. My grandfather and father were both thirty-year career men with outstanding records."

"I'm not a military man. And I'm not fond of the reputation I've acquired as a gunman. I like the quiet life of a rancher, where I tend to my stock and my crops and mind my own business. I don't bother anyone, and no one bothers me. You can keep your action, Havoc. I want none of it," Boone affirmed.

"You're lucky we haven't seen too many missions."

"I guess I am."

Blade cleared his throat. "We're all lucky we weren't sent on more missions. Our fatality and injury rate has been horrendous as it is. Five missions in ten months. That averages out to an assignment every other month. And look at the losses we've suffered. Spader. Kraft. Probably Grizzly. And possibly Thunder and Bear." He paused and frowned. "Makes you wonder if the Force is necessary."

"What do you mean?" Boone queried.

"How essential is the Freedom Force to the safety of the Freedom Federation? Would the Federation fall apart if we disbanded? Or would the separate factions continue to deal with their problems and hot spots as they have in the past?"

"You sound like you're having second thoughts about the Force, sir."

"I am," Blade confessed.

"Governor Melnick would be upset if he could overhear you talking right now," Sergeant Havoc said, referring to the duly elected Chief Executive of the Free State of California who had conceived the idea for the Freedom Force.

"Who cares?" Blade replied. "Melnick has no cause to complain. Thanks to Athena's stories in the newspapers, Melnick's political career received a terrific boost. He's practically assured of a second term in office. The people of California think his brain-storm in creating the Force qualifies as sheer genius."

"Do you think Melnick manipulated us for political reasons?" Boone asked.

"Yes and no. I believe he was sincere when he proposed the Force to deal with threats to the Federation. But I also believe he milked the situation for every benefit to his career he could accrue. Makes me wonder."

"About what?" Boone questioned.

"About whether the prewar politicians were the same way, whether they were always looking out for number one, always concocting plans and programs to make them look good in the eyes of the public, even though the programs might not solve the problems they were designed to rectify."

"Would you say that again in English?" Sergeant Havoc quipped.

"You forgot to call me sir."

"Oh. Sorry, sir," the noncom said soberly.

Blade laughed. "I was only kidding."

"I know, sir."

"Just once I'd like you to call me by my name," Blade stated.

"I've spent all of my adult life referring to my superiors as sir," Sergeant Havoc noted. "It's a hard habit to break."

"You forget every once in a while."

"I know, and I'm sorry, sir."

"Do you intend to marry someday?" Blade asked.

Havoc broke his paddling stride, stopping for a few moments and looking at the Warrior's broad back in bewilderment. "I never gave the matter much thought," he said, resuming paddling. "Why?"

"You should. Marriage would do you a world of good."

"What makes you say that?"

"I'm married, Havoc. And I know the effect marriage has on a man. You'll change. You'll learn to relax, to not be so hard on yourself, to lighten up."

"Did marriage have that effect on you, sir?"

"I've learned to take events more in stride, but I haven't had as much time to spend with my family as I would like. My responsibilities with the Force and the Warriors seldom allow me any leisure."

"There is a woman I've been seeing," Havoc divulged. "She's a sergeant in the Rangers. She's the only woman I know who can hold her own against me on the mat."

"I hope things work out for you," Blade said sincerely.

"Thanks—Blade."

They canoed in silence for approximately three-quarters of a mile.

Blade felt the heat of the sun on his face and smelled the scent of the water, allowing himself to relax, to savor the British Columbian majesty. He estimated the temperature hovered in the sixties, warmer than he would have expected for Canada— but he was basing his impression on books he'd read in the Family library, books written prior to the nuclear Armageddon, and the global weather patterns had changed drastically as a result of the environmental upheaval the war had caused. He listened to the lapping of the water and the cries of geese off to the west, the tranquillity of the setting lulling him into a state of quiet

contemplation.

Until the gunshots shattered the serenity of Harrison Lake.

Blade straightened, holding his paddle above the water, perplexed by the sustained volley coming from directly ahead.

"The pirates, you think?" Boone asked.

"Must be," Blade said.

"But who are they shooting at?" Sergeant Havoc wanted to learn.

"Beats me," Blade answered, taking hold on the left gunwale. "I'm the tallest. I'll have a look." He rose carefully, concerned lest he should upend the canoe, and used his left palm to screen the sun from his eyes. To the north, just within the range of his vision, floated a cluster of boats and canoes. "Bingo."

"The pirates?" Boone inquired.

"Yep."

"Why are they firing?" Sergeant Havoc questioned.

"I don't know. They're too far off for me to make out details. There's no sign of the Bowie."

Boone looked at the water. "Maybe they're shooting at something in the lake. Maybe there are... mutants down there." He shifted uncomfortably and draped his right hand on his corresponding Hombre.

"What I want to know is how we were able to catch up to them so fast?" Blade wondered. "They had quite a head start."

"At least we have them in our sights. All we have to do is trail them until we can get the upper hand," Sergeant Havoc said.

The shooting tapered off.

Blade waited for the brigands to move, pondering the possibilities. Had the pirates made a stop somewhere? If so, why? They should have been miles away, and yet there they were. Had they been attacked by a lake creature, as Boone suggested? Several minutes elapsed and the miniature fleet stayed in the same spot.

"Do you think they were finishing off Grizzly?" Boone unexpectedly asked.

"Let's hope not," Blade said, disturbed by the image of the bear-man sinking to the bottom, riddled with holes.

In another minute the pirates resumed their journey.

"There they go," Blade announced, sitting down. "After them." He dipped his paddle in the water.

"We have them right where we want them," Sergeant Havoc declared.

Blade glanced at the noncom. "Remind me you said that if anything goes wrong."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

She stared blankly out the seventh-floor window of Los Angeles Memorial Hospital, adrift in the sea of her thoughts, her slim, athletic form clad in a drab green hospital gown, her right hand and left wrist swathed in white bandages. Fine brown hair draped past her slender shoulders,

Could she do it?

Could she go through with what she had started?

She pictured him in her mind, with his cute, bearish nose, his pointed, bearlike teeth, and those deep black eyes, eyes so typical of a... bear.

The key word here was bear.

Grizzly's appearance startled most people and offended the rest. Many viewed him as inferior to humans because he lacked a human visage, and they were wrong to do so. There was a person under all that brown fur, a human personality trapped in the prison of its own body, a man who experienced the same aspirations and desires, the same heartbreaks and loneliness as every other mortal. He'd impressed her with his humor, sincerity, and warmth, and despite her unwillingness to be swayed by his dynamic personality, to her complete chagrin, she'd grown to care for him with a profound affection.

But did she realize what she was in for?

Once word of their relationship became public knowledge, as inevitably would happen due to their membership in the Force, there were bound to be repercussions. No woman, as far as she was aware, had ever become involved with a genetically engineered mutation, had ever even contemplated such a union. The social stigma alone would suffice to deter most women.

So why was she different?

Why was she preparing to do what no woman had ever done before?

She glanced down at her lap, at her hands, her forehead furrowing, her brown eyes narrowing. Her little strategy had backfired. All she'd ever wanted out of her association with the Force was the means to bolster her journalistic career, to make her syndicated column the most popular column in California. The Force was supposed to be a stepping-stone, the key to wealth and fame, the means of placing her at the top of her profession.

Look at how much effort she'd put into joining.

Blade's stubbornness set her timetable back initially. She hadn't counted on his balking at the idea of her enlisting in the Force. Seldom had any man refused her a thing, but Blade wasn't like most men. He didn't automatically concede her every wish whenever she batted her eyes and favored him with a seductively winning smile. No, not him. The Warrior was

superbly self-disciplined, and he had to be convinced of the wisdom and rightness of any undertaking before committing to a course of action. To convince him she could hack it, she went to Ranger training school for two months, submitting to a grueling physical-exercise regimen and taking complicated military-strategy courses.

Her tactic eventually paid off.

With the backing of General Miles Gallagher, who served as the liaison officer between the Force and Governor Melnick, she persuaded Blade to accept her on the team in time to go along on their strike into the Outlands of southern Oregon. Then there was the Vampire affair and the Pipeline assignment. And on each mission, as she got to know Grizzly better and better, to her utter amazement she discovered she was falling in love with the hybrid.

No, not falling in love.

Growing in love.

The door to her room abruptly opened and in walked Dr. Kosmicki, a kindly surgeon whose white hair accented his dignified demeanor. He smiled and adjusted the glasses he wore. A white smock covered him from his neck to his knees. "And how are we doing, Athena?"

"We, Doctor Kosmicki?"

Kosmicki walked to the head of her bed and placed his right palm on her brow. "Obviously one of us is feeling testy today."

"I'm never testy. I'm a saint. Just ask any of my readers," Athena said.

"If I seem concerned, it's because I am. When you care about someone, you worry about stress-caused behaviorial modifications."

"Is that a proposal or a psychological dissertation?"

Kosmicki removed his palm and studied the bandages. "My, we are testy today. How's the hand and the wrist?"

"I can't tell. You have me so drugged, I feel like I could jump from the window and fly," Athena joked.

"Please don't. I left my dustpan and brush at home."

"Can I take the bandages off today?"

"You know better. Tomorrow at the earliest, and only to check the dressing. In a week the bandages will be off for good, and in a month your finger and wrist will be back to normal. You're a very fortunate lady."

"You think so, huh?"

"I know so. You could have lost mobility in your middle finger, even your whole right hand, if the person who tortured you had cut a fraction of an inch in either direction."

"At least the lancet wasn't poisoned."

Dr. Kosmicki looked at her. "What is the matter?"

She bobbed her shoulders. "Nothing."

"Sure," he said skeptically, then touched her left wrist. "The teeth marks from the German shepherd that bit you won't leave scars. An inch or two dee—"

"How are Bear and Thunder?" Athena interrupted.

Kosmicki frowned. "Hasn't anyone told you?"

Athena tensed, expecting the worst. "Told me what?" she asked softly.

The surgeon gazed at the door for a moment, pursing his lips, then locked his eyes on hers. "They're both in critical condition. The next twenty-four hours should determine whether they live or..." He stopped when shock registered on her lovely features.

"Both of them?" Athena queried in disbelief.

"I'm afraid so. They both sustained multiple gunshot wounds. Both took shots close to the heart."

Athena licked her lips, a lump forming in her throat. "Will you keep me posted?"

Kosmicki nodded. "I'll leave word to have you informed of any developments. I'm not their attending surgeon, you understand, but the man who is, Doctor Simon, is the best on staff at heart surgery. If anyone can pull them through, he can."

Athena lowered her eyes.

"I'm sorry I had to be the one to break the news," Dr. Kosmicki said.

"Thank you," she said.

"There weren't any complications during their operations, which is always encouraging," Kosmicki said to reassure her.

Athena leaned back against her pillow and stared at the sky outside. "Have you heard anything about the rest of the Force?"

"No, but there's an officer waiting for my permission to visit you. General Gallagher is his name, I believe. He's at the front desk. Perhaps he has word."

At the mention of Gallagher's name Athena had leaned forward excitedly. "Gallagher is here?"

"Do you want me to send him up?"

"Of course," Athena stated.

"All right. But he can't stay long. Five minutes at the most," Kosmicki informed her, and departed.

Athena glued her eyes to the door, eager to see the officer. He must have word of Grizzly, Blade, and the others! He'd be able to tell her when Grizzly would get to the hospital. She waited impatiently, nervously gnawing on her lower lip.

Shortly thereafter the door swung wide and in stalked General Miles Gallagher, a man who gave the impression of being a bulldog on two legs. His brown eyes regarded the world defiantly, and his crew-cut brown hair, pug nose, and jutting chin all contributed to his tenacious image. Enough medals decorated his chest to adorn a platoon. "Athena," he said gruffly, moving directly to her bed. "The surgeon says you'll be on your feet in no time."

"Did you hear about Bear and Thunder?"

General Gallagher frowned. "I sure did. And I'm not leaving this hospital until they're stabilized."

"Have you heard from Blade?"

Gallagher shook his head.

"What?"

"That's why I'm here. I figured you should be the first to know."

Athena's countenance became deathly pale. "Know what?"

General Gallagher shifted his stance, ill at ease, and spoke in a low tone. "We've lost contact with them."

A sensation of vertigo made the room spin before her eyes. "Lost contact?"

"I'm afraid so," Gallagher said, then quickly continued. "But that doesn't mean they crashed or were shot down. They might have a valid reason for maintaining radio silence."

"Where were they when last you spoke with them?"

"They were over British Columbia. The pilot, Captain Laslo, mentioned they were anxious to reach L.A."

"And that was it?"

"That was all," Gallagher confirmed. "We're refueling the other Hurricane now, and if we don't hear from them in six hours we'll initiate a search."

"Why wait six hours?"

"Rushing off half-cocked would be useless. If they experienced minor engine trouble, they could still be en route."

"Then why haven't they contacted you?"

"Their radio could be out."

Athena's thin lips compressed. "You're making excuses. You should be searching for them right now."

"Where would we start to look?" Gallagher responded.

British Columbia is vast, over three hundred and sixty-six thousand square miles, most of it wilderness. Without a clue as to their whereabouts, conducting a search will be like looking for a needle in a haystack. The odds of locating a downed aircraft are next to nil."

"So you plan to wait and hope you hear from them," Athena said angrily. "And if you don't, you'll conduct a token search to soothe your conscience."

"That's uncalled for, and you know it," Gallagher stated stiffly.

She closed her eyes and sagged onto her pillow. "I'm sorry. I've been under a strain."

"I know. If it's any consolation, I feel guilty enough about you. I don't want to lose the rest of the Force."

Athena looked at him. "Guilty about me?"

"I was the one who prodded Blade into accepting you on the Force, and now look at what's happened," General Gallagher commented. "You could have been killed."

"Being killed is an occupational hazard of working with the Force. You knew that."

"I did," Gallagher admitted. "But I never expected you to come to harm. I expected Blade to keep you out of the line of fire."

"To protect me, you mean."

"Whatever."

"Blade isn't the type. He accepted me as an equal member of the team, and he counted on me to pull my weight, to do my share through thick and thin. He never treated me condescendingly. In his eyes I was no different from the men where combat was concerned," Athena said, and paused. "I didn't realize how refreshing his attitude was at the time. Few men will treat a woman as an honest equal, or even make the attempt."

General Gallagher took a step backwards. "Well, I didn't come here to debate the equality of the sexes. I just wanted you to know the latest."

"And I appreciate you taking the time to visit me."

"A visit is better than an impersonal phone call," Gallagher said, turning and heading for the door.

"Miles?"

He halted and glanced back, surprised at her informality. "Yes, Athena?"

"Don't blame yourself for what happened to me. I asked for this. My greed and pride overpowered my common sense."

"I'm just happy you're alive," Gallagher told her. "Remember, I'll be at the front desk if you need me. I gave orders to have news of the Force relayed to me the minute we learn anything. I'll keep you posted."

"Thanks," Athena responded, and watched him leave, despondency penetrating to the depths of her soul. Dear Lord, no! Not Grizzly, Blade, Boone, and Havoc!

Especially not Grizzly!

This was too much, the proverbial last straw. Minutes before she'd been debating the wisdom of declaring her love for the hybrid, and now, at the thought of his death, she wanted to hurl herself from the window to the pavement below. Her temples were pounding and her heart thumping. She sat up, swung her naked feet to the cold tile floor, and shuffled to the window.

Air.

She needed fresh air.

Opening the window proved extremely difficult with only one hand. Her left wrist throbbed as she applied pressure to raise the sash, and she inhaled deeply once she could poke her head out, her gaze alighting on the hard asphalt seven stories beneath the sill.

CHAPTER TWELVE

"The pirates are heading for shore."

"Already?" Boone asked.

Blade nodded. "They're making for the west bank."

"Why?" Sergeant Havoc wondered, "we've only been following them for a couple of miles. Can you see any buildings near the shore, sir?"

The Warrior scrutinized the shoreline, then shook his head. "All I see is forest."

"Do you think they spotted us?" Boone questioned.

"I doubt it," Blade said. "We've stayed too far back." He watched the pirate boats and canoes approach the bank, and once he was certain the brigands had indeed stopped and secured their craft, he sat down in the canoe.

"Do we wait out here for them to go on?" Boone inquired.

"No," Blade responded. "We'll head for the shore ourselves. If we can sneak close to their camp, we might be able to find out what happened to Grizzly and what their plans are."

"If they've killed Grizzly, who cares what their plans are?" Boone commented.

"Yeah. Let's terminate them and get this over with," Havoc agreed.

"First we verify they're not expecting reinforcements, that more pirates aren't due in Harrison Hot Springs soon. We don't want to leave the villagers in the lurch," Blade said.

They paddled for the shore, and within minutes were coasting toward a flat stretch of beach littered with pebbles and rocks.

Boone slid over the side, the water rising to his thighs, and eased the canoe to a stop. Blade and Havoc slipped into the water, and together they hauled the canoe onto the bank beyond the beach.

"We need to take one alive," Blade said, grabbing the M-60.

"When I was their prisoner, they never mentioned reinforcements" Sergeant Havoc noted.

"We can't take any chances. There might be more of these Skull and Bones rejects elsewhere. Maybe they have a base on the coast. If they do, we'll use the Hurricanes to wipe them out."

"Why go to all that trouble? If there are more Skull and Bones, they might leave Harrison Hot Springs alone," Boone said.

"And they might not," Blade replied. "When we involved ourselves in this affair, we committed ourselves to seeing this through to the end. I seriously doubt that pirates are the forgiving kind. If there are more Skull and Bones, and if they hear that their buddies were exterminated at Harrison Hot Springs, they may decide to get revenge." He walked to the north along the edge of the beach where the vegetation was thinnest and he could move rapidly.

"One way or the other, we'll be heading for Los Angeles soon," Sergeant Havoc remarked hopefully, following the Warrior.

"Are you thinking of Thunder and Bear too?" Boone asked.

"We both saw them take those hits," Havoc said. "If they live, it'll be a miracle."

Boone frowned, bringing up the rear. The prospect of any one of them dying was an ever-present danger, a danger he'd recognized and accepted when he volunteered to serve on the Force. But with only two months to go before his term expired, he dreaded the likelihood of being killed, of having his freedom snatched from his hands by a cruel fate. He resolved to survive at all costs, even if he had to be a bit trigger-happy in the process. Shoot first and ask questions later would be his motto for the next two months. He saw Sergeant Havoc glance at him, and grinned.

Havoc looked over the Cavalryman's shoulders at the canoe, then smiled at Boone. He faced front and tramped on the Warrior's heels, ruminating. With all the talk about the end of Boone's enlistment, no one had paid much attention to the fact that his enlistment would be up in January too, and unlike Boone, he wasn't eager to quit the Force. He'd grown to like his teammates, even the temperamental hybrid, and valued their friendship. Although he'd entertained grave doubts during the first couple of missions, the Force had developed into a cohesive unit under Blade's guidance. Of all of them, he would miss the Warrior the most. He'd learned so much from the giant about the higher aspects of a martial life, about the qualities of devotion to duty and loyalty to one's peers, and he would always cherish Blade's words of wisdom on the only proper philosophy for a professional fighting man or woman.

Was it six or seven months ago? He recalled the evening he'd seen the Warrior emerging from the trees near the barracks at the Force HQ and had asked where Blade had been. The answer had flabbergasted him.

"I was communing with the Spirit," Blade had said.

"I've been meaning to ask you about this Spirit business," Havoc remembered saying. "How can someone with your heavy rep, someone who has killed dozens in hand-to-hand combat, claim to be spiritual?"

"Are you familiar with the story of Samson?" Blade had answered.

"Do you mean the guy in the Bible?"

"Compared to Samson, I'm an amateur. He lived a spiritual life, and he slew thousands."

"But how do you justify the two?" Havoc had asked. "Killing and spiritual living are poles apart."

"Are they?" the Warrior had replied. "The Family Elders teach us that those who live by the Golden Rule must be prepared to defend themselves from those who don't. Those who are spiritual must protect their higher culture and ideals from those who would destroy them. The Warriors are pledged to insure the Family and the Home are defended from those who believe might makes right. Threats arise all the time. Power-mongers. Raiders. Mutations. The Warriors must be ready to employ whatever force is necessary, including dispensing death on occasion, to safeguard the lives of innocent men, women, and children who only want to exist peacefully with everyone." He'd paused. "The same should hold true for military men like yourself. If the only reason you're a soldier is because you enjoy bashing heads, then you're no better than those you fight. But if you're a soldier because you believe in defending worthy principles, and if you perform your duties responsibly and deal with your opponents justly, you can slay enemies when required and know your actions are justified. No one in their right mind takes delight in killing."

Sergeant Havoc recollected those words fondly. He would miss Blade when his tour was up. The Warrior possessed the uncanny knack of prompting him to think about his life and actions, instead of merely blundering along without a care in the world. He stared at the giant's back, wondering what their leader was thinking about.

Blade looked back at his men, then at the trees to his left, bothered by a premonition of impending danger, a vague feeling of lurking menace. Invariably his intuition proved reliable, which perturbed him even more. But what could be out there? A wild animal? A mutant? A mutante? Whatever was the source of his foreboding, he felt confident he could deal with any threat.

They hiked for over a half mile, treading carefully, alert to the sounds of the forest, without encountering trouble. And then the unexpected transpired; the hunters became the hunted.

The Warrior was the first to detect the subtle disturbance in the rhythms of the wilderness, a slight decrease in the volume of forest sounds, a barely perceptible muting of the insects and the birds, as if the wildlife had recently been agitated by the presence of... something... and was slowly returning to normal. He peered at the trees, his sixth sense shrieking, and halted.

Sergeant Havoc and Boone stopped, exchanged puzzled glances, and gazed at the woods.

Were his nerves playing tricks on him? Blade scanned the dense vegetation, hoping to hear the telltale snapping of a twig or a low growl, anything that would confirm his suspicion, but nothing happened. The forest appeared calm.

Damn.

Blade motioned for the others to advance and proceeded northward, annoyed at his uncharacteristic case of the jitters. Twenty yards ahead they saw a section of beach where the bordering bank had crumpled, leaving a well of dank earth five feet in height with the undergrowth crowning its rim.

"Did you just hear something, sir?" Sergeant Havoc whispered.

"No," Blade responded.

"You seem nervous, and that makes me nervous," the noncom said softly.

"It's probably my imagination."

"What is?"

"I don't know," Blade answered.

"If you don't mind my saying so, sir, I think you need to take some time off."

"Where'd you ever get a crazy idea like that?" Blade quipped. He came to the earthen bank and noticed a worm protruding from the soil, wriggling its tail. Or was it the head? Who could tell with worms? Did they even have heads and tails? Who cared!

Dear Spirit, he desperately needed a rest.

A loud splash caused him to pivot to the right, to scrutinize Harrison Lake for the reason, surmising a fish was responsible, and only when he heard the crunch of the brush and the patter of rushing feet to his rear did he realize, in a flash of insight, that the splash had been created by someone tossing a rock into the water to distract the three Force members from the forest to their rear. He whirled, trying to bring the M-60 around in time.

But the trap had been sprung.

There were five pirates, three of whom were in motion, diving from the earthen bank and tackling the Warrior, the Cavalryman, and the noncom.

Blade felt strong arms encircle his chest and he was knocked onto his back with a brawny black pirate on top, the M-60 pinned under the black's legs. Blade released the machine gun, sweeping his fists up and around and boxing the brigand on the ears. The pirate aimed a right cross at Blade's jaw, but he twisted his head aside and arced the edge of his right hand into the black's throat.

Gasping and grunting, the pirate clutched at his neck and rolled to the right.

Blade swept to his feet, seeing Boone struggling with a portly raider and Havoc, erect, delivering a roundhouse kick to the face of his adversary. He straightened, swiveling toward the bank, expecting the other two to attack, and froze. The pair weren't about to attack. They stood on the bank, smirking, each holding a cocked crossbow, each man identical except for a bizarre deformity, one with huge ears, the other with insect-like eyes.

"No funny moves, friend," said the muscular Goliath sporting the humongous ears.

Sergeant Havoc delivered a sweep kick to his foe, slamming the grungy brigand to the ground, and went to grab his M-16, which was lying on the dirt to his left.

Training his crossbow on the noncom, the man with the eerie eyes grinned and shook his head. "You do and you're dead."

Havoc hesitated, glancing at Blade, then the duo.

"He wants to try you, brother," said the one with big ears.

"Let him try, brother," responded the man with the large blue orbs.

Boone flicked his fists in a quick one-two-three combination and stunned his opponent, then rose and turned toward the bank.

"Don't try anything stupid," warned the one with big ears.

The Cavalryman's hands hovered inches from his Hombres. "You can't get all three of us," he noted.

"So which two of you want to die?" the man with large eyes asked.

Boone and Sergeant Havoc looked at the Warrior.

Blade stared at the crossbows the pair held, knowing the pirate spoke the truth, that one or two of them would take a bolt in the chest or head if they resisted further. He wasn't about to lose another Force member if he could help it. Wisdom dictated yielding for the moment. He shook his head.

Boone and Havoc frowned and raised their arms.

The man with the large eyes looked at the giant. "You must be the brains of the bunch. How are you known?"

"My name's Blade."

"And I'm Bug Eyes. My brother is Elephant Ears. We're under orders to take you alive, if possible, but we'll kill you the instant you give us more grief. Understand?"

Blade nodded grimly.

"Excellent," Bug Eyes said, gazing at his three companions on the ground. The black, flat on his back, coughed and convulsed, breathing in great gulps, his throat crushed, his eyes wide, on the verge of death, while the other two were recovering, shaking their heads and pushing to their feet." Zack the Black has hoisted his last brew, brother."

"A pity, brother," Elephant Ears said. "He was a fine mate."

Bug Eyes studied the giant. "You're a deadly son of a bitch, I'll grant you that."

"I try," Blade responded.

"Red Beard will take you down a peg," Bug Eyes predicted, and looked at the two brigands recovering from the fight. "Skyrme! Condent! Get the lead out, you sluggards, and collect their weapons!"

The dazed pirates hastened to comply, cautiously removing every weapon from the three Force members.

Blade glanced down as the raider named Condent took his Bowies.

"You might be quick, but you're not quicker than a crossbow," Elephant Ears stated to dissuade the giant from resisting.

"Put down the crossbow and I'll show you how quick I am," Blade said, baiting him.

"We have another tough one here, brother," Elephant Ears said. "Just like the furry freak was before we snuffed him."

Blade stiffened. "What happened to Grizzly?"

"Was that the freak's name?" Elephant Ears answered. "He wouldn't tell us, so we had to teach him it's rude to be impolite."

"Where is he?" Blade asked.

Elephant Ears nodded at Harrison Lake. "The freak is sleeping with the fishes."

"You threw his body overboard!" Boone declared angrily.

"He jumped overboard," Elephant Ears said, correcting the Cavalryman. "A poor decision on his part, considering how pitiful a swimmer he turned out to be."

"The beastie couldn't swim worth a damn with his hands tied," Bug Eyes added, and snickered.

"You murdered him," Sergeant Havoc stated.

"It's not our fault he couldn't breathe underwater," Elephant Ears said, sneering at the noncom. "How about you, Army man?"

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Someone's hand was on his forehead!

He came awake with a start, the mere act of opening his eyes painful in the extreme, spasms of torment racking his head, taking stock, viewing the azure sky and the fiery sun

and smelling the scent of water, realizing he had not died after all. He was lying on his back near Harrison Lake.

But whose hand rested on his forehead?

The craggy visage of the shaman of the Kutenai appeared over his eyes. "Do not move, gentle one. You came close to leaving for the Next World."

Grizzly licked his lips, his tongue tracing the cleft in his lower lip, and tried to speak, but the best he could do was croak wordlessly.

"Stay still," Red Hawk insisted. "You are weak."

Grizzly tried again, surprised his throat was so sore, able to rasp two words. "What—happened?"

"You jumped from the boat and—" Red Hawk began.

"I know that!" Grizzly snapped, the effort making him wince. "How'd I get here?"

"The Everywhere Spirit—"

"Quit the bullshit!" Grizzly said, attempting to rise onto his elbows, but the effort transformed his limbs to mush and he sank down. "Who yanked me from the lake?"

"A Sasquatch."

"Yeah. Right. Your momma."

"My mother passed on decades ago."

Grizzly started to utter a sharp retort, but a fit of coughing doubled him up and he clenched his midriff in agony.

"You must lie still," Red Hawk directed. "I am preparing an herbal remedy to heal you."

The hybrid relaxed as the coughing subsided, blood dribbling from the corners of his mouth. "I've never hurt this bad before," he commented. "I feel like my stomach's been beaten to a pulp."

"You have suffered internal damage," Red Hawk stated.

"How would you know? Are you a doctor?"

"I am the last shaman of the Kutenai."

"Why don't you have those words tattooed on your forehead?" Grizzly suggested. "You sound like a broken record."

"I saw a record player at Ostman's once," Red Hawk mentioned. "How can a broken record produce sound?"

Grizzly rolled his eyes, then stared at the sky. "Why me? Why is it always me?"

"Are you talking to the Everywhere Spirit?"

"Don't start with that baloney."

"The Everywhere Spirit is not meat."

Grizzly glared at the shaman in annoyance. "Listen, Red Canary—"

"Hawk."

"Whatever. I'm not in the mood for one of your lectures on the spirit world. Go take a long walk off a short cliff."

Red Hawk threw back his head and laughed. "You have a keen sense of humor."

"Can't you take a hint?" Grizzly snapped. "Get lost."

"I can not leave until I have ministered to your injuries," Red Hawk said.

"What did I do to deserve all this attention?"

"I do as the Spirit wills," Red Hawk said solemnly.

"Somehow I knew you were going to say that," Grizzly grouched, and rolled onto his left side, bent in half, as another bout of coughing convulsed his body. A trickle of blood oozed from the right side of his mouth.

Red Hawk gently placed his right hand on the hybrid's shoulder. "You have ruptured inside. My medicine will mend your wounds."

Grizzly continued coughing, and more blood came out of his mouth. When the bout tapered off he wiped at his lips, then looked at the crimson matting the fur on the back of his right hand. "I'm in worse shape than I thought."

"As I've been trying to impress upon you." Grizzly craned his neck and locked his eyes on the shaman's "Why me, old-timer? Why are you doing all of this for me?"

"You have been lost, and now you are found."

"This isn't the time for riddles, Red Chicken Hawk."

"Just Hawk," the shaman said, correcting him. "Why me?" Grizzly reiterated.

"I will tell you a story."

"Terrific," Grizzly muttered, and reclined his head, feeling too weak to argue. "Is it about a little blonde brat and three stupid bears?"

"No. My story concerns Great Wolf and Golden Cougar."

"Were they on their way to Grandma's house?"

"No," Red Hawk said. "One day before the beginning of time, Great Wolf and Golden Cougar decided to have a whittling contest."

"Wolves and cougars can't whittle wood," Grizzly interrupted testily.

"This is my story."

"Okay. Go ahead. Bore me to tears. See if I care."

Red Hawk sighed. "One day before the beginning of time, Great Wolf and Golden Cougar decided to have a whittling contest. They each gathered pieces of wood from a tree. Great Wolf picked wood from an oak tree, while Golden Cougar selected wood from a madrone. Great Wolf went first, and whittled oak people, marvelous chiefs and warriors. Not to be outdone, Golden Cougar whittled madrone chiefs and warriors. Before too long the oaks and the madrones fell to fighting, and in no time at all they wiped each other out."

"Don't you believe in happy endings?"

"I'm not finished yet," Red Hawk said.

"Who shows up next? The Three Little Pigs?"

"Great Wolf and Golden Cougar were disappointed in their first contest, so they decided to try again. Great Wolf chose the wood of a willow, while Great Wolf used the wood from a maple. Once again they both whittled chiefs, warriors, and common people. Again war broke out, and the willows and the maples destroyed one another. After that, Great Wolf and Golden Cougar never whittled again."

Grizzly grimaced, his stomach in a turmoil, waiting for the shaman to continue, and after a minute elapsed he glanced at the Indian. "That's it?"

"Yes."

"The whole story?"

Red Hawk nodded.

"Do you tell bedtime stories to your grandkids?"

"Yes."

"I bet they don't have any trouble falling asleep," Grizzly commented, closing his eyes and shuddering.

"Think about the story while I finish the remedy," Red Hawk said, and rose and walked off.

Think about the story! The old geezer had to be kidding! Grizzly gritted his teeth, striving to master the pain in his belly, recognizing the shaman told the truth about internal damage. But how did Red Hawk know? And what was the nonsense with the story? Two idiots whittle a bunch of wooden morons who exterminate themselves. What was the big deal? There must be a moral there somewhere. Maybe it was the fact that no matter what type of wood was used, the people always turned out to be hostile killers.

No.

Had to be more to the story than that.

He heard footsteps and opened his eyes to behold Red Hawk approaching, bearing a flat strip of bark on which several objects rested.

"What is the meaning of the story?" the shaman inquired, kneeling next to Grizzly's head and depositing the bark tray on the grass. A handful of large leaves formed a tidy pile on the right side of the tray, while on the left, arranged in neat rows, was a collection of strips of vegetation, broken bits of bark, and a peculiar lump of brownish mush.

"What is that gunk?" Grizzly queried.

"The remedy for your injuries."

"Do you expect me to eat that?"

"I do."

"Don't hold your breath."

Red Hawk went about completing his concoction, carefully placing the brownish lump on one of the large leaves, then adding bits of bark and strips of vegetation, mixing the ingredients with his fingers.

"I hope you washed your hands."

"What is the meaning of the story?" Red Hawk repeated his question without looking at the hybrid.

"How am I supposed to know? Whittling can be hazardous to your health."

"Wrong."

"If I guess the meaning, will you leave me in peace?"

"I will let you sleep once you know the meaning and take your medicine."

"Fair enough," Grizzly said. "The meaning has something to do with the people Great Wolf and Golden Cougar whittled, right?"

"Right."

"They were jerks because they wouldn't live in peace, right?";

"Right."

Grizzly smiled, mentally congratulating himself on his cleverness.

"Go on," Red Hawk said.

"I didn't guess the meaning yet?"

"No."

"Give me a break."

"Give me the answer," Red Hawk stated, putting a second leaf on top of the lump and pressing lightly.

"Why is this nonsense so important?" Grizzly inquired.

"If you want to understand your life of misery, you must understand the meaning of the story."

Grizzly frowned, extremely miffed, wishing the old man would get lost. He doubted there was special significance to the crazy story, but if he wanted to get a minute's rest, he'd be wise to humor the shaman, play along with the guessing game. Now let's see, he thought to himself, where should he begin? He'd already guessed that the people Great Wolf and Golden Cougar whittled were jerks because they wouldn't live in peace. Why wouldn't they live in peace? "The meaning is that the people killed each other because each group was different when they should have appreciated one another for their differences."

Red Hawk looked at the hybrid and smiled. "Wrong."

"Crap."

"But close," Red Hawk added.

"The oaks, madrones, willows, and maples should have lived in peace because they all came from trees."

"No. But you are getting closer," Red Hawk said, raising the leafy sandwich and inspecting the contents.

"I'm also getting tired of straining my brain."

Red Hawk extended his right hand, the herbal remedy in his palm. "Eat this."

"I'd rather not."

"Do you want to see the one you love again?"

Grizzly did a double take. "How do you know about Athena?"

"The spirit of the raven whispered her name in my ear."

"You must feel awful crowded in a bathtub."

"I bathe by standing in the rain," Red Hawk said. "Now eat this."

Reluctantly, scrunching his nose at the pungent odor, Grizzly took the concoction and nibbled at the top leaf. "Mmmmm. Yummy."

"You fool no one but yourself. Eat," Red Hawk instructed.

In order to put an end to the shaman's nagging, Grizzly took a bite, and he was pleasantly surprised to discover the remedy tasted a lot like raw chicken. He chewed, swallowed, and sniffed a chunky morsel in this mouth. "Not bad," he said, the words distorted by the mouthful.

"Eat all of it," Red Hawk directed, "then lay down for a while. When you awaken you will be healed."

"That fast, huh?" Grizzly responded. "Are you a miracle worker?"

"To those who do not know the Spirit, such would seem to be the case."

"I don't believe in miracles," Grizzly commented, chewing heartily.

"How strange. You were saved from certain death earlier by one of the ancient hairy ones. Some could call your deliverance a miracle."

"I did pray for a miracle..." Grizzly began sarcastically, and stopped, dumbfounded. He had asked for a miracle, and look at what had happened! But his rescue could be attributed to dumb luck, not the intervention of Deity. The idea was ridiculous. He stuck the last of the medicine in his mouth and regarded the shaman intently. "It won't work, old man."

"What?"

"Pretending the Spirit had anything to do with saving my hide. I know better."

"Do you?"

"I'm no dummy."

"Then what is the meaning of the story?"

"I don't know," Grizzly replied, peeved, and made a wild guess. "They should have lived in peace because they all came from wood."

"Yes," Red Hawk said, and beamed contentedly.

"What?"

"You have surmised the truth, gentle one. The oaks, madrones, willows, and maples should have lived in peace because they all stemmed from the same source. They should have recognized their oneness, not their differences."

"What's all of this garbage got to do with me?"

"When you look at your human brothers, do you see the differences or the oneness?" Red Hawk asked.

"What oneness?"

The shaman touched the hybrid's shoulder. "Close your eyes and be still. The answer will come to you."

"You're certifiable, do you know that?"

Red Hawk rose slowly.

"Where are you going?" Grizzly queried, settling on his back, an odd sensation, a curious feeling of euphoria and lassitude, pervading his consciousness.

"Your friends are in trouble."

"What?" Grizzly responded, endeavoring to lift himself from the ground without success.

"I will return. You will be safe now. The spirit of the bear will watch over you."

"My friends need me. I'm going with you," Grizzly asserted, and tried to push his body up. Instead, the effort brought on a tidal wave of wooziness and his eyelids fluttered.

"Remember the oneness," Red Hawk stated, and walked to the north.

Grizzly groaned, gazed at a white cloud resembling a pillow, and embraced the domain of the sandman.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"You've done a fine job, mates," Red Beard said, praising the four crewmen who had captured the prisoners. "Too bad about Zack the Black, though. There was a man who could whore with the best of them. Which one of these dogs did him in?"

Elephant Ears nodded at Blade. "Him, Red Beard. He calls himself Blade."

The Warrior saw the pirate chief study him from head to toe. He glanced to his right, at Sergeant Havoc, then to his left at Boone. All three of them stood with their arms in the air, ringed by the brigands.

"You're a big one," Red Beard remarked.

"The better to stomp you into the ground," Blade said.

"And you think you'll get the chance?" Red Beard asked, and laughed. "I have news for you, mister, you and your friends here. The Skull and Bones don't take kindly to others meddling in our affairs. You've cost us, cost us dearly, and you'll pay."

"One of us will," Blade vowed.

"And you have a smart mouth to boot," Red Beard declared. "Sending you to Davy Jones's locker will be a real treat."

"What will we do with these lowlifes?" Fiddler Jack inquired.

Red Beard's eyes narrowed and he scratched his chin hair. "Something special. They deserve a horrible death, an end to match their crimes."

"Our crimes?" Sergeant Havoc said. "You're the criminals, you bastard."

"Says who, soldier man? You?" Red Beard snapped. "I have news for you. If a law isn't broken, there isn't a crime, and whose laws are we breaking? The Canadian government's? It doesn't exist anymore. Who governs the high seas? No one. We haven't broken anyone's laws, so we aren't criminals."

"What about Harrison Hot Springs?" Havoc queried arrogantly.

"What laws did we break? Harrison Hot Springs doesn't have laws on the books anymore. The village doesn't even have a police force," Red Beard said.

"Don't be calling us names, Havoc, unless you want your tongue cut out," Fiddler Jack added.

"Only the strong survive in this world," Red Beard stated. "And the Skull and Bones are the strongest. We've lived by our wits for decades, and our band will be around long after you're gone. We take what we damn well please when we want it, and no one stands in our way if they hope to continue breathing."

"Do most of your victims expire from too much hot air?" Blade interjected.

Red Beard cocked his head, raking the giant with a hostile glare. "You're deliberately trying to get my goat."

Blade smiled. "How am I doing?"

"Not bad," Red Beard admitted, "but I'm not about to lose my temper, do something stupid, and make the blunder you're hoping I will so you can try and escape."

The Warrior shrugged. "You can't blame a man for trying."

Red Beard chuckled. "You're honest, anyway. I like you, landlubber."

"I'd like to say the feeling is mutual, but I can't," Blade said.

"Why not?"

"Because you're on a par with a drug dealer I once met in Miami. You live off other people's misery. You inflict suffering and death on innocent men, women, and children, all to satisfy your baser passions. Technically, legally, you might not be a criminal because there aren't any laws on the books to break, but morally you're a criminal. You hurt and steal for your own gain, and you're too lazy to try and make an honest living.

You're the human equivalent of a slug, and you deserve to be squashed."

"And you're aiming to squash us?"

Blade nodded.

"Big words from a fool who's on the business end of our guns," Red Beard remarked with a chuckle.

"Why are we wasting so much time?" Fiddler Jack inquired impatiently. "First we were sidetracked by the beastie, and now we're chatting with these three. Shouldn't we be on our

way?"

Red Beard glanced at his subordinate. "Are you doubting me, good Fiddler?"

"Never in a million years," Fiddler Jack responded quickly. "But shouldn't we be joining up with the rest?"

The pirate leader gazed at the sun. "We have plenty of daylight left. But I suppose you're right. We should head out."

"You're meeting others?" Blade asked.

"Forty of our mates."

Sergeant Havoc looked at the Warrior. "So you were right, sir. My compliments."

Red Beard's eyes narrowed. "You figured out there were more of us about?"

"Seemed obvious," Blade said.

"Did it now?" Red Beard responded. "I'm not one to leave anything to chance. I divided the Skull and Bones into four groups and sent them in from different directions. We hit Harrison Hot Springs from the west, south, and east."

"But you couldn't hit the village from the north," Sergeant Havoc said. "The lake is to the north."

"He sent the fourth group to hit Port Douglas at the north end of Harrison Lake," Blade stated.

Red Beard nodded, smiling appreciatively. "I respect a man who has intelligence. Yeah, I sent about half of the band to Port Douglas. They went up the east shore of Harrison Lake four days ago."

"And you arranged to hit both Port Douglas and Harrison Hot Springs on the morning of the same day in the hopes you'd find the Bowie at one of the two," Blade deduced. "If the rest of your band doesn't locate the Bowie at Port Douglas, they'll work their way south along the lake while you work your way north, and you'll catch the vessel in between."

"Anything else?"

Blade pondered for a few seconds. "Since you've been staying close to the west bank, your mates, as you call them, must be coming down the east bank."

"Too bad I have to kill you," Red Beard said. "You'd make a fine pirate."

"Not really. I like to bathe regularly."

Red Beard laughed. "There you go again. Yes, indeed. Your death must be very special." He surveyed his men. "I want them tied and put in the boats. The big one goes with me. We'll let them live until we can have some proper fun." He walked toward the shore. "Fiddler, you'll take Zack the Black's boat."

"You heard the man," Fiddler Jack said. "Hop to it!"

In short order the brigands bound the three Force members with stout rope and herded them onto the craft. They led Blade to the outboard cruiser, while Boone and Sergeant Havoc were placed in separate runabouts. Once again the pirate fleet took to the water on a northerly course.

Blade sat with his back to the droning motor, feeling the boat rise and fall slightly in a regular cadence, watching Elephant Ears work the controls. Red Beard stood near the wheel, staring out over the lake. Not a pace away loomed Bug Eyes, who held his crossbow trained on Blade's forehead.

"I hope you're not as dumb as the beastie," Bug Eyes commented. "Drowning is a terrible way to go."

"You saw him drown?"

"We saw him jump in the lake and he never surfaced," Bug Eyes detailed. "Not even a freak like him could hold his breath indefinitely."

"Did you actually see his body?"

"What difference does it make?"

Blade didn't respond. He glanced at the pile of Force gear stacked in the forward right-hand corner, at his Bowies, and frowned. The knives were useless to him unless he could free his hands, and doing so would prove to be difficult with rope looped around his arms from his wrists to his elbows. The brigands didn't intend to let another captive slip through their fingers.

"Have you been wondering about what gave you away?" Bug Eyes asked.

"What?"

"Aren't you the least bit curious to know how we were able to set our trap for you?" Bug Eyes queried.

"You spotted us with those eyes of yours."

Bug Eyes beamed. "That I did. There's little I don't notice. My eyesight is better than an eagle's."

"But you're uglier than a dodo."

Bug Eyes swept his left leg back, about to plant a kick on the Warrior's head.

"Belay that," Red Beard declared. "He's insulting you on purpose, mate."

"I don't like to be insulted," Bug Eyes skid.

"Then don't look in a mirror," Blade remarked.

Bug Eyes looked at the pirate chief. "I want him, Red Beard. I have the right."

"He's insulted all of us and killed many of our mates. No one can claim him as their own," Red Beard said.

"As a favor then," Bug Eyes proposed.

"We'll see."

"I've never asked for a personal favor before," Bug Eyes noted.

"We'll see," Red Beard reiterated.

Bug Eyes leaned over the giant. "Do you know what it means if he gives you to me?"

"We're engaged?" Blade answered. "Sorry, but I'm a married man."

"Not that," Bug Eyes hissed. "If Red Beard agrees, I can decide your fate. I get to pick the way you'll die."

"Are you capable of making major decisions? I was under the impression you have a hard time figuring out which moccasin to put on first in the morning."

Bug Eyes simply glowered.

Laughing heartily, Red Beard moved over to the Warrior. "If I give the word, you'll die a hard death."

Blade shrugged. "Comes with the job."

"And what job might that be?" Red Beard asked.

"I'm in pest control."

"Pest control?"

"Never mind," Blade said. "You'd have to live in California for a while to understand."

"Are you saying we're pests?" Red Beard inquired.

"If the antennae fit," Blade quipped. "Enjoy your fun while you can," Red Beard said, and glanced at the west shore, an expression of shock flitting across his countenance. "Did you see that thing?" he queried.

Blade scrutinized the beach, the bank, and the forest. "I don't see anything unusual."

"What did you see, Skipper?" Bug Eyes asked.

"I'm not sure," Red Beard responded, sounding bewildered. "I thought I caught a glimpse of a huge hairy thing running in the woods."

"Maybe it was a bear," Elephant Ears said.

"It ran on two legs," Red Beard mentioned. "Bears don't run on two legs."

"Then maybe it was a mutation," Bug Eyes suggested. "There's a lot of them buggers about."

"I must have been imagining things," Red Beard said. "I'd swear that the hairy thing was carrying somebody."

"Are all pirates prone to hallucinating?" Blade queried.

"Let me shut this smart-ass up," Bug Eyes proposed.

"I need him in one piece," Red Beard said. "And I don't want a repeat of what happened to the beastie."

Bug Eyes shrugged. "So I got carried away."

Blade looked at the near-twin, at those uncanny blue eyes. "You said that our friend drowned."

"He did," Bug Eyes replied with a sneer. "After I used him for punching practice."

"You beat the freak to within a hair of its life," Red Beard elaborated.

Blade studied Bug Eyes for a moment. "Was Grizzly in chains?"

"My brother held the freak's arms," Bug Eyes said.

The Warrior nodded. "I suspected as much. Otherwise, Grizzly would have whipped a wimp like you in no time."

"I could have taken the freak fair and square," Bug Eyes insisted angrily.

"Look who's calling the kettle black," Blade remarked.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Bug Eyes snapped.

"It means you're a fine one to be calling Grizzly a freak, freak," Blade said, hoping to antagonize the raider. He succeeded.

A crimson hue flushed Bug Eyes' cheeks and he raised the crossbow to his shoulder, sighting on the giant's chest.

"If you let fly with that bolt, I'll have you keelhauled," Red Beard threatened, stepping closer to the Warrior. "I won't warn you again."

Blade stared at the pirate leader, perplexed.. How did Red Beard exert control over the mutant twins? For that matter, how did the man hold sway over the Skull and Bones? Was he their leader by virtue of his intellect, which was like saying he was a stab of marble among a heap of bricks, or did Red Beard rule by virtue of another trait? Blade knew the pirate chief carried a revolver, but the man didn't carry a holster. Where was the gun? He scrutinized the loose-fitting folds of Red Beard's clothing and spied a Smith and Wesson Model 13 tucked under the brigand's black belt on the right side, partly concealed by Red Beard's white shirt.

Bug Eyes glanced at his leader, then at the giant, his lips twitching in suppressed rage.

"Have a care, brother," Elephant Ears interjected. "We have no call to quarrel with the skipper. His word is bond, and you know it."

"The crew will back me on this," Red Beard added. "The articles are clear."

"Listen to him, brother," Elephant Ears stressed anxiously, his huge ears flapping.

With obvious reluctance Bug Eyes lowered the crossbow. "Sorry, Skipper," he said.

"What articles are you talking about?" Blade inquired.

"The articles of our band," Red Beard explained, his gaze on Bug Eyes. "Every mate must swear over a bible to abide by the rules of the Skull and Bones."

"Pirates have rules of conduct?" Blade asked in amazement.

Red Beard looked at the giant. "What? We're nothing but a bunch of scavengers, then?"

Before Blade could reply, a shout arose from Elephant Ears.

"A ship! There's a ship dead ahead!"

Red Beard swung to the north, peering at the vague configuration of a large vessel visible in the hazy distance. "It's the Bowie!" he exclaimed, rubbing his hands together in anticipation. "The Fates be praised! Our prize is coming to us! Get set. We're going to take her!"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

A red fog enveloped the landscape.

She appeared out of the mist, a seductive smile creasing her lovely features, attired in a skimpy green bathing suit. "Hi, lover," she said, greeting him.

"Athena?" he responded, his mouth and throat extremely dry, speaking with great difficulty.

"It's me, Grizzly," Athena assured him, stepping nearer, her hips swaying suggestively.

"You can't be here," he said.

"But I am," Athena replied softly.

"Where's the Indian?"

"There's just you and me," Athena answered, winking her left eye, ten feet from him and closing.

He shook his head, bewildered, feeling hot all over, wondering if he was dreaming.

"You're not dreaming," Athena said, seemingly able to read his mind.

Grizzly pressed his right palm to his sweaty forehead. "What did that crazy shaman give me?"

"Quit fighting it," Athena stated. "Roll with the flow."

"This can't be happening. This isn't real."

"Who's to say what's real and what isn't? For all you know, every waking moment is a dream and every dream the reality of your experience."

"You're talking in riddles," Grizzly said. "You can't be in Canada. You should be in a hospital in Los Angeles."

She halted a yard from him, grinning and licking her lips, "Like what you see?"

He gulped, "Yeah. Of course. Who wouldn't?"

"Then let's cuddle."

"I can't."

"Why not?" Athena asked, moving nearer, lust lighting her eyes.

"I don't feel well."

She laughed. "Excuses. Excuses."

"I'm serious."

She swayed up to him and gently touched his left cheek. "So am I."

"This isn't right," he protested.

"Feels right to me," Athena said, and stroked his neck.

"We're not even married."

She laughed again.

Grizzly grabbed her wrist. "Stop it. Please."

"What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing. Everything. This just isn't right," he stated.

"So you keep saying," Athena said, her disappointment evident.

He managed a feeble grin. "After we're married, okay?"

"What's wrong with right now."

"You don't understand," he told her, releasing her wrist and taking a step backwards.

"I understand, all right. You don't want me."

"I do. I truly do."

"Then prove it," Athena challenged him.

Grizzly shifted nervously. "How?"

She smiled. "You know how," she said huskily.

"Not here. We're in the middle of nowhere."

"Touch me," she directed.

"But—" he said, starting to object.

"If you don't touch me, I'll suspect you don't really love me."

"But—"

"I'll leave you. You'll be alone, just like you've always been."

Grizzly closed his eyes, feeling so strange, striving to focus his thoughts, wishing he would awaken and the bizarre dream would end, appalled by the sexual connotations of his vision, knowing Athena wasn't really there, that his imagination was running wild, yet terrified of the prospect of Athena abandoning him, of more years of loneliness.

"Touch me," Athena demanded.

He opened his troubled dark eyes, reached out with his right hand, and tenderly ran his fingers along her left shoulder. A sharp pain lanced his index finger and he recoiled. Athena snickered.

"What the hell!" Grizzly blurted out, inspecting his finger, astounded to discover an inch-long sliver of wood imbedded in his flesh.

"Touch me," Athena said.

He gaped at her, in shock.

"If you won't touch me, I'll touch you," she declared, and caressed his left forearm. "Your fur is so soft, so smooth."

"Don't," he remonstrated.

"Look," Athena said, drawing her right hand back and exposing her palm. Splinters covered her skin like the quills on a porcupine. "Beautiful," she breathed.

"Dear God!"

She giggled and ran her left hand across his abdomen, and when she held her hand aloft the fingers and palm were dotted with wooden needles.

"No!" Grizzly cried, backing away. "Don't touch me!"

"But I must, lover," Athena asserted happily. "I must show you." She came after him, keeping her body close to his, her hands and arms rubbing against him.

"Show me what?" he asked, aghast.

"This," Athena responded, pausing and allowing him to see the slivers bristling from her hands and arms.

"But how?" he queried, dazed and confused.

"Examined yourself lately?" she responded.

Grizzly looked down, horror-stricken at the sight of his arms and torso, at the wide patches of missing fur, at the jagged wood underneath. He was rooted to the spot by raw fear. "But I'm not made of wood!" he declared.

"Let's find out," Athena said, and embraced him, looping her arms around his shoulders and squeezing tightly. She began grinding her body against his.

"Don't!" he shouted, trying to shake her off,

"I'm yours," Athena said. "All yours!"

"No, damn it!" Grizzly yelled, frantically twisting and thrashing, amazed at the strength she displayed, unable to dislodge her, their forms writhing in a macabre dance. He could feel her lithe figure rubbing against him furiously, and panic seized him. "Let go of me!" he wailed, throwing himself backwards and tripping over his own feet, landing on his back, Athena massaging his form with hers, as if she was trying to weld their bodies together with the heat from the friction of their grinding figures.

"I'll show you, lover!" she stated.

He pitched and bucked, rolling to the right and the left, and all to no avail. She clung to him effortlessly, smiling blissfully all the while.

"Yes!" Athena said. "We're almost there!"

Grizzly felt his limbs growing rapidly weaker and he became light-headed. An urge to scream took all of his self-control to resist.

"Almost there!" Athena repeated.

He rolled to a stop on his left side and gazed into her lovely eyes. "What are you doing to me?"

"Showing you the oneness," she explained.

"What oneness?" Grizzly asked, catching his breath.

"You'll see," Athena promised, sliding up and down, up and down.

An intense burning sensation permeated Grizzly's midriff, spreading ever higher, transforming his blood into molten lava, and for a moment he thought he would burst into flames.

"At last!" Athena cried, clasping him to her heaving bosom and shuddering. "We did it!"

"Did what?" he asked in a whisper.

Athena grinned and pushed herself erect. "Bared our oneness."

Grizzly gasped at the sight of countless splinters, shards, and staves piercing her skin, coating every square inch from her neck to her thighs, except for a roughly circular area at her midsection where the skin and the underlying wood were completely gone. From the hole a blue radiance emanated outward. "What... what is it?" he stammered.

"Our oneness," Athena said. "Look at your stomach."

He did, and nearly passed out from the shock, gawking at a similar cavity where his abdomen had been, the surrounding fur bristling with slivers, resembling a miniature stick forest from his chest to his knees. A bright blue light shone from the cavity.

"Do you understand now?" Athena inquired.

Totally confounded, Grizzly shook his head.

"You are gazing upon our oneness," she informed him. "All women and men contain a fragment of the oneness within them."

"But I'm a hybrid."

"You're a man in a bear's body, but you are still part of the oneness."

He started to tremble. "I don't understand."

"Maybe this will help," Athena said, smiling serenely, and the next instant the hole in her midsection began to widen, to enlarge quickly, as a crack appeared at the upper edge of the hole and spread higher, running between her breasts and up her throat, then over her chin, her nose, and her forehead. Less than an inch in width initially, the crack grew wider and wider, the blue light brighter and brighter.

"Athena!" he cried.

Incredibly, her body was splitting in half, as if she was an ear of corn shedding its husk or a snake shedding its skin.

"Athena!" Grizzly declared, striving to rise but too giddy to do more than prop himself on his elbows.

A protracted crackling sounded and the two halves of her body toppled in opposite directions, falling with a wooden thud to the ground, and there, shimmering and gleaming like a dwarfish sun, in the exact spot her head had previously occupied, blazed a blue sphere casting its radiance in all directions.

"What the!" he blurted out.

The blue sphere hovered in the air soundlessly.

Grizzly heard the crackling noise again, only much nearer, and he looked down. Every hair on his body stood on end as he abruptly realized the crackling came from himself and that the cavity in his abdomen was expanding, exactly as hers had.

"No!

He clutched at himself, his forearms looped across his stomach, endeavoring to hold himself together, terrified when he saw a crack materialize at the top of the cavity and start climbing toward his chin.

He was splitting in half?

"No! No!" Grizzly shrieked, watching the cleft inch ever nearer to his face. "Athena! Where are you?"

Already the crack had reached his ribs.

He struggled in vain to sit up, hugging his chest to keep his body from separating, sweat pouring from every pore.

The crack reached his neck.

"Help me!" he wanted to scream, but his vocal chords refused to function. A cool breeze seemed to be blowing into his throat, and then he felt his chin cleaving, his lips parting, and his nostrils were rent asunder. Somewhere, someone screeched maniacally. He recognized two fleeting impressions, the first the image of a grizzly bear staring at him with a comical, baffled expression, and the second that of the blue light merging with his consciousness, and finally there was nothing save sweet oblivion.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"You'll never take the Bowie," Blade declared.

"Who asked you?" Red Beard snapped, his attention on the ship now a half mile off.

"That vessel will plow right through your band," Blade predicted.

"Observe and learn, landlubber," Red Beard said. "The Skull and Bones always have a few tricks up their sleeves."

Blade glanced to the right and the left, at the line of boats and canoes extending for 50 yards to the east and west. What could the brigands hope to accomplish by pitting their puny crafts against the former Coast Guard ship? The Bowie would reduce the boats and canoes to so much kindling. "You're nuts," he said.

"Are we?" Red Beard responded, and glanced at Elephant Ears. "Where did you stow the bag?"

Elephant Ears pointed at a narrow door to his left. "Fiddler Jack stashed it there when we were leaving the docks at Harrison Hot Springs."

Red Beard moved to the door, opened it, and withdrew a brown leather shoulder pouch.

"What's in there?" Blade taunted him. "A slingshot?"

The pirate chief unsnapped the flap and reached into the pouch, grinning wickedly. "So you think we won't stop the Bowie, bucko?" he asked, and held his right hand out for the giant to see the object clutched in his palm.

Blade tensed. "A hand grenade."

"Eight of them are in this bag," Red Beard disclosed. "More than enough to get the job done." He chuckled and stood, studying the approaching vessel.

"Do you expect the Bowie to get close enough for you to use the grenades?" Blade inquired.

"I do," Red Beard said. "Remember the fate of that poor kitty with the bad case of curiosity." He turned to the east and pumped his right arm twice, then repeated the procedure to the west, and the Skull and Bones members on the boats and canoes promptly dropped from sight, flattening on the bottom of their craft. Sergeant Havoc and Boone were forced to follow suit. All the outboards were turned off.

"Here," Red Beard said to Elephant Ears, and gave the mutant the grenade. "Wait for the word."

"No problem."

Red Beard looked at Bug Eyes. "You're the best shot so you'll handle the bow."

"Can I use this bastard for target practice first?" Bug Eyes asked, gesturing menacingly at Blade.

"Behave," Red Beard stated.

Blade stared at the rope binding his arms, gauging its strength, debating whether to try and warn the family on the Bowie.

"Don't even think it," Red Beard warned.

The Warrior glanced up in surprise.

"I can't afford to lose the ship. If you make even a teensy peep, I'll let Bug Eyes finish you off right then and there," Red Beard said,

Bug Eyes smiled. "Please. Do me a favor and make a peep."

"Do me a favor and swallow a live grenade," Blade replied.

"Everyone down," Red Beard ordered, and lowered to a crouch.

Elephant Ears squatted and took a position next to the port rail, the grenade in his right hand. Red Beard slid the pouch to him.

"How many are on the ship again?" Bug Eyes queried as he crouched on the starboard side.

"A family of four. The father, mother, a girl, and a lad," Red Beard said. "Their name is Jones."

"This'll be a piece of cake," Bug Eyes stated.

The Warrior perplexed his captors by throwing back his head and laughing.

"What's so funny, sucker?" Bug Eyes asked.

"Your face, fly eyes," Blade responded.

Bug Eyes hissed.

"And your breath is nothing to brag about," Blade added.

"That'll be enough out of you," Red Beard said. "We need to concentrate on our work."

"You can't dignify piracy by calling it work."

"And what would you know about piracy?" Red Beard retorted. "For your information piracy has been a respected profession for hundreds, even thousands of years. Piracy was around in the days of the ancient Greeks, and flourished in the open until the seventeen hundreds."

Blade's gray eyes narrowed in puzzlement. "You're not as dumb as I thought."

"You expected me to be an ignorant sot, no doubt," Red Beard said. "I may not live in one of those fancy houses in Vancouver, and I may not have the breeding of a blue-blood muck-heap or be a Lord of Kismet, but I—"

"What do you know about the Lords of Kismet?" Blade asked, interrupting, leaning forward, his countenance hardening.

Red Beard did a double take. "What's this then? Why are you so interested in the Lords?"

"I had a run-in with their Exalted Executioner."

"And you're still breathing?"

"What do you know about them?" Blade asked.

"Not much. We've traded with some of their people. The Lords of Kismet rule Asia, or so I've been told, and they trade heavily on the black market," Red Beard said.

"Then you've never met them?"

"Hell, no. The Skull and Bones have never been to Asia. We've traded with representatives

of the Lords at Port Hardy. They travel up and down the coast looking for goods all the time."

Blade digested the information thoughtfully, thankful for a lead, however ambiguous, he might be able to use to track down the Lords of Kismet. Provided he escaped from the pirates.

"I've heard stories about the Lords," Red Beard was saying. "No one crosses them and lives. On the plus side, they're generous with their money. If they want something, they'll pay or do whatever it takes to get what they want."

"I've heard they plan to conquer North America," Blade mentioned.

"No lie?" Red Beard responded in surprise.

"No lie."

"They're ambitious, I'll say that for them," Red Beard remarked. "But I don't know as how I'd like them to be running the show over here like they do over there. They're too ruthless for my tastes."

"You're calling someone else ruthless?"

"There you go again, insulting me," Red Beard said. "Clam up until I say otherwise."

Blade gazed at the M.V. Bowie, watching grayish smoke curl upward from the prominent smokestack, racking his brains for a way of alerting the family onboard without getting shot. The vessel was bearing slightly to the east of the row of pirate craft, and for a minute he believed the ship might bypass them without incident, until he saw the Bowie alter its course and make straight for the boats and canoes.

"Here she comes," Red Beard gloated. "We stay low until I give the word. The man who owns the Bowie, Jones, will recognize some of these here craft as belonging to friends of his from Harrison Hot Springs and he'll want to investigate. Once he gets within range, he's ours."

"I'm ready," Elephant Ears said.

"So am I," chimed in Bug Eyes.

"I'd like to go for a walk and stretch my legs," Blade quipped.

"If you speak again, I'll cut out your tongue," Red Beard responded.

Resigned to the role of a spectator, Blade observed the drama unfold, suppressing an impulse to shout to the Bowie as the ship closed to within a hundred yards and slowed, the smoke decreasing measurably. Several figures appeared on the bow.

Red Beard snickered, relishing his impending triumph.

Its prow knifing the water cleanly, the Bowie came within 70 yards of the pirate flotilla before a male voice hailed them. "Ahoy, the Minnow! Is that you, Howell?"

One of the boats must be named the Minnow, Blade deduced, and Howell must be a

resident of Harrison Hot Springs.

"Howell, why don't you answer me?" the man asked.

Although the Bowie advanced at a reduced rate of speed, the owner of the ship gave no indication that he perceived the gravity of the dilemma confronting him. "Ahoy, the Denver! he shouted, addressing another of the boats. "Robert, are you there?"

"Duck lower," Red Beard instructed the Warrior. "If he spots you, you're dead."

Blade complied, supremely frustrated at his inability to thwart the pirates, knowing Bug Eyes was keeping the crossbow trained on him every second. If the mutant became distracted for just an instant. Blade felt confident he could escape by diving into the lake and working the ropes loose underwater, but a successful flight on his part might provoke the brigands into venting their anger on Havoc and Boone. Frowning, he watched Red Beard, who was the key to the brewing action.

Cautiously lifting his head, the pirate leader surveyed the Bowie, noting its proximity to the boats, then sank to the bottom. "Get set, mates," he said.

Elephant Ears hefted the grenade.

"Can anyone hear me?" the man on the Bowie bellowed.

Red Beard began counting backwards from ten, and when he reached the number one he leaped to his feet and yelled, "Surrender or die!"

Elephant Ears and Bug Eyes also rose.

Entertaining the forlorn hope that the owner of the Bowie might somehow evade the pirates, Blade sat up and glanced at the bow, spying three people who were gawking at the raiders. A man, a woman, and a young girl, a teenager, were transfixed by the sight of the Skull and Bones band standing in the boats and canoes and aiming assorted weapons at the hapless trio. Do something! Blade wanted to shout. Get out of here!

But the owner, Jones, a stocky man in a green sweater and a jaunty crimson cap, reacted sluggishly to the unexpected development. "Who are you fellows?" he demanded. "What do you want?"

"Are you an idiot, man?" Red Beard rejoined. "We're pirates, and we're taking your vessel. Stop your engine." Perhaps because the Bowie was still 15 yards from the brigands, even though the vessel drifted virtually dead in the water, and perhaps because the engine was running but not engaged, the owner made a futile attempt to flee, turning toward the bridge and cupping his hands to his mouth. "Hard about, Jim! Hard about!"

Red Beard glanced at Elephant Ears. "Teach the son of a bitch a lesson, mate."

The mutant nodded, his ears swaying with the motion, pulled the pin, and lobbed the grenade, his arm and shoulder muscles rippling. He hurled the grenade between the ship and the pirate craft, then dropped down.

Muffled by the water, the explosion nonetheless seemed to shake the very air, sending a geyser arcing skyward and causing the outboard cruiser to rock violently.

Buffeted by the concussion, Blade placed his arms in front of his face to protect his eyes, looking up at the Bowie when the bouncing slackened.

Clearly petrified, Jones gripped the rail and stared at the waves rippling outward from the center of the blast.

"There's more where that came from," Red Beard shouted. "And me next one will blow a hole in your hull if you don't give the order to stop your engine!"

Jones looked at the woman, who spoke a few words, and stared at the bridge. "Kill the engine, Jim!! Now!"

"Smart move, Mr. Jones," Red Beard said. "Now I want you to lower a rope for us to climb, and be quick about it. Your wife and daughter are to stay where they are. If they move, we'll toss another grenade. Understand?"

"I understand," Jones replied nervously.

"Then hop to," Red Beard snapped.

Blade saw the owner scurry to obey, and within seconds a rope ladder unfurled from the forecastle and the weighted bottom rung fell into the lake.

Red Beard waved his right arm, and the boats and canoes converged on the ship.

Elephant Ears started the outboard and coasted the cruiser to within inches of the rope ladder.

"Watch this one," Red Beard said to Bug Eyes, and jumped to the ladder. Drawing the Smith and Wesson as he ascended, Red Beard clambered over the rail and touched the barrel to the girl's head. "All hands on deck!" he announced to the brigands, grinning cockily.

Whooping and hollering, the pirates drew near to the ship.

"Up you go," Bug Eyes told the Warrior.

"You expect me to climb with my hands tied?" Blade responded.

"Your hands aren't tied. Your arms are," Bug Eyes noted. "And you'll climb or I'll kick you in the teeth."

Blade stood and stepped to the side, gazing up at the railing far above. He vaulted onto the rope, grabbing a rung with his hands and holding on as he placed his boots on a lower rung.

"Keep going," Bug Eyes said. "You're holding us up."

With a defiant glare at the mutant, Blade scaled the ladder, climbing awkwardly, using both hands to seize a rung, haul his feet higher, then repeat the procedure. His wrists ached when he finally lunged for the railing, his gaze alighting on Red Beard.

"A little exercise never hurt anybody," the pirate chief commented.

Grunting from the effort, Blade managed to hike his body over the rail and stand on the polished white deck. The owner stood nearby, his right arm draped around his wife's shoulders. "Hello," he greeted them. "I'm on your side."

"Spare me the socializing," Red Beard stated. "Stand next to them and don't make a funny move or this lass dies."

Blade noticed that the Smith and Wesson was already cocked. He walked to the owner's side. "Mr. Jones, isn't it?"

"Yeah," the man responded, his brown eyes riveted on the gun barrel.

"You're supposed to be fishing at Twenty Mile Bay," Blade mentioned quietly.

"Tess came down with the flu," Jones responded absently, nodding at his daughter, a pretty girl sporting curly brown hair and wearing a yellow jacket and faded jeans.

"Don't do anything to antagonize them," Blade advised.

"We won't."

"Where's your son?" Blade asked.

"Jim was on the bridge," Jones answered. . Moments later Bug Eyes came over the rail, then Elephant Bars and four other pirates. Fiddler Jack was next, and after him Boone and Sergeant Havoc, who both joined the Warrior.

"This is another fine mess we've gotten ourselves into, sir," Sergeant Havoc remarked.

"We're experts at getting in over our heads," Boone agreed.

"Who are you people?" the wife asked, a slim woman in her late thirties attired in a plaid shirt and brown slacks.

"We're from the Freedom Federation," Blade whispered.

"The what?"

"We're friends," Blade assured her. "We'll help you if we can."

"You look like you could use some help yourselves," she commented.

More of the brigands were now aboard.

A youthful voice suddenly barked a command from the upper deck. "Drop your weapons or I'll shoot!"

Blade swung around to find the son, a stripling of 16 or so, training a rifle on the pirates.

"Jim!" the father cried.

"Don't! Put down that gun!" said Mrs. Jones.

Red Beard laughed. "Listen to your folks, boy, or your poor sister's brain will be feeding the fishes."

The youth wavered and looked at his sister.

"Please, Jimmy!" Tess yelled.

Grinning broadly, Red Beard glanced at Bug Eyes. "I don't like having a gun pointed at me. Kill the brat."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

"No!" Jones declared.

Blade took a stride, intending to cover the six feet separating him from the mutation and knock the crossbow aside before Bug Eyes could elevate the weapon and fire, But his plan, was foiled by the mutant's unorthodox and lethal firing technique.

Bug Eyes never bothered to raise the crossbow. He pressed the stock against his right hip, angled the bolt at the youth, and let fly.

Trying to cover so many brigands at once, the son failed to detect the surreptitious release of the shaft until the gleaming bolt was already streaking toward him, and then there wasn't time to blink before the razor point penetrated the center of his forehead, the impact flinging him backwards, his arms flung wide, to topple from view.

"You murdered him!" Jones declared, storming at Bug Eyes.

Red Beard shot him.

The slug tore through the father's skull and blew out the rear of his cranium, spattering blood and gore on his wife and the Force members. He tottered rearward into his wife's outstretched arms and collapsed, oozing fluid from the entry hole.

"Dad!" Tess Jones wailed, and dashed to her parents.

Cackling with glee, Red Beard stared smugly at the giant. "Any objections?"

"You're all a pack of murdering swine," Blade declared, clenching his hands together.

"Your turn will come," Red Beard promised.

Blade looked at the dead owner, at the weeping wife and stunned daughter, feeling a burning rage inside him. If it was the last thing he ever did, he resolved to wipe the Skull and Bones from the face of the earth.

Another pirate appeared on the rope ladder, his arms burdened with part of the Force gear, including the Bowies stuck under his belt.

"Is that the last of it?" Red Beard asked.

"Skyrme is bringing the rest, like Elephant Ears told him to," the pirate answered, "We're the

last ones."

"Good," Red Beard said, facing Fiddler Jack. "Get us underway. Store the gear, dispose of the bodies, and make sure our guests are made comfortable." He leered at the mother and daughter.

"Where do you want these three, skipper?" Fiddler Jack inquired with a nod at Blade, Boone, and Sergeant Havoc.

"Where I can keep my eyes on them. Take them to the bridge. I'll be along shortly," Red Beard said.

Fiddler Jack issued instructions, and the Force members were hustled to the bridge by the raider named Condent and two others, all bearing rifles.

Jones and his family had taken meticulous care of their ship, applying paint and a lustrous polish liberally and making repairs whenever necessary to insure the antique vessel remained seaworthy. Patched and caulked in dozens of spots, the vessel was in excellent condition.

Blade scrutinized the bridge as they entered, noting the portholes ringing the walls, the instrument panels, and the wheel. He moved to the right and stood next to the paneled wall.

Boone moved to the Warrior's right and spoke in a whisper. "Do you have a plan?"

"We're going to kill every pirate," Blade answered, watching Condent and the other pair walk over to the wheel.

"That's your plan?"

"We take no prisoners," Blade added.

"You're overlooking a minor technicality, sir," Sergeant Havoc said, extending his bound forearms.

"They'll make a mistake sooner or later," Blade predicted.

"When they do, we take them down."

"I hope it's sooner than later," Boone remarked.

"Shut your yaps!" Condent barked from across the bridge. "I don't want to see you whispering again."

Blade gritted his teeth and waited impatiently for Red Beard to show up. The minutes dragged by, the emotional burden of worrying about Grizzly's fate, as well as Thunder, Bear, and Athena, preying on his mind.

Harsh laughter sounded outside the door, and in strolled the pirate leader with his entourage of Fiddler Jack and the mutations. Red Beard held an opened whiskey bottle in his left hand, and he took a deep swig as he halted and stared at the captives.

Blade glared back.

"Ahhhh," Red Beard said, lowering the bottle. "There's nothing like a taste of the hard brew to warm your innards." He glanced at Condent. "Have the heroes been giving you any trouble?"

"They've been as gentle as lambs," Condent replied, and snickered.

Red Beard nodded. "Right. Then let's be about our business. Get underway," he said to Fiddler Jack, then sauntered over to the Warrior.

"Come to gloat?" Blade asked.

"Why belabor the obvious?" Red Beard responded.

The brigands were busily preparing for departure, with Fiddler giving directions, Condent taking the wheel, and the others attending to various duties.

"Where are the mother and the daughter?" Blade inquired sternly.

"Don't fret. They're safe and sound in one of the cabins," Red Beard said. "We don't want anything to happen to them before the festivities."

"The festivities?"

"Jones had a real liking for the brew. We found four cases of hooch below, and after we retrieve our mates from the east side of Harrison Lake we're throwing a party to celebrate."

"Are we invited?" Sergeant Havoc queried sarcastically.

"Not the two of you," Red Beard said, indicating the noncom and Boone, "but the big one is."

"Why am I so lucky?" Blade questioned.

Red Beard chuckled. "I don't know if luck had a hand in it. I'm not one to disappoint my trusted lieutenants., and since Bug Eyes wants you so bad, I've decided to let him dispose of you after you give us the information we want."

"Never happen," Blade stated.

"Care to wager?" Red Beard asked, taking a gulp and wiping his mouth with the back of his left hand. "One of you will talk. It's only a matter of time."

"So Bug Eyes and Elephant Ears will get their kicks torturing me," Blade said bitterly.

"Nothing so crude," Red Beard said. "We're a sporting breed, Blade. We live for excitement, for adventure, for the thrill of the chase. And we relish a challenge as much as the next person."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning we've arranged a contest as part of the festivities."

"What kind of contest?"

Red Beard smirked and turned away. "In due time." He walked toward Fiddler Jack,

"This could be the break we've wanted," Blade said softly to his companions.

"How do you figure?" Boone asked.

"I don't know what the contest entails, but I might be able to keep their attention on me," Blade proposed. "If I do, the two of you might be able to free yourselves."

"Might," Boone remarked. "Might."

Blade shrugged. "It's the best chance we've had."

"What are our orders if we do get free?" Sergeant Havoc inquired.

"Need you ask? Kill every one of these bastards."

"With pleasure," Havoc said.

With the ship's engine throbbing, the pirates maneuvered the M. V. Bowie in a loop, coming about to head northward and steering toward the eastern shore.

"Stay within hailing distance of the bank," Red Beard commanded Condent. "We've no way of telling how far south our mates have marched from Port Douglas, so keep your eyes peeled for a signal."

"How will they know we're in control of the ship and not the owners?" Condent asked.

"Skyme is hoisting the colors on the mast," Red Beard said.

"What are the colors?" Blade inquired.

Red Beard glanced at the giant. "The colors are our flag, landlubber. Every pirate band that ever set sail has had their own colors to fly proudly in the wind. We're not ashamed of our calling," he explained, and paused. "Our flag is black with a red skeleton, and it's known and feared all along the Pacific Coast."

"You have pirating down to a fine art," Blade mentioned sarcastically.

"And well we should. Piracy is a fine art. My family has been in the business for generations. My father and my grandfather were both pirates, and highly respected by their mates. I hope to induct my son into the ranks one day."

"You have a son?" Blade queried in amazement.

"There you go again, insulting our calling. Pirates can't have families and homes? Many of us have wives and kids. I've got a son and two daughters."

"And yet you ordered one of your pet monstrosities to murder that poor boy," Blade said in reproach.

"The lad was pointing a gun at me," Red Beard said. "That was a business decision. I can't afford to lose any more men."

"You seem to justify all your killing and looting by claiming you're just conducting business."

"And we are," Red Beard said. "If we don't turn a profit, our families go hungry. This is a brutal world, mister. Either a person takes what they want or they get trampled into the dirt, and my family will never eat dirt. After the war everything was worse. There was no food. The governments broke down, and there was no one to protect the people from the scavengers. A bunch of Canadians took to ships with their families because they'd be safe from the mobs and looters. To survive they took the goods they needed."

"They were no better than the scavengers," Blade declared.

"Depends on how you look at their lives," Red Beard responded. "At sea their families were safe. Later they found a secluded cove and built a fortress. Since then the Skull and Bones have scoured the waters for merchandise that can be bartered or sold on the black market." He paused. "You could think of us as a democratic society."

Blade laughed.

"We elect our leader, we vote on every major decision, and we live by the articles of our band, articles each crew member must accept before joining. Every man is entitled to an equal share of the plunder. Anyone who steals from another pirate will be marooned. If one of us murders a mate, the murderer and the corpse are lashed together and tossed overboard. Grievances are to be brought to me, and if the matter is of consequence, to the whole crew. Then we vote and decide the issue."

"And you kill anyone who gets in your way, who has something you want, or who looks at you crossways. You sacked Harrison Hot springs and killed dozens of innocent people, and you have the nerve to talk about your families and your profit margin? You're sick," Blade stated.

Red Beard sighed. "I didn't expect you to understand." He turned and stared to the north.

Blade lapsed into a sullen silence, leaning against the wall and idly regarding the scenic beauty through the portholes. The ship swung to the east of a long island and drew within 50 yards of the eastern shore. The minutes became an hour. Two. He listened with half an ear to the coarse banter of the "businessmen."

A series of rifle shots brought all conversation to a stop, three quick blasts, then a pause, and three more. "Our mates!" Red Beard stated, walking to the starboard.

A brigand hurried onto the bridge. "Skipper, I've spotted Teach."

"Where?" Red Beard asked,

The brigand hurried to the portholes and pointed to the north.

"Off that bank. See?"

"I do," Red Beard said, and looked at Fiddler Jack. "Prepare to anchor as close as we can."

The depth of the lake enabled the Skull and Bones to drop anchor within ten yards of the shore, and the Bowie's lifeboat ferried all of the pirates except two ashore in stages. Blade sat morosely as the lifeboat carried Red Beard, the mutant brothers, two pirates who handled the oars, the four cases of liquor, and himself toward the beach. They were the last contingent to leave the ship.

"Cheer up, mate," Red Beard said. "Your friends are safe on the Bowie for the time being, and the festivities will commence shortly."

Blade gazed at the 40 excited brigands awaiting their leader and frowned. "Your cutthroats look like they're happy to see you, Captain Red Beard."

Red Beard blinked a few times. "Now why'd you call me that? Some bands are led by a captain, but I don't like formality. Skipper will do."

"How do you feel about son of a bitch?"

A flicker of Red Beard's lips signified his displeasure. "I won't begrudge a doomed man his last moments of fun."

A half-dozen raiders entered the cold water and took hold of the lifeboat, guiding the dinghy alongside a flat stretch of beach. Amid hearty greetings and much laughter, Red Beard stepped to the ground and walked to a grassy knoll 20 yards from the lake, his crew clustering around him, buzzing with conversation. Evidently the report of the battle at Harrison Hot Springs had spread like wildfire among the newcomers.

"Give us the bastards who killed our mates!" a scruffy pirate roared. "Let's skin the slimy knaves alive!"

Red Beard ambled to the top of the knoll and motioned for silence. Once the grumbling subsided he addressed them. "All right then. You've heard about the loss of our shipmates, and I can't blame you for wanting the hides of those responsible. I want to flay them alive too."

Some of the brigands cheered.

"But we can't take our revenge until we learn who these men are and where they came from. Why'd they meddle in our affairs? Are there more of them ready to attack us when we least expect it? We need answers," Red Beard declared. "I propose to get the answers and have a little fun at the same time. Give a listen to my idea and take a vote."

"What's your idea?" a pirate asked.

"We've claimed our prize," Red Beard stated, pointing at the Bowie. "And we found a cargo of hooch besides. So I say we celebrate, we hold a first-rate bash before sailing for the Pacific, and then tend to the task of interrogating our prisoners. In the meantime we have entertainment galore. The poor, departed owner of that there ship graciously volunteered his wife and daughter to whet our appetites, if you get my drift."

Raucous laughter erupted.

"And that's not all," Red Beard announced. "As an added treat, we've arranged a contest between the leader of the men who attacked us at the village and two of our beloved mates,

Bug Eyes and Elephant Ears." He looked at the Warrior. "Bring him here."

The mutants escorted Blade through the mob of raiders to the top of the knoll. Several cursed the giant and one elderly pirate spat on him.

"This is Blade," Red Beard informed the Skull and Bones. "By all rights we should toss him to the sharks after plucking his eyes from their sockets, but Bug Eyes wants to take the landlubber down a peg before we cut him into little pieces." He turned and surveyed the slope of the mountain bordering that section of the lake, then grinned and directed their attention to a clearing a quarter of a mile away. "Do you see the clearing near that cliff yonder? The clearing will be the halfway mark for the contest."

Blade stared at the mountain.

Red Beard slapped the giant on the arm. "Here's the deal. We'll give you a three-minute head start, and then Elephant Ears and Bug Eyes will be on your tail. If you reach the clearing and can return to this spot, we'll spare you."

"Sure you will," Blade said skeptically.

"The Skull and Bones are men of their word. We can always pry the information we want from your two friends. If you make it back here, you'll live," Red Beard reiterated.

"What's to prevent me from simply heading in any direction?" Blade asked.

"Your friends. If you try to trick us, they'll die. If you don't put in an appearance at that clearing within a reasonable amount of time, they'll die. If you try to double back and swim to the Bowie, the two men I left on board will sound the alarm and your friends will die. Do you understand the rules?"

Blade nodded grimly. "And I suppose Elephant Ears and Bug Eyes can kill me anywhere along the route."

"They can do whatever they want to do," Red Beard said.

The Warrior held his arms out. "Is this your idea of a fair contest?"

"No," Red Beard said. "Fiddler? Where are you?"

Fiddler Jack stepped from the ring of brigands, the Bowies in his left hand, the Marlin over his right shoulder. He walked up to the Warrior and proceeded to cut the rope binding the giant's arms. When the rope slackened and fell to the ground, he extended the knives. "You'll need these."

Flabbergasted, Blade took his knives and hefted them.

"Now it will be a fair contest," Red Beard said. "As fair as it can be, anyway." He faced his crew. "What do you say? Is the contest a go?"

"Aye!" responded a burly brigand, and the rest voiced a chorus of affirmation.

"Then it's settled," Red Beard said, gazing at the Warrior. "I told you we like a challenge. Be off with you. And for the sake of your friends, remember the rules."

Blade slid the Bowies into their sheaths, glanced once at the ship, and started to the east, hastening past the hostile pirates and entering the trees beyond.

"There goes the chump of the year," Fiddler Jack declared.

"This won't take us long," Bug Eyes said to Red Beard.

"We can't become overconfident, brother," Elephant Ears warned. "This one shouldn't be taken lightly."

"He doesn't stand a prayer against your ears and my eyes, brother," Bug Eyes remarked. "We'll catch him before he even reaches the clearing."

"Take off," Red Beard directed them. "But you promised him a three-minute head start," Elephant Ears reminded the pirate leader. Red Beard grinned devilishly. "I lied."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

"How long has Blade been gone?"

"Thirty minutes at least."

"I can't stand just sitting here, doing nothing," Sergeant Havoc grouched.

"What else can we do?" Boone responded, gazing at the two pirates standing near the starboard portholes. "They're under orders to shoot us if we budge an inch."

"If they'd just come closer," Havoc whispered.

"What could you do with your arms tied?"

"I still have my feet," Havoc noted.

The leader of the guards pounded the wall in frustration "This sucks. Why'd Red Beard leave us to watch these scumbags? Everyone else is out there partying, and we have to baby-sit."

"It was our turn for guard duty and you know that," the second brigand stated. "And Red Beard promised to save us a bottle."

"Big deal. We'll miss all the fun."

"Do you want to know what your problem is, Vane?"

"No," Vane replied.

"I'll tell you anyway," said the second pirate. "You're never satisfied. You gripe all the time over trifles. You should learn to lighten up, to enjoy life."

"I'd like to be enjoying the celebration," Vane complained.

The second pirate sighed and walked toward the door. "I need to take a leak. Watch these

two, will you?"

Boone saw Sergeant Havoc shift imperceptibly and realized the noncom was about to make a move. But what could Havoc hope to do against two pirates armed with rifles when his arms were tied and he was sitting on the floor a yard away from the door? Boone looked at the approaching brigand, then at Vane, who continued to gaze resentfully out the porthole. The Cavalryman sat on Havoc's right, even farther from the doorway, and there was no way he could reach either of the pirates before they gunned him down.

The pirate planning to relieve himself was six feet from the bridge door.

Sergeant Havoc placed his forearms between his legs, his eyes locked intently on the brigand.

"Hey, Dauphin, why don't you scrounge us some food?" Vane requested, "And while you're at it, look for some hooch. Maybe Red Beard didn't take it all."

The brigand called Dauphin had paused in midstride when Vane spoke, and now he glanced over his right shoulder and nodded. "No problem."

At that instant, when Dauphin's attention rested on Vane and the back of his head was turned toward the door, Sergeant Havoc launched himself forward, springing into a roll, tucking his shoulders and straightening like an uncoiling steel spring, his legs arcing up and in, his combat boots connecting with Dauphin's knees with an audible crunch, his hands grabbing for the barrel of the Rossi Model 92 Dauphin held in his left hand.

Dauphin uttered a screech of torment as his legs started to buckle.

By then Havoc had wrenched the rifle from the brigand's grasp and rolled to the left, leaping erect and springing forward with the rifle upraised.

Vane had a Remington 700 in his right hand, and he tried to bring the weapon into play, spinning and gripping the rifle with both hands, but he never squeezed the trigger.

Sergeant Havoc took three bounds and pounced on the pirate, clubbing Vane on the forehead with the stock of the Rossi and knocking the man onto the floor. Without missing a beat Havoc swung the rifle like a bat, catching Vane on the jaw, the blow producing a loud snap and flattening the pirate on his back, senseless, blood dribbling from his mouth.

On his knees five feet from the door, grimacing in agony, Dauphin clawed at a survival knife attached to his belt on his right hip.

Boone sprang into action, rising and taking a stride forward to plant the sole of his right moccasin on the tip of the brigand's nose.

Dauphin screamed and tumbled backwards, his right hand covering his shattered nostrils.

Drawing back his left leg, Boone kicked Dauphin in the ribs, doubling the brigand over, and then stomped on his head three times in rapid succession.

Dauphin's arms slumped and he passed out.

"Now we have a score to settle," Sergeant Havoc declared.

Boone drew the survival knife from Dauphin's sheath and crossed to the noncom. "Hold out your arms."

Havoc complied.

"We'll take these rifles and search the ship from top to bottom," Boone said as he sliced the ropes binding Havoc. "They might have our gear stashed on board. I'd like to get my hands on my Hombres."

"It doesn't make any difference to me how I waste these sleaze-bags," Sergeant Havoc mentioned.

Boone finished cutting the noncom's ropes and handed him the knife. In seconds Havoc had him free. "Thanks."

"My pleasure," Havoc said, sliding the knife under his belt and checking the Rossi to insure the rifle was loaded.

Boone picked up the Remington and verified the magazine held four rounds. "All set."

"Not quite," Havoc stated, drawing the survival knife.

"What are you doing?" Boone inquired.

Sergeant Havoc bent over Vane. "This," he said, and plunged the nine-inch blade into the pirate's chest. Vane convulsed for a few moments, then lay still.

Shocked by the brutal staying, Boone took a step backwards. "Why'd you do that? He couldn't harm us."

Havoc looked at the Cavalryman, his visage seemingly chiseled in stone, and yanked the knife out. He straightened slowly. "Blade told us to take no prisoners, remember?"

Boone stared at the blood pulsing from the hole in Vane's chest. "But you can't just kill them in cold blood."

"Watch me," Sergeant Havoc said, striding to Dauphin. "No!" Boone cried, too late.

His right arm whipping in a precise arch, the noncom buried the survival knife in Dauphin's heart. He waited for Dauphin's quivering to subside, then wrenched the dripping blade out and wiped the blood off on Dauphin's pants.

"How can you kill someone who can't fight back?" Boone asked in horror.

"Since when did you become squeamish over killing?" Havoc rejoined.

"I'll kill any enemy in a stand-up fight, but this..." Boone said, and gazed at Dauphin.

"I'm a professional soldier. When you get down to the nitty-gritty, my job is to terminate any enemy, anytime, anyplace. Whether they're awake or asleep, resisting or defenseless, young or old, doesn't matter. All that matters is I get the job done," Sergeant Havoc stated.

Boone shook his head. "I'd make a lousy soldier."

"Save the moralizing for later," Havoc suggested. "We've got work to do." He moved to the door and cautiously opened it a crack. After peering outside he crouched down. "There shouldn't be any other pirates on board. If we keep low, the clowns on the beach won't spot us. They're halfway to Mars by now anyway."

"I'm ready," Boone said. Rowdy mirth sounded from the shore.

Havoc looked at his friend and nodded. He eased the door wide, lowered himself to his elbows and knees, and crawled from the bridge. Screened from the shore by the bulwark, he headed aft until he came to a companion way leading to the lower deck. Drawing his legs under him, he crept down the stairs and paused at the bottom so Boone could join him.

Two closed doors spaced at ten-foot intervals marked the location of a pair of nearby cabins, and the Force members, stooped over, dashed to the nearest door, tested the knob, and found it unlocked. They went inside to find a neat, clean room containing a bed, a table, and several chairs. They exited and moved to the second door, and Havoc shoved the door inward, hoping none of the Skull and Bones happened to be gazing in the direction of the vessel. He glanced inside and grinned "Bingo."

Stacked on a wooden table in the center of the room was their gear.

"Boone eagerly shouldered the honcum aside and stepped to the table. He tossed the Remington onto a sofa and rummaged in the pile until his hands closed on the Hombres. Beaming happily, he lifted the revolvers and twirled them.

"I've never noticed before," Sergeant Havoc said as he entered, "but you're really attached to those guns, aren't you?"

"Yep."

"I'm surprised you don't sleep with them."

"I do."

"Oh."

Within a minute they were outfitted with their own weapons again. Havoc stuck the extra Colt pistols under his belt, slung an M-16 over his left shoulder, and picked up the M-60. "I'm surprised those lowlifes left these here."

"They probably plan to divide everything later," Boone guessed, and glanced at the noncom. "I can carry Blade's Colts."

"We'll share," Havoc said, and gave the Cavalryman one of the extra pistols.

"I reckon we're all set," Boone commented as he jammed the semiautomatic under his belt buckle.

"Let's kick ass," Havoc stated.

They hastened to the port side of the Bowie, using the bulwark to conceal their movements,

and halted under the smokestack.

Boons leaned over the rail and studied the water lapping at the hull. How will we get down there?"

"Leave that to me," Havoc said. "Stay here." He jogged toward the bow.

The Cavalryman rechecked his weapons, feeling his stomach muscles tightening into knots at the thought of the impending combat. He reflected on his family and friends in the Dakota Territory and wondered if he would ever see them again. The pad of a boot on the deck curtailed his reverie and he glanced up.

A grinning Sergeant Havoc clutched the rope ladder in his right hand. "I don't think they saw me untie it."

Boone cocked his head and listened to the sound of singing and laughter. "They're so bombed by now they couldn't see their hands in front of their faces."

Sergeant Havoc set about securing the rope ladder to the rail, and once the task was done he slid over the side and climbed downward. "We're only ten yards from shore. If we stay low, the bastards will never know what hit them."

"We hope."

Havoc and then Boone eased into the water after lifting their weapons aloft. Havoc slipped a finger through the trigger guards of each pistol and held the M-16 in his left hand while bracing the M-60 with his right. The added weight made his body bob low in the lake, and the water rose to his nose. He tilted his head and dog-paddled toward the stern. Splashing to his rear told him Boone swam right behind him.

"I never was one much for swimming," Boone commented. "Give me a horse any day."

"Horses and revolvers. Is that all you think about?" Havoc asked, his legs stroking in a regular cadence.

"Women. I think about women a lot."

"Now we have something in common," Havoc quipped.

They swam around the stern until the eastern shore became visible, and stopped, treading water. From their position they could scan the beach and the bank. The Skull and Bones were gathered on a grassy knoll situated in a northeasterly direction, closer to the bow than the stern. If the din was any indication, the pirates were having the time of their lives.

"Remember, no prisoners," Sergeant Havoc reminded the Cavalryman, and kicked toward the beach, keeping his head and arms as close to the water as he could without submerging, expecting to hear a shout of alarm at any second. The ten yards seemed like ten thousand. He breathed a sigh of relief when he came within six feet of a log lying near the edge of the lake. His boots touched bottom, and he steadied himself before advancing to the log and easing onto his back.

Boone came ashore seconds later and imitated the noncom's tactic. He replaced the Hombres in their holsters, wedged the Colt under his buckle, and gripped the M-16. "If I don't

come out of this scrape in one piece," he whispered, looking at Havoc, "I want you to know I've liked working with you."

"Same here," Sergeant Havoc said, and smiled. The M-16 dangled from his left shoulder. In his hands was the M-60. He expelled a breath and nodded toward the knoll. "Shall we?"

"For Grizzly," Boone stated. "We take them head-on."

"For Grizzly."

They stood in unison, facing the knoll, and advanced at a leisurely walk. Many of the Skull and Bones were sprawled on the ground, engrossed in conversation with their mates or quaffing hooch. A dozen or so, clearly inebriated, had formed a circle and were singing a sea chantey. Either because their senses had been dulled by the hooch, or because they were absorbed in celebrating, or simply because the noncom and the Cavalryman sauntered to the knoll so brazenly, in the open, none of the pirates perceived the presence of the Force members until Boone and Sergeant Havoc were five yards away.

A bearded brigand sporting a gold ring in his nose spied them first, his bleary eyes widening as his alcohol-numbed mind recognized the prisoners. He was one of the survivors of the battle at Harrison Hot Springs, and his shock was supplanted by rage at the sight of those who had slain so many of his brother pirates. He tugged at a revolver on his left hip and bellowed a warning. "Look out! It's them!"

The nearest brigands were still trying to figure out who he was referring to when the M-60 cut loose.

Sergeant Havoc swung the machine gun in an arc, the buttstock resting on his inside thigh to absorb the recoil and stabilize his aim, the weapon set to fire at the sustained rate of 100 rounds per minute, the slowest of the gun's firing rates but the rate best suited to close-in combat in which the gunner wanted to selectively drop targets. And Havoc was picking his targets carefully, going for those pirates who were armed with a rifle or machine gun because their firepower posed the greatest threat, in the first seven seconds of the fight he downed twice as many brigands, the heavy rounds from the thundering M-60 ripping through their chests and craniums and slamming them to the crimson-spattered knoll. Boone added the lethal efficiency of the M-16 to the M-60, mowing down the nearest pirates, dispatching five in a spray of lead, then sprinting to the right, making for cover as other brigands began firing, running toward a towering pine tree.

Sergeant Havoc dashed for a cluster of boulders on the left, shooting as he ran, sending four more cutthroats into eternity. The M-60 went empty two yards from cover, and Havoc discarded the machine gun and dived for the boulders.

"Get them! Get them!" a pirate bellowed.

"Take cover, mates! Take cover!" shouted another.

Befuddled by the hooch, dozens of the Skull and Bones pirates threw prudence to the wind and charged their adversaries, with 14 closing on the boulders and 12 surging toward the pine tree.

Unslinging the M-16, Havoc risked a peek over a shoulder-high boulder, and promptly squatted as the pirates blasted away recklessly. He knew he should've ambushed the band

when he had the chance, but a surprise frontal assault had seemed like a good idea when he was lying behind the log.

"Kill them!" someone yelled on the knoll.

Havoc darted to another log the height of his waist ten feet from the boulders, flattening and hugging the dank earth, listening to the thump of boots and heavy breathing from the vicinity of the shelter he'd just vacated. He mentally counted to three, hoping the pirates would mill about the boulders in confusion for several seconds. On three he surged to his knees, the M-16 pressed to his right shoulder, and squeezed the trigger, demonstrating why he'd qualified as an excellent marksman in the California military.

Bewildered by their enemy's apparent ability to vanish into thin air, the 14 pirates stood in a perplexed group, looking every which way.

Havoc slew five before they awoke to his proximity and began returning the fire. Several slugs smacked into the log, sending wood chips flying. A stinging sensation lanced Havoc's right cheek, and he ignored the pain, concentrating on his opponents. He bagged two more, and then what felt like a scorching sword seared his left shoulder. He twisted and dropped.

On the far side of the knoll, having killed the foremost pair of brigands, Boone saw the noncom get hit and took a stride in Havoc's direction, but a withering volley from the pirates forced him to jump behind the pine tree.

The raiders whooped and hollered crazily.

Boone quickly backpedaled into the vegetation, using the trunk to block the view of the pirates, melting into the undergrowth and crouching. Unkempt forms appeared at the base of the tree, and he sent the last half-dozen rounds in his magazine into their bodies. Shrieks and curses greeted the carbine's shower of death. He released the M-16 and jogged to the right, skirting a thicket and emerging from the brush between the pine tree and the knoll.

Six brigands were huddled near the tree, peering into the forest. Ten more stood on the knoll.

His hands blurred streaks, Boone drew the Hombres ambidextrously and thumbed the hammers, firing from the hip, his elbows close to his waist. Each revolver boomed, and a pirate next to the tree and one on the knoll were flung to the turf with slugs through their brains.

At the boulders, the seven remaining cutthroats had flattened when the noncom fell from sight. They could see the barrel of the M-16 projecting above the trunk at a slant, and when several seconds elapsed and the soldier failed to return their fire, they shoved to their feet and charged en masse. They covered the ground in a rush, filled with bloodlust, each eager to be the first to gun down the noncom, but they reached the trunk and were startled to discover the M-16 propped against the tree— and that was all.

No Havoc.

"Where the hell is he?" a sodden raider blurted out.

"Right here," came the flinty reply from the woods to their right.

They spun, striving to employ their weapons.

Sergeant Havoc held a semiautomatic pistol in both hands, and he blasted away, the shots so close together they sounded like one, and with every blast a pirate was knocked over the log, shot in the head. Only one brigand managed to get off a round, and he missed.

Boone!

Havoc whirled and raced for the knoll, taking in the situation in a glance, his teeth grinding as he spied the Cavalryman down on one knee, shot in the left thigh and barely holding his own. A pair of pirates near a pine tree were trying to nail Boone, while six more on the knoll converged on him. Corpses littered the ground in the vicinity of the tree and covered the knoll. Havoc saw his friend shoot one of the pair near the tree, and then Boone took a hit in the right shoulder and sprawled forward onto his chest, still game, still firing,

"Try me!" Havoc shouted, running onto the knoll and drilling a pirate between the shoulder blades. He shot two more in the back, and something bored into the left side of his torso and bowled him over. The anguish was exquisite. He landed on his right side, suppressing the agony, and rose to his knees in time to behold two sights: Boone gunning down the last brigand near the tree and Fiddler Jack, not 12 feet distant, fumbling in a brown leather pouch and pulling out a hand grenade.

Red Beard materialized alongside Fiddler Jack, and he sighted his Smith and Wesson on the Cavalryman as Fiddler jerked the pin and hoisted the grenade.

Sergeant Havoc sighted on Fiddler Jack, and in that instant he realized there was yet another pirate three yards to the rear of Red Beard who was aiming at him! He had a split second in which to decide. Should he roll out of the line of fire and allow Fiddler Jack to hurl the grenade at Boone, or should he protect the Cavalryman at the possible cost of his own life?

There was really no choice.

Havoc fired both Colts into Fiddler's sternum and saw the grenade drop to the grass at Red Beard's feet, and then he felt like a tank had rammed into his skull and the world spun and danced and erupted in a titanic explosion. He seemed to be falling, plummeting down an inky tunnel. The void claimed him.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

He needed a ruse.

The reassuring feel of the Bowie hilts inspired Blade with confidence as he threaded a path up a narrow ravine, bearing to the east, determined to turn the tide on his captors.

But how?

Whatever he did, he had to insure his actions wouldn't result in the execution of Havoc and Boone. The first step was to dispose of the mutations or lose them in the forest. Then he could worry about doubling back to the lake, reaching the ship undetected, and rescuing his friends. Blade didn't trust Red Beard to hold up his end of the deal. Even if he defeated the near-twins, he knew Red Beard would have him killed. He came to the crest of the ravine

and halted, turning and surveying the terrain below, spying the vessel at anchor and glimpsing the knoll where the pirates had congregated. He could hear their guffaws and indistinct voices, and he hoped they were too busy celebrating to devote any attention to the noncom and the Cavalryman.

Time was wasting.

Blade rotated, about to resume his hike, when he glimpsed movement in the trees 200 yards from his position. His gray eyes narrowed, and he studied the woods for several moments, wondering if an animal was responsible.

Bug Eyes and Elephant Ears stepped into view.

They couldn't have gotten so close, so quickly! Blade deduced that Red Beard had not honored the three-minute grace limit.

He watched the mutations take several strides, and then they halted and Bug Eyes stared directly at the Warrior and flipped him the finger.

Damn.

Blade hurried higher, fuming. He'd hoped to get far enough ahead of the brothers to give him time to formulate a foolproof strategy, but now he needed to concoct a scheme quickly.

What were his options?

He could continue to the clearing, in which case he risked being overtaken by the mutants before he got there, or jumped by them on the way back to the lake. Either way, the brothers would enjoy the edge if they were permitted to pick the time and place of attack. His second option was to jump them, to select the time and place himself, and hopefully, terminate them before they could retaliate.

But when and where?

If he waited until after he reached the clearing, he'd buy Sergeant Havoc and Boone precious moments of life, provided Red Beard kept his word for once. But the farther he went, the more fatigued he would be when the confrontation came, and he wanted to be as fresh as he could be. So wisdom dictated ending the contest swiftly.

How?

The mutations promised to be difficult to take. Besides their crossbows and knives, their physiques were superbly muscled. They entertained no compunctions about killing. And their enhanced senses, when utilized in concert, rendered them virtually unapproachable. How could anyone sneak up on them when Elephant Ears could hear the faintest noise and Bug Eyes possessed the extraordinary vision of a bird of prey?

The answer: No one could.

Which meant he must either devise a means of staying them from a distance or lay a trap even they couldn't perceive.

Blade climbed 30 yards from the crest of the ravine and stopped, inspecting the landscape

between his position and the ravine. If the brothers stayed on his trail, they would come over that crest in a couple of minutes. Except for low brush and a jumble of small boulders, the slope to the ravine was clear. On both sides were trees, but none of the branches posed an obstruction.

An idea occurred to him.

He ran eight yards to his right, into a stand of trees, scrutinizing the branches overhead and those on the ground. A stout six-foot limb on a tree to his left appeared to be ideal for his purpose, and he crossed to the tree and reached up, testing the strength of the limb by twisting and pulling. Satisfied, he drew his right Bowie and swiftly chopped the limb off, then returned to his original position.

No sign of the mutants yet.

He placed the base of the limb on the ground and trimmed the thin offshoots, then rapidly cut the thick end down into a sharpened point. He slid the Bowie in its sheath and pumped the improvised spear with his right arm.

Crude, but it would have to do.

Blade stepped behind a bush and crouched, his gaze on the crest of the ravine. Spear-throwing wasn't exactly his forte, although he'd spent many hours as a young boy using a spear fashioned from an oak tree to hunt frogs and other game, and had participated in contests with his friends to see who could hit various targets. The elevation would add impetus to his throw, and even if he only succeeded in wounding one of the brothers, he would reduce the odds against him. He lowered the spear to the ground.

A head materialized above the crest.

Bug Eyes stood there, surveying the slope of the mountain, his blue orbs probing every square inch.

Blade stiffened when the genetic deviate looked directly at the bush. Could the pirate see through objects from that far away? The foliage on the bush was dense, but if Blade could view the mutation through the leaves, then Bug Eyes might be able to spot him.

Half a minute elapsed before the mutant nodded and walked out of the ravine with Elephant Ears to his rear. They halted and conversed, then gazed at Harrison Lake.

There would never be a better opportunity.

Blade rose, stepping to the left and whipping his spear arm back. He took a short pace and hurled the spear with all the power in his herculean form, his arm and shoulder muscles rippling, and like a missile the spear flashed toward the mutants in a curving trajectory, right on the mark. Blade held his breath, expectant, seeing the spear cleaving the air within 20 feet of the brothers, both of whom were still staring at the take.

Elephant Ears suddenly spun and glanced up, his supremely sensitive ears registering the swish of the spear's passage, and in the instant he recognized the danger he shoved his brother aside and threw himself backwards. The spear passed harmlessly over the crest of the ravine, missing Bug Eyes by inches.

Blast!

Blade pivoted and headed higher again, his instincts causing him to glance over his left shoulder in time to behold Bug Eyes firing a crossbow, and he dived to the right and rolled onto his knees as a bolt smacked into the earth within a yard of his legs. He lunged, grasping the portion of the bolt jutting from the soil, and tugged the crossbow shaft free.

Bug Eyes and Elephant Ears were pounding up the mountain after him.

The bolt in his left hand, Blade rose and raced away, constantly looking rearward in case they launched another shaft. From the grim, baleful expressions they cast at him, he guessed they were pouring on the speed to overtake him at all costs. He vaulted logs and skirted boulders, wending ever farther from the shore, seeking a vantage point, losing all track of time. Minutes went by, and his skin became caked with sweat.

Like tireless machines, the brothers pursued him.

Blade could feel his thigh and leg muscles starting to tire. How much longer could he sustain such a pace? He glanced to the right, at a wall of rock 15 feet high and 30 feet wide, a sheer wall impossible to climb, and he angled toward it. A narrow game trail wound along the base of the short cliff, a trail he followed until he was past the wall. He cut sharply to the left, scrambling up the steep slope and reaching a level ledge above. Dropping to his stomach, he crawled to the edge and gazed downward.

Elephant Ears and Bug Eyes, breathing heavily, their torsos glistening with perspiration, were almost to the spot where he had turned toward the cliff. He lowered his head so only his left eye and part of his forehead projected past the rim, and he saw the brothers abruptly stop. Bug Eyes leaned over, examining his tracks, then straightened and pointed in the direction of the wall.

On they came.

Blade's eyes became steely. He wasn't about to run another step. One way or another, he would settle the contest now.

Bug Eyes and Elephant Ears halted ten feet from the wall.

Quietly shifting his shoulders, Blade withdrew from view. The brothers would be expecting an ambush of some kind, and they would scrutinize the wall and the terrain carefully before warily advancing. He breathed shallowly, his nerves tingling, waiting for a clue they were going forward again.

A twig snapped.

Blade eased his eye to the edge and stared down, discovering the mutants on the trail at the base of the wall, almost abreast of his hiding place. They were walking fast, as if they were anxious about being near the wall. He clutched the crossbow bolt loosely, eased his left arm away from the rim, and pitched the shaft overhand.

The timing had to be perfect!

He peered over the edge at the brothers, who were directly beneath him, and at the moment the bolt clattered onto the slope below the wall he launched himself into the air, sailing past

the rim and falling toward his foes.

Bug Eyes was standing a yard in front of his brother when the bolt hit a pine tree, bounced off, and smacked against a boulder. In sheer reflex, they both whirled, scanning the slope, their crossbows leveled.

Blade held his body parallel to the ground, wanting to strike both mutants simultaneously, and he winced as he slammed into their shoulders, his hips catching Bug Eyes, his chest Elephant Ears, the impact knocking the brothers off balance and sending all three of them tumbling down the slope. He lost control, cartwheeling end over end, jarring his left elbow on a rock, and coming to an abrupt stop against the trunk of a pine tree, the concussion racking his ribs. Gasping, he heaved erect, searching for the brothers, and he located Bug Eyes seven yards to his left, lying next to a boulder, dazed.

Where was Elephant Ears?

"Die, bastard!" bellowed a harsh voice to his rear, and brawny arms encircled his waist and lifted him effortlessly, swinging him around and bashing his shoulders into the rough pine trunk.

Blade reached down and grasped the mutant's wrists and tried to pry the arms loose, but Elephant Ears squeezed his midriff even harder.

"I want you to suffer, sucker," Elephant Ears declared in the Warrior's right ear.

Blade felt himself being hoisted into the air, and then he was brought down savagely, grunting in pain as a knee poked between his legs and rammed him in the groin. Yellow stars seemed to spin before his eyes, and in the seconds he needed for his vision to clear he was swung into the tree a second time.

No more!

The Warrior twisted and wrenched his body sideways, causing Elephant Ears to stumble close to the pine, and Blade immediately dug his heels in the dirt and surged backwards, thrusting Elephant Ears against the trunk even as he lashed his right elbow in a semicircle into the mutant's face. The grip on his waist slackened, and he was released entirely a moment later when he connected with a second elbow strike. Blade took three strides and wheeled.

Elephant Ears' upper lip and right cheek were split, and blood oozed down his chin. He hissed, shaking his head, and leaped, his arms outstretched.

Adroitly sidestepping. Blade delivered a quick one-two, a pair of punches to the mutation's midsection. He stepped in and planted a right uppercut on Elephant Ears' jaw, then a left and another right.

Staggered by the blows, Elephant Ears tottered and fell to his left knee, attempting to protect his face from further battering.

Sensing victory. Blade raised his right fist to pound the deviate on the head, when suddenly what felt like a battering ram drove into his back and sent him sprawling to trip over Elephant Ears and they both went down. He scrambled to his feet, drawing his right Bowie.

Bug Eyes stood three yards off, his features contorted in elemental fury, a ten-inch survival knife in his right hand. "Leave my brother alone, you son of a bitch!"

"He can wait his turn," Blade said, catching his breath.

"I'm going to carve you into little pieces and feed you to the fish," Bug Eyes vowed.

"Anytime, slug."

Bug Eyes growled and attacked, wielding the survival knife expertly, slashing and stabbing, striving to get past the Warrior's guard.

Parrying and blocking, Blade retreated slowly, giving ground to put some distance between himself and Elephant Ears, who was on his hands and knees. The last thing he wanted was for both of them to jump him at the same time. He had to keep them apart, to finish one and then the other.

Enraged by his failure to slay the Warrior, Bug Eyes intensified his onslaught.

Blade stopped, holding firm, the clanging of the blades a primal metallic melody, countering a lancing underhand aimed at his lions and a reverse cut intended for his throat. Relying upon his years of experience, he fought instinctively, his arms always in motion, his Bowie seemingly an extension of his hand. He was the superior fighter, and he knew he would win.

And so, apparently, did Bug Eyes.

Driven beyond the limits of his self-control by the realization he couldn't pierce the Warrior's defenses, Bug Eyes went berserk, swinging recklessly, forcing Blade to backpedal and turn, the mutant disregarding his own safety in an insane effort to slay the man in the leather vest.

Compelled to concentrate exclusively on Bug Eyes as he deflected a virtual torrent of slicing swipes, Blade neglected to keep an eye on the near-twin, and only when he glimpsed Elephant Ears dashing toward him, armed with a knife, did he awaken to the double threat he now faced.

Bug Eyes saw his brother approaching and unexpectedly stepped back, smirking. "About time, brother."

Stopping five feet from Blade, Elephant Ears glanced at his sibling and grinned. "Together again, eh, brother?"

The Warrior tensed, looking from one to the other.

"Shall we finish this charade, brother?" Bug Eyes asked.

"Let's, brother," Elephant Ears said.

Blade watched their knives, feeling sweat on his right palm, wishing he could wipe his hand dry, and then there was no time for conscious thought, no time for anything but avoiding the repeated thrusts of his adversaries, his right Bowie a streak, preventing Elephant Ears from penetrating his abdomen and then Bug Eyes from hacking him in the neck, moving, moving, always moving because to pause for an instant was to die, using his right hand and right Bowie only, his left elbow still throbbing from the fall down the slope. Because he had not so

much as touched his left Bowie, the brothers were totally focused on the right. The last ploy they would expect would be for him to draw his left Bowie. To do so would entail exposing his left side for the millisecond they required to impale him. So even as he fought, he prayed for an opportunity to grab his left Bowie, for the slightest of distractions to divert the mutants.

His prayer was answered.

The brothers were pressing him hard, with their backs to the lake, standing a foot lower than he was due to the slope, endeavoring to stab his legs or his stomach, and in a burst of unified effort they almost succeeded.

Blade parried a slash from Elephant Ears and slipped, his left foot losing traction on a rock, dread washing over him, bracing for the sensation of their knives plunging into his body. But a strange thing happened.

Bug Eyes and Elephant Ears looked up, over the Warrior's shoulders, momentarily disconcerted.

And Blade whipped his left Bowie from its sheath and lunged with the speed of a rattler, the keen tip sinking into Bug Eyes like a hot knife into butter, impaling him in the windpipe to the hilt. Blade let his body flow with the motion, rotating and heaving, his left arm driving Bug Eyes into Elephant Ears and they both went down, Bug Eyes clutching at his neck as the Bowie squished out.

"No!" Elephant Ears roared, pushing to his feet.

"Yes," Blade said, and rammed the right Bowie into Elephant Ears' abdomen. His muscles bulging, he twisted the knife and drove the blade upward, tearing through flesh, intestines, and internal organs until the edge struck a rib bone and he pulled the Bowie free. Extending the bloody blades, he stepped back, prepared to defend himself from their counterthrusts.

But the precaution wasn't necessary.

Bug Eyes, convulsing and gurgling, flat on his back, crimson spurting from his neck, gaped at the Warrior in wide-eyed wonder. He inhaled raggedly, his lips working, trying to speak, but a spasm stiffened him like a board, and the next second he went limp and ceased breathing.

Still on his feet, his knife hanging limply from his right hand. Elephant Ears was watching his insides gush from the slit in his torso. A whimper escaped his mouth, and he looked at Blade and frowned. "I never expected to go like this."

Blade took a deep, refreshing breath and straightened. "Those who live by violence, die by violence."

Incredibly, Elephant Ears smiled. "That means someone will nail your ass someday," he said, and doubled over, blood running from his nostrils. He grunted, gasped, and keeled over.

The Warrior stared at the corpse for a moment. "Maybe," he responded. "But when I go, I'll die protecting those I love." He sagged, suddenly feeling weary, and remembered the distraction that had enabled him to survive.

What could they have seen?

Blade turned, astonishment making him start, unwilling to believe what he saw.

Red Hawk stood calmly on the rim of the cliff.

"You!" Blade exclaimed.

The aged shaman pointed at Harrison Lake. "Your victory is not yet won. Your friends need you."

Puzzled, Blade looked over his left shoulder, and only then did he hear the sounds he had failed to register during the heat of combat: distant gunfire.

"You must go to them," Red Hawk said.

Blade began to turn, glancing up at the shaman. "What about you?"

"A hairy giant will escort me safely home," Red Hawk said. "We will not meet again in this life."

The gunfire goaded Blade to start down the slope, casting a gaze at Red Hawk as he skirted the brothers. "Take care."

"You are the one who must take care," the shaman called. "And you will find your gentle friend on the west bank. Look for a grizzly bear on the shore."

Blade faced front, digesting the information. Gentle friend? Grizzly Bear? He looked back.

Red Hawk was gone.

EPILOGUE

The sunny sky over Los Angeles served as an azure backdrop for the five figures silhouetted on the tow hill situated to the north of the metropolis, at the Force facility northwest of Pyramid Lake. Aligned in a row at the foot of the three recently excavated holes, they stood at respectful attention as the squad of Rangers lowered the coffins into the ground. On the other side of the graves, a detail of Special Forces personnel raised their M-16s and fired the traditional 21-gun salute.

Blade stared at each of the coffins, his emotions in turmoil, sadness sagging his shoulders.

The Special Forces detail lowered their carbines, saluted, and departed down the hill toward the waiting jeeps and trucks.

"Are you sure about this?" General Gallagher asked.

Blade watched the Rangers start to shovel loose dirt into the graves, then faced the officer on his right. "I've never been more sure of anything in my whole life."

"The Federation leaders are terribly disappointed."

"Tough."

General Gallagher studied the Warrior. "You've changed, son. Do you know that?"

"You think so?" Blade responded absently, his eyes on the coffins.

"I know so," Gallagher insisted. "You're not the same man you were when I first met you. You're... harder."

"I wasn't hard enough."

General Gallagher glanced at the graves. "You can't blame yourself. They knew what they were getting into."

"Did they? Do any of us?"

Gallagher nodded at the first coffin. "Havoc did. He was the best noncom in the California military. His whole life was devoted to the service. He went out the way he would have wanted to go, in combat. The governor has awarded him the Purple Heart and the Silver Star posthumously."

Blade saw a shovelful of dirt spatter on Havoc's coffin, and he closed his eyes and sighed.

"Are you all right?" General Gallagher inquired.

"Fine," Blade muttered, opening his eyes. "I'd like to talk to my unit alone."

"Certainly," the officer said, nodding at the others. He saluted the coffins and headed toward the vehicles.

Blade turned to his left, gazing into the melancholy eyes of the huge black man known as Bear, his trusted friend who had almost died because of the friendship they shared. "How do you feel?"

"Okay," Bear responded huskily. His curly hair formed an Afro, and his massive frame was clothed in a brown shirt and brown corduroy pants. "The doc says I was one lucky turkey." He cleared his throat as he gazed at the second coffin. "Luckier than Thunder, anyway."

"Any plans?"

Bear shrugged. "I'll go back to Halma. I've got me a squeeze there, and I have this urge to start a family. Weird, huh?"

"Not really," Blade said softly. "Your squeeze and you had better visit Jenny, Gabe, and me first chance you get."

"We will," Bear promised.

The Warrior moved to the next Force member. "The same goes for you, Boone."

His mouth curled downward, the Cavalryman nodded, surveying the graves. "I liked them. All of them."

"So did I."

Boone looked at the Warrior. "Was it true what Gallagher said, about the Federation leaders being ticked off at you?"

"Probably. But I need the year off to spend with my family. If an emergency arises, they can call on me. Otherwise, I'm not budging from the Home unless World War Four breaks out."

"I think you made the right decision," Boone commented.

"A man has to place his priorities in perspective," Blade said. "I've been putting my loved ones on the back burner for too long. No one, absolutely no one, is more important than those you love."

"I couldn't agree more," Boone replied, staring skyward. "I can't wait for all of us to fly back together."

"We're taking off in an hour," Blade reminded him. Then he stepped in front of the hybrid. Never, in all his years, had he ever beheld so pathetic an expression. "And how about you? My invitation still stands. You're welcome to come live at the Home. There are three other mutants living there now."

Grizzly slowly shook his head. "No, but thanks just the same." His moist eyes rested on the third coffin.

"What will you do? Stay in L.A.?"

"No. I'm planning to head into the Outlands."

Blade glanced at the others, then at Grizzly. "The Outlands? Are you crazy? What's out there? You'd be smarter to stay in one of the civilized territories. Are you trying to get yourself killed?"

Grizzly looked at the Warrior. "I don't want to be around anyone or anything that will remind me of her."

"I can understand that, but—" Blade began.

"There are no buts about it," Grizzly said gruffly. "She was the only person in this stinking, rotten world who really loved me, and look at what happened to her!" He paused, and his next words came out in a tormented whisper. "She falls to her death from a window because she's too drugged to stand straight!"

Blade averted his gaze from Grizzly's grief. What could he say? Out of all the words in the English language, what magical combination could heal Grizzly's soul?

"I want you to know I've learned a lot from working with you," Grizzly said. "All of you. You're the best friends I've ever had, and you're not half bad for a bunch of humans."

Blade grinned. "We'll take that as a compliment."

They endured the filling of the graves in strained silence, and only when the last of the holes was filled did they turn and walk away, all except for the Warrior.

Blade scooped up a handful of reddish dirt and scattered some on each of the three mounds, voicing his thoughts aloud as he gave them tribute. "Although I mourn your passing, I want to thank you for finally making me appreciate the greatest truth a person can learn." So saying, he strode from the legacy of his past into the certainty of his future.