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Death Master Strike by David L. Robbins

CHAPTER ONE

The scorching sun baked the Arizona countryside, causing rippling waves of heat to distort the view in all directions. For the three people trudging eastward across the blistering desert, the arduous trek was a harrowing ordeal.

In the lead strode a giant of a man, seven feet tall and endowed with the prodigious build of a Hercules. His bulging muscles gave his body a sculptured look, as if a supremely talented sculptor had created him out of Irving bronze. His hair was dark, his eyes a striking shade of gray. A black leather vest snugly covered his broad chest, and sweat-soaked green fatigue pants clung to his stout legs. Strapped around his narrow waist were two big Bowie knives, and clutched in his left hand was an M-16. Secured to his back was a brown backpack, and a green canteen hung over his left shoulder.

Next in line came an attractive woman. Fine, luxurious brown hair hung to the small of her back. Her brown eyes scanned the inhospitable terrain eagerly, in anticipation of spotting their goal soon. She wore fatigues and combat boots. Like the giant, she had both a backpack and an M-16.

The third member of the trio also wore fatigues and held an M-16. His hair, in contrast to that of his companions, was blond, his eyes an alert blue. Two inches over six feet tall, he possessed a superbly proportioned body that would have been the envy of an ancient Greek wrestler. Both he and the woman sported .45-caliber automatic pistols in holsters on their right hips.

"We can't be that far," the woman announced.

"You hope, Athena," said the blond man.

"I had no idea you were such a pessimist, Captain Havoc."

The officer wiped the back of his left hand across his brow. "I'm a realist."

"And you doubt we'll find Mesaville?"

"I doubt the place even exists."

"If you're so skeptical, why did you come along?"

"Maybe I'm a glutton for punishment."

Frowning, the woman gazed at the giant. "And what about you, Blade? Do you believe we're on a wild-goose chase?"

The colossus glanced over his right shoulder. "If I did, I wouldn't be here. Provided the intelligence gathered by General Gallagher is accurate, we should spot the mesa soon."

"Which reminds me," Captain Havoc said. "I've been meaning to ask you a question ever since we left Los Angeles."

"Ask it."

"Why the hell did you accept Gallagher's word? After all he's done, after he tried to destroy the Force from within, after he sent those instructors from the Special Forces Training Center to stop you from finding Athena, you still accept his word about Grizzly? It makes no sense. Do you have a death wish?"

A smile creased the giant's lips. "No. I fully intend to see my wife and son again."

"Then enlighten me, sir, if you'd be so kind."

"Yeah," chimed in Athena, "I'd like to hear your reason too, Blade."

The man with the Bowies pointed at a cluster of boulders not far ahead.

"Why don't we take a break there and I'll explain everything?"

"Okay by me," Athena replied. "I could use a rest. My legs are killing me."

"So are mine," Captain Havoc said. "But what do you expect? We've been hiking across this godforsaken desert for almost three days now. We haven't seen any sign of water for a day and a half, and if we don't find some soon our canteens will be empty."

"Leave it to you to point out the bright side," Athena said.

"Why are you always on my case?"

"Maybe it's the heat."

Blade looked back at them again. "You'd both conserve energy if you talked less."

"I know," Athena said. "I just can't help myself."

"How do you mean?"

Athena gazed overhead at the blazing sun, then surveyed the barren, almost alien landscape. "I can't believe I'm really here. If I had any sense, I'd be safe and sound back in San Francisco, instead of traipsing around in the heart of the Outlands. Who knows what we'll encounter out here? We could all wind up dead."

Captain Havoc chuckled. "Now who's looking at the bright side?"

"It's just all so unreal," Athena said softly. "At least when we're talking, when my thoughts are distracted, I can forget all about the reason we came here and what might happen if we succeed. I can fool myself into believing this is a perfectly normal situation and I won't wind up with my throat ripped open or in the hands of a lousy slaver."

The officer glanced around. "But this is perfectly normal for the southwestern corner of what used to be Arizona. The region receives very little rain and there's practically no vegetation."

"That's not what I meant," Athena said. "I was referring to how much everything has changed since World War Three. Let's face it."

One-hundred-and-six years ago a person didn't have to worry about scavengers, raiders, mutations, or other threats to life and limb. Back before the war, the wildlife was generally under control. Since then, the animals have multiplied to the point where they're a serious problem, especially the larger predatory beasts." She sighed. "Coming with the two of you is undoubtedly the stupidest thing I've ever done."

"Then why did you?" Havoc asked.

"I guess I feel I owe it to him."

"What if we can't locate him?"

"In a way, I almost wish we don't," Athena said and stared at the giant. "You understand, don't you, Blade?"

"Yes," he said.

"Good. I wouldn't want you to misconstrue my remark."

Blade focused on the boulders ahead, reflecting. Yes, he truly did understand, and he felt sympathy for Athena's plight, sympathy eclipsed by the anger that welled within him every time he thought about the devious manner in which the Force had been manipulated. One life had been totally ruined and others immeasurably saddened by the deception. He could understand her reason, but he still couldn't bring himself to forgive her.

She shouldn't have lied.

They'd been her *friends*, damn it!

The bitter memories returned in a rush. He recalled the very first mission the Force had gone on, when Athena had guided them to the Kingdom of the Spider. She'd been held prisoner there as an unwilling breeder for seven years before she had escaped and managed to reach civilization. The Kingdom was located in northern California, in a secluded valley in the Marble Mountain Wilderness; it had been ruled by a vile genetic abomination. Although the Force eventually accomplished its mission and terminated the Spider, a member of the team perished in the attempt.

Blade frowned. If only he could have foreseen the future! He might have been able to prevent some of the tragedies that followed. In a way, he blamed himself for the outcome. He'd been the one who finally granted Athena's request to join the unit, although doing so was against his better judgment.

Why had he let himself be talked into it?

Oh, sure, Athena had trained diligently with the California Ranger Corps in order to qualify for the Force, but her motives had been all wrong. Instead of being devoted to the ideal of preserving the Freedom Federation and safeguarding the remnants of civilization, she'd joined for a selfish reason; to farther her journalistic career.

Before her capture by the Spider, Athena had been one of the top newspaperwomen in the Free State of California. She'd been on her way to Yreka to do a story about a flood when the plane she was in went down and the Spider took her prisoner. After her escape, she became intensely determined to make up for all the lost time. Her ticket to wealth and fame, she believed, lay in joining the Force so she could cover their assignments firsthand.

Blade had known of her ambition and her plan to do a syndicated feature on the Force, She'd been honest with him from the very beginning. And he'd known her lack of experience could well jeopardize her life, not to mention the lives of her teammates. But he let himself be talked into accepting the proposal anyway. He should—

What was that?

A flicker of movement registered on his peripheral vision, and Blade glanced up at the boulders. He placed his finger on the M-16's trigger. So far, ever since the VTOL had deposited them at the base of a low mountain range to the west, they'd been lucky. There hadn't been a sign of raiders or mutations. Except for a few lizards, toads, insects, and an occasional hawk or two, they'd sees no other living creatures.

The boulders were now only 20 feet away.

Blade slowed, probing the shadows between the enormous slabs of rock, but deflected nothing out of the ordinary. He speculated that he'd glimpsed one of the feet, small lizards as it darted for cover.

"Did you see something, sir?" Captain Havoc inquired.

"Yes, but don't ask me what. Stay frosty just in case."

"Can we take a few sips of water when we stop?" Athena asked. "My throat is parched."

"Just a few."

"Thanks."

They drew nearer to the boulders. Many of the larger ones reared 15 to 20 feet in the air.

Athena stepped to the base of the first monolith and sank to her knees, uttering a grateful sigh, "At last I'm off my feet!"

"You've been holding up very well," Havoc said.

"I try to keep in shape." She grinned. "But all the jogging and swimming in the world didn't really prepare me for crossing a desert."

"At least we don't have to go all the way across," the officer said.

Blade removed a map from his right front pocket, squatted, and unfolded it in front of him. He studied the topographical markings, running his right index finger over the paper. "We've been following a zigzag pattern ever since we started our search, and I'd estimate we've covered over thirty miles already. If we don't spot the mesa within twenty-four hours, I'll be tempted to call the whole thing off."

Athena straightened. "Why not give us forty-eight hours?"

"Because we've already gone father than initially projected. Based on the information provided by that tracker, we should have found the mesa by now."

"He could have supplied incorrect figures. It's easy to lose track of distance in the desert. Maybe he went forty miles west of Mesaville before he hit that last mountain range, Maybe he went fifty."

"And maybe he made the whole story up," Captain Havoc said.

Athena looked at the officer. "Why would he have done that?"

"Who knows?" Havoc responded with a shrug. "There could be any number of reasons. He was apprehended trying to cross the California border at an unauthorized point by an army patrol, and when they interrogated him, he told a lot of wild tales about all the incredible sights he'd encountered during his travels. Mesaville was just one of them."

"Mesaville doesn't sound so far-fetched to me," Athena said defensively. "Refugees from Phoenix or Tucson could have fled into this area during the war and established a community that flourished."

"Not unless they lucked out and stumbled on a water supply," Havoc said and mopped his brow. "A big water supply."

Blade leaned his M-16 against his left leg and folded the map. "I tend to believe the trader told the truth."

Havoc seemed surprised. "You do? Why?"

"Because of the details he supplied about the furry man with the retractable claws. The description he gave fits Grizzly perfectly, and we know he ventured into the Outlands after Athena's fake funeral."

Athena winced as if from a physical blow. "Please don't bring that up again."

"As you wish," Blade replied flatly.

At that moment, a loud, ferocious hiss issued from above them, and a huge shadow fell across Athena.

CHAPTER TWO

Blade whipped his M-16 upward, and it was well he did.

Perched on top of the boulder, its red lash of a tongue flicking in and out, was a massive mutation, a genetically warped specimen possessing a toad-like head and bulging eyes. Its body, though, was lizard-like, with a long, sloping spine and an even longer spiked tail, giving it the appearance of a dinosaur brought to life. The thing uttered a raspy snarl and tensed to leap.

"Look out!" Athena cried, as she threw herself out from the base of the monolith.

Blade saw the thing start to spring, and he flicked the selector lever from *Safe* to *Semi* and opened fire.

A half-dozen rounds smacked into the mutation's head before its legs cleared the rim of the rock. Seemingly unfazed, it opened its mouth wide as it plunged toward the woman below.

Standing firm, Blade sent more slugs boring into the monstrosity, stitching a line of holes from its head to its tail. The beast twitched and shook as it was struck, and the impact knocked its scaly bulk to one side.

Athena rose to her knees, took one quick look, and rolled for all she was worth. She only covered a yard before the creature crashed down with a thud.

The reptilian horror tried to stand on feeble legs and inhaled in great, ragged breaths. For a moment it glared at the giant human, then wheezed and expired, its body going limp, its head sinking to the soil, blood oozing from between its thin lips.

"That was too close for my liking," Athena said as she stood. She began brushing dirt from her fatigues and glanced at Blade. "Thanks. You saved my hide. Again."

"What are friends for?"

The reply caused Athena to frown.

Captain Havoc moved over to the dead mutation and studied it closely. "I couldn't get off a shot, Athena," he said. "You were in my line of fire."

"I understand," the journalist said, her gaze still on Blade.

"These mutants come in all shapes and sizes, don't they?" Havoc said absently. "There's no telling what kind we'll bump into next."

"Your father was killed by one, wasn't he, Blade?" Athena asked.

The giant scowled. He disliked being reminded of his father's passing, and he knew Athena was aware of the fact. Unbidden memories filed

through his mind, memories of the kind man who had raised him so lovingly for so many years, the man who once held the position of Family Leader.

Blade thought of all of his loved ones and cherished friends who were awaiting his return to the Family compound, which was located in the extreme northwestern part of Minnesota. Designated the Home by the founder of the 30-acre survivalist retreat, it was where Blade had been born and raised, where he'd spent most of his life, until the current leader, wise and kindly Plato, had selected him to be the head of the Warriors.

Eighteen Family members were chosen by the Elders to be the guardians of the Home. Entrusted with the grave responsibility of safeguarding the lives of everyone there, the Warriors were renowned as an elite class of martial experts. Because of the many conflicts in which they had become embroiled and their many triumphs over sundry enemies, their collective reputation had spread far and wide across the post-apocalyptic country.

It was in large measure due to that reputation, Blade reflected, that he'd later been offered the job of heading the Freedom Force. The Force, as the unit became known, was the tactical arm of the Freedom Federation, the alliance forged by seven organized factions, one of which was the Family, to preserve and nurture the lingering vestiges of civilization. A question from Athena intruded on his thoughts.

"Are we still going to take a break?"

"Ten minutes," the Warrior told her.

Captain Havoc jabbed the mutation. "We could carve a few steaks," he suggested.

"Be serious," Athena said.

"I was. I'm tired of rations and jerky."

"There's no way I'd eat a mutant. The flesh might be tainted with chemical or radiation-induced toxins," Athena noted. "You should know better."

The officer shrugged. "When you're living off the land, you have to

make do with whatever is available."

"We're not out of rations yet," Athena said. "When we are, then I'll consider eating the wildlife."

Blade reached behind him and extracted a fresh magazine from the green pouch attached to his belt. "An animal that size, even a lizard, requires a substantial water intake just to stay alive. Havoc, scout around these boulders and see if you can find a spring or a pool."

"Yes, sir." The blond man headed around the right side of the boulder. "And Captain?"

"Sir?"

"Be careful. Where there's one mutation, there are usually more."

"Understood, sir." Havoc gave a snappy salute and vanished from sight.

"All military, isn't he?" Athena commented.

"One hundred percent," Blade confirmed. He removed the partly spent magazine from the M-16 and inserted the new one, then sat down in the shade of the boulder, within inches of the dead reptile.

"Mind if I ask you something?" Athena said.

"Be my guest."

"I'm curious. Why did you bring just Havoc along? What about the rest of the Force?"

The Warrior put the used magazine in the pouch and leaned against the stab before replying. "The others wanted to come, but I refused to bring them. Since this isn't, technically speaking, an official assignment, I didn't feel justified in exposing them to the danger. They place their lives on the line daily as it is."

"Then why bring Havoc?" Athena asked again.

"Personal reasons."

"In other words, you're not going to tell me."

"Bingo."

"I'd forgotten how tight-lipped you can be when you want to."

"Nothing personal, Athena."

The newspaperwoman brushed at her hair and regarded the giant critically. "I'm sorry I referred to your father. I know how sensitive you are about his death."

Blade said nothing. He closed his eyes and waited for her to get to the real issue she wanted to discuss.

There were several seconds of silence except for the whispering of the hot breeze.

"You've changed," Athena said, "You're not the same man I knew when I was on the Force."

The Warrior looked at her. "It's been a year since your so-called death. A lot can happen to a person in that amount of time."

Athena's lips curled downward. "There you are again, bringing it up."

"It's hard not to."

"You resent me now," Athena said with a trace of bitterness.

"Not you," Blade said. "But I do resent the way you manipulated the Force to satisfy your own selfish interests."

"Selfish!" Athena exploded, her cheeks flushing a crimson hue, "If you had any idea of the sheer hell I've been through, you wouldn't accuse me of being so petty."

"And what about the hell Grizzly has experienced? What about his misery, his hurt? He loved you with all his heart. You were the first person he ever fully and truly cared for, and you concocted an elaborate deception so you could back out of the relationship instead of being open and honest about your feelings."

Athena bowed her head, and her next words were barely audible. "I thought it was for the best."

"You thought wrong."

"I know that now," Athena said, gazing at him, tears rimming her eyes. "I know I made the biggest mistake of my life. But you must appreciate what I was going through a year ago. I mean, there we were, Grizzly and me, deeply in love and talking about the prospect of marriage, of having a home and rearing children." She paused and swallowed hard, "Can you imagine it? No woman has ever married a hybrid before. Our children might have turned out as freaks. They would have been ridiculed and scorned, even hated by some people. How could I put them through that?"

Blade pursed his lips. "There's no evidence to indicate your children would have been freaks. For all we know, they would have been born totally human."

"But what if they weren't? Did I have the right to take such a risk?"

"I can't say," Blade said softly.

"The prospect of having children was only half of the problem," Athena elaborated. "To be perfectly honest, I wasn't convinced I loved Grizzly as much as I thought I did."

"Sounds as if you've been seeing a psychiatrist," Blade said jokingly.

"I have been."

"Oh?"

"I've been in therapy ever since the funeral."

The Warrior leaned forward. "Now it's my turn to get a few answers. If I'm prying, just tell me to butt out."

"What would you like to know?"

"Was it your idea to fake your own death?"

"Yes," Athena said, then caught herself. "Well, no, actually it wasn't. General Gallagher paid me a visit in the hospital while the rest of you were off in Canada somewhere, and I happened to mention my reservations about marrying Grizzly to him."

The Warrior's features clouded. "Go on."

"He sympathized with me, which surprised me to no end, and he told me he wished he could help. I never thought much about it at the time. He left, then came back about an hour later, and said he had this crazy idea that might solve my problem."

"He proposed staging your funeral so you could break off your relationship with Grizzly without having to face him. Did he go so far as to claim the ruse would be best for both of you and spare you a lot of unnecessary grief?"

Athena's eyes narrowed. "Yes. How did you know?"

"A lucky guess," Blade said harshly.

"I thought about the idea that whole night. I couldn't sleep, couldn't eat. The wound I sustained in Alaska was bothering me terribly, and the drugs the doctor had me on didn't help matters much. I was woozy most of the time and couldn't think straight. By morning I'd talked myself into believing General Gallagher had devised the perfect solution," Athena detailed. "I could let Grizzly off easy—"

"Easy?" Blade interrupted.

"I didn't think he'd take my death so hard."

"He *loved* you, Athena."

"I know, but—"

"There are no buts about it," Blade said, cutting her off again. "Why don't you do both of us a favor and confess the real reason you agreed to Gallagher's scheme?"

"What reason?"

"You weren't thinking of any future children. You were concerned about yourself, specifically your career and your status as California's premier journalist."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Athena said defensively.

"I think you do. You pointed out yourself that no human has ever married a hybrid. The news would have spread throughout the entire Federation and beyond. There were bound to be those, both human and hybrids alike, who would oppose the idea, who would have branded you as some kind of pervert or labeled you as demented. Everywhere you went, there would have been people whispering and pointing and laughing behind your back. That's the real reason you had second thoughts. You were afraid of the social consequences, of the stigma."

Athena's lower lips quivered. "Maybe I was. What gives you the right to judge me?"

"I'm not judging you. I'm simply trying to get to the truth. Both Grizzly and you are close friends, and I want to do whatever I can to help. But I can't do a thing if you won't be honest with me."

Athena ran a finger across her eyes and sniffled. "You still consider me a friend after all I've done?"

"Of course," Blade assured her, smiling. He abruptly stiffened when he heard footsteps approaching rapidly and jumped to his feet. Captain Havoc ran around the boulder and halted. "We've got trouble," he announced, his gaze lingering for a second on Athena's haunted visage.

"More mutations?" she asked, rising.

"No. Raiders."

CHAPTER THREE

How many do you figure there are?" Athena asked anxiously.

"We'll know in a bit," Blade said from his position behind a boulder situated on the south side of the rock cluster, which had turned out to be a field of stony mammoths approximately 30 yards in circumference. He gazed across the expanse of burning desert at the distant figures. "What makes you think they're raiders, Captain?"

The officer produced the binoculars he normally kept stashed in his backpack. "Take a look for yourself, sir."

Blade promptly did so, adjusting the black knob on the binoculars until he could see the approaching band clearly. There were 11 of them, eight men and three women, all wearing shabby clothing, all well armed. In the lead walked a tall bald man.

"Can I take a look?" Athena inquired.

"Here," the Warrior replied, handing the binoculars over to her.

Athena gazed through the eyepieces, then frowned. "All I see are eleven people hiking this way. What makes you think they're raiders?"

"Gut instinct," Havoc said.

"That's hardly good enough."

"It's kept me alive all these years."

Blade turned and surveyed the jumble of slabs and spherical monoliths. "We'll take cover and see what they're up to before making our move."

"Do you think they're raiders?" Athena asked, lowering the binoculars.

"Could be."

"They could also be innocent travelers."

Havoc chuckled. "And cows can fly."

"Follow me," Blade said, and headed northward, threading a path among the boulders. He noticed a number of oversized reptilian tracks imprinted in the soft earth and guessed there must be more mutations about. Hefting the M-16, he went around a particularly gigantic slab and stopped in surprise at the sight of a sparkling pool.

"Water!" Athena exclaimed and dashed to the edge. She knelt and cupped her right hand, about to take a drink.

"Holdup," Blade advised. "We don't know if it's safe to drink yet. Havoc has to test it first."

Reluctantly, Athena merely dipped her fingers into the cool liquid. "I hope it tests out all right. The water in my canteen is flat and tasteless

after all this time."

"Do you want me to test it now?" Havoc questioned, gripping the straps to his backpack.

"No," Blade answered. "There isn't enough time. Wait until our visitors leave." He walked slowly along the rim of the pool, peering into the depths. There didn't appear to be a bottom. The subterranean source must be far beneath the surface, he reasoned.

"I'll bet those raiders know about this water," Havoc said.

"We still don't know if they are raiders," Athena said.

"Until proven otherwise, we'll act on the assumption that they are," Blade said. He scanned the boulders rimming the pool, then indicated one 20 feet away. It was easily 15 feet in diameter, about eight feet in height, and flattopped. "That's where we'll take cover."

"What if they spot us?" Athena responded.

"They won't be able to see the top from here," Blade said and walked to the boulder. He slung the M-16 over his right shoulder, bent his knees, and jumped. His hands closed on the lip and held fast, and in a sweeping motion of his powerful arms he pulled himself up. Squatting, he gestured to the others. "Come on. I'll help you up."

Athena and Havoc came to the base of the slab.

Leaning down, Blade extended his right arm, "Leap up and grab hold," he instructed the journalist. She complied, and in an instant he had her beside him. It took but a few seconds to lift Havoc onto their hiding place.

Athena placed her left palm on the smooth surface. "This rock is hot. We'll be burnt to a crisp."

The officer moved a yard from the lip and lay down on his stomach. "It's hard to believe you were once on the Force," he remarked.

"Why?"

"Because you can't take a little discomfort without complaining."

"I crossed the desert without griping."

Blade stretched out and rested his chin on his forearms. By tilting his neck an inch or so, he could see the pool and the ground surrounding it.

"Why did you come along, Athena?" Captain Havoc wanted to know. "We could have handled this without you?"

I don't have to explain my motives to you," Athena replied testily.

"I was just curious."

"And you know what curiosity did to the cat."

Blade glanced at them. "Quit your bickering. Athena, lie down." He faced front again and sighed. Why, he wondered, couldn't they get along? Havoc and Athena had been at each other's throat since day one. Perhaps stress was to blame. For Athena, she was under the strain of knowing she might have to confront the person whose love she'd rejected so deceitfully. In Havoc's case, the officer had to deal with the knowledge that his betrayal of the Force had been revealed.

The Warrior had to admire the officer's courage in frankly confessing to the treachery. It had all started over a year ago when Havoc's younger brother, Sergeant Jim Havoc, was killed in action during a mission in Canada. Another member of the team, a volunteer from the Flathead Indians in Montana, had also been slain. Their deaths, combined with the news that Athena had supposedly died from the injuries she sustained on their previous assignment, had depressed Blade immensely. He'd temporarily disbanded the unit to give himself time to recover emotionally.

Eventually Blade decided to activate the Force again. The call went out to each of the Federation factions and volunteers were sent. Much to his amazement, the Free State of California's recruit turned out to be Captain Mike Havoc. At first Blade was delighted to have the officer on the team. But then he began to notice odd quirks in Havoc's behavior. During sparring sessions, the officer always went overboard and seemed to be trying to beat Blade to a pulp. Havoc maintained an air of secrecy about himself and never really opened up to the other members. And to top it all off, the officer spent a great deal of time in hushed conversations with General Miles Gallagher, the officer liaison between the Force and the

governor of California.

Three days ago Havoc finally admitted his duplicity. He'd gone AWOL from the Force Facility located near Los Angeles and flown to San Francisco, where Blade was investigating a lead that Athena Morris might still be alive. The officer had assisted the Warrior in defeating three martial arts experts sent by General Gallagher to dissuade Blade from continuing his investigation, and then Havoc had disclosed the shocking news that Gallagher had been trying to destroy the Force from within. The good general, Blade learned, had enlisted Havoc's aid by claiming the officer's younger brother died due to Blade's callous negligence. Gallagher convinced his subordinate that revenge was called for, and the general went so far as to propose a strategy of ruining the reputation of the elite squad using Havoc as the inside man.

The scheme had almost worked.

Blade frowned as he considered the devious tactics General Gallagher had employed: convincing him to take the members of the new team on their first mission prematurely, before they were fully trained, in the hope they would all perish; giving the volunteers a three-day pass in Los Angeles and trying to manipulate them into becoming involved in embarrassing displays of drunkenness and rowdy behavior; and even having a spy planted at the Force Facility to keep tabs on their activities, using enlisted army personnel as undercover eyes and ears.

When he returned to L.A., Blade promised himself, there would be a reckoning with Miles Gallagher.

He realized that the general probably proposed the despicable plan to fake Athena's death as yet another attempt to disband the Force. What puzzled him was the motive. Gallagher had never made any secret of the fact he disliked the unit from the very beginning. The general always maintained the strike squad was a waste of manpower, not to mention a needless expenditure of time, energy, and financial resources on California's part. Ever since the governor initially proposed forming the team, the general reiterated his opposition on a regular basis. But Blade would never have suspected Gallagher capable of going to such extreme lengths to eliminate the Force. Fanatical was the word that came to his mind. Now that he understood the full extent of the general's actions, he appreciated how dangerous the man truly was.

The sound of voices wafted to the Warrior's ears.

Blade raised his head and stared to the south, waking patiently for the band to appear.

"Should we try to take a prisoner?" Captain Havoc asked Blade.

"Maybe. We'll play it by ear. Don't make a move unless I give the word."

"Yes, sir."

"I don't like being on this boulder," Athena said. "If they should discover us, we'll be trapped."

"Stay still and be quiet and we won't be discovered," Blade said. He perceived movement at the southern boundary of the boulder field and flattened. "Here they come."

The voices became louder, the words distinguishable.

"—hope that spring hasn't dried up," said a man in a testy tone.

"Relax, Ajax. It's never been dry before," said someone else.

"I can't wait to take a drink," chimed in a third person, a woman.

"How long will we stay here, anyway?" asked a fourth.

"As long as I want," the man called Ajax snapped.

"Do you still plan to get to Mesaville by tonight?"

At the reference to their destination, Blade twisted and grinned at his companions. So they were close, after all! He turned to the front and heard an exclamation of joy.

"The pool! Here it is!"

A chorus of glad cries greeted the announcement, and a flurry of pounding feet heralded a general stampede to the water.

Blade listened to splashing and slurping and a few expressions of happiness. The travelers were quenching their thirst with gusto.

"Ramis, why are you taking off your clothes?" someone suddenly asked.

"I'm going to take a bath," answered a man in a high-pitched intonation.

"Like hell you are!" roared Ajax. "You put one toe in this pool and I'll blow your fool head off."

"What's wrong with taking a bath?" Ramis countered.

"Do you think any of us will want to drink this water after you get through washing your filthy body in it?"

"Give me a break! I'm not that dirty."

"I wouldn't give a damn if you were squeaky clean. Don't step foot into the pool, or else."

Ever so slowly, Blade elevated his head until he could see the band. The 11 were sprawled around the spring in attitudes of profound relief, most drinking greedily. The bald man sat on the south side, lightly splattering water on his head and face. His features were angular and hinted at latent cruelty. A nasty scar extended from the bottom of his lower eye down to his chin. His clothing consisted of a crudely fashioned brown shirt and pants, both sporting uneven stitching and lopsided hems. Black boots, each with the tips worn off, adorned his feet. A revolver rested on a holster on his left hip, and lying on the ground by his side was a rifle.

"I wish I could afford a bath when we get to Mesaville," one of the women commented, a blonde with close-cropped hair who wore a green shirt and blue shorts. A pistol hung in a shoulder holster under her left arm. "How about it, Ajax? Will you give me the money?"

The bald man regarded her coldly. "Dream on, Claire."

"Why not? Baths are only a quarter."

"Does money grow on trees around here?" Ajax retorted. "Even lousy quarters are hard to come by nowadays."

"I wish we weren't going there at all," said the one known as Ramis, a thin man attired all in faded black leather.

"Why not?" asked Claire.

"Because I don't like being within a hundred miles of Death Master. That guy gives me the creeps."

"You're a wimp," Ajax stated scornfully. "You've always been a wimp. What you need is more exercise to build up those muscles of yours. Why don't you climb that boulder over there and check out the area to make sure there's no one else around? And keep your eyes peeled for mutants."

Ramis pouted and placed his hands on his slim hips. "Which boulder are you talking about?"

"That one," Ajax said and absently pointed.

With a start, Blade realized the bald man was pointing directly at the slab on which he was hidden.

CHAPTER FOUR

Blade tensed and placed his right hand on his M-16. If worse came to worst he and the others could probably fight their way out, but any one of them might be killed in the attempt. He lowered his head and listened as the thin man approached.

Both Havoc and Athena were lying flat, their eyes riveted on the rim.

"You want me to climb on top of this?" Ramis asked, his very tone implying the task was impossible.

"Yeah," Ajax answered. Several seconds of silence followed.

"Ain't no way, man," Ramis declared.

"You haven't tried."

Blade heard the thin man snort.

"Look at this sucker. It's at least eight feet high. How the hell do you expect me to reach the top?"

"Find a way."

Mumbling under his breath, Ramis started walking around the slab, his continual monologue enabling the Warrior to keep track of the chronic complainer's position. After completing a circuit, Ramis called out angrily. "I'm telling you, Ajax, it's impossible. The sides are sheer. There's no place for a handhold. A person would have to be a friggin' giant to climb up there."

"Come here, Ramis," Ajax said sternly.

Blade waited until the thin man's footfalls had faded before he risked another peek at the band. Ramis now stood to the right of the leader, and the other nine were observing the exchange between the pair.

"I'm sick and tired of your whining," Ajax said. "All you do is gripe, gripe, gripe."

"I'm not that bad," Ramis replied. His slim right hand hung at his side, next to a pistol in a black holster.

"Oh, you're not, huh?" The bald man looked at Claire. "I need your opinion. Is this chump a royal pain in the ass, or what?"

"He's the biggest pain in the ass I know," the blonde asserted.

Ramis glared at her. "You'll get yours one day, bitch."

A protracted sigh issued from Ajax. He slowly stood. "I wish you hadn't gone and insulted my squeeze."

The thin man backed up a step. "I didn't mean nothing by it, man. Honest. It just sort of slipped out."

Ajax gazed skyward, then stretched. When he gazed at Ramis again, a sadistic smirk twisted his lips. "You bore me, old buddy. I'm tired of listening to you flap your gums." He paused. "And you know what happens when a member of this gang bores me."

Ramis glanced at his companions. "What did I do?"

No one said a word.

"This ain't fair. Come on, Ajax. Quit the clowning."

"Who's clowning?" the bald man asked.

Blade could tell that Ramis was scared and trying very hard not to show it. The rest of the band sat as still as the boulders ringing the pool.

"Any time you're ready," Ajax stated.

"I'm not going to draw on you."

"You don't have a choice."

The thin man licked his lips and retreated another stride. "I can't beat you and you know it. I'd be committing suicide if I tried."

Ajax shrugged. "You're going to die one way or the other."

"Why not just let me walk out of here? I promise I'll never come back."

"No can do, Ramis. You know the rules as well as I do. When someone joins the Razors, they're in for life. There's only one way out."

Again Ramis looked to his fellows for support, but none was forthcoming. He wiped his palms on his pants. "Please, Ajax. Don't do this. We go back a long ways."

"Four years."

"Then how can you just up and kill me?"

Ajax grinned. "You know how I can."

The Warrior saw Ramis's visage harden, and the very next instant the thin man clawed for his gun. In comparison to the leader, though, he was pathetically slow. His pistol was still clearing leather when Ajax's revolver boomed once. The slug caught Ramis in the forehead and spun him around. He sank to the ground without a sound, the pistol falling from his limp fingers.

Ajax twirled his revolver, a Colt Trooper with an eight-inch barrel, into his holster. "How about that," he said in surprise. "The wimp actually tried to draw on me! I didn't figure he had the nerve."

"Should we bury the body?" Claire inquired.

"No. We'll take it with us."

"We're going to lug Ramis all the way to Mesaville?"

"What's the big deal?" Ajax rejoined, sitting down. "We'll be there in four or five hours."

"I still don't see way we should carry that worthless sack of crud along."

"You wanted a bath, didn't you?"

Claire's brows knit. "I sure do. But what does my bath have to do with anything?"

"Think, baby, think," Ajax chided her. "Death Master needs food for his pets, right? And he pays up to two bucks in silver for any corpses that are in edible condition. Our good pal Ramis should bring us enough change for a real blowout."

Everyone laughed heartily at the idea.

Blade lowered his head. Their callous disregard for human life appalled him. After so many missions into the Outlands, he still hadn't grown accustomed to the prevailing attitude that life was cheap, of less value than gold, silver, drugs, or guns. Indiscriminate slayings were commonplace, yet no one tried to change the deadly status quo.

As the Warrior had seen firsthand, where there was no law the strong and the wicked tended to rule with an iron fist. The unofficial motto of the Outlands might aptly be described as, "Anything goes." Civilization's collapse had left a breeding ground for wickedness, had created a social vacuum filled by those who practiced that most ancient of biological imperatives—the survival of the fittest.

"Will we stay here much longer?" a man asked.

"Yeah," added another. "I can't wait to reach Mesaville and party."

"If we're lucky, Death Master will be conducting the Games," Claire said hopefully. "Now there's a man who knows how to put on entertainment."

"That he does," Ajax agreed, "but I wouldn't go so far as to call him a

man."

"Just don't let him hear you say that," said a gang member.

Ajax addressed them in a commanding tone. "Okay. Since everyone is so eager to get there, we'll take off. Just be sure your canteens are filled."

Blade observed a flurry of activity as the band members prepared to depart. Ramis was stripped of all his worldly possessions, including his clothes, which were then distributed by Ajax. In five minutes the members of the Razors were ready to go, and the bald man led them to the east. Only when they were out of sight did Blade rise. "We're going to trail them," he announced.

"They'll spot us," Athena said.

"Not if we're careful." Blade moved to the edge and jumped, the soles of his feet stinging when his combat boots came down hard on the dry earth. He glanced up. "Come on."

Captain Havoc promptly leaped from the rock, but Athena displayed hesitation.

"Something wrong?" the Warrior asked.

"I'm out of practice. I don't want to break a leg."

Blade held out his arms. "I'll catch you."

"I'm too heavy."

"Don't worry. Just step out and I'll do the rest."

Athena frowned, but complied. She gave a little hop and dropped straight down.

The Warrior hardly had to shift position. He braced himself and caught her easily, his huge arms and shoulders absorbing the shock. "See? That wasn't so difficult." He gently deposited her in front of him.

"Want me to take point?" Havoc asked.

"No. We'll stick together. First let's fill our own canteens, then we'll go

after them," Blade said.

They hastened to the pool.

"I thought you wanted Havoc to test it first," Athena commented.

"We can't afford the delay," the Warrior responded. "Besides, evidently those raiders have been using their spring for years. Everyone who travels to Mesaville must drink here. It must be safe."

"You hope."

Blade finished refilling his canteen first. He moved a few yards from the pool and stared eastward. The band was drawing near to the end of the boulder field. He spied two men bearing the lifeless form of their former comrade.

Havoc and Athena joined the giant.

"Ready when you are, sir," the officer said.

"Then let's go." Blade led off, unslinging the M-16. He checked to make sure that the selector lever was on semiautomatic and cradled the rifle in his arms. The simple act of walking caused more sweat to flow from his pores.

"Did you hear what they were saying about someone called Death Master?" Athena asked.

"It sounds as if he's the one who runs Mesaville," Blade said.

"Who in their right mind would want to be called Death Master?" Athena wondered.

"We'll find out soon enough."

"And what was that business about the Games? And feeding that poor man to Death Master's pets?"

"I don't know."

"If Grizzly is there, I hope he's all right."

Blade gazed at her. "Do I detect a note of affection in your voice?"

"Why not? I still like him."

"But you don't love him?"

"No, certainly not. We've been all through this already. Are you hard of hearing?"

"No, skeptical."

"Of what? Me?"

"Do you want the truth or an evasive answer?"

"The truth."

Blade twisted and looked her in the eyes. "I believe you love Grizzly, You always have."

Astonishment brought her up short. She snickered and resumed walking. "You're crazy. If I love him, why did I put him through such torment?"

"You were scared and confused. You allowed General Gallagher to convince you his plan was in your best interest, even when deep in your heart you knew he was full of crap."

"Got it all figured out, huh?" Athena queried irritably.

"You tell me."

"I think you're the one who is full of crap."

"If you say so," Blade said, as he concentrated on keeping the Razors in view. The band had emerged from the boulders and was trekking into the desert, strung out in single file. At the rear was the pair bearing Ramis. He squinted at the afternoon sun and estimated they would reach Mesaville shortly before dark.

Threading among the monoliths, Blade came to the last boulder and halted. The raiders were 100 yards out "We'll wait until they're almost out of sight," he said and crouched in the shade.

Athena stepped off to one side and turned her back to him.

Havoc knelt and gazed at the retreating figures. "You never did get around to answering me earlier, sir," he remarked.

"About Gallagher?" Blade replied.

"Yes, sir. Why were you so polite to him after we returned to L.A. from San Francisco? After all he's put you through, after he's tried repeatedly to ruin the Force, you acted as if nothing had happened. If it had been me, I would have kicked him into the middle of next week and hang the consequences."

"The general will get his soon enough."

"But why didn't you confront him when he welcomed us back?"

Blade leaned against a boulder. "Didn't it strike you as strange that Gallagher was waiting for us at the Facility when we got back?"

"Yes, sir. He had to know you'd found Athena despite all his efforts to prevent you from succeeding. And he must have been informed that I went AWOL to warn you about the trap he'd set. I never expected him to greet you with open arms."

"Doesn't it make you wonder?"

"Sir?"

"Gallagher never does anything without a reason. I knew he was up to something the minute I climbed from the VTOL and saw him standing with the rest of the Force, his arm on Raphael's shoulders, grinning like the Cheshire cat."

"I wanted to punch him in the face."

Blade grinned. "No doubt. But he knew I wouldn't cause a scene while the others were there. This has to be settled between just the two of us, man to man."

"So you think he planned the reception?"

"I know he did. Lobo told me the general showed up shortly before we

arrived and had them all hustle from the barracks to greet us."

"But why?"

"Because Gallagher wanted to keep me at bay long enough to reveal the information he'd learned concerning Grizzly's whereabouts."

Captain Havoc's forehead creased. "I still don't understand."

"He wanted me out of the way for a while, and he guessed correctly that I'd leave L.A. to investigate the news about Grizzly."

"Why does he want you out of the way?"

"I wish I knew."

The officer pondered for a bit. "You've taken a great risk in coming here. You've given Gallagher time to devise a counter-strategy. Given his track record, he's bound to arrange a nasty surprise for you."

"No doubt, but it couldn't be helped. Grizzly must learn the truth."

Havoc nodded, then scrutinized the Warrior's countenance. "There's one more thing I'd like to clear up."

"Go ahead."

"What's the real reason you brought me along?"

Blade glanced at the career soldier. "What do you think?"

"I think you brought me along to keep an eye on me. Now that you know I was helping Gallagher, you no longer trust me completely. And until you make up your mind, you don't want me fraternizing with the rest of the team," Havoc said. "Am I right?"

"You've guessed part of it."

A cloud seemed to descend over the officer's features. "I figured as much. Thanks for being honest."

"I'll decide your fate after we return to California."

"Yes, sir," Havoc said glumly.

Blade stood and stepped into the burning sunlight. The Razors were far enough ahead to justify heading out. "Let's go," he said, and began to trail the raiders.

Captain Havoc waited for Athena to cover a few yards before he fell into place at the rear.

The Warrior looked back once, noting his companion's somber expressions, and wished he hadn't needed to bring them along. In their present frames of mind, their battle effectiveness would be minimal. Both were too preoccupied to be of much use when the chips were down. He could only hope they ran into as little opposition as possible.

For 15 minutes the trio hiked across the parched wasteland. The breeze tapered off, leaving a deathly stillness in the air. Not so much as an insect stirred.

Blade cradled the M-16 in his arms and hiked onward determinedly. The 15 minutes became an hour, then two. His skull felt as if it had been set ablaze. Several times he treated himself to a sip from his canteen.

Three hours after leaving the spring, the unexpected happened.

Blade was mopping his forehead when he heard screams and gunfire arise from the vicinity of the band. He stopped and shielded his eyes with his right hand. The raiders were vaguely visible near the horizon, and there was evidence of a commotion in the form of a rising cloud of dust.

"What's happening?" Athena asked.

"Maybe they're attacking another party," Havoc suggested.

Blade hesitated, debating whether to risk exposure by moving closer, and at that moment he heard the peculiar sound overhead, a distinct flap-flap-flap. He tilted his neck and gazed upward. An involuntary gasp escaped his lips at the sight of the monstrosity swooping down toward them. "Look out!" he cried and brought up the M-16.

Too late.

CHAPTER FIVE

The creature was unlike any the Warrior had ever seen, and in his extensive travels he'd encountered hideous beasts of all shapes and sizes. This one possessed a pair of mighty wings, but it wasn't a bird. It had long teeth, bulging eyes, ears, and a tapered tail, but it wasn't a mammal. Incredibly, the thing most resembled an animal Blade had only seen in pictures; a deep sea manta.

Ten feet across from one tip of its triangular wing to the other, the abomination was thin, almost flat. Its hairless, leathery skin was as smooth as polished glass. A pair of short antennae dangled from under its slit of a mouth. And as it dived at the three humans it vented a snake-like hiss.

Blade had no time to fire. One of the creature's wings slammed into him, bowling him over. He glimpsed its mouth snapping at his face and jerked his head out of the way; when the thing was past him, he leaped up to see it gracefully gliding higher, gaining altitude for another try.

Captain Havoc and Athena opened fire.

The Warrior could see the rounds striking home without apparent effect. He sighted on the squat head and sent a half-dozen 5.56-mm manglers into the mutation.

Banking sharply to the north, the flying manta shuddered, its tail whipping from side to side.

"What is it?" Athena asked in horror.

"Another radiation spawned deviate," Havoc said, stating the obvious.

Blade kept his eyes on the thing, observing it swing in a wide loop and angle down toward them again. "Concentrate on its head!" he bellowed and did exactly that.

The three M-16's chattered in a metallic chorus of raucous discord.

On high, the manta shook violently once more. The hail of lead peppered its rudimentary face and eyes, holes blossoming over every square inch. It tried to gain altitude, then abruptly sagged, its wings

drooping, and plummeted earthward from a height of 200 feet, going into a dizzying spiral.

"Cover it just in case," Blade instructed. The thing crashed not ten feet away from him, its body crumbling with a sickening crunch, the impact reducing it to a crushed mass of pink flesh and brown skin. No bones were in evidence. Greenish-blue blood oozed onto the earth.

The Warrior walked over, regarding the creature warily. He saw one of its dark eyes jutting upward, wide open and already glazing, and he nudged the carcass with his left foot.

"Is it dead?" Athena asked hopefully.

"Yep."

"It's like something from another planet," Havoc said.

"What mutation isn't?" Athena said.

The Warrior pivoted and saw a veritable cloud of the terrors swirling in the air above the Razors. He checked the rest of the sky to make sure there were no more near him, then knelt. "Get down," he advised.

"Do you think more of those things will come after us?" Athena asked, kneeling.

"Let's hope not. The nearest good cover is way back at that boulder field."

"The firing has stopped," Havoc noted. "All the Razors must be dead."

"Surely not all of them," Athena said in disbelief.

The three of them watched for over an hour as mantas landed and others flapped heavily into the air. At first more landed than took off, but in time the ratio reversed and the mutations departed in groups of four or five at a time. They all flew off to the southeast. Not until he hadn't seen any hint of movement for ten minutes did Blade stand and hasten to investigate. He'd counted 74 of the monsters, and he shuddered to think what would have happened if the flock had found the three of them instead of the raiders.

The bodies became clearly visible from dozens of yards away, lying scattered about in attitudes of violent death. To their credit, the Razors had taken several of the mutations with them; there were nine of the creatures lying on the battlefield.

Blade approached cautiously. He felt no sympathy for the gang, but he was annoyed at the turn of events. He'd hoped to trail them all the way to Mesaville. Now he would simply have to continue in the direction the band had been, heading and hope he found it.

One of the mantas stirred, its wings rising a few inches off the ground before settling down again.

The Warrior noticed that one of its eyes was gone, replaced by a ragged cavity, and bullet holes pockmarked its body. He refrained from finishing the thing off because the shot might draw the flock back.

"Oh, my God!" Athena breathed.

Blade saw her staring at one of the corpses, and only then did he realize the condition of the human bodies. Each and every one was missing the nose, ears, and fingers, as well as patches of skin on the neck and face. The mantas had gnawed on the Razors in much the same way he might savor a strip of jerky.

"What a way to go," Havoc said, disgusted, and gazed at a man whose throat was slit.

The Warrior simply nodded, threading among the fallen people. He discovered two gang members lying together, one on top of the other, and recognized Ajax as the uppermost. The mantas had eaten all the skin on his bald head.

"I dost get it. Why didn't those things consume the flesh also?" Captain Havoc asked.

"Who the hell cares?" Athena said. "It's gross enough as it is."

Blade walked past the slain gang leader, then drew up short when he heard a moan. Spinning, he stepped closer and examined Ajax closely. A second moan sounded, only not from the dead man.

The person lying under the bald man moved.

Quickly the Warrior took hold of Ajax's right arm and flipped the body off to find the blonde woman on her stomach underneath, her eyelids fluttering as she struggled to regain consciousness. He placed the M-16 at his feet and gently turned her over.

"She's alive!" Athena said happily.

Havoc came over, unscrewing the cap on his canteen. "How badly is she hurt?"

Blade inspected her face and hands. There wasn't a bite mark anywhere. The officer gave him the canteen, and he carefully let a trickle of water seep between her parted lips. "Claire? Can you hear me?"

Her blue eyes snapped open. She took one look at the giant hovering over her and recoiled in fear.

"I won't hurt you," Blade assured her.

"Calm down, miss," Havoc said. "We're just trying to help you."

Still frightened, the woman sat up and slid backwards. She bumped into Athena and glanced over her shoulder, her eyes widening in surprise. "Who are you people?" she demanded.

"We're friends," Athena told her.

Claire gazed at the giant. "How do you know my name?"

"We overheard the conversation at the spring," Blade explained.

"You were there?"

"Nearby."

The woman looked at Ajax, then surveyed the corpses on all sides. "Did you see what happened?" she inquired, aghast at the loss of her companions.

"We saw the mutations attack your band," Blade said. "We were attacked too."

"They came out of nowhere, diving on us with the sun at their backs," Claire related. "There were too many for us. We didn't have a prayer."

"How did you manage to survive?" Havoc probed.

"Dumb luck. One of them knocked me to the ground, and the last thing I remember is Ajax jumping on top of me to keep them from tearing into me, covering me with his body." Claire's eyes moistened and she shook her head. "I didn't know he cared that much."

"Are you fit enough to walk?" Blade questioned.

"I'll run if I have to."

"Good. I want to make tracks in case those creatures return for a second helping."

Claire jumped to her feet. "You've got a point. The sand rays are unpredictable."

"Sand rays?"

"That's what they're called," Claire said and scrutinized the Warrior's visage. "You'd know their name if you were from this territory. But you're not, are you?"

Blade had no intention of revealing where they came from. "Let's just say we've traveled many miles to reach our destination."

The woman gestured at the surrounding desert. "The Burn Belt?"

"Mesaville."

Claire visibly tensed, "Why do you want to go there?"

"It's personal."

"You'd be smart to stay away."

"Why?" Athena asked.

"Because a lot of folks go into Mesaville and never come out alive."

The Warrior nodded at the bodies. "Your band visited there regularly."

"Yeah, we did. But that's different."

"How so?"

"All the gangs in this part of the country go there to trade goods, get drunk, whore around, and enjoy the Games. Mesaville is neutral territory. Anyone who causes trouble answers to Death Master," Claire said. "It's sort of the headquarters for all the bands for a hundred miles around."

"Are there any hybrids there?" Athena asked hopefully.

"Hybrids?"

"Yes. You know. Genetically engineered beings endowed with human and bestial traits."

"Oh. You mean the freaks. Sure, there are a few."

Blade recalled a comment made earlier by Ajax. "Is this Death Master a mutation?"

"I don't rightly know what he is. He's not completely normal, but he isn't a cat-man or an ape-man or anything like that."

The Warrior surveyed the sky once again. "Back up a bit," he said. "If all the raiders in this region are welcomed with open arms at Mesaville, why will we be in danger if we go there?"

"Because anyone who doesn't belong to a band is in deep lizard dip," Claire responded, glancing at each of them. "It's open season on geeks, if you catch my drift."

"We're not geeks," Captain Havoc declared.

"In fact," Blade said, before the officer could reveal pertinent information, "we belong to a gang that's based far west of here."

"What's the name of this gang?" Claire inquired, her tone laced with skepticism.

Blade gave her the first name that popped into his head. "The

Bombers."

"Never heard of them."

"Well, we've heard about Mesaville. Our leader sent us to contact Death Master and see if we'd be welcome there."

Claire smiled. "Well, in that case you have nothing to worry about. Death Master is always on the lookout for new bands to do business with."

"Good," Blade said, pondering the implications of her revelations. Mesaville served as the hub of a vast, evil empire, providing all the raiders in this region of the Outlands with a safe haven in exchange for a share of the booty the bands obtained when conducting their depredations on those outposts and settlements scattered about the outlying areas. For all he knew, some of the bands roamed as far west as California. The southern section of the Free State had been plagued for decades by savage bands who crossed the border, hit small towns and communities, and vanished again before the Army could catch them. Officials there had assumed most of the raiders came from Mexico, but what if they were wrong?

"Shouldn't we be hauling ass?" Claire inquired.

"Yes," the Warrior agreed. "We'll let you lead the way."

"Okay, but first let's grab all we can carry," the Razor suggested and knelt next to Ajax.

"What are you doing?" Havoc asked.

"Don't be dumb, dude," Claire said as she removed her former lover's gunbelt. "Guns are like gold out here. We can trade these weapons at Mesaville for whatever we want or take money in exchange. Come on. Grab all you can carry."

The officer looked at the Warrior, who nodded.

In less than three minutes they gathered the guns and knives and had them stuffed into backpacks or crammed under their belts.

Claire had three revolvers around her waist and a large hunting knife wedged into the top of her left boot. She beamed happily. "We'll get a lot

of bread for these. It's too bad we can't carry the stiffs, too. There's enough meat here to provide a couple of meals for Death Master's pets."

Blade caught himself starting to frown and stopped. The bodies of the woman's friends weren't even cold yet, and she treated them as trade goods, as mere lumps of meat that could fetch a pretty price. "What kind of pets?" he responded.

Claire giggled. "You'll see. And you won't believe your eyes." Squaring her slim shoulders, she hiked eastward. "We'll have to hustle. As it is, we probably won't reach Mesaville until after dark." Her voice betrayed a certain anxiety.

"What difference will it make?" Athena queried.

"Are you kidding, sister? At night the animals and the wild mutants are out in force."

"A fire will keep them away," Blade said, walking after her.

"Provided you have matches and can find something to burn," Claire said.

"We have matches."

"Really? Great. They're as hard to come by as guns."

"How long have you been a Razor?" Blade casually probed.

"Oh, I don't know. About fifteen years, I suppose."

"That long? You don't look much over twenty."

"Twenty-one, as a matter of fact. I was only six when the band killed my parents and took me in. They raised me, taught me the ropes, helped me to survive."

Blade stared at the back of her head, perplexed. She made it sound as if the Razors had done her a favor. "Don't you ever miss your folks?"

"Nope. Why should I? I hardly knew them," Claire answered and snickered. "Besides, they were a couple of geeks."

Pity welled in the Warrior as he thought of the innocent little girl who had been brutally torn from her family and placed at the mercy of a band of roving killers. Was it any wonder she seemed devoid of any genuine emotion? Where once she might have grown up to become a loving wife and a devoted mother, she was now a cold-blooded raider who preyed on those she deemed weak and worthless.

"Hey, I just realized you guys haven't told me your names," Claire said, glancing back at them.

"I'm Blade," the Warrior said, and indicated the others. "This is Athena and Mike." He intentionally refrained from disclosing Havoc's rank.

"Pleased to meet all of you."

"The same here," Athena said.

Claire stared at the officer. "Do you have a squeeze, handsome."

"A girlfriend or a wife? No." Havoc responded.

"Excellent. You play your cards right, and you just might get lucky tonight," Claire said bluntly.

Havoc did a double take. "Are you saying what I think you're saying?"

The Razor nodded, facing front. "Yep. life's too short for beating around the bush. If there's one lesson I've learned, it's to take what you want when you want it."

"I appreciate the offer," Havoc said politely.

"You won't be sorry. Ajax used to brag that I've got the hottest snatch in the Outlands."

"So much for modesty," Athena muttered.

"I heard that crack, sister," Claire said. "What's modesty got to do with having sex?"

"If you don't know, I doubt I could explain."

"Is that a fact? You must be one of those prudish types. I'll bet you've

never had a decent lay in your whole life."

"For your information, I have," Athena commented stiffly.

"Oh, yeah? I doubt it. What you need is a real animal like my old man Ajax, someone who really knows how to stick it in you, someone who can drive you right up the wall."

"Claire?"

"Yeah, sister?"

"Change the subject."

"Why?"

"Because if you don't," Athena said sweetly. "I'm going to blow your brains out."

CHAPTER SIX

Blade spied the lights from almost a mile out, four white pinpoints situated halfway up the west side of an otherwise inky, mountainous elevation that reared up out of the desert to the northeast. "We were told that Mesaville is a fascinating place," he remarked.

"You don't know the half of it," Claire said.

"How so?"

She chuckled. "You'll find out soon enough."

"Where does the power come from for those lights?" Captain Havoc asked.

"Mesaville has two sources of power," Claire disclosed, "Generators and sheep shit."

"Sheep shit?" Havoc repeated quizzically.

"Yep. Thanks to an irrigation system, the top of that mesa is covered with lush grass. There are over two hundred sheep up there, and all their

crap is collected daily to be used as fuel in the furnaces and steam-powered turbines," Claire said. "I've seen the workers scooping up that crud. Do you have any idea how much crap comes out of hundreds of sheep every day?"

"The mind boggles," Havoc replied.

"How is it that you know so much about the power system?" Blade asked.

"It's no big secret. Death Master took all of us on a tour a few years ago and explained the whole operation. He was real proud of it." Claire laughed. "I never saw anybody so proud of sheep shit in my life."

"Interesting," Blade said.

"Which reminds me. You guys wouldn't happen to know where we can steal a generator or a tanker full of gas, would you?"

"Not offhand," Blade answered.

"Damn. Too bad. Death Master pays ten pounds of pure gold for every generator brought in, and one hundred pounds for every tanker."

"How would a tanker cross the desert?" Athena asked.

"It's been done. If the trucks don't hold up, they're pulled with ropes and chains," Claire stated.

"Where does Death Master get all his gold?" Blade said.

"Ask him. That's one secret he'll never let out."

For five minutes they continued in silence. A cool breeze from the northwest provided welcome relief from the heat of the day. Stars filled the sky overhead.

"We've been lucky so far," Claire remarked. "Nothing has tried to attack us."

As if on cue, from out of the darkness issued a low, bestial snarl.

"What was that?" Athena asked, scanning right and left.

"Who knows?" Claire said. "Just keep your boobs crossed that it doesn't jump us."

"Must you always be so crude?"

"We can't all be glamour pussies like you, lady."

The mesa loomed larger and larger before them, and the pinpoints of light gradually expanded to become a quartet of bright spotlights mounted on the sheer rock face. At the base of the mesa was a cavernous opening over which a sign had been suspended. Painted on the wood in big red letters was a single word: MESAVILLE.

"I can't wait to chug a brew," Claire said.

The Warrior saw ten armed men spaced at regular intervals in front of the cavern, blocking the entrance. Some were conversing, others appeared bored, but they all stopped whatever they were doing and swung around when the man in the middle called out, "New arrivals!"

Carbines and submachine guns were quickly leveled.

"Don't shoot, Luther!" Claire shouted. "If you do, I'll never give you a tumble again."

The tall, bearded guard in the center, who appeared to be in charge, stepped forward so he could see the quartet better. He grinned lecherously when the Razor stepped fully into the light. "Claire Steiger! How's it going, babe?"

"I'm itching for some action."

Luther lowered his Uzi, his eyes narrowing. "Who are those people with you?"

"Friends. They're from a band called the Bombers."

"Did you change gangs?"

"Hope. Ajax and the rest are dead."

The guards exchanged glances.

"How did it happen?" Luther queried.

"Sand rays."

"Damn!"

Blade kept the barrel of his M-16 pointed at the ground and adopted a nonchalant attitude. He saw some of the guards studying him intently.

"I almost didn't make it myself," Claire said.

"Glad you did, honey," Luther told her and shifted his attention to the giant as the four of them halted. "So you're a Bomber?"

"Yep."

"Where's your band based?"

"West of here a ways. We don't call any one spot home. You know how it is."

"Yeah, I do," Luther said. "What brings you here?"

"Our leader has heard a lot about Mesaville. He sent us to contact Death Master. If all goes well, we'd like to start bringing our plunder to trade or sell."

"The boss will be pleased to hear the news," Luther stated. "Your friends and you are welcome. Just make sure you stick to the rules while you're here or you'll wind up as pet food."

"Mesaville has rules?" Havoc asked in disbelief.

"Sure does, mister," Luther responded. "Three of them. No killing is allowed. No stealing is allowed either, and if you're caught you'll get your arm chopped off. And no transmitting social diseases. Got it?"

"I'll try to memorize them," Havoc said dryly.

"Be sure you do. Mesaville is neutral turf. No one can cause trouble without Death Master jumping down his throat, and you definitely don't want him on your case. Take my word for it."

"When will we get to meet him?" Blade asked.

"I'll take you in now," Luther said. "Since you're newbies you've got to stay with me every step of the way." He glanced at Claire. "But not you, babe. You can go party hardy."

The former Razor looked at Havoc, then shook her head. "No thanks, dude. I'll stick with my new friends here."

"Lucky us," Athena muttered.

Luther scrutinized each of them closely. "You gays are packing a heap of hardware."

"We took the pieces off Ajax and the rest," Claire explained. "We want to barter them for some coin or whatever."

"Okay. Keep them. Let's go." Luther turned and addressed another guard. "Tommy, you're in charge until I get back."

"You got it," Tommy said.

Motioning with his right arm, Luther led them into the cavern. Ample illumination came from crudely strung overhead lights and lanterns attached to the walls.

"Get set for the shock of your lives," Claire said and giggled.

Blade wondered what she meant as they proceeded along a wide tunnel for 20 yards. Unexpectedly the tunnel widened into a chamber of enormous proportions, easily half a mile in length and a quarter mile wide. Far above them, the ceiling was obscured by darkness. As a consequence the lights were now mounted on wooden posts set into the ground at periodic intervals.

Luther hailed and nodded proudly. "Don't this just boggle the brain?"

"I don't believe it," Athena declared.

Filling the vast subterranean grotto were hundreds of stone mounds, pillars, and arches, a tangled maze of naturally formed edifices. Scores of openings indicated doorways into rock buildings or rooms. A dazzling array of neon lights shone continuously over business establishments. And

moving about in a boisterous flow of rowdy humanity were 200 to 300 men and women, all from various gangs, all enjoying themselves to the hilt.

"This is the perfect hideout for people like us," Claire said. "None of the city-states we raid or the organized territories would think to come looking for us inside a mesa."

"It's amazing," Havoc said.

Somewhere in the throng a woman laughed lustily and a man cursed a blue streak.

"If you think this is something, you should scope out the place during the games," Claire said. "Everybody gets soused to the gills and humps like foxes in heat."

"My, what a way with words you have," Athena remarked.

"Lighten up, sister. You'll never make friends here if you waltz around like you have a broom handle shoved up your butt."

The bearded guard pointed at another tunnel barely visible on the far side of the cavern. "Through there is another area just as big and a lot of smaller ones. This is just the business district. Death Master's home and the arena are all in the next cavern. Unless the games are in progress you're not allowed in there."

"Yeah, the last clown who wandered off limits was skinned alive and fed his own gonads," Claire said and laughed.

"We won't accidentally stray into the off-limits area," Blade promised.

Lather gestured and led them onward. "The boss is usually at the Club Royale at this time of night. We'll go there first."

"Is he still seeing that tramp?" Claire asked.

"Lolita? She might have slept with half of Mesaville, but unless you want your tongue cut out you'd best not bad-mouth her in public again. Some guys wouldn't think twice about turning you in."

"I just can't understand what he sees in her."

"You've got to be kidding."

Soon they were among the lively crowd, wending among the stone structures. Many of the passersby stopped and stared openly, often in hostility, at the newcomers.

"It takes a while for newbies to be accepted," Luther explained.

They climbed stone steps to a huge dome and entered a wide doorway. Strident music blared mixed with the hubbub of loud voices punctuated by harsh mirth. Revealed in the dim light were men clad in coarse clothing mingling with women clad in scanty apparel. Drinks were guzzled greedily. Despite the merrymaking the place had a hard atmosphere; there was a hint of underlying menace in the air.

Along the opposite wall ran a stone bar, and dancing on stone platforms positioned nearby were three naked women. Patrons leered and pawed at them, and they took it all in playful stride.

"This is the best joint in Mesaville," Luther said, shouting to make himself heard above the din.

"I can believe it," Blade responded.

To the left were a dozen tables crammed with customers. Against the wall was a table three times the size of the others, and seated with his broad back to the cool stone was the biggest man in the club, a man even taller than the Warrior, a man wearing a black leather jacket with a high collar.

The guard nodded and said, "That's the main man himself."

Blade's eyes narrowed as he approached. With a start he realized the colossus wasn't entirely human.

Death Master was aptly named. His head qualified as a grotesque caricature of terrifying proportions. A third larger than it should be, the left half resembled a human face except for the eye, which was the size of a walnut and possessed a tiny black pupil. The right half displayed reptilian characteristics, with brown, scaly skin, a deformed slit of a nostril, thin lips perpetually curled back over tapered teeth, and a small red orb. On the right side of his head he was bald; on the left grew a wild shock of long

black hair that curled down to his back.

There were five women at Death Master's table, each wearing practically nothing. There were also five men, all tough types who wore black leather and were armed with handguns. Ringing the table were four more men, each wearing sunglasses even though they were inside, each carrying either a shotgun or an assault rifle.

Luther slowed as he neared them and grinned nervously.

One of the gunners barked out, "Halt!"

Incredibly, all activity in the Club Royale ground to a halt. The music stopped blaring, the dancers stopped dancing, and the crowd fell silent and gazed at the newcomers.

Blade halted and met the unflinching stare of the titan known as Death Master.

"Sorry to disturb you, sir," Luther said, "but you left standing orders that newbies are to be brought directly to you."

"And so they are," responded the lord of Mesaville, rising slowly to his full height of seven and a half feet. His voice was consistent with his appearance: humanish, but tinted with a sibilant accent.

Luther indicated the Razor. "You remember Claire Steiger, sir? One of the Razors?"

Death Master studied the blonde until she squirmed uncomfortably. "Yes, I do. And I had forgotten how beautiful she is." He nodded at one of his seated men, who promptly rose. "Sit here, my dear."

Claire's terrified expression betrayed her feelings, but she bravely steeled herself and sat down.

"Where is Ajax?" Death Master inquired.

"Dead. Sand rays," Claire answered weakly, her lips scarcely moving, her eyes locked on the bizarre visage looming over her. "All the Razors."

"How unfortunate. Ajax was a man after my own heart. He brought in some prime merchandise and pet food from time to time."

"Yeah, he was a peach," Claire said and placed her left hand on one of the extra revolvers tucked under her belt, "We collected all the Razors' weapons and we were hoping you'd take them in trade."

"We?" Death Master repeated, turning to the three Force members, "Introduce me."

"The big guy is Blade. The hunk is Mikey. And the bitch is Athena. They're from a gang called the Bombers," Claire said.

"Are they indeed?" Death Master came around the table and stood in front of the Warrior. "You're almost my size. Think you could take me?"

Blade hesitated. What was this? A challenge? A test? He didn't want to take on the titan—yet. Not until after he found Grizzly. "I didn't come all the way here to fight you. Our leader sent us to see if we can trade at Mesaville on a regular basis."

"And what's the name of this leader of yours?"

"Lobo," Blade said, hoping Havoc wouldn't give everything away by laughing hysterically.

"Never heard of him. For that matter, never heard of the Bombers either. Where are you based?"

"We usually raid along California's southern border."

"How many are in your band?"

"Eighteen," Blade responded, feeling oddly uneasy. Gazing into those eerie, mismatched eyes at close range was like gazing into the face of a living nightmare. They never blinked, those eyes. They simply bored into him with the palpable force of thrust daggers.

"And how did you hear about our fair town?"

"Lobo heard about you from another gang."

"Which gang?"

"The Devils of Baja," Blade said, referring to a band of raiders the Force had wiped out in a pitched battle in Mexico. The Devils had operated for

decades, conducting dozens of rapid strikes into California and escaping before the military could overtake them. Given their longevity, they must have been acquainted with Mesaville. Or so he hoped.

"Ahh, yes. El Diablo and his bunch. How are they? He hasn't paid as a visit in years?"

"I haven't seen him in some time."

Death Master glanced at Havoc, then Athena. "How strange."

"What is?" Blade asked.

"Both of your associates are wearing new fatigues. California government issue fatigues, if I'm not mistaken." Death Master looked at Blade again and his mouth curled in a sinister smile. "If I didn't know better, I'd swear they must belong to a California Army unit."

Blade grinned. "You're very perceptive. Yeah, they're wearing Army uniforms. As well they should be."

"How so?"

"We ambushed an Army patrol a week ago and took all their gear and clothing."

"Interesting," Death Master said, as he scrutinized the officer and the journalist "Tell me. Should I have all three of you killed now or later?"

CHAPTER SEVEN

It took all of Blade's self-control to keep his countenance unchanged when he answered, "Why would you want to kill us?"

Death Master reached out a long arm and touched Athena's shoulder, his smile widening when she shuddered. "I find it improbable that these uniforms belonged to an ambushed patrol. Why, there isn't a drop of blood or a bullet hole on them."

"Give me a break. Don't soldiers carry extra uniforms in their backpacks when on extended patrols?" Blade countered casually.

Everyone in the Club Royale seemed to tense in expectation of trouble.

"Give you a break?" Death Master said, moving a few inches closer to the Warrior. For seconds he simply stared. Finally he cocked his head. "Yes, I suppose I should. Your reason is plausible."

"So what do we tell Lobo when we get back?"

"Not so fast, my friend. There will be plenty of time for as to discuss trade matters. You won't be leaving for a week at least."

"But we'd hoped to head back in a day or two," Blade said, hoping his lie would elicit a reaction.

"I wouldn't hear of you departing so soon. I'm afraid I must insist that you stay in Mesaville as my special guests until I decide otherwise."

"There's no need to go overboard on our account."

"But there is. Allow me to show you the full extent of my hospitality so your leader will better appreciate the realities of dealing with me."

"In that case," Blade said, feigning capitulation, "we'll be happy to stay as long as you want."

"I figured you would." Death Master pivoted and addressed a muscular subordinate whose spiked, slick hair had been dyed a bright red. "Horatio, you're responsible for making certain our guests are treated with every courtesy. Any lapses and we will have a heart-to-heart discussion. Do you catch my drift?"

Horatio nodded. "Got you, boss."

The colossus jabbed a finger at two other men. "Take all of the weapons they wish to barter to the armory. Make a complete list of every item."

"Yes, sir," one of the pair answered.

Death Master glanced at Blade. "With your permission, of course."

"Be our guest. We trust you."

"As well you should. Just ask around. You'll discover that my word is

law and I never cheat a customer."

The three Force members gave the extra arms to the two men, both of whom grunted under their heavy loads as they departed.

"Now you can eat, drink, and revel in life," Death Master said and encompassed the crowd in a sweeping glare. "Who ordered the music to be switched off and gave permission for the dancers to take a break? I am not pleased."

Immediately the club swung into high gear with the discordant music and the rowdy customers competing to be heard.

Blade leaned toward the titan. "You have them well trained," he said, almost having to shout to be heard.

The most malevolent expression imaginable came over Death Master's visage. "Don't I though? It's a point worth keeping in mind."

"I most definitely will."

Death Master returned to his seat and reached out to stroke Claire's chin. She seemed frozen in place, petrified into docile submission.

Pivoting away from the table, Blade took a deep breath and mentally counted to ten. Total revulsion sparked a surging impulse to empty his M-16 into the fiend's head. He inadvertently started when a heavy hand fell on his left shoulder and Horatio stepped in front of him.

"What would you like first, big guy? Some brews maybe?"

"A drink would be nice."

"Then follow me." Horatio wheeled and strode toward the bar.

Blade nodded at his companions, and they stayed in their escort's wake. He was acutely conscious of the many eyes raking his form. Don't fly off the handle, he told himself. Tolerate everything until you find Grizzly. The resolution provoked a train of thought.

Death Master, he realized, was a hybrid, a being embodying both human and bestial traits. He'd known many others in his time, mutations produced either by radiation scrambling the genetic components of

embryos in the womb or by deliberate design in the case of those genetically engineered by warped scientists. He guessed Death Master to be a product of the first type since the genetically engineered variety possessed clear-cut physical characteristics of the animals they resembled. Cat-men looked just like walking cats. Dog-men would be mistaken for canines if they didn't walk on two legs. But Death Master exhibited a grotesque combination of traits that suggested embryonic deformity.

"Barkeep, give us beers all around," Horatio ordered as they neared the bar.

"Do they have any water?" Blade asked.

"You're kidding me, right?"

"We just crossed the Burn Belt. What do you think?"

Horatio chuckled. "I see what you mean." He placed his elbows on the bar and addressed one of the bartenders. "Frank, baby, change that order to water. These folks are parched after crossing the desert."

"Comin' right up."

Blade placed his back against the bar and surveyed the fun and games. He saw a man fondling a woman's breasts and another guy with his hand up a willing partner's skirt.

"Fun place," Athena cracked, standing on his right.

"Reminds me of every dive I've ever been in," Havoc commented, standing beside her.

"Been in a lot, have you?" Athena responded.

To Blade's surprise, he saw Death Master stand and pull Claire erect, clasp her tightly, and begin dancing slowly despite the frenzied beat of the music. She moved mechanically, her face blank.

Horatio noticed the direction of the Warrior's stare and chuckled. "Looks like the boss is going to get himself a new piece tonight."

"Does he get a piece often?"

"He beds his main squeeze, Lolita, just about every night, and then screws one or two others. The guy ain't human."

"I've noticed."

"Claire will have the time of her life, and she'll be well paid."

"He pays those he beds?"

"Yep. Not Lolita, of course, or any of the other regulars. Just the new snatch he picks up on the side."

"Regulars?"

"Yeah. Those other bimbos sitting at his table and a few others live at his house. They're his harem. They take the pressure off Lolita, if you get my drift."

"He must need a lot of vitamins."

"Nope," Horatio said, taking the remark seriously. "The boss don't eat nothing but raw meat." He paused. "Maybe I should try his diet some time."

"I hear there are other hybrids in Mesaville," Blade said conversationally.

"Other what?"

"You know. Men and women who are part animal or whatever."

"Oh, them. Yeah, there are a bunch of freaks here."

"Do you ever refer to your boss as a freak?"

Gulping air, Horatio looked all around to see if anyone had heard, then sidled closer and said out of the corner of his mouth, "Don't ever make a crack like that in public again unless you want to lose your head. The boss can't stand being called that He considers himself different from the other freaks, special in a way."

"Thanks for the tip."

The bartender brought a tray bearing three glasses of water and a mug of greenish-yellow liquid reeking to high heaven.

"Thanks," Horatio said and lifted the mug to his lips. He drank deeply and sighed when done.

Athena sniffed loudly. "What are you drinking?"

"A brewski, lady."

"Do you mean a beer?"

"Yep. Mesaville has its own brewery. We put out ten thousand gallons of this stuff a month."

"What are the ingredients?"

Horatio peered into his mug. "I don't know. Who cares? The stuff tastes great and really hits the spot. Everybody drinks it."

"I'd imagine constipation isn't much of a problem in Mesaville?"

"Huh?"

"Never mind."

A commotion erupted at the front entrance, and suddenly a man sailed through the air and crashed on top of a table, knocking glasses in all directions. Into view stalked a pair of hybrids. They paused just inside the doorway and arrogantly surveyed the club, causing another general hush to descend.

"Uh-oh," Horatio said softly. "This could be trouble."

Both hybrids were the same size, six feet tall and approximately 200 pounds. Both wore black loincloths and nothing else. On the right stood a creature combining the physical characteristics of a man and a wild boar. Short, bristling hair covered him from the top of his head to his feet. His nose resembled a snout. His eyes were dark and beady. And jutting upward from his lower lip were two tapered tusks, one below each cheek. He snorted and glared with ill-concealed contempt at the assembled patrons.

On the left was a being whose essentially hairless, pinkish skin bore

wrinkle after wrinkle. His dome of a head glistened in the light, as did the long ivory tusks hanging six inches down from his chin.

Blade knew they had been created in test tubes by a skilled genetic engineer. He recognized the hybrid on the right as a boar-man, but it took longer for him to identify the traits of the second figure as being the commingled features of a human and a walrus.

"The boar is called Slasher," Horatio revealed. "The other one is named Blackjack. They get their kicks by stomping humans into the dirt."

"Death Master allows them to indulge in such behavior?"

"So long as they don't go around killing people right and left, they're permitted to do as they please. The boss rarely has a hybrid killed because the damn things are real crowd pleasers at the games."

Slasher and Blackjack stalked forward. Customers in their path hastened to get elsewhere. The pair kicked chairs aside and knocked tables over as they made a beeline for the bar, but they only covered a dozen feet before a low, cold voice brought them to a halt.

"I trust the two of you plan to behave yourselves."

The hybrids spun.

"Death Master!" Slasher blurted in a nasal tone.

"We didn't see you there" said Blackjack, his voice low and booming.

"Obviously."

"We're just out having a blast," Slasher said. "You know how it is."

"Indeed I do. I hope you will remember how it is, and keep in mind the next games are the day after tomorrow."

"Sure, we know," Blackjack mid.

"Excellent. Then have fun." The titan sat down and yanked Claire onto his lap.

Captain Havoc leaned toward the Warrior. "I say we get out of here and

go find you know who," he whispered.

"Who?" Horatio asked.

"No one in particular," Blade said with a reproving glance at the officer. "Besides, I don't want to leave until after I have a chat with the two gentlemen who just entered."

"Say what?" Horatio said.

Subdued conversation spontaneously rippled among the patrons as the pair of hybrids neared the bar.

Blade slung the M-16 over his left shoulder and stepped directly into their path. "Hello."

Shocked by the Warrior's effrontery, the mutations halted and regarded him suspiciously.

"What the hell do you want?" Slasher snapped.

"I have a few coins on me and I'd like to buy both of you brewskis."

Blackjack squinted up at the rugged face above his, "Why should you want to buy us drinks, human? We don't know you."

"Can't a fellow be neighborly?"

"What are you really after?" Slasher asked.

"Yeah," added Blackjack. "Humans are never friendly to us. You must have an ulterior motive."

"Do you want the brews or not?"

Slasher scrutinized the giant's physique. "Who are you, mister? You're not as big as Death Master, but you sure as hell have more muscles than any stinking human I've ever seen."

"I eat my veggies."

"What?"

"My name is Blade."

Blackjack jerked his thumb at the Bowies. "You any good with those toothpicks?"

"I'm still alive," Blade told them.

The hybrids burst into laughter.

"You're not half bad for a scuzzy human," Slasher complimented him. "Maybe I'll take a drink after all."

"Too late," Blade said.

Both hybrids did double takes.

"What the hell do you mean?" Slasher growled.

"I mean I've changed my mind," Blade said calmly and loudly, so everyone in Club Royale could hear. "Why should I buy drinks for a pair of morons who don't have the intelligence of a turnip between them?"

All conversation ceased. For an electrifying span of five seconds no one moved. Then, with a bellow of bestial rage, Slasher pounced.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The brief flurry of action occurred so amazingly fast that later no two patrons could agree on exactly how the newcomer did what he did. Everyone saw a blurred motion and gaped as Slasher catapulted rearward and slammed down on a table, upending it and falling to the floor. A heartbeat later, Blackjack was held in a grip of steel above the grim giant's head, a brawny hand clamped on his throat and another on his loincloth. The walrus-man bleated like a terrified goat and vainly struggled to break free. "You two dummies should learn better manners," Blade said, grinning. His shoulders rippled as he heaved Blackjack to the floor.

Slasher snarled as he surged upright and crouched. "I'm going to tear you limb from limb, sucker! No human does that to me and lives."

"I do," Blade responded, watching the second hybrid shove to its feet. "If you want to go around treating others like dirt, then you must expect

to be treated like dirt in return."

"Don't lecture us, prick!" Slasher screeched.

Blackjack's mouth opened and closed, his large tusks quivering. "I'm going to rip your heart out."

A new voice, quiet but commanding in its forcefulness, intruded into the confrontation, and both hybrids stiffened. "Neither of you are going to touch a hair on his head."

Slasher and Blackjack whirled.

The speaker had entered when all eyes were on the fight, and he now stood only ten feet from the irate mutations. Like them, he wore a black loincloth. In appearance he was a fascinating cross between a human and a bear. Only five-feet-eight, he possessed the build of a powerhouse. Dense limbs resembling thick columns complemented an exceptionally thick torso, and the thickness was further accented by a pronounced bump between his shoulder blades. His shoulders and upper arms were masterpieces of bulging might.

A brown coat of fur covered his entire form, although the hairs on his face were shorter. He had concave cheeks, a pointed chin, and long nostrils. Deep, dark eyes regarded the world from under a receding brow. Circular ears framed his temples. His mouth was large, his lips thin, and when he spoke sharp teeth were revealed. Oversized hands hung at his sides, his prominent knuckles the size of apples.

"What's he to you?" Slasher addressed the new arrival.

"Butt out of this, Grizzly," Blackjack warned.

The bear-man walked toward them and elevated his hands to his waist. "What happens if I don't?"

Blackjack took a step backward, his eyes glued to Grizzly's thick fingers, to the flaps of skin above each fingernail. "Now hold on. I don't want to tangle with you."

"This puke insulted us," Slasher said, indicating the Warrior. "We owe him."

Grizzly stopped and ever-so-slowly started to extend his fingers to their full length. "Maybe I didn't make myself clear."

Now it was Slasher's turn to stare nervously at the flaps of skin. "For crying out loud, chill out. If you don't want us to touch him, we won't."

Smiling, Grizzly let his hands relax. "A wise decision."

"I thought we were your buddies," Blackjack said.

"You are."

"Yet you'd unleash those swords of yours on us?" Blackjack glanced at the Warrior. "What is this lowlife to you?"

"A friend."

"Where do you know him from?" Slasher asked.

"That's my business," Grizzly said. "Now why don't you guys go enjoy yourselves elsewhere while I shoot the breeze?"

"Sure. Whatever you want," Slasher answered. Muttering under his breath he headed for the entrance.

"I don't think the others will like the idea of you siding with a human against us," Blackjack warned and followed the boar-man.

Slowly the club came back to life. The music blasted from hidden speakers and the women on the pedestals resumed dancing.

Blade stepped up to Grizzly and grinned. "It's great to see you again."

"I wish I could say the same." The hybrid's eyes strayed past the Warrior to Athena and Captain Havoc. He completely ignored her and nodded at the officer. "Who is he?"

"Mike Havoc, Jim's elder brother," Blade explained.

"I can see the resemblance," Grizzly said and squarely faced the giant. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Looking for you."

"Why?"

Blade's forehead creased in confusion. He'd expected the hybrid to be overjoyed at seeing Athena again, yet the bear-man was giving her the cold shoulder. Shifting, he pointed at her and asked, "Can't you guess?"

Not even bothering to look at Athena, Grizzly snorted and said, "Is she here looking for a great story?"

"What's gotten into you?"

"Not a damn thing. So do me a favor and leave Mesaville in the morning."

Blade was about to tell Grizzly that they couldn't depart just yet when he sensed someone at his right side and pivoted to see Athena, her face a mask of misery, moisture forming in the corners of her eyes.

"You don't seem surprised to see me," she said, sounding hoarse.

With transparent reluctance, Grizzly finally looked straight at her. "Well, well, well. If it isn't the lady who likes to play dead."

Consternation etched Athena's features. "You knew?"

"Of course."

"Impossible," she countered. "The coffin was never opened."

"Aren't you forgetting something?"

"What?"

Grizzly tapped his nose. "I have the senses of the animal I resemble. My hearing is twice as good as yours, and my sense of smell puts yours to shame. If the wind was right I could detect your scent from half a mile away. So when I leaned over your coffin back in Los Angeles to inhale your fragrance one last time, I was confused when my nose told me that you weren't inside. At first I figured I'd made a mistake, that undertakers must do something to corpses that eliminates odors." Grizzly paused and frowned. "It wasn't until I'd left California for the Outlands that it hit me. My nose had been right. The reason we weren't allowed to see your body was because you hadn't died. But you wanted all of us to believe you were

dead, which could only mean you never wanted to see me again." He paused once more and asked cruelly, "How am I doing so far, bitch?"

"I didn't want to hurt you," Athena said weakly.

"Now what makes you think that faking your death hurt me? Because I was fool enough to love you?"

"Grizzly, please," Athena pleaded, tears trickling down her cheeks.

"Don't expect mercy from me."

Athena blinked and gazed at the nearby tables where customers were watching in fascination. "Can't we go somewhere more private and talk?"

"We have nothing to say to each other."

"I do. Why do you think I came all this way?"

"I really don't know," Grizzly said softly. "And I honestly don't care." He started to turn.

"Wait," Athena said, grabbing his arm.

Grizzly recoiled as if zapped by a million volts of electricity, jerking his arm loose and glaring at her. "Don't ever touch me again."

"You're not being fair."

"Me?" Grizzly thundered so that everyone in the club heard. He raised his right hand as if to slap her, then changed his mind. The hand came down slowly. "I don't want to have anything to do with you."

"How about me?" Blade said. "Let me treat you to a drink for old times' sake."

"Sure. Whatever you want. The bartender knows what I like," Grizzly replied, his eyes on his former lover. He whirled and went to a table that was already occupied. One look at his face and the two men seated there decided they should go seek a good time at another establishment.

Blade turned around and retrieved his water and suddenly the bartender was right there.

"I heard him," Frank said, depositing a tall glass on the counter. "This is his usual."

"What is it?"

"Straight whiskey. He has nine or ten of these a night."

"Thanks," Blade said. He glanced at Havoc and Athena. "The two of you stay right here until I'm done."

Athena nodded and stepped to the bar. "Give me a whiskey too," she told Frank.

"Stick to water," Blade instructed her.

"Screw you."

"You're making a mistake."

"What's one more?"

Shrugging, Blade walked to Grizzly's table and took a seat across from the hybrid. From his position he could keep an eye on Havoc and Athena on his right and see Death Master's table across the room. "Here's your rotgut," he said and shoved the whiskey to the hybrid.

"*Gracias*," Grizzly said. He took a swig and grimaced. "This stuff tastes like horse piss."

"Then why do you drink it?"

"Helps me forget," Grizzly admitted frankly. He scrutinized the Warrior's features and smiled affectionately, "Damn it's good to see you again."

"I thought you wanted me to leave in the morning?"

"I want the bitch to go. But it would be nice to spend some time with you reminiscing about old times."

"I'd appreciate it if you didn't refer to her like that."

Grizzly swallowed more whiskey. "Can't help how I feel."

"Or are you denying your feelings?"

"It's been a whole year, Blade. Anything I felt for her has long since dried up."

The Warrior leaned on his elbows. "Funny. I was under the impression the two of you were in love."

"We were."

"Is that a fact? Well, an Elder at the home once told me true love never dies. Time and distance mean nothing to two people who genuinely care."

A derisive snort burst from Grizzly's lips. "I'd forgotten how tricky you can be. You can talk rings around a tree."

"You're evading the issue."

"There is no issue. Why can't you get it through your thick skull that Athena and I are no longer an item? Let's talk about you. I take it the Force is back in action?"

"Yep. The new team was formed about four months ago. Frankly, they mesh a lot better than the first squad did," Blade said.

"That wouldn't be hard. We were always at each other's throats," Grizzly said.

"Not always."

The hybrid smiled wistfully. "Yeah, we did have some good times, together, didn't we? Kicked some heavy duty butt in our time."

"There's another hybrid on the Force," Blade said.

"Really?" Grizzly leaned toward the giant. "Anyone I know?"

"I believe so. He's a cat-man named Jaguarundi."

"I do know him," Grizzly said. "He's a prissy turkey but the fastest thing on two legs."

"He wanted to come but I wouldn't let him."

"Why not?"

"This was personal, not an official mission."

"I'm surprised you let her talk you into it."

"She didn't. This was my idea. I asked her if she wanted to come and she said yes."

"Your idea?" Grizzly chuckled. "Did you really traipse all the way out here to the middle of the Outlands just to see me?"

"Yes."

"You're crazy."

"There's a method to my madness," Blade said. "I hoped I would find you so I could extend my invitation."

Grizzly paused with the glass halfway to his mouth. "Huh?"

"I'd like to have you back on the Force."

The bear-man's mouth slackened, and for a few seconds his expression was absurdly comical. He regained his composure and gulped a mouthful of whiskey, then wiped the back of his hairy hand across his lips. "No doubt about it, old friend. You are the craziest son of a bitch on the planet. Me rejoin the Force?" He cackled at the notion.

"Didn't you like being on the Force before?"

"I got used to it."

Blade drummed his fingers on the table and surveyed the club. Athena was trying to see how quickly she could finish her whiskey, and Havoc was eyeing her with concern. "Is there something holding you here?"

"This is as good a place as any," Grizzly said defensively.

"Mesaville is the foulest armpit in the western hemisphere."

"Don't let Death Master hear you say that."

"You let me worry about him."

Grizzly set down his glass and blinked. "Are you saying what I think you're saying?"

"Take it any way you want," Blade said, sipping some water.

"Damn you. You are, aren't you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Bullshit. You're going to try and put Death Master out of operation and close down Mesaville. Am I right?"

"I took an oath to protect the interests of the Federation wherever they might be threatened, and Mesaville is definitely a danger to its very existence."

"What can you hope to accomplish? You're one guy against hundreds."

"Havoc and Athena are with me."

"Big frigging deal. Havoc ain't in your class and Athena never was much good at fighting."

"We'll get by."

The hybrid leaned back, tilting his chair until the front legs were off the floor, and peered intently at the Warrior. "You're up to something again."

"Me?"

"You're always up to something. Sure, you act dumb sometimes, but your mind is always chugging away a mile a minute. You've got a plan. What is it?"

"I'm playing this one by ear."

"Well, don't expect me to help you."

"I don't. But I would appreciate you giving serious consideration to rejoining the team."

"You've got Jag on the team. What do you need with two hybrids?"

"His abilities are different from yours. The two of you would complement each other."

"No dice."

"Suit yourself," Blade said, staring into his glass, and waited a bit before saying, "You still haven't told me what you do here?"

A shadow fell over the table and a sibilant voice stated, "He kills those who annoy me."

Blade looked up into the smirking visage of Death Master.

CHAPTER NINE

"Mind if I sit with you?" the towering mutant asked, and he promptly took a seat before either Blade or Grizzly could answer. "Now about your question," he said to Blade, "Grizzly here is the favorite at the games. He has been for the past ten months. The people all like him, and I've won more betting on him than I have on all the other hybrids combined. He's very special to me."

Grizzly looked away, clearly embarrassed.

"What are these games I keep hearing about?" Blade asked, inwardly simmering.

"Hasn't anyone told you? Well, at least twice a month special events are held at an arena in the next cavern. I call them the games. Competitions are arranged between my stable of hybrids and various worthy opponents. For good measure I also pit my pets against certain offenders. It's quite thrilling. Everyone in Mesaville goes."

"I take it these pets of yours are rather exceptional?"

Death Master grinned. "Yes, indeed. I've gone to great lengths to collect some of the deadliest mutations alive. Keeping them well fed is quite a challenge."

Blade gazed at the bear-man. "Why didn't you tell me that you work for

him?"

"What difference does it make?" Grizzly snapped, avoiding the Warrior's eyes.

"Why Grizzly, there's no need to be shy," Death Master said. "You're the most efficient killing machine I've ever encountered. You should be proud of your skills."

"Since when should a person be proud about being able to kill better than others?" Blade said.

Death Master glanced at the Warrior. "Strange words coming from a gang member, eh?"

Chiding himself for being an idiot, Blade tried to allay the mutant's suspicion. "I simply meant that killing can hardly be construed as a creative talent."

"You know," Death Master responded, "you are, without a doubt, the most extraordinarily intelligent raider I have ever met. And I know because I am extraordinarily intelligent."

"I'm no great shakes."

"So you say. But I can see my initial assessment of you was correct. I'm glad I invited you to stay for a week."

Grizzly's interest perked up. "A week?"

"Yes. The three Bombers are here to arrange a barter agreement for their leader, Lobo. I plan to show them every hospitality Mesaville has to offer."

The bear-man's features clouded. "They're my friends."

"So I've gathered."

"If anything happens to them, the person responsible answers to me."

"I'll be sure the word is spread. Practically everyone in Mesaville is scared to death of you, and justifiably so. Your reputation is justly deserved," Death Master said, a note of insincerity in his tone. He abruptly

stood. "I must be going. Enjoy yourself and we'll talk again real soon." With that, he made toward the exit and his entourage followed.

Grizzly twisted to watch the mutant leave, then swung toward the Warrior. "Get out of Mesaville tonight."

"I can't."

"Didn't you hear him? He's planning to snuff all three of you."

Blade glanced at the doorway. "You think so?" he asked innocently.

"I know so. I know him like a book. He doesn't believe whatever you told him about being Bombers, and he'll arrange a fitting end to your stay in Mesaville."

"Why do you work for him, Grizzly?"

"You're changing the damn subject."

The Warrior reached across the table and touched the hybrid's wrist "I'm not leaving without you."

"Forget me. I'm not going to join the lousy Force again."

"Come with us anyway. This is so place for you."

"How would you know? I was genetically bred to be the perfect assassin by the wacko Doktor. Slicing and dicing is in my blood. So what if I settled here so I could forget all about Athena and the Force? So what if I let my animal-half take control now and then? The jerks he pits me against are scumbags. So who does it hurt?"

"You," Blade stated.

Grizzly hissed and stood. "I'm wasting my breath talking to you. If you want to commit suicide, be my guest." He spun and stormed off, glowering at everyone in sight, his fists balled into mallets.

For a few moments Blade sat there, drumming his fingers on the table. The reunion had not gone as he'd expected, but he still hoped to bring the hybrid around. Since Death Master wanted them to stay for a week he'd have plenty of time to try to change Grizzly's mind. He rose and walked to

the bar.

"Why was Grizzly so upset, sir?" Captain Havoc asked.

Horatio picked up on the oversight right away. "Sir? Why did you call him sir?"

The officer had to think fast. "Habit. The Bombers pick certain members as leaders, as officers so to speak. Blade is one of the top guys in our gang."

"Oh," Horatio said, buying the reason. "It's a good thing we don't do the same thing in Mesaville. I can't stand calling anyone sir, except Death Master."

Blade stood behind Athena and watched her down several mouthfuls of whiskey. "I think you've had enough," he told her.

"I'm just getting started."

"No more," Blade said.

"Get lost,"

The Warrior gripped her by the shoulders and whirled her around. Startled, she dropped her glass and gaped at him. "You seem to be forgetting a few things," he said sternly. "As Mike pointed out, I'm in charge. What I say goes. If you give me any lip, I'll toss you over my shoulder and carry you out of here."

Athena glowered, her lips twitching and breathing heavy.

"Remember where you are," Blade said, emphasizing every word.

Glancing at the rowdy patrons, Athena abruptly realized the significance of his statement and let herself relax. "Sorry," she mumbled. "Won't happen again."

"Good." Blade turned to their escort. "Where are we supposed to stay tonight?"

"There's a place reserved for visiting VIPs not far from the club. Why?" Horatio said.

"Take us there."

"You want to crash now? It's still early."

"We've had a rough day. Crossing the desert takes a lot out of a person, as you must know."

Horatio nodded. "I sure do. Okay. I'll take you there." He took a step toward the door.

"Shouldn't we pay for our drinks?" Blade asked.

"Forget about it The boss is picking up your tab," Horatio said and led them outside and to the right along a winding avenue. He looked back to make sure the others were following and coughed. "Say, I couldn't help but overhear back there. What was that business about Athena faking her own death?"

"It's nothing important," Blade answered.

"Sounded to me like Grizzly and she were once an item."

The Warrior frowned, "Sticking your nose where it doesn't belong can be hazardous for your health."

"Hey, lighten up. I didn't mean any harm."

"Of course you didn't." Blade noticed they were entering an area where there were no bars or clubs and fewer people abroad. His gray eyes narrowed when they came near a narrow stretch of the avenue between two structures. He spied two lanterns that had been recently extinguished, as evidenced by the whitish smoke still curling up from them. He pretended to rest his hands on his Bowie hilts while surreptitiously loosening them in their sheaths.

"I'm here to make your every wish come true," Horatio was saying. "Whatever you want, you get. Need a broad tonight? I'll go get a clean one."

"That won't be necessary."

"If Athena wants a stud, I'll scrounge one up. Or she can always have her fun with me."

The proposal brought an appropriate reaction from the journalist, two words that were uttered with the vehemence of an army drill instructor.

"Hey, I was only trying to be helpful," Horatio said.

He came abreast of the first extinguished lantern and paused. "This is odd. Who would snuff out a lantern? It's against the rules. I'd better report it." He moved on.

Blade stared at the narrow gap, not more than four feet wide, and detected a flicker of movement.

"Now where was I?" Horatio said. "Oh, yeah. You wouldn't be sorry if you humped me, Athena. I know how to turn a woman on. Why, I bet I've raped forty or fifty women and not one of them complained about the service."

"Lay a hand on me and I'll cram my M-16 so far up your butt that the bullets will spray out your ears," Athena promised.

"Whoa. Serious hostility. Do you have some problem with sex, lady?" Horatio asked just as he reached the gap and looked back at her.

A hairy fist shot out of the darkness and crashed into the side of Horatio's head. He crumpled soundlessly on the spot, and an instant later two burly forms strode into the open.

"We meet again, sucker," Slasher declared and snorted. "You didn't think we'd let you get away with roughing us up, did you?" added Blackjack with a smirk.

Blade halted and placed his hands on his hips. "Aren't you two mental midgets making a big mistake? Death Master will be ticked off when he hears about this."

"He'll never know," Slasher said. "By the time Horatio wakes up we'll be long gone and the three of you will be dead."

Havoc and Athena stepped forward, one on each side of the Warrior, and leveled their M-16's. "Make a move and you're history," the officer told them.

Slasher laughed, sounding like a hog in heat, and nodded. "Look behind you, jerk."

"I'm not going to fall for that old trick," Havoc said.

Blade shifted and gazed over his left shoulder to discover a third hybrid, a creature exhibiting the characteristics of a human and a weasel, standing ten feet off with a pump action shotgun aimed at their backs, "He's not joking."

"The name is Garo," said the mutation. "Lower the rifles to the ground or I'll blow you in half."

Slasher and Blackjack tittered.

"Do as he says," Blade directed and placed his M-16 down. He stared at the Booby Twins as he straightened. "Death Master will figure out who killed us and feed you to his pets."

"He won't do a thing without proof," Blackjack said. "And there won't be any proof."

"Nobody lays a hand on me and gets away with it," Slasher growled. "Nobody."

Again Blade slowly let his hands drift to his hips, only this time he draped them on his Bowies. "So you'll gun us down without giving us a chance to defend ourselves?"

"Oh, you'll get your chance," Slasher said.

Garo stamped his foot impatiently. "We don't have all night for this. Someone is bound to come along any minute. Get it over with."

"My pleasure," Slasher said, bending at the waist. He slowly stalked toward the Warrior and gestured at Havoc and Athena. "You two stand to one side until this is over. It'll only take a few seconds."

"Do as he says," Blade said.

Captain Havoc adopted a karate stance. "We're in this together, sir."

"That was an order, And quit calling me sir." Blade suddenly shoved

both of them to the side, leaning toward the officer as he did to whisper, "Take out the weasel." His push sent them sprawling, and then he charged to meet Slasher head-on, his arms at his sides, hoping Garo was momentarily confused by the swirl of motion.

Blackjack bellowed, "Look out for the blond guy!"

A .45 boomed and someone screeched in agony.

And then Blade was embroiled in his own combat, ducking under a blow that would have crushed his head to a pulp had it connected and whipping both Bowies out and up, spearing both razor tips into the boar-man's stomach; then driving them in to their hilts.

Utter astonishment covered Slasher's animalistic visage as he grunted and tried to pull loose.

Blade's shoulder and upper arm muscles bunched as he twisted the Bowies and sliced their keen edges upward through the boar-man's midsection, all the way to the sternum. He tore them out and stepped to the right, ready for round two.

Slasher was a statue, his wide eyes gazing down at the blood, internal organs, and sticky abdominal fluid gushing from his ruptured body. Pressing his arms over the slits, he staggered and sank to his knees.

Intent on watching the boar-man, Blade didn't awaken to the new danger until Athena shouted a warning. He perceived a pinkish figure hurtling toward him, and then, a heavy body struck him in the gut, iron arms looped around his waist, and he was propelled onto his back with his assailant on top, his right Bowie jarred from his hands.

"Die!" Blackjack roared and swung his fists twice.

The blows connected, hitting Blade on the jaw and dazing him. He felt rigid fingers gouge into his neck and knew the creature was trying to crush his throat. His left arm was pinned under Blackjack's leg. His right was still loose. He rammed a punch into the mutation's chest, but it was like striking a block of granite.

Athena materialized on the left, her M-16 pointing at Blackjack's head, but before she could squeeze the trigger he let go of the Warrior and

lashed out, backhanding her on the temple and sending her sailing backwards.

The enraged genetic deviate abruptly bent to one side and grabbed the right Bowie. He raised it aloft, grinned in triumph, and tensed to plunge the blade into the Warrior's heart.

CHAPTER TEN

Blade brought his right knee up into the hybrid's spine and lifted his right arm at the very millisecond the Bowie descended, causing Blackjack to lurch forward and making it easier to parry the beastly hand holding the knife with his forearms. He gripped the creature's left wrist, preventing Blackjack from drawing the Bowie back again, and rammed his left knee into the same spot as before.

Snarling in fury, Blackjack tried to tear his arm from the Warrior's grasp. He arched his right fist at the giant's face and connected with a glancing blow to the cheek.

Suddenly a piercing kiai rent the air and Captain Havoc flew out of nowhere, executing a perfect yoko-tobi-heri, a flying side kick. His right boot slammed squarely into Blackjack's nose and knocked the hybrid off the Warrior.

Blade scrambled to his feet, the officer at his side.

Still clutching the right Bowie, blood flowing from his crushed nostrils down over his mouth and chin onto his tusks, Blackjack growled and closed in, wildly swiping the knife back and forth.

The Warrior and the officer parted, breaking in different directions.

Blackjack went after the giant, lunging rashly.

Blade countered with his left Bowie, blocking the thrust, then slid in close and drove his knee into the mutation's groin. He tried to plant the knife in the walrus-man's chest, but Blackjack skipped to the left, gurgling in agony.

In darted Captain Havoc, intending to take the hybrid by surprise from

the rear. He started to flick his right leg out.

Unexpectedly, in the blink of an eye, Blackjack swung his right arm in a semicircle and boxed the officer in the ear, toppling Havoc where he stood. Blackjack dropped to one knee and pressed the tip of his Bowie against Havoc's neck. "Drop your knife or he dies."

The Warrior had no choice. He let the Bowie drop.

Blackjack smirked. "Now come here, bastard."

Still on his knees nearby, Slasher mustered a grin and shouted, "Kill the prick! Kill him!"

Blade stepped slowly forward, his hands at his sides, his eyes on Blackjack's shoulders. There was a chance he could turn the tide, a slim one but the only opportunity he would have, and he must be ready when the time came.

"I'm going to cut you into little pieces," Blackjack bragged.

"Do it!" Slasher urged.

Every nerve tingled as Blade came within striking range. He saw the hybrid's shoulders start to move and he whirled, turning completely around, knowing Blackjack wouldn't be able to stop the thrust in time, and praying he was right, praying Blackjack had speared the knife at his torso instead of the throat. He felt the knife thud into his backpack and whipped his right elbow around, hitting the arm that had held the second knife and hearing a distinct snap. In a fluid motion he sank into a crouch and moved a yard to the right to give himself room in case the mutant pressed the attack.

Blackjack snarled and backpedaled, holding his broken left arm against his side.

"Finish him off!" Slasher cried.

Eager to end the fight, hearing voices of alarm upraised all around them, Blade dove, his outstretched hands closing on one of the Colts at Havoc's waist. He yanked the pistol out, extended his right arm, and saw fleeting fear register on Blackjack's face.

"No! Please! I don't want to die."

"Tough," Blade said and fired, the slug boring between the hybrids eyes and exploding out the rear of his cranium. He shifted, aiming at the boar-man.

"Screw you," Slasher said weakly, defiant to the last.

"Ditto," Blade responded and blew the creature's brain apart with a precise shot.

Now Mesaville was in a tumult. Footsteps pounded on the stone, coming from all directions, and there were countless confused shouts as everyone demanded to know what was going on.

The Warrior stood. He reached behind him and wrenched the Bowie from the backpack, slid it in its sheath, then retrieved his other knife. Sticking the Colt back in Havoc's holster, he was about to try to revive his companions when Mesaville's inhabitants finally arrived on the scene.

They came from both directions, a motley horde of men, women, and a few mutations. Upon spying the bodies they halted, keeping a healthy distance from the giant in the leather vest who rose and glared at both groups. No one dared speak.

Blade regarded them with scarcely concealed contempt, waiting for someone to request an explanation or challenge him. Only when Athena groaned did he move, heading toward her prone form.

Someone else got there first.

From out of the throng on the left, a furry figure dashed up to her and knelt. "Athena?" Grizzly said, examining her for signs of a wound.

"She was knocked out," Blade said.

The bear-man gazed at each of the dead hybrids, then at the Warrior. "You never should have brought her here."

"I couldn't stop her."

"Damn you all to hell for what you're doing to me."

"I'm sorry. I truly am. But we both know it had to be."

Athena groaned again, then abruptly opened her eyes. Astonishment set in when she beheld the one beside her. "Grizzly?"

"It's not the Easter Bunny," the bear-man snapped and swiftly rose. "I was just checking you for Blade to see if you were hurt."

"Oh." Athena sat up, grimacing, and looked around her. "How is Mike?"

Blade stepped over to the officer and bent down. There was a trace of blood where his ear had been split along the edge; if the blow had been any harder, his ear would have been flattened to a pulp. He gently gave the officer's shoulders a shake. "Mike? Rise and shine."

A commotion in the crowd on the right caused Blade to straighten and swing around with his hands on his Bowies, facing the gap.

"Let us through!" someone ordered. "Get the hell out of the way!"

Seconds later the colossus of Mesaville appeared. A clear path magically materialized in front of him, and he strode into the open, eight armed men in leather attending him.

Death Master stared at Horatio, then at the dead hybrids, his eyes lingering on each one.

"Is this your idea of hospitality?" Blade waded right in, gesturing at the corpses. "If so, it leaves a lot to be desired."

"What happened?"

"What does it look like happened? We were jumped by three of your mutations and they tried to kill us," Blade said and then asked a question to which he already knew the answer. "Did you put them up to it?"

Some in the throng gasped. Everyone strained to listen.

Glowing, Death Master walked closer and halted next to Slasher. "I certainly did not," he answered angrily. "Why would I want to have you killed when I'm eager to set up trade relations with your gang?"

"You tell me."

One of the men in leather pointed a shotgun at the Warrior. "No one talks to our boss that way, bozo."

"Put down the gun, Eric," Death Master commanded, and the bodyguard immediately obeyed. He looked at Blade. "I am sorry this occurred. In front of all these witnesses you have my formal public apology. Obviously Slasher and Blackjack were upset over the dispute they had with you earlier and wanted revenge. Garo was probably recruited to help them."

Blade glanced at the weasel-man Havoc had shot. "That would be my guess," he lied.

"I can guarantee it won't happen again."

"I hope so."

"No hard feelings?" Death Master asked testily.

"Of course not," Blade fibbed again.

At that moment Horatio revived and struggled to his feet, staring at all the people and the corpses in bewilderment. "What the hell happened? Who hit me, boss?"

"Does it matter?" Death Master asked and moved toward his underling. "You were supposed to watch out for my guests, to make sure they weren't harmed. Because of your incompetence they were nearly killed."

Horatio licked his lips and took a terrified pace backwards. "But I was sucker punched. I didn't have a chance to do a thing."

"Most unfortunate. As you well know, I'm not one to forgive carelessness." Death Master stopped, towering over the hapless escort.

Blade could have prevented what transpired next by coming to Horatio's defense, by explaining the man wasn't to blame, but he refrained for two reasons. First, Horatio had overheard too much of the conversation between Grizzly and Athena. Second, Death Master had set Horatio up to take this fall, so why not let the tyrant dispose of the snitch

before Horatio could reveal incriminating information?

"Please, boss. You've got to listen to me," Horatio declared. "I've got something to tell—"

Death Master's hands swept up and clamped on the subordinate's head. A sharp lightning twist to the right, another to the left, and Horatio was dead on his feet, his spine snapped, his eyes blank, and his mouth slack, unable to utter a cry, forever mute. Disdainfully, Death Master let the body sink to the ground. "This is his just reward for displeasing me," he announced to the crowd.

Blade suddenly became aware of Captain Havoc standing on his left. "Are you all right?"

"I hurt a little, but it's nothing a case of aspirin wouldn't cure. What have I missed other than Death Master's heart-to-heart with the idiot?"

"I'll fill you in later." Blade walked to his M-16 and picked it up, then tossed the officer's to him.

Death Master pointed at the shotgun wielder. "Eric, you will take Horatio's place, and I trust you will be more diligent than he was. Show our guests to their quarters."

"Right away, boss," Eric said and motioned at the Warrior. "Follow me."

Blade glanced at Grizzly. "Care to tag along? We'd enjoy your company."

"I don't think so."

"Come on," Blade prompted. "We can talk about the good old days."

"Please," Athena chimed in.

The bear-man hesitated, undecided.

"Perhaps it would be better if Grizzly didn't accompany you," Death Master interjected. "You must require rest after your long journey and the stress of being attacked."

"I'll go," Grizzly declared.

Suppressing a grin, Blade nodded at Eric. "Lead the way, Yorick,"

"The name is Eric."

"Whatever."

Death Master stood and watched them wend through the crowd, his alien features successfully screening his inner emotions. He waved just before they turned a corner.

"Nice guy," Havoc said.

"He scares me to death," Athena confessed.

Their new escort heard her and laughed. "You're not as dumb as you look, bitch."

No sooner were the words out of Eric's mouth than Grizzly was grabbing his shoulder and spinning him around. The hybrid's left hand came up, the fingers rigid, and out popped his five-inch claws, one on each finger. He held them close to Eric's eyes and growled. "Ever wondered how a loaf of bread feels?"

The implication wasn't lost on the gunner. He tried not to show his fear and said evenly, "What's eating you?"

"She's a friend of mine. Insult her and you insult me."

"Hey, no one told me."

Grizzly slowly let his arm drop and relaxed his fingers. The claws automatically retracted. "Now you do." He gave Eric a shove. "Keep going and keep quiet."

They walked another 40 yards and arrived at a two-story stone house. A flight of chiseled steps led from the sidewalk to the upper level. Lights were already on inside.

"These are the VIP quarters," Eric announced with a hasty glance at the bear-man. "You have the top floor. I'll be on the bottom. If you want anything give a yell."

"Will do," Bade said and added casually. "Are the lights always kept on?"

"Nope. The boss sent someone over earlier to make sure the place was shipshape."

"How thoughtful." Blade went up the stairs onto a balcony and gazed out over the sea of monoliths, domes, and spires before passing through an arched doorway into a comfortably furnished living room. Connected to the living room on the right and the left were bedrooms; straight ahead was the bath.

"Not bad," Captain Havoc said, admiring the plush couch and twin chairs.

"For a prison," Blade said.

Grizzly and Athena lingered near the doorway, neither bothering to comment.

"I don't know about the rest of you, but I could use some food," Blade said.

"I'm with you, sir," Havoc agreed. "I worked up an appetite back there."

"I'm not hungry," Athena said.

"Me neither," Grizzly stated.

The Warrior motioned for the captain to join him, and together they walked onto the balcony and leaned over the side. "Eric, are you awake down there?" Blade yelled.

"Of course," came the huffy reply. The escort stepped onto the avenue, tilting his neck so he could see the upper floor. "What do you need?"

"Food. Can you dig anything up for us?"

"Why didn't you eat at the club?"

Blade shrugged. "We weren't hungry then. Will you get us something or not?"

"Yeah," Eric replied, although he didn't seem very keen on the idea. "But all of you are to stay put while I'm gone. I don't want anyone wandering off."

"We won't budge," Blade promised.

"Okay. What do you want? There's a bar near here where they serve great sandwiches and brewskis. I can be there and back in five minutes."

"There's no need to rush," Blade said. "Well pass on the brews but sandwiches would be nice."

"What kind? Heroes, plain bread, or hot off the grill?"

"Surprise us."

Nodding curtly, Eric wheeled and ran to fill their order.

"Now we can talk freely," Blade said.

Havoc chuckled. "You sent him off on purpose, didn't you?"

"What do you think?" Blade said. "Now let's get down to cases. Since we know Death Master is trying to kill us, each of us will pull a guard shift tonight. Do you want the first, second, or third?" He paused and chuckled. "There might even be a fourth."

"You've lost me, sir," the officer said. "How do we know Death Master wants us dead?"

"Because he engineered our encounter with Slasher and Blackjack."

Captain Havoc appeared perplexed. "I must have missed something somewhere along the line. I thought they were after us because of the fight you had with them."

"The fight was legitimate. I provoked them in the hope word would get back to Grizzly about the new guy in town who whipped two hybrids. Little did I know he'd come walking in the door," Blade said and laughed.

"Okay. I follow you so far."

"Think back. The two hybrids came into the club and Death Master

warned them to behave themselves, remember?"

"Yeah."

"But two minutes later they're all set to tear me apart. Did Death Master interfere?"

"No."

"Which struck me as odd, when you consider he's the supreme power in Mesaville. Everyone here, with the exception of Grizzly, is terrified of him. With just one word he could have brought Slasher and Blackjack into line."

"But it all happened so fast that maybe he didn't have time."

"That's a possibility, but I suspect he didn't intervene because he saw a way to eliminate us without arousing suspicion."

"You've lost me again, sir," Havoc said.

"Despite what Death Master told us when we met him, he didn't believe for a minute that we're gang members. He's dropped enough hints to convince me he suspects we're linked to the California Army. But he doesn't have proof, and he won't make an overt move against us until he does."

"Why not?"

"Because the success of his operation here is based on the trust he's inspired in the gangs. They know they'll get a fair deal when they travel to Mesaville to trade and celebrate. If he cheated them or mistreated any gang members, the rest would stop coming and he'd be out of business. Didn't you hear him bragging about how he always keeps his word? The irony of his den of iniquity is that Death Master's honesty keeps Mesaville running," Blade said.

"How does all of this tie in with Slasher and Blackjack?"

"They were convenient scapegoats. When Death Master saw us fight, he realized he had the perfect means to dispose of us without pointing the finger of blame at himself. He probably instructed them to jump us on the

way here."

"Wait a minute," Havoc said, recalling the events of the evening. "The two hybrids left the club way before Death Master did. Do you think he had the time to find them and set the hit up?"

"They might have been nearby. Or he could have sent one of his henchmen to trail them and let him know where they went. For that matter, he might have had a goon relay his orders, but I doubt it. He wouldn't want anyone else to know of his scheme."

"The scenario you present is possible, but it's all supposition."

"Call it an educated guess. The clincher for me was the presence of Garo."

"The weasel-man? Why?"

"Because he wasn't involved in the fight. What did he have to gain by helping Slasher and Blackjack when he must have heard that we are Death Master's special guests? He knew to buck Death Master merits death. I doubt he would have assisted them unless he knew in advance Death Master sanctioned the attack."

"Again, it's pure speculation."

"I suppose so. But I'm not about to give our host the benefit of the doubt. Until we leave Mesaville, we're not letting our guard down for a second."

"Okay by me," Havoc said. "What's our next step?" We'll rest up tonight and check out Mesaville in the morning. I imagine that most of the gang members are late nighters; we should have the streets pretty much to ourselves."

The captain pursed his lips and stared into the distance. "I just thought of something."

"What?"

"If you're right about Death Master, then the real reason he insisted we stay here a week is to give him enough time to either snuff us out or

uncover the proof he needs to justify killing us."

Blade smiled. "You're learning."

"Geez. And I thought I was sharp. Where did you ever learn to think so deviously?"

The Warrior chuckled. "It comes naturally once you're married."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I think he did that on purpose," Athena said softly, hoping to break the uncomfortable silence hanging oppressively in the living room.

"Who?" Grizzly asked absently, his hands clasped behind his back as he stepped slowly toward a chair.

"Blade," Athena said, moving closer to take a seat on the couch.

"What are you talking about?"

"He deliberately took Mike outside so we would be alone."

Grizzly glanced through the doorway to where the Warrior and the officer stood discussing the ruler of Mesaville. "I wouldn't put it past him," he concurred. "Blade is the trickiest SOB I know." He stopped near the chair, but did not sit down.

"He's been tactfully pressuring me to resolve everything between us," Athena said, looking at the floor instead of the hybrid.

"What is there to resolve? Our relationship is over."

"I know that and you know that, but Blade apparently doesn't."

"Maybe I should have a talk with him," Grizzly said, and he realized they both were speaking softly so as not to be overheard. "He's getting too pushy for his own good."

"He means well."

"So did Genghis Khan."

Athena giggled, a girlish, genuine expression of mirth, the first such release she'd had in many days, her eyes briefly aglow, with affection for the man-beast before her, and then she caught herself and self-consciously lowered her head.

"Did you know Blade intends to shut down Mesaville?" Grizzly asked.

"No, but I wouldn't put it past him."

"He's nuts. The odds are too great. All of you should leave at sunrise," Grizzly said, his eyes on the ceiling.

"Do you want us to leave?"

"Of course."

"Oh."

Grizzly glanced at her, "We might not be warm for each other's form any more, but we're still sort of friends, right? And as a friend I'm telling you to get your butts out of Mesaville before the psycho running this show sees fit to do you in."

"That reminds me. I want to ask you a question."

"Shoot."

Athena looked up and their eyes met. She started as if from a physical blow. "Why do you stay here?"

"No special reason."

"I can't understand it. You possess such a noble soul. Why stoop to living in a sewer?"

The hybrid snorted. "A noble soul? Me? Honey, I don't even know what the hell a soul is."

"What did you call me?"

Grizzly blinked, realizing what he had said. "Sorry," he said, "Force of habit."

"No harm done," Athena said.

An awkward couple of minutes elapsed as neither dared to speak.

"Why don't you come over here and sit down?" Athena asked, moving to one side and patting the cushion beside her. "There's plenty of room."

"I'd rather stand."

"Whatever you want."

Grizzly frowned and began to pace in a leisurely fashion back and forth in front of the bathroom doorway. "Now I'd like to ask a question."

"Fire away."

"Why *did* you risk your life coming all the way from California to this godforsaken dump?"

Athena didn't reply.

"Is something wrong?" Grizzly asked after a bit.

"No."

"Did my question upset you?"

"Yes."

"Way?"

"Because I don't want to make a fool of myself. I'm afraid you'll laugh in my face."

"Never happen."

She shifted and pretended to look out at the balcony. "I've had a lot of time to think during the past year. When Gallagher first proposed faking my death, I thought his idea would solve all my problems—"

"Hold the phone," Grizzly interrupted. "General Gallagher came up with the brainstorm for the phony funeral?"

"Yes. He visited me in the hospital. Under the influence of all the drugs the doctors had pumped into me, I went and blabbed about our romance. I even admitted I was upset because no human had ever married a hybrid. I guess it was easy for him to see I was at my wit's end. Out of the blue he proposed the funeral."

"General Gallagher," Grizzly said, his voice oddly strained.

"Yeah. Did Blade tell you about the problems he's been having with the good general?"

"No."

"Figures. Blade likes to take care of his own problems, but he loves to help others out with theirs. I don't know all the facts, but it sounds to me as if Gallagher has been working behind the scenes to destroy the Force."

The hybrid's expression hardened. "Do tell."

"When Blade returns to Los Angeles the fireworks will really fly," Athena predicted.

"My money is on the Big Guy."

"Don't count Gallagher out yet. He's a powerful man with a lot of political clout. He can give the Warrior a rough time."

"Sounds like Blade could use some help. Do you plan to stick by his side?"

Athena sighed. "My future is in limbo right now. I haven't given any thought to what might lie ahead beyond Mesaville."

"Are you still writing for a living?"

"Yes. I've been doing my syndicated column under a pseudonym. I even altered my writing style so no one would suspect I was still alive," Athena said, and shook her head in amazement. "Somehow Blade figured it out. Gallagher tried to prevent him from finding me, but you know Blade."

Again Grizzly's voice became strained. "Gallagher tried to stop him?"

"Yes. Sent three soldiers to break Blade into pieces. Havoc told me they

were three of the best martial artists in the entire Armed Forces."

"I take it Blade mopped the floor with them?"

"It was close. Havoc helped him."

"Then I owe Havoc *too*, " Grizzly said to himself.

"Pardon?"

"Nothing. You were saying about Gallagher's loony idea to separate us?"

"Oh. Yes. Well, I was wrong. It didn't solve my problem." Athena stared at him. "During the past year a minute hasn't gone by that I haven't thought about you. And I've tried to forget. On, *how* I've tried. But I kept remembering the happiness we shared, a happiness such as I'd never known, and eventually I came to the conclusion I'd ruined my life by allowing fear to warp my thinking. I never should have tried to deceive you."

The hybrid stopped pacing. He faced her, scarcely breathing. "Are you saying what I think you're saying?"

Athena seemed to spring off the couch to stand in front of him. "I'm saying I'm tired of beating around the bush. I'm saying Blade hit the nail on the head. I let my devotion to my career ruin the only genuine happiness I've ever known. "She paused and took a deep breath. "I love you, Grizzly. I've never stopped loving you. And I'll never forgive myself for the torment I caused you."

The revelation riveted Grizzly in place. He didn't move, didn't blink, didn't even appear to be breathing.

"Did you hear me?" Athena asked anxiously.

He nodded once.

"And?"

"I don't know what to say."

"How do you *feel*?"

"I feel like running as far and as fast as I can,"

Athena's countenance fell and she turned away. "Oh."

"Only because my head is spinning," Grizzly said quickly. "I must be as crazy as you are."

Athena's hopes soared and she pivoted, moving so close to Grizzly that they were almost touching. "Now are you saying what I think you're saying?"

"We could be making a major mistake."

"I was the one who made the mistake when I listened to General Gallagher."

"Yeah. Him." Grizzly trembled for a moment. "So what do we do now?" Grizzly swallowed, his heart thumping loud enough to be heard for miles, his blood pulsing violently through his veins. He inhaled Athena's sweet fragrance, which was finer than any bouquet of flowers or the best perfume, and suddenly felt very, very hot, as if the temperature had risen 20 degrees. Staring into her eager, loving, moist eyes, he answered as his emotions dictated in full awareness of the consequences. "What do you think?" She melted into his arms and their lips fused in a fiery welding of mutual passion.

Of all the stone edifices in Mesaville, only one reared ten stories into the air. Of all the homes lived in by the roguish inhabitants, only one had 30 rooms, a swimming pool fed by warm spring water, and a huge terrace that had been heaped high with dirt so flowers and trees could grow in profusion. The plants were nurtured by a staff of six who were as devoted to them as if their very lives depended on maintaining a flourishing garden, and they did.

On this terrace stood the lord of Mesaville with his hands clasped behind his back. The scowl on his face accurately depicted his turbulent state of mind, and the gleam of hatred in his eyes reflected the state of his inner being. Surrounded by beautiful blossoms and shrubs, he cared not. He stalked to the railing at the end of the terrace and gazed down at the lovely woman swimming naked in the pool, and instead of being cheered by her vixenish figure his scowl deepened.

"Death Master!" she said happily in greeting when she spotted him.

"Is this all you have to do all day? Swim?"

His tone sliced through her like a red hot knife, and she quickly swam to the side and climbed out. Her soaking raven tresses hung to the small of her arched back. She absently wiped beads of water from her pert breasts, then strolled nonchalantly up broad stone steps to the terrace, as unconscious of her nudity as the flowers of their delicate symmetry. "What has you so bent out of shape?"

"Morons," Death Master replied vehemently.

"Morons in general or specific ones?" she asked, halting beside him and placing her damp hand on his arm.

"Slasher, Blackjack, and Garo."

"What did they do now?"

"They're dead, Lolita."

"And you're upset?"

Death Master tilted his neck and stared at the vaulted ceiling of the cavern far, far overhead. "I gave them a job to do, a simple job any imbecile could have performed, and they botched it."

"What was this job?"

"I instructed them to terminate three potential troublemakers. Instead, they got themselves terminated."

Lolita smiled and ran her fingernails up to his broad shoulder. "Who would dare give you trouble?"

"Blade."

"Who?"

He looked down at her and involuntarily felt a stirring in his loins. "Blade. Surely you've heard of the famous head of the Freedom Force?"

"The what?"

Resignation replaced the anger etching Death Master's visage. "How can one who possesses such beauty be such an airhead?"

Lolita lowered her arm and pouted. "There's no need to be insulting."

"I meant it affectionately," Death Master said and placed his left palm on her stomach.

"So what's the deal with this Blade guy?"

"From what I hear he's every bit my equal."

"Impossible."

Death Master smiled in appreciation and leaned down to kiss her on the neck. "I could have had him shot the moment I realized who he was, but I didn't."

"Why not?"

He kissed her on the ear. "Curiosity, my dear. I wanted to know the reason he came to Mesaville. I flattered myself that he was here to assassinate me, but then I learned differently."

"What did you learn?" Lolita asked, as Death Master's hand started to work its way lower.

"Apparently Grizzly and he are old friends."

"You're kidding?"

"No. And that's not all. Some of the customers at the Club Royale overheard an interesting conversation. The impression they received was the Grizzly and the woman accompanying Blade were once very tight."

"Grizzly and a human? How kinky. Just like us. I love it."

"I thought you would," Death Master said huskily, staring down at his hand. "Evidently Blade and this woman, Athena is her name, came here specifically in search of Grizzly. There's another man with them, a military type named Mike. Regrettably, all four of them must now be terminated."

"What harm can they do? Why not just let them leave in peace?"

"Because I run the risk of Blade returning with the rest of the Freedom Force or any army contingent to wipe us out. The Federation might be inclined to view us as a threat." Death Master let his hand drift across her thigh.

"Oh!"

"I'd like to simply toss him to my pets, but I don't have concrete evidence to convince our other visitors that Blade is who I think he is. Without it, some may suspect me of treachery. And never, under any circumstances, must the gangs receive the impression I'm not to be trusted. Follow me?"

"Oh!"

"Since Slasher and his two cretinous friends have failed, I've decided to try another tact. How does Cobra sound to you?"

"Oh! Oh! Oh!"

"I thought so," Death Master said, as he grinned and embraced her.

CHAPTER TWELVE

What was that?

Captain Havoc was seated on a chair on the balcony, his M-16 lying in his lap, when he heard a faint scraping noise from somewhere below. Somewhere nearby. He stood and stepped to the waist-high stone rail and peered down at the deserted avenue. When last he checked his watch, five minutes earlier, the time had been four a.m.

An unnerving silence shrouded the subterranean city.

Havoc scanned the shadows in all directions but saw nothing to rouse his suspicion. The lights downstairs were out, which meant Eric must be asleep. He returned to the chair, thinking of his friends inside. Blade had pulled the first shift on guard duty and was now slumbering in the bedroom to the right of the living room. In the other bedroom were Athena and Grizzly; she'd pulled the second shift and awakened him at

three to do his.

How could they? Havoc wondered, looking toward the room Athena and Grizzly shared. He tried to imagine what it would be like to make love to a hybrid. The very idea was repugnant. Give him a wholesome human any day.

Again something scraped below.

He rose slowly and moved stealthily to the top of the steps. No one was there. Puzzled, he walked the full length of the balcony and back again. Something was wrong; of that he felt certain. But what?

From off in the distance came a boisterous cackle.

Someone must still be partying. Havoc shook his head and leaned on the railing. He thought he'd seen it all in his time: strip joints, drug dens, topless bars, houses of prostitution. None of it compared to Mesaville, the mecca for vice and lust in the Southwest. The city was an abomination, its transient inhabitants diametrically opposed to every moral and ethical principle known to civilized man.

Too bad the rest of the team isn't with us, Havoc mused. If Raphaela, Jag, Doc, Sparrow Hawk, and Lobo were there the Force could put a permanent stop to the vile operation. He knew Blade intended to try anyway, which seemed impossible, given the odds. But if there was one thing he'd learned about the Warrior—and he knew there was much he didn't know, it was never to underestimate the giant.

All of which brought to mind the questions that would not be answered until they were back in Los Angeles. Would Blade permit him to remain on the Force? Would the Warrior press formal charges? Given the circumstances a court martial was a distinct possibility. And even if Blade let his betrayal and disobedience ride, what about General Gallagher? He'd betrayed one of the most powerful men in the Free State of California, a man not noted for his compassion. What sort of revenge would Gallagher take on having turned against him?

Havoc decided he would face whatever came along with his head held high. He'd screwed up grandly, yes, and now he should own up to his stupidity and take his punishment like a man. He stretched, glanced idly at the steps, and froze in consternation.

Someone, or more accurately some thing, stood at the top of the stairs regarding him with an amused smirk.

Flabbergasted, Havoc hesitated, noting the creature's reptilian features. It resembled a walking snake: the body was no thicker than a telephone pole and covered with black scales; the legs were long and thin, the arms the same; and a cowl-shaped head perched on a ribbon-thin neck that barely seemed adequate to support its weight. Although the body was entirely black, the eyes glowed with a pale luminescence and slanted upward from the narrow nostrils toward the bald plate. Needle-like teeth were revealed when it grinned, although it sported a pair of two-inch fangs on either side of its slit mouth: The only article of clothing the creature wore was a black loincloth.

A hybrid, Havoc realized, and desperately attempted to bring his M-16 into play even as he opened his mouth to shout a warning to his friends.

In an inhuman display of dazzling speed the creature flowed across the balcony and leaped, pouncing on the officer and sinking its wicked fangs into his soft throat. In the blink of an eye it backed away, its mouth curving in the sinister smirk.

Havoc felt no pain. He was utterly bewildered. Although he wanted to yell, he couldn't. His vocal chords wouldn't function. Neither would his arms or legs. A terrifying numbness radiated outward from the puncture wounds in his neck with startling rapidity. His heart hammered crazily. Both legs began to buckle.

A toxin! The snake-man had injected poison into his system!

Havoc looked at his adversary and saw certain death in the hybrid's eyes. Fear swelled within him. In moments he would be dead, hurled unprepared into the void beyond this earthly existence. What should he do? Pray for the deliverance of his soul? He'd never been overly religious, and now it was too late to ponder matters of eternal importance. A phantom cloud nipped at his consciousness and he knew the end was near.

Funny.

He'd envisioned being killed in a variety of ways—it came with the job. But never in his wildest dreams had he thought he would be taken out by a humanoid snake. What was it? Part cobra? Did it even matter?

No.

Suddenly his brother's face floated in the air before him, and he longed to cry out, "Jimmy!" At last he would get to see his brother again. They'd always beat the closest of all the Havoc clan, although his younger brother Stephan came in a tight second. Seeing Jimmy again might make dying worthwhile.

Provided there as an afterlife.

Provided he possessed whatever trait was required to make the passage to the far shore.

And provided, in the ultimate analysis, some form of Supreme Spirit existed.

Then, at the instant the cloud swept him into the great beyond, in the fraction of a millisecond before his body slumped lifeless and inert, he perceived the truth and felt his soul soar.

The hybrid stepped forward and nudged the corpse with his foot, perplexed by the smile on the human's face. Not one of his many victims had ever smiled at the moment of dying and he was mystified. Contemplation of the mystery was shelved for the time being so his assignment could be carried out.

One down, three to go.

Pivoting, the creature crept to the doorway and paused to sniff the air and strain its circular ears for sounds. He heard someone snoring off to the right and low breathing to the left. One must be the giant, the other the woman.

He took several strides into the darkened living room, his tongue flicking out repeatedly, and abruptly halted when he detected a familiar scent lingering in the air. As Death Master had informed him would be the case, Grizzly had been there. But was the bear-man still there? The creature couldn't tell and that worried him.

Grizzly shouldn't be taken lightly.

When Death Master had instructed him to make the kill, he'd almost

refused. He knew Grizzly too well, knew the inherent ferocity and uncanny ability of his fellow hybrid, and he didn't know for certain if he would prevail in a contest between them. But then that constituted the appeal. Grizzly was the supreme challenge, a foe worthy of his own unique talents. Slaying helpless humans in the arena had become a boring charade; no worthy opponents had fought him in ages.

The snake-man moved tentatively toward the bedroom on the right. The snorer must be the giant. A quick bite and all he would have to worry about was Grizzly, since the woman constituted no threat whatsoever. At the threshold he paused, his keen senses probing the room, distinguishing the outline of a huge body on the bed. He lifted his right foot to glide within when a barely audible whisper startled him.

"Cobra."

He spun and hissed, more in anger at himself for being so careless than in anything else. "Grizzly," he said softly. Awakening the giant would be foolish. One adversary at a time was enough.

The bear-man glanced at the entrance, his eyes narrowing when he spied the form slumped on the balcony. "You killed Havoc, you son of a bitch."

"And you're next."

Grizzly looked at him. "Don't flatter yourself."

"*First* you, then the big jerk and the woman."

"You'll never lay a fang on her."

Cobra cocked his head and snickered. "Why Grizzly, old chum, is that a note of affection I detect in your voice?"

"Up yours."

"I do believe it is. Odd. I never thought you were very fond of humans."

"I'm less fond of hybrids who are traitors to their entire kind."

"What in the world are you babbling about?" Cobra asked, inching slowly forward. Stall, he told himself. Keep the fool talking until he was

within striking range. Once his fangs injected the poison, Grizzly was history.

"I'm talking about you and me, sucker. We sold out. We let our animal heritages get the better of us."

"I like my animal half," Cobra said.

"And do you like being Death Master's flunky?"

"Why shouldn't I? He pays well. I get three squares a day and all the whores I care to bed, even if they are human trash. And all I have to do is waste a few bozos now and then."

"Your wasting days are at an end." Grizzly crouched and his hands came up, his fingers stiffening. Out slid his ten claws, the reason no one in Mesaville would tangle with him no matter what the provocation.

Cobra knew all about those retractable claws. They'd been designed in a laboratory and genetically encoded into the bear-man's physique when Grizzly was still an embryo in a test tube, all part of a scientist's plan to produce the perfect genetically engineered assassin. Housed in internal sheaths behind Grizzly's huge knuckles, they automatically slid out from under the flaps of skin above his fingernails whenever the bear-man locked his digits at full extension. They could slice through flesh and bone as effortlessly as a sword through a melon; they could even cut through wood. Only two limitations restricted their use. First, they would break if he tried to hack through metal. Second, Grizzly couldn't grip a thing so long as the claws were out. To use his fingers he must relax his entire hand.

A different scientist had created Cobra, but his abilities were no less lethal. He possessed all the attributes of a true cobra: speed, power, heightened physical senses, and above all the same deadly venom. But unlike true cobras, which either administered their venom through bites or by spitting at an enemy's eyes, he could do both, a fact which only one other person in Mesaville knew. And Death Master wasn't about to tell anyone.

Now Cobra moved slowly toward the bear-man, trying to get close enough to make his move. "Did you know your friend Blade is the head of the Freedom Force?" he asked to distract his foe.

"Of course. I was on the Force once."

Cobra stopped in surprise. "You were? Death Master will be interested in the news. He'd heard about your buddy from various gang members who regularly raid southern and western California, but they must not have mentioned you."

"I wasn't on the Force long enough to be as famous as Blade," Grizzly said idly, still keeping his voice down so as not to wake up Athena. He didn't want her blundering in during the impending fight; he couldn't properly defend himself and simultaneously protect her.

"So why did you come here? As a spy for the California authorities?"

"No."

"Why don't I believe you?"

"I don't give a damn what you believe."

"Death Master will feed your carcass to his pets after I'm done," Cobra said, easing ever forward. He couldn't believe how easy this was. Apparently he'd vastly overrated Grizzly's prowess.

"There's something I'd like to know."

"What?"

"Who is responsible for engineering you?"

Again Cobra paused for a second. "What a strange question," he commented, and continued ever-so-gradually narrowing the gap. Soon. It would be soon.

"I'm curious, is all. The Doktor created me and hundreds of other mutations. I didn't know all of them personally, but I saw all of them at one time or another. I remember several snake-men but none exactly like you. So I figure someone other than the Doktor is responsible for your existence."

"How clever of you."

"Am I right?"

"Yes."

"Then who?"

Cobra saw no reason not to divulge the information. In a few moments Grizzly would be dead. And the conversation was enabling him to draw ever nearer. What a chump this bear-man was! "The scientist who created me is named Dr. George Herbert Wells."

"Is? You mean he's still alive?"

"Yes, and producing many more hybrids all the time."

"Where is his laboratory?"

"Guess," Cobra said. He was now six feet away. Perfect.

"Did he breed you to be an assassin like the Doktor did with me?"

"You ask too many questions," Cobra said, then abruptly tilted his head back, opened his mouth, and let his venom fly straight into Grizzly's eyes.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The jet of poison arced through the air in a twinkling, and had Grizzly been a human his eyes would have been seared and permanently blinded, leaving him virtually incapable of warding off Cobra's attack. But his bearish reflexes served him in good stead. The instant he realized Cobra's trick and saw the acidic toxin streaming at his face he darted to the right, and so quick was the coordination between his brain and his muscles that he was a full stride away when the poison passed through the space he'd just occupied.

Cobra hissed in frustration and circled, going to the left, keeping his slim body doubled at the waist and his legs tensed for a leap. If spitting didn't work then biting would.

Grizzly kept his left hand high to ward off more venom and his right near his waist. He moved to the right, treading carefully, aware a misstep would result in his demise. Having seen Cobra in action in the arena, Grizzly knew how amazingly fast the snake-man could strike, and he didn't want to take any chances.

For seconds that seemed to last an eternity, the two hybrids moved in a clockwise direction, maintaining the space between them. Nothing happened to break the stalemate until Cobra had his back to the left-hand bedroom, and then Grizzly's worst fear was realized.

Athena appeared in the doorway, her hair tousled, tiredly rubbing her eyes, shuffling from the bedroom and blurting out, "Grizzly?"

In a flash Cobra spun and grabbed for her arm, intending to seize her and use her to coerce the bear-man to move within reach of his fangs.

At the same instant Grizzly sprang, the sight of his beloved in danger endowing him with the vaunted speed of Mercury. He vented a roar that would have done justice to a lion, causing Cobra to hesitate a fraction of a second and glance his way. By then Grizzly's left arm was on its downswing and his claws ripped into the snake-man's side.

Cobra recoiled, his features contorted in the only agony he'd ever known. He felt his blood flow out of his wounds and knew that he'd been wrong, that Grizzly was as good as everyone claimed. Too damn good. He turned and ran.

"Stay put," Grizzly barked at Athena. He raced after the snake-man, out onto the balcony and down the stairs, perceiving right away that Cobra was faster than he and fearing he would lose him.

Up ahead, Cobra took a left, running up the avenue in a blur. He went 30 yards and looked over a shoulder, grinning when he saw the bear-man 15 yards behind. "We'll meet again," he said, preparing to go all out. Out of the corner of his eye he registered movement back on the balcony.

Simmering in fury, Grizzly didn't understand the reason for the sudden shock crossing Cobra's face until he heard an M-16 blast three times. The reptilian assassin's feet left the ground, and he flew a half-dozen feet, thudding onto his back.

Grizzly halted and turned. The second floor lights were on. Standing on the balcony was Blade, the M-16 still pressed to his shoulder. Athena stood behind the Warrior. Grizzly sheathed his claws and retraced his steps on the double, anxious to take Athena into his arms.

The lights downstairs came on also and out rushed Eric, shotgun in

hand. "What the hell is going on?" He glanced at Grizzly, then up at the balcony. "Why are you shooting?"

"There was a snake in our apartment," Grizzly said to the gunner as he passed him.

"There are no snakes in Mesaville."

Grizzly stopped and pointed at the body. "Check it out for yourself." He bounded up the stairs to Athena.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"Fine," Grizzly said and hugged her. When he broke their embrace he faced the giant, who had knelt and placed a hand on Havoc's chest.

"Not another one," Blade said softly.

"The guy you just shot was called Cobra," Grizzly said. "Death Master sent him to kill all of us in our sleep." He paused. "Death Master knows you're the head of the Force."

Blade didn't appear to hear. He leaned down and closed the officer's eyes. "I never should have brought him along."

"Don't blame yourself," Athena said. "How were you to know?"

"When will I learn?" Blade asked, but his question wasn't directed at either of his friends.

"What are we going to do now? We certainly can't stay here," Grizzly said, his concern for Athena's safety apparent in his voice. Death Master would undoubtedly try to retaliate for Cobra's death, and Grizzly wanted to get Athena out of Mesaville right away.

The Warrior didn't answer. Instead he placed his M-16 down and tenderly lifted Captain Havoc in his steely arms. His head bowed, he walked into the living room.

"What's he doing?" Grizzly whispered.

"I don't know," Athena said. "I've never seen him act like this before."

"This is a fine time for him to go off the deep end."

They moved inside and watched the giant gently lay the officer down in the very center of the room. Blade stripped Havoc of all weapons and ammo and added them to his own arsenal, sticking Havoc's pistol under his belt next to the buckle. Then he stood and walked to the sofa.

"Can we help?" Grizzly said, thoroughly confused.

Blade shook his head and removed the cushions. He proceeded to spread them out on top of Havoc.

"I knew it. He's flipped," Grizzly whispered.

Athena shut her eyes and sniffled. "I think it's beautiful."

"What is?"

The Warrior looked at them. "Athena, where's your rifle and backpack?"

"In our room."

"Get your gear. Hurry."

Athena nodded and hastened to comply.

Waiting until she was out of sight, Blade focused on the hybrid. "I have a favor to ask you."

"What kind of favor?" Grizzly asked.

"You're not a member of the Force, so I can't give you an order. But I'd like you to take Athena and leave Mesaville. You should be able to get her safely back to California."

Grizzly nodded. His sentiments exactly. Then a thought struck him. "And what about you?"

"I'm staying,"

"Do you have a death wish?"

Blade frowned and gazed fondly at Havoc, "No, but I can't leave until I take care of Death Master. He's not going to get away with this. If it's the last thing I ever do, I'm taking him down."

"I agree he's prime scuzz and deserves to have his jewels shoved down his throat, but one man can't do the job."

"I've got to try."

"What about your wife? Do you want her to be a widow?"

The giant didn't respond.

"Look, I've got a better idea," Grizzly said. "Why don't all three of us head for California? Once we're there you can form a small army and return to destroy this dump. What do you say?"

"I have no choice. I must stay."

"What kind of crap is that? Why? Just to avenge Havoc?"

"To atone."

Grizzly took a step and scowled. "You're making no damn sense. Let's get the hell out while we still can."

"I'm staying," Blade reiterated quietly.

Athena stepped from the bedroom. "I heard that. If you're staying so am I."

"I want you to leave," Blade said.

"That's strange. My ears suddenly went on the blink."

"This isn't a laughing matter."

"Do you see me laughing?" Athena said.

"I'm giving you a direct order,"

"Sorry to disappoint you, but I'm not a member of the Force anymore. You don't have authority over me."

Rumbling deep in his chest, Grizzly gestured angrily at both of them. "You're both crazy. If we stay we'll get ourselves killed. Athena, I'm taking you out of here."

"No, you're not."

The hybrid moved over to her. "I can throw you over my shoulder and leave, and there isn't a damn thing you can do about it."

"But you won't."

"Oh? Why not?"

Athena placed a hand on his arm. "Because you love me."

"But this is stupid!" Grizzly protested. "The three of us can't possibly hope to beat Death Master by ourselves."

"Since when did you become such a pessimist?" Athena said, "the Grizzly I knew back in California would never admit defeat."

"This isn't your fight."

"I'm here, aren't I?"

Grizzly appealed to the Warrior. "Help me out, will you? Convince her to go."

"Go," Blade said.

"No."

Glaring at the giant, Grizzly muttered, "Big help you are."

"I want both of you to go," Blade said. He stared at the cushions for a moment, his broad shoulders sagging, then went into the bedroom he had used.

"Please, Athena," Grizzly pleaded. "Let's leave. I don't want to lose you again—not when we have a chance to be happy again."

She slung her M-16 over her right shoulder. "Blade went to a lot of trouble to track me down in San Francisco and to bring me to Mesaville to

see you. I figure I owe him. So like it or not, I'm sticking with him until this is all over."

"Or until we're all dead."

Athena opened her mouth to say more when footsteps pounded on the steps; a moment later Eric appeared in the doorway. He gazed at the floor, then at them.

"Cobra is dead!"

"What was your first clue?" Grizzly cracked.

"What went on up here? Why did the big son of a bitch shoot him?"

"Go ask your boss."

"I think I will. And the three of you had better stay right here," Eric said. He looked at the floor again. "Is he dead?"

"No. He always sleeps with cushions piled on his body."

The gunner advanced several strides, hefting his shotgun. "I don't like any of this. Death Master is bound to be ticked off, and you know what happens to those who give him bad news."

"Yeah," Grizzly said and drew a finger across the base of his throat.

"I hate this," Eric said. "I just hate this." He spun and hurried out.

"Idiot," Grizzly said.

Blade came out of the bedroom bearing sheets and a pair of pillows. He placed the former on top of the cushions, then pulled out his left Bowie and cut open each pillow, letting the soft stuffing inside spill over the top of the pile.

At last Grizzly comprehended. "You're not."

"I am."

"Why?"

"Because there's no place to bury him, and I won't let him wind up as pet food," Blade said. He reached into a pants pocket and pulled out a pack of matches. "I wish there was time to give you a proper funeral," he said to the corpse, his voice barely audible. "You deserve better than a hasty cremation in a rat-infested sewer. You were a brave man, a dedicated soldier misled by someone you trusted.

"I never had the chance to tell you the reason I brought you along. It wasn't that I didn't trust you, I was concerned for your safety because you were the one man who could implicate General Gallagher in the various attempts to discredit the Force, and I wouldn't have put it past the good general to have you silenced. I'd hoped to have you fill in Governor Melnick on everything that happened. Now I must try a more direct approach. "You were a credit to your uniform, Captain Michael Havoc. I was proud to have you serve in the Force and to be my second-in-command," Blade concluded, his voice strained.

Grizzly glanced at the doorway. "Don't take me wrong, but could you hurry this up? For all we know there might be more goons on their way to take care of us and I'd hate to be trapped up here."

"I'm done," Blade said. He struck a match, crouched, and lit the stuffing. It caught readily and in moments flames were spreading across the pile.

Grabbing Athena's hand, Grizzly moved to the balcony and surveyed the avenue. There was no one in sight. He turned and stared at Cobra's corpse, thankful for his heightened senses that had enabled him to hear the snake-man entering the apartment. "It's not too late to change your mind about leaving," he said to Athena.

"My decision is final."

"I was afraid you'd say that." Grizzly looked into the living room and saw the Warrior watching the fire grow. "Come on!" he urged.

Blade came out slowly. He had his own M-16 over his right arm and Havoc's rifle over his left. "Do you know where Death Master lives?" he asked the hybrid.

"Sure I do."

"Are there a lot of guards?"

"Heaps. Humans and mutations."

"Take us there."

"You're thinking of attacking his personal residence?"

"Do you have a better idea?"

Grizzly nodded. "Yeah. Why not find a rooftop, somewhere and pop him from a distance? It would be a hell of a lot safer for—" he said and caught himself.

"For me?" Athena said.

"For all of us."

"Don't treat me like a child," Athena said. "You should know better. I'm in this for the long haul, if need be, and I'll take the same risks as both of you."

"We could save ourselves a lot of aggravation by just shooting the sucker," Grizzly declared gruffly.

Blade slowly shook his head. "We can't do the job your way, Grizzly. I wish we could. But what's to prevent someone from spotting us and letting Death Master know? The best way to end this is by taking him out now, when he'll least expect it. The longer we delay, the more likely the prospect of our being captured."

"I agree," Athena said. "Let's go for the gusto."

Wishing he had the courage to knock her out and cart her off regardless of the consequences, Grizzly glowered from one to the other. "I've got another brainstorm."

"What?" Blade asked.

"You take Athena and leave. I'll snuff Death Master."

Athena bristled. "Trying to protect me again? I thought you knew me better than that."

"Don't you understand how much you mean to me?" Grizzly inquired, taking her hands in his. "Please, go with Blade and leave tall, ugly and wacko to me."

"No."

The Warrior motioned at the stairs. "Then it's settled. You two head out."

Mumbling under his breath, Grizzly started down the steps with Athena in tow.

The Warrior lingered to stare at the crackling flames. "I'm so sorry, Mike," he said softly, then pivoted and headed for his showdown with Death Master.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Four guards were on duty at the entrance to the tunnel connecting the main caverns that made up Mesaville. Since no one was permitted to enter the cavern where Death Master resided after midnight unless they were on official business, the night shift invariably bored the guards to tears. Not so on this night.

First, much earlier, the hybrid known as Cobra had materialized out of the shadows, scaring three of them half to death, and hastened into the town proper. They wondered what he was doing abroad so late, but not one of them had the temerity to ask.

Later came the second unusual event. They heard gunfire, and shortly thereafter Death Master's guard Eric appeared, running past them without a word, his countenance promising worse things to come.

Then came the last incident of their shift.

Rattled by the preceding occurrences, the four of them were exceptionally alert. They clustered at the middle of the tunnel entrance and compared notes and theories. One of them happened to glance at the town and gaped in shock at the column of smoke spiraling high over the stone structures.

"Look!" he said.

They all gawked, thoroughly confounded, and anxiously debated whether to investigate the fire or to notify their boss. Because leaving a guard post was punishable by agonizing torture, they mutually opted to send one of their number to inform Death Master.

Off the chosen guard sped.

The remaining trio walked a dozen yards from the tunnel to better view the town, trying to pinpoint the location of the blaze. On both sides of them were high boulders and stone spires to which they paid not the slightest attention.

Their mistake.

All three heard the guttural growl that emanated from their right. All three stiffened and spun, clawing for their weapons, but not one got off a shot.

Grizzly vaulted from the top of an eight-foot-high boulder, his finger locked, his ten claws gleaming in the lantern light, his hairy form the embodiment of suppleness and power. His lips curved in a devilish grin and his eyes sparkled as he landed among them. To Athena, viewing the ambush from concealment, the hybrid was literal poetry in motion. She saw his arms fly, saw his claws gut one of the guards, rip wide another's throat, and nearly decapitate the third, and she smiled proudly. Here was the Grizzly she loved, the perfect assassin, the ultimate killing machine, yet someone who treated her tenderly, who regarded her as his greatest blessing.

Grizzly gazed at the convulsing guards, his nostrils quivering at the smell of their pulsing blood, his bestial instincts fully aroused, and resisted an urge to hack them to pieces. Instead, he threw back his head and roared.

"What the hell was that?" Eric said. He stood outside the entrance to Death Master's palatial residence, waiting for the guard who had hastened upstairs to return. Five more gunners were with him, and they all gazed in the direction of the tunnel.

"Had to be one of the mutations," said a skinny man.

"What was your first clue?" joked another.

Eric pivoted to study the tunnel mouth, which was several hundred yards away and only partly visible from his position. Scores of mounds, knobs, and columns, and unoccupied structures obscured his view. Only Death Master's immediate staff and his women were housed in this cavern, and they lived in his residence. To the north was the gigantic arena where the games were conducted.

"What do you think, Eric?" asked another guard.

"I think it's Grizzly."

"Sounded like him," agreed the skinny one. "I heard him roar once in the arena after he killed three pukers armed with spears. He ripped 'em to shreds."

"What the hell is going on?" asked someone else.

"Yeah, Eric. What gives?" Skinny said.

"I wish to hell I knew. But I don't like it."

"That makes two of us."

They waited in nervous dread until footsteps brought them around to face the ruler of Mesaville.

"Cobra is dead?" Death Master demanded. He'd hurried from his bedroom when the guard brought the news, taking time only to throw on a pair of leather pants. He was annoyed at having his dalliance with Claire interrupted, but not too annoyed because she wasn't displaying as much enthusiasm as he'd hoped. Compared to his delicious Lolita, Claire possessed the sexual ability of a petrified lizard.

"Yeah, boss," Eric answered. "I saw the body myself. That big son of a bitch Blade shot him. Grizzly was there too, but I don't know how he figures into it."

"That's all right. I do," Death Master said. He teased and peered intently toward the tunnel. "One of the guards is coming this way."

Eric looked back, surprised to see a man sprinting toward them,

already halfway there, winding among the stone shapes. He'd missed spotting the guy before, probably because he was preoccupied with the thought of his probable fate for delivering bad news. But the boss didn't seem to mind; maybe he'd get to live after all.

"Death Master!" the guard called out when still dozens of yards off. "Fire! A fire!"

"Where?" the titan demanded.

The man pounded closer, out of breath, struggling to compose himself. "In the town. We saw the smoke, but we knew better than to desert our post to check."

"You did well," Death Master said.

"Thank you," the tunnel guard said, and glanced over his shoulder. "Did you hear that roar, boss? What was it?"

"Roar?"

"Yeah," Eric chimed in. "We all heard it just before you came out."

Death Master's countenance became a mask of fury. "Why didn't you tell me this sooner?" he snapped, giving each of them a baleful look. "Are you all cretins?" He took a step toward Eric and lifted a hand, about to strike, then abruptly changed his mind. "No. I need every man now. Eric, take these seven men and get to the tunnel. Keep on your toes. If you see Grizzly, Blade, or the woman, shoot to kill. Understood?"

"You got it, boss," Eric said, relieved that his life had been spared.

"Go!" Death Master bellowed to speed them off. He stared for a moment, then wheeled and went inside, taking a right and going down a hall until he came to a closed door. Without bothering to knock he shoved it open. On a bed in the center of the room were a man and woman humping like crazed rabbits. "Nelson, you can bang Ally later. Get up and get dressed."

The man promptly moved to obey, no questions asked. The woman rolled over and winked at the colossus.

"I want all the men out front in five minutes," Death Master ordered. "I want all the hybrids, too. Every last damn one. If they give you any grief, tell them I will personally deal with the troublemakers. Got it?"

"Five minutes. No problem."

Death Master nodded and departed, then went upstairs to the third floor bedroom he'd occupied when interrupted by Eric's arrival. He went in and saw Claire huddled near the pillows. "Put your clothes on, woman, and leave my house."

"What about the money you promised me?" Claire said.

"Be thankful I don't charge you," Death Master said and slammed the door on his way out. He took a stone stairway to the eighth story and entered another bedroom that was four times the size of those below. The sight of Lolita sleeping naked on a pink sheet drew him up short. How unfortunate that Cobra had blown it. Now he must forego another tumble with his beloved.

He walked to a closet and finished dressing rapidly. Next he went to a glass gun case and took out a gunbelt containing a matched pair of Desert Eagle .357 Magnums. He buckled it on and adjusted the holsters on his stout hips. Ordinarily he disdained the use of firearms in personal combat, but his enemies tonight were hardly ordinary. Grizzly was a being to reckon with, and Blade promised to be equally challenging. The woman, naturally, was as threatening as a pile of sand ray dung.

Death Master moved to the bed to admire Lolita, noting the rhythmic rise and fall of her breasts and the angelic innocence her face radiated. Lord, what a lynx. She had the hottest box in the Southwest, maybe the whole damned country. Reluctantly he tore his eyes from her beauty and returned to the first floor.

The head of security, Nelson, had all 21 men and the five remaining hybrids assembled out front. Many were yawning and shaking their heads in an attempt to wake up. They all did the instant Death Master walked outside.

"This is the way it is," Death Master announced curtly.

There are two humans and one hybrid I want dead, and I want them

dead yesterday. All of you know Grizzly. He has turned against us and is helping two newbies who were sent to assassinate me. One is the man called Blade; the other is a bitch named Athena. By now they are somewhere in this cavern. Find them. Whoever takes them out will become rich." He paused. "Nelson, you will organize five squads. Each is to have a hybrid as its leader. Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Post one of the squads on the ground floor as a reserve unit. I want Brahma in charge of that one."

"Brahma it is, boss."

Death Master nodded and began to turn. The crackle of gunfire stopped him in his tracks.

Eric and his seven men were 50 yards from the connecting tunnel when the snarl sounded off to the left. He halted and held up his hand for the others to do likewise, then crouched and scanned the cavern floor. Nothing moved, but he knew Grizzly was out there somewhere.

He twisted, pointed at three of the gunners, and motioned for them to go to the left. Rising, Eric headed to the right with the others. He figured pincer strategy would do the trick and flush the freak out, which was fitting given that Sting was Death Master's favorite pet.

Not so much as a whisper of wind stirred the air. The cavern resembled an enormous stone tomb.

Licking his lips, Eric neared a boulder and glanced back at the four toughs close behind him, each packing a shotgun or an assault rifle. That chump Grizzly didn't stand a frigging chance. Eric looked forward to blowing the mutation away personally.

Another low snarl came from up ahead.

Eric thought he glimpsed something in the shadows and almost snapped off a shot, but he refrained at the last instant. There was no sense in wasting ammo. He would fire when he had a definite target.

For the next several minutes Eric and the seven men hiked farther and

farther from the tunnel. Every time Eric had about made up his mind that they were going in the wrong direction and was considering turning around, another snarl would entice him onward. He figured Grizzly was playing a game, which suited him just fine. The madder he got, the worse it would be for the hairy puke.

Eric passed under a high arch and entered a boulder field. A scuffling noise drew his attention to a group of columns 30 yards away. A struggle appeared to be taking place. He gestured for his companions to move out and ran toward the fight. Two-thirds of the way there silence descended.

Holding the shotgun steady and level, Eric threaded through the columns until he came to a cleared space at the center. Bile rose into his mouth when he beheld a trio of his gunners sprawled in violent postures of death. Blood pumped from the ruptured throat of one. A second guard had been torn open from sternum to crotch and his intestines were seeping out. The third man sported an inch-wide furrow where his eyes and upper nose had been.

"Son of a bitch," one of the men declared.

"Quiet," Eric hissed, knowing the hybrid must still be nearby. His eyes darted right and left.

"Let's get the hell out of here," the same guard said. "I told you to shut your face," Eric snapped. "And we're not leaving until we find the freak."

"Maybe we should spread out," suggested another guard.

"Oh sure, and get ourselves killed one by one," Eric said. "Not on your life, dummy. We'll stick together. There's still five of us and only one of him."

"A minute ago there were eight of us."

"Enough talk. Stay alert," Eric directed, stepping forward warily. Going through the columns until he reached a high stone mound with a wide split up its middle, he paused to ponder his next move. Roaming all over the cavern was a waste of time. He needed a plan, a way of drawing the hybrid into the open. But what?

Eric headed up the mound, walking at the bottom of the split. The walls

only came to his waist. From the top he'd be able to see for a considerable distance in all directions. He might even get lucky and spot the mutation.

"Did you hear something?" one of his men asked.

"No."

"I think I did."

"You think?"

"Yeah. Off to the right."

"It's just your nerves," Eric said. He surveyed the cavern floor as he ascended. Come on, bastard! Show your mangy hide.

Eric and the others were nearly to the top when a female voice called out off to the right. "Hey, boys. How's it hanging?"

Eric halted and spun.

"Who was that?" asked the blabbermouth.

"Who do you think?" Eric said, "It was that bitch Athena."

"I don't see her."

Neither did Eric, and that bothered him. Why had she yelled? Just to attract their attention? If so, it meant—

Oh, God!

Eric whirled, certain he was too late, terror gripping his heart as he saw Grizzly bounding up the left side of the mound. Eric squeezed off a burst of gunfire, but the freak was already in midair, those man-shredding claws sliding out as Grizzly uttered a primal roar. The bear-man's shadow fell over Eric's upturned face, and then the hybrid was among them.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Someone other than Death Master heard the shots fired by Eric. Stealthily approaching the arena from the north, Blade halted and

listened. The gunfire ceased abruptly and he nodded in satisfaction. Grizzly and Athena were doing their job well. He'd instructed them to keep the guards busy while he penetrated the residence and terminated the titan. So far he'd managed to work his way around to the far side of the arena, reasoning that the guards would be least likely to expect an attack from that direction. With any luck, Death Master's minions were concentrating on the stretch of cavern between the tunnel and the ten-story stone skyscraper.

Blade continued toward the amphitheater, a circular structure encompassing over an acre with adequate seating for several hundred in the form of rising tiers of solid rock. Entrances had been hewn by human hands every 50 feet, little more than narrow gaps between tiers. So this was Where Death Master conducted his vile entertainments?

Soon they would come to an end just like their demented sponsor.

Blade bore to the east, moving along the base of the outer arena wall. He held an M-16 in each hand, their stocks cradled against his ribs. Try as he might, he couldn't shake the image of Havoc's body being consumed by the flames. Another good man had died, another member of the Force, another person under his command. How many did that make now? Too damn many. And although he shouldn't, he blamed himself for Mike Havoc's demise. If he hadn't brought the officer to Mesaville, Havoc would be alive. Ironically, his motivation in bringing the captain had been altruistic: he had meant to save Havoc from Gallagher's reprisal.

He shook his head, striving to dispel the morbid train of thought. Hadn't he learned by now not to take the blame for factors over which he had no control? Apparently not.

Blade angled around the amphitheater, surprised he hadn't encountered guards yet. Was Death Master so confident that he had no perimeter sentries? Blade covered 15 more feet, then halted when his ears registered the rapid padding of feet and heavy breathing to his rear. Instantly he rotated.

A lone hybrid was bearing down on the Warrior, a creature possessing the characteristics of a dog and a man. Loping along on two legs, bent at the waist so he could keep his nose close to the ground, the mutation didn't realize he had overtaken his quarry until a mere ten feet separated them.

The dog-man looked up, his German Shepherd features contorting in a savage growl. Five feet in height, he had a stocky body covered with grayish-black hair. His eyes were solid brown, his ears large and pointed at the tips. At the second he spied the giant he charged, his canine heritage supplanting his human reason.

Blade stayed where he was. He fired both M-16's, his arms quivering from the recoil. At such close range he couldn't miss.

A swarm of lead caught the dog-man in mid-stride, puncturing his chest and his head, and two dozen holes blossomed in the span of a single second. He howled as the hot slugs tore through him, hurling him onto his back. Leaking like a sieve, he tried to rise, propping himself on his elbows. He glared at the giant, the spark in his eyes fading rapidly. "Damn you!" he croaked.

The Warrior didn't waste time waiting for the hybrid to die. He jogged toward the residence, annoyed he'd been discovered. Now the guards—and there had to be others—would know his approximate position. They would close in from all directions. He'd lost the element of surprise.

So be it. He'd grown accustomed to doing things the hard way.

Shouts broke out, men asking where the shots came from and others replying on the east side of the arena.

Blade looked over his shoulder and spied four gunners on his tail. He increased his speed, letting the contours of the arena work in his favor. When he'd outstripped the gunners and they were no longer in sight, Blade ducked into the very next gap and crouched.

The gunners didn't suspect Blade's trap, for a minute. All four raced past his hiding place, puffing and pumping, their collective carelessness appalling.

The Warrior stepped from concealment, trained the M-16 on his enemies, and let them have it, pouring rounds into each, slaying them mercilessly, brutally, giving them the same treatment the gangs had given so many innocents. They died thrashing in pools of their own blood.

Blade inserted fresh magazines into the rifles and forged ahead. There was no turning back even if he wanted to. Havoc's sacrifice would not be

in vain.

He was almost to the end of the arena, within 20 yards of Death Master's stronghold, when four more gunners, and a mutation came running around the wall. The hybrid, a rodent-human mix of some sort, squeaked a warning, and the quartet let their weapons do their talking.

Blade dived, hitting his elbows and knees hard, and fired from the prone position, sweeping both rifle barrels back and forth, the combined firepower enabling him to hold his own against superior odds.

All five died on their feet, their bodies leaking life's precious fluid from multiple entry and exit holes.

Pushing upright, Blade replaced the magazines again. He spied a glass door set into the stone base of the tower and raced over to it. Luckily, no more guards appeared. A quick check showed an empty corridor; he entered and turned to the right.

Now Blade had to find Death Master.

He passed several closed doors, trying each one, and found supply rooms and a utility closet. Most of the living quarters must be on the upper floors, he reasoned, and sought a stairwell. Soon he came to one and went up taking several steps with each long stride. At the first landing he stopped and looked both ways down an empty hallway.

Where was everyone?

Perplexed, Blade began to go higher when a loud thumping echoed from below. Someone was coming up the steps with all the subtlety of a dinosaur. A glance over the rail confirmed his assessment.

Barreling up the stairwell was yet another mutation, the biggest of the lot, a hulking brute of a bull-man who stood nearly seven feet tall and weighing in the neighborhood of 300 pounds. Like the animal whose biological traits had been fused with his human characteristics, this hybrid sported a pair of wicked, curved horns a foot and a half long that extended from the sides of his head above the ears. A large hump bulged at the top of his wide shoulders. His features were bovine, his skin a light brown. As with the other hybrids, he wore a simple loincloth.

Blade crouched, waited until the bull-man was almost to the landing, and stepped into view, aiming both M-16's. He expected to riddle the brute, to slay it on the spot, but he failed to reckon with the hybrid's astonishing speed.. His fingers were starting to curve around the triggers when the hybrid bellowed and sprang, vaulting up the last four steps with a prodigious leap that brought it down on top of him.

The Warrior was unable to fire. Both rifles were batted from his grasp even as the bull-man clashed into him, the creature's massive weight bowling him over. He landed on his back, slightly dazed, and placed his palms on the floor to shove erect.

Still upright, the bull-man now charged, lowering his head and snorting as he ran. Blade rolled to the left, glimpsing the mutation streak past, and got to his feet, His M-16's were lying near the edge of the landing, too far off to do him much good considering that the hybrid had already spun and was coming straight for him again. Blade darted to the right, the tip of one horn scratching his arm in passing, and whirled to confront the mutation. His right hand closed on Havoc's Colt, his arm sweeping out with the barrel trained on the bull-man's head. "Don't move," he said. "I want some answers."

The words might as well have been directed at a tree. With another bestial snort the hybrid hurtled forward, his head towered, his nostrils flaring. "Not this time." Blade said and fired, the .45 booming and bucking in his grip.

The slug struck the bull-man above the left eye, jerking his head around and slowing him for a second. And then he came on, head lowered as before, seemingly oblivious to the hole and the blood flowing down his brow.

Blade tightened his grip on the Colt. How could anything take a direct hit in the head and live? He fired again, rocking the hybrid on his heels, and yet again.

The third shot did the trick, bringing the bull-man to his knees. Wheezing and shaking his great head, the hybrid gamely tried to rise.

"Stay down," Blade said.

A demonic smile split the creature's face, and its left leg began to

straighten.

The Warrior squeezed the trigger until the clip was empty, each shot placed in the bull-man's head. Only after the last round was expended did the mutation vent a raspy cry and pitch onto its face with a pronounced thud.

There was no time to lose. Blade wedged the Colt under his belt and retrieved the M-16's. Certain more guards would be on the site in seconds, he decided to go elsewhere fast. Up the stairs he went, past more landings, and stopped at the eighth floor when he heard someone whistling. He ran down the empty corridor until he came to a partly open door. The whistling came from within. Voices from the lower levels spurred him to push on it and enter without bothering to check first. He drew up short at an unexpected sight.

A spacious bedroom spread out before him. In the middle of the room was an immense bed and lying on her stomach, her back to the doorway, twisting her hair in her fingers, was a nude woman: She whistled happily.

Blade walked over, his boots making no noise on the thick carpet, and stared down at her. "Excuse me?"

She started at the sound of his voice and twisted, regarding him in wonder. "Who are you? Don't you know no one is allowed in Death Master's private quarters?"

"The name is Blade."

She stiffened and sat up, then recovered her composure enough to inquire innocently, "Are you one of the new guards?"

"Don't play games with me. You know who I am. Where's Death Master?"

"Haven't seen him," she answered defiantly.

"Who might you be?"

"Lolita," she said proudly.

Lolita? Where had Blade heard the name before? Suddenly he

remembered. "You're one of Death Master's women."

"I'm his only woman," Lolita said. "The rest are nothing to him but pieces of fluff."

"Is that so?" Blade said and leaned closer. "Then you must know where your paramour is."

"My what?"

"Your main squeeze."

"Maybe I do. Maybe I don't. But I'm sure as hell not telling you," Lolita said.

"You'll tell," Blade said. "First, get dressed."

"I don't wear clothes."

"What?"

"Are you hard of hearing? Clothes are unnatural. They prevent our bodies from staying in tune with the vibrations on this level of reality."

Blade cocked his head and regarded her as he might an alien bug from Alpha Centauri. Was she serious? Her expression indicated she was indeed. "Do you have any clothes in this room?"

"A few, but I only wear them when Death Master makes me."

"Now I'm making you. Put them on."

"And if I don't?"

"I throw you out the window."

Lolita looked into his eyes and frowned. "Yeah. I believe you would, you prick."

"Watch that hostility. You might disrupt your vibrations."

Glaring spitefully, Lolita climbed from the bed and went to a closet. She pulled out a pair of slacks and a lace-fringed blouse. "Will these do?"

"Nicely. Get them on."

"All right. All right." Lolita donned both garments quickly. "Now what?"

"Now you're going to take me to Death Master," Blade said and gestured for her to move toward the door as he did the same.

"But I don't know where he is."

"I don't believe you."

"Why would I lie?"

"Because you love him." Blade reached the doorway and waited for her to join him.

"You think you know it all, don't you, sucker?"

"There you go again, ruining your vibrations."

Clenching her small hands, Lolita snapped, "I hope my man rips you to bits."

"He won't get the chance."

"You don't know him like I do. He won't rest until he's found you."

"I want him to find me," Blade reminded her. He peeked out and found the corridor still empty. "You lead the way."

"But I'm telling you the truth, damn it. I don't know where he is right at this moment."

"Maybe you don't," Blade said. "It doesn't matter, Once he discovers I've taken you, he'll come to me that much faster. I can use you."

"You son of a bitch."

"Enough compliments. Let's go," Blade said, and let her pass him and move into the hall. "Go to the stairs and head up."

Reluctantly Lolita complied.

The Warrior stayed on her heels, scanning the corridor ahead. He was about to look over his shoulder and check to his rear when a hard object jammed into the back of his head and he heard the distinct click of a gun hammer being cocked.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Grizzly took out Eric first on general principles, whipping his left hand down and slashing his claws from the top of Eric's head to the tip of the man's chin. Five inch-wide gashes blossomed, spurting blood, and Eric screamed and dropped his shotgun as his eyeballs were sliced in half.

In a blur Grizzly spun, going after gunner number two, spearing his claws into the man's throat and twisting, seeing a hole the size of his first appear.

The other three were trying to flee.

Grizzly grinned as he pounced. Humans like these were so predictable: so big and brave when they had an edge or the odds were in their favor, but craven cowards once the tide of battle turned against them. He dispatched all three before they literally knew what hit them; then he paused to survey the five forms littering the split in the stone. Eric was still alive, on his back, his hands over his ravaged face, whimpering and blubbing.

Keeping his gore-spattered fingers rigid and his claws out, Grizzly walked to the former tough guy. "Eric," he said softly.

"No!" Eric screamed. "Leave me alone!"

"I can't do that and you know it."

"Oh God. Oh God. Oh God."

"If there is a God, Eric, he can't help you now. It's dues-paying time. Now how do you want this? Fast or slow, easy or hard."

"Please, Please. Please."

Grizzly nodded. "Fast and hard. Got you." He bent forward and drove his right hand down and in, lancing his claws into Eric's chest, knowing

the precise point to strike to knife between the ribs and into the gunner's heart.

Eric gasped and arched his back, his hands falling to his sides. All the breath in his body gushed out at once and he went limp.

"Wimp," Grizzly said and straightened. All five gunners. were now dead. He wiped his claws clean on Eric's pants, then let his fingers relax and felt the claws slide up their internal sheaths into the housings behind his knuckles. At times he was thankful the Doktor had seen fit to provide him with retractable claws. A real grizzly didn't have the same luxury—all five of their claws were always out. Perhaps, he speculated, there was a trace of feline in his system. Cats, after all, did have retractable claws. Maybe that was where the damned Doktor got his inspiration.

"Grizzly? Are you all right?"

Athena's voice brought Grizzly out of his reflection. He jogged down the mound and went around its base until he saw her. hurrying toward him.

"Are you okay?"

"Fine."

She halted and stared at his hands. "There was shooting."

"One of them had good reflexes, but he couldn't hit the broad side of a mountain with an A-bomb."

"What now?"

"We do like Blade wants. Hang out in this area and pick off any guards who show up."

Athena looked toward the tower. "I wish he'd let us go with him."

"The Big Guy knows what he's doing. Has he ever steered us wrong before?"

"No."

"Then don't worry. Come on." Grizzly led her closer to the residence, his animal senses reaching out like invisible feelers to probe the stone

formation and the shadows. So far there were no other guards in the area. He halted in the shelter of an enormous slab and crouched.

"Is it wise to stop?" Athena whispered.

"We're safe for the time being."

She knelt beside him, her eyes radiating affection. "This reminds me of the good old days when we fought together."

Athena gazed off into the distance. "You want to join the Force again, don't you?"

"I've been giving it some thought. Blade asked me to, and I'd like to accommodate him after all he's done for us."

"What if I asked you not to?" Athena said.

"You don't think I should?"

"I don't know," Athena admitted, staring at him. "I know we owe a debt to Blade, but I also know I want us to be together for a while all by ourselves. A cabin in the Cascade Range sounds nice. We have a lot of lost time to make up for."

"My sentiments exactly."

"Then maybe you should tell Blade you'll check back with him in a year or so," Athena said hopefully.

Grizzly saw the anxiety etched in her countenance and took her into his arms. "Don't worry. I'm not about to let anything separate us after all we've gone through."

They sat silently for several minutes, embracing.

"I wish I was wealthy," Athena said.

"Why?"

"So we could live in the wild somewhere and never have to come out except to take money out of our bank account and buy supplies."

"And never have to face other people,"

"Right."

"Never have them stare at us and point and make crude comments."

Athena released him and sat back. "I never said that."

"You implied it," Grizzly said. "You're still worried about what other people will think when they see a freak and a human together."

"You're not a freak."

"I know that and you know that, but few humans would agree. It won't be easy. I wouldn't be surprised if vigilantes came gunning for us to teach us a lesson. Some people will have a hard time accepting that two species can mate."

"So isn't it wiser to go off somewhere by ourselves?"

"And hide from the world?" Grizzly said. Annoyed, Athena verbally tore into him. "Why do you keep putting words in my mouth? I thought we had this all worked out, but you persist in rubbing old wounds."

"I just want you to be sure."

"Me?"

"This might seem blunt to you, but you were the one who got cold feet the first time around. You were the one who decided to call it quits. Now here you are, a year later, ready to start over where we left off," Grizzly said.

"Don't you want to start over?"

"Of course I do. But I'm scared to death you'll chicken out again once we're back to California. It's all well and good for you to admit the way you feel here in Mesaville where no one else gives a damn and you don't give a damn for any of them. In California, though, it'll be a different story. Your family lives there. All your friends and business associates are there. How do you feel about their discovering the truth?"

"Afraid," Athena confessed quietly.

"See what I mean?"

She placed her hands on his shoulders. "Yes, I do. But you're sadly mistaken if you think I'll chicken out, as you so quaintly put it, this time around. As you pointed out, I've had a year to think about our relationship, and I've discovered a person's happiness doesn't stem from what other people think. True happiness comes from within."

Grizzly studied every square inch of her face and didn't detect an ounce of indecision.

Athena stroked his neck. "I love you, you hairy lug."

About to respond in kind, Grizzly tensed when the chatter of automatic weapons erupted to the northeast of their position.

"Blade, you think?"

"Probably," Grizzly said, rising.

"We should help him."

"I don't—" Grizzly began, but froze when he heard the stealthy pad of footsteps from a few dozen yards away. He pulled Athena upright and backed away from the slab.

"What is it?" Athena whispered.

"We have company."

"More guards?"

"Another hybrid."

She blinked and unslung her M-16. "What kind?"

"I don't know yet. There's no breeze to carry its scent in this direction." Grizzly pivoted and led Athena into the maze of stone shapes, traveling 40 yards before he saw fit to halt behind a boulder. The moment he did he heard the footsteps. Closer this time. Right on their trail. "Damn," he muttered.

"What's wrong?"

Grizzly didn't bother to answer. He and Athena ran farther into the stone jungle. When they stopped again, Grizzly heard no sound of pursuit. Who had it been? he wondered. Certainly not Brahma; the bull-man couldn't tread lightly if his life depended on it. Nor did he think it was Pika, the timid rodent-man, It might be Rinty, the crossbred result of combining human and canine genes: Rinty's nose could track anyone anywhere, wind or no wind. Or it could be Vank, the marmot, or Drazil, the human gecko.

More gunfire blasted to the northeast.

"Blade must be in trouble," Athena said.

"Let's swing to the south and move toward Death Master's digs from the southeast," Grizzly said. "The guards are concentrating on this area. If we elude them, maybe we can get near enough to see what's going on."

"Fine by me. But I thought you wanted to stay in this vicinity.

"I've changed my mind," Grizzly said, leading off. He didn't bother to add that by taking her to the southeast he was taking her away from whichever hybrid was lurking nearby. Not that he feared any of his fellow mutations. But if they ganged up on him, he might not be able to protect Athena adequately, and safeguarding her was his paramount priority.

They covered 60 yards and heard no one, saw nothing. At one point faint gunshots sounded, as if coming from inside the tower.

Grizzly held Athena's hand in his and marveled at his good fortune. He'd hated to admit it even to himself, but he really did love her. Despite the stupidity of falling for a normal human, he hadn't been able to help himself. To his knowledge, not one hybrid had ever committed the same folly. Athena and he were breaking new ground. If their relationship turned out successful, perhaps other hybrid-human pairings would take place. What would happen, he mused, when offspring resulted? Would the children be human, hybrid, or a quirky combination of both? How would they be treated by society at large? There were so many uncertainties. But one fact he knew for sure: he'd stick with Athena no matter what sacrifices he had to make or hardships he had to endure.

An almost inaudible scratching came from somewhere behind them.

Grizzly paused to listen but the noise wasn't repeated. Were they being stalked or were his nerves getting the better of him? He sniffed loudly.

"What is it?" Athena asked.

"Just checking," Grizzly lied and went forward. He cast repeated glances backward, hoping to spy something move.

As they covered more distance, Grizzly took full advantage of the terrain, staying low, keeping boulders and mounds and spires between them and the tower so they wouldn't be seen from any of the upper floors. He halted at the base of a ten-foot-high boulder and surveyed the route ahead.

"There's something I must say," Athena unexpectedly said softly.

"Can't it wait?"

"No. I've got to say it now."

"What?" Grizzly asked, looking at her.

"I want you to make a promise in case something happens to me."

"Nothing is going to happen to you."

"But if it does, I want your word now that you'll do as I ask."

"I'd do anything for you. You know that."

"I know. Which is why I expect you to keep your word."

"Don't keep me in suspense."

"Okay," Athena said. "I want you to promise me you'll return to California no matter what happens to me."

"You're being morbid."

"No, I'm not. Promise me," Athena whispered.

"It's dumb."

"Damn you, this is important to me."

Grizzly shook his head. "Since you're going to come out of this safe and sound, there's no sense in making such a promise."

"Please."

"No."

"For me."

"What a cheap shot," Grizzly said and expelled a breath through his clenched teeth. "Why are you pressuring me to do this, anyway? Did you have a premonition you won't make it out? If so, we're leaving right this instant."

"No premonition. This is just in case." Grizzly scrutinized her face carefully, trying to ascertain the truth. The promise upset him, implying as it did that Athena might die. "This isn't the time to talk. I'll promise later."

"Now, before you take another step."

"What difference does it make whether I go back to California or not?"

"I want you to be happy."

"I was happy here."

"Bull." Athena tugged on his arm. "Please," she said. "Don't make me grovel."

Frustrated by the request, Grizzly nonetheless acquiesced. He couldn't refuse her a thing even if he tried. All right. But I'm only doing this so we can get on with the job at hand." He paused. "I promise I'll go back to ditsy California should anything happen to you, which it won't."

Athena smiled gratefully and went to speak.

Above them, on top of the boulder, there was a low titter and someone remarked, "How touching. How romantic. I think I'm going to puke."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

"Please give me an excuse to blow your brains out."

At the sound of the familiar voice, Blade imitated a petrified tree. "Hello, Death Master," he said calmly.

Lolita turned, gazed past the Warrior, and smirked. "I knew you'd get this chump."

"You're wearing clothes."

She nodded at Blade. "He made me put them on."

The gun touching the back of Blade's head gouged even harder and he winced.

"For this indignity alone, you deserve the most horrible fate I can concoct," Death Master said.

Blade felt the gun shift, and his nemesis slid into view on his right. The cold steel of the barrel pressed against his ear.

"Lolita, take all his weapons and pile them on the floor," Death Master instructed her. "Be careful to stay away from his hands."

"You've got it, sweets."

Furious at himself for being captured, Blade watched her deposit the M-16's, the pistol, and his Bowies off to the left. His gaze lingered on the knives.

"Don't even think of it," Death Master warned. He quickly stepped around in front of the Warrior and backpedaled over two yards. In his right hand was a Desert Eagle .357 Magnum.

"Now what?" Blade asked, noticing that Lolita still stood beside the pile of weapons only a yard off.

"Now we provide you with luxury accommodations until such time as I elect to dispose of you," Death Master replied smugly.

"He'd be a natural at the games," Lolita said. "Give him to Sting."

"Sting?" Blade repeated.

"One of my pets," Death Master said. "I've had him for over a dozen years."

Blade pretended not to be interested in Lolita, but surreptitiously he was gauging the distance between them, calculating whether he could seize her and use her as a shield while he grabbed his Bowies. He'd probably take a slug in the attempt. Perhaps if he inched a bit nearer—

"Darling, go fetch some of my incompetent guards," Death Master commanded.

"On my way," Lolita said and skipped toward the stairwell.

The Warrior watched her leave with a constricted sensation in his gut.

"Until they arrive why don't we enjoy a nice chat?" Death Master said.

"Why don't you jump off the roof?"

"My, aren't we a poor loser," Death Master said sarcastically. "You wouldn't catch me being so juvenile."

"No, just demented."

"Keep it up. Every insult will cost you."

"Promises, promises."

The mutation backed up another yard and let his body relax. "After all I've heard about you, I expected better than this. To give you your due, though, in other respects your reputation is definitely deserved. I saw you take out Rinty, Pika, and the men with them from a window on this floor. You were quite impressive."

Blade didn't respond.

"And since you made it this far, you must have disposed of Brahma as well. How many hybrids does that make? Six? Seven?"

"I didn't kill Garo."

"Six then," Death Master said, impressed. "There isn't another human alive who could dispose of so many hybrids in such a short span of time."

"Oh, I know one or two who could."

"Some of your teammates on the Force?"

The Warrior sighed. "Let me guess. You knew the moment you laid eyes on me."

"No, but soon thereafter."

"How?"

"I have my sources," Death Master said and chuckled. "Really, though, how many humans are there your size who always wear a black leather vest and carry two oversized toothpicks?"

"Maybe I should start using a disguise," Blade said.

"Aren't you forgetting a trifling fact? There won't be a next time. Mesaville is the end of the line for the famous head of the Freedom Force. When the news gets out, I'll be widely regarded as practically invincible. Your death will do wonders for my business."

"If the news spreads far enough, you won't be doing business very long."

"Oh, and why is that?"

"Because a few of my fellow Warriors will pay Mesaville a visit and wipe you and the rest of these scum off the face of the earth."

"Warriors? What are you talking about?"

Blade adopted a mocking grin. "So you don't know everything there is to know about me. Good."

"Are these Warriors as competent as you?"

"Some are better."

Death Master chuckled. "Now I know you're exaggerating. I didn't take you for a braggart."

"Suit yourself," Blade said. He heard feet pounding on the stairs.

The titan suddenly extended the Magnum, pointing it at the Warrior's forehead. "Where are Grizzly and the bitch?"

"Don't know them."

"Tell me or die."

Instead, Blade laughed.

"Do you find death laughable?"

"No, only your threat. You won't shoot."

"Why not?"

"Because it would deprive you of the chance to display me in the arena, to throw me to your pet, to let everyone see just how powerful you truly are," Blade said.

"True," Death Master said, grinning, and lowered the gun.

Six gunners ran onto the landing and hastened down the corridor. They halted and one said, "We're here, boss."

Shifting, Death Master glanced sideways at his henchmen. "I can see that, Nelson, you blathering idiot."

Nelson tried to wilt into the floor.

"You will take Blade to a holding pen under the arena and leave four men on guard at all times. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"Humor me. Repeat it."

Nelson promptly complied.

"Excellent," Death Master said ever so politely, then cracked his voice like a whip. "Cover him, you morons!"

Blade almost laughed as the six drew their hardware with astounding dexterity. "I hope none of them are trigger happy."

Death Master shook his head. "Not at all. They're all aware of the consequences should a prisoner be slain without proper provocation."

"And I suppose an escape attempt qualifies?"

"I'm afraid so." Death Master moved to the side and motioned for the Warrior to go on by. "I'll be over to see you later."

"Don't do me any favors," Blade said and walked down the center of the hallway, acutely conscious of the guns trained on his body.

The six gunners fell in behind him, Nelson in the lead.

"No funny stuff, you."

"I wouldn't dream of it," Blade lied. He went down the stairwell slowly, hoping for an opening, hoping they would make a mistake he could capitalize on.

Lolita appeared, coming toward them.

This could be it, Blade thought. None of the guards would dare fire if he got his hands on Death Master's favorite.

The gunner named Nelson abruptly jammed an AK-47 into the base of the Warrior's spine. "Just in case," he said.

Any try would be futile. Blade resigned himself to the situation. He smiled sweetly at Lolita as she drew closer.

"Up yours, asshole," the queen of Mesaville said, moving next to the railing and eyeing him suspiciously.

Blade winked as he passed her. "You should write a book on etiquette some day."

"What's etiquette?"

The Warrior made all his escorts jump by laughing heartily.

* * *

Grizzly straightened and stepped into the open, turning as he did, knowing he was already way too late, knowing he'd blundered by not continuing on, by talking when he should have been fully alert. He, of all people, knew the capabilities of his fellow hybrids. He'd been a fool.

A dark form hurtled from the top of the boulder and slammed into the bear-man's chest. They both went down, rolling and tumbling, and separated without drawing blood.

Grizzly rose into a crouch as his foe did the same, extending his fingers and locking them. His claws slid out, ready for action.

The other hybrid grinned, exposing a pair of incisors over two inches long. He stood six feet high and possessed a sturdy build. His entire body was covered with a coat of fine dark brown hair, except for a rim of white around his nose and a white patch between his beady eyes. Small, circular ears framed a narrow head that now bobbed as he nodded and said, "Spare yourself some grief and give up now."

"You know better, Vank," Grizzly said. "You don't have a prayer against me."

"Oh? I'm every bit as fast as you are, buddy, even if I'm not as strong."

Grizzly wagged his hands. "Don't forget my claws."

"Never in a million years," Vank said, grinning. He slowly straightened and casually folded his arms across his chest. "I intend to live to a ripe old age."

Puzzled, Grizzly let his hands fall slightly. "We've shared some good times together. I don't want to kill you if it can be avoided."

"Then it's unanimous."

"Why don't you go back to Death Master and tell the scuzz that you couldn't find me? I'll certainly never tell him the truth."

"You know better, Grizzly, old pal. He's no fool. Death Master knows how good we are, and he wouldn't believe such a lie for a minute," Vank said casually.

"The only other option is for me to carve you into marmot steaks."

Vank chortled. "Oh, there's another option—one you haven't considered."

"Enlighten me."

"You can surrender and let me take you back."

"Dream on," Grizzly said.

"Please. For old time's sake. I'd rather not kill you, either."

"Don't make me laugh."

The marmot-man frowned and let his arms drop to his sides. "Death Master wants your hide, friend. I'm bucking him by offering you a deal."

"You call surrendering a deal?"

"That's only half of it," Vank and.

"What's the other half?"

"We let your friend live," Vank said and nodded to the right.

Grizzly looked. Instantly a red rage threatened to seize control and provoke him into a reckless charge. He subdued his temper with a supreme effort and directed his anger internally. How could he have been so stupid! Vank had always been one of the cleverest hybrids in Mesaville. The marmot-man would never confront him head-on unless he had an ace in the hole. And there it was: Athena clasped in the gecko-man's steely arms.

Drazil smirked, his bulbous eyes unblinking as he coldly regarded the bear-man. His left hand was over Athena's mouth, his right on the back of her neck. There was no doubt he could snap it like a twig; as with all lizards, his thin figure didn't do justice to his prodigious strength. He had light tan skin marked with black, irregular blotches and spots. His limbs were short in proportion to his height, and his stubby fingers were all the same length. "Hello, Grizzly," he said mockingly, the words issuing from his thin lips with a distinct hiss.

"Let go of her, you bastard," Grizzly snapped.

"Be serious," Vank said. "If he released her, you'd be on us before we could blink. No way, Grizzly. She's our insurance."

Grizzly saw Athena's M-16 lying on the ground behind Drazil. The damn gecko-man must have jumped her while Grizzly was rolling on the ground with Vank. They'd suckered him but good.

"So what's it going to be?" Vank asked. "Do you sheath those swords of yours? Or do we off the woman and get down to basics?"

"I'll get you for this. Both of you."

"Frankly, old buddy, I doubt it. Once Death Master gets his mitts on you, you can kiss this life good-bye."

"I'll get him too."

"My. Aren't we in a grumpy mood," Vank said. He motioned at the bear-man's hands. "We don't have all day. What's it going to be?"

Athena tried to speak but Drazil tightened his grip, and her muffled words came out as gurgled gasps.

His shoulders slumping, Grizzly relaxed his fingers, and his claws vanished up his fingers and thumbs. He knew Athena wanted him to resist. She'd make any sacrifice to save him. But the same held true in his case, and he wasn't about to jeopardize her life. He'd bide his time. Sooner or later someone would make a mistake, and he'd be all over them like their *worst* nightmare.

Vank smiled, "I knew you would be sensible if you put your mind to it."

"You're dead meat, Vank. You and Lizard Breath."

"Be nice." Vank shifted and nodded at the edifice. "Since I'm such a nice guy I'll let you go first, Draz and the chickadee will bring up the rear. Any fancy moves on your part, Grizz, and she's pet food. Get me?"

"I'll get you, all right," Grizzly vowed and moved out. Vank glanced at Drazil and chuckled. "Never underestimate the power of positive persuasion."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Blade was testing the shackles and chains securing him to the stone wall when he heard the guards outside his cell address someone. A moment later the door was thrown wide and in walked his four guards, two hybrids he'd never seen before, Grizzly and Athena with their wrists bound behind their backs, and four more guards who kept their automatic weapons trained on the bear-man at all times.

The light from the flickering lantern on the wall near the door revealed the hybrids' smug expressions, the guards ill-concealed fear, Athena's forlorn countenance, and Grizzly's simmering fury.

"Blade!" Athena said. "They got you too."

"Afraid so," the Warrior said.

"And now Death Master has a complete collection," joked a hybrid who bore a striking resemblance to a groundhog or a marmot.

"Remember my words, Vank," said Grizzly.

"Sticks and stones, old pal." Vank nodded at the cell guards, who promptly took the bear-man over to the wall, unfastened the rope binding his wrists, and secured him with chains. They stepped back to admire their handiwork, but a growl from Grizzly sent them scurrying.

Vank and the other hybrid cackled.

In less than half a minute Athena joined her companions, chained on the other side of the Warrior. "There," Vank said. "That should hold the three of you until the games." He glanced at a guard. "What time is it?"

The man checked his watch. "Seven a.m."

"That gives you thirty-five hours to live," Vank told the prisoners. "Cherish every minute." He snickered and departed and the rest filed out.

The cell door clanged shut.

Grizzly surveyed the square cell, noticing the lack of windows and air vents. He sniffed and scrunched up his nose. "This dump reeks. I bet they

haven't cleaned it out in decades."

"Tell me about it," Blade said. "I've been here for almost thirty minutes."

"How'd you manage to get caught?"

"Stupidity."

"The same here."

"I was hoping you'd come to my rescue."

"Actually this is all part of our clever plan to set you free. It only looks as if we're in the same boat as you."

"I figured as much."

Athena suddenly strained against her chains, rattling them, and looked from one to the other. "How can the two of you make jokes at a time like this? We've failed! Death Master has us at his mercy, and before we know it we'll be facing his pets in the arena."

"Calm down," Grizzly said softly.

"A lot can happen in thirty-five hours," Blade said. The wild gleam in her eyes worried him; she seemed on the brink of losing her self-control. This wasn't the Athena he knew, the woman who had fought the Reptiloids, the Vampires, and the minions of the Lords of Kismet In Alaska. This was a woman who hadn't seen action in a year, a woman finding it extremely difficult to cope with the reality of their predicaments. "Take deep breaths. Relax."

"Yeah. Right," Athena snapped, sagging and leaning on the wall.

"We'll get out of this mess," Grizzly said. "Wait and see."

"How?"

"We'll find a way."

"I feel better already."

Blade saw the hurt in Grizzly's face and elected to divert the conversation to another topic. "Be careful. Don't talk too loud or the guards outside will hear."

"I don't care," Athena said.

The Warrior gazed at the bear-man. "Have you been down here before?"

"Nope. Only the captives slated for the games are held here. The hybrids always entered the arena through the entrance nearest the tower. Once we did our dirty work, we went out the same way. There was never any reason for us to come down to the sublevels."

"Where are Death Master's pets housed?"

"On a sublevel on the other side of the arena. A tunnel leads from their holding pens to the arena floor, or so I was told."

"And there must be other prisoners in cells near ours?"

"Probably, but I wouldn't know the head count," Grizzly said. "Why all the questions? What do you have in mind?"

"Nothing yet. I just want to get the layout clear in my head."

"I wish I could be of more help."

The Warrior studied the shackles biting into his wrists. Under other circumstances he might have admired the craftsmanship; they were solid steel and as smooth as glass. The chains had also been constructed to last; the steel used in each link was over an inch thick and would require dynamite to shatter. He'd broken chains before, but never any like these.

Grizzly moved a stride from the wall, which was all the further the chains allowed, and pulled, striving to rip the steel anchors out. He clenched his teeth and exerted all of his phenomenal might, but to no avail. After several minutes, he ceased and glared at the circular anchors.

Now it was Blade's turn. He heaved until his face turned red, and he sputtered from the effort, but the chains held fast.

"No one has ever escaped from the holding cells," Grizzly said when the

giant eased off to catch his breath.

"There's always a first time."

"I'm game if you are."

"Then we keep trying until we break free or they take us to the arena," Blade proposed.

"Fine by me. I could use the exercise," Grizzly said and stared at Athena, "Don't count us out yet."

She simply nodded, her eyes on the floor.

For the next couple of hours, the Warrior and the hybrid exerted themselves tremendously, alternating turns, first Blade and then Grizzly, attempting to break loose. Sweat poured from the giant's pores and the hybrid's fur became damp with perspiration.

Blade would add mental impetus to his attempts by thinking of his wife and son, Jenny and Gabe, and the misery they would experience if he never returned to the Home. Their love served as the fuel for his gradually flagging body.

Grizzly had only to look at Athena's despondent form for all the impetus he needed. His adrenalin would surge and his muscles ripple, but the chains silently mocked him. In his own right, he was one of the strongest beings on the planet; to the chains, he was less than nothing.

They were still going at it, with Blade puffing and huffing, when a key grated in the cell door. The Warrior stopped as an unexpected visitor walked in.

"And here are my special guests," said Death Master, striding to the center of the cell and regarding them with humorous contempt. He glanced at Blade's flushed features and chuckled. "Keeping busy, are we?"

"Go gloat somewhere else," Grizzly snapped.

"But I'd rather do it here," Death Master said. "The rest of my prisoners are basically a craven, pathetic lot. They cringe in my presence. The three of you, on the other hand, are endowed with admirable degrees of courage."

None of you will cower at the sight of me."

"I might barf," Grizzly said; but the insult was ignored.

"What would you like for your breakfast?" Death Master asked. "My cooks are quite adept at preparing fine meals."

"You're going to feed as?" Blade asked in disbelief.

"Of course. I want you to keep your strength up for the games. You'll be the stars of the show, and my audience mustn't be disappointed."

Grizzly snorted. "You know where you can stick your audience."

Death Master stepped closer to the bear-man and frowned. "I expected better from you after all I've done in your behalf during your stay here. I gave you a roof over your head and all the food you could eat. I elevated you to the status of one of my favorite fighters. And this is how you treat me? With petty insults?"

"As usual you've got the facts all butt-backwards, turkey," Grizzly said. "First of all, you didn't elevate me anywhere. I earned the status of a top fighter by eliminating everything you put in the arena with me. Second of all, I stayed in this dump because it was convenient. It helped me forget."

"Forget what?"

Grizzly stiffened, knowing he'd said too much. Death Master pivoted and scrutinized Athena's dejected posture. "What have we here?" He walked up to her.

"Leave her alone, bastard!" Grizzly snarled, wrenching madly on his chains. "Touch her and I swear I'll cut you into bite-sized pieces!"

"You're in no position to be making threats," Death Master mocked the hybrid. He took hold of Athena's chin and lifted her head. "And you, my pretty, are an enigma. I can't for the life of me understand what your hairy lover-boy sees in you."

A tremendous roar issued from Grizzly's throat, and he went wild, yanking on the chains in a frenzy, his pointed teeth exposed, his fingers clenching and unclenching.

"Pay no attention to his temper tantrum," Death Master said to Athena. "He has the emotional temperament of a six year old."

The titan wasn't the only one perplexed. Blade was surprised that Athena didn't pull her chin from Death Master's grip or teat into him verbally. Instead, she appeared utterly indifferent, to the point of being listless.

Death Master let his hand drift onto her shoulder. "If you exhibited more spark, I might be tempted to take you to my tower to determine if you're talented where it really counts. As it is, I'd rather cuddle with Claire than you." He moved back and glanced at Blade. "Now, about the food—"

"Take me," Athena suddenly cried out.

Blade did a double take and saw Grizzly's rage abruptly subside.

"What did you say?" Death Master asked, twisting to stare at her.

Athena licked her lips. "Take me to your place. I'll show you how talented I am."

"No!" Grizzly bellowed.

Death Master's forehead creased as he gazed at her. "Let me get this straight. You want me to bed you."

"Yes. On one condition."

"And what might that be?"

"You spare my life."

Grizzly shook a fist at her. "Don't do it! You'll never be able to live with yourself."

"Look who's talking," Death Master joked, then laughed with gusto. He scratched his chin and stepped near Athena once again. "I find it difficult to believe your offer is genuine."

"It is," Athena said.

"You realize there is no turning back once I remove your shackles?"

"Yes."

"There's nothing I like so much as a good lay. If you're any good at all, your life will be spared. Of course, you'll have to spend the rest of your days in my harem."

Athena never hesitated. "I agree."

"Very well," Death Master said and reached into a pocket for the keys.

Grizzly hissed and shook his right fist. "I can't believe you're doing this!"

"Me, neither," Blade added. "Please, Athena, reconsider. The stress has gotten to you; you don't know what you're doing."

"I know perfectly well what I'm doing," Athena said.

Death Master extended the keys and unfastened the shackle securing her left wrist. "Don't listen to these fools. They're not practical like you."

"I'm begging you, Athena," Grizzly said.

"A male should never grovel in front of a female," Death Master said, smirking. "Women never respect whiners." He undid her right shackle and moved to one side.

Expelling a breath of relief, Athena smiled in gratitude and rubbed her wrists. "I hope I can repay you properly."

"Don't worry. You will."

Blade saw Grizzly bow his head and could readily imagine the turmoil the bear-man was feeling. His heart went out to him.

"After you," Death Master said with a bow and motioned for Athena to precede him out of the door.

"Gladly," the journalist replied and started to take a step. Her right foot came off the floor and kept rising, even as she rotated on the ball of her left, sweeping her foot around and into the titan's groin, hitting him where the kick would hurt the most.

Complete shock registered on Death Master's face, and he doubled over, automatically clutching at his privates.

Athena delivered another kick, this time to Death Master's knee, and caused him to stagger. She slid to his rear and kicked him behind the right knee, buckling his leg, and lunged for the Magnum on his right hip.

Death Master was already clawing for the Desert Eagle on his left hip.

"No!" Grizzly wailed.

Athena almost made it. Her hands were closing on the Magnum's grips when Death Master's right elbow whipped back and struck her in the face, sending her sprawling. Frantically she pushed to her feet and saw Death Master twisting toward her, the other Desert Eagle in his hand. She had nowhere to run, nowhere to hide, and she wasn't close enough to kick the gun from his grasp. Her loving eyes darted to Grizzly at the very moment the Desert Eagle pointed at her forehead.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

That heartbeat in time would be engraved in Blade's memory for all eternity to come. He watched in slow motion, as it were, as Death Master's finger tightened on the trigger and the Magnum thundered in the restricted confines of the holding cell. He saw the tender affection on Athena's face, directed toward Grizzly, the millisecond before the heavy slug slammed into her forehead and flung her backward to smash into the wall. Her eyes stayed open as her body slowly sank down, her gaze still fixed on the hybrid she had so devoutly loved.

The tableau froze as the gunshot echoed eerily.

And then Grizzly vented a soul-wrenching cry of commingled anguish and rage. He tried to go to her and went berserk when he came to the limits of the chains. His body became a surging whirlwind, his arms thrashing, his legs pumping.

Eight gunners ran into the cell, Nelson in the lead. Death Master stood, his visage a mask of hatred, and walked over to Athena. At point-blank range he emptied the Desert Eagle into her, then spun and exited without another word.

The guards likewise departed.

Blade had never felt so helpless in his life. He stared sadly at Athena's delicate, crumpled body, waves of torment beating at his brain. It was a trick! She'd never intended to sleep with the titan. Her ruse had been meant to obtain their freedom and she'd perished in the attempt. To the very last she'd been true to her love for Grizzly and her friendship with both of them. How could he have doubted her?

For almost half an hour Grizzly vainly tried to break the chains. His motions became increasingly sluggish, his roars feebler and feebler, as time went on. Even his superb, artificially enhanced physique had limits, and when his fury spent itself, he collapsed, sagging to his knees with his brow resting on the stone floor.

The Warrior couldn't think of any words that would lessen the hybrid's suffering. He leaned against the wall and closed his eyes, moisture gathering in the corners. His mind went blank and he lost all track of time. He barely stirred when four guards entered and removed Athena's body. Only when a strange sound filled the cell did he rouse himself and look around to discover the source.

Grizzly was crying, sobbing in great gasps, his shoulders rising and falling, and he moaned as he cried a low, plaintive expression of profound agony.

Blade nearly wept too. He held in his tears, though, preferring to channel his grief, to transform it into the fire of vengeance that would sustain him during the conflict to come. Thoughts of getting even with Death Master filled his head: a hundred and one ways of slaying the titan were graphically enacted in his mind's eye; and a fierce resolve every bit as steely as his chains girded him for the showdown. He didn't know exactly how he would accomplish the feat, but he was going to eliminate the titan and destroy Mesaville or die trying.

The appointed hour arrived.

Blade knew in advance that the games would soon begin. The noise of the crowd entering, the arena filtered down to the holding cells and there was constant commotion in the corridor. He looked at Grizzly, who sat morosely contemplating empty air, and said, "It's almost time."

Not a peep came from the hybrid. Not once in the intervening time since Athena's death had he spoken a word.

The Warrior had tried to induce the bear-man to talk, but all his remarks fell on deaf ears. He'd also endeavored to persuade Grizzly to eat when food was brought, but the hybrid wouldn't touch his meals.

Suddenly the door opened and in walked Nelson. Slung over his left shoulder was an M-16. Strapped around his waist were a pair of familiar Bowies. "It won't be long now, chumps. The boss is saving you clowns for the main event, which means you've got forty minutes or so until you can kiss your butts so long."

"Any chance he'll put you in the arena with us?" Blade asked.

"Eat dirt," Nelson said and departed, slamming the door behind him.

The Warrior tried to break the chains one more time. As always they held. He sighed and decided to save his strength.

"I want one thing understood."

Blade turned, surprised by the softly spoken declaration, and found the bear-man staring at him, "What?"

"I want one thing understood. Death Master is mine."

"We're in this together."

Grizzly stood, his voice lowering into a raspy rumble emanating from his chest. "Don't give me that. The son of a bitch killed the woman I loved. I'm taking him out and you'd better not get in my way."

"Are you threatening me?" Blade asked in amazement.

"I'm telling you how it's going to be."

"You're not thinking clearly."

"I don't need to think. Once I'm out in the arena all I have to do is kill, and that's my specialty, remember?"

"We have a better chance of putting a permanent end to Death Master

and his operation if we work together. We might even survive."

"Survive?" Grizzly said, and laughed. "Who the hell wants to survive? I don't care if I live or die. All I want is to sink my claws into Death Master and feel his blood gush out over my hands."

"Do you have a plan?"

"Don't need one."

"Then how do you propose to get close enough to use your claws?"

"I've been in the arena scores of times. I know the layout and how the games are conducted. Since we're being saved for last, that means they'll take us in on the west side. The entrance to the tunnel I told you about is on the east side. Death Master and his entourage will be on a platform to the south. All around us in the stands will be the lowlives screaming for our blood," Grizzly said.

"How high is the arena wall?"

"Twenty feet."

"Even you can't jump that high."

Grizzly nodded. "I could if I had some help."

"What kind of help?"

The hybrid explained, and the two of them spent the next half hour discussing his idea and plotting to bring about the downfall of the lord of Mesaville. They were still conversing in hushed whispers when footsteps sounded outside and the cell door opened once again.

"Are you ready to die?" Nelson baited them. Behind him came nine gunners. Five spread out to cover the prisoners from various angles while the remaining four attended to unlocking the shackles, then quickly stepped back and brought their own weapons to bear.

Blade rubbed his sore, cut wrists, his eyes on his Bowies.

"Move out!" Nelson barked, heading for the hallway. Four of the gunners trailed him while the rest brought up the rear, sandwiching the

Warrior and the hybrid between them.

The Warrior didn't bother to attempt to escape. He knew any try would be futile; the guards would easily mow him down. Everything now depended on what happened in the arena. His life hinged on the success or failure of the strategy he'd formulated with Grizzly.

Walking beside the giant, the hybrid presented the picture of docile despair, his head hung low, his eyelids drooping.

The party made three turns before reaching a pair of wide wooden doors where more guards awaited. From the other side of the doors came growling noises and the pathetic wails of a dying woman.

Nelson moved over and opened a narrow, barred window set in the right-hand door at chest height. He leaned down and peered out, then said, "It won't be long. Ogorg is finishing up."

Blade heard something eating greedily. There was loud crunching, probably the breaking of bones, mixed with an awful slurping and squishing and pronounced gulps. "Let me guess. Ogorg is one of Death Master's pets."

"You got it," Nelson said, still peering through the window. "It's a sand worm. A big mother, too. Twenty feet long. Took the boss a hell of a long time to train the mother."

"Which one of his pets will we face?" Blade asked.

"I don't want to spoil the surprise," Nelson said, provoking laughter from the other gunners.

"Are we allowed to take weapons into the arena?"

Nelson turned, smirking. "Yeah. We give you a machine gun and a few hand grenades."

There was more laughter. The guards evidently rated Nelson as a first-rate comedian.

"I'd settle for my knives," Blade said.

"No way, sucker. These are mine for life," Nelson gloated, patting the

hilts. "The boss gave them to me because I do such great work."

"Take good care of them. I expect to get them back soon.

"Dream on, idiot."

"Hey, Nelson," one of the gunners said. "What's with the freak? He looks as if he's ready to keel over."

"The boss blew his bimbo away and fed the corpse to Sting," Nelson said. "The freak just went off the deep end. His brain couldn't take the strain."

There were shouts from the arena and the unmistakable sliding of a heavy body—or thing—that gradually receded.

Nelson gazed out the window again. "The boys are driving Ogorg down the tunnel. As soon as they've got him back in his pen, they'll rig the rope for the grand finale."

"Rig the rope?" Blade repeated.

"Yeah," Nelson said, turning. "The boss has saved his favorite pet for you, a pet that ain't easy to control, especially when it's first let out. It's killed a few guards who got careless. So a rope has been rigged up, tied around the bar to its pen and attached to a pulley hanging from the ceiling. When the boys pull on the rope from near the tunnel entrance, the bar lifts and the thing is free. It usually comes out snapping and stabbing, mad as hell, then goes into the arena to eat." He paused. "The thing is easier to manage after it's filled its gut; the boys can drive it back down with long poles then."

"Has anyone ever fought this thing and won?"

Nelson and the gunners cackled at the notion. "You don't stand a chance, dummy. Your best bet is to run until you drop."

"Thanks for the tip."

A loud voice shouted a command beyond the double doors. "Bring out the next contestants."

"That's you two bozos," Nelson said and nodded at several guards, who

promptly opened the doors. "Out you go."

Blade walked forward into the glare of bright lights attached at regular intervals to the top of the inner arena wall. He blinked and squinted up at the hundreds of gang members flocking the stands. Boisterous hoots and boos greeted his entry, and many in the crowd took to calling him names that reflected adversely on his lineage and mental ability. He raised his right hand over his eyes, letting them adjust to the light, and pivoted to the south.

Perched on a level with the top of the wall, its outer edge extending six feet over the rim, was the platform where sat Death Master, Lolita, Vank and Drazil, and the rest of the titan's inner circle, 14 in all. Four were women garbed in black leather. Blade heard a feral growl and glanced to his right to see Grizzly clenching his fists and trembling from suppressed rage while balefully eyeing those on the platform, "Not yet," he whispered. "Our timing must be perfect."

The hybrid frowned, nodded once, and resumed his passive posture.

"Let's move closer," Blade suggested, stepping to the south. On his left there was a gaping blade hole in the arena wall, the mouth to the tunnel leading down to the containment pens for the pets. How long before the horror was unleashed?

Death Master stood and strolled to the rim of the platform. He elevated his arms and a hush descended. "Friends and associates, we are about to enjoy the highlight of this edition of the games." He pointed at the Warrior and the bear-man. "You see before you two who infiltrated Mesaville with the sole intent of destroying us. You see before you the man known as Blade, the head of the infamous Freedom Force, a man who has killed more of our brothers than anyone else alive." The spectators broke into curses and general shouts of hatred.

"I've heard of him!"

"He wiped out the Devils!"

"Kill the son of a bitch!"

"Rip him to bits!"

Death Master gestured and the crowd fell silent. "Beside him you see a former favorite in these games, the mutation named Grizzly. It turns out he is a close friend of Blade's. He is a spy, sent into our midst to gauge our defenses, our weaknesses."

"The lying prick," Grizzly said under his breath.

Predictably the throng vented their collective fury until the titan motioned.

"This evening you'll feast your eyes on a real treat. I've saved my best pet until now—the one you all know is the deadliest of the lot—so that we can relish the sight of him tearing our enemies to pieces. Sit back, relax, chug some brewskies, and get set for a fight you'll be talking about years down the road,"

The crowd cheered enthusiastically.

Blade halted 25 feet from the platform and rotated to face the tunnel mouth. None too soon. There was movement in the darkness, and a second later a primordial nightmare scuttled into the open. "Ladies and gentlemen! "Death Master shouted. "I give you the awesome might of Sting!"

The audience went wild.

Blade instinctively crouched and backed up, the short hairs at the nape of his neck tingling, his hands dropping to his empty sheaths.

Sting had been aptly named. Ten feet high and 12 feet long, the creature was an enormous mutation, a black scorpion the size of an elephant. Pincers a yard long were held extended outward on either side of the grotesque head. The thing had eight crab-like legs. Its bulky body sported the arachnid equivalent of armor plating. But most horrific of all was its segmented tail. Tipped by a hooked poison stinger, it lay curled up over the scorpion's body. "Dear Lord," Blade said.

"Don't let it spook you," Grizzly said.

From the platform came a devilish laugh. The Warrior glanced over his shoulder at Death Master, who laughed even harder, and spied Nelson moving up next to the titan. The flunky must have hastened around to be

on hand for a bird's-eye view of the proceedings. Perfect.

Sting swung to the right, then the left, seeking its prey, and finally the two eyes on top of its cephalothorax spied the pair standing 40 feet away. Its legs pumped, driving the tank of a body toward them, and its pincers snapped in anticipation.

"Not yet," Grizzly said.

"I wish I had a bazooka," Blade said, unable to take his eyes from the onrushing monstrosity. Doubt assailed him. How could he ever hope to prevail over such an invincible natural engine of destruction? Pitting his sinews against the armored behemoth seemed certain suicide. Grizzly began to backpedal. "Get set," he said. Nodding, Blade did the same. On came the hideous mutation.

CHAPTER TWENTY

"Now!" Grizzly barked.

Together he and the Warrior whirled and raced toward the south wall, eliciting jeers from the throng who assumed they were fleeing from the scorpion. But they halted shy of the wall, standing directly under the lip of the platform where they were screened from the eyes of those on top. Instantly Blade cupped his hands and crouched.

"I'll drop down a weapon," Grizzly said, and took two strides, placing his right foot in the giant's palms and leaping upward at the same second that the Warrior's bulging arms flung him on high. The combined momentum shot him toward the platform like an arrow.

Blade saw the bear-man straighten, saw the hybrid's fingers go rigid and the claws snap out, and watched as Grizzly sailed past the edge of the platform, missing it by a hair. And then he had to whirl to confront the monster bearing down on him, now only 10 feet away. The scorpion's left pincer arced at the giant's head.

Blade ducked and felt the pincer brush his hair even as he threw himself to the right onto the dirt floor and rolled several yards before rising to his knees. The scorpion had kept on going and was beginning to turn.

A shriek sounded on the platform and suddenly a body pitched over the side and landed with a thud below.

The Warrior recognized Nelson, Five razor claws had reduced the man's throat to ribbons and blood still gushed forth. He darted to the gunner's side and flipped him over, glancing at the scorpion as he did.

The beast had rotated and was advancing again.

Profound relief washed over Blade as his hands closed on the Bowies. Out they came and he rose, smiling, hearing a series of tremendous roars from above mixed with screams and angry curses. He longed to be at Grizzly's side but he had to preserve his own life first.

Its pincers waving, the scorpion closed on Blade.

Even with the knives, Blade knew he was at a profound disadvantage. He retreated, avoiding a pair of mighty swipes, and tried to parry a third swing with his Bowie. The jarring impact of the massive claw almost tore the knife from his grasp and made him stumble.

General pandemonium reigned in the stands. There were screeches of terror, a chorus of frantic yells, and shots.

All of which Blade barely heard. He concentrated exclusively on evading the scorpion's pincers. The thing was fast, but it invariably telegraphed its intent by drawing back the pincer it planned to use to strike before doing so, enabling Blade to dodge five more swings.

His knives were next to useless against such a foe. If he tried going for the thing's head, one of its few vulnerable parts, those pincers would undoubtedly crush him to a pulp.

The scorpion abruptly bent its body low to the ground and speared its tail at the Warrior.

Blade narrowly missed being impaled. He darted to the right, trying to keep track of both pincers and the tail simultaneously. That wicked stinger lanced at him again, then a pincer, then the tail, and each time he succeeded in sidestepping by a fraction of an inch.

As if frustrated by its failure, the scorpion intensified its efforts.

Again Blade skipped out of reach of a pincer. The tail. A pincer. Twisting and weaving, he was holding his own until the unexpected transpired. Blade's left foot encountered a slick spot on the arena floor, a patch of blood spilled by the previous contestant, and with a sickening sensation in his gut, he slipped and crashed onto his back.

Immediately the scorpion moved in, standing astride its prey, its pincers lowering.

Blade looked up at the monster's head and saw its mouth working. The pincers were swooping in from both sides. He couldn't scramble out or to the right or left—to do so meant certain death. The only alternative was to use his elbows and legs to move under the monster. He slid frantically beneath the cephalothorax and discovered its soft underside wasn't protected by an iron exoskeleton.

Apparently puzzled by his disappearance, the scorpion stood with its pincers swinging from side to side.

The Warrior drove both Bowies deep into the creature's body, not knowing if he would hit a vital organ or not, but determined to do a great amount of damage as swiftly as possible. He stabbed again and again, thrusting and twisting each knife repeatedly, opening large holes and grimacing as gore and a pale fluid splashed onto his face and chest. Eight, nine, ten times he plunged the Bowies into the monster.

In a burst of motion the scorpion ran forward a dozen yards and halted, its tail and pincers jerking frantically.

Blade jumped up and swung around to face the beast, his Bowies held at waist level, prepared to renew the battle, but a most astonishing event transpired. The scorpion started stinging itself with its own tail! He watched, in gratified bewilderment as the monster sank its stinger into its broad back a half-dozen times in rapid succession. Then it lumbered toward the west wall, gathering speed as it went. At the base of the wall, it clawed upward, using its stout five-foot-high rear legs to push its bulk from the ground. By extending to its full length and reaching out as far as the pincers would go, the scorpion managed to grip the lip and began to haul itself laboriously from the arena.

The crowd went crazy, realizing its purpose and fleeing in terrified abandon, men and women shoving and fighting as they struggled to be

first to the exits.

Blade heard a roar and turned.

Only one living being remained on the platform. Death Master's entourage were all dead, their bodies cut and ripped and hacked to pieces, lying in spreading pools of blood. A severed arm lay here, a leg there, while fingers and hands were scattered everywhere. Vank and Drazil had been sliced wide open; they were lying on their backs with their entrails oozing out.

At the edge of the platform stood the blood-spattered form of Grizzly, his chest heaving from his exertions, his fur marred by a dozen minor wounds, a knife jutting from his left thigh. He held aloft the object clutched in his right hand, a grisly trophy commemorating his triumph, and beamed proudly. Then his head bent back and he voiced his primal challenge again, the roar carrying the length and breadth of the arena, spurring the departing spectators to go faster.

Blade glanced at the stands and saw the scorpion thrashing wildly, in its death throes. The seats were emptying on all sides and soon the crowd would be gone. A loud thump sounded nearby and he looked down to see something rolling toward his legs. It came to rest a yard away, its features locked in a defiant snarl, its disparate eyes lifeless, its tongue protruding from between its teeth. It was Death Master's head.

An hour later Blade and Grizzly hiked through the empty streets of the subterranean town toward the entrance. Snug in their sheaths on the Warrior's hips were his Bowies. In his arms he held an Uzi taken from Death Master's armory. Slung over his left shoulder was a Marlin 45-70. He wore a backpack crammed with supplies needed for the impending trek through the desert. "There might still be some hiding, out," he said.

"I don't care," the hybrid said, his countenance a study in forceful resolution.

"Neither do I."

They slowed as they nested the outer tunnel, wary of an ambush.

"I can't believe they won't retaliate," Blade said, trying to prevent his friend from dwelling on Athena's death by keeping the conversation going.

"They're a bunch of wimps," Grizzly responded. "They didn't stick around to see Sting die, so they probably figure the thing is running loose in Mesaville."

"And don't forget that most of them saw you kill Death Master. I wouldn't be surprised if they're equally scared of you."

There was no one in the tunnel and no guards on duty outside. Stars sparkled in the heavens and a cool breeze blew in from the northwest.

Grizzly inhaled and smiled wanly. "I haven't been out here in ages. Forgot how beautiful it is."

Blade led the way westward. Muted voices sounded on both sides, and he discovered gang members hiding among the boulders lining the bottom of the mesa. None made a move to interfere. Most pointed and whispered excitedly.

"Like I said. Wimps," Grizzly said.

They never broke stride. Soon they were several hundred yards from Mesaville and they stopped to gaze back. Dozens of toughs were heading into the tunnel, evidently believing the coast to be clear.

"You don't plan to warn them, do you?" Grizzly asked.

"Warn them about what?"

The hybrid began to grin, then sighed. "I should have been the one who died, not her."

"Just don't let her sacrifice be in vain."

Grizzly glanced at the giant. "I'm going back, aren't I?"

"Jag will be glad to see you," Blade said. He resumed walking, thinking of Havoc and Athena, his soul filled with melancholy.

"Are you sure you can handle having two hybrids on the Force?"

"It promises to be an educational experience."

Now Grizzly did grin. After a bit he said, "You know, I felt a little better

after I took that scumbag's head off. It sort of confirmed my true purpose in life."

"You'll have plenty of similar opportunities in the months ahead."

"I know. I'm looking forward to it."

The breeze picked up. They covered a quarter mile before the hybrid spoke once more.

"Shouldn't it be soon?"

"Any minute," Blade confirmed.

"It was nice of the bastard to have such a well-stocked armory."

"Yeah. I particularly admired his explosives."

"And the timer. Don't forget the timer," Grizzly said. "How many do you think we'll bag?"

"All of them, I hope."

"That's what I like about you."

"What?"

"You're always talking about the Spirit and how everybody is supposed to seek truth and all that garbage, but deep down you like to waste lowlives just as much as I do."

"Think so?"

"I know so."

Behind them arose a muffled, thunderous blast, and a stream of fire shot from Mesaville's maw, lighting up the desert in all directions. A second explosion occurred, and a third, each progressively louder. Mesaville shook and shuddered as if in the grip of an earthquake, and then, with a turbulent uproar that would have done justice to an erupting volcano, the mesa collapsed upon itself, the walls and top buckling inward, irretrievably burying the caverns under tons and tons of earth and stone.