

PROLOGUE

The bag lady knew she was being followed.

Ethel Kunze halted and turned, her dark eyes probing the shadows of the alley to her rear. Her vision wasn't as keen as it had been, but she still detected the half-dozen or so vague figures coming toward her out of the gloom. Her heart beat faster. If they were the Pagan Warlords, she was as good as dead. They'd warned her to keep away from their turf. And that wicked one, Mickey, had promised to cut her from ear to ear if she showed her face again.

Light, menacing laughter came from the darkness.

Terrified, Ethel spun and ran as best she could toward the street 40 feet away. Her stout legs, afflicted with gout and arthritis, could do little better than shuffle rapidly. She considered discarding her precious knapsack, but she would rather die than part with all her worldly possessions.

"Yo! Bitch!"

The familiar chilling voice made Ethel gasp. Mickey! Oh, God! Why had she decided to visit the clinic tonight of all nights! She could have tolerated the pain until morning.

"Hey, Ethel! I'm talkin' to you," Mickey called out.

"Yeah, Grandma. Don't be runnin' out on us," someone else added.

Ignoring them, Ethel concentrated on the well-lit street, on her salvation. If she could get in the open, somewhere other people were present, the Pagan Warlords might leave her alone. Her plan to use the alleys and avoid the gang had turned out to be yet another of her great ideas, ranking right up there with her decision to divorce Bob and move in with Zeke. No one in their right mind would have given up a dependable husband like Bob for a lazy alcoholic like Zeke, but she had.

So much for true love.

A grin creased Ethel's thin, dry lips as she neared the street. Only 20 feet to go, she estimated happily. Maybe the Warlords were going to let

her leave. Maybe they were only toying with her. Maybe Mickey didn't really want to slash her throat. But her grin died the very next moment.

Strong hands seized her arms and held her in place.

Stark fear rippled through Ethel and she froze. The pressure on her arm hurt. Protesting, though, would only incite them further, and the last thing she wanted to do was get them mad at her. Out of the corner of her eyes she detected movement in the dim light.

Five Pagans stepped into view in front of her. They were all attired alike, wearing jeans and their colors, their black leather jackets bearing the white skulls on the backs.

"Some people never learn," commented Mickey, a thin guy in his late teens or early twenties. His pale complexion fit his high-pitched voice.

"Hi, Mickey," Ethel said in greeting, beaming her friendliest smile, self-conscious of her three missing upper front teeth.

"Don't hi me, lady," the Warlord snapped.

"Please let me go," Ethel said. "I haven't done anything to harm you." The fingers on her upper arms were digging into her flesh, gouging her through the flimsy fabric of her baggy dress.

Mickey sighed and shook his head. "You were told to stay out of this area, weren't you?"

"Yes, but—" Ethel began.

"I don't want to hear no lame excuses," Mickey told her angrily.

Ethel couldn't help herself. "But the clinic is here. Where else am I going to go for my medicine?"

"Do you think we care, woman?" Mickey rejoined. "We've tried to explain it to you, but you just won't listen. There are other clinics you could go to. This one ain't no better than them."

"But the other clinics are too far away. I don't want to travel all the way to Hawthorne or South Whittier."

"What you want doesn't matter to us, idiot. All that we care about is what *we* want."

"I've spent most of my life in this neighborhood," Ethel remarked sorrowfully. "I can't leave here."

"You can die here," Mickey pointed out, smirking. He placed his right hand on her shoulder. "Look, Ethel. We tried to be nice about this. We told you how it is. Our customers don't like to see scuzzy types like you bums waltzin' around when they cruise down here to buy their goods."

"Drugs are a dirty business," Ethel stated testily.

"Listen to you," Mickey replied, and some of the others laughed. "You make the trip to the clinic three or four times a week just so you can get the free drugs the government hands out to poor trash like yourself."

"That's different. I need the drugs for my pain. I need my medicine to live."

"And our customers need their drugs to live, Ethel. It's the same thing."

"Please, Mickey. Let me go."

A Warlord lowered his arm and regarded her critically for a moment. "And what happens if I do? Are you going to come back onto our turf?"

"No. Never."

"Why don't I believe you?"

"I promise," Ethel vowed. "I suppose it won't kill me to go down to South Whittier."

"But you've already received your warning, lady. You and the rest of the garbage like you." Mickey gazed up at the few stars visible high in the sky above Los Angeles.

"Please," Ethel said yet again.

"I'd like to. I really would," Mickey mentioned. "But I've got the business to think of." He looked at her. "You see, Ethel, ever since the Barons and the Brothers were wiped out, every gang in the city has been

tryin' to become the top of the heap. The Warlords are one of the main contenders. We need to increase our power, and one way to do that is to get the coin to buy more guns. The more guns we have, the more turf we can control. Can you dig it?"

"I understand."

"Then stick with me. To get the coin, we need to draw in more customers to buy our drugs. I mean, people come from miles around to buy our smack and the Big H. To make them feel more at home, we've begun a clean-the-trash campaign." Mickey paused and jabbed her in the chest. "You're part of the trash, Ethel."

"Dear God."

"Now don't start that religious crap on me," Mickey said. "You were given a fair warning and you decided you knew better. Now you pay the price. Just think of your death as a public service."

"A what?"

"Some of the other trash might get the same notion in their lame brains as you and figure we don't mean what we say. Once the word gets out about you, they'll all head elsewhere and we won't have the problem."

Ethel gulped and trembled. "I give you my word I'll never, ever come back this way."

"It's too late," Mickey stated. His right hand dipped into his jacket pocket and came out holding a slim, closed folding knife.

An urge to scream prompted Ethel to open her mouth wide, but her vocal chords refused to cooperate.

Mickey pressed a button on the knife and the blade snapped out.

A switchblade, Ethel thought, and nearly fainted.

"I'll make this fast and painless," Mickey proposed. "You sort of remind me of my old granny, and I always had a soft spot in my heart for the old bag. She was one of the few people who treated me decently when I was a kid."

The hands restraining Ethel clamped down with more force.

"Relax, lady," Mickey said soothingly. "I'm not going to cut your throat. One stab in the chest, if I do it right, is all it'll take." He wagged the knife back and forth in front of her face, grinning all the while.

"Do the old bag, Mick," coaxed another Warlord.

"Yeah. We ain't got all night for this crap," added a tall one.

"You heard them, Ethel," Mickey remarked, feigning sadness, then smirked. "Ready?"

"No. Please."

"On the count of three."

"I'll scream," Ethel blurted out.

"Go ahead. Who do you think is going to be dumb enough to mess with us on our own turf? Even the cops avoid this neighborhood."

"I beg you."

"One," Mickey said, grinning.

"Sweet Jesus, save me!"

"Two."

"Let the woman go!"

The five Warlords in front of Ethel whirled at the sound of the hard, commanding voice. She felt the fingers on her arms let go, and a sixth Pagan came around her and joined his companions. Squinting, she distinguished the form of a huge man standing ten feet away, his back to the street, his figure an inky silhouette.

"Who the hell are you, dude?" Mickey demanded angrily, holding the switchblade near his waist.

"Let the woman go," the stranger repeated, taking a stride nearer.

"This is none of your business, mister," Mickey said.

"Yeah, asshole. Don't stick your nose where it doesn't belong," said the tall Warlord.

The stranger took one more stride. "If you let the woman walk out of the alley, you'll live," he stated, every word pronounced distinctly with a rich resonance.

"*We'll* live?" Mickey responded, and cackled.

"You've got it all backwards, chump," said the tall one. "Haul butt and we might let you live."

For a few seconds the giant did not utter a word, and Ethel feared that the Warlords would make him back down. Then she saw him walk confidently, but slowly, forward, his enormous arms swinging loosely at his sides, and he drew close enough for his features to be perceived. She inadvertently stiffened.

The stranger stood seven feet high, at least, and was endowed with a mighty physique. Layers of prominent muscles rippled and bulged as he moved. He wore a black leather vest, green fatigue pants, and black combat boots. His dark hair hung in a comma above his eyes, which appeared to be a shade of gray.

"Look at the size of this mother!" a Pagan exclaimed.

"He must be a friggin' freak," stated a hefty Warlord.

"He may be big, but there's six of us and just one of him," Mickey noted. "We can take him easy."

The giant halted a yard from the gang members and placed his hands on his hips.

Ethel spotted distinctive bulges under the leather vest, above his hands, and she speculated on the items concealed underneath it.

"Are you takin' a hike or what, Jack?" Mickey demanded.

"The woman. Let her pass," the giant said.

"This turkey has a one-track mind," declared the tall

Warlord. "I vote we cut the jive and off him."

Mickey chuckled. "All those in favor?"

A chorus of agreement emanated from five throats.

"Okay, then. We waste you, sucker," Mickey stated.

Oddly, the giant smiled. "You have it backwards."

"Do we, dog-breath?" Mickey retorted, and snapped his fingers on his left hand.

Instantly all the Pagan Warlords produced weapons. Knives, chains, and a pair of nunchaku glinted in the practiced hands of their youthful owners.

"What have you got to say now, big man?" Mickey taunted the stranger.

"I hope they have room for all of you down at the morgue."

The Warlords exploded into action, converging on the giant in a pack.

Ethel covered her mouth with her right hand, aghast at the budding violence, certain her protector would fall before the combined onslaught of so many adversaries. She saw him move, saw his hand whip under his vest and sweep out holding a matched pair of immense knives, the largest she had ever seen, and he met the attack head-on.

Never, ever would she forget the fight.

The giant flowed with pantherish grace among the Warlords, his arms swinging to the right and the left, his knives flashing streaks of gleaming steel. His first swipe slashed open the tall Pagan's throat, causing a geyser of crimson to spew out. His second buried his left knife in the abdomen of the hefty Warlord, and he ripped the blade upward with a surge of his prodigious sinews.

Ethel scarcely credited her eyes.

Still in motion, the giant sank his right knife in the chest of a third

Pagan, then jerked the blade free to meet the threat of the Warlord whirling the nunchaku.

Dazzled by the flying sticks, Ethel wondered how the giant would defeat the muscular Pagan wielding them. She didn't have to wonder very long.

In an astonishing display of speed and coordination, the giant abruptly dropped onto his right side, using his clenched hands to support his body while he swung his legs in a tight arc, slamming them against the knees of the Warlord employing the nunchaku and knocking him down. Before the Pagan could rise, the giant drove his right knife into the gang member's neck.

Now there were only two, Mickey and another, and they both leaped at the giant, clearly trying to get the stranger at the moment he was rising, at the moment he was most vulnerable.

Ethel saw her protector ram both knives into the other Warlord, then spin and seize Mickey by the front of his leather jacket and his knife arm, and heave.

Mickey sailed through the air and crashed onto a garbage can, upending it and falling onto the ground, cursing in a red rage.

The giant reached the Warlord in three bounds. His right boot tramped down on Mickey's right hand, making a crunching sound, and Mickey screeched and released the switchblade. Bending over, the stranger grabbed Mickey by the hair and hauled him erect.

"My hand! You busted my hand!" the Pagan wailed.

"And that's not all," the giant replied. His left fist swept straight into Mickey's startled face, hitting the Warlord squarely on the nose.

Ethel distinctly heard a loud snap.

The giant stood still for several seconds, surveying his handiwork. He pushed the limp Pagan from him and walked over to retrieve his knives, wiping the blades clean on the jacket of a dead foe. Once the weapons were clean, he slid them into the sheaths he had tucked under his pants, aligning the hilts underneath his vest, and walked over to Ethel. "Are you okay?"

"Yes. Yes, I am."

"I must be on my way. Will you be safe?"

Ethel gazed at the bodies littering the alley. Not one so much as twitched. "I'll be fine. There's a friend down in Anaheim I can visit for a spell, until the heat blows over."

The giant started to turn. "Would you like me to escort you to the street?"

Delighted by the offer, Ethel nodded. "Thank you." His steely fingers, which mere moments before had dispatched six of the deadliest gang members in all of L. A., gently took her elbow and together they exited the dismal alley.

"Take care," the stranger said, and started to leave.

"Wait," Ethel said.

"What is it?"

"Don't I know you from somewhere?"

He didn't respond.

"I'm sure I do," Ethel maintained, studying his handsome visage intently.

"We've never met personally," he assured her.

"Then why do I have this feeling I've seen you before?"

The stranger sighed. "Do you ever read the paper?"

"The newspapers? Sure. Which one?"

"Any of them. But primarily the *L.A. Times*. "

And suddenly Ethel remembered where she had seen her protector, and the realization flabbergasted her. "You!"

A wan smile creased the giant's lips. "Yep. Me."

"No one will ever believe this!"

"I'd appreciate it if you don't tell anyone."

"Why not? You did a good deed. You saved my life. I should tell the whole world."

"Please, as a favor to me, don't say a word unless the police show up to question you."

Ethel shrugged, overjoyed at being alive. If her savior desired anonymity, he must have a valid reason. Who was she to argue? "Okay. As a favor to you."

"Thank you," the giant stated sincerely, and hurried off into the night.

Beaming at her incredible luck, and amazed she had actually met one of the most famous men in the Free State of California—in the entire Federation, for that matter—she shuffled to the west for 20 yards before she remembered something else, something that could put money in her pocket, money she desperately needed. "Let's see," she said aloud to herself. "What's the name of that radio station that offers fifty bucks for the best news tip?" Moments later it came to her.

ONE

The giant paused outside the eleven-story building and gazed up at the neon sign overhead. *L.A. TIMES*. A cloud seemed to descend over his features, which he promptly dissipated with a vigorous shake of his head. He pushed through the ornate glass doors to find himself in a spacious lobby. A counter fronted the opposite wall, and behind it stood a security guard engaged in reading a newspaper spread open on the countertop.

Engrossed in reading, the guard failed to look up.

After checking to ensure his Bowies were properly hidden, the giant advanced across the lobby and halted a yard from the man in the brown uniform. "I'm here to see Mr. Wentworth," he announced.

"You are, huh?" the guard responded in a bored manner, and glanced at the speaker. His mouth dropped and his eyes tried to become the size of

apples.

"Yes, I am," the giant reiterated.

"Of—of course, sir," the guard stammered. "I mean—he is expecting you, isn't he? I'm not supposed to let anyone up this late unless—well, you know."

"I believe he's expecting me. We have an appointment for eight p.m."

The guard looked at the clock on the wall behind him. "Only seven fifty-five. Punctual. Mr. Wentworth will like that." He gestured at an elevator situated in the middle of the right-hand wall. "That's Mr. Wentworth's private elevator. It'll take you right up."

"Thank you." The giant turned and took several strides.

"Hey," the guard said.

"What?" responded the giant, halting and gazing over his left shoulder.

"You're him, aren't you?"

"Him?"

"The leader of the Freedom Force. I've seen your picture in the paper. You're Blade, right?"

"I'm Blade."

"Wow. My kids will never believe this. Do you mind if I get your autograph?"

"My what?"

"Sign your name for me so I can show the family. Please? I've read all about your exploits, you and the rest of your team. You people are incredible."

Blade's lips twisted wryly. "Do you really want my autograph?"

"Damn straight," the guard said. He reached under the counter and produced a tablet, then yanked a pen from his shirt pocket. "Please?"

"This is the first time I've done this," Blade mentioned as he returned to the counter.

"Really? As well known as you are?"

"Really," Blade assured him. He took the pen and hastily scribbled his name on the top line. "There you go."

"Thanks." The guard scooped the tablet up and studied the signature, beaming like a kid who had just received the special gift he'd wanted for Christmas. "This is terrific. If I can ever do anything for you, just let me know. My name is Ronny. Ronny Felton."

"I'll keep it in mind," Blade promised. Grinning at the peculiar consequences of notoriety, he walked to the elevator and pressed the appropriate button. As the car descended from the top floor he reflected on the reason for his presence at the most prestigious newspaper in Los Angeles, a reason that could be summed up in two words.

Athena Morris.

Once she had been a top journalist, until her capture by a deviate mutation known as the Spider. For seven horrific years she'd endured the acute torment of a veritable Hell, until she managed to escape and get to civilization. To her credit, she'd then bravely led the Freedom Force back into the Spider's domain and assisted in the creature's extermination.

Blade thought of that mission and sighed. She should have left well enough alone after that. But not her.

Athena had insisted on joining the Force, and begrudgingly, against his better judgment, after she'd distinguished herself in the confrontation with the Reptiloids in the wild Outlands of southern Oregon, Blade had agreed to take her on.

How was he to know what would happen?

On two subsequent missions Athena had proven herself to be a competent member of the Force. Against the Vampires and again against the minions of the Lords of Kismet she had fought valiantly. On the latter mission she had been injured, then conveyed to a hospital in L.A.

And that, Blade mentally noted, was when the strangeness had begun.

The Force had flown back from an unfortunate affair in Canada to learn Athena had died, fallen to her death from her seventh-floor hospital room when she'd tried to open the window to her room while heavily sedated. She had sustained such massive injuries and been so terribly disfigured, a closed-coffin funeral had been required.

Blade frowned at the memory, and chided himself for not suspecting something was amiss then. Why had it taken him so long to wake up to the fact someone had deliberately deceived him? Probably because he had trusted the man who relayed the news of her death. Probably—

The elevator arrived and the door slid wide.

Entering the car, Blade turned and pressed the white button for the penthouse he knew filled all of the uppermost story. A second later the elevator began its ascent.

Now where was he?

Oh, yes. Athena's death.

Did he have the right to pry? he wondered. Should he launch a private investigation? After all, if his theory was correct, if a grand deception had been foisted on the entire population of California and the rest of the Freedom Federation, those responsible must have had excellent reasons. Would he just be opening the proverbial can of worms?

Maybe.

But he didn't give a damn.

Blade's lips compressed as he contemplated the manner in which he had been used, in which the whole Force had been played for suckers, and the anguish one member of the team had experienced as a result of the ploy. So what if there were excellent reasons? No one had the right to inflict such suffering on another being. No one had the right to take another's heart in their hands and willfully crush it.

The trail had to start at the *L.A. Times*. Prior to her untimely death, Athena had been employed as a special correspondent for the paper. Many

other newspapers in California and a few in the Civilized Zone had carried her syndicated column detailing the exploits of the Force, but her base of operations had been the *Times*. Someone there might know something, or so Blade had hoped when he'd phoned earlier in the day and made a simple request.

How was he to know his request would result in a personal appointment with the publisher?

In itself, that too was odd.

The sudden opening of the door effectively ended Blade's musing and he strode out of the car and into a lavishly furnished receptionist's office. There was a stairwell door off to the left.

"Blade! How nice to meet you at last."

A lean man attired in an immaculate blue suit advanced to meet the giant, his right hand extended, his expression friendly. Meticulously groomed white hair crowned his stately visage.

"You must be Mr. Wentworth," Blade said, taking the hand and shaking firmly.

"Please, call me Phil," Wentworth responded. He studied the giant intently. "You're all that they say you are."

"I'll take that as a compliment," Blade stated, letting go. "And I want you to know I appreciate your seeing me at such a late hour."

"Late?" Wentworth laughed. "Usually I'm up until two in the morning. This is early for me." He motioned at a partially open door on the other side of the office. "But we shouldn't stand out here and talk. My secretary is gone for the day, so we won't be disturbed."

"What about your family?"

"I don't have one," Wentworth said, walking slowly toward the door. "My dear wife, bless her soul, passed on five years ago."

"No children or grandchildren?" Blade asked, following.

"Nope, sorry to say. We tried, but we could never have any. And unlike

back in the good old days, when there was a surplus of children and plenty available for adoption, there are none to be had now." He paused. "Lord knows, we tried."

"Conditions were much different back then," Blade agreed casually. "It's hard to believe, sometimes, that World War Three took place only one hundred and six years ago."

Wentworth came to the door and shoved it open, then stood aside so his visitor could enter.

Within was an opulent living room. Burgundy carpet several inches thick covered the floor. Paintings adorned the walls, and a grand piano sat in the northeast corner. A huge couch had been aligned along the south wall, and matching chairs were scattered about.

Blade took a few steps, then paused.

"My humble abode," Wentworth said. He closed the door and stepped to the couch. "Have a seat. Before we get started, would you care for a drink?"

"Sure."

"What will it be? I have a fully stocked bar in the next room."

"Do you have any milk?"

"Milk?" Wentworth repeated, and blinked.

"Or raspberry juice. It's my favorite."

"I'm truly sorry. I don't have either on hand. Usually I eat my meals out so there is rarely any milk on the premises. And I'm not much of a juice man."

Blade shrugged and took a seat on the end of the couch. "Doesn't matter. I came here to talk, anyway."

"Yes," Wentworth said, his tone betraying an odd, slight nervousness. "So I understand." He sat down in the center and draped his left arm on the back. "But before we begin, tell me something."

"What would you like to know?"

"Are all the Warriors like you?"

"How do you mean?"

"Well, I know all about how you come from a survivalist group residing at a thirty-acre compound in northwestern Minnesota. The Home, I believe it's called. You call yourselves the Family, which I always regarded as rather quaint, and eighteen of you are designated as Warriors, responsible for the protection of the Home. You're the head Warrior, correct?"

"True," Blade said when the publisher stopped. He wondered why Wentworth bothered to relate information everyone in California who read a newspaper already knew. Could the man be stalling? "We're the descendents of the followers of a survivalist named Kurt Carpenter. He named the compound and first called his followers the Family."

"I'd like to visit your Home someday. But I digress. Are all the Warriors built like you? I've never met anyone possessed of such a remarkable physique."

"Thank you. A lot of hard work and sweat went into my physical development. And to answer your question, yes. There are two other Warriors who are almost as muscular as I am. Their names are Samson and Yama."

"Isn't the leader of your Family named Plato?"

"He is."

Wentworth cocked his head and pursed his lips. "If you don't mind my asking, why do all of you have such uncommon names?"

"Kurt Carpenter again. Our Founder, as we call him, instituted a practice known as the Naming. All Family members, on their sixteenth birthday, are permitted to select the name they would like to have for the remainder of their lives."

"Really? How remarkable."

Blade decided to take the initiative. "If you don't mind, I'd like to discuss the subject that brought me here."

"Certainly," Wentworth said with a marked lack of enthusiasm. "Be my guest."

"I've noticed someone else has taken over writing the column about the Force since the death of Athena."

The publisher bowed his head sadly. "Yes. That poor woman. What a horrible way to go." He looked up again. "The column on the Force is one of our most popular features. The public simply can't get enough of your adventures. Consequently, after Athena died, we decided to continue the feature."

"The column is as well written as when Athena did it."

"Isn't it, though? We're quite proud of the fact the quality has been so consistent."

Blade nodded slowly. "In fact," he said, and feigned a smile, "If I didn't know any better, I'd swear Athena was still doing the writing."

"I'll pass your comment on to the new writer. She'll be very pleased."

"Her byline in the column is given as Abigail Manners. Is that her real name?"

"No. Her real name is a well-kept secret. Abigail Manners is a pseudonym."

"Is that a common practice?"

"Oh, yes. Many reporters prefer to keep their true identities a secret. Some columns generate a lot of hate mail and even threats, so the columnists naturally wish to remain anonymous."

"Naturally," Blade said dryly.

"Abigail admired Athena's style very much. She even copies it to a degree, which undoubtedly accounts for the similiarity you noticed," Wentworth explained.

"That would account for it," Blade concurred. "If you don't mind, I'd like to meet this new columnist."

Wentworth seemed to turn to stone. "Whatever for?" he finally blurted.

"To satisfy my curiosity. Besides, I should think she'd be delighted to meet the man she has been writing about for the better part of a year."

"Has it been that long?" Wentworth queried absently.

"Yep. Athena died in October of last year. Here it is October again already. How time flies."

"Yes. Doesn't it, though?" Wentworth's brow furrowed in intense concentration. "I'll tell you what I'll do," he offered. "I'll give Abby a call, let her know you'd like to meet her, and if she's agreeable we can set up an appointment for you to meet her. What do you say?"

"Sounds fine to me," Blade said.

"Excellent. I'll phone her tomorrow."

"Thank you."

"Can I be of assistance in any other respect?"

Blade shook his head. "I don't want to impose on you any more than I already have. "He rose. "And I must be getting back to the Force facility."

"How do you like it out there near Pyramid Lake?"

"Governor Melnick had a fine training facility constructed. We have plenty of privacy. Yet it's close enough to L.A. to make short trips like this one convenient."

"Well, we have your number out there," Wentworth noted, standing. "We'll give you a call as soon as I talk to Abby."

"Fair enough." Blade shook once more and made for the doorway. "I'll see myself out." He opened the door and paused long enough to smile at his host. "Thanks again," he said cheerfully, then closed the door behind him, scowled, and thought to himself, "For nothing."

TWO

There were six of them gathered about the heavy mats that had been placed on the ground near the Command Bunker for their daily hand-to-hand combat sessions.

Standing on the north side of the mats, his brawny arms folded across his chest, his back to the bunker, was a man possessed of the build of a classical Greek wrestler. He wore a Special Force uniform bearing the insignia of a captain on the lapels. His blond hair had been cropped short. He had penetrating blue eyes and, at six feet two inches in height, he was the tallest of his companions. "Try harder, Lobo," he declared. "You're goofing off again."

On the south side of the mats were three others. One man was attired almost all in black: black boots, black pants, a black frock coat, and a black, wide-brimmed hat. The only exception to his somber color scheme was his white shirt. His brown hair had been clipped close to his ears. Hazel eyes regarded the pair of combatants in the center of the mats with amusement. In a holster high on his right hip rested a pearl-handled, nickel-plated Smith and Wesson Model 586 Distinguished Combat Magnum.

Next to the gunman stood an Indian dressed in beaded buckskins. Only five and a half feet tall, six inches shorter than the man in black, he was endowed with a powerful physique, as evidenced by his wide shoulders and thick arms. His shoulder-length hair and eyes were both dark, his eyes brown, his hair black. In a leather sheath dangling from his left hip was a hunting knife, and in his right hand a spear. "If Lobo's not careful, she'll beat him again," he commented.

"A ninety-year-old grandmother could whip Lobo," said the third figure, a being totally unlike his friends. This one was a hybrid. Six feet tall and as thin as a sapling, he enjoyed the singular distinction of having humanoid and bestial traits. As a genetically engineered creature, spawned in a test tube by a demented scientist, he was the only one of his kind. There were other hybrids in existence, but none quite resembled him. As a cat-man, his body was covered with a reddish coat of fur. He also had a small, oval head, rounded ears, and eerie green eyes with vertical slits in the middle. His teeth, when exposed in a grin, were tapered, razor sharp. Inch-long fingernails, capable of ripping through flesh as easily as a knife, capped his slender fingers. His sole item of

apparel was a black loincloth.

"I heard that crack, dude," snapped one of the two combatants. A husky black man wearing a black leather jacket, a blue shirt, jeans, and knee-high black boots, he hastily blocked a handsword blow from his opponent and retreated a few paces. "I'm just going easy on the bimbo so I don't hurt her."

"Bimbo!" shouted the object of the black's concern. "I'll show you who's a bimbo." A young, red-headed woman with flashing green eyes, she wore neatly creased fatigues and combat boots. Five feet eight in height, she projected a frail appearance that belied her inner strength.

Lobo countered a snap kick, then skipped to the right. "No offense, Raphaela. For a babe, you're not half bad."

"Oh, thanks," Raphaela stated, and tried to plant the instep of her left boot in his gonads.

Barely getting out of the way in time, Lobo paused and glared at her. "Hey! No fair! I thought you promised you were never going to do that again?"

"Sorry." Raphaela smiled ever so sweetly. "I forgot."

"Like hell you did," Lobo snapped. "You did that on purpose."

The blond man on the north side of the mats suddenly spoke up. "Is this a fight or a debating match? Let's get with the program, you two."

"Chill out, Havoc. You saw what Raphy tried to do to me," Lobo groused.

"I suggest both of you quit your squabbling and attend to cases," Captain Havoc stated, and added, "unless you would rather I tell Blade that you're goofing off again."

Lobo glanced at the entrance to the Command Bunker. "Hey, man, there's no need to bother the Big Guy. I don't want him gettin' ticked off at me. He's been a real grump lately."

"Working with you does that to folks," the gunman interjected, and he

and his two comrades laughed.

Spinning, Lobo regarded the disparate trio angrily. "Who asked you, Doc?"

"Now who needs to lighten up?" the hybrid asked.

"Same to you, Jag," Lobo retorted.

The Indian sadly shook his head. "You really must learn to control your temper, my brother."

"Spare me your goody-two-shoes routine, Sparrow," Lobo responded. "If I want to blow my stack because Raphaela is cheatin' again, that's my business."

"Cheating? I never cheat," Raphaela said huffily.

"That's enough!" Captain Havoc barked. He walked onto the mats and over to Lobo. "You're stalling again, mister. Every day it's the same damn thing. Frankly, I'm becoming tired of your same old routine."

"Here we go again," Lobo sighed. "Another pick-on-Lobo day."

"Are you listening to me?" Havoc asked. "This isn't a game. You're supposed to be honing your fighting skills, not flapping your gums. Believe it or not, Lobo, some of us actually care whether you stay alive out in the field."

A broad grin creased Lobo's mouth. "Really? Gosh. I didn't know you cared, Mike."

"It's Captain Havoc to you, moron. And I just don't want to fill out all that paperwork in triplicate because you're too stupid to learn even basic survival skills."

Lobo bristled. "Survival, huh? Let me tell you something, bozo. I learned how to survive as a member of the toughest, meanest gang in the Twin Cities. I can kick butt with the best of them. Who needs this daily martial arts crap, anyway?"

"You do. And if you'd rather not spar with Raphaela, I'll gladly take her place."

"No fair. You're a black belt."

"So what's the problem? You just told me you can kick butt with the best of them. I'm going to give you a chance to kick mine."

Lobo glanced from the officer to the redhead and back again. "Did she put you up to this?"

"Of course not," Havoc answered. "Where'd you ever get a crazy idea like that?"

"I bet she did," Lobo persisted.

Raphaela took a step toward him, her annoyance transparent. "How can you make such an accusation? I don't need Mike to stand up to you on my behalf."

"Sure you do," Lobo said. "You know it's just a matter of time before I win this bout, so you set me up for Havoc to take over in your place."

"What?" Raphaela exclaimed angrily.

"That's not true and you know it," Captain Havoc said. "You're just stalling again. I've never met anyone who can procrastinate like you do."

"Leave my religion out of this, dude."

"You're hopeless, Lobo," Raphaela declared.

About to voice a sharp rebuttal, Lobo held his tongue when he saw the door to the Command Bunker suddenly open, and out strode a brooding seven-foot giant. Lobo plastered a grin on his face and gave a little wave. "Yo, Blade! What's happening?"

The Warrior had his gaze on the ground. He looked up and acknowledged the greeting in a distracted fashion. "Not much, Lobo. How's the sparring going?"

"It's totally def, man. I'm kickin' Raphaela's tail every which way but loose."

"In your dreams," the redhead stated.

Captain Havoc coughed lightly. "Lobo is being his usual intractable self, sir. But I have matters well in hand."

"That's nice," Blade said, already walking eastward, his hands clasped behind his back, his Bowies suspended in plain view on his hips.

"That's nice?" Havoc repeated in disbelief.

"He's not going to chew me out?" Lobo asked, stunned.

"Something is going on here," Raphaela said. "He hasn't been acting like himself for days."

"Yeah. Ever since we got back from the Dakota Territory," Lobo agreed.

"Before that, even," chimed in Jag.

All six of them watched the giant walk off into the trees.

"Anyone have a clue as to why that hombre is so preoccupied?" Doc inquired.

"I don't have an inkling," Sparrow said.

"Well, whatever it is, it's none of our business," Captain Havoc mentioned. "If Blade wants to confide in us, fine. But idle speculation will avail us nothing. So let's get back to our sparring session."

"Not so fast, chuckles. Blade is our fearless leader, right? He's the one who holds our lives in his hands. If there's something buggin' him, then I say we try to find out what it is," Lobo proposed.

"As much as I hate to admit it, for once Lobo is right," Raphaela said.

"No," Havoc replied. "We shouldn't pry in his personal affairs."

"He'd help any of us if we were having a problem," Jag interjected.

"His soul is normally so in tune with the Spirit in All Things," Sparrow commented. "What could possibly disrupt his inner harmony?"

"I don't know nothin' about no harmony jazz," Lobo told them, then smirked. "But I do know something the rest of you clowns don't."

"Like what?" Doc demanded.

"Like the fact Blade left the compound last night."

Captain Havoc's brow knit. "How do you know he left? None of us saw him go."

Lobo snickered. "That's because you're a bunch of gullible chumps. All of you believed him when he said he was plannin' to spend the night doing paperwork and didn't want to be disturbed. All of you went about your business without being the least bit suspicious."

"And you were?" Havoc probed.

"Damn straight. Blade can't *stand* to do paperwork. More than two hours behind a desk drives him wacko. So when he claimed he would be in his office all night, I figured I'd stick around out here to see what was up," Lobo detailed smugly.

"So what happened, already?" Jag queried.

Lobo gazed at the trees bordering the eastern perimeter to ensure the giant wasn't heading back, then grinned at his anxious audience, reveling in their attention. "About seven o'clock Blade came out of the Command Bunker and boogied to the front gate. He ordered one of the guards to drive him into L.A. in a jeep."

"Blade went into the city? How do you know? I doubt you could have gotten close enough to overhear their conversation. He would've spotted you," Havoc observed.

"I'm no dummy. I waited until the guard got back, then pretended to be out for a stroll and bent his ear for a while,"

Lobo related. "And get this. Here comes the weird part. The soldier boy told me Blade wanted to be dropped off in the middle of nowhere, in a scrungy part of town where there was nothin' but tenements and lowlifes."

"Why would Blade do that?" Raphaela inquired of no one in particular.

"Makes no sense," Captain Havoc opined.

"It gets weirder," Lobo informed him. ' "The trooper saw Blade make

tracks for uptown, like the Big Guy was in a hurry to get somewhere."

"This is most baffling," Sparrow said.

"Back up a bit, partner," the gunman declared. "All of us know it's next to impossible to pull the wool over Blade's eyes. How is it you were able to spy on him without him noticing?"

"Simple." Lobo indicated another concrete building to the west of the Command Bunker. "I hid behind the Supply Bunker and peeked out at him. This is October, you know, so by seven it was pretty dark. He never saw me, but he kept lookin' back like he suspected someone was watching him." He paused. "The guy is spooky."

"And none of us knew he'd left because we were all in the barracks," Raphaela mentioned thoughtfully. "We wondered where you'd gone."

"It pays to keep on top of things, sister."

For a minute no one uttered a word. They simply exchanged puzzled glances and repeatedly gazed to the east.

"So what do we do about Blade's strange behavior?" Jag finally said, breaking the silence.

"I still think it's none of our business," Captain Havoc stressed.

"Bull. If the Big Guy has gone off the deep end, we deserve to know," Lobo said.

"I doubt very much that Blade has gone off the deep end," Raphaela stated. "But I do believe we should try to discover what's bothering him. Maybe we can help. He might be too proud to come right out and ask for our assistance."

"How do you reckon to discover the reason?" Doc wanted to know.

"Easy. One of us will have to go talk to him," Raphaela suggested.

"Don't look at me," Lobo remarked. "I'm fond of my teeth."

"It has to be someone he would never suspect of trying to trick him," Jag pointed out. "Someone he'll let his guard down for, someone he trusts

completely."

Raphaela suddenly found herself the center of attention and she fidgeted nervously. "Why are all of you looking at me?"

"Which one of us does the Big Guy trust the most?" Lobo rejoined. "He'd never suspect we put you up to it."

"He might," Raphaela said testily.

"Lobo is right again," Jag concurred. "Twice in one day too. The mind boggles."

"Keep it up, kitty."

The hybrid hissed and raised his curved fingers in front of his abdomen. "This your last warning. Don't call me that."

"Touchy, touchy," Lobo quipped.

"I don't want any part of this," Captain Havoc announced. He shook his head and walked to the south, toward a distant hangar. "We'll take a thirty-minute break. I expect all of you to be here when I return."

"What's eating him?" Jag wondered aloud.

"Don't pay any attention to Mr. Military," Lobo said. "He just figures he has to go by the book since he's the second-in-command. He probably wants to know what's going down as much as we do."

"And he gave us a half hour," Doc noted with a smile.

Lobo nodded at Raphaela. "It's up to you now, Red."

"I don't know."

"Hey, you're the one who keep's tellin' us we should be one big, happy family, right? Here's your chance to prove it. Put your money where your mouth is. Go grill Blade."

Raphaela swallowed hard, grinned weakly, and made for the eastern perimeter.

"That woman has guts," Jag said.

Lobo solemnly nodded, but inside he cackled with glee. No doubt about it. They were definitely a bunch of chumps. He happened to agree with Havoc that butting into Blade's affairs was a no-no, but he wasn't about to risk losing another sparring match to that rad redhead. There was his dignity to think of, after all. So what if he sort of coaxed the twits along just to get out of finishing the bout? No harm was done, right? He almost laughed at his triumph.

Yes, sir.

When they'd passed out the brains, he'd been first in line.

THREE

Perhaps he should have told them.

Blade leaned against an oak tree and stared at the rolling hills beyond the electrified fence topped with barbed wire. They were his people, after all. His team. They had a right to know even if they hadn't been members of the *first* Freedom Force. The names and images of the earlier team filled through his mind as if they were on review on a parade field: James Havoc, Thunder-Rolling-in-the-Mountain, Kraft, Spader, Boone, and poor Grizzly had comprised the first unit. Four of them had perished in the line of duty: Havoc, Thunder, Kraft, and Spader. Boone had survived his required year's enlistment and returned to the Dakota Territory. And Grizzly had supposedly ventured into the barbaric Outlands after Athena's death, too heartbroken to care whether he lived or died.

They were the past.

Now he had a new team to mold into a cohesive, dedicated, elite tactical squad.

So far they were passing muster.

Not that there had ever been any doubts about some of them. Captain Mike Havoc, a career military man whose father and grandfather had both enjoyed illustrious careers in the service, was the older brother of Sergeant James Havoc. A qualified marksman, Captain Havoc also held a

black belt in karate and had been through Officers Training School and received specialized instructions in the Special Forces. As the volunteer from the Free State of California, Havoc was an ideal candidate.

Also reliable, although for different reasons, was the hybrid, Jaguarundi. Sent by the Civilized Zone, an area in the Midwest embracing the former states of Kansas, Nebraska, Colorado, Wyoming, New Mexico, and Oklahoma and part of Arizona and northern Texas, Jag had been created by a deranged genetic engineer to be the perfect assassin. None of the other recruits were as naturally, instinctively lethal as Jag. His heightened senses had served them in good stead many times.

A third team member was also exceptional. Don Madsen, better known as "Doc," had acquired a notorious reputation as a preeminent gunfighter in the Dakota Territory, the rugged domain of the superb horsemen known as the Cavalry. Originally North and South Dakota, the combined Territory was now controlled by men and women who lived a frontier life-style and were every bit as hardy as their early ancestors. Doc was typical of their independent breed: stoic, stable, and as deadly as a coiled rattler.

Sparrow Hawk came from an altogether different background. A Flathead Indian, he had spent his entire life in the former state of Montana, which the Flatheads had reclaimed after the war. His hunting and tracking abilities were superb, and he could easily live off the land. Next to Jaguarundi, Sparrow felt most at home in the forest, communing with Nature.

The last two were another matter entirely.

Lobo hailed from the Federation faction named the Clan. Refugees from the ravaged hell once designated the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota, they had settled in the small town of Halrna to be near the Family. They were all former gang members. The leader of the Clan, a man called Zahner, had sent Lobo to represent them, and Blade was beginning to wonder about the wisdom of the selection. Lobo could fight well when he had to, when his back was against the wall, and he occasionally let a whole day go by without giving Blade any grief over discipline and training. But the Clansman also caused most of the contention in the team; he was a continual thorn in their sides, always ready to argue over the merest trifle.

Raphaela, on the other hand, never caused a dispute. She related well to all the other members of the Force. If any one of them could be labeled the heart of the unit, she was it. Those were her strengths. Her main weakness lay in the fact she had limited combat experience. She was as green as a recently sprouted blade of grass, but nowhere near as fragile. Sent by the Moles, a race of subterranean dwellers who resided in the underground city in north-central Minnesota, she tried the hardest, and had improved tremendously over the past few months. So should he tell them or not?

The Warrior sighed and watched a pair of sparrows frolic in a nearby tree. His conversation with Wentworth had solidified his suspicions. There definitely had been a cover-up. Someone wanted something hidden. But he still didn't know exactly what. The publisher's evasive behavior had provided few clues. His best bet was to track down Abigail Manners, with or without—

Soft footfalls sounded to his rear.

Instinctively Blade whirled, his hands sweeping to his prized Bowies. He seriously doubted anyone would attack him at the Force Facility, but a decade of hard experience contending against assorted devious killers, mutations, and madmen had taught him the wisdom of being constantly vigilant. To his relief, and considerable surprise, he discovered Raphaela approaching.

"Mind if I join you?" the Molewoman asked.

Blade let his hands fall and regarded her quizzically. "I thought you were engaged in an unarmed combat session."

"I was," Raphaela answered, walking up to him. "But Mike just gave us a thirty-minute break, and I thought you might like some company."

"Oh?"

"Yeah." Raphaela bobbed her chin. "Maybe you'd like to talk about whatever is bothering you?"

"Who says something is?"

"Everybody."

Blade gazed in the general direction of the bunkers, which were obscured by the trees, and braced his left hand against the oak trunk. "Is that a fact?"

"Please don't be mad."

"Why would I be mad?" the warrior asked defensively.

"Because I doubt very much that you like to have others pry into your private affairs. But all of us are worried about you. We figured we might be able to help."

"Busy bunch of bees."

Raphaela nodded. "I knew it. You're upset."

"I am not," Blade stated gruffly.

"Then you won't mind telling me why you've been acting so strange recently."

"Tell me something first. Why did the others send you?"

"It was mainly Lobo's idea."

"Figures."

"But don't be ticked off at him. We all agreed one of us should talk to you. We're in this together."

"Is that so?"

"Except for Mike. He wanted no part of it."

"Smart man. Remind me to put him in for a commendation."

Raphaela studied the giant for a second. "You're being sarcastic, aren't you?"

"Perish the thought."

"I know you are. Look, Blade, if you don't want to talk to me, I'll leave. I'm not about to impose. If you have a secret none of us are supposed to

know about, that's fine."

"If I do, I'm not the only one."

The Molewoman did a double take. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Maybe we should share our secrets."

"I don't have a secret," Raphaela said, taking a nervous step backwards.

"Don't you? Perhaps you'd care to explain to me the reason you become upset whenever the subject of Wolfe comes up?" Blade mentioned, referring to the autocratic leader of the Moles, a vain, overbearing man who believed himself to be superior to everyone else. Of all the Federation factions the Moles possessed the least freedom; they were subservient to Wolfe's every wish. A few of the other Federation leaders had privately expressed reservations about Wolfe's fitness to be a leader, but none of them would broach the issue publicly for fear of causing a rift. Whatever Wolfe's personal shortcomings might be—and they were ample—he had remained a generally staunch supporter of the Freedom Federation and all the confederation stood for.

"I have nothing against Wolfe," Raphaela declared without a shred of conviction.

"And nothing at all is bothering you?"

"No."

Blade shrugged. "Okay. I won't press the issue, for now. But we've become good friends over the past few months, and I'll let you know to your face that I think you're lying through your teeth."

The Molewoman appeared shocked by the Warrior's blunt comments. Her lower lip quivered and she started to turn.

"Hold on," Blade said, moving closer to her and placing his right hand on her shoulder. "I'm sorry. There is something bothering me, and I guess I'm taking out my frustration on you. Please forgive me."

"There's nothing to forgive," Raphaela said softly, avoiding his eyes.

"Fair enough. Would you care to hear my problem?"

She simply nodded.

Sighing, Blade leaned on the tree once more and looped his thumbs in his brown leather belt. "I have reason to believe that someone has perpetrated a cover-up."

"Of what?"

The Warrior opened his mouth to answer as the strident blaring of a vehicle horn arose from the vicinity of the bunkers and continued unabated for half a minute.

"Who could that be?" Raphaela wondered.

"I don't know."

Again the horn blared, and this time it did not let up.

Blade headed to the west. "We'd better go see."

"Will you tell me your problem later?" Raphaela inquired hopefully, following, compelled to walk especially fast because of the giant's long strides.

"Maybe."

They hastened from the trees and across the open ground bordering the three bunkers. Parked near the mats was a green jeep. Standing alongside the vehicle and pressing on the horn, oblivious to the stares of the Force members watching him, the buttons on his immaculate dress uniform glistening in the morning sunlight, was a bulldog of a man with crew-cut brown hair and brown eyes. He let up on the horn the instant they appeared.

"It's General Gallagher," Raphaela declared. "What's he doing here?"

Blade had the same question. General Miles Gallagher served as the official liaison between Governor Melnick of California and the Freedom Force. The general had never made any secret of his dislike for the team; he had even objected to California joining the Federation. An admitted isolationist, Gallagher believed California could handle her own problems without outside aid.

"He doesn't look very happy," Raphaela observed.

"No, he doesn't," Blade agreed, noticing the officer's scowling visage. "I must have gotten him angry again."

"I used to think he's nothing but a mean, spiteful person until he talked the governor into giving us that three-day pass in Los Angeles two months ago."

Blade almost broke his stride. "Gallagher persuaded Melnick to give us that pass? I was under the impression our time off had been the governor's idea."

"Not entirely. Mike told me the general convinced Governor Melnick to offer us the days off."

"How did Havoc find out?"

"He didn't say."

The Warrior's eyes narrowed for an instant, then relaxed as he drew closer to the jeep. "General Gallagher," he said in greeting to the officer. "What a pleasant surprise."

"Is there somewhere we can talk privately?" Gallagher responded in his customary brusque manner.

"In my office," Blade replied, and motioned toward the Command Bunker. He let the officer enter first, then trailed down the steps and into his sparsely furnished room.

Gallagher moved immediately to one of the chairs in front of the sole desk and sat down without ceremony.

The Warrior closed the door and moved to his seat behind the desk. "To what do I owe this honor?"

"Cut the crap, mister. You know damn well why I'm here," General Gallagher snapped.

"Did I fail to fill out one of the forms properly again?" Blade asked innocently.

"Screw the petty forms. This is more important." Gallagher leaned forward, studying the giant. "Why didn't you go through proper channels?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Don't play games with me. *I'm* the liaison officer for the Force. *I* handle all contacts with journalists. *I* oversee public relations. If you wanted to talk to someone at the *LA. Times*, you should have gone through me."

Blade folded his hands on the desk top and deliberately adopted an inscrutable expression. "You must have heard about my visit to Wentworth."

"Of course I did. Phil Wentworth and I are old buddies.

He happened to call me last night and mentioned your interest in meeting the woman who is handling the column on the Force. Naturally, I was shocked. That's my province," Gallagher said in a normal tone, his indignation suddenly under control.

"I didn't mean to offend you."

"Why didn't you contact me first?"

The Warrior shrugged. "It never occurred to me to bother you over such an inconsequential affair."

Gallagher straightened, lines creasing his forehead. "I've been personally ordered by the governor to assist you in any respect I can. You can call on me any time of the day or night. If you had phoned me first, I could have arranged an earlier interview with Wentworth. You wouldn't have had to go into L.A. by yourself at night."

"I'm a big boy. I can take care of myself."

"Undeniably. But if you'd permitted me to cut through the red tape, you could have avoided the unpleasant incident involving those six Warlords."

Blade tensed. "Where did you hear about it?"

"Now there's a story in itself," Gallagher said. "Imagine my surprise

this morning when I'm listening to the radio while shaving and I hear a news story about the head of the Freedom Force saving a sickly bag lady from a half-dozen Pagans! I nicked myself." He touched a small cut on his chin.

"The news is on the radio?"

"That's right. On every station. The newspapers will carry all the gory details in their afternoon and evening editions. By tomorrow morning practically everyone in the Free State of California will know what you did," Gallagher stated, and paused meaningfully. "That includes the rest of the Warlords."

"So?"

"So the Pagans are a tough bunch. They don't take kindly to having their own killed, and they have a state-wide organization. The police have been trying to shut them down for years without success. And after you so conveniently got rid of the Barons and the Brothers, who were the Warlords' main competitors, there was nothing to stop the Pagans from consolidating their power." The general shook his head. "I wouldn't put it past them to try and hit you."

"They'd actually take on the Force?"

"Hit *you*, I said. They couldn't care less about the rest of the unit. But they'll come after you with everything they've got."

Blade pondered the implication. The last thing he needed was a private war with a gang of minor-league killers. He heard a faint scratching sound on the other side of the office door and listened for a moment, but the noise wasn't repeated.

"So to play it safe, you shouldn't go into Los Angeles by yourself until this whole mess blows over," Gallagher proposed. "A guy your size sticks out like a sore thumb. The Warlords would be bound to spot you and try to take you down."

"Thanks for the warning."

"Warning, hell. This is a direct request from the governor."

"Melnick knows too?"

"What? You don't think he listens to the radio?"

The Warrior scratched his chin. "This does put the situation in a new perspective."

"Damn straight," Gallagher said, mistakenly assuming the giant referred to the Warlords. "For your own safety, stay at the Facility until further notice."

"I wouldn't want to cause the governor any trouble."

"There's the spirit," Gallagher replied, grinning. "I knew you'd cooperate." He stood and stretched. "Well, it's time for me to be going. I apologize for flying off the deep end, although surely you can appreciate my position."

"More and more every day."

"Thanks," the general said, and took a pace.

"One more thing," Blade mentioned casually.

"Oh?" Gallagher halted, staring over his right shoulder.

"I think it's only proper that I thank you."

"Hey, this is my job. It's no big deal."

"Not about this. About the three-day pass the Force received a couple of months ago."

General Gallagher visibly stiffened. "What about it?"

"I discovered you were the one who put the governor up to it. Even though I strenuously objected, and even though the time off interfered with our training schedule, in retrospect you did the right thing. The team needed the break," Blade stated evenly.

"How did you find out it was my idea?"

"A little bird told me."

"This bird have a name?"

Blade gazed into the other's eyes. "Is it important?"

"No, I guess not," Gallagher answered, tension etched in his countenance. "I'm glad there are no hard feelings. I remember how mad you were at the time."

"What's past is past."

"Glad to hear you feel this way," the general said. He nodded and departed without another word.

Just then the black phone on the right side of the desk buzzed.

Blade picked up the receiver. "Hello?"

"Good morning, Blade. This is Phil Wentworth. How are you today?"

"Just fine, thanks."

"I wanted to let you know I've spoken to the reporter currently doing the Force feature and she's agreed to meet you."

"How nice. When?"

"Today at noon. Here at the *Times*."

The Warrior glanced at the clock on the south wall. "It's only ten-thirty. I can be there on time."

"You're coming?" Wentworth responded, his voice conveying complete surprise.

"Of course. Why wouldn't I?"

"I just thought—" Wentworth blurted out, then regained his composure. "Well, this is great news. I'm sure she'll be delighted. I'm sorry it's such short notice, but I'm leaving for San Francisco this afternoon."

"No problem. See you at noon then."

"Yes. Yes. Bye."

Blade heard the publisher hang up and did likewise, then threw back his head and laughed.

FOUR

During weekday hours the *LA. Times* bustled with activity. Countless people came and went throughout the day, and between eight in the morning and six in the evening the lobby buzzed with the voices of at least a score of persons at any given moment. At eleven-fifty that particular morning all those voices fell abruptly silent as a seven foot-tall colossus shoved through the glass doors and crossed to the counter.

Blade ignored the gawking stares. He disliked all the attention he inevitably received whenever he ventured into the grimy metropolis, and he limited his visits for that very reason. Thanks to all the news stories on his activities as leader of the Force, he found himself in the distinctly uncomfortable position of being the most famous man in the city, even the state. Most Angelinos reacted to him in the same fawning fashion as their ancestors had reacted to "movie stars" and other celebrities; they were either stunned into submissiveness or began behaving like ten-year-olds. In this instance no one presumed to talk to him, no doubt because he had opted to wear his Bowies openly.

Instead of a security guard, a young woman stood behind the counter, and her mousy features registered frank astonishment as he approached.

"Hello," the Warrior said cordially. "I believe Mr. Wentworth is expecting me."

"You're him!" the woman exclaimed.

Here we go again, Blade thought, and gave her his friendliest smile. "Yep. I'm me. Last time I looked in the mirror, anyway."

Giggling hysterically, the receptionist covered her tiny mouth with her right hand.

"Would you kindly inform Mr. Wentworth of my arrival?" Blade requested.

The authoritative request brought prompt response. "Yes, sir, Mr.

Blade. Right away." She reached for a phone.

"You can call me Blade. There's no need for the mister."

She looked up at him and smiled nervously. "I can? Golly. Thanks. Wait until I tell my mother. She'll never believe this happened to me in a million years. She's a big fan of yours, you know. Clips out all the stories and pastes them in a scrapbook. She wishes she could come live at that Home of yours. The papers make it sound like Utopia, you know. One of these days—"

"Excuse me," Blade said, interrupting.

"Yes?"

"I really am eager to see Mr. Wentworth. If you would be so kind," the Warrior said, gesturing at the telephone.

"Oh, my. I do tend to babble when I'm excited and I'm extremely excited right now." She giggled again and dialed a three-digit number. "Mabel, this is Gracie. You're never going to believe who's standing right in front of me. No, not the governor, dummy. No, not the mayor. It's *Blade*!"

The Warrior sighed and leaned on the countertop, unsure of whether to chuckle or cry.

Gracie suddenly became all business. "Oh, really? Oh, I didn't know. Why doesn't someone tell me these things? Of course. I'll send him right up." She hung up and faced the giant, her hands folded demurely. "You can go right up, sir. Mr. Wentworth is waiting for you."

Blade glanced at the doors to the left of the counter, behind which were located the *Times's* offices. "But I thought I was to meet with one of the paper's columnists."

"You are. In Mr. Wentworth's penthouse."

"Do tell," Blade said, the corners of his mouth curling downward.

"Is something wrong?"

"No. I enjoy a good game of chess every now and then." The Warrior

smiled and headed to the right, for the elevator. He had to hand it to them; so far they had been one step ahead of him almost the whole way. But he intended to get to the bottom of the mystery, even if he had to tread on a few toes in the process.

The people in the lobby quickly parted to permit the giant's passage.

Blade punched the elevator button, then used the ride up to compose himself and prepare for the battle of wits about to ensue. When the door slid open he discovered an attractive blonde seated in the secretary's office. She beamed and brushed at her bangs, which were already aligned three inches above her brow.

"Come right in, sir. Mr. Wentworth is expecting you."

"Thank you," the Warrior said, stepping to her desk.

"I'm Mabel, Mr. Wentworth's private secretary." She stood, revealing an exceptionally supple form clad in a skimpy green dress. Had the stitching been a hair finer, she would burst from her garment and run the risk of being fined for indecent exposure. As it was, she almost ran the risk fully clothed.

"Mr. Wentworth is a lucky man," Blade told her.

Mabel allowed her bosom to expand a few inches. "My, what a gentlemanly thing to say." She turned and sashayed to the inner door, her hips circumnavigating the globe with every stride. A light rap on the wood brought an immediate reply.

"Send him in, please."

The secretary pivoted and twisted the doorknob. "Please, go right in."

Blade nodded and entered the opulent living room. Waiting for him were the publisher, who now wore a brown suit, and two others: a young woman and a stocky middle-aged man. "Hello."

Wentworth came forward with his right hand extended. "What a pleasure to see you again."

"Glad you could squeeze me into your schedule," Blade responded,

shaking.

"Nonsense. For you I'd cancel a whole day's worth of appointments," Wentworth stated. He moved toward the couch, where the other two were seated. "We decided to conduct the meeting in the privacy of my living quarters rather than down in the office complex. There would just be too many distractions down there."

"I appreciate all the effort you're going to on my behalf."

"I'm sure you'd do the same for me."

"I will. Count on it."

Wentworth stopped a yard from the couch and the man and woman rose. "Blade, I'd like you to meet Harry Kupfner, my editor-in-chief. He wanted to have the honor of meeting you."

The Warrior politely took Kupfner's fleshy hand and shook it. "The honor is mine. How long have you been working for the *Times*?"

"About fourteen years," Kupfner said. His suit had the slightly rumpled appearance typical of a hard worker too busy to bother with the trifling detail of maintaining a spotless wardrobe. "I think it's safe to say that I know the ins and outs of this paper better than anyone with the exception of Mr. Wentworth."

"You're being too modest, Harry," the publisher stated. "Blade, this man is indispensable. He has a photographic memory."

"He does?"

"Yes, indeed. He can recall any fact or statistic from any given year. Names, dates, you name it. He's a whiz."

Kupfner beamed proudly. "I do my best."

"And here's the lady you've been dying to meet," Wentworth declared, indicating the young woman. "Abigail Manners, as her readers know her. Vivien Farris to the rest of us."

"Hello," Blade said.

Farris wore a white blouse and black slacks, both properly professional in fashion. Her sandy hair fell to her shoulders. Wary green eyes returned the giant's unflinching gaze as she mustered a wan smile and offered her slender hand. "This is quite a treat for me to finally meet the man I've written so much about."

Blade shook lightly. "Do I call you Vivien?"

"Most of my friends simply call me Vi. Why don't you?"

"Fine. Vi it is."

"Why doesn't everyone get comfortable?" Wentworth proposed, and when Kupfner and Farris sat back down he quickly positioned himself on the woman's opposite side.

Repressing a grin, Blade stepped to a plush red chair and sank down.

"Where are my manners?" Wentworth stated. "Would any of you care for something to drink?"

"No," Blade responded.

The two employees shook their heads.

"Then let's begin, shall we?" Wentworth said, looking expectantly at the giant.

Vivien Farris cleared her throat. "Yes. Perhaps someone can clear up the purpose for this meeting?" She focused on Blade. "No one seems to know the exact reason you wanted to see me."

"Didn't Phil tell you?" the Warrior asked, feigning mild surprise.

"Mr. Wentworth told me that you were anxious to get together. That's all."

"Maybe I didn't make myself clear. I wanted to compliment you on the outstanding job you're doing writing the column on the Force."

All three newspeople exchanged delighted glances.

"Thank you very much," Farris said.

"Tell me," Blade prompted. "How did you get the assignment? Looks can be deceiving, but I'd never guess in a million years that you'd be the type to be interested in such a feature."

"Appearances can be deceiving," Farris replied. "I've long been a fan of the Freedom Force. Who in California isn't?"

Wentworth and Kupfner laughed.

"To answer that question," the columnist went on, "I leaped at the chance to do the feature after Athena's tragic death, and I certainly wasn't the only one. There's a lot of prestige attached to doing the regular Force piece, not to mention extra income because it's syndicated."

"You write extremely well," Blade noted. "Is it my imagination, or do I detect some of Athena's influence in your work?"

"I'm flattered if you do. Athena and I were friends. I sort of looked up to her as my idol, even though she was only five years older than I was. I guess I unconsciously copy her style a little when I write."

"I've noticed you project a lot of excitement into your writing. When I'm reading your stories it seems as if you're right there with the Force, as if you've had extensive combat experience and know what you're writing about."

"That's the highest praise anyone can give a writer. I'm very flattered."

"Do you have any combat experience?" Blade inquired idly.

"No, I'm sorry to say. But I've been blessed with a terrific imagination."

"You certainly have. Why, I remember a particular column where you were comparing the merits of the previous team to the new unit. You were talking about Grizzly, as I recall, and you mentioned in passing how his nose always twitched when he sniffed the air seeking a scent. How did you know that?"

"Elementary logic. A dog's nose will twitch too."

"So you never met Grizzly?"

"You're the first member of the Force I've met."

"Have you ever met any hybrids?"

"No. I'd like to, though. I hear they're quite fascinating, being so different from us and all," Farris said.

Blade nodded and stared at a window to his right, watching clouds drift lazily across the L.A. skyline. "I'll gladly arrange for you to meet Jaguarundi. He's Grizzly's replacement, as you know. And he's a lot easier to get along with."

"Can I quote you on that?"

The Warrior looked at her. "Be my guest."

"I have an excellent idea," Wentworth interjected heartily. "Why don't you bring the entire Force to the *Times* for an in-depth exclusive interview session? We'll have our best photographers on hand and put all of your pictures right on the front page." He paused. "Of course I'll have to clear the idea with General Gallagher first."

"Speaking of the good general," Blade said, taking advantage of the opening, "how would you rate his performance?"

Wentworth blinked. "Sorry?"

"Gallagher is our liaison representative. If he should screw up, if he lets his normally cranky disposition interfere with his work, he can give the Force a bad name."

The publisher seemed to be trying to swallow an invisible ball. Several seconds elapsed before he recovered and declared, "General Gallagher is a perfect liaison. He's never given us the slightest problem. Any information we've requested, he's promptly relayed. The man does a remarkable job."

"I'd expect you to say that, Phil," Blade mentioned. "He told me that the two of you go back a long way."

"I'm proud to call Miles Gallagher a close friend."

"What about you?" Blade asked Farris. "How would you rate the general?"

"Me?"

"You're doing the regular column. You must talk to him frequently."

"Now and then."

"So how is he doing? Should I ask the governor for a new liaison?" Blade asked, pretending to be joking.

"General Gallagher is doing just fine," the newswoman replied, her left hand clenched tightly in her lap.

"That's nice to know," Blade said, and opted to add icing to the cake. "To tell the truth, he can be a pain in the butt at times. I was seriously considering replacing him."

"You couldn't do that. Miles was appointed by the governor," Wentworth commented.

"True, but as the head of the Force I can pick anyone I want for the post. There's nothing that says I have to stay with any one man." Blade leaned forward and lowered his voice conspiratorially. "Please don't say anything to the general. This is just between us."

"Of course," the publisher assured him.

"He'll never hear it from me," Kupfner stated.

"Nor me," Farris chimed in.

"Good," Blade said, and stood. "I guess I should be going."

"What?" Wentworth blurted out.

"So soon?" Farris asked, sounding stunned.

"Yep. The training schedule is quite tight this week. I have duties I must attend to," Blade told them. He took a pace, then halted as if remembering something important. "Oops. I almost forgot."

The three newspeople were in the act of standing. Each one appeared to tense.

Blade smiled at Farris. "I wanted to ask you if you happen to know where Athena's locket might be?"

"Her locket?"

"Yeah. Grizzly gave it to her shortly before she died. You must have seen her wearing it."

"It's been a year," Farris pointed out. "I'm not sure which locket you're referring to."

"I helped Grizzly pick it out at the jeweler's. It had a heart-shaped pendant and a solid gold chain. Since Athena had a closed-coffin funeral, I never did learn whether they buried her with it still around her neck."

"Why do you want to know where it is?" Wentworth queried.

"I was hoping to give it to Grizzly the next time I see him."

"Do you know where he is? We heard he ventured into the Outlands," Wentworth said.

"I don't know where he is now, but I intend to go looking for him soon."

"You do?" Wentworth responded, his voice squeaking oddly.

"Yep. We were close friends. I'd like to make sure he's okay," Blade said.

"I'm certain he is," the publisher stated.

"Let's hope so," Blade replied politely. He nodded at them and made for the door. "Don't bother to see me out. And thanks, again, for taking the time to talk to me."

"Anytime," Wentworth said.

The Warrior paused at the doorway to glance back and wave, enjoying the confusion rampant on their features, then walked into the secretary's office, opening the door so abruptly she jumped in her chair and slammed a desk drawer shut.

"Blade!" Mabel exclaimed, swiveling her chair toward him. "You startled me."

"Did I? I'm sorry." He closed the door.

The blonde chuckled. "For a big guy you can move fast."

"When I have to," Blade said, approaching the desk slowly. He studied the drawer she had closed, debating the implications, and decided to put the finishing touch to his visit. "You know, you impress me as being an extremely competent person. I bet Phil relies on you a lot."

"You don't know the half of it."

"He trusts you completely, does he?" Blade queried, now within six feet of the desk.

Mabel exposed nearly all of her pearly white teeth. "I think it's safe to say he trusts me more than anyone else he knows."

"I believe you," Blade told her, now within a single stride of the drawer in question. "He must trust you if he has you record his conversations." With that he lunged, his hand on the handle in a twinkling, and jerked the drawer open.

"No!" Mabel cried, too late.

"What have we here?" Blade queried, staring at the black rectangular object inside, its tape spools still revolving. "My goodness. It looks like a tape recorder, doesn't it?"

The secretary's friendliness had evaporated and been replaced by frigid silence.

"I don't take kindly to having my private conversations recorded," Blade stated, straightening. "Just this once, though, I'll make an exception. Tell Phil he can keep the cassette."

Mabel's brow knit in bewilderment. "You're not going to take it?"

"No."

"I don't understand."

"You're not supposed to."

"What are you trying to pull?"

"Me?" Blade responded, his tone hardening.

Mabel tried to sink into her chair. "I didn't mean nothing by that. Honest."

"Sure," the Warrior said dryly. He moved to the elevator, which had not descended since his arrival, and pressed the button. As the door hissed wide open, he stepped inside and glanced at the secretary. "Tell General Gallagher I didn't want to be misquoted."

"I don't know—" Mabel began, and caught herself when the giant's eyes narrowed. She watched the elevator close, saw the floor indicator light come on as the car descended, and breathed a sigh of relief.

FIVE

There were two of them standing on the street corner, both attired in faded, torn jeans, T-shirts, and their customary black leather jackets bearing the distinctive white skulls on the back.

"Son of a bitch! It's him!" the skinny one declared.

"Who?" the stocky one responded, glancing about them.

"That big bastard who pounded on Mickey and offed the others!"

"Where, Ice? Where?" asked the stocky one excitedly.

"Right there, asshole," Ice answered, and pointed at the *L.A. Times* building half a block away.

"I don't see him."

"How the hell can you miss him, Carl? Look at the friggin' size of him!"

"Oh. You mean the dude in the leather vest walking to that jeep?"

"No. I mean the little old lady holdin' the poodle."

"You do?"

The man called Ice hauled off and smacked his companion on the top of

his head. "God! What do you use for brains?"

Carl was concentrating on the giant. "Look at that guy's muscles! No wonder he broke Mickey's nose with one punch."

"Jerk. That sucker could've snapped Mick's fool neck if he'd wanted."

"What do we do, Ice?" Carl inquired.

"We're going to follow the prick."

"But what about Bruno?" Carl responded, and glanced at the pharmacy to their rear.

"He's over twenty-one," Ice snapped, and stepped to his hog. "Let's go. That jeep is pullin' out."

Taking a tentative step, Carl brightened when a six-foot, ten-inch tall hulking figure emerged from the pharmacy. "Hey! Here's Bruno!" He happily mounted his cycle.

"What's up, guys?" the newcomer questioned in a booming voice as he hurried over to them.

Ice indicated the jeep, which was pulling into the traffic flow. "It's that Blade dude."

"The scuzz who racked our brothers?"

"The same."

"Then what are we waitin' for?" Bruno demanded, climbing onto his 1200-cc customized chopper. "What's the plan, Ice?"

The skinny Warlord had his eyes glued to the jeep as he kicked his machine over. "We'll follow the prick, find out where he hangs out, then get some of the boys and pay him a visit."

Bruno snickered. "Sounds like a blast."

"I'm with you," Carl chimed in, although deep down he doubted whether going after a guy who had that many muscles was such a bright idea. Long ago, however, he'd learned to keep his peace when his good

buddy Ice was itching for action. His prior carelessness had cost him two front teeth and he didn't want to lose any more.

"We'll stay back as far as we can," Ice said, shouting to make himself heard above the combined growling rumble from their motorcycles. "Stay frosty, dudes. This mother we're after is mega-buff."

No kidding, Carl thought, and pulled out after his companions.

They walked down the front steps of the L.A.P.D., their disparate appearances presenting an incongruous contrast.

"You did a good job, mouthpiece," Mickey declared, his words pronounced with distinct nasal distortion due to the large bandage covering his shattered nose. "You'll get a bonus for this." Spattered drops of dried blood dotted his shirt and the front of his leather jacket. His jeans were peppered with spots caused by his intimate contact with the garbage can.

"I appreciate it, Mick," the suave lawyer responded. He wore an expensive, three-piece gray suit and carried a gold-handled attache case.

"How'd you get me out so quick?"

"Wasn't hard. They had nothing to hold you on. The bag lady had disappeared. She blabbed the beans to that radio station, took the money they gave her for the tip, and simply vanished."

"Ethel always was a shrewd bitch."

"Without her, the cops can't hold you. All they have are five stiffs in the morgue. The captain told me they want to question this Warrior, Blade, to find out what happened. But they haven't been able to get hold of him."

Mickey's features clouded. "That bastard! He's dead meat, Louie."

"You'd be smart to leave him alone."

Glowering in suppressed rage, Mickey extended his right hand. Three of the fingers had been bandaged and secured with splints. "Leave that pig alone after what he did to me? Not on your life. Nobody breaks my nose and my hand and gets away with it." He paused for emphasis. "Nobody."

Louie stared at his younger associate. "Do you realize who you're dealing with?"

"Yeah. Blade. The head of the stinkin' Force. Big friggin' deal."

"He's not someone you should take lightly."

"He bleeds, just like everyone else."

"Look, Mick. I'm your lawyer. You pay me lots of green to keep you out of the slammer. I owe it to you to lay the facts out in the open."

Mickey came to the bottom concrete step and halted. "So bore me, already."

"This is serious. I know you want Blade in the worst way, and I would too if I was in your shoes, but you can't go after him like you would some lowlife off the street. First of all, as you discovered the hard way, he's not easy to take out. The man is probably the deadliest guy on the planet right at the moment."

"You think so?" Mickey responded, his interest abruptly perking up.

"I know so. Haven't you read about him in the papers? He's killed more enemies, single-handed, than all the Pagan Warlords put together ever have."

"Just this one dude?"

"This dude, as you call him, has defeated El Diablo, the Vampires, Reptilians, the Russians, the Technics, the Superiors, the Gild, and Manta, just to mention a few."

The corners of Mickey's mouth curved upward slightly. "So Blade has a heavy rep, huh?"

Louie snorted. "To employ your own parlance, Blade has the heaviest rep of anyone. He's the best of the best, the cream of the crop."

"Very interesting, mouthpiece."

The lawyer glanced at the Warlord. "Interesting? What's so—" he began, and stopped in disbelief, astounded. "No!" he declared.

"Yes," Mickey said, smirking.

"Are you insane? You can't take him on."

"Give me one good reason."

"He's *Blade*, damn it."

"So?"

"I don't want to hear any more," Louie said, waving his hands as if warding off unseen insects.

"Why not? You gave me the idea."

"I did no such thing," Louis stated indignantly. "All I did was emphasize the facts. You're the one who thinks he has to prove something by killing the Warrior."

Mickey jabbed his left forefinger into the lawyer's chest. "Hey, sucker, we didn't start this. He did. He messed in our business and killed five of the Warlords. One of the fuzz told me it's all over the radio. Now everyone has heard how this chump beat the Pagans. They're likely to think that we're a bunch of wimps if we don't avenge our honor."

"Do you think any of the good citizens of California even care about your honor?"

A steely gleam seemed to come into Mickey's dark eyes. "Don't overstep your bounds, counselor. Our honor might not mean diddly to you and the rest of the straights in this chicken-squat state, but the Warlords care about their rep. Our rep is our life, man. We're not the only gang around, you know. If we don't go after Blade, we lose face. The other gangs will start to push us, see if they can walk all over us too. We can't let that happen."

The lawyer placed his right hand on the Pagan's shoulder. "Listen to me, Mick. I've known you for eight long years. We may not be friends, but we have a professional business relationship and I feel it's my duty to warn you against trying to take revenge. There's not only the Warrior to worry about."

"How so?"

"I seriously doubt the rest of the Freedom Force will stand idly by while the Warlords kill Blade. They might come after you also."

Mickey smiled. "A regular war, huh?"

"I can see I'm wasting my breath," Louie said, lowering his arm. "I know how you are when you get in one of these moods."

"Moods, hell. This is business too, just like between you and me. It's bad business for the Warlords to let anyone get the better of them. If we want to stay on top, we've got to waste this Blade."

"Just don't bite off more than you can chew."

"Why?" Mickey joked. "You worried about losing your monthly retainer?"

The lawyer frowned and wheeled. "I did my job and got you out. I earn every penny you pay me."

"Sure, counselor. Sure. Have a swell day." Mickey chuckled and stared at Louie's retreating back, then turned and ambled along to the west, musing on his course of action. He liked the idea of offing the giant; it would give the Warlords the heaviest rep around and give him no end of personal satisfaction. His first step was to contact the boys and have them pick him up.

The roaring of motorcycles, a dozen or more, arose ahead.

Mickey looked up and smiled. The mouthpiece must have called them, he realized, and decided to make Louie's bonus a hefty one. He waved his left hand to draw their attention.

So much for step one.

Now he had to discover where the bastard lived.

Blade leaned back in the passenger seat and absently observed the landscape as the jeep sped to the northwest out of L.A.

"Will there be any other stops, sir?" the sergeant doing the driving

inquired.

"No. Take me to the Facility."

"Yes, sir."

Memories of the meeting caused the Warrior to grin in satisfaction. He'd thrown them for a loop with his remarks about General Gallagher and his plan to locate Grizzly, and he could well imagine Wentworth on the phone at that very moment, relaying a report on the conversation to the good general. They wouldn't know what to make of the meeting, which suited his ends perfectly. Although they might suspect the reason for his interest in the woman writing the Force column, they didn't know for certain, and odds were they wouldn't make any drastic moves until they did. He wanted them to maintain the status quo a little while longer.

Success depended on it.

The Warrior saw a tawny cat dart across the road ahead and his grin broadened. Was that an omen? His investigation had already devolved into a game of cat-and-mouse, and so far the mice were doing a superb job of keeping him on his toes. The meeting with Farris had been stacked against him, and he derived considerable pleasure from having stymied their strategy.

The presence of that editor-in-chief, Harry Kupfner, had been a masterly stroke. A photographic memory would have enabled Kupfner to recall every trifling detail ever written about the Force. Any probing questions directed at Vivien Farris would have been promptly answered by Kupfner if he believed she needed assistance.

Farris herself had been extremely clever. She'd refuse to take the bait when Blade had brought up the subject of the bogus locket. He'd hoped she would say she recalled seeing it, which would have exposed her as a phony right then and there, but the ruse had gotten him nowhere.

Then there was Phil Wentworth. How much did the man know? Was the publisher an accomplice or an unwitting stooge? From Wentworth's nervous behavior Blade could safely deduce the man was terrified of the truth being discovered.

Whatever that truth might be.

"Sir?"

The Warrior glanced at the sergeant, a stout man in green fatigues.
"What is it?"

"I don't know if I should tell you this," the soldier began, and paused.

"Tell me what?"

"About last night, sir."

"What about it?"

"Well, I was talking to Corporal Jensen this morning. You know, the guy who drove you into L.A. last night?"

"And?" Blade prompted, wondering where this was leading.

"He told me that after he got back to the compound, Lobo came strolling by and asked him all sorts of questions about where you had been, what you were doing, stuff like that. Jensen didn't think much of it, since he's new on the job. But I remembered you telling all of us to let you know if any member of the Force ever tries to leave the Facility without proper authorization, or if they do anything out of the ordinary. I think at the time you were concerned about Lobo always begging the perimeter guards to give him a ride around the fence when he's supposed to be running his laps."

"Thanks for letting me know."

"I'm not normally a snitch, but I figured you'd want to hear about it. And I ordered Jensen never to divulge details of your trips into the city."

"Thanks again."

"Just trying to do my job."

Blade filed the information for future consideration and resumed thinking about his bigger problem. He'd have a long talk with the Clansman later. Right now he had to plot his next move. Since they had countered his oblique approach, maybe it was time to employ the tactic he liked best.

Maybe it was time for a frontal assault.

SIX

Mickey stepped onto the old, empty wooden crate and scrutinized the three dozen Warlords assembled in the deserted warehouse on the west side of Los Angeles. Late afternoon sunlight streamed through the shattered windows. Dust a quarter inch deep covered the cement floor. He inhaled, his nose tingling, and sneezed.

Someone laughed.

Glowing maliciously, Mickey tried to spot the one responsible in the crowd. Failing, he covered his embarrassment by launching into his spiel. "All right, turkeys! Listen up!"

The muted conversations taking place immediately ceased.

"As all of you know by now, five of our own were offed last night by the guy who heads the Force, the Warrior called Blade. We can't take this crap lying down."

"You're not thinking of taking on the Force, are you?" someone called out.

"What if I am?" Mickey rejoined.

"Those dudes are heavy, man."

"So are we. Or has everyone here suddenly gone wimp?"

No one answered.

"I didn't think so," Mickey said harshly. "Okay. Here's the deal. We're going to rack this sucker, and we're going to do it in style. It'd be too easy just to walk up to him and shove a shotgun in his face. I want him to suffer first. I want him to bleed. When the other gangs hear about his death, I want them to be righteously impressed. Do you get my drift?"

"Sounds risky," a Pagan remarked.

"Life is a risk, jerk. You never know from one day to the next whether

you'll wake up the next morning," Mickey stated. "Besides, we're not about to do this without a plan. Thanks to Ice, Bruno, and Carl, we now know where the Force Facility is located." He gestured at Ice, who stood on his right. "They shadowed the giant out there earlier. Bruno and Carl are keepin' watch on the place."

"Are we gonna attack the compound?"

Mickey stared at the portly Warlord responsible for the query. "Yeah, right, bricks-for-brains. We'll attack their Facility and take on the California Army and the rest of the Force in the bargain." His features became flinty. "Idiot! We want the Warrior, not the rest. So we're going to keep a watch on the Facility until the giant leaves again, then we'll follow him. When the right time comes, we'll snatch his sorry ass."

"We're going to capture Blade?" a woman inquired in a tone that implied the suggestion bordered on insanity.

"Yeah. Why not? He may be tough, but we're tougher. And I want to have some fun with the chump before I waste him."

"Do you have a plan?"

"Of course I've got a plan! Why do you think I called this meeting? To discuss how to grow flowers?"

A burly Pagan at the front shifted. "I like growin' flowers. It relaxes me."

"Did I ask you, Fritz?"

"No, but I thought—"

"I don't want to hear it!" Mickey snapped. "All I want to hear is whether or not all of you are with me on this? I'm talkin' one hundred percent."

"No one kills five Warlords and gets away with it," declared a listener.

"We're with you, Mick!"

"Let's do this guy!"

A chorus of assent sounded from every throat.

Exultant, Mickey motioned with his good hand for silence, and once the Warlords quieted down he continued. "We could call in every brother in our organization for this hit, but we don't want to go overboard. The L.A. chapter can deal with Blade without any help. He's bound to leave the Facility sooner or later, and when that mother does, he's dead meat!"

"What about the rest of the Force?"

"What about them? They didn't off any of us. We've got no beef with them. But if they interfere, we take them out. Now let's make sure everybody is packed and get set." He looked at Ice. "And don't forget. I want the limo here in thirty minutes."

The skinny Pagan snorted. "That big son of a bitch will never know what hit him."

Lobo strolled as nonchalantly as he knew how toward the Barracks Bunker, and once he passed the Command Bunker he raced flat out to the entrance and pounded down the stairs to the living quarters.

All of the bunkers were constructed of concrete and had been built to withstand a direct mortar strike. Each measured 20 yards in length by 15 wide. In the barracks spacious accommodations were provided for the team. Two rows of beds were near the bottom of the steps, permitting a rapid departure in case of an emergency deployment. After the sleeping section came the kitchen, which was kept completely stocked at all times, then the showers and the toilet facilities. The only modification made on the original design had been implemented after Athena Morris joined. A thick plastic partition had been strategically positioned in the bathroom to allow a measure of privacy. Now Raphaela enjoyed her own sink, shower, and attendant facilities.

Lobo found his companions resting either on their bunks or in one of the chairs scattered about the living quarters. They all glanced up as he burst inside, and he related his news excitedly. "Blade is headin' into town again in an hour."

"How do you know?" Jag responded from a nearby chair.

"I was down near the guard shack and I saw them gassin' up the jeep."

"Doesn't prove Blade is leavin'," Doc Madsen commented. "They could

just be getting it ready for the next trip."

"They're not," Lobo asserted. "I snuck close enough to give a listen to what they were saying. Corporal Jensen is takin' the Big Guy in."

"Oh, my," Raphaela said. "I was afraid of this. What do we do?"

Lobo took several strides into the room. "We already talked this over, remember? We follow him."

"I don't know if that's such a good idea," Raphaela stated.

"Why not? You were all for it earlier? Are you gettin' cold feet, Red?"

Sparrow Hawk sat up in his bunk. "Why would Blade be venturing into the city again tonight?"

"Who the hell knows?" Lobo replied. "I told you what I accidentally heard the general and him sayin' when I went down to ask about havin' the afternoon off. And we all heard the radio."

"The radio report claimed he killed them to protect a woman they were attacking," Sparrow noted. "I doubt he's declared war on the entire group."

"Look, what's with you guys?" Lobo demanded in exasperation. "I thought we've been all through this. We figured we'd keep our eyes on Blade for the next couple of days, just to be on the safe side."

"It doesn't feel right spying on him," Raphaela mentioned.

"We wouldn't need to do any spyin' if you'd done your job earlier," Lobo told her.

"Don't blame me. I did the best I could. It wasn't my fault we were interrupted by the general's arrival."

"Excuses, excuses."

The one member of the unit who had not yet spoken now interjected a remark in his distinctive, deep voice. "Aren't all of you forgetting something?"

Lobo rotated. "Like what, Havoc?"

Seated by himself a few feet from the rest, the officer swept all of them with a penetrating gaze. "There's no way you'll be able to follow Blade. None of you are authorized to requisition Motor Pool vehicles."

"Mike's right," Raphaela exclaimed. "What will we do?"

"I could trail him on foot," Jag offered.

"Listen to the speed demon," Lobo quipped. "Just because you've been clocked at over fifty miles an hour doesn't mean you can stay with the jeep all the way to L.A. It's, what, forty miles or better?"

"Then it's hopeless," Raphaela stated.

"Maybe not," Captain Havoc declared, and suddenly became the sole object of attention.

"You'll help us?" Jag asked.

"We thought you were against the idea," Sparrow added.

"I was," Havoc confirmed, then sighed and ran his right hand across his short hair. "Until this afternoon, anyway."

"What happened?" Doc queried.

"I walked down to the hangar to talk to the VTOL pilots about our new courier schedule. While I was standing outside with Captain Laslo, I happened to look to the west and spotted three bikers driving along that dirt road leading back into the National Forest."

"Bikers?" Raphaela repeated.

"People who ride motorcycles," Havoc explained. "Specifically men and women who like to wear a lot of black leather and ride around on their choppers."

"But isn't a chopper a helicopter?"

Lobo laughed. "Those dudes at that Mound you came from must all be geeks."

"The Moles don't have any choppers," Raphaela said defensively. "We don't even have any cars or jeeps."

"What do you ride way out there in the boonies?" Lobo inquired with a smirk. "Rabbits?" He laughed harder.

"Can it, dummy," Jag declared. "We want to hear the reason Mike has changed his mind."

Doc Madsen's right hand strayed closer to the Magnum. "Yeah. You're beginning to rile me, partner."

"I can take a hint," Lobo said, and sat down on the end of his own bed.

"Go on," Jag urged the officer.

"As I was saying," Havoc went on, "I happened to look to the west and saw these three bikers going past. Now that in itself is strange, because our Facility is so far off the main highway. It piqued my curiosity so I watched closely as they did a U-turn and went back the way they had come." He paused. "And that was when I noticed the white skulls."

Raphaela leaned toward him. "Do you mean they all shaved their heads bald?"

Lobo flopped onto his bunk in a fit of mirth.

"No," Havoc answered her. "I'm referring to the white skulls on the back of their leather jackets, emblems worn by a certain gang in L.A."

"The Warlords?"

"Yep. The white skulls are their trademark."

Jaguarundi stood. "They must be planning to get revenge."

"My thoughts exactly," Havoc concurred. "Why else would three of them be so close to the Facility?"

"They could try to kill Blade when he goes into the city," Sparrow said, noting the obvious.

"I say we tell him," Raphaela declared.

"What good would that do?" Lobo asked.

"He should know so he can be on his guard against them," the Molewoman said.

"You missed my point, Red. Tellin' Blade would be a waste of our breath. Do you really think he'll give a damn whether the Warlords are after him or not? Do you think he'll change his mind about going into L. A.? You know him as well as I do. He ain't scared of nothing. He'll go in whether we tell him or not."

"But he has to know," Raphaela insisted.

"Blade is always on his guard against danger. He's got eyes in the back of his head. So I vote we don't tell him," Lobo stated, and grinned. "I vote we do even better than that."

"How?"

"We follow him and protect his butt from the Pagans."

"Without authorization?" Sparrow queried doubtfully.

The Clansman looked at Havoc. "We'd have the authorization if a certain party goes along with the program."

For a full minute no one else spoke while they waited for the officer to respond.

"I've been mulling over the situation ever since I spied the bikers, and arriving at a decision hasn't been easy," Havoc said slowly. "On the one hand I have my duty. As a career military officer, I know my primary responsibility is to inform my immediate superior about the Warlords I saw. If I don't, I could rightfully be accused of dereliction of duty."

"Is that serious?" Raphaela questioned.

"Nothing a court martial wouldn't remedy," Havoc told her, and frowned. "But on the other hand, I also have a duty to protect my superior's life at all costs. As much as it galls me to agree with anything Lobo says, he's right about Blade. The Warrior won't give a damn about the Warlords. He'll probably just go about his business as usual, which will

put his life in grave jeopardy and which leaves me with a dilemma. Essentially, it boils down to this: Do I tell him or protect him?"

"We could do both," Raphaela suggested.

"But if we tell him, he might give us a direct order to stay out of the fight. Knowing him, he'll consider the affair with the Pagans as personal and won't want us getting involved," Havoc said.

"What do you propose we do, then?" Doc Madsen asked.

The officer looked at each of them in turn. "God help me, but I believe the wisest recourse is to shadow Blade and cover his back. We could all wind up with our butts in the slinger for this, so don't agree if you have any qualms."

"What's the worst he can do to us?" Lobo brought up. "Kick us off the Force? Big deal. Who needs this two-bit outfit?"

"I sort of like it here," Raphaela mentioned.

Captain Havoc rose and faced them. "We must decide now. What's it going to be? Each one of you should voice an opinion because we're contemplating a move that could endanger our careers."

"You know how I feel, Joe Army. I'm lookin' forward to stompin' a few Pagans into the dirt," Lobo answered.

"Blade is one of the few humans I've ever met who accepted me just as I am from the moment he met me," Jag informed them. "There isn't a bigoted bone in his body. I respect him highly, and I don't want to see him hurt. Count me in."

Doc nodded. "Count me in too. I reckon we'll baby-sit that hombre whether he likes it or not."

"I too would like to help him," Sparrow Hawk declared. "Blade and the Family have helped my people many times. They are valued friends. His enemies are my enemies."

All the men stared at the Molewoman.

"What's it going to be, Raph?" Lobo demanded.

"We could be making a mistake," Raphaela said.

"Are you in or not, wench?"

"Don't call me that," Raphaela said angrily. "Then quit stallin'. What's your vote?" Raphaela seemed to experience difficulty moving her lips. "We go for it."

SEVEN

Blade adjusted his Bowies so they fit comfortably under his vest as the jeep neared the *LA. Times* building. Although General Gallagher had previously requested that all Force members travel into the metropolis unarmed, the Warrior refused to comply. He'd worn the big knives every waking hour of every day for more than half of his life, and he felt oddly uneasy when abroad without them. Then too, during his tenure as the head Warrior and head of the Force he had made many powerful enemies who craved to get even for the defeats he had inflicted on them. For him to go into Los Angeles unarmed would be stupid, and a person in his position couldn't afford such a luxury.

Where he went, the Bowies went.

The Warrior wasn't worried about the authorities. He carried an Identification Card issued by the governor that every law-enforcement officer in California would respect. And as part of his commission to command the Freedom Force, he'd been given *carte blanche* to operate as he saw fit in any Federation territory. All of the Federation leaders had agreed to the proposal.

"Excuse me, sir?" Corporal Jensen said.

"Yes?"

"I assume you'll want me to take you back to the Facility?"

"No."

"Sir?"

"I'll be driving myself back."

Jensen glanced at the giant in surprise. "What about me, sir?"

"You have the rest of the night off to spend in L.A. doing whatever you want."

"But I'm scheduled to work this shift, sir. General Gallagher will be ticked off when he hears I took unauthorized time off."

"I'll handle the general," Blade assured him. "Unless, of course, you don't *want* the time off?"

"I'd have to be crazy to refuse. Sir."

"Then it's yours," Blade said. "With two conditions."

"What are they?"

"One, you'll stay in Los Angeles until at least three in the morning. You're not to return any earlier than that. Understood?"

"Not really, but I'll do it. Can I stay out to four?"

"Stay out until six a.m. for all I care. But under no circumstances are you to report back to the compound prior to three."

"Fair enough, sir. What's the second condition?"

"You're not to phone any of your buddies back at the Facility and tell them about this. You're not to contact anyone connected with the military or the Force."

"If that's what you want, you've got it, sir," Corporal Jensen stated. "I don't suppose you'd care to explain the reason?"

"No."

"Okay. But if you don't mind my saying so, this whole business is off the wall. I mean, if you didn't want me along, why didn't you just drive the jeep yourself?"

"I don't need to explain my actions to you, Corporal."

"No, sir, you sure don't."

The *Times* building materialized ahead, looming in the twilight like an enigmatic monolith. The interior lights shone through the tinted windows with a diffuse glow.

Blade regarded the structure thoughtfully, hoping the corporal would abide by his conditions. Otherwise, Gallagher would hear about his activities sooner than he wanted. The Warrior suspected that one of the troopers assigned to the Force Facility regularly reported to Gallagher. Perhaps several did. Why the general should see fit to plant spies at the compound mystified him, and he resolved to get to the bottom of it after he completed his investigation into the syndicated column.

"We're almost there, sir," Jensen said.

The Warrior merely nodded. He planned to complete the night's activities and be back at the Facility before Gallagher could intervene. Granted, one of the other soldiers might have already contacted the general. But Gallagher's suspicions would be allayed once the officer learned Blade had taken a driver along. The ploy should buy several hours.

Heavy traffic flowed in both directions. Late-working commuters were en route home and early evening shoppers were headed for the malls and other stores, exactly as their prewar ancestors had done. Only now there were fewer malls and stores, with greatly diminished selections. Rationing had ended decades ago, lending an illusion of prosperity to an economy where quality goods were at a premium.

Blade spotted a huge clock above the doors to a nearby bank. Six-forty. Twenty minutes ahead of schedule. Should he wait or take the bull by the horns?

"Here we are, sir," Corporal Jensen said, angling the jeep toward the curb.

"Go around the block."

The trooper reacted without a flicker of hesitation, turning the wheel sharply and merging with the traffic again. "Yes, sir. Around the block it is."

Blade leaned back and scrutinized the pedestrians. Some were nattily dressed while others wore virtual rags. The metropolis contained a

cosmopolitan mix of citizens, reflecting the whole spectrum of racial and cultural diversity. In the final analysis they could all be segregated into two main categories: the rich and the poor. Seldom had the Warrior observed such abject squalor as he'd found in certain slum districts. By contrast, within a few miles of each slum existed neighborhoods where the residents dwelt in staggering opulence.

The haves and the have-nots.

The way of the world.

Blade had studied the prewar society extensively during his schooling years at the Home, and been appalled by the conditions the leaders had let flourish. At the Home money was nonexistent. At the Home every person performed a valuable function. At the Home no one was permitted to lord it over anyone else. Rich and poor applied to the possessions of spiritual wisdom instead of material objects. To one who'd been raised in such a paradisiacal environment, the mean streets of L.A. at times resembled a literal hell.

The Warrior ruminated on his upbringing at the Home as the jeep went completely around the block. He gazed skyward, admiring the brilliant streaks of red, orange, and yellow on the western horizon, and looked at the expectant corporal. "Again."

Jensen sighed, shrugged, and kept going.

For another ten minutes the jeep made circuit after circuit around the *Times* edifice. Not until all traces of sunlight had succumbed to the encroachment of night did the Warrior finally nod at the driver.

"Pull over."

"Yes, sir!" Jensen declared eagerly. He whipped the vehicle into a parking space and turned off the ignition. "Here you are, sir," he said, offering the keys.

Blade took them and locked his eyes on the trooper's. "Now remember the conditions."

"Don't go back before three a.m. and don't call anyone."

"If you break either one, I'll have you reassigned to border duty."

Jensen blinked. "Border duty sucks, sir."

"So I've been told."

"My lips are sealed, sir."

"Good. Take off. And have a good time."

The corporal grinned lecherously. "I intend to, sir." He hopped out of the jeep and blended into the stream of passersby.

Blade gazed up at the top floor of the *Times*, then climbed out, pocketed the keys, and strolled to the entrance. A woman came out just as he went in. Otherwise, except for the security guard, the lobby was empty.

Tonight the man in the brown uniform had his nose in a book.

The Warrior hurried to the counter. "Hello, Ronnie."

Startled, Felton looked up and did a double take. "Blade! You're back?"

"Yep."

Felton's brows furrowed. "Why are you here? I mean, Mr. Wentworth is out of town. Do you have an appointment with someone else?"

Blade smiled and leaned on the counter. "No. Phil told me I could pick up some important papers he was leaving in his secretary's office. He said to stop by this evening."

"Really? Gee, no one told me about this. And you know I'm not supposed to let anyone up without permission, especially when there's no one up there."

"There isn't? I thought his secretary was going to wait for me."

"Then she must have forgot. Mabel left an hour ago."

"Damn," Blade said, adopting a resigning expression. "Oh, well. I wouldn't want to get you in hot water. I'll come back some other time." He turned to depart.

"No. Wait," Felton declared. He gnawed on his lower lip for several seconds, then motioned at the elevator to the penthouse. "Go on up."

"Are you sure?"

"Hey, if I can't trust you, who can I trust?" Felton asked. He bent forward and lowered his voice. "I owe you for the autograph, remember? My family loved it. The kids pestered me for half an hour to tell them what you're really like."

Blade grinned. "Well, if you insist."

"I do. It's not your fault Mabel didn't stick around like she was supposed to," Felton said, and glanced at the lobby to ensure no one else was approaching. "Just between you and me, that woman has more airs than a pedigreed pooch. She thinks she walks on air, but in my book she's a snot. You go ahead."

"I won't be long," Blade promised, and moved quickly to the elevator. So far, so good. He waited impatiently for the car, then ascended.

An overhead light had been left on in the vacant office.

The Warrior went directly to a row of file cabinets positioned along the left-hand wall. None were locked. He sorted through every drawer and discovered mundane files containing bills and varied official correspondence, none of which offered the clue he needed.

Where would it be?

Blade moved to a file cabinet against the right-hand wall and tugged on the handle. The drawer was locked. Pursing his lips, he debated whether to force it. He could fabricate a plausible excuse to justify the visit and appease the publisher and Gallagher, but not if he broke into the cabinet. Reluctantly he stepped to the secretary's desk and rummaged through the drawers, finding pens, pencils, black paper, carbons, paper clips, and assorted odds and ends. In the top drawer on the left was a cosmetician's bonanza: enough make-up to beautify a petrified hag. In the top drawer on the right he found a bonanza of a different sort.

Mabel's appointment book.

The Warrior scooped up the gold-colored book and flipped through the pages. Neatly entered on the appropriate dates were pertinent items, extending over a span covering the past six months, written in tiny block letters. Most of the entries consisted of a time, a place, and several letters or initials. He checked the last of all, from that day, and studied the cryptic note: "2PM, P. to. S.F."

"P. to S.F.?"

Blade pondered the probably meaning. There were dozens of other entries bearing the single initial "P," which he deduced stood for Phil Wentworth. Therefore, "P. to S.F." must refer to the publisher's trip to San Francisco. He paged backwards, noting points of interest. There were an awful lot of entries concerning someone designated only as "G" who met Mabel regularly for lunch. And three times a week, without fail, Mabel visited her beautician. He stopped on one page when an entry caught his eye.

"11A.M. P. and Gen. G. to S.F."

The date had been a month and a half ago. Blade wondered if the obvious applied. Had Wentworth and General Gallagher traveled to San Francisco? If so, why? He began searching specifically for entries bearing the initials "S.F.," and discovered that the publisher flew up there at least once a month. Twice in the last three months the mysterious "Gen. G." had gone along.

What was the big attraction in San Francisco?

A slight hissing sound abruptly came from the direction of the elevator.

Blade looked up, surprised to see the door closing. The car started down the next instant. He straightened, perplexed. Could the security guard be coming to check on him? Or had the secretary unexpectedly returned? In either event, he only had a minute left. His fingers flew as he went from page to page, his eyes roving from top to bottom, anxious to uncover the clue that could set him on the right track. He knew it was a long shot, but—

Hold the phone.

What was *this*?

The Warrior turned the appointment book sideways to read a tiny note written along the inner margin, barely discernible to a casual glance. He'd detected only the tops of the letters. Now he read the entire entry and his body tingled in excitement.

"Monthly on 15th. CK. to A. care Katy's Place. 1410 Harbor Rd. S.F."

Elation surged through him. For a moment Blade forgot all about the elevator, until the whirring from the shaft reminded him that he was about to have a visitor. He quickly stashed the appointment book in the desk, then closed the door and faced forward to greet whoever rode in the car. His mind raced with the implications of his discovery.

Could it be?

Had he been right all along?

The Warrior draped his brawny arms at his sides and smiled, intending to breeze past the secretary, if she should arrive, before she could object. If the guard had become curious about what was keeping him, he could always say he'd been trying to find the papers but apparently Mabel had forgotten to leave them. Felton would buy the story.

Seconds later the elevator whined to a stop and the door slid wide, revealing the occupants. Only they weren't Mabel or Felton.

There stood four Warlords, armed to the teeth.

EIGHT

Security guard Ronny Felton had just made himself a cup of steaming hot coffee, and was turning back toward the counter when a shotgun barrel gouged him in the left cheek and a gruff voice asked a hopefully rhetorical question.

"Do you want to die, sucker?"

Startled, Ronny looked up to behold a dozen scruffy types in black leather jackets ranged across the lobby, each one carrying a gun. All the barrels were trained on him.

"Did you hear me, wimp?" demanded the burly character holding the

shotgun.

"I heard you," Ronny blurted. "No, I don't want to die."

"Then let me lay it on the line. You'll live if you cooperate. Otherwise, we separate your head from your body."

"What do you want?"

"Where's the bozo from the Force?"

"Blade?"

"Yeah."

"Never met him."

"Smart guy, huh?" the burly man said. "Do you know who we are?"

Ronny opened his mouth to say no. One of the men nearby turned, revealing a white skull on the back of the jacket, and Ronny froze in alarm.

The burly man laughed. "Yeah. I can tell by your stupid expression that you know. So you can imagine what will happen to you if you give us any grief."

Ronny simply nodded.

"Okay. Fork over your piece. And do it real slow."

Acutely conscious of the weapons pointed at his chest, Ronny used the thumb and forefinger of his right hand to carefully pull his revolver from its holster. "Here."

Another Pagan stepped forward and took the gun. "Thanks for the gift, dude."

"Now get on your knees," burly-butt said.

"What?"

"On your knees or I'll blow you away."

Reluctantly, Ronny sank down. The counter now cut off his view of the lobby. He stared up into the shotgun barrel and tried not to flinch. "You're crazy if you think you can get away with this."

"Who asked you?" the burly Warlord snapped. "Tell us where Blade went. We saw him come in here and he hasn't left."

"He must have gone out the rear exit.'

The Pagan scowled. "This jerk is givin' me a hard time, Eddy."

"I'll take care of him," announced a dark-haired Warlord armed with an Uzi. He came around the counter and walked over to Felton. "Where's Blade?"

"The men's room," Ronny answered, and promptly regretted his rashness. The Uzi stock slammed into his right temple, lancing his cranium with intense pain, and he sagged against the counter, his forehead resting on the edge of the shelf.

"Answer me, jerk, or lose some teeth," Eddy snapped.

Ronny kept his head down, pretending to be worse off than he was, stalling, wishing he had some way of warning the Warrior. He heard another Warlord speak.

"This is gettin' us nowhere and we don't have all damn night! Keith, take one guy and go check out the offices on this floor. Frank, take three others up to the penthouse in that elevator over there."

"The penthouse?" repeated the one who must be Frank.

"Yeah, dummy. I read that the dude who owns this paper has a fancy spread on the top floor. The Force geek might have gone to see him. Boogie up there and check it out."

"On our way, Fritz."

Ronny slowly lifted his head.

"What do we do about this dork?" the Pagan named Eddy asked someone on the other side of the counter.

"Off him."

Eddy smirked and reached down.

"Wait!" Ronny exclaimed, but the Warlord hauled him erect and placed the Uzi barrel against his right ear. He saw four Pagans making for the private elevator.

"Say your prayers, creep," Eddy taunted.

"Please! I have a wife and kids," Ronny cried out, voicing the first thought that came into his head. He shuddered at the prospect of receiving a bullet in the brain, and his eyes frantically roved over the counter shelves for something, *anything* he could use to defend himself. A letter opener resting on the shelf at waist height drew his desperate attention.

"Hey!" a Pagan standing near the entrance shouted. "There's two dudes headin' this way."

"Are they cops?" Fritz called out.

"Nope. They're wearin' street threads. Weird street threads."

"What the hell do you mean by weird?"

"You'll see for yourself in a sec. Here they come."

"Hide the guns!" Fritz barked, and slid his Winchester behind his left leg.

Eddy lowered the Uzi to belt level.

A pair of shadowy forms materialized on the other side of the glass doors, then stood there staring inside, apparently in no great hurry to enter.

Flooded with relief at the temporary reprieve, Ronny looked toward the elevator and saw the car was already ascending. Blade would be taken unawares! The Warrior didn't stand a chance. His left hand inched closer to the letter opener. Beside him, Eddy stared intently at the glass doors.

"Who are those guys?" another Pagan hissed.

A moment later the duo strode boldly into the lobby and halted six feet from the entry way.

Some of the Warlords laughed.

"What are you two supposed to be?" demanded a gang member.

Ronny gawked in amazement, tempted to laugh himself until he recalled an article he'd read in the Sunday supplement of the newspaper some months ago, an article containing brief biographies of the new recruits who had joined the Freedom Force. He almost whooped in sheer delight.

On the right stood a man who looked as if he'd just stepped from the pages of an ancient pulp Western. He wore all black, except for his shirt, including a wide-brimmed hat that obscured his eyes. His hands dangled loosely at his sides. A bulge on his right hip suggested there was something concealed under his frock coat.

Next to the cowboy was a genuine Indian attired in beaded buckskins. Slung across his back by means of a thin leather strap was a stout spear. His right hand rested on his corresponding thigh, but his left hand was screened by his leg.

"Howdy, gents," the man in black declared.

The burly Warlord advanced cautiously, keeping his Winchester hidden the whole time, and halted ten feet from the newcomers. "Did you two take a wrong turn at the circus?" he asked, precipitating a chorus of chortles.

"This is the *Times*, isn't it?" the man in black asked.

"Yeah," Fritz replied. "We're a construction crew gettin' set to renovate the lobby. The paper is closed. You'll have to leave."

"But we're here for the party," said the man in black.

"Party? What party?" Fritz queried testily.

The Indian smiled. "A party celebrating the guidance of the Everywhere Spirit in all of our lives."

"What are you babbling about?" Fritz demanded.

"If the Everywhere Spirit had not guided our footsteps to this place, you and your friends would be free to do as you pleased."

"So?" Fritz growled.

The man in black moved the right flap of his coat aside, revealed a pearl-handled revolver in a polished holster. "So I reckon it's time to dispense with a few pills."

Ronny held his breath, certain violence would erupt at any second, astounded at the courage exhibited by the gunman and the Flathead. The six Pagans had tensed, and an air of impending conflict crackled in the room. An instant later it happened.

The burly Warlord went into action first, bringing the Winchester up and around with deceptive speed, a signal for all the Pagans to open fire.

Had Ronny blinked he would have missed half the fight. He saw the man in black draw, an incredibly fast blur of arm and hand capped by the boom of the Smith and Wesson.

Fritz took the slug squarely in the center of the forehead, the impact hurling him backwards, his arms and legs thrashing, dead on his feet long before he crashed onto the floor.

Already the gunfighter had pivoted, and he squeezed off a second shot that ripped into a Pagan trying to bring an assault rifle to bear.

All this transpired in a space of a heartbeat, almost too swiftly for Ronny to follow. He glimpsed the Indian sweeping an M-16 into use and heard the short burst that downed two more Warlords.

The fifth gang member got off a hasty shot from a .45. He missed.

Ronny heard the Magnum blast once more, and the Pagan holding the .45 reacted as if he'd been slammed in the head by a baseball bat.

Leaving only Eddy. Shocked by the abrupt demise of his companions, he had yet to lift his Uzi above the counter. He remedied his oversight by jerking the submachine gun up and shouting, "You bastards!"

The gunman and the Indian were diving for the floor.

In the millisecond before the Pagan cut loose, Ronny heard yet another noise. A strange noise, like the patter of naked feet on the tile floor, then a soft swish. He registered motion out of the corner of his right eye, and he twisted, not knowing what to expect but certainly not expecting to see a furry man-thing arcing through the air in an acrobatic flip, coming at an angle from the rear, from the direction of the door leading to the ground-floor offices. He gaped as the creature sailed directly over Eddy the Pagan, its hands flicking out and down, its nails digging deep into Eddy's face, into his eyes. In a flash the man-thing swung its legs downward and landed lightly on the countertop.

Eddy dropped the Uzi and screamed.

Ronny looked up at the creature, who he now recognized as the cat-man, in stupefaction.

Grinning, the hybrid nodded and said, "Excuse me." He seized the Warlord's head in his slender hands, then twisted sharply. There was a distinct snap and Eddy the Pagan collapsed. "I despise crybabies," the cat-man commented. "Don't you?"

Ronny simply nodded.

The man in black and the Indian had risen and were checking the fallen Warlords.

"What's your name?" the hybrid inquired politely.

"Ronny Felton."

"I'm Jaguarundi. Pleased to meet you," the cat-man said, and offered his right hand.

Still in a daze from the whirlwind of activity and the sudden demise of the Pagans, Ronny shook, feeling the hybrid's fur under his fingers. "Nice meeting you," he said lamely, wondering if there were any more surprises in store for him.

There were.

"Nice job," declared someone in a deep voice, and a blond officer endowed with a superb physique and attired in a Special Forces uniform came around from the rear and stepped to the middle of the counter. "Did we miss any?" He carried an M-16.

"Not that I know of," the gunfighter replied.

"You did," Ronny blurted out, and they all looked at him. "Four of them went up in the private elevator after Blade."

"Then we should go up too," said a newcomer, a lovely redhead wearing fatigues. She also held an M-16.

"What for?" asked yet another new arrival, a stocky black man in a black leather jacket. In his right hand he held an AutoKnife, a bloody AutoKnife. "The Big Guy will carve those turkeys into itty-bitty pieces."

Ronny stared at the crimson-coated blade. He'd seen such a knife before and knew it to be a NATO MILITARY spring-loaded automatic. "There were two Pagans who went into the back offices," he mentioned.

"They're worm food," the black said, and cackled. He bent over and started wiping the knife clean on the pants of a dead Warlord.

The redhead took several strides toward the elevator. "We've got to help Blade."

"If we go up there, he'll know we followed him," the officer stated.

"And we'll be in deep doo-doo," the black added.

"But we can't just stand here and do nothing!" the redhead insisted angrily. She took another pace, then paused, staring at the floor indicator. "Look! It's coming down!"

"So soon?" the Indian said.

The officer smiled knowingly, then motioned at the entrance. "Let's go, people! On the double!"

"But Blade!" the redhead declared.

"He's fine. Let's go! Move!"

A compelling quality to the blond man's authoritative tone prompted them into dashing for the glass doors.

The cat-man winked at Ronny. "It's been nice, chuckles. Try not to get a swelled head."

"A what?"

Grinning, the hybrid leaped from the counter and raced incredibly fast to the entry way. Although he started for the doors last, he reached them before any of the others.

The officer ran up to the counter and deposited a rifle. "Do you know who we are?" he questioned, glancing anxiously at the private elevator, which had descended to the twelfth floor.

"Yeah. I've read all about you."

"We need your help."

"Mine?"

The blond man nodded, his blue eyes seeming to probe into the very depths of Ronny's soul, as if measuring Ronny's character. "We don't want anyone to know we were here. Will you keep it a secret?"

"You don't? But—"

"I don't have time to explain," the officer interrupted. "But I would take it as a personal favor if you wouldn't tell anyone."

Ronny nodded slowly, his mind stuck in neutral. "Sure. For you. Whatever you want."

"Thanks. What's your name?"

"Felton. Ronny Felton."

"I'll be in touch. I'm a man who always repays his debts, and I owe you one." The blond man smiled and gave a salute, then wheeled and dashed for the entrance. He just exited when the elevator reached the ground floor.

The elevator!

Ronny snatched up the rifle, the Winchester the Pagan named Fritz had carried, and swung around. What if it wasn't Blade? What if the four Warlords had killed the giant? He aimed at the door, his finger on the trigger.

But the elevator didn't open.

Puzzled, concerned for the Warrior's safety, Ronny moved across the lobby and stood next to the pair of buttons to the right of the shaft. Five seconds elapsed. Ten. And still the door remained closed. Finally he couldn't take the suspense any longer, and his right forefinger stabbed the Up button.

A heartbeat later a heavy hand fell on his right shoulder.

NINE

With an AR-15, a Marlin .30-30, a Remington 870 Magnum, and a Ruger Mini-14 Carbine all pointed at his chest, Blade did the only thing he could under the circumstances: he froze.

"Look at what we found!" stated the Pagan holding the AR-15.

"Don't move, chump," snarled the Warlord armed with the Ruger. "Not unless you have a death wish."

The Warrior complied, externally at least. Inwardly, his nimble brain calculated probabilities and rated options. They'd taken him by surprise and for the moment had the upper hand. But before he made any desperate moves, he needed to know their intent. If they were there to kill him, they would have already done so. And if they weren't there to kill him, then why? "To what do I owe this honor?" he asked.

The foursome emerged nonchalantly from the car, confident of their edge, their faces mocking him.

"Listen to this geek," said the thin one carrying the Remington.

"Mickey sent us," the Pagan with the AR-15 revealed.

"Mickey?" Blade repeated.

"Yeah. You remember him. You busted his hand and his nose last night in an alley."

"Oh. You mean the tough guy who likes to take on gray-haired, defenseless ladies?"

"Yeah, that's him," AR-15 confirmed.

"Mick wants to talk to you," Remington said.

"Lucky me," Blade responded, watching them approach, gauging the distances and the angles of attack. Instead of spreading out to use the intervening space to its maximum advantage, as true professionals would have done, the quartet advanced in a cluster with AR-15 and Remington in the front and the other pair walking a few feet to the rear.

"So don't give us no grief and you'll live longer," AR-15 stated arrogantly.

"Is Mick here with you?" Blade inquired, his eyes narrowing as he tensed his legs for his move.

"No, but we know where to find him. So be a good little turd and stick your hands in the air. Real slow, like."

Blade grinned and began to hoist his arms. "I make it a point never to argue with a loaded gun."

"Smart man," AR-15 said. He halted a yard off and glanced at his fellow Pagans. "It'll be interesting to see this dork's puss when Mick get's through with him. His own mother won't be able to tell who he is."

"Yeah," snickered Remington. "Mick's a whiz with a straight razor."

"That's fitting," Blade said.

"It is?" AR-15 replied.

The Warrior nodded. "Seeing as how good old Mick is a candidate for a straightjacket."

Predictably, AR-15 glared and grabbed for the giant's right arm. "Let's go, sucker."

And go Blade did, whipping both arms down, using his right hand to batter the barrel of the AR-15 aside while his left hand slashed in a handsword chop into the Pagan's neck and his right leg swept up and out. His boot connected with the Remington barrel and knocked that weapon aside as well. In a smooth flow of unbroken motion he followed through with his offensive, lunging forward between the first two Warlords, ramming his broad shoulders into their torsos and sending both of them staggering backwards.

"Look out!" Marlin shouted, way too late.

The Pagan chopped in the neck sagged to his knees, clutching his throat and gagging.

Leaving three foes still in the fight.

Blade had counted on none of them firing while they were all bunched together for fear of hitting each other. But the Warlord clutching the Ruger snapped off three wild shots anyway. All three struck Remington in the back and burst out his upper chest to lodge in the far wall.

"Don't shoot, jerk!" Marlin cried, attempting to pull a survival knife from a sheath attached at the small of his back.

The Warrior shoved Remington aside and closed on Ruger just as the Pagan frantically leveled the Carbine. Blade twisted and a shot blasted, the round missing him by a hair, and to forestall another bullet he planted his right combat boot into Ruger's groin.

Gurgling in agony, Ruger released his gun and pressed his hands over his privates.

Blade delivered a snap kick to Ruger's chin, the impact flinging the Pagan rearward to stumble into the elevator. Dropping his right leg and assuming the cat stance, he pivoted.

Marlin had his survival knife free. The rifle lay at his feet. He grinned and wagged the knife. "Mick wants you alive, bastard. And I aim to deliver." He deftly swiped the keen blade from side to side, moving

forward as he did.

The Warrior gave ground slowly, his eyes never leaving the gleaming survival knife while his right hand stretched to his side, reached under the leather vest, and drew his Bowie.

Suddenly Marlin halted, taken aback by the size of the giant's knife. "Whoa! You play for keeps."

Blade had no time for idle conversation. He lanced the right Bowie at his adversary, making Marlin give way and skip to the left, and the moment the Pagan moved, Blade had his left hand on his other Bowie and the knife flashed out and around and in, straight into Marlin's chest, sinking all the way to the hilt.

A stunned expression etched the Warlord's face in a bewildered mask. He grunted and tore loose from the blade, blood gushing from the wound, and tottered a few feet before sinking onto his knees and wailing in despair.

Blade glanced at the others, and it proved well he did. Remington lay prone on the floor, crimson rivulets seeping from the three holes in his back. AR-15 and Ruger, though, had both recovered sufficiently to spring at him, and both did so simultaneously.

"Die!" Ruger screeched.

The Warrior sprang into the air, drawing his legs up under him as he rose, then flicked his right foot into Ruger's face, his hard sole crushing the Pagan's nostrils. As he started to drop he quickly pulled the leg back, then kicked his left foot into the second Warlord's mouth, crunching teeth and felling the man in his tracks. He shot both legs down, landing erect in the on-guard stance.

Both Ruger and AR-15 were on the floor, the former holding his ruined nose and cursing mightily, the latter lying on his right side and spitting out blood and broken teeth.

Blade kicked AR-15 one last time, rendering the Pagan insensate, then stepped to Ruger, who rose in a mad rush and tried to claw his eyes. A glint of steel, a blurred arm, and Ruger stopped short with a Bowie in his heart. He gasped, sagged, and flopped onto the floor, his chest making a

sucking noise as the knife pulled free.

Four up, four down.

Amateurs, perhaps, but brazenly dangerous nonetheless.

The Warrior stared thoughtfully at the elevator, pondering the significance of the attack. He should have finished off all the Pagans in that alley instead of leaving one alive. The Warlord called Mickey must crave revenge in the worst way if the gang was willing to invade the *Times* building to get him. How had they known where to find him? More to the point, what would it take to deter them from future attempts? If they came after him every time he left the Facility, sooner or later innocent bystanders would be caught in the crossfire.

The security guard!

Blade ran to the elevator, then paused. If there were more Pagans in the lobby, taking the car down was the last thing he wanted to do. He glanced over his shoulder at the stairwell door, a plan forming. Moving swiftly, he leaned into the car and smashed the hilt of his right knife against the control panel, shattering it, then stepped back and punched the button to start the car on its decent.

Move it!

Spinning, the Warrior raced to the stairwell, threw the door wide, and went down the stairs taking five at a bound. He had 11 floors to cover, and he wanted to reach the bottom before the elevator did. Which meant moving faster. Recklessly faster. There were 24 steps between each floor, with a small landing below the twelfth step where the stairs reversed direction. Instead of taking a measly five or six at a leap, he went all out and vaulted from landing to landing, from each floor to the midpoint and from there to the next level. He could cover an entire floor in two prodigious springs. Only someone of his massive size could have accomplished such a feat.

Leap.

Land.

Coil and Leap. And be careful not to trip or else.

Blade lost track of the number of floors he covered. At least five went by, then maybe ten. And moments later he sailed through the air and landed lightly two yards from a door bearing the word LOBBY in large black letters.

There was a small window in the door.

The Warrior ducked low and moved in under the window.

Faint voices came from the other side. Expecting to find the lobby full of Warlords, he inched upward until he glimpsed the occupants. To say he was surprised would be an understatement.

What in the world were *they* doing there?

Captain Havoc, Raphaela, and the rest of the unit were 30 feet away talking to the security guard. The officer suddenly barked an order and the others made for the entrance.

Where were they going?

Didn't they know he was in the building?

Havoc and Ronny Felton exchanged a few sentences, at which point the officer saluted and ran out.

Totally confounded, Blade squatted and shook his head in amazement. First the attack, now this. He'd seen bodies of Warlords dotting the floor in front of the counter, and he could readily imagine how they met their fate. The team— *his* team—must have disposed of them.

But what had brought the Force to the *Times*!

Why would they help him, then run?

The team wasn't supposed to leave the Force Facility without his authorization, which he hadn't given. They could also leave if Havoc gave his consent, and knowing the officer as well as Blade thought he did, there must have been an excellent reason for Havoc to give the okay.

Think, dummy!

Blade absently wiped his Bowies clean on the back of his pants as he

contemplated the mystery. He recalled Raphaela mentioning how all of them were worried about him. He remembered the scratching he'd heard outside his office during his discussion with General Gallagher. He recalled Lobo spying on him from behind the Supply Bunker last evening. And he didn't have to be a mathematical wizard to add it all up and arrive at a logical conclusion.

A smile creased his lips.

The insubordinate little devils!

They were trying to protect him without his becoming aware of their activities.

Blade began to laugh, but checked his mirth. He rose and peeked through the window, and saw the security guard moving over to the elevator. Easing the door a crack, he scrutinized the entrance to ensure none of his people were peeking in, then stepped into the lobby.

None of the Pagans were so much as groaning. The team had done a commendably thorough job.

The Warrior slid his Bowies into their sheaths and walked toward the security guard. He had a decision to make. Should he continue trying to unravel the thread of deception involving the death of Athena Morris, or should he go after Mickey and eliminate that problem permanently? He felt tempted to attend to the Warlord immediately. The Athena enigma could always wait a couple of days.

Or could it?

Blade thought about the entry in the secretary's appointment book, then recollected where Phil Wentworth had said he was heading that day. The connection could hardly be coincidence.

The security guard was standing in front of the elevator, a Winchester in hand.

As was his unconscious custom, the Warrior approached Felton silently. He placed his left hand on the guard's shoulder, neglecting to speak out beforehand, and suddenly the man rotated, striving to bring the rifle to bear. "Whoa, there!" Blade said, grasping the barrel. "It's me."

"You!" Ronny exclaimed in relief.

"In the flesh," Blade reiterated, smiling.

"They didn't get you!"

"Nope, but they tried real hard."

Ronny lowered the Winchester. "Are they all dead?"

"None deader," Blade responded, and glanced at the corpses lying in the lobby. "Are you okay?"

"Me? Fine."

"It appears you put up quite a fight."

A subtle, nervous expression lent the guard an insincere aspect. "Yeah. I wasn't about to let them take you without a struggle."

Blade gestured at the bodies. "You killed all of them by yourself?"

Chuckling loudly, Ronny nodded and skillfully evaded the question. "You don't see anyone else here, do you?"

"Sure don't. You must be quite a fighter."

Ronny's chest expanded an inch or two. "Well, I'm not one to brag, but my friends all call me Deadeye."

"The papers will find that interesting."

"The newspapers?" Ronny repeated, seemingly dazed by a fact he should have considered sooner.

"Yep. I imagine every paper in the state will carry the story. It'll be on all the radio stations and television. Everyone in California will hear about your bravery."

"Everyone?" Ronny said, beaming, his eyes twinkling.

Blade placed his hands on his hips. "You'll be famous."

"I will, won't I?"

"No doubt about it. Do you think you can handle all the publicity? Strangers will point you out on the street. They'll ask for your autograph just like you asked for mine."

Ronny's mouth slackened as the potential magnitude of his notoriety dawned on him. "Wow!"

"That's the plus side," Blade said. "Don't forget about the negative aspects."

"What negative aspects?"

"Well, for starters, you'll probably find yourself in the same boat I am."

"How so?"

"I saved an elderly lady from a half-dozen Pagans last night, and now they're trying to get even. They're out for my blood. They'll probably be out for yours too, once the word gets around."

"They will?" Ronny queried, his voice an octave higher than normal.

The Warrior nodded. "From what I've heard, the Pagans aren't the forgiving type. They always try to take revenge on anyone who stands up to them. And since you just killed six of their gang, they'll *come* after you with everything they've got."

"I never thought of that."

"Don't worry, though. A guy who can take on six Warlords should be able to hold his own."

"Should be?"

Blade patted the man on the back, suppressed a grin at Felton's comical countenance, and walked toward the entrance. "I've got to go, Ronny. There's urgent business I must attend to elsewhere." He stopped and looked back. "Would you do me a favor?"

"Sure. Anything," Ronny said softly, his gaze on the bodies.

"Don't tell the police I was here."

Ronny's head snapped up. "What? Why not?"

"I'd like to keep my visit a secret. Why don't you take credit for the four I took care of on the top floor?" Blade proposed. "What's four more, huh?"

"Yeah. Right," Ronny stated listlessly.

"Thanks. I appreciate it." Blade waved and hastened outdoors, hoping his psychological ploy would work. He ran to the jeep, climbed in, and turned the engine over. In moments he was en route to the Facility, reflecting on his next step. He looked in the rearview mirror and saw a black limousine following him. Hardly a cause for alarm. The Warlords rode bikes, not limos. He relaxed and enjoyed the ride, savoring the precious moments of relative tranquility.

Let's see.

Which pilot was on call tonight?

If memory served, Captain Peter Laslo had the honor. Blade smiled. Of all the pilots, he was closest to Laslo. He could convince Pete to take him without any difficulty.

Engrossed in his thoughts, the Warrior neglected to pay anymore attention to the limo until it did a most remarkable thing—the huge black car drove straight into the back of the jeep.

TEN

"Any sign of him?" Raphaela asked from her position in the front passenger seat.

"Nope," Jaguarundi replied. "I thought I saw him a few seconds ago. He must have fallen behind in all the traffic."

"Or he's doing the speed limit," Lobo remarked. "Which Mikey, here, definitely isn't."

"That's Captain Havoc to you, lame-brain, not Mikey," the officer responded. He sat gripping the steering wheel with both big hands, his

M-16 in his lap, concentrating on the cars ahead as he sped to the northwest doing 20 miles over the posted speed.

"It'll be Captain Dog Meat if you get a ticket from the fuzz and Blade finds out," Lobo retorted.

"We should have started back sooner instead of waiting two blocks from the *Times* to see if Blade emerged," Sparrow Hawk mentioned. "Now he may arrive at the Facility before we do."

"Not the way Mikey is drivin'," Lobo cracked. "He'd beat a Hurricane back."

"I just don't want to get caught," Havoc mentioned. "So far we've been very lucky. If we get back before he does, he'll never know we were gone."

"You hope," Lobo said.

"What's that supposed to mean, partner?" Doc Madsen inquired.

"You should know. Weren't you the one who reminded us it's next to impossible to pull the wool over Blade's eyes? The guy is spooky. He knows things as if by magic."

"I wouldn't go that far."

"Oh, yeah? Then how does he always know when I'm goofin' off, even when he's nowhere around at the time?"

Doc shrugged. "Most likely because you're *always* goofing off."

"Who asked you?" Lobo asked sullenly, glancing at the others. "And whose bright idea was it to bring just one jeep? I feel like one of those dinky fishes in the flat tin cans."

The six of them were packed into the jeep. Between Havoc and Raphaela crouched Sparrow, holding on to the backs of their seats for support. Jag, Doc, and Lobo were jammed together in the back seat, with the Clansman in the center.

"Since I'm the only one who has a California driver's license, we could only take one jeep," Captain Havoc noted.

"Then it's about time the rest of us got licences," Lobo said. "Jag is gassin' me out back here."

"I don't have body odor," Jaguarundi declared acerbically.

"I wasn't talkin' about your B.O.," Lobo declared. "You're fartin' up a storm and my nose is about ready to fall off."

Jag's eyes narrowed. "I don't fart, I'll have you know."

"Give me a break. Everything farts. Even fish."

"Please," Raphaela interjected. "Now's not the time for the two of you to be bickering."

"Then tell him to apologize," Jag said, jerking his thumb at the Clansman.

Raphaela glanced at Lobo. "That wasn't very nice. You should tell Jag you're sorry."

"Don't hold your breath."

"Why are you so nasty all the time?"

"Nasty is my style, lady. I'm a lean, mean, fightin' machine. I don't take crap off of anybody."

Jag, Doc Madsen, and Sparrow all laughed.

"What's so funny?" Lobo demanded.

"Have you looked in a mirror recently?" Jag asked.

"Up yours, kitty-cat."

"Don't call me that."

"What are you going to do? Beat me over the head with a bag of cat litter?"

Before anyone else quite knew what was happening, Jaguarundi clamped his hands on Lobo's throat and began squeezing.

"Stop it!" Raphaela snapped. "You're behaving like children!"

But the hybrid and the Clansman ignored her. They began grappling, tumbling about in the back seat as each sought to pin down the other.

"Watch what you're doing," Doc cautioned after an elbow gouged him in the ribs.

"Calm down, you two!" Captain Havoc said. "And that's an order!"

Still Lobo and Jag fought on, grunting and twisting and thrashing wildly. Inevitably, they slammed into Sparrow Hawk, who in turn fell forward onto the driver.

"Get off me!" Havoc bellowed. "I can't see the damn road!"

The hybrid and the Clansman landed between the front seats, preventing the Flathead from disentangling himself.

"I can't see the road!" Havoc repeated.

"Get off of him!" Raphaele shouted.

"I'm trying! I'm trying!" Sparrow responded.

Doc Madsen suddenly leaned forward. "The road turns! Look out!"

"What turn? What turn?" the officer practically screeched, glimpsing a short stretch of asphalt and assuming it to be the highway. He spun the wheel frantically, then tried to brake.

"No! We're in a parking lot!" Doc yelled.

The jeep suddenly hit something and became airborne, throwing all of them off balance.

"Look out for that tree!" Doc warned.

"The tree! The tree!" Raphaela added.

"What tree?" Captain Havoc thundered.

The newspapers would later report that residents a block and a half

away heard the crash.

For a moment Blade believed the ramming might have been a mistake. The impact had been slight, no more than a nudging of the jeep's bumper. He leaned out his open window and glanced back.

A limousine window was also down, and a thin man abruptly popped into view, a submachine gun at the ready.

The Warrior tramped on the gas pedal and the jeep surged forward. There could be no doubt as to the identity of his assailants. Coming so soon on the heels of the attack at the *Times*, and given the fact the man wielding the submachine gun wore a leather jacket, he realized the Pagans were trying again. Apparently they were going to keep the pressure on, keep sending gunners after him, until they scored. The insight hardened his features, and as the jeep came to an intersection he wrenched on the steering wheel, sending the vehicle into a sharp right turn, the tires squealing.

The limo driver, taken unawares by the abrupt maneuver, almost overshot the intersection. Smoke rose from under the tires as the car came to a sudden, slewing stop, narrowly missing vehicles. The black car roared into reverse, and in moments the limousine was again in breakneck pursuit.

Blade had watched the limo in the rearview mirror. He'd gained almost a block, and now he poured on the speed, weaving around the cars and trucks in his path, his left hand blaring the horn. Should he try to lose them or should he turn and fight? Armed with just the Bowies, he'd be at a great disadvantage unless he picked a suitable spot to make his stand.

The limo began to gain ground, racing at a suicidal rate, causing other cars to swerve and skid.

The Warrior could see the guy with the submachine gun still hanging out the window, apparently waiting for the range to narrow. He spotted a junction ahead and saw a dump truck entering from the left.

A mother and her two young children started to cross on the right.

Blade pressed harder on the horn, relieved when the woman looked up, realized the danger, and hustled her young ones to the sidewalk. Focusing

on the dump truck, he gauged the distance, his speed, the speed of the onrushing limo, and calculated a hazardous gambit that might lose the Warlords.

The truck's driver glanced out the side window, spotted the vehicles bearing down on him, and slammed on the brakes.

Which suited Blade's plan perfectly. He sped around the cab of the truck, furiously spinning the wheel, and shot in behind it. Putting the gas pedal to the floor, he fairly flew down the street, temporarily screened from the limousine. He glued his eyes to the mirror, counting on the limo going through the intersection too swiftly for the occupants to notice his ruse.

No such luck.

The black car came thundering around the dump truck and stayed on the jeep's trail.

Damn.

The Warrior searched both sides of the street, seeking somewhere he could pull over. There were pedestrians clogging both sidewalks; he seemed to be in a retail district. To his left he spied a police cruiser, parked at the curb. Two officers looked in his direction, then scrambled for their unit. He grinned, believing they would be able to stop the limo, and went past them.

Not two seconds later the black car drew abreast of the cruiser, which was trying to pull out into the traffic. The Pagan leaning out the window cut loose, pouring two dozen rounds into the police car, shattering the side windows and the windshield.

The pair of officers jerked and thrashed as they were struck repeatedly, then slumped over the dash when the firing ceased.

An overpowering rage welled within the Warrior. He growled in frustration, appalled by the horrible loss of the two brave officers, and said aloud, to himself, "That does it!"

The limo came on strong.

Blade deliberately slowed, letting them draw ever closer. The gunner opened up, and several rounds smacked into the jeep's tail but failed to penetrate. He saw an alley ahead and tensed.

If the Pagans wanted war, he'd show them war.

The people lining the sidewalks, who had heard the gunfire, were scattering for cover, running into the nearest buildings.

In moments the Warrior was almost upon the alley. He buried the brake pedal and frantically turned the steering wheel. His front fender scraped the right-hand wall as the jeep barely executed the almost 90-degree change of direction, then slid to a stop. Scowling, he slapped the gearshift into reverse, looked behind him, counted off one second, and floored the gas.

The timing was impeccable.

With its rear tires locked, the limousine lurched to a halt at the mouth of the alley. The gunner had a clear shot, and he whipped his weapon up, taking it for granted the jeep would be halfway down the alley, and not awakening to his grievous error until it was too late for him to move. His eyes widened when he saw the jeep hurtling at him, instead of the other way, and he opened his mouth to shout a warning that was never heard.

Its motor revving, the jeep barreled out of the alley and into the side of the limo, its rear end smashing into the gunner and crushing him between the two vehicles. Blade heard the crunching of bones and a sickening squish. He shifted into drive and drove forward about 20 feet, then repeated the maneuver.

The limo driver reacted quickly, speeding away before the black car could be struck again. Dangling from the open window was the bloody, pulpy mass that had been the submachine gunner.

Blade bounced over the curb into the street, braked once more, and turned the tables by taking off after the Warlords. He kept right on their tail, forcing them to go faster or be rammed.

Driving like a man possessed, the limo driver whipped the car from side to side, battering other vehicles aside, crossing the center line time and again and causing scores of accidents.

The Warrior buried the accelerator, scarcely noticing the speedometer as it climbed past 60, 70, and 80. He wished other police cruisers would show up, but seven blocks were covered and none appeared.

A city park appeared on the right.

To Blade's consternation, the limo swerved, unexpectedly angled off the roadway and onto the grass. People casually strolling about or lounging idly had to leap for their lives or be run over. A man walking a poodle was too slow; the left fender clipped him and he sailed over ten feet and crashed onto a bench.

No more!

The Warrior stayed directly behind the limousine, sounding the horn constantly, anxious for an opportunity to bring the Pagans to bay. Forty yards further on he got it.

A knoll materialized in the night, a gazebo on its peak. To the right of the knoll reared a stand of trees. To the left a lake posed an impassable obstruction.

Blade had them! The limo couldn't possibly negotiate the knoll as readily as the jeep, and skirting the small hill was impossible unless the black car could fly or make like a boat.

He grinned grimly and saw their brake lights flash as the limo driver slowed a bit. He spun the wheel and the jeep darted to the right and came alongside the bigger vehicle.

One of the windows on the passenger side began to roll down.

Undeterred, the Warrior leaned hard on the steering wheel and braced for the impact. Metal smashed against metal, creating brilliant sparks that shot into the darkness, and the limo edged a few yards to the left.

Both vehicles were hurtling up the knoll.

A shadowy form became framed in the rolled-down window, a rifle in its hands.

Blade gripped the wheel with all his strength and plowed into the limo

again. He wanted the limo driver to be paying attention to him and nothing else when they reached the top, so he rammed them once more for good measure.

Evidently the Warlords were more intent on the giant than the ground in front of their car, because by the time they slowed, applying the brakes in desperation and trying to slant further to the left, they were too close to the crest to avoid the gazebo. The limousine plowed into the wooden structure with a tremendous crash, shattering the side and snapping the support poles into kindling. Out of the other side it went, shearing off more poles, and the moment the rear bumper bounced clear of the pavilion the roof collapsed.

Blade managed to swing to the right, the jeep's tires sliding on the grass, and closed in again.

Below the knoll stretched a field dotted with clusters of trees.

The limo driver drove down the slope doing over 60 miles an hour and hit the field going like a bat out of hell.

Why were the Pagans running instead of fighting? Blade wondered. They had the larger vehicle and were better armed. Perhaps, since they had no way of knowing if he possessed a weapon, they were simply being prudent. Or maybe they were concerned about the police showing up. They must have planned on killing him quickly, not on having the hit devolve into a running firefight.

Now that the limo was on flat ground, the driver pushed the car to its limits, going 90, then higher.

Blade frowned as he started to fall behind. The jeep couldn't match the limo's speed on a long straightaway, and unless he stopped them soon they would escape.

The black car headed toward the right side of the field.

What were they up to now? Blade matched their angle and leaned over the steering wheel, tense, anxious to catch them. They seemed to have a definite destination in mind.

As it turned out, they had more than that.

Twenty yards separated the two vehicles when the limo abruptly turned broadside on the proverbial dime and slid to a halt, the passenger side facing the oncoming jeep.

Blade braked, perceiving their intent when a rifle protruded from the open window, the barrel pointed at the jeep's windshield.

ELEVEN

The Warrior threw himself to the right, dropping below the edge of the dash, and heard four booming retorts almost at the selfsame instant the glass shattered and shards cascaded onto his body. He felt the jeep slowing and risked a peek.

Immediately the rifleman fired again.

Blade instinctively ducked when a slug tore into the top of the dash. He spun the steering wheel furiously, endeavoring to swing past the limo's front end, but a jarring impact occurred. His body smacked into the underside of the dashboard. Sliding up a few inches, he shifted his right foot from the brake to the gas pedal, shifted into reverse, and beat a strategic retreat. After counting to three he raised himself high enough to see the limo in motion again, swinging toward him.

The rifleman hung out the window.

This was getting him nowhere, Blade realized, and opted for a death-defying gamble. He slipped the transmission into drive and raced at the limo, at the black car's hood.

More shots rang out. One of the rounds passed through the jeep and out the rear window, the fracture lines resembling the silken strands of a spider's web.

Blade opened his door, his eyes just above the dash, and braced his legs on the floor. The limo driver was trying to get out of the way, an impossible feat given the rapidly narrowing distance.

Ten feet.

Eight.

Five.

Now!

The Warrior uncoiled and dove from the jeep. He landed on his right shoulder and rolled, the smashup of the two vehicles signifying his strategy had succeeded. He came off the ground running full-out, drawing the Bowies, and sprinted to the black car.

Thanks to the collision, the limo had stalled. The driver was urgently striving to turn the engine over.

Blade could see the two men in the front seat. The Pagan on the passenger side looked vaguely familiar.

The rear door started to open.

Everything depended on speed. The Warrior leaped onto the hood, then onto the roof, dropping to his knees and sliding to within inches of the opening door. When the Warlord armed with the rifles began to step out, he was ready, the Bowies poised.

With one foot already on the ground and his body partly out, the Pagan glanced up in dismay, caught napping by the giant's unorthodox move. His gaping mouth revealed two front teeth were missing.

Blade speared both Bowies down and in, slicing the knives into the Warlord's thick neck, severing veins and arteries and causing a crimson geyser to spray in all directions.

Another door, the rear one on the driver's side, was shoved outward.

Wrenching the blades free, Blade spun just as a huge Pagan, a man almost the size of the Warrior, surged into the open, a revolver clutched in his left hand.

"Get him, Bruno!" someone inside the vehicle screamed.

Blade sprang, his outstretched arms wrapping around the huge Pagan's midriff, bearing both of them to the grass. He let go and twisted to his feet.

The Warlord named Bruno was on his knees and sweeping the revolver

up.

With a practiced flick of his right wrist, Blade threw his Bowie underhand, the knife glittering across the three feet between the Warrior and his foe and spearing into the Pagan's wrist.

Bruno jerked his right arm aside, roaring in rage at the excruciating pain. The revolver fell from his fingers.

"Get him, damn it!"

Blade had to dispose of the large Warlord swiftly. There were two other gang members left, and at any second one of them could cut loose with a gun. He felt exposed and vulnerable. A long stride brought him next to the big Warlord, and he lanced his left Bowie at the man's throat.

Bruno blocked the blow, using his uninjured forearm to batter the knife aside, and surged erect, the other Bowie still imbedded in his right wrist.

The Warrior crouched, ready to spring.

Unexpectedly, Bruno smiled. "Think you're tough, huh?" He took hold of the Bowie's hilt and proceeded to slowly draw the knife from his flesh, his challenging gaze steady, his visage resolute. The blade eased out, blood coursing from the wound. He gave a short, harsh laugh and wagged the weapon. "You don't know the meaning of the word. I'm going to take this pigsticker of yours and shove it up your ass."

Blade waited, every muscle taut.

"Ain't that right, Ice?" Bruno asked, glancing at the limo.

Although it went against his better judgment, Blade looked toward the black car and discovered a skinny Pagan armed with a switchblade.

"That's right, Bruno," Ice said mockingly. "Let's waste this son of a bitch before the cops show up."

"You each get a ten-thousand-dollar bonus if you rack him," declared a voice the Warrior had heard before.

Blade stared at the crumpled hood of the limo and saw Mickey the Pagan standing on the opposite side.

"Remember me, bastard?" Mickey snapped, waving his bandaged right hand.

"Should I know you?" the Warrior responded intentionally.

Mickey leaned his good hand on the black car and glowered. "Damn straight you should know me! You did a number on me last night and now I'm about to return the favor."

"Be my guest," Blade said.

"Take you on with a busted hand? Not very likely, sucker," Mickey stated, and nodded at his two companions. "They'll do the job for me."

"They'll try."

"Take him!" Mickey bellowed. ".Take him *now!*"

Bruno and Ice converged on the Warrior from different directions. Both Warlords grinned in anticipation and hefted their weapons.

The Warrior retreated, taking careful step after careful step, his gray eyes darting from Pagan to Pagan. In a certain respect he should be grateful. Instead of doing the smart thing, instead of simply gunning him down, the Pagans wanted his death to have a personal touch. Now it was up to him to turn their mistake into victory.

"Come on!" Mickey stated impatiently. "Do him! The cops will be here any minute."

"Ready to die?" Ice asked sarcastically.

"Are you?" Blade rejoined, and took the offensive, skipping in close to Bruno and slicing at the big Warlord's stomach. Bruno, predictably, backpedaled.

Ice moved forward and tried to bury his switchblade in the Warrior's back.

Blade was ready. He twisted and swung around, his left arm fully extended, his Bowie cleaving the air and then slicing into Ice above the right elbow, the razor edge penetrating deep, cutting muscles and tendons as if they were string.

Screeching in terror, Ice stumbled rearward, his arm nearly sliced in half, blood spurting over his clothes and splattering onto the grass.

The Warrior reached the skinny Pagan in a single bound and sank his knife into the gang member's neck.

"Ice!" Bruno howled, and set upon the giant with the savage intensity of a man berserk.

Blade narrowly missed being impaled by his own Bowie. He spun and sidestepped, Bruno's knife scraping his leather vest, and stabbed at the Pagan's chest. Bruno parried, the blades clanging as they connected, then unleashed a brutal onslaught, his left arm slashing wildly, a feral sneer contorting his countenance. All of Blade's expertise was brought into play. He found the Warlord to be a surprisingly worthy antagonist. Slash after slash was countered or evaded.

Bruno's fury intensified the longer they fought. He hacked and thrust and feinted, his arms always in motion, a dynamo of revenge.

The Warrior was hard-pressed to stay alive. He circled to the right, then the left, seeking an opening he could exploit. But the Warlord thwarted every move. Eager to end the fray, knowing Mickey was nearby and might shoot him in the back, Blade opted to rely on his wits instead of his brawn. He pretended to tire, moving a shade slower than previously but still fast enough to block the Pagan's swipes. For half a minute he battled on.

Sensing impending victory, Bruno tried even harder, his arm pumping back and forth.

Blade let the knife come within an inch of his torso, stepping backwards, then pretend to trip over his own feet. He went down onto his posterior.

"Got you!" Bruno cried, and lunged.

The Warrior bent to the right, his adversary's Bowie stirring the air near his neck, and drove his arm outward, sinking his knife into the Pagan's right calf, the edge rasping against bone.

Bruno stiffened and backed off, limping. "Damn you!" he shouted.

Blade paid no attention. He sank onto his right side and suddenly started rolling, going for the Warlord's legs, and he felt his hips slam into Bruno's shins.

The Pagan toppled.

Rising to a crouch, Blade took a mere heartbeat to note his enemy's position.

Bruno lay on his left side, a spreading red stain on his calf, down but not out. He lanced his knife at the giant yet again.

Blade dodged the stab and retaliated with one of his own, sinking his Bowie into the Warlord's thigh.

In prevailing torment, Bruno arched his back.

The Warrior had the opportunity he'd been waiting for. The Bowie slid out of the Pagan's leg and up into the jugular. He grabbed Bruno's left wrist with his other hand and held on.

As if high voltage was shooting through his body, the Warlord convulsed violently, bounding up and down, his right hand feebly attempting to remove the Bowie from his neck even as he tried to tear his left arm loose. For over a minute he shook and trembled, his eyes rolling in their sockets, growing weaker and weaker until he gasped, his eyelids fluttering, and sagged.

Blade yanked his knife from the man's neck, tore his other Bowie from the Pagan's grasp, and shoved to his feet, turning toward the limousine, expecting to find Mickey about to attack.

The Warlord was gone.

A ripple of movement two dozen yards distant disclosed the fleeing figure of the Warlord's leader.

Blast!

Blade took off, running around the jeep and chasing after the S.O.B. who had caused him so much aggravation. He wasn't about to let Mickey escape, not when there was a one-hundred-percent certainty that the

Warlord would be back, that Mickey would never let the matter drop. If he didn't finish it *now*, he'd always be looking over his shoulder when out in public, always wondering when the next attempt would be made, never safe, never able to relax.

No way.

The Warrior's long legs ate up the distance. He gradually gained, but not quickly enough to suit him. After all he'd been through, after the battle in the *Times* building, the highspeed pursuit, and now the fight in the park, the strain was beginning to make itself felt. If he didn't overtake Mickey soon, the weasel might get away.

As if to accent the point, Mickey ran a bit faster.

Blade shut out all thoughts from his mind. He settled into the rhythm of his pumping arms and his pounding legs. In all the universe there was no reality but his pumping arms and pounding legs. He breathed easily, running a marathon of death with the Warlord as the finish line.

Mickey looked back once and cursed.

You're mine, Blade thought, and picked up the pace. He noticed the Pagan was bearing to the right of the knoll, heading in the direction of the pond. Why? Was the Warlord merely panicking, or did Mickey know something Blade didn't?

Off in the distance a siren wailed.

For over a minute the race continued. Fatigue crept into Blade's limbs. His thighs ached terribly. He couldn't see Mickey sustaining such speed for very long. The outcome boiled down to which one of them possessed the greater stamina.

Another minute elapsed.

The north end of the lake came into view, the tranquil surface resembling an enormous dark mirror that reflected the lights from the lampposts ringing the shore and the quarter moon far overhead.

The Pagan glanced over his left shoulder and smiled.

Blade saw the flash of teeth and frowned. Why was Mickey so confident? The Warlord had yet to show any sign of fatigue, which mystified Blade no end. Mickey wasn't exceptionally muscular. There was absolutely nothing about him to indicate the man possessed extraordinary endurance, no hint whatsoever he could jog forever, just like a longdistance runner.

No.

Not *like* a long-distant runner.

The psychopath *was* a long-distance runner!

The logical insight firmed Blade's resolve. If he was right, if Mickey exercised daily by jogging, it put their little race in a whole new perspective. Blade hadn't jogged regularly in years, ever since his duties as head Warrior and with the Force had started demanding so much of his time. The odds of Mickey getting away had risen dramatically.

Too bad Jaguarundi wasn't along.

The Warrior forced his legs to fly faster. He gazed at the lampposts bordering the lake, puzzled by the incongruity. Why would the city go to so much trouble and expense to illuminate the shoreline?

In 20 seconds he learned the answer.

Mickey reached the north shore and took off to the right, staying close to the water, still running strong.

Mocking laughter wafted to the Warrior's ears, and he didn't understand why until he pounded to within 15 feet of the water and spied the ribbon of asphalt fringing the pond.

A jogging track!

Blade turned to follow the Pagan, furious that his adversary was on the verge of escaping.

More laughter sounded on the wind, the brittle cackle of a demented soul who sensed victory.

TWELVE

General Miles Gallagher was not in a good mood. He paced back and forth in his spacious office located in the east wing of the governor's mansion in Los Angeles. The stately mansion had been built 12 years after World War Three, shortly after the state capital had been relocated from Sacramento. Fewer functional vehicles and the rationing of fuel had made traveling all the way to Sacramento impractical for the majority of the surviving populace. And the lawmakers had not liked being relatively isolated from the major urban centers on the coast, where most of the survivors dwelt. Consequently, the governor and the lawmakers had opted to move the seat of government.

The black phone on the general's desk buzzed.

Gallagher quickly scooped up the receiver and spoke brusquely. "Speak to me."

"Miles, this is Phil."

"About damn time. I expected to hear from you over an hour ago."

"And I resent your tone of voice," the publisher said. "I'm not one of your subordinates who you can treat like dirt because you hold rank."

A frown twisted the general's rough visage. "Okay. Sorry. But I'm a bit on edge right now."

"So am I."

"Give me the news."

Silence lasted for several seconds. Finally a sigh revealed the publisher was still on the line. "I haven't made contact."

"What?" Gallagher responded, checking his anger with an effort. "Why the hell not?"

"A boating trip, would you believe?"

"At a time like this?"

"How was she to know? Remember, she has no idea what Blade has

been up to."

"That bastard," Gallagher said. "Why couldn't he leave well enough alone?"

"We still don't have any proof he knows."

"No proof? What the hell do you call his sudden interest in the columnist writing the Force features? It's been a year, for crying out loud. Why this interest now?"

"Who knows? Perhaps he was motivated by curiosity."

"Curiosity my ass. Your own secretary told you about the tape recorder."

"Yes. He wanted you to have a verbatim record of the meeting. That hardly constitutes proof."

"Bull. He was playing with us, jerking us around. You don't know him like I do," Gallagher stated.

"So you keep telling me. I'll be frank, though. During my meeting with him, he never displayed the behavior you credit him with. He was always courteous, always civil."

"Of course he'd be on his best behavior around you. He didn't want you to write any unflattering stories about him or the Force."

"I still can't believe he's as bad as you paint him," Wentworth commented.

Gallagher gripped the edge of his desk until his knuckles whitened. "Let's get back on track. We must warn her. She has to leave the city, head up into the mountains somewhere.

Surely she knows someone with a cabin."

"Have you considered that she might not want to go anywhere? She might want to face Blade and explain."

"Yeah. Brilliant idea. What do you two care if my career goes down the tubes?" the general snapped sarcastically.

"You're blowing this all out of proportion. Look, we tried to pull the wool over the Warrior's eyes and it didn't work. So now we simply tell him the truth and let bygones be bygones."

"And what happens when he informs the governor? Damn it, Phil, you know I didn't even tell Melnick. He'll skewer me."

"Why are you always ready to expect the worst from others? Governor Melnick will understand. You had an excellent reason, after all."

General Gallagher bowed his head, and his next words were hard and low. "I don't want Melnick to find out. And I certainly don't want that oversized egotist to learn the truth." His tone mellowed a bit. "Please, Phil. We go back a long way. I'm counting on you."

"I'll do the best I can, Miles. You know mat."

"Is there any chance of contacting her by radio?"

"None, I'm afraid. They didn't take one. Wanted to be alone, if you get my drift."

"Idiots," Gallagher fumed. "It would serve them right if a mutated shark got them."

"You can be heartless sometimes. Do you know that?"

The general said nothing for half a minute.

"Are you still there?" Wentworth asked.

"You know I am."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Rent a plane and try to find her."

Wentworth chuckled, then abruptly sobered when he realized the officer was serious. "Do you really want me to rent a plane?"

"Why not? I doubt she'd stray very far out of the bay without a radio. You might be able to locate her from the air and drop a message."

"This is all becoming too complicated for my tastes."

"I'd do it myself if I could get away. But Melnick expects me to attend an important staff meeting in the morning."

"Why don't I just leave a note on her door?" Wentworth suggested. "That way, when she comes back she'll give me a call."

"And what if Blade gets there first?" Gallagher queried.

"Do you know something I don't? Is he planning to come here?"

"I wouldn't put it past him."

Neither man spoke for a span.

"We brought this on ourselves, I suppose," Wentworth commented. "But I'd do it again for her. It was the least we could do in light of all she went through."

"I hope she appreciates all the aggravation this has caused us," Gallagher declared.

"Well, I'd better be going. I'll stick around until I make contact."

"What about the plane idea?"

"I guess it can't hurt. I'll hire a pilot first thing in the morning."

"And I'll see what I can do at this end," Gallagher said. "My snitch out at the Facility hasn't reported in, so it's safe to assume the Warrior is behaving himself for the time being. He's probably relaxing or getting ready for bed. We're safe until tomorrow."

"Who is this snitch?"

"Sorry, Phil. I can't say."

"Suit yourself. I'll be in touch. Bye."

General Gallagher hung up the phone and sat down on the top of the desk. Damn that simpleton! He knew he couldn't rely on Wentworth to do the job correctly, and there was nothing he could do personally until after

the staff meeting. He was stuck, and he hated it, hated being unable to take decisive action against the giant. Since the inception of the Force he'd masked his true feelings, but the subterfuge became harder to carry on every day. He'd hoped to have the goods on the Warrior by now, and he'd tried so hard to discredit the Force.

Why did all his schemes fail?

What kept going wrong?

Persuading the Warrior to take the new team on a mission prematurely had been a masterly stroke. Since they'd had little time to train as a unit, he'd felt certain their first mission would be their last. No one had ever defeated El Diablo. So who could have predicted a bunch of novices—with the exception of Captain Havoc, of course—would beat the terror of Baja?

Then he'd devised another strategy. He'd sent the Force into L.A. on a three-day pass, positive they would overstep the bounds of propriety and commit an act that would bring public censure. How was he to know they'd wind up taking on the Brothers and the Barons? How was he to know they'd be praised as heroes?

And now this.

Now the Warrior suspected the truth about Athena.

Some days it didn't pay to get out of the sack.

Gallagher straightened and walked around the desk to his chair. He slumped into the seat, then twisted and switched on the radio resting on a metal stand behind him. A little music was just what the doctor ordered.

Instead, the hourly newscast, already in progress, emanated from the speaker.

"... seven-car pileup on the Long Beach Freeway. Four fatalities have been reported. Traffic is now backed up for two miles and motorists are being urged to take alternative routes."

Who cares? Gallagher thought, and started to turn the damn thing off.

"And now this late-breaking story concerning multiple homicides at

the *L.A. Times* ..."

Gallagher stiffened and fixed his gaze on the radio.

"Details are still sketchy. Our reporter at the scene informs us that the police are being tight-lipped about the facts, but KGOW has learned there were twelve bodies found in the *Times* building and all of them belonged to an L.A. gang. Police have cordoned off the crime scene and are questioning a security guard at this very moment. In other news, the Mayor has announced a new program designed to keep our fair city clean, a program we can all take pride in. It's called the Adopt-a-Street—"

The general turned the volume all the way down and sat in a bewildered daze. Twelve deaths at the *Times*! What the hell was going on? It made no sense.

Unless.

Unless the gang members were all Pagan Warlords. In that case a possible scenario occurred to him. He knew enough about their reputation to account for their presence at the *Times*.

What if Blade had gone there?

What if the Pagans were out for the Warrior's blood?

What if they trailed him there, or simply spotted him and decided to bust his head in revenge for last night?

What if. What if. What if.

Gallagher rubbed his right palm across his forehead and wearily closed his eyes. He was letting his imagination get the better of him. The odds of Blade being involved were minimal, at best. And the gang could be any one of the dozen or so roaming the streets of Los Angeles. His overwrought nerves were fabricating wild possibilities out of thin air. Peeved at himself, he increased the volume.

"... update on the *Times* story. Police have now confirmed the twelve dead men all belonged to the Pagan Warlords. The security guard, whose name is being withheld for the time being, reportedly told authorities he was in the bathroom when he heard shots and rushed out to find dead

Warlords in the lobby. So far police have no suspects. Now to those lotto numbers you've been waiting for—"

His pulse quickening, Gallagher turned the radio completely off and sat back in his chair, his mind whirling.

Could it be? Could his farfetched scenario actually have happened? More to the point, could he afford to disregard the probability?

No.

And if Blade had been at the *Times*, there was only one explanation. The Warrior had gone there to try to uncover more information.

A disturbing thought caused the general to rise out of his chair and lean on the desk, in distress.

Could Blade have found a clue?

Surely Wentworth wouldn't be dumb enough to leave clues lying around, but Gallagher couldn't rely on his friend's discretion. Wentworth was a civilian, a wealthy publisher, not a person accustomed to the intrigues Gallagher dealt with regularly. He had to assume the Warrior had uncovered a clue and acted accordingly.

Where was that address book?

Gallagher opened the top drawer and rummaged through the papers. At last he found the small black book he wanted, and he quickly turned to the E's and found the number for the Special Forces Training Center. In seconds he had the number dialed and waited for the base operator to answer, then said, "Hello. This is General Miles Gallagher. I'd like to speak with Colonel Escobar."

"One moment, sir. I'll ring him."

The general listened impatiently to the muted buzzing at the other end.

"Colonel Escobar speaking."

"Tim, this is Miles Gallagher."

"General!" the junior officer declared happily. "It's been ages. How are

you?"

"Not so good," Gallagher said. "That's why I'm calling. I have a problem and I need your help."

"After all you've done for me, any problem of yours is a problem of mine. How can I help?"

"As I recall, you have several instructors there who are outstanding at hand-to-hand combat."

"All my instructors are tops," Escobar boasted. "But there are three who are the best I've seen in fourteen years of running the Training Center."

"How good are they?"

"I told you. They're the best. Captain Swenson is one. He holds a black belt in karate and a brown in judo. The man is unbelievable. No one can lay a hand on him."

"What about the others?"

"Sergeant Mongeon is a black belt in aikido. He studied for four years under Waseda himself. And Sergeant Shibata is the undisputed jujitsu champ. He's won the state title four years in a row."

Gallagher pondered for a moment. "Can you rely on them?"

"Completely."

"Will they do anything you ask?"

"Without question."

"Excellent. I knew I could *count on* you," Gallagher said, complimenting the colonel. "Now here's what I want done..."

THIRTEEN

The desperate race had continued for over about two minutes. Mickey gained an additional 20-foot lead and ran onward tirelessly.

Blade was becoming winded. A persistent ache in his left side bothered him tremendously. They were approaching the southwest border of the lake. Beyond lay a field, then a crowded avenue. If the Warlord reached the thoroughfare and blended in with the pedestrians, Blade would never catch him.

The prospect of defeat galled the Warrior.

"Give it up, butt-head!" Mickey shouted back, and tittered.

Blade kept going mechanically, his arms and legs moving even though his mind had already conceded the outcome. So long as the Pagan maintained the current pace, the end result was a certainty. And Mickey wasn't about to slow down or stop for anything.

Or would he?

An idea born of futility developed in Blade's mind. He glanced to the right at the night-enshrouded landscape. After running under the lampposts for so long, his eyes accustomed to the illumination, the fields surrounding the lake were an inky void of indeterminate details. It was as if he gazed at an invisible black wall.

The same must be true for Mickey.

Blade looked at the fleeing Warlord again, smiled, and darted into the darkness. He ran for 15 feet, then cut to the south, going at full speed despite the risk of tripping over an obstruction. His eyes he glued to the Warlord.

Five seconds went by before Mickey glanced around. His forehead furrowed in consternation and he slowed a bit, studying the empty jogging track.

Blade gained five yards, easy.

Mickey slowed even more. He stared toward the north end of the lake, then probed the gloomy veil to his right.

The Warrior ducked low as he ran, bending in half at the waist, seeking to minimize his silhouette against the backdrop of the city lights. He gained five more yards.

Showing increasing bewilderment, Mickey cut his speed in half. His head swung nervously from side to side, and his countenance displayed incipient fear.

A tight-lipped grin of satisfaction creased Blade's mouth. He swung a dozen more yards away from the water as he drew abreast of the Warlord, hoping he was far enough from the lake so his footsteps wouldn't be heard.

Clearly mystified by the Warrior's disappearance, Mickey was moving at a fast walk, his head constantly swiveling.

Moments later Blade passed the Pagan. He went another 20 feet, then slanted back toward the jogging track. He slowed, his soles padding the ground, the Bowies in his hands.

"It won't work, jerk!" Mickey cried, and sped off, making for the southern end of the lake and the field.

We'll see about that, Blade thought, and poured all of his flagging energy into his legs, disregarding the pain, resolved to cut the Pagan off. He watched Mickey draw closer and closer as he drew nearer and nearer to the lake. At the last instant, in the second before he burst from the night, the Pagan's head snapped in his direction. But it was too late.

"No!" Mickey wailed, extending his arms protectively.

The Warrior sprang when still six feet from the track. His left shoulder slammed into the Warlord's chest, his arms looped about Mickey's upper body, and his momentum carried both of them from the track into the water.

The Pagan went crazy, kicking and beating his hands on the giant's head, the force of his blows weakened by the density of the cool liquid, his broken hand practically useless.

Blade's knees hit bottom. Hard knuckles rammed into his left ear, stinging the lobe. In the murky lake he could barely distinguish the flailing form of his enemy. He released his hold, estimated where the Pagan's stomach would be, and planted the hilt of his right Bowie in the man's abdomen.

The rain of blows ceased.

Shoving off from the bottom, Blade straightened and broke the surface. The water came as high as his chest. To his left a sputtering head emerged. Sliding the left Bowie into its sheath, he clamped his hand on Mickey's shirt and proceeded to haul him onto the shore.

"Damn you!" the Pagan barked. "You're dead meat!"

The Warrior stepped to the jogging track and unceremoniously dumped his foe onto the asphalt.

"Did you hear me?" Mickey snapped, lying on his left side and glaring up at the giant. "You're dead meat, bastard!"

"You think so?" Blade responded softly, inhaling deeply, regaining his strength.

"I know so. You may have stopped us this time, but we'll never give up. We'll keep coming until we nail you."

"We?"

"Yeah, jackass. Me and the rest of the Warlords."

"You?"

Mickey rose to his knees. The bandages on his right hand hung limp and dripping water. "What is this, some kind of game? You know damn well I'll get you. As soon as I'm released, it's round three, sucker."

"Released?"

Infuriated, Mickey jabbed his left hand at the Warrior. "Quit with the friggin' echo! You know what I'm talkin' about. As soon as my mouthpiece gets me out of the slammer, I'll become your worst nightmare."

"Slammer?"

"What the—" Mickey began, then paused as a disturbing thought struck him.

Blade hefted his right Bowie.

"Now you just hold on a minute," Mickey said, eyeing the knife

fearfully. "You can't be thinkin' what I think you're thinkin'."

"Why not?"

"Because, man. You have to turn me over to the cops."

"Who says?"

The significance of the Warrior's remarks brought a shudder to the Pagan. He licked his lips and glanced at the distant avenue, then at the giant. "It's the law, dude. A citizen can't go around boppin' people. You have to turn me in."

"Do I?"

"I know my rights!" Mickey screamed.

"Tell me," Blade said, his tone deceptively pleasant. "What are your rights?"

"Don't you know nothin', man? I have the right to an attorney. I have the right to keep my mouth shut if I want. I have the right to a phone call," Mickey stated knowingly, based on his familiarity with the California judicial system. "And I also have the right to be duly arrested by an officer of the law, not some dork from the Funny Farm."

"Wrong."

Mickey cocked his head to one side. "What?"

"Those aren't your rights. They're legal privileges accorded you by the society in which you live."

"What are you? A lawyer?"

"I'm a Warrior."

"So what the hell do you know from rights, jerk?"

"The Elders at the place I'm from, the Home, teach us there are three inalienable rights every man and woman has, three rights I firmly believe in."

"Oh yeah? And what might they be?"

"We have the right to commune with the Spirit as we see fit. We have the right to be able to love others to the fullness of our capacity. And we—"

The Pagan interrupted, laughing scornfully. "Are you some kind of preacher?"

"And we have the right to life as long as we don't unjustly deprive others of theirs," Blade finished.

"Those are some weird rights you practice as this Home of yours," Mickey mentioned, snickering. "And none of that garbage applies here in California."

"Wrong again."

"Like hell."

"Follow me on this. The leaders of the Federation, including Governor Melnick, gave me the authority to deal with each and every threat to the safety of any Federation member as I see fit. My jurisdiction encompasses all seven factions, and my discretion is the only law I need live by. In other words, I can do whatever I want if I feel it's necessary to preserve the Federation," Blade detailed.

"What does all of this have to do with me?"

"Everything."

Mickey slowly stood. "Look, man. I'm tired. And I'm sick of listening to you flap your gums. Just take me in and be done with it."

"You still don't understand, do you?"

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

"I'm not taking you in."

"You have to," Mickey insisted.

Blade didn't bother to respond. He stood still, waiting.

"You can't off me just like that!" Mickey declared, and snapped the fingers of his left hand. He let the hand drop to his side, then casually eased it back until he touched the top of his rear pocket.

"As I've tried to explain to you, the Federation leaders have invested me with the authority to terminate anyone who jeopardizes the security of any faction."

"And I do, huh?" Mickey inquired while slipping his fingers into the pocket.

"Definitely. You're the head of the Pagan Warlords, which—"

"I'm the head of the L.A. Chapter, stupid. Each chapter has its own leader and pretty much does as it pleases."

"In any event, you're part of an organization responsible for countless deaths, for untold suffering. Next to the Brothers and the Barons, who have already been eliminated, the Pagans are the worst gang in the state."

Mickey smiled. "We are bad, aren't we?"

"The baddest. How many lives have been ruined because of the drugs your gang sells? How many innocent lives have been lost to your greed and thirst for brutality."

"Yep. You really should think about becoming a preacher," Mickey said, baiting the gaint. He started to inch his hand out of his pocket.

"My calling is to be a Warrior."

"Your calling is to die," Mickey stated, and whipped his hand around and in, spearing the switchblade he held at the giant's groin, smirking in anticipation of the rep he would earn for taking the Warrior out single-handedly.

Only the blow never landed.

Blade caught the Pagan's wrist in his left hand, the tip of the blade within inches of his body, and drove his Bowie into the base of the man's throat.

Terror widened Mickey's eyes. He tried to pull free, but the iron vise on

his wrist held him in place. A whine issued from his trembling lips, then a trickle of blood.

"You should have left well enough alone," Blade said.

Mickey gasped, more blood flowing from the corners of his mouth, and raised his bandaged hand to his neck.

"I really should thank you," the Warrior commented. "Now that I know how extensive the gang problem is in L.A., I intend to do something about it. Once my team has been properly trained, we'll practice for official missions by doing what we can to stem the spread of the gangs." He pulled the knife out.

His head bobbing, Mickey sagged, feeling the grip on his wrist slacken. He fell to his knees, his movements sluggish, a crimson stream gushing down the front of his shirt.

"I know you won't believe me, and I know it doesn't matter to you, but I'm truly sorry for having taken your life. I don't enjoy killing, Mickey. I simply do what must be done."

The Pagan tilted his head and focused on the giant. He sputtered, forcing himself to say the last words he would ever utter, the words coming out distorted by the blood clogging his throat. "Screw you!" he snarled, and pitched onto his face.

Blade regarded the corpse for a moment, then wiped the Bowie clean on Mickey's pants. He eased the big knife into its sheath and turned. After he returned to the Force compound, he'd place a call to the L.A. police and inform them of the body's location. His first priority, though, was to get to San Francisco as quickly as possible. If he called the police now, they'd undoubtedly detain him for hours while they conducted their investigation, asking dozens of questions. He couldn't afford to delay, not with Phil Wentworth already in the city by the bay.

The Warrior jogged northward, sticking to the jogging track, running easily, avoiding taxing himself. He'd try the jeep, which might still be operational, and only call a cab as a last resort. The less evidence he left at the scene, the better.

Several sirens were shrieking to the south.

To the east there were flashing red and blue lights.

Blade hurried, letting his thoughts drift. He should be thankful, he supposed, the Pagans had jumped him. By disposing of Mickey now, he'd forestalled potentially interminable future trouble. Hopefully the Warlords would leave him alone. If not—well, the Force would be going after them anyway. He liked the idea of a war on the gangs. They were an urban blight long overdue for eradication.

A brown dog appeared ahead, trotting along the shore. It took one look at the approaching giant and bounded into the night.

What should he do when he got to San Francisco? Blade wondered. How should he play it if no one would cooperate? Be tactful or bust heads? Playing it by ear was his best bet, he reasoned. For all he knew, he could be going on a wild-goose chase. Even if his suspicions were correct, Wentworth had probably warned her.

But he had to try.

For Grizzly's sake.

The minutes went by quickly, Blade musing on the implications of the information he'd uncovered so far and the decision he might inevitably have to make. Before he knew it, he came to the jeep and the limo. The collision had buckled the jeep's sturdy fender, which had absorbed most of the impact, and crumpled the front of the hood.

What about the engine?

Blade slid behind the wheel and turned the keys. A low growl greeted his efforts, and then the jeep abruptly roared to life. He shifted into reverse, backed away from the black car, and drove to the north, searching for a street.

Look out, San Francisco!

He was on his way.

FOURTEEN

The two California Highway Patrol cruisers pulled up in front of the

gate in the center of the south fence bordering the Force Facility, and braked.

On duty just inside the gate, a pair of California Army soldiers glanced at each other, and the tallest of the duo moved forward to open the barrier.

A Highway Patrol trooper emerged from the leading car.

"Can we be of assistance?" the tall soldier politely inquired while pulling on the gate.

"We're making a special delivery," the trooper replied, and stepped to the rear door. He pressed on the handle and tugged. "I believe these belong to you."

Out of the patrol car came Captain Havoc, Raphaela, and Jaguarundi. From the second car emerged Lobo, Doc, and Sparrow Hawk.

"The jeep will be towed out in the morning," the trooper told the officer.

"Thank you," Havoc replied somewhat sheepishly. "And thanks for the lift."

"No problem, Captain," the trooper said. "We're under standing orders to cooperate with the Force in any way possible. We're all on the same side, after all." He glanced at Lobo. "I think."

Raphaela smiled. "We won't forget your kindness. If we can ever return the favor, just let us know."

"Will do," the trooper said. He slammed the door, nodded, and climbed into his vehicle.

"Such nice men," Raphaela remarked, waving.

"Says you," Lobo mumbled.

The six of them stood next to the gate as the cruisers swung around and drove off.

"Good riddance," the Clansman mentioned, and took a stride.

Captain Havoc suddenly blocked Lobo's path, his fists clenched at his sides, his countenance conveying simmering anger. "Don't open your mouth again."

"Say what?"

"If you hope to enjoy a normal life expectancy, you'd best keep your mouth shut for the rest of the night," Havoc stated coldly.

"Are you mad at me or something?"

"I commend your powers of observation."

"Why? What did I do?"

Havoc leaned forward until his nose nearly touched the Clansman's. "You're *responsible* for this humiliating episode."

"Me? Jag started it. Just because he can't take a joke—"

The officer's right forefinger swept up and jabbed Lobo in the chest. "*Not another word!*" *he snapped. 'You're at fault, not Jag. You know how sensitive he is about his hybrid nature, yet you deliberately provoked him. Because of you, we wrecked the jeep. Because of you, I've just been through the most embarrassing incident in my entire life. And because of you, Blade will have us in front of a firing squad.'*"

"You're blowing this all out of proportion, Mike," Raphaela said in an effort to mollify the officer.

Havoc glared at her. "How would you know?"

"What?"

"You come from an isolated group of underground dwellers who haven't had contact with outside society for over a hundred years. You have no idea what life is like in California. You have no idea of how the military conducts its affairs. If you did, you'd know how serious this is."

"Don't get on her case," Jag interjected. "We're all to blame, more or less. We all agreed to go into L.A."

"Don't remind me of my stupidity," Havoc declared. He whirled and

stalked through the gate. "Come on. Let's get back to the barracks. We'll see Blade in the morning and face the music."

The tall guard cleared his throat. "Uhh, sir?"

"What is it?" Havoc demanded impatiently, halting.

"You might not be able to see Blade in the morning, Captain."

"And why not, Private?"

"Because he's not here, sir."

"He hasn't returned from L.A. yet?"

"Oh, yes, sir. He came back about an hour ago. And then he took right off again."

"Did he happen to say where he was heading?"

"He didn't tell us, Captain. You'll have to ask the pilots."

"The pilots?"

"Yep. Blade took off in a Hurricane. I believe Captain Laslo was flying the VTOL."

The officer gazed at the huge hangar to the north, situated between the south fence and the three concrete bunkers, where the pair of Hurricanes were normally housed. Both jets possessed vertical-takeoff-or-landing capability. Both were the last of their kind, manufactured 109 years ago, three years before World War Three. Both had been deligently maintained by the California military. When not parked in the hangar for repairs or an overhaul, the VTOLs were kept in constant readiness on the concrete pad west of the hangar. Only 50 yards square, the pad served as the landing and takeoff area.

"Why would Blade fly off without telling us?" Jag asked of no one in particular.

"He's never done that before," Sparrow noted.

"Let's mosey on over to the hangar and find out what's up," Doc

proposed.

"My sentiments exactly," Captain Havoc concurred, and led the way.

Raphaela quickly caught up with him. "I'm sorry if I was out of line back there."

The officer studied her earnest expression, then averted his gaze and frowned. "You weren't. I'm the one who should apologize. It was rude of me to fly off the handle at you." He paused. "My only excuse is that I've been under a lot of strain lately."

"Because you were selected as second-in-command?"

"No," Havoc said softly. "I wish it was that simple."

"Care to talk about it?"

"I can't."

"Okay," Raphaela said, and placed her left hand on his arm, "but I'm here if you need me, if you want an ear to bend."

Havoc looked at her, unable to decide if there might be an underlying meaning to her comment. "Thanks. I'll keep it in mind."

"You do that."

Behind them Lobo snickered.

Annoyed by the Clansman's crude behavior, Havoc was just about to turn and tell Lobo off when he spied the jeep next to the enormous hangar door, bathed in light from above. "Look!"

"It's been damaged," Raphaela declared.

They all ran the rest of the way and clustered around the vehicle, staring at the fender and the hood.

"What could have happened?" Sparrow Hawk queried.

"Maybe Blade ran into more Warlords," Raphaela speculated.

"Or maybe he took driving lessons from Havoc," Lobo joked.

"What did I tell you about keeping your mouth shut?" the officer retorted.

"Give me a break, dude. I'm not one of your wimpy soldier boys who jumps every time you open your mouth. If you've got a beef, report it to Blade. But get off my back or else."

Havoc moved closer to the Clansman. "Or what?"

Before the Clansman could respond, a dark-haired man attired in a blue Air Force uniform sauntered from the hangar, saw them, and grinned. "So there you guys are. It's about time you got back."

"Captain Jeffries," Raphaela said. "How are you?"

"Just fine," Jeffries replied, strolling over. He glanced up at the spotlight affixed to the corner of the hangar, then faced them. "Not a problem in the world, which is more than I can say for you clowns."

"Who are you callin' clowns?" Lobo responded testily.

"Anyone who gets in hot water with Blade qualifies as a clown in my book," the pilot said. "I know I wouldn't want him ticked off at me."

"We're in hot water?" Jag asked.

"Over your heads," Jeffries answered. He looked at Havoc. "Blade asked me to keep an eye out for you and relay a message. Actually, it's a direct order."

"What is it?" Havoc inquired, dreading the worst.

Jeffries swept them with an amused glance. "You're all confined to quarters until further notice. Under no circumstances whatsoever are you to leave the barracks."

"Blade said that?" Raphaela ejaculated.

"There's more," Jeffries said. "I don't understand all of it, but I'll give it to you exactly as he gave it to me."

"We're in deep doo-doo," Lobo stated.

"Quiet," Havoc directed. "What's the rest of it?" he asked the pilot.

"Blade thanks you for your concern, but he doesn't appreciate the people under him sneaking around behind his back. If you'd wanted to go into L.A., you should have asked. A pressing matter has taken him to San Francisco, and he has no idea how soon he'll be back. Anyone who leaves the compound before then will be expelled from the Force," Jeffries quoted. "He wanted me to emphasize that last statement."

"The Warrior knows what we did," Sparrow said. "I knew we couldn't deceive him."

"How did he find out?" Doc wondered.

"Maybe that security guard at the Times spilled the beans," Jag speculated.

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

"Who cares how he found out?" Lobo interjected. "All that matters is our goose is cooked. You watch, though. All of you will get off easy. He'll blame me for the whole deal." He sighed and shook his head. "I always get the blame."

Captain Havoc pointed at the jeep. "Do you know what happened to this, Jeffries?"

"Sure don't."

Lobo started northward. "I'm going to get a shower and guzzle down a six-pack. Catch you dudes later."

"Before I forget," Captain Jeffries said, looking at Havoc, "General Gallagher called. He wanted you to phone him the minute you arrived."

"What could he want?" Raphaela asked.

"Who knows?" Havoc replied. "When it rains, it pours." He motioned toward the barracks. "Why don't all of you go on ahead. I'll call Gallagher and join you in a bit."

"We don't mind waiting," Raphaela said.

"No," Havoc stated sharply. "Really. I'd rather you just go on. I'll be there shortly." He turned and hurried into the hangar, bearing to the right toward a small office. Once there, he opened the door and walked to the black phone resting on a small table. It took but a moment to dial the number.

"Speak to me."

"General, this is Captain Havoc."

"Where the hell have you been?"

"In LA., as I believe you already know."

"Don't get smart with me, mister," Gallagher warned, his tone gravelly. "I'm not in the mood."

That makes two of us, Havoc thought, but said nothing.

"I rely on you, Captain, to keep me informed of the Warrior's activities. You're supposed to cue me in to his plans in advance. So maybe you can explain to my satisfaction why I had to hear about the Times affair on the damn radio?"

"I'm sorry, sir. I didn't know he was going into L. A. until it was too late to call you."

"Bull. How much time does it take to pick up a phone?"

Havoc knew better than to answer.

"Where's Blade now?" Gallagher inquired.

For a moment Havoc hesitated. His agreement with the general had gone sour weeks ago, and he disliked being a spy for a man he had grown to despise. "He's in the Command Bunker."

Silence greeted the falsehood, persisting for over ten seconds.

"General?" Havoc prompted. "Are you still there?"

"So this is the way you want to play it."

"Sir?"

"Captain Jeffries told me Blade has taken a Hurricane to San Francisco," Gallagher disclosed.

"Oh."

"What are you trying to pull, Captain? First you deliberately withhold information, then you lie. Are you reneging on our agreement?"

"It's not like we had anything in writing," Havoc noted gloomily.

"True. But I thought we had a gentleman's agreement, so to speak, a commitment from one officer to another. Until now, I've been under the impression you wanted to see Blade pay for his carelessness as much as I do. I believed you desired to pay the Warrior back for the death of your younger brother."

"When I joined the Force months ago, I did feel that way."

Havoc admitted. "You had me convinced Blade was incompetent. You told me Jimmy died needlessly on an unauthorized mission in Canada, which was only partly true. You claimed the Force is a waste of manpower and resources, and you persuaded me to join so I could be your spy in their very midst. I accepted everything you said without question. And I know I promised to gather the evidence you need to put Blade and the Force out of business."

"But?"

"But I've learned you weren't telling the truth, General. Blade is competent. In fact, he's the most competent man I've ever met. And do you know what?"

"What?" Gallagher responded gruffly.

"He cares about his people. Really cares. I've seen him demonstrate his feelings time and again. He never exposes the unit to needless danger, and he never has us do a job he wouldn't do himself. He's dedicated, reliable, and fair."

The general snorted. "You make him sound like a damn saint!" he scoffed.

"There's no need for petty sarcasm, sir. I'm just telling you the facts. Blade is a natural leader. I admire the man highly, sir. I'm afraid I can't gather the proof of malfeasance or misconduct you requested so you can take your case to the Federation leaders. As far as I'm concerned, Blade is the best man for the job."

"Is that a fact?" Gallagher asked scornfully.

"Yes, sir. And there's one more thing. I've grown to like the people I work with. Jag, Doc, Sparrow, Raphaela, and even Lobo are okay in my book. They're trying hard to mesh as a team, to prove themselves worthy of the trust bestowed in them. I feel like a traitor by trying to destroy the Force from within, and I won't be a party to the deception any longer."

"How very independent-minded of you," Gallagher said. "Evidently I was mistaken when I rated you as a dependable officer. It's a good thing your brother will never know how little he meant to you."

Havoc leaned on the table and gripped the receiver tightly, his face livid. "You leave Jimmy out of this! My brother and I loved each other more than a man like you could ever know."

"Have a care, Captain. Don't forget who you're talking to."

"How could I ever forget, sir?" Havoc retorted bitterly.

"It's obvious I'd be wasting my breath if I tried to make you see the error of your ways," Gallagher said, and sighed. "I'm very disappointed in you, Captain. I had such high hopes."

"I'm sorry, General."

"No you're not. If you want out of our agreement, so be it. But I want you to know two things. First, I don't take betrayal lightly—"

"I haven't betrayed you," Havoc said, interrupting.

"But you have, my good captain. You've let me down, turned against

me. In effect you've allied yourself with the opposition. Consequently, you'll share the fate I have in store for them."

"Gladly, sir."

"Oh, really? Well, you won't be so smug come morning, Captain."

"And why's that, sir?"

The general gave a little laugh. "Because I've arranged a suitable reception for the vaunted Warrior in San Francisco. By this time tomorrow, the papers will be filled with the suitably sordid details. I don't need you to gather evidence for me anymore. I'll have all the evidence I need."

Havoc straightened in alarm. "What do you mean?"

"Let's just say your friend Blade shouldn't have poked his nose in where it doesn't belong. He should be arriving at Katy's Place any minute. An hour from now the media will have the story." Gallagher chuckled. "I must be sure to mark this day on my calendar so I can celebrate my victory once a year. I've been waiting for this for a long time."

"General, you can't."

"Watch me. I've maintained all along that California had no business joining the Freedom Federation. I've held that the Force isn't necessary to preserve our security and ensure our domestic tranquility. And I'll be damned if that pompous ass of a Warrior is going to have authority over me much longer."

"That's the real reason, isn't it? You despise Blade."

"The man is scum."

"How can you make such an absurd claim knowing him the way you do?"

"I know him, all right, Captain. I'll bet you didn't know that the first time we met he shoved my face into a wall and humiliated me in front of my men?"

"He did?" Havoc declared in surprise.

"Yes, he most definitely did, at the summit meeting in Anaheim almost two years ago. Do you have any idea how degrading it was? For a military man like myself, a man of my prominence and prestige, to be manhandled by that upstart was the ultimate insult."

"So you're just out for revenge," Havoc said. "You don't care about the welfare of California. This is purely personal with you."

"On the contrary, Captain, I do care about California. The state doesn't need the Force. And now I have a chance to kill two birds with one stone."

"I'll go to the governor and tell him everything," Havoc threatened. "He'll stop you."

"Melnick and I are close friends. It'll be your word against mine. Who do you think they'll believe?"

Havoc didn't bother to answer.

"I thought so," Gallagher said. "Well, I've wasted enough time with you. You're on your own now, Captain. You've made your bed. Now lie in it."

A distinct click sounded at the other end.

"General?" Havoc stated, knowing he was wasting his breath. He slowly hung up, his mind whirling with the implications of the revelations he'd learned. To think that Gallagher had been using him all this time! He'd been duped into deceiving Blade and the rest of the Force, all to satisfy Gallagher's thirst for vengeance.

How could he have been so gullible?

So stupid?

Dazed, Havoc turned toward the office door, then halted in astonishment.

Raphaella stood framed in the doorway, her right hand pressed to her mouth, her eyes moist with welling tears.

"You heard everything, didn't you?" Havoc queried.

The Molewoman nodded.

"I can explain," Havoc said, and took a step.

Light a frightened doe, her features reflecting her turmoil, Raphaela spun and raced for the hangar.

"Raphaela!" Havoc cried in despair. He ran from the office, hastening outside, and stopped when he saw her 20 yards to the north, fleeing as if pursued by a demon.

"What's with her?"

The officer swung around at the sound of the voice to find Captain Jeffries standing near the jeep.

"Why was she crying?" the pilot inquired.

"You'll have to ask her after you get back," Havoc said, unslinging his M-16.

Jeffries's brow knit. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Yes, you are," Havoc ordered, and trained the M-16 on the Air Force officer's chest. "You're taking me to San Francisco."

"You're crazy!" Jeffries exclaimed.

"Then you'd be well advised to do as I say."

"But Blade confined you to the barracks."

"I don't have time to argue." Havoc pressed the rifle to his right shoulder. "Either you fire up the other Hurricane this minute, or I'll shoot."

The pilot hesitated, staring into the blond man's eyes, gauging the seriousness of the threat.

"So help me God, I will," Havoc stressed.

"I believe you."

"Then let's get going, Frank. I don't have all day."

Jeffries moved to the west, toward the gleaming jet on the concrete pad. "I hope you know what you're doing, Mike. They'll crucify you for this."

"I don't much care anymore."

"Mind telling me why?"

"No. I just want you to fly us to San Francisco as fast as the VTOL will go."

"I can have you there in twenty-five minutes."

"Make it twenty. And I want you to radio ahead for an address."

"Want me to call a cab for you?" Jeffries cracked.

"No need for that," Havoc said, and grinned. "We're going to land in the middle of the city."

FIFTEEN

"This is it, mister," the cabbie stated.

Blade roused himself from his somber introspection and gazed out the open cab window at the seedy tavern on the west side of the road, a run-down brick structure, two stories in height, situated back a ways from the road. "Are you sure this is it?"

The taxi driver, a lean man wearing rumpled clothes and sporting uneven chin stubble, glanced over his right shoulder at the giant in the back seat. "You can read, can't you, bub?" he inquired, and pointed at the sign above the tavern entrance. A pair of lightbulbs illuminated the red letters.

KATY'S PLACE.

"This is the place," Blade agreed.

"I've been a cabbie for eleven years, mister. I drop off customers here regularly. Harbor Road is a hot spot, if you get my drift."

"How do you mean?"

The cabbie snickered. "Just go on inside and you'll find out. Before you do, you owe me eighteen bucks."

"Seems like an awful lot of money for just bringing me from the airport to here."

"I don't set the fares, bub," the cabbie declared. "And if you don't pay up I'll call the cops."

"Go right ahead."

"What?"

"I'd like to ask them how many Van Ness Avenues there are in San Francisco. I distinctly recall crossing three of them on the way here," Blade mentioned, his hands easing under his black vest.

The cabbie glowered. "A smart-ass, huh? You don't want to make trouble for me, mister. I can have a half-dozen buddies of mine here in five minutes. We'll convince you to pay. I guarantee it."

Blade leaned forward, smiling pleasantly. "If you call your friends, I'll have to rely on mine."

"Do you think they can get here before my pals?"

"They're already here."

"Where?" the cabbie asked, looking around, smirking in disbelief. "I don't see anyone."

"I never claimed they were people," Blade noted, and raised both Bowies into view. "Allow me to introduce them." He wagged the left knife. "This one is Jim."

The cabbie seemed to be trying to swallow an invisible apple whole.

"And this one is Bowie," Blade told him, hefting the right knife. "Now

what were you saying about calling your buddies?"

"Those are the biggest friggin' blades I've ever seen," the cabbie stated, then studied his passenger carefully. "Wait a minute! I know who you are!"

"The barbarian from Cimmeria?"

"I don't remember where you're from, but I've read about you in the paper. You're that Force guy. Knife, isn't it?"

"Actually, it's Blade."

"Wow! You're famous!"

"I'm beginning to get that impression."

Licking his thin lips, the cab driver smiled and gestured with his palms outward, projecting an air of total innocence. "Hey, I hope you're not upset or anything. I sure don't want no grief from you. If you say I crossed Van Ness a bunch of times, then I must have done it and not realized what I was doing."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. When you've been driving a taxi as long as I have, all the avenues and streets start to look the same."

"You learn something every day," Blade said dryly.

"So why don't you be a nice guy and put those swords of yours away?"

"What about your buddies?"

A patently fake laugh spurted nervously from the cabbie's mouth. "That was a joke! I was having a little fun with you. Don't you know a joke when you hear it?"

"I thought I did."

"And I tell you what I'll do. Since you're so famous and all, I'll only charge you eleven dollars for the trip and you can forget about my tip."

The Warrior slid the Bowies into their sheaths and covered the hilts again. "You're too generous."

"Sound fair to you then?"

"No."

"No?" the cabbie said, and glanced at the meter. "Well, the lowest I could go is ten."

Blade suppressed a grin. "I was thinking more like twelve."

Utter bewilderment gave the cabbie's visage a comical cast. "You were?"

"Sure. You can deduct the actual fare for a trip from the airport to here and keep the rest as your tip."

"Now that's what I call fair," the cabbie declared, brightening considerably. "And a three-dollar tip never hurt anybody."

The Warrior reached into his left front pocket and extracted a small roll of the currency currently used in the Free State of California. He peeled off the amount agreed upon and gave the bills to the driver.

"Thanks. You know, you're an all-right guy. Wait until the other drivers hear about this."

Blade opened the door and stepped out, inhaling the cool night air. He gazed up at the stars overhead, then shut the door and moved to the curb.

"I don't mind waiting if you want," the cabbie offered.

"No thanks," Blade replied. "I have no idea how long I'll be."

"Well, if you need a cab just call my company and ask for Joey."

"I'll keep it in mind."

"So long," Joey said, and drove off grinning like a five-year-old who had just pulled a fast one on his parents.

Blade surveyed his surroundings, orienting himself with respect to the city's prominent landmarks and recalling the information Captain Laslo had shared on the flight up from L.A.

Built on a series of steep hills, San Francisco was located on the tip of a peninsula. To the west lay the Pacific Ocean, to the east San Francisco Bay. At the north end of the peninsula, spanning the mile-wide Golden Gate channel, glittered the Golden Gate Bridge. Also north of the peninsula was Alcatraz Island, used as a prison and housing California's most violent, intractable criminals.

Although much of the city had changed but little since World War Three, the northeast quadrant had fallen into a state of general neglect. Once the bustling hub of the metropolis due to the millions of tourists who visited San Francisco annually, the waterfront, including Fisherman's Wharf, Nob Hill, Chinatown, and other areas, was a pale reflection of its former greatness. Without the inflated tourist trade, a majority of businesses had folded. Whole blocks were filled with decrepit buildings.

Such was the case with Harbor Road. Blade scanned the ramshackle structures on both sides, counting four other bars within half a block of Katy's Place. To the northwest the lights on the Golden Gate Bridge were visible. He could also see Coit Memorial Tower. Southeast of his position stood the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge.

There were scores of pedestrians moving to and fro. An inordinately high number were young women attired in skimpy outfits. Others were men and women in ragged clothes, who walked along with their shoulders slumped as if resigned to bearing an oppressive weight only they knew.

Blade turned and walked along the cracked cement walk to the tavern's entrance. He squared his broad shoulders, twisted the tarnished knob, and walked inside.

Katy's Place might once have been a classy joint. Now the paint on the walls was cracked and peeling. Dust and cigarette butts covered the floor. Dim lighting plunged the corners in inky shadows. The entire place gave off a slightly sour, almost offensive odor that none of the patrons seemed to mind. Across the room from the doorway was a long bar. Behind it, a mirror. Small circular tables provided seating for the

customers.

The Warrior walked toward the bar, aware of the frank, sometimes hostile stares shot in his direction. Hushed conversations ceased as he approached, and resumed with animated intensity once he walked by.

Behind the bar stood a burly man who wore a white shirt and black pants. Red suspenders held up the latter. From the left corner of his mouth protruded a smoldering stogie. "What'll it be, mister?" he mechanically inquired as the giant halted in front of one of the empty stools close by.

"Are you the owner?" Blade inquired.

"I wish," the bartender said, and devoted his attention to removing a pair of empty beer bottles from the top of the bar and tossing them into a trash can.

"Is the owner here?"

The barkeeper regarded the giant suspiciously. "Who wants to know?"

"My name is Blade. Perhaps you've heard of me?"

"Can't say as I have," the bartender said.

"Figures," Blade muttered, and leaned on a stool. "I must talk to the owner about an urgent, personal matter."

"Well, the owner ain't here and won't be back for an hour."

"Do you mind if I wait?"

"It's a free world," the bartender said, gesturing at the tables. "Park it and I'll let you know when she arrives."

"She?"

"Katy. The owner. Why do you think they call this dive Katy's Place?"

"Do you always refer to the establishment where you work as a dive?" Blade rejoined.

"I call 'em like I see 'em. Besides, they pay me to serve liquor, not review the tavern for the Chronicle. "

"What's Katy's last name?"

"Morris. Katy Morris."

A surge of elation washed over Blade. Could it be? Had he found her so swiftly?

"Do you want something to drink while you wait?"

"A glass of milk if you have any. A glass of water if you don't."

"Our cow died a month ago," the bartender said, grinning. "It'll have to be water."

"Fine."

The burly man took a clean glass and moved along the bar until he came to a pitcher of water resting on a shelf under the mirror. He filled the glass slowly, his gaze roving over the patrons, his chin bobbing once when his eyes were fixed on a table near the door where three men sat. Whistling softly, he returned. "Here you go. Try not to get too stoned."

"I'll do my best," the Warrior promised, and walked to a table near the far wall where he could keep an eye on everyone who entered. He sat down with his back leaning against the faded paint and took a sip.

Had fortune smiled on him? Blade wondered. If Katy Morris turned out to be an alias for the person he thought, there would be hell to pay. Doubts assailed him, though. If she was still alive, and if she was in hiding, she wouldn't adopt a name so similar to her own. She was an extremely intelligent woman. If she didn't want to be found, she would be extremely difficult to trace.

A young couple came into the tavern and went to a table on the south side of the room.

The Warrior swallowed more water. He saw one of the customers guzzling whiskey straight from a bottle, and frowned. According to the Family Elders, as verified by books in the library, many people in

prewar America had a chronic alcohol problem. Apparently the government had tried to eliminate all abuse of intoxicating substances, with predictably dismal results.

Having been reared in an environment where alcohol addiction was nonexistent, he found it difficult to comprehend the full magnitude of the social epidemic that had once ravaged the very fabric of American culture. The Eldler most knowledgeable about American asserted the reason for the rampant alcoholism had been an underlying malaise of the collective soul of the nation. Where once the U.S. prided itself on moral greatness and adherence to supernal values, in the years before the war the country languished in a state of apathy and individual selfishness. Only a third of the population had bothered to vote in any given election, thereby allowing the political power-mongers to manipulate the citizenry and subvert true freedom. And with everyone always looking out for number one, the proud American heritage of sharing and caring for one's fellows became an obsolete tradition.

Was it any wonder that so many people turned to alcohol and other substances to relieve the sterile monotony of their minutely regulated lives? Was it surprising that the suicide rate of the nation's youth had risen to astronomical levels? No, not really, Blade reasoned, not when liberal, humanistic values had been force-fed to the American people for decades. As the Elder once succinctly expressed it: "When a nation or a person is subjected to a steady diet of materialistic dogma, it's like feeding someone food that has no nutritional value whatsoever. Sooner or later that nation or person will expire from a lack of the essential spiritual sustenance necessary to sustain both."

The Warrior grinned. Leave it to him to wax philosophical at the oddest of momemts. He tilted the glass again and let the cool liquid trickle down his throat. Only when he lowered the glass did he become aware of the three men walking directly toward his table. He tensed, his instincts telling him to beware, and placed his right hand on his lap.

"Say, aren't you the one called Blade?" demanded the biggest of the trio. "We hear you're a tough son of a bitch and we're going to give you a chance to prove it."

SIXTEEN

The Warrior calmly regarded the trio, who halted a yard away and positioned themselves an arm's length apart, and noted a few interesting points. All three men wore ordinary civilian clothing, yet all three wore their hair cropped short in the distinctive military style. All three had walked unsteadily, as if they were under the influence, but their eyes were steady and alert. And all three possessed a certain indefinable air, an aura of supreme self-assurance characteristic of men who had been tested to their limits many times and never been found wanting.

"Didn't you hear me?" snapped the one who had spoken before, a muscular blond man wearing jeans and a brown T-shirt. Several inches over six feet in height, he weighed close to 240 pounds.

"Maybe he thinks he's too good to talk to us," said the man in the middle, a stout specimen with black hair and dark eyes, clothed in black pants and a green sweater. His features bore traces of an Hispanic ancestry.

The third man said nothing. He was the shortest and slimmest, his Oriental face an impenetrable mask. He wore all black.

"Cat got your tongue?" the blond man quipped, and stepped closer.

"You must have mistaken me for someone else," Blade said good-naturedly.

"Are you trying to tell us you're not Blade?" responded the guy in the middle.

"Whether I am or not doesn't matter," the Warrior answered. "You sound as if you're spoiling for a fight and I have no intention of accommodating you."

"You don't, huh?" said the blond.

"No. So why don't you go back to your table and we'll forget this ever happened."

The man in the middle laughed. "You know what? I think you're yellow. Is that it? You're afraid to prove how tough you are."

The Warrior stared at the man in black when he replied. "Only a fool

goes around trying to prove how tough he is. True strength comes from within and should be demonstrated when the need arises."

"Where's a piece of paper?" the blond asked his companions. "I want to write that down for posterity."

"Come on. Get up, coward," taunted the one in the green sweater.

Blade glanced toward the bar. The bartender had stopped working and was watching expectantly. Many of the customers were also staring at the exchange.

"Maybe he needs to be goaded into proving his manhood," the blond speculated, smirking. He moved to the very edge of the table and glared at the giant. "What if I tell you that your mother was a whore and your father a bastard?"

The Warrior only smiled at their transparent attempt to bait him.

"No go," the blond said. "Then try this on for size. Your wife sleeps with every man at the Home."

"How did you know I'm married?" Blade asked casually.

"Read about it," the blond stated.

"You can read?"

Stung by the insult, the blond clenched his fists and leaned forward. "Think you're funny, don't you?"

"Not as funny as you'll look after the papers carry the story in their morning editions," Blade said.

The man in the middle shifted. "What are you talking about?"

Blade slid his left hand under the table. "Do you think the media will pass up a story about three soldiers who attacked me in a dive in one of the seamier parts of San Francisco?"

"Who says we're soldiers?" the blond retorted.

A sudden roar from overhead prevented the Warrior from

responding. A tremendous thundering vibration shook the roof, and all the patrons looked at the ceiling in startled amazement.

"What the hell?" the blond blurted out.

"It sounds like a jet," the man in the middle declared.

Blade recognized the booming sound, the high-pitched whine and steady rumbling of a Hurricane engine^ a sound he knew so well, and his forehead creased in perplexity.

"I don't like this," shouted the blond to be heard above the noise. He stared at the man in black. "Shibata, go check it out."

With a curt nod, the Oriental rotated and hastened to the entrance.

Blade listened as the roaring sound subsided slowly. He guessed the VTOL must be moving to the south. "So what's it going to be?" he asked the remaining pair. "Will you leave me in peace?"

"We can't," the man with black hair replied.

"You're making a big mistake," Blade admonished them.

"We've made them before," conceded the blond. "Now are you going to sit there like a bump on a log all night or can we get down to cases?"

The Warrior eased forward several inches and surreptitiously pressed both palms to the underside of the table.

"You're absolutely certain there's nothing I can say or do that will change your minds?"

"Nothing," the blond stated harshly. "So stand up and let's get this over with. I'm tired of playing games."

"So am I," Blade acknowledged in an easygoing manner to disguise his true intent, and suddenly galvanized into action. He came out of his chair with a surge of his powerful legs, his hands lifting the table clear of the floor and sending it crashing into the blond, knocking the man down.

The stout guy in the green sweater skipped lightly to the right and assumed a back stance.

Blade swiftly skirted the upturned table, moving to the left. He saw the blond trying to scramble out from under it and slammed his right boot into the man's chin, flattening his opponent. The man's eyelids fluttered and he passed out.

"Swenson will have your hide for that," commented the guy in the sweater.

The Warrior adopted a forward stance. "Is that his name? Well, I'll be long gone by the time he revives."

"You're not going anywhere."

"Do you have a name or should I just refer to you as Stupid?" Blade taunted.

"Mongeon."

"Let me guess. You must be a sergeant."

Mongeon's dark eyes narrowed. "What makes you think so?"

"All three of you are military. Since you let Swenson do most of the talking, he must hold higher rank. An officer, maybe. Which leaves you as a noncom or a private, and I can't see Gallagher sending green privates after me."

"They told us you were sharp," Mongeon said. "They weren't kidding."

"Will you let me pass?"

"Sorry. No can do."

"I have no quarrel with you."

"And we have none with you."

"Then why bother?" Blade inquired, hoping to avoid further violence if at all possible."

"Because our commanding officer told us you're giving a friend of his a hard time. You've been prying into matters better left alone. We're here to convince you to back off."

"And what if I told you that you're being deceived, being used? Would you call this nonsense off?"

"I'd expect you to make such a claim. The only way we'll go our merry way is if you agree to let us escort you back to L.A. first," Mongeon stated.

"I can't do that."

"Then we have nothing left to talk about."

Blade sidled in the direction of the door, but the sergeant quickly blocked his path. Only five feet separated them. Blade shifted his legs into the cat stance, his hands held at waist height.

Like a wary leopard stalking a lion, Mongeon advanced cautiously. He suddenly aimed a snap kick at the giant's left knee.

Easily blocking the blow with his left forearm, Blade aimed a tegatana-sakotsu-uchikome, a handsword collarbone strike, at the noncom. He wanted to end the fight rapidly, and in his haste he made the mistake of assuming Mongeon must be proficient in karate, like Mike Havoc. An instant later he discovered his error when the sergeant caught his right wrist in an iron grip and performed a perfectly executed two-handed throw. Blade felt his feet leave the floor and his body turn in midair. With a resounding crash, jarring him to his core, he came down on top of a table. The wooden legs shattered. He landed on his shoulders and arced his legs in an acrobatic flip, sweeping erect before Mongeon could close in.

The sergeant had taken two strides, then stopped short at the giant's abrupt recovery. "Nice moves," he said.

"Nice throw," Blade returned the compliment. "Ju-jitsu or aikido?"

"How do you know it's not judo?"

"Your style. My guess would be aikido."

Mongeon gave a slight bow. "And you?"

"A little of this, a little of that," Blade said, pondering how best he

could use his newfound knowledge to the greatest advantage. Aikido, unlike karate or kung-fu, did not incorporate an extensive array of hand and foot strikes; the system was renowned for its throwing and flipping techniques, many concerned with wrist action and holds. An aikido master could deflect virtually any attack. The philosophy behind the art had been succinctly summed up by its founder, a man named Uyeshiba: "Martial training is not training that has as its primary purpose the defeating of others, but the practice of God's love within ourselves." Since Mongeon was in the service, Blade suspected that the sergeant practiced a modified form of aikido, probably relying on offensive karate techniques to complement the aikido movements.

"What are you waiting for?" the noncom asked.

In response, the Warrior drove an inside sweep kick at the sergeant's calf, which Mongeon deftly evaded. Without pausing, Blade employed a knife edge kick, expecting it to be neatly blocked, and it was. Still he pressed the serviceman, using kicks instead of hand blows for the simple reason kicks were harder to defend against using throws or flips. He forced Mongeon to retreat for a half-dozen yards.

The noncom seemed disconcerted by the giant's exclusive use of kicks. Unable to close because of his antagonist's longer reach, he satisfied himself with countering and blocking until an unforeseen, and presumably minor, incident occurred. He inadvertently backed into a table.

Blade had waited for just such an occurrence, intentionally compelling Mongeon to retreat toward an empty table located in the left of the front door. He knew the noncom would have to go to the right or the left, and he planned to use a kick to set the sergeant up for a series of hand strikes. Unfortunately, his foe had other ideas.

The moment Mongeon bumped into the table, he threw himself backwards and simply flipped to the other side.

So Blade improvised. He darted in, seized the table in both steely hands, and did as he'd done against the blond; he hurled the table into the sergeant before the man could fully regain his footing.

The heavy wood top caught Mongeon in the forehead and bowled him down, causing him to totter backwards and trip over a chair. He landed

on his knees and elbows, then started to straighten.

In two long strides the Warrior reached the noncom. He planted his right combat boot in Mongeon's ribs, doubling the sergeant over, then delivered a malletlike fist to the back of the sergeant's head.

Mongeon went limp.

Exhaling in relief, Blade bent down and took hold of the serviceman under the arms. He hoisted Mongeon into a nearby chair and deposited him gently. Although he resented the arrogance of the three men, he felt no animosity toward them. They undoubtedly believed they were doing Gallagher or someone else a favor, and he suspected they had been told a pack of lies to convince them to take him on. They were dupes, nothing more. He suddenly remembered the one who had gone outside, and he turned and made for the entrance. He had managed only two strides, however, when he heard the sound of padding feet to his rear and an instant later a sledgehammer rammed him squarely in the back and drove him to his knees, stunned, excruciating torment lancing his spine. A spiteful laugh fell on his ears and he twisted to discover the blond, the man named Swenson, standing a few feet away crouched in a cat stance. The big belligerent's face was all bloody.

"Get up!"

Blade slowly stood, grimacing at the discomfort.

Swenson glanced at his defeated companion. "You took out Mongeon easy enough, but he's always been a softie at heart. His killer instinct isn't as developed as it should be." He spat a mouthful of crimson spittle onto the floor and glowered at the Warrior. "Me, on the other hand, I'm different. I like to break bones and stomp pissants like you."

"There's no need for that," Blade noted, realizing the futility of the statement but buying time for the pain in his back to subside.

"Like hell there isn't," Swenson snapped. "Nobody takes me out and gets to brag about it."

"I won't tell a soul."

Swenson laughed again. "Damn straight you won't. By the time I'm

through with you, you won't be able to speak for six months."

The Warrior assumed an on-guard stance. Since words were useless, and since he wanted to ascertain the reason for the VTOL's presence in San Francisco, he determined to end the conflict quickly. "Let's get this over with," he proposed.

"My sentiments exactly," Swenson said, and closed, unleashing a flurry of foot and hand blows.

Blade countered the initial onslaught, impressed by the brutal power the man exhibited. One thing became readily apparent. Defeating the blond would be no easy task. The man was a master at karate, as good as Captain Havoc, perhaps even better. A stinging strike to his ribs reminded him of another fact.

Swenson was out for blood.

SEVENTEEN

Sergeant Shibata walked to the end of the cement walk and stood gazing to the south, listening to the rapidly diminishing whine of the jet aircraft engine. He guessed the noise to be coming from the direction of a supermarket on the corner. If he didn't know better, he'd swear the aircraft was landing. But such a feat was impossible for a conventional jet.

What about an unconventional one?

Shibata nodded in understanding. There were two jets possessed by the California Armed Force capable of ascending and descending like a helicopter, and he knew the identity of the unit to which both had been assigned. He retraced his path to within a yard of the tavern door, then turned and waited calmly for the occupants of the jet.

How many would it be?

If they all came, Shibata knew he wouldn't stand a chance. Especially against the hybrid. In a way he almost felt relief when he spied the lone figure running swiftly along the sidewalk. The tall blond man spotted Shibata at the same instant and slowed for a fraction, then came on even

faster. How similar they were, Shibata thought, the teacher and the star pupil. Both Swenson and the protege` were big blond Caucasians. He folded his arms and waited for the officer in the Special Forces uniform to advance within six feet, then greeted him cordially. "Hello, Mike. I was expecting the entire Force."

"There's just me, Tadashi," Havoc responded, glancing at the door.

"I have heard about your exploits. You are doing your teacher proud."

"Where is Dee? If you're here, he must be also. The two of you are inseparable."

"He's inside."

"Who else?"

"Lou."

"Mongeon, Swenson, and you. General Gallagher doesn't pull his punches," Havoc commented, and took a step forward.

"You would be wise not to interfere," Shibata advised. "This is between the general and the Warrior."

"Where do you and the other instructors fit in?"

"Gallagher apparently called Escobar. You know they go back a long way."

"And Escobar asked the three of you to do the general a little favor?"

Shibata nodded.

From within the tavern came a loud crash.

Captain Havoc started forward, then halted abruptly when the small man in black fell into a horse stance.

"I cannot permit you to pass," Shibata said solemnly.

"I must get by, Tadashi."

"Why bother trying? The Warrior might be skilled, but he's no match for Ike and Lou. It will all be over in a bit."

Havoc took another pace. "I'm asking you as a friend to step out of the way."

"I can't."

"Then I'm giving you a direct order, Sergeant."

The man in black smiled. "It won't work, Mike. General Gallagher will cover for us. I'm afraid I must refuse your order."

Frowning, Havoc adopted the shumoku-tachi stance and raised his hands to chest height. The T-shaped stance permitted him to position his body facing forward and gave no hint of the techniques he might employ in an attack. "Please, Tadashi."

"Go back to L.A., Mike. I have no wish to harm you."

"Such overconfidence is unbecoming for a martial artist of your caliber."

"I'm being realistic, not overconfident. There is no doubt that you were the best student Swenson ever taught. He's stated many times that your natural aptitude is as great as your brother's was, and with more experience you'll become virtually unbeatable. But you have years to go yet before you can hope to match me. Why not spare yourself some misery and simply leave."

Havoc glided slowly forward. "I can't leave and you damn well know it. Now step aside or suffer the consequences."

"Your karate against my ju-jitsu. This should be an interesting match."

"This isn't a regulated contest, Tadashi. I won't hold back."

"I wouldn't have it any other way," Shibata said, and dutifully bowed.

Havoc hesitated, girding himself, thinking of all the stories told about Tadashi Shibata at the Special Forces Academy. Of all the instructors there, three stood out as exceptional: Swenson, Mongeon, and Shibata.

Of those three, Swenson was renowned for his devastating brute force, Mongeon for his artistic approach to martial form and execution, and Shibata for being a peerless master, the perfect martial artist, as demonstrated by his four state championship titles.

The small man in black grinned, as if he intuitively sensed the officer's train of thought.

To delay any longer would be courting disaster. Havoc knew, and he slid into action. In a fight between relative equals, mental attitude mattered more than physical ability. According to some experts, attitude accounted for three-fourths of any combat. A combatant must want to win, must expect to win, or defeat was assured. If he wavered now, if his resolve was superficial, Shibata would triumph. To compensate for his hesitation, he closed in and delivered an oi-mae-geri, a front lunge kick. Or tried to.

Shibata skittered to the left, from the walk onto a stretch of grass, displaying his characteristic grace and economy of movement.

Havoc took a stride toward the man in black, letting Shibata assume he was pressing his attack, then whirled and lunged for the doorknob, planning to go to Blade's aid. Only he wasn't fast enough.

Shibata pounced with lightning rapidity.

A foot swept past Havoc's ear and slammed into the door, cracking the wood panel. Havoc stepped to the right, his forearms coming up just in time to deflect a chop aimed at his throat.

Not slowing for a second, Tadashi rained a barrage of hand and foot blows at the officer.

Compelled to stay on the defensive, Havoc countered every attempt to render him unconscious. As with karate, kung-fu, and other martial systems, there were numerous styles of ju-jitsu. Some relied heavily on holds, locks, and throws. Other substyles included a substantial number of hand and foot blows, to the extent that they were nearly comparable to karate. Havoc knew that Shibata adhered to such a substyle, which made the man doubly dangerous. He gave ground slowly, blocking, always blocking, and hoped for an opening he could capitalize on.

Tadashi never ceased striking or kicking, never gave his opponent a moment's respite.

For over a minute the battle waged, Havoc barely holding his own. He took a bruising swipe to the left cheek and a kick to the right shin, but otherwise he evaded Shibata's blows. He refrained from overextending himself, for letting his arms swing out too far from his body, knowing full well that the man in black would take immediate advantage and apply a lock or a throw. By shrewdly making Shibata fight on his terms, he increased his odds of winning.

The man in black unexpectedly disengaged and stepped back, then lowered his guard. "My compliments, Mike. You are a credit to Swenson's competence as an instructor."

"I try," Havoc answered, mystified as to why Shibata had broken off the fight so soon. Neither of them had scored a decisive hit.

"Perhaps some day you can stop by the Academy and we'll discuss the merits of ju-jitsu versus karate."

"What is this?" Havoc snapped, and abruptly perceived the strategy behind Shibata's unusual behavior. "You're stalling," he declared.

"Am I?" Tadashi retorted, smiling enigmatically.

"You're hoping to delay me long enough for Swenson and Mongeon to finish off Blade."

"If you say so."

"Damn you," Havoc stated, and performed a series of side thrusting kicks, driving the instructor backwards. Three times he performed the same kick, then readied for the fourth. Three times the man in black parried with his right forearm. Counting on Shibata to do the same again, Havoc began his fourth side thrust kick; then, at the instant he bent his knee, he reversed direction, spinning on the ball of his left foot and whipping his right leg in a 360-degree rotation, turning his side thrust kick into a spinning wheel kick. The unorthodox move caught Shibata unawares, and the man in black staggered when the heel of Havoc's foot landed solidly on his chin.

Tadashi backpedaled, shaking his head to clear it.

Seizing the initiative, Havoc swept in closer and planted a knife edge kick to his adversary's midriff.

Shibata grunted, but stayed erect.

Havoc thought he could finish the fight swiftly. He forgot about overextending himself and swung a palm heel thrust at Tadashi's chin.

Instantly Shibata applied a countermove, as if he had been waiting for just such a moment. He batted the palm heel thrust downward, skipped in with his right foot behind Havoc's right foot, and applied a straight-down arm lock, twisting and tripping the officer in one smooth motion.

Off balance, Havoc fell onto his back, his right arm still in Tadashi's grip and immobilized. But his feet were still free, and he arced his left leg in a crosswise front rising kick. His heel connected, smacking into Shibata's mouth and knocking the smaller man rearward over six feet. Havoc shoved off from the ground and assumed a kake-ashi-tachi, a hooked foot stance.

Tadashi was in the cat stance. He wiped the back of his left hand across his bloody lips and regarded the officer coldly. "It appears you are right. I have vastly underestimated you. So much for going easy. Now we'll fight in earnest, eh?"

"Unless you plan to talk me to death first," Havoc quipped.

The man in black renewed his assault, going all out, striking in fierce, calculated determination, trying to hurt, to maim.

Havoc recognized as much and applied every iota of his energy to staving off the raining hands and feet. He held his ground, refusing to be budged, letting his anger fuel his limbs but not cloud his mind. He thought he knew the three instructors. He'd believed they were men of impeccable integrity. He'd even set Ike Swenson on a pedestal as a rugged individualist who could do no wrong. And here all three were trying to put Blade out of commission without any regard for the moral or ethical propriety of their actions.

They were doing the same thing he'd done.

They were allowing General Gallagher to mislead them, to trick them into violating their principles of right and wrong. They'd let their conditioned subservience to higher authority pervert their purpose as martial artists.

Damn Gallagher all to hell!

Captain Havoc threw caution to the wind and exerted himself to the utmost, anxious for the Warrior's safety and intent on aiding Blade at all costs. He hit Shibata with a succession of staggering hand blows, and for every one he scored the man in black retaliated. Their silent struggle intensified, their speed increased. Havoc rammed a back fist punch to the spleen, and in return received a tremendous piercing hand stab to his ribs that doubled him over in agony.

Tadashi swept his right knee up, catching the officer in the forehead and sending him crashing to the grass.

I'm losing, Havoc thought, and the realization sparked him to take a desperate gamble. He tried a dragon sweep, his hands braced on the ground for support, and succeeded in slamming the back of his left leg into Shibata and upending the smaller man.

Tadashi fell onto his buttocks and rolled to the right.

In a sudden tactical insight, Havoc perceived a means of achieving victory. He rolled too, following the man in black, and when Shibata stopped and tried to stand he was right there, on his right side with his left leg sweeping around and in. His foot hit Tadashi in the neck and brought the sergeant down again.

Clearly dazed, Shibata sluggishly stood, weaving unsteadily, his hands raised defensively.

Havoc stayed on the ground, rolling once more and lashing out with his right foot, driving his heel into the small man's stomach, causing his opponent to bend in half, bringing Shibata's face closer. He tried another palm heel thrust, and this time he succeeded in landing a solid blow that snapped Tadashi's head back and lifted the man in black from his feet to come down with a thud a yard away.

Instantly Havoc shoved erect and tried to end the clash by swinging a handsword strike at the left side of Shibata's neck. Another blow there should put the martial master totally out of commission. Or so Havoc hoped.

At the last second Tadashi battered the officer's hand to the side and rose, shaking his head, his left hand pressed to his neck.

Havoc adopted the cat stance and was about to attack again when he detected movement out of the corner of his right eye. Thinking that Swenson or Mongeon had come to Shibata's aid, he risked a quick glance and was surprised to discover a woman standing on the sidewalk, watching them with an odd, aloof expression. He knew he'd made a mistake by taking his eyes from his opponent, and he paid for the error a second later when Tadashi delivered a devastating kick to his ribs, causing him to gasp and stagger rearward.

Shibata skipped forward and chopped at the bigger man's throat.

Only Havoc's superbly conditioned reflexes saved him. He deflected the chop, and despite the anguish in his side he rammed his right fist into Tadashi's jaw, then followed through with a roundhouse left, his arm a near-invisible streak.

The punch straightened the man in black, smashing his teeth together and toppling him to the grass. He feebly lifted his head and made a game attempt to stand, then sank flat with a protracted sigh, his eyes closing.

For a few seconds Havoc simply stood there, astounded he had actually defeated one of the best instructors at the Special Forces Academy. His many aches and stinging bruises reminded him of the price he had paid.

"Friend of yours?"

He pivoted at the question, regarding the woman coldly. She wore green slacks and a yellow blouse, both neatly pressed, and had a leather tote bag slung over her left arm. Raven hair cascaded to the small of her slender back. Her eyes were a deep green. "Yes, he is," he answered harshly, then faced the tavern.

"You should rest a bit," the woman suggested. "I saw most of the fight.

You took quite a beating."

"Can't rest," Havoc told her, grunting as he moved toward the front door.

"That thirsty, huh?"

"A friend needs help," Havoc said, clutching his side when a lancing spasm sent waves of agony rippling through his consciousness.

"Let me assist you," the woman offered, stepping over and reaching for his arm.

"I don't need help," Havoc stated, and halted to collect his strength.

"Macho type, I take it?"

"Screw you."

"Not to mention loaded with charm and good manners."

Havoc looked at her, surprised to see a smile on her full red lips, and allowed himself to grin. "Sorry. But I really must get inside this dump. A friend of mine is in serious trouble. He could wind up in the hospital."

"Then let's go," she said, and took a step.

"Maybe it would be best if you stayed outside," Havoc recommended.

"I can't."

"Why not?"

The woman turned to him and displayed all of her dazzling white teeth. "I own this dump."

EIGHTEEN

The Wairior had fought many skilled martial artists in his lifetime. Several had rated as the best of the best. To that short list he would have to add the name of the man called Swenson. The blond fought with a disciplined savagery that bordered on a berserk rage, and his

consummate karate ability rendered him doubly dangerous.

None of the customers bothered to intervene. They stood along the walls of the bar, observing the fight in awed fascination. The bartender had pulled out a notepad and scribbled away whenever a chair or a table was broken.

Blade's forearms were aching terribly. Every block cost him. The calloused edges of Swenson's hands were like clubs; even when parried they caused pain. He'd tried to break through the blond man's defenses, without success. Now he tried a spinning kick that only compelled his foe to skip lightly to the left.

Swenson laughed.

The Warrior formed his hands into leopard paws and waited for the officer to make the next move. In a bizarre sort of way he almost admired the man. Most adversaries were intimidated by Blade's size. Fear defeated them before they even engaged him. But not the blond. Swenson didn't display any fear whatsoever. Instead, he seemed to revel in their battle, to delight in having a foe his equal.

"Getting tired?"

Blade shook his head. "I'm just getting warmed up."

"So am I," Swenson responded, smirking.

"That's nice to hear. I was wondering when you'd get serious. I'd like to work up a sweat."

The blond man snorted. "You know, you're everything I heard you were. Havoc must like serving under you."

"Havoc?"

"Oh, that's right. You don't know. I was one of Mike's instructors at the Special Forces Academy. I taught the kid everything he knows."

The Warrior nodded. "That explains it."

"Explains what?"

"The reason Havoc is so sloppy."

"Bastard," Swenson growled, and sprang in close.

Blade blocked a whirlwind sequence of hand strikes. Any one of them could have caused severe internal damage. He knew the blond man was trying to hospitalize him, and he intended to return the favor. He backed up, letting Swenson come after him, making the officer work harder, hoping to tire his foe.

But Swenson showed no signs of becoming fatigued.

The Warrior's left leg bumped into a chair and he kicked it aside. For a moment he was off balance.

Eager to score, the blond man danced in and tried a sweeping hook with his left leg.

Blade parried and retreated a few feet, his mind feverishly striving to devise a strategy that would insure victory. After having blocked and countered for over two minutes, after repeatedly evading terrific strikes aimed at his nerve centers and pressure points, and after all he had been through with the Warlords, his arms and shoulders were feeling extremely fatigued. He needed a brilliant tactic. Staying on the defensive was foolish and impractical. All he did was block, block, block.

Swenson attempted to break through the giant's guard employing a high round kick.

It was then, as Blade warded off the other's leg with his left arm, that the idea struck him.

What if he stopping blocking?

The Warrior glanced down at himself, verifying his leather vest still covered the Bowies, then started at the officer and smiled.

Swenson, immediately suspicious, stopped his assault and stepped back. "What's so funny?"

"That's for me to know and you to find out."

"Don't think I won't, mister. This has gone on long enough. Here's

where I cut loose."

"Don't do me any favors."

"Let's see how flippant you are after I bust your teeth," Swenson stated, and endeavored to do just that using a jumping drop kick.

Again Blade avoided the blond man's rock-hard foot. Instead of backing off, he moved in and swung both arms in a flurry, keeping his left side toward his opponent. Each time he whipped his left arm forward, he elevated his elbow a bit more than was prudent, exposing a tempting target area between the top of his hip and his lower ribs. Three times he intentionally left himself vulnerable to a hand blow, and on the third try the officer took the bait.

Swenson speared a uraken-shita-tsuki at the giant's side, expecting his fist to make devastating contact with pliant, yielding flesh.

Blade felt the blow, even through his leather vest, and saw the marked astonishment on Swenson's face as the blond man's knuckles cracked against the hilt of his Bowie.

Sliding quickly rearward out of range, Swenson held up his right hand and scowled at the sight of the blood trickling from the first two knuckles. Both were split, revealing the bone underneath. He glared at the Warrior, his features becoming steely. "Damn you," he hissed.

"Want some peroxide?"

"I want your head!" Swenson snapped, and charged in recklessly, his arms pumping.

Blade dodged two swings, and when the blond man tried to connect with his injured right hand again, he drove his own right fist straight forward, not at Swenson's head or throat or torso but directly at that wounded hand, intercepting it, smashing his knuckles against Swenson's.

The crack of the two fists pounding together was heard all across the room.

An inadvertent cry escaped Swenson's lips, and he drew his right arm back swiftly, his face contorted in anguish. He tried to reassert

self-control and assumed a back stance. But by then the Warrior was on him.

Blade snapped his left foot at the officer's right knee, and when Swenson instinctively drew the threatened knee back, he pivoted and slammed his combat boot into the injured hand.

Grimacing, Swenson tucked his right hand against his side and backpedaled.

It was now or never. Blade took two long strides and brought his left foot up, knowing his foe would try to block with the good arm, and the instant the blond man's left arm knifed down he lunged, catching Swenson's wrist in an unbreakable grip. He wrenched on the arm, pulling the officer toward him, and surged his right knee into the instructor's elbow.

A loud pop sounded.

A hint of desperation lining his face, Swenson frantically attempted to jerk his arm free.

Blade willingly obliged, letting go so abruptly that the blond man stumbled. Before Swenson could recover, the Warrior stepped in and launched a malletlike right fist from the level of his thigh, arcing his haymaker into the officer's jaw, the impact lifting Swenson from his feet and sending him toppling onto a table where he went instantly limp.

Sudden silence descended on the tavern.

The Warrior straightened slowly and sighed.

"Hey, you!" the bartender called out.

"What?" Blade replied without bothering to look at the burly barkeeper.

"You owe me two hundred and eighty-seven dollars."

"Don't hold your breath waiting for the money."

"I'm serious, mister. That other guy and you broke three tables and four chairs."

"Get the money from him," Blade said, turning, his voice flat and testy.

"How do I know he can pay?"

"You don't."

"I'm warning you, Blade. I'll call the cops."

"Be my guest."

"Huh?"

"Call the police. I don't care."

"You think I won't?"

The Warrior walked toward the bar. Those patrons in his immediate vicinity scattered. "Not with your jaw broken."

Conspicuous apprehension etched the bartender's countenance and he held his right hand out, palm forward. "Now you just hold on a minute! You can't beat on me."

"Why not? You knew those three men were waiting for me, yet you didn't bother to let me know."

"I had no idea."

"Don't lie," Blade snapped. "I saw you signal to them."

The bartender gulped and backed into the shelves bearing various bottles and glasses. "Hey, man. Don't lose your cool. It's not like I had much choice. That blond guy told me to nod when you showed up, and he's not the kind of guy to take no for an answer. Besides, it's not like they wouldn't have recognized you even without my help."

Blade stopped near the stools. "What's your name?"

"George. George McNair."

"Well, George, if you want to collect the money for the furniture I suggest you send a bill to General Miles Gallagher in Los Angeles. I'll give

you his mailing address."

From the direction of the entrance a new voice intruded into the conversation, the melodious voice of a woman. "That won't be necessary, Blade."

The Warrior pivoted, refusing to betray his surprise at seeing Captain Havoc in the company of a lovely woman with luxurious black hair. "And who are you?" he demanded.

"Katy Morris. I own this tavern." She gazed at the damaged tables and chairs, at the customers standing along the walls, and lastly at the two unconscious men. "You must be hell at parties."

Blade walked toward her. "Did you know these men would be waiting for me?"

"I had no idea," Katy responded, her tone conveying evident sincerity. "I've been gone for a couple of hours, and I know they weren't here when I left."

"She didn't know," McNair declared. "I was the only one working when they showed up."

The Warrior halted a yard from the owner. "You know who I am. Did you overhear the bartender or did Havoc tell you?"

Katy glanced at the captain. "Is that his name? Fits his disposition to a T."

"Don't evade the question," Blade said sternly.

"I'm not," Katy replied, and looking the giant in the eyes. "Athena told me a lot about you. Quite frankly, I've been expecting you to show up sooner or later. I'm amazed it took you this long."

"Are you her sister?"

"No. Cousin. Her dad was the older brother of my dad." She gazed at the bar. "It was my dad who left me this place when he died from a heart attack."

"What's your connection to Phil Wentworth?"

Katy Morris sighed and gestured at the broken tables. "Look, I'll gladly answer all of your questions. But do you mind if I have this mess cleaned up first? My customers can't stand around all night twiddling their thumbs while you interrogate me."

"Go ahead," Blade said, and watched her move toward the bar. He shifted his attention to Havoc. "What happened to Shibata?"

"He's currently indisposed."

"Are the others here with you?"

"I came alone."

"Did you happen to get my message?"

The captain slowly nodded. "Yeah. Jeffries told all of us that we were confined to quarters."

"Did he happen to mention what would happen to anyone who left the Facility?"

Again Havoc nodded.

"And you did so anyway?"

"I had no choice. Gallagher told me he'd arranged a suitable reception for you, as he put it," Havoc said, staring at Mongeon. "I figure he intended for Swenson, Shibata, and Mongeon to beat the stuffing out of you, probably break a few bones in the process. By tomorrow the newspapers would have been plastered with the news that you'd been hospitalized after being beaten in a barroom brawl. He hoped to tarnish your credibility with the public."

"He went to all this trouble to prevent me from uncovering the truth about Athena Morris's death?"

"No. It goes deeper than that."

"Explain."

"General Gallagher hates your guts. He wants to discredit the Force and humiliate you."

"And how would you know?"

Havoc averted his gaze. "He told me." His shoulders slumped and he coughed lightly. "You see, I joined the Force under false pretenses. I wanted to get even with you for Jimmy's death. And I agreed to help the general by working undercover for him, so to speak. I was supposed to gather evidence of your incompetence so he could present a concrete case to the Federation leaders."

The Warrior listened attentively, his face impassive.

"I'm revealing all this now because it no longer matters. I've informed the good general that I won't do his dirty work for him," Havoc said, and looked at the giant. "I misjudged you. I believed you were guilty of gross misjudgment by having the Force become involved in that unauthorized mission in Canada. I reasoned that Jimmy would still be alive if you hadn't. But during the months I've been on the team, I've learned the truth about you. You care about your people. You believe in preserving the Federation at all costs. And you're willing to go anywhere to protect innocent lives, even onto non-Federation territory."

"This explains a lot," Blade said.

"It does?"

"Yes. It explains the rather secretive conversations Gallagher and you have had on a few of his visits to the Facility. It explains why you tried to take my head off the first time we sparred. And it explains your reclusive behavior at times."

Havoc bowed his head. "I'm sorry. I deceived you and disgraced myself."

"I can imagine the courage it took to admit the truth to me," the Warrior commented.

"And I can understand how you must feel after learning of my betrayal. I'll submit my official resignation after we return to L.A."

"Are you sure you want to do that?"

"You can't have a traitor like me on the team. Once the others learn

about my deception, they'll despise me," Havoc stated, and frowned. "I can't say as I blame them."

Blade studied the officer for several seconds, noting the anxiety and the sorrow on Havoc's downcast face. "Maybe you should—" he began, and was interrupted by Katy Morris rejoining them.

"Now you can ask all the questions you want," she announced. "George will take care of your unconscious friends, and I've ordered a round of drinks for everyone on the house."

"Come on, folks!" the bartender called out. "Free drinks for anyone who wants one!"

Katy took a step toward the entrance. "Listen, how about if we go somewhere else to talk? Somewhere quiet where we won't be disturbed? Once your dancing partners revive, they might cause you more trouble."

"Do you have a place in mind?" Blade asked.

"I know a quaint Italian restaurant four blocks from here. We can get a booth, have a drink, and get down to cases."

"Lead the way," Blade said.

"What about me?" Havoc inquired. "Should I head back to L.A. now, sir?"

"No. You'll stick with me for the time being."

"As you wish."

The Warrior let the others go first. He glanced at Swenson as he went out the door, grinning at the thought of Gallagher's reaction when the general learned the outcome of the incident, and strode into the night. To his surprise, both Havoc and Morris had halted and were standing stock still. He stopped, then gazed past them.

There were four men, each wearing a black leather jacket, three armed with shotguns, the fourth apparently unarmed. The latter stood on the walk, grinning broadly. His spiked hair had been dyed red and blue. A gold earring hung from his right ear lobe. The front of the white

T-shirt under his jacket depicted a naked woman chained to a wall. Under the woman's feet was a caption: "AIN'T LOVE GRAND?" He took a few paces and chuckled. "Surprise, surprise!"

"Who the hell are you?" Katy snapped. "What do you want?"

Earring snickered and pointed at the giant. "He knows who we are, lady."

"What do you want?" Katy repeated. The man twisted and pointed at a black van parked at the curb. "It's party time, Momma!" The trio bearing shotguns laughed.

NINETEEN

"Will someone tell me what this is all about?" Katy Morris demanded angrily.

"Why don't you ask him?" Earring rejoined, and nodded at the Warrior. "After all, he's the reason you're going to be snuffed."

Blade leaned his back against the van's rear doors and draped his arms over his knees. He glanced to his left at the woman, then to his right at Captain Havoc. Like him, they had been shoved into the vehicle at gunpoint and forced to sit facing the comfortably furnished interior. Red carpeting covered the floor. Wooden paneling adorned the sides. On a small couch sat two of the gunners. Across from them sat Earring. The third gunner was in the front passenger seat. A fifth tough drove. Both front windows were down.

"What's going on?" Katy asked, turned toward him.

"These gentlemen are Pagan Warlords. I had a run-in with a few of their gang in Los Angeles, and apparently the word has gone out to every Warlord in the state to be on the lookout for me," Blade explained.

Earring snorted and slapped his thigh. "You had a run-in with a few of us? Is that how you describe offing about two dozen of our brothers?" He looked at Katy. "This geek isn't telling you the whole story, babe. He killed the head of our L. A. chapter and all the others because he likes to play hero. Seems he saved some worthless bag bimbo from our boys,

then declared war on us."

"I was content to leave well enough alone after I defended the bag lady," Blade mentioned. "Mickey and the rest of your so-called brothers were the ones who declared war on me."

Katy glanced at Earring. "How did you know Blade was in San Francisco? How did you know where to find him?"

"There's the funny part," Earring said, and accordingly tittered. "We just got the word about Mickey an hour or so ago. One of our boys went out to the airport to pick up a shipment of coke a pilot friend of ours delivered. And what do you know! While Johnny was out there, he saw one of those fancy jets land and out came the colossus here. Well, Johnny's never been extra bright, so he came into the city and told us instead of following Blade."

"Then how did you know where to find him?" Katy reiterated.

"I'm getting to that." Earring beamed, as if about to reveal a great revelation. "A while ago another one of those fancy jets comes streaking in over the city. Everybody for miles around saw it. One of our gang happened to be in the neighborhood when it came down. He trailed the army goon to the tavern, then phoned me. End of story."

"And who might you be?"

"My friends call me Spike."

"I wonder why," Captain Havoc interjected dryly.

"You've got a smart mouth, sucker," Spike snapped. "We'll see how smart you are after I get through cutting your tongue out."

Blade leaned forward, feeling the reassuring pressure of his concealed Bowies under his arms. Thankfully, the Warlords hadn't bothered to frisk the three of them before loading them into the van. "It's me you want, Spike," he declared. "Why don't you let these other two go?"

"No can do, chuckles," Spike responded. "They've seen our faces and know my name."

"Who are you trying to kid?" Havoc queried sarcastically. "You planned to kill us the moment we walked outside the tavern with Blade."

"True," Spike admitted, and grinned.

"Where are you taking us?" Blade asked, gazing at the driver. He estimated the vehicle had been traveling in a generally westward direction for ten minutes.

"Golden Gate Park."

"Why there?" Katy asked.

"Come on, lady. Why do you think? Golden Gate Park has over a thousand acres of woods."

"Plenty of places to stash our bodies," Havoc said. Then he added bitterly, "Am I right, creep?"

The Pagan called Spike glared at the officer for a moment. "You know, bastard, we'll off you first just for the fun of it. How does that sound?"

"You're a brave man when you have three shotguns backing you up," Havoc replied. "Why don't the two of us go at it man-to-man?"

"Why should I bother?" Spike retorted. "I got nothing to prove."

"Are you the head of the Pagans' San Francisco chapter?" Blade inquired.

"How'd you guess?"

"You're obviously the brains of the outfit."

Spike took the remark as a compliment. "It's that obvious, huh?"

"Sure. I can see the brown streaks running out your ears."

Five seconds elapsed in which the head Warlord's brow knit in confusion. Suddenly he comprehended the insult, and he took a quick stride and backhanded the Warrior across the mouth. "You son of a bitch! I'm going to make you beg for mercy before you die."

Blade had remained immobile the whole time, even when the hand struck him. Now he grinned, despite the acute stinging in both lips, and spoke calmly. "Is that the best you can do?"

Spike almost flew into the giant. He clenched his fists and was about to lunge when one of the gunners addressed him.

"Chill out, man! We don't want to start anything while the van is moving, do we? We're still in heavy traffic. The fuzz might notice."

After a moment's consideration, Spike returned to his seat. He jabbed his left forefinger at the Warrior. "Nobody messes with me, man! You're all mine when we reach the park. I'll make you sorry you were ever born."

Blade looked at Havoc. "Is it my imagination or is there a lot of hot air in this van?"

"They must have the heater on," the officer responded.

"A couple of funny guys," Spike growled. "We'll see who has the last laugh."

Although he kept his body motionless, Blade's mind raced. There had to be a way to turn the tables on the Warlords. Two Bowie knives against three shotguns were formidable odds. He needed a ruse, a tactic to render the Pagans' firepower ineffective. To make a move while trapped in the confines of the van rated as certain suicide. He decided to bide his time and wait for an opportunity to develop.

Several more minutes elapsed. The driver turned onto a street with reduced traffic, then turned again into a large parking lot. He pulled into a space situated in the deepest darkness, shifted into Park, and killed the engine.

Blade hoped the interior lights would go out, but they stayed on. In the dim yellow glow the hard faces of the Warlords resembled masks of death.

"Here's the way we're going to work this," Spike stated, his hate-filled eyes on the giant. "You'll open the back doors, then get out. Your friends will go next, then us. If any of you try anything, we'll blow all three of

you away. Understand?"

"Understood," Blade said.

"Good," Spike said, and glanced at the driver. "Where's the flashlight?"

"Right here," the man answered, and opened the glove compartment. He removed a black flashlight and handed it over.

Spike nodded at the Warrior. "Open the damn doors. And remember what I told you."

Blade rose until he was stooped over, his broad shoulders scraping the ceiling, and rotated. He gripped the door handles, flicked a meaningful glance at Havoc and Morris, hoping they would realize he was about to do something unexpected, and shoved the doors wide.

The parking lot stretched off to the right. There were no vehicles parked in the immediate vicinity of the van. To the left, not 20 feet away, lay an expanse of grass and trees. Golden Gate Park.

"Outside," Spike directed. "And don't do anything you'll regret."

Blade casually reached up and gripped the edge of the roof, as if to steady himself before stepping down. He thought of the countless hours he'd spent during his teen years working out on the makeshift set of rings and parallel bars he'd constructed using photographs in a sports book in the Family library as a guide. Now all those hours were about to reap a priceless dividend.

"Hurry up, lard-ass," Spike snapped.

"Hold your horses," Blade responded idly, and lifted his left leg to give the impression he was about to step down. Instead, he tensed his massive arms and whipped his legs up and around, flipping onto the top of the van in a fluid, acrobatic display of gymnastic prowess. He immediately let go, spun, and made for the front of the van, listening to the reaction inside.

"What the hell!" Spike blurted. "Nobody else moves!" he added.

Blade came to the edge near the windshield and crouched, drawing his Bowies. He could hear Spike cursing a blue streak, then there was a moment's silence.

"Hey, Warrior!" The Warlord called out. "You don't hear so good, do you?"

Inching to the left, Blade perched directly above the driver's window.

"I know you're up there," Spike said. "If you think any of us are coming out there so you can jump us, you're nuts."

Blade eased forward until he glimpsed the driver's left arm.

"You'd best get your butt back in here or we'll waste the broad and the Army geek," Spike warned.

The Warrior clenched both Bowies tightly.

"Did you hear me?" Spike demanded.

Blade rested his chest on the roof, held the knives next to his ears, and uncoiled, striking with a speed that would have done credit to a king cobra, spearing both Bowies down and in.

Twisted in his seat, staring at Spike, the driver was candy. Both blades sliced into his neck, eliciting a terrified shriek, and he involuntarily stiffened.

A belated "Look out!" came from the gunner in the passenger seat, and he tried to bring the shotgun to bear.

But the Warrior was already out of sight, having wrenched the dripping Bowies out and risen to a crouch.

Shouts and oaths came from within the van.

Blade slid over to the passenger side.

"Calm down! Calm down!" Spike shouted. "Vic, hold Leo down. He's getting blood all over the place!"

Bending slowly down from the waist, Blade saw the gunner trying to

restrain the wildly thrashing driver. A crimson geyser sprayed from the dying Warlord's neck. Lying on the gunner's lap was an Ithaca Model 37 12-gauge. The sight of the gun prompted Blade to change his mind about duplicating the tactic he'd used to take out the driver. He replaced the Bowies in their sheaths, then reached into his left front pocket and removed four coins. Two were quarters minted during the prewar era, the others pennies produced since the holocaust. The Free State of California used prewar vintage money as legal tender in addition to the currency and coins turned out by the former federal mint in San Francisco.

"Let's kill these two!" one of the Pagans suggested loudly.

"Not yet, stupid," Spike hissed.

"Why the hell not?"

"We need them as leverage."

Blade transferred the coins to his right hand and waited, vigilantly watching the rear of the vehicle in case one of the Warlords should try to nail him.

"Listen, you big bastard!" Spike yelled venomously. "You come down now!"

The Warrior kept quiet, counted to three, and threw the coins toward the parking lot. The Pagans were on edge, waiting for his reply. He hoped the sound of the coins striking the asphalt would distract them momentarily, and the moment he heard the metallic clatter he lunged through the window, glimpsing Spike and three gunners, all four of whom were peering intently in the direction of the noise. His right hand closed on the shotgun, and in a twinkling he was back on the roof. A quick check verified a shell occupied the chamber.

"He grabbed my piece!" the gunner in the front seat cried.

"Damn it! Can't any of you do anything right?" Spike barked. "Forget about Leo. Get us the hell out of there."

"But that big son of a bitch is still on the roof."

"He won't be for long."

Almost tempted to grin at the Warlords' amateurish insolence, Blade slid to the driver's side, heard a shuffling sound and a grunt as the Pagan named Vic began to haul the driver from the seat, and dropped to the ground. He landed upright, not six inches from the window, and saw the petrified expression on Vic as he materialized.

"Here he is!" Vic screeched.

Blade shot him, firing from the hip, the barrel slanted upward. The blast caught the gunner in the face and blew away his nose and eyes, the impact slamming the man against the passenger door.

"Son of a bitch!" Spike cried shrilly.

The Warrior ducked low and ran around the front of the van. Treading softly, he dashed to the rear, working the slide action, and he was about to burst into the open when he spied them.

Katy Morris stood with her arms at her side not four feet away, anxiety lining her fair features. Behind her, pressing a butterfly knife to her throat, screened by her body, was Spike. His gaze darted from side to side and up at the roof.

Blade frowned, debating whether to risk a shot. He could see Spike's forehead clearly. With a rifle such a shot would be easy. But a shotgun loaded with a 12-gauge shell was like a cannon primed with grapeshot. He undoubtedly would kill the Pagan, but the shot would also slay Katy.

"The bitch dies if you don't step out here, Warrior!" Spike bellowed. "And I mean right this second!"

There was no choice. Blade stepped cautiously to the left, glancing at the interior of the van to find Captain Havoc on his knees at the very back, facing outward. Both remaining gunners had their shotguns trained on the officer's head.

Spike shifted, trying to make himself invisible, exposing just his arms and part of his face, his nose and his right eye. "There you are. Drop the shotgun or I cut the bimbo."

"If you do, I'll shoot you," Blade promised, stalling. He looked at Havoc and gave a barely perceptible nod.

"And my boys will off the geek and you," Spike said. "Play it smart. Drop the damn gun."

Nodding, the Warrior sighed and extended his right arm toward the ground, letting them believe he was going to comply. If he did so, though, the Pagans would kill all three of them within minutes, if not seconds. His last hope of disposing of the Warlords was right then and there. Either his improvised strategy worked—or Jenny became a widow.

"Now you're being bright," Spike assured him, grinning.

Blade smiled. "I couldn't agree more," he responded, and tilted the Ithaca at the nearest gunner, holding the shotgun with one hand, and fired. The recoil, which could severely jar an average-sized person, barely fazed him.

The shot perforated the Warlord's cranium and blew the back of his head all over the inside of the van. Clumps of hair and bits of skin peppered the carpet.

Instantly Blade leaped forward, and as his head was turning he caught sight of Captain Havoc in motion, driving an elbow into the groin of the sole gunner, who in turn was trying to bring his weapon to bear on the Warrior. And then Blade was almost upon Katy and Spike, and all he could do was pray that Havoc terminated the gunner because he had his hands full.

Uttering a feral growl, Spike drew the butterfly knife back, intending to spear the tip into the woman's neck.

Katy Morris proved to be surprisingly resilient. She suddenly tore herself loose and slipped out of the Warlord's grasp, stumbling to her knees as she did.

Spike tried to nail her, lancing the butterfly knife at a point between her shoulder blades.

But Blade was there, blocking the knife strike with his left forearm, his right hand drawing the corresponding Bowie out and sweeping the big

blade straight into the Pagan leader's chest, all the way to the hilt. He held on fast as Spike gurgled and convulsed, clamping his left hand on the Warlord's knife arm.

"You... you... you," Spike stammered, his facial muscles twitching, his lips curled in a snarl.

Warm blood flowed over the Warrior's right hand. He looked the Pagan in the eyes and spoke without a trace of sarcasm. "Give my regards to Mickey."

Spike wheezed and went limp, his countenance locked in shock at his demise.

Blade glanced at the van, dreading the worst. He needn't have worried. The last gunner lay on the floor, throat crushed, glazing eyes wide.

Captain Havoc held a shotgun. "What now, sir?" he inquired.

"We dump these bodies on the grass and borrow the van for a while."

"You can take me back to my tavern," Katy said softly, staring at the dead Spike.

"No," Blade stated, pulling the Bowie out.

"No?"

"You know the reason I came to San Francisco. You'll take us now."

"I can't," Katy protested. "General Gallagher will have a fit."

"Leave Gallagher to me," Blade told her. "I can take care of him."

Katy thoughtfully regarded the corpses. "Yes, I bet you can, at that."

"So where do we go?"

EPILOGUE

Phil Wentworth stood on the pier next to the Neptune and nervously

observed the man and woman who were on board the yacht as they attended to last-minute tasks. He tapped his right foot, wishing they would hurry. This cloak-and-dagger business, he realized, definitely wasn't his cup of tea.

First there had been the brainstorm to contact the Coast Guard. He'd disliked deceiving them, and felt guilty whenever he dwelled on how he'd claimed her father and mother had been seriously hurt in a car crash and she was needed right away. Ever courteous, ever professional, and anxious to please such a prominent person as himself, the Coast Guard had sent out two patrol boats and a helicopter.

Thank God the copter had found the Neptune!

Who would have guessed the couple were a mere half mile out, at anchor, enjoying a romantic, idyllic interlude?

Wentworth knew he'd seen the Neptune earlier that very day, while out on routine patrol, and recalled the general area in which the yacht had been sailing. If not for the officer...

The man and the woman came onto the pier and walked toward him.

"Hi, Phil," she called out when they were still ten feet off.

"Hi," he replied in a desultory fashion.

She studied him, noting his apprehension, her left arm around the slim waist of her handsome companion. Dressed in a white top and white shorts, her fine brown hair hanging to the small of her back, she radiated vitality and beauty. Her face was particularly attractive, distinguished by alert brown eyes, high cheekbones, and a mouth any man would find delectable.

"You took your sweet time getting back," Phil chided her.

"What's this all about?" she inquired. "I was shocked when the Coast Guard officer shouted down to us through a bullhorn and told me my mom and dad were in a car accident." She paused. "I couldn't understand what was going on since they both died years ago. And then he mentioned that you were waiting for me at this pier, and I had a fair idea."

Wentworth glanced at the companion and pursed his lips.

"You can talk in front of Earl. He and I have no secrets from each other," she assured him.

"Very well. I'll put it to you bluntly. He's on to us."

The woman's vitality seemed to drain from her limbs. She gazed at a nearby lamppost, then overhead at the stars. "I knew he'd be, eventually. Nothing gets past him."

"Miles is fit to be tied."

"I can imagine."

"He wants you to head for the hills, literally. There must be a cabin somewhere in the mountains you can use as a hiding place till this blows over."

"What good will running do?"

"We're trying to throw him off the scent. We've already covered our tracks at the Times. Introduced him to a ringer. And I talked to Katy earlier tonight. To tell you the truth, I don't know if we can trust her. She has strong scruples against lying."

"So did I, once," the woman commented wistfully.

"You didn't have many options, if memory serves," Wentworth said, trying to soothe her.

"I could have handled it differently. I was a coward."

"No one blames you."

The corners of her mouth tried to touch her chin. "No one has to. I blame myself every time I look in the mirror."

"What's done is done," Wentworth stated, and nodded at the shore. "Shall we go? I have a car. I'll take you anywhere you want to go."

"Mars?"

"Not quite that far, I'm afraid," Wentworth answered, smiling.

"Then it's a waste of time. He'll find me. You don't know him like I do. He'll track me down to the ends of the earth."

"Then we haven't a second to lose." Wentworth turned and walked briskly along the pier.

"Is he still in L.A.?" she asked from right behind him.

"I don't know. The last I talked to Miles, he was."

"If he discovers that you've been sending my checks to Katy, we're sunk."

"Don't worry. He'll never learn the truth," Wentworth said.

"I wouldn't count on that," declared a deep voice from directly ahead.

Phil Wentworth halted, feeling chilled to the bone as a huge figure detached itself from the shadow of a docked ketch and stepped to the center of the pier, blocking their path.

"Oh, God," the woman said, then quickly recovered her composure. "Hello, Blade."

The Warrior nodded grimly. "Hello, Athena."