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Seattle Run

#14 in the Endworld series

by David L. Robbins

PROLOGUE

High ground!

He needed high ground!

Captain Nathan Dale paused, perspiration beading his furrowed brow despite the chill January breeze, and scanned his surroundings for a suitable spot. His tattered uniform, now little more than strips of fabric clinging to his battered, pale skin, did nothing to ward off the cold. He surveyed the decayed, dilapidated structures nearest him, seeking somewhere high above the ruins of the city once known as Seattle to increase his chance of success.

Hurry! his mind shrieked.

Manta will be after you!

Dale's naked feet padded on the cracked sidewalk as he hurried to the northwest, away from the Humarium, away from Pier 59. How far had he gone? he wondered.

Not far enough.

From the rear, perhaps 50 yards distant, wafted a loud, shrill whistle.

They were coming after him!

Frowning in frustration, Dale rounded a corner and glanced to the north. A cluster of buildings met his gaze, and even in the dark he recognized the configuration of the architectural marvel dominating the gloomy, oppressive landscape: the Space Needle!

Another whistle sounded behind him.

The Space Needle would be ideal for his purpose! Dale ran toward the Needle, feeling the backpack he'd stolen sway back and forth as the shortwave inside shifted with each step. He should have adjusted the straps tighter, but there simply hadn't been time.

The wind increased, stirring his long brown hair.

Dale vividly recalled the first time he'd seen the Space Needle, as his ship, the destroyer CN 003, had sailed into Elliott Bay. During the ship's navigation of Puget Sound he had been preoccupied on the bridge, and he hadn't bothered to note any of the landmarks until the destroyer had passed West Point. Now, as he jogged in the direction of his possible salvation. Dale tried to remember all he could about this particular section of the former metropolis. Think! he goaded himself. He'd attended several briefings on the layout of Seattle before departing San Francisco, and the pertinent facts came back to him in a rush as he passed the benighted Pacific Science Center.

The Space Needle was 605 feet high, perfect to broadcast from. It was situated in the 74-acre Seattle Center, or what was left of the Center after more than a century of abandoned neglect. Most of the buildings had been extensively damaged by the elements during the intervening 105 years. The quarter moon overhead provided scant illumination, just enough to accentuate the stark barrenness of the relics from a bygone era and emphasize the glory which once was.

A feral dog howled far off to the east.

Dale slowed slightly, reminding himself not to become careless. Manta

and his cronies weren't the only danger lurking in Seattle; there were the Sharks, the wild animals, and of course, the bestial mutants in their many bizarre shapes and sizes. He certainly didn't want to blunder into one of them, not at night, not when he was unarmed. Fortunately, the Sharks seldom ventured west of Interstate 5, and the wild animals and their genetically deviate kin, the mutated fauna so prevalent since World War Three, were not very numerous near the water.

Manta and company saw to that.

Dale's chest was aching, the consequence of his prolonged imprisonment. Four months of improper nutrition and enforced labor had taken their toll on his once-robust physique. An acute pain lanced his left side as he neared his destination.

The Space Needle seemed to reach the very stars. The saucer-shaped dome at the top, like the rest of Seattle, was enveloped by an inky nocturnal veil. The metal tower supporting the dome, once polished and gleaming as a lure to countless tourists, had long since lost its luster, and the concave framework appeared to be tilting several degrees to the west.

Dale stopped at the base of the Needle, catching his breath, doubled over. How in the world was he going to get to the top? Broadcasting from the Needle's pinnacle would serve to minimize potential interference from the nearby structures, but the task of ascending the tower without the aid of an elevator promised to tax his diminished strength to the utmost.

But what other choice did he have?

None.

Dale moved along the bottom of the tower, seeking an entrance. He found a door ajar and halted, listening. His brown eyes detected a line of faint black lettering on the light-colored door, barely visible but legible if he placed his nose next to the large faded print. NO ADMITTANCE. EMPLOYEES ONLY.

Where did it lead?

Dale cautiously entered the tower and was elated to discover a flight of stairs. He craned his neck, trying to see the underside of the dome, but the Stygian shadows swallowed up everything more than 20 feet overhead.

Was anyone... or anything... in the tower?

There was only one way to find out.

Dale squared his slim shoulders and started up the stairs. The air inside the tower was muggy, making breathing difficult. He ignored the discomfort as he forged ever upward, speculating on whether his gambit would pay off. What were the odds someone would be listening when he broadcast his Mayday? Shortwave sets were scarce, even in California, and the number of shortwave enthusiasts had drastically dwindled after the war. There were perhaps two dozen functional sets in all of California, but if just one shortwave operator was monitoring the airwaves, then the hope of a rescue, however slim the hope might be, outweighed the risks. One of the hams, after all, had first monitored an S.O.S. coming from Seattle.

A long time passed without a hint of pursuit.

A sudden draft of frigid air brought Dale up short. He gazed upward, surprised to see the outline of the underside of the dome not more than 15 feet away. He was almost there! Excited, he hurried to the top of the stairwell and found another open door. This one afforded access to the dome. Even in the dim light, he could distinguish the jumble of upended and broken furniture and other debris littering the interior. He walked to the right, toward the windows ringing the former revolving restaurant, and a fresh breeze tingled his skin and ruffled his beard. For a moment he was distracted, wishing he had a razor. Four months without shaving had produced a long mustache and a bushy beard, neither of which he liked. The wind increased as he neared the windows. His eyes narrowed as he noticed many of the panes were broken or missing.

Now was the time!

Dale halted and quickly unslung the backpack. He opened the top flap, then nastily removed the shortwave unit. This particular model had been manufactured shortly before the war, using the ultimate in prewar state-of-the-art technology and miniature components. Unlike its bulky predecessors, which had taken up a lot of space and required a big external antenna, this streamlined, compact model incorporated an antenna into its housing. And unlike the earlier versions, which had relied on conventional AC electric outlets, this unit was energized by an incredibly powerful battery.

What was that?

Dale stiffened, listening. He thought he'd heard a thumping noise emanating from the bowels of the tower.

The gillmen?

Dale hastily flicked on the POWER button, and the dials and indicators became aglow with a pale greenish light. He detached the silver pencil mike from its holder and raised it to his lips. A hasty check of the meters verified the unit was operating properly. Static crackled from the small square speaker located in the upper right-hand corner of the unit.

Dale took a deep breath. "Mayday!" he began. "Mayday! This is a Mayday call! Mayday!"

The static sounded like frying bacon.

"Mayday! Mayday! Can anyone hear me?"

Apparently no one did. The static continued to issue from the speaker.

"Mayday! Mayday! Does anyone have their ears on?" Dale implored, crossing the first two fingers on his left hand. "Please! Does anyone have their ears on?"

The static was abruptly, unexpectedly replaced by a low voice laced with a touch of Western tang. "Of course I've got my ears on my head, you cow chip. Where the heck else would they be?"

Dale gaped at the shortwave, stunned. Someone had heard him!

"Are you still there, pardner?" asked the voice, "If you like the notion, we can shoot the breeze a bit."

"Mayday!" Dale blurted, afraid he would lost contact. "This is a Mayday!"

"There you go again," the man at the other end commented. "This isn't May, you ding-a-ling. This is the month of January. Didn't your ma ever teach you how to tell what month it is? May is the one with all the flowers."

"No! Please! You don't understand!" Dale exclaimed. "This is a Mayday call! It means I have an emergency!"

"An emergency? Is that what Mayday means? I don't know radio lingo. I've never talked on one before," the man said.

"We need help!" Dale declared.

"Tell me all about it," the man advised. "But first, I'd like to know who the dickens I'm chattin' with."

"Dale. My name is Captain Nathan Dale."

"Howdy. My handle is Hickok," the man said. "Now what's this business about you needin' help?"

"There are hundreds of us, men, women, and children, being held prisoner by a mutant!" Dale explained. "We need to be rescued."

"Where are you callin' from?" Hickok asked.

"Seattle," Dale answered. "Where are you?"

"Minnesota," Hickok replied. "Northern Minnesota, to be exact. Near what was once Lake Bronson State Park. From the Home."

"From your home?" Dale repeated, wondering if this Hickok was a ham radio operator.

"Not a home," Hickok corrected him. "*The* Home. It's the name of the compound where I live."

"Are you a ham?" Dale queried.

There was a pause before Hickok responded. "Some folks might disagree, but no, I don't think I am. I'm not much for showin' off."

"No," Dale said impatiently. "Not that kind of ham. Are you a ham radio operator?"

"Didn't you hear me?" Hickok rejoined. "If I don't show off in person, I'm not likely to do it on the radio, now am I?"

Dale gripped the microphone in annoyance. What was with this guy? Was Hickok playing games, or was he really a simpleton? Dale decided to try another tack. "What kind of set do you have?"

"Set?" Hickok replied quizzically.

"Yes! The set you're using now!" Dale prompted. "What kind is it?"

There was another pause before Hickok answered. "It's called a radio. Haven't you ever used one of these contraptions before?"

Dale suppressed an urge to scream. "I know what it is. But can you send as well as receive? Can you relay a message to California?"

"California?"

"Yes. I need to have word relayed to Governor Melnick. He must be told about the *Cutterhawk*, about Mama!" Dale said urgently.

"Governor Melnick? I know him," Hickok stated. "I met him when I was in California last week."

"You know—" Dale began, then froze as a penetrating whistle sounded from the direction of the stairwell. He was running out of time! "Listen, Hickok! You've got to help me! To help us! Get word to Governor Melnick! Tell him the *Cutterhawk* was taken, that we hit a mine. Tell him we're being held by a mutant called Manta. The S.O.S. we picked up was phony, a ruse Manta uses to lure in victims."

"Calm down," Hickok said. "Don't you worry none. If you need help, my pards and I will bail you out."

"Contact Melnick!" Dale reiterated. "Warn the governor about Manta! The bastard uses humans as slaves! And if we don't cooperate, we're fed to—" His words caught in his throat as a footstep padded on the floor behind him.

"Fed to what?" Hickok asked.

Dale whirled, expecting one of the mutants, a gillman or gillwoman.

It was Manta, his distinct outline unmistakable, a black form against the backdrop of the room.

"Dale? Are you there?" came Hickok's voice from the speaker.

"You!" Dale exclaimed, forgetting the mike was still on.

"Yeah, it's me," Hickok said. "Who were you expecting? The Lone Ranger?"

"You're too late!" Dale declared triumphantly. "I've called for help!"

Manta moved closer.

"Who the blazes are you talkin' to?" Hickok questioned.

"Your jig is up!" Dale gloated. "They're on to you now!"

Manta spoke, his voice sibilant and raspy. "So?"

"Dale! Who's that?" Hickok queried.

Manta suddenly reached out with his right hand, gripping Dale's throat, his nails digging into the officer's flesh.

"Dale?" Hickok said.

Dale thrashed and squirmed, dropping the mike, striving to break free.

The creature called Manta slowly lifted the human into the air, his shadowy figure blending with the night. "Do you think I care, foolish one? Let them come! They can't stop me! Nothing can stop me!"

Dale bucked and kicked, gasping for breath.

"Who's that?" Hickok demanded. "Dale? What's going on? Are you all right?"

Mama's face tilted toward the shortwave. "No, Mr. Dale is not all right. He is... indisposed... at the moment."

Dale was wheezing and gagging.

"Who are you?" Hickok inquired.

"I am Manta," the creature stated imperiously.

"The joker Dale was tellin' me about? The one usin' humans as slaves?" Hickok asked.

"What other use is there for human scum?" Manta commented.

Dale's arms dropped to his sides and he went limp.

"Where's Dale?" Hickok wanted to know. "What have you done to him? He'd better be in one piece when I get there, or I'll make you regret the day you were born!"

"Are you threatening me, human?" Manta asked.

"You bet your ass I am!" Hickok responded. "I'm comin' after you, you mangy coyote!"

"I'll look forward to meeting you," Manta commented sarcastically. "In fact, on behalf of the Brethren, allow me to extend a formal invitation. Come to Seattle, if you wish. Bring your friends, why don't you?" He dropped the unconscious officer onto the floor.

"We'll come, all right!" Hickok vowed. "Count on it!"

"I am," Manta stated.

"You are?" Hickok said, puzzled.

"Of course," Manta affirmed. "I can always use more kelp harvesters."

"Kelp harvesters? What are they? And who's the Brethren?" Hickok questioned.

"Come to Seattle and find out," Manta declared arrogantly. So saying, he lifted his right foot and brought it down on top of the shortwave, his calloused heel smashing the unit in one violent, powerful blow. The set sparked and popped for a moment, then fell silent. Manta's sable silhouette slraightened. "So you conlacted would-be rescuers?" he addressed the human at his feet, then snickered. "I must assemble the Brethren. We must insure your liberators receive the reception they deserve!"

A gust of wind howled through the Space Needle.

Chapter One

The VTOL arced in out of the southwest, a gleaming, streaking dagger in the azure sky, swooping low over the forest, the pilot unerringly on course. "One minute to ETA," he announced for the benefit of his sole passenger.

That passenger, a giant of a man attired in a black leather vest, green fatigue pants, and black combat boots, stared at the countryside sweeping past below with a mixture of fascination and apprehension. "I'll never get used to this," he absently mumbled, momentarily forgetting every word he spoke was amplified by his helmet mike and picked up by the pilot's helmet.

"Give yourself some time, Blade," the pilot promptly responded, chuckling. "This is only the second time you've flown in one of these babies."

"I could fly in a Hurricane a hundred times, Laslo," Blade remarked, "and I'll never get used to what this feels like."

Captain Peter Laslo laughed. "It is mind-boggling, isn't it?"

"You don't know the half of it," Blade mentioned, gazing to the north, catching sight of his white helmet reflected in the aircraft's windshield.

"Do you want to go straight in or give your friends at the Home a show?" Captain Laslo inquired.

Blade grinned. "Give them a show. It isn't every day they get to see a functional jet. They've only seen this one twice before, when you flew here to take Plato, Hickok, and myself to the summit meeting in Anaheim, and when you brought Plato and Hickok back four days ago. So give them a treat."

"Will do," Laslo said.

The Hurricane roared over the Home at 647 miles an hour, then banked to the east, its engines thundering.

Craning his neck, Blade caught a glimpse of the survivalist compound in which he had been raised. The Home. The brainchild of a man named Kurt Carpenter, the 30-acre compound had been constructed prior to World War Three. Situated in extreme northwest Minnesota, surrounded by brick walls 20 feet high capped with barbed wire, and containing six massive concrete structures designed to withstand nuclear and chemical warfare toxins, the Home, as Carpenter had dubbed the site, had survived the insanity of the "final" holocaust. For a century after the war the descendants of Carpenter's followers, those whom he had affectionately christened as his Family, had kept to themselves, seldom venturing far afield, isolated from the rest of the world. Only within the last five years, Blade reflected, had the Family undertaken to explore a world environmentally, culturally, and biologically deranged by humankind's ultimate folly.

With astonishing results.

Blade's mind reviewed the highlights as the Hurricane arched toward the Home. There had been enemies galore: the Trolls, the Watchers, the Brutes, the Wacks, the Doktor and his personal army of genetically engineered mutations, the Reds, the Zombies, and more. And the Family had made friends too, had found allies in the struggle to restore some semblance of civilization to the ravaged planet. Those allies included the Flathead Indians in Montana, the superb horsemen known as the Cavalry in the Dakota Territory, the Clan and the Moles —both based in Minnesota, the Civilized Zone in the Midwest, and finally the most recent addition, the Free State of California. Including the Family, all seven factions had banded together to form the Freedom Federation, a mutual alliance of self-preservation. And as the head of the Federation's newly appointed tactical strike squad, the Freedom Force—or the Force as it was simply called—here he was returning to the Home from Los Angeles after finalizing the details for the Force's formation. He planned to escort his wife and young son to California.

The Hurricane slowed dramatically as Captain Laslo angled the aircraft toward the large field bordering the Home to the west. As a security precaution, the Family regularly cleared the land for 150 yards on all four sides of the square compound. By doing so, they insured potential enemies could not launch an assault undetected by the Warriors manning the ramparts on the brick walls.

"You know," Blade commented, observing a bustle of activity in the Home as the aircraft approached, "it never ceases to amaze me."

"What does?" Laslo asked.

"That with all their technological wizardry, the leaders of the prewar society stupidly managed to destroy their way of life," Blade said. "They could build wonders like this Hurricane, they dominated the globe scientifically, yet they were unable to dominate their baser emotions and wound up turning their technology against themselves." He sighed. "Pitiful. They could have transformed the world into a Utopia. Instead, they came damn close to obliterating the human race. Instead, they unwittingly unleashed horrors beyond their wildest imaginings. They could have created a Utopia, but they created a hell."

The Hurricane coasted to a stop approximately 100 yards above the field located to the west of the Home, and poised in the Hover Mode, suspended in the air like a gargantuan dragonfly.

Blade could see dozens of figures lining the top of the west wall, and the huge drawbridge situated in the center of the wall was lowering outward. He felt eager to be on the ground again, to be with his loved ones and friends.

Captain Laslo was busy flicking several switches in the cockpit. The Hurricane's engines decreased in volume from a raucous crescendo to a muted whine, and the aircraft slowly descended toward the middle of the field.

Blade could see a small cloud of dust swirling below the Hurricane as they dropped down. "How small a landing space do you need?" he inquired.

Captain Laslo was occupied with his landing procedure, watching the ground below. "What?"

"How small an area can the Hurricane land in?" Blade asked, rephrasing his query.

"The Hurricane requires about eighty square feet of landing space," Laslo disclosed. "And the same amount to take off."

"That's all?" Blade asked.

"Some of the earlier versions required even less," Laslo mentioned. "One of the popular models in use before World War Three was called the Harrier. That beauty only needed seventy-two square feet of landing or takeoff space. Of course, the Harrier was smaller than the Hurricane. The Harrier normally carried just the pilot, but this Hurricane, as you know, can transport up to five passengers in addition to the pilot. The Hurricane is larger than the Harrier was, primarily because the Hurricane was designed to carry a strike team or squad into combat, instead of just serving as a fancy fighter with unique capabilities."

Blade had detected a note of pride in Laslo's voice whenever the pilot talked about his craft. "The Hurricanes were built right before the war, weren't they?"

"Yep. Not many came off the assembly line before the radioactive shit hit the fan. This baby was one of the last ones built. California had four of them at one time, but only two are still flyable. The other two were salvaged for spare parts." He paused. "What a waste!"

"You like to fly, don't you?" Blade inquired. He noted the Hurricane was about forty yards above the ground.

"I love to fly," Laslo replied. "And I love the Hurricane. She's a distinct improvement over the earlier V/STOLs."

"The what?"

"Oh. Sorry. The Harriers I told you about were called V/STOLs. It's an abbreviation for vertical-short takeoff and landing ability. But they dropped the S for the Hurricanes and called them VTOLs, like the pre-Harrier models. Bureaucratic mumbo jumbo, I guess. Understand?"

"I think I follow you," Blade said.

"This beauty carries up to ten thousand pounds of firepower. Rockets, bombs, Sidewinder missiles, you name it, the Hurricane packs it. I could level a city if I had a nuclear warhead," Laslo declared, sounding excited at the prospect.

The Hurricane settled onto the earth with a gentleness belying its size

and weight. Dust enveloped the cockpit.

"Well, you're home," Laslo commented. "How long will we be here?"

Blade unfastened the strap of his helmet. "Not more than two or three days, I should think. I have to break the news to my wife, then pack, then—"

"Your wife doesn't know you're going to live in Los Angeles?" Laslo asked, interrupting.

"Nope," Blade responded. "I told Plato and Hickok not to mention a word. I want Jenny to hear the news from me."

Captain Laslo laughed. "Good luck. You'll need it."

Blade removed his helmet. A comma of dark hair fell above his eyes. "Why do you say that?"

"I'm married, too," Laslo divulged, opening the cockpit.

Blade breathed in the air, ignoring the lingering dust particles. He unfastened the belt restraints, then dropped his helmet onto the seat behind him.

Scores of Family members were converging on the Hurricane, crossing the drawbridge and hurrying up to the aircraft, their expressions conveying an attitude of restrained awe.

Blade spotted his beloved wife in the crowd, her long blond hair flowing over her shoulders, her shapely figure amply filling a pair of blue pants and a yellow blouse, her lively green eyes on him. He didn't bother to wait for the ladder; he simply vaulted over the side of the cockpit, slid down the forward fuselage, and dropped lightly to the ground in a crouch. His hands automatically clasped the hilts of the twin Bowie knives strapped around his waist, one in a sheath on each hip, insuring they were still in place. He straightened and moved to greet Jenny.

She eagerly pressed her way through the assembled Family members and leaped into his outstretched arms, giving him a hug and planting her lips on his.

Blade felt her sweet tongue part his lips. He held her close, her feet a foot above the soil, savoring the kiss. His absence had intensified his passion, and he wished they could be alone. An hour with Jenny invariably sufficed to remove all the residual tension from a harrowing mission.

Jenny reluctantly drew back, grinning. "Ummmmm. That was nice, handsome. I can see all our practice hasn't been wasted." She chuckled and pecked him on the tip of the nose.

Blade eased her to the turf, his hands on her shoulder blades. "I've missed you," he said.

"And I've missed you," Jenny stated. "Why didn't you come back with Plato and Hickok?"

"I had business to attend to," Blade told her.

"What kind of business?" Jenny probed. "Plato and Hickok wouldn't tell me. All I know is that the three of you flew out to California for a summit meeting, and you ran into trouble from a group of professional assassins who didn't want California to join the Freedom Federation. After the summit, Plato and Hickok returned. Why didn't you?" she queried with a hint of reproach in her tone.

"I'll explain in a bit," Blade promised. He scanned the crowd, seeking his son. "Where's Gabe?"

"Sherry is watching him," Jenny replied, referring to Hickok's wife. "She was at our cabin when the jet flew over. I asked her to watch him so I could get here as quickly as possible."

Blade kissed her on the forehead. "I can't wait to see him," he mentioned.

"I reckon you might have to," interjected a newcomer in a decided drawl.

Blade looked to his left, knowing who he would find, smiling at the sight of one of his best friends and a fellow Warrior. "Hickok!"

The Family's preeminent gunfighter was standing five feet away, his lean six-foot frame clothed in buckskins and moccasins, a matched pair of

pearl-handled Colt Python revolvers suspended from his slim waist, his thumbs casually hooked in his gun belt. He sported a blond mustache to complement his blond hair. "Howdy, pard," he said to Blade, his blue eyes uncharacteristically somber.

"What's up?" Blade inquired, his brow creasing in concern.

Before the gunman could respond, Jenny held up her right hand. "Hold it! Can't this wait, Nathan?"

Nathan was the name bestowed on the gunfighter by his parents at birth. But like the majority of Family members, and according to a formal ceremony initially instituted by Kurt Carpenter, Nathan had selected a new name on his sixteenth birthday, the name of an ancient legendary shootist. This Naming ceremony, as the Family called it, was designed to encourage familiarity with the Family's historical antecedents by having each 16-year-old select a new name as his or her very own from the history books in the library, or from any other book available. For some reason, many Family members still referred to the gunman by his given name. All this passed quickly through Hickok's mind as he shook his head. "Nope. This can't wait, Jenny. I need to talk to Blade now."

Jenny frowned. "But he just got home!"

"I know," Hickok said, shrugging. "But this can't be helped. It's very important." He glanced up into the gray eyes of the seven-foot giant. "I'm sorry about this pard. I really am."

Jenny gazed at her husband. "Blade! Not now!"

"It's really important, pard," Hickok stressed.

Blade draped his right arm about Jenny's shoulders. "Walk with us to our cabin," he instructed the gunfighter. "Fill me in on the way. I want to see Gabe." He led Jenny toward the drawbridge, nodding and smiling as many of the Family members welcomed him back.

Hickok fell in alongside Blade and Jenny.

Jenny cast a spiteful glance at the gunman.

Grinning sheepishly, Hickok decided to try the oblique approach. "Yes,

sir," he commented, "that Gabe of yours sure is a chip off the old block."

Blade gazed at his friend. "I just wish I got to see him more often."

"Maybe you will in—" Hickok began, then caught himself.

Jenny noticed. "What was that?" she inquired.

Blade hastily came to the gunfighter's rescue. "So how is your son Ringo doing?"

Hickok beamed. "The little buckaroo is growin' like a sprout," he stated proudly. "My missus claims Ringo will grow up to be just like his pa."

"Poor Ringo," Jenny muttered.

"Be nice," Blade said, then stared at the gunman. "So what's so damn important that you had to interrupt my homecoming?"

"I'm sorry," Hickok apologized again, looking at Jenny. "I truly am. I know how much you were lookin' forward to Blade comin' back. But I didn't have any choice in the matter."

Jenny stared into the distance, her annoyance at Hickok's intrusion temporarily overriding her affection for the flamboyant Warrior.

"So what is it, already?" Blade demanded impatiently.

Hickok frowned. "Well, it's like this. Last night I was in A Block gettin' some ammo for my Pythons—"

Blade glanced at the drawbridge, thinking of the layout of the compound. The eastern half of the Home was preserved in a natural state and used primarily for agricultural purposes. In the center of the compound, arranged in a row from north to south, were the cabins for the married Family members. And in the western section were the six huge concrete blocks constructed under Kurt Carpenter's careful supervision over a century ago. Each block was designated by a letter, and each one was devoted to a specific function. A Block was the armory, where the Family stored their enormous supply of weapons. B Block was the sleeping quarters for single Family members. C Block was the infirmary; D Block the carpentry, blacksmithing, and general construction shop; E Block was

the invaluable library; and F Block was devoted to the work of the Tillers, to preserving food and storing farming supplies. The six blocks were aligned in a triangular formation.

"—and I was on my way out the door," Hickok was saying, "when I saw those radios we confiscated a while back. Remember them?"

Blade did indeed. The Warriors had taken the radios from vanquished enemies. One of the sets had been appropriated from the Watchers in Thief River Falls, and the second from the Russians. The radios were kept on a bench at the rear of the armory. "I remember them," he said.

"I got this urge to tinker with 'em," Hickok disclosed. "I've seen Plato use them. He likes to spend hours listening, hoping he'll pick up something. So I figured, why not?"

"You picked up something?" Blade deduced.

"More than I bargained for," Hickok admitted.

"Like what?" Blade queried.

"Let me put it this way," Hickok said, grinning. "Have you ever wanted to visit Seattle?"

Chapter Two

He was hurrying from his cabin when he saw her storming toward him.

Plato paused, his kindly blue eyes narrowing, absently reaching up to stroke his long gray beard. His slim frame was clad in patched and faded jeans and a brown shirt well past its prime, both stitched together by his doting wife, Nadine. As Family Leader, he was sensitive to fluctuations in the normal Family routine. And the sight of Blade's wife in a funk was definitely out of the ordinary.

Jenny's fists were clenched, her jaw set tight, as she tramped in the direction of the row of cabins.

"Hello, Jenny," Plato greeted her when she was several yards off.

Jenny simply nodded.

"Is anything amiss?" Plato inquired as she came abreast of him.

Jenny broke her stride, halting and glancing at the Family's wise, elderly chief. "Why do we do it?" she snapped.

"Do what?" Plato responded, perplexed.

"Get married?" Jenny stated. "Why do women willingly tie themselves to a man for better or worse?"

Plato opened his mouth to speak.

"I'll tell you why!" Jenny said, cutting him off. "Because we're gluttons for punishment! That's why women marry men!"

"Love is also a prime factor," Plato observed.

"Love!" Jenny practically exploded. "What kind of love is it when the husband is hardly ever home? What kind of love is it when the man you love has to leave all the time to go off slaying dragons?"

Plato glanced at the west wall. "I don't understand. Didn't a jet arrive a short while ago with Blade?"

"It did!" Jenny said bitterly. "But I won't get to see much of him! He's planning to leave tomorrow morning!"

"Leave! Why must he leave?" Plato questioned.

"Ask him!" Jenny replied, starting to walk off.

"What is his destination?" Plato asked.

"Seattle!" Jenny declared over her right shoulder.

Plato scratched the gray hair rimming his wrinkled forehead, confused.

Jenny abruptly stopped and turned. "Oh! If you should see Hickok, would you do me a favor?"

"Anything," Plato promised.

"Punch him in the mouth!" Jenny spat, her eyes watering. She spun and ran toward her cabin.

Plato hastened to the west, scanning the compound for the man he loved as the son he'd never had. Spotting Blade wasn't difficult; the giant Warrior towered head and shoulders over the majority of Family members. He saw Blade and Hickok in the open area between the concrete blocks, moving his way. Plato smiled and waved.

Blade returned the wave, increasing his stride, reaching his mentor within seconds. "Plato! It's good to see you." He placed his brawny hands on Plato's narrow shoulders. "How is Nadine?"

"She is fine," Plato replied. "I wish I could say the same for Jenny."

Blade gazed at the cabins. "You saw her, huh?"

"She is extremely upset," Plato remarked.

"She'll get over it," Hickok interjected. "Women are contrary critters. They're so blamed moody. They're just not happy if they don't have an excuse to get all bent out of shape now and then."

Blade glanced at the gunman. "Do you ever tell *your* wife she's a 'critter'?"

"Are you crazy?" Hickok rejoined. "She'd kick the stuffin' out of me."

"The marriage expert," Plato commented, smiling. He stared up at Blade. "What is this revelation concerning your impending departure for Seattle?"

"Didn't Hickok tell you?" Blade asked.

Plato looked at the gunfighter. "Tell me what?"

"I was playin' around with the radios last night," Hickok divulged. "I received this emergency broadcast from Seattle, from a man named Dale. He claimed he was being held prisoner by a mutant called Manta. Him and a bunch of other folks."

"Do you believe the call was genuine?" Plato inquired.

Blade nodded. "It's genuine, all right. Hickok said the man wanted a message relayed to Governor Melnick about the *Cutterhawk*."

"The *Cutterhawk*?" Plato repeated quizzically.

"I heard about the *Cutterhawk* when I was in California," Blade detailed. "It was a destroyer sent to investigate a call for help from Seattle. The destroyer never returned to California."

"Did Governor Melnick send a rescue party?" Plato queried.

"No," Blade said. "There was a lot of political pressure on Melnick to do something, but he refused. He didn't want to risk more lives, and he definitely didn't want to lose another ship. The *Cutterhawk* packed a lot of firepower. Melnick was worried that whatever took out the *Cutterhawk* could take out anything."

"California has a large standing army," Plato noted. "Why didn't he sent a battalion north overland?"

"Like I said," Blade replied. "Melnick didn't want to lose more lives. And remember. North of California is no man's land. We know Portland suffered a direct nuclear hit during the war, and Seattle was extensively damaged by a neutron bomb. Who knows what's between California's northern border and Seattle?" He paused, pursing his lips. "Melnick told me he sent his most experienced admiral in command of the *Cutterhawk*. He was shocked when they lost contact with the ship. There were close to three hundred crew members on board that destroyer."

"Three hundred," Plato said, gazing at the dozens of Family members going about their daily routines all around him. How would he react if he was responsible for the loss of three hundred lives? Small wonder Melnick was reluctant to commit more troops.

"How do you know Portland was wiped out?" Hickok questioned. "And that business about Seattle?"

"That's what the records say," Blade explained. "There were a few radio stations operating in rural areas during and shortly after the war. Some of the broadcasts were received in California, probably relayed from station to station."

Plato looked into Blade's eyes. "So you intend to rescue the captives in Seattle?"

Blade nodded. "I intend to try."

"I commend your noble sentiments," Plato said, "but I am leery of your logic."

"You don't think I should go?" Blade inquired.

"Not if there are other viable options," Plato answered. "For instance, why not inform Melnick of the news when you return to California? He might be willing to dispatch another ship, once he is apprised of the situation."

"True," Blade conceded. "But think of the time involved. I won't be ready to leave with Jenny and Gabe for a few days. If I wait and inform Governor Melnick, more time will be wasted while he organizes the rescue operation. And even if Melnick does send another ship, another destroyer or something else, they will have to sail all the way up the coast to Seattle. By then, all the people being held could be dead."

"How do you propose reaching Seattle?" Plato wanted to know. "The SEAL?"

Blade shook his head no. The SEAL was the Family's pride and joy, a mechanized juggernaut, a prototype developed by top engineers for Kurt Carpenter, an all-terrain vehicle bequeathed to the Family by the Founder to enable them to travel safely beyond the confines of the compound. "The SEAL would take too long. I'll use the Hurricane."

"The VTOL?" Plato said in surprise. "But that's not ours. The aircraft is the property of California. Do we have the right to utilize it?"

"I have the right," Blade stated emphatically. "I'm the head of the Freedom Force, and the Hurricanes will be transporting the Force to all hot spots. Seattle qualifies as a hot spot."

"But what about fuel for the flight?" Plato queried.

"There is more than enough for the Hurricane to make a run to Seattle," Blade said. "It can drop me off, then fly to California for refueling."

I can arrange a rendezvous for the pilot to pick me up."

"I notice you are using the singular," Plato remarked. "Are you going alone?"

"Yes," Blade responded.

"What?" Hickok chimed in. "The blazes you are!"

Blade stared at the gunman. "This job is my responsibility. I'm in charge of the Force. I'm pledged to safeguard the lives of everyone in the Freedom Federation."

"You're also still head of the Warriors," Hickok noted. "And where you go, we go."

"I agree with Nathan," Plato mentioned. "You can't go alone. Doing so would be rash and foolhardy. After all, the Family is part of the Freedom Federation. We signed a treaty with all the other Federation members, including California, a pact of mutual self-defense. We would be shirking our responsibility if we failed to aid the unfortunates in Seattle." He paused. "Take as many of the Warriors as you require."

"I can't ask any of them to put their lives on the line for complete strangers," Blade said. "The Warriors swore an oath to protect the Home and preserve the Family, not to defend California."

"What a crock!" Hickok stated. "We're Warriors, plain and simple. When someone needs savin', we save their butts. If some low-down varmint is holdin' a passel of people out in Seattle, then it's our duty to teach the prick the error of his ways."

"Eloquently phrased," Plato agreed, grinning.

"I don't know," Blade hedged.

"I think your new job is goin' to your head," Hickok said.

Blade did a double take. "What? Why?"

"Why else would you want to go to Seattle by your lonesome?" Hickok inquired. "Be serious, Big Guy. Whatever is in Seattle defeated a whole destroyer and three hundred sailors. Isn't that what you said? Yet you're

all set to waltz on over there and pull their fat out of the fire all by yourself?" The gunman snickered. "Give me a break!"

"You should take several Warriors with you," Plato reiterated.

"But which ones?" Blade speculated aloud.

Plato glanced at Hickok. "Nathan, would you excuse us, please? There is a matter I would like to discuss with Blade privately."

"You got it, old-timer," Hickok said, walking to the west.

Plato waited until Hickok was beyond earshot. "You'll leave tomorrow morning?"

"Yes," Blade confirmed. "I need to spend at least one night with Jenny and Gabe. I owe them that much. Besides, I'll need the time to prepare. I want to check in the library for everything I can find on Seattle. Old maps. The atlases. Anything. And I need to decide who to take."

"Perhaps I can assist you there," Plato commented.

"How do you mean?"

"I was late welcoming you back because of a conversation I was having with several of the Elders," Plato said. "There is a difference of opinion as to your status in the Family now that you have accepted the post on the Force in California."

"Difference of opinion?" Blade declared, puzzled. "Why? I can't be the top Warrior and the head of the Force both. Pick one of the other Warriors to replace me."

Plato made a smacking noise with his lips, appearing troubled. "I'd rather not."

Blade studied the Family leader. "Why?"

Plato swept the Home with his right hand. "Because of them."

Blade's brow creased as he surveyed the compound. "I don't follow you," he confessed.

Plato clasped his hands behind his back, sighing. "You have held the post of top Warrior for almost a decade. During your tenure, you have acquired considerable skill and undeniable expertise in your craft. Your ability is widely recognized, especially by the leaders of the other Federation factions, which is the reason they wanted you to head the Force." He watched a young mother carrying an infant toward the infirmary. "Choosing a suitable replacement is not easy."

"What are you talking about?" Blade rejoined. "I'm not the only Warrior with skill and expertise. What about Hickok? Or Geronimo? Or Rikki or Yama? There are any number you could choose from."

"If only the issue was so readily resolved," Plato stated wistfully. "True, all of the Warriors you mentioned are proficient in their own right. But none of them—not one of them—possesses the balanced personality traits you do. Each one is deficient in one respect or another."

"I'm not perfect," Blade noted cynically.

Plato stared at the giant. "As a Warrior you are, whether you realize the fact or not."

Blade snorted. "Oh, come on!"

"Hear me out," Plato suggested. "Let's examine the candidates you listed. First was Hickok. Nathan is one of the best Warriors, I'll grant you that. His speed with those Pythons is astonishing, and he had dispatched more adversaries in one-on-one combat than any Warrior except you. But Nathan evinces a disturbing propensity for impetuous behavior. He acts first and thinks about his actions later. Which in itself can be a strength. But several of the Elders are adamantly opposed to having him as the top Warrior."

"There are others you could pick," Blade said.

"Geronimo? A sterling Warrior, but his leadership qualities are in question. Rikki? As a martial artist, he is without peer. And Rikki has been in charge of the Warriors on several occasions when you were absent. Personally, I believe Rikki would make an outstanding head Warrior. But a few of the Elders don't, and I want to select a candidate agreeable to everyone," Plato said.

"Then what about Yama or Spartacus?" Blade stated. "Either of them could handle the job."

"Perhaps," Plato said. "Perhaps not. Yama has never led the Warriors. Spartacus has, and he performed admirably, but his experience was limited. You must bear in mind an important fact; we are talking about a long-term commitment, a permanent change in the Warrior organization." He paused, grinning. "Unless..."

"Unless what?" Blade asked suspiciously.

"Unless we can develop a standby system instead of selecting a permanent replacement," Plato said.

"A standby system?" Blade repeated, studying the Family Leader. "Do you mean a temporary system? It won't work. I'm going to be in California for a long time. Years, maybe."

"But you could, if you wanted, return to the Home every month or so," Plato commented.

Blade placed his hands on his hips and locked his eyes on Plato's. "Okay. Enough is enough. Quit beating around the bush. You have something on that devious mind of yours, and I want to know what it is."

"Very perceptive, as usual," Plato said, smiling. "Yes, I do have an idea I'd like to share with you. But first I should explain my motivation."

"I'm all ears," Blade assured him.

Plato pointed at a group of six children playing tag nearby. "Take a look at them. A good look."

Blade stared at the children, thinking of his young son. "So?"

"So I have a supreme responsibility to those young ones, and to every member of our Family, to chose the best possible candidate as head Warrior," Plato stated. "The safety of the Family depends on my choice. Next to the position of Family Leader, the post of top Warrior is of primary significance. During a crisis, the top Warrior is empowered by our Founder's directive to assume command of the Family. Our survival depends on the person holding the post. I have an obligation to the Family

to pick the very best Warrior as head Warrior, and from an overall perspective you are the best Warrior."

"But..." Blade began.

Plato held up his right hand, cutting the Warrior off. "Hear me out, please." He paused. "All of the Elders are in agreement on this. You are the best Warrior, and we wish to retain you as head of your order. Our problem was to discover a satisfactory means of having you continue to head the Warriors while simultaneously fulfilling your commitment to the Force. We believe we have discovered a way."

"How? Saw me in half?" Blade quipped.

"If we could, we would," Plato rejoined, chuckling. "I even considered cloning, but I lack the scientific equipment necessary."

"Cloning? What's cloning?" Blade queried.

"A technique developed before the war, enabling the scientists to produce duplicates of living organisms," Plato answered.

"They could make copies of people?" Blade asked in disbelief.

Plato nodded. "The procedure was perfected within a year of the war. But I digress. The Elders have a proposal to make, a way in which you can remain as head Warrior and serve on the Force. The solution is quite simple. As you know, the Federation has established a weekly shuttle service. Since all long-distance telecommunications systems were destroyed during the war, and since none of the Federation factions possess broadcast facilities capable of linking us on a regular basis, Governor Melnick has kindly offered the use of the VTOLs. When they are not on a mission for the Force, the Hurricanes will run weekly shuttles between the Federation members, carrying correspondence and important dispatches." He looked at Blade. "We want you to return to the Home on one of the shuttles a minimum of once a month."

"And what about my responsibilities with the Force?" Blade questioned.

"Spending a few days each month at the Home will not interfere with your duties in California," Plato said. "I realize the prospect of flying back

here periodically might not appeal to you, but I assure you there is a method to our madness. By having you return regularly, we can justify retaining you as the head Warrior." He paused and glanced around, insuring they were alone. "Such an arrangement would immensely benefit me. I will not be under any pressure to select a permanent successor acceptable to all the Elders. True, the choice is mine, but I want to avoid antagonizing any of the Elders if possible. A temporary replacement can be chosen, someone to fill in while you are in California, someone who might, perhaps, succeed you should you eventually opt to stay in California. But in the interim, I will be able to groom your successor, to mold him to acceptably fill the post." He reached up and placed his right hand on Blade's left shoulder. "You will be doing me a personal favor if you agree to this arrangement."

Blade pursed his lips, then sighed. "If you put it that way..."

Plato brightened. "You agree?"

"I won't do anything to jeopardize the Family," Blade stated. "I know how important the job of top Warrior is, and if you need time to pick someone to replace me, I'll do whatever you want to buy you the time you need."

Plato squeezed the giant's shoulder. "Thank you."

"So what did you mean before?" Blade asked. "About assisting me in deciding which Warriors to take to Seattle?"

Plato lowered his right arm. "You know all of the Warriors better than I do, their personal strengths and weaknesses. So I have a suggestion to make. Why don't you take the three most eligible candidates with you, the three you consider as best suited to follow in your footsteps? This trip to Seattle promises to be fraught with danger, and could serve as an excellent testing ground for the three you select. Evaluate their performances and report to me after you return. I will accept your recommendation without reservation, and I will subsequently prepare your nominee to ultimately become the chief Warrior. What do you think of the idea?"

"I don't know," Blade said uncertainly.

"What's wrong?" Plato queried.

"Do you expect me to tell the three I pick the reason I picked them?"

"No," Plato replied.

"I don't like deceiving my fellow Warriors," Blade noted.

"This is not a case of deceit," Plato countered. "Informing them they are undergoing a test would defeat our purpose. They might act differently than they normally would if they knew their behavior was being monitored. Simply conduct business as usual and judge them accordingly."

Blade stared at Plato. "Why is it I get the feeling you're just passing the buck?"

Plato grinned. "A wise leader knows when to delegate authority."

"I wish *I* had someone to delegate this to," Blade muttered.

"Which three Warriors will you take?" Plato inquired.

"I have to give it some thought," Blade responded.

"There's no rush," Plato commented wryly. "You're not departing until tomorrow."

Blade shook his head. "And I thought Hickok has a warped sense of humor!"

Chapter Three

He was seated in the lotus position on a low knoll situated in the northeast quadrant of the Home, his back straight, his hands draped loosely on his knees, his eyes closed. Baggy black pants and a black shirt, both fabricated by the Family Weavers, covered his small, wiry frame. His Oriental features were crowned by black hair. Lying on the ground in front of him was a long black scabbard.

Blade slowly approached the man in black, reluctant to intrude on the other's meditation. He walked to within eight feet of the diminutive figure and halted, waiting.

The man spoke without bothering to open his eyes. "I heard the jet arrive earlier. Please forgive my failure to welcome you. I was communing with the Spirit."

"I understand, Rikki," Blade said.

The Warrior known as Rikki-Tikki-Tavi opened his brown eyes. "Why have you sought me out? I'm not due on guard duty for several hours yet."

Blade moved closer. "I know. But there is something important I must talk to you about."

"What does it concern?" Rikki casually inquired.

"I'm leaving in the morning for Seattle," Blade detailed. "There are some people there in trouble."

"I will go," Rikki stated.

"How did you know I was going to ask you to go?" Blade questioned.

"How do the plants know the wind will bring rain?" Rikki responded enigmatically.

Blade smiled. "You and your Zen."

"Zen is not mine," Rikki said softly. "Zen is... Zen."

"All paths lead to the Spirit," Blade noted, quoting one of the Family Elders.

Rikki nodded. "And how many paths lead to Seattle? How many are going with you?"

"Three," Blade replied.

"May I ask which ones?"

"I don't know yet," Blade answered. "This run to Seattle is strictly a

volunteer affair. It's not official Family business. You can decline if you want."

"I'll go," Rikki reiterated.

"Are you sure you don't want some time to think about it?" Blade inquired. "We could find ourselves in a real hot spot."

"Any hotter than St. Louis?" Rikki rejoined.

Blade chuckled, thinking of their harrowing experiences in that city several years ago. "I doubt it. But you never can tell."

Rikki closed his eyes. "I will go. I'll be ready to leave at daybreak."

"Meet me at the drawbridge," Blade directed.

"I'll be there," Rikki promised.

"Bring whatever weapons you want," Blade said. "But include an automatic rifle or a machine gun."

"I will visit the armory later," Rikki assured the giant.

"Thanks." Blade started to leave, then paused. "Thanks for coming. I hope you won't live to regret the decision."

"Life is composed of a series of decisions," Rikki observed philosophically. "For better or for worse, we must adjust to the consequences."

"I'll try to remember that if we run into trouble out there," Blade said, "and someone or some... thing... is trying to rip my face off."

"In which case you should bear in mind my personal code of conduct," Rikki mentioned, the corners of his mouth curling upward.

"Your code of conduct?"

"A code I strive to live by," Rikki disclosed. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you, unless they intend to separate your soul from your body."

"And then?" Blade asked.

Rikki-Tikki-Tavi grinned. "I introduce them to my katana."

Blade stood next to a tree bordering the western edge of the firing range, his hands on his Bowies, watching the Warrior currently using the range, his features reflecting his frank admiration.

The firing range was located in the extreme southeast corner of the compound, far from the cabins and the Blocks and those areas where the Family usually gathered. The children were dutifully instructed to keep away from the range unless accompanied by an adult. The Warriors utilized the cleared section on a regular basis to hone their skills, while the other Family members were required to participate in regularly scheduled firing lessons to familiarize themselves with firearms in case the Home was ever attacked.

A row of rusted cans had been positioned on top of a large log at the eastern edge of the range. Fifteen cans topped the brown bark at two-foot intervals.

Standing in a relaxed posture 20 yards from the log was one of the Family's premier Warriors. In stature and physique he came close to matching Blade's awesome build. He clothed his powerful body in a garment especially constructed by the Weavers to his specifications: a one-piece, seamless, dark-blue uniform with the ebony silhouette of a skull on the back. His eyes were a cool blue, his short hair and drooping mustache both a shade of striking silver.

While most of the Warriors specialized in one weapon or another, this one was an expert with any and all. He could handle a handgun almost as skillfully as Hickok, although he could not always match the gunfighter's unerring accuracy. When it came to the martial arts, he could hold his own with Rikki-Tikki-Tavi. And he could wield bladed weapons with a dexterity surpassed only by the Warrior whose name was synonymous with edged arms. He was rightfully recognized as the best all-around Warrior in the Family when it came to fighting ability.

The silver-haired Warrior shifted his stance, cradling a Wilkinson Carbine with a 50-shot magazine in his brawny hands. In a shoulder holster under his left arm was a Smith and Wesson Model 586 Distinguished Combat Magnum; under his right arm was a Browning

Hi-Power 9-millimeter Automatic Pistol. A curved scimitar was in a scabbard attached to a leather belt above his left hip; on his right hip was a 15-inch survival knife, a Razorback.

Blade kept his eyes on the Warrior, not the cans, knowing he would miss what was coming if he so much as blinked.

The silver-haired Warrior suddenly went into action, leveling the Wilkinson and firing from the right hip. The Carbine chattered and four of the cans were sent flying.

Unexpectedly, with the Wilkinson magazine nowhere near empty, the Warrior dropped the Carbine and drew his revolver and pistol, whipping the Smith and Wesson and the Browning clear in a cross draw. He emptied the revolver before cutting loose with the automatic, each shot on target, blowing the rest of the cans into the air with professional precision. When the blasted cans were scattered over the soil he straightened and slowly bolstered his handguns.

Blade strolled toward the Warrior.

The silver-haired man turned. "Hello, Blade."

"How's it going, Yama?" Blade asked.

Yama stopped and retrieved the Wilkinson. "I'm a bit sluggish today."

Blade glanced at the ruptured cans. "You could have fooled me," he commented, smiling. "What were you practicing? Primary jamming?"

"Yes," Yama replied, carefully wiping the Carbine clean.

Blade nodded. Primary jamming was a technique he'd devised to insure the Warriors could react on the spur of the moment if their primary weapon jammed, if their automatic rifle or machine gun malfunctioned while engaging the enemy. The Warriors had to be ready to resort to their secondary weapons, their handguns or whatever, automatically in a crisis.

Yama looked at Blade. "I heard you're leaving for Seattle tomorrow."

"Word travels fast," Blade commented.

"I also heard some of the Warriors are going with you," Yama

remarked.

"I'm taking three," Blade divulged.

"Any chance of taking me?" Yama queried hopefully.

"That's why I'm here," Blade said.

"I'd like to go along," Yama declared.

"Any particular reason?" Blade asked.

Yama motioned toward the log. "I haven't seen any action in ages. I'm bored to tears."

"Is that your only reason?" Blade probed.

"Do I need more?" Yama retorted. "I'm a Warrior, like you. My craft is terminating every threat to the Family. My trade is death. Why do you think I took the name of the Hindu King of Death as my own? And I can't perfect my craft, I can't hone my trade, unless I'm afforded an opportunity to use my skills. This trip to Seattle could give me the chance."

"We could face some stiff opposition," Blade confirmed.

"The stiffer, the better," Yama asserted earnestly.

"Be ready to go at dawn," Blade directed. "Meet me at the drawbridge."

Yama nodded. "I'll be ready. Who else is going?"

"Rikki."

"Just the three of us then?" Yama questioned.

"There will be one other," Blade said.

"Who?"

"I don't know yet," Blade answered.

"Any Warrior would be happy to go," Yama commented. "It doesn't matter who you ask."

Blade's lips twitched. "I suppose," he said casually.

Yama smiled contentedly. "I'll be at the drawbridge at dawn."

Blade turned to depart.

"Blade," Yama said.

Blade glanced at the man in blue. "What?"

"Thanks for taking me," Yama stated sincerely. "I don't get to leave the Home as often as you do, and I'm curious about what's out there."

"Curiosity killed the cat," Blade reminded his companion.

"I'm not a cat," Yama said, then patted the scimitar. "And my fangs are a lot deadlier than any feline's."

"Keep your... fangs... handy," Blade advised. "Seattle promises to be hazardous to your health."

"I'm prepared for whatever comes along," Yama declared confidently.

"Like you just said," Blade mentioned. "You haven't taken as many trips away from the Home as I have. You've been to Wyoming and you went to Denver once. There's a lot you haven't seen. There's a lot you wouldn't *want* to see. Monstrosities from your worst nightmares. Deviate mutants. Degenerates." Blade shook his head. "This run to Seattle won't be a picnic. I can feel it in my bones."

Yama's blue eyes brightened.

Blade walked up to the cabin door and knocked.

There was a muffled commotion inside. A moment later the door was wrenched open by a stocky Indian dressed all in green, his shirt and pants both constructed from the remains of an old tent. His hair was black, his eyes brown. He smiled at the sight of the giant, his rugged features conveying his genuine affection. "Blade!"

"Hello, Geronimo," Blade said. "How are you?"

Geronimo glanced over his left shoulder, then stepped outside, easing

the door shut behind him. "I'm okay. But I wish I could say the same about my family."

Blade's gray eyes narrowed. "Cynthia and Cochise? What's wrong with them?"

Geronimo frowned. "I guess you haven't heard. They're both sick. Very sick. I wanted to be there when you landed, but I was tied up."

"Is it serious?" Blade inquired.

"The Healers have prescribed an appropriate herbal remedy," Geronimo said. "But you know how it is with the sores."

The sores! Blade had seen the disease on a dozen occasions during his lifetime. Like the common cold and the flu, the sores struck without warning, debilitating the victim, rendering the unfortunate incapable of performing the most menial of tasks. A high fever was a typical symptom, as were the peculiar reddish, blistering sores which dotted the sufferer's body. Rarely fatal, the sores were nonetheless not to be taken lightly. The Healers maintained the disease was another legacy of World War Three, linked to the lingering radiation prevalent in the ecological chain. Certain radioactive substances were known to stay radioactive for centuries, and minute particles had been dispersed over the landscape by the prevailing winds after the nuclear exchange. The Healers believed the sores were connected to the environmental poisoning, but the actual source of contagion had yet to be discovered. One fact was encouraging; the sores were not communicable.

"They've been sick for three days," Geronimo was saying. "The worst is over, but they won't be back on their feet for another two or three days." He sighed, his fatigue self-evident. "I've been waiting on them hand and foot. They can't even go to the bathroom without help. I'll be glad when they've recovered."

"You'd better get back inside," Blade advised.

Geronimo turned toward the door, then paused, staring at Blade. "Say. Did you stop for a special reason? Do you need something?"

"No," Blade replied. "I just wanted to see what you were up to. I'm leaving for Seattle tomorrow morning."

"You are? What's in Seattle?"

"Trouble," Blade said.

"Do you want me to go?" Geronimo queried.

"You stay with your family," Blade advised. "I won't need you on this run. Give my regards to Cynthia and Cochise."

"Will do." Geronimo opened the door, smiled at Blade, then entered. The cabin door swung closed.

Blade gazed at the wooden door, deep in thought, before wheeling and striding away.

Two down.

One to go.

He found them seated on the bank of the moat.

The Founder had provided an additional defense for the Home using the Family's water supply. A large stream entered the compound at the northwest corner, flowing through an aqueduct. Carpenter had supervised the construction of a trench along the inner base of the brick walls, then diverted the stream to serve as an interior moat. The two channels converged at the southeast corner and exited the Home via another aqueduct.

Blade spotted the gunfighter on the north bank of the moat next to a Norway Maple.

"—you get a little older, I'll teach you how to fish," Hickok was addressing his companion.

"What's that, Daddy?" the three-year-old at his side asked.

"That's where you stick a worm on a hook and toss it in the water," Hickok explained.

"Why, Daddy?"

"So you can catch a fish, Ringo," Hickok elaborated.

Ringo, a pint-sized replica of his father dressed in a brown shirt and buckskin pants, stared at the moat for a moment. "Why, Daddy?"

"So you can eat it," Hickok said.

Ringo glanced at his father, aghast. "I don't want to eat a worm!"

Hickok laughed. "Not the worm, buckaroo. The fish. You use a worm to catch a fish, then you eat the fish."

Ringo didn't seem to like that idea much better. "But fish are nice. We don't eat fish."

"You eat fish all the time," Hickok declared.

Ringo pointed at the blue water. "Not them fish."

Hickok studied his son. "Where do you think the fish you eat come from? They come from the moat. You like fish. You eat it all the time."

Ringo's mouth dropped. "Not those fish, Daddy!"

Hickok nodded. "Afraid so, little guy." He scrutinized the moat and spied a small school of fish. "See those? We eat fish just like those."

"But that's not nice!" Ringo declared.

"We have to live," Hickok said.

Ringo glanced at his father. "Fish live too, Daddy."

"It's nothin' to get upset about," Hickok said. "Lots of folks eat fish."

"Not me," Ringo stated.

"Oh?" Hickok faced his offspring. "I take it you're not going to eat fish anymore?"

"Nope," Ringo maintained.

"Suit yourself," Hickok said, shrugging. "But you'll have to cook your own skunk."

Ringo's forehead creased in confusion. "Skunk?"

"That critter we saw about three weeks ago," Hickok mentioned. "The black and white one. Remember? It stunk like the dickens!"

"I won't eat skunk!" Ringo vowed.

"You don't have much choice," Hickok said. "You need protein in your diet."

"What's protein?" Ringo asked.

"You know how your ma is always pushin' you to eat your greens?" Hickok noted.

"Yes."

"She wants you to eat your veggies because your body needs them to grow," Hickok detailed. "The same holds true with protein. Your body needs protein, and fish is a prime source of protein. But if you won't eat fish, we'll make due with protein from something else."

Ringo's eyes widened. "Skunk protein?"

"Skunks have protein too," Hickok said. "And you have to get your protein somewhere."

Ringo's thin lips curled downward. "I don't want skunk protein."

"Maybe you'd best stick with the fish," Hickok suggested.

Ringo looked at the moat. "I don't know..."

"You can always have skunk meat," Hickok commented, suppressing an impulse to laugh.

"I like fish better," Ringo said.

"Fine. Then we'll feed you fish instead of skunk," Hickok stated.

Ringo beamed. "Thank you, Daddy."

Blade grinned as he cleared his throat and approached them from their

left.

Hickok shifted, smiling. "Howdy, pard."

"Hi," Blade said. He stopped and crouched in front of Ringo. "You sure are growing! How have you been, Ringo?"

"Just fine," Ringo responded.

"Have Gabe and you been playing together?" Blade queried.

"Yep," Ringo answered. "Gabe is my friend."

"Gabe and you are friends, just like your daddy and I are friends," Blade mentioned. "And you must always be loyal to your friends."

"I will, Uncle Blade," Ringo promised, then added, "What's loyal?"

"Loyal means to always be true to someone," Blade elaborated. "To be there when they need you. To give them the benefit of the doubt. To stand by them through thick and thin. Do you understand?"

"Some," Ringo said.

"Which reminds me," Blade said, gazing at the gunman. "I want you by my side in Seattle. Be ready to leave at dawn."

"I already told the missus I'd be taggin' along," Hickok remarked.

"Rikki and Yama are going with us," Blade divulged.

"Four of us? This shindig should be fun," Hickok said.

"Fun? Fun isn't the word I'd use," Blade said, disagreeing.

"Lighten up, pard," Hickok recommended. "I'll see to it you get back here in one piece."

Blade smirked. "Thanks."

Hickok gazed to the west. "Yes, sir. I'm lookin' forward to gettin' there. I told the guy who radioed for help that we'd bail him out. And I can't wait to tangle with that mangy coyote Manta."

"From what you told me earlier, it's obvious this Manta will be expecting us," Blade cautioned.

Hickok patted his Pythons. "So?"

"So I don't like walking into a trap," Blade declared soberly.

"Trap, schmap! We can handle anything the vermin throws at us," Hickok predicted.

"I wish I had your confidence," Blade observed. "Don't sweat it," Hickok said. "It'll be a piece of cake!"

"Famous last words," Blade quipped.

Chapter Four

"We're on our own," Hickok announced, watching the Hurricane wing rapidly to the south toward California.

"Where are we?" Yama inquired in his low voice.

Blade studied the old map in his left hand. The Hurricane had deposited them in a field to the north of Seattle. Captain Laslo had deliberately landed in a secluded area to minimize the risk of detection. Trees bordered the large field on all sides.

"Which direction should we take?" Rikki questioned.

Blade surveyed the immediate vicinity. Hickok was to his right, an M-16 in the gunfighter's hands. Yama, armed with the inevitable Wilkinson, was to the left. Rikki stood ten feet away, alertly scanning the vegetation, holding a Heckler and Koch HK-93.

"We head south, right?" Hickok said.

"Right," Blade confirmed, glancing at the map again. "This area was once known as Lake Forest Park. I estimate we're about two miles from

the Seattle city limits." He folded the map and slid it into his left front pocket, then unslung his Commando Arms Carbine. "Let's head out!" he ordered, jogging to the south.

Hickok kept pace with the giant while Yama and Rikki fell in behind. All four Warriors toted backpacks containing their rations.

"Keep your eyes peeled," Blade advised.

"Shucks! I was thinkin' of takin' a nap," Hickok stated.

"Since we don't have any idea where to find Manta," Blade said, "we'll proceed into the heart of the city. We should stir up something."

"I wish I had my Henry," Hickok mentioned, thinking of his favorite long gun, a Navy Arms Henry Carbine, a lever action rifle in 44-40 caliber.

"Automatics are better when you might be outnumbered," Blade noted. He hoped they were packing enough hardware to overcome any threat. His 45-caliber Commando incorporated a 90-shot magazine. Combined with Yama's 50-shot Wilkinson, Rikki's 25 rounds in the KH-93, and Hickok's 30 in the M-16, their firepower was awesome. As if the automatics weren't enough, Yama carried his personal arsenal, Hickok his Colt Pythons, Rikki his katana in its scabbard attached to a black belt around his waist, and Blade was armed with his Bowies and Combat Master MK V's in shoulder holsters, one pistol under each arm.

Surely that's enough, Blade thought to himself.

But as events turned out, it wasn't.

The four Warriors entered the woods, threading their way through the dense growth.

"Do you think anyone saw the Hurricane come down?" Hickok asked.

"Probably," Blade said. "Even if they didn't see it, they had to hear it."

"When will the Hurricane be back?" Hickok queried.

"Laslo will land in that field in three days," Blade responded, keeping his tone subdued. "If we're not here, he'll leave."

The quartet advanced for over a mile.

"Blade!" Rikki stated urgently.

Blade halted and turned.

Rikki was standing with his head cocked to the right, listening. "Do you hear them?"

"I do," Yama said.

Blade heard them too. A chorus of howls off to the north.

"They're on our trail," Hickok deduced.

"Move it!" Blade barked, sprinting southward. He wanted to avoid a confrontation, if possible. Gunfire might enable hostile elements to pinpoint their position.

"Must be the welcoming committee," Hickok joked.

They ran for another 500 yards, then unexpectedly darted from the forest onto the ravaged vestige of a road.

Blade abruptly stopped. The road surface, aligned from east to west, was buckled and cracked, choked with weeds. He studied the foliage on the far side, espying buildings some distance beyond.

Hickok was listening to their pursuers. "They're gainin' on us," he declared.

Blade had reached the same conclusion. "Take cover," he commanded. "When they reach the road, let them have it."

The four hastened into the brush.

Blade concealed himself behind a tall tree, using the wide trunk to screen him from the road. He checked the Commando's magazine and flicked off the safety.

The howling had attained a crescendo.

Blade peered around the trunk.

A frenzied pack of feral canines burst from the woods, onto the road, yowling in anticipation of their next meal. The pack was a mixture of diverse breeds of mongrels, including shepherds, Dobermans, Great Danes, collies, and others. Each dog was on the lean side, with a lackluster coat. Ravenous, eager to eat, they were slavering at the mouth, many with their fangs exposed. The leaders of the pack checked their rush, pausing to sniff at the road where the scent of the humans was strongest, causing the dogs to mill about. The pack was momentarily vulnerable, in the open, their vigilance diminished.

Which was the opening Blade wanted. He counted 21 canines before he elevated the Commando barrel and squeezed the trigger. The Carbine thundered, the stock bucking against his stout shoulder, the 45-caliber slugs ripping into the unsuspecting dogs with a vengeance.

The other Warriors opened up.

Endowed with incredible reflexes, the feral dogs reacted instantaneously, hunger compelling them forward into the hail of lead. Snarling and growling, bristling in primal fury, they charged the humans.

The slaughter was total.

Most of the dogs died on the road, their forms torn apart by the withering gunfire. Hair and blood sprayed everywhere. Several of the biggest canines managed to reach the edge of the road.

Yama stopped them cold. He emerged from behind a tree, the Wilkinson blasting, and stitched a pattern of bullets across the chests of the hurtling dogs. They crashed to the ground in a bloody line of perforated, convulsing figures.

Blade ceased firing, his ears ringing. He frowned as he surveyed the carnage. He much preferred a stand-up fight, where he could engage an enemy face-to-face. An ambush wasn't to his liking. But in the Outlands, the regions outside the territories of the Freedom Federation, where survival of the fittest was the norm, he couldn't afford to be particular about the style of combat he employed. Surviving was essential by whatever means necessary.

Hickok came around a bush, shaking his head. "Stupid mutts! They should have hightailed it instead of comin' after us."

Rikki walked into view from the undergrowth, scrutinizing the slain dogs with displeasure. "They were famished," he said. "And starvation can override prudence."

Blade walked to the roadway. He reached behind him and opened a leather pouch attached to his belt.

"Between the Hurricane and this," Yama mentioned, "the whole city must know we're here."

Blade removed a fresh magazine from the pouch. "I agree. Which means we keep on our toes at all times." He removed the spent clip from the Commando and inserted the new one.

The others were replacing their spent magazines.

"Who cares if they know we're comin'?" Hickok commented. "We have a job to do, and we're going to do it no matter what."

Blade turned to the south. He placed the spent magazine in the pouch and closed the flap. "Let's go."

The four Warriors continued their search, moving at a dogtrot.

In the century since the war, the prolific vegetation had reclaimed much of the land, overrunning the spaces between the buildings. The majority of the structures were in dilapidated condition; roofs were caved in, the paint had faded or peeled off, the walls were rent with fractures, and the windows were broken or missing.

Blade noted the state of the buildings as they proceeded further into the city. They encountered more and more structures, many individual residences. But as they went on, larger edifices appeared. Ancient stores. Industrial buildings. And others of indeterminate design and purpose. Despite the brightness of the morning sun, the interiors of the structures were plunged in obscure gloom.

"This place is sort of spooky," Hickok remarked.

Blade nodded. The air was still, the nearby trees motionless. Disturbingly, there was no indication of wildlife: no birds, no squirrels, no rabbits, nothing.

As if he was reading Blade's mind, Rikki spoke up. "Where are the animals? There should be animals."

They crossed a small field and reached an intersection. The highways were still in passable condition, but there was no sign of any traffic.

"I don't understand," Yama stated, scanning a four-story building to their right.

Blade was taking his bearings by the sun. The field they'd just crossed was slightly to the northeast of the intersection. He elected to stay with the road; the going would be easier and they could spot an assault in advance. "What don't you understand?" he asked, following one branch on the highway to the south.

"A lot of these buildings are in better shape than I expected," Yama said. "They're relatively intact. But you told us Seattle was hit by a neutron bomb. So why isn't everything destroyed?"

"I can answer that," Hickok chimed in.

"Go ahead," Blade directed.

Hickok looked at Yama. "I saw the same thing when I was in Washington, D.C. A whole bunch of the buildings there are still in one piece, and Washington was hit by a neutron bomb too."

"But how?" Yama queried, puzzled.

"A Russian general told me about neutron bombs," Hickok disclosed. "The Soviets apparently used a heap of them during the war. The general said the Russians liked the neutron bombs better than the typical H-bombs because the neutron kind aren't as destructive."

"A Russian told you that?" Yama questioned skeptically. "Why didn't the Soviets employ their most devastating bombs and missiles?"

"The general explained that," Hickok said. "He said the Russians wanted to *conquer* America, not turn the country into a desolate wasteland. You see, those neutron bombs didn't produce as much fallout as a conventional warhead and their explosive power wasn't as great. So a lot of U.S. cities and targets were hit by the neutron type."

"Like Seattle," Yama stated.

"And we know the Russians launched a drive through Alaska and Canada at the outset of World War Three," Blade noted. "They were stopped in British Columbia by the coldest winter western Canada had seen in centuries. The same thing happened to the Nazis during World War Two. A Russian winter softened them up for the Allied troops. Well, during the Big Blast, a Canadian winter checked the Soviets and enabled the U.S. and Canadians to drive the Russians back across the Bering Strait. The Soviets probably used a neutron bomb on Seattle because they intended to eventually use the city as a major port of entry."

"Why didn't the Americans reoccupy the city?" Yama wondered aloud.

"Several reasons," Blade said. "Most of the U.S. population was evacuated into the Midwest during the war. Thousands and thousands more fled to California. And while neutron bombs don't produce as much fallout as typical thermonuclear devices, they do create some. There must have been enough to dissuade anyone from reentering Seattle for years, maybe decades."

"But there must be people here now," Yama observed.

Blade shrugged. "We know there are captive humans here. And mutants. Who knows what else?"

"I do," Rikki-Tikki-Tavi commented.

Blade glanced over his right shoulder at the black-garbed Warrior. "You do? What?"

"That," Rikki said, pointing to the right.

Blade faced in the indicated direction. And froze. His companions did the same.

Standing on eight squat legs, glistening red in the sunlight, was a gargantuan creature with a huge circular shell for a body, a pair of brown, bulging eyes, two antennae, and two enormous claws. The thing stood a good ten feet in height and was about fifteen yards off, its protruding eyes locked on the four Warriors.

"What the blazes is that?" Hickok blurted.

"It's a crab," Blade said. "But it's bigger than any crab I ever read about."

"Do you suppose the critter is friendly?" Hickok inquired.

As if in response, the jumbo crab suddenly uttered a grunting sound and skittered toward them with its claws extended.

Chapter Five

"Look out!" Blade bellowed, moving to the right, raising the Commando and squeezing the trigger.

Scores of slugs smacked into the creature's hard body and legs, and it stumbled and nearly went down. But it quickly recovered, rearing high on its hind legs, revealing a gaping maw.

All four Warriors fired at will. Hickok stayed close to Blade while Rikki and Yama dashed to the left.

The crab seemed uncertain for a moment, ignoring the rain of lead while it swiveled to the right, then the left, apparently making up its mind which victims to chase.

"Take cover!" Blade shouted.

The monster, evidently attracted by the yell, went after the giant and the human in buckskins.

"Terrific!" Hickok exclaimed, sighting the M-16 and sending a half-dozen rounds into the mutated crustacean's left eye.

Blade spotted a low brick wall bordering the road and raced up to it. "Come on!" he goaded the gunfighter, then vaulted over the wall and landed on his right side. He rolled, placing his back against the wall.

Two seconds later Hickok joined him. The gunman came down on his elbows and knees and glanced at Blade. "What—?"

"Get close to the wall!" Blade ordered.

Hickok immediately complied, aligning his body with his head inches from Blade's combat boots.

None too soon.

The crab materialized overhead, looming above the wall, its eyes scanning the weed-choked yard beyond for its quarry.

Blade found himself gazing at the underside of the carapace, and he abruptly realized the bottom of the crab wasn't like the impervious upper shell. It was soft, unprotected flesh!

"Let him have it!" Blade instructed, then pointed the Commando barrel at the crab's underbelly and fired.

Hickok's M-16 chattered.

The titan shrieked as its stomach was ruptured by the slugs. A transparent fluid spurted from the creature as chunks of tissue were blown outward. It frantically back-pedaled onto the street.

Blade rose up, continuing to pour in the gunfire. He aimed at the monster's mouth and saw the crustacean shudder as his shots hit home.

The crab lurched to the north, weaving unsteadily.

All four Warriors emptied their magazines into the colossus.

Blade swiftly extracted his spent clip and grabbed for a new one.

"Look!" Hickok exclaimed.

Fluid gushing from its underside, the crab was tottering, on the verge of collapse. Its legs buckled and it crashed onto its stomach, trembling, its claws thrashing the air. After a minute the claws fell to the roadway with a distinct thump and the creature was still.

"We did it!" Hickok elated.

"We were lucky," Blade said quietly.

"Lucky? It was a piece of cake!" Hickok declared, using his favorite expression. "The critter never laid a claw on us."

Blade slid over the brick wall and cautiously approached the crab as he inserted a fresh clip into the Commando.

Rikki and Yama were walking toward the bulky corpse from the other side of the street.

Hickok came up on Blade's right. "What if there are more of these things around?"

"There probably are," Blade said.

Rikki and Yama warily stepped around the rear of the crab and rejoined their fellow Warriors.

"If we keep going at this rate," Yama remarked, "we'll run out of ammo before we find Manta."

"Each of us has twelve clips," Blade said. "That should be enough."

"The ocean must not be far off," Rikki commented. "A crab like this wouldn't wander a great distance from the water."

Blade pointed to the east. "Lake Washington is less than a mile that way." He shifted and pointed to the west. "And Puget Sound is three or four miles in that direction. The crab could have come from either one."

"First a passel of mangy mutts, and now a crab the size of Mount Everest," Hickok mumbled. "What next? Carnivorous daffodils?"

Blade scrutinized the road to the south. "We could encounter anything. There's no predicting how the radiation might have affected the local flora and fauna."

Hickok squared his shoulders. "I'm ready when you are, pard."

Blade resumed their journey. As they trekked southward the buildings became generally even larger and more numerous. They were packed close together, as if prewar space had been at a premium. They reached the

crumpled remains of a wide thoroughfare.

"What was this?" Hickok inquired.

Blade removed his map and consulted the reference guide at the bottom of the page. "This was State Highway 513." He nodded to the right. "Interstate 5 should be a mile and a quarter to the west. Let's find it and follow it into the inner city."

"You're the boss," Hickok said.

Blade led them toward Interstate 5. They passed row after row of damaged edifices, including a few over five stories tall.

"Are most big cities like this?" Yama asked.

"Let's see," Blade said, enumerating his travels. "I've been to the Twin Cities, Denver, St. Louis, Philadelphia, New York, Houston and Los Angeles. Not to mention quite a few small towns. I'd say Seattle is about par for the course. Minneapolis and St. Paul were spared a direct hit, so they're in a bit better shape. Denver, as you know, became the capital of the Civilized Zone, and although it's changed since the war the city was unscathed. St. Louis is in the hands of a biker gang, but it's in fair condition. Philadelphia is in Russian-controlled territory. Houston is managed by androids, and you wouldn't believe what they've done there. Los Angeles is much like it was before the war."

"And New York?" Yama queried.

"New York is history," Blade said. "The Big Apple was one of the first targets the Soviets hit, and they used an H-bomb. Geronimo and I went to New York, remember? The city is nothing but melted slag."

"I wonder what Portland looks like," Hickok mentioned. "If it was hit, like you said, then it must look like New York."

"We're being watched," Rikki suddenly interrupted.

The Warriors halted.

"Where?" Blade asked, searching the closest structures.

"I don't know," Rikki replied.

Hickok looked in all directions. "I don't see anyone."

"I know we are being watched," Rikki insisted. "I can feel their eyes on us."

Hickok glanced at the martial artist, grinning. "Have you been readin' those old superhero comic books in the Family library again?"

Yama slowly pivoted, probing the buildings. "Movement," he declared.

"Where?" Blade demanded.

Yama motioned with his Wilkinson at a seven-story-square structure to the south. "There. On the fourth floor. I saw a face at the busted window in the middle."

"Human?" Blade inquired.

"Seemed to be," Yama said. "But I saw it for just a second."

Blade studied the building, examining the rows of shattered windows on the side fronting the highway. He saw several enormous yellow letters near the top, part of a wrecked sign.

ANK.

What in the world was an ANK?

Blade discerned a row of lesser letters under the first word.

OF A LE.

What did it mean? He moved toward the ANK, his Commando at the ready. If there was someone inside the building, then whoever it was might know where to find Manta.

"Orders, pard?" Hickok asked.

"I want to question whoever is in there," Blade said. "We take him or her alive."

"What if it's a mutant?" Hickok noted.

"Don't kill it unless it tries to harm us," Blade directed.

"I hope it's not a carnivorous daffodil," Hickok quipped.

"Enough already with the daffodils," Blade said.

"What have you got against flowers?" Hickok rejoined.

Blade kept his eyes trained on the windows. They were a block from the building, which was on their right, with trees bordering the sidewalk to their left.

"I don't like this, pard," Hickok mentioned. "This is a perfect spot to be bushwhacked."

"I sense danger," Rikki concurred.

Blade slowed his pace. "We can't turn back. Stay sharp."

Blade saw a face appear at the window on the fourth floor, but the visage withdrew before he could identify whether the countenance was human or otherwise.

"Did you see that?" Hickok asked.

"I saw it," Blade confirmed.

The Warriors angled toward a series of concrete steps leading to a pair of huge glass doors. Amazingly, the glass panes were unbroken.

"Would it be wise for all of us to go inside?" Rikki queried.

"No," Blade said. "If this is a trap, then two of us should stay outside. Hickok and I will go in. Yama and you will cover us from those steps."

"Be careful," Yama cautioned.

"What can happen? He's with me," Hickok stated.

Yama grinned. "Be doubly careful," he told Blade.

Blade grew tense as he reached the bottom of the steps. He lightly touched his trigger finger to the Commando trigger. Just in case. "On

me," he said to the gunman.

"Like a shadow," Hickok promised.

Blade nodded at Rikki and Yama, then took the steps two at a time. He gained the uppermost step and darted to the right of the glass doors, his broad back to the wall.

Hickok ducked to the left.

Squinting because of the glare on the glass panes, Blade leaned forward and peered inside. The recesses of the building were dark and ominous.

"Ready when you are, pard," Hickok whispered.

Blade wrenched on the right-hand door, flinging it wide and lunging inside, moving to the right away from the lighted doorway.

As before, Hickok bore to the left.

Blade crouched and waited for his eyes to adjust to the murky dimness. The chamber they were in was spacious and filled with dust-caked furniture. Cobwebs hung from the ceiling. To the right was a wooden counter running the length of the room, while to the left were six desks positioned along the wall. At the rear of the chamber, in the center, was an elevator shaft with the door open and the cage gone. Blade could just make out a black cable dangling down the shaft.

Where was the elevator?

Blade spotted a door in the far corner of the room, at the end of the counter, hanging from its upper hinge.

What was beyond the door? An office? Or a stairwell?

Blade rose and hastened across the chamber to the door, Hickok on his heels.

The doorway afforded access to a flight of stairs.

Blade started ascending the stairwell, vigilantly staring upward, the Commando held next to his chest. He came to a landing and paused, listening.

Not a sound.

Frowning, Blade advanced higher. Like the others, his intuition was blaring a mental warning, and prior experience had taught him never to disregard his intuition. But he felt confident they could handle any opposition. And with Rikki and Yama covering the front, what could go wrong?

Plenty.

Blade was two steps below the fourth floor landing when he heard the pad of stealthy footsteps. He halted, perceiving the landing door was open.

The sound of the footsteps stopped.

Blade sidled toward the landing, easing onto the platform and inching toward the doorway.

A dim corridor became visible past the door.

What was that?

Blade thought he'd heard a hushed word spoken, but he wasn't positive. He stepped into the doorway and squatted.

Far down the hallway a Stygian figure streaked from one side of the corridor to the other, then vanished.

Someone was hiding down there.

Blade stood and strode forward, managing a solitary stride before all hell broke loose.

The brittle bark of automatic gunfire arose from outside, from the vicinity of the front steps.

Blade whirled toward the landing, intending to race downstairs and aid Rikki and Yama.

Hickok, in the middle of the landing, glanced over Blade's head. "Above you!" he cried in alarm.

Blade went to look up, but before he could something dropped on him

from the darkness overhead. As the constricting object draped around him and encased him from his head to his waist, he realized with a start it was a net!

"Blade!" Hickok shouted, coming to his friend's rescue.

Just as two forms pounced on the gunman from aloft.

Blade, struggling to extricate himself from the mesh net, saw Hickok go down in a jumble of flailing limbs. The M-16 clattered to the landing. "Hickok!" he yelled, exerting his massive muscles to the maximum, his veins bulging, but the net refused to give.

The three thrashing figures on the landing rolled to the edge, up to the metal railing. They came erect, still fighting. Hickok was nowhere near as skilled as Rikki or Yama in hand-to-hand combat, but he was holding his own against his assailants until tragedy struck.

Horrified, Blade watched as one of the attackers tried to land a haymaker on the gunfighter's chin. Instead, the gunman's foe appeared to trip and slam into Hickok, who was grappling with his other adversary. The next instant, Hickok was hurtling over the top rail into the abyss beyond.

"Hickok!" Blade screamed.

The gunman plummeted from sight.

"No!" Blade roared, straining against the net, twisting and rocking from side to side.

From the corridor and the landing they came, over a dozen forms converging on the giant, tackling him, bearing him to the floor.

Blade bucked and heaved, kicking at the heads and arms encircling his legs and ankles. His right boot smashed into a man's face and the antagonist shrieked in agony. He almost succeeded in dislodging those clinging to him, striving to restrain him, when one of his opponents abruptly reared alongside his head bearing an upraised club.

Damn!

Blade saw the club descending and tried to jerk his head aside, but the net hampered his movement.

The club thudded into the left side of the giant's head.

Blade's world seemed to spin, with pinpoints of light flickering everywhere.

And then the lights went out.

Chapter Six

Rikki and Yama were at the bottom of the front steps when the ambush came.

"I don't like being separated from the others," Yama commented, surveying the trees and the buildings across the street.

"It couldn't be helped," Rikki remarked.

They waited for a minute in silence.

Yama looked at his diminutive companion. "Did you notice something different this time about the selection process?"

Rikki gazed at Yama. "What do you mean?"

"Blade personally asked us to make this run to Seattle," Yama observed.

Rikki didn't see the point. "So?"

"So in the past the selection process was conducted differently," Yama mentioned. "Think back. When Blade and Plato needed a Warrior to infiltrate the Citadel in Wyoming, they had all the Warriors draw straws. The short straw got to go."

"That was you," Rikki said.

"And when they needed a Warrior to venture to St. Louis," Yama went on, "they had us draw lots again. Hickok and you went."

Rikki's forehead furrowed in reflection. "True."

"That's not all," Yama said. "What about the trip to Philadelphia? Again, they drew lots to determine which Warriors would go. But not this time. Blade specifically wanted us. Why? Doesn't it make you wonder?"

Rikki pursed his lips. "To be honest, I hadn't given the matter much thought."

"You were probably too busy communing with the Spirit to notice," Yama stated, grinning.

"Communing with the Spirit is essential to my inner harmony," Rikki said. "Don't you commune regularly?"

"Yes, but not as often as you do," Yama responded. "I'm more interested in perfecting my craft as a Warrior, in developing my skill in the line of duty."

"Duty?" Rikki rejoined. "Or death?"

"What?" Yama asked.

"Of all the Warriors, you have a supreme fascination with the subject of death," Rikki said. "You even took the name of the Hindu King of Death. And of all the Warriors, you are the most versatile at your trade. Most of us have adopted one weapon as our province of expertise, but not you. You have mastered every weapon in the Family armory. When it comes to dispensing death, few of the Warriors are as capable as you."

"I don't know about that," Yama said.

"We are quite different, you and I," Rikki asserted. "We view life and death differently. I try to live my life to the fullest through the philosophy of the martial arts, while your life is devoted to acquiring as many lethal attributes as possible for the sole purpose of being Death Incarnate. Even our perspectives on the afterlife are diverse. I don't fear death because I regard dying as simply a technique for attaining a higher level of spiritual living. You, on the other hand, don't fear death because you don't fear

anything. You are Death, Yama, whether you're willing to admit it or not."

"That's ridiculous," Yama retorted in surprise. "I'm just a Warrior, like you." He paused. "I never knew you felt this way about me."

"I hope I haven't offended you," Rikki said.

"Not at all," Yama declared. "But there's more to my outlook on life than death."

"Like wh—" Rikki began, then spun toward the street, toward the opposite sidewalk, leveling his HK-93.

The trap was sprung.

They poured out of the buildings on the far side of the road, dozens of them, unkempt, clad in rags, filthy and unshaven, and armed with everything from pipes to knives to a few guns. They created a bloodthirsty din as they surged toward the pair of Warriors on the steps, their features contorted in bestial hatred.

"They're human!" Rikki cried.

"So?" Yama crouched and cut loose with the Wilkinson, downing six of their onrushing attackers with a quick burst. He backed up the steps, Rikki at his side.

"We must warn Blade!" Rikki shouted, turning to run to the glass doors.

The doors abruptly swung open and four barbaric men emerged. Starting down the concrete steps, they uttered strident, savage whoops. Two of them carried clubs, one a sword, and the fourth an axe.

"Behind us!" Rikki warned Yama, then fired the HK-93 from his hip.

The quartet died in midstride, tumbling down the steps as their chests were perforated by the powerful slugs.

Another burly man appeared at the glass doors, a rifle in his hands. He snapped off a hasty shot, which went wild, then retreated inside.

"They're in the building!" Rikki cried.

The mob in the street had slowed at Yama's initial burst. A lean woman with a Winchester got off a shot, the bullet striking the concrete at Yama's feet and ricocheting off.

Yama fired, stitching her from chin to navel with crimson holes.

"We've got to reach Blade!" Rikki declared.

Yama risked a glance over his right shoulder. He spied four or five forms just inside the glass doors. "They'll cut us down if we try to go in there!"

"We can't leave Blade and Hickok!" Rikki said.

Yama looked to the right, then the left. More foes were bearing down on them from both directions. Their position was untenable. "We can't hold here!" he yelled to make himself heard over the clamor of the onrushing throng, then shot two nearby men.

"We have to reach Blade and Hickok!" Rikki persisted, sending several rounds into the glass doors. The pane to the left shattered. There were screams of anguish. "Follow me!" he directed, racing to the left, to the edge of the steps, shooting at a row of charging figures and dropping five of them. The rest scurried away.

Yama spotted a man aiming a revolver and sent him into eternity.

Rikki reached the end of the concrete steps and dropped to the sidewalk below. There was a narrow alley between the building Blade and Hickok were in and a smaller structure, a rundown supermarket. He dashed into the alley, making for the rear of the building. There had to be a back exit! If Yama and he could find it, they could enter and find their friends.

Yama jumped to the pavement and unleashed a volley to discourage pursuit, then sprinted after Rikki.

The alley was filled with rusted garbage cans, piles of moldy trash, and other discarded items. An obnoxious stench permeated the air.

The Warriors wound past the mounds of refuse, seeking an exit at the tail end of the alley.

Instead, they found a brick wall.

Rikki drew to a halt, scanning the walls for a door.

Yama came up behind his fellow Warrior. "Now what?" he snapped in frustration. From the sound of things, their enemies were coming down the alley after them.

"Over the wall," Rikki said.

Yama nodded and quickly knelt, placing the Wilkinson on the ground. He cupped his hands.

Rikki glanced up at the rim of the wall five feet above his head. He set his right foot on Yama's palms, the HK-93 in his left hand. "Ready."

Yama straightened and heaved, his steely muscles propelling the martial artist upward.

Rikki almost went clear over the wall. He hooked his right arm on the lip and lithely perched himself on the top. On the far side of the wall was a sidewalk and a city street. He gripped the HK-93 by the barrel and slowly eased the weapon as low as his left arm could go, then released it.

The uproar in the alley was growing louder.

Rikki took hold of the wall with his left arm and extended his right toward his friend. "Hurry," he advised.

Yama slung the Carbine over his right shoulder. He took two steps backward, then ran forward and jumped, easily grasping Rikki's right hand with his own. He used his momentum and Rikki's assistance to swing onto the crown of the wall, then promptly dropped to the sidewalk below.

Rikki leaped from the wall, alighting with the ease and grace of a cat. He scooped up the HK-93.

To the right was the rear of the building Blade and Hickok had entered, and in the center was a wooden door.

"Let's go," Rikki urged, moving toward the door.

"Wait a second," Yama said.

Rikki looked back.

Yama had the Wilkinson cradled in his arms. He was watching the top of the brick wall, waiting. From the volume of the hubbub, it was obvious their pursuers were on the other side of the wall. Sure enough, a moment later a trio of heads appeared above the rim, evidently supported by their comrades underneath. Yama fired, whipping the barrel in a tight sweep.

The three pursuers sprayed blood and brains as they toppled from view.

"They won't try that again for a while," Yama said.

Rikki raced to the rear door. Yama's ploy had bought them a little time, an opportunity to find Blade and Hickok. He grabbed the doorknob and tugged.

The door was locked!

"What's wrong?" Yama queried.

"The door is locked," Rikki told him.

"Stand back," Yama directed. He aimed the Wilkinson at the knob.

A gleaming arrow arced out of the sky, from behind the two Warriors, intended for the big man in blue.

Rikki caught a motion out of the corner of his right eye and went to shout a warning, but he was too late.

The arrow struck home, catching Yama in the lower left corner of his back, piercing his skin and flesh and going all the way through his body, its point protruding from the fabric of his dark-blue uniform to the left of his navel. He inadvertantly grunted, falling to his knees, as agony lanced his frame.

Rikki spun, spying a bearded man with a compound bow on top of a three-story building to the rear. He elevated the HK-93 and got off a burst as the man was notching another shaft.

The bearded bowman screamed and fell onto the roof.

"Yama!" Rikki cried, moving to his companion's side.

Yama was breathing heavily and his face was pale. He mustered a feeble grin. "I'm not Death. I'm just stupid."

"We must get you out of here," Rikki said.

"You go find Blade and Hickok," Yama suggested. "I'll stay here and hold them off as long as I can."

"Now who is being ridiculous?" Rikki countered. He looped his left arm under Yama's right and lifted.

"You can't carry me!" Yama objected. "Save yourself!"

"I'm not leaving without you," Rikki stated. He started toward the other side of the street, Yama shuffling to keep pace.

"Be serious!" Yama protested, his tone strained. "You can't lug me around Seattle!"

"Can't I?" Rikki rejoined, hoping to keep his friend talking, worried Yama might succumb to shock.

Yama was doing his best to bear as much of his own weight as he could. Blood was seeping down the front of his uniform. He held onto the Wilkinson with his left hand. "No."

"Why not?" Rikki asked, stepping onto the far sidewalk and bearing to the south.

Yama grimaced and gasped. "Because," he panted, "I'm too heavy. You're only five feet tall and you weigh, what, one hundred and forty?"

Rikki nodded, scanning the street ahead for a hiding place.

"Well, brother, I'm six eight and I weigh two hundred and thirty," Yama noted. "You're strong, but you can't carry me forever."

"I won't need to," Rikki said.

"What?"

Rikki wagged the HK-93 barrel at a four-story brick structure 40 feet in front of them on the right side of the street. "We'll take shelter there."

"Why there?" Yama queried, exhaling loudly.

Rikki grinned. "Because I think I have to tinkle."

Yama snorted. "You're getting worse than Hickok!"

"I'll take that as a compliment," Rikki said.

The two Warriors covered the 40 feet at a rapid walk, Yama forcing his legs to respond. But he was gritting his teeth, his blue eyes narrowed in pain, when they reached a short flight of cement steps leading to the building.

"Let's go," Rikki said, slowly ascending.

Yama held his left arm against his right. "How do we know it's safe in there?"

"We don't," Rikki admitted.

"There could be someone in there," Yama went on in an uncharacteristically talkative mood, as if the mere act of conversing somehow alleviated his torment and kept him from dwelling on the arrow in his back. "There could be rats. Or spiders. I'm not very fond of spiders."

"Nitpick. Nitpick," Rikki quipped. "Everything has always got to be perfect with you."

Yama coughed, sagging against Rikki, then recovered slightly. "Sorry."

The twin front doors to the brick structure consisted of metal frames with the inner glass panes gone, the glass lying in bits and pieces on the steps outside the doors. Rikki's black shoes crunched on the glass as he covered the last two steps. He didn't bother opening the brown metal frames; he simply angled his body through the middle, through the space formerly filled by the panes.

Yama managed to crane his neck and look behind them. "I see one of them," he commented.

Rikki hastily pulled Yama into the dusky hallway inside, drawing his friend away from the doorway until they were completely hidden in inky shadows.

Yama abruptly doubled over, his legs buckling.

"Yama?" Rikki queried anxiously, lowering the man in blue to the floor.

"Can't go... any... further," Yama mumbled. "Feeling... weak."

"You stay here," Rikki said. "I'll check the street." He hurried to the doorway, keeping his back flush with the left-hand wall, then peered outside.

A crowd had gathered at the rear of the seven-story building. They were conversing and gesturing, apparently undecided on which direction to take.

Rikki smiled. The one Yama had seen must not have observed them. They were safe for the moment.

The crowd began moving, splitting in half, some heading to the north, the rest advancing to the south.

Toward the brick building.

Toward the Warriors.

Chapter Seven

No one was more surprised than Hickok when he sailed over the top railing. He tried to grab for the rail but missed, and he felt the musty air rushing past his face as he dropped like the proverbial rock.

Why did these things always happen to him?

He glimpsed the third-floor landing and he tried to grasp at the metal railing. His fingers closed on the center of the three horizontal rails, and

for a fleeting instant he thought he would arrest his fall. His right hand couldn't bear the burden of his weight, though, and his hold was torn loose by his momentum.

He would only get one more chance.

Then splat!

Hickok acrobatically twisted in midair, extending his upper torso toward the landings, and when the second-floor landing materialized underneath him he was ready. Both hands closed on the top rail, gripping for all he was worth, and his body whipped around in a tight arch, slamming into the railing and knocking the breath out of him. He gasped and held on, his shoulder muscles feeling like they'd been torn in half. His senses swam and there was an acute ache in his abdomen.

Dear Spirit!

That was close!

Hickok dangled from the railing for a minute, gathering his energy and his wits. He vaguely became aware of a commotion far overhead.

Blade!

Hickok struggled to pull himself up and over the railing, his arms quivering, his shoulders throbbing. The excruciating anguish threatened to overwhelm him, and for a second he felt like he would pass out. He shook his head to clear the cobwebs and succeeded in raising his head and shoulders above the top rail.

His sweaty hands were beginning to slip!

Hickok's lips compressed together as he hauled himself up to his waist. He teetered on the brink, marshaling his strength, then swung his chest all the way over the top rail. Gravity did the rest, and he tumbled onto the landing, his left shoulder absorbing the brunt of the impact.

Blazes!

Hickok almost cried out, but didn't. He inhaled deeply, listening to the sound of a gun battle outside.

Rikki and Yama were in trouble.

But Blade took priority. The giant was the head Warrior, second only to Plato in importance to the Family. Hickok decided to save Blade first, then help Rikki and Yama. If they needed help. Those two could handle practically anything or anyone.

The commotion up above had ceased.

Hickok went to roll onto his back, the movement racking his body with torment. He suppressed the discomfort and turned over.

So far, so good.

He propped his palms on the landing and attempted to push himself erect, but his arms and shoulders wouldn't cooperate. His shoulders felt like burning coals had been imbedded in his flesh, and he wondered if one arm or both had been wrenched from its socket.

That would be all he needed!

Hickok waited, chafing at the delay, knowing he would do more damage if he tried to rise prematurely. Just a minute more, he hoped, and he would be able to stand. But would he be able to use his Pythons?

The gunfire outside had abated.

Where were Yama and Rikki?

Hickok cocked his head, perplexed by the sudden silence. Why didn't he hear anything upstairs? The quiet upset him more than the sound of fighting. At least when he heard gunfire and a commotion, he knew his friends were alive and giving the enemy heck.

A minute dragged by. Two. Shots sounded farther away.

Enough was enough!

Come on, boy! Hickok goaded himself, grunting as he pressed his palms against the landing and shoved. His arms felt weak, but he was able to sit up. The exertion caused his shoulders to throb worse than before.

Who was the dummy who said this run would be a piece of cake?

He'd like to shoot the idiot!

Hickok grinned at his own joke. He shifted, tucking his legs under him, then stood without employing his arms.

Bingo!

But now what?

The gunman cautiously moved to the edge of the landing and looked upward. There was no one in sight. Where were their attackers? He slowly climbed the stairs, one at a time, as sensation returned to his arms.

Could he draw his Colts yet?

Hickok clenched and unclenched his hands, limbering his muscles, gauging the extent of flexibility in his hands. He placed his hands on the Pythons, feeling the cool grips against his skin. Pausing, he tried to whip the Colts free, but the best he could do was ease them from their holsters. He leveled the barrels and continued climbing, becoming doubly alert as he neared the fourth floor.

This was where they'd been jumped.

He peeked over the landing, surprised to discover it was vacant. Even his M-16 was gone.

What about Blade?

Hickok boldly walked to the doorway and stared down the corridor, his eyes widening in amazement.

They were gone!

The bushwhackers and Blade were gone!

But if they hadn't passed him, then there must be another way out of the building. A rear exit maybe.

Annoyed, Hickok turned and hastened down the stairwell to the lobby. He rushed across to the glass doors, noticing one of them had been shot out. Bodies littered the steps beyond and the street below, but none of them were moving. And Rikki and Yama were nowhere in sight.

Blast!

Hickok shoved through the glass doors, forgetting his sore shoulders and paying for his neglect with a painful twinge. The air was refreshing on his face. He halted and surveyed the street and the nearest buildings.

No one.

Where *was* everybody?

Hickok went down the steps to the sidewalk, debating which way to go. Faint yelling seemed to be coming from behind the edifice he'd just vacated. He heard a voice and glanced to the left.

Three men and a woman, all on the grubby side, unexpectedly appeared on the left side of the steps. They were in a heated discussion and they hadn't seen him.

Yet.

Hickok darted to the right, his moccasins pounding, wanting to temporarily evade them until he regained better use of his arms. His accuracy was undoubtedly diminished, while theirs wasn't. And two of the men carried rifles.

"Hey! There goes one!" a man bellowed.

"Stop!" shouted another.

Not on your life! Hickok mentally vowed. He weaved to the left as a shot rang out, into the street, the move saving his life, causing the rifleman to miss. He bounded across the street as a second shot cracked and missed.

What a bunch of cow chips!

Hickok ran behind a row of trees lining the opposite sidewalk, interposing the trees as a screen.

Two more shots blasted.

Something tugged at Hickok's right sleeve as he raced to the south. He passed building after building, some damaged, some untouched.

The rifles weren't firing.

Had the yahoos given up?

Hickok came to an intersection and jogged to the left, looking over his left shoulder as he made the turn, discovering the quartet a block behind him in hot pursuit. He grinned, confident he could elude them, facing forward, his eyes expanding in stark astonishment as he abruptly stopped, nearly tripping over his own feet.

No!

Not another one!

But it was.

Another gigantic crab was blocking the sidewalk not eight feet away, its eyes on him!

Chapter Eight

Rikki watched the mob drawing ever closer to the brick building. They were searching every structure they came to, and they would inevitably find Yama and himself. He might be able to escape, but Yama was not in any condition for a fight. They had to depart before they were found. He darted along the hallway to his friend. "Yama?"

There was no answer.

"Yama?"

The silver-haired Warrior was sitting with his back to the wall, hunched forward, his chin on his chest.

Rikki knelt, unable to see Yama's face clearly in the dark. "Yama? Can you hear me?"

Yama didn't budge.

Fearing the worst, Rikki groped for Yama's left wrist and felt for a pulse. It was there, but weak. With Yama unconscious their predicament was compounded. He could not possibly escape the crowd while bearing Yama's big bulk. Which left him one of two options. Either he made a stand right where he was to protect Yama, knowing he would eventually be overcome by sheer force of numbers, or—

There was shouting outside.

Rikki rose and ran to the front door. The forefront of the mob was twenty feet off, and they were still looking in each building. They would be at the brick one in less than a minute, and they would enter unless they were diverted. Rikki stared in the direction of his helpless companion. "May the Spirit be with you," he whispered, then bolted out the front door.

The crowd saw him immediately.

Rikki leaped to the sidewalk, raking his foes with the HK-93 while in midair, landing on his feet and sprinting to the south.

The mob howled and gave chase.

"I want him alive!" someone yelled.

You must catch me first, Rikki thought to himself. He jogged daily and was in superb physical condition. Pouring on the speed, he pulled ahead of those after him. He glanced back once to insure none of them had gone into the brick building harboring Yama.

They were all after him.

Rikki grinned and ran even faster. His scabbard was flapping against his left leg, and he steadied his katana with his left hand.

"Don't lose him!" a man commanded.

Rikki was pleased with his strategy. If he drew them away from Yama, he could circle back undetected. His friend required medical attention, and the sooner the better. In another block or two he would attempt to shake his pursuers.

But fate intervened in a bizarre manner.

Rikki was abreast of a brownstone when the unforeseen occurred. To his left was the rusted hulk of an automobile, and on the pavement next to the wreckage was the partially devoured carcass of a black cat. Rats were doing the devouring, and a half dozen of them were nibbling at the cat's putrid meat when Rikki suddenly came upon them. He saw the rodents at the same instant they saw him, and the rats automatically scattered for cover. A pair of the 18-inch long scavengers bounded directly into Rikki's path.

The Warrior's reaction was instinctive. He endeavored to vault over the rodents, but he was already in midstride, running at full speed, and his left leg came down short. His black slipper-like shoe, constructed for him by the Family Weavers according to photographs in the library depicting the apparel worn by prewar martial artists, stepped on the back of one of the rats.

The rodent squealed and kept moving.

Rikki felt his left leg slip out from under him. Unable to retain his balance, he sprawled forward onto the side-walk, onto his hands and knees. The HK-93 went flying from his grasp. His palms stung and his kneecaps were racked by unbelievable torture. He tried to regain his footing, but his legs momentarily wouldn't support him. Stumbling, he tottered forward.

Footsteps pounded to his rear.

Rikki attempted to turn as the fleetest of his pursuers caught up with him. Strong arms encircled his waist and drove him onto his back.

A black-haired man with a jagged scar on his right cheek straddled the Warrior's chest. "Got you!" he shouted, elated.

Not quite.

Rikki-Tikki-Tavi formed his right hand into a leopard paw and thrust his calloused foreknuckles into the man's throat.

The man with the scar clutched at his crushed larynx, gurgling and sputtering, and toppled to the right.

Rikki scrambled to his feet, his disciplined mind shutting out the ache

in his knees, knowing his foes would be on him like a pack of hungry wolves on an injured bull elk. But like the elk, with its pointed antlers, he possessed a tapered, glistening weapon of his own. He whipped his katana from its scabbard and faced the mob.

Just as they reached him.

The first three never slowed. They expected to bowl the wiry man in black over.

Rikki taught them the error of their ways. His katana flashed once, twice, three times, each stroke a veritable blur, and the three men were dead before their bodies struck the sidewalk. Two were nearly decapitated, and the third's neck was slit wide open.

A fourth antagonist reached the Warrior, a brown-headed woman with a machete. Apparently she'd forgotten the order to take the Warrior alive because she aimed a vicious swipe at his head.

Rikki ducked under the blow and retaliated, gutting her, her abdominal cavity splitting and her intestines pouring out over her ragged clothing. She screamed and dropped.

Two men charged the Warrior, one with an axe, the other with a baseball bat,

Rikki danced to the right, slicing his katana through the left leg of the man with the axe. As the man started to fall, Rikki rent his face from his forehead to his chin. Blubbering, the man collapsed.

The one with the baseball bat delivered a wicked swing at the Warrior's head.

Rikki stepped backwards to avoid the bat, then drove the point of his katana into the man's chest, straight through the heart. As the man stiffened and expired, Rikki yanked the katana free.

"Pretty sharp moves you've got there, sucker."

Rikki pivoted to his right, his katana in front of him at waist level.

A handsome man and a strikingly beautiful woman were calmly

standing seven feet away. They resembled each other in every respect. Both were about six feet in height and both were lean and muscular. Their facial features were angular with prominent chins, thin lips, and thin eyebrows. Both had green eyes. And both had white hair, completely white without a strand of color anywhere. Unlike their crude associates, they were clean and wearing unsoiled black leather pants and shirts. Black boots covered their feet. And both were holding pump-action shotguns trained on the Warrior.

Rikki glanced from the man to the woman, wondering if they were twins.

The man grinned. "Don't even think it, little man," he warned. "We'll take your head off at the shoulders if you so much as blink."

Rikki said nothing. Other men and women were surrounding him.

"What do you think, Fab?" the man said to the woman. "Do you think he's worth saving for Tiger?" He snickered.

"I think so, Gar," the woman responded huskily. "In fact, I think this little man is kind of cute."

Gar gave the woman a reproachful stare. "Now don't start! We're taking him directly to Tiger."

The woman ignored the man. She winked at the man in black and smiled. "What's your name, little man?"

Rikki didn't respond. He counted 21 people ringing him.

"Stuck-up little shit, isn't he?" Gar stated.

The woman named Fab chuckled. "I bet I could melt him down a peg or two."

Gar sighed. "So do I. But I repeat: We are taking him directly to Tiger."

Fab looked at Gar, pretending to pout. "You're no fun sometimes, do you know that, dear brother?"

"I'm only doing what's best for us," Gar said.

Fab giggled. "Best for you, maybe."

"I'm not going to antagonize Tiger just because you've got the hots for some moron in black pajamas," Gar declared stiffly. He gazed at the man in black. "Okay, fella. Drop that fancy sword of yours."

Rikki did not move.

"Are you deaf?" Gar demanded. He wagged the shotgun. "There is no way you could reach us before we blow you in half. So be a good little boy and drop the sword. I won't tell you again."

Rikki hesitated, reluctant to relinquish his prized katana. He was an astute judge of character, and he knew this Gar would kill him without waivering if he didn't comply. Obeying, temporarily, was his only option if he hoped to survive and return to Yama. He slowly lowered the katana to the sidewalk.

"Now that's a smart boy," Gar said mockingly.

"Put your hands on your head, handsome," Fab instructed the Warrior.

Rikki did as he was told, hoping for an opening. If they would just move in a bit closer...

"Strip," Gar commanded.

Rikki looked at Gar.

"I said strip," Gar repeated. "Take off your clothes."

"Don't be shy," Fab said. "You don't have anything I haven't seen before."

Gar glanced at his sister. "Don't you have any modesty?"

Fab shook her head, her long white hair swaying. "Nope. Modesty is for losers. I'm not a loser."

Gar studied the guy in the pajamas, who hadn't budged. "Strip, asshole."

"Make up your minds," Rikki finally spoke up.

Gar did a double take. "Whoa! He can talk! What the hell do you mean, make up our minds?"

"You tell me to remove my clothing, and she tells me to put my hands on my head. I can't do both," Rikki noted.

Gar frowned. "A smart ass, sis. We've got a smart ass on our hands." His tone hardened. "When I tell you to take off your clothes, mister, you damn well better take them off. Now!"

Rikki began removing his backpack and his black shirt.

"Oh, goody!" Fab said, smirking. "A strip show!"

Gar gazed at his sister in disapproval. "Geez! What a nympho."

"Tiger doesn't mind the way I am," Fab retorted.

"Tiger will hump any..." Gar began, then quickly caught himself.

"What was that?" Fab snapped.

"Nothing," Gar said. "Forget it."

"I don't know as I like your attitude sometimes," Fab commented.

"The feeling is mutual," Gar rejoined.

Rikki dropped his shirt to the pavement, then raised one leg at a time and took off his shoes.

"Now the baggy pants," Gar directed.

Rikki slowly peeled off his pants. He was naked underneath.

"Not bad, handsome," Fab said appreciatively. "You're well-hung for a little guy."

Gar scrutinized the pile of clothing and other items on the sidewalk. "What's in the backpack?" he asked.

"Rations," Rikki answered.

"What kind of rations?" Gar wanted to know.

"Venison jerky," Rikki replied. "A canteen filled with water. The herbs for my tea. A tiny cup. And hardtack."

"What's hardtack?" Gar queried. "I've never heard of it."

"Hard biscuits," Rikki explained.

"Well, we'll confirm that in a bit," Gar said. He nodded at the pile. "What's in that pouch on your belt? More rations?"

"No," Rikki admitted.

"Then what?" Gar asked.

"Clips for my automatic rifle, a shuriken, and a kyoketsu-shogeï," Rikki revealed.

"Shuri-what?" Gar questioned. "And what was that last thing?"

"They are weapons," Rikki said, simplifying his response.

"Oh, really?" Gar pointed his shotgun barrel at the clothes. "You can get dressed, but leave the backpack, pouch, and scabbard on the ground. And no funny stuff."

Rikki donned his shirt, pants, and shoes. He removed the pouch and scabbard from his belt, then looped the belt around his waist.

The woman was scanning the street. "We'd best haul butt, Gar. The crabs are out again, you know."

"That fucking Manta!" Gar stated angrily. "I can't wait for the day when his own damn crabs turn on him and rip him to shreds."

"Never happen," Fab said.

"You wait and see," Gar declared.

"What's your name, cutey?" Fab asked the Warrior.

"Rikki "

"Well, Ritchie," Fab began.

"Not Ritchie," Rikki corrected her. "Rikki. As in Rikki-Tikki-Tavi."

"For real?" Fab inquired.

"For real," Rikki confirmed.

"Never knew anyone with that name," Fab mentioned, smiling. "It's original. My name is Fabiana, but everyone calls me Fab."

"What is this?" Gar interjected stiffly. "The social hour? This clown is our prisoner, sis. Quit being so nice to him."

"Don't push me," Fabiana said.

Gar sighed and looked at the ring of men and women. "We're taking him to Tiger," he announced. "Tom and Earl, you take the point. And keep your eyes peeled. Mania's pets are out again."

A pair of men with rifles headed to the southeast.

Gar motioned with his shotgun. "Let's go, little man."

"What about my katana?" Rikki inquired.

"Your what?"

"My katana," Rikki said, indicating the weapon bestowed on him by the Family Elders in honor of his martial arts prowess.

"That fancy sword?" Gar stated. "Don't worry. We won't leave it behind." He raised his voice. "Buck! Stick this guy's sword in the scabbard and bring it! The pouch and the backpack too. Simms! You find that rifle he dropped." He looked at the Warrior. "Satisfied?"

"Yes," Rikki said. "I would not leave without my katana."

"Who cares about a lousy sword?" Gar queried, then laughed. "Where you're going, that sword will be the least of your worries!"

He laughed even harder.

Chapter Nine

Hickok threw himself to the left, flattening against a wall and freezing.

The enormous crab tentatively moved forward two feet, then stopped. Its eyes shifting back and forth, its antennae waving.

Hickok held his breath. Maybe, just maybe, if he didn't so much as twitch, the thing wouldn't attack. Maybe the crab was attracted by motion and sound. And if so...

Seconds later the three men and the woman rushed around the corner. One of the men saw the gunman and blurted out, "There he is!" before realizing the crab was in close proximity.

"No!" the woman yelled.

The crab pounced, gripping one of the men in each mighty pincer. They shrieked as they were lifted into the air and horribly crushed to death.

The remaining man, a stocky fellow with torn brown pants and a yellow shirt marred by holes under the armpits, and the woman fled. Or tried to.

The crab scuttled after them, overtaking the woman immediately, slamming into her and knocking her to the ground. Her hatchet skidded from her grasp. Without slowing, and with a limp corpse in each bloody claw, the crab went after the last man. That worthy sped around the corner with the crustacean on his heels, and both were promptly lost to view.

Flat on her back, elated at her good fortune, the woman grinned and went to rise.

A pair of gleaming revolver barrels suddenly appeared before her hazel eyes.

"Don't move!"

The woman suddenly remembered the joker in the buckskins.

He came around in front of her, his revolvers cocked, his blue eyes narrowed. "What's your name?" he demanded.

"Hedy," she replied.

"I'm Hickok," said the gunman, introducing himself. "And I've got some questions that need answerin'. On your feet, lady!"

Hedy slowly rose.

Hickok studied his prisoner. She was in her twenties, about five feet six with fleshy arms but skinny legs. Her face was oval, her long, stringy hair black. She wore dirty jeans that had seen better days decades ago. Her top was a faded blue, marked by mud and grime. Even her exposed skin was dirty, dotted with smudges. "We need a place to palaver. Let's mosey."

"What?" the woman said, plainly confused.

"Let's find a place to hide out for a spell," Hickok stated. "I don't want to be interrupted by another mutated critter."

"Where?" the woman asked.

"Anywhere," Hickok responded. He stepped aside and nodded to the east. "That way. Vamoose."

"What?" Hedy queried.

"Move it!" Hickok barked.

Hedy hastened eastward, her eyes betraying her fright, the set of her chin denoting her determination not to show her fear.

Hickok surveyed the buildings ahead. He observed a one-story affair across the street. There was a spacious paved area between the structure and the street, which would afford him ample warning if an enemy materialized. There were six odd metal and plastic rectangular doohickeys aligned at intervals in the paved area. What the blazes were they? He saw a cracked, reddish hose hanging from one of the rectangular boxes, and his mind flashed back to one of the books he'd read in the Family library, a book about the prewar cars and trucks. The book had contained a

photograph of a car refueling at... what were they called? Service stations! That was it! Or simply gas stations! "Head over there!" he ordered. "To that gas station."

"Is that what it is?" Hedy inquired nervously.

"You don't know what a gas station is?" Hickok asked doubtfully.

"I've seen the place dozens of times," Hedy said. "But no one ever told me what it was."

"Now you know," Hickok said, alertly scanning their vicinity as they walked across the street.

"How'd you get so smart?" Hedy asked facetiously.

"Just natural intellect, I reckon," Hickok stated.

They neared the service station, which consisted of three sections. The two at the west end of the building were open bays with tools and old tires scattered everywhere. The eastern third was a small office with the windows and the door surprisingly undamaged. The glass door was open.

"Inside," Hickok directed.

Hedy tentatively entered the office, walking to the far wall and turning toward the gunman. Her body was tense, her fingers twitching in a jittery fashion.

Hickok stepped just inside the door, where he could keep an unobstructed eye on the paved area and the street. "Don't fret none, ma'am," he told her. "I won't hurt you unless you give me cause."

Hedy mustered a weak grin. "That's nice to know." She did not sound like she believed him.

"How long have you lived hereabouts?" Hickok inquired.

"I've lived in Seattle all my life," Hedy said.

"Then you must know the city real well," Hickok deduced.

Hedy shrugged. "Some parts I do. Some parts I don't. I've never been

west of I-5."

"I-5?" Hickok repeated quizzically.

"Interstate 5 it's called," Hedy elaborated.

"What's west of there?" Hickok probed.

"Manta and the Brethren," Hedy said with a visible shudder.

"Manta! He's the vermin I'm lookin' for!" Hickok declared.

Hedy stared at the gunman like he was crazy. "You're looking for Manta?"

"Yep. My pards and me." Hickok's voice lowered. "Where are they?"

"Who?"

"Don't play games with me," Hickok cautioned. "I need to know what happened to my pards."

"And what if I don't tell you?" Hedy rejoined defiantly.

"I'll shoot you in the knees," Hickok coldly informed her.

Hedy stared at his handguns. "I believe you would."

"So what happened to them?"

"I know we caught one of your friends," Hedy said. "I saw them taking him out the back."

"Yeah," Hickok commented. "Your trap was real slick."

"We knew you were coming," Hedy detailed. "We saw this thing up in the sky earlier—"

"The jet," Hickok interrupted.

"Is that what it's called? No one had ever seen one before, not even Tiger. A short while later we heard all this shooting, and Tiger sent some Sharks to check it out. They came back and said there were four strangers

coming into the city from the north. So Tiger arranged a trap. We were to take you alive, unless you resisted," Hedy said.

"Back up a bit," Hickok stated. "Who is Tiger? And what are the Sharks?"

Hedy's eyes widened. "You've never heard of the Sharks?"

"Nope."

"Where are you from? The moon?" Hedy queried sarcastically.

"I'm askin' the questions," Hickok reminded her. "Now who is this Tiger you keep talkin' about?"

"Tiger is the head of the Sharks," Hedy explained.

"And what are the Sharks?"

"I'm a Shark," Hedy said.

"It's the name of a gang?" Hickok inquired.

"There's only one gang in Seattle," Hedy said. "That's us. The Sharks. We control all the turf east of I-5."

"The Sharks are the only gang? What about Manta and the Brethren?" Hickok noted.

Hedy snorted. "The Brethren? They're not a gang! They're just mutants!"

"The Brethren are all mutants?"

"Right. And Manta is their leader," Hedy said. "The Sharks and the Brethren have been at war since before I was born. The Brethren run things west of I-5."

"How do either of you control anything with all those crabs runnin' around?" Hickok commented.

"The crabs are Manta's," Hedy stated.

"What?"

"Yep. Manta raises them at the Humarium, then he sends them into our territory to hunt us down and kill us," Hedy disclosed. "But the crabs are real dumb. They don't get many of us."

Hickok was striving to comprehend all of the information. "We got off the track. What about my buddies? You said you caught one?"

Hedy nodded. "A big guy. He was packing these knives—"

"Blade!" Hickok interjected.

"All I know is that he was the biggest son of a bitch I ever laid eyes on," Hedy declared. "He was captured inside by Oakes and his squad. I was outside, one of those who tried to take the short guy in black and your friend with the dark blue outfit."

"What happened to them?" Hickok probed.

"I don't know," Hedy said sincerely. "We tried to nab them, but couldn't. They were too good for us."

Hickok beamed proudly.

"They took off down the alley on the left side of the building," Hedy went on. "We went after them, but they held us back for a while. When we finally got over the wall, they were gone. That's when I saw Oakes and his squad carrying the big guy out the back door."

"Carryin'?" Hickok exclaimed in concern. "Was he hurt?"

"I don't know," Hedy replied. "I can only tell you what I saw. They carried him away. Then Gar decided to split us up so we could look for the short guy and the guy in blue. But he sent Terry, Marsh, Benjamin, and me around front to see if any of the Sharks who'd been shot were still alive. That," she concluded, "was when we saw you."

Hickok was trying to put the pieces together. The coyote named Oakes must have taken Blade out the back way while he was lying on the landing. But why hadn't Oakes sent someone after him? At least he knew what had happened to Rikki and Yama. They had gone behind the building by the

time he came out the front, which explained why everyone had disappeared.

"Anything else you want to know?" Hedy asked.

"Where did Oakes take my pard? The big guy?" Hickok inquired.

"To Tiger," Hedy said.

"And where would I find this Tiger?" Hickok demanded.

"You don't want to find Tiger," Hedy stated. "He'll rack your ass as slick as shit."

"Where would I find him?" Hickok persisted.

"Where Tiger always hangs out," Hedy said. "At our headquarters. I think it used to be called the Seattle Art Museum."

Hickok nodded. "Okay. Let's go."

"Where are we going?"

"You're takin' me to Tiger," Hickok informed her.

"You're wacko, mister. Tiger will kill you," Hedy promised.

"You let me worry about Tiger," Hickok said. "Just get me there and no harm will come to you."

"Before we go, do you mind if I ask you a question?" Hedy queried.

"What is it?"

"We don't see many strangers in Seattle," Hedy said. "We heard a rumor Manta caught over two hundred people off some kind of boat four months ago, but we didn't believe it for a minute."

"Why not?" Hickok interrupted.

Hedy tittered. "Come on! There's no boat that can hold hundreds of people! The story was another of Manta's lies, a rumor he spread to make us do something stupid like invade Brethren turf. But the Sharks know

better."

"You do, huh? Well, for your information, the rumor is true," Hickok assured her.

Hedy laughed. "Do you expect me to believe you?"

"Believe what you want," Hickok said.

Hedy peered at him, trying to gauge his earnestness. "So what are you and your friends doing here?"

"We came to free the folks Manta captured," Hickok divulged. "And I'm personally going to plant a slug in Manta's head."

Hedy seemed to be trying to swallow a watermelon whole.

Chapter Ten

Rikki slowed at the sight of the bridge.

"What's the matter?" Gar asked. "Haven't you ever seen a bridge before?"

Rikki was walking behind Gar and Fabiana. The point men, Tom and Earl, were fifty yards ahead. A few feet behind the Warrior was the grungy man bearing his katana, pouch, and backpack, the one called Buck. Following Buck were 41 men and women.

"That's the Montlake Bridge," Fab said. "It'll take us over the Canal."

Rikki looked around him at the buildings they were passing. He was beginning to believe Yama had been right. A majority of the structures were not seriously damaged. A neutron bomb may not have been as destructive as a conventional nuclear weapon, but a neutron bomb would surely have caused more devastation than he was seeing. "I thought Seattle was hit during World War Three," he commented.

"It was and it wasn't," Gar said.

"Our parents told us the bomb hit east of Seattle," Fab elaborated. "They said the blast was centered east of Bellevue, over Lake Sammamish. I guess the Russians weren't as accurate as they thought they were."

"How far is Bellevue from here?" Rikki inquired.

Fab pondered for a moment. "The center of Bellevue is about ten miles from here. It was a shambles after the bomb hit. No one lives there now."

"And that explains why Seattle wasn't extensively damaged," Rikki remarked.

"A lot of roofs were damaged, and the frame homes," Fab said. "And eastern Seattle, along Lake Washington, is a real mess."

Gar glanced at his sister in annoyance. "What's with you? Why are you telling this moron everything?"

"I told you," Fab declared. "I think he's cute."

"Then tell him about your birthmark, why don't you?" Gar snapped in disgust.

Fab smiled at Rikki. "I'd love to show him sometime."

Gar looked at the Warrior. "You must excuse my sister. She has the manners of a..." He paused.

"Of a what, dear brother?" Fab asked with a malicious gleam in her lovely green eyes.

"Of a vixen," Gar said, tactfully finishing his sentence.

Fabiana laughed. "You should know, brother mine."

Rikki noticed a sign they were nearing. MONTLAKE BLVD. He speculated on the reason Gar had stayed with the larger roads and highways as they traveled to the south. Was it because they could make faster time, or because they would be better able to spot the crabs and whatever else lurked in Seattle? He gazed at Gar. "You two surprise me," he admitted.

Gar glanced over his right shoulder at the man in black. "Oh? Why?"

"You convey the impression of being more educated than the other residents of Seattle," Rikki itemized. "You don't wear rags. And, wonder of wonders, you appear to believe in the benefits derived from regular bathing."

Gar unexpectedly threw back his head and laughed uproariously.

"Damn!" he exclaimed. "It's so rare to encounter someone with a sophisticated sense of humor! My sister may have a point about you. I'm beginning to like you myself."

"Enough to release me," Rikki asked half-heartedly.

Gar cackled. "Can't do that, little man. Tiger would have my head on a platter. But you are right. My sister and I are not like the rest of this pathetic rabble. We were taught to read by our parents, and to appreciate culture and fine art." He signed. "Except for Tiger, I'm afraid the rest of the Sharks wouldn't know refinement if it bit them on the ass."

The Sharks? Was that what they were called? Rikki stared over his left shoulder at the line of men and women trailing them. He frowned, intensely upset by the fact he was putting more and more distance between Yama and himself by the minute. If he endeavored to escape now, he'd be cut down before covering ten yards. He reflected on whether to inform his captors about Yama. If he did, would they tend to his stricken friend or hasten his demise? And if he refrained from informing them and continued to the south, how long could Yama hold out without medical attention? The quandary was depressing.

"Why so glum, lover?" Fab inquired.

"I am not your lover," Rikki told her.

Fabiana grinned. "You could be if you play your cards right."

"Here we go again," Gar muttered.

"I can not be your lover," Rikki stressed.

"Oh? Why not?" Fab chuckled. "Don't tell me you like men?"

"I am in love with another woman," Rikki revealed.

"So? What's that got to do with us getting it on?" Fab asked.

"I must be loyal to the woman I love," Rikki said. "Such loyalty extends to our physical relationship."

Fabiana did a double take. "Are you serious?"

Rikki nodded.

Gar chuckled. "How about this? Not only does he have a sense of humor, but he also has morals! The last of a dying breed!"

Fabiana did not appear pleased. "I've just been insulted."

"No, you haven't," Rikki disputed her. "Were I in love with you, I would be as true to you as I am to the woman at my Home. You must understand. My Family is very idealistic. We believe in being guided by the Spirit in all of our activities. We also believe in truth, honor, and loyalty. Loyal persons are spiritually growing persons."

Fab studied the man in black for a moment. "I've never met anyone like you."

"There are many more at my Home," Rikki said.

"Like the three who came here with you?" Gar interjected.

Rikki remained silent.

"That's okay," Gar said. "Don't tell me. But you'll talk to Tiger, I guarantee it. As for your three friends, one of them was captured before you were. And it's only a matter of time before we find the other two."

"You caught one of my friends?" Rikki questioned.

"Sure did," Gar confirmed. "He must have been seven feet tall."

Blade was a prisoner too! Rikki's lips compressed in mounting frustration. If Blade had been captured, then where was Hickok? This cast an entirely new perspective on the situation.

"Now he really looks glum!" Gar observed derisively.

"Leave him alone," Fab snapped.

"What's wrong with you?" Gar countered. "Don't tell me you're really falling for this guy?"

"Drop it," Fab said.

Gar stared at his sister for over a minute, evidently bewildered by her behavior. At last he shrugged and devoted his attention to the bridge ahead.

Rikki became immersed in thought, considering his options, striving to compose his troubled emotional state, to empty himself of his anxieties, to attain the inner harmony essential to the effective performance of a perfecting martial artist, of a consummate swordmaster. Engrossed in his inner effort, he trekked after Gar and Fabiana onto the Montlake Bridge.

The column was a third of the way across when Gar and Fabiana inexplicably halted.

Rikki nearly bumped into Fab.

"Son of a bitch!" Gar barked.

"Maybe they're not," Fabiana said.

"They are," Gar stated. "I know they are."

Rikki, puzzled, looked to the west, in the direction the twins were gazing with uneasy expressions. Hundreds of yards off was an immense flock of birds.

"They're coming this way!" Gar said.

"What do we do? Stand or run?" Fab questioned.

Rikki realized everyone else was watching the birds with transparent apprehension.

"We run for it," Gar ordered. "And remember to keep your eyes covered."

"What is going on?" Rikki inquired.

"Gulls," Fab said.

"Gulls? You mean sea gulls?" Rikki asked.

Gar turned toward the column. He pointed at the flock of gulls and shouted. "Head for the trees on the south side of the bridge! Don't stop! And protect your eyes!" He spun and ran to the south.

"Hurry!" Fab said to the Warrior, running after her brother.

Why were they anxious about a flock of birds? Rikki took off, drawing abreast of Fab and keeping pace with her.

The rest of the column, galvanized into action by Gar's admonition, fled toward the south end of the bridge.

Fab had her eyes on the gulls. "They're getting closer!" she cried.

"I don't understand," Rikki said. "What can gulls do?"

Fab glanced at the Warrior. "They can tear out your eyes and rip off your flesh."

"Seagulls?"

"Have you ever seen gulls before?" Fab queried.

"No," Rikki confessed.

"They have big, sharp beaks," Fab mentioned. "And their talons can cut you open."

Rikki gazed at the flock, which was now about 200 yards distant. "I didn't know gulls attacked humans."

Fab nodded, jogging effortlessly. "They do. Our parents said the gulls were different before the war. They were scavengers, mainly. Fed on dead or dying fish or squid or whatever they could find. They also learned to like garbage. And some of them became aggressive. The tourists and even the locals thought it was fun to feed the gulls. My grandmother told my mother that some of the gulls would eat right out of your hand." She

paused. "So the gulls must have lost their fear of humans even before the war. And the war changed them even more. I don't know what it was, whether it was the radiation or something else, but some of the gulls will attack humans on sight. A number of Sharks have been killed by them over the years."

Rikki glanced at the flock, now less than 150 yards away.

"Like Gar said, be sure to protect your eyes," Fab cautioned. "The gulls like to go for the eyes."

"Have you ever been attacked by them before?" Rikki queried.

"No," Fab answered nervously. "I've been lucky. Usually you can see a flock coming and take cover if you're alone. They don't normally go after large groups of people."

The flock was 100 yards from the bridge, their raucous cries filling the air.

Rikki estimated the column would be two-thirds of the way across the bridge when the gulls reached them. He looked over his right shoulder, relieved to see the Shark named Buck about six feet behind him. He wanted to keep close to his katana.

The race to escape the gulls was conducted, for the most part, in silence. The Sharks pounded over the bridge in an uneven line, the fleetest dozens of yards ahead of their slower comrades.

The point men were almost to the end of the bridge.

Gar was ten feet in front of his sister.

An idea occurred to Rikki. The sea gulls might provide just the distraction he needed. If the Sharks became embroiled in a running battle with the birds, he might be able to slip away unnoticed. He decided to avail himself of the opportunity if it developed.

There was a strident screech and a solitary gull with over a three-foot wingspan arched toward Gar. The gull had a white head and chest and gray wings. Its bill was a bright yellow, its legs and talons reddish-orange.

"Gar!" Fabiana shouted.

Gar was already in motion, sweeping his shotgun to the right and squeezing the trigger when the gull was less than 15 feet off.

The shotgun boomed and the gull exploded in a shower of feathers and pulverized fragments.

Fabiana laughed.

Three more gulls appeared, swooping toward the head of the column. Fab raised her shotgun and blasted one of them. The other two veered upward.

Rikki gazed to his right. The main body of the flock was only 20 yards off, and the end of the bridge was still 30 yards away.

Gar had slowed, gazing at his sister.

Rikki glanced back at Buck. The Shark was huffing and puffing, the katana and pouch in his right hand, a revolver in his left, and Rikki's backpack on his back.

A woman in the column screamed as the flock closed on the bridge.

And all hell broke loose.

Chapter Eleven

"We shouldn't be doing this," Hedy said, her tone conveying her anxiety.

"Quit gripin'," Hickok declared.

Hedy looked at the man in buckskins. "Listen to me! This is too dangerous! We'll never make it!"

"We'll make it," Hickok assured her.

Hedy stared directly ahead and shuddered. "Oh, God!" she exclaimed in horror.

"Get in the rowboat," Hickok commanded impatiently.

"I'm dead," Hedy mumbled, but she complied.

They were on the north bank of Portage Bay, midway between Montlake Bridge and University Bridge. The bluish-green water lapped at the weed-covered bank.

Hickok was pleased at finding the small rowboat stashed on the bank. Hedy had led him southward after leaving the service station. She had intended to take him across Montlake Bridge until he had spied a large group of men and women heading for the same bridge. Sharks, he had guessed, and he had forced her to veer to the southwest to avoid them. All the water had surprised him. He had had no idea Seattle was divided in half by a series of canals, bays, and a lake. They had traveled along the bank in the direction of another bridge, University Bridge, which Hedy had claimed they could safely cross. And then Hickok had spotted the wooden, rickety boat.

"We shouldn't do this," Hedy insisted.

The rowboat was ten feet in length and half that in width. The seats were a pair of wide boards attached to the sides, one in the center and a shorter board a few feet from the tapered bow. Two yellow oars were lying on the bottom of the rowboat.

"Sit," Hickok directed her.

Hedy reluctantly sat down on the board in the center, her back to the bay, facing the gunman.

Hickok leaned over, placing his hands against the bow. He had already pushed the boat to the edge of the water; now he gave a final shove, then quickly stepped aboard as the rowboat drifted into Portage Bay. "You do the rowin'," he told her.

"What?"

Hickok rested his hands on his Colts. "You heard me. Pick up those oars

and get crackin'. We don't have all day."

"Why should I do the rowing?" Hedy asked defiantly.

"Because I said so," Hickok stated. He didn't want her to know his shoules were killing him. His mobility had improved, but shoving the rowboat into the bay had aggravated his injured muscles and tendons.

Hedy snorted. "Thanks a lot! I get to row to my own funeral!"

"You're not going to die," Hickok said.

Hedy leaned over to retrieve the oars. "A lot you know, jerk! No one goes on the open water! It's stupid! It's suicide!"

Hickok gazed at the tranquil bay. "What are you yappin' about? There's nothin' out here."

Hedy straightened with an oar in her hands. "Yes there is! There are giant fish, and the gulls. Not to mention the Brethren."

"The Brethren?"

"Yeah, Mister-Know-It-All! The Brethren are mutants. They can breathe *underwater*."

"Breathe under the water?" Hickok repeated skeptically. "You're pullin' my leg."

"You're hopeless!" Hedy stated angrily. She leaned toward the gunman. "Please! I'm not pulling your leg! If we row out on the bay, we're doomed! Let's walk to University Bridge."

"Nope," Hickok said. "I can't afford to be wastin' time arguin' with you. We're already in this dinky boat, so we'll row to the other side. The sooner I get there, the sooner I can find my pard. So row!" he ordered sternly.

Frowning, Hedy defly inserted the oars into the oarlocks.

"You've done this before," Hickok noted.

"I know how to use a boat," Hedy said testily. She took hold of both oars and began rowing out from the bank.

"I thought you never went on the water," Hickok remarked.

"*Open* water," Hedy corrected him. "The Brethren are based on Puget Sound and the waters around the Sound, but they'll also enter any body of water connected to Puget Sound. This bay here, Portage Bay, connects to Lake Union. Lake Union connects to the west end of the Lake Washington Ship Canal. And the Canal leads to Shilshole Bay, which opens onto Puget Sound."

"So we could run into some of the Brethren," Hickok speculated.

"*That's* what I've been trying to get through your thick skull!" Hedy snapped. "They don't come in this far often, but they do from time to time." She paused.

"They keep out of the shallow creeks and rivers, and they won't go near landlocked ponds or the reservoirs."

"Why not?"

"Because, dummy. They're afraid of being trapped," Hedy said. "If we find one in a pond or a shallow river we can kill it pretty easily." She paused, continuing to row. "The water is their element, and they can move a lot faster in the water than they do on land. But in a pond there's nowhere they can hide. They're strong, real strong, and they can breathe air like us, but there are somewhat more of us than there are of them. So they don't risk straying from their territory too much."

Hickok admired the Shark's fluid movements as she expertly rowed toward the south side of Portage Bay. "Why are your people called the Sharks?" he inquired.

"I don't know where we got our name," Hedy replied. "The Sharks have been around for decades, long before I was born."

"You know about boats," Hickok said. "But what about cars and trucks? Do you have any?"

"Are they those things that were used to get around on land before the war?" Hedy queried.

"Yep."

"We don't have any," Hedy disclosed. "I've seen rusted-out wrecks all over the city, but I don't know of one in running order. And I don't think Manta has any, either."

"Seattle is such a mess," Hickok commented. "Why do the Sharks stay here? Why don't you go somewhere else?"

"Where would we go?" Hedy retorted. "Seattle, bad as it is, is our home. We've heard stories about who's outside the city. Cannibals. Monsters. Starvation. No thanks. We're safer here."

"You call this safe?" Hickok quipped.

"I was until I met you," Hedy said.

Hickok gazed to the right. They were approximately 50 yards from the north bank, and they had a long way to go before they would reach the south side. He saw the ruined hulk of a huge boat protruding from the water off to the west. When he glanced at Hedy, he noticed she was examining him critically. "Why are you starin' at me?" he asked.

"I'm trying to figure you out," Hedy explained.

Hickok chuckled. "Don't bother. My missus hasn't been able to figure me out and we've been hitched for years."

"You have a wife?" Hedy inquired, sounding amazed at the prospect.

"Yep," Hickok said. "The best-lookin' filly this side of the Milky Way."

"Filly? Has anyone ever told you that you talk funny?" Hedy questioned.

"Just about everybody," Hickok admitted.

"Then why do you do it?"

Hickok shrugged. "Keeps me from twiddlin' my thumbs."

Hedy shook her head. "You're really weird, Hickok."

Hickok grinned. "But I'm adorable too."

Something splashed on the surface of the water to their left.

Hickok shifted in his seat, drawing his left Python. "What was that?"

Hedy laughed. "Just a fish. A small fish."

"It's nice to see you're relaxed," Hickok observed.

"Who the hell is relaxed?" Hedy rejoined. "I'm scared stiff."

Hickok rested his left hand in his lap, his finger on the trigger. It didn't hurt to be prepared.

"Look!" Hedy abruptly exclaimed, releasing the right oar and pointing to the east.

Hickok gazed to his left. All he saw was the water, Montlake Bridge a ways off, and a flock of birds between the rowboat and the bridge. "What am I lookin' for?"

"Don't you see them?" Hedy queried excitedly.

"See what? Those birds?" Hickok asked.

"They're gulls!" Hedy declared.

Hickok stared at her. "Yep. So what?"

"They're gulls!" Hedy repeated, as if that explained everything.

"So they're gulls? So what. What's the big deal over a nock of birds?"

"You don't know nothing, do you? Gulls will go after you. They'll tear you apart," Hedy said.

Hickok snickered. "Gulls? Birds? You're pullin' my leg again. What can a bunch of measly birds do?"

Hedy sighed and resumed her rowing. "Thank goodness they're heading toward the bridge and not this way. We'd be in deep shit."

"What a mouth for a lady," Hickok muttered.

"Where are you from, Hickok?" Hedy asked.

"Minnesota," Hickok revealed. "Know where it is?"

"Is it a city near here?" Hedy responded.

"I can see you were a whiz in geography class," Hickok cracked.

"I never took no geography class," Hedy said. "I never took any class."

"You never went to school?" Hickok inquired.

"What's a school?" Hedy replied.

"You ain't got no schools here in Seattle?" Hickok asked. "How do you learn things?"

"From our folks," Hedy said. "From the other Sharks. We learn how to survive. That's all that counts."

"Can you read?"

"No," Hedy answered. "I want to learn," she added quickly. "Gar and Fabiana can read. So can Tiger. And they're the smartest of the Sharks. I bet if I could read I'd be as smart as them."

"What do they read?" Hickok probed.

"Books, dummy. What else?"

"I was in a city once where they'd burned almost all of their books during their cold winters," Hickok mentioned.

"Well, we have lots of books left," Hedy said. "I've seen some of them. I like the ones with the pictures."

"Why don't you get someone to teach you to read?" Hickok suggested.

Hedy shrugged. "I've never found the time."

"My Family could help you learn to read," Hickok said. "We could help all of the Sharks. That is, if you wanted our help."

"Why would you help us?" Hedy queried suspiciously.

"We'll help anybody," Hickok stated. "All you have to do is ask."

"I can't see Tiger asking anyone for help," Hedy remarked.

"Looks like I'll need to have a long talk with this Tiger," Hickok said.

"Tiger doesn't like outsiders," Hedy divulged. "He thinks all outsiders are trouble."

"You've been isolated here too long," Hickok commented. "Cut off from the rest of the world. True, there are a heap of misfits out there ready to stab you in the back the first chance they get. But there are a lot of friendly folks too. People who are ready to lend a helping hand. My Family is just one group. There are others, and we've all joined together in the Freedom Federation."

"Never heard of it," Hedy said.

"I'm not surprised," Hickok declared. "You don't know what's going on out there in the world. It's about time you learned."

"I don't know," Hedy said uncertainly.

"What have you got to lose?" Hickok asked. "Look at the way you live. Hand to mouth, never knowing if the next day will be your last. The Sharks must change things around, make Seattle a safe place to live again."

"As long as Manta and the Brethren are here, Seattle will never be safe," Hedy asserted.

"So I gather," Hickok said.

They lapsed into silence. Hedy rowed. Hickok idly gazed over the water, the tangy air tingling his nostrils, squinting because of the bright glare on the water.

Time passed.

Hickok checked his bearings, estimating they were in the middle of Portage Bay. He was becoming adjusted to the gentle rhythm of the boat, and he was lulled into a state of fatigued complacency. His eyelids were sagging when the first thump resounded on the bottom of the rowboat. He

sat up straight, instantly awake. "What was that?"

Hedy had ceased rowing. Her features were pale, her mouth slack. "Oh, no!" she moaned.

"What was it?" Hickok asked.

"I told you!" Hedy whined.

"Was it a fish?" Hickok inquired, peering at the water.

"That was no damn fish!" Hedy snapped.

"Keep going," Hickok instructed her.

Hedy hastily obeyed, rowing strenuously for the north shore.

Hickok drew his right Colt and held both Pythons in his hands, searching the water for any sign of motion.

"Please don't let it be what I think it is!" Hedy said. "Please! Please!"

Hickok probed the water for signs of motion, a fish, anything. For 12 feet or so the water was relatively clear; beyond that was an alien realm of insidious shadow.

The rowboat was suddenly struck a second time, a distinct thud.

Hedy froze. "No!" she cried.

"Keep rowing," Hickok commanded. "We can still make it!"

Hedy applied herself to the oars in a frenzy.

Hickok was feeling extremely uncomfortable. He didn't much like being so exposed, and he regretted his decision to force Hedy to row across the bay.

Yet a third blow was delivered to the underside of the rowboat.

Hickok leaned over the bow. What the blazes was happening? What was down there? Why...

A dark shape materialized from the depths below, swimming toward the boat, toward the bow.

Hickok glimpsed a greenish, scaly figure with arms and legs and a hideous face with big, circular, pitch-black eyes.

The thing lunged from the water, grasping at the Warrior.

Hickok received a fleeting impression of scales and teeth and a pungent fishy smell. The Python barrels were resting on the top edge of the rowboat, slanting downwards, and he scarcely had to move them because the thing came up directly into his line of fire. He saw webbed hands reaching for him and a mouth stretched wide, exhibiting long white fangs, and he squeezed the triggers.

The Pythons thundered.

Taken unawares, the thing was hit in the forehead. It tumbled into the water and started to sink from sight, its arms and legs outstretched.

"I think you got it!" Hedy yelled happily.

"There might be more," Hickok said.

The rowboat lurched to a sudden stop, as if something had grabbed it from underneath.

"No!" Hedy wailed.

Hickok glanced from one side of the boat to the other, waiting for the mutants to make their move.

They did.

But not as expected.

The rowboat unexpectedly tilted, the right side lifting a foot above the water and dropping down again.

Hedy screamed.

Hickok was jostled by the impact, but he retained his seating.

"We're going to be killed!" Hedy wailed.

"Not if I can help it," Hickok said. "Keep rowing!"

"What good would it do?" Hedy retorted, terrified.

"Row!" Hickok ordered.

Hedy was reaching for the oars when the rowboat rose from the water again, the left side this time, elevating two feet above the surface. She started to slip, to fall toward the right side of the boat. "Help me!"

Hickok began to rise, to go to her aid.

The left side of the rowboat shot up almost vertically.

Hickok saw Hedy upended, her legs flying out from under her, and she toppled into the water, shrieking as she fell. He lunged, trying to grab her left ankle, but she went under before he could reach her.

Blast!

The gunman was holding onto his seat with the fingertips of his left hand, his right arm outstretched, a Colt in each hand, when the rowboat was flipped completely over. He instinctively inhaled a second before his head broke the surface. The water was cold on his skin as he sank a few feet below the overturned boat.

Green figures converged on the Warrior and the woman.

Hickok's arms were taken in grips of steel. He struggled to break free, to regain the surface before he ran out of air, but the green forms were intent on keeping him under the water.

Hedy was being overpowered by three of the mutants.

Hickok kicked at the pair holding his arms, but the water hampered his movements, impairing his blows.

The mutants took him lower.

Hickok was feeling an intense pain in his chest. He needed fresh air, and quickly! His shoulders were in excruciating torment, further

hindering his efforts.

A leering visage appeared before him.

Hickok tried to butt the mutant with his forehead, but the creature retreated out of range. He felt like his lungs were going to burst! He thrashed and heaved, all to no avail. Bitter water began to seep into his mouth. He tried to fire his Colts, but his hands were strangely limp and wouldn't cooperate. A searing spasm lanced his side and he involuntarily opened his mouth.

And blacked out.

Chapter Twelve

He came awake slowly, his head throbbing.

"He's coming around!" someone shouted.

Blade opened his eyes, confused at first, gazing at the spacious room with the opulent furnishings. Where was he? The last he remembered was... Hickok! Hickok was dead! Everything came back to him in a rush and he sat up, his hands dropping to his Bowies.

They were gone!

"Are these what you're looking for, asshole?" a gruff voice asked.

Blade suddenly perceived he wasn't alone. There were others in the room. He also realized he was sitting on the edge of a bed.

Five men stood at a respectful distance from the giant. Each was armed with a gun, three with rifles, two with revolvers. Their clothing was ragged, their bodies badly in need of a washing. One of them, a portly fellow with a stubbly beard and piggish brown eyes, attired in a grubby green shirt and filthy black corduroy pants, was holding Blade's Bowies in his left hand, a Marlin .30-30 in his right.

"You won't be needing these toothpicks, shithead," the portly man declared.

"Where am I?" Blade asked.

"Wouldn't you like to know!" the portly character taunted the Warrior.

"That's why I posed the question," Blade said calmly.

Portly Butt cackled. "Posed the question?" he said, mimicking Blade. "Well la-de-da! We've got us an educated shithead on our hands!"

Several of the others started laughing.

Until a deep voice spoke up from the rear of the chamber. A commanding voice with an edge about it.

"Did I miss the joke?" the speaker demanded.

The laughing abruptly ceased.

"Tiger!" the portly man exclaimed, spinning around, nearly falling over in the process.

Blade looked toward the rear of the room. A pair of wide doors were open at the very back. The light in the room was patchy, supplied by the sunlight streaming in two large windows above his head, and the section near the doors was obscured by shadows. A tall figure was framed in the doorway, but his features were indistinct.

"You were expecting maybe Edgar Allan Poe?" the figure asked sarcastically.

"No, Tiger," the portly fellow said obsequiously. "Of course not."

The figure came into the light.

Blade's eyes narrowed as he studied the newcomer. The man was about six and a half feet in height, and must have weighed 210 pounds. His physique radiated power; his arms rippled with layers of muscles. Yet his most outstanding feature was not his build, but his face. His features were decidedly feline. Slanted blue eyes and brows, narrow nostrils, rounded cheeks and hairline, and curled lips all contributed to his uncanny

appearance. His meticulously combed mane of hair completed the picture: reddish-orange with black stripes. Blade could readily comprehend why they called this man Tiger.

Tiger stalked into the room. He wore black boots, custom-tailored orange pants, and a clean black shirt. A wide black leather belt girded his slim waist. He moved with a supernal economy of motion, seeming to glide across the floor.

"He just woke up!" the portly man blurted.

"I can see that," Tiger said disdainfully. He scrutinized the giant as he walked up to the bed. "Greetings."

"Hello," Blade said.

"We have much to discuss," Tiger stated. "But first, there is a matter I must attend to. If you'll excuse me." He faced the portly character.

Blade saw the corpulent man gulp.

"So, Oakes," Tiger said slowly. "You completed your assignment, did you?"

Oakes nodded. "We captured this guy. And I brought you these." He extended the Bowies.

Tiger took the weapons, nodding appreciatively. "Nice." He glanced at Blade. "And I suspect you are adept at their use, are you not?"

"Some say so," Blade replied.

Tiger nodded, grinning. Then he looked at Oakes. "Tell me what happened."

"What?" Oakes said.

"I just enjoyed a discussion with some of the other members of your squad," Tiger stated. "I'm hoping you can clarify certain inconsistencies."

"Inconsistencies?" Oakes repeated nervously.

"Yes," Tiger confirmed. "I want you to tell me everything that

happened."

"Everything?" Oakes queried.

"Humor me," Tiger said.

"Well, we set the trap, just like you wanted," Oakes began.

"Exactly as I specified?" Tiger inquired.

Oakes nodded vigorously. "Yep. Gar and Fab waited outside with the main body. I lured two of them upstairs to divide them, to make them easier to capture, just like you said."

"I see," Tiger commented.

"Yep. I hid some of my men in the lobby," Oakes went on. "And I took the rest up to the fourth floor. We used a net on this guy, and here he is. In one piece. You wanted them unharmed if possible, right? At least able to talk, you said. Right?"

Tiger smiled pleasantly. "Those were my instructions. But I'm afraid I must have missed something."

Oakes appeared worried. "What?"

"Where is the other one?" Tiger inquired.

"The other one?" Oakes repeated.

"Yes. You know. The other one. You said you lured two of them upstairs. Where is the other one?" Tiger questioned.

"He died," Oakes responded.

"You saw him die?"

"Yep," Oakes said.

Tiger reached his left hand out, the Bowies still in his right, and draped his hand on Oakes's right shoulder. "Now think. Did you *really* see him die?"

"He had to be dead," Oakes maintained. "I saw him fall. He went over the railing and we were on the fourth floor."

"But did you see his body?" Tiger asked.

"Well, no..." Oakes responded.

"Why not? Why didn't you confirm his death?" Tiger queried.

"I don't know," Oakes said. "I guess I was in too big a hurry to return with this guy."

"Ahhhh." Tiger smiled at Blade, then locked his blue eyes on Oakes. "And where is the rest of your squad?"

"Where are they?" Oakes said weakly.

Tiger let his left hand ease to his side. "Yes, Oakes. Where are they? I sent one hundred Sharks to capture four strangers. Just four. Of the one hundred, you, as one of my trusted lieutenants, had twenty-four Sharks under your command. But only fifteen returned with you. Where are the rest?"

"They died," Oakes declared.

"Did you see their bodies?" Tiger pressed him.

Oakes averted his gaze. "No," he admitted.

"Then how can you say they died?" Tiger demanded, his tone flinty.

"I had nine men downstairs, hidden in the lobby," Oakes detailed. "They were to stay down there in case the two I lured downstairs tried to escape. But I never saw them again after I caught this guy. I think they tried to take out the two strangers out front."

Tiger pursed his lips. "So you saw no sign of these nine when you departed through the lobby?"

Oakes blanched. "I didn't leave through the lobby."

"Oh?" Tiger said in mock surprise. "How did you exit the building?"

"I went out the back door," Oakes answered.

"Why?"

"I wanted to get this guy here as quickly as I could," Oakes said. "And there was a lot of fighting out front."

"So I was told," Tiger commented.

Blade could sense the tension in the room. The one called Tiger was supremely displeased with his lieutenant. Obviously Oakes wasn't telling the truth. Blade wondered what Tiger would do about the deception, and he found out the very next instant.

Tiger's steely arms lashed up and out, a Bowie in each hand. With astonishing speed, he buried the knives in his lieutenant's eyes. Oakes went rigid, his mouth gaping, blood pouring from his ruptured sockets. He collapsed without uttering a sound, onto his back, the Bowies jutting toward the ceiling.

"I can not abide liars," Tiger said softly. "And you were a liar, my dear Oakes. You departed by the rear exit when you heard the firing in front because you were afraid. You feared for your life. So you fled without bothering to confirm if the stranger who fell over the railing was dead, without bothering to check on the men you posted in the lobby, without even having the decency to wait for Gar and Fab. You were a coward, Oakes. A blustering, swaggering coward. I could not retain you as my lieutenant." Tiger sighed. "I suppose the blame is mine. I elevated you above your station in life. I gave you responsibilities you were unable to handle. At least now, on the other side of the veil, you are released from those responsibilities."

None of the other men in the room had moved.

Tiger knelt alongside Oakes' body. He proceeded to yank the Bowies from Oakes' sockets, then to wipe the knives on his lieutenant's shirt, all the while quoting, of all things, a poem: "On this home by Horror haunted— tell me truly, I implore—Is there—*is there* balm in Gilead?—tell me—tell me, I implore!"

Blade suddenly recognized the quote from his schooling days at the Home and he finished the refrain: "Quoth the Raven, 'Nevermore.' "

Tiger looked up at the Warrior with an expression of shock on his features. He rose. "You know Poe?"

Blade nodded. "He was one of my favorites in literature class. I always regarded him as a genius."

Tiger seemed to be stunned. "Can this be?"

Blade's mind was racing. Tiger, evidently, was the leader of those who had captured him, the Sharks. If he could impress Tiger, if he could win the leader's confidence, he might be able to enlist the Sharks as an ally against Manta. He hadn't read any Poe in years, but he dimly recalled a passage he'd liked. "Wasn't it Poe who wrote that all life exists by virtue of the Spirit Divine?"

Tiger's face lit up. "Yes. Yes. In *Eureka*. One of his most underrated works." He raked the Warrior from head to toe with a probing gaze. "I can see I must amend my plans for you."

"Oh?"

"Yes. I intended to interrogate you to ascertain the reason for your presence in Seattle. But a crude interrogation would be unthinkable now. You—wonder of wonders!—appear to be an equal, and as such I must accord you the respect your status deserves," Tiger said.

"Thank you," Blade responded, not quite sure if he understood.

Tiger extended his right arm, the Bowies in his hand. "Here. I believe these are yours."

Blade stared at his knives, surprised. He quickly took them before the Shark leader could change his mind. "Thank you."

"I want you to feel comfortable here, to enjoy your stay," Tiger stated. "We have so much to discuss."

"That we do," Blade agreed, thinking of Manta. Then his thoughts strayed to Hickok and he closed his eyes, the memory wrenching at his soul.

"Are you ill?" Tiger inquired solicitously.

Blade opened his eyes. "No. I'm okay."

"Excellent." Tiger indicated the room with a sweep of his left hand. "Would you do me the courtesy of remaining here until I return? I must attend to a formal dinner in your honor—"

"There's no need," Blade said, interrupting.

"But there is," Tiger said. "I insist. Except for Gar and Fab, I dwell in an intellectual wasteland. I look forward to our discourse. I crave conversation with an equal." He started to leave, then stopped. "How rude of me! As you have undoubtedly surmised, I am called Tiger. What is your name?"

"Blade," the Warrior answered.

Tiger's forehead furrowed. "How unusual. Is there any correlation with your choice in weaponry?"

"Yes," Blade verified, admiring the Shark leader's perception.

"You must tell me all about it over our meal," Tiger said. "It might interest you to know my real name is Blake. My father and mother named me after William Blake, a genius the equal of Poe. Ironically, I later acquired as my nickname the same appellation as one of Blake's more famous works. Perhaps you are familiar with it?"

"*The Tyger*," Blade said.

Tiger grinned. "Outstanding. Until our repast." He hurried from the chamber.

Blade slid his Bowies into their sheaths. He was fascinated by the Shark leader; the man was a curious blend of literary connoisseur and murderous psychopath. He speculated on whether, realistically, he could hope to persuade Tiger to join in the fight against Manta. Would Tiger make a stable ally or be a treacherous stumbling block? The man had seemed so sure of himself, positively reeking with confidence. But what had been all that business about equals? Did Tiger consider himself superior to most others?

Two men, both lean, both in shabby attire, entered the room and

walked to Oakes. They lifted his corpse, one by the ankles, the other by the arms, and carried the body away.

Blade thought of Tiger's exchange with the hapless Oakes, reviewing their words concerning Hickok's demise. Oakes had not seen the gunfighter's body. Was there a chance, however remote, that Hickok was still alive? In his mind, Blade saw Nathan go over the railing again. They had been on the fourth floor. How could Hickok have possibly survived? He had learned never to put anything past the gunman, but the prospect of his friend being alive was a dim one.

Enough morbid recollection!

Blade shook his head, then examined the furnishings in the room. They were exceptional, literally works of art. Magnificent paintings adorned all four walls. The furniture was in superb condition, polished and immaculate, and each piece, including the huge bed, was an antique. Where had Tiger obtained such a collection?

A minute later footsteps pounded in the hallway outside. A young woman of 15 or 16, with blond hair and brown eyes, wearing jeans and a lavender blouse both past their prime, ran into the chamber. In her left hand was a book.

One of the four men stared at the woman in annoyance. "What are you doing here?"

The woman nodded her head at the Warrior. "Tiger sent me."

"Go on, then," the man said.

Sheepishly, the woman walked up to the Warrior. "Here." She offered him the book. "Tiger sent this. He said you might enjoy reading it while you wait."

"Thank you," Blade said, taking the volume, "And thank him."

The woman nodded and dashed from the chamber.

What was this? Blade gazed at the purple cover. *The Portable Poe*. There was a bookmark protruding above the pages. He opened the book to the appropriate page and found several photographs had been underlined

in blue ink. Blade started reading.

"I have sometimes amused myself by endeavoring to fancy what would be the fate of any individual gifted, or rather accursed, with an intellect *very* far superior to that of his race. Of course, he would be conscious of his superiority; nor could he (if otherwise constituted as man is) help manifesting his consciousness. Thus he must make himself enemies at all points."

Blade straightened, frowning. So that was it. Tiger *did* believe he was some sort of superior man. He resumed reading.

"And since his opinions and speculations would widely differ from those of *all* mankind—that he would be considered a madman, is evident. How horribly painful such a condition! Hell could invent no greater torture than that of being charged with abnormal weakness on account of being abnormally strong."

Blade recalled the sight of his Bowies sticking from Oakes's eye sockets, and then he read the sentence written in the margin of the book, evidently in Tiger's handwriting.

"It is my destiny to subjugate all inferiors!"

Blade looked up at the doorway.

Uh-oh.

Chapter Thirteen

Rikki had never known birds could be so deadly.

The flock swirled and dove and arched above the Montlake Bridge, the gulls diving at the humans and attempting to peck or claw at the Sharks with ruthless abandon. The birds invariably went for the face, concentrating on the eyes, as if they somehow knew the humans were vulnerable in the facial area.

For their part, the Sharks were shouting and cursing and shrieking, all the while conducting a running fight with the gulls. A few firearms boomed. Knives, axes, and swords were brought into play. The Sharks were determined to reach the trees at the south end of the bridge, while the gulls were equally determined to stop them.

Rikki was hard pressed to evade the sea gulls. He blocked bird after bird, swatting them aside as they came at his face. Once a talon scraped his right cheek.

Fabiana was using her shotgun as a club, apparently conserving her ammunition. She warded off repeated assaults, but in the struggle she inadvertently moved ever closer to the railing along the west side of Montlake Bridge.

Gar was a whirlwind, swinging his shotgun right and left, concentrating on protecting his sister at his own expense. Oblivious to his own safety, he bore several deep gashes on his arms and neck.

A large gull hurtled toward Rikki, talons outstretched. The Warrior twisted to the left, avoiding the bird's sharp claws, and clamped his hands on the gull's wings. He held onto the sea gull's squirming form, then bent the wings backwards until they snapped. The bird tried to peck his fingers as he released it, and it attempted to snap at his feet as it landed on the bridge. Rikki jumped into the air and came down with both heels first, directly on top of the gull's head.

There was a faint crunch and the bird expired.

Rikki spun as a man screamed to his rear.

The Shark called Buck was in trouble. Two gulls were clinging to his face, one of them with its talons imbedded in his eyes. He was futilely swatting at the birds while screeching at the top of his lungs.

The gulls were pecking furiously at the man's face.

Buck staggered and fell to his knees. He dropped his revolver and Rikki's pouch but clung to the katana scabbard, vainly attempting to bludgeon the gulls with it.

Rikki reached the Shark's side in two strides. He tore the scabbard

from Buck's grasp, then whipped out the katana. In one glistening swipe, he drove the sword through both birds, severing the gulls in half.

Three of the four feathery sections flopped to the pavement, but the fourth, the lower half of the gull which had its claw buried in Buck's eyes, held fast, the talons reflexively clamped onto the eyeballs. Suffering intolerably, blubbering and wailing, Buck gripped the lower half of the gull and pulled, trying to pry the claws from his face. Instead, to his ultimate horror, he tore his eyeballs from their sockets. He doubled over, sobbing pathetically.

Rikki, momentarily unassailed, stuck his scabbard under his belt, aligning it over his left hip. He took hold of the katana with both hands.

Just as five gulls attacked.

Rikki decapitated one of the gulls with his first stroke. His second chopped off a wing apiece on two other birds and they flapped to the ground using their good wing to retard their fall.

The remaining pair dove for the Warrior's face.

Rikki crouched under a pair of slashing talons, spearing his katana upward into the gull's body. The bird squawked as it died, and he jerked his blade free to confront the last of the five.

The gull was winging skyward.

Rikki abruptly realized his opportunity had arrived. The Sharks were immersed in their combat with the sea gulls; not one of them was so much as looking in his direction. In the confusing midst of the combat, he could easily slip off and return to Yama. He grinned and turned to the north.

Behind him, a woman screamed.

Not just any woman.

The tone was unmistakably Fabiana's.

Rikki rotated on his heels. There she was, backed up to the railing, fighting for her life against a dense concentration of gulls, perhaps a dozen of them, some tugging at her long hair with their beaks, others slashing at

her body, tearing her leather garments and the flesh underneath, and several going for her eyes.

Gar was trying to reach her, but a wall of hovering gulls separated him from his sister. He could not dare fire for fear of striking her.

Fabiana cast a pleading glance in the Warrior's direction. "Help me! Please!"

Rikki-Tikki-Tavi never hesitated. He waded into the gulls with his katana flashing in a scintillating exhibition of matchless swordsmanship. Six, seven, eight gulls died in half as many seconds, and then Rikki was next to Fabiana, shielding her with his body and holding the sea gulls at bay.

The next moment, as swiftly as they had attacked, the gulls departed. As if they were reacting to an invisible command, they soared high on the currents en masse, reformed into a cohesive flock, and flew to the east.

Rikki surveyed the bridge. It was littered with the dead and the dying, with scores of birds and well over a dozen Sharks. Moans and cries of despair wafted skyward. Pools of blood and feathers were everywhere.

"Thank you," Fabiana said softly.

Rikki turned, smiling. Her hair was disheveled, with a few feathers entangled in the strands. She was cut on her face and neck, and sweat caked her skin, sweat intermixed with blood. For all that, she was extraordinarily lovely, and Rikki had to force himself to think of his beloved Lexine, the woman he cherished, who was awaiting him at the Home.

"You saved my life," Fab stated.

"I could do no less," Rikki declared.

For a moment they stared into one another's eyes, sharing an unspoken bond of deep affection. Only for a moment. Before reality intruded on their silent emotional exchange.

"Drop the sword, little man!"

Rikki pivoted to the south.

Gar was holding his shotgun leveled at the Warrior's stomach, not five feet away, his finger on the trigger. "I said drop it!"

Fabiana took a step toward her brother. "Gar! Don't!"

"Butt out, sis!" Gar barked. "This doesn't concern you."

"The hell is doesn't!" Fab retorted angrily. "He saved my life!"

"I saw it," Gar said. "But it doesn't change things."

"It changes everything!" Fab snapped. "Can't you see that?"

"I can see what's happened to you," Gar replied. "I can see you're head over heels for this clown. So you don't have a say in this, sis. This guy is going to Tiger, whether you like it or not." He paused. "I'm sorry, but I'm doing this for the both of us."

Seven of the Sharks approached, their weapons at hand.

"What's it going to be, little man?" Gar demanded. "You can drop your sword or you can die. It's up to you."

Fab looked at the Warrior with tears in her eyes. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

Rikki shrugged and lowered the katana to the pavement. He removed the scabbard and placed it next to the sword, then stood.

"Now step away from the sword," Gar directed.

Rikki moved several paces to the left.

Gar glanced at his sister. "You like this guy so much, I'll let you carry his sword. But I'm warning you. If he gets his hands on it, no matter how much you like him, sister or no sister, I'll blow him away. Understood?"

Fabiana nodded.

"Okay. Pick it up," Gar said.

Fabiana bent down, set her shotgun on the ground, then slid the katana into the scabbard and straightened with the scabbard in her right hand and the shotgun in her left.

Gar spied a tall Shark nearby. "Simms! Find out how many we lost, how many are injured. We've got to get the hell out of here! Move your ass!"

Simms hastened off.

Fab hefted the scabbard, staring at the hilt of the sword. "Why?" she asked.

"Why what?" Gar replied innocently, scanning the bodies on the bridge.

"Why did you let me have the sword?" Fab inquired.

"Why not?" Gar rejoined.

"That's not a reason," Fab noted.

Gar shrugged. "What's the difference who has it? We might be attacked again, and I wanted you to have it in case lover boy gets in trouble," he said quietly, so only Fab and Rikki could hear.

"But you just said you'd shoot him if he lays his hands on it," Fab stated.

Gar glanced at his sister. "You do what you've got to do," he told her gravely, his tone implying an ulterior meaning. "I'll do what I have to do."

Fab gazed at Rikki, then at her brother. "You know what I'll do if need be."

Gar sighed. "I was afraid you'd say that."

"You wouldn't stop me?" Fab asked.

"You're my sister," Gar declared bluntly.

Rikki wasn't certain he understood every nuance, but he believed he had acquired one, and possible two, newfound friends. "I thank both of you," he said.

"For what?" Gar queried irritably.

"For being true to the Spirit within you," Rikki said.

Gar looked at Rikki in amazement. "I don't know what you're babbling about."

"I thank you anyway," Rikki reiterated.

"Don't thank us!" Gar snapped. "You haven't met Tiger yet. And you may not be so grateful after you've met him."

"Why not?" Rikki inquired.

Gar stared into the Warrior's eyes. "Because you might be dead."

Chapter Fourteen

What was that awful smell?

Hickok opened his eyes, and for several seconds he wondered if he was alive or dead. Everything was black. There wasn't a glimmer of light anywhere.

So he couldn't be dead.

Hickok shifted his eyes to the right and the left. The Elders had always claimed that those who experienced the translation of death, those who passed on to the higher mansions, were always aware of a light upon awakening. Since he couldn't see a light, he was alive.

But where was he?

Hickok took stock. He was on his back, lying on a hard surface. A rank, fishy odor assaulted his nostrils. His chest ached and his buckskins were damp. Worst of all, his Pythons were gone! He ran his hands over his soggy clothing, checking his holsters, his belt, and the floor in his immediate vicinity, but the Colts were definitely gone.

Some low-down varmint was going to pay!

There was a protracted moan from his left.

Hickok twisted onto his left side, probing the darkness. He reached out with his right arm and his hand brushed against soft fabric. His fingers traced the outline of a peculiar, pliant mound under the material, a mound with a rounded tip in the center. He...

Mound?

Rounded tip?

Like someone who had just touched a scorching coal, the gunman retracted his hand.

But not in time.

"Is that you, Hickok?" a feminine voice demanded.

Hickok balked at responding, embarrassed to his core.

"It'd better be you!" the voice declared. "Or I'm in deep shit!"

"It's me," Hickok admitted.

"I knew it!" Hedy exclaimed. "I knew you were the type to cop a feel the first chance you got!"

"But I wasn't—" Hickok began, trying to defend his action.

"Pervert!" Hedy snapped indignantly.

Why bother? Hickok asked himself. She'd never believe him.

"At least you didn't grope me downstairs," Hedy was saying.

Hickok sighed. If there was any one lesson he'd learned during his marriage, it was this: never argue with a woman. A man will lose every time.

"What are you? A tit man?" Hedy queried sarcastically.

"Watch your mouth!" Hickok warned her.

Hedy made a sputtering sound. "What a hypocrite! Mr. Roaming Hands wants me to watch my mouth!"

"I didn't mean to touch you there," Hickok said.

"Oh, sure!" Hedy snickered.

"I didn't," Hickok insisted. "It was an accident. As soon as I realized what I was doing, I stopped. I didn't mean to touch your... you know."

There was a moment of silence.

"Why?" Hedy asked. "What's wrong with my boobs? Aren't they big enough for you?"

When would he ever learn? Hickok shook his head and sat up. He could distinguish Hedy doing the same.

"Where the hell are we?" Hedy inquired.

"I don't know," Hickok replied.

"Wait!" Hedy cried. "Do you smell it?"

"The fishy odor?" Hickok responded.

"Yeah. I know where we're at!" Hedy stated, her voice rising in fear. "Oh, God!"

"Where are we?" Hickok wanted to know.

A wooden door in front of them was abruptly yanked wide and light flooded over them.

"I can answer your question," asserted someone in a raspy, sibilant tone.

Hickok shielded his eyes with his right hand, blinking rapidly in an effort to adjust to the bright glare.

There was an intake of breath from Hedy.

Hickok squinted upward, distinguishing details, his mouth slackening at the figure he beheld.

"So you are Hickok?" the figure asked, smirking. "I see you've accepted my invitation."

"Manta!" Hickok blurted out.

"Of course," the mutant replied.

Hickok did a double take. He'd seen a lot of mutants during his lifetime, but nothing like this one!

Manta was a hybrid of humanoid and aquatic features. He stood about six feet four and was broad through the shoulders, trim at the waist, and possessed stocky, powerful legs. And that was the extent of his human aspects. His entire body was covered with greenish scales, even his hands and feet, both of which were webbed. Long nails tapered from his fingers. His lips were red, ringed a mouth filled with pointed teeth. The nose was a mere slit, while his eyes were pools of black. Except for skimpy briefs covering his genitals, briefs the same shade as his scaly skin, he was naked. The queerest part of his appearance was the bizarre triangular cowl, a flap of scale-covered flesh extending several inches outward from each circular ear, then narrowing to a point at his shoulder. "Are you finished admiring me?" he asked at length.

"You're not what I expected," Hickok said.

"Oh? What did you expect?" Manta queried.

"I don't rightly know," Hickok admitted. "But you sure as blazes ain't it!"

"Such eloquence!" Manta stated contemptuously. "It's difficult to believe you are human!"

"What do you plan to do with us?" Hickok ventured to inquire.

"Why, give you the grand tour, of course," Manta said, moving to the left. "Step out here."

Hickok slowly rose, then assisted Hedy in rising. Her legs appeared to

have turned to mush, and she couldn't take her wide eyes off Manta.

Manta uttered a nasal snicker. "I am irresistible, aren't I, my beauty?"

Hickok led Heady from confinement.

"I trust you found the accommodations to your liking?" Manta said. "You were in our first-class closet."

Hickok glanced at the narrow cubicle they'd just vacated. "We were in a closet?"

"Not just any closet," Manta declared, grinning. "Observe." He closed the door and pointed at black letters stenciled on the upper panel.

"Sanitation," Hickok read the word aloud.

Manta nodded. "An appropriate place to hold a human, don't you think?"

"What have you got against humans?" Hickok absently questioned.

Manta hissed through his teeth. "Everything! Humans are despicable! Eventually they will be eradicated from the earth!"

"Not if I can help it," Hickok mentioned.

"But you can't," Manta stated, and turned to lead them down the corridor to their right.

Hickok's gaze rested on the side of the mutant's neck and his eyes narrowed.

Dear Spirit!

The sides of Mania's squat neck consisted of vertical, reddish membranes, expanding and contracting in a regular rhythm.

"You've got gills!" Hickok exclaimed.

Manta looked at the gunman. "And who says humans are stupid? Your powers of perception never cease to astound me!"

"But how—" Hickok began.

"How is such a thing possible?" Manta interjected, leading them along the cool, pale green, tiled hallway. Illumination was provided by an intermittent series of overhead lights.

Hickok had to lead Hedy by the hand. She kept digging in her heels and trying to flee.

Manta appeared not to notice. "How can you ask such a foolish question? Or have you been residing in a cave all of your life?"

"No," Hickok said.

"In case you haven't noticed," Manta went on, "there are many beings such as myself. Superior beings. You call us mutants."

"Now hold on a blamed second," Hickok stated. "Who ever claimed mutants were superior to humans?"

Manta glanced at the Warrior, his fangs gleaming. "I did. Because our superiority is an established fact. Mutants possess capabilities far beyond the pitiful limitations of your species. We are more intelligent, more adaptable physically, and destined to rule your kind." He paused. "You'll see. I'll show you what I've done here. Perhaps then you can appreciate the truth of my statements."

"You're impressin' me so far," Hickok said.

"I am?" Manta inquired, smiling.

"You sure are," Hickok asserted. "I've been captured by the best of 'em. By the Watchers, the Moles, the Commies, the Technics, and a passel of androids. But you're classier than all of 'em. No doubt about it. I've never been held prisoner in a sanitation closet before."

Manta unexpectedly halted, glaring at the Warrior. "You are mocking me."

"Wouldn't think of it, Fish Lips," Hickok rejoined.

Manta raised his right arm, about to strike, when he inexplicably changed his mind. His arm lowered and he smiled. "Have your fun while

you can, human."

"I intend to," Hickok assured him.

Manta began walking again. "Obviously an explanation is in order. You were held in a sanitation closet because, after all, where else does one put trash? Besides, the Humarium lacks jail cells, and the closets are adequate for our purposes."

"What the dickens is a Humarium?" Hickok queried.

"Do you know what an aquarium is?" Manta asked.

"Yeah. A tank where you keep little fish," Hickok said. "Some of the younguns in my Family have aquariums."

"Your description is accurate to a point." Manta stated. "Aquariums can contain little fish, as you so quaintly phrased it, but they can also contain large fish, very large fish indeed. In fact, prior to the war, there were a number of facilities devoted to exhibiting aquatic animals and plants. They were called aquariums too."

"I remember reading about them once," Hickok mentioned. "They even had whales, didn't they?"

"That they did," Manta confirmed. "Your kind scoured the seas for the most exotic specimens you could find, then you imprisoned them for life in your holding tanks. Yet another example of human barbarism!"

"Hold the fort, there, Fish Lips," Hickok said, interrupting. "I wasn't around when all of this was going on, and those who were involved were tryin' to advance the cause of science. They studied the specimens they caught to increase their knowledge of the sea."

Manta stared at the gunman. "You're not the bumpkin you pretend to be."

"I'm as bumpy as they come," Hickok retorted.

"I will, though, concede you are correct," Manta said. "Many of those involved in capturing aquatic species were sincerely striving to broaden their oceanic understanding."

"Is there an echo in here?" Hickok quipped. He hoped he could keep the mutant talking. Stalling was imperative. He needed to find out where they were and what had happened to his Colts. Once he had his guns in his hands, he was going to teach Manta a lesson the mutant would never forget!

"I'm glad you comprehend," Manta stated. "Your transition should be easier."

"Transition?" Hickok repeated, perplexed.

Manta nodded. "Be patient. You will understand everything shortly."

Hickok wanted to continue the conversation, to learn all he could before making his move. "Were those your goons who jumped us?"

"The Brethren are not goons," Manta snapped.

"Those were some of your gang?"

Manta's lips twitched. "Nor are the Brethren a gang."

"What are they?"

"The Brethren is an association, the first of its kind. We are an organization devoted to the fostering of mutantkind around the globe. All mutants are welcome to join," Manta boasted.

"So how many mutants are there in your outfit?" Hickok idly inquired.

"There are two hundred and sixty-seven Brethren of the Primary Order," Manta declared proudly, then stopped again. He gazed at the Warrior, "Exceedingly clever."

"Who? Me?" Hickok responded.

"Yes. You," Manta said. "The number of members we have is classified information. For Mutant Eyes Only." He paused. "Oh, well. No harm has been done. You will never leave here to reveal your knowledge."

"Who cares how many yahoos with fish lips are runnin' around?" Hickok commented, still holding Hedy's hand in his. The poor woman was terrified.

"The Sharks care," Manta declared. "They would launch an attack on our domain if they discovered their numerical advantage is actually greater than they believe it to be."

"The Sharks outnumber you, huh?"

"By over four hundred..." Manta began, then checked himself. "There you go again! Yes. They outnumber us by over four hundred, but they don't know that fact. They think they have an edge, but only by two hundred or so."

"Two hundred. Four hundred. What's the difference?" Hickok observed.

"To them, everything," Manta said. "I wouldn't put it past Tiger to invade us if he knew the truth." He accented Tiger's name with a bitter tone.

"I take it you're not too fond of old Tiger," Hickok commented.

"Fond!" Manta spat the word. "I'll rip him apart with my own two hands if I ever have the chance! Tiger is a typical example of your kind! He is a vile, insidious bastard! I had the Sharks on the run until he assumed their leadership. I would have wiped them out, but he checkmated my every move. He organized them, inspired them. He has prevented me from extending my domain east of I-5. But he'll get his someday! Him and the rest of the Sharks."

Hickok felt Hedy's hand tremble.

"The Sharks!" Manta snapped scornfully. "Would you like me to tell you a little secret about the mighty Sharks?"

"Maybe you'd better not," Hickok said. "It might be classified for Mutant Eyes Only."

Manta disregarded the taunt. "Not even the Sharks know this, but I was the one who named them!"

"*You* named them the Sharks?" Hickok stated skeptically.

"Yes," Manta exulted. "Decades ago, when I was in the process of forming the Brethren, the humans in Seattle were a ragtag collection of

misfits. They had no leader, and they were always fighting amongst themselves. They didn't even have a name for themselves."

"So you named them out of the goodness of your heart," Hickok interjected.

"It was a fluke!" Manta declared. "I had just started my Humarium and had captured twenty or so humans. One of those humans was a belligerent savage who vowed to escape and lead the humans against me. I ridiculed him. I told him I was quaking in fear at the prospect of being attacked by those human... sharks! But I meant it as an insult!"

"They didn't?"

"No," Manta said in frank amazement. "That savage I mentioned escaped. He was the only human to ever escape from my Humarium. And shortly thereafter, those fools began referring to themselves as the Sharks. Can you believe it?"

"Indirectly, then, you were responsible for giving them their name," Hickok mentioned.

"Yes!" Manta replied angrily. "I think they did it deliberately. They took the name as an affront to me! To offend me!"

"Why would anyone want to offend a sweet, lovable guy like you?" Hickok quipped.

"One day I shall make them pay!" Manta vowed.

"Hey. Wait a minute," Hickok said. "You fibbed."

Manta stared at the Warrior. "*I do not lie!* As a superior being, I have no need to resort to petty subterfuge."

"Then maybe it was an honest boo-boo," Hickok remarked. "But you said only one human ever escaped from your Humarium."

"So?"

"So what about the guy I talked to on the radio?" Hickok inquired. "Remember him? Dale was his name. Captain Nathan Dale. He escaped, didn't he?"

"Only temporarily," Manta replied. "The savage I referred to was never recaptured. Dale was."

"Is he still alive?" Hickok asked.

"Yes," Manta verified. "And I thank you for bringing him up."

"Why's that?"

They were nearing a junction in the corridor. The intersection was brilliantly lit.

"Because," Manta said, smirking, "you are about to meet him in person and behold your future home, your residence for the rest of your short life span." So saying, Manta walked ahead of the gunman and the Shark and turned the corner to the left, motioning for them to join him.

Hickok walked around the corner and was shocked speechless.

It couldn't be!

But it was.

Chapter Fifteen

"I trust this is satisfactory," Tiger stated.

Blade nodded, gazing over the table at the food. Six feet long, four feet wide, and nearly every square inch loaded with succulent dishes. Seafood was in abundance; there was crab meat, lobster, clams, and several varieties of fish. There was a heaping plate of steak, not the venison Blade was accustomed to at the Home, but genuine beefsteak. There were even fruits and vegetables, as well as three different types of bread.

"Dig in," Tiger suggested.

"I can't get over this," Blade said. He was seated at the west end of the table, Tiger at the east. The Shark leader had personally escorted the

Warrior from the room with the bed to this huge chamber, which was even more ornately decorated with artistic masterpieces.

"What?" Tiger prompted, appearing quite pleased with himself.

"Where did all this food come from?" Blade asked. "Do the Sharks always eat this well?"

"I do," Tiger stated. "And my captains and lieutenants. As for the rest..." He dismissed them with a wave of his right hand.

"What about the others?" Blade pressed him.

"They forage for their meals," Tiger said. "They eat what they can find, what they can catch."

"How is it you eat so well?" Blade inquired politely.

"I am their leader," Tiger declared, as if that explained everything. "But enough of this *talk* about food. Let's *eat* some."

Blade's stomach was growling, his mouth watering, his nose delighting in the fragrant scents. He decided to enjoy a meal, then sound Tiger out for more information.

Tiger watched Blade dig into a juicy slab of beef. He scanned the table, frowned, and clapped his hands.

The young blond woman Blade had met earlier, the one bearing the book on Poe, materialized through a doorway located to the rear of Tiger. She hurried up to Tiger, on his left. "Yes?"

"Isn't something missing?" Tiger queried stiffly.

The woman looked at the sumptuous spread in consternation. "Missing?"

"I see the food I ordered," Tiger said, "and I see the gold silverware I wanted. But I don't see our liquid refreshment or any of the crystal glasses. Where are they?"

"I forgot!" the blonde blurted.

Tiger looked at Blade. "She forgot! This is Lenore. She attends to my physical needs. All of them."

Blade paused in his eating with a fork of steak halfway to his mouth.

Lenore's cheeks turned crimson.

Tiger suddenly lashed out, backhanding Lenore across the mouth and sending her stumbling backwards. "The wine!" he snapped. "And the water! Now!"

"Right away," Lenore mumbled, her right hand on her chin. "Right away."

Tiger sighed. "The bane of the superior man. Inferiors!"

Blade abruptly lost his appetite. He lowered the fork to his plate.

"I try to impress upon them the necessity of excellence," Tiger said, "But their limited intellects are incapable of grasping the finer points of life."

"I read some of the sections you'd underlined in the book on Poe you lent me," Blade commented.

"Poe! Now there was a man!" Tiger exclaimed passionately. "As far above his peers as the stars are above our planet!"

"Is Poe your hero then?" Blade asked.

"My hero? No. I admire the man, but I can't claim him as my hero. Remember what Poe himself had to say about heroes?"

"What was that?" Blade inquired.

"No hero-worshipper can possess anything within himself," Tiger quoted from memory. "That man is no man who stands in awe of his fellowman."

"You know Poe well," Blade said, complimenting the Shark leader.

"Poe might not be my hero," Tiger said, "but I can identify with him. I share the affliction he had, the curse of superiority."

"Is any person superior to another?" Blade questioned.

"Oh, come on! Don't tell me you subscribe to that equality nonsense prevalent in this country before the war? The notion that all men and women are created equal is sheer bunk! You and I are living examples of how wrong Thomas Jefferson was."

"How do you mean?" Blade asked.

"Look at us!" Tiger said. "We stand out above the rest, and not just physically. Our intellects are vastly superior to the majority of our fellow humans."

"I don't agree with that..." Blade began, then stopped.

Lenore had returned, walking into the chamber bearing a silver tray containing sparkling crystal glasses, a pitcher of water, and a flagon of wine. She hastened to Tiger's side. "Here it is."

Tiger glanced at the tray and smiled. "At last. My throat is parched," he exaggerated.

"This won't happen again," Lenore assured him.

"It had better not," Tiger declared ominously.

"Where do you want the tray?" Lenore questioned.

"On the ceiling," Tiger rejoined. "Where do you think?" he snapped, and indicated a clear space to his left. "Place the tray there."

Lenore complied. "Will that be all?"

"Yes," Tiger said imperiously. "Now leave us."

The woman quickly departed.

"A veritable dunce," Tiger mentioned, grinning. "But a wildcat in bed."

Blade's gray eyes narrowed. His initial fascination with the Shark leader was rapidly being replaced by an intense dislike.

"Now what were you saying?" Tiger inquired.

"I don't agree that our intellects are superior to most others," Blade said. "I don't see myself as possessing more than an average intelligence."

"Rubbish!" Tiger responded. "You're selling yourself short. The average moron wouldn't know Edgar Allan Poe from Edgar Rice Burroughs. You do."

"I know about Poe because I studied him in school when I was younger," Blade detailed. "The Elder teaching our literature course taught us about all the truly great writers. I don't regard Poe as highly as you do, because like most of us he possessed certain flaws in his character, flaws which interfered with the expression of his inherent brilliance."

"All superior people display eccentricities," Tiger said lamely.

"Feeble excuses do not justify bigotry," Blade noted.

Tiger peered at the Warrior. "Poe was not a bigot."

"No, but some of those who have misconstrued his writings qualify as bigots," Blade said.

"How so?"

"Take his writings on the superior person, on the true genius," Blade elaborated. "Poe acknowledged there was a difference in degree between a true genius and someone of average intelligence, but he never, so far as I know, claimed the genius was *better* than the average person. He never claimed the superior types should subjugate the so-called inferior ones and rule them with an iron fist."

Tiger was silent for a full minute, studying his guest. At last he spoke. "You are referring to myself."

"If the shoe fits," Blade said.

Tiger leaned forward, his tone hardening. "You don't believe I am superior to the rest of the Sharks?"

"Physically you are," Blade acknowledged. "Maybe intellectually too. But even if that's the case, what gives you the right to lord it over them? What gives you the right to treat them as your slaves? You mentioned

Thomas Jefferson before, but you missed Jefferson's point. When he wrote that all men are created equal, he wasn't referring to our natural talents and abilities. He was referring to our rights under the law. All men and women are entitled to the same basic rights. We studied the Declaration of Independence in school. Jefferson said that we are endowed by our Creator with certain inalienable rights, such as life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Inalienable. Which means that no one, no government or no individual, should be permitted to take these rights away from us."

Tiger pursed his lips. "You're referring to me again."

"I saw what you did to Oakes," Blade stated. "You deprived him of his life without justification. He wasn't trying to kill you. He wasn't a threat in any way. His only 'crime' was incompetence and cowardice. You had no right to kill him."

Tiger's nostrils flared. "Who the hell are you to judge me? If it wasn't for me, the Sharks would still be the disordered, motley rabble they were when I assumed command. I molded the Sharks into what they are today! I made them a force to be reckoned with! I gave them new life and brought culture into their miserable existence! I selected the Seattle Art Museum as our headquarters. I did all of this because they need someone like me, a superior man, a genius who can ease the strain of their wretched lives by doing their thinking for them. Without me the Sharks are nothing!"

Blade was startled by the transformation in Tiger's countenance. From placid host the Shark had changed into a raging egomaniac. He was glad Tiger had returned his Bowies because he sensed trouble brewing.

And he was right.

"I can see I misjudged you," Tiger was saying. "One must learn never to rely on first impressions. You are not my equal, after all."

"I would like to be your ally," Blade mentioned.

"My ally?"

"Yes. Against the mutant known as Manta," Blade said.

"What do you know of Manta and his followers?" Tiger questioned.

"Not a lot," Blade admitted. "I know he is holding a number of people as prisoners somewhere in Seattle. My friends and I came here to free them."

"Manta and the Sharks have been at war for years," Tiger stated. "If we could not defeat him in all that time, how can you expect to best Manta with the aid of just three others?"

"There would be more than three if I could rely on the Sharks for assistance," Blade commented. "You're the Shark leader. The decision is up to you."

"And the answer is no," Tiger said. "We don't need your help."

"But we can use yours," Blade corrected him.

"It's the same thing," Tiger remarked. "The Sharks don't need your help. We'll defeat Manta on our own."

"And what about the prisoners Manta is holding? When will you free them?" Blade inquired.

"When we defeat Manta," Tiger reiterated.

"And when will that be?" Blade asked.

"Who knows? As I said, we have been fighting for years."

"It doesn't sound to me like you're very anxious to resolve the conflict," Blade said.

"Meaning what?" Tiger rejoined.

"Meaning maybe you like things the way they are," Blade commented. "Maybe you don't want to defeat Manta. Maybe you prefer the status quo."

Tiger laughed. "That's ridiculous!"

"Is it?" Blade countered. "If you're as superior as you claim to be, then you should've finished off Manta long ago. Surprisingly, you haven't done it. Why? Because you know Manta's presence consolidates your own

power. As long as Manta is a threat, the Sharks will look to you for leadership, for protection."

"The Sharks will look to me for leadership even after Manta is gone!" Tiger interjected.

"Maybe." Blade shrugged. "Maybe not. Here's your chance to prove yourself. Help me overthrow Manta. Help me make Seattle a safe place for humans to live again."

Tiger stared at Blade for a moment. "If anyone is going to overthrow Manta, I will be the one. And as far as the Sharks are concerned, I know what is best for them. You don't. You're a stranger here. How dare you come in here and dictate to me!"

"I wasn't dictating—" Blade said.

"Strangers always bring trouble!" Tiger declared. "Fortunately, I have ways of dealing with trouble."

"I can see this is getting me nowhere," Blade remarked, standing and shoving his chair back. "I thank you for your hospitality."

Tiger grinned. "Where do you think you're going?"

"I'm leaving," Blade announced. "I must find my friends and locate Manta."

Tiger slowly shook his head. "You're not going anywhere, Blade."

Blade rested his hands on his Bowies. "Do you intend to stop me?"

Tiger's right hand disappeared under the table. "Yes. I do."

"I'm leaving!" Blade repeated.

"Yes, you are," Tiger concurred. "But not in the manner you expect." His right arm moved and there was a loud click.

Blade felt the floor fall out from under him, and the next instant he was hurtling down a dark shaft toward whatever awaited him below.

Chapter Sixteen

Everything was so... strange.

He felt like he was floating, and when he glanced down at himself he received two shocks: first, he *was* floating; and secondly, his dark-blue uniform seemed to have been replaced by a diffused, light-blue glow.

What was happening?

He stared overhead, bewildered to observe a dark, cylindrical tunnel nearby. The moment he saw the mysterious tunnel, and without consciously willing himself to move, he glided toward the tunnel opening. As he did, a sensation of extreme serenity pervaded his being.

Was this a dream?

It must be a dream.

Then why did he feel like the experience was really happening?

He shot through the tunnel at a speed defying description. A dim light became visible ahead, at the far end of the tunnel. The closer he grew to the light, the more his serenity intensified. He slowed as he neared the tunnel mouth, and he coasted out into a verdant valley. Green and lush and tranquil, the valley was exquisitely beautiful. His attention was drawn to the center of the valley, to the most incredible edifice he'd ever seen, huge beyond belief, dazzling to the eyes. The atmosphere was permeated by a soft radiance.

Where was he?

A figure appeared, coming toward him from the direction of the edifice.

He studied the figure, certain he knew who it was.

The figure was that of a woman. Her black hair flowed to her shoulders,

and she wore a white, shiny, gossamer gown, the gown billowing as she moved.

His mouth dropped open.

Could it be?

She came even closer. Her brown eyes were locked on his blue, her expression one of ineffable happiness.

"This can't be!" he blurted out when he was a few feet away.

She halted, staring at him with love and joy illumining her visage. "I'm not a ghost, darling," she said and laughed, and her laughter was like the peeling of melodious bells.

"I'm dreaming!" he stated. "I must be dreaming!"

She shook her head, her luxuriant hair swaying. "No, dearest. This is not a dream."

He gazed at the valley and the edifice. "But I don't understand. How..."

"You understand," she assured him.

"Is this what happens, then?" he asked.

"For some," she replied.

"I never thought I'd see you again," he told her, his tone strained.

"The Elders taught you well," she noted. "Your Family has a better understanding of the higher spheres than most."

"I feel... at peace," he said.

She smiled, her teeth glistening white. "All do who enter this realm. Immature anxiety is prevalent on the nativity spheres of time and space, but not here."

"But I also feel somewhat uncomfortable," he conceded.

"Only because you are here prematurely," she informed him.

"What?"

"Your time has not yet come," she said. "You entered the portal before your allotted interval."

"But you..." he began.

"I was sent to greet you," she explained. "Your guardian alerted us to your coming."

He shook his head, confused. "I really don't understand."

A bright light materialized in the distance.

"What is that?" he inquired.

"Your Guide," she said.

The light grew brighter and brighter, attaining an indescribable intensity as it drew nearer.

Surprisingly, he was able to gaze at the light without flinching or squinting. Pulsations of warmth and love engulfed him.

"Is it worth it?"

He felt the words in his head; they were not spoken.

"Is it worth it?" the light repeated.

"I don't understand," he stated for the third time.

"Is your life worthy of this?"

He stared at the valley and the edifice. "All of this?"

"This is just the beginning. Mortal mind has not conceived of the wonders awaiting those who survive the planetary experience."

"So I *am* dead," he declared.

"No. You are dying. You, the real one, your soul, has ascended prematurely. You must return."

"But I like it better here," he said, feeling so content and loved.

"Everyone does. But your time has not yet come."

"When will my time come?" he asked.

The light did not answer.

"What should I do?" he queried.

"Return to your nativity sphere. We will be reunited as you renew your life struggle."

"Will I remember any of this?" he questioned.

"Perhaps."

"I want to remember."

The light moved away.

He gazed at the woman, his emotions surging, and he went to embrace her.

She backed off, extending her arms. "Do not attempt to touch me. I am not composed of the substance you remember."

"Can I at least touch you?"

"No," she told him. "You must go."

He started toward the tunnel feeling immeasurably melancholy.

"Be of good cheer!" she advised.

"I will miss you," he said.

"Remember, the faintest flicker of faith is the key," she stated. "And you possess more than a flicker."

"I will see you again?" he asked hopefully.

"That is up to you."

He drifted to the edge of the tunnel and looked back. She was standing there, watching him, a supernal vision of loveliness. If only he could have held her in his arms! "I'll be back!" he said. "I'll be back, Alicia!"

She smiled benignly. "I know, Yama."

His eyes opened, and for a moment he was completely disoriented, his mind a virtual blank. Then the waves of pain hit him, agony excruciating beyond belief, racking his lower back and his abdomen. He grit his teeth, taking his bearings, realizing he was in the ground-floor hallway of the brick structure. His back was to the wall and he was bent forward at an uncomfortable angle.

Where was Rikki?

And what was that noise?

Yama glanced down at the floor. Hours must have elapsed since he'd entered the building. There was more sunlight streaming in the front doors, bathing the hallway in golden rays. Thirstily lapping at a puddle of blood to his left was the source of the noise.

A rat.

A big, hairy rat with a twitching nose and beady eyes. Its tiny tongue was licking away at the crimson pool.

Yama saw his Wilkinson on the floor to his right. Using the gun would be too noisy. He eased his right hand to the survival knife on his hip. Slowly, gingerly, he pulled the Razorback from its sheath.

Now came the hard part.

Could he do it, injured as he was?

There was only one way to find out.

Yama brought his right arm up and around, lunging to the left, ignoring the torment as he buried the Razorback in the rodent's neck. The blade went clear through the neck and imbedded in the hardwood floor with a thunk.

The rat squealed and thrashed for several seconds, then went limp.

Yama jerked the Razorback from the rodent, wiped the blood off on his left pants leg, and slid the survival knife in the sheath.

What could have happened to Rikki-Tikki-Tavi?

Yama stared at the front doors, noting the sunlight pouring into the building through the spaces between the frames. Rikki would never have deserted him, which meant Rikki was in trouble. Or dead.

The word triggered a reaction.

Yama suddenly recalled his strange dream in vivid detail, his forehead creasing in bewilderment. Alicia! He'd seen Alicia! And she had seemed so real!

But that was impossible.

Alicia had died, killed by a Technic assault team, a special demolition squad sent to destroy the Home while Blade was in New York City.

Yes, Alicia had died.

But if the Elders were right, if their teachings were accurate, then there was life *after* death.

Somewhere.

Yama frowned. He'd listened to the Elders over the years, and he had read volumes on religion and philosophy. But he'd never really given the next phase of life much thought. Oh, he'd believed, but he'd never confronted the reality. Until now.

Rikki had been right, after all. What was it Rikki had said? "You have supreme fascination with the subject of death."

True.

How true.

Death was an inevitable counterpoint to mortal life. Thousands, even millions, feared death, dreaded the act of dying. If his experience had been real, and not a dream, then all that fear, all that dread, all the anxiety humankind ever displayed toward death was unnecessary. Totally,

stupidly, unnecessary.

Death was a portal to the other side.

Death was the technique of passage to the higher spheres.

A technique, and nothing more.

Death was not to be feared. Not to be dreaded. Death was to be accepted, and once accepted to be placed in its proper perspective.

Yama made a silent vow to himself. Never again would he become worried at the prospect of dying. Never again would the likelihood of his demise upset him.

Never again!

Never more!

Yama glanced at the arrow protruding from his abdomen. The Spirit had smiled on him! The point of the shaft was not a broadhead, which would have torn his insides to shreds. The point was an ordinary target tip, small and tapered to a neat point. The arrow could be extracted without breaking the shaft! He reached behind him with his left hand and gripped the arrow near the fletching.

It had to be done.

Girding himself, tightening his stomach and arm muscles, he slowly pulled on the arrow. The shaft resisted his effort for a second, then began to slid outward with a slurping sound.

The sensation was sickening.

Yama grinned when the shaft was completely out. He brought the arrow around in front of him and studied the bloody shaft and feathers.

Close.

So close.

He tossed the arrow aside and tried to rise, but vertigo overwhelmed him. Dizzy, he sighed and propped his back against the wall. He'd lost a lot

of blood. If he pushed himself, he could well succumb because of the blood loss alone. He could... die?

Oh, really?

His dream, if such it was, had indicated otherwise. "Your time has not yet come," Alicia had said. So was he going to believe the woman he loved, or go by the large pools of blood on the floor?

Yama laughed.

Mere minutes ago he had made a vow never to worry about the prospect of dying again. And what was he doing?

He put both palms on the slippery floor and shoved, rising to a squatting posture.

No problem.

Yama lifted the Wilkinson in his right hand, then used the stock on the floor as a brace while he straightened to his full height. The dizziness disappeared. He bent over, examining the exit wound in his abdomen. The target tip had perforated the skin in an even circle, and the blood flow had ceased.

But what about infection?

Yama shook his head, bemused by his second lapse. He chuckled and headed for the front doors while inserting a fresh clip into the Carbine's magazine. Blinking in the bright light, he went outside.

Rikki was nowhere in sight.

Nor were Blade and Hickok.

Yama looked to his right. Far down the street there were six or seven bodies. Swarming over the corpses were scores of hungry rats.

Which way should he go?

Yama walked down the steps to the street. Seattle was a huge city, or had been. He could search for weeks, wandering at random, and never find his fellow Warriors. If Rikki, Blade, and Hickok had been captured, he

didn't have the slightest idea where their captors might be based.

The solution was simple.

Yama proceeded to the south, bypassing the feeding rats, until, four blocks later, he found exactly what he needed.

An ancient store, the faded lettering on its sign still legible. OFFICE SUPPLIES. The front window was busted and the door was off its hinges.

Yama entered the store, searching for the materials he required. Dust covered everything. Debris dotted the floor. Grimy computers and typewriters lined shelves on the walls. He crossed to one of the computers and ran his left index finger over its display screen. The dust was half an inch thick.

Where was what he needed?

Yama moved to the rear of the store. There, in a corner of the store, he found the items he wanted. Boxes of paper. Reams and reams and reams.

Time to set the bait.

Now where were his matches?

Chapter Seventeen

"What the heck!" Hickok blurted out.

"Oh, God!" Hedy exclaimed.

Manta hissed maliciously.

Hickok was staggered by the setup. They were in a vast chamber, and the exterior walls, which were composed of glass or plastic, afforded a view of the sea! Fish could be seen swimming past, singly and in schools.

"Do you know what this was?" Manta asked.

Hickok shook his head, surveying the chamber's interior. Square and oval tanks, some small, some huge, were everywhere. He guessed the tanks had once been utilized to house sea life, but now they housed... humans!

"This was once an aquarium, the Seattle Aquarium to be exact," Manta stated. "I understand they underwent a major expansion project shortly before the war. How convenient for me!"

Hickok released Hedy's hand and took a few steps into the gigantic chamber, stunned. There were scores upon scores of humans in the tanks. Incredibly, they were engaged in typical human activities. In a large tank to his right, a group was tending to a garden growing *inside* the 40-foot-wide tank. And in a smaller tank to his left was a woman *seated in a rocking chair and sewing*.

"What do you think of my collection?" Manta taunted the Warrior. "A variety of human activities are represented for the enjoyment and edification of the Brethren."

Hickok spun toward the mutant. "It's... it's like a blamed zoo!"

"This is better than a zoo," Manta gloated. "This is my Humarium."

At last Hickok understood. He gazed at the dozens of tanks, at the humans inside, and comprehension dawned. "The humans have taken the place of the fish! Everything is reversed! Instead of the humans watchin' the sea life—" he looked at Manta—"the sea life is watchin' the humans!"

"You *are* a bright one!" Manta declared.

"How long have these folks been here?" Hickok queried.

"Some have been here for decades," Manta said. "Others, not so long. Captain Dale and the crew of the *Cutterhawk* have been here four months," Manta replied.

"This isn't right!" Hickok stated. "It's inhuman!"

Manta smirked. "Do tell. Is it any worse than what your species did to the former occupants of those tanks?"

"But that was different!" Hickok retorted. "You said so yourself! The

aquariums were for broadening human understanding of sea life."

"And my Humarium is for broadening mutant understanding of humans," Manta said. "There is no difference."

Hickok stared at the group tending the garden. "I don't see how they can stand it!" he commented.

"Actually, most of them have a better life in my Humarium than they did outside," Manta asserted. "I feed them daily. They are sheltered from the elements. And, if they perform their duties as required, they are not harmed."

"Where are the rest?" Hickok questioned. "Dale said you were holdin' hundreds of men, women, and children. I only see about a hundred in here."

"The rest are elsewhere," Manta said. "They work in shifts. Some are in the housing units to the south of the Humarium, others are harvesting kelp."

"Kelp?"

"Kelp is a seaweed," Manta explained. "One of the staples of our diet, along with dolphin, porpoise, and whale meat."

"You eat other sea creatures?" Hickok inquired in surprise.

"Dolphins, propoises, and whales are mammals," Manta reminded the Warrior. "We relish their flesh. Unfortunately, we must devote much of our time to slaying them ourselves. Humans are incapable of catching their warm-blooded, aquatic kin without the aid of a boat, and we would not trust putting a boat in the hands of our human workers. The temptation might be too great. So we relegate humans to kelp harvesting, work we find menial and boring."

Hickok was observing the Brethren members engaged in overseeing the operations of the Humarium. All of them resembled Manta except in two ways. Some were female mutants, and they wore short green skirts instead of skimpy briefs. And none of the other Brethren possessed the peculiar fleshy cowl Manta did. Perhaps the cowl was a hereditary trait, a genetic mark of leadership.

"Our kelp factory is to the north of the Humarium."

Manta was disclosing. "Both the factory and the housing units are connected to the Humarium by watertight passages."

"Why are you doing this?" Hickok asked.

"Isn't it obvious?" Manta rejoined.

"Because you hate humans," Hickok speculated.

"Not really," Manta said.

"Bull-pukey!" Hickok declared.

"Not personally," Manta clarified. "I don't have anything against you personally, but as a species you have outlived your usefulness, and have forsaken your heritage. When your species tried to destroy the world, your kind relinquished any claim to leadership. And now, thanks to the genetic deviations caused by the radiation your species unleashed on the environment, a new, superior breed has arisen to assume the mantle of creating a new world, a world where sanity will be the norm instead of insanity, where reason will prevail, where harmony will be nurtured. Your kind ruled the world for ages, and look at what you finally did to it!" He paused. "The Brethren will do better."

"I doubt it," Hickok said.

"Why? What can stop us? Your species is on the verge of collapse. Oh, I know about the Freedom Federation, but your Federation is your last hope, your dying gasp, as it were, to retain your control of the planet," Manta smiled. "Evolution has provided a superior species to take your place. The Brethren will continue to multiply as we consolidate our power base and spread all up and down the West Coast. Five hundred years from now we will be the dominant species on the planet."

"Not at the rate you're breedin'," Hickok noted.

"What?"

"You've been at this for decades, and there are only two hundred and sixty-seven Brethren," Hickok said. "Maybe you need lessons on

whoopee-makin'. Instead of puttin' humans in those tanks and watchin' them, you should be studyin' rabbits."

"We reproduce as rapidly as we can," Manta stated.

"But we have experienced great difficulty in impregnating our females, and even when the impregnation is successful, many of the infants are stillborn. I suspect our genetic code is to blame."

"Speakin' of your genetic code," Hickok said, "there's a question I'd like to ask."

"What?" Manta said impatiently.

"Where the blazes did you come from?" Hickok inquired. "Most mutations I've heard about or seen were caused by the radiation alterin' an ordinary species. I was told the radiation affects the reproductive process by changin' the embryos. What species did the Brethren spring from?"

Manta smiled. "There lies the supreme irony. I was the first of my kind, and I was born seventy-two years ago-

"You're seventy-two!" Hickok said, interrupting.

"Why should you be so astonished?" Manta asked. "Many sea creatures enjoy a longevity equal to, or surpassing, the human life span. Anyway, to answer your question, both my parents were human."

Hickok did a double take.

"That's right," Manta said, and laughed. "What sweet irony! I was born to human parents living on the north shore of Elliott Bay. Later, I determined they had been regularly drinking radiation-tainted water. The radiation mutated the embryo my mother carried. Radiation, as you noted, can effect wonderful transformations in embryos. My mother's second, and last, child was like me, only female."

"So you mated with your sister," Hickok deduced.

"Of course," Manta said. "We bore sixteen children of our own. Unfortunately, my mate died three years ago."

"What happened to your parents?"

"My poor human parents," Manta stated sadly. "They tried to rear us as normal children, as they would have raised human children. And I think, in their own way, they did care for us, despite our appearance. But the other humans didn't care for us! They despised us! They claimed we were monsters! That we deserved to die! So they hounded my parents into an early grave. Our parents protected my sister and myself until they died, and once they were gone we departed the human community to live in the sea. That's when inspiration struck."

"How so?"

"I realized the reason I was here, on this planet. I perceived my destiny, and understood my importance in the evolutionary scheme of things," Manta said. "I had seen how ugly humans were. I knew what your species had done to the planet. And I also knew my sister and I were not monsters, as your kind claimed. No! We were destined to found a new and better species, a species which would eventually supplant the human race. My sister and I were unique, the apex of evolutionary perfection, the best of both worlds, able to live on land or in the water, at home in both environments. I realized we were the wave of the future, and I set about repairing the Seattle Aquarium to use as my base of operations. As our numbers increased, I organized the Brethren. Today, we control Puget Sound and western Seattle, and we range far out over the Pacific Ocean. We are spreading ever outward, and one day the planet will be ours."

"Fat chance," Hickok mumbled.

Manta stared at the Warrior. "We *will* rule the world! I have every confidence in your species, in its ability to destroy itself. The war hasn't taught you anything! You still slay one another with reckless abandon. Good! Keep it up! You will only make my task easier."

"I think I understand all of this now," Hickok commented. "Except for one thing. Why'd you send out the phony call for help? A pard of mine told me you sent out a fake call on the radio, and that's how you caught Dale and the crew from the California boat."

"Ingenious, yes? We needed more kelp harvesters, and it was next to impossible to capture any of the humans living in Seattle. They know about us and they stay away from our territory and the open water. We

were compelled to secure new laborers from another area. I had salvaged all the usable equipment I could find over the years. Included in that equipment were two portable radios with broadcast capabilities."

"So you used one of the radios to lure in people who didn't know about the Brethren," Hickok said. "It was just dumb luck you caught a whole boatload."

Manta smiled. "My plan worked to perfection." He surveyed the Humarium. "This conversation is almost at an end. I like to welcome the new arrivals, to explain the situation so they will fully appreciate the hopelessness of their predicament." He looked at Hickok. "There is no escape. Resign yourself to your life here, and you will be much better off. Give us problems and you'll live to regret it!"

"There's one thing you haven't mentioned," Hickok said. "The most important thing of all."

"What?"

"Where are my Colts?" Hickok asked.

"All weapons are removed from new arrivals," Manta detailed. "They are locked in the storeroom."

"And where's this storeroom?"

Manta shook his head. "That, you will never know!" He suddenly seemed angry. "Time to put you to work!"

Two Brethren materialized at the Warrior's side.

"Take the male to the kelp factory!" Manta commanded. "Tell the overseer to watch him closely. I suspect he will cause trouble."

"And the female?" one asked.

"Assign her to the painting detail working in the housing units," Manta directed. "And inform Ore I want the painting completed within two days. I have another project in mind for the humans."

"Yes, sir," the one mutant stated. He faced the Warrior. "You will come with us."

Hickok glanced at Hedy. "Don't fret none. I'll get us out of this."

Manta laughed. "You are not going anywhere, human. Both of you will stay here for the remainder of your natural lives."

"I can't stay that long," Hickok quipped. "My missus would have a fit if I missed my son's birthday."

"Take this prattling fool away!" Manta barked.

The two mutants took hold of the Warrior, one on each arm, and forcibly propelled him to the north.

Hickok glanced from one to the other. "When is the grub served around here?"

Chapter Eighteen

As Blade hurtled down the metallic shaft, he envisioned several horrific possibilities awaiting him at the other end: he could fall into a vat of acid; or there could be a slaving mutant waiting to rip into him; or perhaps a score of Sharks were going to welcome him with a hail of gunfire. He tried to reach his Bowies, but couldn't.

The shaft abruptly ended, and Blade plummeted from the mouth and dropped onto a dirt floor, jarring his left side. He rose, drawing the Bowies, ready to sell his life dearly, only to find he was in a cell!

The compartment was ten feet by ten feet. Two of the sides were brick walls, the other two consisted of iron bars spaced close together. The cell was situated in the middle of a wide chamber, and both the chamber and the cell were illuminated by lanterns hanging from the chamber walls.

Damn! How could he have been so dumb?

Moments later, a door in the chamber wall opened and Tiger appeared. He grinned at the Warrior and came up to the bars. "I'm afraid these accommodations are on the spartan side, but fortunately you won't be

using this cell for long."

"I was sitting on a trap door the whole time," Blade said.

Tiger nodded. "I've made certain modifications to the Art Museum. This lower level was constructed by the Sharks."

"So what now? Death by starvation?"

"Nothing so crude!" Tiger replied. "I want to be fair about this. I'll give you a fighting chance."

"Oh?"

"Yes. I am in need of a workout," Tiger stated. "And since you won't accept the fact of my superiority, I must prove it to you."

"How?" Blade asked.

"You'll see," Tiger said, grinning. He turned and departed, closing the door behind him.

Blade placed the Bowies in their sheaths. He should never have attempted to befriend the Shark leader, to persuade Tiger to become an ally. True, he had only extended Tiger the benefit of the doubt, the same as he would have done to any person. But he should have seen this coming. The slaying of Oakes had revealed Tiger's unpredictable nature.

Doubledamn!

Blade walked up to the iron bars and ran his hands over their cool surface. The bars were too tightly aligned to permit his hands to slip through. There was a door, a heavy metal affair, in the center of one of the brick walls. But the doorknob and the hinges were on the outside. He experimented and forsook the door as a lost cause. Even his mighty muscles couldn't budge it.

There had to be a way out!

There simply had to be!

Blade knelt and touched the dirt underfoot. The soil was compact and hard. He might be able to dig his way free, but the digging would take

forever.

Was there any othe way?

Blade studied the floor, the walls, and the ceiling. He gazed at the shaft for a moment. There was his way out!

The wine tasted pleasantly refreshing on his lips and tingled his tongue as he gulped a mouthful from a crystal glass. A strip of steak, a lobster claw, and clam shells were all that remained of his delicious meal. He shoved the plate back and set the glass on the table. Such a feast invariably made him drowsy. After a short catnap, he'd be as good as new. Then he would attend to the pretender in the cell.

Footsteps pounded in the corridor, and a second later one of the Sharks burst into the room. "Tiger!"

Tiger swiveled in his chair, glaring at the man. "This had better be important! You know I don't like to have my repast interrupted."

"Fire!" the man blurted. "There's a fire!"

Tiger straightened. "Where?"

"In north Seattle," the man said. "You should see all the smoke!"

"Is this fire in our territory?"

"Yep. It's on our side of I-5," the man answered.

"Okay, Collins. Take fifteen others with you and investigate this fire," Tiger ordered. "Insure everyone is armed."

"Yes, sir!" Collins wheeled and started off, but halted in the doorway. "Oh! Almost forgot!"

"What?" Tiger asked.

"Gar and Fab are on their way back," Collins informed the Shark leader. "We saw them from the roof. They're about half a mile away."

"Excellent. On your way north, tell Gar and Fab to report to me immediately," Tiger directed.

"Yes, sir!" Collins raced off.

Tiger sat back in his chair. A fire, eh? Fires were an infrequent occurrence in Seattle. The climate was too damp, for one thing. Lightning strikes started fires, but rarely. None of the Sharks would start a blaze for fear of arousing his wrath. Prior to his assumption of command, a few of the least intelligent Sharks had periodically indulged in petty arson. He had forbidden the practice on the grounds the fires might destroy items the Sharks could use. So if the fire couldn't be attributed to the weather, and if the Sharks hadn't started it, three possibilities were left. The fire could have begun accidentally, with the sun igniting an overheated combustible object. Which was not very likely. Or the blaze could have been intentionally lit by the Brethren, but for what purpose? Manta would expect the Sharks to investigate, but Manta would also know only a few Sharks would be sent. No. If Manta was launching an assault, he wouldn't employ such an obvious ruse as a fire.

There was only one other likely candidate. Or candidates.

The strangers.

The initial reports had indicated there were four strangers in the city: the giant, a man in buckskins, a big man in a dark blue outfit, and a runt in black. With the giant in the holding cell, the remaining three were the probable culprits.

But why?

What were the strangers up to?

Tiger stood and clamped his hands behind his back. He began to slowly pace around the table, immersed in speculation on the activities of the newcomers.

There was a faint scraping noise from underfoot.

Tiger came to the opposite end of the table and halted, staring at the hole in the floor. He had neglected to reset the trapdoor after triggering the mechanism to plunge the giant into the cell. The door, which was three feet by three feet, now hung down inside the shaft. He dropped to his knees and reached for the small metal ring in the center of the door, about to haul the door up, when he heard the odd scraping again.

What was this?

He lowered his face to the rim of the shaft and peered down. The shaft descended at an angle, and his view of the cell was limited to the middle of the floor. He caught sight of Blade and almost laughed aloud.

What resourcefulness!

The giant was erecting a mound of dirt!

Tiger instantly perceived the purpose behind Blade's digging, and he grinned in admiration. How unfortunate the man had to die! He debated whether to close the trapdoor or spring a surprise on his clever guest.

The surprise, definitely.

Tiger stepped around to the rear of the shaft. He reached his right arm to the small of his back and clasped one of the pair of gold-handled daggers hidden in leather sheaths slanted under his wide black leather belt. The gold handle glistened in the light as he brought the 12-inch dagger around in front of him. He smiled wickedly. The giant was not the only one adept at the use of knives, as he was about to discover.

A few minutes elapsed.

What was taking the giant so long? Tiger wondered. Perhaps he had misjudged the man; maybe the giant was digging to China instead of trying to escape through the shaft! Tiger chuckled at his joke as voices sounded from the corridor.

Gar, Fabiana, and one other entered.

"Tiger!" Gar exclaimed. "Good news!"

The man with the white hair and his twin sister skirted the table and approached their leader.

Tiger was watching the man in black, a man of small stature. A runt.

"We've caught one of them," Gar stated, pointing at the stranger.

"So I see," Tiger said.

Gar halted five feet off. "Did Oakes return with the one he caught?"

"Yes. Long ago," Tiger replied.

"We were detained," Gar said. "We were attacked by gulls on the Montlake Bridge."

"Did you lose many?" Tiger inquired. He noticed the man in black was standing near the table, his eyes on Fabiana.

"We lost eleven on the bridge," Gar said, frowning. "Seven more were injured."

"And the other two strangers?" Tiger inquired.

Gar shrugged. "We lost them, I'm afraid."

"Did this one put up much of a fight?" Tiger questioned.

"A hell of a fight," Gar replied.

Tiger stepped several feet to his left, examining the man in black. "And what is your name?"

"Rikki," the man answered.

Tiger hefted the dagger in his right hand and glanced at Gar. "I'm confused, Captain Gar."

"Sir?" Gar said.

"Something is amiss here, but I can't quite put my finger on it." Tiger smiled at Fabiana. "You've been so quiet, my dear. Would you happen to know what I'm talking about?"

"No," Fab responded quickly, averting her gaze.

Tiger looked at Gar. "Ordinarily, you are the epitome of precision. But when I just asked how many you lost, you specifically gave me the figure lost on the bridge. How unusual. Evidently, I must rephrase my question." His tone hardened. "How many did you lose, Captain Gar, on your mission? How many, all told?"

"All told?" Gar repeated meekly.

"Yes!" Tiger thundered. "You lost eleven on the bridge. How many did you lose capturing this man? Speak! Now!"

"Twenty-nine or thirty," Gar mumbled.

"Twenty-nine or... !" Tiger could scarcely believe his hearing. He glared at the man in black, then at Gar. "Tell me this is your idea of a sick joke!"

"We tried our best," Gar said in his defense.

"You tried your best!" Tiger repeated in a mounting rage. "Yet this man killed thirty of our brothers and—"

"Seventeen," Rikki said softly.

Tiger spun toward the stranger. "What did you say?"

"I am responsible for slaying seventeen Sharks in the line of duty," Rikki elaborated. "Perhaps a few more."

"Oh. *Only* seventeen!" Tiger snapped. His anger was tempered by his amazement. What manner of men were these strangers? How could just one of them kill 17 Sharks?

"We tried to take them alive, like you wanted," Gar noted.

"I told you to *try* and take them alive, if possible," Tiger mentioned harshly. "I *didn't* tell you to get yourselves killed in the process!"

"Where is Blade?" Rikki interjected.

Tiger glanced at the runt. The deadly runt. "What was that?"

"Where is Blade?" Rikki repeated his question. "My friend?"

Tiger looked down at Rikki's hands, then turned to Gar. "What the hell is this? His hands aren't even tied! I thought you said he's your prisoner!"

"He is," Gar responded.

"*Then why aren't his hands tied?*"

"He couldn't get away from us," Gar said. "What difference did it make?"

Tiger placed his hands behind his back, fingering his dagger. He paced up to the trapdoor and peeked over the edge.

Perfect!

The giant was a third of the way up the shaft!

"We come in peace," Rikki declared.

Tiger slowly pivoted, smiling broadly. "You come in peace?"

"Yes," Rikki confirmed. "We came here after Manta. Gar told me you have opposed the mutant for years. We will help you defeat him."

"How kind of you," Tiger said courteously. "Your friend said the same thing."

Rikki took a step forward. "You have talked to Blade?"

"Yes," Tiger stated. "I didn't know whether to believe him or not."

"We are sincere," Rikki assured the Shark leader.

Tiger smiled. "Well, in that case, I see no reason why you can't be reunited with your friend. Come here."

Rikki cautiously advanced. "Where is Blade?"

Tiger stepped back, nodding at the shaft. "Downstairs."

Rikki saw the opening in the floor for the first time. His forehead creased as he walked up to the rim and crouched. "Blade? Are you down there?"

Blade's deep voice bellowed back. "Rikki? Is that you?"

Rikki leaned over, staring down the shaft.

"Look out!" Blade shouted.

Tiger was already in motion. He swept his left leg up and in, catching the man in black in the rear of the head and knocking him off balance, causing him to fall forward.

Directly into the shaft.

Chapter Nineteen

"I can't believe you really came."

"My word is my bond," Hickok declared. "I told you I would come, and I did."

Captain Nathan Dale shook his head in disbelief. "Then I'm sorry. It's all my fault you were captured."

"How do you figure?" Hickok asked.

"If you hadn't come here to rescue me, you wouldn't have been caught," Dale observed. "I'm really sorry."

"Don't be," Hickok said, winking conspiratorially. "This is all part of my plan."

"You wanted to be captured?" Dale queried skeptically.

"Naturally," Hickok stated. "How else was I going to find you?"

Dale laughed. "You're a card, Hickok. You know that?"

"Just so it isn't the Joker," Hickok rejoined.

A mutant suddenly appeared on the wooden walkway. "Get to work, you two! Or there will not be any food rations tonight!"

Dale sighed and returned to cultivating the kelp.

Hickok bent over, giving the impression of going to work, while he

surreptitiously surveyed the kelp factory.

Manta evidently did everything on a grand scale. Not content with controlling western Seattle, he wanted to rule the world. He had repaired and rearranged the Seattle Aquarium to suit his needs as a Humarium. And the kelp factory was equally as impressive, if at least five times as odoriferous. Hickok nearly gagged every time he took a breath.

The kelp factory was approximately one hundred yards long and half that distance wide. All four walls and the ceiling were composed of shaded plastic which allowed only the required amount of sunshine to penetrate to the kelp beds. Walkways divided the beds into sections. The factory was divided into four major areas by three large walkways running the width of the building at 25-yard intervals. Smaller, narrower walkways projected from the main walkway at 10-yard intervals. The mutant guards, the Brethren, patrolled the walkways, armed with leather whips and goading the humans to work. Over a hundred humans were in the factory, involved in the kelp harvesting. A third of those laboring in the knee-deep water were children between the ages of 8 and 15.

Hickok could feel the water seeping into his soaked moccasins. He had refused to remove his footwear and received a lash from a mutant for his obtinacy. But the Brethren hadn't pushed the issue. Which suited him fine.

Dale was carefully aligning the greenish-brown kelp into precise rows as required by the overseers.

Hickok nudged a lump here, a lump there. He was sweating profusely under his buckskins; the factory was intentionally humid and muggy. "Say, Dale?" he whispered.

"What?" Dale whispered back.

"How many sailors are in here right now?" Hickok asked. "How many from the *Cutterhawk*?"

"I don't know for sure," Dale replied. "I'd guess about fifty."

"Are they ready to bust out of here?" Hickok inquired.

Dale froze, a strand of kelp dangling from his right hand. "Do you mean

right *now!*"

"No. Of course not," Hickok said.

Dale visibly relaxed.

"I was thinkin' more like in five minutes," Hickok stated.

Dale glanced at the Warrior. "Five minutes? Are you insane?"

"Okay. Make it ten."

"But you just got here!" Dale declared in a hushed tone.

"Which is why they won't be expecting me to pull a stunt like tryin' to escape," Hickok pointed out. "This is my best chance."

"What can we do now?" Dale asked, scanning the factory. "There are over forty overseers in here and they have whips. We don't have any weapons."

"What if I could get my hands on some weapons?" Hickok inquired.

"How do you expect to do that?" Dale wanted to know.

Hickok grinned, reached back, and tapped an exposed portion of his gun belt, his fingertips touching the cartridges in the loops on the rear of the belt.

Dale's eyes widened. "They didn't take your ammo?"

"Nope," Hickok said, swiftly covering the gun belt with the lower part of his buckskin shirt. "And I wasn't about to remind the vermin."

"Your shirt hangs down when you stand up," Dale observed. "They probably didn't see the ammunition."

"Where's the storeroom?" Hickok questioned.

"I don't know."

"You've been here four months and you don't know where the storeroom is?" Hickok asked in surprise.

"Not the storeroom where they keep the weapons," Dale said. "They're real secretive about that. No one knows except them."

"Do they use weapons much?" Hickok asked.

"No," Dale whispered. "They prefer to use their nails in close combat. The overseers use whips. But I've never seen them use guns. I imagine they would, in a crisis. Maybe they don't like guns because guns were a human invention."

"What a passel of cow chips," Hickok commented.

"Do you have a plan?" Dale inquired.

"Do birds fly?"

"That's not much of an answer," Dale remarked.

"Here's what I'm going to do," Hickok detailed. "I intend to create a diversion to distract the overseers. Then I plan to slip out of the factory and go find the storeroom. Once I lay my hands on my Colts, these mangy varmints are done for."

"There are close to three hundred of the Brethen," Dale said. "You can't take all of them on by yourself."

"I might need a little help," Hickok acknowledged. "That's where you and the rest of the sailors come in."

"What do you want us to do?"

"After I skedaddle for the storeroom," Hickok instructed him, "make as much of a ruckus as you can. I don't want the overseers to know I'm gone."

"Why don't some of us come with you?" Dale queried.

"It'll be a heap easier for one hombre to reach the storeroom," Hickok stated. "I'll load up on guns and hurry back here. Keep your peepers peeled. When you see me, come a runnin'. By tonight, the Brethren will be twiddlin' their gills out in the ocean—those who survive, anyway."

"If any survive," Dale amended. "We're going to kill all of the bastards we can find."

"Some of them are likely out rustlin' up whales and such," Hickok said. "I doubt we'll get all of them."

"Just so we get Manta!" Dale stated vehemently. "I want that bastard for myself."

"First come, first serve," Hickok quipped.

"Look busy!" Dale abruptly warned, and worked on the kelp.

Hickok did likewise.

An overseer was walking toward them along the walkway. The mutant came abreast of their position in the kelp beds and stopped. "You!"

Some of the other workers looked up.

"You!" the overseer shouted. "The one in the funny clothes."

"He means you!" Dale whispered to the gunman.

Hickok straightened. "Are you talkin' to me, Fish Lips?"

"You're the one in the funny clothes," the mutant said.

Hickok moved toward the walkway, looking down at himself. Buckskins were typical attire in the Midwest and the Rocky Mountain region, but he hadn't seen one person wearing them in Seattle. Apparently, when it came to high fashion, the folks in Seattle were downright ignorant. He reached the walkway and looked up at the mutant. "What's up, gruesome?"

"Manta wants to see you."

Chapter Twenty

"I apologize for my carelessness."

"You've already apologized. A dozen times."

"I allowed myself to be tricked," Rikki said. "I was foolish."

Blade sighed and glanced over his right shoulder at the martial artist. "Would you feel any better if I agreed with you? You made a mistake. We all make mistakes. Now forget about it."

"I am not accustomed to making mistakes," Rikki remarked.

"I wish I could say that," Blade said.

"Shut up!" one of their escorts barked. "Both of you!"

Ten Sharks were taking the Warriors to a meeting with Tiger. They had arrived at the cell minutes ago and announced that Tiger wanted the prisoners brought before him. The Sharks had prudently bound the Warriors and removed Blade's Bowies. Four of the Sharks were walking in front of Blade, the rest behind Rikki. Six of the ten carried rifles.

Tiger wasn't taking any chances.

Despite his predicament, Blade marveled at the outstanding artwork they passed in the corridors.

They climbed a short flight of stairs and entered an enormous chamber. In contrast to all of the other rooms in the museum, this chamber was devoid of artistic masterpieces. It was filled with Sharks, standing room only. They were jammed into a compact mass surrounding a cleared space in the center. At the sight of the Warriors, the conversation level rose.

"Make way!" the head of the escort bellowed.

The throng parted to permit the escort to pass.

Tiger was awaiting them in the middle of the chamber.

his hands on his hips, a smile on his lips. To his right was Gar, to his left Fab, both bearing their shotguns. Fab also wore Rikki's katana, the scabbard angled under her belt above her left hip.

"Welcome, contestants!" Tiger called out.

As they emerged from the crowd, Blade spied the arrangement behind Tiger and the twins. A long, narrow wooden rail had been positioned

horizontally on stout upright posts. Under the 20-foot rail, and on all sides, projecting upward from the tiled floor, were dozens and dozens of sharp metal spikes.

Tiger scanned the Sharks. "Are you ready for a little excitement?"

"Yes!" they chorused back.

Tiger grinned at Blade. "I trust you will not disappoint them. Try to put on a good show."

Blade nodded at the rail and the spikes. "What is this?"

Tiger chuckled. "I told you I need a workout. This is how I exercise, how I keep my reflexes at their peak."

"What does all of this have to do with us?" Blade asked.

"Everything," Tiger said. "You or your friend will be the featured attraction."

"Doing what?" Blade inquired.

Tiger smirked. "Staying alive, I'd imagine." He pointed at the rail. "Do you know what that is?"

"No," Blade admitted.

"That's a balance beam," Tiger disclosed. "The exact kind they used before the war. You or your friend will be on the balance beam with me. The object is to walk from one end to the other without falling off. One of us will, and one of us won't."

Blade stared at the spikes under the beam and encircling it. Some of those spikes were a foot in length, others slightly shorter.

Tiger gazed in the same direction. "Those spikes were extremely difficult for our metalworkers to construct. Imbedding them in the floor was nearly as hard."

Blade looked at the Shark leader. "Don't go through with this," he warned.

"Why not?"

"You might die," Blade said.

Tiger threw back his head and laughed. "I might die? Your fear is showing, Blade!"

Rikki glanced at the beam, then at Blade. "Permit me."

"No," Blade said.

"I am smaller," Rikki stated.

"So?"

"My feet are much smaller than yours," Rikki noted. "To me, walking on the beam will be like walking on a fallen tree. To you, it will be like walking on a toothpick. I am more likely to retain my footing."

"I'll do it," Blade insisted.

Tiger leaned toward them. "Gentlemen! Please! This argument is unnecessary. Each of you will have the opportunity to show your prowess on the beam. One of you will try with me tonight, the other at a later date."

"I will do it," Blade declared.

Tiger shrugged. "Suit yourself. Personally, I was hoping you would be the one." He rubbed his hands together in anticipation.

Blade extended his arms. "Am I supposed to do this with my wrists tied?"

"Not at all," Tiger said. "I said I would be fair." He stared at the burly head of the escort. "Untie him."

Rikki held his wrists up. "What about me?"

"What about you?" Tiger retorted. "Your wrists stay tied."

Fabiana frowned.

Blade studied the balance beam as the burly Shark untied him. When his wrists were free he rubbed them to fully restore his circulation.

"Any questions?" Tiger asked the Warrior.

"What are the rules?" Blade queried.

"Rules?" Tiger repeated, and laughed. "There are no rules. The contest is simple. You climb on one end of the balance beam, I climb on the other. The first one to reach the opposite end alive wins."

"There's not enough room for us to pass each other without falling off," Blade mentioned.

Tiger smirked. "Acute, aren't you? You are permitted to do whatever is necessary to get past your opponent."

"And the one who falls off lands on the spikes," Blade commented.

"Exactly," Tiger stated. "Only one of us will win. Only one of us will be alive when it's all over."

Blade looked at the Shark leader. "Whose warped idea was this? Yours?"

Tiger did a mock bow. "I claim all the credit. After I became leader, after I had silenced all my opposition. I became bored with the routine. Without stimulation, without challenges, even a superior man languishes."

"How many have you murdered on this thing?" Blade asked.

"I don't murder anyone," Tiger responded testily. "Everyone has a fair chance." He paused, chuckling. "Of course, my reflexes and sense of balance are superb. Nature's gifts, you might say. And I am not to blame if others are not so gifted."

"You didn't answer me," Blade pressed the Shark. "How many have you... killed on this beam of yours?"

Tiger shrugged. "Who keeps count? Two or three dozen, I'd estimate."

Blade stared into Tiger's eyes. "Your reign of abuse and murder ends here and now."

"Ohhhh! I'm trembling in my boots!" Tiger said mockingly.

Blade took a step toward the balance beam. "Let's get this over with."

"Hold it," Tiger said. "Don't you want your Bowies?"

"I get to use my Bowies?" Blade asked in disbelief.

Tiger nodding, glancing at the burly Shark. "Cover him. Then give him his knives."

Five Sharks trained their rifles on the Warrior.

The burly Shark walked over to the man who had carried the Bowies from the cell, took them, and returned the knives to the giant.

Blade hefted his prized Bowies, smiling. "You just made a mistake," he said to Tiger.

"Did I?" Tiger rejoined. His hands disappeared behind his back, and when they reappeared a moment later he held a gleaming dagger in each palm.

"Good," Blade said. "I want this to be fair too."

Tiger turned toward the assembled Sharks. "Are you ready?" he yelled.

"Yes!" they thundered.

"Then let the contest commence!" Tiger shouted. He nodded at Blade, then threaded a path between the spikes to the far end of the balance beam.

Blade wondered how the Shark leader would mount the beam. The top of the balance beam was about five feet off the floor.

Tiger paused, deposited his daggers on the beam, and quickly removed his boots and socks. He picked up the gold-handled daggers, took one step backwards from the end of the beam, then gave a little hop and a jump, placing his closed hands on the edge of the beam for support, the dagger blades pointing outward.

Blade was impressed. Tiger's motions were fluid and graceful, his

strength incredible. The Shark leader sailed up over the end of the beam, his body doubling in half, his feet alighting on the narrow beam as he straightened.

Some of the Sharks cheered.

Blade leaned toward Rikki and lowered his voice to a whisper. "I hate to sound like a sore loser, but if this madman should win, would you do me a favor?"

"Anything," Rikki promised.

"Kill him," Blade stated.

"Will you two quit arguing over which one is going to do this!" Tiger impatiently called out. "Blade, tell your little friend he can have his chance after I dispose of you, if he wants."

Rikki smiled at Blade, then looked at Tiger. "Glad to!" he responded.

Blade nodded at Rikki, then faced the balance beam. His stomach muscles tightened as he moved to the beam. There was scarcely room to place his boots between the spikes, and he couldn't help but notice their razor points.

"Don't take all day!" Tiger taunted the Warrior.

Blade reached the near end of the balance beam. He rested his Bowies on top, then emulated Tiger's example by stripping off his boots and black socks.

Tiger folded his arms across his chest.

Blade gripped the Bowies, carefully rested his wrists on the top of the beam, then bent his knees and vaulted upward. He nearly missed. His buttocks came down on the very edge of the beam, and he would have toppled backwards onto the spikes were it not for the pressure of his wrists against the beam. He righted himself with a supreme effort.

Tiger laughed. "Inferior genes at work!"

Blade ignored the barb. He slowly brought his feet onto the beam, then, with his arms held out from his body to increase his balance, he stood.

"Bravo!" Tiger cried, clapping with the daggers in his hands. "Bravo!"

Blade gazed down at the spikes. There seemed to be a sea of them forming a wide circle around and under the beam. He hadn't realized there were so many! One slip would be fatal!

"Shall we dance?" Tiger said to the Warrior.

"I'm not here to dance!" Blade snapped.

"Pity." Tiger took a casual step forward and performed a remarkable maneuver. He leaped into the air, a good two feet above the beam, executed a 360-degree turn, and landed lightly on his feet, grinning.

Blade's astonishment showed.

Tiger strolled toward the center of the beam. "Tell you what I'll do. I'll meet you halfway. If you can make it." He walked to the middle and halted.

Blade shuffled toward the center. His feet felt slippery and he wobbled as he moved.

Rikki was watching with worry in his eyes.

Fabiana sidled next to the man in black.

Gar edged closer to the balance beam, his finger on the trigger of his shotgun.

The Sharks were vociferously encouraging their leader.

Blade took all of this in out of the corner of his eyes. He concentrated on maintaining his balance as he neared Tiger.

The Shark leader was waiting with an amused expression.

Blade stopped when he was three feet away. He held the Bowies in front of him.

"Finally," Tiger said sarcastically. "I was beginning to believe you might have become lost!" He cackled.

"Do you fight with your daggers or your mouth?" Blade retorted.

Tiger scowled and crouched.

Just as a commotion erupted at the entrance to the chamber. There was a lot of yelling and shoving.

A lean, bedraggled figure burst through the crowd and raced toward the beam. He halted, inhaling deeply, out of breath from his strenuous exertion.

Tiger straightened. "Collins! What are you doing back? I sent you to investigate that fire."

"We did!" Collins mumbled, having difficulty in speaking. "We're under attack!"

"What? By the Brethren?"

"No," Collins said, doubling over.

"Look at me, you fool!" Tiger roared.

Collins unfolded with a grunt. Sweat caked his face.

"If it's not the Brethren, then who?" Tiger inquired angrily.

"Don't know," Collins replied breathily.

"How many are there?" Tiger questioned urgently.

"One," Collins said.

Tiger's slanted blue eyes narrowed. "One? Did you say one?"

Collins nodded.

"How dare you! You violate the sanctity of the contest because of one man!"

"You don't understand!" Collins exclaimed. "We can't stop him!"

"Tell me everything!" Tiger commanded.

"We went to north Seattle," Collins detailed. "And we found the cause of the fire. Someone had piled paper and a lot of other flammable junk in the street, then lit it. That's when we saw him."

"Who?" Tiger queried.

"The big guy in the dark blue clothes," Collins said. "He came out of an alley and told us to take him to our leader."

"You refused?"

"Yeah. He said he was looking for his friends, and he suspected we knew where they were," Collins detailed.

"What happened then?" Tiger inquired.

"I told him he was coming with us and to drop his weapons," Collins answered.

"And?"

"He refused," Collins said. "We tried to take him! We did! But he killed all the others!"

Tiger's eyes widened. "I sent fifteen Sharks with you. He killed them all?"

Collins nodded, looking as if he wanted to cry.

"How is it you are alive?" Tiger asked.

"He... he stuck his machine gun to my head and made me bring him here!" Collins declared. "I didn't want to do it! Honest!"

Tiger's jaw muscles twitched. "If I wasn't on this beam..." He glanced toward the doorway. "Where is this man in blue now?"

"Outside. Can't you hear it?"

Tiger raised his head.

Man in blue? There was only one man in Seattle answering that description. Blade cocked his head, listening. From the distance arose the

faint chatter of automatic gunfire.

"The guards tried to stop him from entering," Collins went on. "He blew them away. Reinforcements showed up, but I don't know how long we'll be able to hold him! I got away when he was fighting the others."

"This is only one guy!" Tiger remarked.

"You haven't seen him!" Collins responded. "He's not human! He just wades into us like we don't even exist! He's not afraid of anything! And he's even taking guns from those he kills and using them against us!"

"Calm down!" Tiger directed. "I'm certain you are exaggerating to cover your miserable failure."

"I'm not lying!" Collins cried.

"Then show your mettle! Take twenty others with you and stop this bastard!" Tiger instructed.

"Can't I take more than twenty?" Collins asked.

"Certainly not," Tiger stated. "It's bad enough the twenty you take will miss this contest. I don't want to deprive the rest of the spectacle of my victory."

Collins frowned. "Don't say I didn't warn you." He turned and hastened to the entrance, indicating Sharks with a jab of his finger. He departed with 20 armed men and women on his heels.

"The fool!" Tiger hissed. "The miserable cur! First Oakes and now Collins! Cowardice must be contagious."

"You don't believe him?" Blade asked.

Tiger snorted. "How stupid do you think I am? He probably fled back here at the first sign of your friend in blue, and your friend simply followed him. I will tend to this man in blue after I deal with you."

"You're lucky you're dealing with me instead of him," Blade said. "You wouldn't last two seconds against him."

Tiger sneered and crouched. He inched forward, his daggers extended.

Blade held his right Bowie next to his abdomen and his left out from his chest.

"I'm going to enjoy this!" Tiger said wickedly.

"You're going to enjoy your own death?" Blade rejoined.

Tiger was within two feet of the Warrior when he went into action. He suddenly spun, his right leg flicking up and out, his instep catching Blade's left wrist and jarring the arm aside. As the Warrior's arm was deflected, Tiger stabbed inward with his right dagger.

Blade threw himself backwards to evade the stroke, his left foot slipping out from under him. He tottered on the beam, his arms waving, trying desperately to regain his footing.

Tiger pressed his advantage, closing, slashing at the Warrior with his left dagger.

Blade felt the dagger bite through his right thigh. He swayed to the right, about to go over.

Tiger speared both daggers toward the Warrior's chest.

Blade did the unexpected. He deliberately dropped from the beam, releasing his Bowies, and twisted his body toward the beam as he fell. His hands closed on the narrow rail, clamping with all of his prodigious power, and he wrenched himself upward, tucking his body against the underside of the rail. His legs swept up and around, his left leg wrapping over the beam, his right driving into the Shark leader's midriff.

Tiger almost went over. He stumbled backwards and dropped to his left knee, clutching at the rail with his fingers.

Blade scrambled on top of the beam, his arm muscles bulging. He managed to perch his body on the rail, but with one problem.

He was facing away from Tiger!

Blade glanced over his right shoulder. The Shark leader had recovered and was slowly rising.

"You really are clever," Tiger muttered.

Blade crawled a few feet from the Shark, then gingerly stood. He turned on the rail, knowing he was dead if he kept his back to his foe.

Tiger was advancing with his daggers at the ready.

Blade tentatively retreated, wishing he hadn't let go of his Bowies.

"I must admit," Tiger said, "you've put up a better fight than I expected."

Blade didn't respond, focusing his energy on backing to his end of the beam.

"In honor of your prowess, I'll have your body buried instead of fed to the animals," Tiger offered.

Blade looked over his left shoulder. The end of the beam was six feet off.

Time for his big move.

Blade halted.

Tiger also stopped, eyeing the Warrior suspiciously. "What are you up to now?"

"Nothing," Blade lied.

"Why don't you jump and make this easy on yourself?" Tiger asked.

"Why don't you shove those daggers up your ass?" Blade countered.

Provoked by the affront, Tiger came on.

Blade estimated the Shark leader was five feet from him. He stared at the beam between them, his arms and shoulders tensing. He would have one chance, and one chance only. Tiger would be unlikely to fall for the same strategy twice. His mind flashed back to his teen years, to the rigorous exercise regimen he had adopted to develop his physique. Part of his regimen had involved calisthenics and basic gymnastics; he had improvised a makeshift set of rings and parallel bars, using photographs in a sports book in the Family library as his guide. Additionally, one of his favorite exercises had been a modified handstand. He would push himself into a vertical position on his hands, then do push-ups while in the

handstand posture. So perhaps he could utilize his skill at standing on his hands to his advantage.

The gambit was worth a try.

What did he have to lose?

Other than his life?

Tiger was smirking, savoring his impending triumph.

Blade made his move. He bent over sideways, his left side toward Tiger, and gripped the rail with both sturdy hands. His forearms swelled as he applied his entire weight to his arms, and in the next instant he was doing a handstand on the balance beam.

Tiger checked his advance, his features registering his consternation. "What the... !"

Blade's confidence was growing with each passing second. He found, as he had hoped, that it was much easier to balance on the beam on his hands than it had been on his feet. His hands took up less space and could grasp the rail tightly, whereas his feet were hampered by the limited gripping ability of his toes. On a flat surface he could walk on his hands for an indeterminate distance; he didn't see any reason why he couldn't do the same thing on the balance beam.

"Have you flipped?" Tiger queried, snickering.

Blade twisted his head so he could stare up at the Shark leader. "I haven't got all day!" he said derisively.

Tiger stepped toward the Warrior, his daggers outstretched to maximize his range. He was three feet from his adversary, eager to draw blood, when the tide of battle turned.

Upright on his massive arms, watching Tiger's every move, Blade abruptly whipped his right leg down.

Tiger retreated a stride to avoid the leg. His forehead furrowed. He looked at the Warrior for a moment, then tried to get within striking distance.

Blade swept his leg down a second time, forcing Tiger to stop in his tracks.

Tiger was frustrated and stymied. Blade's legs were longer than his arms. He wouldn't be able to get close to the giant without risking a blow from one of the legs. And although he might score a hit with his daggers, just a glancing blow from those legs would be enough to topple him from the rail and onto the spikes. For the first time, a hint of self-doubt crept over his face.

Blade detected the transformation. He began to slide his hands toward the Shark, one after the other, his body upright, prepared to swing his legs at any hint of an attack.

Perplexed and thwarted, Tiger retreated toward the far end of the balance beam. He considered dropping the daggers and adopting a handstand himself, but he hadn't practiced a handstand in years. None of his previous opponents had ever employed such a strategy.

Inexorably, Blade herded the Shark leader toward the far end of the beam.

"My compliments," Tiger spoke up. "This is most unorthodox."

Blade continued to slide toward the Shark leader.

"It seems I have underestimated you terribly," Tiger said. "I won't make this mistake again."

Hand after hand, Blade drove the Shark toward his doom.

Tiger frowned as he backed up another step. This was getting him nowhere! He needed to do something, and to do it *now*! His own words rang in his mind: "You are permitted to do whatever is necessary to get past your opponent."

Whatever was necessary.

Eight feet separated Tiger from the end of the beam.

Blade's face was red, his veins protruding, his arm muscles rippling like living steel.

Tiger abruptly realized the chamber was hushed. Every eye was on him. His followers sensed his demise was imminent.

He had to prove them wrong!

He had to show them who was the master!

Tiger grinned as he suddenly raised his daggers, reversing his grip on them, rotating them in his palms so he could grip the tips, so he could throw them.

Blade saw Tiger's hands come up, saw the daggers beginning to swivel in Tiger's palms, and he knew what Tiger was doing. The Shark leader was planning to hurl the daggers into his body!

No way!

Blade arched his superbly conditioned frame downward, sweeping his feet onto the balance beam and releasing his hands in one smooth flow. He came erect, taking a stride toward Tiger, closing his left hand into a compact fist and sending his fist into Tiger's startled face with a speed belying his huge size.

Tiger was caught off guard. He saw Blade execute the flip, and he was crouching to defend himself when the Warrior's calloused knuckles slammed into his nose, crushing the cartilage, flattening his nostrils. He reeled, dazed, striving to bring his daggers into play.

Blade delivered a devastating right uppercut on Tiger's jaw.

Tiger felt his feet leave the balance beam. The entire world appeared to be moving in slow motion. He glimpsed the shocked faces of the Sharks, then the ceiling overhead, and then he was crashing to the floor and he felt like his body was being torn apart. The last sight he beheld was the giant on the balance beam, gazing down at him with an oddly sad countenance.

Why was the giant sad?

Blade's mouth curled downward as he saw the spikes tearing into Tiger and spearing out his body. Blood gushed everywhere. One of the spikes tore through Tiger's heart.

Tiger's eyes glazed over and he died with a puzzled expression on his face.

The chamber was deathly still.

Blade forced himself to look away, to see how the Sharks were reacting to the death of their leader.

They were paralyzed. Some were gaping at Tiger's body in manifest horror, while others were gawking at the giant on the balance beam in awe, astounded speechless.

Blade perceived he was still in danger, still on the balance beam with the spikes all around, unarmed in a chamber full of enemies. He decided to get off the beam and retrieve his Bowies.

Rikki-Tikki-Tavi was standing calmly, his bound wrists in front of him.

The twins exchanged nervous glances.

"He killed Tiger!" a woman abruptly wailed.

"The son of a bitch killed Tiger!" chimed in a male Shark.

There was a rustling among the crowd and audible mumbling. Several of the men moved toward the balance beam.

"Hold it!" Gar shouted, raising his right hand for silence. "Listen to me!"

The Sharks shifted their attention to the man with the white hair.

"Listen to me!" Gar reiterated. "We must think before we act!"

"What's there to think about?" a man asked. "We should waste the scumbag!"

"No!" Gar yelled. "Think about this! Tiger took him on in a fair fight! You all saw it! The giant should be allowed to live!"

"Live? Are you crazy?" someone rejoined.

"He won fair and square!" Gar declared. "He has earned his life!"

"The son of a bitch has earned a bullet in the brain!" a Shark responded angrily.

Arguments broke out. Some of the Sharks wanted to spare the giant; others wanted him dead.

Blade reached the far end of the balance beam. He stared at the spikes, pondering how best to dismount without being impaled.

Over a dozen Sharks, led by the burly man who had been in charge of the escort for Blade and Rikki, started to converge on the middle of the chamber, fingering their weapons.

"Wait!" Gar called out. "We must talk about this!"

"There's nothing to talk about, Gar!" the burly man retorted. "We want his hide!"

"He should live!" Gar insisted. "He came here in peace!"

"Then he can leave here in pieces!" the burly Shark countered.

Blade glanced at the Sharks. Violence was on the verge of erupting and he was stranded on the end of the beam! He was about to try and drop between two of the spikes when tempers flared and bloodshed ensued. Perched on the beam, he was compelled to witness everything from his vantage point.

The burly Shark and his companions suddenly roared and surged forward.

Gar blasted the burly Shark in the chest, the shotgun blowing the man's torso apart.

Blade's eyes narrowed. Rikki had told him a little about the twins, but nothing which would explain why they should side with him against their own kind.

Half a dozen Sharks closed on the twins and Rikki. One of them snapped off a shot from a revolver.

"Rikki!" Blade yelled in alarm, knowing his friend would be unable to fully use his martial arts skills because of the rope binding his wrists.

Or so Blade thought.

Rikki's hands came up to his chest, the rope sliding to the floor, even as the woman, Fabiana, drew his katana.

Fab tossed the sword, hilt first.

Rikki-Tikki-Tavi caught the katana with his right hand and spun, a black streak as he slashed into the charging Sharks, his sword a gleaming blur. Two men and a woman fell in the blink of an eye.

Fabiana opened up with her shotgun, her shot striking a Shark in the forehead and exploding his cranium in a spray of brains and crimson.

Gar moved to his sister's side, his shotgun booming.

For a moment the outcome was in doubt. Many of the Sharks were frantically endeavoring to remove themselves from the line of fire. Others wavered, uncertain which side to take.

Rikki decapitated a skinny man wielding an axe.

Fabiana fired into the face of a woman with a revolver at point-blank range.

Gar took down two Sharks with a single shattering shot.

More Sharks, though, were joining the fray against the trio. Close to two dozen were pouring toward the center of the chamber.

Rikki, Fabiana, and Gar were on the verge of being overwhelmed.

Blade prepared to jump, to go to their assistance.

But aid came from another quarter.

A woman near the entrance abruptly screamed, an ear-piercing shriek of deafening intensity. Her screech carried over the general din and was punctuated by an explosion from the corridor outside the chamber, bringing all conflict to an unceremonious halt as all eyes focused on the entrance. The Sharks nearest the doorway scurried to put as much space as they could between themselves and the source of the explosion.

The double doors were wide open, and whitish-gray smoke swirled into the chamber.

A man materialized out of the smoke, standing in the entrance, a big man in a dark-blue uniform, a man with silver hair and a silver mustache and blazing blue eyes. His uniform was covered with soot and splotched with blood. For a moment he was framed in the doorway as the smoke billowed about him, rearing grand and terrible in the flickering light of flames in the hallway to his left.

Somewhere, another woman screamed.

He raked the chamber with his gaze and spied his companions.

A second detonation rocked the building as he stalked into the chamber.

Stupidly, four of the Sharks endeavored to stop him.

He shot them with his Wilkinson, with a speed and accuracy uncanny in its lethal efficiency.

The rest of the Sharks wanted nothing to do with this dispenser of death and destruction. They hugged the walls, afraid to intimidate the man with the silhouette of a skull on his broad back.

Rikki-Tikki-Tavi was wiping his katana clean on the shirt of a dead Shark when Yama reached him. Rikki looked up, grinning. "About time you got here. What have you been doing, goofing off again?"

"Sorry. I had a hard time getting directions to this place," Yama quipped.

Rikki smiled and placed his right hand on Yama's left shoulder. "Are you okay?"

"Never been better," Yama stated. He nodded his head toward Blade, who was still poised on top of the balance beam. "What's he doing?"

Blade mustered a sheepish grin.

Rikki smiled. "Blade is teaching us a new fighting art."

Yama appeared perplexed. "A new fighting art? Is it related to karate or kung fu or jujitsu?"

"No," Rikki answered.

"What is this art called?" Yama asked.

Rikki's eyes twinkled as he solemnly responded. "It's called the how-to-survive-a-battle-while-standing-on-a-beam-with-a-stupid-expression-on-your-face art."

"Ahh. I see." Yama nodded. "I hope he'll teach it to me someday."

Chapter Twenty-One

"You wanted to see me, Fish Breath?" Hickok asked.

Manta stared at the Warrior with obvious disdain. "Yes." He looked at the overseer who had brought the human from the kelp factory. "That will be all. Return to your station."

The mutant turned on his heels and walked off.

Hickok hooked his thumbs in his belt. "This is a surprise. I didn't think I'd have the displeasure of seein' your ugly puss twice in the same day."

"We did not cover everything we should have discussed in our initial conversation," Manta remarked.

Hickok chuckled. "I was wonderin' when you'd realize the boo-boo you made." He casually surveyed their immediate vicinity. They were standing in the Humarium near one of the large tanks. Inside were a dozen humans engaged in carpentry work. The bottom of the tank had been converted into a hardwood floor; the top was open to allow fresh air to circulate.

"Yes, I was remiss," Manta admitted.

Hickok idly gazed to his right. The blamed hallway had to be around

there somewhere! They were near the first tanks he'd seen when they'd arrived in the central section of the Humarium earlier. So the corridor had to be close at hand.

But where?

"What are you looking for?" Manta inquired.

Hickok faced the mutant. "Who? Me? I'm not lookin' for anything."

"You can't fool me, human," Manta said.

"I can't?"

"No," Manta declared. "I know you are looking for the female who arrived with you. She is not here."

"Where is she?" Hickok inquired.

"I assigned her to the painting detail in the housing units," Manta replied. "Don't you remember? Humans have such pitiful intellects!"

"Oh. Now I remember," Hickok said to promote the charade. Still, it was nice to know Hedy wouldn't be in the Humarium or the kelp factory when the fighting began.

"I want to know all about you," Manta said. "Where you are from. How many came here with you. Everything."

Hickok pretended to yawn while swiveling in a half-circle.

Bingo!

There it was!

The corridor leading to the closet in which they'd been held.

"Did you hear me?" Manta stated harshly.

"I heard you." Hickok gazed at the mutant, grinning.

"But give me one good reason why I should spill the beans to you?"

Mania's lips curved back, revealing his pointed teeth. "If you don't cooperate, I will send for the woman and feed her to the sharks. And I don't mean those pathetic humans occupying eastern Seattle. I mean real, live sharks. I have conditioned several of them to stay near Pier 59 by feeding them regularly."

"Pier 59?"

"The pier where this Humarium of mine is located," Mama explained.

"You say you feed these real sharks regular-like?" Hickok inquired.

"Yes," Manta affirmed.

"What do you feed 'em?" Hickok asked.

Manta grinned. "What do you think?"

Hickok scratched his chin, as if mulling the matter. "I don't see where I've got any choice."

"You don't," Manta asserted.

"Okay. Tell you what I'll do," Hickok said. "I'll cough up the info you want, provided you answer one measly question of mine."

"Don't dictate terms to me!" Manta snapped.

"What can one question hurt?" Hickok asked.

Manta reflected for a moment. "What is your question?"

"Do you have any?" Hickok queried.

"Any what?" Manta responded, confused.

"You know," Hickok said, grinning.

"No, I don't know," Manta rejoined in annoyance. "What are you talking about?"

"I was just sort of wonderin'," Hickok mentioned, scanning the area to insure none of the Brethren were nearby or blocking his route to the

corridor.

"What?" Manta spat, becoming angrier by the moment.

"About whether humans and the Brethren have similar reproductive organs?" Hickok said.

"Somewhat similar," Manta said. "But what kind of question is that?"

"I was just curious about those briefs of yours," Hickok commented.

As the gunman expected, Manta looked down at his briefs.

And Hickok lashed out with his right leg, kicking Manta right in the... briefs. He didn't wait to see the affect his kick had. The gunman took off lickety-split for the hallway. Only when he was about to disappear around the corner did he risk a hasty look over his right shoulder.

Manta was on his knees on the floor, clutching his genital region. Three of the Brethren were hurrying toward their leader.

Time to haul butt!

Hickok raced along the hallway, hoping he wouldn't bump into one of the mutants. He tried to recall if there had been any turns between the sanitation closet and the central core of the Humarium. As far as he could remember, there hadn't been. His moccasins squished on the tiled floor as he sprinted deeper into the corridor.

He was acting on a hunch.

Hickok had seen a lot of humans in the Humarium and the kelp factory, and he knew there were many in the housing units because they were forced to work in shifts, according to Captain Dale. But the gunman had not observed one other human in this corridor connected to the Humarium. Not one entering or exiting the hallway. Even the Brethren rarely used it.

All of which had aroused his curiosity.

If the corridor wasn't being used frequently, then there must be an important reason. Or so Hickok speculated. And what better reason than the presence of a room the Brethren did not want the humans to see?

There was more cause for conjecture.

The Brethren had dumped the gunfighter and the Shark into a closet at the end of the seldom-used hallway. Odds were, Hickok told himself, the Brethren removed all weapons there and carried them to the storeroom. He doubted the mutants would lug the weapons any great distance. The Brethren weren't fond of firearms and despised anything manufactured by human hands. So logic dictated the storeroom must be in close proximity to the closet.

And there was one more factor.

Hickok knew of four passages leading from the Humarium proper. One linked the Humarium to the land to the east; another was the passage between the Humarium and the housing units to the south; the third was the one connecting the Humarium to the kelp factory to the north; and then there was this one, which seemed to angle to the west but served no functional purpose.

Or did it?

Maybe it served to house the Brethren's collection of confiscated weapons at a prudent distance from the areas where the humans normally worked and lived.

Maybe Manta had grown complacent over the decades and had failed to guard the corridor properly.

Maybe.

Maybe.

Maybe.

Hickok caught sight of a series of doors ahead and increased his speed. There were three on the left, four on the right.

The first door was the wide open door to the sanitation closet.

Hickok grabbed for the second door on the right and twisted the knob.

Another closet.

He lunged for the third door on the right.

Yet another lousy closet.

Hickok didn't bother with the last door on the right. He crossed to the doors on the left and took hold of the first doorknob. The door was vibrating and there was a throbbing noise from the opposite side. He pulled the door open and discovered a green generator.

Which explained the lights.

Hickok darted to the next door and tried the knob.

Locked.

The gunman returned to the generator room and scrutinized the four walls. To his left was a shelf containing a toolbox. He moved to the blue metal box, opened the lid, and found a hammer on the top shelf.

The Spirit was smiling on him!

Hickok grabbed the hammer and hastened to the hallway. He stood in front of the locked door and raised the hammer.

"Down this way!" a raspy voice shouted from up the corridor.

Hickok pounded the hammer onto the doorknob once. Twice. Three times. The doorknob broke off and clattered to the floor. He wrenched the door open and entered.

Eureka!

The room was filled with weapons of every variety: revolvers, pistols, shotguns, rifles, machine guns, bows, swords, knives, explosives, and more. On a corner of the nearest table were the newest additions to the collection: a pair of pearl-handled Colt Python revolvers.

Hickok snatched up the Pythons, relief washing over him. He quickly checked, verifying they were loaded.

Footsteps pounded in the hallway.

Hickok emerged from the storeroom with the Colts held at waist height,

the barrels tilted upwards.

Three of the Brethren were rushing toward him.

"Lookin' for me?" Hickok asked, and shot each of them between the eyes, the Pythons thundering in the confines of the corridor.

The mutants died without uttering a sound.

Hickok bolstered his Colts and reentered the storeroom, seeking an equalizer. He was vastly outnumbered, and even his precious Pythons couldn't fend off a horde of mutants. Well, 264 might not, technically speaking, qualify as a horde, but it was close enough for him. He gazed at a rack of machine guns and automatic rifles.

Just what the doctor ordered!

Hickok selected six of the automatic rifles, insured their magazines were full, then swung two over each arm. He was about to take the last two and leave, when his eyes fell on a green metal box in the far corner of the storeroom, its lid partially open. He walked to the box, knelt, and raised the lid.

Someone must have remembered his birthday.

Hickok stuffed his pockets, then retrieved the pair of rifles he'd chosen. One in each arm, a stock pressed against each side, he exited the storeroom and headed for the Humarium.

Party time.

A mutant ran into view, took one look, and headed for the hills.

"Was it my breath?" Hickok quipped.

The Warrior calmly proceeded along the hallway until the junction appeared. He slowed, the rifles pointing straight ahead.

Where the blazes were the Brethren?

An answer was promptly forthcoming. They came at him in droves, charging around the corner en masse, most armed with only whips, the rest relying on their nails, their claws. They were no match for the

gunman.

Hickok poured round after round into them, their bodies twitching and convulsing as their organs were ruptured by the heavy slugs. They toppled to the floor in rows, and those to the rear were shot as they attempted to clamber over their fellows. An acrid stench filled the corridor.

As suddenly as it began, the attack ceased.

Hickok squinted as he cautiously moved up to the pile of dead mutants. He stayed next to the right-hand wall and squeezed through between the wall and the corpses.

Manta and three dozen Brethren were waiting for the Warrior ten yards into the Humarium. The Brethren were lined up behind their leader in disciplined ranks.

"Howdy, Fish Lips," Hickok greeted the mutant.

"Drop your weapons!" Manta commanded.

Hickok snorted. "You must be jokin'!"

"You cannot hope to slay all of us before we reach you," Manta stated. "Drop your weapons and I will be lenient with you."

"Now I know you're jokin'," Hickok said. "And as usual, you've got everything all backwards. I want you and your cronies to lay down on the floor with your hands behind your backs. Pronto."

Manta took a menacing step forward. "Don't be absurd! We'll do no such thing!"

Hickok knelt on his right knee, placed the rifle in his right hand on the floor, and rose.

"You are surrendering!" Manta declared happily.

"Not quite," Hickok said. He reached into his right pocket and extracted one of his surprises, holding it aloft. "Recognize this, Fish Lips?"

"A grenade!" Manta exclaimed. "We took those from the *Cutterhawk*."

"You were real lucky the sailors didn't have a chance to use 'em," Hickok commented. "I trust you know what these can do?"

"If you use one in here, human, you run the risk of fracturing one of the outer walls," Manta noted. "And if you cause a rift in the exterior walls, the Humarium will be flooded. Every human inside will be killed."

"That's a risk I'll have to take," Hickok said.

"You're bluffing," Manta snapped. "You won't use a grenade. Even if you do, we can breathe underwater. Most of the Brethren will survive."

Hickok detected a hubbub of shouts and cries coming from the north, from the direction of the kelp factory. "Say, Fish Breath, I've got a question for you."

"Not *another* one!" Manta remarked bitterly.

"Yep. Did you happen to pull some of your overseers from the kelp factory to deal with me?" Hickok inquired.

"Yes. Why do you ask?" Manta responded.

Hickok grinned. "Just a lucky guess."

Manta suddenly turned, listening to the uproar coming closer and closer. "No!" he cried.

"Afraid so," Hickok said. "Your little empire is about to come tumblin' around your gills."

Manta glared at the Warrior. "If it's the last thing I ever do," he hissed, "I will revenge myself on you!"

"Now there's an original line," Hickok cracked.

Manta shook his right fist at the gunman. "I swear you will pay!"

"Just so you don't jump me in the bathtub," Hickok said. "You might scare my son's rubber ducky."

Further conversation was precluded by the arrival of nearly a hundred rampaging men and women from the north, from the kelp factory, where

they had risen up and pounced on their overseers, killing every mutant and sustaining marginal losses in their frenzied bid for freedom.

Manta and the Brethren with him turned to meet the rushing tide of enraged, bloodthirsty humanity. The mutants fought with fang and claw, but they were grossly outnumbered. The humans overwhelmed the mutants, venting months, years, and even decades of simmering hatred and hostility. The center of the Humarium became a writhing mass of humans and mutants. Screams, cries, and curses rent the air.

Hickok leaned against the wall. He propped his other rifle alongside his left leg, folded his arms, and waited.

Fewer and fewer mutants were still in the fray. Bodies dotted the floor, contorted in their death throes.

Hickok began whistling the tune to "Home on the Range." He saw five men straddling a mutant, beating at him with their fists and kicking him again and again and again. The mutant wasn't moving, but their fury had not subsided. They would beat him until his corpse was a pulpy mass.

The battle was slowing, winding down.

A lone mutant broke from the melee and staggered toward the gunman.

Hickok straightened, his hands dropping to his Colts.

Manta was coated with blood and sporting half a dozen wounds. His left leg was bent unnaturally. He shuffled to within six feet of the Warrior, breathing heavily, his tongue flicking over his lips. "You! You did this to me!" he bellowed.

"I reckon so," Hickok agreed.

"Human scum!" Manta growled.

"I've been givin' some thought to what you said," Hickok commented as Manta limped toward him.

Five feet separated them.

"And I don't much like the notion of your traumatizing my son's rubber ducky," Hickok remarked.

Four feet.

Manta lunged, his claws stabbing for the human's face.

Hickok hardly seemed to move; one moment his hands were lightly resting on his Pythons, and the next the Colts were bucking and belching lead.

Manta took a slug in each eye. The impact catapulted him backwards to crash to the floor in a disjointed heap. He gasped once, then was still.

Hickok twirled the Pythons into his holsters. He walked over and looked down at Manta. "Piece of cake, Fish Lips."

Epilogue

They were at the designated rendezvous spot, Lake Forest Park, waiting for the Hurricane to return. Their relief and happiness at being reunited was tempered by their sadness at the loss of the Family's flamboyant gunman. Gar, Fab, and forty Sharks were waiting with the Warriors. Gar had assumed leadership of the Sharks, none of whom had opposed his taking command. A majority of the Sharks considered Gar to be an excellent candidate, and a majority also wanted to avoid antagonizing Gar's newfound friends, the Warriors, at all costs. Especially Yama.

Blade had scoured Shark territory for Hickok after returning to the site of the ambush and discovering the gunman's body was missing. He entertained the forlorn hope the gunfighter was alive, although his better judgment told him the rats had disposed of the corpse.

"I am sorry about your friend," Gar said to Blade as they stood near the field where the Hurricane would land.

"Thanks," Blade responded, his expression downcast. "I don't know how I'll tell his wife and son."

"You won't need to tell them a thing," Rikki commented from Blade's left.

Blade glanced at the martial artist, who was staring to the south.

"How does he do it?" Yama asked no one in particular.

Blade looked in the direction Rikki was gazing, and his features brightened, a broad smile creasing his face. He slung the Commando over his right shoulder and jogged toward the man who had just emerged from the undergrowth 40 yards to the south. "Hickok!"

Hickok was wiping at a smudge of dirt on his left leg. He saw his friend approaching and ran to meet him. "Blade! Where the dickens have you been?"

The two Warriors met each other halfway. They halted and studied one another for a moment.

"I thought you were dead," Blade said.

"Me? I'm too ornery to die," Hickok joked.

To the gunman's utter astonishment, Blade unexpectedly stepped forward and embraced him in a bear hug, lifting him off the ground.

"Damn! I missed you!" Blade declared ecstatically.

Hickok struggled to break loose. "Put me down, you dang-blasted idiot! What do you think you're doin', anyway? I swear! You're gettin' worse than Geronimo!"

Blade grinned and released the gunfighter.

Hickok shook his head in annoyance. "You ever pull a stunt like that again, I'll tell your missus on you!"

"Where have you been?" Blade inquired. "We've been looking all over for you."

Rikki and Yama reached them.

"*There* you two are!" Hickok said. "I was beginnin' to think I was the only one tryin' to get our mission accomplished."

Blade stared over the gunman's right shoulder at a column of armed

men and women coming from the underbrush. "Who are they?"

Hickok glanced back. "They are some of the ones we came here to rescue. Remember them? That's Captain Dale in the lead, and there are seventy more behind him. The rest are camped two miles from here."

"You found Manta?" Blade asked in amazement.

"Yep."

"What happened?" Blade queried.

Hickok ran his right index finger across his throat.

Blade stared at the column. "Do you mean to tell me you took care of Manta and rescued the people he was holding all by yourself?"

"All by my lonesome," Hickok said. "I don't see why you guys even came along."

Gar and Fab were approaching.

"Who are the two book ends?" Hickok inquired.

"I'll introduce them in a bit," Blade stated. "Why don't we get Captain Dale over here and make the introductions all at once. Then we can compare notes on what happened and make plans for the future."

"Sounds okay by me," Hickok commented. "Just so you don't get long-winded on us. I've breathed enough hot air on this trip already."

Hours later, after the introductions had been made, after the Sharks and the survivors of Mania's Humarium had gathered around a fire and agreed to consolidate all of their forces and to return Seattle to exclusively human control, Blade nudged Hickok and led the gunman away from the discussion.

"Hickok! Blade! Hold up a second!"

Captain Dale ran up to the Warriors, grinning from ear to ear. He stared at the gunman. "I want to thank you again for what you did. We're free today because of you."

"Glad I could help," Hickok said.

Dale looked at Blade. "I understand you will be returning to California soon?"

"Yes," Blade verified.

"Would you do me a favor?" Dale asked.

"What is it?"

"Inform Governor Melnick we'll be staying in Seattle until everything here is organized and we're sure we've heard the last of the Brethren. The crew and I feel we owe it to ourselves and the people here," Dale stated. "You understand, don't you?"

"We understand," Blade assured the officer.

Dale smiled and returned to the meeting.

Hickok gazed at Blade. "What's up, Big Guy? Why do you want to talk to me alone?"

"I have something important to ask you," Blade disclosed.

"Shoot."

Blade placed his hands on his hips. "Well, as you know, I'm going to spend a lot of time in California in the months ahead—"

"You plannin' to do any surfin'?" Hickok interrupted.

"And I need someone I can trust to take charge of the Warriors while I'm gone," Blade went on. "Someone who can lead the Warriors in a time of crisis. Someone who always gets the job done, no matter what the odds."

"I read about surfin' once," Hickok said. "You take this ironing board, see, and you..." He paused, staring at Blade. "Someone to take charge while you're playin' on the beach? Who'd you have in mind?"

Blade grinned. "You, dummy."

"Me? You mean it?"

"Would I joke about something as important as this?"

Blade rejoined.

"I appreciate the honor," Hickok remarked. "I truly do. And I won't let you down. I promise. I'll handle everything the same as I always do."

Blade smiled. "That's what worries me."