

Miami Run

#16 in the Endworld series

David Robbins

Dedicated to...

***Judy & Joshua & Shane. To Bobbi at City News,
for kindness above and beyond the call of duty.***

***To the legacy of Vincent Van Gogh, Colonel P.H. Fawcett,
and Korak the Killer.***

We both found ours, eventually.

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Prologue

The night was perfect for a sacrifice.

A brilliant full moon illuminated the Everglades as the party of 13 robed figures and the woman in the blue dress threaded a path toward the grove on the island 50 yards ahead. A cool, moist breeze stirred the red robes of the 13 and caused the woman to shiver. Her fearful green eyes locked on the island and she stumbled.

The scarlet-robed figure to her rear stepped in close and gripped her left arm to prevent her from falling.

She regained her balance, but she recoiled defiantly at his touch, jerking her arms from his grasp. Her wrists were already hurting from the tight coils of rope binding them behind her back. "Don't touch me!" she snapped.

"We wouldn't want you to fall," the figure responded, his features enshrouded in the hood of his robe.

"I didn't know you cared!" she stated sarcastically.

"We care, Carmen," the figure said. "We care about keeping you clean for the Masters."

"Stuff the Masters!"

The red-robed figure sighed. "Such a childish attitude will only make it worse."

"What could be worse than dying?" Carmen retorted.

"You have no one to blame but yourself," the figure noted. "You deliberately violated the Precepts of Dealership. The consequences are inevitable."

Carmen glanced at the grove of trees and began chewing nervously on

her lower lip as they moved nearer.

"You always were too smart for your own good," the figure commented. "You thought you were better than everybody else."

"I was," Carmen replied. "I was the best damn Dealer in the Dragons, and you know it!"

"Your distribution network was superbly organized," the figure conceded. "And your enforcement procedures were carried out to the letter. You had everything worth living for. Wealth. Power. Prestige. And you blew it."

"I was framed!" Carmen declared.

"You were stupid," the figure responded. "You weren't satisfied. How did you expect to get away with cutting your own deal? Did you really think the Masters wouldn't learn about your deception? The Masters know everything."

Carmen snorted. "They don't know crap!"

"They know you were cheating them," the figure said. "They know you were diluting the Powder of Life, then selling the watered-down bags at full market value. You were skimming some of the Powder to sell on the side and make yourself richer." He paused. "You were greedy."

"Lies! It's all a bunch of lies!" Carmen insisted.

"Please," the man said. "Don't insult my intelligence. Your hearing was fair and square. The evidence against you was overwhelming."

"What evidence?" Carmen retorted. "You took the word of a low-life junkie over mine!"

"Four complaints were lodged against you," the figure mentioned. "Three were from middle-echelon distributors. Only one was from a street junkie."

"That damn Harlan!" Carmen muttered.

"Harlan did the right thing. He knew he wasn't getting his money's worth, and every customer is granted the right to petition the Directors

for a hearing."

"I was framed!" Carmen repeated.

"Suit yourself," the figure said. "But the thirteen of us listened to all of the evidence and rendered the only possible verdict. The Masters had advised us to keep—"

"They what?" Carmen interrupted.

"The Masters knew of your deception before Harlan and the others brought their formal complaints," he detailed. "The Directors were advised to keep an eye on your activities."

"You were?" Carmen asked in disbelief.

"We were," the robed man confirmed.

"But how?" Carmen queried.

"The Masters have their ways," he replied.

Carmen looked to the right and the left, gauging her chances of escaping. They were nil. The path to the island was the only solid strip of ground for hundreds of yards, surrounded by the mucky, peat-filled, treacherous soil of the Everglades submerged under a foot or more of water.

"Don't even think about it," the man advised, as if he could read her mind.

The party reached the eastern edge of the island and started up a slight incline. Wax myrtles and willows lined the path.

Carmen gazed toward the top of the rise. "I thought we were friends, Arlo," she commented.

"That's a cheap shot," Arlo said.

"You can get me off the hook with the Masters," Carmen stated. "They'd listen to you."

"Be serious."

Carmen licked her lips. "I am. Talk to them for me. Intercede in my behalf."

"I can't, and you know it."

"Please!"

"Don't beg," Arlo said. "It doesn't become you."

They climbed steadily higher.

"Tell them I'll straighten up my act," Carmen said. "Tell them I'll turn over a new leaf."

"Are you finally admitting your guilt?" Arlo questioned.

Carmen's slim shoulders slumped and she expelled the breath in her lungs. "All right," she declared. "I admit it. I wasn't framed."

"Surprise, surprise," Arlo said dryly.

"What if I make a full confession?"

"It wouldn't do any good," Arlo told her. "The execution verdict is final."

"I can always try," Carmen said.

"I expected better from you."

Carmen glanced over her left shoulder. All she could see was the tip of Arlo's angular chin and his nose protruding from his hood. "What else can I do? What would you do if you were in my shoes?"

"I would never allow my ego to supplant my better judgment," Arlo remarked.

"I don't want to die!" Carmen declared bluntly.

"Who does?"

Carmen faced the path, a feeling of utter helplessness welling up within her. Her resolve faltered and her courage flagged. A sensation of weakness

engulfed her legs and she slowed.

"Don't drag your heels," Arlo admonished.

Carmen looked at him and mustered a feeble smile. "We've been through a lot together."

Arlo didn't respond.

"We organized our distributorships at the same time," Carmen mentioned. "We rose through the ranks together. Hell, we were even appointed as Dealers on the same day."

"It won't work," Arlo said. "You can't expect me to change my mind by recalling the good old days. Those days are long gone. We've been out of touch in recent years, and the fault wasn't mine. You set yourself up as a queen in your district. You lorded it over everybody. Where are all your other old friends? I'll tell you. They don't want to have anything to do with you. You alienated everyone with your ambition, Carmen."

"I always treated you with respect."

"Only because you had to," Arlo stated. "As a fellow Dealer, I was your equal."

"And now you're more than my equal," Carmen said bitterly. "You were selected to become a Director. I was overlooked."

"You would have been selected as a Director someday," Arlo observed.

"Someday! When?" Carmen demanded. "I was tired of waiting! You became a Director over four years ago. Why wasn't I given a Directorship? My qualifications were as good as yours."

"The Masters didn't think so."

"The Masters have had it in for me since the beginning," Carmen maintained.

"Have you been snorting your own sneeze?" Arlo inquired.

"Up yours!"

They reached the rim, the 13 forms in red fanning out. Arlo took Carmen by the right shoulder and led her toward the middle of the large clearing crowning the island.

Carmen gasped. "Please! No!"

"Be brave," he advised.

The clearing was man-made, 20 yards in diameter, and bathed in the additional glow of a half-dozen braziers positioned at regular intervals around the edge. Flickering embers drifted skyward from the metal-receptacles. Flat, knee-high granite pedestals encircled a low marble slab situated in the center.

Carmen tensed and halted.

"There's no resisting," Arlo stated, pulling her toward the marble slab.

"This can't be happening to me!" Carmen mumbled in a daze.

A pair of red-robed forms walked over to assist Arlo, one taking Carmen's left arm, the other her right, and as Arlo stepped aside they dragged her to the slab.

"Please!" she whined. "I'm begging you!"

"Save you breath," Arlo said, following them. "You'll need it."

Each of the figures in red was stepping onto one of the kneehigh, square granite pedestals. The pair holding Carmen stood her upright next to the slab, then turned and dutifully climbed onto their pedestals. Every pedestal was spaced a precise distance of seven feet from the marble. Only one was left unoccupied, the pedestal to Arlo's rear. He stood to the right of Carmen, his hood facing the slab.

Carmen began to tremble. "Please, Arlo!"

"Stop it!" he barked. "You've sealed your fate! Now have the decency to meet it with dignity!"

"I could make a deal," Carmen said hopefully.

"You have nothing to deal with," Arlo assured her.

The wind was picking up and shaking the leaves on the willows and the other trees.

Carmen stared to the north. "How many do you think will come?" she asked with a tremor in her voice.

"I don't know," Arlo said.

"I hope Radnor isn't one of them," she commented. "He's the worst of them."

"You cannot judge the Masters by our standards," Arlo stated. "They are as different from us as night and day."

"Or mutants from humans," Carmen noted.

"Mutants will be with us forever," Arlo opined. "World War Three saw to that."

"Maybe so," Carmen said. "But how many humans serve mutant Masters? How many kiss mutant ass for a living?"

"You're being petty," Arlo remarked stiffly. "You were willing to serve the Masters while it suited your purposes." He paused, his hood swiveling toward her. "I once thought you had a good head on your shoulders, but I see now that you can't accept reality. You can't accept the world as it really is. You still mistakenly believe humans are the dominant species."

"We are," Carmen said.

"Oh? Is that why you served the Masters for eleven years?"

"I wanted power," Carmen admitted. "And the Masters reward those who serve them efficiently with ever-increasing power."

"You attained a position of power," Arlo said, "but you abused your trust. You failed to place your position in its proper perspective. You were a servant, Carmen. A Dealer, true, but still a servant. And that's as it should be. Eventually, all humankind will serve mutant rulers."

"You're crazy," Carmen mentioned.

"Am I?" Arlo rejoined. "Take a good look at our world. World War

Three unleashed incalculable amounts of radiation on the environment. The entire biological chain was affected. And radiation, old friend, inevitably causes mutations in living things. Scientists knew this. They experimented with deliberately producing mutant strains in their laboratories, both by genetic engineering and through controlled radiation exposure. One of the first mutants they created was a hairless cat—"

"A hairless cat?"

"That's right. It cooed like a pigeon, wagged its tail just like a dog, and ate like a horse. Even its body temperature was higher than a normal feline. The scientists went on from there, of course, to develop many other mutations. And again, this was before the war." Arlo stared at the moon. "World War Three transformed the planet into a mutant breeding ground. Whereas prior to the war a mutation might occur naturally in a species every one hundred thousand generations or so, the radiation unleashed by the nuclear weapons caused mutations in every species immediately after the war. Think of it! Every species was drastically affected simultaneously! And the mutations have been appearing ever since."

"One day the humans will wipe the mutants out," Carmen said.

"Never happen," Arlo said, disagreeing. "There are too many mutants now. Both the wild ones—the two-headed bears and the six-legged alligators and the like— and the mutants stemming from human ancestry will be with us always."

"Were the Masters human once?"

"No," Arlo replied. "But ninety-four years ago the first Master was born to human parents. The parents must have consumed tainted radioactive substances, and the result was the formation of an embryo unlike any other ever known." He chuckled.

"You sound like you're happy about it."

"I owe everything I am to the Masters," Arlo said. "The birth of the first one was a monumental occasion."

Carmen scrutinized the trees lining the north side of the clearing and shuddered. "Where did the other six come from?"

"The first Master's human parents gave birth to a daughter a year later," Arlo detailed.

"Jarita?"

Arlo nodded. "Jarita. She and Orm mated."

"Orm was the firstborn?"

"Yes."

"Somehow I received the impression Radnor was the oldest," Carmen commented. She was feeling grateful for the conversation. *Anything* was better than contemplating her impending fate.

"Radnor is the oldest son," Arlo explained. "Then came Dimitri, Sapphira, Quartus, and Marva."

"I never knew," Carmen said. "It's impossible to guess their age by their appearance." She glanced at Arlo. "You seem to know everything about them."

"Orm trusts me," Arlo stated proudly. "Physically, they're different from us. But they have the same emotional needs. They can be our friends."

Carmen snorted. "Now who's not facing reality?"

"You simply don't understand them," Arlo said. "You never did. Look at what they've accomplished. A handful of mutants have subjugated the southern third of what was once the state of Florida. Seven mutants rule a hundred thousand humans! Amazing!"

"Why are there only seven? Why didn't they breed more?"

"They tried," Arlo answered. "But that's the trouble with mutations, especially those created by excessive radiation. The mutants have difficulty procreating. Most of their offspring are stillborn. Even when they do give birth, the infants might be deformed or mutated more than the parents. Orm and Jarita were able to have five children. That was all. And Radnor and the others have been unable to continue the line. Orm once considered the idea of mating with humans, but they decided against it."

"Thank God," Carmen remarked.

Arlo straightened. "They will be coming soon."

Carmen pursed her lips. "Why did Orm's parents let him live? If I had a child like him, I'd drown it."

"You would," Arlo said testily. "Fortunately, Orm's human parents couldn't bring themselves to slay him. He must have been an adorable baby."

"Adorable!" Carmen declared, then laughed. "You're worse than crazy! You're really sick in the head! How can you call something like him adorable?"

"You wouldn't understand."

"Try me."

"The Masters are the pinnacle of mutant evolution. They're more intelligent than humans, they're stronger, and they're more adaptable. We should feel privileged to serve them," Arlo stated earnestly.

Carmen stared at the marble slab and blanched. "I always thought they picked a strange name for their organization."

"The Dragons? What could be more appropriate?"

There was a loud splashing from the north side of the island.

Carmen jumped. "What was that?"

"A fish or a gator," Arlo said. "Maybe a turtle. Who knows?"

Carmen tried to relax, an impossibility given the circumstances. She wiggled her fingers and flexed her arms to keep her circulation flowing. "Any chance of being untied?"

"The Masters will untie you when the time comes," Arlo said. His hood bobbed up and down as he studied her. "Since we're being so honest with each other, maybe you'd see fit to set me straight."

"About what?"

"Why, Carmen?" Arlo queried. "Why'd you do it?"

Carmen frowned. "You hit the nail on the head earlier. I did it for wealth and power."

"But you already had wealth and power," Arlo observed. "You were a Dealer in a prime district."

"It wasn't enough," Carmen said. "Once a person gets a taste of genuine power, they always want more. Power is addictive. I wasn't satisfied. I wanted to be appointed to the inner circle, to become a Director. When they made you one, and not me, I realized I would have to increase my power base myself. That's why I took the initiative and contacted Don Giorgio in Las Vegas."

"You did what?"

Carmen laughed, a brittle sound. "Do you mean to tell me the Masters didn't let you know about my Vegas activities? I thought they know everything."

"You overstepped your bounds," Arlo said. "No one except the masters may negotiate distribution contracts. Besides, Las Vegas is already part of our distribution net work."

"But the Vegas market is far from saturated," Carmen noted. "And they pay for their Powder of Life in gold and silver."

Arlo suddenly raised his right hand and snapped his fingers. "So that's it! You diluted the Powder you were sending down the line on your network, then shipped the skimmings to Don Giorgio for him to sell there. What kind of split did you arrange?"

"Fifty-fifty," Carmen confessed. "I'm surprised Don Giorgio went along with your scheme," Arlo mentioned. "He knows the consequences of violating a contract with the Dragons." Carmen bowed her head. "Giorgio is dead."

"What?"

"He planned to use his share of the profits to finance his war against the other Dons," Carmen elaborated. "Giorgio wanted to take over Vegas."

"The other Dons found out and had him killed?" Arlo speculated.

Carmen shook her head. "The Warriors killed him." Arlo's robed figure visibly stiffened. "The Warriors? How did they get involved?"

"I'm not sure," Carmen said. "My regular runner to Vegas couldn't find out."

"The damn Warriors again!" Arlo snapped. "They pop up all over the place! The Masters will want to hear this news."

"Do you think the Masters will step up their timetable for destroying the Family?"

"I wouldn't doubt it," Arlo said. "They—" A muted hum sounded in the distance, from the north. "Oh, God!" Carmen exclaimed in alarm. The hum grew in violence, becoming a distinct, peculiar buzzing.

"Your hour of reckoning has arrived," Arlo commented.

Carmen started to back away from the marble slab, but he grabbed her right arm.

"You're not going anywhere."

"Let go of me!" Carmen cried, vainly striving to break free.

"Be still."

Carmen listened as the buzzing grew louder and louder. "I'll pay you!" she blurted.

"Pay me?" Arlo repeated.

"Yes! I have over two million in gold in a secret stash!" Carmen said. "No one knows about it! It's all yours if you'll let me go!"

"Two million, huh?" Arlo remarked.

"That's right! And it would all be yours!" She glanced at the ring of robed figures. "All of you! You could split it!"

"What good would the gold do us if we're dead?" Arlo asked.

"The Masters don't need to know!" Carmen stated. "You could lie! You

could say I fled Florida and you weren't able to apprehend me!"

"Do you really expect to be able to buy us off?" Arlo inquired. "The Directors of the Dragons don't need your paltry two million." His head shook back and forth. "You don't understand at all."

"What's there to understand?"

Arlo gestured at the robed forms on the granite pedestals. "Why do you think we were selected as Directors? Why do you think you were denied promotion to Director rank?"

"I never—" Carmen began.

"I'll tell you!" Arlo said, cutting her off. "You pathetic bitch! We were chosen because we owe our exclusive allegiance to the Masters. We don't care about money, or power, or all the rest of the trappings that go with our posts. All we care about is serving the Masters. Nothing else. Which explains the reason you weren't promoted, why you would never have risen higher than a Dealer. The Masters aren't fools! They evaluate us according to our loyalties and promote us accordingly. They knew where your loyalties were."

The humming now resembled an odd, pronounced whirring.

"They're almost here!" Carmen cried, and tried to bolt.

Arlo held on tight. He motioned at the pair who had assisted him previously, and they promptly jumped from their pedestals and hurried to Carmen. They seized her arms.

"No!" Carmen wailed.

The whirring reached a crescendo, then abruptly ceased.

Carmen felt her stomach muscles tighten. She gazed at the north side of the clearing with baited breath. The trees were engulfed in inky shadows, and a minute elapsed before she spied the dark, lean shapes moving toward the clearing, their tall bodies rising and falling with their unearthly rolling gait.

"The Masters," Arlo said happily.

Carmen wrenched her body backwards, frantically attempting to flee, her face a mask of stark terror.

Seven alien forms materialized at the edge of the clearing and halted.

Arlo bowed, his hands clasped at waist height. "Masters!"

The seven advanced toward the marble slab.

"No!" Carmen shrieked, bucking and heaving. She kicked the red-robed form to her left, but he ignored the blow.

One of the seven, the tallest, bounded forward. It reached the marble slab and rounded the end, coming for Carmen.

She threw back her head and screamed.

The tall Master clamped its right hand on her neck, its left grasping the fabric of her dress over her breasts, and lifted her into the air with supreme ease. "Greetings, Carmen," it said in a guttural voice. "Long-time-no-see."

Carmen gurgled and thrashed.

"Be patient," the Master advised coldly. "We're not about to rush the proceedings on your account. You should be grateful for the unique experience you're about to undergo. Not many humans have ever been skinned alive!"

The steely grip on her neck slackened just a bit, and Carmen screamed even louder.

Chapter One

"Did you hear that?"

"I heard it. Was it thunder?"

"Thunder don't sound like that. Besides, there ain't a cloud in the sky."

"Then what was it?"

"I don't rightly know."

The twins studied the sky to the west, the bright sun, making them squint.

"Let's go have a look-see," suggested the boy.

"No way!" objected his sister.

"Come on!" he goaded her. "I think I saw somethin' over there a ways."

"Poppa would blister our butts, and you know it, Leo."

"Come on, Ernestine! Don't be such a candy-ass!" Leo said. He placed the bundle of sugar cane he was carrying on the ground.

"What are you doing?" Ernestine demanded.

"What does it look like?" Leo retorted. He wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his right hand.

"We can't just leave the cane here!" Ernestine protested.

"What's gonna happen to it?" Leo asked.

Ernestine gazed to the west, frowning. "We'll get in trouble for sure."

"It won't take but ten minutes," Leo assured her. "We got to go see what it was."

Never one to deny her brother for long, Ernestine deposited her bundle of cane beside his.

"All right!" Leo declared. "That's more like it!"

"You lead," Ernestine said. "And we'd best not run into anything!"

"Don't worry," Leo said. He patted the machete in its sheath on his right hip. "I can take care of us."

"Big talk for a fourteen-year-old," Ernestine remarked.

"Poppa says I'm a man now," Leo said. "And don't you forget it!"

"Men do their duties. They don't go chasing noises and funny lights," Ernestine mentioned. "Then you saw the lights too?" Leo asked. Ernestine nodded. "What do you think they was?"

"I don't know," Ernestine replied. "It looked like the sun was reflectin' off of somethin' shiny," Leo guessed. He hastened to the west. "Slow down!" Ernestine complained. "You're the one who's worried about gettin' our butts blistered," Leo reminded her.

Ernestine walked faster, sticking to her brother's heels, watching the sweat trickle from under his Afro. The scorching July heat caked her faded jeans and yellow blouse to her trim body. Leo's jeans and brown shirt were stained with sweat marks. She glanced down at her grungy sneakers, at the holes exposing her toes, thankful for the ventilation.

"It can't be more than a mile," Leo said.

"I ain't going no mile."

"A mile's not far."

"The hell it ain't," Ernestine declared. "We're in the bush, you idiot!"

Leo skirted a dense cluster of shoulder-high bushes. "So?"

"So there's *mutants* in the bush," Ernestine stated. "There ain't many mutants in these parts," Leo said.

"One is enough to waste your black butt," Ernestine commented. "All you do is gripe."

"Let's just get this over with," Ernestine advised. They trekked westward, staying in the open areas where possible. Once they startled a marsh rabbit, distinguished by its short, broad ears. It took off from a clump of weeds in their path and zigzagged to the west, its small gray and brown tail bouncing with each leap. "There must be water hereabouts," Leo remarked. Ernestine felt her skin crawl. She didn't like the idea of being near water. Water meant a swamp or a marsh. Water meant a lot of

wildlife. Water meant possible mutants. "Let's go back," she recommended.

"Not yet."

"Come on! This is stupid!"

"Just a ways yet," Leo insisted. They hiked for several hundred yards. "This is stupid," Ernestine reiterated, peeved. Leo didn't reply. He angled to the left, heading up a low hill.

"What are you doing?" Ernestine asked impatiently.

"We'll see good from this hill," Leo said. They reached the crest of the hill and halted. To the west stretched a swampy tangle of lush vegetation.

"This is it!" Ernestine announced. "I ain't going no farther!"

"We could go a little ways," Leo urged.

"Not into no swamp!" Ernestine stated. "You know better."

Leo sighed. "I guess you're right." He sauntered down the hill toward a wide pool of brackish water.

"What are you doing?" Ernestine questioned, following. "I said this is it!"

"Just to the edge of the water."

"What difference does it make?" Ernestine snapped.

Leo disregarded her protest, walking to the bank bordering the pool.

"Leo! I want to go home! Now!" Ernestine stepped to his left.

"Hold your horses," Leo responded. He knelt at the edge of the bank and dipped his left hand into the water. "Don't drink that!" Ernestine warned. "How dumb do you think I am?" Leo asked. He cupped water in his left hand and splashed the cool liquid on his face.

Ernestine hesitated for a moment, then joined him. "This feels nice," she commented, swirling her right arm in the pool. She imitated her

brother, feeling a sense of relief as the water trickled down her cheeks, over her chin, and moistened her neck. Leo rose. "Okay. Let's go."

"Not so fast," Ernestine said, reaching for another handful of water. As she did, her left foot slipped, throwing her off balance to the left.

The motion saved her life.

An alligator surged from under the water, its mouth opening wide, its broad, rounded snout tilted upwards, its teeth exposed. The gator's jaws closed within an inch of Ernestine, who screeched and scrambled backwards.

Leo gripped her by the armpits and hauled her from the bank.

The alligator came after them, a huge specimen over 12 feet in length, its powerful, squat legs propelling it up and over the bank at a speed belying its bulk. The beast snapped at Ernestine's feet, missing her heels by a hairs-breadth.

"Leo!" Ernestine squealed.

Leo jerked her upright, twisted, and shoved, sending her stumbling. "Run!" he shouted. He took a stride.

Her eyes riveted on the gator, terrified to her core, Ernestine saw the massive reptile lunge forward. She screamed as its maw closed on her brother's right leg with a sickening crunch.

Leo stiffened, his brown eyes bulging, and shrieked.

The alligator twisted its head, upending its victim.

"Leo!" Ernestine cried.

Her brother was flat on his back, his face contorted in severe agony, desperately striving to draw his machete.

Ernestine froze.

The gator began to move backwards, dragging Leo, intending to savor its meal in the pool. With slow, measured steps, it slid toward the water.

"Leo!" Ernestine yelled, her fear for his safety eclipsing her instinctive sense of self-preservation. She darted to the left, past Leo, and up to the gator's head.

"Run!" Leo shouted, pulling the machete.

Ernestine kicked at the reptile's protruding right eye, but missed. "Let go of him!" she wailed.

The alligator abruptly shifted position, bending its body in half, whipping its heavily armored tail in a tight arc while keeping its teeth imbedded in its prey's leg.

Ernestine felt something slam into her left side, and then she was sailing through the air to crash onto her back on the hard ground. Dazed by the impact, she forced herself to roll over and faced the pool.

The lower third of the gator's serrated tail was already in the water.

Leo swung the machete, landing a blow on the reptile's snout.

The beast's eyes blinked, but that was the only reaction as it continued to ease backwards into the water.

"Leo!" Ernestine shouted in dismay. The alligator would drag her brother under the surface! Leo would drown! She pushed to her knees.

Half the reptile's tail was immersed.

"Leo!"

A loud pounding unexpectedly sounded to Ernestine's rear. A hurtling figure flashed past her, a giant of a man in a black leather vest, green fatigue pants, and black boots. She gaped at the newcomer in astonishment as he launched himself in a flying dive *onto the alligator!* Mesmerized, she saw the man swing his legs around as he landed on top of the reptile. His left arm looped under the alligator's thick neck as his right arm swept aloft. Clutched in his right hand was a gleaming knife.

Leo, about to swing the machete again, froze.

Ernestine couldn't believe her own eyes! The giant was the biggest man she'd ever seen, at least seven feet in height, and his body rippled with

layer upon layer of bulging muscle. His hair was dark, hanging above his gray eyes. She glimpsed his features in the fraction of a second before he went into action.

The giant's right hand plunged downward, burying his large knife in the gator's head between the eyes.

Ernestine saw the alligator respond in a fury, releasing her brother and swiveling its head toward the giant. It snapped at the man with the knife, unable to get a grip. The newcomer's knife sank into the gator's head again and again. With an enraged hiss, the reptile suddenly scrambled backwards into the pool, and no sooner was it in the water than the gator rolled, seeking to dislodge its foe.

The water became a wild whirlpool of thrashing forms, the reptile spinning over and over as the man hung onto its neck and repeatedly stabbed his knife into the gator's head.

Ernestine was filled with awe at the white giant's daring. But how could any man, even someone with his incredible physique, hope to kill a 12-foot gator with just a knife?

More pounding came from behind her. Two men raced to the edge of the pool and halted. One was a lanky man dressed in buckskins and moccasins. His hair and sweeping mustache were both blond. Around his slim waist were strapped a pair of pearl-handled revolvers. A camouflage backpack rested between his shoulder blades, and a rifle was slung over his left shoulder. He stood six feet tall, an easy head and shoulders above his smaller companion. The second man was dressed all in black, a glimmering sword held in his hands. His features were Oriental, his hair dark. Like the man in buckskins, the man in black had a backpack. An M-16 was slung over the Oriental's right shoulder.

For a second or two Ernestine was distracted by the arrival of the two men. She glanced at the pool again to find the gator on its side, struggling feebly, as the giant continued to ram his knife into the beast.

The man in buckskins took a step into the pool, but the wiry man in black grabbed the blond's left arm.

"It's not necessary," the man in black said. "The alligator is finished."

"I reckon," the one clad in buckskins responded uncertainly. His hands hovered near his pearl-handled revolvers.

The short man in black turned and studied Leo for a moment. He replaced his sword in a black scabbard slanted under his black belt above his left hip, then walked to Leo. "I'll tend your injury," he offered in a soft tone.

Leo appeared to be in a state of shock. He simply nodded, his mouth slack.

Ernestine slowly stood.

The alligator was limp, all except for the sluggish twitching of its tail. A punctured mess of flesh, spurting blood, was all that remained of the creature's upper head.

Ernestine watched as the giant straightened, the water reaching above his waist. He stared at the gator, evidently insuring the reptile was no longer a threat. Satisfied, he looked at the man in buckskins and smiled.

"You're lucky it was just a little one," the man in buckskins quipped.

"You call this little?" the giant retorted, moving toward the bank.

Ernestine saw the alligator abruptly turn upright, its wicked maw swooping at the giant's back. She went to yell a warning, but the man in the buckskins was faster. His hands were twin streaks as his revolvers cleared leather, and both guns boomed simultaneously.

The gator's eyes exploded.

Perhaps sensing his danger, the giant had started to pivot to confront the reptile. He watched as the great body sagged and was partially submerged, then he headed for shore again. "Thanks," he said to the blond man.

The gunman chuckled and twirled his revolvers into their holsters. "It was a piece of cake, pard."

"For you maybe," the giant said. "But try killing an alligator with a Bowie knife sometime. It isn't easy."

"It gave you an excuse to take your annual bath," the gunman remarked. "Besides, you like doing things the hard way."

The giant placed his Bowie knife in a sheath on his right hip.

Ernestine realized the giant was carrying an identical Bowie on his left hip, and for the first time she noted the two ammo belts crisscrossing his broad chest.

"Do you think that critter might have a hubby hereabouts?" the gunman asked as his enormous friend stepped onto the bank.

"Maybe," the giant answered. He glanced at the carcass. "What makes you think that one was female?"

"Anything that contrary had to be," the gunman joked.

"And you talk about me being lucky," the giant muttered.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means you're the lucky one," the giant said. "If Sherry wasn't such an understanding wife, she would have booted you out the door years ago."

The gunman elected to change the topic. He faced Ernestine and smiled. "Howdy, ma'am. The handle is Hickok," he disclosed, crossing to her and extending his right hand.

Ernestine gazed up into a pair of alert blue eyes. "Hello," she responded, shaking.

"The Spirit smiled on you today," Hickok remarked, nodding at her brother.

Leo was lying on his back, grimacing, his right forearm on his forehead.

The short man in black had deposited his backpack on the dirt and removed a brown leather pouch. Having lifted Leo's shredded pant material to one side, he was administering a greenish powder to the deep lacerations.

The giant walked over to the man in black. "How is he, Rikki?"

The one called Rikki looked at the man with the Bowies. "I believe the leg is broken," he replied. "He requires stitches in two of the gashes. The rest is not as serious." He paused. "The herbs will prevent an infection, but the leg should be set and the wounds cleansed with hot water as soon as possible."

"We could start a fire here," the giant proposed.

"Our cabin!" Ernestine blurted. "Bring him to our cabin!"

"Is your cabin nearby?" the giant inquired.

"It's five miles or so that way," Ernestine said, pointing to the east.

"The cabin would be better," Rikki mentioned.

"Then the cabin it is," the giant stated. "I'll carry the boy. Hickok, you bring the girl. Rikki, my gear." He nodded at a point behind Ernestine.

She turned and discovered another camouflage backpack and an automatic rifle ten feet to her rear. The giant must have dropped them when he came to their rescue. She began to rotate toward the giant, and was startled when a strong arm encircled her waist and another scooped her up by the knees. "What?" she exclaimed.

"Don't fret none," Hickok advised, holding her close to his chest.

Ernestine could see the giant lifting Leo with extreme care. "Put me down! I can walk!"

"It will be quicker this way," Hickok told her.

"I can walk!" Ernestine protested.

"You've just been through a nasty ordeal," Hickok observed. "You rest and leave the runnin' to us." He jogged to the east, heading up the hill.

The giant was following with Leo.

Rikki was donning his backpack.

"But it's five miles!" Ernestine emphasized.

"So?" Hickok responded.

"You can't carry me five miles," Ernestine assured him. "It's too far."

"This is nothin'. I once had to lug *him*," Hickok said, indicating the giant with a jerk of his head. "It about near gave me a hernia."

Chapter Two

"Where the devil can those children be?"

"I don't know, Clara," the man responded, his brow furrowed with worry.

"Go look for them, Ted," Clara urged.

Ted stepped from the wooden porch to the ground and placed his brawny hands on his hips. His stocky frame was clothed in a patched blue shirt and ragged jeans. "I swear. Sometimes those youngsters are more bother than they're worth!"

"The good Lord blessed us with healthy, normal children," Clara stated. "We should be grateful."

Ted nodded. "At least their minds haven't been turned to mush."

"Go find them," Clara reiterated.

Ted sighed and began walking across the cleared expanse in front of their small cabin. "Those twins!" he declared, then stopped, shocked.

"Ted!" Clara exclaimed, looking out across the clearing.

"I see them," Ted confirmed. He wheeled and stalked toward the open cabin door.

"Ted?" Clara said, wringing her hands in the fabric of her pink dress.

"I'm getting the gun," he announced as he reached the porch.

"Ted Butler! You'll do no such thing!" Clara rebuked him sharply.

Ted hesitated, staring to the west. "But they're white."

"They've got Leo and Ernestine," Clara said.

Ted disappeared into the cabin.

"Ted! No!" Clara objected. She gazed at the figures, now 40 yards distant and closing at a dogtrot, and perceived they were well-armed.

Her husband emerged with their ancient double-barreled shotgun cradled in his arms.

"Put that away!" Clara stated.

"No."

"You don't even know if it'll work!" Clara reminded him. "Those men are armed to the teeth!"

"No," Ted said with finality. He moved to the edge of the porch, interposing himself between the approaching threesome and his wife.

"Leo looks hurt!" Clara cried.

Ted gritted his teeth and leveled the shotgun.

The three strangers never slowed. They fearlessly crossed the yard and halted ten feet from the porch.

"That's far enough!" Ted warned needlessly.

"Howdy," said a blond man in buckskins.

Ted glanced at his children, his eyes narrowing as he saw Leo's right leg.

"Your son requires prompt medical attention," the short man in black stated.

"We come in peace," added the giant bearing Leo.

"Put down my kids," Ted directed.

"You're not being very neighborly," commented the one in buckskins.

"Put down my kids!" Ted repeated.

"Suit yourself, mister," the blond man said, and gently lowered Ernestine to the grass. He moved a pace to her right, his hands dropping to his sides.

Ted could see the sunlight glinting off the man's pearl-handled revolvers.

"We just toted your young'uns five miles," the man in buckskins mentioned. "Your boy here needs help. Now."

"Hickok!" the giant interjected.

The gunman glanced at his companion. "We don't have time for this, pard." He looked at Ted. "Put down that shotgun."

Ted wagged the barrel. "I've got you covered."

Hickock smiled. "I don't mean to brag, you understand, but if you tried to shoot one of us, I'd plug you before you so much as moved a muscle. I'm askin' you nice. Put down the gun."

"Poppa!" Ernestine exclaimed. "Do it! These men are our friends!"

Ted balked.

"Please, Poppa!" Ernestine prompted. "I've seen Hickok draw. You wouldn't stand a chance! He'd kill you!"

The gunman glanced at her. "Kill him? Are you loco? I might shoot him in the foot for being such an obstinate cuss, but I'm not about to kill your pa."

"Put down the damn gun!" Clara snapped.

Surprised at his wife's rare use of profanity and the tone in her voice,

Ted slowly lowered the shotgun.

"Thanks," Hickok said, beaming. "I hate pluggin' folks in the foot. It's a pitiful waste of toes."

The giant walked up the porch, his gray eyes scrutinizing Ted. "Your son was attacked by an alligator. He needs a Healer."

Ted reached out and touched his son's forehead. "A Healer? There's Doc Stone, but he lives fifteen miles from here."

"I am not a Healer," the small man in black remarked. "But I do possess some small skill at treating injuries. With your permission, I will tend to your son. You can send for the physician after his condition is stabilized."

Ted glanced at Clara, who nodded.

Leo appeared to be woozy. His eyelids fluttered as he grinned at his parents. "They saved my life, Poppa, Momma. I was a goner."

Ted looked into the giant's gray eyes. "Thank you. Come in." He motioned at the doorway. "My name is Ted Butler. This is my wife, Clara."

"I'm Blade," the giant said. He nodded at the gunman. "That's Hickok—"

"Right pleased to meet you folks," the gunman stated.

"—and that's Rikki-Tikki-Tavi," Blade said, nodding at the man in black.

"Let's get inside," Clara suggested.

"I'll stand watch out here a spell," Hickok offered.

Ernestine watched her parents, Blade, and Rikki enter the cabin. She gazed at the gunman in frank fascination.

Hickok hooked his thumbs in his gunbelt and smiled at her. "Shouldn't you be inside with your family?"

Ernestine shrugged. "There's not much I could do. Leo will be okay."

"You think so, huh?"

"I know it, Mister Hickok," Ernestine assured him.

"Drop the mister," Hickok instructed. "And what makes you so blamed sure of yourself? You're not much more than a sprout."

"I know Leo will be okay," Ernestine explained. "We're twins, you know. We're like two peas in a pod. Sometimes we even have the same thoughts at the same time. Ain't that spooky?"

"Not really," Hickok responded, his voice momentarily losing its decided western twang. "Biological twins, as Plato once said, enjoy a mental rapport."

"What?"

Hickok chuckled. "Oops. Sorry. I plumb forgot myself. Yeah, you're right. It is downright spooky."

"You talk funny," Ernestine told him.

"No one's ever noticed it before," Hickok said with a smile.

"Who's Plato?"

"He's the leader at the place I come from," Hickok replied, scanning the yard and the fields beyond.

"Where's that?"

"It's called the Home," Hickok said.

"Your people have a name?"

Hickok nodded. "The Family. We were named by the hombre who started the Home right before the war."

"Is it far to your Home?"

"Far," Hickok stated, grinning at her. "You sure are a bundle of questions."

"Am I botherin' you?"

"No," Hickok said. "I'm hitched."

"Hitched?"

"Yeah. I'm married."

"I don't get it," Ernestine commented.

"You will after you're married," Hickok mentioned.

Ernestine seated herself on the edge of the porch and rubbed her left side.

"Are you all right?" the gunman inquired.

"A little sore."

"We should have Rikki check you after he's done with Leo," Hickok suggested.

"I'm fine," Ernestine insisted.

Hickok inspected their cabin, noting the craftsmanship displayed in the meticulous construction. "Did your pa build this?"

"Yep."

"He did a right smart job," Hickok said.

"Thanks."

"But why'd he build it out here? Why are you folks livin' in the middle of nowhere?"

Ernestine frowned. "We came here about four years ago to get away from the city."

"Miami?"

"Yeah. Miami. It's about twenty miles southeast of here," Ernestine said.

"I know. That's where my pards and I are headed."

Ernestine's eyes narrowed. "You'd best be real careful there. Miami is a bad place. Momma says its evil."

"Did you like it there?"

"No way!" Ernestine declared. "It was terrible! All those pushers after you to get stoned! Everybody on their own little trip. It was a real bummer. Being straight was out."

The gunman's forehead furrowed in perplexity. "What the dickens are you talkin' about?"

"Don't they have pushers at your Home?" Ernestine asked.

"The Family doesn't go in for pushin' folks around," Hickok answered. "And if anyone tries pushin' us, they're in for a world of hurt. The Warriors don't take kindly to anyone messin' with the Family."

Now it was Ernestine's turn to be confused. "No. That ain't what I meant." She paused. "Are you a Warrior?"

"Yep."

"Your friends too?"

Hickok nodded. "The big dummy, Blade, is the head Warrior. Rikki and I are under him."

"How many Warriors do you got at this Home of yours?"

"Let me see," Hickok said thoughtfully. "Sometimes it seems like we're addin' new members every time the wind changes. We had five Triads with three Warriors apiece, and then we added the mutant Triad—"

"Mutant!" Ernestine exclaimed.

"Yep. Two furry runts and another ding-a-ling. They were created by a scientist, a genetic engineer. Anyway, that gives us eighteen Warriors," Hickok detailed.

"Mutants!" Ernestine said again, astounded.

"You don't like mutants?"

Ernestine shuddered. "Who does? Some of the Dragons are mutants, you know."

Hickoks blue eyes locked on hers. "What do you know about the Dragons?"

"Everybody knows about the Dragons," Ernestine said. "Poppa says they practically own everything and everyone."

"And some of 'em are mutants?"

"The ones at the top. Just ask Poppa."

"I will."

Ernestine glanced at the cabin door. "I don't hear no yellin'. Leo's takin' it like a man," she said proudly.

"Your brother and you are real close," Hickok noted.

"Sure are," Ernestine conceded. "Do you have any kids?"

The gunman's chest puffed up. "Yep. A little buckaroo named Ringo. He's a chip off the old block."

"Do you let him get stoned?"

"There you go again," Hickok said. "Listen. Anybody throws stones at my son, and they're liable to wind up addin' some lead to their diet. If you get my drift."

"I ain't talkin' about the kind of stones you throw," Ernestine stated. "I mean the—"

Blade walked from the cabin. "Leo will be fine," he informed them. "Rikki has washed the wounds and is preparing to set the leg. Leo is fortunate. It's a clean break."

Ernestine stood. "I never did thank you proper for savin' us."

"We happened to be in the right place at the right time," Blade

mentioned. "I heard your scream."

"What were you doing out there near that swamp?" Hickok inquired.

"We heard this noise like thunder," Ernestine answered. "And we saw this funny light in the sky."

"That was us," Blade said.

"You?"

"The noise and the light were caused by the Hurricane," Blade stated.

Ernestine gazed at the blue sky. "There ain't no hurricane in these parts."

Blade grinned. "Not a storm. The Hurricane I'm referring to is an aircraft, a jet with VTOL capabilities. It brought us here."

"I ain't never seen no jet."

Hickok cleared his throat. "How long are we stayin', pard?"

"We've been invited to supper," Blade said. "We'll stay until morning. I want to learn all we can about Miami."

"You're stayin' the night?" Ernestine asked, excited. "Good!"

There was a cry of pain from within the cabin.

"Rikki must be settin' the leg," Hickok commented.

Ernestine ran inside.

"Sweet kid," the gunman remarked.

Blade surveyed the fields to the west. "Why don't you take a walk?"

"Is it my breath?" Hickok rejoined.

"Conduct a perimeter sweep," Blade directed.

The gunman sighed and strolled to the west. "I doubt the Dragons know

we're here."

"Better safe than sorry," Blade philosophized.

"Be back in a bit," Hickok said.

"Just don't get bit by a gator," Blade commented.

Hickok looked back, grinning. "I didn't know you cared!"

"We've already killed one alligator," Blade noted with a straight face. "Giving another one food poisoning would be irresponsible."

"Ouch."

Chapter Three

"You're a humdinger of a cook, ma'am," Hickok said, complimenting Clara Butler.

Clara smiled self-consciously and shrugged. "It was a little something I threw together."

"Feeding you was the least we could do," Ted remarked. "We're in your debt."

The three Warriors and their hosts were sitting on the front porch, the Warriors to the right of the doorway, Ted and Clara to the left. A strikingly beautiful sunset emblazoned the western horizon. Bird and insect sounds provided a natural melody.

"I'm beginnin' to see why you folks settled here," Hickok said, admiring the resplendent hues in the sky.

"This was just part of the reason," Ted said, then frowned. "We wanted out of Miami."

"Tell us about it," Blade coaxed. "We studied the old maps in our library and read all we could on the city, but our information is outdated. The Founder of our compound assembled the hundreds of thousands of books we own prior to the war. All of our maps were accurate one hundred and five years ago, but things are bound to have changed since then."

"I have no way of knowing how it was before the war," Ted said. "But it had to be better than it is now, what with everybody wearin' guns and doin' drugs. Miami ain't fit for decent people."

"How do you mean?" Blade probed.

"The Dragons control Miami," Ted stated.

"Ernestine mentioned the Dragons," Hickok brought up. "She said the head honchos are mutants."

Ted nodded, his lips compressing.

"Only the leaders of the Dragons are mutants?" Blade stressed.

"That's what everyone says," Ted replied. "But very few have ever seen them. They're called the Masters, and they formed the Dragons about four decades ago."

"How many Masters are there?" Blade queried.

"I don't know," Ted said. "Only the top Dragons have contact with the Masters. No one else meets them and lives."

"Go on about the Dragons," Blade prompted. "You said they control Miami. How?"

"Drugs mainly," Ted said.

"Drugs?"

"Yeah. You know. Grass. Coke. Other hard stuff like heroin, opium, and morphine. You name it, the Dragons supply it. Getting high is a way of life nowadays. Everyone does dope," Ted disclosed.

"Not everyone," Clara amended bitterly.

"We didn't want our children to have their minds destroyed by the drugs," Ted said. "So we up and left Miami and homesteaded this place. It's been rough, but we're making a go of it."

"I'm puzzled," Rikki-Tikki-Tavi interjected. "These drugs you mention. Why do so many people use them?"

"Like I said. They do it to get high."

Rikki gazed skyward. "High?"

"Yeah, man. High means to feel good. To get a buzz on. To pack up all your cares and woes," Ted elaborated.

"I still don't understand," Rikki said.

"Have you ever used drugs?" Clara inquired, staring at each of the Warriors.

Blade shook his head. "The only drugs we know are those used by the Family Healers, and they're all medicinal herbs."

"Do your people drink alcohol?" Ted questioned.

"The Tillers concoct a home brew for special occasions," Blade answered. "But no one in the Family drinks on a regular basis, if that's what you mean. The Elders would not tolerate alcoholism."

"Well, that ain't the way it is in Miami," Ted revealed.

"Those who don't do drugs do the booze. Findin' a sober person is next to impossible."

"You're exaggerating," Blade said.

"A little," Ted admitted. "But not by much. You haven't been there. The rotten pushers are everywhere, and every pusher is a Dragon."

"What's a pusher?" Hickok wanted to know.

Ted did a double take. "A pusher pushes the dope."

"They sell the drugs," Clara clarified.

"How many pushers are there?" Blade asked.

"Thousands," Ted replied. "And they're just the lower-level Dragons. There's a whole chain of command from the pushers to the Masters."

"Do you know how many Dragons there are, all told?" Blade inquired.

"No," Ted admitted. "But if you wanted a guess, I'd say there's seven thousand Dragons, maybe more."

Hickok whistled. "Whew! That's a heap of opposition."

"We're not here to deal with the lower-level Dragons," Blade said. "The pushers are none of our concern. We're after the Masters."

"If you want my advice," Ted offered, "I'd say go home. Go back to where you came from. There's no way you can take on the Dragons. Not with just three of you."

"We've tackled tough odds before," Hickok observed.

"Are there others like yourselves?" Blade queried. "People who don't like the Dragons, who don't like the drugs?"

"Some," Ted responded. "But not a whole lot. Most of the decent people left ages ago."

"What about the authorities?" Blade asked. "Doesn't Miami have a police force?"

"Yeah," Ted said, his lips curling downward. "The Narcs."

"How effective are these Narcs against the Dragons?" Blade asked.

Ted snorted. "Effective? You've got to be kidding! The Narcs are in league with the Dragons."

"How can the police force be in league with the Dragons?"

"I might be able to answer that," Clara said. "It all goes back to the war. An aunt of mine told me the story when I was a young girl. The federal government, as you probably know, resettled in the Midwest after evacuating a lot of folks from the east. The state governments fell apart.

Florida was no different than the rest. With the government gone, the police and the sheriff departments broke down. Miami was a wide-open city. There was no one in control. The drug gangs took over."

"Where did these drug gangs come from?" Blade inquired.

"They were always around," Clara said. "Even before the war. The drug business in the United States was a big operation. A lot of the drug smugglers used Florida as the entry point for the drugs they brought in from other countries. Miami was a hot spot of drug activity. But before the war, at least, the authorities kept a lid on it."

"And after the war, with the collapse of the government, the drug organizations moved in to fill the vacuum," Blade deduced.

Clara nodded. "You've got it. For forty years after the war, according to my aunt, there were three or four major drug dealers fighting for the upper hand. And then the Masters showed up."

"From where?"

"No one knows," Clara said. "The Masters took over the largest drug gang in Miami, and within a couple of years they had wiped out all their opposition. They named themselves the Dragons, and they've ruled Miami ever since."

"The Dragons control all of the land from Fort Lauderdale south," Ted added. "Alligator Alley is their boundary line."

"Alligator Alley?" Blade repeated.

"The Everglades Parkway," Ted explained. "It runs from Naples in the west to Fort Lauderdale in the east. Anything south of the Parkway is in Dragon territory."

"And they rule it with an iron fist," Clara went on.

"They pass laws. They appoint people to posts like mayor or councilperson. And they set up their own police force, the Narcs."

Ted laughed bitterly.

"What's so funny?" Blade questioned.

"The Narcs," Ted responded. "The Masters have a warped sense of humor. You see, before the war, back in the days when there really was law enforcement, the Narcs were the police who went after the pushers and the dealers. The Narcs were the tough officers who put the drug-runners out of business." He paused. "But after the Dragons took over, they made drugs legal. All drugs. They set up a system of big-time dealers and thousands of pushers. And they made it illegal for anyone to interfere with the drug trade. If a pusher tried to sell crack or smack to Leo or Ernestine, and if I tried to stop it, I'd be arrested by the Narcs. They're the so-called official police force, hand-picked by the Dragons. And the Masters must have named them Narcs as a play on words."

Rikki-Tikki-Tavi, who had been listening attentively, gazed at Ted. "What did you mean earlier about getting high? What is this 'high' you speak of?"

"Getting high. Getting stoned. It's all the same," Ted said. "The drugs do things to your head, to your body. They make some people feel good, but there's always a price to pay. The drugs can destroy the mind and the body. They mess up your head. The strong stuff makes you hallucinate. You can go off the deep end just like that." He snapped his fingers.

"Why do people use drugs?" Rikki asked.

Ted shrugged. "They like the buzz they get. They like to escape from reality."

"This is most bewildering," Rikki confessed. "Why would anyone want to escape from reality? Attuning our souls to cosmic reality is one of the purposes of our very existence."

"You're a weird one," Ted remarked.

"Ted!" Clara said.

"Our souls should be devoted to perceiving the nature of spirit reality," Rikki elaborated. "Without a spirit anchor, our lives are like a piece of dead wood floating on a pond, tossed every which way by the currents and the wind, without direction, without purpose."

"Are you a preacher of some kind?" Ted inquired.

"I am a martial artist," Rikki answered. "A perfecting swordmaster. I have devoted my life to the principles of Zen and the Circles."

"What in the world is Zen?"

"Zen is the art of finding your true spirit center," Rikki detailed. "Through Zen, we attain a state of intuitive enlightenment."

Ted shook his head. "I never heard of it."

"We believe in the Bible," Clara mentioned. "Do all of you practice this Zen?"

"No," Blade replied. "The Family Elders encourage each one of us to seek our own spiritual path. We are not forced to follow any one religion. We have Christians, Moslems, Buddhists, and others. Many follow the teachings of the three blue Circles. Rikki happens to prefer Zen."

"Do you mind if I ask you a question?" Ted said.

"No."

"You haven't told us exactly where you're from," Ted noted. "And I can understand the reason. The less we know, the better. But why are you here? Why are you after the Masters?"

"Because the Masters are after us," Blade divulged.

"You've had a run-in with the Masters?" Ted queried in surprise.

"Not yet," Blade said. "Let me explain. A while back we were in Las Vegas. We became embroiled in a mob war. And before we left, we heard a story, a very interesting story, about the Dragons. We were told that the Dragons intend to eradicate our Family. After the Elders were informed, they decided to send three Warriors to Florida to see if the story was true. If so, we're to prevent the Dragons from carrying out their threat."

"We're gonna kick us some butt," Hickok said, grinning.

"How did you know the Dragons were based in Florida?" Ted questioned.

"We'd heard about the Dragons several times before," Blade disclosed.

"They have a formidable reputation. From what you've told me, I suspect their drug dealings extend to other areas of the country. Some of the rumors we heard were incorrect. For instance, I was told that all of the Dragons are mutants, but now we know that's not the case."

"Why are the Dragons after your Family?" Clara asked.

"We don't know," Blade said, his tone lowering, "but we'll find out."

Clara studied the trio for a moment. "Do the three of you always work together?"

"Sometimes we go on runs together," Blade said. "The Warriors are divided into Triads, and Hickok and I usually work with a friend named Geronimo. Bui Geronimo is overseeing the Warriors in our absence to give him the added experience."

Hickok chuckled. "That was my idea. Since I've been picked to head the Warriors whenever the Big Guy is in California, I figured Geronimo should be my second-in-command. He didn't like the notion of being left behind."

"Rikki has been with us to Denver, St. Louis, and Seattle," Blade mentioned. "He knows the score."

"It sounds like you've been everywhere," Ted commented.

"We get around."

Ted leaned forward. "What's it like out there? We never hear much about the outside."

"The country is divided up into factions," Blade expounded. "As Clara pointed out, the government of the United States reorganized in the midwest and became known as the Civilized Zone. It's one of the largest factions in terms of area. The Civilized Zone includes the former states of Colorado, Wyoming, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, the northern half of Texas, New Mexico, and portions of Arizona. Denver, Colorado, is the capital."

"What about the other factions?"

"The state of California survived the war intact," Blade said. "California

has a standing army and a navy. They've been able to protect themselves from the scavengers, raiders, and looters. In fact, the governor of California proposed the formation of the Freedom Force."

"What's that?" Ted asked.

"The Force is the special strike squad set up to deal with threats to the Freedom Federation."

"The what?"

"Maybe I'd better back up a bit," Blade stated. "The Civilized Zone, California, and five other factions have banded together into the Freedom Federation."

"What five other factions?" came from Clara.

"There are the Flathead Indians in Montana, the Cavalry in the Dakota Territory, and three groups from Minnesota—the Clan, the Moles, and the Family."

"So you're from Minnesota?"

"Now you know," Blade said. "Anyway, as the head of the Warriors and the head of the Force, I spend my time bouncing back and forth between Minnesota and California."

"And when he's not at the Home, I handle runnin' the Warriors," Hickok interjected.

"Lucky us," Rikki-Tikki-Tavi quipped.

"What about the rest of the country?" Ted inquired.

Blade sighed. "It's a mess. Barbaric. Savage. The Russians control a corridor in the eastern half, sort of a belt from the Atlantic Ocean to the Mississippi River. Chicago is under an autocratic group called the Technics. St. Louis is the territory of a biker gang, the Leather Knights. And Houston is run by androids."

"Androids?"

"Artificial men and women," Blade divulged. "They treat humans as

inferior life-forms."

"Incredible," Ted commented.

"I don't know about the rest of what was once America," Blade said. "Any area not under the control of a faction is designated as part of the Outlands. And as far as the rest of the world is concerned, all we have to go on are a few rumors."

"There's something I don't understand," Clara observed.

"What?"

"If you heard about the Dragons in—where was it?"

"Las Vegas, Nevada."

"Yes. Why didn't your Federation just send in an army to take care of the Dragons? Why are only the three of you here?"

"Good question," Blade said. "There are several reasons. First, I didn't inform the other Federation members about the threat from the Dragons."

"Why not?"

"The threat was directed against the Family. I relayed the information to the Family Elders, and they agreed we should deal with the situation ourselves. The Federation has enough problems to deal with. Secondly, we couldn't be sure the report was legitimate. We had to confirm the Dragons existed. Third, the Warriors are pledged to defend the Family and the Home from all danger. This is rightfully our job."

Clara nodded.

"So we were dropped off by one of the Hurricanes," Blade concluded, "and here we are."

"What's a Hurricane?" Ted queried.

"It's a jet with the ability to take off and land like a helicopter," Blade detailed. "California owns a pair. They're at my disposal as head of the Force, and I use one of them to shuttle to the Home at least once a month."

"I've always wanted to fly," Ted commented.

"So what's your next move?" Clara asked.

"Tomorrow we go into Miami."

Clara frowned. "You don't know what you're getting yourselves into."

"There's no turning back," Blade said. "We have a week before we rendezvous with the Hurricane at our pickup point. Thanks to you, we've verified the Dragons exist. Now we need to find out why they want to destroy our Family. We have to track down the Masters."

"And then?"

Hickok answered for the Warriors by grinning and placing his hands on his Colt Python revolvers. "We teach these critters the error of their ways."

Chapter Four

"What do you make of it, pard?"

"I don't know," Blade responded.

"Should we intervene?" Rikki asked.

"Not yet. Let's listen and see what's going on," Blade directed. He stared over the rusted chain-link fence at the dilapidated, weed-choked playground bordering the alley.

"Why are they chasin' him?" Hickok wondered aloud.

Blade's eyes narrowed as he watched the gang of ten youths pursue a solitary boy of ten or twelve around the playground. No one else was in sight. The gang consisted of older youths, 16 and up. They were attired in black leather clothing, some with miniature metal spikes adorning their shoulders and sleeves. Their hair was invariably past their shoulders and

dyed different colors. One female member sported hair arranged with alternate stripes of purple, orange, and yellow.

Hickok had noticed her too. "Do you see that one? It looks like she was stirrin' paint with her head."

The gang was laughing and taunting the younger boy, circling him and shoving him, preventing him from fleeing.

"What's the matter, Stevey?" declared a hefty youth with a Mohawk haircut as he stepped in front of the panting boy.

Stevy halted, breathing deeply, obviously afraid.

"Didn't you hear me, Stevey?" Mohawk demanded. The gang formed a loose line enclosing the boy.

"Let me go!" Stevey blurted out.

Mohawk laughed. "Did you hear Stevey? He wants us to let him go."

As if it was a great joke, the gang cackled.

Mohawk poked Stevey in the chest with the index finger of his right hand. "You ain't going nowhere, chump!"

"Please!" Stevey cried. He was a skinny boy who barely filled his tattered jeans and green shirt.

"Please!" Mohawk mimicked the boy.

"I want to go home!"

"You want to run to Daddy and Mommy!" Mohawk snapped. "Well, your ass is ours!"

"I haven't done nothin'!"

"Oh?" Mohawk gazed at his peers. "He says he ain't done nothin'!"

Some of the gang snickered.

Mohawk grabbed the front of Stevey's shirt. "Who are you tryin' to kid?"

You've insulted us."

"I did not!"

"You won't buy our shit."

"I don't want any!"

Mohawk made a smacking noise with his lips and released the boy. "You just don't understand the facts of life, Stevey. I'll do you a favor. I'll tell you how it is." He paused, then tapped his chest. "I'm a registered pusher, dude. I make my bread by hustlin' smack, bennies, weed, and anything else you need—"

"But I don't need it!" Stevey interrupted.

Mohawk slapped the boy across the mouth. "Shut your face when I'm talkin' to you!"

Stevey's legs nearly buckled.

"I'm beginnin' to think you're a real lowlife," Mohawk told the boy. "Haven't I offered you a ten-percent discount? Who else would give you a deal like that?"

Stevey didn't answer.

"But if that's not good enough for you, then how about a fifteen-percent discount?" Mohawk asked. "Just for the first three months."

"No," Stevey said.

"What?"

"I don't want any drugs."

Mohawk frowned. "He doesn't want any drugs!"

"He's a goody-two-shoes!" cracked one of the other gang members.

"Mommy's boy!" mocked another.

"The little turd!" declared a third.

"What are we going to do with you?" Mohawk asked.

"Let me go!" Stevey pleaded.

"No can do," Mohawk said. "You're givin' my reputation a bad mark. If I don't sell to you, then some of the others might get it into their heads not to buy. I can't allow that. This is my assigned turf, man. I have a quota to meet. My commission money don't grow on trees."

"What if I buy just a little?"

"And then what? Flush it down the John? I know you, you chickenshit bastard. You won't use it."

"No one would know."

"I'd know!"

Stevy gazed at the ring of harsh faces and gulped. "What are you going to do?"

"What do you think, nerd?" Mohawk responded. He reached into the right front pocket of his leather jacket.

Stevy's eyes widened. "No!"

"Yes." Mohawk's hand emerged holding a closed knife. His thumb moved, there was a loud click, and a six-inch blade snapped out.

"No!" Stevey repeated, taking a step backwards.

"If it was up to me," Mohawk said, "I'd cut you a few times and be done with it. But I know you'd run to your folks and blow the whistle, and they'd probably file a formal complaint with my Dealer. Technically, I'm not supposed to force my business on anyone." He shrugged and grinned. "But you know how it goes. We all have to eat." He wagged the knife.

Stevy seemed frozen in place.

"Stand still," Mohawk advised. "I'll make this short and sweet." He drew back his right hand.

"Release the boy!"

Mohawk whirled at the sound of the low, firm voice coming from his rear. He did a double take at the sight of the small man in black ten yards away, immediately noting that the man was armed with an automatic rifle and a sword. But the rifle was slung over the man's right shoulder, and the sword was in a scabbard on his left hip. The man's hands were empty, dangling at his sides. "Who the hell are you?"

"Release the boy," the man in black repeated.

Mohawk motioned with his left hand, and within seconds the man in black was surrounded by the entire gang. Three members produced knives, one a pair of brass knuckles, one a blackjack, and another slid a foot-long metal rod from his left sleeve.

The man in black remained motionless.

"I asked you who you are?" Mohawk reiterated angrily.

"If this boy does not want his body polluted by your drugs," the man in black stated, "you will not sell them to him."

Mohawk glowered. "Mister, you've got one hell of a nerve talkin' to me like that! Do you know who I am?"

"Someone whose sense of self-importance is greatly exaggerated," the man replied.

"What the hell does that mean?"

"It means the boy and I will depart without interference."

"You think so, huh?" Mohawk asked, and snickered.

"I know so."

Mohawk's brown eyes narrowed. The stranger had yet to make a move for his weapons. The chump was just asking for it! "Take him!" he ordered.

They tried.

Three of the gang members closed in on the diminutive figure in black, two of them with their knives extended.

The man in black uttered a peculiar, catlike noise, his body dropping into a squat and his hands rising. One moment he was perfectly still; the next he was a black blur as he executed a series of spinning roundhouse kicks. Once. Twice. Three times in all. And with each kick, with each devastating spin, a gang member was sent sailing through the air to crash onto the cracked playground asphalt.

"Get him!" Mohawk bellowed.

The burly youth with the brass knuckles tried to deliver an uppercut to the stranger's chin. Instead, the palm of the man's right hand slammed into *his* chin, snapping his head back, and he crumpled.

"I'll get this prick!" declared the one with the metal rod, taking two quick strides and swinging the bar.

With consummate ease, the man in black deftly ducked under the blow, then spun his body in a coiled arc, his left leg whipping outward, his left foot driving into the youth's midsection and knocking the gang member over six feet to sprawl onto the ground.

"Get the bastard!" Mohawk screamed.

The man in black suddenly moved even faster, taking the offensive, his legs flashing up and around, his feet landing off decisive blows in half as many seconds.

Mohawk abruptly found himself the only one left, with the man in black three feet off, in a crouching stance.

"It is over."

"Suck on this!" Mohawk snapped, and charged, whipping his switchblade toward the man's face.

Stevey, an astonished witness to the squence of events, gaped as the man in black easily blocked the knife, then retaliated with an open-hand blow to his foe's nose.

Mohawk screeched as his nostrils were crushed. He felt an agonizing pain in his forehead, then tumbled, gurgling and spraying blood.

"Are you all right?" the man asked Stevey.

Stevey nodded vigorously. "Thanks," he blurted.

The man in black smiled and walked up to the boy. He placed his right hand on Stevey's shoulder. "You were very brave. A person must be true to their convictions. These others had no right to force you to take drugs."

Stevey watched several of the gang thrashing in anguish. "I never saw anyone move like you."

The man's smile broadened. "Practice." He glanced at the alley to the west. "I must leave. May the Spirit guide you at all times." He turned and jogged toward the alley.

"Hey! Wait!" Stevey called.

He stopped and turned.

"What's your name? I need to know your name!"

"I am called Rikki."

Stevey nodded, grinned, then ran to the south.

Rikki-Tikki-Tavi watched the boy for several seconds, then resumed his sprint to the alley. He slowed slightly as he reached the chain-link fence, his hands flicking out and grabbing the top metal rail, and with a light-footed spring he vaulted into the alley, clearing the four-foot-high fence with a foot to spare. His companions were waiting.

"Well done," Blade said, complimenting the martial artist.

"I thought it was a mite sloppy myself," Hickok remarked.

"They lacked skill," Rikki said.

"You should have let all of us tackle those yahoos," Hickok commented.

"We don't want to draw any more attention to ourselves than necessary," Blade responded. "Rikki took care of them with a minimum of fuss."

"So what now?" Hickok inquired.

"We keep going," Blade stated, and led them to the south. "We're in a residential suburb northwest of downtown Miami. We'll stick to the alleys and side streets for the next few miles."

"I'm gettin' tired of all this skulkin' around," Hickok declared. "Let's find a bigwig and force the cow chip to take us to the Masters."

"Easier said than done," Blade noted. "We need a plan."

"And you have one?"

Blade nodded.

"Mind fillin' us in?"

"We find a bigwig and force him, or her, to take us to the Masters."

Hickok made a show of gazing around the alley. "There's a blamed echo around here."

"Locating the right person won't be simple," Blade said. "We need to learn more about the Dragons, about their chain of command."

"Then why didn't we question the leader of that gang?"

"He's strictly small potatoes," Blade replied. "We need someone higher up the ladder."

They came to the end of the alley and found a busy avenue running from east to west. Pedestrians jammed the sidewalk. Many of the men and women wore side arms, and a few carried rifles.

"The folks here sure look like a friendly bunch," Hickok quipped.

None of the pedestrians paid the slightest attention to the Warriors; they were too involved in the hustle and bustle of their daily lives.

"Why are the citizens permitted to bear firearms?" Rikki inquired. "Before the war, doing so was against the law."

"The Dragons make the laws now," Blade speculated. "I would expect

that all of their Dealers and pushers go around armed. The Dragons wouldn't want the bearing of firearms to be illegal."

"My kind of city," Hickok said.

"Which way?" Rikki asked.

"Left," Blade said, and merged into the flow of pedestrians. He scanned the avenue and the buildings on both sides. Although the avenue contained cracks and potholes, and a majority of the stores and residences were grimy and in need of a fresh coat of paint, Miami was in better shape than some of the other cities he'd visited. Lost in thought, he absently adjusted the shoulder strap on the F.N.-LAR Paratrooper slung over his right arm. So here he was again! About two thousand miles from the Home! Two thousand miles from his beloved wife and precious son, Jenny and Gabe. And his soul was troubled.

Jenny had pleaded with him not to make the run. Her lovely green eyes had been moist with tears when he'd explained the necessity of the trip. She had sat at their kitchen table, her back to him, and cried silently, her blonde hair bobbing, her slim shoulders rising and falling. Thank the Spirit that Gabe had been asleep! Jenny was becoming increasingly distraught over his prolonged absences, and who could blame her? With his duties as the head of the Force and as leader of the Warriors, he was constantly away from his family. The emotional strain was beginning to tell. A resentment was gradually growing inside him, increasing with each mission. The Federation leaders had no right to expect him to relegate his family to a secondary status in his life. The Elders taught every Family member to revere and cherish his or her loved ones. Jenny and Gabe were the core of his life; they gave meaning to his existence. Their happiness should come first, yet their happiness would continue to suffer for as long as he held down two posts.

What should he do?

Give up one of his positions?

Which one?

His train of thought was interrupted by the sight of a couple up ahead. What was this? He saw the man hand a packet of white powder to the neatly dressed woman. She gave the man a handful of silver coins. They

both laughed at some private joke, then parted company. Was the man a pusher? Had he just sold the woman drugs? What type of currency were they using in Miami? Old coins? He decided to trail the man, a portly, balding individual dressed in a light brown suit and black shoes. If they could—

"We are being followed," Rikki abruptly announced.

Blade glanced over his left shoulder at his friends.

Rikki nodded at the avenue.

A black and white sedan was slowly cruising on the other side of the street, traveling in the same direction as the Warriors. The uniformed driver's window was rolled down, and the driver was not trying to conceal the fact he was staring at them. On the driver's door, in large, bold, red letters, was a single word: NARC.

Chapter Five

"Want me to plug the varmint?" Hickok asked, his left hand on the strap to his Navy Arms Henry Carbine.

"Be serious," Blade said.

"I am. I can always use the target practice," Hickok stated impishly.

Blade gazed to the east and spied an intersection 30 yards distant.

The Narc vehicle unexpectedly accelerated, driving to the intersection and taking a left, then pulling over to the curb. Two men in blue uniforms and caps climbed out and crossed to the near side, then halted, waiting.

Blade knew the Narcs were waiting for the Warriors. He casually placed his hands near his Bowies and looked at Hickok and Rikki. "Let me do the talking."

Hickok grinned. "Fine by me. But if you decide to plug 'em, I get first dibs."

"We want to avoid a confrontation," Blade said.

"What a party-pooper."

Blade faced the intersection with an expression of feigned innocence. He pretended to be interested in a grocery store across the avenue as he neared the intersection. Out of the corner of his left eye, he saw the pair of Narcs coming toward him.

The men in blue positioned themselves directly in the giant's path. Both wore revolvers on their right hips.

"Hello, citizen," said the tallest of the two.

Blade stopped and smiled. "Hello."

Hickok moved to Blade's right, Rikki the left. Both stood calmly, Rikki with a slight grin, Hickok beaming like an idiot.

"Howdy!" the gunman declared.

The tall Narc glanced at the gunfighter, then at the short man in black. "These two friends of yours?"

"Two of the best," Blade admitted. "How may we help you?"

"We received a call a couple of minutes ago," the tall Narc disclosed, raking the Warriors with a probing gaze. "There's been a report of a 10-69."

"A what?" Blade questioned.

"A 10-69. Restraint of trade by interference with a pusher in the exercise of his or her rights," the tall Narc elaborated.

Hickok looked at Blade with a shocked countenance. "Do you mean that uncouth character was a pusher? I didn't know that!"

"What uncouth character?" The Narc demanded.

"We had a minor disagreement with a young gentleman who tried to force us to buy drugs from him," Blade answered.

"Then it was you," the Narc said. "You three fit the descriptions."

"Are we in any trouble?" Blade, inquired.

"That depends," the Narc said. "Do you live in Miami?"

"We're visiting," Blade replied.

"From where?"

Blade mentally reviewed the map of Florida he'd studied. "Jerome," he responded quickly.

"Why are you here?" the Narc interrogated them.

"We're on vacation," Blade said. "Thought we'd come to the Big City. Have some fun. Live it up." He paused and frowned. "We didn't expect to be jumped by a gang of wet-nosed delinquents."

"That damn Fowler!" the Narc muttered.

"Fowler?"

"Yeah. He's a lower-echelon pusher. We've received a few complaints about him before. Seems he likes to strong-arm his sales. But there's never been a case we could prove. Do you want to file a formal complaint with his Dealer?"

Blade's forehead creased, as if he was pondering the matter. "I don't want to make waves," he remarked.

The Narc shrugged. "It's your choice, mister. But if it was up to me, I'd file the complaint. Assholes like Fowler only spoil the trade for the law-abiding, hard-working pushers."

"How would I go about filing a complaint?" Blade queried.

"I'll see that Admin gets the proper forms to you," the Narc said, reaching into the top right pocket of his uniform shirt. "But I'll need your names and the place where you're staying." He pulled a small notepad and

a pen from the pocket.

"We just arrived," Blade stated. "We haven't decided where to stay."

"Try Hotel Row," the Narc suggested.

"What's that?"

The Narc cocked his head at an angle and stared at the giant. "Jerome must be in the boonies. Hotel Row is another name for Miami Beach. It's an island to the east of Miami, about two and a half miles across Biscayne Bay. You can take any of the causeways over on a shuttle bus. From where we're at, I'd say take the Kennedy Causeway or the Julia Tuttle Causeway. Both will get you there. And if you're looking to live it up, Miami Beach is the place you want."

"Thanks for the advice," Blade said.

"Tell you want I'll do," the Narc offered. "I'll have the forms delivered to the Ocean View. It's not the ritziest joint, but it should suit you just fine."

"I don't want to put you to any trouble," Blade remarked.

"It's no trouble," the Narc insisted. "Besides, if you do file the complaint, and if the Dealer decides Fowler did try to stiff you, then I get a bonus. Every little bit helps."

"You get a bonus?" Blade mentioned in surprise.

"Sure. The Dealers don't like the pushers to overstep their bounds. Most of the pushers know how to toe the line, but a shithead like Fowler can give all of them a bad name. Which is why the Dealers like to know about incidents like this. They want the bad seeds weeded out. Any Narc who helps get rid of the driftwood receives a bonus. After all, the last thing the Dealers want is to jeopardize the tourist trade."

"Understandable," Blade commented.

"Your going to Miami Beach will make filing your complaint a lot easier," the Narc observed.

"It will?"

"Sure. The Dealers all have their assigned territories in the Greater Miami metro area. The whole city is divided among them. North Miami. Hialeah. Coral Gables. You name it, a Dealer controls it. But not Miami Beach. That's neutral territory. No one Dealer can claim it, and that's where most of them hang out. Practically all the Dealers have suites there."

"Fowler's Dealer too?"

"Yeah," The Narc confirmed. "But I can't think of the name of his hotel. I'll have the forms and the info sent to the desk at the Ocean View. All you have to do is complete the paperwork, then drop it in the mail. Easy as pie."

"You have mail service?" Nickok asked.

The Narc snickered. "Yep. You're definitely country boys. Of course we have mail service! It's only in the Greater Miami area, and delivery is slow sometimes, but the mail gets through."

"I appreciate your effort on our behalf," Blade said courteously.

"No problem. Now I need your names."

"John Clayton," Blade answered.

"And you?" the Narc asked, looking at Hickok.

The gunman grinned. "William Cody."

"And you?" the Narc inquired of Rikki.

"Bruce Lee."

The Narc dutifully scribbled the names in his notepad. "Okay. Thanks for your cooperation." He nodded at them, wheeled, and strolled off with his fellow officer.

"Most mystifying," Rikki mentioned.

"Not really," Blade said.

"Then maybe you can explain it to me, pard," Hickok chimed in. "Why

the dickens was that hombre so blamed nice to us? Why didn't he haul us in?"

"Checks and balances," Blade stated. "The Masters have set up a system of keeping everyone in their organization in line. I didn't realize it before, but the tourist trade must be critically important. They wouldn't want the pushers to endanger it."

"Where do these tourists come from?" Hickok asked.

"The southern U.S.," Blade guessed. "Probably elsewhere. Maybe Central or South America. The Dragons must have trade relations with someone able to supply the fuel for their vehicles."

"What's this business about checks and balances?" the gunman questioned.

"The Narcs serve a two-fold purpose," Blade said. "They insure no one interferes with the drug trade, but they also keep an eye on the pushers to make sure none of them step out of line. That Narc said he gets a bonus for turning in pushers gone bad. The idea is brilliant. The pushers are continually monitored by the so-called police force created to protect the drug trade."

"I'm glad you're impressed," Hickok stated.

"We can't underestimate the Masters," Blade warned.

"I don't intend to estimate 'em," Hickok said. "All I want to do is plug 'em full of holes."

"Are we going to Miami Beach?" Rikki inquired.

"We are," Blade replied. "Let's go." He headed to the east.

The next hour passed uneventfully as they meandered into the heart of the metropolis. Both the pedestrian and vehicle traffic increased the farther east and south they went. Guns were in evidence everywhere, but the citizenry appeared to take the presence of the firearms in stride. Miami's population was a cosmopolitan mix of ethnic groups. Some neighborhoods consisted of predominantly Hispanic or black residents, while others were racially integrated. Gangs were in abundance. Every six

blocks or so, there would be an average of ten youths lounging on the steps of a tenement or hanging out on a street corner. Their faces were invariably hard and challenging, and black leather was obviously the preferred style of clothing.

If the gangs and the guns were common, the drug use was universal. Deals were conducted openly. Hundreds of people the Warriors passed were smoking odd, stubby cigarettes that gave off a pungent odor. Popping pills or capsules was also a favorite pastime. A large number of the gang members bore needle marks on their arms. Street vendors, urchins mainly, hawked their wares brazenly. The result of all this drug use was reflected in the customers; heavy users weaved as they walked, or gazed at the world with blank expressions, or talked to themselves. Totally wasted men and women were a frequent sight, their personalities shattered, their clothing mere rags, filthy and beyond reclamation.

"Remind me to never take a vacation here," Hickok said at one point.

"Same here," Rikki said. "Why would anyone come to Miami as a tourist?"

"Why else?" Blade responded. "For drugs. Miami could well be the drug capital of the Western Hemisphere, for all we know. When that Narc talked about tourists, he wasn't referring to the old-fashioned kind who took their families on trips to amusement parks once a year. He was talking about drug-users. Think of it. An entire tourist industry catering to drug-users. Every drug a person could imagine, right here at their fingertips."

"People come here from all over merely for drugs?"

Rikki commented in disgust.

"That's the way I read it," Blade replied.

Hickok spotted an emaciated man, naked from the waist up, to their left. The man's arms were discolored and dotted with needle tracks. "This is sick."

The buildings were becoming taller, more stately. Dozens of skyscrapers appeared to the southeast.

Blade made for them. He spied a Narc car patrolling the adjacent street, and realized dozens had driven by during their trek. The Narcs must need to maintain a high profile to keep a lid on the city.

A boy of six or seven, wearing jeans and a green shirt, ran up to the Warrior and tugged at his left leg. "Hey, mister?"

Blade halted and glanced down. "What?"

"Can you spare some coin?"

"I don't have any coins," Blade told him.

"Please, mister," the boy said. "My dad needs a dime bag bad."

"You need money for your dad to buy drugs?" Blade asked.

The boy nodded.

"I can't help you," Blade said sadly.

Frowning, the boy ran off.

"How could these folks do this to themselves?" Hickok wondered aloud.

"I don't know," Blade admitted.

They entered the heart of Miami, the downtown section with its towering skyscrapers, with predominantly antiquated cars and trucks bumper to bumper, and with a seething wave of pedestrians on every sidewalk.

Blade drifted with the crowds, enthralled by the spectacle. He was in no hurry to reach Miami Beach. Studying enemy terrain was essential to the success of any mission, and he was familiarizing himself with the landmarks, noting the tallest skyscrapers and other distinctive structures.

"Does the air smell funny to you two?" Hickok inquired. "Sort of tangy?"

"We might be near the ocean," Blade guessed.

They traveled in an easterly direction. A sign materialized ahead:

BAYFRONT PARK. Water was visible to the east and south.

"We'll take a break in the park," Blade suggested.

They followed the sidewalk until they came to a beautifully landscaped strip of land, a garden of tropical foliage. Dozens of people were lounging on the green grass. Others were engaged in games or conversation. Skimpy attire was the order of the day.

"At last!" Hickok remarked. "Breathin' space."

The Warriors mingled with the crowd, moving at random, observing.

"What the blazes is that guy doing?" Hickok asked.

Two men and two women were sitting on a blue blanket under a tree. In the center of the blanket was a small folding table, not more than six inches high. On one side of the table was a pile of packets of white powder. On the other side, one of the men was opening packets and arranging the white powder in straight lines.

The Warriors halted, perplexed.

One of the women leaned forward over the table, pressed the first finger of her left hand against her left nostril, then lowered her right nostril to the white powder. She started inhaling loudly.

"She's suckin' that gunk up her nose!" Hickok declared in amazement.

One of the men heard the remark and looked up, smiling. "Hi. Care to join us? There's plenty to go around."

"What are you doing?" Hickok asked.

"Getin' high, dude. What else?"

"What is that stuff?"

The man stared at the Warrior as if he was from another planet. "Coke, man. We're snortin' a little. You sure you don't want some?"

Hickok shook his head. "No thanks. I don't even stick a finger up my nose unless it's a serious emergency."

The man shrugged and returned his attention to the small table.

"Cow chips," Hickok muttered. "The whole blamed city is full of cow chips."

The Warriors continued walking.

"We have company," Rikki stated, nodding to their right.

Blade glanced around.

Seven men, ranging in age from their twenties to the late thirties, were standing in a compact group 15 yards away. All seven were eyeing the Warriors with intense interest. And all seven were armed, four with revolvers, two with rifles over their shoulders, and one with a pump shotgun. Their attire was a mix of jeans, boots, and leather shirts and jackets. One of them, a man about six feet tall with a neatly trimmed beard and mustache, motioned with his left arm. The seven strolled toward the Warriors.

Hickok sighed. "Here we go again."

"I'll handle this," Blade said.

The seven approached to within three yards and stopped. Their apparent leader, the man with the beard, grinned. "*Buenas tardes, señor,*" he said to Blade.

"Hello," the Warrior responded.

"*¿Habla español?*"

"What?"

"Do you speak Spanish, *señor?*"

"No," Blade admitted.

The man nodded slowly. "English then. I am Pedro."

"What can we do for you?"

Pedro tilted his head, inspecting the portion of the Paratrooper visible

above the giant's right shoulder. "We couldn't help but notice, eh? Your guns."

"What about them?"

"They are nice guns, no?"

"They get the job done," Blade replied.

Pedro patted the Smith and Wesson on his right hip. "Our guns are not so new as yours. Ours are old guns."

"Ours were manufactured before the war," Blade said. "We take good care of them."

Pedro nodded. "So I see, eh? Real good care."

Blade waited for the man to come to the point.

"Would you like to sell them?" Pedro asked.

"No."

"Just one or two."

"No."

The corners of Pedro's mouth curled downward slightly. "Please, *senor*. You don't understand. We will buy some of your guns. We won't cheat you on the price. You name it."

"Our guns are not for sale," Blade stated firmly.

Pedro sighed and gazed at his companions, then back at the three strangers. "*Por favor, senor*. Guns like yours are important to us. Good guns are hard to come by. They can mean life or death. You see?"

"I see. But the guns are not for sale."

Pedro surveyed the park, his lips pursed.

Blade tensed. He realized the man was checking for Narcs. "Don't do something you'll regret."

"One last time, *senor*," Pedro said. "Will you sell us some of your guns?"

"No."

"Then we will take them."

The seven sprang forward.

Chapter Six

Blade was about to whip the Bowies from their sheaths when he perceived that the seven gang members were not relying on their weapons; not one was reaching for a revolver or bringing a rifle into play. Before he could reflect on this, Pedro was on him.

The gang leader aimed a vicious kick at the giant's genitals.

Blade twisted to the right, dodging the blow, and grabbed Pedro's leg in midair. Gripping the ankle with his left hand and thigh with his right, Blade rammed his right knee into the underside of Pedro's leg directly below the kneecap.

There was a distinct popping noise.

Pedro screeched and fell as the giant released his leg.

The tough with the shotgun swung the stock at the giant's head.

Blade ducked under the swing, then slammed his right fist onto the tip of the man's jaw. There was no time to gauge the effect of the punch, because another gang member was already hurtling toward him. Blade sidestepped to the left, then lashed out with his right leg, catching the charging man in the gut and doubling him over. As the man gurgled and wheezed, Blade swept his left knee into the gang member's face.

The remaining four had separated, two going for the man in black, and two attacking the man in buckskins. Neither pair succeeded.

Blade spun in time to see Rikki-Tikki-Tavi leap into the air, a piercing kiai bursting from the martial artist's lips. Rikki's legs flicked outward, each foot connecting with the head of one of the men assaulting him. Both gang members went down.

Which left the two rushing Hickok. They were both within a stride of the gunman, who had not moved a muscle, when his hands became a literal blur. Both gang members drew up short, gawking, as each one found himself staring down the barrel of a Colt Python .357.

"You boys are being a mite inhospitable," the gunfighter remarked. His voice hardened. "It's not nice to be inhospitable."

Blade stared at Pedro. The gang leader was clutching his knee and groaning, his face contorted in agony.

"What should we do with these turnips?" Hickok asked. "Turn 'em over to the Narcs?"

Blade scanned their vicinity. Many people were standing and watching, but none seemed inclined to interfere. There was no sign of any Narcs. "No," he replied. "They might want us to fill out an official report, or take us to their headquarters. Let's get out of here."

Hickok winked at the pair in front of him. "Don't so much as twitch until we're out of sight, or I'll ventilate your noggins. Savvy?"

Neither man responded or moved a muscle.

The Warriors slowly backed off.

"They didn't go for their hardware," Hickok remarked.

"They probably didn't want to get the Narcs after them," Blade deduced. "Carrying firearms may be legal, but I doubt that the Narcs allow random gunplay."

Hickok twirled the Pythons into their holsters. "What now?"

For an answer, Blade turned and jogged in the direction of a nearby avenue.

"I've been thinkin'," Hickok commented as he kept pace with Blade.

"Uh-oh," Rikki said.

Hickok ignored the martial artist. "I'm serious. Let's suppose we find these Masters. Let's suppose we terminate them."

"If they're a threat to the Family, they'll be terminated," Blade guaranteed. He spotted a row of buses parked near a monument and angled toward it.

"Will killin' the Masters stop the drugs?" Hickok queried.

Blade glanced at his friend. "Stop the drugs?"

"Yeah. Do you think blowin' the Masters away will put an end to the drug use?"

"I doubt it," Blade said. "Someone, or some group, will take over the operation."

Hickok frowned. "That's what I figured. Pity."

"This drug business has you upset, doesn't it?" Rikki interjected.

"Yep," Hickok acknowledged. "I keep thinkin' of what drugs could do to Ringo."

"Your son is safe," Rikki assured him. "The Home is drug free."

"Only because we keep it that way," Hickok mentioned. "The Elders teach us to enjoy life naturally, to value our health. As parents, we're expected to set an example for our young'uns. We have to show 'em that pollutin' their bodies is the worst thing they could possibly do."

Rikki nodded. "Any type of addiction hampers our spiritual communion. Chemical poisons prevent us from enjoying a fuller contact with the Spirit."

"We know that," Hickok said. "And we try to pass on our values to our young'uns. But what about that boy we saw earlier? The one who asked Blade for some money?" He paused. "That kid is learnin' to use drugs from his own parents. He'll be hooked before he's ten. What kind of life is that?"

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

"I know," Hickok reluctantly agreed. "I was just thinkin', is all."

Blade studied the gunman for a moment. Hickok was genuinely perturbed, and rarely did the Family's preeminent gunfighter become disturbed over anything. "You don't need to worry about Ringo," he assured him.

"I pray I don't," Hickok said.

Blade slowed to a casual walk, heading for the buses.

He stared at the monument, a curved wall with the words THE TORCH OF FRIENDSHIP near the top. In front of the wall was a solitary pillar. A man was playing a guitar a few yards from the pillar, a metal cup at his feet. Five people were listening to him, and one of them deposited several coins in the cup.

Blade halted.

The guitarist finished his song and the five listeners dispersed, two of them adding coins to the cup.

"What's up, pard?" Hickok asked.

"We need money," Blade noted.

Hickok looked at the musician. "Got you." He marched toward the guitarist ten feet away.

"Wait—" Blade began, but the gunman kept going.

Hickok stepped up to the musician with his thumbs hooked in his gunbelt. "Howdy."

The guitarist, in the act of tuning his instrument by ear, glanced up. "Hey, man, how's it going?"

"Just dandy," Hickok said.

"Do you have a request?" the guitarist inquired.

"Do you use drugs?"

The man's green eyes narrowed and he ran his right hand through his shoulder-length brown hair. "Say what?"

"Do you use drugs?"

"What kind of question is that?"

"Answer it."

"Yeah, I do drugs. Doesn't everybody?"

"I figured you'd say that."

The musician lowered his guitar. "What's the big deal? Do you want to hear a request or not?"

"Yep."

"What's it called, dude?"

"Do you know This is a Stickup?"

The guitarist pondered for several seconds. "No. Can't say as I do. How does it go?"

Hickok leaned forward. "It goes like this. You hand over your money, and I let you live."

The musician grinned. "Are you puttin' me on, dude?"

Hickok's voice became flinty. "Do I sound like I'm puttin' you on, you peckerwood? And if you call me 'dude' again, I'm gonna ram my Python barrels up your nose and see what happens when I pull the triggers."

The guitarist blinked rapidly. "You're not puttin' me on!"

"You must have all the intellect in your family," Hickok quipped.

"You're really stealin' my bread!" the man exclaimed in astonishment.

"Keep your voice down!" Hickok warned. "I couldn't care less about your bread. I want your *money*. Now."

The guitarist blanched, his lips quivering. "Like, this is for real!"

"The money," Hickok prompted, his hands inching toward his Colts.

The musician noticed the movement and swallowed hard. "Take it! It's all yours!"

"Be a nice... dude... and hand it to me," Hickok directed.

With supreme care, the guitarist leaned over, retrieved the metal cup, and straightened. "Here. Just don't shoot me!"

"I wouldn't think of wastin' the bullet," Hickok commented, taking the cup in his left hand. It was two-thirds full.

"Like, this is a cosmic injustice!" the man stated belligerently.

"Get me riled and you'll see an injustice," Hickok said.

"I'm an artiste!"

"You're a dipshit," Hickok countered. "You're lettin' drugs mess up your head and cramp your talent."

The guitarist snorted derisively. "You're crazy! What do you know? Drugs expand my mind, dude. They make me more creative."

"That's why you're standin' here playin' for small change?" Hickok retorted.

"I need my smack, man."

"Smack?"

"The Big H."

"Can you speak English?"

"Heroin, man. It chills me out. If I don't get my fix, I freak out."

Hickok gazed into the musician's slightly disoriented eyes, recognizing the reflection of commingled craving and fear. He extended the cup.
"Here."

The man gawked at the cup. "What?"

"Here. Take it. You need this more than we do." Hickok wagged the cup and heard the coins jingle.

"You're givin' it back?" the man asked in disbelief.

"Take the damn cup!" Hickok snapped. He suddenly became aware of someone standing behind him and looked over his right shoulder.

Blade and Rikki were a foot away.

"What, *exactly*, are you doing?" Blade calmly inquired.

Hickok mustered a feeble grin. "Who? Me?"

The guitarist, unaware that the guy in buckskins, the giant, and the man in black were together, took a step toward the giant. "Stop him! He's tryin' to rob me!"

Blade glanced from the musician to the gunman. "Is that right? You're robbing him in broad daylight in the middle of a park?"

"You said we need money," Hickok responded.

"But I didn't intend for you to steal it," Blade said.

The guitarist stared from the giant to the guy in buckskins. "You two know each other?"

"How else will we get the money?" Hickok asked Blade.

"You two know each other!" the musician reiterated.

"We'll find a way," Blade stated. "First, we see if one of these buses goes to Miami Beach. Then we'll find out how much it will cost for the three of us. After we know how much we'll need, we'll find a way to get it."

"You want to take the bus to Miami Beach?" the guitarist questioned in astonishment.

"I figured this yahoo could spare a few coins," Hickok commented.

The musician's face was turning a light shade of crimson. His eyes glared from one to the other. "All this over the lousy bus?" He snatched the cup. "You morons!"

Hickok looked at the guitarist. "What's eatin' you?"

"What's eatin' me?" the musician exploded. "I'll tell you what's eatin' me! You scared me half to death over a lousy bus fare! You threatened to blow out my brains for a bus ride!"

"I was only joshin' you," Hickok said.

The guitarist became madder. He leaned his guitar against his left leg and began sorting through the coins in the cup. "Of all the dumbass, screwball, wacked-out things I've ever heard—"

"I don't see why you're being so touchy," Hickok remarked. "You're still in one piece."

The musician's mouth moved, but no words came out. He held three large silver coins in his left hand and jabbed his arm at the gunman. "Here!"

"What are they?" Hickok asked.

"What do they look like?" the guitarist retorted. "They're your bus fare."

"What?"

"You heard me!" the musician snapped. "It costs a buck to ride the shuttle bus from here to Miami Beach. There's three bucks here. Enough for all three of you."

"We don't want your money," Hickok stated.

"Take it."

"No. You keep it."

"Take the damn money!" the guitarist shouted.

"We'll take it," Blade said, stepping up and palming the coins. "And thank you."

"Don't thank me!" the musician barked. "I don't want your gratitude! I just want you out of my life!"

"We're going," Blade assured him.

"And take this lunatic with you!" the guitarist demanded, nodding at the gunman.

"Who are you callin' a lunatic?" Hickok responded.

"Get him out of here!"

Blade tugged on the gunfighter's right arm. "Come on."

Hickok shook his head and turned toward the buses. "Some people have no sense of humor."

Chapter Seven

"May I help you?"

Blade smiled at the elderly desk clerk, then scrutinized the dozens of small wooden boxes on the wall to the rear of the front desk. "Yes. My name is John Clayton. I believe some forms were dropped off for me."

"Forms?" the desk clerk said, turning toward the boxes. His balding pate was nonetheless slicked and combed, his cerulean suit immaculate. "No one mentioned any forms—"

"The Narcs were supposed to leave them here for me," Blade explained.

The desk clerk wheeled. "The Narcs! So you're the gentleman!"

"Yes."

The desk clerk stepped to the boxes and removed several folded sheets of paper from a box on the lower left. "It isn't every day the Narcs drop off

something."

"I hope it wasn't an inconvenience."

"Inconvenience?" the desk clerk repeated, sounding shocked at the suggestion. "Helping the Narcs is an honor!" He placed the papers on the counter.

"Thanks," Blade said, taking them and starting to leave.

"Will you be staying the night?" the desk clerk inquired hopefully. "I can reserve a suite for you right now."

"I'll think it over," Blade said. He walked to the front entrance to the Ocean View and pushed through the glass doors.

Rikki and Hickok were waiting on the top step.

"Did they leave the papers?" Rikki asked.

Blade nodded, unfolding the three sheets.

"I don't see why we're diddlin' around with this nonsense," Hickok remarked. "Are you plannin' to file a formal complaint?"

"No," Blade said.

"I know you," Hickok stated. "You don't do nothin' without a reason. What gives?"

"Your great plan, remember?"

"My plan?"

"To find a bigwig and force whoever it is to take us to the Masters," Blade reminded the gunfighter.

"How's this tie in?"

Blade examined the top sheet, a white piece of paper entitled FORM 1073 CITIZEN COMPLAINT. The second sheet, another white paper, bore a bold, black PAGE TWO at the top. He checked the third and final sheet and smiled. This one was a yellow paper, and handwritten in the middle of

the page was the information he wanted. "Bingo."

"What is it?" Hickok questioned.

"The name of Fowler's Dealer and his address," Blade replied.

Hickok grinned. "Now I get it."

"The Narc wanted us to fill out the forms and drop them in the mail," Blade said. "We'll go him one better. We'll deliver the forms personally."

"So where does this big-time Dealer live?" Hickok inquired.

Blade read from the paper. "The Oasis Resort Hotel. It's on Collins Avenue."

"We're on Ocean Drive now, right?" Hickok brought up.

"Yeah," Blade said.

"How far is Collins Avenue from here?" Rikki queried.

"Let's find out the same way we found this place," Blade responded. "Ask."

The Warriors descended the half-dozen concrete steps to the street.

"Miami Beach sure comes alive at night," Hickok commented.

Blade was thinking the same thing. The avenues and streets had been much less crowded two and a half hours ago when the shuttle bus from Bayfront Park had deposited them on Dade Boulevard after crossing the Venetian Causeway. The late afternoon heat had instilled a lethargy in the inhabitants, a sluggishness promptly dispelled by the enveloping shroud of darkness. Now, with a few stars faintly discernible in the inky sky, Miami Beach was a vibrant, hustling hub of activity. People thronged to the sidewalks. Vehicles packed the thoroughfares. And there was a distinct difference evident, as if those who roamed Miami Beach at night were a breed apart from the daytime dwellers. The clothing worn by the passersby consisted more of tailored suits and dresses instead of black leather and jeans. Even the cars prowling from block to block betrayed the meticulous care they received by their shiny paint jobs and gleaming bumpers and chrome strips.

A pair of women approached the Warriors, one in a sheer black dress, the second in a yellow blouse and short red skirt. Their hair was stylishly coiffured, their nails painted red, their lips a striking scarlet.

Hickok nodded at them and smiled. "Howdy."

They stopped. The brunette in the red skirt raked the Warrior with a critical gaze. "Howdy yourself, handsome."

"We need some help," Hickok told her.

The woman laughed and nudged her friend. "I'll bet you do, lover!"

"We're open to anything except S and M," the woman in the black dress added.

"S and M?" Hickok repeated quizzically.

"Yeah," the brunette stated. "We don't do the kinky stuff. A working girl has to draw the line somewhere."

"It's nice to know you ladies are holdin' down jobs," Hickok remarked, "and we really can use your help. Which way is it to Collins Avenue?"

The brunette's brown eyes narrowed. "Is that all you want? Directions?"

"We're lookin' for the Oasis Resort Hotel," Hickok elaborated. "Do you know it?"

"Yeah, we know it," responded the one in the black dress.

"How do we get there?" Hickok inquired.

"Is that *really* all you want?" the brunette demanded.

"That's it," Hickok said. "We'd be in your debt."

"You don't want to turn a trick?" asked the brunette.

"This isn't a blamed trick!" Hickok declared.

The women exchanged bemused glances. "Are there many like you at home?" the brunette asked.

"Nope," Hickok said. "I'm one of a kind."

"Figures," the brunette stated. "So you need directions to the Oasis?"

"That's the general idea."

"Go north three blocks," she instructed them. "Then take a left. The next drag you'll come to is Collins. Take a right. Go about a half-mile. The Oasis is on the right. You can't miss it."

Hickok grinned. "Thanks. Hope you ladies have a fun night."

"Business before pleasure," the brunette said, and they walked off.

"What did she mean by that?" Hickok queried.

"They must work the night shift," Rikki speculated.

"Let's go," Blade directed, leading them to the north. He folded the papers and slid them into his right front pants pocket.

"What if this Dealer doesn't want to take us to the Masters?" Hickok asked.

"He'll take us," Blade stated.

They traveled the three blocks to the appropriate intersection, then turned to the left. Their progress was slow, hampered by the press of the lively crowds.

"Will you look at that!" Hickok marveled.

A tall black woman was drawing near. She wore black, high-heeled shoes, a lavender skirt scarcely covering her shapely thighs, and a pair of silver cups constructed from a pliable material over her large breasts. Purple tassels dangled from the tips of the cups.

"The womenfolk hereabouts sure don't believe in modesty," Hickok observed.

The Warriors reached Collins Avenue and took a right. The volume of pedestrian and vehicle traffic was twice that of Ocean Drive.

"I'm glad I don't live in a city on a regular basis," Hickok remarked. "Give me the wide-open spaces any day."

"Millions, maybe billions, lived like this before the war," Blade mentioned pensively. "Overpopulation was a serious problem for most of the countries in the world."

"No wonder they went off the deep end and tried to blow themselves sky-high," Hickok said.

Blade glanced at Rikki. "Why are you so quiet?"

"Something is amiss," the martial artist answered.

"Like what?"

Rikki's thin lips tightened. "I don't know. But I feel that something is wrong."

Blade scanned the avenue in all directions. "I don't see anything."

Rikki shrugged. "I could be mistaken. My intuition is not infallible."

Blade looked at Hickok. "Do you feel anything?"

"Hungry."

"You're a big help," Blade muttered. He threaded his way to the north, bothered by Rikki's revelation. The martial artist was not prone to needless worry or flights of fancy. Rikki was always levelheaded, even if the Zen he practiced did imbue him with a mystical air. If Rikki's senses were telling him that something was wrong, then something was wrong.

But what?

What had they overlooked?

"It's all this sea air," Hickok quipped. "Everything seems fishy."

Blade couldn't help but grin. He searched the avenue for someone who might be tailing them or watching them surreptitiously.

Nothing.

Maybe Hickok was right.

They proceeded a quarter of a mile.

Blade was almost to an intersection when there was a tug on his right arm. He turned to find a thin man with a sparse mustache attired in a natty white suit and carrying a cane. "Yes?"

The man in white beamed. "I couldn't help but notice you boys. I bet you're from out of town, right?"

"Is it that obvious?" Blade responded.

"Your threads have a lot to do with it," the man said.

Hickok looked down at himself. "Threads?"

"What can we do for you?" Blade inquired.

"You've got it backwards, friend," the man said. "It's what I can do for you."

"For us?"

"You name it, I can supply it," the man boasted. "You want broads? I have a stable of the finest in Miami. You want to connect, I'm your source. Crack, smack, ludes, weed, whatever you want, the Genie can get."

"Are you the Genie?" Blade questioned.

The man in white bowed. "At your service, sir! I don't mean to brag, but my rep is as heavy as they come! I supply the tourists with the stuff dreams are made of. I—"

A young girl, not much over 15, abruptly materialized to the Genie's left. She was wearing a lacy red dress and red shoes. Her hair was blonde, her face caked with makeup. Her arms were folded across her chest and she was shivering. "Genie?"

He stared at her in disapproval. "Not now. Can't you see that I'm busy?"

"Please," she said, fidgeting with the strap to her brown purse.

Before the Warriors could intervene, the Genie slapped the girl on the mouth.

"You know better than to interrupt when I'm making a sale!"

Tears welled in the girl's eyes. "I can't help it! I need a fix."

"Work for it like everyone else."

The girl glanced at Blade. "How about you, mister?"

"Me?" the Warrior responded.

"Yeah. I'll get you off for twenty. Please. I need the bread."

Blade studied her for several seconds. His features seemed to ripple in the glare of the streetlight, hardening for a fraction of a instant before inexplicably relaxing as he smiled at the girl. "I may be dense, but I'm not stupid."

"What?" the girl asked.

"Nothing," Blade said. He gazed at the man in white. "You've impressed me. I'd like to do business with you."

The Genie snickered. "A man of class! What what will it be? Coke? Grass?"

"Grass will be fine."

"How much do you want?"

"A handful should be enough."

The Genie blinked twice, then cackled. "I like your style, my man. You can buy it by the joint, the lid, whatever. If you've got the green, you can buy a whole key."

"We'll take three keys."

Hickok and Rikki looked at one another and Hickok shrugged.

The Genie's mouth slackened. "Three keys? Are you putting me on?"

"No."

"Three keys is a lot of bread, man," the Genie said. "You have that much on you?"

Blade patted his right front pocket. "I have it on me."

"You wouldn't be trying to stick it to me, would you?" the Genie queried suspiciously.

"I want to do the honorable thing," Blade said.

The Genie hesitated, his dark eyes roving over the Paratrooper on the giant's right shoulder and the Bowies in their sheaths. "I don't know—"

"Suit yourself," Blade stated, and started to turn.

"Wait!"

Blade faced the Genie.

"All right. We've got a deal," the man in white declared.

Blade began to reach into his right front pocket. "Do you want the money now?"

"No!" the Genie replied hastily. "Don't go flashing that much bread! Some of these hit-and-run types might see it!"

Blade removed his hand. "Where then?"

The Genie jerked his head to the rear. "My wheels, man. They're parked down the block. I've got the stuff in the trunk."

"After you," Blade said.

"What about me?" the girl asked.

"You stay put, bitch!" the Genie snapped. "I'll deal with you later."

Blade looked at his companions. "You two stay here. I'll be right back."

"You sure, pard?" Hickok responded.

Blade nodded.

"Follow me," the Genie directed, and hurried down the block.

Blade warily followed, deliberately holding his hands away from his Bowies. He spotted a row of flashy cars parked along the curb.

The Genie hastened toward an enormous automobile notable for its sparkling golden finish and more chrome per square inch than any other vehicle in sight. "I knew this was my lucky night!" he declared excitedly over his right shoulder.

"Mine too."

"You never can tell," the Genie went on. "If there's one thing I've learned in this business, it's never to judge a book by its cover. You never now how much bread a customer will have."

The front passenger door on the gold car suddenly opened and a huge black in a black suit climbed out. His head was bald, his expression tainted with a cruel edge.

"This is Hugo," the Genie said, introducing his henchman as he halted next to the front fender.

Blade stopped and nodded.

Huge said nothing, his eyes radiating distrust.

"This gentleman wants to buy three keys," the Genie stated. "Open the trunk. Give him a peek at our goodies."

Huge moved to the rear of the car, withdrew a key ring from his left front pocket, and unlocked the trunk.

"See for yourself," the Genie said, walking to the rear and motioning for Blade to join him.

The Warrior moved to within a foot of the trunk.

"Open it," the Genie said.

Hugo slowly raised the lid.

Blade's eyes narrowed as he beheld the bewildering collection of drugs and drug paraphernalia. The trunk was filled to the brim.

"I'm as good as my word," the Genie declared. He reached into the trunk and patted three large bundles. "Three keys. Just what you want. Now I need to see the color of your money."

Blade reached for his right pocket.

"Wait a second," the Genie said. "Why don't we do this right? Step into my parlor. We can have a drink while we finalize the deal." He stepped to the rear door and threw it wide. "After you."

Blade leaned over and peered into the spacious, indulgently furnished interior. The back seat was covered with a lustrous brown leather, and the floor was a rich, thick, green carpet. A handsome wooden cabinet was positioned behind the front seat.

"Slide on in," the Genie urged.

Blade hunched his broad shoulders and eased into the plush vehicle. He looked out the rear window to see Hugo standing next to the trunk.

"Close it," the Genie ordered, then bent down to enter the car.

Blade was in the middle of the seat, his buttocks resting on the edge, his body slightly twisted to the left, his right hand touching the wooden cabinet, his left on his left Bowie.

The Genie was halfway inside, the cane in his right hand.

Blade tensed and watched as Hugo walked to the rear and was momentarily obscured by the trunk lid.

Now!

The Warrior's body unwound, his right hand sweeping up and over the Genie's head, his fingers locking on the man's neck and yanking the Genie forward even as his left hand brought the Bowie around and up in a savage arc. The tip of the razor-honed blade penetrated the Genie's neck just below his chin, and the knife slanted upwards and was buried to the hilt.

For an instant of incredulous shock, the Genie's only reaction was a widening of his eyes. He gurgled as a crimson spray gushed from his throat, then abruptly lunged, hissing, spearing the cane at the giant's face. There was a muted click and a five-inch sharpened metal spike popped out the top of the cane.

Blade jerked his head aside, but the spike dug a red groove in his left cheek. He tightened his hold on the Genie's neck and slammed the man to the seat.

The trunk lid closed with a thump.

Blade kept his eyes on Hugo as the black came around the driver's side. His arms bulged as he held the Genie flush with the seat, and he felt the spurting blood spatter his left forearm. Would Hugo look inside first or simply open the driver's side door? Blade gritted his teeth as the Genie thrashed and heaved, the cane swinging wildly.

Hugo reached for the rear door.

The Genie uttered a strangled gasp and went limp.

Blade yanked his left Bowie free as the door on the driver's side opened. He spun, the Bowie going straight out, knowing he had to take Hugo down without attracting the attention of anyone outside.

Hugo was leaning down when the Bowie sliced through his trousers and into his groin. Totally stunned, racked by torment, he inadvertently doubled over and clutched at his genitals.

Blade clamped his right arm on the bodyguard's throat and hauled Hugo inside, onto the floor. The small oval overhead bulb cast a garish yellow glow on the black's stupefied expression.

Hugo brought his bloody hands up, clawing at the Warrior.

Blade wrenched the Bowie out, then sank the knife in Hugo's chest.

Hugo stiffened, his lips moving formlessly, then sank back, his eyes open but unfocused. He expelled a lingering breath and was still.

Blade glanced at the avenue. Cars and other vehicles were passing, but

not one appeared to have noticed the struggle. He pulled his Bowie from Hugo's body, wiped the blade on Hugo's jacket, and replaced the knife in its sheath. Working quickly, he closed the driver's side door, then reached for the passenger door.

And froze.

The Genie's black shoes were protruding from the passenger side.

Staring at those shoes, not two feet from the car, was the young girl in the lacy red dress.

Blade prepared to pounce, expecting her to scream.

Instead, she looked him in the eyes, her features composed and licked her lips. "I get half or I'll roll over to the Narcs."

"What?"

She moved closer. "Don't try and scam me, turkey! I want half!"

"Half of what?"

She put her hands on her hips. "You know damn well what I'm talking about! What's it going to be? Fifty-fifty, or the Narcs?"

"I don't want the Narcs involved," Blade admitted.

She slapped the Genie's shoes. "Dump his ass on the floor."

Confounded, Blade rolled the man in white on top of Hugo.

"Keep your hands away from your knives," she warned as she slid in.

"Close your door," Blade said,

"Do I look stupid?" she countered. "The door stays open!" She reached for the wooden cabinet and jerked on a gold knob. "Fifty-fifty is fair," she commented nervously.

Blade did a double take as his gray eyes alighted on the contents of the cabinet. Under a shelf containing liquor bottles and glasses was another shelf piled high with stacks of bills and rolls of gold and silver coins bound

by plastic bands.

"Look at it!" the girl said in awe.

"You want to split this fifty-fifty?" Blade asked.

The girl stared at him defiantly. "Damn straight! Unless you want me to go to the Narcs!"

"You seem more concerned about the money than the Genie," Blade commented.

She glanced at the corpse in white, scowling. "Who the hell cares about that bastard? I can always get me a new pimp. Young fluff is always in demand. Know what I mean?"

"Fluff?"

She nodded at the cabinet. "Look! Enough stalling! Do we split this or not?"

Blade studied her for several seconds, then sighed. "Take as much as you want."

"What?"

"I don't need half of it," Blade told her. He removed two half-inch stacks of bills and two rolls of coins. "The rest is yours."

She looked like she was going to lay an egg. "Are you for real?"

Blade stuffed the bills into his left front pocket, then placed the coins in his left rear pocket.

"Are you for real?" she repeated.

The Warrior gestured at the cabinet. "Help yourself."

She laughed and opened her purse. "I may never have to hustle again!"

"You could start a new life," Blade suggested.

She grabbed stacks of bills and crammed them into her purse. "You

don't know the half of it!"

"You could give up the drugs."

Her hand paused in midair. "Why would I want to do that?" She laughed and resumed filling her purse.

"You like using drugs?"

"Sure. Doesn't everybody?" She giggled. "With this, I can get a buzz on like you wouldn't believe."

"Why not do something constructive with your life? Why not find a mate and settle down? Why not rear a family?"

She gazed at him in surprise. "Get real, man! You sound like my grandmother. Those old ways are for nerds! Number one is all that counts, and I intend to look out for number one."

Blade waited as she finished stuffing her purse.

"That's it!" she exclaimed happily, looking at him. "Thanks. I'll never forget you!"

Blade said nothing.

"Are you sure you wouldn't like a freebie? I feel like I owe you. How about a quickie right here?"

"No," Blade responded softly.

"What's the matter with you? A big hunk like you, and you don't want to make it? Why not?"

"I doubt that you'd understand."

"Try me," she prompted.

"For one thing, I'm married—"

"So? Three-fourths of my Johns are married."

"For another, sex should be an expression of love, not lust."

The girl laughed. "You're weird! Do you know that?"

"We should leave before someone looks inside," Blade advised.

She glanced at the sidewalk, at the people hustling past. "I guess you're right. If I had the time, I'd snatch some of the trunk stash. But we're pushing our luck as it is."

"May you know true happiness someday."

The girl laughed and climbed out. "Ta-ta, lover!" she said in parting, and dashed to the south.

Blade emerged from the car and closed the door. He spotted a man in a brown suit standing a few yards away, watching him. "Do you want something?" he demanded.

The man shook his head and blended in with the throng.

Blade turned to the north.

"Havin' fun, pard?"

"We could have helped you."

Hickok and Rikki were near the front fender, their bodies positioned so that anyone walking past would need to swing wide of the vehicle.

"Let's find the Oasis Resort Hotel," Blade said.

Hickok nodded at the car. "What was that all about?"

Blade frowned. "I don't know if I could explain it."

"Yeah," Hickok said thoughtfully, surveying their surroundings. "This city is gettin' to me too."

Blade headed north.

Chapter Eight

"Can I be of service?"

Blade stared at the middle-aged desk clerk in the blue suit. "I hope so. The Narcs sent me to the Oasis."

The desk clerk was suddenly all attention. "The Narcs? Whatever about?"

"I'm to deliver some papers to a man staying here," Blade detailed.

"Who is the gentleman?"

The Warrior reached into his right front pocket and extracted the three folded sheets. He deposited them on the counter and read the name written on the yellow paper. "Tom Barbish."

"Mr. Barbish!" the desk clerk exclaimed.

"Do you know him?"

"Of course! Everyone knows Mr. Barbish!"

"We need to see him."

The desk clerk glanced at the giant's two associates and his nose crinkled. "What about?"

"That's between Mr. Barbish and us," Blade stated.

"Mr. Barbish is one of our top tenants," the desk clerk said. "He occupies the Presidential Suite, and has for years. I'm not about to risk interrupting him over a trifle."

"This is important," Blade persisted.

"So *you* say."

"All right," Blade said in feigned resignation. "But I'll need your name."

"My name?"

"To tell the Narcs," Blade explained. "They'll want to know the reason Mr. Barbish didn't receive the forms."

"I don't see why I should be involved," the clerk said defensively.

Blade shrugged. "You know the Narcs."

"I don't want the Narcs on my case."

"I don't blame you." Blade folded the forms again and took a step from the front desk.

"Hold it," the clerk stated.

Blade looked back.

"I can phone Mr. Barbish's suite for you. If he consents, you can go up."

"That's fair," Blade said. "We'll wait."

The desk clerk moved to a white telephone on the wall behind the desk.

Hickok leaned toward Blade. "I don't see why we didn't just mosey upstairs and tend to Barbish."

"Take a look at the elevators," Blade advised.

Hickok glanced to the right at the row of four elevators. Three were set off by themselves and were being used by the general public. The fourth, though, isolated by itself in the corner, was distinguished by a large sign above it with the word PRIVATE, and by the pair of guards blocking the elevator door.

"I want you to stay in the lobby," Blade directed the gunman. "Keep your eyes on those guards. If an alarm sounds, take them out."

"Piece of cake," Hickok pledged.

The desk clerk returned to the counter. "You're fortunate that Mr. Barbish is in and has consented to see you." He pointed at the isolated elevator. "Take Mr. Barbish's private elevator to the penthouse on the eighteenth floor."

"Thank you," Blade said. He led Rikki through the crowded lobby to the far wall.

The two guards straightened, their hands hovering near their belts.

"You want something?" the burliest of the duo demanded.

"Mr. Barbish wants to see us," Blade replied. "The desk clerk said we can go up."

The guard glanced at the desk clerk, who nodded. "Okay. But the hardware stays here."

"We can't take our weapons?"

"Not if you want to see Mr. Barbish. No ones goes up armed. That's the rule. No exceptions," the guard stated.

Blade unslung the Paratrooper and leaned the automatic rifle in the corner. He hesitated before drawing his Bowies. "These had better be here when I come back down."

"No one is going to steal your hardware," the guard assured him. "What do you think we're standing here for? Our health?"

Blade rested the Bowies on the carpeted floor.

Rikki-Tikki-Tavi rested his katana and M-16 in the corner.

The second guard pressed a button to the left of the elevator and the door hissed wide.

Blade moved toward it.

"Not so fast," the burly guard said. "Leave the backpacks."

The two Warriors removed their backpacks and dropped them next to their weapons.

"Anything else?" Blade asked impatiently.

"I've got to frisk you."

Blade frowned.

"Don't blame me, buddy," the guard said. "I'm just doing my job." He stepped in close to the giant and expertly ran his hands over all potential spots where a weapon could be concealed. "You're clean," he declared.

Rikki raised his arms from his sides.

The guard frisked the martial artist. He was running his fingers around Rikki's back when he froze. "What's this on the back of your belt?"

"My pouch."

"What's in it?"

"My kyoketsu-shogei, four shuriken, and a yawara."

"What? Show me?" The guard stepped back.

Rikki opened the pouch and withdrew the weapons, holding them in his palms.

"What the hell!" the burly guard declared. He picked up a metal star and inspected its sharp edges. "What's this thing?"

"A shuriken."

"What do you do with it?"

"Throw it."

The guard snickered. "You use this dingy thing as a weapon? Give me a .357 any day!" He tapped a black round piece of metal an inch in diameter and six inches long. "And what's this one?"

"The yawara."

"What do you do? Poke people with it?"

"Something like that."

His eyes narrowing, the guard inspected the last item, a doubled edged, five-inch knife attached to a length of cord with a metal ring at the end.

"And what the hell is that?"

"My kyoketsu-shogei."

"How's it work?"

"Perhaps one day I can give you a demonstration."

"Mr. Barbish is waiting for us," Blade noted.

"Okay," the guard said. "Put your stuff in the corner," he instructed Rikki, handing over the shuriken. "I'll keep a real good eye on it. I wouldn't want anyone to walk off with your deadly arsenal."

Both guards laughed.

Blade entered the elevator and waited for Rikki to join him. He spied Hickok in the lobby, nonchalantly leaning against an ornate white column.

The gunman smiled and winked.

"You'll be searched again upstairs," the guard informed them as he pressed the button on the wall.

The elevator door closed and the cage ascended.

"Orders?" Rikki inquired.

"They'll be waiting for us upstairs," Blade said. "We'll play it by ear. Watch me. If I nod, you know what to do."

Rikki nodded.

The elevator climbed swiftly to the penthouse and coasted to a smooth stop, and a second later the door opened. Four men in suits were standing outside the elevator, two of whom were armed with machine guns, M.A.C. 10s. They stood slightly to the side of the doorway, one to the right, the other to the left. Two more men, neither holding a firearm, were directly in front of the elevator.

"Hello," said the tallest of the duo, a man in a blue suit. "Step out and raise your arms."

Blade and Rikki complied, with Blade deliberately taking a shuffling stride to the right. He scanned the plush, spacious living room beyond and spotted a sole figure seated on a large sofa. The man's back was to the elevator, and all Blade could see was a thatch of gray hair and slim shoulders. Was it Barbish? The man was gazing out an enormous window at the Miami Beach skyline.

The tall bodyguard stepped up to Blade as his unarmed companion did the same to Rikki.

"This will just take a moment," the tall one said to Blade.

Blade smiled, looked at Rikki, and nodded, and even as he nodded he was whipping his body to the right, his massive fist clenched, delivering a pile-driver blow to the guard with the M.A.C. 10, his knuckles crunching on the guard's nose and sending the man flying backwards.

As Blade attacked, so did Rikki. Lacking the giant Warrior's extended reach, Rikki was compelled to compensate with his skill and speed. There was no way he could reach the second bodyguard packing a M.A.C. 10 before the man could fire. So he grabbed the guard about to frisk him by the lapels, whirled, and shoved, flinging the startled man into his colleague. Both men stumbled backwards, and Rikki was on them in two bounds. He deflected the M.A.C. 10 with his left forearm, then delivered a slashing leopard-paw strike to the bodyguard's throat, crushing the larynx. The frisker was clawing for a pistol on his left hip. Rikki kicked the guard on the right kneecap and heard a cracking sound, and as the man buckled, opening his mouth to scream, Rikki used a sword-hand blow and chopped the man across the throat. The Warrior pivoted.

Blade had already dispatched the tall guard and was holding a Browning automatic pistol in his right hand, trained on the figure on the sofa.

The man in the living room had not budged.

Blade glanced at the pair Rikki had dispatched, then pointed at the machine gun the bodyguard had dropped.

Rikki retrieved the M.A.C. 10.

The figure on the sofa still hadn't moved.

Blade's forehead creased as he advanced into the living room, the thick, green carpet muffling his footsteps. He aimed the Browning at the rear of the gray-haired man's cranium. Slowly, cautiously, he skirted the end of the sofa, then stopped.

The man was asleep! He was dozing on the sofa, his chin slumped forward, breathing regularly. His gray hair was streaked with white, and he wore a tan suit. Wrinkles lined his weathered features.

Blade walked up to the man and nudged him with the Browning.

The sleeper abruptly awakened, his head swiveling to the left, his green eyes widening at the sight of the giant. He turned, spying the man in black cradling a M.A.C. 10 six feet from the sofa, and then looked at the four forms on the floor near the elevator. Instead of registering fear or shock, the gray-haired man recovered his composure and stared up at the giant. "Congratulations. No one has ever taken Casper down before. You must be good."

"Are you Tom Barbish?" Blade asked.

"One and the same," Barbish replied. "And you?"

"My name is unimportant," Blade said.

"Are you here to kill me?" Barbish inquired coolly.

"That depends on you," Blade stated.

Barbish studied the giant for a moment. "You're from the outside."

Blade surveyed the living room, bothered by the dealer's calm demeanor.

"You are, aren't you?" Barbish asked.

"I'll ask the questions," Blade told him.

Barbish shrugged. "Suit yourself. But I know I'm right."

"You do, huh?"

The dealer smiled. "When you've been around as long as I have, young

man, you learn a thing or two. You're not from Miami. You're not from Dragon territory."

"Would you believe I'm from Jerome?"

Barbish chuckled. "Is that what you're telling everyone? No, you're not from Jerome."

"How can you be so sure?"

The dealer looked fearlessly at Blade. "Elementary, young man. Jerome is a small town approximately twenty miles from the Gulf, as the crow flies. Not many people live there now. My travels have taken me through Jerome several times, and I never saw you there. And face it. You'd stand out like the proverbial sore thumb." He paused. "Don't try to convince me you live on the outskirts of Jerome either. You're not the type to spend his days raising sugar cane or trapping alligators for a living. No, you have the air of a leader about you."

"Where are the Masters?" Blade demanded bluntly.

Barbish was taken by surprise by the unexpected question. "The Masters?"

"You heard me. I need to find the Masters."

"Is that what this is all about?" Barbish asked, then laughed.

"What's so funny?"

Barbish laughed louder and slapped his left thigh.

Blade glanced at Rikki, who shrugged.

"You went to all this trouble for nothing!" Barbish stated. "I can't help you!"

"You'll help us," Blade directed, leaning down, "or else."

"Please, young man!" Barbish said, smiling. "There is no need to be so melodramatic. I'm not a fool. I don't want to die. If I could assist you, I would. But I can't, because I have no idea where the Masters can be found."

"Don't lie to me."

Barbish held his hands out, palms up. "I'm not lying! I have had very little contact with the Masters."

Blade wagged the Browning. "You're a Dealer. You're one of the top men in the Dragons. And the Masters head the Dragons."

"I'm a Dealer," Barbish confessed. "But I'm two levels removed from the top of the Dragons."

"Explain," Blade ordered.

"The Masters run the show. At the bottom of the barrel are the pushers, who receive their wares from the middle-echelon distributors. Dealers like myself comprise the next level up. We insure our merchandise is allotted properly to our distributors, and through our network we keep tabs on our pushers to ensure they don't cheat us. We're responsible for all the people under us, and we're held accountable for the quality of the dope we sell. But we're also held to account by those above us," Barbish detailed.

"Above you?" Blade repeated.

Barbish nodded. "The Directors. There are thirteen of them, and each one is personally selected by the Masters. The Directors get together with the Masters on a regular basis, not the Dealers. Once a year the Masters hold a meeting in Miami with us." Barbish grinned. "So if you came here hoping I would take you to the Masters, I'm afraid you're in for a disappointment."

Blade scrutinized the Dealer, striving to determine if Barbish was being truthful. Reluctantly, he decided the man was sincere. "Do you report to one of these Directors?"

"Yes," Barbish answered. "Each Director is responsible for the oversight of six Dealers." He sighed wistfully. "Most of the street people look up to the Dealers. They think we have all this power, all this prestige. Most of them don't even know about the Directors."

"The Directors are the only ones who know where to find the Masters?" Blade requested confirmation.

"You've got it," Barbish said. "I don't know why you're after the Masters, but I do know you'll never find them."

"We'll locate them," Blade stated, "with your help."

"My help?"

"You're going to take us to your Director," Blade directed.

Barbish tensed. "I can't do that."

"You have no choice."

"If I take you to my Director, the Masters will have me killed."

Blade grinned as he reached out and tapped the Browning on the Dealer's nose. "And what do you think I'll do if you don't take us?"

"I'll take my chances with you," Barbish said.

"Your mistake," Blade declared, and rammed the Browning barrel into the Dealer's stomach.

Barbish doubled over, wheezing, his face reddening.

The Warrior gouged the barrel into the side of the Dealer's neck. "Are you paying attention?" he asked gruffly.

His face flushed, his eyes wide, gasping for air, Barbish nodded vigorously.

"Good. Because if you don't do exactly as I say, when I say it, you're dead," Blade stated. "Understand?"

Barbish nodded again.

"I've seen this city," Blade went on. "I've seen what's happened to the people here. The drugs have ruined their lives, turned their values upside down. They've become slaves to their addictions. And the Dragons are to blame. Since you're one of the major Dealers, you're largely responsible for the conditions here. You're more guilty than most." He paused, his tone lowering. "I think you're scum, Barbish. You're the human equivalent of garbage. And if you don't cooperate, I'll squash you like the bug you are!"

The Dealer trembled.

"Now on your feet!" Blade commanded, stepping back.

Barbish slowly stood, his right hand holding his abdomen.

"We're leaving," Blade said. "You're taking us to your Director. If you try any tricks, you'll be dead before we are."

Rikki moved toward the elevator.

"Let's go!" Blade snapped, hefting the Browning. *He* backed across the living room with the Dealer following meekly. "What's the name of your Director?"

"Arlo," Barbish answered in a barely audible tone.

"Arlo what?"

"Arlo Paolucci."

"And where do we find Mr. Paolucci?"

"He has an estate west of Miami," Barbish disclosed.

"How far west?"

"About fifteen miles west of the city limits on Highway 41."

Blade reached Rikki's side and halted. "Okay. We're going down. You'd better pray that your men downstairs don't start something, because you may be caught in the cross fire."

"They'll know something's up," Barbish said. "They'll try and stop you."

"Then you'll buy us a few seconds," Blade stated. "Talk to them. Tell them anything. Stall them." He glanced at Rikki. "Take them out quietly."

Rikki-Tikki-Tavi nodded.

Blade waved the Browning at the elevator. "Inside," he said.

The Dealer walked past the Warriors and entered the cage.

Blade and Rikki stepped inside. Blade scrutinized the side panels to the door. "Where's the button?"

Barbish nodded at the doorway. "On the outer wall, to the right. It's a security precaution. The elevator can only be operated by someone standing outside, by one of my guards."

"That's easily remedied," Blade declared, leaning out the doorway and looking to the right. The black button was positioned just beyond the reach of a normal-sized man, but he wasn't normal-sized. He reached out and easily stabbed the button, then withdrew before the door could shut.

The elevator began its descent.

Blade tucked the Browning in the small of his back. "Stall them or you're dead."

Rikki placed the M.A.C. 10 in a corner and straightened.

Barbish swallowed hard, his eyes flicking nervously from Warrior to Warrior.

"Don't do anything stupid," Blade cautioned.

The elevator passed floor after floor.

Sweat broke out on the Dealer's face.

Blade pushed Barbish up to the door. "Remember what I've said."

The Dealer took a deep breath as the elevator glided to a rest at the bottom of the shaft.

Rikki was waiting to the right of the doorway.

With a protracted hiss, the door slid wide.

Both guards were facing the elevator, their hands at their sides. Both displayed surprise when their gaze alighted on the Dealer.

"Mr. Barbish!" the burly one exclaimed. "Where's Casper?"

"Upstairs," Barbish answered. "I wanted to see these gentlemen out by

myself."

The burly guard's eyes narrowed. "Is everything okay?"

Barbish stepped from the elevator. "Of course."

Rikki exited, smiling at the guards as he walked to his pile of weapons and crouched.

The burly guard eyed the Warrior suspiciously. "I don't know about this," he said, his right hand drifting under his jacket.

"Believe me," Barbish assured him. "Everything is fine."

Both guards glanced at their boss.

And Rikki uncoiled with the dazzling quickness of a striking cobra. He spun around, a shuriken in his left hand, the kyoketsu-shogei in his right. His left arm arced up and out, and the gleaming shuriken streaked straight into the second guard's forehead, the razor teeth biting deep. Powered by Rikki's steely sinews, the shuriken sank over half its width inward. The guard tottered backwards, his right hand gripping the shuriken and tugging, but all he succeeded in doing was slicing his hand and three fingers. Crimson flowed over his face.

The burly guard was drawing a pistol.

Rikki released the kyoketsu-shogei in an underhand motion, the last two fingers on his right hand retaining a hold on the metal ring as his thumb and first two fingers sent the five-inch knife into the burly guard's throat. The man grabbed for the double-edged knife in sheer reflex. Before his foe could snatch the weapon, Rikki wrenched on the metal ring connected by the leather cord to the knife hilt. The knife was yanked free, its trajectory marked by a geyser of spurting blood.

Pressing his slippery, crimson-coated hands over the hole in his neck, the burly guard fell to his knees.

The guard struck by the shuriken collapsed onto his back.

Rikki scooped up the yawara and stepped up close to the burly guard. He delivered a roundhouse blow to the side of the man's head with the tip.

With a loud groan, the guard sprawled onto his face.

Rikki crouched and began reclaiming his gear.

Blade hastily joined him. "Stay right where you're at!" he said to Barbish.

The Dealer appeared pale, his eyes on his dead men.

Blade replaced his Bowies first, then aligned the backpack between his shoulder blades. He lifted the Paratrooper.

"You'll get yours, bastards!" Barbish snapped.

Blade stepped up to the Dealer. "Keep your mouth closed." He glanced at Rikki.

The martial artist had put the kyoketsu-shogei, the yawara, and his three other shuriken in his belt pouch. He was donning the backpack, his eyes on the lobby, when he suddenly dived for the M-16 while shouting, "Look out!"

Blade whirled.

Three men in suits were charging the two Warriors. All three held pistols. Two of the trio already had a bead on the giant; the third was sighting on the diminutive man in black.

Blade tried to bring the Paratrooper into play, realizing he was way too late, expecting to hear the boom of their guns and feel their slugs tear through his body. Out of the corner of his left eye he caught a motion.

Hickok. Crouching and drawing his right Python, his arm nearly invisible, the gunfighter fired three times from the hip, the shots thundering in the lobby, unerringly on target.

The three charging bodyguards died on their feet; not one managed to squeeze the trigger. They tumbled to the carpet, head-shot, brain dead.

Hickok sprinted to his friends, pulling his left Python on the fly. "We'd best skedaddle."

Blade nodded, then shoved Barbish toward the front entrance. "Move

it!"

Rikki slid his katana under his belt and brought up the rear.

"You'll never get out of here alive!" the Dealer taunted them.

Hickok took the lead, his revolvers sweeping from side to side; covering the people in the lobby.

Blade realized there were over two dozen men and women surrounding them. How many were in the Dealer's employ? Would Barbish plant men in the—

A man in a dark brown suit burst from behind a column to their left, an Uzi in his hands.

Hickok's Pythons cracked.

His eyes rupturing as they were perforated by the slugs, the man in brown was catapulted onto his back by the impact.

Hickok walked faster, his blue eyes darting every which way.

Barbish was dragging his feet, moving as slowly as he could.

Blade gave the Dealer a brutal push, and Barbish stumbled forward, cursing under his breath.

Hickok was within eight feet of the entrance.

A brunette in a green dress, standing to the left of the glass doors, suddenly whipped a revolver from her black leather purse.

The gunfighter shot her in the forehead.

Blade covered a group to their right. So much for abducting the Dealer without attracting attention! Every Dragon in the city would be on the lookout for them! Which meant they had to get out of the city as quickly as possible. But how?

A portly man with a shotgun abruptly jumped up from concealment behind the front desk, his appearance accompanied by the instantaneous, simultaneous discharge of a pair of pearl-handled .357 Magnums. He

dropped from sight.

Hickok reached the glass doors and stood to the right, his Pythons trained on the lobby.

No one else seemed disposed to dispute the Warriors.

Blade grasped Barbish's left shoulder and propelled the Dealer outside.

They'd made it!

Or had they?

A pair of Narc patrol cars, their sirens wailing, their lights flashing, took the nearest intersection to the south at 50 miles an hour and roared toward the Oasis.

Chapter Nine

Blade was fuming. His simple plan had gone awry with potentially disastrous consequences. The last thing he'd wanted to do was draw the Narcs into the conflict. The Narcs were, after all, the legal arm of the law in Miami, even if they were allied with the Dragons and the drug trade. But now, as he watched the two patrol cars screech to a halt at the base of the concrete steps leading into the Oasis, he knew he could no longer afford the luxury of minimizing conflicts with the Dragons *or* the Narcs.

Two officers piled from each cruiser. All four were armed with revolvers. They started to train their weapons on the giant at the top of the stairs. "Freeze!" one of them bellowed. "You're under arrest!"

Blade fired from the right hip, sweeping the Paratrooper in a semicircle.

A pair of Narcs were stitched across their chests and flung to the tarmacadam.

The pedestrians on the sidewalk between the concrete steps and Collins Avenue, many of whom had stopped to stare at the Narc cruisers, panicked. Screaming and shouting, they frantically endeavored to remove themselves from the line of fire. Some were trampled in the process. The flow of traffic on Collins was disrupted by drivers slamming on their brakes. Horns blared. Bedlam ensued.

Hickok and Rikki came through the glass doors.

The surviving pair of Narcs took cover in the shelter of their patrol car. One of them jumped up and fired a hurried shot. He missed.

Hickok didn't. His right Python blasted, the slug boring through the Narc's skull and knocking the officer backwards.

"On me!" Blade barked, running to the south, his left hand clamped on Barbish's arm.

Hickok jogged after them.

The last Narc tried to shoot the gunman in the back, rising and placing his gun hand on the roof of the cruiser to steady his aim. He glimpsed another man on the concrete steps to his left, a man in black, and perceived that he'd miscalculated. Drastically.

Rikki-Tikki-Tavi fired the M-16 from a distance of less than 20 feet.

The final Narc twisted and fell, his head riddled.

Rikki took off.

The people crowding the sidewalk were scrambling to get out of the path of the Warriors. Many ran into the avenue, causing cars to brake abruptly, adding to the mass confusion. More sirens pierced the night, drawing ever closer to the Oasis.

Blade slowed, waiting for Hickok and Rikki to catch up. He swept the Paratrooper back and forth, clearing the sidewalk as everyone in front of him moved aside. Footsteps pounded behind him.

"Where we headin', pard?" Hickok asked, his eyes on Collins Avenue. He saw a car rear-end another.

"We've got to get out of Miami," Blade stated.

Rikki raced up to them. "Clear to our rear," he declared.

Blade nodded and pressed forward, peering to the south. How far was it? A quarter of a mile? Less? Would it still be there, or had the Narcs found it?

"You've done it now, prick!" Barbish commented.

Blade ignored the Dealer, scanning the cars parked adjacent to the curb. Where *was* it?

"You've killed Narcs," Barbish said. "No one kills a Narc and gets away with it! They have a fraternal spirit. Do something to any one of them, and you wind up with every one of them on your case." He snorted. "They'll hunt you down."

Blade increased his pace, concerned by the growling volume of sirens. Most of the Narcs in the city must be converging on the Oasis!

"I wouldn't want to be in your shoes!" Barbish remarked.

"Can I plug this varmint?" Hickok asked. "His prattle is startin' to get to me."

"We need him," Blade said.

"Can I shoot him when we're done with him?"

"Be my guest," Blade offered.

"Thanks, pard."

Barbish clammed up.

Blade spied several Narc patrol cars speeding toward them from the south. He could see their lights flaring, and he judged the cruisers were less than two blocks off. And he'd also noticed something else. The farther south the Warriors proceeded from the Oasis, the fewer frightened pedestrians they encountered. The actual witnesses to the fight with the Narcs were lingering in the vicinity of the Oasis. None had dared follow the Warriors. The people directly ahead had no way of knowing the

Warriors were the reason for the turmoil. Blade forced himself to walk at a normal rate. He threaded through a crowd watching the approaching cruisers.

"Why'd you slow down, pard?" Hickok queried.

"Act innocent," Blade said.

"What?"

"The Pythons."

Hickok looked at his Colts, at the crowd, then at the fast-coming patrol cars. He grinned and twirled the Pythons into their holsters.

Rikki slung the M-16 over his left shoulder.

The Narc vehicles were under a block off.

Hickok clasped his hands behind his back and started whistling a random tune.

Blade lowered the Paratrooper alongside his right leg. His left hand closed in a vise on the Dealer's arm.

"You're hurting me!" Barbish hissed.

The patrol cars raced north on Collins Avenue.

Blade speeded up again with the Dealer struggling to match his lengthy stride. The avenue was well lit by the streetlights, and he knew he'd have no difficulty recognizing the car when he saw it. Provided it was there. As he covered more and more ground, traversing four more blocks, he seriously doubted he would locate the vehicle. But a few minutes later, as he was crossing an intersection, he discerned the golden finish on the car in question and smiled.

Hickok's keen eyes saw the vehicle too. "Isn't that the buggy—" he began.

"It is," Blade verified.

"Are you thinkin' what I think you're thinkin'?" Hickok questioned.

"I am," Blade confirmed.

"Can I drive?" Hickok asked excitedly.

"We'll see," Blade said. He neared the car cautiously, puzzled. Someone, either on Collins Avenue or on the sidewalk, *had* to have seen him dispatch the Genie and Hugo. And if someone did, then logic dictated that that person would report the deaths to the Narcs. The Narcs would send a patrol car to check the story. But there was no sign of the Narcs in the immediate vicinity. The big gold and chrome vehicle was exactly as he'd left it: parked at the curb, with all the doors closed. None of the passersby were paying any excessive attention to it.

Was it possible no one had seen the Genie and Hugo die?

Or had there been a witness, but the witness had preferred to remain silent? Was it natural for a citizen in Miami to automatically report a crime? Did the populace trust and rely upon the Narcs, or did they resort to contacting the police only under extreme circumstances?

He didn't know.

And he wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth.

Blade walked up to the rear door on the passenger side and opened it. "Inside," he directed the Dealer.

Barbish bent over at the waist and started to climb in. His body tensed and he gasped when he observed the pair of corpses. "What the hell!" he blurted.

Blade prodded the Dealer with the Paratrooper. "Inside! We'll dispose of them later."

Barbish sat down on the driver's side. He was forced to rest his legs on the bodies.

"You drive," Blade told the gunman. "Rikki, you get in front. I'll keep our friend company." He slid in and slammed the door.

"Who are these guys?" Barbish asked, nodding at the corpses.

"They dealt in drugs," Blade responded acidly.

"Pushers?" Barbish said, aghast.

Hickok and Rikki entered the car.

The gunman studied the instrument panel for a moment. "Where the blazes is the key?"

Blade glanced at the Dealer. "Search Hugo."

"Who?"

Blade tapped the bodyguard's bald pate. "Hugo. Search his pockets. He was carrying the keys."

Barbish scrunched up his nose. "You want me to *touch* him?"

"Unless you're adept at telekinesis," Blade quipped.

"Tele-what?"

"Find the car keys," Blade directed. . Barbish leaned over the bodies and reached his arms under the Genie. He started and jerked his right arm up, his hand coated with blood.

"Squeamish son of a gun, isn't he?" Hickok remarked.

"Keep looking," Blade ordered.

Barbish hesitated, then applied himself to the task once again. He ran his fingers over the black's body, feeling for pockets. Locating a pants pocket, he plunged his left hand inside, awash with relief as his fingers closed on a key ring. About to extract the keys, his right hand bumped against a hard object attached to the black's belt above the hip. He traced the outline of the object and suppressed a surge of elation at his discovery: a derringer. "I can't seem to find any keys," he remarked casually. His torso was bent over the corpses, screening his arms and hands from the bastards holding him. Here was his chance to gain the upper hand! He could get the drop on them! The thought made him tingle! He owed these sons of bitches! *How* he owed them! He would personally officiate at their torture.

"You haven't found them yet?" Blade asked skeptically.

Barbish shook his head. "No. Not..." he said, then pretended to grope the corpse. "Wait! Here they are!" His right hand eased the derringer from its small leather holster, and he grinned triumphantly as he straightened, bringing the derringer up. Expecting to take his captors unawares, he was all the more shocked to behold a Paratrooper, M-16, and a pair of Colt Python revolvers trained on his head.

"Drop the derringer," Blade commanded.

"And do it quick," Hickok added. "My trigger fingers are a mite itchy."

Barbish allowed the derringer to fall to the seat.

Hickok made a smacking noise. "Tisk! Tisk! Didn't your Ma ever teach you any manners?" He holstered his Magnums.

Blade picked up the derringer, examined it, then placed the gun in his left rear pocket. "The keys. Now!"

Barbish frowned as he reached his left hand down to the appropriate pocket again and withdrew the key ring. He held the ring aloft. "Here," he said bitterly.

"Thanks," Hickok said, taking the keys in his right hand and turning.

"Can you drive this thing?" Blade asked.

"Piece of cake," the gunman responded. "It's an automatic, just like the SEAL."

Blade nodded. The SEAL was the impervious, vanlike vehicle constructed by the Family's Founder prior to World War Three as a prototype. Solar powered, outfitted with deadly armaments, and capable of traversing any terrain, the SEAL was employed by the Warriors on most of their trips into the Outlands or elsewhere. The Solar-Energized, Amphibious or Land Vehicle was unlike any other in existence.

Hickok inspected the key ring, found one he felt would fit, and inserted it in the ignition. He twisted the key and the car's engine rumbled to life. "Which way are we headin'?" he asked.

Blade looked at the Dealer. "You heard the man."

"You can either drive north until we reach Dade Boulevard," Barbish stated, "and then take the Venetian Causeway across Biscayne Bay to Miami, or you can make a U-turn and go south and take the General MacArthur Causeway."

"How many Causeways are there?" Blade inquired.

"Four," Barbish replied. "The Kennedy is farthest north, then the Tuttle, the Venetian, and the MacArthur."

Blade recalled the Narc mentioning the first two. Of course, the Warriors had been in northwest Miami at the time, then drifted to the south, eventually taking the Venetian Causeway by bus.

"Which way should I go?" Hickok queried.

Blade debated for a moment. If they went north toward the Venetian again, they would have to pass the Oasis Resort Hotel. The hotel was undoubtedly swarming with Narcs and Dragons, and he didn't relish the idea of driving past and risking detection. "Make a U-turn," he instructed. "We'll take the General MacArthur Causeway."

Hickok shifted into Drive, turned the steering wheel sharply to the left, and tromped on the gas.

"Take it slow!" Blade said, but his advice came a second tardy.

The car barreled out of the parking space and shot across Collins Avenue, its tires screeching. Oncoming traffic was thrown into confusion; brakes squealed, drivers shouted obscenities, and vehicles slewed to abrupt stops.

"What a bunch of lousy drivers!" Hickok remarked, grinning as he wheeled the gold car south on Collins.

"Don't attract attention," Blade declared.

"Too late," Rikki mentioned, gazing out the rear window.

Blade glanced over his left shoulder, his eyes narrowing as he spotted a Narc cruiser bearing down on them with its lights and siren on.

Hickok looked into the rearview mirror. "Are they after us?"

Barbish unexpectedly laughed. "Oh! Did I forget to tell you?"

"Tell us what?" Blade responded.

"That U-turns are illegal on Collins Avenue," Barbish said with relish. "Too much traffic, you know."

Blade's mouth curled downwards. "You told us to make a U-turn on purpose, hoping it would attract one of the patrol cars."

"Who? Me?" Barbish said, the picture of innocence.

"What do I do?" Hickok asked. "Stop or keep going?"

The cruiser was a block to their rear, moving fast.

"If we pull over," Rikki noted, "they will see the bodies."

"Not to mention Barbish," Blade said.

"Do we outrun the coyotes?" Hickok questioned eagerly.

"You can't outrun a Narc car," Barbish informed them. "Their vehicles have high-performance engines. They're souped up. You wouldn't get two blocks."

Blade felt his frustration mounting. He wanted to get out of Miami Beach swiftly, but they were being thwarted at every turn.

The Narc cruiser roared toward them.

"Roll down your window," Blade directed the Dealer.

Barbish balked. "Why?"

Blade rammed the Paratrooper into the Dealer's ribs. "Do it!"

Barbish grunted, then hastily complied.

"Lean back," Blade snapped. He rested the tip of the Paratrooper barrel on the door, his finger on the trigger.

With a harsh blare of its sirens, its lights spinning, the Narc vehicle

pulled abreast of their car. A Narc on the passenger side had his window down, and he waved at them to veer to the curb.

Blade fired instead, his initial burst catching the Narc in the head and flinging him backwards. He kept firing as the Narc vehicle started to slow, his rounds punching into the patrol car's windshield, shattering the glass and riddling the driver.

The Narc cruiser angled to the left, into the opposite lane, narrowly missing a station wagon. Its speed still over 60, the patrol car plowed into a red sedan parked at the curb, the impact thrusting the sedan onto the sidewalk. Both vehicles flattened a number of pedestrians.

Blade looked back to see a fireball envelop the Narc cruiser.

"You bastards!" Barbish said.

"You're the one who tried to get us caught," Blade mentioned. "Try it again and I'll shoot you in the knee. Consider this your last warning."

Barbish started to say something, but thought better of the idea. If his abductors wanted to go to his Director's estate, fine. He would take them. Once there, though, they were in for an unpleasant surprise. He suppressed an impulse to smile. There was no sense in giving away his ace in the hole.

One thing was for sure.

He would piss on their graves!

Chapter Ten

"So where is it?"

"It's just up ahead."

"That's what you said a mile ago," Blade noted.

"Cut me some slack!" Barbish retorted. "The cutoff isn't easy to see in broad daylight, let alone at night! Just look for a dirt road on the left. The road leads south to Paolucci's estate."

The gold car was heading west on Highway 41, its headlights illuminating the trees and other vegetation lining both sides. Traffic during the hours preceding the dawn was sparse.

"Any sign of a turnoff?" Blade asked Hickok.

The gunman shook his head. "Not yet, pard." He was driving at 30 miles an hour, hunched over the steering wheel, his gaze riveted to the left side of the highway.

Blade stared at the Dealer, wondering if the man was leading them on a wild-goose chase. He doubted Barbish would be that stupid. Perhaps the cutoff was genuinely hard to spot at night. In any event, he—

"Blast!" Hickok muttered, applying the brakes. "Missed it."

Blade looked out the rear window, spying a break in the vegetation, a lighter patch of gravel.

Hickok executed a tight U-turn and drove to the turnoff, then braked. The gravel road receded into the distance without any trace of a light or indication of habitation.

"I don't see an estate," Blade remarked.

"We have about ten miles to go," Barbish said. "Arlo lives in the middle of nowhere, on forty acres surrounded by swamp. He likes his privacy."

"Keep driving," Blade instructed the gunman.

Hickok shrugged and accelerated. The gravel road was bumpy, filled with shallow ruts, causing the car to bounce and vibrate with each bump and jar.

"Arlo had this road built," Barbish commented. "One day he may get around to blacktopping it."

"Does every Director live out in the country?" Blade inquired.

"Some live in Miami," Barbish replied. "Some, like Arlo, prefer the rural life."

"How many guards protect his estate?"

"I don't know," Barbish said.

Blade sighed and placed his right hand on the Paratrooper in his lap.

"I don't know!" Barbish insisted. "I've never counted them! I've seen a dozen or so, but there are probably more."

"Describe the estate."

"Most of it, up to the edges of the swamp, is wooded," Barbish detailed. "An eight-foot-high brick wall encloses five acres, the main area. There's a house to the north, a barn to the east—"

"A barn?"

"Arlo raises horses," Barbish said. "He likes the races. The gate to the compound is located in the north wall."

"What about quarters for the guards?"

Barbish grinned. "Did I forget to mention that? Their quarters consists of a barrackslike building on the west side."

"And the southern section of the five acres?"

"Gardens," Barbish said. "Arlo fancies himself a horticulturist, another reason he lives in the country."

"Do the guards make regular rounds?"

"Yes," Barbish responded. "But I don't know their schedule."

Blade peered out the window at the darkened landscape, reflecting. He estimated there were three hours until dawn, ample time to reach the estate and penetrate it before sunrise. The predawn assault would give the Warriors a decided advantage; any guards awake would be sluggish, either just waking up to start their day or closing out a night shift and ready to hit the hay. The delays in Miami had not proven too costly. He

recalled the ride across the General Mac Arthur Causeway, and dumping the bodies of the Genie and Hugo in the first alley they'd found. They had driven to the southwest, staying under the posted speed limits, doubling back on themselves repeatedly to insure they weren't being tailed.

"What the heck!" Hickok abruptly exclaimed, slamming on the brakes.

Blade looked ahead.

Not 15 yards away, vividly revealed by the car's headlights, was an enormous alligator crossing the road. The reptile lumbered from left to right, ignoring the vehicle.

"Where the blazes did that critter come from?" Hickok asked.

"Ever hear of the Everglades?" Barbish responded.

Blade thought of the century-old map. "Aren't the Everglades southwest of here?"

"You're thinking of the Everglades National Park, as it was once known," Barbish said. "The Park covered a million and half acres on the southwest tip of the peninsula. But the Park was a small part of the total Everglades. You're on the eastern edge of the Everglades right now. Five thousand square miles of swamp. Nothing but water, gators, and snakes for miles and miles and miles."

"Snakes?" Hickok said.

Blade watched the alligator disappear in the brush on the right side of the road. "Let's go?"

"Snakes?" Hickok said again, driving forward.

"The Everglades are a haven for snakes," Barbish elaborated. "Swamp snakes, brown snakes, ribbon snakes, garter snakes. And they're the harmless ones. Poisonous varieties abound in the Everglades. There are the coral snakes, the cottonmouths, and the rattlers, of course, as well as the exotic types, like the cobras."

"Who are you tryin' to kid?" Hickok demanded. "Cobras live in India and Africa, not Florida."

"That was true once," Barbish said. "But not anymore. You see, a lot of people imported exotic species into Florida before the war. Cobras. Piranhas. Others. And some escaped or were deliberately let loose by their owners. The climate in Florida was ideal for breeding. The cobras and piranhas multiplied, despite the best efforts of the authorities to eradicate them. Don't believe me if you want, but I assure you that there are cobras in the Everglades. One of Arlo's men was bitten by a cobra a few years ago."

"What happened to him?" Hickok asked.

"What else? He died."

Blade remembered a schooling class on Florida and voiced a question. "What about the alligators? There seem to be a lot of them, and yet I read that they were almost exterminated before the war."

"Not quite true," Barbish answered. "The alligators made a comeback before World War Three. They were protected by law, and they reproduced so fast that special hunting seasons were set up. After the war, of course, with so few hunters and poachers to reduce their ranks, the gators made like rabbits. Now the damn things are everywhere."

"I don't reckon I'll retire in Florida," Hickok joked.

"The gators and the snakes aren't the worst of it," Barbish went on. "There are other—things."

"What kind of things?" Blade queried.

"Mutant things," Barbish said. "Huge things." His tone changed, becoming filled with awe. "I saw one once, from the south dock on Arlo's estate. It was splashing in the swamp, heading from east to west. The moon was out, and we could see it fairly well."

"What did it look like?" Blade probed.

"How can I describe it?" Barbish responded. "It was like a dinosaur. Think of an alligator fifty feet long, only with spikes on its back and a head like a frog. It was bizarre."

The mention of mutants had stimulated Blade's curiosity. He stared at

the Dealer. "And the Masters?"

"What about them?"

"They're mutants. What do they look like?"

"Only two of the Masters have attended the annual Dealer meetings," Barbish said. "Orm and Radnor. How can I describe them? Walking nightmares? And," he emphasized, "they never revealed where their base was."

"Weren't you ever curious? Didn't you ask Arlo questions?"

Barbish snorted. "It's not healthy to ask too many questions of your superiors in my line of work. Yes, I was curious. Yes, I tried to gather as much information as I could on the sly. But I didn't learn much."

"How much?"

The Dealer looked at the giant for a moment. "Perceptive, aren't you? All right. What harm can it do? I learned there are seven Masters, and they're all part of the same family."

"They're all related?"

"So I was told," Barbish confirmed. "But I don't know the specifics."

"And that was it?"

"Trying to discover more would have cost me my life," Barbish stated.

"So working for mutant Masters never bothered you?"

"Maybe a little," Barbish said. "But the benefits outweighed any qualms of conscience."

"So you sold countless souls into a life of drug addiction to line your own pocket and please the Masters," Blade commented scornfully.

"We all have to look out for number one."

Blade frowned. "That's twice I've heard the same stupid statement. It's so selfish, it's disgusting. We're not put on this planet just to look out for

number one, just to think of ourselves first all the time. We're put here to learn to care for others, to learn the meaning of love and sharing—"

Barbish laughed. "Where did you ever hear nonsense like that?"

"Our Elders taught us the importance of possessing fundamental values."

"Your Elders? Where are you from?"

"Never mind."

"Your philosophy on life is all backwards," Barbish commented. "It's a dog-eat-dog world. Only the strong survive, by any means necessary. If you want something out of life, you have to take it. Love is an illusion. Power is what counts. Power and wealth. And by rising through the ranks of the Dragons, by becoming a Dealer for the Powder of Life, I'm living proof of what I say."

"What is the Powder of Life?" Blade asked.

"Cocaine. The Masters refer to coke as the Powder of Life. They like the Dealers to encourage the pushers to push coke over the other drugs," Barbish replied.

"Why?"

"The profit potential is greater, for one thing," Barbish said. "Smaller quantities bring bigger profits. Coke is easy to handle, easy to measure and packet. Plus the addiction factor is incredible."

"The addiction factor?"

"Yes. The addiction factor is a primary concern for every Dealer and pusher. If we want to maximize our profits, to increase our pool of repeat customers, we must get them hooked on the hard stuff. Coke is ideal. It has fewer side effects than, say, heroin, and it gives a high like you wouldn't believe. Coke is the mainstay of the Dragons' business."

"Where do the Masters obtain their coke?"

"I was never told," Barbish said. "I suspect they get it from a cartel in South America. I accidentally saw some vouchers once dealing with

planeloads of dope coming down the pipeline from Colombia."

"Someone should have put the Dragons out of business a long time ago," Blade remarked.

Barbish snickered. "Like who, young man? The police? They are paid by the Dragons. They're in our employ. The same with the politicians. The people think they get a real choice at election time, but every candidate is on the Dragon payroll. We allow elections for mayor and council seats to give the citizens the illusion of freedom. But it's all a farce, and the people are too stupid to realize it."

"Are they stupid, or drugged out of their minds?" Blade asked. "Their entire perception of reality is off."

"No one forces them to use our products."

"Products? Don't you mean poisons?"

"Call it whatever you want."

"Someday, someone will come down here and mop up the Dragons," Blade predicted.

"Never happen," Barbish responded.

They drove in silence for over five minutes.

"Hey!" Hickok declared. "Look!"

Blade stared through the windshield. A cluster of lights had appeared far in the distance.

"The estate, you figure?" Hickok inquired.

"Must be," Blade said.

"It's the estate," Barbish verified.

"Kill our headlights," Blade advised.

Hickok promptly complied, slowing down as he did so. "How the dickens am I going to drive? There's no moon tonight."

"Perhaps we should walk from here," Rikki suggested.

"Drive another mile or so," Blade directed. "We want to get as close as we can, but not so close that they'll hear our engine."

Hickok leaned forward, reducing their speed to under 20 miles an hour. "I just hope we don't bump into one of those mutant things."

Barbush glanced at the lights and grinned, then quickly wiped the grin from his face.

The swampy land bordering the gravel road was enshrouded in an inky gloom. A breeze rustled the intermittent stands of trees. Insect sounds filled the night accompanied by a chorus of frogs and other creatures.

"What was all that big grass I was seein' before we killed the headlights?" Hickok asked.

"That's sawgrass," Barbush disclosed. "It's all over the Everglades. Grows over twelve feet high in some places."

"I'll bet a lot of snakes could hide in it," Hickok remarked.

"You don't sound like you're very fond of snakes," Barbush noted.

"Let me put it this way," Hickok said. "There are a heap of critters on this planet, and I think I understand the reason the Spirit put a few of 'em here." He paused. "But snakes aren't one of them."

"He was attacked by a mutated snake when he was twelve," Blade detailed. "The snake was over eight feet long and had two heads. Ever since then, he hasn't liked snakes very much."

"The only way to conquer a fear is to face it," Rikki said to the gunman.

Hickok glanced at the martial artist. "Are you sayin' I'm afraid of snakes?"

"No," Rikki responded. "But you may be afraid of being afraid of snakes."

"One of these bumps must have rattled your noggin'," Hickok mentioned. "I'm not afraid of anything, least of all a passel of creepy,

crawly reptiles."

"I'm not fond of snakes either," Barbish said. "Which is why I've seldom visited Arlo unless it was unavoidable. Being situated in the Everglades like it is, there are snakes everywhere."

"Just what I wanted to hear," Hickok muttered.

"Enough about snakes," Blade said. "Look for a spot to pull over."

Hickok slowed slightly and gazed from side to side. The narrow, cramped road, rimmed by the prolific vegetation, afforded few parking places. He proceeded several hundred yards. "What if I drive this buggy off the road into the brush?"

"That 'brush' could be swampland," Barbish cautioned. "The car could sink."

"Just dandy," Hickok said.

Blade rested his right arm on the top of the front seat and peered into the night.

"Do you see those trees?" Rikki inquired, pointing ahead and to the right.

A stand of tall trees was silhouetted against the sky 50 yards in front of them.

"Trees require solid soil," Rikki observed.

"He's right," Barbish agreed. "The Everglades are dotted with tree islands, clumps of higher ground where myrtles, bays, and willows grow. There are also a lot of islands and scattered sections of firm ground, like Arlo's forty-acre plot."

Hickok braked when the car drew alongside the trees.

"I'll check it out," Rikki offered, looking at Blade.

The Warrior leader nodded. "Be careful."

Rikki opened his door and vanished into the dark.

"We should have about a mile and a half to walk from here," Blade calculated.

"Just so we don't step on any snakes," Hickok said.

Blade looked at the Dealer. "You'll be coming with us. But not a peep out of you, or else."

"What? You're not going to tie me up and cram me in the trunk?" Barbish retorted sarcastically.

"The idea occurred to me," Blade said. "But we can use you once we reach the estate."

"Does this estate have a name?" Hickok asked.

Barbish chuckled. "Yes. As a matter of fact, it does. Arlo calls it Happy Acres."

"You're joshin'," Hickok said.

"I kid you not," Barbish stated.

Rikki-Tikki-Tavi materialized at the door. "Twenty yards up ahead is a flat, clear area between the trees. You can park the car there." He climbed in and closed his door.

"Did you see any snakes?" Hickok inquired as he drove forward slowly.

"No," Rikki said. "But I did hear a ferocious-sounding killer cricket."

"You're gettin' worse than Geronimo," Hickok cracked. "Where's this clear spot?"

"Right there," Rikki replied, pointing at a break in the foliage.

Hickok turned the wheel, moving the vehicle at a snail's pace, angling the car between the trees and parking on a level stretch of firm turf. He switched off the ignition, and as the muted rumble of the motor died, the nocturnal sounds of the wildlife in the swamp hummed, buzzed, and thrummed to a crescendo. "Noisy bunch of critters," he remarked.

A high-pitched cry, a y-eonk, y-eonk, y-eonk, punctuated the general

din.

"What was that?" Hickok queried.

"A young gator," Barbish answered.

"How do you know it's a young one?" Hickok asked.

"The big ones *roar*," Barbish said.

"Oh."

"Okay. So much for our class in Everglade zoology," Blade interjected. "Let's get moving. Check your weapons."

Each Warrior dutifully insured his firearms were loaded. Barbish watched them with a scornful stare.

"Out," Blade directed, and they exited the car. He glanced in at the Dealer. "That means you too."

Barbish sighed and opened his door. He stepped onto the ground and stretched. "The air here is always so fresh."

"Should I bring the keys?" Hickok questioned.

"Leave them under the front seat," Blade said. "If we get separated, one of us might make it back."

The gunman nodded, then tossed the key ring under the driver's side. He closed the door quietly.

Blade and Rikki shut the other doors.

Hickok walked up to the Dealer. "You must be feelin' a bit frustrated right about now."

"Not in the least," Barbish declared.

"Won't you get in hot water for bringin' us to the estate?" Hickok questioned.

"Time will tell," Barbish said enigmatically.

"Hickok, keep him covered," Blade instructed. "I'll take the point. Rikki, the rear. Five-yard spread." He moved toward the road, his boots swishing in the grass, enjoying the invigorating, cool breath of air on his skin. His nostrils detected a musty, earthy odor. The pale gravel outlined the road distinctly, and moments later the small stones and pebbles were crunching underfoot. He turned to the south, the Paratrooper cradled in his arms.

Barbish's behavior was troubling him. Why was the Dealer being so congenial? Why wasn't Barbish terrified at the prospect of betraying his Director and the masters? At the Oasis, Barbish had been petrified by the mere thought. So what was the reason for the Dealer's changed attitude? What did Barbish know that they didn't?

They covered over five hundred yards in tense expectation.

Blade glanced over his left shoulder. Barbish was five yards to his rear, with Hickok's Henry unslung and pointed at his back. Rikki was almost invisible five yards beyond the gunfighter; his black clothing blended with the night, accenting his facial features and hands.

A frog croaked to the right.

Blade faced front and continued toward the lights. He recognized the lights were arranged in the shape of a square, apparently aligned along the wall enclosing the five-acre living area. What was the power source? he wondered. A generator? Or a line from the metropolis? Did the utility company run lines out this far? If so, it was underground. There was no evidence of utility poles.

"Psssst!"

Blade halted and pivoted, thinking Hickok had signaled him, but he was mistaken.

Rikki had done the whispering.

The martial artist dashed up to Hickok and the Dealer. "We are being followed," he declared in a hushed voice.

Hickok looked to their rear. "What? Are you sure?"

"Something is after us," Rikki asserted.

Blade walked to them. "Something?"

"Listen," Rikki said.

"I don't hear nothin'," Hickok commented.

"Listen," Rikki reiterated.

Blade cocked his head to one side, straining his ears, hearing only the sounds of the swamp. He was surprised Rikki would be susceptible to a case of overwrought nerves.

"I don't—" Hickok began, then froze.

Blade heard it then too. A deep, heavy sort of *breathing*, as if a gigantic animal was on their back trail, expelling its breath in wheezing sighs.

"It's comin' after us," Hickok said.

"What the hell is it?" Barbish asked fearfully.

"We're not sticking around to find out," Blade stated. "Run!"

And run they did, sprinting to the south, their feet pounding on the gravel, swirls of dust rising from the road.

Blade intentionally refrained from reaching full speed. His companions could not hope to match his lengthy strides, and he was not about to outdistance them in a crisis. If whatever was chasing them caught up with them, he would make a stand with his friends.

Which just might be the case.

Because the thing was gaining.

Chapter Eleven

The three Warriors and the Dealer raced down the gravel road two abreast, with Hickok and Barbish a few feet in front of Rikki and Blade. From their rear came the measured thump-thump-thump of their colossal pursuer.

Blade could hear the breathing grow louder and louder. He racked his mind, speculating on its identity, and reached an inescapable conclusion. Only one type of creature achieved such awesome proportions; only a genetic deviate, a hybrid or a unique new specimen, fit the bill; only a mutant could be after them. A gust of warm air suddenly struck the nape of his neck, and a fetid stench assailed his nose.

The thing was so close it was breathing on him!

Blade risked a glance over his right shoulder, his eyes discerning the bulk profile of a lizard-like beast with a gaping maw rimmed by white teeth. The creature's head was eight feet behind him and twice that distance above the gravel road.

Damn!

What was the word Barbish had used?

Dinosaur?

It fit.

Involved with keeping his eyes on the gargantuan, carnivorous brute, Blade did not realize that Barbish was on the verge of collapsing until the Dealer abruptly cried out, clutched his chest, and toppled forward. Blade looked around in time to see Barbish go down onto his knees, but he did not have enough time to react. The Dealer was directly in his path, and he tried to throw himself to the left to avoid a collision. His legs crashed into Barbish and he was upended, tumbling to the gravel and landing on his right shoulder. He rolled onto his back, bringing the Paratrooper up.

The creature reared above them.

Blade could see the beast swiveling its huge head, gazing from Barbish to himself.

The Dealer was on his hands and knees, taking deep gulps of air and

groaning.

Blade waited for the thing to lower its head. He wanted a better line of fire at the mutant's eyes.

Barbish unexpectedly rose on his knees, swaying unsteadily, his arm flapping weakly. "My chest!" he cried. "My chest!"

The movement and the outcry attracted the creature's attention. Its head tilted downward as its eerie, light green eyes appraised the human below it.

Barbish caught sight of Blade. "Help me! It hurts!"

Blade went to warn the Dealer to keep quiet, but the harm had already been done.

The beast's head swooped low, its maw wide, attacking with astonishing rapidity for an animal so huge. Its mouth closed on the Dealer, its jaws locking fast, taking in Barbish's head and shoulders in one bite. There was a muffled scream as Barbish was lifted into the air, his arms and legs flapping wildly. Without a moment's hesitation, the creature turned to the west and plowed into the vegetation. Loud splintering and crackling attended its progress through the undergrowth, terminated by a monstrous splash. Then all was still.

"Are you lyin' down on the job again?"

Blade craned his head backwards.

Hickok and Rikki were a yard away, their weapons trained on the west side of the road.

"I thought you kept going," Blade remarked as he rose.

"You know better than that, pard," Hickok said.

"We would never desert you," Rikki added.

Blade gazed to the west, listening for more sounds of the creature's passage. Everything was quiet.

"What the blazes was that critter?" Hickok asked.

"A mutant would be my guess," Blade said.

"What happened to Barbish?" the gunman queried. "It looked to me like the cow chip had a heart attack."

"Same here," Blade concurred. "He wasn't in the best of shape. Maybe he didn't exercise regularly. Maybe the strain was too much for him."

"That critter will probably get indigestion," Hickok joked.

"Perhaps Barbish will not satisfy the creature's appetite," Rikki commented.

Hickok glanced at the martial artist. "What?"

"Perhaps it will return for a second helping," Rikki said.

"We'd best vamoose," Hickok suggested.

"Let's go," Blade stated, jogging to the south.

Hickok and Rikki flanked the giant.

"Do you think they heard Barbish yell at the estate?" Hickok questioned.

"I doubt it," Blade replied. "We have about a mile to go yet."

They ran a quarter of a mile, constantly glancing to their rear, alert for the return of the beast.

"What's the plan once we get to Happy Acres?" the gunman inquired.

"We'll go in over the wall," Blade said. "We'll find this Arlo, Paolucci and force him to take us to the Masters."

"Then we can wrap this up and head for the rendezvous site," Hickok mentioned.

"We have plenty of time before the Hurricane returns to pick us up," Blade noted. "The VTOL won't be at the site for five days."

"There's something I've been wondering about," Rikki mentioned.

"What's the maximum range of the Hurricanes?"

"The Hurricanes were constructed right before the Big Blast," Blade answered, using the colloquial term the Family employed for World War Three. "They were designed to ferry combat troops, strike squads, over vast distances. With greater fuel efficiency than previous models, with their state-of-the-art technology, and with their six fuel tanks each filled with five hundred gallons, they have a maximum one-way range of approximately three thousand miles."

Rikki performed a few mental calculations. "The Hurricane that dropped us off won't have enough fuel to return to the Home."

"It's flying to Denver, not the Home," Blade said.

"Denver?" Rikki repeated. "It still won't have enough fuel."

"It will once it's been refueled en route," Blade divulged.

"What are you talkin' about?" Hickok inquired. "They can refuel those contraptions in midair?"

"Yes," Blade replied. "Refueling in flight was a common procedure before the war. California owns eight tanker aircraft, and the governor has loaned a pair to the Civilized zone. They're being housed at Stapleton Airport in Denver. If necessary, they can fly out to meet the Hurricanes and refuel the VTOLs." He paused. "Do you remember when we left the Home to come to Florida? We flew a wide loop to the southwest."

"I remember," Hickok said. "I figured the pilot was gettin' his bearings."

"He flew the southwest loop so he could radio Stapleton and arrange to be refueled on his return flight from Florida," Blade explained.

"So the Hurricanes can go anywhere in the country," Rikki remarked.

"And out of it," Blade added.

They were now within a half mile of the estate. The insect sounds, mixed with the calls of other wildlife, emanated from everywhere.

Blade noticed more and more trees as they drew near to the lights, and

he realized they were on the estate, on the 40 acres of dry land Barbish had mentioned as comprising the Director's domain. Ahead was the walled, five-acre compound. If it wasn't for the thin ribbon of gravel connecting Happy Acres to Highway 41, the swamp would enclose the 40 acres entirely. If Arlo had financed the construction of the gravel road, merely to link his compound to the rest of the world, then the Director must be a man of staggering wealth and influence. All of which substantiated his status as a top kingpin in the Dragons.

The Warriors advanced cautiously until they were within 40 yards of the brick wall.

Blade stood behind a tree and studied the layout. As the Dealer had related, the wall was eight feet high, but Barbish had failed to disclose a pertinent fact: The wall was crowned with strands of barbed wire. The gravel road went straight up to the closed metal gate in the center of the north wall. Floodlights were positioned just inside the wall at 20-yard intervals. The vegetation for 30 yards from the walls had been stripped to the ground, affording the guards an unobstructed view. Two guards were standing inside the gate, conversing idly. Another guard, armed with a machine gun, was patrolling the top of the brick wall. Evidently there was ample walking space between the strands of barbed wire and the inner edge.

"How will we play this?" Hickok whispered from a tree on Blade's right.

Blade motioned for his companions to withdraw deeper into the undergrowth. They retreated 15 yards and crouched down. "We're going to circle around the compound," he informed them.

"I wouldn't want to trip and give us away," Hickok commented. "Any chance of you carryin' me piggyback?"

Blade straightened and headed eastward.

"I guess not," Hickok said to himself.

The Warriors wound between the trees, moving as shadows, their consummate stealth a testimony to their skill at their lethal trade. They angled to within a few yards of the cleared strip bordering the walls, never once exposing themselves to the men on guard duty. A hush enveloped the compound, the lull before the dawn.

Blade knew they had to work quickly if they were to gain access to the compound and locate Arlo Paolucci before daylight. He surveyed the walls intently, searching for a weak spot in the defenses. But there wasn't one on the north wall, nor the east. Only when they were skirting the compound to the south did they hit pay dirt. They found a door.

Blade halted under the spreading limbs of a willow and stared at the small wooden door situated in the middle of the south wall. What was its purpose? Why have a narrow door on the opposite side from the gravel road? Was it an exit in case of an emergency? Not likely. Who would dare attack a Director of the Dragons? There was a trail in the grass, leading from the door toward the south side of the estate. Where did the trail lead?

A finger tapped him on the right side.

Blade looked around.

Rikki pointed at the south wall. "Where is the guard?"

The guard? Blade gazed at the wall again, his forehead creasing as he noted the absence of a sentry. Strange. There had been a guard on the rampart on both the north and east walls. Why wasn't there one on the south side?

"Let's go for it," Hickok urged from Blade's left.

"I don't like it," Blade said.

"What's not to like?" Hickok responded. "They don't know we're here, so this can't be a trap. Maybe the guard is takin' a leak. Why don't we give it a shot?"

Blade looked at Rikki.

The martial artist shrugged. "When the time has come for action, the moment must be quickly seized," he quoted.

"More Zen?" Blade asked, smiling.

"The *I Ching*," Rikki said.

"Sounds like my kind of book," Hickok commented. "I've always said

that the direct approach is the best."

"You should read it sometime," Rikki suggested.

"Does it have any gunfights in it?"

"No."

"Any mangy Injuns tryin' to scalp thievin', fork-tongued whites?"

"No."

"Any damsels in distress?"

"No."

"I'll reckon I'll stick with Zane Grey."

"Are you two done with your literary discussion?" Blade demanded.

"You sure are touchy this trip, pard," Hickok whispered. "Is your missus makin' you sleep on the couch again?"

Blade sighed and moved toward the wall, using every tree, and bush as a screen, his gray eyes sweeping the wall again and again, insuring the guard was really absent. He stopped in the shelter of the last tree before the cleared section and crouched.

Hickok and Rikki were right behind him.

"Rikki," Blade ordered. "You stay here and cover us. I'll signal if the coast is clear."

"If I see the guard, I'll whistle," Rikki said.

"Whistle? What kind of warning is that?" Hickok asked. "If you see the guard, pretend you're a hoot owl."

"A hoot owl?"

"Yep. Like this." Hickok placed his right hand on the side of his mouth and uttered a realistic imitation of an owl's "Whooo?"

Rikki glanced at Blade. "Which do you prefer? The whistle or the hoot owl?"

"Blow a trumpet, why don't you?" Blade answered.

Hickok and Rikki stared at the ground.

"I want you two bozos to remind me of something after we return to the Home," Blade said.

"What's that?" Hickok inquired.

"To bring Geronimo and Yama the next time I make a run," Blade said, and eased forward.

Hickok leaned toward Rikki. "Don't take it personal. He has these cranky moods now and then." He grinned and tailed after his giant friend.

Blade checked the wall once again, then took a deep breath and bolted from under the willow's limbs, racing across the open stretch, anticipating a verbal challenge or the blast of gunfire at any moment. Amazingly, he reached the wall to the right of the door without incident.

Hickok ran to the left of the door and flattened his back against the wall, his Henry in his hands.

So far, so good, Blade thought. He glanced at the vegetation, pleased Rikki was completely hidden. Now for the door. Gingerly, he reached for the brass knob and twisted it.

The door wasn't locked!

Blade frowned as the door swung inward on well-oiled hinges. His intuition was nagging at his mind, but he couldn't pinpoint the reason. What could be wrong? Hickok was right. The Dragons didn't know the Warriors were at Happy Acres. Still, his intuition blared.

Hickok was waiting.

Annoyed at his indecision, Blade slid inside, keeping his back to the wall, stepping to the right away from the doorway and pausing with the Paratrooper level.

The gunfighter came through the doorway, stepping to the left and standing in front of the door.

The Warriors found themselves in a 20-foot grassy space between the wall and a waist-high hedge. Beyond the hedge flourished the gardens, with an astounding array of diverse plant life; flowers, shrubs, herbs, and other ornamental greenery grew in profusion. The floodlights illuminated the gardens as brightly as if it were daylight.

Blade was about to take a step when he heard the metallic click. He tensed, glancing at Hickok, and for a second their eyes touched.

And over a dozen men in camouflage outfits, each armed with a machine gun or an automatic rifle, rose from concealment behind the hedge, their weapons pointing at the pair of Warriors.

Blade held his fire, knowing to do otherwise would be suicide, hoping the impetuous gunman would do the same.

He didn't.

Hickok's Henry boomed twice, and with each shot one of the gunmen was hurled backwards to drop from view. He managed a stride toward the doorway before the inevitable transpired.

The tallest of the men behind the hedge, an M-16 already pressed to his shoulder, fired once.

Hickok grunted as he was struck, the impact wrenching him to the right and bringing him down.

Blade turned toward the gunman.

"Don't move!" barked the tall man. "Drop your gun!"

Blade hesitated, his gaze on Hickok. The gunfighter was sprawled face down, eyes closed, with a bullet hole rimmed by blood above his right shoulder blade, next to his backpack.

"Look above you, *senor!*" the tall man declared.

Blade gazed up at the wall, stunned to discover ten more men in camouflage clothing, ten more barrels centered on him.

"I will not tell you again!" the tall man stated. "Drop your weapon!"

Gritting his teeth in resentment at his stupidity, and shaken by what it had done to Hickok, Blade reluctantly released the Paratrooper.

"*Excelente*," the tall man said.

The men in camouflage filed through a six-foot-wide gap in the hedge, the tall one in the lead. He radiated an aura of power, of strength. His black hair was curly, and a dark mustache framed his upper lip. With a measured stride he crossed the grass.

Blade took a step toward Hickok.

In one light-footed bound, the tall man reached the giant's side and pressed the barrel of his M-16 against Blade's temple. "Are you prepared to die, *senor*?"

Chapter Twelve

Blade felt his abdominal muscles tighten into a knot. Immobile, his right arm outstretched in the act of reaching for the gunman, he forced himself to project an air of indifference to the tall man's threat. "You won't shoot me."

"What makes you so sure?"

"If you'd wanted me dead," Blade said, "I'd be dead by now. You wanted both of us alive."

Chuckling, the man with the mustache lowered the M-16. "A man of courage and insight. I like that. Yes, we were under orders to take both of you alive. Your friend was most *impetuoso*, yes? And most *tonto*."

"*Tonto!*"

"Foolish."

Twelve hardened figures now hemmed in the Warrior.

Blade stared at the obviously professional squad, then up at the ten on the wall.

The man in charge noticed the giant's gaze. "They were on the wall the whole time, lying flat next to the wire. You couldn't see them from the ground. The top of the wall is a yard across."

Blade frowned. "We walked right into it," he said in self-reproach.

The tall man nodded. "We were waiting for you most of the night." He paused and extended his right hand. "I am called El Gato. The Cat."

Surprised at Cat's seemingly authentic friendliness, Blade shook. "I must examine my friend."

"We will take care of him, *senor*," Cat said. He motioned to two of his men, and the pair promptly slung their weapons over their shoulders and lifted the gunfighter by the arms. "Take him to the infirmary," he ordered.

"You have an infirmary here?" Blade asked.

"*Si*," Cat replied. "Mr. Paolucci provides for all of our needs. There are accidents from time to time, snakebites and such, and occasional sickness. We need a doctor on the premises. The medicos in the city are too far away."

The pair of guards lifted Hickok by the arms and draped him between them. They hurried to the north.

"And now, Señor Blade," Cat said, "I will have your Bowies."

Blade's mouth slackened in astonishment.

Cat laughed. "*Si*. I know your name."

"But how?" Blade blurted.

"Sefior Paolucci will explain everything to you," Cat stated. "But first—" He looked up at the men on the wall. "Gehret."

A stocky man with blond hair and an Uzi snapped to attention. "Yes,

sir?"

"Take eight men with you and go find the third one," Cat directed. "The one in black. Leave Webster on the wall."

Gehret saluted. "Yes, sir."

El Gato gestured at the Bowies. "And now, Blade, your knives. Don't forget the gun behind your back, the derringer, and the backpack." He raised his left hand and his men sighted on the Warrior.

Inwardly seething, Blade nonetheless smiled placidly. El Gato was a pro; he'd detected the Browning and the derringer's outline easily. The Warrior removed the backpack, Cat snapped his fingers, and one of the guards stepped forward to take the gear.

"Your men are well trained," Blade remarked.

"Yes," Cat agreed. "But they are not my men. They are the Director's men, Mr. Paolucci's men. I am but a captain."

"Mr. Paolucci has his own little army," Blade deduced.

"He needs one," Cat said, nodding toward the break in the hedge. "After you."

Blade walked into the gardens.

"Go straight," Cat declared, staying on the giant's right.

The lush collection of plants was more impressive close up. Every conceivable variety appeared to be represented.

Blade glanced over his right shoulder. Gehret and eight others were descending the wall using a narrow flight of stairs 20 feet to the east of the south door.

"They will have your friend in custody within fifteen minutes," Cat predicted.

"I wouldn't count on it," Blade responded.

"Mr. Paolucci hires only the best mercenaries," Cat stated. "Your friend

in black is as good as captured."

"You don't know my friend," Blade said. "I hope your men are expendable."

Cat laughed. "I like you, *gringo*."

"Oh?" Blade commented skeptically. He followed a worn path to the north, inhaling the heady fragrance of the myriad of flowers.

"I am sincere, *señor*," Cat insisted. "Call it professional courtesy, from one man of reputation to another."

"I have a reputation?"

"You are playing games with me," Cat said. "The fame of the Warriors has spread far and wide. We have even heard of you here."

Blade's brow creased in confusion. What else did Cat know?

Cat observed the giant's expression and chuckled. "So many questions, eh?"

"This is an unexpected development," Blade admitted.

"Be patient. Mr. Paolucci will answer everything. He has been looking forward to your arrival."

Blade caught sight of buildings. A large red barn appeared to the east, and to the north loomed a four-story, sprawling, magnificent house with a portico supported by marble columns. "Where is the infirmary?" he asked.

Cat pointed to the west.

Blade gazed in that direction and discovered another structure, the barracks Barbish had told them about, a low wooden building with several doors and a green roof. Of course, the Dealer had conveniently lied about the size of the guard contingent. A large sign imprinted in red with the word INFIRMARY was attached above the northernmost door. The door was open, and the two guards responsible for conveying Hickok were standing outside, conversing.

"They will bring word as soon as your friend has been examined," Cat

said. "What is his name anyway?"

"Hickok."

"So that was Hickok?" Cat remarked. "I did not expect him to be so rash."

"You've heard of Hickok too?"

"Si."

"How many Warriors do you know by name?"

Cat Grinned. "Mr. Paolucci has talked about four of you by name. Hickok, an Indian named Geronimo, the hombre they call the Dispenser of Death—Yama, and yourself." He paused. "There was an unconfirmed report concerning a small man in black, but his name was unknown."

"Where did this report come from?"

"You must ask Mr. Paolucci."

Blade looked over his left shoulder at the mercenaries. One was carrying his Bowies, the Browning, and the derringer, and a second was bearing the Paratrooper, the Henry, and the backpack.

"They say you are quite skilled with your knives," Cat commented.

Blade said nothing.

"Perhaps we will have the chance to test your mettle," Cat stated. "You and I, eh? *Mano a mano*. One on one."

"You sound like you'd enjoy it."

"Si, Blade. I would," Cat confessed. "There is very little action at Happy Acres." He spoke the last two words contemptuously. "A man of my expertise, my caliber, needs challenges. Without action, what use are the talents we have? When Mr. Paolucci told us you were coming, I was overjoyed. This is the first action I've seen in two years. No one else would have the *cojones* to take on the Dragons. You have my respect, *amigo*."

Blade stared into Cat's dark eyes, only four inches lower than his own.

He perceived that the mercenary was sincere.

"Yes," Cat went on. "I will be glad when my contract is up. Another six months and I can return to Colombia."

"You're from South America?"

"Si. Why do you sound so surprised?"

"I suppose I expected you to be from Miami."

Cat snorted. "That sewer? Give me the green hills of Colombia any day!"

"How did South America fare during the war?"

"There were not any nuclear strikes on South American soil," Cat replied. "But most of the governments fell apart. The winds brought a lot of radiation, and there was much sickness and death."

"And now?"

"Colombia is ruled by the Cartel," Cat disclosed. His eyes narrowed as he gazed ahead.

Blade faced the house.

A man was awaiting them on the bottom step of the portico, a stately individual attired in an immaculate white suit and matching shoes. His hair was black, tinged with gray at the ears. Frank blue eyes watched the Warrior approach. The man's face was leonine in aspect. Here was a man accustomed to giving orders and being obeyed. Here was a man of power.

Cat stepped in front of the Warrior and saluted. "Here he is, Mr. Paolucci. Just as you wanted."

Paolucci raked Blade from head to toe with a critical gaze. "I heard shooting."

"Hickok tried to resist. He's in the infirmary," Cat detailed.

"And the third one?"

"Sergeant Gehret is out after him as we speak," Cat said.

Paolucci smiled at El Gato. "Well done." He walked up to the Warrior and offered his right hand. "I am delighted to make your acquaintance, Blade. My name is Arlo Paolucci."

Blade shook the Director's hand. "I know."

"Ahhh. Yes. Tom Barbish. Where is Mr. Barbish? I expected him to arrive with you."

Blade slashed his right forefinger across his throat.

"Really? You?"

"No," Blade said. "I can't claim the credit. A mutant made a snack out of your Dealer friend."

"Barbish was a business associate," Paolucci said. "Not a close friend. His betrayal necessitated his termination, and I'm happy the mutant has saved me the trouble." He moved to the east, nodding at a white table ringed by four white chairs. "Why don't we take a seat and continue our discussion in a civilized vein?"

El Gato nodded at the men toting the weapons, and the duo hurried to the table and deposited their loads. At a jerk of Cat's right arm, the mercenaries fanned out around the table.

"Simply a precaution, you understand," Paolucci said to the Warrior.

Blade nodded. He took a chair on the south side of the table.

The Director stepped to the chair on the opposite side. As he sat down, a petite, dark-haired woman in a white blouse, white skirt, and a white apron hastened to him.

"Refreshments, *señor*?"

"Yes, Maria," Paolucci said. He looked at Blade. "What would you like? We have tea, coffee, milk, fruit juice, water, or any liquor you can name."

"Do you have raspberry juice?" Blade asked.

Paolucci looked at Maria, who shook her head. The Director's mouth curled downward. "I apologize for the oversight."

"No big deal," Blade said. "Raspberry juice is my favorite, but I can live with grape juice, *if* you have any."

"We do, *señor*," Maria assured him.

Paolucci waved his right hand, and Maria took off for the house at a run.

"Are you always up at this time of the night?" Blade inquired.

The Director smiled. "My business activities demand unusual hours. But no, I would have been asleep tonight, if it wasn't for your arrival. I wanted to be up, to greet you in person, to bid you welcome."

"How kind of you," Blade said sarcastically.

"There's no need to be nasty," Paolucci stated. "Crudity from a man of your stature insults both of us."

The light from a floodlight at the eastern corner of the house cast a glimmering reflection on the weapons piled on the table. Blade glanced at the Paratrooper, estimating his chances of successfully making a bid for freedom. With the table encircled by mercenaries, and El Gato standing four feet to his right, any precipitous movement on his part would be met by a hail of lead. Wisdom dictated sitting tight, biding his time. He stared to his left at the infirmary 50 yards distant, suppressing his anxiety over Hickok. Why had the gunfighter pulled such an inane stunt? Hickok was impetuous, true, but the gunman wasn't an idiot; his gambit at the south door made no sense.

"I was quite surprised to learn of your presence in Miami," the Director commented.

"How did you find out?"

"I was called by one of Barbish's people fifteen minutes after you took him from the Oasis," Paolucci divulged. "It wasn't terribly difficult to put two and two together. When my caller described the three men responsible for the abduction, I remembered the descriptions I'd been given of yourself and a few of your colleagues."

"But how did you know it was me?"

The Director smiled. "How many seven-foot men with Bowie knives are traipsing around the country?"

"That's not what I meant," Blade said. "How did you know about me, about the Warriors? Where did you hear about us?"

"From the Masters," Paolucci answered.

"How did they learn about the Warriors?"

"You'll need to ask them," the Director said.

"They didn't tell you?"

"No," Paolucci said. "And I'm not about to pry into their affairs. As a Director, my job is to carry out their wishes, not to pry into their sources."

"How much were you told?"

Paolucci leaned back in his chair. "The Masters held a conclave with all of the Directors in attendance. We were told about this group in Minnesota, the Family, and provided with convincing evidence of the Family's threat to our operation."

"What are you talking about?" Blade demanded. "How can the Family be a threat when our Home is located over two thousand miles from Miami?"

"If the Masters see your Family as a threat, then you're a threat," Paolucci maintained.

"What else did they inform you of?"

"We were provided with a brief description of your administrative organization," the Director said. "We learned about the Elders, about your Leader, Plato, and about the Warriors."

"And did the Masters happen to reveal their plans for the Family?"

Paolucci nodded. "Complete eradication."

"Then the report we heard was true," Blade commented.

"Now it's my turn," the Director stated. "I've answered all of your questions, and I expect you to extend the same courtesy." He paused as Maria approached with a silver tray containing liquid refreshments. She placed the tray on the table, picked up a glass filled with grape juice, and handed the drink to the Warrior.

"Your grape juice, *señor*."

"Thank you," Blade said.

"That will be all, Maria," Paolucci stated stiffly.

Maria glanced nervously at the Director, then departed.

"I'll talk to her about the raspberry juice," Paolucci commented.

"Talk to her?" Blade repeated, and took a sip.

"I pride myself on running an orderly household," the Director said. "My servants perform their duties impeccably, or they don't work for me very long." His tone lowered ominously. "I despise imperfection."

"So what if you're out of raspberry juice," Blade responded. "It's not worth getting upset about."

"To you," Paolucci said sternly. He abruptly smiled. "But enough of this. Where were we? I believe you were going to answer my questions."

"I never said I'd answer anything."

"But I answered all of yours," the Director declared.

"That doesn't make us best friends," Blade quipped.

Paolucci's lips compressed. To cover his chagrin, he reached for a pitcher of red juice. "Tomato juice," he explained. "*My* favorite." He poured the tomato juice into an empty glass, set down the pitcher, and reached for the glass. His fingers were an inch away when the predawn quietude was shattered by the blast of gunfire.

From the infirmary.

Chapter Thirteen

Sergeant Ambrose Gehret hustled his men across the cleared strip and into the trees to the south of the compound. He stopped under the willow, the same willow he'd seen the giant and the guy in buckskins dart from when they'd approached the wall. As he expected, the man in black was gone.

"We're after one man, Sarge?" asked a tanned, experienced soldier to his rear.

Gehret nodded.

"We won't even work up a sweat," Stanz remarked.

Gehret turned to his men. "Listen up!" He recalled an episode earlier that night. Shooting the breeze with El Gato near the barn, both of them had been surprised to see the Director running toward them from the house. The Director, displaying an uncharacteristic uneasiness, had told them about Barbish's abduction, about his belief that the Warriors were involved. Gehret had been secretly amused at the Director's ill-concealed anxiety. Paolucci had expressed his belief that the Warriors were on their way to Happy Acres, based on the assumption the Warriors would not go to all the trouble to snatch the Dealer alive without a specific purpose. And what better reason than to compel the Dealer to take them to Barbish's superior in the Dragons? Gehret had to hand it to Paolucci. The Director had been right on the money. "In case you didn't hear, we're after a Warrior." He said the name scornfully.

"What's a Warrior?" Stanz asked.

"They're supposed to be real hotshots," Gehret replied. "The one we're after is dressed in black. He must know his pals have been caught. I doubt he'll go very far. We'll divide up into three teams. Stanz, take two men with you and sweep to the west, then north. Check under every tree and behind every bush."

Corporal Stanz nodded. He looked at two of the mercenaries and wagged his right thumb westward. The trio hurried off.

Sergeant Gehret glanced at one of his men. "Weber, take two men with you," he directed. "Go east, all the way around the compound until you join up with Stanz."

Private Weber selected a pair of men and off they went.

"Right," Gehret said, staring at the remaining duo. "The south side is all ours. Let's go." He advanced into the undergrowth, his men flanking him.

The mercenaries dispersed in three directions of the compass, and as their stealthy footfalls faded, a lithe, pantherish form dropped from the overspreading limbs of the willow to the ground.

The hunted was now the hunter.

Sergeant Gehret was becoming increasingly annoyed at the minutes elapsed without a sign of the Warrior. No trace at all! Not one of the other search parties had signaled, not so much as a single shot had been fired.

Where the hell was the guy in black?

Gehret paused on a low mound and surveyed the terrain. In front of him was a 15-foot incline covered with weeds, and then a sea of sawgrass. They were nearly to the southern edge of the estate; beyond was the reptile-infested swamp. Dawn was streaking the eastern horizon, the increasing sunlight lending the murky water a golden hue. He turned to the west, intending to head for the airboat dock.

"Sarge!" one of his men exclaimed, pointing to the north, at a tree 20 yards distant.

Gehret swiveled, doing a double take when he saw the cause of the man's alarm.

There he was!

The son of a bitch was standing next to the tree, just watching them, an M-16 slung over his left shoulder, his hands empty!

Gehret recovered from his amazement and raised his Uzi, his finger on the trigger.

With startling swiftness, the man in black stepped behind the trunk and was screened from view.

"Damn!" declared the first man.

"He must be crazy!" said the second.

Gehret motioned with his left arm. "Take him from both sides," he commanded.

Moving with practiced precision, the three mercenaries closed on the tree, their weapons at the ready.

Gehret fixed his gaze on that tree. The nearest brush was five yards from the trunk! The guy had trapped himself! There was no way the man in black could reach the brush without being cut down. Gehret smiled in expectation.

One of the other mercenaries was moving cautiously to the right, the second to the left.

Sergeant Gehret halted a yard from the three-foot-wide trunk and crouched. He glanced at his men and nodded, and all three hurled themselves forward. Gehret rounded the trunk on the left and swiveled, prepared to blast away.

But there was no one to blast.

The Warrior was gone.

"Where'd he go?" asked the private on the right.

"I don't know!" Gehret snapped. "Fan out. Find the bastard!" He watched them enter the undergrowth, his brow knit in puzzlement. No one could up and vanish. No one ordinary, that is. But Gehret had lived as a professional mercenary for two decades. Before being hired by the Dragons, he'd worked for seven years in the Far East. In Japan he'd encountered certain men capable of astounding feats, men known as Ninja. Oddly enough, the Oriental in black reminded him of those Ninja.

In the brief glimpse he'd had, he'd recognized the same aura of supreme confidence in the man in black as he recollected observing in the Ninja. Was it possible? he started to think, when a strangled gurgle sounded from the vegetation to his left.

"Anders?" Gehret said softly but urgently.

There was no response.

"Anders?"

Still no answer.

Gehret took a stride toward the undergrowth, looking to the right as he did so. "Wilson!" he hissed.

"Yeah, Sarge?" came a reply from the other side of a dense thicket.

"Get back here! On the double!"

"On my way."

Gehret heard the muffled footfalls as Wilson started to obey, and an instant later there was a loud crash. Then silence.

"Wilson?"

Wilson did not reply.

Discarding prudence, concerned for his men, Gehret plunged into the woods, weaving to minimize the target he posed, skirting the dense thicket. The morning light cast the vegetation in a deep green tint. His combat boots bumped an object in his path and he looked down, a chill washing over him.

Private Wilson was on his back, his mouth open, his tongue protruding out the left corner. His head was almost severed from his shoulders; only a few inches of flesh and the spinal column had not been sliced clean through.

Sergeant Gehret licked his lips. He'd seen this kind of handiwork before, and a word flashed into his mind unbidden, a word with supremely lethal connotations: katana.

The Oriental had a katana.

Gehret scanned the vegetation. He vaguely remembered seeing something long and thin slanted under the Warrior's belt. The katana? He wanted to kick himself for underestimating the man in black. Now his men were dead, and El Gato would have his hide! He decided to head to the west and locate Corporate Stanz, and he took several steps. As he did, the short hairs on the nape of his neck tingled.

No!

Sergeant Gehret whirled, his Uzi tucked against his right side.

The Warrior was a foot away in the Kokutsu-tachi, the back stance. His M-16 was still over his left shoulder, and his katana was angled over his left hip. As the mercenary turned, the Warrior slid in close, his left hand in the Nukite, the piercing hand, position, his right in the Shotei. A slash to his left hand deflected the Uzi barrel aside. He uttered a sharp kiai and drove his right hand in a palm heel thrust into the mercenary's side, hemorrhaging the spleen underneath. Another Shotei blow to the sergeant's chin snapped the soldier's head back.

Gehret saw pinwheeling lights explode before his eyes. Dazed, he tried to stagger backwards, to clear his head. But the Warrior wouldn't let him.

The man in black rammed his right elbow into the mercenary's jaw.

Gehret felt his teeth crunch together. His world spun and danced and he sagged forward.

The Warrior yanked the Uzi free and tossed it aside. He stood above the mercenary as Gehret landed on his knees, struggling to focus.

This couldn't be happening!

Gehret felt steely fingers lock on his throat. He gasped and grabbed the arm holding him.

"You have captured my friends," the man in black stated harshly. "Now you are going to tell me everything there is to know about Happy Acres." To emphasize his point, he raised his right arm aloft, his fingers taut, ready to use a Crane strike to the eyes.

Gehret blinked and gulped.

Chapter Fourteen

Dear Spirit!

His shoulder hurt like the dickens!

Hickok kept his eyes closed, listening to the conversation between the doctor and the nurse.

"Will you operate?" the nurse asked.

The doctor had removed the backpack, then used a scalpel to cut a line in the gunman's buckskin shirt from the right shoulder to the neck. He'd peeled the strong, pliable leather down to expose the wound. Now, as he probed at the hole with his instruments, he voiced a contemplative, "Hmmmmm."

What the blazes did that mean? Hickok resisted an urge to cry out as the doctor's probe hit a sensitive spot. He didn't want the physician to know he was awake and he had been the whole time.

So far his plan had worked to perfection.

Sort of.

When those coyotes had popped up from behind the blasted hedge, springing their ambush, he'd believed he and Blade were going to cash in their chips. But when the men hadn't fired, in that split second when he'd realized they were about to be taken prisoner instead of perforated with dozens of rounds, he'd attempted to get through the doorway, hoping the varmints would hesitate just long enough.

Wouldn't you know it.

The dipsticks hadn't.

The shot had knocked him for a loop. Surprisingly, the pain had been slight at first, then grew progressively worse. He'd retained consciousness all the while the two guards were lugging him to the infirmary and making snide comments about his level of intelligence.

What did those cow patties know?

"Most remarkable," the doctor remarked.

"What is?" the nurse prompted.

"The wound isn't life threatening," the doctor said. "The bullet missed the clavicle, the subclavian artery, and the subclavian vein. Except for damage to the trapezius muscle—and the entry and exit holes, of course—this man is fine. Remarkable," he repeated.

"What should I tell the two outside?"

"Tell them we'll need to clean and bandage the shoulder," the doctor directed. "It shouldn't take more than five minutes."

Hickok heard the nurse walk off.

This was his chance.

He opened his lids a fraction and studied his surroundings. The doctor was a man of 30 or so, attired in a white smock and gray trousers. As Hickok watched, the physician walked to a cabinet and opened the glass door. Medical instruments were everywhere, and the ten-by-twelve-foot room was spotlessly clean. A door was visible six feet from the foot of the metal table Hickok was on. Through the doorway he could see a smaller room, and on the far side was another door, this one to the outside. The nurse, an attractive redhead, was framed in the doorway. Beyond her were two men in camouflage uniforms, the same pair, evidently, who had carried him to the infirmary.

The doctor began humming to himself.

Hickok closed his eyes and debated his next move. His Henry was gone, but the dummies had neglected to take his Colts. Since Blade had managed to get himself captured, his first priority was to rescue the Big Guy.

There was the sound of footsteps at the foot of the table.

"What did they say?" the doctor inquired.

"They said they'll wait," the nurse responded. "Mr. Paolucci wants to see him as soon as possible."

"Do they know who he is?"

"They don't know his name. But El Gato said something about expecting Warriors to attack Happy Acres. He must be a Warrior."

"What's a Warrior?"

"Beats me."

Hickok heard the swishing noise of running water.

"You'd better wash up," the doctor directed.

The nurse shuffled to the right. "What do you think Mr. Paolucci will do to him?"

"Your guess is as good as mine."

"They captured another one," the nurse mentioned. "I saw him from the front door. He's a big one."

"I hope I don't go to all the trouble of bandaging this man," the physician commented, "only to have the good Director execute him."

"Don't talk like that," the nurse cautioned. "Someone may hear you."

"I am not one of the Director's hired flunkies," the doctor said. "I'll voice my opinion any time I desire."

"It's dangerous to anger Mr. Paolucci."

"Paolucci is not God."

"At Happy Acres he's the next best thing."

The water was turned off.

"Prep the patient," the doctor directed.

Hickok breathed deeply, simulating unconsciousness. Soft, gentle fingers began washing the blood from his shoulder. Perfume stimulated his nostrils.

"This guy is good looking," the nurse remarked.

"Behave yourself, Norma."

"I was just making an observation."

The doctor chuckled.

Hickok's nose started to itch.

"So tell me," the doctor said. "How's things going between Sergeant Gehret and you?"

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

"Oh. That's funny. You know how gossip spreads around the estate. Yesterday I treated someone who told me Gehret and you are an item."

"Who?"

"You know I won't tell you."

"Why not?"

"Because you'd punch their lights out."

The nurse laughed. "I would not!"

Hickok's nose twitched as the itching intensified.

"I'm done," the nurse announced.

"Allow me," the doctor stated.

Not now! Hickok felt a growing impulse to sneeze and tried to suppress it.

The physician began probing at the wound again. "Would you get the gauze?" he asked the nurse.

"Certainly."

Hickok was unable to control the urge. The sneeze exploded from him, and as his head snapped forward he sat up and opened his eyes.

The doctor, standing next to the table with a long, thin silver instrument in his right hand, took a step backwards, startled. To the left of the table, her hand on the knob of a white cabinet, the nurse shifted her hand to her widening mouth.

Hickok pulled his left Python. "Howdy," he said with a smile.

"You're awake!" the nurse blurted.

"And rarin' to go," Hickok said, glancing at the doorway. He spied the guards through the outer door, both standing with their backs to the infirmary, talking. "Close this door," he instructed them, nodding at the entrance to the room.

Neither the doctor or the nurse moved.

"You'd best hop to it," Hickok suggested. "If those guards see me, there's liable to be gunplay. You'd be caught in the cross fire."

"Close the door, Norma," the doctor said.

The nurse moved tentatively to the door and eased it shut.

Hickok motioned with the Python at a far corner. "Why don't you mosey on over there where I can keep my eyes on you, ma'am?"

Norma complied hastily.

"Now, Doc, you can bandage my shoulder," Hickok directed.

"I should administer anesthetic," the physician remarked.

"No anesthetic."

"It will cause some discomfort."

"No anesthetic."

The doctor shrugged. "As you wish."

Hickok bore the dressing of his wound stoically despite intermittent twinges of severe pain. He held the Python in his lap, his thumb on the hammer.

"You know," the physician commented as he wrapped up the bandaging, "there's only one way out of the infirmary."

"No windows?"

"There is a window in the waiting room," the doctor disclosed. "On the north side."

Hickok smiled. "Thanks, Doc."

"This will suffice temporarily," the doctor said, stepping back and examining his handiwork. "But you should avoid excessive activity."

"I'll keep it in mind," Hickok quipped. He slid to the left, placing his moccasins on the white-tiled floor. "I want you two to stay put until I'm out of here. You'll stay a lot healthier if you do."

"We won't budge," the doctor promised.

Hickok walked to the door and opened it a crack. Peeking through the narrow slit, he observed the guards still engaged in conversation and still facing away from the infirmary. This was a golden opportunity. He quickly opened the door, sidled into the waiting room, and quietly closed the door.

Neither guard looked in his direction.

The gunman moved to the north wall and examined the narrow window. The inner pane was already up; all that separated him from freedom was a screen. He touched the screen with his right hand, grimacing at the soreness. How would he get through the screen? Find a knife?

A boot scuffed the floor to his rear.

Hickok spun, the Colt tight in his left hand.

One of the guards was a yard inside the waiting room, slack-jawed in amazement. A machine gun was cradled in his left arm.

"Howdy," Hickok said with a grin. "Are you here for your lobotomy?"

Recovering from his initial shock, the mercenary pivoted and endeavored to level his weapon.

Hickok's left Colt boomed, the slug slamming into the guard's forehead and knocking him backward. There was no time to lose. The gunman stepped hurriedly to the doorway, and there was the second mercenary, unslinging his M-16, about to enter. Hickok shot the man in the right eye, then dashed outside.

Now what?

The gunfighter glanced to the east, relief engulfing him at the sight of Blade seated at a white table. Unfortunately, his friend was ringed by ten or eleven mercenaries.

Those mercenaries abruptly raced toward the infirmary.

Hickok swiveled to the right, frowning as he beheld three guards exiting a barracks door. He thumbed the hammer three times, and with each shot a mercenary dropped. But more would be coming. It was time for Mama Hickok's pride and joy to skedaddle. He turned to the left, to the north, spying the closed front gate and a pair of guards. Another mercenary was on the brick wall to the west of the gate. All three were staring at him.

So much for subterfuge.

Hickok bolted toward the gate. With a clipped wing, and without the range provided by the Henry, the odds were stacked too high against him. His best bet was to reach the woods, then rescue Blade later.

Easier said than done.

Several of the mercenaries charging from the east opened up, their rounds narrowly missing the sprinting gunman.

Hickok's right shoulder was throbbing. He saw the pair at the gate run

in his direction, and the mercenary on the wall was aiming a machine gun.

When outnumbered, do the unexpected.

The gunfighter stopped, extending and elevating his left arm, and fired once.

With his arms flung wide, the sentry on the wall staggered to the inner rim and plummeted over the edge.

Hickok resumed speeding toward the gate. The layout of the compound worked in his favor; he could make a beeline for the gate from the infirmary, but the mercenaries pursuing him were thwarted by having the house between themselves and the north wall. They had to run all the way around the Director's huge residence. Now, with less than 30 yards to go, and with the pack of mercenaries obstructed by the intervening mansion, he pumped his legs for all he was worth.

The pair of gate guards had halted ten feet from the gate and were sighting on the Warrior.

Hickok threw himself to the left, to the ground, jarring his left side. The left Colt was empty, and reloading was out of the question.

Would his right arm work?

The gunfighter rolled to his knees as the gate guards fired. He grunted as he drew his right Python, his shoulder lancing with agonizing protest. Steady! he mentally warned himself.

Slugs smacked into the turf in front of him.

Hickok fired twice, each shot planted dead center, a slug tearing into each guard's head and dropping them in their tracks.

Move! his mind screamed.

The gunman rose and darted for the gate, looking over his left shoulder. The pack had not yet appeared. He might make it after all. He holstered the left Python and studied the gate ahead. Six-foot-high metal bars, spaced at one-foot intervals, formed the core of the framework, braced by

heavy bars at the top and the bottom. A heavy chain was looped around the central bars and secured by a large padlock. He slowed as he neared the pair of dead guards, intending to search their pockets for the key.

A loud shout sounded behind him.

Hickok looked over his right shoulder to see the pack of mercenaries rounding the northwest corner of the house. They were hard in pursuit, and several of them yelled with excitement as they spied their quarry.

Blast!

He could forget the key.

Hickok spun and ran to the gate, sliding the right Python in its holster. He didn't slow or stop. Instead, he took a leap and grabbed the middle bars, holding on with all of his strength, his right shoulder twitching in excruciating torture. He resisted the waves of pain and climbed higher, hand over hand, using his left arm to bear most of his weight and shimmying upward with his legs.

The chatter of automatic fire greeted his maneuver.

Hickok heard slugs thud into the brick wall, and a few rounds pinged off the metal bars. His neck muscles bulged, his face becoming crimson, as he scaled the gate to the top horizontal bar.

Something tugged at his left leg.

Hickok draped his left arm over the top bar, girded his shoulders, and surged up and over the heavy bar. For a moment he hung suspended by his left arm alone, his right too racked with torment to use.

A stinging sensation lanced his right cheek.

He dropped to the gravel road, landing and almost losing his balance. But he recovered and headed for the vegetation to the north, his sore right shoulder impeding his speed.

A moment later, the mercenaries pounded up to the gate and cut loose at the twisting, dodging figure in buckskins making for the shelter of the trees.

"Get the son of a bitch!"

Chapter Fifteen

In terms of experience and expertise, Rikki-Tikki-Tavi was acknowledged by the Family as one of the more deadly Warriors. Rikki practiced his martial arts skills daily. He would spend hours honing his ability to throw shuriken into logs positioned upright as makeshift targets. He continuously worked at increasing his mastery of the katana, his favorite weapon. Calloused and hardened by constant striking of hard surfaces, his hands and feet were employed in unarmed contests with other Warriors, friendly affairs with a lethal undertone. Only two Warriors could hold their own against Rikki in hand-to-hand combat: Blade and Yama. Devoted to attaining the spiritual state of a perfected swordmaster, Rikki honed his reflexes ceaselessly. He recognized the critical importance of sharpening his reflexes to a razor readiness. When on a run, if he slacked off for just a second, it could mean the difference between life and death. Warriors had to guard against being taken by surprise. Their reflexes must be equal to the unexpected developments of any given moment. Yet despite this fundamental knowledge, Rikki knew the impossibility of maintaining a perpetual state of hypersensitivity to imminent danger. Invariably, inadvertently, when a Warrior least expected it, his guard would falter for a crucial interval. This happened to every Warrior at one time or another.

And now it happened to Rikki.

The martial artist was listening to his prisoner describe the interior of the compound, when from the north erupted the crack of gunfire. Rikki should have kept his eyes on the mercenary. He knew to do otherwise was a major blunder. He had trained and trained for just such a contingency. But the gunshots sounded familiar despite the distance. Countless times he had heard Hickok fire the Pythons, and eventually, after years of familiarity, his ears could register the subtle difference between a Colt Python revolver and other firearms. So when he heard the gunshots, and when he realized that Hickok could be doing the firing, he carelessly,

automatically, looked up, gazing to the north.

In that moment Sergeant Gehret struck.

The mercenary had babbled to save his life, supplying the details the man in black requested. Gradually, the intense pangs in his side and jaw had subsided to a tolerable level. His arms at his sides, he had meekly complied with the Warrior's demands for information. But he was still, first and foremost, a seasoned, professional soldier, a mercenary of outstanding ability. He was not a man to permit an opportunity to pass untaken. And when he saw the Warrior glance to the north, he reacted with all the speed and efficiency at his command. He drove his right fist into the Warrior's groin.

Rikki-Tikki-Tavi doubled over, gasping, his genitals afire. Any normal man would have clutched his privates and been oblivious to all else. But Rikki was not normal; his self control, his inner discipline were supreme. Instead of allowing the agony to control him, he controlled it. Instead of wheezing for air, at the mercy of his foe, he threw himself backwards to put distance between them, tottering, every iota of his concentration devoted to regaining domination of his body.

Sergeant Gehret pushed to his feet and closed on the Warrior, performing a side thrust kick to his opponent's midsection.

Rikki stepped to the right, evading the kick, his fluidity reduced to a mere shuffle.

Eager to press the initiative, Gehret delivered a sweep kick at the Warrior's legs.

The blow was telegraphed by the mercenary's stance and muscle movement, and Rikki skipped out of range. His legs were responding better to his mental commands.

Gehret made a mistake of his own. He stepped back and assumed a fighting stance, and then he violated the cardinal rule of martial-combat: He spoke. "I'm going to stomp you into the ground, little man!"

Rikki said nothing. He tensed his muscles, gauging his recovery, waiting.

"I've got to hand it to you," Gehret said. "You're good. But I'm better," So saying, he attempted to connect with a front rising kick to the Warrior's head.

Rikki-Tikki-Tavi was not so easily taken. His left forearm blocked the blow and he rotated, whipping his left elbow in nearly a full circle, adding the momentum of the swing to his inherent power. His elbow caught the mercenary on the nose and crushed the cartilage, flattening the nostrils.

Gehret tottered backwards, blood pouring from his nose.

Eager to aid Hickok and Blade, Rikki wanted to end the fight promptly. He flicked his left foot in a side kick, his heel jamming into the mercenary's right kneecap.

Gehret stiffened and cried out as his kneecap was shattered. He hobbled to the left and tripped over a log, going down on his left side at the crest of a four-foot-high drop off, the eroded vestige of a low mound.

Rikki pressed his advantage, moving to the mercenary's right, seeking an opening.

The realization that he was hopelessly outclassed goaded Gehret to a desperate measure. He scrambled onto his good knee, his hands in front of his torso in a defensive posture. An unorthodox ploy was called for, a strategem the Warrior wouldn't expect. But what? What was the one tactic the man in black would never anticipate? He riveted his eyes on the Warrior as the martial artist circled him, and an insane idea gave him a straw at which to clutch. He glanced at a stretch of sandy earth below the drop-off. The ground appeared slightly soggy and ideal for his purpose.

Rikki neared the edge of the drop-off to his enemy's right.

It could work. Gehret told himself. He shifted his body to keep the Warrior in front of him, then used his uninjured knee as a crutch and retreated a yard.

The Warrior stepped along the rim of the drop-off, his back to the sandy patch below.

Gehret waited until the man in black was at the midpoint of the rim, then put his scheme into operation. He heaved erect and started to turn,

pretending to flee, hoping the Warrior would take the bait.

Rikki, believing the mercenary was foolishly striving to get away, took a stride after his foe and lowered his guard slightly.

Which was precisely the reaction Gehret was counting on. He spun on his left leg and dived, his arms outstretched, tackling the Warrior, gripping the man in black about the ankles and propelling them both toward the rim.

And over the edge.

Gehret had planned it this way. He wanted them to fall to the ground below with him on top, pinning the Warrior beneath him. But he had failed to account for the Warrior's reflexes.

Rikki-Tikki-Tavi flipped his body to the right in midair, and both men landed on their sides. Rikki was surprised to feel the earth yield to the impact, to feel the dirt give out under his body. The soft ground absorbed the force of the drop, and a moist, sticky substance clung to his right ear and cheek. Although he was puzzled, he knew better than to take his eyes from the mercenary. And so it was that he observed a remarkable occurrence.

As his left shoulder sank into the sandy turf, Gehret's eyes showed stark fear. He twisted and tried to push up, but his arms sank to the elbows in the mushy soil. "No!" he cried.

Bewildered by the sight of the mercenary sinking, Rikki remained motionless, trying to comprehend what he was seeing.

Gehret endeavored to sit up, but the motion only contributed to his rate of submersion. His arms disappeared to the shoulders, his legs to his knees. Frantic, he wrenched on his arms, his blood-stained face contorted in horror. He was sinking even faster. "No!" he shouted, looking at the Warrior with an expression of pathetic despair. "Help me!" he yelled. "It's quicksand!"

At last Rikki understood.

Even as the damp sand touched his nose.

Chapter Sixteen

"Don't move, *señor!*"

Blade had risen as he spied Hickok exiting the infirmary, but he stopped, his body poised to run.

El Gato was covering him with the M-16. "Stay right where you are, Blade." He waved his right arm at the infirmary. "Get Hickok!"

The ten mercenaries took off in pursuit of the gunfighter.

Blade reluctantly sat down, watching the tableau unfold. He saw Hickok shoot three guards, and then the gunman wheeled and ran to the north. Where was Hickok heading? Blade thought of the front gate and smiled.

"What is so humorous about the death of one of your fellow Warriors?" Paolucci asked.

"Hickok isn't dead yet."

"He will be soon," Paolucci vowed.

Blade listened to the gunshots coming from the north side of the house. He could distinguish between the boom of Hickok's revolvers and the lighter, more metallic chatter of the mercenaries' automatic weapons.

"And for that matter, so will you," Paolucci said.

Distracted by the noise of the running gun battle, Blade wasn't certain he'd heard correctly. "What?" he asked belatedly.

"Your demise is at hand."

With a conscious effort, Blade faced the Director. "What do you have in mind? A firing squad?"

Paolucci smiled. "Nothing so prosaic."

"You're going to feed me to the alligators?"

"Now there's an idea!" Paolucci stated. "But, sorry to say, no. To tell you the truth, the manner of your death is not my decision to make."

"Then whose is it?"

"Guess."

Boom. Boom.

Hickok was still alive and kicking! Blade focused on the Director, reflecting. Insight struck him seconds later. "The Masters want to attend to my death personally?"

Paolucci nodded.

"Why am I receiving special treatment?" Blade queried. "Or do the Masters dispose of all of your enemies?"

"The Masters only involve themselves in the exceptional cases," the Director said. "You're receiving quite an honor."

"How so?"

"The Masters will sacrifice you."

"They make sacrifices?"

"Yes."

Blade tensed as the automatic gunfire attained a crescendo. He envisioned Hickok being hit by a storm of slugs, and he shook his head to dispel the image.

Paolucci misinterpreted the movement. "You don't believe me? I'm offended. I have no reason to lie to you. And I know whereof I speak, because I have personally attended fourteen sacrifices."

"You stood by and watched the Masters sacrifice humans?" Blade asked in disgust. Out of the corner of his right eye he noticed El Gato frowning.

"Most of the sacrifices were Dealers gone bad," Paolucci detailed. "The rest were troublemakers, people who couldn't appreciate the essential social service provided by the Dragons."

"In other words, they were against the Dragons and everything you stand for. They opposed your drug-dealing."

"They were fools."

"You're the fool, if you think you can continue to control the people of Miami with drugs," Blade said.

Paolucci did a double take, genuine amazement flickering across his features. "My compliments. Your perception is remarkable."

"What's so remarkable about the obvious?"

"You're wrong, though," the Director said. "The Dragons have controlled southern Florida for sixty-five years. We will control this area, and much more, long after your bones are bleached white by the sun."

"You think so?"

"I know so," Paolucci asserted. "Your problem is that you fail to understand the nature of the human condition. Most people are sheep, content to be led by anyone with the strength to assume command. All the average person cares about are the basics. Where is the next meal coming from? Where will the money come from to put clothes on their backs and keep a roof over their heads? And there's one more consideration." He paused. "What can help them forget all their cares and woes? What can alleviate the pain, if only for a little while? What can give them the illusion of being on top of the world, when in reality they're in the gutter?" He smiled. "That's where the Dragons come in. By feeding this need to feel happy in a world of suffering and sickness, by fostering their illusions, we supply an essential social service. And therein lies the source of our power."

"You're sick in the head," Blade stated. "And your philosophy is perverted."

Paolucci shrugged. "Perverted or not, the Dragons *do* control Miami and the rest of southern Florida. And soon we will extend our control to

other areas."

"Not if the Family can help it."

The Director smirked. "But the Family can't."

Blade stared into Paolucci's eyes. "Sooner or later, someone will come along and lead the people in a revolt against your manipulation. I know there have already been a lot who have moved away from Miami, rather than live under the influence of a drug-dominated culture. Not everyone is gullible enough to stupidly believe that pleasure is the only pursuit in life that matters. There are those who believe in higher values, in spiritual values of love and faith—"

Slapping the table in mirth, the Director laughed uproariously. "Love and faith? You don't actually believe that nonsense?"

Blade's eyes became flinty.

"You're too idealistic, my friend," Paolucci declared patronizingly. "The world is not governed by love and faith. It's dominated by greed, lust, and power. Nothing else counts."

A sole mercenary was approaching the table at a trot.

Blade gazed at the guard apprehensively, worried about Hickok.

"Report!" El Gato barked.

The mercenary halted and saluted. "Hickok escaped."

"How?"

"Over the gate."

"And our casualties?" Cat questioned.

The mercenary averted his eyes. "Eight dead."

"Eight!" El Gato snapped. "One man killed eight of our men!"

The mercenary did not respond.

"Where are the others?" Cat queried angrily.

"Hickok ran into the woods to the north," the mercenary answered. "Corporal Kingsley is leading a search sweep right this minute."

"Tell Kingsley to track Hickok down," El Gato stated, "or not to show his face in the command again. Understand?"

The mercenary nodded.

"Why are you still here?" Cat demanded.

After a brisk salute, the mercenary pivoted and raced away.

"Now where were we?" Paolucci asked, leaning back in his chair. "Oh, yes. You were indulging in whimsy."

Blade said nothing.

The Director looked at El Gato. "Do you know what we have here?"

"No, *señor*."

"What we have, Cat, is a throwback to an earlier age, an age when so-called decent types believed in basic values like the importance of the home and family life." Paolucci chuckled. "Blade is archaic and doesn't even know it. He's out of step with the times. And he would have been out of step with the society existing before the war."

"How do you figure?" Blade was prompted to ask.

"Study history," Paolucci said. "Take note of the conditions just before World War Three. Crime was rampant, social diseases proliferated, corruption in government was commonplace, and the average turkey on the street was either an addict, a couch potato, or a vain mental midget."

"I don't share your low opinion of them," Blade stated.

"Then you're denying reality again," the Director said. "I'll cite one example I read about in a library in Miami. Did you know that the educational system was in complete disarray? That the students achieved lower and lower grades on aptitude tests each year? The students just didn't care. And who can blame them? When they had a choice between

studying a stuffy old book and partying with their friends, between acquiring knowledge or living it up, the book would lose every time."

"What's your point?"

Paolucci smiled condescendingly. "My point, Warrior, is that no one gave a damn about the values you honor. No one cared then, and no one cares now. Oh, there are a few misguided souls around. But Miami is living proof of my point. If people are given a choice between their own selfish interests and the common good, they will pick their selfish pursuits every time."

Blade pursed his lips, contemplating.

El Gato stared at the Warrior with a strange expression.

"I'll hand it to you," Blade said after a minute. "Even with your warped perspective, you're more intelligent than I'd expected. But you're totally wrong. People are not inherently selfish, and if you give them half a chance, they'll prove it. The Elders teach us that a lot depends on the leaders of a society. If there isn't wise leadership, the society will suffer. And many of the leaders before the war were..." He paused. "How shall I say it?"

The Director grinned. "They had their heads up their butts."

"They lacked wisdom," Blade amended. "And worse, they were more concerned with lining their own pockets than with public service. They tried to promote a system without values, and such systems produce people without values. They saw everything as a shade of gray, when reality is a contrast of white and black. They prided themselves on a neutral educational system, not realizing that neutral systems breed neutered citizens."

Paolucci slowly rose, smiling. "Fascinating! Everything I was told about you is true. The Warrior with an intellect. What a pity you must be terminated!"

"When?"

The Director stared at the rising sun. "You have about six hours to live. You see, I radioed the Masters last night after I received the call about

Barbish. They ordered me to contact them again at sunrise with an update." He smirked. "They are quite interested in learning the reason for your presence in Miami. An emergency session of the Directors has been called for noon. I imagine the Masters will interrogate you personally, and no one ever survives an interrogation."

"The Masters are coming to Happy Acres?"

"No," Paolucci said. "The other Directors will come here, then we'll travel by airboats to the Shrine."

"The Shrine?"

"You'll see for yourself, soon enough," Paulucci commented. He glanced at El Gato. "Keep him covered while I make my calls and change."

"He will be here," Cat promised.

The Director strolled toward the portico.

Blade looked at Cat. "How can you live with yourself working for a man like that?"

El Gato's mustache curved downward. "I suggest, *amigo*, that you keep your mouth closed until the Director returns."

Blade started to speak...

"Unless, of course, you do not want to enjoy the six or seven hours of life left to you." So saying, Cat aimed the M-16 at the Warrior's head.

Blade shifted in his seat and stared at the fiery orb in the eastern sky.

CHAPTER Seventeen

"Oh, God! Help me!"

Rikki-Tikki-Tavi could do nothing to aid the hapless mercenary. Any sudden motion would result in sinking faster; accordingly, he stayed as immobile as possible, lying on his right side and watching his foe flounder.

Gehret was immersed in the quicksand almost to the neck. Only his right shoulder and head were above the clinging, slippery ooze. His eyes were saucer-shaped from stark terror, and his breathing was ragged. He glanced at the side of the drop-off a mere three feet distant. The firm ground might as well have been on the moon. The quicksand extended for yards in every other direction. He frantically sought salvation in the form of a trailing vine or a projecting log, but such a deliverance was to be denied him. The mercenary whined.

Inhaling and exhaling slowly, shallowly, Rikki still had three-fourths of his body above the quicksand. The sand had not yet seeped into his nostrils, but it was only a matter of time. The nearest terra firma was the drop-off. But how could he reach it? He suddenly realized that the mercenary was looking at him.

Gehret was measuring the space separating them, an estimation he pegged at three feet, maybe less. He girded his muscles and raised his right arm high overhead, about to implement a wild design intended to extricate himself from his smothering grave.

Rikki saw the reckless set of the mercenary's features, he saw his adversary's uplifted arm, and he guessed what was coming next. The mercenary was going to try and grab hold of him and use his body to stay afloat!

Sergeant Gehret took a deep breath, then rose as far as he could and lunged at the Warrior. And missed. The man in black flipped onto his back as Gehret's hand descended, and the mercenary, unable to check his swing, was horrified as his arm sank into the quicksand up to his elbow. He attempted to jerk his arm free; instead, the sandy substance enclosed him to his chin.

The Warrior turned his head to the right.

Gehret gazed into the martial artist's eyes, his own conveying his overwhelming desperation. "I don't want to die," he said plaintively.

"We are all called to the higher mansions eventually," Rikki said softly.

The quicksand was rising toward Gehret's lower lip. He mustered a halfhearted grin. "I never thought it would be like this, you know?"

Rikki did not respond.

Inexorably, the quicksand reached Gehret's lower lip and he sputtered. For the last time his eyes locked on the man in black. "Life is so damn unfair!" he stated, and went under.

Rikki observed the quicksand swirl and roil as the mercenary fought his fate to the end. A grimy hand poked from the ooze, its fingers stiffening, clawing at the sky as if the very air could somehow provide support. For a moment the hand waved back and forth, and then the fingers went limp and the arm was claimed by the primeval muck.

Somewhere, a bird was greeting the new day with a cheery song.

Somewhere, crickets were chirping.

Somewhere, a frog croaked.

Flat on his back on the surface of the quicksand pool, Rikki-Tikki-Tavi suddenly felt very, very alone. He gazed at the steadily brightening sky, at the arrival of the new day, and he wondered if he would be alive to see the sun set. Such a morbid thought disturbed him. A Warrior must maintain a positive attitude; anything less could result in the Warrior's premature demise.

A beautiful yellow and black butterfly flitted over the pool, passing within several inches of the Warrior's nose.

Rikki admired the insect's delicate structure and the beating of its frail wings. Life could be so sublimely glorious, so full of promise and marvels. He was not yet ready to interrupt his quest for perfection by passing to the other side. He would not forsake life while a breath remained.

But how was he to escape the quicksand?

Rikki's feet were nearer to the drop-off than his head. He tilted his chin, tucking it against his chest, and peered between the black shoes especially constructed for him by the Family Weavers at the earthen slope. His only hope lay in reaching that four-foot-high drop-off.

A bee buzzed past his head.

What were his options? Simply surging to his knees and diving was out of the question; the quicksand would not bear his weight and his doom would be sealed. Wriggling toward it was an attractive idea, but he ran the risk of working his body lower into the mire before he reached the drop-off and becoming inextricably trapped. What was left? Swimming? Ridiculous.

There was movement to his right.

Rikki glanced in that direction and spotted a small green snake moving across the quicksand to the far side. The snake's negligible weight was insufficient to cause it to sink, and lacking appendages or limbs to be sucked under the surface, it traversed the pool with indifferent ease.

What was the lesson learned?

Rikki stared at the drop-off again, pondering the significance of the snake's safe passage. As he'd learned from his study of Zen, enlightenment was a state of being attained by blending the soul with the cosmos. And life's lessons were learned by a scrupulous attention to details; even the smallest, most inconsequential happening could be fraught with import.

So what had the snake taught him?

Stay flat. Keep the head up. Keep the arms close to the body and the legs tucked tight together. Distribute the weight as evenly as possible. And don't stop. Not for a second.

What about technique?

Should he wiggle toward the drop-off or roll? Rolling would bury his shoulders in the quicksand. Therefore, wiggling was the only alternative. He hunched his shoulders, tightened his superbly muscled abdomen, and tentatively slid his legs toward the drop-off. The soles of his shoes crept less than an inch closer. He relaxed, breathing regularly. At this rate, hours would be encompassed in the effort.

A red-shouldered hawk winged above the landscape.

Rikki recalled a comment Geronimo had once made: "My ancestors saw

signs in everything. They viewed the sighting of a hawk as a particularly good omen." He hoped Geronimo was right.

The drop-off beckoned.

With the focused determination of a skilled martial artist, Rikki-Tikki-Tavi applied himself to the task at hand. The technique was always the same: a barely perceptible compacting of his slim shoulders, then a bunching of his stomach, followed by stretching his legs as far as they would go. Over and over and over he repeated the procedure. Sweat coated the pores of his face and neck.

The minutes lengthened into hours.

Three times he paused to rest and gather his strength. His abdomen became sore, and his shoulder muscles periodically cramped. He resisted the discomfort, concentrating on the drop-off.

Hour succeeded hour.

The sun angled toward the meridian.

Rikki narrowed the gap to ten inches. He halted, taking a brief break.

Muffled footsteps sounded from the north, the tread of someone advancing stealthily through the undergrowth.

Alarmed, the Warrior craned his head. The footsteps were drawing ever closer to the pool. If the mercenaries found him stuck in the quicksand, rendered powerless, they wouldn't hesitate to finish him off.

He had to hurry.

Rikki renewed his effort, moving twice the speed as before. The ache in his stomach became increasingly severe. Earlier he'd aligned the katana and the M-16 along his left leg. The strain of insuring they were held horizontal and not allowed to dip into the quicksand was taking an acute toll on his left arm.

Nine inches separated him from the drop-off.

Eight inches.

Seven.

Rikki scanned the underbrush bordering the quicksand to the north.

The footsteps slowed, then seemed to cease.

So close, and yet so far!

Rikki stared at the drop-off, calculating. If he stayed where he was, he risked being slaughtered. He was near enough now to justify a gamble, a move that would either succeed in liberating him from the muck or result in a decidedly distasteful outcome. The quicksand gave the impression of being firmer near the bank, augmenting his chances.

A twig snapped in the woods to the west. Had the mercenaries changed direction?

Further delay could prove fatal.

Rikki-Tikki-Tavi launched himself toward the dropoff, elevating his body from the waist up and lunging, his arms at full extension. His fingers dug into the yielding soil, but even as they did, his legs were sucked under, the sandy ooze enveloping him to the waist. He struggled to get a firm grip on the drop-off, but his hands were slipping through the dirt.

The quicksand was pulling him down.

Rikki employed all of his strength, his fingers buried in the earth to the knuckles.

With the irresistible force of gravity on its side, the quicksand was winning the elemental battle. The sand rose to the Warrior's arms.

A heightened resolve flooded over the martial artist, and he released his right handhold and speared his arm upward, trying for a higher grip.

As if the quicksand was a living entity endowed with a malevolent will, the suction intensified at that precise moment.

Rikki felt himself sliding under, and the grainy sand was up to his neck, his arms above his head, when a hand clamped on his right wrist, arresting his descent. He looked up.

"You Zen types sure are loco," commented the figure in buckskins above him.

"Hickok!"

"You were expecting maybe the tooth fairy?" the gunman retorted. He was lying flat, his right hand gripping Rikki, his left arm looped over the edge of the drop-off.

Rikki's elation changed to dismay as he beheld the gunfighter's bandaged right shoulder. Blood was seeping from the bandages, and Hickok's face was distorted in profound pain.

The gunman grunted as he hauled on Rikki's arm, straining to the maximum.

Rikki, the focus of the tug of war between the gunfighter and the quicksand, racked his brain for something he could do to aid his friend. The lighter the load, the easier it would be for Hickok to pull him out. With the idea came action; he used his left hand to unsling his M-16 and allowed the rifle to drop into the mire.

Hickok's neck muscles were quivering and his face was beet red. He closed his eyes and gritted his teeth. "And I thought Blade was overweight," he muttered.

There was one more item he could discard. Rikki used his left hand and drew his katana, his arm protesting the sharp angle required to draw the sword straight up. Once the blade was clear of the scabbard, he glanced over his left shoulder at the backpack strap. Working swiftly, he slid the katana under the strap, pressed the razor edge against the fabric and sliced. The strap parted, the backpack dangling from his right side. He gazed over his right shoulder, locating the strap, then bent his left arm behind his head as he slanted the blade under it.

Two seconds later the backpack fell into the quicksand.

"Your katana!" Hickok exclaimed.

"Never!" Rikki responded.

Hickok grunted once more as he nodded at the bank. "The katana!" he

repeated urgently.

And Rikki abruptly understood. He brought his left arm back and drove the sword into the drop-off, all the way to the hilt. The katana held fast, and Rikki had the added leverage he needed to combine his strength with the gunman's.

Together, the Warriors achieved the success denied them singly. Inch by laborious inch, with the quicksand resisting every gain, Rikki's body came clear of the sandy ooze. Once his elbows were out, he dug them into the ground and arced his hips upward. With an airy hiss the suction was broken and Rikki scrambled free. Hickok kept pulling, drawing the martial artist up and over the drop-off, Rikki tugging the katana free as he went, and as one they sprawled on the crest, breathing deeply.

"Thank you," Rikki said softly, sincerely.

Hickok made a waving gesture with his left hand. "Piece of cake."

Rikki stared at the quicksand, thinking of the mercenary. "I came close..." He didn't finish the sentence.

"Just one thing I need to know," Hickok remarked breathlessly.

"What is it, my friend?"

"What the blazes were you doing takin' a mud bath at a time like this?"

Chapter Eighteen

"So those are airboats?" Blade commented.

Arlo Paolucci nodded, his red hood bobbing. "They are the only practical mode of transportation for navigating in the Everglades. They have a very low draft and can maneuver in shallow water. They're powered by aircraft engines."

Blade was intrigued by the unusual craft. They were box-shaped, a dull, gray metal. There were two flat seats the width of the boat, one a few feet from the prow, the second situated in the center. Immediately behind this second seat was a platform affair, an elevated chair for the person operating the craft. And to the rear of the platform chair was a huge fan or propeller enclosed in a circular housing of wire mesh. Attached aft were the large metal fins used for steering the airboat. Eight of the fifteen airboats secured to the dock had two tail fins, the rest only one.

"It will take us about an hour to reach the Shrine," Paolucci remarked, stepping onto the dock in front of the Warrior.

Blade paused and glanced over his shoulder at the 12 Directors walking toward the dock on the southern boundary of the estate. All 12 were attired in red robes, as was Paolucci.

"Keep going," El Gato directed. Cat and two mercenaries were right behind the giant.

Blade strolled after Paolucci. The swamp stretched to the east, west, and south as far as the eye could see. "Where is this Shrine, exactly?" he asked.

"A man about to die should not be concerned over trifles," Paolucci said. He was holding the Bowies in his right hand.

"Do the Masters live at the Shrine?"

"No. They live elsewhere, on an island deep in the Everglades. Not even the Directors are privileged to know its location," Paolucci replied.

"How do the Masters get to the Shrine?" Blade inquired.

Paolucci looked at the Warrior. "Didn't you ever hear about what curiosity did to the cat?"

"What have I got to lose?" Blade responded.

Paolucci chuckled. "I see your point. The Masters use airboats, just like we do."

"What do the Masters look like?"

Paolucci grinned. "In due time." He halted next to one of the airboats and faced those following. Everyone else stopped. "Cat," he said. "You know what to do."

El Gato reached into his left rear pocket and produced a set of handcuffs.

Blade's eyes narrowed. "For me?"

"I'm afraid so, *amigo*," Cat said.

"It's standard procedure," Paolucci explained. "The Masters require all prisoners to have their wrists secured."

"They don't like their victims to fight back?" Blade said, baiting the Director.

El Gato reached into the same pocket and extracted a small key. "Your wrists, Blade."

The two mercenaries elevated the barrels of their machine guns.

The Warrior frowned as he offered his wrists to Cat.

"Were it up to me, you would die like a man," El Gato stated. "Not like an animal." He snapped the handcuffs onto the giant's wrists, then handed the key to the Director.

Blade studied the cuffs for a moment.

"We should return shortly after dark," Paolucci said to Cat. "Tell Maria I'll be expecting my supper."

"*Si, señor.*"

Blade gazed at the airboats. On three of them, seated in the platform chairs, were mercenaries.

"Let's load up," Paolucci instructed the other Directors.

As they had done on many occasions, the Directors stepped onto the airboats, four to a boat, and sat down.

Paolucci indicated the first boat with a jab of the Bowies. "On this one," he said to the Warrior.

Blade entered the boat. Three Directors were sitting on the center seat, and one was in the front. He moved next to the Director in the front and took a seat.

Arlo Paolucci came on board, standing alongside the Warrior. He looked at Cat. "By the time I get back, I trust you will have found the other two Warriors."

"We will find them," El Gato assured him.

"That's what you said five hours ago," Paolucci mentioned. "Inspire your men to perform as if their lives depend on it." He paused. "They do."

"We will find them," El Gato reiterated.

Paolucci, sat, positioning the Bowies between his legs.

"You still haven't told me the reason you're bringing my knives," Blade noted.

"You'll understand when we reach the Shrine," Paolucci said.

"I can hardly wait," Blade quipped.

Paolucci looked at the mercenary in the platform seat. "Let's go."

El Gato and the pair of mercenaries hastily removed the tie lines to the dock and the airboats were shoved clear. One after the other, the three engines turned over, and a minute later all three were bearing to the south at a rapid clip.

Cat watched the airboats fade into the distance, scowling.

"Is something wrong, sir?" one of his men made bold to inquire.

"There goes a man," El Gato replied. "He deserves a man's death."

"What will the Masters do to him?" the guard asked.

"You don't want to know."

"I was told you've been to the Shrine," the guard commented.

"Several times," Cat said.

"What did you see?"

El Gato glanced at the private. "I haven't seen the Masters, if that's what you're wondering. But I have seen their handiwork. It was inhuman."

The mercenaries exchanged looks.

"How so?" one asked.

"I was sent to pick up the Director," El Gato detailed. "He wasn't at the Shrine dock, so I went searching for him. I found an altar, a marble slab—"

"An altar?" one mercenary repeated.

"Yes. And on it were the bones of a person," El Gato said in a low tone. "A freshly eaten person. Strips of flesh were hanging from the bones. It was horrible." He paused, a faraway glint in his eyes. "But the worst part of it was the head."

"The head?"

"Si. The Masters had eaten all of the body except for the head. They left it intact." He stared absently at the dock. "I knew her."

"Her?"

"A Director by the name of Carmen Gonzales. She went bad, and they *ate* her," Cat said in disbelief.

"I'm glad I wasn't picked to be an airboat driver," one of the guards remarked.

Cat gazed to the south. He knew the airboats would alter course five minutes from the estate and turn westward toward the Shine. "I never want to go there again," he stated, more to himself than his men.

"Have I got bad news for you!" declared a new voice from their rear.

El Gato and the pair of mercenaries pivoted, beginning to level their weapons. But they were already covered.

"Howdy!" said the one in buckskins, beaming, a pearl-handled Colt Python revolver in each hand and trained on the mercenaries. He stood a yard away.

"Hickok!" Cat exclaimed.

Beside the gunman was the third Warrior, a diminutive man dressed in dirty black clothing, a gleaming katana in his hands.

"I don't think we've been formally introduced."

Hickok said to Cat.

"I am El Gato."

"The pussycat?" Hickok said. His tone lowered. "Drop the hardware."

El Gato's M-16 was slung over his right shoulder. He gripped the strap, about to lower the weapon to the dock.

His men had other ideas. In unison, they attempted to bring their machine guns into play. Both men had only to raise their barrels several inches; both had confidence in their speed and ability; both believed they could beat the Warriors.

Both were mistaken.

Rikki stepped between them, his katana flashing in the sunlight, streaking to the right, then the left, and with each swing the forged steel slashed into a mercenary's neck, almost severing it.

In the time it took Cat to think, both of his men were dead on their feet, blood spraying over their camouflage uniforms and the dock. Stunned, he scarcely breathed as their forms crumpled into disjointed heaps, their machine guns clattering at their feet.

Hickok wagged his Pythons at El Gato. "Your turn. What's it gonna be? You can lower your M-16, or Rikki here will demonstrate why he always carves the Family turkey at Thanksgiving."

Cat lowered the M-16 slowly. Very slowly. His eyes were locked on the crimson-covered, dripping katana.

"Well, it's nice to see that one of you mangy coyotes has brains," Hickok remarked. He walked up to El Gato and pressed his Pythons against Cat's stomach. "Here's the way it is. We saw our pard being taken on one of these funny boats by those cow chips in the red pajamas. We aim to go after him. *You* are going to take us."

Cat opened his mouth to reply.

"Before you say anything," Hickok cut him off, "there's something you should know. Rikki and I are plumb tuckered out. We're tired of being used for target practice by idiots who couldn't hit a buffalo at two feet with a bazooka. And I'm not in the mood to play footsy with you. So if you don't agree, right this minute, to take us to our pard, I aim to plug you in the jewels. And if you think I'm kiddin', I suggest you take a gander at my eyes."

El Gato gazed at the gunman.

"What will it be?" Hickok prompted.

"I believe you, *hombre*," Cat said. "I will take you to your *compadre*."

Hickok smiled.

"On one condition," Cat added.

"No conditions," Hickok stated.

"I will take you to Blade," Cat proposed, "if you will permit me to help you once we reach the Shrine."

Hickok was confused and it showed. "What are you talkin' about?"

"It is simple. I want to help free your friend."

"Why?" Hickok asked suspiciously.

"I don't know if I could make you understand."

"Try us."

El Gato looked at both Warriors, then sighed. "Once, years ago, I was a man of reputation. A mercenary, but an honorable mercenary. I did not work for just any pig. I picked my employers. If I believed in their cause, I worked for them. If not, I didn't." His lips compressed. "Now all that has changed."

"You're tellin' me," Hickok said. "Now you're workin' for a passel of low-down mutants."

"Don't remind me," El Gato responded, the words barely audible. "I kept telling myself the money was worth it. Even after I saw what the Masters did to one of their Dealers, I deluded myself. I've dishonored my profession." He looked into Hickok's eyes. "Your friend made me see the light. He made me think of things I have not thought about in a long, long time."

"Like what?"

"I have five brothers and four sisters," El Gato disclosed, his voice strained.

Hickok glanced at Rikki.

The martial artist nodded.

"Okay, pussycat," Hickok said. "We'll take you at your word for now. But you don't get a gun until I say so. And I hope, for your sake, you're not fibbin' us."

"He is telling the truth," Rikki interjected.

"We must hurry," Cat advised them. "The Directors have a head start."

"After you," Hickok directed.

El Gato stepped onto one of the airboats and climbed into the platform chair. "Remove the line."

Hickok holstered his left Colt and unfastened the tie line. Rikki was busy grabbing the machine guns and the M-16. Both Warriors joined El Gato on the boat.

The gunman glanced over the prow. "This boat is dinkier than I

expected. It doesn't sit very high above the water."

"So?" Cat said.

"So what happens if we bump into a big snake?"

Chapter Nineteen

"That's the Shrine?" Blade inquired doubtfully.

"No," Paolucci answered. "That's a small island where we dock the airboats."

Blade scrutinized the few trees dotting the island and the narrow boat dock they were rapidly approaching. The airboat ride was an experience he would never forget. Strung out in a line, with Paolucci's boat in the lead, the three craft had negotiated the swampy terrain with deceptive ease. Most of the hour spent in transit between Happy Acres and the Shrine had entailed crossing vast plains of sawgrass. The airboats had plowed through the grass at terrific speeds, flattening the blades under the prow, the sawgrass and the wind whipping the boat and its occupants. Now, as the mercenary steering the craft killed the engine and allowed the airboat to glide up to the dock, Blade devoted his attention, for the umpteenth time, to his primary concern: escaping. He had toyed with the notion of leaping overboard while en route, but the airboat had been moving at such a great speed that he ran the risk of being injured in the attempt. To complicate matters, the mercenary was armed with a machine gun. And although the Directors were not carrying visible weapons, there was no telling what was concealed under their robes.

The three airboats coasted to the dock and the Directors busied themselves with the lines.

"On your feet," Paolucci ordered the Warrior, rising.

Blade stood. "The Masters must not be here yet," he mentioned. "I don't see their airboats."

"The Masters don't dock here," Paolucci divulged. "They have their own dock on the north side of the Shrine."

"They don't want to share a dock with lowly humans, huh?" Blade taunted.

"Quit wasting your breath," Paolucci advised. He stepped onto the dock and beckoned for Blade to join him.

The Warrior complied, his cuffed hands in front of his body.

Paolucci looked at the mercenaries in the platform seats. "You will stay in your boats until we return. Understood?"

The trio nodded.

"Follow me," Paolucci instructed the giant.

Blade resigned himself to obeying until he could get his bearings and formulate a plan. The twelve other Directors were trailing him as he moved along the dock on Paolucci's heels. A well-worn path at the end of the dock wound in the direction of a large island 60 yards to the west, an island covered with trees and undergrowth.

"There is the Shrine," Paolucci declared, nodding at the other island.

"Why is it called the Shrine?"

"What could be more fitting for the site of the sacrifices our Masters make?"

"You've never told me," Blade noted. "Who or what do the Masters sacrifice to?"

"What do you mean?"

"It should be obvious. Do the Masters sacrifice to a deity? Sacrifices are usually made for a reason. What's theirs?"

"I've never asked."

"You're despicable."

"I wouldn't expect you to comprehend the true meaning of the relationship we share with our Masters," Paolucci said as they wended their way toward the large island.

"I comprehend, all right," Blade stated. "You've enslaved the human population of southern Florida by fostering mass drug addiction, and all for mutant Masters who must view us as cattle. You've sold the human race down the tubes for power and prestige. You deserve to die."

"How convenient! You've set yourself up as our judge and executioner!" Paolucci retorted.

They continued in silence.

Blade stared at the Bowies in Paolucci's right hand. His life depended on getting those knives back, but timing would be everything. He must wait for the perfect moment. His gaze shifted to the island ahead, and he scrutinized the grove of trees. One consolation, he mentally noted, was that Hickok and Rikki were free. If worse came to worst, they could fly to the Home, call a meeting of the Federation, and lead a combined military force back to Miami to smash the Dragons.

The party reached an incline at the eastern edge of the island, with willows and myrtles on both sides of the trail. They ascended to the crest of the rise. Beyond was a spacious clearing containing granite pedestals and a low marble altar.

And seven waiting figures.

Blade advanced toward the forms, determined not to betray a hint of trepidation. He wouldn't give the Masters any satisfaction by allowing dread or fear to register on his features. Setting his lips in a thin line, he boldly walked toward the clearing, studying the mutants.

All seven were exceptionally tall, averaging six and a half feet in height. Each projected an ungainly appearance, enhanced by their disproportionately long limbs; their arms hung below their knees, and their legs, while on normal dimensions from their hips to their knees, were thin poles below the kneecaps. Their skin was a sickly, pale gray, with layers of excess flesh forming pronounced wrinkles on their neck. Four of the mutants were males, three females. The males wore red, skintight shorts, evidently made especially for their bizarre physiques. Red halters

and short skirts clothed the females.

"Masters!" Arlo Paolucci called out happily.

One of the mutants came toward him.

Blade received the impression he was watching a skeleton on stilts. The mutant's stride was peculiar, a rolling sort of gait. He noticed that the Master never straightened its legs as it walked; the knees were always bent. But the strangest aspect of all, one that filled the Warrior with loathing, was the bony visage.

Except for the folds of flesh at the neck, all of the Masters possessed thin, partially transparent, and extremely taut skin. Veins and arteries, even bones, could be seen just under the surface. The result was to transform their countenance into a hideous caricature of a human face. Each Master was hairless, their heads resembling animated skulls. Their eye sockets were deep, dark wells, their nostrils were slits, their lips wafer thin.

"Director One," said the approaching Master, its voice gravely.

"Master Orm," Paolucci responded.

The mutant called Orm halted, waiting for them.

As he drew closer, Blade distinguished additional ghastly characteristics. Orm's rib cage was clearly visible, each rib distinct and seemingly pressing against the skin from within. The mutant's knuckles were outsized knobs. And when Orm spoke, he revealed a mouth rimmed with pointed, white teeth.

Orm was returning the Warrior's critical appraisal. "So this is the mighty Blade?" he asked derisively.

Paolucci bowed. "Yes, Master. Delivered as promised."

"You said there were three Warriors."

Paolucci, straightening, his hood only half over his head, blanched. "The other two have not been apprehended."

Orm looked at Paolucci. "This is most unfortunate. We were expecting you to bring all three."

"My abject apology, Master."

"Kiss his feet, why don't you?" Blade quipped.

Orm cocked his head, his dark eyes flat and cold. "Defiant to the last, I take it."

"I'm just getting warmed up," Blade declared.

Orm motioned toward the marble altar and the granite pedestals. "Shall we proceed?"

Paolucci nudged the Warrior. "Get moving."

Blade moved slowly toward the center of the clearing. All of the Masters were watching him intently. The tallest, a mutant who radiated an air of menace, whose expression was baleful, sneered at the Warrior. "Are you the leader of the Masters?" he asked Orm. As he did, Orm stepped past him and he saw one of their backs for the first time.

Orm's spinal column was a knobby succession of bony protuberances extending from the base of his skull to his waist, each knob progressively bigger than the one above it. The spine curved outward, magnifying the repellent aspect.

Disconcerted by his discovery, Blade abruptly realized the mutant was speaking to him.

"—not the leader of the Masters," Orm was saying, "so much as I am the head of my Family."

Blade gazed at the six mutants now six feet off. "This is your family?"

"Yes, Warrior."

The tallest Master took a stride toward the Warrior. "I am Radnor, bastard!"

Blade stopped and clenched his fists, expecting the Master to attack.

"Radnor!" Orm snapped.

"Let me kill him now, Father," Radnor said.

"In due time," Orm responded. He looked at the Warrior. "Radnor is my eldest."

"One big, happy family," Blade cracked.

"You cannot judge us by human standards," Orm stated.

"He has already judged all of us, Master," Paolucci mentioned. "He believes we deserve to die."

Radnor, who was the only Master the equal of the Warrior in height, glared into Blade's gray eyes. "Let me kill him, Father!" he reiterated.

"After we have questioned him," Orm said.

"You'll get nothing out of me," Blade vowed.

"I wouldn't be so certain," Orm responded. "There are ways to force you to talk," he added ominously.

"Give it your best shot," Blade countered.

Orm sighed. "I was hoping we could conduct our business as reasonable individuals, but if you persist in this obstinacy, we shall commence the skinning."

"The skinning?"

"Why do you think we instructed Director One to bring your knives?" Orm asked.

Blade didn't respond.

"Come with me," Orm declared, walking to the east with his hands behind his back.

Blade hesitated.

"No tricks. I promise you," Orm said.

What was the Master up to? Blade, suspicious yet curious, moved to the Master's left.

Orm resumed walking, scrutinizing the trees surrounding the clearing. "It is quite lovely here."

"What are you trying to pull?" Blade demanded. "Why are you being so courteous?"

"What did you expect? Slaving monsters?"

"I don't know what I expected," Blade admitted.

"I repeat. You can not judge us by human standards," Orm said. "To you, we are physically repulsive. Am I right?"

Blade nodded.

"Yet we have hearts and minds, just like you," Orm said. "We can love and hate, just like you."

"What do you know about love?" Blade asked scornfully.

"I love my wife and children," Orm declared.

"But you don't love humans."

"True," Orm confessed.

"Is that the reason you set up the Dragons? Is that why you use drugs to control the human populace? Because you hate us?"

Orm studied the Warrior for a moment. "I will tell you something no other human knows, because the knowledge will go with you to your grave. I established the Dragons to protect my family."

"What?"

"I am serious," Orm insisted. "There is a natural animosity between humans and mutants. When my children were much younger, there was a great danger of being hunted down by your kind. Although I built a hideaway in the depths of the Everglades, I knew it was only a matter of time before we were discovered. I needed a power base, some way of ensuring my family would be protected. The drug war in Miami provided the ideal setting. I offered my services to one of the drug lords, assassinating his rivals. Such a task was easy. Our night vision and

strength far surpasses the average human."

"What happened then?"

"Once all the opposition was eliminated, I disposed of my so-called employer."

"No one else in his organization objected?"

"Why should they?" Orm responded. "I promised each of them wealth and power beyond their fondest dreams, and I delivered on that promise. They were eating out of my hand."

"So your... children... didn't help you take over the Dragons?" Blade inquired.

"No. They were too young at the time. Why?"

Blade glanced back at the six other Masters. "I'd heard all of you were involved."

"There are a number of popular rumors concerning us," Orm acknowledged. "Some we've deliberately fostered."

"You have?"

"Of course. Our principal means of maintaining control over the humans are psychological, not physical."

"What about the drugs?" Blade noted.

"The drugs are part of the overall picture. By legalizing drug use, we've promoted addiction. An addicted population is a dependent population. The people now rely on the Dragons for drugs. They're dependent on us. We are indispensable."

"You have it all figured out," Blade remarked.

Orm halted. "It hasn't been easy. Solidifying our links with the Colombian Cartel, minting our own money, picking sycophants as Directors."

Blade looked the mutant in the eyes. "Why do you want to destroy the

Family?"

"So that's it!" Orm exclaimed, smiling broadly, exposing his sharp teeth. "The reason you came to Florida! You heard about our plans! How?"

"Forget how," Blade declared. "Why?"

"Because your Family poses a threat to our operation," Orm answered.

"Paolucci said the same thing," Blade noted. "And it doesn't make any sense."

"Would it make sense to you if you learned the Dragons are planning to expand their market into the Civilized Zone?"

The Warrior's shock was obvious.

"That's correct," Orm said, grinning wickedly. "We have made arrangements with a high-ranking official in the Civilized Zone, one of your allies in the Freedom Federation, to begin distributing drugs covertly. Drugs are illegal there, of course, but that won't stop us."

"You're going to introduce drugs to the Civilized Zone!" Blade declared in consternation.

"Eventually, we'll introduce drugs, as you put it, into each Federation faction. We'll corner the market. Your accursed Family, though, stands in our way. You're too idealistic, too damn spiritual. We could never foster drug dependence in the Home. And if we can't turn you, then we must destroy you. We're assembling a mercenary unit to pay your Home a little visit."

Blade raised his hands to his forehead. "I'd like to know how you found out?" Orm mentioned.

The Warrior appeared to be in a daze.

"Oh, well. I guess it's not important. I'll track down the leak," Orm vowed. "Only the Directors and a few of the Dealers know about our plan to send a demolition unit to the Home. If one of them was indiscreet, I'll find out."

Blade gazed at the ground with a blank expression.

"Don't take the news so hard," Orm said. "It's nothing personal. Business is business, and the Dragons have an opportunity to expand our trade in a big way." He turned and started back.

The Warrior walked alongside the mutant.

"I'm impressed that you got this far," Orm commented. "Once, a few years ago, a disgruntled member of the Colombian Cartel hired a professional assassin to terminate us. We caught him, of course. The assassin was a mutant! Can you imagine that? We cut out his tongue, but allowed him to live." He paused. "You will not be so fortunate. I thought it would be poetic justice to use your own knives to skin you. We relish the taste of human flesh, all except for the skin. It leaves a bitter, salty aftertaste."

Blade was scarcely listening, his mind in turmoil. All the pieces of the puzzle now fit, and a rage was simmering inside him, a fury born of his experiences in Miami. He remembered the boy of six or seven who had begged for coins to buy drugs for his dad, and the 15-year-old girl who hustled men to support her habit, and then he thought of all the thousands of innocent children in the Civilized Zone and the other Federation factions, children whose lives would be forever warped by having the drug life-style forced on them by peer pressure or the manipulation of conniving adults. All because the Dragons wanted to expand their drug market! With each stride he took his rage grew. He glanced down at the handcuffs, at the links connecting the metal bracelets.

"—ceremony was my idea," Orm was boasting. "Humans are easily swayed by elaborate ceremonies. The sacrifices are an excuse for us to indulge ourselves."

Blade looked up. They were 12 feet from the waiting Masters and Directors. Seven of the former and thirteen of the latter. Twenty, all told. Not the best of odds, but he didn't care anymore. He felt like molten lava was circulating in his veins.

"Ahh. Here we are," Orm remarked as they reached the assembled group. He extended his right arm. "The knives, Director One."

Arlo Paolucci began to lift his right hand.

And Blade made his move. His massive arms bunched, his muscles

rippling and bulging, as he exerted all of his prodigious strength, his forearms straining outward. For an average man the cuffs would have held; for the herculean Warrior the links were as putty. In the space of a heartbeat they parted with a loud snap, and before the stupefied Masters and Directors could intervene, the Warrior yanked his Bowies from Paolucci and whirled toward Orm.

The mutant leader was reaching for the giant. "Get—" he began.

Blade swept the Bowies under Orm's arms and buried them to their hilts in the mutant leader's chest, his shoulder muscles coiling like steel springs as he lifted the Master on the Bowie blades, surging Orm up and over his head. For a second he stood there, grand and terrible in the sunlight, the mutant upraised and thrashing and screeching.

Snarling and hissing, the other Masters closed in.

The Warrior whirled and flung Orm into the charging Masters, bowling four of them over. But the remaining two, one of whom was Radnor, pounced. Blade felt their bony fingers close on his forearms, one on each side. He dropped to his left knee and wrenched his left arm downward, propelling the mutant holding him to the ground to crash onto its face. Even as he completed the move, he started another. There was no time for needless thought, and there would be no rhyme or reason to this battle. He had to rely on his reflexes, on his honed instincts, and keep moving-moving-moving. If he slowed for an instant, he was dead. Consequently, as the one mutant was crashing onto the hard ground, Blade was already in motion to the right, angling his left knee in a savage arc, ramming the kneecap into Radnor's groin.

Radnor gurgled and released his grip. The Directors swarmed in, their red robes swirling. Four of the thirteen produced knives, two drew pistols from hiding, and one stepped up to the giant with a sawed-off shotgun sliding out of his left sleeve.

Blade was a whirlwind. He took the fight to them, moving into their midst to limit their ability to employ their guns and knives for fear of hitting one another. His right Bowie took out the Director with the shotgun, the point slicing into the man's right eye, causing the Director to scream, release the gun, and flounder backwards, blood pouring from the ruptured socket as the Bowie came free.

Another Director snapped off a shot from his pistol, but missed.

The Warrior pivoted, slashing and swiping, the keen edges of his Bowies cutting and ripping right and left. The two Directors with pistols were the next to fall, both with crimson crescents flowing from their severed throats. Blade pressed his attack with reckless abandon, parrying a knife strike, hacking off the fingers of a hand reaching for him, and ramming his left Bowie into the jugular of a Director clinging to his right shoulder.

A stinging sensation lanced across the giant's lower back.

Blade spun to find a Director with a bloody knife, and he angled his right Bowie up and in, the blade penetrating the Director's left cheek. The man stiffened and tottered backwards, blood spraying in all directions. Before Blade could press his advantage, a body alighted on his back and a thin, bony arm encircled his neck.

A Master!

Instantly, the Warrior doubled over, upending the mutant, toppling it in the grass at his feet. He saw the Master's upturned, skeletal features, and he thrust downward with both Bowies, both blades spearing into the mutant's neck.

Something pierced his right shoulder, burning and racking him with pain.

Blade straightened. A Director had stabbed him and was drawing the knife back for another try. But the Warrior was quicker, his right Bowie cleaving the Director's face from eyebrows to chin with a mighty downswing.

A growling Master tackled the giant from the left, bearing the Warrior down.

Blade landed on his back and kicked, flinging the Master aside. He rolled to his right, and there was another Master diving straight for him. His left Bowie whipped around and met the mutant in midair, catching the creature high on the chest. It wailed and fell, and Blade pulled the knife out and heaved to his knees just in time to meet the rush of a Director with a survival knife. He ducked under the knife as it arched

toward his face, and retaliated with his left Bowie, planting the big blade in the Director's loins. The man gurgled and clutched at himself. The Warrior tugged the left Bowie out and rotated, always moving, always moving, and as fast as he was, he wasn't fast enough, because a mutant leaped on his back and razor teeth tore into the right side of his neck. A clammy substance flowed over his shoulder as he drove the right Bowie back and in, and connected.

There was a cry of anguish and the Master on his back fell away.

To be replaced by a hurtling pair of Directors, one armed with a knife, coming directly at him.

Blade engaged them in a frenzy, fighting on sheer impulse, his blood-soaked Bowies striking in reckless abandon, lashing every which way as quickly as enemies presented themselves. Crimson spurted over the combatants and the grass. He downed the Directors and another mutant, imbedded his left Bowie in the stomach of a third Director, and rotated to the right.

And suddenly the Warrior was alone, standing amidst a heap of bodies, some motionless, others groaning and moaning and twitching. He blinked his eyes rapidly, wondering where his foes had gone, and he spotted several figures in red racing to the east. "You!" bellowed a voice to his left.

Blade whirled, the Bowies held at waist level.

"I want you!" It was Radnor, standing over the limp form of his father, saliva caking his lips and chin, his eyes blazing his hatred. "Try me, Warrior! Just me! Without your knives!"

The Warrior spied a lone female Master sprinting to the north. He glanced down, astonished at the sight of Arlo Paolucci, dead, a foot away. The Director was lying on his left side, his forehead split open wide. When had he killed Paolucci?

Radnor took a step forward. "Me, Warrior! Try me if you have the courage!"

Blade returned Radnor's glare, his rage rekindled by the repulsive Master. He tossed the Bowies to the ground.

A vicious grin creased Radnor's mouth. "Now you die!" he roared and charged.

Blade met Radnor halfway, their bodies colliding with a bone-jarring impact. Both kept their footing, Radnor delivering a brutal punch to the Warrior's midsection. Blade doubled over, and Radnor locked his hands together and smashed the Warrior on the back of the head.

Suddenly Blade was on his knees, reeling, pinwheels of light flickering before his eyes, his ears barely registering the brittle chatter of machine guns from the near distance. He looked up, squinting, as the mutant swung those cupped hands again, but this time Blade blocked the blow with his left arm and retaliated. His malletlike right fist thudded into the Master's stomach once, twice, three times in all, and Radnor staggered backwards. Blade went after the mutant with his fists flying, landing one blow after another, his knuckles pounding Radnor's face. He swung again and again and again, even after Radnor toppled backwards, refusing to relent, venting his fury on the mutant, straddling Radnor and pounding the Master repeatedly. A red haze enveloped him, and he kept swinging long after Radnor had ceased moving. He was still raining punches when strong hands grabbed his arms, and he surged erect, prepared to take on more adversaries. Dimly, he perceived a familiar voice.

"—enough, pard! Enough! He's dead! Snap out of it!"

Blade shook his head, his eyes narrowing, puzzled. He looked to his right.

"Are you okay?" Hickok asked, holding onto his friend's right wrist. "It's me! Nathan!" A machine gun was over his right shoulder.

"Blade?" said someone to the giant's left.

Blade glanced around, inhaling deeply, his temples throbbing. "Hello, Rikki," he said huskily.

Rikki-Tikki-Tavi peered intently at his friend. "You've been cut. I must tend to your wounds."

"I'm fine," Blade said. "Really." He faced forward, surprised to see Cat eight feet away.

El Gato gazed at the littered bodies, at the dead and the dying, at the pools of blood, the severed fingers, and the slashed throats. He stared at the gore-spattered Warrior, his eyes widening. And then he did a strange thing. He crossed himself for the first time in many, many years and uttered a phrase he hadn't used in ages. "*Madre de Dios!*"

Epilogue

They stood at the rendezvous site, awaiting the arrival of the Hurricane.

"—worked my way around to the south side of the compound," Hickok was explaining. "I figured they wouldn't be expectin' me to pull a stunt like that." He chuckled. "I almost bumped into three turkeys on the west side of the estate. Anyway, to make this long story a mite shorter, I went lookin' for Rikki and found him takin' a mud bath."

Blade looked at the martial artist. "A mud bath?"

"He exaggerates," Rikki said.

"Your clothes were dirty until you took a bath in that stream yesterday," Blade remarked.

"He went swimmin' in quicksand," Hickok disclosed.

"That sounds like a stunt you'd pull," Blade said to the gunman.

"What's that crack supposed to mean?" Hickok demanded.

Rikki stared to the south, in the direction of Miami. "What will we do about the Dragons?"

"With most of the Masters dead, the threat to the Family has been removed," Blade said. "And without firm leadership, the Dealers will undoubtedly start fighting among themselves for control of the organization. I don't see the Dragons as a danger any more."

"You still haven't told me what that crack meant," Hickok stated.

Blade glanced at the gunfighter. "Which Warrior nearly ran over half the Family when he was learning to drive the SEAL?"

"Me, but—"

"And which Warrior," Blade went on, "confided to me that he *accidentally* drove a tank into the moat at the Home?"

"Me, but—"

"I could go on and on," Blade said, "but I rest my case."

Hickok looked from Blade to Rikki and back again. "Pitiful. Just pitiful."

"What is?" Rikki asked.

"A couple of teensy-weensy boo-boos and you're branded for life!"