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Spartan Run

#25 in the Endworld series

David Robbins

Dedicated to...

Judy,

Joshua, and Shane.

PROLOGUE

"If one of their patrols spots us, we're dead."

"At least we'll have died trying."

The two men ran at a steady pace to the northwest, angling across a wild field, the landscape surrounding them brightly illuminated by the radiant full moon overhead. Both men were in superb physical condition due to their grueling daily toil, and both breathed easily as they silently ate up the distance to the next stretch of woods.

Off to the east an owl hooted.

"What if we don't make it, Ansel?" asked the shorter of the pair. He cast repeated fearful glances to their rear, clearly far more nervous than his companion.

"How many times must I tell you, Merle?" responded the other. "We'll escape if we keep our wits about us. You must calm yourself. We've gone fifteen miles already and there's been no sign of them."

"Their patrols cover a thirty-mile radius," Merle noted apprehensively.

"Then only fifteen more miles and we're free men," Ansel stated. "Free for the first time in our lives."

"Freedom," Merle said softly, pronouncing the word with exquisite delicacy, as if the very term was too fragile to withstand its utterance.

For two minutes they jogged onward, until ahead loomed a dark wall of foliage typical of the lush vegetation found in the former state of Iowa.

"Can we rest when we reach the trees?" Merle inquired hopefully.

"If you must."

"I'm sorry, Ansel. I know I'm slowing you down."

"Don't be ridiculous. I'm glad you came along. I don't know if I would have had the courage to try alone."

"You would. You're naturally brave. Even they knew that."

"How do you figure?"

"They picked you to be an overseer."

"They picked me because I followed their orders better than most. No other reason."

Merle scrutinized the forest and licked his thick lips. "I hope we haven't made a mistake we'll live to regret."

"Isn't freedom worth the price?"

"Yes, but what if we're wrong. What if there isn't any place better? What if the outside world is even worse? It's been one hundred and six years since World War Three. Who knows what we'll find?"

Ansel regarded his friend for a moment. "It's too late to turn back now."

They've undoubtedly discovered we're missing and have sent trackers after us."

"Do you really think we have enough of a head start to outrun the dogs?"

"I hope so."

Merle ran a little faster.

Soon the fleeing pair reached the treeline. Scarcely slowing, they plunged into the forest, swatting at branches that lashed their bodies and plowing through undergrowth that tried to snare their legs. The heavens were harder to discern, but every now and then they spotted the North Star and knew they were still on course. Twenty strenuous minutes elapsed, and at last they emerged from the oppressive gloom to find a seemingly limitless expanse of open plain ahead.

"I could use a break," Merle commented, puffing from the exertion.

"I guess a rest can't hurt," Ansel said, and halted.

Expelling a breath in relief, Merle stopped and placed his hands on his knees. "I'm glad I didn't eat much supper."

Ansel glanced at his companion. "So am I."

"Do you still think it was wise not to bring a food pouch along?"

"Yes. The less we carry, the better we run. That's the reason I insisted on taking nothing except the clothes on our back." Ansel looked down at his sweaty, torn T-shirt and his tattered jeans. "If I was one of them, I'd strip off all my clothes and run naked just as they do during the contests and processions."

"If you were one of them, you wouldn't need to run at all," Merle said.

Ansel cocked his head, listening.

"Did you ever wish you were?" Merle inquired.

"Were what?" Ansel replied absently, still listening.

"One of them?"

The question distracted the taller man and he gazed at his companion.
"Did you?"

"Every damn day. I'd love to have someone grow all my food for me. I'd love to be able to lord it over Helots and have them do all my bidding. Most of all, I'd love to wear one of those flowing red cloaks, bronze helmets, and short swords," Merle said dreamily. "I'd love to have it easy like they do."

"You really think they have it easy?"

"Sure. Don't you?"

"Not at all."

"I don't understand."

"Do you think it's easy for them to be taken from their parents at the age of seven and forced to live in a barracks? Do you think it's easy for them to devote almost all of their time to perfecting the arts of war? Do you think not being permitted to marry or have children until the age of thirty is easy?" Ansel asked. "I don't. I don't envy them one bit."

Merle uttered a light laugh. "You almost sound as if you pity them."

"In a way, I do."

"Amazing."

"Why?"

"Because if you don't hate them, if you sympathize with them, then why the hell are we out in the middle of nowhere running for our lives?"

Ansel cocked his head again. "I might sympathize with them, but that doesn't mean I condone the status of the Helots. I'd rather be free. If I can't be, then I might as well be dead."

Merle opened his mouth to speak.

"Hush!" Ansel cautioned, motioning for silence with his right hand.

"What is it?" Merle blurted anyway.

"Listen."

Merle did, and for several seconds he heard nothing out of the ordinary. Then his ears registered the distant barking, and goose bumps broke out all over his skin. "Oh, God!"

"The dogs," Ansel declared angrily.

"How far away?"

"I don't know. Maybe a mile. Maybe less."

"What should we do?"

"Keep going," Ansel suggested, and suited action to words by racing to the northwest.

"Wait for me!" Merle bleated, and hastened to catch up, his short legs pumping furiously.

"Our only hope is to find a stream or a river," Ansel said. "They can't track our scent through water."

"Are there any in this area?"

"Not according to the old-timer I talked to, the one who drew us the crude map."

"We're doomed!"

"Don't give up yet. Where there's hope, there's life."

Onward they sprinted, oblivious to everything except the barking of the canines to their rear. Both their forms became caked with sweat, their shirts drenched. The plain was unending.

"We're doomed," Merle repeated forlornly.

"Keep going."

"Maybe we should give ourselves up."

"Be serious."

"I am," Merle stated, breathing heavily. "If we stop now and let them capture us, they might decide to go easy on us."

"Don't be ridiculous. You know the law. The Lawgivers stipulated that any Helot who tries to flee should be put to death."

The reminder sparked Merle to increased effort. He looked over his shoulder every ten strides or so, dreading the moment when he would spot the lanterns. Three quarters of a mile later he finally did. "Look!"

Ansel glanced back and frowned. "Evidently I miscalculated."

"Miscalculated? Damn, man, we're about to die and you act like you made a mistake on a math problem."

"We're not dead yet."

"I'm open to any bright ideas."

"Let me think."

"We're doomed, doomed, doomed."

Five minutes went by. The lanterns drew ever nearer, the barking ever louder and louder.

Merle wheezed air out and gasped akin, his entire body strained to limits he never imagined he could withstand. But he refused to slack off. Surrendering *was* a stupid idea, a desperate step of last resort. He imagined how it would feel to have a pack of dogs tear into his flesh, and his terror of such a gruesome death eclipsed his fear of their pursuers.

"Trees!" Ansel suddenly stated.

Hope welling within him, Merle stared ahead and saw sprawling woodland. "If we can make it..." he began, and wasn't able to complete the sentence for want of breath.

"We'll make it."

Their feet pounding on the ground, their limbs constantly in motion,

they covered the thousand yards to the forest, and paused before entering to ascertain the exact location of the patrol after them.

"Look!" Merle cried.

The lanterns were now less than five hundred yards away, and the dogs were yapping excitedly.

"Come on," Ansel urged, and dashed into the woods.

Panic stricken, Merle followed, parting the brush with his forearms and ignoring the branches that tore at his skin. He focused on his friend's back and nothing else, because to dwell on anything else might inadvertently cause him to slow down and he couldn't afford to slacken the pace for an instant, not if he wanted to live, which he most definitely did. At that moment life was the sweetest, headiest nectar he'd ever known, a priceless treasure he would never relinquish. If he could help it.

How soon would the dogs be released?

Merle knew the routine. The patrol would close to within a hundred yards or so, then the officer in charge would give the command and the four dogs would leap clear of their leashes to chase down the targets with unerring, instinctual precision. He knew there were four dogs because there were always four dogs. Four big black dogs, any one of which could hold its own against a bear or a cougar or even a mutation.

The thought almost made Merle stumble.

Mutations!

What if they stumbled on a mutant the darkness? They wouldn't stand a prayer without weapons. Mutations were not only extremely aggressive, they were hard to kill, as if the radiation or chemical warfare toxins responsible for the genetic deviates conferred a feral hatred of life and an astonishing capacity for brute endurance.

Please, God!

Don't let there be mutations abroad tonight!

More minutes went by. Not a creature stirred in the woods. Every living

thing seemed to be aware of the tableau unfolding under the starry canopy and none made the slightest sound.

Merle glanced behind them and saw the flickering lanterns moving through the trees, the lights appearing to blink on and off as the men carrying them were briefly obscured by tree trunks or dense thickets.

The dogs were in a frenzy.

With his eyes rearward, Merle didn't realize his fellow Helot had halted until he accidentally collided with Ansel, ramming the taller man in the back.

"Watch it!" Ansel snapped, almost falling.

"Sorry."

"Do you hear it too?"

"Hear what?"

"Listen, damn it."

Merle did, and almost shouted in delight when he heard the distinct gurgling of rushing water. "A stream?" he queried hopefully.

"Let's find out."

They moved forward, the sound increasing in volume, and covered only 15 yards before they came to the bank of a shallow creek. It was only three feet wide, the water five or six inches deep at most, and then only in the periodic pools.

Merle stood above one such pool and surveyed the flow in both directions. "Which way?"

"You go right. I'll go left."

"I don't want to split up," Merle said, horrified at the very notion.

"We have a better chance if we do."

"Please, Ansel. Don't make me do it."

The former overseer took but a second to decide. "All right. We'll go to the right. Stick close."

"You don't need to tell me twice," Merle stated, smiling, starting to turn. Out of the corner of his eye he detected movement, something coming from their rear, and his mind belatedly perceived the reason a second after the charging Doberman pincher hurtled into Ansel and bowled him over.

A throaty snarl rent the night, becoming a sustained bestial snapping and growling as the canine sank its white teeth into its prey again and again and again.

Merle took a step toward his friend, his terror rendering his movements sluggish.

"Run!" Ansel yelled, fighting the Doberman, rolling and punching.

Unwilling to desert the man he considered his best friend, Merle took another stride, his eyes casting about for a potential weapon.

"Run, Merle!" Ansel shouted. "Please!"

Loud barking came from 20 yards away.

The other dogs! Merle realized, and suddenly there was no question of staying, of sacrificing himself needlessly. Ansel was as good as dead. Why should he die too? He pivoted and stepped into the creek, then ran to the right, splashing noisily. What if the dogs came after him? He had to pray they concentrated on Ansel and failed to pick up his scent in the water. The creek abruptly curved to the left. He stayed right in the middle, terror lending him speed, and ran, ran, ran.

CHAPTER ONE

The giant clasped the steering wheel loosely, his seven-foot tall frame relaxed as he skillfully threaded the huge van he was driving through a gauntlet of gaping potholes and wide cracks that marred the crumbling surface of the aged highway. A comma of dark hair hung above his

penetrating gray eyes. His bulging muscles threatened to burst the seams of his black leather vest and his green fatigue pants. Combat boots covered his feet. Strapped around his lean waist were two big Bowie knives, a matched set, snug in sheaths on either hip.

"We should be there within a few hours," commented the small, wiry man in the front passenger seat. He was dressed all in black, his features revealing an Oriental heritage. He rested his right hand on the hilt of the sword propped between his legs and draped his left arm on the console between his seat and the giant's. His eyes and hair were both dark.

"At least we'll be in the general vicinity, Rikki," responded the driver.

"If the man spoke the truth."

"Why would he have lied?"

"Who knows, Blade?" answered the man in black.

"Maybe he concocted the whole story for the benefit of the Cavalry, to make them feel sorry for him so they'd permit him to stay in their territory."

Blade smiled and studied the small man's features. "Becoming cynical in your young age, huh?"

"Realistic. Honor and truth are dying ideals in the Outlands. Out here people live by their wits or their brawn. The survival of the fittest is the unwritten law of the land."

A chuckle came from behind them. "Don't let him fool you, Blade. He's a grump because Lexine got on his case about doing this."

The giant glanced over his right shoulder at the man occupying the seat running the width of the vehicle. Six feet in height, the speaker wore forest-green apparel. His hair and beard were both blond. The former was tied into a ponytail with a thin strip of leather. The latter had been neatly trimmed and jutted forward on his pointed chin. His green eyes perpetually danced with an inner mirth, an unrestrained zest for life. Propped on the seat to his right was a Ben Pearson compound bow. Lying next to his left leg was a quiver filled with arrows. "How do you know, Teucer?" Blade inquired.

"I overheard part of their conversation when I was waiting at the SEAL for you to arrive," the bowman said. "Lexine told him he's going on a wild-goose chase."

"Your ears are quite keen," Rikki remarked. "It would be a pity if you were to lose them."

Teucer laughed. "You've been hanging around Hickok too much. Now you're beginning to sound like him."

The small man looked at Blade. "I trust you had a good reason for bringing him along?" he asked dryly.

"Teucer is one of the few Warriors who hasn't been on a regular run yet. This trip will be an invaluable training experience, a chance to hone his skills."

"Just so he hones his tact."

Blade stared at the diminutive martial artist for a moment, then concentrated on his driving. He'd never seen Rikki-Tikki-Tavi so tense before, and he realized how much the trip must mean to the Family's perfected swordmaster. He thought of the 30-acre compound located in the extreme northwest corner of the state once known as Minnesota, the walled retreat constructed by the wealthy survivalist just prior to the nuclear holocaust and dubbed the Home. He also thought about the descendant of the Founder and his companions, the friends and loved ones Blade knew as the Family, and in particular he dwelled on his wife and young son, Jenny and Gabe. A twinge of guilt gnawed at his conscience for leaving them yet again to venture into the hostile Outlands, the vast regions not under the jurisdiction of any organized faction.

But how could he have turned Rikki down?

As one of the martial artist's best friends, and as the one Warrior who had gone into the Outlands time and time again and knew the savage domains better than anyone, he could hardly refuse to help.

And there was another reason, out of the 18 Family members selected to be Warriors, to defend the Home and protect the Family, Blade was the leader. He had a responsibility to those under him. Plus there was the fact Rikki would have gone by himself if no one else went along, and even the

highly seasoned Warriors found surviving in the Outlands a strenuous task. What with scavengers, the crazies, mutations, and assorted cutthroats roaming all over the countryside, a sole Warrior could easily be slain.

Blade didn't want to lose Rikki.

He recalled the recent death of another Warrior, a novice named Marcus, who had perished in the Outlands while on a rescue mission, and he inwardly vowed that none of them would die on this run.

"Where exactly are we?" Teucer inquired.

"Rikki has the map," Blade noted, skirting yet another yawning pit in the center of the road. Although the highways were in deplorable condition, having suffered over a century of neglect and abuse by the elements, they were easier than going overland, even for the SEAL.

The Solar-Energized Amphibious or Land Recreational Vehicle had been the brainchild of the Family's Founder, Kurt Carpenter. He'd wisely foreseen that conventional cars and trucks would become largely obsolete after World War Three; fuel would be scarce and spare parts virtually impossible to obtain. So he'd spent millions to have the SEAL developed by automotive experts who believed they were creating the "recreational vehicle of the future." Carpenter had never revealed his ulterior motive.

Eventually the experts had produced a remarkable prototype. Green in hue and van-like in configuration, the SEAL incorporated a number of unique features. The body was composed of a special heat-resistant, shatterproof plastic that had been tinted so no one could see inside. The floor was an impervious metal alloy. A powerful air-cooled, self-lubricating engine enabled the transport to attain speeds in excess of one hundred miles per hour. The tires were immense.

Especially unique was the power source: the sun. A pair of solar panels attached to the roof of the SEAL collected the sunlight, and the energy was then converted and stored in a bank of six revolutionary batteries housed in a leadlined case under the vehicle. So long as the solar panels weren't damaged or the battery casings weren't cracked, the SEAL would have a constant source of energy.

Kurt Carpenter had taken the innovations a step further. After the

prototype was completed, he'd brought the SEAL to other specialists, to mercenaries versed in the art of war, and instructed them to transform the vehicle into an armed dreadnought. This they'd readily, done.

Four toggle switches on the dashboard activated lite armaments. There were two 50-caliber machine guns hidden in recessed compartments mounted on the roof above the driver's seat with others in reserve. Called Stingers, the missiles were heat-seeking and had a range of ten miles. The mercenaries had also outfitted the SEAL with a flamethrower positioned at the front, behind the fender. When the proper toggle was thrown, a portion of the fender lowered and the flamethrower's nozzle extended six inches and engaged. Finally, secreted in the center of the front grill was a rocket launcher.

Without the SEAL, Blade reflected, the Family would never have been able to send the Warriors out from time to time to make contact with other outposts of civilization.

Like they were doing now.

"We're in northeastern Iowa," Rikki stated, the map spread open on his lap. "The road we're on is State Highway 76." He gazed out his open window at the rugged terrain. "This region was the least inhabited part of the state. They called it the Switzerland of America because of all the hills and cliffs. East of us is the Mississippi River, twenty or thirty miles away at the most. West of this region is prime farming land. Three glaciers, leveled that area ages ago and left fertile topsoil in their wake."

"Been doing some studying, I take it?" Teucer remarked.

Rikki nodded. "Once the Cavalry told us about the man they found and relayed his tale, I decided to do some research."

Blade listened attentively. He'd also conducted background research after being contacted by the leader of the Cavalry, Kilrane. Occupying the Dakota Territory, which embraced the former states of North and South Dakota, the Cavalry was one of six factions allied with the Family in the Freedom Federation. They lived much as did their frontier ancestors, and they were renowned for their superlative horsemanship.

"Are there any towns nearby?" Teucer asked.

"A few. Not far ahead we should find a secondary road that leads to the small town of Dorchester. If we go straight, in six or seven miles we should come to the Upper Iowa River."

"But there's no mention on the map of a town named Sparta?" Teucer asked.

"No," Rikki answered, and sighed.

"Maybe your wife is right," Teucer said. "This is a wild goose chase."

"Perhaps."

"Do you mind if I ask you a question?"

Rikki twisted in his seat to stare at the bowman. "Be my guest."

"Why is this so important to you? What does it matter to you if a new Sparta has arisen?"

Blade waited expectantly for the martial artist's answer. When the message from Kilrane had arrived at the Home, he'd been surprised at Rikki's reaction. The normally cool-headed Warrior had been all set to take off immediately to ascertain the truth. Blade suspected Rikki's enthusiasm had something to do with the time they'd been in Memphis. Rikki had mentioned meeting a man who claimed to be from Sparta, a new city-state that had arisen since the war, but he'd never disclosed the details of that meeting.

"I made a promise to a dying man once," Rikki said. "And I intend to keep that promise."

"Mind if I ask who?"

"A man who went by the name of Thayer, a former Spartan who was exiled for abandoning his post."

"Where'd you meet this guy?"

"In Memphis."

"How'd he die?"

"I killed him."

"Oh."

Blade looked at Rikki's inscrutable face, then at the highway. This was news to him. He resolved to get to the truth of the matter at the earlier opportunity. "I hope we do find these Spartans," Blade mentioned. "We could always use another ally in the Federation."

"If they'll join," Teucer said.

"I don't see why they wouldn't. It would be in their best interest to sign the mutual defense pact. They'd be able to trade with the Civilized Zone and the Free State of California for goods impossible to find in the Outlands. And they'd have friends they could rely on should they be attacked," Blade stated.

"Everyone should have friends," Teucer observed philosophically, and as was his habit, launched into a poem.

*"He who gets and never gives will lose the truest friend that lives;
he who gives and never gets will sow his friendships with regrets;
giving and getting, thus alone, a friendship lives—or dies a-moan."*

"Who wrote that?" Blade queried.

"A poet named Alexander MacLean."

"Cute," Blade said.

Teucer sat up. "Cute? Poetry is more than merely cute. Poetry is an expression of the soul, an attempt to reach out for spiritual values. Poetry is language at its most beautiful." He paused. "Poetry is artistic expression."

"Excuse me for living," Blade mattered.

"Why do you like poetry so much?" Rikki asked the bowman.

"I've been hooked on it since I was a kid. My mom read me a poem every night when she tucked me into bed. I guess I learned to appreciate it fully," Teucer responded, and glanced at the grant. "Unlike some people I can think of."

Blade knew the remark was directed at him and grinned, then turned serious. "Rikki, what do you know about these Spartans?"

"Not a great deal. Apparently their society is patterned after ancient Sparta. Like their namesakes, they're a war-oriented culture."

"This Spartan you knew. What was he like?"

"One of the best fighters I've ever encountered. He was my equal at hand-to-hand."

"Really?" Teucer interjected. "You're the best martial artist in the Family."

"I wouldn't say that," Rikki replied. "Blade and Yama are as talented as I am."

"Blade maybe," Teucer agreed. "But as good as Yama is, he's not quite in your class."

Rikki smiled for the first time in hours. "Tell that to Yama."

"No way. I'm not about to commit suicide."

For a minute they rode in silence. The condition of the highway improved marginally.

Blade idly surveyed the trees lining both sides of the road, his left elbow resting on the window, the air stirring his hair. He estimated the temperature to be in the seventies. Not bad for the first week in November. The weather had been exceptionally mild for weeks, and all of the trees still bore their leaves.

A slight curve appeared ahead.

Slowing marginally, Blade negotiated the curve with ease, alert for the cutoff to Dorchester and debating whether they should check out the town. A flutter of wings to his left drew his attention to five crows flapping into the air, and when he faced front again his eyes widened in alarm and he went rigid.

Not 30 feet distant, racing directly toward the SEAL, terror showing on her face, was a young woman.

CHAPTER TWO

Blade frantically spun the steering wheel to the left and tramped on the brake pedal. The SEAL slewed violently, straight at the woman, who had halted in her tracks and was gaping at the vehicle in stark astonishment, and for a moment he thought the transport would plow right over her. Then the rear end swung back again, and the SEAL shot past her, missing her body by inches. The huge tires squealed in protest as the green van lurched to a stop.

All three Warriors were whipped forward; all reacted instantly. Blade merely gripped the steering wheel harder. Rikki pressed his hands to the dash. And Teucer caught himself by bracing his arms against the front seats.

"Warn a guy, why don't you?" the bowman quipped.

Blade threw the gearshift into Park, shoved the door wide, and leaped out. He ran around the rear of the transport and found the woman still rooted in place, gawking. Her luxuriant shoulder length hair was black, her eyes brown. A blue shirt and brown pants, both of which were faded and worn, clung to her shapely body. "Hello," he said, and held his hands out to indicate his peaceful intentions. "Are you okay?"

"Yes," she said softly.

Rikki and Teucer joined the giant.

"Why were you running?" Blade asked. "Are you in danger?"

The question snapped the woman out of her daze. She looked past them, back the way she had come from, and the terrified aspect returned. "Yes," she stated.

"From what?"

"From that!" she cried, and pointed.

Blade spun, his hands dropping to his Bowies, not knowing what to

expect, but certainly not expecting the monstrosity that was charging toward them, a monstrosity that vented a tremendous roar.

"Dear Spirit!" Teucer breathed.

The creature was a mutation. Six and a half feet in height, with a thick body and stout limbs, the thing vaguely resembled a bear in its general shape, but there the comparison ended. Where bears spent most of their time on all fours and only rose on their hind legs for brief intervals, the onrushing beast ran on two legs just like a human, although with a shuffling, awkward gait. Instead of hair it had reddish, lumpy skin. Its elongated mouth contained wicked, tapered teeth. A pair of triangular ears crowned a rounded head. Most horrible of all were the eyes. They were oversized, as big as apples, and had tiny red pupils.

"Run!" the woman screamed.

The Warriors had no intention of doing so.

Rikki-Tikki-Tavi moved to meet the deviate, gliding gracefully, his long black scabbard wedged under his belt and slanted across his left hip. He assumed a back stance, both hands on the hilt of the sword he could wield with unparalleled precision, and waited for the creature to reach him.

Blade drew his Bowies and went to aid his friend, wishing he had taken the time to retrieve his Commando submachine gun from the rear storage section of the SEAL. The creature sported five inch claws on each front paw, which combined with its size and ferocity made it a formidable adversary. The Commando could slay the deviate in seconds, whereas with the Bowies it would be much more difficult. He saw Rikki's arm move, saw the martial artist's gleaming katana streak from the scabbard, and with the mutation only 20 feet away he braced for the onslaught. Only the monstrosity never reached them.

A swishing sound arose behind them, and a long green shaft sped into the creature's chest with a pronounced thud. The thing roared again and paused to swipe at the object protruding from its flesh. Another swish sounded, and yet another, the second an instant after the first, and two arrows lanced into the mutation's eyes, one in each red pupil. For a moment the creature went rigid, snarling hideously, and then it toppled onto its left side, convulsed for a bit, and expired.

Blade and Rikki exchanged glances.

"Apparently we weren't needed," said the man in black.

"Don't you just hate show-offs?" Blade asked.

Teucer walked past them, another arrow already notched, and warily approached the beast. He nudged its head several times, and satisfied the thing was dead, he lowered his bow.

The woman ran over to them, staring at the mutation in disbelief. "You saved my life! That thing chased me for half a mile!"

"Glad we could assist you," Blade mentioned, sliding the Bowies into their sheaths.

"I meant *him*," the woman stated, indicating the bowman. She stared at him with frank, adoring eyes.

"It was nothing," Teucer said, walking up to her.

"Are you kidding?" she replied. "You were magnificent."

The bowman grinned and slid the arrow into the quiver he had slung over his back while exiting the transport.

"I guess I was, wasn't I?"

"Oh, brother," Rikki mumbled, replacing the katana in a smooth, practiced motion.

"Who are you men?" the woman inquired, and looked at the SEAL.. "And what is that vehicle of yours? I've never seen one like it."

"Our transport is unique," Blade disclosed. "As for our names, I'm Blade. This is Rikki," he said, and nodded at the man in black. "And the man who lucked out and hit the mutation named himself Teucer."

She stared at the bowman. "You named yourself?"

"Sure did, my dear. After a bowman in *The Iliad*. It's common practice at the place we're from to have a special Naming Ceremony on our sixteenth birthday. We're encouraged to select any name we want, from

any source, as our very own."

"I never heard of such a thing."

"What's your name?" Blade questioned.

"Erica. Erica Johnson."

"Do you live around here?"

"Less than a mile away, on the outskirts of Dorchester. My dad has a farm." She paused. "I was out for a walk."

"Would you take us there?" Blade queried.

"No," Erica said, shaking her head.

"We'll give you a lift," Blade offered. "I promise no harm will come to you."

"It's not that. You're strangers. You must leave, and leave quickly."

"Why?"

"Just go, please," Erica advised, and began to head to the south.

"Wait," Blade said. "Explain the reason we should leave."

"I told you. You're strangers."

"So?"

The woman was almost abreast of the dead deviate. She looked back. "Please go. I feel I owe you for saving me, and I'm trying to return the favor."

"Hold on, fair maiden," Teucer stated, and beckoned for her to return. "We need information and you're the only one who can provide it."

Erica stopped, "All right. But be quick about this. If they find you, you'll be taken into custody."

"If who finds us?" Teucer asked.

"The Spartans, of course."

Rikki-Tikki-Tavi took a step toward her. "Then we're near Sparta?"

"You're close. You have to go another ten miles on this highway, then take a gravel road to the east about four miles. But you don't want to go there."

"Yes, we do," Rikki informed her. "We've traveled a long distance to find the Spartans."

"Then you're crazy. They aren't very fond of strangers. If you're lucky, they'll escort you far, far away and tell you to never come back. If not, you could wind up in chains," Erica warned. "Please leave. Now."

"Are you a Spartan?" Blade inquired.

"I wish. No, I'm a Helot."

"What's a Helot?" asked Teucer.

"One of the farming class that raises all the food for Sparta. Each Helot is allotted fifty acres on which to grow the required quota. Any extra the Helot gets to keep."

"How many Helots are there?" Blade wanted to know.

"I'm not sure. Over two thousand, I think. Maybe three thousand."

"And how many Spartans?"

"There you've got me. Last I heard, about nine hundred. Probably more by now."

"Only nine hundred?" Rikki said.

"What did you expect?" Erica answered, and gestured at the van. "Please, for the last time, get out of here. A patrol could show up at any minute."

"We can't leave," Blade declared. "We're emissaries from the Freedom Federation, and we came to extend an invitation to the Spartan people and their leader."

"Leaders, you mean. The Spartans are ruled by two kings."

"Then we must present our message to them."

The woman shook her head. "You're just asking for trouble."

"It won't be the first time," Blade stated. "And since we're going no matter what, and we're heading the same direction you are, why not ride with us? You'll get home that much faster." He pointed at the mutation. "What if that thing has a mate? You wouldn't be safe by yourself."

Her brow furrowed in contemplation, Erica gazed at the carcass, then nodded. "All right. I'll let you take me to the farm. I can take the time to talk you out of visiting Sparta."

Teucer promptly stepped to the SEAL and held the door open. "After you, lovely one." He gave a little bow. "Your chariot awaits."

The Helot climbed inside, bestowing an affectionate smile on the bowman.

"Here we go again," Rikki said as he walked on Blade's heels toward the van.

"What do you mean?" the head Warrior responded.

"Do you realize how many of us have married women from outside the Home? Hickok married Sherry, and she's from Canada. Geronimo wed Cynthia, who hails from the Cavalry. Sundance popped the question to Bertha, who hails from the Twin Cities. And I took Lexine in eternal union. She's from St. Louis."

"Are you saying what I think you're saying?"

"Teucer could be next, which would be highly appropriate."

"How so?"

"Doesn't Cupid use a bow?"

Blade laughed all the way around the front of the transport. He clambered into the driver's seat, listening to the muted whine of the engine, and waited for Rikki to get in before resuming their interrupted

journey, carefully bypassing the dead deviate.

"Wow!" Erica said excitedly. "I've never ridden in anything like this!"

"Does your family own a vehicle?" Blade probed..

"Heavens, no. None of the Helots do. Many years ago the Spartans allowed our ancestors to use tractors, but eventually the tractors wore out. So now we just use horses and oxen."

"Do the Spartans possess vehicles?"

"A few. They have a few jeeps that they only use on special occasions. I was told it's hard for them to obtain fuel. They receive a little now and then in trade with the Scarlet Clique."

Blade had heard of the Clique, a sophisticated network of smugglers and thieves who supplied anything a client wanted provided the price was met. He'd tried to learn more about them, where their headquarters were located and the identity of the party or parties running the operation, but so far he'd not uncovered the information. All he'd managed to discover was the fact that the Scarlet Cliques stole a substantial quantity of merchandise and military items from the Free State of California and the Civilized Zone, both allies of the Family. "What can you tell me about the history of Sparta?" he asked.

"Not a great deal. My grandfather claimed Sparta was formed about the time of the war. A bunch of college professors from back East came to this area to hide, to get away from the mobs and the looters. They were the ones who wrote the Spartan constitution and set up the system of government. They also forced some people to become Helots," Erica said, stressing the last word bitterly.

"I take it you don't like being a Helot?"

"What was your first clue?"

"Why not?"

"Would you like to be a second-rate citizen? Helots are good enough to grow food to feed the Spartans, but they're not considered good enough to have the right to vote or take control of their own lives. The Spartans are

the lords and masters, and any Helot who doesn't toe the line winds up sentenced to work in the quarry for life."

"What quarry?"

"Where the Spartans mine the granite and marble for their buildings. No one sent there ever comes out alive."

Blade regarded her reflection in the rearview mirror. "Do all of the Helots feel the same way you do about the Spartans?"

"Some do. Some don't."

"Why do the Helots tolerate being inferior citizens? There are close to three thousand of them, you said, and only nine hundred Spartans. Why don't the Helots demand better treatment or rise in revolt?"

Erica snickered. "You don't know the Spartans very well, do you?"

"I've never met them," Blade confessed.

"Well, once you do you'll understand. The Spartans live for war. They're the best fighters on the planet. If the Helots ever rise in revolt, the Spartans will crush them just like they crush their enemies, like they crushed the early insurrections."

"There have been rebellions?" Blade inquired in surprise, his gaze on the mirror again, neglecting to watch the highway.

At that moment Teucer pointed at something up ahead and yelled, "Look out!"

CHAPTER THREE

Blade faced front, expecting to see another genetic deviate. Instead, stepping onto the highway from the forest to the west was a thin man wearing scruffy clothing, a lever-action rifle pressed to his right shoulder. Approximately 40 yards separated the SEAL from the rifleman.

"Oh, no!" Erica Johnson cried.

The thin man aimed at the van's windshield and fired.

Despite knowing the transport was bulletproof, Blade flinched when the round struck, the resounding smack and the shrill whine of the ricochet startlingly loud. He tramped on the gas and slanted toward the rifleman; "Let's teach this guy some manners," he commented.

The man had levered another bullet into the chamber and was taking aim again.

"Don't hurt him!" Erica declared. "Please!"

"Why not?" Blade demanded, and saw the man shoot. He heard a piercing screech as the slug was deflected and kept his foot down,

"I know him."

"Is he always this friendly to strangers?" Blade asked.

"Please! Slow down!"

The giant ignored her. He glanced at Rikki and said, "Get ready," then closed on the rifleman.

"Please!" Erica pleaded.

Exercising commendable self-control, the thin man managed to get off one more shot. He stood in the highway until almost the last instant, working the lever, then leaped to the side.

Which served as Blade's cue. He applied his right foot to the brake and held onto the wheel with all of his strength to prevent the SEAL from swerving. Out of the corner of his eye he glimpsed Rikki opening the passenger door, a small silver object in the martial artist's hand. A moment later the man in black vaulted from the vehicle.

Blade glanced in the mirror and witnessed the brief confrontation. The rifleman never stood a chance.

In a fluid, acrobatic movement Rikki landed and rolled, sweeping erect as the thin man tried to get a bead on him. His right arm flashed

downward and the glittering metal object, a seven-pointed shuriken, whizzed through the air and ripped into the rifleman's left forearm. The man uttered an agonized expletive, dropped the rifle, and held his wounded arm next to his chest, gaping at the imbedded throwing star and blood seeping from the laceration.

The SEAL came to a halt. Blade shifted and killed the engine, then turned. "Teucer, give me the Commando."

About to leap, out, the bowman nodded and shifted so he could reach back to the rear storage, where their provisions were piled, and grab the Commando Arms Carbine. "Here," he said, and gave the weapon to the giant.

Blade slid out, working the cocking handle and verifying the 90-shot magazine was securely in place. Somewhat resembling the ancient Thompsons, the Commando had been modified by the Family Gunsmiths to function on full automatic. Although rather heavy as submachine guns went, in his massive arms the Commando was as light as the proverbial feather. He strolled around the SEAL.

Rikki-Tikki-Tavi was standing close to the rifleman, the katana out and pointed at the man's chest.

The thin man was doing a marvelous imitation of a tree.

"Who are you?" Blade demanded, cradling the Commando in his right arm.

"I can answer that," volunteered Erica to his rear, "his name is Rick Grennell. He's a neighbor of ours."

"A real friendly sort, I take it?"

Johnson didn't respond.

The giant walked to within a yard of the man. He noticed blatant fear in Grennell's eyes and his estimation of the rifleman lowered.

Teucer and the woman joined them.

"Erica!" Grennell exclaimed. "How did these bastards capture you?"

"I'm not their prisoner, Rick."

"You're not?"

"No. These men saved me from a mutation. They were giving me a ride to the farm."

Grennell looked at each of the Warriors in evident perplexity. "They were?"

"Why did you shoot at us?" Blade inquired.

"I heard Erica scream and was coming after her. When your vehicle came into view, I naturally assumed you must be responsible. I figured you had harmed her."

"What were you doing in this area?" Blade asked.

"Hunting."

"Did you know Erica was nearby?"

"I didn't."

"Then how did you know she was the one who screamed?"

Grennell blinked a few times. "I, uh, I've known her since we were kids. I'd know her voice anywhere."

"Do tell," Blade said, and nodded at the man's arm. "We'll bandage that for you."

"No. it's not necessary," Grennell responded. "I'll walk home and let my sister take care of it."

"We insist," Blade stated, and turned to Rikki. "Would you get the medicine bag from the SEAL?"

"Certainly." The martial artist returned the katana to its scabbard and ran off.

Grennell winced and stared at his arm. "What is this thing?"

"A shuriken," Blade said.

"Never heard of it. The damn thing flew too fast to follow. Where did the runt learn to throw like that?"

"He's practiced for years," Blade revealed. "And I wouldn't call him a runt to his face if I were you."

"Why not? Will he kick my ass?" Grennell replied caustically.

"No," Blade said softly. "I will."

Teucer picked up the rifle. "This is a Martin 30-30," he commented.

"Where did you find the gun, Rick?" Erica asked. "You know as well as I do that owning a firearm is an offense punishable by death. Our Spartan masters don't permit Helots to own guns."

"It's been in my family for generations. Usually we keep it hidden in the root cellar and only take it out on very special occasions."

"And you were hunting with it?" Erica asked, her tone conveying marked doubt.

"We wanted some venison," Grennell said.

Blade regarded the man coldly. Although he lacked proof, he suspected Grennell was completely untrustworthy. An indefinable aura of deception and menace lurked just below the man's superficial exterior. He noticed the way Grennell's shifty dark eyes lingered on Erica's form, and he deduced a possible motive for the man's behavior and presence. The thought angered him. "You say this guy is a neighbor of yours?" he asked the woman.

"Yeah. His family lives four miles southwest of us."

"How trustworthy is he?"

"In what respect?"

"If we were to let him go, would he run to the Spartans and inform them about us?"

Erica glanced at the thin man, her brow knit. "I don't think so."

"You know I wouldn't," Grennell asserted.

"But there is a reward for any information about strangers," Erica divulged. "Any Helot who tells the Spartans will receive an extra food ration for a year."

"Now there's incentive if ever I heard it," Teucer joked.

"It is," Erica stated. "Most Helots have a hard time meeting their allotted quota, so there's very little grain, vegetables, and fruit left over for their own consumption. An extra food ration can mean the difference between going hungry and a full stomach."

Blade watched Grennell surreptitiously stare at the woman's prominent breasts, and experienced a keen loathing for the man. He was tempted to slug Grennell in the mouth on general principles, but footsteps signaled the timely arrival of the Family's preeminent practitioner of the martial way of life.

"Here's the medicine bag," Rikki announced, and stepped in front of the thin man. Slung over his left shoulder was a brown leather pouch. He gingerly inspected the wound. "The blood flow is already diminishing, which is a good sign. It means the shuriken didn't slice a major artery or vein."

"Are you a doctor?"

"I'm a Warrior, not a Healer. But I have considerable experience in administering herbal remedies and treating the types of injuries sustained in battle. On many an occasion I've assisted the Healers so I could hone my medical skills."

"But you're not a doctor?"

"No."

"Are these Healers doctors?"

"Not in the sense you intend. Our Healers don't rely on artificial substances."

Grennell glanced at the giant. "I'd really prefer to have my sister take care of my arm. She's a whiz with peroxide and a bandage."

"We'll bandage you," Blade insisted. "Go ahead, Rikki."

The man in black lightly touched his fingertips to the exposed part of the shuriken. Three of the silver points stuck out an inch above the skin. "This will sting for a bit," he cautioned.

"What will?"

Rikki suddenly gave a sharp wrench, pulling the shuriken loose. Blood dripped from the throwing star.

Grennell stiffened and gasped, his mouth opening to screech, but he caught himself and scowled. "Damn! Sting, my ass! That hurt like hell."

"You must learn to control discomfort. Use your pain to mold your character."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

The small man knelt and deposited the medicine bag in front of him. He lifted the flap and rooted inside. "I'm talking about self-control, the acme of human virtues. For a person who has perfected self-control, all things are possible. For a person lacking self-control, all pursuits of spiritual consequence are impossible. When persons have self-control, they are the masters of their destiny." He paused to remove a handful of large leaves. "Pain, for instance, can be dominated and channeled. Instead of resisting it, you can use self-control to embrace the discomfort and subdue it."

"I don't have the slightest idea what you mean," Grennell said.

"Cultivate genuine faith and give yourself a few hundred years. The answer will come to you."

"You're downright weird."

Blade chuckled and rotated to scan the woods lining the highway. "Hurry up, Rikki," he directed. "I want to get moving."

"As you wish."

Teucer surveyed the forest. "What's the rush?"

"I don't like standing out in the open like this," Blade responded. He didn't bother to add that deep down he felt uneasy, felt as if unseen eyes were gazing upon them. After so many years of living on the edge, of constantly confronting the enemies of the Family and the Federation, he had learned to rely on his instincts, and his instincts now told him that something was amiss.

"Is anything wrong?" Erica asked.

"No," Blade said.

Rikki-Tikki-Tavi was busy grinding the leaves into powder using a small bowl and pumice stone he'd removed from the pouch.

"Were you alone?" Blade queried, his flinty eyes on Grennell.

The thin man hesitated, then nodded vigorously. "Yep. Sure was."

Blade took hold of the woman's elbow. "Come with me."

"Where are we going?" Erica inquired as the giant pulled her away from the others.

"It's best if your neighbor doesn't hear us," Blade said, and led her a distance of 12 feet. He looked at Grennell, who stared suspiciously at them, and spoke in a hushed tone. "Tell me the truth. Is he a close friend of yours?"

"I wouldn't say that."

"Do you even like him?"

"I wouldn't say that either."

"Then why did you stop me from running him down?"

"He's a neighbor. My parents and his parents are best friends. I never liked him much because he's always been more interested in my body instead of me. Once, about seven years ago, I went to a barn dance with him to please my folks. He spent the whole night trying to slip his fingers under my dress. The man is a crud," Erica stated with obvious sincerity.

"Does he have any brothers or sisters?"

"Yep. Two brothers. Both younger than him."

Blade observed Rikki adding water from a canteen to the crushed leaves. "Do you buy his story about being out here hunting?"

"It's possible."

"It's also possible he saw you leave your farm."

"What are you implying?"

"You're no dummy. You figure it out," Blade commented.

The woman gazed thoughtfully at her neighbor.

"One more thing," Blade said. "Why would you go for a walk without a weapon? Isn't that a bit risky with mutations roaming about?"

"The only weapons Helots are allowed to use are knives, and I just forgot mine. Besides, I wasn't planning on going more than a mile or two. And the Spartans have done a fine job of killing off most of the monsters in this region. They slay every mutant they come across."

"I see," Blade responded. Now he knew they were both lying. He had to decide whether to turn around and leave before the trouble began or to carry the mission through to the end. As the head Warrior and an official representative of the Federation he had no choice. He must contact the Spartans.

Damn.

Just *once* he'd like to be sent on an easy run!

CHAPTER FOUR

The two-story farmhouse and the barn were in need of a fresh coat of paint. A narrow dirty driveway led from a pitted, cracked secondary road

up to the front lawn, which was bordered by a small picket fence, and a narrow cement walk ran from the drive to the front porch. Meticulously tended flowers bordered the base of the fence.

The wide door to the barn stood open. A black horse was visible in an inner stall, and a dozen chickens were walking about near the entrance and pecking at the ground.

Blade climbed from the transport, the Commando held at the ready, and stepped to the picket fence. "Where is everyone?" he inquired when the others emerged.

"My dad is probably out in the fields," Erica said. "My mom might be in the kitchen."

"Can I go home now?" Grennell asked, holding his bandaged left arm against his side.

"No," Blade responded.

"When, then?"

"When I say you *can*."

Rikki-Tikki-Tavi took hold of the waist-high gate. "Do you want me to check the house?"

"Go," Blade directed. "Teucer, you take the barn."

"On my way," the bowman said, and jogged toward the structure.

"You guys certainly are professionals," Erica commented.

Blade looked at her. "Know a lot of professionals, do you?"

A crimson tinge spread across the woman's cheeks and she answered in a flustered manner. "Well, no, certainly not. But I know true professionals when I see them. I mean, I've seen the Spartans on parade and the like. In a way you guys remind me of them. You know. The Spartans and you are both military-like."

"Are we?" Blade said with an air of casual innocence.

"Most definitely."

Suppressing a grin, Blade watched Rikki enter the house. Moments later Teucer went into the barn.

"I don't see why you can't let me go home," Grennell grouched.

"I can bind and gag you if you don't keep quiet," Blade stated.

The thin man shut up.

The Warrior kept an alert eye on the windows of the farmhouse, particularly the second floor. Nothing stirred, though, and within a minute Rikki escorted an elderly woman out the screen door.

"Mom!" Erica declared anxiously.

"Let's go," Blade commanded, and motioned for the Helots to precede him along the walk. He gazed at the fields to the south and spied a lone figure far off. The father, perhaps?

"I demand to know what's going on?" the mother said angrily, glaring at the giant. "This little man waltzed into my kitchen and told me to come outside. Ordered me out of my own house! You're not Spartans. What gives you the right to boss us around?"

Blade hefted the Commando. "This does."

"Well, I never!"

Erica hastened to her mom's side. "Don't be too hard on them. They saved me from a mutant."

"Why did they save you?" Mrs. Johnson responded suspiciously.

"What?"

"Perhaps they have an ulterior motive."

"We have no intention of harming any of you," Blade assured her while staring at the barn.

Mrs. Johnson nodded at Grennell. "And what happened to Ricky? I

suppose he did that to himself?"

"He tried to shoot one of us," Blade explained.

"I can't say as I blame him," the mother said arrogantly.

A moment later Teucer walked from the barn and gave the hand signal for "all clear."

Blade stepped onto the porch and indicated three chairs arranged next to the wall, to the left of the door. "Why don't all of you take a seat?"

"And if we'd rather stand?" Mrs. Johnson rejoined.

"Sit anyway."

"Such rudeness. I hope the Spartans skin you alive."

"We don't want to be impolite, but we must take certain precautions," Blade explained. "We don't know if we *can* trust you yet."

"Trust us?" Mrs. Johnson said tartly. "Haven't you got the shoe on the wrong foot?"

"Please take a chair."

"You must be a barbarian," the mother stated. She moved to the nearest chair and sat down in a huff.

Erica and Grennell followed suit.

"I have a family of my own," Blade said in an attempt to pacify the older woman. "A wife and a son, both of whom I love with all my heart. Rikki, here, is also married," he said, and indicated the martial artist. "None of us are barbaric. We were all reared at a place called the Home, where we were taught to revere the Spirit and respect others. We're not any threat to you whatsoever. Believe me."

"I'll believe anything you tell me." Mrs. Johnson replied. "I make it a point never to argue with a giant holding a submachine gun."

Grinning, Blade shook his head and turned as Teucer hurried up the walk. "What did you see?"

"Animals. A horse. Two cows in stalls at the rear of the barn. All those chickens outside. And in a small pen attached to the side of the barn on the west are seven pigs," the Bowman detailed.

Blade glanced at the mother. "Was that your husband I saw out in the fields?"

"Maybe it was, maybe it wasn't."

"Please, Mom," Erica interjected. "Can't you be nice to them?"

"I can, but I won't," Mrs. Johnson snapped. "For all we know these men are scavengers or worse. The Spartans have told us about the conditions outside our territory. Every stranger is to be considered an enemy until our masters decide otherwise."

Rikki-Tikki-Tavi cleared his throat. "Is any person truly master of another? Aren't we all equal in the eyes of the Eternal Source?"

Mrs. Johnson peered at the man in black as if studying a peculiar insect she had never seen before. "Are you religious?"

"All of us are," Rikki answered politely. "Everyone at the Home is encouraged to develop a spiritual consciousness, to seek spiritual answers to the fundamental questions all of us eventually ask. Who are we? What are we doing here? What is our destiny? These are questions every thinking person views as supremely important."

"What religion are you?"

"Myself, I practice Zen. But there are many Christians at the Home, as well as Moslems and those of other faiths. The religious books in our library are among those most checked out."

"There might be hope for you after all," Mrs. Johnson said. "I am a firm believer in the Holy Bible."

"And where in the Bible does it say that you should call other men your masters?"

"Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's."

Blade stepped to the west end of the porch and peeked around the corner. The figure he'd spotted earlier was approaching slowly, evidently unaware of the situation at the house. Blade leaned against the wall and waited, idly listening to Rikki and Mrs. Johnson discussing the importance of religion. He admired the way in which the martial artist had verbally disarmed the woman and gotten her to open up. Engrossed in their conversation, he didn't realize several minutes had elapsed until he heard the steady tread of someone who was almost to the front of the house, and he quickly swung out, the Commando leveled.

Not eight feet off a tall man abruptly froze. He wore jeans and a patched flannel shirt. His face was rugged, distinguished by a square jaw. Blue eyes stared fearlessly at the giant. "Who are you? What do you want?"

"Mr. Johnson?"

"That's right."

"My name is Blade. Kindly step onto the porch, Your wife and daughter are both here."

"Martha and Erica?" Johnson stated, and hurried forward. He took one look, relief washing over his countenance.

"Harry!" Mrs. Johnson declared.

"Are you all right?" her husband asked.

"Fine. These men claim they won't harm us."

"That's right," Blade threw in. "If you'll give me your word that you won't cause us any trouble, we won't need to keep you under guard."

Johnson stared at the giant. "How do you know you can trust us?"

"You impress me as being an honest man."

The declaration seemed to surprise the farmer. He smiled and nodded. "Fair enough. I give you my word none of my family will be a problem. Satisfied?"

"Yes," Blade said, and slung the Commando over his left shoulder. "Now why don't we all go inside where we can talk?"

"Hey, what about me?" Grennell queried. "Can I go home now?"

"No."

"But you said you wouldn't keep us under guard."

Blade shook his head. "I said I wouldn't keep the Johnsons under guard. You're a different matter. Where we go, you go."

Grennell glowered, but had the presence of mind not to reveal his innermost thoughts.

"Martha, why don't you make some tea for our guests," Johnson proposed, coming onto the porch.

"Gladly. And Erica can help," the mother said, with a glance at the giant. "If it's all right with you, of course."

"Go ahead," Blade agreed. He let the Johnsons and Grennell enter, then turned to the bowman. "Stay out here and keep watch."

"Will do. You never know when those chickens might decide to jump us."

Blade ignored the crack and went in, Rikki right behind him. The living room was sparsely but comfortably furnished. Grennell sat in a chair on the left, Harry Johnson in a rocker on the right. The women were moving about in the kitchen, which was connected to the living room by a doorway situated at the southeast corner.

"Have a seat," Johnson said, gesturing at a sofa along the east wall.

"Thanks," Blade said, and did so.

Rikki-Tikki-Tavi remained near the doorway.

"So what can we do for you?" the farmer inquired. "We've never had the opportunity to talk to outsiders before. You're different than I expected. The Spartans tell us that most outsiders will slit our throats in a minute and steal all of our possessions. Yet something tells me you're not the throat-slitting type."

"I'm not," Blade said. "I'd like to talk about the Spartans, if you don't

mind. We've traveled hundreds of miles to present an offer to them, and I'd like to know a little more about them before we make contact."

"What kind of offer?"

"To join the Freedom Federation, an alliance of seven factions dedicated to fostering the remnants of civilization."

Johnson sat forward, his forehead furrowed. "Really? I had no idea there was such a thing. We've always believed the rest of the country is in ruins, and that savage bands roam the countryside killing everyone they meet."

"It is that bad in most of the country," Blade admitted. "But the leaders of the Federation hope to eventually turn things around, to eliminate all the scavengers and the raiders, to make the country a safe place to live in once again. The goal won't be achieved overnight. Decades might be required, but one day peace will reign again."

The farmer smiled wistfully. "Listening to you, I almost believe it's possible."

"Your daughter told us the Spartans might try to put us in chains. How do you think they'll react to our proposal?"

"There's no telling. I'm just a Helot, mister. I farm for them. Affairs of state are way out of my league," Johnson said, resting his elbows on his knees. "I can tell you that one of the kings might be receptive to your offer. King Dercyllidas is a reasonable sort. At least he doesn't like to lord it over the Helots as King Agesilaus does."

"Dercyllidas and Agesilaus? I'm not an expert, but those names sound Greek."

"They are. The Spartans all have Greek names, just like the ancient Spartans. In fact, they take their names from a list compiled by the Lawgivers who founded Sparta during the war. If a Spartan should fall into disgrace, he is stripped of his rank, his name, and his cloak and banished from Sparta for life."

"Fascinating," Blade said. "And it's encouraging to learn one of the kings will listen to us. All I want is a chance to present our case, and then

we'll leave."

"I'll be honest with you. You're taking a great risk."

"It can't be helped. And I doubt the Spartans will harm us once they learn the Federation would take appropriate action. They wouldn't want a war on their hands."

Johnson made a snorting noise. "You don't know the Spartans, friend. They live for war."

Blade was about to respond when a loud thump came from outside. He glanced at Rikki. The martial artist promptly went out.

"Is something wrong?" Johnson asked.

"I don't know," Blade said. He rose and stepped to the doorway, staring through the screen at the empty lawn. "Rikki? Teucer?"

There was no reply.

Alarmed, Blade shoved on the door and took a stride, and as he did a sharp object touched his neck and a low voice growled a warning.

"Don't move, big one, or you're a dead man."

CHAPTER FIVE

Blade froze. A muscular arm came around his left side and the Commando was pulled from his shoulder. A man stepped into view, moving in front of him, a strapping man attired in the most unusual military garb he'd ever seen.

For starters, the man wore a burnished bronze helmet completed with a dyed horsehair crest. A one-piece outfit snugly covered his sinewy physique. Boots adorned his feet. And clasped at the neck, flowing over both broad shoulders, was a light cloak that reached almost to his knees. Strangest of all was the fact that the crest, outfit, boots, and cloak were all red. A black belt encircled his waist, and from it dangled the scabbard to

the short sword he held in his right hand. Slung over his left shoulder was an Uzi.

The Warrior glanced to the right and saw Teucer prone on the ground, unconscious. At the edge of the porch stood Rikki-Tikki-Tavi, hands in the air, covered by two more men in red bearing Uzi submachine guns. Blade looked to the left and discovered three more men with their weapons leveled.

"What's your name, big one?" demanded the man who'd taken the Commando.

"Blade."

"I'm Captain Chilon of Spartiate Company C. You will consider yourself my prisoner until such time as may be decreed otherwise."

"We come in peace," Blade said.

"That has yet to be established. Kindly place your knives on the porch."

Without a moment's hesitation, Blade responded in a firm tone. "No."

"You will place your knives down now," Captain Chilon directed. "When I give an order, I expect to be obeyed."

A sharp retort almost issued from Blade's mouth, but he decided to try diplomacy instead of antagonizing the Spartan. "With all due respect, I must decline. Warriors are duty-bound to retain their weapons at all costs."

The captain's eyebrows knit. "But I took your submachine gun."

"Correction. I let you take the Commando, to buy time until I could ascertain the situation. Had you grabbed one of my Bowies, it would have been a different story. And now that I know all of you are Spartans, I have nothing to fear by refusing to turn them over."

"You don't?" Captain Chilon asked in surprise.

"No. Not if everything I've heard about the Spartans is true. Your people are fearless fighters, renowned for their discipline and dedication. Such men wouldn't kill others in cold blood," Blade stated with somewhat

more assurance than he felt. He hoped subtle flattery would have the desired effect. If not, his next move would be to employ his Bowies.

The officer smiled and lowered his sword. "Your wit, big one, has disarmed my objections. By your bearing I can tell you're a brave man, and Spartans respect bravery." He paused. "But tell me. What are you doing in our domain?"

"I'm an official representative of the Freedom Federation," Blade explained yet again. "I've been sent to present a proposal to your kings."

"You're ambassadors of some sort? Very well. We'll escort you to the palace. You may keep your other weapons, but not any guns."

"Thanks," Blade said, glancing at Teucer. "I must check on him."

"He's fine," the Spartan stated. "One of my men gave him a tap on the head." He glanced at the two soldiers on the right. "Simoeis, revive the bow carrier."

"Immediately, Captain."

The screen door opened and out stepped Harry Johnson. "Hello, Captain," he said. "It's been a while."

"Mr. Johnson," the officer replied, sliding his sword into its scabbard. "Have these men harmed your family in any way?"

"No. They've treated us decently."

Rick Grennell materialized in the doorway, hatred contorting his visage. "They damn sure didn't treat me decently! The bastards cut me!" He stormed outside and pointed at Rikki. "That one there used a fancy spiked thing."

Captain Chilon stared at the bandaged arm, then at Blade. "Attacking a Helot is a serious offense."

"He attacked us first," Blade explained. "We had no choice. Afterward, we treated his arm."

"You applied the bandage?"

Blade nodded at the martial artist. "Rikki-Tikki-Tavi did. He's quite skilled at rendering first aid."

"Let me get this straight," Captain Chilon said. "First the small one wounded Grennell, then he took the time to bandage him?"

Blade nodded.

"It doesn't matter whether the son of a bitch helped me or not," Grennell snapped. "The important point is that he cut me in the first place. I want to press charges."

"I'm not certain of your legal standing in this respect," Chilon stated. "These men, being outsiders, fall under the special laws set down by the Lawgivers."

"I know my rights," Grennell insisted. "I demand that charges be pressed against these men. I'll gladly testify against them." He sneered at the giant. "I'll even accompany you to Sparta."

Blade recalled the information Erica had imparted concerning the possession of weapons by Helots. "If you're going to Sparta with us," he said calmly, "you'll need your rifle."

Grennell's mouth slackened and his eyes widened.

"Rifle?" Captain Chilon repeated.

"Yes. He tried to shoot us with a Marlin 30-30. It's in our transport," Blade revealed.

The Spartan officer's features hardened. "Is this true, Grennell?"

"No," the Helot answered. "It's a lie. They're just trying to get your sympathy. It's a lie, I tell you."

"No, it's not," interjected a newcomer to the conversation, and Erica emerged from the house.

Blade noticed a curious reaction by the officer. Chilon's stern expression shifted, becoming instantly friendly, almost regarding her with open tenderness and affection. The Spartan's eyes seemed to drink in her beauty like a thirsty man quenching a parched throat.

"Ms. Johnson," Chilon said formally.

"Captain," Erica responded with equal formality.

"Are you saying these outsiders are telling the truth?"

"I am. They saved me from a mutation and were giving me a ride home when we ran across Mr. Grennell. He tried to shoot them."

"You were attacked by a mutant?" Chilon asked, momentarily indifferent to the matter of the rifle.

"I'm fine, really," Erica said softly. "The Bowman over there shot it."

Captain Chilon looked to the east, where his men were busy reviving the man in green. "Then we owe him a debt of gratitude. I'm almost sorry we had to knock him out." He turned to Grennell. "So not only did you break the law about owning firearms, but you lied to me as well."

"I didn't lie to you," the Helot said. "I'd never lie to a Spartan officer. She's lying, just like them."

"And why would Ms. Johnson lie?"

"Because she has the hots for that Bowman."

No one, least of all Grennell, anticipated what would happen next. Captain Chilon abruptly clamped his right hand on the Helot's shirt and lifted, actually raising Grennell into the air with just one arm. He spun and hurled the Helot from him, causing Grennell to sprawl onto the cement walk. "Take this man into custody," he bellowed.

The three Spartans on the left side of the porch promptly ran around to the front. Two of them seized Grennell and rudely hauled him erect.

Blade checked on his companions. He was relieved to find Teucer awake and standing. Rikki stood next to a window, his arms at his sides, his eyes not missing a thing.

"Your fate is now in the hands of the Ephors," Chilon was telling Grennell. "And you know the usual punishment for violating the firearms law."

"But I'm a loyal Helot!" Grennell said. "I've never used the rifle against a Spartan. My family has owned a gun for decades, and not once have we used it to violate the law."

Captain Chilon smiled grimly. "So your family has possessed an illegal gun for decades?" He faced to the west and called out, "Martin, get out here!"

Blade was surprised to behold another Helot appear. The man resembled Grennell enough to be his brother.

"Your older brother has informed me of the rifle your family owns," the officer declared.

Martin Grennell gulped and wrung his hands together. He cast a despairing look at his sibling, gnawed on his lower lip for a few seconds, then blurted out, "The rifle belongs to him, not the whole family."

"You lying sack of manure!" Rick Grennell shrieked. "Tell them the truth!"

"It is the truth, sir," Martin told Chilon. "I don't know where he got the gun. But as the Lord is my witness, the gun is truly Rick's."

"Leave the Lord out of this," Chilon snapped.

"Martin, you scum!" Rick shouted. "You'll pay for this! You always were worthless, you know that?"

Captain Chilon looked at the pair of soldiers restraining the older Grennell. "Shut him up."

One of the Spartans whipped his right fist straight up, catching the prisoner on the jaw. Grennell's eyelids quivered and he slumped in their arms.

"And as for you," Chilon said to Martin, "you can run home and tell your parents the Crypteia will be paying them a visit soon."

"But we're innocent!" Martin wailed.

"I'm a soldier. It's not my responsibility to evaluate innocence or guilt, I simply report to my superiors, and once they learn of this incident you can

be sure the Crypteia will be dispatching men to your farm."

Martin took an anxious step backwards.

"Go!" Chilon barked.

Like a frightened rabbit, Martin Grennell whirled and raced off.

"Miserable cowards," Chilon muttered.

"Where did Martin come from?" Erica spoke up. "I didn't realize he was here."

The officer's anger evaporated once he gazed at her. "We were on patrol on Highway 76 when we ran into him. He claimed he'd been out hunting with his brother, although he never mentioned anything about a rifle. Told us that he'd witnessed his brother being captured by strangers in a green vehicle. Said he hid in the woods when they jumped Rick. He also claimed you had been taken by the same strangers." He paused. "Naturally, my first thought was to come here and investigate whether or not you were missing."

"Naturally," Erica said, her lips curling in a curious little grin.

Blade listened to the narration, able to piece together the missing pieces of the puzzle. Rick and Martin Grennell hadn't been out hunting, as they asserted. Rather, they'd been following Erica, and he could readily imagine the reason. For now it would be better if he kept the secret to himself. Such information might prove valuable later on. He abruptly became aware of someone next to his elbow and glanced down at Martha Johnson.

"Captain, all this nasty business is very distressing. Would you care to come in for a cup of tea?"

"Thank you, but no. We must be on our way," Chilon answered courteously.

"I have some already on the stove," Martha said. "It wouldn't be a bother. And we do so enjoy your, visits."

"I wish we could stay for a while," Captaia Chilon stated. "Our duty

dictates otherwise. Perhaps next time we pass this way on patrol."

"We'll look forward to it," Martha remarked.

"Excuse me," Harry interjected.

"Yes?" Chilon responded.

"The Grennells are good friends of ours. What will happen to them?"

"I wouldn't go around bragging about your friendship, were I you," the captain advised. "As far as their punishment is concerned, Rick will either be put to death or sentenced to the quarry for life. Martin might receive a lesser sentence. Their parents may be placed on probation."

"Thank goodness," Harry said. "The parents are decent folks, not like their boys."

"Perhaps," replied Captain Chilon. "But it's been my experience that inferior genes are responsible for breeding inferior offspring." He gave a courtly bow to Erica, and walked from the porch.

Blade followed, Rikki a few feet behind. "How do you propose traveling to Sparta?"

"We'll walk," the officer answered.

"Why not drive in our van?" Blade suggested.

Chilon halted and studied the transport. "How do I know you're not trying to trick me?"

"As one Warrior to another, I give you my word. There's room inside for three of your men and Grennell. The rest can ride on the roof. There's plenty of room to sit next to the solar panels. I also promise I'll drive slowly."

"It would save time," Chilon mentioned thoughtfully. "All right. But we'll have you and your men covered the whole time."

"I understand," Blade said.

"Then on to Sparta," Captain Chilon commented, and motioned for his

soldiers to move toward the transport.

On to Sparta, Blade thought, and hoped his diplomacy wouldn't result in their deaths.

CHAPTER SIX

Blade had no idea what to expect when they reached Sparta. Although he entertained no preconceptions, he was nonetheless astounded by the awe inspiring spectacle that unfolded before his wondering gaze as he drove the SEAL along the gravel road into the heart of the city. He couldn't bring himself to regard Sparta as a town, even though there were only 900 or so inhabitants, not when he beheld the marvelous architectural wonders situated in a narrow valley lined by steep cliffs. "This is incredible," he breathed in amazement.

"A century of labor has gone into Sparta," Captain Chilon stated proudly. He sat in the front passenger seat, his Uzi trained on the giant.

From the wide seat came a pertinent comment. "Spartan labor or the labor of the Helots?" asked Rikki-Tikki-Tavi.

Chilon glanced at the man in black. "Spartans aren't laborers. We're soldiers. Yes, the Helots built our city, assisted by criminal conscripts." He paused. "What's wrong with that?"

"Did the Helots do so willingly?"

"Most did. Not all Helots are dissatisfied with their status, as your tone implies."

Blade was concentrating on the marble and granite structures. He felt as if he'd gone through a portal in time and somehow wound up in ancient Greece. During his schooling years at the Home he'd studied the history and culture of that country, and he remembered being impressed by photographs of the Parthenon, the Erechtheum, the temple of Poseidon, the temple of Apollo, and many others. Now here they were again, rising right before his eyes, resplendent in the bright sunlight, every bit as magnificent as the originals after which they were obviously patterned.

At the very center of the city, surrounded by a public square, sat an enormous Doric structure, its colonnades glistening, rearing ten stories high.

"That's the Royal Palace," Captain Chiton disclosed.

Blade simply nodded.

Spartans were everywhere, easily distinguished by their red clothes. Even Spartan women wore red: red blouses, red skirts, red dresses, red shoes. Red ribbons or bows adorned their long hair. In contrast, the Helots in the city wore drab hand-me-downs or homemade clothing.

"Park in front of the Palace," Chiton directed.

There was no need to ask exactly where to stop because a portion of the public square served as a parking area. Four jeeps were aligned in a row, each with a Spartan seated behind the wheel, apparently ready to depart at a moment's notice.

Chiton noticed the direction of the giant's gaze. "Only our most skilled drivers are assigned to the Transportation Squad. Usually only the Kings, the Ephors, or one of the high-ranking officers in the Crypteia use the jeeps."

"You mentioned the Crypteia before," Blade noted. "Is it a branch of your army?"

"The Crypteia are our secret police."

"What purpose do they serve?"

Captain Chiton, who had his window down, waved at a Spartan strolling along the sidewalk. "The Crypteia help keep the Helots in line. I don't know if you're aware of it, but the Helots outnumber us Spartans by a substantial margin. If it wasn't for the secret police, the Helots might be inclined to revolt." He paused. "They've tried in the past, and always without success."

"Makes you wonder, doesn't it?"

"About what?"

"About whether or not there might be a flaw in your system," Blade said.

"The Lawgivers designed a perfect government. Our system of checks and balances has served us well for over a century. There aren't any flaws," Chilon declared snobbishly.'

Blade pulled the transport in alongside the nearest jeep and turned off the engine. He looked back at Rikki and Teucer, who were seated between Spartans, and smiled, only he smiled in a certain way, a very precise smile in which he touched the tip of his tongue to his lower lip while at the same time he tapped his right forefinger on his chin. To a casual observer the smile and the tap were innocent enough, but to the martial artist and the bowman they conveyed a secret message.

Because of the nature of their work, because the Warriors were frequently placed in life-or-death situations where verbal communications were impractical, a series of hand and facial gestures had been developed to enable them to convey messages without anyone else being the wiser.

Blade stared at each of them, and although neither Warrior reacted he knew they understood his instruction: STAY ALERT. FOLLOW MY LEAD.

"Everyone out," Captain Chilon said, and opened his door. He extended his left arm toward the giant. "I'll need those keys."

"I'd prefer to keep them," Blade said, debating whether to turn them over or put up a fight. The mission must come first, he reminded himself. Reluctantly, he dropped the keys into the officer's palm.

"Thanks. I'll take good care of them," Chiton said, and slipped them into his left front pocket.

"I hope so," Blade responded. He slid out and moved around in front of the grill, studying the Royal Palace. A flight of ten steps led up to the first floor. Stationed at regular intervals all around the perimeter were Spartans armed with the traditional short swords and nontraditional M-16's.

In short order Captain Chiton had his men lined up by twos. In front of them, bound at the wrists, was Rick Grennell. The officer indicated that the Warriors should walk ahead of the Helot, then he took the lead and

headed toward the steps.

"Shouldn't our vehicle be locked?" Blade asked.

"Why?"

"What if someone steals our provisions?"

Captain Chiton laughed. "No one will steal a single article. Petty thievery doesn't occur in Sparta."

"Never?"

"Not ever."

"How did you Spartans accomplish that miracle?"

"It's really very simple," Chiton responded. "The penalty for stealing is to have both hands chopped off at the wrists. Since the law went into effect approximately ninety years ago there hasn't been a single incident."

"I wonder why," Blade commented wryly.

"We also have a very low homicide rate," the officer bragged. "The last murder in Sparta occurred seven years ago."

"What's the punishment for that? Beheading?" Blade joked.

"How did you guess?"

Blade glanced over his right shoulder at the six Spartan troopers. One of them had his Commando slung over a shoulder. Another had Rikki's AR-15, which the Spartans had appropriated from the rear section of the SEAL. At least Rikki still possessed his katana, Teucer his bow, and he had his Bowies. If they weren't accorded a friendly reception, they stood a fighting chance of reaching the transport. Once they were inside the virtually impervious van there was no way the Spartans could stop them from leaving.

Which reminded him.

The Founder had left only one set of keys for the SEAL. Blade had recently learned from an acquaintance in the Free State of California that

machines existed capable of duplicating any key ever made. He wanted to have spares of the transport's set produced at the first opportunity.

Captain Chiton made for a huge door at the top of the steps. He returned the salute of a guard, which consisted of pressing his clenched right fist to his left breast. "Are both kings in attendance?"

"Yes, Captain," the guard replied.

"Good." Chiton said, and paused while the trooper rapped loudly three times.

Blade heard a faint, click. The door swung slower inward, pulled from within.

Chiton motioned for them to proceed and entered the Royal Palace.

Inadvertently tensing, Blade stayed on the officer's heels. The three soldiers who had opened the door stood at attention as the party passed. Ahead was a great hall, all polished and grand just like the exterior, with Spartans lining both walls.

"These men are part of the Three Hundred," Captain Chiton mentioned proudly.

"The Three Hundred?" Blade repeated.

"The three hundred best soldiers are selected to serve as bodyguards to the kings. To be picked for the Three Hundred is a special honor. Any Spartan warrior would give his right arm to be chosen."

"Are you part of the Three Hundred?"

"Not yet. All candidates must be at least thirty years old. I still have six months before I'm eligible, but I have every hope of being nominated when the time comes."

"Wait a minute," Blade said, doing a few mental calculations. "How many men are there in the Spartan army counting the Three Hundred?"

"Approximately five hundred and fifty. There are also fifty police."

"Which means there can only be about three hundred women and

children in Sparta," Blade said.

"Yes. You're remarkably well informed about our population."

"How can this be? The ratio of males and females is all wrong;"

"True, and through no fault of ours. I'll be honest with you. There has been a chronic shortage of women for many years. No one knows why, but most of the female babies die. So do a lot of the males, but not quite as many. The doctors speculate there might be some form of contamination in the area, either radiation or a chemical toxin. They can't isolate the source, however."

"What about the Helots?"

"What about them?"

"Are they also afflicted?"

"Yes, but not to the same degree."

"Then I'd guess Spartan men must take a fair number of Helot women as wives."

"You'd guess wrong," Captain Chilon responded, his voice lowering slightly, almost sadly.

"Why?"

"Because it's against the law for a Spartan to marry a Helot. Even for a Spartan to show interest in a Helot is to flirt with banishment or worse."

"The law makes no sense," Blade stated.

"It did years ago when the Helots were always making trouble. And too, the Lawgivers wanted to keep the Spartan bloodline pure."

"How do the Spartan men feel about the situation?"

"What we feel is unimportant. Our duty is to serve our kings and safeguard our city-state. This we will do no matter what the cost."

Blade fell silent, contemplating this new revelation. Now he understood

the game Chilon and Erica Johnson played, and realized the consequences should he reveal the officer's secret. Another thought occurred to him, the real reason Rick Grennell had been in the same area as Erica, carrying a rifle no less. What would happen if Grennell told Chiton's superiors?

They had advanced for over 40 yards along the corridor, passing many doors en route. Directly in front of them loomed another enormous door, only this one hung open. Beyond was an incredibly immense chamber packed with Spartans, both men and women, as well as a few children and Helots. A dozen soldiers were posted just outside, all at attention.

"This is the audience chamber," Captain Chilon disclosed.

One of the soldiers stepped forward, blocking their path, and saluted. "Halt, please, Captain Chilon."

The officer saluted. "Captain Tyrtaios. Is there a problem?"

"You have strangers with you."

"Yes."

"They're armed. You know the law as well as I do. Armed outsiders may not be admitted to the audience chamber under any circumstances whatsoever."

"I take full responsibility for them," Chilon stated.

Captain Tyrtaios pursed his lips and studied the Warriors. "This is most irregular. I trust you have an excellent reason?"

"Of course."

"Then they will be permitted to enter, but six of my men will accompany you."

"Take, whatever steps you deem necessary."

Tyrtaios moved aside and pointed at six of his detail. As Chilon started forward again, Tyrtaios leaned closer and whispered, "I hope you know what you're doing."

"So do I."

Blade scanned the chamber. A red carpet covered the floor except at the far end. There, on the east side, on a spacious dais, were a pair of matching gilded thrones on which sat men wearing full red robes and golden crowns. Behind the thrones, in a line from north to south, were ten more soldiers. Unlike the Spartans. Blade had encountered so far, these ten carried bows, powerful longbows, and on their backs perched quivers containing red shafts.

Captain Chilon walked toward the dais, his shoulders squared, his horsehair crest swaying.

Every man, woman, and child stopped whatever they were doing to stare at the newcomers.

The two men on the thrones reacted differently. On the left sat a blond man who sported a full beard and bushy brows. He regarded the party intently, yet calmly. Not so the other king. An exceptionally lean man with black hair down to his shoulders and dark eyes, he leaped to his feet and jabbed his right hand at them.

"Chilon, what's the meaning of this? You dare bring armed outsiders into the audience chamber?"

The officer saluted and halted a few yards from the base of the dais. "King Agesilaus, I beg your indulgence. These men are here on a peace mission. Please hear them out."

"Have you taken leave of your senses? I won't tolerate a threat to my royal person." Agesilaus shifted and glanced at the ten archers. "Kill them!"

CHAPTER SEVEN

For a moment Blade expected to have to fight for his life. He saw three of the Spartan archers step forward, notching arrows to their bows, and he draped his hands on the hilts of his Bowies.

"Wait!" thundered the other king, Dercyllidas, who stood and gestured to the archers. "I say we should listen to the strangers. Captain Chilon

wouldn't have brought them before us without due cause."

King Agesilaus cast a hostile gaze on his fellow monarch. "And I want them slain immediately."

The blond king stepped to the edge of the dais and studied the three Warriors for a bit, then faced Agesilaus. "As a favor to me, agree to let them speak."

"And what will I get in return?"

"I'll owe you a favor, and you know I always make good on my debts."

"True," King Agesilaus said, the corners of his thin lips curling upward. "May I claim this favor at any time?"

"Of course."

"No matter what it might be?"

"If it's within my power to accomplish it, then I'll do it."

"Fine. You may question the strangers," Agesilaus stated, and gave a contemptuous wave of his hand as he sat down.

The blond king placed his hands on his hips and regarded the giant critically. "Who are you and where are you from?"

"My name is Blade. I'm here as an official representative of the Freedom Federation. Perhaps you've heard of it?"

"I recall an outsider who made mention of such a name once," King Dercyllidas said.

"The Federation is an alliance of seven factions that are trying to salvage what's left of civilization from the ruins of World War Three. Each member has signed a mutual defense treaty, agreeing to aid any other member whenever the need arises," Blade related. "I'm here to extend an invitation to Sparta to join."

King Agesilaus came out of his chair again. "What? Sparta has no need of allies. What presumption! Perhaps we should send your head back to this Federation as a symbol of our independence and strength."

"Let's hear him out," King Dercyllidas suggested. "I'm interested in the offer. We should learn all we can before we dismiss it out of hand."

Agesilaus sighed. "Very well. Suit yourself."

"What are these seven factions?" Dercyllidas inquired:

"The faction I'm from is called the Family. The others are the Free State of California, the Civilized Zone, the Cavalry, the Clan, the Moles, and the Flathead Indians," Blade disclosed.

"So the state of California survived the war?" King Dercyllidas said. "We've heard about the Civilized Zone, but not the others. Where are they located?"

"I'd rather not say."

"Why not?"

"The exact locations of the Federation factions must remain a secret until we're satisfied we can trust your people."

King Agesilaus took a stride and glared at the giant. "Trust us? Why, you miserable swine! Who are you to sit in judgment on Spartans? You're not fit to tie our shoelaces."

"Calm down," Dercyllidas told the co-ruler. "I'm certain he meant no offense, and I admire this Federation for possessing the foresight not to trust anyone blindly."

"You would," Agesilaus snapped.

"As Captain Chilon explained, we've come here in peace," Blade went on. "As official emissaries we expect to be treated accordingly. If we should be harmed, the Federation will respond accordingly."

"Is that a threat?" Agesilaus demanded sternly.

"No, a promise," Blade responded, refusing to be intimidated by the pompous chief of state. "The Federation has successfully withstood attempts by the Russians, the Technics, the Superiors, the Peers, The Debtor, and many others to destroy it. We can field a combined army of over ten thousand troops, plus tanks and aircraft, on short notice. If need

be, twice that number could be conscripted into service." He paused and surveyed the chamber. "I reveal these factors not to threaten you or to try and put fear into your hearts, because I've learned that Spartans fear nothing. Rather, I tell you this so you can appreciate the gravity of the situation should you decide to oppose the Federation. Sparta might boast the bravest army on the planet, but bravery is no match for tanks and vastly superior odds. Consider these facts. Consider that the Federation would be honored to have Sparta as a member. And bear in mind that once you've joined, your enemies would be our enemies. Anyone who would try to crush you must first crush us."

"Tanks and aircrafts?" King Dercyllidas said, sounding impressed by the news.

"I bet they don't have a single measly tank," King Agesilaus stated. "He's just making these absurd claims so we'll agree to his proposal."

"And what if you're wrong?" Dercyllidas replied. "Would you sacrifice Sparta on the altar of your vanity?"

Agesilaus turned livid and clenched his fists.

Blade held up his right hand. "Please, I don't want to be the cause of contention between you. Would king Agesilaus be satisfied I speak the truth if I provided proof?"

The dark-maned monarch glowered at the Warrior. "What sort of proof? Did you bring a tank with you?" he asked, and laughed.

"We brought something better than a tank," Blade stated. "And if you're willing, we'll provide a demonstration that should convince you of our sincerity."

King Dercyllidas smiled. "I, for one, would like to see this proof."

At least ten seconds elapsed before King Agesilaus spoke. He was deep in thought the whole time. Finally he nodded and said, "All right. I'd like to see the proof also. But mark my words, Blade. Should this be a trick, you'll live to regret it."

Captain Chiton cleared his throat. "My lords, before we conduct the demonstration there is another matter that must be brought to your

attention."

"Haven't you done enough for one day?" King Agesilaus quipped.

The officer pointed at Grennell. "This Helot has been arrested for possessing a firearm."

"Did you confiscate the weapon?" King Dercyllidas inquired.

"Yes, sir," Chiton responded, and snapped his fingers. The last soldiers in his squad brought forward the Martin 30-30. "Here it is. He'll be turned over to the Ephors for disposition of his case."

King Agesilaus swaggered to the rim of the dais and bestowed a mocking gaze on the bound Helot. "Planning a little insurrection, were you, scum?"

"No, your lordship," Grennell responded in a pathetic whine. "I'd never think of rebelling against our wonderful masters."

"Did you use the rifle for target shooting, then?" Agesilaus taunted.

"My family used it for hunting, that's all, your lordship."

"Of course, my dear Helot."

Grennell looked at the rope binding his arms, then at Captain Chiton. His expression transformed into a mask of hatred and his lips twitched. He impulsively took several steps, until a Spartan stopped him, and blurted out, "Would you grant me leniency, good kings, if I tell you the truth?"

"Do you really think we care?" Agesilaus rejoined.

"Your fate is in the hands of the Ephors," Dercyllidas said. "We can't influence the verdict of the judges."

"But I have important information," Grennell insisted.

"Sure you do," declared King Agesilaus, and pressed his left palm to his forehead. "Your prattling is giving me a headache. Will someone shut him up?"

Grennell cried out shrilly, "But I do have information you'd want I know the name of a Spartan who is breaking the law by—"

Acting more in impulse than logical judgment, Blade spun and delivered an arching haymaker to the Helot's chin. The punch lifted Grennell from his feet and sent him sailing for two yards before crashing to the floor.

No one else moved. Everyone appeared bewildered by the startling development.

Captain Chiton stared at the unconscious Helot, then at the Warrior.

"Why did you do that?" King Agesilaus demanded.

"You wanted him to stop prattling," Blade noted.

"Yes. But what was that business about a Spartan who has broken the law?"

"I have no idea," Blade answered, lying to save the officer. "And I'll confess, I've wanted to lay him out ever since he tried to kill us."

King Dercyllidas came halfway down the steps. "You say this Helot attempted to take your life?"

"Yes. He tried to shoot us."

"I can substantiate that," Captain Chilon interjected. "I spoke with a witness to the attack."

"This is most serious," King Dercyllidas said. "I trust you realize, Blade, that the Helot's action wasn't sanctioned by the Spartan government. Helots aren't permitted to own firearms. Do you know the reason he attempted to kill you?"

"No."

"Well, the Crypteia will get the truth out of him," Agesilaus stated, and nodded at two Spartans standing at the base of the dais. "Take him to General Agis. Inform the general he is to use every means at his disposal to wring this Helot dry, then turn the wretch over to the Ephors. I want to be informed of every word he utters. Understood?"

"Yes, your lordship," one of the soldiers said.

In moments the troopers had hauled Grennell away.

Blade noticed Captain Chilon gazing at him, and deliberately focused on the kings. "I apologize if I stepped out of bounds. As a Federation emissary, I should be on my best behavior at all times."

"You're forgiven, this once," King Agesilaus said. "Now about this demonstration of yours. What does it entail?"

"I'd like to show you some of the capabilities of our vehicle," Blade explained.

"Where is it?"

"Parked outside."

"Then let's get this over with."

The two kings descended the dais, and were promptly surrounded by two dozen Spartans. As they made for the doorway, the crowd parted.

Captain Chilon waited until the royal guard passed, then led the Warriors and his own squad out. He walked alongside the giant, and when they were going through the doorway he spoke in a hushed voice. "I don't know why you saved me, but I thank you."

"You're welcome."

"How did you know about Erica and me?"

"I can add two and two."

"Was it that obvious?"

"Afraid so."

"Damn," the officer said. "Well, I've only myself to blame for what happens after the secret police finish interrogating Grennell. They'll arrest me."

"What about Erica?"

"Helots are rarely punished for having romantic relations with Spartans. Since Spartans are required to be perfect models of self-control and discipline, we're the ones whom the Ephors punish," Chilon said. "At most, you've bought me some time. I only wish I could see Erica at least once before I'm taken into custody."

"Perhaps I can help there."

"How?"

"Leave it to me."

Rikki-Tikki-Tavi nudged Blade's left elbow. "When can I address the kings?"

"After we're done with the demonstration," Blade answered. "Sorry. As soon as we've proven ourselves to them, go ahead."

They passed along the corridor to the outer door, which had been opened well in advance by the three soldiers assigned to the task, and the two kings led the way down the steps. At the bottom they halted and studied the SEAL.

"What type of demonstration did you have in mind?" King Dercyllidas asked.

Blade surveyed the open area. At the north end construction was under way, and a huge mound of dirt had been piled next to the foundation for a new building. "With your permission, I'd like to show you the firepower of our transport."

"Be our guest," Agesilaus said.

"Perhaps you should clear the pedestrians away from that dirt mound," Blade suggested.

King Agesilaus merely motioned with his right hand and instantly six Spartans hastened off to do his bidding.

"And I'll need the keys," Blade told Captain Chilon.

The officer handed them over.

Blade turned to his friends. "Let's go." He walked to the van with Rikki and Teucer on his heels.

"What gives?" the Bowman queried. "Why are we doing this?"

"The Spartans only respect power. If we give them a taste of the SEAL'S armaments, they might be more inclined to take the Federation's offer seriously."

"Convincing Dercyllidas won't be hard," Rikki commented, "but the other one is unpredictable. I don't trust him."

"Neither do I," Blade concurred. "We must try to persuade him, though, and this might do the trick." He unlocked the door, then climbed in and unlocked the passenger side.

"What was going on with Chilon and you?" Teucer asked as he took his seat.

"Chilon and Erica Johnson are in love," Blade revealed, inserting the key. He started the engine, waited for Rikki to close the door, then backed up and drove to within 20 feet of the dirt mound. The soldiers were moving all citizens from the immediate vicinity.

"What do we do if Agesilaus isn't impressed?" Teucer questioned.

"We'll get the hell out of here," Blade said.

"Good. I don't relish the notion of being thrown in a prison or forced to work in a quarry."

Blade watched the last of the pedestrians reach a safe distance from the SEAL. "Here goes," he declared, and flicked the silver toggle switch that activated the 50-caliber machine guns. Almost immediately the big guns cut loose, thundering in unison, the rounds boring into the mound, dirt flying in all directions. The SEAL vibrated slightly for the duration of the ten-second burst. Blade switched the toggle off.

"Think that's enough?" Teucer asked.

"No," Blade responded, and activated the flamethrower. He saw a red and orange hissing tongue spurt from the front fender and strike the dirt

with a sizzling crackle. He counted to three, then shut the flamethrower off. There was no sense in wasting the fuel.

"Let's use the rocket launcher on the Royal Palace," Teucer suggested. "That should really impress them."

Rikki glanced at the Bowman. "Have you been hanging around Hickok a lot lately?"

"No. Why?"

"Just asking."

Grinning, Blade returned the transport to its original position and killed the engine. Both kings, and many of the soldiers, were regarding the van in amazement. Agesilaus, oddly, abruptly smiled slyly and whispered a few words to the Spartan on his left.

"Did you see that?" Rikki asked.

"Yep," Blade replied.

"See what? See what?" Teucer wanted to know.

"Do you want us to stay in here?" Rikki queried.

"You took the words right out of my mouth. I'm leaving the key in the ignition," Blade said, opening his door. He looked at both of them. "As soon as I step around the front of the SEAL, all eyes should be on me. Roll up the windows and lock the doors. If everything is all right, I'll give the proper signal."

"Why not simply stay put?" the martial artist mentioned.

"We'll give our hosts the benefit of the doubt," Blade stated, and slid to the ground. He whispered his final instructions. "Rikki, you've had driving lessons. If we're right, get the SEAL out of here."

"We won't leave you."

"That was an order."

"As you wish," Rikki said, frowning.

Blade slammed the door, plastered a fake smile on his face, and strolled toward the kings.

"An astounding display of firepower!" King Agesilaus exclaimed, and clapped his hands together.

"Evidently the Federation is every bit as strong as you indicated," King Dercyllidas added. "Spartan might would avail us little against such mechanized dispensers of death."

"The Federation has no intention of attacking Sparta unless you give us provocation," Blade said. "We'd rather join hands in friendship and become allies."

"Sparta can take—" Agesilaus began, then glanced at the transport. "Why are your companions still inside?" He did a double take. "And why have they just rolled up the windows?"

"They're making ready to depart."

"Depart!" Agesilaus practically bellowed "I didn't give them permission to leave."

"There's no need for them to be present during our further talks," Blade said.

"I want them out of there this second!"

"I'm afraid that's not possible."

King Agesilaus took a step forward. "Don't tell me what is and isn't possible! You're addressing a Spartan king, not some miserable cur of a Helot."

"What different does it make whether they stay in the vehicle or not?" King Dercyllidas said, interceding.

The thin monarch whirled on his blond peer. "It's a trick. They're up to no good."

"You're making a mountain out of a molehill," Dercyllidas said. "Why do you persist on blowing everything out of proportion?"

"I do, do I?" Agesilaus rejoined, his right hand casually easing under the folds of his robe.

"Most definitely. These men would hardly have risked their lives to come here merely to indulge in petty tricks. They're offering us a wonderful opportunity, a chance to expand our horizons, to enter into a political alliance that will reap untold benefits. Think of the possibilities! Why, we might be able to trade for ammunition and other necessities that are currently in short supply."

"Sparta has managed quite well for over a century without outside aid. There's no reason to change our policy now."

"But there is. For far too long has Sparta existed in isolation. We've had no contact with the world beyond our boundary for decades. We don't know what's out there. And we owe it to ourselves and our people to find out."

"The Lawgivers instructed us to be extremely cautious in making contact with outside influences."

"True, but they wrote those words a century ago when the world was in turmoil, when hordes of looters and crazies were, scouring the countryside, slaying everyone they met." Dercyllidas paused. "Now the world is different. The presence of these three men is proof of it. We must keep our minds open to their words or we'll run the risk of suffering another century in a self-imposed quarantine."

Agesilaus stared at the ground. "Then I gather you've already decided Sparta should join the Federation?"

"Yes. But the final decision isn't up to us. The Ecclesia must vote on such a monumental issue, and I fully expect they will agree once they hear about the benefits to be derived from such a venture."

"The general assembly will never hear about the benefits."

"Oh? And why not?"

"Because they'll be too busy discussing your heinous plot to betray Sparta into the hands of her enemies," Agesilaus declared harshly, and the next moment he whipped a dagger from under his robe and plunged the

keen point into King Dercyllidas's chest.

CHAPTER EIGHT

All hell broke loose.

King Agesilaus raised the dagger for another strike as Dercyllidas staggered backward and fell to his knees.

"No!" Captain Chilon cried, and stepped between the monarchs, giving Agesilaus a shove that propelled the thin ruler onto the ground.

The two dozen Spartan soldiers leaped forward, some surrounding King Dercyllidas, the rest encircling Agesilaus. In a flash swords appeared, and the two sides promptly clashed. Three men perished in the opening seconds of combat.

Shocked by the unexpected turn of events, Blade saw an Agesilaus partisan charge Chilon. He automatically darted to the officer's side, drawing his Bowies as he did, and braced for the onslaught.

The soldier swung his short sword in a tremendous overhand clash, intending to cleave the giant's skull.

Blade blocked the blow with his right Bowie, the clanging impact jarring his arm, then stabbed his left knife into the soldier's side. The man crumpled, and Blade jerked the Bowie free and glanced at Captain Chilon.

The officer was supporting King Dercyllidas. "We've got to get out of here!" he told the Warrior. "There's no time to explain."

Blade didn't need to be persuaded. A quick look showed him the Agesilaus partisans outnumbered the Dercyllidas defenders by two to one, and despite the brave resistance of the defenders they were about to be overrun. "Get him to the van!" he shouted to be heard above the clashing of the swords.

Captain Chilon nodded, looped both arms around the wounded king's torso, and hastened toward the SEAL.

Three troopers moved to intercept him.

What had he gotten himself into? Blade wondered as he dashed to Chiton's defense. Since all the Spartans were dressed alike, he had a difficult time determining which side they belonged to. The trio, however, left no doubt of their intentions. He parried the sword of the foremost soldier, then dodged when another tried to impale him in the groin.

Nearby a defender went down fighting, blood spurting from his ruptured throat.

The three Agesilaus backers converged on the giant in concert, their expressions set in grim determination.

Blade backed up, his eyes flicking from Spartan to Spartan, knowing he was at a decided disadvantage. Not only was he outnumbered, the short swords were six inches longer than his Bowies and double-edged. The swords had also been forged with heavier steel. He couldn't expect to hold them off indefinitely.

All three lunged at the same instant, each one spearing his weapon at a different part of the giant's anatomy.

A side step enabled Blade to avoid a thrust aimed at his legs, and his Bowies deflected the other swords. Almost immediately the trio tried again, two slashing high, one going low. Blade threw himself rearward, evading the high strikes, but an intensely painful stinging sensation in his left shin made him aware the third soldier had scored. He didn't dare glance down to see how bad it was or the threesome would finish him off. He blocked two swords, still backing up, and glimpsed a fourth foe racing toward him.

Damn.

Blade knew he had to put at least two of them out of action and do it swiftly or he would be overwhelmed. He dodged to the right, and when the nearest Spartan tried to slice open his abdomen he swung his left Bowie straight down, cutting into the soldier's wrist and almost severing the man's sword hand.

Incredibly, the soldier simply grabbed the sword with his good hand and renewed his attack.

The Warrior skipped to the left this time, just as another Spartan aimed a terrific swipe at his neck. Blade ducked under the sword and lanced his right Bowie into the man's stomach, then wrenched the razor-sharp blade upward, ripping the Spartan from the navel to the sternum. The man doubled over and toppled forward.

There were still three adversaries remaining, counting the man whose split wrist gushed forth a crimson spray.

Blade countered a series of swings, his superior size and strength enabling him to temporarily keep them at bay. One of the soldiers came at him from the left at the same moment a second came at him from the right. He parried the latter and spun to confront the other one, but someone else beat him to the punch.

A diminutive black-clad figure seemed to streak out of nowhere and a gleaming katana arced into the Spartan's neck. Red drops splattered in all directions. Not slowing for an instant, the martial artist swung his cherished sword in a figure-eight pattern, the blade cutting through two foes, downing both.

For a moment they were clear.

"Took you long enough," Blade said, backing toward the transport.

"I helped Captain Chilon and the king climb in," Rikki-Tikki-Tavi explained, his body coiled in a ready stance.

"Then let's get out of here," Blade proposed, and was about to turn when three more soldiers came at them.

Nearly all of the Spartans who had come to Dercyllidas's aid were dead. Off to one side, well out of range, stood King Agesilaus. He shrieked the same command over and over again: "Kill them! Kill them! Kill them!"

Blade braced to meet the charge of the new trio. An object suddenly flashed past his left shoulder. Three objects, actually, one right after the other, making a slight swishing noise.

All three green shafts struck home with unerring accuracy. Each hit a soldier in the eye, penetrating deep into the cranium, slaying the target in midstride.

"Kill them! Kill them!" Agesilaus raged.

Blade whirled and sprinted to the vehicle.

Standing next to the open door, another arrow already notched to the green bow, was Teucer. "I'll cover you!" he said. "Get in."

A half dozen soldiers were racing to stop them from escaping.

There was no time to lose. Blade vaulted up into the van, then slid over the console to the driver's seat. Both Chilon and Dercyllidas were in the wide seat behind him, the king unconscious. Blade beckoned urgently at his companions and shouted, "Let's go!"

Rikki entered next, moving back to sit beside the Spartan officer.

Teucer hadn't budged.

"Get in here!" Blade bellowed.

Several of the soldiers were in the process of unlimbering their automatic weapons.

"Just getting some air," Teucer quipped, and let fly, his right hand a blur as he fired one, two, three arrows in rapid succession. The shafts sped true, and the Spartans in the act of employing their guns toppled. Teucer rotated and quickly clambered into the passenger seat, pulling the door shut just as a soldier ran from the east and swung a sword, the steel edge glancing off the virtually indestructible plastic. "The natives are a bit restless. I suggest we haul butt."

Blade started the SEAL and threw the gearshift into reverse. Outside, King Agesilaus raved insanely and more soldiers poured from the palace. Some opened fire, their rounds ricocheting off the van with high-pitched whines. Blade tramped on the accelerator and the SEAL hurtled rearward. Spinning the wheel, he executed a semicircle, then shifted again and made for the gravel road.

"We must reach the barracks," Captain Chilon stated urgently.

"Why?" Blade asked. "What's going on?" He gazed into the rearview mirror and saw Spartans piling into the four jeeps.

"You and your friends have been caught in the middle of a power grab. Agesilaus is trying to take complete control of Sparta."

"Tell me something I don't know," Blade said, scanning the pedestrians crowding the sidewalks that lined the square. So far none had displayed any hostility.

"This has happened twice before, many years ago. Each time the would-be dictator was defeated," Chilon disclosed. "Frankly, I expected Agesilaus to make his move a long time ago. He probably decided to act now because he wants to prevent Sparta from joining the Federation at all costs."

"What difference does joining make?" Blade asked while exiting the square and speeding westward, the huge tires spewing gravel and dust in the SEAL'S wake.

"I'm just guessing, but I'd say he's afraid the Federation would intervene if he tried to take control afterward."

"Then the joke is on him. A clause in the treaty prevents Federation factions from interfering in the internal affairs of other members."

"Really? Well, whatever his reason, Agesilaus has gone over the brink and blood will flow until he's stopped."

"What will you do now?"

"I must get King Dercyllidas to the barracks where his bodyguard contingent is housed. They'll protect him."

"His bodyguard contingent? I thought there are three hundred Spartans assigned to safeguard both kings," Blade said. He took a curve as tightly as possible and glanced in the mirror.

The four jeeps, intermittently visible through the swirling dust, were roaring in pursuit.

"True, but each king selects one hundred and fifty men for the royal bodyguard. In effect, each king controls half of the contingent. Those who were picked by Agesilaus will back him to the death, and the same goes for those who owe their position to King Dercyllidas."

"What about the rest of the army and the Spartan people? Which king will they help?"

"Neither."

"What?"

"The regular army and the populace at large won't intervene. Custom dictates that the kings decide this between themselves."

"And what about the judges everyone keeps talking about, the Ephors? Do they have any power? Can they influence the outcome?"

"In a word, no. The Lawgivers tried to improve on ancient Sparta's constitution by incorporating certain changes into ours. Unlike the Ephors in the early Sparta, ours have only judicial powers. Even though all five might prefer Dercyllidas over Agesilaus, they won't attempt, to intervene. Agesilaus is crazy enough to have them slain on the spot."

Blade passed an intersection, narrowly missing two Helots who were scurrying to get out of the SEAL's path. "Every Spartan must know that Agesilaus has gone off the deep end. Why haven't they deposed him?"

"Such an act would be unthinkable. Spartans are raised from infancy to be loyal citizens. They pride themselves on their dedication to Sparta and the principles underlying the foundation of our city-state. For a Spartan, even the mere thought of disobedience is unconscionable."

Frowning, Blade glanced at the pedestrians on both sides of the road. "Are you telling me they'd rather be ruled by a madman than revolt?"

"Essentially, yes."

Blade shook his head in astonishment. What manner of people were these Spartans? He looked in the mirror once more and spotted the jeeps, now less than 40 yards behind the transport and slowly gaining. "Where are the barracks you mentioned?"

"Almost on the outskirts of the city. The troops are billeted there in case of an attack, so they can be called up and into formation at a moment's notice," Captain Chilon said. "Look for a side street on the left. There will be a long, narrow building adjacent to the street."

"Are Agesilaus's men in the same barracks?"

"No. They're in a building on the other side of this road."

"So the contingents are right across from each other?"

"Yes."

"Terrific," Blade muttered, and checked on their pursuers again. Only 30 yards and closing.

Unexpectedly, King Dercyllidas coughed and spoke. "Blade, I want to thank you for your aid."

Captain Chilon bent over the slumped monarch. "Don't talk, my liege. You must stay still until I've summoned a doctor."

"I'm a Spartan king," Dercyllidas stated, straightening slowly. "I won't be coddled."

"These guys give new meaning to the word tough," Teucer interjected.

"All of you must leave as soon as you can," Dercyllidas said. "Drop me off here, if you like, and depart in safety."

"No can do," Blade responded.

"Why not?" the ruler asked weakly, his left hand pressed to his chest.

"Because I intend to drop you off at the barracks where your bodyguards are housed. You wouldn't be safe anywhere else."

"You must leave," Dercyllidas insisted. "If anything happens to you, the Federation will blame us. For the sake of my people, this mustn't happen. I don't want to jeopardize Sparta's chances of joining."

"I can appreciate your concern," Blade noted, his eyes on the road ahead, seeking the barracks. "But look at this situation from my perspective. I believe the Spartans would make great allies. But if Agesilaus prevails, he'll never sign the treaty. Sparta won't be able to join the Federation until after he dies. I'd prefer to hasten his demise." He paused. "It's in the Federation's best interests if we help you out."

"This isn't your fight."

"Wrong. It became our fight the second Agesilaus tried to have us killed. If he wants us for enemies, he's got us."

King Dercyllidas glanced from the giant to the man in black, then at the bowman. "I am deeply in your debt."

"Save your gratitude," Teucer said. "If you're not alive when this is all over, you won't owe us a thing."

Blade looked in the mirror at the thick cloud of smoke behind them. Where were the jeeps? he wondered, and moments later received an answer.

The dust briefly parted, revealing a jeep not ten yards off. A Spartan was leaning out the passenger side, his arm extended.

It took Blade a second to realize the soldier held a hand grenade.

CHAPTER NINE

Blade turned the wheel sharply to the left, causing the SEAL to slew wildly. He regained control and saw the jeep still ten yards away, riding on the right side of the road. Apparently the driver planned to draw closer and then the other soldier would throw the grenade. Sixty feet beyond the first vehicle was the rest of the pack.

"Too bad we can't get behind them," Teucer remarked.

"Who says we can't?" Blade said and slammed on the air brakes, holding on tightly as the van screeched to an abrupt stop. He saw the lead jeep shoot past and floored the accelerator, hoping the other three jeeps wouldn't smash into the rear of the transport.

Loud, shrill noises came from the rear, the squealing of brakes applied roughly, too roughly as the subsequent crash signified.

Blade concentrated on the jeep dead ahead, slanting the SEAL in

directly behind it. He promptly flicked the silver toggle to the machine guns, and the twin big-fifties blasted and bucked, the rounds punching into the jeep's tail and stitching a pattern of holes all over it.

Not a heartbeat later the jeep swerved to one side, then the other. The driver appeared to have lost his grip. For a full five seconds the vehicle veered back and forth until finally leaving the road entirely, angling up and over a sidewalk and ramming into a building. The gas tank ruptured, flames shot from under the hood, and a fireball engulfed the jeep and its occupants.

Blade gazed at the mirror. The dust completely obscured the road so he had no way of knowing if the remaining vehicles were still chasing the van.

"The barracks shouldn't be too much farther," Captain Chilon said.

"What will you do once we get there?"

"How do you mean?"

"Will you lead King Dercyllidas's backers against the Agesilaus contingent?"

"I can't. I'm not a member of the Three Hundred. The officer in charge will make the decision if the king is unable," Chilon answered. "And he's out again."

Blade glanced back and found the monarch sagging against the captain. "Who is the officer in charge of Dercyllidas's men?"

"That would be General Leonidas, one of the most widely respected of all Spartans. He was instrumental in staving off a large force of raiders a couple of years ago."

"Then you trust him?"

"With my life." They rode in anxious silence for less than a minute.

"There's the side street!" Chilon cried.

Blade had already spotted it and the long structure, which was surrounded on three sides by a wide field. Spartan soldiers were everywhere; some were engaged in gymnastics; some were sparring; some

were sharpening their swords; and some were simply conversing. He started to slow and looked to the right.

Almost an identical scene was on the other side of the road. The barracks building had been constructed a bit farther from the junction, and the level ground around it wasn't quite as spacious, but there were scores of soldiers involved in similar activities.

"Neither contingent must know about the fight at the palace," Rikki observed.

"No, Agesilaus hasn't had time to inform his men and General Leonidas will hear the news from us," Chilon stated.

Blade took the turn much faster than was safe, the tires sliding, the SEAL threatening to tip over.

"I'm glad I didn't eat much breakfast," Teucer said.

Twisting the steering wheel, Blade eased up on the brakes and drove toward a pair of wide doors situated at the north end of the barracks. The Spartans were all gazing in consternation at the transport. He brought the van to a full stop within 15 feet of the double doors and rolled down his window. "Is General Leonidas here?"

A nearby Spartan, who held a freshly sharpened sword in his right hand, answered curtly. "He is, stranger. What's your business with him?"

"Get him," Blade directed.

"A Spartan doesn't take orders from an outsider."

"Would you rather that your king died?"

"What?" the Spartan respond, taking a step.

"*Get General Leonidas!*" Blade commanded in a voice that carried to all corners of the field.

Despite the soldier's aversion to taking orders from outsiders, he'd been conditioned since early childhood to respond automatically to authority. That conditioning now compelled him to hasten into the barracks. He instinctively recognized a genuinely authoritarian person when he met

one, and the giant impressed him as being a man accustomed to being obeyed.

Blade glanced at the scores of Spartans all around, who were now moving toward the transport, then at Captain Chilon. "Stay put until I see what kind of reception we get."

"Don't you trust me?" the officer responded.

"You I trust. But I don't know this Leonidas. Until I meet him, we'll sit right where we are."

Chilon smiled. "If I didn't know better, I'd swear you were a Spartan."

"I'm a Warrior. So are my friends."

"Is that a title of some kind?"

"Yes. Eighteen Family members are selected to serve as guardians of the Home."

"Blade is the head Warrior," Teucer commented.

The officer nodded. "I would have expected as much." He regarded each of them. "I saw all three of you in action back there, and I never thought I'd see the day where three outsiders could hold their own against Spartans. Each of you is extremely skilled."

"We've had lots of practice," Blade said, gazing at the barracks. No one had yet appeared. He checked the road, but there was no sign of the jeeps. "There are a few things I need cleared up. What part will the secret police, the Crypteia, play in the power struggle?"

"None. Like the regular army, the police won't interfere. You see, the Crypteia are recruited from the ranks of the army and the bodyguard contingent. Some favor King Dercyllidas, while others prefer Agesilaus. And the man who controls the Crypteia, General Agis, toes a fine line of neutrality. He believes in maintaining a balance of power between the monarchs. There isn't a man alive more devoted to Sparta than him."

"Tell me this. During the fight the soldiers relied almost exclusively on their swords. They didn't resort to their automatic weapons until we were

getting into the van. Why?"

"They didn't use their assault rifles or submachine guns on each other because it's against the law for one Spartan to shoot another."

"But the men who were defending Dercyllidas might have won if they'd used their guns." '

"Possibly. But none of them wanted to be permanently banished from Sparta should they do so. When Spartans have disputes, they're required to settle their differences with swords or in hand-to-hand combat. Guns are strictly forbidden."

"They tried to shoot us," Blade noted.

"The three of you are outsiders. It's perfectly legal so shoot outsiders and Helots."

Teucer chuckled. "Figures."

"Wait a minute," Blade said. "Does this mean the two sides will only use swords if they engage in a pitched battle?"

"Swords and spears."

Blade looked at the barracks again, annoyed at not seeing anyone emerge. Where was General Leonidas? "Something else has been nagging at me. When Agesilaus attacked Dercyllidas there were twenty-four bodyguards with us. Yet almost two thirds sided with the madman. Why weren't the soldiers evenly divided?"

Captain Chilon frowned. "They should have been. The law specifically calls for an equal number of bodyguards from each contingent to be on duty at all times. I suspect treachery. Agesilaus is renowned for his devious nature."

"Do tell," Blade said dryly, and at last saw several Spartans step from the barracks. He immediately took a liking to the soldier in the lead, a muscular man four or five inches over six feet in height and endowed with an imposing physique. The man's helmet shimmered in the bright sunlight.

"I'm General Leonidas. Who are you and why do you want to see me?"

"Are you loyal to King Dercyllidas?" Blade asked bluntly.

The Spartan studied the giant. His features were rugged, his eyes and hair both dark. "If you knew me well, stranger, you'd know that my life is the king's to do with as he pleases."

"And would you protect him with your dying breath?"

Leonidas smiled. "What a stupid question. I would walk through hell barefoot for my liege."

"Good," Blade said, and opened his door. "Because King Agesilaus has tried to kill him and he needs a doctor."

The general stiffened. "How do you know? Where is King Dercyllidas? And who the hell are you?"

"I'm Blade," the Warrior disclosed, and jerked his right thumb to the rear. "Dercyllidas is in here. He's been stabbed. Do you have a stretcher?"

Leonidas turned to another soldier. "Get one immediately."

"Yes, sir," the Spartan said, and ran into the barracks.

"Do you know Captain Chiton?" Blade queried.

"Yes."

"Good. He can explain everything. He is right behind me with your king."

"What's your—" Leonidas began, then stopped when the metallic rumble of racing engines came from the east.

Blade twisted and saw a rising cloud of dust drawing steadily nearer. The remaining jeeps were back in action. He shifted into park and stepped out of the SEAL. "Hurry and get Dercyllidas out. Those jeeps are filled with Agesilaus's men."

The general turned and pointed at four approaching soldiers. "Over here on the double."

They raced to the transport.

"Climb in and assist Captain Chiton in removing King Dercyllidas. And be gentle," Leonidas instructed them.

Blade admired the precision with which the Spartans went about their business. No one pestered the general with meaningless queries. In half a minute they had their monarch out and lowered him to the ground. "We'll be back," Blade said, and vaulted into the driver's seat.

"Where are you going?" Chiton inquired. He stood next to the general.

"It's payback time."

"You're going to try and take out the jeeps?"

"We'll buy Leonidas the time he needs to get organized," Blade said. He backed up, then drove to the side street and took a right.

The jeeps were 50 yards distant and going over 70 miles an hour.

"Teucer, be ready," Blade directed, and swung the SEAL onto the gravel road. He promptly braked and reached for the toggle switches.

Predictably, the soldiers in the three jeeps opened up, their weapons chattering, the drivers holding the vehicles steady so the gunners could aim with a reasonable degree of accuracy. Two jeeps were speeding abreast of one another while the third trailed by three vehicle lengths.

Blade waited, letting them get within range, listening to the slugs zing off the windshield.

Thirty yards separated the jeeps from the transport.

"When?" Teucer asked, his right hand poised to roll down the window, the bow in his left hand with an arrow already notched.

"I'll let you know," Blade replied, still waiting.

Twenty yards and closing.

Rounds were smacking into the SEAL in a continual hail of lead, peppering the van and the puncture-proof tires, buzzing like angry

hornets.

Fifteen yards.

Blade's right index finger flicked the switch to activate the rocket launcher. The SEAL shook as the conical projectile shot from its launch tube, a tendril of smoke and flame marking its level trajectory.

The rocket struck the right-hand jeep in the left headlight.

A tremendous explosion shook the very earth and a blistering fireball swirled skyward. All three jeeps were totally shrouded in a cloud of flame, smoke, bits of gravel, and dust.

The concussion buffeted the SEAL, actually sliding the transport backwards a half-dozen yards. Blade was tossed from side to side and front to back, gritting his teeth as he struggled to retain his hold on the steering wheel and his foot on the brake. Out of the corner of his right eye he glimpsed the bowman being thrown into the door. He glanced behind him and saw Rikki gripping the top of the back seat, his face composed, unaffected by the bucking motion.

As quickly as it occurred, the concussion force of the explosion expended itself. The fireball took a little longer to subside, and the murky cloud persisted for minutes.

Blade placed his hand near the toggles again, his narrowed eyes probing the roadway. With any luck, the rocket had taken out a pair of jeeps. Conceivably, but not likely, even the third vehicle had been caught in the blast.

"You cut that a bit close, didn't you?" Teucer asked.

"I've cut them closer."

"Glad I wasn't along at the time," the bowman cracked.

"Traveling with Blade is always an educational experience," Rikki threw in. "Each time I return to the Home, I seem to have more bumps and bruises than the last trip."

"Then why do you volunteer to go on so many runs?" Teucer inquired.

"Bumps and bruises build character."

"Remind me to hear all about your philosophy of life sometime."

Blade leaned over the steering wheel, striving to detect any sign of life in the cloud of death and destruction. Nothing appeared, and just when he leaned back, almost convinced the rocket had blown up all three jeeps, the roar of an engine proved his assumption to be wrong. He tramped on the accelerator and backed up, striving to put as much distance between the SEAL and the cloud as he could, vexed at himself for not doing it sooner.

A jeep barreled into the open, its windshield cracked but otherwise unscathed. Leaning out the passenger side was a Spartan, an assault rifle resting on his right shoulder.

On his shoulder?

Blade looked again, and this time he recognized the contours of an Armbrust 700 anti-tank portable missile launcher. A tingle ran along his spine. If he remembered his Warrior training on ordnance and armaments, the Armbrust 700 could penetrate up to 12 inches of armor plating. Even the SEAL might not withstand such firepower.

The soldier was tracking the front of the van.

Instantly Blade swerved, attempting to throw the Spartan's aim off. If he recalled correctly, the primary blast radius for a 700 was 50 feet. If he could only get more than that distance from the jeep, the SEAL might not be damaged. All he needed was a few more seconds.

He didn't have them.

A heartbeat later the soldier fired.

CHAPTER TEN

Blade had only a split second to react, and his response was automatic. He already knew the SEAL hadn't covered enough ground to be safe from the missile. He already knew the transport would be caught in the blast

radius. And he already knew evasive tactics would be unavailing at such short range. So instead of trying to evade the missile he committed an act of desperation. His right hand hit the switch to the machine guns.

In a staccato burst of the twin devastators a barrage of lead zinged toward the jeep. With so many rounds filling the air, and with the SEAL and the jeep facing each other when the 50-calibers opened fire, the inevitable occurred. The missile was hit in mid-flight, halfway between the two vehicles, and detonated with an explosion that rivaled the earlier one in intensity.

Again Blade withstood the harsh buffeting. During those precious seconds he had a chance to think, to recollect every fact he knew about the Armbrust 700. One fact, in particular, gave him a glimmer of hope. When the buffeting ceased, he was ready. Instead of continuing in reverse, he put the van into drive and put the pedal to the metal.

"All right!" Teucer exclaimed. "Let's waste these suckers!"

Blade's eyes were riveted on the jeep. He had to get within 20 feet of the enemy. If his memory was right, the strategy would win the day. If not, Jenny would soon be a widow.

The Spartan in the front passenger seat was visible through the bullet-riddled windshield, calmly yet quickly endeavoring to reload the missile launcher. To his left the driver was slumped over the wheel.

Blade realized some of the rounds must have struck the soldier doing the driving. He kept the accelerator all the way down, rapidly closing the range. "Get set," he told Teucer.

Nodding, the Bowman rolled down his window and leaned out, the compound bow extended.

"Wait until I give the word," Blade admonished.

"Understood."

In the space of seconds the SEAL drew within 40 feet of the jeep. The soldier suddenly popped into view again, in the act of raising the launcher to his shoulder.

No! Not yet! Blade mentally counted off the yardage and recalled the critical information concerning the Armbrust 700. The state-of-the-art weapon had been developed just prior to World War Three and widely distributed to U.S. forces. Intended for use against enemy tanks, the 700 had been designed with a unique safety feature. To prevent an accidental detonation as the missile was being fired, which sometimes occurred with conventional launchers, the manufacturers of the 700 had incorporated a computerized chip, a smart chip as they were known, into the hollow-charge missile. The projectile actually armed itself after 20 feet of flight. Prior to that range and the 700 wouldn't explode.

But the SEAL wasn't close enough yet.

They needed a few more seconds.

"Shoot!" Blade ordered, knowing the angle wasn't right, knowing the Bowman couldn't possibly score, but banking on the reflex action of anyone who found an arrow headed toward them.

Teucer already had the string pulled back to just below his right ear. He sighted and released the shaft in the twinkling of an eye, then grabbed another one.

The Spartan ducked back the instant the arrow cleared the bow, his aim spoiled, and nearly lost his life then and there when the shaft struck the windshield a few inches to his left, punctured through the glass in a shower of shards and fragments, and thudded into the edge of the seat. He swung out again and swept the Armbrust 700 onto his shoulder.

Blade slammed on the brakes and turned the wheel briskly, slanting the SEAL, intending to pass the jeep on the passenger side.

The Spartan let the missile fly.

Blade saw the projectile leap toward the transport, and the next sequence of events transpired so swiftly they were over in an instant. The missile struck the SEAL'S grill and bounced off without detonating, its smart chip thwarted because the two vehicles were only 15 feet apart.

Teucer loosed his second shaft simultaneously, and this time he had a clear shot.

A lightning streak of green sped from the bow into the soldier, the arrow penetrating his flesh at the base of the throat, the three-edged hunting tip tearing clean through his neck and bursting out of his body next to his spine. He clawed at the shaft, his lips curled in a snarl, then sagged onto the dashboard.

The SEAL narrowly missed the jeep. Blade drove around the smaller vehicle and brought the van to a stop. He looked in the mirror, gratified to see there wasn't a soul stirring, then faced forward and scrutinized the damage caused by the SEAL'S rocket. Both of the first pair of jeeps had been obliterated. Now that the dust had settled, the smoldering wreckage and twisted frames lay like rotted carcasses in the middle of the road.

Teucer eased inside and rested his bow on his lap. "We cut that one close," he commented.

"At least we took care of their only vehicles," Blade said. "Dercyllidas's troops will have a fighting chance."

"Evidently you spoke too soon," Rikki spoke up.

"Why?"

The martial artist nodded to the north. "Get set for round two."

Blade shifted, surprised to behold a pair of motorcycles, large dirt bikes actually, roaring from the direction of the barracks where Agesilaus's bodyguard contingent lived. "No one said anything about them," he said, and gunned the engine, bearing to the east.

"Both the riders are holding objects in their right hands," Rikki announced. "Hand grenades, I believe."

"Teucer, try to nail one," Blade directed.

"Where's a cannon when you need it?" the bowman muttered.

The Spartan bikers raced onto the gravel road and took off in pursuit of the van, their red cloaks billowing, their helmets gleaming.

Teucer eased out the passenger window once more, twisting so he could watch the dirt bikes approach. He nocked another hunting arrow to the

string, straightening his left arm, and hugged the transport's side, keeping his body flat in the hope the Spartans might not notice him until it was too late.

On they came, their tires kicking dirt into the air, the bikes growling as they shifted.

The Bowman forced himself to relax, to stay loose. One of the first courses taken by every Warrior was entitled Elementary Combat Psychology, and the Elder responsible for teaching the material had continually emphasized the fundamental importance of remaining calm in a crisis. Adrenaline might add strength to panicked limbs, but the hormonal rush could also cloud the reasoning process and impair overall effectiveness. A calm state of mind, therefore, was critical to Warrior survival.

As the Elder had repeatedly emphasized, self-control and self-composure were the keys to becoming an exceptional fighter and a valued defender of the Home and the Family. Of the two traits, the Elders stressed self-control the most. Without it, self-composure was impossible to attain. "Know thyself" had been carried one step further. "Master thyself" became the basic precept for novice Warriors, and only those who achieved a supreme degree of self-mastery were placed on the active-duty roster.

Even then, the diversity among the Warriors surprised Teucer. The range of personalities ran the full spectrum. There was Blade, the devout Family man, a natural leader of men if ever there was one, whose steely body reflected the steely mind within. There was Rikki, a man who lived and breathed the martial arts, who spent every waking moment honing his skills, who dedicated his entire being to becoming the perfected swordmaster. There was Hickok, the Family's preeminent gunfighter, who had a reputation as a consummate killer, the man who faced trouble with a smile on his lips and a pair of blazing pearl-handled revolvers. And there was Yama, the Warrior who had taken his name from the Hindu King of death, the Warrior considered by his peers to be the best all-around fighting man at the Home, the Warrior who could do virtually everything exceptionally well and who had transformed his personal combat techniques into a fine art.

Then there's me Teucer thought. The Warrior who is a poet at heart. The man who would rather spend an afternoon reading Byron than slaying

scavengers. The man who had almost decided not to become a Warrior because he disliked the spilling of blood. Oh, sure, Teucer loved archery, and no one else could handle a bow with such skill and finesse. But his lifelong devotion to archery stemmed from his keen appreciation of the craft's aesthetic qualities; he shot a bow for the mere sake of shooting. To him, the flight of an arrow qualified as poetry in motion. And striking a target dead center was akin to a religious experience. Back when he'd been twelve years old he'd read *Zen in the Art of Archery* by Eugen Herrigel, and his life had never been the same.

On his sixteenth birthday, at his Naming, he'd selected the name of the famous Greek Bowman who had fought so valiantly during the siege of Troy. He'd been tempted to pick the name of several other famous bowmen; Robin Hood, especially, had appealed to him. But since *The Iliad* had always been one of his favorite books, and since he'd always been fascinated by the exploits of the best Bowman in the Achaean force, he'd finally settled on Teucer.

Now he was about to demonstrate once again the expertise that had earned him the respect of every other Warrior, the archery skill few men could ever hope to match. He saw one of the Spartans bearing down on the rear of the SEAL, evidently planning to race in close and toss a grenade, and he forced himself to stay still until the soldier came within 15 feet of the bumper. At the moment the Spartan pulled the pin and lifted the grenade overhead to toss it, Teucer leaned out, pulled the string on the 75-pound pull compound bow back to his ear, and loosed the shaft.

The green arrow was a blur as it flew straight and true, the hunting point boring into the Spartan's chest, the impact jerking him backwards. He lost his grip on the handlebars and toppled off the bike. At the very moment he struck the gravel the grenade detonated with a brilliant flash. By then the transport had traveled another 40 feet.

The whomp of the concussion blasted a gust of hot air and stinging dirt particles into Teucer's face, and he squinted and held on tight to the edge of the window. One down, but where was the other rider? Teucer knew the second Spartan could toss a grenade at any second. He also knew he couldn't finish the man off if the soldier stayed on the far side of the van. With the Commando and the AR-15, the Warriors had no way of nailing their foe. So there was only one thing to do. He slung the bow over his left arm, twisted, and reached overhead, straining his arms to the limit until

his probing fingers touched the narrow, thin railing that ran around the entire roof. He gripped the rail, took a deep breath, and hauled himself out.

"What are you doing?" Blade called out.

As much as he would have liked to respond, Teucer had more pressing concerns. His legs dangled and banged against the SEAL'S body, and his shoulders were focal points of sheer torment. He must reach the roof, and rapidly.

"Teucer?" Blade shouted.

The Bowman grunted and pulled his body gradually higher. While he possessed a muscular build, he wasn't anywhere near as powerful as Blade. Nor, for that matter, could he match Rikki in strength. The martial artist might be small, but he was all muscle.

"Teucer!" Blade roared.

Unable to respond, gritting his teeth against the pain, fighting the wind and the bucking of the transport, the Bowman inched high enough to put his feet on the bottom of the window. The added support elicited a sigh of relief, and for a few seconds he clung there, gathering his energy.

From the rear rose the roaring of the motorcycle.

Teucer resumed his climb, bracing his elbows on the top and using his arms for added leverage. In moments he succeeded in drawing his legs onto the roof, and he simply slid onto his stomach and rose to his knees. To his immediate left was one of the solar panels.

The noise of the dirt bike grew louder and louder.

Turning carefully, Teucer rose to a crouch and made his way to the back of the van. He kept low and risked a peek, unslinging the bow as he did.

Thirty feet away rode the second Spartan. From the grim set of his features, it was obvious he intended to ram the grenade right down the SEAL'S exhaust pipe.

Teucer slid an arrow from his quiver and notched it. He counted to three, calming his nerves, then straightened and in a fluid motion whipped the bow up, pulled the string, and released.

The Spartan spotted the man in green at the last instant. He looked up and automatically tried to swerve to the right. The cycle had just started to turn when the arrow caught him in the mouth, the metal point drilling through his front teeth, through his tongue, and deep into his throat. He grabbed at the protruding shaft, lost all semblance of control, and went down in a crash with the bike.

Almost immediately the SEAL began to slow.

Teucer grasped the rail and waited until the van came to a halt before he hastily climbed down the metal rungs at the rear. He hastened around the corner and almost bumped into a peeved giant.

"Were you trying to get yourself killed?" Blade demanded.

"I needed the exercise."

"Don't you ever pull a stunt like that again without ample cause."

"Don't worry. I won't."

"Let's get out of here," Blade proposed "We'll return to the barracks and consult with General Leonidas."

"Not yet we won't," stated a soft voice behind him.

Blade pivoted to find Rikki standing near the open door, the katana already out. "Why not?"

"See for yourself," Rikki replied, and nodded to the north.

Dreading the worst, Blade looked and discovered eight Spartans bearing down on them.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"They're coming out of the woodwork!" Blade snapped, and drew both Bowies.

"At least these are on foot," Rikki noted.

All eight soldiers had their short swords drawn. None carried a firearm. They charged in ranks of twos, and one of the men voiced a challenge when they drew within 30 feet. "Who are you? What's the meaning of this?"

Blade stepped forward, hopeful further bloodshed could be avoided once he explained the situation. These eight must have been en route either to or from the barracks, and must have witnessed the battle with the troopers on the dirt bikes. Blade mustered a smile and motioned for them to halt.

The speaker held up his sword arm and the Spartans stopped. "I'm Sergeant Thoas. You will lay down your arms and place yourselves in our custody."

"We will not," Blade responded.

"Then we will take you by force," Thoas warned.

"At least hear me out. We were justified in killing those men."

"Since when is an outsider justified in slaying a Spartan?"

"Since the civil war started."

Sergeant Thoas cocked his head. "What are you talking about, stranger?"

"Then you haven't heard," Blade said. "King Agesilaus tried to kill King Dercyllidas a short while ago."

"What?" Thoas exclaimed, and glanced at the man next to him.

"I'm telling the truth," Blade asserted. "We were at the palace when the attack took place. Dercyllidas is now at the barracks where his bodyguard is housed. I have no idea where Agesilaus might be."

"And how do you fit into the scheme of things?"

"We're representatives of the Freedom Federation here to offer Sparta membership in our alliance. We've been caught in the middle of the dispute between your kings. We're just in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"You certainly are," Thoas concurred. "And will you remain neutral during the conflict?"

Blade pointed back at the last rider Teucer had slain. "Those were Agesilaus's men. Does that answer your question?"

"Yes it does."

"Then you can see there's no reason for us to fight."

"Wrong," Sergeant Thoas stated.

"What?"

The noncom gestured at his companions. "We're Agesilaus's men also."

Teucer snorted. "When it rains, it pours."

"Please," Blade said. "We have no quarrel with you."

"Nor we with you."

"Then why go through with this? It makes no sense."

"It's clear you don't understand the Spartan way. We were personally picked by King Agesilaus to be part of his bodyguard. He bestowed a great honor on us. In return, we pledged our loyalty. We promised to defend him to our dying breath, to follow his orders implicitly no matter what they might be."

"But what if those orders are all wrong? What if you serve a madman?"

"It doesn't matter. We've given our word, and a Spartan *always* keeps his word."

Blade frowned. "It's not giving your word that's so important. It's *who* you give it to."

"Not for a Spartan."

"Why don't you just go your way and forget we ever bumped into each other?" Blade suggested. He'd already spilled enough Spartan blood for one day. In light of the rigid Spartan system, he tended to regard all their soldiers as mere pawns. They were superb warriors; of that there could be no doubt. But the Spartans had been conditioned to obey their superiors without question. Independent thoughts and actions were strictly forbidden. In the final analysis, the Spartan system bred perfect fighting machines.

One of those machines now shook his head a trifle wistfully. "I wish we could, but now that I know the situation I'm bound to my oath to slay you."

"Why not just report to your barracks? No one will ever know."

The sergeant tapped his chest with the hilt of his sword. "I'd know. And I couldn't live with the shame of knowing I'd failed my king and violated my vow."

Unexpectedly, Rikki-Tikki-Tavi took three strides and addressed the noncom. "I knew a Spartan once, a fine man who went by the name of Thayer. He told me that it wasn't his real name, that he'd lost the right to use his real name when he was banished from Sparta. Perhaps you knew him?"

"There have been a few soldiers who were banished in recent years," Thoas replied. "Most were men of distinction. Describe this man."

"He was a tall man, about six feet eight or nine."

"Ahhh," Thoas said. "Very few Spartans have been that tall. You must be referring to Captain Sarpedon. He was an officer in the royal bodyguard, in King Agesilaus's contingent to be exact. One day a few Helots decided they were going to repay the king for the death of someone in their family. They gathered together about, forty malcontents and tried to slay Agesilaus while he slept. Sarpedon was on duty at the time."

Rikki nodded. "The details of your story match with his."

"As I recall, Sapredon's son was also in the guard detail. When his son

was killed, Sarpedon left his post at the king's door and ran to the boy's side."

"And for such a natural act, Sarpedon was banished from Spartan and his name removed from the plaque of distinction that commemorates exceptional Spartans. He told me all about it."

"King Agesilaus banished him," Thoas disclosed. "Personally, I disagreed with the punishment, but there was nothing anyone could do. The judgments of the kings are final." He sighed. "King Agesilaus delights in banishing officers for the slightest of infractions."

"And this is the man you're willing to die for?" Blade inquired.

"I have no choice."

"Yes, you do," Rikki said. Sergeant Thoas regarded the man in black quizzically. "Explain, please."

"I grew to know Captain Sarpedon very well before he died," Rikki said. "Thanks to him, I was granted certain insights into the Spartan character. I won't claim to comprehend the Spartan way completely, but I believe I know enough to make you a sound offer."

"What kind of offer?"

"You and I will fight, one on one. If I win, we'll be permitted to go our way without interference. Should you win, we'll let you take us into custody without resisting."

"We will?" Teucer interjected.

"This is a most unusual offer," replied Sergeant Thoas. "What makes you think I'll accept?"

"Because I know a Spartan never refuses a challenge and never tolerates an insult to his honor. So I challenge you, Thoas, here and now. And if you refuse, you will have shamed yourself in the eyes of all your men."

Blade took a step and placed his right hand on the martial artist's shoulder. "Now wait a minute. I haven't agreed to this."

Rikki looked over his shoulder. "Would you rather we take all of them

on?"

"No," Blade admitted. He stared at the open SEAL door, estimating the odds of all three of them getting inside before the soldiers could reach them. The chances were slim. So either he agreed to his friend's proposal or they fought with all eight Spartans.

The noncom chuckled. "You present a most devious challenge, little one. You're pitting my personal honor against my duty to my king."

"This is a way for you to satisfy both." Rikki said.

"And I'm almost tempted to accept your challenge," Thoas responded. "But to a Spartan, duty must always come first." He turned to his fellows. "Slay them."

Without a moment's hesitation, the members of the patrol attacked.

His katana gleaming in the sunlight, Rikki moved forward to meet them. He held his sword in the middle position, the *chudan-no-kumae*, and braced for the onslaught of the two foremost Spartans, Sergeant Thoas and one other.

They never reached him.

An arrow whizzed past Rikki and struck the noncom in the throat, and a second shaft an instant later caught the other soldier in the center of the chest. Both men went down.

The next pair hardly missed a beat. Rikki let them come at him, let them part and spring at him from the right and the left, let them think they had the upper hand, the edge, as it were, of numbers and size, and then he showed them a different edge, the only one that mattered to a practitioner of *kenjutsu*, to a man who subscribed to the code of *bushido*.

Of all the Warriors, Rikki-Tikki-Tavi had always been the most devoted to the martial arts. His mild-mannered father, a former warrior who'd gone on to become a distinguished Elder, had been a black belt in karate. Naturally, his father had delighted in teaching the way of the warrior to him, and had encouraged his avid interest. By the time he turned six, Rikki could perform flawless kata. By the time he turned ten, he was regarded as the best martial artist in the history of the Family.

During his teens he worked diligently at increasing his knowledge and skills. Eventually, he qualified for Warrior status. One of the most memorable moments in his life came when the Elders decided to bestow the katana on him.

Out of the hundreds of hundreds of weapons in the vast Family armory, all of which had been personally stockpiled by the Founder prior to the war, there had only been the one genuine katana. There were firearms galore, as well as various miscellaneous weapons, racks upon racks of them: rifles, shotguns, revolvers, pistols, submachine guns, bows, spears, knives, and many, many more. None of them had interested Rikki.

He'd always wanted the katana.

Forged in Japan hundreds of years ago by a master craftsman, the sword had been initially owned by a famous samurai. Thereafter, from generation to generation, the sword had passed from father to son until, in the modern era, one of the samurai's materialistic descendants had sold it at an auction to a private collector. Years later, while making a film in Japan, Kurt Carpenter had bought the sword.

In ancient times, a katana had been considered an extension of the heart and soul of its samurai wielder. After the collapse of Japan's feudal system, when the code of *bushido* had become discredited by those in positions of authority who were trying to force the Japanese people to adopt modern ideals and a "better" way of life, the samurai had supposedly died out. Although they were officially suppressed, many samurai had simply gone underground, and until World War Three there had been secret samurai societies in existence, practicing the honored precepts of their illustrious ancestors.

Although the samurai supposedly had ceased to exist, their cherished sword had not. The level of craftsmanship had ensured the katanas would last for countless decades. Made of high-carbon steel, each blade had taken months to be constructed. The skilled smiths had applied layer after layer of carefully forged metal until the weapons they produced could cut through heavy armor. Such a sword rarely broke, rarely even became nicked, and retained its razor-sharpness indefinitely.

Rikki-Tikki-Tavi felt supremely honored to possess his katana. As a man who believed in the code of conduct of the samurai, the way of bushido, he exalted ideals largely abandoned by the descendants of the

original proponents. As a Warrior, he lived the way of the warrior.

Now, as the pair of Spartans came at him, their short swords arcing at his body, Rikki demonstrated the peerless swordsmanship that had earned him the right to carry the katana. He moved and shifted with deceptive ease and economy of movement, parrying a swipe by the trooper on his left that would have taken off his leg, then pivoting to counter a swing at his neck.

Even as he countered the neck stroke, Rikki took the offensive. He slid the katana off the short sword and executed a hidari-men, an oblique slash at the Spartan's left temple. The katana's edge bit into the man's bronze helmet, and the softer metal parted as readily as butter. Rikki drove the blade several inches into the head, then pulled it out and spun, reversing his grip on the hilt, and spearing the tip under his left arm straight into the chest of the first soldier, who was about to aim a blow at the nape of his neck. Still in motion, Rikki yanked the katana free and skipped backwards, ready to continue if necessary.

It wasn't.

Both Spartans crumpled.

The remaining four were trying to overwhelm Blade.

Rikki went to the giant's aid, wondering in the back of his mind where the bowman might be, and called out to attract attention. "Try me!"

Two of the soldiers whirled and instantly came at him. Like all of the Spartans, their swordsmanship was superb. Had they been confronting a typical foe, they would surely have prevailed.

But the martial artist wasn't typical.

Eager to end the fray, Rikki terminated the shorter of his foes with a throat cut. He turned to confront the other man, and at that moment the unforeseen occurred. His left foot slipped on a patch of blood, throwing him off balance, exposing his chest and head. He saw it coming.

The second Spartan's sword whistled through the air at his face.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Blade had downed one of his adversaries, and was blocking a terrific blow aimed at his abdomen, when he glimpsed Rikki's predicament out of the corner of his right eye. He leaped backwards and whipped his right arm overhead, about to throw the knife, but he was already too late.

An arrow caught the Spartan about to slay Rikki squarely in the center of the back, and the soldier arched his spine and stiffened, his arms flinging outward. Before he could hope to recover, to continue fighting, another arrow struck him within an inch of the first. He turned slowly, his mouth set in a defiant snarl, and fell.

The distraction almost cost Blade his own life. His opponent tried to take his legs off at the knees, and he barely deflected the short sword in time. The blades clanged loudly and continued to clang as Blade parried more strikes. The greater reach of the short sword compelled him to retreat as he fought, and in just a few long strides he bumped into the SEAL. The Spartan drove his weapon at the giant's stomach. Blade countered with his right knife, then sliced his left Bowie across the soldier's extended wrist, severing tendons and muscles and drawing a spurt of blood.

Grimacing, the Spartan backpedaled.

The Warrior wasn't about to close again. Why risk impalement when he finally had the opening he needed? His arms a blur, he raised both hands above his head and surged them down again, releasing both hilts at the proper moment.

The twin knives covered the intervening space in a millisecond, and both sank into the soldier with distinct thuds. His face contorted in agony, the Spartan made one last effort to stab the giant, but collapsed in mid-stride.

Rikki-Tikki-Tavi was standing over the soldier who'd taken the arrows in the back, his features reflecting sadness.

"Are you okay?" Blade asked, moving to his fallen foe and wrenching the Bowies out. He proceeded to wipe them on the trooper's cloak.

"This man was brave," Rikki said. "All Spartans are brave. It's not fitting for such courageous fighters to be shot in the back."

"It was him or you," Teucer declared. He stood next to the open door. "I didn't have time to ask him to turn around."

"I know," Rikki responded, and frowned. "You did what you had to do."

Blade rose and slipped the Bowies into their sheaths, then regarded the dead Spartans for a moment. "I take no joy in killing them," he commented.

"Is there ever joy in slaying others?" Rikki inquired.

"Sometimes."

"Oh?"

"When I killed a drug dealer in Miami, I felt a certain joy. There have been other instances, and I'm not about to list them all now. But I've learned we can't always remain detached from our work. Sometimes the act of exterminating evil can be personally gratifying," Blade observed.

"But these Spartans weren't evil. They were simply misguided," Rikki stated.

"More's the pity," Blade agreed, and walked over to the bowman. "How did you get over here? The last I saw, you were next to the rear bumper."

"A bow isn't much use at infighting. I needed to put a little distance between those short swords and me, so I scooted to the front as they charged," Teucer detailed and grinned. "Besides, someone had to prevent them from getting inside after someone else conveniently left the door wide open."

"You did well. This might be your first official mission away from the Home, but you're performing as well as any of the more experienced Warriors," Blade said.

"Thanks."

Blade gazed to the north and saw several citizens near an ornate building. They were staring at him in transparent hostility. "Let's get

going before more soldiers show up."

"You don't need to tell me twice," Teucer said, and climbed inside.

"Perhaps we should simply leave Sparta," Rikki suggested, moving toward the front of the transport. "After all, do we really have the right to interfere in their internal affairs? Wouldn't the wise course be to stay neutral and let them decide the outcome?"

"And what if Agesilaus wins? We lose any chance of Sparta joining the Federation."

"I know," Rikki said, and paused. "We're caught between a rock and a hard place, as the saying goes."

Blade studied his friend. "You admire them a lot, don't you?"

"Yes," Rikki confessed.

"So do I. And because I respect them, I'm not about to run off and leave them at the mercy of Agesilaus. They deserve better than to be ruled by a petty dictator," Blade said.

Rikki simply nodded and hurried to the far side of the van.

So now what? Blade asked himself as he took his seat. He intended to offer his services to General Leonidas. Would the Spartan accept? If so, defeating Agesilaus would be easy. The SEAL'S firepower could devastate the madman's bodyguard contingent. He doubted, though, whether Leonidas would agree to such a proposal. If the general was anything like Captain Chilon, he would insist on conducting the battle the traditional way, using swords and spears instead of guns and other armaments.

"Look," Teucer declared, and leaned forward to point to the east.

Blade looked up.

Not 60 yards away was a lone Spartan, a lean man naked except for a red loincloth. He was running at breakneck speed along the grass bordering the road, heading in their direction.

"What's his big rush?" Teucer wondered.

"Who knows?" Blade replied absently. He started the engine and performed a tight U-turn.

"Let's hope King Dercyllidas is still alive," Rikki remarked.

The reminder prompted Blade to floor the accelerator. They rode in silence until they came within sight of the two barracks, and then it was the Bowman who shattered their individual reflections. "Dear Spirit! Will you look at that!"

Facing each other across the road, approximately 50 paces separating them, were the respective royal bodyguard units, each arrayed in phalanx formation.

Blade slammed on the brakes.

"They're getting set to go at it," Teucer said. "We could mow down Agesilaus's men before they knew what hit them." He didn't sound too enthused by the idea.

Scrutinizing both contingents, Blade saw that neither displayed any movement. They were just standing there, either waiting for orders or for the other side to make the first move.

"We mustn't be hasty," Rikki advised.

"Keep your eyes peeled," Blade stated, and picked up speed, glancing from unit to unit. None of the Spartans bore firearms. Each soldier carried a long, glittering spear and something new, a large circular shield that covered each man from mid-thigh to the shoulder. On the front of every shield was depicted a strange symbol that vaguely resembled the capital letter A, but lacking the center line.

Neither formation broke ranks as the transport drove between them. The Spartans might as well have been statues.

Blade took a left at the side street and drove to the barracks of Dercyllidas's contingent, stopping near the dorm doors. No sooner had he turned the ignition off and left the SEAL than two Spartans emerged.

General Leonidas and Captain Chilon walked side by side, both with grave expressions. Each, perhaps unconsciously, had a hand on the hilt of

his sword.

"We saw part of your fight," Chilon said. "Did you destroy the two motorcycles?"

"Agesilaus won't be using them against you," Blade replied as Rikki and Teucer joined them.

"How is King Dercyllidas?" the martial artist inquired,

"Stable," General Leonidas disclosed. "The doctor is with him now. Our liege was fortunate. The dagger came close to puncturing a lung, but he'll live."

"Your physician got here quickly," Rikki commented.

General Leonidas pointed at a cluster of buildings to the east of the training field. "He lives in one of those. Each king selects a doctor who agrees to serve as the official Aesculapian for the bodyguard and is housed at government expense nearby. We sent a runner for him the minute you departed." His gaze strayed to the gravel road. "And here comes another runner now, only he's not heading here."

Blade shifted and spotted the same lean man in the red loincloth he'd seen earlier approaching from the east. "How do you know?"

"All runners wear a red loincloth. And since he's on the opposite side of the road, he's undoubtedly delivering a message to General Calchas, the commander of Agesilaus's contingent."

"You should stop him," Blade suggested.

"Whatever for?"

"He could be bearing an order for Calchas to attack."

Leonidas shrugged. "So be it. The sooner the battle is over, the sooner all Spartans can breathe easier. I would rather engage Calchas now while my men are prepared."

"Is that why your troops are in formation near the road?"

"Yes. Both sides are awaiting the command to attack. King Dercyllidas

is unconscious and not to be disturbed until morning or we would have done so by now."

"Why can't you lead your men?" Blade asked.

"I will when the king instructs us to wipe out Agesilaus's forces."

"And in the meantime you stand around and do nothing? Haven't you heard that the best defense is always a good offense?"

"I believe in the same strategy, but my hands are tied. Unless attacked, I must await Dercyllidas's directions."

Blade opened his mouth to tell the Spartan he was being foolish, then changed his mind. Antagonizing the man would be counterproductive. Instead, he decided to make his offer. "We could rout Agesilaus's men for you."

General Leonidas glanced at the giant. "Using, your vehicle, I assume?"

"Yes."

"No."

"Why not?"

"Need you ask? Spartans have a code of honor, and I won't violate that code under any circumstances."

"Not even if doing so would save the lives of your own men?"

"A Spartan has no fear of dying. To be slain in combat is the ultimate honor, and those who perish on the field of battle have their names duly enshrined on the plaque of distinction to commemorate their bravery and loyalty for all eternity," Leonidas said.

"I wish you would reconsider."

"Never. And I formally request, man to man, that you don't interfere once the battle is joined."

"And if your side is defeated?"

"Then such is the will of the Creator. But don't count us out yet. My troops are every bit as skilled as those under General Calchas."

Blade frowned and placed his hands on his hips, annoyed at the senior officer's obstinate attitude. While he found much to admire in the Spartan character, their stubborn persistence in adhering to tradition at all costs was extremely aggravating.

"Don't look so upset," Leonidas said. "Surely a fighting man such as yourself can appreciate our military philosophy."

"Yes and no."

"Where do we fall short?"

"You won't take advantage of all the forces at your disposal. As a result, if Agesilaus triumphs, Sparta will be thrown back into the equivalent of the Dark Ages. The leaders of the Federation will be severely disappointed."

"Ah, yes. The Federation. Captain Chiton has been telling me about it. I think the idea has merit, and I'll push for Sparta to join once this conflict has been resolved."

"Excuse me," Teucer interjected. "I'd like to ask a question."

"Go ahead," General Leonidas said.

"I couldn't help but notice all those archers on the dais at the Royal Palace, and as a Bowman I'm naturally interested in such things," Teucer mentioned. "Why were there archers guarding the king? Why not soldiers armed with machine guns?"

"Years ago there were men posted in the audience room who were armed with automatic weapons. Then one day three Helots tried to assassinate one of the kings. The guards opened fire, and in the act of slaying the Helots they accidentally hit a half-dozen bystanders. A machine gun is impossible to control in a crowd. No matter how good a marksman a man might be, he can't prevent stray rounds from striking those who are standing near the target," Leonidas said. "After that regrettable incident, the decision was made to employ archers on the dais. There are also riflemen concealed behind the walls."

"There's something I'd like to know," Blade said. "Who started Sparta?" He hoped to elicit more information about its origin.

"There were seven men, all college professors, who worked at the same prestigious university back East before World War Three. When all hell broke loose, they gathered their families and fled. Eventually they met up with the remnants of a National Guard unit and they all decided to hide out in this secluded area," General Leonidas related. "After the U.S. government collapsed, there were hordes of looters and killers roaming the land. The only safe place for the professors and the Guardsmen was right here, so they resolved to start over, to build new lives for themselves."

"But why did they select a system of government similar to ancient Sparta?" Blade asked.

"One of the professors, a history teacher, suggested the idea. They realized only the strong would survive in the postwar era, and there were few people as strong as the Spartans. They held meeting after meeting, and finally agreed to start their own town and to form their own government. Using the Spartan constitution as a model, the professors created a book of laws for all of their followers. Inevitably, I suppose, the seven became known as the Lawgivers."

"And the town has continued to grow over the past century."

"We no longer refer to Sparta as a mere town. It's a city-state in every sense of the word."

"What about the Helots? Where did they come from?"

"There were many farmers in the outlying territory, and most of them balked at turning over part of their crops to the invaders, as they regarded the Spartans. So they were subjugated and forced to turn over a portion of their yields whether they liked it or not. In due course they became an entirely separate class, just like the Helots of old."

"And you approve of such a system?"

"Why not? It works out for the best for everyone. The Helots feed us and we protect them. What more could they want?"

"Their freedom."

"The Helots are as free as they need to be." sounding very much like a trumpet shattered the stalemate. "What was that?"

"The signal!" Leonidas exclaimed, running toward his troops. "Agesilaus's men are going to attack!"

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"What do we do?" Teucer asked.

"Technically, this isn't our battle. We've been told in no uncertain terms not to use the SEAL. And since they're fighting in formation, there's no place for us," Blade said.

"I'd still like to view the clash," Rikki remarked.

"So would I," Blade stated. "This is a once-in-a-life-time opportunity."

"Where the two of you go, I go," Teucer declared. "Count me in."

Blade grinned at both of them. "Okay. We're all agreed. Back in the SEAL." He clambered into his seat, waited for them to get in, then started the engine, backed up, and drove along the side street to the junction with the gravel road.

Neither contingent had moved. General Leonidas stepped around to the front of his men, a sword in his right hand, a shield in his left. Across the way a similar figure stood at the head of Agesilaus's troops.

"That must be General Calchas," Blade deduced, and killed the engine once more.

"He waited for Leonidas to arrive," Rikki said in a respectful tone. "He could have attacked sooner if he wanted."

The bowman leaned between the buckets seats and braced his hands on the console. "I've never known men like these Spartans."

"And you never will again," Rikki responded. Both generals now

addressed their contingents. "Roll down your window," Blade suggested to the martial artist. "Let's hear what they have to say."

Nodding, Rikki complied, and the deep, booming voice of General Leonidas clearly reached their ears.

"—what happened to King Dercyllidas. I need not remind each of you about your oath to him. All of you have taken a solemn vow to defend him with your lives, and now is the time to prove the worth of your word. Stand shoulder to shoulder and fight bravely as Spartans should. And remember that you fight not for yourselves, but for the common good of Sparta and all her people, for your families, friends, and even those you don't know." The general paused. "The man has a way with words," Teucer observed. Leonidas continued. "We face the prospect of death today, but what is death to a Spartan? Death is simply the way we get from this life to the next. And should you fall, you know that you'll be honored as a valiant soldier. Your name will be engraved on the plaque of distinction in the palace for all to see. Your wives and children will receive the praise and gratitude of the whole city. And the marker on your grave will bear not only your name, rank, and age, but will include a list of your accomplishments and mention you fell heroically. Only soldiers slain in combat receive the special markers. Think of the glory you'll have won!"

"Big deal," Teucer said. "I don't see what difference a fancy headstone makes."

"Shhh," Rikki said.

General Leonidas raised his sword on high. "Above *all* you are Spartans. Above all, you value duty and discipline. Get ready for both to be put to the supreme test. Remember the instructions you were given the day you received your shield." He touched his sword to his own shield and declared, "With this or on it. Either return from battle victorious with your shield or dead on it. That is the simple creed by which we live, the creed that sums up our existence. Let's show Agesilaus's men the courage in our hearts. Let's carry our swords to victory and not stop until the enemy has been routed."

"Say, what happened to Captain Chilon?" Teucer absently queried.

"Maybe Leonidas let him join the formation," Blade speculated.

Further conversation was cut short when the two generals assumed their positions in the first rows of the soldiers, each in the very center. The two officers lifted their swords overhead, then swept the blade down, and at the signal both formations moved forward.

"I wish we could aid Leonidas," Rikki said wistfully.

Blade simply nodded, his gaze riveted on the Spartans. The phalanxes presented veritable walls of shields and long spears on three sides. He imagined how he would feel if he faced such a line himself, and shook his head in amazement. Only a truly courageous soul could perform such a feat. He'd rather take his enemies on one by one instead of in a packed mass where the element of chance figured so prominently in deciding the victor.

The phalanxes neared the gravel road slowly, every Spartan moving at a set pace, every man holding position, the glittering tips of the spears held perfectly steady. Red boots marched in precision order.

"Why do they wear all red?" Teucer asked no one in particular.

"I read that the ancient Spartans wore red cloaks so those they fought wouldn't know if they were hurt. They didn't want their enemies to see them bleed," Blade answered.

"A lot of them are about to do just that," the bowman said.

As the twin phalanxes drew closer to the road they moved faster, yet still retained their formations. Soon they broke into a headlong charge, running in rhythm, their horsehair crests bobbing.

Blade scarcely breathed as the two sides converged. The clash, when it came, resounded to the heavens, a tremendous crash of metal against metal, and a mighty shout added to the din. Spears flashed in the warm air. Neither side gave way, and the battle became a grim, intense struggle for survival.

The leading ranks of both phalanxes were on the gravel road, and their strenuous exertions raised choking dust that gave the air a powdery aspect.

Blade had yet to see a Spartan fall, and he marveled at their prowess

and stamina. More than ever he wanted to persuade them to join the Federation. They would be so priceless.

The fighting devolved into a mad melee of thrusting spears, slashing swords, and countering shields. Soldiers finally fell on both sides, and whenever a man in the first rank went down, another moved forward to take his place. At such close quarters all the spears of those in the front were soon shattered or rendered useless by the press of combat, compelling the Spartans at the forefront to rely exclusively on their swords.

Locked in savage conflict, neither phalanx made any headway. The men fought toe to toe, shoulder to shoulder. Those Spartans who were slain died without uttering a cry. Except for the banging of sword on sword and sword on shield, the battle was conducted in an eerie silence. None of the combatants yelled or cursed, as so often happened in mass engagements. Their discipline was superb.

"Just think," Teucer remarked. "One machine gun would turn the tide."

"The man who used one would be ostracized if he lived," Rikki noted. "Not one of them would violate their code of honor." He paused. "In a way, their code of honor is a lot like ours, only stricter. Perhaps even better."

"If you like them so much, maybe you should become a Spartan," Teucer joked.

"No thanks."

"Why not? I thought you were big on codes of honor."

"I am," Rikki admitted. "On bushido. But the real reason I won't become a Spartan is because I'd have to give up my katana." He looked at the bowman. "And the only way anyone will take my sword from me will be to pry it from my cold, stiff fingers."

Teucer frowned. "You're becoming morbid in your young age, my friend."

Blade listened to their conversation with only half an ear. He was absorbed in the battle, noting the ebb and flow, amazed at the swordsmanship displayed on both sides. A crick developed in his neck,

and to relieve it he places his hand on the nape, squeezed, and turned his head to the right. His gaze happened to sweep the field in the general direction of the barracks, and he was puzzled to observe ten Spartans approaching the building from the southeast. "Where did they come from?" he wondered aloud.

Rikki and Teucer both looked.

"They must be Dercyllidas's men," the bowman commented.

The ten were running toward the barracks with their swords drawn, their cloaks billowing behind them. They did not have shields.

"If they're Dercyllidas's men, why are they heading for the barracks instead of the battle?" Rikki questioned.

"Who knows?" Teucer responded. "Maybe they're going to protect Dercyllidas."

"What if they're not?"

"What are you getting at?"

"Could they be some of Agesilaus's soldiers?"

Blade had been thinking the same thing himself. He wouldn't put it past the madman to try and finish the job. If Dercyllidas was assassinated, Agesilaus would win. And what better time to send in an assassination squad than while most of the bodyguard contingent was embroiled in the battle? It would have been easy to send a squad around the long way and have them sneak into the barracks at the proper moment. Acting on a hunch, he started the SEAL and performed a tight U-turn.

"Where are we going?" Teucer asked.

"Three guesses," Blade replied, watching the squad. They were almost to the building. He raced to the south, driving onto the field and angling straight toward them. If he was wrong, no harm done. But if he was right, he must save King Dercyllidas at all costs.

Four soldiers suddenly emerged from the barracks. Without hesitation, as if they'd seen the squad approach through the windows, they drew their

swords and formed a line facing the newcomers, blocking the entrance.

Blade had the answer he needed. He pushed the speedometer over 50.

The squad never slowed. At a word from one of the soldiers in the lead, they fanned out and bore down on the quartet. In moments they engaged, and although the four men fought bravely and downed two of the squad, the fight was hopelessly one-sided. All four defenders perished.

"We're too far away," Rikki said anxiously.

The SEAL was 40 feet from the building. Barring a miracle, Blade couldn't prevent the squad from entering, and slaying Dercyllidas. He needed a distraction, and he did the first thing that came into his mind. His right palm pressed on the horn. At the unexpected blaring to their rear, the eight Spartans spun. The leader barked orders, and four of the men ran toward the van while the rest went into the barracks.

Blade brought the van to a slewing stop. "Stay with the SEAL," he instructed Teucer, then vaulted to the grass, drawing his Bowies as he landed. He ran to meet the four assassins.

Out on the road the battle attained a furious metallic crescendo, the dust becoming thicker by the moment.

The four members of the squad halted, hefting their weapons, and regarded the giant coldly.

"This doesn't concern you, stranger!" one of them barked. "Leave immediately."

Slowing, Blade studied each of them, then focused on the speaker. "I'm going inside."

"Care to bet?"

Before Blade could reply, a black-clad whirlwind hurtled past him.

Rikki-Tikki-Tavi's katana was a blur as he tore into the Spartan on the right, and his graceful movements belied his lethal intent. The Spartan executed a single thrust, then staggered when his neck was nearly severed, blood pumping from his throat. Rikki slipped around his foe while the

man was still swaying and dashed inside.

"Get him!" cried one of the soldiers.

Blade leaped forward to prevent them from chasing Rikki, forcing them to deal with him first, his Bowies flashing. He took on the soldier in the middle, wielding his knives ambidextrously, his initial swings deftly blocked.

The remaining pair came to the aid of their comrade.

Three against one were uncomfortable odds. Blade opted to reduce them immediately by faking an overhand swing with his right arm, then following through with an underhand left thrust when the Spartan lifted his sword in a reflex action. The thrust took the soldier in the chest and the man stiffened and let go of his short sword. Blade yanked the Bowie free and moved to the right, his back to the transport, both knives extended.

Only steps away, the last two abruptly halted, wary now. Each glanced at his fallen buddies and gripped his sword a bit tighter.

"There's no need for this," Blade told them. "Surrender your weapons and you can live."

"A Spartan never surrenders," responded the thinner of the pair, and they both pounced.

Blade backpedaled to gain a few precious seconds.

From behind him there was a familiar swishing noise, and an arrow struck the thin Spartan in the right eye, jerking the trooper's head around. He dropped where he stood.

The last soldier was game to the last. He leaped at the giant and swung his sword furiously, seeking to batter the big knives aside and revenge his companions.

Hard-pressed to parry the flurry, Blade resorted to an ingenious ploy. At the very instant the Spartan's sword hit his left Bowie, he deliberately released the knife. For a fraction of a second, as the Bowie arced to the grass, the soldier's eyes were on the knife, and at the moment of

distraction Blade dropped to his right knee and sank his other knife into the Spartan's stomach.

Unwilling to admit defeat even with a Bowie sticking in him, the soldier delivered a swipe at the giant's head.

Blade caught the man's wrist in his left hand, pulled the Bowie out and reversed his grip, then smashed the hilt into the Spartan's jaw.

Four up, four down.

And now to check on Rikki. Blade took several strides, when a sharp shout drew him up short.

"Blade! Look!"

Whirling, Blade saw Teucer standing next to the SEAL and pointing toward the road. He glanced at the site of the battle and couldn't believe his eyes.

King Agesilaus's men were winning!

General Leonidas's phalanx had buckled in the center and their foes had breached the outer ranks, forcing a wedge deep into the heart of the formation. Dercyllidas's bodyguards were resisting gallantly, but the break in their lines created gaps in their defensive wall of shields, gaps the enemy poured into, causing even more casualties in the process.

Blade hesitated, torn between wanting to go help Rikki and the necessity of determining the outcome of the battle. If Leonidas and his men were routed, Agesilaus's contingent would undoubtedly pursue them to the barracks. The SEAL could fall into enemy hands. General Calchas might decide to destroy the van using grenades or dynamite. Blade couldn't allow that to happen. The SEAL was essential to the safety and future of the Family.

A mighty shout of triumph from the throats of Agesilaus's men signified the worst had occurred.

With their ranks in complete disarray, General Leonidas's troops broke and raced in retreat toward the Warriors and the transport.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Blade was forced to make a snap decision. Would it be Rikki or the SEAL? As if there was much choice. As the top Warrior, he had to constantly regard the Family's welfare as his paramount responsibility. And since every Warrior was expendable, but the SEAL wasn't, he had but one option.

Damn.

"Get in the van!" Blade instructed the Bowman, then stepped to the doorway and shouted into the barracks. "Rikki! Can you hear me?"

There was no response.

"Leonidas has lost! We've got to leave!"

Still no reply.

Frustrated, Blade cupped his hands to his mouth. "We'll be back! Count on it!" He scowled, and quickly reclaimed his other knife, then wiped both on his pants.

The retreating contingent was still 40 yards distant.

Casting a last glance at the barracks, Blade ran to the transport and took his seat. He slammed and locked the door, then gunned the engine and drove to the side street.

Teucer sat in the front passenger seat, his countenance glum. "I don't like leaving Rikki behind."

"Do you think I do?" Blade snapped.

"No, of course not. But what do we do now?"

"We keep the SEAL from falling into General Calchas's hands and figure out a way to reach Rikki."

"Why don't we just mow Calchas and his men down?"

"You made the same suggestion before. Since when did you become so bloodthirsty?"

"I'm not, ordinarily. But we shouldn't hold back any longer, not with Rikki's life on the line."

"General Leonidas requested that we not intervene. So we won't." Blade braked and stared at the Spartans sweeping across the field.

Despite being routed, Leonidas's men were fighting as they retreated, covering their flanks and inflicting heavy losses on their overeager adversaries. Calchas's men had broken their own phalanx to give chase, a mistake that was costing them dearly. Bodies littered the road and the grass, dozens of them, lying in pools of blood.

"We couldn't help Leonidas now even if I wanted to," Blade mentioned bitterly.

"Why not?"

"How would we know which Spartans are on our side?"

The bowman gazed at the conflict, his forehead furrowed. "Beats me. I never thought to ask. They all look alike in those helmets and red cloaks, but there must be a way to tell them apart."

King Dercyllidas's contingent reached the building and poured inside, fighting a rearguard action all the while.

Blade expected General Calchas to order an all-out assault on the building, to crush the opposition while his forces enjoyed the initiative, but to his surprise Calchas's troops began to pull back.

Teucer was equally perplexed. "What in the world is going on?"

"I don't know," Blade admitted. "But we shouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth. Rikki is somewhere in the barracks, and as long as Calchas doesn't try to overrun the Spartans inside, he should be safe."

"You hope."

The last of Dercyllidas's troops retreated inside and the wide doors were slammed shut.

Outside, a stocky Spartan was organizing the victorious contingent into proper order, commanding them to fall in, his crimson coated sword waving in the air.

"That must be General Calchas," Teucer guessed.

"What's he up to now?" Blade wondered.

In practically no time at all General Calchas had his men formed into ranks and issued further instructions. A third of his men were deployed to the right, a third to the left, and they hastened in practiced order to do his bidding, aligning themselves in a row from north to south and linking up at the rear of the building, completely surrounding the structure.

"No one will be able to get in or out," Teucer said bitterly. "Rikki is trapped in there."

"We'll find a way to rescue him."

"We'd better," Teucer replied, and smacked the dashboard in anger. "First we're captured, then we have to contend with a psycho, and now this. Nothing has gone right since we got here."

"Which is par for the course," Blade said. "Try and look at the bright side."

"What bright side?"

"For whatever reason, Agesilaus's men seem to be ignoring us."

The bowman nodded at the Spartans. "Looks as if you spoke too soon."

Blade looked and saw a dozen soldiers racing toward the SEAL. None, as far as he could tell, carried grenades or other explosives, but he drove toward the gravel road anyway, easily outdistancing them, and stopped at the junction.

"What's the plan?" Teucer inquired.

"I wish I had one. We've been playing it by ear so far, letting the

madman and his bodyguard make all the moves. I think it's about time we turned the tables."

"How?"

"We carry the fight to Agesilaus," Blade proposed, staring at the barracks. "Rikki should be safe for the time being, a few hours at the least, which is more than enough for us to locate Agesilaus and kill him."

"We're going to drive off and leave Rikki?"

"Can't be helped. Agesilaus is the key to the conflict. Without him, his bodyguards aren't obligated by their oath of loyalty. His death will bring peace."

"And how do you propose we take care of him? He's not going to let us anywhere near his royal person," Teucer said, emphasizing the last two words sarcastically.

"There has to be a way," Blade stated. He cast an anxious glance at the barracks and the ring of soldiers encircling it, then took a right and headed toward the center of the city. If his scheme succeeded, scores of lives would be saved and Sparta's admittance to the Freedom Federation was virtually assured. If he failed, not only would the Federation lose a potential ally, he'd likely lose one of his best friends.

There were few pedestrians in sight. The smoldering jeeps and the smashed motorcycles were still where they had been destroyed, and the eight dead members of the Spartan patrol still lay where they had fallen.

"Odd that no one has removed those bodies," Teucer mentioned as they drove past.

"My guess would be that most everyone has taken shelter indoors for the time being. The average person wouldn't want to be abroad in the midst of a civil war. Even the regular army troops and the secret police are staying out of the way."

"Just so they stay out of our way."

The farther they traveled, the fewer people there were. By the time they came to the center of Sparta, the city a ghost town.

"This is spooky," the bowman said.

Blade nodded in agreement and focused on the Royal's. Not a single guard was in evidence. Even the square was deserted. He stopped just outside it and scanned in all directions.

"If King Agesilaus is in the palace, why aren't there any guards?" Teucer queried.

"They could be inside." Blade drove the transport to the base of the steps, parked, and palmed the keys.

"I still don't see anyone."

"There must be someone home," Blade said, glancing at the spot where they had fought the guards. "All the bodies are gone." He cautiously opened his door.

"Am I going with you this time?"

"No."

"Are you sure it's wise?"

"No, but we can't risk both of us being captured or worse. You stay with the SEAL until I get back. If I'm not back in half an hour, take the SEAL and go bail Rikki out of the jam he's in."

"All by my lonesome?"

Blade's expression hardened. "If I don't make it back, then all agreements are off. Use the full firepower of the van if you have to, but save Rikki."

The bowman nodded. "All right. But you know I've only had a few driving lessons. I'm liable to wreck the SEAL."

Smiling, Blade handed over the keys. "Take care."

"May the Spirit be with you."

Slipping out, Blade depressed the lock and closed the door. He crouched alongside the front fender, scrutinizing the colonnades, then

dashed up to the huge door. Suspicion flared when he found the door slightly ajar. His every instinct told him to turn around and get out of there, but he disregarded the feeling and pushed. Ever so slowly, and without making the slightest sound, the door swung inward.

Blade tentatively stepped into the great hall. Once again there were no Spartans. Had the entire palace been evacuated? He moved toward the audience chamber. He went by several closed doors and eventually came to an open one. A sideways look riveted him in place.

Lying in two rows within the room, their red cloaks used to cover their bodies, were the Spartans who had been slain during the fight outside. What about their weapons? He entered and lifted the cloak of the first corpse to discover an empty scabbard hanging from the man's belt.

Too bad.

He could use a submachine gun, preferably his Commando.

Blade let the cloak fall and turned to leave, his eyes straying to the left wall, to the rack in the corner, and he smiled.

Bingo!

The rack contained M-16's, UZIs, and assorted other automatics. He went over and inspected the collection, and was disappointed to find the Commando and Rikki's AR-15 weren't among them. Selecting an M-16, he checked the magazine, which turned out to be empty, then noticed a drawer under the rack. A quick tug exposed enough ammunition to start a war, and he picked up a box of 5.56-mm bullets. Working swiftly, he inserted 20 into the magazine, cocked the rifle, put the selector on safe, and slid the magazine back into the feedway until he heard a distinct click.

Voices suddenly sounded outside.

Blade quickly pulled the charging handle all the way to the back and released it, then flicked the selector to semi. He moved to the doorway and stood to the left of the jamb, listening.

"—be mad as hell because we're so late."

"It couldn't be helped."

"Try telling him that."

The Warrior estimated the speakers were drawing close position. He waited, hearing their footsteps, and they walked past he slid from concealment and trained the M-16 on the backs of two Spartans. "Hold it!" he ordered. "Drop your swords!"

Both men whirled, their shock almost instantly controlled and replaced by reserved defiance. They reluctantly obeyed.

"Who are you?" one of them demanded.

"I'll ask the questions," Blade growled. "Are you two with King Agesilaus's bodyguard?"

"No," answered the first man. "We're not with either wait. I'm Major Xanthus." His green eyes narrowed. "And you, if I'm not mistaken, are the outsider named Blade, the one who appeared before the kings earlier today."

"Yes. Little did I know I'd become embroiled in a power struggle. Whose side are you on?"

"Neither," Xanthus answered. "The issue will be settled by our two monarchs."

Blade looked from one to the other. "If only I could trust you."

"We won't try to harm you," Major Xanthus said. "Not unless you interfere in the confrontation between our kings," the other one stated.

Blade studied the man, who stood a shade over six feet and sported a full brown beard tinged with streaks of gray. "And who might you be?"

"My name is unimportant, but my advice is critical. You mustn't interfere or you'll lose important support from many who believe Sparta should join your Federation."

"You know about that?"

"All Sparta knows about the offer."

"Surely you know that if Agesilaus wins, Sparta won't be able to join."

The bearded man nodded. "Sparta's fate is in the hands of God."

"We have a saying at my Home: Never presume to rely on the Spirit to do that which you're too lazy to do yourself. Relying on God is all well and good, but don't expect Him to do your work for you."

"But that's my point. The struggle is Sparta's problem and will be decided by Spartans."

Blade sighed. "I wish I could afford to stand by and do nothing, but I can't."

"Why not?" the bearded man inquired.

"I take it you haven't heard the news. General Leonidas led his troops against General Calchas's men, and Leonidas came out on the losing end. Right this minute Calchas has the barracks where King Dercyllidas is being tended completely surrounded. It's only a matter of time before General Calchas mounts an assault on the building."

The officers exchanged startled glances.

"Leonidas lost!" exclaimed Major Xanthus.

"Are you certain of this information?" asked the bearded man.

"I was there," Blade informed them grimly, and was about to elaborate when he saw the major look past his shoulder. From behind Blade came a harsh shout.

"You there. Don't move or we'll shoot!"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Rikki-Tikki Tavi raced into the long barracks and saw the four soldiers he was chasing 30 feet in front of him. On each side extended a row of double bunks, dozens upon dozens of them. At the foot of each rested a red

footlocker. In racks mounted, on both walls were scores of weapons, primarily guns.

"Someone is after us!" shouted the last soldier in line.

"Stop him!" came the command from the front.

Immediately, the Spartan spun and blocked the aisle, his sword held at chest height.

Rikki never slowed. He was determined to stop the assassins before they reached King Dercyllidas, and he raised his katana in the ready posture as he closed. "Surrender!" he declared.

The Spartan laughed.

There was no time for fancy swordplay, no time for elaborate thrusts and parries, no time to go easy on the trooper, no time for anything but the exquisitely deadly art of kenjutsu. Rikki approached to within five feet of the Spartan, feinted to the left, and when the soldier blocked the strike, speared his katana under the sword and deep into the man's chest.

Complete astonishment filled the Spartan's face. His lips curved upward and he gave a slight nod. "Well done," he said in appreciation, and died.

Rikki yanked the katana out and hastened along the aisle. A doorway appeared ahead, and he raced to it as fast as his legs would fly. In the next long room was more of the same: bunks, footlockers, and racks of weapons. The three Spartans were halfway to the next door, and one of them glanced back and abruptly halted.

"He got past Deiphobus! I'll take care of him!"

The Warrior closed the gap. If just one of the death squad reached the king, the result would be disastrous. As much as he would like to match his katana against the next soldier's short sword, he couldn't waste a single precious second. He transferred the katana to his left hand and reached behind him with his right, his slim fingers opening the brown pouch he always kept strapped to the small of his back. In it he carried his yawara, kyoketsusogei, and four shuriken. He extracted one of the throwing stars, drew to within two yards of the soldier, and threw it.

The glint of whirring metal alerted the Spartan to the fact an object was streaking straight at him, although he had no idea what the thing might be. Automatically he brought his sword up to deflect whatever it was, but he misjudged both the object's size and speed.

Unerringly on target, the shuriken struck the soldier at the base of the throat and sliced several inches into his soft flesh, severing vessels. Blood sprayed out, splattering on his chin and chest. He gagged, released his sword, and clutched at his neck. His eyes acquired a bewildered quality as he sank to his knees, wheezing.

Rikki finished the Spartan without stopping, using the katana to finish the job the shuriken had started.

The last two Spartans were almost to the next door.

No! Rikki almost yelled, his arms and legs pumping. The door was closed, and he intuitively perceived that King Dercyllidas lay behind it. He couldn't possibly prevent the soldiers from reaching the ruler first.

He'd failed!

One of the soldiers shoved the door wide and both men dashed inside.

Rikki frowned in disapproval of his performance and chastised himself for not trying harder. A flurry of activity took place within the next room, and he detected the swinging of swords and the sounds of a struggle. A moment later one of the men he'd been chasing staggered out, his face split, his mouth, moving soundlessly, then pitched to the floor. Rikki halted.

More Spartans poured through the doorway, ten of them in all, and they warily approached the man in black. The soldier leading them held up his right hand and they all stopped.

"You're one of the outsiders." he stated bluntly.

"Rikki-Tikki-Tavi, at your service."

The soldier looked past the Warrior at the slain assassin. "You've been trying to protect our king. Why?"

"My friends and I want King Dercyllidas to live."

At that moment, from the north end of the building, came a shout diminished by the distance. "Rikki! Can you hear me?"

"Who is that?" the leader asked.

"My friend Blade."

The giant shouted again. "Leonidas has lost! We've got to leave!"

"Leonidas has lost?" the man at the front repeated, and the Spartans began talking among themselves, expressing their disbelief at the news.

Rikki opened his mouth to reply to Blade when he heard another yell. .
"We'll *be* back. Count on it!"

His friends were leaving? Rikki turned and called out, "I'm coming!"

"Hold it!" the lead soldier snapped.

The Warrior halted.

"I can't let you leave just yet, not until I'm certain you can be trusted. I'm Captain Pandarus, and I must ask that you surrender your sword and place, yourself in my custody until our superiors decide your fate."

Rikki pointed at the trooper he'd disposed of. "What does it take to earn your trust? If I wasn't on your side, would I have tried to prevent your king from being assassinated?"

"No," Pandarus conceded. "But I still can't permit you to depart. I have my duty to perform."

"And I must rejoin my companions," Rikki stated, and began to retrace his steps. He heard the soldiers pounding in pursuit and increased his speed, confident in his ability to outdistance them. He was the fastest runner at the Home and he had yet to meet his match.

"Stop!" Captain Pandarus cried.

Rikki had no intention of obeying. He drew closer to the dead assassin and tensed in preparation for leaping over the body instead of skirting it.

"Stop or else!"

Or else what? Rikki wondered, and glanced back to see if they were about to shoot him or hurl a spear. Neither was the case, so he faced front an instant before he leaped. Under ordinary circumstances he would have cleared the corpse with ease, but in his haste he neglected to look down at the floor. He jumped, and didn't realize he'd stepped on slick blood until his legs swept out from under him and he crashed onto his back.

The Spartans!

Rikki shoved to his feet, his left palm contacting a sticky, slippery substance, and he was almost erect when it seemed as if a two-ton section of the ceiling slammed onto the top of his head. The room danced and he sagged, struggling to retain his awareness. Another chunk of ceiling crashed onto him, and an inky vertigo engulfed his senses. He was only barely conscious of his head striking the floor.

The excruciating pain awakened him.

Rikki lay still, flat on his back, his eyes closed and took stock of his condition. Waves of agony pounded at the inside of his skull. He gritted his teeth and inhaled softly through his nostrils, endeavoring to compartmentalize the anguish. But the pain resisted and tried to swamp his consciousness, almost like a living creature that was trying to devour him from the inside.

Remember the Zen teachings, Rikki reminded himself. All created beings knew pain and grief at one time or another. Humankind only learned wisdom from tribulation. One of the greatest of afflictions was never to know hardship. The one who knows that pain is universal is at peace even though adrift in a world of pain.

Embrace the pain.

Become one with it.

And in the process, dominate it with the sheer force of indomitable human will.

Rikki relaxed his body and accepted the pain, allowing his consciousness to adjust to its presence. Slowly he came to control the

sensation, to master the agony instead of letting it master him. As he did, he perceived sounds all around him, the murmur of muted conversations..

One in particular stood out.

"—food in the barracks?"

"You should know better. It's against the law for our unit to eat anywhere but in to public mess. We don't have so much as a crumb."

The Warrior recognized the first speaker as Captain Chiton, and he believed the second to be Captain Pandarus.

"We can hold out for three or four days at the most," stated another person in a forceful tone. "After that, our bodies will be too depleted of energy to withstand the rigors of combat."

"How are we fixed for water, sir?" Chilon asked.

"We have a faucet in the small room at the rear of the barracks," replied the forceful one. "But General Calchas knows about it, and I have no doubt he'll cut off our water supply. He won't waste the lives of more good men when he can simply wait us out, then pick us off easily when he ventures from the barracks."

Rikki finally identified the third speaker as General Leonidas. He opened his eyes and glanced to his right. Sure enough, there they were: Chilon, Pandarus, and the general. Leonidas sported a wide bandage on his left shoulder. Rikki discovered he was lying on the top bed of one of the double bunks, and next to his right arm lay his katana in its scabbard.

"Go check on the progress of the casualty count," Leonidas directed Pandarus.

"Yes, sir," the captain said. He did a smart about-face and departed.

The general stared down at the floor and sighed. "Damn my luck! If I hadn't taken a spear we might have won."

"You shouldn't blame yourself, sir," Chilon stated.

"And why not? If the men had let me lie there instead of trying to protect me, our line wouldn't have broken and Calchas wouldn't have

breached our phalanx. The fault is mine for being careless."

"The men were doing their duty by safeguarding you at all costs," Captain Chilon remarked. "You're the best officer King Dercyllidas has under his command. If anything happened to you our cause would be bleak."

"Our cause *is* bleak," Leonidas stated. "Dercyllidas is at death's door. General Calchas has us trapped. We have no food, and soon the water will undoubtedly be cut off. And to top it all off, the outsiders and their van are unaccounted for."

Blade and Teucer were missing? The revelation upset Rikki, although he took comfort in knowing his friends wouldn't desert him.

"Not all the outsiders are unaccounted for," Chilon commented.

Rikki saw both men look at him, and smiled. The mere movement of his lips intensified his discomfort. "I take it you're talking about me."

"Rikki!" Chilon declared, and stepped over to place his hand on the Warrior's shoulder. "Thank God you've revived. The doctor told us you would be all right. How do you feel?"

"Where's the debris?" Rikki responded, and rose onto his elbows to survey the room in which they had placed him. He spied the north doors 30 feet away, closed and barred and guarded by six soldiers.

"The debris?" Chilon repeated quizzically.

"From the part of the roof that came down on my head."

The captain grinned. "If it's any consolation, Captain Pandarus feels very bad about knocking you out."

"Not half as bad as I feel."

General Leonidas moved up to the bunk. "I'd like to extend my apology for what has happened. My subordinate believed he was doing his duty."

"He does it very well."

"Can we get you some water?" Leonidas inquired. "I'm afraid that's all

we can offer."

"Water would be nice." Rikki placed the katana in his lap, then swung around and draped his legs over the edge of the bed.

"Get him a glass," the general instructed Chilon, who promptly hurried off.

There were Spartans standing at every window, and scores of them seated on the bottom bunks, most sharpening their swords or talking quietly.

"I heard you mention my friends," Rikki said. "What happened to them?"

"I don't know," Leonktes answered. "I was injured during the battle and carried back to the barracks, so I didn't note where they went. Some of my men reported that your vehicle was last observed heading into the city. Do you have any idea why Blade would go there?"

"No, but he must have an excellent reason."

"King Agesilaus is still in the city. He'll never let them return."

Rikki grinned. "If you knew Blade as well as I do, you wouldn't be worried."

"And if you knew Agesilaus as well as I do, you would be."

"I understand you're trapped in here," Rikki noted, staring out the nearest window. Beyond stood a row of soldiers holding their shields in front of them. Only their heads, necks, and legs from mid-thigh down were exposed to view.

"General Calabas has us surrounded, yes. I suspect he intends to simply wait us out. Hunger will drive us into his hands."

"Perhaps you won't mind if I offer a suggestion?" Rikki tactfully said.

"Be my guest."

But before the Warrior could elaborate, a loud crash shattered the hushed atmosphere in the confines of the room as a heavy spear smashed

through a window on the west side.

"They're attacking!" someone cried.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Blade crouched, spun, and threw himself to the right, his finger on the trigger. Four soldiers were making toward him, each with an assault rifle they were bringing into play. He squeezed off a burst, sweeping the M-16 from right to left, his rounds taking them at chest height.

All four were jerked rearward by the impact, and all four went down without getting off a single shot.

The Warrior whirled again, anticipating the bearded one and Major Xanthus would be coming at him, but neither of them had moved. Confused, he straightened and tried to read their inscrutable expressions. "Why didn't you try to stop me?"

"We told you we're not backing either side," replied the man with the beard, "Those were Agesilaus's men."

Blade glanced at the bodies, at the bronze helmets and the red cloaks worn by every Spartan soldier. "How could you tell?"

"Do you see these?" the bearded one asked, and reached up to touch the large metal clasp that fastened his cloak at the neck.

"Yeah. So?"

"Look at it closely."

Suspicious of a trick, Blade studied the clasp briefly. "It's made of copper."

"All of the troops in the regular army wear such clasps, as do a few others. But the men assigned to King Agesilaus's bodyguard wear ones of gold, while those in King Dercyllidas's contingent wear clasps of silver."

"So that's the secret."

"It's no secret, actually. Every Spartan is aware of the difference. You're the first outsider to know."

"Thanks for filling me in."

The bearded man smiled. "I wouldn't want you to kill a soldier from the wrong unit by mistake."

"Where's Agesilaus now?" Blade inquired.

"In the audience chamber, I believe."

"Then let's pay him a visit," Blade suggested. "The two of you can go first."

"Do you still intend to interfere in Sparta's internal affairs?" asked Major Xanthus.

"I plan to eliminate the madman, yes."

"Why not let the struggle take its natural course as we advised?"

"Because one of my men is trapped in the barracks with King Dercyllidas. The only way to guarantee his safety is to terminate the egomaniac responsible for your civil war. If Agesilaus dies, it's all over."

The bearded man sighed. "Isn't there anything I could say to convince you to change your mind?"

"No."

"Very well."

The two Spartans turned and walked toward the enormous door at the end of the hall.

Blade stayed a few feet behind them, his eyes darting from side to side, mystified by the absence of guards. Were they in the audience chamber? Even if they were, someone should have heard the blasting of his M-16. Yet the palace resembled a tomb.

"I do wish you would listen to us," Major Xanthus said I over his shoulder.

"I can't."

"Suit yourself."

The door to the throne room, like the entrance door itself, hung open a crack.

"Open it," Blade directed. "Slowly."

The pair complied, pulling the portal a few feet out from the jamb.

"Do you prefer us to go in first?" asked the bearded man.

"Go ahead."

Blade walked on their heels and hunched down. He planned to open fire the second he laid eyes on Agesilaus. All it would take was a single shot. He stared between the Spartans, braced for the worst. Instead, to his consternation, he beheld an empty chamber: no king, no guards, no audience, nothing. "Stop," he commanded the two men. '

"Leave now before it's too late," Xanthus said.

"Be quiet." Blade straightened and regarded the vacant thrones. "Since he isn't here, we're going to checkout every floor from bottom to top."

"You have no idea what you're getting yourself into," the major stated.

" Let me worry about that." The Warrior shifted so he could cover the entrance. "Where are the stairs?"

The bearded Spartan pointed at the southeast corner of the chamber. "Through that door."

"After you."

Their faces reflecting resignation, the pair of soldiers complied.

Blade noticed other doors rimming the room and wondered where they led. He wouldn't put it past the madman to have a secret passage out of

the palace for use in emergencies or a hidden room no one else knew about. Agesilaus was a narcissistic power monger, true, but he was also a *clever* narcissistic power monger. Not the kind of man to leave anything to chance.

So far Agesilaus had stayed one step ahead of everyone else. The monarch must have been planning to do away with Dercyllidas for a long time, and the opportune arrival of the Warriors with their offer for Sparta to join the Federation had given Agesilaus the pretext he'd needed to save Sparta from a detrimental alliance and come off as the hero who slew the wicked Dercyllidas.

The assassination attempt was also a testimony to the man's cunning. Agesilaus had deliberately drawn Leonidas's troops away from the barracks so the hit squad could terminate Dercyllidas. And by having the soldiers in the squad carry nothing but swords, Agesilaus had stuck to the letter of the law.

The man never missed a trick.

But it was time to do to him as he'd been doing to others.

Blade thought of Rikki, and hoped the martial artist was all right. His weapon leveled at the Spartans, he came to the middle of the room and idly gazed at the magnificent vaulted ceiling.

"Don't move!"

The stern command seemed to emanate from the very walls.

Crouching, Blade swung from side to side, searching for the source.

"Drop your gun!" the voice directed.

Unwilling to relinquish the M-16, Blade was confounded by the lack of a target until he abruptly recalled a statement made by General Leonidas. "There are also riflemen concealed behind the walls." He'd automatically assumed the marksmen wouldn't be there when the chamber was empty, and his carelessness had cost him. In his understandable zeal to eliminate Agesilaus and save Rikki, he'd committed a cardinal blunder, a bad mistake even a novice Warrior knew to avoid: Never take *anything* for granted.

"This is your last warning!" the concealed man stated. "If your weapon isn't on the floor in three seconds, we have orders to open fire in four." He paused. "One."

Blade wanted to smack himself in the head with the stock for his stupidity.

"Two."

His broad shoulders slumping, Blade eased the M-16 to the floor and lifted his hands into the air. "Satisfied?" he snapped.

"Quite," responded a different voice, and a section of wall behind the thrones slid aside to reveal King Agesilaus and a dozen soldiers.

Scowling, the Warrior faced the dais.

Other hidden panels all around the chamber opened and disgorged a score of Spartans armed with high caliber rifles.

"Isn't this grand?" Agesilaus asked, and pranced to his throne. "Isn't this positively wonderful?"

"It would be more wonderful if you'd go take a long leap off a short cliff," Blade stated.

The monarch tittered. "Now, now. Where's your sense of fair play? You outsmarted me earlier and escaped. Now I've outsmarted you and lured you into my trap."

"I did it to myself," Blade said bitterly.

"Where are your two companions?"

"I have no idea."

Agesilaus gestured, and all the soldiers in the chamber converged on the giant with their weapons trained on him. "I trust you won't try anything foolish?"

"Not if I can help it."

Smiling contentedly, the dark-haired ruler descended the dais and

approached the Warrior. He glanced at the bearded man, then the major. "And what have we here? How did you manage to get yourselves captured?"

"He took us by surprise," replied the Spartan with the beard.

"Am I to understand, my dear General Agis, that this barbarian took the head of the Crypteia unawares?" Agesilaus inquired, his tone reeking of sarcasm. He gazed at the general's empty scabbard. "Look at this! No wonder he took you by surprise. You apparently left your sword at home this morning." He laughed uproariously.

The leader of the secret police controlled himself with a visible effort, his cheeks acquiring a scarlet hue.

Major Xanthus glanced at Agis, then at the monarch. "You sent for us, your lordship?"

The question had an immediate sobering effect. Agesilaus frowned and placed his hands on his thin hips. "Yes, I did. You were supposed to be here an hour ago."

"We were unduly delayed, your highness," Xanthus said.

"What could possibly be more important than an appointment with me?"

It was General Agis who answered. "I'm the one to blame. I was in the middle of a meeting when your messenger arrived, and I felt it wiser to finish the meeting before coming here."

"What was the nature of this meeting?"

"I called together every member of the Crypteia and impressed upon them the need to remain totally neutral during the dispute between King Dercyllidas and yourself."

Agesilaus grinned. "How wise of you."

"Many of my younger recruits might have been tempted to take sides. The Crypteia must always remain above petty politics if we're to survive as an institution. Our first loyalty must always be to Sparta."

"Wise and noble," the ruler stated, smirking. "I wonder if the good people of our illustrious city-state know how fortunate they are to have such a dedicated protector."

"Service is its own reward. I don't want the gratitude of the people."

The major cleared his throat. "About the reason we were sent for, sir?"

"Be patient, Xanthus," Agesilaus said. "I'm getting to that." He regarded them both for a moment. "What would you say if I told you I plan to reorganize our armed forces after I've defeated Dercyllidas?"

"You must defeat him first," General Agis said.

"And I will," Agesilaus declared passionately. "Once I do, and since I will be the sole king in Sparta, there will be no need for the royal bodyguard to include three hundred men. I intend to muster any of Dercyllidas's men who live through the conflict into the regular army. Naturally, Major Xanthus, since you're the officer in charge of the regular forces, these men will come under your command. I fully expect you'll have four hundred men at your disposal by tomorrow evening."

"How interesting," the major said.

"Interesting? I should think you'd be delighted at the opportunity to increase your command."

"Of course I am, sir."

"But you realize this will only be achieved if I prevail?"

"Yes, your majesty."

Agesilaus turned to the general. "And as for you, dear Agis, I've decided the Crypteia should be permitted to increase their number by fifty. How would you like a hundred secret police to ferret out traitorous Helots and other rebels?"

"There are currently fifty, your highness, and they do the job admirably."

The king appeared flustered. "What is the matter with the two of you? Here I offer you the greatest gift imaginable, more power, and you both

treat my generosity in a cavalier fashion. Don't you realize that power is the only thing that matters in life? You're Spartans. You're military men. You, better than anyone else, should appreciate the sublime feeling that comes from knowing you have unlimited authority over others."

"We realize it fully, your lordship," General Agis stated.

"Then I fail to understand your attitude."

"Forgive us. But being military men, we know better than to let our hopes soar when your victory hasn't been assured."

"It will be. A messenger is on his way at this very minute to General Calchas with the orders that will enable me to triumph."

"We've heard that Calchas defeated Uonidas," Major Xanthus commented.

Agesilaus blinked. "Where did you hear the news?"

"From him," Xanthus said, and indicated the giant.

"Ahhh, yes. Well, he told you the truth. Leonidas and his men were no match for my bodyguards. By sunrise his forces will be crushed."

General Agis looked at Blade; "And what about this man, your majesty?"

A sly grin curled the ruler's lips. "I have special plans for our honored guest."

"May I ask what kind of plans?"

"Certainly. He's going to run the Marathon of Death."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Rikki-Tikki-Tavi dropped to the floor and quickly slipped the scabbard under his belt, slanting it over his right hip...

"To your posts!" General Leonidas bellowed, and the Spartans on the bunks rose and dashed to nearby windows, their swords out and ready. He walked to the shattered window and peered out at the row of troops, none of whom had moved. "Who claimed we were being attacked?" he asked.

"I did, sir," a soldier responded.

"A Spartan must never lose his head, Lieutenant Idomeneus. You are hereby reduced in rank to sergeant and you'll consider yourself on report."

"Yes, sir."

Surprised at the general's strict judgment, Rikki stepped to the left of the broken glass. "Why was the spear thrown?" he wondered.

As if in reply, a hearty shout came from outside. "Leonidas! Are you still with us or has your guardian spirit ferried you to the far side?"

Leonidas chuckled. "I'm still alive, Calchas. You should give your men lessons on spear throwing. They can't seem to hit what they aim at."

"I know you were hit. I saw you being carried inside. Perhaps it's you who needs more exercise. You're not in the best of shape."

Many of the soldiers surrounding the barracks laughed.

"I got your attention so I can make a proposal," General Calchas went on. "I don't want to see more men die needlessly. You're beaten and you know it. If you try to break out, my troops will cut your men down as they try to get through the doors and windows. We have the advantage."

"You think you do," Leonidas stated.

"Save your false bravado for another time. The lives of your men are at stake, and I can't believe you'd sacrifice them for a lost cause."

"Who says our cause is lost?"

"I do," replied Calchas.

Rikki spied the enemy general walking along the line of soldiers, a stocky man sporting a large gold clasp on his cloak. That was when he noticed all of Calchas's troops wore gold clasps; Leonidas's wore silver.

"Then you must be aware of some fact I'm not," Leonidas called out. "The cur you serve won't win unless my liege dies, and King Dercyllidas is very much alive."

"Not for long," Caichas predicted, and stared at the broken window. He gave a courteous nod to Leonidas. "I'm a patient man, as you well know. I can wait out here until you become desperate with hunger or Dercyllidas dies, whichever occurs first. But I'd prefer to spare your men from such acute suffering. Surrender now. Lay down your arms and turn Dercyllidas over to me. I promise he'll be treated with proper respect."

General Leonidas gripped the hilt of his sword. "I've always regarded you as an honorable man, Caichas, until this very moment. You've insulted my king, my men, and me." He paused. "You imply that my men aren't willing to make whatever sacrifices are necessary to perform their duty. You say you would spare them from suffering, but Spartans are bred to endure suffering. And you demand that we turn over the man we have pledged to serve with our dying breaths, if need be. Well, here's my answer. Never!"

A spontaneous cheer rocked the barracks.

Rikki scanned the relaxed, smiling Spartans and marveled at their composure in the face of imminent death. Their attitude was almost Zen-like in their acceptance of the inevitable, whatever it might turn out to be.

"You're a fool, Leonidas!" Caichas cried.

"Perhaps. But I'm a loyal fool."

"Prepare yourself, my former friend I've a strategy or two up my sleeve that will make you realize how foolish you're being." Caichas spun and stalked to the north, out of sight.

"I imagine he does," Leonidas said softly.

"He was your friend?" Rikki queried.

"We were inseparable at one time."

"What happened?"

"I was appointed by King Dercyllidas to take charge of his bodyguard. Calchas was still an officer in the regular army. My promotion upset him immensely. He'd always wanted to be in the Three Hundred. Later, when Agesilaus offered him a post equal to mine, he gladly accepted," Leonidas detailed. "I never did understand the reason Agesilaus selected him. They'd never gotten along very well." He scowled. "Only later did I realize Agesilaus took advantage of Calchas's jealousy to set him against me."

"How long ago did this occur?"

"About four years ago: Why?"

"It means Agesilaus has harbored the idea of becoming sole ruler of Sparta for a long time. Where I come from, we refer to such persons as power mongers. Men and women who crave power for power's sake. Our Founder warned us in his journal against allowing such people to live among us. Whenever power mongers are discovered in our midst, they are banished from the Family or terminated."

"Terminated?"

"Yes. But only if they refuse to mend their ways or leave peacefully."

"Have you had many such power mongers?"

"Only one. A Warrior named Napoleon. About six years ago he attempted to seize control of the Family."

"Was he exiled?"

"No. I killed him."

"Oh."

Rikki gazed at the soldiers standing like statues 30 feet away. "So what are your plans?"

"To wait until King Dercyllidas revives and follow his orders."

"And if he doesn't revive soon?"

"I'll wait as long as I can."

"Doing exactly as Calchas expects."

General Leonidas studied the man in black. "Do you have a better idea?"

"Yes."

"Tell me."

The Warrior nodded at the row of enemy troopers. "Attack now, when they'd least expect it."

"Don't think I haven't considered the idea. But we're outnumbered. They could leisurely pick us off if we tried to escape."

"I'm not talking about escaping," Rikki elaborated. "I mean *attack*. Calchas expects you to send men out every door and window. In that case, he would have a numerical advantage. So do the unexpected. Lead all of your men out at one point, say the north doors. Bear in mind that Calchas has his unit stretched thin. How many soldiers has he posted opposite the doors?"

"Four rows of ten men each. The rest of his forces are deployed in a single row around the building."

"There you see my point? Pour all of your men out of the doors at the strongest part of his line. I know your losses will be high. Those in the vanguard will undoubtedly be slain, but as more and more of your soldiers press into the open the tide will turn. His forty men at arms can't possibly hope to contain all of your men.. And by the time the remainder of his line rushes to the north, it will be too late."

Leonidas scratched his chin and regarded the Warrior respectfully. "A commendable plot. It might work, but the losses, as you've noted, would be large."

"I'll understand if you decide against it. The cost might be higher than you're willing to pay. Losing men is always a distressing experience."

"You've lost a few, I take it."

Rikki nodded, sadness etching his features. "Friends of mine, fellow

Warriors, have died in the line of duty. I mourned their passing, even though I have faith they'll survive this earthly life."

The general turned and scanned the room full of Spartans. "I care for each and every one of them. After all the hours I've spent training and drilling them, I hate to see any of them die. But to die in combat is the dream of every Spartan from boyhood on, and we view death as the crowning glory of a life of service." He nodded at the doorway on the south side of the room. "Come with me."

"Where are we going?"

"To check on King Dercyllidas. I'd like to present your proposal to him."

"And if he isn't awake yet?"

"Then the final decision will be mine, and depending on the outcome the praise or blame will fall squarely on my shoulders." The general started off.

Rikki kept pace with the officer. "Did you know a man named Sarpedon?"

Surprise registered in Leonidas's face. "Captain Sarpedon? I knew him well. He was an honorable man, even if he did have the distinct misfortune of being in Agesilaus's bodyguard."

The Warrior grinned. "He was the first Spartan I met, and, as you say, he was a man who put honor before all else. I admired him greatly."

"Where did you happen to meet him?"

"In Memphis. He wound up there after he was banished from Sparta."

"Is he still in Memphis?"

"No, he's dead."

Leonidas glanced at the small man. "Did you see him die?"

"I killed him."

The general abruptly stopped. "I seem to detect a trend here. Why did

you slay him?"

"We found ourselves on opposite sides. I didn't want to fight him, but he left me no choice. He did his duty to the very end."

"A true Spartan," Leonidas said, and smiled. He resumed walking.

They went into the next room, which was likewise filled with soldiers.

Rikki saw Captain Chilon approaching with a glass of water, and halted once again when the general did.

"Here you are," stated the junior officer. "Catenas hasn't cut off our water yet."

"Thanks," Rikki responded, taking the glass. He swallowed eagerly, grateful for the opportunity to quench his thirst.

"Have you seen Captain Pandarus?" Leonidas inquired.

"Yes, sir. He's finishing the casualty count."

"Good. Let's proceed. Fall in, Captain."

"Yes, sir."

The three of them moved briskly along the aisle to a closed door. Leonidas rapped, once and opened it.

Within was a modest-sized office containing a desk, a chair, a file cabinet, and along the east wall, a green cot. Across the room was another door, partly open, revealing more bunks. There were already eight Spartans crammed into the office. King Dercyllidas was resting on the cot. Kneeling next to him, a stethoscope in his hands, was a man with a worried look. The rest were all guards who snapped to attention the instant the general entered.

"How is he, physician?" Leonidas asked without ceremony.

The kneeling man frowned. "He's asleep, and I wouldn't advise waking him. He's lost far too much blood for my liking."

"I need to talk to him."

"Now?"

"I wouldn't ask if it wasn't urgent."

The doctor, clearly displeased, had his hand on the monarch's arm. "I'll see if I can rouse him; I gave him an herbal remedy to bolster his immune system and make him sleep. He might not wake up."

"Try."

The door on the south side suddenly swung open and in came Captain Pandarus. Like the guards, he stood at attention. "I have the casualty count as you requested, sir."

"At ease, Captain," Leonidas said. "Give it to me straight."

"We lost sixty men, sir." '

"And I'd estimate that Calchas didn't lose more than thirty," Leonidas stated. "Damn."

"Excuse me," Rikki interjected, "but is that sixty men killed or sixty counting your injured?"

"There are no injured men," the general replied.

"How can that be? Surely, in a battle like you fought, there must be dozens of injured on both sides?"

"You don't understand," Leonidas said patiently. "Spartans would rather die than be taken prisoner. If a Spartan is injured on the battlefield, he'll fight to his dying breath instead of surrendering." He paused. "We have no injured men because they were all slain in combat."

Now it was Rikki's turn to voice a simple, "Oh."

The physician was gently shaking the monarch's arm. He looked up at Leonidas. "I'm sorry, General. Our liege won't respond."

"Keep trying."

Rikki placed the empty glass on the desk and scrutinized the Spartans. They were riveted to the cot, anxiously waiting for their king to revive, as

if their very existence depended on it. In a way, he reflected, that was the case. As much as he admired their bravery and devotion to duty, there was a certain flaw in the Spartan system, an ingrained dependency on higher authority that bordered on the fanatical. Spartans followed orders with the single-minded determination of zealots. They never questioned a command, even when it might be issued by a potential dictator like Agesilaus. The Warriors, by contrast, would never follow an order that was unethical, immoral, or given by a power monger. The Family's protectors enjoyed a latitude of freedom and individual responsibility never known by the Spartans.

"The king is coming around," declared the doctor.

An air of tension permeated the office. The soldiers watched Dercyllidas intently. General Leonidas stepped to the cot and knelt next to the pillow. "Can you hear me, my lordship? It's Leonidas."

A fluttering of the ruler's eyelids was the only reaction.

"King Dercyllidas?" the general persisted.

For a second nothing happened, and then with startling abruptness the monarch's eyes snapped wide open. "Leonidas?" he said weakly.

"Right here, your highness."

Slowly, grimacing in pain, Dercyllidas twisted his head to stare at the officer. "What has happened?"

Leonidas bowed his head in shame. "We engaged General Calchas and he broke our phalanx. We're now trapped in our own barracks, surrounded by his troops."

"You must break out at all costs."

"There is a way, but the cost will be very high."

Dercyllidas's eyes closed for a moment. When he opened them again his voice was even weaker. "At all costs, Leonidas. Do you hear me?"

"I hear and obey."

Sighing, Dercyllidas nodded once, a barely perceptible bobbing of his

chin. "Good. And Leonidas?"

"Yes, your highness?"

"Once you've defeated Calabas, as I know you will, kill Agesilaus."

"None of your bodyguards will rest until his head has been brought to you on a platter."

Dercyllidas smiled. "I can always rely on you..." His voice trailed off and he lapsed into unconsciousness.

General Leonidas stood. "You heard our king." He turned to Rikki. "We'll put your plan into effect immediately. Would you care to take part?"

"Yes," the Warrior answered. "And I have a favor to ask you."

"Anything."

"I'd like to be the first man out the doors."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

"Do you have any idea what this is?" King Agesilaus queried imperiously.

Blade refused to give the man the satisfaction of a reply. He stared at the field in front of him, which extended to the east for 300 yards, then glanced over his right shoulder at the Royal Palace. He'd been escorted, under tight security, from the audience chamber and out a door at the rear of the structure. Now he stood at the edge of the field, with Spartans on both sides and to his rear, all Agesilaus's soldiers except for two.

Both General Agis and Major Xanthus had insisted on accompanying the king. They'd told him they wanted to witness the Marathon of Death, and Agesilaus had gladly assented.

"This is a training field," the ruler was saying. "When those assigned to

palace duty aren't required for specific tasks, they come out here to hone their skills. During the midday meal break dozens work out instead of eating."

Blade surveyed the field. A gravel track ringed the outer boundary, evidently for jogging and foot races. There were bales of hay set up at one point, stacked three high, to which targets had been attached. There were also practice dummies dangling from wooden scaffolds. Each dummy was the size of a man and had white circles painted on its cloth surface to signify human vital points.

"Do you see the men I sent out?" Agesilaus asked.

The Warrior couldn't miss them. Eight riflemen were positioned along the outside of the track, spaced equal distances apart. Between them they covered every square inch of the field.

"If you try to flee, you'll be shot," the monarch stated gleefully. "If you break the rules, you'll be shot. And if you don't follow my instructions to the letter, guess what happens?"

Blade glared and clenched his fists.

"Allow me to explain about the Marathon of Death," Agesilaus went on. "Occasionally a Spartan fails to perform his duties as required, or exhibits inferior ability in combat. If the violation is serious enough, as in a case of suggested cowardice, the offender is given the opportunity to prove himself by running the Marathon. If he survives the tests he's redeemed. If he doesn't, then it's taken as an omen that he wasn't fit to be a soldier, that the charges against him were true."

Curiosity compelled Blade to speak. "What kind of tests are you talking about?"

"Ahhh. I have your undivided attention at last," Agesilaus said sarcastically. "The tests are very simple, actually. Yost primary goal will be to run around the entire track."

"What else?"

The ruler took a few steps and pretended to be studying the field. "Now let me see if can remember all of them." He chuckled. "Yes. I think I do."

"Impossible," Blade said.

"What?" Agesilaus said, his train of thought disrupted. He glanced at the giant, clearly puzzled.

"It's impossible to think unless you have a brain," Blade elaborated, and indulged in a self-satisfied smirk.

The monarch glowered. "Is your petty witticism supposed to anger me? A man of my stature is above such trifling insults." He turned to the field again. "Now where was I? Oh, yes. Your tests."

"Have you ever run the Marathon of Death?" Blade interrupted him again.

Agesilaus, his resentment transparent, pivoted. "Don't be absurd. Why should I submit to a lowly test of courage?"

"I figured as much," Blade said. "In fact, I'll bet you've never even been in combat. You're a coward, the kind who hides behind his royal office and lets others do his dirty work."

At the word "coward," Agesilaus went livid. He hissed and took a step toward the prisoner, his hands upraised, about to strike.

Blade braced for the attack, his plan of action already thought out. If he could get his arm around the would-be tyrant's neck, he might be able to reach the SEAL. None of the Spartan would do anything to endanger their ruler's life, and a simple threat to snap the power monger's neck should do the trick.

Suddenly Agesilaus halted, a crafty gleam lighting up his eyes, and lowered his arms. "Damn, you're good. You almost tricked me."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Blade said innocently.

"Sure you don't," Agesilaus snapped, and pointed at the targets 50 yards distant. "You can see that bales of hay have been arranged in a row from north to south as backing for the targets used by our archers and shooters. Your first challenge involves a test of speed. You'll run along the track until you are even with the bales, then move off it and wait for the signal. When I give the word, you'll race from one end of the bales to the

other, passing directly in front of the targets. Should you survive, you will return to the track and continue."

"Will I be dodging automatic weapons fire?" Blade asked caustically.

"No. Arrows," Agesilaus said, and glanced at a nearby Spartan. "Lieutenant, move your squad into position."

The officer nodded and promptly led nine other soldiers, each armed with a bow, out onto the field. They jogged to within 30 feet of the bales and arranged themselves in a corresponding row, each archer standing directly in line with one of the targets.

"After the test of speed comes the test of skill," Agesilaus went on. "You'll run until you reach the area where the dummies are set up for the soldiers to practice their swordsmanship. Four men will be waiting for you there." He indicated a quartet standing to his right and they sprinted off. "Should you vanquish each and every one, then you'll return to the track and complete your circuit."

"Pardon me, King Agesilaus," General Agis interjected. "Isn't it traditional for the test of skill to pit one runner against only two opponents?"

"Yes, but I'm making an exception in this case. I wouldn't want our huge friend to become bored."

Agis frowned but said no more.

"And now we come to the last test, the test of endurance," the ruler said. "You see, not only must you complete a circuit of the track, but you must do so without being wounded."

"And if I am?" Blade inquired, surveying the track solemnly.

"Then the riflemen posted around the perimeter will open fire and riddle you with bullets," Agesilaus stated, grinning maliciously.

The Warrior glanced at a soldier who was holding his Bowies. "Am I permitted to carry weapons? I'd like to take my knives."

"You must be joking."

General Agis and Major Xanthus looked at one another, and the head of the secret police voiced an objection. "It's traditional for the runner to be permitted to carry a sword, your highness."

Agesilaus stared coldly at the officer. "I had no idea you were such a stickler for tradition, my dear general."

"More than you know, sir."

"In any event, the traditions you desire to uphold apply exclusively to Spartans, not to outsiders."

Agis jerked his right thumb at the giant. "He should at least be given a fair chance. That's the decent thing to do."

"Tradition and decency," Agesilaus said sarcastically. "You're a virtual pillar of moral behavior."

"Spartans are renowned for their fairness, my lord," Agis noted. "We wouldn't want word to get around that we had put an outsider to a rigged test, would we?"

The king's nostrils flared and his lips compressed. "Rigged? Who would dare accuse me of such an act?"

"Certainly not I," General Agis said with a slight bow. "But you know as well as I do how tongues can wag. Even if the accusation was untrue, the story might still spread." He paused. "Why add fuel to the fire, if you get my meaning?"

"I get it, all right," Agesilaus stated harshly. He stared at the Warrior for a moment, nervously gnawing on his lower lip. "Very well!" to spat. "The prisoner may take his knives. Never let it be said I'm an unjust man."

The soldiers holding the Bowies took a pace toward the giant, intending to hand them over.

"Not yet, you ninny!" Agesilaus barked. "You'll wait until he has gone ten yards on the course, then give them to him. Understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"Aren't you forgetting something?" Blade queried.

Agesilaus's brow knit. "Not that I know of."

"If I survive this Marathon of Death, what do I win?"

"Your life."

"Not good enough."

The monarch snorted. "Don't presume to dictate terms to me."

"I want your promise of safe passage out of Sparta for my friends and myself."

Agesilaus cocked his head and made a show of squinting up at the sky. "The sun must be affecting your judgment."

Blade folded his arms across his chest. "I'm not budging until I have your word."

"I'll have you shot where you stand."

"Go ahead."

Bewilderment and anger fought for dominance on the ruler's visage, and anger won. "Don't think I won't! Are you prepared to die right here and now?"

"Yes."

Agesilaus did a double take. "You're bluffing, outsider."

"Try me," Blade said, and he meant every word. He wasn't about to run the course simply to provide sadistic amusement for the monarch. A pledge of freedom, given in front of witnesses, would be an ideal incentive to see it through. Besides, he told himself, if Agesilaus did give the order to have him shot, he'd try and reach the bastard before the slugs brought him down and snap the man's neck.

"What harm can such a promise do, your majesty?" General Agis commented. "The odds of him surviving are extremely slim. And even if he does, good riddance to him and his intervention in Sparta's internal affairs."

"You have a point," Agesilaus said, although his tone betrayed marked skepticism. "Do I have your word?" Blade pressed him.

Hissing through clenched teeth, Agesilaus nodded. "Yes, outsider. You have my promise that you and your companions will be permitted from Sparta should you survive the tests."

"I can't ask for more," Blade said sweetly, and glanced at Agis. Why was the officer befriending him?

"Let's get this underway," Agesilaus declared. He clapped his hands once, then motioned for the giant to start running. "Off you go, and I hope I never have the displeasure of talking to you again."

Blade jogged slowly forward, the soldier bearing his knives keeping pace on his left. He glanced at the archers, the swordsmen, and the riflemen, and wished he could use the Commando instead.

What to do?

What to do?

Teucer repeated the same question over and over again in his mind. Blade had been gone over half an hour. He was under strict orders to leave and go find Rikki. But how could he just up and drive off, leaving Blade to an unknown fate? What if the giant was in trouble? He'd never forgive himself if Blade died.

What the hell should he do?

He'd slid into the driver's seat as soon as Blade disappeared inside the palace, and now he anxiously tapped his fingers on the steering wheel and stared apprehensively at the keys in the ignition. There was another reason he didn't like the idea of driving off; he lacked confidence in his ability. As part of Blade's new policy to give every Warrior going on a run lessons in how to handle the transport, he'd spent several hours familiarizing himself with the operation of the SEAL. He'd even taken the van on several hour-long chaperoned practice jaunts and learned the basics of steering, braking, and negotiating rugged terrain. But he still got a case of the willies at the mere thought of driving any great distance by himself.

Damn these Spartans!

Teucer leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes. He could use a few hours of sleep, but he dispelled the urge. First things first. The way he saw the situation, he had three choices. He could obey Blade and go rescue Rikki. He could defy the head Warrior and try to find Blade. Or he could sit there and do nothing.

What wonderful options.

He opened his eyes again, then stiffened.

Spartans were pouring from the palace. Ten, 15, 20 of them in rows of two. They quickly descended the steps and fanned out around the SEAL, training their M-16's and UZIs on the tinted plastic.

Teucer knew he was safe. It would take an industrial diamond drill to penetrate the transport's nearly impregnable body, and he doubted very much that the Spartans possessed such a device. Once before, about three years ago, the nefarious Technics had used just such a drill to bore a small hole in the side so they could slip a hanger in and unlatch the lock. That was the only time the SEAL had ever been breached.

Two more soldiers emerged, one of them holding an object in his right hand.

Teucer leaned forward, trying to get a good look at the item. The pair were halfway down the steps before he succeeded, and recognition caused him to clutch the steering wheel in dismay.

The Spartan held a bundle of dynamite.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

"I positively refuse."

Rikki-Tikki-Tavi did not allow his frustration to show. Instead, he persisted in his attempt to convince the general. "I accept full responsibility for whatever happens."

"Which is all well and good for you," Leonidas stated while watching his men organize into rows four deep down the entire length of the center aisle. "But your safety is in *my* hands. King Dercyllidas would be upset if harm were to befall you. Part of the reason for this struggle, as Captain Chilon explained it to me, is Sparta's opportunity to join the Freedom Federation. Dercyllidas very much wants to join. Agesilaus, the isolationist, doesn't. If you were to be injured or killed, the blame would fall on Sparta and King Dercyllidas's dreams of joining would be ruined." He paused. "I can't allow that to happen."

The Warrior glanced at the north doors, not 15 feet away. "Isn't there anything I could say that would change your mind?"

"No," Leonidas stated emphatically. "You'll remain in here when we launch our attack."

"But the plan is my idea."

"For which I sincerely thank you."

"Allow me to talk to Dercyllidas."

"You heard the physician. The king isn't to be disturbed unless it's an emergency. An extreme emergency," Leonidas stressed.

Their conversation was punctuated by the arrival of Chilon and Pandarus, both of whom stood at attention to report.

"A guard of twenty men has been designated to stay with the king, General," the former stated.

"And the troops are almost ready, sir," chimed in the latter.

"Excellent," Leonidas said.

Rikki pointed at a rack of automatic weapons on the east wall. "You could win the day easily if you used those."

"You know better," the general responded, gazing out a window. "We'll do this the Sparta way or not all."

"Will you be leading your men?"

"Of course."

"In your condition?"

"I sustained a slight injury, nothing more."

"You took a spear in the shoulder."

Leonidas gingerly moved his left arm. "This scratch won't keep me out of the battle. And the way I look at it, I'm living on borrowed time anyway."

"How so?"

"Remember our discussion about injured Spartans? My men should have left me on the battlefield. I failed them, failed my king, and failed myself." Leonidas frowned. "I have much to atone for."

Rikki stared at the ranks of soldiers. The last of the men were taking their positions in the assault column. He rested his left hand on the hilt of the katana and bided his time.

General Leonidas stepped in front of the first row. "We lost once today," he stated in a firm but not overly loud voice. "Now we have a chance to make amends and demonstrate to our king that we're worthy of his trust."

He slowly drew his sword. "Let's acquit ourselves as only Spartans can. Your new orders for the day are simple: Give no quarter. Once we are outside, we will not retreat. Either we triumph or we all die as Spartans should."

The two captains took positions directly behind their superior officer.

Leonidas faced the doors, where two soldiers were awaiting the command to fling them open. "Spartans! Swords!"

As one, in a ringing display of precision, the troopers drew their weapons. "Now!" Leonidas cried.

An instant later the doors were flung wide. Thirty feet away was the 40-man formation Calchas had posted to guard the entrance.

"Charge!" Leonidas shouted, and started forward.

The moment Rikki had been waiting for arrived. None of the Spartans were paying attention to him. He could do as he pleased without intervention. The katana leaped from its scabbard as he darted over and joined the column, stepping into place next to Captain Chilon.

The officer glanced at him and smiled.

With Leonidas at the forefront, the column poured out the doorway and charged the formation.

Rikki heard one of the enemy soldiers shouting, but the words were indistinct in the rush of the moment. His total attention was focused on the formation, on the spears and shields toward which he raced at full speed. Lacking a shield of his own, he would have to counter the long lances of his foes in another manner. In three seconds he was close enough to see the pupils in the eyes of Agesilaus's men, and he raised his katana.

Two spears swung toward him.

The Warrior's arms were a blur as he swung the gleaming katana down, first slashing to the left, then reversing direction and swinging to the right, the steely edge of his ancient weapon cleaving both spears in half. Knowing he would be at a disadvantage if he attempted to batter through their shields, he automatically opted to force them to lower their guard by angling his compact form downward in an overhand cut, aiming at their legs. The katana bit into their flesh below the knees. Both Spartans buckled, their shields dropping as their legs gave way.

Rikki had them. He slew both with a single horizontal cutting motion that sliced open both their throats. They fell, spewing their life's blood, and he waded into the thick of the formation. There were Spartans in front of him, Spartans to the right, and Spartans to his left. He swung and parried, thrust and stabbed, fighting by instinct, pressed on all sides. Crimson drops splattered his face and clothes, but he paid no heed. He mustn't think, mustn't allow himself to be distracted for a millisecond, because distraction meant instant death. He had to swing and swing and swing. Up and down. From side to side. Slicing through spears and foes alike. Never stopping, never permitted the luxury of a breather, transformed into an emotionless killing machine.

Cut to the right.

Cut to the left.

Sweat caked his brow, but he paid no attention. His clothes became damp, but he hardly noticed. His shoulders ached and his hands stung from the impact of metal on metal, but he ignored the discomfort.

In all his years, in all the combat he had seen, Rikki had never known anything like this. Unlike individual clashes, where the fighters could take a measure of each other and their personalities figured as prominently in the outcome as their expertise, in a mass battle there was no personalities, only automatons who fought and fought until they lived through the conflict or lost their lives. There was no middle ground.

The katana became coated with blood. Blood dotted Rikki's martial arts uniform, custom-made for him by the Family Weavers. Blood formed in puddles on the earth and drenched the red uniforms of the slain Spartans. Blood was everywhere, as if the universe itself had sprung a crimson leak at that particular spot. The tangy aroma of blood filled the air, and the salty taste of blood touched the lips.

Rikki downed five of the enemy. Eight. Ten. He lost count early, and still the battle waged. For the most part the Spartans died in grim silence. A few gasped. One of two cried out, more in surprise at their own demise than out of fear.

On and on it went.

And abruptly, to his amazement, Rikki found himself in the clear, temporarily free of soldiers. He looked around and saw bodies littering the field, piled in heaps. Spartans were still fighting, many in man-to-man contests. He realized that all of Leonidas's men were out of the barracks, and that all of Calchas's men had converged on the north end of the barracks to do battle.

Calchas.

Even as he entertained the thought, Rikki saw a stocky soldier bearing down on him. The man had a dent in his helmet and blood dripping from his sword. Somewhere along the line he'd lost his shield.

"Outsider!" Calchas bellowed, halting several yards off.

"General," Rikki responded.

"You and your friends are to blame for this!" Calchas declared bitterly. "You and your accursed Federation."

"I don't know what lies Agesilaus has been feeding you. We came here in peace."

"You're the liar! And you shouldn't have come here at all, because you're never going to leave."

"That remains to be seen."

The general drew himself up, his eyes flashing sheer spite, and attacked.

Rikki never gave ground. He met the assault calmly, passionately, his katana matching the officer's short sword blow for blow. The Spartan's anger worked in Rikki's favor. After half a minute the officer struck in a frenzy, apparently frustrated by his failure to penetrate Rikki's guard, the swings much wider than were prudent. Rikki countered three of them. On the fourth swipe he made as if to block it, then let the short sword swish past his head as he reversed his own stroke and buried the katana in the general's chest.

Calchas stiffened and released his weapon, then staggered backwards, pulling loose from the Oriental blade. "Damn you!" he snarled defiantly, and pitched onto his face.

Rikki glanced at the melee all around him and discovered the conflict was winding down. There were fewer Spartans fighting. Someone nearby, he didn't know who, began to yell stridently.

"General Calchas is dead! General Calchas is dead!"

More of the somber struggles ceased. Soldiers stopped their deadly contests to gaze in the direction of the slain officer and the man in black standing over him.

From out of the intermingled forces came General Leonidas, his features a study of fatigue, the bandage on his shoulder stained red. He walked over to his dead nemesis, then stared at the Warrior. Finally, he

turned and raised his sword. "Hear me, men on both sides! With General Calchas gone, there is no longer any reason to continue our conflict. I call on all of those who have served so valiantly under him to sheath your swords and convey his body back to your barracks. Those under my command are not not interfere, I give you my word."

Rikki waited hopefully for a sign that Calchas's troops would accept the offer. He'd had enough of blood and gore for one day; for many days, in fact. But a rabid shout from a member of the opposing contingent dashed his hopes on the uncompromising rocks of reality.

"For Agesilaus! Victory or death!"

And suddenly the battle was joined again.

The Warrior turned to confront a new foe, knowing he'd been unduly optimistic. For a moment there he'd forgotten who these men were, Spartans.

"You can take them now," the soldier announced, his arms extended to hand over the Bowies.

Blade grabbed his knives on the run. Almost immediately the soldier dropped behind him, and he stared at the site of the first test, studying the placement of the bales and the positions of the archers. How could he possibly hope to evade ten skilled bowmen? Given his size, he'd be hard to miss.

There were two factors working in his favor, though. First, the archers were 30 feet from the targets. Arrows weren't like bullets. They couldn't travel such a distance almost instantaneously. If the bows were as powerful as they appeared, then the shafts would cover the span in a second and a half to two seconds. Not much of a margin, but it would have to suffice.

The second factor was his speed. None of the Spartans were aware of how fast he could run. Next to Rikki, he was the fastest man in the Family. He slid the Bowies into their sheaths, glad to have them back. Soon he came in line with the bales and veered from the track to take the required position. He stood next to the last target in the row and glanced to the west at the monarch.

The archers all nocked arrows and prepared to fire.

King Agesilaus didn't waste any time. He cupped his hands to his lips and bellowed, "Begin the first test!"

Taking a deep breath, Blade sprinted forward.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The sight of the dynamite galvanized Teucer into action. He twisted the key and the engine purred to life. Simultaneously, from the Spartans ringing the transport poured a hail of lead, the rounds striking the bulletproof plastic and zinging off.

In their attempt to shatter the green body the soldiers made a grave mistake. With so many of them so close to the SEAL, and all firing from such short range, the inevitable transpired. Three of them were struck by ricochets and went down.

By then the bowman had the transmission in reverse. He saw the Spartan bearing the dynamite racing down the steps and floored the accelerator. There was a thump behind him, and the transport bounced into the air, as if going over a curb. Instead, when he glanced forward, he spotted the crumpled form of a crushed trooper who hadn't moved out of the way fast enough.

The withering fire from the remaining Spartans persisted, they ran after the van, the man with the explosives shouting instructions. Teucer had them all in front of him. He slammed on the brake pedal, reached over to the toggle switches, and activated the machine gun.

The big fifties made mincemeat of the soldiers. They were perforated repeatedly, thrashing and jerking, then flung to the ground. The man carrying the dynamite made a futile effort to light the fuse, but several slugs bored through his skull and dropped him on the spot.

Teucer turned the SEAL about and exited the public square, bearing to the west, finally having made up his mind. He could take a hint as well as the next guy. Since Blade had explicitly commanded him to seek out Rikki,

that's exactly what he would do. The gravel road was deserted and he made good time. After a mile he spotted a solitary figure far ahead, a lone man in a red loincloth running on the north side of the road.

A messenger.

The Bowman recalled the comments made by General Leonidas, and slowed. If he was right, the runner must be in the act of conveying a message from General Catenas to Agesilaus. Obviously the communication must not get through.

Should he blow the man up?

No, Teucer decided, shaking his head. Such a drastic step would be a waste of firepower. Discretion called for taking the runner prisoner and conducting an interrogation to discover the message. But how should he accomplish the task? Simply pulling over and pointing an arrow at the guy might work; it also might make the runner take off. He had to be clever.

What to do?

Only 40 yards later the answer came to him, and he abruptly pulled over to the side of the road and switched off the engine. Next he leaned across the console and extended his arm fully so he could unlock the passenger door and open it a crack.

Now he was all set.

The messenger came on at a strong clip, arms and legs pumping, his gaze riveted on the ground in front of him in total concentration.

Grinning, the Bowman slid into the passenger seat and waited, placing the compound bow in his lap. The information the man bore might be critical to Dercyllidas's cause. He thought about the runner he'd seen earlier and wondered if this was the same man. Because he foolishly hadn't paid all that much attention, he didn't know for sure. Another fact about the messenger struck him.

Strange people, these Spartans.

Since General Leonidas knew that orders and other information were relayed from the Royal Palace to the barracks by means of professional

runners, and since the officer knew Agesilaus would undoubtedly use such a means during the course of the civil war, why hadn't Leonidas simply posted troopers along the road to ambush the messengers? Was it another of their strange traditions, like only using swords and spears against other Spartans?

The Bowman's musing was disrupted by the approach of the runner, who now had only 50 feet to cover. He calculated the man in the loincloth would pass within a foot or two of the SEAL, close enough for him to get the job done.

Keep on coming, speedy.

Teucer gripped the handle and tensed his right arm, gauging the distance carefully. He froze when the runner glanced up and stared at the van. Would he stop? Were his suspicions aroused? But the man never slowed down.

Perfect.

Sprinting at full speed, his body coated with sweat, the Spartan came alongside the transport.

Teucer was ready. He shoved the door wide at just the right moment, causing the runner to crash into the steel-like plastic with a resounding thud. The door swiveled on its hinges, and the messenger was knocked flat on his back, dazed, the breath forced out of him by the impact.

Clutching his prized bow, Teucer jumped down and notched an arrow. He stepped up to the stunned runner and aimed the tip of the shaft between the Spartan's eyes. "Surprise, surprise, friend. I wouldn't move if I were you."

"You fool!" the man snapped, shaking his head to clear his thoughts. "It's against the law to interfere in any manner with a royal messenger."

"Those laws only apply to Spartans. And in case you haven't noticed, I'm wearing all green, not red."

"Who are you? What do you want?"

"I want answers."

The Spartan scowled and glanced at the SEAL. "I knew I should have given that vehicle a wide berth, but I was anxious to get back to the palace and report. My shift is almost over."

"Spare me your sob story. And don't change the subject," Teucer admonished. "I want to know the message you carry."

"I'm not carrying any."

Teucer leaned over the runner, holding the arrow point a fraction of an inch from the other man's nose. "At this distance the shaft will penetrate all the way through your head. Which is it going to be? Answers, or your death?"

"I prefer to die."

"Suit yourself," Teucer said, and shrugged for effect. He pulled the bowstring back a quarter-inch farther.

The prospect of imminent death brought a worried look to the messenger's face. "If I were to reveal the information you want, King Agesilaus would have me shot."

"Who's to know?" the Bowman rejoined.

"I can't," the man said, although his tone lacked complete conviction.

Teucer frowned. "I haven't got all day. Either tell me now or *die*."

Conflicting emotions caused by the messenger's sense of duty and his desire to live fought an abbreviated war on his countenance. "I have a wife and children," he blurted out.

"I'm sure your widow will be gratified to know that you were thinking about her at the very last."

The contending emotions intensified, the Spartan's lips a thin line of frustration, when suddenly he blurted out, "All right!"

"You'll talk?" Teucer said, wary of a trick.

"Why not? I don't owe Agesilaus a thing after he assigned me to this lousy detail over my objections."

"You didn't want to be a messenger?"

"Hell, no. I was content in the regular army. Then he spotted me at the Games, taking part in the foot races, and decided he wanted me as a runner."

"It sounds like something Agesilaus would do." Teucer tactfully observed. "He's treated you like dirt. Here's your chance to get even. Tell me the message you're supposed to relay."

"I was sent from the Royal Palace with orders for General Calchas, and now I'm taking his reply back."

"What were the orders?"

"To burn down Dercyllidas's barracks within the hour."

Teucer thought of Rikki. "And the response from General Calchas?"

"He intends to try and convince Leonidas to surrender. If that doesn't work, Calchas will torch the barracks."

The bowman slowly let up on the string and took a stride backwards. He had to reach the barracks and warn the martial artist and Dercyllidas's men. "All right. Stand up and continue on your way. And don't worry. I'll never tell a soul about this."

"Thanks," the messenger stated gratefully, rising with an effort. He skirted the door and made toward the east without so much as another look at the Warrior.

So there were a few dissidents in the Spartan ranks, Teucer reflected as he quickly climbed into the SEAL and slammed the door. He moved behind the wheel, deposited the bow and arrow on the console, and started the vehicle. He'd begun to think of all the Spartans as infallible machines. The discontented runner had been the proverbial exception that violated every rule.

Concern for Rikki's safety dominating his mind, the bowman peeled out and raced off. There was no longer any doubt about his decision. Rikki needed help. Blade would have to wait until after he rescued their companion. Then, and only then, would he return to the palace and seek

the head Warrior. He just hoped that in the meantime the giant stayed out of trouble.

How long had it been?

An eternity? Two eternities?

Rikki-Tikki-Tavi stood alone on the blood-drenched battlefield and surveyed the carnage in disgust. What a waste of brave men! He wearily shifted his attention to the two figures approaching from the east.

"It's over," General Leonidas declared wearily. "We've won."

"But at what a cost!" Rikki responded, sorry he had ever suggested the plan.

Captain Pandarus gazed at a nearby body. "Every last one of Agesilaus's bodyguard has been killed. They fought valiantly to the very end."

Rikki knelt and went to work wiping his katana clean on the cloak of a dead adversary. "I've never known men who died so willingly in the name of duty. They let themselves be slaughtered without a single request for mercy."

"They were Spartans," Leonidas stated proudly.

"Have you seen Captain Chilon?" Rikki asked.

Pandarus nodded. "We were fighting side by side when he took a sword in the chest. He managed to slay the man who had killed him with his dying breath."

Sadness softened the Warrior's face. "I'm sorry to hear that. I liked him." He looked up at the general. "What will you do now?"

"Carry out King Dercyllidas's orders. We'll regroup and march on the Royal Palace. I won't rest until Agesilaus is dead."

Rikki straightened and stared out over the crimson sea of corpses. "You're not the only one."

Blade heard an arrow thud into a bale behind him as he bounded toward the far end of the row. He passed another target and felt a slight tugging sensation on the back of his black leather vest a fraction of a second before a second shaft smacked into the hay. Two down, eight to go.

He abruptly dived and rolled, and narrowly missed being impaled by the third shaft. The archer had shot low, aiming for his waist. Surging erect, he weaved and dodged, his legs flying.

Another shaft nearly clipped his nose. Blade wrenched rearward at the last instant, then ducked under the arrow and sped onward. Four down, six to go.

Inspiration struck, and he abruptly halted. The fifth shaft whizzed by his chest and sank several inches into a bale. He went around it, going all out, knowing he was only halfway to safety.

The remaining five bowmen were all aiming carefully. Blade leaped into the air, sailing in a graceful arc as if diving from a high rock into a lake, his ears registering the clean hit of the sixth arrow somewhere below him. He tucked his arms to his chest and his chest to his legs and flipped, a gymnastic feat he had performed many times in his youth. The seventh shaft brushed his hair. Uncoiling, his body a streak of motion, Blade landed lightly and dashed to the south.

Three more to go.

Again he threw himself to the grass, expecting to hear yet another arrow strike the bales, but nothing happened. He rose and hurtled toward the final bales, glancing at the archers as he did, and was astonished to discover that none of them were paying the slightest attention to him. They were all staring in the direction of the palace. Mystified, he continued to the very end of the row before he halted. Only then did he face in the same direction. A second surprise greeted his gaze.

King Agesilaus and his bodyguards were hastening toward the bales, the ruler gesturing angrily and shouting, "No! No! No!"

Now what? Blade wondered, waiting patiently and conserving his energy. He inhaled deeply, grateful to be alive.

The archers lowered the bows. From their expressions, it was evident

they were as perplexed as their intended target.

Agesilaus merely glared at the bowmen as he brushed past them, and drew to within a dozen feet of the giant before he halted. "I knew it!" he declared bitterly. "I knew you would cheat!"

"Cheat?" Blade responded in bewilderment.

"Don't deny it, outsider! You cheated, and now I have every legal right to carry out your execution."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

"How did I cheat?" Blade demanded. "Or is this a charge you've trumped up so you can kill me and be done with it?"

"You dare!" Agesilaus snapped. "You insolent swine. No one accuses me of being a liar. You did violate the rules and you know it. My instructions were to race from one end of the bales to the other."

"Which is exactly what I did."

"Like hell! You were supposed to run, moron, not indulge in all that leaping and diving and spinning."

"You should have been more specific. How was I supposed to know?"

"Don't plead ignorance. You were well aware of the rules," Agesilaus stated.

"Perhaps he wasn't, your highness," interjected a familiar voice.

Blade glanced at the Spartans on both sides of the ruler and saw General Agis to the right. Strangely, Major Xanthus had disappeared.

The king pivoted, his countenance radiating spite. "Are you presuming to disagree with me *again*?" he asked the head of the secret police.

"Not at all, sire. I merely point out that he might not have realized he

had to run the whole distance. As you wisely noted, he's an outsider. He's completely ignorant of our customs, laws, and general rules of conduct."

"Are you saying I should forgive him?"

"Why not, your majesty? The greatest Spartan kings have always been renowned for their compassion. The ability to wield power is only one of the many attributes a wise monarch cultivates," General Agis said.

"I know all that," Agesilaus spat. "You don't need to lecture me on the proper demeanor of a monarch."

Agis smiled. "Of course not, sir."

The power monger studied the Warrior for a moment. "Perhaps I was a bit rash. It would be foolish to expect someone who possesses inferior mental capacity to comprehend Spartan ways."

"Then we can simply continue with the Marathon?" Agis asked.

"Not quite."

"Your highness?"

"Since he failed to adhere to the rules, he can start over."

Blade stiffened. "Start at the beginning?"

Agesilaus smirked and nodded. "You're not as dumb as you appear to be."

"But is that fair?" Agis queried.

"Don't try my patience with the same implied accusation twice," Agesilaus said. "He opened his mouth to speak again, then stopped when he saw someone coming through the cluster of soldiers. "What is the meaning of this?"

Blade looked and discovered Major Xanthus returning. The army officer carried a golden goblet in his left hand and an opened bottle of wine in his right.

"What the hell are you doing with the victory goblet?" Agesilaus

demanded angrily.

"It was my idea," General Agis said. "It's customary to toast those who survive the tests, and I thought it would be appropriate to have the goblet on hand should Blade succeed in doing so."

The ruler scowled in displeasure. "Only Spartans are entitled to be honored with a victory toast. I'll be damned if we're going to give this outsider such a privilege."

Major Xanthus held out the bottle of wine. "But what about this, your lordship? I just took it out of the root cellar under the palace, and the wine is still chilled. Do you want me to replace the cork and return the bottle to the cellar?"

King Agesilaus licked his lips. "The wine is cold, you say?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then we shouldn't let such a superb beverage go to waste," the ruler stated, and grabbed the bottle. He raised it to his mouth and swallowed greedily several times.

Blade noticed General Agis and the major exchange cryptic glances.

"Ahhhh, this is delicious," Agesilaus commented, lowering the wine and grinning contentedly. "I believe I'll finish the rest while the giant runs the course again."

"Is that wise, your highness?" Agis inquired.

"What do you mean?"

"That wine has been fermenting for decades. It must be quite potent. What with all the excitement and this heat, you could become drunk very fast. And we both know that it's against the law for a Spartan to be inebriated."

"I'm beginning to wonder how you've managed to last so long as head of the Crypteia," Agesilaus stated coldly. "Especially since antagonizing your superiors seems to be your forte."

"I meant no disrespect, sir."

"For your sake, I hope so." Agesilaus took another swig of wine. "And for your information, General, I can hold my wine better than most." He gulped even more.

"My apologies, your highness."

The ruler gestured with his hand. "Apology accepted. Now let's conclude the Marathon. I have other business to attend to, you know."

"Certainly, sir."

Agesilaus tramped eastward, but he went only six feet or so when he suddenly halted, placed his right palm to his forehead, and swayed slightly.

"Is something wrong, your majesty?" General Agis queried.

"Perhaps you were right. It's much hotter than I realized. I've broken out in a sweat."

"You should sit down and rest."

"After the Marathon." Agesilaus took one more step, then unexpectedly sank to his knees before anyone could catch him. He groaned loudly.

General Agis, Major Xanthus, and other Spartans closed in about their leader.

"Are you all right?" the general asked solicitously.

"I feel dizzy. Never felt this way before."

"Perhaps we should carry you inside, sir," Major Xanthus proposed.

"I'm fine," Agesilaus snapped, and tried to rise. Instead, he pitched onto his face.

General Agis gently turned the monarch over. He glanced at one of the nearby soldiers and issued an order. "Go find the doctor. Have him hurry."

The soldier saluted and raced off.

Perplexed by the turn of events, Blade stood near the bales and

observed the tableau unfold. He could see the power monger's wide, unfocused eyes and hear ragged intakes of breath.

"What is happening to me?" Agesilaus declared, seemingly directing his question at the azure sky. "I feel so weak."

"I've sent for your personal physician," Agis told him.

"Who said that?" Agesilaus asked, his brow knitting, perspiration coating his skin. "I can barely hear you. Speak up!"

"I spoke, your majesty," Agis said. "I'm right here beside you."

Agesilaus swung his head from side to side. "Then why can't I see you or hear you very well?"

"I have no idea, sir. Please, don't exert yourself. Stay quiet until the doctor arrives."

"I'm suddenly very cold."

"Perhaps it's your heart, sir."

"Don't be ridiculous. I'm as healthy as a horse."

"What else could it be?" Agis commented innocently.

Blade suddenly perceived the truth, and the insight shocked him. He looked at the bottle of wine lying on the grass, then at the ruler. The plot had been flawless. He now knew exactly how Agis had lasted so long.

King Agesilaus arched his back and gasped. "Oh, God!" he cried pitiably, and abruptly broke into violent convulsions, his entire body rocking and bouncing.

Agis and three troopers tried to restrain the monarch, to keep him still. They almost had him pinned down when he screeched in torment, gurgled, and went limp.

"What's happened to him?" Major Xanthus remarked in concern, playing his part to the hilt.

General Agis felt for a pulse, and for five seconds no one else uttered a

word or moved. Finally he straightened and shook his head sadly. "The king is dead."

"Do you really think it was his heart, sir?" asked one of the soldiers.

"I do. But you can be certain my office will investigate his death carefully." Agis stepped over and retrieved the wine bottle. "The first step will be to have this wine tested."

Blade was tempted to laugh. How convenient, he thought, that the general should be the one man responsible for the oversight of such investigations.

General Agis scanned the assembled Spartans. "I believe all of you can fully appreciate the significance of Agesilaus's death. As of this moment, the civil war is ended. I'll personally convey the news to King Dercyllidas."

"But what about those of us who were assigned to Agesilaus's bodyguard?" queried a soldier.

"You'll report to your barracks and wait there until further notice. Agesilaus has a distant relative, a cousin I think, who is next in line to assume his throne. The Ephors will call this relative before them and formally inaugurate him. Whether he retains the current contingent of the Three Hundred will be up to him to decide."

"Yes, sir."

The head of the secret police turned to the Warrior. "You'll be happy to hear that you won't need to finish the tests."

Blade grinned. "Thank you. I am very relieved."

"I'll be leaving for the barracks housing King Dercyllidas's bodyguards in a few minutes. Would you care to come along?"

"I'd be delighted."

"Good. You may bring your knives."

"There's another favor you can do for me."

"Name it."

"I'd really like something to drink."

"Anything you want is yours. We want our new allies in the Freedom Federation to feel right at home here." Agis grinned. "What would you like?"

"It doesn't matter. Whatever you have," Blade said, then quickly corrected himself. "Just so it isn't wine."

"You're not much of a wine drinker, I take it?"

"Now and then. At the moment, I'm just not in the mood."

General Agis stared at the royal corpse. "I don't blame you one bit."

The SEAL was parked at the base of the steps, both doors wide open. Garnered to give the three Warriors a proper send-off were all the important political officials and military officers in Sparta: King Dercyllidas, General Agis, General Leonidas, Major Xanthus, the Ephors, Captain Pandarus, and many others. Packed into the public square were the citizens of the city-state.

"These last four days of discussions have been most productive," Dercyllidas said. "How soon do you think we can expect, to hear the decision?"

"The Federation leaders will hold a special conclave and vote formally on Sparta's admission. As soon as they decide, a delegation will be sent to establish diplomatic relations. I'd imagine that most, if not all, of the leaders will come here for the signing of the treaty."

"The date the treaty is signed will become an annual Spartan holiday. Unfortunately, we can never fully express our gratitude to you personally."

"I don't deserve special recognition," Blade said.

"Yes, you do. All of you do. You acquitted yourselves nobly," Dercyllidas said, and glanced at the small man in black. "Leonidas told me about your participation in the battle. You slew more opponents than any of our own men. He rates you as the best fighter he's ever laid eyes on."

"The general exaggerates," Rikki responded.

"Spartans never exaggerate," Dercyllidas said.

"We'd better be going," Blade stated, casually slinging the Commando over his left shoulder.

"As you wish. But please remember that if we can ever the of assistance to you or your Family, you have only to say the word. After all the three of you have done for us, we'll always be in your debt."

Rikki-Tikki-Tavi cleared his throat. "If it's permissible, I'd like to make a request."

"Name it and it's yours."

"There was once a Spartan by the name of Sarpedon, a brave, loyal man devoted to Sparta. He was unjustly banished from your city and forced to wander the Outlands. I knew him well, and I can safely say that no Spartan has ever been more worthy of the name."

"I'm familiar with his case," Dercyllidas mentioned.

"Then perhaps you'll see fit to grant my request. Sapredon's name was deleted from the plaque of distinction after his banishment. I came here specifically to ask that it be restored to the position of honor it deserves."

The king stared at the martial artist, a tinge of melancholy etching his countenance. "As you wish, so shall it be done."

"Thank you."

Dercyllidas gazed at the bowman. "And what about you, archer? You seldom speak. Is there anything we might do for you?"

"No," Teucer answered.

"No honor would be too great or too small," the ruler said, and added partly in jest, "Perhaps a statue would be in order."

Teucer chuckled. "*Even This Shall Pass Away.*"

"I don't understand."

"That's the title of a poem by one of my favorite poets, a man who lived

a couple of centuries ago, Theodore Tilton."

"And what did this poet have to say?"

Teucer surveyed the assembled Spartans, feeling uncomfortable at the idea of quoting poetry in front of so many people he didn't know. But what difference did it make? he reasoned, and responded to the king's question.

*"Once in Persia reigned a king, who, upon his signet ring,
'graved a maxim true and wise, which, if held before the eyes,
gave him counsel at a glance, fit for every change and chance.
Solemn words, and these are they: 'Even this shall pass away.' "*